

Wayne Fischer Oral History Interview

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MARRAPODE: My name is Nick Marrapode. I'm here with Wayne Fischer at the Pritzker Military Library. And today is August 1st, 2012. Mr. Fischer, welcome to the library.

FISCHER: Thank you.

MARRAPODE: Just to get started, can you tell me when and where you were born?

FISCHER: Born on September 29, 1943 in Estherville, Iowa.

MARRAPODE: Estherville? What part of the state is that in?

FISCHER: Northwest Iowa.

MARRAPODE: Northwest Iowa.

FISCHER: I grew up around Lake Park, Iowa but we lived in Minnesota. Back then the state line didn't determine your address. Our address was always in Iowa, but we lived on the state line in Minnesota.

MARRAPODE: Really?

FISCHER: I'm from Minnesota.

MARRAPODE: That's kind of funny.

FISCHER: Things have changed, but that's the way it used to be.

MARRAPODE: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood and what it was like to grow up in that time and that place.

FISCHER: My folks were farmers so we grew up as farm kids, I went to a twelve grade consolidated country school. There were 220 kids in the entire school. My wife went to a one-room country school on her dad's farm and she joined us at the big school in the 7th grade and that's where we first met. But growing up on a farm was a good life. It was hard. I ended up the cow milker in the family.

MARRAPODE: You had to get up real early?

FISCHER: I had to get up every morning and every night, seven days a week; had to be milking cows. But our folks were hard working folks. They loved farming and for us three guys, kids, it was probably the best way to grow up. Learn values real early and there was no crap giving and you just worked and if you didn't work, you had to face the consequences, but they were good folks and they raised us pretty good.

MARRAPODE: Were they able to make a good living farming?

FISCHER: Yes. My dad rented ground for years. It started out crop sharing with the landlord. That was not a good deal financially, but then they got in to renting the ground and then they ended up buying a farm. It's probably been 40 years ago now and that was the best thing they did because they always worked hard and agriculture was good, the way we were raised but the best thing mom and dad did was buy a farm and they paid it off quick because agriculture was pretty good back then and you're not paying what they pay today, but again, it was something that was theirs. When you work your whole life, especially as farmers and when you end up owning land. That's the eventual target for all farmers, to have something of their own. They didn't inherit anything, they did it all themselves. It taught us a lot of good values.

MARRAPODE: You come from a very hard working family and had a very rewarding but hardworking childhood.

FISCHER: That's right. We didn't have air conditioning.

MARRAPODE: In Minnesota it's nice and chilly.

FISCHER: Not in southern Minnesota! It gets pretty hot. In the summer, they used to say you could lie in bed a night and listen to the corn growing outside because it was so hot and humid and I believe that, but one thing we did learn, us three boys. We slept upstairs in this old farm house and when mom and dad would, I don't know where they'd, they'd be gone for a few days and my mom's parents would come stay with us. Her dad was a chain smoker, Camel cigarettes, and he would sit right down at the bottom of the basement. The door would be open and he had a big chair there, he would sit there and be up all night smoking. That smoke would drift upstairs and that cured us three boys of ever wanting to smoke (both laughing) so he didn't realize what he was doing for us at the time but that was...

MARRAPODE: That never became a vice of yours?

FISCHER: No. I think I smoked one cigarette in my whole life and I've probably smoked parts of four cigars at Marine Corps Birthday Balls back then and that was it and I never had any desire to breathe in pollution that I generated myself. We worked hard and didn't like everything we did but mom and dad were always out in front, driving us. It was good, it was a good life. Good bringing up.

MARRAPODE: What kind of things were going on in the US in that area and around the country when you were growing up and what things did you and your family pay attention to?

FISCHER: I remember when they signed, I'm pretty sure it was the armistice in Korea. I remember us standing around the car out in the middle of the yard and dad had the radio on and we were listening to the proceedings of what was going on and everything. The Korean War was going on. I didn't really know him, but I met him, a first cousin who was in the death march at Bataan. Survived that and he was never around, he stayed in the army and I learned here a while back that he recruited one of my cousins. I didn't know that before but he was 17 when he went in, his folks signed for him and they sent him right to the Philippines with little training and had never fired one round and was captured by the Japanese. I just learned recently that he was in; I can't pronounce it, Camp Katawan or something like that. It was one of the notorious camps. He was 6'4" or something, a real big kid, so he passed for an older person when he got in, that's why the recruiters wanted to get him, because he was a big guy. As it turned out, when the rangers liberated the camp, one of the guys he grew up with, went to high school with, was one that helped carry him out.

MARRAPODE: Really?

FISCHER: He couldn't, he just had all the problems and I remember mom and dad talking about how his folks would somehow arrange for the Catholic Church, through priests to get penicillin pills into the camp. They smuggled them in, or the Japanese would let them bring them in but that's probably what saved him from dying of everything. You know, diarrhea, malnutrition

MARRAPODE: Malaria.

FISCHER: Yes and he was weighing 90 pounds when he came out. The reason I say that because we're trying to research his records, but I don't have his

service number, I've got his social security number but I can't seem to bust into the system yet to find out more about his history. He made a career out of the army. I gave him credit on his grave stone for service in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, but I doubt if he was ever in Vietnam and I doubt if he was in Korea, he might have been, but unfortunately, he died an alcoholic and he had diabetes so he laid in the army hospital down in San Antonio and he was buried down at Forrest Houston National Cemetery. I made it a point here, when I was still working, I covered all United States as a sales manager in Pinford and I was going to San Antonio and I knew he was buried there; I made up my mind I was going to go to his gravesite. I had a rep with me, so we got to the cemetery, went to the computer and found his lot and we went over to the section and, it was really weird, I still haven't figured this out, but it was a flat stone section of the cemetery and he was in that section and as it turned out, I jump out of the car and I said, "Now you look around here, I'm going to go down to the other end and try to coordinate these numbers." As it turns out I parked right next to his stone, as a matter of fact I probably stepped on his gravesite when I got out of the car. The rest of the cemetery were all upright stones, but that section was flat stones and it's all veterans, obviously, and to this day I haven't research why that is because it's not that way down at Abraham Lincoln cemetery and I don't know whether that...

MARRAPODE: You don't know whether that's meaningful, if there's a reason behind it or if it's just the way they did it for a little while?

FISCHER: It might have been that section, they were going to keep it flat stoned for whatever reason. We've lost track of his family. What's going on back then, growing up, all the boys had to go out for high school sports because if you didn't all go out, you didn't have a team; and we played football, we played basketball, track. Before I got into high school, they played baseball, but they lost so many baseballs in the cornfields with the team hitting homeruns, that they couldn't afford it anymore; or so the story goes. It was value based, we worked hard. My dad wanted me to stay home and farm, but I'm not a farmer, I enjoy going back to the farm and helping my brother. I went to college and managed to flunk out of engineering school, first year at the University of Minnesota, and I was done. I came home and dad said, "No, we're going back tomorrow, right back up there and you're going to get back in college one way or the other." As it turned out, it was a good move. I went back up there and back then, they had what was called general college and that's where all the

flunkies, idiots, that's where you start over; general college. I got good grades, I got back in, got in to the College of Agriculture after a year of that and finished with pretty good grades, but because I got behind, like two quarters, it was on a quarter-basis up there at the time. The draft order back home, it was very adamant, you have four years to finish college and if you don't finish in four years, we got you. I got my draft notice the spring after the four years and I still had two quarters left.

MARRAPODE: What year did you start going to college and what year did you graduate?

FISCHER: I started in the fall of '61 and I actually graduated in December of '65.

MARRAPODE: When did you get that draft notice?

FISCHER: After 4 years.

MARRAPODE: As soon as you were out?

FISCHER: Yes, spring of '65, before I got out of college. I had to go to Sioux Falls, South Dakota for a pre-draft physical. I looked around and if you didn't have daylight between your ears, they were [saying], "You're in. You're in. You're in. You're in." I think, "Oh God, I don't know about this." I went back home and fortunately, our neighbor back on the farm was on the draft board, he's a World War II veteran, his name was Alan. Dad and I went up to see him the next day and Alan said, "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of the secretary." She was a pretty tough, old broad and you couldn't talk to her, she would just, and that was the way it is, you're going. I wasn't refusing to go; I just wanted to finish college because I hadn't begun to look at service and recruiters. I went down, go back in school that summer, because I had summer and fall to get finished up, to get everything caught up, which I did. That summer I started looking at recruiters. I wanted to fly since I was a little kid. Looking up cultivating corn, dating corn, looking and see a plane come over you, watching that rather than paying attention, so I go to the Air Force recruiter and he said, "Well, son, I'd love to have you but my quotas full." He didn't suggest I go to another recruiter in the state, he just said, "My quotas full". I went to the Navy and I didn't like their uniforms and I couldn't swim and I didn't want to be on a ship, that didn't strike me as good. I got to the Army and I walked in there and the recruiter said, "Son, we'd love to have you. You sign here and we will guarantee whatever you want to do, you'll do. You want to fly, you're on. No questions asked." I thought about that and I wasn't very smart, but I was smart enough to know that there are not guarantees in anything, let alone the military. I found the Marine recruiter

down in the basement of the old federal building in Minneapolis, next to the broiler and he said, "We'd love to have you, but you've got to take a couple tests to see if you even pass the test to go to OCS, Officer Candidate School." I hadn't graduated yet, but I was on target to graduate. He said, "If you pass those two tests, we will give you a flight physical. There was a naval air station out at the airport in Minneapolis." I passed the flight physical and eyes were okay and everything. Before I signed anything, I knew at least, if I had graduated college that was the ticket to OCS. I had to get through OCS, if I did; I had a ticket to flight school and that just...

MARRAPODE: Put you on a track that you could deal with?

FISCHER: That I could deal with, that I could accept, it made sense. I didn't know a darn thing about the Marine Corps, seriously, I had never even thought about the Marine Corps. I'd always seen the John Wayne flicks and all that crap we grew up with, but it was a different service and it didn't mean anything.

MARRAPODE: No in depth, serious knowledge?

FISCHER: That's right and probably knows more about the Marine Corps today than I ever did, even when I was on active duty in the Marine Corps. That's how I evolved through OCS and went through Quantico in the first quarter of 1966, they never had a class go through in the winter time, but they were short on officers and stuff and Vietnam guys were getting out, if they survived, they weren't staying in. There was a shortage, so we had this one class go through and we probably had the toughest drill instructor, DI, that ever served in the Marine Corps because he hated officer candidates, he thought we were the worst scum of the earth and his objective, clearly stated the first day, "My job is to get every one of you to drop out of the program, period." He went ahead, just like that.

MARRAPODE: Did he succeed with many people?

FISCHER: We only had, half of our platoon made it. Where the other platoons, majority, probably 80-85% made it through. Ours was 50%. When we graduated, back then I think it was 50 cents or a dollar, at graduation the DI would give you your first salute as you came out of the auditorium. He never showed up and he told us. He said, "I'm not coming." He said, "I refuse to salute a 2nd lieutenant, especially you guys." It was just the way it was. We learned from him, he was true, solid Marine Corps tradition, uniform on. We went down to the Marine Corps shop to get uniforms

sized and everything, he was right there and he was watching the tailor to make sure everything fit, he was a Vietnam veteran. I don't know whether he was any good in the field but he was a staff sergeant, so he obviously was pretty good.

MARRAPODE: He was doing his job well; he was just really tough on you.

FISCHER: He was doing his job well, so we learned, but Staff Sergeant Davis, I don't remember his first name, but I remember the last name. I wish I would have known his last name. We were part of the 39th OCS class, the only one prior to that that went through Quantico in the winter time. It was pretty funny because they didn't know how to deal with snow. On the base, they had a Jeep with a blade, and even today the base is still there and HMS 1 that flies the President, they're based out of the air field there, but all they had was a Jeep and a blade. They sent us out, we had a blizzard blow through there one week and they sent us out to pound the snow down with our feet, get it pounded down. There was enough snow around the barracks that we had on the marching areas, we had probably a foot of ice. The next day, they sent us out with trenching tools to dig that up because they couldn't have that. I'm thinking, "You dumb so and so, c'mon, this is now how you deal with snow. You make it hard." I'm sure it was just part of the training, just to let you know who's in charge.

MARRAPODE: Yes.

FISCHER: You get out there and get it done, no bellyaching. That's how I got in the Marine Corps.

MARRAPODE: Okay.

FISCHER: I've never looked back.

MARRAPODE: Can you tell me how you first heard about the outbreak of hostilities in Vietnam?

FISCHER: I started paying attention in college and that was the early '60s. [I] didn't get a lot of stuff but started to read up on it a little bit and the draft was in effect back then, so you knew that unless you went to Canada, unless you had a serious physical ailment, unless you were married. There were certain things that you could avoid the draft on. My middle brother, he never went to college, but he wanted to farm so he got married pretty much right out of high school and started farming, so that was his deferment. My oldest brother had severe allergies ever since he was a kid.

You just wave a wool rug at him back then and he'd just break out. Then there was me and I wasn't married. My wife and I had been dating at that point, but we had no plans to get married or anything like that until I got out of OCS and then we got married. You started to see it, but to me it never hit me, till they hit country, got to Vietnam. You could hear stories, but you know, going to flight school, when you've got enough concentration there to fly a plane, to learn how to fly and get your wings and went to California for training, flying in the mountains and stuff and landing on the side of hills and a little bit of that, but until you hit country, until you, until I hit the humidity and I landed in country on my 24th birthday, which didn't mean anything to me until just recently, I thought that's odd, I spent two birthdays over there, but laying in somebody's rack, in their hooch, at Marble Mountain. The heat, the humidity, the stench of diesel fuel, fumes from the trucks and then you could hear and feel off in the distance B-52s dropping bombs periodically throughout the night. You just sit there and think, "What in the hell did I get myself into?" Even then it didn't quite hit me like it did two weeks after that, but you started to realize that this was totally different than what we were used to. You could hear guys talk about it, tell stories, but until your body is in the mess of things, that's when you start to realize this is not training, this is the real world. When it really hit me was two weeks, I was in the squadron and in the hooch, they would have like pilots, lie six guys, five or six guys to a hooch and the guy that my bunk was next to was married, had a couple kids and he landed in the wrong LZ up in the DMZ, landing zone, supporting the Marines up there and they were either coming in to get MEDEVACs or something, I guess that's probably what they were doing. He had called for a pop of smoke, a smoke grenade and then you confirm the color. He didn't confirm the colors and that's what we were told and he ended up landing. The MBA had an area right next to the Marines, they were in, I mean, they were shooting and he landed in the wrong landing zone and as he flared to touch down, they shot him down and killed him and the crew chief. Going to his memorial service a couple days later there at the base, I guess that's when it really. It was the first time I knew anybody that had been killed and you know we were six feet apart. I guess that's when the true reality of things really set in, what the hell wars all about and people die and it bothers you, you feel it, but at the same time you can't let it overcome you. From his memorial service and I've carried this, it's in that book, in both those books, the Navy has a hymn, it's in a lot of hymnbooks at churches, called the Eternal Father, or the Navy hymn. They play that at memorial services all the time and at

this particular memorial service because it was a Marine. They had two stanzas that are designated for Marines and I kept looking at that and reading it and I said, "I think I'll cut this out and carry it with me." I cut it out and carried it with me up until probably four or five years ago. I guess I've come to the realization that I'm going to need all the help I can muster from wherever to get through this thing mentally, physically and I am very fortunate.

MARRAPODE: Weren't going to turn away any help you could get?

FISCHER: That's right and nobody knew that until years after I got home. It was just something of all that experience, just something that was consistently the same and it was good for me.

MARRAPODE: I want to take it back a little bit and talk about when you were getting your wings and doing your flight training. What kind of aircraft were you training with and what was that training like? Was it very rigorous? How long did it take?

FISCHER: First of all, we were on a fast track, especially the Marine pilots.

MARRAPODE: What base was...?

FISCHER: I went to Pensacola.

MARRAPODE: Okay.

FISCHER: Saufley Field was the first base. We went through pre-flight training, which was physical, classroom stuff at the main base in Pensacola. Based on your test scores, you were selected to either go to jet training or helicopter training. I wasn't any brain surgeon, but in that class I was number two. There was a lieutenant junior a grade ahead of me and I was number two. I always wanted jets; that's all I could, hell I didn't know helicopters existed back then, pitch-winged jets. They picked one student that week, as it turned out he was picked to go because he was the top of the class and I was number two, he dropped out of the program a week later, once he got to Meridian which was the jet training base to go to, but they don't go back to pick people up so...and that's fine.

MARRAPODE: How many people were in the program?

FISCHER: At pre-flight, we probably had maybe 25 to 30.

MARRAPODE: They only took one for jet training.

FISCHER: One for jet training and the rest just went getaway. There was a mix of Navy, Marine officers, Nav-Cads, Naval Cadets and Marine Cadets, Mar-Cads and a good friend one mine was a Mar-Cad and it was like being enlisted but going through flight training and officer training all at the same time. They were pretty tightly controlled and they weren't free to go ahead and do whatever they wanted to do in their free time. I went to the next base [that] was Whiting Field. That was out of Saufley when all this happened, Saufley Field, because we did have some flight training.

MARRAPODE: Softy?

FISCHER: Saufley. S-A-U-F-L-E-Y, it's in the Pensacola area and it's no longer a base, it's a, I think it's a drug addiction rehab center now. Not just military, but general. We were down there a few years ago and went to the base but it's nothing to do with the military anymore. Then it was to Whiting Field to fly T-28s, at Saufley, we flew T-34s, which in Naperville there's a Lima Lima organization that flies, well they fly T-34s. That's what the plane looked like, except the painting was different. We were white and orange.

MARRAPODE: I used to see them flying over my house all the time.

FISCHER: Yes, you're right out there in the middle of it. My first flight in the T-34, the first couple flights were memorable. I had a Marine captain was my instructor. He's in the backseat and we take off and we're up tooling around and he said---well they teach you how to fly landmarks in T-34s so you're looking down, you don't fly looking down, you fly all around, but you're gonna get lost, because they have to get you safe for solo. We're tooling around, we just took off, probably been in the air around 10 minutes and your nerves are clear up there. Somewhere down there, there are three towers. He rolls it on its back; put the stick forward so it's zero G. I had never experienced zero G, especially prolonged zero G and I started vomiting. I never even looked out of the cockpit the rest of the flight, I don't think and just, God it was awful. Got back home, I just laid down and I was totally wiped out. The second flight, a similar thing, I got airsick and the rule was back then, on the third flight, if you got airsick on the third flight, you were going to get checked out, dropped out of the program because you couldn't handle it.

MARRAPODE: Three strikes.

FISCHER: Three strikes and you're out. I was pretty damned determined on the third go around and I didn't get airsick and got safe for solo and stuff. That's

where I came up second in the class and again there was about 25, 30 of us in the group at that point. I was on Whiting Field to fly T-28s, which was quite a bit bigger airplane, two-seater—instructor, student—and I ended up flying.

MARRAPODE: Jet or prop?

FISCHER: Prop. I think it was like an 1800 horse reciprocating engine, radial engine and just a big old dog, just lots of power and we learned basic flying, you know, landings, formation flying. We did some instrument flying and stuff and then it was on, at that point, the guys, then we'd go to Ellison Field at that time, and that's no longer there either. Whiting Field is still there, they don't fly the T-28, but I think they fly probably a Turbo Prop or Jet Trainer there now. I was on Whiting Field to fly H-34s and we started out not in the H-34 but we started out in the Bell Helicopter, they were

MARRAPODE: The small one right? With the big bubble glass front and the exposed structure on the tail.

FISCHER: Yes, and as I tell people, you know how they teach you how to fly helicopters? It's really simple. The instructor takes you out [and] puts you in a hover in front of a light pole and he says, "Now keep it here, you got it?" You're obviously on the controls, he's on the controls too just so you don't crash and kill everybody and you're all over the sky and you just kind of settle down and he keeps doing that and pretty soon you start flying the helicopter. That's how we learned to fly a helicopter.

MARRAPODE: Holding a hover?

FISCHER: Just trying to hold a hover in front of a light pole. You're watching that and that's your guide to keep control on it and it wasn't that hard to do once you sort of got in the groove of things and understood what was going on. Flying helicopters, you have to use all four, plus your head of course, but both hands and both feet because the left hand controls the collective, which raises it up to control the pitch of the main propellers. The power also controls the pitch of the helicopters. If you turn the power on, you have to adjust the pitch of the blades.

MARRAPODE: With your left hand, you're doing power and blade pitch?

FISCHER: Power and blade pitch. Right hands the stick and you've got your radio/intercom control there and both feet are on the rudders because every time you change the power setting or the pitch, the whole thing

adjusts. That's what you've got to get used to. Everything's moving and adjusting as you go. You talk about the movie *The Right Stuff* and all that, well that's kind of what helicopters...and again, it's not impossible. In fact, most people could probably fly. It's pretty... 100% of people can actually fly a plane and fly a helicopter it just takes a little training and consistency and all that but that's how we learned. Again, we had to get up safe for solo and then they moved you up to the next level, which was the H-34.

MARRAPODE: That's a pretty big chopper.

FISCHER: Compared to the Bell, yes. It was big, a big dog. We spent a lot of time going around squares. There were remote fields, they would have kind of an asphalt area and they would have a big square out there and you'd come in into a hover and then you would just go around the square.

MARRAPODE: Slide and then turn?

FISCHER: Slide, turn. Slide, turn.

MARRAPODE: You're always facing inwards, you're just making kind of right hand turns?

FISCHER: You learn to get out of...move this, move that.

MARRAPODE: If your left hand is adjusting the pitch of the main propeller and your right hand, that's the stick. That's moving the...

FISCHER: If all you do is move the pitch and leave the stick the same, you're going to go up or you're going to go down, depending on how you adjust the power.

MARRAPODE: Okay. That's just your power the whole....that's actually adjusting, like tilting it.

FISCHER: Yes, the stick is the tilt.

MARRAPODE: Right, and your foot, that's your vertical and your horizontal rudder on the back with your feet.

FISCHER: That's right. Everything to stay in balanced flight, everything is moving.

MARRAPODE: If you're hovering, everything has to be perfectly balanced.

FISCHER: Everything has to be perfect and a windy day, it's constantly changing. To keep it there, and that's what you learn how to do is to get control of the airplane or the helicopter.

MARRAPODE: The helicopter, that's got that really big, bulbous front. I feel like in the wind, that it must get whipped around.

FISCHER: That's right. They all get whipped around. Unless they're the big heavy ones, then that's not a problem. For me it was a tremendous experience and I think that week, there was like three or four of us graduated together. The naval air training for me was a tremendous experience. I didn't get to fly jets, I didn't get to Carrier Qual, but as it turned out, I spent most of my time connected, pretty directly with the Navy. Either in Vietnam, flying off in different ships to different helicopter ships and when I came back, they send us back to Naval Air Training Command to fly jets. I got my jet time.

MARRAPODE: You finally got your jet time?

FISCHER: Never Carrier Qualified on a jet, but I spent a lot of time...

MARRAPODE: Carrier Qual?

FISCHER: Carrier Qualifying. My only thing I regret was never having the opportunity to get shot off a carrier in an F-4.

MARRAPODE: Off the catapult?

FISCHER: Yes, I think going back wouldn't have been much fun, but that. Get shot off, full bore, afterburners that was the big dog in Vietnam, the F-4. That was a, God; it was a beautiful machine to watch.

MARRAPODE: Really high load potential. It could carry a ton of stuff.

FISCHER: A ton of bombs and one thing back on the helicopter. Generally, motorcycle guys didn't make good helicopter pilots or probably vice versa and a chopper, now I've never driven a chopper.

MARRAPODE: Motorcycle?

FISCHER: Motorcycle. But the power goes the other way.

MARRAPODE: Okay.

FISCHER: The power goes to a chopper that's cutting off, you're going to auto-rotate when you do that, where on a motorcycle, that's power. The other way is cutting off. We were always told that.

MARRAPODE: That seems to be a pretty important distinction.

FISCHER: Yes, and that's why there were guys that did both, but not many. Not many, because...

MARRAPODE: At some point, you're going to mix them up.

FISCHER: That's right! You just never know especially if you had a lot of motorcycle time before you went to Vietnam. When you're getting shot at, you...it just takes over, you don't act, [and] you react.

MARRAPODE: You're in a stressful situation and you got a fully loaded chopper and the wind could be blowing. Things start to stack up pretty quick.

FISCHER: That's right, and you can get screwed pretty fast.

MARRAPODE: But you enjoyed the helicopter training?

FISCHER: Yes, training was good. I went to California for three months to do mountain flying with a Marine squadron there and that was good training. We got to experience smog for the first time in the LA area; because you come out of the Santa Ana hills when you come down that smog would be up maybe about a thousand feet and you couldn't see through it. When you came down through it, you start flying landmarks off the ground.

MARRAPODE: When did you join the unit that you would serve with in Vietnam?

FISCHER: September 29, 1967, [on] my 24th birthday.

MARRAPODE: And that unit was?

FISCHER: HMM363

MARRAPODE: HMM is Heavy Marine?

FISCHER: No, Helicopter Medium Marine, or Marine Medium.

MARRAPODE: Something like that.

FISCHER: We were considered medium range helicopter. Everyone knows the Huey. You had the H-34 and then you had the H-46 and then you had the H-53; those were the four levels of helicopters. Then you've got the Cobra gunships, which were and off shoot of the Huey, started coming in the latter half of the time I was in Vietnam. Our job, we called ourselves the expendable ones because we were an old helicopter, we could only carry five troops. But the H-53s would bring 35 combat loaded Marines into a flat area, maybe 10 miles from the LZ, five miles from the LZ. Our job was to take them in and our job was to get them out. The 46s eventually

took that over. The Army used the Huey for both, so they didn't have the H-34. They had it early Vietnam, but only had a few planes over there

MARRAPODE: 46? Is that the Sea Stallion?

FISCHER: Yes. That's the three wheeled, twin rotor. When I went to Vietnam, probably a month after I was there, they kept losing them because the transmission decks would come apart. They would crash and guys were getting killed that weren't even in combat and so they grounded them.

MARRAPODE: Just new machinery?

FISCHER: New machinery and not well researched machinery. It was a lot of stress; for us H-34 pilots. I never did get in one, never flew in one, [and] never even rode in the belly of one. That's just a dangerous machine. A friend of mine I went through flight school with, he was scared to death of H-34s when he got to Vietnam even though he was assigned to our squadron. He wanted to transfer to 46s, well he transferred, when they were down, he got transferred in the squadron. As it turns out, he got shot down and was shot off the struts of a Huey trying to lift him out of there one time. It's just one of those things, but the 46s, they started to take our load over then they could bring 20 some troops in, but they lost a lot of them. They were jet powered and they had dust covers over the engine so the sand and stuff couldn't get sucked in there but all they had to do was go one round through the jet engines and they were done. The old H-34, we had a nine cylinder radial engine like the old T-28. Never happened to me, but the story was you could have a cylinder get blown off and you could get on the LZ, you weren't going far but you want to get out as fast as you could, get as much altitude because the engine is going to seize on you because you're losing all your oil and then you ought to rotate to whatever, wherever you can find or wherever you're headed. We had one set of pilots that had 26 hits in the cockpit, never hit the pilots. Talk about the grace of God.

MARRAPODE: Were the cockpits armored at all?

FISCHER: Yes, somewhat. The sides where the pilot sat, on the side where the door was, there was a little armor, a half-inch maybe, a plate. There was a plate on the back of your seat and under your seat. The story goes that the windshield, the center windshield could take small arms fire, deflect small arms fire. I don't know...I never experienced that. The pilots wore vests, plated vests. You had some protection, but I guess that time the pilots didn't get hit. There was a lot of crap flying around the cockpit, of course,

but the 34 was, you know, you could have so many inches of crack in the skin in the six inch square before they would patch it. They would just stop, drill the crack, get to the other crack, they would stop, drill it. You had so many inches within a six inch thing before they would even patch it up. The rotors, you couldn't take a round, in the front of the rotor there was like steel, like an air tube that was in the leading edge of the helicopter blade and if you took a round in there, you were screwed, but the rest of the blade, you could get shot up and just duct tape it.

MARRAPODE: But that hollow portion?

FISCHER: Yes, you could just duct tape it up and keep going. It was a very forgiving helicopter, very forgiving. I think that's why I'm here today.

MARRAPODE: Much more easy to do maintenance on and keep them running.

FISCHER: At the time it was. Today, as a matter of fact, a little side story I just learned this week that in the Marine Corps museum, Quantico, there's an H-19, which was the pre-H-34 helicopter. As you come in to the front door, it's part of the display on the main floor. They were replacing that with an H-34 and I actually flew that particular bird. It was only in our squadron for maybe four or five months when we were on the Princeton and as it turned out, looked in my log book and I flew it on my 25th birthday and I flew it four days before I stopped flying, leaving country and stuff. I got a little connection to it, so I don't know what that'll...they said send us whatever you got and we'll include that in the history book to go with the display when they get it set up in the Marine Corps museum so we'll see what happens.

MARRAPODE: Do you remember the specific mission that you flew that helicopter on?

FISCHER: No. I can't even

MARRAPODE: I thought maybe if we could get it recorded, we could contribute to it.

FISCHER: I wish I could. I recognize one of the, the copilot. But the second guy, for the second flight that name didn't ring a bell. I had to go back through our squadron logs to get his first name, I didn't even. I guess you forget, well you forget a lot of things, just routine. Nothing happened, the missions were according to the code that's in the log book one was a resupply and the other was special equipment whatever, I don't know what the hell that meant.

MARRAPODE: You got to Vietnam in 1967. Your training was over a year, is that right?

FISCHER: Yes. The training to get to Vietnam, because flight school didn't start till, probably after pre-flights, probably in March I probably started at Saufley Field. So yes, probably a little over a year's total training. Normally, flight school is a year and a half. The Navy pilots, that stretched out a year and a half, so we actually, as I recall, I think I got my wings within 11 months of starting flight school and stuff. A couple leaves in there, going to California and even in Vietnam, if you flew as a copilot, you had to get checked out as a HAC, which is Helicopter Aircraft Commander. You flew copilot, probably for a couple months and then you started if you were doing okay, then you got HAC check and once you got a HAC check, and that was given by a senior pilot who'd been there, through the ropes and wanted to make damn sure you were safe to lead a helicopter. As you worked up, you got to be what was called a section leader, which were two helicopters. Division leader was four helicopters and then a strike flight leader was, in other words, if there was an insertion mission or where everybody went in, then it was a strike flight leader. Very few guys ever got to that level, I don't recall that we ever had a strike flight when I, after I got to be a division leader and stuff. But there were guys that did and they were cool, cool headwork kind of guys.

MARRAPODE: Kind of calm, collected.

FISCHER: Calm, collected and made sure...

MARRAPODE: I guess in that stressful of a situation, you don't really have a whole lot of options but to be.

FISCHER: You don't. At least you're the first one in and so you have that final green light to give. When I checked in country, our CO of our squadron, Colonel Lewis, said, "I am not a strike flight leader. I will go in the lead airplane; the names Lieutenant Colonel." The pilot was the captain. Arch Ratliff was the pilot who always, the guy I knew always recalled as being a strike flight leader. Colonel Lewis would fly with Arch Ratliff. Now on a routine flight, Colonel would lead the section, if you're ever doing a mail run or something like that, but he said, "I do not possess the ability to lead a strike." He was probably a WWII veteran, late WWII, he was Korea War. Obviously he was a senior Marine officer. He probably came out a Fixed Wing out of the Korean War and they put a lot of those guys in charge of helicopter squadrons.

MARRAPODE: Airborne troops? Or Fixed Wing?

FISCHER: Fixed Wing pilots and they were, generally, not good helicopter pilots because they came up from a different mindset flying Fixed Wing. Helicopter pilots, it's a little different. You have to react to a lot of things.

MARRAPODE: You're sticking around, you're not just...

FISCHER: Yes, you're blowing out and then going back to the ship or back to base. You could get a call on guard channel and that would happen sometimes, pick of MEDEVACs. If you were in the area and nobody else was, then you said, "Let me go, I'll take care of it." And take it from there. I was just junior officer so I was a middle aged guy, 24 and 25, they were old guys at 40, the senior officers, but they just didn't, it just didn't seem to have the leadership qualities that the rest of the guys were looking for. When we were flying, still as aircraft commander, you're in charge of the helicopter. Whatever goes on, you're responsible. Whatever the crew does in the belly, you're responsible for. Whatever the copilot does, you're responsible for. They're coming to you first. It was one of the disappointing things for me, over there. I just didn't have...I had more respect for senior captains. They were chopper pilots [and] that's all they knew. They had no aspirations to do anything but to serve their fellow Marines. They weren't worried about moving up the officer ranks or anything like that, it was strictly get the job done every day. That's the way you wanted to look at it, if you looked at it any other way, you weren't worth a damn and everyone knows who they are and who they're not. That was just the way it was, for our group anyway.

MARRAPODE: You hear a lot about Vietnam having issues with the leadership structure and issues with the people who were in command. That was fairly present in your unit?

FISCHER: Yes. It was...another story. This would have been mid '68. We seemed to be putting troops at the bottom of the same hills. We were fighting over the same territory. It was really getting demoralizing. The heavies, when I say "heavies" that's the senior officers at the command level, set out a survey to survey the officers and men for morale purposes. We sent in our inputs and all we ever heard back was that it was a pack of lies, but

MARRAPODE: What was your input?

FISCHER: That we were sick and tired of losing Marines fighting over the same territory. If it's that important...and Marines don't strike and hold; Marines strike, move back, [and] go somewhere else. We were taken, put them at the bottom of a hill, [and] support them as they'd fight up the hill over

territory. They captured, hold them for 30 days, take them back to camp, [and] pressed them up, put them back.

MARRAPODE: Take that same...

FISCHER: Territory, yes. That crap was getting old.

MARRAPODE: It didn't seem to you that there was a lot of rhyme or reason

FISCHER: No, not at all. Not for us. Now we were junior officers and we weren't...

MARRAPODE: Necessarily privy to all the information?

FISCHER: That's right. We understood that but what we saw was every day. I don't know how the ground troops viewed it, because our interaction with them was minimal. It was take them and get them out, support them, take their MEDEVACs and KIAs.

MARRAPODE: You weren't on the same bases?

FISCHER: No.

MARRAPODE: Contact was...

FISCHER: No, no. Even on the ships, there would be [a] regiment Marines on board the ships, we never interacted with them; [only] very, very little. This would've been the summer of '68. I shouldn't even tell this story because it'll probably come back and bite me in the butt and you may not want to use it here, but the commanding general of I Corps at the time was Major General Raymond Davis. He was a Medal of Honor recipient of the Korean War. Highly respected Marine officer, head up to be the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps. As it turns out, he was based out of Dong Ha, which is right south of the DMZ. Marine Hueys would fly him around and our job as a squadron was to chase him. If he got shot down or went down, our job was to get help in or go and get him. As the story goes, he became convinced that his Marine Huey pilots were trying to kill him. Again, that's how the story came down to us because the senior pilots wouldn't fly him; they refused to fly him because he was noted back then for supposedly for body count, that was the big thing. Body count was the big thing in the Vietnam War. At home, people are like "We killed a thousand and lost ten."

MARRAPODE: Body count and kill ratio was what they were chasing?

FISCHER: Right. That was the big thing and that was, we had a hard time with that. After apparently a couple accidents, he requested an Army Huey, "H" model, and an Army pilot to fly him.

MARRAPODE: An "H" model is?

FISCHER: An "H" model was the highest powered Huey at the time. It wasn't a gun ship, it wasn't armed, it was just slick. One Sunday morning, my job was to be his chase. We'd fly him up and we're up in the Western part of the DMZ and I don't know if it was a Marine company on the ground or a platoon, I didn't know if it was an officer in the radio, I don't know because there was... anyway, they started to make some contact and the first question he asked, "Enemy contact?" "Negative, sir." Pretty soon the Huey starts going down, spiraling down. You never do that, you just never spiral down over where the Marines are at. North Vietnam is just across the street.

MARRAPODE: Right, if they see you circling a position?

FISCHER: Yes, they give you time. When you disappear, they start to put crap on top of you.

MARRAPODE: They know right where you're going?

FISCHER: That's right; you just line her up and start shooting. He starts down, he says, "I'm coming down." Whoever's on the radio says, "Sir, don't come down, you might get shot." He said, "Well I thought you said there was negative enemy contact." He said, "You're right sir, but your own men will shoot you." The Huey leveled off and away we went. We set back there and we couldn't believe it. We could not believe it. It was a classic...and that was the honest to God truth. I've shared that story with some guys, and I have high respect for Medal of Honor recipients and I have high respect for generals and certainly for him as Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, but on that day, that instant, that's exactly what happened. I don't know if anything ever happened to that.

MARRAPODE: Yes, I was going to ask.

FISCHER: I don't know, I never heard any more about it, but that was a true story. Again, it was the feeling, the attitude, the morale situation back then.

MARRAPODE: I was going to say, especially with the guys on the ground. If that's the way they were feeling.

FISCHER: Now did the Marines not do their job because of that? No, Marines were... I'm here today because I joined the Marine Corps. I would be here if I joined the Air Force or any other branches, but I know today, I am 100% convinced that the only reason I'm here today is because I was in the Marine Corps and I served with a bunch of guys that were no B.S. When the job was there, we went out and did the job. The Marines on the ground were the same way. Yes, our jobs were, MEDEVAC pick-ups were generally not a lot of fun, but our job was to get them out of there and get them to a hospital ship or get them to a medical battalion. The KIAs waited until things eased up because you couldn't do anything with them anyway. You had to wait until...unless the Marines were on the move and they would take their KIAs with them if they had to, to never leave them behind. Again, that was an incident of, once in a lifetime thing. It's not in my book because it was just one of those things and we all had a big chuckle about it back at base that night, in the hooch having a beer or two and talking about that, it was, it seemed hilarious at the time, but it was also a pathetic incident of what was going on I guess.

MARRAPODE: Kind of indicative of...

FISCHER: Yes and how we viewed, as no name officers, pilots, crews, because crews in the belly, they're on the radio, they're listening to all this crap. There was nothing they didn't hear, that we didn't hear. But it didn't stop you from doing your job, but it was just an instant where, it was part of what was going on back then. We had no feel for back home with LBJ, although I will say in 10 of 1968, in January, when they hit that 9th, we were still at Marble Mountain at the time, at the Marine facility at Marble Mountain, which is in the Da Nang area.

MARRAPODE: It's the northern region?

FISCHER: My whole time was spent in I-Corps that was the Marine section of Vietnam. The Army was there too, they were First Cavalry, Air Cavalry, it was air based at Marble Mountain for a while. But I-Corps was where the Marines concentrated their efforts versus the other corps. They hit that night and the next morning we were on the, again, the general's chase, based out of...I don't remember the general's name, but he was west of the Da Nang airfield still on the base property. I remember we had a couple Hueys maybe and two H-34s, went over there and shut down and we were sitting in his conference room and then generals at the other end. You've got four Bird Colonels sitting there with him and they're giving an update on what the hell's going on. That was at 10 in the morning. Every ARVN

outpost, Vietnamese Army outposts, the South Vietnamese army had been overrun by that time.

MARRAPODE: In I-Corps?

FISCHER: In I-Corps, yes. Every friendly, every U.S. base was under heavy fire and they came out of freaking nowhere, we weren't expecting it because it was their Lunar New Year. We're sitting there looking at each other and we thought the war was over and we hadn't won. We were grasping ideas, well how the hell do we get out of here? We had visions of, not realistic visions but, of loading these helicopters up with fuel and just heading out to sunshine and sea and try to find a ship, get on board and get the hell out of here. It was a serious time. There's a river that goes around the dang city and Huey gunships were going at it for 48 hours around the clock, killing, shooting guys out of the water; Viet Cong and NVA soldiers. It was just a blood bath. It just kept coming and coming and coming and then stopped. If, and we all agreed at the time, if LBJ, Lyndon Johnson, not because of great leadership, but because I don't know what the hell to do, they had half a million Americans in Vietnam at the time. If it had been half that number, I don't know whether any of us would be here today, it was probably the most serious time of my time over there because it just, "POW!" Like that and when that was all over, we went back to camps and rested up. We never pursued it and even the guy who was the North Vietnamese general, recently had a...he said, "You know, the war was over for us at the time. If the Americans would have pushed and turned the tables and come after us..."

MARRAPODE: Before they were able to rebuild they said that?

FISCHER: That's right.

MARRAPODE: Because they put everything into the Tet Offensive?

FISCHER: That's right; it was, again, thanks LBJ for... I didn't vote for him but because he, just in the way they were managing back in D.C., which is scarier than hell. That's the way it was back then. We just had more fire power and we just kept shooting and killing and shooting and killing and finally they just backed off.

MARRAPODE: Did your base come under direct attack?

FISCHER: Oh yes, we were under heavy fire.

MARRAPODE: What was that like?

FISCHER: Here's how it evolved. We had hooch maids come in the base and clean up the hooch's, do your laundry and you paid them, MPC, Military Payment Certificates, which was garbage money but it's all the money you had. You didn't have U.S. dollars. You learned real fast...and they would work from, say, 9-3, 3 to 5 days a week, I don't remember. When they started gathering at noon to get off base, you were going to get hit that night. You could book it. When I first started observing that, we started seeing that, and we waited and never paid any attention and then, at about midnight, we would get mortar attacked. Generally not rockets, mostly mortar attacks and so it got to a point where, at least for me, I'd see that if I was not flying that day, I would see them gather. When it became dark, I would grab my hard hat and my radio. We had cots or whatever you call them in the bunkers, spend the night in there and, by God, mortar attack would come, just, you book it. Reason being, it was their sons and husbands were Viet Cong, they were right there and they knew it was coming and they wanted to get the hell off the base before, because they weren't sure when it was coming, they just knew it was coming .

MARRAPODE: If they stuck around until three or four?

FISCHER: Right, they might be into it. At least at Marble Mountain, we very seldom had a rocket. Rocket attacks were pretty bad, did a lot more damage than mortar attacks. Gunships would circle around Da Nang overhead at night, they could see the, where the mortar tubes, you could see the flashes, so even in the dark, they could zero in on them and take them out. The rocket belt we never found. One night they had, there was a big Da Nang complex [attack] was going to happen. They had this plan that at midnight, all guns were going to start shooting artillery, just shoot out in the country side. The idea being we'd surprise the enemy and they would go to their rocket sites and we'd have Huey gunships, lights out overhead watching, because we could never find that rocket belt. The reason I know that is because I was so-called ground defense officer for the squadron at the time and my job was, in event there was an attack, was to go down to the listed area and make sure we didn't lose control down there and that was always an experience. At midnight, bang, they started shooting, just like clockwork and they'd shoot for a half hour and stop, the idea being surprise the enemy, then go to the rocket, start shooting gunships, take them out. At one o'clock we were all back in our bunks sound asleep. Not one round was fired. Either mortar or rocket attacks.

MARRAPODE: They never responded?

FISCHER: Never responded. They knew more what was going on than we did. I'm convinced of that. It was only one time they ever did that. We just all shook our heads and, again [said], "What the hell are we doing here?"

MARRAPODE: They were no dummies, huh?

FISCHER: They were no dummies. You really had to be careful on the radios to make sure you were talking to a U.S. soldier versus an NVA soldier. Those guys, some of them went to college back in the U.S. early on. Jack Benny's age and I know that's not brain surgery but Jack Benny plus two. They hit the channels that you were going to be coming up on and you had to do a lot of different things, they'd pop a smoke grenade, confirm the color, so you didn't go to the wrong place. You just always had to be careful. I don't think it was any different in the southern part of South Vietnam, but when we were out in the field flying, we had to make sure that was where the Marines were at. Because if they were in combat, the enemy's right there too, and you got to know which way to come in, regardless of the wind, you got to know which way to come in without taking heavy fire and which way to get the hell out of there; don't go up over them. You had the H-34, you had the, you learn through experience how to go right at the ground, right at a tree line, lay it up on its side and land. Get them loaded and then get the hell out of there; and its seconds, never minutes; always seconds ,especially if there's heavy fire going on because your job is to get the MEDEVACs out of there and you still had a crew. The kids in the belly, the guys in the belly, and I told all of them every time I run into them every evening, I said, "You guys are magnificent." Unbelievable; [they were] 17, 18, 19 year old kids, crew chiefs [and] gunners. They could fix these planes like you wouldn't believe, overnight. They'd spend all night...

MARRAPODE: They would go out on the missions with you?

FISCHER: Yes, they were crews [and] that was their plane.

MARRAPODE: They were maintenance and they were going up?

FISCHER: They were in charge of the belly and whatever went on in the belly, when you're coming in for landing--because the way we did it, the pilots in the H-34s sat up high, crew chiefs sat right under the pilot, the gunners sat father back on the left side, behind the copilot, but he was far back. You would turn your radios down, so once the belly was loaded, the crew chief would reach back and tap you on the inside of your leg. That was the signal to go. It worked magnificent, you didn't have to be on the radios

because there was a lot of garbage on the radios, screaming and yelling. This one time, the crew chief named Bill Dummitt, he lives in southern Illinois, southern Illinois redneck soldier, he had to be 18 or 19 at the time. We're up in the DMZ picking up MEDEVACs, we were in a ravine, there was a company of Marines out there and it was just hot and humid and they were dropping from heat prostration and stuff. Everything is mapped out, going in, ground level, lay down and we're in a ravine. The pods are sitting up, there's North Vietnam, its right across the street. We're right in the middle of the DMZ; we don't want to hang around there very long. I'm waiting, looking out and I don't get the tap on the leg and I look down and see this mortar tube getting thrown out and a mortar tube getting thrown back in the belly and Dummitt [said], "What the hell's going on down there?" He said, "So and so captain thinks we can get this mortar tube out of here with the MEDEVACs... we can't get out of here." I said, "Dummitt, we need to go now." Still nothing, and I looked down and they both had pulled their 45s on each other. "Dummitt, we're going now!" Started cranking up and the mortar tube went out of the belly and away we went. I probably should have turned Dummitt in. I never said a word, other than I thanked him for what the hell he was doing down there. I don't know if the Marine captain ever did...and I understand from the grunts view, the Marines on the ground, somebody had to carry that mortar plate and that mortar tube. The reason we were getting it is because the guy in the belly, was the guy carrying it and he passed out from heat prostration. When you're on a MEDEVAC mission, that's what you're on, you're not on a pick up equipment mission. Whatever happened, I don't know if the Marine captain ever tried to do something, honest or not, never heard another word. Dummitt was probably one of the best crew chiefs that I ever flew with; they were in control of the belly. They saved more Marines, along with the Corpsmen, the Navy Corpsmen, we could never imagine. It was phenomenal. Hell, the corpsmen were 18-19 year old kids. These guys are, at the end of the day, you get back to base, you got to get the plane all cleaned up and wash the blood out of the belly. They just dealt with it all the time. I just; we're pilots, we're flying, we're this highly skilled to maneuvers and headwork and all that crap, but the guys in the belly sort of made the difference. No doubt in my mind. I'm here today because one was a damn good shot because the bullet hole was three feet behind my head. That's as close as I know I've ever been shot at; three feet. May have been closer, but that's where the bullet hole was behind my head, three feet, eye level and the gunner got him. What these young men and women do, even today, is pretty phenomenal. That's probably why a

lot of them are screwed up because they're down in front of the combat; they're part of the combat. They're there when the guy get blown away, they're there to pick them up and put them in the belly, blood shooting all over the place. I can hardly visualize it, let alone experience it. I think it's amazing, absolutely amazing and that's why young men and women go to war. They don't send those old guys anymore. Used to, back in Vietnam, get the old..."Yeah! Send me, by god, I'll get that straight!" Like hell. Every war is a little different, but it's the young men and women who make a difference. It's not the generals. Maybe Patton made a difference, maybe Ike made a difference, but I don't recall any generals in our time that made a difference. Like a day to day.

MARRAPODE: Didn't have the same kind of...

FISCHER: No and not that it's easier to make decisions, command decisions. It's not that, it's just what they did. They just reacted and just, to me, it's amazing; absolutely amazing. Like I said, I'm here today for a number of reasons, one is because those guys in the belly. It was their plane, we were flying their airplane.

MARRAPODE: Would you catch hell if it got shot up?

FISCHER: Yes! Or busted up.

MARRAPODE: Yes.

FISCHER: You would hit a tree. I hit a tree one time coming out of a MEDEVAC pickup up in the DMZ.

MARRAPODE: You heard about it afterwards?

FISCHER: I heard about it from the CO, he was, he said I'm not going up there anymore, not worth my time. I didn't get a flight today, so I've been flying all morning, I got so sick of it, I quit flying. I quit flying. We picked up MEDEVACs, a little platoon of Marines were out in the damn artillery round and ran right in the middle of it and they were all blown to shit, blown to pieces and we got them in and I wanted to see if we could get warm, because there was a guy, probably just 20 foot away. They had him propped up on his elbows and held his head like this and had him shelter half tent shelter half covering the lower part of his body and I could see, I lifted up got a little hover and I set back down and I pointed, "Get that guy." The guys went over, grabbed him by the shoulder, there was nothing from his waist down, he was a KIA, and threw him in the belly. That was

just enough weight where I couldn't get up, couldn't lift off. Before I sat down, I looked out and this piece of meat rolled out of the belly and Dummitt was the crew chief at the time. He knew we weren't going to get out of there, so they just. It's not out of lack of respect, but again, they had to react, so out went the body and we got out of there and on the way out, you level around to get away from these guys before you start going up because, again, the bad guys can see you. First time ever I recall, maybe I heard it before, but this first time I recall hearing screams out of the belly. Wounded Marines were screaming. I had been flying MEDEVAC all morning, since daylight 'til noon, and then the CO was going to take over for the afternoon when we were flying out of a place called Quang Tri, but it was up around the DMZ. That's it, I'm done flying. I can't do it anymore. I'm, mentally, I'm incapable of flying this helicopter. I got back to medical battalion and unloaded the MEDEVACs and flew back to the other side of the field, shut down and I went to the hooch and lay down and that was it. I said, "I'm not flying." As it turned out there were no more MEDEVAC pickups that afternoon, but on the way out I hit this tree and busted up the nose cone of the helicopter and got back to base and I know the crew chief wasn't happy but he understood and the gunner understood, I'll tell you that story after this one, but the CO came over and chewed my ass out because I busted up one of his helicopters. He said it really wasn't worth my time, you can go up there, [and] I'm not going back up there to fly anymore. Now, again, a Korean war guy, he's the CO of the squadron, our job is to support our Marines, what would be more important than taking a MEDEVAC mission as your turn comes up because you kind of rotated between the pilots and stuff and you don't always fly with the same copilot or with the same pilot. He didn't want any part of it; I lost all respect for the guy, even to this day. He's still alive, I've seen him since but I don't talk to him. I just can't accept that from anybody. As it turned out the gunner on my side, we were at our first Pop A Smoke reunion in San Diego in the year 2000, his name is Red Schultz and he's in my book, a picture of him, and my wife and I were standing this, we called it a hooch, where the guys bring their pictures and stuff, every squadron had a hooch there at the reunions and he came up behind me and introduced himself and I didn't know him from Adam, and he said, "Didn't you hit a tree in the DMZ?" I said, "Yeah, it was a MEDEVAC mission." He said, "Yeah, I was your gunner." I said, "You're kidding me. Are you sure?" He said, "Yep." We were describing the situation and we don't track the crew names. We track the aircraft number, but not the crew names. He said, "I told my wife I was coming to this reunion and I'm

going to see if that pilots there. I'm going to talk to every pilot because I've got to tell you that was the best goddamn flying I've ever seen; before or since." He said, "You hit that tree and it was just like..." I said, "That's how we did it." To this day, we're pretty good friends. I remember the instant, I didn't remember the people involved, but he was there, he was the gunner on the left side. He said, "I remember all the debris came right in my window. I had small cuts on my face and stuff." [It's] because you're exposed. I said, "I'm sorry about that." "Oh no, I thought it was a great piece of flying. I wanted to tell you that." You remember some good things too.

MARRAPODE: That was nice of him to come find you. Can you tell me a little bit about your opinion of the military capabilities of the North Vietnamese and what weapons that had that were really dangerous to you and your helicopters?

FISCHER: They had...probably for us it was .50 caliber machine guns. Rockets weren't an issue for us, although we did one day up in the DMZ experience flak for the first and only time. We got the hell out of there. There was a, we were doing, I think it was a four plane division. We were up there and our CO at the time, Colonel Allgood was flying he didn't understand, you can't circle over where the Marines are at and go over and he did that and all of a sudden, there was this, like that all around us in the air. We had never even talked about flak, that's WWII stuff. Just a black burst in the air and we got the hell out of there but that was the only time that happened. For us, I guess small arms fire if you...you either flew 250 feet or above or you flew on the ground, below the trees, depending on what your mission was and what you were doing. Flying in between [the trees] you were subject to small arms fire and .50 caliber [fire]. [That] was a whole different experience. It was like a lighted beer can coming at you. When you saw it, it was instantaneous; it was going to hit you. I never got hit, but that was probably the one that I was most concerned about. There's not a lot you can do about it because it's so quick and so fast coming at you, the tracers.

MARRAPODE: They've got you sighted in?

FISCHER: That's right, you're screwed. That's the one that probably scared me the most. As far as rockets, I don't think even the jet engine, like the Huey, the 46s, the 53s; I don't know that that was even an issue for them. I don't recall them getting shot down from rockets. It was mostly small arms fire, .50 caliber. Yes, if you were on the ground and mortar tube, a mortar round hit you, you were screwed or come close, it'd knock you out of the

air but, generally, if it wasn't mechanical failure, it would be probably small arms, .50 caliber. Small arms you could, if you're coming in like a hilltop landing, you were at the mercy of whatever the enemy had. You just tried to get in as quick as you can and get out, but the problem with hilltop landings is you're coming down like this, you can't, it's not like something you can come up the side of the hill and set down. You had to come up here.

MARRAPODE: You're exposed in your approach?

FISCHER: You're exposed in your approach because you've got wind considerations because the wind is really smoking up the side of the hill and you're coming in like this. Coming down wind, you lose a lot of control. If there's a good wind out there, you want to be landing as close end of the wind as you can. You can come in sideways with the helicopter, things like that, but tail winds, high tail winds were not good because you just lack control setting it down, especially the landing pads they had, you had just enough room to probably put the plane down and they would have like a rectangular square and the pilot generally landed on those hilltop sites, your job is to put the right wheel on that rectangular, that way you didn't worry about the other two wheels because you were safe on the pad, but that's where you wanted to put it. But anyway, that was always a consideration.

MARRAPODE: Did you have any experience or did you ever work with ARVN units?

FISCHER: Yes, we supported the ARVN units. One of the first strikes I was involved with was we inserted a big ARVN unit along with a Marine unit, not in the same belly but they were separate. Beyond that...

MARRAPODE: What was your opinion of the ARVN units? Do you think they were well trained?

FISCHER: They had nice uniforms. They had the M-16 at the time; this was early '68 or maybe late '67. Marines, it was funny. Here were the ARVN units, brand new uniforms, M-16 rifle. Here were the Marines, kids, not a hair on their chest, lying out. They're sitting on the sand, waiting for time to go and they had the old M-14 rifle, their uniforms were worn-well-worn, you know, the heat and the humidity and the jungle. They'd rot off of you before they got new ones. Wait a minute, there's a picture here. These are our guys here, you know why are they...of course the M-16 at that time was a bad weapon, you didn't want the M-16, [and] it was not reliable. It jammed all the time on the grunts, so they loved the M-14 for them. The

ARVN's, other than that, they always seemed to be well-equipped, well-armed; nice. I don't know about their training. We never heard anything and said, "Man that's the greatest outfit serving over here." Or anything like that. We didn't get that close to them. There was a Marine, a Korean Marine outfit, the ROKs--the Republic of Korea Marine unit, we supplied them and they were ruthless. They were absolutely ruthless. Vietnamese feared them more than anything because they just kill everything, as they were going through...everything was killed. They didn't care. Their job...and when they left, when they moved from this one base, which would've been Chu Lai, they moved north and the ARVN's came in behind them and they land mined the whole area.

MARRAPODE: The Korean marines?

FISCHER: Yes, and these were friendlies. [T]hat was a whole different mindset.

MARRAPODE: Did your unit carry the ROK units around?

FISCHER: Oh yes, we support them. You bet, oh yes. They were a wild bunch of guys; wild bunch. They were very deadly, just, yes, they were tough guys. They were just tough guys.

MARRAPODE: Did you get to know any of them?

FISCHER: No. The story was one of our helicopters, a guy wanted to go for a ride and unbeknownst to the pilot and crew, he jumped on one of the struts. The pilot looked down and there was this guy hanging on the stretches enjoying the ride. They were just very regimented guys, but very much feared by the Vietnamese. I don't know how big of a unit it was, even at the time. I got a picture of their flags flying there at their compound headquarters and stuff. But, yes, the Vietnamese feared them more than anything. There may have been a lot more to the stories than what we ever heard too, I don't know.

MARRAPODE: When they're out there on their own, who knows?

FISCHER: Yes, they didn't differentiate the good guys from the bad guys.

MARRAPODE: You mentioned earlier the Tet Offensive, [and] that your base had come under attack. There were obviously a lot of American counterattack operations going on that involved like, what comes to mind is the fighting around Hue City. Was your unit involved with that at all?

FISCHER: Yes, we supported, on a limited basis, the Marines there in Hue City. It was... the counterattacks were...

MARRAPODE: Or was it more reinforcing?

FISCHER: Well Hue City was a counterattack because the NVAs put their flag up over the city of Hue. The Marines, their job was to get that flag, which they did. It was a major offensive counterattack. The rest of it seemed to be more defensive in nature, in other words, once we kicked them and got them out of there, we weren't proactive, we weren't going after them. Khe Sanh was a whole other unbelievable experience. Places like Con Thien up in the DMZ and Gio Linh; just bad, bad places.

MARRAPODE: All completely cut off, surrounding. You were bringing in, was your unit bringing in supplies? Soldiers?

FISCHER: Yes supplies [and] bring troops in. There was a road leading to it, but that wasn't safe at all. There were a lot of daily flights in and out of there. Very, you had about 10 seconds on the ground. Even though you come up the highway there, a little gravel road coming in, it was like the NVA could see you coming and they just seemed to know about when you were going to touch down and you had about 10-15 seconds to get them off and get them on kind of a thing and get the hell out of there before they'd...the whole place was, Con Thien and Gio Linh was like a big bunker. Guys would stick their head out once in a while and see what was going on. It wasn't where you walk around or come in, land and shut down kind of a thing.

MARRAPODE: Come in; unload whatever you had as quickly as possible?

FISCHER: If somebody's leaving, you get them on. It was just like that and you were out of there. You had to be, otherwise...

MARRAPODE: You never went on the ground there, you were...?

FISCHER: No, just touch down; get in and out of there. Khe Sanh and I never shut down in Khe Sanh, but the early days of Khe Sanh, when we were flying in and out of there, you could shut down and it was relatively safe, but when the siege of Khe Sanh started, that whole place was just a ball of fire all the time. You got in and got out as quick as you could.

MARRAPODE: Did you lose any helicopters in those missions?

FISCHER: We didn't lose any up there, no. Get shot up, but never lost any, but there were some that were lost. There was a C-130, pictures of somewhere in the catalogues. [A] C-130 burning and stuff. Because they used to command and land, go back up and then when that started happening, they'd just come in, low level and...

MARRAPODE: Drop the pallets and stuff out the back and keep going?

FISCHER: Parachute them down and keep going. Drop them really low and...

MARRAPODE: You still see the videos just rolling things off the back.

FISCHER: That's because, it just wasn't... We had certain hills around Khe Sanh that were controlled, but that's jungle out there. You can't see them, you know they're there, they're watching-hell, [and] they would hoard the dang city. I guess it was probably mid '68; it was like when we were at Marble Mountain. The enemy's always watching [and] you can feel them watching you. As it turned out, there was an NVA-North Vietnamese-camp up in the hills, north of Da Nang harbor and the Marines found them, purely by accident because for some reason, they were coming up the north slope and I don't know whether they were just snooping around or what it was. Anyway, they come over the ridge and they stumble in to this NVA camp that's under the jungle cover and, of course, the thing just exploded. And that was going on for a few days. We would fly in there to drop supplies, ammunition and stuff. You just come in, and you try to figure out about where the Marines are at, come in and just do a tight, right turn-because your door is on the right side-kick out the stuff. The joke was going around that the NVA were throwing back the rations--lima beans, ham-because they didn't like that. You didn't know where the line was.

MARRAPODE: Right. You're dropping supplies and they could very well be on the wrong side.

FISCHER: Yes, but here was this NVA camp. Right there, it'd been there for who knows how long.

MARRAPODE: Overlooking?

FISCHER: Da Nang harbor, Da Nang City.

MARRAPODE: They knew exactly who was coming and going?

FISCHER: Yes, they know what's going on, yes. They were tracking the flights in and out, the jets flying in and out of there and heading north or where ever they're going.

MARRAPODE: It's pretty reasonable to assume that camp wasn't an isolated incident, they had those everywhere?

FISCHER: That's right. Well, actually at Marble Mountain, there's a little mountain called Marble Mountain. South end of the airstrip at Marble Mountain Marine Air facility at the time, there was a...monastery isn't quite the word, but there was a temple, a little Buddhist temple right in the south side, there's a picture of it in there. There was a Marine platoon or company that had a post on top of the hill and they had a landing pad that we would drop external loads into and stuff of them and stuff. Here, a few years ago, I was reading a history book on it and stuff. Well, [it] turns out, inside Marble Mountain; there was a Viet Cong medical hospital to treat Viet Cong and NVA soldiers that are wounded inside the mountain. We were sitting up on top.

MARRAPODE: Marines are on top?

FISCHER: Marines are on top of the mountain, the Buddhists were covering the front of it. But inside the mountain there was this hospital. It was just, I know that's all after the fact, but it's just...they're everywhere.

MARRAPODE: You hear the story about when the Tet Offensive started, the U.S.O. shows were all going on and the North Vietnamese were essentially under the stage. Their tunnels were right under the thousands of Marines and Army soldiers up there being entertained and the same thing was going on under a pre-offensive.

FISCHER: Celebration. Get ready. It just seemed...

MARRAPODE: It's kind of surreal.

FISCHER: Yes, it was just surreal. I guess, [and] then learned a lot of that stuff after the fact. At the time, you're just sort of, "Okay, I'm flying tomorrow, I can't think about it, I can't worry about it, but I'm not going to sit at the O Club and drink all night, I want to be alert, sober and ready to go to work the next day."

MARRAPODE: How did you feel about the Viet Cong, the VC? What was your opinion of them as people? What did you think of what they were doing?

FISCHER: The South Vietnamese people I really felt sorry for because during the days, during the daytime, we were going to villages and harassing, looking for ammo stores. The Viet Cong would come in at night and take their young men and husbands away and make them soldiers. I felt really sorry for them because, I got a picture of a camp where if we were going to bomb an area, B-52s, they would drop leaflets ahead of time [and] say, "You need to move to this camp to be safe." Christ, you didn't know who the good guys and bad guys were anyway. Just because they wore black pajamas didn't mean they were bad, that's just the native wear. You had to have compassion for the families and the kids and stuff, because they were just caught up in the middle of nowhere. The women were caught up in it all and I'm sure some of them were NVA--or Viet Cong. Did they support them? Sure. That was their husband, sons. It's hard to be critical of that, but there was no doubt they were still the enemy--the Viet Cong, NVA, you couldn't tell them apart from the locals, but still the enemy, so you needed to be cautious. My first trip to the PX at China Beach from Marble Mountain air facility, I get in this bus and there's wire mesh on the windows of the bus. I said, "Hmm, what's this?" "Well, that's to keep the kids from throwing grenades inside the bus." Don't stop them from rolling them under the bus, but...

MARRAPODE: At least they can't get them in.

FISCHER: I said, "Okay, I guess that's what we're in to here." I don't recall ever carrying an NVA soldier. We would carry Vietnamese civilians, like MEDEVACs. I learned the hard way, never take a Vietnamese civilian without someone to go with them because the first time I ever did it and I don't know why it was just this woman. She was on a stretcher and we went to a Vietnamese hospital, medical battalion; [a] medical facility. It was up; I don't even know where it's at anymore. I think it was up by Dung Hong. Around the fence line, there were people standing, watching, including ARVN soldiers. We landed at the medical battalion and we set her outside and before we took off, I motion for people to come and get her and they just stood there and watched. We had to get going; we had MEDEVAC, Marine MEDEVAC to pick up so we took off. She could still be there today, I don't know. But I started checking around and they said, "You never take a civilian without someone else going with them because they get minimal care at their hospitals; to feed, to bathe, [and] to be with them." They just don't do that. I don't know whether that's true or not, I just know ever since then, I'd always make darn sure there was somebody

to go with them; another woman, a mother, or whatever. If it's a child, the mother had to come.

MARRAPODE: Somebody to plead their case?

FISCHER: Yes. No different than here, I guess, but at the time, especially when there are people standing there, in a medical facility and no one raised a finger to come help this woman. It just seemed odd. Another thing I'll just never forget. It just seemed weird. But the enemy was the enemy and we were there to support our Marines and everybody with ammunition, food, water to overcome the enemy.

MARRAPODE: Did you get to take any leave, or spend any time away from your combat post?

FISCHER: Yes, I ended up with two R&R's, [and] met my wife in Hawaii both times. It was a great release. The second time, I forget what was going on, it was summer of '68 and we were still at Fu Bai and I had orders for R&R and all of a sudden the word came down, all R&Rs are cancelled. I had something big going on I guess at the time. I don't even remember that. I'm sitting there, "Oh crap. She's on her way from Minneapolis to Hawaii." Everything was pretty set. I go to the, I think it was the XO at the time, I said, "What do I do?" He said, "You got your orders?" "Yes." "I would execute your orders. See ya!" [I was] on the next 34 from Fu Bai down to Da Nang, jumped on the plane for Hawaii. I wasn't going to ask anybody else. He said, "You got your orders in hand?" "Yes." "Then I would proceed."

MARRAPODE: Good enough for me.

FISCHER: That's right, I took off and Major Falaski, I appreciate him telling me that.

MARRAPODE: How long did you get to spend with your wife?

FISCHER: I think it was five days in Hawaii. Both times we went to see Don Ho. You probably don't know who Don Ho is, but back then, Do Ho was *THE* name in Hawaii for entertainer. He had a bunch of Hawaiian songs, very, very popular. It was a popular place to go for active duty people because he would have you stand up, he would recognize the military. It was just neat. My wife and I and family, we went over on our 40th wedding anniversary to Hawaii and Don Ho was not playing at this, back then, it was a Hawaiian village, he had his own location, he's playing in a room in a hotel somewhere. The kids didn't want to go see Do Ho, it didn't mean a

damn thing to them, but to Iris and me it was special so we wanted to go see Don Ho. He did his thing. He recognized any veterans that were in the room. Afterwards, he was signing and I go up to him and I said, "Don, you don't remember me from Adam, but I was at two of your shows and I have to tell you, when you recognize the military guys at every one of your...we were at two of your shows, two different times." I said, "I have never forgotten that, I'm just here to thank you for that." He has since passed away, but... We got a picture of him and he gave me some tapes. He was selling them and said, "You take these." I said, "I'll pay for them." He said, "No no no." It's meaningful to us, doesn't mean anything to anybody else. They don't even know who Don Ho is. If you went to Hawaii back then...

MARRAPODE: You saw Don Ho?

FISCHER: You saw Don Ho because he was the man. I don't think he was ever in the military.

MARRAPODE: He had an appreciation for it?

FISCHER: He had an appreciation for the military.

MARRAPODE: Which was getting to be kind of uncommon at that time?

FISCHER: Yes, it was. I never experienced as much as a lot of the guys did, but wearing a uniform was not appreciated. I know a lot of guys got spit on, treated...I never did. Just the way it turned out. I remember when we came back home. Went from Vietnam to Okinawa for a few days to get cleaned up, disinfected and all that crap. Flew back to Travis Air Force base, early in the morning or late at night, I'm not sure when it was. We were in uniform; we were told when we got off the plane, to get in your civilian clothes and we had to go through the check lines, check our bags and all that crap and get in civilian clothes because you don't want to be spit on, treated. Keep a low profile. We all did. It was funny; we took a cab ride from Travis in San Francisco down to the airport. The cab backfired a couple times; we thought we were getting shot. It was just... we got to the airport, had a flight to LA. My wife was meeting me at the LA airport to go back to Minneapolis. Got to LA and went in the bathroom and there was probably half a dozen Vietnam veterans, guy was sitting in the corner crying. It was just weird seeing that. I had already made my decision, I was going to put my uniform on because I came back in the fall and the Marines had a green uniform. It was really sharp. I'm going to wear that because I'm going to meet my folks in Minneapolis. I put my uniform on and walked right down the side of the concourse in the LA airport, had no

problem finding my wife, got treated great on the airplane. Got back home to Minneapolis and my folks, my brother and his wife met us at the gate. Again, we're walking right down the side of the airport and people just kind of moved aside, but I never experienced any spit on or anything like that. We had the Harry Kirschners or whatever they were, back then they were all over these airports. They were some of the ones that were doing that crap to the returning guys. There was one time I went back to Meridian in Mississippi to be a jet flight instructor, we went home on leave one Christmas, we just had our daughter and we're in Minneapolis and I'm in uniform because back then, you got a discount at the fair or something but you had to be in uniform. We're standing at the gate at Minneapolis airport, and I'll never forget this one either, hold the baby and we're in the back and this ticket agent getting ready to load looked at me and said, "Captain, come up here. You're going on first." We weren't first class, but the guy didn't have to do it because back then it was just load. He said, "You come up here, Captain. You get on first." Little things like that, I appreciate it. We never talked other than I said, "I appreciate it. Thank you." "No problem." Away we went. What his background was or what his reason for doing that, other than maybe we just had a baby, I don't know, but he picked us out of the back of the crowd. He had to see more other than the fact we were just carrying a baby. Other than that, I didn't have any problems [and] didn't go looking for problems either. I'm sure I would have found it if I went looking. A lot of guys did, unfortunately. That's too bad but that's the way it was back then.

MARRAPODE: You talked a little bit about being in a cab and thinking you was getting shot at. Was that something...the feelings that came from getting back from Vietnam and that kind of stress something you talked about with your family? While you were there, was it something that you maybe wrote home about? Or was it something that you kind of kept to yourself?

FISCHER: You know I don't know what I wrote home about. I sent a lot of slides home. I would, back then everyone had an audio tape recorder, the little reel things. Somewhere in our house, I think Iris has got the audios; I got to dig them out and listen to them and see really what I sent. I didn't get in to a lot of stuff, but I remember one time, and I don't remember whether this was Tet, I think it was further in to the war, we were really busy flying and I didn't write home for two or three weeks and I would always make sure to write mom and dad and my wife. I just didn't. We were just busy. My dad was convinced--he wasn't a positive thinker in terms of my returning---he was convinced that I was going to get killed over there.

When he was out doing fieldwork, he was constantly looking down the road, looking down the road, looking for this green car driving up. He was just distraught. I think it was three weeks he hadn't heard a word. As it turned out, my mom said, "Well call Iris and see if she's heard anything." He called, and Iris had just gotten a letter from me that day and they got a letter within the next day or two. Again, I don't recall...I don't think I wrote a lot about. I don't know what I wrote about, but I'm sure I didn't write a lot about the combat and stuff. Unless it was in the audio and I had a slide and I'd try to describe the slide or the picture as to what it was. I don't think many guys wrote about the war itself. It's weird...even after I got out, even when I was a flight instructor, you're around the guys you were with in Vietnam, it turned out there were three or four of us from the same squadron, we were all together doing the same thing and we became very good friends, but we never really sat and got drunk and talked about all these bad things in Vietnam. We just sort of moved on. When I got out of the service, I got a job and just moved on. I worked downtown Chicago. Went and had the first veterans, Vietnam veteran's welcome home thing here twenty five or twenty seven years ago. I worked over, close to the train...Riverside Plaza. I thought I'll just go down there for an hour and see what's going on and walked down there and stood in the crowd. They were encouraging Vietnam veterans to come out. I stood there and watched. After Westmoreland came by and a few more, I just went back to work. It never really--I never really thought much more about it. The only thing that did hit me, they had a moving, Vietnam moving wall came here. It was either that or a wall with the casualties from Vietnam. I don't remember because I don't know if it was after the Vietnam wall had been built and all that in D.C. but I couldn't go close to it. Even sitting in Grant Park, they had a display of it and I walked down there one day and I was going to walk by it and I got within-I could see it- and I thought, "I'll just turn around and go back." I always thought that was weird, because I know some guys on there, but then maybe about three or four years ago we were in--two years ago--for a Pop A Smoke reunion in Washington DC and I had a chance to go down there and Iris was with me and we walked down in the center of it. I stopped and it was just overwhelming. It was like there were people all around you, ghosts. I said, "We got to get out of here." It was, it was really, really strange. I've been back to it since and I never got that same experience. It was guys you knew, it was guys you picked up, either KIAs or whatever. I don't know, it just came out of nowhere and then it left the same way. For what it's worth, it was just a really unusual experience. I guess from that I decided to do that memoir

thing, just was a way to share some things, some feelings and what we did. Maybe the grandkids will enjoy seeing it someday, I don't know. It was just something I felt I needed to do; to recognize the guys who were lost over there.

MARRAPODE: Maybe in some small way contribute to the memory.

FISCHER: Yes, it's like a World War II guy, World War I guys are all gone. I really encourage guys to do like what we're doing here today, whatever opportunity you get to share your experiences; whether it's in writing, whether it's an oral history or nothing else for the family and stuff because when you're gone, it's gone. It goes with you. We were married once I got out of the OCS, but even Iris doesn't; she wasn't there in Vietnam, she wasn't like in the camaraderie of the guys. Only I can feel that and only I can experience that and I think it's worth taking time to do that. That's my opinion, but that's why I enjoy doing it. I enjoy going to schools and talking to the kids and try to answer their questions. Not get in the brutality and the bloody and the killing, we don't get in to that stuff. That's way back here and it will stay there. So they, hopefully, will understand what war is all about.

MARRAPODE: Try to share the human experience.

FISCHER: That's right, that's really important; for me, anyway. I think to most veterans. Not all veterans serve in combat, does that make them less of a veteran? Absolutely not. When you put that uniform on, you have no control over what's coming next. I don't care where you're at, it's like the occupation forces, [and] those guys were at risk every day. Guys serving all around the world today, and women, they're at risk because you don't know where the bad guys are at, you can't pick them out of a crowd. They're out there. They're walking down Michigan Avenue as we speak, we just don't know who they are. Are we safe? Yes, but 9/11 happened out of nowhere. I think people need to recognize war is bad, but at the same time, you got to do what you got to do. That's why the draft is no longer in effect and young people sign up. Yes, maybe they can't get a job, but they feel a sense of loyalty, a sense of patriotism. I don't know if we felt that back then as much, because we had the draft. You had a choice, go to the draft, [and] go to Canada. That was your two choices. I wasn't about to go to Canada; and wanting to fly. When else are you going to learn how to fly and it doesn't cost you a penny, except the military. My motivation back then was a lot different than probably what a lot of people's are today. We probably had guys that were gung-ho, their family was military. My

family was not military per se, I had a couple uncles that were in the service but I wasn't raised in a military environment. I know more about the Marine Corps today than I ever knew when I was in the Marine Corps. I look back on it and I guess, it's more meaningful that what it was back then. That's the way it is with me, other people it's different I'm sure, but that's me.

MARRAPODE: Do you ever get a chance to talk with people who are in the service now, or people who served in the Gulf Wars?

FISCHER: I've been very active in our local American Legion post and VFW post and we get a chance to interact with them. Not many have joined; we'd love to have more of them just to join, to get in to the flow of what these organizations are doing. Right now, they've got jobs, they've got families. We had the same thing, I had never really thought about joining the legion when I was out of the service.

MARRAPODE: When you talk with them, do you get a sense of a lot of the same kinds of stresses, a lot of the same kind of reactions in the fact that Vietnam War and a lot of the counterinsurgency operations going on now are very much kind of fighting with a shadow enemy, you don't really know who's who. There's not, like you said, there's not always a clear line. You don't even know if you're on the right side of the line in an operation. Do you kind of get that same kind of sense from veterans these days?

FISCHER: For the most part, yes. I think today, it's kind of weird and I may be way off base, but we still got a lot of World War II guys that are still active and I know them pretty well and when you look at post-World War II, here's a group of men and women that fought on two fronts, won on two fronts, rebuilt the countries on two fronts. PTSD didn't exist, shellshock did, but it was really down played. Not that there wasn't PTSD back then, but it's like move through, we've got a life to live. Korea was probably more of the same. Vietnam, there's only a third of us left; Vietnam veterans, boots on the ground. Because of suicides, Agent Orange, diseases, I mean, it's just. I heard that number about a year ago, I said, "I don't believe it." I've done a little bit of research, and that's a good number. That's probably where you start to see the fallout. Back from Vietnam, with the guys, the homelessness, messed up mentally, suicides, it's just. I may be way off, but I think, unfortunately a lot of the young men and women going in today, not that they were raised in a soft lifestyle, but I think the raising up is a lot different. I mean, it's a different age. With all the technology we have and all the research that's been done, surely they could come up with

a test to give anybody that wants to join the service. You take this test, [and] it is a hundred questions, you get done, "Okay, you're a sniper type." Your mentality is that you can be a sniper because you can deal with that. I couldn't be a sniper, that's why I wanted to fly. I don't know that I could have shot another plane down, so helicopters for me were good because I wasn't pulling any freaking targets...err triggers. I think today we hear a lot about PTSD and I think it's real. I think it's been real for years, but I don't know whether it's how we raised our kids in the last 30, 20 years. At the same time, the combat they're in, it's the enemy's there. There's no lines but the enemy...I don't know, I'm trying to wrestle with it to understand it better, but we've got some really serious issues coming back with PTSD, not the cancer type stuff we got with Agent Orange, but, hell, that may be coming down the road, we don't know because we don't know what they use, especially in the Gulf War. It seemed to me, and maybe we are, maybe we're doing a better job of prequalifying our soldiers to make sure that we minimize the impact of combat on people that just can't deal with it. Are we letting them in combat situations? Do we recognize that ahead of time? They're in the military, they're active duty, they wear the uniform, but at the same time, they're made to be desk job or ground crew, they're not pulling the trigger on the front lines. They may artillery guy because you're not seeing what you're hitting. I don't know if that would work either. We really continue to work on that so we don't put people in situations where we know mentally that they're not capable of handling it. I don't know, maybe we are doing that. I don't hear the guys talking that way. But they still are very proud of their service, which is good. I think we were, but I think we evolved with more pride in more recent years. Vietnam veterans, yeah we're getting a lot more attention today, but the damage is done. I'm trying to get my crew chief Bill Dummitt, who ended up with a less than honorable discharge after Vietnam for a number of reasons. I'm trying to get him upgraded and I keep getting rejected by the Navy Review Board. I may try to get in front of them face to face, "What are you doing here, guys?" The Vietnam Board did this to this individual, who has been diagnosed with PTSD through the VA and then when his records caught up with him, said no, you're out. Now it's the principle of the thing. The routes I've chosen to work with them and try to get it done, we've been turned down, but we don't give up. Here's a guy, he couldn't deal with peacetime service. The guys today that are over there for three or four tours, that's pretty heavy duty stuff. That's got to be tough. Because if they're front line kind of guys, I hope they're mentally strong enough to put that aside and not let that control their life every day because

that's...killing people is not good, but that's what war's all about. Some people can do it and move on, others can't and I hope we can separate [and] find ways to keep balance out there.

MARRAPODE: Do you think it's going to make a difference for long term mental health of Vietnam War veterans, if there had been a system in place to help them, similar to what we have now, where we've made a lot of effort to recognize and address that PTSD is a real thing and that it needs to be treated. Vietnam, that didn't really exist.

FISCHER: The VA is a lot better today. It's meeting its challenges. I just got in to the VA probably four years ago. I didn't have any problems I knew of other than hearing issues, that's why I'm in the VA, but I do some other things in it. I swear to God, I think this was the way it was run, the VA would keep rejecting you until you died, regardless of the circumstances. The Chicago Regional VA Benefits office here a few months ago was still dealing with claims from September of 2010. Now their farming claims out to other states because they are just overwhelmed. Some of that's newer vets, but there's a lot of vets now that are trying to get in the VA system. A few Vietnam vets are left and things like that and they just, those health issues, cancer and all those things, they come late in life. If we had something just to deal with PTSD back then, if it had been recognized but I don't think the mental health people really...

MARRAPODE: Really understood.

FISCHER: ...understood it and the impact it has on guys. When people ask me now, "When were you in Vietnam?" My answer is, "I was there last night." I'm very fortunate; I think I'm mentally pretty balanced. I don't do it intentionally, but I find myself at night when I lay down in bed, I'll remember something or something will flash through my brain and I kind of move on.

MARRAPODE: Still very present?

FISCHER: Yes. Once you're in combat, you're there every night. It comes back. It's not in a negative way. The Vietnam POWs, McCain and those guys, and I learned when I was in Vietnam, I don't know whether it was based on one of those stories of what, but maybe it goes back to World War II, I don't know, but the POWs mentally had to control their lives. I don't know which one it was, supposedly built a house—brick by brick, board by board, nail by nail—in his mind. When he got back home, he built this house or whatever. In Vietnam, at night, I would try to, I would have to

force this Marine to move somewhere else and not think about the next day, not think about what was potentially coming. If you did, you couldn't sleep, you were just...you were worthless. It's truly mind over matter. I think in combat-not that you're not alert, not that you're not responsive if something happens like that, but when you lay your head down to get some sleep, that's got to be your number one objective and you can't do that if your mind is reliving this crap or thinking about the possibilities. You just can't do it.

MARRAPODE: You're starting to wander off...

FISCHER: That's right and you're going to be up all night. That could lead to drinking and a lot of other issues and stuff, so it's truly mind over matter. Somewhere I learned about that, I heard about that when I first got in country or somewhere, I don't know and I found myself, at times, at night if my mind started trying to outguess the next day. I had to take control. Even if it was to go back home and get on the tractor, cultivate corn. It was thinks like that. Again, I feel very fortunate. I think there's been a guiding hand over my life for a long time. That's the way it is. Everybody's a little different. I enjoy having beer, I enjoyed the parties we had over there...all man parties, but we could get pretty full of beer, get our alcohol tolerance up pretty high from drinking Bloody Mary's at the O Club. We were in shit sandwiches during the day, but a night, we'd get back to base maybe go get a hot shower where you can't shave in the same place you shower, but at least you get warm water, go down to the O Club and have a couple drinks, go back to the hooch, read your mail and maybe have a beer or two with the guys and hit the rack. Air conditioned comfort after the first six months, that wasn't too bad. Except you didn't know what the next day was gonna bring and if you started to outguess that then you'd get really screwed up.

MARRAPODE: The base you were on had an officer club?

FISCHER: Yes, they had...all the places I've been...

MARRAPODE: Started to get more amenities kind of while you were there?

FISCHER: Well yes. We got the old Quonset huts up at Phu Bai and Marble Mountain with air conditioning. Prior to that, it was just open the flaps up and whatever's there was there. Back then officers had their quarters and privileges and enlisted men had theirs. The staff NCOs had theirs. They didn't mix all the time with the enlisted, the junior enlisted, but they had their staff and CO clubs and stuff like that. We couldn't because Marine

officers at Da Nang or Marble Mountain area, we'd go to the Air Force club in Da Nang, get busted up, [and] liquored up. The commanding general put a stop sale on all booze to his Marines. I couldn't as a Marine officer go down to the PX and buy a fifth of whiskey. An Army private could walk in and get a fifth of whiskey, but I couldn't. Did that stop us? No, because Navy chiefs have a way of getting their hands on anything and everything. Behind the exchanges there would be a Navy chief, with this big metal container, would have beer and booze and that's where we would buy out stuff from. We might buy a pallet of beer, bring it back to the base, up Phu Bai, and dole it out.

MARRAPODE: How did you get a pallet of beer up to the base?

FISCHER: You just load it in the belly of the helicopter!

MARRAPODE: I was afraid you would say that!

FISCHER: Yes that's how you did that! Was that wrong? Well it wasn't right but that's what we did. Just hoped we didn't have a mission between here and there.

MARRAPODE: Right.

FISCHER: We got to throw it out case by case, but...

MARRAPODE: The VC might end up drinking your beer.

FISCHER: Yes. Those were just side stories, but every day was a new day and you just weren't sure what was coming.

MARRAPODE: I want to talk about your career and what you were doing after the war. Quickly before that, you mentioned being stationed on a couple of aircraft carriers. Can you tell me a little but about those carriers and the role they played?

FISCHER: Yes. Those were helicopter ships. The role, they would carry, for us at the time, would carry an H-34 squadron of 24 to 28 planes per flattop and the regiment of Marines, which I don't remember how many Marines were in a regiment but it was a pretty good size group of Marines. Our job was to insert them where needed for missions and then supply them food, water, ammo, bring their MEDEVACs out, KIAs out and then get them out of there once they were done. First one I was on was the Iwo Jima, the U.S.S. Iwo Jima, LPH 2, I think.

MARRAPODE: LPH?

FISCHER: Landing Pad for Helicopters.

MARRAPODE: Okay.

FISCHER: That was a Navy terminology.

MARRAPODE: Right.

FISCHER: Had a great skipper on the Iwo Jima. The ship's captain, he would put that damn ship right up, he'd run it right up the Cua Viet River if he thought he could avoid the sand. If the Marines were we're going to put him in, he got as close to shore as possible. One time we were actually almost stuck in the sand he got so close.

MARRAPODE: With the aircraft carrier?

FISCHER: With the aircraft carrier.

MARRAPODE: Wow.

FISCHER: A second one right before I left country went aboard the U.S.S. Princeton, which was LPH 5 and they were both the same kind of ships. They were basically post-World War II flat decks for a fixed wing. They converted them into helicopter ships.

MARRAPODE: I'm envisioning an escort carrier ship, relatively small.

FISCHER: Compared to today's carriers, yes, really small. No angled deck, it was just a straight deck. You've seen the old World War II carriers with straight decks? That's basically what it was.

MARRAPODE: It wasn't a super carrier or anything?

FISCHER: No, no, no. But the food was great. You could get a hamburger 24/7 down at the mess hall. Navy food was always great. Marine Corps food at the dining halls was fine, but the Navy eats good, I don't care how you cut it. I don't know where they get their good but they always eat good. But it was...learned how to get over seasickness, learned how to come aboard those flight decks because they're round bottom boats and they rock and roll in the water. The first time we came aboard, I was the last helicopter in the squadron, the skipper wanted all helicopters in the air to come aboard the Iwo Jima, I think that would have been maybe February '68, but I'm not sure; February or March. I was the last guy to come on board and they left me a spot between, on the left side of the boat, there were two helicopters in front and two behind and I had the middle spot. You

can't just come in and land, you've got to come up alongside of it, get it to the speed of the boat and then come across and land it. That was not too bad; a little challenging. The tough part was the boat was doing this in the water.

MARRAPODE: Rocking up and down?

FISCHER: Yes. You [have] to get in to the rock and roll and you just control crash and put it down. Get shut down, get tied up; and walk over. I made my mind up that I wasn't going to get sea sick. I've been air sick a few times and that wasn't good so I'm not going to get sea sick. Walk over to the side of the boat and there's three or four pilots hanging over the side, puking their guts out. Okay, go down to the...put my stuff away in the quarters and go in the ready room—you see these in old WWII carriers...big lounge chairs, maps. I'm sitting in one of these big lounge chairs, the maps are on rollers and they're going like this, you know. Somebody comes up and said, "Hey fish, you look a little green." I spent three days on my back. I couldn't. Every time I raised my head, I'd feel like I got to throw up. All you can do is finally force yourself to get up. Nobody will bring you any chow. Like an apple or an orange. Something that you know you can...that's neutral, that you can digest. You have to get up, let's get going. I was never so sick in my life. Never experienced that again, but wow, it was awful.

MARRAPODE: Once you got over it the first time.

FISCHER: Then it was fine. You didn't have patches to put behind your ears or pills to take. You just make it, survive. Princeton was a lot easier. We used to fly off of... the tough one was there were two hospital ships offshore, depending on when and where, but they were never together side by side, they were either one was in the south, one was up north, the U.S.S. Repose or the U.S.S. Sanctuary. Their landing pad was just a landing pad on the rear end of the boat. The only time we would fly out there was if there was a head or eye would out of combat. We would take them directly out there. We would get missions from the medical battalions to take them out because they've done all they can do in country, so now they want to get them on the hospital ship and work with them more and get them to the Philippines or somewhere else. It was a 24/7 kind of thing, you never knew when you were gonna go, day or night.

MARRAPODE: It's a constant shuttle running?

FISCHER: Yes and that was always a challenge because, again, the landing pad had this rectangular thing and the ship would try to get into the wind, but you've got all this wind circulating over the decks and stuff. That boat was really rock and roll. You could see the screw coming out of the water at times. That was a challenge to get on board there. They had a sign—I've got a picture in the book here—that said, "You find them, we bind them." I don't know which boat that was but it was on one of them. They would always give us little Dixie cups of vanilla ice cream, the crews and stuff, after you unload your MEDEVACs, which was a nice touch.

MARRAPODE: A reward for successfully getting...

FISCHER: Yes, now get the hell off the boat!

MARRAPODE: Take your ice cream and get out!

FISCHER: It was, probably, Vietnam I probably spent three months, plus or minus; on board either one of those two boats.

MARRAPODE: Much more, after you get over the sea sickness, more comfortable?

FISCHER: Oh yes, it's great. Everything was air conditioned. We got...one night we had general quarters, it was on the Iwo Jima then and we had never heard general quarters before, it was like midnight. [As it] turned out there were two unidentified objects chasing us on the water. The ship had picked it up on its radar. They started steaming south. The boat, you just feel the boat lunging in the water. As it would turn, these two unidentified objects would follow it. They were concerned it was boats from North Vietnam. The ship's captain wanted to put two crews airborne, in the dark, lights out. Start, crank up, lights out, pitch dark outside and I'm sitting there, start sliding down in my chair. I didn't get picked. As it turned out, some sailor left a red light on the fan tail of the boat. Every time the boat would turn, these two objects would follow it because they could see the light. Put the light out and the boat's disappeared. Now, the story is it was probably two of our boats coming back from North Vietnam on a recon run or riverboats and stuff, running down the coastline and they were just, might have been horsing around with the boat, who knows.

MARRAPODE: Or seen that light, not knowing what it was and decided to investigate.

FISCHER: See how close they could get; see what the hell it was because they wouldn't know. There's no radio contact between the two. Next morning we woke up in Da Nang harbor in the boat, just to be safe. They weren't

going to sit out in the water anymore; they wanted to get in a bay area. That was a tense time, because Marines and general quarters on the boat, we're not...Navy, yes, but we're Marines...what the hell does this mean? Go down to the ready room. It was a tense time because it just, you don't know. Be blown out of the water or whatever. It was comical after the fact, but during the time it was a little stressful.

MARRAPODE: When did you depart Vietnam?

FISCHER: October of '68. I think it was the 20th; I went to Okinawa to get cleaned up. It was a happy flight leaving Vietnam because when I came in country, back then, they had like PanAm Airlines, Continental airlines flying guys in and out, I thought that was weird. I thought we were in combat, and here we got airliners. Anyway, when I first came in country we were getting out, the heat and humidity hit us and the stench. I could see these guys over there; they were going to load after we got off. They were all sitting there with a deer in the headlights look at us, just watching us. Sorry guys, you're in for the thrill of a lifetime here, which we were. Then we got our chance to go home, to get the hell out of there. Before we even got to Okinawa and we had a flight crew, stewardesses and everything. I remember going to the head in the back of the plane, and here they were all sitting in the back row going like this and we couldn't smell ourselves.

MARRAPODE: They're all back there plugging their noses.

FISCHER: It wasn't the john that was stinking; it was just the body odor of all the 300 of us on the plane. The plane was just jammed three, six across, just jammed.

MARRAPODE: I bet they were dreading when they had to push the drink carts up and down.

FISCHER: Yes, they didn't want to do a lot of that. It was pretty raunchy I guess. In Okinawa, get hot showers and got cleaned up and got the uniforms cleaned up. We smelled better leaving there. It is one thing you don't think about when you become a short-timer. We were grounded within like a week of leaving the country because you got, you were pretty much worthless as a pilot if you tried to fly right up until the day you left, because you're thinking about going home. A never marked the calendar thing. I knew when my grounding day was and I had taken a check flight, like a couple days before my last flight and I couldn't even land the plane on the flat deck, I couldn't. I was so nervous, so tight, so apprehensive, so wanted to get the hell out of there and I couldn't even land it. I don't know

how many landings I'd had on that same boat, on the Iwo Jima, but it just, yeah. Once it's there, you don't want to be in the air, even as a co-pilot because you're pretty worthless. At least I was, I mean maybe other guys were a lot savvier than I was.

MARRAPODE: For a while before you left, you were grounded. You were just sitting and waiting?

FISCHER: Just sitting for three or four days and you went to your quarters and...

MARRAPODE: I'd imagine those days went by pretty slow.

FISCHER: Yes, well, you slept. You just slept, all you did. Just don't even, let me go to sleep. I want to go home, I'm done, [and] I don't even want to think about any more out here.

MARRAPODE: What was it like when you finally got home? Back to your...

FISCHER: It was nice. It was...like I said, my dad and mom, and Iris was with me. My brother and his wife met us at the airport. We went to their house. It was just nice to...Iris and I, she got an apartment there in Minneapolis and we just got to spend some time alone. It was just...didn't sleep. You're just wound up so damn tight that...it's just good. You want to think about, I don't remember thinking about anything other than it was just good to be home. It was strange to some degree because I'm sure my brother and his wife, my mom and dad, well what do you talk about? Talk about combat? I don't want to talk about combat. I mean, it was...like I don't remember any kind of conversation because I think, I don't even know what we talked about. Probably just some miniscule things and the weather, maybe, it just, it was like you were trying to get reintroduced together. You know what I mean? Because they're looking at you like...

MARRAPODE: Like you're a different person?

FISCHER: Yes, and I was different. Mom always said this, "That changed you." I think for the better because I'm a severe introvert. People don't realize that and I talked in front of the Commandant of the Marine Corps one time when I was on active duty, but deep down, you won't find me going out all night with the boys. I've got to go back to my room, I've got to have quiet time for myself because that's how I recharge my batteries. That's how introverts do it, they don't, don't take me out partying all the time because that's not my style. Now, I've overcome the talking to people and stuff like that. That doesn't bother me, but at one time, I couldn't get up in

front of anybody and say a damn thing. Is that due to Vietnam? I don't know, I think there's a lot more to it than that, but obviously you mature a lot and you look at things with different priorities and what's important, maybe what's not so important, take it in stride and move on. I think that's...in my work career, I think that's helped drive it. Although my work career wasn't military motivated or anything like that, as I recall, other than take care of your people. It's pretty basic, as a manager, you take care of your people. If they're not doing the job, help them. If they can't do the job, get rid of them. They will find something better suited for their skills and probably make more money.

MARRAPODE: Doing something they're successful at.

FISCHER: That's right, something they enjoy doing. What I did was, what I hired people for, not everyone was good at. I wasn't necessarily good at the time, I was fortunate enough to...because my mentor was a World War II tank driver. I had two mentors, they were both World War II veterans and we never talked much about war but I guess they saw something in me that I probably didn't see and helped me move up the channels. I spent most of my time in sales management. Started out as a salesman feed salesman out in Iowa, livestock feed. I enjoy working with people, I don't have a problem firing people if they're not doing the job, if they cheat on me, you screw me over, [and] you're gone. It's not a threat, it's a promise. I've had to do that to a few people. One guy, I knew he wasn't working the hours he should be and in sales, I don't tell you what time to start, what time to quit, you got a job to do, but I can tell in talking to you, what you're doing. You don't have to tell me, I'll sort through it, I've turned out to be a pretty good listener and I think that's more important than talking most of the time. One guy was, I called him 11:00 in the morning and that's when I entered the pet food business and stores open at 9:00 in the morning and if you're a salesman, you should be out, on Wednesday at least, middle of the week, out making sales calls. If you're home at 11:00, haven't gone out, we're missing the day here. He pulled some other stunts. I said, "Mike, I need to meet with you tomorrow morning." "What about?" "Well, you and I need to talk." "You going to fire me?" "Yeah." "Why?" "Mike, what time is it?" "11:00." "Mike, it is 11:00 and you're at home. You've been at home all the time when I call you at 11:00. That's not the job." He wasn't getting the job done anyway. We were good friends, we talked after that. I never fired people just to fire them because I didn't like their personality; I've dealt with the personalities. If you're not doing the job, then I need to help you do something you're better suited at.

MARRAPODE: You think your military career prepared you for...

FISCHER: Yes. You take care of your men and today your women and they will take care of you. They respect you for dealing with the problem children. You will never earn the respect of your people, if you continually accept poor performance, people not doing their job. Because you know who does their job and who doesn't, you know who's lying to you and who's not. Everybody does in your immediate circle. You will never get the respect of all your men and women unless you deal with those things too. I learned that a long time ago. I learned that in the military. We knew who the good pilots were, that we would fly their co-pilot and we knew ones we would never fly with. We always had a choice and there were some guys I wouldn't fly with. "Don't put me there," I'd tell the operations guy, "let's not even go there." I won't fly with them and we had crews that they couldn't ever say that. "I don't want to fly with that Colonel or that captain or that lieutenant."

MARRAPODE: They were at the mercy of the system, had to go...

FISCHER: They just pull wire on the engine. When that crew would come out, the engine would be down, the plane would be down. That's how they got around it. I learned that after the fact talking to them, "Yeah if we didn't want to fly with somebody, we'd just pull the wire off." They'd say, "Well, I don't know, it's going to take me a while to figure this out." The crew's got to get going so they get another helicopter.

MARRAPODE: You remained in the military once you got back to the States?

FISCHER: Yes. I had a three year obligation once I got my wings and then I extended one year because I wanted to be an airline pilot, back to my roots. The airlines were, they weren't hiring really heavy then and I extended a year and it was worth it. The airline industry went south. I ended up, one interview with; at that time it was North Central Airlines out of Minneapolis, only because the chief pilot grew up in the same area I did back in southwest, northwest Iowa, southwest Minnesota. I knew the family, they knew me. Went up there, had an interview. The guy who was interviewing said, "Oh, you're just what we're looking for." They were looking for first pilot time. They didn't care whether it was helicopters, jets, first pilot time because they want people that can think, react properly and they were going to hire five pilots. Supposedly they had 50 interviews coming in and I felt pretty good. The guy was very encouraging, turned out they didn't hire anybody. And the industry just went down from there.

If I had been two years earlier, just two years earlier, I would have got on with any airline and spent a whole career. Because that's when those guys that got hired two years prior.

MARRAPODE: They stayed on?

FISCHER: They stayed on. But that's what I wanted to do, it didn't turn out that way and we had a family then, so I went back to my roots and got a job with a company in the livestock feed business. The company was Wayne Feeds, believe it or not, Continental Grains, but that was their feed brand. We moved to southwest Iowa, spent a year training there and then out to Wayne, Nebraska selling Wayne Feed. Name is Wayne Fisher, in Wayne County so I had a lot of things...

MARRAPODE: Kept it all...

FISCHER: Kept it all together. After a couple years, I was given the opportunity to move into management. And moved up to management, was going to take over the southern part of the United States, Memphis and ended up in Chicago because they shut the office down there. Went in to pet food sales in about '83 and ended up being a sales manager for the company. Got demoted once and then got promoted back. Company changed hands and I ended up being the director of a breed of dog and cat food business for Royal Canine, they brought the Wayne business. Most of my career was sales, sales management. We're all salesmen and I did some leadership training with American Legion out in Levitt District, which is a basically western suburb. First question I asked people, "How many salesmen we got here?" Nobody raises their hand. I said, "Well wait a minute, you're all salesmen. You've always been salesmen. You got to sell yourself looking for a job. You're selling; I don't care what it is. So we're gonna talk about salesmanship here as part of leadership and what your job is to bring people on board, get them excited. That's number one. What's the oldest profession in the world?" You see the guys chuckling, "Prostitution." I said, "No, no, no it's not prostitution, salesmanship. She had to sell it first." That's just my joke, but again, lots of opportunities. When I was approaching 66 and I got thinking about retiring and finally came to the conclusion, when the economy went down and I was the head of the dog/cat breeder business for the company, we lost like 60% of our customers in one year. People stopped buying puppies, dog breeders went out of business, cat breeders and nobody's buying nothing, couldn't afford it. I looked at that and said, "I'm gonna be 66, actually 65. I got a year's pay on top of that." It was just time to move on and I never looked back.

I've been very fortunate and got more involved with the veterans groups and stuff, Legion and VFW locally and then more Legion up the line, in the department and stuff. I feel very fortunate. The military, I think just things we did and decision making, reacting to and the training. A lot has to do, I think today, I've mentioned before, I probably know more about the Marine Corps today than I did back then. The Marine Corps for me, as I look back, was such a rich tradition and it's just really proud to be Marine Corps and we have a lot of fun with that and veteran's organizations, joking about Marines and we interact a lot. It's, for me personally, it is what I am and... Can I march? No. Can I sing the Marine Corps hymn, I'm not very good, but I'm proud to wear the Marine Corps logo. This was the hundredth anniversary logo for the Marine Corps. I go to our reunions.

MARRAPODE: It's still very much a part of your identity?

FISCHER: That's right. People know it and I think respect it. I don't put any branches down, once you put the uniform on, regardless of what uniform it is, you're in it and you don't know what's coming tomorrow, but the better you prepare yourself, we prepare our young people, for that situation, I think that's what we're all about as veterans. That's why we go to the schools and talk to the kids. How many of them will join the services? We don't know, but a lot of seniors have already signed up, that's just their mindset. We don't encourage people to enlist, at least I don't, I think that's a personal decision. Know what you get in to, know what you're getting in to because once you put the uniform on, you can say well I don't want to be in combat; well that's not your choice. It is, you can do something to get tossed out I guess, but then your career's shot. You won't ever get a good job doing that...

MARRAPODE: Did you ever receive any commendations or medals or special service awards?

FISCHER: The highest one I received was the Navy Commendation with Combat V for Vietnam experience. I've got roughly, just under 700 combat missions, according to how we defined them over there, so that's 34 Air Medals, which you don't wear 34 Air Medals, you wear one with the number 34 on it and then the rest are unit citations, we had a Meritorious Unit Citation, Presidential Unit Citation. I got the Vietnamese once, but the Navy Commendation is as far as I go. We weren't a squadron that rode up a lot of medals, as a matter of fact, I don't know of anybody offhand that got like a bronze or silver star. It was more of just, we had kind of a laid back

attitude and, you know, we did the jobs we were asked to do and that was important to us. One of our objectives was always to get wounded Marines to the medical battalion before they died. I don't know that, I don't recall anybody that died in the belly, but we may have had some, but that was always our push. Once you got them on board, the quickest way to the medical battalion was your job and if that meant flying below the tree line, that's what you did, no questions asked. Again, I can't tell you if we lost them or not, I just know that that was number one. Everybody did that, that's why we were there, to support our Marines, that was number one. They would get themselves in to what was called shit sandwiches all the time, that's what we called it and our squadron...our patch. It seemed appropriate. There's some other...I've got the Red Lion and the white clover leaf in the background, but that's the one most of us wear or have. That's the way it was, so...and we could get ourselves into the same thing. We didn't need the grunts to do it; we could do it ourselves at times. It's just part of it.

MARRAPODE: Have you ever gone back to Vietnam?

FISCHER: No.

MARRAPODE: Have you ever considered going back?

FISCHER: Not really. One of the reasons, it's a beautiful country. It's got some of the most beautiful beaches in the world. Da Nang harbor, when we were there, the beach on the north side of the city was black sand beach. You can cut this out of the tape, but we called it *Shit Beach* because that's where everybody would relieve themselves in the morning, when natives were brought in, relieve themselves on the beach. Today, I understand there's a Hyatt hotel sitting there on a golf course. I think Marble Mountain is gone; it's in that area anyway. If I went back, it would only mean something to me if I saw it from the air.

MARRAPODE: Walking around wouldn't...?

FISCHER: Walking around wouldn't mean anything to me, not at all. I've got a friend who works for a company, he's in Vietnam two or three times a year, he's been after me to go with him. I said, "Mike, unless we can arrange expensive helicopter trips." There are a lot of places I would like to see from the air, but it's all changed anyway. That would be the only reason and that; I wouldn't probably waste the money on it. I wouldn't, this guy, who told me about the Hyatt, his daughter works in that particular Hyatt and he was a 363 pilot, well we got to go he said. Now I'm not a golfer.

Yes it'd be great to go see a beautiful beach, but I can see that in the U.S. I don't need to fly all the way over there. That's a long flight.

MARRAPODE: You can go to Southwest Michigan to see some nice beaches.

FISCHER: That's right! Lake Michigan [has] enough sand and beach for me. No, I wouldn't; and I don't know if anybody, any of our squadron guys have even gone back over there, even considered it. Guys that I've run into since, they've never expressed any interest. Maybe for the same reason, I don't know. To see if from the air, you recognize things, but again it's...

MARRAPODE: So much would've changed?

FISCHER: Yes. The landing zones are gone. You probably wouldn't even, "I think it was in this area." Khe Sanh is gone and the hills around...the hills are there, but you don't remember which one was what. The people are friendly, but the population is young because of Vietnam and there are a lot of serious health issues from Agent Orange and stuff that disfigured-disfigurements, crap like that and I don't want to see that. We've ignored those people and I don't want to see that. It'd be too depressing, for me anyway. The reality of it is, they're there.

MARRAPODE: You know it's there, but...

FISCHER: The government, it's like a reason Vietnam ended up the way it was because our government at the time couldn't agree like they can't agree today on anything. We abandoned the country, we abandoned the South Vietnamese people and I don't want to go back and be reminded of all that. That's me.

MARRAPODE: I'm pretty much out of questions. Is there anything else you would like to share or anything you thought I would ask, but didn't?

FISCHER: No, not really. We talked about a lot of things and you'll see in my book. We had...in every squadron, in every army, navy, they're all a tight-knit group of guys, but we had a really great group of men. We didn't have any women in the squadron. The only women that were there at the time were nurses. But it was the camaraderie, the fellowship; it made it survivable; if that makes sense. I'm glad you guys are doing what you do here. I've done the oral history thing a number of years ago, I can't seem to find it online, for the Library of Congress, [and] we had a guy doing that. I think it's good and not just to hear guys, but to document and let people hear it for themselves. They research Vietnam; it was....war is hell. The people who

lose are the civilians. Between North Vietnam and us, we pretty much destroyed South Vietnam. In my opinion, it was an agricultural based country, village based and when we all got done, that was gone. There are a lot of people in Saigon and Hanoi, but the people out in the country, the fishermen, the villagers, the farmers, we just destroyed it. I guess that's the hard reality of war. I don't know what we would have done, I'm sure we could have done something different, but the Viet Cong was out in the country too, the NVA moved into the country. That was enemy country. You didn't go on driving tours that's for damn sure and to fly over it, you always had a safe feeling but if you went down, you didn't know what was around the next tree. But, again, that's war; sad reality of it all. The people lose. It's like I tell the kids in schools, think about Naperville being in a war. Your dads are gone, your brothers are gone and you can't, your school is gone. You're living in a hole in the ground; you're living in a camp. We're going to put you over in Neuqua Valley, we're going to put a fence around it and that's where you're going to stay. Live, eat, sleep; and of course they can't...and that's probably not a good scenario to talk about, but that's the reality of it. People, families get destroyed.

MARRAPODE: Yes. Whole worlds just get upended.

FISCHER: That's right. Will we ever be a peacetime world? No, probably not, but if we can avoid it, if we can do things, I don't want my privacy invaded but, by God, if you can get ahead of the terrorists, I hope you do. I don't believe in giving up my guns, I'm not a gun person, but I've got some family heirlooms and I believe in the Second Amendment, I believe in the First Amendment, people have the right to demonstrate from Vietnam. Just don't get in my face. But the reality of it is that's what we fought for.

MARRAPODE: Did you ever have any direct contact with demonstrators?

FISCHER: No, never. I was never around them when I came back at Meridian, that was a military town, per se, in the south and there was no demonstrations near the base or anything. When I got out, I was in rural America and they were very patriotic. You get in the cities; you got more of that stuff, even in Chicago. It's like I said, when they had the first Vietnam veterans welcome home, I was oblivious to get back into it at the time. [I] just look at them, watch the guys walk by and appreciate them, give them a round of applause and then go back to work. I don't know how I would have dealt with demonstrators, I really don't, because my personality is not aggressive, but I don't know, if you get in my face, I don't think I would just sit there and take it, but that's me. I'm glad I did...but you fight for the

privilege and honor to express your opinion. I just don't have to like it or to have to agree with it, that's all.

MARRAPODE: Yes, you don't have to agree with it.

FISCHER: Yes. Well anyway.

MARRAPODE: Thank you so much for coming in.

FISCHER: My pleasure!

MARRAPODE: We really appreciate your service.