Kim Sawyer: This is Kim Sawyer conducting an oral history interview with Bill Vannoy on February 28, 2001 at 1:00 in the afternoon in the Special Collections Library. This interview is part of the Lubbock area Vietnam Veteran’s Oral History Project. Mr. Vannoy can we begin with a little bit about your early life? Where were you born?

Billy Vannoy: I was born around Yuma, Arizona April 8, 1947, spent most of the first of my life, until I was about 14, around Yuma and the surrounding towns. When I was in high school I moved to O’Brien, Texas with my grandparents. They needed some help getting around, so I was the help. I graduated from O’Brien High School in 1965. It’s a little bitty place over North of Abilene about 60 miles. In fact, it no longer has a school. That’s the way it goes (laughs). Met my wife while I was going to high school there in O’Brien, went to a year of junior college at Cisco Junior college, got married. My dear Uncle was getting ready to send me greetings and I decided it would be prudent to get a little training so I joined the Navy. That was April of 1967. I was 20 years old and very uneducated.

KS: What about brothers and sister?

BV: I have a half-brother and half-sister living in Yuma, Arizona. I have a sister that lives in Knox City, Texas, which is just north of O’Brien. That’s all that I pretty well got left except my mother still lives in Yuma, Arizona.

KS: How was growing up in O’Brien?
BV: Well, it was different. Very, very small town. We had a few people in high school that held a full time job.

KS: What was your job?

BV: Actually I worked at a grocery store in Four Corners [actually O’Brien]. I had an old uncle [?] that owned the grocery store. I usually worked there six hours a day and on the weekends. In the summers I could get on full time. I worked about ten hours a day as a plumber for a company in Knox City, Texas. You do what you can to make a dollar.

KS: Did you have a car?

BV: Yeah, I had a ’55 Chevy Nomad. Which in my great brilliance I traded off for an English Ford when I started off to college because I wanted to economize. I should have been shot. That’s just the way it goes.

KS: What did you study in college?

BV: Agriculture. General Agriculture at Cisco Junior College. It got me bumped up one pay grade when I enlisted in the Navy. I went in as an E-2 instead of an E-1.

KS: You enlisted in 1967?

BV: Yeah, April 1967, I think it was April 22nd or 23rd.

KS: What made you decide to enlist? Was it a family tradition?

BV: Well quite a few of my family had been in the Navy. My dad had been. One of my uncles and several of my cousins had been in the Navy. I had another Uncle who was a career Marine. I guess several of them had been. One of my great-uncles had 37 years in the Navy. I was given to understand there were worse things. I guess there were worse things. It was kind of a semi-tradition.

KS: Were you married when you joined?

BV: Yes, I was.

KS: What did your wife think about this?

BV: At the time, we were living in Odessa, Texas and the economy wasn’t real good. If you went into a place and they said well, have you been in the military and at that time if you said well not yet, you couldn’t get much because they knew you were fixing to be drafted. If your draft category was 1-A which mine was, keep your bags
packed you will be going, unless you have enough money to go to college or your daddy
knows somebody or something along those measures.

KS: After you enlisted, where did you go in Texas to enlist? Did you have a
local?

BV: I enlisted at Odessa, Texas. From there they sent me to Albuquerque, New
Mexico to an induction center. From Albuquerque, New Mexico we rode a train to San
Diego, California. I wound up being in the same barracks that my father had been when
he enlisted in WWII.

KS: So this was your basic training?

BV: Basic training at San Diego, California.

KS: How long did that last?

BV: That was a full three months.

KS: Could you talk a little bit about your experiences there? What was your
typical day like?

BV: Typical day, get up around 5:00 in the morning; do your shave, all that good
stuff. Dress out usually in dungarees, stand inspection, march to the chow hall, be fed
and then it was typical military training, marching etc. The first half of the day we would
go from there to march back to the chow hall. We did a lot of tests. I had wanted to go
into gunners mate training, but they decided I needed into go to aviation electronics.

KS: Did they just tell you this is what you’re going to do? Were you tested in
some way?

BV: You took a battery of tests and they said this is what you’re best suited for.

This is what we would like for you to do. It was not considered graceful to say
something besides yes, chief. I tested out and they said aviation electronics. The aviation
fire control. Aviation electronics, aviation electronics warfare whatever.

KS: At this point had you been following the news coverage of the Vietnam
War? I know things were just starting to build up.

BV: A little bit.

KS: Were you aware?

BV: My wife had a cousin about the same time that went into the Marine Corps
from Munday, Texas. In fact we wound up at NATTC (Naval Air Technical Training
Center) Memphis going to aviation electronics school. He was a class ahead of me.

KS: In San Diego what kind of weapons training did you receive in basic training?

BV: Very very little. Most of it was done with a .22 caliber bolt-action rifle. I shot well enough at basic training. We actually went out to the range and the range master chief, gunners mate there said you think you can shoot boy, small BM boy. I said well, fair chief. He said that’s Master Chief to you. Yes, sir Master Chief. He broke out a national match M-1 and I shot expert with it. We went from the M-1 to the .45 pistol and I shot expert again. He said well, see what you can do with this and gave me 1928 A-2 Thompson submachine gun. He said can you shoot that? I said sure thing, checked the magazine, went through it and I wound up being qualified on automatic weapons. Which wound up being somewhat of my down fall in the Navy. After that we got along. Instead of boy it was recruit Vannoy.

KS: What was the most difficult part of your basic training would you say?

BV: The most difficult part of my basic training was being away from my wife. That and well a lot of the stuff was kind of Mickey Mouse. I understand that it needed to be repeated and repeated and repeated so that we would act automatically instead of sitting there thinking about something for about, four or five minutes. It was basic quote, unquote seamanship, just basic military training. I think I myself and one other were the only ones that fired anything but the .22 caliber rifle. That was it.

KS: Was that unusual?

BV: Apparently not for the Navy. As I found out later most sailors are not qualified to handle any weapons smaller than a 3-inch rifle, just was very unusual at that time.

KS: What about, did you have any training on board ships?

BV: They had the U.S.S. Recruit, which was a land-based destroyer escort mock up at NTC San Diego. Of course, when that dust fired down in that water, it was either forward starboard or port aft or one of those things. I forget which way you’re supposed to go. I was only aboard ship twice. When I didn’t need it I forgot about it.

KS: Were any of the recruits ever injured during this basic training? Any problems?
BV: One of them kind of slipped a few cogs and decided to sit in the corner and cover his head up with a blanket. They sent the hospital corpsman in there and took him off. I don’t really know what happened to him. That was about it. You’d get some bumps and scratches. You didn’t always agree with everybody, things of this nature. We did have one recruit that didn’t want to keep clean. He was holding us back. He was given a thorough shower with a scrub brush. He was clean that day. We didn’t get dinged for him being a slime ball.

KS: Were there problems with discipline, certain people?

BV: No.

KS: What about had any of your superiors been to Vietnam were they saying you need to know this in order to get through if you were going to Vietnam? Did they talk about it?

BV: Actually we had one first class enginemate that was the company commander of another recruit company who had been on river boats over there. For some reason there were about four of those recruit companies together at one time. He gave a little talk about it. He was less than impressed with the country and less impressed with their abilities. However, the odds were good for some of you to go over there. He said remember this, if it’s short and does not speak English real well shoot first, you can say I’m sorry later. I tucked that back into a little file in my head. I said remember that it might come in handy. Sure enough it did.

KS: Anything else you wanted to add about your basic training?

BV: That’s about it in basic training. Of course, we all did fire fighting. That was pretty easy.

KS: When you say fire fighting?

BV: Basic ship board fire fighting. There is no place to go across the street and set and watch it burn aboard ship. Everybody has to know what to do.

KS: What was the standard practice to put out a fire?

BV: Standard practice was water fog and funnel. Of course you were split up into teams as you would a damage control party aboard ship. That part was quite interesting learned a few things and stood me in good stead there.

KS: After San Diego, where did you go for your advanced?
BV: After San Diego they decided I needed some more electronics training. They sent me to Naval Air Technical Training Center NAS, Memphis, Tennessee. Which is actually north of Memphis, at Millington, Tennessee.

KS: What year was this?

BV: That was still in 1967. I was there from the end of July ’67 until January of ’68. I went through several schools there. The most difficult being Aviation Electronics ‘A’ school. Of course there was the basic aircraft schools that you went through. Then the specialty schools, aviation electronics after.

KS: The basic aircraft schools, could you talk about that? Were you trained on a specific aircraft?

BV: This end of the aircraft bites, this end of it kicks. Don’t walk through the prop arc. This is how you start a reciprocating engine. At that time they had close to a hundred AD Sky Raiders setting out for people to play with. They were not air worthy at that time, but this is what you practiced on. This where you find this. This is what kind of equipment. From there we messed with some P-2V Neptunes, which were across the highway and actually in NAS Memphis. For larger aircraft, the jet aircraft they had some old F-9F Cougars. The jet aircraft fighter, ex-fighter aircraft.

KS: Is that from WWII?

BV: No. That was from Korea and right after Korea. The AD-Skyraidars, Korean War and the same with P-2V Neptune. It was right after the Second Word War and they modified it.

KS: What about specific electronics training?

BV: Specific electronics was basic vacuum tube circuits. We found out pretty quickly I had a pretty fair aptitude for at that time, transistors were not new but integrated circuits were new. I had a pretty good knack for those and for radar. I went to a couple specialty schools on radar there at Memphis.

KS: Was this interpreting radar signals?

BV: Say again.

KS: Was this to learn how to interpret radar signals or maintain the radars?

BV: Both to interpret them and to maintain the radar things [equipment]. If you flew on an aircrew in the Navy you had to be able to maintain anything that you operated.
In some special cases if you flew on an aircrew you had to be able to do anything anybody else on the crew could do. That included flying the plane. That’s not the little ones; it’s the bigger ones.

KS: Did you have any pilot training or experience?

BV: I had flown some. We used to chase horses on the desert at Yuma and catch them, break them and sell them. My dad had a friend by the name of Wiegle, Douglas Wiegal and he taught me to fly a single engine plane, didn’t have a pilot’s license at the time. O.K. This is a rudder. This is an elevator, it’s pretty easy. Not a difficult thing at all, just don’t run out of altitude, air speed and ideas all at the same time.

KS: When you were trained in the electronics training were you trained on a specific aircraft or were the systems the same?

BV: Actually it was general except for the specialty training on the APS 20 and the APS 38 radars and the ANAPX6 identification perimeter for equipment. That was specific. Not everybody got that at that time. A lot of people got it later. From NATTC Memphis I went to fleet airborne electronic training unit Atlantic Fleet at Norfolk, Virginia.

KS: How long were you in Memphis?

BV: From the end of July ’67 to, it was either, January or February. Went to Faetulant in Norfolk and went to four specialty training schools. The one that was the most important was the ARR52 sonobouy receiver school. It was brand new in the fleet at the time. They had started playing games with it, by using it you had I think it was 56 different specific channels you could receive on, specific frequencies. Sonobouy were tuned to one of those specific frequencies and they were so marked on the outside of it. This is a number 15 or a number 37 or what have you. It was that frequency channel, channel 15 or channel 37 and so forth. At the time, they were starting to make land sensors. I got in on the design of some of those that were dropped over land, the same frequencies. If you gridded out an area and dropped specific type sensors from specific frequencies you could grid out several square miles with just that set of frequencies. If you flew into another grid, you had another grid with a different set of frequencies. The sensors were seismic. If the ground trembles a little bit, somebody’s stepping past, acoustic which was just its a microphone. Some of these were fine runners of photo
ionization detectors. They were tuned specifically to ionize for things along the nature of
explosives; specifically simtex was the explosive we were generally tend [calibrated] to.
We also had one that was specific for C4 which is similar to sintex. We had some that
were calibrated with Asian Elephant urine. I wondered about that for a while and then I
found out more about it later. There were some calibrated with well one thing you can
tell the difference between Vietnamese troops and American troops by the waste
products.

KS: Oh, cool.
BV: You could tell who had been through there and had marked territory or what
have you as they went (laughs).

KS: This was new technology that was just, at this point?
BV: At that time that was brand spanking new technology.
KS: Who developed that? Was that developed for the Navy?
BV: Some of it was Raytheon. Some of it was Air Force. Some of it was strictly
Navy. The receivers had started out strictly Navy. I don’t know if Air Force used the
same type of receivers or not. I expect they did because Raytheon was in on it too. They
were big gun contractors. From the school at beautiful downtown Norfolk, let’s see I
can’t even remember exactly when I went. I went to patrol squadron 30 on the 27th of
April ’68. While I was at Norfolk I had made petty officer 3rd class in a little under a
year, made 3rd class on the test. It was not on a gimme type advancement. I had tested
for it. In the Navy to make rate you had to test against everybody else that was eligible
for that rate in the Navy. It was a test. I went to aircrew training. Patrol squadron 30 at
Pantuxent River, Maryland. Most of that was in a P-3 Alpha Orion, which used that
ARR52 sonobuoy receiver. I didn’t say this about it, but the sonobuoy could give you all
sorts of different information. You had some that act like a regular sonar that ping. They
would give you a range and if you had three of them in the water they’d give you a range
of bearing and speed for underwater. You never got a range or bearing on the land based
sensors until you had movement on several of the sensors of different types as they went
down. To interpret the sensors like the photo ionization detectors, they had what they
called the waterfall display. It was on the pavement, gravel. It was different lines that
corresponded with frequencies or ionization levels in case of ionization detectors.
KS: You were trained to interpret this?
BV: That’s right.
KS: I was curious what the actual land based sensors looked like? You say they would be dropped?
BV: They could look like a limb, a piece of a tree.
KS: They were camouflaged to fit in with the surroundings?
BV: Some of them would hang up in the trees. They were designed to hang up in the trees and drop a little line, looked like a piece of vine that had a microphone in it, basically acoustics a pad for that little seismic as well. The seismic might look like a ratty looking piece of another stump, but when it hit, it stuck in the ground.
KS: Did they have prongs on the bottom or something just to secure it?
BV: No, just a spike. The seismics had a spike. The photo ionization detectors would look like a rock. Of course, if you listened real close and had real good ears, they wouldn’t do anything until you interrogated them. Then they would sample the air. You had to basically call them up on that frequency and then they would sample the air. It would sniff to see what was there. Or what had been there. You could get a soft, strong signal or a weak signal. If you got a weak signal you knew where the other sensors of that type were around there, you would interrogate them on a different channel. And you could get a strong and a weak. O.K. It’s closer to this one so you could do this one over here. If this one’s weak go back over here. You could virtually tell where people were or where they had been. Interpreting that data you could tell basically was this section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail cold or was it hot. If it’s hot try something else down the line. Which way are they going? They went both ways on that thing. That’s what a lot of people don’t understand. You don’t care about who’s headed North generally because they’re carrying nothing but air in their pockets. The ones that are going South are the ones that you really would like to deal with. I got to where I was very good at guessing where they were going, where they were going to show up next.
KS: When you were trained for this type of work would you actually have mock up demonstration?
BV: Actually they had a computer program. Of course this only a little wide tape. That somebody, and I don’t know who, had thought of it. It worked quite well.
You could sit there and you could play with it. You could interpret data and you could say, they should be, knowing the terrain as well, they should be somewhere around this point. Then you would interrogate that set of sensors. If you didn’t get any data from that then between here and here and go from there.

KS: Now what would you do with the data?

BV: When we ascertained that people were heading South at a certain area of what we believed to be the cargo that we needed to interdict we had 8 forward firing .20 mm canons. We had a bomb bay you could basically park a pick up truck in and we had several hard points for bombs etc on the wings. Basically made a gun rerun down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Another little things that was quite nice that they’d come up with was called an intervalometer. If you weren’t addressing somebody specific you could address it to who it may concern and every so many yards down the trail you could drop a bomb of one type or another. You usually you set the intervalometer for a spread of 30-40 meters at a maximum. You didn’t just drive over and say whew, good-bye. You wanted everybody to enjoy your presents. The .20 mm in the wings were fixed and bore sited to converge right at 300 meters in front of the aircraft. We flew low and we were very slow.

KS: Was this the Neptune?

BV: This was the P-2V Neptune. It was the AP2V-H. There is one left in the entire world today and it sits in the Pima Air Museum in Tucson Arizona. Up in the nose bubble behind the intercommunitions box is BM Vannoy ATR2B712101. My name, my rank, my service number. I didn’t know one of them still existed in the world until 1977. Myself and Dr. Roger Ward, I used to work with him at Delta and Pine Land Company, went out to Phoenix and we stopped there. He said tell me what they’ve got out here. I think I ate about five pounds of dirt when my chin hit the ground. There it was. It was a little bit different. At that time, we were allowed to go up in it. I told the guy that was there I said I can show you where my name is on this one. Popped it up, there it was. It was definitely different, fun. That part was fun. I digress.

KS: Your training at Maryland, could you talk a little bit more about that? This was more electronics specific?

BV: It was more electronics operator. They set up anti submarine warfare and reconnaissance operations. At that time we were flying in a P-3A Orion. You could set
up much of the ground sensor stuff using things they had set out over a range that they
had, I believe it was in Florida, that they had set things on the ground to give you canned
information and you can do that. The antisubmarine warfare things were quite a bit
simpler and easier. At that time 30 knots under the water was super fast in a submarine.
We only had a few that would do it. The Russians had exactly three that could do it.
You knew who you were following by their own signature. Their submarines were a
little different.

KS: Did you ever detect any Russian submarines?

BV: As a matter of fact, we came up on two of their boomer boats that had
apparently strayed into one of our practice areas.

KS: Was this off the coast of Maryland?

BV: This was off the coast of Virginia. Myself and one other guy were getting
identical readings on our instruments. We said say we’ve got what shows to be a Russian
boomer here and had another flight taxiing down, and not in one of our training
assignments. He looked at it and said well, on second thought you do have it. They
whipped off a message to Norfolk. We stayed on station. It was just supposed to be
about for our training play. We stayed on station eight hours and they got a couple of
destroyers out there.

KS: How tense was the situation?

BV: Tense. I mean it was one of those things; they really didn’t know we were
there. I don’t think they really knew where they were until they came up and got a fix on
their position. They’re not the world’s best navigators or defiantly were not at that time.
They and Columbus just got lucky he found America. The destroyers came out there.
They knew the destroyers were there. They played games.

KS: What happened? They just ended up leaving the area?

BV: Well, they left the area basically. ‘You get out so far.’ Now that we know
you’re here, you’re now assigned this many at that time destroyers or patrol planes will
check on you every little bit. Since we know you’re here, we will watch you. We
couldn’t watch everything. If you knew it was there you could watch it.

KS: On the Orion how many people were on the crew?

BV: A normal crew on Orion, let me redo it, a pilot, co-pilot, navigator. The next
station back is your radio operator. The next station back is where I would have been on
the Orion, which was radar ECM. That’s on the Orion. The next station back would be
what they called a Julie Station. I knew how to operate that one. The next station behind
that is the tactical coordinator or officer. Then there were two other sensor operators past
that in the very back you had aviation ordinance men running BB stackers and he
selected the sonobuoys that were ejected or dropped out a chute. One thing about the
sonobuoys and the sensors, they were released from the aircraft through a retro chute and
they went out the back of the aircraft at the same speed you were going forward so they
fell straight down. That’s how you got your plotted maps.

KS: Were they accurate the drops were always pretty accurate?
BV: They had to be or you were just guessing about it, ok he’s down there
somewhere but I really don’t know where. They had to be accurate. If they weren’t
accurate. There was a signal you could send specifically on the channel and it would self-
destruct, sonobuoys no, but the ground sensors, yes. They were somewhat tamper proof.
If you wanted to play with it was going to catch fire. It might be magnesium the way it’s
burning, never give a sucker an even break, PT Barnham was on the right.

KS: You mentioned a Julie station? What is that?
BV: Yeah. It uses a normal acoustic sonobuoy and what you do is you drop the
equivalent of a hand grenade out the back and you have a noise source. It will bounce off
of a submarine. You will have the source of noise here on the plot. You know what that
is. You have two sonobuoys in the water. O.K. Which one gets the signal first? Then
you know where your signal came from. You can triangulate and you can have the
position of your fish in the water. It’s pretty easy if you’ve got more than two sonobuoys
out there. You’ve got it really pinpointed. At that point you make a low level pass and
you activate the anomaly detector and I ran that as well. You caught a change in the
Earth’s magnetic field from several coils. There’s a stinger on the tail of the P-3 and of
the normal P-2. That’s just four [eight] coils of copper wire. It detects a change in the
magnetic field of the Earth. It was called MAD for short, Magnetic Anomaly Detector.

KS: How new was this technology at the time, do you know?
BV: Second World War. Actually before then, but it came into its own in the
Second World War. It wasn’t brand new by any stretch of the imagination. They just
didn’t have it working real good. If you flew over and you called MAD, you dropped a
smoke canister. In a serious social endeavor you would come around and that’s where
you would drop you homing torpedo. The homing torpedo would go around and homes
in on the screws as the weakest point in the submarine. If it detonates back there you’ve
popped all the seals on the propeller shaft, usually have a little recording that goes along
with it, says see, does the Titanic mean anything to you [in Russian]. Something to those
effects because if you popped the seals on that and if he can’t get to the surface real quick
he ain’t going to get to the surface. That’s just the way that works. That’s the name of
the quote unquote game. Except it really wasn’t a game. Usually if you dropped the
smoke pots and then dropped a couple practice depth charges they would come up and
wave to you. They didn’t necessarily use all their fingers when they waved, but they
would come up. If they were unidentified in U.S. territorial waters the next thing coming
down would be a mini depth charge, which was about 25 pounds of TNT in a canister.
Very seldom was it ever used. I understand it was used more in the ‘50s, to make
believers out of submariners. In the ‘50s, if you couldn’t get an identification, there were
occasions where they dropped those mini depth charges. It would do considerable
submarine damage. It wouldn’t sink it, but it would blow out their sonar and quite often
blown out the pack in the periscope. When they weren’t quite neck deep in water, they
were at least ankle deep in water, then they would come up.

KS: On these training missions you mentioned you came in contact with the two
Russian submarines, did you encounter any other countries submarines during your
training?

BV: Once in a while you’d run into a Brit. That’s kind of like you run into a
racehorse or you run into a plow horse. This is a plow horse. They weren’t very good.
If you did run into one, if you dropped what they call a practice depth charge, about the
explosion power of a hand grenade, drop them three in a row, they will come up and they
will give you wave.

KS: Let you know who.

BV: In fact, one time we went on a training run over by Spain and we didn’t
interrogate a submarine or anything, but we tracked a French diesel lake runner. It was
actually an old U.S. fleet tackle. They didn’t have much. I don’t know whether they do
now or not. That was about the extent of our training. Of course, you can train on your
own station, train on somebody else’s and so forth. The flight line let’s see, there were a
minimum of ten people crew. Most of the time you had twelve to fourteen.

KS: Did you always fly with the same crew during training?

BV: No. They just mixed you up with those. In patrol planes and patrol
squadron they tried to keep you in crews, but it was virtually impossible because of turn
over of course.

KS: You mentioned that you had a training mission near Spain. Was that
common to do long flights like that?

BV: A regular patrol flight in P-3 Orion was 14-16 hours. You had a galley
where you could cook and things of this nature. If you were lucky usually you got a box
lunch. Boy wasn’t that great.

KS: How frequent would you do these long flights in training?

BV: In training, I flew two days and was off one. And that’s weekends and all.
Every two out of three days.

KS: Was your wife able to live on base with you during any of this time? How
does that work?

BV: Let’s see. Of course, my wife was living with her parents when I was in
boot camp. I picked her and our car up on my way to NATTC Memphis and we got
there. There was no base housing for E-2s or E-3s. We rented a little a dump outside the
base. At that time I was making less than 100 dollars a month and lucky to get it. She
had a basic allotment fro quarters check which was another 90something dollars a month,
that’s before taxes. So, we were living off base about three miles form base. There had
been a bunch of little cheap ratty housing built up there in the Second World War and
that’s basically what we were in. The first place we rented at 55 dollars a month. It was
roughly twice the size of this room. This room is a 10X14, roughly, that’s it. It had a
shower, a commode, a little kitchen sink, a two burner electric stove, no heater, no air
conditioner, a bedroom, a living room/dining room whatever. It was more or less
furnished with whatever they had decided to put in it. Usually four or five people that
were going roughly the same schools, had to be there at the same time would try and ride
together. As cheap as gasoline was then it still wasn’t cheap enough. When we went to
Norfolk we lived in what had at one time been an old tourist motel, right on the beach, which was pretty good. I had made 3rd class petty officer an E-4. I was making a little more money. I think we paid something like 65 dollars a month there. It was pretty decent. We enjoyed that. The beach was pleasant even though it was during the winter. In Patuxent River Maryland the closest thing we could find was 12 miles from the base and it was an old trailer house in a trailer park. That’s where we were. I forget what we had to pay there, but it was outrageous. She came along with me good-natured as she was, more or less anyway. In July of 1968, I arrived at Patrol Squadron Five NAS Jacksonville, Florida. That was to be my home squadron for quite a while.

KS: Was this more training?

BV: This was an actual fleet squadron. This was an actual fleet patrol squadron. Mostly anti-submarine warfare. Starting off, I want to say I was 3rd class petty officer aviation and electronics technician. I stayed in Jacksonville for a little over a month I guess it was. Then I was told I was going to be going on a deployment. Flew into Rota, Spain. I was told when I got to Rota Spain that I would be going on to another assignment. They sent us on what’s called open-ended TDY or TAD orders, Temporary Assigned Duties. There’s usually a clause in there that says and other positions as assigned, or any other destination as assigned. That way they don’t have to carry you on troop strength at any one place. They could do that up to as I understand it 120 days. You’re just out there. Wound up I went from Rota, Spain we flew into Wheelus Air Force Base in Libya at that time. We went from Libya I think somewhere in South Africa, then to India, then to Thailand and to Cam Ranh Bay.

KS: When you were in Spain did they say, you’re going to Vietnam, or did they just say you’re going to Libya or India?

BV: Actually they said, you’re going to wind up going to a detachment in Cam Ranh Bay for a while.

KS: Was your wife still in Florida at this point?

BV: My wife was in Florida at that time. We had rented a trailer house outside of Jacksonville, which was about 18 miles from the base and that’s about as close as you could get. If you were lucky you could get closer. If you owned something you could get closer. It was hard to get anything rental in close to NAS Jacksonville. At any rate, I
went off to that. She stayed in Florida. I got to Cam Ranh Bay and found myself with a bunch of other people who were some what baffled as what in the heck are we doing here? Here sits a bunch of old AP2VH aircraft. Not all of them were identical. Some of them weren’t really set up for area of gun runs or bombing or anything else. Several of them were set up for gunning and carrying bombs things of this nature. We were on the northwest end of the Taxiway at Cam Ranh Bay. That’s why I’ve got these maps here I needed to study. Let me see if I can find anything on it. We were actually living in eight foot by eight foot by sixteen-foot Connex boxes buried in the sand. There were usually three to four people in each one of the Connex boxes. We did our aircraft maintenance, things of this nature on loading, in space revetments basically in the open. We had to provide our own security. As I mentioned before my automatic weapons card got me into a world of trouble. I had the only one in the squadron. Actually it was kind of a miss-matched deal. In the Navy if you’re not qualified with it, they’re not going to issue it to you. If you’re not qualified to use a weapon they’re going to give you a nightstick and that’s it. I had shot on the pistol team with a Marine Master Sergeant at NATTC Memphis. He just happened to be over at the Marine Armory. Marine/Navy Armory at Cam Ranh Bay. I talked to him and I begged and I pleaded, promised him my three oldest daughters. Whatever, whatever it took and I got us a bunch of pump shotguns and automatic shot guns and a whole world of double ought buckshot. I got our people qualified on the shotgun. It was a chore and we provided our own security.

KS: If I could back up just a minute, this was 1968 when you arrived at Cam Ranh Bay? What month do you recall?

BV: It was in September as I recall it that we got there. Starting in good on the long side.

KS: How close had you been following for instance Tet and other developments?

BV: Tet.

KS: Before you arrived in Vietnam?

BV: We had a pretty good idea what went on at Tet. I never watched a lot of TV, never had time to watch TV. The little base papers now and again would say well this group or that group or the other group is engaged currently in this area or that area of Vietnam. Or this squadron was there and what happened. What I did follow was you
know all this stuff is coming down from the North; it looks like we could stop that.

However, we were kind of blessed with Uncle Lyndon, one of my least favorite Texans. But at any rate we got there, I say we, it was myself and one other person from my squadron were the only ones that went there. Some of the others went to some other places. We got there and I found out I was going to be an electronics operator.

Operating equipment I was relatively familiar with. I found out I would have the same duties, but not the pay, responsibilities but not the pay of a W-1. The aircraft when we arrived were still marked VAH, which is heavy attack squadron 21. Some of the people that were there, as I understood it, were quote part of VAH 21. I have since found out that VAH 21 was decommissioned in June of ’68, gee, that’s a few months ago. Here’s still the same planes, still flying the same mission. Looking back you kind of wonder about it because we had a couple pilots that looked like they were mess cooks when Noah took the ark out. They were old. They looked to be 60 odd years old, if they were a day. You were encouraged to say, this is pappy, this is so and so. You were discouraged in striking up any real lasting type friendships. Just hi, how are you. Go about your business. You were rotated from one plane to the next plane to the next plane. You did your maintenance. You mounted your guard. I got into setting up parts of the mine field because when they were arming bombs I was always choosing the fuse that I thought was appropriate. It kind of intrigued one of our aviation ordnance people. He was an old timer too. He said why did you choose that fuse? I explained to him why I wanted that one. He said ok that’s a good thought. He took me out and showed me the ropes of the minefields. We were responsible for maintaining our own. This was for our perimeter defense. Rule one was, if you set out a mine, booby trap it. If they want to try and remove it and turn it around they will get the full benefit. That’s what you’ve got to do. Never did have anybody get through my minefield. To my knowledge it should still be there. I know this much, the Russians built a fence around it when they were up at Cam Ranh Bay.

KS: What were your first impressions when you arrived at Cam Ranh Bay?

When you first stepped off the plane in Vietnam?

BV: It was not a good impression. I will curb my tongue just a little bit. What in the hell have I got into, basically? It was hot. It stank! I was dirty, I stank! I had
eaten a box lunch on that plane that stank thoroughly. Here I am three days in to this
flight suit and I’m standing in the big middle of a piece of concrete apron in Cam Ranh
Bay. I asked a question, gosh I don’t know. It was kind of a, nobody seems to be
knowing what’s going on. Finally, came to the conclusion that number one, I didn’t
know if there was a plane going back to the real live world. Number two, I probably
wouldn’t be going anywhere that I wanted to go for a while. Number three, it might be a
real good idea to get serious about this social endeavor. At the time, I had on my flight
gear, my survival vest, things of this nature. In my survival vest of course you’ve got
your flotation stuff and what have you. You could add and delete some items. I had
added a .45 Colt. It was my personal .45 Colt. I talked with some of the people around
there. They wouldn’t give you a whole lot of information about what was going on. Just
wait until the big dog gets here. When the big dog finally got there, they kind of squared
me away. I got a little bit better idea of what I would be doing and what I would not be
doing. All mail in going, incoming, outgoing went through the squadron offices. You
turned it in unsealed. I’m guessing some of it got censored. I know some of it never got
to my wife.

KS: Is that standard practice for all of the branches of the Armed Forces, do you
know?

BV: Not to my knowledge. I don’t think so. Most of the time as I understood it,
most people just got to write free if they want to put a stamp on it and go from there.
What did get to my wife came through the squadron that was deployed and in North
Spain, so much for that. We were advised that number one, we would tell nobody what
we were doing. We would tell nobody what we were flying. We would tell nobody
where we were flying. We would tell nobody what we dropped and where we dropped it.
If you meet somebody over here you know it’s hi, how are you? I’m just passing
through. That’s the way that was. They were very adamant about it. Number two you
will not wear dog tags, you will not have tattoos. You will not have a nametag on your
flight suit. You will leave any rings, watches, wallets, etc. at the orderly hut when you go
fly. You may take anything else that you want to in your flight kit. The one thing you’ve
got to do is you leave your old one here. We will give you a new one. It was unmarked.

KS: Was this in case you were shot down?
BV: I guess.

KS: Did they ever explain why?

BV: They didn’t explain a lot of things. Generally speaking it was not considered polite or militarily correct to say why. That’s a good way to get to go peel potatoes if you had potatoes. That evening at about 9:00 at night I started doing a pre-flight on one of these airplanes. I flew my first time that night. It was definitely different.

KS: Did they assign you to a specific unit or was all this kept secret?

BV: I had assumed for years that it was Heavy Attack Squadron 21. After a careful perusal in the text. I don’t know what its real designation was in life. I know they had then Navy aircraft. I knew some crew were Navy. There were some of the crew I had grave doubts about what they were. I even think a couple of them were Army or very possibly Army. Army people act different than Navy people. They really do. They’ve got different mannerisms, different terminology, things like that. Some of them I think were actually too damned old to be in the Army or the Navy. I don’t know what their function in life was other than the fact they could really fly that thing. They were good pilots. We had a bunch of fairly young, impressed me as mid-range officers. I thought they were officers, I don’t know, that were good tactical coordinators. If you came up with something you said I think, they’d let you go ahead and finish what your thought was instead of telling you no, we’re going to do this, we’re going to do that. They would take your input, they would assess it. They’d say good, run it. Then they’d say well, how about we check this, then we’ll see about that. It got me after about four flights if I said I thought something I generally got a good, right. I would vector in there for altitude. We’d arm up the switches, rack up the wing and roll in for a run. Funny thing, you’ve probably never heard of a jet engine with a muffler have you?

KS: No.

BV: They exist. You’ve probably never heard of an airplane with a muffler generally, they too exist. This was the original stealth bomber. It had a coating about half to three quarters of an inch think of what they call anechoic paint, it was kind of spongy. Had little cells in it. You got a very, very weak grade of a print. In those days when my computer assisted augmentation of radar, you didn’t take it back. They
couldn’t hear you. One thing a muffler on a jet engine does, it diffuses the heat, hard to
pick you up on the infrared. They can’t paint you on radar; they don’t know what’s
happening until everything comes down on them. The only thing we did have on the
right hand wing, the starboard wing, there was a large carbonate arch searchlight. When
you made your run you had that carbonate arc searchlight lit off. That’s the hottest point
of your plane.

KS: This was the AP2VA?

BV: Yeah. AP2H. In fact there may be a photograph of it in there, the last
surviving. It’s hot, it’s real hot. At that time they had to come up with flares for heat
seeking missiles, magnesium flares to be ejected. At least they didn’t have them on those
planes. They may have on F-4s and the fancy ones, they didn’t have [them on our
planes]. That’s the hottest point. There is no fuel tank in that area. It’s just out there on
the end of the wing. So, if they fire a little heat-seeking missile at you, it hit that, or
detonated by it or may have messed up your jet engine out there a little bit. It’s a lot
better than it hitting the jet engine or hitting the recip engine and what have you. It’s not
exactly a real kill shot. It can be, but if you’ve got a good pilot it’s not. Generally once
we found where they were going we had our bomb loads worked out pretty well. After a
time, I found that in my estimation there was an old bomb that had been developed in the
‘30s that worked wonderful. It was called a parafrag. We could carry a boxcar load of it.
It looked like an old pineapple grenade that had gown to be about three feet long and
about four to six inches in diameter. It had two fuses one on the nose and one on the tail.
They were both contact fuses, if it hit something it went bang. Seldom did I see one that
failed to go bang. With a little parachute on it to swing down nice and slow, you were
out of area when it did go bang. They work real good against trucks, people, bicycles
whatever they had running up and down their grassy lanes. They weren’t real bad about
elephants either. I usually flew at least every other night. Sometimes I flew as many as
eight night in a row. I sat right up in the nose of the plane in a little glass bubble.
Sometimes they would put another seat [up there], you had a track up there that your seat
was on and you could have somebody else up there with you that you could train on the
instrumentation. One of the little interesting things about the P-2V Neptune to get from
the nose back to anything else, you had to crawl through a little tunnel beside the nose
wheel and up in front of the flight engineer. You had to reach up and slap him on the
face [or knee] so he could move his seat back and you could get out for whatever
purpose. It’s not exactly one of the most friendly things in the world to ride in. You had
to do that to go get your parachute because it wasn’t down there with you. You couldn’t
get it through that tunnel. It’s one of those things that makes you say bad words about
Mr. Lockheed’s designers. There’s not really enough room for two people with two
parachutes on. You could get somebody else in there and train them on the equipment. I
was somewhat of a coward. The seats we had some composite armor on the back and on
the bottom. It’s basically built up fiberglass. I misappropriated three helicopter chicken
plates. They were about this thick, one of them went to the back of the seat, one of them
went to the bottom of the seat, one of them I wore. In addition I wore my flak jacket on
every flight. I always wore my flight helmet. A lot of people take their flight helmet off
and just have their radio headset. I had every indication that those people down there
would shoot at me. I wanted as much between me and them as possible. Contrary to
everybody’s opinion, they didn’t always miss. John Wayne was an optimist.

KS: I have to ask you, you mentioned early on about living on the base that you
lived in Connex boxes?

BV: Buried in the sand.

KS: Was that unusual?

BV: As I understand it, yes. I had found out in the last couple of years that when
VAH 21 was originally there, they had barracks. Wooden barracks. Generally the
Marines and the Army were the ones that dug into the ground. The Navy generally didn’t
do it. You do understand what a Connex box is?

KS: Yes.

BV: These were set in the ground and you had about three feet of dirt and other
sort of junk on top of them. It was actually just sand. They weren’t too bad other than
you didn’t have any air movement. If it rained a whole bunch, the water got about four
inches deep in the bottom of it. I dispensed with a cot rather early on and I slung a
hammock. There’s worse things to live in. The bugs will run all over you and the mice
and rats were horrible. You had to make do as good as you could. As far as uniforms, I
wound up having five flight suits. That’s all I wore. Flight suit, socks, flight boots.
KS: Did they issue those to you once you had already arrived?

BV: I had three flight suits when I got there. They took those up and they gave me five unmarked flight suits. It was casual to the obvious observer that yes, these are U.S. flight suits, but they didn’t have any markings. Flight boots, tags were out of them. Flight helmets no tags. You could put anything on your flight helmet you wanted to as long as it did not identify you as being from the United States.

KS: You were specifically told, you do not do this.

BV: You do not do that. It was a funny thing I carried reloaded .45 ammunition with me because I had come to depend on it and I knew it would go bang. Myself and one of these gentlemen that I assume was an officer kind of got into it one day because these were hollow points. I had reloaded them using military brass that said Remington Army’s (RAGG) 1966 on it. He said you can’t carry that. I said why? It’s got a military head stamp. I said it’s a reload. You can’t carry it. I had to sit down and reload. I had to pull the bullets out of those shells and the powder and so forth. I don’t know where he got the slick based .45 ball ammunition, but it was not marked, pulled the bullets out of them, reloaded the hollow points the way I wanted. It was just the way it was. I almost said to him, do you want me to grind this Made In USA off this Colt? I didn’t.

KS: What about the food on base, what was that like?

BV: That was a very sore spot for me to this day. You didn’t get much. On TAD orders you cannot get into a Navy chow hall. They didn’t feed much of anything. We had all the rice we could steal from the Vietnamese and anything else we could rustle up. By the same token our pay records, were held at our home squadron.

KS: In Spain or Florida?

BV: Or wherever.

BV: Guess what? You couldn’t get a hold of the money. You were forced to doing as best you could and they would give you flight lunches. Either non-prepared flight lunches or box lunches. Non-prepared was the best because it was frozen meat, frozen vegetables. You could do something with that. Occasionally you would have to make room to here or there or some other place and some body would report some American soldiers appropriated a pig or something like that. By the same token, hand grenades were quite useful for fishing at Cam Ranh Bay. That’s where we all fish.
get the U.S. aid rice. It was always stacked up over there around the Vietnamese stuff. Occasionally you would find where the Vietnamese had been given C-rations or K-rations. Instead of being marked with a black C for commissary stores we’d thought the red C meant the same thing, that’s condemned rations, be careful which can you open. It was a good deal. For water we had one basically hose bib. There was one-inch hose bib. For a shower we had two 55-gallon drums set up. That was for everybody. I’m sure you’re familiar with the other bathroom arrangements. That’s what you had.

KS: So, you were separate from the other Navy personnel, is that right?
BV: That’s correct. In addition, you did not have a specific pass to come into that area. I don’t care who you were; you didn’t come in there.

KS: Did you ever talk amongst the other guys like what was going on? Why all this secrecy?
BV: That was discouraged. You know you might say hey boy, that worked out good last night didn’t it. Got some wonderful secondaries, which meant whatever you had dropped on the ground, it contributed to the delinquency of those headed south. That was about it. Of course if you were talking about electronics we’ll use here’s a tip on this specific part, this specific plane. Because they were all a little bit different. One of them specifically I hated flying on it. It had a bunch of garbage in the bomb bag wherein they could fire .40mm grenades straight down. I think Rube Goldberg had been in charge of designing that. I avoided flying on it at any cost.

KS: Did you ever discuss you living conditions or why you weren’t getting regular food with the other people you were with? Or like you said, you just didn’t talk about that?
BV: If there was somebody there you relatively trusted and you thought there was an odd chance you could get a hold of this one six by six truck that we used to haul bombs around and so forth. You say what do you think the chances are of going and finding a pig? Or going and do this or doing the other? If they were agreeable you went about recruiting probably two others. When you went to do these things, you went very well armed. That discourages a great deal of extraneous discussion on the parts of people that don’t need to know. I don’t know who did it, but they had some little old papers printed up. It supposedly said in Vietnamese you can present this for payment of
whatever at the Province headquarters whatever that was, around Cam Ranh Bay. I don’t even know.

KS: This was issued to you?

BV: No. I think somebody made it up on the sly. It worked well enough; it seemed to pass by these people. That worked pretty good.

KS: When you first arrived were you briefed at all about Vietnamese culture or if you should leave the base?

BV: We were discouraged from leaving the area, let alone the base. We were told in no uncertain terms that if something happens and you get in trouble in town, we will come get you but you will not enjoy it. That was the last of that. We didn’t have an ID. Your ID is sitting down there in the squadron office. You had to give them ID cards, they had it and we didn’t. I was there until, gee whiz, it was sometime after Thanksgiving. I flew back the same route that I had taken. The first time I was there, I got my first air medal. Now, an air medal denotes twelve strike sorties. If you have a combat V with it that means twelve times you were fired on and returned fire. That was actually twelve real live honest to goodness rocket I dropped on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That encompassed areas of North, South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

KS: Speaking earlier about the first flight that you had, were you briefed before each flight? This is where you’re flying over; this is what you’re doing? How did that work?

BV: It went like this at such and such; so-and so time you will depart the area, fly on a course, which was basically due east. You’d fly at 084 degrees I believe it was until this point, which was over a destroyer, which was a checkpoint. We maintained radio silence. The destroyer broadcast a signal, a homing beacon. At which time you will fly due north until you reach this other destroyer at which time you will turn to heading 270° whatever. You will cross the coastline at approximately this position. In the mean time, you were navigating by the stars, TACAN, LORAN. Once in a great while they’d have a trail watcher set up that had a homing beacon. As I understand it that was green beanies and occasionally Marine Recon.

KS: So, an actual person based along the trail?

BV: Actual person who was hiding in the brush telling us that if this beacon
comes up, this frequency you will interrogate on this frequency which he was supposed
to be listening to. You will get this answer. Any other answer you bomb that because e
has been captured, the equipment has been compromised. There is somebody there
operating it and we don’t want them to do that. One time we did that that was my second
tour.

KS: Were you shot at quite frequently? Did you receive fire?
BV: Oh, absolutely. If you were making a run down there, I will say this for
those people they were tenacious. They didn’t give up. If you were making a run on
them, they were going to do their best to blow you out of the air. You consistently took
small arms hits in the airplane.

KS: What altitude did you fly at?
BV: We flew normally at about 15-20,000 feet while waiting to interrogate. It
was not a big problem. The aircraft was slow. Remember this was two piston engines
and two jet engines. When we were making up our minds, where to start and what have
you and you could see some lights on down there. They weren’t bright, but they were
there. If you had forward looking infrared you could see it real good. You’d make up
your mind, which was the best target. You throttle your engines back a little; very, very
quiet and you’d go into a long shallow dive. You’d start you gunnery at about 100 feet
altitude. That’s a radar altimeter. You waited until you got down to about 300 feet
before you turned your radar altimeter on. You didn’t want any kind of electronic
emissions. You were quiet. It’s all passing. The interrogation signals for these
sonobuoys [channels] it sounded like radio spike. Just static. That’s all it sounds like.
They’re low power emissions anyway. You start your run at about 100 feet. You’ve
already got everything setup on your intervalometer as to what you want to drop first,
depending on what you’re looking at. Your gunnery run, you’ve got 600 rounds per gun.
600X8. That’s 4,800 rounds. When you’ve got two guns sitting in the tail, your tail
gunner can do what he wishes. You make one fairly swift run down in the line of
whatever you’re going to bomb or shoot up. When you hit what you call your initial
point you start your [intervalometer], you hit the go button. It starts dropping coordinates
at a set sequence. The box itself, sub a sub, a sub chooses whatever ordnance you have
set into at that sequence. If you think you have people in one area it’s going to drop
parafrags or CBUs. If you think you have trucks, it’s going to drop heavier parafrags
250s, 500 or 750 pound bombs whatever.

KS: Now, would you determine if it was people or it was trucks or would you
have computers to do that?

BV: No. You did not have computers, you interpreted the data that you were
getting from your own ground sensors.

KS: Would you radio that too?

BV: You made the decision on the aircraft. You would talk to the person that I
would call a tactical coordinator. You say well, I believe we have this in this element,
this in this element this is the element, and so forth. Between you, you would figure out
about what you thought you out to drop and where. The 20 millimeters were always
loaded. Everything was high explosive incendiary [HEI]. You want to poke a hole in it
and set it on fire. Very, very seldom were there any tracked vehicles going up and down
the trail other that the ZZU23. Which is like a light tank with a four 23 mm cannon on it.
Most of the time those were radar aimed. You knew where they were. They’d be
sweeping and searching. Bless you my son go and sin no more you get a 750 [pound
bomb]. If you did it just right you would hit either that specific vehicle or close enough
to turn it up on its top.

KS: Would you have visual confirmation that yes, you did hit your target? How
could you verify?

BV: Usually that was done by what’s called an RA5C vigilante off of an aircraft
carrier. They did the bomb damage assessments. The made one real fast, fast, fast run,
took their pictures and got out of dodge. They were smarter than they looked. They were
quite fast until the SR71 came along, nobody was faster.

KS: You mentioned small arms fire was that the only threat or were there
different kinds of weapons that you had to worry about?

BV: I mentioned the searchlight on the wing; we had eight foot of it blown off at
one time. It was a small heat seeking missile shoulder fired and they were in love with it.
If it was too close to you, if you were just passing over, it missed you. I didn’t have time
to lock on the heat seeker. Quite often that’s what happened. In fact most often. They
tried to fire it straight up or they tried to fire it behind you. It didn’t work. Small arms
and 12.7 mm machine guns quite often. That can ruin your whole day. Once in a while you get somebody on the ground there that’s real, real good. They wasted a lot of people when the put them in the wrong places and got caught. That’s their problem, not mine. Usually some of the trucks would have a machine gun. Most did not, some did. It was usually a 12.7 mm. They’re equivalent of our .50 caliber Browning basically. A little different design but works quite as well. Most of it was small arms. Occasionally 37 mm and by the time they got to firing at us we were gone. As you look at the cross section of P-2 from the rear, well gee there’s not a hell of a lot to shoot at there George. We did have a couple of hits in the flaps one time. Had a couple of flaps that would not go down.

KS: Did you fly at night or during the day or both?

BV: Almost always at night. Once in a great while would you fly during the day, usually that was in South Vietnam? Then you were visual. They could see you. At night I hated a full moon, because it’d silhouette you just bigger than anything. You got to remember this, there’s no real light pollution in that area. The night sky is just as black as a coalmine. If I’m looking for little white dots, gee that looks like an area like a T that doesn’t have any white dots. Let’s shoot at that and they would.

KS: How long were you missions usually? How many hours would they last?

BV: It would depend on what intelligence you could get off the ground. Normally you took off at about midnight. You whiz banged around a lot of time until about usually not later than 4:00 in the morning. I say usually about midnight [to 3am]. As the fall months were coming up you would take off early depending on where you were. If you got it good and dark directly you’d hear a P2 fired up. It was always one. One of these P2s doing it. You had another one sitting back here ready to go if you had to abort the flight. There was just one in the air. Number one, the thing of it is they couldn’t see you and hear you and catch you on radar from the ground, they couldn’t do it from the air either. It’s a good thing not to have too many people right in you area. When we got finished with our run you head for the coast due east. Closest water. If you had hung ordnance and you were over what was considered a free fire zone on North Vietnam or Laos or Cambodia, you dumped it. Wave good-bye to it it’s going to go the ground. It’s going to go down live.

KS: So you would never return to base with any?
BV: No. You did not. If something went haywire where you couldn’t get rid of hung ordnance or something you were really worried about it. You figured when you landed it was going to fall down. Some of it as soon as the arming wire came out of it, it’s armed [parafrag]. Remember you’re at 100 feet. That little propeller doesn’t have to turn much. In fact, about 6 revolutions, it’s armed on some of the newer fuses. On parafrags the wire comes out, it’s on. Don’t hit that fuse. You get four pounds of pressure on the fuse be real quick at saying your rosary because it’s going to go down. I’ve seen more than a few fuse failures on the parafrag. When those fuses failed they picked it up and started working on it, but the tail fuse didn’t. They figured they had found them a prize. Maybe it was a surprise because we listened to them on acoustic. We made a recording of it. We got translation. Found this one and it’s a dud. Wonderful! Take the fuses out and salvage the explosive. Start with the nose fuse. Here it goes. Nothing happened. Ah, that is so fine. Said ha, now we start with the tail fuse. That’s when we got the bang on it. By that time they had a circle of their friends around them. We were fortunate.

KS: Is that common to pick up human voice?

BV: You would always make a recording.

KS: You would always make a recording.

BV: When we picked it up they have an Akai reel-to-reel tape recorder. If you got human voices it went on there, just noise on a waterfall. If you started picking up human voices you hit a record switch. You could get intelligence from what they were yacking about. Oh, it’s so horrible up hold all the B-52 damage. Lyndon is a so and so and we’d applaud naturally.

KS: You mentioned you had several shortened tours in Vietnam? How long was this first one?

BV: I did. The first one was from September to toward the end of November. First part of September into November. I came back the way I had gone. In the mean time while we were on the ground we had people trying to infiltrate us.

KS: Your base at Cam Ranh Bay?

BV: Yeah. People lobbing in mortar rounds. They intended to see what they could do about us. We were thorn somewhat in their side. I went back the same way I
had come with the exception of I flew in to the island of Crete. We had a problem with
the airplane. We had a small detachment at Shonda Bay, Crete. While we were there
working on the airplane there were two occurrences that were kind of semi-spectacular.
The Greek Air Force had a training field there. They were putting on an aerobatics show.
They flew one of their bright, shiny semi-new F-86s right into the ground. We had to
help them go pick up the parts, parts, parts, parts, which we did not enjoy. Two days
later they had a carrier on board delivery aircraft and I forget which aircraft carrier it
came off of. [Later remembers name of aircraft carrier is The Wasp, Nov. 15, 1968]
They flew in there to pick up some stuff. They flew out and it was foggy and they flew
into a mountain. We had to go pick up the parts, parts, parts there. It got to where it was
real old. After several days we flew into Rota, Spain and two days later we flew back to
Jacksonville, Florida. When I got there I found out my wife had moved my trailer out.

KS: This is disk two with Bill Vannoy. We were talking about you had
mentioned your wife had moved in Jacksonville?
BV: Yes. She had moved in closer to Jacksonville wasn’t quite as far away from
the base. I got some friends to run me out in the area. We finally found out where she
was. She was surprised to see me. She hadn’t had any mail for the better part of the
week. I hadn’t had any mail for three weeks. At any rate I was glad to be somewhere
besides where I had been. Of course, we went on with the squadron training. About
three of four weeks later they sent me to some schools at different places, back to
Petuxent River, Maryland for some specific equipment schools. Then we went to what’s
called Springboard which is an exercise held in Puerto Rico in the spring of the year.
Made second-class petty officer at that time, which is E-5. About that time we learned
that we were expecting our number one son. Let’s see I’m trying to think when it was
they sent me back. Well, at any rate the squadron deployed to Kendley Air Force Base.
Which was Kendley Air Force Base at that time in Bermuda. When I arrived in Bermuda
I was immediately told that I would be going on to do the same thing I had done before at
Cam Ranh Bay. This time I was the only one out of the squadron to go.
KS: What month was this?
BV: I’m going to say it was either May or June of 1969. We had been back in
Jacksonville about six months, half of which I had been gone for training. I arrived back
in Cam Ranh Bay and did basically the same thing, different people this time, lots of
different people. I was put in charge of training several people to operate the equipment
that I operated. Whenever I flew, they flew with me. Several significant things happened
during this time, got the second Air Medal with Combat V. Several times we had people
try to infiltrate us. Whether or not they were South Vietnamese or what I don’t know.
Some of them had South Vietnamese uniforms on. However, they didn’t give the proper
answers and they were treated accordingly. That’s just the way life is sometimes. One
specific thing I remember is three people tried to go in through our minefield. Two of
them set off mines; the third one was a kid. I figured maybe at the most fourteen years
old. He was smarter than he looked; he just laid there until morning. I went out and got
him and washed him off with a water hose he needed it rather badly. I called up
operations and said what do you want me to do because I got a kid here prisoner. He said
what do you mean? I said we got infiltrated and two of them died and this one’s alive. I
said he’s not hurt just scared to death. He said what a minute we’ll send Marvin the
ARVN. Marvin shows up. Here’s this properly starched and impressive DiWie, which is
a lieutenant and two ARVN sergeants. Polished boots and polished helmets and what
have you with a little M-1 carbine. They meet us up there where that’s as far as they can
go. We were a little short on water at the time so I hadn’t really taken a shower and I
may have been a little offensive. I had absolutely no reason to handcuff the kid, didn’t
have any handcuffs anyway. I just took him out there. He was still in what clothes he
had and they were wet. We fed him a little bit of rice. Took him out there and handed
him over. Thank you very much. They commenced beating on him with these M-1
carbines. We’re talking serious beating. You could hear the bones break. One guy I had
known from before had gone out there with me. I’m not a nice person in some ways. I
was fixing to dust all of them with the 12-gauge shotgun, which would have been
terminal. He saw what I was fixing to do and he said no Bill don’t do it. He said it ain’t
worth it. Here, he said I don’t know how we can make it look like an accident. I had
picked up enough Pidgin Vietnamese to call the man anything but a Vietnamese in very
foul terms. I told him to get in his jeep, his prisoner and his minions of doom out of my
sight before I killed them all three. And they did. That’s one thing I really wish would
have never happened. If I’d used my head. If I had thought for an instant they were
going to treat that kid that way, I’d have done one of two things. If he’d been belligerent
I would have shot him. Acting the way he was I should have just let him go back in the
brush. I didn’t.

KS: Was that standard procedure to call?

BV: I’d never captured one alive. I mean most of the time we’re talking serious
belligerent social endeavors. Gosh, what do you do? It was a completely new one for
everybody around there. There was nobody of any greater authority around there at that
time that I knew of for sure. So, I said what do I need to do.

KS: Did you have much contact with ARVN soldiers?

BV: No. I can remember about five of them that had ARVN uniforms on when
they got dusted off. I don’t really care what uniform you’ve got on if you’re coming up
into an area that you’re not authorized to be in if you don’t didi mao lin right now you’re
in trouble. Especially if you break into a run toward me. You’re just in a real big hurry
to get to the next life. Like I said, I looked like a well-armed teddy bear. I was drinking
about five gallons of water a day and keeping a lot of it. I carried a pump shotgun. I
carried an M-3 grease gun and I carried a .45. I looked like a dang Mexican Bandito.
That’s the way it is.

KS: Did you have many civilians on base? Vietnamese civilians at Cam Ranh
Bay?

BV: Not where we were. We were away from most everybody else. I had a pair
of old hand powered hair clippers and I gave people haircuts. That was cheap enough.
Our hospital corps man had high graded surgical soap of course. He was passed master
of slight of hand apparently. For which we were quite grateful. We didn’t have money
for anything.

SM: You found yourself in the same conditions as you had been in the first?

BV: Exactly. I did think to bring along a little money this time. Not much
because I didn’t have much. I was still making, my paycheck was under 200 a month and
my wife still got basically quarters. Most everything I made was going back to her. At
any rate that happened we had several flights, got shot up several times. I got hit with a
piece of shrapnel. It went through my flak jacket up in my left chest. The same hospital
Corps man big, skinny black guy named Bones, I was laid back against the mount on the
P-2 and I thought I’m dead because it stank, it’s hot. That’s why I was looking at the
branding iron pictures. I can relate to that. It stank, it’s hot. Reach over there and at
night, blood’s black. This ruins your whole day. It scares you. When you’re about 18,
19, 20 etc. you are bullet proof until further noted otherwise. This well and truly proved
otherwise. He gets over there and he’s tinkering around under a red light. I guess he
could read my mind he said no man you ain’t about to die, I ain’t going to let you yet. He
just kept rattling on. He pulls out the chunk, a piece of mortar round, lays it on the
ground, he deadened it. I was amazed. I thought gee, you’re a nice guy after all.

KS: Is this still in the plane?
BV: No, it was on the ground.
KS: Did you go back to the base or did you have to land?
BV: No. It was on the ground at the base. We’d had a mortar attack. This one
landed pretty close. I’ve got a bunch of little shrapnel in my arms and hands and what
have you. That chunk went in through the flak jacket. That’s what I said. I thought this
something or other was bullet proof. He said not quite. He cut it up and made it pretty
and stitched it right. Painted it with betodyne, he said remember you owe me beer. I did
pay. That was different. Then in August, well things got a little different in August. We
were going down Uncle Ho’s Trail and we just got started and I do mean just started on
the run. I can vividly remember here comes this little white light and it gets bigger.
About the time I think what the hell is this it hits the starboard reciprocating engine in
this airplane. It causes that wing to fall back along the fuselage. I have a trainee with me
up front in the other chair. He’s in front of me. Always put something between you and
where the fire’s coming from. I figured he was much more expendable than me. I am
fond of myself. At any rate it folds up along the fuselage. We hit the ground rapidly and
the nose section breaks off and goes skidding through the brush. All in all, a good deal
because the rest of the plane is on fire and trying to blow itself completely to pieces and
succeeding. When we come to a stop and halt in the mud and crud, dirt, the rocks, the
trees, the brush. My seats all the way back against the door. Remember I told you
there’s a tunnel? There’s a door to the tunnel. It opens toward the front [nose] the
aircraft. This kid is in his seat upside down on top of me. By my little red light I could
see that he was quite dead. I had appropriated a survival radio from a Marine attack
squadron. I had it out and I turned it on and I gave my call sign, my specific call sign.

Each person had a specific I was sheer eight. I gave my identity saying all that. I think I reached, I think an Air Force surveillance point [aircraft]. I let them know basically where I was. I said triangulate if you can. I’m here now. I’m alive. Our little brown brothers are coming around. If I come out up in the morning if I say that I’m doing wonderful don’t come get me.

KS: Could you see people?

BV: Yeah. They were coming up. There was a lot of light from the fire of the plane. I shut down the radio and I tried to play dead. I guess I succeeded. I got a bunch of cuts in my head. My flight helmet as broken in about 40 pieces. Like I say his chair had come loose and he rattled around in there like a BB in a boxcar. That’s not good. The plexiglass on the front of that stuff is about this thick. It was cracked but it wasn’t broken out. I don’t understand why to this day. It may have been broken at the bottom where there was some dirt coming in. There was nothing you could reach in or anything like that. There were several Vietnamese standing around having a good time smoking a cigarette. I think they were saying something about hey we shot that job down. They decided to stick an SKS carbine in one of the cracks, ripped off magazines at least 10 rounds that ricocheted around in there. Most of it hit this other guy. Fortunately it couldn’t hurt him anymore. A couple of them grazed me, but that’s all. Then they went to the back and tried to open this door. The nose wheel was kind of in the way, not real bad, but they couldn’t get past my seat. They could open it about this far [one inch].

That’s as much as they could do. They couldn’t find a way to get to open it any further. They couldn’t bend it. It was fairly strong. They emptied magazine, I don’t know if it was SKS or [AK] 47 or what, but they hit the back of my seat. It feels like somebody’s hitting you in the back about as hard as they can with a ball beam hammer. I found that the chicken plate was well advised because the points of the bullets had gone into the chicken plate. If I hadn’t had the chicken plate they might have gone through and hurt me. After a while the amusement subsided. They couldn’t get a grenade in through any of the cracks, they tried. One of them who I think he was in charge told them there’s no use wasting a grenade on this. These people are obviously dead we got more fish to fry.

KS: Were they speaking Vietnamese?
BV: Yes, Vietnamese.

BV: Could you understand a little bit?

BV: I didn’t understand much except what they called me. At the moment I couldn’t reciprocate because there was a whole lot more of them than there was of me.

KS: There were no survivors at all on the plane?

BV: After they went away I had what’s called a shroud cutter. It’s a hooked blade on your survival knife. I cut this guys harness lose. I cut mine lose because I couldn’t get mine undone either. It had jammed. I moved his seat away where I could try to be as quiet as I could, found the barrel of my shotgun was bent. This was not a good thing. I got it to where I could get out that door. The sun just coming up and over the hill comes an old H-34. It was one that they had retro fitted with turbine engines. I turned on the survival radio and I had slowly reported in my ear. They came up calling me. Saying how are things on the ground? I said they’re real nasty. He said ok where are you at? I told him he said well pop smoke. I said I ain’t got no smoke thank you. I don’t carry no smoke in this airplane. I said you can see where the main part burned. He said yeah I see it. I said I’m about 75 meters south of there. I said you start to set down I’ll come running. I said I’ll be the only one carrying somebody over my shoulder. If anybody else comes up, dust them. He said I’ve got four Skyraiders and I’ve got four F-4s. He said be sure there ain’t nobody else down there with you. I said there’s nobody else. He started to set it down, I made a run for it as fast as I could. I hadn’t taken my helmet off so it looked odd. About the time I dumped this kid in there and me with him, they lifted off. Immediately when he got clear of the area, Skyraiders came in and they dumped napalm and .20 mm all over everything.

KS: Including the plane; the wreckage?

BV: Including the plane. I had set my self-destruct charges in the nose. When I left I pulled the lanyard, so that the equipment that was still there would self-destruct. It was a thermite reaction. It wouldn’t burn, it would melt. As soon as they got finished the phantoms rolled in. It looked like they were using 250-pound bombs. They scattered it all over the place. We flew back and we went into Da Nang. That’s where we took the kid off. This was our quote, unquote squadron logistics helicopter. It was an old piece of junk.
KS: Was it Navy that picked you up or Army? Do you know?

BV: That helicopter wasn’t marked either, but it was ours. None of our equipment was marked. Now, the NC5 starting units were marked. That I have no doubt about. They flew me back to Cam Ranh Bay same old boy cut my flight suit and everything off of me. Here I am sitting buck-naked on basically a trashcan. He was hosing me off with water and painting me with a paintbrush and betodyne. That’s where I get Bless you my son, go and sin no more. Give me a whole ration of shit. He stitched up my head real good.

KS: What injuries?

BV: I got a bunch of cuts on my head, bruises, more cuts, broken hand. It just played hell on my spirit in general. He had bootlegged a bottle of rum from somewhere 151. Out of the kindness of his heart he donated that to me. I did my best to really get good rip roaring drunk, but it didn’t work. So, I just kind of gave it up. I was taken over to another area and of all things air-conditioned spaces. Can you believe this, air-conditioned? I thought I would freeze to death. It was again reminded that anything you’ve seen you don’t need to tell anybody about. You don’t need to tell any body where you’ve been, what you’ve done, who you’ve seen, what you’ve seen. You will not do this. They said if you do, we can assure you, you will spend the next 40 years in Portsmouth Naval Prison, said that is a forgone conclusion. It’ll take about 30 minutes to run the court martial. So I didn’t say much about it until about 1991. I finally told my wife about it. But at any rate I flew several more missions. They wanted those planes real bad, because we were hurting them. We’d fly for a while; we’d have to stop for a while because we were causing a hardship in the South. People were taking their rice and all that sort of stuff. For a while hell, you didn’t get any of that aircraft fire because they weren’t getting nothing down the trail. I got rotated back to Jacksonville, Florida, went back to Bermuda, back to Jacksonville, Florida. I was pretty well healed up then. I think that was in October. No. I can tell you when it was. It was the first part of October. My son was born the 27th of September 1969 [actually 3rd of October 1969]. I had been sent back to Bermuda because I wasn’t working out real good. I was just a little bit jittery and a little bit shaky, had a real bad attitude. They sent me back to Bermuda. They had a hurricane evacuation and I caught a flight to Jacksonville, Florida a little bit before the
rest of the squadron. I started to go to the Naval hospital in Jacksonville, Florida in my flight suit. In the meantime, this was my original flight suit, said who I was what my rate was, second-class petty officer etc. I started to go in the door and this corpsman says you can’t come in here like that. I said why not? He said it’s not visiting hours and you’ve got to be in full uniform. I said this is my flight uniform. He calls the doctor and they tell me I can’t do this. So, I have to go home, my wife’s in the hospital with a baby. She had been trying to reach me for three weeks out of that hospital. The answer to her inquiries through a chaplain for the fleet air wing is to where in the hell is he? Is wherever he is, the Navy needs his services more than you do. She never got an answer, ever. In fact, parts of her medical record are missing that we got as I exited the Navy. Those parts are gone. They were no more. At any rate, I finally get to take her home and what have you. That’s an improvement. While we’re in homeport they send me to more schools. Well I can see things are winding down in the land of the great, big, ugly and green. I get it in my idiot mind that I’m going to re-enlist, because next step is so much shore duty, which no doubt will beat me flying all over the place. I decide in that April, I’m going to re-enlist. Well, about March we deploy again to Siginola, Sicily, early deployment. I get to Siginola, Sicily after a couple of days, I’m told keep your sea bag packed. That was my last tour over there. I went straight to Cam Rahn Bay, same situation, been there about a month. They sent me back to Sigonola, Sicily to re-enlist, because if I re-enlist in Vietnam, they have to state that I re-enlisted in Vietnam and they have to give me a 10,000 dollar bonus tax-free. Ooops. No we can’t do that. I have to go back to my home squadron Siginola, Sicily. Re-enlist there X number of days later, I go back, not to Cam Rahn Bay. They’d moved everything to Da Nang. Basically the same setup, same air craft. These airplanes are getting tired. They’ve got more patches that Little Abner’s britches. The engines have been replaced. In fact we had to fly to NAS Dallas in a C-130 one time to pick up from a reserve squadron, four brand new, reconditioned, reciprocating engines of that type. That was the only ones we could lay our hands on. They wound up with two planes down for recip. engines before we had them engines.

KS: Did you fly from Vietnam to Dallas?

BV: Vietnam to the Philippines, Philippines to Hawaii, Hawaii to San Francisco.
In what space that we couldn’t get taken up by engines was taken up by Coors beer. You
could get virtually anything your little hearts desired for a six-pack of Coors beer. It
didn’t exist in Vietnam.

KS: On your second and third tour in Vietnam were you being paid this time?
BV: It was the same thing. The money was still is Jacksonville, our home
squadron. I did take a part of my re-enlistment bonus with me. My wife has the one
thing I bought over there and brought back. It’s a teak chest lined with camphor wood on
it. It’s well carved. I had seen them. It’s not fancy, but I did buy that. That I brought
back along with my dirty old carcass. Never mind. I did re-enlisted for six years. For re-
enlisting I was promised Avionics B school, which is the highest level you can go. I
went. I went through that. It was a little different. You did everything you had to do in
B school at Memphis, to get through it and pass. If you flunked out you’re eligible for
sea duty. Having had sea duty before, and knowing what at that time it meant, I was not
interested in sea duty. So, I passed, did well. They said where do you want to spend
your shore duty? Where I wanted to spend my shore duty nothing was available. I
wound up at Naval Air Station in Meridian Mississippi.

KS: Was this after your last tour in Vietnam?
BV: After the Avionics B school in Memphis Tennessee.
KS: How long was that last tour in Vietnam?
BV: Let’s see. That was November to July. October to July.
KS: Any specific incidents during this tour that comes to mind? How things
might have been different from the previous two times?
BV: Everybody was nervous; they didn’t want to get in on the tail end. Don’t fail
out of school, especially the Marines. If they even got bad grades, how does West PAC
sound to you? Not good. We had two that went. One sailor, one Marine. The sailor just
flat flunked out, he was drinking way too much. The Marine got a bad attitude and told
the master gunnery sergeant to pound sand up his snout. We all got to comparing notes
from different squadrons who they knew that was still over there. We got to comparing
notes. Do you remember such and such and so and so? Yeah. He was aboard the
Forestall when it burned. After a careful perusal of the text, there were 22 people in my
class, of the 22 people in my class, we knew over 125 hurt people that had gotten hurt
really badly or killed over there. We decided to have a beer party. We almost all got sent
back. We had it on a Friday and they wanted to pull an inspection. Fortunately we were
somewhat inebriated. However, discretion being the better part of valor, the old chief
petty officer was going to hold the inspection said something ugly and just went and did
something else. Now we did get to pull extra duty. He could have been a real horse’s
neck. For that I’m grateful. Like I said from there I went to NAS Meridian, Mississippi.
I was on a SAR crew there for a while, just search and rescue. Operations line and
operations line supply of the SAR crew. About two weeks after I was there I got tapped
for a funeral detail. Went on the funeral detail and figured when I got back to the gate
they were going to arrest the whole busload of us. It was a disaster. The guy that was in
charge of it, after thinking about it a little bit on the way back I said he’s got to be drunk
or on dope, or both. Like I said I was about half ashamed to come back in the gate. This
was oddly enough a Navy person had got shot up on a river boat, died and we went to
Hattiesburg, Mississippi to bury him. I think if they people had been anything but
grieving, they would have been well and truly offended. I got stuck in charge of the
funeral detail for about three and a half years. We never had anything like that again. I
do mean never. I did run into one guy at Meridian that had been with me in both patrol
squadron five and then he had been in Vietnam there too. Second class metal smith by
the name of Carl Hood. He was well and truly into the bottle. I don’t know where he
went from there. But I did my thing and I tried for warrant officer. I tested for chief
petty officer, and always got passed, not advanced. I did everything I could to when next
time I get shore duty or not shore duty but sea duty they send me to some place like
ASCAC in London. Well behold, I’m ready to go to sea duty. I got a year and a half
running still to do. Here comes a set of orders to what’s called the ASCAC, anti
submarine warfare command at Rota, Spain, an accompanied tour take momma and the
other little childees with me.

KS: This is 1970?
KS: ’75 O.K. This was after everything.
BV: In the meantime I had been teaching electronics at Meridian Junior College.

Anything to make a dollar ten, because I still wasn’t making much. At any rate, this was
all wonderful and then they have this T-2 Buckeye burn to the ground in mid-air with two
Marine aviators, well, one Marine aviator and one wannabe Marine aviator. The
problem was traced to a faulty Nicad battery. Nicad’s were relatively new. I was quite
familiar with them. We come to find out such and such and so and so had given this
quality assurance stamp to an airman while he went down to Mardis Gras in Biloxi and
partied. The guys said it’s the airman’s fault he did what he was told to do, set it out,
battery caught fire. The Marines tried to bring the airplane back instead of ejecting and
they both died. When push comes to shove, I’m on the aircraft investigating board and
behold here’s where the CDI stamp was used and so and so wasn’t even in town. Went
to work, called in asking about him. Finally said well, yeah I was in Biloxi, said we
didn’t really hurt anybody. The CO said well you’ve got a choice. You can either be
court martialed or your eligible to retire. They said if you retire this week, we won’t court
martial you. If you’re here next week we’ll court martial you. That’s the choices. He
retired. He was not happy. His best friend in the entire world was the aviation
electronics detailer. Shortly thereafter I get this orders report to the U.S.S. Nimitz ships
company. You must re-enlist four years for these orders. I go ballistic. It takes me two
minutes to get five miles from where I’m at to the personnel office. Because they’d just
sent to the yard, poor little old personnel man behind the counter. I started on him about
his shoelaces. They were bite marks all the way up to the top of his pointy little head by
the time I’m finished. This friend of mine, Chief look around the doorway, God what
happened? By this time I’m a first class petty officer, that far from chief. He comes
around and said man what’s the matter? I said first things first I got to apologize to you.
I ate him out and it ain’t his fault. I worked that out. I said what do you make of this?
He looked at it and said when did this come in? It’s third class so what is it chief? He
said yeah that came in yesterday. He said I was kind of wondering about that, but we’re
looking at a month away from now so I thought I better get it down there to him so he
could make plans. So, I prepared for a call to the AT detailer. I get this character up
there. I said what’s going on? What happen to my orders to Rota, Spain accompanied
tour? He said well we had to change that. We had to make some adjustment. We just
had to put this one man in there. The guy they put in there couldn’t get the clearance to
go in the Anti-submarine warfare patrol somehow, cd not get it. I said man, that’s not
acceptable. I’m not going to re-enlist for this garbage. I said I don’t know a damn thing about bird flying except I don’t want to be on one. Well, he gets all irate and calls his lieutenant commander. I speak to the lieutenant commander as nicely as I can. But by this time, I’m mad. We’re talking red and black screaming rockets mad. I guess I made him mad. I don’t know; don’t really care at this point in time. He said well, Petty Officer Vannoy we’ll send you wherever we want to, wherever we have need for you. I said that’s wonderful, but you’re only going to send me for twelve months. That’s when my end of service is. No, you’ll re-enlist. We can’t send you to the Nimitz unless you re-enlist. I said well, I’m not going to do that. I’ve already told you. He said well, we’ll send you wherever we want to. He said you’ll get your orders in a few days. Well, here comes a set of orders to attack squadron ’75, which is an A-6 squadron out of Oceana, Virginia. My wife is real upset because we had sold the trailer house we had bought. We’re going to go to Spain you don’t take your trailer house with you. She’s upset, the kids are upset. I’m really upset. The only thing I know how to work on A-6 is the ACM and radar altimeter. That’s all I knew how to work on. I get to the squadron. They say you’re going to be in charge of night check, board care. You know you’re doing the maintenance on it. I did it. Race relations were not real good at that time. It was unfortunate. That is both the blacks and the whites. We had the lever of Spain and I knew this character would take my boat. He is mad. He got 16 years in the Navy and he’s considering getting out next year. Not re-enlisting because they took away his billet at this TAC [actually A-6] squadron, which it didn’t just fly over water. It landed on water, walked on water etc. This was his bread and butter, which he knew. I didn’t. He couldn’t get the clearance for the ASCAC because of a couple drunk and disorderly charges. So we’re sitting there looking at each other and we decide so and so and such and such and boy he was a sorry something or other, agreed on that. I went back on my own ship and we’d go flying around and we’d do this. They find out I can operate the ECM an A6. So they don’t have enough officers and gentlemen to fly me in, off the pointy end and you land on the round end. In the mean time, not having any intelligence about me what so ever they found out I have a machine gun card for automatic weapons. I’m paid a visit by warrant gunner Marine, one of the officers from the city. I need you. I said forget it. I said the Navy’s done got me. He said No. He said, you and me going
to take a little walk. So I go, you don’t turn down a Marine gunner. We take a little
walk; he said it’s like this I’m short handed on the landing party of Marines usually
taking care of that damn aircraft carrier. He said specifically short-handed people that
can handle a machine gun. He said here’s the big ‘if’ we had to go into Beirut and we’re
steaming off of Beirut for 46 days and 46 nights. If we go in, you will go in as a W-2.
When you come back aboard ship, you’ll still be a W-2. He said your squadron doesn’t
have a billet for a W-2. He said I know what happened at ASCAC and they have room
for a W-2. I said take me gunny, I’m yours. Then we didn’t go ashore. But I did train a
few Marines. This is 1919 space A4 Browning machine gun. Your great granddaddy
used it in the First World War, it’s been altered. We ain’t got but this many M-60s. We
went through that song and dance. We didn’t go ashore. I didn’t have to. Toward the
end of the cruise I applied to umpteen different colleges wanting out. You got an early
out to go back to college. Behold the first one to say we want you was Texas Tech. I
take it running, giggling, snorting and laughing to the personnel office. Slap it down on
the counter and said tag I’m it. They look up and they say oh, my lord you’re not re-
enlisting. I’ve not been a real good boy. I had said no on occasion to people who didn’t
want you to say no. They said you got to wait your turn. I said I don’t. Shortly
thereafter this was in July of ’76 my grandmother who I had lived with over in Texas
died. I tried to get back for the funeral. That was a guilt rope. I got back three days late.
After bribing some people in an airline to bump somebody else off of an overseas flight.
Remember this is in ’76, remember the bicentennial coins? You could get somebody
bumped off an international flight out of Barcelona, Spain if you bribe the ticket table
with a Bicentennial dollar. He happened to be a coin collector. I was just playing with
one. Can I see that? Where do you get these? I said if I got a plane you got them,
there’s two of them. Here’s two half dollars, here’s two quarters. He said you have a
seat in first class. I said I can’t afford first class, he said no, no, no, no. Coach price, the
seat’s in first class. So, I get to JFK in New York it’s running late there. Fly from there
to Norfolk International and I’m waiting there for my wife to show. She has to drive all
the way from Oceana across Norfolk and Newport News to this Airport at 2:00 in the
morning. Finally, she shows up with my two very sleepy little boys. In the mean time
aboard ship, I had waxed my moustache way out. I looked like Poncho Villa on a bad
hair day. The first one, my oldest one recognized me. Dragging your kid and your sea
bag and this that and the other one along there trying to get to your wife. The second
one, who was about three at the time, was hiding behind his mom, looking like who the
hell are you? It was hilarious. He definitely gets to the point, I drive them home. We get
there about 4:00 in the morning and we got this little old black Sky Terrier out at the
pound. Well, Sam’s a real good dog and he’s very protective. I get in there. He don’t
recognize me. He puts the tooth upon us and not wanting to be a real bad guy, kick the
kid’s dog, I just let him go. I finally got back there. I took leave and getting everything
ready to get out of the Navy because I had to be at Texas Tech on August 23rd. I was
released August 20th. Tried to get copies of my wife and kids medical records and the
Navy captain gives me a large ration of manure over that. He said Petty Officer Vannoy
if you say one more word I’ll have you court-martialed. I told my wife, you’re going to
have to handle it, I’ve got to get out here. They gave me copies of most of her medical
records. The parts where they wrote off to find out where I was, they’re as blank as my
mind on any given day. All we have is the copies. I departed Oceana. We definitely
made some major tracks getting to O’Brien Texas where her parents lived, had our
household goods. We dropped the kids off there and told them if the household goods
show up, put them in the garage we’ll go from there. My wife and I get up here, I get
registered for school. I start the next day. Oh, no. She has a cousin that lived here at that
time. He helped us find a house for rent. We go make X number of loads that day from
O’Brien to here. I start Texas Tech working on an EE degree. My attitude ain’t real
good. A person who is still over there ticked me off one day. I said two words will cover
this. I left to Ag Engineering. It was right across the street.

KS: Now, you were officially discharged from the Navy at this point?
BV: I was, got an honorable discharge. I wound up with two good conduct
medals, a purple heart, three air medals with combat –V., Navy Commendation with
Combat –V., Vietnam service, Vietnam campaign, Vietnam Cross of Gallantry for an
individual action and expert pistol. I was never expert on the rifle. I could only do
marksman.

KS: Could I ask you a couple of clarifying questions about your service in
Vietnam?
KS: You mentioned that you were injured twice with the shrapnel and then also with the plane crash. Did you spend any time in hospitals or this was all taken care of by your corpsman?

BV: Taken care of by the hospital corpsman. We depended on him.

KS: You mentioned the Purple Heart, was that when the plane was shot down?

What were the incidents?

BV: It was in the time the plane was shot down. So, too is the Navy Commendation Certificate. That’s as I understand it now somewhat of an anomaly. The hospital corpsman gives you a Purple Heart says o.k. I think you qualify let me get another stitch here.

KS: Was it in a ceremony?

BV: No (laughs). Not hardly.

KS: You kind of mentioned that in the Navy the problems between the races.

When you were in Vietnam was there a lot of racial tension?

BV: No. Hey I don’t care. Black, brown, green, purple, chartreuse, white. It does not matter. If I can depend on him, he can depend on me. That’s the end of the description. If I can’t depend on him, again, it doesn’t matter. If you’re a no load, I don’t want you around me. You go over here and you draw fire, whatever you do I’d give them somebody else to shoot at and won’t bother me. That’s the way that worked. One of my best friends was a big, black mother. I knew without fail, no matter what, I could depend on him.

KS: What was his name? Do you recall?

BV: Carl Leatherman [later remembers name is Carl Hood]. Either way, if somebody wanted to give him a hard time, gee I really wish you wouldn’t do that. This fine gentleman is a friend of mine. You really don’t need to rag on him. If they said why, I said both of us will dust your ass and now. Usually that pretty well settled it.

KS: What about allegations that soldiers use drugs in Vietnam? Did you see any of that? Was that a problem in your opinion?

BV: I saw one guy smoking dope on watch, one time. He was kind of zonked out. I kind of slipped up beside him. Got my little case-folding pocketknife. I used it to
shave every morning. I used it to shave every morning because razor blades were really
extensive and hard to come buy. He was leaning back and his eyeballs were in the stars
and I slashed the tip of his nose off. We got rid of him. He’s hurt.

KS: He was sent back home? Do you know?
BV: I don’t know where he was sent. Didn’t really care. If he’s going to be
nodding off when he’s out there protecting me. Like I said I’m fond of me, I’m going to
handle that anyway there was. I won’t wait for somebody to court martial him or
anything else, don’t even know for sure that he could be court martialed, didn’t care. If
he wants to go smoke dope on his own time, that’s his problem, not mine. It’s just like
somebody wants to stay drunk, off-duty that’s his problem, not mine. If they do it on
duty, if they can get me hurt, thank you very much you’re talking to the wrong person.
That’s the only time I ever ran into it. I’m sure that I’ve got a cousin that says he ran into
it all the time. That was the way. I never knew anybody else even back in the States that
I knew was doing drugs at all. There was a lot of people drank a lot. I do mean a lot. I
never ran into them doing dope.

KS: What about while you were at Vietnam did you get any R&R time?
BV: No.
KS: Not at all.
BV: I was on TAD orders. They weren’t going to send me someplace they didn’t
have to basically.

KS: Around the incident when the plane was shot down and you said that people
came in and they napalmed it or palmed it. Was that standard practice or did they try to
retrieve bodies from any of the wreckage or was it just too dangerous to go in? Do you
know?
BV: Well, considering that this was in the northern part of the Ho Chi Minh
Trail, it would have been extremely difficult and perhaps a little harder to go and retrieve
bodies. You might be sitting there, Okay you’ve got three more helicopters and how
many more people on the ground there? The thing of it was you couldn’t do anything.
That’s the unfortunate part.

KS: Do you know where your exact location was? Were you in North Vietnam
or Laos?
BV: We were in Laos. I think

KS: You think.

BV: Because we had gone over the Mu Gia Pass. We had made a northern circle and we were headed south. I say over the Mu Gia Pass, we never went directly over the Mu Gia Pass. Because there’s SAM sites there. You don’t take the chance.

KS: Is that Surface to Air Missile? That’s right.

BV: If they had any kind of a lock on me they’d do the best to dust you, to a certain extent quite successful. When we’d come off the trail, when we got back over the sea, we would radio data to other units as to what was where. This was already encrypted. It was what they called a squirt gun message. Very short transmission. Somebody took it, decoded it and said whew, looky here what we got. Whether it was B-52s, F4, A4s, whoever was handy they got the assignment. That’s what we did.

KS: You mentioned a little bit about LBJ. I see you rolling your eyes. How much when you were in Vietnam and even the time after, were you aware of the bigger picture, so to speak? The policies that the military was using or the governmental policies? How close did you follow those things?

BV: After a careful perusal of the text and or the news and everything we had seen we came to the general conclusion that not only had we been had, we hadn’t even been kissed. It was not a real happy sensation for us. I grew up a man whose government would do all the good stuff in the world for you. I found that it’s kind of like a box fan on a hot day. One side of it blows hot air, the other side sucks hot air and you stand beside it, it’s not doing a damn thing for you. So, I consider nine and a half pretty well wasted years. That doesn’t mention any of the carry-over since them. Because that ain’t real fun either. Oh, one other thing I want to mention. Right before I got out of the Navy I was given all of the original stuff in my service record, where they quote unquote copied stuff to go to records center. I have found since then I have the only complete set up of my service record. The National Record Center doesn’t have everything. They’ve got the fronts of some pages, but not the backs. Tag we’ve been hit again.

KS: Did they give a reason for this, or explain what had happened?

BV: Call the Navy. So, you talk to the Navy you send them certified copies, they scratch their head. A lot of things are you can get out of it is what’s termed deck logs.
That tells you who’s assigned. This is your home squadron. It gets to be rather interesting.

KS: But they turned over these records to you when you left the Navy?
BV: Yeah. I don’t know why in the world I kept them. I guess because I was ticked off. If you’re going to give it to me, I’ll keep it. Thank you.

KS: But when you go back to the Navy they say they don’t have them because they say they gave them to you?
BV: They don’t have all of them at the National Records Center because somebody in my last squadron didn’t copy everything down.

KS: Has that caused you problems today?
BV: Oh, yes. Well, prove you did this. O.K. Go into a VA hearing and you have these originals with you and adjudicate it. Well, touch them. That happened at Phoenix, Arizona. It gets to be a problem. But there we are.

KS: Is there anything else you’d like to add about your time in Vietnam that we didn’t discuss?

BV: Well, other than like I say overall that stint in the Navy was nine years and some change that I guess I can look at as somewhat wasted. Like a lot of other people I am somewhat bitter over the treatment we got when I got out of the Navy and came back to Tech. I was going to have to work anyway while I went to school. Several places I went to get a job in our fair city of Lubbock, when they found out that I had been to Vietnam, oh, well we’ll call you. One guy at a car dealership where I was putting in to work as a part time mechanic asked me at point blank if I had been there. I said yes, sir did three short tours. He said well you can just get out of here right now. He said we don’t need your kind here. That gave me a lesson on Texas now, not Texas back then, when I left. Almost everybody was man; you’re doing the right thing. Some folks have got it in their mind that we are a little bit less than human. I will propose this, we are no less human than we absolutely had to be in a given situation. That’s like jumping into a cesspool. You don’t come out smelling like roses.

KS: Did you ever encounter any anti-war demonstrations when you got back in the states or anything like that?
BV: I kind of ran into that thing, one time at a civilian airport. I was in dress
blues. A person ragged on me real heavy, kind of got in my face. I pulled my medals off
the dress blues and I stuck them in his face quite literally. They had pins on the back.
Before the local Gestapo arrived I boarded my plane and got out of dodge.

KS: When you were in Vietnam or maybe looking back now, why do you think
the U.S. was involved?

BV: Well, because we were stupid enough to let the people at Potsdam talk us
into letting France have all its former colonies. In the first place, they did not manage
any of them well. In the second place they had no facilities to manage them even
horribly. Of course, being our trusty allies we had to go right along and give them a glad
hand, pat them on the back. Say yeah, you bet. Whatever you feel like you can handle
just go for it. For a few dollars worth of aid, Archimedes de Patti and Mr. Minh. Go set
up a deal where gee, whiz that could have been a going concern over there. All those
people could still probably be breathing and I wouldn’t have had to mess around with it,
but we ain’t learned nothing yet.

KS: Do you think things have changed as far as getting involved in other
countries from lessons learned in Vietnam?

BV: I have grave doubts about a lot of lessons being learned other than
technological. I think there are some men of good intentions that are casting a bit of a
blind eye toward it. That’s an opinion. But as far as honorable men, I can think of one
character that just does not fit the pattern. By the time he got through hashing it up over
there we were well and truly involved up to our eyebrows. Remember this when you’re
in manure up to your eyebrows don’t yell for help. That’s where we were. Somebody’s
going to throw you a brick in there or an anchor or something like that. No you didn’t get
any help. Through that whole dang quagmire at least from 1959 on until the last Air
American helicopter got out of dodge, the only people that benefited from the whole
thing, never went over there, up and to include our late, great draft dodger [president]
who now explaining did I pardon him? Oh, well.

KS: Is there anything else?

BV: That’s it.

KS: This concludes the interview with Mr. Bill Vannoy. Thank you very much.