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**Col. Arthur L. Kelly American Veterans Oral History Project:  
Vietnam War**

**Interview with Larry Thomas, April 30, 1985**

**Interview conducted by Terry L. Birdwhistell and George Herring**

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This is an unrehearsed interview with Larry Thomas for the Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project. The interview was conducted by Terry L. Birdwhistell and George Herring in Mount Sterling, Kentucky on April 30, 1985.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Just finding out where you're from originally, and a little bit about your family when you were growing up, that type of thing.

**THOMAS:** Okay. I was originally born in a little town about 12 miles from here, Sharpsburg, Kentucky, which is in Bath County.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And you have brothers and sisters?

**THOMAS:** No, just an only child.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Uh-huh. What did your father do?

**THOMAS:** My father worked for a farm machinery retail place.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I see. And then you went to grade school over in Sharpsburg?

**THOMAS:** I went to grade school there and then I graduated in 1966 from Bath County High School.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Bath County High School.

**THOMAS:** Owensville.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you were born in what year then?

**THOMAS:** 1948.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** 1948. What are . . . what are some of your earliest recollections that there was a war going on in Vietnam. When do you . . . do you remember when you may have first heard about that?

**THOMAS:** I guess I was probably . . . in those years, all I done was play baseball, I

didn't read the papers. . . only thing I read in the paper was the sports page. But probably '64, '65, '66, I was a senior in high school then, and I thought about it then because it was still going on and I was getting out of high school, close to being 18, so it was time to register for the draft and stuff.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Do you have any notions about being. . . about what was going on over there?

**THOMAS:** Not really.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Just the fact that it was going on.

**THOMAS:** Just the fact that I was going on. I didn't realize that I would be over there. That didn't cross my mind until I got out of school, you know, and it was tough to get a job because I was 1-A, they didn't have the lottery at that time, and nobody would really hire you, give you a permanent job, and then I found out what was going on.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So what did you do after you got out of high school, did you work around at different kinds of jobs?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, I worked here at the local grocery, and just doing, you know, odd jobs, working in the dairy, sacking groceries, and this, that and the other, and then I got a job at a local manufacturing plant here in town, I was driving my fork lift, and that's where I was working when I got drafted.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, you volunteered for the draft, you knew you were going to be drafted, and. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah. I sort of got fed up with, you know, I couldn't get a decent job, and one day I took off work, and I was still registered for the Bath County Draft Board, and I went over there and asked the lady, you know, when my number was coming up, and she

said, “well, you’re due to go in April,” and. . . in ’68, and I said, “no, I’m not going to wait that long.” She said, “the earliest I can get you in is March,” and there were some friends of mine that were going in March also. So I volunteered for the draft right then.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** In March of ’68.

**THOMAS:** Then I came back to town that day and told my mother.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What’d she say?

**THOMAS:** She couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was she just worried about you?

**THOMAS:** Probably was, yeah. I can understand why now, I’ve got two kids of my own, but at that time I couldn’t see any reason why she was worrying.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about your father or other relatives? How did they react to your. . .

**THOMAS:** Well, dad didn’t say much, you know, he usually let me find out on my own, you know, he was real good about it. Well, both of them were real good about it, but you know, he stood behind me.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was he a veteran?

**THOMAS:** He got called, and he got drafted, and he went to, I think Cincinnati or something, and he took another physical or something, and then they turned him around and sent him back home, he never was in the service.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So when you volunteered for the draft, were there any options available to you in terms of what you’d be doing? Or were you just going into the. . .

**THOMAS:** Just a two year volunteer. And, I went to. . . they put us on a Greyhound bus, and we went to Ashland, Kentucky, that was the local. . . where you had your

physicals and what-not, and I passed my second physical, and that night they locked us up in the Henry Clay Hotel.

**OTHER VOICE:** Pause the tape just a second.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Anyway they took you to Ashland.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, they took us to Ashland on a Greyhound, and we passed our physicals and were sworn in, and that night they locked us in our rooms for a while, and they took us down to eat, took us to a movie, and locked us back up so we wouldn't go AWOL, I guess, and I got on another Greyhound and went from Ashland all the way to Fort Campbell, all the way through the state, and came right back through Mount Sterling, again.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Well how much trouble did they think a bunch of 20 year old guys in Ashland could get in trouble doing? [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** [chuckle] There's nothing to do in Ashland anyway.

**OTHER VOICE:** I know, I live there.

**THOMAS:** Oh, is that right? [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you went straight from there, then to Fort Campbell. 

**THOMAS:** Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tell me about arriving at Fort Campbell and what you did there.

**THOMAS:** Unbelievable.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Really.

**THOMAS:** When you got off the bus, you know, the drill sergeant's there and all of that, and we spent about a week, I guess, in what they call the reception center, getting all your shots and getting all your hair cut off, your uniforms, and taking tests and all that,

and I guess they sort of intimidated me when I got down there, you know, they said. . . they do everybody, I guess, they said, you know, “you’re gong to go straight to infantry, as soon as you get out of here, you’re going to go to Nam, you’re going to be in the bush,” and all that, and I said, “not me.” He said, “Well this is what we’ve got available.” He says, “you’re qualified for MP in the helicopter stuff,” and that sounded real interesting, and he said, “Well, you can have this helicopter school, but it’s going to cost you another year.” So, dumb old me, I signed on the dotted line and added another year to my term, and then they sent me to helicopter school after basic.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But you wanted to do that at the time, just thinking that that sounded like a more interesting way to spend your time in the military.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. True. Yeah. I thought maybe I’ll have something decent, to get out of and. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Actually learn from. . .

**THOMAS:** New experience, or maybe I could use it when I got out, or something like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** It sounds familiar, the guy who wrote Chicken Hawk that’s what he said too, I remember that.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. But I’d never been in a helicopter in my life, you know, other than just seeing them fly over or something.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were you surprised when you got into basic training there at Campbell that they started throwing the Nam thing at you right away as just fresh recruits?

**THOMAS:** Somewhat, because I really hadn't paid much attention to Vietnam and what was going on until I got down there, and of course all of our drill sergeants and the COs they were all Vietnam Veterans, every one of them.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What kinds of things were they telling you about Nam?

**THOMAS:** I guess. . . they wasn't trying to scare us, they were really trying to prepare us, I guess, you know, gung-ho, and you need to learn this, and you need to learn that, which they were right, you know. They were right. It was good training, because that was the home of the 101<sup>st</sup> airborne and they really got us in good shape.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tell me about some of the types of training you received in basic.

**THOMAS:** In basic? An awful lot of PT, physical training, you know, push-ups, and exercises, and we ran. . . we'd get up at like 3:00 in the morning and have to be up at 3:30 in formation, and we'd run anywhere from 10-20 miles, and then have breakfast at 5:30 and run back to the barracks and then go through, you know, rifle training, and hand to hand combat, and bivouac and all that stuff.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you make any friends at that point in your military career? I mean, did you. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh, I had. . . there were about 9 guys from this town that were with me, we were all in the same barracks.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Wow.

**THOMAS:** And the whole bottom barracks was from Kentucky, and the upstairs was from Minnesota. Of course, we didn't get along at first because they were northerners and we were southerners, but it was good. We made a lot of good friends over there.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Sort of felt a sense of camaraderie.



**THOMAS:** Yeah, once we became a unit, you know, it was fine.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you receive any advanced training for Vietnam at that point? I mean, any special training that. . .

**THOMAS:** Don't recall any.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Just basically physical training.

**THOMAS:** M-16, and [?] machine gun and all that stuff.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhm. Now, after you. . . after you volunteered to go into the helicopter training and added a year to your service, then were you separated then from your. . . that group?

**THOMAS:** Right. Well, once we graduated from basic, you know, everybody went their different directions. Guys went to infantry school, advanced infantry school, or cook school or wherever they were going, and they sent me to Fort Eustis, Virginia for helicopter school for 16 weeks.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** 16 weeks. Tell me about that, how did that go? What were some of your. . . what was your training like?

**THOMAS:** About the first four weeks of it was in the classroom, you know learning engines, what to do, procedures and policies and electrical stuff and what could go wrong and all that, and about the last 12 weeks was in the field. And then we could fly everyday learning how to sling load artillery and carry troops and wounded, and using machine gun from the door, and all kind of stuff like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Had you ever flown before you went in the military?

**THOMAS:** Never.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** Never. First time I flew was when I got on a plane at Bluegrass Field and went to Virginia Beach.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Went to Virginia Beach.

**THOMAS:** First time.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So how did you react to this flying down in Virginia? [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** It wasn't too bad. I never will forget, they gave an orientation right, I think the first week we were there, and there was about 30 aboard, I was on a Chinook helicopter, and that's the kind with the twin rotors, the big ones, and we lost an engine, and set down in the middle of the golf course.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Your first flight?

**THOMAS:** First flight. So, I knew things were going downhill after that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] That's an interesting way to start out your helicopter experience.

**THOMAS:** Yeah it is. But you know, they were. . . it was a training class, and those helicopters were in terrible shape, you know you've got students taking engines off and blades off and putting them back on and seeing if they could do it, and [?] they flew anyway.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Let me back up for just a moment, did you. . . did you get a chance then to come home back to Mount Sterling prior to going to Virginia?

**THOMAS:** I think I had a week from basic. . . yeah, I had a week.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did you spend that week?

**THOMAS:** Gosh, I can't remember.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Probably just flew by, didn't it?

**THOMAS:** Yeah. The time I had to catch a flight and get up there and all that. I don't remember what I done, I really don't.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, you received your helicopter training there in Virginia for 16 weeks, and then did you feel pretty good about that after that 16 weeks? You feel like it was pretty good training, and. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. I went to. . . when I was there I was a private E-2, and if you graduated in a certain percent of your class, you got promoted to spec 4, which was an E-4, which I missed PFC completely, I went from E-2 to spec 4, and so I felt real good about that, but I figured all through the class time that as soon as this is over, you know, I'm gone. But that wasn't so, they sent me to Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay. Did you go directly from Virginia out to Oklahoma?

**THOMAS:** No, I had another week's leave. Yeah, I did. Had one more week.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I see. So what did you do out in Oklahoma then?

**THOMAS:** I was assigned to. . . just an aviation company, and we had our own fleet of helicopters and we just flew the missions, we didn't really do much, there wasn't nothing to do, we'd fly to Oklahoma City and drink coffee or fly to Dallas and drink coffee or chase buffalo, just goofing off, really, it was like a 9-5 job. And that's when I volunteered for Vietnam.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You just got tired of being out in Oklahoma?

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Got bored with it?

**THOMAS:** Got bored. And all the rest of the guys were Vietnam Veterans, and the helicopter I was on, both pilots were Vietnam veterans, and we had a snack shop there in

the hangar and they'd sit around and tell war stories, you know, and I said, "well that sounds pretty interesting," you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did they give you a hard time because you hadn't already been over there?

**THOMAS:** Yeah. There was 19 of us that day that volunteered to go. The CO thought that it was something he did, you know, everybody wanted out of his unit, that he was a bad CO or whatever, but that wasn't the case.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** 19 guys on one day out of that one unit volunteered to go to Vietnam?

**THOMAS:** Right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did everybody know that's what... everybody get together...

**THOMAS:** After we finally explained it to them, what was going on, you know, we didn't... we wanted to go, you know, because it was just a waste of time I thought. I didn't want to spend my whole tour in Oklahoma. I mean, it's a nice place, but...

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now would there have been a chance at this point that if you hadn't volunteered to go to Vietnam you wouldn't have gone?

**THOMAS:** Oh, I probably would have went eventually, I think, but I guess I just speeded it up, I don't have much patience.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** I just speeded it up.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Do you remember any of the types of stories the guys who had been over there were telling you about?

**THOMAS:** They made it sound like John Wayne and all that, sound real glamorous, but it wasn't.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Uh-huh. So you volunteered for Vietnam, when would that have been? That was in '69, right?

**THOMAS:** Uh-huh. Let's see, it was about May. . . April or May I guess of '69.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you'd been in about a . . almost . . well over a year at that point.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, a little over a year.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So then what happened next after you. . .

**THOMAS:** Well they gave me a 30 day leave and I came home for 30 days, and. . . which, when I was home, when I left, they gave me all my records and all that stuff, and you had to hand carry it with you when you went to Vietnam, and my mother found a . . she was looking through them one day, because she didn't understand none of them, and she found a signed statement where I'd volunteered for Vietnam, and she. . . she couldn't believe that either.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did you explain it to your mother?

**THOMAS:** I don't remember. I was more worried about my dad, because the day I left for basic he was in the hospital with a heart attack, and I don't know how I explained it to her.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And you being an only child.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. They were. . . they were awful worried. I never will forget the day I was to leave, I think the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, I had to be in Seattle, Fort Louis, Washington, the 14<sup>th</sup>. The day before that I had to catch a flight, and they were all outside at the house

with my aunt and uncle living next door, thought they were going to take me to the airport, and my best friend pops over the hill in his hot rod, and I jumped in the car, and bye-bye, because I didn't want them taking me to the airport, in the airport, you know how it is in airports anyway, especially me going over there, so I said goodbye right there.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Just make it short and sweet.

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now by this time, in '69, there was already building up some opposition to the war, even in Kentucky. Did you experience any of that during your 30 day leave before going to. . .

**THOMAS:** No, I didn't, because Sharpsburg's a real small town, and you know, I knew everybody, and everybody knew me, and I didn't hear anything like that, you know, everybody wished me well and stuff like that. There had been a couple of guys before me from that town that went and came back, you know, but I didn't hear any of that, not until I got back.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So how would you. . . how would you characterize your attitude then at this point? You. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh, the Army done a fantastic job on me, I was brainwashed. I was gung-ho.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You were all set.

**THOMAS:** Which, you know, I still think I done the right thing. But I was all for it, I didn't pay much attention to the protestors or why we were there, I just went.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Uh-huh.

**THOMAS:** I just felt like I had to go.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. Let's talk a little bit about your trip over, that always seems kind of interesting. Okay, I thought we might be close.

[tape paused]

**OTHER VOICE:** We're rolling. Anytime Mr. Birdwhistell.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tape 2. Larry, we were just getting ready to talk about your trip over to Vietnam on July 14<sup>th</sup> of '69 you were. . . you took off from Bluegrass Field to go to Seattle, and then tell me what happened from that point.

**THOMAS:** I didn't have to check in that day until. . . or the next day, until the 15<sup>th</sup>, so I just stayed at the airport motel there in Seattle, or Tacoma, wherever it was, I believe, and the next day we checked in, and it was the same old stuff, you know, processing, make sure your shot record was up and all that stuff for two days, I believe. And, while I was at Fort Sill, I had made the promotion board to E-5, but there was no slot there, and I was still an E-4, so the next day at Fort Russ, they had me on OS for KP, and I didn't want to do that, but I had to anyway, so I went. . . I had to pull KP that day, and I told them. . . the mess sergeant, I said, "look, I'm going to Vietnam at 3:30 the next morning, I'm going to get by with as little as I can," which I did. And, after we processed and all we had some free time and they said we could go to a movie under escort, again, I guess they thought we was going to go AWOL there too. And, they took us to the base theatre, and you'll never guess what was playing, John Wayne and the Green Berets, so you know, they do it up right, so we went and saw that movie and about 3:30 that morning we left for

Vietnam. Our first stop was in Anchorage, Alaska, and we stopped there for about an hour or so to refuel, and I made a big mistake, I called home from there and wished I hadn't done it, because it made me more homesick, and then we flew onto [?] air base in Tokyo. And, we got off there for about 3 or 4 hours, and they just let us there in the terminal, we couldn't go any farther than that, and about 8 hours later we were in Vietnam which was the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You landed on your birthday, your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

**THOMAS:** 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in the middle of the afternoon.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Let's go back a second now, when you went. . . got to Seattle, you didn't know anybody there, you were all on your own.

**THOMAS:** All on my own, yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So that had to be a little intimidating, to. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh, it was because they had to go from Bluegrass to over here in Chicago and change planes, and that's such a huge place, and first time I'd ever been there, you know, had a direct flight from there to Seattle.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were you in uniform?

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Oh yeah. Nobody said anything, as I recall, you know. There was an awful lot of GIs in airports every time you go to an airport, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I would think at [O'Hair], in Seattle there'd have to be a lot.

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So did you go over on a commercial airline?

**THOMAS:** It was a commercial airliner. I think it was [Seaboard] World or something



that. . . something that was contracted out to the government or something, but it had stewardesses on it and everything and that was it, just. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you know It was going to be that way or did it surprise you?

**THOMAS:** Huh-uh. I figured it'd be a. . . you know, a military plane, something like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Everybody huddled down in the bottom of a plane somewhere.

**THOMAS:** So I took some. . . I think I read some books on the way over, there wasn't anything to do, because it was such a long flight.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was there. . .

**THOMAS:** It was all full, it was a plane load and it was all GIs, and there had been a few on board that had. . . was going back, you know, for their second tour, but I think the guys next to me were first timers too.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What'd you all talk about?

**THOMAS:** I don't know. You know, where we were from and stuff like that, you know, trying to get acquainted in the short time we had.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah.

**THOMAS:** All hoping to come back on the same flight.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. Well what were your first impressions of Vietnam when you landed?

**THOMAS:** When they opened the door of the airplane, we landed in Cam Ranh Bay, which is way down south, and I never will forget the smell, you know, as soon as they opened the door, the heat and the smell, you know, I couldn't believe that I was there. You know, I'd seen it on TV and stuff, but never really thought much about it. But you

know, all of the sudden here I am, and we got off the plane and they put us on the bus, and the bus had the wire steel mesh on the windows to keep kids, and stuff from throwing grenades in, and you know, I was scared to death, because I didn't know where I was going, or. . . I was still all alone. I didn't go over, like some guys do, as a unit, which might have made it better, but I had no idea what I was doing or where I was going, so we stayed there about three days.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What did you do during that three days?

**THOMAS:** More processing. You know, shots and all that stuff, and there wasn't anyplace to sleep, because they were bringing so many people in at that time, I guess there was a big build-up in '69 and '70, and the place was just crammed full, and I met some guys that was on the plane and we slept on the beach just on a duffel bag, and all we had to do was just wait and go up to the airport and they would put a list on the board, and where your name was, you know, that's where you went. So, I think the second or third day my name was under Chu Lai on a certain flight, and I didn't know where Chu Lai was, never heard of it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [cough] Excuse me. Did it seem, at that point, to be a little disorganized?

**THOMAS:** No.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Just hectic.

**THOMAS:** Hectic, yeah, there were so many people there, and they were, you know how army paperwork is, and trying to get all that processed and what not.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, after you saw your name on the list Chu Lai, did you try to figure out where that was?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, everybody I talked to, nobody knew, somebody said up north, somebody said down south, and they put us on a C-130 cargo plane and strapped us to the floor, there wasn't any seats or anything, it was about a two hour flight, I think, it was way up north.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, did you know what you'd be doing once you got there at that point?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, I had my orders and I had the unit and stuff, so I knew what unit I was going to and where it was at, but my particular job when I got there, I had no idea.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay, so then you landed at. .

**THOMAS:** Landed in Chu Lai.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was that. . . did you get a different impression of that place as opposed to where you'd come in country?

**THOMAS:** It didn't look too safe in Chu Lai, you know, where I was at. Cam Ranh was like. . .

[telephone rings]

**THOMAS:** . . . a huge city.

**OTHER VOICE:** Let's stop the tape here for a second.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So. . . so it didn't appear as safe.

**THOMAS:** No, it seemed real desolate, you know, there wasn't anything around, I saw some mountains and stuff and rice paddies and stuff, which I didn't see that in Cam Ranh, you know, Cam Ranh was just a big sprawling base. Supply base and deport port.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, tell me about arriving there and what you did the first few days you were there?

**THOMAS:** Okay, the first week they sent us to what they called the combat center, and that's where all the new guys came in and they were orientated and you went through a small booby-trap course, on what to look for and classes on the customs and how to treat the Vietnamese and how not to treat them and things like that. I was there about, oh, 4 or 5 days, I guess.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How many guys were going through at the same time you were?

**THOMAS:** Let's see, there's probably 40 or 50 guys on that plane, and we all went our different direction from there. Everybody going through. . . some guys were going to the infantry unit, they're finance people or whatever. And then someone called, and somebody from my unit came down and picked me up, I think in a truck or something. I think I was the only one, at that time, that was going to my unit. Came down and picked me up.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How long a truck ride was it then up to where you were going?

**THOMAS:** 30 minutes later. Not very far. We were at the end of Chu Lai, ig uses, you might say. We were on a hill. . . we had the South China Sea behind us, and we were on top of a hill, and down in front of us was a village, and there was a river that ran in behind the village, and beyond that was no man's land.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So that became your base camp.

**THOMAS:** Right, that was our base camp. Right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, what. . . describe that physically, what did that look like when you drove into that?

**THOMAS:** Hell.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** It wasn't a vacation spot. It was awful dry, you know, and hot, and dusty, sandy, you know, just army shacks and hooches as we called them, and of course there was helicopters in the air and jets in the air, and go on about doing things, you know. And you could hear gunfire in the background, helicopters shooting and artillery going off, and I said, "oh God," you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** At that point you knew you were. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah, at that point I knew that this was for real. This was for real.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So there were actually combat situations going on around you at that point.

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. Like, the place we were at, we were at the end of Chu Lai and they were always trying to, you know, get our helicopters and stuff. We always were subject to mortars and rockets, and coming through the wire at you and stuff like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, was somebody given the responsibility then of getting you set up, getting you a place to stay?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Getting you oriented into what. . .

**THOMAS:** Right. I went to the company headquarters there and they got me a bunk and all the necessary gear I needed, you know, and issued me a weapon and a helmet and all that stuff.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So up to this point you didn't have a helmet or weapon or anything.

**THOMAS:** No.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You were just out riding around in that truck.

**THOMAS:** Riding around in the truck. Yeah. Riding around in the truck. And you could tell I was new, because you got on new jungle fatigues and everybody else's is faded and worn, and they knew you just got there. Of course, you know, you didn't have any tan or anything.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Anybody give you a hard time?

**THOMAS:** No. Hmm-mm.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Because I've heard that, you know, because new guys coming in, that. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh, they just ride you, you know, they come up and aggravate you, look at me, I've just got so many days left, and all that, you know, all the short timers, but I did the same thing to the new guys when I left. It was like a tradition, you know, see who was the shortest.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So then what were you assigned to do then, once you got there?

**THOMAS:** I was a crew chief and a door gunner on a Chinook helicopter.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And, that's what you'd been trained. . .

**THOMAS:** That's what I was trained to do in Fort Eustis, yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, you felt pretty good at this point in terms of your training and what your assignment was.

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. Uh-huh.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You'd signed up to do.

**THOMAS:** Of course, a lot of the things you learn, you forget, you know, when you get over there they do things different, like I can never remember. . . in school they would teach you how to load, about the center of gravity and all that, but you know, in a combat situation, you've got to get something on you throw it on and you get out, you know, you don't worry about the center of gravity or nothing, if you do you'll be dead. Just put it on and take off.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I guess, of course, ideally in training you're trained to the point that you don't think about it, you just go in there and do it.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Mmhmm. You had all the basics down, you know, just about.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Describe, if you can, the first time you went out from base camp.

**THOMAS:** I didn't think I was going to come back. But it was not a. . . you know, wasn't a combat mission, it was re-supply, but you know, the view was. . . it's a beautiful place, really beautiful, the green and all that, it'd be a nice resort, or would have been, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So were you told like one day, the next day you were going out.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, you always knew when you were going to fly or something. ®

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And, so tell me about getting ready for that first mission and what went through your mind?

**THOMAS:** I was scared, you know, I said. . . you always think you're going to get shot down or shot at or crash and burn or captured or what not, but it took about. . . I guess 3 months, it seemed like to me, about 3 months to really get used to it. And, believe it or not, you got used to it. It became a way of life. You forgot about back here is the world, as you called it, and that's the way you live, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Just kind of get in a groove.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, you got in a groove, a routine, and you worked 18-20 hours a day, and you didn't know if it was Wednesday or Sunday, you didn't care, you know, just kept on working.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now did you go out with the same guys all the time in your. . .

**THOMAS:** Most of the time, yeah. Of course a lot of guys rotate, you know, and go back home, there'd be new guys coming in, and pilots to leave and pilots would come in, and some days you didn't go out, you know, like during the monsoon season, most of the things we did then was move villages, you know, they'd get washed out by all the rain, and we'd haul their family belongings and their pigs and their water buffalo and chickens and stuff like that, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now you're talking about this first mission you went out to re-supply troops out in the field.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, I think we went to a LZ somewhere, firebase or something like that, we carried out. . . you know, you carried food, and ammunition, and the mail, and whatever else you need.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, did you spend any time there? Was this just a drop off and. . .

**THOMAS:** Drop it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** In and out.

**THOMAS:** In and out, yeah. Wasn't any reason to stay unless, you know, we were going to pick up something and bring it back, or we'd go somewhere and pick up a downed helicopter and bring it back or something like that. But we didn't hang around.



Anyway, you might do 50 of them a day, you know, just depends on what they had scheduled for. There was always something to do.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I guess in some ways you preferred being busy there than on a day when you might not do too much.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Right. Because the more busier you stayed. . . I didn't mind working 18 hours a day, because there was nothing to do if you were off, and when you were off you got to thinking about home or this or that, or. . . I just worked. That's all you could do.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And, the way you described your base camp, it's not the kind of place you'd just enjoy hanging out in over a 24 hour period.

**THOMAS:** No. Huh-uh. Later on we built an NCO club, you'd go in and be beer and cokes, and every now and then they'd bring in floor shows, these bands from the USO, you know. If you can imagine a Korean rock band or a Filipino rock band trying to sing beach boys, or something like that. So, that was some entertainment.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, how many people would be at this base camp?

**THOMAS:** Let's see, the battalion, golly, 4 or 500 guys, I guess.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Well that's a pretty big operation.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, we had a headquarters company, and we had A company and B company and E company, maintenance, and aero scout unit, there was about four or five companies, you know, in the battalion.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What was your impression of your immediate superior officer? Who was that and what did you think about him?

**THOMAS:** Well, my first CO was an ex green-beret, and he was on about his third tour, and he was a little warped, and he was really gung-ho, you know, but outside of him, everybody was firing, we didn't have any trouble out of anybody, which, I became real good friends with one of my COs, we went on R&R together and we visited each other during vacation since we've been back, but there wasn't any personnel problems, big personnel problems, other than one guy, he was a nice guy, but he came into the army under an assumed name. Somebody paid him \$5,000 to be drafted. Anyway, they caught him over there and they court marshaled him, but other than that we didn't have any personnel problems that I know of.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, you had. . . you felt that your. . . the officers were doing a pretty good job.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, they were. . . it just filters on down, you know. We didn't have any. . . I didn't know of any instance where sometimes you get new pilots coming in out of. . . straight out of Fort Rucker Flight School and they come over as John Wayne, and you have to calm them down a little bit.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] How would you calm them down? Just. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh, the word gets around, nobody'll fly with them, you know, they take too many chances. And, there's a lot of guys that were killed over there by accident. You know, stupid stuff.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, after you were there for a while you felt like, you know, you'd have to. . . if some guy came in and didn't know exactly what the situation was, you had to explain it to them.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. It just takes a while to get orientated to what's going. . . because it's completely different from anything you do back here in the states, you know.

Completely different.

**OTHER VOICE:** [?] change tapes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay.

[tape paused]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay.

**OTHER VOICE:** Not rolling.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Oh, I'm sorry. I never know when you're telling me to go.

**OTHER VOICE:** Anytime Mr. Birdwhistell.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tape 3. I was getting ready to say that I suppose working in close proximity in this. . . in a helicopter with a crew, you would come to rely on one another and feel some sense of camaraderie.

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. Definitely. Yeah. Yeah, we were a good unit. The division I was in, I was in the 23<sup>rd</sup> infantry division in Chu Lai which was the [Americal] division at one time, they just switched names for some reason. But you know, I was told that our battalion, we had the second highest killed of anybody in that whole division, there was 25,000 men in that division, so we were a good unit. I liked it. I enjoyed it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What did you think about the rotation schedule, the way it was set up, you know where you would always have new people coming in and people leaving.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, it got tough, especially in helicopters. It became what the army called a critical MOS, you know, they were having a tough time getting and keeping qualified people. But, especially toward the end, it seemed like every day there was 4 or 5 that'd leave, and you'd start all over and train somebody new.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you find that frustrating? Or just difficult.

**THOMAS:** At times, I guess. At times.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** When were you first involved in a combat situation?

**THOMAS:** In. . . you mean eye to eye contact?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Well, in a situation where you felt. . .

**THOMAS:** That my life was in danger?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** That I'm in combat now.

**THOMAS:** Okay. I was there about 3 weeks, I guess, and one night we had the barrage rockets come in, we had a rocket attack, and of course being new, you don't know what to do, where to go or nothing, but that was the first time I realized, you know, that my life was in danger, somebody was out there trying to kill me.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. Did the rocket attacks come very often to the base? 

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. Oh yeah. They had eyes inside the camp. They knew where to go. See, we were in a hairy position, I guess, because we would hear all the hooches on top of the hill and behind us was the heli[pad] with all the choppers and the ammunition and what not, and then the ocean, you know, South China Sea, and a lot of times they were either long, they'd hit the ocean, or they'd be short and hit us, that was the biggest scare.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Oh, so they'd actually be shooting at the choppers.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, because they're. . . you know, they're shooting from 3 or 4 miles out, and their aim wasn't too good. It got real hairy sometimes. Of course, you know, like a direct hit on a bunker or a hooch is going to kill somebody, which it did.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about combat situations when you were out on missions?

**THOMAS:** Well, the first time when. . . you could see them, you know, when you knew that there were NVA or Vietcong there, and they're firing at you, the first time that happened to me, I guess you act on instinct from the training, but after it was over I thought my knees were. . . they were shaking so hard, you know. It's unreal.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, as a crew chief and door gunner, what were your responsibilities in the. . .

**THOMAS:** Well, it was my responsibility to keep the thing flying, you know, as far as general maintenance. We had a company there that did the heavier maintenance, and the helicopter itself was my responsibility. You know, if I told the pilot that it was time for a 25 hour inspection and we shouldn't fly today, it didn't get flown. And then of course, as we were flying, sling-loading stuff or what not, if you wasn't doing anything you were manning the door with a machine gun or something, you know, keeping your eyes

peeled. And a lot of times, you know, it got so that if you were fired upon, you had to ask permission to fire back. It got that bad.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** During the time you were there it changed?

**THOMAS:** Mmhmm. Seemed like it did to me. Of course, there were places they called free fire zones that anything goes, it didn't matter. But, you know, when you were around villages and what not, people would take pot shots at you or something, and you

knew who they were, but you just couldn't open up on a village or something, you had to ask permission to fire back.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Who did you ask permission. . .

**THOMAS:** You'd ask the pilots, you know, they were officers. And, I guess if they didn't know, they'd have to call in on the radio or something, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were there times when you did actually ask permission?

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. You'd have to, yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How many. . . how many missions did you fly?

**THOMAS:** Gosh, I don't know. I didn't count them.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But you said it was a lot. . . some days it'd be a number of. . .

**THOMAS:** Yes, some days it'd be a number, and then sometimes there wouldn't be. . . you know, wouldn't be any.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**THOMAS:** Wouldn't be that much to do. Especially toward the end, they started the Vietnamization program before I came back, and we were turning a lot of our stuff over to them, you know, and there wasn't that much to do, and as new guys came in, you'd train them and [?] a while, you know. I got to the point I didn't want to fly anymore. I got too short, as you might say, you know. So, I figured I lasted this long, you know, I'm going to do something else. And then toward the end I got completely out of flying, I just transferred to company headquarters.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** At what point did you feel like you could see the. . . when did you start feeling like you were short?

**THOMAS:** Well, I spent 16 months there, I was there maybe. . . okay, I was there 10

months, and I'd about had it, because I hadn't been anywhere and I went on R&R and that's when I went with my CO. And, when I came back from R&R from a week in Taipei, I knew I didn't want to do it no more. I didn't want to fly no more. So, with his help, it's good to know somebody somewhere, I got a job in company headquarters, I quit flying completely.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you think just being on R&R had that kind of effect on you? Or was it building up at that point?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, I think it did, it had a real good effect on me, because I'd been there so long, you know, I was going a little crazy or dinky dau as the Vietnamese call it, and I got in a rut, you know, I got in a routine, and you live like an animal, you work like an animal, and I got to Taipei and it's a huge city, modern, you know, and I saw how you're supposed to live, you know, and I said, "I want to go back and live like that," and so when I got back to Chu Lai I decided I wanted to get out of that end of it and see a little bit of the other side, make it a little bit safer on me so I could go back home.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was that fairly common with the guys over there that had gone on. . . go on R&R and come back?

**THOMAS:** Probably, I know it was for me. I couldn't say, in general.

[End of tape 1, side 1]

[Beginning of tape 1, side 2]

**THOMAS:** It does help your morale quite a bit, you know, to get away from that for a while and try to get your head back on straight.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What's the most dangerous combat situation you found yourself in?

**THOMAS:** One night when. . . we had a rocket attack one night, and it just seemed like an enormous amount, at that time, and all of the sudden we heard gunfire from our bunker line, and they were coming through the wire at us, because my hooch was about as far as from, I don't know, 50 yards, I guess from the bunker line, I guess, and that was the most scared I was, I guess, because it was more or less, you know, eye to eye contact, real close then, and they were really good at getting inside, and what they were trying to do was come in and blow up our helicopters and stuff like that. And you know, there was fire going everywhere, everybody was firing, they were firing back, you know, and it was quite wild there for a while.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**THOMAS:** That's the most scared I ever was, I guess.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** As far as on the. . . on the missions you flew, you didn't have any close calls.

**THOMAS:** We got shot at, you know, quite often, I never did get shot down, as such, but you got used to it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did you react personally to having to shoot?

**THOMAS:** [Why'd' you have to ask that?] Well, I don't guess it really. . . at first it bothers you, you know, if you're human it has to, you know, it gets down to the point it's either him or me, and you know, not only me, but if I'm in a helicopter, you know, I've got two pilots and I've probably got another door gunner or flight engineer on board, we could have a ship full of wounded, or whatever. You know, there's. . . more than my life depended on it, you know, so it's just instinct, you know. Instinct. Just shoot back.



**BIRDWHISTELL:** How often would you fly out wounded?

**THOMAS:** Whenever they'd call for us?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was that a difficult job to. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah, we didn't do that too much because our helicopter was so big, because we were an easy target, and usually the switch, as we call them, dust offs went in and got them, and I don't see how they done it. I wouldn't want their job. Because they would go in. . . most of the time when we went in, you know, there might be 5, or 6, or 7, and generally not that seriously wounded, sometimes they were, but the other guys in the dust offs, they went in regardless of what was going on, and we lost some that way. If they would call in for a dust off and they sent one in and it got shot down, they'd send another one up behind it. You know, they were terrific about going after the wounded.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Hmm.

**THOMAS:** And usually, 30 minutes you were in a base hospital somewhere. I could be in the hospital faster than I could if I went downtown here. If I broke my leg right now, they'd wait 3 days on paperwork up here, make sure you've got insurance or something, but my wife would get made for saying that, she's a nurse, but that's usually what happens. ®

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] I guess with the type of combat situations you saw, you know, when you were landing or flying over, that you felt pretty lucky to be in a. . . in the situation you were in, in some ways, as compared to out there in the middle of it.

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. Exactly. I felt very fortunate, you know. We had our times, but a good friend of mine here in town was infantry and he spent 60 days out in the bush and come back for two days and go back for another 60, you know, and how he made it back

I'll never know, but I guess you get used to it there as you do, you know, whatever you're doing, but I felt real fortunate, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You mentioned that you thought Vietnam was a beautiful country and the landscape and geography and what not. Once you got up to your base camp, did it seem strange? I mean, was it. . . did it seem different to you?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, because it was. . . the army had taken it over, you know how the army can do things to. . . to the countryside, which. . . with the barb-wire and the flares and the bunkers and all that, but out. . . out where the Vietcong was, out in the jungles and what not, and the hills, and the rice paddies, it was a beautiful place.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you have much contact with civilians?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, I did. As a matter of fact, after I took over in the company headquarters, one of my jobs was that I was in charge of all the mama sons that came on the compound, did all the cleaning and the KP and all that stuff and out going to villages twice a day, or I'd go pick them up, you know, bring them in and they would work all day and I would take them back, and I was in charge of their security checks and all that stuff, and I had an interpreter, and I don't remember what her Vietnamese name was, we

called her Vicki, and she spoke better English than I did, and she took me and my commanding officer and the first sergeant to her village one day, and we had what you call Sunday dinner with them. It was out in the middle of nowhere, and we had sweet and sour pork and fish something and brown rice and Vietnamese beer, and sitting there on an old table and a dirt floor and a thatched roof. That was a good experience.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How had she learned English? Had she. . .

**THOMAS:** I don't know. She knew it before I got there, I guess through the. . . somebody taught her somehow, somewhere.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What did you think of the civilians? What was your attitude toward them?

**THOMAS:** Oh, I didn't hold any grudges against them or anything like that. I knew that some of them were Vietcong, you know, you couldn't prove it until the. . . of course the government changed hands daily over there in the daytime, they were South Vietnamese and at night they were Vietcong. But, I guess they'd never seen as much money as they had in their life as when we were over there, because we paid the mama sons, what was it, \$30 a month or something to take care of the hooches, you know, 6 or 7 guys in a hooch, and that was a lot of money compared to, you know, out there hoeing the rice.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** When you visited the village, what was it like? You know, when you went over there for dinner that day?

**THOMAS:** You get a lot of strange stares from the people, you know, from the villagers that live there, but you know, it was their custom, you didn't want to turn their meal down or offend them in any way, so we ate, as terrible as it was, you know, to our taste, which, they can't eat our food either, you know, hamburger, something like that, they couldn't eat. But it was real interesting, I enjoyed that day. I really did. I saw the other side, I guess, you know how they live and how they lived for centuries and probably will from now on.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** A lot of people went over there and never had an opportunity to experience that, ig uses.

**THOMAS:** I'm glad I did. It gives you a little bit better perspective, you know. I've often wondered about her in particular, you know, what happened to her? You know, did the NVA kill her because she worked for us? Or is she over here somewhere? Or her family, or you know, what happened to her? What happened?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you feel like, that when you visited that village and were around the civilians that they appreciated what the Americans were trying to do?

**THOMAS:** I believe they did. Some of them did. Yeah. We tried to help them, you know, with medical supplies, and you know, just whatever we could do, you know, protection and what not, and of course I know like at . . . when we would have ground attacks and rocket attacks, they would send out a . . . what they called a reactionary force and they'd go out to the villages and check and stuff, and we tried to take care of them. There was some of them you could help, and some of them that you know, you couldn't help. But, we supported an orphanage, you know, they were. . . a lot of them were orphans, and a lot of them were [?] Asian children, and I enjoyed doing that, we'd take that money at payday and take money to them and stuff, and have a little Christmas party for them, but I got into that side of it, and I guess that's why I stayed 16 months instead of 12. I got extended for four more months.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You got your tour extended?

**THOMAS:** Yeah. It was time for me to come home and I decided, well for two reasons, I . . . I extended to get the early out, and when I came back I got a 5 month early out, I didn't spend but 31 months in total, and you know, I liked what I was doing, I didn't want to come back stateside and spit shine my shoes and all that stuff and be military, I guess for another, whatever. I enjoyed what I was doing.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Interesting.

**THOMAS:** I got used to it. And, I was a little bit afraid to come back home, if you can believe that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. Well, it was a known quantity over there, you knew what. . . you were in. . . you'd established a life, and. . .

**THOMAS:** It was more tougher coming back than it was going. I never thought I'd ever say that, but that's true.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** That's interesting. Yeah. What about the relationship with the South Vietnamese soldiers?

**OTHER VOICE:** [?] need to change tapes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay.

[tape paused]

**OTHER VOICE:** Any time John.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay, tape four, so in terms of safe jobs in Vietnam, especially at

the place you were located, getting back and being the company clerk, those type of things, were things that guys might want to try and get into toward the end of their. . .

**THOMAS:** If they could, yeah. Really though there wasn't any. . . there are some safe jobs, but there weren't any safe jobs per se, you know, you could get killed being a company clerk, or you could have been a finance clerk in Saigon and got killed, but it was somewhat safer, you know, we were still subject to rocket attacks and mortar attacks

and coming through the wire and all that, but it wasn't like being out, you know, pounding the bush day after day.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I wanted to go back to your. . . to the missions you were flying for just a moment. Did you feel a sense of accomplishment? Did you feel like what you were involved in was accomplishing some purpose?

**THOMAS:** Yeah. I did for a long time, I really felt like, you know, for the first time in my life I was doing something that meant something and it was worthwhile. I've always felt that way, I guess. There might have been a time or two when I came back that, you know, that it might have been a waste, but I think what I done was right. Only thing I regret. . . I don't think there's anything I could do about it, well I know there couldn't, but two weeks after I left, five of my friends were killed by rocket attack, they were all five for medics, and one morning at about 6:00 their hooch took a direct hit, and it killed four medics and our flight sergeant. You know, there wasn't anything I could have done, but I would have liked to have been there anyway. We did lose guys like that, you know, from time to time. We lost some by accident, you know, mechanical failure, and we lost 12 that day one day. Something went wrong with the helicopter, and it just fell from the sky like a rock, and people getting shot, and shot down, and crashed and burn, and during the monsoon season one of them flew into a mountain, you know, in the fog and the rain, stuff like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you feel confident you were going to get out of there?

**THOMAS:** No. A lot of times I didn't. You know, I didn't really worry about going home until I got down to about the last two weeks, then I really got nervous. As a matter of fact, I missed my flight.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] You missed your flight.

**THOMAS:** Exactly.

[telephone rings]

**THOMAS:** Phone again.

**OTHER VOICE:** Keep going.

**THOMAS:** Okay. What was I saying, oh, missed my flight. I got sick. I don't know if

I got pneumonia or what it was and I lost some blood, and I just missed my flight.

Maybe I didn't want to go home.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about your relationship with the South Vietnamese soldiers?

**THOMAS:** Well, I knew it wasn't going to work. I didn't think. . . you know, really didn't think it was going to work. I just didn't think they could do it, which they didn't. I didn't have too much contact with them there toward the end, you know, before I came home we were. . . as a matter of fact, right before I left, the marines held the air base, the main air base at Chu Lai with their phantom jets and stuff and they left, and we took it

over, the helicopter unit, we just took over their place, and that's where the 5 of my friends got killed, and we had some South Vietnamese pilots there and what not, and there'd been an instance or two when we went to a place called Kham Duc and it was over on the Laotian border, and it used to be an old green beret base, real small place, but it sat down in a valley, like you're down in the bottom of a teacup, and hills all around it, and a bad place to be. They decided to open that back up and we were taking supplies in, and you couldn't hardly get them in, because every time a helicopter would get close to

landing, they would start pounding with the rockets and the mortars and what not. And, one time we went in, we had some south Vietnamese army aboard, you know, to re-supply them with troops, they didn't want to get off, and you had to literally kick them out. Because, you know, a lot of times over there when they would get in a tight spot, the South Vietnamese would change sides all of the sudden, and you got a [?] over there he would chu hoi, as they called it, surrender, and come back over this. . . whatever suited him best.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you didn't have much confidence then that once this Vietnamization. . .

**THOMAS:** No, not really. I liked the people, but I didn't think they could hold their own

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What was the difference in. . . well, let me ask you. . . let me ask you this way, what was your opinion of the. . . of the Vietcong? Or, you know, the Vietnamese as enemies?

**THOMAS:** Pretty sharp. You know, when they first got there, everybody, you know, myself and a lot of other people were really gung-ho and we were superior and supposedly had more brains and more firepower and more equipment, but they knew what they were doing. They knew exactly what they were doing. It's their country, you know. It's hard to win a war like that, I don't know how we would have done it. You know, I mean not being a general or anything, but there's more. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Just from your perspective it looked difficult.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, they're tough people to beat. And I think, I was watching TV the other night, they're the 4<sup>th</sup> largest army right now. They'd really be tough to beat if we



went back. There'd be only one way to beat them, drop the bomb on them, but that'd be a lot of civilians go with it. But they're pretty sharp.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How do you account for the difference in the . . . the South Vietnamese soldiers and the Vietcong.

**THOMAS:** I don't know. Political I guess. One wanted it more than the other did, I guess. I would hate to live in a situation like that, you know, like my family, they come and take my boy, you know, and draft him at 11 or 12 years old, or take my daughter and make a prostitute out of her or something like that, I don't see how they survived, but that's a way of life to them, I guess. I would like to go back someday to visit the country if I could. I know right after we did the dedication, Congressman Hawkins went back, he went to Hanoi and what not, I would have loved to have carried his suitcases for him if he'd let me.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Why do you think you want to go back so bad?

**THOMAS:** I don't know. I don't know. I don't think I'd want to go back in a . . . well, I would to, I'd go back regardless of whether it'd be a combat situation or a vacation, you might call it. I would like to go back and see the . . . see it again. I'd like to see what happened at Chu Lai where I was at, they came down the coastline before they hit Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, Danang, and all that and they took all that over, I'd just . . . I'd like to see what it was like.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. Were there any people, any guys around you who took any unusual steps to try to get out early at that. . . you know, at that point?

**THOMAS:** You mean, just to get out to be getting out?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah.

**THOMAS:** You mean like AWOL or something like that?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Or, you know, any kind of measure to go home early.

**THOMAS:** Oh, we had some crazy ones, but I don't recall anything like that happening. I remember one guy, a friend of mine, matter of fact. He took an R&R to Hawaii, which was perfectly legal, 7 days, and the military furnishes your transportation to and from, but as soon as he hit Honolulu, he caught a flight to Oklahoma City for like 3 days, but he came back. He wanted to go home, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What'd they do to him?

**THOMAS:** Nothing, they never did find out about it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] He got all the way back to Oklahoma City for his R&R.

**THOMAS:** Sure did. I wouldn't have done it. Too much danger of not catching your flight back. I went to Taipei and everybody else did too, or. . . the guys that went came back. I'm sure there were a lot of instances where people would take off, but I never thought about doing that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you write letters home to your parents?

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What'd you tell them about what was going on?

**THOMAS:** I had to water it down, you know. I didn't try to worry them, because dad had been sick, and well, he's died since, but you try to put on a good front, you know. I was single at the time, and things like that. I remember, I think it was Christmas all the local guys from Central Kentucky, they had their names in the Lexington Herald, and I got gobs and gobs of Christmas cards from all these people I didn't know, it really made me feel good. I mean, third grade classes and sixth grade classes, and college girls, all

kinds of people, and that was really. . . because mail was a lifesaver, you know, if you didn't get any mail you had a bad day. But that was great though, getting all that mail.

As a matter of fact, I think I've still got a lot of it. I kept all that stuff.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** That's good. So what kind of mail did you get? Did your parents write you? And. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. My parents wrote me, and I got a Dear John one time.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You had a girlfriend when you left?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, somewhat girlfriend, but that turned out for the best too, and all my friends, you know, stuff like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Just telling you about things going on back here.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Yeah. "wish you was home," and all that stuff, and I'd write and say, "wish you was here."

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** Stuff like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were you still homesick?

**THOMAS:** No.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You'd gotten over that.

**THOMAS:** Only time. . . I really got homesick real bad Christmas Eve, we had a surprise visit by Bob Hope and I went to see his show, and right toward the end, I think it was Connie Stevens and the Gold Diggers, and Neil Armstrong, anyway they started singing Christmas carols and I really got homesick. So, that night we had a floor show at the NCO and I sort of forgot about it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** Because, you know, Christmas over there, it was 100 degrees that day, and you can't enjoy Christmas. You get boxes in the mail with goodies and stuff, you know, cookies and cakes and stuff you might need. Of course, you didn't really need any money, there wasn't anywhere to spend it. There was a PX in the main base at Chu Lai, you could go up there and buy cokes and stuff like that, cigarettes you can't enjoy Christmas. You get boxes in the mail with goodies and stuff, you know, cookies and cakes and stuff you might need. Of course, you didn't really need any money, there wasn't anywhere to spend it. There was a PX in the main base at Chu Lai, you could go up there and buy cokes and stuff like that, cigarettes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was there a lot of drinking on. . . at the base?

**THOMAS:** When you were off, yeah. There wasn't anything else to do. Wasn't anything else to do. If there's an NCO club you could buy a beer for 20 cents, and a bourbon and coke was a quarter, I mean for a dollar and a half you could really get stone drunk, but that's all there was to do, other than the floor shows coming in. Anything to. .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So did you guys get drunk most every night then? Is that. . .

**THOMAS:** Well not drunk drunk.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah.

**THOMAS:** You go over there and drink or something, listen to the juke box or something. We would. . . they would tie one on when somebody would be going home, they'd have a party for them, you know, and they'd get drunk or something, but they'd be at it the next day. There wasn't any drinking or anything like that, especially when

you're flying, that was a no-no, because you could get somebody killed or get yourself killed.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. What about drugs? Were they prevalent?

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. I didn't see any hard stuff as what, heroin or cocaine or stuff like that, it was mostly marijuana, it was plentiful. You could get it anywhere. It was everywhere.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did guys try to hide the fact that they were using it? Or was it just pretty open?

**THOMAS:** Oh, they would hide it, but everybody knew. You know, there was nothing you could do.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Like, if you'd walk in living quarters or something, then you could tell that people were smoking?

**THOMAS:** Oh, you could tell the guys that were pretty high. Oh, we had one guy that went sort of berserk, they put him away though, he was doing all kinds of stuff, and he was. . . I guess he was a drug addict, I guess you might say, but he wound up in Fort [Livenworth], I think. He went berserk. Tried to kill one of the guys or something.

Because everybody. . . you know, everybody. . . you carried your weapon wherever you went, everybody was armed, you know, so you had. . . you had to be careful whose toes you stepped on, especially when somebody was drinking or something like that. A lot of times, some of the guys from other units would try to come into our club, you know, we'd run them out and stuff like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Be a fight maybe?

**THOMAS:** Probably.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah.

**THOMAS:** Nothing serious, but it was a navy thing. A Navy patrol boat unit down over the hill where the river was, and we wouldn't let them in, they wouldn't let them in ours, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Hmm.

**THOMAS:** But you know, when it came down to the serious stuff, we'd help them out and they'd help us out, you know, if. . . you know, in the war situation. But, that was our club, you know, for our unit, and that's what we kept it as. You could play cards or something like that, they'd play poker and stuff.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did the liquor and the drugs in any way hamper the military operations at all?

**THOMAS:** It didn't in our unit, you know, from my end, I didn't see anywhere it would hamper it, but it probably did elsewhere, or maybe it did in our unit, but I didn't see it. I don't know of any instance where a pilot would be too drunk or too high to fly or something like that, maybe it happened in an office somewhere or something, you know, some clerk or some mechanic, maybe that. But. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** While we're on this kind of topic, what about the black market?

Did it operate. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** At the base, what was it like? How did that work?

**THOMAS:** I can remember. . . of course we had a ration card, and you could go to the PX and get, you know, like so many cases of beer and so many watches and so many radios and so many cigarettes, but really the main thing, if you ran out of cokes, or Pepsis

or whatever, I saw them go for \$2 a can. Because beer was plentiful. I don't know why you couldn't get cokes in, you know. Because we were in the middle of a . . . well not the middle of. . . it wasn't. . . Chu Lai wasn't a big supply base, we'd have a hard time getting supplies. As a matter of fact, we took a convoy one time to Danang, up highway one, it was about sixty miles and we went up and traded and stole, whatever we could do, swap, you know, with the navy, the air force, or the marines, wherever we could get to steal stuff that we could use, but I'm sure in Saigon the black market was unreal.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But out where you were it was just a matter of. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah, some stuff. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Trading, and. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah, there was two villages close by, but mostly was, you know, radios and tape players and stuff like that, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You mentioned the American and Vietnamese children.

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were there a lot of Vietnamese women around the base then, and did the American soldiers develop relationships with those. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. They came in, you know, daily. They wasn't allowed on base at night, and they would come in and. . . whatever they were hired to do, as a mama son, as we called them, washed the GIs clothes and stuff like that, iron, or whatever, most of them worked in. . . like in the mess halls and stuff, KP and all that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**THOMAS:** Especially at Tet, you know, their holiday, they didn't even come in for like a week or two, they were out loading rockets, I guess.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did. . . okay.

[tape paused]

**THOMAS:** Who's got a light?

**OTHER VOICE:** I do.

**THOMAS:** I've sweated so much. . .

**OTHER VOICE:** We're rolling.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tape 5. We were talking about American soldiers and Vietnamese women, were there guys you knew in your unit who developed serious relationships with any of the Vietnamese women? Wanted to marry them? Bring them. . .

**THOMAS:** [inaudible]. There was one that I know of for sure, he was a. . . he was a sergeant major, and he was old enough to know better, I guess. But, I guess that does happen over there. It didn't with me, but a lot of them, you know, brought some back, which, I see no harm in that. But I think it's an awful lot of red tape, you know, you've got to go through to do that. Some of the ones I talked to that I got to know didn't want to come to the United States at that time, I'm sure they do now, or I'd say the majority of them would want to.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Uh-huh. And you mentioned that by this time, by 1969-70, there were already children around that area that. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. Yeah. Right, because see Chu Lai was first occupied in 1965 by the marines, they were the first people to, you know, set that base up, so there have been



troops there since '65, and of course, I would say there's a lot that came down from other places and the villages and from the hills and what not that were at that orphanage.


**BIRDWHISTELL:** Uh-huh. And you talked about your work with them, that apparently became very important to you.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, I really enjoyed that. And, I told my wife a number of times I would like to. . . to adopt one maybe, you know, later if I had the money and what not, I think that's a long process you've got to go through to get one. I think I'd like to do that. I saw how they lived, you know, maybe I could help them do better maybe.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Uh-huh. We talked early on about your unit being recognized as a very efficient unit in terms of the body count, is that right?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, I guess you'd call it. . . they said killed, body count, I guess it was the same.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What was your attitude toward using the body count as a measure of success in war?

**THOMAS:** I didn't particularly like it. I didn't think it done any good other than pass the word on up that we did this, and they did that, and then it got. . . it went all the way up  the ladder, I guess, to satisfy the politicians or the generals back here that. . . we were trying to tell the American public, I guess, that you know, we were winning. We did. . . we killed so many a day and what not, you know, by attrition or something. But I don't think it worked. I don't think there's any way you can count those people. Like I said before, you know, they would work for you in the day and try to kill you at night. You know, you never knew. . . I don't see how you could do it. I don't see how you could do it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, when you went out on a mission and were at your gun post there, then would you bring back a body count number from. . . from a mission like that?

**THOMAS:** Sometimes, when it was. . . you could see it. But, a lot of times it was very difficult from the air, especially when you're getting fired upon from a jungle that you can't see down in, you know, you don't. . . a lot of times you don't know if you hit. . . hit them or not.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**THOMAS:** Very seldom, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I guess I was wondering if there was pressure on you all to bring back. . .

**THOMAS:** No, not on me there wasn't. There wasn't any pr-. . . there might have been, probably on maybe some grunts, infantry, you know, platoons or squads, or what-not.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Hmm. Were there any particular experiences while you were in Nam that made a lasting impression on you as you think back?

**THOMAS:** Oh lordy.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Some things you maybe still think about occasionally.

**THOMAS:** I think about Vietnam daily. I don't guess there's. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What. . . what pops in your mind when you. . . you know, when you think about Nam?

**THOMAS:** I don't know. Right off the top of my head, this past year it seems like it's really built up, because all last summer, you know, I worked on the monument, and my wife told me one night the only way she could talk to me was to speak Vietnamese, and then we went to DC that following weekend and with 300,000 Vietnam veterans, and it

seems now that, you know, the American people are maybe getting behind this or finding out what went on over there, you know. It's made a big impression on my life, I guess. I don't know how to describe it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was there anything that happened to you over there that you felt really changed your outlook on things? Or was it just sort of a . . . the total experience. Is there anything in particular that happened that really caused you to change or look at things differently or alter your philosophy or. . .

**THOMAS:** Well, I guess, you know, going through the. . . you know, the rocket attacks and the ground attacks, I'm very thankful to be alive, and I never was a very patriotic person, you know, before I was in the military, and now you know, when they play the national anthem or what not, I've got cold chills running down my spine. I'm a whole lot more outspoken now. A lot of people'll tell you that. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** I don't have much patience, and a lot of people will tell you that too. And, sometimes I have a hard time dealing with people that are not Vietnam Veterans, or people that know I am, and they're not a. . . maybe it's just me, but after you're back 10 years, seemed like the first 10 years I didn't think about Nam that much. There's always something that comes into your mind, or maybe you have a bad dream one night, or something. . . you'll be driving down the road and a song'll come on that was playing back then, and now it's getting more and more, it seems like, at least to me. I don't know how to get it. . . I mean, doing the monument helped me tremendously. It helped me. It really did. And, going to Washington helped too. I don't feel as much guilt, I guess, you know after I saw the wall in DC and I saw my friends names on it, and I looked up the 7

here from Montgomery county, and it was a real touching, emotional weekend for me, and that helped tremendously.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What were you feeling guilty about?

**THOMAS:** I don't know. Well, I do too, I guess guilty that I came back. You know, that I made it and some of my friends didn't. I feel fortunate that I did, but sometimes I just. . . I feel guilty [?] make it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I want to talk about your return home, and you said something earlier that. . . it might sound strange, but you felt like that you didn't want to leave in some ways.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, I just got used to it, you know, I'd really forgotten about the world, as we called it, you know, the United States, you know, just got into that, and I guess in a way I enjoyed. . . I loved what I was doing, I guess. I was asked to reenlist, and I was recommended to go to Officer's Candidate School, and they offered me \$10,000 cash bonus, tax free, if I would have stayed. But that night we had a rocket attack, and I said well I'm going home.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you think maybe if that rocket attack hadn't come that night you might have signed up?

**THOMAS:** Probably. And I had a first sergeant too that was. . . sort of took me under his wing, and he was more like a father to me, you know, and he told me I should go home. So I went home.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Why'd he tell you you ought to go home?

**THOMAS:** I'd been there too long, I guess.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I get the impression from what you said about having to come back and not wanting to come back and spend a long time in the military base on. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** . . . in the states, that over there it wasn't quite spit and polish.

**THOMAS:** Oh no. No. No.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** They'd still get on you from time to time about haircuts and stuff like that, and. . . but you know, back stateside, it was all strictly spit and polish with nothing to do, you know, play army, no real sense or purpose to it. Well, I'm sure there was, but I didn't think so.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was there a. . . makes you wo-. . . brings to mind, you know, that because of that over there, was there a lack of discipline within the units?

**THOMAS:** No. Probably a little bit lesser in stateside, you know, they were a little more lenient on you. Of course I'm sure you heard of the. . . a lot of times some of the officers would get fragged, as they called it, you know, that would happen, but we didn't have that much trouble out of our unit. And I know that happened. ®

**BIRDWHISTELL:** In your opinion then, there'd be discipline where it counted.

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** In the chopper, on the missions.

**THOMAS:** Right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Responding to emergencies.

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah, definitely. But they were a whole lot more lenient on us than they would be stateside. Definitely.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** We talked a little bit before we started the interview, we were looking at the [?] of what. . . was there discussions about those types of incidents within your unit?

**THOMAS:** Oh, that one especially, because, you know, as I told you before that my unit flew Lieutenant Kelly down there, that was a year before I got there, and they had all the investigators come up and checking our flight records and all the brass and what not, but they talked about it from time to time, but I don't think that bothered anybody.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How were the investigators treated?

**THOMAS:** Fine, as far as I know. I don't know what they could have. . . I mean, we just flew them down there, I guess. I guess they wanted to just document that, you know, as far as flight records go.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Personally how did you deal with those types of incidents when you heard about them, you know, because of your relationship with the local South Vietnamese people you worked with, the orphanage and what not, did that bother you at all when you would hear those things happening?

**THOMAS:** No. In a way I could understand why he done that. I can't understand why he did the little. . . the little little kids. A friend of mine was really hurt bad by a six year old girl. She threw a grenade at him, I'm sure she was put up to it, but I can understand his point, you know, they were going through this village almost daily on their missions, and each time they would get ready to go through the village chief would say, you know, "we're not VC and everything's okay" and blah blah blah, and they'd go through and they'd step on booby traps and land mines, and they'd get all their guys hurt, and I guess

he just got to a point that he just got fed up with it. And I guess they all went berserk that day, I guess.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you hear of other incidents like that? Or did you have personal knowledge of anything like that going on?

**THOMAS:** No. No personal knowledge, no. We had an incidence one time that, as I said before, the hill we were on overlooked a village, and there was a 75-80 yard, well they call it a kill zone, you know, where you get all the vegetation out of the way so you can see anybody coming in, and there happened to be trip flares go off one night on the wire, which would tell you that somebody's trying to get in, you know, and it happened two or three times, and one of the bunkers opened up with an M-60, and it didn't happen anymore, so we didn't worry about it, and the next day they found a little 12 year old girl down there. But, we don't know if she was playing, or where she shouldn't have been, or what, but that was just an accident.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did you deal with those things?

**THOMAS:** What could you do? I heard that the father came back on the army and the army had to compensate him for the loss of his daughter, which, probably give him some money or something. But you know, we're there and it's pitch dark, and you know, there's a war going on, what are you going to. . . you know, you have no way of knowing. Have no way.

[End of tape 1, side 2]

[Beginning of tape 2, side 1]

**THOMAS:** We didn't know it until the next day.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Let's talk about your leaving Vietnam then. You told us earlier you missed the plane. [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You got sick and missed the plane.

**THOMAS:** Missed the plane. They wouldn't let me go, I had to catch the next flight the next day. I went back. . . I flew out of Chu Lai, because you had to say all your goodbyes and everything, which is really tough, hard to do after living with those guys for you know, a year and a half, sixteen months.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You really felt close to them.

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. Definitely. I felt closer to them than any friend I had back here that I went all the way through school with, because it was a different situation, you know, he depended on me and I depended on him.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, in spite of the rotation system, there were guys there long enough by the time you were there that you developed a close friendship.

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. Yeah. One in particular, you know, I spent. . . like Lieutenant Price, my ex CO, we were together about 8 months, and at Nuncio we were together 8, 10 months, there's a lot of guys you can spend a lot of time with, and anyway, I caught that flight the next day back to Cam Ranh Bay, and I think it was that night or that morning or something we flew out of there.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** There was a question I wanted to ask you before we get you back in the states, during the mid to early 60's, there doesn't seem to be as many problems going on within the units in Vietnam, things like we talked about, alcohol abuse, drug abuse,



morale problems, and just the negative things that you sometimes hear about in Vietnam, but it seems like at the time you were there, these things were really building up.

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And that's why I've asked you about all of that, did you sense that there was a negative. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** A black cloud hanging over this thing?

**THOMAS:** The last three or four months, it seemed like things got worse, you know, and I don't know what. . . I guess it was all the protesting back in the states, and you guys coming over, and of course you heard all the reports on the radio and what-not, and you got to wondering whether. . . you know, was all this worth it? All these lives we lost. And, morale got bad, and there was no way that. . . we knew there was no way you could win. You'd go out and support these guys that would fight for a hill, you know, and they would fight for the hill for a week or two and lose 15 or 20 lives and leave it the next day. It wasn't like World War II, you know, when you push forward, keep on going. It was like. . . got to be like a job. You go out and you fight, you come back, and you sleep. ®

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So when you all were sitting around the club, you know, maybe having a beer, or a coke or something, did you talk about, you know, what's going on here? Why are we going out there doing that?

**THOMAS:** We probably did. I don't recall any. . . you know, thing like that, but I'm sure we did. I'm sure we all got fed up with it to a point, but. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I guess I was just wondering if that had something to do with your not re-enlisting.

**THOMAS:** Well there was an awful lot of talk about, you know, all the protesting, going back on, you know, especially on college campuses and what not. And at first everybody was really mad, you know, of course it didn't do us any good, and we didn't understand it, but it wasn't until after you got home, you know, and then saw it from this end, that they . . . they probably was right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What concerned you most about coming back home? Okay. Good place to stop.

[tape paused]

**THOMAS:** Morale got. . .

**OTHER VOICE:** We are rolling.

**THOMAS:** . . . terrible probably. I'd say it did.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. So tell me about your coming back to the states then and what your . . . some of your concerns were, and what your experiences were getting back home.

**THOMAS:** Okay, let's see, this was in October. We came back into Fort Louis, and I was to be discharged, and it took about 19 hours to be discharged, and they kept us on the move all day long, you know, processing out, getting your pay and all that, and that night they let us have a steak dinner, it was the only time they fed us, but it was really nice. And we got paid, and I caught a taxi or a bus or something to the airport, and of course there were quite a few GIs going home, you know, and my flight didn't leave until about 7 the next morning, and we spent the night, there was a lounge down in the airport that

stayed open all night, and just a bunch of us got together to talk about where we were from, where we'd been in Vietnam and stuff like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You must have felt very different from the guy who left Sharpsburg, and. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Gone out to Seattle, and now here you were coming back after 16 months in combat.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. I was really nervous about coming home. As a matter of fact, the flight sergeant gave me a bottle of valium when I came home. I don't know why I was so nervous about coming. . . I guess it was because, you know, trying to adjust back to this way of life again after being over there for so long. It was really hard to. . . and I had no idea what I was going to do, you know, I thought about going to college or working. I knew for a while I didn't want to do anything, which I didn't for three or four months.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you flew back into Lexington.

**THOMAS:** No, I flew into Louisville, I couldn't get a flight to Lexington.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Flew into Louisville, who picked you up?

**THOMAS:** My mother and my dad. I wish I'd have done that different now, I wish I'd have snuck in on them, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Kind of the way you snuck out? [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** Yeah, kind of the way I snuck out, you know. I thought about doing that, and I called them from Seattle that night, and I told them my flight was coming in and what not, but they met me in Louisville, and it was about 9:30 or 10:00 that night, and

they wanted to know if I wanted to stop and McDonalds and all that stuff on the way home. I said, “no, just get me home.” All I wanted to do was go home.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How many days had you been away from your base camp by the time you. . .

**THOMAS:** When I left?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** By the time. . . yeah, by the time you. . . from the time you elft your base camp to the time you met your parents.

**THOMAS:** Let’s see. About 3 days, I guess. Roughly. By the time I got to Cam Ranh, and then, you know, it takes about a day’s flying time, about 24 hours to go from Cam Ranh to Tokyo to Seattle, and I was about a day in Seattle.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So then. . .

**OTHER VOICE:** Let me pause just a second here John.

[tape paused]

**OTHER VOICE:** Rolling.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What were your. . . what was your parents’ reaction to you when they saw you? What’d they. . . how’d they react?

**THOMAS:** Well, of course there was all the hugging and carrying on, you know, but they said. . . they said I looked bad, you know, which I probably did. I’d lost some weight and I’d been sick and what not, and of course I was real brown, you know, from the heat and the sun over there. But you know, I found it hard to talk to them. It was

strange. Real strange feeling. I was like I was in another. . . you know, like a twilight zone or something like that. Real tough.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Hmm.

**THOMAS:** Tough to get to. . . everything seemed strange, you know, all the people and everybody going about their daily life, you know, like it didn't even happen, but it was really tough.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But as far as on the way back running into any type of conflicts with anybody. . .

**THOMAS:** At the airports. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** In the airports or anything.

**THOMAS:** Well, that night in Seattle there were some guys that was at the lounge there that was sort of mouthing off, but there was 8 or 9 of us sitting there at the table, and they were Marines and Air Force and Navy guys that were all just, you know, having a good time, glad to be home, and they were just smarting off and stuff like that. But, they didn't do anything, we just let them talk. We had enough of it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you got back home and then you had some time before you had to go. . . did you have to go back in after. . .

**THOMAS:** No, I was out.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You were out once you got home.

**THOMAS:** I was out. When I left Seattle I was out. I'd been honorably discharged there and I was completely out.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tell me what you did immediately after getting home for the next period of time there.

**THOMAS:** I didn't do anything. Some friends got. . . I stayed at the house, as a matter of fact they got worried about me, I didn't go out, I didn't date anybody, I stayed up and watched TV until the thing went off. I slept on the couch, I wouldn't sleep in my own bed, and I didn't do nothing, I was sort of a hermit, I guess you'd say. Because it was, you know, like I said before it was tough getting back into the main. . . mainstream.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you know. . . did you know what you were going through? I mean, did you have a sense of what was happening?

**THOMAS:** No.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Or did you just feel kind of confused?

**THOMAS:** I didn't know because they didn't tell us anything, you know. I was very well prepared and trained to go, knew what to do when I got there, but when I come home I didn't know what in the hell was going on. I didn't know anything. I'd never heard of delayed stress, or you know, all that stuff. I didn't know. . . I said, "well, maybe this will pass," but for about two months I didn't do anything.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did your parents try to talk to you to see what they could do to help you?

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. Yeah. But I just didn't want to be bothered, you know. Didn't want to be bothered by nobody, didn't want to be around nobody. Wanted to be by myself. And, I thought once about just, you know, going back, instead of being. . . you know, I could have reenlisted and went right back over there, but I said no.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What kept you from doing that?

**THOMAS:** I met my wife.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** She finally brought me out of my shell. I met her. . . I got home in October and met her in December. Had no idea I was looking for a wife, either.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** But, my cousin who lived next door was dating a nurse that was going to school at the University, and he wanted me to go Christmas shopping with him, so it was close to Christmas and I didn't. . . had forgotten about Christmas anyway, so I said, "okay I'll go with you." So we went Christmas shopping and he wanted to go by and see his girlfriend, and when we did, my wife at the time was standing there in the door, but I didn't know who she was, you know. Two weeks later they fixed us up and we had sort of a blind date, and we got married in July. We waited about 6, 7, months and got married. Been married 14 years. So I guess if it hadn't have been for her. . . I have to give her a lot of the credit, I guess. If I hadn't have gotten married, you know, and settled down, I don't know what I would have done. I probably would have went back in the service, because I didn't have anything to do, especially.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did she know, at the time, that you were going through all this?  
Did you. . .

**THOMAS:** No, not really, she knew I was. . . when she first met me, she knew I had just gotten back from Vietnam, but she really didn't think that much about it, you know, she knows it now though.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I don't want to ask you a lot of personal questions, but since you've given her the credit for this, you know, for helping you get out of this period, it wasn't from telling her what you went through, it was just that. . . you just found her supportive just being there.

**THOMAS:** Right. Yeah. I've tried to tell her things, you know, from time to time, especially when, you know, like all last year when we were doing this monument, I'm sure she got real tired of it, and a matter of fact, she suggested that I go talk to my friend over at the Vet center, Ivan works over there, a counselor, and I talked to him a couple of times, but you know, she's been a real big help.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were you able to talk to anybody in the community about your experiences? Were there other vets around? Or. . .

**THOMAS:** Well. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Back then, I mean, when you first got back.

**THOMAS:** Back then there were some, but back then you didn't talk about it. You know, like I told you before what that minister said to me.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tell me about. . . tell me that story again now, you went down to visit your former. . .

**THOMAS:** My Ex-commanding officer.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Ex commanding officer. And he was where now? In. . .

**THOMAS:** In North Carolina.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**THOMAS:** And, that Sunday we went to church, I think he was a Sunday School Superintendent also, and we went to church and it was a packed house and what not, and he asked Tim to get up and introduce me, and me and my family stood up, and the minister said, "this is Larry Thomas, he's a friend of Tim [Price], says, "they were in Vietnam together." Says, "that's. . ." how'd I say that a while ago? That's a bad subject,



we don't talk about that here. That's the way he put it, and so we sat back down. And I said well. . . I said it to myself, you know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** That must have been very hard on you then to. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I mean, because that would have been an emotional reunion anyway with your [?] CO, and then to have that happen in a public setting, did that sort of reconfirm then what you had been going through?

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did you account for it? What did you. . .

**THOMAS:** I didn't know what to think about that, and Carter letting all the draft-dodgers come back, and you know, I figured everybody was just dumping on the Vietnam Veteran, and a lot of guys felt the same way, but nobody would say anything, you know what I'm saying? It was. . . nobody would. . . everybody felt it, and agonized over it, but nobody would say anything about it until, you know, last year, or especially after they did the wall in Washington DC, and I think that helped tremendously, a lot of veterans, and people started talking about it then, and then last year when I did this

monument, I want to tell you a story about it. There was a guy that came to the dedication who was a Vietnam Veteran, I won't tell you his name, but he had a real hard time dealing with it, and I didn't know this until later, and he'd been an alcoholic, he couldn't hold a job, or nothing, going through a lot of problems that, you know, the Vietnam Veterans have had. And, he came to the dedication, and he hasn't had a drink since.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Hmm.

**THOMAS:** And, I found this out two weeks ago, as a matter of fact, and that really made me feel good. I'm glad that that had some part, you know, it helped somebody, you know, plus the families too. But, when I was doing this last year, the community was tremendous. Everything I asked for, nobody said no. They gave me the spot in the courthouse and the city council was behind it, and the county fiscal court was behind it, and the newspaper gave us the. . . all the publicity we wanted, and we put on that dinner, and got donations, and of course we raised, you know, about \$7,000 and that was tremendous.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, why did you start this in the first place?

**THOMAS:** Well, I worked for Nabisco, and one of my store owners Tommy Thompson is a Vietnam Veteran from 101<sup>st</sup> airborne, and we've been friends for a long time, and when I would visit his store, we'd always talk, just him and I, you know, in his office about Vietnam, about our experiences and what not, and we were at lunch one day, and this was after they did the wall in DC, and said, "well why don't we do something about it here?" So, we got all the names together and what not, and I went to the city council meeting one night and just asked him. I said, you know, "I live here, I'm a Vietnam veteran, we want to do something for the seven that were killed," and it was unanimous. And, it took a long time to get everything organized and go on in the fundraising, but that's the way it began. So, it was favored. And then I met Colonel Smith down there, you know, at the General Westmoreland dinner, and Jim [Lundgard] of the Vietnam Veteran Leadership Program, and they was a tremendous help, you know, help me get it going and what not. And, it seems like since I've done that, you know, a lot of veterans have come up to me and talked to me, and it seems like it's more open now, and the

community is just more open to it, you know, and they ran articles every week on the seven that were killed, and interviewed different Vietnam Veterans here in town, their experiences, and it was great. It really was. If that would have happened when we got back, there wouldn't have been any delayed stress or. . . I don't think, you know. We were sort of pushed in the background because we lost. That's the way I feel, anyway.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But you didn't feel like you'd lost, right?

**THOMAS:** Personally I didn't, no. As a whole, probably yeah. You know. I felt everybody felt that toward me, because they didn't want to talk about it, you know. But now it's a little bit different, it's coming around.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Took a long time.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, sure did. Sure did. It's about time too.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did you feel toward President Nixon when he announced, you know, that. . .

**THOMAS:** Peace with honor?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Peace with honor.

**THOMAS:** Well, all right, I guess. I knew. . . I didn't think we could win it, and it was time to get out, and I guess it was a good thing, should have been done earlier I guess, probably. I still hope that we can do something with the 2500 that are still, you know, missing in action or what not, POWs. I'd like for them to do something about that. You know, there's at least 4 or 5 here, and 2 or 3 there, but I guess they're waiting on financial aid, I think that's what they want. When we do that, they'll turn loose a lot of the [boys].

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I've had veterans mention the, the Iranian hostages.

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah. I don't care much about that either. I mean, I'm glad we went and got them, and I think the rescue mission was a fiasco, and the ticker tape parade, and stuff, I didn't think much of.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You sat here and watched it on TV.

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You. . . why would you. . . what was your negative attitude toward it? I mean what. . .

**THOMAS:** Well, you know, I didn't want a ticker tape parade, you know, when I came home or nothing like that, but it just seemed like it was not wrong to go all out on that, but what we all went through, we spent a whole lot more time over there than we did. A whole lot more worse conditions. But, I don't know. I guess the country just went all out for it, I guess they needed something to cheer about at that time, I guess. Which, you know, I was tickled to death they came home, but you know, we were pushing the background again. Sure was.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. Well, you all had been home a lot longer than they had.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. That's right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] At that point. And then of course, it's ironic, I suppose, that the Vietnam Memorial in Washington in itself stirred up controversy.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Everything we've done has been, you know, controversy it seems like.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were you concerned about the design of the monument? Or were you just. . .

**THOMAS:** I liked it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You liked it.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. See, now some of the people were fussing because of the Chinese student, and I think she was an architect or something, wasn't she? Or a student or whatever that got the design for it, but it didn't bother me. I don't care if they would have put it on a . . . what they put it on. Something needed to be done. Period. I think it's beautiful. I saw it last year and I think it's just beautiful.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about the new addition to it?

**THOMAS:** Oh, it's fantastic. They look real. They looked real. It was really hard to see that day unless you went in there late at night, because there were so many veterans there, but that was probably the best weekend in my life. That weekend that I went to DC. The weekend before when I did this monument, and the weekend up there, it was the best two weekends I ever had in my life. Up there it was, you know, there was 3 or 400,000 veterans, and everybody in their jungle fatigues, and the bush hats, and a lot of hugging and crying and talking to people, you know, you never knew before and shared your experiences and look up old friends, and it was fantastic. I want to go back.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay.

[tape paused]

**OTHER VOICE:** Want to [?] or something?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Seven.

**OTHER VOICE:** Tape seven.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tape seven. I just want to go back to this point about your local. . .

[telephone rings]

**OTHER VOICE:** Stop the tape.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay. Wanted to go back to your work on the local memorial again, and you feel like that brought the community together, and. . .

**THOMAS:** I think so.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** . . . really opened things up.

**THOMAS:** A lot of people came up to me that. . . that I wouldn't have dreamed would have, you know, I had a lot of help from the community. The American legion doing the spaghetti dinner and the whole town showed up for that, and everything was donated, and dinner we had the night before, and people that sent in their money, and it's really been good.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now why would a monument make all the difference?

**THOMAS:** I don't know. I don't know. I guess maybe people. . . a lot of people thought it was time to do something, I guess, you know for the county and maybe the whole nation too, I guess. I was told that after we done this that the Philadelphia Enquirer called and was wanting to know about this, that they were going to do a story on it, because this was supposedly one of the smallest towns to ever do something like this, but I've never seen the article, I don't know if they went through with it or not.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. And, it seems from what you said that you felt like just the experience that you had benefited you personally.

**THOMAS:** Doing the monument?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah, helping you get through some. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Yeah, it did.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** . . . difficult times.

**THOMAS:** It sure did.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Uh-huh.

**THOMAS:** I enjoyed the. . . I really enjoyed working on it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. Do you think the United States should have been involved in Vietnam?

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Yeah I do. It. . . communism, you know, I think we should have because, you know, now they've got South Vietnam, maybe next they're going to do Cambodia and Laos and then Bangkok and then maybe the Philippines and maybe Hawaii next, they need to stop it somewhere, and I thought at the time yeah, we were doing the right thing. I still think we did. But. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What'd we do wrong?

**THOMAS:** I don't know. I don't know. I don't know what happened. I don't personally think what went wrong happened over there. I think it was back on the hill here somewhere.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How do you feel about. . . how has your Vietnam experience influenced you in terms of, say what's going on in Central America today.

**THOMAS:** It sounds like another Vietnam, you know, from what I've read and what I saw on TV. I would say we'll probably get into it again. It's about time for something else to go on.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** In looking back at your Vietnam experience and your service there, do you. . . are there benefits you feel you gained from your service? Are there positive things that came out of your experiences and your. . . your tour of duty?

**THOMAS:** Yeah. I think then I was a. . . to coin a phrase that some of them put over there, I was a rock and roller with one foot in the grave. But, you know, after going through all of that and coming back, I think it's made me, you know, a stronger person, and a whole lot more patriotic, you know, I really love this country, especially after an experience like that. And, I would go somewhere again if I was asked to. But, I think it's definitely helped, some people might disagree on that, as far as me personally, but, I think they really have.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Are there negative aspects?

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** For you personally?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, probably. . . yeah, I know there is. You know, the. . . every Vietnam veteran suffers from some sort of a. . . what they call delayed stress syndrome and all that, of course, we never knew anything about that, nobody did. That would be the negative part of it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, in your case, you know, you were having trouble adjusting when you first got back, then did you go through a period when it seemed okay and then it would. . . then it got worse again?

**THOMAS:** Mmhmm. I think the experts say after 10 years it gets worse, in which they're probably right on the money, but you know, there's a lot of unemployment in Vietnam Veterans, and even guys such as myself that's employed, there's still a lot of



things that affect it, you know, I get restless, you know, from time to time, and sometimes you feel like you're not settled down, especially, I'm talking job, you know, like that, I'd probably like to have my own business, maybe. I believe I'd feel. . . you know, I have a good job now, but maybe I'd feel more comfortable with my own business.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. So you found about 8. . . 5 years ago around 1980 that you started getting restless again.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And, did you feel like there was somebody to help out there? Or somebody you could. . .

**THOMAS:** I talked to other veterans. I mean, especially when I done this monument and met the guys in Louisville and the guys over at the Vet center, and. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you think those. . . that outreach centers that they established were. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** . . . you're all for those.

**THOMAS:** Yeah, definitely. But I don't know how long they'll last, I'm sure one of these days, you know, they're going to cut the funds off. But I think they're doing a good service right now, because there's some guys out there that need help, you know, a whole lot of guys worse. . . a lot [?] than I am.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about the people back in the states who protested the war? How do you feel about that? How did you feel about them, and have you changed on that any?

**THOMAS:** I don't have any love for Jane Fonda at all, I don't like her as far as, you know, I know there's some local people here in town that protested it, you know, some. . . when they were in college, but you know, that. . . I don't hold any grudges against them, they did their thing and I did mine.

[End of tape 2, side 1]

[Beginning of tape 2, side 2]

**THOMAS:** I think. . . some of them have come up to me, as a matter of fact, and some of them feel a little guilty, but I don't know why, maybe they wished they'd have done what I done, I don't know. And some of them feel they were right and I was wrong, you know, this is America, they can do whatever they want.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] That's why you were over there.

**THOMAS:** That's right. At the time, you know, when I was there and they were here, you know, if they would have come over there they wouldn't have lasted very long, or if they let us come home right then, they wouldn't have lasted long, because you know, we were all upset at. . . mad at them at that time, but now it's all water under the bridge.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. So when you heard about Kent State, that wasn't. . . how'd you react to that?

**THOMAS:** I think that was a tragic mistake. I don't think that, you know, that should have happened. Especially, what was it, five people killed, I believe, wasn't it? I don't think that should have happened. I believe if they would have had. . . I'm not putting down the National Guard, because they do a real good service, I believe if they would

have been combat seasoned veterans there, we'll say, that maybe that wouldn't have happened. That maybe, you know, somebody panicked. But we'll never know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. Well that's about all I have. Is there anything you'd like to add in terms of. . . you know, this tape's going to be for future generations to, hopefully better understand what this country went through during the Vietnam experiences, any additional things you want to add that might. . . [chuckle] you think might help them understand it?

**THOMAS:** That's a tough question.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah it is. It's not a fair question, probably.

**THOMAS:** [chuckle] No, it's not.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** It's. . . you know, like I said before it's hard to talk about Vietnam unless you're talking to someone who has been there, you can't hardly get the feeling across to them, even my wife, she's listened to me talk about Vietnam for 14 years, but there's no way she could understand it. . . what it was like. I've got a young son now that's 11, 12 years old, and I'd hate to see him go through this same sort of situation and come back

that way. But, if there was of war, and he was that age, you know, I think he should go, of course he'll have to make his own decision. I would definitely hate to see him run for Canada. But, I think there's an obligation that you've got when you're American, you know, to protect this country. And, sometimes the politicians make the wrong choices, but what can you do? You have to go for it, I guess.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Do you find Kentuckians in general to be patriotic. . .

**THOMAS:** Yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** . . . people?

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Yeah, this is a fantastic state.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were there any other Kentuckians in your. . . at your base over there?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, there was one. I think he was from Radcliff, I didn't know him that well, and all the rest of the guys, there were two. . . two from Texas that were friends of mine, and of course the guy in North Carolina and California and Colorado, everywhere.

When I was in helicopter school, we lived in like two room apartments, used to be old transportation officer candidate school quarters, and he was from the Bronx, and here I am from Kentucky and neither one of us understood each other at all. It was. . . it was great meeting different people like that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Learned a lot just by being around. . .

**THOMAS:** Oh yeah.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** . . . people you've never seen before.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. You learn more in the Army than you do. . . I'm not putting down all these college guys around here, but. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** You learn a whole lot. . . I went to school and I came back on the GI bill, which, that's a good benefit.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Uh-huh.

**THOMAS:** They're supposed to be working on one for the state in Frankfort, I don't know if you've heard that or not.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** State memorial. . . monument? Yeah, I saw that.

**THOMAS:** 1,049, so we've got some money left over from our monument we're going to donate to it, and last time I talked to Jim in Louisville, they're going to try to get each county to do something, going to cost, you know, a half a million dollars, so I'm going to try to get behind that again, and raise some money for him down there, I think that'd be good too.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. Sounds like you're going to stay busy. [chuckle]

**THOMAS:** Yeah. I enjoy doing it. I enjoy doing it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah. Okay.

**THOMAS:** Thank you.

[End of interview]

