Hale Irwin
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
June 11, 2020
Transcribed by Karen Navarro

LUCAS: I'm C.C. Lucas. I'm a Dartmouth College junior. I'm in the class of 2021 and I'm in my home right now in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I'm interviewing Hale Irwin ('68), and Hale, where are you right now?

IRWIN: Middlesex, Vermont.

LUCAS: And we are conducting this interview in the morning on June 11th, 2020, for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. Thank you so much for doing this interview and just agreeing to talk with me today. So, can I ask you where and when you were born? Just to start off the interview.

IRWIN: I was born in Baltimore in December 28th, 1945, while my mother was living at Edgewood Arsenal and my father was overseas in World War II.

LUCAS: Where was your father overseas?

IRWIN: I'm not sure at that time. I'm not clear of all of his goings on during the war.

LUCAS: And can you tell me your parents' names or if you have any other members of your family?

IRWIN: Yeah, my father was Henry Franklin Irwin. They called him Frank. My mother was Josephine Irwin. And I have an older brother named, we call him Terry, and I have a younger sister named Maude.

LUCAS: And, so did you live with your older brother and your younger sister and your mother for the majority…

IRWIN: No. My father ended up after the war in the State Department, so the family moved around the world in different places, like London; Edinburgh, Scotland; Tegucigalpa, Honduras; and Costa Rica. And then my father was at the United Nations when my family was living in Washington, DC. So, I went away to boarding school in

9th grade. I went to a Quaker boarding school in Pennsylvania, and the school was named Westtown School [West Chester, PA].

LUCAS: So, before you went to Westtown in Pennsylvania, do you have any memories of the places you lived abroad?

IRWIN: Yes, I do. Honduras was probably the most, the place that made the most difference on my life, because I saw the poverty and the families, the great families of these people in Honduras. I liked that. It was an interesting place. We were there during some revolutions and things like that, but it was quite an experience for a kid who was what, eight years old?

LUCAS: Yeah. Yeah, really young. What do you mean by you liked the families?

IRWIN: I just liked the Latino families. There's something about them. They're very close, they love their children. I just noticed that and I still notice it today.

LUCAS: So then you moved to Pennsylvania to attend boarding school. And do you know what year you started boarding school?

IRWIN: '60. 1960, I guess, because I graduated in '64. Yeah, my parents were in Costa Rica with my younger sister at that time, and my older brother was in college.

LUCAS: Where did he go to college?

IRWIN: Wesleyan [University, Middletown], Connecticut.

LUCAS: So you were pretty much on your own as sort of how it goes with boarding school all the time. Was that the first time it was like that for you in your life?

IRWIN: Say again?

LUCAS: Was that the first time that you were pretty much on your own apart from your family?

IRWIN: Yeah, right. Yes, and basically that was the last time we were together as a family really. I mean, sure, I'd see them on vacations while I was on leave and things like that, but

my mom sort of ended up losing her kids to boarding schools, at least her boys, when they were 9th grade age.

LUCAS: And why did you want to go to Westtown? Was that sort of a decision that you made?

IRWIN: No. It was a decision that they made. My brother went there at first, and I think the reason we went there was because my mother grew up in Paoli, Pennsylvania, and she knew the area, she knew the school, and because in Costa Rica there was no real school for me to go to, so they decided to send me there. And it was one of the best experiences, I mean, to me it meant much more than Dartmouth. I mean, I have much closer friends from Westtown. I think the values of the Quakers at Westtown helped mold me to be a person I am today.

LUCAS: How so? Like what was your experience like there?

IRWIN: Well, the Quakers are pacifist. And, you know, not all the kids were Quakers or anything like that. But, we used to go to Quaker meeting twice a week, and I learned the values of, the value of human life and the pacifist theory or belief, which even when I was in—then I ended up in the Marine Corps, which seems a little bit strange. But that helped me with some of my decisions, like I didn't want to be a fighter pilot. I wanted to be a helicopter pilot so I could rescue people and help people, among other things. But, so I think it was very important to my values.

LUCAS: Do you think that otherwise you might have become a fighter pilot or otherwise been involved in combat?

IRWIN: No, I wouldn't have, because I didn't have the flight grades in flight school to go to jets; because at that time when I was in the Marine Corps going through flight training, the Marine Corps was really in need of helicopter pilots for Vietnam. And, so only like 2 out of a class of 50 would get to choose to go to jets. And so, even if I had wanted to, I wouldn't have. [laughter]

LUCAS: Just such a [inaudible]. Okay, I want to ask a little bit more about your experience in Westtown, because that was ultimately—did you have any experiences there that academically or personally made you either want to go to

Dartmouth, or just, yeah, or just like experiences that you can recall that were really significant?

IRWIN: Okay. Westtown was a co-ed school, so it's not like Dartmouth was when I was there. Dartmouth was not co-ed. So, it was nice because we all developed relationships with the opposite sex. You know, we had girlfriends, or girls had boyfriends and stuff. But, it was such an ideal place. Let me see. And one of the other things about Westtown was it had a farm, a dairy farm, and because my parents were out of the country, I ended up living with the farmer who was only, what, eight years, nine years older than me, and his wife, and I worked on the farm for the summers while I was in high school. So, I became very close to them and I became very close to farming. I mean, I loved it. I mean, sometimes I wish I could have farmed like that. But, those types of farms are all gone now. Family farms are all now big factory farms. So… Let's see, what else? I don't know. Got a question?

LUCAS: Well, and so that dairy farm, it was owned by the Walter family, is that right? So, Steve and Cindy Walter, and they have a son named Pete. So you, during the summers, you lived with them and just spent a lot of time with that family, right?

IRWIN: I did. I did. I spent more time with them. I lived there. I lived up in the attic in a nice little room up there with the family, and I'd get up in the morning at 5:00, milk the cows, help milk the cows, and then we'd go in and the whole family would be there and you'd have the best breakfast you'd ever had for about an hour, and then go back out to work for the rest of the day. And in the summer a lot of times we worked until like 9:00 at night baling hay. So, I worked, and then I'd end up going out and fooling around with my buddies from school nearby, and come back and get to bed around 11:00, get up again at about 4:30 to milk the cows.

But, and I kept in touch with them. I mean, I had until very recently. So, and they moved, because they didn't own the farm. The school owned the farm. They was managing it. They moved out to Oklahoma and brought the herd from a place—built their herd up out there, and then all of a sudden all of their cows started to miscarry and their dog died, birds began to die. And it turned out they got a load of feed from the grain store that had PCV in it, so it wiped out his herd,

almost killed the family. So they ended up having to start all over again.

LUCAS: And so they started a new—did they get a new herd?

IRWIN: They had to build up the herd. But I think they could get the herd—they had to take the herd away and put it on another land, and the land couldn't be used for like a year-and-a-half because of the PCB in the manure and the ground and all. So, it was very, very amazing. So… Anyway, to me they were like family. And my father commented later about I had friends, other people's fathers and people like Dave and stuff, that he said, "You know, these were your father figures because I wasn't around to do what I"—you know, be a father because of a lot of the work he was doing.

LUCAS: And he said that to you?

IRWIN: Yeah. Right.

LUCAS: Do you feel like that's true because he was busy with his various jobs?

IRWIN: Say again?

LUCAS: Do you feel like that's true, like in your experience did you feel like…

IRWIN: I think probably because I mean, my dad was so involved in the work with the State Department and whatever else he was doing that sometimes it was, you know, if he was worried about the Bay of Pigs invasion or something like that, he probably wasn't thinking that much about what I was doing at that moment, you know. He had a lot going on, interesting experiences that I understood. And I think what I did gain from him is a total belief in service to others. Like, that's why the military, that's why I ended up doing jobs that they weren't that great, but I mean, they weren't jobs—I didn't go to work for some company just to make a ton of money. I did things which I think were of value to people, hopefully.

LUCAS: And you think that was—did you pick up on that by watching him? Or was it sort of passed on to you, that value?

IRWIN: It was passed on. I've thought about that. I've talked about it with my wife, Susan, and I think it's just there. I mean, I don't ever remember him sitting down telling me this or that or about values in service and stuff like that. It's just the way my parents were. And I think that's the way a lot of parents my age were.

LUCAS: So, some of your friends at Westtown then, if you got to know their families, did they have similar values or, you know, parents who also believed in service?

IRWIN: I don't think I really got to know any parents really well of any of my Westtown friends, because we were in a boarding school and I was—I didn't meet their parents.

LUCAS: Yeah.

IRWIN: But I think that's why I joined the Marine Corps, because that's what you did then. You did something. People either—kids got out of college and they were going to go to Peace Corps, they were going to go to Vista, they were going to go in the military, regardless of any war. Because I ended up signing up for the Marine Corps, I think it was my birthday in 1964. I think it was my senior year in high school. We were home. My parents lived in Washington and I was home, and I went to the recruiting office—not the recruiting office, selection office and took the test and signed up for that Marine PLC [Platoon Leaders Course] program that you do two summers while you're in college, and then when you graduate from college you're commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant. Well, I joined up in 19—what would that be, '64? And I hadn't even heard of Vietnam.

LUCAS: In high school you hadn't?

IRWIN: No. And by the time I graduated from Dartmouth and knew I was off to the—you know, I was going in the Marines on active duty, that was it. The whole world was about Vietnam.

LUCAS: Yeah, and a lot of different things that people were doing after graduation were entirely tied to Vietnam.

IRWIN: Yeah. And a lot of experiences at Dartmouth were tied to Vietnam protests and all that, because the school was complete sort of divided. It was ridiculous. Like you're either pro-war or against the war. You couldn't be rational. It was

very difficult. I don't know if anybody's told you about every day—not every day, I think it was every Wednesday, a line of people would stand on The Green. They'd form a line, and the guy at the first sight of the line had a big blue sign that said "Peace." And people would stand beside him, and all out along the paths on The Green, if they were against the war. You may have seen pictures of that.

LUCAS: I have, yes. And at first it's my understanding that it was just people who were against the war lining up, and in the coming years people would line up—correct me if I'm mistaken about this—people would line up on opposing sides of The Green if they were for the war.

IRWIN: Yes, were for the war. Yeah.

LUCAS: Yeah, so I want to ask you more about that, and about Dartmouth in general. I have so many things that we should talk about. But just to set the scene a little bit, so you started college at Dartmouth in '64, right?

IRWIN: I guess so, yes. It'd be the fall of '64, because I graduated in '68, yes. And I applied to two colleges, because I really wasn't that excited about where I went. I applied to—actually, when I was at Westtown I tried to get into the Naval Academy. I took all the tests to get in the Naval Academy, but I didn't get an appointment from a senator you needed because I really didn't have a senator because my parents were living out of the country. So, I ended up not going there. So I ended up applying to Wesleyan because I'd been there to visit my brother, and I applied to Dartmouth because my dad went to Dartmouth and I knew it meant a lot to him. And I didn't really care. So, I ended up going to Dartmouth. It wasn't any great academic decision. It was just I liked Dartmouth because it was out in the country. And Hanover was a much different town back then. It wasn't like…

LUCAS: Yeah, what was your impression of it, the town and the college before you went?

IRWIN: It was more like a smaller town with the college being the main part of the town. And the town was much—well, today it's so, I don't know how you say it—it's so commercially yuppie. I mean, it's all these fancy stores and all this. Then it was like, you know, there was Campions [Store] where you could get clothes, you could get skis. There's the Co-op,

which was really cool because they had all sorts of camping gear, skis and all that. And there was the Village Store on Allen Street. I worked there. I delivered kegs for the Village Store because of the fraternities. That was my job while I was in college. [laughter] So, but it was just a, it was a low key, it was a nice place then. I liked it. And then I ended up going back and working there later on in my life at the hospital, and the town changed, and changed more and more.

LUCAS: So, do you have any memories of your arrival at Dartmouth in 1964 in the fall, or that first term?

IRWIN: Yes. Yeah, I remember, oh yeah, the freshman trip was the best thing. I remember going with my dad dropping me off. He and I bought myself a backpack, and then I went on one of the freshman trips at Mount Moosilauke [NH], and it was three days. It was really great. And then, even better the next year I was a leader of one of the trips and that was really fun. I really enjoyed that. But, so there was the freshman trip. And then you came back to the school and you had to wear the freshman beanies. Have you seen those?

LUCAS: Yes. Yeah, do you want to just explain those quickly?

IRWIN: Well, it's like a sailor hat. The hat part was green and the part around was white and had a 68 number on the front. And we had to wear our beanies all the time, and any upperclassman who saw you or needed something done, they'd just say, "Hey, come here." And you'd have to go help them move furniture into their rooms and clean their rooms and do all sorts of stuff. I'd forgotten all about that. It was kind of neat, actually, because it was a way you met upperclassmen. And I remember them all being pretty nice. Yeah. I don't remember anything negatively hazing or anything like that. So… and so then classes started within a week, I guess. And I lived in Gile Hall, Room 405.

LUCAS: Me, too. I lived in 105.

IRWIN: Really? Huh. What was a little interesting, my father said, "I lived in that room." He lived in 405. And that was completely coincidental. I mean, it was completely coincidental. Yeah.

LUCAS: Woah. That's crazy.

IRWIN: Yep, and you know, it was a crazy place. We had water fights and all that sort of thing. It was pretty—we were pretty immature. [laughter] It was a bunch of kids [inaudible]. I think it's a lot different now. I hope it is. So…

LUCAS: Oh, go ahead.

IRWIN: No, you go ahead.

LUCAS: Okay. So, how did you spend your time on campus and what did you end up studying the four or so years you were there? What were those like, [inaudible] classes?

IRWIN: Okay, I decided to be a Spanish major because I already spoke Spanish, so I could exempt all the language requirements, so I did the literature and that sort of part of it. And the reason I did that was at that point I was pretty idealistic and I wanted to become like my dad in the State Department, so I could take lots of government courses and courses that would be good for that. But by the time I graduated, and it was after my time in the Marine Corps, I didn't have much interest in being in the State Department anymore.

But, so I took Spanish literature, some really great professors. Robert Russell, Bob Russell, was my favorite Spanish professor. I hope he's still living. I went down to his retirement, well, it was probably 10 years ago. He had a little retirement tea and I went and visited him, said goodbye, wished him well. Just a super person. I had some personal issue that I was really upset about, and he invited me to come. I don't think I did, but he invited me to come out and spend a weekend with he and his wife to get away from Hanover at the time. Just a good person, Robert Russell.

And while I'm on it, other professors I really remember was a zinger, Vince [Vincent E.] Starzinger, a government professor. You may have heard of him. He was the 8:00 class. He'd stand up in his three-piece blue suit with a 12-inch cigar, and give you a lecture that you could not—it was just awe inspiring. And then I had an English professor, a literature teacher, Professor Schultz, and he was cool. And one of the first… a couple times he had his students like go out in the woods at night for two hours in the woods, and then come home and write about it. And he did a couple

assignments like that which were really interesting and kind of fun.

LUCAS: The funny experience you had in the English course… I major in English and have a professor who gives similar assignments for his non-fiction classes. They're to go into the woods or go into the cemetery and observe, and then yeah, leave and write about it. So, yeah, there's something very magical about that kind of teaching at Dartmouth, and this apparently existed for you as well.

IRWIN: Yes. Yeah, I've got to say actually in talking with you a little bit, I'm remembering a lot of good things about Dartmouth, but I think what happened was the war destroyed it. It tainted all the fun, joy and a lot of the other positive things from the school. So when I remember it, I don't—things happened. Some of the good things haven't popped up because of that.

LUCAS: Yeah, do you want to talk about Dartmouth in terms of Vietnam? You were talking about the gatherings on The Green every Wednesday. And yeah, I imagine that it was a complex relationship between the students and the two sides they took and the school. Yeah, so do you have any other memories or impressions of the school and how it, as you said, destroyed the fun, or tainted it?

IRWIN: Well, there was also the racial issues going on at that time in '68. So, George Wallace from Alabama…

LUCAS: Oh, yeah, the governor. He ran for President.

IRWIN: Yeah, and he ended up getting shot, not killed. But he came to Dartmouth, and I went to his talk, which was in Webster Hall. Is it still Webster Hall, sort of the hall next to the library, the right side of the library looking at Baker from the front? And it was like a small theater play area and he spoke there. But all he did was tell jokes about Harvard, and dinging Harvard and making jokes. So, he ended up leaving Dartmouth with a sort of the press saying "George Wallace has great acceptance at Dartmouth College," you know, "kids are laughing, people are listening to him" and all that. But as he left, he was getting into his car—he had a limo with a State Trooper driver, and a bunch of people stopped the car and were pounding on it and pretending they were going to roll it over, try to roll it over and things like that, until the New Hampshire State Police came and cleared out the

mob of college kids and he got away. And then a couple weeks later, Malcolm X spoke. So, it was quite an interesting time. And…

LUCAS: Did you feel like—oh, go on.

IRWIN: No, I think you probably have a better question.

LUCAS: Oh, no, not necessarily. I was just wondering about the—yeah, I want to hear what you have to say. My questions aren't, yeah, they're not necessary.

IRWIN: Well, everything was, it was so much of that. And I think you were so inundated with it, and I'm probably not the most academic or intellectual type person, so I probably didn't spend hours contemplating what this meant and what that meant at the time. It was sort of just like day in and day out of working towards graduating. And really, you asked me what I did at Dartmouth. I studied. I had to study hours to get my gentleman "C". I mean, I lived in Baker Library [Baker-Berry Library] up in the, what's it, the Tower Room? Is it still there?

LUCAS: The Tower Room, yeah. It's in the…

IRWIN: With the big armchairs looking out the window. I had my armchair there and I had a board, which I think was from a shelf in the library. I put it across the two arms of the chair, and that's where I studied probably eight hours a day when I wasn't in class. Because if I wasn't in class, I ran cross-country on my freshman team, and so I was either running cross-country or studying or eating. [laughter] Yeah. And let's see, I ended up joining a fraternity in my sophomore year, which meant nothing to me. It ended up being a place for me to live free, because I became the treasurer, and so I got free board, I mean room, because I was the treasurer of the fraternity. But, the fraternity was another thing that really I'm not sure why I joined it, because all my best friends were in different fraternities. We all ended up in different fraternities.

LUCAS: Yeah, what was—or first of all, which fraternity at Dartmouth did you join?

IRWIN: It was Zeta Psi.

LUCAS: Yeah, we still have Zeta Psi.

IRWIN: Pardon?

LUCAS: We still have Zeta Psi, and the house is on Webster, correct?

IRWIN: Right. Next to Beta. No, is it Beta?

LUCAS: Oh, go ahead.

IRWIN: Go ahead. No, I can't remember what the name of the other fraternity was. I get mixed up. So, let's see, that's it. I studied, I delivered kegs on fraternity meeting nights on Wednesdays and on Saturday nights.

LUCAS: Did you deliver them by—did you carry them or did you use a car or something like that?

IRWIN: Well, I had a pickup truck, so you'd go around and then you'd have to carry them out of the truck down into the basement, and then you'd tap the keg for them and go. I really was popular, though. It was amazing. You'd walk into a fraternity house with a keg of beer on your back, and wow, people would cheer for you and everything. [laughter]

LUCAS: You're a hero. [laughter]

IRWIN: Pardon?

LUCAS: [inaudible] Yeah, I imagine that you would be like welcomed over here if you walked in with a keg, yeah. So, and you also while you were at Dartmouth, before we get away from it, you studied abroad in Spain for your major.

IRWIN: Yes, I did, in Salamanca, Spain. We were there at the University of Salamanca, but most of our—our courses were taught by Dartmouth professors, and most of us, we wrote a thesis, you know, a paper in Spanish, a thesis in Spanish while we were there. Our professor there was Arturo Madrid, and he and his wife were like our caretakers where we were there, and we all lived in different houses and with different families. And it was pretty interesting, because the different types of houses or families you might live with was so different. I lived in with this old, old gentleman who was a dentist and his wife. And I got there late the first day, and I

go into the dining room for dinner and these two nice looking girls are there. Wow. They ended up being from Mary Baldwin [University, Staunton, VA], and they had another room in the apartment, so these people were making money by having students live with them. But, it was interesting. It was nice. I liked Spain a lot.

But, I had another friend who—and this house had normal heat and everything—I had another guy who had to write his thesis sitting in the dining room of the house he was living in, or the apartment he was living in, and what they had was what they called a brasero. It was like a charcoal pot with charcoal burning under their—they put it under their dining room table, and then they'd have a big heavy tablecloth you'd put over your legs and stuff so it would keep you warm. And he ended up writing these papers sitting at that table with that tablecloth up over his shoulders to keep warm. [laughter]

LUCAS: Pretty funny. Good idea.

IRWIN: Yeah. So I, when we got two weeks off vacation or leave time, vacation off while we were there, and you could do what you want with it, and some guys—most people paired up and went off. I went off by myself because I thought I'd learn more and see more, and so I took trains, and I went from Salamanca to Madrid, and then down through Seville and Cordoba in southern Spain, and living on no money. Spain is a pretty interesting or not classy pensiones.

LUCAS: So, how did that experience—while you were there, did you feel like you were connected to what was going on at all in the United States or at Dartmouth or in Vietnam?

IRWIN: Wow. I don't recall. I don't recall any connection. No. I know the people who went to France had a hard time because the French people gave the American kids a lot of grief about Vietnam, even though they're the ones that got us involved in it. [both talk at the same time] Say again?

LUCAS: No, go ahead.

IRWIN: So, in Spain it was very much like, I think, an escape from the Vietnam thing for me. Now I don't recall any connection of the two.

LUCAS: What was it like then returning to Dartmouth as the war was progressing?

IRWIN: Well, I guess that's when it all was building and building, and that's when all the marches were. I can't recall that it was any different. I just recall that, I have this image of my Dartmouth experience and the polarization of the student body over the war. And, but there were fun times. I remember the time when there was a huge snow, and there was a huge snowball fight. It ended up that kids were lined up on both sides of The Green pelting all the cars that came through. It got so bad the State Police shut the town down so cars couldn't come in, and then Dean Seymour, "Dad Thad," Thad Seymour, who recently passed away, got smart and he led one side of the street with an attack of the other side of the street kids, and he re-focused the whole snowball fight away from the cars and the people driving through town, and they just had a big snowball fight on The Green. [both talk at the same time] And he was a very… Pardon me?

LUCAS: Did that become a tradition?

IRWIN: I don't think it became a tradition. It just ended that fight that was causing so much damage at that time.

LUCAS: Oh, just that one.

IRWIN: Yeah, that was just one time, yeah. I think I read recently he passed away, and in this story about him, not his obituary, but somebody wrote up about him, they mentioned that snowball fight.

LUCAS: Yeah, so with the tension on campus, is there anything that you recall happening outright or subtle other than gathering on The Green? Anything that sort of you felt from how the student body was interacting with itself or with the Administration?

IRWIN: Not really. All I remember is my graduation, which was… because by that time, by the day I went to graduation—the day before I graduated, we were, all of us who were getting commissioned as officers in the military from Dartmouth were commissioned up in BEMA, up by the big tower.

LUCAS: Yeah, [both talk at the same time] [inaudible] on East Wheelock Street.

IRWIN: Yeah, it's something up back behind there in the BEMA area outdoors, and we all were commissioned then. So we were all lieutenants or ensigns in the military by that time we graduated. So we were told, "Do not react to anything that you hear or see. Don't make a scene." So, we didn't. And my friend, Jamie Newton, who was in Spain who I really liked, he was the valedictorian. He was very active in the SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, anti-war. He was the valedictorian and his famous line was, "And thank God we're losing the war in Vietnam." Well, we didn't boo, but I'll tell you our parents did. [laughter] My father—my sister-in-law tells me my dad was standing on his chair way in the back yelling, "Shame. Shame." And my mother and my brother said, "Frank, sit down, sit down." And my brother's wife says, "Let him yell." [laughter] So, anyway.

So then, that was it. Packed up, went home. My parents were living in Middlebury by then. Went home and spent the summer in Middlebury, Vermont, and I think I was working. I worked as a mechanic in a farm machinery dealer until I went off to active duty, I mean, yeah, to flight school. I went straight to flight school in I guess it was August or September. September…

LUCAS: Of 1968, right?

IRWIN: Pardon me?

LUCAS: Of 1968, which was a big year. A lot happened that year.

IRWIN: Yeah. That was during the Tet Offensive and all that, and the war was just huge. So, I went through flight school. It took me a year to get through flight school, and was sent to California where I transitioned into the CH-46 helicopter as a pilot, which is, I don't know, the CH-46 is a tandem rotor helicopter, the one with the rotors on the top front and back. It's the smaller version. The Army, and the one they use today, the CH-47, and that's a much bigger helicopter. CH-46 was built to hold about 20 troops, but it was very underpowered and had a little problem where it would break in half in flight back then. But, these little problems were all fixed, and it became the stable helicopter for the Marine Corps from 1964 when they first got them and they were retired in 2015. And I think they had about 300 of them that were built, and obviously many, many of them didn't survive.

And they've all been renovated and upgraded, and a lot of them are still being used by—the State Department uses them, and a lot of companies use them now that they've all been rebuilt and upgraded. Anyway. CH-46 is the best aircraft the Marine Corps ever had. [laughter]

LUCAS: So, what was—yeah, you trained in Pensacola for it, and then you also trained in California.

IRWIN: Yeah.

LUCAS: What were those experiences like, and especially given that you thought you were going to get orders to go to Vietnam? And you did get orders to go to Vietnam. But yeah, what were those training experiences like?

IRWIN: Well, Pensacola was an amazing experience because you'd never been in an airplane before, well, you'd never flown an airplane before, and so you go through a pre-flight training where they give you tests in physics, trigonometry and something else. Anyway, I had to go to stupid study to get sharpened up on the physics and trigonometry part. [laughter] That's what they call it. Doing the stupid study for a week, you do these program test things, little workbook things. And by the time you get out, you know this stuff or you would have—in college you would have spent a term studying it, but here you can learn what you need to know in a week because it's all fanned right at you. So, and then after that you went out to fly a little T-34, which is like a single engine small airplane with a pilot and the instructor sits behind the student.

And after you get through that, they sent us out to another airfield called Whiting, where you flew the T-28, which is more like a World War II fighter airplane, big engine, huge propeller, probably one of the most difficult airplanes—well, it's the most difficult airplane I've ever flown because it's so primitive and so powerful, everything you have to do is done manually, where nowadays in an airplane you just push a button and it turns it up. And there you had to turn dials and wheels to make the airplane stay in balanced flight as you added power and reduced power. And, so the basic flight in that, learned how to fly. And then we did acrobatics in it. You had to learn to do some acrobatics. And then we did basic instruments so you could learn to fly instruments. So, you'd be in the back seat in the airplane and they'd have this hood

thing they'd put over you, it would fold over you so you couldn't see outside. So you learned how to fly it by just the instruments. And then you went to navigational instruments doing that, so you learned to navigate all by instruments and fly.

And I remember one time where the instructor had me shoot a—it was we were flying along and he said "okay" and I was shoot an approach, or fly an approach to an airfield, so I tuned in the reuse system and all that, and I flew down the approach as I was supposed to, and all of the gauges were showing me, and he said, "Okay, pop the hood." And what I should have seen was a runway, but all I saw was woods. I tuned it into the wrong radio station, so I shot an approach to nowhere. And I remember when I was going off to flight school, I thought, *Boy, this is gonna be fun! This is really gonna be fun!* [laughter] It was not fun. First of all, the days were like, you start out at 5:00 in the morning and you might have to go do two flights in a Link Trainer, and then you go to breakfast. Then you could go to ground school from like 8:00 to noon, and then you'd go fly one or two hour-and-a-half flights. And then you'd have to come home and eat. And then you'd have to study and prepare for the same stuff for the morning. You'd have to prepare for the Link Flights, the real flights, and the problem is you have to memorize. You have to memorize stuff, and they proved back at that time that you could memorize something cold, and the minute you got in the air, 60% of it you'd forget. So, it was really challenging.

And the instructors were all Marine helicopter pilots back from Vietnam, and they were flying too many flights a day, like four or five students a day, seeing the same problems, same thing every student every time, because they'd have a speech they'd give: "Okay, now we're gonna do a loop. You lower the nose, you gain air speed, da da da da… and you pull back on a stick." He explains everything you have to do. And then he'll say, "This is what you're going to do, so don't do it." And he'd tell you all the mistakes people make. And then you'd do it, and you'd make all the mistakes. So, they were rather impatient. And I had this one instructor, really good guy, but he was a real screamer. His name was Captain Major, and he ended up becoming Major Major. He got promoted. But, he would just yell. They would just yell. I mean, I remember I'd be on final approach and I'd be all tensed up and he'd key the mic and he'd scream,

"Goddammit, relax!" [laughter] That really doesn't help you relax.

I had another—oh, my roommate had another instructor who was a real screamer and yelled at him all the time, and he used to bang him on the head with his knee board. The knee board's a clipboard you have strapped to your knee with all your information you need on it, and write on it. And he used to lean over to the front seat and hit my friend on the helmet with his knee board. [laughter] So one time, my buddy, his name was Bud Grubs, he opens the canopy, grabs the knee board and throws it out of the airplane. And the instructor said, "Wow, Grubs, you're the first student that's showed me any guts." And from then on he never harassed him anymore.

But it was a scary time, I mean, scary because the flying was kind of scary. I mean, you learned how to fly in formation with four aircraft, all students in them, and you're flying a couple feet from the other aircraft, all four of you, and these are guys who hadn't been in an airplane more than maybe six months at that time. And then the biggest event was when we carrier qualified, where we landed on the aircraft carrier, the [USS] Lexington [CV-16].

LUCAS: Yeah, do you want to continue talking about what you're saying with your training?

IRWIN: Okay. The most memorable part of the training was what we called "hitting the boat," which is when we carrier qualified, or qualified to land and take off from an aircraft carrier. We did this in the T-28, which was, as I was saying earlier, it was like a World War II fighter plane, 1,800 horsepower, three-bladed prop, and the instructor or two pilots sit one behind the other. So, the day we hit the—to hit the boat, you practice qualifying on the ground, and you use what's called the Fresnel Lens or "meatball" to fly so you know, it keeps you on the glide slope so your aircraft will touch down hopefully at the right spot on the carrier deck, which is the number 2 wire, because there's four wires across a deck, or cables, and the tailhook, the hook on the back of the aircraft that hangs down can catch that airplane and stop it.

So, for about a month we went to a place called Brewton Field out in Alabama, which was in the town of Brewton, Alabama. I think that's the name of the town. But it was a

tiny little town, had a neat little restaurant type bar, a place that we could go for lunch. But, so we had to be out there by 5:00 in the morning because to do the carrier qualifying you're flying very low, very slow, and wind really makes a big difference. So, we'd go out there, do a flight, which would only take about 20 minutes because you get about four attempts using the mirrors that [inaudible] described. And then we'd hang around until about 5:00 at night when the wind would die down, and we'd get in another flight.

So, we were in a flight, which means there were five of us—six of us, I guess, that flew together every day. And our instructor, who was the LSO, landing signal officer, who was the guy who would talk you down. So, we were called Polecats, and I was Polecat 1-3. But, so what you have when you come in to land on the aircraft carrier, you fly alongside of the aircraft carrier from front to back, and then you turn what's called the base leg, at which point you're looking at the carrier deck out your left side, and you pick up what's called the meatball, which is an orange light that reflects in a mirror. And as you turn onto the final street in approach to the aircraft carrier, the ball will move up or down. If you're high, the ball goes high in the mirror, and if you go low, the ball goes—the reflection which we call the ball goes low, and it finally turns red, and at that point if it goes red, usually the LSO will have you wave off where you add power and keep going, go around again instead of trying to make the approach.

So we did about… We did that, for about a month we'd do that, go out there and we'd use the practices. And then finally one day we'd do the real thing, and we all took off from NAS [Naval Air Station] Ellyson Field, which was—no, it was Saufley Field, I'm sorry, in Pensacola. And we had an instructor who led us, and we were all in formation on him, and we flew out over the Gulf of Mexico until we saw this postage stamp down there, [laughter] and that was the aircraft carrier.

LUCAS: [inaudible]

IRWIN: And then the instructor would end up—or the pilot who led us out would just go fly around and pattern away from the aircraft carrier, and then we would end up shooting the patterns, and we did one touch and go—well, the first time we just did a little pass. We came in—this is all one at a

time, you're lined up, and you come in and you do a low pass, low over the deck, take off and go around again. So we did that. Then we did a touch and go where you bounce, you touch the wheels on. And then we did five arrested landings where the hook is down and it catches the aircraft. And then you raise the hook, they taxi you over. And these aircraft were so powerful, they didn't use catapults like they do now. You see the jets being launched off big carriers with the catapults, the steam catapults. I think you may have seen that. But these aircraft had such power that they could take off, that you'd just hold the brakes and put it to full military power, and take your feet off the brakes and go off the end of the deck. And the plane would keep going. It might sink a little bit off the nose, and then you could fly it out straight and then start to climb when you got your air speed. Pretty neat. Pretty exciting.

And always a lot of incidents. A friend of mine, a guy I knew, went in the water. He was very lucky. He saw his air speed—they say "don't look at your air speed," because you see the air speed as you're going out over the edge of the deck, and it's slower than the airplane will fly. You know it won't fly, but because there's a lag in the air speed indicator, it's actually going faster than you think. But he thought—so he pulled the stick back to make it fly, which is the last thing you want to do because it makes it slower, and it stalled. So he stalled and went off the side of the boat. He was lucky he went off the side because he didn't get hit by it. And they said, "He was out running along the top of the wing before it hit the water," they laughed. [laughter] Not quite, but he was so fast getting out of the aircraft, he was very lucky. They say he was white as a sheet. And he was one of the few black aviators I knew in Pensacola at the time.

So, let's see what else? Then at night we had what they called the debrief for the flight. It was in a bar in Pensacola and the flight instructor or your landing signal officer would be there, and it was like a party, celebrating your success. And the most impressive thing was one of the flight instructors could do this trick where he would stand on his hands on a bar with a glass of beer on the bar in front of him, pick it up in his teeth and drink the beer up while he was standing on his hands. Now, that was something I really remember. [laughter]

LUCAS: Wow, I'm trying to picture how that worked. [laughter]

IRWIN: Yeah, I don't know how he did it, but he did it, and it was the thing he did at every one of these debriefs he did for the flights. And so, after that I ended up going to California, transitioned into the CH-46 helicopter, went home on leave with orders to Vietnam, Da Nang, Vietnam. And I got as far as Okinawa, which is an island on the way, and my orders were cancelled for Vietnam because by that time the Marine Corps was pulling out a lot of their units. And, so I ended up being a maintenance test pilot in Okinawa, and again in Japan, where I used to ferry helicopters from Okinawa that came from Vietnam and fly them up to Japan, which was about five hours over the ocean.

That was another thing that was kind of exciting and fun, because these aircraft would come out of Vietnam and they were really damaged, and bullet holes in them and stuff like that. The windows were all knocked out because the grunts used to break the windows out so they could shoot out the windows. And, so we're flying these helicopters in the winter up over the Sea of Japan. The heaters were removed because they were extra weight, so they took them out in Vietnam. Freezing, with all we had in side was two huge tanks of fuel, extra fuel tanks, so we could make it to the very southern tip of Japan, where we could stop at a Japanese air force base and get fueled, and then fly from there to Iwakuni, Japan, which was a Marine Corps air station in Japan near Hiroshima, and I would spend the night there. And then the next day we'd fly on to Atsugi Naval Air Station, which is south of Tokyo, sort of between Tokyo and Mount Fuji, where they were overhauled.

And then I was sent back as a test pilot for the—assigned as *the* test pilot assigned to the company to test the aircraft after they were rebuilt and accept them back into the Marine Corps to be sent back for use. So, that was…

LUCAS: [inaudible] in Vietnam?

IRWIN: Pardon me?

LUCAS: To be used in Vietnam, or elsewhere?

IRWIN: I think some went back to Vietnam, some went back to the States, because—I'm not sure exactly because it was being wound down by that time. But I think probably a lot of them

went back to Vietnam. But it was incredible because you'd see these things, we'd fly them and they looked like wrecks. The paint's all faded, you'd see all the patches. They patched them when they'd get shot, the skin riddled with little pieces of metal over it. And then, when they'd come out of the factor overhauled, they looked like brand new aircraft.

LUCAS: One thing that I was wondering about, so it's interesting that you were in this way still interacting with what was going on in Vietnam, even though your orders to go to Vietnam got changed. I was wondering what it was like to go from expecting to be in the middle of that to then spending your time in Japan and Okinawa. Yeah, because on your blog, "Protecting my six," you said that you didn't expect [inaudible] until 25. So I'm just wondering what all that was?

IRWIN: Yeah. I mean, even though I was sent to Japan and other places—I was in a couple of little, other squadrons for a short time in Okinawa before I went to Japan, and so you never really knew. I mean, at any time they could have said, "Okay, we want to send you back to…" You could have gone to Vietnam for, you know, a while. But it turned out I didn't. And I sort of felt guilty all my life because I didn't fly combat. But that's sort of a way this war screwed everybody up in a way about guilt. People who didn't go to Vietnam feel guilty because they didn't go to Vietnam when everybody's dead. The guys who went to Vietnam, didn't get hurt, feel guilty because their buddy got wounded. The guys who got wounded feel guilty because their buddy got killed. It's, I think, created a whole guilt kind of trauma for a lot of people from this war. And I think it's lasted, you know, it probably has lasted forever for a lot of these people.

Because now, recently, my latest thing before this virus, I spent six years as a volunteer at the VA, Veterans Administration Hospital. And I'm a driver, and I drive patients from up where I live in central Vermont down to the big hospital in White River, which is an hour or so. Once a week I would go around and pick up four or five guys in the area, and drive them down, wait for them while they had their appointments, and then bring them back to their homes. And I'll tell you, the Vietnam guys have had it tough. Their lives have been tough, and it might not be something you… And now they're still dying because of Agent Orange. I mean, that's what's so tragic is the number of guys who left

Vietnam unhurt, but are poisoned by Agent Orange. So, that's the end of my philosophy.

LUCAS: Did you feel that you or anyone else you were surrounded by was experiencing any form of that guilt while you were a pilot? Or did it set in later?

IRWIN: I always sort of felt guilty that, you know, I hadn't proven myself as a pilot. I mean, after I got back I ended up in a job in Cherry Point, North Carolina, where I didn't get to fly, so I told the Marine Corps I wanted to get out. They had an early out program. And I was expecting a letter for them to let me out three months early, and then they called me up and they offered me a regular commission where they expect you to stay in forever and make a career out of it. So I said, "Well, I guess you didn't get my letter. I asked to get out." And they said, "Well, why do you want to get out? We want you to stay in. We think you're a good man." And I said, "Well, I want to fly. I want to be a pilot. I don't want to fly this desk down here." And the guy said, "Well, I'll call you back. I'll see if I can get you a job flying." And the only place I knew that anybody was flying at that time because there was no money after the war, I mean, squadrons didn't have money to fly basically, so the only place I thought I might get a job, they might get me a job was a flight instructor in Pensacola, and I didn't think I wanted that.

But he called me back and he said, "How would you like to go to HMX-1?" And I said, "Hum, what's that?" And HMX-1 is the squadron that, among other things, flies the Presidential helicopter, the one you see landing, and our present Clown-in-Chief making his speeches in front o, to the press so they can't hear him. But, anyway I ended up in that squadron, which was really a neat squadron because in every other squadron there was only one type of aircraft, so you'd fly the same model every day. At HMX they had four different helicopters, so I was flying the CH-46, I was flying the Huey, UH-1, I flew the SH-3G which was a military version of the Presidential helicopter which we used for training, and then I was a co-pilot on the Presidential helicopter at times.

So, and the best part of that place was I was the flight line officer on the non-White House aircraft side. They had two hangars, one for the top security helicopters, and then the ones that were regular helicopters. So I was the flight line officer, and so I was responsible for all the mechanics on the

flight line. And that was the neatest job. It was like being the father and teacher and motivator and protector of these young Marines who do phenomenal work on these aircraft, and I became very close to these young Marines. And that was a very, very moving experience.

LUCAS: Yeah, I want to hear more about your work with squadron 1. Just to wrap up a little more about Japan, though, because yeah, the type of work you were doing changed a lot and the setting changed a lot when you went from Japan and being close to Vietnam to then returning to the US. But yeah, so after 1970, you were redirected to Japan, and I was wondering what it was like to be in post-occupation Japan, because correct me if I'm wrong, it was [inaudible] from having any military force at that time? Yeah, I was just wondering about what it was like to interact with, if at all, people in Japan at that time?

IRWIN: Well, the Japanese people?

LUCAS: Yeah, the Japanese people, especially in that, you know, it was certainly post-war, and it was having an economic boom, but yeah, I'm just wondering what it was, if you interacted at all with the people there?

IRWIN: What was incredible to me was, what was this, 1970? Yeah, when did we bomb them? 1945. 25 years ago we bombed Japan with two atomic bombs, and 25 years later as an American in Japan, they were the friendliest, nicest people I've ever met. I mean, it's incredible. I was on a train and I was trying to get back from Tokyo, back to my base, and I needed to find out where my stop was, so I went up to this Japanese guy, I said, "Yamato, Yamato, eh, eh?" You know, like pulling question marks with my hands and face. And he says, "Oh, sure, Yamato. [laughter] It's two stops down. I'll let you know when it's time to get off." Perfect English.

So then, there was very good relationships between Americans and the Japanese, at least I felt that way. Now it's gotten bad because the Japanese don't want Americans on Okinawa anymore, and we gave back Okinawa to Japan, and now they're trying to throw the Americans off the base, and American troops have, there have been rapes and things like that of the Japanese women. So, things are different again now in Japan—in Okinawa. I think Japan is probably fine.

So the mechanics who were Japanese who worked on the aircraft were so dedicated and hardworking, and when you'd go out to do a test flight, they weren't—nobody was allowed in the aircraft, none of them were, so it would just be me as the pilot with no co-pilot and the mechanic from the Marine Corps, and we'd do the test flights. And if something went wrong, the Japanese guys would go crazy, they'd be so upset and embarrassed and all that, where the difference was, two years later, in the United States—I was with a co-pilot on a flight, we took a helicopter from Quantico out to North Island, California Naval Base for overhaul, and we were supposed to pick up one that had been overhauled by Americans in California, and were going through the pre-flight of the one that's all fixed, so we're supposed to take out, and a pilot says, "This transmission mount's cracked." You could see it from inside the aircraft. I mean, the whole helicopter could come apart. And the guy who was in charge of the maintenance place there—this is a Friday afternoon and so of course he wanted to go home, he said, "Well, that wasn't on the contract." So, instead of fixing it so the airplane was safe to fly, they hadn't done anything. They didn't care. It was a whole different type of mentality between the Japanese and these American union workers back then.

And I remember when I was in Japan the movie *Tora! Tora! Tora!* was showing in Tokyo, and I thought about going, just to see the movie. It was about the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, an American movie, it was showing in Tokyo. I was going to go watch it in this theater, but I didn't go. I thought it would have been very interesting to watch the people in Japan as they watched that movie, but I did not do that.

LUCAS: Why didn't you go?

IRWIN: I don't know. That was a long time ago. [laughter] Probably because I couldn't get to Tokyo, to be away at the time or something. It was a long way up from where I was.

LUCAS: Did you have any feelings of—so they were generally very friendly, but did you have any feelings about in some way representing the US, did you feel like that? Or did you just feel like you were there as a pilot, as a member of the Marine Corps? Like did you feel sort of any sense of national identity coming with you?

IRWIN: Well, it's hard to say. I mean, I would always try to be not the Ugly American, wherever I was, because of my background, and respectful. But, I wasn't around that many people because I lived on base and I didn't travel around that much, just because of the logistics of everything. So, but there was another pilot with me, but his wife came over to Japan, and they ended up renting a little—I never went there—a tiny little house in Japan, and I just said, "Why don't you just go do whatever you want." And I did all the flying while he and his wife lived in Japan for three months. [laughter]

LUCAS: You were just like "you can go ahead and…"

IRWIN: Yeah, I didn't have anything to do. If I was flying, that was great. There wasn't much else to do. I'd just sit around and wait on base, because I couldn't just… And so I said, "Well, why don't you go out and just…" So I did all the flying. It was kind of neat actually because there wasn't that much flying to do, so I could do what there was. And there was a time, I didn't mention it, before I got the test pilot job up there, I was attached to a detachment of three CH-46 helicopters that were based in Atsugi that provided helicopter support to a Marine artillery base which was at the base of Mount Fuji, Camp Fuji, and we were surprised it was medevac helicopter support or anything they needed a helicopter for. So I got to fly around a lot of Mount Fuji area and saw a good bit of that part of Japan from the cockpit.

LUCAS: Yeah, I mean, you seemed to really, really like flying. But I bet, yeah, just like… Did you enjoy flying while you were actually doing it?

IRWIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I enjoyed flying. It took me—I had a hard time getting through flight school, because I was so stressed by trying to do well. I mean, a lot of times I'd go out and get ready for a flight before the instructor would come out. I'd puke behind the aircraft, because I was a little nervous. And finally, at the very end of my flight training, the last thing was having to carrier qualify. You'd go in the helicopter squad and then it's a quick thing, they just transition you into a helicopter for a while. And I had this old retired Navy commander who they'd hired back as an instructor, and he said to me, he said, "Hale, you are one of the most natural pilots I've ever known, but you're too tense." He says, "You

ought to take two shots of Scotch before every flight and you'll be the best." [laughter]

So finally as I got more and more experience and I became more comfortable, it became almost like second nature flying the helicopter, the CH-46, the one I flew so much. I mean, when I first flew it, to hover you have to concentrate every muscle and nerve and sensory perception. Looking out the windows, it hovered because, you know, the thing wants to go up and down, it wants to go left and right, it wants to go front and back. So, hovering is very difficult. And they used to be, take all that… But by the time I was a test pilot, I could hover without even looking out of the aircraft. I'd lean over looking at an instrument like three inches away so I could read exactly what it was, and the helicopter would stay rock solid just because the sense was there, and it… Anyway, I don't know where I was going with that, but… Are you there?

LUCAS: I am. Yeah.

IRWIN: There was a story. One time we, a friend of mine, the co-pilot and I, had to go up to the artillery range at Mount Fuji to pick up a fighter pilot who was an F-4 Phantom fire pilot Marine who was at the time working as a forward air controller. They're with the grunts and they call in air strikes, and they use pilots to do it. And he had the weekend off, so we went up to pick him up to bring him down to Yokosuka, near Tokyo, so he could have a weekend off. And he made the comment, he said—this is going to be a bleeper maybe—he said, "You know, flying a helicopter is kind of like masturbating. It's fun, but you don't want to tell your friends you do it." So, I said, "Okay, let's try this." So we went and landed at Atsugi and landed on a helicopter pad. I got out of the seat and sat in the back, and we let the big hotshot fighter pilot get in the cockpit, and "okay, you've got it. Let's see you hover." After bouncing around and crashing and banging around for a while, he said, "Okay, I got it. It's not that easy." [laughter]

LUCAS: My God. [laughter] Did you feel like of places that you were, either in Okinawa or the second station in Japan, do you feel like you, despite there not being that many people to maintain relationships or like, you know, how was it socially?

IRWIN: There was about 10 pilots there. There was a group with the—the Mount Fuji group, so there were six pilots for that,

and then I was there. So there was about eight pilots, and it was a naval air station, so there were Navy pilots. And the Navy people had their families there, where the Marines were just in and out, you know. The Navy was there for a long time. But I didn't—I mean, I've been in touch with some of the people, but not much from there. I'm still in touch almost a couple times a week with one of the guys I went through carrier quals with, the Polecats guy, one of those guys, and I keep in touch with him all the time. But, I'm not too much in touch with other people. Time and business.

LUCAS: Yeah, and it sounds like you moved a lot. And then you—when was it that you went back to the US? Is that what you did directly after Japan?

IRWIN: Yes. I went to North Carolina for almost a year, until they sent me up to Quantico to be at HMX-1. And I was there, and I got married there, and I ended up resigning my commission in 1975, and I got out of the Marine Corps.

LUCAS: What was—yeah, okay, so Marine helicopter squadron 1, you talked about joining that a little bit? Yeah, and on your blog that I've mentioned you said, "When I checked into the squadron on April 17th, 1972, I was the youngest and most junior officer, 1st lieutenant, on board." So you were—yeah, what was that like to be junior, but to be working with a very uniquely oriented squadron?

IRWIN: When I first got there I thought, *Why am I here?* I mean, I remember I walked into the operations officer and turned in my log book, and he looked at it and he said, "How come you haven't been flying for a year?" And I said, "Because they sent me to…" I explained it. He said—and I finally said, "Look, if you don't want me here, if I don't have enough hours, let me out. Just call headquarters and let me get out like I originally wanted to." He said, "Oh, no, no, no, no, lighten up." So, it was, so I didn't have enough hours to fly in the Presidential helicopter, and that's what they want you there for, to be a co-pilot on the alert aircraft. They have three helicopters that were on alert back then just across the river from the White House and Anacostia. So they had three aircraft that are on alert ready to launch in minutes. So, they liked to have a lot of co-pilots to do that. So they wanted to get me enough hours so I could do that.

So, I got to fly so much. Any mission they had with a CH-46 or anything else, I got to fly. That was great. I was flying all the time, and finally got enough hours so I could start flying on the Presidential helicopters. And then they'd do what's called the saturation tour where the new pilots go up and they spend three days on, three days off for months on the alert with the alert group up in Anacostia. And they would have drills. I mean, this was just a hangar. We had a nice ready room and a TV, they had a woodshop, they had all sorts of stuff you could do just to kill the time. And every crew of the three crews that were there would take their helicopter out one at a time and fly it around for an hour just to keep it coiled, running. Just like anything, you have to keep it running well to run it. So, we'd fly for an hour, come back, the White House would send us some movies to watch, we'd watch a movie. [laughter]

And then they would have these drills. I mean, picture this, you're sound asleep in this room with six pilots, these guys. All of a sudden the lights go on, the sirens go off, and you hear this "This is the White House. Execute dah dah dah dah dah," whatever it was. And the helicopters are in the hangar, but they're attached to the tow tractors. So what we would do was run and either meet the helicopter on the way out or jump in it on the flight line, and you'd be from sound asleep to maybe six minutes, seven minutes flying over the Tidal Basin at night. And it was pretty challenging, because the aircraft has what's called stabilization assistance, which electronics helps the aircraft know it's like frontwards or backwards; in fact, it helps it control itself. And that doesn't really come on line for about five minutes. So you're making a takeoff without that, so it's like flying a football until the [inaudible] came on, and then you'd fly, and we'd do different things, go different places. And one helicopter would go to the Pentagon, one would go to the Capitol and one would go to the White House and pick up certain people and take them different places.

LUCAS: You know, so this was during [Richard M.] Nixon's Presidency, right?...

IRWIN: Yes.

LUCAS: …that you were… Did you have any personal experiences with him? Or, yeah, or the White House?

IRWIN: Not really. I mean, I flew with him. I flew President Nixon back from Camp David. I was a co-pilot. On the night that he fired Archibald Cox—you know the history of that is he was the special prosecutor investigating Nixon, and he fired him. You know, they call it the Midnight Massacre or something? I flew him back that night. But, like when an aircraft landed and dropped him off or picked him up, the co-pilot would have the controls of the aircraft, and the pilot, aircraft commander, would always shake the, you know, lean over or the President lean in and thank him, shake his hand. I think he may have patted me on the shoulder once. [laughter] But, so I flew him. I flew [Andrei] Gromyko from Russia when he was visiting with the President. And in the non-Presidential lineup I flew Vice-Presidents and all sorts of admirals and high mucky mucks, just as a [inaudible] pilot. It was pretty fun.

And one interesting fun time was, I had to pick up some Navy admirals at the Pentagon, picked them up at the Pentagon helicopter pad, and flew them up to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, and landed on the football field. And we knew we were going to have to wait for them for a few hours, so they were getting out, we shut down the aircraft and, you know, we figured we'd just be lying around just under the aircraft in the shade or hanging out waiting for them. And the admiral said, "Hey, Captain, what are you doing? What did you think you'd do while we were waiting?" I said, "We'll just wait for you here." He said, "No, you guys come with us. This is going to be fun." And the Navy was testing a new gunboat that Boeing had built for them that was a hydrofoil. You know, it was like a, I guess a 60-foot long boat, maybe bigger, gunboat that at high speed it lets out those wings down onto the water and it picks up and flies on the water. So, they invited us along, so we got to go for a ride in that. We got this dry bed. You know, it was pretty neat.

LUCAS: That was pretty neat.

IRWIN: Yeah, it was cool [inaudible] And I guess it never, they never developed them any further. So, what was nice about, or interesting about the HMX squadron, that one, was that one day you'd be flying the President; the next day you could be flying in the woods with the students from the Marine Officers Basic School doing combat inserts and training missions for them, with them. Over a Saturday we might take

up members of the Quantico skydiving club, and take them up so they could skydive out of the aircraft. So, it was very varied. Did some test hops, did some testing, and at the Navy test labs in Dahlgren [VA] we used to, a friend of mine and I, another pilot and I had this duty, and we'd go down once a week with one of our CH-46 helicopters, and [inaudible] would get in, and they'd hang some stuff on the side of the aircraft, and they'd say, "Okay, fly toward that island. Don't look back," because this thing could hurt your eyes, whatever it was. And, so we did this for about, I don't know, five, six, seven weeks, and finally he said, "Okay, guys, we got it. We got exactly what we need." And it turns out they were developing the laser guided bomb system. So, it was soon—I'm not sure this is true, but I sort of think it was soon after that that we were able to take out some bridges in North Vietnam they'd been trying to bomb for years and had never been able to hit, and it was the beginning of the use of the laser bombs.

LUCAS: Wow.

IRWIN: Okay. Pardon?

LUCAS: Oh, are you again?

IRWIN: Well, my last real story I think is, the most meaningful mission I ever got to fly was, it wasn't flying the President or any other of those guys, but when the prisoners of war came back from Vietnam, they each were flown by the Air Force from the Philippines to different bases in the United States whether it would be to meet their families or whatever. So, one night I was sent up to Andrews Air Force Base [MD] to pick up somebody, and it turns out his name was Ray Alcorn, Naval commander. He was lieutenant when he got shot down. So, Ray Alcorn was a Navy A-4 pilot, jet pilot, who got shot down like on his, I don't know, 10th mission, and spent over seven years in prison camp in Vietnam.

So I, we got to fly up to Andrews Air Force Base where he got off the big jet from the Philippines. And he got on our plane, or helicopter, we shook his hand and I gave him my flight jacket because he was cold, and he sat, we had like a little vic chair seat sitting in the back, in the back of the CH-46 by the window so he could see. And he was to go to Bethesda Hospital where his family was and then where they'd be going over him physically for a while. So, I took off

out of—this isn't "I", it's "we"—the crew took off out of Andrews headed for, he needed to go to Bethesda Hospital, which is normally you do down on helicopter routes which are low above the water of the Potomac and the Anacostia River to wherever you're going. They have different helicopter routes, so they stay under the jet traffic going into Andrews and going into Washington National Airport, and it keeps you away from all the restricted zones like the White House and Washington.

Took off, called the Washington towers, the watch tower, in this Nighthawk 1-9 and then, "We're off of Andrews Air Force Base with Commander Alcorn on board. The commander is just coming home from seven years in Hanoi Hilton, and we need to go to Andrews." And they said, "Nighthawk 1-9, from the boys at Washington tower, welcome the commander home and you can go wherever you want across Washington at night." So, I was able to fly the helicopter over Washington, which was fully lit up on a clear night, I was skirting around the White House and then over Washington into Andrews—I mean, into Bethesda Hospital where his, I thought it was his wife and child, but it was his sister and niece were waiting for him. And by this time I'm fricking crying. It was the most moving experience of my life. And I've thought about this man and this event probably monthly for the last how many years?

And the weird thing was I had forgotten his name, and it really bothered me because I wanted to know what happened to him. But, about a year ago I was going through some letters that my father left that I had written when I was in high school and college and the Marines, and I found the letter describing that night, and it had his name, Ray Alcorn. So I tracked him down and I actually spoke to him. And he remembers that night as the point where his life changed, the welcome home, the flight over Washington. And so it was an important thing to him, it was an important thing to me. And unfortunately he recently, within the last couple of months, passed away from cancer. So that's that story, which to me was pretty important.

LUCAS: What was it like to find out that that was also a memorable time for him, given that you'd thought about it monthly for the last 45 years?

IRWIN: Yeah. I mean, it meant a lot that it meant a lot to him, because, I mean, he ended up doing a lot of things. He was in the Navy a long time after that, and the fact that he remembers that night like he did and how important it was… The way I found out more about him was, there's a woman in North Carolina in the town he lives in that works for a newspaper who decided to write articles about—or do what you're doing, but short interviews with each of the veterans she could find around that area, and she wrote an article in her local paper weekly for months, or a year, I think. And she met Ray and she wrote the article about Ray, and that's how I basically tracked him down was through her. And since then, she and I have been in touch, and she wrote an article about Ray for this book she wrote which is called *Welcome Home, Brother[: Memoirs of Vietnam War Veterans*].

LUCAS: *Welcome Home, Brother*?

IRWIN: Yes.

LUCAS: I'm just taking notes. Yeah, okay.

IRWIN: *Welcome Home, Brother*, and it's written by, her name is Michel Robertson. And, so she's written that, and she'd written the article about Ray, and then she did an addendum, attached it to Ray's about my experience with Ray. And, so it was kind of neat.

LUCAS: What kinds of things did she say about your experience with Ray?

IRWIN: Basically, she told about the flight that I just talked to you about.

LUCAS: So, that was in, Ray was released in 1973. You continued to work in the Marine Corps until 1975. And, so why 1975 did you transition out of your work as a pilot?

IRWIN: I got married in '74 to a woman who I met at the squadron. She was a clerk at the squadron actually. She was a local girl from Spotsylvania, Virginia, Fredericksburg area. And we got married and I adopted her young son. And it looks like what my next orders out of HMX would have probably been to go aboard a carrier, a helicopter ship, for a year unaccompanied tour. And I also felt that I'd seen a lot of my friends get passed over for major. And if you don't make

major in 20 years as a regular officer, they throw you out and you get nothing, no retirement. So you could be in 19 years, not make major, and you're done, and you have nothing for the 20 years. So I figured, *Wow, I don't even have any combat time. How am I gonna make it?*

But, so I decided, we decided to resign, and we moved to New Hampshire, where we lived in Concord until I found a job, and I ended up finding a job at Mary Hitchcock [Memorial] Hospital in Hanover, because the director of the hospital was a former Army colonel who was a head of ROTC at Dartmouth when I was there, and he was my advisor at Dartmouth. I went up just to visit with him and he ended up finding me a—he had a job opening at work, and I ended up taking a job and ended up working there for about 12 years at the hospital, which was in Hanover at the time, before…

LUCAS: And what did you do in that job?

IRWIN: The title was Assistant Director of Communications and Transportation, so I was responsible for all of the telephone systems, radio systems as assistant director, and also I was responsible for the orderlies who do all the patient movement, you know, carrying, transporting patients within the hospital. And, so it was good. I had a boss who was a woman who was not very well, so I ended up being the—she'd be gone for months at a time and I would run the place, and then when she came back it would be difficult. And finally I found out there was a job opening at the State of Vermont for a Director of Telecommunications for the state, and I got that job, worked there for 21 years.

LUCAS: Wow. What was that experience like working there for 21 years?

IRWIN: At first it was really good because I had a—you worked for political appointees, and the first ones I worked for were really good, and they let people who knew what they were doing do their job. So, I did a whole lot of great stuff when I first got there. I got contracts with phone companies that [inaudible], so I saved the state billions of dollars right off. And [inaudible] came in and then you got more and more incompetent leaders responsible, you had to work for, who were all they want to do is make a name for themselves. So, I basically resigned, retired early because I couldn't stand

my position in there. And, so it's too bad, I think, and I think that's a problem with politics. But, I don't think I want to go there anymore.

LUCAS: Yeah. Well, so what about being back in the area of Vermont and New Hampshire? Because you spent a significant amount of time there, as going to Dartmouth. Yeah, what was that like to be back and…

IRWIN: Well, my wife [Susan] and I were going up to visit my father, who was at the time he was president of Lyndon State College by this time, up in northern Vermont [Lyndon, VT], and we were going to visit him, and then I was going to come back down and we were going to visit my mother, because they got divorced, in Middlebury. So we were driving along the interstate, and you probably know the spot when you come from Concord to Hanover, you come up over that hill, there's that really neat rest area in New Hampshire that looks out over the mountains and everything. And it was a beautiful snowy day, and my wife and I talked at that time and we said, "It's time to get out and move to Vermont or New Hampshire." And so we did.

So my life never was by a plan. It's sort of like a lot of lives, I think, just things happened and you do things because you have to or it's convenient at the time. You know, it's not like I ever sat down and decided *this is what I want to be when I grow up*. [laughter]

LUCAS: I remember earlier you mentioned that commitment to service that you inherited from your father, sort of like in an unspoken way. Did you feel like you continued to, or you continue still to have that, even if not in the form of, you know, working with the Marine Corps?

IRWIN: Oh, yeah, I feel that way, and it's not that I do that much now. I mean, there was the VA driving. I did that because it was helping people that needed help. I don't think I'll be doing that again because they shut it down because of the Coronavirus, and I don't think I'll be driving anymore even when they do start it up, because I'm so vulnerable to it. And, but I will be doing all the scheduling for this. I always have also, so I'll be continuing to do that. And I think because of the way I am, because of my dad, even though I don't do the things I would have wished I could do, I mean…

And the way I feel about what's happening to this country and such is so, so, so disturbing to me today.

LUCAS: What are your thoughts, then, where you're going? Because yeah, we're in 2020, we're not even halfway through it, and yeah, a lot of horrifying things have happened between the pandemic and I guess, yeah, this recently started, or accelerated at least movement away from racism, thankfully.

IRWIN: Yes. Yeah. It is shameful. And I'm sort of ashamed of myself in a way because I don't think before the last murder in Minneapolis that I really, really got it what it was like to be a black man today. I mean, I didn't get the fear and the stuff. I mean, I always cared about the black movement and everything like that, but I don't think I realized—I think a lot of people probably didn't quite realize how bad their lives had been. And you start to think about it, it's been 400 years where this country has treated human beings worse than they treat an animal. And then you have a President [Donald Trump] who has no empathy, no understanding, no intelligence and no leadership to help bring the country together. I think we're in a really serious time, and we've been in a serious time for the last three years or… But, I think, I'm hoping that this new Black Lives [Matter] movement and the realization of so many people that the President is completely incompetent will change, get a new President, and hopefully we can start bringing this country back to where it should be, or make it where it should be, even though it maybe never have actually been what we hoped for.

LUCAS: Yeah, it's tough to say where, if there is a state that we should revert to or if it's going to have to be a completely new, if everything's going to have to be completely different.

IRWIN: I think it's going to be different. I think it's going to have to be different, because you look back, even though I wasn't aware of it, racism was much worse, and it still is and it's not going to go away. I mean, some people will never change. But their children are changing. So, hopefully when the people like me die off, our kids will bring—the country will be a better place. It's going to be up to kids like you, my daughter, and I think this is a time that could save this country, but I don't think that many of my ilk, my age group, are going to be helped.

LUCAS: Does any of this make you think back to the Vietnam era, and then specifically you just mentioned racism, which has come up a couple times. You mentioned some on Dartmouth's campus when you attended.

IRWIN: Say again? I'm sorry.

LUCAS: Does anything that's happening right now make you think of scenes from the '60s and the '70s that you experienced or witnessed? Because you just mentioned racism.

IRWIN: Yeah. Well, I think I was out of the country… well, there was the Rodney King and all those riots back then. And I don't think it was done as—it wasn't positive like it is today, the protests. And it was a tough time. I mean, when I was in the Marine Corps in Okinawa, the Black Panthers were really strong, and like when I was the squadron duty officer in Okinawa they made me, they had us carry pistols. It wasn't because we were worried about the enemy; it was because the Black Panthers were trying to kill white officers and things like that.

So, I don't know, it seems that now finally the real ability for people to communicate has really come forward, I mean, when you have, look at those protests with the black kids, the white kids, old and young, police going on their knees in respect. But you do have the deep-seated racism still. You can see it in some of the cops. You can see it in a lot… and I think we're going to see more of it as this Black Lives Matter movement proceeds. I think it's going to wake up a countermovement. I mean, I was just reading an article today about the idiot Nascar, you now, the redneck racing? [laughter] You know. But I mean, they banned the Confederate flag from all Nascar events. Now that's going to be really interesting, because these good ole Southern boys, they pretend it has nothing to do with racism. And maybe a lot of them it doesn't. But, why are we celebrating a flag of a country that, or organization that the United States defeated because of racism?

I mean, why do we have statues to Robert E. Lee? Why would we name Army bases after generals in the Confederacy? We beat them. The only reason those statues and things are there is because after the Civil War in the early '90s [1890s], it was a way for the white people to continue their domination of the blacks by putting up a big

statue of some Southern general on a horse. Anyway, I think we're straying. [laughter]

LUCAS: Yeah, that's okay. It had me thinking about, so George Wallace, who visited Dartmouth, and when you went there he was well remembered as being a segregationist and only a couple days ago, [Stan] Simpson in Alabama began asking for his name to be—or demanding that it be taken off this tunnel that's named after him, the George Wallace Tunnel [Mobile, AL].

IRWIN: Oh, really? Huh.

LUCAS: Yeah. And, you know, obviously we have a different era completely than the Confederacy, but yeah, interesting.

IRWIN: It is.

LUCAS: No, I wanted to get your perspective on that, because I think a lot of things unfolded in that era when you were in the Marine Corps and when you were in college that are coming to a different light right now, so…

IRWIN: That's true. And I think back in that era I would say, "Well, why take down the statues? That's history." But you know, when you study it, you really realize those statues were built way after the war, and it's time that… I guess it was—I'm not that good on American history now, but after the Jim Crow thing, it was just another way to dominate. "'Dominate,' that's a good word, Mr. President. Yeah, we can dominate…" [laughter] So…

LUCAS: Yeah. Is there anything else that you want to talk about related to Dartmouth, to Vietnam, the Marine Corps, or anything else that you've been thinking about, before I end the interview, if you have anything you want to say?

IRWIN: I don't. I have often thought what I would do if I was still a Presidential helicopter pilot today, with this President. I have fantasies, but I really hope I would have had the courage just to say, "I will not fly this guy. Get me out of here." But there's other things I could have done if I did. But, no, no way. I felt like I could have spoken to him. Let's leave it at that, okay? [laughter]

LUCAS: Yeah, to each his own. Well, thank you so much for talking with me today, and doing it in these crazy conditions where we're speaking to each other on the phone. You have really, really interesting perspectives and yeah, thank you.

IRWIN: Well, you're welcome. And I hope it was interesting at least to some degree, okay?

[End of Interview.]