

ERIC RICHSTEIN, USAF

C-130 NAVIGATOR

'69 – '71

Eric: My name is Eric Richstein and it's spelled E-R-I-C and the last name is R-I-C-H-S-T-E-I-N. I was an air force officer and entered the air force through officer's training school in November 1967. Was commissioned in February of 1968, and went through navigator flight training thereafter, arriving in Southeast Asia in mid-November of 1969, and was in Southeast Asian from November of '69 until February of '71. I was a C-130 Navigator.

Producer: Where were you born, brought up, and where did you get your education, and how did you end up in the military?

Eric: I was born in Brooklyn, New York. My father was a lawyer but had served as a Jag Officer in the United States army as a regular army officer. We were stationed in New York for a number of years. He had been in World War II and then we started moving around. Like so many army brats, I lived all over the place in different places in the United States, in Germany, Holland, and Japan as a youngster. I wound up going to Bethany College in Lindsbourg, Kansas. It's an interesting story in that Bethany College was founded by Swedish settlers in the United States in the late 1860's. You can walk down the street of Lindsbourg, which is the town the college is located in, and to this day still hear Swedish spoken in the street. If you were to open the phone book you would think you were back in Sweden.

It so happens that, totally unrelated, I wound up marrying a wonderful woman from Sweden. So we have great stories about that, but never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that that would happen, but it did. So after college, I always was enthralled with airplanes from the time I was this tall, and I enlisted in the air force with the idea of going to some sort of flight training. I wound up as a navigator and that is what started the whole thing.

My parents were a bit uneasy even though they themselves grew up in the military. My father had grown up in the military for many years. They were not too keen on their son going off to Vietnam. They were very worried when I was over there. Of course every time they'd hear of a plane crash they would get on the phone and try to track it down, but I think any parent would do that. Nevertheless, that's the quick and dirty of how I got over there. It was a very interesting time.

Like so many of us, we were young and felt pretty invincible. We could take on the world and do anything. In many ways we were able to do that, we did that. I

am convinced now from this vantage point, where I'm about to become 70 years old, that war is really a young person's game. It takes a tremendous amount of energy and the wherewithal to gather yourself up and strap an airplane on every day. Or pull that rifle up, whatever you're doing, and do it correctly and do it to the best of your ability.

I have nothing but tremendous respect for the people who have followed on now, who I see on the news everyday, and these days in Afghanistan and I'm getting engaged again in that. I have nothing but respect for them because what they did, what they're doing now, what they did in Iraq and Afghanistan to me, in some ways, is even more amazing than what we did. We were there for 15 months typically, and they've been there for rotation after rotation after rotation. It goes on and on with no end in sight in many cases. You can have nothing but respect for those people.

My officers' training school was at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. That was the air force officer training school entry point in those days, I think it still is. After that I wound up at survival school up in Washington State for about a month and a half, and that was absolutely amazing. You know, I think of what happened to John McCain, Senator McCain, and in fact, if you go to Annapolis, which I do from time to time, they have aircraft on display there.

They have an aircraft similar to the one he flew and got shot down in. It's a very small airplane, even though it's a jet fighter, it's a relatively small aircraft. And to think that those people, day after day, launched off those carriers in all kinds of weather, and went up North to [Annoy 00:04:58] and did what they did is to me absolutely amazing as well. But the point I want to make on that is, having gone through the air force survival school was an amazing thing for me. I was never an athlete, I was never a football player, that kind of thing. But the purpose of it, I think, was really to teach you that if you learn the lessons that they taught you correctly, you knew in your own mind that if you ever got into that situation. You would have a plan, a template in place that might help you somewhat overcome what you were about to face.

Every time I think of Senator McCain going through what he went through, I think of the time I spent in the survival school. It gave me an inkling, just a tiny little inkling of what he must have gone through a hundred times more for the number of years, 6 years I guess that he was there, and I have nothing but respect for him and for his comrades who were with him in that situation. But that training was extremely good training and I think it not only gave me the feeling that maybe it would help me survive a little bit, but I'm sure it helped those men tremendously when they were in that situation.

Producer: Give me one example of that training that really sticks out in your mind.

Eric: There are various aspects to the training. As I recall, it was a good month or so, or maybe more, in duration. And it started out with classroom training, the air force always gives you the classroom training. Sit there and take notes. They bring out these really big sergeants who are experts in everything you could think of and they put the fear of God in you. "If you don't listen to me, gosh almighty, you're going to be in big trouble." So you listen. And then you go out into the field, and it starts out with ... I don't have the sequence right, but the World War II scenario, where you're in the stalag in Germany. The guards are around and they rough you up a little bit, and they try to interview you, and they try to instill in you some techniques for getting through these interviews.

Then at the end of that, which lasted for about a week, they have you escape ... It's all staged ... So you escape, and you're in groups of two as I recall, off into the mountains of Washington State. And it's some pretty - I thought - rough terrain. And you have a few little items like a nylon cord and a needle so you can maybe try and catch a fish. They give you a bunny rabbit.

The whole point was that, some point along the number of days that you're evading, you're going to have to kill the rabbit. To me, that was just amazing. I'm not a hunter or fisher. I'm from Brooklyn, you know. We don't do a lot of hunting in Brooklyn. But, you have to take this rabbit and break its neck, and then you can skin it, cook it for dinner, and eat the eyeballs because the eyeballs have a lot of saline solution in them. That's something you need. So there were two of us and you each got an eyeball and swallow it. To me it was like landing on the moon. I couldn't believe I was doing this. That certainly stands out in my mind. The whole thing ... Then you continue the evasion and they finally pick you up in a helicopter. You use a signal mirror, and you signal a helicopter, and the helicopter lowers a cord, and you get on it and up you go.

It was quite fascinating, and I thought, very well done. There are other survival schools. In fact, if I'm not getting too far ahead of you, when I got over to the Phillipines there was a jungle survival school we had to go through. There they put you out in the jungle scenario that you find in the Phillipines. To just get your attention they say, "You're going to be out here one night and last day, but we don't advise that you fall asleep because there are a lot of mice and field mice out here and other kinds of things, and if you fall asleep, if you have any kind of odor of food on your lips or on your hands, they'll run up and snap at you and perhaps bite you. Of course you're going to go like this and they're going to run off and you're going to have to get rabies shots because we don't know whether they're rabid or not"

That got everyone's attention. Nobody slept that night. The next morning they sent the helicopters out and you signaled them and up you go again. So I think the air force, the military in general, does a tremendous job using lessons

learned in terms of how to prep people through these survival schools. I'm sure it's helped a lot of people, whether you're in a combat survival situation or just a downed air craft trying to stay alive until somebody can come and find you.

Producer: You must remember when you set foot in Vietnam.

Eric: Absolutely. Let me just track it back to the Philippines. What I was telling you before, there were three groups of C-130's stationed in Asia. One group was in the Philippines. I think perhaps one of the larger groups. There was another group in Thailand and another group that was stationed in Taiwan. The reason for that was that these are fairly big air planes, even though they have amazing capabilities in short fields and so forth. They had to be maintained and they had to have certain kinds of technical maintenance and so forth done on them. So just to keep them safe, and to keep these fairly expensive assets safe, they chose to base them like that. But for instance from the Philippines it was only 2 hours and 45 minutes more or less to Cam Rahn Bay.

Cam Rahn Bay was where we operated out of most of the time. In fact, most of the time we were out in Southeast Asia we spent in Vietnam. So I got to the Philippines, they opened the door to this big airliner we were on and this was November when we left the States. They'd issued us these big heavy, we called them "horse blankets", heavy coats and they were great because we went through Alaska on the way over there. I remember the first thing we all noticed was this tremendous blanket of heat that just came in the airplane and enveloped everybody inside the airplane.

We said, "Oh my God, here we are", and it was just almost unbearable. We got off, I got processed in and found the place where I was going to be sleeping for a few nights initially, but then very quickly after that I got checked out locally in the squadron, and was over in Vietnam. That first trip was kind of amazing because we went up to Okanawa on the way over to the Philippines to pick up or discharge some cargo and I said, "Oh this is great, this can't be bad, this is like a tourist trip to Japan or something". Then the next day we got up and flew over to [Chu Lai 00:12:07] and I think we dropped off some vegetables to [Chew Lai 00:12:11] and then wound up going to Cam Rahn Bay where we would be for the next, oh probably 14 to 16 days.

We would go in for typically 2 to 3 weeks at a time and it was quite amazing because there are people walking around with rifles, and you can hear guns going off, and all kinds of things. We would fall into a cycle where you would initially get in there that first day, check in, and bed down, and then the next day you would pick up a schedule. And the schedule would rotate through a 24 hour cycle. So you basically flew almost every day and you would come back and they

would slip you a few hours. You would go through a 24 hour cycle and then start all over again.

Well it just so happens that November of course is Thanksgiving, and my birthday is December, and then Christmas and New Years ... I flew, and I'm glad I was, but I flew every day that one of those events took place, I was in the air. So I had no time to think about those things. In fact when we got back down on Thanksgiving, all the food was gone when we got back down, on Christmas all the food was gone as well. It was just as well, it made the time pass. But I remember flying over Saigon and looking out the cockpit on, on for instance New Years, and seeing all of these rockets going off and the beautiful sight of the river passing through Saigon, that's something I'll never forget.

The time passed fairly quickly, and we were in the tactical air command so we flew all kinds of missions in Vietnam. We flew the typical airlift mission which was cargo or people. We flew supplies like ammunition, or pieces of big wood to build things with. We carried [gliders 00:14:07] of fuel for the helicopters at these army forward operating centers. We carried Agent Orange. I think I'm still starting to feel the effects now of having done that because those things were in drums and they always leaked. So when you either picked those things up to load into the airplane or unload them at some forward operating place you're always sloshing around and there's stuff on the ground and it would get on your boots for instance.

When you went home that evening, or when you got back to where you were going to bed down you'd untie your boots and you know you pick that stuff up ... Two years ago I found out I had kidney cancer. I had to have my right kidney removed. Now kidney cancer is not on the Agent Orange list of cancer-causing agents, but somewhere in the back of my mind I just have a gut feeling that it certainly didn't help. I've just been diagnosed now with prostate cancer, because everybody, when you get to a certain age, is going to have ... Prostate cancer is on the list of things related to Agent Orange.

So I continue to wonder if exposure to that stuff may have had some effect. And I think that even though they continue to add diseases or medical problems to the Agent Orange list and I'm in the Agent Orange registry, that as people age now they're going to find that there are more and more things that continue to pop up that you could make a case for being related to exposure to Agent Orange. But that's what we did.

We also went on missions called Commando Vault where the military found these old 10 thousand and 15 thousand pound bombs which I think may have been left over perhaps from World War II. They were these huge ugly looking things. They would be perhaps this tall off the ground, long, and they had a huge

probe that was maybe 3 or 4 meters sticking out the front. When I was getting checked out that initial month in Vietnam, the aircraft commander I was flying with was checked out in dropping these things so I got to go on 2 or 3 of these missions. Absolutely amazing.

You had to go and drop them from a fairly low altitude and you had to make wind runs back and forth for about an hour. You couldn't just go drop it because you had to be extremely precise where you dropped it. The purpose of these things, as we were using them, was to clear helicopter landing zones. So if you dropped a 10 000 pound bomb which would be sitting on a pallet in the back of the C-130 would be extracted just like any other cargo with a parachute. And we could carry 2 of those at once. We could carry one 15 000 pounder. The thing would shoot out the airplane, it would go on down to the ground, it would impact above-ground when the probe hit the ground, and the shock-wave would go out and it would just clear about a 1500 circular meter area in the jungle.

The helicopters would come in and safely disgorge their cargo. But the problem was that the shock-wave from these things was so great that it looked like a World War II movie and you'd have to do this to the airplane to get it out of there. You couldn't get the airplane away from it fast enough. And so the shock-wave would come up and just grab the airplane and shake it like crazy. You'd think the whole airplane was going to fall apart. I was crazy enough the first time to go back there and I wanted to see it. So I strapped myself in with a harness to the inside of the airplane and the load masters just thought this was great fun, and they were going to have fun with me. So the pilot says, "Off we go" the bomb goes off, the airplane shakes, and the whole back of the airplane is open. You're looking out and you just look like you're going to go right out the back of the airplane, but luckily you have a harness on. I've got pictures, which are great photographs of this thing shooting out the back of the airplane. That was something I'll never forget. That was absolutely amazing. I don't know if we still have that in the arsenal or not, or whether we still do that. I think it must have been very effective, and I can only imagine if there was somebody on the ground watching one of these things drift down. If you knew or you didn't know what was going to happen, you found out very quickly. It must have been a horrible way to leave this world.

Producer: 10 or 15 000 ... I'm trying to think. I've had B-52 pilots and they would load it up with ...

Eric: Yeah, no these were ...

Producer: The bombs that they had were nowhere ...

Eric: No, no.

Producer: You think these were left over from World War II?

Eric: That's what I believe. Maybe they were from Korea? I don't think they were made specifically. I think it was something that some planner someplace said, "Gee, we've got these bombs sitting in this warehouse". I mean, I don't know for sure. I wasn't part of that. "Why don't we use them? They're just sitting there collecting dust."

Producer: Would they clear right down to the ground and knock those trees' stumps right out?

Eric: Yeah because you had this 3 meter probe sticking out the bottom. And so the probe would hit, that would detonate the bomb, and then before the bomb hit the ground it exploded.

Producer: I see. So it wouldn't really create a crater.

Eric: No, no, no. No, not as far as I know. It would just clear everything.

Producer: Wow. 1500 square meters.

Eric: Yes. And I'm sure the 15 000 pound bomb did even more than that. It was quite a bang. The interesting part was that you had to go through all these shenanigans before they would let you drop it. You were getting temperature readings at different altitudes, wind readings. You were talking to a control site many miles away and they were confirming your findings. They were deadly scared about making a mistake with dropping one of these things. As a navigator, that was the part that I was quite interested in. The precision with which you were doing these calculations.

Producer: It was called the vault?

Eric: Commando vault. Commando vault. V-A-U-L-T. And you can research, you can Google it and find some information on it. Trash haulers was the nice name they gave it.

Producer: I would imagine that a C-130 is kind of a slow-moving easy target. Did you get much fire?

Eric: No we didn't because we could take off, and we were always cognizant of that possibility. There were some times when we would pick up some stray fire from the ground. That's an interesting story as well. When you have a headset on and you're inside one of those airplanes there's a lot of tubing inside the airplane, both electrical cabling and tubing for hydraulics and stuff. When you pick up a

bullet going through an airplane like that it reverberates through all this tubing and you can hear it in your headset and it was quite interesting. That happened a few times.

The one time it really happened we were going up to the place where that photograph is behind me, Song Bay, and we were hauling some heavy timber. And the whole inside of the airplane was full of timber. When that happened, if it got into the airplane in any way I'm sure it would lodge in one of those big pieces of finished wood we had, thank God. So it never got any further than that. That was something we were aware of, but because we were a C-130 we could get up high fairly quickly and we would normally fly at about, I would say, 15 000 feet in Vietnam.

So we were pretty much above most of that kind of ground fire that the helicopters for instance would be subject to. I mean there were days when I can remember flying up in areas near the parrots beak, which was an area of Vietnam near Cambodia, and there was a lot going on those days. I must have heard at least 5 helicopters hit and go down on the radio. The pitch of the voice as the guy knew he was going in, in many cases, just got higher and higher. You know. Then there was just silence. That was not very pleasant.

Producer: Were SAMS a concern?

Eric: No.

Producer: It was all [inaudible 00:22:43].

Eric: The only thing, when we had concerns about missiles or that kind of heavy anti-air craft was when we would fly from Clark once in a while over-fly Vietnam and head into someplace up in Thailand. And we had to go in some places that were reported heavy anti-air craft guns. We knew where they were and we had them marked in our charts and we would just try to keep an eye on that.

There was one other mission which you might find interesting which we flew which was an intelligence mission. There was a unit of a tactical reconnaissance squadron based out of Yokota air base in Japan. They had a group that was based out of Cam Rahn. The purpose of this group was to in C-130's was to take off, fly out, come back over Vietnam, and then turn north along the Ho Chi Minh trail, Laos and Cambodia in that area. We had sensors, we had trailers that they would park in the back of the airplane with intelligence people and we couldn't even go back there.

They were all sealed up, but apparently there were people that would drop various kinds of sensors along the trail. Some of them were heat-seeking sensors

and some of them actually picked up voice communication. So we had linguists in the back and all kinds of interesting people. We would fly along the trail, they were 10 hour missions. Every, I think it was, 2 to 3 degrees, if you altered the course of the air craft 2 to 3 degrees you had to make a full line entry in your log. It was fun initially because we got to go to Japan for 2 weeks or 3 weeks at Yakota and Tokyo and go to class every day. Then in the afternoon you'd be finished. We thought that was just great. We were just hired help just to help out these fellows on the squadron ... They never had enough people.

They had this one special C-130 which was fascinating. It had an auto-pilot control navigator station. So when you got on station, when you're flying this mission, the navigator took over control of the air craft you would steer the airplane using the wheel that you would like with an automatic pilot. The navigation was extremely precise and you had to be certified as a crew. So you had a pilot, a co-pilot, and a navigator who were certified going through training. You had to fly together, they couldn't put you on another crew. You had to stay together always. In the morning when you'd get ready to fly you would go into a room and take everything off except your dog tags. No, not your dog tags. But every patch, your wallet, every piece of identification would go into a little box they'd hold for you, and you'd give a stand up briefing.

So the pilot, the navigator, I'd get up there with my little pointer and you'd have ... You know it's like something out of 16 Minutes over in Tokyo. You see these old Hollywood movies. I hate to keep referring to it, but that's what it was like. You'd stand up and the two of you would give this briefing and you'd point out the route, where you were going, what you were going to do. The intelligence briefing and so forth. Then you'd go out to the aircraft, take off, and fly for 10 hours. At the end of 10 hours, on the way back in, you'd land some place just on the border. I can't even remember the name of this place. A little dirt strip in the middle of nowhere.

A guy would come out of the jungle in a jeep, a lone figure. We always figured, "He must be CIA guy or something". They'd take all the tapes that they got, put them in a big satchel bag, and toss them out to this guy. I guess he took them back where he was coming from and they would process it, get it on a satellite link, and get it someplace they could use it. It was fascinating.

One time, you asked about missiles and SAMS and so forth, we were out there flying this mission and we got word from our control site that several Migs had taken off from a field in Vietnam, and they were heading our way. As you say, we had no armaments. We were just fat and dumb and slow. The only thing you could do was to get the heck out of there as quickly as possible. So that's exactly what we did. We put the throttle forward and just turned back and got back to

Cam Rahn Bay as quickly as possible. Never saw any of the Migs, but they apparently were in the area. But that was the kind of thing you were subject to.

The saving grace of the C-130, and I think the thing that made it such a tremendous asset in Vietnam, was the ability to land in very short, relatively short runways. Un-improved runways. It could be dirt, it could be gravel, it could be anything.

Producer: Roads?

Eric: Yeah. And then take off in a very short distance. Normally, on a normal mission the C-130 could hold, in those days, about 15 tonnes of cargo. So it was a very good aircraft, I think, for that situation. We could haul certainly jeeps. We could haul, I think, maybe a tank or small armored personnel carrier. That kind of thing. It's funny because it's been so long ago now. If you said, "What could you haul on a C-5A, which was the last aircraft I flew, which is the biggest airplane in the world, I could tell you exactly. Going back now I really have to think about it. But we would haul jeeps, we would haul cannon, pieces of armor.

Producer: Howitzers.

Eric: Howitzers. 155 millimeter Howitzers. I think we could get in there. It was amazing what you could get in there.

Producer: It would carry troops?

Eric: Yes of course, troops. I think it was 77 troops we could carry. That leads me to another aspect that we did which were aero medical flights. Every day out of Cam Rahn Bay there would be typically scheduled two aero medical flights. They would leave in the morning. One would head north and one would head south. They were staffed with nurses, not so much doctors, but medical people, nurses [corpsman 00:29:36] in the back. We would have a schedule that was given to us, where we would go to these forward operating bases, land, pick up ... It was like an airliner really. Up and down, up and down. Pick up people, and then at the end of the day we would get them back to one of the large field hospitals. [Qui Nhon 00:29:52] was where we had a large field hospital ... Dislodged them and they would get the treatment they needed before they could stabilize further and get back to the States hopefully.

Well these always were subject to change, these schedules because you never knew if there was something unexpected happened, you would have to divert and that is exactly what happened. One day we were taking off and we got a call to divert ... They told us where it was roughly, the coordinates. I plotted it out on the chart, and it was during the monsoon season, so there was a lot of rain. The

rains in Vietnam were just horrendous, they were horrible. So we get over to this place and it's about 5:30 in the morning, this was an early flight.

The weather was horrible, the minimums are actually below our minimum ... We called it [fire and defeats 00:30:49], we'd have a chance of getting in there. In the middle of the jungle. It was just literally in the middle of the jungle. It was just a little strip that looked like what you'd imagine, just dirt. So I set up what we call an ARA, which is an Airborne Radar Approach wherein the navigator calculates the glide slope and the distance from the touchdown point and uses his radar to get the airplane down, telling the pilot where to turn, what else. It's very much like what an air traffic controller might do, but we do it inside the airplane.

So we did that and we made a few passes. The navigator also had a Fox Mic Radio, it was an FM radio, which was a portable box which we would strap in where we sat. You'd have to clear the artillery sites because there was a lot of artillery always going up. I mean there was the bad guys' artillery and there was the good guys' artillery, and you at least could avoid the good guys' artillery. To do that, you'd have to let them know you were in the area, be in communication with the army guys and say, "Here's what we're doing" and, "Please point that gun in another direction." We were doing that, doing the ARA, and we finally got down there and, this was very close to the New Orleans part of South Vietnam. There had been ... it's very interesting ... an engagement over-night that had ended early in the morning that involved U.S. troops, South Vietnamese troops, and North Vietnamese regular troops, and some North Vietnamese armor. So it was a big shoot up. When we got there we landed and pulled up very close to where these wounded were. All four of these groups had wounded people on stretchers on the ground. The South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese were literally tied to their stretchers because they were just trying to get off their stretchers and go at each other. The Americans were badly wounded. The thing that I'll never forget was that this one young man who I think couldn't have been more than 19-20 at the most, had taken a shell that had entered the back of his head and had taken his whole nose off. He was awake and cognizant. You almost feel embarrassed when you see something like that because you want to reach out and do something for these people. There's nothing you can do except, you know, say, "Hello". You almost want to say "How are you" but you don't want to say, "How are you", you know how they are. The medical people were out there triaging and getting these guys ready to get on the airplane. This one fellow caught my eye so I knelt down and was talking to him. He said, "Do you have a cigarette? I really want a cigarette. I want to smoke" and of course I didn't smoke. So I found somebody with a cigarette, lit the cigarette and gave it to him, and he somehow managed to smoke it. Held his hand for awhile. We never exchanged names. We just talked and looked at each other, you know. Then they

finally came and got him, put him in the back of the airplane. We climbed in the front and took off. We flew back immediately to Kien Giang which was along the coast, and we landed. But along the way Kien Giang was coming under a rocket attack. It was the darnedest thing. So we had a circle wall ... the attack took place. That was over. We finally stopped on the runway. I'll never forget this, opened the back of the airplane. The ambulance backed up into the back of the airplane, there was a doctor on board the ambulance, and they got this one kid ... that's who they wanted ... they got him onto the ambulance and drove away. It always comes back to haunt me that I never found out what his name was. Had no way of knowing whether he lived or died. I certainly hope he lived and had a really good life because he deserved it. But that was the kind of thing we did and that's the kind of thing that stays with you in your memory forever and ever.

There was a lot of bad in the Vietnam War, but there was also a lot of good. I like to think that that was some of the good. And that went on everyday with people just like myself. By nurses who just gave everything to these kids. When I talk about it it still brings tears back to my eyes.

Producer: Good Samaritans. [inaudible 00:35:40] ... so we're actually patching up the enemy. I trust once they're healed they just become prisoners of war.

Eric: Right.

Producer: But I think that's just amazing that we're taking the enemy up.

Eric: It is quite amazing. You know the analogy to that is ... my wife is a nurse over at Walter Reed and I get my medical treatment over at Walter Reed. And I've been going there for years. They have this military art on the walls as you walk through the halls over at Walter Reed aisles. They have some war art from World War II with the Japanese in the Pacific. There's one picture that I see every time that I go there, and I never forget this picture. It's of a wounded Japanese P.O.W., badly wounded, all bandaged up. He's in a bed in a ward with American doctors tending to him. The lesson of that is that if that had been reversed and that guy had been an American in a Japanese situation I bet my last dollar they would have been cutting his head off. That's the difference between this country and many other countries I could name. You know I'm a tremendous fan of this country. I think it's the greatest country in the world. I think it's great because we do that kind of thing, not what we see on the news these days, but we do that kind of thing ... that's our mores, that's the way we approach life. That's what makes us different. I'm not going to say maybe a little bit better, though some people might. But that's our approach to the way we do things, and thank God that's the way it is.

Producer: It's maybe why you can go to Vietnam today and as an American they're not begrudging our problems.

Eric: No. The Vietnam story is an amazing story as you look at it from the end of the war to now. Of course we had this tremendous influx of Vietnamese. Many many of them have become very successful. They're very educated people. We have this natural, now, affinity to Vietnam that as things open up more and more I think they're almost an ally of ours now. They're very interested in what we do vis a vis the Chinese. They've had their run-ins with the Chinese. They're no fans of the Chinese. So I think that it's too bad we had to go through this war to get to that point but in the end it may be for the better. They're wonderful people. I find that when you get past the level of government that the people in these countries, for the most part, are very fine people. Most people, anywhere you go in the world ... and I'm sure you have, and I've traveled a lot ... want several things. They want enough food on the table to feed their family, a roof over their head, they want a safe environment to live in, and they hope that their children will grow up to a better world than what they knew. People are the same no matter where you go and that's a universal characteristic of the human being. If we just get past everything that gets in the way of doing that ...

Producer: The politics and the ideology that drove us to that war in the first place.

Eric: Exactly.

Producer: The whole domino theory. As you grew older and wiser and certainly even through the course of your military experience, did you begin to doubt some of the military action based on this ideology that didn't seem to be supported by ...

Eric: Fact.

Producer: Yeah.

Eric: I certainly studied it. The one counter to what you're driving towards is this ... what we were fighting was a revolution, and in revolutions people do very terrible things. And I can tell you and I will believe this until I die ... I know it's a fact in my mind ... that when the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, would enter a village they would say, "Bring me the mayor, bring me the school teacher, bring me the midwife." You could go on and on and on. They would put them up against a wall and, "boom, boom, boom" and those people were dead. Now in my mind there's no excuse. You can't justify that. You just can't justify that. It's no different in Iraq and Afghanistan today. You cannot justify that. I think that the South Vietnamese at the time, the people running the government, I believe that many of them were corrupt people. If they hadn't been so corrupt, if that corruption hadn't have been there, that maybe the thing could have turned out

slightly differently. If you look at Vietnam, it's an amazing country. It's a gorgeous country. As I often used to joke when I was younger, if you look at those beaches ... if the right guy [inaudible 00:40:31] that war ... you know, Hilton, [inaudible 00:40:33] ... we'd be going there surfing on our surfboards. It didn't work out that way but maybe in the end it worked out for the best. The people have their own country. They're doing it their way. There are still a lot of people who are communist in the government obviously who, as I say, went to "Communist U" you know in Moscow or whatever, but there are many other people who have gone back who were there who went to Western universities. I think those people now are starting to get in the ascendancy. I think in China for instance, they got the economics right, they haven't quite got the politics right. I think the same thing could happen in Vietnam. They have got the economics right but they have got to shove those older people who this heavy communist overlay on them aside so that they can implement what they know is right and what will make that country bloom.

Producer: You got out in September of '73.

Eric: Yes, I left the air force in September of '73. At that time, when I came back, I [inaudible 00:41:42]. That was the C-130 school. We taught people ... pilots, navigators, flight engineers, load masters, and trained them to go to Vietnam to do the same mission we had been doing.

Producer: But now September '73 the last troops were withdrawn in [inaudible 00:42:00] that year. What was it like to come back ... I mean, [inaudible 00:42:04]

Eric: Well I came back through, I guess it was Los Angeles I think ... or San Francisco ... Los Angeles. I had my uniform on and you hear these tales of people being told not to wear their uniform and so forth. I was in a little better shape in those days and I was kind of a taller guy. You know, nobody was going to bother me. I walked through that airport and was waiting for a plane to get back to Washington. So I read about it, I saw it on the news, but I never really was exposed to it except that it really hurt me to know that people were coming back and were being treated that way. Again, no excuse in my mind for that. I think we've learned that lesson now whether you agree with the government's action or not, you can't take it out on the people that did the government's bidding.

The interesting adjunct to that in my case was that when I came back I had to decide at that point what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I had been in law school for half a year before I wound up in the air force. I could have gone back to law school but my equation told me that there were too many lawyers around and that I would be better off getting an MBA degree. So off I went and was interviewing with schools and the director of MBA admissions at American University in Washington was a retired air force colonel who had been a

navigator. So I went in there and he said, "Oh you know, you big jerk, just take the test and if you do well on the test come back and see me and we'll start you off." So I did that because I had also gone by the CIA offices in Rosslyn in Virginia. I thought that might be interesting. The guy said, "Yeah I think we'd be interested in you. It sounds good" and he said, "Here's a stack of papers which I'd like you to fill out." And I'm not kidding, the papers ... it took me two hours to carry them home. They were like this thick. And I started doing that and I said you know, I must be crazy. I'm not going to sit here and fill all of this out. I said, I'm going to go back to school and be an MBA, so that's what I did. So I completed my MBA and then my interest was Asia and business in the Asia Pacific region because I had lived there as a kid and had been there in the war and I was just fascinated with it. So I went up to New York to interview because the country was coming out of a recession. This was actually '77 now. The country was coming out of a recession and there was no jobs locally ... the kind I wanted. Banks were pretty much the only people hiring people, and the big banks were in New York. At that time I was flying in the air force reserve out of Dover on the C-5 and I had a friend who was doing his MBA at Wharton at the same time that I was doing mine in Washington. They were much more advanced in their placement ability. He would bring me a big thick book literally every month we would get together at Dover that they used to help their kids get placed. We had nothing like that, it was an American university. You know, it made it a lot easier. So I get up to New York to interview with all the big banks and there was a bank in those days called Chemical Bank which was the 6th largest bank in the United States. In most of the banks that would hire you you had to go through a training process, but Chemical Bank was unique in that it would hire you specifically for a particular part of the bank, a particular part of the world, a particular thing you wanted to do. So I was hired to go through a training program which was a year long and eventually make my way to the Asia Pacific region, which was exactly what I wanted to do. I show up and the training program was, I think, the hardest thing I had ever done. Harder than anything in the air force academically, harder than college, harder than the MBA ... it was tough. They segregated the candidates into those with MBA's and everybody else. If you had just a masters degree, a BA, or a PhD, you were in a general grab bag, but MBA's were in an advanced track program. There were two MBA classes that year and I was in the first one with 10 people ... 3 women and 7 men. The first day, they take you out to lunch at Tavern on the Green and, you know, this is really great. They bring you back and they paired us into twos and had us introduce each other. I was paired with a young lady and we had to talk to each other for a few minutes and tell them what your background was. None of these kids had been in the military. They were all a bit younger than I was at the time and they had all gone to top notch schools. Harvard, Northwestern, Stanford, you name it ... they were there. Chicago. So I said, "You know, I was in the air force, got out, and joined the reserve and I did my MBA in Washington." And she

said, "Well what's this pin on your lapel?" And I said, "It's a distinguished flying cross." And she said, "Well what's that?" So I told her that in fact I had gotten it as a result of the mission where I picked up that young man, on the air evac mission. So she gets up and introduces me and says, "This is so-and-so and he's been in the air force, and he's got this pin he wears which is a flying cross from blah, blah, blah." For the next, I'd say, almost 3 months, unless they had to, not one of those kids would talk to me. And that gets back to your part about the reception you had on the way home. That was my initiation and that kind of thing. Of course it hurt. I don't have fangs on my head. Why would they feel that way? But that's the way they were. They had no idea of what the military was like, what people in the military had done. They just knew, in their mind, that was a bad thing. It took me about 3 months ... and I mean, you're together all day long with these kids and it's not a very comfortable situation. And finally, I don't know something must have happened, we broke the ice and we all wound up going out and drinking that night and we were friends the next day. But yes, I did experience that to that extent and it was very hurtful. I don't understand why they felt that they had to react that way, but nevertheless they did. So I know for many of those people walking through the airport who got spat on, it was much worse, but it was something that I always remember. It was the greatest 15 months of my life. I mean as I look back on my life professionally, the time I spent in the air force, and particularly that 15 months, was absolutely amazing. I felt that I grew as a person because ... we were very young. I think I may have mentioned at some point that I saw the crew where the pilot, the copilot, and the navigator, that was me, were all lieutenants, either second lieutenants or first lieutenants. And that was a bit unusual because usually the crews would be made up of people who might be majors, or lieutenant-colonels, or captains, lieutenants. But we were all Lieutenants and we flew a lot together in Vietnam. We would pull into these little forward operating bases where we would need something done ... we'd have to give some orders. You'd have these really tough old sergeants, these army guys, and they'd look at us and they'd laugh. They'd say, "Well no, we're not going to talk to you. We want to talk to the aircraft commander or whoever is flying this airplane." That's us sergeant. So that was an example of that.

Producer: What was your average age of all you guys?

Eric: Of us at that time we were ... well let's see. I was born in 1944 and this is ... so I was early 20's. We were all 21, 22, 23. We were young kids. 24. Maybe a little bit older in some cases, but we were young. Even the people we flew with ... The flight engineers, in many cases, load masters were old enough to be our fathers sometimes you know. They kind of looked after us. No, those were great days and I felt, at least, that I was really doing something. That I was contributing in some way. When we flew those air vac missions we were perhaps saving

somebody's life. When we flew a supply mission in a way we were saving somebody's life by getting things to them that they needed.

We had flights where we had families of Vietnamese soldiers who had been killed someplace in Vietnam and we were taking the remains back to Saigon or some place, bigger city. Where one day we had the aircraft was loaded with the coffin holding the remains of one of these South Vietnamese soldiers. His family, extended family was on the airplane and we're flying along and all of the sudden the load master calls up and says, "They're lighting candles on the coffin ... Having some sort of ceremony." Of course you can't do that in an airplane ... you'd blow the whole thing up. So I had to go back there and it was the most moving thing I had ever seen, but I had to tell them, "Please extinguish these candles." There they were and it was just the most moving thing I had ever seen.

The other thing that I'll never forget is that we used to carry the remains of soldiers who had been killed in action. You know, there's a whole protocol to that ... how you put the bodies in the airplane, the remains in the airplane. In this case, they weren't even typically in any type of coffin, they were in body bags with formaldehyde in them. There were flags over them in some cases, sometimes not. We used to fly a lot at night with this kind of mission and we'd have these, we'd call them floor lights. They were red lights that would mark both sides of the airplane along the floor. You'd go back there sometimes and they'd have these big, oversized identification tags tied to the bottom of the body bag and you could hear the liquid in the bags sloshing bag and forth. That was the most heart-wrenching thing I've ever experienced. To go back there for some reason and walk among these honored people. I'll never forget that. I think about it often, like I think about that young man on the airplane.

The C-130 was a versatile airplane and it did so many kinds of missions that you had a panapoly of things that you could recall for that 15 months. It was all interesting, it was, for the most part, all good. You got to know a lot of people. Strangely enough, you got to know a lot of people very closely. I always thought when I came back from Vietnam that at some point these people would try to stay in touch with each other, but no, it never happened in my case. We all sort of went our separate ways and I don't think I've ever run into anybody since that I'd flown in Vietnam with. That was a great disappointment to me. I thought that that would be something that would be very nice that you could take away from this experience, but it never happened.

I've never been a joiner of organizations or clubs. I just don't like that kind of thing. But, in the last couple of years, I've joined a few of things. The distinguished Flying Cross Society is a Congressionally mandated group that has chapters around the country and I just decided that I was going to join the chapter here. We have a small group of people, even though there are many

members, and we get together about every 6 weeks. Very interesting people from all services ... Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine corps. We have a business meeting and then we go out to lunch someplace, you know.

We talk about the politics of the day or what we did in Vietnam. I find a great deal of support in that kind of thing [inaudible 00:55:05] doing that because these people, to me, were the greatest people in the world. I look at these people in awe. I mean, when I look at their accomplishments ... We have one guy who is a retired general in the air force in this chapter who has a Phd, he teaches. I call him the fastest man I know because he flew the F-104 Starfighter which was about as fast as you can go in an airplane. I always joke with him about that. He gets a kick out of it. We have guys that flew ... One good friend I made was a guy that flew B-52's and large helicopters in Vietnam. The contrast is amazing. People that flew tanker air crafts, people who flew small little helicopters ... You name it and we have people who flew it. The stories that these people tell. I have one distinguished flying cross. There are people in this unit that have 3 and 4 and 5 of these things. That was the F-105 ...

Producer: 405.

Eric: Yeah. This was a needle nosed Lockheed fighter that they put in Vietnam in the early years of Vietnam and it turned out to be not that effective. He probably wouldn't want me to tell you this but he was shot down in this airplane and survived. Took one of his eyes out, but he survived. He's just an amazing, amazing guy. He's an emigrant. He was an emigrant to this country. Came as a young man ... family. Went to school. Got into the Air Force and was successful, extremely successful. But those are the kind of people.

I'm a member now of the MOAA chapter here which is a military group that does legislation and so forth. We have a luncheon once a month. It's funny, I never thought I would find interest in those kinds of groups but it's a function of my age, where I'm at in life, the kind of ... I don't want to call it camaraderie ... The contact with people that did what I did. That are pretty much my age and went through the same experiences as I went through in Vietnam and so forth that I find interesting.

To get back to my point ... The point is that I'm amazed at these people. The accomplishments of these people in all walks of life. You hear so much about many of the soldiers that came out of Vietnam were on drugs or were homeless and that kind of thing. There were those people. I've seen them, I've talked to them, I've been in rooms with them. There are also other people that succumb those problems and went on to do many great things. There's a whole spectrum of people and I'm sure in your interviews for this series that you've met the same spectrum of people that I'm describing. I think that each of them has to be held

in the same high esteem because they all went through, in their own way, the same hell, if you will. You know. The same fear sometimes, but the same feeling that you were doing something that was very good.

Producer: One last question, since you were ...

Eric: I'd like to. I'd like to. I'd not had the opportunity to do it. It's one place I haven't traveled to. I've been to pretty much every place else, but not to Vietnam. At some point I'd like to do that. I think it would be fascinating to do that. Maybe we ought to get a group of Vietnam veterans from Maryland and put together a trip and go back to Vietnam. That would be a lot of fun. It was the most beautiful country. The French, when they were there. With their plantations, the Michelin plantations. You'd fly on a nice day where there wasn't much happening, you'd be flying around doing your thing, flying along the coast, and you'd see the most beautiful French homes and villas that were left over from the good old days, as far as the French were concerned, along the water. It was like a paradise. It was like a Shangri-La. And then the next minute you'd been in the [inaudible 00:59:35]. It must be the most beautiful country. To answer your questions, yes I'd love to come back. To see those people.

Producer: Well Eric I want to thank you for sharing your stories.

Eric: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Producer: Thank you for what you did.

Eric: Thank you very much. There are many people that did much more than I did, I think, but it was an interesting experience and I think to just close off and answer your last question, I think my experience in the Air Force, and particularly in Vietnam, was probably the most formative thing in my life that I can remember. Except perhaps giving birth to a beautiful daughter that I have and marrying my beautiful wife. I mean, professionally in terms of the work that I did, this is something that I'll never forget and I think it formed me as a person. I think that, not that everybody should go off to war to get that kind of experience, but that serving your country in some way is something that everybody ought to consider doing in this lifetime because I think that it makes you a much better person.

Producer: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Eric: Thank you, sir.

Producer: Good job.

