Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Ben Van Etten on the 22nd of January 2003 at approximately 3 o’clock Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Van Etten is in Alabama. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up with a discussion of your time with Air America and if you would just go ahead and describe some of the operations you recall most vividly and also the personalities, the people with whom you worked in Laos and Thailand.

Ben Van Etten: Okay, first of all the type of missions I think we talked about before, there was for what I, the H-34 that I was flying, we had three main customers, which the missions would have been, it was a 713 customer which was a CIA type mission where we’re probably going to be supporting whatever their teams are doing, you know re-supply or troop transport. The other ones, USAID was refugee support and villages taking food, rice mainly to areas and other food and then transporting people and that became a kind of an evacuation mission too at times when they wanted to move a whole village because the North Vietnamese were coming into that area, they went ahead and moved the whole village further to the west, try to keep them out of harm’s way. The other customer was what we called the RO, Requirements Office, which had to do with really support for the Laotian Army, logistics support for the Laotian Army, whether it be ammo, food or troop transport. I think we talked about a typical work week would be normally six days on the flight schedule, working out of a location in Laos, again H-34s worked out of all the way from Ban Houei Sai on the far north all the way down to Pakse as far south and then quite a few places in between. And you would work for that particular customer, there was the air ops customer that was in that area and he would give you direction on what you’re going to be doing and where you’re going, whatever. Some areas we did a lot of flying and other areas, flying was limited. Of course we were paid by the flight hour. We tried to get seventy hours a month minimum, because you were guaranteed for that much money. So it behooved you to go ahead and try to, you know if you could to get as much flight time as you could, as quickly as you could, that’d give you more time off toward the end of the month. They tried to divide the load, so
everybody didn’t go to the same place every time. The missions were, we also I think I talked about the green stems before the special missions, which were kind of an added thing. So to which we’d, a normal daily routine and they were mainly the infil or exfil of a team, a road watch team or possibly the rescue of a downed airman, downed U.S. Air Force airman. Generally that, or something that came up all of a sudden that was out of a real hot area that you had a pretty good chance of getting shot at during that mission.

SM: Well, the special missions, I’ve also, I think I’ve heard them referred to as special projects. What, as far as the rotary wing support that you would provide, was it almost exclusively infil/exfil and SAR or were there other types of missions that?

BV: The only ones that I became involved with were the infil/exfil and occasional SARs. There could have been other special projects that I’m not aware of. I mean I was aware of but I really didn’t get involved in what they did exactly. For example, the twin pack program, which I wasn’t in were, ran specials. I think really what they were, they were just inserting teams further north than we normally went, possibly even outside of Laos, but I don’t know for sure on that one.

SM: When you say outside of Laos, obviously you’re talking about inside of either North Vietnam or China?

BV: Yes, affirmative, yes. I really can’t say or elaborate or say much about those because I wasn’t ever doing. I didn’t do those, and so I don’t know exactly what they did. But special projects and special missions really were not the same thing. A special project was a special project that you might; one crew or one aircraft may remain on for a long time. A special mission, that’s something that was more impromptu that you can have, it’s, you’re going to do it one time and then it’s over with. That’s really the only difference.

SM: Now for the special missions, did you have to sign any kind of security agreements for those?

BV: Nope, no just a, in fact I never signed any security agreement for anything, my whole tenure over there. And contrary to what some of them may say, but I never did anyway and I don’t know of anybody else that did either, of the pilots at least.

SM: Are there any other pilots that you flew with in the same areas with any kind of routine, that you remember?
BV: Yes. Actually I flew, after I had been there for a couple years I flew with most of the younger pilots, as I was what you call a training captain also. And would fly with them try to get their initial training out of the way so they could be upgraded also to captains. And additionally I flew a lot of Thai copilots because I don’t know whether they thought I could relate to them or something. I don’t know, but I didn’t mind flying with them. Some guys didn’t want to fly with Thai pilots and Thai crews, but I didn’t care and so I flew with them, quite a few of them too.

SM: Were there any, I’m sorry go ahead.

BV: I was going to say we also flew solo quite a bit too, in that program.

SM: Well, most of your missions were solo weren’t they?

BV: Oh, probably half and half. If you were working on exceptionally, one of the bad, which considered the bad area, or if you’re working the 713 jobs, normally if you’re working USAID or RO you might fly solo because many times you’re just going to be shuttling either ammo or rice into relatively secure areas. But if you’re going to do the combat assaults or SARs or special missions of course you’re going to have a dual captain on those missions. So I would say it was about probably half and half.

SM: And were there any particular reasons why some of the pilots didn’t want to fly with Thai copilots and crews?

BV: Oh, I think that some of them were kind of concerned about their proficiency, which you know when they first started they weren’t quite as proficient but most of them got to be pretty good at flying; that and the language barrier. They all spoke English, but not real well. But I don’t know, other than that but that just some guys’ idea. They just didn’t want to fool with the, probably thinking they were maybe taking a chance or you know?

SM: Okay, how about Lao crews, Lao pilots, did you ever fly with Laotians?

BV: No, not with, I’m not aware of any of the, I didn’t fly with any of the Lao pilots, any helicopter pilots, just the Vietnamese, I mean excuse me, the Thais, wrong country.

SM: Well, did you fly with any Vietnamese as well?

BV: Well, see backing up through my training days, when I was a flight instructor, I had a lot of Vietnamese students I flew with and the same with the Thais too.
That was back in Camp Walters, at Fort Walters. I usually carried at least one H-class, one of the foreign students like that.

SM: Well, that’s an interesting question. How about, while we’re on the subjects of foreign students that you were training in Fort Walters, were there other nations that were sending their soldiers, their airmen to be trained?

BV: Well there were a few Israelis. Actually at Fort Rucker there were a few Israelis, I flew with one of them. There were some, mainly just Thais and Vietnamese at Rucker, I mean at Walters. I’m not aware of other, there were occasionally what you might call an exchange student but we didn’t have any very big programs to train other pilots other than Thais and Vietnamese. Laos, I don’t recall any Lao pilots in the States, we trained most of them over there. We had a program going on the side over there that, I say we, it really wasn’t Air American but they used Air America aircraft and Air American facilities, but it was some U.S. Army instructor pilots that worked over there with Lao pilots that they did training. They worked in Thailand with them, they were not in Laos, they were down at Udorn. One of the guys I knew prior to that in the Army, he was still in the Army when he was over there.

SM: Okay, do you remember, do you recall the names of any of the American pilots that you flew with in Laos and Thailand?

BV: Oh, yes sure. In, like we were with Sandy Sant, who unfortunately is dead. I flew with Dick Cariote, and unfortunately he’s dead now; these guys that have passed on. I flew with Leon Machome and he’s passed on, flew with Roger Cook who just died day before yesterday, I don’t know if you’d ever heard of him or not.

SM: Yes, sir I did.

BV: And I flew with all of the young. You know a guy named Danny Koalick, and let’s see, a guy named Connely, who unfortunately he’s dead. Gee, that’s unreal how many of them are gone. Of course when I first got there I flew with a lot of the older pilots so I could get my training. I flew with John Fanburg, I flew with Mike Terina, I flew with Pogo Hunter, who he’s gone now. Fanburg is too as a matter of fact. I flew with Jerry Macinty, he’s still around. Of course Jerry was a training pilot, or a captain, so I flew with him for my annual flight check most of the time. A guy named Wayne Webb also. I flew with, oh heck, I flew with a lot of them. Let’s see, I mentioned Mike Terino,
flew with J.J. McCauley a little bit at first. Of course Abbedee and you know there’s a
few other guys that I was with a lot but I don’t remember if I actually flew with them.
They flew in the same flight with me, Jerry Tollman and Tim Woosley, Tim’s dead too
unfortunately. John Ford, he’s still around.

SM: How about the customers?
BV: You know, I.
SM: You knew them by code name, is that right?
BV: Yes, most of them by their call sign. I worked a lot with them on the RO
side. There was an Army NCO by the name of Larry Martin who later actually retried
from the Army as a Sergeant Major years later. I haven’t, the last I heard from him he
was working from VaNell Corporation over in, if he’s still working, in Saudi or
someplace over there. He was, I remember him pretty well because he was, I worked
with different loadmasters and people, the air ops guys. The customers, a kind named
Fred Cost was up at Luang Prabang and down in Pakse was Jim Butler. There was, let’s
see the guy in Savannakhet was named, his call sign was Church Bell. I’m trying to think
what his name was. I can’t remember but he was a smoke jumper from either Idaho or
Montana or something in his other life. I worked with, well the, of course Pop Buell
when he was alive and his people, for USAID up at Site 20 and there was just a lot of the
local guys that worked for the customer, that worked for the American customer that
were actually in charge of making sure my loads were right for wherever I was going and
make sure I had the coordinates and signs and so on. I worked with a lot of them, of
course I worked with Tony Poe one time and, quite a bit in fact, he as a colorful guy to
say the least.

SM: Well, what do you remember about the customers in particular in terms of
well anything, Tony Poe in particular, but also the other customers you supported?
BV: Well, excuse me, of course Tony was kind of like a legend. He’d been there
forever, since World War II days, and the deal about the ear, is you probably heard this
story. That was a true story. The way he could get, he had up where he was; the site was
118 Alternate. I can’t remember the name of the village right off of it, up in northwestern
Laos anyway. To get his teams to go out and patrol further out, he gave me a bounty on
ears. They would kill an enemy soldier and they would collect the ear and bring it in and
he gave them some kind of, probably about a dollar, but he gave them a reward for it. And he would take those ears and put them in little plastic baggies and staple them around the ceiling of his hooch where he was up there, where he lived up there. So they went clear around but I guessed that stopped after he went to some villages himself and saw a bunch of kids running around with no ears. They were just snatching them off live people and turning them in, so I think that was the end of the ear deal.

SM: Okay, and I had heard that story from someone else, so I guess that probably is true.

BV: Yes, okay it was the same version, that he.

SM: Yes, that he was giving the bounties, but he later discovered that they were actually. The way it was told to me from someone else is it was someone who actually either turned in their own ear or he had seen a person without one and asked him what happened. They explained, well I got some money for it.

BV: Yes, I got some money for it, that’s about right. So they convinced the little kids in villages they don’t need an ear anyway, so toss them. Yes, that’s true.

SM: Well, what did you think about the effectiveness though of some of his, I guess his unorthodox paramilitary style?

BV: Who, Tony?

SM: Yes.

BV: Well, I don’t, I just thought he was a warrior. I thought he was very dedicated. I thought he was trying to do the job the best he could up there with what he was working with. He loved the Laotian people, the local people and practically one himself; you know he’d been there for so long. Of course he married a Laotian lady, she lived in Udorn, but so he, for quite a few years. The assumption is they’re still married I guess, wherever they are, California or wherever they are now. Because I had heard he made one of the Lao reunions recently, in the last couple of years, so I think he’s probably still around. But I didn’t, I know that he was having trouble with the local Laotian commander for that district up there because he suspected him of dealing with drugs or opium and Tony didn’t like that. So I know they were kind of on the outs because of that, because their opinion on you know. His opinion was he should not be
doing it but he did it anyway. Other than that, I mean he’s a guy trying to do a job and I admired him. He was a definite; he was there for a cause.

SM: And as you said already, he was there for the long term.

BV: Yes, he’d pretty well settled there, that was his life.

SM: Now, what about the other case officers that you had worked with?

BV: Well, I’m trying to think; of course I think I even mentioned one of my stories here about Jim Lewis, who unfortunately he’s gone too. I worked with him a little bit, quite a bit. He didn’t have a good reputation of telling the whole truth about the bad guys. It was no use forcing yourself to go into harm’s way if you don’t have to. You can always figure out ways to fly the mission without going right over the guns, but he gave me the idea that he didn’t really care whether you got shot or not, or your aircraft took fire or not, just wanted to get the mission done.

SM: How long had he been there, do you know? How long did he spend there?

BV: He hadn’t been there very long. He was there for a couple of years, a couple maybe three years or so. Now, he, I don’t know when he, he may have stayed all the way through the end. I don’t know on that because I left in the end of ’72 and of course they still went on for another year there in Laos, before they moved down to Saigon to finish up down there. So, I don’t know when he left the area. What I’d heard, that he got killed on a mission in Africa or someplace else, that they’d sent him. I’m not really sure; you know the routine, if you could figure it was like an eight to five war for us. It kind of was in a way because we returned in our helicopters usually to the town that we staged out off. You’d fly the missions all day out in the maneuver area, out where things were going on, but then it was relatively safe back at the base camp. Then the same when you got off and got back over to Udorn. Of course then you’re back with your family and relaxed and again you know Thailand had. You know you didn't want to go driving around at night out in the country, but on the other hand I wasn’t concerned really with driving during the day time anywhere in Thailand, even though it was reported some areas could be Communists or bandits, but I never really, that didn’t really concern me.

SM: Well while you were flying out of villages or staging areas in Laos, who provided security in those villages, was it always just a local?
BV: Yes, just now like in Luang Prabang or Ban Houei Sai or the towns there’s the local police and that’s about it. We didn’t have anything special. We just kind of, of course there weren’t that many Air America crews in a town, there may be you know two guys, four, six, eight guys, maybe MACs, or one of the bigger ones like Pakse or Savannakhet you could have some fixed wing pilots staying there too, and same with the up country too, but up in the northern parts. We never, I never had any fear of going out at night, we’d go down to the bars or go down to the noodle stand or something, relax after dinner and walk back home and get up the next morning and go. Now, like I said, I never, and I’m not really aware of anybody else that had encountered any enemy type problems, you know other than the normal problems you’re going to have when you get drunk and raise hell and that type of stuff with anybody.

SM: What about the aircraft, would you store them in a secure compound?

BV: No, they were left out at the airfield. Now there were you know a certain amount of soldiers at the airfields where we were, but quite frankly I guess anybody could have walked into the aircraft and stuck a bomb on one or something if they so thought about it. But another thing about that Laotian conflict was that the enemy, at least the Path Et Lao knew that we were there to deliver, not only to help fight for the Royalists, but to deliver materials and food, and I think they figured they were going to get their share anyway, when things like that were delivered out to the different areas, and especially early on. So, that’s why I think a lot of times they figured, well just leave the helicopters alone because we’re going to get some of that ourselves.

SM: Well, that’s interesting. Did you ever hear or even see perhaps some of that material being sold on the Black Market?

BV: Well, yes I’m not even sure it would be sold as much as it might have been an agreement that you know if you leave my village alone I’ll go ahead and share some of the rice with you or whatever. I had heard that mentioned before, especially early on when I was first there. Now, later on of course when the NVA became more and more involved and really running the show, the Communist side, well then I doubt if there was much collusion going on then, at that time. But with the Path Et Lao, which a lot of times were just the brother-in-law or the cousin of whoever was there already, it wouldn’t
surprise me at all. Did you ever hear that even the Russians gave them aviation support early on, I mean talking about the very early ‘60s or late ‘50s?

SM: No, I hadn’t heard that.

BV: Yes. And I’m not, I’m going to say Air Russia, but yes they had an aid program going there too, with fixed wing aircraft. I don’t believe there were any helicopters, there could have been but very early after the first coalition governments were set up there, the Path Et Lao, the neutralists and the Royalists. The pilots would stage out of Vientiane for example and fly their various missions during the day with Russia supporting the Path Et Lao and of course the American guys supporting the rest of them and then at night sometimes they’d get together and have a drink at the bar or something just like it was, put the airplanes to bed and go on in and for them the war was strictly a day time thing. Now I don’t know anybody in particular that did that, but that’s what I heard, these are fixed wing guys. I’m not aware of any of the helicopters sharing space out there with the Russians but they did have some fixed wing support.

SM: I was just wondering if you ever ran into any on the streets?

BV: I never did. They were gone when I got there, that particular program was gone.

SM: Any other foreign nationals?

BV: Well, there were, I think, what did they call it, the CIC, I think it was called the CIC, what it was, it was a monitoring Poles, I think there were Poles, Canadians, and Indians. I think it was called the CIC and we flew for them too, we supplied their aircraft. It was a white aircraft, different color than our own aircraft and occasionally I’d fly that aircraft.

SM: Was this part of the International Control Commission?

BV: Yes, ICC okay.

SM: So you did fly some of them around?

BV: Yes, occasionally I would draw that mission. Because they used our, we supported their aircraft with maintenance and whatever, and pilots too, at least the helicopters, I’m not sure about the fixed wing.
SM: Now would you fly, in terms of the types of supplies you could carry in your
aircraft, did that include building supplies and things like that or was it pretty much
limited to food and ammunition?
BV: No, it was, sometimes for USAID we would take whatever they needed,
including live animals. You’ve probably heard the story, what we would do, he had a
young water buffalo, of course he would make sure it was pretty well tied up, you didn't
want to. They wouldn’t kill those until they were ready to eat them because obviously
there were no refrigeration, so he didn’t want to kill it ahead of time. So we would fly,
several times I’ve flown live hogs and live buffalo out to an area where they’re going to
have a party. Then of course, your passengers you pick up, they could have chickens
with them and ducks and other live animals. Then of course we flew just people a lot of
times, local folks, especially the Mayos up from the, they live in the higher country and
we bring them down into town, they’d hitch a ride, say hitch a ride, somebody would say
okay, it’s all right to jump on that aircraft, go to town, especially up at Ban Houei Sai and
I mean Luang Prabang. We had a high pad called the victor pad that we, unfortunately
had a crash on it that killed two pilots up there while I was there, two guys that I knew in
fact from the Army.

SM: What had happened, what caused the crashes, do you know?
BV: Yes, it was the pilot was Harvey Potter was the IP or the inexperienced pilot
and the other guy was by the name of John Beardsley, who was actually was a classmate
of his in the Army, Army flight training and he knew him in the Army, but he was a new
hire to Air America, and he was up there training with him and somehow John managed
to, it was kind of a high pad, it was kind of rough pad, a lot of rocks and things on it,
managed to tip the aircraft over during landing or takeoff on the pad. It caught on fire
immediately, and the crew chief was able to kind of scramble away, he got some burns,
but he was not seriously burned but the two pilots, it fell on the right side and the student
pilot was on the right seat and the instructor pilot who was Harvey was on the left seat.
And all he really had to save his own life was just to go right out the window there on the
left side as it. But he stayed in the aircraft long enough to get John out and pull him out
and because they were in the fire a little bit longer they both breathed it. They actually
lived. They were evacuated from there to Japan, some burn center up there or hospital up
there for awhile, but about a week, less than a week later they both died because they’d inhaled the fire.

SM: Oh, what a shame.

BV: Yes it was, it was too bad. That was that mail pad or victor pad that we called it up it at Luang Prabang.

SM: Were there any particular airfields that you liked to fly into or didn’t or others that you didn’t care to for one reason or another?

BV: Well, the only one I really didn’t like at all was a place called 69 Alternate, and to me that area was always bad. It was over by, I don’t know if you heard about Chinese trail, that road they were building up there or not.

SM: Very little, why don’t you explain what you knew about it?

BV: Okay. Up in the northwestern part of Laos, being again Ban Houei Sai, which was Lima 25, which was really our most northwestern big airfield that we’d work out of, that we’d RON at and even actually Lima 54. Well in between that area there was a large area that. Laos kind of goes out to the west and actually borders Thailand too, and 69 Alternate was right, just about on the Thai border up in that area is where they worked, but there was a. The Chinese were building a road, it was like supposedly an aid project but anybody that flew near it was going to get shot at, that’s where we had a C-123 shot down in fact and the crew were missing for, I heard recently that maybe they found some of them, but they were missing for many, many years, the crew on that one. But I transgress a little bit, that’s when Jim Ryan, the chief pilot fixed wing lost his foot up there looking for guys, and I was up there that night in a helicopter too, so I followed him as much as I could. They took an air burst and he lost his one of his feet. Luckily, they had, there were three guys on board, another pilot that could still fly the aircraft and the other guy that was helping him throw, they were throwing leaflets out there to the villages, saying if you, you know offering a reward if anybody give any information on that C-123, and he was able to put a tourniquet on Jim and save his life that way, or help save his life because he would have bled to death probably otherwise. But anyway, the Chinese road, it was the only route from China to Thailand without going over any major mountains. It was kind of a nice little level route, and that’s why, one reason they were interested in building that I think. It would give them an access to that part of Thailand.
But whether or not it ever got finished but I don’t think so. We had road watch teams on that one too, we would take in and count their trucks and you know take inventory of what’s going on.

SM: Was there a lot of traffic on the road?

BV: I guess there was. I didn’t, now when I first got there we used to just fly right over it, going on up from between, just say Lima 54 and Ban Houei Sai, but in later years you didn’t fly over that trail, you flew around the south end of it, over 69 Alternate and then on up. It kind of followed, there was a, it’s kind of a valley and there was a couple of rivers in there too, and it kind of followed that. Of course the Mekong River was still further, from Luang Prabang the Mekong River really goes east and west, and a lot of places it’s the common border between Thailand and Laos, and that area too and then it turns north again and it’s still pretty much the common border, in a lot of places anyway and on up through, what they call the golden triangle, right up where Burma and Laos and Thailand come together up there, it includes China. But anyway that road was, well another thing that happened there is early in the war the U.S. Air Force would bomb up in that area, and later on they were restricted by how far north they could go.

SM: Was it because of the road?

BV: No. Well it may have been partially, they just didn’t want the Air Force that far up. They were afraid they were going to maybe get involved with Chinese, or maybe get shot down in an area they didn’t need to be shot down, well they didn’t need to be shot down any place. So anyway for whatever their political reasons were they pulled them back in a little bit further south in that area.

SM: Well, you mentioned that previously you used to just fly over the road but did that stop for some reason that you can pinpoint?

BV: Yes, because we started getting shot at every time we flew over there, the anti-aircraft would shoot at you so that was.

SM: And this was Chinese anti-aircraft?

BV: Yes, Chinese that’s right. A good reason not to fly over it.

SM: What would they shoot at you, do you know?

BV: What kind of weapons?

SM: Yes.
BV: Probably twenty-three millimeters or a quad, 12.7 fifty calibers.

SM: Did anybody ever get shot down?

BV: Only one that got shot down was that C-123, the one that was missing. That’s the only one I’m aware of that actually took hits from the road but a lot of us were shot at.

SM: Now were there, during your briefings, if you were flying in that area was there good intelligence about what the Chinese were doing there?

BV: Well, the only good intelligence we had of course was if another aircraft received fire he would report where it came from. Now, we just flat avoided that area, there wasn’t any reason to fly over that road from there on. And obvious what happened, the 123 got shot down. The next day or the next couple of days after that Jim Ryan’s up there in a Mapar flying, this is like a U-21 and flying and he took a round. Luckily they were able to fly, continue on, get back home, but when I say he took a round it was some kind of an airburst. It could have been thirty-seven millimeter but I don’t know whether they actually them, but even a twenty-three is a pretty big round.

SM: Now, did you spend very much time transporting Laotian soldiers around that were, and especially not necessary conventional, like Royal Lao Army soldiers, but the unconventional forces?

BV: Well, the mercenary types were, first of all a lot of them were Thais, from Thailand and the Thais I had actually, they were actually out of, a lot, most of them were out of actually units in Thailand, they know that were volunteered or put into that area. And I flew, I mean you know by percentage of time I would say I flew soldiers around probably twenty percent of the time of all of my flights and everything, would just fly, they’d be loaded and fly soldiers with their guns and their packs and go on in now. The big missions, with Vang Pao, they were joint missions with all of our Hueys and H-34s. I also flew missions with the Air Force aircraft, U.S. Air Force, ponies they called them, they were, let’s see, I think they were, I'm not sure. They were about the same size as H-34 except they were a turbine engine. They weren’t CH-53s, they weren’t that big, I think H-3s is what they were called. They’d carry about twenty people I think in those things.

SM: Were these the, were they black ponies?
BV: Well yes. Ponies is what they were called. They weren’t, well to say black, they weren’t really painted black, they were painted a gray, but yes ponies, we flew with them sometimes. You know there’s some, I can talk, relate some funny stories that I think are funny stories about when we flew with the Air Force. They normally would stage out of Udorn or NKP, Nakhom Phanom, NKP, that was a forward base for the Air Force there. We would go in there, Air America crews would go in there with the briefing, a joint brief with them prior to the mission. Now, the one mission I can recall pretty well was we landed there, I think we had three or four of our aircraft, and our flight leader was a guy named Tony Burns, I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of Tony Burns or not. He’s still around. He lives up Pennsylvania, but he was the senior guy on this particular group of, above all those pilots. So he was in charge of our flight and we’re sitting in their briefing room and first of all, just to get in there, you know NKP of course is a secure camp. Of course we landed inside that, and then to walk into the briefing area, the CIC or whatever they called it, it was going through barbed wire and all kinds of stuff, like it was really a big deal, and then we got into this area and it was, we all, the Air America guys all kind of sat in the back of the room. And there was all the pilots from the Air Force were up front and then there were the briefers. First of all some lieutenant gets up, is going to give the weather brief and he starts about the weather in the South China Sea and everything and we’re only going to go, the mission actually was to go right across the river, there’s a town called Thakhek right there and just over that, behind that there was a place we called the rooster tail which was kind of a hot area, and that’s where we were going to infil a bunch of troops. I think we were going to shuttle from Thakhek up into the rooster tail, which was probably not more than three, maybe five miles max after the pickup so it wasn’t a really a big deal, but it was, and it was a shuttle, we’re going to continue to take them up there until they were out, until we got them all in there. So, anyway, so the mission starts out, he starts giving the weather all over the world, and then the next thing they’re talking about, I guess general concept, enemy action and stuff like that, and then finally they get to the end and we’re talking about loads and everything and this colonel that was up there briefing, he says, “Okay, Air America, do you have any questions?” And Tony, Tony is funny, Tony Brerens, he gets up, he had kind of a British accent, even though, I don’t know how he, why he had that,
he also smoked a pipe and he gets up like a limey accent and he says. “Well, Colonel I
have one question.” And he says, “What’s that, captain?” He says, “Where the fuck are
we going?” See, they never did tell us where we were going and we cracked, everybody
cracked up when he said that.

SM: Did the briefer crack up to?
BV: Oh, yes the Air Force there, cracked up when that was over. Because really
the guy, they got us through this big brief but they really never told us where the
objective was, other than it was out that direction [laughter]. Anyway, that was pretty
good, that was classic. Of course, I, come to think I’ve flown with him, I flew with a guy
named Chuck Brady a lot too when he was there. In fact I wrote a story about him. He
was my instructor when I got there and then he quit for a while and then he came back,
was a new hire. So now he had to go through re-training and I was his instructor. That
was kind of, unfortunately he died, he smoked like a chimney, like every, he go the big C
later on he’s gone, just like a lot of my friends that smoked all their life, paid for it.

SM: Any other missions or incidents involving the Air Force?
BV: Yes, I had another mission one time, down near, out at Pakse with the Air
Force, and these guys were. Well the ponies were out of, I think out of Ubon or that area,
another place in Thailand, and the air support were A-1Es, their call sign was Oboe down
there, and we did the same thing. We had a brief, the brief went, actually I think the brief
was actually on our side over in Laos down in Pakse by the customer down there, but we
shuttled troops from the Pakse area back into a, not too far from there, back into an area
where the enemy had pretty well taken over, it was near the Bolovens Plateau, but it
wasn’t up on the Bolovens, it was kind of down along side it, and we did that. See we
staged in another area too, it was, down there they’ve got the Lima sites all over, the LS
sites, down there there were PS sites, Pakse sites. It was the only difference in that area
we had, some of them were Lima sites but a lot of them were called PS sites, and that was
just another area of Laos or another Corps area that the CIA customers were down there
and training these guys, and after they trained them we would infil them into whatever
they were going to doing. And this particular mission was joint Air Force because we
wanted to move a lot of people in a short time. So in between, let’s see in between the
missions some of us would remain out in the area and kind of in an orbit in case we
needed to go in and pick up somebody and then as we were orbiting the area, let’s say about three thousand feet, the Air Force hobos would kind of make a large circle around us as our cover. This one hobo was actually flying like, kind of like in formation with me, like my wing and talking to me, and then he said, I remember him saying, “Well, I’m getting low on fuel, I’m going to need to go back and refuel, but I haven’t expended any of my ordnance so go ahead,” they had some kind of a target down there that they wanted to go ahead and put some ordnance on, so he just kind of dives from me, right down away from me down maybe, and I’m watching him do all this and he strafes and bombs this area, or actually puts rockets on it and then bomb it again, dropped a couple bombs on it too, pulled up several miles away from me and then climbed right back up my altitude and then rejoined me. And just as he rejoined me he was not more then, oh I would say three or four hundred meters from me is all, his aircraft exploded in a ball of fire and it was just unreal. Now, whether he took an air burst or whether it was something, one of his ordnance that somehow got hung up or something went off, I don’t know, but there wasn't anything left but bigger than a foot. You know it was just a ball of fire, a bunch of debris falling down, no parachute, no body, no nothing, and I had a good visibility on all of that. Of course King, I’m not sure if it was King, but whoever the real high Air Force controller was, said, “Well, gee Air American run down, swoop down and get the body or get the guy or rescue him.” I said, “Hey, if I could see anybody I would,” but there wasn’t anything left there at all. That was an interesting story.

SM: You hadn’t been taking any fire whatsoever and?

BV: Hadn't at all and I’m just thinking man, if that was an airburst that got him, he was only, they could have easily moved it right over and got me too, but they didn’t. I don’t know, nobody knows for sure what caused it, because there was no, there was no any more broadcasting from his radio or anything, it was just blam, that was it, it was amazing because it was right next to. You know, like I said right up my altitude right about a few hundred meters away from me.

SM: Was he carrying any ordnance that would have a time delayed fuse or?

BV: No, there wouldn’t be any delayed fuse, but maybe there was something that might have got hung up you know a bomb. Although I don’t know if it, you know a bomb has to hit something to go off, and same with his 2.75 rockets. They’ve got to spin
so long, so many revolutions away from the aircraft to arm themselves, so I don’t know.
Of course the assumption is he took some kind of an enemy round.

SM: But a single shot?
BV: Well, I didn’t see any other ones, I don’t know. And he didn’t mention
either, normally you say hey. I’m getting shot at or I heard some shooting or something.
But he didn’t, it was just one of those things.

SM: Very interesting, very sad.

BV: Yes, it is sad. I wrote a story once about, oh this was a long time ago and
they were talking about whether or not they were going to recognize Vietnam again as a, you
know give them recognition, and I was in favor of that and I wrote why and part of
that was, well we’ve got so many MIAs, until they’re all accounted for, we shouldn’t
recognize them, well my story was and I use that as an example, I said you know there
wasn’t anything to recognize out of that poor guy. He was MIA there, because they
never got a body, but obviously there was nothing left to find. And that’s unfortunately
the case of most of your MIAs because most of them were airmen, you know pilots. And
when you get shot down at six hundred knots, wherever you are, there’s not going to be
much left unless you’re just lucky, parachute, and then unfortunately if you don’t
parachute right over Hanoi, Haiphong or someplace where they can take care of you, you
know if you’re just go into the jungle, well it’s a survival thing out there, and even if
you’re captured the enemy doesn’t want to, especially if you’re wounded, they don’t
want to take care of you. They’ve got as much problems taking care of themselves. That
was kind of my story, there aren’t any more MIA, there’s no more bamboo cages
someplace out there with prisoners that they didn’t release, and at the end of the peace
talks and we got our folks released from Hanoi, that was it, that’s all they had to give us.
I mean I was positive.

SM: Well, do you recall about how many SAR missions, you yourself participated
in?
BV: Oh, I was on at least a dozen or more missions. Now, I actually picked up,
on four different occasions I had actually picked up a downed airman out there.

SM: Were these all Air Force pilots?
BV: All Air Force, and one time I took a guy and moved him to a safer area and let him out because the Jollys were coming. They picked him up, but I didn't want to leave him where he was particularly at the top of this hill and left him up there. I think that’s happened before with other pilots too. They just moved them to a safer area, let the Jollys get their air medal and make their pick up.

SM: But, that would allow you also to jump in quickly, even if you were in the middle of a mission.

BV: That’s exactly right. You’re right there, and time is of the essence of course in stuff like that. If a guy’s on the ground too long, well he’s going to get captured. You know another thing that was, when I spoke before about the one year tour in Vietnam being too short really, even though it was nice to get in and out, about the time you’re getting some pretty good experience and getting to know your terrain and getting you know your aircraft and everything, it’s time to leave, the same with Laos. The Air Force tour, the guys that lived in Thailand that flew in Laos or Vietnam to Laos were there for a short time too, so a lot of them really not. Except for the, the Ravens that’s a different story, the guys that lived up there. They stayed for, some of them stayed for many years, but that was a different breed, those guys. But anyway, for the normal Air Force guy out of Udorn or something, that would by flying missions in Laos. When you go into one of your briefings, you know you’ll look at a map and the map will have red marks on it where enemy fire was. Well, the difference between their maps and Air America maps is that that gun would move, and we showed it moving. In other words, if it shot at you one place one day and then you got shot at another place another day, the assumption is that gun had moved, because you know they’re on wheels anyway, and the Air Force never bothered to do that, they just. So after a couple years, it was solid red and I could be, I’d be nervous as heck flying into Laos thinking the minute you crossed over the Mekong River, you’re going to start getting shot at, it’s no man’s land. Well, it’s not really the case. Some areas were worse than others. I mean there wasn’t any area that was one hundred percent safe all the time other than the big towns, but the point was there was no need to get that nervous. Now, we’ve had Air Force guys, a couple of occasion with their F-4s getting shot over Vietnam coming down across Laos to get back home to Udorn and refuse to bail out. I could saw one above me and I said, “Hey, go ahead, we’ve got a
visual, go ahead and bail.” He’s smoking you know, “Go ahead and bail out.” He says, “Oh, no, negative, negative, I’m going to.” He’s just afraid that wherever he goes in Laos he’s going to be dead meat. And you know that would take a billion soldiers to cover that big of an area, and obviously you don’t want to be unfortunate enough to land right in the middle of an enemy concentration, but on the other hand there’s a lot of areas there, that there weren’t any enemy. Of course that’s why, by being there for so long, well first of all before you even started flying on your own you know as a captain, you had to know the terrain real well, especially where you could be working, but after a period of time of course you got to know it very well and got to know pretty much where the bad guys probably were or might go so you just tried to avoid that.

SM: Well, the Air Force method of tracking where anti-aircrafts weapons were emplaced, that doesn’t, it doesn’t make much sense.

BV: No, it didn’t. Particularly see along the Ho Chi Minh Trail with all of its little tributaries I could say, they had a lot of little other roads. We would bomb a road really bad and while they were repairing it they would go ahead and divert around another area, some places. But anyway, that area, anywhere along the Ho Chi Minh Trail there were guns at one time, because they were on wheels. But there’re not guns everywhere, but if you’d look at their map it was solid red from one end to the other of that trail. And other areas, you know up at Sam Nua province and areas where it was a heavy Path Et Lao area and where the North Vietnamese operated out of too. They, a lot of things we could have done I think. I say we, the U.S. forces could have done out of Vietnam into Laos that might have helped their cause a little bit more because we didn’t have enough, in Laos, we didn’t have enough folks to completely block the Ho Chi Minh Trail for example that would have been one of their. To me it would have been one thing they could have done, you know gone in with enough arms and enough folks to just block off an area. Don’t allow them to use it. But we would do, we would bomb them, strafe them, and then leave so of course they just kept moving. They’d pull into their, usually they moved at night; they’d pull in during the day in the caves or in areas that were sheltered and then move out the next day. I had some missions at times to go check on the Trail, I had one customer; I’m trying to remember his name. His call sign was Greensleeves, but I’m trying to think, he was a big old, probably an ex-Marine, and he loved to take a tank
mine, anti-tank mine and we’d fly out there and land on the trail and he’d bury it right there, then the next day we’d go out and check it and see if anybody hit it. And that was his big thing, you know setting his traps out there, then going and checking them.

SM: Unbelievable.

BV: Yes. There was another guy that liked to take a fifty-five gallon drum of fuel and strap a grenade, tape a grenade to it and then we’d fly over and you’d kick it out of the aircraft and of course pull the pin on the grenade, in other words you’re making your own napalm bombs.

SM: This would occur over enemy territory?

BV: Yes, we’d go over an area, like it could be an enemy, for example. See they were, enemy, a lot of those what you call French forts that were scatted over all Laos, most of them left over from the French Indochina days, some of them were occupied by the enemy, especially up in the northern part. I made that error one time of getting too, I thought it was a friendly one and I came in, I was high because I wasn't sure. I wasn’t going to let down and boy it lit up like a pinball machine, but I was pretty high so I just flew on out of it. It was an area that probably, maybe several months earlier might have been the friendlies.

SM: What was the ceiling on that aircraft, what was the limit?

BV: Oh, I would, normally we wouldn’t fly much above eight to ten thousand feet at the highest.

SM: Could it go much higher if you had oxygen?

BV: Yes, it probably could, although the recip engines lose an awful lot of power as they climb up, so it really would have been hurting for power.

SM: And you mentioned that Raven FACs. What do you remember most about them, any particular facts come to mind? Any particular pilots come to mind?

BV: No, there was a guy named Jim Gallagher that I knew. I didn’t really know them by name very much, just by their call, Raven 21 or Raven so and so or Raven 6, Raven 10. They worked out of, and see they were based out of Luang Prabang, they were based out of twenty alternate, they were based out of Pakse and Savannakhet area and probably out of Vientiane too. I’m not sure but anyway, and they would return to their bases too. They’d work that area. Of course they, they were pretty gutsy, they’d get
down there at tree top level, just flying all around looking for targets and then when they
found one of course they would mark it and call in an air strike on it. Did I mention the
time that I was working out of a special forces camp in southern Thailand and got shot
at?

SM: No.

BV: Okay, well this is a pretty good one. There was a camp down; I don’t
remember what the name of it was. It may have never had a name for sure but it was real
close to Laos, down across from Pakse and Kong Island, which was the, Kong Island was
on the Mekong River, which is where the Mekong leaves Laos. Well it’s a common
border between Laos and Thailand and goes into Cambodia, so it’s right down in the very
southern corner of, is where we were working with it. That camp was on the Thai side
but it was right near that area. What they did at that camp, they would train, there was
two or three Americans there was all, there was like a Master Sergeant and a captain, and
there might have been one other but I can remember the two because when I used to work
for them they were there all the time. What I would do was, they had teams that were
working on the Laos side and I would transport either the teams back and forth or
supplies to them, and I was already told by my boss, do not take the Americans into Laos,
period and so, but they were always, this captain especially was always bugging me to
give him a ride. And I had been shuttling, we weren’t going more than like five miles
across the Mekong into this area where they were camped on the other side so one day,
he’s been bugging me to go, I says, “Okay, you can go with me this time, but if you get
shot I’m just going to take your body and throw it in the Mekong and pretend like you
were never with me because I’m not supposed to take you.” He said, “Oh, no sweat.”
So, we flew over there, flew the mission, did whatever, dropped off whatever we were
supposed to drop off. We were on the way back and I was on final approach into the
compound in Thailand, right over an open field, a guy jumps out of a little hooch there
with an AK and I saw him plain as day, pointed right at me and let go with about a blast
of ten shots. And man there was bullets flying all over my cockpit, I didn’t get hit but
there was pieces of the honeycomb and pieces of, actually one of the bullets actually after
it ricocheted around there, ended up right on my shoulder. Anyway, I immediately I
sucked the aircraft back up high and got right over the spot, called the little compound we
were just going to and I said, hey, did you hear that? Get somebody out there and get him. And they didn’t want to do that, so I said well let me register a mortar for you. So I got up high and they had a four deuce mortar and they started shooting it out their way and I’m trying to register it for them, put it on the target, they couldn’t hit their ass with a sack of what. Anyway, I’m kind of pissed because that was a pretty close call and nobody wants to run, it couldn’t have been more than a kilometer from the compound there, maybe even closer. So anyway I got on the air, whatever our common frequency was to the Air Force, I said “You’ve got anybody returning with any ordnance, I have a target” and they said, “Roger, there’s a flight of two A1Es coming back from someplace that still has their ordnance with them” and I said, “Well good, give them my” they came and got a hold of me and I told them, they came overhead and I said okay, it’s that hooch right down in the middle of that field. So then they strafed in with bombs, CBU’s, rockets. I mean I’m talking, when they got done there was nothing left down there. Finally one of them says, “Okay, Air America, what was the enemy?” I said, “Oh, it was one guy with an AK and he shot me.” And they said, “Boy, you’re kind of vindictive aren’t you?” I said, “You’re damn right, when they shoot at me I take it very personal.” And I don’t know whether we got him or not because I was watching and he didn’t go out but he probably had an underground escape area out of that. But when we landed of course then the captain who was with us, he might have organized something more to go out there and take a look, but yes I couldn’t get the Thais and people there on the ground to go out.

SM: And where in Thailand was this again?
BV: This was over on the Thai side across from Pakse. It was, the closest Thai base to there would have been Ubon base, it was a little south of that, right on the, just off the Laotian, the river there, on the Laotian border. That was another day.

SM: Well, how about other incidents where you were shot at and these were close calls?

BV: Oh, there were a bunch of them. Of course I, I sent you the story about Christmas Eve, right?

SM: Yes, sir but you can talk about that as well.
BV: Well okay. The area that I was going to work this particular day, first of all it was the 24th of December 1970; some dates you never forget and that was one of them. Anyway because that was really my first mission after I was released from the Burma intonement there for a while. It was going to be one of these missions where I was just going to shuttle stuff all day long out of a place called Hmong Suy, which was an, ARVN, not ARVN. It was a Lao compound with an airstrip there, probably a five thousand foot strip, pretty good-sized strip and then it was right west of the Plain De Jars. At that time we had outposts all around it, but we didn’t control the Plain of Jars. At that particular point in time the enemy had it, and so you don’t fly over the PDJ. There was a lot of anti-aircraft there, a lot of, if you could look at the picture of the PDJ it was like a bone yard out there with lots of downed aircraft laying all over the place from over the years. But anyway, so the procedure was you would take off from, in this case Hmong Suy. I was going to pick up the loads, take them out and, we had many compounds, out posts, all the way around it so I was going to re-supply them. So I had a, I was flying solo that day because it was supposedly a piece of cake mission day, as long as I didn’t get over the PDJ, and the flight mechanic with me was a guy named Charlie Brigham. He was a new guy, in fact a guy I’d known in the Army, enlisted guy in the Army, he had just come to work for Air America and this was his first flight as a fully qualified crew chief. So he and I, along with a Laotian lieutenant loaded up a bunch of, I think they were mortars, I believe they were mortar rounds in boxes right in the door of the aircraft so the idea was we would. You don’t want to spend very much time on the ground around that areas but you come in and discharge your load, kick it off as quick as you can and then fly on out. So we flew over the area and circled overhead looking for the signal, and they came up with the proper signal and the lieutenant was on board talking on a PRIC-77 radio to the ground guys. And he said, he tells me through the crew chief, of course I’m above, the H-34 I can’t see, but the flight man, Charlie Brigham told me, he said, “Yes, he says it’s okay.” And so I start circling on down to land, but I notice that there were not a lot of women and kids out on the pad, so, usually they’re there to watch the helicopter so when you don’t see that, you know that there could be some action, thing that’s been happening around there. So I told Charlie this, I said, “I’m going to keep the aircraft pretty light on the struts when I land, go ahead and get the load out of it
as quickly as you can and then we’re going to be out of there.” So, I had not any more
than touched the ground, maybe a few seconds and they shot a recoilless rifle at me,
which luckily for us went off just short of the aircraft and then ricocheted up through it
and of course hit the aircraft and I was sure Charlie must be dead. I couldn’t see him
from where I was sitting, and I took some shrapnel in my right leg. And so I grabbed all
the power I could and figured, okay, if it flies, it flies if it doesn’t, it doesn’t because the
next round will get us direct. They usually don’t miss with those things, we were
fortunate, and took off and started climbing out and hoping he was okay, and I asked him,
I said, “Are you okay?” And he says, “Yes, I’m all right, but,” he said, “I can see you’re
not.” By that time the blood’s starting to run down the inside of the aircraft from my leg,
and I said. “Well, as long as the aircraft will fly, we’ll be okay to make it back to Ban
Houei Sai, I mean to Hmong Suy,” to get picked up and they can haul me off to the
hospital and I made aid and a flatter porter was right near there working theirs. He said,
“Okay, I’ve got a visual on you, I’ll follow you on into Hmong Suy.” I got in there and
Charlie, I jumped piggy back on his back and he carried me, although I probably could
have hobbled over to him, but carried me over to the porter and got in and he took off
with me for Udorn. The aircraft, the round itself put sixty-some holes right through the
aircraft, in one side and right out the other, that’s the power of those rounds, and eighty-
two millimeter would have. We were very fortunate, it wasn’t a direct hit, it just hit short
and sprayed the shrapnel up on it. But I guess there was nobody else, Charlie didn’t take
any hit, it went all around him and I was only, I guess the only person that took any, got
wounded from that.

SM: Was that the most serious wound you received?
BV: Yes it was. I never got any, that was the only time I really glad, because I
got shot in Vietnam but that was another time but.
SM: But I mean in Laos?
BV: Yes, well in Laos, yes.
SM: That was the most serious injury you received?
BV: Yes, that was.
SM: You were really lucky.
BV: Yes, I was, sure was, very lucky, could have been done. Because that aircraft was full of avgas, 115, 145 octane, so a direct hit would have been quite a fire.

SM: Yes sir. Now, could you, in the event of something hitting your fuel tank, did you have a quick dump capability, where you could just basically dump your fuel?

BV: No, couldn’t do that in that aircraft. It was all pretty much self-contained and the other thing about, back in those days they didn’t have the crash worthy or explosion worthy systems they do nowadays. So if you had a crash landing, same with, Hueys were the same way. If you had a crash where you split the aircraft apart, well you’re going to probably have a fire because that tank’s going to come apart too. In modern days, and right now, the fuel tanks in helicopters are all fixed so they break away and self-contain if there’s any, and they’re also self-sealing.

SM: Yes, I was going to ask you that, did you have a self-sealing tank?

BV: No, we didn’t but later on they, because I’m being an old maintenance guy, I know all about those too. They have a, the way the work, they’ve got layers of rubber and in between that layers of rubber there’s a substance called Buna-N. In case you’re on trivial pursuit sometime with your helicopters and anyway, the Buna-N when it mixes with fuel, if a round went through it of course it would have cause it to, fuel to get on it, expands eight times its size, real quick, so anything up to a fifty caliber round it will pretty well plug that whole right up, pretty good, right then, so that’s a good deal. But yes, we don’t, we didn’t, at that time they weren’t crash resistant or self-sealing tanks like they have now.

SM: But if you had the, even if you did have a self-sealing tank on one of those aircraft, with that fuel would probably a round hitting it set it off anyway?

BV: It could yes, because it’s pretty volatile. I mean if it, again, you know fuel has to, you’ve got to have vapors to get that explosion. So if you want to, say you’ve only got a half a tank of fuel, so half of it’s full of vapors that’d be a better possibility. If you were completely full of fuel than you might have a chance and not have a fire.

SM: Okay. Now, were you ever short of anything that you needed for those aircraft?

BV: Oh, not really I, maintenance was generally real good and you know we just operated with what we had. If you can imagine flying that old aircraft, well they weren’t
that old, it was old technology, but the aircraft, actually the ones we had were pretty new ones, right out of the Marine Corps. But anyway, with very limited navigational aids, or there weren’t any nav facilities really in Laos. There were a few beacons but that was it, if they happened to be turned on and flying with those. In the very mountainous terrain, weather, especially during the monsoon was pretty skoche, bad guys shooting at you, trying to operate with max loads and then navigate and you navigated by map, you had to be able to read a map. It was reported that a lot of the maps were not really, really accurate. You know they were pretty accurate, but not like they would be nowadays. They were probably made by the French originally. So anyway, you operated that way with, but that’s all you had. In later years back in the military, the stuff they have now is all GPS navigation and all kinds of automatic pilot stuff, everything, it was not that easy back then, and then plenty of power too.

SM: But, your navigation in Laos in particular, what was the biggest hindering factor, was it a weather/smoke combination or something else?

BV: Probably weather was the worst thing. If the enemy of course you try to avoid them you know when you’re coming in and out and going into areas, figuring okay the enemy are just over the hill or the enemy are probably over here, you avoid that. A lot of the pads that we serviced over were real high, right on the tips of mountains right around there. That’s where the friendlies were stationed, so to land on those we had to, in many cases you couldn’t sit all the way down, just put one, you’d lock the brakes and I’d just kind of ease it so one wheel was on the pad, so they can unload the stuff out of the cargo door and then you just kind of slide right off and fly right down the side of the mountain, get out of there.

SM: But all the while you’re still running, you’re hovering?

BV: Yes, you’re kind of hovering there, that’s right, just holding up. And you have to, you know the higher elevation ones, you’ve got to plan that you’re going to, when you’re a short finaller just prior to landing you’re going to be losing your power so you’ve got to make that approach to the ground and time it so that you don’t hurt the aircraft any, because you’d be running out of power in a lot of them and you know that, fly it that way.
SM: What, you mentioned, you qualified that generally maintenance was good, where there any particular problems?

BV: I didn’t have much problems. I had one incident I can remember pretty vividly and that’s. I was flying an aircraft that I had, I could hear a clicking sound from the transmission area and I mentioned it. I wrote it up and you write up your faults and I mentioned it to the, back to the chief pilot when I called in for our daily calls, or I called him and I said, “You know you need to send maintenance guy up here to look at this aircraft or do something with it.” I was due to rotate out and I was going to leave the aircraft up country and just get on a fixed wing and fly home. So I mentioned that, that I, there was something there that, something was wrong with that transmission, it shouldn’t be making a noise like that, so I went up. I went home and actually I picked up another aircraft and I was out flying the next day again and I came back up in that same area and I look over and here’s that same aircraft I was flying the previous day with that maintenance problem and it’s flying, so I got with the pilot and I said, “Hey, let me look at the logbook, I want to see what they did to fix that,” whatever it was. And they hadn’t done anything, and I kind of got a little upset about that, I raised hell with the maintenance guys and said hey, I really did hear something and I told the other pilot that was flying, I asked him, I said, “Did you ever?” He said, “Yes, I was hearing this thing, I didn’t really pay enough attention to it.” I said, “Well, there’s something wrong.” And sure enough that particular there was something wrong, it was not getting, it had a bearing that was going on out on the transmission, and I guess they fixed it eventually but that was you know one of the things that. You know I, of course later, many years later when I was a very senior Army aviator with a lot of experience and I was a maintenance pilot, maintenance test pilot and a young pilot would come with a problem, which I wouldn’t belittle him but I would think to myself, he’s just probably inexperienced, he doesn’t know what he’s hearing, or not hearing but of course the typical corrective action was checked and found okay, which really that is the typical one, take it out for a test flight and try to duplicate the problem that they said it had, and couldn’t duplicate it. And you know maybe back then, the older maintenance guy might think that young guy doesn’t know what he’s hearing.

SM: But it was a bearing?
BV: Yes, it turned out to be some kind of a bearing problem.

SM: Now, would that have, if a bearing went out, would that be a catastrophic failure?

BV: It could have been, it may not have been, it could have been. If it was allowed to go long enough, of course you could even have a fire, if it gets hot enough.

SM: Just not something you want to mess with?

BV: No, you want to change it, especially for flying. It isn’t like you can just coast it to the side of the road and call for a tow truck.

SM: Now, were there any serious mechanical failures of any aircraft you flew?

BV: No, well I had an engine failure there, one time. In fact, this was an interesting story too. I was flying solo back from up country, back toward Vientiane and I got a call from some USAID workers that had a radio in our frequency asking any Air America aircraft could you come in and give us a ride back to Vientiane, we’re at Site so and so, USAID. I think it was a dam project or some kind of a project they were working up there. I called them and said, “Yes, okay I’ll come over and get you.” And, I would go right near there, so I picked them up and then I flew back. I was flying solo, so there was nobody up front with me and the two guys I picked up were down below with the crew chief or the flight mechanic, in fact his name was Rick Strubb. He’s still around, I think he lives in Chicago area and I see him occasionally at reunions. It was going to be one of his last flights, or maybe his last flight, he was getting ready to go home. So I flew on up at a real high altitude, up to seven thousand feet I think it was, then locked down, that aircraft has an automatic pilot too, you just to have to get it all set up, then you can push the button. It’ll hold you where you are, you’re altitude and you’re heading and so on. So, I locked down, friction down on the controls and had my feet kind of up on the console and reading a book, fat, dumb and happy as it was kind of flying, heading home, homing on the ADF, there was an ADF in Vientiane so I was all tuned in on that and it was homing it on that and all of a sudden, kaboom, bang. The engine quit on me and well, you talk about scrambling around up there in the cockpit to get the pitch down on the helicopter. So anyway, I got it down and we said, “May Day” and they started the auto rotation. Of course I was seven thousand feet that was pretty high.

SM: It gives you some time to play there.
BV: Yes, it gives me plenty of time, so I start making a big old circle as I’m auto-rotating, looking down below me and all there is, is solid jungle. It was just, you know and I made another revolution and I just didn’t see anywhere to land. I’m thinking, and that was, I think it was in 1969 and there had been several fatal accidents just prior to that, which were all attributed to pilot error, and the pilots died on them so they really couldn’t defend themselves one way or the other. I’m thinking right now, I’m thinking, shoot, here’s one here I’ve got an engine failure, it’s not my fault and I’m going to crash and burn probably in the jungle and they’re going to call it pilot error and that’s going through my mind. So part of my May Day discussion was, “Oh by the way, the engine quit. I’m auto-rotating.” Anyway, about my third revolution down I saw a little Buddha parade, it was a neat little clearing, it was a small little rice paddy clearing, but it was big enough to auto-rotate down into. So I started setting up for that and the other thing that happened is that, because I was up so high, letting down so quickly the windows, the front window on the H-34 is made of glass, not Plexiglas, but actual glass and it was, it got all steamed up because you know it was the jungle. The heat we were descending down into caused the window to get all steamed, so I couldn’t see out in front so I’ve got my. I’m looking out the side window with my head sticking out that turning on, do my auto-rotation into the landing area and I could still recall as I was. I had it made, I was no short final I started a deceleration and I remembered, shoot there was one lone palm tree in that rice paddy area, and I’m thinking man, that would be something I hit. I made the area okay but I hit the darn palm tree but as it turned out I didn’t, it was to one side but that’s what was in my mind. During your deceleration, your final, you have no other, you know there’s no go around. Anyway, it was no problem, we got in there and landed okay and, a helicopter came out later and picked us up.

SM: How softly can you land one of those aircraft in auto-rotation?

BV: Oh, with practice real softly, you’ve just to got make it right, you only have one try. And what you do on an H-34, it’s got a tail wheel so you hit that first and kind of drag it along the ground holding rear cyclic on it so you dissipate all your forward air speed and then as it settles down, hopefully with very little forward roll on the main gear, then you cushion it in with your collective pitch and you’re there.
SM: Okay, so when you landed here, another aircraft came out, picked you up, what happened to your helicopter?

BV: They came out the next day with maintenance and changed the engine on it.

SM: Was it they brought a new engine out to the aircraft?

BV: Yes, brought another engine out, it swallowed a jug is what had happened, a valve I mean. The, you know also kind of funny, I got back to Vientiane, of course Udorn is our base, our main base. So I called back to the chief pilot and he says, “Did you run out of gas?” I said, “No.” The next thing he says, “Were you overloaded?” I said, “No.” And you know, not glad to hear you’re, well done, good deal, glad you made it okay. “Okay we’ll see you tomorrow.” That was all that was on his, that was Jerry Macinty was the acting chief pilot then.

SM: Did you run out of fuel, were you overloaded [laughs]?

BV: Yes. We’d had several fatalities, fatal accidents prior to that just that one year. It was a bad year, and they were attributed to pilot error.

SM: In those respects, I mean lack of fuel and overloaded?

BV: No, I don’t know anybody that ran out of fuel, but they could have been overloaded.

SM: Did you ever know of anybody running out of fuel?

BV: No, I'm not, I don’t know of anybody over there that ran out of fuel. You know there were some dumb things done.

SM: Well, not getting personal in terms of naming people, but what were some of the dumber things that you recall?

BV: Oh, I can get personal, this is Larry Frazier, I don’t think, you know Larry Frazier?

SM: Yes, sir I do, I interviewed him.

BV: Okay, you know the story about him trying to smoke grenade into Don Henthorn’s house?

SM: No. This is an interesting story. Go ahead [laughs].

BV: Well, okay, this is what, did he tell you how he got fired from Air America?

SM: Well, he mentioned that he got fired, and I think he did talk a little bit about it but.
BV: Yes, well this is how he got fired. A friend of ours, whose named Don Henthorn, another guy, I flew with him quite a bit too, had this house that he shared with some other guys and they called it the Captain’s Club. It was out by a golf course in Udorn; it was kind of like a party house, there was always something going on there you know, it was a good place to go out and drink. Anyway, so Larry’s flying the H-34 solo one day and he think he’s going to fly, swoop down close to Don’s house and try to throw a smoke grenade out of the, into his window of his house. And, so he’s getting down close and kind of loses a little bit of control of the aircraft and manages to clip a palm tree that’s right there into the landing gear and then puts a bunch of, he uses something. Anyway, darn near crashes, then he flies back to Udorn, of course there’s still branches sitting in the gear and pretty hard to explain how that happened. Of course people put two and two together and anyway, he got fired. He stayed over there with another company for a while. He’s going to be one of the sponsors of the reunion in the Jacksonville.

SM: Right the Jacksonville reunion, yes.

BV: Yes, Larry Frazier. His wife just passed away unfortunately this year.

SM: Yes, sir. Well, so okay, so because he was, it was discovered that he was I guess engaging in some kind of?

BV: Goofing off, yes.

SM: Yes, reckless behavior they decided to terminate his employment?

BV: Yes, they terminated him. As far as I know that’s the only thing he ever did. Now, we had some, a lot of, some drinking problems there and they. You know it’s twelve hours between bottle and throttle, is the standard rule. Of course if you were drinking a lot, sometimes twelve hours may not even be enough and for other guys it probably wouldn’t even matter, they could but. We had this one guy who finally got fired, his name was Robbie Robinson, good old, old pilot, Huey pilot, been there for a long time. But he’d get in the bar he’s get so drunk his head would be on the bar at our club right there in Udorn. Well, when we started having those accidents and other problems the customer was getting a little bit more picky I guess you could say. So our flight ops guy, usually it was like Dick Fore, he’s still alive, Dick’s still around, would come in with the next day’s schedule and make sure there wasn’t anybody still drinking
in the bar that prior evening that was on the schedule the next day. And Robbie, and of

course I never flew with him because he flew the Hueys and I was H-34s but I had heard

that many times his other pilot with him would strap him into the cockpit and he’d, they

would just go and he would wake up maybe after the first fuel load and he’d be all right,

you know from drinking all night because he had it pretty bad. But when he got fired one

of our vice presidents from Taipei was there and he mentioned just something about

maybe you ought to be going home or something like that instead of drinking, and

Robbie I guess, gave him some lip about something and he was terminated, like I don’t

need to, or I can do what I want to do, or it’s none of your business or something like

that, but anyway.

SM: Oh, boy.

BV: Yes, that got him out of there. We had a lot of funny incidents. I liked to

write a little bit of humor when I write. I’ve got several that are kind of on the humorous

note, in fact I can send you those, in fact before we get off I need to get your mailing

address because I want to send you those tapes when I find them so you can try to get

them, I mean the eight millimeter movies.

SM: Right, so we can digitize the eight-millimeter for you, absolutely.

BV: Yes, like I said I don’t know what you’re going to get and I don’t know, they

may be the film may be so brittle that it won’t even work any more, but hopefully we can

get something out of it. Another funny story is there was a guy who’s passed away too,

another good friend of mine named Dave Anchorburg, have you heard of him?

SM: No, sir I haven’t.

BV: He’s in the Ravens, he’s mentioned in the book *The Ravens*, but Dave,

another former Army pilot and a good friend of mine too, I knew him many years later,

all the time, he went to Fort Worth where I lived after he left there, and then he flew for

the police department there, Fort Worth Police. He was their chief pilot in fact for like

twenty years or longer; he finally died from lung cancer. But Dave was a joker, and he

was always pulling practical jokes, he was single and over there he would get a lot of the

wives together in the bar, and he’d have a raffle to buy able to be able to fly up, or no

he’d be signing up a list to fly up country with your husband. And of course it was

absolutely, he was getting all these women to sign up and they’d buy that and then, but
one of our funniest stories about Dave was. We had a new pilot over there named Francis Bennett. I'll never forget him because I was also one of his training captains and this guy Francis, according to rumor had graded one of the highest stanine test grades that they’d ever had. He was like a genius, but the guy was really weird. It became evident when you flew with him now. I went, I flew with him up country and our pre-landing check for example, on any airplane, you’ve got certain thing you always, usually you read it off on a checklist, you know pre-landing check, gear down and locked the mixture rich or whatever trim on this, whatever that particular aircraft needs is on the checklist. So he made a little rhyme out of it and he would sing it to you, da-da-da-da, for every approach, which you know I thought at first, well that’s kind of a good way to learn it. You know, it kind of makes it fun, but finally it got where it kind of got on your nerves, he sang this damn song every time you landed and that was part of it. So, then the other thing, of course we got on the ground down there and he and I were together flying out of Luang Prabang and we were the only aircraft there for this particular, on this particular couple days we were up there. So at night there was a place called the Tree Bar, which was an outside bar around a great big tree which was kind of neat, we used to stay at a hotel up there. In later years Air America built there own hostel, which we stayed there, but anyway. Francis and I were there at the bar and having a drink after work, and I’m trying to make. The guy was completely, I don’t know, void of personality I guess to say. You really couldn’t talk to him about anything. Of course I figured that he’d probably done a lot of flying in his life so maybe he wants to talk about flying. So, we’re talking, I said Francis, you must be a, let’s see what he’d say? Oh no. First of all he didn’t have any survival gear with him, and I said Francis, you need to have a survival vest with a radio. He says, “Oh, no I can’t check out one of those because if I lose that radio it’s worth like four hundred dollars, and I just can’t afford to lose that.” Well, that was really pretty far fetched, and I’d rather have the radio than, anyway, and then I said, “Well Francis how do you plan to, if we go down someplace how do you plan to survive without any survival stuff with you?” He said, “Oh, I’ve got that figured out.” And I said, “Oh, yes what’s that?” He said, “Oh, I’ll go over to the, a river like the Mekong and I’ll get myself a reed to breathe, and get underwater and breathe with my reed and follow it all the way down to civilization,” or something. Oh, man what a Looney Toon [laughter]. He had
hemorrhoids real bad, so he used to always be sticking these darn suppositories in his ass all the time. On the H-34, the pilots are up high and one day he’s got his bare ass sticking out of the window up there, putting a suppository in, and that’s all you can see. Like a guy mooning the world out there, and here comes this fuel truck, this Laotian driving it, he damn near, he’s looking at him, he damn near drives into the aircraft because it’s such a strange sight [laughter]. But anyway, the funny story with him and Ackenburg is this, he was up there training with Ackenburg and they’re in a, actually working Lima Five-Four-Two, out of Luang Prabang, and they, I guess on takeoff out of an area up there in the boonies, Dave says to Francis, “Hey watch for ground fire for us.” Well, okay you could watch, what are you’re going to do, but anyway, he said and I’ll be darned on takeoff they get shot at and they take a bullet hole back in the pylon or someplace in the aircraft. So, they’re flying on out, finally Dave says, “You know Francis, I’m kind of pissed at you.” Francis says, “Why?” He says, “Well, you know we took that round on your side of the aircraft, and I’m going to have to blame you, you know it’s going to cost me a hundred dollars as the captain, seventy-five dollars for you, and fifty dollars for the flight mechanic, because of the.” And then Francis says, “What do you mean?” You know he’s always worried about money, remember he didn’t want to, “What do you mean?” He says, “Doss never told me anything about that.” And it was “Oh yes.” He said, “It’s in the bullet hole file.” And Francis says, “What do you mean the bullet hole file?” He says, “Well, you’ve got to be cleared for that, maybe you haven’t been cleared for it, maybe you haven’t read it yet. It’s a secret bullet hole file.” He says, “When you get back you go in and see Captain Abbedee,” who was now the base manager, “and tell him you want to see the bullet hole file.” So, as soon as we get back he goes up to. Of course Abbedee’s got like a secretary out in front. He gets through her, and finally gets in to see Abbedee and Abbedee says, “Yes, what do you need?” And he says, “Well, I’d like to look at the secret bullet hole file.” And Abbedee looks at him like the tree fell out of, “What are you talking about?” So he says, “Well, I was up flying with Captain Anchorburg.” Well, that’s all he had to say, he knew right away, he sees “Get out of here.” But every other guy was that gullible. One other thing about that same guy, when you’re normally new there, you’ll get a hotel room before you get a house or an apartment, so he was living in a hotel room, but rather than buy it by the month or buy it
by the week or whatever, so it would be a lot cheaper, every time he flew he would take all of his gear, which was like a suitcase full of stuff and bring it back into the flight operations locker and put it in there and check completely out and then go back. You know, rather than just living at one place for. He thought he was saving money there, but he really wasn't because, anyway, that’s just, anyway he didn’t last. He never checked out, he was gone after a few months.

SM: Oh really? What prevented him from checking out?
BV: Being weird, seriously yes.
SM: Being weird?
BV: Yes, you can be weird and be a pilot, but this guy was too weird to be. I mean he was another frequency. He was on VHF and everybody else on UHF.
SM: Oh, that’s bizarre.
BV: Yes, he was strange.
SM: Well, you would think just the suppository issue would be enough.
BV: That was funny, and he had a little rubber tire he kept with him to sit on too all the time. He was something else.
SM: Well, what were some of the weirder guys that could make it through being check out, what were their characteristics, their more colorful characteristics?
BV: Well, there were a lot of guys like to drink and have a good time and carry on. A guy named Ted Cash, he’s still around. We were staying in Vientiane one time at a place called the Lang Syne hotel, which at that time was like the nicest hotel in Vientiane. And the Air America guys would stay up in like a various, we’d be like three or four to a room. We’d stay on the second floor. Well, Ted took his .38 pistol one time and went out there to the back, like a back porch on the upper floor of the hotel and shot at the lights above the police station, which was just down the block. The next thing you know, that was place was swarming with cops looking for whoever was shooting and everything else. I’m thinking boy, that is crazy, why would he take a chance like that.
SM: Unbelievable.
BV: Yes, I wrote a story about another guy named John Shine. This is quite a story too. He was solo with the H-34 and I was solo up at Lima 25, Ban Houei Sai and the plan was after our daily missions and everything, and there were a couple of fixed
wing pilots living there too, at the hostel there. We would go down and have a beer
together at this little bar, was just like a block away from the place we stayed, the house
there. But as it turned out I didn’t get to RON there. Tony Poole was in that area and he
called right before my last mission, said he wanted me to come up there and RON at his
location that night. And so, which I did, so I wasn't with John, so John goes down
drinking, John carried a 357 pistol on his belt and he’s sitting down there on the outside,
outside of this bar drinking by himself and he had several drinks I guess and trying to get
the bartender’s attention to come out and get another drink. Well, the bartender wasn’t
coming fast enough to suit him so he took his pistol and shot it up in there outside and
that’s a pretty loud pistol too. Man, immediately there’s police there and all the little, and
the police come over to him and tell him that they want his pistol and everything and he
wasn't going to give it to them. He starts walking back up the street towards where our
house is; he’s a big guy too. At that time he was probably 240 and 6’6, you know a big
guy and of course here’s the little Lao cops, who are probably all like 5’2 and maybe a
hundred pounds, but they all had carbines, they had guns. So, they’re trying to tell him to
stop and turn over his weapon. Well, he’s not going to do it and he walks back to the
house, and I don’t know whether he threatened them at all with the gun or anything, but
he managed to keep on going. They couldn’t stop him and he got into the house and the
other pilots were asleep in there. He hollers in the door, he says, “Hey, get your guns!
Get out here!” Well, nobody’s going to move and meanwhile the cops all kind of got a
line right across the street in the ditch and they’re all lined up there looking, with their
guns pointed toward the house and John goes inside, gets an M-16, brings it out and
along with his pistol. He cocks his pistol, sets it up on the railing on the front porch there
and then kind of crouches behind the post there with the M-16 toward the policeman.
And there’s one police man out still trying to talk to him, and then somehow John reaches
around kind of behind his back for his pistol and it goes off and he hits himself right in
the back and, luckily they air evacced him there. He lived okay. In fact I saw him at one
of our recent reunions. I saw him in Las Vegas in fact, but he got, he was gone then, I
don’t think he ever came back, I think he either got fired or, of course he was hurt pretty
bad.

SM: He’s lucky they didn’t open fire thinking he shot the gun.
BV: Yes, sure could have opened fire and that old wooden house they were in, they could have opened fire right into that thing, because they couldn’t understand what he was talking about, other than he was big and intimidating and had a gun, a couple guns. Yes. He was just; it was just a dumb move, but anyway.

SM: Were most of the silly things like that that happened, was alcohol typically involved?

BV: Probably, yes, in most cases. There was this guy, same guy, Ted Cash I talked about. He had a wife, has a wife named Cathy who back in those days was kind of a party gal herself and she used to, you know the Air Force guys that were stationed over like in Udorn and Thailand, unaccompanied of course, a lot of them had girlfriends there and they would get these party suits on, which was actually a flight suit with all kinds of stuff on it that they would give to these gals that they wear to parties. Well, Cathy also had a party suit, and I don’t know whether Ted got it for her or whether she bought it but anyway, she had one and she used to wear it around, like she was like a party girl. Of course she wasn’t Thai so obviously she could attract attention of the American GIs that were there because there aren’t very many round eyes as we call them, gals like that, American gals. So whether or not she had a boyfriend or not I don’t know, but Ted thought she did. So, one night, there’s a hotel up in Udorn called the Charron Hotel, which was a nice hotel, like about ten stories and had a swimming pool and it was a new hotel and there was a restaurant that a lot of us went to in that hotel. And Ted and Cathy are walking out of the hotel one night and apparently an airman or an Air Force guy that he thought was seeing Cathy met them at the door, and Ted was an ex-Marine, pretty tough looking guy. Anyway, he went ahead and punched him and punched him right through the door, right through the glass door of the hotel there. Obviously it wasn’t a real heavy glass door but it pushed him through it, just blap, anyway.

SM: So, did he ever discover whether this really was?

BV: I don’t know. Everybody suspected that she was probably running around, but I don’t know. But anyway, you know another guy over there who’s also dead I’m afraid, his name was Elmer Monzel, ever hear of his name?

SM: No, sir.
BV: Well, Elmer had one of these Austin Princess cars, you know what that is, like a Rolls Royce.

SM: Yes, sir.

BV: And it was neat because when you’d drive it around, people would think you were like the Queen or the King of Thailand, to ride in the back seat of that and he’d ride around town. Well, the town of Udorn which was pretty much dirt roads had these circles, you know like they do over in Europe, you know these traffic circles. And then sanlaws are little pedal vehicles, you know like a little pedicab where a sanlaw driver takes people for rides in them. This sanlaw was in front of his Austin Princess one night. Elmer had a drinking problem too, he was all tanked and the sanlaw wouldn’t get out of the way so he started pushing it with his Austin, and the guy’s going twenty miles an hour, going along, that was a, a lot of funny things, a lot of good times, a lot of good trips. I don’t know really what else to tell you about Air America.

SM: Right. Well, let’s see here. This will end the interview with Mr. Ben Van Etten on the 22nd of January.