Holt Livesay oral history interview

Lieutenant, United States Navy Reserve
Vietnam War

Interviewed: April 23, 2023
Identifier: 23-007

Keywords:

Vietnam War (1961-1975)
Northern Vietnam
Military reconnaissance
Naval aviation
USS Midway
USS Coral Sea
Naval aviation--Study and teaching

Repository: Virginia War Memorial Archives

Related Interviews Note: Video, Holt Livesay oral history interview, 6 April 2023, Virginia War Memorial.

Title: Holt Livesay oral history interview, 6 April 2023

Collection (host): Virginia War Memorial Oral History Project

Interviewee (creator): Livesay, Holt M.

Interviewer: Marshall, Sylvia

Date of interview: 2023-04-23

Region of Virginia: Tidewater

Branch of Service: United States Navy Reserve

Conflicts/Era of Service: Vietnam War

Military Service History
Service Dates: 1963-1968
Highest Rank: Lieutenant
Units, ships, etc.: Attack Squadron (VA)-25; USS Midway; USS Coral Sea
Locations of Service: Laos; Thailand; Cambodia; Gulf of Tonkin; NAS Lemoore, Lemoore, California; NAS Whiting Field, Milton, Florida
Medals or Service Awards: Distinguished Flying Cross; 14 Air Medals; Navy Commendation Medal with Combat V; National Defense Medal; Letter of Commendation; Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal; Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Bronze Star; Vietnam Service Medal with 3 Bronze Stars; Navy Unit Commendation

Extent: 1:00:31; transcript (19 pages)

Abstract: Holt Livesay discusses his experiences as a veteran of the United States Navy Reserves (1963-68) during the Vietnam War. Livesay was active duty for most of his career as a Navy pilot with Attack Squadron 25 (VA-25). He conducted missions in Laos, North Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia. Livesay discusses joining the Navy, basic training, and deploying to the coast of Vietnam in the South China Sea and the Tonkin Gulf in 1965. Livesay explains the various aircrafts on day and night carriers stationed off the coast of Vietnam. He describes about flying on road reconnaissance missions, participating in night operations with his squadron, earning a Distinguished Flying Cross, and other missions during the Vietnam War. One of his squadron's primary duties included Rescue Combat Air Patrol (RESCAP). Livesay describes one of his most memorable missions on a RESCAP team in July 1965, and reconnecting with the person he helped rescue in 1993. He discusses leaving the squadron in Spring 1967 and

becoming a flight instructor with Training Squadron Two (VT-2) before leaving the Navy in August 1965. At the end of the interview, Livesay talks about life after his military service and living as a Vietnam veteran.

Transcript Notes:

Transcriber:	TEMI
Abstract by:	Sylvia Marshall, VWM Archivist
Additional Notes:	
	HL: Holt Livesay
	SM: Sylvia Marshall

Interview Transcript:

SM (00:00:03):

All right, we are now recording. Um, this is Sylvia Marshall, the archivist at the Virginia War Memorial. Today is April 6th, 2023. I am interviewing Holt Livesay for the Oral History Project. Um, thank you for being here, and thank you for agreeing to talk with us. Um,

HL (00:00:22):

You are welcome.

SM (00:00:23):

Can I get you to state your full name, what branch of the service, uh, you were in, and your, what was your highest rank?

HL (00:00:31):

My name is Holt m Livesay, and I was in, I was in the Navy Reserve, but I was active duty the whole time. So not much difference, but anyway. And, uh, I, I, I got to the rank of lieutenant when I, before I got out.

SM (00:00:50):

Great. Great. Um, and let's start all the way at the beginning, you know, can you tell me about when you were born and where you grew up and what your life was like before joined your service?

HL (00:01:01):

Yeah. I was born in Suffolk, Virginia, and, and lived there until I was 12 years old. I finished the sixth grade in Suffolk, and then my, my family moved to Franklin, Virginia, which is 20 miles away from Suffolk. But I thought it was the end of the world. I, I never been to Franklin before, so, uh, but I, it, it, it turned out to be fine because I found out there were more girls than boys in Franklin. And that was good <laugh>. Um, then I, I, I went through high school. I went to NC State University for, well, it was a college at that time, for two and a half years. And, and they didn't invite me back for a six semester. So, uh, uh, I had been in Air Force ROTC, uh, while, while at NC State as a Land-Grant College. So you had to be in ROTC.

HL (00:01:52):

And I said, I, I did, I did not sign up for advanced rights because I said, if I go in the Air Force, I wanna fly and, and you gotta sign up for five years to fly, and I don't wanna do that. So I, so I didn't take advanced. Right. So then the next semester, I, I came outta college and, and back at that time, uh, boys at least had a, a military obligation, or six year or something like that, military obligation. So I said, well, I don't know what I want to do. And, and while I'm figuring it out, I might as well get that military obligation over with. So I went down to Norfolk and all the recruiting officers were on Ramey Street, uh, in the same block, just next door to each other. And so the one on the corner was the Navy, and that's the first one I got to.

HL (00:02:37):

And I went in there and, uh, and they said, oh, you've got two years of college, said, how would you like to fly? And I said, oh, that sounds great. So I never got to the other, and, and I had all my life, I thought I was gonna be a Marine, 'cause John Wayne was, was a Marine. But anyway, um, but anyhow, I didn't get any farthers in that Navy, uh, recruiting office. And, and they signed up, they have a, had what they call a NavaCa program, Naval Aviation Cadet. And that was if you had two years of college or you could get into that program about being coming in from the enlisted ranks, uh, and taking a test and all that and get into it. Anyway, so that's what I did. And, and that consisted of the rank of NavCa was roughly equivalent of wired officer.

HL (00:03:24):

Uh, it was, it was above enlisted and, and below, uh, officer status. But anyway, and I was a NavCa until I got my wings, which took about a year and a half. And when you got your wings in the NavCa program, you, you got it commissioned at the same time. So that's how I got there. Uh, and, and while, while I was in the Navy, the last year, I, I mean, last year I was in, in training, uh, we became engaged, my wife and I, and so, uh, after I got my wings, I had something like 30 days to go from Corpus Christi, Texas to California. So I went home and we got married and went to New York on the honeymoon. And then we drove back across the country to, to, uh, Lamoore California. And that's, that's, uh, that's where I was stationed. I went through, uh, I don't know, several months, four months of something like that, of, of retraining a, uh, to, to go into a, what I call wheel squadron operational squadron.

HL (00:04:31):

And, and then I, I, uh, got, uh, transferred to VA 25 attack Squadron 25. And that was right about the time that the Vietnam situation was heating up. And in fact, when I went in the Navy, I never heard of Vietnam. I couldn't have find it on the map if I had to. And, uh, when I found out where it was. But anyway, um, so I, I joined the squadron, uh, coincidentally that, I think it was the 5th of March. But anyway, 1965. And, uh, I, I joined 'em the day they set sail from Alameda, California to head to Westback. Uh, and, uh, we went through Hawaii and had a operational inspection of in Hawaii and all over to the Philippines to, uh, they did some spook stuff. They were loading and unloading weapons that I wasn't supposed to know anything about. So anyway, then we left there and went on into, uh, the South China Sea and, and, and, uh, tonkin Gulf and, and started flying in combat in, uh, in Vietnam.

SM (00:05:47):

So you, you joined before things in Vietnam really heated up. So you weren't prompted to join by the conflict, you were

HL (00:05:57):

No, no. I, there wasn't any conflict when I went in the Navy. And, uh, but anyway, it, it blew up. Yeah. Oh,

SM (00:06:05):

And did you have a family history of military service or your father?

HL (00:06:10):

No, my uncle was in the Navy. . Uncle Holt that I, after whom I was named, my father was, was too old for the, uh, for World War ii, but he served his time. He, he was a welder at the Newport News Shipyard, and he, he welded on at least two ships, the, the, uh, midway and the Carl c that I made cruises on. And so, uh, and I, I wrote him and told him I was glad he put it thing together. Well, that, uh, it held up and, and supported me fine.

SM (00:06:48):

Okay. So from there, you know, and going towards Vietnam, well, let's back up a little bit. Can you tell me a bit more about your experience with basic training and how did that feel as a young man? And how was that for you mentally and physically?

HL (00:07:06):

Well, yeah, when I got to Indoc Batal Battalion, indoctrination Battalion, it was the first place you went when you checked in down in Pensacola. And, uh, they didn't give you a uniform or anything. You had a, a, a big overalls type thing that you wore. And, uh, I know that the first morning, uh, we got early, went out and did calisthenics and ran and all that. And, uh, um, then we went, we finally got about seven o'clock in the morning, we got, got to the mess hall, and that was the first time I'd had a chance to, you know, sit down and rest or speak to anybody. And there was, you know, people on both sides of me and I, I said, hello, I'm Holt Livesay and, and the same and by that Time said, (?) let's go. And I didn't get a bite to eat, but that was the, that was the last time that happened.

HL (00:07:56):

I could eat the whole meal in a minute, anytime. Uh, but that was, that was sort of the beginning of, and, and, uh, and then pre-flight, uh, was physical training and, and military training and, um, school schoolwork, uh, classroom training. They taught us all about engines and things that we needed to know how the engines worked on the airplanes we were flying. So that, uh, that took, uh, roughly four months. And, and then when you got through that, you went to, uh, uh, VT one training Squadron, one at Softly Field, which is nearby, is is just outside of Pensacola. Flew T 34s there, and, and started from, from scratch and, and, uh, got up to where we could solo fly by ourselves, and they would let us do that. And, and then, uh, then I went to VT two, which was a, a training squadron two, and there flew bigger airplanes that were faster and, and had more capability and all of that.

HL (00:09:02):

And that's where we got into instrument training and radio instruments and, and that kind of thing. And, and, and did that until then we went back, let's see, alright, I got down to, to Pensacola in April of 65, and about April of 66 or so, uh, no, I'm, I'm wrong. No, it 63, you got down there in 63. And in April of 64, uh, we went to a squadron that was, again, was stationed at Softly Field outside of Pensacola to carry a qualify and all, all we did that, uh, there was fly T 20 eights, and we, um, we had day after day you'd go out, go up and make six or eight or 10, uh, simulated carrier landings, FCLP, field carrier landing practice. And we fly round and round and, and they had a, a mirror system set up and a, and a, uh, simulated flight deck on the, on the runway.

HL (00:10:18):

And we flew around and around until we could land there pretty consistently. And that took about a month. And a lot of that's variable on the weather. But anyway, and then, uh, then once the, the instructors thought we were capable enough of doing that, we wouldn't kill ourselves or somebody else. They carried us out to the ship. And we, we carrier qualified that, that and, and made, uh, well, we did two or three touch and go lanes on the flight deck. And then the, the, then the next one was a full stop landing and takeoff from the carrier deck. And we did, uh, oh six or eight of those and, and flew back to, to, uh, softly field. And, and they declared us, uh, carrier qualified. That's when that, so that was the end of, of basic training, uh, aviation training. Then we went to advanced training, and mine was at Corpus Christi, Texas.

HL (00:11:14):

And uh, and that's where we started flying the A ones, the Sky Raiders. And interestingly, everything else, we, up to that point, we flown T 30 fours and T 20 eights were, which were tandem cockpit. Uh, there was an instructor in the back and you were in the front. Now, not all the time we got flying 'em solo, but, um, but at least they, they started out that way, you know, where you had an instructor, but the, the skyraiders there, A1s, the very first flight was bass. There wasn't but one seat in the airplane and there, so you flew, uh, solo, the first first flight, uh, the, it, they had a, uh, had a 13 foot propeller. Uh, and, and it was a very powerful airplane. And, uh, to when you added a lot of power, it, it wanted to, it wanted to turn, and you had to put in a lot of right rudder, to keep it from turning.

HL (00:12:08):

Well, they had us go out and do that on the runway, uh, three or four days of, of, of getting it start runway and start and, and go un until you get, and it had a tail wheel. The other things had had tricycle landing. It was, this had a tail wheel till you could get, get it up fast enough to lift, lift the tail wheel off the ground, then you chop the power back and stop and go back around and do it again. So we did that several times before we, we ever got it, got airborne and took off. And, uh, then I was down there, uh, uh, in Corpus Christi. I got down in, in May of, what year did we say? 65? It was no, 64. And, um, and I was there until September of 64. And I finished the, uh, the training syllabus they had and, and got, got commissioned, got my wings and all that. And that's when I went on to get, get married and go to the fleet and do real, real flying.

SM (00:13:17):

And can you describe what it's like to be in the air and to, to control aircraft, and especially the first time you're, you're in the air on your solo flight and being in control of that?

HL (00:13:30):

It's ecstatic. It's, it's, it's, you, you, it's like you're, I mean, you, you drive a car so you can move left and right and all that, what airplanes you do left and right. You go up and down. You, it's, it is like having your own rollercoaster and you could go wherever you want to pull up, stick back or push it forward or roll this way, that way, and all that. So,

SM (00:13:53):

So going forward, you know, when was the first time that you, you learned about things heating up in Vietnam?

HL (00:14:04):
Um, when I was at, at Corpus Christi Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> in advanced flight training there occasionally there were, uh, there would be some advisors, some US advisors that would come back from Vietnam. They had been over there advising that, that, uh, south Vietnamese, coupled with the fact that, uh, uh, we decided Vietnamese sent, uh, their pilot training students over. And, and we trained with them too, so they were there. So we knew about it. Anyway, so they, so we started having some of those, uh, uh, advisors come back, filter back, and, and, and I was, I was the, the ultimate of dumb and naive. And, and I asked one of 'em when they, when they had given us a talk and all that, I went up to 'em. I said, sir, I said, do you have to be a senior officer to, to, to get into combat? And I <laugh> I've learned that in spades. No, you certainly didn't do The more junior you were, the better they liked it. 'cause you didn't, you didn't know anything

SM (00:15:11):
<laugh>.

SM (00:15:19):
So you were out in the, so you went from Hawaii to the Philippines and then, uh, the South Sea

HL (00:15:27):
Tonkin Gulf

SM (00:15:28):
Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And then that's when you started heading towards Vietnam?

HL (00:15:32):
Well, that was where, that was where we were. Okay. The, the, the coast of North Vietnam wa was oriented 3 1 0 1 3 0, the, the coastline. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And they would launch us out there and, and we, we'd fly, uh, 3 1 0 to where we needed to go in and take a left and, and go inland and do whatever we need to do and come back out and fly 1 3 0 back to the ship. But the ships were, I, there were typically, there were three ships out there at, at the time, two, two day carriers and one night carrier. And we did night operations too. So, uh, some of that was very frightening.

HL (00:16:15):
Can you tell me a little bit more about, you know, your operations there, what your tasks were?

HL (00:16:21):
Well, the, we had, we fly flew Skyraiders a ones, and they were great big old, uh, propeller driven airplanes. And most of those planes on the ship were jets. And they were, some of 'em were attack jets, and they did the bombing. And some of 'em were fighter jets. And the fighters were supposed to keep the intimate aircraft off of us while we were bombing. Uh, but it, it turned

into that there weren't that many intimate aircraft up there. And they, uh, the powers to be, uh, sort of converted the fighters into attack planes also. They hung bombs on 'em. They did bombing too.

SM (00:17:04):
Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>.

SM (00:17:10):
And the, the night operations, you were

HL (00:17:13):
Night operations. Yep. We, yep. One third, like I said, there were two, two day carriers and one night carriers , and they launched us at night. Now, one of their prime, my squadron, the, the a ones, one of our prime, uh, uh, missions was to fly road reccing, a road reconnaissance. And we fly up and down the roads looking for truck, looking for targets of opportunity. >. And, uh, and we do it at night too. And, and the idea was that if they heard us up there, maybe they wouldn't be so anxious to move the materials up and down the road. So they, they hunker down and, and, uh, and not be too much problem. Um, I, I remember one particular mission that, uh, I was up with a, I was an ensign, I was the only ensign pilot in the airway. Uh, but anyway, and, and I was flying with the lieutenant or the lieutenant JG or something.

HL (00:18:15):
We were up on a night road reccing, flying around. And, and, and we had, uh, flares that you could drop, you know, the light up the countryside down below so you could see what was going on. And we dropped one over this, the prettiest little bridge over this little stream down there. And, and we said, oh, look at that bridge. And, and we circled down around, you know, looking at the bridge. This was two 30 in the morning, and we got, we dumb as dumb could be, got under our flares so that we were silhouette against the, the flares and, and gunfire from all four quadrants of that, of that crossing the river and, and the bridge. Um, it came and it made me so mad. I couldn't, I got, well, it was so close. We, we were flying tight formation. And, and the stuff was going between the two airplanes because you could see the, uh, the, uh, traces.

HL (00:19:12):
And, and the scary thing is that they say they have four or five, uh, other rounds for each tracer you, so if you, if you see 10 traces, they have 50 bullets they've shot at you. But anyway, so we got under that thing and, uh, and I, I I, I, I'm mad to this day that, that those, those guys sat at there all night long, 2, 2 30 in the morning, they should have been asleep waiting, waiting for somebody to be stupid enough to come by that they could shoot at. And now we put 'em, the, the perfect opportunity got right below the, the, the flares. And, and there we were silhouetted against the sky, and they just opened up. And I said, they, those, they, they got nothing else to do, but sit out there and all night and, and, uh, and wait for some stupid guy to come by there and, and, and shoot at her.

SM (00:20:04):
Mm-Hmm mm-Hmm.

HL (00:20:07):

There was another time, I remember another time when, when I, I pro, I think I was flying with the same lieutenant that we dropped a flare over a, over a convoy, and there was a road and, and there was a, I mean, it was full of trucks and we circled around a and the flare went out and we dropped flares all over and never could find it again. That was so dis disappointing. 'cause I mean, that was a perfect target. And, and we couldn't find 'em after that first drop.

SM (00:20:38):

Mm-Hmm. When you had, were doing these missions back when, um, your first one, what were, what were your impressions of Vietnam? The climate? Uh, just being there.

HL (00:20:51):

It's a pretty country. And, and they had beaches and all to die for. I mean, like you'd see in Hawaii, you know, with palm trees and all that stuff. And, uh, well, my, my first mission, uh, and it, and, and the statute of limitation is passed that, I don't mind saying this, but my first mission was into Laos . And, and it was, it was years before we, the, the US ever admitted that we, no, they denied it. Denied. No, we, we not in laos. We don't fly in laos. And that's bologna. The very first mission I flew within in laos. And, uh, we flew plenty of missions in laos in, in, uh, north Vietnam and Cambodia and, uh, Thailand, all those places.

SM (00:21:44):

What was your hardest mission?

SM (00:21:50):

One hard one,

SM (00:21:52):

Or however many you Wanna tell take off?

HL (00:21:55):

Well, I, I, there's one that, that stands out that was, uh, aside from road reconnaissance. one of our, uh, my squadron and our airplanes, uh, primary duties was, uh, rescue cap Rescue combat air patrol. And that's, that's when somebody, you know, a navy or an Air Force pilot would get shot down. And, and we were supposed to go and find the guy on the ground and, and stay there until the helicopter came and escort the helicopter in, pick him up and, and, and go home. I mean, that's the way it's supposed to work. But one, one day, um, I was launched at 11 o'clock in the morning with, with a, I was still a a, an ensign and with a lieutenant commander and, and we know more that got off the ship than he had engine problem. He had to go back to the ship and land.

HL (00:22:50):

So they said, well, you just orbit overhead and we'll send somebody else up there. So in another hour and a half, they, they sent another guy up there. And, uh, so he and I made up this, uh, rescue cap team that day. And, um, they, uh, inexplicably they would load us with all the fuel we

could carry, which was, uh, an enormous amount of fuel. And, and the things I flew had a, a, a, well, they had a maximum landing weight. You couldn't, you couldn't land on the ship if you weighed more than X, whatever it was. And, and we, we had to start burning. Now, we didn't have the, uh, capability like jets do to, to dump fuel out of the, out of their external fuel tanks. So we had to burn it down. So that, that just meant running a high RPM uh, setting on the engine.

HL (00:23:46):

And, uh, so we, alright, this, this other fellow night. So we sat out at 1230, uh, a little after lunch, and we were supposed to be back at four 30 or something like that. And we knew we, we had to burn down. So we spent the first couple of hours or so burning down to get, try to get down to landing weight. And, and then that was, uh, July the 27th, 1965. And I, I very, uh, much remember that day because, uh, it, they said it was the worst day that the Air Force had in Vietnam. They, they launched many, many airplanes, uh, 48 or 50 or something airplanes out of Thailand to go after the, the, the sams. That's the first time that they had tried, tried to attack the SAM sites. And, uh, they got eight or 10 of 'em shot down. But anyway, so we were circling out over off the coast, over the water, waiting to get called in or go home when the time came or whatever.

HL (00:24:57):

And they called up three 30 or so in the afternoon and, and gave the cord and said, we've got an Air Force pilot that's just ejected over here. And it was, I had a map and I could look at the coordinate and see it was right on the edge of Hanoi. And I, I was, uh, well, I could see where we were going. And we had, we leveled out and headed that way. And, and just before we went, uh, feet wet, I mean feet dry, which is to go over land. Uh, and I, I had heard this, uh, saying before, he said, bend over and kiss your ass goodbye. Well, at, at specifically ran through my mind that day, I, I said, if I ever get back out over the water from this, I'll be happy. And, uh, so we went on in and, and, uh, located the pilot.

HL (00:25:47):

Well, his, his flight leader was still with him, but he was running lower fuel. Jets are always lower fuel. And so, uh, he, uh, he, he pinpointed us to the place where, where we saw the, the pilot on the rank. And then he went on back to Thailand and, and left us there. And, uh, the, my flight leader didn't, didn't want to keep circling the guy on the ground 'cause he would draw the, the, the grind people to him. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, you know, and show where his location was. So, um, so we talked to him and say, look, we're going to go over here 20, 30 miles out west and, and circle around in the, in the woods over there. And we'll come back every now and then and talk to we, we got a helicopter coming to get you. Well, we hoped we did.

HL (00:26:36):

But anyway, uh, and from where we were, we could see the, the, the nigs taxing around on <inaudible> airfield, which was the, the big, big base over there, just out of Hanoi. So we went back over there and, and back and forth a few times. And finally someone called us, and this was probably five or six o'clock, 10. Now, of course it was, you know, it didn't get dark until seven, eight o'clock, but it was getting later. And somebody said, okay, we've got a helicopter coming in towards you from, uh, 2, 2 6 0 degrees or 2 4 0 degrees or something like that. Said, y'all fly that

course until you meet this helicopter. And we did. And we met the helicopter and escorted him back to where the guy was on the ground. And, uh, it, it was, it was not easy. The helicopter first off had put pull, put the, uh, thing that the guy's supposed to get into on a, on a, on a cable from a winch, put it down in the, on the, and, and, uh, the guy got on it and the winch jammed and they couldn't, couldn't lift him up.

HL (00:27:45):

So they, so they had to take it, pick him up and fly over and, and sat down on a rice pad. And, and it was too small. They couldn't land at the helicopter there. So, uh, they took him to another clearing. And by the way, I, I thought while when he picked him up, I said, he's gonna have a hell of a ride back thailand the end of that 200, 200 yard, uh, cable he's on. But anyway, they put him on the ground and then they found a, a place they could land and he and he came running do dove in the helicopter. And he was taking ground fire all the time. And, and we were, we were trying to suppress the ground fire. So they carried him back to, uh, a Lima site. It wasn't even a air airport or landing field. It was a, it was the top of a hill and the, the bad guys had all around the hill and halfway up the hill and we just had the, the top piece of the hill and that.

HL (00:28:40):

And, uh, it was air miracle and people like that were, were running those things. And, uh, anyhow, he, they carried him back there and he spent the night there. And he, he helicopter right next well time we got him back there. And, and I had, there again, I had been burning down fuel the first part of the, the mission. And then, uh, later on, uh, when I realized that this was going to go a long time, I've been, been flying, uh, very economically. In fact, my flight leader said at one point he said, we're gonna be up here a while. I said, you might want the, the, uh, uh, published, uh, minimum RPM for the engine was 1400 RRP m He said, you might wanna pull it back to 1400 RPM 'cause we're gonna be here a while. And I said, well, I've been at 1325 for the last two hours because, because I, I had figured out how much fuel I had to have to get back at old, not not back to the ship, but just get back at over the water.

HL (00:29:42):

And I felt like if I got over the water, our helicopters would come and get me. Well, we, we left him over there at the Lima sighting and had to fly back across North Vietnam. And it was dark by then. And my flight leader gave me the, the lead, 'cause I was the one that was super low on fuel. And we called it the ship and said, okay, we're, we're inbound, you know, and we'll estimate time getting there, whatever it was. And they said, we've closed flight operations for the day. I think they thought we'd been shot down or gone somewhere. They didn't, they didn't expect to see us again. So we didn't have any choice but to turn, take a right turn and fly down to De Nang, which was two, 300 miles on down the coast. And, uh, usually Navy people, when you, when you go into land, you, you, you go down the runway and you, you a racetrack circle and you come around and, and come back and, and turn any land. Well, this one, I, I called 'em from, from north of the field. And I said, I'm, I'm, I'm making a, uh, Australian. And, uh, and that usually you, you gotta talk to the tower. We get their permission. All this. I, I said, I announced I'm, I am making a straight here.

MrsL (00:30:58):

He was 22 at the time.

HL (00:31:04):

Yeah. I was 22 years old. And, uh, so anyway, we went in and landed, well, they said that, that I only had 200 pounds of fuel left and my airplane and, and the maintenance people and squadron said, well, the gauges are not even accurate within 200 pounds. So, you know, no, no telling that much. A little I had. But anyhow, uh, so that was, that was the most exciting single mission I had. And that was, it was, it was 9 45 that night when I landed. I'd been up for 10 hours and 45 minutes and sitting in that one little cockpit there. Um, anyway. And would you believe that was in 1965? In 1993. And I always wondered, well, who was that guy that we, that we rescued that day? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And he find us in 1993. Um, and he called on the phone and, and introduced himself out. And every year since then, on the 27th of July, he has called me on the phone. He lives in California, and he's called and thanked me. And, and I've said, well, you were worth rescuing. Anyway, that was the, that was the single most outstanding mission I had.

MrsL (00:32:26):

How about the bullet in here? You said the bullet in your engine

HL (00:32:35):

Oh, well,

HL (00:32:37):

Up north, uh, foam. They had, they had a fishing fleet out there, and we'd fly over 'em, uh, down low, low level because they weren't supposed to be shooting out. Well, they could if they wanted to, but, you know, fishing boat, I mean, little 20, 30 foot fishing boats, not, not expected to have much ammunition on them. And, uh, but anyway, and I went back one day, uh, after, after we'd been out there, and, uh, and I noticed on one of the, uh, laps, one of the, the panels out on the wing, it looked like some, uh, gun powder re residue out there. And I thought, well, the, the guy that flew this plane before me shot the shot the counter. And that's where that came from. Well, after I landed the, uh, ordinance chief came, came up from, from down below. He, he brought me a 50 caliber slug that was, it was about that long and, and about the size of your finger, and it was twisted.

HL (00:33:41):

You could tell that you had been rifled and gone through something. And he said, we, we pulled this out of your ammo can, we had about, uh, four ammo cans, he said. And it went all the way through the ammo can and set off the last round. And that's where the, the, the, the gunpowder Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> residue came from. But anyway, he said, I, I've never seen one do this before without blowing up the whole ammo can. And that would've blown the wing off. And, and that'd been it. But anyway, so that was very fortunate. I, I kept that, uh, 50 caliber slug for a long time. And, uh, and I'd put it in my pocket, and if I felt like I was having a bad day, I could pull it out and look at it and say, you ain't having a bad day, <laugh>.

HL (00:34:23):

But, uh, I, I carried it with me one time. I went on a, a mission trip to, uh, Haiti and, uh, and we stayed in a, in a, a room above a, a fellowship hall of a church down there. And when I got home, I didn't have it. So I left it, lost it down there somewhere. But Are you, are you, do you want me to tell you some more stuff?

SM (00:34:49):

Oh, yes. Please. Tell me about your entire boat, uh, tours.

HL (00:34:53):

Well, one Sunday afternoon, we happened to be down flying into South Vietnam, and we got over there to the target area and was circling waiting to, to roll in and, and, and make the bombing runs.

HL (00:35:11):

And my engine went, bam. And I, I thought I'd sure I'd been hit. I I rolled out and I could see the coast. I rolled wings level and headed for the coast. I said, I'm hit, you know, I, and uh, anyway, it, it held together long enough for me to get, uh, get out over the water. And I, I pulled the ordinance off. I didn't drive it armed. I just got rid of it. And, uh, uh, some, some, some jerk ship down there complained that we were, we were bombing them. Well, we weren't in a mile with them. But anyway, anyhow, uh, so the, the airplane was still running, but the engine was real shaky and, and, and everything. And, uh, I was flying wing on the, uh, executive officer of the squadron that day. And that he said, well, it's still running.

HL (00:36:02):

He said, let's, let's turn around and go back to, uh, tan son nhut, which is one of the air bases down there around Saigon. And I said, no, sir. I said, I, I made feet wet one time, and I'm not going feet dry again today. I'm headed back to the ship. The ship was only 130 miles away, but I could only get 130 knots. Uh, and, and normally our cruise, uh, speed was 160 knots or something like that, but I could only get 130 knots. And everything was shaking, rattling. And, and, uh, some of people that were along with us, they flew under the airplane. They said, you, the whole underside of the airplane is covered with oil. And, uh, I had, I had a, a, we have, we had a temperature gauge in the, in the instrument pound that told you what the cylinder had temperature was for the, uh, engine.

HL (00:36:55):

And mine was registering, uh, low. So I closed the cow flaps to, to contain some of the heat and flew back. And, and I got, uh, got around to, uh, behind the ship finally after an hour of, of that and started in to, to land. And a voice came on the radio, said, pull the power back a little bit. Well, the last thing you do when, when you have a a, a rough running engine like that is mess with the power station. You just leave 'em where they are. But I thought it was a landing signaled officer that, that said that. And, and he's, he's, God, I mean, you do what he says. So I was coming in and somebody said, pull the power back a little bit. So I did. Well, clouds of smoke by this big Ryan came out of both stack both sides of the, of the, uh, uh, cowie.

HL (00:37:49):

And, uh, I, I would, and I had to, I had to take a, a fast cut and cut and landed there. Thank goodness I landed. 'cause I couldn't have gone around. It would, it would've, if I had tried to add power, it would've quit right then. But anyway, so, uh, two things I would say. One is the voice that said, pull the power back. Was it xo? It was not the landing signal officer. And I could have shot him. And, and the second thing was, uh, I, I had been a, a cool, uh, Chuck Yeager all the way back with my communications all, I mean, I just as professional as you, you could ask for. And, uh, when I got got back and, and, and landed on the ship and turned the magnet off and the engine kept running. And I, my first thought was that I made it all the way back here to the ship and landed, and it's gonna blow up and kill me right now. And so my voice went from, from Cool Chuck Yay to it won't quit School, girl Voice. And, and they, uh, they had the capability of, of playing, of, you know, they recorded, they had a a, a camera mounted in the, in the flight deck deck that would that would take a picture of all the landing. So they, for critique purposes and learning purposes that, and, uh, and so that thing played over and over and over on it shipped that night all night long. That was, that was the excitement of the day.

HL (00:39:23):

What, what year was that? Was it, uh,

HL (00:39:27):

I think, I think that was 65 because, um, I, I'll extend that story a little bit. That four people in my squadron had taken off one afternoon to go over, go way inland in North Vietnam. And they got jumped by bigs. And in the ensuing, uh, battle, they over boosted the engine. All four of the engines were over boosted. All four of 'em had to be replaced. Well, this was one of 'em that, that was, that was over boosted. So that happened. That was that. Another one was a, was a friend of mine, and he and I were flying together one day. We were behind the ship waiting for our turn to, to come in and land. And he got a, a, what do you call a sump club warning light. And his light came on, it shows metal, uh, metal fibers in, in the engine.

HL (00:40:20):

And, uh, so we called the ship and headed right in. Well, we were on, on final, about a mile and a half out behind the ship, head down. I was flying his way. And he said it, it was just like the propeller came dis disengaged from the engine to just quit. And he just, he landed just as softly right in the ship's wake. And he, I, so I walk out on the wing and the ship, I mean, that airplane went down and he, he, uh, inflated his May West, and he sat there until the helicopter came and got it. Uh, but that was another, so that were two of the, of the four mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, uh, big shoes that happened.

SM (00:41:06):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>,How long were you in Vietnam?

HL (00:41:16):

Well, I got over there in April of 65, and I left in February of 67. But now, April of 65 ended in November of 65. And we came back to the, to the States. They have a training sequence that you come back and, and that's when they get the new ballots. ?, and everybody trains together then. So then we went back in, uh, August of 66. And, and that lasted until February of 67.

HL (00:41:50):

Can you tell me about, uh, the period of 1966 to 1967?

HL (00:41:57):

Well, we were stationed at Lamore, California, NAS Lamore, California, in the Central Valley of California. And, and we did training and, and it was a lot of it was ordinance training. Now we would go up to, um, Fallon Nevada, which is where, uh, coincidentally where the Top Gun school is now. But anyway, it was, it was just, it was a naval air station up in the desert, uh, about 50 miles east of Reno. And because it was sort of out in the country and not a lot of air traffic and all that area, it was a good place for us to, to practice bombing and doing things like that. So, uh, we did that. And so between the two, uh, between, uh, November of 65 and, and August of 67 that we were training, it was a training cycle.

SM (00:42:56):

And then after that training, what did you do then?

HL (00:43:00):

Then went back over there. That's Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, that was the second cruise we went on. Went on the car. The first cruise was on the midway, the second cruise was on the Carl C. And we, we, uh, we went to, uh, again by Hawaii and had an operational weapons inspection. Then we went to, uh, the Philippines and Mm-Hmm. Loaded and unloaded stuff. And then we went to Japan for, I think we were supposed to be, uh, be taught or something, uh, by the people that were coming off the line. They'd gone up to Japan. So, so they were supposed to be, uh, educating us as what to look for. But anyway, then we went back to the Philippines and, and out of there, we just ? like a day there. And then we headed for the Tonkin Gulf, and we were out flying that night.

HL (00:43:54):

Uh, you, you, you, you never get too much training. And so it was, uh, night carrier landings and stuff like that. And that the, uh, carl C through a screw a a propeller, one of the huge things as big as this, the walls in this room. And it, it went over and hit another shaft next to it and Bent it, and so it was, it was shaken. So instead of going on to, to, uh, the Tonkin Gulf, it turned around and went back to Japan. And we, we stayed up there for a couple of weeks. They had to, they had to manufacture a, uh, a, a shaft here in the US and fly to Japan. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So, uh, everybody said we, we were going, going to go broke because we, we, we went to Hawaii and then the Philippines in Japan and Philippines, and back to Japan, and said, we, if we don't have a get to sea, we going to all be broke, spend all that money.

SM (00:44:56):

So can you walk me through your day-to-Day operations and that time period until the end of your service

HL (00:45:06):

Day-to-Day Operat? Well,

SM (00:45:08):

Not, not exactly day-to-Day, but you know, during the day until those memorable moments,

HL (00:45:18):

Well, I got out of the squadron in, uh, in the spring of 67. And I, I always wanted to fly jets, and I had orders to a, to the Jet Training Squadron in Pensacola. Uh, but they, they required that I extend, uh, to, to make a full three year, uh, shore duty tour. And I only had a year and a half left to go. And I had the thing, but then I said, no, I'll go ahead and get out. So that, so then they sent me to VT two, which training Squadron two, which is what I was in after VT one as a student. And I was there for the last, uh, however long that was, 14 months or something like that, as, as an instructor, flight instructor there.

HL (00:46:11):

And I, I, I, I was due to get out of the Navy somewhere along April of, of May of, uh, of 68. But, um, I was, I had already applied and, and been admitted to school at the University of Virginia to, to go there. And I thought, well, what am I gonna do between April and and September? And I was making fairly good money, uh, in the Navy as flight, flight pay, combat pay, and, and all of that stuff. So, uh, so I extended until August. I got out in August of 68. And it, the, the, the, uh, I was a precision at, uh, transition Precision acrobatics instructor at, at VT two flying the T 20 eights. And the transition part was you got the students that are coming in from softly field from the T 30 fours, and that's the only thing they'd ever flown. And you had to transition them into the T 28, which was way much bigger and fast and, and, uh, harder to control and all that. And, and then the second part, precision acrobatics was just what it sounds like doing loops and barrel rolls and stuff like that, which, which were fun.

SM (00:47:36):

And were there any mentors or, uh, that guided you through your time in the service?

HL (00:47:45):

Well, not one particular one, because you, you moved around from Squadron to Squadron now. Um, the, the commanding officer I had in the, in the first, in VA 25 was, uh, was a wonderful person. And he, he, he helped me a whole lot. Uh, he was from Boston, and if you heard us talking on the radio, you, you'd laugh. But anyway, uh, he was, he was a lifelong friend. And also my instructor, uh, at Corpus Christi that instructed me in the sky Raiders, the A ones, uh, he was from Herford, Texas. And four or five years ago, I made a, a big loop tour of the West. And I stopped by, he lives in Amarillo. I stopped by Amarillo, Texas to spend the night with him. So he's, he's been a lifelong friend.

SM (00:48:38):

Yeah. I'm curious, how did the Naval Reserves work with other branches of the military?

HL (00:48:45):

Well, unless you said reserve, they would never know the difference. I mean, it was just the Navy Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And we mostly worked with, uh, with the Air Force. Uh, we did

a lot of, of, uh, now this is down in South Vietnam, did a lot of, uh, close air support where if, if there was a ground fight going on, we would try to drive the, the bad guys off. Now I wasn't, I wasn't personally involved as much of that. They, they did more of that on the cruise after I got out of the squadron.

SM (00:49:28):

You say you were the squadron's historian? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. Can you tell me a little bit, uh, about that role and how you became the historian?

HL (00:49:38):

I became the historian because I was the youngest guy in the squadron and the junior guy. And I, I also became the, the coffee mess officer because, um, and I didn't even drink coffee at the time, but after days and days of making coffee, cleaning the coffee pot, keeping everybody in in coffee, I decided, well, heck, I might as well drink some of this too. And I got started, I still drank coffee, but Squadron historian, they had, they had a book leading up to, uh, I don't know, maybe it's 1964 or some sometime like that. They had written some of it. But anyway, I expanded it greatly. Of course, we were more active during the time I was in than, than there had been. It just routine cruises and lots of training and all before Vietnam came along.

SM (00:50:34):

So we're, I'm getting to my last few questions. Um, you know, are there any memorable moments from time in Vietnam, even during your downtime?

HL (00:50:46):

Don't understand the question.

SM (00:50:48):

Uh, sorry. Was there, uh, a event or something that sticks out in your mind when you think of your time in Vietnam?

HL (00:50:57):

Well, the one mission that I told you that risk cap mission Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. That, that's, that's a primary one. Yeah. And I'll tell you something that it is, I don't know why it's come to my mind the last few mornings when I was lying in bed before I got up thinking, um, I remember one time when we had gone to ?to, to train and coming back. And we, most of the time we'd fly two or three or four, five airplanes together. But for some reason, I was coming back to Lamore, California by myself one day from Fallon. And you, you there on opposite sides of the, uh, Sierra Nevada mountain range. And I was coming up a valley there just flying along, uh, by myself one day and ran into a horrendous snow storm. And I, I could, I could barely see the, the tips of the wings.

HL (00:51:52):

And so I, I just, I just circled a fairly tight circle and climbed until I got up above what I knew was, I don't know what the ground elevation was of the mountain around at 13,000 feet or so.

But anyway, I got up above the, the, uh, the mountain tops, and then I called, uh, uh, flight control and, and filed a flight plan back to Lamore and flew back there. Mm-Hmm. But that was a, that was a shock. And I thought, boy, that it would've been easier to fly into the side of a mountain there and, and, and never knew what hit you. But anyway, I made it. Okay.

SM (00:52:35):

Um, you know, what has it been like living as a Vietnam veteran, especially for the last 50 years?

HL (00:52:46):

Well, most people didn't know I was a Vietnam veteran, and I never tried to make a big deal of it. And, uh, I, I did not personally encounter what I, I went to a, uh, uh, American Legion Dinner last Sunday, uh, given by the Post in, in Smithfield that was honoring Vietnam veterans. But, and, and I've heard it, and I'm sure it was true, that so many people ran into, uh, opposition and stuff when they came back from Vietnam. But I, I never encountered any of that. The closest I ever came was one time we were in, uh, California. And, uh, Judy and I, I, I said, I'm going to the, the University of California at, uh, Berkeley. I'm going over there and see some of those communists standing on the, on the sidewalk, and I'm gonna jump on them. But we went over there, didn't see any of, so that was

SM (00:53:46):

What did you do after your military service?

HL (00:53:49):

I, I, I went to, went to college and I, I went into banking and I did that for six years. And my father was in the real estate business in, in Franklin, in the hometown of Franklin. He asked me to come down there and go into business with him, and I did. And, and that was pretty much, I, I was, uh, spent the rest of my working years in real estate and one, one facet or another real estate.

SM (00:54:19):

Great. And my final question is, you know, what do you think the American people should know about Vietnam and its veterans?

HL (00:54:30):

Well, I think they should just acknowledge what the people on the ground did over there and, and, and how hard that was. I've got a good friend who, who still suffers from PTSD, is that what it is? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And, and I can understand, he was a, he was a marine on the ground and, uh, it it down to hand to hand combat. And he was a, he was an officer. He was a a, a second lieutenant, the first lieutenant of something in the means. But, uh, it's just horrendous. Unimaginable what, what you have to go through on the ground over there to in, in a war like that. And I'm glad I was, people asked me did I kill anybody? I said, I hope so. I tried to, but, uh, but I, you from where I was, I couldn't see people most of the time.

HL (00:55:21):

But one other, uh, uh, mission that that's worth mentioning, I guess was, and this was in May of, of 1965, uh, the Marines were going to establish a a, an air station below da Nang over there, right off the coast of, of, well in, from the coast of, uh, of South Vietnam. And they sent us, uh, several from my squadron over to flight, close air support for them while they landed, uh, winter Shore. And I remember, uh, sitting there looking at it, it looked like a, an old World War II movie or something where the, the landing craft were coming to shore. And it, it was just a, the whole sequence of, and, uh, they established the, the base that July and, uh, I think it was reported, we encountered very little, uh, opposition and, uh, I think somebody claimed that we killed so some number of water buffalo, but that was, that mostly we did that day.

HL (00:56:30):

Great. And I'm actually gonna give you the last word. Um, is there anything more that you wanted to share that I didn't ask about? Or you get the last word, basically?

HL (00:56:42):

Well, I thank you. No, I I

MrsL (00:56:45):

squad mates to come.

HL (00:56:47):

Yeah. Well, that was the main thing that I came away from. that we had, uh, in my squadron, we had usually about 20 pilots at the time. And, uh, and they were the closest group of folks. And, and some of 'em were wild and crazy. And, and I, I wouldn't have thought so, but I recognized that they were some of the smartest people I'd ever been around And, uh, and we formed bonds that, I mean, we're going to a reunion in this coming in November for, for those those that are still left. And, uh, it was just, it was much closer than a fraternity in college. It was just the closest group. And it was, it was one of those things where, uh, I, I die for 'em and they die for me. It if, if it had to,

MrsL (00:57:46):

Some of them didn't come back.

HL (00:57:49):

What?

MrsL (00:57:50):

Some of 'em didn't come Back.

HL (00:57:51):

Yeah, you're right.

SM (00:57:56):

Alright. Thank you so much. This has been really Great. And I, you brought so much here. Did you wanna talk about it

HL (00:58:03):
For, I just know if you want any of that stuff or not. So I got a lot of old history stuff and my old log books and things, but they, no.

MrsL (00:58:12):
Okay. You didn't even tell her about the one you got a a medal for, did you? Oh, yeah, I didn't mention that. Oh,

HL (00:58:20):
Well,

SM (00:58:20):
Did you want to mention it now? <laugh>

HL (00:58:23):
It was for a spotty naval gunfire, and we, we were working off the coast of North Vietnam one day, and it happened more than one day. But this particular day, uh, and I think it was at USS New Jersey, was run off the coast firing, uh, large rounds of ordinance into, uh, suspected enemy and placements on, on shore. And they usually did that with impunity. But, uh, but this particular day, and, and, and I was up there, maybe, I, sure I wasn't the only one, but anyway, spotting gunfire to see where they were shooting and, and help 'em with adjust. And, um, the, all of a sudden they started taking fire from, from the mats, uh, uh, behind us on, on the shore. And they weren't used to that. And, and shells started dropping around the ship back there, and they were, they were excited, which I don't blame 'em. And they was, anyway, I just happened to be in the place, right place to, to look and see where they were shooting from. I saw the, I saw the ? that fired the, the shells and I, I called, uh, I, I adjust, made adjustments to the ship's, uh, ordinance. And, and, uh, very first salvo, they, they, they blew a whole side of a mountain up and that, that was the end of their opposition that day.

SM (01:00:02):
Great.

HL (01:00:03):
And I was awarded the distinguished fly- flying cross with that, but that was as much luck as skill.

HL (01:00:16):
Well, sir, I thank you for your service, and I thank you especially for your time.

HL (01:00:21):
Thank you. Thank you.

HL (01:00:23):
It's been a, it's been a great honor to speak to y'all.

HL (01:00:26):
Thank you.