

**Roberts Memorial Library, Middle Georgia State College
Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project
Interview with Retired Col. Theodore C. Robinson (Ted)**

May 2, 2013

Paul Robards: The date is May 2, 2013. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia State College. I am interviewing Col. Ted Robinson about his Vietnam War experience.

Robards: What branch of the military did you serve in?

Robinson: I was in the Marine Corp Reserve.

Robards: Why did you join the military?

Robinson: I was going to be drafted.

Robards: How old were you when you joined?

Robinson: 21

Robards: Where did you go to receive military training?

Robinson: I went to Quantico. I was with the Marine Corp OCS at Quantico. The Marines normally send Second Lieutenants to the Basic school, but I was an aviation candidate. I was already pre-approved to be a pilot, and so they eliminated basic school for all pilots at the time; so I went straight to Pensacola. I spent a little over a year in Pensacola and was designated an able aviator.

Robards: How did the training you received prepare you for your experiences in Vietnam?

Robinson: It was excellent [training], because after I left Pensacola, I went to Camp Pendleton and was in Marine Observation Squadron Five, which became Marine Light Helicopter Squadron 267; and so I got ample training to be able to become a co-pilot when I got to Vietnam.

Robards: Please tell us about any particular incidents that occurred during Basic or Technical Training.

Robinson: Other than what a normal pilot does, [there were] events where I tried things that I really didn't know how to do, and came close to killing myself. I learned, and I think that is how pilots learn. I remember an instructor, I asked him if he would teach me how to do an airline roll, and he said "That's not an authorized maneuver." I said, "Ok." I didn't

realize, even after watching the Blue Angels, that to do an airline roll, you need to pull the nose up thirty degrees, so I'm over the Gulf of Mexico, and I just did it level, and turned it immediately into a split-S. When I woke up, I was headed into the Gulf at maximum air speed. Fortunately, it was high enough that I could pull it out, but I felt like Jonathan Livingston Seagull right before he hit the brick wall.

Robards: Please give us some examples of how discipline was enforced during your training.

Robinson: [One thing happened] about the third day in OCS, when we were learning how to do close-order-drill. I was a musician and a bartender, so I didn't know anything about the military; it was totally alien to me. And a helicopter flew over. I had never seen a military helicopter, so I looked at the helicopter. The captain who was teaching us how to do this said, "Robinson, do you want to look at the helicopters," and of course, immediately I knew that there was no correct answer, and I was really in trouble. So, I said, "Yes, sir," and he said "Good," and for three days I got to march about 12 meters behind the platoon looking for helicopters. I had to keep my head looking straight up. Of course, there were no helicopters for three days. I'd say that the Marine Corp discipline is incredible. The physical discipline; the mental discipline; the academic discipline, and the commitment, which is what creates the esprit de corp, a lot of this is what makes marines different from all the other services.

Robards: How did you feel when you learned you were going to Vietnam?

Robinson: I had mixed emotions. I was trained to go to Vietnam. I was young and immature enough to think that that was what I was supposed to do. [I] had absolutely no comprehension of the brutality of war. Even though I knew it, I didn't face that reality. I remember sitting in my best friend's house before I went and his father said, "Don't be too anxious. War is not what you think it is." I recall all the enthusiasm in *Gone With the Wind* when everybody gets their uniforms and all the pomp and circumstance. [Then] you see somebody blown up and you realize that absolute horror of what war is. So, I guess I had very mixed emotions.

Robards: What dates did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Robinson : I went from the middle of April 1968 to the middle of May 1969. I was there for thirteen months except for six weeks when I was on the USS Tripoli. I got wounded, and I was on the boat for six weeks.

Robards: Where did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Robinson: I served in the I-Corp. I was based in Phu Bai, which is a small city right near Hue City, the ancient capital [of Vietnam]. I was at Phu Bai Air Station, or Phu Bai Airport.

Robards: What was your rank during the war?

Robinson: I was a First Lieutenant. I was a First Lieutenant for the whole time.

Robards: Since you served with a combat unit, please describe your first encounter with the enemy.

Robinson: It was amazing! And a paradox! First of all, as I said, my background was as a musician and a bartender. My first combat mission, I was awakened at 3:30 in the morning, and I thought, "This is going to be a very long 13 months if they keep doing this." We got up and were briefed and flew from Phu Bai or Marble Mountain which is near Da Nang. As we flew, we flew south and the Oriental Mountains were to the right and the South China Sea was to the left, and it was incredibly beautiful as the sun came up. Then when we got towards Da Nang, we went over the white beaches. The beaches on the South China Sea looked just like Pensacola or Destin on the Gulf Coast [with] beautiful white sand. Even at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning, people were swimming, and they had sailboats on the beach. I thought, "Hmm, this is very strange." Then we landed, and we had actual breakfast. The base there had much better kitchen facilities than we had in Phu Bai. We had a great breakfast. Then we were briefed for the mission, which was an insert of troops on the Hai Ban Pass up in the mountains where Highway 1 left Da Nang. We took off and we were escorting two H46 transport helicopters. As soon as we got close to the zone, we started taking fire. The helicopter in front of us got hit; the pilot got his leg blown off. It was just all going by me; in fact, I had a chin turret and I was firing, clicking the trigger, clicking the trigger, and when we pulled off the pilot I was with (I was the co-pilot, of course), said, "Make the guns go cold." [It was then that] I realized that I had never turned the guns on, so I never fired a round in anger on that mission. I was just stunned at having seen beauty and water and sea, and then have somebody get his leg blown off. I think it was a moment when I probably aged about ten years in one minute.

Robards: Did you bring any personal weapons with you?

Robinson: Yes, I did. I thought, "If I'm going to go over there, I'm going to be a warrior, so I went to the pawn shop in Ocean Side near Camp Pendleton and bought a huge Bowie knife. Now, I had no idea how to use a Bowie Knife, but I thought, "If I'm going to go to war, I'm going to have a knife." This knife caused my first real crash. I bought a gun belt, because when I got to Vietnam they issued a Police Special .38. Every pilot had a .38, as opposed to the .45s the Infantry carried. The .38 had more range, and it was supposed to keep the bad guys away until you could be rescued if you went down. So, I strapped the .38 and the Bowie knife on my side, and I flew with that for a while.

Robards: Do you remember any action that stood out as being particularly brave?

Robinson: Every day. Every single day! I saw the pilots I flew with, and I felt like as Marines, we would never leave our guys on the ground.....sorry.

Robards: Take as much time as you need.

Robinson: Anyway, we would fly in really crummy weather and go in and cover the transports..... I didn't think this [interview] would bother me this much.

Robards: It's your time. Take as much time as you need. This is a learning experience for everybody.

Robinson: Multiple times. One that stands out is when an A4 pilot went down and was hanging by the straps in a tree. The Viet Cong was approaching, or maybe it was the NVA, and everybody did everything they could to get the guy out. I saw multiple demonstrations of bravery. It happened every single day. My whole squadron's job was to put themselves between the transports and the gunfire. So every day, somebody hung it out.

Robards: If you were wounded while serving in Vietnam, what kind of injury did you receive, and how were you rescued and treated for your wounds?

Robinson: I am the luckiest person in the world, really, because I was in a gunfight, I was in a gun run, and I was shot. A round came through the cockpit and it was armor piercing 30 caliber round, and it went through the instrument panel. Fortunately, it hit the stick. It went through my hand, spread shrapnel everywhere and hit me in the chest. I was shot in the arm and the leg as well, although I didn't know that until much later, because they were just like John Wayne flesh wounds. So the co-pilot took the stick. The crew chief dumped me backwards. I was really all right. I had lost a finger, and the first thing I thought was that I wasn't going to be playing the saxophone that afternoon at the squadron picnic. My second thought was that I didn't want to bleed to death, so I took my other flight glove off and wrapped it around my hand. Then I tried to make a radio call, but all my radio controls were blown up, because the stick was blown up and the top part of the stick was where the radio controls were. So I had to give commands to the crew chief who could pass it on to the co-pilot. We were talking to the HDC which is a Helicopter Direction Center. Marines in an I Corp, if you are on land are under control of DASC, the Direct Air Support Center. We had been working with a ship, and we were controlled by the ship, so I wanted to switch the radios to that frequency, but I couldn't, because the radios didn't work. The co-pilot had never landed on the air-craft carrier before, so I flew it back to the carrier myself. Everybody in the area switched their radios to my frequencies, because I couldn't switch my radios. Anyway, we got back to the boat, and what was really so touching was, before I got to the boat, I had two transports on either side of me, taking me back to the boat. This is really tough [to talk about]. So I got to the boat, and the corpsmen met me right there and said, "Are you hurt anywhere else?" I said, "No, I don't think so," and they cut my flight suit off and found other holes. I was on the operating table twenty minutes after I was hurt. So, I was really lucky. And the guy that worked on me was a hand and finger specialist from New York. There isn't one on every boat; the doctor goes wherever they stick the doctor. The guy was amazing; he put my whole hand together. Later on, I was able to still play the saxophone.

Robards: Providential. Describe your living conditions, housing and food while serving in Vietnam.

Robinson: The food on the aircraft carrier was the best food I had over there. It was incredible. I was on the boat six weeks, and then we had a number of tours on the boat. When we were getting mortared every night, we'd put the helicopters on the carrier. It was a World War II carrier that had been converted to an LPH, which was a helicopter carrier; it was the Valley Forge. In Phu Bai, the food was pretty awful. We had artificial peanut butter flavored ice cream, and so I don't ever eat peanut flavored ice cream anymore. At Marble Mountain, the food was a little bit better, and every once in a while we had really good meals. Toward the end of my tour, they had rebuilt the Officer's Club, and they had pretty good food there. On party nights we ate the food there. The living quarters; because we were pilots, we had much better quarters than most people. We had hard-back tents in the beginning, and probably three or four months after I was there, we had Quonset huts. The Quonset huts were air-conditioned, so it was really not that bad. Except for the rats [you saw] when you walked. If you had a real early morning brief [you saw] Vietnamese rats the size of raccoons. And the outhouses—they weren't pleasant either.

Robards: Were you aware of drug use among American soldiers when you were in Vietnam?

Robinson: Not really. I never knew anybody who used drugs, and I never saw it; however, the first time I ever saw a marijuana cigarette was at Phu Bai walking back with another pilot from the mess hall back to the operations desk. He [other pilot] said, "What's this?" and he reached down and picked up what today would be called a zip-lock bag, and it had a marijuana cigarette. Later in my time there, my collateral duty was [being] the Civil Actions Officer, the S-5. So I was an advisor to a village chief, and his wife made a lot of money by growing marijuana. She had about 15 hectares [37 acres] of marijuana fields. So, I know it was over there.

Robards: What was your daily routine while in Vietnam?

Robinson: It varied week by week. Every 4th week, we flew SOG missions, which was a special operating group. We would go to the SOG headquarters and brief. We flew where we weren't supposed to fly; where the world didn't know that we flew. We flew the Prairie Fire missions. We would just sit and wait; there was a lot of waiting around time. We flew with the Vietnamese helicopters. They flew the H34s. It was a combined group with Vietnamese Air Force and American Army and Air Force. We were controlled by an Air Force covey, which is an O-2. There was a Cessna; I don't know what the civilian number is, but it was a push-pull airplane. We had two to four Vietnamese H34s. The Vietnamese pilots were amazing; they were incredible pilots. We [also] had two army slicks which were Hueys, Hu H1 D models, at the time. The Army was just getting their Cobras, so we had two Army Cobras. I flew a section of two marine gunships. At that time, I flew as a co-pilot and later as a pilot, and later as a section leader.

Robards: What did you do to relax?

Robinson: We drank, and we played volleyball, and I read a lot. I had lots of books.

Robards: Please tell us about any community involvement you participated in such as irrigation or construction projects.

Robinson: As a civic action officer, I worked with the village chief, and I also worked with an orphanage in Hue City. I helped rebuild things that we blew up, actually. We rebuilt a market place. Corruption was rampant; if I needed 24 sheets of tin strips to build a roof, I had to order 96 strips from the government, because the federal government [Vietnamese] took a fourth, the regional government took a fourth, and the provincial government took a fourth, and I ended up with a fourth. The village chief that I worked with was the one who taught me this.

We built the market place and we also built a medical facility. It was just a pavilion, but I also brought Navy doctors ashore to do MedCAPs, which was Medical Civil Action Patrols. We would go in, and the doctors would treat the people. The doctors liked it because they saw things they had never seen, and never would see again. All the civilian people over there had dysentery in various severe stages, because there was very little sanitation in the villages.

I actually wrote back to people in my high school and said that I needed toys for TET [Vietnamese New Year]. My high school had a drive and sent two truckloads of toys for these kids [orphans] for TET.

I also had to negotiate with a farmer, because we crashed a helicopter in his yard and killed his pig. This guy probably had some American training because he thought that pig was worth a lot more than the pig was really worth. We paid him a lot for his pig.

Robards: Plenty piasters.

Robinson: Millions of piasters. Piasters, I haven't heard that word for a long time.

Robards: What awards or citations did you receive?

Robinson: I have a Bronze Star with a V. I have a Purple Heart. I have a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. I have a Single Mission Air Medal. I have twenty-nine Strike Flight Air Medals. I have a Meritorious Unit Citation. I have a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry Unit Citation. I have a Reserve Ribbon. I have a National Defense Ribbon. I think that is it.

Robards: What is your evaluation of American Military Leadership and of other commanders you worked with in the field during the Vietnam War?

Robinson: I ran into some really great leaders. Truly great leaders; some were Majors and there was one Lieutenant Colonel who was the Squadron Commander right when I got there. Command changed to the next guy, who was a horrible leader, and he was an alcoholic and I probably got promoted from left seat (co-pilot) to right seat (pilot) because I carried him home three times, not because I could read maps well. I think I could, and I think I deserved it, but I'm sure that it came early because he liked me.

Our Group Commander was one of Pappy Boyington's Black Sheep, and he remains to this day one of my great heroes. He was an incredible leader and taught me things that I use in my business to this day. I thought that the Wing Commander was really good.

I thought that the senior leadership from Westmoreland down was really inept, and they thought they could do what they couldn't do. That doesn't even hold a candle to how dismal I thought the political situation was, that there were Congressmen who sent us into war without letting us fight the war fairly. It was like having to go into a fight with one hand tied behind your back. I had friends who bombed Hanoi, and when they were going in they found ships with Canadian flags and French flags, and we weren't allowed to do it, and I think the evidence is that as we needed to get the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table, the way we did it was by moving the B-52s closer and closer to Hanoi. As Nixon moved them up there, they [NV] started talking.

The other crime was the media, and the left side, because if you read what General Giap said, General Giap was the North Vietnamese Military Commander, and he said that two more days after the TET offensive, and they would have caved. So I think it was a crime, just an absolute crime on the part of the Congress and the President that we had 50,000 people killed and several hundred thousand people wounded without having anything to show for it.

Robards: From your experience, how would you evaluate the enemies fighting ability?

Robinson: It was incredible, absolutely incredible. They wanted to win more than we wanted to win. Later on in my career, I went to senior staff level schools, and briefings from our intelligence people, and their intelligence was far greater than ours. If you read the book SOG [*Sog: Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam*, by John Plaster], there was a three star mole [spy] on the South Vietnamese Joint Chiefs of Staff. In order to bomb anything, we had to run it through the South Vietnamese Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Ambassador, so by the time we would send bombs out, they knew exactly where we were going. I think that their [North Vietnamese] commitment; their ability to dig tunnels; their ability to hide; their ability to capture our information was dramatic. I have all the respect in the world for the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong and their passion. I *hated* their brutality. I thought at the time (I was 22, 23, & 24) that it was a very just war. I'm not sure how I would think if I were going back today.

Robards: Could you tell me about the most memorable event that happened to you or your unit while you were serving in Vietnam?

Robinson: There's some humor here, I guess. The initial Officer's Club when I got there was a tent, because the bad guys had blown up the Officer's Club, which was just a small hut. However, we built a great big nice Officer's Club. Let me back up here. I was medivaced for having a heart attack when I had my physical, because the EKG machine had dust in the stylus, and they got the electrodes crossed on my legs. So, I was medivaced to the USS Sanctuary, where I met the head nurse, and the Captain of the hospital on the ship.

There are three four-strippers on any ship. One is the Captain of the ship; one is the Chief Engineer who drives the engines and the other is the guy who runs whatever the ship is supposed to do. On a hospital ship, it is the Captain of the Hospital. Anyway, I asked him if I could bring some nurses ashore. He said, "Sure. They'd really like to go see some Marines. They don't have anything to do on the boat." So, we went to the Colonel, and he said, "As soon as there is an Officer's Club, because I'm not going to let any nurses come ashore unless we have flush toilets."

So I arranged that after the Officer's Club was built, and I went and brought four nurses ashore. Of course, I did some bad scheduling, because I had to take them back, so I couldn't drink or party, and I flew the mortar watch from 10:00 at night until midnight. At midnight, I had to go get the girls. Of course, they were umm... inebriated is a kind word. They were in Marine uniforms, their uniforms were off. They had their flight bags, and some of their underwear was hanging out of the flight bags.

So, I threw them in the back of my helicopter, and I took off about 1:00 in the morning back to the ship. I had a hydraulic failure. Now I had to have an escort, because I had to go over enemy territory. So, I had to go back and get another helicopter [because of the hydraulic failure]. Ted has now taken two helicopters out of the war effort. The one I am flying has to be maintained in the morning, and the other one is broken.

By the time I got to the Sanctuary, she was no longer in flight quarters; it was 3:00 in the morning, and I didn't realize the Captain of the ship was a Mormon, who frowned on military drinking. So, I had to call the ship to emergency flight quarters in order to land. So they bring everybody on the deck and they get me down, and I drop off these four drunk nurses and they go staggering across the deck with their underwear hanging out of the flight bags. I take off and go back home.

I had to do a number of rug-dances; one for the Maintenance Officer of the squadron; one to the Squadron Commander; one to the Group Commander, although he covered me. The Captain of the ship backed me up too. He said it was okay. But it went to the General and back down. I think that was probably the most memorable event. My career was hanging by a thread more times than I could count. That certainly was one of them.

Robards: What music or songs remind you of your service in Vietnam?

Robinson: Lots of it. The Mamas and the Papas. That was the first time I had ever heard The Mamas and the Papas. And then Country Joe and the Fish, and certainly the *Ballad of the Green Beret*. We sang a lot of songs, but we had words that I don't want recorded, but we sang [them] to *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*. It was a "707 to carry me home."

Robards: Did you see or participate in a USO show. If so, where did the show occur, and who was in it?

Robinson: I didn't see any stars in the shows. Ironically, I had auditioned before I was wounded, maybe two or three months, for a band that the Armed Forces Broadcasting Network was forming to do talent shows up and down the coast. I thought I didn't play that badly, and the next day I received orders directing me to leave the Marines Corp, and go to the Armed Forces Broadcasting Network and be the director of the orchestra, because I had a music minor and had traveled with some prominent musicians over time, and then the next day I got my finger shot off; so that was providential too. A number of years later, I remember going out to lunch with my father, who was probably 85, and he said, "You know, when you were wounded, your mother and I were really upset, and then we found out that you weren't wounded that badly, and then we thought, "You know, it was probably a good thing, because we didn't think you played the clarinet well enough to make a living." He was probably right.

Robards: How did you feel about your experience when you left Vietnam?

Robinson: I was ecstatic, extraordinarily ecstatic that I lived and that my friends, most of the friends I had gone through flight school with had made it through alive. So, I was just thrilled. I was a lot older than one year older. I regretted all the bad things that happened. I just had a lot of pride in being a Marine. I had a Marine's ego at the time.

Robards: Describe how you felt once you were back in the United States.

Robinson: The country had changed so dramatically. It was astounding to me. The absolute best thing was mini-skirts. The skirts went from below the knee to as high as they could get, and I loved that. But I didn't like the fact that everybody was smoking, that drugs were rampant. I didn't know how to deal with people very well, because if somebody made me mad in Vietnam, I shot him. And [in the U.S.] that was not acceptable behavior. I remember sitting at the dining room table at my parents house probably four or five days after I got back and a car going by back-fired, and I dove under the table. My mother was like, "What's the matter with you?" It was hard to explain. Contrary to what other people have experienced, when I came back, I landed at El Toro and went to LAX [because] I was going to be picked up by a girlfriend who was a flight attendant for TWA. She was late, and the people in the bar were pro-American military people, so I didn't have to buy a drink the whole day. By the time the girl came, I couldn't even recognize her. So, I had a pretty good homecoming experience, but later on as I got back to Chicago where I lived, I just kept running into people that were very hostile, because I was a military person. I remember the Christmas after I got back, the minister at our church was very anti-war. I had a couple of drinks before the New Years Eve service and my dad said, "Well, just wear your uniform, and sit in the front pew."

So, we did. I thought that it would make a statement. It was very paradoxal. This was a time that while I was gone Martin Luther King had been killed; John Kennedy had been killed. There was so much turmoil and so much unhappiness. It was really awful.

Robards: How do you feel now about your service in the war?

Robinson: I take great pride in the technical skill and the fact that I flew a gunship. I was like [riding] shotgun on a stage coast. I never lost a helicopter, and I never had a crew chief hurt, other than the guy who got scratched when I got shot. I was so proud of what we accomplished at the orphanage and also in the village, and that I left Vietnam a better place than I found it. I made so many friends up to this day and that is 45 years later. Those people are my best friends in the whole world.

Robards: Has your view of the war changed over the years?

Robinson: Well,....yes. I look at our relationship with Vietnam, and I say we have a reasonably good relationship. My view of the communist government hasn't changed. It's a horrible government. Communism is a horrible system and the brutality. You [asked for] memorable things that happened, and I gave you a humorous incident, but one memory was having to collect rocket boxes to use as coffins for the 350 bodies one of our ground units found near our base, and we had to go help them put....These were people who had been assassinated by the Viet Cong because they had been leaning toward the South Vietnamese government. I think the reason for the war was probably very valid. The execution of the war by the military, especially at the unit level, was spectacular. The primary leadership was dismal. I have very mixed feelings about the War.

Robards: Thank you for your service and thank you for participating in this project.

Robinson: You are welcome.