Jonathan Bernstein: This is Jonathan Bernstein conducting an oral history interview with Dr. George Thatcher. We’re in the administration building of Texas Tech University. The day is the fifteenth of November 2001 at approximately 1:00 pm. Dr. Thatcher could you start off with a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

George Thatcher: Starting with the military days?

Jonathan Bernstein: Pretty much growing up.

George Thatcher: I was born and raised in West Orange in Newark, New Jersey. One of my early memories is sitting by the radio with my dad while he pounded his fist in his hand listening to the reports of the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor. I was eight years old and it wasn’t too long after that when my dad joined the Army and spent the next three and a half years in uniform in combat zone in Italy. That was one of my abiding memories. His only brother, my uncle was drafted into the Army before the war started and spent most of the war in the generals in New Guinea. So, I spent a lot of my pre-adolescent years writing v-mail to dad and my Uncle Jim, back and forth and cheering them on. I graduated from high school in 1951 and with nothing better to do with my life; I just went out and started working as an ironworker. That didn’t last too long because I got my draft notice. I thought rather than go to the Army and come back in a rubber suit; I better do something about this. So, I joined the Air Force. I spent the next four and a half years in the combat zone of Salina, Kansas. Rising to the grade of staff sergeant and
being a supply clerk, administrative and training NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer),
married the only gal in town that would look at me, and decided to stay in the Air Force
for a while longer. That’s when I also decided that it would be in my interest to make the
best I could of it rather than be an enlisted swine the rest of my life. So, I applied for
OCS (Officer Candidate School) and they took me. Graduated in 1957, June. Had a little
problem passing the flight physical at the time, so they put me on radar sight in Japan for
a couple years manning a large green scope. I reapplied for pilot training and was
accepted. I went to pilot training in 1959, graduating in June of 1960. I chose to go to
the B-52 for various reasons. One of which was, my dad was dying of cancer at the time
and I thought it was prudent to be closer to home and I had an assignment, which was
close to home. I spent the next eight years flying the B-52. Became an instructor pilot.
Flew combat missions out of Guam into Vietnam for eight months. Long twelve hour
missions. During the Cold War I had flown longer missions. We flew many, many
airborne alert missions carrying nukes. Twenty-four hour missions. I was promoted to
major in the B-52. My last flying assignment in SAC (Strategic Air Command) was at
Plattsburg, New York, where I served a couple of years and then was nominated to go
back to Vietnam in the AV-66, which is the old Douglas Destroyer modified from a light
bomber to electronic reconnaissance. I flew for a year, another hundred missions or so
out of Takhli Air Base in Thailand. Ironically most of our missions were supporting the
B-52 bombing missions with electronic jamming. Had some other interesting missions in
the AV-66 and enjoyed my tour very much. Also served as a tactical operations center
controller. When I finished my tour there, I had another year and a half left until
retirement, mandatory retirement, as a reservist was twenty years. So, I finished out my
career as a command post controller again with SAC. That’s the end of my military life.
There are a lot of vignettes and stories that go on in the interim and I’ve documented a lot
of my experiences and those of my comrades in a book of flying poetry I’ve done called I
Wanted Wings. I still get to go to a few reunions occasionally. My OCS class reunites
every two years. The old B-52 outfit gets together on odd years as well. Mostly the guys
that flew out of Guam and Thailand in a B-52 get together with their black painted B-52s
and we tell lies and sell memorabilia and drink too much and tell each other lies about
how young we still look and how beautiful our wives are and have a lot of fun with it.
We’re just a bunch of old soldiers. But, I’ve reapplied for recall to active duty because I
know that there’s a shortage of flying pilots. They’ve requested recall, a voluntary recall
of people who have staff skills, like I did in the command post to relieve guys that are on
flying status to go back into the line duty. So, I reapplied for that and who knows, even
at my age, sixty-eight they may take me. They’ve indicated that they need me. The story
about my military life maybe is not totally done yet. I’ll see what happens; if I go it
won’t be until next summer. After military service I didn’t know what to do with my life.
I didn’t have any college to speak of, except a few courses at Camden nights. So, I went
back to college and got a business degree. Was brainwashed into thinking you had to
make a lot of money to be happy. So, I went into business, got a master’s degree in
Urban Planning, but couldn’t find work in that area. Stayed in business for several years
until I started listening to the voices that told me I should be a teacher. So, I went back
and got another degree in Spanish and became a Spanish teacher. It wasn’t too long after
that when I learned that there was a field called bilingual education and they were giving
doctoral fellowships in that field. So, I applied and sure enough got lucky again and
came to Texas Tech and got my doctorate and have been a practicing bilingual teacher of
behavioral modification in prisons. An international teacher in China for a year. A
teacher of Spanish at the community college level and bilingual education. Now, I’m the
professor and coordinator of the bilingual ed program here at Texas Tech again. So,
we’ve come full circle and we’re back home at Tech where we plan to stay. That’s the
story in a nutshell.

JB: Excellent. I guess as a youth writing the v-mails to your father and your
uncle, did you have any thoughts about going into the military yourself?

GT: I would have done anything to be like my dad and my Uncle Jim at the time.
These guys were my heroes, my role models. After I graduated from high school, all of
that changed. I began to see some of my guys from back home, who had dropped out of
school to join the Army and now they were coming home in rubber bags. I decided that’s
just not the way I envisioned a military career. So, joining the Air Force then was
probably a cop out to that. At the same time I had heard that the Air Force gave you
better training and prepared you for real life. I mean, how do they prepare a guy for real
life by carrying a rifle? I thought I’d get a skill out of the Air Force. Well, I did. I
learned to type a hundred words a minute. I learned the ins and outs of the supply
business at the records level. I was a supply records keeper and statistician. Learned a
lot of valuable things for work habits and things that could apply later on. I really didn’t
have any idea of being a front line, combat infantryman or anything like that. After a
couple years in the Air Force, I was just like any other grunt; all I could do was think
about getting out. Then I got married and things changed. Then I began to see the Air
Force and military life in general from a different perspective. What it could do for you,
what a career could be like and the advantages that it presented. Especially because I
would be retiring at the grand old age of thirty-eight, with a flying skill and I’d be
eminently employable in the airlines afterward. So, that became a big goal. I’ll put in
my military time and then go into the airlines and fly until I retire. Well, it didn’t quite
work out that way. Because when I got out at the end of 1971, so did about fifty
thousand other young pilots. I mean young pilots. A lot of these guys were twenty-five
to twenty-six years old. They had a thousand hours or two thousand hours of fighter time
or a thousand hours of helicopter time. All eager and hungry and would work for
peanuts. So, the airlines were cutting off job applicants at age thirty. I found one airline
that would take you at thirty-two and one other would take you at thirty-five. But, still no
exemptions and no waivers. So, there I was washed up at thirty-eight, except for
corporate flying. There was no real way to make a living in corporate flying back then. I
equated corporate flying with being on SAC alert where you were always on call to go
were the man wanted you to go. I had done years of that. So, I opted out of corporate
flying. As it turns out my first job after the military was as property manager for a large
real estate and development firm in Omaha, Nebraska. The president of the company had
been an old bomber pilot during War II and he had a Beach Baron that he used for
company purposes. He said, “George why don’t you just come and be my company pilot
along with your other duties?” Boy, I jumped at that. So, I started flying this pretty little
twin-engine Beach Baron around the country. I liked it so much; I let the other job
requirements go to hell. I didn’t like being a property manager anyway, it’s a doggy job.
But I copped out of property managing to fly his airplane for a year until I decided to go
back and get some more education. That really was the end for all practical purposes of
any flying I ever did except for another period later on I owned another beach airplane.
A Beach Bonanza flew it for a couple years and that was God’s way of telling you you’ve got too much money when you own an airplane. So, I sold out of that about the time I went totally broke trying to maintain it. So, I haven’t flown since. But I keep up with technology as much as I can by reading *Air Force and Space Technology Magazine* and keeping up as best I can with the state of the art, just by reading. I’ll always be interested in flying. Probably just isn’t in the cards that I do much of it anymore.

JB: Yeah. I know that feeling. Now, stepping back 1951, you’re drafted. Go into the Air Force, of course, the Korean War’s going on. How was the training? I mean what were your thoughts going in?

GT: I was thoroughly miserable for two months in Lake Geneva, New York, where they had reopened an old Navy training base to make it a basic training base for the Air Force. I hit that base on the last day of November and didn’t leave it until the last day of January. If you’ve ever lived in up-state New York—

JB: Yes. I have.

GT: That is the definition of cold. I was a walking case of bronchial pneumonia for most of those two months, but I was never going to go on sick call because going on sick call just meant washing back to the next class and repeating the misery. So, I walked around holding my chest for most of that time. Did push-ups in the snow, double time through the muck. Made it through basic training thanking God for still being alive when I left. I thought the training was horseshit. Really didn’t teach you much of anything except how to march and say, “Yes, sir.” Stand at attention and then sending me to administrative school after that. A tech school out in Kansas was I don’t know, probably just a repetition of everything I already knew how to do. Because I’d had an office management curriculum in high school. I pretty much knew all that stuff. So, it was just going through the motions again. There wasn’t anything glamorous about it. I wasn’t trained to be anything but a—I’ll tell you what they used to call us, you don’t have to print this, but they used to call us titless WAFs. Women in the Air Force is WAF. I just really didn’t like that at all. Besides the civilians in town didn’t like us much all either. They used to call us air dales when we’d go to town. Air dales and titless WAFs, wow. I didn’t get much respect. So, I learned to live down to the expectations. I really wasn’t much of an exemplary airman. I just did my job and kept my nose clean. Waited to get
three day passes so I could get the heck out of Salina, Kansas and go to Wichita or Kansas City and have a little fun. I mentioned not getting any respect. I’ll tell you as a retiree, outside of our own bunch of contemporaries, with whom you stay in touch and keep friends; you don’t get whole lot of respect as a veteran. At least, we didn’t up until right now. We’re in a defining moment in our history as I see it. The veteran is now being recognized for yes, having served his country and having sacrificed. You know we all gave up our youth, for our country. Now, when I go to Veteran’s Day celebrations I get slaps on the back and hand shakes. “Well, done old buddy.” You know everybody’s your friend again. Whereas when I came home from Vietnam what I got was catcalls and boos and people spitting at you and calling you baby killer and warmonger. Things like that that left you kind of shocked and bewildered. Because all we ever got over seas was the company line. We got Armed Forces Radio and *Stars and Stripes* newspaper.

Nothing else in the way of information really seeped through. It was a real surprise to me to find out that my country really didn’t like me because I represented the element of our country that was war mongering and trying to rule the world in the name of whatever we thought was democracy. Now, we’re finding out that the world really didn’t appreciate us. A lot of our politicians are standing around with their palms turned up saying, “Hey, what happened? Why does everybody hate us so much?” You know I’ve been over seas a bunch both in the military and as a civilian. I may have mentioned I just came back from a year in China. I’ve spent other time in South America because my specialty is Spanish language and Hispanic cultures. My time among the populations over there has told me that people do not like us as a country. They love us as people and as individuals, because when they get to know us, they find out we’re fairly likeable folks. They don’t like our politics. They don’t like our leadership. They don’t like our Big Brotherism and us telling them how to run their countries is especially true in China last year, when we were trying to bushwhack the Chinese when they were applying for Olympics to be held in Beijing in 2008. We held out on voting for them until they gave us indications that they were going to make strides in humanitarianism. Things like we were trying to tell them not to sell us products that were made by convict labor and child labor. Well, the Chinese know more about us, I’m sorry to tell you, than we know about us. Every time they would broadcast some diatribe from our politicians they could be
able to counter it by telling us literally not to throw stones because you live in a glass
house. They were telling us until you clean up your Human Rights Act; don’t tell us how
to run our Human Rights Act. They’re absolutely right about that. They knew more
about our race relations, about our history of bigotry against minorities here, genocide
against our native people and the atrocities that we’ve committed over the centuries and
recently. Hiding behind some cloak of democracy. They see it as cynical. They see that
really what we’re after is just this big empire. We’re Imperialists. We’re greedy, we’re
over consumers and we’re telling them about their environment and yet we’re glutting up
our own environment over here. See, they see us as two faced about all of this. Maybe
our recent tragedy will serve to wake us up and help us to realize the world sees us a
different way. We don’t get overseas news a lot. I mean our press basically sells
newspapers and airtime. They don’t print or broadcast that isn’t going to make John Q.
Public tune in and stay tuned for the commercials. If that doesn’t buy you market share
or airtime then they don’t print it. Therefore, we don’t get a lot of news from overseas.
Therefore again, we don’t find out how people really think about us over there. We’re
abysmally ignorant. We’re xenophobic. We are paying a heavy price for that. I don’t
think the price paying is going to be over for along time unless we do some major attitude
changing. We have a big paradigm to shift. Anyway that’s my lecture on that.

JB: Do you think that came from as a result of our policies in Vietnam or was it
inherent before that?

GT: Well, we’re basically an isolationist mentality. A country with an
isolationist and xenophobic mentality. We’ve always been able to hide behind our
oceans and our long borders with basically friendly folks on both sides of that border.
We have had the luxury of being able to tell the rest of the world to kiss our ass up until
recent times. The world is impatient now. The globe is shrinking because of our
communications leaps. We can’t do that anymore. We can’t treat our minorities like
second-class citizens. We can’t sanitize history and make it seem like, for example, like
Jefferson never had a black mistress or Ben Franklin didn’t have eighty-six kids. That’s a
number I just heard recently.

JB: Really?
GT: Yeah. We tell our history from the Eurocentric, white-Anglo male dominated perspective. The minorities in our country, which are soon to become a majority, are the victims of that. If you can’t tell it like it is, you’re going to pay the price ultimately because ignorance is not bliss. Ignorance is what let’s the rest of the world go by us and get ahead of us. All that said, I only say that because I am a Patriot and because I have paid the price in service and sacrifice for the country. Because anybody that just does an automatic stand and salute when they play the Star Spangled Banner, which I do, but anybody that doesn’t think about what it’s cost us and what it could cost us. If we still have this Pavlovian response to everything our government tells us that we go on like that and keep showing up 25 percent at the polls when it’s voting time, we’re going to get our butts kicked because we’ve gotten too fat and too lazy. You could argue that Americans are the hardest working people in the world; well you haven’t been to China and seen how they work for peanuts literally. We do work hard, but we’ve got to do something else besides work hard. We’ve go to be aware. We’ve go to spend some of our human capital and our personal resources in finding out about the rest of the world. I’m sitting here wearing an entire ensemble of clothing that I bought in China. It has American labels on it, but it was made over there. I’m driving a Dodge Caravan with a Mitsubishi engine in it. I’m about to buy a Honda, because I don’t want to buy American? Nah. Because we’ve let the rest of the world undercut us. So, now we’re a net importer. Our balance of payments is all screwed up. Balance of trade is all screwed up. I’m a real patriot, but I see that we’re a flawed country. We’ve got warts all over us. I’m even proud of some of the warts and scars, but if we’re ever going to do business we have to start doing business as partners with the rest of the world and not as overlords or big brothers. Because it isn’t working. Until we get the rest of the world on our side, then you’re going to have these havens for terrorism everywhere. Our allies are going to pay for it too. We’re not done with terrorism. As soon as we think we’ve cleaned out one pocket, they’re going to attack us some place else where they think we’re weak. So, eternal vigilance in the price of peace and we have to be vigilant. Vigilance means getting yourself educated and educated objectively. You cannot look at the world through a sanitized type of a prison of history that distorts it. We’ve got to get straight. We’ve got to admit who we are and then start form there.
JB: Whoa, you never thought you’d hear all that. I guess 1957, OCS. What was it like?

GT: It was probably the most miserable six months of my life. It was the compressed version of the first year or so of the Air Force Academy where you had square corners and square meals. Lots of hazing. Of course when you became first class you became the hazer. I guess the most miserable part of OCS was the trivia of the academic program there. It was nothing but rote memory work, party line baloney. Absolutely no calories in the stuff at all. It was a joke. It really was a total joke. But of course, the instructors and all the staff there were brainwashed just like we were. Having said that what could I say? What could I do? That was the only way for me to get a commission at the time. So, I sucked it up and did it, just like so many other guys. We lost a bunch of fellows there. We started out with a class of 160 and graduated 110. So, 40 percent there. When I went to pilot training we lost 40 percent again in pilot training.

JB: Basically just do to washouts or injuries?

GT: Washouts for various reasons. You know you washed out of OCS a lot of it was guys that said, “I don’t need this shit. I was a master sergeant before.” We even had a couple of warrant officers in our class. “Why do I need this? This is just baloney.” So, they went back to the ranks. A lot of them just mentally couldn’t take it because the hazing was tough. In one respect the hazing and pressure did separate the people who were going to make good line officers from the people who were not going to make good line officers. Because if you couldn’t put up with stress and pressure in a combat situation then you were no good to yourself or the service, same way in flying training. A lot of the pressure of flying training was because of the skills involved. Some guys couldn’t fly instruments, some guys couldn’t fly formation. Others had problems with depth perception so that they would prang the airplane in trying to land it. Various things like that. Again a lot of guys just said, “This isn’t worth it.” Because there was the stress, stress got more guys than anything else. So, they would wash themselves out. I feel like after all that, having survived those two and several other training programs in which we lost a lot of people I feel like there is a Christmas tree to all of this. Once the branches get smaller and smaller at the top and when you finally reach the top, there is just you and the angel standing at the top of the Christmas tree. You shake hands with
the angle and you say, “I survived it old girl, thanks.” I feel like a survivor. I’ve had experiences where I could’ve have been the one that dug the big crater and survived it. One little anecdote from after flying school is when I graduated I stood pretty high in the class and they offered me an instructor job. Probably mentioned to you, I didn’t think that was the appropriate thing to do for guys with such little flying time. So, I passed on the instructor job, which was to Reese Air Force Base here and gave it to my tablemate who stood right behind me in the class standings, and he took it, and his first student killed him. That could have been me. Many other times like that I didn’t go on a certain mission because I was ordered to a different mission and the guy that took the first mission got killed or had his career ruined for one reason or another screwed up. All those things could’ve happen to me. I feel like, as I mentioned, a real survivor for just having come through training. Low-level, night weather air refuelings, twenty-four hour missions, hazardous duty, combat and coming home and being spared to have another career. That’s why I feel very fortunate and very blessed to be here. That’s why I’m still doing it, I could be retired. I feel like the big guy up there kept me alive for something. That something is to give back of what I’ve received in the way of training and education and experience through my life. That’s what I’m trying to do here is give back what I’ve been so fortunate to have.

JB: Well, thank you. When did you first realize that you wanted to fly?

GT: That goes back to when I was a little boy in World War II. I would buy all of these little airplane models. Balsa wood models. A lot of them I had to carve from just blocks of wood. So, I would sit there carving P-51s and P-40s and Messerschmidts and Foke-Wulfs and do mock dog fights in my room, course we always won. Then I would build the little frame models with paper and glue covering them and rubber bands and propellers and fly those babies. Usually get about three flights out of one before I crashed it. I learned an awful lot about the principles of flight that way. You know following the war as a little boy, newsreel coverage right from the Battle of Britain to the bombing raids over Tokyo and then Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I was right there with those guys. I was right up there in the cockpit with them. So, it seemed to me like I always wanted to fly. Never got it out of my system, probably never will.

JB: Yeah. I can relate. So, in pilot training what types of aircraft did you fly?
GT: In pilot training we started off flying the old T-34, which was a tandem cockpit arrangement, rearrangement of the Beach Bonanza. Little more power, little longer fusel life, but a nice little trainer. Then the T-28 and they used that baby, they gave that one to the Vietnamese Air Force. The Navy, I believe, still uses a version of that airplane for basic training.

JB: Really?

GT: Yeah, they put a bigger engine on it. We used to call it the Calvinator or the John Deer. It went clappity, clappity, clappity, big old radial engine. That was my primary training aircraft. Then in basic training we flew the old T-33, which is the two-seat model of the F-80. First operational jet fighter we had.

JB: What’d you think of it?

GT: The T-33? Fine. Fine old airplane. You know it wasn’t fast or anything. It would go faster than its airframe would let it. Once you got it up to about .9 mock, the wings started to shutter on it. You didn’t want to take it any faster than that. Interestingly enough, I went through flying training one class ahead of the first Air Force Academy class. We were class 60H. The Air Force Academy’s first class was 61A. In honor of the Academy they changed the basic trainer and the primary trainer. So, my class was the last one to fly the old Proctor and T-28. The Academy class got to fly the Tweety Bird, the T-37. Of course they made a fighter model of that too that flew in Vietnam. They flew the T-37. In basic training where we flew the T-33, the old T-bird they got to fly the T—they’re still flying it?

JB: T-38?

GT: T-38, yeah. Not the twenty-eight the thirty-eight. They flew the T-38. So, it would have paid to be a ring knocker back then and fly the updated stuff, but no they didn’t. I didn’t get to. I knew all those guys in that class. They were good people. They were the cream of the crop back then, but it’s nice to know that I was in their company and could fly the airplane as well as they could. It made me feel good that I could keep up with them. They were great guys. A lot of them retired as generals.

JB: From pilot training did you go directly to an operational unit?

GT: Right in to the B-52.
JB: Any multi-engine training heading into that?

GT: Never.

JB: Really.

GT: No. Single engine training right, B-52. We were the first pilot training class that sent people right to the B-52. SAC was real rigid about that. They were taking people from the B-47 and putting them in the B-52s. They wanted lots of experience. They were rightly concerned that the B-52 is a real complicated machine and that new guys could screw it up. I never found it to be, I mean it was a challenge of course, but I never found that I couldn’t handle the responsibility of flying the airplane. So, I felt pretty comfortable with it.

JB: Had to be some, I guess sort of shell shock moving form one engine to eight.

GT: Eight and sometimes ten.

JB: Ten?

GT: Yep. We had a few of our combat sorties, operational sorties where we sat on alert and flew training missions with two airborne missiles, long range missiles hung under the wins. Each one of those had an engine the equivalent of our J-57 engine that we used and could develop thrust. All you had to do was crank it on and turn the little dial and it was up to full power. Actually could fly it with ten engines.

JB: Those Hound Dog missiles?

GT: They were AGM-28s. Not Hound Dogs. They were, I forget what their acronym was. It’s been a long time. They were still in the testing stages or I don’t know that we ever achieved what I could call full reliability out of those things. We would do simulated launches with them. Actually we would do a simulated launch and then we would fly the airplane on its path to the target as a simulated missile launch. Likely, as not we’d miss the target by large gross errors. But some of them were reliable, but they were still in the early stages at that time. But, you could miss a target by a couple of miles and still do incredible damage because the warhead on that thing was a 1.1 megaton warhead. That was our two external warheads and then we carried four more and sometimes eight internally. So, we were targeted for multiple strikes in that airplane. It was a huge responsibility. When I finally became an aircraft commander after two thousand hours of flying that thing, that was our minimum, I became an aircraft commander.
commander. I was a little odd with the responsibility of carrying all that nuclear arsenal, but hey it was a job. We were trained to do it, so we did it.

JB: Getting out of pilot training June of ’60, of course, within the next couple year’s major events going on all over the world, Berlin Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis.

GT: Berlin was way before that. Berlin was in ’48.

JB: Right. Okay, I’m sorry. I mean the Berlin Wall in ’61, that’s what I was thinking.

GT: I was sitting on hard alert, is what we call when we sat in the alert bunkers for seven days at a stretch with our airplanes out on the alert pad, Christmas tree in front of us. I was on alert when the Cuban Missile Crisis happened. We listened to an awful lot of it on the radio as it progressed over a period of time. Then the horn went off and we all ran to the airplanes. I’ll never forget it. We ran to the airplanes, cranked the engines and listened for the radio message from the command post that told us if this was an exercise or if it was something else. Well, the green coded messages were training exercises. The blue codes were, “Get ready for launch.” The red codes, we called them red dots, that was, “Launch you’re going to war.” They broadcast a blue dot for the first and only time that I ever heard it in SAC. We taxied to the end of the runway; we were lined up seven of us. Seven birds from our alert force. Sat there for a half a day waiting for a launch message and we sweat bullets. Because that’s the first time we ever really thought that we were going to war. Up until then it was just what the old secretary of state used to call brinksmanship. That wasn’t Atchison that was the guy in the fifties. It was Eisenhower’s secretary of state, called it brinksmanship. We’d go right to the brink and then bluff them down. This time it didn’t seem like there was going to be any bluffing. By the time they stood us down from that after four hours sitting on the ramp, we were a humble bunch. We were thinking, “You know this could happen any time.” Then for the next thirty days we flew a twenty-four hour airborne alert mission every other day. I flew fifteen of those babies. Some of them because of big headwinds coming back from the Mediterranean, some of them lasted twenty-six, twenty-six and a half hours. We were a whipped bunch of pups at the end of that month. You know you can’t rest, you try, but you really can’t rest aboard those things. B-52 is not really built for crew sleeping quarters. Even with an automatic crew you were just a rag when you
got out of the airplane and then you had to go home and sleep for eight hours and then
come back and target study and get ready for the next go. It seemed like you were just a
zombie. That was hard to do. We earned our pay.

JB: What was the under field duration of the flight? I mean how many times
would you tank during one of those?

GT: During an airborne alert we would refuel minimum twice and that’s full
tanks. Max weight refuelings. We’d refuel over the Med, but there were times coming
back when we would have a two hundred knot jet stream headwind that if we didn’t get a
tanker on the way back in, five hundred miles off shore, we wouldn’t have made it. So,
there were those missions. I hate to look back and call them hairy missions because the
planning was extremely good. You knew well before hand if you were going to need an
extra tanker. That’s what my job as a copilot was to read those gauges and plot out our
endurance. The airplane could, if you managed to fuel right and you took off loaded it
could fly twelve hours without a refuel. It was and still is a great long-range bomber.

JB: Now, I guess moving a little further on. November 1963, Kennedy’s
assassination: where were you?

GT: I was going through an unfortunate time in my life then, getting separated
from my wife. I think I had gotten off alert that morning and everybody remembers
where they were on that day. I had come home and I guess I was going to go play golf or
something, walked into my kitchen, nodded, “Hello.” My wife and I weren’t really very
friendly back then. She said, “I have some really bad news for you.” Right away I
thought, “Uh-oh, she’s found something else of mine she wants.” She said, “President
Kennedy’s just been shot.” I remember just standing over the sink with a glass of water
in my hand, just frozen. I thought the world was going to come to an end. I stayed by the
radio all that day while they broadcast the events and it wasn’t too long after that that
they broadcast that he was dead in fact. It was extremely sad for all of us. Of course, we
didn’t know what a womanizer Kennedy was, that was another part of our sanitized
history. We didn’t know about that stuff. We just knew that he was the new generation.
He was Aquarius. He was going to lead us into the light. Everybody believed in that
man because he was a true war hero. He goes down in history as a hero but now in light
of revelations subsequently he’s a flawed hero, but aren’t we all? All heroes seem to be
gifted but afflicted too at the same time with an Achilles’ heel of some kind. That was
Kennedy; I guess the poor guy never had a peaceful night in his life. He just had a hard
on all the time. In a lot of ways I feel bad for him because he couldn’t think with the big
head. In a lot of ways I say, “You know, guys you’ve got to overcome that.” I had my
own problems with it as a young man; I guess it’s part of being Irish.

JB: Now, during I guess the early sixties and everything were you aware of
development going on in Vietnam; Kennedy sending first advisors over?

GT: A lot of people don’t realize it but it was really Kennedy’s war. He bears a
big responsibility for that involvement. I knew an awful lot about Vietnam as just a
casual student of history reading about the French Colonial days and the way they got
their butts whipped in Dien Bien Phu. That was 1957. We never really thought of it too
much as a communist thing, at least I didn’t. I was too concerned with keeping North
and South Korea apart. To me, that was where the battle was. When the French got
kicked out of Vietnam, I just thought, “Well okay, that’s the end of colonialism” because
colonialism was coming to an end in other places of the world in North Africa and
different places like that. India had just gotten its freedom not too long before. We’d
given the Philippines back to the Filipinos. It seemed like a natural thing. Again, I was
thinking about Ho Chi Minh as more of a leader than a communist and I think we missed
some opportunities there. Because back then we were so paranoid of the Red Tide,
whether it be Mao Tse-tung or Ho Chi Minh or Kim II-sung, these folks scared us. These
folks could very easily ally with Russia, and they did. I still think that Ho Chi Minh
could have been our friend if we had played our cards right.

JB: Absolutely, I mean look at his declaration of independence. It’s directly
copied from ours.

GT: Anyway, Chairman Ho, to me, could have been an ally. If we could have
made an accommodation with communism on a regional scale and made some kind of an
accommodation to a little more understanding and a little less paranoia we’re absolutists
when it comes to communism. We don’t understand that Communists can be Patriots
too. We blew that chance and therefore we were sucked into the war and it just kept on
escalating and the politicians kept lying to us. Westmoreland and McNamara and his
bunch lied to us even more about body counts, progress made, and all this stuff. In fact,
we never really were about to win that war. Oh, I suppose if we had turned the B-52s
loose on Hanoi at the beginning and flattened the city; that could have brought the war to
an end, as it brought them to the table in ’73. We didn’t have the guts for that. One thing
is we were really afraid the Chinese would come pouring across the border. To this day
the Chinese boast about the alliance they had with Vietnam and how they did in fact help
in that war. It was the same in Korea; we didn’t want to see the Chinese come across the
Yalu so we fought a political war. Anybody that was in the Air Force especially the
fighter guys can tell you about the avoidance of real targets and going after paddies and
dikes when we could have been targeting some real meaningful targets. But there we are.
Sad war, sad we were in it. Wish it could have been different, but hey, there we are.

JB: So, what year did you start flying combat missions out of Guam?
JB: So, those were mainly arc light strikes?
GT: Arc Light is what it was. The Arc Light group is what gives us our reunions
every couple of years, the guys that flew Arc Light. Arc Light and what was the name,
there was another one?
JB: Rolling Thunder?
GT: I don’t know if they called it that, out of Thailand? Could have been Rolling
Thunder but I think there was another acronym for it too or another name, I forget. But
yeah, Arc Light was the name of our mission. Then I went back to Thailand in AB-66 in
1969, stayed ’69 and ’70 there.
JB: Flying Arc Light strikes out of Guam; you said there were long missions.
What’s it like flying six hours there, a couple minutes?
GT: The definition of flying hours and hours of boredom punctuated by instants
of pure terror. Of course, I don’t think we, we had some some missiles fired and threats
come up all the time. For us, there really wasn’t any terror involved. Fairly routine. I
did go on a couple of sixty ship gaggles in the weather that got a little bit hairy because
flying in the weather when the navigator and bomb dropper were trying to concentrate on
a target instead of station keeping on the airplane in front of you, you could overrun
people and get out of formation and things like this. It was always a mess to try to keep a
gaggle like that together in weather. Clear air wasn’t any trouble.
JB: Actually I was just reading an account yesterday of two cells, preship cells sort of colliding on a refueling track just because of that. They weren’t paying attention.

GT: Yeah. While I was there we lost a couple of ships. It was a combat mission, but it wasn’t combat damage, they collided. We used to fly this formation tactic where we flew three ships. One lead ship and one on each wing. Flying in close formation well, an airplane with a wingspan of 156 feet should not be flying close formation wing-to-wing tip. Close formation for me in a B-52 is getting up behind the tanker. That’s very close. But, wing tip to wing tip, you’re looking out at the wing and the wing between you and your wing mate, the wings are flexing six to twelve feet as you go through rough air and turn. Well, it’s awful easy to slip and slide when you’re turning in that airplane. That’s what happened in this case. Our division commander was on this mission: Major General Crumb, along with several guys from my squadron. They ran together and lost both airplanes and all but about three, I guess, from both crews. It was a big tragedy. I still think about that.

JB: Now, were these F models you were flying at the time?

GT: Ds.

JB: They were Ds.

GT: There were a few F models flying over there, but not many. For some reasons the D models were the ones they chose to modify first to carry external storage. The F models they didn’t modify them to carry as much. But the old D models could carry sixty thousand pounds of ordnance and we did every flight. They were a horse.

JB: Did you go up north at all?

GT: Yes.

JB: Over Hanoi?

GT: No, I didn’t get to Hanoi; that was the last year. That was ’72 when we went over Hanoi. I went up to places like Vinh. Only place I can remember right off hand but we flew quite a few missions up north. Yeah, if any of them got hairy those were the ones. That’s where they had most of their missiles and good, high altitude triple A. But came through it okay.

JB: SA-2 missiles?
GT: They had twos and threes. They had some pretty good radar guided triple A. Enough said about that because if I were running the tactics I would have run a whole lot of different kinds of tactics than what we ran over there. It was kind of a set up for running up a predictable track at a predictable altitude into a predictable target. All the missiles had to do was elevate and salvo and they were going to get some of you. If we had varied our tactics it could have been different but we were kind of grounded in World War II tactics unfortunately. For dropping iron bombs they never bothered to change the tactic. A lot of fellows are bitter about that. 

JB: I can imagine. What ways would you have changed it?

GT: I would have done a lot of low-level bombing. After all, when we sat on alert at home, that’s all we trained for was low-level nuclear weapon delivery. We could fly low-level radar guided as well as anybody in the world. We had terrain avoidance radar and we could get down on the deck. We could drop the bombs with better accuracy from low-level than we could from thirty-five thousand feet. I would have varied up the tactics to do low level from various penetration points so at least you catch them a little bit by surprise.

JB: Makes total sense.

GT: It does to me. It does to a lot of us.

JB: Any thoughts on why they chose to stick with the rigidity of World War II tactics?

GT: Most of the line flying troops don’t have a lot of respect for the upper echelons of wing staff. Who we always thought were a bunch of ass-covering careerists, who wouldn’t change anything because they’d be afraid they’d make a mistake and let themselves in for criticism while they were covering themselves with glory and making their promotions. There was always that tension between staff and line. I better not say anything more about that.

JB: Just lost my train of thought.

GT: We must be covering it all.

JB: So, you were over there from ’65 to ’66. Coming back the first time, what was the response like? Was there any anti-war sentiment at that point?
GT: It was really starting to burble up. I had the mistaken notion that all of this was just sex, drugs and rock and roll out there. It was the new Age of Aquarius blooming. All this freedom for the kids, long hair and hippies. I didn’t realize that so much of that was grounded in protest. I just thought people were just getting goosey, living a new lifestyle. It really was the beginning of the drug age. So, we kind of insulated ourselves from that. Where we were based were, for the most part, in smaller towns and cities away from the highly populated industrial and residential areas because basically SAC was a target of the Russians. We wanted to minimize casualties if they attacked us. We were in these little conservative communities where we got support instead of criticism. For along time we just didn’t realize how deep the country was being divided. Maybe we didn’t want to know. I’ll give it that because when you’re brainwashed you don’t want to believe that you’re doing wrong. You want to believe that what you’re doing has some meaning and some purpose to it. When we sat home on alert we shifted back to where we were targeting the Russians and the Chinese with our nukes. We would just rotate back to Guam or Thailand every year or so for three or six months. That seemed to be like a diversion in the real job, which was a nuclear deterrent job. You know we always thought, “Any minute now it’s going to be over,” right up until about 1970, then we began to see this could go on indefinitely.

JB: Between say, ’66 and ’69 when you returned in AV-66s, did you return to Thailand at all to fly combat missions?

GT: Yeah. The AV-66 was a combat tour.

JB: I meant with the B-52. Did you rotate back at all?

GT: I didn’t fly B-52s anymore after that. Most of our missions were to provide jamming cover for them. I never really left. We were always joined at the hip.

JB: Did you fly any of the land law B-52s at all?

GT: Uh-huh, I flew the G model. That’s the model before they hung the fan engines. The H was the last model they built. The G models had better engines than the previous models. Had a little bit updated electronic equipment and higher power. I enjoyed flying that airplane because you didn’t have to scratch gravel at the end of the runway when you took off with a full load. It would get off a couple of thousand feet
sooner. There was that safety factor. Always felt good about that. G-model was a nice airplane.

JB: How many combat missions did you fly over Vietnam?

GT: About 125.

JB: Wow. That’s excellent. Any interesting stories of particular missions?

GT: Well, yeah. I had a navigator, I won’t tell you his name, maybe he’s still alive. His nickname was Max Relax. Everything he did, “It’s time for Max Relax!” He was the closest thing to a no account I ever flew with. We had a crew there for a while, I had a bunch of cast offs on this crew and he was one of them. On the way home from one particular mission, there comes a point half hour before take off where you start running your descent and pre-landing checklist, and one of the items on the checklist is for the navigator to physically go to the bomb bay, go through the crawl way and look into the bomb bay and ascertain that the bomb bay is clear, that we dropped all the weapons. So, I told the navigator, “Check bomb bay.” He came back a few minutes later and said, “Bomb bay clear captain.” So, we land and taxi up to our parking stall. I saw the ground crewman give me the signal to cut engines. As I cut engines the next thing on the checklist or maybe it was before I cut engines. It was before we cut engines it was a checklist item to open the bomb bay doors. So, I opened the bomb bay doors and I looked down and I saw the crewman giving me this throat cutting sign with his eyes about as big as saucers. So, I shut the airplane down right quick. He came on the intercom, he plugged in and he said, “Pilot, you’ve got two hanging.” I said, “Oh, shit.” I said, “Crew get out of the airplane, get as far away as you can.” So, everybody bailed out of the airplane and I was the last one down. The ground crew was all standing there petrified. There was a five hundred pounder in the lower rack that hadn’t released. There was another five hundred pounder on top of it. It had released, all but one shackle. The front shackle had released the rear shackle. So, it was hanging by its tail on top of the other one. I thought to myself, “Thank God for a smooth landing.” I could have tumbled that thing right off on the runway and blown us up with the bomb bay door closed. So, I got old Max Relax and I put him against a tire, and the tires on the B-52 are about five feet and a half tall, studded with steel shards for strength. I didn’t care if I ripped his back off. I put him against that tire and I gave him an OCS ass chewing that I hope he’ll
never forget. I told him that if I got in trouble out of this, which could have been a court marshal offense, because I’m responsible, you know. The buck stops with me. If I got in trouble for it I was going to make sure that I did my time standing on his head. I really wasn’t going to take the wrap for that, for him not checking that bomb bay. Then he just sat there in his seat and faked it. That was probably the closest I ever came in my life to intentionally killing a human being. If we hadn’t had witnesses I think I would have. I was so mad at the son of a bitch. I still hate his ass. He could have killed the whole crew. Court marshal would have been the least of our troubles. As it turns out he got a reprimand for it and I skated. I got away clean. I guess we just got lucky that time.

JB: Wow. Well, we’ve been going for about an hour.

GT: Well, that’s good. I’m about out of time myself. I need to get on with work.

Appreciate sharing anything like that with you. I hope some of it is meaningful to the project.

JB: Well, I’m going to go ahead and officially end this. This will end the interview with Dr. George Thatcher.
JB: This is Jonathon Bernstein conducting an oral history interview with Dr. George Thatcher. We are in Dr. Thatcher’s office on Tech campus. It’s eleven o’clock in the morning on February 11, 2002. I guess we left off last time it was 1966. Headed home between ’66 and ’68 when you headed back, what were you doing?

GT: I was still in the B-52. After going home in ’66, my base had closed so they posted me to a new place in base up in Plattsburg, New York, and I spent ’66 to ’69 there. Actually left there the beginning of ’69 to start going through B-66 training. By that time I was so tired of flying the B-52 I would have done anything.

JB: Really.

GT: So, back in early ’69 I guess I would have gone in January to survival school if you can believe it again.

JB: They made you go a second time?

GT: Yeah, because it had been like ten years between. That time I went through several survival schools. I went through winter survival up north and then I went through sea survival at Biscayne Bay, Florida. Then on my way overseas, after my training, I went through jungle survival again. That was in the Philippines. I had all kinds of survival training. Then they put me through what they call a special survival thing, which I still don’t talk about. It was a special deal for people who were taken POW (Prisoner of War). I still can’t talk about it. It was for that purpose. It was to get communications out if you were a POW. So, I went to Thailand then. I was stationed at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base. That was up country from Bangkok about hundred and fifty miles if I remember something like that. Spent my year.
JB: So how was, I guess, transitioning from the monstrous B-52 to the fairly small B-66?

GT: Thought I’d died and gone to heaven. I had volunteered to go back in fighters but they said, “Oh man, you’re thirty-five years old, you’re an old man. You can’t fly fighters.” So I said, “Well, what can I fly?” They said, “Well, let’s see, we have an assignment here in bug smashers.” 0-ones actually. 0-one observation planes. I said, “Don’t think so.” He said, “Well, okay one other choice here. You can go in the B-66.” So I said, “I’ll take that.” Reason I liked it so much is because one you got it off the ground it flew like a fighter. It really was good. You could roll, loop, immelmann, do anything with it. Yeah, it was a good bird and a real good airframe.

JB: Yeah, I was wondering I had heard various opinions of it. People saying it was underpowered.

GT: It was that.

JB: Really?

GT: It was underpowered. Yeah, they put 1950’s engines on them before the technology was any good. By the time I flew them they were hanging fan engines on everything new, but they never bothered to do it with the ’66. They just left the old engine on it. They had some electrical and hydraulic systems, all of which came into play on engine power. If any one of them malfunctioned, any one of those systems malfunctioned you would lose power, at least partial power, in a particular engine. If you did it at a critical time, like on take off, you were going to go off the end of your runway. That airplane required full power from both engines to get off the ground. It was that critical. You didn’t want to lose any thrust at all. But once you got her off the ground it was a nice airplane. I enjoyed flying it very much. Single pilot airplane.

JB: Really? I wasn’t aware of that.

GT: Yeah, that’s why I enjoyed it, didn’t have co-pilot to worry about. On most of our missions we had crew of three, pilot, nav and an ECM (electronic countermeasures) operator. EWOS (Electronic Warfare Operational Support) we called them. That was on the active jamming missions. On passing jamming missions, we carried a bomb bay full of EWOS. We carried four of them. They had their little listening station in the bomb bays. We would fly various places. I still don’t want to tell
you all the places we flew because some of them we weren’t supposed to be. But we flew passive detection missions, listening for SAM (Surface-to-Air Missile) sites and radars of different kinds and other communications. It was a pretty interesting mission. It was a longer mission than our active jamming missions. Usually we’d be up four to six hours with the passive detection missions. Then two hours to two and a half on the others. So, it was a nice mission and I have to say we were darn lucky to be able to fly out of Thailand and come back and sleep in air conditioned trailers and have a mama san to make up our beds and keep things tidy for us. It was really a white glove war for me. Of course, it wouldn’t have been so nice if I had taken a hit. It was probably the best way to fight the war that I can think of.

JB: Now, down time. Did you head into Bangkok at all?

GT: We would work seven day weeks. We all had our flight rotations and then additional duties that we performed for the squadron. We had a dual squadron there, Forty-first and Forty-second TEWS (Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron), tactical or early warning squadrons. Ultimately they closed one and merged, and we all became one big happy family. But, we had our own little operations. Building our own command posts. My extra duty was to man a shift in the command posts, take care of briefings, launch and recovery and weather briefings and that kind of thing. Brief the commanders and keep everybody happy and liaison with maintenance. I later did that for SAC too, back in the States. Ran a command post on SAC base. So, we worked around the clock, around the week and every six weeks we’d get a little break, three or four days. Bangkok was one place we’d go. Pattaya Beach was another down on the Gulf of Siam. I was there a couple of times. We would go north from time to time to Chiang Mai, which is the old ancient Thai capital. The king had his son a palace. It was up in the mountains of northern Thailand. It was on the drug trade route. We would get these guided tours up into the hills to see opium dens and guys lying around all whacked out on opium. It was in an area where Burma was close and China wasn’t too far away. All of the trade routes came together up there. There were a lot of silver coins that were used as exchange for opium at that time. I used to pick up Indian rupees. Even one time an eighteenth century deb slime. Don’t know what I did with it. Those things were the interesting bi-product of the drug traffic up there. Then I got to Chiang Mai two or three times. I liked going back
there because it was a real clean place. It was traditional Thai. It wasn’t the tourist place at the time. It wasn’t run over by prostitution and bad things happening. There wasn’t a big military presence up there except that you could see Air America in there, the old CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) airline. You could see those guys coming in from time to time. They pretty much stuck to themselves. We didn’t have any traffic with them to speak of. I enjoyed going down to Pattaya Beach too. At the time, it was just a few hotels run by Lufthansa and a couple of the European airlines. They would bring big planeloads of Europeans down to enjoy the beaches. The beaches were wonderful. I understand it’s grown up to be a big sin city now.

JB: Really?

GT: That’s what they tell me. From my memories of Thailand are that the people were just sweet and wonderful. They were gentle folks. The weather was hot and sticky all the time. It was either hot and sticky or dry and sticky. There were only two seasons there: the hot wet season and the hot dry season, and snakes.

JB: Really?

GT: Man, there were snakes in that country. I was a runner at the time and I wouldn’t go out running in the dark because that’s when the snakes would come out. I had seen Russell’s vipers and cobras and different kinds of crates. It’s just a reptilian paradise over there. The few times I did venture out after dark I was real careful to bring a flashlight. I would see lots of these snakes. I don’t have any phobia about snakes but I do have a healthy respect. I’d ride my bicycle over there through the paths, the off road paths sometimes and I could see the snakes zipping across the trail in front of me. I always figured I could get by them before they got to me if I was going fast enough.

JB: Did you encounter any other types of wild life there? Tigers? Monkeys? Anything like that?

GT: No. Really wasn’t any jungle around where we were. It was a highly cultivated area. Rice paddies and other things that they grow. I didn’t see much wildlife. I did go to the Bangkok Zoo, saw it all. Bangkok was a pretty moderate city. But there again I’m not a big city boy. The traffic, and the pollution, and the noise, that kind of thing doesn’t do a whole lot for me. It was nice to go to Bangkok from time to time.
JB: Now, getting back to mission scheduling and stuff, how often would you fly a week?

GT: Depending on mission requirements, every two to three days. The rest of the time, as I mentioned, we’d do our duties. There was always plenty of time to lay out in the sun, for which I’m paying the price now. Just had a couple of squamous cell lesions cut off my back. Lie out in the sun outside the barracks and drink beer all day and listened to Armed Forces radio. We had lots of time to ourselves and it got kind of boring. You almost got impatient for time to go to work to pass the time away.

JB: Did you have a daily beer ration?

GT: Yeah, it was like all you could drink.

JB: Really?

GT: We weren’t the Russians.

JB: Okay.

GT: It was a place where people if they had an alcohol problem they really brought it to fruition over there. There was an awful lot of drinking going on. I’ve written poetry about that. I have a poem called the “Fighter Pilot Island.”

JB: Really?

GT: It was all about the time over there. It’s like fighter pilots do live in their own little world. They have no conception of other jobs. It’s just either you’re a fighter pilot or you’re a pilot fighter to them. They don’t have anything to do with people who aren’t their type. They disdain them, they insult them. It’s all part of their little sophomoric arrogance. We were tenants on the base. It was an F105 base, and we were tenants, and they didn’t respect us a lot for what we did. So, we kind of kept to ourselves.

JB: Even though you were there to pretty much support them and protect them electronically?

GT: Absolutely. No one ever said being a fighter pilot made you smart or instill camaraderie. They just did their thing and lived on their island. So, the poem starts, “On the fighter pilot island, the jocks, by heavenly grace, lived in closed fraternal boy favor and each pilot is an ace.” It goes on from there.
JB: Sort of like the line, “Fighter pilots make movies, bomber pilots make history.”

GT: Yeah, I like that. I don’t have anything against fighter pilots. In fact, looking back on it I wish I had my chance to fly them.

JB: Me too.

GT: Wasn’t in the cards. Actually, I had plenty of chances, but I chose bombers because I thought I could get promoted faster in bombers. I was thinking career, not thinking fun.

JB: I mean at that point everything was geared toward SAC. Career wise it was the only choice really.

GT: Yeah, you were on a select crew in SAC, for the first couple of years I flew anyway, you could get a spot promotion. Spot promotions were nice. They got you an edge on the rest of the field. You wore another rank and then you came up for the next round promotion earlier because of that. So, lots of guys did very well with their spot promotions. They did away with them shortly after I got into the bomber business, so never had my chance at it. So, there we are.

JB: Let’s see what else. How many missions did you fly in that year?

GT: You know I think all together I had something like eighty-five.

JB: Most of those were, were they solo missions or strike support?

GT: Well, all the active jamming missions were strike support. The passive jamming was just our own little thing that was delegated to us by the Air Force over there. It was a pretty constant thing. We had a bird in the air almost every day doing a passive mission. Then we had who knows how many? Ten, twelve, fifteen sometimes in the air doing strike support. It was busy. They never let down.

JB: Any particularly memorable missions that you can talk about?

GT: Actually they were all fairly routine. I never had any maintenance problems except before take off. I was lucky I caught an engine malfunction as I was lined up to take off. One of my engines lost partial power. That was that engine electrics and it was just before I started to roll. I got very lucky on that one. I mean as far as getting shot at and SAMs in the area, it was always that.

JB: Really?
GT: Yeah. Most of the time you really didn’t unless you’re EWO, your EWO called out a SAM in the area because it would light up his screen, we didn’t really worry about it too much. I worried about it when we got up north supporting the upset by the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We worried a little bit about it then. There was always lighter triple A. They had Quad 37s and some bigger stuff. We were flying right at pretty much the limits of their good accuracy. So, again I didn’t worry about it because we couldn’t see it except at night. Then it’s treacherous. You know when they were tracking you because the tracers would come up and when you started to turn, so did the tracers. You knew when you were a target. But, I was lucky never got hit. I didn’t have anything that I would call a monumental experience over there. Saw a lot of stuff happening, but it was the closest thing to a routine assignment that I could have had actually.

JB: Really? Routine assignment in combat?

GT: Well, just get up and do your job. You try not to worry about what other dangers might be up there. So, the fun part was our end of tour missions. We had a couple of wing tanks that we would fill with fuel, but we would put food coloring in them. So, that when we came back, quite often there was two of us flying a mission together. When we’d come back we’d fly low over the field in formation. We had a fuel dump system on the airplane. As we fly, do our pass over the field, we’d hit the fuel dump and we’d have this red and blue smoke where fuel is coming out with food coloring in it. We’d do a couple of chandelles up there. Make it look like two members of the Thunderbirds. That was fun.

JB: Very cool. Sort of I guess a question off the beaten track, but any of the aircraft in your squadron have any nose art on them?

GT: Nose art? Never.

JB: Really?

GT: No. I can’t think of a single one. That was a War II and Korea thing. I don’t even know about the other birds in Vietnam.

JB: I’ve seen some Vietnam nose art. Not nearly to the extent of World War II or Korea. Just a phenomenon I happen to be fascinated with.

GT: I just visited the Confederate Air Force Museum in Midland last weekend. They’ve got a whole wall full of sheet metal from the noses of bombers. They’ve got all
the nose art on them, which is pretty wonderful to see. There’s fifteen or twenty of them in there.

JB: Actually, two people in my program actually worked on putting that exhibit together.

GT: Really? That’s really a sight. I enjoyed seeing that.

JB: Actually I haven’t seen it yet. I’d like to get down there.

GT: I can’t remember, you know, maybe it’s because in War II and maybe even in Korea the airplane was your airplane. You know the crew was assigned to the airplane. Well, in my time, the airplane just rotated around among whoever was scheduled to fly. There never really was any ownership. We didn’t even put crew chiefs. Well, maybe you would have the crew chief’s name on the airplane, but you never had the pilot’s name, the crew’s name.

JB: Really?

GT: It was just one of those things.

JB: From what I’ve seen in Vietnam or during the Vietnam War, most of the nose art was either on fighters or there were a couple B-52s. Actually mostly it was on F-105s.

GT: On the 105s? I flew out of that same base with those guys and I never noticed it or if I did I forgot.

JB: Most of them had to do with the glide characteristics of the 105. Called it the Flying Anvil or the Polish Glider. All sorts of stuff.

GT: It wouldn’t glide very far. You would have slid. Wouldn’t have power. It was a great airplane. Yeah. A whole great load of ordnance. Lot of respect for them.

JB: Have you seen the one out at the Texas Air Museum in Slaton?

GT: Yeah. They’ve got a pretty nice little collection of war birds down there.

Couple of old Navy things that I’d never seen before. I think they’ve got an old F-4D.

JB: Yeah. Actually it’s an S model. It was a B updated to an S. And that one supposedly has a kill over in North Vietnam in ’72. They haven’t confirmed it. The Navy records say that aircraft shot it down, but the pilot and the RIOs (Radar Intercept Officer) say they were flying a different aircraft that day. So, it’s not confirmed.
GT: I think that’s an airplane that was in the inventory from way back and the
Marines had it. I believe. They had an enlisted radar operator.


GT: Yeah, I knew a couple of those Marine types. Flying backseat in that thing.

JB: Really? Back during the war?

GT: Well, they had it; I think they used it even during Korea. I may be wrong
about that.

JB: Let’s see the first F-4H1s I think first flew in ’54. So, it would have been
post Korea.

GT: Just right toward the end. Anyway, it was interesting that they still had an
enlisted crew member.

JB: Definitely. I thought that pretty much the services had done away with that.

GT: They have now.

JB: Yeah, that’s true.

GT: But back then we even had ground radar controllers. Guys that did that
before I went to pilot training. We had intercept directors who were enlisted back up, up
until 1956 or so. Then the Air Force said, “Wait a minute. Who’s going to control
fighters if you’re going to control weapons like this, who are manned by officers?” You
better be an officer. So, what they did they took anybody who was a weapons director,
tech sergeant, or above, and made them a warrant officer. So, when I was into OCS in
’57 they sent me to intercept director school and I was there with a bunch of warrant
officers. Served with a bunch of them. Brand new W-1 commissions. It was a pretty
good deal. It was the last of it too, because after that the Air Force did away with warrant
officers. Those who were onboard got grandfathered. Then they didn’t produce
anymore. I never could understand. It’s a great way for enlisted guys as a technician to
get a commission and make a real good career for himself. The Navy still does it. They
Army still does it. I can’t understand the Air Force’s thinking of this.

JB: At this point, most of the pilot’s in the Army are warrant officers.

GT: Well, the chopper pilots are for sure. Not all, most of them are. Yeah, you’re
right. Darn good pilots and darn good officers, I think. So, what else John?
JB: Let’s see. Coming home I guess at that point I guess transitioning back to stateside military life, any differences from coming back the first time?

GT: Well, I was within about a year and a half of retirement when I came back. I guarantee you I was not enthusiastic about going back to SAC. I knew what they had in store for me and that’s what happened. My squadron commander says, “Hey congratulations Major, we’re going to make you a B-52 aircraft commander. Aren’t you lucky?” I said, “Colonel, I think we have to have a talk about this. I’ve got four thousand hours in that airplane and I don’t ever want to go near one again.” He said, “But you have to.” It turned out I didn’t have to, because I’d been out of the bird so long that they would have had to send me back through the training program. I didn’t have enough time left for them to get enough mileage out of me. So, they stuck me in the command post and that’s where I served out my time and flew the Gooney bird. We had a little base flight Gooney bird haul troops and supplies to satellite bases. When I wasn’t on my command post ship, I would fly the Gooney bird around.

JB: That’s great. That’s a great airplane. I’ve flown on a couple of them.

GT: Yeah. It’s going to be flying as long as, who knows?

JB: Absolutely.

GT: I still see them around. Saw one down in El Paso a couple weekends ago.

JB: Really?

GT: Yep. It’s a great old bird and it’s reliable. It’s a hog to fly. Everything is manual on it. No boost. You’ve got to horse it around a little bit, but it’s okay. Pretty little airplane.

JB: I got to ride jump seat a couple times. Never actually had any stick time in it.

GT: You need to get some time in it.

JB: That’d be kind of cool.

GT: Just a little different taking off and landing because—

JB: Tricycle gear.

GT: You don’t want to land that baby tail first.

JB: No. I’ve got about an hour and a half of tail dragger time right now. Actually interesting I flew for an hour and a half in the backseat of Charles Lindberg’s Morocco Champ.
GT: He’s very young.

JB: Very young. It’s based out of Denver Airport. It’s a 1946 Champ.

GT: Wow. What a piece of history.

JB: Yeah it was very cool.

GT: I’m a little envious. I’d like to have some stick time in that old bird myself.

But it’s nice to go down to Slaton and Midland and these places and see the old war birds. I still get a thrill looking at them. Those that are still flying, they keep a few of them flyable for air shows. That’s nice. Actually I had tears in my eyes one time seeing a B-29 in fly over being escorted by a B-51 and a B-38.

JB: Wow.

GT: One on each wing.

JB: Fantastic.

GT: That to me was nostalgia time.

JB: Yeah, I’ve had a few experiences myself like that. My birthday’s September second, which is VJ (Victory over Japan) day and for the fiftieth anniversary of VJ day I was at Pearl Harbor, and I was standing on the Arizona Memorial looking up through the hull. The flags were there and everything and just wave after wave of World War II airplanes were flying over. Just sort of one of the defining moments of my life.

GT: Boy, I’ll say. I hope you got good pictures of it. Got some video?

JB: No, I didn’t actually take any video, but I do have quite a few nice pictures of it.

GT: Yeah, that only happens once. That only happens once, something like that.

That’s wonderful.

JB: Do you still fly?

GT: No. I had my own airplane for a time and was in another one as a partner, but it’s God’s way of telling you, you have too much money. I had a Debonair, which is the straight tail version of the Bonanza. Had it for a couple of years and I really couldn’t justify it. Thought I’d be using it in business, but it never worked out that way.

Southwest will go anyplace I want it to go. So, I sold her off and decided that was the end of that. So, I don’t fly anymore.

JB: I desperately need to get back into it.
GT: Well, I understand they’re selling. There are very few airplanes for rent available around here anymore. Because people just can’t afford to keep them up. There isn’t that demand. You need to go in the Air Force, go to cloud training.

JB: Still have the thought. Although I’m about to get engaged. My girlfriend would kill me.

GT: Yeah, you know you have to have your priorities. You don’t go into flying training thinking that you’re going to get killed. Even though the mortality rate might be a little higher than driving a bus, but if your girlfriend really cares about what you do, about you being happy in a career, she’ll see the light.

JB: True.

GT: Either that or you haven’t got the right girlfriend.

JB: This is true. I’m fairly certain I’ve got the right one.

GT: I made the mistake of not pursuing a post Air Force flying career. Well, it wasn’t totally a mistake. I retired at age thirty-eight and the airlines wouldn’t have me, because I was too old. Now, they’re hiring guys who are fifty. But I did check in with Federal Express and they were a pretty new operation back in ’72. They had a base; still have their headquarters in Memphis. They also had a domicile in Columbus, Ohio.

Outside of that, they didn’t have anything. They said, “Well, we need to put you through the ATP (Airline Transport Pilot) program unless you already have one.” Which I didn’t. “Come on down and spend some weeks with us, get checked out and get ATP in our Falcon.” I said, “Fine, what’s that going to cost me?” “Nineteen thou.”

JB: Wow.

GT: That’s a lot of money. It was a lot of money in ’72. Like, sixty or seventy now. Post career I checked in with Federal Express. The price was prohibitive, but I think I could have made my GI bill stretch for most of it. I said, “Well, you know after giving it a lot of thought I think I’ll do that if you can promise me a job after I finish the program.” “Oh, no. You go on a waiting list.” I said, “Well, how long is the waiting list?” “Well, we can’t tell. It depends on whether the company prospers or not.” With mouths to feed at home, I decided to pass on that. That’s when I closed the book on flying, as for a living. Who would have known what Federal Express was going to do?
Had I been able to see as far ahead as I could behind, then I would have definitely taken
them up on it.

JB: Yeah, I can imagine.

GT: But you don’t know those things. I really couldn’t take the risk. I had to be
pretty conservative at the time.

JB: Of course with these fantastic poems, I’ve got to ask when did you start
writing and collecting aviation poetry?

GT: Not all that long ago actually. I think I started writing this stuff, I don’t
know five years ago.

JB: That’s it?

GT: Well, I had all this stuff running around in my head and I thought to write a
book on it. You see all these war movies especially, my favorite, the Great Santini. That
tells the story of the “Fighter Pilot Island. I said, “Why write a book, when it’s been
done?” So, I just confined myself. I said, “I’ll write about this stuff, but I’ll make it
short pieces.” Little vignettes and snapshots, so I started writing poetry about it. By just
noodeling around I’ve probably got thirty or thirty-five of them written now. Some of
them are about experiences. Some of them are about tributes to airplanes that we flew.
Not too long ago finished one about the Spitfire. Don’t ask why. Sometimes this stuff
comes to you in the night.

JB: An inspiring airplane.

GT: It is. I’ve never been up close to one, but seen a lot of them in films. I
started writing the stuff because I have certain feelings about certain things that
happened. If I get inspired or somebody tells me a story then later on I’ll run it through
the mill. See how it processes. I’m starting one that I’m going to call “Tailwind
Charlie.” It’s about a guy I knew in the service who went through pilot training with me.
We’re a class apart, but at the same bases. He graduated Tailwind Charlie in the class.
He couldn’t fly in formation. Lucky he got through. Well, they sent him to fly C-124s.
They figured it’s the one place that he’d be safe. He was flying missions down to Congo
during their uprising. He got a Presidential Citation and a DFC (Distinguished Flying
Cross) for flying the president of Congo in and out of danger. Then during the early part
of Vietnam they sent him over flying the Albatross. The sea rescue airplane? What did they call it?

JB: HU-16.

GT: The sixteen and he rescued a full colonel who’d been shot down out of, gosh, what was it? Hai Phong harbor.

JB: Wow.

GT: He had bad guys. He had our Air Force flying cover while he landed. And driving off their gun ships while he picked this guy up. So he gets another DFC for that, maybe even better I don’t know. But this colonel rotated back home to Air Force personnel, “My friend,” he said, “Tom when it comes your time to rotate back, you call me for your assignment.” So, Tom went back and his next mission was to fly the B-57 long-range reconnaissance airplane. For some years he flew that airplane. Their big mission was to fly through nuclear clouds, from tests set off by the Russians, and sample that out. A lot of his shipmates died of cancer. Your air supply was ambient air that they processed. They didn’t filter out the radiation particles in it. So a lot of his crewmates are dead now. Then he volunteered to go back to Vietnam. This guy couldn’t just fly enough. So, he went back and flew a double tour in F-4s. This is the guy couldn’t fly formation. A double tour in F-4s, wound up as an F-4 squadron commander up at Mountain Home. Ultimately retired there a lieutenant colonel.

JB: What’s his name?

GT: Tom. Tomtien. I wrote a poem about him too. I asked him what his name meant, Tomtien. He said, “That’s the name of a Norwegian troll.” A little Norwegian troll that guards the farmhouses and lives in the barns and takes care of the farm when the farmer can’t do all this stuff. He’s invisible except to children. That started me writing legends. So, I’ve written bunches of legends. Some of them pretty obscure and that one’s very obscure. But it comes out sounding like the Norwegian Night Before Christmas they way I wrote it. It’s a good legend and I’m going to get it published as soon as I clear off my desk here. Anyway, that’s Tommy Tomtien. Tom’s a great guy.

JB: Fantastic.

GT: He’s up in Eagle, Idaho. Right outside of Boise.

JB: Any I guess closing thoughts?
GT: I still feel like the Air Force was my major career. That was my life during my youth. Did everything to it at the time. Looking back on it now, I’m pretty proud of it. At the time, I could say it’s just a grunt job. We did a lot of crap and followed a lot of orders. You couldn’t see the big picture from inside. You almost had to get out and look back on it to be able to put it in its proper perspective. That’s probably why I didn’t write anything about it while I was in it. It wasn’t what I’d call a lot of fun. At least the B-52 part wasn’t a lot of fun. The B-66 was. So, I don’t have any. I’m just an average guy, did an average job. I have no delusions that I was a hero or anything like that. Just did my job, but I’m glad I’m in the company of the guys who are heroes. A lot of them still over there sleeping beneath the paddies and those are my heroes, these guys. Several of my squadron mates are still over there. You know I have memories. Looking back on it now, I’m pretty proud. Petty proud we’re getting some recognition; you know I took a national calamity to restore some respect to the veterans. Before September we weren’t getting a lot. But it seems like now they’re treating us like decent human beings again, which I’m sure will all fade—

JB: As time goes on.

GT: As time goes on and wars are put in the past, but I guess that’s the nature of the country, so I have no complaints. I have no complaints.

JB: Fantastic. Well, thank you.

GT: My pleasure Johnny.

JB: This will end the interview with Dr. Thatcher.