Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone, I am conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Winston S. Churchill III. I am joined today by Assistant Archivist and Oral Historian Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive also. We are, the three of us, are in the Rawls Business College Conference Room in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas Tech University. Today is March 30, 2005 and it is 11:05 AM Central Standard time. Mr. Churchill thank you for talking with us this morning. We’d like to ask you if you could, you spent your time in Southeast Asia as a correspondent in 1966, if you could, could you provide some comments and tell us a little bit about how you got that job and about getting into Vietnam? How did that happen?

Winston Churchill III: I had just completed a mammoth coast-to-coast lecture tour of the States. At a Christmas party in the home of my mother, who later became Pamela Harriman, at the time she was Pamela Hayward. In Mt. Kisco, New York I was accosted by Mike Coles the publisher of Look Magazine at the time, which was the competitor of Life Magazine who said, “Winston would you care to go to Vietnam for us?” It was Mao Chinaman. I was over the moon. I can’t say that was the reaction of my wife who had just produced our first child. Anyway I got myself organized and I first made it my business to go and interview Sir Gerald Templer, who was the general in charge of confronting and indeed defeating the Communist insurgency in Borneo, which today is part of Malaysia, and to try to find out what lessons we had learned in that conflict. I also went out by way of not just Singapore, which was still a major British base, but I went on to Borneo to see British troops in action at the time of what was
knows as confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia at the time. So having briefed
myself from the British point of view, I then arrived in Saigon where I arrived I would
imagine sort of mid-January 1966. I thought I knew nobody in all of Southeast Asia.
The first day of my arrival I was walking down Thu Do Street in Saigon and I suddenly
hear my name called. I look across the street and it’s Johnny Apple, better know to
people as R.W. Apple Jr., who for many years afterwards was a correspondent in New York TIMES. He and I had been on the copy desk of the Wall Street Journal, which I had
done as a summer job in the summer of 1959. He said, “Winston come to my place this
evening we’re celebrating.” I said, “What are we celebrating John?” He turned around
and showed me the denim seat of his pants, which had two clear holes through it. He
said, “War Zone D 0500 hours this morning.” He said, “I didn’t have so much as a
scratch. Today, I shouldn’t be saying this but he’s got such a fat ass that he wouldn’t
have got away unscathed (laughter). Anyway, so I find myself that evening in his
apartment and beer is flowing freely. There is some crazy, drunken American Air Force
Colonel, Irish-American, I forget his name. But he was in charge of all PR for the U.S.
Air Force throughout Southeast Asia. He said, “Say, Winston, what are you planning to
do in the month you’re going to be in-country,” which was sort of the jargon of the day. I
was an amateur pilot. I’d learned to fly small airplanes when I’d been at Oxford
University. As soon as I left the University I piloted a single-engine plane all the way
around the African continent. On my way out to the Far East from London, I had been
reading in a Sunday Times Magazine, the British Sunday Times Magazine of a British
correspondent who had got on an air strike from a U.S. Navy carrier. I thought what
could be more fun than that to get my sticky little paws on a fast jet! Without any malice
a forethought I said to this Air Force Colonel, “The one thing I was to do while I’m here
in Vietnam is to fly a combat mission from a carrier.” And he went ballistic. He said,
“Hell, those Navy guys they don’t know how to fly! If you want to fly, come fly with the
Air Force.” He said, “Give me a call tomorrow morning, 11:00 AM.” Well, I knew that
wars weren’t like that. They weren’t done for the sort of convenience for journalists, at
least I imagined that. And at 11:00 I was still at the PIO office getting my press
credentials. It was probably 11:45 before I got around to calling the Colonel. He said,
“Get your ass the hell out here.” He said, “I’ve got four F-100- Fs lined up on the tarmac
ready to roll.” So I found a pedicab driver, paid him double and he pedaled like crazy through the very heavy Saigon traffic out to Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Forty-five minutes later, there I was waddling out to this clutch of four F-100- Fs weighed down with a parachute and a dingy and survival gear and emergency radio and fishing tackle and dagger- you name it, I had it. I was greeted by Major John Sersel of Columbus, Ohio who was my pilot. He extended a welcoming hand and he said, “Say Mr. Churchill if we’re shot down by the VC will you be explaining to them that you’re only an English round-eye and not an American round-eye or would you care for this,” handing me the butt end of a colt .45. I said, “Give me that damn thing.” Five minutes later we were thundering down the runway, four aircraft in formation. Exciting stuff for someone who had never been in a fast jet before with the afterburners flaming. I got some great pictures. He was a super guy, Major Sersel. He let me fly the whole mission, apart from the take off, the strike and the landing. So we flew northeast to Tuy Hoa, about 300 nautical miles northeast on the coast where we rendezvoused with our FAC, forward air controller and we couldn’t see. There was a little Cessna Birddog at 100 feet over the jungle canopy. Who said, “I’m making red smoke now. You’re target is 100 yards east west or whatever from the red smoke.” We’d been at 35,000 feet and we rolled over and put out the speed brakes and came in for the attack. What I was fascinated to learn of the way the U.S. Air Force was operating was basically these aircraft on the way to their mission were a taxi rank and would be sent very often to very low priority missions, but at any moment could be reassigned to a high priority mission. On the first of the air strikes I got on, we stuck with the original one, which was frankly a low priority target. There were some recently dug VC trenches, which the net effect was that we made them a bit bigger. There was a supposed arms dump in a jungle location which the forward air controller thought we got a secondary explosion out of, which would indicate that yes, indeed it was an arms dump. I wasn’t completely convinced by that and there was no sign of enemy at that point. Then we came in for three or four passes and dumped our ordinates. Then we were back at 35,000 feet heading back to base and a nice beer. But I still hadn’t gotten on my Phantom strike. Britain had just announced that she was going to buy Phantoms and that’s why I was particularly interested in Phantom strikes. So I was pretty pleased with my first strike. Three weeks later I found myself in Da Nang and
I thought I’d pull the same stunt with the commanding officer. I said, “The one thing I’d  
like to do is get on a Phantom strike.” He said, “Well we don’t actually use Phantoms for  
in country missions and it is forbidden by the Pentagon for us to take media out of  
country.” But he said, “I tell you what, I’ll fix you up on a strike and we’ll assign a  
Phantom to the strike.” It was your version of the British Cambra Bomber, I think it was  
the B-58. The Hustler was a B-57. I think this was B-58 and there were three of those  
and one Phantom. The pilot was Colonel “call me Poncho” Pasquilito. Anyway he put  
me in the cockpit quite a while before because I was in the bombardier navigator’s seat  
behind. I was the only one who could control the Sparrow Missile in the unlikely even  
that we were jumped by some Vietnamese MIGs. So they showed me how to bracket the  
target on the little control box, showed me the fire button. Anyway we thundered down  
the runway, the three B-58s and the one Phantom F-4C. As we rolled down the runway  
we were reassigned to a high priority target. En route to that high priority target, we were  
reassigned a second time to an even higher priority target, which was on the Ia Drang  
River between Cambodia and Vietnam. The information that we were given was that  
U.S. Special Forces were on one side of the river; an entire Vietnamese division was in  
the jungle on the other side. So our boys were having trouble. Our mission was  
effectively to come in and set the jungle ablaze on the other side of the river. We had  
four pods, I think it was totaling 64 two-inch high explosive incendiary rockets and a  
pistol, which was the colloquial name of the gatling gun, slung mid-ship sort of cigar  
like underneath the belly of the aircraft. We came in wing over, dived down high speed  
towards the target, which again had been identified by a birddog aircraft. We fired two  
pods, which set the jungle ablaze. Back on the stick suddenly I found myself being  
grabbed by the thighs, the calves and the stomach by the G-suit as it inflated to force the  
blood back into one’s brain. We were pulling between seven and eight G. Did a quick  
bank to the right, a quick bank to the left, they told us that we were taking ground fire  
from machine guns, but luckily it didn’t connect. Then we came around for a second  
pass for the third and fourth pods and then we came around for two more passes with the  
pistol, which just sort of grunted (grrrrr, grrrr) firing 6,000 rounds a minute. Then we  
were back on our way to base. We were cleared to land and suddenly Poncho in the front  
office said, “Say, I haven’t shown you how this bird performs. I promised to and now
we’ve gotten rid of the garbage,” which was the ordinance. He broke off the approach
and we were one mile from touch down, pushes the throttle to the fire wall, pulls the nose
up and we’re doing climbing barrel rolls up to 40,000 feet.

RV: How was your stomach?

WC: Quite one of the most exciting things I’ve ever done. So that was my
experience with the U.S. Air Force. I also got on, also from Da Nang on a bird dog
mission. There you see a totally different view. You see what looked like hundreds of
black ants, they’re not black ants they’re actually human beings. They are fathers,
husbands, brothers, working in the fields, whatever. I have to say that the power of a fast
jet and the power of the ordinance, which the fast jet delivers is something that can very
easily go to your head. You can very easily think that you are God Almighty. You see
these little black ants and you can just crush them without giving it a second thought.

About three years later my first assignment as a correspondent for the Times of London
was to report the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War. Day one of my arrival in Biafra I found
myself on the receiving end. You get a totally different impression of aerial warfare.

Heard a roar overhead, I came out of a thatched roof mud hut. I’d gone to sleep with my
jeans on, it was about 6:00 in the morning, the sun was just coming up. I look up and I
see up above my head the bomb bay of an Illusion bomber opening up and the bomb was
cascading down to land quarter of a mile down the street on what turned out to be a
maternity clinic in full swing. It was my very unpleasant task to report that and
photograph that. Over the next 10 days I saw 10 deliberate attacks on the civilian
population of Biafra culminating the last day. Well I counter arriving on the scene three
hours later more than 350 bodies, all women and children or old men. That to me put in
perspective what I had seen the flip side of in Vietnam. I did feel that one was, until the
moment when either technology breaks down or they get lucky and manage to shoot you
down, in which case whether it is Israeli pilots in the Middle East or American pilots in
Southeast Asia, the civilians would literally tear people apart. Because they have been
struck from the air by this almost unseen, unreachable force which they have no means of
striking back at, when they have the chance of laying their hands on you, they go wild. I
can well imagine not that many of those who were shot down actually were taken
prisoner. I know there have been long efforts to locate prisoners of war. I’m sure that
some were taken alive and have not been accounted for. I’m sure equally that many were
just on the spot torn apart. That was sort of the luck of the draw. Otherwise you are
totally insulated from the realities of war and you end up a couple of hours later in the
officer’s mess downing a nice cool lager and you have no contact with the situation on
the ground. I also spent time with Special Forces. I went to Pleiku and Pleimy, I was
also in Cam Rahn Bay, went down to the Delta to Can Tho. A very interesting little
hamlet, which was a Catholic hamlet, which was under attack from the Viet Cong at the
time, we could actually see the entrenchments of the VC. I also spent a very, very lively
24 hours aboard the U.S.S. Ranger on Yankee Station. That is so impressive. There
were two carriers, each would operate for 12 hours. The other 12 hours they would stand
down and be resupplied of bombs and ammunition and oil. The other 12 hours, sustained
operations. There was a young man, his name escapes me. A 19 year-old who was my
escorting officer and his elder brother, age 21 had gone off on the first wave and he never
came back. For once I was lost for words. What do you say to a 19 year-old who has
just lost his brother, either KIA or MIA? And that was really quite an emotional moment
that the excitement of being on that carrier, it was a wonderful place. I forget what it’s
called. Just very close to the touch down point. So they’re coming in at 150 knots with
full reheat because a jet engine takes long time to wind up to full power. If you wait
until you miss the cable until you power up, you fall into the drink. So they came in not
only at great speed, but with full power and hit the deck with such a slam the whole ship
shakes. So four rester cables and it catches on one of them. I found that wonderfully
exciting. I have to say that and I also had a very lively night in War Zone D, my last
night with lots of incoming mortars and machine gun fire. I was with the Royal
Australian Regiment. I went along to the Australian Ambassador and said, “I’d like to go
along with RAR for their operation tomorrow in War Zone D.” “Operation tomorrow in
War Zone D?” He said, “I can neither confirm nor deny.” I said, “Look, come off it. All
the bar girls in Saigon have known about this for the last three days.” Anyway he was
playing dumb. So I just went later that afternoon to Bien Hoa, which was the helicopter
support base. I went from one help to the other saying, “Are you going to the RAR?”
And about the fifth one I got lucky and he said, “Yes, hop aboard.” I arrived. God they
were unhappy about my arrival! First of all, they hadn’t been told. Secondly I had no
sleeping bag, no rations. I had nothing. They put me in the charge of a captain who was
sort of the PR guy. He and one other very generously shared their evening rations with
me. We had a two-man bivvy and had to dig foxholes. It was rocky and really difficult.
We eventually got down this far and some God-awful Aussie officer would say, “Say
that’s a mighty fine trench.” He said, “I think I’ll put a machine-gunner in that one.” So
we had to start all over again. We hadn’t got very deep. Anyway when the whiz bangs
started flying in the night, we all sort of dove in to this trench. I found myself atop of the
pile, this much off the ground. I realized that was a mug’s game. So I actually just
stayed where I was lying on the ground. Then at dawn it was incredible. The sun comes
up, not a cloud in the sky and I’m rubbing my eyes and looking to the sky and I suddenly
see with a great school of silver fish. These were the B-52 from Guam, more than a
dozen of them. About five minutes later, it was like an earthquake. Their target was five
miles from where I was standing, a network of underground bunkers and the whole
jungle shook. Even some leaves were flying off the trees. That was very impressive.
RV: Well I know we’re out of time and I appreciate your time with us sir, and
we’ll end the interview for now.