Roberts Memorial Library Middle Georgia College Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project Art Howard Interview June 25, 2012

Paul Robards: The date is June 25, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking today with Arthur Howard from Warner Robins, GA about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

Robards: Mr. Howard, what branch of the service did you serve in?

Howard: The Air Force

Robards: Why did you join the military?

Howard: I wanted to fly. One of my uncles at that point was still serving in the Air Force, and I just wanted to fly.

Robards: How old were you when you joined the military?

Howard: I joined ROTC when I was 19 and graduated and got a commission, so I entered in 1967. I was 21.

Robards: What was your hometown when you joined?

Howard: Chico, California

Robards: Where did you go to receive basic training?

Howard: I went to Biloxi Mississippi; that would have been Keesler [AFB].

Robards: Where did you attend Advanced Training?

Howard: Navigator training at Mather AFB in Sacramento California.

Robards: What were you trained to do in Advanced Training?

Howard: I was an Air Force navigator and had an undergraduate in navigator training.

Robards: What weapons did you learn to use and did you ever have to use them?

Howard: We were taught to use handguns, a 38 [pistol], and also M16s. I never had to use one.

Robards: Were there any particular or special incidents that occurred during your training, and how did it affect your life?

Howard: Yes, I met my wife, and we got married when I got back from survival school, and we are still

married. That was 44 years ago.

Robards: Congratulations!

Howard: Thank you. We have two children. In terms of the training itself, it led to a 30 year career. It led to a new direction. So it had a profound impact; I met my wife and that really changed my life.

Robards: Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

Howard: Yes. Well, in navigator school, you got a choice based on your class standing. I remember we went into the auditorium and they had all the assignments on the chalkboard. We just went down the

Robards: What is your evaluation of American military leadership in Vietnam and of your immediate commanders in the field?

Howard: By immediate commanders, it would be the squadron commander. They were very good overall. From my point of view and the way we were being used, I think, looking back, this is hindsight, but I think strategically we made a lot of mistakes.

Robards: As a young serviceman, did you understand the politics and diplomacy of both the United States and Southeast Asia that landed you in the middle of a war?

Howard: No. I tried to keep informed. I brought along a book, for example, Hell in a Very Small Place: the Sege of Dien Bien Phu by Bernard Fall. There was no discussion; it was very routine. We were stationed in Okinawa and we'd fly in there; we were very much mobile. But was no discussion about the war in terms of purpose or the futility; we were just doing a job.

Robards: Did your fellow servicemen have the same opinions and understanding that you held?

Howard: I would say in terms of flyers, yes. We spent a lot of time griping and complaining, but yeah, I think for us, now this would be different than the Air Force people who are fighters, but for us, it was just routine. It was what we were trained to do. We were also over there in a period after TET and before late '71. From our perspective, it was relatively quiet. Flying in South Vietnam, there was no threat. It was after Kaisson and before mid-'71 when I left. In mid '71, I've talked to people who were in 130's and, oh boy; it wasn't routine then. They had a lot of ground threats. The period of time I was there it was relatively benign. [This is] from my point of view, I'm just talking about my experience.

Robards: Did your understanding of the situation effect how you did your job?

Howard: From my perspective it was really important about what the people I worked with thought of me, so I wanted to do a good job and be thought of as competent. It was particularly important for me to be well thought of by Senior NCOs. I remember they paired me up with a flight engineer, a master sergeant; he sort of took me under his wing for the first six months, just to make sure that I understood the ropes and how things worked and to make sure that I didn't make any serious [mistakes].

Robards: Describe your living conditions, housing, and food in Vietnam.

Howard: I was on air bases; we had (?) trailers, you know, two or three people to a room, air conditioned. That was also true in Thailand when we were there; there were six people [in a space] about the size of this room, divided into bunks. We shared our bath, so it was sort of like camping. It was always air conditioned, because we would fly all times of the day or night, so when you came in in the middle of the day, you had crew rest, so you had air-conditioning, which was...

Robards: A little R& R?

Howard: Yes. And then the food was chow hall...

Robards: Beats c-rations from what I understand.

Howard: Yeah, yeah. The powdered eggs were an acquired taste.

Robards: What did you do to relax and have fun?

Howard: For example, in Cam Ranh Bay, you had the air base, and you could just walk to the beach. It was a fantastic beach; so, you could go there, or there was also an inlet where you could rent a boat and go water skiing; those kind of things. I spent a lot of time at the club talking, playing. It was just a routine you fell into, because you knew you were only there [for] 15 days. When we flew out of Ubon in Thailand, several times we would go downtown, and one time we befriended the intelligence officer. He took us on a trip down the river and went up to several villages; so that was pretty exotic.

The most interesting experience was at Ubon. I was sitting there, and a fellow I knew from ROTC showed up! He was a Japanese American. It wasn't quite clear what he was doing [there], but he was in

Howard: I can see that in the strategic picture that it was part of the maneuvering with the Cold War and the Soviets. But our mind set was that we had to do it, [because] there was this threat. But we look back now; we look at the relations we have with Vietnam and the Vietnamese and the commercial relationship that we have, and [it makes you wonder] if there was another way. But I think that we were just so caught up in their situation with China and Russia. Yet a few years later, when Nixon and Kissinger went to China, they understood that it [Vietnam]

Robards: Is there anything else that you would especially like to share about your Vietnam War experience?

Howard: I was really fortunate; more [so]