Transcription: Donald Willhouse

Today is Monday, November 1st, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and today I'll be interviewing Lieutenant Colonel Don Willhouse. This interview is taking place in person at the Stephen F. Austin Building in Austin, Texas, and it's being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to come down and talk to us today.

Donald Willhouse: Good to be here. Thank you for the offer.

Yes sir. Well sir, I guess the best place always to start with is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the service.

Donald Willhouse: As I've gotten older, my sense of humor has gotten a little stranger. I give you fair warning. I grew up in that little town called Houston, and where I grew up, Houston Municipal Airport later became Hobby. Well when I was a child, that was out in the country. The neighborhood I grew up in, we had oyster shell streets, we had milk delivery door to door, and the ice cream truck came down the street twice a week and there was six cents by the front door every time so I could go get a popsicle. It was the same thing for my younger brother and sister. And so we were out in that area and everybody knew everybody in the neighborhood, and so we could run around anywhere we wanted to. There was a certain time we had to be home and we had to be close enough to home that when my mother rang the cow bell at 5 o'clock that we could hear it and get back.

Did you have cows, too?

Donald Willhouse: Oh no, we were in a neighborhood and it was a developing neighborhood. Every lot had at least one pecan tree in it, and Garden Villas was off the I guess it was the northwest runway of Hobby. So we used to watch the airplanes go in, so I remember the old Convair's and Constellation's and then eventually of course you had jet aircraft when it became Hobby, and the area grew tremendously. So where Grinks Road and Houston used to be city limits, then it went almost to Pearland while I was growing up. I went through the public schools and because I didn't have the money to get out of town, I worked my way through college at the University of Houston. I was accepted at other universities but I didn't have the money to go.

At that time you mentioned seeing the aircraft flying and that sort of thing. Was that something as a child that you thought you might want to do at that point?

Donald Willhouse: I guess I kind of got the bug a little bit. My father was a naval aviator in World War II. In fact he was instructor pilot at Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. So that's the reason I was born there. I didn't move to Houston until after he got out of the Navy, and I was roughly 2 years old. I was sent to my mother's parents in Kansas City, Missouri, for I guess almost a year.

During the war?

Donald Willhouse: No, the war was over, but my father was getting out of the Navy, he was moving back to the Houston area where he had grown up, and so they were building a house and trying to get established and I just barely remember OK, my first time in Houston that I was

introduced to my new younger brother. But we grew up, everybody knew everybody in the neighborhood and if you did something wrong, you can bet your life your parents knew about it before you got home.

That sounds like a good neighborhood to grow up in.

Donald Willhouse: Oh yeah, it's one of the things people today miss. They move around too much and they don't have the cohesiveness in most of the neighborhoods.

Yeah, a lot of homes don't have front porches anymore. You said your home had a front porch?

Donald Willhouse: We didn't have a porch big enough you could sit on, but we were out and we knew all the kids in the neighborhood, so we were all over the place and my parents used to play bridge with the couple that lived across the street and others in the neighborhood.

So people knew people.

Donald Willhouse: People knew people.

So as a child growing up, did your dad talk to you much about his time in the service?

Donald Willhouse: No, beyond I saw pictures he never really talked about it. I knew he was an instructor pilot and that's the reason he never left the United States. His older brother was a pharmacist mate in the Navy and was out in the South Pacific. After the war, my father later on flew as a private pilot. I'm trying to remember some of the names of some of the companies – he flew for Superior Oil and flew all over Latin America and some other places when he was the pilot for Comet Rice which I think Uncle Ben's eventually bought Comet Rice, and he'd fly different places, and I'd get to fly in the other seat. He didn't have a copilot.

Wow, how old were you?

Donald Willhouse: Back at that time I guess I might have been 10.

And you got to fly with your dad, wow.

Donald Willhouse: I found that kind of exciting.

Yeah, that's unique.

Donald Willhouse: But the odd thing, and my father is no longer living and he wouldn't have remembered anyway, but for whatever reason at a very young age I said I was going to go to the Naval Academy and I was going to be a civil engineer. Part of that worked out and part of it didn't for a variety of reasons. But I eventually did become educated and got a civil engineering degree. What ended up happening in my case is I went through high school Army ROTC in Houston. I went to Stephen F. Austin High School down there. I was trying to get an appointment to the Naval Academy at the time. Like I said, for whatever reason it got ingrained in me, maybe because I started life as a Navy brat. So I got a political appointment and I took the SAT test.

That was from your Congressman?

Donald Willhouse: I got it from my Congressman at the time, and I don't remember his name right off, but my father had some connections through other people.

It wouldn't be hard to look that up though if you knew what district you were in.

Donald Willhouse: Yeah, I could go back and look it up, and I may have something in some of my old records somewhere. This was in the early 60s, because I graduated in high school in June of '63. At any rate, so I took the SAT test. The minimum score to go to Naval Academy in math was 550. I was way over that. Minimum score in English was 500. I made 499. And that one point kept me out of the Naval Academy, and the Reader's Digest version here is that I enlisted in the Naval Reserve to kind of, OK, maybe I can get a military appointment through or whatever. Meantime I didn't have the money to get out of Houston, and so I ended up working my way through four years at the University of Houston studying civil engineering and I wore Navy blues at the Reserve center on Wednesday night, and on Thursday mornings I was in Army green because I was in ROTC at the University of Houston. The first two years were not contract. I was at the time a student assistant to the safety officer who was a retired Coast Guard commander. So I'd worked for Frank Sampson for a year and then I was coming up and I had just gotten notice of an appointment I could have for the Naval Academy, and I also, well earlier I had taken the NRTC exam and that's something else, but there was some other conflicts there as to why I couldn't accept it even though I passed everything. All I had to do was take the physical, and I was in the middle of finals at the time. Anyway, so Frank Sampson told me that he thought I'd be happier in the Army than the Navy, and I thought about it for about a week, and decided you know, he's right.

What was his rationale for that?

Donald Willhouse: He just knew me personally and the fact that my background really was through Army ROTC even though I had an interest in the Navy. So I thought about it and decided he was right. I transferred services and went into the Army Reserve and went under contract as ROTC cadet. Engineering was a five-year degree, and after four years I was out of money. So and it was the Vietnam era, so you had the draft.

When was this?

Donald Willhouse: This was in '67. And so in June of '67, I enlisted in the United States Army. So I went from Navy Reserve to Army Reserve to regular Army enlisted. They changed the regulations and at one point there, even if you hadn't graduated from college but you had completed college ROTC, you could get a commission. Then they changed that. So I was on active duty a year.

Where did they send you to basic training?

Donald Willhouse: I went through basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, at what they called North Fork.

Yeah, I've been to Fort Polk.

Donald Willhouse: Yeah, they call it Tiger Land. We lived in the old World War II barracks.

Those are still there actually.

Donald Willhouse: Oh they are? They were supposed to have fallen down.

We stayed in some for a little period of time and they're pretty old.

Donald Willhouse: Then I got shipped to Fort Bliss. I had enlisted as a combat engineer and the MOS that the Army gave me when I came out of basic training wasn't that, but I was shifted at Fort Bliss, Texas, as a draftsman. So I was there for a year and did some other things, and I went through the NCO academy at Fort Hood and then back to Fort Bliss, and I went through a lot of things that would take too long to explain because of the internal politics and how things were working out there, but I finally got things lined up. So I went to officer candidate school and I put a tracer on the paperwork because I had gone through an interview at basic training, and it turned out that the staff or the committee I appeared before recommended a direct commission. Anyway, so that got lost and then by the time it was found and I was sitting at Fort Bliss they said eh, it takes six months to get that thing processed, eh, I'll just go through OCS. So I went to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, which was the engineer school, and six and a half months later I was a second lieutenant with Corps of Engineers.

So this was about '68 timeframe?

Donald Willhouse: I was commissioned December of '68.

Right in the middle of some really tumultuous times with Vietnam and the United States and everything that was going on.

Donald Willhouse: Yeah, and the odd thing though is that I was sent to a construction battalion at Fort Bragg, which was the only assignment that was forced on me if you will. It was my first assignment as an officer, and as a Corps of Engineer officer though I was offered things throughout my entire career and I had the opportunity to say naw, I don't want to do that, or yes, I want to do that, or can I go do this? So the rest of my career I got everything I ever asked for. And my infantry friends said we've heard of guys like you, but never met one. Anyway, so after Fort Bragg, I was only there three months, I was awaiting orders to go to flight school because I had applied for flight school. It turns out the engineer battalion commander, well first of all, you went through every colonel's office on the way down to wherever you were going, they all asked the same thing – how would you like to go to jump school? I said sir, I just got out of the hospital. I had spent three weeks in the hospital while I was in OCS because I had a case of infectious mononucleosis which I had had two years running when I was in junior high school, so I knew what you could do and not do, and I physically wasn't able, up to going to jump school. Anyway, so three months after I had gotten to Fort Bragg, I received my orders and I went to Fort Walters, Texas, and did the first half of rotary wing, and then I did my second half at Hunter Army Air Field in Savannah, Georgia.

Now Fort Walters, is that west of Fort Worth?

Donald Willhouse: It's west of Fort Worth near, what's the name of that, I'm trying to remember the names of the towns up there, it's been so long since I've driven through. Anyway, it was about 50 miles west of Fort Worth, roughly. Mineral Wells. I knew I'd think of it. So it was in Mineral Wells, but I did my second half at Hunter Army Air Field in Savannah, Georgia, and graduated, and the corresponding course to my commission class of ward officers, as soon as

they graduated and were made W-1's and had their aviator wings, they shipped them to Vietnam. I had my aviator wings and I was so junior, I was still second lieutenant when I graduated, and I worked out a deal where Hunter Army Air Field sent me my promotion orders while I was en route to Fort Hood. So I reported in as a first lieutenant at Fort Hood, and went into an aviation assignment and they didn't have any aircraft, so I didn't have anything to fly. So I was there about two, three weeks I guess, and went into see the troop commander one day. I said sir, nothing against you, but you don't have anything for me to do. If it's all right with you, I'm going to go to engineer battalion and see if I can find a job. He said I'll support. So I went down there, walked in the door. I had met the XO when I was reporting in and he saw the castle on my left collar because I was one of the few standing around with a field jacket on and my collar over the top. I was from a different school. And he saw that castle, so I stepped inside, three weeks later I stepped inside the headquarters for the 16th Engineer Battalion which was the 1st Armored Division, and the XO was at the end of this long World War II wooden headquarters building, saw me, and he said, pointed at me and said lieutenant, come here. He remembered me and he was standing outside the door of the battalion commander's office. And ten seconds later I was in talking to the battalion commander who then turned around and called the commanding general and then and there I was transferred to the engineer battalion. So when they finally caught up on cutting orders, they showed me as being with the 16th Engineer Battalion on day one instead of the three weeks I spent in Delta Troop 3rd the 1st Cav. So I was there three months and they were going to make me a company commander, and all of a sudden I got a phone call that said you're going to Vietnam. OK. So we talked about when I was going to report over there.

Were you single at that time?

Donald Willhouse: I was single. And so I had filled out this dream sheet when I was still in flight school, and I had listed, yeah, I might be interested in covert transition or ___ transition or QEIB. So they called up and we went through the list in order, decided an engineer doesn't need flight cobra's, and I said I don't think I'm interested in Chinook's, and he said well how about Huey instructor pilots? Yeah, let me do that. So I went to Fort Ruck, Alabama, which was the only time I was ever based at the aviation school.

This was right before you were going to go –

Donald Willhouse: Right before going to Vietnam. So in April of '69, I was in IP school at Fort Rucker for Huey's, and so I completed that, and then had my orders for Vietnam.

Tell us a little bit about what flight school was like especially for learning to fly a helicopter.

Donald Willhouse: Well, they were old helicopters to begin with, and at my height, I was put in the OH23 Raven which was a reciprocal engine. It had the same basic engine that a lot of fixed wing aircraft had, so you had to check any time you flew it, like the fixed wing engines at the time, and you took your left mag and your right mag and if both were working, OK, you can go ahead and fly. And so there was a lot of time learning just the basics. I remember my battalion commander at Fort Bragg who was a master aviator even though he was an engineer, and he said when he had asked me how would you like to go to jump school, and I said no sir I'm on pecking orders for flight school, he said good, because I was going to try to go to candidate anyway. When I left, he said Don, when you learn to hover, all of Texas is going to seem too small. And so learning to hover was a challenge, but it is for all helicopter pilots.

What's the most difficult part of that?

Donald Willhouse: Well, because we'd never hovered, and the IP would sit over there and he'd say OK, I'll give you the cycling now, and then you're kind of all over the place, and then finally you kind of settle down. Not doing too bad. So he takes cyclic away from you and says OK, now you can have the pedals. And then so you play around with the pedals and you go through the same wild gyrations learning how to move, just small adjustments, not big ones. He takes the pedals away from you and then he gives you the collective which takes you up and down, changes your power settings, and so when you finally have that, you say OK, got it. He says OK, now you've got the aircraft. And you sit there for about five seconds and everything is going great, and then all of a sudden you start rocking all over the place and just trying to move your head around and do three separate control systems at the same time is a real challenge. In college I had, college ROTC, I had flown 36 hours in Chervicky 140, which is the only fixed wing aircraft training I ever had, and so comparing it to that, flying a helicopter was a lot more difficult.

Yeah, did you enjoy it though once you got it down?

Donald Willhouse: Oh yeah, once I got it down it was fine, and then we spent a lot of time out doing, let's see, they called it pinnacle training if I remember it right. I hadn't thought about some of these things in a lot of years. And so you had different colored, painted tires on different hilltops all over within 50 miles of Mineral Wells. So you'd go out and you'd practice all the right things to do to make your approaches and all those kinds of things. So you spent a lot of time doing that. We had one card, he was a real character in my class, and he was about my height and he'd gotten one of these old World War II leather helmets, and a white scarf like some of the pilots of World War I wore.

The old pace's.

Donald Willhouse: Yeah, so he had already been out in pre-fighter's aircraft and he put his helmet and everything in there, and he sat in the back of the bus when we went out, and so he was the last one off the bus and he had slipped this leather skullcap on and the white scarf and he pulled down the goggles and he made a beeline running across the parking area for the aircraft, jumped in his aircraft and took off, and everybody was trying to figure out who this guy was. So he caused quite a sensation. But anyway, so yeah, the real challenge is just learning how to fly a helicopter, which was the Raven was an uncomfortable aircraft to me because I needed to be about 6 inches shorter and it would have fit me right. But anyway so I finished that there and then went to Hunter and we did the instrument training there, flew what we called the Bell 13 in the Army, and I've forgotten what the civilian called it, but the way I used to describe it to people if you ever saw MASH on television or Whirlybirds, that old show if anybody who's old enough to remember it, that's what it was. That's what we flew.

Was it kind of a glass canopy then?

Donald Willhouse: And tubular tail buff. And that was another aircraft I couldn't fly worth a darn. It was just, I was too big for the aircraft, and for me to reach the controls I had to lean over and my natural tendency was to sit up. So I had a lot of trouble in it. And I was getting pink slips and my IP was a little concerned about it, so he put me in, and I said I can't fly the aircraft. It doesn't fit me. So they put me in the Link trainer which was an old World War II Link trainer, and I did great, did all my instruments and everything right, and they decided OK, they agreed

with me, it was the aircraft. And then I had a transition into Huey's, didn't have any trouble and I did all my contact flying in Huey's.

So when did you finally get to Vietnam?

Donald Willhouse: I got to Vietnam in June of 1970. I was there for the last half of the push into Cambodia, so I was flying in and out of Cambodia. I was assigned to the 191st Aviation Company which was a salt helicopter in Canto, Vietnam, which is down in the delta, and there's a little bit of a story about how I got there and we can back up to that if you want to.

Sure.

Donald Willhouse: But anyway, I reported in and I knew almost all the warrant officers because they were in the corresponding walk class to my commission class, and one of them I flew copilot for for about my first two or three months there.

In the Army, what percentage of helicopter pilots then were warrant officers? Was it a majority?

Donald Willhouse: A great majority, and I'm trying to think of what kind of percentage I might give you and I may be a little bit off, but about 75 percent, because in an aviation company they were all warrant officers, the exception being each platoon had two commissioned officers as section leaders and then you had a platoon leaders, and so we had three platoons, so that would be nine commissioned officers, and each platoon I guess we had 15 warrants, something like that.

Now the Army was, I guess remains this way, unique in that. I know in the Marine Corps, and I think the Navy and Air Force, all the pilots are regular commissioned officers, but the Army has primarily warrant officers. Do you know what the history is behind that or why that is done?

Donald Willhouse: Not really. I used to know some of those details and I'd be sitting here for a long time trying to drag them out of the back of my memory banks.

But all these guys were prior enlisted, right, to become warrant officers?

Donald Willhouse: Many of them were prior enlisted. Some enlisted specifically go to flight school and after advanced individual training I guess they did, and I do know that at one time, let's see, the Army Air Corps, they were all commissioned officers, and of course the Air Force transition remained the same, and the Army having more aircraft than even the Air Force, and I do know that not too recently and I can't tell you the time period – there's a guy I know that is a civil engineer I know here in Texas, and he was rated aviator, and this has been since I retired and I retired from the Army in January of '93, so somewhere after that, they tried to do the enlisted aviators like some of the other armed forces in the world do. I know Italy, when I went through IP school, Italy had sent an army captain and an army master sergeant to IP school. They were in my class. The captain only had like a thousand hours of flying or something like that, and the master sergeant had something like 10,000 hours. But they tried it in our Army and this one former aviator I knew was enlisted as a sergeant, as a lower enlisted, and he said the problem they were having was that the first sergeant as most companies do, he needs these people for all these fatigue details and everything else, and the aviator needed to be out doing his flying and all the other things that he's supposed to do, so there was a conflict then between the fact that he was enlisted even though he was a qualified aviator, and he could fly say as aircraft

commander, and he could have a captain as his copilot, and he'd be the guy in command company. So I imagine with those conflicts they decided OK, we're going back and they're all going to be warrant officers, and the warrant officers are the real specialists in the aviation field and those of us who were commissioned, and of course now they do commission the warrant officers so they in fact can command and I thought that was a necessary change and I'm glad they already finally did it. But anyway, so that's kind of that background. As an aside, when I was no longer flying anymore, because the last time I flew was '75, but when I was the brigade engineer in the Persian missile brigade in Europe and I was major at that time, and if you wanted to go through to flight school, you had to appear before a board of company grade officers consisting of three officers or one field grade officer who was rated aviator. Well there were two field grade officers in the brigade that were rated aviators – W Brigade commander was a master aviator and me. They sent them all to me. So there was a sergeant and the only aircraft I ever went down in, he was the crew chief on it and I was a passenger. So we had, I was in a helicopter crash in Germany that we all walked away from, and later on he appeared before me as his board because he wanted to be a pilot. After we discussed several things about why the aircraft crashed and what his part of it was and everything else, and what he had learned, and I had approved for him to go to flight school and I had come back to the States, and I was stationed in Bixford, Mississippi, but I went to Fort Rucker to take my annual physical and I ran into him. He was midway through flight training doing great. So I imagine he turned into one really top notch warrant officer.

That sound unusual to walk away from a helicopter, it was a helicopter crash?

Donald Willhouse: What happened is it had been raining, so the ground was fairly soft which was good, and we had landed into one clearing and the copilot jumped off to go into the tent for the aviation detachment for the Persian missile brigade, and so we went back out around to another clearing to refuel, a forward air refueling point, FARP. So we had a full fuel load and we went back around to pick up the copilot, and we were, I guess these trees were about 50-60 feet tall, anyway so I had my helmet on even though I couldn't plug into anything, but as a pilot you always unconsciously listen to what's going on. It's second nature, and you're listening to the sound of the engine. So we were over trees and not that far above them and starting to go for our approach, and it suddenly dawns on me I'm hearing the engine slowing down and we had just refueled. Well, we cleared the trees, and I had to tell the CW2 pilot what he had done later because he didn't know, but he did an attempt to route a rotation but he didn't have enough air speed to really do it. And I remember the sergeant and I later on applied, approved to go to flight school, had noticed that the bleed air on the aircraft hadn't been turned off. That takes heat from the engine and puts it inside so you can warm up, because Germany's cold sometimes. And he reached overhead and flipped a switch because he was sitting in the jump seat at the end of the control panel between the two pilots, and then he reached out on the main console and flipped a switch, and he was one switch off. He had turned off the main fuel switch. So we went in and we hit and because the ground was wet and spongy, we bounced back up in the air about 50-60 feet and then went back down again, and the pilot did the best he possibly could, so he got it landing flat. And it wasn't all that bad. But the tail boom spread out and so I'm sitting back there.

So a very hard landing.

Donald Willhouse: It was a very hard landing. So we were sitting back there and nobody's moving, and I'm not the aircraft commander but I'm sitting back there and said OK, I'm the ranking aviator here and I'm a major and nobody's going to tell me I can't do something

anyway, so I ready to get out of the aircraft. When I got out of the aircraft, everybody got out except for the aircraft commander. I went around and opened his door and climbed up on a skid and I said what happened? He said the crew chief turned off the main fuel switch. But what I was thinking about when we were over trees, and I was in the second half of flight school at Hunter Army Air Field, as we lost an aircraft in tall trees along with the instructor pilot and two students, and one of the students was a good friend of mine. So that's what I was thinking about as I looked down in the trees.

Trees, hair-raising, overlooked it – tell us, too about your time in Vietnam because I know you flew for a year there.

Donald Willhouse: I got over there for the second half of the push into Cambodia, so I was flying in and out of Cambodia.

What was your first impression of Vietnam when you arrived there?

Donald Willhouse: Do I really want to be here? It was very scary because when we first got in there, and the reason I ended up in the delta is the fact that I had gotten to Travis Air Force Base where we flew out of a day early, and I got in the area because I wanted to travel around the San Francisco area and kind of sight-see before I went in. So I had signed in the BOQ a day earlier than I would have and they made me sign out but they let me sign back in again because I really wasn't supposed to be there. So the night before I left, I was in the officer's club, and I get notice of this two nights before, I was in the officer's club and a first lieutenant I run into and I was a first lieutenant at that time, got talking. He was headed back over on his second tour and he had been a warrant officer and it was during deployment first lieutenant. So I got talking to him and I told him well, there's a girlfriend of mine, we're starting to get real serious here, and she was at 3rd surgical hospital in the delta near Canto. He said well give me your numbers. I'll see if I can have your orders waiting for you when you get over there because I know the assignment officer. So I got over there, I stepped off, and I was handed a set of orders to the 160th Engineer Group which was in the delta, subsequent assignment to the 13th Aviation Battalion and into the 191st Assault Helicopter Company there in Canto, which was on the lower branch of the Mekong. But the word had gotten passed down was that we were engaged. It wasn't true. But how do you explain that when somebody is saying well, we're going to put you right near your fiancé. OK, some things are better left alone. Anyway, so Warrant Officer Jacobs, I don't remember his first name, but I flew copilot for him almost exclusively my first two-three months there. We were flying in and out of Cambodia moving troops and what not, and so we'd fly back into South Vietnam and just inside the border the NAVY had an LST anchored, and we'd refuel on the LST. Every time we landed, a sailor would show up and count how many people were on the aircraft and disappear, and then pretty soon you'd see a bunch of sailors running out there.

Getting rides back.

Donald Willhouse: Every single person on the aircraft was given a gallon can of very cold iced tea and two steak sandwiches, every time we landed. And so then we'd take off and fly back to Cambodia. So I landed on this LST at night time and it was a moonless night, and there were no lights on this thing, and the lights on the four corners of the helipad were very, very dim. That was scary landing on that thing.

I bet.

Donald Willhouse: And later on in my time over there, I had some other landings very similar in areas that were lighted.

Yeah. Did you have night vision goggles then?

Donald Willhouse: No, we didn't.

Yeah, it made it even more difficult.

Donald Willhouse: Anyway, so we made it there OK. It was really scary. My entire time I was there, I got shot at and never got hit. I was one of the lucky ones.

Wow. I've read enough about Vietnam and it seems like being a helicopter pilot there was one of the tougher assignments, especially flying into hot LZ's and that sort of thing.

Donald Willhouse: My time there was a little different. I was out in the real combat zones if you will. Most of what I flew were single ship missions. For instance, the commander of the 21st Arven Division was a Vietnamese major general who did not trust the Vietnamese air force. They had Huey's. He would only fly in a U.S. Army helicopter. The year I was over there, it was only one time I knew he flew in a Viet aircraft. As soon as he could, he got back into an Army aircraft. I've got a copy of the news article that came out in the Stars and Stripes. But one day we were down there and General Trong was the Corps commander for 4th Corps. He was a major general, and he would only fly in U.S. Army aircraft also. The aircraft he was in was shot down when we were in the delta, and he was heading down, I've forgotten precisely where. So General Nee came running out and he said General Trong had got shot down, we need to go get him. Pretty soon he came running back with a squad of Vietnamese infantry. We piled in and off we went. So I ended up picking up General Trong who was OK, and I've forgotten who his American advisor was, he was a full colonel. I had General Nee who was a 21st Arven Division commander, and his senior U.S. advisor was Colonel J. Ross Franklin who had been chief of staff of Americal Division during V-Light. So I had all these high, powerful people sitting in the back, and there was another general and I don't remember who he was. So I pick them up out in the middle of a rice paddy and away we go, and when the aircraft had been shot down, the warrant officer who was in the pilot seat took a bullet through the foot, it just missed his heart, and the crew chief on that side of the aircraft on the machine gun got a lot of shrapnel, and there just happened to have been a dust-off aircraft in the area. So they dropped in and picked them up and left all the others there, and both survived all right. So I picked up everybody else and pretty soon there was a Chinook came down and they lifted the aircraft out. But the article that came out in the Stars and Stripes said General Nee took his own aircraft and a Vietnamese crew flew out and made the rescue. So I had a Vietnamese name for the rest of the time I was there. It must have been in the spring of '71 because I came back in June of '71. But my time over there I flew a lot of single ship missions, I'd fly General Nee down into the Uman Forest so he could go out and see his troops, so you would corkscrew down to wherever he wanted to go and corkscrew back out, and occasionally you'd see a tracer go by. I know one night I was headed back in on another one of these moonless nights, and we had our lights on because we flew 2,000 feet which was in small arm range. My crew chief in this tone of voice said hey sir, we're taking fire. I said what? I said I don't hear anything. He said look over here. So I looked over there and there were quad 50's just barely missing us. We were just out of their range. But we did a lot of those things. Occasionally I flew VIP's, and I would have to say down at the delta at that time, there were a lot of things going on, but it was nothing like what was going on up in I-Corps

and other areas. There were some hair-raising things that did occur. I had a new copilot who was doing very well, and so we were headed up, and of course in the delta in the dry season they burn off all the rice paddies, so at zero 4,000 feet you can't see anything. So he was doing well, and of course all the canals are dried up, and you have a little trouble down gig, and so he was doing fine, I was busy doing something, and I looked up and he was way off course. So I said where are we – and I called up all kinds of radar outfits and they were not helpful. They couldn't find us. I knew we were headed up to some place near what they called the Parrot's Beak which was west of Saigon, and so I knew we were somewhere in that area and we flew over, it cleared off enough and we flew over an area, and I said I don't like the looks of this. The colonel who was a passenger in the back and we were taking him up there to an outpost, he said why don't you land down there? I said no sir, I don't think I want to, because there was a bridge barricaded across the middle, and I said I don't think I want to do that. It was later on I figured out where we were, and there was a large NVA with anti-aircraft there, but they didn't want to take pot-shots at a single helicopter. And so as things cleared off, I finally found the Vietnamese outpost, a Special Forces outpost. They actually flew fuel to us and we hand-pumped it from a 55-gallon drum and got back in. Everything turned out OK but I'm glad I didn't do and the colonel later on told me, he says I'm glad you over-ruled me as commander. He says I know what we would have ended up. He found out some things later on. But I know when I first got over there I flew 9 missions, and C&C, command and control, and we were kicking out Perchu flares and a gun team, rolling around and finding targets. Later on they took the Charlie models away and we ended up with these Mike model aircraft, which was a reconstituted Charlie model.

So all tolled, you spent about a year?

Donald Willhouse: I spent a year.

Do you remember how many times you flew, how many missions you flew during that year? Did you fly almost every day or every other day?

Donald Willhouse: I flew more in my last two months than I did in the previous 10 because I was supply officer for the aviation company, and I did all kinds of things. I had learned the supply system and so I got things that the company didn't have. I converted the company from the old, old APH -5 helmet which didn't give any hearing protection really, to the SPH-4 that we called a Mickey Mouse, but it was much, much better. And everybody had new Nomex, because most of them were torn up and didn't have anything. And repair parts, the maintenance guys did pretty well with that, but everything else, I knew how to get it and where to find it. So I did that for 10 months and I got the company up where they finally passed a CMMI because they kept failing them all the time, and we had aircraft on the property books that weren't there. I mean it was a total disaster. The property book didn't match anything we had and the combat losses they never documented right, so I got that all squared away. At one point, the company commander told me to get all the bunkers rebuilt because we needed sandbags. So being an engineer officer, I found out who had the sandbags, and being an engineer officer, the engineers took care of me. So I flew to Longbed and the Chinook Company gave me a helicopter, and they gave me 9 hours in a Chinook I didn't deserve. I didn't find it in my records until I got ready to leave Vietnam, and I'll come back to the missions in a minute. So we flew up and I filled half the Chinook with sandbags, pallets of sandbags, and the other half was pallets of toilet paper. So I had more than I could do. I was giving toilet paper and sandbags away all over the place. I flew enough missions to get 13 air medals, and most of that was in my last two months. I was flying almost every day, and they'd send me on a mission like to the 21st Arven Division and they said don't fly more than 8 hours today. I said well if you don't want me to fly more than 8 hours, you

better not send me down there. So I'd come back at the end of the day having flown 13 hours, and they'd ground me the next day, and I was being grounded every other day because of that type of thing. I spent a lot of time in an orbit so the commander of the 21st Arven Division could conduct a battle, and they had tracers coming up and he had T38 jets coming in doing bombing runs, and then we'd go refuel and all that kind of stuff. So I totaled of my 967 hours in helicopters, 630 hours roughly was combat flying.

Did you get to see your girlfriend at all during that time?

Donald Willhouse: A lot.

Well that's good. That was probably unique.

Donald Willhouse: The other part of that is we dated in Fort Hood and it was because I was a first lieutenant when I got there. I didn't end up in the old World War II BLQ's where the second lieutenants went. So had I reported in as a second lieutenant, that's where I would have ended up. So as a first lieutenant I reported in and I ended up in what they called the high-rise BLQ next to the hospital there at Fort Hood, and she lived on the same floor I did. So I'd been there about two-three days, and we dated for about three months. She went over, wrote back and told me where she was, and we wrote back and forth, and I went to Rucker and I knew right where she was, and so that's what I told you previous was how I ended up in Canto. Now Canto was four to five miles away from Air Force Bentui which was a large air field. Next to Air Force Bentui was 3rd Surgical Hospital, and the Navy had a small base there and I've forgotten what all they did, but they had a few helicopters, and all of my supply agencies were on the other side of the fence from 3rd Surgical Hospital. So what we'd do is I'd get all my business done. Sometimes I'd go over and we'd eat lunch there at 3rd Surg, or sometimes we'd hitchhike into Canto and CORDs, and I don't remember what CORDS stood for, it was a civilian organization, but they had a restaurant and a compound and a swimming pool, so we'd go swimming a couple of afternoons a week. So we spent a lot of time together as much as we could in the 10 months, and then she left and that's when I said OK, told my company commander I said OK, I've got all this done, didn't mention my girlfriend. Everybody knew I had one. I said got all this done, I'm ready to do nothing but fly if you want to put in somebody new as a supply officer, and did that transition. But when I got over there, oh, one of the other things I did, too, I guess I wasn't supposed to do it, the nurses weren't supposed to fly in helicopters, but I fixed them up, a lot of them with rides into Longbed, into Saigon or what not. But it was mostly single ship missions. We used to get at the airfield where I was, we used to get mortared every night about 2 o'clock in the morning, and the first time, well before I got there, a month or two previously, they had some mortars that landed in the hangar, and then one night they hit the officer's club and they burned up the group commander's trailer and what not. That all occurred not too long before I got there. So when I got there I'd have to say relatively speaking, it was fairly quiet. We got mortared 2 o'clock in the morning all the time, and first couple of times I used to run down to the bunker, couldn't see in there, and I didn't know what it was, I was scared. So after that, you'd lie in bed, and we had nice mattresses, we had nice beds, 4-inch mattress, that kind of thing, with box springs. So you'd lie in bed and you'd say OK, you'd listen and say where is it landing? OK, do I want to stay in bed or is it close enough all I do is roll on the floor and pull the mattress over me, or do I really want to go to the bunker? And after two times in the bunker, I never went down there again. So I listened where they were landing, and they were aiming for center mass, and so one night they pushed shrapnel all through our helicopters. We were late getting off. And then one night they must've had a new crew. They totally missed Canto Army Air Field and hit Ben Samoi in Canto which was a red light district. So my assumption is they probably

took ‘me all out and shot ‘em, but we didn’t get mortared for about two-three months, and then a new crew came in and they start hitting some of us again. But we used to fly to Saigon and it’s one of these strange things if you see some of these old war movies or even some of the shows that have been on television – we’d fly into Saigon and hit the PX and everything, so we were going back to the war, to the delta, and I think we couldn’t go over 500 feet in Saigon until we got outside past a certain bridge and then we’d go back to 2,000 feet and head back down. We had a big Coke on one side of us, a bag of popcorn on the other and we’d tune in a radio station out of Australia and listen to American rock ‘n roll.

That’s pretty surreal I would think.

Donald Willhouse: And then you get back down and see, getting shot at again. Almost got knocked out of the sky twice. One time we were going into Saigon and we were flying at 2,000 feet, and I look out and nose-to-nose to me is a camouflage Lear jet coming at my level. Where am I going to go? I decided the best thing to do is turn on all my lights and let him figure it out, and they went under me. So I’m glad I didn’t go down. One time I had a new copilot and he was under the hood practicing instruments, and so because I was a school-trained instructor pilot, I got used to lefthand seat. Aircraft commander and the pilot normally flew the righthand seat. So I let the junior guys, I liked the lefthand side. I could do everything I needed to and I just liked it there. So this one time he was under the hood and we were off the end of the runway, and I’m listening to everything of course on the radio that was going on, and why the air traffic controller didn’t tell us, we knew that there was a fire artillery area down south of us and we wanted to stay out of it. But he didn’t tell us about the V-NAF birddog that came out of the clouds, and I looked up and this thing was so darned close and I made motion for the controls, and my copilot noticed I had done that, so he let go of everything as soon as I touched the controls. He didn’t question it, he just knew something was up and I was the guy that knew what was going on. Because normally there is a very set procedure. You put your hands on the controls, you say I have the aircraft, and he says you’ve got the aircraft, and he lets go. We didn’t do that. And I rolled the thing on the side and we went from 3,000 feet and I finished pulling it out at about 400. I was trying to get away from that birddog and I’m listening to the radio and that air traffic controller is saying on course, on glide path, on course going slightly below glide path – what’s this guy seeing? I don’t know. And the entire time I’m thinking not only being an engineer, it’s another story as to later on how about my wife, because I went back to bootstrap and finished my degree in civil engineering, but you don’t want to mug your mast because if you do then the mast comes off and you fall out of the sky – the blades shear off is what they do. So I’m thinking about this the entire time and I’m very slowly bringing us out of that drop and we came out OK, but we missed two mid-air’s the time I was in Vietnam. One time when we flew anywhere you used to clear for artillery, you’d call in and get clearance so you knew you could fly through an area, and I had clearance and I looked between my pedals and saw marking around the land down there. I said what’s going on. It was strange.

So you got back from Vietnam and then you ended up retiring you said ’93, so you had a long career after that in the Army as well.

Donald Willhouse: I was promoted to captain December of ’70. That was six months after I got over from Vietnam. So I was a captain when I came back and I worked out a deal. I went bootstraps, I was sent back fully funded to the University of Houston and finished my degree in civil engineering. The dean of the college and the chairman of the civil engineering department remembered me, and they were impressed with what I had done. Of course they had a lot of respect for the military. There was one of my instructors there previously, he was a retired Corps

of Engineer lieutenant colonel, and he taught the lower level. At any rate, they said OK, a lot of things have changed because at the time that I was there previously, the University of Houston expanded so much and the grade average across the university was extremely poor because they didn't have the training and all the things they needed. They got all that under control, so I came back and I went to Washington and I saw the education officer and my assignment officer, and then and there they said OK, here's the deal. Nobody's using the money. If you want to finish your degree, here's what we can do. And so I went back to University of Houston while I was on leave and I saw the associate dean of the engineering college and Artis White who was the chairman of the civil engineering department, they said not a problem. We'll put you back in school. They said all these things have changed over time and the catalog has changed every year you were gone, so it's going to take you about two years to finish instead of one year. And the scholastic standing has changed, so they said coming back in, you're going to be on scholastic probation. Don't worry about it. Do nothing but go to school. We will put you back into school at the end of every semester. You just go ahead and make your grades. So I came back and did that. My grade average went up tremendously and I qualified to be able to go to graduate school in the university if I wanted to.

And you were in the Army during this entire time.

Donald Willhouse: I was on active duty in the Army. In fact, I got back in let's see, I guess it was the end of June, beginning of July of '71, and I couldn't get any classes until September, so they loaned me to the ROTC detachment. So I worked over there through the summer. I used to, even after I started back in the classes, I didn't wear a uniform except on rare occasions, but I taught their Corps of Engineers and aviation branch orientation classes for 'em. One day it was in the summer and I had on my TW's and my I've been there ribbons and my aviator wings, and I'm walking across the campus, and I see this guy coming toward me in cut-off blue jeans, floppies, t-shirt, hair long and a beard, and I'm thinking oh heck, here it comes. And it looked like he was coming straight toward me. And he was I don't know, 30-40 feet away, and pretty soon he raised his hand and said hey sir! OK, this changes everything. So I stopped and we walked toward each other and shook hands and he said he had been a warrant officer aviator in Vietnam, and he saw I was wearing aviator wings been there and he just wanted to talk to another aviator. So we had a nice conversation. But anyway, so I went through two years and my spring semester in February of '73 I met my wife on a blind date. Three months later we were engaged.

So the girlfriend from Vietnam –

Donald Willhouse: When she got out of the Army, she went back to Minnesota to finish her schooling because she was only halfway through nursing school. I talked to her a couple of times, but you get real busy and we lost contact. And it wasn't meant to be.

So you met your wife when she was a student?

Donald Willhouse: No. I was a student at the University of Houston, I was on active duty. She was a teacher in Friendswood. She had been teaching there 9-1/2 years 3rd grade, and she was from a little town in Arkansas, south of Magnolia, which is about an hour and a half drive north of Shreveport, Louisiana. So there was a guy there who he was actually a mechanical engineering student, but the mechanical engineering student group didn't do anything on the American side, so the interested group was very, very active, and he just hung out with us. And one time he said hey, if you ever want to meet anybody, I know a lot of single teachers. And one

of the odd things is he used to call me captain. There were several veterans there, and they were all enlisted previously. They knew I was an active duty captain and they just called me captain. Very seldom did they call me Don. And then you get all these younger guys that came in fresh out of high school and they started calling me captain. Well one day I showed up in uniform and he said I thought it was a nickname, you're a real one aren't you?

Like Captain Crunch or something, yeah.

Donald Willhouse: I'm one for real. Anyway, and I'd been dating several different women over the time and nothing was going anywhere. So I told Chuck, yeah, I'm ready to meet somebody. So we were supposed to double date and Chuck and Dorothy couldn't make it. Dorothy and now my wife Dottie used to teach together, and so I'd seen her picture. So I showed up at her door. I knew what she looked like, and she had a very vague idea of what I looked like. Anyway, so three months later in May of '73, we go engaged. She had a bus tour planned for the summer already paid for, so she said should I cancel that? I said no, go ahead and go. So I didn't see her from June to August, and then we got married in November of '73 at her parent's house in Emerson, Arkansas, which was two months before unfortunately her father died. So we've been married almost 37 years now.

That's great.

Donald Willhouse: And she knew nothing about the Army and she signed on with me. So her first military post, she knew I was a captain but she didn't know what a captain was really, so her first base as a military spouse was Fort Hood, because I accepted an assignment at Fort Hood again, and I went to the 2nd Armored Division, 17th Engineer Battalion. And so I accepted that assignment before we got engaged, and so I went on up there as soon as I graduated. I went up there in December of '73, because after I graduated from the University of Houston with my degree in civil engineering, I did the Army engineer advanced course by correspondence. So they left me in Houston to do that. So I got all that done and then I went back to the real Army. From Fort Hood, I left her there for six months when I took my first command to Graffenwier, Germany on Brigade 75 for six months, and then after, well, I'd been a staff officer in that battalion and finished my command of 18 months, and then I did a transition to Fort Worth engineer district and I was based at Fort Hood as a project engineer overseeing military construction. Then I got a phone call one day and said hey, how would you like to go to Berlin and command the 42nd Engineers? So I said hey, that sounds great. So we spent two years in Berlin commanding 42nd Engineers, and the reason I ended up getting that command is the battalion commander wanted somebody because the engineers were in a special troops battalion along with the MP's and I forgot what all. The Berlin Brigade Command was in that group. They wanted somebody who had been a successful company commander before and six non-commissioned officers in that company had been under my command at Fort Hood. One of them finally told this battalion commander one day, he said sir, if you want a yes man, don't ask this guy to come here. He said but if you want a company commander, we want him. So that's the reason I ended up in Berlin. So I got promoted to major arms there. Then I went to the Persian Brigade, and when I came back, I was in Europe three and a half years, when I came back I went to Bixford, Mississippi, and did research and development. So I became coauthor on a manual on air base survivability that is given to every single graduate of the air command staff college. So there's my name on there and two civilian. Two civilian PhD's are the ones that deserve all the credit. My name is on there only because I was military. And the cover doesn't tell you it was done by the Army Corps of Engineers. It said the Air Force. From there, I went to Memphis, Tennessee. I was a deputy commander in the Memphis Engineer District. Then I

spent two years I guess it was roughly as post engineer at Fort McNear in Washington. Then I went to the Dept. of the Army DES OPS, and I was the engineer officer there in the unclassified I did was the domestic disaster assistance, and so I was there three years. I went to Korea as my last overseas and I was the only non-Korean branch chief in headquarters combined forces command and the AC ___ engineer. Then I did my terminal assignment for seven months for headquarters Army Corps of Engineers in Washington doing domestic disaster assistance.

And then after you retired, you were with the Water Development Board for a while?

Donald Willhouse: After I retired, we moved down here and the Army will tell you when you get ready to retire, find a job and move there. We decided no, we wanted to move where we wanted to live, and we liked central Texas so we moved here. I've been here about four and a half months, and decided it was time to find a job. And so I was checking around, and nobody was hiring civil engineers in the consulting firms, so I accidentally, I think I found it in a newspaper, found a job for a civil engineer, a licensed, professional engineer, and I was. I was stationed at Vicksburg when I got my PE. And so I applied for the job and it was with the Department of Health. And the guy who hired me was an Air Force Reserve officer. He says I know what your background is, and you know how to do the things I want to do. And so we get along very well, and I was there about four years, but there really wasn't any place for me to go. Then I went to, I spent five and a half years in the Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, and I spent 18 months in what used to be called Austin State School, and did a lot of things there, and then I was hired to be the manager of plant maintenance and operations for the agency, so I worked with the maintenance departments at the 23 hospitals and schools around the state. And then as it was, because there were no merit raises, no other kind of raises, and you can only work in the same job for so long even if you like the job, you finally say I need to make some more money because the cost of living is going up and that kind of thing. So I found a job and was hired at the Board of Professional Engineers and I became the director of licensing, and that's where I was when I retired. Then I went out into the consulting world for about four years, and the first company I was with, I was with them for about two years, and it was based out of Ohio. Then they brought all of their folks out of Ohio and they didn't need me anymore, and a different company picked me up that was based out of Dallas, and I worked for them for a year when they were bought by an international company and so there was a transition period there. Despite the fact I had gone through that particular company's project management course and completed it, they didn't have anything for me to do really. And it was the people I had worked with and the company had been bought that were giving me time, so only about 25 percent of my time was billable. The company wasn't getting any new projects, so they finally let me go. So I was off for a while and a friend of mine said hey, there's a temporary job at the Water Development Board, why don't you apply for one? And I looked at it and said I don't think I qualify but I'll go ahead and apply. Well they called me for an interview and they asked me some questions that I hadn't thought about since I'd been in college, you know, water chemistry and what not. My basic answer was, I don't remember and I'd be blowing smoke if I tried to tell you anything that I don't really remember. I said if I wanted to know, I'd go look it up or ask somebody who's been working with it for a while. So they interviewed nine of us for, no, interviewed 18 of us for nine positions, and they actually ended up hiring eight of us, and we were all older, experienced engineers. And so I did something, but I decided when my time was up and I handed everything back to the two guys that took the projects over because they came back from the AARP business which was a stimulus-funded, and I said nah, I don't want to work there anymore.

How are you involved now with veterans, are you involved?

Donald Willhouse: I'm in a lot of veterans organizations and most active with Military Order of the World Wars, and one of the things we do, well first of all to be a member, you have to have been an officer in one of the armed forces. And we have all five of the armed forces represented by our chapter. We recognize young men and women who get their Eagle Scout, or cub scouts the gold award, and give them a certificate. Sometimes we will have them at some of our meetings and have them talk about different things. Every summer we send about 18 mostly sophomores and juniors to a youth leadership conference and they learn about patriotism, how the government is supposed to work, they hear from every reformed drug addict. We've got a judge that comes down and they do mock courts and what not, so they learn a heck of a lot and you can tell by the thank you notes you get from these kids as to how much they learn in four days. We also support the ROTC. The other thing I'm heavily involved in though, I've been in boy scouting since I was 8 years old, so I'm into year 59 now.

That's great. Well sir, I know we're almost out of time and I know we've reserved this room for a certain period, but I always like to ask and I'll ask you, we do these interviews, the goal is for posterity for future generations. We have archives in this building downstairs that go back to the 1600s, and we have David Crockett's widow's paperwork, the Land Grant she received after he was killed, and we have Stephen F. Austin's original Registro and that sort of thing, so with that in mind, is there anything that you'd want to say to anyone that might be potentially listening to this years or decades from now about your service or anything of that sort?

Donald Willhouse: I guess if I said anything, I would say that what you gain personally out of serving in the military, no matter which armed force it is, there is friendly competition among, but we all need to work together in a purple frame of mind. But what you gain from your service far outweighs the disadvantages of the things you don't like about it. It's very important what we do. If the United States military didn't exist, we wouldn't have the United States of America and it would not be able to stand or withstand anything, and the military gains so many experiences that you cannot gain anywhere else. I got to do things that in the civilian world they could never comprehend. I mentioned disaster assistance before. I used to be able to sign orders out of the Pentagon, and the first operation I ran 6,000 troops of all services and ___ from the National Park to fight forest fires. The U.S. military can do anything. The difficult we do immediately, the impossible takes a little bit longer. So there's a positive attitude, people work together, they accomplish phenomenal things. The civilian world really can't comprehend it. And that was one of the things that we lost when we went from a draft era to volunteer forces is you don't have all those people who used to be in for at least two years and they would have some understanding and appreciation.

Yeah, I think the percentage of Americans that have served in the military now is perhaps at an all time low.

Donald Willhouse: In Vietnam, I had one soldier and I'm surprised I remember his name, the other soldier I don't remember. I had one young soldier when I was running a 24-hour a day slide operation in my aviation company who was an alcoholic, and I fixed his work hours. I ran a 24-hour day operation 7 days a week. And so when I switched him to night time, he was good enough not to leave his station. He would do his duty, and it kept him out of the bars so he couldn't get drunk. My soldier I had on night time, word had gotten to me he had gotten into some real problems, and so I switched him unannounced to day time and he didn't talk to me, he was my armored. For three days he didn't talk to me. Then one day he stood in front of my desk and he said sir, may I say something? I said yes. He never looked up. He said sir, obviously

when I repeat precisely what he said, he said sir, I was getting in some really bad stuff. He says thank you. Before he left, he had gotten promoted to sergeant because he deserved it. He got an Army accommodation medal because he deserved it. He specifically came to see me and he was very, very formal. But he said sir, before I was drafted, I was a Black Panther. He said I don't like the Army, it's not for me. He said I've learned a lot. And when I got back, I don't want to ever see those so-and-so's again. He says I intend to make something of myself and he says because of the time I was in the Army and for people like you I've run into, my life is going to be better.

That's great.

Donald Willhouse: So there's a lot to be gained in the military service that you can bring back. The civilian world is not ever going to really appreciate because they've never been there to see it, and they may not know anybody who's been there. But with all the things that are going on these days, people are trying to raise the awareness of support to the troops, at least maybe even though they don't really understand it, they'll have some appreciation.

That's right. Well sir, on behalf of Commissioner Patterson who is also a Vietnam veteran and just everybody –

Donald Willhouse: He's a retired Marine but I won't hold it against him.

That's right, but thank you for your service and for coming down and sharing your stories with us today.

Donald Willhouse: Thank you for having me. I appreciate meeting you.

Yes sir.

[End of recording]