Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Pete Lappin at Ft. Walton Beach, Florida on the 24th of September, year 2000 at approximately 8:45 a.m. Mr. Lappin, let’s begin first by…would you be willing to agree to an interview agreement whereby we can release this interview to Texas Tech University and to the book project that is currently being worked on by the FAC group? Pete Lappin: Yes sir, certainly.
SM: I also stipulate that I release this interview. Let’s begin by a brief biographical sketch of yourself.
PL: Steve, call me Pete, by the way. I was born in 1940 in Boston, Massachusetts. I grew up and was raised in Lexington, a suburb outside of Boston. I graduated high school in 1958, went to the University of Colorado ‘58-’62, four years of ROTC. Pilot training in Valdosta, Georgia…survival at Stead and spent two years at McNeil Air Force Base, Tampa, Florida. I went to Vietnam in late ’65. After a tour at Naha, Okinawa we actually rotated from Naha to Udorn, Thailand. Then I went to Cam Ranh Bay when they first opened Cam Ranh Bay. I flew F-4s back in the States briefly at Davis Mountains and Semora Johnston, North Carolina during the time it was not fun to be in the military in the States. I decided to go back over and went to Ubon, Thailand and from Ubon went to NKP to fly the O-2s, primarily to be a TASS, 23rd TASS, Liaison to Task Force Alpha. I came back to the States in ’69 and separated from service.
SM: Now, let’s see. Your time with the Tactical Fire Squadron, 555th, 557th…
PL: Triple nickel and 557.
SM: You flew F-4s?
PL: F-4s, yes.
SM: What was that like?
PL: We’ve all often wondered what descriptive phrases you use to describe what it’s like to fly a fighter. Here we are in the year 2000 describing what was, at the time, the most advanced fighter in the world. Today it’s an antique. But when people ask I always tell them it was the greatest thing since, but not including sex, snow skiing, and gambling, and not necessarily in that order.
SM: What was the transition like going from being in a fighter like the F-4 to the O-2?
PL: It was horrendous. I couldn’t land that little thing. I had a hellatious time learning to land the O-2, but finally did. It’s like anything else. Once you catch on to it, it was pretty easy. It’s hard to believe, but the year of flying the O-2 out of NKP was fun. It was a lot more fun flying because literally you were like your own boss. That was fun.
SM: Now, when you had flown F-4s earlier, you say you rotated in, helped open Cam Rahn Bay with the first F-4s. Did you get to fly close air support missions at all with the F-4s in Vietnam?
PL: Yes sir. That was their primary mission. We had an occasional flight to North Vietnam for MiGCAP missions for 105s, but mostly it was close air support in South Vietnam.
SM: That was MiGCAP close air patrolling or…?
PL: The MiGCAP mission was separate from close air support. MiGCAP, you’d fly to North Vietnam, you’d refuel over at Golf of Tonkin, fly a 45 minute flight over North Vietnam, go back out to the tankers, refuel, and do it again. It was a long, long day, but what you did was you protected the airspace for the 105s who would come in and fly their missions.
SM: So, basically on the MiGCAP, you were flying overhead keeping, hopefully, acting as a deterrent to MiGs from taking off. Because if the MiGs get in the air, you guys are taking them down.
PL: That’s right.
SM: Then, as you said, you moved from there to Laos.
PL: Cam Ranh Bay.
SM: Yeah, that was at Cam Ranh Bay and then from there you moved into Laos.

What time period was that? When did you actually arrive in Laos and then become an O-2 pilot?
PL: January ’68.
SM: TET Offensive.
PL: Right after the TET. Matter of fact, the day the TET Offensive hit was the day I flew from Saigon to Bangkok. It was two days later that I went to NKP.
SM: What were your feelings about TET? What did you think about that, how it blew open?
PL: I was at Tan Son Nhut when it actually hit and the reason I knew we were in a lot of trouble, it was about 120 degrees, and on the ramp I saw an Air Force full colonel in his blues laying on the tarmac. When the shells started to hit in and around Tan Son Nhut, they eventually closed the airport. I got on one of the last flights to leave Tan Son Nhut and I had no idea where it was going. I just threw my bag on and jumped on and it ended up going to Bangkok. It could have been going to Clark, it could have been going to Guam, who knows.
SM: When you found yourself at NKP, what were things like there?
PL: Although I had been warned about what NKP was like when I was at Ubon, it still was an awakening. Things were on a much, much smaller scale than they were at any of the other major bases in Thailand. It was all old, old airplanes except for this new O-2 they were flying. It looked like it ran back in World War II, or at least what my image of World War II was. It was exciting because it was a different part of the war. That was intriguing to me that I was going to become part of it.
SM: What was your evaluation of the O-2 in terms of its structure, its power supply, the twin engines.
PL: Well, I didn’t know anything else except the F-4. And you have to understand that when you move from the high performance fighter to the low performance propeller driven airplane, it’s quite a difference. But, I didn’t have any trouble with it. It was a fun
airplane to fly and the mission we were flying gave it an excitement. It wasn’t the best airplane in the world, obviously not, but it was an interim airplane and we made the best use we could.

SM: And by interim, you mean between the O-1 and the OV-10, which became the real workhorse of FACs.

PL: FAC airplane of choice.

SM: Well, let’s go ahead and discuss your involvement with the SAR mission and Streetcar 304 and how would you become involved in that, under what circumstances and how did the events unfold once you became involved?

PL: I was actually in Bangkok on a three or four day R&R and as I was leaving the massage parlor, one of the FACs who was coming in told me that they wanted me back at NKP as soon as possible. That was the night of June 2nd. I did get back to NKP that night, late and immediately went into a briefing where they talked about how Streetcar 304 had been shot down and at that point they needed to get him out because they knew he was getting weak, knew he was running out of resources. The weather was bad, we’d lost about seven airplanes to the effort so far that they were using him as a decoy. There were two FACs assigned, myself and I believe it was an AO-51, but I’m not sure. He was going to be my high FAC. He would brief the fighters and then send them down to me. My job was to find Kenny Field and suppress the around fire enough so the sandies and the jollies could get in for back up. This was the third day, so we knew his batteries would be getting weak. We knew that he would be getting weak. They also told me they were authorizing use of the special gas in case that we couldn’t do anything else.

SM: This is the sleeping gas?

PL: Yes. I don’t remember what time we took off, but I remember getting into the area and it was still dark and the main first job was to find a way to get down through the clouds because they were pretty low. Even at that point, we didn’t know if we were going to be able to put any suppression down, but as light started, the first dawn started, I found a way to get under the clouds. We found a hole where the fighters could get down through. How ever many flights we put in did a magnificent job. They were just incredible being able to get down through the clouds and having an extremely short time period of time to get oriented, get lined up, drop their weapons, and get out. Until you’ve
flown a fighter and know what that is, you just don’t understand how high a level of
capability is required to do that. I will forever take my hat off to those guys because not
only did they get down through the clouds, not only did they find me and the target, they
were able to get lined up and drop their weapons without putting them right on the
survivor.

SM: What was the minimum air speed when they came down out of the clouds?
How much time did they have about, do you think?

PL: This would be pure guesstimate on my part, at this stage, but I would say,
target recognition, once you broke through the clouds- and that scenario was always
changing, because the clouds never stayed the same, never stayed in the same area- they
were constantly moving. The ground threat was constantly changing, so to put specifics
on it is hard, but I would say from break-out to target acquisition to bomb release could
be no more than 10 seconds. Maybe less than that.

SM: How fast were they going usually when they broke out of the clouds?

PL: 350 to 450 and in some cases faster.

SM: That’s moving.

PL: Well, they didn’t want to expose themselves any longer than necessary either.

In a lot of cases, when they came down, the first thing that they would see would be my
smoke and then me and then they would see shells being fired. They did their work. I
would estimate that their were a minimum- I was not on station, but my total time was
about five hours - I would probably say a good hour and a half or two hours was spent
putting in fighters. There would be breaks in the action when obviously we couldn't get
them down. Then we would reacquire the target because there were times where I would
end up going up in the clouds. My altitude was probably anywhere from 2,500 to 3,500
feet. They didn’t shoot me down and I was able to talk to Kenney, find out where he
was. He would tell me where the last vestiges of firepower were coming from and that’s
where we’d put the targets, or I could see their fire. At one point in time, he told me
where some firing was from; it was from people in trees real close to them. With that,
you have to get those guys because when the jolly greens would come in, these guys were
going to shoot them down. So we put some CBU’s in, and this is an interesting story that
he will elaborate on. When they got him back to the hospital at NKP he expressed to the
nurse, who I guess was a male nurse, that he had some pain in his groin area. Apparently,
when they unrolled the foreskin and a CBU pellet fell out. He tells that story much better
than I can. But, that was the weapon that we put in to get rid of the last guns that were
seen to be a threat to the Jolly greens. We’ll never know if we got them. But, at some
point in time, Kenny came up on the radio and said, ‘I’m hit!’ I called the sandies and I
said, ‘Get in here; let’s get him out!’ They did and I left and I went back to NKP and I
climbed on an airplane and went back to Bangkok.

SM: Finished your R&R.
PL: I came back there was not a hole in the airplane.
SM: I was just going to say, did you ever get hit by anything?
PL: That morning, nothing.
SM: No other aircraft, nobody else got shot down that day?
PL: Nobody else got shot down that day.
SM: How did you isolate Kenny in terms of his location? Was it identifying you
needle where you were flying over, or how did you get that accomplished?
PL: He was able to see me. He saw and identified me and I said, ‘Now, I’ve got to
identify you.’ He described his location and it was pretty succinct. There was an open
field and there were a clump of trees in the middle of the open field and that was where
he was. The clump of trees, I don’t mean to give…was a large clump. It was necessary to
get him pin pointed it in that clump of trees. So, when he said he was hit, we had him pop
smoke and he still had a smoke flare and we could positively identify him. The jollies and
the sandies were holding to the southwest on the other side of the ridgeline and when I
talked to - and I can’t remember who I talked directly to but I think it was Crown - and
then Crown was the one who cleared them in. They did get ground fire. A helicopter was
shot at when they picked him up.
SM: What kind of weapons systems, small arms?
PL: I think it was small arms. I think we had gotten just about every one of the big
things, but when you’re in a helicopter, it doesn’t take much
SM: No, it takes an AK-47.
PL: That was my involvement and it was – the Jolly Greens hold a reunion - and
it was here at Ft. Walton Beach that Kenny and I and a couple of the sandies first got
together for the first time since that mission. This is one of the things about the mission in Southeast Asia - it happened today, tomorrow you were right back as if yesterday it never happened.

SM: Was their any indication, while you were on station, that the NVA were listening to your radio transmissions? Maybe, particular movements they engaged in or when, for instance, Kenny popped his smoke, did the other people pop smoke in the area, things like that?

PL: No. As John told you earlier, it was felt like this whole area was, besides being a transitional route for transportation south, it was also kind of a rest and relaxation area for the guys at Khe San. In terms of numbers, nobody knows how many people were there, but that whole area was just saturated with NVA troops and Laotian helpers. But in terms of numbers and in terms of being smart enough to do that and listen to the radio and interpret what we were saying and pop a false smoke, no.

SM: I’ve heard that that happened in other areas, which is why I asked.

PL: It may have. I never saw it.

SM: How about in your discussions later with Ed Leonard, is it that right?


SM: The sandy that was shot down, did he give you any indication of the disposition or the size of the enemy force that you guys were going up against because he was captured, so he saw first hand the enemy?

PL: He would make a fascinating interview for you and he would be more than happy to do it. That kind of information, you know, again, becomes third hand for me and I would certainly refer you to him.

SM: Okay, excellent. Then I’ll definitely interview him. How did your participation on this mission affect you as a pilot and as a person? This was a pretty highly stressful situation, highly emotional and you pulled it off.

PL: I would caution the reader or listener to remember that there I was combat fighters, you’re invincible. At that time nothing can go wrong and I’m sure that was the attitude that I portrayed at most of the time. Once it’s over you simply move on. You do not realize at that time the implication. Say you helped to save a guy’s life, and maybe that’s what it’s all about, but you moved on. As you get older the importance
begins to really take effect. I think probably in Kenny’s case and certainly John [?] case, age has made this one of the highlights of our life. I think maybe that’s why we put so much importance on it today. As opposed to stopping a truck, as opposed to the political philosophy that they never did get out the troops and cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail down, which the North Vietnamese have said time to time again, ‘We’ll just stop the war.’ Our politicians weren’t smart enough to do that or didn’t want to or were afraid to. Who knows? It depends on who you believe, I guess. In hindsight you can see all of these things. But that’s when saving a life takes on much higher significance. I didn’t realize what the importance was when I did it. I was more anxious to get back to Bangkok.

SM: To the massage parlor.

PL: I think probably I made a lot more of that than really it was. It sounds good today.

SM: It was a great story. I’m curious. Did you ever have any other occasions to use that special gas that you mentioned in missions?

PL: No.

SM: That’s the only time.

PL: I never used it.

SM: Why don’t we go ahead at take a few minutes and talk about Task Force Alpha and your position there as liaison between Task Force Alpha and IBM Explain that disease?

PL: TFA or Task Force Alpha was charged with the igloo white mission. The igloo white mission was McNamara’s electronic wall and what it was, was dropping sensors from, among other planes, the F-4 hopefully in a small enough, specific enough area that when the listening post at Task Force Alpha, which was a building in the corner of NKP, could listen to these sensors talk. They were actually microphones that were listening and you could listen to them back there. If you heard trucks moving or people talking and interpreters could listen to what they were saying, hopefully you could find out where truck parks were, fuel depots or troop movements. You could target fighters then appropriately. Since I had flown F-4s and the F-4s were the primary droppers of the sensors, I was able to go back to Ubon and brief the F-4s and work with the IBM guys at Task Force Alpha and bring these sensors in. We found out through listening that the
North Vietnamese valued these sensors highly because of the parachutes. They could use the parachutes for hammocks or sleeping bags or ground covers or whatever. They just threw the rest of it including the microphones away, but they wanted the parachutes. It’s a little humor. I’ve often wondered what it would be like to talk to somebody who had actually grabbed one of these sometimes.

SM: You mentioned earlier that there was actually some conflict between IBM and the military component, a schism; I think is what you called it. Why don’t you describe that or talk about that issue.

PL: You know, I’m not really sure what I mean when I say that. The only remembrance I really have is that if Task Force Alpha, through the sensors, found a truck park. To get that truck park targeted fast enough to do some good didn’t seem to work. So, the schism that I refer to was really a reference of the fact that by the time something could happen that could materially be good, the truck park probably moved. Because this was a moving, this Ho Chi Minh Trail was a living, breathing organism if you will, who is constantly moving and changing. To be able to make it work you had to have somebody listening to the sensor talking, saying ‘We’ve got trucks moving at this sector or at these coordinates.’ You have somebody from there call a FAC who had facilities or who had assets available to him and put it right in and that didn’t work.

SM: What was the process of getting information from sensors to the military commanders so they could launch some form of an attack?

PL: Whatever it was, it took too long. That was frustrating from my standpoint. While the process that I described was necessary, it wasn’t available. There were too many levels of command that had to be gone through before you could get there. There were very few times that there were fighters with ordinance available for targets of opportunity. Usually, those are the kinds of assets that you would have that could meet this requirement. They weren't available. Usually, when they were, they were coming back from another target that was weathered in and they simply were targeted to orbit targets of opportunity. No fighter ever wanted to come back to the base without having his ordinance dispensed so, the number of FACs who put targets of opportunity available to these guys was probably a lot more than we will ever know. Those targets of
SM: The receiving station itself was actually run by civilian IBM personnel…

PL: Yes

SM: …with their own interpreters and it was something that, if perhaps, military
intelligence personnel that were involved with a direct link to you, the FAC or to air
assets that might have been in the area, that may be a better system could have evolved,
but just didn’t.

PL: There is no question a better system could have been put into place. I do
believe there were military intelligence people involved. Remember, I could be briefed
by our intelligence people at 23rd TASS who would tell me, without knowing what my
job was, two days earlier we had report from Task Force Alpha that there were trucks in
this area.

SM: Why are you being told two days later?

PL: Ah, I think you broke the code. Steve, it happened a lot.

SM: That must have been very frustrating.

PL: It was, it was. You know, that was part of the problem that guys have over
there is they matured and grew older and for the first time, reports from the States
showed, in the middle ‘60’s, ’66, ’67, campus riots and laying down in front of troop
trains. When I went back to the States, it was no fun. That’s part of the reason I went
back overseas. But then you started to question, and more people started to question the
military political decisions that were being made. In hindsight, those who chose to read
McNamara’s book probably got sick, in the process, as I did. But at the time you still had
the mission to do and then, while you can always see better ways to do it, you still did it.

I’m babbling.

SM: No, not at all, not at all. Did you ever have the opportunity to talk with the
IBM civilian personnel that worked at NKP?

PL: Oh yeah, on a regular basis.

SM: How was your relationship with them and how would they interact generally
with the Air Force personnel that were on base, especially in that chain that was supposed
to exist so that the transmission of information would occur?
PL: The head of the IBM project, and I wish I could remember his name, was an
All-American football player at Michigan. He had two Ph.D.s. He was a quite a person.
He and I had a great relationship. Step out of that personal relationship, into a
professional one. I think he was probably as frustrated as I was. That’s why I say,
between the military and between the IBM the was kind of a wall, even though you had a
brigadier general sitting there and you had some full colonels and light colonels, to get
something done, seemed to have a block at 7th Air Force.

SM: So, you would identify the block in terms of the flow of information in the
Air Force, not necessarily in IBM, or vice versa or, right in the middle?

PL: I have to believe it was right in the middle. Remember, unlike running a
business, military had tours of duty and who might be your friend at a control desk today,
rotated out tomorrow and some new guy came in, he had no idea, or if he had an idea, he
usually had his own way of doing things. That happened not in one place, but in several
up the line. So, we had our own choke pants.

SM: That brings up an interesting question and issue about the war, the rotation
system. What did you think about that as a pilot? My understanding, based on my
conversations with other men this weekend, is that it usually took three to six months to
really get used to being a FAC, and so, in a year tour, then you spend maybe six months
or nine months and then you’re gone. Then some other guy comes in and he’s got the
learning curve. Repeating the experience over and over again, learning being effective
and then splitting, what did you think of that at a policy?

PL: I thought it was a waste of assets, a waste of experience. There was no
question that the Vietnam War was conducted in a much different fashion than anything
previous. Probably it was a learning experience for everybody who conducted it and
hindsight is wonderful. I think we had a tremendous waste of talent, but I also think it
was not necessary to waste that talent because of the poor political decisions; correct
political decisions… totally different result. Your assessment is correct. Should we send
somebody over there for six months and improve productivity? No.

SM: Was this talked about much in the Air Force circle where you were running
in terms of ‘Why are we conducting a war in this fashion?’ Was it a topic of conversation
then, or is this exclusive to hindsight?
PL: No, it was a topic of conversation then, but not to the level that it was afterwards. It was almost in passing, because you were still talking about the professionals are going to do with their job. But when you take a group off, you’re going to have a group that are going to say, ‘Okay, my year of tour is up January 1st. If I stay at 5,500 feet or 6,000 feet, my chances of making it to January 1st are a whole lot better than if I go down to 4,000 feet or 3,500 feet.’ So, there’s a level of quality for doing a job as there was for every fighter pilot to suppress the target, to get the job done and I felt fortunate that I worked most of the time with guys who were very, very professional. Taxpayers got their money’s worth in terms of doing a political job.

SM: Based on what you just said, it seems like at a certain point, when you’re getting close to your DEROS, the mission becomes survivability versus the mission of winning. Was that the case at all?

PL: Unfortunately, yeah. Because statistics bore out the fact that so many guys in their last week got shot down. There was a tremendous amount of weight put on that last week and the last day, last mission. Who knows what caused it, but guys… As statistics came in, your chances of being shot down on the last week of your tour over here, or on your last mission, and as that word filters around, survivability becomes paramount. If you know this coming Tuesday you are going home, are you going to want to go out and fight a route access mission tomorrow? Doubtful. Or if you do, where are you going to stay, or having trouble with getting gas. There’s no question about that. I think that was part and parcel of the sociological psyche that made us up in the middle ‘60’s.

SM: While were on the topic on some of the broader issues of the war and strategies employed, what did you and other Air Force pilots that you talked with and other personnel, maybe civilians, IBM civilians, what did you think about the conduct of the war in terms of Westmoreland’s attrition policy, the body count, how we were measuring victory was basically by seeing if we couldn’t attrite the Vietnamese Forces as fast as they attrited ours?

PL: I can tie several things into that answer starting with the restrictions that we had a fighter pilots flying over North Vietnam. It started with a 25-mile boundary of the Chinese border that we couldn’t penetrate. It progressed to diameter circles of a safe area around the airfields where the MiGs were first kept when they came down from China,
they kept them in Phu [?]. We could see the MiGs at the end of the runway waiting to
take off after we dropped our bombs and got light on fuel. We couldn’t hit them. To the
ships of friendly countries, quote, unquote, ‘friendly’, that were at Haiphong Harbor
waiting to unload that we couldn’t hit, to the fact that military put such a priority on body
count and rolling stop count and it was early in the war that we had killed the entire
rolling stock of North Vietnamese at least twice. So we kind of took all of that with a
grain of salt. We talked about politicians in kind of a laughing matter, much like as we
grow older, certain events become important, I think also with retrospect looks that we
take things are much different today than they were back then. I’m not sure we had the
maturity as individuals to look at what was happening in the big picture. You can isolate
some of the individual things and say, ‘Ha! Ha! Boy, did they screw that up!’ But I don’t
think in the big picture we had it at that point. It became clearer and clearer as time went
by. Do we respect it? No. It’s interesting, Clinton was going back to Vietnam soon, but it
won't have any affect because he’s a lame duck President. He’s the first President to go
back there since Nixon. Nixon only went to Cam Ranh Bay, which at that point was a
very safe village. You know, and I’m babbling, I think the Vietnam War is going to be
marked by historians as the seed event of certainly the twentieth century. It may also be
the event that turns our society into something that we don’t fully recognize today. We
didn’t have before that the freedom of the borders that we have today. The restrictions on
immigrants, today there are almost none. The different groups that have come out of the
closet, the freedoms that we don’t have today that we had before that, the government
regulation that is some good and some bad, but becoming more so. I think history is
going to show the Vietnamese Conflict changed society in an irreversible way and we
don’t know where that’s leading us yet. I think that’s what Vietnam is going to prove to
be.

SM: What lessons do you think we should take away from the Vietnam War as a
nation? Well, what major lesson?

PL: Don’t underestimate the Oriental mind. I would think probably people who
debriefed Korea said the same thing. Do we have to learn our lessons all over again?
Yeah. Our human nature and our egos demand that we learn lessons all over again. We
can't take what other people have learned.
SM: Why don’t we go ahead and stop here. This will end the first interview with Pete Lappin.