Legion of Valor History Project

Philip J. Conran

August 30, 2018

Ian Holmes: Today is August 30, 2018. My name is Ian Holmes and I am interviewing Philip J. Conran by telephone from his home in Santa Barbara, California. This interview is part of the Legion of Valor History Project.

IH: Can you tell me about your path into the military? How and why did you join the military?

Philip Conran: I joined the military based upon a desire from early childhood, back in World War II. I was out sickling some hay for the pen that we had for our ducks, etc., and this noise came at me from behind, and I turned around and it was an aircraft coming in, strafing me. This is in Connecticut. I, needless to say, went to the ground, and the airplane just passed over me, wiggled his wings, circled around and came again, and the second time I just stood up and waved to him. I said, my god, that's what I want to do, I want to fly. This was, like I said, during World War II when they had I think it was B-24s up at Bradley Field in Windsor Locks, Connecticut. I joined the Connecticut Air National Guard in high school, my senior year in high school, as an airman, and stayed in that until I was told at the beginning of my junior year at Fordham University in New York that I couldn't be in two organizations at once because I was in

the Air Force ROTC program at Fordham. So I had to resign from the Guard and went into the inactive Air Force Reserves and stayed in that until I graduated from college in 1958 and got my commission as a Second Lieutenant and came on active duty in 1958.

IH: How did you end up in combat in Southeast Asia?

PC: I was assigned as an ROTC professor at Occidental College in 65-68. Needless to say, the Vietnam War was ongoing, and I knew my next assignment was going to be Southeast Asia. So I knew the assignments guy down at Randolph, so I called him up and I said, hey, I'd like to get the assignment into F4s, and he said I think I can help you with that. I sat back on my laurels and waited for the order to come down, and the orders came down, instead of F4, they changed one letter and one number, it was H3. I called him up, I said, please, what are you doing to me, you promised me F4s. He said, well, to tell you the truth, Phil, we have so many F4 pilots we don't know what to do with them, but we're desperate for helicopter pilots, and you've had helicopter time, so you're it and you're going over. So I said, okay, where am I going? He said, I can't tell you that. I said, what's the mission? He said, I can't tell you that either, but it's the highest assignment that you can get as far as security, and it's directly under the president. It turned out to be an assignment at NKP, Nakhon Phanom Thailand, which is right at the border of Thailand and Laos. We were assigned to the Igloo White project, which was Secretary of Defense McNamara's baby of dropping sensors along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, coming down from North Vietnam through Laos into South Vietnam. Our

assignment was to put sensors out there so that we could pick up the enemy movement, and then come in and eliminate them if at all possible. That's what I did initially until they realized that it wasn't the best way to utilize a helicopter. In other words, our assignment was to go fifty knots at fifty feet above the jungle and drop these things out. When you're flying over one of the heaviest defended areas in the war, it is total stupidity to be flying at fifty knots at fifty feet. So needless to say, we went like hell and at treetop level throwing them out, but we still lost some aircraft. So they decided the best course of action would be to put the sensors on F4s that could move in real fast, dispense the sensors, and get out of there before the enemy was able to knock them down. It proved to be successful that way. Then we went into prairie fire missions, which were bringing indigenous and Special Forces troops up into Laos, North Vietnam, DMZ, to drop them off to perform the mission assigned to them, and then we would go back in and hopefully pick them up at a predetermined time and place. Unfortunately, most of the time and place were emergency exfils, because they were detected and they were being pursued by the enemy and we had to go in there and get them out of there. That was the mission that I was assigned over in Southeast Asia.

IH: Can you describe what happened on October 6, 1969, the day of the event that led to your Air Force Cross?

PC: That was interesting. That was my last mission, my last scheduled mission, because my time was up and I already had my PCS [Permanent Change of Station]

orders. I was going to Hawaii to become a satellite recovery pilot, but that's after the fact. As far as October 6, we were going on a milk run. We departed NKP, Nakhon Phanom, at 8:00 in the morning with five H3s and one H1 helicopter. We went down to Bulovan Plateau in Laos, which was a forward CIA operating base. There we went in and got briefed and the briefing was very casual by the CIA. They said it was strictly a milk run taking troops from Bulovan Plateau, their operating site, into an area in Laos close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and drop off the troops and then we'd be home for lunch. So it was as they said a milk run. So I got back to the helicopter and got strapped in. I saw twenty-five indigenous troops lining up in front of each of the five H3 helicopters. They were indigenous troops, all they had was a backpack, a rifle, and a lot of them had chickens. Before they got on to the aircraft, it was kind of humorous, I really got a chuckle out of it, they would take the chicken, it was a live chicken, and they'd take it by the head and just wring it and kill it, and then stick the neck underneath their belt with the head sticking out on top and then they'd jump in the helicopter. We loaded them up, twenty-five, and you're not familiar with H3s, but American soldiers, we'd probably get a dozen on, well, we got twenty-five on the helicopter, all five with the H1 as a reserve for any potential rescue operation. Took off and went into the area where we were going to drop them off, and I was number two in the formation, the first one was Major Taylor and Lieutenant Colonel Silva, and they made their approach in, and were just getting into a hover, and the enemy opened up on them and destroyed their aircraft and they had to crash. They were in a hover, so they just set down and got out and evacuated the aircraft. I was right behind them and I, needless to say, peeled off and I was able to

climb out and everybody followed me and then I took over as the lead helicopter. We had two A1s, they were fighters, they took over and they went in and sanitized the area. After everything quieted down on the ground, I said ok to the H1 helicopter pilot, why don't you go in there and pick up the four Americans and get out of there, and he said, no, it's still too dangerous and I'm not going in and I'm low on fuel anyway. After he refused the order, I said to myself, well, those guys have had it if I don't do something, so I decided to go in. I felt that with my twenty-five troops we could really mount an offense and maybe save the day. Also, after I got the twenty-five troops off, I would pick up the four airmen from the U.S. and get out of there. So I started my approach in, and they started opening up halfway down, and they blew out my servo. They were hitting the aircraft substantially, but I was still able to fly it. When the servos are blown out, I could say that it's like going down the road at eighty miles an hour and your power steering is blown out, so now you are manhandling your vehicle on the road. That's how it was flying, I was manhandling the aircraft, but I could still fly it. I continued the approach in and landed, offloaded the twenty-five troops, got the Americans on board, and was just proceeding to take off and the enemy finally was able to blow out my transmission, so I came back down and evacuated the aircraft. For the next six, seven hours I took over the operation and set up a defense and did everything I could to keep the Americans safe and the indigenous safe because we had fifty troops of our own down there plus the eight Americans, but the enemy had completely surrounded the area. It was a trap that they had set up for us and the CIA didn't know a thing about it. We continued for the next six hours to try to keep them away from us. I, with my

compass, was able to see the enemy periodically and with my compass headings I would call in the aircraft for immediate response, and the fast movers, I shouldn't say this, but the fast movers weren't worth a damn because they couldn't pinpoint where I was saying, but the A1s were outstanding because they were low and slow and they could really pinpoint the enemy. We pretty well kept them at bay, but afterwards they said there was upwards of 2000 enemy soldiers there. Again, to this day I'm annoyed about the whole thing because our intelligence sure broke down. We had terrific air support and we were able to keep them at bay, but as dusk was settling it didn't look good for us because I could still see the enemy rolling in over different berms and I'd call for the fighters to come in there and neutralize them. They did a good job, but they still continued to get closer and closer. Fortunately we had a fantastic airborne mission commander and he decided that the only way we were going to get out was if he used gas. What he had, he had four A1s with gas canisters, CBU-19, which is a debilitating gas that makes you cry, makes you vomit, makes you throw up, everything, it was debilitating. He came in, had two of them come north to south, drop the gas right on east and west of us, and that was immediately followed by two coming in east to west dropping the gas north and south of us. So we were completely surrounded by this gas and needless to say we were gassed, but the enemy was gassed, too. Then the H-53s came in and we were able to get out of there. Of course, the H-53 crew, they had gas masks on and all, so they weren't affected by the gas. It was just a hellacious exercise at the end. Unfortunately, it worked out okay, but the forty-six indigenous troops that were still alive went first to the H-53 and got onboard the rear deck of the helicopter and

once we got there there was no room. I directed the guys to go around the side to the door. It was my mistake, I was thinking the door was the same as the H-3 that we were flying. Unfortunately, the H-53 is a massive helicopter versus ours and they had Dutch doors on the side. The bottom Dutch door was closed and locked and a mini gun was on the top. So we had a very little entranceway to get in. The first guy just leaped up, it was five or six feet, grabbed and PJs [Para Jumpers] would pull him in. Unfortunately, Colonel Silva was severely wounded and he couldn't get up. I was also wounded, there were two of us that were wounded in the Americans, he and myself, so I got down on my hands and knees and he used my back as a steppingstone, and then with one of the guys pushing him and the PJ pulling him, they got him into the aircraft and then I leaped up and got in the aircraft and we were saved. Got out just in the nick of time, because as the second H-53 was taking off they were actually firing at the enemy, which were a few yards from the aircraft. Again, the enemy was gassed, too, so they were not coherent in their shooting ability, so the PJs who had mini guns were, you could say, taking care of them. We got back and I went into the hospital and spent a couple days in hospital, then came back and packed my bags and came back to the United States. So ended a year of active combat in Southeast Asia.

IH: And you were wounded in the leg, correct?

PC: Yeah. Actually, my wound was a miracle because the bullet came in the leg and was probably at the end of its spent life, you might say, because it came in and hit the

main leg bone and went in just a little bit, and then came out and went around the leg bone to the other side. So when I got to the hospital, the doc said, okay, your outside is all torn up where the bullet went in and we're going to have to go in on the other side to take the bullet out, so that way you're going to have two sides opened up and that's not good. What we would like to do is just fill you with penicillin and monitor it, but just leave the bullet in there. I said fine, that way I didn't have a wound on the inner part of the leg, and after I got out of the hospital I just was able to dry gauze it. You had to push stuff into the leg to make sure that it healed from inside out so you didn't get problems inside. It worked out. Unfortunately, six months later, I was tired all the time. I'd come home from flying and I didn't even have enough strength to eat, I'd take a nap first. Finally, the flight surgeon called me, this was in Hawaii, and the flight surgeon said, come on in, I want to check you out, I want to give you a blood test. I asked him why and he said, several of the other troops that were down with you came down with an infection, and sure enough, I had the infection and that's what was killing me. The extremely long worms had gotten out of my intestines and into my blood, they were eating my blood up and I was losing all the white cells in the blood, whatever it was. They gave me poison to take. This was a three series. The first series was a light poison, it just made me dizzy, no problem, and then they'd take blood a couple days later and they were still there. The second time they tried more of a dose, and this made me sort of fade out a little bit, and they took a blood sample of that and still they were there. So then they put me into Tripler hospital and gave me the full dose, which to a layman killed me, but they had the antidote there, and they waited as long as they could till they felt that I would be

dead if they didn't give me the antidote and they did. When I came to a couple of weeks later they took blood samples and they had killed, they had poisoned the worms so they weren't in my bloodstream any more. If that didn't do it, they would have to operate on me and take all my blood out and eliminate it that way and reinject it and all that good stuff. I was really fortunate in that I got good help at Tripler Army Hospital in Hawaii and they saved the day.

IH: Wow, you really were fortunate. That's incredible.

PC: Yeah, it was.

IH: The Air Force Cross is the second highest award given for extraordinary heroism in military action. People would say, Mr. Conran, that you were extremely courageous for fighting while wounded to protect your crew and the crew of the other helicopter. How would you describe your actions that day?

PC: Well, my actions were I couldn't leave them. When I was airborne I was out of the thicket, H-1s were in their strafing area. When the H-1 pilot said that it was still too dangerous, I just made the decision those guys aren't going to last if I don't get in there and help them so I just made the determination that I had to go in and do it and I did. Unfortunately, my aircraft was destroyed, but I think it saved the day and I saved the crew, the downed crew, and my own crew. Even though I wasn't the senior ranking

officer, the other two on the first aircraft were senior ranking, I took over and ran the show. Did what I had to do in order to prevent the enemy from coming on and killing us all because they would have killed us, I don't think they were interested in capturing us, maybe they were, I don't know. Anyway, it was a hell of a day; it started at 8:00 in the morning and finished at sunset. They had 123s out there, we called them the candles because they had flares on board and they were circling around at sunset ready to dispense candles to keep the area lit up. Fortunately, the airborne on-scene commander said, those guys will never last. He made the determination to bring in the gas, which really saved the day.

IH: How would you define courage?

PC: Define courage. I really can't define it, it's just something that you decide in your own mind what you have to do. I'll read you one thing that I came across if I can find it, that Major Taylor, who was the mission commander for the operation, said in a written statement to the Air Force personnel. Colonel Taylor, he retired as a colonel, he was the mission commander, he stated in his eyewitness report, "Conran, realizing we had little hope of surviving without additional troops, made the decision to assist even though he knew his chance of survival was minimal. He could have exited the area because of the extreme high risk and let us fend for ourselves and nobody would have questioned his decision, but he didn't." He goes on to say more about what took place.

I don't know if you'd call it courage or stupidity, but I just couldn't leave them there at the time and I made the decision to go in there and do what I could.

IH: How long were you in the military?

PC: Total, including the Air National Guard, I was in thirty-five years. Thirty-five years and one month, I think it was, but active duty thirty years.

IH: What rank did you attain by the time your service ended?

PC: Well, that's, if you have time I'll just give you a quick rundown. I was commander of the Arnold Engineering Development Center, a general position, and I got a call from a Major General from Los Angeles that I was working with to build a tunnel down at Tullahoma, Tennessee, which is the largest ground test facility in the world for testing engine and space related hardware. Anyways, he said you'll be receiving a call from General Skantze here in a couple days and I just want to congratulate you beforehand. I said, ok, thank you very much General. I knew what it was because the promotion board had met and I was on the list for a promotion to BG. A couple days later the call came in from General Skantze, and he said Phil, I know you're expecting a congratulation call, but he said, it isn't a congratulation call. You were taken off the list, you and one other individual was taken off the list, you were the top two on the list, and the reason you were taken off the list was because you would have had over twenty-

seven years of active commissioned service when you pinned on your star. The Chief of Staff decided that he was not going to promote anybody to BG that had over twenty-seven years of commissioned service. His idea was sound in that if I wasn't promoted to Major General within those three years I would have to retire and at that time you would retire at your former rank, which was 06 Colonel. If I wasn't promoted within the next couple cycles, I would have had to retire at thirty years and assume my rank of colonel. Anyway, he made his decision and two of us were taken off the list. My general, General Skantze, a four-star, he said, I'm really sorry about that, I tried, I told them that it was unjust, etc., etc., the fact that he didn't make this announcement before the board met. It would have made a difference in who the board selected. He said, what do you want to do, Phil, it's up to you. I said, well, I'm occupying a General Officer position, and I don't feel I should stay here because I would be denying someone else the right to make BG out of this position. He said ok, go down to my Assignments Branch and tell them I said to give you whatever you wanted. I called up the Assignments Branch, I knew the guys there, and I said, ok, what have you got? They said, you know, we happen to have an assignment I think that you would be interested in. It's in London, England, and you would be heading up the European Office for Aerospace Research and Development. Needless to say, I talked to my wife and she said you betcha, so off we went to London, and I stayed in London for two and three quarters years and it was a fantastic assignment. So in a way, I wasn't promoted to BG, but I got an assignment that was fantastic because it was a win-win situation over in London. We were extremely successful in what we did, in other words, we traveled

around Europe talking to the various scientific professors to see if they had any projects that they were working on that they needed monetary assistance on. Then, if they did, most of the time I didn't even know what they were talking about, so I would go back to London and we had a stable of Ph.D.s working with us there that if it was aeronautical or medical or physics or chemistry or what have you, we would send them to talk to the professor that was doing the research. We would get that information and send it back to the laboratory in the states that directly worked in that one specific area. If they liked the project, then we would pay and send the professor over to that laboratory for two weeks and let him discuss it with the scientific laboratory in our country. If they felt it was worthy of our participation, then they would call us, and we would enter into a contract with the professor for two, three, four years and fund his project, and he would get credit for it and we would get all the information. It was a win-win for the professor and for the United States because the research that we were doing was basic research. It could go into the military channels, it could go into the civilian channels, you name it, but it was like I said a win-win. When I left we had 154 contracts that we were monitoring throughout the European theater. It was a fantastic assignment so even though I wasn't promoted, I had a fantastic last three years of my Air Force career doing something that was so rewarding. If I had been promoted I probably would have been a baggage handler for a four-star, carrying his bags, so I consider myself in a way lucky.

IH: Definitely.

Mr. Conran, how did you join the Legion of Valor?

PC: When I received the award in Hawaii in 1971, actually it was in May of 1970, an individual, a colonel stationed at Hickam in Hawaii, was there, and after the presentation he came up to me and he introduced himself and he said, I'm a member of the Legion of Valor. He had the Distinguished Service Cross. He said I would like you to look at the information I have and come and join us. Needless to say, I looked at the information and Legion of Valor, as you know, is a unit that is dedicated to preserve the award of the Medal of Honor and the Distinguished Service Cross or the Air Force Cross or the Navy Cross. Based upon his recommendation, I joined the Legion of Valor.

IH: What does the organization mean to you?

PC: It didn't mean anything to me initially. Yes, it was an honor to be a part of such a group of highly decorated personnel throughout the Armed Forces, and I read all of the information that they provided in their bulletin, that they put out every other month, but I didn't really participate in the Legion of Valor until I retired, mainly because I just didn't have time. I was active duty, and my family came first, the job came second, and I didn't have time for anything else. I wasn't an active member of the Legion of Valor until I retired, and the first convention I went to was in 1990, which happened to be the 100th anniversary of the Legion of Valor, and that was down in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I was very impressed with the outfit and from then on I tried to be an active participant and go to the conventions. Then I got on the board and then eventually became commander, the National Commander. After I was National Commander in 2000, I took

over as the National Adjutant, and was the National Adjutant for sixteen years until I had a stroke and a heart attack and I decided that it was best if I give that up because I had been doing it for sixteen years. When you're the National Adjutant, you run the organization, there's no ifs, ands, or buts about it, you do everything except the convention and the National Commander does that. That's what I did for sixteen years, run the organization, and I decided that I needed to get younger blood in there after I had my stroke and heart attack because I didn't want to leave them in the lurch if something should happen. That's when I gave it up and Don Marx was gracious enough to assume the position and he is now the National Adjutant.

IH: Thank you very much for sharing your inspiring story with me today, Mr. Conran. It is an honor to talk to you and hear your story.

PC: Thank you. Thank you very much. What the Legion of Valor does, it's a good organization and it's a small organization, so small that very few people know about it, but those that do know about it think very highly of it and are quite impressed with what we do. It's a good organization and what you're doing is outstanding, too.

IH: Thank you.