Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history
interview with Mr. Raymond Merritt. I’m in Lubbock, Texas in The Special Collections
Library interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University and today is August 15,
2003. Mr. Merritt, you’re in Marysville, California and it is approximately 10:14 am
central standard time. Sir, let’s start with some biographical information on yourself.

Could you tell us where you were born, when you were born, and a little bit about your
childhood?

Raymond Merritt: I was born in Portland, Oregon in 7, October 1929. As a
youngerster, of course that was the start of the Depression Era. I lived there about four
years of them; my father worked for a furniture store in downtown Portland. During the
Depression, I had a younger brother born in ’33. About that time of course with the
Depression thing, things got a little rough so the family had an opportunity to find
employment in Southern California; the Los Angeles area, so the family moved to the
Los Angeles area where my father did work.

RV: What did he do there?

RM: He worked for a large downtown furniture company, but he was actually a
drapery estimator. He estimated what it would cost people to put the draperies and
curtains and things like that and a design, a special design; those kind of things. Part of
his need to make ends meet of course during that time frame; he had a brother-in-law who was active in the California National Guard, so my father got involved with that type of thing. As we progressed through the 30’s, he progressed in rank in the Guard and in his position in the store. The National Guard was called active duty, California National Guard was called to active duty in 1940’s, so we spent some time up in Central California on the coast, Camp Roberts, is what it was called, Camp San Luis Obispo, I’m sorry; in those days for a year. Then they were all released so we moved back to the Los Angeles area. Then ’41, it was the start of the war, was called active duty again. While he was off to the military, we remained in the Los Angeles area.

RV: How many siblings did you have?
RM: Two. Another one was born in 1942.
RV: So you were the oldest of the three?
RM: I’m the oldest of three boys.
RV: Did your mother work?
RM: Off and on, yes. She at times worked in a restaurant just as a waitress. Other times, I can remember she worked at what they called See’s Candy Store on Wreath Hill, candy.

RV: That’s a nice place for a mother to work.
RM: Oh yes, (Laughing) for kids.
RV: Absolutely. What are your remembrances of the Depression?
RM: Very little, honestly. I don’t recall that much about it. I know there was not a lot of money going around for a lot of extra things. We had a good healthy growing up when I was young.
RV: What kind of jobs did you work as a young boy?
RM: Oh, probably starting about early ’40s; I delivered newspapers in the morning for both; one following the other large Los Angeles morning newspapers. When I got into high school, one of the things my father was eventually stationed at St. Anita Racetrack, which is Arcadia, California. So, we moved out in that area where I had eventually started in and went to Alhambra High School. During that time frame, all I worked in gas stations. That’s when people, you went into the gas station and you were served your gas. It wasn’t self-service in those days. Then I worked in a lumberyard for
a while just as a handy man. Then I worked on odd jobs off and on my entire time I was
going to high school, even into Junior College.

RV: What kind of student were you?
RM: Not an outstanding student. I had fair to meddling in grades.

RV: What your favorite subjects?
RM: Engineering and drawing; mechanical type subjects. I eventually wound up
going to Pasadena City College after I graduated from Alhambra High School in 1947. I
went to Pasadena City College at that time and was involved in the program; it was really
a technical program aircraft detailed design work. It was a termination course; a two-
year course where you were prepared to go into aircraft industry and be a detailed
designer for parts for airplanes at one of the factories. One of the summer times, the
professor, head of that little department, had a great knowledge of the aircraft industries
in Southern California, so he did get us jobs during the summer time. I worked for
Northrup Aircraft not as a designer, but as an aircraft assembly.

RV: Had you always been interested in airplanes?
RM: Oh yes, I’ve been interested in airplanes all my life as a youngster making
little flying models.

RV: How did that start?
RM: Oh, maybe from the fact that when my next youngest brother was born in
’33. One of the things I think my father did do, he didn’t want to pacify me, but to make
me feel that I’m not being left out all of a sudden. After we visited my mother in the
hospital after he was born, he took me downtown Portland and we went on an airplane
ride and I will always remember that. Two seat, open cockpit, bi-plane. It interested me
in aviation and I was involved with model airplanes and things as long as I can
remember.

RV: What are your thoughts and memories about World War II?
RM: Oh, I guess as a youngster in the early teens, I remembered it going on
certainly then, of course, my father was gone and he never did go overseas. I did have
relatives that were overseas and involved in the fighting. I think the basic, most of
Americans as I do, let’s get the Japs beat and get on with the war and get the German’s
beat and come home and end it, let’s get back to normal.
RV: As a young boy there in growing up on the west coast, was there a fear of the Japanese invasion? Do you remember anything like that?

RM: I don’t recall that. I remember when shortly after we moved away from when were up in the North of San Luis Obispo where my dad was that first year. There was an attack on the coast and a ship sunk right off the beach where we lived by a Japanese submarine, but I don’t think we were too concerned about it.

RV: Your interest in airplanes started with that airplane ride?

RM: I surely would say that, yes. While I was in high school, about the time I may have been 15, 16; I did start to take flying lessons. By the time I was 16, I was qualified, I was ready to get a pilot’s license.

RV: Wow. What was it like for you to fly?

RM: It’s a marvelous feeling (Laughing). The freedom that you have and the quiet, relatively; going, pointing at where you want to go and go there so to speak. Of course, light airplane is a little bit different than a high-powered jet aircraft. I’ve been involved with airplanes and flying as long as I can remember basically.

RV: Right. Did you have your eyes set on the service or were you after you finished Pasadena City College? Were you looking at actually going into business doing that while the aircraft design?

RM: Basically, yes. I was going, my goal was going into industry as I have mentioned; I was in the Navy Reserve from just after I got out of high school. I think a friend of mine went into that on a lark of certainly in 1947; there was no war going on. But, there was one of the Naval Reserve Organizations was having a summer cruise. One of their ploys to get you involved was a summer cruise through the Panama Canal; one of those two week things through the Panama Canal. Sounded like a neat idea at the time, so my friend and I joined the Naval Reserve, and we did that and we just stayed active in the Naval Reserve; you sign up for a commitment. Another thing that I tried to do when I got out of high school was to get involved in the flying end of the military. So, I went down and took the necessary examinations; physical and mental. Going into the Navy, what they called at that time, the V-5 Program, it was a program that allowed young people to go into the Navy. If you qualified, they would send you then two years to college at expense of the Navy. They would then take you out of college; you would go
to flying school. If you graduated from that, you became a midshipman. You spent two years active duty flying and then you went back to college for two years to get a degree where you were commissioned. That was some to me, at that time, was a process where I could get a college education at no cost. Of course, I enjoyed the flying end of it. Well unfortunately, the first physical, I didn’t qualify for one reason or another, so the Navy doctor gave me something for my eyesight. He gave me some exercises to do and he said, “Come back in a year and we’ll retest you and maybe you’ll be okay.” So, I did all this and a year later, I went back to take the physical examination. I passed everything, but as they said, “Unfortunately, that program has stopped.”

RV: Oh really?

RM: The Navy V-5 program had stopped. Of course, the war had ended; this was now ’48, the war had ended and been over and there’s an excess of pilots and were not needed at that time. I said, “Well, okay, thank you very much.” I was in the Navy Reserve as just an enlisted seaman. After I found that the navy program had ended so I can fly airplanes, I walked down the street and popped into the Air Force recruiter. I said, “Hey, what’s the chances?” He said, “Sign the dotted line.” So, I took all the physicals and passed that and was accepted as an aviation cadet. They don’t have that program anymore, but it allowed you to go through flying school without a college degree. But, since I did not have any college at that time; well, I was going to junior college, but didn’t have a degree. They said, “My name’s toward the bottom of the list, so if you continue college, your name works up. So every time you get to finish your course, you let us know and we’ll move your name up on the list”, which I was doing dutifully. 1950, I graduated from Pasadena City College with an AA degree, except in June. As you might recall, about June, July, August time frame, the Korean War started. Right then and there it happened and I’m still in this waiting list to go into the Air Force as a pilot to trainee aviation cadet. Well, I think I graduated from junior college and about three weeks later; there was a notice in my mail report to class in Perrin, Texas in August of 1950. So, I was on my way.

RV: That’s when you really started your Air Force training?

RM: Yes, that was aviation cadet program.

RV: How did your family feel about you going off in the war having just started?
RM: Well, I think being part of a military family, that’s what I wanted to do, so they were all in favor of that. They knew I liked the flying. They knew I had interest in that area. I was married at that time. I had gotten married right after I finished junior college. That was a little difficult to go off and leave a wife after being married for two months. Well, she had known me for quite awhile; we had known each other for quite awhile. So, she knew what was going on with that within respect to what I wanted to do for a living. She honored that and we did separate there for a while.

RV: Tell me about your training at Perrin. What was it like for you?

RM: Oh, it was a real joy to get into something that had some flying an airplane that had some power. T-6 airplanes is what we flew with here at Perrin. I don’t even know how many hours we were required to get, but it was the basic training; what they called at that time, basic training was a six-month time frame at that base. You went through all the necessary steps to learn to fly and operate the T-6.

RV: You already knew, you had a leg up I guess because you remember.

RM: Yes, I could fly. That wasn’t the problem it’s just the transitioning something a tad bit heavier and I don’t know if that put me at an advantage or disadvantage because the military does things differently so basically everybody starts from step one. At least I wasn’t afraid of flying or at least knew some of the things that were going to happen and not happen.

RV: What was it like adapting to the military lifestyle at this basic training?

RM: It was fine; I had no problem with it. I missed the family and my wife, when I was there, learned that she was expecting a child and of course that was rather a hardship, but you could not at that time as an aviation cadet I could not live off base and she could not be on base. It was permitted when I had applied for aviation cadet program back in 1948, one of the ground rules; yes you could be married. That was a decision that was later changed by the military. So, when I was notified that I had been accepted for the cadet program, I wrote write back and said, “Hey, in the meanwhile guys, I’ve been married.” They said, “No problem, you applied and were accepted under the other regulations so you be there when we tell you to.” Others in the training at Perrin, there were probably six, seven of us that were married as aviation cadets, which the regulation had changed and you could not be a married cadet.
RV: You said this was a six-month training?
RM: Yes, that was six month. That’s what in those days was called basic training. From there, you were depending on your ability and what your instructor thought, your grades, and ground school and all these kind of things; you were sent to an advanced training base. At that time, there were two bases that you trained in the specific types of aircraft that you would fly eventually in your career. Two of them were multi-engine; one of the advanced bases was in Selma, Alabama was [you flew] P-51’s and the fourth was at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona, where you qualified in jet aircraft.

RV: You went to Williams, is that correct?
RM: I went to Williams. I was lucky enough to get what I really wanted to do; fly jet airplanes.

RV: Now you obviously, I guess, scored high enough to get jet airplanes?
RM: Oh yes.

RV: Tell me your basic training at Perrin. Can you describe kind of what you guys did on a daily basis as you progressed? Was it more classroom, was it a lot of flying?
RM: It was about half a day of class and half a day of being on the flight line. You didn’t get to fly everyday, but out of the week; you probably flew three to four times. I can’t quite remember, I guess during the six month time frame, you got perhaps 120, around 120 hours of flying.

RV: What was the most challenging aspect of that training for you?
RM: Adjusting to military (Laughing). You had school always half a day. We did since none of us, well I had been military reserve; most of the folks were just out of civilian life. Most of the cadets were just out of civilian life, so you also had military training to go. You had academic training in aircraft systems and all of this, navigation, radio. You also had military training: marching, picking up things, keeping your barracks in order and all that just as a regular G.I.

RV: What was the most difficult as far as that regular G.I. in training, the non-flying part?
RM: You had to march, not walk. You had to march everywhere, everywhere you went you were in formation and you marched which would sort of aggravate you
when you’d see some of the pilot trainees in the class were student officers. They had
already graduated at either West Point, or Annapolis, or College, or ROTC. Of course,
they were officers; they didn’t have to walk.

RV: So, tell me about Williams Air Force Base and your advanced training.
RM: Williams was basically the same type of program. You flew, you got
maybe another 120-25 hours of flying time spread over the six month time frame and you
went to classes half a day. You marched; you lived in the barracks. You flew or were on
the flight line learning that end of it the other half of the day.

RV: What aircraft were you trained in again?
RM: I was in those days, the first three months of your advanced training was in
the T-28 aircraft, which was North American aircraft. A little bit bigger than the T-6; a
little faster, more systems, more navigation systems. Just little more advanced trainer.
Then the last three months you were there, you transitioned, if you had passed all so far.
There’s always the potential of you being eliminated for failure to maintain proficiency,
or in grades, or military, or flying training. So, the last three months, you’re graduated
then into the T-33/F-80. Again, your training is strictly learning to fly the airplane and
use the systems in it. There’s nothing to do with the eventual use you’re going to get.
You go to what they call “crew-training” later on. During this time frame, my wife had
actually moved into Lubbock. I’m sorry, not Lubbock; Sherman, Texas at Christmas
time. I had Christmas leave with my team. ’50 and she moved and came back to
Sherman, I couldn’t live in town with her, I had to live on the barracks and didn’t get to
see her too much, but at least she was close by.

RV: Now, is this during basic at Perrin?
RM: Yes, at Perrin. Then when we moved to, when I was transferred down to
Williams, again. As an aviation cadet you didn’t make very much money. I think it was
125 dollars a month or something like that. So, she had been working, so she moved
back to Southern California and went back to work and I was at Williams until July 1950;
I’m sorry, July ’51. I had an airplane wreck in the F-80; I crashed one.

RV: Did you really? What happened?
RM: How it happened, I don’t know what happened. I wound up breaking my
back.
RV: Really, you don’t know how it happened?
RM: Compression. Well, yes. I stalled on final turn; on landing. And it stopped flying and fell to the ground. At that time, the F-80 did not have an ejection seat and I don’t know whether I would have made it out of the aircraft if it did have one. I hit on the ground, it didn’t kill me but it did break my back. So, being then in the hospital for several months; about three months. But after about a month, I was able to get back and at least do the ground school part and continue in the program and there was a the prognosis of complete recovery. It was just a compression fracture of the lower back. So, I would go to ground school and I’d take all the military training subjects up unto and continue like I was in the program, I just was not flying.

RV: When were you able to get back into it?
RM: I started flying again in probably December of that year. So, all I had left to do really was the last three months of pilot training.

RV: Were you still at Williams or did you go somewhere else?
RM: I was still at Williams. I had to go back into the T-6 for a bit to get requalified to show the flying people that I could still take off and land an airplane, which I did. Then got back into the jet training and finished the program, finished in and graduated as a second lieutenant and a military pilot in March of that would be ’52.

RV: Where did you go from there?
RM: I went from there, of course the Korean War was going on at this time, so being jet qualified, single engine fighter pilot, I was sent to Luke Air Force Base, the other side of Phoenix. Where I was assigned to a weapons class in F-80, F-84. Did a little bit of, wait I’m sorry. No F-80 in there, just F-84. Now, I’m transitioning from the F-80, F-84 so there’s a little time where you learn how to fly the F-84, but the other, it’s about a three or four month program. Most of it devoted to using the airplane as a weapon; learning how to shoot the guns and drop bombs and those kind of things.

RV: How did that come to you? Was it difficult?
RM: Oh no. No, not difficult at all. I seemed to get through it okay.

RV: Any memorable incidents that you remember from the training on the F-84?
RM: Oh, I don’t know that I remember anything specific. It seemed like, “Okay, here’s a culmination of what I wanted to do.” I wanted to be a fighter pilot and I’m doing it and life is lovely.

RV: So, how long were you at Luke?

RM: Just about four months.

RV: From there, where did you go?

RM: Luke was sort of a TDY assignment on the temporary, on the way. My potential orders was to Korea.

RV: Where were you stationed?

RM: I’m sorry.

RV: Where were you stationed in Korea?

RM: I was sent to 49th fighter-bomber wing at Tague, which is south central, South Korea and an F-84 wing and was involved then until September time frame up until; well, I left just before the war ended. The program then was you fly 100 combats sorties and your tour is finished. Your eligible to extend if you wanted to, but I said, “No, I’ve got a wife and a little boy at home that I haven’t seen for a long time.” I came back to home.

RV: How long did it take you to get your 100 missions?

RM: I finished the first part of June, or late May of 1953.

RV: Tell me about some of the missions that you flew in Korea. What was that like? What was your typical day like? What was your routine?

RM: You, there are no typical; now we’re in a truce type situation. There is a cease-fire in place, but we were still flying combat sorties into North Korea, disrupting (North Korea) their flow of traffic, destroying bridges. Sometimes we would fly support of ground forces. There would be a push by the North Koreans/Chinese against the American Army unit and we would be called. So you did close air support as you called it in those days; supporting the Army. We did interdiction, we did recon we flew, reconnaissance. We flew some night combat missions trying to destroy guns and supplies and things like that. I was never involved in air-to-air combat. The F-84 was not really designed, was not used for that. They had F-86’s over there doing that.

RV: Did you ever encounter any MiGs?
RM: I saw one once way up above me being chased by an F-86. No, I never was
subjected to any kind of air-to-air combat.

RV: How did it feel being in a war zone, being in combat for the first time?
RM: Sometimes it’s scary, sometimes you got to think of it, “Hey, I’ve got a job
to do, I got to destroy.” One thing about being in combat in an aircraft, and I’ve never
been in an air to air combat situation where I’m trying to shoot down another airplane,
that just never happened to me. You are slightly detached, you are not bombing,
shooting, killing people. You are bombing, destroying targets. So, you don’t get that, I
don’t know what you call it, “worry or concern that what’s happening on the ground.”
You really don’t think about that. You think, “My mission is to destroy a target whether
it be a bridge or a line of trucks down the highway or a factory or whatever somebody up
above has decided that’s your target for the day.” You go out and do your damnedest to
try and destroy it and not thinking that there are individuals on the other end. You’re
very detached; it’s not like sitting over the end of a rifle and pointing your rifle at
somebody and say it’s either he or me. You don’t get that kind of feeling about it. I
never did anyway. There was an inanimate object that I had to destroy and that was my
job and I was going to do it not thinking that there’s people or other things involved in it.
It’s an object to destroy.

RV: Yes sir. Were there any memorable missions that come to mind now when
you think back about the Korean War and your experience there that you see?
RM: No, I can’t think of any. I did spend a week up on the front lines observing
how airplanes are controlled from the front line with a forward air controller and this…
and watched as they called in airplanes to destroy gun positions or whatever like that.
My only thought was, “God, I’m glad I’m not up here with these guys. I’m sure glad I’m
up flying airplanes.” Korea was colder than all blue blazes during the winter time
(Laughing). Besides, they get shot at. I don’t know that they got shot at anymore than I
did, but I did get shot at. I know I did because I came home sometimes with holes in the
airplane, but you never think of it.

RV: You didn’t think about that?
RM: No.
RV: What did you think of the U.S. conduct in the Korean War and how the war turned out?
RM: Well, I think it drug on for about two years there. I think it was justifiable. I think it was an invasion; strictly an invasion by North Korea, later assisted by the Chinese and that vast numbers. I think it was a justified cause. Unfortunately, the last two years, the killing and the battles kept going on, but there was never really any change significant in the final ending. The truce line ended just about where it was when they first declared the truce.

RV: When you finished in June ’53, did you transition back to the United States or just stay in Asia?
RM: No, I came back to the U.S. When you finished your combat tour, you were reassigned back to the States. My assignment back to the U.S. was to back the Luke Air Force Base as a weapons instructor. Though I flew for the next 3 ½ years or so at Luke as a F-84 pilot teaching young pilots how to use as I had gone through, how to use the airplane as a weapon.

RV: You did that for how long?
RM: I was at Luke until middle ’56; another 3 ½ years.

RV: From there, where did you go?
RM: I went to Randolph Air Force Base. They needed some F-84 type airplanes down at Randolph. Randolph at that time, being a headquarters based, also had a flying wing where they taught KC-97 crews how to use KC-97 as a refueling airplane; as a refueling school. What they needed was some airplanes that were relatively inexpensive to fly up behind the KC-97 and train the boom operators on how to use the boom refueling system. Basically, I did that for a couple of years.

RV: Until about 1958?
RM: Yes, ’58; summer ’58, the Training Command of the Air Force was all still part of Training Command of the Air Force was changing, and those aircraft that were in advanced training, like I was there at the time, not primary, not teaching you how to fly but teaching how to use a system, was being transferred to the using commands. In other words, fighter aircraft tactic training and fighter aircraft would go to Tactical Air Command training in bomber type airplanes and go to SAC. The KC-97’s all at that time
basically supported SAC. So that organization was going to the KC-97 training wing at
Randolph was going to SAC. Fighter pilots and SAC don’t normally agree. SAC didn’t
have fighter airplanes; they had bombers. None of us that were down there doing this
particular thing wanted to go to SAC so we all looked for ways to get out of it. One of
the things I had tried to do all along all these years from the time I got into the Air Force
or was able to, I would continue taking courses at Junior Colleges close to where I was
stationed. So, when the time came, I said, “Okay, maybe I have enough credits now to go
back to college and get a degree.” Because I had an associate degree was all just two
years to go plus other courses. So I applied through the Air Force; I didn’t want to get
out of the Air Force. I applied through the Air Force for what they call the AFIT: Air
Force Institute of Technology program. That was through a large organization at Wright-
Patterson, I guess it was on an Air Force Base in Ohio. There were several options if you
were accepted into the program, which I was! There were several options depending
upon what you selected to be your undergraduate degree. I said, “Okay, I will, if
possible, mechanical or electrical or aeronautical engineering.” Then the Air Force
evaluates what you have; depending then upon what kind of program you want to get
into. Your transcripts then are forwarded to an associate university or college. Some of
the training is done right at Wright Patterson, but at that time, most of it and I assume that
programs’ still going, I don’t know. My transcripts were sent to Texas Tech. They were
evaluated by the staff at Texas Tech and I got a letter back from them once Texas Tech
told the Air Force, “Yes, we could accept him in a degree of mechanical engineering.”
So, the Air Force sent me a letter, and said, “You’re hereby assigned as of fall term to
Texas Tech University for undergraduate study in mechanical engineering.”

RV: When was this?
RM: That was 1958; summer of ’58. Sure enough, there I was; had to move my
wife, family, and young son, had a daughter by this time; up to Lubbock and be there for
the start of school in August or September, whenever it was, enrolled in the program. We
were still in the military, so those of us that were pilots were required to go out to Reese
Air Force Base. I don’t even know if it’s there anymore.

RV: It’s here, but it’s no longer an Air Force Base.
RM: Yes, okay. At that time, it was a pilot training base. One of the requirements in the Air Force is to get paid, at that time, to get paid, you had to fly four hours a month. So, those of us that were in the AFIT program at Texas Tech were assigned to Reese to get our flying time, but our primary duty was being a student. We had to meet all the requirements of the school. We really did not have any military duties; marching or any of that kind of stuff. We were students; professional students getting paid by the Air Force and the Air Force was paying our education, so that was a neat deal.

RV: Was it a four-year program?

RM: No, it was a two-year program because you had to have two years of college to get into the AFIT program. I had two years. When Texas Tech evaluated the registrar’s office or whoever does that kind of thing evaluated my transcripts. When I got there they said, “Okay, you have two years of college, but only a little over a year of it applies to a mechanical engineering degree.” A lot of my courses were at Pasadena City College were termination courses going toward employment. I actually wound up needing three years of college, trying to squeeze it into two years; three years worth of credits to comply with the requirements of Tech in getting an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering. I found after my two years was up, that I still needed basically another year’s worth. So, I applied for an extension and was accepted for a one-term extension. I stayed at Texas Tech continuing on as a full time student until I was carrying about 20 hours a quarter. It wasn’t a light load.

RV: That’s a heavy load.

RM: Your social life was absolutely zip. You studied. The only thing I can remember doing was if there was a football game in town, I would go to the stadium. If there was a basketball game, I would go over there. That was my entertainment; I’d take my son with me. I was there when they enlarged the stadium. You probably heard of that program.

RV: Yes sir.

RM: Where they slid the whole thing back, to get into the Southwest Conference. Of course, we were avid supporters attending all sports.

RV: What was Texas Tech like at that time period, ’58 to ’61?
RM: Small; a fall semester was a little over 9000 students, full load campus.

Spring semester maybe dropped down to 6000. Summer school, which we had to go to, double all the classes; I don’t know how many were there, but I basically carried 20 units plus summer school units the entire 2 ½ years I was there.

RV: How’d you do academically?

RM: Not too bad. I don’t know what my average turned out to be, but I wasn’t Sigma Cum Laude, but I graduated; I qualified. When I did leave, finally in January of ’61, I still was short 12 units. I made arrangements with Tech to take those either by correspondence, for my next assignment was out in Los Angeles. One of the things that the Air Force required, if they sent you to school, they demanded that you be used in the field that your studies were in. That’s not being a pilot; that’s being basically, I was in mechanical engineering, so I went to sort of an engineering function. So, I made arrangements with Texas Tech to either take correspondence or local university courses out in the Los Angeles area to finish up the 12 units. Which, eventually; I did. I think, [actually], my degree date is 1963.

RV: What did you do in Los Angeles?

RM: I worked in, at that time was called Ballistic Missile Division, which was the engineering end of the Air Force that procured ballistic missiles for the military. The Titan, Minuteman, and the Atlas Program. Those were all under what we called at that time Ballistic Missile Division; part of Air Material. Oh, it wasn’t Material Command; it was Systems Command. So, I was in the Minuteman program office working. The Air Force was the managers of the program. The actual engineering acceptance, no, we did the acceptance. The engineering review and all that was done by an organization called TRW, which was under contract at the Air Force. We had to know what in the heck was going on. I was in a section that we called Configuration Management, which was in charge of…buy a system for the military; to buy a system. For instance, Minuteman missile. We are not necessarily buying each missile; we are buying a way to make those missiles. We are buying an engineering program, so it was part of my responsibility to ensure the drawings, the specifications were all acceptable to do the end job that piece of paper was to build something that once you built it and put it with other things that were built, makes a missile. I did that for 3 years.
RV: Did you enjoy that kind of work or did you miss flying?
RM: Well, I was still a pilot, so I still had to fly airplanes to get my flying pay. It was all right, but my purpose I think would be fly airplanes. This was directed out of…

Once you finished your college portion of this AFIT program, you went to three years directed duty. My three years, every time I had an opportunity, I told my boss that I wanted to get back to flying. He’d say, “Don’t bug me, you got three years!” So, finally, I kept doing it. I didn’t particularly care for it; it wasn’t that bad. I was home all the time. It certainly wasn’t an 8 to 9, 8 to 6 job, but it was not flying airplanes, which I went into the Air Force to do. I kept bugging my boss to let me go back to flying and he’d say, “Alright Merritt, when you have less than six months left, I will sign a paper, authorizing you to try to get back to a flying job.” I did my job, I was dutiful and the Air Force, that’s the office I was in at that time, developed an operational Minuteman Missile System; which was what we were supposed to be doing. That system is the only one still operating, so I feel satisfied that I contributed to at least to the operations. I don’t know if they’ll ever get used; I hope they never get used. That was my function, so I did it.

RV: When did you finish that program, it was 1964?
RM: I left; I finally got the assignment out. The unit had moved from Los Angeles, downtown Los Angeles Air Force Station out to Norton Airbase. I left and got out of Norton Air Force Base in early 1964. I finally got an assignment. My three years were almost up. I had been there, yes, three years and my assignment was to I requested to go into the F-4 upgrade training. At that time, the F-4 was still not enough of them around, so I was sent…got orders to go to F-105’s.

RV: Where was that?
RM: That was at Nellis Air Force Base. First of all, I went to survival school up at Stead Airbase.

RV: What was that like?
RM: Miserable (Laughing).

RV: Was it a two-week program?
RM: Two or three week. Yes, three week I think. It seemed sort of funny that I was going there after all. I wanted to go, because I never had anything like that going and flying. They didn’t have that kind of program during the Korean War that I knew of.
Here I’m sent to Stead Air Force Base in January of 1964. The classroom training and thing is done right there at Stead, it’s about 30, 40 miles North of Reno; no longer there either. Then your field exercises where you go out and be the EVAD EE for a while and they try to capture you and you go through prison training and code of Conduct training and all that kind of stuff. It’s up in the Sierras, east side of the Sierra Mountains. Of course, in January; there’s snow up to your armpits. So, I’m going to Southeast Asia (Laughing). I knew where I was going; I’m going to Okinawa. Why am I going to survival school in the middle of winter? Well, they didn’t have jungle survival school at that time. The only thing they had was survival school, which in some respects was alright because part of your survival training is imprisonment and you get the Code of Conduct and you get a little bit of what it might be like in a prison situation.

RV: How much did that help you when you were in Hanoi? How much applied?

RM: Not really a whole lot because you knew that the instructors could not hurt you. You knew that this program, this prison training compound training exercise is over in 2 ½ days. You know you can not get anything to eat for 2 ½ days and basically, you know you’re not going to be hurt. You know you’re not going to just starve. Nothing’s really going to happen you, it’s strictly a simulation and you hope, “Let’s get out of here. Let’s finish this thing and go to where we’re going to go start flying airplanes again.” I don’t know. We didn’t even have to catch a rabbit on the survival portion of it. They just gave us a rabbit and we had to cook it. That’s part of it, and then there was nothing to do; tramp around in snowshoes in six feet of snow. To prepare you for Southeast Asia was not the answer. They later before I was shot down in Okinawa, they started what they called Jungle School there in the Philippine Islands. That was a little more aimed at Southeast Asia, but I never did go through that.

RV: So, when you get to Nellis, how long did your F-105 training last?

RM: That’s only a couple of months long. You learn, again, you’re already a pilot, you know how to fly airplanes; you just learn how to fly the particular airplane you’re going to school in and how to use it as a system to drop bombs and fire rockets and all those other things that it does.

RV: How different was the 105 from the 84?
RM: Thirty years worth or twenty-five years worth of improvement in airplanes. It was three times, or four or five times as fast. It was four or five times as heavy and it can carry four or five times as much. F-84 you struggled to carry two 1000-pound bombs. The F-84 can carry up to 16 to 750-pound bombs-105 I mean. Plus, now we’re in a nuclear age and you are learning how to deliver those systems, which the F-84 never did. It’s a huge step forward in technology and capability. But to operate it, it operates the same way. You pull the stick back and it goes up and you push it down and it goes forward and it goes down; those kind of things. Flying the airplane portion of it is not that much different. Yes, you got systems that internal operating systems. The airplanes are different and advanced and the particular systems of navigation and communications are all far advanced from what you had in the F-84. Again, not that much because we’re not yet into the glass cockpit so to speak as airplanes have today. Everything’s on a visual display. You had gages and you had instruments.

RV: After you finished your training, is that when you went over to Kadena?
RM: Yes, I left in the summer of ’64, Late Spring ’64 and went to Okinawa. I got there, and lived in the BOQ for a while until we found quarters on the island for my wife and family to join me.

RV: So, they were able to come over?
RM: Oh yes. They were there. They got there probably two or three months after, about two months after I was there. Early fall of ’64, they arrived on the island. We had a little small house off base, later moving to on base quarters.

RV: What were your duties there at Kadena?
RM: I was a flight commander a squadron commander operations officer and usually a fighter squadron has four flights of eight to ten pilots and you’re responsible for their training and their flying and making sure that they’re doing what they need to do. Actually, as a flying job, it’s your first command responsibility; you’re responsible for eight to ten people underneath you.

RV: What was your rank at this time?
RM: When I go to Okinawa, I was a captain. I was promoted; that was spring, early summer of ’64. December ’64, I was promoted to major.

RV: Why don’t we take a break sir?
RM: Okay.

RV: Okay, sir, let me ask you. This is 1964, you’re in Okinawa, you’re over in Southeast Asia; what did you know about why the United States was actually involved in Southeast Asia and Vietnam specifically at this point in your career?

RM: At this point, I knew that we had advisors, Army advisors, down in Southeast Asia, in the southern part of Vietnam. I knew that the country had divided. I knew, but the operations that were going on, I don’t think anybody thought that much about it.

RV: Did you know what the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam, why they were there?

RM: Other than support, the South Vietnamese Government, which couldn’t at that time, couldn’t seem to keep a president.

RV: That was a quite tumultuous time period right there.

RM: Oh yes. They were having coups [“coup” as in coup-d’etat] and all kinds of things going on. At that time; our primary concern where I was in Okinawa and what I was doing was certainly not Southeast Asia, it was China. Our mission primarily was aimed in that direction. Southeast Asia was a blip down there where you’d hear about it and didn’t seem to be that much going on that we knew of.

RV: What were your orders or your duties specific to China threat there in Okinawa?

RM: Well, we were part of a deterrence to keep China in bay. We had aircraft on alert same as SAC, Strategic Air Command, to attack targets if necessary, if ordered, on the mainland.

RV: How long were you going to be stationed in Okinawa?

RM: Normal tour like that was three years.

RV: So, you knew you’d be there until 1967?

RM: Yes.

RV: Did you get to fly any at all into South Vietnam at this point?

RM: Okay, I got there in May, early May of ’64. I was assigned to a squadron. I was flight commander. My wife and children whose numbers increased by this time arrived probably in July, August timeframe. We had a house off base. The main part of
our mission at that time, mid ’64 timeframe, was the alert business of deterrence against China. We, again, didn’t hear that much what was going on down in Southeast Asia other than reports. There was no, we were not involved in any fighting going on. We knew there were airplanes down there, but again, part of their mission was some F-100’s were stationed at Clark Air Base, I guess. Again, they were primarily deterrence against China. November of 1964, our squadron was tasked to send ten, it may be eight, eight airplanes to Da Nang Airbase as just on the trial basis to see if the 105 could be adapted and used in Southeast Asia. That’s what we did. I was in the squadron; the squadron commander selected me because I had experience in war experience in the F-84, which is basically the same mission. I had been a weapon’s instructor and I was the senior flight commander so my flight and the squadron commander took eight airplanes to Da Nang Airbase [South Vietnam].

RV: How long were you there?

RM: We were only there about two weeks, as I recall. We did not fly any combat per say. One time, we did I can remember going over into the Laotian area to “act as” cover for some MiG cover in case the MiGs came down from North Vietnam or even China; wherever they might come from. Again, some “Laotian” fighters, bombers; doing some bombing work in Laos. Which at that time, nothing much was said about that. I don’t even know if the American public knew. Of course, probably, the pilots were Laotian pilots, probably “Air-America” and doing the training of the Laotian’s. That’s as close to combat. We just sort of stood up and watched flying overhead, watching what they were doing and being listening for alerts ready for any MiGs coming down. There certainly wasn’t any threat to us unless the MiGs did perhaps come down out of wherever they were going to come from.

RV: What were they doing with the planes that you were watching in Laos?

RM: They were dropping small bombs. They were flying T-28 aircraft and that doesn’t carry too many bombs. But they were attacking probably the Pathet Lao there and some positions in the Southern part of Laos.

RV: Had you received any instruction at this point of what happened if you would get shot down over Vietnam or Laos?

RM: No, not specifically.
RV: Nothing beyond your…
RM: Not on this first trip down here, no. Like I say, we were down there about
two weeks and we flew home and nothing more was thought about it.
RV: What was your impression of Vietnam at that time?
RM: A lot of trees. We did get off [base]. A bunch of us went over into
downtown into the commercial part of Da Nang, but it sort of seemed strange that all the
buses had wire screen, heavy wire screen over the windows. Like, “Watch out,
somebody might try to throw a hand grenade in the window”, that kind of thing. But,
other than that, we didn’t see any visual signs of any kind of harassment by Viet Cong or
whatever you want to call them about Vietnamese uprising type thing going on. There
was more of that going on down in the Saigon area. I never got to Saigon, never was
down in that area. Yes, you knew that there was some threat, remembering now this
timeframe; the Marines have not arrived.
RV: The only thing is the “Gulf of Tonkin” happened.
RM: The “Gulf of Tonkin” had happened and I think that’s what led to us going
down. At that time, the only news we had was what the government had put out and the
press. Torpedo boats had attacked the destroyer. We had no reason to disbelieve that.
We went down there, they finally, whatever reason, our little experiment and to see how
the “105” would fit into the program did or didn’t work. After that, the F-105 was never
to my knowledge, used in South Vietnam. We continued our Okinawa mission until
sometime late January. No, I’m sorry; it’s the middle of March. When we had some
orders sending our squadron since we had been down there first, our squadron went to an
airbase in Thailand, Korat.
RV: What was your mission there?
RM: To set up operations, specifically, to prepare for flying over North Vietnam.
We were there probably less than a week. At that time, we weren’t flying at first into
North Vietnam or we weren’t even flying into Laos; we were just flying missions around
Thailand seeing where we were getting the lay of the land around there. We did get
orders, or as they say, a “frag”, fragmentation orders; to get ready to fly a mission against
a target in North Vietnam with F-105’s. It was going to be a combined mission. There
were going to be other aircraft that were flying up there against the same target from
South Vietnam as well as ours, the F-105’s. This was late February. This was going to
be the first U.S. Air Force mission into North Vietnam. The Navy had been in there for
the Tonkin Gulf thing, but other than that, there had been no that we knew of, no actually
attack missions against North Vietnam by U.S. Air Force Aircraft. There may have been
reconnaissance or there may have been other things, but as far as dropping bombs and
trying to destroy a target; none. We briefed for this mission. It was a so-called target
definition to description, it was an ordinance depot and it was some short distant 20, 30
miles north of the DMZ. Of course, we had all this stuff laid out on our map where the
DMZ was, where we could fly, where we couldn’t fly. It was very, very tight control on
what you could or could not do if and when we went into North Vietnam. We briefed for
this mission, we went out in the airplanes, sat basically a cockpit alert with all those
things on, ready to push the button to start for about minimum two hours, sometime two
hours plus, waiting for a release to go against this target. It never came that day. Finally,
we were called back in and said, “Okay, mission’s cancelled. Brief same mission
tomorrow, same time, same station type thing.” We did this the second day. We sat in
airplanes and waited to release and nothing ever happened. We were called back to the
briefing. You’re mission’s scrubbed. I don’t remember right now whether it was three,
third day or the fourth day, but this kept going. You know, “What’s going on? Why are
we being held up?” Finally, on either the third or fourth day, we got released to take off
and go bomb this target. Finally, we’re doing something. Why are we doing it, we don’t
know other than the fact that the “Tonkin Gulf thing” and we knew that the North
Vietnamese were helping the so called “Viet Cong” in South Vietnam and their efforts to
overthrow the South Vietnamese government. Our mission was to support the South
Vietnamese government.

RV: Do you remember those in that briefing, the restrictions that were given to
you on account of how you would fire discipline, things like that?

RM: I don’t remember any specifics. We had targets; we had sequences. I don’t
recall any of the details of what would happen if you were shot down or anything else or
like this.

RV: What about air defenses around the site?
RM: We knew there were going to be air defenses. In fact, my flight of airplanes four aircraft, I was again flying with the squadron commander. The first aircrafts to cross the target were multiple aircrafts. There were F-100’s; from South Vietnam probably Da Nang. There were B-57’s; American B-57’s from South Vietnam probably further south. I don’t remember right now where they were stationed, but down closer to Saigon. There were F-105’s, probably rescue airplanes in and about SAR forces probably out of Nakhon Phanom just inside the Thai border. Now also at this time, we were cautioned against saying that we were using Thai airbases. That was still something going on between U.S. government and the Thai government monarchy saying, “We don’t want the world to know you’re using our airbases to bomb North Vietnam.” So, that was, “Where’d you come from?” “Well, I don’t know.” (Laughing) [So what do you say?]

RV: Somewhere south.

RM: Anyway, the first four aircraft of F-100’s were first to cross the target with flac, what they call flac depression; dropping CBU’s, cluster bomb units to anti-personnel weapons. Little teeny bomblets. Our first four aircraft, the flight that I was in and I was number three man, our first four aircraft from our squadron was across the target; same thing, CBU’s. We were circling the target; not circling, just waiting and getting in position to make our attack. We saw the F-100’s go across and drop their bombs, bomblets. Did one of them get shot? I think on one of the F-100’s got shot down. To deliver CBU’s, (cluster bomb units), anti-personnel’s; it’s a low level high-speed pass across the target. I mean, down to one, two, three hundred feet. We were warned that there were automatic weapons up to medium densities 57mm anti-aircraft weapons around this particular target. It was a very easy target to see a few buildings and a lot of boxes and things like that standing around. It was designated as an ordinance supply point. First four airplanes, the F-100’s went across, one of them as I recall was shot down. That sort of delayed us while we tried to figure out where he went, was he going to be able to be rescued, did we have to go over and help the rescue rather than continue the bombing mission. Finally, it was determined; right now I can’t recall what it was, but there was an F-100 shot down and I later found out that the pilot was captured and was a prisoner, first Air Force prisoner. Our airplanes, our four airplanes went across the target in formation, the release formation and our number two airplane was hit with small arms.
automatic weapons type fire. We continued releasing our weapons now. The weapon
that we had was CBU; I think it was CBU 12’s. It doesn’t matter. It’s a little bomblet
that comes out of a canister and it has a parachute. It floats down and as it hits the
ground, it explodes; it has a trigger device that explodes it. They’re not very big, maybe
a size of a softball. Somebody forgot to take into consideration that there were a lot of
trees around this place. As we went across, we could see little white parachutes all over,
hanging in the trees. These little bomblets had not gone down and had not exploded. We
were carrying the same thing so basically the same thing happened. I say, it was an
ineffective weapon under the circumstances because they weren’t going off; they weren’t
killing anybody like they were supposed to. What anti-suppressant does is you try to kill
the gunners that are shooting at you; well we weren’t doing it. We had the F-100’s have
an airplane shot down. We had an airplane shot down, our pilot got further away, the
number 2 guys got further away from the target area than did the F-100 pilot. He was
eventually rescued but for all practical purposes, that stopped our portion of the mission
for a while. We were done; we were headed back anyway. We went out and covered for
our down pilot and he was picked up. Here now out of eight airplanes across the target,
two of them were shot down. That’s not too good, what’s going on? What eventual
damage we did, we never did re-bomb that target; I don’t recall what the bomb damage
assessment was afterwards. We flew back our planes and all the rest of them got back.
We probably had 16 airplanes total and we all got back to Korat Airbase and our rescued
pilot got brought back and we had a big party; everything’s all right. Rescue forces
worked good.

RV: This is your first mission?
RM: Yes, first mission. Two airplanes that we know of got shot down. At that
time, we didn’t know that the one pilot had been captured. We just knew we had lost a
pilot and two airplanes out of the mission. I don’t know how many total airplanes there
were, but like I say, from Korat, 16 probably. So, you’re down a little bit about that and
did we really do anything; and I don’t remember, I just don’t remember whether that
target was ever destroyed or made inoperable. Basically, it’s supposed to be an
ammunition storage depot.
RV: Do you remember how you felt after your first mission flying into North Vietnam, what this was like?
RM: No, I had done that in another war. Basically, doing the same thing. Using basically the same weapons; CBU’s and bombs. Just doing it faster and probably a greater defense. Now the U.S. military has been in North Vietnam twice and we’ve lost at least three airplane, resulting in two pilots being prisoners of war.
RV: Was your unit permanently stationed or moved over to Korat?
RM: No, we were down there TDY. Okay, now initially, for all the time I was there, Okinawa’s main primary mission was deterrence in China. We would rotate a squadron to Khorat for two months. A squadron of airplanes was 18 to 20, would go to Korat or 24; would go to Korat, we would stay for two months, fly missions, then return to Okinawa for four months. To fulfill the commitment that we had at Okinawa, a rotational squadron from Stateside would fly from wherever they were in the U.S.; George Air Force Base or McConnell Air Force Base, fly to Okinawa, and fill in for the deployed squadron from that base. A lot of times, we would take some of their pilots with us and maybe a couple of their airplanes instead of our own airplanes. But we always then had the three squadrons on duty at Okinawa; the fourth, the squadron, the rotational squadron in and out of. So, we would go down for two months, back to Okinawa for four months, down to Korat for two months. The second F-105, there was another wing of F-105’s in Japan…Yukota. They were doing the same thing. They would have one squadron at; let’s see, we were at Korat, they were at Takhli with a fill in squadron coming from one of the other 105 bases to 105 bases in the States and they would be down there first. So, we were temporary duty in Thailand flying the fly combat sorties into North Vietnam, which started like I say for the 105, the second of March, 1965, finally. We never did understand what the full story was behind the day to day delay on launching that first mission and it wasn’t until many years later and a couple of books later that basically, we’re waiting for the president say, “Okay, let’s do it.” We got very high-level control on any sortie into North Vietnam.
RV: How long did that last? I guess the whole time you were there?
RM: First couple of months, yes. We eventually had this system what we called rolling thunder. This was the first of the rolling thunder missions into North Vietnam.
[They were designed.] their purpose was to apply pressure up to a point without getting involved into a full go to hell war. Targets, rolling thunders primarily against the transportation means between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. What we were trying to do was stop the flow of goods to South Vietnam. This [“Rolling Thunder”] was eventually approved by LBJ and that was how we operated for a long time.

RV: Were you frustrated with that, that when you found out later or I guess at the time?

RM: Yes. At the time, yes because there are ways to stop a war and there are ways not to stop a war. You don’t piddily bomb, use multi [million dollar] airplanes and weapons systems to bomb trucks on the trail. It’s basically what we were limited to. There were rules of engagement, “ROE’s”, which mean it defined what you could attack, where you could attack, and what it took to attack a target once you were cleared to attack it. There was multi-layers of command all the way up to the White House was like. You know, now know. Unless the White House said, “Go”, you could have a target that again, restricted areas, restricted locations, restricted ordinance, as to where you could and couldn’t bomb. Stupid way to run a war. I think I said that in my paper. [We could not] at first, there were not surface-to-air; North Vietnam did not have surface to air missiles; at least in the area where we were allowed to go. You could not attack one of the ROE’s, was you were forbidden to attack a SAM site unless it launched a missile on an American airplane. You could watch it being built, you could see it being built, very distinctive pattern on the ground as it’s being built; a Star of David type thing with missiles in the points of the stars and the big radar set right in the middle of it, SA-2s, SA-3s. You could see it being built. You could not attack them. If it launched a missile finally and became operational, the missile site, SAM site; then it could be targeted, but by now it’s ringed with many layers of automatic weapons, camouflage; much more difficult target to find and destroy.

RV: This was part of your ROE while you were there at Khorat?

RM: Yes. Another restriction, of course, you couldn’t go within so many miles of the DMZ. You couldn’t go within I think 20 miles, maybe 10 a distance from the Chinese border. You had a 30-mile circle around Hanoi; you could not fly inside of or drop bomb expend ordinance inside of. Same thing with Haiphong, the harbor where all
the ships were coming into; you could not attack. You could not destroy their capability
to conduct the war. You can get targeted for “piddily-ass” things like truck convoys up
and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and that kind of stuff. We didn’t know at that time how
extensive that was, but again, there were severe limitations on what we could and
couldn’t do from highest level.

RV: Did that affect the morale of the men in your unit?
RM: I think we all said, “What the hell, why are we doing this? If you’re not out
to win in, why fight it?”

RV: How much did the shoot down or those two planes shot down on your first
mission although one pilot came back, how much was that a factor in morale?
RM: I don’t think it was. You sort of expect to lose. I think the biggest effect
was that the fact that the ordinance we were using to suppress what eventually got these
two aircrafts was basically worthless. That was more of a morale problem than the fact
that you lose somebody. We of course were ecstatic that our pilot happened to get picked
up. By now also, we knew that the man, the Navy pilot that was shot down in the Tonkin
Gulf thing had been captured and alive. Okay, they’re going to have prisoners, yes. You
sometimes expect that in flying airplanes; you get shot down. The greatest number of
prisoners in World War II were aircrews. But again now, we’re talking instead of a B-17
or B-24 with ten people were talking about one person or two in F-4’s. It’s there in the
back of your mind, but a fighter pilot or a pilot doesn’t think that way, he thinks, “I’m
invincible, nothing will get me, I will be home for dinner.”

RV: I guess you have to, to an extent.
RM: You have to do that or you lose all-purpose of doing your mission. So, I’m
down in Southeast Asia and we get a few of these piddily targets here and there until I go
back to Okinawa, back on the alert pads up there doing my job in Okinawa and listening
to what’s going on down in Southeast Asia and basically the same thing. I go back down
again that way after four months and a little less restrictions, but “Rolling Thunder” has
gotten a lot more open, but again, we’re restricted; can’t go in and around Hanoi or
Haiphong. Again, we still can’t attack SAM Sites until it launches something at
Americans. We’re trying to bomb the jungle so to speak; to stop the flow of goods
coming south.
All right, I’m up to 16th of September

RV: Is this the shoot down mission?
RM: Yes. I’ve accumulated on the two different times now, the second different
time that I’ve been there; I’ve accumulated. I think there’s 28-7, 28 combat sorties into
North Vietnam.

RV: How close had you been fired upon toward the sorties?
RM: I’ve seen it. I’ve gotten a couple bullet holes, but no serious damage.

RV: Any SAM problems?
RM: No SAM problems at that time. They’re not wide spread as they later
became. One of the problems; if we flew a large number of airplanes against the target,
whatever that target happened to be; the 105 at that time did not have what we call a
RHAW system, a device for pin pointing or locating or knowing that SAM’s were in the
air searching. Not in the air, but the radar was on. We didn’t have Anti-SAM systems in
our 105’s. If we were going into an area where we knew there were SAM’s, then we
would be assigned a Navy or a Marine airplane that had that kind of equipment on. Our
airplanes were being recycled through a modification program to get that equipment put
in. Up until the time I was shot down, I never did fly with what we call RHAW system,
Radar Homing and Warning System. So, we didn’t have it; we did the best we could
without it. If we thought we really needed, we had additional help come in to fly with us.

RV: Had you just spoken with your wife about the possibilities and what would
happen and that whole scenario if you did get shot down?
RM: Yes, briefly. You say the possibility is there; the Air Force is going to look
after you. You won’t know; we won’t know what’s happened to me for awhile. I think
the wife of a military combat pilot is tenuous at best, but again, if she stayed with you,
then she accepts those conditions. Maybe not readily, but it’s a fact of life. Maybe that’s
why there’s so much divorce in military pilots fraternity…I don’t know.

RV: Sir, let’s pause for a moment.
RM: Okay.
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Raymond Merritt. Today is September 8th, 2003. It is a little after 10:00 am central standard time and I’m in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library Interview Room on the Campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Merritt is in Marysville, California. Sir, we left off; you were on the tarmac about to launch on September 16, 1965. I wonder if you could pick up the narrative from there and continue.

Raymond Merritt: Okay. This was to be and I don’t know where we got before this point, but it was what we called an iron hand mission. An iron hand mission was a colloquialism for trying to destroy a SAM site. Our flight of four aircraft was assigned to destroy two separate SAM sites, so two airplanes would take care of one and the other second two airplanes or element would take care of the other SAM site. It was briefed to be radio silence all the way from take off to completion of mission or at least leaving the North Vietnam area. The target area to the best that I can recall was certainly South of Hanoi forty, fifty miles. It was North of the big bridge, Thanh Hoa Bridge; it was north of that somewhere in there. I think we had some elements of our squadron that had gone after the same target once before. They were building a very large defensive ring of anti-aircraft guns, missiles around the Thanh Hoa Bridge because that was a very important mission and I think this was one that was discovered later and we were assigned to take it out; try to take it out. We had very funny operating procedures. One of the dumb rules of rules of engagement was that you could see a SAM site being built very distinct
pattern, like a Star of David on the ground in the middle being the radar sight, or the radar
equipment and the points of the star, the various missiles. You could see it being built;
you could not attack that site unless it fired a missile at an American airplane. Of course,
by the time it’s able to launch a missile at our airplane it’s also been ringed with defenses
of various sized anti-aircraft weapons and camouflaged. You have a coordinate on the
ground and you go up in the air trying to find this thing. First of all without getting shot
down by the SAM, and second, trying to evade the defensive ring that’s around these
things. The ordinance that we carried at that time was not a guided missile as they have
these days. It was low-level attack with cluster bomb units and napalm to destroy the
target on the ground; get rid of the people then get rid of the target and burn it down.
RV: Did you feel those were adequate?
RM: Absolutely not because you’re in a very vulnerable positions to deliver that
ordinance, scooting down low along the ground because you have to deliver that as a
tactic. You’d deliver it low level at a high speed. You’re flying down low where it’s
more difficult to see a target and you are of course now within the range of everything
that’s coming up at you; little kids on a dike throwing rocks could possibly hit you.
You’re down to a 100 feet or so. It was not a good situation, but that’s all we had to do it
with. We didn’t have guided missiles in at least in the 105 at that time that were radiation
seeking. In fact, our aircraft at the time frame, ’65; did not even have what we call
RHAW gear, or “Radar Homing and Detection” devices. You were eyeballing
everything and hoping to get back. All right, we took off, we headed toward the target
area, we refueled in the air over the North Vietnamese border into the target area, letting
down low altitude and we were to be low altitude all the way across North Vietnam until
we got to the target area. The two elements split 20 or 30 miles short of the target; one
heading south and my wingman and myself headed to the northern target. The navigation
system in the airplane was an accurate system; it was zeroing out and I was looking and I
didn’t see a target. At this same time, I did not at any time see anybody shooting at us,
which was good. My navigation system, it was a Doppler navigation system, zeroed out
which indicated that I had gone over the top of the target, but I hadn’t seen it. So, I
started to turn to and called my wingman and said, “Let’s reverse and we’ll go back from
a different angle and see if we can pick it up.” About this same time, the wingman of the
flight leader who was the Colonel Robinson Risner, the squadron commander; called
over the air, just a blind call, and said, “Oak three”, which was our call sign, my call sign,
“Oak lead is on the ground, but he’s okay,” meaning that Colonel Risner had
been shot down. So, I said in astonishment, “Repeat that again please Oak two.” And he
said the same thing again and I said, “Okay, hang on, climb up, we will be down to set up
a Rescap (or rescue effort) to try to pick him up and have a helicopter come in and pick
him up.

RV: Immediately when that happened, you abandoned the target?
RM: Yes, and trying to get my target. First things first; you go down and try to
help your downed wingman. We were turning to head to the southern most target, my
wingman and myself; when I noticed that a yellow light came on the side panel of the
cockpit indicating I had electrical failure. So, wow; that’s not good. I told my wingman,
I said, “Hang on, I’m having some problems here. We may have to head for the coast
and get out over the water.” I looked down again at the side panel and a second light had
come on indicated that I had hydraulic failure. Well, a modern jet aircraft flies on
electrics and hydraulics and without them, you become not unstable, but you certainly
have a harder time flying the airplane. I called him hoping my electrics were still
working and the radio and said, “We’re heading for the coast, I’ve got problems.” I
initiated a slight climb. Now we had been cruising along over the ground looking for the
target and it’s down fairly low, two or three hundred feet which was until you see the
target, then you drop on down to release altitude of a hundred feet or so. I started a slight
climb and I headed toward the Tonkin Gulf and I could see the sun shining on the ocean
out in the front of me. I said, “Okay airplane, just hang together for awhile longer.” I
looked back into the cockpit, of course, now without electrics, I’m gravity feed fueled; no
fuel pumps, no hydraulic controls. The airplane is becoming very hard to fly; not
difficult, but more difficult to fly than normal because you do have some back up
systems. As I swing my eyes through the cockpit one more time seeing what’s going on,
right in front of me is a big yellow light that has come on that says overheat. There’s two
big lights right in front of your forward vision and if those come on, you have serious
problems. The first one’s the overheat light means there’s a fire somewhere in the rear
end of the airplane outside of the engine.
RV: Was your plan to eject over the water?
RM: Oh yes, get out over the water and eject because that was a U.S. Navy lake out there and you’re darn assured of a rescue if you get out of your airplane okay. Of course, I could see it in front of me so I wasn’t maybe 10 kilometers from the ocean. As I was looking at the yellow light and climbing slightly; I’m up probably five, six, seven, eight hundred feet by this time and going fairly fast because one of the last things I remember is “Let’s get out there fast.” I pushed the power up to full. The second light in front of me came on and that says fire; a big red light. It’s about the size of your thumbnail, but it looks like it’s about 20 inches in diameter when it comes on. That light came on followed almost immediately by the aircraft pitching over, nose down, straight to the ground and absolutely no control.

RV: Had you ever experienced any of these warning lights before when flying?
RM: No.
RV: This is the very first time?
RM: Yes, very first time. It’s something you never hope to see. The pilot’s handbook on the F-105 says one simple thing about that red light coming on. It says, “If on fire, eject.” They don’t give you any options because the airplane soon becomes uncontrolled as I found out and I’m heading straight for the ground doing over 600 knots. “If on fire, eject”, so I start squeezing the handles and eject from the airplane. I had enough time, I knew my parachute had opened; I was in a violent oscillation because of the speeds at which my chute had opened and I saw my airplane hit the ground.

RV: Did your back seater get out?
RM: No, there was only one.
RV: There was just you?
RM: Just me, 105 D-Model; single seater. I saw the airplane hit the ground, I made about three oscillations in my parachute and I hit the ground.
RV: What did it look like when your airplane hit the ground? What do you remember?
RM: It exploded and ammunition was going; well, of course I had the napalm on it and I had the ammunition in the nose 20mm and it was exploding. I think my first thought was, “I hope nobody gets hurt, I don’t want them mad at me.” I no sooner than
saw my airplane hit the ground when I hit the ground and landed right in the middle of a rice paddy; unfortunately or fortunately, whatever the case may be, there were 50, 60, 70 people out planting rice.

RV: Did they watch you?
RM: Oh yes, I’m sure they saw me.

RV: Right. Did you see them coming down or did it happen too fast?
RM: Did I see them? Not until I was on the ground moving around. No, I wasn’t paying much attention to what was going on underneath me.

RV: About how much distance between you and your crashed aircraft?
RM: Oh, probably three or four hundred feet. There wasn’t much time left; I barely got out so to speak. Two swings in the chute and I was on the ground and I hit very, very hard. The rice paddy probably had 10, 12 inches of mud in the bottom of it and 10 or 12 inches of water on top of that. My leg instead of doing a nice; what they call PLF, Parachute Landing Fall; my leg stuck in the ground and I rotated around my knee. So, my knee was dislocated; my shoulder hurt like heck from the forces of the ejection high-speed low altitude. All of those people were running toward me as I sat there and was looking, surveying the situation and probably 2/3 of them had big long rifles and another third had big long poles with machetes on the end; one of the tools they use over there.

RV: Do you remember how you felt, what you were thinking when you saw these people coming towards you?
RM: No, this ain’t good (Laughing). “I hope they don’t kill me.”

RV: Were you scared?
RM: Absolutely you’re scared. You’re in the middle of their country and you’re trying to do them in and they’re all running toward you; they’re bound and determined to catch you somehow. I was unable to walk. I did have sense enough to take out my 38 revolver that I carried and destroyed my little emergency radio so they couldn’t use it which was a trick that they used. They would capture what we call a survival radio and use it to lure other people to come in and try to pick you up.

RV: Did you think about setting that off instead of destroying it or activating it without destroying it first?
RM: You have two systems; you have a beeper, an automatic system in the parachute harness or in the rigging of the parachute that automatically goes off when you jump out and that was going “Beep, beep, beep, beep” very loud. I could hear it on my little hand held radio. Any transmissions I was trying to make on the radio were being blocked by the emergency locater beep. Again, I didn’t want them to use that little hand held radio so I had my “.38” on my lap and this isn’t really a John Wayne type situation but I’m going to do my best if they start shooting, I’m going to have to start shooting back.

RV: You were prepared to defend yourself?

RM: Oh yes. I just destroyed my radio, my little hand held radio and I threw my .38 as far as I could throw it in the rice paddy. They were on me like flies on a piece of raw meat so to speak. One of the first things they did to you was always take off almost all your clothes. To them, it was like a big flea market because they were taking stuff off and I had a survival pack and they were taking stuff out of that; the water, food, and parts of my uniform and my boots.

RV: They pulled you out of the mud I assume?

RM: No, I was still just laying there on top of the water and the mud.

RV: Were they laughing, were they angry?

RM: No, they were not laughing, they were serious and I had no idea what they were saying, but they had their guns on me and they were “Yak, yak, yak, yak.” Somebody took my watch off and looked at me and looked at the watch and pointed to himself and I sort of nodded “Okay.” You know, it’s yours, what can I do?

RV: Right, what choices did you have? (Laughing)

RM: Yes, what else do you want? (Laughing) Eventually, they had me stripped down to my under shorts and they wanted to take me off out of the field and over to the closest village. Sometime during the ejection, I had broken my left arm, forearm.

RV: Was it a compound fracture?

RM: No, just more of a crack, but it was broken; it hurt. I had dislocated my left knee; so to get me, I couldn’t walk. So, to move me, they tied a rope around my….No, I guess it was my left shoulder that I had dislocated during the ejection because they had tied a rope around me to drag me off the field to scoot me across the top of the water.
because I couldn’t walk. As I got to the edge of the field with this rope around my arm, they yanked on it and I could hear my lower arm break. That was when the arm was broken.

RV: It did not break during the ejection, but it broke when they…

RM: No, they broke it pulling me across the dike, the canal at the end of the edge of the rice field.

RV: What injuries did you have to your legs? If your shoulder was separated, was your knee still separated or not?

RM: Oh yes. It was badly dislocated. I was having a difficult time walking, but they struggled me to the nearest little village and I was put into a house and not really interrogated. Basically, they gave me a set of Vietnamese clothes, pajamas type, and I was in this little house and they really weren’t doing anything to me. People were coming by and looking in the window and looking in the door at me and jabbering and shaking their fist and this and that.

RV: Was anyone inside the house?

RM: I think there was. Eventually, I asked if I could and complaining about the injuries that I received, so I kept saying, “Doctor” and there was nobody there that spoke English. Eventually, later on, what they called a medic did appear that afternoon. Now, I got shot down probably 8:00, 9:00 in the morning and so it’s afternoon sometime when a medic did show up. He feeled around and didn’t do anything except his little assistant did give me a shot in the shoulder of something to deaden the pain, but that was about all. They didn’t do any splints or anything else.

RV: Did that shot help?

RM: Yes it did. It was pretty good and they brought me a great big bowl of rice, probably the biggest bowl of rice I’ve ever seen in my life for one person to sit down and eat. Yes, they weren’t being mean. Oh, probably sometime, it was 6:00 or 7:00 still light, early evening; somebody came in with some militia guys, military uniforms on anyway and tied my arms together behind my back and started leading me down the road and I was taken to a second little village.

RV: Your shoulder still dislocated?
RM: Yes, shoulder’s still dislocated and my knee is still banged up, but I’m limping along and they’re pushing and shoving and helping me to walk. I get to a second little village just about dark. There is a short interrogation wanting to know what my name was, where I was from, a few questions that I did answer and a few that I tried not to answer.

RV: Like what?

RM: Your name, what squadron you’re from, what kind of airplane you’re flying, what was your target, these kind of things. I know I gave my name because the Geneva Conventions give name, rank, serial number, date of birth, and the Code of Conduct says; resist the best of your ability answering further questions. When there’s a language barrier; they’re not speaking very good English and of course I couldn’t speak any Vietnamese, so you can get away with not answering and they weren’t persistent about it at that point. Later that evening, I was in a back room and I could hear someone; it turned out it looked like the building I was in was a school room or a school house or a town meeting home. Later, I could hear a man talking to the assembled village people and he would say something and they would go, “Ra, ra, ra, ra” and he would say something else, and they’d go, “Ra, ra, ra.” Pretty soon, the guards came in and got me into that room on the stage and I said to myself, “I’m going to be tried and shot right here.”

RV: Really?

RM: That’s what I was thinking. The man that was doing the haranguing of the crowd, of the villagers said some more and they all cheered and the people cheered and then he turned to me and he said, “Bow!” And I said, “No.” I shook my head, no, one or the other.

RV: Bow to him or bow to the crowd?

RM: Bow to the crowd; show some submission, show that your repenting your crimes type thing as I later found out that purpose. I shook my head no and he said it again a couple of different times and I kept shaking my head no and pretty soon I could feel a bayonet behind my head; pushing into my neck. So, did the obligatory; three bows. Everybody cheered, the whole audience out in the front, the villagers; they cheered and I was taken back to my room and they all left. It was sort of probably political; “Here’s
what we do to you filthy capitalist American” type thing. Next thing I remember late that
night, I could hear a vehicle pull out, pull close to the building and I was eventually led
out and put in the back of a truck and taken off to somewhere.

RV: Were you under armed guard the whole time?
RM: Oh yes; armed guard. Two or three guys sitting in the truck with me with
rifles; the militia probably.

RV: Did they try to communicate with you at all?
RM: No.

RV: Were they staring at you?
RM: Yes. Well, it was dark. They were there to assure that I didn’t get away
from them. Eventually, I could hear us coming to a large town and I really didn’t
consider that we were in Hanoi, but that’s where we eventually wound up.

RV: How much pain were you in?
RM: Pretty painful in the shoulder and in the knee from the twisted or dislocated
knee and shoulder. The arm didn’t hurt at all, but the shoulder was pretty painful.

RV: On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate?
RM: Seven or eight; somewhere along in there. I was having a hard time
walking.

RV: Right, I can imagine.
RM: I heard the vehicle stopped and I heard, sounded like a rusty gate being
opened. The vehicle moved forward and stopped and I could hear this rusty gate being
closed behind me. That was my introduction to the Hao Lo Prison land on the Hanoi
Hilton because you always came in the same way through this big gate and the rusty door
always squeaked and always clanked shut. I was taken directly to a cell in an area that
we called Heartbreak Hotel; a small section had seven different small cells [in a cell
block]. Eight cells; one of them converted to a shower room. I was put inside and told to
be quiet.

RV: So there was a guard there that spoke English?
RM: Oh yes. There was a guard there patrolling around the outside. I didn’t hear
anything. This was very early in the morning. Later that same day, I could hear an
American talking and so I was able to climb up on the bed slabs and now the cell is about
6 feet by maybe 9 feet down each side. The narrower side is two cements slabs to sleep on and at the end of each of them is what they call leg irons, leg clamps; hold your legs in place; shackles. I could hear somebody eventually saying, “Hey, new guy, what’s your name?” in a soft whisper. So, I climb up on the bed board with difficulty and look out and I can’t see anybody, but this voice calls again and says, “Hey, new guy, say your name.” I look around and there’s no guards in the hallway of this section, so I said, “Ray Merritt.” The voice on the other end says, “Hi Ray, this is Ron Byrne, welcome to Hanoi.” Ron was shot down, same squadron, about two weeks ahead of me.

RV: Oh really.

RM: Did you know each other?

RV: Oh yes. In fact, next to him as it turns out as we are starting this little whispering conversation was another fellow that had been shot down from my same squadron the day before Ron had been shot down. Out of the seven people in the cell block, three of us are from the same squadron and one of them next to me was a Navy pilot and then there was an empty cell and then there was another Navy pilot. About this time, you could hear the outer door of the cellblock opening and so everybody jumped back down off out of the window and played like we were asleep or resting and a guard wandered through. Every time he’d go by he says, “Do not talk. Keep silent.” I guess is what he said. He looked around a while and went to the other end and went out again and you could hear the outer door clank shut. “Hey Ray, get up.” So, I got back up on the bed and looked out the window and we started carrying on a conversation and that was my introduction to the tap code.

RV: So, it started immediately introducing you to the tap code.

RM: Oh yes. Ron said, “Ray, there’s probably somewhere scratched in your room, there’s this little block box, 5 X 5 matrix; that’s our tap code.” Then he very briefly explained how it worked. He said, “You got to learn that because that’s the only way we can communicate safely.” Then, I said, “Okay.” About that time, the guard came in again and everybody got down and the rest of the day went fairly silent because they were in and out.

RV: What kind of food were you given?
RM: That day, usually a bowl of rice, probably about an 8-inch soup bowl full of rice and a plate or another bowl with soup in it, which contained a few vegetables.

RV: Did you receive any medical attention that first day?

RM: No. Over the period, I didn’t see a real doctor probably or a medic for years.

RV: Really?

RM: Things sort of healed themselves eventually.

RV: So, your shoulder was still separated?

RM: Yes.

RV: Your left arm is still broken and your left knee is still dislocated?

RM: Yes.

RV: After the first day, how much were you able to communicate with the others and what kind of situation did you feel that you were in?

RM: Well, you’re in a cellblock with seven cells and the guards patrolled through there occasionally and so you’re not talking verbally very much, but I was busy trying to learn what this tap code and communication system was. The next morning, we heard the same; somebody else being brought into the cell block and put into the empty cell. It wasn’t too long because the guards had left and we hear this whistling from we assumed, the new guy that just got brought in and he whistled the little tune, “My Name is McNamara,” he sang this little ditty, “My name is Robbie Risner and I’m the leader of the group.” That was my element lead, that had been shot down shortly before that I had been on my way down to try to help, and he had been also captured and brought eventually to one day after me because he was further south from me. Now out of seven people in this cellblock, four of us were from the same squadron; not a good average for F-105’s.

RV: No, no sir.

RM: With that, everybody in the cellblock is back up looking out their little barred window on top of the door.

RV: Are you looking across to each other; across the halls?

RM: Well, you can’t see directly; I couldn’t because directly across from me was an empty room that was the shower room, but I could see the shapes in the two rooms
across from me down the hall. I couldn’t tell who they were; I knew who they were from
their voice.

RV: Were there any windows in the cell at all, beyond the one that’s on the door?
RM: Yes, there was one high window on the outside wall that you could not
reach; you could see out. Had no idea where we were or what we were in other than the
fact that we were in and I guess it was either Ron or Wes Schierman said, “Welcome to
the Hanoi Hilton. The rooms are bad, but the price is good.”

RV: Can you describe the tap code?
RM: It’s a matrix of you divide the alphabet. The alphabet has 26 letters, but you
eliminate ‘K’ because in most instances, a C or a K is interchangeable. You have
actually 25 letters left; you put the first five letters on the first row; one, two, three, four,
five; A, B, C, D, E. Then the second row is F, G, H, I, J; then L, M, N, O, P; and so on
and so forth. You fill out this 5 X 5 matrix. Then each letter of the alphabet, and this is
being told to me how it works as we did the same thing with Robbie as they did with
Robbie the next morning, we were told how it works. The letter A is in the top left-hand
corner of this 5 X 5 matrix and that’s a sign it’s in row one, column one. We’d have a
value of 1-1. Letter B is in row one, column two; so it has a value of 1-2. Across to E is
1-5, the F; row two, column one is 2-1. So, it’s similar in a way to Morse code except
you don’t have to make dashes. You just use single taps which became a necessity
because the Vietnamese in later days were always looking for, inspecting the rooms at
least once a week in every room I lived in after that, at least once a week they’d come in
and inspect the room. If there were marks on the wall, then they would accuse you of
communicating whether you were caught or not. They say, “Oh, you make marks on the
wall.” If you had to make a dash as in the Morse code, your fingernail would leave some
kind of mark on the wall. So with just the tap, tapping the wall, and if you had to use a
piece of toilet paper that they gave you; not the kind we use, like a paper sack; then you
could put that under where you’re tapping and you wouldn’t mark the wall up.

RV: Would you tap with your hand, your finger?
RM: With the end of your finger.

RV: How thick were the walls?
RM: The walls were probably a foot thick, but they’re brick walls with a plaster over them, so the sound carries through them. You could hear tapping 50 feet on a solid wall like that. It’s also adaptable, [the tap code], to any other system of making noise. If for instance, you were taken outside to do some sweeping in the street with a little short whisk bamboo, whiskbroom, you can start sweeping in the motion of the tap code. “Sweep, sweep…sweep, sweep, sweep….sweep” this kind of thing and just send messages in the blind. The Vietnamese eventually knew what the tap code was. They caught guys communicating occasionally and eventually they knew what it was, they knew how it worked. What they did not know was how we initiated it.

RV: Meaning how you passed it?
RM: How we said, “Okay, I want to talk to you, whoever you are in the next room.” There was a system initiating the request that you want to talk.

RV: Can you describe it?
RM: It was a tapping to the “shave and a haircut” which is “dot…dot, dot, dot, dot.” A “shave and a haircut” has a little rhythm to it when you say it. The initial call when you wanted to tap with somebody in the next room or wherever they were, was you would look for guards, make sure none were around to the best of your ability under doors or through cracks or however it was. Then you would tap on the wall, “Dot…dot, dot, dot… dot, “ and the guy next door, he would look around and see if he could see any guards wandering or anybody in the area and he would come back, “Dot, dot,” meaning, “okay.” So, you would start your communication system. If a guard happened to show up or they could hear somebody coming, a danger signal with just a “thump” on the wall and you’d walk away. So, you’d be maybe in the middle of a conversation, conversation tapping with the guy in the next room or wherever your were tapping to and the “thump” and everybody would walk away from the wall.

RV: Okay, so it was a louder thump?
RM: Oh yes, a loud “thump,” rather than a tap.
RV: I’m sorry?
RM: Rather than a tap.
RV: I imagine you had to develop a lot of patience in this conversation.
RM: Oh yes, but it was the only way. The Vietnamese insisted that you... Okay, let’s get back to ground rules of how they operated. First of all, we were not considered prisoners of war; we were war criminals. Therefore, in their view, the Geneva Conventions did not apply that describes how nations are to treat prisoners of war. The American Military Code of Conduct did not apply. The only thing applied was the ten little rules that they had printed as, what did they call it, instructions; camp instructions.

RV: They were given?

RM: Yes. You were told them and they were glued to the inside of your wall of each cell, had these ten little instructions. The first one said, “You are a war criminal, you are not a prisoner of war.” As it goes down, “You will be respectful of the Vietnamese guards and officers and personnel” and down the line. There were ten of these things. Down the line it said, “You are forbidden to communicate with other prisoners, other criminals. If you live in a room with another criminal, you can talk to him in a low voice so you cannot be heard outside.” They were trying to disrupt the communication system and parts of the code of conduct that says, “If I’m senior, I’ll take command.” They didn’t want communication between prisoners. So, another one of their camp instructions was, “You are required to do, write, or say anything we tell you.” Which is an absolute contradiction of the Code of Conduct. Then there’s some others, and down at the bottom, the last one it said was, number ten, “Failure to comply with any of the above, you will be punished.” They had written a set of instructions that guaranteed you’re going to be punished for one reason or another. One, if they catch you communicating; two, if you don’t do what they tell you to.

RV: How defiant were you in your mind when you first arrived?

RM: What, I’m sorry?

RM: How defiant were you in your mind when you first arrived?

RM: Oh, you’re not going to do anything [to hell with them], yes, Code of Conduct says I will give name, rank, to the best of my ability, resist answering further questions. They’re going on the opposite, “You will do, write, or say, or we’ll punish you.” That lasted almost the entire time. The communications was our main thing to do during the day. Exercise if you could.

RV: In your cell?
RM: In your cell, oh yes. Never outside; I never got outside my cell to do any
exercise and now you see some propaganda pictures taken about the time we were
coming home in early ’73; the guys were out playing volleyball and this kind of stuff.
Propaganda; strictly propaganda. I never got outside. I got outside maybe once a week,
to go, I was escorted under guard, the armed guard to a cistern out in the fenced in area or
blocked off area of bamboo screen area of the courtyard. Allowed to dump a couple of
buckets of water over my head and swish my clothes around in another bucket of water
and then taken back to the room. That was your bath if you got it.

RV: That did not happen every week?
RM: No, because a lot of times you were being punished for doing something
wrong; not answering questions.

RV: What was your weight when you arrived?
RM: When I was shot down, I was about around 180.

RV: How about 1973?
RM: ’73, when I got to Clark Air Force Base, I weighed, I was 130, but they had
fed us a heck of a lot of food, extra food, that last two or three months. We were getting
a lot more than we did normally. A meal consisted; we were fed twice a day, it was
brought to us, it was handed to us through a small hole in the flapper door in the main
entrance door that popped down.

RV: What times were you fed?
RM: Probably somewhere around 11, 11:30 and again late afternoon, 4 or 5:00.

We didn’t have a clock, had no idea what time it was. The only way we knew what time
it was, there were a couple of occurrences outside and inside the camp that at six o’clock
in the morning we figured, the closest we could figure; there was a gong that went off, a
“Gong, gong, gong, gong.” Somebody was beating on an old something or other
iron rail or something. That meant everybody up. Outside the village; everybody got up
at that time of the morning. The whole country wakes up at six o’clock. There was
another gong, same gong, but at a different time, probably about noon. That meant,
everybody go to take siesta or if you’re outside, I assumed it mean go home and eat lunch
and rest. There was another gong at around 2:00. That meant, everybody back to work.
Then there was another gong probably about 8:30; 9:00 at night and that meant
everybody go to sleep. That’s the only way you could tell time. From that and “guesstimating” where the sun was from period to period; from when the gongs went off where you had a relative time frame that you could set with position of the shadow.

RV: Let me ask again about the meals. Twice a day and can you describe exactly what you got? Was it always that bowl of rice and the soup?

RM: No, they preferred not to give us rice. That’s what they ate. What we got was twice a day we were fed. We would get a bowl of some kind of soup normally. Sometimes we would get a plate. The morning meal was almost always a bowl of soup and a loaf of French, like a baguette. Some country had sent them wheat and of course, with the French being there for so many years, they had bakers; had learned to bake darn good French rolls. We got one of those for one meal and we got half of one for the other meal every day. They were delicious, but we had a bowl of soup and this loaf about 11 to 12 inches long and weighed probably three quarters of a pound. It was delicious; it was really good. Particularly when we would get it sometimes, they just brought it in and it was still warm. That’s as good as any French bread I ever had in France or anywhere else in the world.

RV: Was the soup warm?

RM: It was warm, but it was very watery. There were four vegetables that were served year after year after year and you got a truck load of them dumped into the camp somewhere of one: pumpkin, two: white potatoes, three: Kohlrabi, which is sort of an above ground turnip, and four: a combination of green things. All the way from Boc Choi looking to just, it looked like leaves picked out of the jungle, a lot of it tasted like it too. We had different names for them depending on what their taste was, but that was the four vegetables. Now a bowl of soup normally consisted of about an 8 inch bowl, a couple of inches deep probably a half to two thirds full and maybe four chunks of vegetable of the day or the week or the month, about the size of your thumb and the loaf of bread. You’re always brought sometime during the day; they came around with a container of water. It was hot, so we had thought they had at least tried to boil it. So, the only thing you had to drink was water.

RV: You got your own individual container?
RM: We were given a little teapot, about a one-quart teapot and you kept that in your room. You were given a cup which you kept in your room. The bowls and plates were given to you at the meal and picked up afterwards.

RV: How much time did you have to eat?

RM: As long as you wanted, they didn’t come back for them right away.

Initially, they gave us sometimes a fork, but normally it was like a Chinese soupspoon that one shaped funny little spoon you used to get at Chinese restaurants. They were made out of aluminum and stamped out of aluminum. Every once in a while, you’d see little markings on the spoon that said stamped into the spoon, “This spoon made from five thousandth aircraft shot down by the Glorious Democratic Republic of Vietnam.” Propaganda everything; propaganda, propaganda. You didn’t have anything particularly to do all day. You exercised, you tried to communicate. At first, the first several months until probably mid ’66, about 9 months; very few interrogations or quizzes as we called them, very few. Then they got on a kick of wanting propaganda from us and what we thought of the war and these kind of things. Some of the ground rules that we operated under were the code of conduct that says, “I will resist to the best to my ability answering anything beyond name, rank, serial number, date of birth.”

RV: What were the initial quizzes like?

RM: They wanted you to condemn the US War, praise the Vietnamese people.

RV: Verbally or written?

RM: Written or over the radio. They wanted you to talk over their little camp radio probably taped and played all over the world. Not very often did they take pictures, but they did take pictures for propaganda value.

RV: How did you hold up in the first initial quizzes?

RM: Until they really started wanting something that they I would refuse to answer, they weren’t that terrible. They’re no fun, but they would threaten and brow beat you and everything else; you must talk now. There were quizzes and there quizzes; we called them quizzes. There were sessions and there other sessions. Some of them, they were after something and you could pretty well tell when you got into one, whether they were going to be an English lesson for the interrogator or just a general BS session or they were after something.
RV: How could you tell?

RM: Just the way they started out. Also, part of the process of and the need to communicate between each other, our communication system, was we always wanted to know and let everybody else know what we jokingly said, “What is the question of the week? What’re they after?” Somebody would go off to an interrogation they would come back and as soon as they got back in the room, immediately you would as soon as possible, you would get on the wall and start saying, “Hey, I just had a quiz with somebody.” All the Vietnamese officers and guards all had nicknames; we called them different things.

RV: Can you give me some examples?

RM: Oh, the Rat, Scar face, Pox; I blanked, but they had a name, so you tried to keep identify him, but the problem is if the officers or interrogators move to a different camp, that camp gave them a different name or a different building gave them a different name. You were never real sure, but there were of interrogator’s officers. The officers were the interrogators. The camp commander, which is probably equivalent to a captain in our military was not an interrogator, but he could, but he normally wasn’t. The guards; there were two levels of guards. There were the ones we call the turnkeys, the guys that wandered around and had the ability to get into your room with a key. Then the rest were just the gun toting guards that wandered around the camp with their guns.

RV: How much contact with the camp director?

RM: Camp director?

RV: The one in charge?

RM: Oh, none. I never saw one.

RV: Continue with these interrogations.

RM: Then you’d come back from an interrogation and you would get on the walls as soon it was possible to communicate and said, “I had a quiz with so and so and the subject was…” The purpose for this was to give the next guy who may or may not have had that same particular line of questioning before a chance to prepare in your own mind how you’re going to answer it which was very, very helpful.

RV: Did you also sometimes coordinate your answers?

RM: Have what?
RV: Did you coordinate your answers sometimes if possible?
RM: No, sometimes, yes, you would say, “Here’s how I answered.” Now, as I say, there were two or three different levels of interrogation. One was an English lesson, one was “We want you to do this or do that.” Then you get up to the highest level, “We demand that you do something.” Then you got to decide, “Where am I going to yield?”

One of the things the senior officers in camp did in their communications and decision processes was say, this primarily, Robbie Riser, later General Riser said. The code of conduct says, I will resist to the best of my ability answering questions, giving anything but name, rank, serial number, date of birth. They continued and said, “Nowhere in the code of conduct it says I have to die while resisting.” It was left this way. “You will resist to the best of your ability, do not endanger yourself physically or mentally in resisting.” They can hurt you long enough and they drive you batty or they can kill you and we know some that were killed. We know some that were badly, badly beaten.

What then the following correlation to this is when you reach a point where you think you’re going to be physically or mentally damaged, let me see how this goes. You answer to the best of your ability without….I’ve lost the words right now.

RV: Then in general.
RM: In general, when you reach a point where you think you’re going to lose physical or mental control of the situation, stop and give them something that is the least beneficial to them as you can possibly give them. Use their words, use their propaganda. In other words, maintain mental control of the situation. Repeat what they say, so a lot of times you would find yourself absolutely necessary to tell them something under duress; you’re going to tell them something or you’re going to find yourself dead or you think you’re dead; you don’t know. You say, “Alright, I will do what you want.” Of course, everything automatically changes. From now on, you’re back to being a good guy again and they’re going to maybe give you a cigarette, maybe give you a cup of tea, give you the piece of paper and they’ll send you back to your room sometimes and say, “Alright, you write this.” Then you start and you give them back something that paraphrases all their BS propaganda. Use their phrases, like such as, “stop this illegal immoral unjust war. Stop bombing churches, schools, hospitals, and pagodas.” They always used the same sequence of words. They must have tons of stuff where Americans were under
duress, reach that point where there’s, “Okay, I’ll do what you want.” They’ll give them something and it contains this kind of nonsense.

RV: Nothing substantial in other word?

RM: Yes, nothing substantial that you can possibly [anything that you can] get away with. That’s basically how it went. Now, sometimes they were very, very serious and they wouldn’t take no for an answer. That’s when you go into the, let’s just call it heavy pressure, torture; whatever you want to call it. There’s several levels, I don’t know if in your book; all your reference material; there you have Mike McGrath’s book on where he draws all the sketches of life in prison camp and one of the methods, one of the most severe; was what we called the rope tricks. Where they would take and tie your wrists together behind your back and with standing on you and forcing, they’d keep continue wrapping the rope up on your arms until your elbows touched. Now this is behind your back.

RV: Sir, I need to take a break and change out this disc, I’m sorry.

RM: Okay.

RV: Hold on just one second. Okay sir, why don’t you continue?

RM: I was discussing what we called the rope trick where they tie your wrist behind your back together and then up to your elbows then they take the rope and run it up around your neck pulling it as tight as they can around your neck then down your back to around your ankles and tie it there. If you tried to straighten out, you’re choking yourself and you’re in bad pain. You’re dislocating your shoulders.

RV: Your’s is already dislocated so I bet you that was…. RM: It’s gotten where it’s by the time this happened to me again, it almost gotten well. Oh yes, dislocated shoulder, broken arm; they were going by their rules. They wanted something; if you don’t give it to us, we’re going to punish you.

RV: How often in general would you have interrogations?

RM: Oh, there were times when they were more frequent. I had one in the first seven or eight months and then in September of ’65, they got fairly serious; or ’66, I’m sorry. Particularly after the first time an American aircraft bombed in the Hanoi area. Then they were trying to boost the spirits of the Vietnamese people and bent some people
pretty badly trying to force them to make statements condemning the war and all this kind of stuff.

RV: So, do you mind talking about some of your interrogations and the one’s that you remember being the bad ones?

RM: Well, they went through right after what we called the Hanoi March. The first time they bombed downtown Hanoi, around the outskirts of downtown Hanoi, again, one of these dumb ground rules that we operated when I was flying before I was prisoner; you could not bomb anything or strike any target inside of the 30 mile circle around Hanoi or 30 mile circle around Haiphong and 15 miles on the Southern edge of the Chinese border. They just made it difficult to conduct a war that makes sense if you want to say; a way to win a war. If we were there to win a war, then lets win the war, lets don’t play games. Finally, they gave Johnson the authority to bomb inside of Hanoi and they hit the oil refinery in there and they shot down and captured one of the pilots and they brought him through town on the back end of a truck during day time and they had a lot of people standing there jeering and yelling at him. In my own thought process, “Okay, the Vietnamese got some propaganda value out of this.” They got the people excited to continue to resist the Americans and all of this kind of thing. So, they said, “Okay, we’re going to have a demonstration to show the people all these American prisoners we have.” Now, they said they were just moving us from one camp to another. They had the press from Germany there, they had other communist press was there.

What they did, they took the group of us, there were I think 52, on what we call the Hanoi March. From the two or three camps that they had around Hanoi, the ones that were ambulatory. They got us all nice, new, clean uniforms; their pajama sets and straps and took us downtown and said, “We’re going to take you to another place in town.” Well, out in front of this whole gaggle of prisoners was a flat bed truck with klieg lights and cameras and down the side of the street as we were walked, marched down this street were groups of the Vietnamese civilians and it looked like cheering sections. They had probably a local cell leader out in front and a group of 20, 25 people behind him, and he would chant a slogan, “Down with “McNamara”, “McNamara. Kill Johnson, not Vietnamese people.”

RV: He would say this in English?
RM: Yes, he would say it in English to the group behind him and they would yell the same thing back and all this bombarding of filth would come pouring down on us. It got out of control. The whole mishmash got out of control as the further we were led down through the center of Hanoi, the more unruly the crowd got. It became a real mob scene as we were in the middle of the street.

RV: You were actually walking down?

RM: Walking down the street in groups of about I think 52. There were three groups and two guys were way out in front, Ev Alvarrez and Robbie Risner were out in the front. The crowds started throwing rocks; anything else they can get at us. There was a guard about every 5 feet on either side of us with AK-47’s with a bayonet on the end. The guards were getting pushed into us; the people on the streets just became a mob. Soon, there was no control whatsoever. We were struggling and every time one of the officers was running up and down alongside of us always saying, “Keep your heads bowed, bow head, bow head. You’re showing submission; bow your head. Be contrite for the people. Confess your crimes.” It just got out of hand. The closest I’ve ever been into a real mob scene. We were struggling to get to wherever we were going. People were being knocked down, being hit with rocks, being hit with bricks, being hit with briefcases, being hit with anything the people had. The guards marching along side of us; there was fear in their eyes.

RV: Were you hit with these objects?

RM: I’m sorry?

RV: Were you hit with these objects personally?

RM: Oh yes. I was hit with all kinds of things. We were eventually taken to what is the Hanoi Soccer Stadium and led through a small gate and as we approached this gate, you had to step up over a threshold 15-18 inches above the ground to get through this narrow gate. I could see somebody out of the corner of my eye running toward me and I was handcuffed. You were two and two; handcuffed together with another American. I saw this guy running toward me and out of the corner of my eye, I could see him swinging a briefcase and about the time I started up the steps, this briefcase caught me right under the jaw and I went down on the ground and the guy I was walking with, Howie Dunn, a Marine pilot; pulled me through the gate. That’s probably as scared as
I’ve ever been in my life of not knowing what’s going to happen. As the result of this, the Vietnamese got on a big kick of forcing us to write a paper or be filmed expressing our thoughts on the determination of the Vietnamese people to win the war. That’s probably the worst torture I’ve ever had was at that night after we all got back; we were taken back to the camp.

RV: Did you have to walk back or were you taken by trucks?
RM: No, we were taken back in a bus because the jails were on the outskirts of town.

RV: When you got to the soccer stadium, were people in the stands?
RM: No, there was nobody. They didn’t allow anybody in the stands. It was empty, but they blindfolded us pretty quick afterwards, got us on the buses and took us back to camp. When we got back out to the camp where I was at at that time, I was out at a place we call The Zoo out on the east, southwest side of town, 4 or 5 miles out of town. It was an old French film studio complete with movie theatre and everything else and a fishpond in the middle. There was a swimming pool in the middle that had been filled with old film cans filled with water and yuck. Anyway, my walking partner and myself were handcuffed arm and arm around a tree and let sit there blindfolded and a gag stuffed in our mouth and let sit there all night preparing for this to be interrogated on this determination thing. Sometime close to morning, they just came and took the handcuffs off and sent us back to our rooms, separate rooms because I was living by myself at this time. They tried to keep you separated as long as possible again to stop communication. About three days later, I was taken back downtown to Hanoi and blindfolded. Anytime you went outside the camp, you were handcuffed and blindfolded, hands behind you under guard. I was taken back downtown to the Hoa Lo Prison and put in a cellblock and then the next morning I was taken across the street to the what later turned out to be the Ministry of Justice and sat before a big panel of 4 or 5, I assumed to be officers. They never wore their rank, but you could tell if they spoke any English at all, they were probably an officer of some kind or another. I was told I would write a piece of paper saying my impressions of the determination of the Vietnamese people and I said, “No, I’m not going to do that.” I jokingly say we bantered back and forth for about 5 seconds and I find myself tied up in a ball with this rope trick as I described earlier. About this
time, an air raid took place over Hanoi again and I was left in this room on the floor all
tied up and every time an airplane would fly over and guard would hear an airplane; there
was a guard in the room with this rifle, he would start kicking me in the back, anyplace
else he could find. The raid was over, pretty soon all the officers come back and said,
“Will you now write your letter to the Vietnamese people apologizing for the war and
show their determination?” I said, “Well, I probably will.” Now, you start thinking,
“How am I going to word this so it’s not of no real value,” and again you try to use their
phrases, but I satisfied the requirements. As long as I did something for them, I wasn’t
being punished. Where do you draw the line? Did I break the Code of Conduct? I don’t
know, I don’t think so; I did the best to my ability and that’s all the Code of Conducts
says. You will resist answering and giving information to the best of your ability. It
doesn’t say you have to die. We determined, the senior officers as I said earlier,
determined where this point is, “Don’t endanger yourself physically or mentally.
Maintain control of the situation.” Yes, I gave them something. I had my picture taken a
couple of different times during the years I was up there for strictly propaganda pictures.
There’s a very good picture that’s been out. I’ve seen it in magazines and books and
things. At that time, I had two roommates and Christmas time, they always usually fed
us turkey dinner and there’s a picture of the three of us sitting at this small table that had
been brought into the cellblock and a turkey dinner sitting in front of us. “Look how
good we treat the American criminals, in spite of the fact that they’re killing our people
and destroying our country” and all this kind of thing and there’s three bottles of beer,
what’re you going to do? Not eat?

RV: Could you actually get to eat it and drink the beer?
RM: Oh yes. We got to eat it. There was a very famous picture of, I can’t put a
name to it right now, but he’s sitting there; they’re taking a picture of him, probably
getting a propaganda picture and he’s sitting with his hands between his legs on a bench
and he’s got his middle finger extended. The picture is taken and of course after it’s
taken, the Vietnamese, somebody happens to notice that he’s giving everybody the bird.
The picture is on the cover of Life Magazine, this particular picture and the fingers are
erased out. The story goes that this guy’s son sees this picture of his dad on the front of
Life Magazine and he says, “They cut his fingers off!” (Laughing) It’s very obviously a
photo retouch, but that’s another one of their famous propaganda shots. But there’s all kinds of propaganda shots taken. I don’t have them at the current time, but I’ve seen magazines in later years printed of Vietnamese propaganda printed in Vietnam printed under there in English, French, and Vietnamese. It’s propaganda books. So, they’re still around and they can be purchased in Hanoi or Vietnam.

RV: Were you ever asked about specific information such as Force Levels and deployments of aircraft and all that kind?

RM: No. They asked me what squadron I was from, where I took off from and I said, “I can’t answer that.” This was right after I was captured and they never did do anything about it, but my helmet, which they had in front of me, and they showed it to me. At that time, it was a white helmet that had a picture of a squadron logo, which was a fighting cock and ’67 Tac Fighter Squadron; they knew as well as anybody else where I was from. They were just trying to get me to say something. At that time, they weren’t pressuring me; they didn’t do anything when I said, “No, I can’t tell you that.” A lot of the interrogations were nothing but English lessons.

RV: What do you mean by that?

RM: Help the interrogator with his English; practice English with you, just general questions about American life or anything else. He was just trying to better his English usage, which at times, you could get them screwed up with some of the answers you would give them because they didn’t understand what you were really saying.

RV: Did you try to teach them honestly and correctly or did you not do that sometimes?

RM: Well, we tried to give them as much of a “bad time” as we could.

RV: How long would those kind of sessions last?

RM: Normally 20, 25, minutes; 30 minutes maybe at the most. Now, if they were really after something like the rope tricks or they really wanted you to do something what you really didn’t want to do, then they’d last a little bit longer and you’d get hurt.

RV: What kind of things would they do besides the rope trick?

RM: They could beat you with a fan belt.

RV: Can you talk about the things that happened to you specifically?
RM: Yes, I got beat with what looked like a fan belt; it was probably a strip out
of a sidewall of a tire, but about the size of a fan belt. They’d slap me against the wall
and you’d have to hold the wall up and as they say, “Hands up, “ and there’s a guy there
with a rifle with a bayonet on the end. If you don’t have your hands on the wall, he’s
jabbing it in you and next thing you know, you’re getting strapped with this fan belt.
Again, you got to determine in your own mind and everybody is different how much can
you withstand before you say, “Okay, I’m going to get myself physically or mentally
hurt.” There’s a very thin line sometimes between one breath and the next. We had guys
that were killed resisting interrogations. Not that many, but there were [some].

RV: How were they killed, do you know?
RM: I don’t know. They just never came back. I know one of them was literally
probably beaten to death by a Cuban interrogator that was there for a while.
RV: Did you have your shirt on or off when they were beating you?
RM: Normally it was still on.
RV: What else would they do or did they do to you?
RM: They could just tell you to sit there for one; they weren’t after something
that I was going to want to give them freely, so I had to sit on a stool for five or six hours.
Eventually, probably up to a day an a half, not a small stool, but just sit there and if you
fell off of it during the night or the next day, they would smack you around with their
rifle butt or with a fan belt again. Sometimes just a very minor something you did wrong,
they would stand you up and say, “Hands up,” and you’d stand and hold the wall up.
You’d move your feet back and just stand there and how long are you going to stand
before you fall. Sometimes it depends on what condition you’re in. We tried to keep
ourselves in the best physical condition. We exercised all we could inside the rooms.

RV: What kind of exercise would you do?
RM: Oh, you did push ups, you walked; that was probably most of it. You
weren’t allowed outside except in the latter years where you saw pictures of guys playing
volleyball and wandering around the outside. In the 6 X 9 foot cell, you walked back and
forth back and forth back and forth. I don’t think I’d ever like to go to a zoo again
because now I know what the lions feel like, as they walk back and forth back and forth,
nothing else to do. You do sit ups, push ups, whatever you can think of to keep your
mind off of what the hell’s going on.

RV: How did you hear the bombing? Was that far away or was it close, was it
unmistakable?

RM: Oh yes, you could hear bombs going off. I was not in Hanoi when the B-
52s were bombing Hanoi in December of ’72. So, the guys that were there said it was
really loud; that things were really rattling. I was not there; I was up in a camp up on the
Chinese border. You could hear airplanes flying around. There would be an air raid
siren and you had to get into your room and under your bed board for an air raid shelter.
Of course, it was a locked up cell anyways, you weren’t going to go anywhere, but they
wanted you under the bed “to protect you.” “We don’t want you to get hurt.” They’ll
beat the crap out of you, but they don’t want you to get hurt by falling debris. You could
hear bombs every once in a while and you could hear airplanes flying over across town.
You could hear SAM’s being shot. The one camp on the outskirts of town, I was at The
Zoo, was right next across the klong or small lake. It was an anti-aircraft organization of
some kind complete with a SAM missile launcher and every once in a while, a raid would
be taking place and you hear the gun just shooting right outside over the wall from the
camp. You could hear a SAM go off saying to yourself, “Well, I hope they don’t get
him.”

RV: What did the bombing do for your morale? Did it change?

RM: Oh, it made you feel good. We’re still after these guys. I think I’ve been
told again. Like I said, I wasn’t in Hanoi when the 52’s hit, but they said they were
scrunched up in their corners tightly and as small as can possibly be, not afraid that the
Hanoi Hilton would get the bomb, just the debris falling and the shrapnel falling around
that they said it was loud. It made everybody feel good; as the general saying, “It’s
something we should’ve been doing 7 or 8 years ago to get this war over instead of
playing games with them; LBJ’s and McNamara’s games that they were playing.

RV: How do you think the bombing affected the morale of your captors? Could
you sense any difference in them?

RM: Again, I wasn’t there. Oh, you mean general bombing?

RV: In general, yes sir.
RM: Most of the time up until the B-52’s came downtown, that made them more
determined I think. The piddling bombing that we did do around Hanoi; well, they
destroyed the power plant, they destroyed the refuel refinery, they destroyed some
bridges and things. With enough people, you could get around those things. I think it
just made them more determined to carry on the war. Then when you got serious in ’72
with the 52’s coming downtown, that’s when they went back to the tables and said,
“Okay, we’ll agree. Let’s sign this thing.” Of course, the best I could figure out, there
was nothing from when they first started talking or when they broke it off, the talks off,
in late mid ’72 to when they finally signed in early ’73; there was no, as far as I could
understand it, there’s no specific changes into the document that was signed in to cease
fire, ending the war. It was just the Vietnamese wanted more and were trying to get more
and they probably got just as much as they were ever going to get, but none the less, they
didn’t want their town destroyed.

RV: How did you pass the time mentally? Can you talk about that?
RM: I’m sorry?
RV: How did you pass the time mentally? You said you rarely got out of the
cells and besides communicating with the others, how’d you occupy your mind?
RM: Well, there were all kinds of ways. One, particularly if you had a
roommate; you can sit down and try to give a book review, tell a movie that you had
seen. It was neat to get new roommates, new guys shot down, you hated to see them
there but it was neat to get somebody just recently shot down because he’d seen movies
you hadn’t seen. You spent a lot of time telling each other books, movies; one of my
roommates and I figured out without paper or pencil, we were saying how long is it going
to take an X percent interest. How long is it going to take us to double our money? We
did that for a couple of months I think. Of course, you think of your family. If you did
get letters from home and letters to home; were always a stick and carrot. You do
something for them; they’ll do something for you. They beat the crap out of you to force
you to do something and then they say, “Oh, we have letters for you.” You look at the
letter and you weren’t able to keep it, but they let you read it. Sometimes you’d read a
letter and you can see the postmark was maybe two years earlier. You know they’ve had
them all along, they were just being their good contrary selves of wanting something
before they do something for you; it was a stick and carrot.

RV: So, how many letters were you actually able to read?
RM: I received five letters the last year I was there in 1972, were the only ones I
got.

RV: That’s it?
RM: So, in some respects, it makes me feel good that they were always mad at
me because I wasn’t doing what they wanted me to do. In some respects and other
respects; it’s best hearing from my family.

RV: What other kind of communication did you have with home? Was that it?
RM: That was it.

RV: I imagine the new people coming in could also tell you about who won the
World Series.
RM: Oh yes, what was going on in the States, so you spent hours communicating
on the wall with other guys. First of all, you wanted to know who was in camp, who
everybody was, what was going on. The name situation turned into what we called our
memory bank. Everybody was in their minds, somehow, they categorized everybody in
the camp; everybody in every other camp. They moved us around from camp to camp,
something I always thought very strange. They didn’t want us to see other Americans,
other prisoners, but they’d move you from camp to camp; they knew we were
communicating. They tried to stop it; they never could completely stop it. If you moved
from building to building, the first thing you did was establish a communication with
somebody in your next cell or you established communication, or tried to, with another
building. So, if you moved from building to building, pretty soon you knew who was in
that building; you knew who was in the building you just left and you kept getting names.
Probably by the time I came home, I had memorized alphabetically by last name, first
name, rank, squadron, wife name if possible, and then the other useful information;
probably 400 to 500 names. You spent a lot of time doing that, running over your list of
names to make sure that you could get them and then somebody would come in
alphabetically that fit between somewhere else, so you had to insert it there. So, you
went through your list time after time after time to get that name so it automatically fell
into position when you repeated your list.

RV: How often would you repeat your list?

RM: At least weekly.

RV: Were you moved individually or were you moved with others in groups?

RM: We were moved individually usually except the one time we moved as a
group of us were taken in spring probably of ’72. The war got to where in early ‘72; they
had what they called LINEBACKER ONE OPERATION. The B-52’s once again,
started bombing North Vietnam. They’d been on a bombing halt since ’68 when they
started their talking, “Oh, no American airplanes had been over Hanoi to speak of or in
North Vietnam.” Early ’72, they started the bombing again in North Vietnam and they
had B-52’s and one day the guards came in and gave us a sign to roll up everything we
owned which was a mat and our other pair of clothes and put us in blindfolds and
handcuffed and into a truck and they took about little over 200 of us up to a camp way up
on the Chinese border. So, we called it Dog Patch. We say, “Why you bring us way up
here?” They said, “Well, we’ll protect you. We don’t want you killed by bombers.”
Then we say, “Well, what about the other three hundred that are still in Hanoi?” “How
do you know that? Not to worry about them, we take you here.” What we always
thought, this camp was about 5 kilometers from the Chinese border and things go to hell
in a hand basket, they could run us across the border and we’d disappear. It wasn’t until
after, Peace Accords were signed in January, we were already after first couple of weeks
in January of ’73, they closed that camp down and they brought us all back to Hanoi. At
that time, they had started dividing us into what we figured was four basic different
groups. We didn’t know what it was all about, but we at least had an idea that we’re in
four different groups for some reason, why; and it was grouped by longevity. Then on
the 28th of January when they officially signed the Peace Accords, then they were
required to read them to us. I was on that camp on the Chinese border, Dog Patch, and
came back to and put in Hao Lo Prison again, The Hilton. They took everybody out and
had a big military formation for us. Our senior officers got us into an assemblance of
formation took down and the Vietnamese read the Peace Accords to us. Again, they said
there would be four releases starting with the date of the Peace Accords which is 27th or
28th of January to coincide with the withdraw of American military forces from South Vietnam. Then we thought, okay, this was to take place over 60 days, so every 15 days, there would be a group of Americans leaving South Vietnam and to coincide with that, ¼ of the prisoners would be taken home. These groups of four that we had been slowly been divided into after we come home from Dog Patch back to Hanoi made sense.

RV: Which group were you in?
RM: I was in the first group. I’d been up there in the long section. The old adage; first in, first out. They never did tell us when we were going to be going home, it was just the Peace Accords said 15 days. It doesn’t take a genius, to say 27th or 28th of January, whatever it was, and 15 days is about the 13th, 12th, 11th; somewhere around there of February. Sure enough, on the night of the 11th, they got our big room out and another room and they took us all down and they gave us brand new sets of clothes and said, “Tomorrow, you go home.” Took us back to the room, didn’t feed us anything better, but sent us back to the room and they had started giving us more packages. That’s one thing that happened in 1970. The Vietnamese allowed the families to send a package to prisoners. The 6 kilos; the Vietnamese pretty tightly controlled what you got out of that package and they dictated what could be in it and what could not be in it. But again, 3 kilos, 6 pounds; but the time I got a package, the 6 kilo had developed into a handful of hard candy and maybe a package of tobacco or something. There was a lot of Vietnamese wandering around camp that smelled like aftershave lotion, and Lifeboy soap and whatever else, munching on candy, and smoking American cigarettes.

RV: Did you find out what you did not get later?
RM: No, never did.

RV: How many packages did you actually end up receiving?
RM: I think the third one came just shortly before I was released and it had a lot of vitamins and stuff like that. We left most of that stuff with the guys that were coming in the next come out.

RV: How many different camps were you in actually?
RM: I was in Hoa Lo, the “Hilton”, I was in “The Zoo”; which was the old French film colony, I was in Dog Patch up on the Chinese border, and I was in another one we called Camp Faith I think it was. It was about somewhere 15 to 20 miles to the
west of Hanoi out towards Son Tay. All outlying, well, except Dog Patch; Dog Patch
wasn’t being used at this time. When they had the incursion into North Vietnam by the
Rangers that tried to rescue the POW’s from Son Tay. It really shook the Vietnamese up
that we could get a force in, land, and out. They moved all the outlying camps back into
downtown Hanoi. There were several within the downtown Hanoi area. At that time, I
was out at “Camp Faith”-Dong Hoi, I think is the name of it, is the town or the village.
Again, we were in the bombing pause. We had not had any bombing since ’68 over the
North Vietnamese area and that particular night, we could hear bombing going on;
something was going on. The next morning, you couldn’t tell, Son Tay was another 10
or 15 miles to the west of us. The next morning, they wouldn’t let us out of the rooms at
all. Things had been getting better; we were allowed more time outside at least at Camp
Faith than some of the other camps. They kept us locked up that afternoon. A bunch of
trucks arrived and they blindfolded us, handcuffed us, and took us all back downtown
Hanoi. They never would tell us why we were taken, but they just consolidated
everybody again. They were upset that we were able to get in with a force and try to
rescue some people.

RV: How did you know about Son Tay? How did you find out?
RM: Not until a long time later; I think even after I got home. Son Tay was
successful in that one; it was unsuccessful in that one, they didn’t get anybody out
because they had already moved the prisoners from there. They had been taken over to
Camp Faith where I was. They opened up Camp Faith in middle of ’69, shortly after they
had taken a bunch of people, about 50 people, out to Son Tay. They opened up Camp
Faith as sort of a good guy camp or improvement. We had more time out, we had more
not any better food, but we were able to get out and we were able to talk with other
Americans within the camp a lot easier. The guys from Son Tay had been moved into
Camp Faith. They were one of the four compounds in Camp Faith. It wasn’t a screw up
on the part of US intelligence; they were just unable to tell that there were no longer
Americans there. There were people living in the old Son Tay camp when it was raided,
but it was Vietnamese, it wasn’t Americans. They were just unable to tell, but it was a
big morale booster for us. That was when they brought us all back downtown Hanoi and
put us in the big rooms where we had to now in the big cell blocks at Hoa Lo and we had anywhere from 40 to 60 guys in a room.

RV: So that was an extreme change?
RM: Oh yes, halleluiah. We find things to do, you say, “What do you do with yourself all day long?” We set up classes; no books, no paper, no writing and reading material; but we had guys that had knew all kinds of things. Professors from colleges, we had engineers, we had a lot of practical knowledge, hell, I taught a course in thermodynamics for a while. The guys got English history, or English literature; and we would sit around in small groups and it gave you a chance after living very tightly controlled with one or two people or three people for several years, to say, “I don’t have to talk to him. If I’m mad at him, I’m going to go find somebody else to talk to,” which you can’t do when you’re in a 6 x 9 room or 9 x 12 room and three or four guys in there; you’re pretty limited to what you can do and what you can’t do as far as your own little world to live in. Son Tay from our viewpoint was certainly successful in that it had got us back together and we became probably overly organized. The morning of the 12th of February, none of us slept all that night; we were up all night long and they came in and said, “Put your clothes on” very early in the morning and took us out of our big room, 40 or 50 guys and took us in bus loads out to the airport; Gialam or Gallam, however you want to pronounce it. We waited for airplanes to come in.

RV: Why don’t we go ahead and use this as a stopping point for today?
RM: Okay, sounds good.
Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone; I’m conducting my oral history interview with Mr. Raymond Merritt. We are continuing our interview today. It is September 30, 2003, a little after 10 A.M. Central Standard Time and I’m in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library Interview Room on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Merritt is again in Marysville, California. Sir, let’s continue. We reached the end of confinement with our last session and I wanted to go back and just ask some general questions about the imprisonment. One, specifically, did you ever know John McCann or come across him at all during your time in Hanoi?

Raymond Merritt: I did not personally have contact with John. I knew he was there through our “Covert Communication System.” I knew who he was and knew what was happening to him as we did most everybody else, but personal contact; no, I never lived even in the same building with him that I know of.

RV: I wanted to ask you about probably something that people listening to this in the future and just the general public would want to know how you dealt with the immense amount of time you had behind bars and in this situation. How did you deal with the time factor? How did you pass the time? You talked about different cell situations and being with different individuals and sometimes in the group cells toward the end. You talked about the tap code, but how would you personally in your own mind; deal with the time and in the question of whether you would even be released?

RM: Probably the most difficult question to answer. Every individual I feel, in my own opinions, was different. You’ve got to set some standards for yourself and I like
to put it down over the years and I’ve talked to a number of different groups over the
years, I probably put it down into what I call five beliefs or five faiths. One, you’re going
to get home; you don’t know when, but you are going to get home someday and doing
then what it is necessary to keep yourself going which involves a lot of interpreting.
Second, you’ve got to have a belief that your fellow prisoners are doing the best that they
can do, also to live up to the Code of Conduct in the standards expected of them as you
are trying to do. Third of all, you’ve got to believe that somewhere along the line, your
government is taking care of your family; you don’t have to worry about it. You know
there are problems and more or less, but you have to believe somebody is taking care of
them because you certainly can’t. Fourth, you’ve got to believe that somewhere along
the line, there is a God that’s helping you, even though you’re not religious, you do have
to have a faith that somebody’s looking after you besides yourself. I’m not professing
any strong religion, but just a belief that somebody’s there to help me because it certainly
can’t be other people directly. Those four, I think, probably help you get yourself
together and say, “Okay, I’m going to make it through here.” Now, individual instances,
you can only do the best you can. You know we had the Code of Conduct and we’re the
first group of American prisoners of war that were incarcerated under the conditions that
the code of conduct was a viable piece of document. It certainly did prove that. Now,
the code of conduct, it says certain things you must do and certain things you must not
do. Along those, “I will resist to the best of my ability” and I quote again, emphasize,
“To the best of my ability, divulging information beyond name, rank, serial number, date
of birth.” Nowhere in there or even in the instructions did you get in survival school does
it say you have to die to do that. There’s a very, very thin line; you’re resisting to the
best of your ability and you’re under extreme pressure at times and you say, “Is this
really worth it? Will I die?” Sometimes, you don’t know. You can be in a situation; you
can be forced into a situation under duress, under pressure, under torture; whatever you
want to call it, that says, “If I continue this, another second I’m going to die.” Is what
they are after worth dying for? In some instances, it may be, but in most cases and what
we used as a sort of a guideline and we, the senior officers, put forward the policy;
“Resist up to a point where you are in danger of losing your life or losing physical or
mental control of the situation.” All right, so somewhere along the line you say, “All
right, I’m reaching that point. I better do something different.” What most of us, I think, tried to do was finally under extreme duress say, “All right, I’ll do what you want, but I’m going to be in mental control. So, I’m going to lie, steal, cheat; anything I can do to satisfy you, but not give you anything.” One of the things we did was use their phrases that they fed to us all the time in their propaganda. Such things as “Stop this unjust, illegal immoral war.” Now, Americans don’t talk like that normally. It comes out in several different people; American prisoners that are saying the same thing because we hear it all the time and we say, “Okay, that’s a fall back position. We will give them something. We’ll give them their bullshit so to speak.” They get off your back, they take off the extreme pressures that you’re under and say, “Okay, you do this, write this; and we give it to them” and they have a big smile on their face and we have a smile deep down in our heart knowing, Well, maybe we got by with something.” So, you’re taken out of the stressful situation and you’re back to living and immediately, you’re through the communication network. You’re telling everybody else what happened to you and what you did to get out of that situation.

RV: So everyone else can use it.

RM: Yes, [so everybody that it] reaches and they usually went in cycles. They would ask the same general questions throughout. You had to use your mind to try to outwit them. One of the things that they were after me and very rarely were they after military information, but one of the things they got after me one time was that we had what we called jinking; moving an airplane around to avoid anti-aircraft missile fire in the air. They wanted to know how we did it. “I’m not going to answer that.” “You will be tortured.” “Well, okay.” It went on and on and finally I found myself in a very serious physical condition; adverse condition that I had to do something.

RV: What were they doing to you? Do you remember?

RM: Well, probably in some of your books, you know what the rope tricks were. So, they put you in that. Then you’re in serious trouble because ten minutes of that and you may or may not live. So, I said, “Okay, I’ll give you something.” They have a big smile on their face and they send me back to the room with a piece of paper and a pencil and so I spend the next day and a half elaborating this big long story about how we move our aircraft around to avoid being shot down. Basically, what I have done in this two or
three page piece of paper is enter their country and make a 180-degree turn through
several minor variations of shifting airspeed and altitude and at the end of the paper, I’m
going 180 degrees; I’m going out of their country. This takes three and a half pages to go
two degrees up, five miles an hour change of speed, and this kind of thing. I give it to
them and of course they’re all smiles and I’m back into their good graces I guess because
I start receiving food again. About two days later, the little flapper in the door in the little
door inside the main door opens up and the officers standing outside, the interrogator, and
he throws this little sheet of three papers back at me and he used my Vietnamese name
and he says, “This is worthless”, but they don’t do anything about it. All right, I’ve
succeeded another time. I’ve been hurt, but I haven’t been stopped. You devise methods
of continuing to resist to the best of your ability without getting yourself killed or
physically or mentally deranged.

RV: What kind of information or what was worth dying for? Was there
something that was kind of unspoken or spoken between all of you?

RM: I don’t know that there was. Everybody has a different point where they’re
going to say, “Okay, I’ve reached that limit.” You don’t know until you’re under that
situation. I don’t know what there would’ve been or if I knew it. You can’t say, “Okay,
this is the point where I’m going to stop somewhere ahead of time.” It has to be there
and it’s a thing within your own mind, your own body; it says, “Hey, if I continue this
nonsense, I’m going to get myself killed.” Now the secret of course is, when do you
reach this point, how quick do you yield, how long do you go? Every individual is
different. I can’t say; I never reached that point where or had those kind of questions
asked to me where I would I quit; I don’t know.

RV: What do they most want from? Was it propagandas, statements?

RM: Ninety nine percent of the time, it was propaganda statements. “Why is
your country involved in this illegal [immoral war]?” There’s another one of the favorite
phrases we used when we were eventually forced to do something. “Stop this illegal
immoral unjust war.” Those phrases used by the Vietnamese daily. “Why are you in
Vietnam? This is a free independent country. Stop this illegal, immoral, unjust war
against the Vietnamese people.” When you get to a point, that’s a good one to use
because that’s what they say.
RV: Would they want you to write that down?
RM: Oh yes, write that down or maybe even say it on a video tape or on a movie or talking to an interview group that’s coming over there for foreign dignitaries that have come for specific purposes.
RV: Would you ever try to communicate with any of these foreigners that did come into the camp; the movie or the news crews?
RM: I never tried. There’s rumors around of the situation between Jane Fonda and a couple of the guys and that’s strictly non-truthful.
RV: Really?
RM: The passing of the names; that is false. It never happened and I know the two individuals that it supposedly happened to and they have told me and they have told anybody that’ll listen; it did not happen.
RV: These are good sources?
RM: Yes, the individuals themselves.
RV: Who actually met Jane Fonda, but there was no passing of information?
RM: No passing of information that I knew of. This is the only incidence where there’s even been any claim of it and it didn’t happen.
RV: That’ll be very interesting information to put out there. You mentioned that you had a Vietnamese name.
RM: Yes. Basically, it was M-O, pronounced like “Ma.” I don’t know what it meant; I would assume that it was a Vietnamese equivalent of Meritt, M-E-R-I-T. It had a M-O with a circumflex over it with a dot under the O. I don’t have any idea what it meant.
RV: Did they have names for all of you?
RM: Oh yes, everybody. They didn’t call you by your name, just what your Vietnamese name was.
RV: How were you able to keep up with time? Did you have a calendar on the wall, did you have it in your mind, or did you just do it by means of tap code?
RM: No, we understood that at early in the morning and the best we could figure it out was somewhere around 6:00 in the morning, there was a gong that rang outside. Somebody beat on a big metal; like a fire bell or something. It went off at 6:00. The
same thing happened around noontime. The same thing happened about 2:00, and the
same thing happened again about 9:00 at night; somewhere and maybe plus or minus a
few minutes, but that’s the best we could figure it out. Your day got divided and you
learned there’s a 6:00 in the morning, noon; everybody takes a siesta. The Vietnamese
are like parts of Central America. They go off for siesta for two hours then they come
back to work and they start in the same way around camp; things quieted from the mid-
noon to 2:00; if you want to call it that gongs, the camp was quiet except the guards, the
rifle-toter guards wandering around. That’s when we did a heck of a lot of our
communication because there weren’t that many guards around and you could keep track
of them if you had right ways to look out of your cellblock. We communicated all day
long, but those were our primary times of getting information around then. You wanted
to tell the guys first of all, and I may have said this before, you wanted to find out who
was next to you. Then you knew what was going on and if you came back from an
interrogation or quiz as we called it, then you passed that information on what they were
after because then that gave the next guy a little chance to sit by himself and say, “Okay,
this is what I intend to do if I find myself being asked those same questions.” We would
tell the next guy what we did under the circumstances and a lot of the interrogations were
just basic English lessons for the interrogators. We passed that on; went through the quiz
and we just called them quizzes. We went to quiz with whatever his name happened to
be, the Rat, the Cap, the Owl; whatever. We all had nicknames; everybody had
nicknames.

RV: What about keeping up with the actual war effort; the American war effort
for the progress or lack thereof?
RM: Hell, we got fed the Vietnamese version of that everyday. We weren’t there
for three or four after I was there about three or four months, they came around and put a
loud speaker in every room. We had to sit “quietly” on your bed in your long trousers
and your long sleeved shirt and listen to world news. Of course, it was the Vietnamese
interpretation of the world news and how the battles were going. Of course, every time;
the Americans were losing and the loses were in thousands and the Great Soviet Republic
was doing this and the Vietnamese were Democratic Republic of Vietnam was doing this.
For instance, one time they came across and said, “This year, we have increased tractor
production 500 percent.” Then a sort of a paraphrase, they said, “Last year, we produced
A lot of times, it was entertaining, but most of the time it was just strictly nonsense. We
did get an indication, we didn’t know for sure for a while, in 1969 when America put the
man on the moon. The radio broadcast said one day that, “Unlike these capitalists
American pigs, the Russians have put an object on the moon that hasn’t contaminated the
surface.” So, you sit down and think about that about how could you put something on
the moon that doesn’t contaminate the surface that would contaminate a surface. So, the
obvious answer that it sort of circulated around amongst the prisoners over the
communication systems was, “Hey, we landed a man on the moon and the Russians
haven’t done it yet. They got a ball up there, but that’s about it.” Sure enough, several
months later, somebody was shown a letter from home and it had a stamp of Neil
Armstrong standing on the moon. You had to look for the good things interpret and try to
think what they’re really talking about.

RV: What about information about the United States and the American side of
the war from incoming prisoners of war that were brought in? Did you kind of tap into
them for news?

RM: Yes, you could. You’d get there and everybody would ask you, “How’s the
war going, how’s the war going?” And you get it through the system, you pass this
around and pretty soon, somebody else would come in, “How’s the war?” It sounded
basically the same way. Not too much in the way of strengthening our belief that we’re
winning, but not saying that we’re losing either. “How’s it going?” “Oh about the
same.” “When do you think the war’s going to end?” “Oh, about six months.” This kept
going on for me for fifteen, sixteen-month periods.

RV: Let me go back to Jane Fonda for a moment. What did you think about her
visit to Hanoi?

RM: Well, I think she should’ve been shot.

RV: You felt that at the time or did you know about it during your imprisonment?

RM: Oh yes. They advertised that she was there and I don’t remember at the
time that I saw any pictures of her, but they would have her on. They would have
anybody that came into their country, foreign visitors; and it was mostly peace groups;
they would certainly let us know about it that they were there and maybe you’ll be asked to see them. That was always more of a threat than anything else because you knew you weren’t going to give the answers that the Vietnamese wanted. You were briefed to be or and what you could or could not say and I never met any group, but just through the communication system. Wilford Burchett, the Australian socialist newspaper writer; he was there frequently. Cora Weiss out of the United States, she was there. About the only good thing that we got out of the visitors coming in if they were Americans was that they would ask the Vietnamese if they could have some letters that Americans had written. Okay, if the Vietnamese said yes, then they would and I don’t know how they picked, but they would go around and say, “You write letter, this group will take them home.” Well, that was an opportunity to write something that probably would go and probably not be censured. In one respect, that was good and you would get a full page of a sheet of paper; 8 ½ x 11 or whatever it happened to be of writing material that you could send out whereas a normal letter that you were sometimes allowed to write was seven lines, heavily censured, doctored up, and given back to you and if you didn’t recopy it exactly how they had changed it, then it would never go.

RV: Did you recopy yours when asked?
RM: Oh yes. At least let the family know that I’m still alive and I’m somewhere. In all my stuff, I have those original letters that got sent. There weren’t many. I don’t know how many there were, wasn’t that many.

RV: Can you talk about your family and what they went through during your imprisonment and then how you personally dealt with being separated from your family and all the questions that must have come up in your mind?
RM: Well, difficult to answer because I came home to an almost immediate separation and divorce. Like I said earlier, one of the things you almost had to believe was that the government is continuing to look after them and providing the best that they can do and briefing who they have as prisoners and who they don’t have and this and that. I think that happened. It was a difficult time for the family, probably the greatest being not hearing for months and sometimes years at a time. You know, what’s happening, what’s going on; and our government really didn’t know either. They’ll say, “Yes, we have conformation that he is a confirmed prisoner of war, but how he’s being
treated; we don’t know. How he’s being fed, we don’t know.” We just didn’t know on
this side and there was not too much they could tell the families. It was later, probably
’69, that time frame; that a bunch of the wives petitioned the Vietnamese after the so
called Peace Talks that gotten underway, a bunch of them went to the Paris, some of the
wives went to Paris; petitioning the Vietnamese government for better treatment for their
husbands. I don’t know that it did any good, but overall during that time frame, a couple
of things had happened. One, ’69, in September, Ho Chi Minh died. Treatment got
better. The heavy, heavy torture practically stopped for propaganda or for anything else.
One of the Vietnamese camp commanders was removed from his job. We didn’t ever
really know why, but we assumed and I read after since then that he was fired because he
wasn’t following the “humane and lenient” policy of the Vietnamese people; whatever
that means. Treatment after Ho Chi Minh’s death certainly improved. In 1970, the
Vietnamese finally allowed us to get packages from home. The Vietnamese specified
what could be contained in that package, and how much it can weigh and all these kind of
things. Basically, it boiled down; they could send 3 kilos, a little over 6 pounds. Well,
one of my first or second packages I got; the part of the package that they gave me could
fit into my two cupped hands. They were stealing us blind and you could smell the
guards wandering around the camp. They smelled like American aftershave lotion, those
kind of stuff.

RV: Was your separation or divorce due directly to your confinement?

RM: Probably, I would say so, yes. I at the time had six children and left. My
wife at that time and the children were living on Okinawa where I was stationed and they
moved her off base back to the U.S. “You can’t live here because there’s other people
coming into replace your husband, we need your housing, this and that.” They didn’t
want a bunch of moping wives hanging around Okinawa making the rest of them feel bad
so they sent them all home. It was a long, long time and who’s to blame? Who knows?
We were still friends, there’s no problem there. The kids; I’m on real good terms with all
my children. Just the time factor, 7 ½ years is a hell of a long time for somebody on
either end of the world not knowing what’s going on to say, “Oh, well, everything’s
hunky dory.” Well, it did happen. The divorce rate in the military is high anyway,
and because of that, but it is a hard profession for marriages. I would guesstimate that the
divorce rate coming home from imprisonment in Vietnam for those of us that were there
was probably 55, maybe as high as 60 percent. It was difficult on either end not
knowing. Particularly at home; having to raise the children, having to provide for the
house. Money wasn’t a problem because our wives continued to receive our full pay in
allowances that I earned all the time we were gone. That wasn’t the problem, but just
managing children growing up and the responsibility of the household of cars and all this
kind of thing. The insurance and etc., etc., etc., was very difficult.

RV: You mentioned one of your beliefs was about that you had to have some
kind of faith or some kind of belief that there was a God or some kind of power looking
after you besides yourself. Can you talk about your religious beliefs, your spirituality and
that experience during imprisonment and afterwards and how it did or did not affect you?

RM: I …as long as can remember, had grown up in the Methodist Church. I’m
not a strong religious person. I do believe there is a somebody up there looking after you,
controlling things. I think it gave [you some], probably gave those of us who were there
some kind of relief that maybe hopefully there is somebody upstairs that’s looking after
us and they’ll get us home. The return home, [I don’t know], I’d say I’m probably not
religious; I am spiritual. I think if you can differentiate the two, I believe there is a God.
I don’t openly practice any one religion, but it doesn’t keep me from saying that there’s
things going on that man doesn’t have control over.

RV: How much did your imprisonment affect those beliefs?

RM: I think it probably strengthened them because certainly there were times
when I was ready to quit and something said, “Okay, let’s go through another day”,
whether it was my roommate or the guys in the next cell or somebody else there saying,
“Hey, this isn’t the end of your world, let’s keep going.”

RV: Let’s talk about going home. You did mention that one of your beliefs that
you wanted to maintain or happened to think was that you were going to go home.

RM: Yes, absolutely, you had to believe that.

RV: I can understand that. Did you ever have any information that it would be
otherwise? Did they tell you that you’re never going to leave Vietnam?
RM: Oh yes, they’d tell us that all the time. “You will never go home, your return home will depend on your behavior here. You’re not a prisoner of war. Just because the war ends doesn’t mean you’re going to home.” You show repentance, and you show a positive attitude toward the Vietnamese people and Vietnamese ideals, then and only then will you go home. They played the non-war, non-POW thing to the fullest extent. We were the “blackest of criminals” because we had violated their space. They would always tell you, we were not POW’s, we were war criminals. Therefore, the Geneva Conventions did not apply; therefore the Code of Conduct did nothing. They knew the Code of Conduct as well as we did. None of these things applied. You can’t write letters because you’re not under the Geneva’s Conventions concerning that portion of it; communication with your families. It doesn’t apply because you’re not a prisoner; you’re a criminal. Again, the entire time, “Your return depends on how well you accept your belief in our system.” We as a group… I don’t know of any indoctrination techniques that were used other than constant; everything was in their favor, nothing was in the U.S. favor. As far as sitting us in classrooms and learning communist doctrination like so called has been done in the “brain washing” of some of the Korean prisoners; that never happened. We didn’t sit in classrooms. I have read that there was some of that went on in some of the Army folks that were captured in South Vietnam and eventually wound up in North Vietnam, but they were undergoing some kind of indoctrination. As far as we were concerned; no, it never happened. We didn’t sit in classrooms, we were not having to repeat the doctrine, “I am this and I am that.” The only thing we got was day after day after day was their propaganda BS.

RV: Did you ever find yourself starting to believe any of it?

RM: No. You would laugh at it just like I say. The production rate of tractors and all the great, glorious things that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was doing and these kind of things. Sometimes you’d have to just sit back and say, “Holy mackerel. Do they really believe this?”

RV: Did you ever see any of your fellow prisoners starting to believe any of this stuff?

RM: I never did. Shortly after we came home, there was actually some of the senior officers of some of the outlying camps that actually brought charges against a
couple of pilots and five or six of the Army personnel for what those individuals thought, the seniors, thought they were cooperating too freely with the Vietnamese. The various Secretaries of their particular Service of these individuals that were charged said, “Let’s just forget this.” Nothing was ever done.

RV: Tell me about going home when you were released.

RM: Oh, marvelous, marvelous. Finally be able to walk out of the door and climb on the bus and you’re not blindfolded and you’re not handcuffed. I can remember climbing on the bus just outside the Hoa Lo Prison and starting over toward Gialam Airport and there were people standing and there was also a lot of guards. There were people standing around and they all had very long, dour looking faces. Why, I’m not real sure. That can’t be their general demeanor all the time, but they were sure just dour.

RV: How about the guards? How did they treat you when you walked out?

RM: It was another day’s duty. Get them to the airport and get them out of here. We won the war, get them home, get them out of here. I think they were as happy to see us go and probably as we were to be going.

RV: Tell me about the experience at the airport. What was it like?

RM: They took us to a big-tented building and sat us there waiting for the airplane. The sequence of going home was first in, first out. Those shot down first or… actually the first one’s loaded on the airplane were those who had been still suffering from injuries. Primarily, those were some of the B-52 crewmembers that were shot down that December, but nonetheless, they went first. That was the only proper way; those that were there the longest went out and I happened to get on the second airplane out that day. Everybody was jubilant; everybody was happy. You probably couldn’t describe the backslapping and the happiness that everybody felt, it was indescribable. It was certainly recognized. We as a group said that amongst ourselves, we are not going to show the Vietnamese any recognition that they’ve done anything for us other than be very polite, but don’t overdo the happiness. As we were still under their control, we were rather subdued and quiet outwardly; inwardly, of course we’re bubbling like an uncorked champagne. It wasn’t until we actually got on the airplane as you might imagine; all hell broke loose. Everybody was hugging and lots of flight nurses were on there and everybody was getting kisses from the flight nurses. The handshaking with all those on
the airplane and probably many others on the airplanes: doctors, and photographers, and
everything else as there was POW’s on each airplane. They didn’t force us to do
anything on the airplane. I think the 7 ½ years in my case just erupted all at once and
everybody was quite pleased. I’m told there’s a picture right now going around, actually
a Vietnamese movie, of the release and my friend that has these copies said and he’s seen
them. He said, there’s one of me walking out the Hoa Lo Prison gate and he says there’s
a smile on my face about the size of the man on the moon. After 7 ½ years, you’ve got to
release emotion somewhere, but not in front of the Vietnamese [don’t show them]. It was
grand and glorious. That’s a hell of a long time to be separated from your world, not
knowing from day to day what’s going to happen next.

RV: Did they fly you to Okinawa first?

RM: No, actually we flew from Gialam Airport to Clark Air Force Base where
we were taken to the military hospital there at Clark. They had basically blocked off the
hospital for everybody except prisoners. They did have the emergency ward still opened,
but they kept everybody out that was trying to come in and see us, except unless we
wanted them to come in. We underwent initial physical evaluation there. Serious
problems, immediate problems were taken care of; dental or whatever, mostly dental
problems. Then, as you were cleared to leave the hospital to return to the States, you
were put on a flight out of Clark Field to the closest military hospital of your service to
where you lived. Which in my case, my wife at the time had moved back to Southern
California from Okinawa and the children and they were living close to or they’re living
in San Bernardino basically and March Air Force Base in Riverside, California was the
big Air Force Hospital, so that’s where I was sent, where I went through complete
physical, mental, and psychological, physiological examinations and evaluations. When
they felt I was ready to go back to work if I wanted to, I could go.

RV: How long was it before you went back?

RM: It was probably about 30 days. I was an outpatient. I was never there day-
to-day, overnight. I wasn’t that crazy that I had to stay there. As I was saying, I was
given outpatient status and I found out very soon that I was not to be living at my home
in San Bernardino with my wife. I found a place at the BOQ at the base and lived there.

RV: How hard was that for you?
RM: Very difficult. Again, lives change in 7 ½ years and I can understand her problems and I can understand some of the things that led to it. You got to either accept it or you don’t. You do what you can to salvage what you can get.

RV: Were you angry at the Vietnamese?

RM: I don’t think I was angry at the Vietnamese. I more probably felt sorry for them because they’re going to have to live in that mess country. I’m going home to the “World’s greatest country” and I want to get my life back in order. They’ve got to live there with whatever they’ve got. To each his own I guess.

RV: What was the first thing that you wanted to eat and you wanted to do when you were released?

RM: We were on the airplane flying between Hanoi and Clark Field and there must have been a half a dozen or so flight surgeons and doctors on board. They were looking at everybody and getting an initial evaluation on everything. They were feeding and they had cans of Soco milk or whatever it was; little cans of health drinks. This is all we could have; we would have to go on a light diet for a while. Everybody started grumbling and growling and saying, “No way Jose.” The doctors finally said, “Well, okay, how many of you have stomach problems?” One or two guys held up their hand out of the 40 and he says, “Okay, you guys lay off on eating until we figure out what’s wrong with you. The rest of you, you can eat what you want.” Of course, when we got on the airplane, all the crew that was on the airplane flight; the nurses, the doctors, and the photographers, and the PR guys, and everybody else; they were passing out cigarettes. They was no booze on the airplane, but they were passing out cigarettes and cigars if you wanted one. It was a joyful flight back over. We were again; once we got into the airplane, then we started to loosen up. When the doors closed, it got a little bit nosier inside the airplane. When the wheels were up in the airplane, it got a little bit nosier and then the Navy pilots had a term called the “feet wet”, meaning that you’re out over the water and your headed back to the ship and you’re no longer in danger of being “shot down.” The Air Force pilot of the 141 calls as we went across the ocean and across the beach out in the ocean and he said, “Okay guys, feet wet.” That’s when all hell broke loose inside the airplane. There was cheering and hugging all kinds of stuff; emotional releases I think of, “Hey, we’re free, finally.” There’s no danger of getting ourselves shot
down by a SAM missile. We never saw, but we sort of figured there was F-14’s escorting each of those airplanes to keep the MiG’s away. Over at Clark, as they said, “Okay, you can eat what you want.” They had the cafeteria at the hospital blocked off; we were the only ones who can go in there and you can get anything you wanted. I can remember having corn on the cob, and I had probably gobs and gobs of salad. I think that’s probably the thing that I missed most is fresh green food; fresh food. Corn on the cob, probably had seconds; probably went back for desserts. Ice cream, I love ice cream. I probably went back for two or three scoops or helpings of ice cream. I got myself satisfied and said, “Yes, I can still eat and I’m not sick over it and so on with the world.”

RV: Were you able to call home?

RM: Yes, we were able to call home within that day. I don’t remember what time we finally got to Philippines, but it was mid afternoon and we were able to call home that day. No indications of anything wrong at that time.

RV: Tell me about back in the United States. What was the biggest shock to you besides the family situation, but this culture shock and what the United States had been through? The last time you were Stateside was in the 1960s. How was it different?

RM: I think the biggest difference was not being prudish or anything, but the morals seemed to have gone to hell and ash in a hand basket. The styles of clothing had changed, the guys with their hair; long hair and the baggy drawers. We greatly appreciated everybody came home. We got there before the mini mini skirts disappeared. (Laughing). It was certainly different. I had grown up in the Los Angeles area and basically I was back in the Los Angeles area. I think the thing that I noticed most about change was the towns had gotten bigger; they’d gotten taller. They’d gotten a heck of a lot more people. When I left California in 1964, there was a lot of people. It seemed like it tripled in size by the time I got back in ’74.

RV: What did you think of the outcome of the war and what was happening and especially what happened in April of 1975?

RM: Well, I think that the American administration had basically given up on trying to maintain a separate South Vietnam. They signed the Peace Accord that said, “We get out.” We said, okay, and Congress was tired of providing money to fight the war. We sort of gave up on South Vietnam as a separate government. We continued to
recognize it, but we didn’t do anything anymore. I think that’s a shame. We let an awful
a lot of people go through a lot of suffering as I did becoming political prisoners when
their country finally fell. I talk and you talk with people, Americans that have been
prisoners in my case, 7 ½ years on the way up to 9 years; Americans were held prisoners
of one end or another of Vietnam. Since returning, I’ve talked to Vietnamese who were
military that worked for us or worked with us in their army that were sent off to
reeducation centers and so for 20, 22, 24 years before they were finally allowed to leave
the country. That’s a kind of country, they’re governing the people in power want and
they can have it. But you can’t help feeling sorry for those that we supported for so long
and then just said, “Over to you buddy. Do the best you can, we’re not going to support
you.”

RV: How much did you talk about your experience with others? How much did
people question you about what had happened?

RM: For a long time, I didn’t do too much. It had never bothered me in the last
several years since we lived up here in this area now about 12 years. I’ve talked to a lot
of civic groups, I’ve talked to kids at school; high school, junior high, even elementary
schools. You got to vary what you tell kids, but it doesn’t bother me to talk to them. I’m
part of a speaking group that is out at Beale Air Force Base and we talk to the young
airmen, Airmen Leadership School. Every class in my case, I’m talking about living with
the Code on Conduct, which of course is still a valid military doctrine. I say, “Okay,
here’s what it says. Here’s what it doesn’t say. This is how we did it. Now, what will
happen the next time, you never know. You may find yourself, you never know when
you’re going to find yourself”, as the Vietnamese say, “An uninvited guest.”

RV: Did you have difficulty transferring back into the country, transitioning back
into American life and life outside of the cell?

RM: I don’t think so. I stayed in the Air Force. I continued… I was still
physically qualified to fly airplanes. I needed to get my family life squared away so
instead of going immediately back into operational duty, I went to the Industrial College
of the Armed Forces in D.C. for a year. The divorce thing settled itself, but I knew when
I finished there then I had already been told if I wanted, I could go back into it and go
learn to fly again and get back into operational flying which I did. The year in
Washington D.C., then I went to requalify flying airplanes down in Texas and learned to fly the F-4 over down in Florida and then I went to Germany for four years as a staff officer, but a flying position; top Director of Operations for a Fighter Wing and an Air Force level. I enjoyed my military career except those 7 ½ years; I have no complaints.

RV: Do you suffer any disabilities today from your interment?

RM: Yes. I am rated with disabilities from VA, not from the military. For a long time, I did not get involved with the VA. I retired in late 1979. It wasn’t probably until ’82, my current wife and I were living in Washington State when one of the Service Officers of Department of Federal Service Officers said, “Come on, let me get you evaluated and see what we can do for you.” Since that time, my various injuries have given me disability rating and I do get VA compensation and all my medical cares are taken care of or medical concerns are taken care of by the Department of Veteran Affairs Medical Services. Of course, the big thing going around now is concurrency; as I get disability pay from the VA. They take it away from my military retirement. They’re working on changing that. Who knows what will happen.

RV: How about any kind PTSD incidents?

RM: Yes, my service officer, she said, “Ray, you were over there for 7 ½ years, so all these things happened to you. You must have PTSD.” I said, “I don’t think so.”

So, she said, “Well, why don’t you for my sake, let me send you to the psychiatrist over at the VA Hospital, this is again in Seattle. She said, “Let them evaluate you and let them tell you.” So, she set an appointment and I went over and talked with the shrinks for a couple of hours. Finally, he sort of sits back in his chair and he looks at me and he says, “What the hell are you doing here? Get out of here.” (Laughing). So, he wrote it up, “No sign of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.” I said, “Fine, I told you.” I was evaluated. About four years later, I’m still up in Washington and my service officer says, “Ray, let’s go back for a reevaluation of PTSD.” I said, “No, it’s a waste of time.” She says, “Yes, I want you to do it just for me.” I said, “Okay.” So, she filled out the paper work and I went back over there and I walk in, same doctor. (Laughing). He says, “What are you doing back here? Get out of here.” I say, “I got an appointment with you.” He says, “All right, sit down, let’s talk.” Twenty minutes later, he says, “Get out of here.”

RV: How can you account for being so well adjusted?
RM: I don’t know. I think you’ve got to say….okay, again, falling back; someday I’m going to go home. I’m not going to let day-to-day activities wear me down. Maybe I just have a pleasant disposition outlook on life and say, “Okay, it happened. There’s nothing I can do about it. Let’s get on and do the best I can with the rest of my life.” I think that’s probably what keeps me [going]. There’s enough to do without thinking about the bad times I underwent. But again, it doesn’t bother me and I think that may be part of why I’m not really disturbed by it because it doesn’t bother me to talk about it. It’s not inside of me somewhere festering around bubbling and causing me those kind of problems.

RV: When you heard about the anti war movement and learned about its extent, how did you feel about what happened?

RM: You naturally, like everybody else, we knew about it because again that was what the Vietnamese would tell us. That’s one of the things they would broadcast over their radio; the anti war movement, the demonstrations and all this kind. We’d say, “What kind of jerk is there at home doing that?” We didn’t believe the extent of what it evidently had gotten to. Again, we as a country say, “Okay, you can say and do basically what you want as long as it’s not against the law.” I don’t agree with all the stuff that they were putting out, I don’t agree with any of that BS. Again, I will defend the right to do it.

RV: What kind of lessons do you think the United States learned from this experience in Southeast Asia?

RM: I’m sorry?

RV: What kind of lessons did the United States learn from this experience in Southeast Asia?

RM: Well, the way we’re continuing to do things sometimes, you wonder whether we learned anything or not. I mean what we’re doing in Iraq and that part of the world now. There’s a couple of real good books that I’ve read. One, Dereliction of Duty, by McMasters; I think is the author. And it point out if you find yourself in the situation where you are going to go to war, go to war; don’t try to do ten other things at the same time. We did that in World War Two; we didn’t want to get into World War Two, we got into it, we fought it to win it. This one, Vietnam War; we got into it, we didn’t fight it to
win it, we fought it to proceed along a political agenda of the President of the time. I think by the time that Dick Nixon; I care less about him. Everything I read about him except one thing, he said, “Let’s end this war.” He said the way he’s going to end the war is bomb Hanoi and he did it. We went, first, those months that I was actively involved in the war from early 1965 to September when I was shot down; we had a red circle on our maps around Hanoi 30 mile radius. We could not fly into that. Same thing, Hai Phong Harbor; we could not fly into there. If you can’t destroy their infrastructure or where their power base it, you’re not going to win the war as we found out. You’re going to get into war, get in it to win it. Otherwise, stay out of it.

RV: What about for you personally looking back at those 7 ½, 8 years that you spent over there, how has it most effected you?
RM: Well, there was a period of life that I grew up and my children grew up that I didn’t get to see. Their years and then their following the immediate return. Basically, it destroyed my life with my children. It has picked up with the children, but there was 7 ½ years of their formative childhood that I missed. They’re all good kids these days. My first wife must have done something good.

RV: What do you think was the most significant thing that you learned while you were there in Southeast Asia?
RM: We’re each a little bit stronger than what we give ourselves credit for if we put our mind to the things we have to do. I think we each learned that each of us there said, “Okay, I can be beaten, but it’s more difficult to break me”, in which I think it was worthwhile.

RV: How do you feel about your service to the country militarily, looking at it as a military officer?
RM: I hope I did those things that were required of me and I think I contributed somewhat and if nothing else into showing the country that under situation of being a “war criminal”, we were able to prevail and come home with our heads held high. I think that’s something that some of those in today’s military don’t think too much about.

RV: You mentioned that you did read book on Vietnam and you mentioned Dereliction of Duty. Any other books that come to mind that you think are very representative of the war?
RM: Yes, there’s a lot of them; I can’t think of them right now.
RV: But you do read about the war?
RM: Oh yes. How did we get ourselves, why did we get ourselves in the mess that we got ourselves in? What can we learn from the past that we should be not doing these days and we see it going on again? When are we going to learn?
RV: Do you go to movies on Vietnam? Do you see Vietnam War movies?
RM: Do I?
RV: Yes sir.
RM: There hasn’t been a decent one really made.
RV: So you have seen them?
RM: Oh, I’ve seen a couple, yes. What’s the one about the Rangers down south?
RV: Yes sir.
RM: A lot of it is a bunch of BS; a lot of the movies they make about the war in Vietnam, but the best movie that I’ve seen on the war is Freida Mock and Terry Sauders. You probably have that in your files, Return With Honor?
RV: Yes sir.
RM: Yes, okay. If you want to get the story of why the guys did in Vietnam, the prisoners, not the guys in the South. My thoughts on the guys in the South, there were hell of a lot of good people. There were a hell of a lot that should’ve never been in the military. There were drugees and no goods before they got there and the Army’s not going to change that no matter how hard they try. So, you got a bunch of druggies and no goodnics down in South Vietnam trying to fight a war. I see movies, but I don’t put too much faith in them.
RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?
RM: They’re struggling. Well, it’s like a lot of these socialist countries in the world; there’s a lot of control and I don’t know if they’re improving the lives of their people.
RV: Would you ever want to go back?
RM: I don’t think it would bother me. I’ve thought about it, but right now, my wife has difficulties in traveling, so we don’t do that much of it anymore. We’ve been based all over the world during my continuing career in the Air Force and afterwards. We [phone problems.] My phone keeps going static; we’ve been back to Vietnam. I
don’t think it would bother me. It would be interesting to see some of the places where I was. During the time we were in Germany, my wife went to some of the communist countries; I couldn’t go, but she went. She said some of them were beautiful; Russia was beautiful, but at the time, Russia was still communist. She thought St. Petersburg was more beautiful than Paris, but again. I don’t know any particular reason why I’d go to Vietnam. I liked to say there’s a heck of a lot more places I’d rather go than Vietnam, but I don’t think it would bother me if I had the opportunity or really wanted to go.

RV: When you speak to the younger generation today, what do you tell them about the Vietnam War?

RM: Well, basically I said it was a political era or a political mish mash that we probably were correct in getting involved, but we didn’t get involved to the extent to maintain what we said we were going to do. Again, as I said, either get in it to do what you want or stay out of it.

RV: Have you ever been to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C.?

RM: Yes I have.

RV: What’s been your experience there?

RM: It’s moving. It portrays, it shows that a hell of a lot of people, 58,000 or whatever it was, Americans gave their life. You sometimes wonder knowing how things turned out, was it worth it? I think probably at the time that they gave their lives, yes it was. It must have some kind of attraction I think, as I understand the most visited monument memorial in the D.C. area. I’m not real sure what they’re looking at it for, what purpose of looking at it other than maybe a name that they would recognize or so. I saw names on there of people I know. It’s hard to say, I don’t know beyond there.

RV: Sir, is there anything else that you’d like to discuss or talk about that we have not touched upon?

RM: I don’t know. We’ve been jabbering now for a long time.

RV: Yes sir. Okay, well, this will end our oral history interview with Mr. Raymond Merritt. Thank you very much for your time sir.

RM: Okay.