

SALVATORE FORMICA: 1961 ARMY CH-21 COPTR PILOT

SALVATORE: My name is Salvatore, middle initial E, Formica. S-A-L-V-A-T-O-R-E, middle initial E, last name Formica, F-O-R-M-I-C-A.

I was in the United States Army. I received a second lieutenant's commission at Syracuse University in 1959 so I was in the service about three months after my commission. Went to flight school in January of 1960. Spent eight months in flight school. It was in two parts. Primary helicopter school was in Camp Wolters in Texas.

Grew up in Queens. The borough of Queens in New York City. I was born in Manhattan and my father moved us to Queens when I was only nine months old. Basically grew up in Queens until I was 17 and attended public schools there. Very proud of attendance of public schools because I got rid of the Italian accent, the New York accent and on and on, particularly since I went away to Syracuse University when I was 17 years of age. That happened in 1955.

Spent four years at Syracuse and I opted to join the Army ROTC. I got a second lieutenant's commission there.

PRODUCER: What did you study?

SALVATORE: I studied radio and television broadcasting and I did graduate from the School of Speech and Dramatic Art from Syracuse. It's now called something else. That's irrelevant, but in any event, I did graduate it with a Bachelor of Science from the School of Speech and Dramatic Art at Syracuse University.

The Army had me about three months after I graduated and went to flight school. Flight school was from January of 1960 to August of 1960. It was in two parts. Camp Wolters was primary helicopter where we flew the H23-D model helicopter. It was made by the Hiller Corporation in Palo Alto, California.

The second part of it. After four months, a second part of our transition was into cargo helicopters. That was where I learned to fly the H21-C model. It was originally made by the Vertol company. Actually, Piasecki, then Vertol and then Boeing. Boeing was, of course, in Seattle, Washington. That's where they're based. Those helicopters originally belonged to the United States Air Force. The Army purchased them and we used those aircraft not only to train in, but those are the ones that we brought to Vietnam with us

PRODUCER: Some people are going to say wait a minute, I thought the Huey was the famous copter in Vietnam.

SALVATORE: It is. The Huey is the famous helicopter in Vietnam. It did not see service in Vietnam until 1963, but the H21 and the H34, which was brought in by the Marines about a year after we moved in. The H21 was used from 1961 through 1963 and then they were then replaced in 1963 by the Uh1s, the very famous workhorses, the Hueys. Very good helicopter. Turban-driven aircraft where as the H21 was an eight-cylinder radio engine, it was a piston-driven aircraft. Very difficult to fly, but nonetheless, a very smooth helicopter as well.

PRODUCER: Now, some people who don't know the extensive history of Vietnam are saying wait a minute, we really didn't send troops to Vietnam till '65. What are you doing there in '61?

SALVATORE: Actually, we were so-called advisors. We were under the auspices of the Military Assistance Advisory Group. MAAG as it was called, in 1961. We were invited to go to Vietnam because President Kennedy and President Ngo Dinh Diem, they were in collusion. Not collusion certainly. I would say that the president of Vietnam invited us to be there. Let's say it that way. The President Ngo Dinh Diem invited us to be in Vietnam where he needed help against the Viet Cong, who apparently were messing against borders.

In any event, that's how it all began with us, as advisors. In point of fact, as pilots, we were logging training time just as if we were in the United States. Many of our fellow aviators, most of whom are warrant officers, complained about that because we were picking up bullet holes in the aircraft so either the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense decided to change our training venue from that definition to combat support. That was the first time that we were ever logging a two-letter mission, CS instead of just T.

Later, during the war, we were logging total C time, total combat time. We were losing troops, we were losing pilots and crew chiefs at the time.

PRODUCER: Let's go back to when you completed your helicopter training and they tell you you're going to Vietnam. Did you even know where Vietnam was?

SALVATORE: Yes, we all knew where Vietnam was. It was all, at the time, called Zone D as in Delta. When all of us graduated from H21 transition, most of us went to the west coast. That's where most of the 21s were located. There were other units in South Carolina and in Massachusetts. However, I was transferred to the 57th Transportation Company at Fort Lewis in Washington. We operated out of the Gray Army Airfield. From approximately August of 1960 to November of 1961, I was helicopter pilot in the United States.

We received our orders on or about October of '61 and we were alerted and our unit was even upgraded to a higher readiness status. We had to start packing our gear so then in November of '61, we were definitely on the way to Zone D. We had received a secret briefing, closed doors with an armed guard at the door and all of us pilots and the crew chiefs received a secret briefing, regarding where we were going and we are obviously prohibited from discussing that with girlfriends, wives, etcetera.

PRODUCER: Everyone knew Zone D was this little southeastern country [crosstalk 00:07:15]

SALVATORE: Actually, it was from India through southeast Asia. That's where Zone D was, but it was [inaudible 00:07:23] at the time of that briefing. We were going to Vietnam and then no doubt we would be landing in Saigon aboard a U.S. naval ship, USNS and the name of the ship was Core, C-O-R-E. The USNS Core. That's where our helicopters were to be loaded at the Sharpe Army Depot in Stockton, California. We were to be situated there until all those helicopters were cocooned, if you will, with a white substance that was to prevent damage on the voyage across the Pacific Ocean.

PRODUCER: When you got this secret instruction of where you were going, how much did you know about Vietnam at that point in your life?

SALVATORE: We knew that at one point that it was called French Indochina at one time, that there was a ... I'm trying to remember the name of the town that got ...

PRODUCER: Oh, I know what you're [inaudible 00:08:24]

SALVATORE: Dien Bien Phu. That was a disastrous occurrence. The French had given up, basically and had fled Vietnam and Dien Bien Phu was a chapter in history that will never be forgotten. It was disastrous. We did know about that disaster. We were aware of it and consequently, that's about the length and breadth of our knowledge. We knew that it had French influence. Some of us, including me, began studying the French language on the 26-day trip over, from San Francisco and I'm trying to think of the town, Oakland. From the Oakland Army Depot to Saigon Harbor and we had a French-speaking American aboard the ship and he gave instruction as well.

Little did we know, it would have been preferable to learn the Vietnamese language than the French language since the French were considered masters, if you will.

PRODUCER: [Inaudible 09:38]

SALVATORE: We were not to wear pith helmets at all. That's what the French would wear so those who bought pith helmets were encouraged not to wear pith helmets. We wore our Army garb.

PRODUCER: Do you remember the dates you arrived in Saigon?

SALVATORE: It had to be early in December. I'm not exactly sure of what day, but the first mission we flew I remember exactly. It was the 23rd of December, 6 days before my 24th birthday so this old man turned 24 on the 29th of December.

PRODUCER: What year are we talking?

SALVATORE: We're talking about 1962. It was December, the 23rd of 1962 was our first mission. Unfortunately, we lost our first aircraft on that mission, on the way back to Saigon Airport, which is called Tan Son Nhut Airport. I flew over the aircraft that was burning. I saw it burning on the ground and there were a few bodies that had perished and there was some Vietnamese soldiers who had perished during that disaster.

It occurred, I'm only assuming at this point because they exited the aircraft too early. When an aircraft such as a helicopter lands or has a crash landing, you have to wait until those blades stop turning because basically that's what takes lives, is the blades turning. Turning of the blades. In any event, I remember flying past it, aircraft that was on fire.

PRODUCER: [Crosstalk 00:11:30] to go down?

SALVATORE: It was being flown by an instructor pilot and a pilot who had very little time or no time. He was a lieutenant colonel. He had very little, if any, time in the H21. He was a helicopter pilot, but he was a lieutenant colonel and he wanted to fly the left seat, which is where the instructor pilot normally flies. The instructor pilot was flying the right seat and although the left seat pilot is the co-pilot and the right seat pilot is the pilot. It is the pilot's responsibility to see that the aircraft is maneuvered properly. The lieutenant colonel had the controls and lost control of the aircraft so when they landed, I'm only assuming that they landed too hot.

We didn't get a complete briefing on the accident, but it rolled over and crashed and caught fire. Both pilots escaped injury. A few of the Vietnamese soldiers escaped injury and were brought aboard another aircraft to return them to Tan Son Nhut. We're really not sure what occurred and why it occurred, but we do know that it was the lieutenant colonel who was flying at the time.

PRODUCER: How active were these Communist insurgents, Viet Cong out in the bush? Give me a sense of what it was like once you got off that ship in 1961, I guess it was.

SALVATORE: Yeah, '61 going on to '62. When we arrived, I get the feeling that we were unexpected. We brought in 20 helicopters, all cocooned aboard the ship and now being uncocooned and that the MMAG folks are saying things like what are you folks doing here and we're saying someone said here that they needed aircraft to deliver Vietnamese troops into landing zones.

In any event, we had to stay aboard that ship for about two or three weeks because there were no billets for us to ... We were unhoused, if you will, so we had to remain aboard the ship, this tub, as I used to call it, where even the officers were sleeping stacked on top of each other. Three or four on top of each other.

I was truly amazed at that since I thought an officer should be treated better than that, but so be it. It is what it was. In any event, we were aboard that ship and I remember looking into the city of Saigon. Saigon Harbor is right up against Saigon City. I remember looking up to Tu Do Street and there were bars and dry cleaning establishments, etcetera.

There was a dead pig floating in the Saigon River, which about lost my cookies. I had already done that on the trip over, on the ship or off the ship on the trip over. That was a 26-day trip and it just hassled my tummy. Anyway, while we're in Saigon, we were let off the ship. We could visit the bars. We did not feel intimidated in any way. In fact, they were happy to see that we were spending piasters at the time and we were welcomed into the bars and at the restaurants, etcetera. There were abundant restaurants and bars, particularly on Tu Do Street, which was the main street in Saigon.

Returned to the ship because there was a curfew and we sleep in these bunk beds where we were stacked one on top of each other. Finally, the Hotel Rex became available so they housed us now in the Hotel Rex. Now, that was nice. It was air conditioned. It was really quite nice. The food was very good. There were cooks assigned to our units so the cooks were doing their thing at the Hotel Rex as opposed to the ship because the ship's food smelled like bacon grease every day. That was tough to take.

In any event, after our stay at the Hotel Rex, that's when we picked up. I guess we must've stayed at the Hotel Rex for perhaps three or four weeks. In late January, it seems to me, we moved to Tan Son Nhut Airport where we set up tent city and we slept in tents. Cots and tents, where we were disturbed every night by mosquitoes so we would set up our netting and tuck it underneath the mattress of the cot and spray the entire cot with this DVT type material.

PRODUCER: How many men, by the way, are in your unit? How many people are we talking about?

SALVATORE: Our unit had easily, if we had 20 helicopters, we would have at least 40 pilots. We had four flight leaders like myself, first lieutenants that had charge of five aircraft so in terms of commissioned officers, we probably had, I'm guessing something on the order of 12 because a company commander and an assistant company commander, etcetera, and the flight leaders and platoon commanders, etcetera, who were all commissioned officers. The rest were warrant officers who were not commissioned officers. They were not non-commissioned officers, but just not commissioned officers so I'm guessing something on the order of 50 to 50 officers and then another, perhaps, 40 or so maintenance personnel. I'm guessing somewhere between 100 and 125, perhaps 150 personnel.

PRODUCER: The size of the company?

SALVATORE: Yeah, it was the size of our company. We had the 98th cargo helicopter field maintenance detachment also with us, which had another 45 or 50 people. They were our maintenance detachment. They did maintenance above our first level of maintenance so they were with us as well, aboard that ship. We're talking about something on the order of about 200 personnel. 200 to 200 and a quarter, something like that.

PRODUCER: It's mostly VC attacks that you would take these ARVN troops up to these battle areas?

SALVATORE: Yeah, to the landing zones and basically, we would land a little bit distant from where there is a suspected Viet Cong entrenchment. Then our troops would disembark, our troops, the ARVN troops. The Army of Vietnam troops would disembark and then we would have our rotors turning at full throttle so that after they're through, we're out of there so we pick up as few rounds as possible.

The one experience that I had after a drop off. Again, the pilot who was sitting in the left seat is the pilot of the aircraft because he was a warrant officer and I had minimum time. He had more time than I did. He was flying the aircraft, I'm in the right seat, which is normally the pilot seat, but I was not on the controls at the time. We were returning to the pick up zone when we heard the machine gun fire. He said holy expletive deleted, did you hear that? For a 24-year-old, who was just invincible, I had an experience of calm overcome me and I keyed the mike and said yeah, I heard that. How do you miss it? I heard that. Are you okay? He's pulling in power, trying to go faster. It's not going to go any faster. Helicopter will not go any faster just to pull in power. Yeah, I'm alright.

I keyed my mike again and called to the rear of me and said everybody back there okay and everybody is in the affirmative. We get to the pick up zone and upon inspection, the aircraft had picked up rounds in the forward transmission calling. It's a dangerous area for rounds to be picked up because if the forward

transmission fails, we've got failure of the transmission, in which case the blades, which are normally 120 degrees out of phase, actually, they go out of phase, would become into phase and just bang against each other. Total destruction.

We also picked up rounds in the blades and the blades in those days, the blades were made out of crisscrossed four types of lumber, but crisscrossed to give the entire blade strength and then it was wrapped with an aluminum wrap. The splinters were actually showing through the blades themselves.

Now, I don't know what happened to my co-pilot or to the pilot, I should say, flying the co-pilot's seat. He disappeared somewhere, probably to have a beer or something. I don't know what. My commanding officer, this is very unusual, that my commanding officer came to me and said Lieutenant Formica, would you be willing to fly your aircraft 048 with a three-letter designation of my aircraft. Would you be willing to fly 048 with me back to Tan Son Nhut? In a nanosecond, I said no problem, sir.

So we hopped in. He flew in the right seat and he flew all the way back to Tan Son Nhut. I flew the left seat. Now, we could have catastrophic failure at any time because of the fact that the rounds did hit the forward transmission calling. When we arrived back at Tan Son Nhut, we were able to count how many holes were in the aircraft, etcetera. That's beside the point, but the inspection did show that there was some transmission hits, but the transmission was strong enough to accept those hits and not have a catastrophic failure. The blades definitely showed hits because there was splinters through the blades.

PRODUCER: In that early phase since we were just there in an advisory capacity, there was no armaments on that CH ...

SALVATORE: That's right. The CH21 did not have armament. In point of fact, the company commander that I'm talking about that asked me to fly with him back to Tan Son Nhut was the second company commander in that unit. The first company commander did not really want to load the aircraft with 30 caliber machine guns. We had the go-ahead from President Kennedy to fire back if we were fired upon. Well, that convinced us that we should have these aircraft mounted with 30 caliber machine guns. The first company commander indicated that people got a little too trigger happy and so he declined putting the 30 caliber machine guns aboard the aircraft.

It was the second company commander that gave the order to have them mounted. In that transition point, we had not yet gotten those aircraft rearmed, if you will, or armed. In any event, after that particular mission, I noticed that the rescue door, which is on the upper right hand side of the aircraft and the cargo

door and the left hand lower side of the aircraft both had 30 caliber machine guns mounted on them hereafter.

PRODUCER: Did you sense when you saw machine guns being mounted in the copters and even though we were supposedly there only in an advisory capacity, that something major had changed at that point?

SALVATORE: Yes, we felt that something major had changed at that point. Point of fact, another mission that I was on, the crew chief who, he was like a gunner as well as a crew chief. I think in later days, they actually had a gunner and a crew chief, separate duties, so he was shoving duties [inaudible 00:24:54] well. I remember being on the ground. Again, I was flying right seat, co-pilot., the pilot flying the co-pilot seat and I heard him fire some rounds. It startled me and I said holy cow, what was that. He calls back on the intercom, the gunner does, the dual gunner crew chief, calls back and says I thought I saw something move in the bushes, sir. Okay, well, warn us when you fire because man, that was scary and we took off immediately. Nothing was moving. It was the helicopter down wash. Nothing moving in the bushes. That was pretty scary. That was scary.

I think I was more scared then than having heard those 30 caliber rounds hit the aircraft on the mission back returning to PZ.

PRODUCER: When you would basically go out and drop these ARVN troops off [inaudible 00:26:00] activity, what condition were they when you went and picked them up?

SALVATORE: When we picked up the ARVN troops, they were dirty. They smelled bad. They might've been out there a day or two because we didn't pick them up on the same day. Normally, we would make that pick up a day or two later and they would have their rice rations with them. They might've had fish rations with them as well. They said very little. Of course, they all spoke Vietnamese.

We might've had one interpreter for a flight of 5 or 6 aircraft so I didn't get a sense of any sadness or anything, but on one psychological operations mission that I flew on, we landed in the middle of a killing field, if you will and there were many, many dead bodies lying around. These are all VC. I knew two words [foreign language 00:27:10] which means dead, yes and the Vietnamese were yes, they nodded, they were dead. The Vietnamese Army had formed a perimeter around our landing zone and the psychological operations officer would be interviewing the Vietnamese soldiers through an interpreter.

There, I saw more happiness than on missions where we had returned and picking up other ARVN troops. That psy ops mission was a learning experience

for me because that was a successful mission for the ARVN, it seemed to me. They were very happy about it as well.

I never was on a medevac mission. Sometimes I threw a kitchen mission. One of our aircraft would be designated as the kitchen aircraft. It held all the hot food or rations aboard that aircraft so when we dropped off ARVN and returned to the PZ, we would shut down and have lunch. On those occasions, if we had a reporter and a cameraman with us, that reporter would also help themselves to the kitchen helicopter as well. We had a mess officer as well. I flew with that mess officer occasionally as well. Not only in Vietnam, but in the States. He's now deceased.

PRODUCER: At that point in time, do you have a sense of how many advisors there were in Vietnam in 1961? Of course, Mr. Kennedy was now in charge. I've heard a number, but I'm curious to see how many Americans you think were in country at that time.

SALVATORE: I don't really have a sense of how many advisors were in country at that point. I do know that there were two lieutenant colonels that gave our unit a great deal of difficulty because there was a conflict between who's in charge of this air mission. Is it going to be a ground commander or is it going to be the aircraft commander? The guy who's in charge of 5, 6, 10, 20 helicopters on any given mission and, of course, it was our contention that the aircraft commander, who's in charge of all these aircraft, is in command of the mission. Not the ground commander, who, in point of fact, would be kneeling between the co-pilot and the pilot, giving instruction to either one. That was not to be. We tried to straighten that out during briefings after, debriefings if you will, missions after the briefing.

Getting back to the original question, I really don't have a sense of exactly how many advisors we had on the ground, but we were known as advisors at the time until such time as we began logging C time, combat time.

PRODUCER: I have heard the number, there were 16,000 Americans in country in a variety of capacities ...

SALVATORE: Wow.

PRODUCER: At the end of Kennedy's first year and then he began to ramp that up rather dramatically over the next couple years [inaudible 00:30:45] two and three.

SALVATORE: Yeah.

PRODUCER: Now at this point, you felt like you were simply there to help these Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam soldiers oppose the North Vietnamese terrorist as the Viet Cong were known. Is that your impression of what you were doing there?

SALVATORE: Yes. Our impression was to help the Vietnamese Army destroy the Viet Cong. Obviously, what we needed to do is find the Viet Cong, find the enemy, close with him and destroy him. That was our mission. It's like an infantry mission, except that we were heliborne and we wanted to maintain that cohesiveness for all our mission, for the aircraft mission.

At one point in February of 1962, I distinctly remember that the palace was being strafed. We didn't know how that was happening, but we later learned that some of the Air Force Vietnamese pilots, who were unhappy with the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, were strafing the palace. Now, apparently, their technique really hasn't been fine-tuned and they still had their finger on the trigger as they began their climb after the strafing run. Consequently some of those runs came and landed near our aircraft and near my operations building and I saw pieces of the [inaudible 00:32:30] popping up as those rounds were landing among us. A number of us ran into the building, into the operations building, to seek safety, obviously.

Now, that gave us a sense that the Vietnamese, at least the Vietnamese Air Force, wasn't totally on the side of the ARVN mission, if you will, of destroying the Viet Cong and we're wondering why would they even attempt the life of, whom we thought, was a good president, Ngo Dinh Diem.

PRODUCER: Interesting. What was your impression of the South Vietnamese soldiers?

SALVATORE: Of the South Vietnamese?

PRODUCER: The South Vietnamese soldiers.

SALVATORE: That's a tough question. The South Vietnamese soldiers, although I suspect had some bravery attached to their inner self, that wasn't very demonstrative. For example, on one occasion my aircraft was too heavy. We were carrying too many Vietnamese soldiers to the landing zone and I had to get just one Vietnamese soldier off the ship so the crew chief, in the best hand language that he could tell give, just told one of them to exit the aircraft. Well, he was elated because he wasn't going to go into the battle with the rest of his comrades. Absolutely elated. I turned my head to look back and he was really happy to get off the aircraft. Tells me that if I were an American soldier, you mean you can't use me, I want to go. You're leaving my buddies behind. I'm an American soldier, I'm here to fight. I did not get that total impression from the Vietnamese soldier. Not completely.

As I understand it, there has been some training for Vietnamese pilots and they were just as good as Army pilots, U.S. Army pilots. The Air Force as it existed when we first arrived at Tan Son Nhut, we saw all the, I think they're C23s or C47s. I've forgotten exactly which. In any event, a tail wheel and two wheels up front, I think is the C43. I'm not an Air Force guy. In any event, they were lined like a column of ducks and when we first arrived, we were told yeah, that's part of the Air Force. Well, they look like they've never been flown. Well, that's because there was fear to fly these aircraft over Viet Cong-populated areas and these aircraft were not armed so consequently, they stayed right there, lined up like a column of ducks in plain view of all us helicopter drivers, just sitting there on the tarmac at the fight line doing nothing. Just sitting there whereas at one of our airfields in the United States, two or three of them, at least, would be in the air, gaining some experience in flight, but these just stayed there. It was a reticence on the part of the Air Force to fly.

PRODUCER: How long were you in country?

SALVATORE: I was in country for about six months. The tour is for about a year, 12 to 13 months, as I understand it. The reason for that is when I signed up for the Army and ROTC back in '59, I had a three year obligation and my three year obligation was due to expire in June of '62. We arrived in Saigon in late November or early December of '61 so I served about six or seven months in country and then I opted to leave. I regret doing that.

PRODUCER: Why do you regret it?

SALVATORE: I regret leaving the Army because one of the best crew chiefs we ever had was shot and killed in October of 1962. I wasn't there at the time and he was a very, very good crew chief and a good soldier, too. He was a Hawaiian. In 1959 as every American should know, Hawaii joined the union in 1959 and he was button busting proud to be an American.

We lost of him because of some failure in the system. As I understand it, and again, I wasn't there, but as I understand it from my operations officer, apparently he was pointing out where the Viet Cong fire was coming from and that's when he got hit and hit so seriously hard that he fell dead on the cargo floor right then and there. He was evacuated by one of the other helicopter pilots, who actually, under fire, had actually taken him across his shoulders and carried him to his own helicopter.

I can only picture the scene. As I say, I wasn't there, but I can only picture the scene. I regret losing Ellis. Ellis was a marvelous soldier. His name is Richard L.K. Ellis. Marvelous soldier, great crew chief and served me very well.

My company commander, the second one I referred to earlier. My company commander tried to convince me to stay in the Army. I had gotten some pretty good efficiency reports and consequently, when you get good efficiency reports, your commanding officer is almost obligated to encourage the officer to remain in the service. I decided that instead of staying in the service, I'd already written some resumes and letters, sent back to the United States and I was anxious to start my career in television broadcast because basically that's what I had studied.

Little did I know that Colin Powell had tracked the same track that I had, an educational track the same way he did. He wound up as a four star general and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and I wound up as first lieutenant [inaudible 00:40:22] Army, but in any event, he had to go through the same route I did. He got wounded in Vietnam. Thank God I did not. In any event, I did leave the service. I had a long break in service, working in the broadcasting industry and missing it so much after this long 15 or 16 year break in my service, that I really wanted to return to my flying, in the United States now. Vietnam has well passed at this point so I received UH1 training.

For 26 days in California at the Sierra Army Depot in Susanville, California, the Sharpe Army Depot. I received transition training in the UH1 helicopter at the Sierra Army Depot in Susanville, California and met a wonderful instructor pilot there and for 11 years I flew for the 11th Special Forces at Fort Meade as a UH1 helicopter pilot.

PRODUCER: What years were [inaudible 00:41:38]

SALVATORE: Those were the years from 1981 to 1992 or 3.

PRODUCER: So you returned full time to [crosstalk 00:41:47]

SALVATORE: I returned into the service and actually served a total of 23 years. Three years, as I mentioned, on active duty and then an additional 20 years of active reserve duty. Flying aircraft and doing some, as we say, ground pound work as well at the very end of that 20th year and continuing my broadcast career as well. I was a citizen soldier, if you will, for which I am very, very proud.

PRODUCER: By the way, I did a story on DINFOS at Fort Meade.

SALVATORE: Oh, did you?

PRODUCER: Yeah, on the combat artist that they produced out of there. I'll give you a copy of it before you leave.

SALVATORE: I'd like to see it.

PRODUCER: I just wondered if you were affiliated with DINFOS while you were on reserve duty.

SALVATORE: The only affiliation I have is one of the national guardsmen that was working at the same television station that I was working at was interested in taking a flight with me. After he flew with us, he applied for the DINFOS school at Fort Meade, but something happened there that he didn't graduate and that's the only thing I had to do with DINFOS. That was the only association I had with DINFOS.

PRODUCER: Getting back to your period of active duty in South Vietnam and this advisory period, did your unit suffer any casualties? Other than they lost the one [inaudible 00:43:26] that crashed that first [crosstalk 00:43:27]

SALVATORE: Yeah. There were no casualties during the time I was there. I was very upset to learn about Specialist Five Ellis, but there were no casualties for those few months that I was there, the six months that I was there. We picked up a lot of bullet holes and of course that's when the warrant officers were very upset that we were still logging training time and not combat time, which, of course, changed. In any event, no, there were no casualties, just the aircraft were getting hit and there were some engine failures as well because it was only one engine on that aircraft, just as there is on the UH1.

PRODUCER: I guess during that period of time, what, after you left, would you feel that United States effort in South Vietnam was going to ... Did you ever have any idea it was going to escalate like it did?

SALVATORE: I never really felt that it was going to escalate this much because our orders read, when we first got our orders, an exercise in excess of 30 days. I always thought to myself, this thing is only going to last for a little bit more than 30 days. Little did we know that it lasted all the way to 1975 with 58,000 deaths as well. It would never have occurred to me, not at age 24. I thought it was going to be over in an instant, but it just simply didn't occur to me it would last that long. It simply never occurred to me.

PRODUCER: What was your impression of this unusual [inaudible 00:45:09] strange little country in southeast Asia?

SALVATORE: Well, I like to assimilate myself into another country. For example, I do use my Spanish capability when I go to Mexico. I'm somewhat conversant in Spanish. There were a number of us that decided to assimilate as well and we actually took a Vietnamese language course. That was in early January when someone said hey, anybody want to learn the Vietnamese language. At this point, I can tell

a cab driver turn left and turn right or go straight ahead. That's basically what I can do.

Most of the civilian Vietnamese folks on the street that we met were very friendly and very happy to see us. I suspect because they were relieved that someone was coming to help them for obtaining their freedom and keeping them apart from the Viet Cong, not knowing what would happen in 1975. Well, you've seen this. This image of a helicopter on top of the Embassy building, lifting off with people hanging off the skids. Scary. Never anticipated that. I never did,

PRODUCER: How did you like the culture that you found [inaudible 00:46:44]

SALVATORE: I like the culture. I guess because I'm of an ethnicity ... Both my folks were born in Sicily. Not only are they Italian, they're Sicilians so consequently, I'm culturally aware, if you will and I like seeing different cultures and I like gathering information from different cultures as well. Consequently, I found the Vietnamese culture very, very interesting.

The most amazing part of the Vietnamese culture is very Asian. It's the saving of face. I met a sergeant who befriended me and was teaching his Vietnamese girlfriend how to drive a Jeep. Well, it was a scary thing to see her behind the wheel of this Jeep because she was all over the place. She was mishandling the Jeep and I said, hey, Sarge, let me out of here. Would you let me out of here? I'm not for this, okay. I got to get out of here, Sarge. He said sorry I can't do this. He told her to stop the Jeep, I got out and now she's in tears. I had violated the save of face tradition that exists with most Asian folks and I really felt bad about that. I did not feel good about that at all, but I was in fear of my own life. What if I'm hurt. I would be non-deployable. I didn't want to get hurt and at this point, I had to time out the situation and get out of there. That was part of my introduction, if you will, to the save of face tradition so prevalent in that country.

It seemed like it was in the offing, but I thought this was just an anomaly, this strafing of the palace, was simply an anomaly, but after his assassination, I think it was ... His wife that took over, what was her name? Madame Nhu, N-H-U. Of course, we call her Madame No because everything with a negative answer for her. I believe she took over after that. Things got worse, it seemed to me, following that. I didn't expect him to be assassinated in the manner that he was because he escaped things, rejoining that strafing situation, but this was a surprise to me. I thought he was good for the country and instead, it turned out the guy was bad for the country.

After that, I think it was the Air Force commander, Nguyen Khanh, Khanh. I think he took over after Madame Nhu. That whole situation became, as one of my neighbors who was a Vietnam veteran said, it became very confusing and I agree with that. I believe I was confused at the time as well. I think that's one of the reasons I left the service at that time. I served a few more years in the reserves flying H23-C helicopters, in a reserve unit, following the service, but that was here in the United States and that didn't last very long at all. Just a couple of years.

PRODUCER: When the Hueys, UH1, came in, in '63, did they rapidly retire the CH21s because it was so technologically superior?

SALVATORE: Yes. Yes, they did. The H21s were gonzo. They all but disappeared.

PRODUCER: Were they left over from Korea?

SALVATORE: The H21s? I don't know if they were left over from Korea. I know that a major part of the mission of the H21 was in Alaska because they're very good in cold weather, but nonetheless they certainly weren't mothballed. They were still used in the United States. They made their way back to the United States. I'm not sure how that happened, but they all but disappeared from the scene in Vietnam. The UH1 became the workhorse. That became the workhorse. It was more reliable. The fuel control function was more reliable. Everything was more reliable with the UH1. Everything was.

PRODUCER: Since you flew UH1s from 1980 for another 10 years, how would you compare the UH1 to the TH21, using automobile analogy? What was the comparison like?

SALVATORE: I'd say the UH1 is more like a Cadillac, where as the H21 is like a Chevrolet. I hope the Cadillac and Chevrolet folks don't come down on me on this, but the UH1 has so much power that you can lift just about any ... I have done many, many lift with, not only internal lifts, but external loads with the Uh1. Has an immense amount of power. I have been at 10,000 feet and above in a Uh1 and only had to launch my exhaust gas temperature. That's it. We didn't rise too high. UH1 was a marvelous helicopter. The H21 cannot compare to that. Yeah, the H21 was better than a model T and certainly the UH1 is simply no comparison because of the fact that the engine plant.

The engine plant itself on a H21 is a 8-cylinder radio engine, and by the way, it sits upright. The last three numbers, 103 indicates how it is located in the aircraft and it's straight up and down just as it was in the B17. In the Uh1, it's a turbanned engine and it's very powerful, 6600 RPM. It's immensely powerful so to compare the two is apples and oranges.

PRODUCER: Two different air.

SALVATORE: Yeah, two different helicopters completely because they're just two different engines. They operate very, very differently.

PRODUCER: Since you were there early, and really I guess it was, the personnel were now subscribers, it was actually a popular cause to help this little nation defend itself from the perils of Communism. This domino theory was coming into [inaudible 00:54:18] at that point and you were there in a period when there was American support of this action, probably 95 percent. As the country got further into Vietnam, into the conflict, where we're doing the fighting and the dying and you saw the country just become split, polarized on this, with the [inaudible 00:54:41] What was your reaction to all that?

SALVATORE: I was very disturbed by it. I was very disturbed by it because the men in my unit were all patriots and to see these patriots, some of them who came home, not treated well and this war is going on, this conflict is a conflagration happening throughout the entire country. I saw so little support for it. The impression I had was maybe God had sent me on a path different than I thought I should take, that I should come back to the United States, rather than be subjected to this unpopular view of what I, personally, am doing and what my fellow soldiers are doing, my fellow aviators are doing as well. We're here on a mission. We're here to do something positive for this country. We're trying to get this country on its feet. The amount of appreciation that existed was all but existent. It simply ceased to exist, it seemed to me.

Even when I went to an interview for my first job, there were no smiles. There was no welcome home. There was very little that was appreciative of my service in those days. Thank God for the way things are happening now. I am happy to see today's soldiers receive the ardor that they're receiving today. We didn't have that back then.

As the war escalated and continued to grow and more people were perishing at the hands of the Viet Cong, not only the ARVN folks, but our troops as well. The amount of devastation and the kind of support we were getting, I was getting the feeling that was becoming more political, the politics against a mission accomplishing situation more than let's get the mission done and let's pull out of here. Get her done and let's pull out of here, but it didn't seem that way. It seemed like if we do this, what is going to happen politically? If we do that, what is it going to mean politically, etcetera. I'm not sure I'm making that clear, but this is the impression that I had after I had returned to the States.

It was the 24th of December so it was Christmas Eve, we were summoned for a briefing by the Special Forces, who are now running the ground war. We're in

the auditorium or a movie house, something like that and we were introduced to a Special Forces officer and the first thing out of his mouth was one down, 19 to go. He was referring to the helicopter crash that we had on the first mission that we ran, where some ARVN troops had perished, but both our pilots made it safely home. One down and 19 to go is one heck of a way to start a briefing in my estimation. That didn't sit well with any of us. The commanding officer, my commanding officer, the one who was encouraging me to remain with the service, he shook his head like this and whispered to one of the other officers that's a bunch of stuff and just continued listening to the briefing. It was an unkindly thing to say to, to say the very least, to be polite. It was just not a kindly thing to say. One down and 19 to go, referring to our helicopters, obviously.

PRODUCER: Obviously did not respect the inclusion of the helicopter into the war.

SALVATORE: I think that was because of the conflict between the ground people and the air people, who's got control of what. Ground people think they've got control of the air assets. They do not. The air assets have control over the air assets. Ground assets, ground control. If he had said it in a less pejorative way, if he had said it in a milder manner. Sorry that one of your aircraft went down. I understand there was some casualties and on and on. We're very sorry about that. Let's try to do better the next time. Wars are at effect, I think, would've encouraged us, rather than turn our heads and say this guy is whatever. Full of baloney.

PRODUCER: How do you look back on this part of your life?

SALVATORE: Well, again, as I say, I regret not remaining in the service. Number one, I probably would've gotten a few medals than I have right now that are non-combat medals. Not that I'm a seeker of favoritism, etcetera. Number two, if I had gotten killed, I'd be buried in Arlington. That's where I want to be buried. Simple as that so I'm looking back on it like that, that if I had been killed I'd be buried in Arlington. That's a goal that I'd like to accomplish. I did the best that I could possibly do when I was there.

There was a man who, one of our soldiers, who died out of natural causes and I had to respectfully find all his receipts from downtown, if you get my drift, for bars and stuff like that and discard the stuff that his family would not appreciate seeing. I had to distinguish between the good stuff and the bad stuff, if you will. Discard the bad stuff. Capture all that and send it to the next of kin. His remains were taken care of by the Department of State. The coffin and everything, all that, the body bag, the coffin, all that got taken care of, not by me, but by the Department of State. I've done a credible job. My efficiency reports were okay. They weren't truly outstanding, but they were alright.

The folks that I met there, I still converse with and email. We meet every three years. We have one coming up in 2015, a get-together. A little reunion in 2015. We all have our stories, too, and they're scattered throughout the United States. I think in retrospect having done Vietnam and having done some flying in the States, where my unit and the States was responsible for jump missions, airborne qualification missions. They're called jump hertz for the airborne people.

It was an airborne unit that I was with in the United States, the 11th Special Forces. It was more fun than work. Yes, there was work attached to it because you have to plan the flight. There was risk assessment to the flight. There was weather considerations to the flight, etcetera. The amount of joy that others felt because of our support was our satisfaction.

PRODUCER: [Inaudible 00:03:28] I want to thank you for sharing your stories with us and I want to thank you for what you did over there as well.

SALVATORE: I appreciate that and you're certainly welcome. I thank you for the opportunity.