

Oral History Transcripts

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(0:00) So, I came with a couple of questions.

Col Joe Panza

(0:06) I do not know exactly what the nature of your...

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(0:11) So, just a brief overview of what it is. (0:15) I am taking a class on the Vietnam War right now at UA. (0:19) And so what they wanted us to do is they wanted us to find a Vietnam veteran and just interview them about their time before, during, and after the war.

(0:28) And so, I did a little bit of reading. (0:32) And so, from what I understand, you were a helicopter pilot. (0:37) Is there...

(0:38) Oh, that's nice. (0:40) And so, really I just wanted to ask you a little bit, you know, like I said, about your time before and after the war, during as well. (0:49) And so, you know, just any questions that you feel comfortable answering.

(0:53) First, I wanted to ask, so I was reading that you were originally in the Navy and then you got out of the Navy to do ROTC, right? (1:04) What is that? (1:05) I didn't know that that was like a transition that you could make going from one branch into the ROTC.

(1:11) Is that something that's changed or what was that transition like?

Col Joe Panza

(1:14) I went to high school back way before you were born, in 1956 I graduated. (1:23) But there were four of us who decided, hey, let's go join the Navy, you know, just kind of on a whim. (1:27) I was 17. (1:29) My dad had designed for me to go in. (1:32) And I went in the Navy and did six years as a radio intercept operator for the Naval Security Group. (1:40) So I was stationed at Hawaii, Okinawa, Japan. (1:50) And I signed up for San Jose State College. (1:54) And I was working in a bar, kind of a college pizza hangout, banjos and piano and all that, you know, fun place. (2:03) And some of the guys that I was working with were in the ROTC.

(2:07) And they said, why don't you join the ROTC? (2:10) You only had to do your junior and senior year if you were a veteran. (2:13) You didn't have to do the full four years.

(2:16) So I signed up for the ROTC. (2:20) In my two years, I finished as a distinguished graduate out of that. (2:24) About two months before graduation, I was going to go back into intelligence work since I was in the Naval Security Group before.

(2:32) And my ROTC instructor said, why don't you go to pilot training? (2:35) You've got all the qualifications. (2:36) And I said, well, okay.

(2:38) You've got my orders changed and off I went to pilot training. (2:41) So I went to pilot training at Vance Air Force Base.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(2:52) Yes, sir. (2:53) And so what was that transition from like ROTC, thinking you're going back into intelligence, and then just being thrown into pilot training like?

Col Joe Panza

(3:03) I had no aspirations for that. (3:17) So I went into it kind of with my eyes wide open like I should have. (3:25) And I got to Vance.

(3:28) They assigned me to a BOQ room before my wife came to join me. (3:34) And I got in the BOQ room and I sat down and I thought, what have I done? (3:44) It turned out great.

(3:46) I loved it.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(3:54) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(3:57) So it was a great experience. (4:00) And I met some great guys there in pilot training.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(4:08) Yes, sir. (4:08) And so when you're going through pilot training, what made you land on helicopters as opposed to other?

Col Joe Panza

(4:18) You didn't land? (4:19) I had a nice bum there, by the way. (4:22) No, I finished up, well, we flew the T-37, which was the T-38.

(4:30) And then when you graduated, they came down with a block of aircraft, B-52s and tankers and C-130s and a whole range of assignments. (4:40) And depending on your position in the class, you got to pick which one you wanted. (4:44) So the top guys usually picked a fighter or a 130, something like that.

(4:51) But they had a 131 on there, which was like a T-29, a two-engine propeller airplane that was for the air evacuation mission. (5:01) My ROTC instructor had always told me, get into air evac if you can.

(5:06) It's a wonderful mission.

(5:07) So I signed up for that, and I got that. (5:11) I was assigned to McGuire Air Force Base, flying air evac, picking up patients all day long, dropping them off. (5:21) And it was a great assignment right out of pilot training for a new guy because you'd fly 10 or 12 stops a day, up and down all day long, from hospitals, which was picking them up at the hospitals and taking them home.

(5:36) So for a new pilot, it was a great experience because the fighter guys might have gotten a lot of stick time.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(5:52) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(5:55) So I ended up in Fixling. (5:57) That's why I'm in Fixling. (5:58) And I was there for about a year, and I came off of a mission.

(6:02) I was down here in the southeast, flying stops around the southeast. (6:08) And on the third day of the mission, I'd fly back to New Jersey to our home base. (6:12) I got home, and there was a note on the bulletin board, Call Colonel Z.

(6:19) Zamboni. (6:19) Colonel Zamboni was my commander. (6:22) And he said, He said, Are you interested in going to Vietnam?

(6:30) And I said, Oh, sure. (6:31) I'll take my turn. (6:32) He said, Well, your orders are here.

(6:34) And he said, Are you sitting down? (6:38) I said, I'm going to tell you what you're going to fly.

(6:45) And he said, It's a helicopter.

(6:46) I said, Holy crapola. (6:49) I said, I'd rather have a sister walk in the streets and fly a helicopter.

(6:52) Back then, you were one or the other.

(6:54) You had a fixed-wing fighter or a helicopter. (6:57) But the war was cranking up, and they were getting more helicopters on board. (7:02) And they needed guys to fill the seats.

(7:04) And they were getting the HH-53B, the Jolly Green from Sikorsky, out of Stratford, Connecticut.

(7:11) The Air Force didn't have any of those at the time. (7:13) And they were buying six of them for the air-airback mission.

(7:22) So I got that assignment to the helicopter. (7:25) So they started a transition program to go from fixed-wing into helicopter. (7:31) So they transitioned to school.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(7:37) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(7:37) So that was a shepherded program. (7:44) Just my luck.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(7:45) Yes, sir. (7:47) And so was that a... (7:49) That was a big switch.

(7:50) That was a big switch?

Col Joe Panza

(7:51) Yeah, because flying a fixed-wing was a lot different than flying a helicopter. (7:58) 400 knots, and now you're going 70, and H-19.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(8:10) Yes, sir. (8:12) But that was a big transition. (8:16) Yes, sir.

(8:17) And so the B-53 or... (8:21) The HH-53. (8:22) HH-53.

(8:23) That was still, from what I understand, a medevac helicopter or like... (8:27) No. (8:27) No?

Col Joe Panza

(8:27) No, we didn't have any in the Air Force at all. (8:29) Okay. (8:30) The only things the Air Force had were UH-1 Hueys.

(8:35) They would shuttle people on missile sites. (8:37) They'd take the planes out. (8:40) So we had a few of those.

(8:42) Yes, sir. (8:42) The Army had a course at the time. (8:45) But this was coming on board from Sikorsky.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(8:48) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(8:49) And we were going to put it into airbag. (8:50) We were using HH-3s in the search and rescue business. (8:57) And the 53, bigger, 5'6".

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(9:02) Okay. (9:02) And so what kind of capacity did it have? (9:07) What did a crew for one of these helicopters look like?

Col Joe Panza

(9:10) Our crew was a pilot and co-pilot and a flight engineer and then two para-rescue guys in the back.

(9:22) We went up to Sikorsky and picked those up. (9:25) This was in 1966.

(9:27) I was at Eglin Air Force Base. (9:29) After the transition school and the helicopters, we went to Eglin Air Force Base for combat tactics where we practiced flying, air-to-air refueling, and that kind of thing. (9:45) The 53 has a boom on it that allows it.

(9:48) So we practiced that there. (9:50) We were supposed to be there seven weeks. (9:52) We ended up being there seven months because production on the airplanes were slipping up at Sikorsky.

(9:58) And we had two Marine A-models, A-model, loaned to the Air Force to do our training while waiting for those to come on board at Sikorsky. (10:14) So I was there seven months, and when those were ready, we went up to Sikorsky and picked them up. (10:26) Because they were brand new right off the bat.

(10:31) Somebody said, well, this is not going to break. (10:34) So they canceled that, and we took them from Eglin Air Force Base in Florida to California, and they put them in styrofoam cocoons, two at a time, and they put them on a little carrier and floated them over to Vietnam.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(10:46) And so being a pilot over there, what did the day-to-day mission look like?

Col Joe Panza

(11:00) Our mission was search and rescue. (11:03) Charlie Green was our call sign.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(11:09) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(11:12) But day-to-day missions, our sole mission was to recover a downed aircraft and to do any shuttling. (11:21) Our mission was just to stand alert, go up north, up to North Vietnam, northern Laos, and pick up anybody who got shot down. (11:31) We lost a lot of people back then.

(11:33) I was over there in 1966 to 1967, which was the peak of the war. (11:38) We had probably serving over there during that time. (11:43) There was a lot of activity, a lot of bombing going on.

(11:47) We would take off. (11:49) I was based at Udon, Royal Thai Air Force Base on the Mekong River, just south of the Mekong River, which is the border between Laos and Vietnam.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(12:01) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(12:02) We were in Thailand in the north part of Thailand, right across the Mekong River. (12:08) We would take off from Udon and go up north to all these little places, little dirt strips in the jungle called Lima sites. (12:16) They were numbered Lima site 98, Lima site 83.

(12:22) We would either land at some of those and sit on the ground and listen to the radio for the strikes. (12:26) When the fighters were going on their strikes, if they got shot down, we would launch and go try to get them. (12:32) Sometimes if the Lima sites weren't secure, we would board by 14 hours that day, just flying circles and air-to-air refueling behind the 130 that we needed to get.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(12:47) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(12:48) Some of the fighters were bombing around the clock up in the north.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(12:58) You said there were six of these green giant helicopters. (13:04) Was there a lot of rotation in between the crews for those, or did they pretty much stay?

Col Joe Panza

(13:09) No, we were in the first deployment, so we took the first six over there. (13:13) The guys I went with, we stayed a year over there, and then, of course, we started to rotate out. (13:22) The fighter guys had a better deal than us.

(13:24) They would go up and fly 100 missions. (13:27) Sometimes they would fly two or three missions a week. (13:29) When they got their 100 missions, they could go home.

(13:33) When we got 100 missions, we had to stay the whole year. (13:36) We didn't get that day.

(13:43) It was a great mission.

(13:45) Yes, sir. (13:46) It was a great mission. (13:47) I was kind of disappointed when my commander told me I was going to go into helicopters.

(13:53) He tried to stress the significance of the mission. (13:59) He said that anybody can teach a monk to yank a bank in a flare. (14:02) He said, but you're going to be doing something pretty profound, picking guys up that have been shot down.

(14:08) You don't really think about it too much when you're doing it, because you're just in the heat of battle there. (14:12) You just do what you can. (14:15) Some of them we did, some of them we didn't get.

(14:19) But when you look back on it and reflect on it, he said, well, I picked up six or eight guys and sent them home to raise a family and kept them from being either killed or imprisoned in Hanoi for six or seven years.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(14:35) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(14:38) So that's my most rewarding mission of my whole career was in the Jomig Vang.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(14:43) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(14:43) I flew a lot of other airplanes. (14:45) The C-141. (14:49) No, it's not there.

(14:50) It's behind that. (14:52) Yeah, a big transport, the C-141. (14:54) I flew that aircraft.

(14:57) Some other cats and dogs. (14:59) I got back into the air, in fact, just later on, I flew the C-9.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(15:03) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(15:04) That was a great mission. (15:08) When I was flying C-9s out of the Scott Air Force Base in New Jersey, this was after I came back from Vietnam, 10 of the POWs when they were released in 1973 from Hanoi.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(15:22) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(15:23) Yeah.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(15:28) Yes, sir. (15:30) And, like, was the helicopter more efficient in, like, search and rescue, like, in that, like, wartime environment compared to another aircraft, or was there a reason that they specifically chose helicopters?

Col Joe Panza

(15:47) Because we could get into, you know, into real small spaces and hover. (15:55) I mean, a fixed wing wouldn't have been appropriate in search and rescue. (16:03) Use the hoist to take them up.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(16:05) Yes, sir. (16:12) Yes, sir. (16:12) My dad, he flew UH-1s before he got to Maxwell, but he's working on the project that's bringing the helicopters.

Col Joe Panza

(16:24) Oh, the NH-139.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(16:26) Yes, sir. (16:26) Yeah. (16:26) He's working on that.

Col Joe Panza

(16:27) Is he active in the service?

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(16:29) No, sir. (16:29) He's active, but he's working on the active duty side of bringing them to Maxwell. (16:34) Where does he work?

(16:35) Here on Maxwell.

Col Joe Panza

(16:36) Yeah. (16:37) What's his name?

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(16:38) Derek Cumbie. (16:39) I think he's—I think he just hits—he works next to, like, the thrift store that's on base. (16:50) I know where he is.

(16:52) What's that?

Col Joe Panza

(16:53) Very good, yeah.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(16:56) And so, I mean, as a whole, flying search and rescue, you consider that to be your mission. (17:02) Is there any, like, one specific, like, flight or rescue mission? (17:07) Oh, we have a lot of them.

Col Joe Panza

(17:08) There were— The search and rescue mission was a pretty dangerous mission because nobody gets shot down in a nice, friendly area.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(17:15) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(17:16) So I had several missions that were pretty—I had one that's real famous, and you can do some research online. (17:24) It's called Lima Site 85.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(17:26) Yes, sir. (17:28) I think that's the one that I read about. (17:29) Yeah, I read about it.

Col Joe Panza

(17:31) It was a top-secret, mountain-top radar site. (17:36) When—this was back in 1967, at the end of 1967. (17:41) We were bombing in.

(17:42) Hanoi had the targets around the clock. (17:45) During the good weather, there was no problem because you could see the targets. (17:49) But during the monsoon season, when it was heavy rain, sometimes Hanoi would be socked in for a couple, three months, and that gave the bad guys the opportunity to move materials and troops down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the border in the south.

(18:04) So that was a big respite for them for a couple of months, and we didn't want them to have that break. (18:09) So they decided to put this radar site up in northern Laos, about 100 miles from Hanoi, on top of a mountain, with a line of sight to it. (18:20) They asked for volunteers to man the site radar controllers, and they got about 30 guys to volunteer. (18:27) They just told them it was a top-secret mission. (18:30) They were going to be for a year. (18:32) They didn't really tell them the nature of the mission. (18:35) They made them sign a secrecy agreement, and we had to put them up there as civilians because we had signed a neutrality treaty with Laos. (18:46) We weren't supposed to have any military on the ground in Laos. (18:50) So they discharged the NCOs that volunteered to go up there, and they sent them over to Sears and bought them some overalls, and they made them employees of Lockheed, and they went over as civilians. (19:05) When they came back, they were going to get reinstated in their appropriate rank and pay, but they went over as civilians to man this site. (19:16) So they put the radar up there in about, I think, about November of 1967. (19:24) They helicoptered the containers up there with the radar and the building for them to operate out of and some other equipment. (19:34) So they began operations at the site in around December, I think. (19:40) It was only operational for about two months. (19:43) Of course, the bad guys didn't like the fact that they were now using the radar to vector the 105s over the targets, and then they would tell them when to drop their bombs and do the weather to hit the targets. (19:56) So the bad guys lost their respite. (19:59) So they started building roads out toward the mountain where this radar site was. (20:06) Poohpawtee is the name of the mountain, but a moon site here, and shuttle approached to the site and rotated the crews back. (20:20) Well, they built the roads out there, and they surrounded the site with about five battalions of bad guys, and they knew that it was imminent that they were going to lose the site. (20:34) And they were only operational for about two months, and they started a rocket and mortar barrage from the east side toward Hanoi to bomb them. (20:52) Some of the men went down the side of the cliff and hid in the little crevices on the side of the cliff. (20:59) They thought that the west side of the site was impregnable because it was a 3,000-foot cliff on the west side of the site. (21:06) And in the middle of the night, about 25 or 30 bad guys scaled that 3,000-foot cliff and went up on top of the site and surrounded the buildings. (21:16) And when they got established, they started killing the guys that were on duty. (21:22) And there was about five of them that had gone down on the side of the site to get away from the shelling on the point. (21:30) And they started shooting at them down there. (21:32) One of them got blown in half, and they were throwing grenades down there, and they'd just kick them off. (21:39) And we got alerted to fly up there to evacuate the site. (21:49) By the time we got there, it was 7 and 8. (21:56) They were attacked in the middle. (21:59) And we lost 11 guys up there that night. (22:06) We got up there, and there was a Huey up there flown by Air America. (22:12) And Ken Wood and Rusty Arons were flying the Huey for Air America. (22:17) They went in. (22:18) They picked up Chief Hetchberger and three of his guys. (22:21) And Russ Kaler and I were flying Jolly Green 6-7.

(22:24) We were searching along the ridge line because the tracers were coming out from the top of the site. (22:32) We were searching along the side, and we saw a reflection. (22:35) We thought it was a cell mirror.

(22:36) We turned out the flash, and that stalking was one of the radar detection. (22:41) We went in and picked it up. (22:43) Ken Wood pulled the Huey away from the side of the cliff.

(22:46) And as he was pulling away from the side of the cliff, some armor-piercing rounds came through the floor. (22:51) One of them hit Hetchberger. (22:53) That's a possible Hetchberger there.

(22:56) And he bled out and was killed there. (23:00) And he was put in for the Medal of Honor, but they didn't get it because they didn't want the notoriety that one was not supposed to have any military there. (23:11) Yes, sir.

(23:11) A lot was said. (23:14) So he got put in for the Medal of Honor. (23:16) It got denied, and he got an Air Force Cross in a secret ceremony at the Pentagon with his family.

(23:24) About 42 years later, when the mission was declassified, a sergeant up in North Dakota read about it, political considerations. (23:37) So he worked it with his congressman, and they was crossed in the Medal of Honor. (23:50) I was sitting in my kitchen when the phone rang.

(23:53) The guy says, this is Corey Hetchberger. (23:55) Do you know who I am? (23:56) And I said, yeah, you're Chief Hetchberger's son.

(24:00) This guy, Corey, was nine years old when his father was killed. (24:04) Of course, this is 40 years later. (24:08) And I said, yeah, I know who you are.

(24:09) You're Chief Hetchberger's son. (24:11) And he said, yes, that's right. (24:12) He said, you've got a good memory.

(24:14) He said, President Obama just called me and told me he's upgrading my father's Air Force Cross to the Medal of Honor, and we'd be. (24:25) So 42 years later, after I approved the mission, I wound up in the White House. (24:33) That's Corey Hetchberger.

(24:35) I have a photograph of him.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(24:37) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(24:39) So that was one interesting mission. (24:42) That was a pretty good mission in terms of the impact. (24:46) I mean, it was a Medal of Honor mission, plus we lost 11 guys, which was the largest loss of Air Force ground.

(24:51) You know, the whole thing. (24:54) Okay. (24:57) And several others.

(24:59) I had one of the heroes, one of the guys, Central Laos. (25:04) We were sent an alert.

(25:06) Our number of hostages was two Delegates.

(25:08) We were allowed to get their hybrid, and go in and pick up the hybrid, and back it up, and the guys got that. (25:15) And then we took four A1s, and everything else, maybe a plane or two.

(25:22) Four of those would go with us.

(25:24) They would escort us out. (25:27) Two of them would stay with us, and the government would try to locate the guy and suppress that ground fire. (25:34) And when they got it, they thought it was a reason to save the person.

(25:38) They called it a helicopter. (25:40) Yes, sir. (25:41) On this particular day, we were putting a lot of fire assistance on the helicopter.

(25:47) We got alerted to a forward air controller. (25:51) We got a shot at him. (25:52) We were down in the Serra band.

(25:55) So they sent us up there, and it's a real bad area. (25:58) We got over there. (26:04) We took a couple rounds of 37 millimeter on the way in.

(26:12) We went in to make the pickup. (26:14) The forward air controller's name was Jerry Dwyer. (26:17) He'd been shot down.

(26:18) This was his second shoot down. (26:20) He was in a clearing in the little gully running through this, surrounded by bad guys. (26:29) The A1s just scraped and bombed quite a bit, and then they thought it was safe for us to go in.

(26:36) We went in to make the pickup, and we got all shot up real bad. (26:40) And then pulled out, and they bombed us straight some more. (26:43) There was a forward air controller controlling this whole mission.

(26:47) He was calling in fighters. (26:48) When you had a guy shot down, the whole war would stop, and all the guys would come to support the rescue. (26:54) He had 105s and F-4s stacked up waiting to come in.

(26:59) They were flying along the ridge line. (27:02) He told us one flight I remember. (27:04) It was called Bear Flight.

(27:05) Bear was our call sign. (27:07) Four 105s. (27:09) He said, I need some ordnance on the ridge line above this clearing.

(27:13) He said, I don't want you to kill those. (27:15) The guy said, we're pretty good with this stuff. (27:18) Four 105s came down this ridge line.

(27:20) They had them all salvoed at the same time. (27:26) It was impressive to watch. (27:29) We were holding off at the side then.

(27:32) When they got it, quieted down the best they could, we went back in again, and we got shot up again. (27:38) One of our guys got wounded in the back. (27:39) Fuel lines were leaking. (27:41) We lost our servos. (27:43) The bullet was coming through the windows. (27:45) I took a run right between my shoulder blades and the bullet.

(27:54) It was pretty hairy, and we lost the hoist. (27:56) They shot the hoist down so we couldn't pick the guy up. (27:59) We had to pull off again.

(28:03) They bombed the heck out of it for the next hour or so. (28:06) They sent another helicopter over from Da Nang over in Vietnam. (28:12) We hobbled back to Thailand.

(28:17) They had an F4 escort us back to Thailand. (28:19) The servos were shot up. (28:21) It sticks like a 12 into the floor when you don't have any servo.

(28:26) It took them four months to get the airplane back in condition. (28:34) They found 200 holes. (28:36) I figure we got hit over 75 times.

(28:39) That was my appearance.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(28:46) In those four months where they're trying to work to reinstate the helicopter, were you all still flying?

Col Joe Panza

(28:55) We had the other five. (28:58) We flew every day. (28:59) We just went up every day and stood alert.

(29:04) We needed to orbit up in northern Laos. (29:08) We bombed the place going into Hanoi during the bombing. (29:11) If they got shot down anywhere up north, we could just get there real quick.

(29:16) We orbited up. (29:18) We had six Jolly Green 53s at Boudon. (29:22) We took northern Laos and north Vietnam.

(29:27) We had some H3s over at NKP. (29:30) They kind of took the central Laos. (29:34) They were H3s, the Jolly Greens too.

(29:37) They took central Laos. (29:39) They were responsible for us. (29:42) We had some H3s at Da Nang over in Vietnam.

(29:46) They took south Vietnam and up to the DMZ.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(29:49) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(29:52) It was a good mission, a great mission.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(0:03) And so, what are some of the other missions that you flew?

Col Joe Panza

(0:34) 110 hours a month, every month, you know, we flew to Da Nang. (0:39) My first mission out of... (0:41) We usually pick up a load of Travis and fly across.

(0:48) Go through Hawaii, midway, Guam. (0:54) And then we'd shuttle into Vietnam. (0:58) My very first mission, back, got into Da Nang to drop off some cargo and stuff.

(1:07) Got shot out on final approach, going into Da Nang. (1:10) I said, I'm back. (1:12) Just what I needed.

(1:13) I thought I was through with all that when I left. (1:18) So I did that for three years. (1:20) I got through about 2,200 hours.

(1:25) I loved that. (1:29) It's nice if somebody hands you the key to an airplane. (1:31) You can take it around the world and bring it back in a couple weeks.

(1:36) Yes, sir. (1:37) It was a great mission. (1:40) And then I got out of the 141, had a couple of staff jobs at the headquarters.

(1:56) Yes, sir. (1:58) Graduated in the class of 1984. (2:01) And then I stayed on the faculty, 85 and 86.

(2:09) U.C.B. Headquarters as commander of the base.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(2:18) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(2:19) So I worked on the C-9s. (2:29) I flew the C-9s. (2:31) I was the commander of the C-9 jet.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(2:35) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(2:35) Beautiful. (2:36) Great mission. (2:37) I loved the area.

(2:38) The mission was around Da Nang, and it was very rewarding also. (2:44) Taking the kids home. (2:46) A lot of times you had kids returning home and moving on.

(2:49) And they came home and conquered it. (2:51) Thankfully not on the airplane. (3:02) I had one died at the bottom of the ramp as they were offloading the patient to take him to the hospital.

(3:17) The boarding air force. (3:31) Most interesting thing was when they came back, other than taking the U.S. Air Force on a flight from Denver to the interior base, a premature baby that was having problems. (4:02) So we flew up there, and they brought the baby on the airplane.

(4:12) They were working on this baby, and we were heading for Denver, and one of the medical technicians came up and said, get the plane on the ground. (4:19) The baby's maybe dying.

(4:26) So I landed, and he said, don't make a hard landing, he said, because it could put pressure.

(4:35) So nighttime, and we went into the next base. (4:38) I can't remember the name of the base. (4:40) Ellsworth or something.

(4:44) Snowing. (4:45) Made a really great landing. (4:50) Flight lines all lit up with lights, and the flight surgeons were out in the hospital, the wing commander, all the staff cars out there.

(4:58) Taxied in, and they took the incubator surgeons, the flight surgeons came on board, and they said, we can't handle this here. (5:09) We don't have the baby to Denver. (5:14) So we took off again, and we headed for Denver.

(5:16) Of course, all of my passengers were hanging over the backs of the seats, you know, because the nurses were working on this thing with a bag and all that. (5:25) We got it down to Denver, took it off the airplane, and they left the airplane with their arms inside the incubator, and they got it to the hospital in Fitzgibbons, and it was a pretty harrowing mission there. (5:43) Memorable.

(5:47) Risky business, but rewarding as hell. (5:50) It's just a great moment. (5:51) I mean, I look back on my career, and I'm so thankful I got to experience all these things.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(5:59) Yes, sir. (6:00) And so, like, with these missions, like, what helped you deal with, like, loss in those situations where?

Col Joe Panza

(6:07) Yeah, well, I lost some buddies over in Fitz. (6:21) You know, it's hard, but you learn to accept it. (6:23) You know, it's part of it.

(6:26) Flying's a dangerous business. (6:28) We lose, even in peacetime, we lose a lot of people.

(6:35) You kind of learn to deal with it.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(6:41) Yes, sir. (6:43) And then just a little bit about your time after the war in Vietnam. (6:50) Obviously, you touched on some of the flights or some of the missions that you flew after that, but, like, what about your role here at the Air University?

(7:00) What does that look like?

Col Joe Panza

(7:02) After I came back from my command job in the base, I was the commander of RAF Chicksands in the U.K. And I came back here to Montgomery, so we came back here, and I was a commandant in one of the schools here on the base in 82. (7:25) And I really didn't want to get

into, you know, I did 34 years between the Navy, so I didn't want to get into the corporate world. (7:34) And this job came available with the Air University Foundation as the executive director. (7:40) And it's a great job because it's a good way to get on top of everything going on in the base. (7:45) It gives me all the activities out here at all the schools. (7:51) And it's rewarding because I get to take it to Central Factor, our mission is to raise funds to support all of the schools on the base and here in Guam.

(8:03) So it allows them to do some of the other things that they want to do, but they're not funding it. (8:10) So, you know, it's a great job to be able to stay in touch and all that.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(8:21) Okay. (8:23) And so are you technically a civilian contract under the Air Force?

Col Joe Panza

(8:28) No, it's a private 501C3. (8:30) Okay. (8:31) It's not for profit.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(8:32) Yes, sir.

Col Joe Panza

(8:44) We operate here on a no-cost lease.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(8:53) Yes, sir. (8:56) And those were pretty much the majority of the questions that I had. (9:01) Is there anything else about the Vietnam War that you want to share?

Col Joe Panza

(9:05) I can't think of anything specific. (9:09) I mean, it was a long, hard war, not a very popular one here in the States. (9:14) So it wasn't very comforting to go over there and really see the importance of why we were there and then to do a very critical mission, search and rescue, like a lot of missions over there, a lot of turmoil here in the United States, a lot of protests and a lot of people against the war.

(9:39) So when we came back from the war, we did not receive tender loving treatment from the locals. (9:49) In fact, we were told not to even wear our uniforms off the base. (9:53) And they were defecting up to Canada, burning their draft cards and hid them from Canada.

(10:03) So coming back was in some ways more stressful than anything.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(10:14) So coming back to that environment, you were saying you weren't necessarily the most welcoming. (10:20) Did you receive any medals or anything from your time in Vietnam?

Col Joe Panza

(10:26) Yes, sir.

Me (Jamal Cumbie)

(10:41) Yes, sir. (10:44) Well, thank you for your time. (10:47) Thank you for calling over.

(10:49) Yes, sir.