Ron Frankum: This is Ron Frankum. I’m at the reunion of the USS Frank E. Evans. It is Friday, September the sixth. We’re in St. Louis, Missouri.

Sara Green: Two thousand two.

RF: Two thousand and two thank you. I’m here with the Box family and what we’ll do is first introduce the family and then we’ll talk a little bit about why we’re here. Mrs. Box if you’d begin.

Frances Box: I’m Frances Box. I’m the mother of Tom.

RF: And that’s Box, B-o-x so we have that for the record.

SG: That’s right. F-r-a-n-c-e-s, Belue, B-e-l-u-e, last name Box, B-o-x.

RF: That was the voice of Sara Box.

SG: Youngest and shyest daughter, Sara, S-a-r-a, Box, B-o-x, last name is Green, G-r-e-e-n. I’m the baby sister of Thomas Belue Box and Thomas is T-h-o-m-a-s and then B-e-l-u-e Box. Now, that’s my brother that was on the ship.

RF: Okay, good.

Julie Lea: Okay. I’m Julie. I’m the next of the youngest of the four. Tom was the oldest and Sara and I are the youngest two. My name is Julie Box Lea and Lea is spelled L-e-a.

RF: For the purposes of the interview if it’s okay, I’ll refer to Mrs. Box as Mrs. Box and Sara and Julie. Why don’t we begin, Mrs. Box, if you would, tell us a little bit about your son Thomas and then certainly Sara and Julie, you can chime in any time you like.

SG: Chime. I like that. Chime.
RF: But certainly, I’m curious a little bit about him and some of his background, his growing up and then also how he managed to get into the US Navy and then when he did get into the Navy.

FB: Gosh, there’ll be chiming now, won’t there? I was interviewed once on TV when we had the service for the memorial that we had in the welcome center in Athens, Alabama and I decided then I never wanted to be on the TV again. Everybody else said I did fine, but I didn’t think so. Tom was a normal little boy. He was happy, humble, outgoing.

JL: I’ll say humble.

RF: What made him get interested in joining the US Military? What were the events that led him to get into the military?

JL: Well, Daddy was in the Navy and then in the Air Force, so we moved around a lot when we were all little. So military life wasn’t anything new to any of us.

RF: So it was a part of the family tradition.

SG: We were acclimated this way. It was a way of life almost. We were all [means Janie and Sara] born on military bases. I cost seven whole dollars. That’s how much it costs.

JL: That was the cost of Momma’s meals.

FB: That’s right.

RF: So then did he [Tom] join the military?

JL: Yes.

RF: The circumstances in which he got into the military, into the US Navy.

JL: He was drafted.


FB: Maybe you all had better chime. You don’t get drafted in the Navy. That is correct isn’t it? You are going to be drafted in the Army and you volunteer for the Navy before you get drafted.

RF: So he was part of the draft system?

FB: Yes.

RF: Do you recall what year he joined?

SG: Sixty-eight.
JL: Sixty—Gosh. Is there a time limit on this?
RF: No, no. Keep going. We’re fine. This doesn’t exist [pointing to the
recorder].
JL: Oh. It’s a video camera.
SG: He’s not timing or chiming, okay. There you go.
JL: The girl who transcribes this is going to love this.
SG: Was it before we moved to Birmingham?
FB: Yes.
JL: Yeah, because according to his paperwork, he went in in Ohio.
SG: So we were in Belleville.
JL: So we were in Belleville, so ’67.
SG: Sixty-seven.
JL: That sounds right, ’67.
RF: And he made the choice then to go into the Navy.
SG: Join the Navy.
RF: Did he ever talk about any of the motivating factors for going into the Navy
versus the Army with any of you?
JL: No. But I would think maybe because Daddy had been in the Navy.
SG: That’s what Tom remembered the most was the Navy.
FB: His dad was in the Navy for five years then got out, then went back to school.
JL: On the GI bill.
FB: On the GI bill and then he joined the Air Force unit in Birmingham. We were
living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He joined this Air Force unit in Birmingham so that
means he was reserve. He was activated because of the Korean situation. So he was in
the Air Force.
SG: And this is my Daddy you’re talking about. Daniel William Box. Dr. Daniel
William Box.
FB: Well, after he got out of the Air Force, he went back to school. We used to
call him a professional student and got his PhD in Education Administration. So, that
way of life in the military had been—that’s what they all knew.
RF: It was embedded within all of them really.
FB: That’s what they all knew.

RF: Going in your correspondence with Thomas during his service in the military, what do you recall? What do you recollect about his thoughts and his feelings that he expressed to you guys during that time period from ’67 through ’69?

SG: He sent home recipes to Mother. Peanut butter blossom cookies are one of the recipes that he sent home. I remember that.

JL: It was in his handwriting and we kept it because it was in his handwriting.

SG: Our letters came unless it was our birthday. On our birthdays we had separate letters but the general letters came to Spooky, which is Julie, and Sara and he always told us to be good and behave and mind Mother.

JL: He sent a lot of post cards. One was from Washington.

SG: Lots of postcards.

JL: It had a beautiful—what’s up there? Hood? What’s the one in Washington?

RF: In Washington State? Yeah.

JL: Washington State. It was all blue and pretty and clouds and everything and on the back he said, “Ain’t that purty?” And he spelled it P-u-r-t-y. Do you remember that?

SG: Yes.

JL: It said, “Be good to my momma.”

SG: He was very tall. About 6’2, 6’3. He was taller than Daddy. Our last Christmas together was Christmas 1968. We have a picture of Tom in the back and then in descending order, Daddy, Mother, Janie, my sister in Birmingham, and then Julie and myself because I was the youngest. But it’s all in descending order and Tom was the tallest one in the back. He was very, very, tall.

JL: Shy.

SG: He was not as outgoing as I am, but he wasn’t as quiet as Julie. Would you say that?

JL: Yes.

RF: A healthy compromise between the two, right?

JL: Well, see, he was ten years older. She and I are thirteen months apart in age.

So for a very long time we were called the babies. And Momma treated us like twins
because what you do for one you do for the other. Tom used to call us the babies and he
took up lots of time with us, just the three of us.

SG: He liked me best. (Laughter)

JL: When she needed a spanking, he’d come out and get her and take her away
from Momma and remove her from the situation so she wouldn’t get a spanking. He
didn’t pick me up and move me. But he picked up Sara and took her away from there.

SG: You weren’t as bad as I was. (Laughter)

FB: There was a special bond between them.

JL: Between those two.

RF: Between Sara and Thomas.

SG: Well, I’m the baby. I’m sure it’s because I’m the baby. But Janie and Tom
had a special bond and Julie and Tom did, too.

JL: It was all different.

SG: But I’m the baby so he coddled me more.

FB: More protective of her.

JL: He always did take up for the underdog and he was big enough to do it.

SG: He was a lifeguard, too. He could swim very well. That’s why I had trouble
believing this in 1969. It was like, “No, not my brother. He could swim. The ocean
couldn’t get him down.”

FB: She was nine [actually ten].

SG: I was a baby. I was just nine [actually ten].

RF: In that period of 1968, he joined or he was assigned I should say to the U.S.S.
_Frank E. Evans_, which was a destroyer, a DD-754. Do you recall any sort of reactions,
his reactions, of being assigned to a destroyer or what he thought of that kind of duty or
assignment or some of the things when he was able to correspond with you, some of the
unique things about being a part of the ship?

FB: I’m sorry, I don’t. (Gets emotional)

RF: That’s fine.

SG: He used to send home reel-to-reel tapes and cassette tapes.

JL: And we would listen to them. I remember one time he said, he was talking
about one thing and then another and he changed subjects and then he stopped and said,
“Mom, if you wonder why I’m talking this way, it’s because I’m trying to think of something to say. I’m cutting this off in between. Then when I think of something to say, I’m going to cut it back on.” Do you remember that?

SG: Yes. He always described the ship in our letters to us about how big it was, but you can’t decipher emotion that much when he’s writing to a child.

RF: Even, I think what’s interesting is in the observations of what it was like to be aboard the ship. And it’s how his perception to his family which would be different than perhaps a shipmate to a shipmate.

SG: See, we haven’t met anyone yet that knew him. But we just got here yesterday.

JL: I’ve got his picture in case. We’re hoping to meet new ones.

RF: Well, there’s quite a few here that were aboard on that night. So perhaps you’ll have the opportunity. Let’s talk a little bit then about the incident. The incident I’m referring to, the collision between the Melbourne—

SG: HMS Melbourne.

RF: The Australian light carrier and then the Frank E. Evans. When did you, Mrs. Box, when did you first hear of the incident?

FB: I can't tell you exactly but we knew that something had happened to the ship. We had gotten that through the news and didn’t know any of the particulars at the time.

Then we got a call from a friend either in Fairborn, Ohio where we had lived or Bellville, Ohio where we were after my husband got out of the Air Force to check on us and we knew then they had heard the news and wondered if it had happened to us. We cannot quit agree on the actual time that we were informed. She [Sara] thinks it was about a week. I can't tell you. I don't know. But now, I will say, I have a leather briefcase full of his stuff, which I have not looked at in several years. It has only been recently that I can even talk about it without crying. I try not to.

SG: But we had, after the phone call came from our friend, and I’m sorry, I don’t remember the name, I was in the family room when the call came through. However many days later, two men from the United States Navy came to the door to see my mother and father and I showed them into the living room. Mother and Daddy had us leave. We were supposed to leave. So, of course, we snuck around the corner in the
foyer and listened. But we were supposed to be in our rooms. But we knew that this visit from these two Navy men were upset. Were they colonels, admirals, what? I don’t know.

JL: They were in dress uniforms.

FB: I don’t know. They were in uniforms. But I do remember since we mentioned this last night, I told somebody about my husband running into one of these officers.

SG: One of these two men that came to the door.

FB: One of these two that came to the door at a seminar after he [my husband] was going to education seminars when he had gotten out of the Air Force. Of course, he was out of the Air Force at the time.

JL: He had been out two [actually three] years. He retired in March of ’66.

SG: Yeah. He retired when we were in Fairborn [Ohio].

FB: We had moved from Helena at that time. But he ran into one of these officers at an educational seminar and I have recollected since last night, he was the public relations man for Segers. I believe Segers was the mayor of Birmingham. I could be wrong but that name came to me last night. And he was a VIP of Birmingham in some way. This man was his—

JL: His PR man.

SG: But he recognized Daddy.

FB: They recognized each other.

RF: This was the day when he came to the house?

SG: No, this is ten years later.

RF: Oh, ten years later. Okay.

SG: Ten years later. One of the officers that came to the house in June of 1969 was at this seminar with my father. He recognized my father and my father recognized him. They knew who the other was.

FB: And related the situation to each other. But I expounded last night to someone—

SG: Can't tell you who.

JL: Ken, I think.
FB: When the officers came [in 1969] and they left, I don’t know whether my husband said something to them or not, but they told the news representatives to lay off.

JL: Yeah. They were pestering us.

FB: And they did [lay off].

JL: Tom was the only one from Alabama.

SG: Well, I don’t know if he was the only one from Alabama aboard but he was the only one from Alabama of the seventy who were lost.

JL: Lost. I didn’t mean aboard.

RF: Sure, I understand.

JL: They [the press] could have had a field day with us and Daddy put a stop to it.

FB: I resent the news media interviewing these people that have just had a great loss.

SG: And exploiting your feelings.

FB: “And how did you feel? Would you like to tell us your emotions?” That’s personal. That’s not for the world.

RF: Absolutely.

FB: That’s personal. I was glad we didn’t have to face that.

RF: Let’s take on a tangent back to that time period as a mother and as sisters of someone who was serving overseas in a combat zone at the time, how did you feel about the way that the media was portraying the war in 1968, 1969? Did you feel as if you knew what was going on? Did you hope to see your son on TV?

SG: I just wanted him to walk through the door.

JL: It seemed like they had, they talked more about ground fighting on the ground in Vietnam. I don’t remember hearing as much about anything that was going on in the water. It was more about what was happening in the jungle or what city had been taken.

SG: I resent the fact that his name is not on the wall, nor the other seventy-three men.

RF: We’ll talk about that. We’ll definitely talk about that.

SG: We’ll get there, huh. You’ll chime in then won’t you?

RF: But it’s an interesting phenomenon here. We focus on the service men and women who were overseas, but there were families back home, which I would think,
would have been starving for information. Really, what you’re saying. You never heard
anything about what happened on the water.

SG: Not really. We’ve always had more questions than we had answers. But I
think if this kind of thing happened now, the news media would be crawling all over it.
Because what’s going on in Afghanistan, they can't seem to get enough of they feed on it.
You can find out what the guy had for breakfast.

FB: We don’t need to know everything the military is doing.

SG: That’s right. And they’re spreading it all over the place.

FB: I mean, there are those of us that can accept it and know all is going well and
we are trying, but look at those that do hear about it and can capitalize on it.

RF: Yeah. That’s true. If we go back to 1969 in June, you and your husband
heard the news. How did you talk to your daughters? How did you guys find out? I
guess I should ask about your brother.

SG: My father has seven brothers and sisters and they live in the Birmingham area
and we [girls] were gone. Julie and Janie and I were gone a good bit. They [Aunts and
Uncles] would come get us and take us to Smith Lake in Cullman County to spend two or
three days.

FB: Fifty miles.

SG: Fifty miles south. Excuse me. North then at that time. It’s south now.

FB: North then. It’s half way between where we live now and where we lived
then.

SG: So there were a lot of times that we were not around that Mother and Daddy
were just left alone. So they had their own private time, personal healing, dealing with
things while a lot of us, well, all three of us were gone a good bit at the time. I finally
asked Daddy because I could read between the lines pretty well even at a young age. I
asked Daddy, “Was Tom gone? What has happened? Is he gone?” Daddy said,
“They’re searching the area. We don’t know yet. We’re trying to find out.” But he
never would come out and say he’s gone. So it was several months after that, probably,
about the time I started back to school before I was ever told, “Yes he is dead. We don’t
have any reason to believe he is alive.” So, then again, I was the youngest one. I’m sure
they told Julie and Janie probably more.
FB: We didn’t talk about it a whole lot.

SG: We sure did feel it though.

JL: Yes. We felt it. You could cut the air with a knife. It was the following January when we put his stone in the cemetery in Athens (begins crying) which is where our family plot is.

SG: Well, and see you don’t have closure either. There was no body. There’s no closure. It’s hard to deal with. It was the following January before a memorial stone was set in the family plot in Athens, Alabama and my grandmother and grandfather, my maternal grandmother and grandfather are and were very well respected people then in Athens. You don’t see them break down that much but this just about destroyed them. My paternal grandmother was alive at this time and she was a rock. I know it bothered her, but Mrs. Box, my father’s mother was very strong through all this. A lot of my father’s siblings were equally strong. That’s the only time I’ve ever seen my Daddy cry. That’s the only time in my life I’ve ever seen my father cry. Of course, all you have to do is look at us and we’ll break down into tears. But that’s okay. Because, see, we were worried about this reunion. We were excited about it and I can’t speak for Mother and Julie, but this last week I got really nervous about this reunion. I didn’t know what to expect. And so far we’ve been treated very, very well and I’m sure that will continue. Everyone’s been very, very nice, but it’s not any easy thing to do in front of strangers, find out this information. But you’re back in 1969. Go right ahead.

RF: The other thing, I’m curious how the community responded to the family.

SG: Well, our minister was one of the first at the door. We went to Vestavia Hills United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama and we had three ministers. Dan Kitchens, Woodfin Grove—he let my sister Janie drive his car.

FB: It was a Jaguar.

SG: It was a Jaguar.

FB: It was gray [black]. And nobody drove that car back then.

SG: And we lived at Indian Hills at the time. And I mean hills, lots of hills and he let Janie drive it all through there. And the third minister.

JL: Ed Belue.
Ed Belue who is actually related to us on Mother’s side, the Belue side of the family. So we had ministers from church visiting, people from church. Now this is in Birmingham. Then we went to Athens [in 1972].

JL: There was a write up in the paper.

SG: There was a write up in the paper and a lot of people that mother had grown up with were, I would say supportive. Wouldn’t you?

FB: Oh, yes.

SG: And people from the church in Athens that we attended when we visited my grandmother and grandfather in Athens. So as far as community, it was more personal friends than community because in Helena—

JL: We hadn’t been there very long.

SG: We hadn’t been there very long and it was still considered a larger part of Birmingham. We were down in Shelby County instead of Jefferson County. There’s the big difference. You have the whole cast system. Now, everyone’s moving out of Birmingham and into Shelby County because there’s more room. However, we didn’t know a lot of people. We had [a few] really good neighbors in Birmingham that checked on us a lot.

FB: We just didn’t know people like we knew in Athens. We knew everybody in Athens.

RF: How about shipmates from the Frank E. Evans? Did you have any contact at all with the survivors?

FB: I received one letter once and I never answered it. I always regret that I didn’t. I still have the letter.

SG: Is this the letter you told me about last night?

FB: Uh-huh.

RF: I’m thinking in 1969, that would be a terribly difficult thing to have to do.

SG: You’re very wrought.

RF: Well, let’s talk, I guess then. Well, let me ask you guys, regarding the collision and the incident, what are other things; other remembrances or histories that you would like to make sure that are included in the record?

SG: We were told he was asleep. So we were glad of that.
RF: By your mother and father?

FB: I don’t know when.

JL: Who told us that? Maybe Daddy said we assumed he [Tom] was asleep.

FB: What time of the day was it?

JL: Three AM. It was in the middle of the night.

FB: Three AM their time on the third.

SG: So it was on the third there and the second here.

FB: And the second here.

RF: Three PM. Roughly, three or four AM.

SG: AM.

FB: Here it’d be noon.

SG: Oh, okay.

RF: Here it would be in the afternoon.

SG: Yeah. I’m with you.

FB: I’m sorry. I don’t know. I don’t know whether I’m blocking things out of my mind or just getting old and forgetful.

SG: Yeah. That’ll happen.

JL: Her father lived to be twelve days shy of ninety-seven and he practiced [medicine] until August [1983].

SG: Until he was ninety-three.

JL: He retired in August.

FB: Two years earlier.

JL: He retired at ninety-four and a half. He retired in August before he turned ninety-five in December. So she’s got longevity on that [her side].

SG: He was the oldest practicing physician in the state of Alabama.

RF: That’s pretty amazing.

FB: Of course, that tells you a lot of people knew him, especially there in Athens.

JL: And Tom was his only grandson. He had five granddaughters and one grandson. Tom was it. The write up in the local paper, the Athens paper was a nice one.

RF: Do you guys still have the write up from the paper?

SG: Oh yes.
FB: From Tom?
RF: Yes.
SG: I’ve never seen it.
JL: It’s in that briefcase.
SG: Obviously, I’ve not been allowed to look in this briefcase.
FB: Well, you’ve grown up now.
SG: I don’t ask for permission a whole lot any longer, do I?
JL: You’re taller than she is. (Laughter)
RF: Let’s jump ahead and we can jump back at any time, but let’s jump ahead
into the more recent years. You just learned about the association.
JL: In August, about three weeks ago.
RF: You really just learned about the association.
SG: Yeah. Just did. The dust hasn’t settled yet.
RF: Let’s talk about that a bit. Who’s the one? You, Julie, found the
announcement in one of the veteran’s magazines.
JL: The VFW (Veteran of Foreign Wars). The August issue of the VFW
Magazine and they list the reunions in the back each time and I would check them each
time. The one for the Army might be half a column. The one for the Navy is always
something like three columns long. It’s done alphabetically and I scan it every time it
comes and until this August issue, I have not been able to find anything about it
anywhere. Then there it was here. I about dropped my chops!
RF: What’s the first thing that came to your mind besides, “Oh my gosh!”
JL: That was the first and the second one was, “Where is this phone number?”
She works for the phone company so she knew where the area code was.
RF: Sara does.
JL: And she can handle computers. I don’t know anything about it. But they
didn’t give us an email address. It was just the area code and then Mr. Campbell’s
initials. LC or JC Campbell.
SG: JC
RF: JC is right at the end.
JL: And then the phone number. And I dialed immediately and got his wife, Sylvia. She said, “You are the twentieth family we’ve been able to find out of the seventy-four.” When I told them my maiden name, she said, “Tom Box, Helena. We’re so glad to be able to get in touch with you.” So twenty families out of seventy-four isn’t even a third of them.

RF: That’s right.

JL: She told us about an article that was in the Long Beach, California.

RF: Long Beach, right.

JL: Okay because the ship pulled out from there so that was considered its home port. She [Sylvia] said that the paper there ran an article listing, giving a lot of the information about it and then listing the names of the seventy-four missing. Then Tom was listed as being in Helena because that’s where we lived. That’s how she knew the name. She said, “He’s the only one from Alabama.” She said, “I can tell you’re from the South.” I said, “Yes m’am.”

FB: I don’t know how she could tell that? (Laughter)

JL: Gee, I don’t know either.

RF: Well, I think, Sara, you mentioned a little bit earlier about the feelings and emotions as August into early September, I imagine you guys made a pretty quick decision on whether or not to attend the reunion.

SG: Oh we knew we would attend. Julie took care of it that night. We were coming.

JL: I called and got the room that day. We knew we were coming.

FB: For them.

JL: We just didn’t know until night before last Momma could come.

SG: I couldn’t decide whether to bring my sons or not. I have a twenty-four year old named Thomas and I’m sorry my last name is Green. Thomas Belue, B-e-l-u-e, Green and he has red hair, but he’s absolutely adorable. I don’t care that he’s twenty-four years old. Then I have a twelve year old named Daniel William after my father, last name Green. I couldn’t decide whether to bring them or not. I took off work to come. I get paid to work Mother and Julie don’t. They take care of my father who’s an invalid. But, I don’t know if Julie got nervous, but I have been nervous this last week about it.
JL: I did.

SG: Did you? And then Mother, at the last minute, Mother finds someone to take care of Daddy and she calls me at home and says, “Guess what? I’m going with you to St. Louis.” I thought they’d have to rename the city. However, we were glad that she was able to come. The first thing Sylvia did was walk up and hug my mother. Isn’t that sweet? I think we should keep Sylvia. I like her.

RF: Sylvia Campbell, JC’s wife.

SG: If she likes my momma, then she’s all right.

RF: I would think that in the last short few weeks, a lot of memories have resurfaced. A lot of thoughts and feelings and also the history and all the good things. Maybe even some of the bad things. They all sort of come together in the—

SG: We don’t have bad things.

JL: She and I don’t have—

RF: But good bad things.

JL: Except for the accident, she and I don’t have a bad memory of Tom. He was calm.

SG: He was, as I said before, he was very, very tall. His presence was calm, but if he said something, Julie and I listened. If he said, “We’re not going to do that,” we didn’t do it.

RF: A commanding presence.

SG: Exactly. If we were lost, I remember we were on the Wright Pat Air Force Base. Mother or Daddy, someone was supposed to pick us up; I’m not quite sure who.

JL: From the pool.

SG: From the swimming pool.

JL: And I can’t swim.

SG: I know, she still can’t. She can sink really well, but she cannot swim. Anyway, there was a mix up in communication somehow and Julie and I weren’t frightened. We had Tom. And we just tramped all over the base until we found wherever Mother or Daddy were. I think we went to Daddy’s lab didn’t we?

JL: Yeah. We went to the lab. Because there were white coats everywhere, which that was normal.
SG: That’s what we were used to. That’s what I was used to. But we were never upset if Tom was there. I mean, his presence was just as calming and you felt just as secure with him as you—as I did with my father there.

JL: It was just as good as having Momma there.

SG: Or Daddy either one. We were in a car wreck one time. This idiot blonde hit us and when Tom got out of the car in the rain, he held the umbrella over her head to keep her from getting wet while she is looking up at my brother screaming. I was angry. I was in the back end of the station wagon.

JL: It was her fault.

SG: It was her fault and she was yelling at my brother. I don’t think so. Anyway, but he held that umbrella over her head saying, “Yes ma’am,” to her the whole time she was screaming at him. That’s just the way he was. Now, if he had gotten angry, she’d had jumped back in her car. But he did not do that often.

RF: It wasn’t his nature.

SG: No. It really wasn’t his nature. He was pretty gentle. Oooh! How’s she going to transcribe that? (Julie blows her nose.)

JL: Sorry. (Laughter)

RF: Well, one of the things we talked about briefly last night, Sara and I did and Mrs. Box was a little bit about the nature of the collision and the result of that having the names not be on the Vietnam Wall. I know that’s been a highly emotional, a highly charged issue for all of the members of the Frank E. Evans; those that were aboard the ship.

SG: When the Wall went up, Mother and Daddy made a special trip up there to see their son’s name.

JL: It never occurred to us it wouldn’t be on there.

SG: We didn’t realize that his death was unimportant until his name was not on that wall. It was important to us but we didn’t realize it until then. They came back just crestfallen because his name was not there.

RF: What was the reaction in terms of, or actually, what was the action in order to begin that process of trying to get the name on the Wall, trying to get his name as part of the fifty thousand plus who sacrificed themselves?
FB: Somebody did something.
SG: Well, there you go. Someone did something.
FB: Jerry Barksdale talked to me about that fairly recently and he’s a lawyer in Athens who I don’t know whether he was ever in service or not but he interviews military people. He writes article about them. We have a book that he has written and I think he’s writing another one. *In the Line of Duty* is the name of the book. He and I talked about it one time, but that’s as far as we ever got. Now, somebody else has done something previously, but I can't think of what it is.

RF: Are you familiar with what the association is doing with the House Bill?
JL: We just heard.
RF: They filled you in on that?
JL: Uh-huh. Sylvia told me the day I called.
RF: Okay, that’s good.
SG: That’s the first we had know of it. It was after they came back from Washington that Limestone County started dealing with the whole state of Alabama and all the counties to get all of Alabama’s lost on a wall at the welcome center. And as you can see, my brother’s name is right in the middle [shows Ron a photograph].
FB: His name is up there.
SG: We can see this wall many more times than we can the one in Washington.
FB: We were questioned last night, how could we put his name on the wall since it’s not on the wall in Washington?
SG: Yeah. Who asked us? “How did you get that done? How did you get his name up there?”
FB: But the local Vietnam veterans raised the money.
JL: Through private donations, hot cake breakfasts and that kind of thing.
FB: To get this done. And I guess that’s the reason they can put it on this wall and it’s not on the other wall.
SG: You don’t ask permission.
JL: It’s *our* wall.
SG: We didn’t need an act of Congress for it. It was *our* wall.
JL: We paid for it or it was paid for through private donations and there are sixty-seven counties in Alabama. They found at least one person from all sixty-seven counties. Many of them have a lot of names. Some of them have say, only two names. Some have maybe one. But there is someone from every county. Then, in the center portion, Limestone County is listed because we spearheaded it. We’re the smallest county in the state. We did it!

SG: That’s been healing for a lot of people, this wall. Not just us but for a lot of people who have lost loved ones.

RF: I think it’s probably been even more healing after your visit in the early eighties after ’82 with his name not being on the Wall, having it on the wall in Alabama. I think eventually, knowing JC and Sylvia and the rest of the association, the names will get into the Wall.

JL: Well, I hope so.

RF: Because, they’re going to make it happen.

JL: I believe that after meeting them.

RF: I think that would be just terribly disturbing. As you said, you alluded to the feelings as to perhaps his death wasn’t as significant.

JL: Well, that’s the way it makes you feel.

RF: That’s how they should feel. Certainly you know from your short experience here, that’s not true.

SG: Oh, absolutely.

JL: It’s good to know this association exists. We didn’t know. I had no idea that anything was going on. I can't tell you how shocked I was when I saw this in print after all that looking every time that issue came. Nothing was ever in it [in any of them].

SG: If it was, we didn’t see it. I’m sure they’ve had it in there before. You don’t think so?

JL: Not since Daddy’s been taking it.

FB: We take the American Legion and the VFW and what’s the other one?

Veterans of Foreign Wars. VFW

RF: VFW.

FB: And the DAV (Disabled American Veterans).
SG: When did you get your PhD?

RF: Nineteen eight-seven, ’88. Nineteen eighty-eight. Yeah. I had to think about that.

SG: I figured you would be able to tell me the date, the time, what you were wearing and the whole nine yards.

RF: After a while, it all becomes a blur. Let me ask you, Julie, about Thomas. What’s your favorite memory of him? When you think back and your absolute favorite thing.

JL: Sara mentioned a minute ago that Daddy had seven siblings. He had three sisters and four brothers. There were eight of them. He’s the second of the oldest, but he’s the oldest boy. His brother just—Sonny Boy older than Polly? The brother just younger than Daddy. We called him Sonny Boy. It wasn’t his real name. It was Stewart Jennings but we called him Sonny Boy. He was quiet and calm and—

SG: Everyone loved him.

JL: And everyone loved him and he loved us. He never raised his voice to us. Everything, with Sonny Boy, everything was okay. He loved you period no matter what you did. Tom was like that. I can't swim, don’t like to fish. But one day Tom said, “Let’s go to—” Daddy was stationed at Wright-Pat in Ohio—he said, “I’m going to go to the—” where was that quarry? It was like a rock quarry and there were a lot of deep pools and I guess there were fish in there. But he [Tom] said, “Let’s go.” So I went with him and I didn’t want to bait the hook I just wanted to be with Tom. HE had a pocket knife and I was either holding it [his knife] or he had laid it down and I had picked it up and was looking at it. He said, “Don’t open the knife. You’ll cut yourself.” I was in first or second grade. I said, “Oh, okay.” The first thing I did was open the knife. He said, “Just leave the knife alone and lay it down. I’ll close it.” I said, “Okay.” And I don’t do it. I close the knife and of course, slash my hand [cut my thumb]. He did not blow up. He didn’t raise his voice. He just calmly took out his hanky; put it over my hand—we took the knife out—then put the hanky over my hand and closed the knife.

SG: Boy, I’m glad he took that knife out.
JL: And then picked up his rod and reel and went back to fishing. He didn’t blow up. Now, there are members of our family who have short fuses and quick tempers. Tom didn’t have that. Just as calm as he could be.

SG: Was I there?

JL: You must not have been.

SG: Was Janie there?

JL: No. Tom and I were the only ones in the boat. He took us to see Mary Poppins and he took us to see—

SG: Was he with us for The Sound of Music?

JL: Yes. The Sound of Music. We had his total attention. He brought us popcorn.

SG: He spent time with us.

JL: He did. He didn’t fuss if we spilled anything.

SG: They had these stupid cartoons at drive-in theatres. Yogi Bear. And he would take all of us to the cartoons and Janie would want to go see another movie—

JL: It was that blue and white ’65 Chevy truck.

SG: Buy us popcorn and sit us out there.

JL: He liked being with us. We weren’t a chore. We weren’t two little sisters who were a bother or a problem or a pest.

SG: He used to make smoke bombs in mother’s popcorn popper. (Laughter) We still have this popcorn popper. It looks like it’s been to the moon and back. He made smoke bombs in this popcorn popper when we lived in Fairborn, Ohio on Bordeaux Drive next to Wright Pat Air Force Base—do you remember this? And he would light them and they’d look like, you know what homemade soap looks like now when people make homemade soap? It’s not white. It’s kind of got that dirty look.

JL: Like brown sugar.

SG: Well, this had that dirty look and it just looked like chunks of dirty soap is what it looked like. He would light that in the back yard and the whole back yard would fill up with smoke. And not just ours, oh no. We shared with our neighbors. I mean, it
was all up and down the street. We would go out and play in it. I was short enough, for some reason the smoke was always, I would always run right under the smoke. I could see where I was going. But people that were taller than I was could not see it. But I do remember that. I remember the smoke bombs. I remember the horny toad. Is that what you call them?

RF: Yes. Horny toads.

SG: He had a horny toad that was a pet and when you have four children at the table and the youngest one doesn’t want to drink her milk because she’s just full and she doesn’t want to, which was me, he [Tom] would have already finished his meal and he would get the milk and pour himself a full glass and he would say, “Okay, Sara, I’m going to race you.” I’d grab my milk and we’d race and of course, I had that much left so I would win. But it kept me from getting in trouble and that was his whole point in doing it. We would walk to school together. I didn’t like school. Not a good time. I walked home during recess the first day of school.

JL: We lived within sight of the school.

SG: Mother made me go back.

JL: You had a thing going with the mailman and the tootsie rolls. You gave up a lot to go to school.

SG: That’s right.

FB: The mailman would draw her up two or three boxes worth.

SG: See, I was just a precious child.

FB: And he had tootsie rolls for her. Well, now, we’ve got to go back to the bombs.

SG: That’s all I remember of the bombs. I remember it tearing up that popcorn popper.

RF: There’s more to the story.

FB: Okay, he had this in the science fair out at the school.

JL: It was eighth grade wasn’t it?

FB: I don’t know.

JL: It was at Fairborn wasn’t it?

FB: Yeah. Okay. He got to go to the city.
JL: For the finals. For the city finals in the science fair.
FB: It was in the high school there in Fairborn and they had it in the gym. Well,
here comes the judges and his [Tom’s] exhibit is fine.
JL: The rocket goes up and everything.
FB: Then some of the other kids wanted him to do it again. “Let’s see it again!”
He did it again. A beaker or something broke. The signs up on the—
JL: Up on the ceiling of the gym.
FB: There was no ceiling there. It was just
RF: Rafters
FB: Right, the rafters.
JL: Those metal crisscross rafters.
FB: Up to the roof on the inside and it cut his [Tom’s] pants and a piece of it
[glass] lodged in a boy’s foot [actually throat]. He was all right. He got all right. But
after that, they had a nurse on duty.
JL: At all science fairs. (Laughter_
FB: When Tom was at a science fair.
SG: Do you remember when he played—now you told me this story, I don’t
remember this. But he played baseball and he was like just barely old enough to play
baseball and Tom was always very strong. Very tall, very strong, very muscular. He
broke the bat and the coach said, “Here, take this home to your mother,” thinking,
“ Wouldn’t she be proud to have a bat that her son broke because he’s so strong and hit
the ball so hard.” “Oh, my mother doesn’t want a broken bat.”
FB: “Oh no. I’m scared to take it home.”
SG: “She doesn’t want a bat. She’ll know I broke it.” We’d love to have that bat.
FB: Oh, yeah. What I remember most, (gets choked up) when we saw him at
Christmas time and we have a picture of all of us together which was the last time we saw
him, it was at the foot of the basement steps, the garage. The car is parked in the
basement and the steps walk off—
JL: Off the family room, off the den.
FB: Okay. We were at the foot of the basement and he said, “I love you. No
matter what happens, I love you all.” (Crying) That stands out more than anything else.
SG: He just told me to leave his tootsie rolls alone. I didn’t know anything about this.

JL: He played the trumpet, beautifully.

SG: Yes, he did.

JL: You think Doc Severenсон’s good; he’s got nothing on Tom. He loved to eat and Momma’s a good cook. Because he was older than the rest of us, he had a room to himself—the only boy and he had a room to himself. And in Fairborn—are we taking too much time?

RF: No. Not at all.

JL: In Fairborn, Ohio and in Bellville, Ohio, we lived back to back; we had a basement in both houses. That’s where his room was and then the rest of us were upstairs. He would walk up the stairs playing the trumpet, holding and playing with the right hand and the steps in Bellville came up into the kitchen. Do you remember this? And he’d walk through the kitchen and pick up a piece of whatever Momma had just made, walk back down stairs, never miss a note. You don’t get better on the trumpet than he was.

SG: Yeah. He was good.

JL: Oh, he was good. He was so good.

RF: He sounds kind of like the perfect son and the perfect brother, like a really good brother.

SG: I wouldn’t have wanted anyone else.

JL: I get tickled. Her [Sara] sons are twelve years apart in age. The older one’s named for Tom. The younger one’s named for Daddy.

SG: But he doesn’t act like it.

JL: Yes.

SG: I’m thankful for that. He doesn’t.

JL: When her younger son was trying to decide exactly who our brother was, he thought, “Well, they’re both named Tom,” he was about six when he came up with this. He said, “They’re both named Tom but they don’t look alike. One’s here and wasn’t, one isn’t.” So he finally came up with a way to divide them, to separate them. He called his brother, Brother and he calls our brother, Uncle Brother. That did it.
SG: This is Tom, my brother, Tom my son, Daniel, my son and that’s my Daddy.

(Looking at pictures) That’s Tom, my brother. I didn’t know if anybody [here] would want to see. I know they just won’t show up in the air.

JL: See, we want to meet someone that knew him.

SG: That was the picture from the ship.

RF: I can see him in all y’all. All of your faces have a similar look to them.

SG: Do you think so?

RF: Oh, absolutely.

JL: Now, his hair was darker than that. His hair was Momma’s color and Sara’s.

His hair is darker than that.

SG: You’re going to have to put that [the photo] up. (Tearing up)

RF: I think a lot of the shipmates would probably appreciate the opportunity to take look at that. Well, let me ask you guys, and maybe this would be probably a good time to stop it. Before we do, let me give you and opportunity, if there’s something you’d like to add, something you’d like people to know about Tom, about that period of time or even where you’d like to see the resolution of the Wall issue for Vietnam veterans and give you guys an opportunity to say anything you want to or nothing at all. You may begin Sara. I can see it on your face.

SG: Oh well, the Vietnam War was a political farce. Men were ordered not to shoot and not to defend themselves but yet my brother had to lose his life over this political farce. Look how many years it lasted. They didn’t want us there. They didn’t need us there and they ended up being a Communist country anyway, so we had no business being there whatsoever, none. Even the people we were defending did not want us there. So, lots of lives were lost for absolutely no reason other than political gain. But that’s something they’ll have to deal with when they meet their judgment, won’t they?

JL: Well, if Lyndon Johnson had had sons instead of daughters, he might not have been so gung ho to just send all these boys in. His girls were safe.

SG: They were ugly but they were safe.

RF: Now, now.

JL: Don’t put that on, don’t say that.

RF: Mrs. Box, I will let you have the last word if you would like the last word.
SG: Do you have a last word?

FB: That there people’s last word.

RF: Okay. Well, let me end and say I appreciate the opportunity to spend this
time talking to you guys and learning a little bit more about Thomas. I can tell from you
and Sara and Julie that he was a fine brother. I hope to, at the reunion, you have an
opportunity to meet somebody here who has served with him so you can learn a little bit
about that time in his life.

JL: I hope so too. See, Sara and I were so young when it happened. I was eleven
and she had not yet turned ten and he’d been out of the house for almost three years
because Daddy sent him to military school to finish high school.

SG: It was that nurse at the high school. (Laughter)

JL: It was because of the eighth grade science fair.

SG: He’s legendary.

JL: It is no longer in existence. The buildings are still there but Columbia
Military Academy in Columbia, Tennessee is where Tom finished high school. So he
was gone out of the house for three years and in the life span of a child as young as she
and I were, that’s a long time. Three years is almost, well, a little bit better than a third of
your life. He was out of the house for so long that we don’t have anything but good
memories. Anything she [Mama] would have to say reminding us of things he did when
he was little and that kind of thing, just add to it. But they’re all good. There’s not a
bad—

SG: He was a good baby, too, Mother says.

FB: Yes. He was.

SG: Of course, I was the best baby. It might have been because Tom was there.

RF: Kept you out of trouble.

SG: Kept me out of trouble.

RF: This ends the oral history interview with the Box family. Let me thank you
all for being here with me.

SG: Thank you for your time.