Interview with Richard Friemel

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Interview # 1:

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A Note to the Reader

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Friemel: My name is Richard Friemel. I'm 75 years old at this time. I was born in Chicago, Illinois, and I enlisted in the Air Force in 1958. I retired October 31st of 1981. I served in Vietnam from '69 to '70. I was an air craft engine mechanic. I repaired piston engines on different aircraft that were over there that served in the war.

Robinson: Take a moment and think back to who you were before the war and who were you after they war. How were those two men different?

Friemel: I don't know if there was any difference. My wife might have noticed a difference. I don't know. I re-enlisted over there after twelve years of service,

so for about eleven and a half years beforehand. I did my job. That's what I was supposed to do. I learned my job and to me I was practicing to go to war, and when I went to Vietnam I was actually doing the job I had practiced at. You know, we had a job to do and we did it. That's the way I looked at it. I also looked at is as I'd rather be over there fighting than here in the states fighting. I had no problem with going over there to fight the war. Now, I didn't fire any weapons. I didn't shoot anybody. I had a few rockets shot at the base I was on, but I was never really too close contact with the war.

Robinson: You mentioned you had enemy fire. Who was that from?

Friemel: That was from the VC. They would shoot rockets in on us. You never knew. Well when I was at Pleiku, on each odd numbered day of the month we would get one, two or three rockets launched onto our base. Then we'd have to go into the bunker. They'd launch one rocket. We'd go into the bunker. Twenty-five minutes later they'd launch a second one because they knew after thirty minutes without a rocket coming in they'd release us from the bunker. They would wait twenty-five minutes and shoot another rocket in. Sometimes they would wait twenty-five minutes more and shoot a third one in. It was all just to get at us mentally. They had no way of aiming their rockets like they have today.

Kranich: What was that like to have rockets come into your bunker? Tell us how it felt.

Friemel: The rockets never got close to me. It just somewhere on the base you would hear this large explosion, and wherever you're at you can feel the thud. You

would just immediately go for the bunker, but the closest that one ever came was I was in my shop one night and the rocket landed maybe a hundred yards from the shop. As we were running through the shop to go to the bunker, we heard a tinkle tinkle on the roof. The tinkle tinkle on the roof was the shrapnel from the rocket landing on the roof, and afterwards we all went out there, and we picked up a piece of the rocket as a souvenir.

Robinson: Did that ever get to you mentally?

Friemel: I don't know that it did. I really don't. You just do a job that's all there is.

Robinson: You mentioned one of the bases you were staying at there was one attack that killed six to seven people. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Friemel: At Da Nang, there was a rocket that hit the, we call them hooches, the barracks next door to me. It killed six or seven of the Air Force guys that stayed there. One guy, he was laying on the top bunk and a piece of shrapnel went right through his bunk and right past his back and didn't hit him because he was laying on his side. They did send him home right away. I guess it pretty well scared him. I know it scared me, but I wasn't there at the time the rocket hit. I was there for a few weeks on temporary duty. I went back to Pleiku. I was at Pleiku a week, and then I came back. During that week the rocket hit the barracks right next to where I was staying.

Ledford: So you just heard about it?

Friemel: I just heard about it. I wasn't there when it hit, and I'm thankful for that because that probably might have scared me then. That's just like a month before I first got to Da Nang, a rocket hit the ammo dump and blew up the ammo dump. I saw all kinds of pictures the guys had taken of that. That was pretty devastating. Not many people got hurt over that, but we lost a lot of ammunition, a lot of bombs.

Robinson: So when you heard about these types of things, how did it make you feel? Did it make you change your behavior at all?

Friemel: Not that I noticed. I really don't think it changed me any. I really don't believe so.

Robinson: Can you talk a little bit about the basic training leading up to the war before you deployed?

Friemel: Well, my basic training was eleven weeks at Lackland [Air Force Base in Texas], but you know I thought that was fun. Of course you got to realize that Air Force basic training and Army and Marine basic training are totally different. Ours is nowhere near as strenuous as theirs. We weren't training to be fighters. We were training to be behind the lines fixing aircrafts, so that they could go into war. Whereas the Army and the Marines, those guys are trained to go into war and do the fighting. Before I went to Vietnam though, I had to go out to a base out in California for three days and shoot up a lot of ammunitions, so I knew how to use the weapons. I thought that was fun. You

know shooting a lot of ammunitions, and throwing hand grenades, rifle-propelled grenades. I had fun with that. It was enjoyable.

Robinson: What was your mindset going into the war during that time?

Friemel: At that time, I had a wife and two children. I didn't really like leaving my wife and two children back at home, but they lived only a mile from her mother. I felt comfortable leaving them. I knew that my in-laws would take care of my wife and children. I had a little that was five months old and another little girl that was two and a half. Well, she was just about to turn three then. I just didn't really like leaving them, but it was just the job I had to do because that was part of the job of being in the Air Force. When you're in the military, you do as you're told.

Robinson: Were there any specific times where that separation got to you where you realize it more? How did that make you feel?

Friemel: There were times I didn't really like being away from my family, but that's normal. But I knew where I was, I had to be and that's someplace that I should be. The people over there, they needed help, and I think they still need help. I had no problem being over there and trying to help them keep away from communism. I was a firm believer that communism is bad. I had no problem with going over there and trying to help them, but if we're going to fight communism let's fight it there and not here. Then I didn't have to worry about my wife and children's safety. If they were fighting here, I would have to worry about them.

Robinson: Can we talk a little bit about what specifically your job was in Vietnam?

Friemel: In both bases I was at my job was to repair aircraft engines. I worked on C-123s, A-1Es, C-119s, 01s, 02s, a bunch of different propeller-driven aircraft. Most of them were on the C-123s. One unit were what we called the ranch hands. They sprayed the Agent Orange. That was the unit that went out with the spray bars and sprayed Agent Orange on the foliage to kill the foliage. Working on those, walking underneath there, the spray bars when they come back from mission were always dripping a little bit. It was nothing to have a drop on you, and we thought nothing of it. The other 123 outfit, they supplied the army out there at their forward bases. They would have a perforated steel plate runway, and they would fly in with cargo, offload it. They never shut down the engines. They just pulled up to the ramp, offload the cargo, accelerate the engines and all the stuff would just roll off the back of the aircraft. Then they would leave. Anytime one of these airplanes broke, they would call the engine shop, and they would want an engine mechanic. That would be when I would go out to that flying unit, and I would work on their aircraft in their particular area of the base. The 123 outfit that did the supplies, sometimes their aircraft broke at a forward operating base. Then I would have to fly out there and repair it, and then fly back home on it. But they would never let me spend a night out at those bases, I had to leave and go back to Da Nang.

Ledford: It's so interesting to me that y'all had a name for those planes. Can you just say again what you called those planes and what their mission were? Where did that name come from?

Friemel: Well, probably the ones you are talking about were probably Puff the Magic Dragon and Spooky.

Ledford: No, you mentioned…

Friemel: The ranch hands?

Ledford: Yes, can you go over that one more time.

Friemel: I have no idea where the name came from. When I got there, they were called a ranch hand outfit, and that's all I knew. The rest were just garbage haulers. We called them garbage haulers, but what they hauled was not garbage. They were just resupply aircrafts.

Robinson: What exactly was it that they hauled?

Friemel: Anything. Food, ammunition, whatever they needed out there. The 123s held a lot of cargo, just whatever those guys needed. A lot of food because you know it takes a lot of food to feed those guys and a lot of ammunition.

Robinson: Back to the ranch hands and the Agent Orange, did anyone know about the effects of it?

Friemel: Not that I know of. I was never briefed on it. I didn't know about it until long after Vietnam was over with. Agent Orange is well, we didn't know that it

was bad and it would hurt me. We had no idea. Nobody told us that Agent Orange was bad for us, that it would cause us physical damage. We never knew it. It was just something that de-foliated the forest. We didn't know until long it was over with that hey Agent Orange was bad for us.

Robinson: Did you ever see any of the effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam?

Friemel: No, I never saw the effects of it on any Vietnamese, no. I didn't know anything about that. I've heard that some of our GIs had problems with Agent Orange, and they say that my heart problem is a result of Agent Orange. That's all.

Kranich: What heart problem?

Friemel: I have what they call systemic heart disease, and they say that is a direct correlation to Agent Orange.

Ledford: How does that affect your life?

Friemel: I don't let it affect my life right now. It did until I had surgery. Now I just don't think about it.

Kranich: Did the government help you with your heart disease in any way?

Friemel: They're giving me a VA disability which means I get paid each month because of the disability. I also can use the VA for medical care, but between having Medicare and the military I don't need to use the VA except when I have to. They require me to come over twice a year.

Robinson: Can you tell me what you did with the empty containers of Agent Orange?

Friemel: I don't know if I want to say that on camera. We used the empty containers as a bathroom. Is that what you're getting at? I thought that was what you were getting at. Yeah, we used the empty Agent Orange containers as a bathroom. Rather than go to a latrine that might be several hundred yards away, the empty containers were about fifty feet away, so when you got to go you got to go. They didn't like us using the landing gear, so we used empty containers.

Robinson: Did any of the aircraft that you worked on, were any of those aircrafts used to drop Napalm?

Friemel: No. Well, the A-1s might have been. I don't know if they dropped napalm or not. I really don't know what was on the A-1s. I know they had a lot of different things, bombs on their wings when they went out. They had four 20-mm cannons. They had little CBUs, the little tiny cluster bombs. If there was napalm on there, I really don't know.

Ledford: You mentioned the cluster bombs. If I'm not mistaken those have been banned now by I don't know a treaty, I think. They're banned under a worldwide treaty through the UN or something. I'm just curious if back then you had any different view of any of those weapons then you have now. I'm not saying you should or shouldn't. I'm just interested in if your thoughts on them have changed over the years or not.

Friemel: No, my thoughts haven't changed. If someone's shooting at me, I'd use any means I have to shoot back whether it be a bomb, a rifle, or a gun of any sort. I'm going to defend myself. That's what these pilots were doing. They were either defending their lives or the lives of our military on the ground.

Robinson: What was your favorite type of engine to work on? Did that desire ever change?

Friemel: I liked working on all engines in all honesty. I loved being a mechanic. I loved working on aircraft engines, and that's why I stayed in the Air Force to begin with. Like I said, I re-enlisted at twelve years over at Vietnam. When I first re-enlisted the first time in 1962, I did it because I liked what I was doing. I felt a sense of accomplishment every time I worked on an engine and it ran good. I had that sense of accomplishment, that immediate gratification that I did a good job. I just liked doing it. I really enjoyed being a mechanic. Nowadays I can't even fix my own car because you got to have so much expensive equipment, besides the fact I'm getting too old.

Robinson: Speaking about the pilots, we spoke about the relationship between the mechanics and the pilots. Can you talk about that and what type of responsibility you felt?

Friemel: Well, the pilots, you know, when you get on an aircraft they pilot has your life in his hands, or her hands. If they don't do their job right…

Ledford: I'm sorry. You're saying the mechanic has the life?

Friemel: No, when you get on an aircraft the pilot has your life. When you're flying, he's the guy that's got your life in his hands. He also realized that before he ever climbed in that aircraft I worked on that aircraft. I fixed those engines. If I didn't do my job right, I had his life in my hands. It was both ways. We both realized that either the mechanic or the pilot, we had the other person's life in our hands at sometime or another during a mission.

Robinson: Did that responsibility make you change your behavior in any way?

Friemel: I treated the pilots like I always did. You know treated them right, and they treated me right. That's just the way you do. You treat each other with respect. You respect them for what their abilities are. I had to respect an officer for being an officer, but I respected him for his abilities more than the fact that he was an officer.

Robinson: Can you talk about how you gained your reputation as a mechanic?

Friemel: Well, just one incident when I was over in Vietnam, I had to go out to a forward base because an aircraft engine had failed. The pilot happened to be the commander of the flying unit, the lieutenant colonel. He told me what the problems were and what the indications were. I said, "Sir, there's three gallons of oil up in the nose of that engine. Now this engine is not supposed to have any oil inside, just a light film in all the working parts. The oil is kept in a big thirty-gallon tank behind the engine." He said no it can't be. He knew there wasn't supposed to be oil up there. I said, "I bet there is." So, I got a garbage can, and I pulled the pump of the bottom of the nose section of the

engine and about two to three gallons of oil came out of it. He says, "Let me see that pump." So I showed him the pump, and he took the pump. He spun the gear, and he saw the pump working. He says, "There's nothing wrong with this pump." I said, "That's right sir, but look up in that hole." He looked up at the hole, and he says, "I don't see nothing wrong up there." I took a long screwdriver, and I pointed up at the hole, and I said, "You see that shaft right there?" He says yeah. I said, "There's supposed to be a gear that drives this pump." You could just see the light come on. He realized hey that pump wasn't working, and that pump was supposed to pump any oil out of that nose section back to the oil tank. From that time on, any time there was a flying unit and that flying unit had an aircraft down, they came over and picked me up and took me over to their aircraft and flew me to the aircraft to fix it. I had good reputation then, and I enjoyed that reputation. I thought it was real good.

Ledford: Must have been a hell of a nice feeling. Can you talk about how that felt?

Friemel: It felt great. I mean anything I wanted I could get. The engine shop would have a little party. Now I was a reciprocating engine shop that was a section of the jet engine shop which was a massive shop. It had probably at least a hundred mechanics assigned, and we would have a party ever once in a while. So I'd let it be known that I could sure use a case of steaks and a case of chicken. Within a day or so I would get a phone call, "Hey Sergeant Friemel, there's two boxes over here with your name on it. They seem to have fell off of a pallet." I'd go over there, and there was a case of steak and a case of chicken. We would go and have a party. That was just part of the benefits of

getting to know the people in the flying unit and having a reputation with them.

Robinson: While you're on the base, how often would you get to leave? Where would you go if you did get to leave?

Friemel: Well, in Vietnam we were scheduled to work six days a week. There were a lot of weeks it was seven, but we were scheduled to work six days a week. On that day off, we could take a bus over to China Beach which was a little Navy place. I don't know if it was Cam Ranh Bay but some bay over there by Da Nang. We would take a bus through there, and you'd drive through the city, and you'd see the poverty. That was what really got to me was all the poverty that I saw. The way people had to live over there, I don't think I could have lived like they did. It really bothered me. That bothered me because I don't like seeing that kind of poverty.

Robinson: Do you think that reinforced your feelings about the war and why you were over there?

Friemel: It probably reinforced me wanting to do my job the best I could and not be afraid or ashamed for being there. I was never ashamed of what I did over there. I still am not.

Kranich: Can you paint a picture of the poverty you saw?

Friemel: It's just the people, the way they were living, and the shacks that they were living in, the clothes that they wore. You could tell that they didn't have

anything. The houses were just shacks. They weren't real houses, and the clothes they were sort of tattered and not looking good. Of course, they all had their black pajamas and their hats on that you probably saw pictures of. The ones that worked on base, they seemed very nice. They treated us right. We had what we called mamasans. The mamasan would do our laundry for us, so I never had to do laundry. They washed my uniforms. They pressed my uniforms. I never had to worry about that. I didn't have to make my bed because they would make my bed for me.

Robinson: Who were the mamasans?

Friemel: They were locals, women from the local area.

Ledford: Who were the mamasans and what did they do?

Friemel: They were local women that worked on the base, and there would be two or three assigned to a barracks. They would do all of our laundry, clean our area, make our beds, change the beds once a week. They were just, you know, house women. The mamasans were the local women that worked on the base. There were two or three assigned to each barracks. There might have been more than that. I don't know. I know I had at least two in the local area that I was in, on the floor I was on. They would do all of our laundry. They would iron our clothes. They would clean our area. They would make our beds, change our beds. You know basically take care of us, and most of us treated them right. We would pay. I don't remember how much we paid, but I know all of us would kick in a few extra dollars to tip the mamasans. I think we

probably didn't pay more than two or three dollars a week for them. We would all kick in to give mamasan a couple extra bucks now and then. I kept Cokes in my refrigerator because I had a refrigerator over there, one of those little, small, apartment-sized. Mamasan liked Coke, so I would always tell her that she could have one Coke a day. My area was always nice and clean, and it was always one Coke a day take it from my refrigerator, but that was ok by me.

Ledford: You said most everyone treated them well. Did you see any incidents of, not so much like something you heard about, was there any firsthand experience with people not treating them right?

Friemel: I did not see any that didn't treat the mamasans right. The way they talked with them and that, some of the guys yes there were one or two that sort of thought the mamasans were beneath them. But most of us we all treated them right and we'd kick in a few extra dollars a week because they did such a good job for us.

Robinson: How could you tell that someone thought the mamasans were beneath them?

Friemel: Just the way they talked about them. They didn't talk about them very nicely sometimes.

Ledford: Examples, please?

Friemel: I can't really think of a good example. You got to realize that was quite a few years ago.

Robinson: We've heard war described as basic human survival. Kill or be killed. How was your experience with war? Was it similar?

Friemel: I never had to fire a weapon in anger. I just fixed airplanes. That was all. I had a weapon in my hand twice in a year. That was just because it was a practice, and we had to go on the perimeter to guard the perimeter in case we were being overrun. But that was just a practice. That was strictly a practice. They gave us our M-16s, a bandolier of ammunition, and they told us we couldn't load the weapon, period. If we went on the line we couldn't load the weapon until we were told, and we couldn't shoot until somebody on our side of the line got hit which seemed sort of stupid to me, but that was the way it was. The Air Force, you got to realize, the Air Force enlisted are not fighting people.

Robinson: Let's do a word association. If I say war, what's the first thing that comes to your mind? Just start with war is…

Friemel: War is terrible. You want me to expand on that? Is that what you're trying for? I don't like war. I'll tell you right up front, but war is going to happen. People disagree all the time, and people want to take things by force. Somebody has to go in there and stop that, and that's what causes a war. War is not good. I don't like it. Too many people get killed. Innocent people get killed. I don't think that's right, but if it has to be it has to be. When you're firing a weapon, when you're dropping bombs back forty, fifty years ago, you had no idea if you were going to kill civilians. Nowadays they can do a little

bit better with aiming their weapons and reducing the number of civilian casualties, but war is inevitable. We're always going to have a war someplace. There might be some times of peace, but there's going to be a war someplace in this world.

Ledford: War is terrible, but there is always going to be wars. How does one reconcile that? My brother is in the army. That's something you know, it's a moral dilemma I think right?

Friemel: It is a moral dilemma. I don't know how you would reconcile it. When you join the military, you give an oath that you are going to follow the orders that are given to you. You're going to defend the Constitution. You're going to defend this country, and that's what we do. That's what all the GIs do. Anyone that raises their hand, they are out there, and they are willing to give their life if they have to to defend this country. To fight for that Constitution. To fight for that flag. To fight for their families back home.

Robinson: Was there any time while you were in Vietnam where you started to question that?

Friemel: No time. I never questioned whether I should be there or not. If anything when I saw the way people were living over there, I thought we really needed to be there. The only thing I disliked was our Congress restricting what we could do. Instead of letting the military take care of the situation, the civilians who had no knowledge of what was going on were dictating what we could and couldn't do.

Robinson: If you had your choice, how would you have done it?

Friemel: Sir, I really don't know. I didn't know all of the things that the powers at be would know.

Robinson: How was Congress restricting you and how would you have changed that?

Friemel: Well, you couldn't go up into North Vietnam. We weren't supposed to go up there. There's so many things they wouldn't allow us to do. Anytime you fight a war, if you're fighting with rules and your opponent does not have the same rules, is that fair? It's not fair at all. A lot of our guys got killed because they weren't allowed to do something that they should have done. Don't ask me for specific instances, just things that I remember. I remember hearing these things that were going on, and that's what I thought that the rules were getting too stringent, and they weren't allowing our military to do the job that they were supposed to do.

Robinson: How did you feel about the way the war ended?

Friemel: Don't like it at all. We lost. That's the way I feel about it. We lost that war. We didn't win a thing.

Robinson: Do you think there was any good from the American side?

Friemel: I don't know of any. We got experience that's about all.

Ledford: Sorry I just want to rephrase that question just so we get it both together because they are great questions how did you feel about the way the world ended and what was the other question, Will?

Robinson: Was there any good that came from the war?

Ledford: How do you feel about the way the war ended and do you think there was any good that came from it?

Friemel: I didn't like the way the war ended at all because I felt like we lost the war. About anything good coming out of it, the only thing good was the powers at be, the generals and the high-ranking officers, got experience in war. Experience is what leads them to do better the next time they come into a situation like that. Our pilots got experience fighting a war. Our military got experience fighting a war. I got experience as a mechanic working under wartime conditions, but that's the only good that came out of it. Otherwise, good for the people of Vietnam? I don't know that any that came out of it except some Vietnamese got out of there.

Robinson: I've seen images of when the war ended of people dumping over like helicopters and the ocean and things like that. Where were you when the war ended? Do you remember how you felt about it?

Friemel: I was back in the states, for sure. I think when it ended I was at just north of here at Chanute Air Force base. What did it end in '72 or '73 or something

like that? You know, just what I read in the newspapers was what I knew. I didn't know anything else. What I read in the papers, what I saw on television.

Robinson: How do you feel about the way it was covered through the media?

Friemel: Through the media all through Vietnam everything was negative. They never showed anything positive. They didn't show when we were helping people. Same with Iraq and Iran and Afghanistan, you see very little about what our GIs are doing over there helping the local people. You see all the negative stuff. The news media puts out sensationalized, negative information. Things that are not positive. I think we need to put out more positive information about what our people are doing for the people that are in those countries.

Ledford: Can you give us some examples of the kind of things you are talking about from Vietnam? What would you have liked to have seen covered?

Friemel: I wasn't involved in any of the good things that had been happening over there, but I just know from what I've heard from guys that were over in Iraq and Afghanistan where they were rebuilding schools, and helping the people and bringing stuff to the people. They're getting a little more positive over there than we did with Vietnam, but you see so little of it. How often do you see our GIs over there rebuilding a school? How often do you see them giving toys to the kids?

Robinson: You said you weren't a part of the good?

Friemel: I was not part of that, no.

Robinson: What were the good things that were going on?

Friemel: I don't know what they were doing because I wasn't involved. I was on the base working, and we didn't have any of that going on that I know of.

Robinson: But you're confident that there was good things?

Friemel: I'm confident that there were good things that our GIs were doing. You don't put those GIs out there in the field without them doing some good someplace. The Americans just aren't like that. We are going to help people if we can. I think that's part of our national heritage. We help others.

Keating: Previously you said, after Vietnam you are not ashamed of what you did. Why did you feel like you needed to say that?

Friemel: Probably because of the way the American people felt during Vietnam. They thought everything was bad. We shouldn't be there. We shouldn't be doing it. We were wrong, everything negative. I never felt that way. I was never ashamed.

Keating: Did you know people in the service who were?

Friemel: None that I know of. I really didn't.

Keating: During our pre-interview, you talked about how the protocol of your uniform when you came back. How were you received when you came back from Vietnam?

Friemel: When I came back from Vietnam, by regulation I had to fly in uniform. We came back into Riverside, California, and I had to get to LAX to fly back home to my family, but I was not allowed to leave airport until I had changed into civilian clothes. There were three of us. There was a major, myself and another soldier. We all had to change clothes, and we thought it was terrible we had to do that to protect ourselves because the way people felt about us. I never had anything negative done to me, but then I never walked around in my uniform, not when I came back from Vietnam. Around military bases I never had any problems.

Ledford: Did you purposefully not wear your uniform in public because of the threat, the possibility?

Friemel: Just when I left the airport, I had to. I had no choice. The Air Force told me I had to have civilian clothes to leave the airport; therefore, as all good military people you salute smartly and do as you're told.

Keating: Doing that, how did that make you feel? You said the other guys were angry.

Friemel: I was angry that I was required to do that. I always used to fly in my uniform. There were several times when, let's be honest, some guy would buy me a drink or buy me something to eat because I was in my uniform, but that was before Vietnam. I did a lot of traveling on commercial airliners and always flew in uniform. Twice I was able to fly first class because I was in uniform. I thought that was rather cool back then. Of course, I was only a 19 or 20-year-old kid but still so what? I thought that was rather cool, but coming back from

Vietnam things were not that way. We had to get in civilian clothes. I had no choice, but I was prepared, and that was all that mattered.

Keating: Did you notice in the years after Vietnam a significant shift in the way attitudes were towards Veterans?

Friemel: Around military bases there wasn't anything really. You got to realize I spent my life around military bases. Ever since I was eighteen, I've always been somewhere near a military base either living on it or working on it. The military has a good reputation because the GIs, they got a guaranteed income and they're paid ok. People think well of them. These are people that are actually working. I've never had a problem with going to the local communities.

Keating: During our pre-interview we talked a little bit about your role in rescue missions. Could you talk a little bit about your role in pilot rescues and how did those moments make you feel in comparison to your twelve years of service prior to Vietnam?

Friemel: The one time over in Vietnam I had to work on an A-1 aircraft. The A-1 is a propeller driven aircraft that flies quite slow compared to the F-4s and F-105s that were flying at that time. When the helicopters would go in to pick up a downed pilot, if there was an F-4 flying over there, they flew too fast to see their target and fire in one pass. They would have to find a target, make a loop around and come back to shoot at the target. Where the A-1, the pilot would see his target, look at him, identify him and shoot him if that's what he was

supposed to do. This one time I was working on the A-1, and I didn't get the chance to run the aircraft to make sure the engine was ok. The pilot asked me, "Can this airplane fly?" I said, "I just got to run it, sir. I think it's good." Though he says, "I'm taking it," and he left. When he left, he had all his armament underneath his wings. When he came back, he was empty. All of his armament was gone. He had dropped everything, and he said, "We got him. The helicopters coming right behind me with the pilot." Made me feel good. The pilot also said "Hey Sarge, go ahead and sign it off, it's a good engine." It made me feel good that I just had a little tiny bit to do with getting that pilot back safely.

Ledford: Can you just say what your little tiny bit was?

Friemel: Fixing the engine. That was the little tiny bit that I did, fixing the aircraft so that the pilot could go out and do his mission.

Keating: Tracking back to when you were talking about going to the beaches and your R and R. Did you get a chance to interact with Vietnamese civilians outside of the ones you met in the base?

Friemel: No, I did not. I did not interact with Vietnamese civilians at any time. That wasn't part of my job, and when I went to China Beach that was just a name of a place. I guess there was a beach there someplace, but I never was on it.

Keating: Where were you?

Friemel: I was in the Base Exchange at this China Beach which was a naval station. That was just the name of the naval station.

Keating: So what did you get a chance to do while you were there on these Sundays?

Friemel: On my day off I would go over to China Beach and walk around the BX and see what was there. The BX was the base exchange, just to see what was there and if I wanted to buy something. I would get to ride through the community and look. That's all I did. Most of what I did, I'm ashamed to say, is I did a lot of drinking.

Ledford: Why are you ashamed to say that?

Friemel: Because I don't believe in drinking for the sake of drinking. I have no problem with having a beer every now and then. Fact is I enjoy a nice cold beer, but when I was over in Vietnam I drank a lot of beer. Don't ask me why because I don't know why. Maybe because it was there. I only paid a quarter a can. You can drink a lot of beer at a quarter a can.

Keating: What did you do to stop your drinking?

Friemel: Cold turkey, I just quit. Three or four weeks before I came back I said this is not the way I want to live. I'm not going home a drunk, and I quit. I just didn't drink anymore. That's just if I want to do something I can do it. That's the same way I quit smoking over there. I wanted to quit smoking, so I quit cold turkey. That was the only way to do it.

Kranich: I want to ask you about R&R. Did you ever have a leave from the base where you went somewhere else?

Friemel: No, I didn't. I didn't take any R&R while I was over there. That cost a lot of money, and I was saving my money for when I got back to the states for my family. If I'm not mistaken, I bought a new car when I came back from Vietnam with money that we had saved. We also had to buy a whole house full of furniture because we didn't have a whole lot.

Ledford: You're an honorable man. Could you comment on that?

Friemel: That I'm honorable? I don't know that I'm honorable. I just try to do the best I can for God, country, and family. That's all I can do.

Kranich: Did the war give you the opportunity to stop drinking and smoking? You were drinking and smoking before you got into the war right? But then you quit.

Friemel: I quit smoking about less than a month after I got to Vietnam. I was only over there probably about two or three weeks when I get fed up with coughing from cigarettes, coughing from climate change. I said that's enough of this. My wife had always been after me to quit smoking, and I said, "I'm not going to do as my wife tells me." I wasn't going to quit at home, but as soon as I got to Vietnam I quit. I just realized I needed to quit. I haven't smoked since. That was from 1969 to now.

Keating: Was there in particular something about that environment that motivated you to quit those things?

Friemel: No, not that I know of. I had no problems before that. Smoking was a normal thing back in 1969. I would say probably about 75 percent of the GIs smoked, if not more. It was just something that I did, and then I just quit.

Keating: You told us in the pre-interview that you've been to D.C. a few times. When you've gone to Vietnam memorials in the past, what emotions did you feel when you were there?

Friemel: It touched my heart. I've been to the moving wall, and I've been to the Vietnam wall a couple of times. It gave me some emotions because I realized all the guys that died over there. In a way, sometimes you might say that they died for nothing because we gave up. The U.S. gave up on the war. I don't think we accomplished a mission over there.

Keating: Also when you were there, you told us about the civilian who was sitting.

Friemel: There was one time when we were there. Now the wall is real tall in the middle and then goes down. A lady was sitting on one of the low panels, just sitting there on the memorial. It bothered me, bothered me enough. I'm not a forward type of person that would go up there and say something, but I had to. I asked her if she would kindly not sit on the wall. I said, "Just remember, those guys whose names are on that panel that you're sitting on, they died for this country." She was very apologetic, got up and left.

Keating: You brought in two artifacts, including a cluster bomb shrapnel metal. I was wondering how you got your hands on that.

Friemel: Well, the piece of shrapnel metal was from the 122 rocket that hit on the base of Pleiku, and I heard it hit on the roof of our building. Afterwards, a bunch of us went out there and we picked up a couple of pieces as a souvenir. I don't know what they call it, but the little piece that was in those bomblets, I don't know where I got it. I don't remember where I got it. I wish I could tell you, but I don't remember where I got it. I just know I got it and I was told what it was from.

Ledford: Why did you keep it all these years?

Friemel: It was in my jewelry box, and it's been there ever since I got back from Vietnam. I just never cleaned it out. I thought sometime maybe somebody might want to see it. It might be interesting for somebody. I also had an AK-47 round that I took out of an engine, but I can't find it. I don't know where it went to.

Ledford: Can you tell us the story about getting that?

Friemel: Well, that was on a ranch hand aircraft, one of the Agent Orange spray airplanes. They had a problem on it, and I went up there and worked on the problem. We took the aircraft out to run it, and we identified another problem. The one I went to fix was fixed, but another one occurred. So when I started climbing up to the engine to look at it to try to determine what was causing the problem, I look up and I see this hole through this conduit. I followed the hole through the conduit, and it goes up through the magneto which fires the spark plugs. There's a hole into the magneto, so I take the magneto apart and here's

this AK-47 round in the magneto. So we had a whole lot more work we had to do to fix the airplane.

Ledford: What is that round in that engine mean to the pilot? What was the meaning of that?

Friemel: He had no idea it was there, none. They didn't write it up. They didn't have any problem. If they would have made the right check, they would have made the same indications I had except they wouldn't have known what it was. What it did, it shorted out. Well, this aircraft had eighteen cylinders, thirty-six spark plugs, and it shorted out nine of the spark plugs. So when I made it my check on the ignition system, it showed me there was something drastically wrong. That's what made me go looking.

Ledford: I was just thinking about it in terms of, if they fired and it hit the engine it could have, how close did it come to killing him or putting the aircraft down?

Friemel: It could have. It just depends where it hit. Now these aircraft they had a bunch of armament around the pilot and co-pilot. The people that ran the spray bars, the spray equipment in the back, they had armament around there. All that armor was around that box that they sat in, and it was all bulletproof. Of course it was all on the bottom and the sides because that's where you're going to get hit.

Keating: Going to the process of sharing your story with us, why did you initially decide to share your story with us? Have you talked to your wife about these same stories or other people?

Friemel: Well, my wife has already said that she's hearing things she's never heard before. And why? I don't see any reasons why not. Might as well share what little bit I can do. There's a lot of things lost. People today have no idea about Vietnam, none whatsoever. They know about Iraq and Afghanistan, but Vietnam was just something maybe they studied in grade school or high school. Most people don't know what went on over there, don't know why we had it, don't know what the GIs went through over there. You know, most of us, by far the vast majority 99 percent of the guys I'm sure, had no compulsion about being there. They were glad they were there. They were doing a job that they thought was needed. We didn't have any problems with the Vietnam. It was the civilians back here in the states.

Ledford: You said that you people nowadays don't know about Vietnam. What would you like people to know about Vietnam that you feel like they don't know? How does it make you feel that they don't know about Vietnam?

Friemel: I think that the people need to know that all the wars that we've been to, no matter where it's at, our military was out there doing the job, doing the job to the best of their ability without regard for their own lives. They were there to protect our national interest and to protect our country. I'm sure they all feel like I do. If we're going to fight, let's fight there and not here. We don't want

the fighting on our shores. That's the reason we fight a lot of these wars. We're trying to fight the aggressors, whoever they might be. Be it the communists back there in Vietnam, or it could be people like we had over here in Iraq and Afghanistan and now this ISIS that we're worried about. We don't want these people doing that over here. So let's get rid of them before they get a chance.

Keating: Is there anything we have not asked you about that you would like to share?

Friemel: I think you've covered a lot. I really do. I hope somebody just gets one little iota of knowledge out of this, and I will feel that this is all worthwhile.

Ledford: These aren't easy questions, but I'm going to throw them out.

[chatter about time/cameras]

Could you just describe for someone who has never heard of a cluster bomb or this bomblet, what is that? Could you just say what that is and how it would operate? You're an honorable man and don't take this the wrong way. I've seen the scenes you've talked about of poverty. I've been to 52 countries. I know what you mean when you have a heart for those people. Is there any moral dilemma with these bombs being over there, and maybe some of the people that who had such compassion for getting accidentally hit or accidentally stepping on one? I'm not pointing fingers. I just think it's a question that's worth asking.

Friemel: Now how those cluster bombs work, I couldn't tell you.

[chatter about time/cameras]

The cluster bombs, I don't know exactly how they are all put together. I didn't do work on bombs. I just know what I was told, that their little bomblets, that they come out of this container and that they blow up when they get near the ground. That's all I know about them, and they got those little things inside of them. They are mainly anti-personnel. How I feel about them being used? When it's being used in combat, somebody is shooting at you, I've got no heartburn with it at all. If someone is shooting at you, you do whatever you've got to do to protect yourself. Whatever equipment that's available to you, you use it. That's the way I look at it. You just don't go over there and bomb a school. I don't believe in that. Unless the school is being used for the enemy, and if the kids are in there you're still probably going to have to be careful what you do.

Ledford: I appreciate that a lot. You just phrased at least once, maybe twice, 'you salute smartly and follow orders'?

Friemel: You salute smartly and do as you're told.

Ledford: Can you tell us where you picked that way of living up? I know the answer to it, but I want you to say it. Say the phrase, and say where you acquired that. Then tell me if that influences your life now at all?

Friemel: Well that's just part of being in the military. You always salute officers, and when you're told by an officer to do something you salute smartly and do as

you were told unless it's going to hurt you. That's just the way I've always done things. If my supervisor tells me to do something, I usually do it unless it's going to hurt me. If my supervisor tells me to do a job, I do the job. That's just the way I've always lived my life.

Ledford: How would that phrase maybe apply to anything that you do now or you're involved in? Does that phrase relate to your current life at all?

Friemel: I don't know. Do as you're told is probably the best way to say it in current terms. Just do as you're told. Especially to somebody that would be in charge, that's just the way I would do it. I don't know if it affects my normal life or not.

Ledford: I'm just thinking about it in terms of being part of a team and almost self-sacrifice.

Friemel: I don't think that term would be used for self-sacrifice, but you know when you join the military you're willing to give your life and that would be, yes. That's just like our police officers, our firefighters. They're willing to put their life on the line for you. The military the same way.

Ledford: Anything else you want to throw in?

Friemel: Not that I can think of. Think you tore me up.