Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Jon McMurtry. We are in Fort Walton Beach, Florida on the 24th of September year 2000 at approximately 8:00 am in the morning. Mr. McMurtry, would you first please indicate that you would agree to releasing this interview to the Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive and also for the use of third parties, researchers and also the FAC book committee and their writing activities.

Jon McMurtry: I certainly will.

SM: I also will agree to release my portion of the interview.

JM: Call me Jon.

SM: Okay, Jon. Would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

JM: Okay, I was raised in Oklahoma. I went to school in Stillwater, Oklahoma. I went to Oklahoma State. I graduated through ROTC. I always wanted to fly. It was a land grant college so you had two first years mandatory unless you wanted to be drafted. You had your choice. I went ahead and learned to fly. I graduated as a distinguished military graduate. I’m still not quite sure how I did that. I went to pilot training. I got married to my wife Jane. I went on to pilot training at Malden, Missouri for T-34s, C-28s. They were
props. I felt very lucky because most everything was T-37s by then and on to Vance is a
t-33. Trained and remained there as an instructor and instructed there. I went on to
Europe RF 101s. Southeast Asia after that. I toured the Academy for four years, ran the
[?] program, back in the training command, many jobs in that. That’s kind of a quick run
down.

SM: When did you graduate from college?
JM: January 1959.

SM: And entered the Air Force immediately after that?
JM: April.

SM: April. When did you finish your pilot training in the Air Force.

SM: When did you find yourself with orders going to Vietnam?
JM: I was flying RF 101s in Europe, in [?] England and we’re still not quite sure
how this all came about. But, I was assigned to be a FAC and they were still needing 101
drivers but that was kind of toning down. The F-4s were coming in the RF. So anyway, I
had orders to be a forward air controller. I was not sure exactly what that involved at that
time. They came back kind of PDY through the States. Got my family squared away in
Oklahoma and came down to Hurlburt here in Florida for training. I trained out of Holly
Field and O-1 initially and went over and I arrived in country 29 March 1968, Bien Hoa.
From there they said you are going to be an O-2 out of country FAC and look like you
are going to a place called Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, which I didn’t even know what
Thailand was to speak of. I thought I was going to fight the war in Vietnam. But anyway,
so soon enough I found out what that was all about. So I went to Phan Rang, go checked
out in the O-2 and arrived. I had to go back to snake school, jungle survival. The orders
messed up so I had to leave Bien Hoa in the meantime and go there before Phan Rang. I
completed that. Then, we arrived at NKP about the middle of April.

SM: April of ’68.
JM: Yes. I went through my check-out in the O-2 and started flying missions right
off. What happened to me is pretty early. The mission on Streetcar 304 occurred. It stared
on 31 May 1968. It turned out to be the largest SAR effort at that time when it was
completed in Southeast Asia. I think it was 189 sorties. But it stared on 31 May and was
completed, 2\textsuperscript{nd} June. The way it started, we had what we called sector FACs. We had an
are we covered with four O-2s 24 hours a day. It might change some. But during the
daylight hours, we had four O-2s start in the Mu Gia pass down to an area called
Tchepone. That’s the southern end of the trail network where the Route 9 turned and
went over the Tchepone fords towards Khe Sanh. And of course, there became Vietnam.
The area that they were trying to infil and exfil mostly supplies, mostly by truck. But of
course, they move a lot of people. I arrived on station, this is kind of in the late afternoon.
Well, late afternoon. And I was told by Alley Cat which is an airborne command and
control that the FAC I was replacing had found a barge on the river south of Tchepone
and he tried to hit it with a flight of four duds, 105s and they missed it. So, they thought it
was a real good target for me and to go down there. So I did. I looked and I found what
they were talking about. But while I was waiting for air strikes, for aircraft to strike it, I
found a bridge back west of actually the Fort or the barge. And this bridge, to me, was a
much more lucrative target. They kind of camouflaged it, but the sun was getting to the
west and I lucked out, just pure luck. I found to see this bridge. The next thing I knew,
then I said, ‘I really need some air,’ I said, ‘I’ve got a lucrative target.’ The next thing, I
have two Navy A-7s, or a fight of A-7s Streetcar 304 flight showing up. I’d never worked
Navy before and I asked them what they had and they told me. And some of the problems
we had quite often that what the Navy and Air Force described as ordinance could be
different. I found later on from experience, sometimes if I didn’t understand what they
were saying I would ask them, ‘Does this go boom, clip, sparkle, gas?’ Whatever. It came
around the good weather, the target area was in good shape. I briefed them on the normal
stuff, the escape routes, all that. I said I would mark the target for them because they
couldn’t see it. I tried to describe it. The flight ahead of me had no ground fire. The guy
reported no ground fire, they were trying to hit the barge. This area was far enough south
of Tchepone, I really thought it was no big problem. So, standard stuff, expect 37 mm
and automatic fire. I said, ‘I have not received much of anything and I have been out here
for a while.’ We came back around. He said, ‘Right. I have your smoke and I got kind of
lucky.’ I said, ‘Well hit just above my smoke.’ He came in and he did, but he flew in and
came in much lower than what I was accustomed with the Air Force. His pull off was
very low. I thought, ‘Man this is different.’ And they pulled off and they really started
firing. He obliviated the target. He really nailed. So his wing man is coming in and I clear
him but then I said, ‘Hey, look out! Look out!’ He jinked and threw his bombs off and
that didn’t matter. There was no friendlies in that area. So back around and he said, ‘I
want to make another attack.’ I said, ‘They go the target.’ This is where Kenny and I feel
Street Car 304, and we’ve talked about this and have different recollections, I think he
wanted to go after the guns. He said, ‘No, I wanted to hit another area.’ Anyway, on his
second, I told him alright and he had all kinds of weapons left. They come back around.
And the thing is I cleared him random. The reason we did this, is so the enemy can't track
you in a standard bombing approach. I cleared the area. As long as they had me sight, I
let them do anything they want. I didn’t want them to run over me, but I’d get. What he
did, he came around the same was exactly. Back out. At least we were coming out of the
sun. Coming from west to east and the sun’s behind him. As he starts his approach, and I
told him about all the ground fire, ‘Yeah, Yeah.’ He knew that. He saw. And he starts
down and the A-7 yawed, kind of yawed once or twice and then just tumbled completely
out of control. I started yelling, ‘You’re hit! Eject, eject, eject!’ Kenny gives me credit for
saving his life because of this. Because he said the A-7 was brand new, with all the new
equipment, he felt so comfortable in there. He said, ‘I’ve got to figure this out. Something
is wrong here.’ He said he would have ridden the thing right in until finally he said
something in his mind kept saying, ‘I hear this guy saying eject.’ And, bam, out he went.
The airplane, he said, passed him. All I saw, I thought he didn’t get out initially. I saw the
big impact, the explosion of the aircraft, then I saw the chute. So it could have gone by
him before the chute. He wouldn’t have been very close to it. I told his wing man, I
turned over to his wingman to go high. I said, ‘Go get Crown.’ That’s a big air rescue. C-
130 somewhere the Crown was, I never knew, but it was around. They monitored all of
us. I said, ‘Get Crown. Let’s get some SAR. Get the sandies and jollies.’ I came back
around, trying to get him up. I kept saying, ‘Guard,’ and I said, ‘Street Car 304 and L66.
Come up.’ The next thing I know, beep, beep, beep. There’s the big beeper going. So I
knew I had him and we got right to him.

SM: Let me ask you a couple of quick questions about the pre-mission briefing
you received. What kind of expectations did you have making enemy contact and what
der
kind of briefing did you receive?
JM: Okay, like I said, it was a sector FAC. In other words, we normally had five fighter for us and had interdiction points. Mu Gia, Foxtrot, Delta points. Pete knows these.

SM: Were these kind of like choke points that you would normally have?

JM: Yes. We had the fighters and the idea is to try to interdict the road. I thought the Ho Chi Minh Trail was a little path of guys with rubber soled shoes going along with a backpack. Its two, four lengths I some places, going out like the moon. We try to stop the traffic. They did most of the moving at night so in the daytime we tried to work on those points. And that’s what you’d get fragged. Or whatever you found. We did a lot of VR, visual reconnaissance. So you’re looking down in areas you could see where they’d pull off into the trees in the jungle off the main road. If they were lucrative enough, we’d be hitting those. The thing is, when you ran over the road, you had to jink. You had to keep it moving or they’d fire. It was kind of like an unwritten rule. As long as we were jinking, they didn’t usually shoot at us. It was just the FAC by himself. However, if we’d stop, start looking where we could really look, then they would hose us. But the problem with the jink, I always thought, if they moved, we turned and they fired and we ever saw them fire the war is over. We always thought that as long as we jinked, but that made a tough decision. That was the job. I was briefed. That was my job. I think I had some fighters. I had sector four which is the southern one. Just before I got out there, this is how it transpired. Yes, they would always brief us on active and triple A sights, the one before you, what he had. But we did a lot of this ourselves. You talk to the guy you’re replacing, passing, or maybe meet him on station and say, ‘Hey, what's really going on?’ Sometimes they would say, ‘It’s a really great day. A lot is going on.’ I didn’t like those days. It means there’s a lot of ground fire. I like to hear them say, ‘Ah, not much going on.’ ‘Oh, Okay.’ That’s it.

SM: On this particular mission, your briefing, when you got information, it was basically, well, its pretty light out there. It’s not a whole lot of action.

JM: That’s right. The war itself, the Tchepone area we knew was bad. So it was nothing extraordinary. Nothing that would make me expect this kind of situation starting. Later on, I think they figured it was and infil or an exfil maybe of the regiment size in VA. Those exfiling or infiling Khe Sanh. It was still at Khe Sanhh. They were over there
R&R or something maybe in Laos. So that never got really clear to me. But there was a
big bunch. So the guns at triple A that came up was not normally what you would ever
associate in that area.

SM: So this was a small arms fire. This was like twelve.

JM: Well they had GPU 2337 but I blended into that area so I had no idea. If it
weren’t for the bridge, I wouldn’t expect anything like this. But evidently they thought
we found them. Its all I can think of is why they came out and responded. After Kenny
came up, I talked to him, started the fighters would be diverted in now to start to try to
recover him. The first ones I want was CBU. They had [?] guns. The biggest ground fire
was coming north of the position. That’s where the bigger guns were. So we started
getting the fighters. Started attacking those. I talked to Kenny. Right then I knew where
he was. I didn’t think he moved much. He was right in where the guns got him. I mean,
he was right there. But, I didn’t want to hit him so my big concern was to take the fighter
guys and slowly work them out. The CB-24 finally got some of that. We kept pounding
those. During this time, the fighters were getting more, I was getting an awful lot of
ground fire. 37mm. I didn’t see much of it, which is great. But the fighters were saying,
‘Hey, FAC! They are really hosing you.’ [tape skips] As long as I didn’t know I was
going shot at, I was pretty brave, but once I found out. They were shooting even from
[?]. Clear across. They were shooting way off at us. They weren't even reaching us. A 37
would break and blow up maybe a mile away. So, I don’t know what was going on. We
really thought we had them. They had a lot of 37, 23mm and a GPU. It’s pretty hard to
see in the daytime than you can at night. But it’s a tracer and it’s point impacting. It was a
modern weapon Czechloslavakian rapid fire. It would really cut you in two. I think that’s
later on probably what got the sandies. That 23 or 37. We kept on going, follow him,
follow him, follow him. And finally it kind of rode up. In the meantime, the jolly greens
and the sandies had arrived and they were down south targeting it in. The tactics, I had
been taught before- we didn’t understand how to work this very well- was that if
somebody go shot down, the sandies and jolly greens got him. But the sandies said, ‘No
FAC. You know where he is. You got him.’ They said, ‘You work it until we get the
guns.’ So the guns finally subsided. A lot more went on, but anyway, I was up talking to
Kenny. He thought I’d put the bombs close to him. Too close ones. Some were using
750s and 500 pounders. With five, there’s a big difference in the bank. I told him that no, I had gone with 750s. They’re still in the same area and the guns were well clear of it. Then I find out he had another flight of A-7 Navy guys in there. Never checked in with me. One of those guys made a pass on his burning wreckage and bombed it and almost got killed. And I never knew that. I must have been so concentrated. I could see his airplane cook. I’m sure one of my thought the bombs were going. I remember that distinctly, but that had to be his wing man. Never checked in with me, nothing. So then he screwed around and off he went. So we got the [?] the sandies wanted to give it a try. I’ll try to speed this up. So they come up. Sandy lead was Bill Plank and they make their first pass talking to Kenny. The ground fire starts up again. Not, I didn’t see any big stuff breaking like 37mm. Bill Flank says, ‘I’m hit! I’m hit!’ I said, ‘Well turn west. Get west, get over the ridge.’ And I saw him turn around there and just like we talked before, like a World War II movie, where you see the airplane back smoke pouring out. Because the sandies were a big problem. That thing was just engulfed in smoke. He kept that thing going. Talked about the rooster tail, get to a safe area and all that. So I turned after him. There’s another FAC replacing me. This had been going on for a while. Sandy seven, which was actually sandy three and four said, ‘I think we can pull this off.’ It’s starting to get dark. After sandy lead got hit, I said, ‘We’ve go to have some fast movers.’ These guns are different than the ones we’ve been going after. And sandy three and four and three says, ‘I think we can pull this off,’ and he pulled in there and they shot him down. He heard him running, talking on the radio. They’re after me going up the hill, maybe across the road, something. So again, ‘Knock it off, we got to knock this off.’ So I guess Kenny, Street Car 304, told sandies three and four not to come because he said it was too much down here. I didn’t hear that. So they went out, I went back. We knocked it off. It was getting dark. We told Kenny we would be back. So, that night, we briefed about the SAR that next day. He said, ‘Y’all go back. We’re going to be out there an hour before sunrise or close to it, before sunrise. The sandies will be there.’ They were going to get him out of there. It started out pretty well. I got Kenny, Street Car 304 right up on the radio. I couldn’t get sandy seven. I couldn’t, the come up beeper, always couldn’t, couldn't. Well, it made me feel bad. So I thought, ‘Well, what are going to do?’ Bill Plank, the guy who got shot up so bad, is back. He’s sandy lead again. I said, ‘You’re
really the SAR force commander, I guess.’ I said, ‘What are we going to do?’ He said, ‘Jon, we got to get first L66. We got to get what we got to get. So let’s get Street Car.’ So then we start in…

PETE LAPPIN: Sandy seven was Ed Leonard who was a POW for five years.

JM: So we wrote him off of that and didn’t know until he came back that he got out of there. That was the greatest day, one of the great days of my life when I heard he got out of POW. We thought he was dead.

SM: I’m sorry. What was his first name again?

JM & PL: Ed.

SM: Leonard.

JM & PL: Leonard, yeah.

PL: Great guy. I’ve got his name, address, email, phone number and everything if you want it. He would be a great addition.

SM: Yes, sir. He would. Thank you.

JM: So that evening we decided what we’re going to do. The forces were going to have every fighter in the war there. They’re going to get him out. All war stop up north. What ever is necessary if we need to. Brief tactics. They talked about using spads.

PL: I don’t think that’s classified stuff anymore.

JM: In other words, use gas if we needed to.

SM: This is just…

JM: SAR. And the idea was you could just put him to sleep. The guy who briefed the guy briefing that part of the spaz come in Pleiku and the weather’s good, once we know exactly, [?] we got to know exactly where he is because he is probably going to go to sleep. Prepare to go to sleep by the way you put your gas mask on or your oxygen mask on, we do this. Well, we didn’t have oxygen masks. So what do we do? I said, ‘I don’t think that’s going to work.’ I said, ‘If I see that, I’ll stay upwind. I don’t want to go to sleep with this crap going on.’ We go out there, get joined against our finding the guys. Now we’ve got every flight ahead of you is leading three because out of the four, usually they were the better. Plus they had the CBU-24. I mean, we really nailed them guys. They shot and shot and shot. Then the weather starts getting bad. The stratus is rolling in. This happens pretty quick. We probably fought pretty hard for about an hour. Then this crud’s
coming in again. We had to hold it off. The fast movers can't get under it. It’s too low. Kenny gets on and says, ‘Hey, they’re coming after me.’ I said, ‘God,’ trying to figure this out. So Bill Plank, sandy lead, says, ‘Can you find me a hole?’ Sandies still are circling above me, A-1s most the time. The other two were with the jolly greens down south again. I went down the river a ways and I found a hole. I said, ‘Come down, hit this hole, follow the river. A couple of clicks, then where it starts to bend, that’s where he’s going to be.’ He said, ‘We got it.’ I said, ‘Do you want me to go down there with you?’ He said, ‘No.’ I was going to go but I knew I wouldn’t make it either. He said, ‘Well, no, you’re not going.’ I said, ‘Alright.’ It made me feel pretty good at the time. So they go down there and right off the bat, Plank’s hit. He said, ‘This time I’m hit. I’m hit hard. I’m not going to get back.’ And I yelled again, ‘This is under the undercast. I can’t see him!’ I knew where he was. I said, ‘Turn left. Get over that ridge if you can. The jollies and the other sandies are starting up on the other side.’ He jumps out and they make a pick up right there. They had all kinds of sorties running around trying to get more going. Told Kenny, ‘We’re going to get you.’ Then it rained like blazes. This is why you need to talk to him. That’s how he moved. His story on the ground is amazing. So, I said, and maybe Robbie saw, I didn’t know, I said, ‘Hey, that right now looks like a flak trap. I don’t know what the hell to do. I said, ‘We can hang around.’ I was running out of gas. I flew five and a half hours. Normally, our gas in that airplane is not that. They launched a FAC to meet me. In fact, the squadron commander thought I wasn’t going to make it. I forgot time. I just, that time. That’s a long time.

PL: You get so into it.

JM: Yeah, you don’t even know it. But anyway, we got that back. Try to keep track of all the fighters you put in. We used to use a grease pencil or whatever to write. That time I just put it. I had another FAC helping me. He’d brief the fighters and all the stuff normally you do. He’d brief those and then I’d give passage to them. So that saved time. Just keep them coming, keep them coming. But the weather became such a factor then, we couldn’t pursue it. We got back and debriefed.

SM: About what time was that? Do you remember?

JM: We went out, it was about an hour at night time. That was probably 11:00 or so in the morning. I can’t remember that part.
SM: About midday?

JM: So they had other guys on station that day, I know, trying to talk with him. They had some strange things happen at night. I heard about later. An A-1 showed up from somewhere and made them [?]. Kenny’s got a lot of that, but the big thing was trying to coordinate, get the thing in. I learned a lot. You get so frustrated because it doesn’t seem to work. And you think you’ve got some guns and here’s others. That’s what happened there. I’m sure the same gunners got all those A-1s. If they could do it over, that was our area to come up. Thinking about this all these thirty-two years, if we’d come in from the north, if we’d come in from the west, up over, we probably could have got back out. We didn’t know because we didn’t know that threat. It was flood all over. So, we got back, debriefed, couldn’t sleep for a long time. The next day, I decided to go back and they said, ‘No, you’re not.’ And that’s when they got Pete. And I’ll let him tell his story. He’s the one that did it, got him out. Last time I saw Kenny that next day after he got him out, was there came a jolly green and there came Pete. I was waiting to go to Bangkok. They said, ‘You’re going to Bangkok for your time off.’ And I got to see Kenny. I saw him on a stretcher. It was quite a mission. We all learned a lot from it I think. I certainly did. At that time, I think we talked about this too, I think there were five silver stars. I know Pete, I got one, three sandies, and I even heard some maybe more than that. So, at the time, it was a lot of activity. Everybody said it was. I know I had enough for a war time. I knew Pete did, too.

SM: Now, when you were there for the two days, do you recall about how many sorties were flown in support of this SAR?

JM: Most of them. There was 189.

SM: 189.

JM: Because, Pete how many do you think you worked?

PL: I have no idea.

JM: You were on station. Okay well, probably, it’s hard to say. 189 sorties were there. I don’t know if that means launched against us. I don’t know if it actually means on strike. So actually strike sorties.

PL: I actually have that information as part of my write-up, the Silver Star write-up.
JM: Okay, well you’ve got that.

SM: Well, I’m curious. You said that you kept track of the sorties and the aircraft you brought in and everything else with a grease pencil. When you went back after a mission like that, did you end up writing a report?

JM: You would debrief intelligence. You went in with a guy like you sitting there as intelligence. He goes down through; what was this, the flags, the TNT, time on target, bomb damage assessment. In a situation like this, that kind of goes out of the window, trying to keep track of who was there.

SM: That number of sorties is phenomenal.

JM: You get their flight lead. Particularly the first day. The second day I had some help. That guy was tracking. So that I remember following up on that.

SM: Was it exclusively Air Force and Navy that you had support from?

JM: No Navy.

SM: No air Navy came to support. But this is a Navy pilot.

JM: Yes, but they didn’t. There was no SAR. They never came. It was the Americas, a brand new carrier. This was a brand new outfit. It just pulled out Yankee Station. It was some of their first launches. And the idea, they were launching to South Vietnam to get them some experience before they flew against North Vietnam. That’s where Kenny thought he was going.

SM: And he went into south of Tchepone in Laos.

JM: He was down there. He said, ‘Hey, I saw you down there fighting. Nice, green.’ He says, ‘This really looks pretty. I can see you down there.’ And I said, ‘Oh this really just turned to hell later on.’ He and I have become good friends. We hadn't seen each other. We saw each other about two years ago in a debrief. I hadn't seen him in 32 years, 31 years, I guess. We really had a reunion. We got back to NKP, I took him to the club, we had a few drinks, snuck him out of the hospital. That’s another story. But anything I can help you with, let me know.

SM: Okay. Let me go ahead and end this officially. This is the first interview with Jon McMurtry.