**Mark DePue:** Welcome. My name is Mark DePue and I’m the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Monday, July 21, 2014. And today I’m with Gary Price. Good morning, Gary.

**Gary Price:** Good morning.

**Mark DePue:** We’re gonna be talking to Gary a couple sessions at least. Gary’s had a long career in the United States Marine Corps as an aviator. Today’s focus is gonna be all about your experiences in Vietnam, but you didn’t really spend much time in Vietnam itself. Fascinating story, though, because you were there at the end, and that’s where we’re gonna end up. But let’s start at the beginning of your story, Gary, and tell me a little bit about when and where you were born.

**Gary Price:** Well, I was born in Fresno, California, and I was raised in California, actually northern California. Sonora, northern part, Stanislaus County. Grew up there, dad was a teacher in high school, so you had those challenges where your dad’s a teacher and you’re a student, and so the kids made fun of you a lot of times. But other than that, grew up with the desire to fly. My dad got me into line control model airplanes, and that kinda put the bug into me. Sunday after church we’d go to the airports and watch airplanes take off and land for hours, bring a lunch or something, that’s what we did, and that’s how we entertained ourselves on Sundays. He had that same desire and put the bug into me, and so over time, I ended up wanting to fly, and so.

**Mark DePue:** What was your birthday again?

**Gary Price:** October 7, 1948.

**Mark DePue:** Was your dad a World War II veteran?

**Gary Price:** No, he was not. He was not a veteran at all. In fact, the only veterans in my family was my uncle, who was a World War II veteran MP, so he was like my favorite uncle. He always had stories, you know, sea stories about what he did and what he didn’t do, and of course when I got into the Marine Corps, it became a two-way. We started sharing stories about what we’d done and where we’re going. But no, my dad was not a veteran, and he did not discourage me, did not encourage me, just, you know, pushed me in the direction I wanted to go.

**Mark DePue:** What subject was your dad teaching?

**Gary Price:** Actually he taught mechanical drawing. And he was studying to be a school psychologist on the side and so he ended up getting his master’s and becoming the school psychologist with it before I graduated. So I had one class with him. I actually got an A in it. Everybody thought I was, you know, had some partiality going on, but I didn’t, I worked hard because I had to. My dad was a teacher there, and I couldn’t let him down. So anyway, but mechanical drawing, and that was mainly his, he did a little coaching on the side in tennis when he had a chance.

**Mark DePue:** So the class you took was a mechanical drawing class?

**Gary Price:** Yes, sir.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. How about your mother? Tell me about your mother.

**Gary Price:** We always tease me my mom that she learned to talk and talk a lot when she was a telephone operator, back in the days when you actually pulled the plug out and plug them in, that’s when she became an operator, telephone operator. She did that because my dad went back to college to get his teaching credentials, or his teaching degree, and so mom actually put us, brought home the money, but she did it talking on the telephone, being a telephone operator, so she talked. And we always teased her, even today, that she learned her gift of gab, anytime anywhere, for as long as she wanted to talk, by starting off with telephone operating. But she did that for twenty years, well, twenty years at a telephone AT&T company. And we finally moved to northern California, and she worked for AT&T as a front office lady, and she collected bills and so forth. She retired.

**Mark DePue:** So which one of your parents do you take after, Gary?

**Gary Price:** I don’t know. Probably a little bit of both. Right now, my dad passed away about seven, eight years ago, and he left the family for a while, so we got closer to my mom’s side. And so probably my mom in that regard. She’s been my spirit, my spiritual mentor in life as well as my, I call her every day when I go home from work just to say hi, what’s going on.

**Mark DePue:** Do you lack for words yourself?

**Gary Price:** Probably not.

**Mark DePue:** Good.

**Gary Price:** So I can talk.

**Mark DePue:** Where did you move to in northern California?

**Gary Price:** A town called Sonora. It’s an old, Sonora, Columbia, Twain Harte, are kinda gold rush towns. In fact, the Sonora creek that ran through the town, I used to spend time when I had a little bit from high school, going down panning for gold. And you always found gold, I mean, it wasn’t, it was everywhere. It wasn’t a whole lot, but you panned for gold. You’d get colors, they’d call it, and you could, did it long enough, you can get an ounce out of it. But back then, in the sixties, thirty five dollars an ounce was what the gold was going for, which is not a whole lot, but then it was. And we found some dirt in one place, and I worked at the airport, loading and mixing fire retardant for these, what we called borate planes, TBMs and PBYs, and we’d spend hours doing nothing, waiting for the fire. So we would sneak off at night and get this dirt, and come back and we’d pan this dirt over a faucet. We got all kinds of gold, we really did. We couldn’t, went to the jewelry stores in the local areas and sold to them, nuggets, you know, the size of your little finger, we got a lot of gold. So there’s, so the gold rush, the gold is still there, just a matter of knowing where to get it and how to get it.

**Mark DePue:** And this is stuff you’re doing in high school?

**Gary Price:** Yeah, high school.

**Mark DePue:** What was it like? Thinking about, you know, we’re roughly in the same generation. A lot of people get very nostalgic about growing up during those years. Are those good years to be growing up in Sonora?

**Gary Price:** I thought so. I mean, it was, wasn’t uncommon to see someone walking down the street, cowboy boots, cats, wearing a six gun on the side of the hip. That’s kind of the culture we had. It was a disruption of our, what we thought was right, when the long hair hippie movement came in, Haight-Ashbury in the late sixties, sixties timeframe, and so we always harassed those kids that came up just because we could. Because we didn’t like what they stood for. But that timeframe, of course up there, it was the country, the outdoors. Rodeo was the biggest thing in town. Riding horses, my sister had six, seven horses. So that was the timeframe we spent. I did a lot of hunting, I did a lot of fishing. And a lot of people did the same thing in my generation, at least in that area. So I thought it was a good life, it was a wholesome life, and my dad was schoolteacher, and mom worked in town, so we were involved community-wise too.

**Mark DePue:** Did you live on a farm?

**Gary Price:** We lived on ten acres of land. It wasn’t a farm. Dad tried to make it a farm, an apple farm, but the deers kept eating all the apples. And so we didn’t raise anything to eat, basically, that much, but we had all kinds of apple trees around the house and so forth. But no, we lived out in the country, next to a horse ranch, and I shot my deer in the backyard, I did my quail hunting in the backyard. And so it was one of those places where it was still isolated, and you could do a lot of things. We lived, real close to our house was a big granite boulder, and it was covered with dirt. But when it railed real hard, it would open up some holes. And if you cleaned the holes out you found out that this was a land, a spot where these Indians were grinding their acorns, and almost lay out the whole area. Hole here, small hole there, where we figured Indians would come up from the creek because behind our house there was a burial ground. And every year, tulips would come up where the graves were at. Now they’d been robbed, but the tulips kept coming up every year, about five or six of them up there. So the Miwok Indians wasn’t too far from where we’re at, so we figured the Miwok Indians kinda moved around, used this big old granite boulder to mush up the acorns and make whatever they wanted to make there. The creek was close by so they probably had water for that, so it was kinda a nice area. We would walk around and find Indian arrowheads sometimes in our land, and so that’s kinda what we did. My kids came up there and we would build tree houses and so, it was kind of a back to nature trip when I came home.

**Mark DePue:** Well it sounds like a great place for a kid with an imagination.

**Gary Price:** That, well, you had to have imagination because there wasn’t much else to do. You can get out there and be back and you’re isolated somewhat. We had a half-mile dirt road to get to the main road from where we lived, and so we came home, you know, when we got the cars and got older, probably as little as possible because once we got home we kinda stayed there.

**Mark DePue:** What year did you graduate from high school?

**Gary Price:** In 1966.

**Mark DePue:** And you went to public school apparently?

**Gary Price:** I did.

**Mark DePue:** Any other extracurricular activities?

**Gary Price:** That time, no. In school, just sports. I played football, wrestle, tennis.

**Mark DePue:** What did you think you wanted to do when you graduated?

**Gary Price:** I wanted to be a physical education coach. And I went to junior college, Modesto, which was a couple hours away. And I majored in physical education, that was my desire. And I thought I was pretty good at math, so I was gonna go with a math minor because that was a little different from the normal P.E. type majors being history or English. At that time, they didn’t appeal to me as much, and I thought I had a chance, maybe have that niche with the math. Math, I did okay. I graduated from junior college, but I just didn’t, lost the motivation to kinda really jump into the two-year, four-year element. Of course, Vietnam was coming up or had been around and I went to school to go to school, because most of my friends jumped into National Guard to not get drafted, and I didn’t think much about it. We went down to watch Green Beret when it first came out, about nine, ten of us. Everybody but Jim Pedesta and I, they all joined up in the Army, and the next day they signed up. That’s how motivated you were sometimes from watching these movies. And, but no, they joined up to go in the Army, a lot of our friends went to National Guard. I just went to college, you know.

**Mark DePue:** Before we get beyond the high school and the college years, do you remember the Cuban Missile Crisis at all? Did you pay attention to that? I think you probably remember this one, though. JFK assassination, 1963. November ’63. What do you remember about that event.

**Gary Price:** To be honest, not a whole lot. It happened, it was a tragedy. I know the school shut down in that regard. We didn’t, you know, at the time, we just, people had speculations, you know. They had theories about what happened, what was gonna happen. Of course, with the next, what, two, three weeks, we had the other Kennedys shot as well, so it became pretty tragic event.

**Mark DePue:** Well, we had the assassin who was killed right afterwards, yeah. You mentioned already that you always had this interest in flying, so I’m surprised that you weren’t interested in joining the military right out of high school.

**Gary Price:** No, I didn’t. I don’t know why. I think one, because I didn’t have a college degree at the time, and I didn’t want to fly helicopters. That wasn’t my desire at the time. I wanted to fly jets, and just because that seemed to be the thing. And that required a college degree, and I didn’t have one. So my mom knew I wanted to fly. And they were in San Francisco in a conference, in a governmental type of conference. My dad was, I guess, doing what he had to do. My mom was walking around, looking in the hallways, and they had all these employment opportunities, and they had all four services there.

**Mark DePue:** When was this, do you remember? The year?

**Gary Price:** It had to be in the ’71 timeframe, ’71, maybe late 70s, November timeframe. Because I actually signed up in May of ’71, so it wasn’t too far before that. Because she was down there and the story goes, she tells you, that she went to the different recruiters, saying, “My son wants to fly jets, but he hasn’t got a college degree.” So the Air Force says, “Well, he needs a college degree, we can’t help ya.” And so she goes to the Navy, can’t help ya. The Army says, well, I can fly helicopters. “But he doesn’t want to fly helicopters,” she said. So she gets to the Marine Corps and a custardy old gunnery sergeant says, “We got the program for you sign. Just sign right here and we’ll sign him up.” And so I get a phone call Monday, this was over the weekend, Monday saying I’m scheduled for a physical for Oakland naval air station on a certain date. And I was a little taken aback. So I said, “I don’t think, who, who signed me up?” “Well, a lady named Dorothy Price.” “Oh, geez, that’s my mom.” So I said, “Let me call you back.” So I called my mom. She said, “Well, Gary, you want to fly. Here’s the opportunity to fly jets, be an officer, the whole works.” So I said okay, maybe this was my destiny, I don’t know. So I ended up calling back, scheduled the physical. Passed the physical. Took the written test for aviation, passed all that. So the next thing I know, raised my hand May of ’71, and August of ’71 and I was. My dad had never been to the airports, never flown in the airlines, so he takes me to San Francisco to fly me to OCS, Officer Candidate School in Quanitco. And of course, we’re all a little bit nervous, I’d never flown before. And I get on the airlines, and I’m flying, and of course the stewardess talked about your travels and a few things. Next thing I remember hearing, she says, “Well, we’ll be landing in LaGuardia, New York.” And I’m thinking, “No, I’m not. I’m not supposed to go there. I’m supposed to go to Washington D.C.” I found out that I was on the wrong airlines. Of course, you’d think how can that happen? Well, it happened. We’re on the wrong airlines, so now I got to New York, I had to go to another place to get another flight back to Washington D.C. So that started my military career. I ride the wrong flight, getting very late, I was one of the last buses, in fact the last bus to leave Washington D.C. area airport to go to Quanitco, and that kinda how it started.

**Mark DePue:** I’m interested in your timeline because you graduated from high school in ’66. Did you complete an associate’s degree in ’68?

**Gary Price:** No, I quit school. And I went back after about one semester and got the last classes I needed to graduate. So I actually probably graduated in ’69.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. But that’s about the time that the draft is going hot and heavy. And you obviously are in good shape physically, there’s nothing that would prevent you from being drafted.

**Gary Price:** That’s right.

**Mark DePue:** So how was it that you were able to avoid the military until ’71?

**Gary Price:** Well, I don’t know. I mean, I had, my draft card was 1A. I mean, I didn’t avoid it, I was just waiting to be called. And I didn’t get called. And so I ended up joining the Marine Corps, and obviously that eliminated being drafted.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. I know, I think it was December ’69 that they changed the draft system and went to the lottery, and that started in 1970. Do you remember what your number was?

**Gary Price:** I do not.

**Mark DePue:** Fairly high? High enough that they weren’t interested in you?

**Gary Price:** It may be in the 1200 category, if that makes any sense. I don’t know.

**Mark DePue:** Okay.

**Gary Price:** Actually, I didn’t really care. I mean, if my call, if my number was called, I was gonna go. It was one of those things where I got myself out of high school, I mean out of college, now I’m 1A, now the lottery’s coming around. And I really didn’t, you know, I said okay, I wouldn’t go an voluntarily go for that reason, but I wouldn’t go to run to Canada either if I got called in to go. Fortunately things worked out to where I just signed up the Marine Corps before all that happened.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. Let’s talk about your experiences at Quantico.

**Gary Price:** Okay.

**Mark DePue:** Because my understanding is, it’s not, they’re not necessarily gentle to young officer candidates there.

**Gary Price:** No, they’re not. They, it’s, it’s twelve weeks of course, officer candidate school. And it’s just like boot camp at Parris Island, you know, San Diego. Probably not as, it’s not as long, obviously. But no, you had to be physically fit, and that was one of the main points that I remember because I could do twenty pull-ups, and I could do a hundred sit-ups in two minutes. Max Rung was eighteen, and I was in that twenty-one, twenty and a half category. So I was probably in the top third, if not top fourth of that class, and the class was about two hundred plus, accompanied by two hundred Marines. And so I was singled out a lot of times to make up a pull-up bar chart. We had a pull-up bar in the squad bay, open squad bay, and I had to make sure everybody signed off doing their pull-ups at night because I could do pull-ups and nobody else could. Three was minimum to pass, and most were in that five and six category, but that’s what I remember. We did a lot of hikes, a lot of physical fitness, three-mile runs, and hikes with packs and so forth. We ended up doing a lot of war gamings, hiking twenty miles, and then bit of, dig holes, play the war games a little bit, and hike back.

**Mark DePue:** I know, at present, if you don’t have a college degree, you’re not gonna get a commission of any type. Obviously the rules were different at that time?

**Gary Price:** Well, evidently, when my mom saw this recruiter in San Francisco, he was mentioning a program that the Marine Corps just opened up for a short time. Post-Vietnam, they were, I guess, a rift of aviators as well of officers in general was occurring. And, well, that was a reason, I don’t know, but they had a six, they had a window where you had to be a graduate, a two-year college and transferrable to a four-year college, and accepted as a junior, which I had that, that’s as far as I got. That and, based on that, they would send me to officer candidate school, and if I qualified for aviation, send me right to Pensacola. And that’s the program I was in. And as I got to Quantico, I found out in my two hundred plus company, there were six of us in that program.

**Mark DePue:** Six of you who didn’t have college degrees?

**Gary Price:** Yeah.

**Mark DePue:** Well, not necessarily a group that you want to belong to, was it?

**Gary Price:** Well, at the time, we didn’t care, you know. We were fellow Marines, you know, we were all, we were candidates at that time.

**Mark DePue:** Crawling around the mud, it doesn’t make a whole lot of difference.

**Gary Price:** Doesn’t make a difference. The only bad thing, or good thing, is that because most of us, it was about half of us were for an aviation, Jim, and Sukura, Mike, about five of us were for aviation. And we went straight to Pensacola and started training. Now, every other Marine has to go to training basic school, which is a six-month school. And there’s where you learn to be, what they call rifleman. Every Marine’s a rifleman, and that's where you actually do all the shooting, a lot more live action, a lot more live ordinates and to become that rifle Marine.

**Mark DePue:** When did you graduate from Quantico.

**Gary Price:** November of ’72, ‘71.

**Mark DePue:** Okay, November ’71. So the war in Vietnam is still going on, we're definitely on the downhill slope. By 1973, our ground forces are basically out of the picture. So you're looking at a, path for training now that's basically going to, not going to get you to Vietnam. You're not going to see any action in Vietnam because essentially the war is over in ’73, and they were, you know, war planners were thinking that was the case by that time, and it sounds like from what you said, the Marines were already thinking about the problems they’re are going to have with an excess of lieutenants and captains when the war ends. And then meeting new lieutenants to come into the system. Is that about right?

**Gary Price:** Well I know that they were short of aviators for whatever reason. I knew they took the guns up, the Hueys, after post-Vietnam. And we've spent ten years putting guns back on the Hueys because we were short gun ships in the Marine Corps. I don't, I know that there was a lot of lieutenants in these squadron I was in and saw were all new guys. There was a few captains around, some majors who were Vietnam veterans and such. From my little world, you know, I was, I was just fortunate to get in the window to be a officer and a pilot without a college degree. And the rest of guys were in the same boat. Some of them went back and got the degree, which I did as well, but a lot of them did not.

**Mark DePue:** He said you graduated from O.C.S. in November ’71. Did you also get commissioned then?

**Gary Price:** Yes.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. But your status is an aviation cadet or something like that?

**Gary Price:** No. Unlike the other services we, when you graduated from Officer Candidate School, you were commissioned as second lieutenant, period. Everybody goes to training basics school for six months. I went to Pensacola, Florida for training, pilot training. I say training because at that time it could be in anything, could be Hugo, fixed wings, or proper jets, didn't really matter. But you're going to go for pilot training. And six of us went down at that time frame and we just started. At that time were just second lieutenants going through pilot training. There was not a name to us. We weren't aviation cadets or anything. We were Marines, a lieutenant, in the Pensacola training program.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. A couple more housecleaning questions for you here, Gary. Did you have a girlfriend at the time?

**Gary Price:** No, actually when I graduate from Quantico, went to Pensacola, it wasn't until halfway through my training, training lasted about a year. And that I think I met my wife, future wife and, it had to be the December, January timeframe. Jim Cartwright, a good friend of mine, and he's the last of my class, Marine who stayed in. He became a four star general. Anyway his, his first wife, they moved down and lived on the beach. Jim was in the, he was a real backseat pilot. He didn't have the eyes at the time to become a pilot. So he was in a different program, but in the same area. So anyway, he called me up. I’m in the Whiting Field Naval Air Station, Whiting Field. And he says, “Gary, I got a small party at the house. Why don’t you to come on over.” So anyway, his sister, Cindy, came down and her girlfriend, Suzy, my future, they travel around a lot together and they were down there visiting. As it worked out, Suzy was the only one that wasn't matched up with somebody. So I'm not sure it was a set up blind date or just come enjoy yourself, whatever. But anyway, I met Susie at that time, and six months later and six visits later we were married. Married in November.

**Mark DePue:** Well I would imagine that the Marine Corps had you fairly busy with aviation training at that time.

**Gary Price:** They did and this wedding kinda interfered with that. In fact, I ended up getting, I didn't pass the check ride, and at that time, you got three downs, as they call it, in the whole training program, from once you start to once you to finish. Three downs. If you get three downs, you were washed out of the program. And so I had my first down in the last stages of my training, and of course when they asked me, you know, “Anything interfering with your thoughts and training and attention?” I say, “Well I'm getting married tomorrow.” “Well that's good enough. We'll come back give you a couple E.T.S. and continue on.” That’s exactly what happened. Went up Rockford, Illinois, we go marry, drove back, the next day we got there, and I put her in this apartment complex. It was cheap. I wasn’t going to be there very long, I thought. Unfortunately, for Susie, when I left her at nights, I had night flights to do. The professional wrestlers in the town, they were there on weekends, Gorgeous George and all those guys, they all stayed the same place. So when I came back at midnight at one o'clock, the cops and the lights were twirling around. There were ambulances are here because they all have fights around the area. Susie’s in the room, says, “Gary, Gary what are you doing to me?” So I end up giving her my gun in case she got scared any more, but anyway we were there for almost three weeks longer than we planned. So I got my wings in December and there’s a picture of her, pinning my wings on at the ceremony, and then after that we drove to California.

**Mark DePue:** Was that December of ’72 now?

**Gary Price:** Yes.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. So roughly a year they're in flight school.

**Gary Price:** Yes, yes.

**Mark DePue:** At that, during that time period then was this strictly, were you progressing from basic trainers, fixed wings, to jets, to helicopters? How did that process go?

**Gary Price:** You started off with the ground school. I remember taking tests on aerodynamics and a few other stuff, you know, survival training and doing all your physical requirements as far as swimming goes. And all that was happening throughout three weeks. Then we all went to Naval Air Station softly. What we did T-34 training. And I already flown, by this time, now I already had my private license. I got my license, civilian license, so I had some flight time. In fact, I even had a flight in the T-34, so when I got in the aircraft things weren't were all that unfamiliar.

**Mark DePue:** A T-34 was a fixed wing?

**Gary Price:** Low wing, fixed wing prop job, a T-34B. Mentor was the name. It's a low wing aircraft that’s got tendencies front and back. Stick, throttle on the side, and nothing real fancy. Basic training aircraft. In fact, they're still flying for basic training some places. But anyway, I sold in that, I think in like ten hours or less, and it was the accelerated, they told me they accelerated me through the program because I didn't really need all the extra flights, which was good and bad, as I found out later on. But T-34 was a first step. Then Naval Air Station softly. Next station for all of us was Naval Air Station Whiting Field, where you did fixed wing training. We flew a T-28 at that time, T-28 Charlie, which was the Navy version because the Air Force flew the T -28 as well. It has a great big engine like the P-51, the Corsair, that big engine and it's, again a great big aircraft it looks to me. It’s one of those aircraft when you sit in front there and you're cranking it out when the blades are turning in the smoke is popping out, you kind of look back the John Wayne movies and the carriers and all that, that's how you have, that's a, that's the feeling you had, you know, back in that era with that kind of aircraft. So I flew it, I got a couple hundred hours in that aircraft, about a hundred hours plus, and you did formation cross, country training, instrument flying. So at that stage is where I went to helicopters. Other people went to prop, fixed wing training. It could be jets or it could be propeller driven. We had the C-130 cargo plane, we also had the OV-10. It’s a one engine observation plane, and then of course you had jets. And so you left at that point based on your score and what the needs of the Marine Corps were.

**Mark DePue:** A long time before in this interview you mentioned what you wanted to do was to fly jets.

**Gary Price:** Jets.

**Mark DePue:** What happened?

**Gary Price:** Well, now I'm in the Marine Corps and I wasn't sure if I would want to stay a career in the Marine Corps. I figured I had an obligation, six and a half years. And so I thought, “Well, if I get out of six and a half years, I would have a lot better chance of getting a flying job if I had a both helicopter training, helicopter rating, and fixed wing rating. I can play both cards, and hopefully be a more marketable pilot on the outside. And at that time there was articles about the helicopter side becoming more popular in the civilian side. So I want helicopters. And as it worked out I ended up taking my tests later on, and I got both my ratings, helicopter and fixed wing.

**Mark DePue:** Well, this is still, there’s still American troops involved in Vietnam and my understanding is that the casualty rate for helicopters and helicopter pilots was significantly higher than for fixed wing aircraft. Would that be right?

**Gary Price:** Probably so.

**Mark DePue:** Did that even factor into your consideration?

**Gary Price:** No, it did not. To be honest with you, I didn’t even think about the, I thought about the mission of the helicopter I was going to fly, I wanted to fly. And how do you figure out that while you talk to other pilots who flew that aircraft or flew different aircraft. Of course they all have their passions and reasons why they fly their aircraft. Of course their aircraft is always the best aircraft, and so. Fortunately for me, there was more CH-46 pilots I could talk to, and the CH-46 mission was to carry troops primarily, cargo secondarily, and medevac. And so they, the story goes, was that, well, you are at the forefront because the grunts are the ones where the fighting force should be moving the grunts around and supporting grunts. And everybody else supports the grunts, but you are actually carrying, you actually planning missions with them because you have to get him on the ground. And that appealed to me. And so I went to CH-46 training. That's my desire, and the West Coast was my coast of choice.

**Mark DePue:** I think we've got a picture here that we can show of the CH-46. And did you start training on the CH-46 then only after you to, basically a duty station?

**Gary Price:** Yes. Once you got your wings.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. There is the helicopter.

**Gary Price:** Once you got your wings, then, of course you put your dream sheet in. I want to fly this type of helicopter, and I want to go this East Coast, West Coast. And so I pick CH-46s, and coming from the West Coast, I picked the West Coast. And I went to, I was assigned to Marine Corps Air Station Santa Ana, California. And I was assigned, initially HMT, a training, helicopter squadron. They had both 46s and the CH-53, and they gave both trainings. I was there for about two to three months and acquired my, what they call a helicopter second pilot, H2P. They do all the training.

**Mark DePue:** Now we've gotten into the military jargon here, big time. HMT, what would that stand for?

**Gary Price:** Helicopter. Marine Helicopter Training. HMT. 301. And the East Coast has 302. And then they have 303, and there are just different platform helicopters they train. Cobras, attack helicopters, or the Hueys, another utility aircraft, were in different training groups.

**Mark DePue:** Now of course, when people think of Vietnam, they think of the helicopters. Everyone thinks of the Huey. The aircraft, though, that we looked at picture a little bit earlier looks very similar to what the Army’s CH-47 would be.

**Gary Price:** In fact, it's made by the same company, Boeing Vertol. The CH-47, the Chinook. They look at us, the Army guys, as a baby Chinook. And we look at, there was a big 46. But we have some of the same parts, and we have shared some parts that has Boeing labels on, bearings, whatever. We exchanged here and when we get a chance, but it is a smaller version of the 47. There are differences, but.

**Mark DePue:** Tell me about the characteristics of flying one of those, and the crew, if you would.

**Gary Price:** Well it hasn't got a tail rotor, and the Huey’s got a tail rotor. In fact, almost all the helicopters have tail rotors, which has aerodynamic characteristics that you have to be careful of. Well, the 46 does not, it has to do is two tandem rotors, counterclockwise, meshed together, synchronized. And it has three wheels. The wheel in the front’s not steerable with the rudder or anything, the pedals. It is canistered where you have to move the aircraft up and down and then move the stick right or left to get it to go in that direction. So the true are flying, the hardest part was taxing this aircraft. Now we call the aircraft the Phrog. Because from the back end it looks like a frog with the bulging fuel tanks on the side and the nose in front. It looks like a frog, and so we always call ourselves the Phrog pilots. P-H-R-O-G. Phrog.

**Mark DePue:** I thought they called it a Sea Knight.

**Gary Price:** Well that's the official name.

**Mark DePue:** Okay.

**Gary Price:** But we all call it the Phrog, Phrog flyers. And the battle Phrog. You know, the killer Phrogs. But CH-46, the Sea Knight is the official name, yeah.

**Mark DePue:** But is it a challenge to fly one of those?

**Gary Price:** It was. It’s more a challenge to take in the size of this aircraft. Because when you land the aircraft, where you're looking, just think like, think of an airliner, you know, he's way up front but the wheels are on the back. When you land down, when you land the aircraft, whether on a runway or whether it's a pinnacle, you’ve got to be thinking about thirty feet behind you where the wheels would be sitting down. And you could sit down there and hold the nose off the ground and that could be over a cliff. Just let the grunts out of whatever it may be. But you’re thinking of that. So the size of the aircraft is what the biggest adjustment was. It was pretty stable, a stable aircraft, and all our aircraft in the military at that time were, had autopilot, had stability systems, so it was pretty stable aircraft to fly both in instruments and conditions. But it was a fun aircraft to fly. I mean it was maneuverable. We would do air combat, maneuvering with the aircraft, so we can move around pretty good with it. But the challenge was more from the Huey to go to the 46, is just the taking in the size of the aircraft was more the challenge, and then taxiing it. Because you knew, if you were a rookie, because if you hit too hard, you bottom out. If you pull back too much. the nose come off the ground, so you had to find that magic moment in there. And every aircraft’s different, has own little personally about how that oleo strut moved up and down.

**Mark DePue:** What was the crew size?

**Gary Price:** We had a pilot, co-pilot, and non-combat. We would have probably one crew chief and one guy in the back, who's probably a, he’s a mechanic. During combat we would have, we got, our aircraft would hold 250 cal of guns on the side, so we had two gunners on the side who would carry a couple thousand rounds of ammo. And then we have a crew chief and he may even, depends on the mission, have a mechanic with him, so there’ll be two, four, maybe six people total in that aircraft flying.

**Mark DePue:** Did you have a specified ground crew as well, or did the ground crews work on all the aircraft?

**Gary Price:** In mission profile there were no ground crews. At the squadron we had ground crews that would work on all the aircraft. And they would see if we had aircraft problems, they would initially be coming out to help us to troubleshoot the problem and get it fixed to go. But once you took off there’s just no ground crew to support you, unless you call them from the squadron to help you.

**Mark DePue:** What kind of missions? You talked about troop transport. Anything else that the aircraft would be expected to do?

**Gary Price:** We did, we did logistics, supply transport to support the grunts, medevac was another one that we did. And actually, early on there in California, we had two side missions. I didn’t tell you about that earlier. We had two side missions. When the presidents came, was it Nixon and Reagan, when they came they would have their West Coast place to hang out. HMX came. We were their back up to the HMX. So we actually had a VIP kit. This is when I first got to the West Coast. We would weekend duty assign, and we would take out the, we would take out the web seats, which usually had oil stains on them, and we would put in, actually airline seats in them, bolt them in. They were red and vinyl covering, blocked off the back so you can’t see it, and the whole works of vinyl layout in front, and that was our VIP kit. And that was our, we would set the aircraft up and sometimes we would fly the El Toro to standby for next six, seven hours, while the, you know, we were a backup to the backup. But it was a mission. And then the other one was that we got some training picking up, in fact, you see it now in the news, water bottles, water bags, and helped drop, put out fires. We did some of that on the side, so it was a couple things we did. Not really a side mission but some side, different side tasks that we ended up learning to do while we were there in the West Coast.

**Mark DePue:** Did you guys like that VIP mission?

**Gary Price:** No. No. Don’t like VIP missions.

**Mark DePue:** Why not?

**Gary Price:** Just, just the nature of the beast. I remember a flight. I was a co-pilot, this was in HMT 301. We had to move a general, two-star general from someplace down to Camp Pendleton. We took off, we went to the clouds, got on top the clouds, flew down to Camp Pendleton. We end up, now I’m just flying along, and we’re, co-pilot, we’re flying down. And we see two peaks in Camp Pendleton above the clouds, fog bank. So we fly to this peak over here. We hover over the top of the peak. We see a road. We air taxi down to this freakin’ road just above tree tops for about three, four miles. We get to the bottom. It opens up like a sea, maybe a mile, mile and a half, we go over to the coordinates where the general was. We pick him up and we move him two clicks, two thousand yards, and let him down to his, the car to drop them off, picks him up, and takes him somewhere else. That's VIP missions and that's the nature of the word. Even that, you had to be there, and they were important mission, but from, you know, from our standpoint, what we did a lot of times, it's just didn’t make a whole lot of sense.

**Mark DePue:** Did you enjoy the fire suppression missions a little bit more?

**Gary Price:** Yes, little better.

**Mark DePue:** Just a little better?

**Gary Price:** A little better, yeah.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. How long were you there in California then?

**Gary Price:** I was in the HMT, the training squadron, for about six months. Got there in January and I think I got transferred out June or July, June, July timeframe. We were in the blimp hangars and they're still there, in fact. And Goodyear still uses them when they come in there, but the blimp hanger had four squadrons in there, four or five squadrons. And so I was on one side of the blimp hangar, and I walked across to the other side of the hangar and checked in to HMT. HMM. Helicopter Marine Medium is what that stands for. 163 Evil Eyes. And Evil Eyes, for some reason, they had painted a couple eyes on the front of the aircraft, and their Vietnam story was that when they, the Vietnamese, I guess, or Viet Cong saw these aircraft with those eyes and they came carrying troops and were shooting guns from their sides or getting them in the zones; they were, I guess, evil, and so evil eyes is how that name came about from the stories I’d been told.

**Mark DePue:** But that unit being in California illustrates that the military was basically out of Vietnam by the time you got to that unit.

**Gary Price:** Well, the units in California, we either go to, on a cruise ship, cruise for six months, or they would go to Okinawa for six, for a year at a timeframe. So the squadron back in the States wouldn’t normally be the ones taken out of Vietnam. The ones who may be in Hawaii aboard ships probably came up, and I know we had airplanes stationed there, but you're right. Probably most are all out of country and we supported from the ship's side or our standby side basically like in Okinawa.

**Mark DePue:** Were you hearing lots of war stories from other members of the unit, some of the more senior members?

**Gary Price:** No, no. That was the ironic thing I found, is that the only time you hear them talk about their experiences in Vietnam was at a bar, and they had to be half tanked talking about it. They just didn't talk about it, and just like now, you hear some stories about World War II veterans or even Korean veterans. They just don't talk about their experiences. Either it was so tragic and they just don’t want to bring up those memories. But a lot of my friends, they were friends at the unit who came back, they were captains and sometimes majors, then didn’t want to bring, didn't talk about it. Now, the training we did was post their, what they learned. We would fly, initially, when I got there, flying high, fifteen hundred feet. And we would get over to a LZ, a landing zone, and we would stay out of smaller far, and we were trained to stay over that small area, and do 360s. Land and pop in the zone, and then that's what we did. So it was, a lot of times it was just hand eye coordination, more training, you know, to learn the aircraft. Get the feel a little better, but also a practical use for it too. And so then we went to, when the surface air missiles came around, the training went from the high 360s down to low altitude. So now we're below the trees, and we would kind of fly along the riverbeds and so forth and kind of pop up and then drop in.

**Mark DePue:** A nap-of-the-earth. You guys like flying nap-of-the-earth, don’t you?

**Gary Price:** Yeah we do. That's why. Nap of the earth flying is a challenge, gotta learn how to read a map and read the contours, but it's more fun to fly.

**Mark DePue:** How long were you in California before you got your next posting?

**Gary Price:** Actually, I was probably about a year. At the time, the Marine Corps had the individual replacement going on to Okinawa, and so there were thirteen month tours going on in Okinawa. Different pilots from different areas, it was based on seniority. You've been there longer, then your time came up. Now when your time came up, it was a quota system that came to the air group. The air group may get ten pilot requirements for forty-six pilots in Okinawa, and so they may put two here, two there, two there and that's how, and the guys who were there the longest got tapped to go. And so I was in HMM 163, that's what the plan was. And Dean Koontz was one of the guys who was assigned to go, and then before he left, they changed the mandatory requirement to a voluntary requirement, we had a volunteer go there. And so he said, “I'm not going to volunteer, the open billet.” And so, I don't know why I volunteered, but I volunteered to take his place.

**Mark DePue:** It's thirteen months in Okinawa.

**Gary Price:** Yes.

**Mark DePue:** Wouldn’t that be an unaccompanied tour?

**Gary Price:** That's right. And I just got married.

**Mark DePue:** So what did Suzy say about that?

**Gary Price:** Well, she.

**Mark DePue:** She knew what she was getting into.

**Gary Price:** I don't think she did, and I don't think she knew it even till halfway through my whole career. She said, “I don't know what I got into.” You know, but anyway, she, we were married. She had a small, she worked at a job in a bank, and so we were looking for a house to buy. And the houses there were fairly inexpensive back in the 70s, but anyway she, we decided when I had the orders to go for thirteen months, she says, “Why should I stay here? I’ll go home for a year. I’ll live at home, work with my dad, and all that.” And that's what she did. So when when I left, she came over to Okinawa one time. And we, of course, honeymoons are, honeymoons when you have them after you get married, not a year later, they don't count as honeymoons anymore. And so, you know, we took a trip to Hong Kong and Taiwan for ten days and it was called our honeymoon. I think today she says, “Now, that wasn’t, we didn't have a honeymoon. I don't care what you call it, Gary.” But anyway she didn't like it obviously and she went home. But that was thirteen months is a long time, but then I got to go to Pensacola, Florida as a flight instructor, so I was there for four years.

**Mark DePue:** After the thirteenth month?

**Gary Price:** Yes, sir.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. But it's, the reason we're sitting here today is because of what happened when you actually got sent to Okinawa. When did you arrive in Okinawa?

**Gary Price:** Should be June of ’74.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. And what was your unit of assignment there?

**Gary Price:** I was assigned to HMM 165, called the white knights.

**Mark DePue:** Were doing the same kind of missions you were doing in California?

**Gary Price:** Yes, doing the same thing, same mission. We did a lot of what we call NTA, Northern Training Area. Okinawa, is only some places in the northern part you trained at. There were some headquarter elements in around, I was stationed Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. Not too far from us was the Naval Air Force, Kadena Air Force Base. But you had to go for the north of the island to find Marine Corps ground units. Camp Hansen was up in that area. Camp Schwab was in that area all up there, and they were small camps. The northern area was training and the grunts, the infantry unit would go up there as a company or platoon, and they stay there for maybe a week, week and a half, ten days, and they would be training in this jungle environment. Again, come in post-Vietnam, least you know this three-tier canopy jungle just is bad stuff to fight in, let alone train in. And this is what they were doing. So we would go up there and stand by overnight when they were in the field as a medevac. Because the biggest fear was what they call the habu snake, and there was, at that time, no anti-venom on the island, unless it was some small places that had it and it wasn't in very big supply. So we were there to carry the Marine if he got bit down there as fast as we could because it killed a lot a lot of Okinawans early on. And when I left after a year, they were just getting more and more anti-venom, but the habu was snake, northern training areas, is where we trained at. We would do small, little LZs, we practiced landing in, but that's what we did. We land in these places. Jungle penetrator cables through the jungle to pick up Marines on the ground, a three-tier jungle penetrator device that's on our external hoist. It's got a three seat metal heavy thing that will punch through the three tier, get down the bottom. They pull the three-prong thing out and they strap themselves around it and we pull them up. That's how we extract the Marines in that kind of environment.

**Mark DePue:** Were you a first lieutenant by this time?

**Gary Price:** No, not yet. I was a first lieutenant probably about half way through my tour there and so I was a first lieutenant before the evacuation started.

**Mark DePue:** Okay.

**Gary Price:** I was still a helicopter second pilot or co-pilot, so I ended up, we had to have five hundred hours total time as a minimum.

**Mark DePue:** To be a co-pilot?

**Gary Price:** To be an aircraft commander, and that was the next step you progressed to. Co-pilot to an aircraft commander, and the difference is that he signs for the aircraft and he's responsible for the aircraft. I’m just his co-pilot.

**Mark DePue:** Between the two of you, are you getting as much stick time?

**Gary Price:** It depends on who you're flying with. And he says, “You know, I’m going to fly the aircraft,” and you sit there and you monitor instruments and you get the pubs out, you go through a checklist, but you may not fly.

**Mark DePue:** So it doesn't sound very exciting.

**Gary Price:** Well, it became who you flew with, and then most of the aircraft commanders knew that we were in training to get our check rides to be aircraft commanders, so they would let us fly. And we would do certain things to try to work on some, he’ll ask, “Well, what do you want to do?” Say, “I’ll like to do some more c-ry landings or high-altitude landings sometimes. In California, we had some mountains to work, there weren’t too many high-altitude areas. But c-ry, we had a lot of them, c-ry just a small … you landed into, and you could do spirals that small, or you could do low-altitude jump up, small, but they’re all small. And it took a little coordination, verbal coordination for your crew in the back to get you cleared in, so how’s the ground, how are we looking, one feet, two feet, you’re cleared, touchdown.

**Mark DePue:** Did you have any additional duties, things that kept you busy when you weren’t flying?

**Gary Price:** Well, in the Marine Corps, unlike the Army and Air Force, we have collateral jobs. In fact, you can get more trouble from your collateral job than you can from screwing up being a pilot. My collateral job was in maintenance, so I worked full-time in maintenance, and I would take a break from my full-time job to go fly. And so, when I finished flying, do the debriefing, whatever paperwork, and I’d go back to my job. And I got a regular full-time job. I got, had line officers, they called it. I had about forty to fifty mechanics and crew chiefs to work with. So I had people under me, I had responsible for, accountability for the aircraft that we were working on. So it was a typical full-time job, and I would take a break from that to go fly.

**Mark DePue:** How much maintenance time would it take for one hour of flight time, typically?

**Gary Price:** I think they advertise it almost six hours to one hour, four to six hours to one hour flight time. It’s an old aircraft, and it’s even more now, because it’s still flying. It’s sixty, of course, I got a bumper sticker saying don’t trust any aircraft under forty years, and so.

**Mark DePue:** By this time, were you thinking you were flying the best aircraft in the system?

**Gary Price:** Oh, I did, yeah. There was, you know, you have some guys who didn’t want the ’46 but got it because the needs of the Marine Corps at the time, and that’s the criteria, the needs of the Marine Corps got you east coast, west coast, got you into a halo platform or a fixed wing platform, whatever it may have been. And so the needs of the Marine Corps, but I felt like I lucked out. I flew the ’46, that was my choice, and today it’s still the best aircraft flying. It’s the only aircraft worth flying, really. Because I flew the Huey too, so.

**Mark DePue:** Okay. Let’s get into early 1975. And what happened then that got you guys steaming south towards the South China Sea?

**Gary Price:** Being in maintenance kept me in the dark, and being a second lieutenant, first lieutenant, you wasn’t in the, you didn’t have a whole lot of need to know sometimes, other than you had to get aircraft prepared to fly, mission profile-wise. And so it was in that timeframe where we were talking about not a Saigon evacuation, but to go support, I can’t remember what we were talking about. I don’t remember talking being talking about evacuation. We had to get aircraft ready. Our squadron was eighteen aircraft. Our squadron was getting to go composite. And I say composite, composite meant we have eighteen ’46ers, we were gonna get four ’53s, two Hueys, and four Cobra gun ships, that’s a composite squadron. And we were getting ready to go composite because they had planned to go aboard ship for six month crews, so that was a precursor that we were going under, and all of a sudden, this was, we were getting aircraft ready to fly and to go aboard ship. And I remember we were flying, gonna go off the coast of Vietnam, and that’s really all I knew at the time, and so were putting aircraft on ships that came by, ships of opportunity. And so USS Blue Ridge, a communication ship, came by, and we put two on that one. They served great meals there, they had lobsters all the time.

**Mark DePue:** I think we got some pictures here for you, too. There’s the Blue Ridge on the bottom.

**Gary Price:** Yeah, the Blue Ridge. And so we put two helicopters on that one. Those guys had it pretty good. They got to eat and flight suits and all that good stuff, and good food. The USS Debuque, we had six ’46ers on that one. We put one in the hole, which is a little hangar-like, and two on the side, and three, two on one side, one on that, so we had four, and we put one on the first deck, closer to the hangar, and then one on the back open, so we had six aircraft on that one.

**Mark DePue:** LPD, what does that stand for?

**Gary Price:** Land Platform. I don’t know.

**Mark DePue:** Well, the Navy calls it an amphibious transport dock.

**Gary Price:** Well, the back of the thing opens up, and they have amphibious vehicles that the Marines are on that come floating out of there and hit the shoreline.

**Mark DePue:** So it’s kind of a mixture of that and a helicopter aircraft carrier?

**Gary Price:** Normally, the aircraft aren’t on that ship. This is, you just mentioned it, that’s what their mission is. So this ship would have two, couple thousand marines, all infantry to hit the shore from these amphibious vehicles. Now, we used this ship, the opportunity to get our aircraft out there. Because we had the Blue Ridge, we had the Debuque, now the next ship was a Hancock, a USS Hancock, an aircraft carrier. And so we put the rest of our aircraft on that one, and so, but that’s the ships we had available. Now they all couldn’t go on the Hancock.

**Mark DePue:** All the helicopters, you mean?

**Gary Price:** Yeah, all our, we couldn’t get the whole squadron on the Hancock.

**Mark DePue:** Well, I’m sure that the Hancock had a full complement of its own aircraft.

**Gary Price:** That’s right. They also had other helicopters from other places, so the point was we used the Blue Ridge for two, we used the LPD for what we could get on there, I figure six, and the rest went onto the Hancock.

**Mark DePue:** Well, let me take just a minute or two to give some more background to what’s going on at this period of American history. 1973, the Paris Peace Accords are signed, and it divides up South Vietnam so that the North Vietnamese are allowed to occupy huge portions of South Vietnam, but there’s supposed to be some kind of a transition towards peace and open elections and things like that. That obviously is going on, shortly thereafter, there’s the Watergate scandal, and so the American public gets distracted in a big way, especially late ’73, ’74, by Watergate. But the North Vietnamese aren’t distracted as you well know, and in early 1975, North Vietnam launches a major offensive with the goal in mind of occupying the entire country. Now, the American ground forces are out, but there are still plenty of Americans in advisory roles and in the embassy, and lots of other capacities. And so, that’s, I think, part of the reasons why, I don’t know if you were sent out to the fleet because of that or it just happened to coincide?

**Gary Price:** I know we were not the primary exit plan. The exit plan was the airliners and the transporter aircraft to fly all the Americans out of Saigon. And of course, they’re all being pushed into the Saigon area. And so that was the primary exit plan. I think we were sent out there as a backup to that plan, and there was some other plans for refugees, but we weren’t part of the refugees. We were there primarily to support our embassy we had there, and the Marines, and the Army, what services were still there, to support them. But again, their plan was to go out via the big airliners. And when they started bombing the airfields, that kinda knocked that opportunity out.

**Mark DePue:** What I’d like to have you do, then, is, and when we sat down you explained this to me before. There was a lot of moving back and forth between the Philippines and South Vietnam, and back and forth, so what I’d like to have you do is just kinda lay out that chronology as best you can for me.

**Gary Price:** Well, we get off the coast initially, and we sit there, and we didn’t, there was no plan for us to be used yet. This was the, the bombing may have started by then, but the plan was still the air transport plans to get the people out of the country. So we sat there, and now we’re getting hit with a bunch of junker ships, I call it Chinese junker ships, refugees were cruising out there. We’re several miles out, and they’re coming out, and we hear the whole banging at night and day, trying to get back in.

**Mark DePue:** We’re getting a picture of that, too. Go ahead.

**Gary Price:** And so we’re sitting there, and our ship didn’t have a mission, we didn’t have any mission, but we’re moving grunts from one ship to the other ship, back and forth, staging for possibilities, consolidating our assets because we all kinda jumped on this ship of opportunity. And again, our squadron was divided among four ships.

**Mark DePue:** Which one did you end up on?

**Gary Price:** I was on Debuque, the LPD. So we actually got a mission, ARG, Ambphigious Ready Group, to go back to the Philippines, which is, if I remember correctly, maybe a day and a half, two days of sail job, sailing. Anyway, we sail back. We get there, we weren’t there very long, all of a sudden we get told to go back to our holding spot off to Vietnam. So we head back out there. Again, we still move troops around from ship to ship. There was a couple flights I had where I was following Hueys on the shoreline, and we were looking to see, well, they were looking to see, the Hueys had the VIPs in them. We were a backup to them, one --- 46, and two Hueys, and we were told to stay feet dry. So we’re sitting there. We’re flying, but the ships are out, holding spots. We didn’t have any missions, per se, assigned to the helicopters, so we were just told to escort this Huey and don’t go feet dry. Well, so all of a sudden we fly north, and you see all these ordinates going off on the shoreline. We were about a half a mile from the shoreline, we sall these explosions going off. And they weren’t shooting at us. They were, more or less, bombing the shoreline to keep the refugees from escaping. One little town, I remember, got bombarded, a whole lot of ordinates. And it was mostly to keep the ship from sailing and people from evacuating because obviously they were escaping, and they were coming down, I guess, control. So we saw all that, so we kinda move a little further offshore. Next thing I knew, the Hueys were gone. They went inland someplace. I never saw them again. And so, Clow Shaget, I’ll never forget his name, sat there, and we call the ship, and says, “We’re beyond that point of no return on fuel. Can you help us out by moving our way?” And he says okay. So they sail full speed, so help us with in our flight back. We landed with, you know, on fumes, just about. But that only, so that was the kind of flying we were doing. Ship to ship with troop movements, moving some people around. I remember doing the.

**Mark DePue:** Some Vietnamese refugees?

**Gary Price:** No, no, we’re not carrying any refugees. We’re just carrying Marines from ship to shore, I mean ship to ship, supplies ship to ship. Sundays we didn’t do anything but a mail run, or a shopping run.

**Mark DePue:** Well how about these VIPs you were talking about?

**Gary Price:** They came off a Huey off the Hancock somewhere.

**Mark DePue:** So these are military Americans?

**Gary Price:** I don’t know who they were. I just know that we were escorting them.

**Mark DePue:** They could’ve been South Vietnamese bigwigs?

**Gary Price:** They could’ve been some people, yes.

**Mark DePue:** You talked about these ships, these boats, whatever the Vietnamese would be able to get to. They had to be desperate. Were they trying to get to your ships?

**Gary Price:** Well, yeah. They were banging the ship hull with some manic hammers, or whatever they had metal-wise because they were ringing the hulls. And sometimes at night, we’d get up, four or five ships around our big ship. We’re sitting there, we’re not moving, we’re just sitting there. And these Chinese junkers, like you see in Hong Kong, all those little ships, are banging the hulls, trying to get help, trying to get aboard. And we, that wasn’t our mission. We didn’t really have room for them, to take on the potential thousands that would come to our ship. So we didn’t take them on. We ended up moving the ship further offshore, if I remember correctly, got a little farther away from them. And so, but that’s what we did. And then we didn’t pick any up. We ended up, because we sat around for a few days, I remember going back to the Philippines. We got sent back to the Philippines at this time, again, because we’re delayed in what’s gonna happen. The transport planes aren’t gonna be working now. So I think they were consolidating people, consolidating efforts at the embassy and the compound itself. Meanwhile, we weren’t doing anything. So we go back to the Philippines. Then we get to the Philippines, and they say, “Now head back out.” So we made two trips to the Philippines. Then we had to back off to the coast of Vietnam again, Mekong Delta area.

**Mark DePue:** What was happening to all these desperate Vietnamese on these Chinese junks that were trying to get someplace, somewhere that would take them in.

**Gary Price:** They were just cruising out. They weren’t being sought after by the bad guys. They were out there, at least they were off the shorelines. And the junker just floating around.

**Mark DePue:** You don’t really know what happened to them, though?

**Gary Price:** Do not. Now I do know that a lot of these merchant ships gathered a lot of these refugees to help get them out of Vietnam. And the merchant ship became another problem by itself. And so when we got back to the coast, the merchant ships was now loaded with people, running out of food, running out of medical supplies, and the ship captain lost control. So the refugees that was on the ship, there was some bad guys in there because a lot of these refugees were not really refugees. They were Vietnamese regulars who just changed uniforms and just became refugee. And now they took control of the ships.

**Mark DePue:** Wonder if we can get a picture of one of those here up in just a minute or two. And go ahead and keep talking.

**Gary Price:** So we, we now had, our ship had a mission because the only place they could go.

**Mark DePue:** There’s the, is that a map of one of these merchant ships?

**Gary Price:** That’s a barge there. That barge is loaded with people, and you got a tugboat that’s moving it around, that north, top side of it. And so, they were obviously, needed medical supplies and everything else. And our ship had security and we had medical teams to support this. But we weren’t gonna do them on open water. We were gonna do them, they were told to a place called Phu Quoc Island.

**Mark DePue:** You can see that it’s on the, on this map it’s way to the left of that map. It’s basically, it’s right close to the border between Cambodia and Vietnam, is that correct?

**Gary Price:** And Thailand is up there in that area as well. So they were told to go there, all the merchant ships were told to go there because they can be offloaded there. And so, we, the ship had a mission. We didn’t, the Marines didn’t, we were attached to the ship. So the ship sailed to Phu Quoc Island area. We get there and it was at least two merchant ships. And I don’t remember seeing that barge anywhere, but it went someplace. But I know we got there, and I think I got a picture as well, showing one of our amphibious vehicles, ship vehicles, going to the merchant ships with security teams, medical teams, the whole fleet, wanted to establish control of this ship, and get the ship back under control of the ship captain and ship crew, as well as supply any medical support that they can. And we were there for maybe a day or two doing that. We just flew around, and you saw I took pictures of the barge, and some other merchant ships we took pictures of, basically. But the airside of the house didn’t have a mission. We support the ground guys and the ship and that was about all. But Phu Quoc Island, now, was the place they were supposed to be offloaded. I remember, you could see with binoculars, but we flew around as well, that some of these, the people in charge of the shoreline, the administration people, wasn’t gonna allow them to get off. And now we saw refugees jumping off the merchant ships, and somehow, looked like a two by four, they were floating on, they were kicking to the shoreline. Now they weren’t very far off the shore, maybe a mile, which is not really far particularly for a big merchant ship. But anyway, we saw a bunch of these refugees jumping off the ships, and they were swimming towards the shoreline. I remember there were a bunch of military on the shoreline, and they were shooting at them. They weren’t gonna let them come, so they shot most of those refugees that came over there. But that didn’t stop the people from jumping, they just kept jumping, thinking they can get there, and they just kept shooting them.

**Mark DePue:** Any idea, the ones who were on shore, were they North Vietnamese? Or Viet Cong? Or just South Vietnamese that were?

**Gary Price:** I think they were South Vietnamese because we ended coming back to Phu Quoc Island to do another mission. And obviously, if the same place where there were North Vietnamese, we wouldn’t have been able to do that mission if they were, because they would’ve probably shot us down, obviously. But no, they, I think they were South Vietnamese. Maybe they didn’t get the word that they were gonna come there, I don’t know. I just know they weren’t gonna let these refugees come off. And the ship, this left. And so did we.

**Mark DePue:** What’s going through your mind, watching this? And basically there’s not much you can do.

**Gary Price:** There wasn’t much we could do. And we weren’t sure what we were going to do. Each mission seemed, okay, how long are we gonna do this? Are we gonna take on those junker ships, those Chinese junker ships with people on them? What were we gonna do? We weren’t gonna pick them up. At the same time, we’re here supporting refugees. We were also kinda in the background working on a plan to go into Saigon for the embassy and compound. That was kind of a terse thought because we weren’t given any orders to plan yet, to my knowledge, but at the same time, we weren’t gonna sit back and wait to be surprised and all of a sudden plan. So they were doing some planning off and on, at least to my understanding, at least the CO, the operations officer, and I think the maintenance officer was on my ship. So the planning element was there, and of course, we were conversing with other ships and other commands and making the plan work, or come up with a plan, what we were gonna do, where we were gonna go and a timeframe to do it all. We’re doing all this kinda off and on while we’re in Phu Quoc Island, while we’re sailing and all this stuff. We’d have meetings in the operations room with the opso, and we were talking about different elements of planning and different aspects of what we’re gonna do. Of course, I worked on maintenance at the time, so I was strictly working on the maintenance side of the house, making sure the aircraft was ready to go, make sure our fifty cal guns were ready to go as well, and all that. So the thought was preparing. Getting our aircraft ready to go, getting our troops ready to go. Make sure we’re set to go with what we needed. Again, I’m second, first lieutenant now, and I don’t know a whole lot about what we do need. And so I was asking questions of some of the more experienced people in my maintenance department who had Vietnam experience. And really, as it works out, it’s not a whole lot more than what we plan normally. We plan the aircraft to get it ready. All the operational things were functional, fixed and checked to go. We have machine guns ready to go, they’re set up. We got backups of guns in case they jam, we can’t fix them. And that’s really all we had aboard our aircraft. Of course they gave us our TO weapon for our aviators, a .38 pistol.

**Mark DePue:** A TO weapon?

**Gary Price:** A Table Organization weapon for a pilot is a .38 pistol, and that’s what I qualify with all the time, every year. Of course, the M16 is what they end up giving us, but we never shoot them. We just shoot them one time a year, at the fam shooting, but that’s about it. We did qualify for them, but that’s not our, what we call, our TO weapon. So the weapons they normally would give us would be that .38. So anyway, so we made sure we had all that ready to go when the time came. And it was kind of the preparatory side of the house.

**Mark DePue:** In other words, up to this point, you guys hadn’t been actually flying over South Vietnamese land itself.

**Gary Price:** No, no, none of us flew even close to the shoreline, other my mission that one time, we were parallel to the coast. Other than that, we were not allowed to get any closer, and anytime we heard, and the time I flew, they were using mortars, as we found out, launched into the shoreline to keep all the refugees, what they could, from escaping. So that was going on a lot, and so that was also, as far as I’m concerned, a pretty good barrier not to go in.

**Mark DePue:** So after this experience at Phu Quoc, did you, then, the ships returned to the area of Saigon?

**Gary Price:** We did. We turned back there. Now the merchants, now the Chinese junkers are tenfold more. They’re everywhere. And so we were further off shoreline because we were moving more, but the junkers were out there. I guess it was getting closer to the fall, and they came out more in desperation. At this timeframe, I remember, when we started getting the aircraft, the helicopters being flown out of Saigon onto the ships. Again, a desperation moment because we had one Huey land. It was a military pilot who brought his family, cousins, and relatives.

**Mark DePue:** These are South Vietnamese?

**Gary Price:** Yes. They, so they, he stole the aircraft and he flew out to land it somewhere, someplace, and he landed on our ship.

**Mark DePue:** I think we’ve got pictures of this as well.

**Gary Price:** Okay.

**Mark DePue:** Go ahead.

**Gary Price:** The helicopter would land aboard the ship. This is a CH-46, we were transporting, I think, some of the refugees away. The one on the right, some of them were being brought down off this Huey that landed, were brought down, interrogated, stripped of any kind of weapons they might have been carried. Of course, we found suitcases of gold in that case. As you know, some of these people brought what they had, was gold and some weapons. But most were families. And so as soon as they got the people off the ship, at the top deck, got them down, my maintenance guy would say, “Okay, you got five minutes to take whatever you can get off the aircraft.” So I sent my avionics guys out there to take whatever he could take off the Huey that might be compatible, and we all just pushed the aircraft, the Huey off the ship, because we were fearful that more would try to come, and we feared that they would crash that helicopter, and then the flying debris would break our aircraft up, now we can’t do our mission. That was mostly the fear we had. So that landed. We had one land in the water close to our ship. They just didn’t know how to land on the aircraft carrier ship. So they landed in the water. They climbed out. We ended up picking those people up because they’re sitting out there now, floating. So we pick them up. Other ships had other helicopters being landed on. A Chinook landed on the Hancock, and it was pushed over, once they got everybody off that one. Again, there was no room for these aircraft. And the Chinook is not ship compatible. The blades don’t fold, so it’s just a big sore spot, it takes up space. So we pushed that one off, they did. So that was the timeframe that was going on, this time, for about two to three days was this ongoing. Weather was sky blue. Water was, what I call, water skiing perfect. Calm, no movement. It was a beautiful day. It was this time frame was ongoing. And these ships, you can hear them, you hear them, people talking around the area because it’s kinda quiet at night. But yeah, that’s the moment was going on. So now, I gave you a picture, but it didn’t come out very good. And this was, had my concern, because we would catch the intelligence briefing of the North Vietnamese moving in. And we’re getting, and they were posting the threat on the map. I took a picture of it because it scared me almost because we heard about the surface air missiles. And they were now, and we had, at this time, we kind of figured we would fly up the Mekong and kinda turn to the west, or turn left toward the compound.

**Mark DePue:** So go into South Vietnam itself?

**Gary Price:** Yes. So we were looking at that, and I remember each day I go in to look at the map, each day had more and more surface area missiles along our path of flight. And I’m thinking we’re going to die. There’s no way we can get in there, what he had planned to do, and not get shot at.

**Mark DePue:** And what was it that you were planning to do?

**Gary Price:** We were planning to go into the, we initially had the embassy, we call it the embassy snatch, embassy raid, pick up the ambassador, but he wasn’t ready to go. And so as things fell apart on the ground and the compound at the embassy, we started going in. It was like a three, four level plan. There was aircraft that was assigned to the embassy itself. There was aircraft planned to go into the compound itself. There was aircraft ’46ers planned to be, what we call, feet dry search air rescue. We had a spare hawk, we had Marines aboard our aircraft that was gonna land. We land the aircraft, provide a perimeter, get the good guys out of the aircraft, get them on board, and get them out of there. That was what we called feet dry. Then we had feet wet search air rescue, where we stayed feet wet, and we had patterns to stay at, places to hold at in case something got shot down and made it to the water. Or something happened in the water, or they landed in the water and crashed. We were gonna be searching for them. So we had this element all the way back, so we had all of the aircraft utilized in the plan. And so I was a copilot for our RCO, Colonel Jim Kaiser, and so we took off. And another story is that we took off in a rush because the day before, we had this plan. And we remember, I think, L-hour was, like, 08, 0730. Well, L-hour to the Air Force and L-hour to the Marines were different timeframes. So we woke up, saying we were an hour late because what we interpreted L-hour, so now we’re rushing to get done, we get our flight suits on, we get everything set up, and we’re launching aircraft. We’re moving aircraft out to launch, then take them off. Move out two more to launch, take off. So we’re in this rush to get going. Of all the days, thirty-three days I was on this ship, it was sky blue, and water skiing water. I mean, it was perfect. The day of, overcast, high thunder bumper clouds, rain, misery, low-ceiling, low-visibility, and we’re taking off in this stuff. And so we took off early. We got going, and I guess we were late, I don’t know. We interpret the L-hour and we might’ve got up in time, but my mission was with Jim Kaiser, the CO, and we flew, and we were feet wet SAR. So we had two ’46ers when we were orbiting this one point. Everybody was going in the shoreline and going in, and the other crew was inland about two miles or so. They were over about kind of halfway. And at this time, we couldn’t fly low because we were afraid we were going to run into more visibility problems, we fly higher. So now we’re up around four, five thousand feet, in around the thunder bumpers and so forth. We could see the ground off and on. It wasn’t overcast, but enough where I could see the ground and so forth. Of course, we were feet wet, and then the other guys. We got a little close to feet dry, the CO wanted to go in, so we started heading in. If I remember what the colonel said, we’re gonna fly in and take a look at the things because his aircraft and his people going in and doing this, he wanted to have a better bird’s eye view. So he, so we departed our holding spot because all the planes are now gone feet dry. So we’re out there, just two ‘46ers by ourselves, sitting there, orbiting around and things are going off. And so we started feet dry, and then all of a sudden he gets a call on the radio from the ship captain, and from the higher command says he cannot go in. He needs to return to the ship ASAP, as soon as possible. He didn’t know why. He was upset because he didn’t get a chance to go in and see what was going on, see what his airplanes were doing, where they were going, the conditions are set up, how bad was the threat, so he’d have a better bird’s eye view, so when he went back he can now better assess his higher ups, better assess support needed and all that. That was his motivation for going in. And so we didn’t go in. And so we got back to the ship, the two of us, and the ship was on the move. The ship was going back to Phu Quoc Island. At the time we didn’t know why. And so we finally landed on the ship. Meanwhile, the evacuation’s now unfolding, to what you see in the movies, as far as the compound being beaten down from the gates. The embassy is still intact. A good friend of mine, who was a FAC, a forward air controller with the infantry on the ground, he was on the top of the embassy giving calls do us, coordinating the flights in, the flights out for all that.

**Mark DePue:** I think we’ve got a picture of that, as well. Not your picture, but that’s the classic photo of the desperation of the people trying to get out of the embassy.

**Gary Price:** And that’s just the top part. The compound was packed, and from what the guys were telling me, they could no more get there, and they had Marines on the ground providing security, so they all just swamped the aircraft. We could only take so many. The ’46 can take, well we call them gooks at the time, but we could only take twenty-five seats, but we were loading more on there because they were smaller in stature and weight, so we could carry more. The ‘53s were carrying almost fifty of them, and they had more, they can carry heavier weight, and they had more room to carry, the cubic feet, but anyway, they were loading them all up to get them out of there. It was an endless process, get back to the ship, unload them, and then go right back out there and doing this the whole time. And the ’46 has a six-hour operation limit. After six hours, you gotta shut down, check the hedge, we have oil hedge and so forth, shut down, they’re all good, crank right back up, and then they went back out again. They did this for almost twenty-four hours. And they still left people behind, obviously. And that picture you had up there was probably one of the last calls, and I remember on the radio, the high frequency radio, either it was President Ford, someone said it was President Ford, that we need to get the ambassador out of there now. At that time is when the Huey was going in there to pick up just the ambassador and his family and so forth. Jerry Barry was one of our pilots, and he was one of the guys who flew, I think, the longest hours in this process, and he was the last helicopter to fly out of the compound, if I remember correctly. Jerry Barry at the time was a captain, ended up retiring as a colonel, but he was a captain at the time. And he, the annual May movie or showing the historical aspects of the evacuation, Jerry Barry was in that TV, giving his viewpoints on what was happening from his viewpoint. So I’m aboard ship now, and this was all going on, and we’re sailing, and now it’s getting dark. And we get to Phu Quoc Island, and it’s light, early morning phase. And we didn’t really have a mission to my knowledge. What the ship had a mission of, the helicopters were flying out the Mekong Delta toward the ship holding spots, and they were all different stages and such, and that was one escape route for the helicopters. It was, I guess, given to the helicopter squadrons or the pilots there. You can come out this way, or you can go out towards Thailand. Well, you can’t make it to Thailand with the fuel, so the ship was gonna be sitting there, refuel them so they could fly up to Thailand.

**Mark DePue:** And these are South Vietnamese aircraft? This trying to get out of countries as much as they could?

**Gary Price:** Well, they had Army stickers on them, so they were Vietnamese pilots who flew them. At that time, I think there was mostly Vietnamese pilots, and these airplanes had families on them. They weren’t carrying other military guys. They were taking care of themselves because they could fly the Hueys, and they were loading up the aircraft, and they knew the plan to go that direction. So when we got there, obviously there was no aircraft orbiting, so skipper and I.

**Mark DePue:** The area being Phu Quoc you’re talking about?

**Gary Price:** Yes, the area. So now, skipper and I, General, Colonel Kaiser, we got in the aircraft, went looking for them. This is why I say if there were North Vietnamese on that island, we would’ve been prime targets. We flew all around those areas there looking for Hueys that might’ve been on the ground. We found, I think, three of them, three Hueys, and so we would orbit around them and try to signal and kind of follow us, so they would crank up and we would fly back to the ship, and we had Air Force pilots aboard the ship, as I found out, because we refueled those Hueys, the Air Force pilots got in the aircraft, and they flew to Thailand. We would go back and get the other aircraft and have them follow us, because they were out of fuel, nowhere else to go.

**Mark DePue:** US Air Force pilots that would take the aircraft off the aircraft carrier, but with all the South Vietnamese that were on those ships?

**Gary Price:** I don’t remember that part of it.

**Mark DePue:** Did they stay on the ships with you?

**Gary Price:** I didn’t see them get out. If they got out, it was some other timeframe. How? I don’t know.

**Mark DePue:** Was this daylight now, when this was going on?

**Gary Price:** This was early morning, yes. So we were there for hours. Found all we could on the Hueys that might’ve flown out, I remember three of them. I also remember that the Air Force pilot, he had about two to three cruise boxes, which is four feet by two and a half feet wide, and we had, they were full of weapons, .45s, machine guns, everything, mini guns. And we were gonna, we didn’t have, we weren’t authorized, the ship wasn’t authorized to have them. We were gonna dump them over the shoreline, over the side of the ship because they were, we were taking them off the Vietnamese and off the aircraft that flew to the ship. So the Air Force pilot says, “Hey, we’ll take them,” so we put them in there, they flew off Vietnam to Thailand. So I remember that one because I was on the ground for that segment of it, and then I went back out again, and more aircraft came in. And of course when they landed, you couldn’t land because they occupied the only spot. And so we had to wait till they refueled and got back on and took off, and we kind of came back and landed. There may have been some refugees on there, depends on who they were. I know there were some high level refugees, I call them refugees, high level officials from the South Vietnam government, they were treated like VIPs, I remember that. Who they were, I don’t know. I know that some of my crew chiefs said, “Well, Gary, lieutenant, they had, it was gold in those suitcases they had. It wasn’t clothes or anything.” So that’s the stories we heard at that time. So we were there for several hours, and finally, that kind of dried up, so the ship now had hours to go to get back to the holding spot off Vietnam. And we got back there, and I remember we took off and flew again, if I recall, and all these ships were just sitting out there like they were dead in the water, and they were just sitting out there, dead in the water. And the Chinese junker ships were just banging the hulls, they were everywhere out there now. And all our airplanes were on ships, but different ships, so eventually we reorganized the aircraft to be on the ships that they came out on, and that took a little process to get organized. And I was in what they call CIC, combat information center, where the high level operations is going on. I remember on the high frequent radio, someone, some high ranking individual, said, “Get these ships, go on and get the hell out of here. Let’s move.” And so ships started cranking up, started moving, and we all kind of headed back out of that area.

**Mark DePue:** Towards where?

**Gary Price:** Well, were heading towards the Philippines, and we didn’t get to the Philippines, because we got about halfway there and then we started proceeding towards Okinawa. And in this timeframe was when the Mayaguez was being taken down. And so now the ships started cruising toward the Mayaguez, and we had about, I don’t know, five or six hour cruise to get to that place. Meanwhile.

**Mark DePue:** And that was off the coast of Cambodia.

**Gary Price:** Yeah, meanwhile, the Marines were aboard Air Force ‘53s coming out of Thailand.

**Mark DePue:** What’s the name of that helicopter again? CH-43s?

**Gary Price:** CH-53s.

**Mark DePue:** 53s.

**Gary Price:** Is what we call our heavy hauler, nicknamed the Shitter because it leaks oil everywhere, but anyway.

**Mark DePue:** Because you were flying a better aircraft.

**Gary Price:** That’s right, well, I fly better aircraft. But anyway, so Marines were in that aircraft, and they had done a lot of over flights of the island, and they couldn’t find any threats. And so the Air Force flew in like they would fly in any air base in the States, and basically got the shit shot out of them. We lost a lot of Marines that day.

**Mark DePue:** That ended tragically, even though it ended up with, we were able to rescue the SS Mayaguez in the process, but a lot of Marines died, as you mentioned. What did you and your fellow pilots think about, after all that had been spent, and all the lives that had been spent on trying to keep South Vietnam free from communist control? What did you and your fellow pilots think about this evacuation and the collapse of Vietnam?

**Gary Price:** Well, to be honest with you, not a lot of talk about that level of operations. It was more or less of what we did, and how we did it. And of course, we were looking at some of the Vietnam veterans who had tours over there already, had a different perspective than the guys like me, who were just aboard for the first time aboard ship. They ran missions supporting the grunts, and of course we would fight for days, and Marines killed, occupied one spot on the ground, and later on get it back up and move somewhere else, and hold that spot, lose Marines. It seemed like it was moving around like that. Of course, the fixed wing guys we got stories of, were bombing hillsides with nobody on them just because of the political environment that we were in. That kind of discussion was going on, the fact that we were finally coming to a climax, that we were completed, was probably good in that regard. Sad that we had to end it this way, where South Vietnam, if I remember correctly why we were there, was to prevent the domino theory of communists taking over. So we were gonna stop this domino effect, and the fact that we lost in that regard, that South Vietnam surrendered in total to North Vietnam, was a collapse of that. And now, we’re just trying to get out with our skins and get all we can out of the country, our fellow service members. But I don’t remember a whole lot of discussion about that level. This was a tragedy. We shouldn’t ever have been there to start with. You look at a Marine, who’s getting told to go, we train for a mission, we get told to do a mission, we execute the mission, we get out and move on to the next mission. So this was the kind of thoughts, the Marines you have, not criticizing the politics as such. Yeah, we all have our opinions, and when you’re active duty, you kind of keep those opinions in close quarters, because you just don’t want to be publicly known for anti-government, anti-whatever. Now, there’s also, but ironically, the people who flew before just didn’t have a whole lot to say, and they still don’t have a whole lot to say, a lot of them.

**Mark DePue:** Well, we’re coming up to the, I think, the fortieth anniversary of those events next year. Have any reflections or opinions about what you experienced directly and what happened to South Vietnam?

**Gary Price:** Personally, it was one of those experiences that, you know, it pretty much stays with you. We did lose one helicopter in that flight. They crashed in the water, and we lost all four members of that flight. So we did have a tragedy in our case. And so that was sad, and you think of the Marines you lost for that reason. You look at what we accomplished, which is categorized as the largest evacuation in the history of our country, and so we were part of that, so that’s something to be proud of. And we did it well. And we executed it as planned. And the story, I think, that I told you before, is that this route we planned, I was being a lieutenant, I’m not normally in the ops, need to know side of the house, but a friend of mine, this captain, Captain Klaus Shaggat, said, walking down the hall, said, “Gary, come with me.” So I go with him. We walk into the CO’s stateroom, and he’s got the operations guy, and he’s got the intel guy, and he’s got this big map. You can’t have alcohol aboard ship, but he had a bottle of Jack Daniel. So we were passing around shots. I’m just a lieutenant in this equation, sitting back, watching, what the hell we doing here, you know? And so they’re planning the flight. They’re planning this route up the delta, we’re gonna make a left turn, we’re gonna hit this checkpoint, we’re gonna go to this compound, and here’s the embassy and all that stuff. They’re planning all this. Okay, what are we gonna call these places? Well, we’re gonna call this, I don’t know, white, and this is red. And they named all these sites, you know, checkpoints to go into. I didn’t think much of it. Next thing I know, next day or two, I’m reading on the classified information, this plan, with these names. I was there, we did all this, you know, two days ago with the CO and all that. It was kind of, looking back, even during Desert Storm, the planning we did wasn’t too much from that, a little more formalized, but you sit around with the best players you got. And you come up with here’s the terrain, here’s the mission, how are we gonna get there safely, what are we gonna do for backup, what about this, what about this, what-if games all the way through. And that’s what we did. It was kinda exciting at the time that I was involved in that, head on, with that, and then to be able to fly with the commanding officer as his co-pilot. And I felt pretty privileged in that regard because he picked me to fly with him, as I found out, versus just a random assignment. I had flown with Colonel Kaiser. We flew to the Philippines from Okinawa a couple times. So anyway, it was unique in that regard, and I felt privileged to be, for what I was doing, and where I was sat. In hindsight, I kind of wish I got to go in country just to see what other guys saw. Other than that, more of a curiosity than anything else. I do remember, we had no countermeasure for surface air missile, and I know Captain Bud Moose, he was our maintenance guy, stayed back in Okinawa, he sends a classified message. Of course, surface air missiles, we had no countermeasure aboard the aircraft, and so you had to see, physically see the plume, the white plume shoot at you, before you know what was happening. So we were talking about using ferry pistols, which is a pistol that shoots out a flare, signal. And we had two to three of those aboard the aircraft. The plan was if we see this plume come at us, we’re supposed to turn the aircraft away, reduce the power a little bit, to reduce the heat, and shoot a ferry pistol out the right side, the side that we’re turning away from. And that would create a heat signal for that missile to come after. Well, you’re talking about seconds. You’re talking about seconds, if you’re four, five thousand feet, you’ve got about four seconds, four to five seconds before you see it, before impact. It made us feel good, but I’m not sure of the practicality of it all. But we had a lot of, a lot of crews were reporting these plumes coming at them in the early morning. And after the fact, we found out there were other ferry pistols being shot up in the air, but when you’re in not quite dark, but twilight, in the morning, and you’re three, four thousand feet, and you see this white plume coming at you, you don’t know what it is.

**Mark DePue:** Guys have parachutes?

**Gary Price:** No. We don’t have parachutes. Don’t fly high enough to use them. So hindsight is that a couple of personal aspects of the evolution. The fact that I volunteered, my buddies from California came six months later, and that six months made the difference because I was back in Okinawa, and they all started coming back on board. So, if I never volunteered, I wouldn’t have been involved in this. So a lot of things fell in place to get me where I was at.

**Mark DePue:** So you’re proud that you had the chance to be there.

**Gary Price:** I do, I do. Proud to be able to serve in this environment. There was no combat, per se, but we did get to fly in and around Vietnam. For new lieutenants like me, who was a feather in the air cap, I got to fly what we did and saw what we saw, and the pictures I have was kind of unique to have as memories, to start with. But yeah, it was sad that we lost South Vietnam. I know we lost a lot of Marines and soldiers across the board, supported that. From that experiences, carried on, follow on train that I got involved in in the eighties.

**Mark DePue:** And we will save that one for the next session. When you got back and you finally got back and spent some time with Suzy, did you tell her about what you’d gone through?

**Gary Price:** Not in detail. The less she knew, the better off she was, because the more she knew, I think, the more she’d get scared. And the more I told her, Christ, you look back in war, hindsight, like anything else, you wonder, well, how do I get out of this, how come they didn’t shoot at us? We didn’t get shot out at all in this whole evolution. The only airplane we lost, we flew it into the water. Well, how come they didn’t? Some theories were that they didn’t want to start another war, because they knew they would have one at this point, if we did shoot down helicopters. We would bring all our Marines to ground and do what we gotta do, and so I think they just let us come in and get our Marines out, get the ambassador out, and go home. Get off their land, period. At that point, it was just a closure in that history, and it took another twenty years before another war came around, so.

**Mark DePue:** Well, again, we’re gonna have a chance to talk about the rest of your career the next time we get together. One other question here about, there were lots of stories in the Vietnam era about the way Vietnam veterans, who came back to the United states, were treated, and not very well by the American public. Did you experience any of that?

**Gary Price:** I did not. There wasn’t no happy, welcome home signs, obviously, but I didn’t catch the others. Now, we didn’t fly from coast to coast in uniforms, either. At least I didn’t, and most of the Marine did not. Some of the troops did because we didn’t fly that much, and I don’t remember the airports that I did fly into that I saw much of the anti-baby killer and all that stuff. I didn’t see that. But then again, I wasn’t at the hub of a lot of these Marine units coming back home, either. Again, I flew, in this case, I flew to Pensacola, Florida for my next assignment, and I landed. Met the wife, she came down. And so it was a different area that I was in that may have not been as anti-military to start with, or anti-Vietnam to start with. You get the West Coast, you got a lot of that, and a lot of that was experienced from a lot of the Marines and soldiers as well in the West Coast.

**Mark DePue:** You’ve done a wonderful job, Gary, of laying all this out and painting some very vivid word pictures as we’ve gone through this as well. Wonder if you have any final comments about your experiences, especially the experiences you had in the evacuation of South Vietnam?

**Gary Price:** Well, I guess the final note would be that it’s a part of our history that we obviously went through. It was amazing that we did have bigger plans to do this right, being right, getting everybody out with the big transports. But we had, did we have the foresight to see that if this doesn’t work, what are we gonna have as a backup, and what was the backup plan behind that? I didn’t get the third backup plan involved, I don’t know what that might’ve been if there was, but we did have a backup plan from that standpoint. Historical, that we lost an embassy in a country that we fought so hard and a lot of people died to protect. I may not agree with all the politics involved, but that’s beside the point as a military person. You’re assigned a mission, you go to execute. Yeah, you wish it could be done other ways. Stories, I had dinner with General Westmoreland and General Voigt in the War College later on, and they told some stories about what they experienced, that they couldn’t do some things based on the politics and such, which adds more insight to what was going on during the war itself. But I just hope we haven’t got another war like that to go through, and hope we’re smart enough politically to avoid it, but at the same time, I just hope the military forces are prepared to go do what they gotta do if they get assigned.

**Mark DePue:** Thank you very much, Gary.

**Gary Price:** You’re welcome.

**Mark DePue:** And thank you.

**Mark DePue:** Welcome. My name is Mark DePue. I’m the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Thursday, September 4, 2014. And I’m here sitting with Gary Price. Good morning, Gary.

**Gary Price:** Good morning.

**Mark DePue:** Last time Gary and I met, we talked about his fascinating experiences about the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 as a Marine Aviator who just happened to be there helping with the evacuation of refugees and military personnel, etc. Well, today we get to pick up the rest of your story. So let’s talk about what happens immediately after when you return back to the United States. Or actually, Okinawa, wasn’t it.

**Gary Price:** Okinawa, yes. In fact, on the way back, we were tapped. We went to the Philippines, and we headed back to Okinawa, and in route was the Mayaguez issue, and our ship turned for a few issues towards the Mayaguez issue, island, and maybe we could be that evacuation or rescue the ship, but it worked out to where we were not. So continued on to Okinawa, and that was in May timeframe, and I rotated back to the States in June, late June timeframe. Went to be an instructor in Pensacola, Florida, flying Hueys and HT18 to squadron at Whiting, Naval Air Station Whiting Field, in Milton, Florida, which is about a half hour north of Pensacola. Was there for two years.

**Mark DePue:** After flying CH-46s, what was it like flying Hueys, which is, you know, that’s the quintessential aircraft for the Vietnam War.

**Gary Price:** Yes, yes, yes. In fact, it was, not having flown a tail rotor, that was a challenge itself. The tail rotor issue, which I had none in the 46, didn’t have that squirrellyness of concern of winds and all that. Still concerned, but not as much as before, like a little sports car in comparison to driving a Cadillac. It was a fun airplane to fly. I enjoyed it. I flew it for two years, and then I went back to, applied for the college degree program. Went to University of West Florida for two years, or eighteen months, and got my bachelor’s degree in business.

**Mark DePue:** So the Marine Corps took care of you, finally getting a bachelor’s degree.

**Gary Price:** That’s right. Went back to school full time, it was great.

**Mark DePue:** What’d you major in?

**Gary Price:** Management. It was fairly simple course to get through, that being, and I tapped into the ROTC at the college and found out the who, where, what, when, and all that, so I hung out with them and drank their coffee and got smarter, street smart, from the college standpoint, which has been out of the realm for a few years, several years.

**Mark DePue:** You didn’t tell them any war stories while you were there?

**Gary Price:** No, no, not like that. Told them what airplane to fly if they were gonna do that. No, didn’t influence in that regard.

**Mark DePue:** Was this a Naval ROTC program?

**Gary Price:** Yes, yes.

**Mark DePue:** How did Susan like you being back home, and regular, actually, someplace that she might like living?

**Gary Price:** Well, when we came back after that, we were married about fourteen months, and then Okinawa was thirteen months. We weren’t sure if we were gonna pick up where we left off a little bit or renew, or what. It was just one of those strange moments. So as it worked out, we didn’t know what to do. So I came back to Rockford, Illinois, picked her up, and we drove to Pensacola. And we ended up going there and finding a place to buy, and we bought a house, and then had both our kids there, and got my college degree. So we had a great time. Pensacola is, in fact, we lived, in the past, for almost twenty years, thinking we were gonna retire in Pensacola. It just didn’t work out either. But she loved it.

**Mark DePue:** By this time were you thinking that you might want to stay with the Marines, make it a career?

**Gary Price:** Yes and no. Before I got, went to school full time, most of my friends were getting out and going to airlines, helicopter type, fixed wing type. Didn’t really matter, they were hunting for airline pilots. Well, unfortunately, I had the airline tickets, my commercial and civilian fixed wing, and instruments, but I didn’t have a college degree, so they weren’t taken without college degrees. So there was another drive to go back to school because I couldn’t go to the airlines, if my true desire to go to, I couldn’t get out to do that. So I went back to school. Now I had a four-year payback, so yes, I was sticking around for another four years at least.

**Mark DePue:** Which would put you into how many years by the time that was done?

**Gary Price:** Close to eight or nine, ten years, so at that point I was pretty well set. And every time I moved, every time I got promoted, it was another two years, one-year commitment. I didn’t really finish paying off all my required duties until I had about eighteen years in, then I was a CO of a squadron.

**Mark DePue:** The culmination of anybody’s career.

**Gary Price:** That’s right, that’s right, so I wasn’t gonna get out before then.

**Mark DePue:** What did you do then the following tour after you got done with college?

**Gary Price:** After I got done with college, we packed up, had orders to HMM268 in Tustin, now Tustin, it was called Santa Anna. Marina Corps Santa Anna when I left in the 70s, early 70s, and when I came back it was called Marine Corps Air Station Tustin. Santa Anna was a little north of where we were at, and Tustin’s a little bit east, west a little bit. So anyway, Tustin, I was there. HMM268 was a Huey squadron decommissioned after Vietnam Wars, and now being recommissioned as a CH-46. So we were called a brand-new squadron, we were getting new people. I was one of five. I was the operation officer as a captain. And so we were at the ground level trying to build, well, what do we need, we need seats, we need chairs, we need this, we need that for operations, computers, and whatever it may be. So we were building up, we had no airplanes yet. We were still playing around with office stuff, maintenance stuff, getting people put together, the right people put together for making the squadron a squadron, and then came the helicopters.

**Mark DePue:** Were you expecting brand-new helicopters or rebuilt ones?

**Gary Price:** No, we were expecting helicopters. No, they quite making them, and so I’m not sure where they came from, but I know we got, I know where they came from. They went from eighteen to a squadron to twelve, so all the excess was farmed out in different areas, and that’s the where we got them.

**Mark DePue:** Well, knowing the way the military works, you got everybody else’s junk, I would think.

**Gary Price:** It took, it was a challenge to get maintenance to get equipped, ready to go, start flying again, yes, but that’s where they came from.

**Mark DePue:** What timeframe are we talking about here?

**Gary Price:** We’re talking about 1979.

**Mark DePue:** So what years were you in college?

**Gary Price:** I got to Pensacola in ’75. And ’77 I went to school for eighteen months. So that makes it ’78, late, early ’79, so that’s when we went to California.

**Mark DePue:** The reason I’m asking for the dates here is because this is the time period that, if you were in the regular army, and I was during that time, they consider this The Hollow Army. The downside of the Vietnam War, the morale was very low, disputant problems, equipment problems. There was oftentimes not enough money for training or fuel or ammunition, things like that. Were you seeing some of that?

**Gary Price:** Some of that, particularly in the, it picked up more obviously when we, when I got to California, but we saw some of that in Pensacola. The, they have a pilot requirement, PTR, pilot training requirements based on the needs of the Marine Corps and the different communities and all that. And we would jump on it early one, fly students till they couldn’t fly anymore, had to give them some rest. But we ran out. There just wasn’t there. And then when we did have them, we didn’t have the parts, or we didn’t have the fuel, and so it was always kind of a catch-up at the end of the fiscal year. We had the airplanes, but we’re still struggling with fuel and a few other parts that we needed to keep the airplanes going. We had a hundred Hueys there. You’d think we have enough, but we were cannibalizing a lot to make that work because the parts weren’t there. And that carried over when I got to the Marine side in Tustin. It was the same way. We were flying, but we were, they were used to flying five hundred miles a month. We got down to about two hundred miles a month because of fuel, parts, but the mission didn’t go away. We still had to fly the requirements, it’s just that you had now quit training, or you had to quit doing other things to make that work. And every time we got an add-on mission, wait a minute, time out, we needed more fuel to make it work. Well, we have to figure this all out. Meanwhile, you plan on it anyway, and something would come up when we get the fuel to go fly. And that’s how it was in that timeframe, until Reagan came on board.

**Mark DePue:** Do you remember any morale problems that you had among the troops or the officers during that period?

**Gary Price:** Not really. In 268, we were all kind of a new squadron developed. We took over the old patch, made it a new patch. The only, I guess, depressing thing was that we were expecting nice, ready room airline type seats, and we didn’t get any of that stuff. Oh, you’re a new squadron? You’re gonna get all new office stuff. Well, no, that was maybe a thought, but nothing came through. We had regular fold down chairs and we had regular old blackboards to do things with, so it was a struggle in that regard, as a new squadron being stood up. We didn’t get the new administrative stuff in the office areas to make it right.

**Mark DePue:** I would think you’d be the ideal guy, having both CH-46 and Huey experience.

**Gary Price:** Well, unlike probably other services, once you were set into your, what they call it, MOS, your specialty, mine was a 46 pilot, you didn’t have the opportunity nor were you authorized to fly something else, unless you happened to be a co-pilot, and that didn’t happen very often. So yeah, I may have flown Hueys, but we had plenty of more experienced Huey pilots flying, you know, Marine Hueys, so there was really no need for me. I was just trying to get back in the 46 so I can be a respectable, credible pilot in my community, which I’d been out now for four years. So I had to go back to a little refresher course, with the refresher training program, flying in academically, to get back into the aircraft. When you’re out of the aircraft for over a year, you’re required to go back to an academic period and a flight phase.

**Mark DePue:** It’s not like riding a bicycle? It just comes back automatically?

**Gary Price:** Yes, but the academics and all the other stuff, it was a little bit tougher to come by, as you get older and trying to remember a few things. And the aircraft has a few quirks, and one of the few quirks was taxiing. You didn’t have a steering wheel like the 57, the Chinook has, and it has one nose wheel in front, and it has a canister with the oleo strut, and you had to pull the stick back to get the oleo extend a little bit, and then balance it to the right or to the left to go left and right, and then it’s that skill feeling where that magic spot it. And every aircraft was different in where that feel was. A little bit of power, a little bit off power to get the aircraft to turn, and once you got it turning the way you wanted, you stabilize it and then it would just continue on. The worst case is you push it too far, you hit the bottom, and it bounces. You pull too high, and the aircraft comes off the ground. So you had to learn that, and that was the biggest thing to learn in a 46.

**Mark DePue:** Did the older 46s, were the controls a little bit sloppier?

**Gary Price:** Don’t remember that, I really don’t.

**Mark DePue:** Just was curious.

**Gary Price:** No, don’t remember.

**Mark DePue:** Did you have any additional duties?

**Gary Price:** Eventually, when I got in HMM268, after about a year, they had this, they had a requirement of weapons and tactics instructor, WTIs. And the Marine Corps requirement was two per squadron, and so I was in operations, and I had flight time comparatively to the other pilots because I had Huey time, or at least instructor time. So I got sent to Yuma, Arizona for about eight weeks. And the requirement for the squadron to do that was to support me with four aircraft and maintenance people support the aircraft.

**Mark DePue:** Going out to Yuma, you went with four aircraft?

**Gary Price:** Yes, one per four. And so, as it worked out, there was ten of us, ten students in 46, so ten times four is what you had, and all the maintenance people to make that happen. So I was trained in nap-of-the-earth flying. I was also, got into night vision goggles for the first time, and it was a full-face type, and we were all looking at cutaways where we can see below. But the full-face are the ones that the tank drivers use down at the Camp Pendleton. They actually covered your full face, so you couldn’t see. So you were looking at, focusing one eye inside, one eye outside, or vice versa, or one out, one in. Light control was an issue. All that for night vision goggles, maybe at phase one, which was basically learning to fly, take off and landings, and a little bit of navigation with them. And we got introduced to air combat maneuvering, helo versus fixed wing. And particularly the F4s, who thought they were ruling the sky, and when they couldn’t shoot us down, it was kind of an ego for us to be able to survive those attacks. But that’s what the course was, and the academic package went along with that, so when I came back to the squadron, one of my requirements was not only teach my fellow aviators the academics, but also now, as an instructor, take them out and fly, nap-of-the-earth, do night vision goggles.

**Mark DePue:** Well, night vision goggles, ruling the night has, for a long time, been something the American military has taken pride in. But I think, perhaps a lot of viewers, wouldn’t know what nap-of-the-earth means.

**Gary Price:** Nap-of-the-earth is flying at the contour level, fifty feet, ten feet for some communities. We were flying at fifty feet, so you would take a map and you would look at the contours of the map, and you figure out ravines and valleys. That’s how you navigate, looking outside, reading the map, and watching where these mountains are, rivers. You had a little bit of a head-in for a long ways. You maybe had a little bit of a time element to figure out how much time to go, but you were basically reading the map to follow from contour to contour, from mountain peak to mountain peak to valley, to get to your landing zone. So the idea was that you stayed below the mountain ridges so the bad guys with surface air missiles wouldn’t be able to shoot at you.

**Mark DePue:** Below the tree line?

**Gary Price:** Below the tree line. And so masking below the ridgeline, masking below the, getting down to the creek beds. The Cobras and the Hueys were a little bit smaller platform footprint. They can get down about ten feet and just scoot along the riverbeds, down below the tree lines. And we would be around fifty feet. We can get lower, but for training purposes, we were fifty. And so we would get below the ridges as much as we could to be safe, and the whole idea was to mask yourself against the enemy.

**Mark DePue:** Fun flying?

**Gary Price:** Fun flying. Doing that with night vision goggles was more fun, because you did that during the daytime, and that was okay. But at night, doing the same thing, reading the map with your full-face, so you were trying to focus your goggles to look inside a map with a red lens, and then tell your pilot which way to go. Go left now to get to this point here, and turn right here after this point, and then we should fly out, and then we’ll fly. And that’s a discussion you had in the cockpit, and so not only did you have a skill to learn the map, but to communicate that to your pilot so he will be ahead of the game, where to turn, when not to turn and all that.

**Mark DePue:** You gotta be on your game, then.

**Gary Price:** On your game, that’s right. There was no, you really had a challenge, during the day and night, nap-of-the-earth, because you really had an issue with terrain, and in some areas we were above fifty feet, but we had close walls. So tip-hat plane of the aircraft rotors was a concern. But no, that was survival tactics, to stay masked day and night.

**Mark DePue:** Any accidents, as you recall?

**Gary Price:** Later in life, yes, we had several, unfortunately. Like any other community, new skills and so forth, and getting too low, hitting the ground, not communicating very well, flying formation, hitting each other mid-air.

**Mark DePue:** In other words, this is dangerous business.

**Gary Price:** Yes, it is.

**Mark DePue:** Peacetime training or wartime, it’s dangerous.

**Gary Price:** Yes, the old cliché, we were saying, back in those days, shit happens. Well, it doesn’t happen, it was for a reason, so we changed that cliché to shit doesn’t always happen. There was a reason why it happened. You gotta go back and find where it started, and try to prevent that because and see if you can fix it for future, and that’s what we did after every accident, particularly in those areas. And every time we had a nap-of-the-earth, night vision goggle, air combat maneuvering accident or incident, it was another threat against stopping the program. And those were always new challenges from a political standpoint. We didn’t need to do that stuff, we didn’t do it before, and we survived. What are doing flying so low for? Why are we flying at night so much? Well, I remember flying at night without goggles, and I look back on it, even now, it was a scary thing. Because I fly now with night vision goggles in my little air medical flights, versus when I first came on, not having them, thinking nothing of it then. After having them, thinking, oh man, how did I survive the first year of this.

**Mark DePue:** I’m assuming you’re not flying nap-of-the-earth right now?

**Gary Price:** No. No, I’m not.

**Mark DePue:** Well, let me pull you up from nap-of-the-earth all the way up to the international level. Just wondered to know if you remember the Iranian hostage crisis. Were you paying any attention to that at all? That was late 1979.

**Gary Price:** Yes and no. Yes, we were watching it on TV, it was obviously the big news, but more personably, I had friends who all of a sudden didn’t come to work. 53 pilots didn’t come to work. Don’t know why. No one knew why. And then several months thereafter, we found out where they were. Key personnel from the 53 community was pulled, basically, from what I heard, pulled from their houses, homes, from works, and they were tapped to go do some training. And no one knew where. No one knew what they were doing, or how long they’d be gone. And so I don’t think, from what I’ve been told, even the family knew, their families knew where they were at for months. And later on we found out that they were out somewhere in the desert, flying the 53s. Pilots were flying long nap-of-the-earth flying, night goggle vision flying. They had some new nav systems in the aircraft that no one had yet, that they were flying from maybe eleven o’clock, midnight, to light. And they would fly as far as they can go one way, different areas over towns, around the communities, and then they’d come back, and they did that forever, landed in the desert next to C130s, refueling practices, forward air refueling, FARPs, we call them. And they were doing all that stuff, and trying to get all that down and get their communications, their planning, based on, as we found out later on, the rescue. Now I was fortunate later on, jumped the chain on the subject, I ended up, got reassigned to work at the group, Marine Air Group 16, and I worked for a guy named Jim Schaffer. Jim Schaffer was one of those 53 pilots that was yanked out of his house and trained. Jim Schaffer was also one of the few 53 pilots that made it to the refueling place.

**Mark DePue:** Are we talking about, was it the mission Desert One?

**Gary Price:** Desert One. The plan was 53s were gonna land that came off the ship, land at point A and they were gonna meet up with C130s to refuel, and I believe there was gonna be a go, no go, and it continued on for the mission.

**Mark DePue:** To rescue the hostages.

**Gary Price:** Rescue the hostages. As I understand it, several of the 53s didn’t make it. They got caught in a sandstorm, had to force themselves down, had mechanical problems. I think three, I think there’s like seven 53s, seven or eight that was planned on going, and I think only about three made it. The C130s were there. Jim Schaffer was also the one, unfortunately, that crashed the helicopter against a C130, and that’s where we lost a few Marines. He was a pilot. His co-pilot got burned real bad. Jim kind of had, I didn’t see any scars or burn marks, I don’t think he got burned, maybe on his body, but he survived it. But some Marines in the back did not, some of his crew did not make it. Even at that point, and this was now maybe ’83 timeframe, he still couldn’t talk about any of the stuff or where he went or how he did. And I would just try to pull things out of him.

**Mark DePue:** He was prohibited, or he just wasn’t willing to talk about it?

**Gary Price:** Prohibited. I don’t think he was released to talk about the details for a long, long time.

**Mark DePue:** Well, what we just been talking about, the Iranian hostage crisis, the disastrous attempt to rescue them, the horrible economy that was going on that the time, that all contributed to Jimmy Carter’s defeat and Ronald Reagan’s being elected president in November of 1980. And what I wanted to ask you then, how did things change after Reagan came in, and you had that build up the military again?

**Gary Price:** Just like Christmas, almost. We had money. We were back to four hundred, five hundred plus hours. Again, the requirements didn’t go away. We still had exercises to do, but we had more money, I say more money, more money in the flight time category. The squadron commander doesn’t get, well, you got a hundred thousand dollars or a million to work with, you get hours. You got five hundred hours assigned a month. What you do with them is what you are challenged in your leadership and organization, planning. You got your mission requirements, but then you got maintenance requirements to do, but you have training to do. And we were forgoing the training in the past. So we flew the missions. We flew the test flights. We flew the required items to keep us legal, our instrument check rides, our NATOPS, our aircraft check rides, but when it came to doing nap-of-the-earth, doing confined area landings, doing formation flying, doing some sea landings, water landings, that wasn’t part of it, there was no money for that. So now we had opportunity to go train. So a lot of the co-pilots, who were just getting stuff whitewashed, just not getting the training, now we were going back doing the basic training that they should’ve done way back when. And so that was the morale booster, was that we would get to fly some training flights, which was good. And parts became available. So the flight time, the parts, the aircraft availability became better because we can keep the aircraft flying. We weren’t cannibalizing, taking parts off one aircraft for another one all the time back and forth, which, now our poor maintenance guys were working six, seven hours for every one hour. This airplane had another problem, we’ll take all these parts off, we’ll put them on this aircraft. So they’ve been working day and night to get another aircraft fixed just to cannibalize parts, and now that wasn’t required. So all the parts, the flight time, the training, we’re getting more people, so it was a real big morale booster. And just like night and day, when he came on board, just like, there was no problem anymore for money.

**Mark DePue:** Were you getting better recruits, better enlistees by that time?

**Gary Price:** It seemed like it. Of course, in aviation, you didn’t really see too many bad Marines. They were all pretty smart. All your mechanics, avionics, flight equipment guys, and so, of course, your staff was basically the same cut, and so they had maybe a little bit of a higher caliber Marine, if you wanna call it, who had to have a higher aptitude to pass the test. Of course, you always had, I don’t remember a whole lot of disciplinary problems in those squadrons. There were some, but nothing like I heard in the future and heard from the ground side of the house.

**Mark DePue:** I want you to walk through then the next couple steps in your career in the early and mid-1980s timeframe.

**Gary Price:** Well, I was at HMM268, and we deployed two times to Okinawa for six months. They were called unit deployment. So I deployed in ’80 and I deployed n ’82, and when I came back after that, I had already gone to weapon and tactics training course at Yuma and back, and so after ’83, ’84 timeframe, I got ready ---- and I went to a school, Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. It was a real feather because I hadn’t been to a Naval Marine school. So I went to Newport, Rhode Island, Naval War College, and went there for a year, got my master’s on the side. So now I got educated again.

**Mark DePue:** Is that, how do you say the university?

**Gary Price:** Salve Regina University. It used to be an all-girls school way back when, and a lot of.

**Mark DePue:** What’s a Marine doing at an all-girls school?

**Gary Price:** Just lucky, I guess. But as it worked out, we found out that all the instructors, they accept, the challenge was, they accepted all my grades and units from the War College, and I only took three classes to finish it out for the year to get my master’s. Naval War College was an accredited school, giving A’s and B’s and so forth. And so I had to get a B, which was a challenge, because most of my friends who didn’t go, didn’t need, didn’t want to go to school, the could get C’s or D’s to pass, and then they just did the minimum, it seemed like, to get by, where I had to the extra studying because I had to get a B. Because if I couldn’t get the B, then it wouldn’t be transferrable, then I’d be in trouble. So I had the culture shock of reading and writing and studying after not having done it for a long, long time. And my poor wife paid the price because she was my sounding board in all my writing and typing, and she would correct it, and I’d be retyping. Of course, back then, the typing was manual typewriters because computers weren’t around yet, and so we were required to read from fifteen to two thousand words a week, plus I had three papers a week to do.

**Mark DePue:** Pages a week.

**Gary Price:** Pages, yeah, pages. But anyway, that was a challenge, and so it was a fun time. I spent most of my time in my little cubicle at work, days and weekends. The wife got to go to a few of the fun things, Boston and New York for some plays and travels and sightseeing. So anyway, I went to school there for a year, and got my master’s at Salve Regina. I did get everything, well, I remember one time, I took this test. Carl von Clausewitz, “On War,” was the study guide, and when I took the midterm test, it was about five questions on Clausewitz. And I remember getting my answer, my test answers back the following week, and the colonel called me in and says, “Gary, how do you think you’re doing?” And I says, “Sir, I think I’m struggling. I’m not gonna make.” He says, “Nah, you’re right where we want you.” So I got my paper back, and it says, “Nice try, Gary, but you didn’t answer the question.” And he gave me a B, one of those things. And I say, okay, I’m at that point where I’m no different from anybody else.

**Mark DePue:** Was that a big of a gift, getting the B?

**Gary Price:** I think so. I wrote about eight pages about it, trying to answer the question.

**Mark DePue:** Von Clausewitz, he’s a requirement for anybody in the military.

**Gary Price:** Yep.

**Mark DePue:** You had to be missing the flying, though.

**Gary Price:** Yeah, I didn’t do any flying, but I was so overwhelmed with studying that I didn’t get a chance, in fact, I missed a lot of the little social things because there was opportunity to do things in Newport. And I just didn’t take, I was too worried, I guess you’d call it, of not passing, or trying to write answers to questions out. We had study questions to answer, and we would type them out and then in class, we would pass them around and exchange papers, and then that’s what our midterm was based on. So I was trying to do good by the questions I answered, and then pass them out to the other fellow students and all that. So I spent a lot of time home on weekends and nights, doing that. And the wife, when she got back, she was, we had two little kids at that time, so her hands were full. But yeah, we were looking forward, from there, I got reassigned to, I was gonna go to headquarters of the Marine Corps, but things changed, things fell through.

**Mark DePue:** Headquarters of the Marine Corps, meaning the Pentagon?

**Gary Price:** No, headquarters, Marine Corps in Quanitco.

**Mark DePue:** Quantico, okay.

**Gary Price:** Washington D.C., it’s next to the Pentagon, headquarters, the Navy Annex is, I think, they call the building. That fell through, and so I ended up going to Yuma to the place that I had my weapons and training instructor course, WTI class. The squadron that did that course was called Marine Aviation Weapons Training Squadron One, MAWTS-1. M-A-W-T-S-dash-1. One squadron, the only kind of its kind. It was a conglomerate of ideas from what they call Marine Force, Pacific and Marine Force, Atlantic, MAR-4 Atlantic and MAR-4 Pacific. They both had individual tactical schools, so they combined them into one, and they had representatives from every aviation skills, I guess, every pilot, I mean, every aircraft, Hueys, 53s, 46s, and then we had an Army pilot, a Navy pilot, and Air Force pilot, and then we had all the fixed wing communities, we had all the air command control system people, all there to represent all seven functions of Marine air instructors. They developed the foundation so when these students came, with my case, for aircraft and maintenance people, we went from probably a hundred and fifty people to almost fifteen to two thousand people. And the ramp went from empty to the whole Yuma airbase was covered with our jets and aircraft. You’re looking at 46s alone with ten students, and every other community had the same issues.

**Mark DePue:** I know that during this timeframe, late 70s but especially in the 80s, and the Army at least, this was the time when there was a lot of doctrinal development going on, and focusing, getting away from the Vietnam era doctrine, and designing something else. Was that something that was going on at Yuma at the time when you were there?

**Gary Price:** In fact, I taught Marine aviation doctrine, so they knew what they were deviating from because it wasn’t one of those knowledge things, and there was no teaching of aviation doctrine, how to employ. And so we taught aviation doctrine, and we’re saying that this school, what you plan and what you do, it’s open game. Whatever you think is right. Here’s your threat. Based on what the threat can do to you, how are you gonna get from point A to point B with your battalion of offload, and how are you gonna defend that from the fast movers in air command control side of the house to get your troops and people there safely, and protect them while they’re on the ground? And so we, people were trying four different routes and groups of helicopters and escorted to a single route with the whole conglomerate of, all those were on the table for them to play with and try and learn and trials and tribulations and all that.

**Mark DePue:** You mentioned the threat. What was the threat you were working against?

**Gary Price:** Well, back then it was still the Soviets. And the Soviets as well as the Soviet weapons because I taught Soviet anti-aircraft, triple A, because all, I call them the raghead countries, all the other countries had those weapons. They may not have the Soviet guy on the trigger, but all the weapons, it has the same capability, potentially, was in the hands of somebody else, the third world countries, or the satellite countries that the Russians worked with or were selling weapons to, from Iran to Syria, to Iraq, all those countries had those weapons.

**Mark DePue:** So are you working on the assumption that, one, the threat was probably gonna outnumber what you had, and that the equipment was pretty close to par?

**Gary Price:** Yes.

**Mark DePue:** That was the world that you were trying to devise, the doctrine?

**Gary Price:** We were looking at, if there was a triple A weapon, anti-aircraft weapon, and it shoot accurately within seconds of acquisition on radar, and putting around zone target within ten seconds, then we assume the worst, that those third world counties, Syria, whoever may have them, can do the same thing. So that was the threat.

**Mark DePue:** Well, that’s an attention grabber, I would think.

**Gary Price:** Yes. When you look at Grenada, which happened in the 80s when I was at Yuma, and you look at the weapons, was Soviet weapons, they shot down several of the helicopters, and these were third world countries who just happened to have the weapons, so you can’t ignore the weapon from what it can do, no matter who had it. The capability of the weapons is probably in the hands of who was operating it. It was still a shoot. It would still knock you down if it hit you, but at the same time, they had to see you to find you and acquire you to pull the trigger, and that was what we were trying to avoid, being seen.

**Mark DePue:** What was your specific assignment while you were there?

**Gary Price:** In Yuma, I became a senior at that time. I was a senior CH-46 pilot. There was three of us, so I was in charge of three of us, but I had the 46 community. And I had the largest group. I had ten students, on the average, two times a year, and did it every year. So the syllabus that we worked out for the CH-46 pilots, it was me, Jim, and Rick, we sit down and we plan out in detail, and the community eventually, every community did the same thing. And then I became the helo, head helo guy, and so now I was in charge of all the helicopters and coordinating what they were doing, and Jim ---- took over the 46 community, being in charge of that. Then, after another year, I became the operations officer out of the whole organization, and I had looked at one my last, I thought, I felt pretty proud about, was that I was able to coordinate five B52s from the East Coast, escorted by a squadron of F16s as the threat to our predominant air mission with helos, nar jets and so forth. And so I was able to coordinate all that in a mission that we had real, dissimilar aircraft, and of course, B52s came in because we had the Chocolate range, the Chocolate Mountain range just north of Yuma, and they can drop live ordinates. And live ordinate dropping is pretty rare in the United States, and there’s a couple of ranges, and we had one. So we says, “Come over here, you can drop your ordinates, free of charge of anything. And if you’ll fly this profile and fly this, F16s.” Out of Luke Air Force Base, mash them all up, and it was fun for those guys, as much as it was for us.

**Mark DePue:** Wasn’t the F16 pretty new to the inventory by that time?

**Gary Price:** At that time, yeah. So we were getting them ones and twosies for what we call dissimilar aircraft. jet guys were getting them for air combat maneuvering, ACM, and we were getting the F16s once in a while to do the helo versus fixed wing as well. And so to get them to be able to fly as a squadron, escorting bombers, and we had to plug them in our profile, how we’re looking at them. And then we, based on that threat, would be planning our mission from our combat air patrol missions capped, all the way back to air defense on the ground, and to our helo escorts. We all evolved around getting the ground guys from point A to point B for the mission.

**Mark DePue:** From what you’re saying, it sounds like you were really at the ground level, developing, upgrading the tactics, learning the process. Is that?

**Gary Price:** That’s correct because we sat there, when I was a helo, head helo guy, one of the key products we produced was the assault support manual, which included air combat maneuvering, which included nap-of-the-earth, which included night vision goggles. Up until then, there was no manual for us to look at. For a helo guy in a squadron to be looking at what to plan for, how to plan, using night vision goggles, so we wrote that manual. That was another thing we wrote, and we wrote the air combat maneuvering manual because there was none, helo vs. jets, helo vs. fixed helo, and we would go out and experiment and try those different maneuvers and so forth while we had the aircraft. So we were on the ground floor back in the mid-80s, producing this.

**Mark DePue:** What were the lessoned learned? Anything that really sticks with you today?

**Gary Price:** Well, the helo vs. helo was a cluster, it’s like cats fight, you just can’t, you couldn’t, we can disengage from the jet guys. When they pull over, they go up and go back around. We can go high. We can do something to help ourselves, delay the, maybe get out of the way, maybe get some help. Helo vs. a hind.

**Mark DePue:** Which was the main Soviet attack helicopter.

**Gary Price:** Correct. You couldn’t get away because you can escape the first one, but they can turn just like where you’re turning, and there’s no way to get away from them.

**Mark DePue:** Did they have hind helicopters you’re working against?

**Gary Price:** No, no, no. Though we did train the Utah National Guard in air combat maneuvering, certified them as such, and they came back to be what we call our aggressor helos, painted a little differently. But they knew, so they could engage us, and we could do some maneuvering initially and be comfortable that they knew what to do from their standpoint, and us from our standpoint. So we had dissimilar aircraft. They were our Army Cobras, versus our Marine Cobras, which was a different paint scheme, single lens versus our dual and all that. But no, we did that, and it was kinda fun. They came down to every class, and they became our aggressor Cobras.

**Mark DePue:** Any other stories you remember from that tour?

**Gary Price:** No, that was, well, the only other thing, when I was the operations officer, I did get the award from the Navy League, the Holland M. Smith Award, Holland Smith as they call them. And I got to go back to Jackson, Florida for the awards ceremony.

**Mark DePue:** What’d you get that award for?

**Gary Price:** As the operations officer.

**Mark DePue:** So one operations officer in the Marine Corps, aviation, is assigned it each year, or what?

**Gary Price:** They picked out one operations guy for the year for that award, correct. And I was able to get it from what I did that one year, from activities and what I was responsible for, what we accomplished. All that was written up well and submitted. The previous, Butch, is it Butch, I think it was, one of the previous operations officer, two previous didn’t get it, and they applied for it every year, that’s one of those Navy League awards, and so I felt pretty fortunate, pretty good about getting it.

**Mark DePue:** What was the thing that contributed to you actually getting the award? Those manuals that you were talking about developing?

**Gary Price:** We did do some first time things. We did write the manual, we did write the air combat maneuvering manual, the assault support manual. We did have some significant support of the B52s and the F squadron and F16s, that didn’t hurt. We had some, we developed the, what they call the VIP course. In other words, all those COs who had the airplanes and had those students that came, we developed a week course just for them, so they could see what we’re doing. They could have a better understanding so when their WTI went back to the squadron, they would understand what they’re supposed to be doing, what they can be doing, and how they can do it. And this was a way for the CO to see how he can best support that training back at his squadron. So we gave them two day crash course in academics, and we gave them three days of flying, which they all liked too. But we had NBC, CBS, we had all the big news people there almost every class, and they’d go out and they’d be filming and watching and all this stuff. And it’d be some TV, film footage on, from what we’re doing exercise-wise. Because we did occupy, and of course of the big boost for the economy because we’d bring in almost a thousand, fifteen hundred people to support all this. So they were living on base, off base, and of course we were eating the community, so it was a big boost for economy as well. Timing might have been everything as well, but we did do a lot of work that one year that contributed.

**Mark DePue:** How do you top that assignment then? What’s next?

**Gary Price:** I left the area to be the XO, the executive officer, of HMM161 in Tustin.

**Mark DePue:** Tustin, what state?

**Gary Price:** Marine Corps Air Station, Tustin, in California.

**Mark DePue:** Okay.

**Gary Price:** Went back to Marine Corps Air Station, Tustin, and I was there for HMM268, and then back to Tustin for HMM161.

**Mark DePue:** And all these numbers and letters, those are specific units that you’re assigned to.

**Gary Price:** Yes, different squadrons. And so HMM is Helicopter Marine Medium. HMH, Helicopter Marine Heavy. And HMLA, Helicopter Marine Light Attack. Anyway, so HMM161, so I was the executive officer for that. And we ended up, took a cruise, first cruise I had. I’ve been to Okinawa, now, three times. The Hawaii squadrons were doing the cruises aboard ship. Well, they rotated that to where the West Coast were doing the ship cruises. So we went aboard ship, the LHA Belleau Wood was our ship to go on. We had a few exercises.

**Mark DePue:** I think we got a picture up right there on it.

**Gary Price:** Yes, so we were aboard that.

**Mark DePue:** Fairly new ship at the time?

**Gary Price:** It was fairly new, to my knowledge. It was, we had twelve helicopters. We had four Cobras. We had four Hueys. We had four 53s, and we had six AV8s. And then we had, that was the ace, air combat maneuvering, so we were task organized. We had the air LAD people, Low Altitude Air Defense system, we had all those people, so we were a pointy edge of the sword, if you wanna call it, as we floated. We had, that was the aviation combat element, and also, we had a battalion reinforced, so they had all the ground elements with them, logistically was there to support. So Belleau Wood was a command ship.

**Mark DePue:** The command ship for?

**Gary Price:** For this, the admiral in charge of this amphibious force, the ARG, Amphibious Ready Group, was aboard our ship.

**Mark DePue:** Was this part of a fleet that would be?

**Gary Price:** Part of a fleet. We never did see the other ships, but we saw about four or five of our ships. From our ships, there’s an LPD, another grunt, infantry level, the LST, which is more logistical support, and maybe two LPDs out there. And we floated around maybe four or five ships.

**Mark DePue:** In the Pacific?

**Gary Price:** In the Pacific. We cruised out of San Diego, drove to Okinawa. We were there for a short time, a few hours, and we were involved in exercises in South Korea, crashed a helicopter there in the exercise. Then we went to Hong Kong for a few days, then the Philippines for a few days, and then we went to Australia, and back to Hawaii.

**Mark DePue:** And essentially showing some American muscle in that region of the world.

**Gary Price:** That’s right. Just a standard cruise. We were supporting different countries, and we had some exercises with different parts from Australia. We worked with them on some exercises. And we were gonna go to Guam, but something was going off in the Central America area, and we cut that short and went to Hawaii. And we were never involved, but they didn’t know at the time, so we went back to Hawaii. I flew the advanced party, so I flew back to the States early, and the other guys came about a week and a half later aboard ship.

**Mark DePue:** Well, at this time, you’re a major?

**Gary Price:** A lieutenant colonel.

**Mark DePue:** When did you get promoted to lieutenant colonel?

**Gary Price:** When I was in Yuma. I was a major shortly after I got there, and I was a lieutenant colonel four years later because I was a lieutenant colonel when I went to the squadron HMM161.

**Mark DePue:** As a lieutenant colonel, is that the point in time when you’d be eligible as a Marine aviator to take command of a squadron?

**Gary Price:** Yes.

**Mark DePue:** And that’s the thing that all of you guys are vying for, is it not?

**Gary Price:** That’s right. That was a key thing. And it’s funny because I called a friend at mine. When I was at Yuma, Bobby Joe Garter was there, and he went to a squadron. Several squadron COs were relieved throughout the fleet for different things.

**Mark DePue:** For misconduct or bad performance?

**Gary Price:** Misconduct, maybe not doing their job, incompetence, you name it. And so I called Bobby Joe up because I didn’t know, says, “Man, do I want to be a CO now? All my people I knew were being relieved. I don’t need the stress. Find something else to do.” And Bobby Joe told me, he says, “You know, Gary, I’m here. It’s still the place to go. It’s still the dream to come true. There are risks, and there’s responsibilities and accountabilities that goes with that job. But if you just work hard at it, you’ll find that it’s worth every risk there is.” So I said okay, my goal now was to be the CO of a squadron. And that first step, at that time, was the be the executive officer because they were basically, if you were competent and doing okay, and your CO liked you, and you worked well and thought you could do the job, he would recommend to the next echelon that, hey, Gary should be that commanding officer.

**Mark DePue:** Wasn’t the executive a major, though?

**Gary Price:** It can be.

**Mark DePue:** Okay.

**Gary Price:** It can be, but on the ship cruises, they had been lieutenant colonel CO and lieutenant colonel XO, executive officer. And when I became the CO, my executive officer was a lieutenant colonel as well. So it was a change in time how they were doing things, because a lot of times the CO came from outside the squadron, just showed up three, four weeks before they transitioned, and he was a lieutenant colonel, got promoted shortly before that, so things changed how they did things over those years.

**Mark DePue:** What unit did you get command of? Well, tell me when it happened, and more about the unit too.

**Gary Price:** We cruised for six months. We came back roughly in April timeframe. And that CO was, did a rotate in June, and so in June I was what they call fleet-up. So I was lieutenant colonel, so I became the CO of HMM161.

**Mark DePue:** This is June of ’89?

**Gary Price:** Yes.

**Mark DePue:** Okay.

**Gary Price:** Yes, trying to get my dates right.

**Mark DePue:** And HMM, medium helicopters?

**Gary Price:** Medium helicopters, 46s.

**Mark DePue:** Well, you’re back to your home turf then.

**Gary Price:** That’s right. Now I’m the CO, and the strange thing is that the new air group CO came from the East Coast, and he was, his experience in the East Coast was that they had a stay back squadron. Of all the squadrons they had, they had one squadron who would to the VIP missions, maybe some generic repelling missions down there, or they had some other things. And the idea was that the state back squadron would do all that stuff, which would free up the more, free up the other squadrons who was gonna be deployed to do more training, not take away their flight time, let them do more training, getting ready for their deployment, where they’re gonna go. And so that was a concept. Along with that concept became, well, you’re also lowest on the priority for people, on parts, aircraft, and flight time.

**Mark DePue:** The one that’s on the training mission is lowest?

**Gary Price:** The stay back squadron.

**Mark DePue:** Okay.

**Gary Price:** The stay back squadron was now, and that was how the East Coast air group did it. And this guy, the colonel, came from the East Coast, so that’s what he wanted to do at MAGS16, which is where I was, Marine Air Group 16. So that was my mission. So as it worked out, I had twelve aircraft. Four was flyable because I didn’t have any parts to keep the other ones flying. Out of thirty-three to thirty-five pilots I had ten, to include me, and I became the functional check pilot and everything you could think of, because everybody was either flying or was sick, or I ended up flying almost every day. We did the same missions. We would go twenty-nine palms for stag displays and just fly out there and sit there for a day, and then come back home. Those were the kind of missions we did. And so, but ironically, in this timeframe, in squadron tour, CO tours eighteen months. So roughly seven months into this program, I get called on a Sunday morning by the group CO, and he said, “Gary, we got this Desert Shield program.” And the squadron was assigned to Marine Air Group 70, and Marine Air Group 70 was assigned to the seventh MEB in -----, and the seventh MEB’s responsibility was the Middle East.

**Mark DePue:** The Marine Expeditionary?

**Gary Price:** Brigade.

**Mark DePue:** Brigade, okay.

**Gary Price:** MEB. And so the seventh MEB was responsible for actions in the Middle East, and that’s how a West Coast squadron got attached to the Middle East. So we got, the seventh MEB was activated, which activated Marine Air Group 70, and I, my HMM161, again, a stay back squadron, was assigned to MAG 70 as part of this contingency.

**Mark DePue:** Put some specific dates on this. August 2, 1990 is when Saddam Hussein, after the long war that they had with Iran, decided that Kuwait was there for the taking, and on August 2, Iraqi forces invaded and occupied Kuwait. And very quickly after that, of course, the world mobilized. President Bush mobilized, and it wasn’t just five days later, August 7, that officially Operation Desert Shield began. So that probably was about the timeframe you were just talking about.

**Gary Price:** Yes, in fact, August 13, I was in Saudi Arabia. How I got there is a whole other story because I get called in Sunday morning from the group’s CO, he says, “This Desert Shield program and all that, you’re gonna be going.” But skipper, I only got four airplanes. I only got ten pilots. I didn’t have any maintenance people. I didn’t have any gunners, didn’t have barely any crew chiefs to man four, let alone twelve. Didn’t have twelve airplanes. He said, “Well, we’ll give you the squadron next to you airplanes.” And so I came back, and Wayne was a good friend of mine, but not very long, when I told him I was gonna take your airplanes. And my maintenance guys that I had went down there almost at, this was now Monday, and my phone at home was, while at work, just would not stop ringing. I had volunteers from East Coast, from Hawaii to everywhere, to get attached to the squadron. I happened to have two pilots from Yuma who was helping me do some academic training, and so I kept those two because they were my instructor base, my WTIs if you wanna call them. And they became, ten pilots, they became the two. So anyway, I end up, in that week, we were in Saudi Arabia, all of us. I had twelve airplanes. I had thirty-five pilots. I had every maintenance personnel, gunner, more gunners than I thought I ever dreamed of, and crew chiefs to man all the airplanes, and so I had more than what they call a table organization for the squadron when I left. And we took the airplanes, the mechanics went over and checked them out, and the pilots signed the paperwork to accept them, flew them to El Toro, tore them all down, and put them in C5s and off they went. They flew over to Saudi, almost that same day, four aircraft per C5.

**Mark DePue:** You’re saying that by August 13, the entire unit is in Saudi Arabia.

**Gary Price:** Yeah, I landed in Saudi Arabia the 13th of August.

**Mark DePue:** And then you gotta reassemble the aircraft, it sounds like.

**Gary Price:** That’s right. We did. We pulled them all out, put all back together, had to do a ground turn, make sure they’re all functional, we didn’t lose anything. And when we took with us GP tents, we didn’t have enough cots for everybody, and we got, I never saw a 9mm, but I got one issued with fifty rounds before I left, and we got into country. Jubail International Airport was a brand new airport, brand new international airport, never used by international planes, to my knowledge. They had, Saudis had some helicopters there, as part of their self-defense force, I guess, and they had a brand new terminal. And Scott, Scott, Mike Hearth, the CO of a Huey squadron in Camp Pendleton, arrived a few hours before I did, so he was really the first one to land, and I was basically the second one to land. And his squadron people occupied most of the terminal, so I told my sergeant, major, and XO, I says, “Okay, this is all desert, everywhere you look, just desert. Go find a place and pitch the tents.”

**Mark DePue:** I think we got a picture here of, that you probably took yourself of Jubail International Airport.

Yes. International Airport.

**Mark DePue:** It doesn’t look like much.

**Gary Price:** We landed and we just, we said go out in the dirt, so we went out there and we pitched about twelve GP tents, general purpose tents, and we occupied a little spot in the hangar there for our maintenance people, or for our equipment. And the offices was, we grabbed a little corner of, terminal portion, within the terminal, for the maintenance guys. Unfortunately, there was only about four restrooms, and they were quickly overran and plugged up within a week, within a week in. Mike had about three hundred people, and I had over three hundred people total. And we picked up, we put our tents down, and we got them all staked and set up, and then we had to remove them, I think we moved them two different times. Staked them all out, had to pick them all up, and move them somewhere else, picked them all up again and moved them somewhere else, within about three week time period, based on other units coming in and how we were gonna be situated. Nobody in charge there, we just got there. There was nothing. There was nothing there other than that terminal, and I was the second unit to arrive. There were C5s and C141s landing right and left behind me as we, all week long and forever until the war started.

**Mark DePue:** But you’re part of this MEB, the MEB?

**Gary Price:** But we never saw the MEB. And we never saw the Marine Air Group 70, either, because they’re the ones, the air bosses. And Mike and I would sit down, say, “What are we doing? I don’t know.” There were some Apaches there. So we come and there’s Apaches for ourselves because they didn’t have any stinger, we didn’t have any weapons to my knowledge. I had 50 cal machine guns I didn’t have any bullets for.

**Mark DePue:** You’re talking about Apache helicopters?

**Gary Price:** Apache helicopters.

**Mark DePue:** Army helicopters?

**Gary Price:** Army helicopters were there. There was four of them.

**Mark DePue:** And you just mentioned stinger, that’s the weapon that shoots down the aircraft.

**Gary Price:** Yes.

**Mark DePue:** Now how did that factor into it?

**Gary Price:** Well, we didn’t have any. The Cobra guys had, they had, I can’t remember the name of the weapon, it was a missile, but it had to be laser designated. We had, grunts had what they call mule A ground level designation, but the Apache can be airborne and designate the target. Our airborne capability was OB10s, but they were a different base. And so we commandeered, we asked the Army to hang around longer to help us out until we found a capability, airborne capability, to support the weapons that the Cobras had.

**Mark DePue:** Well, it sounds like a little bit of confusion, but also, it was this timeframe that the news media was portraying you guys over in the desert as, essentially, a speed bump. So how did it feel being a speed bump, if the Iraqis decide to invade Saudi Arabia?

**Gary Price:** Well, we didn’t get any news there, so what we probably didn’t know probably didn’t hurt us, because we didn’t hear the word speed bump until much later in the game. We were, I remember Mike and I and other CO friends of mine, started arriving with their squadrons, became a survival. There was no water. There was no showers. What food we had was MREs we brought, and so those survival instincts, taking care of my three hundred people, making sure they were taken care of with water, food, and shelter was the game plan, the priorities that we had, as well as get our aircraft up and running. And then we started flying around to see where in the hell are we? What’s around us? What threat do we have? So we became, we set up a perimeter around the airfields. All the squadron guys supported with people, so we had two to three machine gun nests that we were a part of, of the team plan, as far as our protection. The threat was the Bedouins, the Bedouin camel herders, I guess you call them. They were just in the wild out there, just going from point A to point B, and they had weapons. And so we were fearful that they would come to the airfield, or we had to be careful flying over them because they were shooting at us every so often.

**Mark DePue:** Now it had been a long time since the United States had been at war like this. Did it surprise you?

**Gary Price:** Yes and no. It was a matter of time. We had Grenada, which was a little skirmish down at that country.

**Mark DePue:** And Panama.

**Gary Price:** And we had a few little ones, but not a big war. And yes, the threat in numbers where overwhelming. They had the fourth or second largest air force in the world, Iraq. They had number one in the grunts, tanks, and so forth. We were trying to get equal to maybe two to one superiority over them. And so fortunately for us that they didn’t do anything for almost six months. That allowed us to build up, that allowed us to train in that environment. So yes, we were a speed bump, and the fear was gas, as much as anything else.

**Mark DePue:** You mean chemical?

**Gary Price:** Chemical warfare. Because we were pretty behind the state of art when it came to protection for that. Our aircraft wasn’t sealed or anything, but we did get the British AR5 gas mask, and so that was another training process. It’s wetsuit-like with a charcoal liner for a flight suit, underneath your flight suit, and you’re talking about warm temperatures, and now you got a rubber hood to go over it with a plastic lens. And you had a pump that you carried with you, which gave you overpressures, they call it, so it forced air in your head and hood, and keep the, would leak out, but that kept the gas from coming in. And you had your flight suit over that and you had night vision goggles, helmet, all that was part of a, now I gotta learn how to fly, shoot and train with this AR5.

**Mark DePue:** I would think that vision would be a problem just because you’re sweating so much in that mask.

**Gary Price:** Well, if the pump is working okay, at least it wasn’t sweating too bad. And once you got in the aircraft, supposedly, you could hook it up to the electrical system, which gave you the power, versus the battery we carried. So we got there, and we end up, we were at Jubail for a long enough time to where the MEB, the Air Group 16 finally came on board. We eventually had, I don’t know, probably ten squadrons there alone, helicopter squadrons. And then the East Coast squadron started coming on board, and they ended up going out there, north of where we were at, not too close to the border, and they built a whole new airfield out of the desert, called Lonesome Dove. And you’re talking about the same thing we had, they now had at nowhere, with tents and capabilities and mess halls and showers, you name it, out there, nowhere. We ended up leaving Jubail, went to a place called Tanajib, which was a small.

**Mark DePue:** Tent-a-jeeb?

**Gary Price:** Tanajib, that’s how I pronounced it.

**Mark DePue:** T-E-N-T?

**Gary Price:** Tanajib, T-A-N, I think. It was north of Manifa, another air base up in that area. And we were moved up there and it was another place, a plan to get closer to the border. The air war was gonna be picking up, if not already started by that time. And we were looking at the ground war, G-Day, coming around the corner, trying to get situated logistically and physically for the potential of breaching the borders and going north.

**Mark DePue:** What did Susan think of you finally going into harm’s way?

**Gary Price:** Well, it’s funny because Sunday, when I got called, she was in Yuma with her girlfriends, and we had plans to meet in San Diego. I called her up and says, “I don’t think we’re gonna be able to meet in San Diego. You might wanna come home.” Because not only what I was doing, but she, being the commanding officer’s wife, kind of ran the officers’ wives’ club, if you wanna call it, for the squadron. So I not only had the troops and the aircraft to take care of. Her and I kinda looked at, doing, getting all the troops in the auditorium. We’re looking at three, four days to coordinate. The chaplain came in, the legal guys came in with wills and so forth, and ----- attorneys, and communication system plan, what we had planned to set up, and all that. And when I left, there was no communication between Suzy and I, except for when I got over there, we eventually able to communicate, probably after the first month, I get one phone call a month. One phone call a week, and I had about five minutes to talk. It was like one of those things, “I love you baby,” and then we started saying, “Okay, I got Joe and Jim, and these guys, they need to check on their wives,” and she had a list the same way on her side, so it became interacting, problem, issues or concerns to take care of on both ends.

**Mark DePue:** Tell me exactly, the best you can, describe the mission that your unit had.

**Gary Price:** Well, our aircraft missions didn’t change. Our aircraft mission is troop transport, and the other alternate mission was medical evacuation and logistics, supply, resupply. And in a mechanized war, which is what we were in, there wasn’t a whole lot of requirement for a troop movement, though we did move a lot of troops from point A to point B within the ground floors of Saudi Arabia, getting them situated and all that.

**Mark DePue:** In other words, you’re keeping busy as the build-up was occurring.

**Gary Price:** Yes, we also got build-up, and we also developed the medevac plan, because we’re looking at, I think, one percent, ten percent, we’re looking over twenty thousand casualties, potentially a lot of gas type, chemical attacks type, and so now we’re looking at, we had a USS comfort, hospital ship, in the Jubail port area. We had a major hospital in the port of Jubail, but in between Jubail and the border, where do you go? We’re looking at a good hour, hour and a half to get to the border, and so they had developed some intermediate medical sites, based on the capability, to a triage up by the border. And so the game plan that we developed for the theater, at least on the Marine Corps side, was that we had, if the casualty happened at the border, we had helicopters at the border and medical evacuation capability, and we were gonna pick them up, triage them right there, and then haul them back to the next level, sustain them, live, better, then move them back to the hospital, then eventually to the hospital ship. So we had this network of transportation capabilities. We also had a network of medical capabilities at different stages. When the G-Day, the ground war started, I and another aircraft was at the border, about a quarter mile from the border. We flew there around 05 in the morning, with my AR5 gas mask on, with my night vision goggles, we landed out there in the desert, and we walk in there. Everybody else was in these gas masks, the ground war was gonna kick off. We set there, my little battery operated blower keeping my head cool, best I can, and set there, I think it was ten o’clock in the morning, and nothing was going on. Didn’t get a call, didn’t see anything. About eleven, we had some casualties come in. By this time, ground war had gone so fast that they didn’t have time to drive fifty miles back to give me a casualty. We started getting calls to go pick up the casualties that occurred.

**Mark DePue:** In Kuwait?

**Gary Price:** In Kuwait. So the breach was a piece of cake, from what they say. They had a two plan, and it went as planned, and they just rolled across with their tanks, and nothing stopped them. Now I’m sitting here, a kind of obsolete concept, because we weren’t expecting it to go that fast. And so I finally says, “I’m not wearing that gas mask anymore.” We took it off about eleven o’clock, and so we all took it off, and there wasn’t any gas or chemical attacks. What chemical injuries was from the gas that was released in the breach. When they blew up those areas, there was some mines that had some gas in them, and that was what some of the grunts got caught with. So now I had a couple Iraqis who were injured, and I had a couple Marines who was injured. I actually had to put them in two different aircraft because I was afraid the Marines would get up and kill the other Iraqis, or the Marines kill the Iraqis, because they were injured and so forth. So anyway, we ended up flying back to the second stage, and actually flew the Iraqis back to the Jubail port. And basically, my mission was over with at that time because the grunts were so far inland. So now I came back to the squadron, Tanajib, but the base that we were base, we were kind of getting missions from was Lonesome Dove, our fueling as well. So we would go back there to refuel. And then call the command up and find out where our next step is, so a lot of us came back to Tanajib to get the squadron, airplanes fixed, refueled, rechecked, and rearmed. And go in, I checked with my air group boss, Colonel Garrett, and see what the plan is, how it’s going, what’s going on next. It was kind of a piecemeal, what the war was doing. All I knew was that they were just moving really fast, and we were flying out of Lonesome Dove to stage. I had medevac guys setting there, I had medevac guys staged some other place, and then we were getting missions to go into Kuwait to pick up some grunts and move them around a little bit, and not a whole lot, not a unit like it was a recon element to go someplace and drop them. So we end up, I came back to Tanajib and we end up getting a mission to go out to Lonseom Dove and I was gonna relieve a Huey squadron, a Huey debt. It was two Hueys that was assigned to General Myatt, who was the first battalion commander, division commander.

**Mark DePue:** For the Marine division?

**Gary Price:** For the Marine division. He was already about fifty, twenty-five to thirty miles north of the border. And so I flew up there, and this is before, or right at the timeframe when all the oil wells got let off. And so no more than I get there, the Huey guys had a system on the aircraft that I didn’t have called a loud hailer, a big speaking system, speakerphone, which wasn’t on my requirements. So when I go in to check in with the division and talk to the Huey guys, they said, “You have to have a loud hailer for the mission you’re gonna be doing.” I said, “Well, I don’t have one. Guess what, Huey, you’re staying with me.” So I commandeered the other two Huey guys, which I knew already from my Yuma days, so they stayed with me. So now I had two Hueys and two 46s. They also had four firing guns, so they were my gunship escorts, as well, for any kind of medevac. Well, by this time, the freaking smoke was everywhere, just covered us. And overnight, nothing was going on, a few things were happening, that morning we got a call for medevac. Mike Kurt, the Huey CO friend, called for a medevac. He was up there about twenty miles in front of us, and so I get out there and we’re walking around, and I can’t see the ground. It’s eight or nine o’clock in the morning. I’m putting night vision goggles on, can’t see.

**Mark DePue:** I think we got a shot that you took while you were there of the oil fields burning, if we can get that up as well. And obviously, you just mentioned you were on the ground for some of this.

**Gary Price:** Yes. So on the ground, where this stuff was all over us and we couldn’t see, it was like eight, nine o’clock in the morning, and so we had a map that was just littered with power lines. They were everywhere. And so all that smoke was blowing in the direction that we were, so it got up and then it went over, and it just kind of settled where we happened to be at. And we were there before it came to us, and when we woke up in the morning, or that night, it was all like it was one big cloud of smoke, and you couldn’t see anything. Could hardly breathe, but you had that scarf around the mouth a little bit to keep some of that bad stuff out of it. And so I got night vision goggles, and I’m walking. I can barely see the ground. I get in this aircraft, and I’m thinking, “This is stupid. I can’t see where I’m going. I got night vision goggles. I got four aircraft, and my map just shows power lines from the two hundred foot down to ten feet.” So we take off. I thought maybe it’ll get better. And we took off, and I no more got three hundred yards, and I says, “This is stupid. I can’t see where I’m going. I’m on the insturments at fifty feet.” So I told the crew, I said, “We’re gonna make one big left turn and follow me back, we’re gonna land back because we can’t see where we’re gonna go.” And I call Mike and say, “Mike, I can’t make it. I can’t see.” Now, the other side of the coin, how did Mike get up there? Well, Mike, before he had the issue, General Myatt, he’s the one that’s caught and trapped up there, twenty-five miles in front of us. Now, he’s a general, and he’s up there with the forward element, and he gets surrounded. He’s got tanks shooting at him everywhere around, he’s got two Humvees, and I think a jeep or something, and he is caught. Mike happened to have an OV10, area observer guy, who knew how to work the FLIAR, forward looking infrared system. And they had put that on the Huey as an experiment down the road, and Mike had it on his aircraft. So he commandeers an OV10 AO to work the FLIAR. Mike had night vision goggles to look at, and between the FLIAR, who could see the wires and poles, and him, he flew up to see where General Myatt was in that area, came back and had his Cobra guys loaded and armed, follow him in close trace up to that area. And when they got over the area, according to General Myatt, the Cobras were over his vehicle just firing rockets, three-sixty all the way around him. Expend all their ordinates, Mike calls them back, gets another group of Cobras follow him in there, and he did that for almost an hour. And so Mike led them in and out, led them in and out. And in that timeframe is when they called for me, and I couldn’t see anything. I didn’t have the FLIAR, and I wasn’t gonna take a chance, and I couldn’t fly high. If I fly too high, now I could be a, I didn’t have the right what they call IFF codes, Identified Friend or Foe. And if you didn’t have the right IFF codes, then you could be a bandit, and potentially be shot down, and so all that led to I’m staying on the ground. I can’t see where I’m going. I don’t want to be shot down. I didn’t have the fuel to circle around there and all that good stuff to start with, so I came back. The two, my two 46s and the two Hueys, we set there for about another two hours. Finally, it got a little bit better, and they were still kinda calling for a medevac. I said, “Aw, shit,” so I started talking to the Huey guys, and started looking at the threat, looking at the smoke, and said we might be able to go into Kuwait, which is where no Marines were at and no friendlies were at, to my knowledge. That’s why we didn’t go the first time, because they were all bad guys. We just did a feint, amphibious feint in that area, that supposedly tied in a lot of Iraqis to hold them looking that way while we came up the backside.

**Mark DePue:** Looking back towards the ocean.

**Gary Price:** Yes, sir. And so it was a feint. But none of the guys aboard ship knew that, really, till I found out later on. They were planning for the real thing. But anyway, so we didn’t go that way initially for the medevac flight to get around the smoke because that was bad man land right now, and I didn’t want to take a chance, being out there, afraid and unarmed type of thing. So eventually, we said we gotta get up there. So I had the two Hueys, and I might have a picture of that as well. We were flying up there, and I had my Huey at one side. He was my escort. And we flew around that area. We got up to the coordinates they gave us for the medevac, and they were already gone. By this time, they have already got rid of all the bad guys, the Cobras did, and General Myatt and all those guys left to go up to Kuwait International Airport. So when I got to the medevac site and I started talking, they said they were already at the airport. So I flew in the airport, and that was probably one of the first forty helicopters that landed there. Two 46s, two Hueys landed there, and here’s General Myatt with his battalion behind him, all the battalion he had, and they had a big array of weapons that they have found and captured and taken en route. And then I’m sitting there talking to General Myatt, and then General Boomer walks up, the three star, he’s in charge of the whole Marine unit there, this whole theater. So General Boomer, he and I were talking with him a little bit, and so I congratulated both of those guys for the mission we accomplished. So now we’re sitting there, now what are we gonna do. Our mission was done. The grunts were already at the airport. The airport was somewhat secured, and so we walked around, and the fifth Marines were down a little further, and they had already occupied some buildings. We walked out and we had ZPU4s, which was four-barrel anti-aircraft weapons, with the radar guide, a very deadly weapon.

**Mark DePue:** Soviet systems.

**Gary Price:** Soviets. And they’re all out there, three or four of them, all got weapons, bullets in their chambers, all operational. The people just left. And there was a lot of charred buildings, all torn up from our bombing efforts to set the stage for us to get where we got. So we moved from the border right to that Kuwait, probably in a day and a half. It was real fast operations. So now I’m sitting there, and I didn’t have enough fuel to go flying around too much, other than like a one-way trip, straight shot back to Lonesome Dove to get fuel, and couldn’t go straight back because of all the smoke and the wires and so forth, and I didn’t want to fly high and set myself up. So I stayed there and, fortunately, the thunderstorm came in, so now I’m there for three days, still stuck there. The Hueys, when they finally cleared out, they had the fuel, so they went home. And sitting there, and all of a sudden I see eight 46s laying on the opposite end of the airfield, and they come, air taxiing and taxiing up to where we at. And it was a reserve unit. And I’m thinking, what are they doing here? So they end up, did a troop movement, landed some battalions somewhere in the field, and they came up here to get fuel. Well, there was no fuel there, and they were like me, they were stuck. And so I had enough fuel eventually to, when the smoke cleared a little bit, to go straight back, and we did. They ended up having fuel trucks come fill them up, so they were there for two more days. And so meanwhile, the battalion guys left. When I was there, when I got back to Tanajib a little bit and get refueled, now I’m doing VIP missions to go up and show them. Me, in that timeframe, is when they had that, I don’t know what you call it, the bombing of the rogue going out of Kuwait, they cut them all up, that was going on at that time. So when I get back, the VIPs wanna go up and see what was happening and all that stuff, so now I started flying missions up there to show and tell and sightsee and all that.

**Mark DePue:** But you’re still flying through all the burning oil wells, aren’t you?

**Gary Price:** Not as much. Somehow the weather becaused that to dissipate more. I can fly up there without having to fly into them. You can still them burning, but nothing like you saw in the picture there. It wasn’t that thick, it wasn’t that intense. It was there, but I could still fly twenty-five, fifty feet. I could see. And so the ground war didn’t last very long, as we know now. So I get all my airplanes back. My squadron, in my absence, had a mission. They were assigned, it was a daytime mission, a troop lift, it was four 46s from my squadron, and for about three other squadrons, 53s, Hueys, Cobras, a hundred plus helicopters out in the desert floor at about nine o’clock in the morning, waiting for the word go to go. And the mission was to pick up this battalion unit, reinforced, and take them to a point in the desert, kind of a stopping point, while the American Marines made the turn to the left. This was a block whatever was gonna come down from that side. Well, it didn’t go on time. It didn’t go at all during the daylight. So now, it became dark. And Larry Bynack, a good friend of mine as well as my safety officer, was telling me the story that the airplanes were scattered a mile apart from one end to the other, just in between there, and there was no communication, there was no vehicles to get you around. So the guys at one end had to walk to middle and they all kind of walked in, and they kind of hung out there for a while to figure out what we’re gonna do, when are we gonna go? And so eventually, it became a night vision goggle mission, being dark, and they were still on tap for this troop movement. And so they end up, eight, nine o’clock thereabouts, they get told to make the mission go. And it was one of these quick things, take off now. Well, the guys were all in the middle there talking, now they all gotta run about a half mile a piece to their airplanes, brief their crews, and then take off. According to Larry, he said, “We get back. We just ran to our aircraft, put on our night vision goggles and there was no rhyme or reason for the takeoff sequence.” So airplanes were taking off, and my dash two in this, my flight of four, it was a flight of four, flight of four, flight of four all over the place, a mile apart. Took off, and of course, we had a one big humongous footprint for dust, like moondust almost. And so Mitch, who was dash two, my operations officer, the lead picked up and he picked up, and he waited for the guy in front of him to pick up, and the mist picked up and started going forward. And of course, now it’s ---- far, they couldn’t see anything. And Mitch hits the ground, rolls over. So potentially a crash. As it worked out it wasn’t an accident, it was an incident. We salvaged the airplane and brought them all back.

**Mark DePue:** Is that the one that we got a picture of, the aircraft that’s obviously pretty well damaged?

**Gary Price:** Yep, there it is. So it crashed, it rolled over, all the crew members okay, as I found out. I get a call from my group CO, about eleven o’clock, says that you got one crashed 46. Where’s my crew? We don’t know. Are they okay? Don’t know. So I spend half the night calling all the medical sites in the area I knew of, and no one had heard or seen my guys. So the next morning I got the maintenance officers give me the best airplane you got so I can go find my people. So I go first to the crash site, and the plane is rolled over on its side. And I flew over and circled it a couple times, and all of a sudden these people started walking out of the aircraft. So I landed the aircraft and my crewmembers were all inside the aircraft, and no one, the mission, they all picked up and left, there’s nothing behind, left behind, other than the aircraft and those guys. And they weren’t gonna be just wandering through the desert. They stayed by the aircraft. So I picked them up, took them to Lonesome Dove.

**Mark DePue:** They were happy to see you.

**Gary Price:** That’s right. And I, at first, I was hoping they weren’t there, but at the same time I’m glad they were there, because the nearest site was miles and miles away, and they would never have found it because we didn’t, they didn’t have the map. So I picked them up, took them to Lonesome Dove, did all the administrative things as far as get them all checked out, and they were all okay. The aircraft had, the grunts had took the old jeeps, World War II type jeeps, as I call it, there’s probably a 155 or something like that, a name for them, but they, the grunts had modified these jeeps with stinger missiles on them. So they end up ripping the back of the ramp down, and they pull those jeeps sideways out of the aircraft, got all the ordinates out of there, and they got the jeep and they just drove off. And so that was what the grunts needed, and they wanted that weapon, so anyway. But the aircraft was picked up after the war, shortly after that, 53 Echo, my neighbor Bob picked it up. And of course he teases me, how he had to go and pick up my aircraft out of that desert floor with a sling. And they carried it back to Jubail, and we flew it back to the States, and they supposedly fixed it up, and so it was an incident versus an accident. So the squadron did get hit for an accident. The Air Group didn’t get hit for another accident, which they had numerous accidents, during this training evolution, and then the air war. Mike had a bad accident where it killed everybody. It was a thunderstorm event, and they had a mission that they had to do, it was pick up some maps and so forth, but anyway. So we’ve had a lot of accidents and some casualties on the helicopter side. Crashed like three helicopters in training alone.

**Mark DePue:** Before I get you, get the unit out of the Middle East, I wanted to ask you four more questions, and most of this would’ve been things that happened before the war kicked off. And the air war kicked off January 17, and then a month later, February 24, before the ground war kicked off, and it was all done by the 28th. So it went blazingly fast once the ground war started. But you have quite a few months that you were there, and looking at the pictures of the Jubail International Airport, there’s not much there. So what do your troops do during ground time?

**Gary Price:** It was kind of a commander’s paradise, if you want to call it, because there was no R&R, there was no drinking, there was no women, and so most of my people were scrounging around, getting, finding the coffee out of MREs and overdosing on coffee, if you want to call it that. And the wives’ club, Suzy and the ladies back home, really kept the morale going because my wife had done a lot of fundraising items, events. They bought VCRs, even bought us a small TV, they bought us a Christmas tree, they got books, they got videos and so forth, sent that all over. They had tablets made and other things made for us. Christmas came around, and they all sent us gifts and so forth, and we had a couple Santa Clauses in the unit, went around and placed little items in different people’s hooches and so forth in bed. And so they kept the morale going. They, as I talked to her after the fact, was probably more stressed out for what she was doing because people problems don’t go away, whether you’re at home or whether you’re deployed, and people problems just kind of become bigger problems when the husband’s gone. And it never fails, every time I deploy, it seems like that next day the hot water heater blows, the washer machine doesn’t work, or something goes wrong at the house that becauses a major catastrophe. And nothing different here. When we all left town, every, seemed like every wife was calling Suzy up and what’s going on, and Suzy became real good friends with the chaplain of the base. So her and the chaplain became good friends, and every time she had an issue with a wife or to help take care of the issue, she would get the chaplain, and the chaplain and her would go visit the people and so forth. Now go way back when, when before I got to the squadron initially as an XO, when they deployed before I got there, there was tents pitched in front of the CO’s house because they wanna know right then when, because they figured the CO knows everything, the CO’s wife knows everything, would hear things first. And they want to be right there when things came in, so they were pitching tents in their front yard. That’s how bad, and I tell Suzy, “No way we’re gonna have that.” So but she did know as much as I knew, when I heard it, I was able to get a hold of her. And she was getting some information from the air group that was left in the rear, as well as the chaplain for what his communications was letting her know. And so, but they didn’t really know how we were doing. They would hear stories on the news, so did we. And we would think, holy crap, where did this happen at, and we would find out that it happened up north and all that. But yeah, they, we were, played cards every night. We were always flying day and night because of maintenance, training requirements. We had no GPS systems in the aircraft. Our standard navigation is a ---, tactical navigation system and an ADF, and Automatic Direction Finder. That’s what we have, which does no good in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait because those units, those navigation sites on the ground don’t exist. So when we first got there, for almost six months, we had a big map of Saudi.

**Mark DePue:** There aren’t a whole lot of terrain features to be looking for.

**Gary Price:** Well, you’re right. And so what we would do is throw a dart on the map and say, “Okay, our training mission tonight is to navigate to that point.” So you had coordinates, you had distance, and you had a heading. Back in the old days, it was a time, distance check, because you’re right, you get airborne and it’s just flat. There are no obstacles to look at, to keep you left, right, north of the course, so what you had to do was maintain airspeed and maintain heading the best you can, and hopefully you’ll get in the right area to where you can see somebody on the ground that might get you to the ground. But that was how we trained, and we did that day and night, night vision goggles. Trying to land in that stuff was challenging because it was like moon dust, so you had to be careful where you landed, thinking that, trying to minimize the moon dust signature, so your technique for landing had to be just right, closure to the ground. Wasn’t always perfect, but we didn’t crash any airplanes in that regard. But that’s what we did. We trained during the daytime, we trained at night, and tried to keep this cycle going and trying to keep all the pilots up to speed and current, because we didn’t know what, when, or where it was gonna happen next, from a medical standpoint for flying. And we had night drills with the perimeter. And my sergeant major at the time, he had a heart attack while we were there. And I had a flight surgeon. It’s funny because we called him grasshopper, you know, kung-fu show, grasshopper in those days. Well, he shaved his head bald, and he got nicknamed the grasshopper and it just kinda stuck. So he was playing, the grasshopper was playing cards with the sergeant major and some of the other guys, and the sergeant major kind of keeled over there, so we took him, take him to the hospital that day, that night. And he was okay, but he was kind of done for the war, and he went home. The military had a once R&R site. It was a camp number. And a lot of these camps over there had normal camp workers from Saudi Arabia for working the oil wells and the refineries. They would be like a city within a confine perimeter and so forth. We had invites to go to one camp, for example, and they came out and say, “Hey, colonel, you can take four guys, five guys this place over here, they’ll come pick you up. They got a steak and lobster night for you guys.” And so we go there, within a security, gated community, and you go inside and there’s condos or apartments, and we met the Americans who was there, and they were working on like a yearly basis. They get a couple days every year to go home. But they just went down to Riyadh and bought some steaks and lobsters and came up, and they served us dinner. There was no alcohol in Saudi, so they even had to steal down to the basement. They were making their own whiskey and so forth.

**Mark DePue:** Were there any prohibitions that the Saudi government was putting on for religious services?

**Gary Price:** We did not see that. We did not have that problem in our base compounds, and that’s as far as our perimeter went. Only in the newspaper did I read outside the compounds that they had issues. Women couldn’t drive, they had to keep their faces. But nothing on the religious side. We were sitting, our base was sitting next to a mosque. The only thing we didn’t like was that that mosque was going off every four hours all twenty-four hours of the day, every four hours sounding it off, how they’re doing their yelling and preaching on the speakers.

**Mark DePue:** The prayers.

**Gary Price:** Prayers. And so that was going every four hours, all night long, all day long, all the time. But there was no restriction on us, in our compound, for religious, and we had a kind of a generic view, a church service. They did bring in certain specialties. The Jewish had their own church, and of course the Catholics had their own. Then you had kind of the Protestant type approach, but there was no restrictions on what we could do or not do. And so we didn’t see any of that in that six months, seven months we were there, in that regard. Again, we were restricted from going into town, though I did go in town to, I had my troops. Early on the aircraft was painted, in that picture, of a tan in color. We went there green. And we did some experiments back in the eighties about household latex paint. The concept was aboard ship, we would be able to change colors of our aircraft based on the terrain we would be going into, based on the country we’re gonna be fighting or flying in. So instead of being a green, olive drab aircraft, we can paint it whatever we want to paint. We had all the combinations of paint aboard ship, that was the concept. Well, we painted one in the squadron, back in the States, waited maybe a week or two, flew it a several times, and we figured just wash it off. Well, it didn’t wash off so well, so we had a pink aircraft in the squadron, and it wouldn’t come off. And so, anyway, Mike, when he went there and saw it, he had bought, brought with him polyurethane paint, which is the correct paint type to paint the aircraft with. Well, I didn’t have time for all that. Obviously I had less than a week and I was gone with some other aircraft squadrons, so I sent a few people in town with some money, go find all the latex paint you can get, and we’ll just come back and paint them. So we had three types of camouflage colors. We would paint them all up. The aircraft already had a pattern to it, green, gray and black. We just changed those patterns to tan, light tan, and darker tan. We paint one aircraft, let it try. We had low altitude air defense system guys several miles away, so we would coordinate with them. So okay, we’re coming out there and see what you think about our paint scheme. And they would come up, and they would take a look at it, says, “That’s not that so good.” So we go back, we change the color, go out there another day or two later and says, “How about this one?” Didn’t see it at all, didn’t see it at all, that was great. So I came back and I told, at that time, General Moore was the wing commander, and he happened to be walking up early, the two weeks we were there. And Mike Hearth and I was sitting there, and Mike says, “He’s gonna be painting his aircraft with this paint.” And he says, “Good.” I says, “Well, sir, I’m gonna paint mine too. We already got a pattern we’re gonna use.” “What kind of paint you gonna use?” I say, “Well we got some latex paint.” He says, “Well, you know, that’s corrosive.” I says, “Well, after this war, I really don’t care.” I’m gonna paint it, we’ll get to the war, we’ll worry about that later on. He says okay. So we got the paint, and we ended up painting all the aircraft. So Mike had all his painted one style, light tan, all one color. So I had a pattern, so I painted mine in a certain pattern, light tan color combinations. And then, and so then the air group came aboard. Colonel Garrett and a bunch of other squadron guys came over. Somewhere in that timeframe of the six months, there was concern from the other guys who didn’t paint theirs, that they didn’t want to paint theirs, or did want to paint them, but didn’t want to paint them the way I painted them, wanted to paint them the way Mike had the paint. So anyway, Colonel Garrett gave out the executive order, saying, “You will paint your aircraft one of two types, like mine or like Spot. And you will paint with latex paint.” So we did that, and eventually when they all got back to the States, they all had to go to San Diego to the depo level, higher-level maintenance. They were all sandblasted off, and they had to repaint everything. But the timeframe didn’t care. We had the war to get through. Let’s get to the war first, sir, and we’ll worry about all the corrosion and problems alter on, but anyway. But we painted the aircraft. So that took some time, and again, just that time killing was the issue. And my admin guys, how much can you do in the admin side of the house? Well, we had to keep track of records. Then there was anthrax shots, then there was medical, people were getting sick. Then people were looking around, we got the sand vipers that was running around in the sand that was scaring people a little bit, so we were concerned about that. Then we had the scorpions. Of course, the maintenance guys were catching the scorpions, putting them in a little resin box, putting resin all over them. We had some big black ones about four and a half inches long, big type scorpions everywhere. So we had different things to keep them busy.

**Mark DePue:** They will find something to do.

**Gary Price:** That’s right. Then, somewhere in that first three months, it was starting get the mess hall. They had fresh vegetables. I’ll never forget it. We were happy to get it because we’ve been eating MREs, three MREs a day. And we had water buffalo, which was a big container that we would put water in, and you go there with a spigot and fill your canteen up.

**Mark DePue:** With nice warm water, I would guess.

**Gary Price:** That’s right. And so then they had what General Gray, he came over to visit, we had bottle waters, and he calls them designer bottle waters. And he didn’t like the idea that we were using that for our water. He wanted the buffalo, so we didn’t have that many buffalos, but we quickly had a whole bunch of buffalos after he saw the water bottles. It was not tactical, and it wasn’t ----, it wasn’t expeditionary.

**Mark DePue:** The water buffalos, essentially, water trailers, right?

**Gary Price:** Yes, yes. So we got the mess hall, and shortly after we started eating the vegetables, we all got dysentery. My whole squadron was down. I went from a ready to go fight, my squadron, to I got no pilots. We were all freaking sick. The whole squadron was sick. So it took us a week, week and a half, to get through that whole process.

**Mark DePue:** Was the food contaminated, or just you guys weren’t used to eating fresh vegetables?

**Gary Price:** Probably the first more than the last. We were told that they came, the veggies came from Pakistan. And the Pakistanian fertilizer was not the type that we would use. They weren’t cleaned, processed properly, and so we were told after the fact. And so after the fact, I got people who would not go to that mess hall for anything other than coffee, so they were still eating MREs three a day, or two a day the whole time.

**Mark DePue:** Well, why should your combat experience be any different from any soldier from the last four thousand years, you know?

**Gary Price:** That’s right, that’s right.

**Mark DePue:** Dysentery has come under lots of different names over the eons.

**Gary Price:** But anyway, that was our experience with the mess hall. Eventually got to be a thriving mess hall because now we had, I set there at one time at the mess hall, and talking about people coming in. A lot of my military fellow pilots had gotten out of the Marine Corps, and I’m sitting there and having a cup of coffee in the morning, and I see five or six guys I knew from before, and I says, “What are you guys doing here?” They say, “Well, we’re flying Hueys. We’re a reserve unit.” So that’s the first war where we really started the total force concept of bringing in everybody. I know that, I think eighty percent, maybe eighty-five percent of the Marine Corps was there in the country somewhere, somehow. The only people they didn’t bring to the war was people, students were still in school, they had to stay. I think headquarters, Marine Corps people were still assigned their jobs. Short of that, almost every other Marine Corps pilot of some sort, somehow was in the country. On top of that, we had visits from a lot of dignitaries. I think I had a picture of General Mocorco, who was Deputy Chief of staff of aviation, he was there for a short time. Bands showed up there, just to entertain the guys at the terminal. General Gray, the --- Marine Corps, came over there and he got in trouble by making some derogatory remarks against the Army, and I think General Schwortskoff threw him out of the country.

**Mark DePue:** What?! Well, good for him.

**Gary Price:** That’s right. He got thrown out of country. Of course, the ---- doesn’t have any operational control of anybody. He can bark loud, but he can’t do anything, and so Schwortskoff threw him out of country because he was making remarks about the Army being too slow and all that.

**Mark DePue:** Wanted to ask you, you spent a lot of the time in the 1980s focused on training, operational, developmental tactics, working on the doctrine, those kinds of things. Beyond the specific role that your unit had, would you say that the Marine Corps and the military, American military in general, was preparing for the right war?

**Gary Price:** Yes and no. We trained, a lot of our training is done in the desert environment. Different kind of desert, I have to admit, but still a desert environment. We always figured that the Vietnam type of war was gonna be behind us. And we always figured a Middle East war, which would be more of a mechanized war. And so we were talking a lot about our capabilities and our tactics was against the tanks. Well, you ain’t gonna find tanks in the jungle environment too much, like you would in the desert. So I think our focus was in the right direction. In fact, a real quick story was that when I got there, after my group CO came in, Colonel Garrett, who now became the head guy over all the squadrons there, he says, “Gary, I want you to be the mission commander for the air group.” I says, “Sir, I really prefer to fight in my own squadron, based on the mission I’ve been assigned, and leave my squadron.” That’s what every CO wants to do. I don’t wanna be yanked up and do something else. He says, “I want you to be the mission planner, the weapons and tactics guy for the air group.” “Yes, sir, three bags full.” What it came down to was I planned two major revolutions, occupying probably three hundred airplanes, fixed wings, ---, and rode in Hueys as mission commander. We had one mission to take down an airfield in Kuwait. And we took that mission and made it horizontal, we timed distance ----- for fast movers and so forth, and we planned that all out. And we executed on the desert floor based on what we saw as a threat, and the aircraft and coordination, communications and everything, and how we’re gonna land. The landing, takeoffs are worst. We’re looking at one casualty, well, all our aircraft issues were landing or taking off on that desert floor, just can’t see. It’s moon dust, like powder, talcum powder. Once you picked it up, you just couldn’t get rid of it, and there was hardly any wind most of the time, so it didn’t go away real fast. And so we worked out techniques of making that work, and I did two missions for the air group at that point, occupying every squadron, they all contributed assets. Time the war came, I didn’t do that. I did something else. I fought my own squadron. But anyway, but I did that, but going back to what you’re. We were trained, just a different type of environment. Our tactics, our training from previous coordination within the squadrons, all merged together real well. I had weapons and tactics guys from every squadron who was involved in missions, and because of that our generic training was all about the same, we all had the same. So it wasn’t a big communication change, oh this is all new, no, they all knew the tactics. It was just a matter of how we’re gonna make it work with this particular mission, this particular day, and this particular night. And so the desert floor became the threat. The desert floor becaused us all kinds of maintenance problems. It was fine dust. And our leading blades on the aircraft are titanium. And after flying, our blades, turbine blades and turbine engines are titanium, but that fine dust just chewed them up like sawdust, it was nothing, just tore them all to pieces. And I got out one day and looked at my blades, and you think I got a hammer and I just beat the crap out of each blade. And you think, how could that happen? Well, it was becaused by that dust. And so we quickly went from twelve airplanes to five airplanes real fast. All the blades were all torn up, and we had no more blades. So all the 46s back in the States was stripped down, and the engines and the blades were all being shipped over to us for replacements. When we got them, we had to figure out what are we gonna do to change. We can’t keep doing the same thing. We still, air war hadn’t even started yet. So we had to now make our aircraft last through this war. Well, we found out, an old corrective action the Israelis did, they have the same dust, they used polyurethane tape, clear tape over the leading edge of the blades. Not much to do with the engine blades inside, but the blades they could. In fact, I saw a British pilots flew an airliner with a sheik aboard the aircraft, and I walked up and looked at the aircraft, and even their wings were covered with polyurethane tape for the same reason. So it’s an old technique, but the sand that we have in Twentynine Palms and Yuma, it’s a different kind of sand that they had in the deserts of Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. So now, our training went from Cobras and Hueys to twenty-five to thirty feet, to two hundred feet, because there was a layer like smog you see on the West Coast. You get above that, and it’s clear. Below that, you got that haze, but you don’t know really until you get out of it. So we flew higher all the time, except for takeoff and landings to stay out of it as much as we could, and we survived.

**Mark DePue:** Well, what I want to do here for the last few minutes is get you home and then quickly cover the rest of your military career if we could. And you’re still in command. How soon after the war ends on the 28th do you come home, does the unit come home?

**Gary Price:** I was home in late March, middle of March, late March timeframe. My change in command was in June. And another big carrot, when I got home, we had a heroes’ welcome. We got to Jubail. I had a few people who stuck by the aircraft, but they were all, ninety percent of my troops were all on a 747 flying back to the States. So we landed in El Toro.

**Mark DePue:** With stewardesses and the whole thing?

**Gary Price:** Yes, yes. It was nice. So we landed in El Toro about nine o’clock at night in somewhat of a rain, and the place was covered with people, families and friends and so forth. And we had a fire truck, so it was a heroes’ welcome. It was really nice. Another four days later, the rest of the squadron came back, the maintenance people, the aircraft all came back, and now we had to unload all those aircraft and get them back to Tustin. That was in March, early April, I think, and then in June, I was changed in command, and I went to Maxwell Air Force Base to the Air War College, the Air university the Air Force had. Now I’m a lieutenant colonel, and this school had four Marines, and I was a senior Marine of this four. And the colonel there says, “Gary, you got one mission at this school. Don’t care about the academics. We got a Marine Corps birthday coming up in November. It’s the biggest event in town. That’s your job. Everything else I don’t care about. I don’t care if you fail.” And so I was there for a year, and after that I went to Quanitco. And General Boomer now, who was the senior Marine in theater, came back and his concern was that in country, he had a MEF, Marine Expeditionary Force, which is the largest task organized element we have. Well, when you sit there and you’re gonna fight a MEF, the Marines’ training is from the battalion level. And the battalion says, come three courses of actions, left, right, and the middle, supported by air and logistics. When you get to MEF level, you can’t fight that way, you’re no longer a battalion, you’re a MEF. You have all kinds of forces capability. Well, General Boomer had a thousand people in his staff, and nobody knew how to fight a MEF level war, which is what this was. And so, I was assigned to the General Boomer’s concept of staff, MAGTF Staff Training Program. And I was a head pilot there, I had a fixed wing, I had command controller guys. Anyway, we came up teaching the MEF how to fight at that level, teaching generals how to fight, which was not an easy process because at that level, they already think they know everything, and anyway, and they probably do. But the concept was that at the MEF level, the infantry may not be a course of action at all. It may all be logistically supported, putting things in place. It maybe an air war, which is what it was, so anyway. So at that level, I was there for two years, three years, picked up a battalion command, had the largest battalion in the Marine Corps, three thousand plus Marines. And it worked out I just walked across the street, and that was my new headquarters. First aviation guy to be in charge of this battalion, so they didn’t know what they were getting. The general I worked for, his first aviator to work with, and he was lucky because Sipperoni had the security battalion, they’re 53 pilots, so he thought he was doomed. But anyway, we survived two years and that did well. And then I got picked up, Naval ROTC program, the CO of that, Naval ROTC at Virginia Military Institute, VMI in Lexington, Virginia. I retired there.

**Mark DePue:** Naval ROTC at VMI, and most of the graduates go into the Army, do they not?

**Gary Price:** Pretty close. I had, VMI has a really, it’s known for the engineering program, and so I had a bigger Navy attachment than I did a Marine attachment because of the engineering, so I would produce four to five nuclear graduate types for the Navy per year than most schools.

**Mark DePue:** That’s an interesting way to finish your career. Did you learn a little bit about the War of Northern Aggression while you were there as well?

**Gary Price:** I did. And I know where Stonewall lives and support and everything else. VMI staff are all wearing their Army uniform, even though they may not have spent a day in the military, so those are ongoing challenges of that ethics and customs of campus life. But we had a great four years there.

**Mark DePue:** And a full colonel by that time?

**Gary Price:** A full colonel, I was a full colonel when I took over the battalion. So I was a colonel then. So went to the Naval ROTC and I stayed there four years. Retired at thirty.

**Mark DePue:** And what year was that?

**Gary Price:** 2001.

**Mark DePue:** What month?

**Gary Price:** September.

**Mark DePue:** September of 2001.

**Gary Price:** September of 2001.

**Mark DePue:** It’s an interesting time for you to end your military career.

**Gary Price:** Yes. Because if it’d been any later, I probably wouldn’t have been able to get out, because they had that Stop-Loss program shortly after that. And I was out, retired at that point, and a lot of my friends didn’t get out right away.

**Mark DePue:** Why don’t you wrap it up with just telling us what you’ve been doing since 2001.

**Gary Price:** Well, I retired from Marine Corps. I got a job working for Ducks Unlimited. It’s a conservation program, and I was a regional director. The job I was given was up in central Illinois. So we moved from Virginia to Illinois. I could pick anywhere to live, I lived in Springfield. I did that program for about five, six years, and since then, for the last eight or nine years, I’ve been working for Air Evac Lifeteam. I’m a helicopter pilot for air medical service, and I’ve been doing that for the last eight years now, and loving it more.

**Mark DePue:** Still flying.

**Gary Price:** Still flying.

**Mark DePue:** I think that’s what it’s all about, it sounds like.

**Gary Price:** Yes, sir. It is.

**Mark DePue:** Well, Gary, this has been quite a ride we’ve been on. I really appreciate you taking the time to do this. It was fascinating to hear the stories about Desert Storm, Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Your war was different from a lot of other folks’, but they always turn out that way. Everybody’s got their own very focused perspective of what was going on. But it was great to get the insights. Thank you very much.

**Gary Price:** Thank you. I enjoyed it.

**Mark DePue:** And thank you for joining us.