Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Thomas Norris on the second of October, the year 2001 at approximately 2:12. We are in the Southwest Collections Library interview room in Lubbock, Texas. I am accompanied by Jon Bernstein, graduate research assistant, and Jenny Board, a graduate student of the history department. We are also accompanied by Linda Norris, Mr. Norris’s wife. Sir, why don’t we begin with a brief discussion of your early life. If you would tell us when and where you were born and where you grew up.

Thomas Norris: Okay. I was born in Godfrey, Illinois, one of fourteen children. I did a lot of farm labor, that type of early activity. It seemed like I was always learning to work or do something with a family that size. It was back then when I was probably four or five years old that I remember first wanting to fly. Seeing airplanes flying over, I just couldn’t quite stand seeing somebody else do it and not being able to do it. As I grew up and finished high school I decided to go to college because you needed two years of college to get into the cadet program and be a pilot. So it was during that time that I had my first flight in an airplane. I think I was probably eighteen or nineteen and that I paid for myself, it cost me five bucks. I went through ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps), got my two years in, went to the recruiter and said, “I’m here, send me to pilot training.” He said, “I’ll take your application, but I can’t. They quit doing that.” I said, “Well how do I get to do it?” He said, “Well you’ve got to get a college degree.”
So very begrudgingly I went back three more years and got a college degree. It took me that much longer. After that, well, I did start pilot training at Laredo Air Force Base and flew the T-37 and a T-33. I was going to fly helicopters, but the Vietnamese got all of the helicopters and so I went back to be an instructor in the ATC, Air Training Command. It during that period at Moody Air Force Base that—I was there for about three years—I got my assignment to 105 training and to Southeast Asia. I went to Nellis Air Force Base and went through 105 training there for about six months, finished that up early spring in 1967. Then went to Southeast Asia in May and started flying combat missions. At that time we were allocated, let’s say, or at least expected to get a hundred missions, at which time you could return to the United States. There was no length of time that you had to be there, just a hundred missions. I was shot down on my forty-seventh mission. So I got forty-six-and-a-half missions. I was almost half done when on August 12, [1967] I got shot down. I started about May the twelfth. So I was shot down over Hanoi bombing the Canal de Rapides Bridge with three-thousand pound bombs. We did knock the bridge down. I was hit by 37- or 57-mm anti-aircraft fire pulling off of the target. I took a direct hit on the nose cone, it blew it off. Shrapnel and pieces of airplane went through the engine. Well, the engine was still running and I was able to make it about twenty miles to the base of what we called Thud Ridge where I had to bail out because the airplane wouldn’t climb and it wouldn’t go over the next hill. About five minutes later I was captured by the villagers and they held me for a couple hours until the (North Vietnamese) Army came and got me. The Army picked me up in a jeep, drove me to an airfield blindfolded, put me on a helicopter and flew me to the prison camp. So I was in a prison camp about four hours after I was shot down. We’ll get into the details of confinement later. To release, I was released on October or excuse me, March 14, 1973 and came back to the United States. I went through recurrency training at Randolph Air Force base with T-38s. I met Linda at that point and we got married some time later. Since then, why, I flew T-38s in the instrument flight center. Went to the T-41 program, which is a screening program in Hondo, Texas, and went to the War College in Maxwell Air Force Base. Then after that I got out of flying and I was in the comptroller field where I was director of accounting and finance for Air Training Command, then Pacific Air Forces at Hawaii, and then back to Lackland Air Force Base where I retired as a
comptroller. After getting out of the military I worked for Braniff Airlines, TWA, and I currently fly for United Parcel Service. That brings us up to date.

SM: Yes, sir. Okay. Thank you.

TN: Today I made a motor home trip to Lubbock, Texas. (Laughing) I find myself in a room with Steve, Jenny, and Jon. (Laughing)

SM: A couple questions about growing up on a farm. First of all, I would imagine that that was rather hard work and growing up with fourteen other brothers and sisters.

TN: From a kid’s point of view, it was almost an idyllic point of view. We’d take off all of our clothes and run up and down the creek beds in the summertime.

SM: Oh, okay.

TN: Go out and live in the woods for two or three days and shoot squirrels out of season and do things like that. We did have to work and the smell of fresh mown hay gives me cold chills. It doesn’t smell good to me. (Laughing) I know what it means to be in a barn with a bunch of hay. Yeah, we did a lot of hoe work and stuff like that. But we actually lived on and off the farm. We lived in a subdivision-type area, a suburb area of Alton, Illinois, back and forth. My dad never liked staying any place longer than three years. So he had these two places and we moved back and forth. I liked the farm the best, still do.

SM: Was he in the service during the Second World War?

TN: World War I.

SM: World War I!

TN: Corporal Norris.

SM: What did he do?

TN: He didn’t do anything specific because he didn’t go into battle. But all of my brothers, and there are six other brothers that are alive, all served in the military. My oldest brother Joe was a B-17 pilot in World War II. My next brother John landed at Normandy and fought all through Europe, Battle of the Bulge, the whole bit. He was wounded once. Out of his company of 120-something there was only three or four of them that escaped [death or serious injury]. He was waiting to invade Japan and they kept extending his leave and extending his leave then they dropped the bomb and they
told him just to muster out. That was a big day for the family. I don’t know if he would have survived that. My other two brothers, next brothers after that, Bob and Harold served in the Navy. Neither of them saw service or duty. My next brother Paul, just older then me, was in the Army Reserve. Then my youngest brother was in the Navy and none of them saw any service, combat service.

SM: As you were growing up, would they discuss that service much with you?

TN: My brother that invaded Normandy would not. Once in a while—when I was getting ready to go to Vietnam, he gave me some advice on how to survive, which kind of caught me off guard because he would never hardly ever talk about it. We would ask him questions and he would bypass them. As kids, you know, kids ask dumb questions and he would bypass those questions. But he did tell me a few stories about shooting at Tiger Tanks with bazookas and having the shell bounce off and running forward and that type of stuff. The Tiger Tank shooting down hedgerows and the trees popping up, you know, things that impressed him. The other brother, the one that flew the B-17, he didn’t not see any combat and he is very talkative about his flying episodes.

SM: What was the advice that your brother was giving you?

TN: “Save your strength.”

SM: Okay

TN: He said, “Save your strength because when you need it, it won’t be there if you waste it.” He got that feeling from being on the ground as an infantryman that when the time came to run for it or something like that the guys didn’t have enough and they fell behind and they were lost, that type of thing. Or if then needed to dash from one hole to another they just couldn’t do it fast enough. So that was his advice to me. It didn’t apply to an airplane jock very much, but I took it to heart.

SM: Did the experiences of your brothers have much of an influence on your decision to serve or was it principally you just wanted to fly?

TN: Principally I just wanted to fly. But I have to admit that my brother who was a pilot during that period—I was young, probably five or six years old, four or five years old. He would bring home paraphernalia like a parachute harness. We’d hang them in the tree and swing in them and that type of stuff. He’d bring home smoke flares and that
type stuff. But mainly my desire to fly just came from watching airplanes fly over and
wanting to do that.
SM: What made you decide to go to Southern Illinois?
TN: I can’t answer that question. I guess I got a scholarship to go there and
that’s the reason. It was closest, and it was a state school, and it was the cheapest. Since
I was paying my own way through school I went where the cheapest bucks were and the
closest. It was about a two-hour drive from where I lived.
SM: Is that a land grant school?
TN: Yes, it is. It’s a state school in land grant and therefore they had to offer
ROTC, they had to do it. So it was required that I go the first two years. You’re familiar
with that.
SM: Yes, sir. So you decided after that you definitely wanted to go Air Force
and stay in ROTC?
TN: Oh, absolutely. When I was in high school I was asked to participate in a
careers week and I wanted to represent the guy who was going to talk about flying.
When he came in he was a civilian pilot and all I wanted to know about was military
stuff. He had to, not apologize, but say, “I’m sorry. This is civilian flying.” I said,
“Okay. That’s close enough.” So we went from there. I have from the beginning that it
was going to be military flying. I guess one of the things that really struck me the most
about military flying were the early movies where all the guys are flying in formation and
they do this type thing. Peeling off to the side in their prop airplanes, that was very
stimulating. When I go out to an airport today and that airplane takes off, I have to look.
It’s still stimulating. The louder the better. I saw you had some bumper stickers in there,
we’ve got one that says something like, “Jet Noise: The Sound of Freedom.” You know
those types of things.
SM: Yes sir. What did you study in college?
TN: I studied—I started out in engineering. I was going to get my money’s
worth if I was going to do it. (Laughing) I wasn’t prepared for that. I got into
management analysis, or not management analysis, industrial management in applied
science. That was my degree, undergraduate degree. My advanced degree is
management analysis.
SM: When you got into the Air Force, if you would, please describe your introduction into the Air Force, the training you received, the initial training. Or was the focus mostly on Cold War aspects—?

TN: Yes. Of course during that period we were under the umbrella of threat from nuclear weapons so that had a big effect on my life. I have to admit that a lot of my thinking dwelt around that one thing, that threat. In the early stages why, it was just a matter— I was commissioned at ROTC and then I waited six months until they called me to active duty. I drove to the Laredo Air Force Base and just entered pilot training. I was there a year. So it was just an intensive course, very intensive course of learning how to fly jets. After that they sent me to survival school at Stead Air Force Base. Now Stead Air Force Base Survival School was based upon the experience that the POWs (prisoners of war) had in Korea and they applied that to us very thoroughly. It was a very challenging course and it was practice bleeding. Does that mean anything to you?

SM: No, sir.

TN: Okay. Anytime we’d do something that hurts or something you know that we think is—that you actually kind of have to bleed to show you’re going to bleed. We call that practice bleeding. Well, they throw you in cells, they play loud music, and they antagonize you and they keep you awake. They may get you wet and cold and wear your resistance down and make you go through interrogations, put bags over your head and march you around so you’re disoriented, that type of stuff. All the things that you would experience in a POW camp we had to do without the pain or the actual conflict with Vietnamese. Then we had to do three days of field training: escape and evasion. Where they give you a little bit of food and a piece of a parachute and they send you out there for three days and say, “Survive on your own.” So we did that. That was the survival training and it was very, very effective. I will say right now that survival training prepared me quite well for the prison environment. There were no surprises. It was almost to the script, except it was more brutal, of course. But it followed the script very nicely.

SM: How about the code of conduct? Did they cover that in this training?

TN: Absolutely, absolutely. The code of conduct at that time was given to us and that came out of the Korean War, also. But the code of conduct was designed to prevent
what happened in Korea and I’ll leave that as it is. The idea of the code of conduct was
that you will not give anything but name, rank, serial number, and date of birth unless
you feel like you are going to lose your mind or your life and then you can start lying or
deceiving. You’ve got to be careful about that type of thing because an experienced
interrogator can pick you apart on those eventually over time. But that was the code of
conduct at that time. Under those conditions you could lie, but you couldn’t really go
beyond lying and that’s where they left it.

SM: Excuse me. Jen did you have any questions concerning the SERE (survival,
evasion, resistance, and escape) training that he received, the survival school training?

Jenny Board: No. That covered it pretty well.

SM: How about you Jon?

TN: You went through SERE Training?

J. Board: No, sir. (Laughing)

TN: Oh, okay.

J. Board: But that’s part of my research.

TN: Oh, okay. As an aside, I evaluated, after I got back in 1978, ’77 or ’78, I
evaluated the Navy school at Brunswick and then went to—where does the Air Force
have theirs now?

J. Board: Fairchild.

TN: Fairchild, Spokane, and evaluated those and compared them. Somewhere at
home I have a manuscript or at least a report that we did on that. Would you like to see
it?

J. Board: Yes, sir.

TN: Okay, remind me of that if you don’t hear from me.

J. Board: Okay.

TN: It’s pretty good.

SM: Was there—in retrospect was there anything they could have added or done
differently in that early training, that POW training?

TN: The main thing they could’ve prepared us for, that was the hardest thing in a
prisoner of war camp, was that once you did break, that once you did start giving
information that you felt like you’d stabbed your country, your friends that were still
flying, and your friends that may have been in the camp in the back. That was the hardest
thing to live with because I wasn’t prepared for that. Prepared to be a traitor or whatever
it is. The John Wayne complex and I use that term not offhand. The John Wayne
complex was in us and the John Wayne Complex didn’t exist as we thought it would. We
weren’t as tough as we thought we were. It took me a long time before I was able to get
in rooms with other people to find out that basically everyone broke at some point and
gave information. Well, that gave me great relief. That made me feel like you know,
maybe I’m a real person after all and I know who I am now, but it’s not as bad as I
thought it was. That was really a tough part to grow up in the environment that I grew up
in, that the Americans don’t talk and this kind of stuff, you die first and all that stuff.
Well, pain is pretty stimulating. It caused me to have great relief when I found out that I
wasn’t alone.

SM: When did you finally learn that you were not alone?

TN: I was in solitary confinement for thirty days with no contact with the other
prisoners. I tried and that put me back in solitary confinement for a while. The first
roommate I had, he was kind of like I was, but that’s not representative, I just meant he
was like I was. It probably took half a year at least before I had enough information to
know that it was that way. It probably wasn’t universal, but it was universal among those
who survived. If a guy didn’t survive you don’t know if he held out or not, so we don’t
know that. But for those that did survive, the toughest to the weakest, it was universal to
some degree.

SM: But during your training they did tell you as students that everybody has
their breaking point and eventually you probably would hit it?

TN: I don’t recall that, you know, that’s a lot of years ago, that’s back in the early
’60s, like 1963. The only thing I remember them saying is that, “If you feel like you’re
going to lose your mind or your life then start lying.” You know, I started giving
information. I did learn one thing from the Vietnamese and that is that in the back of my
mind I almost committed suicide. I considered it because—what happened was in the
back of mind I always had this ace in the hole, if I have to I’ll tell them truth. But when I
did tell them the truth they didn’t know the difference. It didn’t mean anything to them. I
was like, “King’s X.” Well he didn’t care, it didn’t mean anything to him, but my ace in
the hole was gone and I had no escape after that. So I made a pact with myself that if it
got so bad that I couldn’t stand it, you know the devices, the strap they use in the room is
still there and there was bars in the cell that you could use and it’d strangled me
unconscious many times. So being unconscious was an easy way out. So that wasn’t any
big deal. But fortunately it never came to that.

SM: After you finished your survival, escape, and evasion training, where did
you go?

TN: After there I went to Randolph Air Force Base in Texas and while I was
there I went to what we call PIT, pilot instructor training. That’s where you learn how to
be an instructor. Then following that, I went to Moody Air Force Base, Georgia where I
was an instructor for three years.

SM: While you were an instructor there, of course, the Vietnam War was in full
swing.

TN: Yeah, that’s right.

SM: What did you hear about the war? While you were an instructor there for
three years, of course, there was time for other pilots to come back from Southeast Asia
and become instructors themselves.

TN: That’s true.

SM: Did you meet any Vietnam veterans?

TN: A few.

SM: Did you talk about the war?

TN: A few. But again I can only remember one person distinctly who had come
back from the war. I had one of my students who was flying 130s over there at the time
and I’d talked to him. Nobody really wanted to say much. The instructor I talked to he
just wouldn’t give any details. He wouldn’t say much, which kind of disappointed me
because anytime you’re going into a new position like that you kind of like to have as
much information as you can get. I felt that he—I don’t know why he didn’t want to talk
about it, but he didn’t. He wasn’t that close a friend, so I guess maybe he thought you
had to go learn for yourself. Whatever. I can’t say.

SM: What was he training pilots on?

TN: In the T-37.
SM: You were training on the same?

TN: Yes.

SM: Okay. What did you understand or think the United States was trying to accomplish in Southeast Asia at that time before you actually went over?

TN: Yeah. At the time I went over the war protesting had, if it started was very minimal. The news media was very, I would say, positive about what was happening. They were saying about all these things we did on a daily bases over there and what was happening. It was positive. So I went over there, or at least I went through training and that, with a positive attitude. The biggest thing about the Vietnam War was it didn’t seem to have any kind of a direction. Even I could see that. You know, where are we going with this and how are we going to end it? What are we doing? Is it just punishment or are we going to eventually try to take over North Vietnam? What are we doing? At the time it just seemed to be retribution. But my real concept of the war over there was that we were trying to make South Vietnam like South Korea. By doing that we would block off the North but as we all know the way the geography is set up that wasn’t very feasible and it didn’t work. But that’s kind of the way I looked at it when I went over there.

SM: What did you think when you got your orders that you were going to Vietnam?

TN: Now that’s a good question because I didn’t have to go. I was coming up on my termination date from my first tour of duty, five years, and I could have put in my resignation at that time and gotten out. The airlines were really hiring and done that. But I didn’t feel comfortable with that, maybe it’s the family history. So I decided that I would volunteer for certain airplanes that would give me a one-year commitment, then after my one year was up in Vietnam I’d come back and get out if I wanted to. Make my decision with a clear mind and a clear conscience. So instead of the ones that I volunteered for I got the F-105, which gave me a four-year commitment. (Laughing) And that made me mad so I put in a non-voluntary statement meaning they couldn’t give me another assignment without me agreeing to do so. Then I get over to Vietnam and I was flying and they did away with non-voluntary statements and that made me mad again.
SM: What did you put in for that you didn’t get?

TN: I put in for the AT-37, which is just a fighter version of the—it’s different but its—and the F-5 which is a T-38, the A-1 Skyraider and what else? I think that’s it. I didn’t want to fly Bird Dogs, too slow. But that’s what I put in for and they gave me the F-105. You know, next slot up, next name.

SM: Well what was it like transitioning into the 105?

TN: Easy. F-105 is the easiest airplane I have ever flown. When I say it was easy, it took the normal process to learn how to fly a different piece of equipment. The flying aspects of flying from one airplane to another is very similar, that size airplane, size means a lot. But the 105 had a lot of equipment in it and, of course, you’ve got all your armaments and all of your boards and stuff just like that and the navigation system. The 105 is designed as a low-level nuclear weapons delivery airplane. They have an internal bomb bay and carry nukes, that’s what it did. It set hot alert in Europe to go bomb Russia at low level and that’s what it was designed for. They just decided to hang iron bombs on it and let us dive bomb with them. But it wasn’t real suited for that but it worked okay. It was a work horse.

SM: What kind of target acquisition training did you have and what kind of range time did you have in terms of actually engaging—?

TN: Not enough. Yeah. The problem there was they trained us to be nuclear weapons delivery pilots and we weren’t going to do that. We did that and we also did the dive bombing, shooting rockets and dropping bombs. We also did air-to-air a little bit. We did formation and we did refueling and all that. All that was at apropos. But the nuclear weapons delivery stuff we could have used that on the range because I definitely was not that proficient by the time I went over there. When I started flying combat, I hadn’t flown in about two-and-a-half months. So the first combat mission I flew was after not being in an airplane for two-and-a-half months.

SM: Go ahead and describe the trip over. From when you finally finished your training and were going over to Vietnam to Southeast Asia.

TN: Okay. Yes.

SM: Where did you enter the country and—?
TN: I finished my training in like February, took all the leave that I had so I could spend time with my wife and kids, previous wife. We went back to Illinois, Godfrey, Illinois and when the time came I just went over by myself on a commercial aircraft. I flew to the Philippines and in the Philippines I went through jungle survival school and that was neat. We went up in the mountains, it was not a starvation deal, we lived pretty good. We had a Negrito—are you familiar with the Negritos in the Philippines? Okay—guide with us and he showed us how to cook manioc and how to get water out of the vines because we were going into the jungle environment. That was nice. So we did that and then before we left to go to Vietnam, my friend and I, who went through my class, got orders to go to Japan and we were going to go through another training program for the Wild Weasel, not Wild Weasels, the Ryan’s Raiders. Where they put two pilots in an F-105 and you have to go in the back seat. Instead of flying the airplane you ride in the back seat operating a radar and dropping bombs at night at low level with this thing. I didn’t want to do it. We sat there in Japan for a month and didn’t fly. Then two pilots got shot down in the squadron and they pulled us out of the program and sent us over to be strike pilots. In a way, that saved us from getting into that program. You know, who knows which way it would have turned out the best, but here I sit. So I didn’t arrive until May of ’67 to start flying.

SM: Where did you arrive in-country in Vietnam?

TN: Korat Air Base.

SM: Okay.

TN: I went into Bangkok, and then Bangkok took a Goony Bird to Korat.

SM: Okay. What kind of briefings did you receive upon arriving there? In terms of introductory briefings, what life is going to be like, things to do, things not to do. Anything?

TN: I got briefed in by the deputy commander of operations and it wasn’t significant because I don’t remember it.

SM: Okay.

TN: I mean, he didn’t put anything on me that hangs in my mind that you would normally take into combat with you or what we’re doing here. Before I left Japan, one of the pilots over there made a very profound statement, one of the 105 pilots who I would
have trained with over there. He made a very profound statement, he said, “When you
get over there you’re going to find out that the pilots are lying about what they’re doing.”
I said, “What?” He said, “Yeah. They’re lying about what they’re doing. They’re
making up stuff about targets and what have you.” I couldn’t believe it. So that kind of
catch me off guard. But that was profound because it was true. It wasn’t so much the
pilots it was the debriefers, the intelligence people. As an example, on my first mission I
flew with this squadron commander who was flying his hundredth mission, so this is my
first mission. I got up there and waddled around and finally got the mission done and we
were flying in the lower part of North Vietnam, Package One, just above the DMZ
(demilitarized zone). We found that it was terrible trying to find a target. But we found
something and we dropped our bombs on it and he said that he wanted to shoot cannon
one last time. We had a 20-mm Vulcan cannon in the aircraft. So he went down and he
shot in some trees along side the road and I went back and he went off for his hundredth
mission parade, this swimming pool trip and all that stuff and champagne and I had to go
debrief the intelligence people. They said, “What did you do?” I told them what we did
and that he wanted to shoot the cannon one more time so he shot it in some trees and
came home. He says, “Where is this truck park?” “I don’t know anything about truck
parks. He just shot it in the trees.” He said, “We don’t shoot trees, we shoot truck parks.
Where is this truck park?” So I said, “Okay.” This is the way it was going and
somebody figured out that we had destroyed more trucks than Russia built anyway.
Normally the other side does that, we don’t like to think we do those types of things, but
it happened.

SM: That was one example. I assume there are many others.
TN: One example. Do you want another example?
SM: Sure.
TN: They asked me if I would like to have my name—if they cared if I released
my name with news releases and I said, “No, go ahead.” So I’m reading these news
releases and I come back one day and I’m reading this one and it says, “This flight of
four F-105s went out in Package One North Vietnam and they attack an ammunition
storage area and huge explosions were billowing to ten thousand feet and fires,” and stuff
like this, “And then afterwards the flight went out and found trucks on the road and
destroyed four trucks and came back.” I thought man, that’s great, I never seen anything
like that and I read down and there’s my name, I’m on the flight. Okay what really
happened, four of us went out and we couldn’t get into North Vietnam because of the
weather up around Hanoi. So we’d go down Package One and there’s a FAC (forward
air controller) down there flying and vectors us in and he shoots these rockets from a
couple miles over. He says, “Right about there.” So we bomb this tree and sure enough
we’ve got a secondary explosion. It’s a big puff of white smoke and it’s much different
than a bomb blast. So, hey, we did something, we did hit something down there. Then
we went off and we were on road rec’ing and lead said, “I see something on the road.”
He goes down and he’s starting to shoot and he pulls off and says, “No, no don’t come
down it’s an ox cart.” So that was it. We went back home, we did some more road
rec’ing and went back home and that’s the way it was written up. How the intelligence
people could, anybody could make a decision based on the reports that are coming out of
there is beyond me. But in fairness to the military, a lot of that was generated by
McNamara and his desires to have numbers and sorties and tonnages of bombs dropped
and on and on and on. So they had to feed this stuff up to the system and unfortunately
we did. So that’s the reason I say that it was profound what he said.

SM: Yes. Well, back at the base, you know, after you finish your day’s work,
sitting there at the bar having a beer, talking with the other pilots, is this type of stuff
discussed much?

TN: Not much. It was too routine. I mean it was a routine war. Do you want me
to go into detail?

SM: Sure.

TN: Okay. We had two missions a day, there were twenty aircrafts in a mission,
four of them were Weasels and sixteen were strike aircraft. The Weasels, as you know
probably, are out hunting the SAMs (surface-to-air missile) and keeping them off the
strike force. We’d fly up there like B-17s at fifteen to seventeen thousand feet, all spread
out in formations like this. We had ECM (electronic countermeasures) gear that
patterned the area, kept the guns off of us and the SAMs for the most part. It was the
safest way to do it. We’d do the same route, same airspeed, same time everyday. Except
for different targets, we basically flew the same routes. I remember we’d fly up around
Dien Bien Phu, Channel 97, you’ve heard of that. Near Dien Bien Phu, cross the ten mile
south of China, couldn’t get any closer then ten miles, hit the Thud Ridge, and go down
at whatever targets were at the end, back up Thud Ridge and fly back. Takhli, the other
base over there, they’d do the same thing at a different time. The Navy came in at a
different time. One of our biggest threats up there was mid-air collisions and dropped
wing tanks and stuff like that. Okay so we’d go back and land at Korat, refuel for our
mission we’d get back and land. The afternoon they’d refuel, rearm, afternoon mission
would brief and they’d take off at two o’clock. Then they’d be back at six or six-thirty
that night as it was getting dark. Did that everyday, seven days a week, same time, same
station, same [aircraft,] same altitudes.

SM: How many aircraft were lost before you yourself were shot down?

TN: There were some lost. There was two or three, but they weren’t when I was
there. I was on R&R (rest and recuperation) or something like that when they were lost.
Actually, I was the first airplane that I saw get shot down, well in my forty-six-and-a-half
missions. I got shot up all the time, the airplane was always full of bullet holes, but the
airplane was a good airplane. It would absorb that. I took a 50-caliber down the intake
one day that went through the engine and I didn’t even know it. I wrote the airplane up
as okay and the crew chief came looking for me, they had to junk the engine. I said, “I
felt this little buzz, but I didn’t feel like anything dramatic.” It felt like the air turbine
motor rather then the engine. But it was a good engine.

SM: You took a 50-caliber through the engine?

TN: Yes, it went through it. Well you could throw ducks and stuff through this
engine. It was huge. It was designed to do that.

SM: Okay. What was morale like in the unit?

TN: Good. We had people over there who wouldn’t leave after their hundredth
missions. They wanted to stay on and a lot of people volunteered to do another hundred
missions. The thing that surprised me about that is all the time I was over there I felt that
I had accomplished very little. When I came over there—remember the news media was
saying all of these things we were doing and all these trucks we were blowing up and all
this? Well, I figured I’d get over there and I’d get involved in that, but I didn’t see
anything. The bridges were all down. All they had was rocks underneath the streams and
the rivers. You could see the wake of the river going over it, you know the bubbles. So you could tell where they were but the bridges were all down. The roads were dirt, you make big holes in the roads and then come back the next day and they’re filled up. The railroad tracks would bomb them, materials were right there so as soon as we’d leave they’d put them back together. So it was just a harassment thing. That’s all I did. When they opened up the bridges in Hanoi, these were great targets. These were real targets! These bridges were—the Paul Doumer Bridge is two miles long, hard to hit, it’s just a big metal structure. You can see that picture. You had to hit it directly, you know, to do any good on it. The Thai Nguyen Iron and Steel Works had been turned to rubble by the time I was over there. We bombed it every now and then because they thought they saw smoke coming out of some building that be smelting iron or something, so we’d do that. We’d bomb suspected troop barracks. I can’t answer to what they might have been and I don’t know where they got their intelligence but that’s what we did. Mainly we just went out and harassed them. Kept them busy building roads and bridges and railroads. Thanh Hoa Bridge, I don’t think we ever did knock that thing down. I wasn’t involved in that one, but we lost more airplanes in there than anyplace else, than any single target.

SM: How about trail interdiction? Did you do any trail work?

TN: Yes. The trail interdiction, we did a lot of that. They called that Red Route when you got into Package One and went into Laos through the Mu Gia Gap (Editor’s note: Mu Gia Pass) or whatever they call that. We went in to there and flew over Laos quite a bit. The DMZ looked like a big barbell because it had all been defoliated. It had a big circle on one end and then a stripe across and a big circle on the other end where it hit Laos and very easy to see from the air. It had been churned up. The Ho Chi Minh Trail went around it and you could see the Ho Chi Minh Trail for miles because it was dirt turned over and this road going through it and then you’d turn the dirt over again that night or that day and they’d repair it and get their trucks going that night. But you could see these things for miles. I have home movies and stuff that I took down there of just bomb craters and shell craters forever. We’d fly across the DMZ sometimes to go out over the Gulf of Tonkin and we’d refuel there and then go into North Vietnam over what we called MiG Ridge, which came in over near Hai Phong, whatever that nice area is out
there in the waterfall with the karst sticking up. You made have taken that trip if you
got out there. Did you do sightseeing?

SM: A little bit.

TN: Okay.

SM: You mentioned the use of electronic countermeasures in terms of the SAM
sites and things like that. What about MiGCAP (MiG Combat Air Patrol)? Did you guys
have fighter cover?

TN: We had our own designated MiGCAP for a while. The MiGs were very
inactive when I was there. I saw a few. In fact the day I got shot down when I was
coasting out, I got jumped by a MiG and he fired on me. But he fired a—I can’t figure it
out, he fired a pod of 2.75 rockets. You had one in your thing out there. They’re about
that big around (gesture). About that long (gesture). What he was doing carrying those—
those are air-to-ground. I don’t know what he was carrying them for, but he fired those at
me and they went over the canopy and they were still burning. They only burn for about
two, two-and-a-half seconds and then they go out. They were still burning when I went
by, he was right behind me. Then he came by on the left side with his after burner going,
I looked at him and he looked at me and he was gone. Shortly thereafter I had to bail out.
That was the closest I ever came to being shot down by a MiG. The MiGs did do some
harassment actions over there, but for the most part they didn’t come up. We’d see them
periodically. Now sometimes we’d have F-4s flying MiG cover for us, especially if
we’re going down in downtown Hanoi. They were hazardous because they’d drop their
wing tanks through our formations. (Laughing) You’d see these wing tanks come
down—

SM: Would they do it on purpose?

TN: Oh, yeah. They’d jettison. They ran out of gas and there’s too much drag,
they can’t keep up with the 105 very well so they dropped their wing tanks so they could
maintain their flight and not run out of gas.

SM: But I mean would they do it on purpose while they’re over your formation?

TN: No, no, no. They didn’t try to hit us. No.

SM: Okay. Well, I didn’t think they tried to hit you, but—(Laughing)
TN: They weren’t careful enough to position themselves in a better—it just looked like they were coming at us. If you could see them falling, you know it worried you.

SM: Yes, sir. That MiG that you did have that encounter with the night that you were shot down, the day you were shot down, did you get a good look at the pilot?

TN: Yes.

SM: Could you tell his ethnicity?

TN: Tell his what?

SM: Ethnicity?

TN: Oh, no. Pilots wear masks and they’ve got their helmet on and their visors down.

SM: I didn’t know if he had his visor up and you could see if he was either Vietnamese or perhaps Soviet.

TN: I’d say probably 250-300 feet away when he went by, which is close for an airplane. He screwed it up, he had an excellent opportunity. In fact, during the interrogation they tried to get me to admit that he’d shot me down and I never would do it.

SM: So it was probably a Vietnamese pilot?

TN: Yeah.

SM: Okay. Well, why don’t you go ahead and discuss, if you would, the events leading up to you getting shot down. That day, the mission, what the mission was supposed to be, what happened?

TN: Right. I’d been flying two sorties a day, which is very tough. I can’t remember if I flew two missions that day or not, but it was an afternoon mission with a two o’clock take off. We knew it was going to be tough. The Doumer Bridge had been bombed and dropped and the Canal de Rapides Bridge was scheduled for Takhli in the morning and it was fogged in, they didn’t get in. So we’re flight up in the afternoon. So we’re coming in in the afternoon and it’s our target. So, of course, they’re expecting us. It didn’t make any difference, they’re always expecting us. Their guns were all around Hanoi. So as we came down Thud Ridge the SAMs were shooting and I did see one SAM explode but it was some distance away. The other thing was when we came down
off Thud Ridge was it was just a beautiful, clear day. I was probably in the second flight that went in. When you drop your bombs you could never see them detonate because we dropped them so high. If we got below four thousand feet they’d tear you apart with their automatic weapons so we tried to pull out at forty-five hundred feet. We’re diving down on the bridge and I’ve never seen the amount of anti-aircraft fire that I saw. I’ve never been in Hanoi before. The sky was just full of flak, you know, exploding white puffs and stuff. So I’m flying on the wing of the leader and the bridge is in my reticle, the sight, and all my instruments tell me it’s time to drop, he hadn’t dropped yet. So I went ahead and dropped on my own instruments and waited for him. He dropped a short time later. As soon as he dropped then I broke off and started jinking. Jinking is just maneuvering your airplane. If you’ve ever shot at a dove you know when you shoot at them they jink. So I’m jinking around out there and I turn back towards him and that’s when I got hit in level flight. All the flak was above us. At that time I’m in clear air because it’s moving through us. We had a saying for that; we called it the Golden BB. They could never hit me, but the Golden BB, I might run into it. So the Golden BB hit me on the nose cone of the aircraft and just exploded. When it did that the airplane decelerated just very rapidly. I was thrown forward in the shoulder harness, you know how most—I’ve arrested on an aircraft carrier one time and it felt like that, just tremendous deceleration. So I’m kind of in shock and there’s a big hole in the canopy, a lot of air noise. I call out on the radio several times that I had been hit and they’re talking to me but I can’t hear them because of the noise, the air noise. I’ve got that on audiotape at home. My roommate—we used to audiotape and video, not video we didn’t have videos, movies and stuff. Would you like that, too?

J. Board: Yes. (Laughing)

Linda Norris: Yeah, you can make the university a copy. Yeah, you can hear it.

TN: It’s very hard to understand, but you can kind of hear it. But anyway, it gives a feel for the environment. So the airplane decelerated and I come out of it and it’s still flying. So I’m heading north to the ridge, back to Thud Ridge. Number three, the F-105 behind me, comes by real close and he looked me over, but he was going like mad. We had preconceived ideas up there that anybody gets hit, there’s nothing anybody else can do. Don’t hang around. You’re going to have two airplanes shot down. Remember I
told you the two people got shot down when I left Japan to go over there? One was the
old squadron commander leaving the other was new squadron commander coming in.
The old squadron commander leaving got shot down. The new squadron commander
coming in went back to see what he could do and, of course, he gets shot down. So they
got both of them. So it’s not a good idea. So these guys, you know, the flight goes on
and away they go. I’m coasting out the best I can, you know that airplane is still flying
and I’m trying to look around. I look down the left side of the airplane and it’s all full of
holes and the wing is really beat up, the air, and the intake for the engine is all beat up on
both sides. As I am looking down the left wing that’s where I see the MiG coming in and
I think there’s two of them because airplanes always fly in two’s. It was just one. I
called him out on the radio. But he falls in behind me and the F-105 is a very thick and
big airplane so I just kind of scrunched up in the seat and he could never get anything to
go through the airplane to get me. He could shoot the airplane down but he could never
hit me because it’s so heavy. But you know the rest of the story, he missed and took off.
I concentrated on ejecting and I pulled the ejection handles up and expected the canopy to
go, it didn’t. So I thought, “Well I have to eject through the canopy.” They’d made a
mod that I had forgotten about. So when I couldn’t clear the next hill, I pulled the
triggers and the canopy went and the seat went. It was, they say it’s slow motion, I didn’t
experience that. To me it was just a tumbling, disorienting experience. I had no
sensation of seeing anything except, you know, all these images going around me
because I was tumbling. The parachute opened with a crack. Again, it was very, very
severe, much more severe than I thought it would be from the airspeed I was at. But it
was so severe that I had baby bottles in my flight suit with water in them and it just
ripped one right out of my pocket. Then I came to the vertical position, I deployed my
seat kit and it went down to the end of the rope and hit the ground and then I landed on
the ground. So I didn’t even get a chance to see the canopy. That was my parachute ride,
just a few seconds.

SM: You weren’t injured?

TN: No.

SM: That’s good.

TN: Just scratched up a bit, things like that, but no real injuries.
SM: How long did it take for you to get captured by the villagers?

TN: About five minutes. I was right next to a village.

SM: How did they respond?

TN: I was on a hill and it was a rolling hill, the airplane crashed right by me. I felt the airplane impact when I was in the chute. I didn’t see it, but I felt it. When I landed I was facing it and it was cooking off 20-mm shells. I get out of my parachute and tried to call someone on the radio, but they were out of range. I heard the Vietnamese. I was up on this hill. It was a pasture with no trees, nothing. I saw dips that had some weeds in it and I ran up there and jumped in the weeds but they’d already seen me. So they just meandered up there until they all got in position around me. Then somebody who knew enough English would tell me to stand up and I was smart enough to do it. They had some rifles and one guy had a wooden rifle, a play rifle. But they had some old World War I firearms that I didn’t know if they’d worked or not, but they had them. So they came up and disarmed me and I had to take my own clothes off because they didn’t know how to work zippers. You know g-suits and all that stuff. They’d strip you down to your underwear, shoes, boots, and everything. They’re waving my pistol around and my knife, my survival knife, which is a nice knife and that kind of worried me. That’s when the guy grabbed me, you know, grabbed me by the t-shirt and he was going to do me harm. The other guy says to him, “No, no. Don’t hurt him or the government won’t give us two bags of rice.” I don’t understand any Vietnamese, but I’m sure that’s what he said. So the guy simmered down, you know, after a while and let me go in disgust. I think that’s the guy that I met later on. So they didn’t do any damage to me. They start marching me back toward their little village and an F-4 rec’ce bird comes over and they make me get in the ditch they dug, like a combat trench, and darned if the F-4 gets shot down by a SAM (surface-to-air missile). They’re just having a ball, pointing up there, making sure I see it. I look up there and one big black plume of smoke and the airplane is spinning down. As luck would have it, the pilot of that airplane became my roommate later on.

SM: Now was he tasked specifically to get some photoreconnaissance of you being shot down?
TN: Yes, that’s true. No, target. The bridge we bombed. He followed us in to get down there.

SM: Okay, he was there to get the bomb damage assessment. He was there for standard assessment. Okay.

TN: Yeah and he got shot down by a SAM.

SM: Wow.

TN: But he was a single ship. I didn’t know a lot about rec’ce at that time, but he was by himself. A two-seater, naturally.

SM: Then you got picked up by the helicopter shortly there after?

TN: No. They came for me in a truck.

SM: Oh, the truck. I’m sorry.

TN: Yes. The villagers—these were mud huts. I think this was a temporary village when the evacuated Hanoi. I think this was a temporary village—mud huts all over the place. They put me in a mud hut and they took me out and they put me in a wooden building. It wasn’t much, but they sat me down and gave me a cup of tea and then all the kids were peeking through the cracks and this type stuff. I just sat there for about two hours and then the truck showed up and the Army took custody of me. They put me in the back of the truck blindfolded and we started to come down toward Hanoi. We stopped at all the villages and they had a bullhorn and they’d have a pep rally and the closer we got to Hanoi the more vocal and more antagonized the crowds became. As you’re flying combat and you’re doing these things you have the preconceived idea that you don’t want to bail out where you’d just dropped your bombs because they’ll tear you apart, and that makes sense. So you get as far away as you can. The closer I got to going back to Hanoi the more apparent that became. You know people are throwing rocks and now the guards are protecting me. So we get to a point and they splash some water on my feet so I’d know what it was and put it to my lips and gave me a drink. Then they moved me to a jeep and then they had a guard on each side of me in the jeep and the guards were taking as many punches as I was. People were trying to get at me. So I’m blindfolded, you know, I couldn’t see but I can feel the punches. Then they drove me from there to an airfield. I think the airfield was probably where you flew into in Hanoi. What was the name of it? I don’t know what it’s called now.
SM: It’s the national airport.

TN: That’s where they—I’m pretty sure that’s where they took me. They put me on an airplane. I knew I was on an airplane, I could smell it and climbed up in it and then they took off. I thought I was in an airplane. It wasn’t until I landed that, and I don’t know where I landed, but when I landed then the wind blew my blindfold down and it was a helicopter. I didn’t even know I was in a helicopter. It was that smooth. I mean it didn’t have the, “Whop, whop.” All airplanes are kind of bumpy. So from there they put me back in a jeep and took me to Hoa Lo Prison Camp to begin my ordeal.

SM: Okay. Why don’t you go ahead and describe your first experience there?

Your first experiences.

TN: Okay. Well, of course, the first thing the Vietnamese were after was military information, as much as they can get as quick as they can get it. Of course, the last thing a grunt pilot knows is military information. So they take me in a room and take my underwear away from me and give me some black pajamas, shorts, and short-sleeve shirt. In retrospect they gave me a short-sleeve shirt and at one point one of the officers gave the guard heck because the short-sleeve shirt—because they were going to use the straps and the straps tear your skin off. But the initial thing they did was the interrogator came in and I stood and tried to act military. They say try to show them respect because it may help. It was just a staring contest. I didn’t want to be there. He started to ask me questions and I politely refused and politely told him who I was and what I could tell him and couldn’t do anymore. “Geneva Convention, this is not the Geneva Convention. You are not a prisoner of war, you are a criminal.” This is the common theme that they had through all of our confinement that they never really changed. We were criminals the whole time we were there; even when we were released in their perspective. So he gets mad and he leaves. Then another guy comes in and—I take that back. He gets mad and he leaves and then the guard ties my arms behind me with straps. He just straps them above the elbows behind me. During the interrogation, why, the interrogator is asking me and I still won’t answer but I’m starting to dance around my toes a little bit. He’s watching my hands so I know he probably has limits. He’s seeing how blue my hands were going to get before he lets circulation back. So that gives kind of a clue that they probably couldn’t damage me too bad. So he eventually releases my hands and that hurts
just as bad for the blood to come back. Okay, and then they had me sit on a stool and
then they do the double hammerlock for a little while and you could stand that. Do you
know what I’m talking about?

SM: I think so.

TN: You’re familiar with these. Double hammerlock where they wrap the straps
around and then they just keep tightening it up until they force both of your hands up
behind your head, and that’s pretty excruciating. But after a while it gets numb. In other
words, it’s easier to tolerate the more time passes, the pain starts dulling. Then they had
me sit on the floor and then, they had me sit on the floor Indian style, with your legs
crossed, and they strap you down and pull your whole head down in a tight little ball.
Then they’d leave the room and let you think about it for a while. So they’d come back,
they’ve got to release you after a while to get the circulation back. So this goes for on
about three times and I can tolerate that. But as time progresses they’re starting to wear
you down. Then later on, why, they—since it wasn’t working they strangled me with the
strap. I’m still tied up back here but I’m not tied around my ankles and they just throw
the strap around your throat and strangle you unconscious. Then you wake up and you sit
up and they do it again two or three times. That was pretty scary. Well, somewhere in
there I said, “Okay, I’ll start talking to you.” So I do. I start telling them this and that
and get out of the straps for a while and then they’re not satisfied so they do it again.
This goes on all night and they leave me alone in the morning and I just laid down right
there on the slab floor and go right to sleep. I was exhausted. Then they come in and
start all over again. This went on for a week and then they moved me out of the room.

It’s a knobby green room that you’re in. The thing about this is that it’s wearing on you.
You’re strong, you’re as strong as you think you are, but as it goes on and on and on it
becomes unbearable and you just can’t face it again. You’re not getting enough sleep;
you don’t have any food or water. It’s degrading and that’s what wears on people. We
found out that the worst torture up there was sleep deprivation, in the long run. You can
tolerate pain to some degree, but sleep deprivation is harder to tolerate for some reason.
Our record, I think, was twelve days on sleep deprivation where guys were able to sit on
a stool and not move. They’d doze some and get water thrown on them, that kind of
stuff. We had a record and I think it was twelve days. So we did this for about a week
and I gave them, like I said, more information than I wanted to, some of it was accurate. They finally moved me out into another area and I saw an American with a little bamboo broom. He was outside my door, my door had louvers on it, and I could see his feet as he was moving around. When he came by my door I said, “Hey, I’m new here, what can you tell me?” This guy was startled. He must have been mentally deranged because he jumps down looks up the louvers and grunts, looks back and forth at me, and a guard runs him off. You know, I’m exposed. So back to the knobby green room for another round and then into solitary confinement in what we called the Heartbreak Hotel, little cells there, in the Hanoi Hilton. So anyway, they left me in there for a month and then put me in a room with one other guy. They had air raids. It’s kind of interesting being on the receiving end of air raids. [During] the air raids there you could hear the flak coming down out of the air from the air burst and things like that, and the concussions of the bombs and the airplane noises. When they had the first air raid I thought they were doing a survival school trick on me. It sounded like somebody was out in the hallway beating on pots and pans, making a lot of racket. It just didn’t sound like explosions because of the area I was confined in. That was my first air raid. I thought it was phony. The guard came and made me get underneath that bunk. You saw that dirty bunk in that picture I showed you. They wanted you to climb underneath there for safety.

SM: Excuse me. Jenny did you have some specific questions you wanted to ask before you leave?

J. Board: Actually, I’m going to have to leave right now to get back to my class.

TN: I’ll be available to you through the email and be glad to help you out in anyway I can.

J. Board: Okay. Thank you.

TN: Or Steve or anybody else if you’ve got other questions.

J. Board: Thank you it was very—

SM: Well, would you go ahead and describe some of the other characteristics of the camp as far as what it was like physically, what were you fed; was it good water, clean water, those types of issues.

TN: Okay. The Hoa Lo Prison, which we called the Hanoi Hilton, was a prison that you’re probably familiar with. It was built by the French and it had all the nice
French implements in it. I’m talking about in these cells that we’re in, these two-man cells, at the bottom of the bunks, these concrete bunks were built-in stocks for your ankles to go into. When they used them they would have us cross our legs to make it a little more inconvenient, a lot more inconvenient. The stocks were controlled on the outside of the doors. The doors had peepholes, all the windows were boarded up, there was a single light in the room that was turned on at night and during the day it was dark. The guard could come by and peep at you through the peephole and you just had to be silent, they didn’t want us communicating. But it was very dirty, it was very masonry. I spent a lot of time looking at the walls finding people’s names who had been there before me, pilots, and memorizing them. You’ve got nothing else to do so you start looking and searching every crack. I remember setting back on one bunk one day and I’m looking at this wall and it hit me. The guy had written his name so big that it was out of perspective, nobody would ever find it. The Vietnamese wouldn’t find it, the letters were that tall. (gesture) His name was Crow, C-r-o-w, and there it was C-r-o-w scratched into the wall. So it was very foreign. What I mean by that is the smells and the noises and the sounds. The radio, they played the Vietnamese radio and the music. It was just like out of being in the survival camp when they played noisy, antagonizing sounds that were foreign to your ear just to throw you off balance. They didn’t do it on purpose it was just there. I mean it was music to their ears, but it wasn’t to ours. The food was very monotonous. The water was boiled, which was the best thing they did for us. The water usually came to us hot, summertime or wintertime. So it was boiled, sometimes you could hardly drink it for a while and we got a quart a day. They gave us a little porcelain pot that we put it in. But at least it was safe to drink. They gave us that all the time we were there, one quart a day. The food was like I said, monotonous. Usually it was some sort of a soup and most of the prisoners remember pumpkin soup because you got water with pumpkin shreds in it and maybe a couple little pieces of pork fat floating around. Then on the side dish, more pumpkin but in a solid consistency with maybe pork fat in it. That was one seasonal vegetable they had. Another one they had was what we called sewer greens, which were probably pretty good. It’s some sort of a fluted green that I’m sure that had lots of vitamins, like spinach. We got that and then we had potatoes when in season. They would bring you potatoes starting with marble-size potatoes and then as
the growing season went on they’d get bigger and bigger and bigger until finally they
were rotten. Then they’d give them all to you at once at the end, you know kind of
rotten. They didn’t have storage facilities over there, the rats reigned supreme. So they
kind of ate their produce as it was produced. Another one was some sort of a squash and
cabbage and those types. Usually we had four different vegetables depending on the time
of year they were being grown and the side dishes made out of the same thing. The meat
allowance for us was negligible, a little bit of pork fat. The skin with—these things
looked like the little candy cornels of corn. You know, they’re v-shaped and maybe a
little bit of lean meat on the bottom and then the fat layer and then the skin with the hair
sticking out. (Laughing) Also, most people think we ate rice, we did eat some rice but
the majority of the grain products was bread. The bread was a French loaf-looking piece
of bread. It didn’t taste good, it tasted like spoiled or soured sawdust and it had string
and varmints and rocks and stuff in it. You had to be careful eating it. But I’m sure it
was nourishing if you could get it down. It was tough to get down. I think they
specifically let it age before they gave it to us. It probably it was pretty good when it
came out of the oven, decent. But that’s what we had was a half of a piece of bread like
that and that was pretty nourishing if you could eat it. Most of the food they gave us
would sustain you—we all lost weight— but it would sustain you if you could eat it.
Some of the stuff was really tough to eat. Do you want details?

SM: How much—well, sure.

TN: Chicken feet. Do you want a chicken foot or chicken head or guts you
know? Rocks, you had to be careful with rocks. The dog, sometimes we think the meat
was dog meat and I know they eat dogs over there. The hoofs, pieces of hoof, anything.
They didn’t throw anything away. So whatever wasn’t really good for anybody else we
found out showed up in our soup. So you just had to eat it. There were insects and
geckos and stuff around that you—if you felt like you were starving. I don’t know if
anybody ate them to keep from starving. But they were there as a supplemental food
source if you wanted them.

SM: But you don’t know of anybody that actually did eat lizards?

TN: No. Not for their food value. I know people who ate one on a dare or
something like that or somebody found one drowned in his water bottle you know before
he saw it was in there. I don’t think that anybody ate them for food value. The food was
generally adequate, not always. But by the time I was shot down, Alvarez had been there
two years and Hayden Lockhart, and Phil Butler, and those guys that came later.
They’d been there a long time and there were periods of famine for them. Some of the
people suffered from vitamin deficiencies and I don’t think—I ate everything they gave
me, you know. A farm boy, I could eat dirt if I had to. But some of the guys just
couldn’t eat some of the food they brought. We made allowances for taking care of those
people that couldn’t. We’d give them the better things that they could eat if it were
possible, if we’re in a room big enough to do that.

SM: You were initially in a room with only one other person?
TN: Initially, yes.
SM: How long did that last?
TN: About a month.
SM: How much communication could you have between each other?
TN: We were in the same room.
SM: So you could talk?
TN: Yes.
SM: Okay.
TN: Whisper. You couldn’t make any noise that would carry outside the room.
SM: Okay.
TN: They were—when I was shot down in 1967, I didn’t realize it, but I was shot
down right in the middle of the worst purge that the prison system had. They just beat
the crap out of all the prisoners that were there; their communications process had been
pretty well shut down. It was the worst situation—when I read this book, Return with
Honor, I learned a lot from it. Man, I thought it was that way all the time and I just
happened to step into the boiling pot when I was shot down. So if I’d been shot down
before or after, it may not have been as tough on me initially. But they would allow us to
whisper and then it was—I guess I was with him about a month and they called us into,
maybe it was two months—memory’s fading. They called us into an interrogation with
this Vietnamese officer and then they brought in two more American prisoners, one guy
was on crutches. They had us all sitting there, he was facing us, and he was going to
have to put us all in one room. This room is five foot by seven foot. But it’s got two
bunks in it and now they’re going to put four of us in there. This is inside the Stardust,
which is one of the inner camps of the Hanoi Hilton. But he’s telling us that—and he’s
uses all of the clichés like “the fat’s in the fire,” “things are going from bad to worse,”
“the Americans are running willie nilly,” and, “We’ve got too many prisoners. We’ll
have to put you in all together. Behave yourself.” This is the effect of what he was
saying. I’m just ecstatic. I’m finally with a group. But I can’t show this, you know, we
sat there and listened, yeah, yeah, okay. They put us all in this room and we stayed in
there. It’s not easy to live with somebody that close twenty-four hours a day, seven days
a week. But this group was pretty good. So we were there about four months and then
they—excuse me?
SM: Who were they?
TN: They were Wally Newcomb, Denis Chambers—no it wasn’t Denis
Chambers either. It was Wally Newcomb, Charles Zuhouseki, and shoot.
LN: Your first roommate. I’m trying to think, too.
TN: Carey. Dave Carrey.
LN: Dave Carrey. Yeah.
TN: Navy guy, two Navy guys. Wally was a 105 pilot from Korat and the other
two guys were Navy guys. We lived together for about four months and then they moved
us out of the Hanoi Hilton to the Annex, to the Zoo, which was where they mixed us up.
We were five in a room in the Annex. The Annex was the camp I stayed in the longest. I
was there three years and didn’t move more than fifty yards. The rooms were bigger. The
rooms were about this size
SM: Okay.
TN: Maybe a little larger.
SM: How many people were in there?
TN: Five.
SM: Five, okay.
TN: It was—eventually we’d get up to seven in a room like that. They had, it’s
an old French film library. You probably heard of the Zoo, it was right next to the Zoo
across the fence and we called it the Annex to the Zoo. Lived in these rooms for, like I said, in this camp three years.

SM: How much rotation would there be of people through your room, or did it stay consistent?

TN: First, that first room was probably about a year and then I moved into another room and they mixed us up. I was the only one they moved into the new room. Then we were in that room for about a year-and-a-half. Then we had the great escape where Atterbury, who was my roommate, he was the guy I saw get shot down. He was involved in the escape out of the Annex and he never came back alive. He and John Dramesi went over the wall and they were picked up some time later and he didn’t survive. Then after the escape why, they mixed us all up again. They put me in with the guys that had been there the longest, like Hayden Lockhart and Darrel Pyle and Phil Butler. Hayden Lockhart was the second or third guy shot down, first Air Force guy. So I’m living with these guys that’d been there a long time. So we stayed there in that room for a while and then after the three years were up in 1970, I believe it was, they moved us to a place we called Camp Faith. It was out near Son Tay and Camp Faith was going to be a compound. They were gradually starting to let us out room by room, more during the day. Vietnamese are step by step nationality—that’s not right. They’re approach to life is step-by-step, nothing—they don’t make any quick decisions. They do one step and see how it’s going to work out and then they’d maybe take another step. So we were starting to get into this when they had the Son Tay Raid. There was nobody in the Son Tay area, but we were probably ten miles from that camp, in Camp Faith. I think all the prisoners were basically there, maybe not all of them, but most of them. I’d say there were probably 250 prisoners in the Camp Faith in about four compounds. I didn’t know at the time. I thought our compound was the only one that was there but I found out later there were others. There was about fifty-five in each compound.

SM: Your saying Faith, F-a-i-t-h.

TN: F-a-i-t-h, yeah.

SM: The camp was named by the prisoners?

TN: Yeah.

SM: Okay. What did you hear or when did you hear about Son Tay?
TN: Well, we knew something happened when it happened.

SM: Okay.

TN: Because we saw the SAMs going off, we heard the aircraft, some aircraft noises. We heard explosions going on. There hadn’t been a raid in North Vietnam for years, ever since [1967], I think. There hadn’t been anything up that far. So we knew something was going on. We could see some flashes in the sky because the windows were basically barred but we could see out of them. The next day there was no doubt about it. The guards show up in full combat gear with automatic weapons and everything on, you know, and they’re eyes are kind of big. They put these little posts on the edge of the camps and they had airplanes on them. They’d practice aiming their rifles at them. The airplanes came down and helicopters went up and they had sandbags, machine gun emplacements around the camp. So we knew that something had happened like that and within three days they’d packed us all up and moved us back to the Hanoi Hilton and put all the prisoners that existed in the same camp at once. We were able to get contact. They put all fifty-five of us in one room. It was a pretty good sized room but when we lay down at night it was eighteen inches per person. There’s fifty-five of us in this room but that was the best thing they did for us. Because now if you didn’t like somebody you could go down to the other end of the room and talk to somebody else and we could organize. We had educational classes and entertainment and religious services and whatever you could think of. The organization was there and it was very, very pleasant during that period.

SM: How long did that last?

TN: That lasted about six or eight months. Then they started dispersing us again to the other camps.

SM: When you were all brought together like that, did that include people like Admiral Stockdale and Sam Johnson—?

TN: Yes. Right. They were all in the camp but the high rankers were still—some of them were in solitary. Some of those guys stayed in solitary for five years. Yeah, Risener was there; Flynn was there; Stockdale was there; Denton was there but they were in smaller cells by themselves. But we got contact with everybody and we organized and we sorted out all of our names. We had 500-and-some names and we got
them down to 352. Memorized everybody’s names in every room, then went from there.

A lot of the names would just come from, somebody would say, “Has anybody heard about,” so and so, “Heard of him?” That name would go on a list. Well, these names weren’t legitimate. Some of them you would just hear sweeping or coughing and you’d get a name and you’d add it to your list and turns out that that would be a real name. We sorted all that out and took care of that.

SM: How about the tap code?

TN: Tap code?

SM: Yes, sir. Did you learn that? Was that—?

TN: Yes. I didn’t practice it like some of the other guys. We had some real technicians to do that. It sent like a telegraph and they’d just do it with their fingernails on the floors or through the walls, and very good at it. I didn’t do that, I did the mute code, which was—the mute code was much faster. You could transmit information with a mute code quicker then you could write it down, if you had something to write it on. We usually took tile to tile, you know and write it on the floor and then scrub it off later.

SM: Could you describe that?

TN: The mute code?

SM: Yes, sir.

TN: Yeah. It’s A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-J-K-L-M-N-O-P-Q-R-S-T-U-V-W-X-Y-Z (shows with hands). You’d shorten that like, that’s Vietnamese and that’s quiz, you know, shortened words, a lot of them, especially the adjectives and the what do you call it—?

SM: It’s like sign language.

TN: Yeah. But you had to be able to see somebody do that.

SM: Yes, sir.

TN: You could transmit this hundreds of yards across the courtyard if you could see somebody and we managed to do that.

SM: Would the guards not respond to seeing that? Or they didn’t care?

TN: They couldn’t see it.

SM: Okay.
TN: The only person who could see it would be straight ahead, like looking through a peephole or something like that. We stood guard for each other and did guard duty during the communications processes. The communication system got working so well, it got burdensome with the amount of velocity and volume that came through. You’ve never heard of the mute code?

SM: No, I hadn’t.

TN: That was very helpful.

SM: Yes, sir. Now how many of the other prisoners learned that code?

TN: Everybody learned it and eventually, getting the person to learn the code initially was the hardest part because you’d have to write it down, you couldn’t talk to them, you’d have to write it down on a piece of paper using toilet paper. There was what they gave us for toilet paper and dust from the tile. Then you’d have to put the code on a piece of paper and put it on a string that went up inside of the pants. Then when you went out, if you saw a new guy there, he’d always have these new clothes, you’d switch clothes with him and take his and he’d take yours and when he’d tied it he’d pull it out and there’d be the note. That’s risky but that’s the only way you could do it sometimes.

SM: Yeah.

TN: One guy, we had a new guy on our camp one time and the guard always came to our room first with the bread. So what we’d do is load up [put a note in] a loaf of bread, and we knew all the bread went in our camp. So we’d load up a loaf of bread hoping that it’d be dropped off to him, trying to figure out where it was and all this. “No, it came to Room Five. Your note showed up in Room Five.” And,” Okay, it went to Room One this time,” you know. We never did get to the guy before they moved him out. But those are the things that you’d try to do. If you could talk to somebody, if you could ever get to them and say, “Hey we’ve got a code here, a tap code and this is how it works with the matrix. A through, leave out K.” That was the work horse, [the tap code].

SM: Eventually, I understand it even had classifications, the tap code did. The different levels of tap code.

TN: Oh. Not that I know of.

SM: Okay.
TN: I’m not sure what you mean by that, but I don’t remember any changes.

There was different ways of doing it, like the hack-spit-cough and sweeping. If they let us out to sweep we would sweep the code and there was no way they’d know the difference. Did that a lot.

SM: Sweep the code?

TN: Yeah. If you’re out sweeping you had these brooms and just (imitating sweeping the code) you know and they could read it very easily. If you’re not familiar with rhythm you’d never detect, the Vietnamese didn’t detect anything. Although they knew we communicated, we’d get caught all the time.

SM: What would they do if you got caught?

TN: They might put you in irons. They might whack you a couple of times.

Depends on what mood they were in or what the circumstances were. If things were tough and they caught you, why it could be pretty bad. If it’s just normal times they might make you stand or kneel on the pavement on your knees for a couple for hours with your hands over your head. They might chain you to your bed. Some people got leg irons and what have you to the beds, handcuffs and all that kind of stuff. Whatever mood they were in.

SM: Did you receive anything? Packages or anything from the United States government or from home?

TN: Sure. Yeah. First of all, there were some of us that wrote letters and received some letters, a few. When I say wrote letters, we could write maybe—depending upon how small you could write, I could get a hundred words on this little note thing they gave us. Some of those got out, I’ve still got copies of them at home. The kids have them, the real ones. I received a few letters from my first wife and got one from my parents. Now, the way they determined who received or wrote or not was if you had been released, through their propaganda, as a prisoner. When I was shot down, there was three of us captured in Hanoi that day, me and the two guys in the F-4. I hadn’t met them but they released all of our pictures as having been captured American Yankee Pirates. So my picture and my name had been released. So at least my family knew that at least at that moment that I was alive. So they gave me this letter after I had been there about three years, first letter. Then later on I was able to write. When they moved me
into that group of old guys I was telling you about, those were the ones who wrote letters.  
So I was moved in with a group that wrote letters and I had—I don’t know if I’d written 
before then or not but I started being able to write periodically. While we were—after 
Son Tay when we were all in the big rooms, just about everybody was writing letters 
then, once a month. Most of them I don’t think got through but some did. Packages 
came. Packages started coming in 1970 and the packages were pilfered, badly. Maybe 
two-thirds were gone but we were getting some things, and especially vitamins were 
very, very useful.  

SM: Oh, goodness.  
TN: Families were sending vitamins, right things. I probably, the whole time I 
was there—which was five years, seven months and two days, a couple hours and a few 
minutes—I had probably received, maybe, parts of five packages.  
SM: Okay.  
TN: Just before was released I got a Red Cross package within two weeks before 
I was released. It had books in it and that was good.  
SM: Was that the first time you got your hands on books?  
TN: Yes, except some propaganda books they’d let us read. Like the one I just 
gave you, that big one, if you read that’s Russian propaganda. It was that type stuff with 
pictures. The captions were often well off the pictures, they don’t represent what the 
pictures really are, but they’re there. I saw a lot of that.  
SM: Did you have any interactions with collaborators?  
TN: When we moved out of the big rooms in the Hanoi Hilton and they started 
dispersing us again after the Son Tay Raid, they moved me into the Zoo. As soon as we 
walked into the Zoo, we got into our room, we were in a courtyard, we boosted one of the 
guys up on the wall to take a look around. There was Miller and Wilber standing there.  
He says, “I’m Bill Austin.” They said, “Well, I’m Ed Miller.” He says, “Okay. Well we 
just came in from the Hanoi Hilton you know. How long you been here?” “Well, we’ve 
been here all the time.” Well, they had a room there and whatever niceties they had 
which weren’t that great. Then it wasn’t ten minutes later, the Vietnamese came back 
and said, “Do not climb on that wall and do not talk to anybody!” (Laughing) He told on 
us. So that was as close as I came to having any contact with those guys. But when we
communicated with the people over there in the Zoo, and after we got in there, they told us that they treated Wilber and Miller as if they were Vietnamese. So we did, too. But that’s the only contact I had with them. I never met them, never saw them. Oh, yes. I did, peeping through the crack in the wall or whatever, I could see them in their room. They had a fish tank and there was some fish in it. It was just, you know, there wasn’t anything great. They wore shoes and they had clothes and they would take them out in jeeps and stuff periodically and we’d see them through the cracks doing this. I saw them a couple of times, but that’s it.

SM: What did you and the other prisoners think?

TN: Of them? That they were just collaborators, you know. We figured they’d get theirs when the time came and didn’t think much more about it than that. As much as that, was the twelve people who came back early, who took early release, those guy sold there souls. They made, they sold, they all wrote out written statements to get themselves released. Why the Vietnamese didn’t release Wilber and Miller is beyond me, except that maybe they were too effervescent. They were even too much for the Vietnamese, probably. But anyway, these twelve guys that came back early, they all sold out and wrote confessions and did all this stuff that they asked them to do and made tapes to play to us. That’s what drove us up the wall. They made these tapes, their going home tapes that we had to listen to and that [grated]. At least Wilber and Miller were still sitting there in the same hellhole we were. There was only one guy that came back, he was ordered back, his name is Black.

LN: No. Hagel.

TN: Oh, yeah. That’s right, Doug Hagel. Yeah, Black was not a good guy.

SM: Doug who?

TN: Doug Hagel. He was a Navy seaman who fell overboard and a Vietnamese fisherman picked him up. He didn’t know what was going on, he just got picked up and now he’s a prisoner of war. He was ordered to go back when he got a chance by the senior ranking officer. They’d offered it to him before and he wouldn’t take it. So he took it and went back and he had all the names memorized and he blew the whistle on these guys that came back early. That stopped the Vietnamese from releasing anybody after that. That was very helpful.
SM: What year was that?
TN: What was year was Hagel released?
SM: Early release.
TN: The last release?
SM: The early release.
TN: Oh, the early releases. That was, that started—
LN: Right about ’68, that was Black and then—
TN: ’68, yeah, because they weren’t there very long.
LN: ’68 or early ’69 because I knew John Black and he’d flown in—
TN: I think ’68 was when they started it. I was in the Annex when we heard
about it. They released, every six months or so, they released twelve. They stopped
releasing these guys before the Son Tay Raid, I think.
SM: Okay.
TN: I really don’t know when they stopped, but they started back in ’68.
SM: They stopped as soon as—?
TN: As Hagel got released and he blew the whistle. We had one guy that came
back was on the brigadier general list. They chopped that real quick.
SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Thomas Norris on the second of
October.