

**Introduction**  
by  
William C. Baldwin

John W. Morris was sworn in as 44th Chief of Engineers on 1 July 1976. He had already served in the Corps of Engineers' headquarters, the Office of the Chief of Engineers (OCE), for four years, first as Director of Civil Works and then briefly as Deputy Chief of Engineers. Figuring that he would be too old to fulfill a term as Chief of Engineers when the present Chief ended his term in 1977, he and his wife Gerry had already begun discussing retirement from his military career. Unexpectedly, the Chief, Lieutenant General William C. Gribble, Jr., announced that he was retiring more than a year early and that General Morris would be his successor. For more than eight years, General Morris occupied key leadership roles in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during one of the most turbulent decades in the organization's existence.

During the 1970s the growing concern about the quality of the country's natural environment hit the Corps of Engineers with full force. Not only did the Corps' large program of water resources development come under attack, but also Congress and the courts pushed the organization into an extensive and controversial wetlands regulatory role. Declining budgets and growing environmental criticism also dampened enthusiasm for construction of water resources projects that had been the Corps' forte in the decades after World War II.

The decade of the 1970s also brought profound changes in the nation's defense posture. Military expenditures declined markedly as the war in Vietnam ended with a corresponding decline in the Corps' construction for the Army and the Air Force. Two massive overseas construction programs, however, took up the slack. The reimbursable construction for the Saudi Arabian armed forces and the construction of Israeli airbases in the wake of the Camp David Accords gave the Corps a huge but delicate overseas workload. Keeping the demanding overseas and traditional domestic customers happy and fulfilling their expectations became major management challenges.

General Morris' military career leading up to his selection as Chief of Engineers was not atypical of the careers of other post-World War II chiefs. He graduated from West Point in the summer of 1943 after a three-year course shortened because of World War II. For three years he served in the Far East in Engineer aviation battalions and in staff positions after the war ended. In addition to the standard Army schooling at the Engineer School, Command and General Staff College, and the War College, General Morris obtained a master's degree in civil engineering at the University of Iowa.

His other assignments reflected the post-war Engineer missions of military construction, civil works, and service in troop units. In the mid-1950s he was area engineer at the Goose Bay Airbase building a variety of facilities under a cost-plus contract on a tight schedule enduring harsh climatic conditions. Earlier he began his long association with the Corps' water resources program by serving as executive officer in the Savannah Engineer District. In 1960 he returned to Engineer troop units where he had served as a young officer during World War II by commanding the 8th Engineer Battalion of the 1st Cavalry Division in South Korea.

Within each Engineer mission area, General Morris held both staff and command positions. Early in his career he was on the staff of the Engineer School in West Germany and later he served in the military personnel division of the Office of the Chief of Engineers in a period when the Chief had substantial Engineer personnel responsibilities. His Army staff experience came in the turbulent mid-1960s when he was deputy chief of Legislative Liaison.

By 1960 General Morris began to receive the all-important senior command positions. In addition to commanding troops in the 8th Engineer Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division, he served as a regimental

tactical officer at the U.S. Military Academy. In 1969 he returned to Engineer units in the field by becoming commanding general of the 18th Engineer Brigade in South Vietnam, which in addition to its combat duties was responsible for a major highway construction program. Command positions in the Corps of Engineers also were important. In the early 1960s he led the Tulsa Engineer District, which had one of the largest workloads in the Corps including major water resources and military construction projects. Five years after leaving Tulsa, General Morris returned to the country's heartland in 1970 as commander of the Missouri River Division just as the growing environmental movement began to have a substantial impact on the Corps.

With this diverse background of assignments, General Morris became Director of Civil Works under Chief of Engineers, Lieutenant General Frederick J. Clarke, in 1972. For the next eight years he held key positions in Corps' headquarters. After he retired from the Army in 1980 to the strains of the popular song, "Please release me, let me go," played by the Army band at his retirement parade, General Morris began an active career as a civilian engineer, first with a Dutch company and then with his own corporation. He also found time for teaching and philanthropic work, most of it related to his chosen profession and to the organization he had served for 37 years. Named Construction Man of the Year by the *Engineering News Record* in 1977, the former Chief of Engineers continued to receive honors in retirement, including most recently the Founder's Award of the National Academy of Engineering and recognition as a Distinguished Graduate of the U.S. Military Academy.

The oral history interview, which forms the bulk of this publication, is General Morris' reminiscences and reflections on his background and personal life, his long career in the Corps of Engineers, and his activities after he retired from the Army. Like all oral history interviews, this transcript contains General Morris' personal thoughts and perspectives. His views do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense or the Army Corps of Engineers. The strength of oral history is that it captures the unique perspectives and interpretations of individuals who witnessed or participated in historical events. Oral history can supplement and enrich the official record but never replace it. Interviews are often not objective nor are they expected to be. Their value is contained in the personal perspective they provide.

General Morris and I taped the bulk of the interview in 13 sessions during 1993.<sup>1</sup> We discussed the subjects of each session prior to taping it and worked from a rough and constantly evolving outline. After the tapes were transcribed, General Morris edited the transcripts carefully and conscientiously. I assisted General Morris in his review of the transcripts, prepared the front matter for this publication, and chose the photographs from General Morris' personal photograph collection. The Office of History thanks General Morris for the time and energy he devoted to this project, which was certainly more time consuming and lengthy than he anticipated.

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<sup>1</sup>The interview sessions took place in General Morris' office in Arlington, Virginia, on 5, 11, 19, and 25 January, 8 February, 1 March, 5, 12, and 15 April, 6, 10, 17, and 20 December 1993 and 18 April 1995. General Morris also recorded one session with Dr. Paul K. Walker, Chief, Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, on 29 November 1984. The original tapes and unedited transcripts are in the Research Collections, Office of History, in Alexandria, Virginia.

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**Career Summary**

Student, Engineer School, Fort Belvoir, Virginia	Jun 43	<b>Oct 43</b>
3d Engineer Aviation Unit Training Center, <b>MacDill</b> Field, Florida	<b>Oct 43</b>	Jan 44
Platoon Commander, 1895th Engineer Aviation Battalion, Florida, Hawaii, and Guam	Jan 44	<b>Dec 44</b>
Company Commander, 1869th Engineer Aviation Battalion, Florida and Pacific Ocean Areas	Feb 45	Sep 45
Staff Officer, U.S. Army Strategic Air Force, Guam, and U.S. Army Pacific Air Command, Manila	Sep 45	Mar 46
Staff Officer, Engineer Section, Far East Air Force, Tokyo	Mar 46	May <b>47</b>
Student, University of Iowa	Jun <b>47</b>	<b>Jul 48</b>
Student, Engineer Officer Advanced Course, Fort Belvoir, Virginia	Jul 48	Sep 49
Staff Officer, Engineer School, European Command, <b>Murnau</b> , West Germany	Sep 49	<b>Oct 52</b>
Executive Officer and Assistant District Engineer, Savannah Engineer District, Georgia	<b>Oct 52</b>	Aug 54
Student, Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas	Aug 54	Aug 55
Area Engineer, Goose Bay Area Office, East Ocean District	Sep 55	Apr <b>57</b>
Branch Chief and Executive Officer, Military Personnel Division, Office of the Chief of Engineers	Jun 57	Jun 60
Battalion Commander, 8th Engineer Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division, South Korea	Aug 60	Jun 61
Student, Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania	Aug 61	Jun 62
District Engineer, Tulsa Engineer District, Oklahoma	Jun 62	Jun 65
Regimental Tactical Officer and Deputy Commandant, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York	Jun 65	Nov 67

## Engineer Memoirs

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Deputy Chief, Legislative Liaison, Office of the Secretary of the Army	Nov 67	Apr 69
Commanding General, 18th Engineer Brigade, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam	Apr 69	Jun 70
Division Engineer, Missouri River Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	Jun 70	Apr 72
Director of Civil Works, Office of the Chief of Engineers	Apr 72	Aug 75
Deputy Chief of Engineers	Aug 75	Ju176
Chief of Engineers	Ju176	Sep 80

### Promotion History

Promotions	Temporary	Permanent
2d Lieutenant		1 Jun 43
1st Lieutenant	1 Dec 43	25 Jun 46
Captain	6 Jun 45	10 Feb 49
Major	13 Jun 51	20 Mar 57
Lieutenant Colonel	18 Aug 53	2 Jan 64
Colonel	5 Sep 61	3 Jun 68
Brigadier General	1 Aug 69	26 Aug 71
Major General	1 Jul 71	28 Jun 73
Lieutenant General	1 Ju176	

### **Education**

U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York	<b>1940–Jun 1943</b>
University of Iowa (M.S. in Civil Engineering)	1947-1948
U.S. Army Command and General Staff College	<b>1954–1955</b>
U.S. Army War College	1961-1962
University of Pittsburgh	1967

### **Decorations**

Distinguished Service Medal  
Legion of Merit with 3 Oak Leaf Clusters  
Bronze Star Medal  
Air Medals  
Army Commendation Medal with 2 Oak Leaf Clusters  
Army General Staff Identification Badge