Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Colonel Jack Keith. I am in Lubbock, Texas at the Special Collections Library on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Keith you are in Miami, Florida is that correct?

Jack Keith: That’s right.

RV: Sir, this morning if you would and it is October 24th on Thursday morning. If you would sir start with some general biographical information. Where were you born and when were you born?

JK: I was born in Muskegon, Michigan, 24 September 1924.

RV: Did you grow up there in Michigan?

JK: Yes, I hardly left town there until I was 18 years old.

RV: Is it a relatively small town?

JK: It’s on the west coast of Michigan, right across from Milwaukee. I think the documents give it a figure of something like 40,000 or 50,000.
RV: How would you describe your childhood there?

JK: I was one of three children. My father was an independent garage man. My mother was a nurse. I had a thought a real fine partially during the Depression there, things were a little tough. But we always had plenty to eat with no problems. I hardly realized that there was a Depression. Just went on through the school system until 1943 when I graduated there at the high school.

RV: So both of your parents worked?

JK: Yes, they did.

RV: What did you do? Did you work during your youth there?

JK: Not really. The only work I did I’d say about the last year before I left, I was still in school and I drove a Railway Express truck. It’s similar to these FedEx and things like today. That was about the extent of my work.

RV: Sir, what do you remember about high school? What were your favorite subjects and were you involved in sports and things like that?

JK: Not really with the war on there beginning in ’41 I wanted to get out and get in the service. I was interested in aviation a whole lot. I took extra subjects and so on to get through a little early. So I had very little involvement with any extracurricular type things. In fact I think they indicated in the yearbook that I never looked back and just marched straight through. That was it.

RV: What were your favorite subjects in high school?

JK: I guess math primarily I guess. I never was really thrilled over schooling.

Those last two years I wanted to get out and get over and get into the World War II.
RV: Why were you interested in the military? Did you have military tradition in your family or was it something that you wanted yourself?

JK: My father was in World War I, enlisted man worked with the quartermaster corps he was. Of course he was proud that he served. Of course in this war, World War II came along I was the only one, my brother was about four years younger so he wasn’t going to make it. My dad wanted us, if we were of the right age, he wanted us to get in there and do what he did. I was interested in aviation from way back by just hanging around the airport and getting a flight or two with a friend of my father’s. One day he came home and mentioned something about aviation. He had talked to the major down at the armory. That was that. I signed up and they allowed me to continue on until I graduated and then they called me in, aviation cadets.

RV: So you signed up before you graduated high school?

JK: Yes.

RV: You knew you wanted to go into the Air Force?

JK: Yes, Army Air Corps at that time.

RV: Exactly. How did you get interested in aviation? You said it started when you were younger.

JK: Like my father with his garage and a mechanic or two. I don’t know maybe Lindbergh or Wrong-Way Corrigan, the man that flew to Ireland you know. Then there was a friend of my father’s that had a little aircraft and he gave us a ride. I had a quick flight with a man named Chamberlain who used to go around with a Ford tri-motor. I got a ride in that and I just began to think this is ok. That’s the way I went.

RV: Were you ever scared or nervous of flying, being up in the air?
After you graduated high school, this was I guess in June of ’43?

 JK: That’s right.

 RV: You immediately went to basic?

 JK: Right.

 RV: Where was your basic training?

 JK: I graduated from high school on 15 June and 5 July I left and went to Keesler, Mississippi.

 RV: How would you describe your basic training?

 JK: It was kind of a big thrill to me. The first time I’d been away from home. I just did everything they told me to do along with a lot of these other 18 year old and I enjoyed it.

 RV: Was it really difficult for you physically or anything?

 JK: No I kind of went through the calisthenics and everything they put us through. Food and everything was fine. You’re kept so busy you didn’t get the chance to think of home or anything else really. It was just day-by-day.

 RV: Did your training focus on World War II and what was happening and where you might be going after you finished basic?

 JK: Yes, I think that’s where we got into primarily code, Morse code and the recognition of all the aircraft and ships of the world that we were involved in. That came a little later. I think basic training was just primarily physical.

 RV: How long was your basic?
JK: About six weeks.

RV: Six weeks, from there where did you go?

JK: From there I went to Ft Ethan Allen or up in Vermont. They had a college training program they had. They called it CTD. It was just kind of a sidetrack; things were slowing down a little bit even then in 1943. So rather than jump right into the flying end of it, they would partition us off into these sidetracks in the colleges. So, I spent a semester at the University of Vermont before getting back into the system.

RV: What did they teach you there for that one semester?

JK: Pretty much math, science, history, English. I went into the medical business a little bit, things like that. Again there was a lot of calisthenics.

RV: When did you first get into the cockpit to fly?

JK: That was in primary flight training in Helen, Arkansas of May of 1944.

RV: After you left the college training in Vermont, where did you go from there?

JK: We went to Nashville, Tennessee, which was a cadet classification center where they determine whether you’re going to be a pilot, bombardier, or navigator.

RV: And this is January 1944?

JK: Right January and February.

RV: Did you get to select what you wanted to do or did they select you?

JK: They select you. They had all kinds of written examinations that you took. It depended on how you made out on those, which way you went, whether pilot or otherwise. I always wanted the pilot bit. I was always kind of worried that you might get something different. I don’t know what I’d have done if that had happened. Butt I was lucky and I managed to stay in to that.
RV: So you were assigned to fly fighter pilots or just you were pilot?

JK: At that point they just called in single-engine.

RV: Ok, so you qualified for that. I take it your eyesight was up to par. If you had done really well on all the exams, but your eyesight was not what they wanted, you would have been out, is that correct?

JK: That’s right.

RV: Wow, so you’re blessed with good eyes.

JK: That’s right.

RV: After, this is in Nashville and you’re there for a couple of months and from there were do you go?

JK: There again like that CTD up there where they put you on a side rail, February, March of that we went to Marianna, Florida Air Base and just again marched time, waiting to go to Maxwell Field which was actually the primary flight business where you really get into it.

RV: Right, and at this point you still had not flown?

JK: No.

RV: Were you itching to get behind?

JK: Yes, every once in a while you’d see an aircraft. They had a P-40 and we’d kind of sneak around and go out and try to take a look and things like that.

RV: What did you do there in Florida? What was your training?

JK: Practically nothing. It was just calisthenics again and that type of thing. And three meals a day. I don’t recall any studying much of any kind.
RV: How much contact did you have with your family through these first years here?

JK: Never saw them at all for 19 months, but I would write regularly. So, there wasn’t any problem there. I don’t recall really calling much. It was always writing a letter.

RV: I take it your father, since he encouraged you to enlist and your mother I guess were they supportive of your military career at this point?

JK: Yes, they were behind me all the way.

RV: How about your brother?

JK: Yes, he was fine. He still had three years of school to go. He was kind of busy.

RV: Did you have any other siblings?

JK: Yes, I had a sister, a year older.

RV: How did she feel about you being in the service?

JK: She was behind me all the way. She was a registered nurse like my mother.

RV: Basically at this point this is early 1944, of course before the invasion of Europe, did you feel like the war was kind of passing you by? Did you want to get over in the fight?

JK: Yes, that was the big thing. We heard of all the kills, you know air to air kills in the Pacific with the Navy and things like that. As all great news that went. All I could think of was “gee, I hope it’s not over before I can get in the fight.”

RV: You wrote in your memoirs that you sent us that really you think that it’s every aviator’s dream or really when you’re in military service, it’s a privilege to be able
to serve in these conflicts. You wait for these conflicts to come up and when they do you
want to get out there and do your duty.

JK: That’s right, that’s what we live for.

RV: So, you’re in Florida for a couple of months and then in March ’44 you’re
transferred to Maxwell Field?

JK: Right.

RV: You’re finally at where they’re going to teach you some more
straightforward aviation. What was your training like there?

JK: Here was the same thing and the calisthenics again, real rigorous. The big
thing here was memorizing Morse code. We had to identify all aircraft and naval vessels
of all countries; ours and all the enemies and the friendlies.

RV: Was that difficult to do?

JK: It was kind of rough at times. It was again fun and I enjoyed it. That was
primarily it. See, that went on for March through May I guess it was. I enjoyed that,
because at that point we knew that the next step was going to be into an airplane.

Primary placement.

RV: Were you able to make friends throughout this early training? Did you have
any good friends?

JK: In those early years you may have one or two individuals that had similar
lives as your own. Like on a weekend somebody to walk to town with. Everything you
did, you had to walk or take a bus. Not over like one or two people like that on most of
the stations where I was assigned where you would have that guy to go to the movies with
or go get a hamburger with or so.
RV: What did you enjoy doing when you had your down time?

JK: That was about it. Probably go down town and look around the Red Cross. You know they give you donuts and coffee and stuff like that. I guess occasionally a movie, but not too much in the movies. I think it was just kind of looking around and seeing the local areas. I remember one time there was a German prison camp near our primary base.

RV: Is this in Alabama?

JK: No, this was my next.

RV: Ok, in Arkansas?

JK: Yes. When we went into Helen, Arkansas, I had a friend there a guy named Henry Peters and he was German extraction and a real nice type. He was the type that I would go in and out of town with and get us ice cream things like that. He heard of this camp so we walked over to it. Stopped late outside of the fence and the guards up in the guard shack watched us. Of course during the war you could never take off your uniform as far as on or off base. They knew or saw that we were cadets so they kind of turned away and we chatted. Henry’s folks, I think his father was born in Germany. German prisoners started to come up along the fence they occupied and we’d just sit in the grass. Henry would talk to them and speak to them in German. When they found out his father was German born they just had a real great conversation. They had a volleyball going and that terminated about that time. The only individuals that didn’t come over looked like some of the hardened types who just kind of walked behind them with their hands placed behind them looking over in disgust at their fellow Germans who would sit and talk to the Americans. That was an interesting little show.
RV: What did they talk about do you remember?

JK: I don’t know. About families and one thing that was interesting I don’t know if I mentioned it. The Germans, they worked in the cotton fields and in other crops there. Of course three wasn’t any activity. They’d hear our little primary plane flying over when they were out in the fields. In fact we would fly over and wag wings or dive down towards them and they’d wave and all this type thing. They told us that they knew this whole area where they were imprisoned there was just a set up, like Hollywood front. That we were all starving to death and we were all about to succumb to the Nazis and the Axis powers you know. So, Henry kind of laughed and said, “No, you’re wrong.” He couldn’t convince them. They thought it was just a fluke there to hide our bad deal.

RV: Really? So they thought that at this point they were winning the war?

JK: That’s right.

RV: Back to your training this is in Helena, Arkansas. This is where your primary flight training took place?

JK: That’s right.

RV: What was that like for you?

JK: That was great. We had the same schooling again like we would fly in the morning and school in the afternoon or vice versa. We had this little PT-19 aircraft, single-engine. We had five of us under our particular instructor who was a civilian instructor. We’d go out and fly with him each day. He’d be giving us instruction and you get up around 10 hours and then he’d crawl out and let you go alone. For some reason they’d send a second lieutenant initial business when you hadn’t flown yet. They’d try to tear you down and scare you to death. Like my guy said, “Well get in there
and go.” He said, “You’re going to kill yourself, I’m not going with you.” Then he
turned me lose. At that point you’re about ready to say, “Gee, if I’m that bad let’s forget
it.” I went ahead and made the flight and the rest of the guys followed right quick.

RV: Were you the first one?

JK: Right I was the first of the five. I don’t know if alphabetically. We were
Keith, Kelly, Katz, Kasaritas and so on. I think Keith was the first one on the alphabet so
I don’t know just how they managed that.

RV: How did you feel when you first were able to fly?

JK: Oh, it was great. A grass patch and kind of bumpy. When he crawled out,
dropped his parachute down in the cockpit. Then as I turned around to go out there, of
course you had no radios then. You just look at the tower and wait for a green light.

When I got the green light I pushed the power on and of course the airplane bumped and
bounced around like a cart. I was finally airborne and shot a couple of rectangular traffic
patterns and then came back in and landed.

RV: So, you’re up for just a few minutes?

JK: Yes, probably 10-15 minutes. They always told us that when you come in
and seek the ground there on your landing, if you bounce rather than try to recover where
you can get behind the power curve and you begin to over control, they said just put the
power on and go around. I did. I came in and bounced. It wasn’t any problem. A few
hours later it would have been no problem at all for me. The fact that he said you

RV: So you bounced once.
JK: I bounced once and went around. Our boy Kasaritas who was the last one, he
went in and came around 17 times before he hit the ground.

RV: Oh my gosh.

JK: He was almost out of fuel when he finally got it down.

RV: Did you guys give him a hard time about that?

JK: Yes. He had told the instructor and all of us that he had a little time in
airplanes. Of course he hadn’t. We had one man that did have, a guy named Kelley. He
could have gone out and probably had several hundred hours. This guy Kasaritas
because he was kind of mouthy like this, the instructor made a point to send him up last.

Of course when he finally got out after 17 tries and hit the ground the instructor looked at
him and said, “Yes.” You know, previous times. I understand the man washed out later
in advanced training.

RV: How many flights did you make in this training here? This was a daily
event?

JK: Right. I probably ended up with I’d say a little less than 50 hours maybe,
something like that.

RV: Did you feel like you received good training there, initially?

JK: Yes, I thought that was fine.

RV: How long were you there?

JK: That was about May through July of 1944.

RV: In July of ’44 I guess did you graduate or did they just kind of move you on?

JK: Yes, you just kind of sit around and wait for orders going to basic flight
training, which I got in early August. It was Greenwood, Mississippi.
RV: Describe that to me.

JK: They took us in trucks, six-bys they called them. Large canvas covered jobs and took us into town and out us in a train. We went from Helena Arkansas to Greenwood, Mississippi. In that route was where one of our cadets walked off the train at night.

RV: He walked off the train?

JK: What had happened we had maybe six or eight cars. Of course you’re never told anything. We eat and sleep on the train. Somewhere in the night they stopped, which they did frequently for various things. They stopped and uncoupled the trains and they sent three or so or half of the cars over to this twin-engine base and then we continued on. This friend of ours, we called him Leaky because he was always going to the boys’ room. He would get up and go back through the back of the car and then step across into the next car where they had the latrine and then he would use that and come back. They uncoupled it right there. Somewhere probably early hours of the morning he went back, pitch dark and stepped off the back of the train while we were moving. Then when we go tot Greenwood, Mississippi they always have head count and this guy was missing. Then the guys figured well he must have went back in one of the others cars to sleep with maybe a friend or something. Then they checked the police stations and so on in the towns behind us. They found he was in the hospital. We didn’t see him for several weeks. He was much lighter, peaked, probably I don’t know now. He probably had broken bones or something.

RV: But he rejoined you eventually?

JK: Yes, he rejoined us, but I don’t remember anything after that regarding him.
RV: What was your training like here? This was your advanced training?
JK: No that was basic.
RV: This is your basic flight training?
JK: Basic where we went into what they call a BT-13 single engine. A little more power a little nicer airplane. Went through a few rides and then the solo. Then we went on to various things like navigation, landing at night and things like that. Just a lot of maneuvering; just became proficient in the airplane everyday. Again half the day was ground work, schooling and things like that.
RV: Right. How many hours do you think you logged?
JK: I probably got 70 or so from there.
RV: Do you feel like you received good training there?
JK: Yes.
RV: Was the military service at this point, what you thought it would be?
JK: Yes, I thought everything was fine. We got a little hazing and stuff like that on occasion, but it was all, to me 18 years old it’s a big kick. I thought it was great.
RV: You’re traveling basically all over the south here. So, Greenwood, Mississippi you’re there until November ’44 and you’re transferred to Craig Field in Alabama.
JK: That’s right.
RV: This was your advanced flight training?
JK: Right.
RV: What aircraft did you train in there sir?
JK: We flew the 826, which is a North American bird, jacked up a little higher that he basic bird that had retractable gear and controllable prop and things like that which the birds in the past did not have. It was a fine airplane. They still talk about it today as being a great trainer before the jet engines.

RV: Any other aircraft that you trained in there besides the 826?

JK: There I went on through the program, graduated class of ’44 K. We watched the bulletin board everyday. They were sending people to Europe and the Pacific.

RV: Ok, so this is where you could have gotten into the fight? You could have been transferred overseas.

JK: Right I still had the rest of ’45. VE-day was May of ’45 and J-day was September. We really hounded that bulletin board every hour. In the mean time we’re flying P-40s Curtis Warhawk they called them. That was a, then a real fine airplane. When a lot of the old jocks look back today, they say it was kind of off gear, but it was all right. Then we went into the P-40s or the P-47Bs which were brand new birds with the bubble canopy and right out of the factory and never been in combat. I flew those for several months and enjoyed those. Had a ball used to get in trouble for buzzing and things like that.

RV: Tell me about that, what would you guys do?

JK: We dusted off an Army housing place Rucker down in Alabama down there somewhere around Mayfair Field in Alabama. A friend of mine, a boy named Ladermer Brigs Neal, we called him Pappy because he was 27. I was 20 when I graduated so we referred to him as Pappy. He had a sister living down there in the Army housing area. She was married to an Army type, of course we were still Army, Army Air Corps. But
the Army guys if they weren’t in the Air Corps they didn’t have too much love for us.
We went off on a cross country in two different airplanes. He briefed me and we ended up at that place to show his sister that he was around so we did. Scared everybody to death. I look at it now and I think my God that was terrible. Because you’re right down clothes line level, taking the roofs off and stuff like that. To make it worse, we made about six passes apiece. Then we went on to Atlanta, spent the night and then came back and did them again about two deals on a Sunday. That was Saturday. Then we got back and landed and everything we thought was great. I being single lived in the BOQ and Greg lived in town with his wife and newborn, a boy. When he got home he got a call from his sister saying things were kind of bad. She’d heard a woman in the hallway in the telephone talking to Mayfair Field about a couple of people that really tore the base up. So he came right out to the base and briefed me on it. So, we went in, some of this is kind of touchy, but I mean it’s been so many years now I’m ok. He came in and gave me those whole picture and he wanted to go turn us in. We ought to go turn ourselves in. I thought we can’t do that because in those days you could be court marshaled or they fine you forever. So, I said let’s tell them we got lost and we went down looking for the railroad station. That was the procedure in those days. If you got lost, you’d buzz the railroad station and read the name off the station. Like Lubbock, you know? So, we went in and told the operations officer who was a captain, we told him this story. He said, “Fine you know; you did the right thing.” In the mean time I took off on another thing in aircraft. So at that point the paper followed us and they were back at our air base. They contacted the captain and so on. At that point he knew what it was all about. Initially he was really happy with us. “You know you did everything right.” At this
point he knew that we’d made a mess of things. He said, “Well I know what happened,”
so get out of my sight type thing. We just got the story together about the buzz and
looking for the town name off the railroad station. Colonel Clifton was the commander,
and his assistant, another full colonel were away, and when they came back they were
told about our story that we had given the legal office and we never herd a word of it. All
I could imagine was that they tried to instill this, afraid of nothing, aggressiveness and so
on in fighter pilots. I thought maybe the colonel thought the program’s pretty good. So,
we never heard. Just terribly lucky.

RV: So you got off free, no problems at all. Did his sister, your friend’s sister
she heard you guys came over and knew that it was him?

JK: I don’t know if they had done any telephone work prior to this thing or not,
but I think she kind of knew what it was. Of course when she called Selma where Greg
lived with his wife, sure.

RV: So you graduated in May of 1946?

JK: February of ’45.

RV: I’m sorry February ’45 and you stayed on there Craig Field for a while?

JK: Until May of ’46. At this time things are getting real rough. The pilots
whether you wanted to stay or not they just lined you up and you went home.

RV: Really they’re discharging people?

JK: Yes, they’re falling like leaves off the tree in the fall. Of course I’d say the
majority of them looked forward to it. They wanted to get back, get to work with their
dads or go to college and things like that. Bu there were a bunch of us that loved
aviation, loved the business and I just held my breath and things really got tight. We
found about that time at Craig in early ’46, if you didn’t have some kind of an additional
duty, like a lot of the fighter pilots after you graduated all you did was fly. You didn’t
have any little crazy jobs like assistant maintenance officer or assistant to the PX officer
or whatever it might have been. We heard that to get into radar was a keeper and another
one was the Hollow Bird Signal Depot in Baltimore was an intelligence, spook school,
spy school. That sounded kind of intriguing and I didn’t have a feel for being a radar
type, so I grabbed that, went off to Baltimore. At that point I was still flying P-40s and
T-47s.

RV: So you did this so you could make sure you stayed in the service?
JK: Yes, because we could tell around the base our days were numbered.
RV: You really did think that was it?
JK: Yes, I thought this was the only thing to tide me over.
RV: So how long were you in Baltimore?
JK: Went to Baltimore in a Hollow Bird and checked with the people there.
They said we’re going to have interviews like we’re having here today with you and
anyone else, any of the other officers who are coming in to see if you’re going to make a
good candidate. At that point there I met a man named Tracy B. Matheson III.
RV: Sir are you there?
JK: Just a minute.
RV: Ok go ahead sir.
JK: He was a fine young officer. We were both first lieutenants and he came
from another base under the same thing I was under. I’d never met him up to this point.
So, they called me and I went in and set for this full colonel. He gave me a briefing on
what the school was all about and what we would do afterwards. He ended up by saying, “Of course you know you lose your wings.”

RV: Oh, if you went to this school?

JK: Yes. He was in the Signal Corps. He had flags up there versus our wings you know on the lapel. I almost felt he was kind of pleased to tell us that. You know, say a little business, but they never had too much love for the flyboys. So, when he said that I thought, gee, I don’t like this at all. I wouldn’t be interested. He said, “Ok, your cue,” and did his paperwork, and shortly after he called in Tracy, and Tracy went thought the same thing. Boy he just about fainted too when he mentioned that, no wing bit. I thought two things there. One deal they may select us just to spite, just to bring us out of the flying business and get into that deal. Another thing, they may just go ahead and release us. I thought more than likely they’ll probably try to keep us. So, we checked the board and sure enough both of us were relieved of that assignment. At that point we were free. We had no base. The only base we had behind us, if we went back, would probably put us out. They would discharge us. But we were free for anybody who might have an opening for pilots. Old Tracy said, “Gee a guy named Beverly, Colonel Beverly is firing up the 4th fighter group at Andrews there at Washington D.C.” The 4th group is one of the proudest groups around and still is. He said, “Why don’t we drive out there and see if we can find him?” They had just brought in their equipment things from Europe as the war ended there. Beverly came in from climbing around in the country or somewhere and was going to be the new commander, a real nice guy. We went to Andrews, a far cry from what it is today. Had a bunch of old tar paper shacks. We saw this colonel directing telling them where to put the boxes and stuff like that. So, we walked up to him
and asked him if he could use a couple of fighter pilots. Boy, he turned around and said,

“Yeah, have you flown before?” I said, “Yes, sir.” Old Tracy said yes sir too, but he
hadn’t flown fighters. But he wasn’t about to say no. He said, “Well the hitch is who are
you assigned to?” We said “Nobody right now. We just left Hollow Bird and were
released for lack of interest. We don’t know where we’re going to go.” He called his
_____ over. He said “Call the Pentagon in the basement, in the order section and check
these two guys out.” So he did and there’s a warrant officer answered and got our names
and said, “You’re right. These two people have just been released from Hollow Bird and
they’re up for grabs.” We were immediate members of the 4th fighter group at that point.

RV: What rank were you out at this point sir?

JK: Full first lieutenant.

RV: How long did you stay there?

JK: Andrews was about April through November. We flew the T-47 in, which is
the version of the D, but it’s got clipped wings, but it’s a little bigger. That’s when I went
in and started flying jets. I checked out in the old F-80 in 1947.

RV: How did you feel flying the jet versus the prop aircraft?

JK: It was great. Again, there were stories about the jet. If you were slow or
sitting on the ground for takeoff you could have full power and it would take a little while
before the thing would wind up compared to the prop job. When you hit the throttle in a
prop job it jumped in the air after a few hundred feet. The jet took a while to wind up.
So they tried to scare you there a little bit. They said if you ever come around like
bouncing type thing, if you ever come around and turn on the final approach in the jet,
you’re going to have to land. Because the power’s back, your speed is down toward the
landing or approach speed. By the time you get the power on you’re going to be on the
ground, you know, enough power to go anywhere you’re going to be sitting on the
ground. They mentioned crazy things like that, which scared a bunch of the older guys. I
thought this is great. We saw a demonstration with a civilian test pilot from Lockheed
accompanied our checkout days there. We had E flying beside or in front of our T-47.
They come by the grandstand, pass at the same point but with a terrible difference in
speed. That drove the tar out of us. So, I got to check out one of the first. I found that
they were right about he lag in that engine coming up to speed. But as long as you knew
it you were ok. So, I flew that the rest of that tour at Andrews.

RV: Why were the older hands a little more fearful?

JK: They had a little more experience and a little more brains I guess. I was still
probably about 20. I think I was 20 years old.

RV: That’s really amazing. You think of a 20 year old today, and they’re not
going to have that kind of experience. You’re flying jets in Washington D.C. at age 20.
That’s incredible. You did prefer once you got in, you preferred the jet to the prop?

JK: Oh, yes.

RV: How about the maneuverability of the aircraft?

JK: Yes, they were good. You couldn’t tackle a conventional bird like a B-51 a
T-47 a Navy corsair or any of these birds. They could turn real tight and they could
maneuver well. They had plenty of power. And the jet, if you tried to get into a just
berry, a turn, circle with one, you would start dropping speed and he would tighten up his
turn and he could have you real quick. When in a jet they were plenty maneuverable for
their speed. As long as you had the power and whatever and if you needed a little more
speed you could keep it going down hill. The tactic became more of a get up on a high point, and that hit, and go back up onto the perch. Come down and strike and cut like a bead. That was what ended up more when in the jets.

RV: This was about the time the U.S. Air Force was created is that correct?
JK: Right. Air Force came in 1947 while I was at Andrews.

RV: So, you changed designations, you became part of the U.S. Air Force?
JK: Yes, it was established 18 Septemeber.

RV: You were there until November is that correct?

RV: At this point how much contact did you have with your family back in Michigan?
JK: Not an awful lot.

RV: Had you been home yet?
JK: Yes, I came back. When I left I had a tour in the hospital.

RV: At Maxwell?
JK: No it was after I got my wings and I was going to go to Germany. At Craig that would be in May of ’46. I had a motorcycle, which I wasn’t too familiar with. Didn’t have tires in those days and a Marine came in from California with a brand new motorcycle and put it in the paper in Selma, Alabama for sale for $600. Today I guess they’d cost $6,000 or $12,000. So, I bought it and never knew anything about them. The day I bought it I spilled on the highway and tore all my clothes off, busted up the bike and then about 90 days later I got the order to go to Germany. The motorcycle was fixed up and I had driven it several weeks, couple three or four months after that. A friend of mine a guy named Armstead, also we were second balloons I think at that time, second
lieutenants. I was going to ride that thing. He lived in northern Alabama. I was going to
drop him off there and then I was going up to Michigan and I’d sell the bike and then
we’d meet in Germany. Around a little town in Alabama in the middle of the night, an
old fellow come out the direction and he had been drinking and he forced us off the
highway and we hit head on. I spent nine months in the hospital.

RV: This is before you went to Andrews?

JK: Yes, it wasn’t long after that at Craig when we found out we were going to
be released, if we didn’t do something. Then we went to Hollow Bird and we met
Colonel Beverly in the 4th group. I was at that point still kind of recovering.

RV: What happened to you physically?

JK: I broke the left lower arm, ulna and radius came through my clothes. I broke
my left femur, the head of it. Crushed that and also crushed the hip joint. I went through
about nine months. Red Armstead, he dislocated a hip was all. He was out and going
within 30 days and then was discharged right after that.

RV: Seems like you were lucky to be alive.

JK: Yes, that’s right.

RV: So back to Andrews, you’re there until November. You got your orders to
go overseas then is that correct?

JK: Right. Young troops, they keep our deagenon. They keep a record of
everybody and how long and if you’ve ever had an overseas tour. The last one you’ve
had. So, myself, Tracy Matheson who joined with me, and a guy named Bob Andrews
all got orders to go to Okinawa with the 51st fighter group over there in Naha, Okinawa,
which is on the south tip, southwest right across from Ishima where Nepile was killed.
So we started flying the T-47 again, because they weren’t up to 80s. Then it wasn’t long
we started flying the 80 again. I met a bunch of old troops there. Geberra, Jim Geberra I
don’t know if you know, I think he was first Korean ace I guess. He’s since dead.

RV: He was there in Okinawa?

JK: Yes, he was on Okinawa along with a bunch of friends. So, the tour there, of
course I was single again and Geberra and Young and all the guys were older than me.
Geberra and Matheson and Andrews they were all married. But their wives can’t
accompany them for a year. So, they had to bach it for a year. Their tour when you bring
your wife over was something like 36 months. Mine as a bachelor was 30 months. At
about the 19th month, the command came out and said eighteen months is long enough
for bachelors. So I was already eligible to go home. So I went home. In the mean time
out there for that, 19 months or so, we used to fly to old Iwojima, Guam, Philippines,
places like that, northern Japan.

RV: What were you doing when you flew there? Just getting flight training?

JK: Yes, sir. Flight training and most of us had a little additional duty of some
kind. I don’t remember what I had. Maybe help the maintenance officer of something.
But it was almost 100% flying. We’d go out and shoot and bomb. We had an endless list
of things that you had to accomplish every six months in order to maintain your
qualifications. So, every flight we’d take we had to try to log these various things.
Whether it was a certain type of IFR recovery or certain departure, working with radar or
whatever. So that’s what we would do, filling all that and then shooting. We had to fill
those squares. Bombing we had to fill those. Then navigation of course and then that’s
when we would go island hopping 700 miles across the water. We always had B-17s
carrying boats underneath in case you had to bail out and stuff like that.

RV: How did you feel flying over the water? Was that different for you?

JK: No, not any big problem. We had the C-pack, a dingy. You had your
parachute of course. Then you had the dingy where you had a rubber boat and all that
sort of thing. Then the B-17 was somewhere within maybe an hour or so of you if you
had to bailout. It never bothered me a bit. I never thought maybe the parachute wouldn’t
work or maybe I couldn’t get out of the cockpit or whatever you know, being that young.

To me it was all just a big kick.

RV: You were still pretty gung-ho at this point?

JK: Oh, yes.

RV: That’s great. What was Okinawa like for you?

JK: Okie when I hit it was, I haven’t really been back, but I see pictures and hear
people talk. When we were there there was nothing. Everything was all bombed out.

There was a lot of caves where the people had hidden. A few people out in the field
doing their farming and so on. Nothing more than almost kind of little grass hut type
things. Naha the city was gone. They had a university or something there was gone. All
you could see is the foundations, shells. We used to ride there. I have a friend named
Roland Nicholas; he had a jeep. We’d just ride around all over the island looking at
everything. Never saw anything other than little huts. You’d always run into the smells
where they always had their little open pits where they’d cook. Some smells are great,
you know you’d smell the wood burning and things like that. It was just a great
education. Went over to point not far from it they called Suicide Point. That’s where
Americans cornered all the Japanese. It was a high cliff. Japanese by the dozens committed suicide by jumping off. The word was, there was a teacher had 600 students. They were in a cave and she talked them in all into suicide and they all supposedly killed themselves.

RV: Wow! What did you think of the Japanese? This is of course right after the war.

JK: Of the individuals there and of the Japanese in Japan when we were there sometimes TDY I looked at them one-on-one. They were always bowing from the waist pap san, mama san. “How are you?” They’d invite you over to dinner at their home and things like that, and have their little children play the piano and violins, and they seemed to really go for that type of thing. Educating these kids in music, real young. It was just I thought a great experience again all around in both places, all areas really.

RV: You’re there for how long, 19 months?

JK: Yes, 19 months.

RV: What were your orders after that?

JK: That was May of ’49, I went to Genier Field, New Hampshire.

RV: That’s a big difference from Okie to New Hampshire.

JK: Yes, that was 82nd fighter group, and we flew T-51s there. They didn’t have jets.

RV: Did you miss the jets?

JK: Not really I guess. You always figured you are going to be back. In the 51 up to this point, I don’t think I’d flown it up to this point. Maybe I had a little bit. It was great airplane so I enjoyed that.
RV: Let me ask you historically at this point, the United States this is just before
the Korean War, and basically we had gone forward with the Marshall Plan in Europe
and the Truman Doctrine is out there. Really the United States is establishing itself as
one of the world leaders of course opposed to the Soviet Union. How aware were you of
the Communism versus Democracy fight that was going on? The early years of the Cold
War?

JK: Not really. I was, I guess some fighter jock and all I wanted to do was fly
and go fight a war going around. One thing, around Tokyo we’d see McArthur running
around. He always had a bunch of motorcycles and squad cars. Every time he went from
his home to his work. The Japanese lined up by the hundreds along the route bowing.

They thought he was some kind of a god.

RV: Right, they called him the white emperor.

JK: I think he really basked in that. But the rest of the things, Europe things like
that, we’d hear about the various plans and so on and trying to put these people back on
their feet and all that sort of thing. I never was too interested too much. I was just sorry I
missed that actually flying in Europe or in the Pacific during the fight.

RV: What about the Berlin airlift that was a huge victory for airpower really? It
kind of proved how capable the Air Force could be.

JK: Yes, that’s right. I remember just where I was during some of that. I was
probably over in Europe during some of that time. The first time in that area was in
January of ’57 when that airlift ended. Do you remember?

RV: The airlift was in the late ‘40s actually.

JK: Late ‘40s.
RV: Yes, sir.

RV: I think you were in Okinawa at the time. I flew over a couple times carrying aircraft. That was like the late ’40s to 1952 probably, flying fighters over to the fighter troops in Germany. But we heard a lot of course you saw a lot in the papers. Then later I’d driven the route many times, that corridor up in the Berlin you know?

RV: Yes, sir.

JK: Still before the wall came down. That was an experience too.

RV: I bet so. So, you’re in New Hampshire?

JK: Get there in about June of ’49 with the 82nd fighter group flying the Mustang. That base, because everything’s coming down again, because of the Butter versus Willox business you know, and the military budget. The word was that outfit was going to phase out. It was just a very short time, I guess I was there like six or seven months. We started sending the airplanes out and giving them to the National Guard in places like Ellcore, Nevada and Fargo, North Dakota. I made a couple of those flights, and as airplanes were all dispersed and given away, the base folded. At that point again some of us lost our flying. They sent a document around to each individual and it said, “I voluntarily request permanent grounding.” And that kind of set me back. Then I thought well, maybe something will happen. I’ll go ahead and sign it and I did. My next assignment right then, right after that assignment the base folded, and they sent me off to Langley Field, which was the 4th fighter group again, where I ran into my old flight commander Jules John and Jim Gerberra and all these guys. They said boy, welcome. We’re back we got the gang. I said, “I’ve had it. I lost my flying.” They said “Gee,
that’s too bad.” I ended up just skipping right out of there into a liaison job in Columbus, Ohio where I oversaw the reserve program at Ft. Hays, Columbus, Ohio.

RV: How did you feel about being grounded?

JK: That’s terrible, felt real bad. Like I said I thought maybe something will come up, and it did.

RV: Something did right around the corner, June 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea. So you’re in Ohio until May ’51. When this happened in the summer of 1950, you’re grounded; you’re in Ohio. What are you thinking about? Now this is my chance to get back in?

JK: Yes, I began to figure something just might come up. It wasn’t long after that the memo came across my desk and the headquarters is in Mitchell Field in New York. It indicated anybody in my category who desired to go back on flying; all you had to do was volunteer for Korea. I signed it and sent it off and I was immediately back on flying. I used to commute to Bright Path where I flew T-51s waiting to go to Korea. I think I flew a B-25 a couple of other birds. One airplane was kind of a kick is a B-29 that was on it’s last flight before they put it in the moth balls. The kept tremendous records. He was a captain and I was a first lieutenant at that time. He said, “Do you want to go on a B-29 flight?” I said, “Sure.” So we took off for 17 hours or something like that in this bird, just he and I. Normally it had a crew of seven maybe, flew around in that a bit and that’s what I did for flying until the Korean orders came out. That was in June ’51 I got the orders.

RV: Sir would you like to take a little break here?

JK: No, I’m fine.
RV: You’re fine? Good. In June ’51 you get your orders and you’re shipped to Korea is that correct?

JK: Right.

RV: Who were you with?

JK: The 8th fighter-bomber group, which had F-80Cs again.

RV: How long were you in the Korean theatre?

JK: I was there eight months I think it was.

RV: What did you do there?

JK: I flew with the 37th fighter squadron. Flew 101 mission in that eight months.

RV: These are bombing runs?

JK: Bombing, strafing, Napalm all that type of thing.

RV: Now this is your first taste of combat?

JK: Right.

RV: How did you feel your first taste here of combat?

JK: Good. I never got hit. I got a bullet hole I guess in the airplane once. But I never had a problem. We took off at Kiem Po, which was at the bomb line, which meant by the time you get your wheels in the well, you’re in shooting territory. Then we would go to the Chinese border, which is 300 miles north. So, for 300 miles up and 300 miles back, you were targets for the MIGs or ground fire. I got through that. Tracy preceded me a little bit. He got knocked down and broke his back and broke his neck and was sent home.

RV: Did you have fighter escorts?
JK: Normally we had three squadrons. We had F-80s in the fourth group, which would usually fly top cover. Then late ’51 or so there, I don’t think we’d see a lot of MIGs but they didn’t come down much. They kind of stayed high. I think a lot of them were in training. The F-86s had really raised heck with them in the earlier months that I think they were just a little apprehensive as far as popping down too freely. You’d always hear the radio. The radar people would keep us informed about these guys and tell us how many were in the air in our vicinity and what they were doing. Sometimes who was at the throttle. They had what we call the guy, I think he was Russian I guess. They called him Casey Jones. Anytime they got hit, they had voice prints I guess, like we had voice prints of them. When they would hear his voice they would just indicate so many trains out of the station meaning so many flights of aircraft leaving China. Then if Casey was at the throttle, they’d always say, “Casey Jones at the throttle.” And then that would cinch you up a little bit because you realized you had an old pro for sure. So, that went on daily for all those missions. We got shot at a lot on the ground because we’re bombing all the time. Of course we’d finish bombing as far as the Chinese border practically we would have 300 miles on the deck with 1,800 rounds of .50 caliber to expend on the way home for targets of opportunity. It could be vehicles, anything.

RV: You could pick what you wanted to?

JK: Yes, everything was open to you.

RV: Were you actually flying the aircraft or were you copiloting?

JK: No, they’re all single seats. You’re always alone. If you went down, you were alone. That was shooting was kind of like the old buzzing days. Things get fired and shot up and everything. Your cameras in the aircraft are taking pictures. Give you
an idea of what kind of damage. Once in a while something would blow up in your face,
angle down for a train or something. Then you’d wonder why you didn’t inhale some of
that debris. They used to brief us to shoot at everything, cattle because they used to use
oxen to haul ammunition. But I never sought out a single cow or something like that. I
just didn’t have the nerve or guts for that. You’d see an individual and I’d let them go.
They knew too, walking down the beach if you were flying by if you couldn’t get your
nose on them, you couldn’t hit them. I just watched them as I went. You’d see them just
kind of cautiously tiptoeing down the beach. We’d get tracers on us, as we’d go home.
Sometimes you’d have no ammo left. Then you always hoped that MIGs didn’t drop
down and catch you between home and China. In a lot of cases you wouldn’t have any
ammo. Also your fuel is right down to just about nothing. So, it was kind of exciting.

RV: It was exciting? How many hours round trip was this?

JK: Usually about, I’d say two, two and a half hours, something like that. We
carried tip tanks, large tip tanks and without them we couldn’t have had half that time.

RV: You did this for how long seven months, eight months?

JK: Eight months.

RV: How did you get your orders to leave the theatre?

JK: In my outfit, the 8th fighter group the word was around that you either got
100 missions or a year. Of course most of the people got 100 missions a lot shorter than
a year. Some of the 51 jocks would get their 100 in maybe six months or so, and they
were going home, but that was a different outfit. When I got my 101 I thought well, I’m
ready. They said well, we’re going to use you as a systems operations officer for another
couple of months or whatever it was. And that’s the way the word was to all of our guys,
so our guys started getting kind of bitter. It started coming around to where they were allowing them to go home not long after they go their 100 in. Then at that point you’re wonder where are we going from here?

RV: Were you disappointed to leave the theatre?

JK: No, I tried to go back a couple of times and they didn’t ok it. Just kind of wanted to get home too.

RV: What was your overall impression sir of the Korean War? The policy of the United States and dealing with that peninsula right there on the border of China?

JK: Again I was kind of young and loved the flying and type thing. But we noticed too that the natives used to flourish during a situation like that. They’d be up around the base with their little newsstands and their soda pop stands and stuff like that. That was their livelihood. Things were going bad like I can leave, they were kind of crushed. That kind of set bad with us. We thought, gee, here they’re having their country beast up and they’re living on it like maybe some of the big industrialists do in a war and then they’re crushed if we had to leave. That didn’t set too well with us. As young as I was I didn’t think much farther than that I guess.

RV: You were what around 26? 25?

JK: I just came up 25 I think then.

RV: So from Korea you went back stateside? Go ahead I’m sorry.

JK: Yes, February of ’52 went to Teowarks Field in Wisconsin, which is an F-86 outfit. I was with the 4th 82nd light interceptor squadron, which was air-to-air type. The type of thing I would have like to have done in Korea and World War II. But I ended up fighter-bomber all the time so I’m air-ground wherever I go. Including Vietnam. I spent
five years there and flew 86-F and the 86-D, which was an all weather type bird, we used.

You seek the guy out in the air in weather under radar control and get him with rockets.

That was kind of new and fun too.

RV: Right this is basically learning dog fighting tactics and all of that?

JK: Yes.

RV: That’s what you had wanted to do for along time.

JK: Sure, from the time I flew when we actually got in the tactical birds, the P-40 on that’s all you did. You went up and fought all the time. To the point sometimes you get such a stomachache, side ache you’d have to maybe quit because you’re pulling so many G’s.

RV: Did you find that really difficult for you to learn these tactics?

JK: No, it was just a matter of eyesight, you know spotting the other guy first and try to get an altitude advantage if you could on him or where he may not fight you at all and then try to get in behind him.

RV: When did you meet Jodie?

JK: Met Jodie in San Francisco in the fall of ’59 to early January ’60.

RV: Ok, so were not there yet?

JK: No.

RV: You’re there five years in Wisconsin, you’re close to home, did you get to go home much?

JK: No I flew over once, kind of looked them over in an 86-F. Saw my cousins out in the country out by their home. They commented and wrote a letter that said they
saw me. My dad died in ’59, yes he was still alive then. I just didn’t get home much.

Other than a leave maybe between assignments.

RV: From Wisconsin, where did you go?

JK: From Wisconsin, I went to.

RV: This is January 1957.

JK: I went back to Germany. I went to Earding Air station at Munich, Germany which was a real plush deal. I flew with the 440, 4-4-0 flight interceptor squad and flying the F-86D again, which was along the iron curtain scrambling on the unknowns coming over from the east. That was interesting. Intercepted a couple of birds on that deal, but they always ended up being ok, airliners.

RV: What do you remember most about that tour?

JK: I guess Munich itself. It was a great town, had great food some real fine restaurants. Flying again met some new troops. Didn’t stay there very long because of the new assignment that came up.

RV: Which was what?

JK: A place in Tulle, France the 50th fighter-bomber group wanted flight commanders. They were flying F-86H, which is a real bomb, a real beautiful bird. I believe it had a Rolls Royce engine in it. They were going into the F-100D, which would be the first century birds that came out, and I hadn’t flown that yet. When I heard they were looking for volunteers for that particular deal, I took it. I was at Earding from May until October only. Earding no, January to May. Then in May I checked in at Tulle, Rosier Air Base.

RV: May 1957.
JK: Right.

RV: You were there for a couple of years?

JK: I was there for the rest of my tour.

RV: You did flight training and you trained in the F-100D.

JK: Yes, I flew the 86 for a while. We used to fly down to Tripoli, Libya. We had a range called El Outiya. That was our range, which was a European range for all fighters in Europe, including England. We’d go down there to fill our strafing and bombing squares. That was nice. What was it 1,000 or 1,200 nautical miles I guess down along Italy, through Switzerland, Italy and then through North Africa. While I was into the H they came up with the F-100D. So, I ended up checking some of the people out. I checked out in Casablanca. The reason Casablanca, the 20th wing had a check out school for their people at Casablanca in North Africa. The 20th was in England and here we were in France, the fact that they had a program going, they would ship us down by courier of some kind. A guy named Charlie Tubbs.

RV: Sir?

JK: We set up our little detachment. We had maybe half a dozen Ds. Our guys would come own in a courier and we’d check them out after we checked out and got all squared away. We went through that deal until we had 30 maybe 40 pilots all checked out and then we’d all end up at Tulle flying regularly. Then we would continue to fly down to North Africa at El Outiya range every few weeks or months in order to keep all of our squares filled. I ended up spending a lot of time in North Africa. I think of the six years in fighters down there, this one and the one coming up, all these short hops ended up a year of it was spent in North Africa. I spent that, up until October of ’59 there. The
50th group I was the Ops officer of the 10th fighter-bomber squadron, a bunch of nice guys.

RV: You were transferred stateside after that, is that correct?

JK: Yes, let’s see. I’d just bought a 300-SL Mercedes that gull-wing type so I shipped that home. I took, I don’t remember I guess I went to London and Hanoi. I probably went to our British base. I can’t think of the name of it and launched out of there on a military bird and went back. Let’s see then I went to Hamilton, that’s where I met Jodie.

RV: Ok, Hamilton Air Force Base in California. And that’s when you met Jodie.

JK: October ’49 I flew with the Air Force again which was an ID type thing where they evaluate all the National Guard and Reserve units on the west coast. So, I became a member of that team, which is an inspector check pilot. I maintained currency in the T-33 all the 86s and F-100s I order to fly with these people and see how they do. I was only thee a year. I met Jodie. I ended up ’59 around October, November getting orders to go. Wait a minute January ’61 getting orders to go to Maxwell, which was the air command and staff college. At that point, we’d only known each other a short time, but we copied each other’s addresses and so on. She went to Hawaii for a year or so and I went to air command staff college where I spent a year at school and few months on the base getting ready to go to school. I left there and hit Maxwell in January ’61 and left in June of ’62.

RV: How was that experience for you there at Maxwell?

JK: At Maxwell? It was good, real good. We went into everything regarding military commands, what we could expect in the future and things of that nature. A lot of
speech and writing and that type of thing. I think I flew there, no I think I flew before I
went into the school, which would maybe be 60-90 days, something like that. I flew like
crazy all over the country. Flying the T-33, which is a S-80 two-seater. Being a
bachelor, they had my name and anytime anybody wanted to go anywhere day or night
anywhere in the country, they’d give me a call and I filled up a lot of time there. Then I
finished that course. Then the same thing, you wait for them to get you in the auditorium
and read the lists where you go. I guess we had maybe 250, maybe 300 troops in that.
They were all captains or majors I guess. I was a captain.

RV: You were a captain by this time?

JK: No I made major at Hamilton, so I was a major. Then in June of ’62 I got the
word to go to the 31st TAC fighter wing at Homestead Air Force Base in Miami. Jodie
was already here. She’d been here five or six months. It just happened that Miami, New
York, L.A., places like that were some of the places that she wanted to hit while she was
single and free. It wasn’t any coordinated type deal, although it might look like it. I
ended up here in June of ’62 flying the F-100D again. I was chief of the command post,
which monitors all the squadrons and all the airplanes. That’s when the Cuban thing
broke out and it really got hairy.

RV: I was going to ask you, you’re right down there in the middle of this. What
was that experience like for you October ’62?

JK: At that point we had three squadrons of the 305-67. One of them maybe 304,
one of them was in Japan setting nuclear targets in Russia, which was one of our
commitments. Each squadron would rotate over there every 90 days. We had one
squadron over there and three here. We got a tremendous ramp for parking because it
was a SAC base. They had B-52 and their tankers. A guy named Captain, Brigadier
Captain was the SAC commander. The orders came out to bring in the fighters. Boy the
fighters came in from everywhere, like the birds from the north. They just filled that
ramp and Jack Cat got the word from the Pentagon to take his SAC birds and relocate
somewhere. So he left with all of the SAC birds and then we became a TAC base,
tactical air instead of strategic. My gosh, I don’t know what we had 400 or 500 fighters
out there. I had the mine post like I mentioned. Then we had another command post, set
up adjacent to us, with a major general I think. We had a brigadier popping in on us all
the time. We maintained all the numbers on the board and kept in contact with
everybody waiting for some one to tell us to pick the airplanes off. Then this thing went
on until the ships, President Kennedy turned them around out there in the sea in the
Atlantic. At that point, everything kind of fizzled like letting the air out of a balloon. The
airplanes just left there by the droves. We went back to our normal 31st TAC fighter
wing operation.

RV: We’re nearing the point when you’re going to be dispatched to Bien Hoa
overseas, but first you’re moved in April ’64 to the United Kingdom from Homestead,
Florida. What was your assignment there?

JK: At Wethersfield. Just note while at Homestead there, of course Jodie and I
through correspondence were able to make contact. I lived here in a motel in Homestead.
She lived with a family up in Miami, which was about 20 miles. We commuted a little
bit, started dating and dated for a while. During that Cuban thing we ran into the
Methodist church in Homestead and got married.

RV: During the Crisis?
JK: I took about an hour off to get married.

RV: Took an hour off to get married (laughs)?

JK: Turned around and went back. We had been building a house. Neither one of us talking marriage at that point. It was finished shortly after, right here in what is called Prynne, which is south Florida. We were married and I went on and got the orders for RAF Wethersfield in April. Jodie was kind of young and she thought “Gee, I don’t know if I want to go off and leave this country again short of Hawaii or not.” I thought, “Oh come on a lot of the women are like that.” I said, “You’ll enjoy it.” We popped off, and we had our 300-SL just the two of us. I joined up with the 20th TAC fighter wing at Wethersfield. I became the Ops officer of the 10th fighter squadron. Again the routine was set nuc targets. I don’t remember too much on the target business. We had the nuc target business there in Wethersfield too. Then we made our regular runs to North Africa.

RV: Again to North Africa?

JK: Right F-100Ds. That went on for two years. I made lieutenant colonel along there. Then they made me a deputy DO of the wing under a nice full bird. That went on for a while. Then I got the assignment in Frankfurt, Germany.

RV: At this point the Unite States became involved in the Vietnam War really heavily in the summer of 1965. What did you think of U.S. policy at this point? Were you aware I’m sure you were, but what were you think about?

JK: In Vietnam?

RV: Yes, what the United States was doing in Southeast Asia?
JK: Again I was kind of busy, flying a lot, the thing I loved to do. Doing a lot of 
sight seeing and things like that. I never really thought too much other than I’d probably
be over there before long.

RV: You did think the war was brewing and you would be there?

JK: Yes, I wanted to get over there.

RV: Even with your new wife, you wanted to get over in the action?

JK: I knew that she’d have to set for a year, but it worked ok.

RV: Yes, sir.

JK: At Frankfurt I ended up an air liaison officer in the ID-FARVN building. ID-
FARVN was a big industrialist in World War II. It’s a fabulous building that we called
Little Pentagon. It was strictly Army. The 5th Army Corps lived in it. It was their
headquarters under the Three Star General Mapler. I was his liaison with the Air Force.

RV: This is May 1966 when you arrived in Germany?

JK: That lasted about a year. I just had an office.

RV: Did Jodie go with you to Germany?

JK: Yes, she was with me in England, lived on the base. And then we went over
to Germany and we lived in nice quarters not far from the base. We called it High Kogg,
it was where a lot of diplomats stayed. We set up tents, it’s still there. She enjoyed that.
She got over England, was great. Germany was great. Germany of course that 300 SL
we could drive all over Europe on the weekends. We’d hit Nazo, Norway to Switzerland
no problem. The thing would cruise at 120. It was a nice car.

RV: How did you get your orders to go to Vietnam? Were you expecting this to
happen?
JK: Let’s see. I don’t remember whether somebody called me because I was in Frankfurt then, in the office. My three-year period was coming to an end. Maybe it was one of the senior allos or something up the way that gave me the word. I thought, “Gee that’s great.” So, we entered the S.S. United States, the big ship with the car and everything. We went to the east coast about May of ’67. Then Jodie and I both drove the 300 out to California. I’m trying to think of the base. Then they sent me to survival school in Washington State, that town that’s been on the news here.

RV: Tacoma?

JK: Tacoma, there’s an air base there.

RV: Ft. Lewis is that right?

JK: Well, it was an Air Force base.

RV: Of course.

JK: Jodie stayed in the BOQ I think, officer’s quarters, and I went to this thing where you live on the land for a week or two.

RV: This is in case you’re shot down in Vietnam?

JK: Yes, they show you how to eat berries and birds and angleworms and things like that. Then finished that and came back about 20 pounds lighter and picked up Jodie. Went to the air base at Washington, I’m trying to think of that air base. It’s a big jump off base for the Far East. Mc Cord Air Force Base.

RV: That’s right Mc Cord Air Force Base.

JK: I met my departure time, and Jodie took off. She drove the 300 back down to her folks around L.A. and Bakersfield and then all alone all the way back to Homestead,
no big problem. With the 3rd TAC fighter wing I spent one year, May ’67, May ’68
flying the F-100D again.

RV: How was that flight over for you?
JK: Flying over there?
RV: Yes, going to Vietnam yes sir.
JK: No problem. I’m trying to think. I think it was a commercial bird, because
they were under contract because of the numbers. Normally we’d fly in a 141, C-141 or
a C-5. Now it’s C-17 I think it is. Think I went in a stretch whatever they had at that
time.
RV: What was the mood on the plane flying over?
JK: Just like any flight in an airliner I guess. Just like around the States, matter
of fact, here we go.
RV: How did you feel going back into a war zone?
JK: Good. We went into Tan Son Nhut there at the capital. That’s where the 7th
Air Force was located under General Lomyre, right in Saigon. At that point you got off
and there’s sand bags and all the military haboloo, no doubt you’re in the combat
situation.
RV: What was your impression of Vietnam when you stepped off the plane?
JK: Just another experience. A little bit like Okinawa I guess. Someplace I’d
never been, busy. All business, serious. I thought, “Well, let’s get on with it.” Bien Hoa
my air base was just a short hop north up the road. I jumped in a 130, it was about 10
minutes I guess. I was on the deck at Bien Hoa. I don’t know who met me. I probably
went to base ops or looked in a wing somewhere there. They know you’re coming so
everything was fine. I got squared away and I was assistant to the deputy of operations, which is a man who’s in charge of all the pilots and fighters. A guy named Corey, Bob Corey, real fine guy. George McLoughlin was the wing commander. In fact at that time I think it was another man. But I ended up most of my time under George McLoughlin. I had that deputy DO for a while waiting to take over the 90th tactical fighter squadron, which is about 25 birds and 30-40 pilots. F-100s again Ds. Milled around everyday at that point, living in a tent type thing. Food was tolerable. Just checking out everything, runways everything was operating right. Then it wasn’t long a friend of mine, a guy named Bill Haines, we were both lieutenant colonels. I had a little more fighter pilot experience than he did. He wasn’t marked or anything that I know of at that point. I had been for quite sometime then waiting to take over this 90th. In fact I was going to take over I flew with him. I got to know the troops, the maintenance guys and the pilots and everything, which makes for a more comfortable, take over. Then one day after this thing had gone along for quite a while. My buddy walked up to me and said, “Did you hear the great news?” I said, “No what was that?” That was old Bill Haines the guy that didn’t have an assignment. He said, “I’m taking the 90th.” I hadn’t heard anything. I thought, “Gee, what’d I do or what happened?”

RV: Right you were expecting that command.

JK: Yes, but I was busy out trotting around on the runway somewhere. Corey had popped the news to him. So, I finally got back to Corey and Corey told me, “You’ve got the 531st.” I thought, “Good deal.” At least I got a squadron, not the one I thought I was going to get. That turned out that they had fired two squadron commanders in a
fairly short period of time. One for cause and the other one had nothing to do with him
really. The airplanes just began to not come home.

RV: They blame the guy at the top. He took responsibility.

JK: Yes when that happens you get in deep water. The fact that I’d had more
fighter time, been in more wings and whatever than most they gave it to me. I ended up
going down there with these guys. It turned out it was a real, I thought and the wing
commander thought, it was the best squadron of men.

RV: Sir, I’d like to ask you a question about overall U.S. policy at this point.
Why did you think the United States, or what were you being told of why the United
States was in Vietnam?

JK: The big thing I guess was to contain Communism and save that country. I
don’t know again I never delved into anything in any depth. In my case and most of our
troops, the DOD, President and all of those troops set the policy and everything. We
were always chomping at the bit to get in there and do what we were supposed to do. So
I guess that was kind of a sorry way to look at it, but I never really went much beyond my
duties. I enjoyed what we were doing. It just didn’t work out.

RV: How would you judge the overall morale of the U.S. troops there that you
encountered?

JK: Everybody around me, I never had any problem at all. It was just like in
Europe during peacetime. You’ve got all these troops, you’ve got the aircraft. You’ve
got missions to fly, maintenance and all the sort of thing. All you hope for is everything
to run smoothly.

RV: How many aircraft did you have there with 531st?
JK: The 531st had about 27.

RV: These are F-100Ds?

JK: Right, the squadron like you said was about 25 plus a couple of spares.

Spares sometimes are the two-seater of the F-100F a pandem set up where you can fly somebody in the back seat.

RV: What was your daily routine? Did you get your briefing on where you needed to go, the target list and then fly sortees all day?

JK: Yes, everyday we had our operations building down on the flight line. Our birds all lined up and they had a command post. They would come up with the frag orders, usually early in the morning and then send them down to the various squadrons. You’d have these pre-planned missions, which the Army asked for to the tactical net that was set up between the Army and the Air Force including our liaison officers and all. Sit there and talk to their commanders, and then they’d have a certain thing they’re kicking off at a certain time under certain latitude and longitude type thing. We had a couple of attack and fight so that we could work off of those to pinpoint locations. They would load the airplanes up right after getting that frag order or whatever the mission might be. Whether it was 500 pounds or Napalm, always carried a fully loaded 20 .mm cannon ammunition. We’d just be where those frag orders told us to be at a certain time and talking to a certain pack, Airborne troops in the little airplanes who would direct you in.

In my case, of course all of my shooting was in the south. We didn’t go up north, where they got all the air-ground or the air-to-air stuff where we lost so many people. We got shot at. We’d primarily on bombing missions and strafing, and where we would catch sampans in the little back streams, the buildup of troops the build up of ammunitions and
things like that. So we did a lot of shooting and bombing that way. We’d also
accompany drops where the transport birds would go in and supply our troops out in the
middle of nowhere in these little encampments. We would get with the FAC and with
that the pilots of these slow going malt engine jobs would just maintain cover, and if
we’d see any enemy activity then we could shoot them up. And also with that green
defoliation thing?

RV: Agent Orange?

JK: Yes, Agent Orange when they would go in, we would follow them up out of
the way a little bit, maybe a couple thousand feet until they got through and then we’d go
home.

RV: Just providing cover for them?

JK: Right.

RV: Did your plane ever get shot, actually have damage done to it?

JK: I don’t know of any hit that I got. Sometime you may have had something
that you didn’t know, but I never got anything. We lost a few guys.

RV: From ground fire?

JK: Yes, ground fire.

RV: These are men under you?

JK: Under me, I didn’t lose anybody. But before I came in, we had a young boy
got down. He was recovered ok. His was a maintenance error where he had a problem
with his oil and the engine froze and he bailed out. They picked him up in a chopper and
they brought him back and he was all right.
RV: When you would get these orders that were basically your targets from the FACs, and after you’d drop your load, I guess you would go back to Bien Hoa immediately? Did you have any orders that you had to dispense of your load no matter what?

JK: Just to dump it you mean, more or less?

RV: Yes sir.

JK: No, in Korea we use to come back and just pound away with our .50 calibers 1,800 rounds, because with your bombs and everything gone, and all of that ammo in the nose, it was heavy. Sometimes it was hard to keep the nose off. When you landed you might hit the nose first you know. In Vietnam, Korean then we would make a point of getting rid of that ammunition, but we always found good targets.

RV: What kind of targets would you use? Was this up to your discretion or would you go through the FAC to get these targets?

JK: With the FAC we’d stick with them. Usually we’d use up everything we had. Make a couple of bomb runs and then they’d say, “Now can you hit three o’clock about 300 yards or something in that clump of growth?” We’d say “Fine.” So we’d go in there and chop that up with a .20mm canon. We had four in each bird. I don’t think we ever went home looking for a target because we’d pretty much expended everything right there with that FAC. He would give us that battle damage assessment. You know BDA and tell us how many arms he counted in the trees and stuff like that.

RV: Really? How soon after would you get that information?

JK: He’d say, “Standby” you know, a couple of minutes, and he’d go on down and we’d, maybe make one orbit or so getting ready to head out to Bien Hoa. Then he’d
come back with so many bodies, so many bunkers, so many vehicles or whatever. I think
one time somebody asked him, “How can you tell how many bodies with such
explosions?” He said, “I just count the arms and divide by two.”

RV: I guess that works.

JK: Something like that. I guess that’s a mess. That’s one thing with a pilot, you
don’t see gore like the Army guys do unless you get shot down and then you end up gore.

RV: That’s what I wanted to ask you about. You never saw really the results first
hand of the bombing and everything?

JK: No, I don’t think in Korea and here. I saw our own guys.

RV: I’m sorry?

JK: I have to pause.

RV: Go ahead sir.

JK: We were spared of that. That was good. I went out once with the 10th, was
the Big Red One infantry division was near us.

RV: They were stationed what? Just north of you?

JK: Yrs, they were a little northwest of us. They had set up around a French
rubber plantation. We used to exchange visits. They’d come over, their colonels and
we’d fly them in the back seat of the F and show them what we did and show them their
place and their area and things. And then they’d come over with a chopper, Army
chopper and pick us up one at a time. They’d bring us out to their plantation there that
was all shot up. We’d spend the night in a cot. Then they’d take us out that night or the
next morning and show us the VC dead that they’d nailed the night before or the day
before. That was interesting.
RV: They’d actually walk you out at night?

JK: No, they'd take us in during daylight hours. Usually I think it was the last
time I went it would be something like 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning. The troops, our guys
are laying around in all the rubble and stumps and everything and shaving in the sun or
eating an orange. Dispersed all over the area. There was always the perimeter guards
they were standing certain distances apart with machine guns and everything. I
remember the colonel that I visited he said, “What are you carrying?” I was in my flying
suit and boots. I said, “I’ve go t a .38 Smith and Wesson.” He laughed and he said,
“Don’t worry about that.” He handed me two hand grenades. He said, “Hang on to
these. If you see anything or hear anything just drop them in there.”

RV: On the ground or in the helicopter?

JK: Yes, we’re on the ground, getting ready to go down into the brush. No
problem identifying our guys because they were all out in the open with their military
gear and rifles and everything here, M-16 machine guns. We’d go down and see some of
the bodies. Most of the bodies they carry away. There’d be some lying around bloated.
You’re always worried about whether they were booby-trapped or something.

RV: Why did the colonel want to show you those bodies do you think?

JK: I guess just to show you what they did everyday. That was what it was all
about. They’d never want more than one ride in the airplane either.

RV: Really? That was enough for them?

JK: Yes, because when you go out, everything is bang, bang, bang, bang; fast and
furious. And You joined up with your flight of three and you’re flying through artillery.
You’ve got to know where the artillery is in the area and all these channels. You stay
away from those. Then you pick up your FAC out there somewhere. I mean it’s just
talk, talk, talk, talk. Turn here, turn there, dive, climb. Then when you get in the target
it’s the three of you in a circle about 130 degrees apart. You’ve got your guns and bomb
pot and everything and you’re throwing stuff all over the place. And by the time you get
back, you don’t realize much, but this guy in the back seat is just about to get sick maybe
from all that. You pull a lot of G’s too. Then they’d usually get back and say that’s
enough of that.

RV: When you were on the ground there with the ground troops, how did they
treat you? How were you received?

JK: Fine. You know the guys, it was like, jeez, I don’t know. Somebody would
walk in the supermarket and you’ve got the handlers, they’re stacking the shelves and
stuff like that. They come walking in with someone off the street. You just kind of walk
though there, they’d look up at you or ignore you, just calm and cool. But all blown to
pieces usually, just rubble, everything shredded and torn and pot holes and stinky water
and stuff like that.

RV: Would you say that their morale was pretty good?

JK: I never heard of any problem, never talked much with the Army guys, the
officers. I’d hear on TV sometime, I don’t know if it’s news or maybe some Hollywood
thing. They’re always talking about all these drugs and stuff like. I never heard of
anything like that myself with our air guys. It could have been different out there in the
toolies, sleeping in the mud.

RV: So you didn’t see a lot of alcohol abuse or drug use?
JK: No, we had an officer’s club and a little squadron deal there where we could
pop in for a drink if you wanted one. Strictly native, like out in the island type thing. All
casual, no problems, no drinkers, no carrying on or I want to go home or that type of
thing.

RV: So, you guys were squared away?

JK: Yes, we just put in our year. Of course we got hit with rockets.

RV: I was going to ask you about that. Is that pretty much besides being shot at a
few times in the air, that was the only enemy fire you came under?

JK: Yes, they shot these 122mm, it looked like a telephone pole. They would
launch those at us from out in the toolies. It’s real simple set up where they just line them
upon you out there at a certain angle from the knowledge that they have. They’ll maybe
take six or a dozen of them side by side, they get all ready and you got them all set up
about anywhere from midnight to 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. They would touch them
off and here they’d come, six to twelve of these things. They’d land in and around the
base, burn airplanes, butt posts and taxiways or whatever. I had one troop picked up a
little flak in the neck from one of them. It’d shake you out of bed. You’d jump out and
go jump in the bunker until they were finished. The tower would sit and watch. When
these things would launch you’d get that telltale flame behind them. The tower guy
would hit the siren. You’d have six or twelve in bound. If you didn’t see them, then first
thing you’d get is an explosion.

RV: Did you ever see anyone killed by these rockets?

JK: No. We had one of the pilots could have kissed it, it hit so close. He was
going into, it was at night and he was going to the operation annex where we kept the
parachutes and so on. This thing hit right beside him. He could have almost touched it.

Instead of hitting the concrete, it hit a little mud triangular spot there. Of course it buried
and then blew up. It had hit the concrete, then it blows out at 360 degrees and clips
everything. It knocked him down, it kind of blew him into the shed but he didn’t get
hurt, but that was about it.

RV: How often would these rocket attacks occur?

JK: The last couple of months it was maybe four times a week.

RV: That’s pretty often. You were there during the Tet Offensive.

JK: Yes, I was in bound to the base. I was away that night. So I’d come in that
morning after things had settled down. I think I have my TV guy at the door. Can you
hold on?