

Interview with Bruce Thiemann

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Interviewer: H. Wayne Wilson

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Thiemann: I am Bruce Thiemann, and I live in East Peoria.

Wilson: And Thiemann is spelled?

Thiemann: T-h-i-e-m-a-n-n.

Wilson: And for the conversation, we'll forget the lights and the camera here.

Thiemann: Okay.

Wilson: You grew up where and when and things like that?

Thiemann: I grew up on the east bluff of Peoria up by Van Steuben playground and I went to Van Steuben Grade School and then Woodruff High School and graduated in the class of '67 from Woodruff. So kind of grew up in the 50s, late 50s, early 60s.

Wilson: Did you know Bill Martin in high school?

Thiemann: Yes, Bill was a legendary character in high school. I'm sure he won't mind me saying this but he was a legendary tough guy in high school. He won the award at Woodruff called the Don Shaver Award for the best blocker and tackler on the football team. He may have won it two years in a row. The Don Shaver Award, by the way, was named after Don Shaver, who was killed in Korea, killed in action in Korea, and had been a Woodruff graduate and had been a tremendous athlete at Woodruff.

Wilson: So you went to Woodruff High School, graduated, and then what did you do?

Thiemann: I started college like a lot of guys in '67 because if you didn't have an acceptance to college, you got drafted right away. And I came from a family where it was kind of expected you'd go to college. I was thinking I wanted to go to Vietnam, but my parents, of course, said, "No, no, you're going to go to college." And I thought this is going to be the only war of my generation and I could see us starting to peak, and I knew I probably wouldn't finish college but kind of to please my mom and dad, I started college.

Wilson: And you went to what college and how long?

Thiemann: I started at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. It's kind of a college like Grinnell or Knox. It was thought of as part of what they call the Ivy League of the Midwest. It was a small, good school but I only went there for a semester and found it was a little too small for me, a little too isolated. So I came back to Peoria and then I went to ISU my second semester, down in Normal. Then I joined the Army.

Wilson: Was there a particular reason that you decided after one year of college that it was time to join the Army, despite your parents' interest that you finish college?

Thiemann: Well, it was 1968 and they had had the Tet Offensive and after the Tet Offensive in '68, the national press, the national mood, there was kind of a sense that I got that the country was starting to give up its support of Vietnam the cause. And I thought, boy, they're going to start pulling people out and it's going to all wind down. And if I stay in college and finish college, it'll be over by the time I get back, by the time I got out of college.

Wilson: When did you go into the service? Where was basic training? Where was AIT? What kind of MOS did you have?

Thiemann: I joined from Bloomington. I was at ISU finishing up the semester and we had these great arguments in the dorm about Vietnam. Of course, it was the big topic of discussion.

Wilson: The Tet Offensive was that semester?

Thiemann: I think it was, yeah, that spring semester of '68. So the thought was that it was unfair for certain people to get deferments, certain people to get drafted. Of course, we were all people who were not drafted, and so the thought was, well, you know, if you really believe that that's unfair, you ought to go join. And after a few discussions like that, I went down to the recruiting office in Bloomington, because I wanted to go anyway, and that was just kind of the last prompt to get me down there. Of course, when I told my folks in Peoria that I enlisted from Bloomington, they thought that I was really foolish. Their whole idea was, my dad had been through World War II, his idea was, you know, why would you want to go to a place where you could get hurt? And now that I'm a parent myself, I can easily understand the advice they were giving me. I don't think I would've wanted my children to join and go to a place where battles were going on but that was the kind of kid I was at that time.

Wilson: Your MOS was in?

Thiemann: I started out as a two-year enlistee. I kind of volunteered for the draft, so they gave you a dream sheet. You probably remember this because you were in about the same time. And you put down what you wanted to do in the service.

Wilson: None of which happened.

Thiemann: Right. I put down combat photographer in Vietnam. I had this romantic idea of Hemingway and war being kind of a thing that was gallant, would test your mettle. And I think that's all I put down. Of course, that was unavailable. I

don't think I ever met a combat photographer, actually, in Vietnam. But I was a good student, and the Army was full of people who had been drafted that didn't have much education so I scored well on all the tests. So they sent me to MP school in Fort Gordon, Georgia. Didn't want to be there. Told the commanders that I did not want to be an MP because I thought I'd be stateside for a couple of years. Had to go in front of a board, had a lot of arguing, and they finally threw the book down and said, "Okay, if you want to go to Vietnam, you're going to go to Vietnam. We're going to put you in infantry, and you're going to go straight to Vietnam." And I said, "That's what I joined for." They couldn't understand it either. Because that was late 1968, and again, even people in the Army were avoiding Vietnam. Vietnam was not a place you wanted to go to even if you were in the Army. A lot of those guys had come back from Vietnam and they, again, like my parents, said, "You're pretty foolish. You don't know what you're getting into." I was young and dumb and that was my goal. So I sat and waited for orders, and again, they didn't give me orders for infantry. They gave me orders for helicopter mechanics school in Virginia at Fort Eustis. So I got there and went through the same spiel. I don't want to be a helicopter mechanic. I just want to go to Vietnam. Send me back to infantry school. And there was a major there who was smarter than I was, and he said, "Hey, you know what? Most of the helicopters are actually in Vietnam. Why don't you stay here and knuckle down. I can pretty much guarantee you'll get to Vietnam. And once you're there, you can do whatever you want. They're always looking for volunteers."

Wilson: So you went over to Vietnam as a mechanic for helicopters.

Thiemann: As a crew chief, actually. Because I had a good aptitude for book learning and classrooms, I rose up to the head of my training unit. And so they promoted me even before I went over to what they call the crew chief status. So I got to Vietnam. My MOS was a crew chief MOS, which I think was 69N20, if I recall. So I got to Vietnam and went to the typical Long Binh holding area there, and then within a few days got orders for an Air Cav unit, which was down in Vĩnh Long, Vietnam. It was called the Seventh Squadron of the First Air Cavalry Regiment, and it was an old cavalry unit that they'd dusted off and reconstituted and made it into an Air Cav unit. But it had this history of being a, like a regular cavalry unit all through the Army history.

Wilson: So you became, you say an Air Cav unit? What did you do? What was the transition, because you were being trained as a mechanic?

Thiemann: Right. I got down there and they said, "Well, we're going to put you on the flight line, and you can work on the helicopters that come back from the missions every day." Because every morning around dawn, or before dawn, the units would take off. The base had, the base of Vĩnh Long had, probably, five or six different helicopter units, some Air Cav units, and some helicopter standalone units. So I did that for a couple of weeks, and it was kind of hot, kind of morning. And so I said, "I want to go off with these guys every morning on these missions." And they said, "You got to volunteer for that." So I went and volunteered for it, and they said, "We don't have any openings

for crew chiefs, but we got some openings for door gunners on the slicks.”

And so I volunteered to do that, and then eventually openings came up to be a crew chief on a slick, and what that meant is that you got to sit on the left side and man the left gun, versus the door gunner who sat on the right side, and he manned the right gun. But it also meant, when you landed, that you could work on the helicopter a little bit. You fueled it up, you tightened up all the loose stuff, you checked it out, and you get to sign the logbook. And you kind of got assigned one particular helicopter, and that was kind of your bird. And then they would have a pilot, usually a warrant officer or a lieutenant, and he was the aircraft commander, so he was assigned to one particular helicopter. And then the door gunners would kind of rotate. You might have one for a month or two. And then the other pilot, who they called the, they called him the pilot, he would rotate. But the aircraft commander and the crew chief kind of got together on the same ship. That was kind of nice because I got to serve with two warrant officers for long periods of time and got to know them pretty well.

Wilson: And their names were?

Thiemann: Jim Boyle was the first one. He was a fellow from Georgia. Excellent pilot. And the second one was from Randy Wagner and he was from New York state. Another excellent pilot. And when you flew every day, and you were flying constantly, you got to really get the feel of who were the good pilots in the unit, and who were, you could be confident enough to lay down and take a nap while they were flying the ship.

Wilson: You stay in contact with either one of them?

Thiemann: Yes, Randy Wagner sent to me the piece off the top of the helicopter, the same helicopter than he and I were on, assigned to. The helicopter was called Dutchmaster 680.

Wilson: Let's show a picture of that.

Thiemann: Yeah, I got some pictures of it. And this was the nut that held everything down on the helicopter. And if you don't mind me using the vernacular, it was called the Jesus Nut because if it ever came off, you would meet Jesus if you'd been good in life. And this is a really tough piece of metal. If you read the top of it, it says 1968, where it was heat treated and baked. His tour of duty lasted a little longer than mine. The pilots would usually fly for six months and then they would do six months of ground duty, like kind of, operational assignments. And so he started his six months a little before my last six months, a little afterwards, actually. So he stayed, and he said a couple of months after I left and came home, they got into a battle and the ship got shot up quite a bit and had to be kind of gone over, and they decided to take the Jesus Nut off. And so they gave it to him, and he brought it home. And I go to a couple of the reunions every once in a while of the unit and run into these pilots, and so that's where I got the Jesus Nut. He loaned it to me for ten years as a paperweight.

Wilson: Ten years, and then return it.

Thiemann: I got to return it to him in ten years.

Wilson: So when you talk about door gunner and the pilot and the chief warrant officer, et cetera, you went out as a unit, four people on the helicopter.

Thiemann: Right, right.

Wilson: What were your duties?

Thiemann: Well, my duties on the slick were to make sure that the, make sure the door gunner had armed the ship in the morning, make sure the guns were on the ship, make sure the ship was gassed up, make sure the logbook was kept up to date, make sure the ship, mechanically, was okay, that, cause the ships were constantly being checked out at the end of every day. A lot of times, we would be flying along and a stray bullet would hit the ship and the ships were so loud that it was hard to know if you got shot. And so one of the jobs was to check the ship out thoroughly, every night, to see if there's any new bullet holes in it. And if there were, to tell the mechanics about it, and whether it needed to be prepared, or just put some tape over it. That was, but the ships went out in a compliment of other ships, so our slick was one of four or five slicks. We had a couple of gunships that went with us, either Cobras or Huey gunships, mainly Cobras towards the latter part of it. And then there were small ships called Loaches, light observation helicopters. And we would go out, our flight would go out with all those helicopters, and then we would join other flights of helicopters, and we would all meet somewhere and pick up troops and we'd get our assignments. But before we left we knew we were going to do missions

that day, maybe in Cà Mau, which was a certain area, or Sac Trang, which was another area, or Cần Thơ, or any of these places, and it might be an hour, an hour and a half to get there. So all the ships would load up in the morning with all their fuel and ammunition, and then we would fly for maybe an hour, hour and a half, we'd land, and then we'd work with the commanders to pick up the infantry. And then the assignment would be to insert the infantry wherever they thought the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese were in these LZs that they had picked out or were picking out that day.

Wilson: The landing zones?

Thiemann: Yeah. Yeah.

Wilson: And then you would go back and pick them up after a certain amount of time?

Thiemann: Yes, we always brought them out at the end of the day. Sometimes it was late in the day. Sometimes if they couldn't find much activity we'd pick them up and then reinsert them in the afternoon somewhere else. So we did a lot of what they call insertions. Quite a few times they were called hot LZs, and that was the most fun, when you could go in with the guns blazing, and there was a lot of excitement to it. The LZs would be marked and it was thought there was enemy there and so you would go in as fast as you could, as low as you could above the treetops, and at the last minute the pilots would flare the ship up, which kind of stops the ship in the air, and then settle it down close to the ground. And then the airwaves would be full of, "Get the troops off! Get the troops off!" And you'd stop firing while the troops were jumping off,

although some of the troops would start firing on their own, especially if fire was coming from the tree lines. All this was happening with ships all around you doing the same thing, behind you, in front of you, sometimes to the right and left, depending on how big the LZs were. And then the pilots would try to get out of there as quick as possible. And with the troops off, the ships would be a little bit lighter and they could pull all the pitch in, all the strength of the ship, and tip it forward and pull it up as fast and as high, and kind of rotate it out of the LZ as quick as possible. Those were the times when the ship was most vulnerable, when you were slow and near the ground.

Wilson: You use the term fun and exciting. In what capacity are you using the word fun and exciting when you're talking about guns blazing, dropping off troops with enemy fire coming in?

Thiemann: It's a capacity of distant memory. It's being a long ways from it. I'm sure at the time I was terrified, petrified. I think everybody was, although you did get used to it after a while. But now that I look back on it, I'm thinking that was really exciting and if you read books about Vietnam, you constantly hear people talk about insertions and hot LZs being a high adrenaline, kind of a rush.

Wilson: What was the most difficult insertion that you participated in?

Thiemann: We were taking troops down to the U Minh Forest one time and this was an area that was just full of the enemy down the southern part of Vietnam. It was swampy, brushy. There were trees, there was a lot of water, and it was a real

small LZ. And as we were going in, one of our small helicopters got shot down. And when we dropped our troops off, we were directed over to try to get it out of there because we had a hook on the bottom of our helicopter. We had enough power that we could drop a sling down and while we were doing that, we started getting shot, taking fire. And as we were picking up this other helicopter, our fuel started to spurt out the sides. I sat on the left side, and the fuel tank was right next to me, and I looked down and it was like a little garden hose of JP4, which was the fuel. The pilots said, "I think we're taking hits." I said, "Yeah, we just got hit in the fuel cell right here." And he said, "How bad is it?" I said, "Well, it's about the size of a garden hose." And he said, "I think we can get out of here, but not very far." So we got the other helicopter up in the air, went a short distance, and we all came down fast, and that was really exciting.

Wilson: Did it occur to you, you keep using the term exciting, did it occur to you that you were this far from injury or worse?

Thiemann: Yeah, but I thought I was kind of invulnerable. I was sitting on a plate. When helicopters would crash, we would scavenge the armored plates because the pilots actually had an armored seat they sat in. They had sliding panels, and they sat and the whole seat was armored and they had a, even up to the, almost up to where their neck would start. So when we had ships that got shot down and we could access them, we would scavenge pieces of those armored plates, especially the sliding side panels. And then we would make our own little armored area. We would put a piece down on the floor, a piece behind us, a

piece on our left, maybe sit on another one, and then we wore a chicken plate. So we kind of thought of ourselves being protected pretty well. I mean, we weren't entirely protected, but it gave you a feeling of some protection.

Wilson: And a chicken plate would be what?

Thiemann: A chicken plate was a vest that had armored plating on it to kind of fit around your midsection, from here on down to here. They supposedly could stop a .30 caliber round, and one of my pictures here is my pilot, Wagner, the second pilot, and he's pointing to the hole in his chicken plate that stopped a round. One day, a bullet came up through the bubble and hit him right in the chest and that chicken plate stopped it. What we worried about was the .51 caliber rounds and the RPGs and the bigger stuff than the normal .30 cal.

Wilson: Were you ever injured?

Thiemann: I wasn't. A couple of times there were fragments of explosives going on around us, but never injured to the point where I had to get stitches or anything. Just cuts and abrasions, and things like that.

Wilson: How long were you in country?

Thiemann: One year and two days. And I stayed two extra days so I could get that early out. Remember, back then, if you were just a two year enlistee or draftee, after you did your training and went to 'Nam, you only had three months or so left, and so they would give you a early out up to a hundred and fifty days, but you

had to arrive in the States with less than a hundred and fifty days. So I stayed a couple extra days.

Wilson: We've been talking about a variety of helicopters. What kind of helicopter did you fly on?

Thiemann: It was a UH1H. It was made by a company called Bell in Texas, and they called them slicks because they had the ability to carry troops and they were not a complete gunship. They had machine guns on the sides but they were designed more to ferry troops. Sometimes we did medevac duty, sometimes we made supply runs, and it was kind of a utility helicopter, but the main purpose was to take troops.

Wilson: And how many troops could you carry?

Thiemann: Well, if they were Americans, only about nine. If they were Vietnamese, it was like twelve or thirteen. Weight was a big factor.

Wilson: You say you carried Vietnamese troops, too. So you were ferrying ARVN troops?

Thiemann: Yes. As I thought, when I got to Vietnam, I thought, the war's peaking out here. And sure enough, after about five months in country, working with the ninth infantry, which was located down the Mekong Delta, where we were, they told the Ninth Infantry, "You're going to go back to Hawaii." That was the first unit that was pulled out. And so after that we had to work with the ARVN soldiers.

Wilson: Did you have any friends who were injured or lost their lives in Vietnam?

Thiemann: I did, yeah. And that was the sad part of it. They were really good guys, guys who would've made a contribution if they'd come back. When I found out about the air crews, and I never knew this, cause I just kind of happened into it, was they had a lot of esprit de corps, they had a lot of camaraderie, the flying together. And the pilots kind of accepted the crew so there wasn't a hierarchy that you sometimes find in the military where the officers didn't want anything to do with the enlisted men and the enlisted men thought the officers were above them, or something. When you're all up in the air together on the helicopter, all working together, it develops a lot of camaraderie, and so you get to know people pretty well. Everybody that I flew with, I thought were people with a lot of integrity, a lot of capacity, a lot of bravery. Good people.

Wilson: Most of your insertions were in the southern portion of Vietnam? The southern portion of South Vietnam?

Thiemann: Yes.

Wilson: The delta area?

Thiemann: Yeah, it was called IV Corps. In fact, I never even got to Saigon, which I really wanted to do, and maybe I'll go back someday, but it was all the way down south, and the Mekong Delta, where the Mekong River spreads out into a bunch of smaller rivers and then spreads out into a bunch of smaller canals.

We did a lot work up on the Cambodian border where there's some mountainous areas. Nui Ba Den is a famous mountain up there and then a couple mountains called the Seven Sisters.

Wilson: Did you, other than transporting ARVN troops, did you have any interaction with the South Vietnamese Army?

Thiemann: No. Our base was mainly all American troops, American helicopter units. We had some infantry on the base. They guarded the base and did some missions in the local area. Once a month we got a day off and could go into town. We were next to a town, a town of maybe couple thousand people anyway, and could relax in town a little bit. So I had some ability to go into town and see how the Vietnamese lived.

Wilson: One day a month?

Thiemann: One day a month, yeah. Yeah, the one thing that's easy to forget about Vietnam, you probably remember this, they worked you hard. I mean, we were up before dawn. We came back after dark a lot. We got not a lot of sleep and it was seven days. There wasn't a day off every seven days.

Wilson: My recollection was, you didn't know what day it was.

Thiemann: Yeah.

Wilson: You have a Vietnam veteran shirt on, you have your dog tags. You're proud of your service.

Thiemann: I am now, but I wasn't when I came back and I wish I had saved more parts of the uniform I brought back. But I came back to Peoria in the spring of 1970 and nobody was talking about how proud they were to be a Vietnam veteran. And I kind of just got rid of almost everything that I brought back, except the dog tags, and then in the late seventies and early eighties, particularly the early eighties, I started to get together with other Vietnam veterans. Probably met you around then, and we formed this group called the Vietnam Veterans of Illinois and started to just buy stuff like this Vietnam shirt and wear it once or twice a year around Memorial Day and Veterans Day. Started marching the parades, and it made me feel a lot better to do that.

Wilson: How long did it take you to come to grips, being able to talk about your service?

Thiemann: I'd say about ten years, really. I mean, I felt like I had been reckless. I felt like I hadn't thought it out completely. When I got there, I did enjoy the missions and I enjoyed the adrenaline and the rush from it all, but I knew we were causing a lot of havoc out in the countryside out there. And these people, this was their home. When you're doing missions and you see people tending the fields to the right and left, walking around, conducting their daily activities, and you're inserting troops down the road in some tree line and shooting up the countryside. Everywhere that we looked down from the helicopter, there were shell craters, and the whole countryside was shot up by the time I got there, and we shot it up a lot worse. And I got home, I started thinking, maybe the people that were anti-war were on the right side of it. Maybe it was kind of

a reckless thing for the country to do, and for we that went over there to do individually.

Wilson: With time did that perception change?

Thiemann: It did, yeah. And what I saw over the years was that the Vietnamese that got out of there, and I met a few in Peoria, they said the Americans coming was the best thing that ever happened to them and that the country fell apart as soon as we left. They went into almost like the Dark Ages after that. But whatever little bit of liberty, whatever little bit of free market, whatever little bit of success they were having all ended when this totalitarian Communist regime ended up putting its stamp on South Vietnam, and they've still got them in a yoke, I think. I can't think of any really good news that's come out of either South Vietnam or North Vietnam since the North Vietnamese took over the whole country. So looking back in hindsight, I think it would've been better had we just won the war completely and Vietnam, the entire country, had become like a Japan, or like a South Korea, a prosperous country with freedom and free elections.

Wilson: You came back in '68.

Thiemann: '70.

Wilson: I'm sorry, '70, you went in in '68.

Thiemann: Yep.

Wilson: And you mentioned VVI.

Thiemann: Yeah.

Wilson: What other organizations have you participated in? Why do you feel the need to support veterans' issues?

Thiemann: I liked being around veterans, it's kind of got me into it. And the high school I went to, Woodruff, had a lot of veterans and a lot of them were still around Peoria. So I kind of enjoyed their company and I knew a lot of them and so that made it comfortable. And then as I met veterans from Central and Spalding and Richwoods and people that were living in Peoria that were veterans, it just became kind of a wider circle of being comfortable. And it seemed like being around each other made us all feel better and talking about our experiences in Vietnam and being able to take some pride in it with people who had kind of been there, done that. I think it was a healing process. I'm sure I wasn't the only person that came back from Vietnam conflicted. I'm sure I wasn't the only person that came back feeling like you hadn't done the right thing, you hadn't done enough, or that you had some kind of issues with your service. So all of us getting together, I think, I think it was a big benefit to us.

Wilson: What organizations have you been participating in?

Thiemann: Living in East Peoria, I found they had a really active VFW, it was called Post 2078, I think.

Wilson: 2078.

Thiemann: Yeah. And so I was active in that for quite a while. They raised a lot of money for local causes. Then a bunch of veterans who had been in different posts, including the VVI, thought there's just too much pettiness among the different veterans' organizations. Like maybe you couldn't join the VFW unless you had had a certain type of service. Or maybe you didn't want to be in the Legion because you thought they were older guys that looked down on your service. And so, you'll remember this, we came up with the idea of an umbrella group that would bring all the veterans organizations together at least once a year and have what we call the Veterans' Ball. And we would use that group also to raise money for good purposes and it was called 92 Bravo. And one of the purposes we came up with was to start junior ROTC programs at all the high schools. They call them junior ROTC, or JROTC programs. They needed some start-up capital and so I was proud to work with you and a lot of other Vietnam vets and some older vets, too, Korean vets and World War II vets. And we had maybe a dozen of those Veterans' Balls, and they were fun, and to some degree, I think they allow the different veterans' groups in town to come together at least for a night.

Wilson: You came back, you've been involved in veterans' organizations. You've actually spoken at a couple of events. Why did you feel, I mean, you were asked, probably, but why did you feel compelled to say, "Yes, I have something to offer"?

Thiemann: Well, again, after I kind of got to a point where I started feeling like the whole effort was not in vain, I came up with an argument and kind of turned it into a speech, which I called, "Vietnam was Not in Vain." And it gave me a positive feeling to give that speech. And I talked about the good that the Americans did when they were over there, talked about how the effort was not a complete lost cause. And when I give that speech, people would come up afterwards, especially veterans, and they would say, "Thank you. Thank you. I enjoyed hearing that. That was great to hear." But after hearing it two or three times, they said, "Bruce, can you have a new speech next time?" So I came up with a second speech, which I have given often in the area, but if asked, I'll come up with a third speech, because I like talking to veterans. And sometimes the parents will come up, and the, or the siblings, or the wives, we're all getting older now, even the kids, and this idea of being proud of your service, that's the theme. And I'm glad to help with that.

Wilson: Let's talk about your personal life when you got back. Your family wanted you to go to college, so you did. Where did you go? And tell me about your professional career.

Thiemann: Yeah, I had to be accepted at a college to get that early out we talked about, and ICC had just started, so I knew they were accepting everybody.

Wilson: Illinois Central College.

Thiemann: Yeah, Illinois Central College. And then I had a friend that said Hiram Walker was hiring veterans, and so I got a job working second shift at Hiram

Walker's, and I got accepted at ICC. And I went days to ICC, and did that for, oh, a year and a half or so, till I ran out of credits I could get at Illinois Central, and then I transferred to Bradley. Living in different parts of Peoria, had a lot of fun. I lived down on North Madison with some guys from high school who were still single, some of them were veterans, and then we moved up to Lynn Street. We had a place called the Lynn Street Crazy House. It was kind of like a frat house, only most of us were working or going to school part-time. And then down to Main Street, there was a big, couple big apartments on the Main Street hill. And kind of let my hair grow out and just enjoyed the relaxed lifestyle of the 1970s in Peoria. But eventually ran out of places I could go in Peoria. So in the mid-seventies, I went down to Carbondale and lived in Carbondale for a couple years and went to SIU and I finally got a degree. I wasn't a real, what's the right word, I was a lazy scholar. And I was getting credits, I was using the GI Bill, used it all, but it took me five years to get that history degree from Carbondale. But then I didn't want to leave school.

Wilson: And what do you with a history degree other than teach history?

Thiemann: Yeah, and I was twenty-five and I wasn't ready to settle down and do something, so somebody suggested taking the LSAT, the law school admission test, and I took that and did okay on it. Surprised myself, and again, they were looking for vets. They wanted to fill their quota of vets. I found that a lot of places, if you told them you were a veteran, and told them you were a Vietnam veteran, they wanted to kind of help you along, and I got helped.

Probably got me into a lot of schools that wouldn't have accepted me otherwise.

Wilson: And where did you go for law school?

Thiemann: So at that point, I had been to Cornell College in Iowa. I had been to Illinois State University, I'd been to Illinois Central College, I'd been to Bradley, and I'd been to the Southern Illinois University, and that was my undergraduate studies. And SIU had just started a law school, and they had just started, and they said, "You might be able to get in here cause you're graduating from SIU, you did okay on the LSAT, they're looking for warm bodies." And so they accepted me. And I was just kind of, again, loafing around Carbondale, living in a trailer out on the edge of campus out there. The books were really expensive and I wasn't a serious student, so I didn't buy any books. I didn't buy any law school books. The professors noticed it, the class, other classmates noticed it, so they called me "Wingo." And that was the best nickname I ever had. "Wingo." They said, "You're just winging it." And so the professors said, "You know, if you're serious about it, you better buy books. If not, get out of here." And so after a year I transferred out and I had a friend out in Boston and they told me about a law school out there that would probably accept anybody who could pay the tuition. It was called the New England School of Law. You've probably never heard of it. But it was across the river from Harvard and down the street from MIT. It was on Newbury Street near Copley Plaza, it was in downtown Boston. Boston's a great town. So I stayed there and went to school for a year, got some more credits, and

then somebody told me about a school called American University that would accept transfer students in Washington DC. And of course, my second year I bought books and did pretty well, so I had enough of an academic record to get accepted to American University. And I finished up down there. Their college is called the Washington College of Law of the American University. It's a good school, but I was only in the bottom third of my class. I applied all over the East Coast for jobs, applied everywhere, and could not get a job offer anywhere, probably sent out a hundred resumes and job offers. So I thought I'll come back to Peoria and look around, and got a job here.

Wilson: Do you think that your tour in Vietnam impacted your attitude about education in any way?

Thiemann: It did, I was always a believer in learning by doing. Of course, anytime you're around a lot of equipment, as you do more, your confidence level goes up. So handling the machine gun every day, handling the helicopter to some degree, some of these long runs we'd do, either going or coming to the AOs, the areas of operation, the pilots, they were young guys. I mean, I was twenty, but a lot of the pilots were twenty-two or twenty-three. There was a lot of drinking in Vietnam, and they were old enough to go to the PX and buy booze. They'd be a little hung-over in the mornings. They would say, "Hey, could you crawl up here into the seat. And I want to crawl into the back and sleep." And there were two pilots, you know, there was the aircraft commander and the pilot. So I'd crawl up under the seat, and after a while, I'd be talking to the other, the guy who was flying the ship. And he'd be showing me, "This does this, and

this does this, and this does this. Why don't you try it? Put your feet on the pedals, put your hand on the sticks. Watch the bubbles and all the altimeters and stuff." And even though we were kind of in formations, it was a real loose formation, so there was plenty of room between you and all the other helicopters. Pretty soon, the radio would crackle and some other pilot would say, "Is your crew chief flying your helicopter? You're porpoising all over the place. What's going on over there?" Cause it's actually pretty hard to keep a helicopter going straight and level.

Wilson: So you learned how to fly a helicopter by doing, and everything was by doing.

Thiemann: I did, yeah.

Wilson: Your personal life? You're married, have a family?

Thiemann: Yes. A son and a daughter that are raised and now have been blessed with grandchildren. So my son, Bob Thiemann, he's in the community, works at Methodist, he's married to Andrea. And they blessed us with Levon, our grandson, and Rory, our granddaughter. And my daughter, Maggie Thiemann-Rush is in the community, married to a fellow from Metamora. And it's a lot of fun to be gramps.

Wilson: You've been promoted.

Thiemann: Yeah.

Wilson: You have your Air Cav hat, may I call it an Air Cav hat?

Thiemann: Yeah, I was lucky, the unit I got sent to. When you go to Vietnam, halfway through the war, you're just filling in. These units area are already there. People you may have interviewed before may have gotten over there in '65 or '66, when units were first getting there. And whole units would go over together on ships and they would wade off the ship onto the beach, just like World War II. In our case, this unit that I ended up joining had gotten to Vietnam years earlier, several years earlier, and they had formed in Fort Knox, Kentucky. That's where the First Air Cavalry regiment, that's their home base, for lack of a better word. Once they got all their full complement of officers and helicopters, they flew the helicopters across the United States down through El Paso, I guess that's the lowest area of the Rockies that you can fly them across, they flew them to Long Beach, they dismantled them, put them on ships and they took the whole unit over there, all the helicopters, all the equipment. Then they went to a place called Zion for a couple of years, then they went down to Vĩnh Long in 1968, and they set up a camp there, along with these other helicopter companies. And so when I joined them, they had all of these cavalry traditions and one of the cavalry traditions is that you wear a cav hat. And so this cav hat is kind of a neat thing, makes you look good, makes you taller, and people recognize it, and say, "Hey, that guy was in the cav."