Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone; I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Gerald Kumpf. Today is March 10, 2003. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas Tech University in the Special Collections Library interview room. Mr. Kumpf you are in Las Cruces, New Mexico, is that correct?

Gerald Kumpf: That’s correct.

RV: Okay, great. Well, why don’t we get started here with some basic biographical information on you? Could you tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

GK: Yes, I was born in Lexington, Nebraska. I lived on a farm eight and a half miles northeast of there. I spent the first eleven years of my life there, went to a little one room school house-- it was one room until the last year I was there, they built on extension, had enough kids -- which was probably the best education I ever got because in a one room schoolhouse you get to listen to all the classes going on, and it was really great. We moved to Cheyenne, Wyoming when I was just turning twelve and that was a big change, going from a little one-room schoolhouse to a big school, and I tended to become a bad student there.

RV: Oh, really?

GK: Yes, I ended up dropping out essentially. Dropped out of high school my last two years. I had a deal going with my teachers, I’d come in once a week, take the
exams and if I passed them they would give me a passing grade and I managed to get through that way.

RV: Okay, so you did graduate high school then?

GK: No, I got a GED eventually. They wouldn’t let me do it because of the state requirement for history and I didn’t attend the history classes.

RV: Okay, what were your favorite subjects growing up in school, if there were any?

GK: My favorites subjects were art and science and ROTC when I got into high school. I wanted to be a military man all my life.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, yes. I made that decision when I was probably about ten I think I wanted to become a soldier.

RV: Now, why did you feel that way at such a young age?

GK: You know I’ve thought about that for a lot of times. I think what had happened is we got a TV set when I was ten and that was the first TV in the county as a matter of fact, living on the farm. And they used to show movies from World War II all the time, and so I was pretty well raised on those so you know a lot of John Wayne movies and what not. And my father was in the military. He was a medal winner in World War II and all of that and I’d heard all those stories and.

RV: What did he do in World War II?

GK: He was an infantryman in the 69th, Fighting 69th. Anyway, I think that was what got me. My father was active in the American Legion and what not and the vets were pretty well looked up to and that’s kind of the road that I took. I just wanted to become a hero I guess. That’s kind of a hard way to think about it but when I think back on it that’s probably exactly what it was.

RV: How many siblings did you have?

GK: I had, there were five of us in the family. I have two brothers and two sisters.

RV: And where did you place age wise in that?

GK: I was the second oldest, and then there was a big gap between me and my next little sister. She’s seven and half years younger than I am.
RV: Okay, well tell me about that one-room schoolhouse, what do you remember about that?

GK: Well, it was about a mile and a half from where we lived. We used to walk to school unless the snow was too deep, then my dad would take us in the truck. There was a, the class that I was in there were four of us, all three girls and me. There weren’t, there were more girls at that time. I don’t know what, if it was anything to do with the baby boom or what not, but there were a lot of girls in the school. Guys-wise, there were two that were older than I was, and the rest of them were all girls. There were a couple after I got in, for awhile there were a few more younger than I. We, it was just a good experience because like I said, the thing that I really enjoyed about the one-room schoolhouse was the fact that you got to listen to all the classes that were going on and it went through kindergarten through seventh grade. So as a, if you could assimilate the material sitting back there as a second or third grader, and she’s up in front, the teacher’s teaching seventh graders and you could just click right on I and learn. That’s one of the reasons I started dropping out when I went to Cheyenne, I went to school there. They were so far behind where I was. I was just bored to tears most of the time, yes. All the stuff that they were covering I had already heard, and so I got into the habit of just dropping out and not going to the classes. I went to the library, there was a library just down the street from the school and I used to go sit in the library and read.

RV: Did your parents know about this?

GK: They found out eventually. Yes, and, but the teacher, not the teacher, the dean of boys, the one that contacted them and we had a big conference, and he said that I was capable and all of that, it was just that I never showed up for classes. I had a couple of conflicts with a couple of teachers I didn’t care for. So anyway they made the arrangements for me to just come in and take the tests. They didn’t have any home schooling or anything in those days.

RV: Okay, what kind of work did you do as a young man?

GK: Geez, just about everything. I started out the first job I had of course was delivering newspapers in Cheyenne. This is outside the farm, mainly on the farm I did the typical farm things, up before dawn feeding the stock.

RV: So you were raised on a farm.
GK: Yes.
RV: Okay, both in Nebraska and Wyoming?
GK: No, in Wyoming we went into the city. My father went into construction. We lived in Cheyenne, in the city there.
RV: Okay, but in Nebraska you were raised on the farm initially.
GK: Raised on the farm, right.
RV: Okay, so you would do farm chores?
GK: Right, yes, same thing, working in the fields and stock and all of that. But when we went to the city then I got a job. The first job I had was delivering newspapers. Then I got a job bagging groceries at a grocery store. Then the final job that I had when I went and joined the military was working at a printing house. I manned the blue print machine.
RV: Did your mother work?
GK: Oh, yes my mother had always worked, my father worked and my sister worked, my older sister. All of us kids worked.
RV: Right, what did your mother do?
GK: She was a waitress and a hostess at the hotel, the Plains Hotel in Cheyenne.
RV: Okay, so when you were in high school, you said, you talked about the history test that you did not take. Did you have an aversion to history or was that one of your least favorite?
GK: No, I had an aversion to the instructor. It was funny, we got into a big argument about the Civil War one day and I ended up getting kicked out of the class because of it.
RV: Really?
GK: Yes, and it was quite the deal.
RV: Do you remember what the argument was about?
GK: It was, I said that Lincoln’s priority was not freeing the slaves, that it was a political decision and it wasn’t necessarily his personal convictions to free the slaves. It was more of a political decision on part. And we got into it on that and eventually what happened was I just do like most kids do. I just shut him out and started staring out the window and then he got really upset and sent me down to the office and I just dropped
out of his class and never bothered going back. Bad decision on my part, but that’s the way it goes.

RV: I’m sorry, a bad decision?

GK: Yes, it was a bad decision on my part I think, because I went into the military then without a high school diploma which precluded me from being able to get into the officer ranks.

RV: Right, tell me about ROTC.

GK: ROTC was fun for me.

RV: Was it Army?

GK: Yes, it was Army ROTC that we had there at Cheyenne, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed all of it: the discipline, the military history, tactics and strategy and all of that and I just enjoyed it. It was really the only class that I actually went to.

RV: Really. You said you enjoyed the discipline?

GK: Yes.

RV: Why?

GK: I don’t know, it’s probably because I was raised with it so much. My father was a great disciplinarian.

RV: So this is in high school, Army ROTC, and did you have plans for college to continue with this?

GK: No. Probably, we were poor, we weren’t wealthy, couldn’t afford to go to college even if I had wanted to, and that really hadn’t entered my mind. My goal was immediately get into the military when I was of age to do so.

RV: Okay, and did you do so?

GK: Not quite, my dad wouldn’t sign the papers for me when I turned seventeen at first. I had to hang around for about six months and finally convinced him. There wasn’t any war going on of course at that time, it was in ’61 when I finally went in, but he was worried about that. He wouldn’t let me. I wanted to go in and become an infantry officer or sergeant, whichever, and he was adamant that I not do that.

RV: Did he tell you why?

RV: Yes, because he was one and he knew what it was like. He never went into any detail of it until after I had come back from Vietnam, then he sat down and discussed
things, but prior to that he would just say “No, you’re not going to do that,” simple as
that. So finally the way it happened is I, when I went down and talked to the Marine
Corps recruiter they had the air wing program and I was going to go into the air wing and
so he finally submitted and said, “Okay, you can go in.”
RV: Okay, so you chose the Marine Corps?
GK: Yes, I chose the Marine Corps.
RV: Why the Marine Corps?
GK: Well, it was the one that offered probably the best deal for me. It was funny,
like most recruiting offices they have them all together right, in the same building, Air
Force, Marine, so you get to go to talk to everybody. And I went down; Air Force
wouldn’t take me, nor the Navy because I didn’t have a high school diploma. They both
required high school diplomas. The Army just didn’t have really anything that I wanted
and the Marines just seemed the way to go.
RV: Okay, so did you immediately go to recruit depot training or?
GK: Yes, well I had like a two-week period from the time I signed the papers
until I had to leave. Then I went down to Denver for the induction and all that, you know
the physical and all of those things, then they sent me back to Cheyenne for just about a
period of four or five days then I went on a bus to San Diego.
RV: How did your parents feel that you joined the Marine Corps?
GK: My mom was actually proud of me. She was the said, yes go out and do
your thing for the country and all of that. My father, he was rather reluctant. He was
actually quiet about the whole thing, once he has signed the papers and let it go, he didn’t
really say anything about it.
RV: Okay, well tell me about basic training, what were your initial impressions
when you go down to San Diego?
GK: It didn’t bother me at all. I pretty well knew what to expect. I had seen all
the movies and all that. My father, one piece of advice he did give me, he said, “If you
just tell yourself you can do it and you can do it.” That’s basically what I went through.
Anything they threw at me I can do it, you know other people have done it and I can do
it, just do it.
RV: Was it as tough as everybody says it was?
GK: Oh, yes, yes, it was tough. I wouldn’t want to do it again. Once is enough but what they do, they, I’m sure you’ve heard it a thousand times, everybody says they essentially brainwash you. They tear you down, make you feel worthless and then they start building you back up in the mold that they want you to be in. The biggest benefit that I got from Marine Corps basic training was the, the feeling if not the fact that I could do anything. I can accomplish anything in my life, whether it be a physical, something physical, something mental, it makes no difference. You just get, they instill the attitude in you, “can do” and it follows you through your entire life, it really does. It was probably the most positive aspect of that whole situation.

RV: When did you first realize that attitude change in you?

GK: Probably about halfway through basic training. It was funny, I was on the obstacle course and when I first went in I was very skinny, I was 136 pounds, something like that, six feet tall, and so I was capable of doing anything physical because I didn’t have a lot of weight to move around. They gave you a pre-physical, or not a pre-physical, a conditioning course that you go through and they see how many pull-ups you can do, how many sit ups you can do, and all of that, and I was just blowing them away, you know I could do a hundred and some odd sit-ups with no sweat, I could do chin-ups all day long. But we were about halfway through and what they had done is they want everybody to come out looking the same, and they got me putting on weight really fast. I had to go through and eat double in the chow line, they had three different chow lines, the skinny guys, they sent you through twice, you had to eat twice as much, the fat guys, they got a glass of water and a little bread and had to run all the time, the other guys got to eat normal meals. Well I was on the double chow line; they really packed the food on me. I just, I went from 136 pounds, like I said I was about to 185 at least.

RV: Wow, wow.

GK: Yes, that’s what I said, wow. So my upper body strength had not developed to handle that extra weight yet. So we’re on the obstacle course and they got me going up this rope thing, you have to run, you know climb up the rope and touch the beam at the top. I got about halfway up and I couldn’t get any further, and DI sticks a bayonet between his teeth and he’s coming up behind me, he says “You get your ass up there or I’m going to stick this bayonet up till you sideways.” Well, I thought he was really going
to do it, that guy was a mean little SOB and I scooted right on up, touched that beam. I
said, “That’s amazing, that’s amazing.” It was more psychological than physical, and it
hearkened back to me what my father said. He said, “You just say, tell yourself you can
do it, and you can do it.” I think that was the key from that point on.

RV: That’s interesting. What would you say was the most challenging aspect of
your basic training?

GK: The physical part. There were times when they ran you through the sand,
running in sand with extra weight, packs on your back and all of that. That was the most
physical, the physical aspect of that, you know keep it going when you’re dead, dog tired
and you just, you don’t have the energy to, you can’t take one more step, but yet
somewhere or another you dig down in and you do it, and that was the most challenging
aspect for me.

RV: Okay. What kind of weapons training did you have?

GK: In basic, or after?

RV: In basic.

GK: Okay, in basic all they taught was the .45 pistol and the M-1 rifle.

RV: Okay, what kind of shot were you? Were you comfortable with the
weapons?

GK: Oh yes I was, my dad put a shotgun in my hands when I was four years old
and I’d been shooting all the time when I was a kid and I had no problem. My drill
instructor really got upset with me. Now the Marine Corps has three ranks. They got, its
called marksman, sharpshooter and expert. Well expert, the badge that they give you for
that is a wreath with crossed rifles, it was rather ugly. The sharpshooter is a iron cross,
looks like a German Iron Cross with a globe, a needle, an anchor in the middle of it. It
was a very sharp, distinctive looking badge and I wanted that. Well, during the rifle
range practice, you go to the rifle range for a week and you go through several practices
and then you have qualification day the day before you leave the range. Well I had done
so well during the practice, I was shooting at the expert level and all that and all that, and
the drill instructor and everybody were talking about, they were going to put me on their
rifle team and all this. So it comes to the qualification day and I just deliberately started. I
sighted my rifle wrong so I could get myself a sharpshooter badge.
RV: Really?

GK: Yes. Because I know how well I shot, it doesn’t concern me, getting the 
expert thing. So anyway, he really got upset about that, he kicked me in the ass.

RV: Literally?

GK: Literally, literally.

RV: Okay. Well you wrote in your questionnaire, I wanted to ask you about this, 
that the question about what was basic like, you said it was just like the movie Full Metal 
Jacket, could you explain that?

RV: Oh yes. You watch the movie Full Metal Jacket, the way they go through 
and pick on the weak guy. What they’re trying to do though, maybe it didn’t come out as 
well in the Full Metal Jacket, it did a little bit, what they’re trying to do is get everybody 
to pull together, to make sure that the strong links pull the weak links together. And so, I 
think, in the elements of the Full Metal Jacket, the ways he’s always, the drill instructor’s 
always yelling in your face, always intimidating you, always belittling you. Those 
elements are exactly right, a hundred percent correct, that’s exactly the way they work it 
and they do. If you’re a fat body or a skinny twig like I was, they tend to focus in on you 
and keep yelling at your face all the time.

RV: How did you handle that?

GK: My dad did that to me all my life, so it kind of rolled off, like water off a 
duck, it never really bothered me that much. Some of the kids it really did. I mean guys 
would go to bed crying at night; you could hear them in the barracks in there. We had 
one kid that tried to get out. He hid in the dumpster and tried to sneak off base that way, 
trying to get out of the situation. Some people handled it real well, some people laughed 
their way through it and some people cried their way through it.

RV: What about leadership, how would you describe the leadership you had there 
in basic, your DIs and otherwise?

GK: They were, our DIs, we had one situation which came up; they were being 
investigated for cruelty.

RV: Oh, really?

GK: Yes.

RV: In your platoon?
GK: In our platoon, yes. What they did, one of their favorite punishments was making guys that had done something wrong, make them jump up on the top or hang over our wall lockers. You grab the backside of the wall locker, so you’re hanging with your arms down the front and it just puts all that stress and strain on your arm socket and some kid broke his arm hanging there like that. And he fell down and when he broke his arm he fell off and cracked the back of his skull, he had to go into the hospital. So they were coming over and checking on that. And it was a punishment that they weren’t supposed to be doing. Other than that they seemed to be fair. They seemed to have their favorites, they would poke us out and then, well we want this guy to be the squad leader, we want this guy to be the platoon leader, regardless of what their abilities were and I’m not sure what they used of their criteria.

RV: Were you ever selected for one of those positions?

GK: Yes, I was but that was before, we had a change over. Our senior DI retired right, halfway through and how that happened I don't know. Anyway he chose me; I was the guidon. That’s the man that carries, you know guidon bearers leads the platoon and he chose me for that. And the day after he left, boom, I was demoted right there, pa-pow.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes.

RV: Why?

GK: Well, the junior DI, the one that took over, he did not like me for some reason. I mean he was constantly in my face all the time from day one and I don't know what it was, whether he didn’t like my looks or my attitude or whatever else. Yes, I was demoted right to the end of the platoon, immediately.

RV: Wow. Did these guys serve in World War II or in Korea?

GK: The senior DI did, the juniors DIs had not, not one of them.

RV: Did he talk to you about his experiences any?

GK: No, other than the senior DI, the only thing that he was talking about said basically the same thing, we’re here to teach you to keep yourselves alive, you know in combat, that’s what their primary goal is.

RV: So you were expecting infantry?
GK: That’s what I had wanted. No, I knew I was going into the Air Wing; my father would have never signed the papers to let me in.

RV: Okay, so he never did do the, he did not want you doing infantry and so you had changed your mind.

GK: Right, right. It was the only way he’d let me go into the military period. I mean I could have waited until I was eighteen probably but I tried even after I got in to get back into the infantry and they would not do it.

RV: Looking back, when you were in the field in Vietnam, looking back at your training, did this basic training help you or did teach you things that did help you once you were in country?

GK: Oh, absolutely, yes.

RV: Such as what?

GK: Well one of the things it didn’t, maybe it didn’t teach me but one of the things I did in Vietnam, I was stationed at Da Nang when we first got there, so I was in the Air Wing. We used to go up on the hangar in the evenings and whatever. So there was a little, like a iron rung ladder well at the side of the, the hangar is a big, giant Quonset hut and we used to climb up on the top of that illegally, all the officers were always against us doing that. But one day there were two sappers that had snuck on, there was a tree line behind the flight line there and a dense line that separated the base from the civilian community, and they had come through and cut through and the security had spotted them. So we had two sappers and three Marines in a firefight and we went up on the hangar to watch it and it was amazing to see it, really worked, the fire maneuver that they had taught us in basic training, where one guys lies down, or two guys lay down a field of fire, one guy moves and keeps them pinned down. With the overhead view like that, these guys were 150 yards away from us where we were watching so we had a real good overhead bird’s eye view of their work, and it was just amazing that it does work. These three Marines managed to come up and waste them, that quick, it wasn't that bad. It was interesting to watch it in action so that part worked, yes. And the other things, like I said, the basic training, more than teaching you these aspects of it is to get your attitude correct. Then when you go onto infantry, basic infantry training, that’s what everybody has to go through, that’s at Camp Pendleton, and that’s where we learned these firing
maneuver, land mines and trip wires and all this other good stuff that you have to go
through. Then they, the guys are going into infantry, they go into advanced infantry
training which I did not have to take because I was going into the Air Wing.

RV: Right, so where did you go after Pendleton?

GK: After Pendleton I went to a casual company in Memphis, Tennessee where
they put everybody while they’re waiting for their technical schools to move on and go.
So I was down at Memphis for, I don’t know, three or four months. While I was there,
there were two guys that I used to hang with, and they were both going into flight training
down at Pensacola, Florida, waiting for the next flight school to go on and they convinced
me to go into flight school. So I went in and took all the exams and got my GED at that
time and unfortunately they gave me the physical and said, “No, you’re going to need
glasses.” I’ve got poor night vision, for night flight.

RV: How did you feel?

GK: I was really upset, because these guys had convinced this was the way to go
and I said, “Yes, that’s a good idea.” So I went through all that work and all that effort at
becoming qualified and then find out I’m not physically qualified. It’s funny, the way
psychology works, but I think for a long time I hated officers because I couldn’t be one.

RV: Really?

GK: [Laughing] Yes, yes.

RV: So once you know you’re out of the cockpit, what were your options?

GK: The options were just to continue on going back to my tech school. They
were going to make me an avionics technician. They called them electrician’s mate.

RV: How did you feel about that?

GK: It was all right. I would rather have gone on to flight training, probably a
good thing that I didn’t because both of the guys that did are dead.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, both of them were killed. One of them became a helicopter and he was
on his second tour in Vietnam when he died, and the other guy became the, some kind of
a, I forget what it was, some, not O-2, I forget what they, bird dog they call it, which the
Marines with a forward air controller and he bought it.
RV: Okay. So tell me about the kind of training you had to be the electrician’s mate.

GK: It was a long school, it was a six-month school down in, it was in Jacksonville, Florida. And it was a good school, it was Navy and Marine combined. Lots of technical studies, memorizing various facts and figures and learning math and all of these things; Marine Corps, their electrician’s mate essentially took care of everything except for the radar. Anything that has an electron running through it, that’s what you took care of. The only thing you didn’t take care of was the radar; they had a separate shop for that.

RV: How adept were you at the schooling was it a problem for you academically or were you okay?

GK: No, no I ended up top of my class and got my choice of assignment.

RV: Okay, what did you choose?

GK: El Toro, California.

RV: Which was what?

GK: It’s, it was the MFA-314. It was the first Marine Corps F-4 fighter outfit, quite a unit. The F-4 was just, the Navy had got it first, then the Marine got it. We were the first Marine Corps outfit to have it. It was long before the Air Force got the F-4s, I think the Air Force didn’t get it for like two or three years. It was the F-4Bs and we had a commander that really loved to fly, and all the other people did too and we set up tons and tons of records that still stand to this day. For example I got one right here, I got it right in front of me, I thought it was really interesting, its 1,314 flight hours in a thirty day period.

RV: Wow.

GK: And they shut it off at 314 because that was the unit’s number, the VMFA-314. And we went TDY constantly; we were constantly on the go.

RV: With the F-4 squadron?

GK: Yes, with the F-4 squadron. We lived out of our sea bags, and every that we had, all the offices, commander’s office and everything just folded up and it stuck in the back of the C-130 and off we would go and our airplanes would be there.

RV: What were your specific duties?
GK: My specific duties, initially I was in the electrician’s shop and I guess it was about eight months after I was there; they were looking for some plane captains. Plane captain is the guy that straps the pilot in and he pre-flights the airplane, makes sure it’s fueled and does all these other good things. So I volunteered for that and I became a plane captain.

RV: All right, so that’s after eight months.

GL: About eight months there at El Toro, and I was there with that unit from ’62 till, I went to VMF-8-115 when we went over there to Natsed in Japan, so that was four years there.

RV: So ’66, first of ’66.

GK: Yes, very first, well very last of ’65 is when I went over there so it was yes, it was almost that.

RV: Describe some of the TDYs you went on, what were the more interesting assignments?

GK: Oh we had some great ones. Well.

RV: I know that one of them included Vietnam.

GK: Oh, yes, no. This was prior to the war; this was from ’61 though, well ’62 through, early ’65. The Vietnam War had gone on, but we hadn’t gone into there yet. But stateside we went to Fallon, Nevada, Yuma, Arizona, went down during the Cuban crisis, they flew down us, just before I get into the unit, during the Cuban crisis and they went down to Pensacola, Florida for that and so once they had done that then that was one of their favorite places to go as a bug out. If we can get down there and operational in twenty-four hours, so we did that a couple times. Then we had overseas assignments. We went to Taiwan once, we went to Okinawa once, went to Japan twice, to Korea once, and that was about, and then two aircraft carrier qualifications, floated for thirty days each on those.

RV: What was it like on the carriers?

GK: Fun, exciting, and interesting as hell to me. Its choreographed mayhem, that’s all I can say. Its just amazing the way the Navy and the flight deck operations, hangar deck operations work, just always thrills me. I mean, you know you don’t move this thing until somebody tells you to, and here you are working aircraft on the hangar
deck and moving around on top of the flight deck, you know within inches of each other, aircraft running all over the place, people running all over the place. Its just, it’s a wonder anybody survives, it really is.

RV: Tell me what you did in Thailand, was it I guess a typical TYD deployment?
GK: No, I wasn't in Thailand, I didn’t go into Thailand until after I got into the Air Force.

RV: Okay, you said Taiwan, I’m sorry.
GK: Taiwan, right.
RV: Okay, okay. Well what was your typical deployment like, what would you do. You said you’d fly over on a 141?
GK: No, it was C-130s.
RV: 130s, okay.
GK: Yes, C-130s, that the Marines used.
RV: So you’re part of the support crew, the support staff.
GK: Right, we would, one of the things that, being the VMFA-314 did. We were the first ones to prove the viability of flying long distances and refueling along the way. We were the first to Trans-Pac. That’s when they took the F-4 aircraft that flew all the way across the Pacific by themselves, to Taiwan as a matter of fact and we did it to Japan as well. They had to be refueled four times I think it was along the way. They had tankers that left from California to go halfway out and then meet them and then had tankers from Hawaii going both directions and then from Midway I guess it was, to refuel our planes. That was really hard on the pilots of course, going out like that. Then we would always leave, part of us, about half of the maintenance crews would leave on C-130s like two days before them so we would be there at the final destination, recover, repair.
RV: Okay, any noticeable repairs that need to be done on the F-4s, things that continued to malfunction or things that were really good about the aircraft that you can recall?
GK Well it’s really, the good things about the aircraft is its powerful, fast, and reliable in the air, when it is working. It doesn’t, it’s got a terrible maintenance record. When they designed the damn thing, as one guy said they suspended the bolt in mid-air
and then built the airplane around and the only thing that breaks is that bolt, so you have
to disassemble the airplane any time you want to fix it and it was really terrible for that.
Its got something like forty hours of maintenance down time for each hour of flight time,
something like that, its not very good for that. But fortunately it’s a workhorse, it really
is. I got some stories I’ll tell you later when flying in country with it, how the other
planes could absorb a lot of punishment, it would come back and keep on going.

RV: Now this is, you’re stationed at El Toro, from ’62 to, you said late ’65. What
did you know about U.S. foreign policy? Did you keep up with it and if you did, what
did you know about our involvement in Southeast Asia at the time?

GK: At that time very little. I knew that there was something hot going on over
there and that was about the extent of it. I didn’t really, like most teenagers at that time, I
just didn’t really pay much attention to it. I didn’t even, as a matter of fact, see I was in
four years in the Marines and it was my last year, it was in, I was getting ready to get out
in ’65, and I went over to what they, the unit, I forget what they call it now, it’s the last
two or three weeks that you’re in they try and turn you back into some kind of a civilized
human beings, its like a de-conditioning program that they put you through. So they sent
me to that, and I was there two day is guess and some colonel come in and says, “Okay,
all you guys that are getting ready to get out, we’re getting ready to go over to Vietnam
and we’re looking for some volunteers that will stay in” because there were a bunch of us
going out all at that one time. Because the unit had formed as new, the MFA-314 with a
new aircraft and everything and they had, almost all of us were new when we started out
four earlier, so they didn’t want to lose us all and have to go out with all new people, they
wanted some experience. So that’s when I volunteered to go ahead and stay in a bit. The
funny thing is I used to tell people that they extended me involuntary and you probably
understand why that is.

RV: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Let me ask you two questions, why were you considering
getting out of the Marine Corps?

GK: I had, that’s a really good question. I think one of the reasons was I got into a
conflict with one of the officers that we had there. It was, we had been flying forever,
we’d just come back off TDY and I needed a haircut. I hadn’t had a haircut in about
three weeks, and the Marines Corps they’re always really, you have to be sharp looking
all the time, right. You’ve got to keep your hair buzzed, and I just didn’t have time to do
it and this officer had saw me on the flight line and then I had to have a haircut by such
and such a time. But anyway, what had happened is another, the commander as a matter
of fact got on me, gave me different orders, conflicting and I ended up running around in
circles all day and never got my haircut. This guy, he’s going to bust me. So he has a
full, what they call a junk on the bunk inspection for me, he makes me lay out all my
equipment on my mac that evening, open up my locker and all of that. And they had a
U.S. government ink pen in my locker, it says U.S. government on the side of it and they
court martialed me, or didn’t court martial me, gave me an Article Fifteen for having
unauthorized government property. So I got busted a rank and all that, it was fabrication,
really the whole thing was a big set up because this guy was, I mean he was really nuts.
He ended up literally getting kicked out on a section eight.
RV: Oh, really?
GK: Yes, yes.
RV: So what rank?
GK: I got reinstated, my rank reinstated about six or seven months later.
RV: Okay, okay. So the other question was, why did you volunteer to stay in and
go into a war zone?
GK: Well that was why I was going to get out is because of that; I didn’t want to
deal with officers like that. But then I decided to stay in. A friend of mine happened to
be there on the day when they came in and said they needed volunteers to stay in. He
talked to me, he says “Come on, Jerry, it’ll be fun.” He says, “What did you join for?”
He says, “To fight a war wasn’t it?” I said, “Yes, might as well.” And that’s true, so I
might as well go see what this is all about.
RV: Okay, what did you know about Vietnam at the time?
GK: Nada, nothing.
RV: Yes.
GK: Yes, I didn’t, other than the fact that I knew that it was, like everybody else
did, this is where we’re going to stop the spread of communism.
RV: Okay, okay. I mean did you think that was a worthwhile objective at the
time, the domino theory, all that stuff?
GK: Well, you know we were inundated with that constantly. I mean we were raised on that, to stopping the spread of communism. We had all heard about the domino effect and all that, so I bought into it, yes. I was a stupid kid.

RV: So tell me what you did then when you re-enlisted or you extended, where did you go?

GK: Well, the VMFA-314, we hopped on a ship, I think it was, I forget what the hell it was, Valley Forge, that was what it was, and it’s a helicopter carrier, helicopter, for the 3rd Marines, and they packed us and an A-4 squadron on board; so we were just packed to the gills with airplanes and people and shipped us over to Japan. We got there, and the VMFA-314 was supposed to go to Chu Lai, but we flew one of our planes down there and all I had was PSP, that’s perforated steel platform. They hadn’t gotten a permanent runway in built down there yet. We had never attempted to land on their foreign perforated steel platform. So they chose my airplane of all to send down there and see if we could land. They had the arresting gear and everything set up to stop these guys on stuff, but it’s so slippery. The F-4 is so heavy and comes in so hot when it landed it just skewed sideways and ripped the damn landing gear off my airplane, with the tail hook and one gear went off. So they decided, well we’re not going to send them to Chu Lai right away; we’ll wait for the runway to be built. So they sent us to Da Nang. And I went to Da Nang for about three weeks and they decided, well here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to rotate squadrons in and out and General Green or Shupe, I forget which was the commandant at the time; anyway he said he wanted all the Marines to get some time in Vietnam, and get some combat time. And in theory I think it was a good idea, so they split the squadron. He says, “Okay, half of you guys are going to stay here, and half of you are going to go to the MFA-115 and we’re going to take half the guys from 115 and bring them down here.” And that way we’ll get a, they get a six-month rotation periods. So you’ll never more than half of the people in country are new. You won’t have an entirely new outfit and so that’s what they did. So they sent me back up to Japan, where VMFA-115 was at the time and so I went into there with MFA-115.

RV: How long was your tour supposed to be here?

GK: It was supposed to be thirteen months, that’s what the standard tour was. Of course I was only going to be there for twelve because I would have gotten out, I only
extended for a year. It was right at the end of my extension when I went over. But, so I
never did actually spend, like I said I was there about three weeks or so before they sent
me to 115, and then I was back up in Japan for almost five months I guess before we
went back down.

RV: Okay. Tell me about those three weeks; what were your initial impressions
of Vietnam?

GK: Well when I first got there, when we first got there, it was, one runway, one
taxiway, one big Quonset hut for a hangar, a bunch of tents and foxholes that used to
cave in because we were digging in sand. We didn’t even have any sandbags at the time;
we’re waiting for those to come in. They made us dig foxholes and stuff for a defensive
perimeter, and if it rained they’d just cave in. So it was rather primitive at the time, but
we had done that before in different exercises, so we were kind of used to it. Long hours,
the entire time that I was in country, in Vietnam, with both outfits I just was constantly
work, I don’t even remember sleeping, I really.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, I don’t think I slept, maybe. I don’t even remember having a dream or
anything. At one point while in VMC-115, after I’d gone back in country, there was one
of those big battles going on, and I’m not sure what it was, but we went for twenty-one
days without even leaving the flight line, we ate C-rations.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, twenty-one days straight. We hot fuelled, sending airplanes out
constantly.

RV: So this three weeks, did you, what kind of duties did you perform? Were you
guys just kind of waiting around to see what would happen?

GK: Oh no, no we were flying missions, constantly. We flew missions of our
fellows who had close air, and they also flew some missions clear up into Hanoi. At that
time that Rolling Thunder was going on, they hadn't stopped the bombing, and they
participated in that. So they, one of the things that they were doing, I was going up into
the Tonkin Gulf, and trying to hit the shipping, so that was one of the major things that
our pilots did.

RV: Okay. What were your specific duties, what did you do?
GK: I was a plane captain, which is refueling airplanes, loading, supervising the
loading of the bombs and all that, and helping them, pre-flighting the aircraft, changing
the tires, doing all of the normal functions.

RV: Okay, how many people did have under you?

GK: I didn’t. At that time I was just a plane captain, I got an assistant so I got one
guy under me I guess you could say, but we were more. We worked in tandem, we didn’t
really, I wasn’t really in charge, you know.

RV: Right, right.

GK: If anything happened I guess would be the one to be blamed, but we just
worked as a team essentially.

RV: What kind of relationship did you have with the pilots?

GK: Good. Most of the pilots, like me they would be friendly and bored. Some of
the pilots were rather reserved. Of course they’re worried about their mission and things
that are going on so they wouldn’t say much to me. They would kind of stay out of your
way and get a little snappy and snippish, but most of them were pretty friendly and nice
guys.

RV: Okay, so when you rotated back to Japan, where were you stationed there?

GK: It was at Aksugi, at that time, or was it Ether Cooney, I forget, I keep getting
those two confused. It was a, it must have been, I think I put it down on the list. I went
back and had to do some research, you know this had been a long time ago.

RV: Yes, sir.

GK: A Lot of stuff went on there, let’s see where was that. I think it was Aksugi.

Yes, Aksugi, Japan.

RV: Okay, did you continue with your plane captain duties there?

GK: Yes, that’s what I did.

RV: And where were you guys hitting, what targets?

GK: Well, when we were there at Aksugi all we were doing was they were just
doing the training flights and so there wasn’t anything going on. They did some, went
out and landed on the carriers and stuff. The pilots have to maintain their carrier
qualifications but rather than send the entire unit out, there were enough aircraft carriers,
battle groups over there that they would always manage to go out and get their monthly
qualifications done that way, without sending the entire unit out.

RV: How many men were in your unit actually, in the 115?
GK: Oh, geez, I don’t know, several hundred.
RV: Okay, so how long, you were there for five months before you rotated back
to Vietnam?
GK: Yes.
RV: Okay, and where did you go back?
GK: I went right back to Da Nang, right to the same place I was before, as a
matter of fact I slept in the same tent, they just stuck a different sign in front of it.
RV: Really?
GK: Yes.
RV: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about the base there, and your living
quarters and kind of base life?
GK: Well, when we first got there, when I was with VMFA-314, like I said it was
just nothing but tents on dirt ground. By the time I went back with 115, they managed to
scrounge some plywood. The Air Force had started to come in and they were building
revetments and getting prepared to bring the aircraft and stuff in, so there was a lot of
construction materials that we managed to scrounge from them. I remember one day it
was funny as hell, they had brought in a whole bunch of stacks and stacks of plywood,
and the floor in my tent that I was living in, some of the plywood had started to
delaminate and come apart because of the, you know constant rain and stuff during the
winter season of monsoon. And so we got in a six by, and a bunch of us, our lieutenant
with us, and went driving up to the Air Force compound gate and says we’re here to
requisition that stack of plywood over there, here’s the paperwork for it, and while a guy
was looking at the paperwork we went over and stuck it on the truck and beat a hasty
retreat, so thanks to the Air Force we had a nice new floor in our tent.
RV: Okay. How many men were in your test with you?
GK: Oh, let’s see, I have to count them up. That’s four and then, must have been
about fourteen, twelve or fourteen.
RV: Okay, and were these all the guys that served in the support, were you housed separately from the pilots or?

GK: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Officer country is a different part of the base.

RV: Right, right okay. How were relations inside the tent, how did you get along with everyone else?

GK: Nobody ever really spent that much time in the tent, and if you did you were either tired and sound asleep, so you never did much anyway. There were several tents that had poker tables in them. There were these constant non-stop games, and I knew where those were and that’s where I spent a lot of my time if I had any off time, playing poker.

RV: Okay. What did you do for entertainment, besides play poker?

GK: Yes, that was essentially it. Movies, whenever they had movies. They had an outdoor theater right in the middle of the tent area where all the support crews lived and it was just nothing but actually a big sheet between a couple of posts and little shacks sitting out there to protect it from the rain. We used to sit out in the rain, matter of fact the movie would be better in the rain because once the screen became wet it got a little shinier and you could see the picture better.

RV: Okay. How much contact did you have with home?

GK: Probably a letter a month, that was about it.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, not a great deal. I got a couple of care packages when I was there, I got one on Christmas time and one that was Easter or something like that.

RV: Did you ever make any MARS calls home?

GK: I didn’t until I was getting ready to leave. I made a MARS call to let them know I was coming back.

RV: Okay, okay. So tell me what a typical day would be like for you there at Da Nang?

GK: Well, it depended on whether we had been flying, like during that twenty-one day period it was just a constant day, it was just, but if we did have some time off which wasn’t often – we worked twelve hours shifts generally, if we weren’t on the twenty-four hour thing. You’d get up and go down to the wash area which was I don’t
know, probably several hundred yards from where I lived. They had a little shower area
set up there and you could take a shower and then you would get dressed, hop on the,
either a six-by which we had for the crew chiefs because oftentimes we had to be there
before everybody else, we’d hop on that, travel around the base. The living quarters were
on one side of the runway and the aircraft and the hangars and everything were on the
other side, and then we’d have to drive around the end of the runway and get over. Then
we’d get out and collect our airplanes, we used to disperse the aircraft at night. We didn’t
have revetments; the Marines didn’t anyway. The Air Force built some of theirs, but our
aircraft were just lined up facing each other in two rows: nine airplanes on a side, well
usually probably about eight because you’d have a couple in the hangar. We used to
disperse them at night to keep them from being subject to sappers coming in, blowing
them all up. They would only be able to get one or two. So we used to take them and tow
them out different places around the runway, wherever you could to hide them. So we’d
collect them all, bring them back and get them all ready to fly, and off they would go
usually. Most of the flying that we did was daylight. We did have, during that twenty-one
day period it was a constant round the thing, around the clock, but most of the missions
were daylight missions.

RV: When you said you prepped the airplane, got it ready to fly, what would you
do?

GK: All right, well bring them in, unbuckle them, you would do your pre-flight
which is checking the aircraft over, makes sure there’s no loose screws, flicked metal,
parts falling off what not, wash the canopy, you’d use a Plexiglas cleaner to make sure
the pilot could see through it. Get all the straps and everything in the right order so when
the pilot climbs in you can get him strapped in properly. You know, kick the tires and
light the fires.

RV: Okay. So you would be on twelve hours and off twelve basically.

GK: Yes essentially, that was what the normal routine was, and that would be six
days a week, they used to try and give us one day off a week but that didn’t happen often.
RV: Those are long hours.

GK: That’s pretty much what aircraft operations do. I did that a lot when I was in
the Air Force too, twelve hour shifts, six days a week.
RV: Okay, so when you would get an aircraft ready to go, they would taxi and take off and you would just switch to the next one, kind of do it in that sense or would you try to prep a bunch before?

GK: Oh, yes we would always try and get the aircraft ready to fly on a moment’s notice, whether you were scheduled to fly or not, the aircraft would be ready, so that was the thing that you did. Of course you have aircraft that are broke that needed special attention, what not, so if you had a radar out or some kind of glitch like that you’d have the people out there working on it. But the object of course of the game was to keep all the aircraft operationally ready at all times and that’s what we attempted to do obviously but can’t do it.

RV: Right, right. What kind of armament would the F-4, would you put on the F-4?

GK: Well, it depended on what the mission was, anything from nape to hard bombs, five hundred pounders, even one time we had a ten thousand pound blockbuster, some daisy cutters on occasion, so it just depended on what the mission was. But towards, we used a lot of nape. There was, especially in close air, that’s one of the favorite, get the bad guys off your ass, throw a bunch of fire between you and him.

RV: How many sorties would you guys put out a day?

GK: It depended on what was going on. Some days we might only throw up three or four, next day every aircraft might fly six times.

RV: Okay. And you said that your relationship with the pilots stayed fairly well?

GK: Yes, the pilots liked the crew chiefs for the most part I think. We got into a working relationship, its funny. Pilots tend to think they own the world and in a good sense they do, you know once they’re in that aircraft and off doing their business. They’re in charge but they like to be in charge when they’re on the ground too and sometimes that’s dangerous. When you got people, when you fire up the aircraft and the people and the rio, the guy in the back, they’re in there and you have to run through a hot check on his aircraft before he can fly, check the whole control surfaces, made sure there’s no fuel leaks, hydraulic leaks and all this stuff. And the airplane’s sitting static on the ground is a lot different than an airplane running hot. So they are supposed to follow your orders precisely, they’re not supposed to move a control stick or anything unless
you give them the hand signal to do so – everything was done by hand signals from the
ground, so the aircraft, the crew chief is the one that’s supposed to be in charge until that
airplane taxis out, and some of the pilots didn’t quite understand that. We had one crew
chief, he was a big guy, he was probably six-six, probably weighed 245, you know Big
John, and we had one pilot one day who decided he was going to wash out his controls,
all right that’s when he takes the control stick and they move it in a circular motion, so all
the control surfaces move around. And they feel for any hitches in there is what they’re
doing, they can’t see what they’re doing, they’re sitting clear up in front of all these
control surface, all he’s doing is checking for the feel. Well this, Big John, he was out
underneath the wing when it happened and the aileron come down and bashed him in the
back of the head, knocked him down to his knees. Well that kind of upset him, so he just
jumps up on the wing, crawls up around the back, comes over, reaches in and grabs the
pilot by his, they’re hooked in with the shoulder harnesses, and he just grabbed his
shoulder harness, unsnaps him and drags him out of the airplane. It was funny, it was
funny. This pilot just turned white as shale, nobody felt for him.

RV: What did he do with him?

GK: Well the commander had to come out of course all this thing later and they
had a big inquiry about what went on. Well fortunately big John had some witnesses. I
was one of them too, we told them what happened. The pilots sitting there washing his
controls out, bashing him in the head. You can’t do that stuff; you’re supposed to obey.
So they wrote it up, well he was just temporarily deranged from the blow on his head.
Nothing happened and the pilot subsequently never did that again.

RV: Okay, he learned his lesson.

GK: He learned his lesson, yes.

RV: Okay so tell me about chow, would you guys take your lunch break or would
you eat there on the line or what?

GK: Well I preferred C-rations; yes we used to eat on the line mostly. They did
have a chow hall but they served a whole lot of green eggs and World War II hot dogs,
which were green too. It was terrible chow in the chow hall, just atrocious. There were
two times that I recall that we had reasonably decent chow, that was when John Wayne
came it visit and when Ann Margret came to visit.
RV: Tell me about that.

GK: Well, its, you know celebrities coming over with USO tours. I never got to, I
saw John Wayne from a distance, I never got anywhere near Ann Margret. We were out
busy, working. But they put on the feed. I think it was because they got lots of reporters
and what not following them so they want to show how well they treat the troops, right?
RV: Right.
GK: So that’s the day you get a feed. So we used to like celebrities coming simply
so we’d get some good chow.
RV: Did you look at John Wayne and say, “Hey, that’s, you’re the reason why
I’m here. You’re the reason why I joined the military?”
GK: I thought about that, I really did. It was the truth, I think it really was.
RV: Tell me about Ann Margret when she visited.
GK: Well I never got, like I said, I never got to see her. A bunch of the guys did
and I’m not going to say, I can’t say those jokes, people don’t need to be listening to
those.
RV: You could sanitize them.
GK: Well, one of them I thought, one of my friends said, who did get to go up
and see her, he says “Man, that woman, she doesn’t shit she’s so damn good looking.”
He says, “Can you imagine her sitting on the pot? No way!”
RV: Okay, did you ever get to see any of the USO shows?
GK: No, yes I take that back, I did too, I did too. I saw Arthur Godfrey, I don’t
know whether you recall him or not or?
RV: Yes.
GK: Okay. Yes he was over there with Jerry Colona and I forget, he had a couple
other people with him and I got to see that, about an hour show. Yes, it was the first one
I saw.
RV: Was it there at Da Nang?
GK: Yes, it was at Da Nang.
RV: Okay, did you ever take any R & Rs?
GK: No.
RV: Was that by choice?
GK: Yes, I think it was probably not by choice because my split, because splitting up, going from 314 and then to 115, so I wasn’t really in country long enough, I guess I was the last one, I could have taken, because I was in there, you had to be there six months minimum before you could take an R & R and I guess I was there about six months with 115, but I never did I was just getting ready to go home.

RV: Right. Did you have enough supplies there, while you were working, did you feel like you were ever undersupplied?

GK: No, we had plenty of supplies, other than like I said the chow was terrible, if it wasn’t for C-rations and our ability to get them together. We used to get all the guys together and cook up our own chow, our own meal with the C-rations. We had a few good recipes that we could go with.

RV: What were your favorite C-rations?

GK: I loved the fruitcake.

RV: Yes?

GK: Yes, I really did, I still like that. I get a hungry pang for that, other than that I, oh they had a potted ham that wasn’t too bad sometimes. Some of the stuff was really terrible. I hated that lima bean thing they had, ham and lima beans but most of it was pretty good. We would make some puddings and stuff, they used to have like a biscuit in there, it was a cracker, probably hardtack is what they called it in the old days, but if you take that and you soak it, you can take some of the powdered cream that came for the coffee and you can mix that in with it and if you could get any kind of dried fruit or anything like that put in there. We used to bake it in the helmet and.

RV: Bake it in a helmet?

GK: Yes. We used to take C-4 and light it and if you light it, it burns really hot and it makes a nice little fire, build a little stand to sit it under a helmet and then we could actually bake things or cook things right inside of the helmet.

RV: And you would do this out on the flight line while you were working?

GK: Yes.

RV: Okay, and whose helmet would you use? Would you rotate or did you find a used one or?
GK: No, well, we never really wore the helmets much, just anybody that had one available. I just to use mine all the time, I used to be the baker.

RV: Okay. Did you ever sense any tension between kind of the lifers and those who were drafted or those who were not in for the long haul in the military?

GK: Not in the Marines. In the Marines everybody, I never saw that. Everybody, of course I think we were all volunteers at that time. I don't think we had any draftees.

RV: Yes, by '66, yes. Any discussion or incidents of fragging, anything like that?

GK: No. Morale was good. During the '65, '66 era while I was there. We were going to kick ass. We were there doing our duty and doing it well. It was the entire atmosphere was different at that time. We were there doing the duty and people were supporting us, the newspapers, everybody was supporting us. The war protestors hadn’t gotten the public eye at that time yet.

RV: Right.

RV: Why don’t we talk a little bit about more when you guys finished your daytime duties out there on the flight line, what would you do when you would go back to your tent, you said you would crash and go to sleep or would you go off and play poker or what?

GK: I’d usually play poker. One thing that was sort of interesting. When you’re on the flight line working constantly like that, nobody ever said anything, if there was nothing going on you happened to take a nap, unlike normal. So in a wartime situation like that. So oftentimes we just, I’d stay up and play poker until it was time to go to work again and then headed into work and then just catch catnaps in between flights and whatever.

RV: And you felt pretty sharp during the day when you could do that?

GK: Oh, yes. Yes, when you’re young and full of piss and vinegar you can do a just about anything. But like I said I don’t, it turns into kind of a never-ending blur.

RV: It sounds like it.

GK: Yes.

RV: What kind of contact did you guys have with women, were they available, was it just nurses or what?
GK: I never saw, I take that back, I saw two roundeyes the entire time that I was in Da Nang. That was two stewardesses on an airline that had come through; they were at that time using contract civilian aircraft to fly troops in and out. They had a plane that had some mechanical malfunction or something and they turned the flight crews and a couple of the stewardesses were brave enough to walk down our flight line. So we saw them and that was it. Other than that, the only other women that we would see would be local Vietnamese. At that time there weren’t very many Vietnamese themselves working on the base. The base was really primitive when I first got there, it was dog patch, with a little town, a little village that was on the, I guess northwest side of the base, not too far from where our tent area was, but that was off limits ninety percent of the time. When it was okay to go out there we would go on out and there were not like any other GI town, bar after bar after bar, whorehouse after whorehouse and that’s where you would find your women.

RV: Why was it off limits ninety percent of the time?

GK: Well, they used to always say it belonged to Uncle Sam during the day and Charlie at night, and so there were oftentimes the bad guys out in there and they didn’t want us going out and giving away secrets I would imagine. There were more spies than there were people with guns out there. When we did go down we had to be armed ourselves, they wouldn’t let us go off without our arms. It’s funny, you’d be sitting around like a bunch of guys in the Old West, your rifle in your lap or your pistol strapped to your hip drinking beer, petting the women.

RV: What was that town like, I mean was it very, very small?

GK: Oh, yes it was just like one street, yes.

RV: Okay.

GK: Yes, with bars up and down one side, yes it was very primitive. The entire country, that’s one thing that was probably a shock to me. At that time, of course we weren’t anywhere near any of the big cities. Da Nang itself of course was a relatively big city and if you went into Da Nang proper it wasn't so bad and then you had, what we would call permanent structures. Most of their villages and stuff were grass huts and it was very alien to us, no electrification or water or anything like that. That was really
strange to us. That was one of the things we did when I was first there with 314 was to
go out and provide power and water to some of the surrounding villages.

RV: In those first three weeks you were there?

GK: Yes, that’s, I think, I’m pretty sure that they continued that for actually
months when I first got there. Of course one of the big things was the Vietnamization or
not, the pacification I guess in the local countryside, and one of the things was, is to go in
and provide some of the infrastructure that was sorely lacking. So when I was there, the
first three weeks I was there, when we weren’t flying airplane, which wasn’t all that
much, we didn’t have that many missions, we were out, I pounded wells, I used to drive
pike into the ground, I used to do it by hand. The water table is pretty high there, so you
don’t have to go down very deep, maybe sixteen feet before you hit water. But most of
the people had been getting their water I guess for millennia out of the klongs and so we
went in and provided them with some fresh well water. We also went in and provided
electrification, power generators and stuff like that for various villages.

RV: How did they react to you?

GK: Friendly when we first got there.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, the people were actually glad to see us, and contrary to everything you
always hear that they hated us and didn’t want us around and all that. That’s a bunch of
bullshit. When I was there initially, the people were really glad to have us. Of course we
had money to spend, to spread around. We were helping them, we built a school, our unit
did in Da Nang.

RV: Like a one-room schoolhouse shanty?

GK: No, it was actually a big school and guys went in and I saw pictures of it, like
I said I was out pounding wells, but some of the guys that had done it, they went in and
laid big blocks and all this, it was like six room structure, big one, big school.

RV: So the civilians were relatively open to you?

GK: Yes, and the military, you know the South Vietnamese military was there in
Da Nang as well, they flew the T-28s out of there. The ARVN was also there, anti-
aircraft sites all the way around and they really were enthused and glad to see us, to be
there to help them. Contrary to popular belief, these people did not want to be
communists. They were a free and open society and they wanted to remain so, especially
the guys that were in the military. They had a, they weren’t conscripting as heavily then I
don’t think as they did later. Most of the guys that were in that were just like us, they had
joined for whatever reason you know.

RV: Did you ever work intimately with them at all or?

GK: Not directly, I did on occasion, we worked with them. They would come
over and ask for technical advice and equipment to borrow and what not, because we
were better supplied than they were. So I got involved with a few of their technical
people that way. One of the people that I got to know more than anybody was an artillery
sergeant, a guy that ran, he was in charge of an anti-aircraft battery, which was probably
fifty or sixty yards from where our flight line tent was, where we worked. So we used to
go, it was funny because all of their units that were there, they had their families with
them.

RV: Oh, really?

GK: Yes, they lived right outside where their gun was at; it was embanked, in
places. Surrounded, and they lived right outside of that emplacement with their kids and
their wives and all that, their pigs and their goats and all that. But we used to, I got to
become relatively friendly with this guy. He spoke some English, he was teaching me a
little bit of Vietnamese and all of that and from what he was telling me everybody, they
were really glad we were there. They invited us over, for food and chow and all these
other things.

RV: Did you associate with his family at all?

GK: Yes, I met his wife and his kids and all of that.

RV: How did the kids react to you?

GK: Oh, they were fun just like any other kids. Yes, once they get to know you,
they’re a little shy at first, just like puppies and then pretty soon they’re crawling over
you, pulling your hair. They were always fascinated with the hair on our arms, because
they were relatively hair free; they were slim and light people. The kids would always
come up and they just loved to rub the hair on your arm. I remember them doing that.

RV: How much was there to the myth or the truth that it was very difficult to trust
the Vietnamese civilians particularly at night, but just in general?
GK: Well, you know I think that most of that was propaganda instilled into us, “You can’t trust them; they’re the enemy.” You don’t know them and there’s a lot of truth to that. You don’t know what this person’s real political beliefs are, you know, you don’t know what their real point of view is, they could be lying to you, they could be a spy and some of them probably were. But for the most part I trusted them. I thought that they were no different than any other people in the world, you know? They had their way of doing things but it wasn’t all that much different when you go in the house.

RV: You said that you could tell that they wanted to be communist free, how could you tell that?

GK: They used to tell you that, they didn’t want to; you know they wanted to live close to an American dream, if you will. They wanted to be free; they wanted to make their own decisions, their own choices in life. They didn't want anybody directing them to do this and that. A lot of these people were fairly well educated. Some of them, for example the sergeant that I was with, he had been to university, so he was world-wise, you know and I’m sure that their government did no different than ours. They go to school and they learn the difference and they’re indoctrinated into their political system as we are. And at that time that political system was free for them, you know, freedom.

RV: How much did you sense that they were aware of the world context of which the Vietnam War kind of fell into, this Cold War context? Did they have a grip on that or, I guess understanding why you were there?

GK: Yes. I never got into that deep political conversation with anybody other than that sergeant, but his point of views was yes, he understood the domino theory and you have to stop it someplace and he said, “This is it.” He said, “This is our doorstep, we have to stop it.” That’s what he believed and he believed that fervently.

RV: Okay, did you ever get into Da Nang city proper?

GK: Yes, twice.

RV: What was that like?

GK: Well, compared to the villages that were around there it was a hell of a lot better. They had permanent structures, you know the French had great influence there in the architecture and all that so you could see that, but still the infrastructure was rather crude and elementary, you know open binge ditches and all that rather than sewer
systems. Oftentimes you’d go into a place that had not running water and the binge-o
ditch out in the back and all of that, so it was kind of a mix, half civilized and half stone
age.

RV: Okay, what kind of weapons did you guys carry or have with you?

GK: At that time we had M-14s. They changed, the Marines changed to M-16s
just about the time I was leaving. The M-14 was a big botch. I hated that sucking rifle
ever since the day they gave it to me. I like the M-1, but that M-14 of mine just used to
jam constantly.

RV: And when did you have opportunity to fire it in country?

GK: In country, we, there was a rifle range that we had to go qualify on right
outside the base we shot at. So we fired every month but firing it in anger, never did.

RV: Okay, was there any weapon that you wish you did have, but did not have?

GK: I’d rather have my old M-1 back, for reliability. I carried that M-1 for three
or four years. I got the M-14 just before we went over to Vietnam, and then like I said
fortunately it was only in country and active for about a year. The Marines hated it. And
then they went to the M-16, which wasn’t much better at that time but it improved.

RV: What was your first experience with any kind of combat, or if you did
experience that?

GK: Well, it was at Da Nang. You can’t really call it combat because its kind of a
one-sided thing, they used to lob mortars in all the time. They would sneak around the
base and throw in a few mortars and then they’d pack up their shit and go on. And
snipers. The end of the runway, there was a hill out there, not far from Monkey
Mountain, but they used to infiltrate down and they’d set up their on that hill and then
shoot at the guys going around the end of the runway. We used to have; they had the
cattle cars, remember I told you about the six by I used to take to work. Well if I didn’t
have to get to work early in the morning or something, I used to, they had a cattle car that
used to run every half hour back and forth between the troop area and the flight line. And
its just a, called it a cattle car because it looks like one. Its just, you got a big truck
pulling, its got benches inside and just walls. I’m sitting there and I used to be a reader,
and I’m reading along and all of a sudden I hear this loud clap, you know pow and got
this light shining down on my book that I’m reading and I look up right over my left
shoulder there’s a hole, just missed me probably by three or four inches. But they used to shoot at those things, trying to get guys, very seldom hit anybody, but once in a while they would. And then like I said they had sappers, they came and they kept trying to blow up, there used to be a fuel line that ran from the ships and into the fuel bladder so they used to have big, they’re like big balloons, big rubber bladders and the ships would come in and unload the aircraft fuel and it would pump up through that pipeline into those big fuel bladders and they were constantly trying to get some kind of charge on that and blow that line up.

RV: Were they ever successful?

GK: No, not while I was there. I think they got it once but not while I was there. They attempted several times, one night while I was on guard duty we used to, Marine aircraft units, the one I have to, they always have to supply their own guard, at the perimeter so for thirty days out of a year you have to go on guard duty and while I was there, I did it, and while I was on there they attempted one night and it wasn’t on my post but it was downwind. Two guys came in and they traced them back, I guess these suckers; here’s how persistent they are. It took them almost three days, that’s what they estimate, for them to creep and crawl across this whole open field area to get to that pipeline, and unfortunately they tripped a trip flare that was near there, got wasted but they went back out, they brought in the G-2 intelligence folks to see what it was. They claim by looking at their clothing and their haircuts and all this they could identify where they came from and they were supposedly from the North, they were hard core North Vietnamese that had come down and they made sappers and to die.

RV: Tell me about guard duty, what would you do?

GK: Sit and watch. There used to be two of us in a hole and we would supposedly try and keep each other awake, oftentimes we’d take turns sleeping which you’re not supposed to do, but and oftentimes we wouldn’t, we would stay awake all night long. We never had, the posts weren’t manned during the daylight hours, they just have a roving patrol that would go around during daylight hours, but during the dark hours we would be in the bunker and we had our specific field of fire and that’s what we were supposed to watch for. And you’d sit there, and its really strange, you know pretty soon you get to see things in the dark.
RV: Yes. How would you describe the nighttime versus the daytime?
GK: Depending on what you were doing, I mean if I was in the guard that was probably the scariest time because you know that they’re going to try to sneak in and do their dirty deeds, so you’re always a little more apprehensive than you are during the day time. I always felt more comfortable sleeping in the day then I did at night, maybe that’s one of the reasons I stayed up and played poker all night.
RV: Okay. How would you gauge the enemy, what were your general impressions?
GK: Persevering little fucks, I’ll give them that. Yes, they wouldn’t give up. They, the ones that I saw of course were, I only saw four of the enemy and they were all dead by the time I saw them, other than the two guys I told you about with the firefight, the fire maneuvers. I saw them alive for a while but I saw them dead close up afterwards, but they were rather inept as far as their trying to become sappers or throwing in mortar rounds. All the time I was there, when the mortar rounds, we got mortared probably, oh I don’t know, maybe half a dozen times while I was there, the two times. They never hit anything except they hit the hospital once and they hit a supply ship once and the rest of the rounds would go off in the middle of nowhere and never hit anything. They weren’t set up. They’d just come in, set up their mortar and throw in the rounds and go on their way without really aiming at anything I think, this kind of terror tactics I suppose you would call. But you learned really quickly, because they would usually throw in about four to five rounds and that was it, then they would move, they would scoot, so you would learn. The first two rounds, they used to try and do them randomly, essentially I imagine they just drop a round down the tube and then just drop another one without re-aiming the tube and when you do that, each round tends to get, because the way the mortar works, kicking it back, each round tends to move fifteen, twenty yards back from where the first one hit. So if you see where the first one hit you know if they’re coming at you or going away from you. So, of course when the first one hits you don’t have to, if it hasn’t got you, you’re okay. We learned that. Some of the new guys, I remember we had a new lieutenant that came in right toward the end and they started throwing some rounds and the first two rounds, one, first round hit and everybody hits the deck and then I peek up to see where the second round is and they started going away so I just stood up and
went back around my business. Well, this lieutenant, he’s jumping up and down, screaming and yelling at me, “Hey, you get down.” “Jesus man, they’re going the other way, I’m not going to get hurt.”

RV: Were you ever wounded at all?

GK: I got shot in the ass, it was funny. My friend and I were both, we were changing the nose tire on an aircraft and it was on the hill I was telling you about where the snipers used to sit and we were probably four hundred yards further back from the end of the runway, more than that, probably five hundred yards back from that, so he’s shooting a hell of a long way. But anyway we were out changing, and all of a sudden my friend sat down, he’s working on the jack on the front of the aircraft and all of a sudden he sat down with a big thump and blood started trickling down his forehead and I said, “What the hell?” and just about that time, kabamm, I hit the deck and his damn rounds hit me in the right leg, right up near the buttocks, right in the crease, but it had hit the runway or the taxiway first, so it was basically a spent round. It went in sideways and it put a big-ass welt on my leg and what hurt the most is my knee, when it hit me it knocked me down and hit my knee on the concrete there, my knee was sore as hell, it was for years. It still hurts and aches once in a while but it never even broke the skin. My friend, it had put a crease directly across his forehead so he had a big red welt, but he was okay.

RV: Did you guys get Purple Hearts?

GK: He got a Purple Heart, I didn’t, because it didn’t break the skin on mine, just a big-ass bruise on me.

RV: Okay, what were your experiences with death over there while you were in country?

GK: With death?

RV: Yes.

GK: Well I saw those four Vietnamese die and the other people that I saw die, which were probably even more horrifying than watching the enemy killed was I saw a guy get run over by a tug. He stepped off the airplane, his first day in Vietnam, stepped off the airplane, walked right in front of a tug which the guy was driving backwards and wasn’t watching where he was going and just peeled him like a grape.

RV: What’s a tug?
GK: A tug is a big unit that they use to pull the aircraft around.
RV: Okay.
GK: And, so he died from that. The other one I saw three aircraft go in, I saw an F-105 hit what they call the wheel shack. There’s a shack on the end of the runway, some guys is supposed to be checking with a pair of binoculars making sure that the aircraft have their tires down, or anyhow, gear down before they land. Anyway, the F-105 came in and clipped that, killed the pilot on that. I saw a C-147 go in on takeoff, it was taking off, there were seven guys on board from what I understand later, but he stalled out on takeoff and when he stalled the wing came over on that side and it came down and hit nose first, killed all those guys. So basically it was a lot of accidents, where more guys were killed than in actual combat that I saw.

RV: Did you ever work with troops from other countries, the South Koreans or the Australians?
GK: Yes, there was the South Korean, there was a South Korean unit that came through and we talked to those guys. I never really worked with them much. There was an Australian unit, helicopter unit down the street from us and we used to buddy with them a little bit, crazy folks.

RV: What were your impression of the Australians?
GK: Crazy. Yes, I thought the Americans were crazy; these guys were really something else. Nothing to them, arrogant and think they could control the world.

RV: How about the South Koreans?
GK: They were good, I mean, the South Koreans were really disciplined, you’ve got to give them that. They, well, they were, because I didn’t speak Korean or anything at that time I didn’t associate with them and all that closely. Of course there were a few of them that spoke some English and all of that, but they were a little bit more, even more disciplined than I think the Marines were.

RV: Okay, you mentioned that you did a lot of reading there, was that normal for you?
GK: Oh, yes I’ve always been a reader ever since I started to going to the library instead of school. Yes, I always had a book in my pocket, plus in the military you’ve always heard this hurry up and wait, right. So there’s always a lot of waiting, so I’ve
always had a paperback book in my pocket wherever I got and in the military you’ll always find them at the community centers or wherever you go, at the airports and any place, transit point. There’s always a paperback exchange. So you get done with yours and you toss it on the shelf and grab another one, and off you go.

RV: Do you remember what you read in country?

GK: The last book I read was, let’s see, it was Ayn Rand, I forget which one, *The Fountainhead* I think was the last one I was reading when I left there.

RV: As far as entertainment and things like that, tell me about the drug and alcohol use that you witnessed.

GK: Yes, at that time no marijuana at all. I don’t recall anybody ever smoking grass. I’m sure it was probably available but nobody that I knew and I never did use any of that. We had two kids that got strung out on heroin, both of them were New York kids and had experienced it before they ever came into the Marines I guess, and they both got strung out and they both ended up getting busted out. And other than that, alcohol was a big thing, everybody was drinking beer. They used to have this terrible goddamn beer called Black Label and they used to ship that over there all the time, they had mountains of it and it was the most awful stuff. You drink two cans of that and you puke for the day. Never could get any hard liquor. The officers had some, they used to fly it in whenever somebody would have to go someplace, they’d always bring back, they had a little baggage pot, looks like a little drop tank on the wing of the aircraft and they would have that packed full of booze but that was officer stuff. I don’t think I ever had a drink of hard liquor other than downtown and that was usually the crappy stuff with formaldehyde in it to make it taste like alcohol.

RV: Okay. Were you able to keep up with the news back in the United States any?

GK: No. Every once in a while you’d get a newspaper or something from back in the States, though mostly *Stars and Stripes* is about all you could get.

RV: Okay. Did you find that your experience in Vietnam at this point had affected your religious beliefs at all if you had any?

GK: I was an atheist then, I’m still an atheist now. I think it probably reaffirmed it. I couldn’t believe the stuff that was going on, no god out there could allow that.
RV: What do you mean?

GK: The killing and the mayhem and all of these things that are going on. If there’s a god, if I was god, I’d be good. I wouldn’t be going out there and allowing all this stuff, but I was pretty much an atheist like I said then, I think it probably just reinforced my atheistic beliefs.

RV: Okay, did you ever have any experience with any wild animals, poisonous insects, anything like that?

GK: Yes, yes. Well, other than mosquitoes, god they used to eat you alive. I had a wasp sting me in the arm, well that was later, that was not while I was in the Marines, that was when I was in the Air Force, but it was in Vietnam. Man, did that thing screw me up for a long time.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, it’s like every muscle in my arm where it stung me, it just separated into individual strand and no strength at all for, it lasted for about three weeks.

RV: Wow.

GK: Yes, I went to a doc and they couldn’t do anything. He said, “Well, just put ice on it and see what happens.”

RV: And it got better over time?

GK: Yes, yes it did eventually, it took about three, four weeks before it came back, and the muscle separation, I guess it lasted several months until all of a sudden all of my muscle mass started coming back together.

RV: Is it normally functioning now?

GK: Yes, yes it’s good.

RV: How about pets, did you guys have any pets?

GK: One guy had a monkey which used to love to hop on somebody’s head and try and screw them in the air and we laughed at that, but other than that, there was a few guys had some puppies, dogs, whatever was around, never saw any cats, that was about it.

RV: Okay, did you ever witness any racial tension, any race issues while you were there or any of your tours there in Southeast Asia?
GK: Yes, a little bit. It wasn’t a great deal. We didn’t have, we had two blacks in our unit, one of one them I was real, real good friend with and the other guy I wasn’t but most of the blacks were in the infantry or supply, either one of those two. You didn’t have too many of them in the air wing, whether that was, I don’t think that was by design, I think that was just probably happenstance or education or whatever. But I saw some racial tension. I guess you would call it reverse discrimination because the blacks were definitely anti-white and it was over a poker game and they came in doing all kinds of bad-mouthing on whitey and things like that.

RV: Were they serious?

GK: Yes, they were serious. They hated white guys and they were coming in there, they were out for blood and all of this, of course they were trying to do with the psychological thing, get the guys psyched up so they could beat them at poker.

RV: Did anything ever happen?

GK: Yes, they ended up cheating is what it was. There were two of them and they were from an Army supply unit and they had come over and come on base. They used to, Army used to come into Da Nang once in a while, whenever they had units going by essentially they were there, basically on R &R I guess, and they came in and they were playing poker and they both cheated, they were marking the cards and get a round of poker players and other guys playing poker they find out right away somebody’s cheating, can’t get away with it too quick. So, it ended up in a big brawl, big, broo-ha-ha, a few guys got carried over to the infirmary.

RV: Were you involved in that?

GK: No, I sat back. I’m basically a pacifist. I don’t know how I ended up being a full time GI. I avoid conflict at all costs but I observed it, you know, I mean I just stood back and didn’t get involved during the conflict.

RV: Right, okay. Tell me about the relationships that you formed with the other men in your unit, did you become close to anyone?

GK: Oh, yes, yes. Kelly Collier was his name, my black friend. He was the only other guy, he was a crew chief too, he was just like me started out, but as an aviation electrician’s mate, went over to crew chief and we were good buddies, we hung together a lot, played poker together, went downtown together, he was my best buddy.
RV: Do you still keep up with him?

GK: No, I haven’t seen him since I left, when I left, no. That’s true, it’s just gone. I mean that’s the way it is the military though, I just didn’t. There’s a few guys from the Air Force that I see on occasion but nobody from the Marines, not one of them since I left the Marines have I ever seen.

RV: Okay, well tell me what happened, you leave Da Nang when?

GK: It’d been September of ’66.

RV: Okay, and where did you go?

GK: They sent me back to El Toro for discharge.

RV: Okay, and this was it for the Marine Corps, you were?

GK: Yes, that was it for the Marine Corps, yes. They sent me back, they tried to get me to re-enlist and I wouldn’t do it. I was fed up with living the way we were living. They wanted me to extend right there in country at the time and re-enlist and I wouldn’t go for it.

RV: Did they offer you any incentives to do that?

GK: Not really, no. They didn’t, the Air Force did later but no, they just wanted me to stay on so they just asked me to. Tried to, “Oh, I thought you were a career man?” all this bull crap. They sent us back to Okinawa, it was on the way and they had lost, or not lost, they claim it was blown up, I don’t know it was probably just mildewed, when we first went to Da Nang, we took all of our dress uniforms in a sea bag and they stored them for us because we didn’t them, only needed our fatigues and so when they shipped us back mine was lost, for some reason or other, somebody told me that one of the mortar rounds had hit the shed where it was stored and it had gone up, whether it was true or not I have no clue. But I reached Okinawa with nothing but the two pair of fatigues that I had that were serviceable. I had a couple pair that were so holey I couldn’t hardly use them and so they took all those from me, they threw them away and burnt them. They gave me a pair of what they call Class B uniforms, just a pair of khaki uniform with no stripes, nothing, no insignia.

RV: What rank were you at this point?

GK: I was a lance corporal, and so I went back to the States and boy that caused me no end of grief coming back because here I am out of uniform, no stripes, no insignia
of any kind and walking around. I got a pair of combat boots on instead of dress shoes
with a Class B uniform and a tongue cap. Man, every officer that I saw was all over my
case, so it was three days of hell. They weren’t even going to let me discharge me, until I
bought a new uniform. They wanted me to buy a new uniform so I, in my stubbornness I
said, “Screw you, I don’t need a new uniform, I’m getting out.” So the guy that was in
charge of the unit, to discharge people, he wasn’t going to let me out. So I ended up
spending two extra days there and every time I would have to go back up to this unit, this
Major and he’d say, “Well, you come back in full dress uniform at such and such a time.”
I’d go back in there in the same crap they gave me when I was in Okinawa. So finally he
just got fed up, signed the papers and let me out.

RV: Okay. Did you have any problems at the airports or anything like that,
coming back in country, back to the United States?

GK: No, we went, I went directly into El Toro, when we landed, they stopped at
Hawaii on the way back. I went from Da Nang to Okinawa, Naja, Okinawa, then from
Naja to, I forget what the base is in Hawaii and then went to El Toro. The funniest thing
that happened to me and I’ll never forget it. I’m going to write it in a story someday, the
day I got discharged and got my ID, I’ve got nothing on in the world except my paycheck
and my clothes on my back, and I go out to catch a ride. And I said, “Well, I’m going to
go buy a car and then I’ll drive home.” And so the first thing, I go outside the base and
I’m sitting there and waiting for a ride. This woman stops and picks me up and she says,
“How come you’re not overseas?” She says, “My son’s overseas, you goddamn hippies
are all the same, you’re walking around wearing these old uniforms and you don’t do
anything.” I said, “Yes” so I’ll just keep my mouth shut and I said “You can let me out at
the next corner ma’am, thank you for the ride.” So she lets me out and I start sticking my
thumb out again, catch a ride. One of them stops, another woman this time. She says,
“You goddamn GIs are all the same.” She says, “Over there fighting these wars, you
know you’re just terrible” and all this bullshit. So exactly opposite spectrum, it was the
first time that I had ever heard anything negative about the war and it just, it set me back,
right there. I thought wow, what the hell is going on here.

RV: How long did it take you to realize what was going on as far as anti-war
demonstrations, there weren’t that many at this point but they were?
GK: No, they were just starting and it was starting to get into gear but they were spreading like wildfire I guess, because I went, when I got out I did, ended up going downtown and got my car and I drove home. I didn’t go to Cheyenne, my parents had moved up to Montana at that time, and I went up there. And they lived outside of Belgrade, Montana, little town named, oh I forget the name of it now. But anyway, Belgrade Montana so I got the University of Montana there. So I went over to the university and I got a job working in their chemistry department as a research engineer they called it. That’s when things got really strange because there was lots and lots of anti-war sentiment amongst the students there. There were some, not necessarily demonstrations but meetings about it. They were getting ready to protest and march and all that so they were constantly having group meeting, various organizations have any meeting about the war and all that. And I, where I worked in the chemistry department, it was right next to a lecture hall, a big lecture hall which they held all kinds of classes, not just science classes or chemistry classes, huge classroom. And the room I worked in didn’t have any air conditioning or anything, so I used to leave the door open to get the air conditioning from the auditorium running through there, so I got to listen to all the lectures and a lot of the professors, the political science and history professors particularly were definitely anti-war, and I’d listen to all this anti-war rhetoric going on in their classes and I had a few stories where I could refute them you know, they were always saying, constantly, they were always saying “The people don’t want us there,” which in my experience was an absolute falsehood. I’m sure there were some South Vietnamese didn’t want us there. I’m absolutely sure of that but the ones that I had met were not that way. So, I just was constantly hearing all of that thing and then what really amazed me, and shouldn’t have I suppose, because I’m subject to it as well, all of a sudden you’ll hear students in conversation with each other just regurgitating the platitudes that the professor was saying in class without any real knowledge of the situation. They were just repeating what their professor’s had told them. So I became quickly upset with academia at that time.

RV: Yes, I was going to ask you, what was your reaction to it all?

GK: Mostly negative, that’s one of the reasons I went back in the service. I was at a party. I was into photography, I’ve always enjoyed taking pictures and stuff and I had
gotten on the yearbook staff taking photographs at fraternities and sororities. Whenever
they would have a party they would always get somebody from the yearbook to come
over and take pictures. So I started going to lots and lots of parties, every weekend, two
or three of them and listening to the students and all that. One night we got into a big
argument, there was a bunch of students that were talking about, we had to get out of
Vietnam, we shouldn’t be there and all of us so I was arguing the other point of view. I
entered the argument, unlike where you can’t do that in a lecture hall right? I couldn’t go
barging in and tell the professor he was full of shit. Anyway, I started telling some of the
kids that were regurgitating things that they had heard in class and that they were wrong.
And one young lady said, “Well, if that’s the way you feel about it, why aren’t you over
there?” And I said, “That’s a good question” and the next day I went down and signed up
and went back over, eventually.

RV: Why the Air Force?

GK: Funny, because I went back initially to go back into the Marines and again it
was the same thing; the recruiting depot there was all of the services down at the post
office with a cubicle. And I went in and talked to the Marines and they said “Well,
you’ve been out more than thirty days so you can come back in, but you’re going to lose
rank.” That’s one of the things that they have I guess to keep you from changing your
mind, getting out and changing your mind. Well, I said screw that, I’m not going to start
back over as private first class. I was just ready to mark corporal when I got out. It would
be another two years before I could do that, I said no way. And the guy from the Air
Force, was right next door, he says, “Come on over here, we’ll give you a bonus to sign”
And I said, “Hey, I’ll walk over there.” And I said the Air Force, remember I told you
when I came back from Vietnam the first time, when we stopped at Hawaii it was at the
Air Force Base, Hickam, that’s the name of the base. That’s where we had stopped and
man, I couldn’t believe how those guys lives compared to the Marines. They had
separate rooms and a barracks and they had great chow and all that stuff and I
remembered that when I went over and talked to this guy in the Air Force. So they gave
me a few thousand dollars and gave me thirty days leave right off the top, or thirty days
to report and gave me an assignment. I didn’t have to go through basic, didn’t have to go
through tech school or any of that stuff, I just went right on up to Glasgow, Montana.
RV: Okay, what did you do at Glasgow?

GK: It was a bomb wing, SAC, 91st bomb wing, and I worked on B-52s in the instrument shop.

RV: Wow, so you’ve had a, at this point you’ve had a wide range of aircraft you’ve worked in and now you’re going to the big bomber.

GK: Yes.

RV: How different was it for you to make these switches from aircraft to aircraft?

GK: Not that difficult at all, you know, the basic theory of electronics all holds true. So its just a matter of learning the components are in the airplane and as long as you can read a wiring diagram you can fix just about anything.

RV: This is the B-52s that were, basically these were nuclear bombers, is that correct?

GK: Right, exactly that was on the, at the time they had what they called the DEW line, you know the early warning system, we had SAC bombers sitting on alert. We also flew what they call Chrome Dome at that time, where they kept X number of airplanes in the air at all time, so that’s what it was.

RV: What were your typical duties there, what did you do?

GK: Just maintain, fixing the aircraft and as far as instrumentation goes. By that time, they let me back in with my full rank so I was an E-4, or I made E-4 immediately after I got in. I was an E-3 when I first got in; it was six weeks later they made me an E-4 so I was in charge of the shift and just regular aircraft maintenance.

RV: Okay. What did your parents think about you re-joining? What was it like for them when you came back from Vietnam and then here you are back in the military again and the war is heating up.

GK: Yes. In a way we, my mom never said much, you know she let me do what I wanted to do. My dad said, “Well, do what your conscience dictates” and I don’t think he really wanted me to go back in. It was funny, remember I told you earlier, my dad never talked about his war experience until after I came back, and I think he did that because of common experience. He didn’t think I would understand what it was all about unless I had gone through some of it.

RV: Is that when he opened up to you or was it later?
GK: Yes, yes. My dad was a drinker, he was a big beer drinker, German family and been drinking all this time so one night we were out drinking beer with a bunch of guys down at the bar and they were a bunch of guys that were saying, “No, we shouldn’t be there.” At that time the political rhetoric was getting old in the news and stuff and some of the protests at Berkeley and things that had gone on already so that was the big topic of the conversation. And so that night we got into some big discussions and he told me some of the things that happened to him.

RV: Do you remember what he told you?

GK: Yes a few. One of the stories that he told me was, well first off, I started, I told him I said I felt guilty and I really did. I said, “I came back, I wasn’t wounded and I really didn’t do anything over there except other than fix airplanes and keep them flying” and I wasn’t in the combat like he was. And he says, “Oh, you’re crazy.” He says, “everybody feels that way” and I had never realized that. He felt guilty for having made it out alive. Yes, hang on.

RV: Okay, let’s pause.

RV: Go ahead sir.

GK: Anyway my dad said that it took him years to get over the guilty feeling of coming back alive when so many of his buddies had, and I never realized, that was a lot of what had formed his life his military experience, and I understood a lot more of why he didn’t want me to go through it.

RV: Did you then understand why he would never sign those papers to let you go into the infantry?

GK: Yes, yes.

RV: What did you think about that at that time, did you say “Thanks, that’s something that I agree with that” or how did you feel about it at that point?

GK: Yes, by that time I said, “Yes, thanks. I’m glad that you did it because its something that I really don’t want to go through and glad I never had to.” I saw, by that time of course, Da Nang was, they had the China Beach area there and so we always had guys coming in on R & R, from Army and Marines both and you’d see some of these guys who had been in combat and you know the thousand yard stare and all that and they
were screwed up individuals, a lot of them, a lot of them really were. I’m kind of glad
that I never got that way.

RV: Did this bring your father and yourself close together?

GK: Yes, I think it did, yes. We had some real long conversations about all these
different things like that. And I think it made, by the time I came back you know of
course I had more world experience and what not, he started treating me like a man rather
than a boy.

RV: How did he feel about you joining back up with the Air Force?

GK: Well he said, whatever my conscience thought, so he was supportive I guess
you would say. He was glad that they gave me the bonus, which at that time, I guess it
was sixty-whatever. He had been out of work. They had gone a strike. He was in
construction and he had been out of work so his truck was broken, so I took the bonus
money and bought him a car. I couldn’t afford a new truck but we got him a car and
chopped off the back and made it into a truck.

RV: Okay, Did you live at home?

GK: Yes, I did. I lived there with my mom and dad while I was out for that brief
period. I was out for about five months I guess. I worked two jobs, I worked at the
university in the science department, then at nights I worked at the lumber mill sorting
lumber and trying to keep the family together because my dad being out of work and all
that.

RV: You sound like you have a tremendous work ethic.

GK: Yes, it was kind of instilled in me. When you’re raised on a farm you get
used to it. If you’re not busy you feel like you’re worthless.

RV: So, did you ever go overseas when you were stationed in Montana or were
you just there at the base?

GK: I went over to Guam for sixty days.

RV: Okay, what did you do there, basically the same thing?

CK: Yes, basically the same thing, fixing B-52s they used to, that’s when they
were running Tolling Thunder, bombing up north and we used to run hundred plane
missions out of Guam every day, man and that was amazing as things go.

RV: Wow, did you stay busy?
GK: Yes, constantly, constantly. You know to sleep on the job, just send your airplanes off and you’re too damn tired to go back to the barracks, you just crawl under a bench and go to sleep until the airplanes come back.

RV: What was your impression of the B-52 as an airplane?

GK: Oh, it’s an amazing, amazing airplane. I mean you’ve got to consider that thing was designed back in 1950 and its still flying today.

RV: Yes, such, stealth plays such a key role.

GK: Oh, yes it does. Yes, its, talk about value for your money, that’s one airplane that the United States built that’s really worth it. There were several, the KC-130 is the same.

RV: So after your time at Glasgow, you were there until what, spring ’68?

GK: Yes, until they closed the base. They closed the base down and shipped everybody out and I went to March Air Force base then. So I was stationed there for a year and during that time I went to Guam again, I was in Guam almost six months that time. It was two ninety-day tours back to back. They used to ship us in and out, rotate the guys in and out every ninety days but I did two back to backs there.

RV: Was this also B-52?

GK: Yes, same things. Some of the airplanes that we had up at Glasgow in the 91st when the closed up the unit, we shipped our airplanes down to March too.

RV: What was it like in Guam, how different was it than Vietnam?

GK: I don’t know. Of course you don’t have to worry about sappers and things like that, so you slept there. Work was just as horrendous, of course being in the Air Force compared to the Marines, the discipline was not as bad. SAC is the most disciplined unit in the Air Force, I’ll give them that, but compared to the Marines it’s basically nothing. The Air Force was more like, what we used to, I still say it, its like being a civilian discipline, that’s what it was because they give you a lot more freedom and choice in what you do and you’re not as controlled as you are in the Marine Corps.

RV: Were you stationed anywhere else or go anywhere else besides Guam?

GK: No, when I was at March and Glasgow both, that was the only place that we went TDY to, most of the time we were in the base, home base.
RV: Okay. Let me ask you a question about overall strategy, you worked
intimately with these aircraft, what did you think of the air campaign against North
Vietnam, did you think it was effective or a viable strategy and if not how would you
have changed it?

GK: First off by limited the targets, it was the stupidest thing. I mean once you’ve
made the rubble bounce you should just stop it; I mean it was stupid what Johnson did,
just keep rolling it in there. Now, the B-52s played a critical role in the Battle of Khe
Sanh, keeping the enemy at bay out there and the air power is just amazing. If you went
over, the North says that they lost 1.3 million people and that’s their estimate, which is
higher than the Americans say that we killed, and they say that the majority of their kills
were air power, which is probably the truth. Probably seven out of ten casualties were by
air power. So by those standards, air power is effective, but when, like I said when you
restrict the targeting to a particular zone and say okay, we’re going to bomb Hanoi only
or the military targets in Hanoi you can only bomb so many times. And by that time, we
talk about the carpet-bombing and all of that today and the accuracy of the munitions.
That’s one thing I can speak directly to when I was in the Marine Corps and my
particular airplane. One of the things that they did was experimenting with triangulation
bombing. We flew, they came fitted my airplane with a little antenna up on top of it and
an electronic trigger to the bomb release mechanism and they fly these big ass block
busters, ten thousand pounders loaded right, one on the center line and flying them at
night. And our guy would go up and fly down one radar beam until he intersected with
another radar beam and that little antenna would automatically release a bomb. The
experts that were there installed that stuff, I was talking with them about it, and they said
that they could drop a block buster down a fifty gallon drum using that technique so we
flew lots of missions like that against military targets up North. So with the effectiveness
like that, I think once you’ve taken out all the military targets, the rest of its just
psychological and when the North and what we understand now, having seen their little
one man manholes they built, the concrete cylinders that they stuck in the ground for
cover. Unless you get a direct hit they’re very well protected there. So I think that whole
bombing routine was just a wasted exercise, a waste of money and time.
RV: What, did you talk to the B-52 pilots and what they thought, what
their impressions were of what they were doing?
GK: Yes, a lot of them were the same, the same mind. I mean they would go off
from Guam and constantly bomb the same targets, day after day after day and they were
doing the same thing. That was the joke, you know, well what are you guys going to,
what’s your mission today? Make the rubble bounce.
RV: So you think they could have selected, or the leaders political and/or military
could have selected a lot better targets or spread it out more?
GK: Yes, and then plus the other thing which a lot of the B-52 pilots were really
upset about it, all the 105 pilots and everybody kept flying them down the same damn air
corridors every day. You keep coming into the same target the same way, that’s why we
started losing so damn many B-52s against the SAMs. They go in there and they know
exactly where they’re coming and when they’re coming, essentially, day after day. The
pilots definitely would have liked to have some different targets someplace, you know
something useful. You know, if we’re going to bomb them, if you’re going to do strategic
bombing let’s do it like they did in World War II. Let’s bomb the hell out of their cities,
kill all the civilian population as well as everybody else, you know get the, work on them
psychologically if nothing else.
RV: Do you think air power has a psychological advantage or psychological
component to it?
GK: Oh, I’m sure it does. I’d hate to be underneath that shit. I’ve been under an
artillery barrage and that was enough. Yes, its scary stuff I’m sure.
RV: Why do you, go ahead, I’m sorry.
GK: I just said I’d hate to be under a B-52 strike.
RV: Right. I’ve heard their pretty awesome, eyewitness of a strike.
GK: Yes, I went, I saw one when I went up to Song Bay. This was when I was in
the Air Force, well I’ll talk about that later when I get up to that point.
RV: Okay, okay good. Why do you think that the same air corridor was used, the
same targeting was used, why do you think the United States leaders were doing this?
GK: Well, they didn’t want to spread the war is what they keep saying. You
know Laos is supposed to be neutral, Cambodia, all of those, so you’ve got a very narrow
place where you can legally, international law and all that, that you can fly and so they
would do it that way. They could have, I think, come in over the Tonkin Gulf or
something like that rather than flying up the land corridors like they used to always take
but they never did. Partly I assume that the tanker coordination and all of that’s difficult
to do.

RV: Right. Okay, well after you finished at March, where did you go from there?
GK: I left March Air Force Base and where the hell did I go from there?
RV: This is in June ’69.
GK: I think I went right over to, pardon?
RV: This was in June ’69 I believe when you left March.
GK: Yes, I’m not sure where, oh yes, that’s right, I went up to Kadena from there.
RV: Okay, and you.
GK: No, I didn’t, no I didn’t, let me think.
RV: Was it Naja?
GK: It was Naja, yes I went to Naja. Yes, Naja, Okinawa.
RV: What did you do there?
GK: 21st TASS, this is where, yes. When I first go to Naja, worked on, it was a
C-130 outfit and 21st TASS, Tactical Airlift Support Squadron, and we supplied planes
and crews into Saigon, Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, we kept a constant TDY contingent
there and we flew fresh fruits and vegetables essentially, that’s ninety percent of the
cargo that we’d fly in country, every time an airplane would leave from Okinawa we’d be
flying in produce into there. Then in country we hauled trash, whatever had to be hauled,
wherever it needed to be hauled.
RV: So you were actually on the aircraft?
GK: No, I was ground maintenance at first, I didn’t fly in but I was what they call
an airborne mechanic, I had gotten my flight wings by that time, so anytime there was
something that was broke on an airplane we couldn’t reproduce on the ground, I’d have
to go up with the aircraft and try and troubleshoot and what not while we were airborne
and try and do some repairs like that. That’s, now we’re getting to the point where I went
up to Song Bay, I guess I was in country about a month before I made my first trip down
to Saigon and to Tan Son Nhut.
RV: What was your impression of Saigon?

GK: Strange town, its fascinating, I led the architecture there, all that French architecture and the tree lined streets and all that. We used to ride the what they call the shit scoop, its like a tricycle built backwards, the wheel on the back of the motorcycle and the guy that’s driving it and you could get two, maybe three guys in front of the little shit scoop and it had a little awning over the top to protect you from the sun. It was an interesting way to travel. I liked going down the tree-lined boulevards and going downtown Saigon in one of those. I used to go out just to take the rides, not to go down to the bars or anything but just to ride the shit scoops around. Yes, I enjoyed that city; it was a really pretty city.

RV: Had you noticed any changes in the civilian attitudes toward Americans or toward the war?

GK: Well, at that time I really never associated with many of them. I hung out down at Continental Hotel, that’s where a bunch of, a lot of the journalists and high ranking officer from various militaries around the world used to hang out and I used to hang out at the bar down there and I would talk to them, but there was mostly all the GIs and the girls would parrot whatever they were saying. They were trying to please their customers, which I found out subsequently I guess a couple of those girls that worked there were high ranks spies for the other side. So, I never really associated with many of the civilians there so I couldn’t say.

RV: Okay, what was Tan Son Nhut like compared to Da Nang?

GK: Oh, huge. Da Nang was crude and rough when I was there. I saw it later, I saw it years later, I guess right near the end of the war, I saw in ’72 and it had grown up, big base then, but Tan Son Nhut then at that time ever was a big military complex, huge.

RV: Okay, all right. So tell me what you would fly in with you said food and produce most of the time and occasionally you were on these aircraft, right.

GK: Yes.

RV: And how long was your TDY, did you actually stay in Saigon for a period of time and then go back to Okinawa or what?

GK: Yes we would, it was thirty days is what we would have been out for. We’d rotate in and there was, oh about every three months you’d go in for thirty days. If you
were on that end of it with the 21st TASS. So yes I spent a lot of time in Tan Son Nhut there. I think I went twice myself, two thirty day TDYs. The first one there was interesting, somebody stole my boots.

RV: Oh, really?

GK: Yes, we had gone down and the quarters that they had had us in, they were rebuilding a barracks or something down there at the Air Force and so they stuck us in these transient quarters and I went to bed that night, I put my boots right beside my bunk and I woke in the morning and they were gone. And somebody says, “Oh, you stupid fool, you never take off your boots.” So that was my first experience in Tan Son Nhut there.

RV: How difficult was it to get your replacement boots?

GK: It was a hassle, it was really a hassle so I’m walking around in these shower clogs and then of course every officer again was accosting me, I couldn’t get anywhere. It took me about four days to get a new pair boots and I ended up, guess where I got them, I got them on the black market downtown.

RV: Did you really?

GK: Yes, that’s the only place I could find to get a pair. The military had to order them for me and all of that, so I eventually got the ones that they ordered too but just to get the officers on my back I went down, bought a pair of boots and perpetuated the theft I imagine.

RV: Yes, exactly. Do you remember how much paid for them?

GK: Six or seven bucks, something like that.

RV: Okay, so you would do thirty days at Tan Son Nhut, then go back to Okinawa. Did you do anywhere else, thirty days anywhere else in country?

GK: Not during that time frame, this was before I joined Air America. The only thing that we did do, like I said I was on the in-flight repair crew so I had a couple places where I went out to the planes. The one at Song Bay was the interesting one. Some people call it Son Be, but it was Song Bay. The Army had been hit real heavy the night before, and they needed to be resupplied so the aircraft we were going to fly in, we were going to fly in some bullets and bombs, grenades and what not for them. So we loaded up the aircraft but we had a flow pressure problem on one of engines and they couldn’t
duplicate it, couldn’t figure out what the hell was going on so they wanted me to go up, find out what was going on. So we went up to Song Bay and while we were there they have an Arc Light mission, or not Arc Light but like a Rolling Thunder, B-52 strike and then to try and clear out Charlie who had been attacking the base the night before and that’s the first time I saw a B-52 strike come in like that and it is just, I mean its, its like shaking the world when those things hit, its just amazing. The entire sky just turns black with a big wall of black dirt and clouds and lashing going up. And it just rumbles, you can’t hear anything else but that.

RV: How far away was it?
GK: Probably a mile and a half, two miles.
RV: Wow.
GK: Yes, it was close.
RV: Was it effective, did it work?
GK: Oh, yes, yes it worked. It definitely suppressed any fire, all the artillery stopped. They were still getting small arms attack while we were there, our aircraft was being targeted when we landed, and so we got the stuff off, it was about two thirds off and we still had about a third to go and the pilot restarted the engines and we just kicked it off as we rolled off, back onto the runway and get in the air.

RV: What was the 131 like, what did you think of that aircraft?
GK: 131, no it was the 130.
RV: These were 130s okay.
GK: Yes, C-130s. Yes, it was a remarkable aircraft again. They always advertise, it’s the only aircraft in the world that can take off and land fully loaded in a three hundred foot bean field and it can. Some of the stuff that the airplane can do is just totally amazing. The old B model, that’s what we were flying at that time, it’s the three bladed prop version, versus the four bladed prop. It was just an amazing aircraft for getting off the ground and landing in a short distance. When they went to the four bladed prop, which made it more efficient at high altitudes and cruising, it shortened the error, it deteriorated its ability to take off at such a short distance and then you know a JATO to get if off the ground if you wanted to get off quick, that’s jet-assisted takeoff.
RV: Okay, what kind of maintenance would you have to do, or check out when you were in flight?

GK: Whatever happened to be broken. Usually, the only time that we would do it is if there was something that we couldn’t duplicate on the ground. Most times if an aircraft breaks, instrumentation, electronic stuff’s funny. A lot of it’s to do with the stress and strain on the airframe while it’s in the air versus on the ground. If it’s on the ground everything’s sitting relaxed and nothing’s strained and all electrons are flowing fine and everything is working good, but then you get it up in the air and you put the flight stresses on it and things start breaking down sometimes. So you can’t duplicate it on the ground, so you have to go up and troubleshoot in flight. You break a circuit, there’s on almost every electronic circuits got two or three break points in it where you can take it apart and see, whiles its good from this point to that point, you know? So you can help isolate where its broken, so that’s what I’m doing, go up there. Sometimes it was a pain in the butt because like one time I remember I was up, they had an instrumentation problem on the navigation system and the antenna was back in the tail and it fed from there up through wire bundles up into the instrument rack which is down below the cockpit and then from there, from the instrumentation component up to the instruments themselves in the cockpit, but I always had the problem. I had isolated between the transmitter in the back of the aircraft and the instrument rack, so I’m up in there trying to troubleshoot and they’ve got these control cable that are controlling the aircraft and I’m stuck in between the control cables and of course the pilot’s flying the airplane, these control cables got sledges on where they, they’re not just one straight piece of wire put together in sections, these things are scraping me and cutting me apart and then I finally get the connector isolated and I found the problem, which is a wire that was shorting out so I’m getting electrocuted with these four hundred volts of electricity going between my hand and my neck. It was terrible, that flight.

RV: Are there any outstanding incidents, besides that one you just related that stand out in your mind from this particular tour at Naja?

GK: Yes, one time I was working up under an instrument panel and I was laying on my back and I’m jammed in between the rudder pedals and the floor and my feet are up in the air on the pilot’s seat and the blood I guess drained down into my upper body
and swelled up so I couldn’t get back out and that was terrible. And I’m out there, I was
by myself, so I’m yelling and screaming and trying to get somebody’s attention and I
can’t get out of this goddamn thing, I was stuck up there.

RV: What happened?

GK: Well they finally, they went and got some ice water, a couple buckets of ice
water and they fit up a plastic sheet somehow or another so it would kind of drain away
from instrument racks and back off the aircraft. They poured cold water on me until the
swelling went down enough I could get myself back out there, and even then I about took
an ear off getting out. That was scary, that made me claustrophobic for a while.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, I was really afraid to get in any tight places for a long time after that.

I’m okay now but for a while it was terrible.

RV: Right. Did you ever go into Thailand at all on this tour?

GK: No, not until I joined Air America, which, I don’t know I guess I was there
about four or five months before I joined Air America.

RV: Okay, so you left Naja in April of ’71?

GK: Well yes, that’s when I left, but I joined Air America while I was there.

RV: Okay, tell me about that. How did you get hooked up with these guys?

GK: Playing poker [laughing].

RV: I could have guessed that.

GK: Yes, it was funny. The, one of the guys that had been on it there, the 21st
TASS I guess had been supporting that operation since’61 or something, whenever it first
started up. But anyway they used to, he rotated out and they needed a replacement for
him, and when they came down to the shop they told my NCO-IC in charge there that
they needed a replacement and they wanted somebody if possible that could play poker.
Of course the first priority was you had to be good at your job, so he asked me, he said
“Would you like to join E Flight?” and I said “What the hell is E-Flight?” And he says,
“Well it’s a unit that you fly down to the war zone and you do your thing” and that’s
about all he could say. He says, “Fix airplanes” and he says, “You’re going to be by
yourself, you’re going to be the only instrument man there. You’re going to have to not
only run the instruments but the autopilot shop, the instrument shop and the electric
shop.” He says, “You’re going to take care of those” and he says, “You’ve got the qualifications because of your Marine Corps experience” because the Air Force, they divide their jobs up a lot more finely than Marines did. We had broader skills in the Marines, but anyway since I had all those skills already and readily available plus I could play poker I was the perfect choice and he asked me if I’d go and I said sure.

RV: Did they offer you any pay incentive at all?
GK: No, none at all at that time. They did later when I re-enlisted but they didn’t. It was just a thing, it was a top secret and he didn’t know much about it other than the fact that we went out of country and he didn’t even know where we went at that time, he says, “But you’re going to be gone” and they told me I had twenty-one days gone and then twenty-one days back, every twenty-one days in and out.

RV: Back in Okinawa.
GK: Yes.

RV: Okay. Tell me about how the actually processed you. Did you stay in uniform or out of uniform or what?
GK: No, I was out of uniform. It was funny, we used to, when you go off a mission, you taxi out as GIs, we hit the end of the runway, we’d bail out of the aircraft, we’d take the Stars and Bars off, which were screwed on the sides of the airplane and put Air America signs on. We took all of the manuals that were in the aircraft, the parachutes, anything that had the military identification off of it, stuck it in the back of a pickup truck and it would go off and hide our stuff and off we would go. We would change out of our uniform and into a non-marked flight suit and the only thing we took with this was our civilian clothing and our ID card.

RV: What were you flying, were these 130s as well?
GK: C-130s, yes.

RV: And you would fly into Udorn or Ubon?
GK: No, initially when we were stationed at Naja we flew into what we called the Rang, it was Takhli, Thailand and that was the big headquarters of the CIA, Air America operation at that time.

RV: What kind of specific instructions did they give you before you got over there, about as far as identification and questioning and things like that?
GK: Yes, well they had the complete briefing and everything before my first mission and it was a clandestine operation and if we did have an accident where we would fall into enemy hands or whatever, the first thing we were supposed to do was destroy our ID cards, our military IDs, because we were supposed to be strictly civilian, Air America employees, so that was the basic instruction that we had. They didn’t provide us with any alternative identification either. We always questioned that and one time they had talked about getting passports for us, with civilian identifications and what not and do that, but they never did.

RV: What did they explain as the mission of Air America?

GK: They told us that we were going to be flying in support of the Hmong, the Montagnards as they called it then, out of Takhli and up into Laos and that’s basically what we did. Mostly they were rice drops, our C-130s had the best of my knowledge never hauled any ammunition or bombs or anything of that nature. We hauled almost exclusively food. We did have, out of the same flight ramp where we were at, there were 123s, the old twin boom cargo planes. They flew all the weapons and stuff. Now we loaded it, it was all right there on the ramp where we were at but our aircraft themselves never flew any of that.

RV: Did you stay in that unmarked flight suit the whole time basically?

GK: Yes, and civilian clothes when we went to work. When we flew we were in the unmarked flight suit and we worked in civilian clothes.

RV: Did you have to sign any agreements stating that you wouldn’t talk about any of this while you were there?

GK: Yes, yes, yes. It was classified entirely, yes. We couldn’t tell anybody what we were with; we couldn’t even say the world E-Flight.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, it was totally clandestine. That caused us some grief once in a while, especially when we were, every time we were going in country and coming back out of the country and some of the stuff we did was rather dangerous, we would fly, sometimes, not all the times. We would fly into Vietnam itself, we’d drop the produce and stuff off there, but we would be in our military uniforms and everything, we hadn’t sanitized the aircraft. We would sanitize it at the end of the runway there and then leave and the
purpose of that was trying to get us combat pay, as long as we were in country once
during the month we could get combat pay for that, so that would help.

RV: Tell me more if you can about the agreements you had signed, what was the
stipulation here, was there a period of time that you could talk about this or was it
basically until war’s end?

GK: No, it said forever. Essentially I’m not supposed to talk about it now except
it’s been de-classified, I double-checked that before I.

RV: Yes, yes, definitely.

GK: Yes, no at that time it was you will not say anything to anybody about what
you do forever.

RV: No matter what?

GK: No matter what.

RV: What were the repercussions if you did?

GK: I imagine treason, you could probably be tried for treason and shot.

RV: Did that affect your mindset at all going into this?

GK: Yes and no. In a way, you know we were an elite unit as far as the people
around us were concerned because everybody there was, they were highly skilled, you
didn't get into this thing unless you were highly skilled and responsible. And so
everybody else, all the people in the other units, they treated us with more respect and
dignity I think after I was in it then I had been treated before.

RV: Okay, could you describe the Ranch, what was that like physically?

GK: Yes, its, it was just in the corner of Takhli, Takhli was an operational air base
at that time, two used to fly 104s, F-100s, not 104s, F-100s and 105s, 102s, they had
those. And anyway we were in a compound on one of the corners of the base, my sense
of direction there is kind of screwed up because its basically jungle, the entire base is
surrounded by jungle but anyway it was fenced off, had its own gate and you had to have
an Air America pass to get in. They used to issue us little ID passes to get in and out.

RV: Did it say Air America or E-Flight or?

GK: It said Air America, is what it said. It didn’t say E-flight but it was a
beautiful little compound. We had, it was set up of course for more like a civilian
organization than military organization, so they had a, like a clubhouse, beautiful chow
hall, they had some of the best chow in the world.

RV: Oh, yes?

GK: Yes, I’m serious. They had a French trained cook there that used to cook
some great stuff. Had its own theater, had its own swimming pool and of course its own
barracks and everything there. We had several operations that would be going on at any
one time out of there. They used to fly these, they’re called porters, it’s a light aircraft
made in Sweden or Switzerland or someplace, I’m not sure where, and some of those
porter pilots would be there. There would be the 123 crews sometimes and the C-130
crews there, then you’d have the spooks, that’s the CIA operatives in there.

RV: What were they like?

GK: Strange people, strange people. I didn’t like any of them. They seemed to, all
wanted to be James Bond.

RV: Could, I mean did you sit and eat with them, talk with them all that?

GK: Oh, yes, yes. You played poker with them and you’d talk with them and
what not but they were, all of them, they were more secretive than us and they all packed
all kinds of weapons because of the nature of the business. Yes, they were strange.

RV: What kind of weapons did you—I’m sorry, go ahead.

GK: It just, compared to the normal GI, I was used to the association.

RV: What kind of weapons did you carry while you were there?

GK: None. We weren’t allowed to carry any weapons, we didn’t have any. Now
we had a couple guys, pilots particularly, our pilots by the way never flew in there. We
flew our aircraft down and then our pilots sit on their butt for three weeks and the Air
America pilots, which most of them were GIs on lease from their branch of the service
were flying. Some of the people that were there were actually full-time civilians that had
never been in the military but they carried weapons. They weren’t supposed to as well
but most of them all carried pistols of one sort or another.

RV: About how many people do you think, would you estimate that were there at
the Ranch?

GK: It varied. One time you’d be there you would be the only crew, the next time
the place would be packed to the rafters, you know hundred of people, so it depended on
what was going on and where. Every once in a while there would be up in Chang Mai, which is northeast or northwest rather of Takhli there was a, that’s where Vang Pao I think was his name, the Hmong leader and he had a compound there and they would have a big meet up there with all the various generals and what not and it would get real busy around that time.

RV: Let me ask you about overall American strategy in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, I mean we were actively involved in these neutral countries, as was the enemy obviously. Was there any discussion by yourself or others that you heard about the supposed neutrality of Laos?

GK: Yes, we always talked about, you know Laos is supposed to be neutral and that’s one of the reason it was all clandestine operations in there. Of course they did run a few military ops in there but they were hush-hushed, never publicized. Yes, we discussed that and we always thought, you know it’s the political expedient thing to do, to keep it neutral, to keep the spreading of the war from going on. Because there was great concern there that it would spread down into Thailand, and they didn’t want that to happen, so that’s one of the reasons that the Thai themselves. The Thais used to supply troops too. We used to, that was one of the other things we did out of, not Takhli, but out of Udorn and Ubon, when we were there. We would ferry Thai troops in. Yes, the Thais were, when we talked to them about it, they wanted Laos to remain neutral because it was a buffer.

RV: Did you think that the United States, personally did you think that they should have carried the war into Laos, cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a lot of people argued that should have been done, what did you think about that?

GK: Well we did, that’s what the Hmong were trying to do was to contain that Ho Chi Minh Trail. They used to run raids against it all the time from in Laos, so that was a big major things that they were doing, not just protest the Plain of Jars so.

RV: I’m talking about American ground troops.

GK: Oh, just send American ground troops in there. Yes, there was a lot of people that advocated that, yes that’s what we should so let’s just go in there and do it. But then again, like I said I think the political decision was probably right to keep it neutral but that’s in my personal opinion, I’m not the strategist for the war.
RV: Well, this is what this interview is about, your personal opinion, so I appreciate that.