Transcript of Jack Rhodes interview
Salt Lake City, Utah

Jack Rhodes

My full name is John Jack Rhodes. I go by Jack. I've always been called Jack.

Interviewer

Where are you from?

Jack Rhodes

From Logan, Utah.

Interviewer

You grew up there?

Jack Rhodes

I was raised in the town of River Heights right next to Logan, Utah, in Cache Valley.

Interviewer

You went to high school in the area?

Jack Rhodes

I went to High School at South Cache. There was a North Cache and a South Cache - there used to be.

Interviewer

And what year did you graduate?

Jack Rhodes

1958.

Interviewer

So when you graduated, there was no Vietnam or anything.

Jack Rhodes

No. No.

Interviewer

Well how did you get into the military and how did you become a helicopter pilot?

Jack Rhodes

Well it started out – I was fascinated by airplanes all my life, and I never thought I'd fly, but I gravitated down to the Pheonix area and found it easy to obtain a pilot's license in that area. So I bought a small plane with a friend and started gaining hours. After flying for a year and a half, I was really taken by the helicopters that were coming

along. And that technology intrigued me so much that I started talking to the military people. Rather than get sucked into the military I went and took their helicopter training and found out later they were gonna send me to Vietnam.

Interviewer

There was a television series called Whirlybirds at that time, I think. Do you remember this? It made helicopters very popular in pop culture at that time.

Jack Rhodes

Right.

Interviewer

What year did you actually go into the military?

Jack Rhodes

I went in '68.

Interviewer

What had you been doing before then?

Jack Rhodes

I had been in the military in the reserve, and I was actually a reservist. Right after high school, I went to basic training. Did a 6 months active duty. Didn't have anything to do with aviation.

Interviewer

What did your reserve unit do?

Jack Rhodes

I went to Ft. Ord back then - that's how old I am. I went to Ft. Ord and then went 4 months to Presidio in San Francisco. Photomapping was my MOS. I was trained in the photomapping process at that time.

Interviewer

Aviation mapping?

Jack Rhodes

No. Well, the photos were taken on aircraft but they had a different way of transposing them onto maps at that time.

Interviewer

So you already had your basic and everything - you'd had some training. So what year was it you went in as a helicopter pilot?

Jack Rhodes

Actually I had to go through basic again. It had been quite a while, so I went through basic training, and then helicopter primary school, in Texas, and then on over to Ft. Rucker.

Interviewer

And that year was?

Jack Rhodes

That would have been '68 going into '69 when I finished up.

Interviewer

So you knew you were going to go to Vietnam at that time?

Jack Rhodes

When I got out of primary training, I knew I was going to have to go over there.

Interviewer

Did you start training in any kind of specialty helicopters? You eventually ended up in gun ships. Were you trained in that?

Jack Rhodes

Yes. In Rucker, I was trained in the gunnery range for gun ships. And then was sent to Ft. Stewart, GA for tranisition into Cobra, AH1G Cobras. Gunship training. I did I think 25 hours training there. And then it was off to Vietnam.

Interviewer

How many helicopter pilots were being trained at that time?

Jack Rhodes

Quite a few.

Interviewer

Hundreds, or thousands?

Jack Rhodes

I suspect thousands. I don't know how many. Ft. Rucker in Alabama was a very busy place and that's where they ran most of them through. In fact all of them if they were in the army. I think some of the other services trained there as well, because they had a very good helicopter training base there.

Interviewer

What day did you actually arrive in the country?

Jack Rhodes

I arrived in December of 1969. I don't know what day. It was a long ride, I'll tell you that. It was a 13 hour ride. I think we stopped in Guam on the way over there. It was a very long ride.

Interviewer

Was it commercial?

Jack Rhodes

It was commercial. Tiger Airlines, I think, was the name of it. The military used them to haul people back and forth

to the war.

Interviewer

So when did you get your first assignment? Where was that?

Jack Rhodes

Well, of course you arrive in Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon. Some fast briefings and within a day was shipped off to a unit. Mine was the 92nd Aircraft Assault Company. In the Dong-Tinh two core area. Which was not far from Cameron Bay Air Force Base, for location purposes. We were south of Nha Trang and along the water, along the coast there.

Interviewer

This was just after the Tet Offensive. Things are very hot at this time in Vietnam, aren't they?

Jack Rhodes

They are. They are. Missions going immediately. Three days I was in the helicopter as a newbie copilot. Very interesting days to me, because I flew UH1C gunships. These are Huey model gunships that have a cobra converted head, a 540 rotor system, which is wide blades, 28 inch chord blades, for lift, for the ordinance that we had inside. Put as many mini gun rounds and rockets as we can on there - fuel to do the mission.

But the copilot is responsible for the mini guns attached out on the side. Now, these mini guns are six-barrel, 30-caliber weapons, and you've seen them in all the movies. They are run by a chain and the bullets go through really fast. Every fifth round is a tracer round. So when you were firing this thing and it flexed, the motors on the mounts out there would flex back and forth, just enough to keep from shooting the front skids out, and they deflected down and up, just enough so that you wouldn't hit the blades. And the copilot would look through the site and aim and point in the general direction of where we were to fire. Only, instead of using the sites, we would just follow the tracers.

So you start expending rounds -many rounds are going from both sides like fire, and you'd just point it to where the target is. And you could only hold those electrical motors for 3 seconds and then you had to let go. And then, the aircraft commander would fire some rockets and when he let up then you'd fire some mini guns. And the reason for that was the electrical system wouldn't handle them both going off at the same time. It wasn't like today when you have better technology and know where the ordinance is going. We just had to fire when we could, and never the rockets and the mini guns at the same time.

So it's like this for a new guy- *zzzzzt!* and then you'd just hold your head for a second, hoping no rounds are coming through the ship while he shoots the rockets, and back up onto the side again. And all of a sudden, on my first trip out, some of those bullets were coming back. I could see them and I thought "Oh, we're hitting rocks!". Then all of a sudden, one went above my head and hit the helicopter. And I said over the mic, "We're hitting rocks. It's coming back!" And the door gunner and crew chief back there, who were firing out the side with their M60's, started to laugh and said, "Got a new guy! We're takin' rounds you know, that's not reflected bullets. They're shooting at us!" The aircraft commander was over there just calmly firing his rockets and switching back and forth to four channels, and you could hear people screaming on four different channels, and he's handling his wing man, the troops that are in the other ships that were going to be inserted or extracted, some character way up in the sky – usually a major or something trying to run the operation – and then the guys on the ground are screaming "We're getting hit! We're getting hit!"

I mean it was all going on, and I saw these bullets coming back and I was on my third day in the country and I thought, “I'm not going to make it a whole year. This is ridiculous. How am I going to make this? I'm going to get killed.” It was very scary that first day.

Interviewer

Was your first day in combat?

Jack Rhodes

Well it was the first day of flight. I think it was the second day in the company.

Interviewer

So you're being oriented as a co-pilot?

Jack Rhodes

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

And how long did you fly copilot?

Jack Rhodes

I flew 5 weeks as a copilot, and then I was an aircraft commander. And that's pretty fast, but there were some rotations for various reasons, and I had made a conscious decision that first day, that, “I'm going to get in charge of what's going on around me as soon as I can, because I've got to have that edge.” And I was good. I was really good. I'd had some aviation. What, 310 hours of fixed wing flying? So handling the ship became second nature very quick to me.

And then all of a sudden my eyes, seeing, got very good. I could see the enemy down in the trees better than the other guys. I'd say say "See! See there?" And they'd say "I can't believe you can see that!" But I think it's because I wanted to be in charge of anything, and aware of anything, around me. Especially if somebody's shooting at me and trying to kill me. So that was one of the reasons I was aircraft commander so quick. Then I went on to be company instructor pilot. I'd take guys with me and give them their 90 day checks on different missions. I was a test pilot. And I did everything I could to the max. Keep things straight.

Interviewer

Tell people today a typical mission that you might fly, and what a gunship would do that was so critical.

Jack Rhodes

Well you had your regular Hueys, maybe a D model and an H model, in those days, mostly D models. For troop hauling, for insertions and extractions into landing zones – or LZ's as we called them – where a little skirmish is going on, a battle that you gotta put the troops in and take 'em out. And they developed the gunhips to fly alongside or ahead or to be big brother and protect them. We had rockets, mini guns, some hips we called hogs, that would blow about cannon out in front, were mounted on the nose. And we basically went in and covered the area. And the enemy, when they heard the rockets lobbing down, and the mini guns, they were more likely to keep their heads down.

So we flew in twos. There was a league and a wing man. And one would cover the other. We just go around in circles and cover each other as we made our gun runs, and mowed the area and lobbed rockets, and we'd hear the guys on the ground screaming "Oh, that's bad!” “Oh, that's good!" or "This area! That area! Hurry, get out here! We're takin' a round!" I mean, the gunships played a very important role, and we were happy to be there when, we could. It just made us feel bad sometimes when there were things going on and we weren't there or didn't get there in time or weren't sent in time or hated to leave because we were running out of fuel. Things like that.

Interviewer

You told me there was a mission you felt really good about. You were talking about the worst and the best.

Jack Rhodes

Oh! The worst and the best memories? Well, let's talk about the best memory, then. Fondest to my heart, or one of the fondest, is, I met my wingman and we were going cross-country on an assignment and made a decision to stop into the highland city of Da Lat, which is a resort area that was fairly friendly and not a lot going on there, for

some fuel. We wanted to take on some extra fuel. And on approach, I told them I was coming in for some fuel and they came back and asked us if we had enough fuel to go to the other side of the city and if we had any rocket ordinance on board because there were some ground troops having some problems.

I said, sure, we'd go over there for a little bit, and got ahold of the ground commander. He was trying to bring troops up a hill. Up on top of the hill was this one old, old church-type building and it was full of kids. It was an orphan school. There were over 100 kids in there. And some Viet Cong or the South Vietnamese, good people gone bad, helping the north out, well they were upset and they wanted some of their friends out of jail. They had killed a couple of kids and threatened to kill them all if their friends weren't let out of jail. And so he said, “If you could come around and very carefully put some rockets in the trench where these guys are holding us from.” I mean, there was a trench around this building, or a ditch. And they were holding them off and they were makin' their demands and the day had gone on. Well, we just happened to show up and went around high and looked down and we could see the people in the trench.

So he says, "So how 'bout it? Can you do it?" I felt like I'd do it myself, and felt the crew could back me up, and I just said, "Yes, we'll do it." And then immediately I had this cold feeling come over me, and boy, if he, we hit that building, you know, it's very close. Just feet away. So I told the crew, “We only get one pass at this. If we mess it up, we're gonna start killing the kids for sure.” We decided to fly kind of away from town to make them think we were headed away, and came back around very low - very, very low and partially surprised them. It was probably too low, but we were able to hit the rockets in the ditch and the bodies flew and the ones that ran back toward the building, crew chief and door gunner, you know, they had 'em. And the mini guns. And that was it. One pass and it happened.

And immediately the ground commander got a hold of me and said, "Phenomenal." And we said, "We're headin' up the hill". And when we landed someone came over to get fuel, someone in a jeep with a message and said that the ground commander said to tell you that you had saved many children’s lives today. And we heard nothing of it any more. We heard some different figures some people had filtered down, there was a hundred and this, a hundred and that, but there was over one hundred kids at that. And what happens is, a lot of Viet Cong get killed and the kids are left. So there's a lot of homeless kids who were in that country at that time.

So what are the odds that we would stop there that day just at that time? Because it was crunch time, right there. I mean, they'd been at it all morning and they'd already killed a couple kids and they were gonna go mow the rest of them down, and they would of done it, 'cause they get crazy. So I've always felt good about that. And you know why, is because, you know, so many other horrible things happened. Well, you know, flying with the gunships you're always mowing bad guys down and people are crashing and terrible things are going on. But to me, that's a little bit different type of story you can take home. It's still very touching to think about that, and I'm glad we were able to do that.

Interviewer

You got a "Dear John" when you were over there.

Jack Rhodes

We had a company of helicopters, I think three platoons. One platoon was the gun platoon and I was giving briefings and doing a lot of running of the platoon towards the end and I was feeling sorry for myself because I had gotten a "Dear John". I tallied it up and I thought, "Oh my - lot of guys are getting Dear John-ed," and it was exactly 75% of the pilots, at that time, in my gun platoon that had gotten "Dear Johns" from their wives, or their fiancées. So it was kind of demoralizing and bad. You know, the Vietnam War was not a fun time. We found out more about that as we were coming home. We were serious over there, but back home it seemed to be a lot different without the support. So yeah, that took its toll, too.

Interviewer

You say you volunteered for some missions after your "Dear John"?

Jack Rhodes

Yeah. I was quite depressed and one of the ways to overcome it was, just go ahead and volunteer for missions that

other people didn't want to go on. I had a guardian angel over there, because I had a lot of close calls. I'm one that feels very lucky that I was able to come home. Wonderful guys in that group. Some of them I'm still in contact with, and I've found recently – they're my brothers and we have a special bond going through this war together, as many people do.

Interviewer

Can you tell us how the communication worked between you and the ground crew and others, and what was the role of your crew on your chopper?

Jack Rhodes

Speaking about the crew in the helicopter. In the Hueys – whether the transport helicopters or the AN, of course – the gunships, there are four: pilot, copilot and some very important people in the back. Crew chief. Now, the crew chief you kind of hand your life to. You get to know the crew chiefs who take care of their ships the best, because they're assigned to the ship. It's their ship and they maintain it, keep it clean, and basically keep us all alive. They're very special. Enlisted men that get a lot of experience very quickly, work long into the night, and the hours.

The other fellow is a door gunner, and usually training to be a crew chief. So they're working together, keeping this thing running so that when we get our sleep, we can get up and take off early and go do something else. Patch up the holes and do their scheduled maintenance, and just keep us in the air.

So we all flew as a finely-tuned team. We parked in revetments - just two walls full of sand – and we'd sneak ourselves up into that revetment, with the rotors hanging out over us, so at least we had those two sides of the helicopter protected. And when you pick-up or going into a tight place, you know the eyes and ears for the pilot are the crew chief and the door gunner. How high you are, “little bit more,” “watch out for this,” “careful of this,” you know, and you just totally rely on the crew chief and the door gunner. You become a finely-tuned team.

Interviewer

Can you describe what you're doing and saying in your role?

Jack Rhodes

We depend so much on the crew chief to watch the back side of the helicopter and out to the sides. Example: we parked into a revetment, crank up: "Is it clear in back?” “Clear in back, sir." And "go ahead", you're waiting for his “go ahead,” so you can lift his ship up. I'm not gonna lift it up and hit something, and I'd say "coming back". Always said "Comin' back. Clear in back, sir.” “Clear on the left,” door gunner, “clear on the right." And then "How's the height?" "Height is great,” “up just a little,” “down just a little," depending on the terrain of the ground where you are.

And taking fire - "We're not taking fire on the right,” “we're not taking fire on the left", just talking constantly with each other of what's going on all around the helicopter. The tail rotor's back there, and boy, these guys in the back, they're watchin' where you're stickin' that tail rotor at all times. I mean, it's just a continual – it doesn't matter what service you're in or what helicopter you're in, it's just a crew effort. That crew chief is vitally important. Anybody that says crew chiefs and door gunners have less of a job… I think they're more concerned at night than the pilots are about the flying and maneuvering of the helicopter.

Interviewer

That's a good point. Tell us about night missions. Did you have night goggles at that time? Or how did you do this?

Jack Rhodes

We didn't have night goggles, the Army didn't have them in our basic operation over there. Maybe the Air Force or

the Navy had some or were developing them, but certainly not like they have now. It would have been wonderful. Would have been wonderful to have night goggles, but no, we were just watching out. We did have some lights that we could shine - landing lights, area lights underneath the helicopter and then the crew chief and door gunner, if we went up at night, they'd come up with some kind of lights that they could shine back and see what's going on.

All eyes aware, 'cause you've got a lot of moving parts you're trying to keep off the ground from crashing and wrapping itself into a terrible ball. And if something started to happen, we had some great little sayings over there. Oh, if the rotor came off – "Did you tighten the Jesus nut?" Now, there are some splines on top of the rotor head and they were on the mast, and the rotor head would slide down over onto these spines. Well, they were on there nice, but then you would screw the Jesus nut on, to keep it on there. But to keep the Jesus nut from unscrewing, you had a little keeper on the side – "Did you put the keeper on the Jesus nut?" And the pilot always went up and checked that, unless we were getting rocketed at night and had to go running out and jump in the helicopter, "Did you check?" you know, and you believed him. Because our saying was that if the roller head went off, "then you'd come out of the sky like a highly-polished brick, and it would ruin our whole evening." You know, things like that. Those were things we said to each other to keep the levity up. I can tell you that at night, since you ask, we were being rocketed and had mortars coming into our compound quite a bit at night, 'cause they'd try to hit our helicopters.

And we had another problem - sappers. They were the little guys that were highly trained to run around and all they had on was a loin cloth and a bomb. And they were to crawl through the perimeter and get to those helicopters and throw a "satchel charge" in, we'd call them. And the satchel charge would go in and burn that helicopter to the ground. Those of us that were in the gun platoon, we took turns and slept up by the helicopters. We had a little hooch built there, and as soon as we heard the noise, our bodies would run for the helicopter. Sometimes even before we were awake. I was half dressed one night, woke up starting the helicopter. 'Cause the fear of getting blown up was very high.

My friend was running, and right alongside of him was one of those little guys with a satchel charge running alongside him. They looked at each other and they were both scared. John was trying to pull his handgun out and this guy just took off in the other direction and found a helicopter a couple rows over and blew it up. But that was a fear we slept with every night.

Interviewer

I get a feeling the close call missions were very common.

Jack Rhodes

There were a lot of close calls. One that comes to the top of my mind right now is, at times we'd go out on a mission and get some rounds come through the helicopter. Usually AK-47. 'Cause we flew low, we kept our visual down – in other words we didn't want people taking aim at it. We just skimmed across the trees, and if you didn't come home with a few branches in your skids then you probably weren't low enough. The guys with AK-47's would fire at us, but if we got several, the crew chief would get some string and run it from the hole the bullet entered to the hole it exited and he'd go back and sit in and see how far you were missed. And one that still makes me shutter today is that I had a string right here and a string right here, and the one that was supposed to come here was deflected by the eight-day clock on the instrument panel. So, things like that – sudden turns without having to stop and think about it, an inclination to do this or that, I credit some guardian angel that was watching over me. I don't know who it was, but I know there was one.

Interviewer

Were you praying? Were you raised in a religion? Did you experience any kind of spiritual support there, or within yourself, to get through the fear?

Jack Rhodes

I was raised in a religious home, and I've always counted on God to watch out for me. Once I got there that first day and started getting shot at, I thought, “I think I'm in a situation that it's gonna be real hard for anyone to protect me on a daily basis.” So yes, I did pray. I prayed for the crew. I had prayers with the guys in the crew. I prayed every time we went out, during and on the way back. I have friends now from that company. Dear brothers. They tell me that they've always been impressed with that, that I was able to give a prayer. I prayed right while we were getting shot at. "Please God, let us make it through this one." And when I said that, I wasn’t concerned about myself, I can honestly say that I didn't think of myself at any time flying, because it was a team effort. There was always concern about the crew.

I gave some briefings on nights before flights. On the board, they would be numbered or graded from 1-10. “This is gonna be a number 5 mission in severity.” “This is gonna be a number 9 or number 10.” I remember several that I said, “This is gonna be a number 15 or 19.” One of these, some of us may not make it back. So, you know, let's have a prayer. And absolutely, there was a guardian angel. At times I thought it was my great-great grandfather. Amazing man. Or my father. But my great-great grandfather had passed on, and I thought of him an awful lot. He was a tough, old Irishman. His mother died when he was young. And I don't know if I should mention names, but he was a pretty prominent old fellow.

Interviewer

Yes, mention names.

Jack Rhodes

The man's name is Howard Egan. That's my mother's side, she's an Egan. Came from Ireland, went north and went to Montreal with, I think there were 9 of the kids, and ended up down in Salem, MA. And after he'd been out on the ocean - I think at 14 he went out as a sailor - met this gal and married her in Salem, MA. Erastus Snow came along and converted them to Mormonism and they joined the church. He's very resourceful, tough, and at that time followed some other saints out to Nauvoou and joined up with them. He was a Porter Rockewell type. He was a policeman and major for the Nauvoo legion. They called him Major Howard Egan. Came out this way, was a teamster, and there's quite a history about him. As a teamster, he was a Pony Express superintendent out here from going west out of Salt Lake. Tough, resourceful man, that a lot of people relied upon. And I just felt very strongly about him.

Interviewer

So you felt a mythic heritage?

Jack Rhodes

I did. I did. I'd read about him. Not an awful lot, but just enough to know that he got things done and I always appreciated that.

Interviewer

Can we go back to the crew? Can you tell us about the crew chief you referred to as "Mouse"?

Jack Rhodes

When I was talking about the crew, to this day I know some of the people I flew with. It's been a lot of years. We

have an organization called the Vietnam Pilots' Association. Some of the pilots belong to that, some have died. Some, we just lost them. As far as the crew's concerned, I've only known three of those that were in the back as crew chiefs. One in particular was a very special crew chief. Short guy, Richard Masias. We called him "Mouse". Wonderful guy. Just got to work, did his job. Everyone wanted to fly with him and wanted to fly in his ship. He was just a great guy, and when I left Vietnam everybody I knew never knew what happened to him.

My company had a reunion, all of a sudden, over in Colorado Springs last September. And I got word from one of my buddies; he said "Can you believe it? Mouse is gonna be there. He found out about this." I just could not believe it. Two or three of the pilots had almost decided not to go because they had other things going. Well, when Mouse is comin' they decided they were gonna be there. He showed up. He lives in Whittier, CA, he's from that area. He's gone on. Sent his kids to college. Just as straight as he ever was. Since September, I have visited with Mouse a couple times over there in CA. And we talk every week, and it's a brotherhood that's hard to describe. We've been through a lot together. He cannot believe that there was anybody out there that loved him so much. We talk to each other and we're at a loss for words sometimes that we're actually associated with each other now.

Interviewer

Do you remember a mission with him?

Jack Rhodes

Yes, I do. Several.

Interviewer

Can you give us an example of why he was so special?

Jack Rhodes

At that young age, the crew chiefs were usually a little younger than the pilots, Mouse was a little, short, spindly fellow. And you look at him, good-looking guy, but just to look at him you didn't think he'd do wonderful things, but everything was methodical. He knew every nut and bolt on the helicopter. He'd start barking off commands as soon as we started taking fire, and he'd see the enemy first: "Sir, I think it'd be better if we go this way. Sir, you better...." and you'd listen to him because it was right. And then we'd get home and he was just a humble, young fellow. Just barely - I think he was 19 years old. And he was amazing, and I never met anyone quite like him. So yes, that's one of the benefits of finding each other after crazy goings-on over there.

Interviewer

Can we talk about how you supported the Hueys? Did you communicate with the Hueys by radio?

Jack Rhodes

There's a lot going on, on the mission. The mission is planned for an insertion of troops, for example, in an LZ. The company that's going to take them in is called, and they're on their way. The gunships have been called, and they're to meet up with them, or be there shortly before. We're all talking to each other. We're talking to the commander, way up in the sky out of harm's way, in a fixed wing, trying to tell us where to go, and this, that and the other. Once we got on-sight, then usually, if there was too much radio communication, he was the first one you'd turn off because he wasn't down seeing what was going on. They got us in place, then yes, we're all talking to each other. Gunships are talking to their wingman, their partner, and to the other groups of gunships if they're coming

out. On another frequency, the slick operators or the troop haulers; on an FM frequency, to the fellows on the ground that are waiting desperately for us to come in and to get them out if that's what's happening; or other, forward, people on the ground, who have gone and checked the area out.

There's about four channels going, and people are talking and some people, when they're young, you know, you learn the etiquette pretty quick on the radio – to keep it short – but a lot of young fellows are thinking only of themselves, so there's a lot of screaming and "blah, blah, blah," and misinformation going on, that has to be deciphered to make this whole thing work. If you're the one in the air in the gunship trying to keep everybody protected, then you gotta kinda work that out the best you think it should be to keep everybody alive, get the insertion in there, get them out, cover this, make sure this is taken care of.
You know, even to the point of telling the Slick operators where they should and shouldn't fly when they leave the landing zone. I got some recordings, I don't know where they are, of all of those radios going on at one time and it has always baffled me how we could figure each one of these things out, listen to everybody and make all of this happen while you're flying and getting shot at, at the same time. But you rise to the occasion, and I'm sure anybody will tell you that when you're getting fired on, you can do some miraculous things to stay alive – learn and become very good at something very quick.

Interviewer

Can you recall and demonstrate some of that radio chatter?

Jack Rhodes

Say you were doing an insertion, the first communication is with the commander: direction, approximate location.

Let's see.

"LC Command, this is Sidekick 3. We're 20 out for the LZ. When do you plan on popping smoke and what color?"
"The color's red and 10 miles out you'll get the smoke."
"Roger, Sir. Slick 7, how far out are you?"
"We're 20 out, should be there such-and-such a time."
"Commander, did you get that?"
"Roger, Roger. We got that."
"Sidekick 3, how far are you out now?"
"Approximately 5 out."
"Do you see the red smoke?"
"No I haven't got it yet, sir."
"Your direction is right. You should see the smoke now."
Guys on the ground: "We popped a smoke. We can hear you comin'." A "Roger". Then all of a sudden you'd see the smoke.
"Sir, where do you want the fire? Where's the hot area?" And he'd call down. You'd have to ask Sir first, you know. Call down to the guys on the ground and they'd give you some approximate locations. "Two clicks south-southwest of the smoke. Everything in that area, just burn it up as fast as you can."
"Roger that. We'll be on scene in two minutes"
"Roger, two minutes. Slick did you get that?"
"Roger."
"OK, wingman, did you get that? I want you guys, nobody firing on the left, we'll all fire on the right. We'll do the daisy chain and we'll circle. Keep me covered."
"There it is, I got the smoke."
"Got the smoke, sir."
"Roger that Slick operator?"
"Yeah we can see it out there too!"
Guys on the ground: "Oh you're right over us now. Watch out. Just under you are some bad guys."
Then we'd roll in on the smoke, start suppressing fire, and then we'd all just talk with each other at the same time. There are certain cadences you'd get in, everybody talking back and forth. But you'd keep it short. Everybody knew what you were going to talk about, so you'd just use one or two words: "Roger that," "Look north," "Turn left," "Turning left, sir," "You're going over bad guys," "Roger that." And then you'd talk to the fellow who's hanging his head out the door on the left: "Watch for the bad guys. You got one there. OK. We're rolling out on the bad guys on this side."
And the commander in the ship way up high would say, "Well, that's all right, but I think maybe...." and then we'd just turn him off, see. Because he was trying to do his job, and he did good jobs getting us there, but you know,

most cases you'd try to get rid of as much chatter as you could. Sometimes you had to turn the guys on the ground off so that you could get all the helicopters in, everything moving just like a finely-oiled ship. The operations would go much better that way.
And then you turn them back on : "Where are you now, ground?"
And they'd say "Oh good! Those rockets are great. About 50 feet further ahead."
And you can hear guys in the background : "Oh no! They're gonna get us!"
There's all this chatter going on from the FM. You just make slight moves. Do your thing.
"How's that?"
"Wonderful, can you do that again?"
"Watch out! Youre going over bad guys!" You know, blah, blah, blah.
"OK, we're here. Is it alright if we drop the first load?" You know.
We got Slick guys that are waiting for commands: "Is it safe that we come in now?"
"Just keep your eyes peeled. You're gonna get hit. They're gonna get fired on."
All this going on at the same time. So you can imagine. You've seen movies and all that drama and everything, and it's usually true. There was a movie put out that I think is the best of all of them. It's called *We Were Soldiers*. It was when they first got over there. They portrayed the gunships probably closer to what goes on than other movies did.

Interviewer

What about the power you and your crew felt when shooting – the rockets and explosions. Is that a powerful feeling? Describe that feeling of having that capability, and the noise and the destruction that your chopper was capable of.

Jack Rhodes

Being an aircraft commander of a gunship allows you to fire back with a lot of fire power. That's better than being a peer pilot in a troop-carrying helicopter, and you don't have your hands on the controls and don't have any gun to fire. You can imagine. So yes, I've always been thankful that I was in gunships. We were able to cover people with a lot of fire power. We had to manage it. We'd run out of ordinance too fast. Ran out of fuel too fast. You're managing all of that, but we wielded a lot of power. And I honestly think that's one of the reasons I'm alive today. Because we could fire back and make good things happen. And bad things happen. So yes, if I were to have my choice to do it again I would want to have something that could fire back, big time. Fighter pilots, gun ships.

As a result of that, you've got to live with the memories of things you see that die. One particular incident that I've always had trouble getting out of my head, and actually I've talked to someone about this - I went three different times to a person that the Veterans' Affairs offers, because of what they call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It had to do with a mission I did on the side for the South Vietnamese Colonel. He had a problem with some Viet Cong people raising food up in the mountains and feeding the enemy from the north coming down. A lot of that was going on, and they wanted to eliminate these farmers because these Viet Cong would go up and they'd feed animals for them. They'd have some elephants corralled. Some buffalo for transportation, corralled and fed them. But these feed these troops.
So, a forward air controller was way up high from the Air Force. We worked with him. And I'd work to get some flechette round rockets, which are deadly, deadly 2.7 round rockets with a head on it that's 1500 little nails, about this wide. You could set the proximity at which they went off from the ground. If you want 'em to blow 50 feet or 100 feet off the ground, the wider your pattern and it would just obliterate everything. Where I was, the army didn't have a lot of those. The Air Force, they could get them. An airforce C-130 brought me a pallet of those when I took him on a test flight once for a helicopter. We did some training that way.
So we were loaded with flechettes and we were to go out and destroy this farm area. We were being vectored by the forward air controller, way up, high up the ravine, over the ravine, down through a canyon. We approached this ridgeline, and they said, "They're right on the other side of this ridgeline." So I briefed my crew and my wingman, I said "Look, we only got one shot at this. We're gonna let everything fly." So we got right to the side of each other. He said "Yeah, you're just right, you're just right. They're out there in the field." Came up over the top and looked, and there they were. Black pajamas and the cone hats. All there. And we just obliterated everything – trees – I mean everything just fell, without a thought.
We had seen them fall, and it was kind of a victory thing, at first. Then we flew around and came back. And this

pregnant lady in the black pajamas – of course. Her body - when these little short Vietnamese gals get pregnant, they're almost as wide as they are tall – her body was rolling and then it got over to **(?)** and it rolled and right over to the next one and **(?)** and it was rolling for the third one and we were all mentioning, "Oh, no! Please stop!" And then we saw there were some kids. We went around two or three times, and all 13 were women and children. That's one of the worst memories I have. Worst hell. You have to do certain things. These innocent kids and these poor women were put in this situation, and I will never forget it. I've had to work on that a little bit. It's affected me in life. You know you were guided to do it, but you still carry some of the burden of those lives. That's just one of the black sides, one of the dark sides of being in a war. That war.

Interviewer

You said you're very touched now that people care.

Jack Rhodes

Yeah, I am touched that it seems in the last few years, people who have gotten the animosity over the Vietnam war, the generations that have come along, realize that those of us who were over there were in a very unthankful position coming home. That is really true, believe me. I came home, and luckily I was sent to Germany for two years. I am so glad I went to Germany because the short period that I was home, people would almost be mad that you went to Vietnam. I mean just terrible things they'd say, and name calling. Their emotions would come out. The politics of that war, as you know from history, were just terrible. I found myself hiding here and hiding there. So yes, it's wonderful.

I've met some of the guys and right now, as of the last couple years, we're coming out. To be able to come and have an interview with people like you about....it's unblievable to me. And I want you to know, I appreciate it. It's good therapy. Good therapy, I was told. One of my relatives asked, "Why wouldn't you come to some of these banquets?" Because I didn't have the right uniform for it. I never bought one. And I talked to some of my other friends and they hadn't bought a warrant officer's dress uniform. I was invited even with the governor something several years ago. I didn't want to go. I didn't have the right dress. I've been figuring it out lately, that I just didn't want people to know that I had been over there.

It's kind of ironic, because I really gave it, we gave it, our all. The guys who were around me, the pilots, the gunship pilots in that company, we were there to do business and make it happen. But to have it have a memory like it has, we never thought that would happen. So, thanks to you, for letting us tell our story. It's good therapy at an old age.

Interviewer

Now, everyone is so appreciative of the military. The military is so celebrated in popular culture. You're on the other end of that. Popular culture was hostile toward you.

Jack Rhodes

During the time in Vietnam, we started hearing a lot of what was going on state-shore. Families and everyone, and we got some news that we could read, how political it had gotten, and decisions couldn't be made. Things were being done. We started talking amongst ourselves, and the story got around that brigade commanders would come over and do their one year tour. They'd do anything in their power to keep us from engaging with the enemy for that year, because they did not want their tour of duty besmirched in any way. You could understand why, because that's the way it was happening in Washington, I think.

I mean, Barret Goldwater came over when I was in Vietnam, and he was looking around. He wanted to see for himself and talk to the troops about what was really going on over there. And he got a lot of flak from that, from the leaders, for going over and then coming back and talking about it. And we were curious as to how he would handle it, because he was noted as a hawkish, get-things-done guy. He was very vocal. He was asked, "How would you handle the war? How would you stop this war? What would you do?" He made a famous quote about the only way to win a war was to win it, and win it decisively and don't look back.

And we asked him, "What would you do?" He said, "Well, I'll tell you what I would do if it was up to me. I'd tell the North to get those commie expletives out of South Vietnam within 3 weeks to a month, or I would blow Haiphong harbor right off the map with B-52's, and the city up there with it." He'd just keep blowin' em off the map until everybody was out. He says "Unfortunately that's just the way I am." I always remembered that. And I thought, "Gosh, it's like the bomb on Hiroshima and the world wakes up and says "You're serious!" It's like Desert Storm, I mean, you say you're going to win the war, and you do it. But I think our enemy – well, let's not get into politics.

Interviewer

Let's talk about the restrictions of firing. We had Huey guys who were like, "After a while, you know, three quarters into our tour, we didn't follow any of those rules."

Jack Rhodes

There were restrictions on engaging and firing on the enemy because of a lot of reasons. Mainly, by having real heavy restrictions, then hopefully nobody's record would be tarnished. When I got to Vietnam after going through gunnery training – and I was all pumped up, all of us were – we walked in (this was December '69, and you remember, '68 the Tete-a-tete Offensive, and some of the things that happened there), walked into a briefing room.

"All right all you guys, gunship pilots. Despite what you learned in the States, you can forget it right now. While you're over here, if you see the enemy, you will not fire on the enemy." And we're all looking at each other. "Unless you're getting shot out of the sky, you will not fire on the enemy, because what you think is the enemy and what is the enemy has gotten us in a lot of trouble." And that's what we were briefed when we got to Vietnam. We got to our companies, and it was stressed that we will not take it upon ourselves, if we see the enemy, to go fire on them. After you're in the country for a while, you can tell who the enemy is. What they wear - how they're wearing their clothes, the location they're at, how they carry themselves, blah, blah, blah. A pilot can make a decision, but we still had that rule we would never fire unless we were fired upon. If we were sent on a mission to wipe out, say, a village or something, there was always that commander, way up above, that had to make that decision. Pilots, after you've been there a few months and were sure of yourself, and we were very sure of ourselves, we did fire upon the enemy. Because that's what we're there for. And the North guys are down in the South and their doing their operations and they were to be eliminated.

If push came to shove, and we came back and had a debrief and really talked about it, then we would just say that we were fired upon. We were getting shot at. And that's how bad it got in politics, really. Those were some of the things you lived with. You can't name names or anything. It may have been worse in this area depending on who you were involved with, whatever, but you just knew intuitively who the enemy was and what they were going to do. So those were the restrictions.

And it had gotten worse after the Tete-a-tete Offensive, because there were guys runnin' off, shootin' everybody - some guy I guess. I was never involved in anything like that or saw it. It wasn't in my company. But war is hell, and those are the kinds of things that happen. Pilots, gunship pilots especially, took it upon themselves to run that war sometimes, so the commanders didn't have to take the guff for it, or even hear about it. And you may question, "Well, I wonder if these young pilots really did know anything." Anything and everything that happened in my gunship company was on the up-and-up. That's how we treated it. But that's not how we were treated when we came home.

Interviewer

You were the only chopper that carried Agent Orange. Was that a gunship order?

Jack Rhodes

In my company, we did not carry defoliant in the helicopters. I know that had been done, and there were certain tanks arranged in helicopters to spray agent orange for defoliation missions, but our company had never done that.

We got involved primarily with the gunships to cover the Air Force while they were dropping. They used C-123's.

They were stationed in Phan Rang, and their missions for dropping defoliant were called Ranch Hand Missions. They would call us down once in a while to cover them, 'cause they didn't have any fire power, they just had the defoliant in them, and they'd fly very low. So we'd go out with the gunships and we'd get out about where this was to start, and here they'd come. And we'd fly as fast as we could alongside of them to suppress any AK-47 fire because people would take pot-shots at them with this defoliant mission because they did a lot of destruction with that stuff.

I was trying to remember how many, if it was 4 or 5 of those missions, during my tour, where we covered these Ranch Hand Missions. We'd come back with this Agent Orange, this sticky stuff, and at that time we really didn't know how bad it was. It's be stuck on the outside of our helicopter and they'd have to wipe it off and stuff. I've lost friends that have had cancer as a result of that stuff. I, fortunately, have not had it, I don't know why. Those were dangerous missions. But to answer your question, yes there were some helicopters at that time, and I don't know what companies, that did small spraying, out of the helicopter.

Interviewer

Vietnam was so different because, at some point, it was every man for himself on the ground, oftentimes because of the way they were being drafted and put in through a unit and pulled out, and officers, too, being rotated constantly. And it seems, at times, those managing the helicopters were in similar circumstances. That fear of "I'm short and this guy's new, and rather than me take the risk of not having all the aircraft there when I only have two weeks to go..." could cause some officers to wield their power to call in aircraft for reasons related to their own personal interests. Did that ever happen?

Jack Rhodes

I've always been thankful that I was not a ground pounder, that I was not in the war on the ground. You never know what you can do in life, and how you can make things happen, until you're faced with it. This is one of the things that I don't know how I would have faced it. I would have done the best I could. So I'm glad that this was a helicopter war. That's how these "grunts" as we called them, it was just a nickname, the "groundpounders" – these brave souls that were on the ground, facing the enemy – would get moved around and covered by helicopters. And they were so thankful. We can only imagine. So we tried to be there when they wanted us. We were there.

But you talk of how, in Vietnam, things started to happen either from the politics coming in from information from home, either you're new, or you're a short-timer, and you're in charge of your company and you want to be protected more because you wanted to get home. There were many occasions we were called out to fire upon enemy areas and cover, and wondered what the real mission was. A lot of it, a lot of times it happened. There was nervousness. People that call in to cover, they did want to get home to their families. They didn't want to die. We'd bring gunships out to neutralize the area, or make sure it was neutralized. Keep them covered. Probably was not, many times, justifiable, using the resources that cost a lot of money (course, during war nobody cares about money), but people were worried about their lives. A lot of that did happen. I've been on missions where we went out there and knew for sure guys were just nervous on the ground. They wanted to get home, and wanted to know we were around there to protect them. So, things like that happen in war.

Interviewer

How many missions did you fly?

Jack Rhodes

Oh my gosh. I had two R&R's, which is when you get a week off. I went to Australia. Another one to Hawaii for a week. And other than that, it seems like I flew every day. I mean there was something going on where they needed gunship cover constantly. Someone asked me how many air medals I had. You get an air medal every time you fly 25 hostile missions. Well, medals in my company, you know, we really didn't seem to have an active medals officer so we got the standard. And I got, what, I think I've got 2 oak leaf-cut clusters on air medals, so that would have meant I flew 75 hostile missions.

It seems like I flew all the time. And sometimes those were long days. We'd go way out, and then we'd cover one skirmish, fly way over somewhere else to a base, find some fuel. Go way out to another one and come back at dusk or after dark. And the next day do it again. It was just the order of things. And then, try and get some sleep, hoping the rockets and mortars wouldn't come in. When the rockets and mortars came in, my body would go from

the bed to under the bed, which was a bunker, without me even waking up. It was a response. And that's why I did some crazy things when I heard certain noises after I came home. Your body just reacts. I mean if that door over there slammed right now and the wind slammed it shut, I'd probably jump a foot off the chair without even thinking about it. Anyway, yeah, we put in a lot of hours flying.

Interviewer

What do you think when you hear a helicopter blade today?

Jack Rhodes

There are still some Hueys flying around. There are some states or organizations that have some Hueys and they have a distinct sound. And your mind just races back to that time. I'd even said to myself, in years past, "I wonder why he's flying so high," without even thinking about it. Because we always flew along the trees so we could keep our target exposure down. What do I think when I hear a helicopter? Well, everything comes back, you know. Especially the old Hueys. I see these fancy things they're flying today, it's amazing. Amazing. But you know, it's the same story. You're a target. Their defenses are a lot better today. Their sensors, their reliability for ordinance on target is much better. But still, somebody's out there with great guns trying to shoot 'em out of the sky.

Interviewer

When did you come home?

Jack Rhodes

I got out in December of '70. I spent two weeks at home, and headed for Germany for two years.

Interviewer

How did you physically leave Vietnam?

Jack Rhodes

I think it was Tiger Airlines, that the military leased to fly us out. Flew from Cameron Bay. Caught a ride on a C-130 down to Cameron Bay, from Cameron Bay down to Saigon. I was processed out. Took one day. Got on an airline.

Interviewer

Was it hard to leave?

Jack Rhodes

No. Hard to leave some of my buddies. But as an instructor pilot I felt there was some confidence there in some of the guys that they could keep it goin', make some good decisions. That always helped me. I was glad I was an instructor pilot on the side, 'cause I flew with almost everybody. Just run 'em through the paces, roll the throttle out in mid-flight, give them emergency procedures and stuff like that. Try to keep ' em alive.

Interviewer

I would like to know, do you carry this war with you every day? Do you think about it at some point in the day, every day?

Jack Rhodes

Carrying the war with you. I, in years past, used to be very conscious of it on a daily basis. There is something almost daily that will remind you, because it was such a traumatic situation. I signed up at the VA a few years ago

and they wanted to know a little bit about what was in my head. I was brought to tears to realize the things that, psychologically, I was thinking about, and which affected me in my daily life. So, yeah, there are sights, sounds.

One thing you have to learn after a war is to have patience with people. Because you've got to be on cue, you've gotta watch out, you've gotta be at the right place at the right time. It's been one of the toughest things for me, other than the discouragement of the political situation. That was one of the toughest things for me, is to just unwind, but I still catch myself. There are jobs that I gotta go get it done. Because, what if something else happens?

Is it hard for me to leave that war behind? I can do it more and more outwardly, openly in my mind, but psychologically, it's always there. Very, very tough to break that. Like I say, I'll jump. I was getting some salad from a salad bar and this old lady was standing next to me. I had this little Styrofoam thing I was putting salad in. And the noise - the wind blew a back door. And before I even knew what was going on, I was three feet off the ground in a prone position. And how I got to there, trying to figure out how I'm going to the ground, I don't know, but it was a total reaction. This lady thought I was very sick. People lookin' at me. She thought I was having an epileptic fit. It was just very embarrassing. Truck backfires now - if I'm next to a truck anywhere and I'm in the car, my gosh, that sounds like a mortar goin' on to something in there. Little things like that. But hey, it's the challenges of life. You have to go on. Just concerned about all my buddies and things that happened to them. And pray for them all the time.

Interviewer

Is there anything you want to include that we haven't covered?

Jack Rhodes

Oh, there's a thousand things. I think the bottom line is having a conviction of what life is all about. We have disturbing things that come along, like wars. Vietnam had its own problems and people were affected in a certain way, but we have to push on with other purposes of life to overcome these little challenges. I would say to any of my friends that are out there, that if you need to sit down and have a good talk about it, call me up. I'll put my arms around ya' and we'd have a little talk and move on. Move on the best we can. Thank you very much for letting me express my feelings.

Interviewer

Sure, sure, absolutely. I have another question that may not be relevant at all to this, but I'm curious. Did you stay with the same gunship the whole time and did you give it a name? Were you pretty attached to it? And did you ever lose a ship?

Jack Rhodes

We had several C-model gunships in our gun platoon and we had our favorite ones, and they were usually attached to the favorite crew chief. We had one ship (we called their last three numbers on their tail), that had a little bit darker paint. I think Air America had used it for a while. So it wasn't just old it was kind of a dark, almost black. And the last three numbers were 003. And someone came up with the name Balls 3. That was my favorite ship because the crew chief was Mouse. And then he was on 047 and I liked the 047.

And 951, I flew. Flew 'em all, but yes I had favorite ones, and the pilots were not assigned. We flew whatever ship was ready. It was the crew chiefs that had these ships. One of our ships is on a pedestal down at Ft. Stewart, GA. And I went down for the dedication of it being upon a pedestal and I had flown that ship over there in Vietnam. That was quite an undertaking to see that ship being displayed up on a pedestal down at Ft. Stewart.

Interviewer

Did you ever lose one?

Jack Rhodes

Yes. It wasn't that one. There was one like it, a hog ship, which was 38 rockets and a cannon lobber on front. Took some rounds, and the blade wasn't supposed to split. We found out when we got down, but it, it just set up a vibration that was terrible. Had to get to the ground. Entered out of rotation. It was not a real friendly area, so we basically got shot down there and by the time we got on the ground and this blade was comin' around, the whole ship was wobbling and the transmission was almost rocked off its' mounts. We just ruined the transmission, everything. Luckily, it was just before dark, and somebody got out and found us. It destroyed a big part of the mechanics of that ship.

Interviewer

One last question. We haven't talked about the Vietnamese, specifically the children. I have another chopper guy who really took to the kids, but boy, they had to be careful and on alert for hidden grenades.

Jack Rhodes

Real quickly, the children. We did have an opportunity to interact with different people. The montagnards, up in the mountains, were wonderful people. But we'd go maybe close to a village somewhere, and wait. Be on call, on alert, in case a skirmish flared up in a certain area, or we waited for a certain time for a skirmish, and the kids from the villages would run out there. And we always watched out for these kids because what would happen is, the favorite little trick is, they'd get hold of a grenade, pull the pin, have an elastic band around it, and then while you weren't watching they would slip it into the fuel tank which eventually would blow up when you're out flying in the sky somewhere. This had happened.

So whenever we stopped and the kids came, we watched them real close. I always interacted. We had little pieces of candy or part of the food we had with us, C-rations and whatever. I tried to be positive with the kids, play games and stuff. But the crew chief always stood on the side where the gas tank was, and we were all eyes at all times, even though we were interacting. Had our side arms all tied down so they couldn't get at anything.

A few of these kids you could tell were Viet Cong kids because they were very scared. They had been told terrible things about us and they'd look at us with a wary eye. But I always did whatever I could and I was aircraft commander and usually in charge. I did whatever I could to make them feel good so that we left a good image as we moved on.