

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH FLOYD M. BYERS

FOR THE
VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEW BY
G. KURT PIEHLER
AND
PATRICIA E. GRIFFING

KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
16 APRIL 2002

TRANSCRIPT BY
PATRICIA E. GRIFFING

REVIEWED BY
ANGELICA KAYAN
MCCALL SIMON

G. KURT PIEHLER: This begins an interview with Floyd Byers on April 17, 2002 in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

PATRICIA E. GRIFFING: Patricia Griffing.

PIEHLER: And let me begin by just thanking you for coming here today and bearing with us through some technical difficulties. You were born on February 8, 1929 in Tracy City, Tennessee.

FLOYD M. BYERS: That's correct.

PIEHLER: And your parents were Maude Byers and your father's name was ...

BYERS: William J. Byers.

PIEHLER: Let me just start out—could you tell us a little bit about your parents?

BYERS: Well, yes. Basically we came from a rural county and my mother had been married previously. Her first husband passed away, who happened to be my father's brother. And then my parents [had] very little education, some elementary. My father was a coal miner most of his life, including there some timber cutting and working around saw mills and what have you. And basically that's it you know. They were just simple folks from Tracy City, Tennessee.

PIEHLER: He was a coal miner most of his life.

BYERS: Yes.

PIEHLER: Did you live—did you grow up in a company town?

BYERS: Actually no, because the coal mining was done in Palmer basically, and so it wasn't necessarily a company town, no.

PIEHLER: You mentioned also that your father was a farmer. Did he do that on the side or did he try farming at one point?

BYERS: Well, he tried farming at one point and it just didn't seem to work out for him. So, back to the timber cutting and coal mining and what have you to make a living.

PIEHLER: Was your father ever in the United Mine Workers?

BYERS: I'm sure he was a member of the union, yes.

PIEHLER: Could you tell us a little bit about Tracy City, Tennessee?

BYERS: Well.

PIEHLER: Your recollection.

BYERS: Well, it hasn't changed much actually since I left there. It's a little town—a little over 2000 people total. The principal employment there was, as I was growing up, the Coca-Cola plant. They had a Coca-Cola plant there. Teaching, banking, and that was about it. There was no industry other than the Coca-Cola plant. Now later on they did pull some clothing factories in there—shirt factory as a matter of fact. That's what they called it, a shirt factory. They made shirts for some company. And I'll be honest with you, I was already gone.

PIEHLER: When that occurred.

BYERS: Yeah, that's true. And some of the things that were there as I was growing up are still standing. The Dutch Made Bakery; these people came from Switzerland and started out baking bread and delivering it in a wheel burrow. Then they opened up a bakery and it is still sitting there doing the same thing.

PIEHLER: It's still a bakery?

BYERS: It's still a bakery. Uh, they don't own it anymore, but they have retained the name of it, the Dutch Made Bakery. And, uh—just a little town. Just a little simple town.

PIEHLER: Did you have a movie theater growing up?

BYERS: We did. We did have a movie theater growing up. Of course, it is no longer there either. But we did have a movie theater growing up.

PIEHLER: How—you were very young through much of the Great Depression, but any memories about the Great Depression? How it affected your family?

BYERS: Well, actually I can't recall it affecting us that much because we usually lived on a plot of land where we could grow a garden, all right. I just can't recall at that young age my father not working. We didn't have much, but at least we had a living.

PIEHLER: So your father was able to work either timber cutting or the coal mining? As far as you can, I mean 'cause ...

BYERS: As far as I can remember.

PIEHLER: Because during the depth of the Great Depression you were very very young, so ...

BYERS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: But, but say during the '30s, when you were in say grade school. You have memories of your father going off to work.

BYERS: Oh yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: You said you were sort of on the outskirts on a plot of land. Where you connected to any utilities like electricity?

BYERS: No, no, no. Back then you had to be midtown before you had utilities as such.

PIEHLER: So you didn't have electricity.

BYERS: Didn't have electricity or running water. No, no. Everything was outdoors. You know, it was very rural.

PIEHLER: And your father had steady work too...

BYERS: Yeah, yeah. As long as he was with the mines he worked steadily, yeah.

GRIFFING: Do you still have family there?

BYERS: I have three sisters there, still living there, yes. There ended up seven of us, five sisters and two boys. Unfortunately, my brother got killed in a car accident and my oldest sister just passed away last year. So now we're down to five total. One of them lives in Aberdeen, Mississippi, and three of them live there. Yeah, there are three still there.

PIEHLER: Before moving on to your growing up, do you know how your parents met?

BYERS: Well, actually, my mother was a part of the family—my father's family, because she was married to his brother. Now how she and my Uncle met, I have no idea.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

BYERS: I really have no idea.

PIEHLER: How that came about.

BYERS: No, I really don't.

PIEHLER: What—growing up, what did you do for fun?

BYERS: Oh my goodness. We hunted. We fished. We didn't have any videocassettes. We didn't have any TV. We did have a radio and that's about it. You know, radio. Just played games and what have you. You know little simple games. And when I got old

enough I'd do hunting and fishing. Of course in high school I played some football and everything. That kept you pretty busy.

PIEHLER: Did you—you said growing up you had no utilities because the lines didn't run out. When did your parents' house get electricity? Was it when they moved?

BYERS: Well, my mother—I insisted that she have a house built. My goodness, I don't recall what year that was. But I was in the military then and had been for a number of years. And we had her a little two-bedroom brick with all the amenities built. And she lived in it of course until she passed away.

PIEHLER: But it was—it sounds like this was after World War II.

BYERS: Oh yeah, definitely. Definitely after World War II. Yeah.

PIEHLER: So the power lines didn't make it out.

BYERS: That's true. That's very true, yeah. They didn't get out to the rural areas. That's right.

PIEHLER: You went to school where growing up? Was it in Tracy City?

BYERS: Tracy City. (Church?) School, a little school. Elementary school was called (Church?) School there. Then of course I went to high school. Grundy County high school there.

PIEHLER: And growing up, did you think you would go into the army or military in general?

BYERS: No, no. I hadn't thought about it until I got a little older. And at that point my father had had some medical problems and the family was struggling. And so I figured, okay, I'll just join the military and help them out, which I did. I had no thought though about going into the military. I went in, of course, as an enlisted man, and uh, stayed that way until I went to Warrant Officer Candidate School, which she's familiar with, in 1956. So, from '48 until '56—well actually until I graduated in June of '57, I was an enlisted man in the military. And of course after that, a warrant officer.

PIEHLER: In high school what did you think you wanted to do? Did you think you wanted to be a coal miner?

BYERS: No, no thoughts along those lines. To be honest with you, I hadn't really given it that much thought.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

BYERS: You know, in high school you don't think that much about it. Or at least I didn't. Matter of fact, I left when I was in my junior year to join the military, so had I stayed on until the senior year, then of course I would have made some decisions then in what direction I would have wanted to go.

PIEHLER: Now were you on—I guess they called it college prep. Where you in a college prep curriculum?

BYERS: Well, at that time they didn't have that.

PIEHLER: They didn't have that in your high school?

BYERS: No.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

BYERS: What I was doing, of course, would have prepared me for college, yeah.

PIEHLER: But your high school didn't have a track?

BYERS: No, not at that time. No.

PIEHLER: You—you grew up, I mean you were, let's see—you were a teenager during a good part of World War II.

BYERS: That's correct.

PIEHLER: What are your memories of World War II as a teenager?

BYERS: Well, the newsreels. You go to a movie the newsreels, of course, showed the horror stories, if you will, and of course they're nothing compared to what we have seen since then, but at least they were there. And the fact that the people were out there fighting to get rid of Hitler. You know, I can remember that very distinctly. Realizing that he wasn't the type of person that we wanted as a leader, and I appreciated the fact that we had the people in the military, and of course, we had a lot of them from right there in that little town—volunteered, you know, and went and got killed.

PIEHLER: Anyone you knew growing up? Any individual?

BYERS: No, no, no. I really can't recall anyone that I knew as I was growing up that got killed. That's correct.

PIEHLER: Uh, It sounds like you got to the movies quite a bit then growing up. Is that a fair ...

BYERS: You mean ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, how often might you go to a movie? 'Cause I know some people said that they used to go to Saturday Matinees.

BYERS: Well, basically, once or twice a month. And then you really enjoyed it when you did get to go.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, because I know my late father in law really liked Tom Nicks. Did you have any particular favorites growing up?

BYERS: Hmmm, I'm trying to think. Well of course, there was Tom Nicks and, uh, I can't think of the others right at the moment. Old Tex Ritter was there, you know, and everything. Most any of those western people I sort of ...

PIEHLER: That was what you liked.

BYERS: Well, yeah, but then again if they brought a musical in, I liked that also.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay.

BYERS: Yeah, definitely.

PIEHLER: What about—because particularly there were all these war movies that were coming out during the war itself. Do any stick out? Particularly to someone who then later spends a career in the military? (Laughter) Youthful memories of watching certain movies...

BYERS: No, not really. Well, okay, the one about the brothers seven, the seven brothers...

PIEHLER: Oh yes, yes...

BYERS: Now that I remember very distinctly.

PIEHLER: *The Sullivan Brothers*.

BYERS: *The Sullivan Brothers*, right.

PIEHLER: So you remember seeing that during the war?

BYERS: Yes. Mm hmm, yes.

PIEHLER: Did your parents—were they—did you get a paper at the house? Did you regularly read a newspaper growing up?

BYERS: No, no.

PIEHLER: So it was mainly radio that you learned about the world? I mean in a sense that was the news.

BYERS: Basically. Yeah. And radio and the newsreels and what have you.

PIEHLER: Your parents were both Democrats. What did they think of Franklin Roosevelt?

BYERS: Oh, they thought very highly of Franklin Roosevelt. They thought he was a good man—a sensible man, of course. And, of course, they new very little of him, if you will. They had no idea of his background necessarily, but they just thought he was doing a good job during the war there, yeah.

PIEHLER: Any memories of listening to any of his fireside chats?

BYERS: Really don't recall that much, but I'm sure I probably did, but I just don't recall it, you know.

PIEHLER: Yeah. People remind me it's been a while. I have a difficult time recalling stuff from two weeks ago. (Laughter) My class can—I give them a long list of things to remind me from the last class.

BYERS: (Laughs) Okay, that I'm sure that they'd be prone to do.

PIEHLER: Your parents were Baptist. How active were you and your parents in the church?

BYERS: Uh, I went basically to a Methodist church mostly as a child.

PIEHLER: As a child.

BYERS: Yep, sure did.

PIEHLER: And they—did they ...

BYERS: They weren't that active.

PIEHLER: They weren't that active.

BYERS: No, no they weren't. And I'm not sure I was as active as I should have been, either. But I did go to church.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you liked to hunt and you obviously liked the movies a lot. You also played football in high school. Were you in any other clubs or organizations? The Y, the Boy Scouts, or...

BYERS: No, no. We didn't have a Y.

PIEHLER: Yeah, as I said I'm still relatively new to Tennessee.

BYERS: Okay, okay. Not in a small town.

PIEHLER: Growing up, before you joined the military, what's the farthest north, south east and west you had traveled growing up?

BYERS: Okay, I guess south down into Alabama. We had relatives in Sheffield area and I recall going down there. I can't recall going anywhere north until I got into the military.

PIEHLER: Like, had you ever been, say, to Knoxville?

BYERS: No, I had not.

PIEHLER: Chattanooga?

BYERS: Chattanooga, I had been to Chattanooga.

PIEHLER: Chattanooga, but not, say, Virginia?

BYERS: No. No.

PIEHLER: What about, say, east. Had you traveled, say, to Savannah or the shore?

BYERS: No.

PIEHLER: And west? I take it you never made it across the Mississippi?

BYERS: No. No. Not until the military.

PIEHLER: Your father, did he serve in the military?

BYERS: No.

PIEHLER: What did they—you mentioned that your family—that part of the reason you joined the military was because of hard times at home.

BYERS: Well, with a number of children he was exempt from having to go into the military with the number of children, yeah.

PIEHLER: But you had mentioned that you felt the need to join yourself in part ...

BYERS: To help out. That's exactly right. Yeah.

PIEHLER: How did your parents feel about that?

BYERS: Well, they were accepting. They were very amiable to it, okay. They accepted it. No problem. They didn't mind my doing it. Of course, I'm sure they missed me, or at least I would hope so. (Chuckles)

PIEHLER: But, I mean, you hadn't even finished high school, so you were quite young.

BYERS: No, to be honest with you I wasn't. I was nineteen years old when I went in. I had had a health problem early on in life and I was a little late starting school. But I was nineteen years old, so I wasn't that young.

PIEHLER: Where you the oldest one in your class?

BYERS: Uh, yes. Yes. I was.

GRIFFING: About how big was the high school? How many people were in your class?

BYERS: In our class, I would say probably seventy-five to one hundred. The high school now I think only has about eight or nine hundred in it. It hasn't really grown that much. So it was even smaller then. I would put it in the vicinity of 575 to 600 at that time, total. And of course, as you well know, as you're moving up on in junior and senior years the class sizes are dwindling.

GRIFFING: And that was for the county?

BYERS: Yes, the entire county. Very rural county. Very rural county. That's the reason I'm not back there. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: And I take it there was a black high school. Or was there?

BYERS: There was a what?

PIEHLER: A black high school.

BYERS: No, no. There were no African-Americans in the county, period. None there. No. There was not a black high school.

PIEHLER: Why the Army? Had you thought of the Navy or the Air Force?

BYERS: Well, as a matter of fact I'd enlisted for the Air Force. That was my initial choice. And they sent us to Fort Benning, Georgia, for our induction. And I ran into a fellow that had been in previously. He said, "Forget that Air Force. Let's go Army."

We'll go to Jump School and you can make extra money." I said, "Okay, that's fine." Fifty dollars extra a month right there. (Laughter) So that's how I ended up in the Army.

PIEHLER: So in some ways it was a chance encounter that ...

BYERS: That got me in the Army.

PIEHLER: Yes, that got you in the Army.

BYERS: Yes, exactly.

PIEHLER: You're not the first to have a similar story.

BYERS: Oh, I'm sure.

PIEHLER: It's a very common story.

BYERS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So you went in the Army, and I guess—you reported initially where for induction?

BYERS: Fort Benning, Georgia.

PIEHLER: Fort Benning, Georgia. Any recollections which—did you think it was going to be as long of a career as it became when you first were inducted?

BYERS: Actually, no. No, I didn't think I would stay the entire time. Of course induction is at Fort Benning and then we went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, for the Basic Training. And no, I had no idea that I'd stay the full thirty years. But things just started happening you know, and promotions and what have you. I just figured, well, there's a war going, they're not going to let me out anyway, so why not stay for thirty. So, that's what I did.

GRIFFING: What career field did you initially go into?

BYERS: Initially I was in an airborne medical company, and I worked in a dental clinic as a dental assistant. I'd say for maybe a year, and then the first sergeant realized that I could type. Of course, I took typing in high school and it was sort of frowned on for boys to do that. They sort of looked at you funny, you know what I mean? (Laughter) I'm grateful I did. But anyway, he found out I could type. And he said, "If you'll become my company clerk I'll exempt you from all duties and promote you to corporal." I said, "I'm your man." (Laughter) So that's how I got into the administrative end of it. And I stayed in the administrative end of it until such time as I went to Flight School.

PIEHLER: So, let me just back up. What was your initial impression of the Army at induction? And sort of initial—how long, for example, were you at Fort Benning?

BYERS: Oh, I was probably only there a week maybe, before they got us to Fort Jackson. Lonely. I mean all these people around you, but it was lonely. It was the first time basically that I had ever been away from home, you know. The togetherness was a little difficult to accept initially. What I am talking about is the nudity in the showers and what have you. I was a bashful person. Believe you me. I was a bashful person.

PIEHLER: In the Army I've always found—I mean the two times I've been on bases it's particularly stark, particularly for enlisted personnel. You did find that somewhat hard to get used to?

BYERS: Very much so. Very much so. But you know they had facilities for your entertainment and what have you. They had theaters. They had their little cafes. They had their little beer halls. They had it all, you know, available to you, so it wasn't that bad. But it was a rude awakening at least, yeah.

PIEHLER: And what about Basic Training at Fort Jackson? What are your memories of that?

BYERS: I remember some of the cadre. Not so fondly. (Laughs) But, you know, I've always been a person that realized there's something to be done. Let's get it done. So whatever they demanded of me, I went ahead and did it. Matter of fact, I guess I hadn't been there a week and a half and they made me what I refer to as an "acting gadget," in other words, a temporary non-commissioned officer. And usually you held it for maybe a week, and then rotated. I got mine and kept it until I graduated because I liked it. Again, exempt from KPs and things like that, you know. And when I did guard, I was corporal of the guard as opposed to private of the guard, so I don't know. I mean I went in I was—my height practically. I guess it was my height, and all of 133 pounds. Now why they chose me to be an acting NCO, I don't know, but they did. But I kept it the entire time. I liked it.

PIEHLER: How did that make life? I take it from the way you described it it made life a little bit easier in basic.

BYERS: Well, as far as the extra duties were concerned, but it made it very difficult on me controlling the people that I was responsible for. You know, you had to make sure they got up. You had to make sure they took their baths and things of that nature. And so it made life a little more difficult in that sense, but as far as the extra duties were concerned, it was a considerable break.

PIEHLER: You mentioned the cadre, and not having the fondest recollections. Who were they, and how many were World War II veterans?

BYERS: Oh, I'm sure three or four of the senior people were. Some of the younger corporals and sergeants weren't.

PIEHLER: Were not.

BYERS: You could recognize that in their ...

PIEHLER: What would give it away?

BYERS: Their demeanor mostly. The vets, you know, they were strict on you but they weren't nasty with you, you know. But some of the younger people, given a little power, if you will, they like to exercise that power and what have you, you know. You run into that anywhere in life, I think.

PIEHLER: You didn't know it at the time, but it was the beginning of a long Army career. What did you find, over the long term, the most useful about Basic Training? Is there anything that really sticks out?

BYERS: Well, the conditioning and the mental preparedness. They caused you to start thinking a little bit on your own. That was the beginning of it, of course. Then I think I sort of carried it on over you know. But the mental preparedness I think helped considerably. Of course I took Infantry Basic, but I didn't serve a day in the infantry after I got out. Again ...

PIEHLER: Yeah that's another irony there. Did you think that initial Infantry Basic came in handy?

BYERS: Oh yeah, definitely. Definitely. It taught you how to conduct yourself in certain situations and what have you; in the event you had to go to combat. Even though I wasn't in the infantry, I could very well have been called on to battle too you know. So, it prepared us.

PIEHLER: Any recollections of the people you served with in Basic? You mentioned the cadre. What about the people, say, in your barracks? And you sort of got to know a lot of them in an authority way. You were trying to get them up in the morning and so forth.

BYERS: You know it is difficult. I remember one individual. You just couldn't get him out of bed, and so I just warned him. Couldn't get him out of bed and I turned his bed over on him, you know. I just dumped him. (Laughter) I remember him distinctly, but you know after the number of years in the military it becomes sort of a blur as to recognizing and remembering the faces with names and what have you. Now I can get on into Airborne School when I did that and a couple of people stick out there, you know, in my mind and what have you.

PIEHLER: But Basic is it—it sounds like it's a distant blur.

BYERS: It is. It is.

PIEHLER: Let me ask one thing tied to that. How many ... that you served with in Basic, how many were from the South? Did you feel there were a lot of people just like you? Or were there a sprinkling of people from other parts of the country?

BYERS: There was a sprinkling from other parts of the country; however I would venture to say that the majority in the basic company I was in were Southerners. I'm sure they had camps located in different locations. But we did have some people from the other side of the Mason-Dixon Line in the company.

PIEHLER: Now when you enlisted we were at peace. Did you have any sense—and you mentioned you didn't think you would make it a career. Did you have any sense, you know, you might be in war at some point? Was that—or how realistic or how theoretical was that?

BYERS: Well, it was theoretical to start with, but it became reality two years later with Korea, you know.

PIEHLER: But when you enlisted you didn't have a notion that would happen.

BYERS: No, not that it would happen. Because we hadn't heard that much rumbling from that part of the world at that point. No, no, certainly hadn't.

PIEHLER: Now you had been talked into sort of going into the Army because of the lure of Airborne. And then what happened after Infantry Basic?

BYERS: Well, I went to—I was assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina where the 82nd Airborne Division is located. And I was only there two weeks and they sent me to Fort Benning, Georgia, for Jump School.

PIEHLER: So you did get into the Airborne?

BYERS: Oh yeah. Oh, definitely. That's a five-week course there, you know. I really thought I was in good shape coming out of Basic Training, but boy, oh boy. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So the Airborne had not let down since World War II they still ...

BYERS: Yeah, yeah they still demanded quite a bit, I'll tell you. The first three or four days I didn't get up out of bed. I rolled out of bed and pulled myself up because I was so sore. They really put you through—they really put you through it.

PIEHLER: And how many vets were there in terms of the cadre at Jump School?

BYERS: There were quite a few vets there, yeah.

PIEHLER: Who had been with the Airborne?

BYERS: With the Airborne, exactly. Yeah, there were.

PIEHLER: My late father-in-law used to say when he was going to college on the GI Bill when all the vets were back he was intimidated by some of them. What was your feeling, particularly when you were in Airborne, about the cadre who were vets? They had been at the Bulge, or they had been at D-Day or they had been at other battles.

BYERS: Well, you know I respected them, but I really didn't feel—I've never been a person to bow to anyone. I really had tremendous respect for them and everything. They told me to do something and I did it, you know. I had a lot of respect for them. But I wasn't necessarily in awe of them if, you will.

PIEHLER: Well, let me rephrase the other way. Did you feel you were accepted?

BYERS: Oh yeah.

PIEHLER: You didn't have a sense that there was, between—we're the vets and ...

BYERS: No, no, no.

PIEHLER: Okay. And then, after finishing Benning, where to next?

BYERS: I went back to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg.

PIEHLER: Fort Bragg.

BYERS: I stayed there four years. As I said my first actual job after I got out of Basic Training and Jump School was in a dental clinic. I was a dental assistant.

PIEHLER: Did you have any specialized training for that?

BYERS: No.

PIEHLER: There was no school you were sent to or ...

BYERS: No, no. On-the-job training. I did though go, let's see—Fort Sam Houston, Texas, for a lab technician's course for four months out there.

PIEHLER: Before ...

BYERS: No, I was already doing the job. (Laughter) I learned fast. I'm a quick learner.

PIEHLER: (Laughs) I'm just curious. So what—that could be an array of things, so what did you do initially. I mean there has to be a story, because it sounds like this is something that you didn't apply for.

BYERS: Well, are you talking about ...

PIEHLER: The dental...

BYERS: No, I didn't. They just needed people there, and they assigned me there.

PIEHLER: What did they have you doing initially?

BYERS: Well, actually I went right to work for a dentist. He showed me the instruments and he said, "Learn what they are. When I ask for one, know when to give it to me." And there's the autoclave. You turn it on, you keep them clean and all that good stuff, you know. And actually I worked for a dental surgeon. He was a captain. He had a deformed right arm. He was left handed, and man he would get that little right arm around that head and he was ready to do some work on a person. (Laughs) With those forceps and what have you. It was interesting. It was interesting, yeah.

PIEHLER: It sounds like you didn't mind the duty.

BYERS: No, it was clean. You know, and not out in the boondocks or anything. I enjoyed it as a matter of fact.

PIEHLER: And then at some point you went to Fort Sam Houston for the actual formal—because I'm curious. How much did you already know and how much did you learn new?

BYERS: Well, everything at Fort Sam Houston was completely new because we're talking about lab work. Doing inlays, doing false teeth, and things of that nature.

PIEHLER: So they were really training you to be more than just passing equipment.

BYERS: Oh, yeah. They were training me to be a lab technician. Yeah, to go in there and carve cast inlays, do false teeth plates. You know, we'd make them, they'd break them, and make us put them back together again.

PIEHLER: Did you ever sense that if you ever left the military this would be something you might want to go into? Dentistry or dental technician?

BYERS: Uh, well no, because things again, as I said, started happening that precluded getting out, if you will. And again—there's a family back there, and I'm still helping them, okay. So as far as getting out and going into dental school, no. Sort of out of the question at that point, yeah.

PIEHLER: You mentioned becoming a company clerk next. Was that before the Korean War or after the Korean War broke out?

BYERS: I'm trying to get the dates ...

PIEHLER: The Korean was June of 1950.

BYERS: I know. Um, it was very close to—either maybe just a little before or right in that time frame that I became a company clerk. Because I can remember in '52, early part of '52, they had started forming Airborne units. Not Airborne—Ranger units, and I tried to volunteer for one and my company commander wouldn't let me go. So, you don't know how many times I have thanked him for that, you know.

PIEHLER: So you had wanted to go become a Ranger?

BYERS: I wanted to become a Ranger, and I knew very well that I would go to Korea if I did. And he wouldn't release me, so I didn't go.

PIEHLER: Did he give you a reason?

BYERS: He said, "I need you here." So, I stayed there.

PIEHLER: And you said you thanked him. Why do you say that?

BYERS: Well, probably saved my life, because a lot of those people did get killed over there. I stayed with that company until 1952. And speaking of Korea, there were twenty people that left the battalion on levees, if you will. Nineteen went to Korea. I went to Europe. So I consider myself very lucky there also. Very, very lucky. So I ended up not having to go to Korea. I didn't go to Korea.

PIEHLER: You said your chances of getting out of the military had ended with Korea.

BYERS: Well, I started getting promoted fairly ... quickly, and you know, I was enjoying myself and I just thought I would stay in for a little while.

PIEHLER: It also sounds like that—I wonder if taking that typing class sounds like it was also vital because it allowed you to become a company clerk.

BYERS: Well yeah, and that got me into the administrative field. It did, yeah.

PIEHLER: I'm just curious, thinking back, how much of a shock was the Korean War? Do you have any recollection—because you're in the Army now, and then fighting breaks out in Korea, and it's clear the US is committed. Do you have any recollection of the reaction you and others might have had? That initial reaction.

BYERS: Well, you know it was an aggressive thing for the North Korean's to have done. Of course I realized that then. It was sort of a shock to all of us. Of course we are in the military and we realize that we're subject to be sent there at any time. And it was somewhat traumatic of course, because they were sending a lot of people over there. And a lot of people got killed over there.

PIEHLER: Because you had sort of signed up in '48 when, in some ways, war seemed a more distant thing. I think anyone who joined the military probably had some recollection thought that there might be a war, but war was not looming in 1948. Or that may be a false ...

BYERS: No, actually I don't think it was looming in my mind. I really didn't give it a consideration. But one of the important things that I've always kept in the back of my mind—I went into the military. The military paid me to do a job. And if there is a war, and they ask me to do it, then I have no choice except to do it. Right or wrong, you know, you just go ahead and do what you're told to do. Because you have been paid all these years, and that's what you're trained for. So that's the way I've always looked at it.

PIEHLER: Now you stayed stateside during most of the Korean War period. You said in '52 you were levied to Europe.

BYERS: That's correct.

PIEHLER: How did—I also ask this of people who were in the Army pre-Pearl Harbor and after Pearl Harbor. How did—from being sort of stateside, how did the Korean War change the army routine?

BYERS: It intensified the training before I left—going to Europe. And it ruined some good people, because I saw that when I got to Europe, some of the NCOs had been there. They were Korean vets and they just could not handle the restrictions that were placed on them in Europe. They just kept getting in trouble, getting in trouble and what have you. They didn't realize that they're not in a war zone and couldn't do pretty well what they want to. And so the war affected these people that way. Now for me, it just gave me a sense of the fact that you're in a vulnerable position and you can be called on any time, basically.

PIEHLER: So in a sense you had this expectation that you could very well go to Korea.

BYERS: There was no doubt in my mind that I could have very well gone to Korea, yeah.

PIEHLER: What about the caliber of people that were coming in during the Korean War? Because there were lots of volunteers, but there was also a lot of draftees. What was your sense of the people coming through, particularly Airborne?

BYERS: Coming through there they were good people. You didn't get into that unless you were. Of course, you ended up with foul-ups there just like anywhere else, but that's going to happen. I don't think that there was that much of a degradation of the people coming in there that much, you know, them being drafted and what have you. As a matter of fact, the drafted people, they were getting some of your more educated people then. And of course, I'm not sure—well, as a matter of fact I know that when I went in you didn't even have to have a high school education to get in. So you're getting, basically, a better caliber of people through the draft.

GRIFFING: When you went to Europe were you in an Airborne unit there as well?

BYERS: I think maybe for about three weeks. I left the 82nd Airborne Division. I ended up with a quartermaster air resupply company right outside of Stuttgart. Somehow or other the replacement system had flooded that little company with too many NCOs, and I was an NCO. I was a sergeant, a three striper at that time. I was last in, and they didn't need me, and so they shipped me down to an infantry division down in Augsburg.

GRIFFING: While you were at Fort Bragg did you have to maintain jump status?

BYERS: I was on jump status.

GRIFFING: So how many times did you have to jump a month?

BYERS: You had to jump once every three months to draw your pay—every three months to draw your pay. Of course we did it more often than that, but you had to do it once every three months for your pay.

GRIFFING: Are there any jumps that stand out in your memory? Anything go wrong?

BYERS: Some of the night jumps and Jump Master School. Unknown landing zones and what have you.

GRIFFING: Any broken bones or anything?

BYERS: No, no. No broken bones. There was a—in that little quartermaster air resupply company, one of the members landing on an airfield and he pulled his feet up a little too soon, and he broke a leg. No, I had absolutely no broken bones. No, I got through four years of it with no broken bones. I think I ended up with maybe forty jumps—senior parachutist. Had to go to Jump Master School to get that, you know, and everything.

PIEHLER: You said you'd gotten reassigned to an infantry division in Germany. How long were you with that infantry unit?

BYERS: Oh, for the remainder of my three-year tour.

PIEHLER: In Germany?

BYERS: Yeah, I ended up in the division public information office there. As a matter of fact, I was the NCOIC in charge of that public information office in Germany. Again, administrative ability, and we supervised the writing and publishing of the division newspaper and what have you. So I stayed there for the remainder of my three years.

GRIFFING: And which division did you say that was? Which division?

BYERS: It started out as the 43rd Infantry Division. It was a National Guard division, but then it switched to the 5th Infantry Division before I left. They took the colors back for the National Guard division to the states, and brought the colors over for the 5th Infantry Division, which was a regular division. Yep.

PIEHLER: In terms of public relations, what encompassed your duties? What was a typical day like? Any unusual duties that didn't meet that role?

BYERS: Well we dealt with the German public. If there were incidents we'd send teams out. You know, try to smooth them over and what have you. And again, we were responsible for the news for the entire division. And the big thing though, I guess, was the dealing with the public, with our teams and what have you—out talking to them and everything.

PIEHLER: How often would you put out the divisional newspaper?

BYERS: It was a weekly thing. It was weekly. And we also contributed to the *Army Times*. We contributed copies to the *Army Times* while I was there.

PIEHLER: How much writing did you do for say the divisional newspaper or the *Army Times*?

BYERS: I didn't do any writing.

PIEHLER: You didn't do writing?

BYERS: No. I didn't do writing. I would edit some of it for them, and what have you. But as far as writing, no. If it needed to be chopped, I would do a little chopping here and there. And I have always had a half way decent flair for English, and I would check it for errors and what have you.

PIEHLER: This skill in writing. I mean where did you learn—pick up this skill in writing? Did it come from high school or does it come from later down the road?

BYERS: High school basically, I guess. We had some very good English teachers back then in high school. And I ended up with a college degree, and I never took an English course, okay? I took some tests. I had to take a junior—a rising junior English test in

Georgia to continue my education in Georgia. I passed it. I never did take an English course in college. Not one.

PIEHLER: You mentioned one of your jobs was also to patch things up with the Germans when there was a problem. What kind of problems would you have to patch up or things you'd have to explain?

BYERS: Well, your vehicles get into some farmland and create ruts in it. Tanks going through a town bump a side of a building. Those streets are very small over there, you know, and everything. And going through the towns sometimes they would nudge a little side of a building you know, and what have you. Those are the things that the public information office sort of got involved in.

PIEHLER: What was your sense of the attitude of the German civilians towards the Americans, particularly the American Army at that time?

BYERS: At that time they were very receptive toward us. Of course, over the years it's changed, considerably. But at that time, they were happy we were there. We were pumping money into the economy, you know, and everything. Helping them rebuild and this was—you've got to realize this was '52 to '55. That was my first tour over there. And you're only talking what, ten years since the war. There was still a lot of rubble in Germany at that time.

PIEHLER: Quite literally rubble?

BYERS: Oh, yeah. And they were very receptive to us at that time. Very receptive.

PIEHLER: What did you do for fun while you were in Germany? You hadn't traveled much growing up, and now you're in a foreign country that truly is a foreign country because they're speaking a different language.

BYERS: Well, I did some traveling while I was over there. At that time I didn't have a car, you know. I'd get on a train though and go to various places. The military ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

PIEHLER: You mentioned that the military also provided sort of recreational opportunities and travel opportunities and then the tape cut off.

BYERS: Well, they maintained hotels in these locations: Berchtesgaden and Garmisch. And they were available to us to utilize. Very nice places to go to and what have you. I didn't get into skiing. But I did like to get up into the mountains, if you will. It was beautiful over there.

PIEHLER: Did you date any German women? How much dating was there among the GIs?

BYERS: Oh, there was quite a bit. As a matter of fact, my first wife was from Germany. I married her over there. My three children are half-German.

PIEHLER: We're in the war with Korea, and it's very clear that the Soviet Union is our adversary, or could even be our fighting adversary. What was the sense in Germany, among troops, about the prospect of war in Europe? What did they, you know ...

BYERS: I'm not sure. In some of the planners' minds, and what have you, your leaders, but I don't think it filtered down that much to the lower ranks, if you will. I just don't feel that it did.

PIEHLER: You didn't have a feeling there that next week we could be at war here?

BYERS: No, no, no. I really didn't. Not on that tour, no—surely didn't.

PIEHLER: It sounds like you really enjoyed Germany.

BYERS: I did, I did. Lovely country. They were good to us at that time. Very accepting and everything. I did enjoy it. I really did.

PIEHLER: I partly ask that because you do other tours in Germany and ...

BYERS: I've done two other tours in Germany.

PIEHLER: Two other tours. I'll be curious how those compare to that.

BYERS: Well, the first one of course was as an enlisted man and when I went back I was a pilot. I managed to see it from one end to the other—a little different viewpoint you know. And it was different. I went back in 1960 and stayed until '64. I stayed four years that tour. And I was stationed in Munich for the first year and then they moved us up to—actually we were housed in Mainz, but the airfield was out in a little town called Finthen, F-I-N-T-H-E-N. And we flew all over the countryside. I did training down in the Bavarian Alps for mountain training. The pilots, I taught them how to fly in the mountains and what have you.

PIEHLER: In your second tour what was the attitude of the Germans towards the Americans? In general, what was your sense?

BYERS: Generally speaking they accepted us but then you would start running into a few that would just as soon see you go home, you know. But again, 1960 to '64 a lot of money is still going into the economy. And generally speaking they didn't bother you. But you started running into people that resented you and would rather you go back to the states.

PIEHLER: And this is also a tense time in Germany in terms of the Berlin crisis and the Berlin Wall.

BYERS: Yes.

PIEHLER: Any memories?

BYERS: Well certainly it was talked about a lot at that time. Of course that could have conceivably turned into a nasty situation but luckily it didn't, I guess. The diplomats handled it fairly well I guess. But there was always that sense that something could happen. We always—even the first tour we did monthly alert drills. In other words, we would get calls just out of the blue and we would have to deploy to our staging areas and be ready to go. You always carried basic loads of everything; ammo, food, and water, and everything, you know. They pretty well kept us hopping as far as being ready to go if we had to.

PIEHLER: Did you have a sense that there was greater readiness the second tour instead of the first?

BYERS: There was greater readiness the second tour probably than there was the first.

PIEHLER: Did you get a sense that—not that war was probable, but that it was slightly more imminent the second time around? You're also an officer, and you're aviation ..

BYERS: Well, I realized that there could have been—that there was a probability of it you know, but I didn't really concentrate that much on it because you just have to wait and see, you know.

PIEHLER: You would do one last tour. When would be your third tour in Germany?

BYERS: I was in what they call—I was stationed in a little town called Fulda. They called it the Fulda Gap, and it was considered the main route coming out of East Germany down into West Germany at the time. And that tour I was with an armored cavalry regiment aviation company. And we physically flew the East-West border, and I mean right up on it. Let's see, I got there in October of '66. Just before I got there a Soviet helicopter—armed helicopter if you will—had come over into West Germany and forced one of our civilian helicopters down. It didn't shoot him or anything, but I mean, forced him to land and everything. By the time I got there we were flying with guns on our ships. We didn't have that sort of situation again. (Laughter) No more of that. But, I mean they were right there, we were right here. (Gestures) We had three sectors that we flew. And it was to determine if there was any unusual buildups on the other side and what have you, you know. That's what it was all about. That was my primary mission. That was our company's primary mission that third tour that I was over there.

PIEHLER: What about the attitude towards the German-American relations?

BYERS: They were sort of deteriorating a little more by then. Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: Also I get the sense by the late '60's—Germany was how prosperous? You have memories of rubble from your first tour. How much of Germany—what was still the same and what was very different?

BYERS: There wasn't anything still the same. They had cleaned it up by then. They had cleaned everything up by then and rebuilding almost completely. We had a friend that worked in Border Ops and on the ground you couldn't get any closer to the border than five kilometers. But he worked in Border Ops, so he had a border pass and he took my wife and I right up to the border. And the contrast was really amazing in East Germany compared to West Germany.

PIEHLER: In what way?

BYERS: The condition of the buildings and things of that nature.

PIEHLER: You could just see...

BYERS: Oh, oh, so obvious. I shouldn't say this but, to a great extent, between Germany and France, [in the] early part of my second tour, that was obvious, too.

PIEHLER: In what, the second tour...

BYERS: This was in 1960...

PIEHLER: France was...

BYERS: Hadn't come back as much as the Germans had. I ended up—I flew into Verdun for some reason—I don't recall what. Of course you could really tell the difference between the condition of the buildings and what have you between the two countries.

PIEHLER: It's a very interesting observation. Well, I usually try to keep everything chronological, but I just couldn't resist in terms of—particularly comparing the observations of Germany.

BYERS: That's okay.

PIEHLER: Because you sort of get snapshots of Germany in three different eras. Coming home to the states it would be 1955. You would then go to Warrant School, or where would you go to?

BYERS: What was that question?

PIEHLER: Going back to 1955, after your first tour in Germany, where would you go? Would you go then to Warrant School—Warrant Officer School?

BYERS: I came back in 1955 and ended up at Fort Benning, Georgia, and signed in to Warrant Officer Candidate course Thanksgiving Day 1956. I had put in for OCS while I was in Germany that first tour. The requirement was that the paperwork had to hit the processing headquarters ninety days before your rotation date—expected rotation date. Mine got there eighty-nine days before and they bounced it and said reapply back in the states, okay. So rather than reapply for Officer Candidate School I decided to go to the Warrant Officer Candidate program and Flight School. And I did that in—I started actually in November of 1956.

PIEHLER: Why did you change? I mean partly you explained if the paperwork had been processed you would have gone to OCS.

BYERS: I would have, yes.

PIEHLER: But you could have also just applied again for OCS. Why the change?

BYERS: Well, when I got back to the States my wife was pregnant and my first son was born in October of '55. And so I didn't want to do anything there for a while. Then I just got to thinking that I would like to fly, you know. Had I gone to OCS, I wouldn't have been guaranteed that opportunity.

(Tape Paused)

PIEHLER: You were in the middle of explaining the switch to aviation.

BYERS: Oh, okay. I had decided at that point that I wanted to fly. And had I gone to OCS I wouldn't necessarily have gotten that opportunity. The probability was there, but not a guarantee. So, I knew if I went to the Warrant Officer Candidate course that I would certainly get it. And I did.

GRIFFING: What kind of requirements did they have to get into that program?

BYERS: At that time you had to be a noncommissioned officer. You had to have a general testing score of 115. To go to OCS you only had to have a general testing score of 110. And we used to niggle the officers a little bit about that, you know. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So it was harder to get into Warrant Officers then into OCS.

BYERS: Yeah, because a person finishing Basic Training can go to OCS. But for us, we already had to be a non-commissioned officer, and again, a GT score of 115 or above. That was basically it. Regular Army—you had to be regular Army. That was basically the requirements. Of course you had to pass a Class-1 Flight Physical, 20/20 vision, good hearing. Of course, now once you graduated you could wear glasses corrected to 20/20, but to get in it had to be 20/20 to start with.

GRIFFING: So you were guaranteed Flight School when you got Warrant Officer School?

BYERS: Oh yeah. That was the program. That was the tail end of it, yeah.

PIEHLER: Why such a desire for aviation?

BYERS: Something different, money, they paid flight pay. You know, I was already a sergeant first class, an E-6. At that time you could only go to master sergeant, E-7. Of course now they have E-8 and E-9. I would have hit E-7 and that would have been it as an enlisted man. I just wasn't happy with that. I wanted to continue progressing, if you will. And that's the way it went. I managed to do it.

GRIFFING: Well, what were your impressions of Warrant Officer Candidate School? Like, how difficult was it for you?

BYERS: Having been an Airborne sergeant first class E-6, I was pretty well in command of my own self. To go down there and become a nothing was very difficult for me. (Laughs) Got to be honest with you, it was very, very difficult for me. But again, you suck it up and take it because you know what the end result will be if you do. But, it was difficult for me.

GRIFFING: And how long was that school?

BYERS: It was a six-month course. Our first month was strictly Pre-Flight, in other words, soldiering if you will. Harassment, trying to run you out of the course and what have you, you know. Inspections and I mean very, very, very detailed inspections and everything. And classes. We were going to class at the same time. There was a lot of studying to do—aerodynamics, meteorology, and things of that nature.

GRIFFING: So, they combined Flight School and Warrant Officer Candidate School?

BYERS: The flight portion of it is a part of the Warrant Officer Candidate School, yeah. That particular course.

PIEHLER: So anyway, there are elements of sort of going back to the beginning in a different context, in terms of some of the rigors of making your bed a certain way.

BYERS: Very much so.

PIEHLER: Polishing your shoes a certain way. (Laughter)

BYERS: As a matter of fact, when checked in, you check in of course with your rank on. Tomorrow that'll be off and you're a nothing, you know. You start from scratch.

PIEHLER: If you hadn't made it, what would have happened?

BYERS: I would have gone back to my old rank.

PIEHLER: You would have gone back to your old rank.

BYERS: To my old rank.

PIEHLER: You wouldn't have ...

BYERS: No, no, no. I'd have gone back to the old rank. That wouldn't have been taken away from me just because I flunked out.

PIEHLER: For the duration, you were just...

BYERS: You were a nothing.

GRIFFING: Was there a high washout rate there?

BYERS: Very much so, yeah. I think we started with better than I think around fifty-six or fifty-seven and we graduated around twenty-six or twenty-seven.

GRIFFING: Wow.

BYERS: Yeah, they got a lot of them in Pre-Flight. Then of course there were some people that just couldn't fly that helicopter, too. They just couldn't fly it.

GRIFFING: What kind of helicopters were you training in?

BYERS: We started out with the Bell, two-seated OH-13—Observation Helicopter-13—with a bubble on it. That was our training helicopter. And then of course we did fly—I think I got almost ten hours in the Sikorsky H-19. It was, I think, an 8 or 9 passenger helicopter at that time. There was the little Bell observation machine. A little dinky thing—reciprocating engine in it.

PIEHLER: You mentioned that some people just washed out in Pre-Flight. What would trip them up? Was it the classroom? Was it the discipline?

BYERS: Well, the classroom got some and the discipline got most of them. They just couldn't handle the discipline.

PIEHLER: Which is interesting, because you had to—you just can't go right from Basic Training like OCS. These people had been in the military.

BYERS: That's true. At that time you could not go from Basic into it. You had to be a non-commissioned officer to get in. And of course, we knew how to soldier, but we weren't used to soldiering quite like they wanted us to. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: So in some ways there's an element—the way you're describing it. I wouldn't say hazing, but we're going to make life difficult for you for a reason, because we're looking to see if you'll trip up.

BYERS: That's exactly right. That was the intention of it.

PIEHLER: It worked, at least in the sense that...

BYERS: It worked.

PIEHLER: ... you want people to trip up and some tripped up.

BYERS: They wanted to know how you would function under pressure, basically. Because up there, there are situations that you get into that there is pressure. You have to be able to deal with it, and they felt that if a person couldn't deal with it on the ground, he couldn't handle it up there. And I think that was their reasons for it, although I didn't like it. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Do you think the reason was a correct one?

BYERS: To an extent, yes. I think they may have gone overboard with it sometimes.

PIEHLER: Well, let me ask this in a cultural way, in terms of the differences between the Air Force and the Army. I've often got the sense talking to a lot of Air Force people that the Air Force was a bit more relaxed.

BYERS: It was.

PIEHLER: It's just striking because interviewing a lot of people with Army Cadet Training, it could be very rigorous, but particularly when you got to the flight time, that's when things start to—not that discipline would disappear, but would be less sort of severe. I got a sense you got past the cadet stage they moved away—well, they wanted you to shine your shoes, but they weren't going to flunk you out for it.

BYERS: That's true. That's true.

PIEHLER: You got the sense that it was a very strict discipline all the way through.

BYERS: It was. Once you got through the Pre-Flight. The discipline was still there, however it wasn't to the extreme that it was during the Pre-Flight.

PIEHLER: But you still give a sense that it was a very structured, a very ...

BYERS: Very much so.

PIEHLER: And your impression is you've been in the Army for a number of years.

BYERS: Oh yeah, by that time, let's see, '56. I had been in a little over eight years.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you have vivid memories of people at Warrant Officer and early aviation.

BYERS: Well, yeah. Yeah.

PIEHLER: Any people or stories?

BYERS: Well, unfortunately, in our class we had two get killed. In training, they crashed their machines, you know. One of them—we both lived in Columbus, Georgia, 'cause that's where I had come from to Fort Rucker. And after Pre-Flight on the weekends, we could leave if we weren't flying and go home. I can recall one trip I rode a motorcycle with him. He had a motorcycle, and we went home on a motorcycle. That was a trauma, very traumatic when we lost him. He was such a nice guy and everything. But then again, it is one of those situations—it can happen. So, you just have to accept it and keep going with it. The one I can remember was sort of a—he had a commission before—a reserve commission, of course—then he was going through the Warrant Officer Candidate course also. And he sort of wanted to be a little above us and what have you, you know. But it didn't work. (Laughter) It was interesting, very interesting.

PIEHLER: Did you have any black soldiers in your aviation ...

BYERS: Sure did. Matter of fact we had two in my class that graduated with us. Sure did.

PIEHLER: I guess—you'd been in the Army and when you joined in '48, Truman was just about or had just issued the Segregation Order.

BYERS: I was in when he issued it. Yeah, I was in.

PIEHLER: When did you see integration start to be a reality where you served?

BYERS: Oh, I guess in '49 at Fort Bragg. I can remember out in Fort Sam Houston, Texas, there was an African-American in the school.

PIEHLER: In the school with you?

BYERS: Yeah and we became friends. You know, I come from a little dinky town that didn't have any you know, and I didn't have a prejudiced bone in my body—still don't. And he'd say, "Floyd, I'd just love to be able to go out and have a beer with you." I'd say, "I'd love for you to also, but we know you can't." You know he was such a nice guy and it was a shame there in Texas. But he couldn't have done it, and we both knew it. But we did—of course Truman did do it in 1948.

PIEHLER: What about, say, in your division in Germany? Had that integrated yet? I had read it was a very uneven, you know—some units, like Korean units, integrated more quickly. Did you have any black troops?

BYERS: I'm trying to recall. In 1952 I doubt. There may have been, but I just can not recall seeing them in 1952.

PIEHLER: What about when you left?

BYERS: Yes. There were. There were.

PIEHLER: And then in Warrant Officer School you did have some black soldiers.

BYERS: Yes, as a matter of fact we had two in my class that graduated with me. Sure did.

PIEHLER: And what did you like? Did you like flying as much as you thought you would?

BYERS: Yeah, I really did. I like flying. I enjoyed it.

PIEHLER: Any initial close calls when you started?

BYERS: Uh, I had a little training accident, but I didn't get blamed for it. The instructor did. (Laughter) ... The engine out procedure in a helicopter is called auto-rotation. In other words, if the engine quits you can land the thing safely without tearing it up. So we had been doing nothing but that from altitude. Auto-rotation, auto-rotation, you know. So, the flight's ready to go back to our base where we parked the helicopters and he's rushing me. He had kept me over a little too long, and he's rushing me. And he chopped the throttle on me. And there is a completely different procedure in a hover as opposed to up in the air. I can tell you. So, I faked him out. Up in the air you lose an engine, you get the collective pitch down immediately to maintain rotor RPM. At a hover, you just hold what you've got and then whatever you have left you cushion it on. Well, I faked him out just momentarily. Held what I had, and then I bottomed it out. So I sort of smiled the skids on him. (Laughter) Sort of slammed it into the ground. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: And he got the blame?

BYERS: He got the blame, and I got his ire. I can tell you that. (Laughter) "Candidate Byers, I'm not sure you're going to make it." "Sir, Candidate Byers, yes sir." All the way back—you know we had to ride a jeep back because the helicopter was broken. He kept after me. But I made it.

GRIFFING: How far into training was that?

BYERS: How far into it? Oh, I'd say maybe the second or third month. Wasn't funny. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: You had passed the course, and not a course that it was obvious that you were going to finish in the beginning.

BYERS: Oh no. No. No.

PIEHLER: This sounds like this was one of your more difficult—I mean the actual training was one of your more difficult assignments. Is that a fair ...

BYERS: It was. It was one of the more difficult assignments. As a matter of fact, until I soloed in the helicopter—in other words, we did certain things up to a point and then they let us solo. Then they'd turn us loose out into some of the other areas out away from the stage field and a little bit on our own. Until I did that, I had gripped the collective so much that I couldn't spread my fingers. I mean, I've got a death grip on that thing. I'm not going to lose it, okay. (Laughs) And in reality you really didn't have to do that. You know you could just hold it loosely. Because first of all you've got the throttle on. You've got a little friction on it. It's not going to change. And you've got a little friction on the collective. It's not going to change anyway. But I couldn't convince myself of that. I had to hang onto it. And I had squeezed it so much that—you think I'd go see a flight surgeon? No way! He'd of kicked me out. But after I soloed I realized, "Hey, just relax and fly." Then it got easier on me, yeah. It got much easier. But you're right. It was a difficult course—a very difficult course.

PIEHLER: Well after graduating Flight School where were you assigned next?

BYERS: I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, to an aviation—actually they called them transportation companies then. They had a Sikorsky built CH-34. It was a twelve-passenger helicopter, and then they modified them and put some seats in the door thing—doorstep—and took it up to eighteen. I flew that thing for seven years. Seven years. I flew it at Fort Benning, and then in 1960 when I went to Europe. Flew it over there for four years. So, flew it for seven years on one machine.

PIEHLER: That's a long time.

BYERS: It was.

PIEHLER: It sounds like a basic question, but how did you like the machine?

BYERS: It was a good machine, very good machine. Reliable. It had a radial reciprocating engine in it. But basically it was a reliable machine. And you could do a lot with it. Troops, equipment, sling loads. You name it, we could do it. Enjoyed it, sure did. Then after I came back from that tour I ended up in a company that had the Chinook in it—the CH-47 Boeing Vertal. It's a twin engine, tandem rotor, at that time, thirty-three passenger, crew of four helicopter. It's a big one. Ninety-eight feet long, as a

matter of fact. Essentially that was my primary helicopter for the rest of my career. But I did fly the others intermittently. I was qualified in the -34, the H-13, the OH-6 observation helicopter, the OH-58 observation helicopter, the Huey. Everybody's heard of the Huey. I flew that thing. It wasn't my primary, but I could fly it. The Chinook is the one that I flew in Vietnam for the two tours I was over there.

GRIFFING: Was that a really challenging aircraft since it's bigger?

BYERS: It had its idiosyncrasies, if you will. It was a challenging aircraft. You try to put a ninety-eight foot long helicopter into a little hidey-hole in Vietnam, you'll know whether or not it's a challenging aircraft or not. (Laughter) Very, very challenging, yeah. It was.

GRIFFING: When you had learned to fly the different aircraft was there like a school, or was it just on the job?

BYERS: I'm trying to—okay. I went from the -34 to the CH-47. I got most of my training by instructor pilots in the field. In other words, out in the field. I went to Fort Rucker for my final ten hours in it. And the Huey—I got transitioned into it in the field. In other words, I didn't go to Fort Rucker. When I got ready to go to—I'm trying to think. I'd only been instructing since 1959 in the various helicopters, and they figured I needed to go to the instructor course at Fort Rucker. So I got checked out in the OH-6. That's the Hughes that looks like the egg you see running around. I got checked out in it there. I got checked out in the Huey—let me take that back—when I went to the instrument course. They had to give me ten hours in it so I could fly it on instruments. And the -58, I got checked out in the field.

GRIFFING: So did you have any choice about which aircraft you learned to fly?

BYERS: Ah, well the Chinook, I guess, is my favorite. Big, a workhorse, good machine. I liked it better.

GRIFFING: How closely did you have to work with the crews?

BYERS: With the Chinook?

GRIFFING: Yes.

BYERS: Very, very close—very close. On the Chinook you had a flight engineer, a crew chief. That was peacetime. (Pauses) In Vietnam—okay, you had a pilot, copilot, flight engineer, crew chief in peacetime. In Vietnam we had a pilot, copilot, flight engineer, crew chief and a door gunner. So you were dealing with three enlisted people plus your copilot.. So you had to work pretty close with them on that machine. You really did.

GRIFFING: Were you guys consistently in the same aircraft?

BYERS: No, no, no. Unfortunately it's not like it is with the Air Force. We weren't that lucky. We flew whatever they put up on the line. You know, what was going to happen to this one or that one, you know? Because they all have their own little idiosyncrasies and everything. No, we didn't get to fly the same aircraft, no. Surely didn't.

PIEHLER: After you came back from Germany in 1964, how long would you be in the States before you went to Vietnam?

BYERS: One year.

PIEHLER: One year. And after Germany where were you reassigned? Back to Georgia?

BYERS: Yeah. In '64 I went back to Fort Benning, Georgia. That's where I got transitioned into the CH-47. And I went from there to the Instrument Flight School and back to Fort Benning, Georgia. And then, of course, that's where we left to go to Vietnam in '65.

PIEHLER: You were part of the big build up in '64 and '65 in Vietnam.

BYERS: We went over as a division—the First Air Cavalry Division. We had over 400 helicopters in that—over 400 aircraft in that division. That's the reason they called it air cavalry, I guess. Their concept was we can get around on the battlefield over there much easier with helicopters. Basically that's what we did. We were the beginning of the big build up, you're right there.

PIEHLER: I guess, what's your most vivid memory of your first tour of duty in Vietnam? That's a broad enough question.

BYERS: The Ia Drang Valley fiasco—the death that was caused there and everything. Of course I flew support. We could move a gun crew and an artillery piece, a 105mm howitzer, basically, with a load of ammunition at one lift in that thing, you know. And we put them into their fire support bases and everything in support of that. And of course, we were working out of a place called Pleiku, which was east of where this was located, and that's where they brought the dead and lined them up and everything. There were quite a few people that got killed during that little thing.

PIEHLER: That was—I've read—the accounts I've read it was a very bloody and a very brutal fight.

BYERS: It was very bloody and brutal. They stumbled on an entire division. And for whatever reason they only put a battalion in there. I've not understood that yet, you know. One battalion. The North Vietnamese actually had a regular North Vietnamese division there. That's the reason it was brutal. We lost a lot of people there. I just never did understand why they didn't put more people in there.

PIEHLER: Even at the time?

BYERS: Oh yeah.

PIEHLER: Oh, you felt it then?

BYERS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: In your first tour of duty, any close calls?

BYERS: Oh, we were still operating off of the airfield that we landed on when our first casualty took place. We had sent a Chinook in support of some Marines that were in there and they took several rounds. The flight engineer got killed. I took rounds the first tour, [but] not very many. So I consider myself lucky the first tour. We were up in the Highlands and they couldn't see you very long up there because of the woods and what have you. So we didn't get shot at and hit that often.

PIEHLER: So in some ways that was—it could occur, but it was not a frequent ...

BYERS: No.

PIEHLER: You didn't go out and—the odds were really against you getting hit the first tour? It could happen, but ...

BYERS: Yeah, yeah. Going into some of the landing zones and what have you. You know, because they would set you up. They wouldn't do anything and you'd get a few troops in there, and you'd go in and they'd open up on you. First tour, I don't recall, maybe the helicopter I was flying took two or three rounds. But that was it. Wasn't that bad up there. Wasn't that bad at all.

GRIFFING: So your missions there, where they primarily moving troops or moving equipment?

BYERS: We used ours mostly moving equipment—the Chinooks. Occasionally we would get called on to move troops, but not that often. We would be called on to evacuate the wounded and the dead sometimes. I remember one time I got called out and we had to use a hoist to pull this—he was a South Vietnamese soldier. He'd taken a round. We used a hoist to lift him up out of the trees and get him in and take him back into the base. Unfortunately the poor guy died. You know, we didn't get to save him. But anyway, you're sitting up there and he's just been shot down there. You don't know whether they're going to shoot you. You just sit there, and grin and bare it.

PIEHLER: To me what's so striking from what I've read about Vietnam—I have to confess I'm more of a World War II in terms of what I do my scholarly work in—but I've been very struck from what I know about Vietnam is that the helicopters—the places you

would fly—maybe not your particular unit, but in general. Helicopters were going into some of the worst of fighting at times. And much like the B-17 pilots had to fly into flak in World War II; you were sort of going into some pretty—could go into some very touchy situations.

BYERS: I have flown even up in the Highlands at night, and you look over at another aircraft over here. As a matter of fact it was a Mohawk. He's doing reconnaissance, and you're seeing red balls that size. (Gestures with his hands) And what it is it's a .50 caliber machine gun.

PIEHLER: Several inches large and these little red balls coming.

BYERS: They get bigger! (Laughs)

PIEHLER: They get bigger as they're coming closer.

BYERS: .50 caliber machine gun trying to quiet that guy, you know. Boy, get out of there, you know. (Laughs) Luckily I'm off to one side away from it and it's not happening to me.

PIEHLER: You would go over as a division?

BYERS: Well, the first tour we went as a division.

PIEHLER: Sort of jumping ahead, but how did that compare to your second tour when you didn't go as a—or how did you go over your second time?

BYERS: I went over as an individual replacement the second time. And I ended up down in the [Mekong] Delta that trip. First tour I flew the helicopter off the aircraft carrier. It was at night. I was an intermediate aircraft commander. I had all of fifty hours in the machine—all of fifty hours. Of course I had a lot of helicopter time, but fifty hours in that machine. I was designated an instructor pilot in it before I left my first tour. So, when I went back the second tour I'm an intermediate instructor pilot. Of course you take check rides and everything, you know. And so the second tour I went back as a replacement. And again, we're down in the Delta. They can see you a long way, I can tell you there. And as an instructor pilot—and later they had what they called the standardization instructor pilot. He gave all the instructor pilots the check rides. He gave other people check rides. I was even an instrument flight examiner. Gave instrument check rides and everything, you know. So they really took advantage of me and they flew my hiney off. I ended up with over 1300 hours in twelve months that second tour. That's averaging over 100 hours a month.

PIEHLER: That's a lot of flight time.

BYERS: It was a lot of flight time. Too much flight time. Much too much flight time. And we got shot at and hit more often down there. I guess the closest on that one—we

took a round and I was in the right seat training the man in the left seat to become an instructor pilot. We were just taking off from the base camp, climbing out, taking a load wherever. I don't recall exactly where. I'm sort of leaned over talking to him and everything, and a round came up through the cockpit floor. You hear them, even if they hit you in the rear, you hear them splat, you know. And I'm looking. Where did it go? I see where it came in, but couldn't find it. And since I couldn't find it, I figured we better get on the ground and see what damage it's done, if anything. So we land. Still can't find it. The crew chief picked up my chest protector, turned it upside down, and it was in the bottom of my chest protector.

PIEHLER: That's a pretty close call.

BYERS: I know. That's probably the closest that I...

PIEHLER: You actually ...

BYERS: ... came to getting killed over there.

PIEHLER: Was that a little spooky?

BYERS: Very spooky—very spooky. I saved it and gave it to my son. I don't know whether he still has it or not.

PIEHLER: So that did leave an impression.

BYERS: That left an impression that you're vulnerable—very vulnerable.

PIEHLER: You said, I mean, 1300 hours flight time in twelve months.

BYERS: Yeah that's right.

PIEHLER: And much of this is being an instructor pilot.

BYERS: Well actually, it's on missions. Because ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, if you could explain that.

BYERS: Okay. We usually gave the check rides out on missions because we didn't have the time to do it otherwise. In other words, if a man is coming up on his check ride, what better way to check him out than to see if he can handle it on a mission? So that's when we would do the check rides.

PIEHLER: So, these are not "training exercises."

BYERS: No, no.

PIEHLER: They're sort of instructor—you're the experienced pilot taking someone into his first or second or third or combat situation either as a check ride or he's new and you're training him.

BYERS: Right, right. And of course the emergency procedures we would save—the auto-rotation and things like that we'd save until we got back at the end of a mission and then do a few of those there. The emergency procedures, you know.

PIEHLER: Like before you land?

BYERS: Exactly.

PIEHLER: But it's a mission. So you're sort of in "harm's way" quite a bit.

BYERS: All the time—all the time, from take off to landing.

PIEHLER: And how did this differ from other pilots?

BYERS: Well, the others didn't fly quite that much. But they were exposed to it, essentially, the same way I was.

PIEHLER: But they have less hours?

BYERS: Less hours. I don't think there were very many that ended up with more than 100 hours a month during that period of time. I just don't think so. But you know, you had to give the check rides. You had to go. So, you were exposed quite a bit.

PIEHLER: I think—going back, because we know a lot—you probably know a lot more about the Vietnam War in retrospect. But thinking back to both your tours of duty, what did you think of the mission and what did you think of the war? Was this something you assumed we were going to win? Did you give it any thought? I'm curious. Not what you now may know or think about it, but at the time, thinking back.

BYERS: The first tour over there, in the back of my mind, I thought we could win it. I really did. I thought that we would put the necessary requirements in there to do so. I didn't think that we would let politics dictate and preclude us from doing that. But then the second tour it became somewhat of a question in the back of my mind whether not we could because they were everywhere. You didn't know where they were. They could have been in the hotel that I stayed in at night, you know. That's what our BOQs were—what our BOQs consisted of—acquisitioned hotels. We had little rooms and what have you. Don't get me wrong. Their hotels weren't like hotels that you might visualize here in the states. They were everywhere. You just didn't know where they were. Our home airfield took rocket attacks on numerous occasions. They were everywhere. It wasn't like a front line or anything.

PIEHLER: It sounds like it's even more stark—the Highland versus the Mekong Delta. From your perspective as a pilot, because you had mentioned earlier that you were fired on a lot more and there was a lot more closer calls.

BYERS: In the Delta.

PIEHLER: In the Delta, yeah.

BYERS: Well, number one, I didn't fly as much in the Highlands. I think I got around three plus hundred hours up there.

PIEHLER: For the whole tour?

BYERS: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: So you had 300 the first tour versus...

BYERS: 1300 the second. Yeah.

PIEHLER: That's a big ... (Chuckles)

BYERS: Yeah.

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

PIEHLER: This begins an interview with Floyd Byers on April 17th, 2002 in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

GRIFFING: ... Patricia Griffing.

PIHLER: And you were saying about the difference—you were starting to talk a little bit more about the Highlands-Delta comparison and the comparison between your two tours.

BYERS: Well again, in the Highlands, it was forested and the mountains were there. The Viet Cong couldn't see you as readily as they could once we got down in the Delta. Of course, that being the case, it made it more difficult getting the equipment in because, again, the forest—we had to create landing zones. And they would send some engineers in with chainsaws and cut a few trees, and then we'd take a bulldozer in—the bulldozer down in there and they'd doze out a landing zone. Put artillery batteries in and what have you. Big difference between the rice paddies down in the Delta and the Highlands with the forest and everything.

PIEHLER: Well—and Ia Drang has been widely written—I mean that was a major battle ... a fixed piece battle where—and I've gotten the sense that—you've even said the Delta was just more confusing. It was more regular fighting and fewer regulars—North Vietnamese Regulars. Is that ...

BYERS: That was in the Ia Drang Valley.

PIEHLER: Yeah, the Ia Drang where they had ...

BYERS: They were the regular people.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but in the Delta ...

BYERS: Delta you ran into more of the Viet Cong. The people that really operated out of South Vietnam itself. However, there were some North Vietnamese units that would come over from Cambodia—the southern end of Cambodia and into the Delta even. We'd run into them also over in some of the places near the Cambodian border there. You just didn't know where they were. They were everywhere in their little black pajamas. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: How much contact did you have with the South Vietnamese Army?

BYERS: We supported them sort of like we did the American Army. We would move their equipment, move their headquarters units, provide them with the artillery pieces. We'd move their artillery pieces like we did the—came into contact with them quite often down in the Delta. Very little up in the Highlands because I was supporting mostly that one First Air Cavalry division, but down in the Delta we worked with them quite extensively, in addition to the Australians. They were over there and we supported them too.

PIEHLER: Any contact with South Korean troops at all in either one of your two tours?

BYERS: With what?

PIEHLER: South Korean troops.

BYERS: I didn't understand that.

PIEHLER: South Korea.

BYERS: Oh. Yes, yes. I apologize.

PIEHLER: Oh no, I should ...

BYERS: Yes, in the Highlands only did we have contact with them. They were good troops over there—very good troops.

PIEHLER: What was your impression of the South Vietnamese Army, working with them in both tours, though it was more the second tour you worked with them?

BYERS: Mostly I'd say they were an effective army. Of course I'm sure they were infiltrated with the Viet Cong, but basically they did a pretty good job I thought. Not as well as the Americans did, but they did a good job I thought.

PIEHLER: Did you get any R and R while you were in either—what kind of R and R? I mean particularly your second tour where you're doing all this flight time.

BYERS: The second tour I didn't get R and R. First tour I did.

PIEHLER: Where did you go?

BYERS: Hawaii. I went to Hawaii and met my wife, yup—went to Hawaii. I take that back. I went to Okinawa my first tour with a friend for a few days. The second tour I went to Hawaii and met my wife.

PIEHLER: And how did you stay in touch? How often did you write? How often did she write?

BYERS: I'd say I managed to write maybe a letter every week and a half or so. We corresponded quite a bit. But again, as busy as I was it took some time to take time out to write, you know, but we stayed in touch fairly well.

PIEHLER: And how did your children—how did they fare while you were in Vietnam—overseas?

BYERS: Well, they missed me, I'm sure. (Laughs) Of course they're growing up with my not being there. After the first tour I came back and unfortunately we had rented prior to my going over on the first tour and my wife had had to move while I was gone. Of course the military did it for her, no problem. But we were having breakfast and my youngest daughter was a little reluctant to eat her cereal and so I said, "Why don't you go ahead and eat your cereal." And she looked me right in the eye and said, "Well Daddy, I'm not sure I'm happy you're back from Vietnam." (Laughter) That was a welcome back. But my son really grew up after I got back from my second tour. He had really shot up.

PIEHLER: So he was a very different—he looked very different from ...

BYERS: Considerably different after the second tour, yeah. Of course this was in '68. He was—he would have been—no, this was '69. He would have been fourteen years old then. So he had really shot up on me.

GRIFFING: Where were they living while you were gone?

BYERS: Columbus, Georgia. Both tours. Mostly—each time I came back to the States I ended up in Columbus, Georgia.

GRIFFING: How did you like Columbus?

BYERS: It wasn't a bad town, you know. Wasn't that bad of a town. We of course had the military installation. We'd go into Columbus occasionally for dinner, the Officer's Club, the Home Post for dinner, you know, and things of that nature.

PIEHLER: So in some ways, I mean, because even though you did a lot of overseas tours you sort of had a home. Other military people I know will often in their career will often—not only will they go overseas tours, but a tour in California, a tour in the Midwest, a tour in the South, a tour ...

BYERS: I was lucky I guess because for some reason I seemed to always come back there, and with the exception of my last four years—of course I wasn't coming back from an overseas assignment. I left Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1974 and went to Savannah, Georgia, to Hunter Army Airfield for my last four years down there. But basically Columbus, Georgia, was my home base if you will.

PIEHLER: How did you—when did you have some sense or—by '68 there's becoming a louder protest movement in Vietnam, but when was your sense that there's some ... people [who] don't like this war effort. When did you sense it?

BYERS: Oh, I was aware of that after the first tour. Of course I was in the States for a short period of time between coming back from Vietnam and going to Europe. You always come back to the States and then you go from there to the other overseas assignment. And you could see opposition even then. This was in '64, or—no, I'm sorry. This was in '66. But when I came back in '69 it was very obvious because the opposition had issued a moratorium. I don't know if you're familiar with that or not. You remember it?

PIEHLER: I don't remember it personally but I've read about it.

BYERS: You've read about the moratorium. And they actually—I went to D.C. to support the troops in the event that they really got nasty up there. In other words we took the helicopters up there. The 82nd Airborne division was up there and everything. So it was very obvious to me that ...

PIHLER: So there had been contingency plans in case the protestors got out of hand?

BYERS: Exactly. Oh yeah, yeah. We drove all over D.C.—picked out landing zones. We were—our helicopters were at Andrews Air Force Base. Picked out landing zones where we would put them in and everything, and ready to go in the event we had to. You read about it. Luckily it didn't transpire so we were able to pack up and go back to Fort Benning, Georgia. But that certainly brought it to mind that it was a very unpopular war, if you will.

PIEHLER: Now you would stay in—you would do two tours of duty in Vietnam and then you would be deployed to Germany. In a sense, Germany, Vietnam, Germany, and then Vietnam, '68 and '69. And you would arrive there before or after the Tet Offensive?

BYERS: Right after the Tet Offensive. The Tet Offensive was May. I got there in July of '68. It had just concluded, the Tet Offensive had. I actually volunteered coming out of Vietnam to go to Germany because, as I told you earlier, my wife was from there. Her parents were there and everything, you know, and we wanted to go back. So we managed to do it. But back to Vietnam. The Tet Offensive had just finished when I got there.

PIEHLER: How surprised were you by the Tet Offensive? I mean did ...

BYERS: I wasn't really surprised. I wasn't surprised at all.

PIEHLER: Why? Because a lot of civilians were.

BYERS: Well, I—you know, theoretically during the holidays everybody stood down—didn't fight each other. But I didn't trust those people. I really didn't.

PIEHLER: So that part didn't. Were you surprised at all by the strength of the attacks?

BYERS: No, no, because they brought them in very quietly. Stashed them here and there and had them ready to go, you know. No, I wasn't surprised. I wasn't surprised at all.

PIEHLER: What about the—both in Vietnam and Germany, but also because you would stay in the Army for several more years after your last overseas tour—what did you think of the soldiers you were getting during the course of the Vietnam War? Both in Vietnam itself, but also as a sort of stateside and Germany?

BYERS: By this time—after Vietnam of course we had switched to the completely volunteer military. And you're getting some that aren't quite up to par as they should be. Of course, we had that previously also, but you're getting more and things are beginning to change a little bit as far as the military's concerned. Discipline wasn't quite what it had been previously, I don't think. And I was sort of happy to see my time come to get out because you're running into situations where it's not quite the way you would like to see it be, you know. Politics get more involved and what have you, so—but I think even today though that the military has some very good people in it. You're going to get some sub-par people in there, but I don't think to a great extent.

PIEHLER: But it sounds like you're conveying there are some problems with who the military is attracting, particularly all volunteer. How was morale, say in the second tour, then even after you came back from Vietnam?

BYERS: Well, unfortunately the morale the second tour wasn't as good as it was the first tour. We went over as a big huge unit, you know. And we're there to support each other. The next time you go over you're over as an individual. You're dealing with people you've never met before in your life, and consequently morale is down a little bit. You're starting to get your drugs into it then. And that created a problem.

PIEHLER: Why would the drugs be such a problem? I mean, it may sound like an obvious question, but why would the drugs be such a problem? Because I've also been told there's also a lot of drinking in the military, at least in the earlier era. So what would be so disruptive about drugs—beside the fact that they're illegal, so I don't want to—but how would they ...

BYERS: Well, I think the drugs—generally speaking the drinking in the military was done perhaps in the evening and come next day ...

PIEHLER: You were on the ...

BYERS: You were out there going. You're not drinking during the day. The drugs, to me, seemed to be a continuing thing.

PIEHLER: So it wasn't just someone would do their duty and then at night they might smoke a joint. It was that they're supposed to be ...

BYERS: That's exactly right.

PIEHLER: ... on duty and they're ...

BYERS: That's right. They didn't just do it in the evenings, you know, which is unfortunate you know. I didn't notice in the aviation units it being that disruptive because I guess we were closer type unit than would be an infantry company would be because we had to depend on each other so closely and everything. But there was some drug use of course in the aviation units. We all know that. But I don't think it was all that widespread.

PIEHLER: But it sounds like the support personal—that was where you were noticing there was a problem—and infantry.

BYERS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Any—how would you and other officers react? I mean what was the—how would you deal with the problem at the time?

BYERS: Well, if I caught anybody using drugs I reported them to the first sergeant and let the first sergeant take care of it. I'm speaking of enlisted men.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

BYERS: I don't recall ever seeing an officer ...

PIEHLER: So it was never ...

BYERS: Now taking a drink, yes. But as far as doing drugs, I don't think I ever saw one do drugs. I would have reported that to the company commander, not the first sergeant but the commander, of course.

PIEHLER: But your notion was to report it?

BYERS: Oh definitely, definitely, yeah—because people's lives depended on them being alert. Matter of fact I was off for the day one evening and caught a guy sleeping. I relieved him immediately. Got another person and put him on his post, you know. You just don't do that. You just don't do that over there. Just wouldn't put up with it.

PIEHLER: After your second tour of duty in Vietnam in '69, where would you—you'd go back to Fort Benning—Columbus, Georgia?

BYERS: I did, and ended up in the division Standardization Office. In other words, running the check rides, and what have you, of the instruction pilots—the training. We—of course at that time we were doing a lot of experimenting with “nap of the earth” flying—lower level type flying and everything. We had a program going. We worked very extensively with that. Some of the people that worked for me that worked on that and everything. And just check rides, flight time—very seldom went on missions. I very seldom went out on a mission because I was more into the headquarters area at this point. But occasionally I would, you know. I'd volunteer for it because I enjoyed doing it. But essentially that's what I did when I get back to Fort Benning, and even after I went to Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah I continued doing that. Inspect the other units as far as their aviation elements were concerned. Unannounced inspections, unannounced check rides and things of that nature. Just make sure they're ready to go. And essentially that's what we did.

PIEHLER: Now when you—and then your next tour would be—is that when you would be sent to Savannah?

BYERS: Yup. And again, I did about the same thing down there. In the headquarters, doing the check rides, the inspections, walk in on a battalion commander and say, “Sir, we're going to inspect you today. We're going to inspect your aviation company today.” You know, and they'd say, “Okay.” (Laughter) Not much you can say.

PIEHLER: Now I guess I should ask you—earlier about your promotion. When did—what types of promotion?

BYERS: Well, I think I mentioned I was a sergeant first class E6 when I went to flight school. You come out of warrant officer candidate school as a warrant officer W1.

Eighteen months later I was promoted to W2, and I think about three years later W3 and probably three years later W4. At that time that was as high as you could go as a warrant officer. I came out as a W4.

PIEHLER: So that was your retirement?

BYERS: Yes.

PIEHLER: Any regrets—I mean you wanted to fly, but any regrets that you didn't go the OCS track, where theoretically you could have risen to a higher rank or ...

BYERS: I've reflected on it, you know. I could have done that. I could have ended up with a commission, gone to Vietnam as a second lieutenant, captain, or whatever, and gotten my head blown off in the infantry, you know. So really I've not regretted having done it. There's one thing that I always tell my wife. "Yesterday is gone. Don't even worry about it. You can't do anything about it." So I've never let it bother me. Not reflected on it any—it has entered my mind, but not to the extent that it has bothered me.

PIEHLER: Let me ask—tied to that question. Did you enjoy flying as much as—did you enjoy flying in the Army as much as the last day as the first day? I guess—and I probably ask this because pilots, particular Air Force pilots I think—and my assistant is a civilian pilot and she talks about almost a fraternity of pilots that—I mean how did your feeling of flying go over time?

BYERS: Well I continued enjoying it, but to an extent it became a job also—especially what I was doing. In other words, you go out there, you're doing your check rides, you're doing emergency procedures and what have you, and you're sort of hanging it out, you know. Taking chances if you will, for the sake of training. But the training has to be done. And I still enjoyed it, but then again you had to look at it like a job also, and that's the way I looked at it. Always prepared, ready to do it, you know. And knowing what I was doing I lost total hearing in my right ear in '75. I was on active duty for an additional three years and I continued flying. They allowed me to do that. They called it based on demonstrated ability, you know, and granted me a waiver and let me continue flying. But I couldn't fly out here in civilian life without—with the loss of one ear. But it was enjoyable still, but it was a job.

GRIFFING: When did you manage to get your college degree?

BYERS: While I was in the military. I was in the military. At night—I've got courses from the University of Maryland, Columbus College—none from Armstrong State College in Savannah. I actually got my degree from—at that time Saint Leo College, Saint Leo, Florida. What the colleges and universities did—they brought programs onto the installations, made them available to us, and I took advantage of it. I ended up with a degree in political science. I just wanted a degree. I figured I'd probably never use it, but I wanted the degree. So I did it. As a matter of fact my son and I graduated from

college the same year. (Laughter) I graduated I think a week ahead of him though, yup. Graduated the same year—1977. I went into the army in 1948. I got my degree in 1977.

PIEHLER: Now your son—you had one son.

BYERS: Yes.

PIEHLER: He would go into the Army ROTC?

BYERS: Right.

PIEHLER: When did he enter the Army?

BYERS: 1977.

PIEHLER: And how encouraging were you of him, or was that his idea, or ...

BYERS: I didn't tell him to go into the military. It was his idea. He wanted to go into the Navy. As a matter of fact he applied for the Naval Academy, but unfortunately his vision wouldn't get him in. And of course I told him to apply for the Naval Academy and the Army Academy at the same time and he didn't do it, so he ended up—we ended up paying for his first—I guess first year of college, and then he took ROTC, and then he got the ROTC scholarship and that's how he got his commission.

GRIFFING: What school did he go to?

BYERS: Pardon?

GRIFFING: What school did he go to?

BYERS: Columbus College in Columbus, Georgia.

PIEHLER: And he also would later go on to get an MBA.

BYERS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: How long did he remain in the service?

BYERS: He got out last year [2001]. Went in 1977 and got out last year.

PIEHLER: He was also another career ...

BYERS: Yeah. He got out as a lieutenant colonel. You know, ironically he is working at the same desk that he was working at when he was on active duty. Doing the same job.

PIEHLER: There's another interview on the horizon.

BYERS: They're paying him more money though. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Yeah—oh, I can imagine.

BYERS: He's working for a contractor and doing the same job as when he was on active duty.

PIEHLER: And your two daughters. Did either join the military?

BYERS: No, no, no. My oldest daughter—we put her in college when we moved to Savannah, Georgia. She stayed a year and chose to come out. She went to work in the accounting department for a hospital. That has been her career path since. She's done very, very well at it. She's got probably enough courses to have close to a degree, but she's not a degree person. She's done very well at it. Living in Marietta, Georgia now, and very happy. The other daughter—an associate degree. She's here in Seymour, Tennessee, local.

PIEHLER: I guess, before asking you about what happened after you left the service, just a few more questions about the Vietnam War era. You mentioned the politics intruding. In terms of your missions, where did you have a sense that politics was intruding and what was your thoughts about the general war effort in Vietnam?

BYERS: The Cambodian border was as far as we went. Even though we knew that if our infantry people were chasing them, and they went right into Cambodia, that's as far as we went. Although—and we knew the next day they could be right back in there, you know.

PIEHLER: That was clear. You can't go into Cambodia.

BYERS: That's exactly right. We technically couldn't go into Laos. We had to send some rescue people in there because we had a company operating over there called Air America and they went anywhere they wanted to, of course. Well, they went where our government sent them. Let me put it like that. But we had to have some of our helicopter crews go in and pull some people out of there. That was sort of frustrating. Even after that Ia Drang Valley thing, those that didn't get killed they were right back into Cambodia, you know. And they'd come right back out of there, ready to go the next day. And it was used extensively for resupply. They brought it from up north down right along the border. We knew that. We knew that.

PIEHLER: Did you think when Richard Nixon broadened the war into Cambodia was that—did you think that was going to work? I mean, you weren't in Vietnam at the time, but ...

BYERS: Uh ... I thought it'd help, allowing us to hit some of those supply routes and what have you, you know. I thought it would help considerably. But, I still say—well ... we shouldn't have lost that war.

PIEHLER: From your perspective, what would it have taken at the time? What did you think?

BYERS: It would have taken—I think at the peak we had, what, over 500,000 people over there. It would have taken some more troops, and go into North Vietnam and end it. That's what it would have taken. Don't stop—go on.

PIEHLER: Don't stop at the border.

BYERS: Exactly, don't stop. That's what it would have taken. And we could have done it. We could have done it. How long it would have lasted after we pulled out, I have no idea. Probably a year or two years, but at least we would have accomplished what we—I thought set out to do. And evidently that wasn't what we had set out to do.

PIEHLER: You stayed in the military for thirty years. The Vietnam War clearly ends in '75. You were also given a special exemption to continue flying. When did you think it was time to get out, or were you encouraged to get out? What was that process? My understanding is that after twenty years you had your pension, so you stayed in longer than a lot of people.

BYERS: I hit twenty years and I was on orders to Vietnam for the second tour. I was a regular Army person, so I had to go. When I came back I had been promoted. A promotion locked you in two years. I got back. I went to a couple of schools. They lock you in. And the lock-ins just sort of kept snowballing on me. Next thing I know I'm at twenty-six years in, you know. And I said well why not, you know, go for seventy-five percent of your base pay as opposed to a lesser amount. I was in half way decent assignments. Well, not half way decent, very good assignments. And I figured, may as well stay.

PIEHLER: So some of it's snowballing as you lock into promotions, and then all of a sudden you get to the point where the pension will be better. You also convey a sense that by the mid '70s you were getting—I wouldn't say counting the days, but it was clear ...

BYERS: I was reaching a point where I thought it was about time to come out. Although in my case I couldn't have stayed in beyond what I did anyway because with my rank when you hit thirty they retire you.

PIEHLER: So that was also going to be ...

BYERS: Right, right.

PIEHLER: In a sense because of you being a warrant officer.

BYERS: Right, exactly. They retire you.

PIEHLER: While you were in the military you got a college degree and you also decided to work after retirement. But what was your thinking in terms of what you would do in retirement from the military?

BYERS: At one time I thought about getting some additional college courses and teaching. But then again I sort of saw how the school systems were going and what have you, and I sort of backed off of that. And then decided to do something differently.

PIEHLER: You thought of teaching at what level, what grade?

BYERS: Uh, had I done it I would have hoped for high school at least. I don't think I would have had the mentality, if you will, to have dealt with the smaller children. I think I could have dealt with the high school children.

PIEHLER: But you were dissuaded because in terms of—I guess I'm curious about your thinking at the time about schools.

BYERS: I didn't quite get the question.

PIEHLER: I can understand not wanting to teach elementary school, but why not high school in terms of—was it the same high school experience you thought when you were a kid?

BYERS: No, I realized it was a little different then it was when I was a kid. Of course, I'm seeing my children going through high school, and I'm seeing the things that are going on in high school—the struggles for the money and what have you. Of course, I'm sure there was struggle back then, but I just wasn't aware of it, you know. And I just made up my mind that that I didn't want to do. So I chose not to do it.

PIEHLER: And after you left the military, what would be your first post-military career?

BYERS: Well, actually I ended up with an airline.

PIEHLER: Tennessee Airways?

BYERS: Yep.

PIEHLER: And I've never heard of them, so ...

BYERS: Well, they're no longer in existence. It was an individual owned the company, the entire company. He started out with Cessna 402s. Then he went into a Brazilian

manufactured aircraft. We serviced several of the cities around here. I went into management as opposed to—well, I couldn't fly. So I enjoyed working there.

PIEHLER: How long did you work with Tennessee Airways?

BYERS: About fourteen years.

PIEHLER: That's a significant ...

BYERS: Period of time, yeah.

PIEHLER: You were office manager at one point.

BYERS: I started out as office manager and then promoted to vice president for his passenger traffic. In other words, I became not only just responsible for the office at the home office, but for the stations out at the different airfields.

PIEHLER: And how many airports did you serve?

BYERS: Okay ... out of Knoxville, Chattanooga, Nashville, Lexington, Charlotte, Tri-Cities, at one time Memphis. We went into Dulles International for a while. Cincinnati. I think that's about it.

PIEHLER: So at its peak how many planes?

BYERS: He had four of the eighteen passenger [Embraer EMB 110] Banderirantes—had four of them. We actually started a company out in Iowa when I was still with him. We serviced Dubuque, Des Moines, Midway [International Airport] at Chicago. I can't think of the rest of them right now—but several of them out there.

PIEHLER: This is also the age of deregulation had just sort of really was picking up steam. What was the aviation industry like, because my sense was there were a lot more airlines in that period.

BYERS: There were. That may be one of the reasons that he decided to get out of the business because he's small and in order to survive you had to affiliate yourself with one of the major carriers. As a matter of fact we did with American Airlines. We carried their designation for a while. We sort of fed them at different locations and what have you. We tried to work with Delta, but it just didn't work out. But we did work with American Airlines for a long time there. I think that may have been the reason he decided to get out of that.

PIEHLER: Did you leave the company before the company dissolved?

BYERS: No—well, yes I did. I was still working for the company when they had one out in Dubuque. I sort of backed out because I didn't want to continue messing with

them out there in Iowa. So I left the company before they totally dissolved. Tennessee Airways had sold its certificate to the company out in Dubuque and that is basically when I left the company when he sold his certificate. But we still had that arm out there I could have continued working there, but I chose not to. I did work for a person that had worked for us previously. He started a maintenance outfit and I only did it on a consulting basis for a very short while. And then stopped working completely until tax season.

PIEHLER: How did you—making the transition from being in the military for thirty years to working in the sort of civilian workforce.

BYERS: It was difficult. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: What was the difficult part and what were some of the easier things?

BYERS: Well, the easier things was being able to manage. Of course I had to have the training and everything. The difficult part was telling someone to do something and not seeing it done immediately like you expected it to be done in the military, you know. Civilians just don't react that way. And I got chastised a couple times by the boss. (Laughter) "You've got to be a little easier on them Floyd." I said, "Okay, sir." You know, he was a good guy to work for. Local—he was local. Grew up here and everything. Easy to work for. I enjoyed working for him. He is now a chiropractor, of all things. From airline owner and pilot to chiropractor.

PIEHLER: That is a switch. (Laughs) And so after you left the airline, in a sense you retired again. When did you start doing taxes?

BYERS: Well, I actually started in '90. I hadn't been out of the airline very long. As a matter of fact—I mean almost immediately I guess. Almost immediately I started doing them, yeah.

PIEHLER: So every year you work from January ...

BYERS: January 1 until April 15. (Chuckles)

PIEHLER: In retirement, when you're not doing taxes the first quarter of the year, what do you do for fun?

BYERS: We do a lot of traveling. We've gone on a lot of tours. We've been to Europe a couple times. We've been to Canada. We've toured the United States. We go to Florida every year for at least a couple of weeks. Just do a lot of traveling. We like movies, go out to dinner, I read a lot.

PIEHLER: Are you active in any veterans' organizations?

BYERS: Yeah, unfortunately, two. (Laughs) I belong to the East Tennessee chapter of the Retired Officers Association. I'm a former president. I belong to Military Order of

World Wars. I'm a third vice president in it now. I'm currently president of the West Knoxville Kiwanis Club. So I don't find too much spare time.

PIEHLER: Yeah, I have a sense that you're very active.

BYERS: As a matter of fact, before coming down here today, I was dealing with the Kiwanis situation. We've got a prayer supper coming up and we had some dates sort of goofed up, and I was working on that with the Lieutenant Governor and everything before I came down here. Always something—always something.

PIEHLER: How do you—looking back on the Vietnam War. What other thoughts do you have about it? I guess tied to that, is there any particular movie or novel or memoir that sort of, that you would recommend saying this is closest to my experiences? Or does a novel, memoir, or a Hollywood film not really capture what your experiences were?

BYERS: I don't recall right off them doing—they did one and I can't think of it right now. Early on after the Vietnam War, and I can't think of the name of it right now. It showed the helicopters quite extensively. The movie *We Were Soldiers Once* is out now, and it is a fair depiction, I think, of what happened in that particular Ia Drang Valley thing, you know. It started out with the Dien Bien Phu French fiasco there. That should have told us right then and there, don't go into Vietnam, you know. (Laughs) Because they slaughtered those people, you know, they really did. And, of course, we ...

PIEHLER: How much of that—'cause one of the things that always strikes me is the strength of the war effort of America in Vietnam is we don't have a Dien Bien Phu. There are places like Ia Drang or later, Khe Sahn where it looks like we could have that. But you, in many ways, you in the Air Cavalry and the other components made sure that doesn't.

BYERS: We precluded that.

PIEHLER: Did you sense that at the time?

BYERS: Oh yeah, yeah. In other words, we may lose helicopters, but we'll get our people out. And we did lose helicopters trying to get our people out, you know. But we won't leave them there to be done that way. The Khe Sahn thing, of course, that one could have gotten very, very nasty, but they at least had enough sense to send a sufficient force in to take care of that. I doubt it that the Marines will 'fess up to it, but it was First Air Cavalry Division that went in there in the final analysis and ended that thing I believe.

PIEHLER: How did sort of infantrymen feel about you? Did you get a sense that you were always appreciated?

BYERS: Oh yeah, very much so. Very much so. I'll never forget I had put a platoon in an area up in the Highlands, and they were supposed to make a certain point for a

rendezvous for me to pick them up and bring them back out. Well it's getting late, you know, and I didn't want to be up there trying to find them at night. So I'm in the vicinity, and I spot some troops down in a riverbed. And I call them. Of course I had their call sign, and ask if that is the platoon that I put in. It is. I said, "Well, if you'll just move on up just this short distance I'll get you right out of there." Well, I went in and I did it. In the process I knocked a hole in the ramp—in the bottom of the ramp that we let down for them to come in. In other words, all I did was put the wheels on the bank of the river and they came into the aircraft. I'm sitting up there with the front end up above the river. And the platoon commander came up and wrote on my knee pad, "This is what makes it work." They appreciated us.

PIEHLER: You had a sense that ...

BYERS: Oh yeah, yeah. They appreciated us. And when those artillery batteries were running out of ammo, and you call inbound with a load, and they say, "Well, we're firing 360 degrees, can't bring you in right now." And you say, "Well, I'll tell you what, I guess I'll have to take this ammo back to where I got it." They'll let you in. (Laughter) Yeah, they'll let you in. One of the frightening things could be not knowing precisely where you were at all times over there, because the B-52 bombers were over there constantly. And they were doing what they call their [Operation] Arc Light bombing. In other words they're up there where nobody sees them. And we had to monitor about four or five different radio frequencies to know where friendly artillery is coming from, where bomb runs are being made and everything, you know. You had to know where you were at all times.

-----END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE-----

BYERS: No, I really didn't. Not along those lines because I was a very strict disciplinarian about that radio, and knowing where we were and everything, if I were flying and the other guy was navigating he knew where we were, you know, and listening and taking note of what's happening you know.

PIEHLER: And I should have asked you this earlier ... since you mentioned your other crew mates. What was your crew like your first two—particularly your first tour, because your second tour it sounds like as an instructor you really are rotating a lot. But your first tour you came over as a unit and you came over with a crew. What was that ...

BYERS: Well we were a pretty close group of people. You know, we had to be. You had to trust those enlisted men that maintained the—well, you had your maintenance companies that—your maintenance platoons, rather, in your company and they maintained them, but your crew chiefs and your flight engineers were ones that dealt with them on a day to day basis. So you really had to depend on them. And they knew that I knew the machine and they made a point to make sure they were in good order. Back stateside some of the flight engineers and crew chiefs sort of hate to see me coming because I would question them sometimes. I brought their maintenance manuals to them sometimes, you know. They didn't like that. (Laughter) They didn't like it. But you

have to take care of your life, you know. But the second tour it was muggy down there in the Delta. And we always carried water on board you know, and I'd say to the enlisted folks, "Let me have a shot of water." One trip up to the cockpit he had a great big syringe going to give me a shot of water. (Laughs) You know, a little humor—you have to have a little humor in a situation like that.

PIEHLER: I would also tie to that—what did you think of your different commanders and chiefs—the different presidents, particularly ... Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, because your first tour was under Lyndon Johnson. Your second tour was straddled Richard Nixon—Johnson and Nixon.

BYERS: Nixon, right. To be honest with you ...

PIEHLER: And this is more at the time, or did you even—was it something you didn't think about?

BYERS: We didn't think that much about it because again over there we were pretty well limited as to what information we were receiving. Radio basically, and Armed Forces Network Radio.

PIEHLER: So that was your source of ...

BYERS: Yeah, and the *Stars and Stripes* newspapers, you know. So you really didn't manage to keep up with it that closely over there. Especially that second tour I didn't have time. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: I'm curious concerning some questions about being a Vietnam veteran. What did you thought of the views of Vietnam veterans? Or what's your view of how people view—you're lumped all together with a lot, you know—you're a regular, but you're also a Vietnam veteran, and a Korean War era veteran.

BYERS: Well to be honest with you, nobodies ever bothered me in any way what so ever. I know for a fact though that some of the enlisted men more than likely got treated badly when they came back from Vietnam.

PIEHLER: But you never had a sense of ...

BYERS: No, no. I've never run into any problems. Of course—again after Vietnam I was associated with the military up until what, 1978, so you don't really see that much. Of course you're out in the civilian communities, but they're not going to bother you that much. And they didn't. They didn't bother me. I think it was wrong that they were as nasty to the vets as they were. It's all well and good. They had the perfect right to be against the war I think, but the vets had—they couldn't control what they did. They were following orders. They didn't volunteer for it. They were drafted mostly, you know, and when you're in the military you do what you're told—popular or otherwise.

PIEHLER: What did you—have you been to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial?

BYERS: Yes. It was a while before I would go because there are names on there that I know and it was sad—very sad.

PIEHLER: Have you ever been to any reunions with any one you served with, even in Germany—either Germany or Vietnam, either formal or informal?

BYERS: For a while a fellow warrant officer got a company—a group of company ... personnel together. Searched all over the place, and used his computer and running down everybody. And we have had—I think we had maybe three reunions. But this was a company I served with in the States, but all of them ended up in 'Nam also, you know, sooner or later and everything. And we did have some reunions. As a matter of fact I'm seriously considering going to one up in Williamsburg next month and this will be the folks that served in the company—the last company I was in in Vietnam. So I'm wondering how that's going to be, but I really enjoyed getting together with the people that I had served with in this particular unit. Unfortunately the roster of those that are departed is exceeding the roster of those almost that are still alive, and people considerably younger than I am are gone. And not killed, but just died, you know. And I consider myself very fortunate ... to have managed to last this long. But I really enjoyed the reunions, had a good time. We went down to Fort Walker to do it. That's where the primary flight training was and everything.

GRIFFING: I have a question ...

PIEHLER: You should ask—you're going into the service. I'm surprised—you should ask some practical questions. (Laughter)

GRIFFING: Well I have a question about the awards. The Air Medal and I think the thirty-seven Oak Leaf Clusters? What exactly did you get the Air Medal for?

BYERS: That's combat missions and each Oak Leaf Cluster means another award of the Air Medal for non-combat missions but flying in a combat zone. You had to have fifty hours to get an Air Medal. In a combat situation it took twenty-five hours to get an Air Medal. And that's—you can see how many I got there. Actually thirty-eight Air Medals, if you will, okay.

GRIFFING: And what did you get the Distinguished Flying Cross for?

BYERS: Got shot down. Took a round in a fuel tank and we had used all the fuel out of it. Just the vapors in it exploded into the interior of the helicopter on fire. Put it on the ground safely. I had, I think three or four American officers on board, Vietnamese headquarters people and a Jeep. Got them on the ground, secured the aircraft, and they awarded me the Air Medal for it. I mean the Distinguished Flying Cross for it.

PIEHLER: And no one was hurt? Was anyone hurt?

BYERS: No one was hurt. We got the fire out but they had to evacuate the helicopter to the States to repair it. The explosion had warped the stringers underneath and everything.

PIEHLER: But that wasn't as close of a call as you mentioned earlier when the ...

BYERS: No, I don't think so.

PIEHLER: You didn't feel ...

BYERS: No, no. I think the bullet was—had I been leaning forward that much more it would have been in my stomach, you know. That was the closest I'd say.

GRIFFING: And then the Bronze Star?

BYERS: That was for—that one was for meritorious service in Vietnam, the Bronze Star was.

GRIFFING: I was also wondering just the changes in aviation. Like from when you first started to when you got out of the Army. I mean it seems to me like that was a pretty revolutionary time with a lot of changes going on.

BYERS: There had been considerable changes in aviation since I went into it. One of the most important I think is the fact that women are now into aviation very extensively and I'm happy to see that you know—very happy to see that. The equipment is much more advanced. Takes more technical knowledge to be able to handle the equipment. That Chinook was a pretty complicated machine. I can tell you that to start with. That thing had five transmissions on it—five transmissions. Two engine transmissions, combining transmission, a fore and aft transmissions. The engine transmissions change the direction of the drive, slows down the RPM into the combining transmission. Of course they'd put power out to the fore and aft transmissions for those tandem rotors. And if that's not technical—you know, very technical. (Laughs)

GRIFFING: And when you were in the service did you work with women at all?

BYERS: Yes. I can remember at Fort Benning there was a woman in my section. We had women in Air Traffic Control. The one in my section—sort of an administrative type clerk person. Yeah I did. I worked with women in the service, sure did.

PIEHLER: And it sounds like you didn't mind.

BYERS: No, no, no. Equal pay, equal jobs as far as I'm concerned, you know, really.

PIEHLER: I'll ask the question. So Trish here is going to go into the Army, hopefully commissioned. Because part of us—our primary reason for getting these interviews is for history's sake, but I also have often emphasized to my students, you know there's a

practical—practical advice that might not be written down or some commander won't tell you at Basic or other levels of training. What advice would you have for some one entering the Army in general? Not even just aviation specifically, but Army in general, particularly a young officer.

BYERS: Young officer? Number one—know what you're doing before you stick your foot in your mouth. Number two—when you go into a new organization sit back, take a look at it, and see what's happening before you try to go in and take over. Number three—treat everybody equally. Number four—require that they respect you and adhere to the discipline, you know. I think those are some of the more important things that I would advise.

GRIFFING: You feel like your experience as an enlisted man—did that really help you in leadership?

BYERS: It helped me. It did. Unfortunately a lot of your second lieutenants, they go in to take over a platoon. They've got NCOs in there that have been there done that, and they need to listen to them. Don't let them run the platoon, but listen to them and take their advice and what have you. But unfortunately some of them, you know, I'd venture to say—probably you're going to get more people coming out of the academies than you would out of ROTC.

PIEHLER: You think the academy people are more ...

BYERS: Arrogant.

PIEHLER: And it sounds like also a little cocky that they think they know more than a sergeant with thirty years in.

BYERS: Yeah, I would think so.

GRIFFING: Overall what was the biggest difference in your experiences as an enlisted man and as a warrant officer, just in general?

BYERS: Well, once you reach a very high level as an NCO you're treated very well. I mean you don't do too many extra duties. You could end up sergeant of the guard or something like that. Overall the big difference—better housing, better pay, you know. You're associating with a different group of people. Don't get me wrong, enlisted people are the backbone of the Army and I have no qualms about associating with them, but generally speaking you're dealing with people that are more educated. Your conversations are a little different and what have you. That's the big difference.

GRIFFING: If you had had the opportunity you would choose against being enlisted and had gone to OCS or to ROTC? Or I guess what I mean if you had had the opportunity would you have still enlisted or would you have tried to seek a commission?

BYERS: You're talking back when I came in?

GRIFFING: Right.

BYERS: More than likely I would have gone for the commission, more than likely.

GRIFFING: Did your son ever consider going enlisted?

BYERS: No, no, no. He wouldn't have gone in as an enlisted man. (Laughs) No, he never considered it.

PIEHLER: Anything else?

GRIFFING: Out of all the places, all the different posts that you served at, which was your favorite?

BYERS: I think Augsburg, Germany. I was an enlisted man at that time. I think that is my favorite location. Loved the city—very nice place. Of course in '52, as I said, we were treated very well you know. That would be my favorite place right there.

GRIFFING: Did you ever have the opportunity to go back to Germany after the Berlin Wall came down?

BYERS: Let's see, when did I go back?

PIEHLER: The Wall came down in '89.

BYERS: Well I've been back several times since then.

PIEHLER: What's your observation of today's Germany?

BYERS: They're still nice people. They're very nice people, but they—you get the feeling they don't need us as much as they used to, you know. But I get along well with them. Always have enjoyed being around them. Had to—I was married to one.
(Laughter)

PIEHLER: How did your—my aunt married a sergeant who was serving in Germany in the occupation in the '40s. How did your wife adjust to coming to America? What was that experience like?

BYERS: It was difficult on her. It was very difficult on her. Leaving her family, and of course thrown into complete strangers, but she was the type of person that made friends easily and we made some friends pretty quickly and that sort of eased the burden a little bit on her and everything. And from I guess the summer of '55 until November of '56, of course, I was there with her to sort of buffer it all and everything, yeah. I lost her to a

heart attack in 1985, and, of course, I've remarried since then. Matter of fact I married a person that I went to school with in elementary and high school.

PIEHLER: Oh wow. And it sounds like it was a very deliberate decision to come back to Tennessee.

BYERS: Oh it was definitely, yeah. I had a friend that lived up in Knoxville—in Powell, and as I'm coming up on retirement I visited him, took a look at the town, sort of liked it. And then when I got out decided to stay here. I was only forty-nine years old. I knew I'd want to work more and that little town where I came from—Oh it's lovely to go back to. We go back quite often.

PIEHLER: But you didn't want to buy a house and ...

BYERS: No. It's only three hours drive from here you know. You've heard of the University of the South.

PIEHLER: Oh, yes.

BYERS: Tracy City is twelve miles from the University of the South.

PIEHLER: There is nothing there.

BYERS: There's Sewanee, University of the South, there's Monteagle, which is where the interstate comes across and then just north of there is where I grew up. Very rural.

PIEHLER: I'm curious. You listed your current—you're Presbyterian. You listed on your pre-interview survey a Democrat. I'm just curious because—how much of that is your parents? Also I'm probably asking because I think there's a stereotype which I always try to dispel. Not all academics are Democrats. You know, they may be majority. And not all Army officers are Republicans. But I partly ask—there's a hidden agenda to my question, but I guess just if you could reflect ...

BYERS: One reason I'm a Democrat I guess is that I find that the Republicans a little too on the conservative side as far as your social situations are concerned. We've got situations here in this state—in this country—that if they didn't get help they wouldn't survive I don't think, and some how or other I get the impression that the Republicans aren't quite as compassionate as the Democrats are towards that. As a result the Democrats have achieved a tag of being liberal you know. But I don't think that's all of it. Some of it yes—some of it yes. You can take your social work a little too far and everything. I should have put independent over there. Because I'll tell you, I've voted Republican and Democrat. I do still you know.

PIEHLER: Yeah, no I mean I've also—I'm a Democrat but I have voted for Republican. But I guess what's struck—because I probably try to tell my ROTC you know, remember it's more complex out there than you think—and I think I say that—I try to emphasize

that about college. Yeah, there tend to be more Democrats in universities. There tend to be more Republicans in the Army, but don't stereotype.

BYERS: That's very true.

PIEHLER: I'm not completely surprised, but I wanted to deliberately ask that because ...

BYERS: Well that's fine. My parents were Democrat, but that has not ...

PIEHLER: It wasn't necessarily ...

BYERS: No, no, no. That has not done it. I voted for Howard Baker. I voted for John Duncan. So I vote for the person more than I do a particular party.

PIEHLER: But being a Democrat you would not necessarily disqualify ...

BYERS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Well is there anything we forgot to ask you or anything ...

BYERS: I don't think so. Pretty well covered my life, I think. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Well we really—I really enjoyed it.

GRIFFING: So have I.

PIEHLER: This was actually very relaxing after running around this morning—scurrying around to do all kinds of things.

BYERS: Oh, I bet you were, yeah.

PIEHLER: Well thanks a lot.

BYERS: You're quite welcome.

GRIFFING: Thank you.

BYERS: All right.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----