Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner, conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Scott Stucky. I am located in Lubbock, Texas. He is located in…

Scott Stucky: Washington D.C.

SM: Washington D.C., yeah. It is the 23rd of August, year 2000 at approximately 9:10 a.m. Lubbock time. All right, Mr. Stucky, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

SS: I was born in Kansas in 1948 and grew up on a town [farm] outside a small town called Pretty Prairie, Kansas, which is where I attended public grade and high schools. I attended Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas where I was a history major. When I entered Wichita State I enrolled in Air Force ROTC. That was in 1966. I did not enroll in Air Force ROTC because of the war, because of worries about the draft. I actually enrolled in Air Force ROTC because every male in the college had to complete a physical education requirement, and there were three alternatives; one was ROTC, one was being in the marching band, which I wasn’t good enough for, and one was taking physical education, which I didn’t want to do. So I enrolled in ROTC really to get rid of physical education requirement. I stayed in ROTC because of the draft because when it came time to drop it after my sophomore year or get in for a commission it was 1968 and everyone was being drafted and I thought, ‘Well, better to go as an officer,’ so I did. I was commissioned as a reserve officer in 1970 when I graduated with a B.A. and they
gave me an educational delay to go to law school. An educational delay didn’t pay for law school or anything like that. What it amounted to was come back in three years with a law degree and the bar admission and we’ll make you a Judge advocate. I attended Harvard Law School, graduated in 1973, and went on active duty in San Antonio, Texas in November of 1973 having just been married in the interim. I volunteered for service in Thailand in 1974 and went over there in June of 1975 and stayed there until May of 1976 when we closed the place down, the Thai government having chucked the United States out. Okay, that’s a brief overview of my life until I got there.

SM: Now while you were in school, both as an undergraduate and then later on at Harvard Law School, how much were you involved with the anti-war movement if at all?

SS: Zero.

SM: What kind of activities were going on on your campuses?

SS: Well, Wichita State was a pretty conservative campus. It was not a residential campus; it was a commuter campus where most people lived at home and were older than the average, and many, many people worked. I was frankly a member of the Collegiate Young Republicans at Wichita State and I was president of the Republican Club at Harvard Law School, which believe it or not, had about 100 members. So, I was not involved at all in anti-war activities. They didn’t touch me but very tangentially. The month before I graduated [from college] was when the thing blew at Kent State and there was a - by most standards – a very minor demonstration at Wichita State, but we went ahead and had our review and commissioning ceremony outside anyway, although not much of anybody showed up except the people that were getting commissioned. At Harvard, I missed it on the other end. The whole thing had blown in ’69 and ’70 when Harvard Square was trashed, and by the time I got there in September of 1970 the thing had to some extent run out of gas. Of course the overwhelming political sentiment at Harvard was anti-war and leftish, but violent protesting kind of shot its bolt the previous year, so I kind of avoided it on that end.

SM: Now what about your understanding of what was going on in Vietnam while you were in college? Why were we there, and did you agree with how we were conducting the war?
SS: Yes, well I was generally supportive of the reasons we were there because I believed it was both in the national interest and morally permissible. As the thing wore on and on and on you did get the feeling that maybe it wasn’t being managed tactically and strategically as it ought to be. But, I can't in good conscience describe myself as anti-war.

SM: Again, from your perspective, what do you think the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam?

SS: It was the Domino Theory thing, and it was not until I got to Thailand that I realized there were more complexities about that thing than I had thought. I know when we pulled out of Thailand there were a lot of guys running around saying, ‘This country’s going to fall in six months,’ and I said, ‘No this country’s not going to fall in six months; this country held off the two largest imperialist powers in the world for a century, and this country’s got internal strengths that will make it a good deal more complex proposition.’ But, I think the proof was in the pudding that when we did pull out of Vietnam and the place fell, everybody that could get out of there got out of there, rather than engage in this socialist paradise, and as many as could came here got here and most of them are prosperous folks today.

SM: And when you got to law school and you started learning about, discussing issues of international law, did that have an effect on your perspective concerning American policy in Southeast Asia?

SS: Not really. In the first place, I never took any international law for the JD. I’ve got a Master’s in it that I got later at George Washington University, but no. It actually wasn’t much…it didn’t play a big part in the JD course. When you’re in law school you’re so focused on law school that you don’t think about much of anything else. I did take a course in military law my third year which was mostly JAGs, mostly guys who were going [on active duty]…and we had a guy teaching it who was a retired Army reservist and who later went on the International Court of Justice at the Hague and we got into those questions then, constitutional limits on war making power and the public international law governing war and so forth. But academically I got into that stuff much more at G.W., which was ten years later.
SM: In that one class you took on military law, was there much talk about the
Gulf of Tonkin resolution? Did you use Vietnam kind of as a case study in terms of the
constitutional limits, the role of constitutional limits?

SS: No more than a lot of other things. I remember we started off with the Prize
Cases, which of course are a Civil War. We started off with a bunch of [future] judge
advocates and a bunch of anti-war people. When it became apparent to the anti-war
people that the guy would not teach the thing as an anti-war spread, most of them
dropped out. Then the people that stuck around were the Judge advocates.

SM: Let’s see, when you left Harvard Law and went into the Air Force, how
much time did you spend in training in the Air Force before you went to Thailand?

SS: Well, we had a six-week basic Judge advocate course at Maxwell Air Force
Base, Alabama that is where the JAG school is, and that wasn’t Southeast Asia specific.
Everybody had to go through that, and in fact I didn’t go through that until I’d been on
active duty about six months because they had so many people to feed through it that you
normally went on active duty and did your work as best you could until a slot opened up
for you. So I went on active duty in November of 1973 and I didn’t get to JAG School
until the end of April ’74 and graduated in June of ’74.

SM: What was the most interesting or challenging thing about JAG School for
you?

SS: There wasn’t much that was interesting. There wasn’t a lot that was
challenging. I remember describing it as three weeks of work packed into six weeks. It
wasn’t really demanding. It was more a chance to get away from the office and meet
some people and so forth, but I can't say it was academically demanding. I will say that it
has gotten a good deal more so over the years, and they now have an impressive facility
down there and they are paying a great deal more attention to professional education of
judge advocates than they did back then.

SM: Do you think the training you did receive was useful in preparing you when
you went to Thailand?

SS: In the general sense, yes, but what I did in Thailand was so situation specific
that they did not prepare me for what I did in Thailand. I learned that on the job.

SM: And you volunteered to go to Thailand?
SS: I volunteered to go to Thailand. I think I put the volunteer statement in about August of ’74. My wife wanted to go to law school and there was only one law school in San Antonio and she wasn’t particularly interested in it, so I volunteered, basically, so that I could get a base of choice when I came back. She ended up going to Cornell and the year I was in Thailand was her first year in law school. It was not a great time for her. We drove from San Antonio up to Kansas where we saw my folks for a few days and then we drove east to Washington. I flew from Dulles and then we took a trip up to New York and back. I flew commercial out of Dulles airport to San Francisco. I’d never been in California, and I took a bus up to Travis Air Force Base north of San Francisco, which was the jumping off point. I remember thinking that Travis looked like the backside of the moon. It was kind of barren and dry looking and so forth. This was in June so it was in the summer, 1975. We got on a Flying Tiger DC-8 charter and flew first to Anchorage, Alaska. I remember getting there about five a.m. Anchorage time. Everybody was shot. They put us off the aircraft, we milled around in the terminal. There was nothing open, absolutely nothing open. Then we got back on the plane and flew to Yokota [Air Base] in Japan and got off. I don’t remember much about it. By that time everybody’s so shot. I don’t remember much about Yokota except being there. Then we got back on and we flew to Clark. The great thing about Clark was that there was a woman sitting right in front of me with a baby that bawled all the way from Travis to Clark, but at Clark she got off so I didn’t have to listen to the baby for the last leg of the flight. I was sitting between a guy who worked in the PMEL, the precision measurement lab, and a senior NCO who talked all the way about this great TDY he’d just had. He’d gone back to California to take what he called this stiff back to California – in other words, this dead guy – and it turned out this was a murder that had occurred upcountry at Lampang that we had some contact with after I got there. So for, I don’t know, two days the baby bawled, I listened to this guy yap on about the murder, they fed us little box lunches. It’s a very narrow, long aircraft. Everybody stunk. Finally we took off from Clark and flew to U Taphao and Clark to U Taphao wasn’t very long, maybe
four hours, and when we landed at U Taphao, which had enormous runways, basically
international airport length runways, and pulled up, and they popped the door and this SP
got on and was carrying an M-16 and wearing jungle fatigues and he walked down the
aisle and kind of looked at everybody and smirked, you know, ‘Ha, ha, ha, here you guys
are!’ and then we got off and the muggy…it was about two in the afternoon, and the
muggy heat just hits you in the face. I got my first exposure to that smell that I always
will associate with Thailand, which is a combination of diesel fuel, the sickly sweet little
flowers they used to make necklaces out of, and Thai cooking done outdoors. They took
us over to the CBPO, the personnel office, and gave us the, ‘Here you are in Thailand,’
lecture which is basically very generic thing, don’t do a few really egregious things, ‘This
is Thailand, not the United States,’ et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and then they let us go.
The legal office is right next door so I walked over to the legal office and met some
people. This was Thursday and the Staff Judge Advocate, my boss, who was about to
leave himself said basically, ‘Okay, find a place to stay and show up Monday.’ So the
first night I stayed in the BOQs, which was a concrete three-story affair. I remember this
was a transient room. I remember being in this transient room that had about 200
Playboy and Penthouse magazines piled in it and an air conditioner made it real clammy,
and you had to walk down the open balcony to the bathroom which was on the end to use
the bathroom and after one night in there I said, ‘That is not going to do.’ I had met a
guy on the flight over from Travis who was a…well, the job title was a bioenvironmental
engineer, this captain from Louisiana who had a degree in public health. What he really
was is a public health officer. We got together and took two halves of a crew trailer.
They had had these crew trailers out there for TDY B-52 crews and the B-52s had just
gone home, so they had all these crew trailers available. So he and I moved into the two
ends of a crew trailer that had a shared bath in the middle and lived in amity until he
PCSed the next February. The crew trailer was about six by ten [twelve]…your part of it
was about six by ten [twelve]. It had in it a refrigerator, a desk, a chest of drawers, a
chair, a wardrobe, and a bed so there wasn’t much room, and a great big air conditioner.
It was cold enough to hang meat in there, and no windows, little tiny dinky windows
about three inches by six that were totally useless, you just kept them closed. But
anyway, moved in there the next day, sort of got situated. On Monday I showed up at the
office and the guy who I was replacing (we overlapped about a week), he said to me,

‘Well, you’re going to court today.’ I said, [makes stuttering sounds].

SM: Yeah, really!

SS: ‘You’re going to court today in Chon Buri. Chon Buri was a city north of the
base about halfway to Bangkok. The base straddled two provinces, Chon Buri
Province…if guys messed up on the north end of the base, they ended up in Chon Buri.
If guys ended up messed up around the south end of the base – this is off base
misconduct, which was all drugs – they went to Rayong which is a coastal city
south…actually, more east of the base because the coast basically ran east-west there. I
said, [makes stuttering noises] and he said, ‘Not to worry, not to worry, you’ll meet the
lawyer there. It’s all taken care of. They’ll take the guy for his bail hearing and they’ll
grant him bail and then you’ll all come home,’ and I said, ‘Okay.’ So here’s this client,
some skinny white kid, I think he was from Georgia or Alabama or something. I think it
was a heroin case. I told him what I had been told, ‘Not to worry, we’ll go, they’ll take
you away, have a bail hearing, they’ll return you, we’ll pay your bail, and we’ll all go
home.’ Okay, so everybody gets in the car. The driver, the lawyer-interpreter, the
accused, and me, and we drive up to Chon Buri, which is about…God, I think that was
about an hour and a half away. It was quite a ways. It was fairly close to Bangkok, a
largish city. We got out, went in, sat around like you always do in court, sat around until
the case got called, went in. I had been told they would take him and put him in a holding
cell until the bail hearing was held and whereupon they granted bail and then they let him
go and we’d pay the money and go. So, they took him and then the Thai interpreter
lawyer who worked for us said, ‘Okay, let’s go have lunch,’ and I said, ‘Okay.’ So, I had
my first lunch in Thailand in an open, corrugated tin shed where we had great seafood
and I had my first Singha beer, one of the great lagers of the world, ice cold. So, we went
back for the bail hearing and of course it was all conducted in a language I did not
understand and basically they hauled the guy out and the judge says, [makes noises] and
the lawyer we had who was some guy from Bangkok – I’ll tell you about this in a minute
– [makes noises] and then the judge says [makes noises] and then something was wrong.
So I turned to the interpreter and said, ‘What’s going on here?’ and the guy said, ‘He not
grant bail! He go to jail!’ Oh shit, first day in country and this happens. So, they took
the guy away to the provincial prison, which was in the middle of town and looked like
the Hanoi Hilton, just an awful place, and I said, ‘What do I do now?’ I said, ‘What do
we do now?’ and he said, ‘Well, we go home without the guy.’ And I said, ‘Well can I
see him before we leave?’ ‘Okay,’ so we drive over to the jail and there was sort of a
loading dock area; we walked through that and there was a big old door and they banged
on the door and somebody opened this little teeny window and the guy talked to the
guard and pretty soon here’s my guy and he said, ‘What happened? What happened?’
and I said, ‘We’ll get you out of there! We’ll get you out of there! Have faith! The
United States is working for you!’ or something bromide like that. I didn’t know what
else to say! (laughs) So back we went. We eventually got him out on bail but it took
four months. He was in there for four months. What had happened as I later learned is
that we had hired…we had given all our business in Chon Buri to one particular lawyer
and 13th Air Force out at Clark which didn’t know anything about the situation or maybe
even [PACAF] decided that we should pass the business around. So for this guy they
hired some guy from Bangkok who looked great on paper but didn’t know anybody in
Chon Buri, didn’t know the judges, didn’t know the prosecutors, and basically went in
there cold. Well, that’s what happened. So, that was the last time we hired any slick
lawyers from Bangkok. Back I went to U Taphao without the guy!

SM: What did they say when you got back?
SS: They couldn't say anything. I said, ‘They didn't grant bail.’ Besides, the
staff Judge advocate was about to leave and the last thing he wanted was to take anybody
to task. He just wanted out of there! Well, it took about four months to get this guy out
on bond. It was a heroin case, but we usually got guys out on bail on heroin cases. So,
that was my introduction.

SM: Now when you left to go to Thailand what did you receive as far as
briefings? What did you think was going to be your job? What kind of cases did you
think you’d be handling?
SS: Zero, nothing.
SM: You had no idea?
SS: I had no idea. I didn’t know until I got there.
SM: And your work there, was it primarily to defend airmen?
SS: My work there was almost exclusively what we called foreign criminal jurisdiction which was to tend to airmen and others who ran afoul of local criminal law; in other words, for off-base misconduct. I did that almost exclusively. I did my share of legal assistance and I did a few court-martials and [discharge] boards but 90% of what I did over there was to do foreign criminal jurisdiction. We had the largest caseload in Southeast Asia other than at Clark, and of course at Clark they had more than one guy doing it. I had about 70 cases in 11 months, all drug cases except one or two weird ones which I can tell you about, but basically all of them were drug cases. I did not defend the guys. We hired Thai lawyers to defend the guys and we had working arrangements that I inherited with these guys. We paid them set fees, they were generous fees. Statutorily we were authorized to pay bail, counsel fees, and that kind of thing to keep these guys out of…my instructions were to keep these guys out of jail.

SM: Out of Thai jail?

SS: Out of Thai jail. We had a prison that the Thais had built. It was in Chon Buri, separate and distinct from the provincial prison in Chon Buri, and it was for Americans who were in long-term confinement in Thailand. It was a fairly grim place but by Thai standards it was a palace. They had a refrigerator, they had a basketball hoop, they had lots of room, they had weights they could lift, and basically had nothing to do. We had about six…we had about half a dozen guys in long-term confinement in Thailand. We had one guy who was from Alabama, I think, Davison, who was there for selling heroin, he had like a four year sentence, and this guy’s mother had come over to try and buy him out. That all happened before I got there. She was always calling every politician she could think of to try to spring this guy and he was patently guilty. Every time I saw him he was skinnier and had more tattoos. That’s generally what Americans in Thai confinement did, they got tattoos, and of course drugs were available. You could get drugs in jail. We fed them rations; we brought them C-rations. Every two weeks you’d bring them a big box of this stuff, and the rations of course had cigarettes in them, which they could barter for things they needed or wanted in jail. Basically in Thai jail with the exception of this place where we fed them, you didn’t get fed in Thai jail except for a rather skimpy rice ration, so everyday in Thai jail relatives would show up at the gate to feed their family that was in jail. Fortunately the Army, there was a base called
Camp Sa Mae San near U Taphao and had four Army JAGs there. Army had the responsibility of taking care of these guys in confinement [in Chon Buri] and a guy from Arkansas had that thankless job. He had to go there every two weeks, talk to them, listen to their complaints, bring them food, and so forth. It just about drove him nuts. I didn't have to do that. I only went up there occasionally. If I was in Chon Buri anyway I’d go by there and see them but it wasn’t my job to visit them regularly. Guys who weren't in long time confinement, who weren't finally sentenced prisoners but whose bail was denied, they were in the regular provincial jail, which was much, much worse. We of course fed them, too, but the conditions weren't nearly as good. There was one guy in there in the prison in Chon Buri who had been the night manager – this is an Army case – had been the night manager of the Windsor Hotel which was the NCO club in Bangkok and who had been standing in the entrance when he saw some guys assault on an American officer. He waded in and one of the guys had a two by four. He waded in and grabbed the two by four from the guy and whacked him with it and the guy died. This guy got run in for manslaughter or something and the Army did everything in the world to try and get him out and they finally got him out about half the way through the time I was there. That was not a drug case, that was a case where the guy was…should have been an official duty case but for whatever reason it wasn’t. So, that’s what I did.

SM: Now what kind of briefing did you receive when you arrived about Thai culture, the dos and don’ts?

SS: Cursory.

SM: You had to learn while you were there?

SS: I had a week overlap with the guy I was replacing who gave me the very basics of what I was going to do, but Thai culture and that sort of thing I pretty much learned on my own.

SM: What about the Thai legal system?

SS: Other than from my predecessor, nothing.

SM: The people who were caught in these drug cases, when they were let out on bail, eventually they’d have to reappear in court…

SS: Yes.

SM: …go to their trial?
SS: Yes.

SM: In the Thai trial system?

SS: Yes, it’s a civilian system, civil law system like continental Europe based mainly on German civil code. The trials were…well of course there were no juries. The trials were bench trials to a judge. They would come in after you got bail, after you did the preliminaries you got bail granted on the guy. I always paid all this stuff in cash. We never did checks or anything like that. The finance office had a great big walk-in vault that was just stuffed with Thai currency. For most of the time I was there the largest denomination in Thai currency was a red note; it was a hundred baht note which was the equivalent of about five dollars. So when I had to pay bail on somebody which could be…how much was a heroin case? Bail on a heroin case was 50,000 Baht, which was $2,500 US; well that was a huge wad of notes! I would go to the finance office and draw it out on a hand receipt and stick it in an old ratty attaché case and go down there and you were supposed to get an armed guard if you had more than so much money but I never did because that was the last thing you needed was some kid with a gun attracting attention to you. So, I’d just take it down in an attaché case and when they called and did it I’d go over to their little finance office and pay it, and the same way with paying the attorneys. We’d go over to their attorney’s office and pay them in cash. I was running hundreds of thousands of Baht on hand receipts at the time, and I never lost any; never lost any, never had to be accountable…well I was accountable for it but I never had to cough up any, I never lost any.

SM: It was always Baht, it was never USD?

SS: It was never USD, it was always Baht. We paid them in Baht, we paid bail in Baht, it was always Baht. We didn't use scrip like they did in Vietnam. We didn't have MPCs or any of that stuff. There was supposedly a regulation against spending green off base, but it was never enforced. I never saw anybody ever get in trouble for spending green off base. You were supposed to only spend Baht off base and of course you could get Baht at the officers’ club, you could get Baht at the…there was a Citibank on base which was a colossal rip-off. They must have made a fortune on that thing. I didn’t even have an account there because the thing was so bad. All I did was cash checks at the officer’s club to get the Baht I needed. Basically that regulation was not enforced.
SM: What was the usual punishment once these guys…they got out on bail, went back for trial. What would be the usual punishment?

SS: Heroin was a year in jail.

SM: In their jail or in our jail?

SS: If the guy didn’t appeal [or his appeals were exhausted], he went to our jail [in Chon Buri]. If he was on appeal he went to their jail [provincial prison].

SM: So an automatic (unintelligible).

SS: Of course you could also get bail on appeal and we had guys who had been convicted who actually weren't in confinement because their appeals were pending. But, heroin was a year in jail. Marijuana was a 100 Baht fine, which was five dollars. Bongs, possession of bongs was a 100 Baht fine. The reason, lots of guys would nonetheless fight a marijuana conviction, not because they didn’t have five dollars but because conviction would subject them to discharge, subject them to administrative discharge for civil court conviction which was usually a UD, an undesirable discharge. You got a guy who had say eight, ten years in, staff sergeant or something like that, well he would fight it, especially since it didn't cost him any money. He would fight it to avoid being subjected to administrative discharge. Now we had guys, there were a few guys who didn’t want to leave when their time was up because they were addicted, or they just liked it there, they wanted to stay and hang out with the women and so forth, and there were a few guys who probably intentionally got busted just to stay there. There were some other guys who tried to stay there because they were really messed up. I remember we had one guy shortly after I got there who we got off [was acquitted in court] and they promptly scheduled for PCS, get him out of the country. The day he was supposed to leave, and this guy was messed up, he showed up at the legal office and said he couldn't go. This guy was a little short black guy, and the Staff Judge advocate, my boss, who was a very tall black lieutenant colonel said, ‘Why can't you leave?’ and this guy when asked that was at a total loss as to why he couldn't leave because he didn't want to say why he couldn't leave and finally he made up some story about how he couldn't find his camera and he had to find his camera before he would leave, whereupon the Staff Judge Advocate said, ‘If you’re not on that airplane…we’re going to make damn sure you’re on that airplane.’ So they put him on the airplane whereupon he just completely came apart.
physically. They had to take him off at Clark and detox him and I don’t know what
happened to him after that.

SM: Now these guys, they never had to pay anything out of pocket?
SS: They never paid anything out of pocket.
SM: Their bail was paid for by the Air Force?
SS: Their counsel was paid for by the Air Force.
SM: The counsel? But the bail would be retrieved once they showed up, correct?
SS: Right, right, in theory. When we left country we left some, but I’ll get into
that later.
SM: What about after their…if they were let off, if they…
SS: The minute they were let off they were PCS, they were gone out of the
country.
SM: They were gone out of the country? They were never court-martialed in the
Air Force?
SS: No, no, the Air Force didn’t…in the first place it was an off base offense, and
while…this was during the O’Callahan regime where there were problems with
jurisdiction over off base offenses. Now O’Callahan did not apply overseas and these
guys probably could have been, in theory, court-martialed, but there were huge problems
with court-martialed a guy like this because all the witnesses were Thais. The guy had
been busted in his bungalow sitting in bed with a girl and the police showed up and all
the witnesses were Thais, all the evidence was under Thai control. There was way too
many problems to ever do that. It was not done.
SM: Was this some kind of a scam do you think? You had about 70 cases, you
said, in the 11 months that you were there.
SS: Right.
SM: If this was a consistent occurrence where American servicemen went off
base and were with women who were probably prostitutes and then all of a sudden the
cops show up…
SS: Oh I think there was some of that. Do I think they were guilty? Yes, I think
they were [virtually] all guilty. I had one guy out of the 70 I thought was maybe not
guilty and then I learned later on that he was a drug user. But was there some scam
involved? Probably in a lot of the cases. But, see, when I got there there was almost
no...as long as you didn’t care about your military career there was almost no downside
to it because if they got into trouble they were put on international hold which meant they
couldn't PCS, they couldn't leave but they were not restricted to base. The minute they
were put on international hold they lost their job because they lost their security clearance
so they had nothing to do. They had absolutely no work to do. They were allowed to
live on [or off] base, they were allowed to mess around with local women, they were still
getting paid, so it was basically a no-lose situation as long as you were sort of present-
and pleasure- oriented. Well I got the base...I and the Staff Judge Advocate
recommended to the base commander that everybody on international hold be restricted
to the base, which hadn't been done. That cut it in half almost immediately because then
they had to stay on base and they had to live in the barracks and that was a good deal less
pleasant, but still working all these cases through took most of my time the rest of the
year.

SM: What about pre-trial confinement? These guys were out on bail as far as the
civil system. You couldn't put them in like a confinement...

SS: No, no, because they weren't under charges. Charges hadn't been preferred
under the Uniform Code [of Military Justice] against these guys. Now occasionally we’d
have guys who got into trouble on base and against whom charges were preferred. I had
one guy, the Napoleon of crime (laughs). This guy, one thing that he didn't have in
common with most of my clients is that he was smart. Most of my clients weren't smart.
This guy was actually a pretty intelligent guy. He was a black staff sergeant...no, he was
a buck sergeant from Tennessee. He was a heavy-duty heroin user, and he managed to
get busted in both provinces. He had a case in Rayong when I got there and then he got
busted in Chon Buri. We got him off in Rayong. He eventually got convicted in Chon
Buri but was out on bail pending appeal. He allegedly threw a trip flare. He thought
another airman had gone to security police and ratted on him and he threw a trip flare in
this airman’s room and tried to set it on fire when he was in there. Well, it caused a big
noise and a lot of smoke but the other guy was not hurt, but the other guy was asleep so
he didn’t see him do it. The only person who saw him do it was the mamason who was
supposed to clean the place up and he got to her and terrorized her to the point she
wouldn’t testify. So, we didn’t court-martial him because there was nobody to testify
against him. We did a [discharge] board on him based on the first conviction, and
determined that he should be thrown out, but we [the Air Force] couldn’t do anything yet.
I don’t know whether they discharged him or not because he still had the second thing
and policy was not to throw somebody out because that would then deprive them of the
bail and counsel fees and everything else. Discipline was pretty lax.

SM: Sounds like it.

SS: Oh yeah, discipline was pretty lax over there. This is right after we pulled
out of Vietnam when the authorities were kind of throwing up their hands in despair and
that kind of thing.

SM: I’m at a loss for understanding something here.

SS: Yeah?

SM: All this drug use going on in Thailand, now in Vietnam I’ve talked to some
of the men who served with the 9th Medical Laboratory in Vietnam and they did a lot of
drug testing for marijuana and heroin. Now this was early, this was in the late ’60s, early
’70s.

SS: Urinalysis?

SM: Yeah, urinalysis and other forms of drug testing, and why wasn’t the Air
Force testing for this and dealing with the…

SS: There were some legal problems with urinalysis at the time. You could not
use [random] urinalysis evidence in a court-martial. That later changed. But at the time,
all you could do with [random] urinalysis evidence was use it in a discharge action. I
think they did do some random urinalysis testing, but why they didn’t more I don’t know.
I really don’t know, except for the fact that you couldn't use it for evidence in a court-
martialed. You couldn't use random. If you had probable cause you could, but you
couldn't use random urinalysis evidence in a court-martial at that time.

SM: Isn't arrest by civil authorities probable cause enough to urinalysis?

SS: Maybe, maybe not. It would depend on the circumstances. I think they did
some of that, but not to the extent that they were obviously doing it in Vietnam.

SM: Why do you think that’s the case?
SS: I think it was partially just sort of throw up your hands in despair attitude, which certainly was prevalent, especially after it became evident - and this was only the last about three or four months I was there – that we weren't going to stay. See, most of the time I was there they were dickering with the Thai government to let us stay at a reduced state and the place we would have stayed was U Taphao because it had the best facilities. But, I don't know. I think there was just sort of a 1970s - well, post-Vietnam, immediate post-Vietnam, we were still there – attitude of despair among senior leadership.

SM: That’s not very inspiring.

SS: No, it wasn’t very inspiring, and of course it’s changed completely, but I can only describe the way I saw it then.

SM: Interesting. It must have had…how did it affect the morale of the base generally?

SS: Morale on the base generally was kind of…a lot of people couldn't understand why we were still there. There were still some operations going on. They were running U2 flights up to China, they were running C-130 flights around Thailand. We had a bunch of KC-135s there. The Navy had a station there that serviced aircraft running from the Philippines to Diego Garcia, and some stuff like that, but we did have a lot of guys…they were trying to send guys home but they didn’t want to send them all home because that would make the Thai government think that we knew we were going to get kicked out, so there were a lot of guys milling around, not just guys in trouble, but there were a lot of airmen milling around the base who really didn’t have much to do because the B-52s had left and their time wasn’t up, so they didn’t have much to do. They had time on their hands and got into trouble, and it was partially a diplomatic minuet in these negotiations to keep a force there. They didn’t want to send everybody home because they thought it would undercut their position. So, yeah, you were in a situation where there were a lot of guys without much to do, and morale wasn’t very high, we’d just gotten kicked out of Vietnam, and there was just a sort of pervasive feeling of, ‘What are we doing here?’

SM: Now you mentioned the drugs, but what about black marketeering? We also talked earlier about…
SS: There was some of that, but frankly we didn’t have that much stuff. When I first got there there was a fairly large exchange but we were on the tail end of the supply line. We didn't have a commissary there. There was a commissary in Bangkok. There was a certain amount of it but it was not a problem like it was in Korea and places like that. I never saw anybody court-martialed for it. I think there were some guys who got Article 15s for it, but especially as the year wore on and there wasn’t much stuff to black market, it wasn’t a huge problem. We all got ration cards. You got a minor item ration card, which was cigarettes and booze, and you got a major item ration card, which was TV sets and cameras and that kind of stuff, and the ration depended on your grade. The officers got…well I didn't smoke, I can't remember what the cigarette ration was but it was generous. The booze ration was like two cases of beer and I don’t know, two or three bottles of spirits [per week]. The booze ration was plenty generous. Nobody ever had to walk around dry. The big problem with it was what was available at the BX because sometimes they didn’t have a whole lot there. At the very end they were practically giving the stuff away. I remember going to the Class Six store where they were just trying to get rid of inventory and paying virtually nothing for scotch and rum and that kind of thing because they were just trying to get rid of it. But no, black marketing wasn’t an enormous problem. It may have been a bigger problem in Bangkok where they had more stuff and a lot more people, but I don’t know. I can't speak to that.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss those other cases you said that were not drug cases?

SS: We had two Navy guys that…this was really fun. The Navy had a thing there called FASU U Taphao, Fleet Air Support Unit U Taphao, which was basically a unit of airplane mechanics. There were about 35 Navy guys there. There was a commander, an ensign whom I got to know well, a couple of warrant officers, three or four chiefs, and a bunch of sailors. These guys got into more trouble than three times their number of Air Force guys, although most of it was just getting drunk and disorderly and stuff like that. Drunk, that kind of thing never got to Thai court because they always compounded it; they always paid money and bought them off. The only thing that ever did, drug cases they would not compound, but drunk and disorderly, car wrecks, messing up a bungalow, property destruction, they always compounded. They'd come in and say,
'We’ll forget about it for $200,' and you say to the guy, ‘You got two choices, you can
go on international hold or you can pay them $200,’ and they always paid. But, we had
two Navy guys, Murphey and Lee. Murphey was another guy that was kind of notorious
all up and down the Pacific. I think he’d been in a while. He was a petty officer first
class, which I think was an E6, and Lee was just a kid. He was about an E3 or 4.
Mruphey and Lee had gone to a bar with another sailor and they were drinking away and
they ran out of money, whereupon to get some more money to continue drinking they
pawned…the third sailor pawned a watch to the bartender. They went back a few days
later to get the watch, whereupon the bartender said, ‘What watch?’ Murphey and Lee,
somehow the owner of the watch drops out of the picture, but what happened, as I recall,
is that Murphey and Lee went and swore out charges for theft against this guy, this
bartender, and the Thai police came and got him and threw him in the little local pokey.
Thereafter he paid them off or talked his way out of it or something and got out,
whereupon he swore out charges against Murphey and Lee of making false statements to
a public official. Turned out that making false statements to a public official was a year
in jail, same as a heroin case. Well, this just terrified Lee, the kid. He just came unglued.
Mruphey was a harder case. ‘I’m going to fight this thing!’ The same time Murphey was
constantly in disciplinary trouble on base. He had more captain’s masts than anybody
else in the Western Pacific. I think by the time this thing was over he was probably about
an E3 because he kept getting busted for being drunk or mouthing off or whatever. But
anyway, this thing dragged on for months. Finally we got them off, we got them
acquitted, whereupon they shipped them off, boot bang, after Murphey had one final
captain’s mast for doing something, and apparently about a month later the ensign came
in and said, ‘You’ll never guess what happened.’ I said, ‘What happened?’ and he
showed me this correspondence. Murphey had been killed in a wreck in wherever he was
from, Tennessee or someplace like that, riding his motorcycle. Before he got killed he
had told his mother that he was shipping back all this terribly valuable stuff and she
should watch for it. Well when she got Murphey’s hold baggage it turned out it was dirty
socks and underwear and junk. So, she was sure that somebody had rifled his hold
baggage and she was yelling and screaming at the Navy about, ‘Where’s all this terribly
valuable stuff that Murphey told her before his unfortunate death that he had shipped?’
Well, there wasn’t any valuable stuff! It was all a bunch of BS, but even in death the Navy couldn’t get shed of Murphey! That was the great non-drug case.

SM: That was the only one?

SS: I think that was the only one I had that went to trial that wasn’t a drug case.

SM: How did they deal with prostitution?

SS: They didn’t do anything about it. There were tons of prostitutes around the base. The base was kind of out in the country. There was a sort of junky area around the gate but there was no city nearby. The closest town, this thing called Ban Chaung, which was where most of my guys got busted that was maybe five miles east, but basically they did nothing about prostitution. My roommate, the public health officer, used to hand out condoms and they’d give little medical lectures and when they showed up with venereal disease at the hospital they’d shoot them full of antibiotics, but basically they did nothing about prostitution. The women were all over the base, and of course most of the guys, a lot of the enlisted guys, were living off base anyhow in bungalows because the barracks were so grim. The [enlisted] barracks weren’t air-conditioned. A lot of these guys just took bungalows and the bungalows all came with women, so basically they let them do it. They didn’t do anything about prostitution that I know of except try and cope with its medical effects.

SM: The bungalows came with women?

SS: Well, not...you could rent a bungalow and if you wanted a tiloc, a girl, you could get one. You hired a girl, as I understood it, you hired a girl to clean the place and cook for you and so forth and provide sexual services. That was my understanding anyway.

SM: The base didn’t have any kind of policies about restricting guys, enlisted guys in particular, from not living off base?

SS: No, they let them live off base except if they were on international hold.

SM: Then they were thrown in the barracks?

SS: Yeah.

SM: And that never changed the whole time you were there?
SS: That didn’t change the whole time I was there. I’m trying to remember whether there was anything like E3 and below had to live on, but I don’t think so. I think basically they let them live off base.

SM: Had it always been that way?

SS: I don’t know, I can't answer that.

SM: Well why don’t you describe interactions with the Thai people, in particular the people that you came in contact with on a daily basis, and also the people that I guess you had interactions with on base. I assume that there were Thai people that came in to clean and provide…

SS: We had a lawyer-interpreter in the office who was about the equivalent of about a GS-11 who was a retired Thai Army major and I went to court with him every day. He was an older guy who had learned English at [the U.S.] Army Signal School at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. He was a Presbyterian, and Christians of any sort were rare in Thailand. We had a secretary who was a very, very nice woman whose husband was the hospital administrator and we got on very well with them. Later as other bases closed we inherited two more lawyer interpreters. We got a guy from Korat and where was the other guy from? I can't remember where the other guy was from. There was a guy we called Charlie who had a Master’s in law from the University of London and spoke very, very good English. Then there’s a guy named Luke who I think came from Korat or Udorn who didn’t speak very good English, but we ended up with three of these guys and we didn’t have enough work for three of them so they just sort of sat around. I had interaction daily with Thai police, prosecutors, and judges. The police were venal, the judges impressed me as honest, and the prosecutors were somewhere in between. We ate everyday I was in court, we ate on the economy. Halfway through the year they dedicated a new courthouse [in Rayong], had the vice premier come down from Bangkok and they invited us to that. We went to the ceremony, put on our Class-A uniforms. I think that’s the only time I wore it the whole year, and went there for the ceremony. I remember one time I was invited to a Thammasat University alumni do at the provincial governor’s house in Rayong. Both our lawyer and the lawyer we hired in Rayong the most were Thammasat alumni. We went to this thing and it was a very curious affair; hundreds of older Thai gentlemen wearing funny paper hats, drunk as skunks, staggering
around the gardens of the provincial governor’s palace and singing old songs and
renewing old acquaintances. It was quite an affair. But yeah, I had more contact surely
with, I don’t know, the local gentry or something, than most guys on base did just by
virtue of what I was doing. I think a lot of Americans didn’t have any contact with Thais
other than prostitutes and bar keeps and probably gave them a jaundice view of the
country.

SM: We’ve been going for an hour. Did you want to take a break?

SS: How much longer have you got?

SM: We could probably go for another hour.

SS: I’m okay. Do you want to plunge on?

SM: Let’s go! So your opinion of the Thai people, did it change over time?

SS: Yes, it did because at the beginning until I got into it all I saw was prostitutes
and people who worked on base. No, I got a significant respect for...while the political
system has chronic problems of corruption, I agree or respect the way it worked,
particularly the way the monarchy and Buddhism worked to shore up the country and the
king, who is undoubtedly the leading, the most outstanding public figure in Thailand, not
just by virtue of his position but by virtue of his individual merits, is a very interesting
guy and I respected him a lot. Reading some about Thai history and the history of the
dynasty and so forth, I got a significant respect for the way they had handled things in the
past two centuries to keep from being taken over by any European colonial power. It was
quite a diplomatic feat.

SM: Did you personally witness any specific incidents of corruption amongst the
rest of the government or government officials?

SS: We paid these lawyers lots of money. We paid them 1000 bucks a heroin
case and 250 bucks Baht equivalent, $20,000 and $5000 for a marijuana case, and it was
always assumed that some of this got spread around, particularly to the police. But no, I
never witnessed open corruption.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss briefly the…I asked the question about
the most humorous experience in Thailand, and you said it was too long to write down
and you'd tell in the interview. Why don’t you go ahead and discuss that real quick?
SS: I’m trying to think of what I had in mind at the time. I remember one thing that was funny. I had a friend who was at Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio and I was at Brooks who’s still a good friend of mine today, he works in West Virginia for a coal company, a Jesuit-educated guy, first class guy. He got orders to U Taphao just after I did and he got there about three weeks, probably two weeks after I had and the first night he was there the guy who was the area defense counsel, the guy who was the defense counsel judge advocate was leaving so they had a big party to celebrate that and everybody went to somebody’s BOQ room and just got smashed. I remember we were drinking 151-proof rum and I finally had enough and staggered off home. This guy had a trailer next to me. The next morning when I got up to go to work I pounded on his door and didn’t get any response so I went on to the office and the Staff Judge Advocate says, ‘Where’s [?]?’ and I said, ‘I don’t know, sir. I pounded on his door but didn’t hear anything.’ Well he finally showed up about noon obviously with a stupendous hang over, sat in a chair and just sagged worse and worse and worse until by the time it was about four o’clock I said, ‘I’ve got to take you to the hospital.’ So I took him to the hospital and pulled up in the ratty old station wagon that the office had, went around the other side, opened the door, he fell out on the ground, I got him in there, sat, waited, and they finally said, ‘Your friend’s going to be all right. We gave him some Maalox.’ They dosed him with Maalox. It turned out that he’d staggered home, gotten lost, fallen in a ditch, eventually found his trailer, and just totally passed out and from then on he was a bit more cautious. There wasn’t a whole lot to do out there at night but socialize.

SM: Now what’s Maalox?

SS: Maalox is the pink stuff they give you when your stomach’s upset.

SM: Yeah, yeah, the upset stomach stuff, Maalox. Oh! That’s it?

SS: That was it. He thought he was going to die. I remember him saying that he couldn't move his arms, ‘My arms are numb, I can't move my arms!’ and all he needed was Maalox.

SM: A severe case of heartburn?

SS: Yeah, exactly.

SM: What about incidents with animals?

SS: Animals?
SM: Yeah, wildlife, anything?

SS: No, not really. I remember...yeah, we didn’t have...it wasn’t like being out in the jungle. In the first place, it wasn’t the jungle. We were on a coast, right on the seacoast. This same guy took up scuba diving and went on a bunch of scuba diving trips. I remember he went to Truk and a couple of other places out there and I remember him telling me about all the horrible things you could find in the sea like stone fish and all that kind of thing. But, I didn’t do that. The only thing I remember about animals is they used to have these enormous spiders that put webs...that lived in telephone lines. You’d drive by and you’d see all these things in telephone lines and they were so huge you could see individual spiders from the car. One time we were having lunch in some place in Rayong and I went into...they had a western style bathroom and I went in there to relieve myself and I happened to look up in the rafters while I was relieving myself and there was one of those things about three feet above my head up in the rafters, and I said, ‘Well you just stay up there and I’ll stay down here,’ and he did. But, no, I don’t have any wildlife stories. I don’t have any snake stories or anything like that.

SM: How big were these spiders?

SS: I don’t know. They looked like they were about as big as your palm because you could see them. If you were driving by in the road and here’s the telephone poles probably 20 feet away from the road plus 10 feet high, you could see the individual things in the wires, in their webs, so they were big.

SM: So they would spin their webs between the wires?

SS: Yeah, exactly.

SM: And was there a lot of recreational activity on the beach as far as swimming and stuff like that?

SS: Yeah, I remember you could rent boats, I remember doing that once. There was a movie theater on the beach that they shut down probably about two months after I got there. There was a snack bar on the beach called the Green Latrine, which used to serve hamburgers and [other American] stuff cooked Thai style, which is pretty bad. The base had a decent gym. They had a very nice swimming pool that was sort of over behind the airman’s club. At the time I wasn’t much of a swimmer so I only went there once or twice and saw so many of my clients that I didn’t go back. Yeah, there were
decent recreational facilities on the base. The base had been there ten years by that time, and it was a pretty mature installation physically.

SM: You mentioned there were USO facilities?

SS: There was a big USO. When I got there, there was a USO, an airmen’s club, an NCO club, and an Officer’s club, oh, and a top three club. The USO was the only place on base that had decent – well, acceptable – American style food. They also had acceptable ice cream. It was a great big old thing where people…it probably closed, I don’t know, four or five months after I got there and the airman’s club closed sooner than that and they folded it into the NCO club, and the NCO club and the officer’s club…well, the NCO club stayed open until we left. The officer’s club, the officer’s club was closed by the base veterinarian because he inspected the kitchen. The kitchen was so filthy that it was like the health department closing a restaurant. He closed it, so from about…that was about…it was either just before Christmas or just after Christmas. The thing was closed until about March. They spent a ton of money fixing up the kitchen. They reopened it, it was opened for about a month, and then they closed it for good because we were leaving and everybody had to eat in the mess hall. But, most of the time I was there…and even when the kitchen was closed the bar was still opened so we could still go over to the bar, it was just that the kitchen was closed.

SM: But it was cheap enough to go out and also eat and drink on the economy?

SS: Yeah, except I didn’t go out at night and drink on the economy much because there wasn’t much around there and most of what was around there was sleazy; and it was just sleazy, crummy stuff that I didn’t want to go to. Besides, since I ate on the economy every day at lunch practically, that was enough. There were two formal Thai restaurants on base, they were called the Thai Officer’s Club and the Thai NCO Club, and very occasionally we went to them. The only time I got sick the whole time I was there and it took about four days to get over that. So, I didn’t do much going out at night, but guys did and there was stuff out there. It was cheap, no doubt about that.

SM: Were there any people injured or killed while you were out there?

SS: Well we had that case I told you about that happened before I got there. There was a murder up in Lampang. That was up country near there was a little thing
called Ko Kha Air Station near a town called Lampang. A guy had been shot gunned there in the public just out in the street. That was a domestic dispute. This caused us all kinds of trouble. Basically the guy had married a Thai and then they had grown apart and the story, as I had it, was that she had hired him killed and he was shot gunned out in the public square in Lampang and the Thai police caught her. But then, supposedly they were paid off and let her go, whereupon she went to the bush. The problem was that they had a child, half American child, who was in the bush with this woman, and the guy’s parents wanted to see justice done but what they really wanted was the kid. So, they were all over everybody they could think to try and get something done. Well, there was very little they could get done because she was out in the bush and I don’t know whatever happened to that. There was a murder at U Taphao before I got there. Some officer was killed in a crew trailer, supposedly in the midst of a homosexual assignation, but that was done before I got there. We did have a case while I was there of a traffic death that caused us some trouble. We had a guy, an airman, was driving a truck on the flight line at night. He had a Thai Marine with him and another Thai Marine was sitting in the bed of the truck. They’ve got these little raised things on flight lines that have the fuel...you know, where the fuel pipes run to underground fuel tanks and there’s a big what amounts to a big lid made out of cast iron that you lift up and attach to the fuel hose to the thing [source] and then run it to the aircraft, and of course when you’re done you put the lid down. Well, somebody left the lid up and you’re talking a big, heavy piece of metal probably two feet by two on a raised thing that you can drive...a raised concrete thing that you can drive over if the lid’s down, but not very fast. The flight line speed limit was five miles an hour. This guy was probably going about 30, he was very negligent. He was going about 30 and he hit one of these things that somebody else had negligently left open and it tore the undercarriage out of the truck, just crash, tore the undercarriage out of the truck and hitting it threw the back end up. The Thai Marine in the back was thrown out onto the tarmac and then the truck slid over him and crushed him. Well, so then we had a case. The first thing we had to do was find the guy’s parents who of course lived way out in the jungle in northeast Thailand. It took about a week to get him there. We paid solatium which is basically an, ‘I’m sorry,’ money payment. I think we paid about $1000 dollars U.S., which is a lot of money, and then of course they filed a
claim for his death. The solatium’s just a gift, and then they filed a claim. I think they
ended up paying about $5000 U.S., which would probably last these people for ten years.
But, I remember the Staff Judge Advocate going through this little ceremony where they
bowed and he gave them the money and all this stuff. Then the Thais wanted to try to try
the driver for negligent homicide.

SM: It happened on base?

SS: It happened on base, and it was an official…well, they had jurisdiction. It
was not an exclusive…see, we had no status of forces agreement over there. There was
no written document that detailed jurisdiction. It was not like Korea, it was not like
NATO, we had no status of forces agreement. All we had was custom and usage, but it
was an official duty case because he was on duty when he was doing it and we said, ‘No,
absolutely not!’ And there was jockeying and diplomatic yelling and screaming and
finally the word came down to just put him on a plane and get him out of the country, so
we put him on a plane and got him out of the country and that was the end of it.

SM: Now with these kinds of cases, in particular that one, was there a lot of
interaction between the Staff Judge Advocate’s office and the base commander and the
embassy at all?

SS: Yeah, see we had a JAG at the embassy. We had a guy at the embassy, really
a good guy, an international law specialist. I don’t know, he might have already been a
colonel then, he was certainly a lieutenant colonel. We had another guy in Bangkok who
was a lieutenant colonel who we went to for permission. He had the authority to
authorize bail and counsel fees and all that stuff. But yes, we did have interaction at the
embassy and with this guy at the embassy and of course 13th Air Force which was the
general court-martial authority got in on the act. But I don’t know, the decision to send
this guy out of the country was made certainly at a higher level in U Taphao, probably at
the major command level in Hawaii.

SM: Was the base commander involved in a lot of the cases that you worked
with?

SS: No, no. We reported to him on the numbers, but no, he didn't get involved in
individual cases generally speaking. You know, when we wanted to restrict them to base
of course we had to go to him and he agreed easily. We did not go to him with individual
cases. We didn’t have any… I never had an officer case, the kind of thing that probably
would get the base commander more involved. I didn’t have any cases involving
officers. So basically he let us do it.

SM: How many people were at U Taphao while you were there?
SS: When I got there, there were about 6,000. When I left there were probably
two to four hundred.

SM: Really winding down?
SS: It wound down, and it wound down very, very fast from about March to June
of ’76. I think the base closed on 30 June ’76. I left about 21 May of ’76.

SM: You mentioned earlier that although all the B-52s had all been sent home,
some of the other operations included U2 over flights and things like that. What about 71
Blackbirds, SR-71 Blackbirds?
SS: I never saw one of those there, but they did have U2s there.
SM: And they were pretty much exclusively going up to China?
SS: We were never told where they went but the general thought was that they
were going over China and places like that. They were long flights because when those
guys came back they were pretty stiff. I remember guys sitting at the bar trying to get
unfolded from sitting in that thing for nine or ten hours.

SM: Anybody ever injured on an operation or any problems with that while you
were there?
SS: There was a… one of them went in the drink. A U2 went into the Gulf of
Siam. I think this was just after I got there in about July of ’75 or so forth. One of those
things went into the Gulf and the guy wasn’t injured. The guy wasn’t injured. The guy
fetched up way, way down in southern Thailand where they were having a Muslim
insurrection at the time and of course I think I remember seeing a picture of him in some
Thai newspaper standing in the middle of a town with a whole bunch of Thais around
him, and the intel people just went nuts, ‘Get him out of there! Get him out of there!’
Then there was this fear that the Russians or somebody would scoop up this aircraft and I
think they sent the Howard Hughes boat out there, the Glomar Explorer. I’m not sure on
this but I think they sent that or something like it out there or something like it to try to
fish that plane out of the Gulf of Siam. Whatever happened to that I don’t know, but the
guy was not hurt. He made it to shore okay.

SM: You mention that a lot of guys or some people would be drunk on duty and
there’d be problems with that kind of activity.

SS: Yeah, there was some of that. There was more off duty stuff. There was
nothing for these guys to do! Most of the guys I had who got into trouble were aircraft
mechanics and the organizational maintenance squadron and the avionics maintenance
squadron and munitions squadron, and all these guys whose jobs were basically to work
on aircraft. The aircraft went away and the guys were still there, and they didn’t have
anything to do. So, they got into trouble, or some of them did.

SM: Anything else that you want to talk about with regard to your service in
Thailand?

SS: Well, I could describe what happened when we left.

SM: Oh yeah, please do.

SS: When we left, when it was…this was April or May of ’76, I had about a
dozen guys still on international hold. Either they were still going through trial…they
were all out on bail. We had bail money posted. They were either pending appeal or
they were still being tried. See, trials lasted a long time. You would go there, you’d get a
trial date, you’d go there, and they’d maybe take the testimony of one witness and then
they’d adjourn it and it might be another month before it would come up again and you’d
take the testimony of another witness. It took about three to four months to get somebody
tried. So, these guys were on bail, the trials were going on or they were on bail pending
appeal. There were probably about a dozen of them. There was a guy I inherited from
Korat, and that was a heroin case. I had to go up there twice and this guy kept breaking
restriction. They finally threw him in the…the trouble was we didn’t have any
confinement facility. They apparently kept him in the SP shack for want of any place to
put him, but the question is what do you do with these guys? Well the decision was made
that we were going to keep some people in Bangkok at JUSMAG, the Joint US Military
Assistance Group, mostly an Army-run thing in Bangkok. The decision was made that
they would take all these guys that are on international hold and keep them at JUSMAG
until legal procedures were ended. I said, ‘That is absolute insanity. These guys are bad
enough out here. You take them to Bangkok where they have nothing to do and drugs are freely available, it is just a recipe for trouble.’ Well the decision was taken at a substantially higher level to do this and I PCSed. What I was told happened, I don’t know that this…all I know is what I was told. What I was told happened [later] was they took them to Bangkok, they put up a bunch of bunks in some room in some JUSMAG compound. The Staff Judge Advocate of JUSMAG was an Army colonel who was not very…he as an older guy, and was not very easy to deal with. The story I heard was that the one-star Army general who was, I think, the commander of JUSMAG was going through the place and he came on these guys, all these mostly Air Force guys sitting around going [makes sniffing noises] with their eternally runny noses, basically doing nothing, walking around in their shower shoes, and he said, ‘Who are these guys?’ and they said, ‘Oh sir, those are the Air Force guys on international hold,’ and he said, ‘What are they doing here?’ ‘Well, they’re going to stay here until their cases are done.’ ‘How long is that?’ ‘Oh, that could be a long time, sir,’ and he said, ‘Get them out of here!’ ‘But sir, that will cause a diplomatic incident and we’ll lose all…’ ‘Well I don’t care, get them out of here.’ They put them on a plane and got them out of there. We forfeited the bail of course, but you think the Thais cared?

SM: No.

SS: Of course not. They were rid of these guys and they had the money. They were happy as clams to take the money and bid farewell to these troublemakers, so I understand the end of foreign criminal jurisdiction in Thailand.

SM: And from that point on they just kept shipping guys out?

SS: Yeah, and supposedly everybody was out of there except the embassy Marines and the JUSMAG people by 30 June ’76 but I wasn’t around by then. I left about 21 May.

SM: When you came back, how were you received?

SS: My wife was happy to see me! I didn’t go through any…nobody threw eggs at me or anything.

SM: There wasn’t anything really going on?
SS: No, nothing like that. Yeah, this was 1976, nobody cared. I just went to another active duty installation because I was still on active duty. I went to upstate New York, spent two years up there.

SM: What did you do up there?

SS: I was Assistant Staff Judge Advocate at a base called Hancock Field, which no longer exists, which was in Syracuse. My wife was in law school at Cornell. I got out in the summer of ’78 from there. She graduated from law school in ’78, and we ended up in Washington where she’s from and we’ve lived here every since.

SM: How did your experiences in Thailand affect what you did when you got back in terms of your career as a lawyer, the job that you pursued…I understand you work right now for the armed services?

SS: Yeah, I work for the Armed Services Committee. I don’t know that being in Thailand had any particular effect. Being in the service certainly did in that I was on a career. Everybody I went to law school with was on Wall Street making huge amounts of money and I did, after I got out, go into private practice for a while but I found I didn’t like it very much and I went back to working for the government and have worked for the government since 1982. When I went back to working for the government I also got back in the JAG Reserve program, which I’m still in, and now I’m a colonel. Being in the Air Force had a definite career effect; being in Southeast Asia I don’t think did.

SM: How were your experiences in Thailand, how were they important for you personally?

SS: I learned I could work in a totally alien environment basically on my own because I was given a lot of discretion and do it successfully. I learned what it was like to live in an entirely alien culture and deal with the people. I learned that I really liked the food, and I got a year to live someplace entirely different and I liked that. It was by far the best duty I ever had when I was on active duty.

SM: Actually take a step back real quick and talk about your work at Hancock Air Field, is that right?

SS: Yeah, I was a claims officer. I did claims and I was the Deputy Staff Judge advocate. Claims is kind of not super interesting work. It was a small base, we didn’t have much in the ways of court-martials or anything.
SM: Was the atmosphere there substantially different than what you’ve encountered at Udorn…I’m sorry U Taphao?

SS: U Taphao? Actually in some ways it was sort of the same. It was a little base with not much of a mission. We had a guy in the JAG office who will remain nameless who smoked dope with airmen. It was not a place you want to go to advance your career. I was there purely…I asked for the assignment purely because it was the closest base geographically to Ithaca, New York, where my wife was. The Air Force has gone through the post-Vietnam doldrums and they didn’t get out of them for a few more years.

SM: Well when did you go to George Washington…

SS: I did that from ’81 to ’83 when I was leaving private practice and going back to government. That was kind of an, ‘Oh hell, why not,’ thing. I had the GI Bill which paid…in those days was still enough money to pay for it, and plus it was a masters in law and I was a lawyer it was deductible. I had an enjoyable couple of years there. I got an LLM in international law and it didn’t cost me a cent.

SM: I guess how did your experiences in Thailand and how did your understanding of the Vietnam War and how we conducted that, was that part of the subject matter you studied?

SS: To some extent. The guy who ran the [LLM] program was a guy who’d been in the Navy and who knew a lot about it. I ended up doing my thesis on a problem in the history of naval warfare that reached the Supreme Court. It wasn't a Vietnam case. It reached the Supreme Court in the Spanish-American War, but it slopped over into Vietnam in the riverine operations they did there.

SM: And did your perceptions or your attitudes about American policy in Southeast Asia, did they change at all as a result of your work that you’d done?

SS: Probably not. I retain an interest in American policy in East Asia generally. Much later we adopted two kids who were born in Korea so I have a continuing personal interest in events in East Asia generally.

SM: And your work now, in the Armed Services Committee?

SS: I’m the general counsel, the majority general counsel in the committee.
SM: Has your experience in the Air Force and Thailand, has that helped you at all?

SS: Sure, absolutely. You’ve got to know…to do this job, it certainly is very helpful to have a meaningful background in military service. It’s not an absolute essential, but it certainly is useful.

SM: What do you think we should take away from our experience in Southeast Asia as a nation? What lessons should we learn from our experience and how could we turn that experience into something positive?

SS: Well I think for one thing doing the right thing may not necessarily work out. The good guys don’t always win. I think the classic Vietnam lesson which is only go in if you’ve got overwhelming support and overwhelming etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, can to a certain degree be over-learned. I mean, there are sometimes when you’ve got to go in. You’ve got to use the armed forces, and you’ve got to use them rather than simply worry about force protection and that kind of thing. Basically I think that what the United States attempted to do in Southeast Asia was a moral thing to do. I think [it’s shown by] the fact that almost everyone with a chance to get out of there got out of there and many of them ended up here. Back that up, I think the United States is greatly enriched by the people. Is it worth it? I don’t know. But, the United States is greatly enriched by the people it got out of Southeast Asia. I’m talking about the Vietnamese and Cambodians, the people that immigrated, and also, I think the effect it had on a generation. I don’t know. I think you’ve got to be careful about presidential war making. Of course now I’m looking at it from a congressional perspective. We just did it again in Kosovo with a good deal less constitutional scruple than we did in Vietnam. In Vietnam you had a clear indication of congressional intent. In Kosovo, you had no such indication whatsoever. I think we need to be careful about that kind of thing.

SM: What did you think about our operations in Kosovo?

SS: I thought they were – this is me personally – I thought they were constitutionally dubious and I thought they were unprecedented in American history that the United States would wage what amounted to aggressive war on a nation with whom we had normal diplomatic relations in the absence of any kind of casus belli that in any way affected American interests. I thought it was a dubious affair.
SM: What about from an international law perspective?

SS: There was no UN sanction sought. I think it was dubious from an international law perspective. I’m more concerned with its effect on our internal constitutional procedures and structures, but it think it’s dubious from an international law standpoint because they didn’t bother to get any sort of UN sanction for it. I’m not saying a UN sanction necessarily trumps everything, but they didn’t really do it.

SM: What about other operations we’ve conducted recently, Bosnia, Haiti, Somalia?

SS: Haiti is more in the tradition of longstanding American operations in Central America. The problem with Haiti is basically there’s nothing you can do to fix Haiti. We’ve been trying to do that for 200 years. In Kosovo, there is a UN sanction for that. My worry about Kosovo is its continuing operational drain on the armed forces because we’re running a bunch of operations like that. The Air Force operations in Iraq, Kosovo, there’s significant operational drains on the armed forces to the point that if we are now faced with a real contingency like Korea, we’d be hard pressed to meet it.

SM: Or perhaps Taiwan?

SS: Or Taiwan.

SM: What about what happened in Somalia?

SS: I actually had a war college classmate who was involved in that. I haven't read that book, but that was a classic...

SM: What book, Black Hawk Down?

SS: Black Hawk Down, yeah. I had a war college classmate who was out there and involved in that. Somalia to me is sort of another instance of, ‘Why are we there?’ What American national interest is there?’ and the answer was, ‘Absolutely none.’ We’re basically there to try and do good. I think again it’s a dubious proposition as far as American national interest is concerned. The other thing about Somalia is that people got killed, and, frankly, you can't wage war painlessly. People are going to get killed, people are going to get hurt, it’s not going to be pretty, and I think sometimes the American public – not the armed forces, they know that – but I don’t know…my suspicion is that the American public would be more accepting of casualties than some people think if you had a situation where the national interest was obviously involved. But, on the other
hand, if you have a situation where basically we’re just doing good, then that’s another matter. I think the American national interest was involved in Southeast Asia. I think the American national interest is involved in a place like Korea or Taiwan. I am not at all sure that the American national interest is involved in some of these other places, although that’s a political decision that the constitutional authorities have to make.

SM: Now have your attitudes about American policy in Southeast Asia changed in any way substantially since your college days or since you’ve served in Thailand?
SS: Probably not much.

SM: What did you think about the way we prosecuted the policies in Vietnam in particular from the buildup, the American military build up during the Johnson period through to Vietnamization during Nixon, and then the American withdrawal under Ford?
SS: The withdrawal was horrible. We left all kinds of friends and supporters in the lurch, and that was primarily a congressionally-compelled thing. That wasn’t a Ford decision, that was a congressionally-compelled thing. You know, with hindsight one can say that it’s palpably ridiculous to have the President of the United States and Secretary of Defense making individual targeting decisions and that kind of thing. I mean, that just gets you nowhere. Did it seem like a good idea at the time? Yeah. I mean, I was probably like a 19 year old kid. At the time I thought, ‘Yeah seems like a good idea!’ Obviously it wasn’t the right way to fight it. What could we have done better? All kinds of things. Even though I’ve spent 30 years in the Air Force I’m not necessarily a believer in air power is the panacea for all military problems. There’s a lot of stuff that has to be won on the ground and Vietnam was one of those situations. I had always thought that once we connived at the overthrow of the Diem government, the thing was basically lost, but that’s neither here nor there. That was a long time ago; that was in ’63.

SM: Yes sir, just before the Kennedy assassination.
SS: Yeah.

SM: Is there anything else you’d like to discuss today?
SS: Not really. How many people have you interviewed for this thing?
SM: Oh boy, it’s upwards of about 70 now and that’s since January. It’s picking up.
SS: Most of them I suppose are people who served in Vietnam?
SM: A lot are, but since my interaction with the TLCB and Air America and through Air America some Civil Air Transport people, so we’ll hopefully get a lot more involvement from people who were in theater and working in Thailand and Laos and Japan and things like that. In fact, our chancellor here at Texas Tech, Chancellor John Montford, was a JAG officer in the Marine Corps stationed out of Japan. Eventually hopefully this semester I’ll get to interview him.

SS: Great, I remember when Neil Rudenstine became president of Harvard in about 1990, the guy who’s resigning now, he wrote an article for the Harvard alumni magazine in which he mentioned among other formative experiences his service as an artillery officer pre-Vietnam, running around Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and plunking at old tanks, and I thought, ‘Well, how refreshing to have somebody running Harvard who actually knows what it’s like to serve in the armed forces!’ All I would say is probably don’t hold your breath. (laughs)

SM: Well let me go ahead and end this by saying thank you and stopping the recording.