Rick Mayes

Buck Sergeant

United States Air Force

Ogden, Utah

"Escalation"

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Rick Mayes

Richard Perry Mayes.

Interviewer

And Mayes is spelled?

Rick Mayes

M-A-Y-E-S.

Interviewer

You're from where in Oregon?

Rick Mayes

Central Point, Oregon.

Interviewer

And you were born there?

Rick Mayes

I was born in Klamath Falls, Oregon, yes. And I grew up in that area.

Interviewer

What was your life like there before you went in the military?

Rick Mayes

Wonderful. I grew up in the area. I spent time with my uncles, grandfather, and dad. We spent a lot of time fishing outdoors. My granddad had a small farm. The Central Point area wasn't large, but growin' up in the grade school in junior high and high school. High school was great; the '60s were great. It was wonderful.

Interviewer

What year did you graduate from high school?

Rick Mayes

I graduated at Crater High School in Central Point in 1965.

Interviewer

At that point, what had you heard about Vietnam?

Rick Mayes

In 1962, for an example, my freshman year, my dad's best friend was a World War II vet, and we spent a lot of time with them. Their son had just come back wounded from Vietnam, and we were pals and so I spent a little time with him. He gave me an overview. Of course, it's just me in high school. He had a strange, distant look in his face and he was retracted. He had come home with a Purple Heart, but he wasn't the same person we knew when he left. I found that bizarre. I tried to talk with him, and he wasn't very vocal at all. He was very withdrawn. Very withdrawn.

Interviewer

What had you heard on the news about Vietnam?

Rick Mayes

It was in the news every day. In our area, we knew that we were gonna get drafted. We went right into high school knowing that the senior classes were all going to war. So we went through high school knowing that when you graduate, you're gone.

Interviewer

Did you think it might be over by the time you graduated?

Rick Mayes

We had hoped, but it just kept dragging on. And then in '65, it just kept escalating. They just kept building up more. It was on Huntley and Brinkley news every night, and we'd watch that. And there they were, showing all of that film. It upset my dad. He was a World War II vet in New Guinea, and he just went nuts over that.

Interviewer

He didn't like what he was seeing?

Rick Mayes

No, I think it brought back memories for him because of the fact that--we didn't know at the time, but I think he had severe PTSD. He reacted very negatively. "We have no business over there," and so on and so forth. That was the reaction throughout our family.

Interviewer

So how did you get in the military?

Rick Mayes

I went to college. I was able to get a deferment as long as I kept my grades good, so I went to college, and I was able to stay in 'til '68. That's when my number came up real high and so what I did-- while I was at college, they had what they called a delayed enlistment, which means that you could enlist, and then they would let you come into basic training at a certain time--in that case, it was June, right after school had let out. So that's what I did. I talked to the Army, Navy, and the Air Force. On the delay program that they offered, that's what I took, and I ended up with

the Air Force.

Interviewer

What was your profession that they gave you?

Rick Mayes

That's interesting. You take a battery of tests before you enter, and sometimes they do that your senior year of high school. They take those batteries of scores, and I came up real high on mechanical and electronics. So what they do is they screen you out, and then they focus you to pull you into those systems. So that's what they did with me, and I ended up as a weapons mechanic. After basic, I went right to Lowry Air Force Base and trained in weapons and nuclear weapons loading on F-4's.

Interviewer

Nuclear weapons?

Rick Mayes

Nuclear weapons.

Interviewer

What was that like?

Rick Mayes

Well, they processed us for clearances as soon as we got into that arena. That's when things in the security business get real tight. We lived under rules, and they were very tight. We learned all of the mechanics of the bomb; how they were launched; how they did all of this stuff because you had to know how to set up the bombs on the airplane to do what they were supposed to do. That was our job, and I was a number two man on a weapons crew, so I handled the cockpit and engaged all of the black boxes to make that bomb hot. So in flight, when they did their thing, they could perform.

Interviewer

How many weeks of training did you go through?

Rick Mayes

The tech school at Lowry Air Force Base was about 18 weeks. I remember arriving there and it was like six months, and it's intensive training. It's every day, even Saturdays, from sunrise to sunset. You have instructors that cover each of these areas. Once you complete one section, then you go to the next section, and then the next, and the next. It's an elevated process that takes you up to the higher level. Some of the folks that screen out don't make those scores--off they go. But as you go up, it's like a pyramid. It narrows down. Not everybody makes it through to the upper levels, but they find jobs for you. The military is good at that.

Interviewer

Did you make it through?

Rick Mayes

Yes.

Interviewer

What happened to you then?

Rick Mayes

I got an assignment. They said, "This half of the class, you guys are going to Vietnam; this half are going to Europe." I was in the Europe side. So I was sent to 36th Tact Fighter Wing, 22nd Tactical Fighter Squadron; Battenberg, Germany. That's where I went into more training. That's where we went to the five level, which is Buck Sergeant. That's the proficiency training that we went through in Germany, so you were up and fully trained. They kept you there for about two years. That's where they run you through the load barn; you memorize all of your operations and your procedures. You have checklists, and you memorize every word of it to know what to do so that you can do it freely. They assign weapons crews by a crew chief and then three operators. Your job is to load the bombs for the mission of the day. They called it the load barn, and we went through weeks and weeks until we passed the proficiency, then to the flight lines.

Interviewer

How did you end up in Vietnam?

Rick Mayes

That's quite interesting. As I got later into my work at the 22nd Tact Fighter Squadron, they were deploying the aircraft mechanics as fast as they could to Vietnam. They'd get 'em trained in Germany, and then deploy 'em. And we were running short of mechanics, so they took a lot of us weapons guys and had us helping the flight line mechanics to launch the airplanes. We did all kinds of things, and there were other duties as required. So that's what I did and I ended up helping on our airplane.

The crew chief was getting ready to deploy, so we were like assistants, and we did whatever to prep the airplane for flight. In the Cold War, most of these fighter squadrons were on alert status, which meant your airplane had to be hot and ready to go 24/7. That's what we did. We got an early-morning launch notice, so we were sent out. We had two inches of freezing rain in the winter in January and February. I was assigned to go up on top of the wing and de-ice the airplane. In those days, you had a pump truck with a hose and an on/off switch to spray methyl alcohol to de-ice the airplane. I was on the wing, and when the pressure came up, I had no traction, and off the front wing I went and landed on my left leg and tore it up good.

I couldn't go back to weapons loading because that's under the wings of the airplane and you crawl around, and so they gave me a medical release and assigned me as a 702 clerk, which is secret clearance. Well, I figured, "Wow. Maybe I'm gonna get off pretty good here." And no sooner had that taken place -- my training was up to the five level. I got order to Tucson, Arizona on Davis-Monthan Air Force Base--a clerk. As soon as I got to Tucson, I was

retrained and given a whole 'nother battery of training. This time, it was for the next level of security clearance. And I mean this was intense training.

I knew when I checked in the first day there was somethin' funny 'cause all the doors in our headquarters had push-button locks on every door. I said, "Whew. This is strange." I had no idea I was going into a Special Ops unit, and it was. My training took me to top-secret message preparations, flight operations, flight planning, flight plans, photo recon, photo intel, and the processing of all the paperwork as a clerk. It wasn't clerk work. It was just lots of other things.

Once I got my clearance, I went to the two weeks' preparation that they go through for inevitable, like the pilot training we had to go through the black box captured, interrogation, and so on, and so forth. That was real intense 'cause they really put you through it. Then off I went to Da Nang, Vietnam. Our unit had U-2's, C-130s that was loaded with TE-154s called Firebees. These were drones, and these drones had extremely high resolution Bausch and Lomb cameras. We were filming for recon, and my job was to, once the film was taken out of the bird, it was turned over to me, and I took it for processing. Then once that film was processed, I screened it out, filtered it, marked it for high security, put it in an envelope, run over to a T-33 jet that was waiting on the runway, and handed to a Colonel, and he took it to Tan Son Nhut Air Base every day.

Interviewer

So you were in top-secret recognizance?

Rick Mayes

Photo recon; I was the courier.

Interviewer

Explain what a firebee is.

Rick Mayes

A firebee is a small drone, and it's maybe 12-, 13-feet long; wingspan maybe four feet. And it had a Williams International Jet Engine in it. It was just a little feller, but boy, could it scoot. These flew extreme high mock speeds. They could be remotely flown from stations inside the C-130 by remote pilots. And then at a certain point that the missions were run, they would aim them out over the South China Sea. And then our pilots, in trailers, would take over and finish the flight; take them to high altitude, 40,000 feet; deploy a chute when the mission was done. And they'd float down, and then that's where our retrieval system came in.

We had a specially modified Jolly Green. It was stripped down. It had a single .50 on the side that seldom we ever used, but every once in a while, we did, but it had hooks that went out the back and a huge deploying reel. We would drop these hooks out the back, and the pilots would fly in and catch the chute of the drone that's floating

down, bring it back to base, drop it on huge inner tubes, put in on a carrier, load it back on the 130s, and back they went to U-Tapao, Thailand.

Interviewer

This was before cruise missiles?

Rick Mayes

Oh, absolutely. We'd even heard that they were testing 'em, working on putting weapons on 'em. I'd heard that they'd said they got some to work, but remember, this is back in the early '70s. We were already doing drone stuff.

Interviewer

Did they have television cameras in the nose or anything like that? How did you know where they were?

Rick Mayes

They had special crypto radio frequencies. The enemy never knew anything about 'em.

Interviewer

Did you run some of these retrieval flights?

Rick Mayes

Yes, I did. Yeah, there was quite a thrill. You figure you're in a Jolly Green Giant that's specially equipped, and you've got three long poles hanging out the back, and the pilot is flying right straight at that parachute, and he's a helicopter. Margin of error is not very large. They had to hit dead nuts. The pilot had a string on the front of the nose, and he had crosshairs marked in his windscreen so that he knew how to hit that parachute dead nuts. And they were good at it. But you figure that shoot's comin' at quite a speed, and then he comes in and swoops down, lifts, and then he snags on the poles would catch it. And then we'd drop real fast.

Interviewer

Any particular memorable missions that come to mind?

Rick Mayes

I only went on a few of the missions because I wasn't part of the crew for the retrieval stuff, but I was part of a very small unit; we were about 25 people. Because we had a modified Jolly Green, when pilots went down in the DMZ, sometimes we were asked to help. Not often, but we had a .50.

Our boss wasn't always real excited to help out on retrievals, but because pilots are pilots, that was an automatic thing. Every once in a while, and because I had weapons training, I got to be the door gunner. So we'd go out and one particular mission--I only went on three missions. Two of 'em, they had already got the pilots, but this one wasn't. It was an afternoon, and we were asked to run the perimeter with the rest of the birds, 'cause that's what they'd do once there was a purple flare from the downed pilots. There was a perimeter sweep of helicopters, usually the Huey's, to keep the enemy from getting to our pilot. Then a Jolly Green would go in with a probe and pull them out.

Well, we were doing a perimeter--I don't know exactly where in the DMZ, but it was a small river, and it flowed east. My pilot spotted three Viet Cong comin' down the banks of the river where they had a trail. So he swept in, and he says, "We're goin' in hot." So we went in, and we got 'em. And that was the only time. It's an adrenaline rush, and it seems like it goes lightening fast. Afterwards, I had the shakes and stuff, but they at least let me train.

I remember before these missions, that the boss pilot Major came out, and he says, "Well, we gotta show you how to run this 50. So we went out to the South China Sea down by South China Beach, and there was an area down there where the cliffs were steep and there was jungle, so on and so forth. He flew down there. He says, "I gotta let you know how this operates when we have to do this." So he was doin' all kinds of maneuvers and stuff, and he had me in the door on the right-hand door with the gun. He says, "The .50 is pretty easy to run, but you don't shoot my blades, or I'll come back and kick your ass." So I had to learn the perimeter of shooting and the angles, and he taught me the figure eight sweep and the lead for the tracers.

Interviewer

What year is this?

Rick Mayes

'71.

Interviewer

Tell us what's going on in Vietnam, and tell us what all the men are talking about, and then tell us what do people think about what's going on.

Rick Mayes

We had noticed, by '71, things were picking up from the North. Our intelligence was finding that they were building up. The Chinese regulars were involved. The North Vietnamese regulars were involved because we could tell on our film that they wore pith helmets, and they were in suntans. And that was the North Vietnamese regulars. The black jammie guys were the Viet Cong. But they're all working together, and occasionally, we'd pick up some guys that were from China. The attitude was that we were seeing things pick up. We couldn't see an end in sight; it seemed like we were on a buildup.

Interviewer

You say you saw Chinese. These were combat troops?

Rick Mayes

Yes.

Interviewer

So you're saying that Red China had combat troops in Vietnam?

Rick Mayes

They were up in the North area. There were advisors; they were helping out; they were in there. Oh, yeah.

Interviewer

It's '71. Things are building up, but you say there's no end in sight. What do the men say? What's the morale like?

Rick Mayes

We didn't mingle with a lot of other units. We were off by ourselves in our own little hooch and our own pad for our chopper, but we didn't get a chance to spend a lot of time with the Marines or the Army guys, or any of the other flight units because we were kinda isolated off. But the general morale in our outfit was pretty good, but there were some who were getting tired. We didn't get a lot of news from back home. Some of the guys did, but they were starting to wear down. But our tours were only short. We were in and out, in and out, and in and out. Our hooch and our choppers stayed there. But when a guy's tour was up, he was out. We didn't deploy or exit like any other units. A lot of the other guys went as a unit. We were individual-- special skills. When this guy's time was up, he was out; another guy came in. So our morale was okay. We all had short-timer calendars and that was a special religious ceremony.

Interviewer

Tell us what short means.

Rick Mayes

You have your time, and you start on a countdown, and the calendar was a playboy picture with numbers on it, and each time you peeled off the number on your countdown, the picture showed behind. When you got real short, that's when you got real nervous to make sure that you didn't get hit by the rockets and the mortars every day and every night. Da Nang was hit every day and every night.

Interviewer

Tell people how big Da Nang is, the air base there.

Rick Mayes

The air base, I would say, would be a lot like Ogden Airport, with all of the support stuff all the way around. On the north side of the base was a short distance to the fence, and there was a mortuary; tons of aluminum coffin boxes. It was an old French air base that we had just upgraded and utilized everything from when the French were in there. They had a little, tiny tower, a little yellow building.

Interviewer

It was full of activity day and night. Planes taking off, landing.

Rick Mayes

Oh, yeah, 24/7. All the time, yep. We flew missions day and night. The 366th Tact Fighter Squadron, her wing was in there. They were the gunfighters of force. We had Puff, the DC-3's, the gunships all around. The Army had different spots just outside of Da Nang, all the way to China Beach, which is just south of us and to the east. Most

of the chopper outfits were down there.

Interviewer

Would you ever go into town on leave? Would you ever have any of those opportunities?

Rick Mayes

None.

Interviewer

USO shows, anything?

Rick Mayes

USO's that were on base. Sammy Davis, Jr., we were there for that, for the Christmas show. They gave us a mortar attack at the end of it. But we were not allowed off base. We were top-secret specialists; forbidden-- Article 15 if you did. We snuck off base, and boy did we get burnt. We went to South China Beach, but that was a no-no. Oh, no.

Interviewer

So what you were doing was that critical?

Rick Mayes

Yeah. My orders said, "Operation Buffalo Hunter." That's what we were sent in to do, and that was the Ha Noi and the Hai Phong Harbor bombings and the coordination. We did all the pre-intel, photo ops, targets.

Interviewer

Did you know why you were doing a specific mission or did you just carry it out?

Rick Mayes

We carried out. We didn't get all the details. Tan Son Nhut and all the generals had all that under their hat. But when we weren't doing this specific operation, our daily tasks and flights were to help all the firebases; all of the Army units up in the north highways; all the borders; and that all that intelligence was so that the Howitzer's could be placed to protect the firebases. And that was our dailies. This didn't take place every day because we had inclement weather. Boom! That's it. You're down. If we can't see it, you can't take pictures of it.

Interviewer

Tell us about the rainy season.

Rick Mayes

There wasn't a hell of a lot you could do during the monsoons 'cause it would just rain, and rain, and rain, and rain, and rain. It's sticky and muggy. Everything was wet and just miserable. Everything stayed wet. You couldn't dry anything out. You could hang your jungle fatigues on a stick, and they wouldn't do nothin' but stay wet and stink. We had a lot of problems with jungle rot. They talk about that.

Interviewer

Tell us about jungle rot.

Rick Mayes

I have no idea what the heck it was, but it was the most irritating, nasty, rotten thing that could ever happen to your feet, and occasionally, you can get it in your hands.

Interviewer

Or private areas.

Rick Mayes

Oh, big time. In fact, that's where the shorts went that way. You had to stay as cool and dry as you could, but it was burning, itching, and a rash. Your feet was just constantly-sometimes, they'd even crack and bleed. We tried everything. The medical corps gave us ointments and stuff. That was no good. That didn't do a darn thing. But when we came home, you still had it. We had to deal with it for some time.

Interviewer

Tell us about coming home. How did that happen for you?

Rick Mayes

When I came home, I didn't come home the conventional way. Normally, at Da Nang, when the Army and the Marines were coming home, the Pan Am jets would fly 'em, and they'd fill that airplane with a whole bunch of rotating soldiers that had been off either in hangers waiting to deploy--and they kept control of 'em, and get 'em all ready to go, and they'd get on all their pretty uniforms, and climb in Pan Am's. We didn't. I went home on a C-130 that was on a return mission, our own airplane that carried the drones. And my day come, and my old man says, "Okay, you're outta here." I didn't know the day before 'cause I had already extended my tour. I was at the end of my service hitch, four years. I was already into the fifth year. So I didn't know; orders didn't come. And finally, they did. I climbed into the back of a C-130 and back to U-Tapao, Thailand.

Interviewer

It just occurred to me that you're sitting on Da Nang, and you're watching all this air activity. Tell us about when the new troops would come in.

Rick Mayes

Like myself when I first landed there, you're stunned by what you're seeing. Seeing these new guys, they looked like calves at a new gate. They're just big-eyed; can't believe what they're seeing. It's shock; it really is because they're seeing so much activity. They really don't know. None of us knew. When you're feet on the ground, that's now what? Until your First Sergeant or someone who's assigned to pick you up--in our case, in our unit, the First Sergeant came and got me, but I got off the airplane alone. I didn't come as a group. Everything that I saw was the Army were always in platoons or groups, and the Marines did the same thing. They're always in groups, and everything they did was in groups. Not us. We were all individual. So I got on a 130; flew back to U-Tapao. And then once at U-Tapao, I had wait for a top-secret flight back to Tucson.

Interviewer

Are there any sounds or smells or anything that bring that back, like helicopter rotors?

Rick Mayes

Absolutely. Like I said, we were under mortar and rocket attack every day and every night, and I have a hard time with fireworks. Still do. Choppers, when they come in. DF-4's from Hill Air Force Base. You're hard-wired. It never goes away. Those buttons are automatic. Automatic.

Interviewer

When do you actually get out of the service?

Rick Mayes

I processed out at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. It was near the middle or the end of June.

Interviewer

Of '70...?

Rick Mayes

Two.

Interviewer

'72.

Rick Mayes

I was married, and I had a new little son that I hadn't seen. He was born in Germany. While I was in Tucson, once I was deployed, I was amazed at how he had grown while I was gone. But things were different.

Interviewer

How was the country different? How were things different?

Rick Mayes

They didn't like us. In fact, when I left, usually you wear your uniform off base. They told us, "Don't wear your uniform once you're discharged." I found that very discouraging that most of the public and the anti-war thing was just furious. They didn't like us. In fact, when I got home that night, I came in at about midnight. I decided to go down outside the gate at Tucson and get a beer. I wanted a beer, so I went in there, and I got in a fight. I was sittin' at the bar, and this long-haired hippy freak called me a baby killer. "What the hell did you go over there for?" I said, "I'm a patriot, and I serve my country." He says, "What an asshole," and that was all it took. I went over, and we started to dance.

Interviewer

Was this shocking to you?

Rick Mayes

No, because it had started early. I was a sole surviving son. And in the family, early on, that was a big deal. My dad was absolutely furious about me going in, and I said, "No. I wanna do my duty. I'm a patriot." He had a fit over it. My grandfather had a fit over it. The general consensus was it was building in the country early. I would say by '65, people were saying, "Wait a minute. When is this gonna end?" And by the '70s, good grief, it had now stretched out and out. And by the time I came home, geez, the hostility was terrible. They did not treat us very good at all. In fact, the first thing I did as soon as I was out is let my hair grow, so I could blend back in. To get jobs, you had to do what you had to do. Never talked about it; you couldn't talk about it. Nobody wanted to talk to you about it, so you just kept it penned up, kept it to yourself.

Interviewer

Did you watch the fall of Saigon on TV on April 30, 1975? What was your reaction?

Rick Mayes

I had a sinking feeling because all of us that were there, we did not look at it as a loss. We did our jobs. We were trained. We did what our country asked of us, and we're proud of that. I'm still proud I was in the Air Force and all my friends. I have a lot of GI friends: Marines, Navy, Army, and we all feel the same. It was a sinking feeling, and I realized because of the political things that were going on, that this was a political war and a not a win victory for the military. They wouldn't let us.

Interviewer

Who's "they?"

Rick Mayes

Congress, the Senate, whatever; the powers-to-be. I'd seen firebases that we'd have one day, and then all of the sudden, they're asked to pull out. Then Viet Cong would have it. This exchange happened quite frequently. We'd have areas, and we never could hold them, or they were told to leave. I was, "That's not putting a flag in a piece of dirt." But that was my own personal feelings about that.

Interviewer

Now that there is this distance, is there anything you wanna tell us about that whole experience and the world we live in now?

Rick Mayes

From a soldier's viewpoint, we were drafted; we served our country. If I was to look at the operations that are goin' on today, it's very disappointing. We're sending soldiers over into war zones. They're coming back with severe PTSD, and then they're sending them back two, three, and four tours. All I can think is, "Are you nuts?" Go in there; win; stick a flag in it; put a K-Mart up; and call it a day." But let the military win something. We haven't won anything. We don't win anymore.

A Marine is taught you take it at all costs and stick a flag in it. And then there's us in the Air Force that support that.

That's the way I think that it should be because that's the way we were taught. How come they're not doing it? And, oh, by the way, how come we're involved in so many? Our taxpayers dollars are going over there, and our soldiers are comin' back all messed up, and you're not winning any ground. What do you want? What is it? Money? Again? Just like Vietnam? Remember, democracy is something that we enjoy and our freedoms. Those people may not necessarily like it.

Interviewer

When you were there, did you have any encounters with the civilians?

Rick Mayes

Oh, yeah.

Interviewer

What did you think about them? Tell us about some of those things.

Rick Mayes

The civilians that we encountered, the regular Vietnamese, they were grateful we were there. I'm not sure that they cared who won or who lost. It seems that they have been involved in wars so much that they would jump to whoever's winning. It's an advantage for them. Their way of lifestyle was totally different. Mama-san was the head of the house, and she ran everything and all the children did whatever it took to support their homes. So their lifestyle was totally different. I do not believe one iota that it was about communism whatsoever. History shows that Ho Chi Minh was making deals with Washington before it went sour. Then he went to somebody else. So what's it all about? It's politics at our cost.

Interviewer

One more question about the firebees. Did any of them ever come back shot up?

Rick Mayes

Oh, yeah. We'd have holes on 'em. Every once in a while, they'd get one. During the operation, they had one go down in Ha Noi. And of course, you remember seein' the pictures of it, and they had this metal plate that said "Williams International." That was a firebee. That's American. But every once in a while, they'd get one.

Interviewer

Did they have any kind of detonating device on it to protect it from being captured?

Rick Mayes

We never had to do that because at the speeds it went, if we put it in a dive, and put it in the ground, there wouldn't be much left. Remember, this thing could go two or three times faster than a MiG in a climb.

Interviewer

You were flying cruise missiles.

Rick Mayes

Oh, I wasn't, but I was involved in it, yes, and doing my part. But yeah, the drones, they were made right there in

Tucson. Teledyne and Raytheon was right there, and they built the air frames for it. The engines came from Williams International right here in Ogden. They ship everything down there, put 'em together, bring 'em out to us, and we'd take out and used 'em.

Interviewer

Can you explain the intelligence photos and recon?

Rick Mayes

Important targets, as we were designated from the general's staff in Tan Son Nhut. If there was activity, they wanted to know where it was at. We monitored Ho Chi Minh Trail. We monitored all routes and the activities. Our film would discover such things as how the armament missiles, rockets, came into country; loaded on san pans; taken up into rivers, were hermetically sealed. They got 'em from Russia. They were dropped in the river, and we had film of that. They would come at sundown, the Viet Cong, and then pull it out of the river; carry it on their backs to the different designations.

Interviewer

Did you have night capability to photograph?

Rick Mayes

No, we didn't. We didn't do night runs with 'em because we didn't -- remember, the bird was small, and our cameras were pretty good size.

Interviewer

So you would take those kinds of photographs of things coming into Vietnam?

Rick Mayes

Right. We were trained to look for certain things, and we would have the film, and we had this little lens that was on a four-pointed tripod, and we could look in at detail from the film. The detail of the film was amazing.

Interviewer

How amazing?

Rick Mayes

Well, from certain altitudes, as an example, from our drawings, we were able to pick up the reading from one of our POW's in camp, the lettering.

Interviewer

How high were the drones flying?

Rick Mayes

The speed of the film was very fast, and so our birds flew not slow, but fast. But the speed of the film, they could fly fast and get a lot of material.

Interviewer

At what altitude?

Rick Mayes

It depended on the weather or the location and the terrain.

Interviewer

Were you concerned about POW's?

Rick Mayes

Very much. That was a primary mission of us, to locate and find. That came up quite often during our daily stuff.

Interviewer

Did you find many?

Rick Mayes

Yeah. We had prime missions to look for and find POW's: the camps, their locations, and all the terrain, so that extractions could be made. We did get good film, and this film was--unnecessary material would be like if you made a pass over John Gull and there was nothing there. Well, those would be red-X'd out on a film. But if they're certain designated areas, then you would mark them. It was a wax pencil, and you would make a mark, and you would identify briefly what it was on the film. And each of these were the pictures about so big. Those missions that we flew for finding POW's was primary. We did that quite a bit. We have several missions, but we flew north in Ha Noi all over, lookin' for the POW camps. We found them; we identified POW's. We knew that they moved 'em quite frequently. The President had had an extraction, and I'm not sure when this was--after I left. I can't remember.

Interviewer

The San Tay Raid.

Rick Mayes

Yeah, and I think that was in '73, wasn't it? I can't remember.

Interviewer

But you were looking for POW's.

Rick Mayes

Yeah, we were constantly looking for POW's, and this film allowed them how to figure out for extraction because it was terrain and buildings and so forth. And the other folks could do their business. But that's what they used. Film says a thousand words. We would have directives come down, and that was my job at night. Usually, I would get the messages about 2:00 a.m. in the morning, just about the time the rockets would come in. My driver would take me down in a jeep to the communications center, where I would go in and get our orders for the next day, flight missions. And that's how we knew what the missions were. That's when I knew where we'd be flying for the day.

Interviewer

You said it was a thousand words from a single photo. Did you see anything heartbreaking? Did you see anything

that would disturb you? It must be hard to watch.

Rick Mayes

Oh, it was. What we were concerned with is they weren't doing anything to get 'em. Remember, they made only one extraction, and then the peace treaty, and then they all came home. We were concerned amongst ourselves why they didn't use any Special Forces, Marines. Just go get 'em. But I don't know why.

Interviewer

From the photos you saw, would this have been possible?

Rick Mayes

I doubt it because the way they moved 'em around, they kept 'em close to Ha Noi and they had certain camps. They just kept moving them. They didn't get 'em out into a place where you could fly into. Ha Noi was really tight. They had SAM 4's, SAM 5's. Our pilots, that's where they'd get hit.

Interviewer

Tell us more about the defenses of Ha Noi, what the pilots were facing.

Rick Mayes

We noticed toward the end, the Hai Phong and Ha Noi Harbor raids that they had to come in with a SAM 5. Our pilots were used to SAM 4's. SAM 4's could only go so high. And those were the 121-millimeter Russian rockets. Not the 121's. The SAM's were much larger. They were aimed to get the birds. But in the Ha Noi Harbor raid, we lost B-52's, F-4's, because the B-52's were ranged at the 32- to 35,000 feet. The new SAM 5's could hit 'em. They didn't know that. They were caught flat-footed. That's why many of the targets were disarrayed. How come they squawked about hospitals being hit? Well, the SAM 5's disturbed the flight patterns. 52's were goin' down. We had one come in crippled; the tail was blown off, but it still flew. I was amazed. A B-52 landed a Da Nang, crippled. But the targets, we often saw craters of the blanket bombings from the B-52's. There was lots of that. Villages, so on and so forth, we didn't get to see the detail of what you might call the body counts. We were after buildings, vehicles, troops, movements; certain identified things that were military movements, military hardware; that's what they're after so that they can go in and hit 'em with the bombs.

Interviewer

When you photographed, what was coming into Hai Phong?

Rick Mayes

Yeah, we knew every ship. Russian ships would go in there. Some Korean stuff would go in there. Not a lot of commercial stuff like you would say, but it was military. They had commercial stuff, but they had a certain area in the harbor that was strictly for military.

Interviewer

You knew information from your photos; but information to the higher-ups, it was skewed. Did you feel like people were being misled? Was somebody distorting information when it got from you, did you ever feel like that?

Rick Mayes

No, none whatsoever. Once I had the package ready to deliver, my driver would take me in a jeep right out to the runway. There was a T-33 with a colonel waiting for it. His airplane was hot; I'd hand the package to him through the window. He'd sign for it; I'd take the receipt, and that was it. I never heard another word.

Interviewer

But later on did you read report information in the papers and you thought, "It wasn't that way."

Rick Mayes

Oh, yeah. During the Ha Noi/Hai Phong Harbor, the complete mission, we had headphones, and we could hear everything going on, the whole thing. We could hear the F-4's, the B-52's, because we had communication links with them. That was the most horrible thing I think I'd ever heard 'cause we could hear pilots getting hit. The B-52 pilots say, "I'm hit! I'm goin' down! I'm gonna ditch where I can." Or blank. Because we heard all of the Falcon Codes that the pilots were talkin', and we knew the Falcon Codes for the flight ops. That's a language all their own. I don't know if you've ever heard of it.

The Falcon Codes were language of the day. The pilots would communicate back and forth without violating military orders. There were cuss words. There were a whole gamet of things. They used them, and the Falcon Codes were flying. Oh, I'm a Falcon 21, so on and so forth. But that was hard to hear, when the pilots were goin' down because we had the communication systems that flew our drones up there. So in monitoring the missions, after the mission was done, we had to go and do flight assessments of the area afterwards with the drones. That's when we discovered that they had missed--well the harbor was great. They hit the Russian ships and everything just fine, but some of the main targets that they had in Ha Noi-- we missed. Some we hit. We tried to get the fuel area, and we missed some areas there. If you look at it from film, it's just a little circle. We could know what were tank farms, etc.

Interviewer

Did you ever see any targets that you identified that you sent forward to higher command and later saw the same targets where they failed to take it out?

Rick Mayes

Yes, that did happen. We knew that the pilots, whenever they were called in, in missions, there were a lot of errors in Vietnam. We had a lot of mistakes happen. Miscommunication or no communication, and we had, in some cases, firebases would call in for strikes. They would ask for a certain weapon, and maybe they used something they weren't supposed to, or they got misconstrued. Because let's say we were lookin' for bombs, and actually, what we seen were napalm and burned off a whole area. We didn't know that that wasn't called for, but later on did we learn that those were things that happened. 'Cause all that we did was identify what we saw. Like we could see firebases, and maybe we'd go in a week later, and nothing. They were gone. We'd say, "Well, why are they gone?" Why is this back and forth all the time? We got some of the Buddhist temples, and we knew that they were hiding rockets and armament. The Viet Cong would use them for storage, but we couldn't touch 'em.

Interviewer

Tell us about the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Rick Mayes

Highway One. Isn't that what it was, Larry? Highway One. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was the main road to the north, and that was the main area that all the military activity took place. On our side, that's where our troops were to head north. I think it went all the way to Tan Son Nhut, Highway One. It's a main highway. With dirt roads, our Army guys patrolled 'em with Deuces, with .50 cals. We moved troops; we moved everything up this highway to the north to the DMZ area.

Interviewer

I thought the Ho Chi Minh Trail was the one that skirted the border to the east, and the Viet Cong would use it to bring all the supplies from the north into Vietnam. It was actually in Cambodia, and it went through those countries.

Rick Mayes

Yes, Cambodia, Laos, across the north to the DMZ; that was the main activity. They moved everything.

Interviewer

Is there anything that we're not asking you that you would like to share that you think is important that people hear?

Rick Mayes

I feel that I had 14 years: four years regular, ten years of reserves. I believe that if folks could understand that we are wired for life. Our movie screen in our head, the film never goes away, moments of what we'd experienced in war--the rocket attacks; the things that we came back with that was lost forever before we went over; our families; the troubles we had that we didn't know what was wrong with us for years.

I've been married four times. I couldn't figure out relationships. We came home to a whole different world, and we were already changed forever. I would say look at the soldiers today, please, and understand that they're not the same as when they left. Be understanding of these guys. They're damaged; they need help. Be a part of their help. And I hope our government decides to end these wars that are useless. We're not going anywhere with 'em. We're just bringing home more and more damaged soldiers. If they could tell us what the victory is, that would be wonderful. But I've never heard anybody say what the victory is. What are we getting?

Interviewer

Was there a victory in Vietnam?

Rick Mayes

For us, it was. We did our jobs; we did what we were told. Did we win the ground? No. I was sad about that. I think we all were. But for us, individually? No. My dad told me when I came out, he says, "Well, you didn't win the war." I says, "So? I did." "Well, there's no parade for you buddy." I said, "Well, so? I did my job. I was a patriot. I did what my country asked of me." It didn't bother me. Even today, I'm still proud. There's lots that left this country; deserted

their country; went to Canada or whatever. They're yellow bellies. Win, lose, or draw, whatever it is, you do your job and you do the best you can for it. That's what our soldiers are doing now. They're doing what they're told. They're fighting, and I hope that this country will someday at the top decide that you just don't send our guys out there to just be ruined. We're not expendable; we're human beings. We're a part of "We the People." That's what our government misses, "We the People," we're a part of it.

Interviewer

What would you say about the 58,000 people in the world that are listed on the Vietnam Wall? Most people don't have any inclination of what Vietnam was about. They just know that 58,000 people are listed in Washington, D.C. on the Wall.

Rick Mayes

Just people? No. They're comrades; they're soldiers. They're the ones that gave up the ultimate sacrifice. Many of them were right beside us. We lost one of our guys in our unit. It imprints on your brain, those people who were special, who gave the ultimate sacrifice. You never forget. Timmy was one of our best electronics guys, and I brought a picture of him. We lost him at--it devastates you because you are--as a soldier in a war zone, you are more than family. You are bonded brothers for life. So unique, you would give your life for your brother; so unique, you share everything; so unique, you would never let one of 'em outta your sight, in a conflict or in danger.

Interviewer

His name was Tim what?

Rick Mayes

I can't remember his last name.

Interviewer

How did he die?

Rick Mayes

This is a side that seldom is told. He wasn't wounded or killed in action. He somehow got downtown and he'd acquired what they called a strain of venereal disease that was called the Black (Gonk?). He was not allowed to come home. It was a strain that was new; they couldn't cure it with any kind of shots. The security police came in and got him and took him to China at Leper Island, and he was reported MIA. Sad story.

Interviewer

He died of the disease?

Rick Mayes

He was taken to Leper Island. He couldn't come home. He had a strain of venereal disease that they would not let him come home.

Interviewer

How did you know when he died?

Rick Mayes

We don't know that. He was an MIA.

Interviewer

Are there any other stories like this?

Rick Mayes

We had heard about it; otherwise, we hadn't known about it. But when he got it, that's when it came right to the forefront. We went, "What?"

Interviewer

There term was Black Gonk?

Rick Mayes

That's what it was. That's what we called it. It was the Black Gonk.

Interviewer

And he was sent to Leper Island where?

Rick Mayes

In the South China Sea.

Interviewer

I'm just curious what STD you could actually die from, if he actually died from it?

Rick Mayes

We don't know that he died.

Interviewer

But why they would even say, "You've got Black Gonk. You're going to this leper island."

Rick Mayes

This wasn't a scare tactic. This was serious.

Interviewer

Tell us about the briefing.

Rick Mayes

As we went into country, there were certain things. We went through all kinds of briefings. And the one thing they told us is that the Viet Cong would use the girls to get to us. We'd heard that they had devices that they would use during sexual intercourse to injure you. We were told to stay away from certain areas. But luckily, I didn't have to worry about that 'cause we couldn't go. But the general briefing was for everybody. But Timmy got in trouble because he wasn't supposed to be off base, and he snuck down there. So when he attracted this, it brought a lot of attention to our small unit.

Interviewer

Go back and tell us about the briefing, what they told you about this strain of venereal disease.

Rick Mayes

Well, it was probably a scare tactic 'cause we didn't believe it. Oh, well. What do you mean, a special strain? But they told us, "If you have sexual contacts, and you get this, it's very serious. It's a special strain of venereal disease." They were not happy with the guys when they go, especially R and R's to Australia or Bangkok, oh, man, that was the, "You're gonna get in trouble, you're government property, so protect it. Wear rubbers; do this; do that. Don't do this; don't do that."

Interviewer

I remember it was a court marshal offense to get sunburned.

Rick Mayes

And that's what happened to me at South China Beach. When we snuck down to South China Beach, we weren't supposed to be off base. We went down for the day, and we got sunburned and drunk. The colonel decided he was gonna Article 15 all five of us. Then he had a change of heart, but the next two weeks, duties were nasty. It was an Article 15 for sunburn, automatic.

Interviewer

A lot of guys were doing anything to get out of duty.

Rick Mayes

Well, for us, we really couldn't because we all had --

Interviewer

I mean, the general GI.

Rick Mayes

We didn't have a lot of contact with the other units because first of all, our restrictions. The only time we got to interchange with any of these guys was at the NCO club at Da Nang. We'd go down there for beer or celebrate the pilots that they'd retrieve. The pilots would go down there and pay for all the beer for the folks that helped extract 'em from the 366th. Or celebrate a guy going home. He'd get his water buffalo wallet and his Da Nang cigarette lighter when he was short and ready to go.

Interviewer

You still have your lighter, don't you?

Rick Mayes

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

Did you see fields of marijuana in your recon photos?

Rick Mayes

Military only, and that's all we did. We were after troop movement, vehicles, period. Military only. Those, we'd heard

about 'em. We'd heard about the poppy fields and so on and so forth. I know that drugs were really cheap and available over there, but as far as our intel, no. We didn't do any of that.

Interviewer

Tell me more about talking to people. Were you inclined to talk about your experience in Vietnam when others just didn't wanna hear it? Or did you just not wanna talk about it?

Rick Mayes

I just didn't wanna talk about it. The general feeling was so negative, you didn't even wanna be identified as a return soldier. For years, I never said anything about it.

Interviewer

What if the feeling had not been so negative about the war, would you have talked about it?

Rick Mayes

Probably not. I feel that in the first place, the business I was in was security. You didn't talk about that. It's top secret. Our business was not discussed. The only reason I even tell some of this is it's 40 years later. The general public, family, they didn't wanna talk about it. My dad was the first person I wanted to approach; didn't wanna talk about it; didn't wanna hear it. He lost. That was it. The only time that I encountered other Vietnam veterans was when I went to work at Hill Air Force Base in 1973. And we were all the same. I would say it was a withdrawn thing. We all were growin' our hairs long and blending in as much as possible. And hell, half the time I didn't even know these guys. I worked with a friend of mine, Terry Pierce, and I didn't know he was a Marine Vietnam until years later. Now we're friends in a group. There were lots of us like that.

Interviewer

Do you think your life would've been different if the country would have been more receptive?

Rick Mayes

Oh, absolutely. I think if this country was more receptive to us like they were the World War II veterans, I think that our lives would've been a lot different. We found that trying to get VA loans, we were looked down upon for years. Things weren't easy. Jobs weren't that easy to get. Being a veteran, you should be able to walk into an Air Force Base or an Army Base and get a job because that was made for veterans. It wasn't that easy to do. It just wasn't. It seems like there was a cloak over this whole country, anti-Vietnam.

Interviewer

How did you feel about how they showed the Vietnam vet in motion pictures or on television?

Rick Mayes

"Full Metal Jacket" and all the movies that came out are not even close portrayals to what it was really like and what we all experienced over there. They glamorized certain things that just weren't true. I think a lot of untruths circulated through this country. The My Lai massacres, so on and so forth. My personal experience about that is if people really knew what was goin' on in villages, they'd look at it totally different.

Interviewer

What was going on in villages?

Rick Mayes

These villages, these people were ambidextrous. One day, they could be your friend, and at night, they'd set a booby trap on your tank, your airplane, or whatever. We had to set booby traps on our jeep, airplanes, and our helicopters to make sure that they didn't come in. In other words, they had certain ways of getting to you with booby traps. We had learned that the folks that worked in the chow hall or helped in the kitchens during the day were Viet Cong at night. The villages would be friendly to you in the day, and the next thing you'd know, they'd have hatches where they'd come out of a night, and they were VC. I think that was quite rampant through the country, and I think Larry would confirm the fact that you didn't know. Kids would steal from you, the Vietnamese children. They'd run by and throw a hand grenade in the truck. We heard these stories all over the place.

Interviewer

What about the portrayal of the Vietnam vet as a drug-crazed loser? How many times have we seen that in television and movies?

Rick Mayes

Totally false. Recreationally, I would say it may occur in a very few and a small number. As far as military duty, we were all sharp, on point, doing our job because you have to rely on the others, and the others have to rely on you. You cannot go into any operation doing your job if you're all drugged up. Our recreation drug was booze. Everyone in our unit. We had no dope users in our outfit. We were boozers. When we had a day off, we'd get drunk. But when it was time to get ready for duty, we did. I think was quite across the board. The picture painted back here about drugs addicts, and so on and so forth is false.

Interviewer

What about after the war? The Vietnam vet as a tragic, broken drug-crazed person?

Rick Mayes

I believe that there were some guys that picked up the habit, and when they came home with the disappointments, that magnified PTSD. Magnified. And I believe strongly that that's what happened to them.

Interviewer

Is that a fair image of most of the people in Vietnam, that image?

Rick Mayes

No, I don't think so. I wouldn't--overall. I look at the assessment of what they labeled us with. They thought us as losers, drug addicts, and it's false. It's not true.

Interviewer

Thank you for coming.