Kim Sawyer: This is Kim Sawyer conducting an oral history interview with Fred Wayne Boling on November 16, 2000 at 2:00 PM in the Special Collections Interview Room. This interview is part of the Lubbock area Vietnam Veterans oral history project and Mr. Boling thank you for being here, if you wouldn’t mind giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself.

Fred Boling: I was born in 1948, July the 18th of 1948 in Wichita Falls, Texas. We moved from Wichita Falls when I was about two years old to Kwana, Texas about 80 miles west of Wichita Falls and I grew up in Kwana and went through the first two years of high school, freshmen and sophomore years and between my sophomore and junior year of high school we moved to Lubbock, Texas where my dad took a job and then I finished the last two years of high school at Lubbock Monterrey high school. I’d always wanted to go to Texas Tech and it was very convenient for me now living in Lubbock so I started right off in 1966 through 1970 at Texas Tech. I was business major, but I was also an ROTC major, I spent four years in the Air Force ROTC at Texas Tech, participated as a freshmen and sophomore in the Savor Plaight drill team for ROTC. And then accepted the, it was called the professional officer corps commitment, between your sophomore and junior year at Tech and you’re officially committed to go into the military at that point. They start paying you, at that time they were paying 50 dollars a month, I think its up to about 100 dollars today, something like that, but you actually go through a
swearing in ceremony before you enter your junior year to take on that professional
officer corps contract. So when I graduated in 1970, it was as I said, the tornado in
Lubbock on May the 11th of 1970, that was Monday, our ceremonies for graduation were
scheduled for the next Saturday, I believe that's the 14th, 15th, 16th, something like that
and those ceremonies were cancelled, but the commissioning ceremonies for the Air
Force ROTC was held that Saturday morning, May the 16th in the basement of the old
Social Sciences building on campus. Four days later I was on active duty going through
pilot training out at Rees Air Force Base. Part of our flying training program was the first
phase of the training was held out at Lubbock Municipal Airport, flying what’s called the
T-41, which is the civilian version of the Cessna 172 aircraft. Well, the tornado had
destroyed about half of the fleet of aircraft that we were scheduled to use. So what the Air
Force had to do was cut the training syllabus down from about thirty-five hours per
student to about twelve to fifteen hours per student. In my particular class in pilot
training, we had about 80 graduates of the Officer Candidate School; ninety day wonders
and about eight of use were Air Force ROTC graduates. The benefit for us in Air Force
ROTC is that the Air Force paid for private pilot lessons during our senior year of college
so we all had already obtain our private pilot licenses and knew how to fly and knew how
to fly those aircraft. So we took twelve hours of flying and didn’t have any problems in
the aircraft. That first phase out at Lubbock municipal washed out about 50 percent of
the Officer Candidate School graduates and they went on to other things. So that reduced
our class size pretty quick and then we went into the T-38 and T-38 out of Reese. I
graduated from Reese as class 7108 and was assigned to fly an AC-119 K gunship in
Vietnam. That was my initial assignment after graduation from pilot training. There was
a series of training schools that I had to go through before I could be shipped over to
Southeast Asia. The first phase was initial upgrade school into the C-119 aircraft. I went
up to, first of all I went down to Florida, Miami Florida, Homestead Air Force Base in
July of 1971 to go through water survival school, that’s a one week course, it was a very
fun course, I enjoyed that very much. From there I drove up to Lockborn Air Force base,
which today is Rickenbocker, its no longer an Air Force base but its called Rickenbocker
Air Force Training Center or something like that and went through about a three month
upgrade school there in Columbus, Ohio, then went down to Fort Walton Beach for the
special operations upgrade courses in C-119 aircraft at the Hurlbert field in Florida. That ended in November of 1971, before I left for Southeast Asia, I then had to go through the basic survival school for the Air Force. That’s where all the enlisted and officers, especially those scheduled for overseas duties had to go through this basic survival school. That was held at McCord Air Force Base, Spokane, Washington. It was kind of funny, because it was in late November, early part of December, there was 30 inches of snow on the ground, we’re going through a basic survival school, you go take this trek out in the country. We’re walking around in snowshoes, no food and trying to build fires in the snow and things like this. Another part of that school was there was a mock POW camp and you go through this mock POW camp where they simulate knocking you around and put you in a closet and kind of trying to deprive you, to give you a feel of what it would be like to a prisoner of war. So I went through that school, this was right before Christmas of 1971 and went immediately from survival school to San Francisco. I boarded a charter aircraft, World Airways aircraft and it took me to the Philippines where I then spent about two weeks in the over Christmas holiday, going through the jungle survival school at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. That was also a lot of fun, it was much more fun than the basic survival school which was really pretty hard to get through. Then just right after the first of the year, that was January 2nd or 3rd of 1972, I went in country. Now, initially we went into Nakhon Phanom, Royal Thai Air Force base, that’s where the 56\textsuperscript{th} SOW, 56\textsuperscript{th} Special Operations Wing and I was assigned to the 18\textsuperscript{th} Special Operation Squadron flying the AC-119 K gunship. I stayed there for a little less than 30 days and after that I went to what was called Detachment One, which was at Da Nang and spent the next six months at Da Nang. Our basic mission was flying interdiction missions up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, all night missions. We flew blacked out, we flew all kinds of weather, mountainous terrain, shooting at the trucks and any movement up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Vietnam, Laos at that time. WE had several ways to identify targets. We had infrared radarscope. We had a crew of ten people, we had two pilots, three navigators and the rest were gunners and observers. And the gunners, what they did was load our weapons, they didn’t have to fire them, they just had to keep the ammunition flowing through the guns. One navigator would operate the infrared radarscope; now a truck traveling down the Ho Chi Minh Trail at night would
probably be blacked out, no lights. But we could pick up the heat form the engine off this radar, that’s how we did most of our hunting. We could then focus a target scope on that infrared blip on the radar screen and then into a firing zone and shoot at the truck.

KS: Can I back you up a little bit and talk a little bit about your training? How well do you feel that your training prepared you for your experiences at Vietnam? Maybe if you could take us through a typical day at one of your specialized training.

FB: Well, the training was excellent. Just you were upgrading into a different aircraft system and for me we went from the high performance jets that we were flying in pilot training, the T-37 and the T-38, which is a supersonic aircraft. It was kind of a step down, I’m going from one supersonic aircraft to, not even a turboprop it was a reciprocating engine that was flown back the late part of World War II and then in the Korean War and even the siege of the North of Vietnam back when the French were in Vietnam and the Americans were giving support to the French. We were actually using some of the aircraft that we flew, flew back into Dien Bien Phu, bringing in supplies. They were cargo planes that had then been converted, so the training was very good. It wasn’t that rigorous, I enjoyed it, there's not too much more I can say about that. And all of the survival schools were very good, really enjoyed those and you learned a lot, so I felt very comfortable, we were all scared to death if you were to get shot down but I felt comfortable that I could survive on the skills that had been taught to me if I had been shot down.

KS: You mentioned the mock POW camp, could you elaborate a little bit more on that? Did you feel it was realistic?

FB: Well, I’m sure that they kind of eased up on this, we weren’t punched around and hit to any great extent, they might have shoved us some. They’d do things like, you have a little cabinet kind of like this cabinet here, stuff you down inside of it to try to. They might leave you in there for ten minutes, but it might fell like an hour that you were in there so it really wasn’t that bad, but it was cold. We were outside to some extent it was very cold. We’d have been a lot warmer if it were in actual conditions.

KS: What about any of your instructors in your training, had they been to Vietnam or were there some that?
FB: Well, yes in the undergraduate pilot training at Reese, I thought that the best instructor pilots were those instructors that had been on a tour of duty in South Vietnam and could relate to what’s going on, especially to the young student pilot. So it was very helpful to have them tell you about what’s going on and some of the things that they did over there and so that was very good. I think that’s the way that the Air Force should have allowed their instructors to be trained. They shouldn’t just take students right off of undergraduate training and take them into the instructor pilot training program, because they weren’t near as well informed as those that had had the on line active duty. As I say, all the survival schools were very good, and I felt very comfortable with what was going on.

KS: What were your expectations, you mentioned some of your trainers had told you things about Vietnam? What about your expectations, maybe things that were going on in the media? Were you really aware of exactly what was happening?

FB: Well, I think I was. That was a time, my senior year at Tech was when Nixon ordered the bombing of Cambodia with B-52s and that’s the Kent State Massacre was the spring of 1970 but right before I graduated and I was a senior ROTC student on campus here at Tech and I felt a little uncomfortable walking around the campus in my uniform at times. I was in the Business school, I was going through some advanced economics classes and there were some active anti-war type students in some of those classes. So we had some pretty good discussions.

KS: Were there ever any demonstrations at Tech?

FB: At Tech there were some minor demonstrations. Yes, I think there were some candlelight vigils and there might have been some paint throwing and things like that.

KS: How did your friends and family react to your choice to be in the military? Was it something that you always wanted to do?

FB: Not really, I guess I was influenced by my brother-in-law who was in Air Force ROTC. He was four years older than I am. I was kind of influenced to go ahead and get into ROTC because of that. I probably would have done it anyway whether I had that influence or not because I really did enjoy it. At the time I probably thought about making the military a career. I really thought about that while I was in the military, that I
might make it a career, at least a 20 year career, but there’s other circumstances beyond
Vietnam why I got out.

KS: Anything else you wanted to add about your training, any incidents? What
about weapons training?

FB: Well, on the aircraft, we had what’s called four mini-guns, they are 7.62
millimeter mini-guns and then two, 20 millimeter cannons and you use the cannon fire to
basically do the interdiction missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to shoot at tanks and
trucks as they move up and down the trail. Then the mini-guns we sued more in support
of fire base defense for camps in Vietnam where we would be called in if a camp was
under fire, we’d be called in at night to try to beat the enemy back by laying down fire
suppression support around the base perimeter. We’d be working normally with a U.S.
military advisor, who was then working with the ARVN troops in the firebase. He would
be spotting us with fire on the targets and he’d say, well you’re short, you’re long and try
to correct our fire that way. Now, the weapons training, we did all that at Hurlbert Field
in Florida in Fort Walton Beach, just go out on the firing range and it’s pretty simple form
the standpoint of the pilots. You have a pilot and a copilot, as the copilot I’d be flying
the aircraft and controlling the aircraft and what you’d have to do is you fly into a firing
circle and you fly around, if this is a target, you would be flying around it like this,
aiming our guns down at the target because the weapons were on the side of the aircraft
and you had to point the weapons down. So the pilot would have an gun sight that was
connected into this infrared radar scope where the navigator is holding the pipper on the
target, so when the two sights crossed, that’s when he knew he could fire and usually hit
the target, so he’s trying to put the gun sight onto the target and keep it lined up. I’m
controlling the speed and the height of the aircraft over here. You practice all that in your
training, and that’s what we did in Florida, went out and fired off into the Gulf of Mexico
at times and around the north Florida area a lot of swamps and its all military reservation
around there, so we had targets who went and fired them.

KS: So once you were in Vietnam, did you use the same weapons that you were
trained on, so did you feel adequately?

FB: Yes, it was exactly the same.
KS: Again, could you tell me exactly when you arrived in Vietnam? What your impressions were, your first day, your first night, where did you arrive?

FB: Well, as I say when I first went in country, we went to Nakhon Phanom, NKP, which is right on the border of Laos and Thailand in the northeast corner of Thailand. Its right on the Mekong River as the Mekong would then flow on down through Vietnam. Its kind of an eerie feeling to go into a war zone, you ever think about what’s going on but that was a very comfortable base. I mean there was never any danger there, as a matter of fact people from Vietnam to come to our base kind of as an R & R center and then just a few weeks I was then sent on into Da Nang. That’s a little bit more frightening because we were pretty much confined to the base and I did not feel comfortable going off the base because as you’re driving through, its pretty squalid conditions and you don’t know who the enemy is and who is not the enemy and we had very tight security around Da Nang Air Force base, it’s a big base. We lived in an area on base called gunfighter village. Basically where all the flying squadrons live in that area. My day was typically, you get up, all of our missions were at night and so you’d probably get to bed, anywhere from four in the morning to nine o’clock in the morning and sleep pretty much all day long and then get up, maybe four or five in the afternoon, go to the commissary or PX, well we didn’t have the commissary just the PX, go to movie theaters and go to the chow hall, things like that.

KS: Could you describe some of the missions that you flew on?

FB: Sure, flying out of Nakhon Phanom, we flew a lot of missions north into Laos over what’s called the Plain of Jars. Flew a lot of interdiction missions and then in, I assume some of the ground controllers who we worked with were probably employees of Air America and the CIA working with the friendly forces in Laos. Then we also flew out of Nakhon Phanom and Da Nang into the lower part of Laos around what’s called the Bolovens Plateau, again the same situation. We didn't have that much ground troops in contact and ground support contact with ground, it was mainly the interdiction of the truck movement up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We’d be flying at night in the dark, occasionally you would hit a fuel truck and the jungles would explode and it lit up the skies pretty good. Now, practically every mission, and this was on my first mission and this kind of made me go, do I really want to do this the rest of the year as I was sitting in
the jump seat of the aircraft, just to get an orientation ride. And we’re on our first mission
out over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, kind of the middle of Laos and the AAA from the
ground comes up at us and I see this stuff coming up and it’s pretty frightening to see
tracers coming up and the bullets are coming at you. They’re trying to shoot you down.
Now, we were pretty safe because about the only way the enemy could identify us was by
sound. We were completely blacked out, so they weren’t real accurate on their shooting,
but once we started firing and they could see muzzle flashes out of our weapons they
could start to zero in on our locations. We were shot at on practically every mission by
AAA from the ground and that’s pretty frightening, you see it coming up and we have
these observers hanging out the back. Our gunners and the flight engineer and people like
that, they’re strapped in. We’re open air, its not a pressurized cabin, so they’ve got their
bodies hanging out, looking for weapons as they’re being fired at us. So when it looks
dangerous, they’ll yell out over the microphone, break right or break left as pilots we’d
have to take a hard right or a hard left to try to get out of the fire.

KS: What was the elevation that you usually flew at?
FB: We were normally around 2,500 to 3,500 feet above ground.
KS: Before your night missions, what was the procedure, would you receive
briefings, maybe what was going on, on the ground?
FB: Yes, you’d start off about two hours before the mission, you’d go into what’s
called a tactical unit operations center and get a briefing, at Nakhon Phanom it was Air
Force intelligence officers that would give briefings on troop movements and things, they
weren’t real accurate. When we get to Da Nang into, went and spent some additional
time down in Bien Hoa. We were given briefings by Army intelligence officers who had
a much more closer network of informants on the ground and could give us specific
movements on VC units movements around the area and things like this. It was much
more interesting to get their briefings. But we’d do that, we wore side arms. Everybody
was issued a 38 caliber weapon and people could carry their own arms if they wanted to.
We had flak vest, the survival vest that had a transponder unit that if you were shot down
you could activate it to radio to let the search and rescue missions know where you’re
located, you’d talk to them on this radio, so we had things like that.
KS: Could you talk a little bit about the AC-119K, you mentioned before that it was a much older aircraft, were there any problems maybe, you had with it with maintenance?

FB: No, we had significant problems with it and you really have to salute the maintenance people that kept those things in the air. You’re looking at an aircraft now, I can’t verify, but this is a story I was told. This C-119, I believe it was built by Fairchild, was the civilian model. It’s a cargo aircraft, its got a twin boom out the back and kind of a little box in the middle, and two reciprocating engines. When it was initially built, the military purchased this aircraft, but the civilian authorities would never certify it was air worthy. So that made you a little hesitant to think about that. Now, what the Air Force did, was take it and put about 5,000 pounds of weapons in the back and so it had a center of gravity with all that so they had to put extra weight in the front of the aircraft to balance it off. So you had an extra heavy aircraft with some armor plating on it also. So it had a very long takeoff roll to get it off the ground. It was a difficult airplane to handle, all that weight.

KS: Were these conversions made just for Vietnam, were they made in Vietnam?

FB: They were made stateside. You might recall that the initial gunship program started off, let’s see the movie, “Green Berets”, John Wayne, with what was called the C-47, AC-47 Spooky aircraft. The second version of the aircraft was the AC-119 G model which was called a shadow aircraft. We were an AC-1119 K because they took two J-85 engines and that’s the same engine that’s on a T-38 and they put them on the ends of the wing for jet assist. We used that jet assist on takeoff and then when we were in firing zone. So that gave it a little bit of extra lift and that’s called K model and its called a Stinger, a Stinger aircraft. Then beyond that came the AC-130 gunship, the Specter and ship.

KS: Also you mentioned that it was an open-air aircraft, were there any problems with crewmembers, that affecting their health or anything?

FB: Well, since we flew at such a low altitude it could get cold in the aircraft. In the wintertime the guys in back would have to wear coats and be bundled up but in the summers it wasn’t bad. No one that I know of ever had any problems. One of the questions in the survey I think was, was there any special mascot or anything like that.
Some of the crew members on one of our crews had a parrot and I think they took the
parrot up with them one night and the parrot succumbed to the cold.

KS: Also, talking about the maintenance crews, how often was maintenance
performed on these?

FB: Daily.

KS: Every?

FB: Yes, every day. I don’t know, we didn’t have a fleet of more than twenty
aircraft for the whole 18th Special Operations Squadron and a couple aircraft of it were in
Bien Hoa which is right outside of Saigon, had been damaged by aircraft fire so they
couldn’t fly any more, they were just taking parts off those aircraft, they were
cannibalizing that aircraft to keep the others flying, they did a great job.

KS: Were there any instances of being shot down that you were involved as well
as your unit?

FB: Well, people in my unit, when I was there, in March of 1972, which was
kind of the last big push that the North Vietnamese made and so there was a pretty
substantial outbreak of fighting north of Saigon in what’s called Loc Ninh and An Loc,
around An Loc. And then also in the central highlands around Dak To to Pleiku and so its
pretty significant, there were North Vietnamese tank coming in and North Vietnamese
troops directly involved in the fighting, pretty heavy fighting, so we had a lot of sir
support activities going on. When that initially happened, they went our aircrews from
Da Nang down to Bien Hoa to establish this, kind of Detachment Two and when they did
that we started flying some day missions. That was kind of dangerous flying day missions
because they could see and then be able to shoot you up. One of crews flying one of the
first day missions in the Bien Hoa area, around An Loc did get shot down and got into –
what you were told if you ever get into a duel with guns, you should get out of the area,
because we’re shooting 20 millimeter cannons, they’re shooting 23 millimeter or 37
millimeter back at us, they got bigger guns so you just get out of the area. Well, the
aircraft commander and several members of the crew, good friends of mine, he hung
around too long and got his aircraft shot up and they had to bail out. He bailed out seven
crew members, the pilot and the navigator, who was real good friend of the pilot, stayed
in the aircraft, kept the aircraft in the air so that people could get out, they were bailing
out the back. They went in later, found the aircraft and he was slumped over the yoke of
the aircraft and the navigator was on the other side. We thought he should have gotten a
medal of honor for what he did, there were others who thought he should have been court
martialed for saying in the area.

KS: You mentioned you flew during the day; this was around the An Loc area?
FB: Yes, I was still at Da Nang and I flew some special missions around the
Pleiku Dak To airfield area and I may have mentioned this, that one of the most
productive missions I had was, Dak To airfield was being overrun so our missions, this
was during the day, was to go in and blow up all of our own equipment. We were
shooting at yellow fuel trucks and flat line equipment at Dak To airfield, trying to destroy
it all before the enemy could capture it.

KS: Was that standard procedure, was that normal?
FB: No, it was don’t let it fall into their hands and so we were, I think we flew
maybe four or five missions that day where we would run out of ammunition, go back to
base and get more ammunition, then take off again to keep blowing up that airfield.

KS: Were you successful then?
FB: I think we were fairly successful. We put a lot of ordnance over that base and
then we stayed there into the night and we acted as FACs for F-4 fighters as they came in
and dropped bombs on the field.

KS: Any other battles or engagements that you were involved in?
FB: Well, just the typical mission along the Ho Chi Minh trail, on the truck and
trying to interdict the moving of supplies. we did find a truck part one night and we were
credited with the destroying or damaging twenty two trucks in the truck park. There were
a lot of secondary explosions and we did get a single mission, distinguished flying cross
for that particular mission. There were a number of missions where the AAA was
extremely close with that twin boom aircraft, we had a saying that the enemy could score
a field goal if they shot a bullet through the boons and had a couple of those happen.
Shells come flying through and we took some small arms hit, but really for me, nothing
really that dangerous. There were times when the AAA would dome by and you could
smell this stuff, the cordite burning and sometimes the shrapnel would explode above you
and fall back down on the aircraft and you could hear it hitting the aircraft.
KS: How would you confirm, other than that you said the explosion if you were able to hit the trucks, could you always tell when you?

FB: Pretty much because you can tell by the explosions. Both from the pilots and the observer’s standpoint. We could see explosions on the ground and then this navigator, this radar navigator with an infrared radar scope can spot the explosions and the fires burning on the ground. It's pretty identifiable, but we also had what’s called, another navigator operated a low level light intensity scope. In other words if you got just a little bit of light it can intensify, kind of like night vision goggles and he can spot targets that way. Now, he wasn’t that effective until we hit something. When we hit something there was a light source on the ground, then he could start identifying targets also.

KS: Were there observers on the ground that you were in contact with?

FB: Not flying over the trail, because it was strictly all enemy territory. We were pretty much authorized to fire on anything out there. Now when we were flying in defense of some of the firebases and around the big bases, we were always in contact with the ground observer, who’s saying, all right we have enemy two klicks to our southwest, just start firing in that general area out there, so we’d start, and he’d say now come back towards me five hundred feet, trying to zero in.

KS: Were they usually accurate?

FB: Yes, we’re credited with; they’d go out the next morning and find bodies all over the place. That 7.62 mini gun could fire six thousand rounds a minutes and put a bullet just about every inch in a foot, square foot, its pretty heavy fire, you wouldn’t want to be in that.

KS: Again, talking about your missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, how long would those typically last?

FB: Typically, anywhere from three to four hours. You’d run out of ammunition, you’d run out of fuel. You’d fly one a night.

KS: One a night, would you go consecutively all week or would you have time?

FB: No, I’d probably fly maybe three or four a week and then you’d have three or four days off, a couple days off.

KS: And that was a ten-man crew, and you were always with the same crew?
FB: No, the crews would be made up of different members every night. Now there were some situations where you started flying with some crew members and were able to keep that component going for a week or thirty days at a time. I enjoyed that because it gave you some camaraderie with your crew members. Seems like most of the time you were getting mixed in with a lot of different crew members and such so you knew everybody in your squadron.

KS: So you had a chance to fly with everybody, you were comfortable flying with everyone?

FB: No, there were some I’m not so comfortable, especially some of the older because you had a lot of senior Colonels that had not had a combat mission and so this was their tour to get that check mark on their career growth. Some of them were not as competent, they were just too old.

KS: Any instances where people not being competent that got you into trouble or any problems or anything like that?

FB: No, not anything like that. Now, there was one particular mission at Bien Hoa when I was taking a check flight with one of the senior Colonels and he scared the flight engineer and myself. He stalled the aircraft out about twenty feet up above the runway and we finally got down but it was a pretty hard landing. We both walked away and swore we’d never fly with him again.

KS: Could you refuse not to fly with people or did that ever happen to people?

FB: I would have in that case.

KS: Backing up, the first time you had contact with the enemy, that was during the AAA fire and what was going through your mind when that happened?

FB: Well, when I first saw it, it was frightening. I said, “Man, I don’t’ know if I can get through this whole year, if it s like this every night.” But you get used to it and they weren’t that accurate. I felt safer in the air then I did one the ground. Now, we did have several guys that would come in to our squadron and they’d do things like that, they’d go out and they ‘d get shot at and they’d go back and say I’m not doing this any more and they’d get just a general discharge from the service. Now living in Da Nang, in Bien Hoa, you were subject to rocket attacks. We had quite a few, almost every night, which is just kind of indiscriminate attacks. The Vietcong would set up, they would just
use bamboo to set up a launching pad and pretty much light almost a fire cracker type
device that would just settle up and drop in on the base. So we were set up for both those
rocket attacks and mortar attacks and that’s pretty frightening because you could hear it
coming, the sounds of the rockets landing and just get louder and louder as they’re
coming toward you. You’d be in your hooch, you jump under your bed and that’s about
all you can do, you don’t have time to get outside. One of the suite mates next to me at
Da Nang was walking to the flight line one night and one fell next to him and blew his
arm and his leg off, killed him. So that was the most frightening thing.

KS: Did that usually happened at night?

FB: It was always at night, almost every night. We’d have anywhere from four
or five to ten to twenty rockets hit the bases at night.

KS: What was the procedure to protect the bases?

FB: Initially there wasn’t much of an initiative. We had some limited Army –
when I was there we’d pulled out all the U. S. forces, the only thing left was some
military advisors to the ARVN, Army of the Republic of Vietnam. And so with this big
push that occurred by the North Vietnamese in March, they beefed up support around all
the major bases. They brought in, I don’t know how many Marines but there’s probably
25,000 came in country to Tan Son Nhut, to Bien Hoa, to Da Nang. We felt a lot more
comfortable having all those guys around the base, supporting the perimeter defense. And
then at that time they also started using us to fly around the bigger bases at night to try to
suppress some of that rocket attack activity. We would be flying in coordination with our
own U. S. Army helicopters that were closer to the ground doing the same thing, they
were doing rocket suppression. Two helicopters would be flying, one would be high, one
would be low, once a rocket was fired, then they could go in and blow up that sight if
they get to it in time. If it was, I guess, too much, they’d get out of the area and then
we’d come in and hose the area down.

KS: Was this at Da Nang?

FB: Da Nang and Bien Hoa and in Saigon, while I was in Bien Hoa, we were
assigned a lot of suppression mission around Saigon. We’d just be flying, here’s this big
city all these lights, we’d just be flying over the city all night long.
KS: You mentioned that you felt pretty uneasy living at Da Nang, so did you pretty much stay on base all the time, did you have the opportunity to go out?

FB: Well, you had the opportunity but I didn’t take it. I went to China beach once. It is nice, but I didn't have any desire to go back.

KS: Talking about An Loc, could you describe a little bit more about what your role was in suppressing the forces from moving on to Saigon?

FB: Well, it was a pretty active theatre around the An Loc area and we flew some of the missions during the daytime. Our mission was really not so much troops in contact, but trying to find trucks moving down the road were we would be firing on targets. But we'd be shooting at one target and an F-4 would be coming off of another target and we'd kind of cross each other’s path. There was a lot of aircraft in the area, that was the most frightening thing I think was, might get hit by another aircraft. We had FACs flying the O-2s and OB-10s around the area and there were a lot of aircraft in this small confined space. That was kind of dangerous.

KS: Were there any instances of American aircraft crashing into each other?

FB: I don’t think, I don’t think they were hit, but that’s where our one aircraft got shot down was in the An Loc area.

KS: Also you mentioned during this time that there was mostly just advisors left and a lot of the other regular troops had gone home, did your unit participate in working with any of the South Vietnamese soldiers?

FB: In late November and December of 1972, our squadron was being turned over to the South Vietnamese. Now I didn’t have to do any of this, but we had our aircrews training South Vietnamese to fly the aircraft but I didn’t get involved in any of that.

KS: What were your opinion of the South Vietnamese soldiers and their leaders?

FB: I didn’t think that much of them. I didn’t really form an opinion of the situation. Flying in the area you don’t see them that much, not much you can do.

KS: Was your unit involved in any civic action or anything like that?

FB: No.
KS: You mentioned that you received the Distinguished Flying Cross, was that
given to you in an Awards Ceremony? I know on your questionnaire, you listed several
other awards and citations, if you could talk a little bit about those.

FB: Received two Distinguished Flying Crosses, the single mission
Distinguished Flying Cross was just a squadron ceremony there at Da Nang and the
second one was an end of tour Distinguished Flying Cross and then the air medals. You
get air medals for the numbers of missions that you fly, so I had seven air medals for the
whole tour. As I said in my questionnaire when I got the end of tour Distinguished
Flying Cross, I was then assigned to the Strategic Air Command at Dyess Air Force Base.
I felt like I was kind of snubbed by the leadership of the Strategic Air Command when
they were honoring their own people for flying the KC-135, getting an air medal for
flying between Okinawa and Guam. And here I was, being in country, in theater, in a
combat mission, having one these awards and there was no ceremony to honor that.
That’s the reason I got out of the Air Force, because I got assigned to the Strategic Air
Command and couldn’t get out. I was flying a KC-135; I wanted to do anything but be in
that Command. If I could have gotten into a military airlift commander or tactical air
command, something like that, I could have gotten into ATC, which is the Air Training
Command. That’s what I wanted to do was being an instructor pilot coming back from
Vietnam, but I didn’t get that assignment because I guess –its real indiscriminate the way
the Air Force handle their personnel policies. I did not like that but anyway being
assigned to the Strategic Air Command and not being able to get out, that’s when I
decided I didn’t want to do that for another fifteen years, got out. My next assignment
beyond Abilene at Dyess Air Force Base, I was there for three and a half years after
Vietnam, was they were going to send me to Minot, North Dakota for a five-year tour up
to there, but I’d had enough.

KS: Just ask you a little bit about, I noticed on your questionnaire about Thailand
and living on the base there, could you contrast that a little bit with your experiences
when you were actually in Vietnam?

FB: Yes, Thailand was great, even Nakhon Phanom, which was a pretty rough
base, was still a very enjoyable experience. We got to know the Thai people very well.
They were friendly, now where we were at Nakhon Phanom was kind of an unusual city
because as I say, its right on the Mekong river in the northeast part of the country across
the river is a small town called Takhet. And we could go down the river and sit in the
barbery, and be on the river and look across the river and watch the friendlies and the
Path Et Lao forces conducting a war over there. We’d see T-28s dropping bombs on the
other side of the river and its kind of an unusual situation to see that. It was reported and I
would assume this is true, that Nakhon Phanom was sort of like an R & R center for the
North Vietnamese and the Path Et Lao troops. We might be walking down one side of the
street in Nakhon Phanom and on the other side may be the enemy troops, but it was hands
off because its an R & R center for them. I guess you’d call it, like Switzerland is, it’s a
neutral country, so it was funny.

KS: Were you ever engaged with the Path Et Lao that you know of?
FB: Yes, when we were flying missions over the Plain of Jars or the Bolovens
Plateau, I’m sure that we’re firing on the Path Et Lao troops.

KS: Did you learn to speak any Thai or anything?
FB: Yes, just small words of Thai. I can count in Thai, actually its Laotian,
because they speak Laotian.

KS: So you felt comfortable leaving the base?
FB: I felt very comfortable, we went into town all the time. There are some nice
restaurants and hotels and lots of bars. It was a friendly city, great country and then from
there we could catch this Thai Airway. We could catch flights over to some of the other
bases, Udorn or Ubon. Udorn was a fighter base and Ubon was a fighter base and a base
for the AC-130 aircraft. Then we’d go into Bangkok, so we went into Bangkok whenever
we’d get three or four days of R & R.

KS: How often were you given R & R?
FB: I think we had to fly twenty-five missions, now this was when I was in Da
Nang and Bien Hoa. You had to fly twenty-five missions and they would give you four
days off, they’d fly you back to Nakhon Phanom and form there I had to buy my own
ticket to go to Bangkok.

KS: It was on a commercial airline?
FB: Commercial, yes, Thai Airways.

KS: Now we are joined by Steve Maxner.
Steve Maxner: I was curious about a couple of things you talk about, first one that you just mentioned, the Path Et Lao versus PAVN, could you tell the difference when you engaged?

FB: No, you could not tell the difference.

SM: Not with your weapons systems or through tactical preparation, nothing?

FB: No.

SM: Would you receive that kind of differentiation in the briefings, that you engaged specific?

FB: Yes, now when we were briefed at Nakhon Phanom by the Air Force intelligence, said you’re going to go up to the Plain of Jars for the night mission up there. We’re told that you could expect to encounter these types of forces.

SM: Also I was curious, you mentioned that you red rush with FACs was the 119 ever controlled back then, was your fire?

FB: No, we were not, we were strictly go out on your own kind of silent hunters out, just doing our own thing. Now we would FAC the fires. A lot of times over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, we would have a high fighter cover so we could fire on a target and if it was pretty heavy we could then fly off and direct the fighters to cover us. They’re cover was mainly for black suppression, so when we were fired at we would leave the area and they would come in to try to suppress the flak.

SM: How would you coordinate, what was the role of the C-119 in that context? Would you actually use your infrared capability and try to actually drain in their fire? How would you let them know where to fire?

FB: They would be flying over us, we had lights on top of our wings, to identity us so if you were flying above and look down and see us. So they could see where we are, but they were watching the ground to see where the flak’s coming in. And once they see it, they can identify it by a geographic locations, they just say all right, they’d say Stinger get out of the way, I’m coming in and they’d go in completely on their own sightings.

SM: I had mostly clarifying questions, I was interested when you mentioned that when you were at NKP you of course were sharing that base with a number of other groups to include Air America, the CIA of course, civilian personnel on the ground
advising the Laotian forces, was there a lot of interaction or fraternizing between the Air
Force pilots and those other groups?

FB: No, we would not know who they were. At NKP we had several units of Air
Force squadrons, you had A1E squadron, you had the nail FACs, you had search and
rescue, Jolly Green Giant, helicopter squadrons there. I couldn’t tell you whether Air
America was there or not, I’m sure they were.

SM: How aware of Air America were you at the time?

FB: Not too aware of it. I became more aware of it after leaving Vietnam because
when I went through my KC-135 upgrade school, one of my roommates was a former Air
America FAC and there were several of them. These are guys that just, line pilots like
myself, they took them off the line and said okay, you’re not wearing your uniform,
you’re going to be wearing civilian clothes, you’re going to be flying this A1E bird dog
at this base over here.

SM: How about CASI, did you ever interact with that, Continental Air Services,
Inc.?

FB: No, I’m not familiar with that one.

SM: And when you were flying missions over Laos, you mentioned that you
would interact with people on the ground, were these American English speakers? Were
the Laotians that could speak English?

FB: Mainly in Vietnam, where we are dealing with firebases, we had very little,
there might have been some interaction with some ground contacts up over the Plain of
Jars, but I can’t recall whether they were native or American speakers?

SM: For those missions, what was the hardest thing about flying a C-119
suppression mission? You’re trying to keep that aircraft in a particular altitude, particular
attitude, so that those guns can be fired on those targets, what were the biggest challenges
for you as a pilot?

FB: Well, let’s see. It really wasn’t that much of a challenge, it was just flying an
aircraft, your basic aircraft controls and the only difficulty was when you were fired at
you had to maneuver the aircraft to get out of the way of the AAA.

SM: So when you finally did get it into a position where you were bringing fire
on targets, was it a fairly stable aircraft for that mission?
FB: Yes, it was.
SM: This is, if you’ll pardon the expression, the flying boxcar, correct? Was that a name that airmen shied away from or did they not care?
FB: Yes, we never used it.
SM: You never used it, why?
FB: Well, I’d use it to describe the aircraft to civilians.
SM: But inside you never mentioned it?
FB: But inside we never mentioned that.
SM: Is there a reason?
FB: No.
SM: The time frames for when you were operating out of NKP versus Da Nang, and Bien Hoa, Saigon, can you give us a break down as far as when you were in those locations?
FB: Right, as I said I got in country, it was January 2nd or 3rd of 1972, by the end of January I was already on my way to Da Nang. I was there for six months, probably went back to Nakhon Phanom for a week or so and went back down to Bien Hoa for two months and then after that came back to spend about two more months at Nakhon Phanom.
SM: Now, when you went to Da Nang, was it your whole crew or was it just you?
FB: It was the whole crew, we went as a crew and we tried to fly pretty much as a crew while we were there.
SM: And you were successful in doing that?
FB: Yes.
SM: In Da Nang, your primary missions were to provide support just outside of the base in Da Nang, or what was your range of operations?
FB: Initially when we got there, we were still flying the interdiction missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, we’d take out of Da Nang, fly over into Laos and fly missions on the trail or fly missions along those portions of the trail that came in country. We flew over the A Shau Valley and with our interdiction mission that trucks driving down the old air strip at, I guess that was Kontum. So wherever we’d find the movement,
that’s what we were doing. But then after March of 1972 its really more towards I guess, April and May, after the initial fighting had clamed down, that’s when we got more involved in the base support, fire suppression missions for the rocket attacks.

SM: Did you fly many missions up by the DMZ?
FB: Probably a half a dozen, we probably penetrated into the DMZ a little bit. I think we got fired at one night by a surface-to-air missile from North Vietnam, where they fired it, but we were so low that you can’t radar control it, so it was just kind of line of sight. That’s what our gunners said, I don’t know if that’s true or not.

SM: Now, were you given specific instructions not to fly over the DMZ?
FB: Yes, we could not fly north through the DMZ, we were given specific instructions no to do that, and I wouldn’t want to.

SM: Not with the SAM threat revealed in order.
FB: And where we flew over Laos and the areas we flew in Vietnam, there were some areas where surface to air missile threats were pretty high and we were told to stay out of those areas. And that’s what we receive on some of these intelligence briefings. One aircraft, a C-130 aircraft who was Specter 1-3, and the reason I know this is because the copilot is a Tech graduate. He was a friend of mine and the aircraft was shot down and the whole crew was killed. He was flying over southern Laos one night and he got blown out of the sky by a surface to air missile, a SAM-2 missile, I think he had about fifteen crew members on board those things.

SM: And everybody was killed?
FB: Yes, the guy’s name was Curtis D. Miller, he’s a Tech graduate, he graduated the year before me.

SM: Were there any friendly fire incidents while you were there?
FB: You’d have a, when you were in the fires suppression missions around these firebases, there were probably one or two instances where you’re talking to the ground controller and you lay down fire and he says whoa, stop, you’re coming too close but nothing reported, no.

SM: What about the heaviest count that you were able to receive as far as damage you inflicted on the enemy? You mentioned taking out that truck farm?
FB: Yes, the truck farm was really the biggest. Around the firebases they’d go out and they’d tell us that they counted a hundred or so bodies in the wires around the camp, so I don’t know. I never paid much attention to that.

SM: At the time were you aware of some of the allegations that body counts were being inflated and there were some problems with that?

FB: No, I was not aware of that, no.

SM: What do you think about allegations of that now, and discussions about that now, one of the problems with the statistics of the war is that there wasn’t a reliable way of gauging whether we were conducting the war appropriately or effectively?

FB: I don’t know, I don’t think about it. It’s not my problem.

SM: What was, when you went down to Bien Hoa, what was your area there in terms of, who were you supporting?

FB: Well, initially we were there in support of the siege of An Loc, to try to help break that siege, and then after that it developed into this base support around especially Saigon. I guess all the generals in Saigon were kind of frightened.

SM: Was there much concern about the potential for collateral damage, civilian casualties, firing so close to Saigon?

FB: No, that never came up, as I say I think it was more a fear on the part of the MACV, Military Command in Vietnam and the leadership of the South Vietnamese government, that hey, we’re going to get attacked here any day now and we want all this support here just in case we do. Now, I don’t know if we even fired, while we were doing these flights over Saigon. It seemed more like it was a big massive area with so many lights. I’m sure we did go out and do some firing certain points, but it seemed like we just flew big circles in the sky all night long.

SM: By ’72 and by the time you’re down around Bien Hoa and around Saigon, did you get the feeling that the war is coming to an end?

FB: Yes.

SM: Is there much discussion amongst the pilots about it, was there?

FB: Well, we’re all there, just for basically a year and we’re all just saying, I’m ninety days to get out of here. You’re really not thinking about the end of the war, you’re just thinking I want to get my own tour over with. In, I guess it was September or
October of that year is when Henry Kissinger announced that the end of the war is at hand and then the North Vietnamese, I guess, started a big push late November, December. That’s when we started the operation linebacker two with the B-52s, that was starting to happen when I was leaving the country. I think that’s kind of what ended the war was when we took off the gloves and started dropping bombs on Hanoi and Haiphong. We lost a lot of aircraft, but I think it brought them to their knees.

SM: Was that the general impression of a lot of men who were leaving Vietnam with you, [?], and then you had contacts with the pilots that you had contact with, when you got back to the States?

FB: Yes, saying why didn’t this happen sooner? This is something we should have been doing years ago.

SM: You were in school from ’66 to ’70, so basically the major build up of the ground war all the way through the time you got there. What were your impressions while you were in school, what was happening in Vietnam, was it something you kept up with as a personal interest at all, or was it something that just wasn’t really on your radar scope?

FB: Well, I kept up with it, it was on the nightly news, you’d see it every night. You’d think that well, eventually this war will get over with and we won’t have to worry about it, but it just kept going and going. I wasn’t a protester, I was involved with the ROTC and felt I had an obligation, I couldn’t go out and protest it.

SM: If you weren’t in ROTC would you have?

FB: I don’t think I would have. No, wouldn't have done anything.

SM: What did you think the United States was trying to accomplish in Southeast Asia, from ’66 to ’71?

FB: well, probably the line that you heard that you’ve got to stop them somewhere, the domino theory that all these countries will eventually come under the control of the Communists if we don’t’ stop them here. That was kind of the general line that was taught in ROTC classes and military science courses.

SM: Did you find that compelling?

FB: Well, I did.
SM: And what about when you got to Vietnam, did your attitude change at all towards them?

FB: Well I think the reason I wanted to go is because I was just curious. I wanted to see exactly what’s going on over here, it was more of curiosity to get involved and see what’s really happening. Now after a certain point in time, I probably became a little cynical and said all right, I’ve had enough of this. I could get killed and say we’re not accomplishing anything, so let’s get out of here and that was towards the end of the war.

SM: So by the time you left, you felt like you weren’t accomplishing that much?

FB: Yes.

SM: Could you elaborate on that a little bit, why did you feel that way as far as?

FB: Well, when you see your friends killed in action and young lives taken away. You know these guys and you knew their wives and they’ve left young kids, its just senseless waste and finally you just get cynical about it and you say let’s just get out of here. I cast my vote in 1972 for George McGovern because McGovern said he’s going to get us out. Nixon was saying he had a secret plan to end the war but we didn't know what it was.

SM: So you didn't find that compelling?

FB: No, I didn’t.

SM: What did you think about his project or his, what he put into place, the Vietnamization?

FB: I wasn’t involved in any of that, I don’t know how effective that was, or how it was going. If you’re talking about replacing American troops with Vietnamese troops, it wasn’t that effective because we see that the Vietnamese troops just didn’t want to fight. I read a very interesting book during the Vietnam War. It’s called Frances Fitzgerald’s Fire in the Lake, and it talks about the history in the Vietnamese people and how they’ve always been able to just kind of adapt to any foreign invasion force that comes through. And that’s exactly what they were doing with the North Vietnamese, they weren’t putting up the full effort that they could have put forth and that was kind of the attitude of the South Vietnamese.

SM: Did you have much interaction with the Vietnamese people, or the Vietnamese military?
FB: No, not much at all.
SM: And how about Laotian when you were at NKP?
FB: Well. Just the Thai and Laotian people that were in the area, we had quite a bit of interaction with them. They were all friendly people, they weren’t at war.
SM: While you were in school, before you actually went to Vietnam, of course the Tet Offensive occurred, Johnson decided not to run for re-election, what were the effects of those events on your perspective or did they change it all?
FB: Well, they were all kind of a shock. I was disappointed that Johnson took that approach, I wish he had stayed. I wish he had run for president, for a second term.
SM: Do you remember the coverage of the Tet Offensive in early ’68?
FB: Yes.
SM: What did you think of that, how did that affect you?
FB: It didn’t have that much of an effect. It was kind of a situation where the enemy was making a push and we beat them back and I didn't think that much of it. I guess, not being there and not paying that much attention to it is probably a bigger deal to most of us in the United States at the time thought about it, that the enemy was stronger than what we thought.
SM: Was that your impression when that happened as well?
FB: Yes, when it happened I still thought the enemy was fairly weak. I guess I never understood the nature of the enemy, how dedicated they were to their cause.
SM: Did that attitude change when you got into country?
FB: No.
SM: You still thought that they were fairly weak and you weren’t convinced that they were?
FB: Again, as a flyer you’re above it and you don’t get that much involved in the actual conflict. You’re kind of a surgical type of a mission and you’re just not really aware of the enemy’s strength.
KS: Did you ever talk to anyone, the ground troops for instance, to get their perspective, while you were there?
FB: No, we didn’t because we didn’t have that many Americans left there. The Americans were not involved in the ground action when we were there. I’m sure if I had
been in the Army and on the ground, I’d have a much different perspective of the war, much different.

KS: Did you correspond with friends and family while you were there, and what were their feelings on you being there? Did they talk a lot about the political climate or what was happening in the States?

FB: No, it was just my family members and we didn't talk about that at all. It was just practically every other thing except that and I didn’t talk about the types if missions I was flying, I didn’t talk about getting shot at and how dangerous it was. I didn’t want to bring that up.

SM: Was anybody ever injured on any of your missions, in your aircraft?

FB: In our aircraft, no, not on any of my flights. Now, we had some aircraft that took some AAA hits and some shrapnel wounds, some other missions. As I said, that one that was shot down. After I had left, I guess it was within the thirty days after I had left and we were, the squadron was transitioning the Vietnamese into those aircraft, they had to ditch one at sea one night, with all the Vietnamese on board, there were like fifteen Vietnamese training them. It was fogged in, they couldn’t land at Da Nang, they ran out of fuel so they had to ditch in the ocean and most of the Vietnamese drowned on that aircraft.

SM: You did mention the altitude that you used to fly these missions was three thousand feet.

FB: Yes, about three thousand feet.

SM: What was the average speed, your air speed?

FB: One hundred fifty knots.

SM: Fairly slow.

FB: Yes, very slow.

SM: You were a large slow-moving target, very lucky.

FB: Yes, that’s right.

SM: I’ve heard other pilots describe AAA, it almost looks like a football coming up at you, is that your experience as well?

FB: Well, that’s how you could tell if it was a danger or not. You’d look down on the ground, you see if its just a single dot coming up at you, its coming right at you, if
you see a tail on it, you know its going this direction or going this direction and so when
you just see the dot you have to call break right or break left to get out of it.
KS: What did that sound like, the AAA, did it?
FB: If it was close you could hear it whoosh by. But there’s so many other things
going on at the same time, you’ve got your aircraft almost in an uncontrollable turn you
were yanking that thing as hard as you can and an old aircraft like that, you wonder about
the structural integrity of the aircraft. We never rolled the aircraft, it probably would
have broken apart if we did, but we put in some pretty steep banks to get out of there.
KS: You mentioned earlier, your flying circle, did your tactics ever change, your
procedure ever change?
FB: No, that’s how you had to fly that aircraft into firing target.
SM: Did you ever stall your aircraft, to try to evade AAA?
FB: No, we’d been out and we’d lose an engine and we’d be flying along and lose
an engine and we’re involved in so many other things you don’t even notice it. Somebody
look up and said, oh your engines out, maybe we better go back to base.
SM: How many times did that happen?
FB: That happened once. Well, actually that happened once and then one night
we were taking off from Da Nang and we had a fire on an engine and we had to shut it
down and just come back into base.
SM: But losing an engine, the aircraft was able to maintain its position well
enough so it wasn’t that noticeable?
FB: Yes, well, we’re involved in flying the mission and the pilot, while he’s still
flying was just slowly pushing on the rudder to offset it, he didn’t even realize what he
was doing.
SM: Did they ever get down with the people that fly turboprops or did they
always have reciprocating engines?
FB: No, always reciprocating engines.
SM: How about the jet assists?
FB: Yes. At Da Nang, really kind of felt uncomfortable when you were coming
for a landing because there were a couple of times we’d be coming in, you’re pretty low
to the ground, you’re coming in over some mountains and some of its still enemy
territory, you’d see some tracer bullets fly past from small arms fire from the ground. I was probably more afraid of just an indiscriminate bullet coming through, blowing your leg off, so you were glad to get back on the ground, you didn't like that landing approach.

SM: When you look at one of these aircraft, not taking into account the thousands of pounds of armament and armor, it looks like it would be a STOL capable aircraft, short takeoff and landing type aircraft, what length of an airfield would you need for taking off and landing, when it was fully armed and armored?

FB: It’s about a five thousand foot takeoff row; you’re going to need about eight thousand feet of runway. At Da Nang, you had two miles; you had twelve thousand feet of runway.

SM: Do you know if about all that equipment, if it is STOL capable, S-T-O-L capable without the armament it still takes a long time?

FB: You’re talking about short takeoff and landing, right, we were not, no.

SM: No, not with the armament, how about without it, was the C-119?

FB: The C-119, no.

SM: It was never a STOL aircraft?

FB: No, it was never a STOL aircraft.

SM: Not enough power I suppose, but the 130 was and is.

FB: No, well yes, it is.

KS: Did you feel that your ammunition and armament was adequate, did you ever have to cut a mission short to go back?

FB: Yes, occasionally your guns would jam and you would have to go back, just have to get that fixed. Its all automatic weapons fire, because I said the gunners are just back there loading the ammunition. They’re keeping it fed into the machines, as they’re firing, so it could jam. It didn’t happen that often, but it occasionally would happen.

KS: Anything else that you wanted to talk about as far as the AC119K, anything else you’d like to mention?

FB: I think that’s about it.

SM: One more quick thing about gun problems, any problems with the weapons getting too hot, overheating?

FB: No.
SM: Cooking off firearms during contact?
FB: No.
SM: These were just standard air-cooled mini-guns, which did you prefer, 762 or the 20?
FB: I liked the cannons.
SM: You liked the 20-millimeter cannons.
FB: I liked to be out over the trail shooting at trucks, I much more enjoyed that mission then flying around a firebase in support of troops in combat.
SM: Did you ever make contact with enemy aircraft?
FB: No, I never even heard of one airborne?
SM: Did they ever fly MiG-cap, where I guess fly fighters over the area?
FB: Yes, the MiGs, they never left North Vietnam. Once they came up over North Vietnam, that’s what our guys lived for, they wanted that and so, no it was never a threat for us.
KS: Anything else about your experiences in Vietnam that you would like to talk about that we didn't cover?
FB: I think that covers it.
FB: 1973 on a Kc-135 aircraft.
KS: Could you describe how you were received, what it was like after coming home?
FB: I would say, the only negative thing that I experienced was I felt like I was slighted in any types of award ceremonies and maybe should have been recognized for that. But otherwise I enjoyed flying the KC-135 aircraft, the mission was a lot of fun. I enjoyed that, we flew up to Europe several times and Alaska and places like that, it was a lot of fun. But we were also involved in the Strategic Air Command alert type activity where you’re sitting on the ground for a week in captivity in the alert shack, waiting for the nuclear war to break out and that wasn’t fun having to do that, I didn’t enjoy that part of the mission at all.
KS: What about any lessons you learned, what did you take away from your experiences in Vietnam?
FB: I guess the same things that we hear today, when we go into a war we need
to be committed to win the war and I don’t think we were ever committed to win the war
in Vietnam and being there I felt that way. We were just there, kind of a holding action.
KS: So in retrospect, now looking back on it, do you see things a lot differently
than you did when you were there, as far as how, the reason why we were there in the
first place?
FB: Yes, I think we were there for the right reasons, I just don’t think we fought
the war correctly. There was too much interference by civilian control authorities that
were too far away from what was going on and too many people trying to exert their
influence on something they really didn’t know anything about. As I said, we never tired
to win it; we should have fought with better tactics. We could have been using B-52s and
blowing up things in Haiphong harbor in 1968, ’76 even, ’66 at some point in time, that
should have never, should have laid the law down to the Russians and the Chinese to stop
supplying these people and taken action.
KS: Are you involved in any veterans groups now?
FB: I’m a member of the Air Force Association, involved in that, just annual
dues and get their magazine.
KS: Do you have any contact with people that you served with in Vietnam?
FB: No, they’ve all kind of gone to different parts of the world and I’d say even
my Air Force ROTC guys that were in Vietnam with me, I’ve lost track of them. I
haven’t seen very many of them. I maintain my membership to the Air Force Association
so that if there is some kind of reunion, those reunions are listed in the backs of the
magazines and so if there is something, I’d probably attend, but I haven’t seen an 18th
Special Operations Squadron or a 56th SOW or Class 7108 or anything like that listed as a
reunion, no one’s done that yet.
KS: Have you ever thought of getting that started yourself?
FB: Well, I have and it’s a lot of work to track all that down.
KS: Have you been back to Vietnam?
FB: No, I haven’t.
KS: Do you desire to go back?
FB: Yes, I’d love to go back, Chancellor Montford’s been a couple of time and
I’ve been trying to talk him into taking me the next time he goes.
KS: Have you, I know you said you haven’t really kept in touch with people,
have you talked to people that have been back?
FB: No, I haven’t talked to anybody that’s been back to Vietnam.
SM: Speaking of going back, what do you think about President Clinton’s trip?
FB: I guess it’s fine, I don’t know what he is going to accomplish over there.
SM: How about your thoughts on the general approach that he has taken to
normalize relations between the United States and Vietnam?
FB: I think it’s time to do that. I don’t see that big of an economic impact in
current day Vietnam, or that much that could be accomplished. American businesses I
guess think that they could have a pretty good consumer market there, but it’s still a very
poor, backward country and its going to be a long time to redevelop. If they want to go,
that’s fine I wouldn’t stop them. It’s good to go ahead and try to normalize relations.
SM: As a businessman here in the community, do you find that’s the case, that
attitude generally amongst people or has you had that conversation at all?
FB: That conversation’s never really come up. I don’t know how people would
feel about it. I would think they’d support it, because we’ve had so many Vietnamese,
especially the South Vietnamese that were repatriated to the United States after the war
and the boat people and things like that, that there’s a healthy community of Vietnamese
that probably would like to re-establish relationships and I’d support that.
SM: You mentioned that you don’t have a lot of contact with men who you
served with, how about just Vietnam veterans generally, here in the community, in
Lubbock?
FB: I haven’t had too much, I know a few like Bill Price, but I hadn’t been
involved in any types of ceremonies or anything. There is an Air Force association
chapter in the community but its not very active, so I haven’t been that much involved.
KS: Do you feel that your time in the military has helped you with your career
now?
FB: No, I think it probably has hindered career development because you’ve
taken six years of your life. In my case I was really thinking of making it a career
opportunity so that after getting out in six years, I got out with really basically nothing. I
lost six years of building up retirement system, things like that. You don’t get any
retirement if you get out early, at least commit to twenty years so I was behind from that
standpoint financially and you don’t get that much of a benefit in your work situation just
because you were in the military, people don’t really honor that as much any more as
they did in World War II.

KS: When you came back to the States, did you talk about your experiences a lot
with your friends, did you discuss things, I know you mentioned while you were there,
you didn’t give specific details.

FB: Well, in discussion with other military officers you talk about it, but you
didn’t talk about it with, my parents or sister, brother-in-law, people like that.

KS: Do you find that people nowadays are more interested in things that you’ve
done, that maybe you feel a lot more veterans groups and people are seen to be talking
about it a little bit more?

FB: I haven’t seen that much more interest. You did ask a question in the
questionnaire about going back to the Vietnam Memorial and I have been back several
times. It is a very moving tribute when you see the names of your friends on the wall
there. I think that was a good move by the country to do that. I don’t like to see, if
you’ve been there and if you’ve seen it, it’s a very striking, stark exhibit and I really
don’t want to see the Washington Mall develop with everything around there, this idea of
where the new World War II memorial I think is fine, but I don’t want to see it taking
away from the Vietnam Memorial. I think it should be something that should stand alone
and remind people.

SM: Do you feel the government has taken care of its veterans?

FB: Yes, I do. Of course, I don’t have any medical problems or anything like
that, now if I had those, I might feel a little differently, but I went to graduate school on
the GI bill when I came back and that’s the only advantage that I had was using those
funds, so after that there’s no other benefits for me.

KS: Is there anything else that you would like to add or comment about your
experiences in Vietnam or on returning?

FB: I think that’s it.
KS: All right, this concludes the first interview with Mr. Fred Boling. Thank you.

FB: Thank you.