

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROGER BACKES

Helicopter Gunner/Crew Chief, Army, Vietnam War

2005

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Backes, Roger, (b. 1945). Oral History Interview, 2005.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 78 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 78 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Roger Backes, a Fitchburg, Wisconsin resident, discusses his service as a crew chief and helicopter mechanic with the 116th Assault Helicopter Company during the Vietnam War. He describes growing up in Peoria, Illinois and attending college at Southern Illinois University. Backes refers to himself as a “screw-up” in high school and college, comparing his three years of college to the movie “Animal House.” In 1967, he dropped out of college, leaving his fraternity during a party for the first Super Bowl. He comments his friends and family thought he was crazy for leaving college because everyone knew it meant he would be drafted and sent to Vietnam. After working briefly as a railroad brakeman, Backes volunteered for the Army in June 1967 because he wanted to “get it over with.” He shares his psychological and emotional state during this period in his life, discussing breaking up with his girlfriend before going to Vietnam and suggesting that he blamed himself for his father’s suicide. Backes tells of long lines of draftees at the recruitment center in Chicago and mentions he switched positions in line to avoid going to the Navy or Marines. Next, Backes describes his basic training at Fort Leonard (Missouri) followed by helicopter school at Fort Eustis (Virginia) where he learned to be a mechanic and crew chief. He enjoyed the fall foliage in Virginia and loved learning about helicopters. He mentions getting out of KP duty because he played on an Army football team there that won a conference championship. Backes vividly describes the shock of landing in Tan Son Nhut (Vietnam) in January 1968; he recalls his fear when the plane flew in very low. As Backes deplaned, soldiers began loading body bags onto the aircraft. Backes was briefly sent to the 90th Replacement Company at Bien Hoa before he was assigned to Cu Chi. He describes his first helicopter ride. The helicopter was so full, Backes had to sit by the open door with his legs dangling out. While working at Cu Chi as a mechanic, Backes accepted an offer to be a crew chief on a “Stinger,” a gunship helicopter. Backes explains that while this was a dangerous job, he preferred riding in helicopters to working at a desk or as a mechanic on the ground. He tells the story of his first and only day of training as a gunner: the captain had him shoot target practice on what Backes later identified as a dead body. Next, Backes describes typical gunship missions. Three helicopters would go out together dropping colored smoke to mark places for troop insertions. Backes states that often only the pilot knew the full details of their mission, and they would go out every day, returning to Cu Chi or another base at night for maintenance and repairs. During the Tet Offensive, Backes relates his helicopter was involved in dropping flares and pamphlets for psychological warfare, flying over Saigon with the lights out for stealth. He states the Cu Chi base was rocketed every night for forty-five nights during

Tet. He tells a story of narrowly avoiding an attack: Backes was showering as the evening movie began on base, when suddenly he heard an alert and jumped, naked, in a trench with other troops. When he got out, Backes saw that a rocket had pierced the movie screen and many soldiers were wounded or killed. He praises an African American medic for heroically rescuing soldiers during that incident. Backes relates that he often played basketball with this medic who gave Backes the nickname "Igor." Backes spends much of the interview discussing the morale and daily life of soldiers. He mentions seeing Bob Hope in his Christmas show at Cu Chi, remarking that the Army cut off the beer supply before Hope's visit so the troops would be less rowdy. Backes portrays alcohol and marijuana use as rampant and admits to using both, although he disliked the behavior of troops whose substance abuse was out of control. Backes reveals he got into a couple fights with other soldiers while drunk. On August 11, 1968, Backes states he had an epiphany; inspired by memories of his mother, Backes decided that since both his parents were now dead, it was up to him to change his own life. He tried to be more responsible and nicer to his crew. As a result, Backes states he spoke to Captain Charlie Thompson about stopping some "minor atrocities" that were committed each day on his helicopter, including: shooting water buffalo, throwing used shells at Vietnamese civilians, and a more serious incident where soldiers dropped a grenade into a civilian hut from above. Backes reports Captain Thompson curbed this behavior for a few weeks, but the soldiers reverted back when Thompson's replacement took over. Thinking about these atrocities, Backes refers to a book by Al Sever called "Xing Loi, Vietnam" which means "I'm sorry, Vietnam." Backes praises Sever, who he trained as his replacement crew chief, and reports that Sever faithfully recounts several of Backes' stories in the book. Backes briefly mentions passing through Agent Orange areas, likening the landscape to a "three-year drought." He also touches upon religious aspects of the war. His sister gave him Catholic holy cards to carry with him and encouraged him to pray, but Backes states that when his helicopter crashed on the runway, he "cinched his seat belt tighter" instead of praying. He also discusses civilian views of the war and the low morale of the troops in Vietnam. Backes tells of catching an Army mechanic who tried to sabotage his helicopter by cutting wires. Backes reveals he was uninterested in the Vietnam War early on until he encountered protesters at Southern Illinois University. In 1969, Backes was able to return home after seventeen months in Vietnam. He feels his homecoming experience was typical of many Vietnam veterans and mentions encountering insults and protesters at the San Francisco airport when he landed. He describes returning to Peoria (Illinois) and attending a small welcome home party with his family and ex-girlfriend, but nobody asked him what it was like in Vietnam, and he didn't voluntarily discuss the war for ten years. He eventually moved to Fitchburg (Wisconsin) where he joined the Vietnam Veterans of America because of their focus on community service. Backes mentions his boss convinced him to go to group therapy at the Veterans Home in Madison (Wisconsin) and praises Bob Cook and Tom Dietz who lead his summer therapy group. Backes feels that war "either makes you or breaks you" and in his case it helped him grow up and become a better person. Finally, he comments upon the mismanagement of the war and expresses anger that the military did not apply lessons learned from Vietnam to conflicts in Somalia and Iraq; namely, he felt dehumanization of the enemy and misunderstanding of the enemy's culture were

ongoing problems, as was the lack of a decompression period for soldiers returning home from combat. Backes sums up his experience in Vietnam as “a loathing for the war, sadness for everybody involved, and beauty occasionally.”

Biographical Sketch:

Backes (b. 1945) was born and raised in Peoria, Illinois. He is an alumnus of Spalding High School and Southern Illinois University. In 1967, after dropping out of college, Backes volunteered for the Army. He served in the Vietnam War as a helicopter mechanic and crew chief with the 116th Assault Helicopter Company. Backes is a veteran of the Tet Offensive and ran countless missions between Saigon, Cu Chi (Vietnam), and the Cambodian border, earning the Air Medal and Valor device. After the war, he settled in Fitchburg, Wisconsin and participated in the Vietnam Veterans of America.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2005.

Transcribed by Alis Fox and formatted by Katy Marty, 2008.

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Interview Transcript:

Backes: -- get this feeling of, sort of, almost like, people describe it every different way, you know.

Jim: Mm hmm.

Backes: Ah, and, ah –

[Gap in audiotape for approx. 2 sec.]

Jim: February 7th, 19-, 20 – I'm sorry. It's working, I think. Let me back off here.

[Gap in audiotape for approx. 10 sec.]

Jim: My name is Jim Kurtz. I'm interviewing Roger Backes.

Backes: I pronounce it "Bachus."

Jim: "Bachus," Roger Backes.

Backes: As in Johann Sebastian.

Jim: "Bach." I don't blame ya. Roger, where and when were you born?

Backes: I was born 2-8-'45 in Peoria, Illinois.

Jim: '45. And is that where you grew up?

Backes: Mm hmm.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: Ninth of nine (??). Catholic family. My dad worked at Caterpillar.

Jim: And you graduated from high school in what year?

Backes: '63. Catholic. All boys.

Jim: What was the name?

Backes: Spalding –

Jim: Okay.

Backes: Institute.

Jim: Like the baseball glove?

Backes: Yes. Well, does that have a "U" in it?

Jim: Yup.

Backes: There is no "U" in this.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: Just "A-L-D.". Same high school that Bishop Sheen went to.

Jim: Okay. And where did you go -- did you go to college then

Backes: Mm hmm.

Jim: after high school?

Backes: Yeah.

Jim: Where did you go?

Backes: Southern Illinois University.

Jim: Southern Illinois. And did you graduate from college?

Backes: Eventually.

Jim: Eventually, but not at that-- how long did you go to college?

Backes: I went to college for about three years, and I changed my major once. I wasn't happy with my major. I went from chemistry to business, but I wasn't happy with it. I liked the subject matter, but the--I didn't like the fact that everybody was out for money, and so I didn't know what to do. I was in a fraternity. I was a bartender, and my grades were going down, down, down, partly because I didn't have a direction. I didn't really know what I was majoring in. So at some point I told my dad I wanted to drop out of school. He said, "No way," and so I went

one more term. They were on a quarter basis down there, --

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: And I went one more term, but I did even worse that term. I got arrested, you know, for drinking on the street. I got arrested (laughs) for driving an illegal car. And so I just dropped out and knowing that, you know, that meant Vietnam. And they even-- When they saw -- after I had turned in my drop-off papers, it got intercepted by a dean, who called me in. He said, you know, "You sure you want to do this?", which was nice of them,

Jim: Mm hmm. I know.

Backes: And they thought I was crazy, you know, to allow myself to be drafted—

Jim: Sure.

Backes: At that point, you know, because it was really blowing up over there.

Jim: So you got drafted. When did you get drafted?

Backes: I went home, and I worked on the railroad from about-- well, actually, I left during the middle -- right at the beginning of a big-- I was living in an apartment at that time with like an "Animal House" apartment, and there was a big party going on with the very first Super Bowl party, and I left right at the beginning of the party. And they all said, "Where you goin'?" but they were all too drunk to care, you know. I said, "I'm leaving. I'm going home," you know, "I'm quitting school." "What? Sit. Watch the game," you know. "Nah," I said, "No. I'm leaving. See ya." "Bye." You know the drinking.

Jim: Was that because the Packers were in it? You were a Bear fan that you—

Backes: No. No. [both laugh] I didn't pay attention to football at all then.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: Not pros. I thought, you know -- so then, yeah, so then I went home, got a job on the railroad, Toledo, Peoria, and Western, and I was brakeman. And I liked that job. It was fun. It was very active. and I was at that for about, oh, let's see, about a month, something like that, and I was over on the train over in Fort Madison, Iowa, and I got a call--they got a call, actually, from the railroad detectives saying that my dad was in intensive care. And so they sent a railroad detective

over and took me back to Peoria, and I made it to the intensive care unit just before he died. And he had overdosed. So this doctor that was his best friend next door comes over and says, "You know your dad killed himself because you quit school," and what can you say, you know.

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: And so then in May I went down to the draft board I said, "You know, I'm thinking about going back to school." I said, "What", you know, what's the chance of me being drafted?" He said, "Well, you will definitely be drafted by October, maybe sooner." I said, "Well, okay. How do I go now then? If I'm going to go, I might as well get it over with." And they said, "Well, sign here, and you'll go in about a month or so." I said, "How do I go sooner?" They said, "Well, then sign here, and then you'll go in five days." So I got on a train out of Peoria.

Jim: Okay. So that was in the Spring of '67?

Backes: That's right. Yup, it was. It was June.

Jim: June. Okay.

Backes: Approximately June 5th, something like that.

Jim: June, '67. Okay, and --

Backes: They took us on a train. They put us on-- we got inducted up in Chicago, and that was weird, you know. They had a big, long line. At that time they needed people in all--Army, Navy, and Marines. And I figured out in that line that like every -- it seemed about every tenth guy they were taking to the Navy and about every twentieth guy they were taking into the Marines. And I'm like-- you know, I'm like aware of that, and I'm like counting, and I'm like moving forward and backward in the line because I did not want to go into the Marines. I didn't want to go in the Navy either. And so I, you know, got in the Army. So then they put us on another train after they swore us in and shipped us down on the Illinois Central Railroad, and they parked us overnight, believe it or not, right outside the bar where I worked. And I -- so -- and we parked there -- they parked us there about 7:00 at night. So I saw all my friends go into this bar and then come out of it at about 1:00 in the morning, you know, and I'm knocking on the window. They wouldn't let us off the train, and so, obviously but nobody ever saw me.

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: I mean, you know, they -- so that was pretty weird.

Jim: So that was in Peoria.

Backes: No, no. That was Carbondale.

Jim: Oh, Carbondale. Okay.

Backes: Yeah, Carbondale. And then in the morning they hooked up another train, took us to St. Louis, where they put us on Greyhound buses and then took us to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

Jim: Okay. And do you have any memories of basic training?

Backes: Sure do.

Jim: That stuck?

Backes: Lots of them. It was hotter than -- it was very hot. We were in, you know, Southern, South Central Missouri in the summertime. It was hot, and it was at times muddy, very muddy. And I was in there with a couple guys from Peoria, but most of the guys were like two to three years younger than me for some reason or other. I don't know why exactly, but I guess they hadn't gone to college for a few years, whatever. And so, you know, I went through basic with those guys, and it was-- you know, I always kind of feared basic, you know, like it was going to be like really hard and punishing, but you know, it's the old thing about you don't have to be the best but you don't want to be the worst.

Jim: Yup.

Backes: You just got to be somewhere in the middle, and I could do that. But I remember one time we were on the, I don't know, the live-action rifle range. --

Jim: Yup, sure.

Backes: You know, when you throw in the barbwire and all that shit. And then we had to go out and set up pup tents, and in the middle of the night we are going to get attacked, the whole deal, you know. And so my partner was this kid from Peoria, he is totally dufus. I don't know why I ever-- And we had those old-fashioned tents, those canvass things, that just are harder than hell to set up in the daylight, you know, with instructions. And he went to learn how to set up a tent, and I was

a demo guy on the rifle range. Well, I made the mistake of grabbing a hot rifle by the--

Jim: Barrel?

Backes: Barrel, and of course, my hand all swelled up. And I went to the officers, "Hey, my hand is all swelled up." He said, "Well, that was stupid. Get back to work." So he wouldn't do anything about it. So we get to where we were camping, and my friend didn't know how to set the tent up. It was dark. Nobody would help us, because they were all tired and pissed off, and my hand is all swollen up with the big blisters on it, and boy, that was quite a night. And then we got attacked, but I didn't give a shit. They said you had to keep your clothes on. They were all soaking wet, and I didn't. I just stripped down and said, "Fuck it. If they attack us, that's it," you know. Anyway, so basic was -- at the end of basic then-- I respected my NCOs there in that basic training, you know, and I remember asking this one-- at the end of our basic training, I asked this one sergeant why he was such a prick, because once we graduated he was nice, and he said, "Because I need to be a prick. I need to do everything I can because of where you are going," you know, --

Jim: Yup.

Backes: And you got to have an attitude and every thing. So, we got our orders, and it was funny because I was so glad to not be going into infantry. Man, was I relieved. All *those* guys were glad that they weren't in the helicopters.

Jim: So you got orders to--

Backes: I got orders to Fort Eustis, Virginia, for helicopter mechanic. Yeah.

Jim: So you went to Fort Eustis,--

Backes: Eustis. It starts with an "E".

Jim: Yeah, and what kind of training did you get there?

Backes: Helicopter mechanic basically, crew chief, you know crew chief means they give you the helicopter, it's yours. You have to do it. You are totally responsible for it, and you can order it down or whatever.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: And so, you know, we learned everything about how they fly, and it was great. I

loved it. Fort Eustis is the Army Transportation School. So they had the landing craft. They had trains there. They had helicopters, small planes, you know. It was just – it was really a cool place.

Jim: So how long –

Backes: And it was beautiful in the fall.

Jim: How long--

Backes: It was only from Labor Day until early December. Then I got about a month, four weeks, something like that, off with orders for Vietnam.

Jim: So you got orders. What was your reaction when you got orders for Vietnam?

Backes: Oh, there was no question about it, we were going to Vietnam. I never-- you know, there was just no question that we were going to Vietnam. So I would have been shocked if I wasn't going to Vietnam. So, you know, it's just sort of a fatalism, you know. It's like, well, you know, it's just – this is the way you go.

Jim: Well, it's just --

Backes: You get drafted in 1967--

Jim: Fairly typical of the people of our generation that were there. I forgot to ask you this. Did you have any of your family that were veterans?

Backes: Never.

Jim: Okay. So you came from a family that had really no military history.

Backes: Right. And nobody ever had college history.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: As a matter of fact, my--I don't even think either one of my parents graduated from high school.

Jim: Okay. So, you came home on leave. How did your friends [clock chimes] react when you came home on leave and knew you were going to Vietnam when you left there?

Backes: Well, they were nicer to me than they had ever been before, but I was pretty, I don't know, I was pretty depressed. And so I was staying at my sister's house, and I broke up with my girlfriend. She asked me why, and I said, "Because you don't get my jokes." So, but anyway, so then I kind of—I did -- I just like stayed in my sister's attic. It was like the butler's room or something like that, you know. And I just stayed up there and I like listened and didn't talk to anybody, and I was depressed, and I had orders to go to Vietnam, I had to be in New Jersey on the 10th of January. But, I mean I, you know, I wasn't depressed about that. I was just depressed about what a screw-up I was. You know, it seemed like I had screwed up high school, my grades were terrible, I was always a discipline problem. At college, you know, I screwed that up. You know, my grades--my grade point average was bad, you know, I'm partying all time, didn't know what I was majoring in. So I thought, you know, that I was just a scumbag, and so, you know, I was pretty depressed about my life.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: And so when I-- my one friend, I remember we stayed out-- and the bars in Peoria didn't close until 4:00 a.m. So they -- some of my friends, we played pool and drank until 4:00 a.m. and went home and got my two sisters, and my brother-in-law took me to Chanute Air Base, which is north of Champaign -- And put us on a small, what is it like DC-9, DC-?, little-bitty plane -- Little Army thing, you know, where maybe you could get seven people on there, something like that, you know, and a lot of cargo and shit, you know, there is a couple seats. There was some general on there, and you know, nobody talked much. [clock chimes] And got to Fort Dix and it was extremely cold.

Jim: Yup.

Backes: And the snow was extremely deep, and of course, we had guard duty every night walking, you know.

Jim: So, how long were you at Fort Dix?

Backes: I was there about six days, and it was about five days too long. There was no warm water at all. It was totally freezing water in the showers. So basically most guys didn't wash, and so when we all -- they put over a hundred of us on that plane.

Jim: Okay. So you got -- was it a military plane out of Fort Dix?

Backes: No, it was like a commercial.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: One of those things, but it was all, of course, all GIs, and there was over a hundred of us. And we went from New Jersey, we landed in Edmonton, Alberta. Then we from there we went to Anchorage. And in Edmonton they wouldn't let us off the plane, because it's Canada.

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: Alberta, I mean in Anchorage you could get off the plane, but there was really no place to go. And then we went to -- we refueled on a little island off in the Alaskan archipelago --

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: And then we refueled in Japan and then Vietnam.

Jim: Where did you land in Vietnam?

Backes: Tan Son Nhut.

Jim: Landed at Tan Son Nhut. What time of the day did you get in?

Backes: I would say it was probably about maybe early afternoon, 1:00 --

Jim: Okay.

Backes: 2:00 about. And, boy, it was freaky going in there. You know, it's like fly higher, damn it, you know, you're going to get shot, you know. And you just feel like you're going to get shot, you know, and then you're going to spend a whole year flying at a hundred feet, you know. But, anyway, it was pretty scary. And then, you know, one of the things that was really weird, the next morning, the first time I'm in the mess hall line for breakfast, it was dark, of course. I don't know what time it was, 5:00 in the morning or something like that. And I'm standing in this long line outside the mess hall, and it's up on the hill, and you could see, you know, all--you could see the jets taking off, you know, with their afterburners --

Jim: Right.

Backes: To get up, you know, to go straight up, and then there is all these flares coming down. You could hear artillery. You get hear B-52 strikes. I mean, it was like

what in the hell? It was like the 4th of July here, you know. And through the window of the mess hall comes the radio on real loud of the second Super Bowl, just starting, you know. The Packers were in both of them.

Jim: Yep. That's right.

Backes: But that was a hell of a coincidence. I thought, damn, boy, I'm in a different place than I was, you know, a year ago for the first Super Bowl, and it sure was different.

Jim: Did you have any reaction when the door opened of the plane of heat smell?

Backes: Yeah, yeah, the whole thing. And I had, that, you know, that experience of walking the line of the guys, you know who were getting on the plane and they're all, you know like-- some of them are like teasing you.

Jim: Mm hmm.

Backes: Some of them are like, "You poor bastard. Good luck, pal." And some of them don't say nothing, they got that thousand- yard stare, you know, and they are all tan as hell, and they look scruffy as shit. And then there is the body bags, you know, that they're going to put on the plane next, and it's pretty spooky. It's very typical, very, very like out of the movies, you know, kind of experience. And then they put us on a school bus, and it's got all those real heavy wire things over the windows, you know. I thought "Why they got those on there for." you know. "How are you supposed to put your arm out the window?" "And they said, I don't know, the drivers, "That's so they don't throw grenades in the bus, you dumb ass." And I was like, oh, oh, yeah. We are driving, you know, through populated areas.

Jim: So where did that bus take you?

Backes: Let's see, I guess it is kind of like from Tan Son Nhut area to Bien Hoa.

Jim: Bien Hoa. Okay, so you went from Tan --

Backes: Yeah, and I never knew where I was. And then--

Jim: So you went to the 90th Replacement Company up at Bien Hoa?

Backes: Probably, yeah. And then I wasn't there very long at all, and I don't know if I was even there a night, and then that's when they put me on the helicopter and then

they took me somewhere where there is nothing around hardly. It was like the edge of the city or something, and they said, you know, "There will be somebody along to pick you up." And I said, "Like when?" They said, "Well, you know, they'll be along." God, it was a long time. It was five, six hours. I never saw anything, anybody, you know, and I thought "These --

Jim: You had no weapon or...?

Backes: I think I did have a weapon, yeah. I can't remember it, frankly. But anyways I thought these bastards forgot about me, you know, I'm just going to be out here for three days or something like that. But they come along, you know, and they -- [dog barking] Hey! Dogs! No! Come here [**Approx. 4 sec. interruption in tape**]

Jim: Yeah. [**Interruption in the audiotape**] Helicopter's already got a bunch of people on it, -- but there is no room to get on it, you know, and I'm like, "Whoa, where am I supposed to get on, you know, the thing's full?" They said, "Well, sit down on the edge there, you dumb ass," you know, and your feet are dangling out and you're hanging onto your bag, and you are hanging onto one of the seats. And then, you know, of course, the door's open, and everything like that, and there is no room on the helicopter, so I'm just -- I'm sitting where I'm going to be sitting. And they take off and they just fly lower than hell, you know, and they come to a little village, they go "whoop-woo", back down, you know. And I thought, geez, you know, we're going to get our asses shot off, you know, flying-- why are they doing that? Of course, you know its safer flying low than it is high. They can't get a bead on you, and -- but what was-- and then the smells, I could smell the food and, you know everything. It was like, man, and that was quite a ride just because it was so new and so scary. And then, you know, they're banking, they like--they go through the trees and shit and they bank, and I'm all of a sudden face down. You know, it's like "Hah-uh-uh!" In a way I liked it, but you know, --

Jim: So, when you were trained in the states you didn't fly with the doors open?

Backes: Oh, no. Well, only when we were doing like an insertion, pretend, you know, then we would and we had to -- and they trained us only as Slicks. They didn't train gunships. So, I had there is some pictures over there you can see if you want. But, yeah, I enjoyed that. I mean, it was pretty when we were in Virginia in the fall, when we did training. And one of the things that I did when I was there--[dog barks] well, I didn't want to, but I got drafted to be on the football team, because I was big. And the commandant had a thing about football, and he said, he told me, "I hate the Army, you know, and the reason I'm in this football

thing is because it's a distraction from the Army. So I want to win. You're on the team. If you don't want to be on the team, that's okay, but you're going to be doing a lot of KP. [both laugh] If you do, if you're on the team, you don't have to do any of that stuff. You're out of, you know, the reveille, all kinds of privileges." So I'm on the team, and we ended up winning the area championship [dog barks] with all the military bases. It was a big deal. I got a picture of it. I got a thing downstairs. So, anyway, so then I get to Cu Chi, and it so happens that the guy that's like interviewing me, you know, the guy that's registering us in or whatever, he says, "Oh, you're from Peoria. Hey, I'm from Pekin." [dog barking] Hey, dogs!

"He said, you know, "I played football, and I remember you. You played football for Spalding." "Yeah." [Approx. 12 sec. interruption in the tape] -- that was the more dangerous alternative, partly because of the fact that that was what I was trained for, and I definitely didn't want to have a desk job in the Army. I wanted to be-- if I was going to be in the Army during the war, I was going to want to be in the action, not because I wanted to shoot people but because that's what soldiers do, you know. You know, if I wanted to hide out, I wouldn't have left school.

Jim: Right.

Backes: And the other thing is that I was--I don't know, suicidal is a strong word. [dog barking] [Approx. 7 sec. Interruption in the audiotape] There was an aspect of me that was—not cared if I lived or died, we'll put it that way. And I also had this kind of Patton thing, you know.

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: Did you ever see *Patton*?

Jim: Yes.

Backes: And those horns go off, you know, and I had that kind of a thing like, you know, if I'm in a position to be in the war and there is a war in my time, it's not that I want to be there but if -- I'm not going to try to get out of it. And so, you know—I mean, that was appropriate. I mean, I don't think its right to divert a guy who's trained to be a helicopter mechanic/crew chief, all of a sudden you give him a desk job. It just didn't seem right. And he also offered to get me out of crew chief, because he said that was dangerous. You could get, you know, so I said no to that. And, also, when I was in the training they gave us an option of being a Cobra crew chief, in which case you didn't fly, you know.

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: You know what the Cobras are, right?

Jim: Yes.

Backes: Yeah. And I turned that down, too. It also meant that you had to be in the Army for six more months or you had to be in training. I did not want to be a mechanic particularly. I wanted to be a crew chief. I wanted to fly, and so in Cobras you didn't fly, except for test flights, but you didn't get shot at either, you know, as much. Anyway, I turned that down, and then I was--then they put me-- so they put me in the grease monkey job. I mean, that's what I was trained for. So I worked -- I got there on January 10th, and I remember asking the guys like, "Hey, you guys ever get rocketed here, you know, you ever?"

Jim: Yeah

Backes: "Oh, no." I think they said about fifty days ago they got rocketed a little bit, you know, but nah, no problem. And then, oh, gosh, it was about, what, fifteen days later, about two weeks later there, I was working in the--and it was hot, you know, and I'm working, getting my suntan, you know, and really having a hard time adjusting to the heat--but eventually I got to like it--and working as a helicopter mechanic doing all this stuff, you know, and then one day this guy came up to me and he said, "Hey, we heard about you," whatever, whatever, you know, "and we're wanting to see if you want to be in the Stingers, but you know, you have to go through some things to"-- The Stingers are the gunships. They are just like the elite group. The only way you can get in there is to be asked. And I was-- I mean it's like, "Sure." You know, I didn't like the Slicks, you know, because the Slicks, they do an insertion and then they go sit somewhere. Boy, and the time would go so slow doing that. I never was in the Slicks. And so I was pretty happy and then --

Jim: Were you on the gunships for the whole tour?

Backes: Yeah, yeah. And so my test flight or whatever you call it--

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: This Captain Atkinson took me out, and he said, "Backes," he said, "I'm going to give you a target, and when I tell you what to shoot at I want you to start shooting at it and I want you to hit it," and I said, "Yes, sir." And so, he said, you

know, he started circling this thing, we're pretty high up, and he says, "There it is. Shoot." And so I started shooting at it, couldn't really exactly tell what it was, could have been a pile of something, whatever. And I'm shooting, and he is circling lower and lower. Pretty soon it's apparent it's a body, and when it became apparent it was a body, I mean, you know, you could see that you were tearing up the body with the machine gun bullets, you know, and so I stopped shooting, and he just went crazy, you know, "God damn you!" just swearing, you know, and screaming at me, "Fire, God damn it! You keep shooting, you son of a bitch, or get out of my fucking helicopter!" You know, and so I started shooting again, and then he goes lower and lower and lower and lower, you know, until, you know--and I'm just tearing this body up, obviously, and then he said, "All right. Cease fire." And so that was my initiation and --

Jim: So what do you think he was trying to accomplish?

Backes: Well, a little bit of desensitization, you know, to-- you know, if you got a target that you're going to shoot, you know, and you know, probably a little bit of can you hit something --

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: And I was pretty good -- there's a Stinger. I was pretty good at that. I mean, it was easy, because we'd shoot at something you'd hit the dust and you could see exactly where you were shooting at. Although, a lot of guys weren't good at it.

Jim: Did you receive any -- obviously he picked you then after that. Did you receive any special training?

Backes: Not much, [clock chimes] not much. The crew chief, the guy that for whatever reason asked me to be a Stinger, he was like the head guy, and he was leaving. So in a way he is getting like his replacement, you know, and so he trained me probably for about, oh, three hours, and then I flew with him one day, you know, as his gunner --

Jim: Right.

Backes: Maybe two days. I can't remember. Before the Stingers asked me to fly with them, after Tet, once Tet started, you know, they blew up our POL. They blew up our--

Jim: POL is petroleum--

- Backes: Petroleum and some ammo, you know, and that. And they got inside our wire, you know, with sappers, and they hit a bunch of aircraft and helicopters and shit like that, and it was scary as hell. They had tear gas and all that. And they had me flying the missions over Saigon, you know, with all the lights out in the helicopter, obviously, and we're dropping off flares and papers, you know, about, you know, psychological stuff:
- Jim: Yeah.
- Backes: You know, and but it was during Tet. I mean, there is fires all over the place. You know, it's really a surreal thing, and it was cold. I remember it's cold up there, and I was wearing my jacket. But it was pretty exciting, too. And so I did that I don't know how many nights, three nights or something like that, but it was spooky as hell. And, of course, we didn't know what the hell was going on, you know. We heard that Hue and all these other cities and that they had taken over the American embassy and all this stuff. You know, it's like what in the hell is going on? They did a lot of damage, and they started rocketing us and mortaring us, and I think they rocketed us every night for like forty-five nights, you know.
- Jim: At Cu Chi?
- Backes: Yeah.
- Jim: So you flew all your missions out of Cu Chi, and you were going to Saigon?
- Backes: Yep, yep, yep. And we were -- our area was right across the street from the hospital and the landing pad for the hospital, and so, consequently, that was their target, was the hospital. So when they miss they get us, you know.
- Jim: Did you take any casualties?
- Backes: Oh, yeah. I don't know how long I was there. I would say --I know I was in the Stingers already, because they were going to show a movie that night, *To Sir with Love*, and I wanted to see it. And usually I stayed out on the flight line until at dark or later, and they started the movies at dark, you know. And so I wanted to get in, so I hurried a little bit, and I was in the shower just as the movie was starting. I could hear it over the PA system, and so I'm trying to hurry with my shower to get out of there and—that running?
- Jim: No.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Jim: -- forgot that the tape went off. You were talking about coming off the flight line and in the shower and you wanted to go to a movie. Then what happened?

Backes: See, then-- yeah, so then the siren goes off, you know.

Jim: The siren, that means a mortar attack.

Backes: Yeah, mortar --

Jim: Rocket attack.

Backes: Yeah, but almost simultaneously the rockets are hitting, and I ran out of there. I remember I was naked, and I jumped into-- I was all soapy and all naked, and I jumped into a bunker, and then, you know, I finally-- after the all clear I go and rinse off and I go back in the company area, and the mortar or rocket or whatever had hit the screen, and it killed a bunch of guys. Another one hit a house. And I remember that there was a black guy who was our medic, and he was pretty much a hero, because there still is all these rockets and mortars coming in and he is out there tending to the wounded, you know. And he was a good guy. He actually gave me my nickname over there.

Jim: What was that?

Backes: [laughs] He called me "Igor"--

Jim: Igor?

Backes: Because we played basketball together --

Jim: Okay.

Backes: And I used a lot of body on him, you know. That was my defense against him, was to push him around. And so he was like "Igor the Monster," that kind of thing, you know.

Jim: Oh, that's neat.

Backes: Yeah. And-- but a bunch of guys were wounded. A bunch of guys were killed, because they were all sitting there watching the movie, you know. And I would have been there, too, if I hadn't been out on the flight line as long as I was.

Jim: Do you have any thoughts about that, that you know, that was a close call, that you could have been there?

Backes: Yeah. The only thought I had about it was just, you know, how sad it is for the guys that got, you know, their bodies all fucked up and for the families that lost their loved one, you know. That was the main thing and then, you know, and then the thing about my friend, you know, being this black guy, this kid, you know, being so heroic, and everybody thought he was like a screw-off, you know, because he was joking all the time, but when the shit hit the fan he was on duty.

Jim: Okay. Did he get any decoration?

Backes: Oh, yeah, I think he did.

Jim: Good.

Backes: I lost track of him. I don't know what happened to him.

Jim: When you flew over Saigon during Tet, did you take any fire?

Backes: Oh, I think a little bit but not much, because they couldn't see us. You got all the lights off. But the thing is, you know, you got to worry about, is the matter of collision.

Jim: Right.

Backes: Because everybody else is flying with their lights off, too. But I don't remember that we did.

Jim: After Tet wound down, was there anything memorable that happened then?

Backes: Well, let's see, basically, you know, every day was pretty memorable.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: During Tet, during that period up until about May, all the way from like-- I remember a mission in April, and I kind of like didn't care if I lived or died –

Jim: Yeah.

- Backes: but about April it started occurring to me that, you know, I wasn't going to live through this shit. You know, every damn day we're getting shot at and my helicopter is getting shot up, you know, and it's like how in the hell are they missing me. One of the things this guy that trained me told me, he said, take your chest protector and tape it or chicken wire it underneath your seat. So I did, and I don't know how long it was, it wasn't too long, before I took a round in that, and it bruised my ass. The thing hit, you know, but it didn't--you know, the bullet did -- it stopped the bullet, because it came at an angle rather than directly. So he kind of saved my life with that deal. But, you know, geez, we'd take rounds. Usually it is surprising that we would take rounds in the tailbone mostly, you know. And so they were like not good at leaving an aircraft. I don't know why they didn't, you know, do better at that, but they were not -- we would have all kinds of bullet holes through our blades, and it was amazing how those blades could hold up, I mean with bullet holes all through them, but they did. And we'd have bullet holes through our gas tank, and those things had a self-sealing thing, you know, a gel about that thick. You know, you'd have the tracers go through there and they wouldn't—
- Jim: It wouldn't start on fire?
- Backes: Umh umh.
- Jim: What did you do with the rotors that had bullet holes in them? Did they --
- Backes: Replaced them. I did a lot of that. It wasn't hard.
- Jim: And what did they do about the holes in the tailbone, just patch them?
- Backes: Patch them.
- Jim: Okay.
- Backes: And, you know, if it hit a control area, you didn't have to do nothing because you were dead.
- Jim: So did you fly every day?
- Backes: Yeah. Every day, except when I had a maintenance thing.
- Jim: So you flew every day that—what was a typical flying day?
- Backes: Yeah, that's, well, typical flying day would be we'd get up at the crack of dawn,

and I would load up. I had a big water cooler. I put some pop in there. And then I'd, you know, we'd have -- my gunner is supposed to have everything ready. My gunner is supposed to have all the armament ready. There's a shot -- oh, we just missed it. Anyway, Usually they did, sometimes they didn't. And then I would sit-- and I loved it when we took off. I loved the sound of the helicopter, you know, when it started up, you know, with that slow thing. Everything about the helicopter I liked, everything about flying in it, fixing it, learning about it. To me it was just an amazing piece of machinery. So I loved the technology.

Jim: So when you left in the morning, did you have a mission?

Backes: Always, yeah. Always, yeah. Well, the usual, the typical day-- sometimes we would do what they call Ash & Trash Missions, you know.

Jim: Say what that is, what an Ash & Trash—

Backes: Yeah. Ash & Trash just means like you're going somewhere to get something or take something somewhere. You have no idea-- I had no idea what it was, you know. The pilots might, but they never would tell us anything, you know, about the mission, in case we got shot down or crashed or whatever. And so -- and I didn't care.

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: So sometimes we'd go to Tay Ninh. Sometimes we'd go to Saigon. Sometimes we'd go down and fight with the Australians, you know, not fight with them but right alongside them, and the Koreans, you know. That was -- I liked particularly fighting with the Australians. They were really cool.

Jim: Yes, they were.

Backes: Yeah. I remember, though, that some of these pictures on the TV there of them fighting in the areas where there was heavy use of Agent Orange, you know, and—

Jim: What did those areas look like that had heavy use of Agent Orange?

Backes: Well, they looked like there was like either like a drought, you know, like a three-year drought there. Everything is totally browned out, you know, and it looks sickening, really.

Jim: Right. So you would go on a mission, but you said you flew on a gunship. So

you would be doing some routine transportation stuff until gunship missions got called?

Backes: No. I'm just saying that every once in awhile we would be assigned to some Ash & Trash Mission. That was -- see, I flew with the-- almost immediately, it seemed like, I was like the head crew chief in the Stingers. So I always flew with the team commander and the lead ship of the three, and so for some reason wherever he went I went, because he would always take my ship, you know. He could take anyone he wanted. He would always take my ship, and his name was Captain Thompson, Charles Thompson, and he was an Ivy Leaguer, also, and he was a good guy. And so he'd have some mission where he is supposed to go somewhere, and so that's where we'd go. But the typical day, I'd say that like nine out of ten days at least, would be we'd, you know, get up first thing in the morning, we'd crank up. The gunships would go out first. We would see the Slicks still getting ready and stuff like that, and then we'd go out, and the pilots would be talking about, you know, like where they're going, and Ho Bo Woods or whatever, you know. And they say, "Oh, man, they said it's a hot one there," you know, or they would be commenting on it to us. And then we'd go in and they would talk to the infantry and get coordinates on shit and make sure they knew where the infantry was, and then they'd find out where the attack line was, you know. And then we'd go down, and the infantry would say where they want the smoke, where they wanted the troops to land.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: And so then—

Jim: So you were supporting insertions and that kind of stuff?

Backes: Oh, yeah, that was our main thing. And so then we'd fly over an area and they would tell me to drop smoke, like a red one let's say and a purple one, whatever. And then the infantry would say we want you to, you know, put one down, you know, fifty meters past the yellow one, --

Jim: Okay.

Backes: or whatever, and so then we would go in and drop a couple down there, and that's where they would land in. And then this Smokey ship that we had, we had it about only about-- seemed like in the latter part of my period there, like the last three - four months, they devised this thing where they took a helicopter and they [clock chimes] put an oil ring around the exhaust so that it would squirt oil into the exhaust and it would create a billow of white smoke coming out, you

know, just a huge cloud of white smoke. I mean, it would be as big as a house, you know. And they would put this down in front of the line where the Viet Cong were or the enemy soldiers, you know. So if it was a tree line, rice paddies, a village, any, whatever, of those things, that's -- Smokey would go through there, and --

Jim: Would you do this only when it was a hot LZ, or would you do this all the time?

Backes: Um, usually when it was hot, yeah. When it was hot, that was a yeah. Of course, they never really knew. You know, all of them were supposed to be hot. That's why they went there, because there was enemy there. But so then, you know, we prepped the area. We prepped the tree lines or whatever with rockets and machine guns, you know. I'd be shooting. So there [phone rings] would always be three gunships, and I'd fly in and I'd be shooting, you know, ahead of us as we go in, and then as we banked out I'd be shooting behind us at the tree line. And the guy in the helicopter behind us is trying to, you know, hit the tree line just as we're pulling out, so that, you know, because you're most vulnerable when you're pulling out. And so then we'd get back in line and we'd cover the guy in front of us, you know. And so that was always pretty hairy, you know. We would take a lot of fire.

Jim: How long could you stay over a target like that?

Backes: About probably close to two hours, you know, and then we had to go refuel, might have to go rearm sooner if we'd use up all the rockets, for example.

Jim: Where would you go to refuel and rearm?

Backes: Wherever was closest.

Jim: So you would go-- so they had, you know, where the fields—

Backes: Tay Ninh, you know, whatever.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: Tan Son Nhut. Those Navy bases, you know, on the Mekong. Probably at least fifty percent of the time you'd be back to Cu Chi and—

Jim: So how long would you stay in the air?

Backes: All day.

- Jim: All day?
- Backes: All day, yeah. So we'd-- so then the troops would be inserted, and we would circle above them all day long. And on about one out of twenty times they would say, "Hey, there's nothing here, you know, we're not seeing, you know, anything," so we could go sit down at the end of Tan Son Nhut or something like that, you know, for a few hours. But that wasn't typical. Typically we'd be in the air all the time over the troops just circling.
- Jim: So the machine would-- you said you had to do heavy maintenance starting at twenty-five hours. So you could do -- you flew basically during daylight hours; is that correct?
- Backes: Right.
- Jim: So you could go about two and a half days, and then you had some—
- Backes: Well, usually that maintenance we would do overnight—
- Jim: Oh, okay.
- Backes: So we wouldn't miss a day. It was the hundred-hour maintenance usually that was a stand down day where we would have to work on it all day long.
- Jim: Okay. So, do you have any memorable experiences other than the ones that you have related on your missions that you flew?
- Backes: I got a book full of them. I don't have them in the book, but there is, you know, many, many memorable experiences.
- Jim: Is that a book that you'll donate to the library someday?
- Backes: Oh, no. Yeah, sure, if—I -- you know, there is a book that was written about my activity there.
- Jim: Okay. What was the name of the book?
- Backes: The book is called *Xing Loi*, X-i-n L-o-i. Do you know what that means?
- Jim: Z –
- Backes: X-I-N.

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: L-O-I

Jim: L-O-I

Backes: and then "Vietnam." *Xing Loi, Viet nam.*

Jim: What does that mean?

Backes: It means "So Sorry," and it can mean like—

Jim: We said "sin loi". That's why --

Backes: Xing, yeah.

Jim: Yeah, "Sorry about that." I know exactly—

Backes: You remember that, "xing loi"?

Jim: Oh, yeah. "Sorry," yeah.

Backes: You got different people around, say different --

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: But it can mean, you know, anything. What did you take it as meaning to be?

Jim: "Sorry about that," but we said "sin loi" instead of-- so I was very close. "S" and "X" in Vietnamese is--us Anglicized people, we Germans, have trouble.

Backes: And so did it mean like-- so what did it--like what would it mean?

Jim: Oh, if something happened that, you know, was not good, you'd just say, "Sorry about that."

Backes: Yeah, because that's what the guy that wrote the book said. It meant anything from "I'm really, sincerely sorry that this bad thing happened to you" or "tough shit."

Jim: That's exactly right. What's the guy's name that wrote the book?

Backes: Al Sever. S-E-V-E-R.

Jim: S-E-V-E-R.

Backes: Yeah. And I've been in contact with him for years, you know, and all the while he was writing this book, and it was painful, you know, because he did the typical thing of-- I don't know how many different publishers he sent this thing to, and some of them would say, "Oh, you got to revise this, you got to revise that, we got to revise that." "Oh, I ain't good enough," you know. And he literally could wallpaper (??)-- and I told him, I said, you know, "Give it up, man. You're killing yourself, you know," because he'd get depressed and all this stuff, you know. But, boy, this guy was so persistent, and he got it published. He got it published beautifully, actually, and this spring it's going to go into paperback.

Jim: Okay, so, in other words, we could archive that with this and that would tell many of the stories that—

Backes: Well, he wrote about his experience, and it so happened that I was the one that got him into the Stingers and trained him, which was typically what I was—

Jim: So he's a crew chief?

Backes: He's crew chief.

Jim: Okay.

Backes: Yeah, and he had a memory that was unbelievable. You know, he is one of those guys that knew every name for every piece of equipment, you know, and sometimes you think like, you know, now wait a minute, how can somebody remember conversations and shit, you know. He is like making them up or what? But, you know, the conversations that he had with me, you know, he told my stories, he used my words, you know, like that are unique to me.

Jim: Sure.

Backes: Because some of my stories were not--were like bullshit, you know, exaggeration, [laughs] stuff like that. But, you know, he had them in there. And so—

Jim: So some of your stories are in this book?

Backes: Absolutely, yeah.

Jim: Are in this book.

Backes: Oh, yeah. It's about thirty-five pages of--you know, some of it more or less, you know, about me. So it's really amazing. And he wrote in the front of the book--I loved it--he said-- I don't know, it's something like, you know, "Thanks, Roger," you know, "You saved my life," and then, "See you in Valhalla," you know, which is the Viking heaven for warriors.

Jim: Yes.

Backes: I like that one.

Jim: [laughing]

Backes: He's quite a guy. He's a civil engineer in Pennsylvania. He works for the State. He's a bridge inspector.

Jim: Well, I know what those people are like.

Backes: Yeah.

Jim: At the end of your duty day, the chopper came back to Cu Chi. Then what happened?

Backes: Well, then we had to refuel and rearm, and I would have to do the maintenance that was, you know, like every night stuff, which is a total inspection, you know, fix the bullet holes, you know, and there was just certain things that you had to do at certain hours of flight. We had a little book, you know, that would tell you what you had to do. And sometimes you would have to polish the windshields, because they'd get scratched by the dust, and just all kinds of stuff like that. And so, you know, I'd usually work on my helicopter until, gosh, 10:00 at night. I remember one night I was out on the flight line-- usually I was later than everybody else but partly probably I think that was because I was conscientious but also because I was slower. And I was out on the flight line one night, I don't know, it was about 9:00 at night, and this guy comes along the flight line, which was unusual, and turns out he was a major, and he said, "Whatcha doing, soldier?" And so I got down and talked to him, and I said, you know, "Well, I'm working on my helicopter," and all this, "Sir." And then we got to talking about the war, and he practically cried about the morale of the soldiers. You know, he said it was so unusual to see a guy, you know, out on the flight line working on

his helicopter late and that, you know, what was wrong with us, that the military that there was so much fragging and bad morale. I actually caught--I caught one of our guys sabotaging our own helicopters by cutting wires and shit, and I was going to strangle him but-- I should have turned him in, but I--

Jim: You didn't turn him in?

Backes: I didn't turn him in, and I should have. I don't know why I didn't, but I told him I would kill him if I--and I was convinced that he would not do that again and that he would fix these wires. But it was an antiwar thing, you know, for Christ's sake. Geez, you know.

Jim: Was this guy a crew chief?

Backes: No. He was a mechanic, just a mechanic.

Jim: So he wasn't going to have to fly in this helicopter?

Backes: No, he wouldn't have to fly in it, no. But, I mean, it would have been such a problem it wouldn't have flown. You know, I mean, it would have been grounded, which is a problem, I mean, you know, because we never had enough, you know, hardly.

Jim: How many ships did you have operating?

Backes: Well, we wanted to have three, and I think we only had about four or five total. Sometimes, you know, one of them would crash and we had to wait to get a new one, and so we were always, there was always-- and we almost had to have three. You know, you almost couldn't fly with two, because you couldn't cover each other when you're doing, you know, rockets and some of that. So, I remember there was just a lot of-- I remember one time I was flying along, and we're flying from someplace to someplace and we're over a heavy jungle area, so you couldn't see the bomb craters and all that stuff in the ground, and it looked pretty. It was unusual, you know. And nobody is talking, the radio is on, and we're just kind of hmm, humming along, and I looked, and all of a sudden I'm like--and there is, I looked at these, like, these three uniformed guys in the helicopter with me, and I thought "What in the hell am I doing here?" you know, "This is weird." And so it was, it was actually a moment of peace. When things were pretty. We're, you know, flying in the air, and it was--but it was like, "Where am I?" It was strange. I mean, I had been there a long time by then, but my biggest event that happened to me was personal, was that I had been in a number of fights with my own--with guys, you know, who pissed me off for one

reason or another. One guy that was a short-timer, he'd come in drunk every night and turn the lights on, and one night I just attacked him. I was planning on attacking him. I turned the light off with my foot, and I just-- I was on the top bunk, and I just dove off and just clobbered him, because it just pissed me off so much. There was a lot of that, you know, a lot of people pissed me off. And everybody was drunk or stoned or both every night, you know, and obnoxious. There was hardly anybody who didn't, you know, either wasn't -- there was the guys in the bar who were drunk, and then the guys in the bunkers who were stoned. And, of course, you know, you could get a lot of powerful marijuana, like, you know, this much, a double handful, for a dollar. And so, you know, like my gunner was like bad on that stuff. He was stoned all day long, and I worked hard to get rid of him, because he was such-- he was irresponsible.

Jim: Did you drink?

Backes: Yeah. I did. But then on--but I really didn't-- I really hated the guys, you know. I mean, they just -- it was so crass. I remember one time I had been smoking dope in the bunker, and I go over to the club to drink. I kind of went to both. Some of them, you know, they didn't mix. And I go into the club, and the bartender says, you know, "Backes, you know, you bastard, you son of a bitch, you know, you--you know, I can't believe you did that to me," and I'm like, "What are you talking about?" You know, he knew I was stoned. And then he pulls out a .45 out from under the bar, and he aims at me and he says, "I'm going to shoot you, you son of a bitch," and he hits under the bar with a hammer, you know. And it scared the shit out of me, you know, and it pissed me off. I mean, I should have just jumped over the bar and kicked the shit out of him, but it-- you know, I mean, what the hell is --what's the guy thinking about, you know, doing something like that? So I remember after that I remember goin' to a -- getting away from my company, and I went to an NCO club, and I wasn't NCO, but I went in there. They didn't check, you know. And I remember going in there, and it was nicer than ours, and they actually had a jukebox. So I played a Barbara Streisand's song, *People Who Need People*, and that was a piece of--because I was real shy, you know, and--[dog barking] Hey, dog, no!--And so on--Dog! No, no!-- And so on August 11th of 1968, I woke up that morning and I had this insight, and the insight was basically that I needed to change myself because my parents were both dead and there was nobody going to help me. I thought about killing myself or running away. There is a book called *Going after Cacciatore--*

Jim: Yes.

Backes: Yeah, where he runs away, and that didn't appeal to me too much, you know, running through Cambodia or whatever. But, anyway, I wake up on August 11

and I had a thing that I had to change myself or kill myself probably, because I was so miserable about how I was. And so I went on a big diet. I lost 45 pounds. I quit smoking, and I was a heavy smoker. And I started and I decided I was going to treat people nice. And so I remember about two days later one of the guys in my unit said, "You know, Backes, you're different," you know. I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, you're nicer." But, anyway, from that day to now I've been working on myself to be a better person and to—all this sort of thing.

Jim: Did you have any inspiration for this, or was this just that you said, "Doggone, I don't quite like quite the way I am and I'm going to change myself?"

Backes: People always ask me that, and I wondered so I always wondered like where did this come from, you know, how did that happen, and the image that always came to mind for me is my mother. And my mother was a very, very loving person, and even though--and my problem was that I thought that I was a schmuck, you know, a worthless scumbag, because I screwed up high school so much and all that sort of thing and I had gotten into trouble so much. And she was dead, and the image of her-- she did two things for me every day. One was that she told me that I was a good boy, and the other thing is she told me that she loved me. And so from deep, deep down inside me this kind of core, you know, was sort of welled up and was-- kind of saved my life, really. You know, it was that. And so things did change for me then. One of the things that I did not too long after that was I challenged my— this Charlie Thompson to stop the minor atrocities that we were doing. Like every time we would come into Cu Chi to refuel and rearm, which was often, there would always be—we'd fire over the garbage dump and there'd always be Vietnamese out there, women, old people, going through the garbage, you know, and this would piss guys off. They'd say, "They're looking for secrets." Hell, no, they're just looking for food, you know, or whatever, anything. Maybe there is somebody looking for weapons. Who knows? I don't know, but there wouldn't be any weapons in there, but there might be scrap metal or something they could make a weapon out of. Anyway, so the game was that we'd take those spent bullets off the floor and throw it at them. Well, you know, if you're going fifty miles an hour and you take one of those brass things and you hit somebody, it hurt. You could tell it hurt. You know, they'd rear up and whatever, you know. That was big laughs. That went on all the time. Shooting the water buffalo went on a lot, not all the time but a lot, way too often. And besides that thing, that story I told you about the pilot who shot at the people, the one thing that really--well, [clock chimes] there's two things, but one of the things that really got to me was, I think it was the third shift, we're coming back from our mission, the third shift, somebody takes a Willie Peter grenade and throws it through the roof of a house for no reason at

all. You know what I mean?

Jim: Yup.

Backes: And, of course, the house blows up in this huge white, you know. And I was like, "What the fuck did you do that for?" you know, when we got back.

Jim: Okay. We've gotta --

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

Jim: Talking to the captain, the platoon leader, about minor atrocities, how did he react?

Backes: Well, not only minor ones, because of the Willie Peters.

Jim: Yeah, yeah. How did he react to that?

Backes: He said, you know, "It's not our business. This is what happens, you know. This is what goes on, you know." But I kept on him, and I said, "If you don't do that, I'm going to have to go higher." And so finally-- he didn't go along because I threatened him. He didn't give a crap about that. He went along because I think I appealed to his sensibilities, his values, you know. Anybody who stopped to think about it--well, not anybody, because-- you know, and some of the songs that they'd sing, you know, like they'd sing like "Napalm the children in the schoolyard," you know, those kinds of songs. And I just didn't get into the thing about the gooks and the dehumanizing people and stuff like that.

Jim: How did your peers react to you, like your gunners and stuff like that? How did they feel about that?

Backes: Well, I didn't, I didn't --

Jim: You just talked about your ship?

Backes: Well, no, except for the major incidents like the-- I mean, I can't talk to a pilot who pulls his .45 out. I mean, I think I did, but you know, there's not much I can say. I could report him, but if you do then you're in all kinds of a mess, you know. But I basically relied on my commander --

Jim: Right.

Backes: To take the heat or to do whatever, and he did. But, unfortunately, he left about within three weeks or so, and then everything kind of reverted, you know, back. And then when I had my going-away, my leaving party, you know, they'd celebrate you and they'd give you a gift, a little shirt or something like that, and then you can make a speech. And my speech was, you know, we shouldn't sing those songs about killing children, napalming children, we shouldn't, you know, be shooting their water buffalo and all that. And they're all like, "Yeah, right. Yeah, okay," you know. Some of them, I mean, some of them would catch it, but a lot of them didn't like it, you know, they didn't want to hear it.

Jim: Did you have any contact with the Vietnamese citizens?

Backes: Very little.

Jim: Very little.

Backes: Very little, except when we'd sit down somewhere and kids would come up to us and stuff like that. But I never had any time off. Guys would be -- other people would be going to Saigon and whatever, you know, in trucks and stuff.

Jim: Yup.

Backes: I never had any time off.

Jim: Did you go on R and R?

Backes: Two.

Jim: Where'd you go?

Backes: Hong Kong and Sydney. That was sweet.

Jim: How did you get to be on two R and Rs? You were only supposed --

Backes: Because I've got my friend there in the office.

Jim: Oh, okay.

Backes: He approached me and said, "I know you've been on one. You want to go on another one?" He said, "We have an extra one," or something. I don't know what the hell it was. "Well, sure."

Jim: Okay. So--

Backes: You know, as long as I wasn't taking it from somebody else.

Jim: Right. Did you go to any USO shows or anything like that, Bob Hope?

Backes: Yeah, I did, saw Bob Hope. Mm hmm. Yeah.

Jim: Okay. So you saw Bob Hope the Christmas of '68?

Backes: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Yeah. That was the only place that he ever got shot at, was Cu Chi that year. But the bad thing about that was, you know, is they shut off our beer about three weeks before he came.

Jim: Why is that?

Backes: Well, the only beer we – huh?

Jim: Why was that?

Backes: Well, you know, so that we wouldn't be rowdy.

Jim: Oh, okay.

Backes: So they have all these pretty girls they were dancing and shit like that. They didn't want us to charge the stage I guess. And they'd bring in all these infantry guys, you know, who were pretty nutty from the field for that show. We could get beer, but it would be 3.2 beer from Korea, and it was just the most awful beer you could imagine. That's the only beer you could get for about three weeks beforehand. But, you know, it was great seeing Bob Hope there.

Jim: Yup.

Backes: It was really great, yeah. It really was.

Jim: I saw him the year before.

Backes: Did ya?

Jim: It was great. You're right.

Backes: Yeah, mm hmm.

- Jim: Did you ever get a chance to drink Beer 33?
- Backes: Huh?
- Jim: Beer 33. It's a Vietnamese beer.
- Backes: Umh – hnh.
- Jim: Okay. [**Approx. 4 sec. gap in tape**] Did you have any lucky charms or superstitions?
- Backes: My sister gave me these holy cards, J Catholic holy cards, to carry. I didn't particularly want to carry them, but I did just for her sake, I said, "You know, I'm not sure I even believe in God, you know. I'm not sure that I'm going to pray, you know." And she said, "Oh, yes, you will. If you're, you know, like in a situation where you might die, you know, you'll pray then." And so this one time, you know, we're taking off all loaded up with fuel and rockets and everything like that out of the POL and all of a sudden the pilot says, "We're going to crash." And that's the most dangerous time, you know, when you're in what they call transition, and we were right alongside a whole row of Slicks. We were on the ground, you know, just waiting all day. And so we went in and we crashed and rolled, and you know, the blades go everywhere. But I thought about praying, but I didn't. Instead I cinched up my seat belt. [laughs] I never – it's like I could have done both, but I remember like, you know, "Do I want to pray or do I want to cinch up my seat belt?" Well, I'll do my seat belt." So there was that. And then the other thing that was interesting about that crash was that I was helping the other guys out, you know, because there was a little blood on people and stuff. I wasn't hurt, and so we were on our side, the helicopter was, you know, it was on my side. My side was down, and so I'm trying to help our guys out, and I got two of them out, and the third guy was my aircraft commander. He said, "No," you know, "I'm the last out." So I thought that was pretty cool, that he made me get out first because, you know, the captain is the last off the ship or whatever.
- Jim: Yeah, yup.
- Backes: Another incident that happened was-- Look at this house that's [unintelligible]-- another incident that happened was we were sitting down off the end of Than Son Nhut, and we were told that there were some sampans hidden in this area, marshy area, that they wanted us to go look at them and see what we could see. Well, they're hidden there, so then we're told to blow them up. So I used my-- I

had a grenade launcher, you know. [clock strikes] It was an M-79. And, you know, it's hard when you're in a circle, you're flying in a circle, and you have to shoot, you know, this thing and it's got the forward momentum plus the curve, but I was good at it, you know, and I could hit 'em. But my pilot wanted to do it, and so but he didn't know how hard it was, you know. So he keeps telling his copilot to go lower and slower. So we got down so low and slow that one of the back blasts hit the helicopter, and I got a piece of shrapnel in my hip, right in here. So it's been in there all along, although I never had confirmation that it was still there, you know, and I figured it was, you know. And the other thing was he asked me not to report it, and you know, which meant I had to like self-treat, because he would have got, you know--I don't know, charged with damaging Army property and because it was stupid what he was doing. And it did hit the helicopter, too. But, anyway, so I self-treated.

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: But you know, my hip started hurting me, gosh, ten years ago, and I got this and that. They did the inspections, you know. And at the VA they said, oh, they think it's arthritis in my tailbone and this and that, you know. And at the VA I had this young doctor, and he did this real good examination of me, and you know, I told him about it, and he said, "Well, we don't know what it is, you know. I can't find anything." And he brought in the x-rays, and he puts them up on the lit-up thing, you know. He says, "See, here is your hip and everything. We don't really see any problems." And I said, "Well, what's that black thing there?" He said, "Oh, that's your keys." I said, "I didn't have any pants on." He said, "You didn't?" And he said, "Oh, well, let me go back in." So then he goes back and talks to the team, and then, they, you know, that was the shrapnel in there, which is kind of dumb. Anyway, so that was interesting. So because of that I was able to get [clock chimes] ten percent disability for this, and the only way-- because there was no medical verification, because I hadn't gotten treatment, the only way I was able to do it was that, one, if you can prove that you were in combat, in like, you know, heavy combat, they have to take your word for it, but you still have to get verification from one or two other people. So I got this Al guy, and a couple of them remembered it, you know, so they vouched for it, and so, you know, it was a done deal. But it was pretty, pretty weird.

Jim: Yeah. Let's go on now to kind of what your assessment of your experience was. What did you think of the country?

Backes: "The country" meaning?

Jim: Vietnam.

- Backes: Yeah. Um, well, I thought it was sad, you know. There wasn't very many areas that I would call beautiful because they all had damage, you know, I mean even around Tay Ninh where there was pineapple plantations. And, you know, Tay Ninh City is a very pretty city, but there is mortar holes everywhere. And, you know, we would land on their soccer field in the middle of the city there, and that was a dangerous area, Tay Ninh was. So you know, like the Mekong Delta, flying down there, at times it would be pretty, but you are always like aware that there's you don't know who is going to shoot at you or whatever. And so, you know, it's a combination of sort of a loathing for the war, sadness for everybody involved, and beauty occasionally. I loved flying. I mean, being up in the air was just unbelievable. It's so much fun, and you know, that was just nothing but gravy for me. I mean, I felt sorry for the guys on the ground. So, you know, what can you say? I mean, you know, it was terrible for the civilians.
- Jim: What did you think of your leaders, like your officers, your NCOs?
- Backes: Yeah. I didn't like Westmoreland very much, but, yeah, [laughs], but I mean all that body count shit –
- Jim: Yeah.
- Backes: Was such a bunch of crap. But the immediate leaders were good, you know. It was Captain Atkinson, Captain Thompson, and Captain Rose, the guy that got killed, you know, excellent, really, really great guys. There were others that weren't so great, but I was lucky enough that all the ones that were my direct commanders were all really, really good during my tour duty there.
- Jim: How did you guys handle body count from the helicopters?
- Backes: We never did body count, just never did it.
- Jim: Okay.
- Backes: I never did it. You know, I don't remember-- I think they had -- they would have, I don't know, somebody else do it. I don't know who did it, but we never did body count.
- Jim: So you don't know whether the ship commander did or not?
- Backes: I don't think the Stingers did it. I can remember maybe they would be asking a question, you know, did you see this or that and what was your estimate and that.

I remember that being an occasional question, but it wasn't like it was our job.

Jim: Okay. What did you think of the mission that the United States--or what the United States was trying to do in Vietnam?

Backes: Um, it was bad. It was very confusing, really, you know. I remember when it was 1966 probably, and I was, you know, that's when I was like screwing up in school, and I, I was totally oblivious to the war, you know, and then all of a sudden I'm walking to the Student Union and there's all these protesters and stuff, and then there's at nighttime there was like people reading all the dead guys' names and stuff like that. And I was only like a little bit aware of it, you know, but by the time I was in it, I didn't know if it was good or bad. I just figured, you know, well, it's a war. In America, you know, we do the right thing. And then they had all the war-at-home stuff and stuff like that, and then after you were there with the morale problems that we had with just the nature of the missions, where we would go into places like this Iron Triangle or the Ho Bo Woods and we would -- there would be twenty-five grunts lose their lives for this area, you know, in a three-day battle, and then the NVA would pull out, and then we'd win. We'd leave. Two weeks later we're back to the same damn place fighting for the same place, thing. Twenty-five more guys would die and lots of wounded, you know, for this piece of land that looked like craters in the moon, you know. Say "What in the hell?" "But it was like the Ho Chi Minh Trail turned in, you know, there and went right through our area. So, you know, that was pretty sickening. So, yeah, the mission thing I didn't care for it much.

Jim: How -- do you think you were properly trained for the job you did?

Backes: Well, there was no training for gunships, you know.

Jim: So it was OJT?

Backes: Yeah, it was OJT pretty much, yeah. And the other thing, that book, you know, that I was talking about,

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: *Xing Loi*, his whole theme is about the lack of training there, you know, that like when he got inside his helicopter-- the Stingers did more training than anybody, because we had this esprit de corps. In his unit they give him a Slick and they said, "Here is your ship. You're flying tomorrow," but not how to do anything, no mentoring, no flying along as a gunner for a day, you know. And he did everything wrong, and everybody is screaming at him, you know, and he

realized--or his theory was that there is this thing about, you know, you never get close to an FNG, you know, a fucking new guy, because they would get killed, and you don't want to have your buddies get killed, so you just stay away from them. So that meant they didn't get training, because nobody wanted to even talk to them hardly, because they were the first to get killed. And that was certainly true in our, you know, thing. So—

Jim: Were you treated like that when you came into the Stingers?

Backes: No, not Stingers. The Stingers weren't like that. I never did know, why exactly they picked me out, except-- I don't know. You know, I would talk to people and stuff like that, you know, at the thing, and I was interested in everything, and I certainly didn't want to work in maintenance, you know.

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: And so I was very, very happy to be chosen for the Stingers.

Jim: How did the Vietnam experience affect your life after you left Vietnam?

Backes: Yeah. You know, for me it was one of those deals like, you know, they say that war makes ya or breaks ya. For me it kind of made me. I left a better person, a much better person, more grown up and committed to, you know, self-improvement. And, you know, of course, it's hard to gauge how the war affects you. You know, I had my nightmare, same nightmare, for many years, and it gradually, gradually, gradually diminished, but themes of it still play out.

Jim: What is that if you --

Backes: Yeah. It was that I was sent back to Vietnam, and there would always be this part of the dream like, oh, shit, I dreamt this was going to happen and now it did. So there was always this part that made it seem like it was really real and that I was you know, so I'm back in Vietnam, but the difference was that I was the one on the ground and the NVA had the helicopters. So I'm in the ground in the tunnels, you know, and it's just like, you know, rockets going off and, you know, it's like my life didn't count for much and my ass is pretty much grass there, and it was like scorched earth. I mean just everything is blown up and there is no support, and it is like Hades or something like that. So that was my dream.

Jim: How were you received when you -- well, when did you come home and what --

Backes: Yeah. I think I had the typical experience where one of the things that you could do if you were in helicopters was the last thirty days you could stop flying,

option is (??) you know, and most guys did. But I flew all the way. I flew every day, and I flew a mission on the morning that I was leaving and because we had taken – we had a lot of casualties and guys were not wanting to join the Stingers because of that. And so I didn't feel like I could just drop out, you know, and not fly. So then, you know I fly on a mission, I jump in a helicopter, go to Saigon, get on the plane, come into San Francisco. I called my sister up to tell her, and they knew approximately when I would be coming back, and I called her up that night, and I remember when she answered the phone I couldn't speak, You know, I was so choked up to hear her voice that I couldn't talk. She is like, "Hello? Hello? Hello?" and I'm like "Uh-uh-uh," like that, and finally I got it out, you know, that I was back and that I would go to Chicago and then I would come to Peoria, and they would have a little gathering there for me. So I did that, and they had this little gathering with my relatives and my girlfriend, ex-girlfriend, and that lasted a couple hours, and hardly anybody--nobody asked you know like what was it like or whatever, you know. It's like we're glad you lived, you know, and we were worried about you, and we're glad you're home and stuff like that but -- and then after that party there was never any acknowledgement about Vietnam from me [laughs] or from anybody else. I had the typical thing where, you know, I never talked to anybody about it for like ten or twelve years, whatever it was, you know, until they started doing the welcome back thing, you know.

Jim: Mm hm.

Backes: and I marched in the one in Verona, where everybody clapped for us, and it was very healing. You know, it was amazing. And then, you know, people start saying, you know, thank you for serving and stuff like that, you know, and all of a sudden you could be proud to be a Vietnam veteran, you know, whereas before that you didn't want to tell anybody. Actually, when I came into that airport in San Francisco there was a whole bunch of people calling us baby killers.

Jim: Did you have any military duty in the United States after your Vietnam tour?

Backes: No. I was lucky, because about in August - September when I was there they passed this regulation that said that if you had less than six months to go in your total time in the Army, active duty, that you could get out immediately, because they were having such problems, discipline problems, with guys coming back from Vietnam, short-timers. They didn't want to paint rocks and dig holes and shit like that, you know. So, basically when I got home I was out.

Jim: So you got out then in—

- Backes: I was total active duty for seventeen months.
- Jim: Okay. So you were –
- Backes: I got out about five months early.
- Jim: Okay. So you got out then in December or January of '70?
- Backes: No.
- Jim: Or, no, '69. January '69. I am not very good on math and stuff like that. Do you belong to any Veterans organizations now?
- Backes: I belonged to the VVA [Vietnam Veterans of America] for a while. Now I don't, though. I could never bring myself to join the beer-drinking ones. The VVA, they never drank beer. You know, they were into like community service. But the one thing I did have was I had my boss at one point was a therapist at the Vets House. It was a woman, Mary Kulwicki (??), and she ordered me to go into this vets group, therapy group, and it was led by Bob Cook and the other guy.
- Jim: Tom Dietz?
- Backes: Yeah, those two.
- Jim: Yeah, I know them.
- Backes: They led this group over the summer, very powerful. The ground rules were no war stories, how are you going to change your life and do it this summer, and three, how do you put the war in your corner. And it was hard core, and boy, I mean it was the most effective therapy thing I think I've ever been in. Every guy in that group made big changes, you know, and--
- Jim: When the tape comes off I'll tell you a story--
- Backes: All right.
- Jim: Because I'm not being interviewed. [laughs] So you had no military experience after. How would you assess this whole experience?
- Backes: Well, for me it was a big adventure that was a hell of a lot of fun if you take out

all the killings and mayhem and damage and everything like that. So, you know, aside from all that stuff, which you can't put aside, I loved flying. I loved the adventure of it all. I actually liked the military. I liked the way they trained us, you know. I liked basic training for that matter. So there – I liked, I just liked the way they taught. You know, I thought that they taught very effectively. The things that—there were some major failings, you know, with regards to that war, which, unfortunately, are not, haven't been corrected. For example, I was talking to a friend of mine. They don't do any-- what would you call it when you come back from the war, they ought to have you sit for a week and you go through groups and--

Jim: Yeah, decompress.

Backes: Decompression, yeah. They don't do that, you know, these guys coming back from Iraq. So that was the dumbest thing I think about, you know, coming back. Because I mean like me, you know, I'm flying a mission one morning in my helicopter--we actually had a hard landing, you know, bent the thing, which it's like a minicrash--and then all of a sudden I'm back in the States and nobody is talking about it for ten years, you know. [clock chimes] Well, that's a setup for bein'--

Jim: That's weird.

Backes: Nuts, you know.

Jim: You bet it is.

Backes: Yeah, it's weird. It really is. The other thing about it was that-- And I watched *Black Hawk Down*, and it made me sick to watch that movie, because I thought the Army would have learned that they should teach you about the culture, they should teach you to know your enemy and respect your enemy, you know. And in *Black Hawk Down* it was exactly the same as it was in Vietnam, you know. It's like "these dumbass gooks," "these niggers," these whatever, you know, these-- what do they call them? Oh, I don't know.

Jim: Ragheads?

Backes: Ragheads, yeah, and all that, you know. Did you see the movie?

Jim: Yeah.

Backes: Yeah. I mean, I still have it (??) and the whole thing, you know. The whole

thing. It pissed me off so much. And you know, the soldiers, they're so macho, and the leaders were so arrogant, you know. And there was some of that in Vietnam. It usually seemed like it was the higher-ups were the ones that were really screwed up. But there were, you know, like some of the, I don't know, some of the missions that we had where it's like "This is a free fire zone"-- totally a Viet Cong village. "Shoot everything that moves." But, wait a minute, you know, there is like women and kids and pigs and shit. I'm not going to-- you know, it was dumb. So, anyway.

Jim: Have we covered everything we should cover?

Backes: Huh? I don't know. [laughs] What more would you want?

Jim: That's --

[End of Interview]