

**Roberts Memorial Library, Middle Georgia College**

**Vietnam War Oral History Project**

**Interview with Col. Michael Chalout (Ret)**

**April 18, 2012**

**Paul Robards:** Today's date is April 18th, 2012 [this date is correct, although the audio recording says 2002]. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director of Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking today with Colonel Michael Chalout from Warner Robins, GA about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

Colonel Chalout,

You joined the military in 1961 and served until you retired in 1987. You served one tour of duty in Vietnam from March 1965 to May 1966.

**Robards:** What branch of the military did you serve in?

**Chalout:** I was in the United States Air Force.

**Robards:** Why did you join the military?

**Chalout:** I had always had a bond for aircraft. From my early childhood I wanted to be a flyer. That led me to either the Navy or the Air Force. I applied to both and the Air Force called first.

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

**Chalout:** I joined just after my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.

**Robards:** What was your hometown when you joined?

**Chalout:** My hometown at that time was Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

**Robards:** Where did you go for basic training?

**Chalout:** Well, I didn't really go to basic training. I enlisted in the Air Force and I was accepted into the Aviation Cadet program, so I did my training at Harlingen AFB, at Harlingen, Texas where at the same time I got my commission and my wings. So, it was navigator training along with a commissioning program.

**Robards:** What aspects of your training did you use in Vietnam?

**Chalout:** I used just about every bit of it. There were some things that weren't covered that maybe we'll get into later on in this conversation. I think the training that I had probably prepared me quite well for the task that I was going to perform, but not all of it.

**Robards:** Do you think that military training changed you in any way?

**Chalout:** I can't put my finger on anything.

**Robards:** What was your job description or occupation code?

**Chaloult:** My job description was a navigator bombardier on a B57 aircraft, which is an attack bomber, and the AFSC at that time was a 1525.

**Robards:** Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

**Chaloult:** No, I didn't.

**Robards:** How did you feel when you learned you were going to Vietnam?

**Chaloult:** I was quite excited. It was an interesting notification. If we have time, I can get into that a little bit. I was visiting my parents in Fort Lauderdale, Florida over the Christmas holidays in 1964. My wife and I had a 6 month old son and we were enjoying the holidays with my parents there in Florida. We left shortly after New Years, and I was going to stop and visit an old high school buddy of mine who was stationed in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. When we arrived at his house, his wife informed me that she had had a call from my Ops [Operations] officer, and that I was to call immediately. So I did, and he informed me that they had permanent change of station orders for me. He couldn't reveal any other information at that time, but he told me that I would be going bearing an airplane, which meant that we were going to take something somewhere. I was told to hurry back. I was stationed at Biggs Air Force Base at El Paso, Texas at that time and he [Ops officer] said I was to hurry back as soon as possible, because we would be leaving soon. So we did.

**Robards:** In what regions, towns or villages did you serve in Vietnam?

**Chaloult:** I was at Bien Hoa Air Base. I flew out of Tan Son Nhut Air Base and out of Da Nang Air Base.

**Robards:** What are the names of the units you were assigned to?

**Chaloult:** The whole time it was the 8<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron.

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

**Chaloult:** Well, it varied at the three locations. At Bien Hoa we lived in I think they were 12 man hooches with central latrines and so forth. Food was provided at the Officer's Club in the Officer's dining hall.

At Tan Son Nhut we lived in an army BOQ which was located in down-town Saigon. The quarters weren't bad; it was getting to and from the quarters out to Tan Son Nhut Air Base that was the interesting part. If you were in Saigon in 1965, you had every means of transport traveling on the road from ox-carts to pedicabs to tanks and all kinds of vehicles. The trip to the base was almost as hazardous as the flight.

**Robards:** What did you do for entertainment?

**Chalout:** For entertainment, we played cards; we played volleyball, and those sorts of things.

**Robards:** Could you please tell what happened during your first encounter with the enemy and how you reacted to it?

**Chalout:** Well, I flew an airplane over from Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines into Bien Hoa about 11 o'clock in the morning, and was informed that we were on the flight schedule for a mission that afternoon. That was my first encounter. The way we operated at that time was, we had a pilot and a navigator in the airplane. For the first two or three missions we split the crew up and a new navigator would fly with an old pilot and an older navigator would fly with a new pilot. When I say "new" [I mean] one who had not flown in the environment there before. We flew our first mission, and I flew with a guy named Bud Chambers that day. My regular pilot was Bill Madis. Bill Madis flew with Bud's navigator. Bill didn't make it back from that mission. He was shot down. That was my welcome to Vietnam. So after the mission that afternoon, the next mission was to North Vietnam the following day, and it went on from there.

**Robards:** What was the most humorous event you witnessed or that happened to you?

**Chalout:** Probably the most humorous thing was: We carried various armaments on the aircraft depending on the target. One of our missions was armed road wrecking between Laos and North Vietnam. We would look for road traffic and so forth. That particular mission we carried rockets—armor piercing rockets. We didn't see anything on the road that day, so when we came back over the fence into South Vietnam, we still had a full load of ammo and so forth, and our GCA [ground control approach] controller said to contact FAC that had a target for us. So we did. What this FAC had, (a FAC is a forward air controller), the target that he had was rice storage hooches—thatched roof, thatched sides and so forth. Well, we had 2.75 inch folding pin armor piercing rockets. The funniest thing was that when we fired at these hooches, all we did was put a 2.75 inch hole in the hooches. The rockets are probably still going as far as I know or until they ran into a mountain somewhere.

**Robards:** What engagements and or campaigns did you serve in?

**Chalout:** I guess there were three campaigns during my time. I was there early on in 1965 and 1966. I don't recall the names of those campaigns.

**Robards:** What kind of weapons did your unit employ?

**Chalout:** On the aircraft, we carried the bombs internally. We also had 8 external stations on the wings. Four of those were for bombs, and four for rockets. So the inboard external stations carried bombs, and on the outboard external stations, we carried rockets. We didn't use rockets very much because of

the incident I just told—the targets just weren't there for that kind of equipment. We carried napalm. We carried thermite bombs. The aircraft could carry nine 500 pounders internally or twenty-one 261 pound frag bombs internally. We usually carried 750 pound general purpose bombs externally. We had 1000 pounders that we could carry. Also, each aircraft either had four 20 millimeter guns mounted on the wings, or eight 50 calibers. The difference in the guns depended on the block model of the aircraft and when it was produced. The early models had the 50 calibers; the later models had the 20 millimeters.

**Robards:** As a Navigator Bombardier, how many combat missions did you fly?

**Chalout:** 211.

**Robards:** If your plane was ever hit by enemy fire, could you share some of those memories?

**Chalout:** Yes, we were hit several times, different occasions. Nothing really remarkable because we never had any serious effects from it unlike some of the guys who were shot down or encountered the radar-controlled triple A anti-aircraft that the North Vietnamese had—37 millimeter and 57 millimeter—we didn't encounter up there. In the south, it was primarily the Chinese equivalent of the quad 50 that the army used, which was probably a 12.7 millimeter or something like that. That was the most common ground fire that we encountered in the south—from the quad 50 or quad 27 millimeter. Our intelligence people showed us some of the ways the Viet Cong gunners used to track an airplane. They would identify the airplane, and they had fixed, I guess you would call it some kind of an armament thing, that with the silhouette of the airplane at various distances from the center line of the guns, [in order] to track what the gunner would do was superimpose that silhouette over the aircraft on those bomb runs or strafing pads or whatever, and that would give him the lead that he needed for the airspeed that that particular aircraft normally flew on a gun run or napalm run or a dry bomb pass. Those guys didn't have a lot of training. Most of them were uneducated, but were very dedicated and very disciplined.

**Robards:** Describe the most memorable event that happened when you were in Vietnam.

**Chalout:** That had to be when we were called off alert one night to help defend a Special Forces camp in the central highlands that was being overrun. Actually it was one of the first encounters with regular North Vietnamese Army troops, interspersed with Viet Cong. But when we got there, it was still dark and the weather was marginal—low ceiling. There was a C47 flare ship that was already in the area. One of the most severe impediments that we had in this whole conflict was communications. We couldn't talk directly with our communications gear to the guys on the ground, so it had to be relayed through the flare ship. They were in contact with the guys on the ground. We found a sucker hole where we could get down below the overcast, and the enemy, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong at that point when we first saw them, were on the wire. This small Special Forces camp was about

to be overrun. The flare ship which relayed what the ground troops were saying said "go ahead and stream your bombs on the wire. That's where the enemy is and that's where we've got to get them and stop them."

So we tried to line up, but we didn't have the altitude to do our normal dive bomb run, so I was hastily computing the site depressions and release angles and that sort of thing. Well, the pilot was trying to get us lined up so that we could make a run parallel to the fence or the wire. So we did; we laid a string of 500 pounders in there. The word we got back from the flare ship was the guys on the ground said "That was great. Make another run the same way." They said "do you still have ordinance?" I said, "We've still got plenty." We stayed there for about an hour, and the flare ship, because he couldn't see the ground, would drift off with his flares, which we needed to see underneath. So I was trying to get him back over the target.

It was quiet a hectic experience, but it was very rewarding--the fact that we did keep those guys from being overrun. At daylight we were relieved by some A-1s that came out of Bien Hoa, and they took over from that point. But we spent probably about an hour underneath the overcast. We did strafing; we did bombing; [we used] whatever we had.

**Robards:** Describe the bravest action, either friend or enemy, that you witnessed while serving in Vietnam.

**Chalout:** The bravest was Larry Mason and his navigator brought back an airplane that had been hit with triple A over North Vietnam. The navigator was severely wounded. The airplane was marginally controllable. He [Mason] could have bailed out, but he brought that airplane back, and was able to land it and saved the guy in the back seat. He was awarded the Air Force Cross for that, which is the second highest decoration.

**Robards:** Please evaluate the North Vietnamese overall fighting ability. What were their strengths and weaknesses?

**Chalout:** Over all fighting ability—they were tenacious. Their leadership—it is hard for me to say because we didn't have that much contact with them, but from what I saw when we were in a close air support role, these guys were like bulldogs—they wouldn't let go. Once they got started on an objective, they kept at it.

**Robards:** What is your evaluation of the South Vietnamese's fighting units and their military and civilian leaders?

**Chalout:** I can give you my perspective [because] I flew with some of them--the South Vietnamese guys. In fact, there was a plan that we would turn over some of our aircraft to the South Vietnamese. We did some training with them. I was an instructor-navigator at the time. So I flew with these guys who were South Vietnamese pilots, and their navigators flew with our pilots. The initial cadre was 4; there were 2 pilots and 2 navigators. I flew 3 or 4 missions with

Major Bien who was with the South Vietnamese Air Force. Good stick and rudder guy [although] marginal on instruments. They never trained with instruments, never had any need for them. If the weather was bad, they didn't go. But they were good; they did a good job of putting coordinates on the target, good at strafing, and napalm, and all the various tactics used.

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

**Chalout:** My immediate commanders were great. We had one guy for most of the time I was there. I can remember when he came in. Lieutenant Dan Far was his name. He gathered us all into the briefing room that we had there at Da Nang. One of the first things he said was, "Okay, I've never done this before in this environment." He had been in Korea, but he hadn't been in South Vietnam. So he said, "I want to fly one of every type mission that we are tasked to do, and I'll do it on somebody's wing. After that I'll lead everything. Until I get the feel of things, I'm gonna be a wing man." We went from there, and he was a great guy.

**Robards:** What medals or awards did you receive for serving in Vietnam?

**Chalout:** I got 2 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 10 Air Medals, Air Force Commendation Medal, Outstanding Unit award with two V [valor] devices, [Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with palm](#), Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal. There was a bunch.

**Robards:** Do you think you understood the reason for the war when you were serving in Vietnam, and has your understanding of the reasons changed?

**Chalout:** Did I understand everything? No. I was a first Lieutenant. I did what I was told to do. I guess looking back at it and doing a lot of reading about it, it was a very complex political and military environment at that time—you know the domino theory we had and all these other high level things that affected the things that we did. I guess I was probably most affected and disturbed by the fact that things were controlled back in Washington D.C. by civilians rather than by the military commanders who were in the field and on the ground. There were incidents where...well, like we got in trouble one time for striking a power plant in North Vietnam that we were receiving ground fire from, [we got in trouble] because that power plant wasn't on the authorized target list. Someone back in the United States decided whether it was a viable target or not.

**Robards:** How did you feel about your military service in Vietnam when you left the country?

**Chalout:** When I left Vietnam to come back home? I was very proud of what I had done. I was very disappointed in the reaction that I got when I got back to the United States. We weren't very well...well in fact I was told that when we got back to California that we should change into civilian clothes before we went down to the San Francisco Airport, because if we were there in

uniform we would be subject to harassment. That's a little bit different from the way things are today.

**Robards:** How did this war experience most affect your life?

**Chalout:** I can't say that it had much effect other than I got in [to Vietnam], did what I was supposed to do, what I was trained to do, came back and went on with my career.

**Robards:** Would you repeat this experience if you could do it over again?

**Chalout:** Sure.

**Robards:** Is there anything we haven't brought up that you would like to share about your Vietnam War experience?

**Chalout:** Well, other than the fact that I started things off nine days after I got back to El Paso, [from the time] we were notified. I went to Louisville, Kentucky to pick up a plane from the Kentucky Air Guard along with 8 other crews. We were the only active duty Air Force crews at that time that were flying the airplane in the United States, and we took those airplanes across the pond to Clark. My PCS station was Clark Air Base in the Philippines. We did all of our flying out of Vietnam on a TDY basis. Temporary duty.

The trip across the pond was interesting because this was in January. The aircraft had marginal range capabilities to make it with the winds that you normally got at that time of the year. So we went from Standiford Field [now Louisville International Airport] in Louisville, Kentucky, and we were supposed to go into McClelland Air Base in California. We were diverted enroute to Navy Moffett which was about 60 miles closer to our first stop in Hawaii. We had a fuel tank in the bomb bay, for extra fuel; the airplane had no mid-air refueling capability. When we were departing from Navy Moffett, all tanks were topped off. We were towed to the end of the runway. [We] plugged in a power cart and got our clearances and all that kind of stuff. We were cleared for takeoff. [We] unplugged the power cart and fired the engines and rolled.

We went in three flights of three. Of the nine airplanes when we got to Hawaii, we had two guys [planes] with emergency fuel which meant that they had to make a landing on that particular approach, or they didn't have enough gas to go around. We had another couple of guys with minimum fuel, which meant that they could make a missed approach and come back in and land, and the rest of us were pretty close to minimum fuel. So that was an interesting trip across there.

At Hickam [AFB], Hawaii, when we rolled out to take off from there, we aborted, because we had a boost pump in our number two fuel tank that wouldn't pump. So, my pilot, Chuck Ramsey, and I stayed at Hickam until there was a support team that came back and fixed us. Then we went by ourselves across the pond. Now, the airplane had no navigation equipment,

no HF radios, so once you are out of line-of-sight communications, you couldn't talk to anybody, and Wake Island was 2000 miles away. We were cruise climbing up [so that we] would have enough gas to make it. That was one method, because as the airplane would get lighter as it burned off fuel, you could climb higher and use less fuel.

We got a call on guard from another aircraft who said, "Air Traffic Control has been looking for you guys because they hadn't heard from you." We said, "We can't talk to Air Traffic Control, because we don't have any HF radio. Just tell them that we are plugging along. We'll make it. By the way, where are you guys?" They had launched in a C130 from Hickam just about 15 minutes ahead of us. I said, "We should be close to you. We are at 47,000 feet and we are pulling contrails, so if you see us give us a shout." After a few minutes, they said, "Yeah, we've got contrails." I said, "Hey, we are going to do a turn to the right and then to the left so you can identify if that is us." We did, and they did. They said, "Looks like you are north of [the] course." I said, "Great. We are going to alter heading and get back down. Let us know when we are almost on track to go to Wake." So he did. I said, "Okay guys, see you on the ground. The beer is on me."

The whole trip and assignment was kind of an interesting experience, because the airplanes we were flying in the United States were electronic warfare aircraft. I was an electronic warfare officer. I was basic navigator by training, but I'd gone to Advanced Training to be an electronic warfare officer, as were all the other guys in the other nine crews. When we got to Kentucky to take the airplanes from the Guard, the guy that was handling the mission said "you guys are all basic navigators. You've got to be a fully qualified navigator in order to ferry an airplane." I said, "Oh, okay. I guess we can all go home." The next morning before we took off, we were all fully qualified.

When we got to Clark, the same thing happened again. "You've got to be a navigator/ bombardier." That is a different Air Force specialty code, which requires a year's worth of training. To make a long story short, we all became entry level bombardiers, and after one year in the entry level, we were all upgraded to fully qualified.

That was some of the experiences just leading into it—in the whole tour there were a number of incidents. We lost a number of airplanes; we lost a lot of good people. I told you about my first pilot. In fact, the guy that I flew my first combat mission with, Bud Chambers was later shot down. One of my roommates at Clark [AFB], also was shot down, and never came back. One day we lost 10 airplanes, when the ramp blew up at Bien Hoa. The story was [that] it was a faulty delayed action fuse on a weapon we were carrying. It wiped out 10 airplanes that day. We lost 12 crew members in one event. That is why we moved from Bien Hoa down to Tan Son Nhut,



and operated out of there for a short period of time, for about 6 weeks while they were moving the 105 outfit out of Da Nang over to Thailand, and then we took their place up at Da Nang.

**Robards:** Thank you, Colonel Chalout, for your service and dedication to our country and for participating in this exercise.

**Chalout:** It was a pleasure.

***Additional pictures and records are available at Roberts Memorial Library's Special Collections. Call 934-3074 for more information.***