Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone, I’m doing an oral history interview with Mr. Robert Fischer. Today is March 20, 2003, it’s approximately 8:37 AM Central Standard Time. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas Tech University in the interview room of the Special Collections Library. Colonel Fischer you are in Marco Island, Florida. Let’s start sir with a brief biographical sketch of yourself, could you tell us when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood.

Robert Fischer: Okay, I was born in Abington, A-B-I-N-G-T-O-N, Abington, Pennsylvania on September 30, 1937 and I grew up in that area, mainly around a town called Doylestown, D-O-Y-L-E-S-T-O-W-N, one word and I spent most of my youth there, we moved around a couple different places, but I graduated from high school in 1955. I was pretty much, a pretty active athlete. I played all sports, plus I was a swimmer from the time I was five years old so I was pretty much outdoors type most of my life. When I graduated from high school I went to Lehigh University, studied engineering for a full year, and halfway through my year I heard about the United States Air Force Academy, which was only one year old at that point. And I’d always wanted to fly so I made application to the Academy, took all their tests and I qualified, and I was accepted to the Academy and I entered the Academy in, let’s see, I guess it was July, yes it was July 1956.
RV: Okay, let me ask you a couple of questions about growing up in Pennsylvania. How many brothers and sister did you have?

RF: One, brother, one sister both older.

RV: And what was Abington like, was it a relatively small town, or in that area you grew up in?

RF: Abington was only the hospital where I was born, the town. I grew up in Doylestown pretty much, or just outside of Doylestown. It had about twelve thousand people at the time and it’s the county seat of Bucks County, which is a pretty famous county in Pennsylvania.

RV: Yes, absolutely.

RF: So it was very active, there was a good cross-section of people there.

RV: Okay. You said you were active in sports and active as a child, was this something that you did immediately, as soon as you got old enough you started participating in sports, and you said that you were swimming by age five?

RF: Yes, I swam competitively from about age eight up until I was about I guess fourteen or fifteen, actually up till eighteen. I swam my first year at the Academy too.

RV: Oh really, okay. Tell me about your parents, what did they do?

RF: My parents were both born in Germany. My father was born near the Austrian border in Bavaria, and he immigrated to the United States in, let’s see about 1923. And he came here, learned English and I think he had about an eighth grade education but he left his home because there was no future there for him at that point in time. My mother was born in Stuttgart and she came to the United States with her family when she was sixteen. That would have been 1922, and they met here and got married and my dad was working as a driver, a truck driver and he ultimately started his own business in 1927 and he retired fifty years later, and he retired with his own business.

RV: Okay, what kind of things was he hauling around?

RF: He was an agent for United Van Lines so he was in the, basically he was, he had about ten men working for him most of the time and he had a moving and storage business and he also hauled milk from the farmers to the dairies.

RV: Okay, did your mother work?
RF: No, she didn’t work. She did a lot of volunteer work but she was basically a household mom.

RV: Okay, okay. Tell me about your childhood, did you work in your childhood?

RF: Did I work? Oh yes, I worked from the time I was fourteen or so. I think the first year I raised corn because I was, corn and cantaloupe because I was too small to drive and really work for anybody, too young. And then the next year I worked for a farmer the whole summer and the following year I had three jobs I think. I worked for a contractor, I drove a truck for my dad and I hauled milk in the morning, worked on the moving truck in the afternoon, and then I was a lifeguard a couple times in the evening.

RV: Yes, I bet you were a pretty good lifeguard since you were such a great swimmer.

RF: Yes, I loved that, I loved being near the water.

RV: Tell me about you academically, what kind of student were you growing up?

RF: I guess I was above average. My senior year I finally got serious and I graduated probably in the top tenth of my class in high school. Our class was about 240 kids I guess, and I was on the honor roll and all that good stuff and my year at Lehigh really enabled me to, I think succeed at the Academy because it really prepared me well. That year of engineering with all the math and the tough courses, the calculus, the separator courses, it enabled me to do very well at the Academy.

RV: Right. What were your favorite subjects in school?

RF: I liked math a lot. I was in some advanced math programs and I represented the school in a couple deals where you go down and take an exam on behalf of your high school. I also liked history a lot and I liked English, I was fairly balanced.

RV: Did your parents push education to you and your siblings, was this something that, kind of you were expected to go to college?

RF: No, not really. I was the first one in my family to go to college and I just kind of did it on my own I think. My parents, I don’t think ever once looked at my homework but they did encourage me. My brother quit high school and really never went back to school, which was a shame. My sister went through high school and then through art school and she was a very accomplished artist. She was married, but I was the first one in my family to go to college.
RV: Okay. Do you have any memories of World War II?

RF: Oh, yes sure.

RV: Tell me about those, what do you remember about that time?

RF: I can remember asking my parents who we were fighting, the Japanese or the Germans. I was very confused because I thought we were fighting the Germans, then I found out we were fighting the Japanese and I was confused by that, but I think I figured that out after awhile. I don’t obviously don’t have any specific memories of Pearl Harbor, I was only four years old. I guess by the time I was in elementary school, I remember my mother never taught me any German because she was afraid I would get into a problem at school but I later studied German and I’m fairly fluent in German now.

RV: Did your parents, being from Germany did they experience any backlash at all?

RF: No, not that I know of, but my parents were pretty close mouthed, pretty private and we never discussed stuff like money, at least not with me. I’m sure they did but I never really understood a lot of the things. I guess as a kid, I just kind of put one foot in front of the other.

RV: Okay, okay. So when you get to Lehigh, did you study specifically engineering and math, was this your kind of course of study that you had chosen?

RF: It was the freshmen year of engineering; it was the base courses. I mean it included all the way up through calculus and a lot of, I also had a great English [course], believe it or not in engineering school it was all men, I had a great English professor there which I really enjoyed, it was like a little respite from all the technical courses.

RV: How did you hear about the U.S. Air Force Academy?

RF: I found it in a brochure when I was in a restaurant one night. We went down to eat dinner, my roommate and I, and I just happened to stumble across it.

RV: Wow.

RF: Yes, that’s the way it happened.

RV: That’s incredible. So when you read the brochure what turned you on, what made you want to go to the Air Force, you said you had wanted to fly?
RF: Yes, I always liked flying, and what I read about the Academy, they had very
high academic standards, they were just a brand new Academy and it was in Colorado. I
always loved the West; so I thought, gee, why not, give it a shot.
RV: Now where did your desire to fly come from?
RF: I don’t know I just, I had flown a couple of time with some boyfriends of my
sister. They took me up for a ride here and there but I just always enjoyed it. I like
mechanical things, I’ve always been very mechanical and flying was kind of a natural
thing for me to pursue I think.
RV: Okay. Did any of your family members serve in World War II?
RF: No.
RV: So your family had no real military experience up to this point?
RF: No, that’s right.
RV: Okay, okay. Well tell me about when you left Lehigh and you went, the
summer of ’56, went out to Colorado Springs, what was that like for you?
RF: Okay, I went to Denver, not Colorado Springs. The first academy, the initial
academy was at Denver not Colorado Springs. We didn't move there until I was going
into my junior year or second class year, but we were stationed at Lowry Air Force Base
and they had a lot of temporary facilities set up there. They were pretty basic, pretty
simple but they were obviously very clean and well maintained. It was kind of shock to
me. I’d never gone through anything quite like that before.
RV: This was your basic training?
RF: Well, the freshmen summer, it was very, very physical. I think I weighed
about 157 pounds. My normal weight even in high school was like 165 so. But it was
very physical and I’m a pretty physical guy, so I kind of liked that. That was not a
problem for me. I think it made me appreciate what they were trying to prepare me for.
They were making you reach down and develop some character traits that would
withstand you under duress. So the freshman [year, “doolie year”] was a lot of different
subjects, everything from shooting various kinds of weapons, we had judo I think,
boxing, we had marksmanship, we did a lot of running, naturally. We had some
academic courses, just I remember they would march us over to the theater on Sundays, a
little wooden theater and they would show us movies about the Air Force. They
indoctrinated us basically and tried to interest us more in the history of the Air Force, where it came from and why we were privileged to be there.

RV: Do you remember how you felt about all of that?
RF: I liked it. Yes, never once my whole time there did I have a feeling that I wanted to leave. A lot of guys did, but I was fortunate I guess, I just felt, I felt committed, I felt like I was in the right place and when I started the academics I realized how high a quality of academics and teaching they were. Our classes were like maybe ten of us. I mean they were quite small. Our instructors, professors, were military people but they were very well qualified, very well educated.

RV: How did you do academically?
RF: I did well. Let me see. I think I was, I think I was twenty something out of my class. We started with 306 and graduated 227, so I was in the top ten percent or so.

RV: Okay. Now when did you first get the opportunity to fly, was this after your freshman year, they put you in an airplane then?
RF: During the four years we were there, we went through navigation training, not pilot training. We had a separate course we started I guess as sophomores and then we flew for about two or three years on a regular basis, and we learned how to navigate. And after graduation is when you go to pilot training. So they didn’t try to compress pilot training into a shorter course for us, we attended that if we qualified after graduation.

RV: Okay, did you graduate in 1960?
RF: Yes.

RV: Okay. How would you rate the training that you received overall there at the Academy?
RF: Excellent. I couldn’t think how it could be any better. That was one of the reasons why I was so positive about the place. I mean even though you were at work and you had very few privileges the first couple of years, I was committed. I wanted to do well and competition was a thing of the, it was constantly in presence there because you were actually graded periodically. You took exams, you took actually small exams almost three, four times a week in classes and then you had quarterly exams and then you had semester exams and finals. You were actually put into sections, so like if we were in,
let’s say chemistry. Initially because I had had a year of college I was able to validate what they called general chemistry, and I went right [into] quantitative and qualitative [chemistry] my freshman year, which is normally for later on in the college curriculum and I went into some advanced algebra and calculus and vector algebra courses. I was also able to study German for about six semesters. I studied Spanish for one semester and studied French for a semester. So it was, what was neat is that we were able to help develop the curriculum. If there were enough of us interested in a particular course that was not offered, they would put together a course and offer it. I mean that was really, being part of the beginning I guess that was the opportunity that most people never had.

RV: That’s very unique. Tell me what you think today about the Air Force Academy, you were there in its infancy and what is your impression about how its changed over the years?

RF: Well, the recent news isn’t so hot, some of the nonsense that’s gone on out there. I personally am concerned about them liberalizing some of the things, we held our honor code as a sacred thing and there were no second chances. If you lied or stole anything or cheated you were gone. And you were gone so fast that most of the people didn’t even realize what had happened, but then they would explain it to you after the individual was gone. But it had to be a specific case of lying, stealing or cheating, or the other part was you were obligated to report someone if you knew in fact or suspected that they had done, either lied, stolen or cheated. And you were obligated to do that, if you didn’t you were just as guilty as the guy who did it. Now, what’s going on today, I’m not pleased with. I belong to the Alumni Association. I’ve been a member ever since I graduated and I meet regularly, about once a quarter with other graduates from the Washington DC area. I travel down to Washington to meet with them and we get normally a very good update there because there’s probably twenty or thirty of us there and we get some input from all over, different people and also I’m on a website and email and with email I’m constantly in touch what’s happening at the Academy.

RV: Okay, so you sound very involved.

RF: I am involved. I’m disappointed what’s happened because I don’t think those things would have happened if they had not liberalized some of their policy.
RV: When you say that what do you mean, what kind of policies do you think were liberalized?

RF: The honor code. They have a second chance now if they, I don't know what the deal is but what it actually boils to is apparently if a kid is found guilty of an honor violation, the parents will sometimes obtain a lawyer and actually challenge this and I just don’t like the whole flavor of it. It's just like it's a litigious society today and that’s where it begins. I guess we were more committed and maybe more focused but we didn’t want anybody in our midst that we couldn’t trust and depend on.

RV: Right. Tell me what your impression was at the time, what did they tell you the role of the U.S. Air Force would be, this is when, you know obviously the very infancy of the creation of the Air Force, what were they telling you about that?

RF: To fly and fight that was it in a nutshell.

RV: Pretty straightforward.

RF: Yes, and they wanted you to be educated, not just technically but as an officer and a trusted officer who would set the example and live up to those expectations.

RV: What about the Air Force in relation to the other branches, what did they explain the role of the Air Force to be?

RF: I mean, that was fairly clear. We basically, always, every one of us I think aspired to fly, and of course after you’ve flown a number of hours you have to progress into other responsible roles of commanding a unit. But the Air Force basically was one of the services and our responsibility was to support the other services whenever possible and it was, we also realized the Navy flew and the Army had, anyway helicopters at that time, rotary wing type but our primary job was to operate, maintain, and support aviation.

RV: Okay. Personally what did you want to do with your Air Force career at that point, when you were at the Academy?

RF: I guess what my, I mean having been I think indoctrinated how important education was, I was interested in, after flight training, spending a couple years on active duty, flying, flying while on, and just flying, flying, basically that was your primary job and after five or six years then I intended to go back to graduate school, get a graduate degree in something that I was interested in and then come back into the service and pick
up some assignments that were more challenging in a management area than just strictly flying.

RV: Was there any pressure on you to come back home and work for your father?
RF: Oh, no no. I never aspired to that.

RV: Okay. How did your parents feel about you being at the Academy and in the military?
RF: Sort of like they did in high school, they sort of figured I knew what I was doing and why I wanted to do that. I don’t think they really ever quite understood what the Air Force Academy was. I think they knew I was in the Air Force, but I don’t think they realized that it was as challenging, you know like it was the equivalent of a very high quality four-year college.

RV: Did they ever get out to visit you in Colorado?
RF: Yes, my freshman year we weren’t allowed to go home at Christmas, so my mother came out with another woman and she was the mother of a good friend of mine from Pennsylvania that we were both in the same class, and they came out and spent Christmas out there and we were allowed to go out there and have dinner with them and stuff like that. So she got a chance to seek, that was at Lowry Air Force Base and then at graduation my mother and my father came out for the graduation.

RV: Okay, what was that like for you, to have them out there when you graduated from?
RF: I was very proud of that. They loved Colorado by the way.

RV: Oh, really?
RF: Yes, they really liked it.

RV: So when you graduated you said you did go through your basic, basic physical training, weapons training, things like that during your summers, is that correct?
RF: Yes.

RV: How did you adapt personally to the military discipline?
RF: Easy. It was easy for me. I understood what they were trying to teach me and I agreed with it, so I wasn't fighting it. I had a couple roommates, one particular who fought it, mainly because I think he struggled academically and I tried to help him and counsel him and do whatever I could tutor him. He just didn’t have the commitment I
don’t think, and he basically left the Academy but all my other roommates were great. Matter of fact we’re still very good friends, with just about every roommate I ever had.

RV: I was going to ask you did you from special friendships there?
RF: Oh yes, the best.

RV: Were you able to run into them during your career at all in the Air Force?
RF: Oh, yes it’s a small society. Aviation is fairly small, and the United States Air Force is an even smaller society. And yes, I would come across them. A lot of times we’d be in the same unit or we’d meet in an officers’ club or we’d seen each other out on the line or something like that, and I got to almost all the reunions so I maintain close contact with my classmates.

RV: Okay, okay. Well tell me about your first basic flight training, I take it this took place in 1960 after graduation, did you go down to Florida?
RF: Yes, I went to Florida, reported in in August of 1960 at a place called Bartow, B-A-R-T-O-W. It’s just outside of Winter Haven, Florida and it was a nice little airport. Our instructors were civilian instructors and we flew two airplanes, the first airplane was called a T-34. It was a trainer, primary trainer and that was a single engine 225 horsepower recip and then we, I think we had about thirty hours on that and then we went into a T-37, which was a twin engine jet, and that was just like downtown. I mean we went from a noisy, hot airplane to one that was just close the canopy, turn on the air conditioning and it was sitting in front of a TV at home. It was very comfortable.

RV: How did you do flying personally as a pilot?
RF: Good, I loved all aspects of it. I mean there’s nothing quite as rewarding as knowing that you can take an airplane up, fly it around, do aerobatics, you can fly formation with three other airplanes and by yourself and you come back and you pitch out and you land together and I mean you just feel like you’re part of a significant force, and you’re special.

RV: Did it come naturally to you?
RF: I guess, not as natural as some guys probably, but a lot better than most guys I think. I think we all struggled, I mean it’s a different world, have you ever flown?

RV: No, sir.
RF: Yes, it’s a different world Richard, very different and you have to transition
to it. I mean you struggle with anything, all kinds of problems, everything from air
sickness initially to maybe you just didn’t like it or didn’t like your instructor or didn’t
like the guy you were living with. I mean there were all kinds of things but the idea was
that you were mature enough to deal with that and I loved it. We spent, I spent, oh let’s
see, August through up to Christmas at Bartow and we graduated, that was considered
graduation from primary flight training. Then I got my orders to go to Reese Air Force
Base, I was able to drive home for Christmas and then I drove, I had an old Austin
Healey. It was about a six year old Austin Healey and I drove that all the way out to
Reese in the middle of winter, and a Healey is not exactly a good winter car. But I don’t
know, I don’t have any bad memories, it was all good stuff basically. And I reported into
Reese in January and you know what is like in January in Lubbock.

RV: Yes, sir.

RF: Whew, it was cold. I can remember, so cold, going to pre-flight on a T-33,
that was the airplane we flew and I was so cold I was shaking, I could hardly read the
checklist. And they also, an interesting thing Richard is we were the first class of officers
that most of these guys had ever put through. They were normally aviation cadets, in
other words they had not been commissioned yet. So we were the first class of second
lieutenants, and they treated us like cadets again and we rebelled a bit at that, because we
had been through four years of stuff, these guys might have been through a couple years
of ROTC, and you’re trying to treat us like a bunch of low lifes and that kind of changed
after a couple months. They had us cleaning the latrines and doing crap like that.

RV: Oh boy.

RF: We didn’t mind doing that stuff, but I didn’t feel like we deserved to be doing
that stuff. We had been there, done that stuff. What we were there for was to learn how
to fly. So treat us like an officer, we’ll treat you like an officer; we’ll get along fine.

RV: These are obviously not civilian instructors?

RF: No, no they’re all military and they were only maybe a year ahead of us.

Most of these guys had graduated from flight training and then became an instructor and
came right back to where they had been. They never fired a shot in combat or done squat
besides been at a flying, training base.
RV: Right, right. How many people were in your class at Bartow?
RF: My class was 62-B or 62-Bravo and I would guess there were maybe forty, something like that.
RV: Okay, how many finished out?
RF: Don’t know exactly, maybe thirty.
RV: Okay, and how about at Reese, what were the numbers, do you remember?
RF: It was probably similar. I really can’t tell you with any authority on that.
RV: Okay. When you think back to your training at Bartow, what comes to mind, what do you remember most about that.
RF: Bartow?
RV: Yes, sir.
RF: It was a great time. I was a bachelor driving a sports car and learning how to fly for nothing, and they were paying me to do it. It was quite a transition from being at the Academy.
RV: Right, I can imagine. And how about at Reese, what do you remember about your time at Reese?
RF: It was cold and it was a lot more disciplined than Bartow was. We all kind of fell out at Bartow, like man we finished four years and this is the way you get treated when you’re in the real Air Force, and now you go back to Reese and they treat you like a cadet again and you say what happened, you know? I thought I was farther along now then I was before and they treat me lousy. But we moved over that and I happened to have a very good instructor. I had good instructors all the way through. If I had had a ding-a-ling I probably would have struggled with that.
RV: How important is it to have that good instructor, that you can relate to?
RF: Fundamental I think, and if you can’t relate to them and they can’t relate to you and you don’t like each other, you should ask for an instructor change. There’s no reason to jeopardize your career because some guy comes up short as an instructor. I mean you’re struggling with a lot of things there. When you’re learning to fly you fly every day, maybe twice a day and you start out with basic stuff just, you have to memorize a whole bunch of stuff. It becomes sort of robotic almost and then you transition into the aerobatics and you transition into formation and instrument flying and
these are all very special skills. So you spend one whole year flying almost every day so
if you don’t like it, obviously you’re getting a full dose of it. You’d better figure out
early on that you want to go somewhere else.
RV: Which of the aircraft that you had flown to this point, the T-34, 37 and 33 did
you like the best?
RF: I guess I liked the T-37. That was my first jet and that’s where we were able
to do a full range of aerobatics and formation. It was pretty nifty stuff; it was like a
sports car in that airplane.
RV: Any incidents that happened at Bartow or at Reese that you recall?
RF: Just minor stuff, you’d have an alternator go offline on the T-34 and you get a
big red light in the cockpit and you know how to deal. I mean you memorized all this
stuff; you knew it by heart backwards and forwards. You’d deal with it and come back
with the T-37 I don’t, I know that we had, we were cautioned not to get that into a spin
because you could get into what they call a flat spin in the T-37. You couldn’t recover
from it, but you did have an ejection seat in the T-37, so it was downtown, I mean you
were flying a pretty good airplane there.
RV: Anybody injured in your training that you recall?
RF: I know a guy punched out, I don’t know exactly what happened but I don’t
think he was fatally hurt or anything, just the guys who resigned, SIE they called it, self-
initiated elimination.
RV: Okay, well how long were you at Reese, from January ’61 until when?
RF: September, graduated, I should know the exact date, it was early in
September because we got married about a week later. It was about the 14th or something
of September 1961.
RV: Okay, and at that point according to where you were in rank at Reese, could
you choose where your next assignment would be or did they pick this for you?
RF: No, you got it right the first time.
RV: Okay, so what did you want to do?
RF: I forget what I volunteered for, a couple choices. One of the things, I knew I
was getting married, and I thought what a great time to go overseas as a young couple
and so we ended up flying a transport in Japan, but it was the only neat overseas
assignment that was offered. I remember I used that as my criteria rather than the airplane, and we went to Tachikawa, Japan, spent three years, had two baby boys born there.

RV: Wow, okay so this is, did you go over in fall of ’61?
RF: After graduation, I’m trying to remember the exact order. I think after graduation from flight training I think we went through survival training first, out at Reno, Stead Air Force Base there. That was about a month training out in the woods and learning how to survive if you got shot down or had to bail out. Then I went through C-124 training at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma, and that was a three month deal and that was quite a shock to me because I was used to flying a nice little airplane like a fighter and all of a sudden I’ve got this big truck behind me but I learned a lot and I flew with a lot of guys that were very, very good pilots.

RV: Tell me about.
RF: Excuse me.
RV: Go ahead.
RF: It was very interesting because we flew all over the place.
RV: In the C-124?
RF: Yes.
RV: Tell me about the 124, describe that airplane to me.
RF: It was a huge airplane, the big doors in the front opened up and the doors, it had like belly doors also with an elevator, you could pull the cargo up on that. You could haul troops or cargo or both, and it had four huge engines on it, they were called 4360s, that’s a term for the number of cubic inches, and I think it was like a stack of doughnuts. There were like four stacks of radial systems, and it was huge. it was one of the biggest reciprocating engines ever, that the Air Force ever built and you had a pretty big crew. You had two flight engineers, you usually had a copilot and a navigator and a loadmaster. The minimum crew would be about six people, but we flew formation, we did a lot of air drops and I flew all over the Far East with it, including Vietnam and that was early on in the war.
RV: Speaking of the war, and speaking of Southeast Asia, how much had you kept up with what American foreign policy was doing overseas? Were you into following that, or did you just kind of follow to where your career might go?

RF: Oh, I can’t tell you exactly. I think we weren’t exposed to the amount of information, I mean they had the *Stars and Stripes* which was a daily newspaper that was given, that you bought but I mean you weren’t immersed in things like you would be back in the States or anything like today where you had daily television, I mean you’re watching a war on TV here. Back then, I mean we had a family. I was gone a lot, my wife was trying to keep things together on the home front, and like I said we had two little boys born there. We almost lost the first one in a Japanese hospital. It was not easy. I mean there were a lot of domestic things that you are more focused on at that point in your life I think.

RV: You’re there in Japan, ’62 to ’64?

RF: Five, ’65.

RV: ’65, okay.


RV: Okay, so it was a three-year tour, all right. So you basically hauled stuff around Southeast Asia.

RF: Yes.

RV: What kind of things would you do? Tell me about your typical day and where you would go and what you would carry.

RF: If we left Tachikawa we probably flew down to Okinawa, four-hour flight, and we would be carrying a whole bunch of equipment maybe to support a fighter squadron and then we would spend a couple hours on the ground, offload, on load some stuff from Okinawa and flew down to the Philippines, another four hour flight. And we’d land at Clark Air Base and then we’d probably go into crew rest and we’d go into crew rest for about fifteen hours and then we’d. We kept the same airplane which was quite unusual, we didn’t flop airplanes and then we would, next day we would fly over to Saigon or Bangkok and then we’d spend maybe a week in Saigon or Bangkok flying out of there, staying in a hotel, but flying all over the country, taking things out to support units throughout the country. And then we would be hauling passengers back; we could
RV: How close were you with your crew, did you keep the same crew or did it rotate in and out of the airplane?

RF: You kept the same crew for that particular trip. Our trips averaged maybe ten days, seven to ten days, and you had the same crew at that time and then when you go back you get your minimum crew rest, maybe two days or so, I think it was one per three with a maximum of three days. So if you’re gone nine days you got three days crew rest and if you’re going twelve days, you got three days crew rest, didn’t matter. And then you’d launch with a different crew. And of course I started flying as a copilot until I got enough time to qualify and then upgraded to aircraft commander.

RV: Tell me what your first impressions were of Vietnam and Saigon.

RF: Interesting. Beautiful country. Bangkok was a lovely city. We were, a fair amount of Americans were there at that time, but we had our favorite places to go where we could buy jewelry and we would have a steak, we knew there was a good steak at a particular restaurant. Saigon was a little different; it was a little iffy at that time. You were more concerned about security than you were in Bangkok, but it was, to me it was a dirtier city than Bangkok. But it was interesting, the French influence was obvious and it was just interesting to see all these people and flying in and out of there for a week, you got to know the country pretty well.

RV: Right, right. How much contact did you have with Vietnamese civilians initially, did you stay in Tan Son Nhut or did you actually stay at a hotel downtown?

RF: We stayed in a hotel downtown at that time; especially if you’re going to fly for any repeated times successive days, we never. I don't remember staying at Tan Son Nhut. They really didn’t have quarters for us at that time.

RV: What year did you first get into Saigon?

RF: ’62.

RV: ’62?

RF: Yes.

RV: And you, I guess flying in and out of there over the next three years, what kind of changes did you see?
RF: Well, I could see the build up. We were carrying a lot of stuff in there. We were carrying ammunition, we were carrying helicopters, we were carrying just about everything you need to go to war, and from ’62 to ’65 there was a significant buildup. We were there carrying the stuff so we could see it. Like I used to fly into Tan Son Nhut, I’m sorry, Da Nang when it was called a PSP runway, pierced steel planking, and we would land the airplane on that. It was just like a steel mat and you’d land on that and have to reverse the engines real hard because it wasn’t real long and they would offload and on load the stuff and then off you’d go. Of course by the time I got over there for my Vietnam tour in ’67, Da Nang was two parallel ten thousand foot concrete runways, so that was a very significant. I mean I’d been flying into Vietnam since ’62 so when I went over there in ’67 I knew what to expect.

RV: Right. How did you feel, ’62, ’63, ’4 and into ’65, flying in a war zone, did that affect your flying at all?

RF: No, not really it was kind of exciting actually. And I learned a lot from guys I flew with. They were transport pilots but they were highly qualified. We flew in all kinds of weather. We made instrument approaches in pretty scary places. Flew into Taiwan, Taipei, there were a lot of mountainous territory, terrain there. Bangkok was pretty flat. Vietnam was pretty flat but it was jungle and we flew into Laos. I even got into Hong Kong one time.

RV: Where in Laos did you fly into, Vientiane?

RF: I can’t remember, I’m sorry. I do remember flying into Karachi and what we were doing there, we either took in or took out a U-2.

RV: Oh really.

RF: Yes, that was interesting.

RV: Very interesting.

RF: It was a very highly classified mission at that time.

RV: I can imagine. Do you remember what you carried into Laos?

RF: No, I don’t.

RV: Did you understand personally or what did the Air Force tell you, or what did you gather from other sources, what the United States was trying to do in Southeast Asia?
RF: I guess I understood what the general consensus was, that we were trying to support the Vietnamese people, the South Vietnamese people and prevent them from going communist, and we were building up for that purpose.

RV: Okay, what were your views on that, did you agree with that or was that?

RF: Yes. At that point in my life I was doing what I was told.

RV: Okay. How about those around you, your crewmates and then those in your units, were they pretty much out of the same understanding, same feelings?

RF: Yes, very much so. If you weren’t, you would have stood out, believe me.

RV: Really, okay. Did you ever have any, during this three year tour in Japan, did you ever have any incidents in country, in Vietnam, any time were you shot at, any incidents on the runways, any close air calls?

RF: I don’t think so. We had some pretty nasty weather sometimes. But if I was shot at, I don’t remember being shot at. Now, when I was stationed there I remember being shot at.

RV: Right. Did they give you any special instructions, say okay you’re flying South Vietnam, there’s a war going on, here’s what you need to do differently?

RF: Yes, and a good example of that. We had, I guess it was in the 141 later on, but we had a very high degree glide slope instead of the standard three-degree glide slope or so it was something like four and a half degrees. So you were basically coming down a very steep gradient to avoid ground fire. That was more in the C-141 than; I don’t think we did that in the 124. We were fairly, I don’t think we were really aware keenly of how tough that was. I mean as far as, excuse me just a second, someone’s at the door.

RV: Okay, sir. Let me ask you, when you got into Saigon and into Da Nang, and I don’t know if you had any contact with civilians at all in Da Nang, but in Saigon you were living downtown for a period of time when you were in country. How did the Vietnamese civilians treat you?

RF: Fine.

RV: Yes?

RF: Yes, it didn’t seem to be a problem. But I think they were careful about where they selected the hotels for us, but there wasn’t a threat. I know we used to eat in a place called The Floating Restaurant right on the Saigon River, and that subsequently was
blown right out of the water. I mean things were a lot different early on in the war then
they were later.

RV: Did you notice a change over the years?
RF: Oh, yes, yes, yes.
RV: As far as their attitude was concerned?
RF: I couldn’t specifically say, I mean they were interested in selling things. If
you were interested in buying you were their friends.
RV: So after your tour in Japan is finished in 1965 did you go back stateside?
RF: Yes, I got an assignment the airplane called a C-141; it’s a four-engine swept
wing jet. It was state of the art at that point in time.
RV: Okay, where were you stationed?
RF: Well I returned to Dover Air Force Base, and then we reported in to Dover
and then my family and I went out to Oklahoma City again. That’s where we
transitioned into the new airplane. Three months in Oklahoma City and then back to
Dover.
RV: Okay, so you did your flight training there in Oklahoma City.
RF: Yes.
RV: Okay, tell me about the C-141.
RF: Great airplane, it cruised at mach .74. It was the airplane that replaced, what
they had then was like 707s and C-135s, and they were using them, it was about the only
jet that they really were operating, and the 141 came along just in time to replace that. I
was in one of the first classes in the airplane. I guess the airplane came in, the inventory
maybe a couple months before I went through the training. So it was brand new to me
and brand new to everybody and a lot of these guys had never flown jets before because
some of these guys came out of pilot training when they didn’t have jets. And so that
was a transition. For some of these guys never were able to upgrade in the 141. It was
much faster, more powerful and it was a nice airplane to fly though, very stable and I
guess I got about I don’t know, eight or ten thousand hours in the airplane so I flew it a
lot.
RV: Where did you fly it during this time period?
RF: Worldwide.
RV: Okay, so you.
RF: We went both to Europe as well as to Southeast Asia.
RV: And how long was this tour, you were based out of Dover?
RF: I was in Dover for a year and a half, yes and I volunteered to go to Vietnam
because I really wanted to go back to graduate school and that was, the way I saw it, that
was a ticket to, if you went through a combat tour, and I was planning to stay in the Air
Force, you needed a combat tour on your record and going back to graduate school
obviously was a big plus too. And there were some professional schools like Command
and Staff or Air War College. Basically I had flown so much, I had had about five years
of consecutive flight time and I was gone all the time too. I have to admit that from a
domestic viewpoint, it was hard on my wife. I mean she was raising two kids all by
herself effectively. I was gone probably eighty, ninety percent of the time. So anyhow I
flew at Dover and I volunteered to go to Vietnam and I put down two airplanes, one was
the B-57 and one was the C-123.
RV: And you got the 123?
RF: Yes, that came through almost right away.
RV: Okay. Did you know what you would be doing?
RF: No, not exactly. It was later I learned that I’d be flying Ranch Hand.
RV: Okay. How did your wife feel about your volunteering to go to Vietnam?
RF: Well, she didn’t like it but she understood why I was doing it, because it
wasn’t much of a life the way it was.
RV: Right, okay. So you saw it maybe as a means to kind of further your career,
get into grad school.
RF: Yes. And plus if you’ve got a war going on and you’re in the military, that’s
where you want to be.
RV: Okay, so when did you arrive back in Vietnam, this is 1967?
RF: Let’s see, July 1967. We went from Dover down to Florida down here and I
transitioned into the C-123 near Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field. We flew there
for about three months, stuff that included formation, low level training and spray
training.
RV: Now how difficult was it transitioning from the 141 to the 123?
RF: It wasn’t that tough. I mean I was used to flying formation in the 141 and we flew low-level formation and that also for drop missions. But the 123 was a totally different ball game. I mean it was pretty basic; it just had two R-2800 engines in it when I initially checked out on it. And I didn’t know I was going to be flying spray until I got down here to training, and then they told that we’d be going to the Ranch Hand outfit.

RV: What did you know about Ranch Hand up to that point?

RF: Nothing, why they were scary. I mean everybody had talked about it, said man they really, they get a lot of this, you’re going to be flying low level, you’ll take a lot of ground fire, some guys get shot down. It was a little different than what they call a trash hauler 123, and anyhow I had good instructors again, I was fortunate and I didn’t have any trouble transitioning into the airplane.

RV: Okay, what kind of training did they put you through, just practicing that low level?

RF: Well you start out just doing your basic landings and short field landings and short field takeoffs and then if your capable of flying the airplane in all type of attitudes and flying it an instrument approach and that type of thing, then they would transition you into the formation, and that was low level formation, that was a different type of formation than I had flown. I mean we were like a hundred feet off the trees, that’s where we sprayed at, and they had their own set of tactics although I don’t think. The instructors we had in the formation part were previous Ranch Hand pilots, so they knew what it was all about but they didn’t have any spray tanks or anything like that on the airplane, not here.

RV: Okay, and they would teach you this once you got in country?

RF: Yes.

RV: Where were you based in Vietnam?

RF: Bien Hoa.

RV: At Bien Hoa. Tell me about flying back into Vietnam at Bien Hoa knowing you’re going to be there a year, how did you feel about that? This is different from flying in and out of country obviously?

RF: Sure. It wasn't fun when I left my family in Florida. I mean I can still remember that was a pretty sad moment for me, and rude. I didn’t go directly over to
Vietnam, I went to the Philippines and had to go through jungle survival school and that was pretty interesting to say the least. But there you met a lot of guys that were going to F-105s or F-4s or 123s or C-130s or all kinds of people, and then we went into Vietnam and I remember the first night there was kind of scary because there were, we could hear some of the gunfire and stuff and we stayed in this real dingy hotel in Saigon. There were about six of us in a room I think, and then the next day we got airlifted into Bien Hoa and I had to report into the squadron. It was called the 12th Air Commando Squadron, ACS, they didn’t even call it a Troop Carrier Squadron, it was Air Commando.

RV: What kind of quarters did you have at Bien Hoa?
RF: They were called hooches, open bay with screens and there were probably six to eight guys per hooch, and it wasn’t air conditioned obviously.

RV: It was not.
RF: We had a problem with, pardon me.
RV: It was not air-conditioned?
RF: No, no. We had a problem with security there. Vietnamese would come in and try to steal from you at night so they had a metal locker they had to lock everything into, and every night you would put your stuff in there and put a lock off it because they would come and take that right next to where you were sleeping.

RV: So they’d come in at night while you were asleep and try to take things?
RF: Yes.
RV: Interesting. Now, were these the civilians that were doing your laundry and cleaning up or were these just people who were?
RF: I think they were outsiders. We had a maid and she was very good. I don’t think that she had anything to do with it. I had a couple incidents there. I caught a guy stealing one night and I pretty much knocked him out and sat on him until the air police came out and picked him up, but that was like three o’clock in the morning and you know every time you hear a loud noise at night you were heading for the bunker and that’s what I thought it was at first. Somebody was screaming and they were yelling “Thief” and I thought, what is he saying, what is he saying? And I finally figured out he was yelling thief and I saw a guy running to the fence and I went after him and I caught him and
subdued him and took him out into the street and called the air police and they came over
and picked him up. And he had my radio, the only thing he had on him was my radio.

RV: Your radio.

RF: Strangely enough, and then in Tet Offensive we got overrun at the base and
we got rocketed regularly at Bien Hoa. I’d say three times a week almost we would get
rocketed.

RV: Did that start when you got over there in July?

RF: No, the Tet Offensive I think.

RV: Well yes, that was early but this; the rocketing did that kind of happen
constantly?

RF: Yes, as a matter of fact we also flew out of Da Nang, we would go TDY to
Da Nang for a couple of weeks and fly to mountain targets up there at Da Nang, and the
first night I spent in Da Nang we had a rocket attack and I think they killed seven guys in
the building next to us and I was just barely in country and I thought oh man this is going
to be a long, long year. But I remember them carrying these guys out in the sheets and
stuff but rockets were pretty nasty stuff.

RV: Is that your first contact with the enemy, through the rockets, or was it when
you were actually flying.

RF: I guess you’d say it was, when you were flying you were getting the ground
fire, you don’t know exactly who’s doing it but we had fighter cover, we had like four
airplanes, either A-1s or A-37s or F-4s or F-100s, any one of those, I guess it’s just the
four type airplanes, and if we took ground fire the guy in the back would throw a smoke
grenade and they would come in and suppress it. But we would stay on target, I mean
we’d stay on target until we finished it, so we were kind of sitting ducks; we were only
doing 150 miles an hour, one hundred feet above the trees. So we were fairly easy
targets. We took a lot of hits; most of them were not terribly significant. You’d got a
rotor cable shot out or an elevator cable or something like that, but we didn’t get too
much up in the cockpit, we had a couple guys shot right through the neck in the cockpit
which was a very unusual case.

RV: Was anybody ever hit in your airplane?
RF: With me flying, no but the guy who checked me out in country, he got shot
down, he was killed, and then a couple guys I went through class with were shot down.
They lost an engine and they went in upside down. And we lost a couple guys during the
rocket attacks also.

RV: Tell me about the rocket attacks? What would happen at night or how did
they prepare you? Did you have a drill that you would go through? They said here, this
happens, here’s what you need to do.

RF: Yes, they pretty much brief you on that and what you do, you sleep in the
hooches which are just cots and as soon as the siren goes off or if you hear a rocket come
inbound, everybody screams and jumps up and runs for the bunker and those are sand
filled bags over PSP with a roof on top of everything. That’s about the safest place you
can be, you want to sit low or lay low inside of the bunker. And then you’d stay there
until the all-clear signal was given.

RV: Okay. How many times do you think your base was rocketed?

RF: While I was there?

RV: Yes, sir.

RF: Fifty, sixty.

RV: Really?

RF: At least. I mean it was a regular thing for us. Most people, you know if you
have a senior officer, somebody come in for a visit or an inspection, believe it or not they
did that, they would be sure to leave at night. They seldom ever spent the night at Bien
Hoa.

RV: How did you guys feel about that?

RF: Well, we thought they were a bunch of pansies frankly. I mean they were, as
a matter of fact I remember one incident where a full colonel he came in. He was newly
assigned and he was going to take over the maintenance operation, and we had a rocket
attack while we were going out to the airplanes that morning. Early in the morning they
hit us, and the best thing you can do is just get down, lay flat on the concrete. He took
some serious shrapnel in his back and his arms and he was bleeding to death frankly, and
they drove him over to some kind of a vehicle and took him to the hospital. They saved
his life, but I think he lost use of his arm for quite a period of time, and that was his first
or second night at Bien Hoa. Poor guy probably thought, I’ll never make it here. But you
do get steeled to it. I mean just like you watch these guys on television today, you know
the journalists, and the first time that they hear that siren or the first time they hear an
explosion they look scared to death, and then later on in the war you’re going to see them
just sitting there with their mask and their flak vest and a helmet and they’ll just be
talking right through it.
   RV: Is that what happened to you?
RF: Well, you have to otherwise you’re going to die. There were some guys that
really didn’t handle it very well. I remember guys drinking in the bunkers, carrying a
weapon into the bunker and drinking, and you’re saying, my god, what’s going to
happen, It’s one or the other, but I don’t want you drinking anyhow. You’re of no use to
anybody.
RV: So that one night of seven killed, were those the only KIAs that happened
because of rocket attacks while you were there at Bien Hoa?
RF: Oh, no that was just the one night. No, I ended up losing everything I owned.
Our hooch burned right to the ground and I went back about a week after when the thing
cooled off and I was able to find my ring, which I had locked in my locker, and it was my
Academy ring and I could tell where my bed had been because I had a fan and that was
melded down to a lump and my watch was melded down to lump and I was able to find
my ring under about six inches of ashes believe it or not, because I knew where it had
been, and I still have the ring. I was able to get it cleaned up, and it was white gold so it
was okay. But everything else I had a bicycle, I had all kinds of letters, I had a painting a
guy did of me over there by the 123, and it was something I really like but it all got
burned up. I lost, I had nothing fancy there. I mean everything I had was basic stuff.
Some guys had big stereo units and stuff like that. I never needed anything like that.
Anyhow I lost everything I had and I flew again the next morning. I think I had shower
clogs and a flying suit, you know.
RV: So was this when you were gone you said it hit; you had a direct hit on your
hooch?
RF: No, it wasn’t a direct hit on the hooch. It was a direct hit on a--Actually we had a couple that were very close to the bunker, and one of the bunkers was hit and that’s where about six or seven guys were killed, that night, that Tet Offensive.

RV: Okay, that was the Tet Offensive night. Why don't you go ahead and describe what happened that night.

RF: I don’t remember what time it was. It was probably about two o’clock in the morning, and boy the rockets started coming in. The siren went off, we all hit the bunker as usual. We didn’t know there was anything different, and then it was intense. I mean it was a lot more intense than what we were used to. Usually we’d catch a couple rockets coming in and when it was over you’d go back to sleep, but this night it continued and then it caught fire. The hooch caught fire. The bunker caught fire because the sandbags caught fire. All the sand started pouring out so it was no protection at all. We ended up in a ditch, and I remember I had my M-16 and lying in the ditch in my flying suit and we were there all night, and finally daylight and I guess they captured a number of people that were trying to overrun the base and we were. I don’t know that we had anybody in my unit killed; I don’t think so. I think most of us were okay and we went right back to work that morning. Then we slowly acquired some boots and another flying suit but I actually. I truly lost everything I had. I didn’t have anything left.

RV: Did you write home about this or tell your wife about this?

RF: I guess I did eventually, but it was, I’m not sure I wrote her about that particular. I just that we had a rocket attack or something like that, but she saw it on the news, she knew that the Tet Offensive included Bien Hoa.

RV: Right, right. How did you fly that next morning? I mean what kind of mind set did you have?

RF: I was shaken I guess, but once you’re flying, it was really almost therapeutic to get back in the airplane. I would much rather have been in the airplane than have some staff job because flying, I flew almost every day, and flying once or twice, normally twice a day. I mean you were preoccupied, you were focused on what you were doing and then you would target study that afternoon for the nest one, so you were flying almost every day. We did have an R & R finally, I guess it was a couple months left in my tour and I met my wife in Hawaii and that’s when I think I told about her about Tet.
RV: Okay. Was that the only R & R you took while your tour?
RF: Yes.
RV: How long were you in Hawaii?
RF: A week.
RV: Okay, what did that do for you mentally?
RF: It was tough. It was great to see her and we were unable to get a hotel. I had
had a hotel reservation and for some reason they cancelled it and we ended up going out
to a place called Fort Bellows, which was an Army camp but it was a bunch of little
houses on the beach and it was fantastic. It was much better than a hotel room. I think it
was eight dollars a night, and she and I had our own place and then we would drive into
Honolulu at night but during the day we could just eat our meals out there and we could
lay on the beach and we just had a really nice time, and then I had a couple months to go
on my tour when I got back. A correction, I did have another R & R, they could call it an
R & R, where we ferried a C-123 up to Taipei, on Taiwan, and we had to stay there I
think a couple days while they, it was called IRAN for the airplane, inspect and repair as
necessary, and they went completely through the airplane and I think another airplane
was finished and then we flew that back to Vietnam. So that was considered an R & R if
you would.
RV: Were you ever wounded at all while flying or?
RF: No, no.
RV: Let me ask you one more question about those rocket attacks. How did you
deal with death, the idea of death, the idea that you could be shot down any time, the idea
that a rocket could hit your hooch at any time?
RF: I remember initially, you know the first month or two I was really focused. I
was trying to think what if something happened to me, and I also realized how
unpredictable it was. One day you were doing fine and then. I made a life over there. I
played handball [almost] every afternoon; we had a handball court. I would play intense
games of handball for an hour or two in that kind of heat, and by the time you showered
and cleaned up you felt like a million bucks and you were ready to go hit it again the next
day. So I stayed in really good physical shape when I was there. I didn’t, I drank, you
know everybody drank, but that was just part of the game and I think I had a very strong
support at home. My wife’s tough, she’s very tough, durable and she put up with a lot of
nonsense. I’ll tell one little aside if you have a second.

RV: Oh, absolutely, have all the time you need.

RF: When my wife decided to stay in Fort Walton Beach, we thought it was the
best thing because she didn’t really want to go back to Pennsylvania where my home was
because there wasn’t anybody. There were no people from that area who had husbands in
Vietnam. Down at Fort Walton Beach there were a lot of military families and families
that were waiting for their husbands, and besides it was a pretty place and we had two
little boys and we got her a little apartment up on the beach where there was a pool so it
was good. I did not know until I had been in country for two or three months that she
wasn’t getting paid. She was supposed to have receive an allotment which I set up, and I
was living, I think I was living on a hundred dollars a month, and all the rest of my pay,
everything was going to my wife. Well I got a letter of apology from the base
commander. I think he was the base commander at Eglin and he apologized to me. He
was a full colonel and he apologized on behalf of the Air Force for the terrible treatment
that my wife had received, and that was the first time I knew that she had had a problem.
She didn’t want to burden with me that and she just worked her way through it herself,
but she got the normal bureaucratic run around from the Air Force, not intentionally. Its
just they lost the paperwork or they screwed something up and she had no money. She
had to borrow money from some friends until she finally got it reinstated. And when I
found out I just felt like getting on an airplane and coming back, I felt, I was furious. I
think was the turning point for me frankly as far as my career.

RV: Really?

RF: Yes, I didn’t want my family to have to experience crap like that.

RV: What kind of turning point was it for you?

RF: Well, I just didn’t feel that they supported my family. I mean they sent me
off to war and they didn’t even take care of the basic things for her, and she had tried
through numerous people, and numerous offices to get the thing corrected and she had no
luck doing that and she’s no shy violet. I mean she finally had to threaten this colonel she
was going to call our senator and go public with this thing. What a horrific situation she
was in. She had a family, she had two little boys to take care of, and she didn’t have
enough money to buy food. But we got it corrected and after that things settled down. It was okay after that. That was kind of a turning point for me because I put my paperwork in a couple months before I came back and I decided to get out and when I came back they reassigned me to C-141s at McGuire Air Force Base, and I flew them for a year and then I transitioned. I went off active duty one day and the next day I went into the reserve unit. We had what was called an associate reserve unit. It was an excellent opportunity for me to fly and still have a job and I thoroughly enjoyed that. I stayed in the reserves for seventeen years after that and I had a lot more fun flying than I ever did on active duty.

RV: Did the Air Force try to convince you to stay in, stay active?
RF: Yes, they did. I mean the squadron commander tried to talk to me, but I had pretty much made up my mind at that point. There had been too many cases where she received lousy medical care. She received lousy support, and most of the time it was when I was gone, either on a trip or over in Vietnam. And I wasn’t there to help and like I said, she was not afraid to ask for help, but she was, you know she was not a needy person she just wanted to be treated properly, that’s all.

RV: Let’s go back to Bien Hoa, tell me about base life was like. I’ll ask you about your flying just in a little bit, but what was it like there on base, what did you guys do?
RF: Well, like I said we made the best of it. They actually had a swimming pool there and I was like, like I said, I swam for most of my life and I really enjoyed, we would play handball and then we’d shower down and then take a swim. And like I said, it refreshed me. And I said, oh I took two college courses while I was there on base. As a matter of fact we had a rocket attack during one of the finals. I’ll never forget that and we run to the bunker, we’re sitting in the bunker there, and everybody you think you’re scared to death and the guy next to me says, “What’d you get for number seven?” Only in Vietnam. [laughing]

RV: That’s funny.
RF: The food was pretty good; we could eat in the mess hall or the officers’ club. I guess we drank a lot of beer. I didn’t drink anything but beer but we would sing. Ranch Hand was a very high morale. We were a very spirited group to say the least. We used to wear purple scarves, and I still have my purple scarf and we still have reunions. I
haven’t been to one but. When I left Vietnam I had collected some shrapnel and stuff; I wanted to show my kids. You know before I got in the airplane, I took it and threw it in the trash. I said I don’t really want to take this crap back with me. And its not like I hated it there or anything, its just that I didn’t want to dwell on it, and after I came home I had a couple incidents where I had bad dreams and stuff, but I never experienced anybody spitting on me or attacking me verbally or whatever. I probably would have lost it if anybody had ever tried something like that, but I didn’t so I was fortunate. I was also a little older than the average bear over there and I was more mature, I had a family and I don’t think I was subjected to that kind of stuff. As far as life on the base, Bien Hoa wasn’t a bad place actually. We had a library, we had an officers’ club. What else did we have? They even had movies once in a while. You could see a movie if you wanted, I didn’t care for that particularly. And then our hooch was our home. We had maybe six guys in our hooch, and we had one little section of the hooch that we fixed up, we got, we apprehended, were able to obtain, probably traded something for something, its kind of like MASH, and we got some plywood and we fixed up a little bar and we had a refrigerator and so we were able to have some cold beer when we came back. And that was fun, I mean we even had a little Christmas tree and went through all that. I mean it’s the old thing Richard that you ask yourself what am I doing here? You’re really kind of working to protect your buddy and you respect him and he respects you and you make a life out of it and we did that. Another incident I’ll relate to you, I thought we had it fairly tough there we because we didn’t “air-conditioned” quarters, blah, blah, blah. One day I was in the bathroom, the latrine they call it, and we had, believe it or not we had a hot shower, because we had a hot water heater and we ran a pipe from the hot water heater across up into a big coffee can that had holes in the bottom and the cold water and the hot water would mix in that coffee can and you could actually take a warm shower. And there was a young Marine came up to me while I was in there, and he had all his battle gear on and he was covered with mud, head to toe and he said, “Excuse me sir.” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Could I take a shower?” He says, “I’m here on R & R” and I said, “You’re in Bien Hoa on an R & R?” He said, “Yes, sir” I said, “By all means” and that young guy took his mud crusted clothes off and his rifle and all his battle gear, and he just stood under that shower and his eyes rolled back in his head because it was the first
time the kid had had a shower probably in months. And at the end he dried himself, I
gave him a towel and he dried himself off and I think he shaved and then he put his stuff
back on, he was so grateful and I said, “You know how tough do I have it?” This was an
R & R for this young fellow, and I’m whining about not having air conditioning, forget it.
That kind of, I think that kind of focused me, rearranged my perspective somewhat.

RV: When did that happen, how far into your tour were you?
RF: About halfway in. By that time I had adapted to the life. There was another
guy we had who was a navigator, and his solution to dealing with stress was to exercise.
He was going like nine hundred sit-ups a day. The guy finally flipped I think because he
was there one day and gone the next. I think they put him in a psycho ward or something,
but that was the only really kind of break down that I ever saw of the guys that I flew
with. Some guys were scared more than others. I was too busy to be scared because I
became like the chief pilot, and I was checking guys out in country. It was some of the
best flying I’ve ever done as far as pure flying. We would shut engines down on the way
back from target and then re-start them to prove to the guy if they got an engine shot out
it would fly on one engine. You know we’d do stuff like that but it became routine and
today you wouldn’t do that, its like practicing for an accident.

RV: Tell me about, what was your typical day like as far as your flying was
concerned.
RF: We would get up about four and we’d grab a bite to eat in the mess hall and
we’d brief. We’d jump in our little van and we would brief down at the squadron about
five o’clock or something like that. We would fly early because if it got too warm the
spray would not settle down into the trees. It would just drift off because of the heat
rising. Then after the brief, I was either flying lead most of the time or I was in the back
of the pack, either three ship or six ship, and I usually had a student. So I would fly in the
back so I could show them things and teach them things and we could call up the lead and
tell him that we’re going to fly out to the portside and shut an engine down. One time we
shut one down and couldn’t get the damn thing started again, and I said, “This is not
supposed to happen.” So we had to call for an escort, we got an F-100 to come out and
escort us back to the base because if we had gone down out there, they would have never
found us. We used to fly the DMZ sometimes with big six, twelve ship formations; that
was pretty exciting. That was unusual to say the least. Then anyhow we would fly the
first sortie, we would usually hit a target that was fairly close, so that we would only be
up for an hour or so. We’d come back, refuel, reherb and back in the airplane and then
we’d fly formation. Flew formation to the next target, join up and then we’d go back on
a second target and we would be done by noon probably or earlier. We didn’t always fly
two sorties. If the weather was really bad we might cancel one, but we flew through all
kinds of weather. I remember I wrote up, I thought it was a little scary the way these
guys were flying and they’d hit weather and we had no procedures how to deal with it.
And I wrote up some weather procedures, which I think we incorporated and I felt a lot
better after that because we knew how to break formation and then rejoin afterwards. You
know, if you had a three ship, you’d go into a, instead of an echelon you would go into an
V-trail formation and then one guy would break to the left, the other guy would break
right and stay on that heading for a minute or so and then turn back to the original
heading, so you have separation through the weather. So you just maintained the
heading, but you were separated by a half a mile or so, and then when you got out of the
weather, or if you never did get out of the weather you would recover individually,
whereas if you got out of the weather you would join up again. And one of the neat things
was when we used to come back to land. We always came back in and went into a right
or left echelon and we pitched out just like the fighters, you know what I mean.

RV: Yes, sir.

RF: Instead of flying in a rectangular pattern we would come over on initial and
we would break, just like the fighters, and we would just come straight around and touch
down one, two, three, or four, five six, and when we used to go to Da Nang for the TDY
we had a guy, he showed the airplanes how to chute in it, you know like the fighters used
to pop a dry chute. We would come in and the guy would deploy the chute that was
attached to the back.

RV: Was that necessary?

RF: No, and I still remember the guy at Da Nang telling us first time we did that,
we were taxing in with out chutes and he says, “Get hot, Ranch Hand.” It was, we made
a game out of it whenever we could. But that’s what the typical day was, two sorties and
then we’d grab a bite to eat and maybe go over and play some handball. My roommate
and I played handball, and sometimes we’d have cutthroat and the third guy and then
after that we would maybe going over and take a swim and then we’d have a cocktail
before dinner and go over and eat and go to bed early, that was the deal.

RV: Okay. Tell me about your briefings; what kind of intelligence would you
received and how would you rate that intelligence?

RF: As far as I know it was pretty good. We had an intelligence officer in the
squadron we always made fun of, you know we always told him we knew more about
what was going on that he did.

RV: Was that true?

RF: [Laughing] Probably. But he was very conscientious and we would have a
debrief after the missions too. So he was updated theoretically after every mission, what
we saw, what kind of ground fire we saw, did we notice anything unusual and sometimes
we took some really heavy ground fire and when you saw that, you knew they wouldn’t
have put on this target had they known differently.

RV: Do you think the enemy knew at times that you were coming that way?

RF: I have no idea. Unfortunately our targets were pretty much approved by the
Vietnamese, and so it became fairly political. So we were doing what we were told, but
there was so much corruption going on over there, who knows why we were hitting a
particular target.

RV: Right. Tell me about that the herbicide you were spraying? How much
contact did you have with it physically?

RF: We used to fly with our windows down, we had sliding side windows, and we
had armor plate under the seats and around the, below the windows. It was thick, it was
about an inch, or an inch and a quarter armor plate and we flew with the windows open
because we didn’t want to shatter the Plexiglas when the bullets came through, because
like I said, we’d stay on target and they’d just sit there and shoot at us as we came by, but
we got a little smarter later on too. We didn’t, we didn’t have a death wish or anything.

Let’s see we. I’m sorry I lost my train of thought. What was the question you asked me
again?

RV: Just how much actual how much contact you had with Agent Orange; with
the herbicide you were spraying?
RF: Oh, the stuff would come in the windows. You’d come back and you had this stuff on you. There’s no question that we, we didn’t exactly take a bath in it but we sure got lots of it. If you were lead you were fine, but if you were back in the pack, you definitely got herbicide in an Army airplane in the cockpit.

RV: What did they tell you about it?

RF: They didn’t tell us there was any problem with it. I was never told that it was dangerous. The generic name for it was Agent Orange, but then we had stuff called purple and, it was white, purple and another color, they were different types depending on what your target was. Like I said, we used to get the bullets winging through the cockpit sometimes, and that’s when a guy, especially if he was in the turn, we were pretty well protected if they were shooting at us from below, but if we were in a turn at the end of the, we would spray, are you familiar at all with right and left echelon airplanes?

RV: Yes, sir.

RF: We would come on and make a high rate descent onto target and then we’d go into, say we’re doing a rectangular target, we’d go into a, say a left echelon.

RV: Why don’t you explain that for those who will be listening to this in the future?

RF: When we proceeded to and from target, we would fly either a loose formation or in trail where we were stacked and it’s more, it’s easier to maneuver when you’re in trail. When you’re in an echelon you have to be a little more, you have to be less aggressive in your maneuvers, but normally we flew like a loose formation to and from the target. And frequently if we had new pilots we would let them fly fairly tight formations just for the practice. Then we would come on to target, the lead airplane would have a navigator, and we would usually have a, almost always have a FAC and he would smoke the target for us and that was usually the spray on point. So we would stay in formation, and we would go into a high rate descent, pull all the power off and come down as quickly as we could and then we would level off at a hundred feet, push the power back up and call for, say a left echelon, or we could have echeloned before we went down, it depended on what the target was like. And it was up to the lead to do it, to make the call. And then we were on a left echelon, and we would spray on and we would stay spray on until we got to the end of target and then if we were going to make repeated
passes, we would go spray off and then the lead would pull up and we would automatically slide into trail. Two would go in and three behind him, and then we would a 90-270 turn and we were very maneuverable, that airplane was a tough old battle airplane.

RV: I was going to say, what was that 123, how was it handling?

RF: It was great, I liked it. You could really bank and yank it. Anyhow, lead would do a ninety degree turn say to the left and then they come back around and do a 270 turn to the right, so you’re heading back to the target and then he would go into another echelon depending. If you came off on a left echelon, he would probably come back and give you another left echelon coming back. So he would by flying a strip of land where adjacent to the one that number three man has just sprayed. So that’s the way you would cover the target. You would continue to do that until you had completed your target.

RV: Okay, how many times would you have to come back and spray the same target?

RF: You know I don’t remember how long, I think we had a thousand gallons of herbicide, and depending on how long the target was determined how long you could spray. So, I mean you might make, I’d say four to six turns at the end of the target, you know reverse course, come back, spray on, spray off, reverse course, spray on, spray off and then you finished up and then you went max power and climbed off the target. Depending whether you were getting ground fire or not but you had, like I said you had FAC smoking the target and he usually knew if there was any ground fire, not always. Sometimes he would be amazed that we were getting ground fire when he didn’t think there was any.

RV: So when you’re getting ground fire say on your first pass, you just would simply turn and continue and come right back into it?

RF: Oh, yes, yes. Yes, you didn’t just pack it in, you just stayed on target but we did have fighters some of time.

RV: Right, you’d call in suppressive fire?

RF: Yes, and they would lay down some CBUs, cluster bomb units, put their heads down and we’d still get fire but it was much more suppressed.
RV: Okay. How effective was the herbicide itself?

RF: Very effective as a matter of fact, we had a guy named Snuffy Smith. He was one of the guys that had been there six months when I got there, you always an FNG, you know F new guy, or you’re an old timer just counting the days, and Snuffy took off and lost an engine, with a thousand gallons of herbicide on. Now understand, we took off well overweight of the airplane, you never took off that heavy with a cargo, with trash on it, but we, because we had “ability to jettison the herbicide” we could take off a lot heavier. So anyway Snuffy took off, I guess he was number two or three or something, and he lost an engine and he was so heavy he couldn’t maintain altitude, tried to jettison, the damn thing wouldn’t jettison, so he didn’t have much choice, so you know what he did, he went spray on and he sprayed all the way around a rectangular pattern to come back in and make emergency landing. And everyday when you took off you could see this brown pass all the way, a perfect rectangular pattern and he was able to maintain, the airplane, I mean it was pretty good thinking. He killed a few trees that people didn’t want to kill but Snuffy made it.

RV: Have you had any medical effects at all from your exposure?

RF: My wife thinks I have, but I don’t. No, I’m okay. I’ve been going back for that annual, I mean tri-annual physical, I guess every three to five years, and as far as I know, I mean I’m sixty-five years old now and I’m still going okay.

RV: Okay, okay. What were your impressions of the enemy?

RF: Well, I didn’t seem them face-to-face you know. I thought they were very determined people. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time I think, and we didn’t have the ability to go after them. The enemy was determined and they could live out in the jungle for months and we couldn’t do that. And because it was so politicized I’m not sure that our intelligence or our security was that good. But the enemy, you have to respect them. They thought they were fighting for what was right, and they were tough.

RV: What would you say were his strengths and weaknesses?

RF: Oh, strengths it was his determination and ability to survive off the land. He was used to the environment and we weren’t. His weaknesses were, I think like these rocket attacks, they would come down the Ho Chi Minh trail, each guy with a piece of the rocket, and they get down in South Vietnam and they would meet and assemble this
rocket and shoot a rocket off and then they truck it on back. I mean weakness being you
know you had to wonder about the futility of it sometimes, but that goes back to their
determination. They were getting bombed and strafed and fire bombed, and they just
hung in there. I don’t know what their weaknesses might have been other than the fact
that they were probably ill-equipped and they were brainwashed but maybe we were a
little brainwashed too, I don't know.

RV: Did you ever do any spray missions in Cambodia or Laos?
RF: Yes, I think we did in Laos, but I don’t remember much about it, sorry.
RV: Well, no it sounds like it was just another routine mission; you just went to a
different geographical area.
RF: Yes, that was usually, I know we did and I think we had A-1s covering for us
because they were the best cover airplanes for us because they were.
RV: Why?
RF: They had so much firepower and they could stay on target with us. An F-4
would come down and make one pass and they’d have to go back up, turn around and
come back, F-100s were good too and so were the A-37s but the A-1s were the best. And
they were, Sandy normally was their call sign, and they were normally, they seemed to be
very experienced pilots.
RV: Could you request your cover or did it just, is whatever was there that day?
RF: Yes, we were scheduled for the cover. We used to fly with some of these
guys in the cockpit with us, the fighter pilots. They would come and sit on an armor-
plated box on the center console and they developed a pretty good respect for us. There
we are down a hundred feet getting shot at and we were glad to have them because it
gave them an appreciation of what we were doing down there.
RV: Did you ever fly with them?
RF: No, no I don’t think we were ever invited to, so. I mean they pretty much had
a single seat airplane, if they had a trainer. If they had a TF model, they normally had
someone in there as a student. I don’t know that they had that luxury.
RV: How did you guys get along as pilots?
RF: Good. Yes, we never had any problems.
RV: Okay. What kind of weapons did you carry?
RF: A .38 and an M-16.

RV: You had that in the plane with you?

RF: We had it on our person. Yes we had a .38 strapped to us. We had a survival vest on with a bunch of stuff on it, a flak vest over that. I guess we had the flak vest and then the survival vest over that. And then I knew I had an M-16. We would keep it right next to us in the cockpit and a .38. Some guys might have carried something differently, but that’s all I ever had.

RV: Okay. Did you guys ever return fire at all?

RF: Yes, some lulu would stick a gun out of the back of the airplane and strafe with it, but that was kind of a joke. Made them feel good but I don’t think it did anything.

RV: Right. Did you have all the weapons that you wanted personally? Was there something that you did not have that you did want?

RF: No I was, I felt like that’s about all I could handle while trying to fly the airplane.

RV: Okay. Tell me about the Agent Orange tank back there, the herbicide tank. This was, I’ve heard stories that the stuff was all over the airplane, kind of sloshing around, it was quite messy, what was that like?

RF: No the tanks were well maintained. There was a pump and there was an armor plated box that the guy, the flight engineer, after we were coming on target he would get out, he would leave the cockpit and go back and climb down into this armor plated box and he had the troop doors removed so he could throw smoke grenades out if we took fire. And he would sit down low in the box and when we said, “Spray on,” we would, he would have the pump pressure, I mean the pump on and the pressure up and then we would actually spray from the cockpit, we had a little switch on the oak. And he would just kind of keep his head down there and keep the pressure up on the tank but as far as I know it was a pretty good system.

RV: Your particular aircraft, did you take any, I mean you took hits but there was anything that you remember, any specific incident where you had some serious problems from the hits you took?
RF: It wasn’t unusual to lose a cable or something but there was normally another
cable you could use or you had some kind of a, or if you lost an engine. If you lost flight
control and an engine, you got a problem, but if you just lost one or the other you could
still deal with it. There were numerous times that we either had an engine problem or lost
an engine and had to come back single engine. That wasn’t real unusual. I remember the
first time I got a bullet through the airplane it scared the hell out of me, but it was one of
those up in Da Nang I remember and it tore a huge hole in the back of the airplane. It was
probably fifty millimeter, I don't know what it was, I mean fifty cal, but it got my
attention. A lot of it was ground fire, we used to tell the story about a guy that got a spear
in the bottom of the airplane, I don’t know if that was true or not but I do know that we
used to take bullets, ground fire from above us.

RV: Really?

RF: Yes, because we’d be flying through a valley and they’d be up at the ridgeline
and shooting at us, so we’d actually be lower than the ridgeline and the bullets would
come in the top and go out the bottom of the airplane.

RV: Did they get better with their shooting as you were there?

RF: Not that I noticed. I took about thirty-five hits or so, I think total in the
airplane, none on me.

RV: Did you ever work with any of the indigenous forces, the South Vietnamese?

RF: I think that yes, some of the things were coordinated but I didn’t really get
involved in that very much. If they were it wasn’t in my area of responsibility.

RV: So you had pretty limited contact with them?

RF: Yes.

RV: What was their reputation, what did you hear about them?

RF: It wasn't great. Some of them were very good I think, and others were, I
don’t think they really were that well trained or had their heart in it. I guess you have to
stop and think what would you be like or you were being, if your whole country is at
war? When you had people everywhere you couldn’t trust, I don’t know. I don’t know
how I would react but I think their pilots were fairly good, but it depends on that kind of
mission they were flying, I don’t know how gutsy they were frankly.
RV: Okay. Did you ever work with any of the other allied forces, the Australians, the South Koreans, New Zealanders, any of those?

RF: Yes, they might have been in the area where we were spraying or working so we would be careful not to try to put any spray on those guys, and they would obviously have to know that we would be coming in. Any airplane flying over could be a threat, depending on who it was, but we did, obviously we had air superiority so we pretty much flew wherever we wanted to and targets would vary a lot, so you had one target, you’d go down in the delta, that was considered a piece of cake and another target you would go up north, but frankly I think we got hit on targets that a lot of times we expected it to be a piece of cake and other ones we expected a real hot target and we didn’t take any ground fire. I don’t know, so that may tell you that intelligence wasn’t that great.

RV: Yes. Where was the one place in South Vietnam that you really dreaded flying, that you did not want to go over and spray?

RF: It wasn't the delta, the delta was pretty easy. It was the targets probably around, anything around Saigon or Bien Hoa, or north of us, yes. Some of the mountain targets we took some ground fire too, up near Da Nang. But I don’t remember specifically any dreaded spot, you know.

RV: Okay, okay. As far as life on base, how much contact did you have home with your wife and everything, did you write her?

RF: We had a great deal. We wrote regularly, I probably wrote four to five letters a week and she would write to me, we also sent tapes back and forth and a neat thing we did, our boys were two and four years old, and let me think, let’s see Kevin was five and Mark was three. I guess three and five years old and Lutzi, my wife would send me a book and I would read the book on the tape and then I would send the tape back to the boys and send the book back and so they could open the book and hear me read the book.

RV: That’s wonderful.

RF: It was a great idea, that was her idea.

RV: Do your boys remember that?

RF: Yes, but you know what, the other day, not the other day, a month or so ago we were cleaning out some stuff in the basement, not only did we come across some, we came across some letters from her and from me, but we also came across some old tapes,
and the kids are on there you know when they’re two and I mean three or five years old. We let them hear these tapes of what they sounded like when they were this age and it was pretty neat. And listening to the tapes again at this time is, you know is kind of interesting.

RV: Did you ever make any of the MARS phone calls?
RF: I don’t think so.

RV: How well were you able to keep up with the news back in the United States?
RF: Well, we read the *Stars and Stripes*. I don't know that we had any other sources of information at that point unless somebody during the intelligence briefing told us something.

RV: Right, okay. Do you think the war affected your religious beliefs at all?
RF: No.

RV: Did you notice its effect on any of the other men?
RF: Some of the younger guys I thought were, I think more stricken by the stress of the situation and other guys were just tough as nails. You had guys there that could help you if you were really shaken about something, but I never had that problem. The first month or two I was scared most of the time, but after that you know you settle into a life and you could be on the moon if that’s where you were and you live it, that’s all. I sure didn’t count days for a long time. I mean if you started counting how many days you had left from say when you were there; you probably had a long tour.

RV: What about the relationship with the guys in your unit? Did you form some special relationships with them?
RF: Yes, I guess one of my best friends was my roommate, a guy named Bill Tucker, and someday I’m going to go look them up again but we had a lot of laughs, we used to hang out together a lot. We played handball together, we’d go to the club together and there were probably ten other guys in the unit. Tom Quinn, I went through training with. He and I were good friends, and probably ten other guys that I was good friends with. I knew everybody in the squadron and if we flew together either as a pilot or if he was a navigator and you were lead, you got to know him real well. We were a very tight group.

RV: Do you keep in touch with any of them?
RF: Not directly, no. Funny you should ask that. I often ask myself why I didn't but I guess if I went to one of the reunions, which I plan to go to the next one. They’re usually down here in Florida and we always have something going on. I know that I’d see some. I remember a lot of their names. I have a lot of eight-millimeter movie film of Ranch Hand. I don’t know if that would ever be of interest to you, but you could see close up what we were doing. I would be flying the airplane and I would say “Okay, take the airplane for just thirty seconds or so” and I’d shoot like descent, the rapid descent on the target or I would let the other guy, because we were both considered aircraft commanders. We didn’t have any copilots, and if he was flying the airplanes for a minute or so I could shoot a film but I got some really good pictures of them. I have to put them on videotape so I can let my kids have them, I’m sure they’d like to see them. I’d never shown them to them.

RV: Did you have any, or encounter any racial issues while you were there?
RF: Racial issues?
RV: Yes, sir.
RF: Absolutely not, no. It wasn’t even a consideration.
RV: Okay, okay. What would you describe as one of the more humorous events that you remember from your tour?
RF: Well, like I said, the guy when we were taking a final exam and ran in the bunker, he was more interested in whether he could answer question number seven than whether he was going to live it or not, that kind of grabbed me. We had some fun times at the club. We used to drink it up a little bit and then throw the glasses; we got in some trouble for doing that. It was stupid but you know you act a little; you act a little bit like children but other humorous events. We had a lot of fun like just getting together after a mission or something. If we had a particularly tough mission, we’d go back over to the club and toast each other. We did a lot of toasting. We had a few favorite songs, a couple chants we used to use that it kind of kept the edge off.
RV: Right, right. Did you all listen to music a lot while you were there?
RF: Yes. I didn't have a lot of music to listen to. I think I had, I mainly listened to the tapes from home and read the letters and like I said, taking the college courses over
there was a diversion for me, it kept my head on straight. I mean you didn’t sit around and wring your hands all day long; you just went to work like everybody else.

RV: Right, right. Which courses did you take?

RF: An accounting course, never had an accounting course. I was more of an engineering type. I took an accounting course and I took a business management course.

RV: How about USO shows, did you ever get to any of those?

RF: Oh, yes. The best was Australian. I still remember that one.

RV: Tell me about that.

RF: Well they had a beautiful girl and she put on a show at the club, and her only prop was an Army cot I think, but it was a great show.

RV: An army cot?

RF: Yes.

RV: Can you explain that?

RF: I don’t remember exactly what she did, but she was a dancer and she just used the cot you know. It wasn’t lewd or anything, she was just a great looking gal and she put on a really good show. We didn’t get the Bob Hope deals, you know like you see. I don’t think we ever had one of them, but they were like smaller groups of people, less well known.

RV: On base did you guys have any encounters with wild animals, snakes, rats, anything like that?

RF: Not that I remember.

RV: Did your unit have any pets?

RF: One of the guys I think had a dog but I don't remember, that was the last thing I was thinking about over there.

RV: Okay, yes. What would you say was one of the more brave actions that you witnessed in Vietnam?

RF: I guess it’s hard to find that in the kind of flying we were doing. I think it took guts to get in the airplane and go do that. The incident I related to you about that young Marine that came in and just took a shower. I felt so sorry for that kid, I just wanted to invite him to come on and have, spend the night with us, relax a little bit you know. I don’t think we had it tough. I think those kids had it tough and they were young
and they were probably not necessarily led by anyone particularly well educated, well
trained, I don’t know. I don’t know that. I had a lot of admiration for those kids that did.
As far as a single act, I mean when we were taking a lot of ground fire on target and we
had to keep going back, we could have left, but going back and going back until they
finished the job, that I thought took some courage.

RV: Yes, absolutely. Do you know what ever became of that kid, did he?
RF: No.

RV: After his shower, that was the last you saw of him?
RF: Yes. That was just like one of those little glimpses in time and you sort of
wish you had gotten his name or something but he was so grateful.

RV: What about the leadership in Vietnam, how would you rate your leadership
in your squadron?
RF: Average. I think the guys that flew the most really were the leaders. The
squadron commander and the ops officer, squadron commander really didn’t do much.
The ops officer we had I didn’t have a lot of respect for. He was a hard ass but he did fly,
he wasn't sitting in the office. He did fly but I don’t know he didn’t show me a lot as far
as the kind of quality officer I would have looked up to. Guys my age and my rank I had
more respect for.

RV: You were a captain, is that right?
RF: I was a captain there, yes.

RV: How old were you?
RF: Let’s see.

RV: Almost thirty, twenty-nine?
RF: I was twenty-nine when I went over and almost thirty when I came home.

RV: What about the overall military leadership in the war, what do you think
about that?
RF: I thought there was a lot of lying with body counts and crap like that. I
remember we had a general came on base one time and told us he wanted us to beautify
the base and tear down the bunkers, and I thought it was a bad joke and he was actually
serious.

RV: Tear down your bunker that you would got to during a rocket attack?
RF: Yes, yes he thought they were ugly, and I still remember his name but I won’t say things like that.

RV: Did you tear down the bunker?

RF: No, told him to screw off. He didn’t spend the night at Bien Hoa.

RV: Okay. So besides the lying about the body count, what else did you think they were dishonest about?

RF: I think the way the war was going. I don’t think it was going nearly as well as it had been reported. And the body counts played a role in that. I thought it was misleading and I think it was too political for us to ever win. I didn’t, I didn’t suffer on that too much when I was there, but afterwards when I looked back on everything and it wasn’t guys flying Ranch Hand that was that were going to win the war but it was guys that could have defeated the enemy with our firepower that were not able to.

RV: What do you think the United States could have done differently?

RF: Differently?

RV: Yes, sir.

RF: We could have empowered the military to win the war but we were being limited all the time, I mean even our targets were being politically determined. We weren’t defeating the enemy where he was. We were reacting to the political climate in the country. Yes, my wife just mentioned we weren’t allowed to fly over the French Rubber Plantations, I remember that, for fear that they might kill one of their damned trees. Knowing what I know today I’d have been happy to fly right through the middle of them. What a bunch of weenies.

RV: Do you think that was a safe haven for some of the enemy perhaps?

RF: Oh, absolutely. I mean those, that’s where they hung out. I mean if they drew fire or fighters were coming in they just went into the rubber plantations and that was off limits, absolutely.

RV: I do know that Michelin and some of the other companies did have issue with the United States government if their plantations were damaged.

RF: Oh, of course, typical French.

RV: Did your unit ever engage in any civic action while you were there?
RF: Yes, we sponsored an orphanage and I remember going out to that a couple of
times. And we also, I think we felt sorry for the people and the fact they had a war in
their backyard you know. They were just trying to live a life, most of them.
RV: What do you remember about leaving Vietnam, when you think back about
that?
RF: I was scheduled to leave one day and I was all set to go and they cancelled
the flight, and I had been looking forward to that day for 365 days, for some reason the
flight was cancelled. So I had to wait another twenty-four hours and I was convinced I
was going to get killed that twenty-four hours. That’s the first time I ever thought I was
going to get really hurt.
RV: Were you waiting at Bien Hoa?
RF: Yes.
RV: Did you have to go back to your hooch or?
RF: Yes. I mean I had said good-bye to everybody and here I come back and
guess what, they all laughed. I had a drink and we sat there, I think I stayed up all night. I
think I slept in the bunker, I’m not sure. Anyhow the flight left the next day and that was
a great, there was a great cheer when that thing lifted off.
RV: How did it feel getting back stateside?
RF: Great. I still remember seeing my wife with two little boys and my oldest
boy didn’t want to talk to me, or kiss me because I had a mustache. He didn’t know who
I was, plus I was very dark. I’d had a lot of sun but I did maintain good physical
condition over there. I figured if I ever needed to walk out of the jungle or something
that would have made all the difference to me so I stayed lean and mean over there.
RV: What kind of reception did you have back in the United States at the airports,
did you have any difficulties?
RF: No, mine was just my wife and kids met me and we went home. And then the
first night I think I tried to choke my wife.
RV: Yes, what difficulties did you have transitioning back out of Vietnam?
RF: The only bad time I ever had was when I ‘d heard a truck going by and it was
shifting gears, it would sound like arooom, it sounded to me like a siren going off and
I’d be hitting the deck or under the table or something and I say, what am I doing, you
know this is crazy. And one of the nights my first week or two I was dreaming that I was
fighting somebody, I think it was the guy I caught stealing from us, and I remember
actually choking the guy, not killing him, but choking him into submission and I ended
up doing that to my wife and scared the hell out of her and she said, “Do that again, and
I’m out of here” but it really did scare her, but that was the only time that ever happened.

RV: Were those the only PTSD type incidents that you’ve ever had?
RF: I guess I had some bad dreams now and then but nothing that I remember.

RV: How much did you discuss your Vietnam experience with other people?
RF: I didn’t mind talking about if they asked me but I wasn’t willing to
necessarily introduce the subject.

RV: Did they ask a lot?
RF: Yes, a lot of people were interested. I found that a lot of my friends, I should
say very few of the people that we run with or hang out with or socialize with have ever
spent any time, certainly no time in Vietnam and hardly any, any time in the military.
People just, I don’t know, maybe it’s the area I’m from or something but there weren’t
many people, there aren’t many of our friends who really were in the military or know
anything about the military.

RV: Do they ask you about it today?
RF: Yes, from time to time it comes up.

RV: What were your impressions of the anti-war movement?
RF: Well, you can imagine how I feel about that. Just like today when you see
these people protesting, they don’t know what they’re doing. In Vietnam I can
understand toward the end of the war why people would be protesting the war but the
way it was done sometimes, especially by celebrities and people that had influence, I
thought it was outrageous, when we had kids over there getting shot at and they’re back
here protesting. They were only undermining the ability of that soldier or sailor or
Marine or Air Force guy to do his job. He’s just trying to do what he was supposed to do
over there and we should show the support that those people need. I had no time for those
people. If I had ever met one personally I probably would have had at them, I had no
time for them. Most of them had never fired a shot in anger. Unfortunately today when I
see parades and stuff and I see even Vietnam vets walking in the parade, they look like a
real rundown raggedy ass bunch of people. If they’re going to wear a uniform, they
should wear the whole uniform and look properly or even just a hat but the way they
dress, you know with half of a uniform or something I think looks terrible. I mean you
see the old guys from World War II, they look distinguished to me but the guys from
Vietnam, I don't know why. The guys that went over there, fought, did their job came
back and didn’t make a big deal out of it, they don’t march in those parades
unfortunately. I don’t know the guys that kind of like a raggedy ass militia is what they
look like to me.

RV: What did you think about he media coverage of the war?
RF: Well, I was there so I didn’t, the only thing I was reading was the *Stars and
Stripes* but by and large I don’t like the media coverage. I think its very
misrepresentative of what’s going on and sometimes I think they’re just trying to get their
name up on the front page and I think the information many of the senior officers were
providing them was distorted. I don’t think the statistics and so forth, that you could bear
that out. I don’t know why we do that, but we didn’t need to do that, except for political
gratification, I don’t understand it.

RV: Tell me what you think about the political leadership we had during the
Vietnam War.
RF: I don’t think they knew what they were doing. I mean I detest Robert
McNamara, he wrote a book, I forget the name of it.

RV: *In Retrospect*?
RF: Yes, *In Retrospect*. I read it cover to cover and I was frequently reading the
book and I would just scream at it in the middle of a sentence or something. I would just
say what a lie. Basically what I think what he was doing was sidestepping his
responsibility. Now, I don't know how far up the ladder all that went but I think what a
guy like McNamara who was Secretary of Defense, I’m not sure anybody below him
could have controlled things much more than he did. I think he was disreputable and I
think he’s a liar. I don’t think he’s a war hero, the country’s own of people we like to
look up to, ever.

RV: One of the best and brightest, not one of those?
RF: Oh, yes he was a smart guy but smart doesn’t, but he didn’t belong in that position. I didn’t think that we had the proper leadership, I really did not. If we did we would have won the damn thing, hands down.

RV: Okay, did you keep up with the war effort in Vietnam after you came back?

RF: Sure. I mean I read everything I could about it. If you ever get a chance to read a book there’s a guy named Lance Sijan, S-I-J-A-N, he was an Academy graduate behind me. He won the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously. There’s a dormitory names after him at the Academy and an incredible book, I think its called *In the Mouth of the Cat*. Talk about a hero, that man was a hero, I mean fantastic. Where do we find people like that? He was my ideal of the perfect guy who went to the Academy, he excelled at everything he did, and when he went to war he went to war to win and to have a guy like McNamara calling the shots for a guy liked Lance Sijan or any of the other people that had to fight and lost their lives over there to me is just despicable. If you ever get a chance Richard, read the book.

RV: I will, I will sir.

RF: The Air Force Academy Association, the Alumni Association can send it to you if you can’t find it anywhere else.

RV: Okay. We might have a copy here in the archive actually so.

RF: You should.

RV: I’ll check that out.

RF: Lance Sijan.

RV: S-I-J-A-N?

RF: Yes.

RV: Okay. What did you think, go ahead.

RF: That’s okay.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamization policy, turning the war over to the Vietnamese, was that viable to you or not?

RF: That policy specifically, what do you mean?

RV: Turning like, this Vietmanizing the war, this was kind of the late Johnson early Nixon policy of withdrawing Americans, letting the South Vietnamese fight this war for themselves?
RF: Well they should have been able to deal with it but they weren’t. I think at some point we realized we were never going to win the damn thing, not the way it was being fought and we were trying to find a graceful exit and I don’t think we ever found one.

RV: Did we achieve peace with honor?
RF: No, I don’t think so.
RV: Why not?
RF: Well, just the way it unwound at the end there. I mean it was like we, we didn’t achieve peace we basically got out and we lost. We didn’t achieve what we set out to do but it wasn’t the military’s fault. It was the civilian leadership and some of the senior officers, some of the senior military leaders I thought were bullshitting their superiors?
RV: Such as whom?
RF: I really don’t, I don’t want to get into that whole thing. I mean take a guy like Westmoreland, I’m sure he did a lot of good things, but I think he did a lot of things that shouldn’t have happened.
RV: How did you feel in 1973 when the United States was completely withdrawn from the country?
RF: I was embarrassed. Of all the people, I mean all the kids we lost over there and we didn’t accomplish diddlysquat, and these kids lost their lives. They were only nineteen years old. I mean it was a different thing in World War II where somebody lost his life, I mean he was there, he knew why he was there and he was serving a real purpose and by the way we won. I just, I don’t think the military was empowered enough to win that war in Vietnam and somebody should have figured that out early one instead of just feeding more and more troops in there. We were either there to win it or get the hell out to begin with. It’s easy to say in retrospect but I don’t think McNamara ever got the picture and I’m not sure Nixon or Johnson ever did either.
RV: How did you feel in April 1975 when Saigon fell, do you remember where you were?
RF: No, I don’t remember where I was?
RV: Do you remember how you felt?
RF: I felt terrible. It just seemed like, my god how we could have lost that? You know, how can a great nation like American succumb to something like that, in a war so far away? I guess we lost our focus and what we were really there for but I think we were also; we underestimated the enemy, tremendously.

RV: Do you think the United States learned any lessons from the war?

RF: Yes, I think so.

RV: Like what?

RF: Well, you know you say that today, I would say offhand that don’t get involved in something unless you intend to win it. I think looking at what we’re doing right now, a similar situation. I endorse what’s going on now because I think we’re dealing with another Hitler. We’re dealing with a very evil guy in this Saddam Hussein and he’s just brutalized his own people, let alone his neighbors and he’s got to be removed but unfortunately we didn’t have very much support internationally but so what. We’ll do it and I don’t think we’re going to back away, I think we’re going to go until we win it and we will win it and it will be quick. I think the aftermath will be tough, setting up another government and trying to ever institute democracy, but we’ve got to solve the Palestinian-Israeli problem too. I don’t know why we’re the ones that have to do all this but I guess we are.

RV: Do you think that the lessons learned in Vietnam affect our policy in the Middle East today, with what’s happening now or what happened in the first Gulf War?

RF: To a degree I guess. I couldn’t quote you a specific place where I can show you where we learned a lesson there. I think we definitely are conscious of it and whether we’re going to repeat the mistake or not I can’t tell you, I don’t think we will but I don’t necessarily classify Vietnam as a mistake, I think our intentions were good when we went in, its just that we weren’t enabled to win. We never had a chance it win.

RV: How do you feel about your service in Vietnam today?

RF: I’m proud of it. I felt like I answered a call and I went and I did my job and I didn't back away.

RV: Is there anything that you would change about your experience if you could?

RF: I don’t think so necessarily. I mean the things that I was able to control, I controlled and I did the best I could. I wasn’t in charge of any great bunch of people but
the people that I did, what my responsibilities were I think I fulfilled them, but I think I did it to the best of my ability.

RV: What do you think was the most significant thing that you learned while you were there?

RF: In Vietnam?

RV: Yes, sir.

RF: That we’re very lucky to have a country like we have. People suffer a lot in this world and we don’t have a clue sometimes and unfortunately I think Americans have become, I don’t know how to describe it exactly. I’m very disappointed sometimes when I see the trash that we put on the television and the stuff, what kids are exposed to today. I don’t know, I think we’ve lost some of the morality that this country was based on. We could certainly, I could certainly, if I had my way I’d like to get rid of some of this trash that comes across the network. I’d like to see our people get educated again and read the newspaper and have an opinion based on something, not just something they happen to hear on a news network. People have to get involved if they want to, I mean they don’t seem, I think we seem more concerned with our own little lives than we do with the country that we live in sometimes, and our kids are our responsibility and take a look at the schools and some of the lack of parental discipline and I’m just wondering what kind of generation of people we’re going to have and quite honestly Clinton was a classic example to me. He was a disreputable jerk and people voted for him, I mean I couldn’t believe it; I was embarrassed by that guy.

RV: How do you think the war has most affected your life overall?

RF: I don’t think it affected it too much except that my wife had to endure a tough, tough year but she was tough going in, she was tough going out so we’re still married after forty-one years, I guess it was okay. I don’t think it’s affected my life a lot, one way or another.

RV: Okay. You mentioned the one book that you recommended, Sijan’s book, any other books that you’ve read on Vietnam that you think are worthwhile or do you read books on Vietnam?

RF: I don’t read much on Vietnam; I guess I got tired of it. Some of the movies I’ve seen on Vietnam I didn’t like.
RV: The movies that you saw in Vietnam or about Vietnam?

RF: About Vietnam. I think they characterize the American soldier as a drug smoking, pot smoking young fool out in the jungle, and I don’t think that’s the way it was necessarily, I think some of those kids ended up doing that because they didn’t have the proper leadership or direction, quite honestly. I think they would have done just fine if they had been given the proper leadership, training and direction out in the field. Plus they were dealing with an enemy they didn’t understand. I was the vice president of flight operations for Airborne Express out in Ohio for seven years, and I had a captain that flew for me out there, he was a real interesting guy, his name was Roger Moose, and he had been a young squadron leader in the Army, in the infantry, in the war and he almost got shot to death, he got shot through the neck and some corpsmen dragged him back and put some morphine in his butt and the guy had a live hand grenade in his hand, he had just pulled the pin, he was going to throw it and the corpsmen realized it somehow, he took the hand grenade out, got rid of it and saved this guys life. Now he is permanently affected from the war, I can assure you. I mean his wife told me several stories. He used to sleep with a forty-five under his pillow at night and he shot a shirt that she had ironed and hung up one time because he thought it was and intruder. He seems to have settled down, I think he had an uncle who straightened him out. He came back from the war and was just crazy man; he was getting in fights all the time, raising hell. Anyhow, somebody straightened him out along the line but he was affected by the war, no question about it. But if those are the kids once again that they went over the war and fought the war and they came back and they weren’t able to ever say we won. I [they] went over and smoked pot and people looked at them and say, “Well you didn't succeed over there, you didn’t do what you were told to do,” wasn’t their fault. It doesn’t bother me; I think I was old enough to realize what was going on. I know that we did what we could do but for the limited things we had and the way we had to fight the war. I understand that and that’s why I’m not ashamed at all of my service over there.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?

RF: Here we are, you know. McCain says, “Let’s go back and make friends with them and juice up their economy.” Hey, we won the Cold War and I think Vietnam was, Vietnam was affected a lot by China, no question about it and the support they got from
Russia and China. I guess they’re doing fine today. It just seems whacko, it just seems
crazy doesn’t it, exactly how it evolved but I mean I hope they’re happy. I hope that it’s
a prosperous country. They seem to be. I’m not sure I want to go back and see it again,
just try to remember stuff I don’t want to do it for that reason but I wouldn’t mind going
back just to see how the country’s doing, but I don’t go back to try to remember what
happened to me there.

RV: Do you know any of your, or have you, well I’ve already asked if you kept in
touch with these guys and you kind of have not too much but I was going to ask if you
heard of other veterans going back to Vietnam and your impression of that journey?
RF: Nobody that I know. I’ve just seen, I’ve seen some movie clips of a guy
going back and it was I think good for him to do that, but I don’t know that I would react
one way or the other going back there.

RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?
RF: No, not by intent or lack of intent but just doesn’t happen.
RV: Have you been to the Wall in Washington?
RF: Oh, yes, yes.
RV: Can you tell me about that experience?
RF: Yes, I cried when I was there because it brought a lot of memories back of
guys who did die and you look at that, I don’t know fifty-six thousand or whatever. The
Wall is a beautiful tribute to them and having their name there and seeing the people
there that are tracing a name or just looking at or touching the Wall, you know there’s a
lot of grief that are people are dealing with. I think it’s a very fitting and beautiful tribute
to those people.

RV: What would you tell young people today about the Vietnam War?
RF: Well, if they asked me I would tell them what my experience was and that we
fought the war wrong, improperly. I don’t think our being there initially was wrong but I
think the way we conducted the war was entirely wrong and then it wasn’t fair to the
troops that were sent over there. But that doesn’t mean I’d be out marching in the streets
while the troops are over there, I wouldn’t, ever. And I would be more interested in what
they think, what does Vietnam think, do they know anything about Vietnam, do they
know anything about World War II, do they know what this country went through in the
Civil War? I mean we have a long history of wars, not necessarily ones we’ve started but we ended up the winner and we’ll win this one. This is a weird one that we’re in now. We’re dealing with like famines and such, we’re going to win I know we are. Not only am I just talking about Iraq, I’m talking about the whole terror threat that we’re facing today.

RV: The war on terrorism.
RF: Right. But I’d be happy to answer their questions you know and I’ve done that. My daughter was in a school out in Cincinnati and they were studying Vietnam in a history course and they asked Roger Moose and well they asked me if I would come in and talk about the war and I invited Roger to come with me and we talked to the kids for awhile. They had no clue what we were talking about.

RV: What grade were they?
RF: Eleventh or twelfth graders.
RV: Okay, high schoolers.
RF: Yes, but they were interested enough to take the course so I felt like, hey, here it is, this is what it was like and depending where you were, what you did it looked a lot different and I’ll never forget that young Marine, I’ll just never forget him.

RV: Sir, is there anything else that you’d like to add to our conversation today?
RF: Only Richard that I think it’s a great idea that whoever it was that started this to try to put Vietnam in perspective. It’s gotten so much bad press from the wrong people who don’t know diddly squat about what really happened and they’ve never stopped to appreciate what some of the kids went through over there. I mean we lost damn near a generation of young people, not a generation but certainly a large percentage of that generation and we came away with bitter memories that we didn’t win the war and the inevitable question is they didn’t we win it, and I think kids should be aware of it. We’ve won some incredible wars, only because we made a national commitment to win it and it has to be a national commitment.

RV: Do you think that’s the key to it?
RF: Yes. But you know what you can’t always get everybody aboard, just like today. You can’t always get all of citizens behind you. I mean it would be great if you could. Now I think if there was another severe, significant terrorist act that they could
define that Iraq was responsible for, I don’t think there would be any question but then
again I don’t expect my president and this administration and any other administration to
make every possible piece of information available to me that they have, as far as
intelligence because that would basically reveal the source of the intelligence and
probably dry it up. I mean I don’t feel like they have to tell me everything that’s going
on, I have to trust in them. Even if I didn’t and I did vote for Bush, but even if I hadn't
voted for him I still have to believe he will do the right thing. They certainly got some
smart people helping them and I have to believe in that and I don’t believe people stand
out in the street with a little bit of misinformation, although they have the right to say so,
I don't think they’ve got the smarts to be able to tell us what we should be doing. They’re
entitled to their opinion, but hey, we’re going to do what we have to do. And if they have
a clue of the fact what we’ve had to do to give them the right to stand out there, I don’t
think they even have a clue about that quite frankly. And I guess the thing that really
perturbs me the most is when I see media people, like Hollywood actors and actresses
standing up because they’ve got the visibility and some of these people actually believe I
guess they really are president or something. I mean they just are so stupid. If they really
were articulate and had a good case, hey great, that’s what makes the country great, you
know we have different opinions but when it comes time to go to war and this goes for
Daschle too quite honestly. When we’ve got troops in the field, they’re going to war, it’s
not the time for some jerk like Daschle to be making derogatory comments about why
our troops are there. Well, you asked me, I told you.

RV: I appreciate your opinion very much. Okay, was there anything else you want
to talk about sir?

RF: No, I think that’s about it. I haven’t thought about this stuff in thirty years.

RV: Well, we appreciate you sharing your thoughts with us and we’ll go ahead
and end the interview with Colonel Robert Fischer, thank you very much sir.

RF: Okay Richard, thank you.