Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m doing an oral history interview with Mr. Anthony Borra. Today is March 25, 2003. The time is 8:50 am Central Standard Time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library interview room and Mr. Borra is in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Sir, lets start with some biographical information about yourself if we could. Tell me a little bit about your childhood, where you were born, when you were born and kind of where you grew up.

Anthony Borra: I was born and raised in New York City, Queens in particular; specifics. 1940, August of 1940 and spent my entire childhood through college in essentially the same area of Queens near the 59th Street Bridge.

RV: So you’re a native New Yorker. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

AB: I had one younger sister. She’s five years younger than me.

RV: Okay. What did your parents do?

AB: Dad was blue collar. My father was born in Italy and came to this country as a young child. My mother was first generation born in the United States, also of Italian parentage. They grew up in Manhattan in the essentially Italian ghettos. Dad worked.

Neither of them finished high school and Dad worked, for most of my childhood, Dad worked for a manufacturing company, and Mother often worked outside the house in order to supplement Dad’s income.
RV: Did they push you into school and making sure you were in school and emphasizing education to you?

AB: Yes. I was just talking with my son about that recently. They wanted my life to be better than theirs as was typical of that generation, and is probably typical of most generations. It’s harder these days. But because they had not completed much schooling, they certainly encouraged education, and I think they would have been happy if I had just vocational training just as long as I had skills. I did well in school and was able to do more than that. And the New York City school system offered lots of opportunity down many paths both vocationally and towards higher education.

RV: What kind of student were you?

AB: I always had an interest in engineering. I liked working with my hands and had an interest in visual art and that seemed to work. Both worked well as a supplement to engineering studies. I was in a very small grammar school which is hard to understand in New York City, but there were only four classes in a grade, so when I graduated there were three, my class and three others graduating at the same time. They were not large classes. Probably less than 30 students. New York City has a number of particularly good high schools that you can compete for scholastically. They have entrance exams and they look at school records and I was able to, I gained admission to Brooklyn Technical High School, which was an engineering college preparatory school.

RV: Where did your interest in working with your hands and the engineering bent to your intellectual activity, where did that come from?

AB: I think mostly my grandfather and some of my uncles because that was not my dad’s forte. I always had an interest in model airplanes and in high school, model rocketry. It evolved. My uncles, one uncle in particular and my grandfather were always building something or repairing something, and I just always enjoyed that same activity with them.

RV: Did you guys speak Italian in your home?

AB: No. We did not. My dad was insistent on being immersed in the American culture. Actually, he forbade that.

RV: He forbade, really?
AB: Yeah. He was chastised by my high school teachers for not affording me the
opportunity for language exposure. They never spoke Italian in the house. My
grandparents would and my mother would speak with them and sometimes her siblings,
but never to the children. So I never learned any Italian other than probably no more than
any of my Irish friends.

RV: Did your grandparents come over later from Italy?

AB: No. Actually, on my mother’s side, my grandfather came from Italy as a
teenager on his own to make his way in America. As he worked and of course, like so
many of the immigrants worked very hard and diligently as many Mexican immigrants
do today, sending money back home and eventually bringing his parents. I guess he
brought his brothers first and then they eventually brought the parents. My father’s
mother left with him as a child. He was about three years old. She just came to America
to make a new life for herself and she remarried eventually in New York also.

RV: What was it like in Queens growing up? Tell me about that.

AB: Well, it was an ethnic neighborhood but it was a mix. It was all families, a
lot, all multi family housing. Like the house that I grew up in, which was actually
grandparents’. My grandfather, although he never had education, he was successful in a
blue-collar way so he bought a home. We lived in one of the--it was a three family home,
and we lived in one of the apartments. That was typical of all my friends. There were
some six and maybe a dozen or more families in some of the larger buildings but most of
them were homes that were just multi-story not untypical of New York. There weren't
many single-family residents. There were some. We were a mix of Italian, Irish, German,
a smattering of Polish, and so that group was all Christian, mostly Catholic. And then we
had Jewish families mixed in the same neighborhood. Many of the merchants were
Jewish, but not all. Many were of other ethnic groups. And then we had a small number
of Oriental families, and later we had some influx of Puerto Rican immigrants started
coming to New York City.

RV: Wow. A true melting pot it sounds like.

AB: Yeah. It really was and yet this was in a, you wouldn’t qualify it as suburban
in the type of environment we mostly live in now. But it would have been in essentially a
suburb because it wasn’t Manhattan. This was almost all residential and small retail. Of
small, some construction businesses and some small manufacturing and that’s what my
father was in.

RV: Okay. Did you associate with all these groups like when you were on the
streets playing with the kids and everything?

AB: Oh, absolutely. Yes, you always played on the street for the most part. I’ll
tell you a little bit. I had an exception to that. But we mostly played on the street. We
played stickball and games like stickball and we roller skated in the street and played
softball up at, you know, I guess it was called sandlot ball. But none of it was organized. I
never played any organized sports except in high school but that was all intramural, not
varsity.

RV: Excuse me. Did you follow like the Yankees or the Mets or the Giants?

AB: I was never a sports fan, and I always was a token Yankees fan because they
were winners I guess. But I never really had. I mean some of my friends were passionate
and of course baseball card trading. During the Korean War I collected trading cards but
they were all of Air Force airplanes, that sort of thing. My grandfather being Italian, most
of the Italians were avid gardeners and we always, even though we were in Queens, we
had an area behind our house that was fenced and ours, and Granddad had built what we
used to call a shack. It was like a tool shed that eventually became my hobby shop and
my hobby center. And I built my model airplanes out there and he built himself a new
building. But I always had a place off the street to play and that was really, for me, very
auspicious I think, because it led to my hobby pursuits.

RV: Tell me, did any of your family members serve in World War I, World War
II?

AB: I had my grandfather’s brother. So that would be like a great uncle, served in
World War I. He, in fact, had been caught in one of the gas attacks, and he had lingering
respiratory problems especially as he got older they bothered him. My favorite uncle who
also was the one that worked like my grandfather with his hands and crafted a lot of
projects, he served in World War II and in Italy and he was at the landings at Salerno. He
had some evidently harrowing ordeals. And it seemed that my mother and her sisters
always exclaimed that he was never the same when he came back from the war. I don’t
know that. Uncle- his name was Joe- and I called him Uncle Joey. Uncle Joey was a
wonderful man and he had his withdrawn moments, and I only later as an adult can reflect back on that and think of what perhaps demons for him ran through his mind.

RV: Did you ever talk to him later in life?

AB: No. You know he wouldn’t. No. He rarely, and I just talked to one of his brothers, another sort of favorite uncle, the only one surviving in fact, who said that—and they were close brothers- that Joey never much talked about the war. Occasionally, at a wedding or something after he’d had a few libations, he might reminisce on some of the fun parts, you know, like being a soldier liberating a town and the warm reception he got from the Italians. But only on things like that.

RV: Where did your love for model airplanes and flying come from?

AB: I don’t know. I really don’t. I’ve thought about that because my son has asked. I really don’t know. I just was always fascinated by airplanes. And dad was good. He’d take me sometimes after work he’d take me to the large railroad switching yards in Queens, and we’d go and stand on like a viaduct that ran over the yard and watch the trains. I just was always taken with machinery, and my uncles seemed to have a demonstrated love of automobiles. And I liked bicycles and I liked mechanical things and airplanes seemed to be the ultimate mechanical thing. When I went to high school, I was able to actually pick a major, and I chose aeronautical engineering so that sort of reinforced that.

RV: How was high school for you? What do you remember about that?

AB: Just a wonderfully innocent time. I always enjoyed and I still enjoy learning. And high school, Brooklyn Tech was a challenging school. You could do a lot there, and we had workshops that during World War II as I understand and maybe even, I don’t know about Korea, they made components there for the Norden bomb site and we had a complete foundry in the school. We had an electric furnace. We did pattern making and mold making. The school emphasized the practical side of engineering and the theoretical, so we did. And it’s still a school of reputation with I think, today, a great emphasis on the information technologies and science. But we studied aeronautical theory in class but then we also went to a shop where we disassembled, I remember disassembling a Ranger 6 cylinder engine, which was used pre-World War II, and I guess maybe in the early war as a trainer aircraft. But we had machine shops and you as a
student got to operate equipment in there including lathes and milling machines and so
forth. And we did sheet metal and then we did the physics labs and the chemistry labs. So
it was a really well rounded school with a big emphasis on sports and again, I was a non-
sports person, but you had to participate in what we called gym and there was big
emphasis on the competitive sports like the horse and the parallel bars and the high bar
and you just did all of those. So their objective was to prepare you for college with a
well-rounded experience.

RV: It sounds like you certainly had that.

AB: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. My recollection is wonderful. A wonderful staff
of teachers, very proud of their students and very supportive and dedicated. They really
were a great bunch.

RV: What do you remember about the Korean War? What are your memories of
that?

AB: You know, I don’t remember much. I had one, when I was a young teenager,
I had a young girl my age who I had a crush on, as you would say these days. Back then
we would say it was a crush. I don’t know what you call it now.

RV: I think it’s called the same thing. I’m not sure.

AB: But her brother was a B-29 tail gunner and so I remember, I didn’t know
many other than he, that were in the war. We always held him in some high place in our
hearts and our imagination, a young airman. And I collected the trading cards and of
course I remember just always perusing looking for stories about the dogfights because
that was what, you know both the aviation interest on my part and also it got a lot of
press.

RV: Right. This was, you were in high school in the late ‘50s, is that right?

AB: I was in high school from ’54 to ’58.

RV: And when you graduated in ’58, did you have your sights set on going to
college or what?

AB: Yes. Brooklyn Tech as we called it, everybody, mostly everybody- I don’t
know what the percentage was- but it seemed like most everybody went on to college.
Tech graduates have achieved a lot in the world as far as I can keep up with through the
alumni news. It’s a school that just was inspiring. It really is interesting. And it was an all boys’ school back then.

RV: Let me ask you a couple of questions about some other general things. Tell me what it was like to grow up Italian American. There’s been a lot of study about, obviously growing up, different ethnic groups coming over to the United States making a way for themselves like your grandparents and parents did. What was it like growing up Italian- American?

AB: Very patriotic. A lot of emphasis, family, family, family. We held on to a lot of tradition, so holiday meals were always taken in community. We spent time as an extended family all the time. So different from the life I live now in the suburbs. So you had your apartment, but even those of the siblings who didn’t live in the house and my grandparents lived there, we lived there and eventually one other aunt and her family lived on the third apartment. For a while it was rented to a Greek family. That was the other group that was there, the Greeks. But every night it seemed like if the weather was decent, we always visited on what’s called the stoop, which is the steps of the house and we had a small, very small little patio area even though it was right off the sidewalk. And neighbors would come by and of course you never could do anything as I always remind my son. Some neighbor was always watching you and threatening to tell your parents if you did anything. So you had aunts and uncles and then you had all your friends’ parents. So people just visited. The street was just an active neighborhood and all the shop keepers, everybody was there forever it seemed like, until my generation grew up and we all moved away. So if you went to any retail establishment, you knew the owner, you knew the people that worked there. They knew you. You were forever being greeted or called after by someone. It was a very embracing community, very nurturing.

RV: It sounds like it. Have you seen the movie, *A Bronx Tale*?

AB: No.

RV: I was just asking because it’s a DeNiro film and he actually directed that.

AB: He would have insight.

RV: You’re describing, I’m picturing street scenes from this where the kids would go around and all the adults knew them and all the shopkeepers knew who everybody was, and it seemed like kind of a large block family almost.
AB: Exactly. It’s called A Bronx Film?
RV: *A Bronx Tale.*
AB: *A Bronx Tale.* I’ll have to look for that. Thank you.
RV: It’s quite a good movie. But moving on with your stuff.
AB: I could talk about that nostalgically now. I understand why old people never shut up.
RV: I can actually, as an Italian-American myself, I can talk to you about that a lot but we can move on. Tell me about your decision to go to college and how that happened.
AB: Well, it was never a conscious decision. It was just, that’s what everybody did. I mean, all your teachers; they never asked you if you were going to college. They just always talked to you as though you were going to college. And the big question was where. My fond hope and the first time in my life that I faced- failure’s not really appropriate- but I didn’t achieve my objective because I applied to Cornell University, was accepted, which I can still remember that day and I was so elated and everything hinged on getting a Naval ROTC scholarship, which was one of the few scholarships other than something probably like National Merit. And although I was a good student, I didn’t have an expectation that I would be at that level and I didn’t get a national scholarship. I passed the academic hurdles that the exams and so forth and whatever documents you had to submit for the Navy scholarship and so I was really riding on a high horse at that point. And then I had to go take the physical and I didn’t pass the eye exam. I can still remember the tears just welling up in my eyes. I just couldn’t believe that there was anything that was going to prevent that. So anyway, I did not get to attend Cornell because it was just too expensive a school and it was a five-year curriculum. And I did get a scholarship to a smaller school called Manhattan College in New York City. And so I studied engineering there and they didn’t offer aeronautical, and so I went with mechanical. Everybody just expected you were going to go on to college so you just applied and did.
RV: Were you the first in your family to go to college?
AB: Yeah. Actually, I have a, let’s see, he’s a cousin who’s older than I am who actually attended New York, its not New York University in the city but it’s the New
York University in upstate and he became a schoolteacher. So I was one of two that went
to college.

RV: Did you join ROTC at Manhattan?

AB: Yes. I didn’t have any expectation. I was in civil air patrol when I was in
high school and I liked that.

RV: What was that? What did you do there?

AB: Not much, unfortunately. We got one airplane ride and it was not a good
experience. It seemed like the adults that were there were frustrated because they hadn’t
been in the military or hadn’t been able to be in the military, so they seemed to take
pleasure in lording over kids. And we picked up on that pretty quick, and eventually I
quit because we were doing busy stuff. We weren't really doing aviation stuff, and I was
disappointed. So I quit that and then when I was, I guess in the summer just before the
start of college, I received a post card in the mail that said, “Do you want to go to gym or
do you want to go to ROTC?” I had had enough of gym so I thought, “ROTC, what the
heck. I’ll give that a try,” because I didn’t expect to really fly. The brochure they sent
talked about the possibility of doing engineering work in the Air Force and then all the
sudden that started to become interesting or interest me. So I pursued ROTC and I’ll tell
you how I got into aviation later.

RV: Okay. What kind of student were you academically?

AB: Well, I started out having too good a time and had to go talk with the Dean
and he got my attention, and by junior and senior year I was back to about a 3.0.

RV: I want to ask about joining the Air Force ROTC versus the other branches.

AB: They only offered Air Force at Manhattan, which was fortunate for me. I
think I wanted to be a Marine at one point when I was younger student, and I had a
neighbor who had been a Marine, I have great admiration for Marines. But he told me
that you have to be half crazy to be a Marine. He said, “You go to the Air Force or
Navy.” He said, “Stay away from the Army.” He was somebody that I had great respect
for. He was older than I. He was the son of German immigrants and I really loved his
parents, so I respected him.

RV: So you joined up the Air Force?

AB: Air Force ROTC.
RV: Tell me what that experience was like for you.

AB: Well, again, it was sort of disappointing in freshman and sophomore year because the emphasis was on drill, just marching and marching and marching. I didn’t understand. We did some air power history but I don’t know. It wasn’t a particularly airplane oriented, and I was disappointed but we had good staff and almost all of the folks were veterans and the colonel in charge and the lieutenant colonel, I think he had a lieutenant colonel on the staff. They were really decorated guys. And I really came to understand what they had done.

RV: Did they talk to you about their experiences?

AB: Well, the lieutenant colonel, he may have been a major but I think he was an LC; he had actually joined. I was just talking to my father-in-law about this yesterday. It was funny. He was a World War II B-26 pilot. He, the major or lieutenant colonel, he was too young to join the United States Air Force or the U.S. Army Air Corps at that time, and so he went to Canada and he was flight trained and I assume got a commission. I don’t know. They may have had flying sergeants back then. And he flew in Europe with Canadian uniform and wings until the United States entered the war. That was the other thing. I guess we weren't in the war initially so he went early on. Maybe it wasn’t his age, it was just that he wanted to be there, and then when the United States joined the war. And so he wore both Canadian wings and U.S. Air Force wings, and I was always really struck by that. He just carried himself with a bearing that just sort of called for your attention. So we liked him a lot. He was real; he was an inspiring guy.

RV: It sounds like he played a role in your life there.

AB: Yeah. He did. And both he and the colonel went to graduate school at night, and that was also impressive. They had finished their formal education and then here they were taking a graduate course, and they both got a graduate degree before they left the school. So that was also sort of a very positive role model.

RV: Did you do your basic training during one of those summers?

AB: Yes. The program is probably different now but what we did was you got commissioned right out of college, and the only requirement was that you did four weeks. Maybe it was only three. I don’t recall now. You went to summer camp between, I guess it was between, I don’t remember now whether it was between sophomore and junior
year or junior and senior year. A group of us went to Lockbourne Air Force Base, which
is now, I think named after Grissom. I think its Grissom Air Force Base. I think its been
renamed. And that was more of, we did survival training, and that was fun and
challenging and it was just a basic introduction. We were given some flights on the
tankers there. So we got to fly on the tankers and refuel B-52s and that was neat. I think
we got a T-33 trainer ride. And I was hooked.

RV: Tell me about the first time you ever flew. I assume this was when you were
younger, much younger.

AB: Well, the first time I flew was after I was commissioned. I don’t know. I
never thought to do that in New York City. Again, I don’t know why. You know, the kids
that were in ROTC and destined for pilot training got to go to a flight school. I mean, I
didn’t have much money. My parents didn’t have much money and I always worked, but
it was to pay my school bills and other expenses. And you know, I mean that’s probably
an excuse because if I really, really wanted to fly, I’m sure I could have somehow. But I
didn’t.

RV: What kind of jobs did you work?

AB: Just grocery store clerk and supermarket checking. During the summers I
was lucky. I had two summers I worked for Grumman Aircraft in, just in production. It
was sort of like if you were an engineering student, they wanted you to have some
production experience. Those were really wonderful jobs, and the other jobs were, I
worked for a company as a draftsman. They designed aircraft fluid measuring systems.
So like fuel quantity or oil quantity, and I got to work in the drafting room and it was
somewhat interesting. It would have been more interesting work say in production or the
lab. They were just mostly jobs to help pay school bills and you know, just contribute to
the family. But they weren't other than the Grumman jobs, they were not necessarily
career related. Working for the other company called Liquidometer was somewhat.

Where were we going? I got lost here.

RV: Tell me how your parents felt about you being in the military.

AB: I’m sorry. You asked me about flying.

RV: Yes, sir.
AB: After I got commissioned. I was at Kessler Air Force Base because I got commissioned and assigned to Air Force specialty code, AFFC as a communication maintenance officer.

RV: This is in ’62?

AB: ’62. So I was at Kessler, which that was an interesting experience going from New York City to Biloxi, Mississippi in 1962.

RV: I can imagine. I can totally imagine.

AB: The first thing I read was the book, *Black Like Me* to try to understand what I was seeing.

RV: Did you read that on your own volition?

AB: Yeah I did. Well, I always had an issue with my dad who did demonstrate prejudice towards Jews and Blacks. And I didn’t understand that because sometimes I had some pretty hot conversations with my dad about, “You came over from The Old Country and you know what it was like to be called a dago and a wop. How could you feel prejudice towards others?” That never got resolved so to speak, but I didn’t understand why that was so. I don’t know where that came from. I always had, I always had contact with other groups. I didn’t have many black, colored friends as we called them back then. I had some in school but not many. And you know, when I think back even then, we sort of lived in separate neighborhoods. But we mingled much more like I do now than that sort of really awkward period we went through as I experienced when I was in the South. But I was not unaware that there was racial prejudice. I don’t know how we go here from flying again. I was going to Biloxi, Mississippi. Okay. So that was just a shocking eye-opener.

RV: What do you remember? What did you see down there?

AB: Of course, I really was struck by the segregated facilities. I mean to go into a Sears-Roebuck and see a colored water fountain. To see two benches on the street, one for colored and one for white for the bus. To see a separate side entrance at the movie theater for colored. And when I was in Biloxi, you know, the only time you saw a person of color was if they were the yard person. I lived in a duplex off base. I was married. The folks that owned the house lived on the other side, Doc and Betsy Sellers and they had a handyman that came, an older Black gentleman. And they went to pain and length to try
to impress on us that they didn’t think any less of, and I forget the gentleman’s name, Mr.
So-and-So because they used to even let him eat with them. Of course, he had to sit on a
stool and eat at a sink and they ate at the table. And he had a special glass and that was
kept separate from you know everything else, I guess with the china too. All that just
struck my young mind. I was fairly idealistic, I guess. It just struck me. How could they
say one thing and not see what they were doing? And then just to see the overt racism,
and then as I reflected, I realized how much of it had been there in New York City, but it
had been covert is the word, and not talked about. One of my mother’s sisters was
married to an American Jew, and so the family had to dance around that. I know that was
an issue at times. And my cousin, their son, who I grew up with, Ronny, eventually
married into a Jewish community and is Jewish now by religion, his choice. And we
always had to dance around that, but Ronny and I were fine. I didn’t know Ronny any
differently because he was Jewish and the school that I went to, it seemed that we always
had a large number of Jewish students who were very, very good students and that’s how
I knew them. One of my best, and I really mean this, one of my good friends in high
school was Chinese, Ray Chin. It was more of, you had more interaction with people.
Ray and I used to swap lunches sometimes so he could eat what my mother sent and I’d
eat what his mother sent. He’d always do that when she sent a sandwich that had lots of
that hot Chinese mustard in it.

RV: So when you were down in Biloxi, you brought your experiences with you
and it was a very different world. What did it make you feel about the United States in
general?

AB: That’s a good question.

RV: Such diverse things.

AB: It was, it was embarrassing. I know I felt that.

RV: Were there any Black people in your unit?

AB: Oh no. Hell, no. (chuckles) No. I don’t recall. You know, I never saw a
commissioned, another lieutenant Black until I got to the radar site in California where I
first was stationed. I’ll tell you about that later, but I remember it was real obvious how
uncomfortable he was. Anyway.

RV: You felt embarrassed you said.
AB: Yeah. Embarrassed and confused. Yeah. Embarrassed and confused I think would be appropriate words.

RV: Okay. Do you think that people today have a sense of the diverse culture that the United States had back then in the ‘50s and ‘60s during the time of segregation?

AB: You know, I look at my own son. His mother is Greek-American. I’m Italian-American. His wife is essentially German American. I don’t think -Tony, our son is law enforcement, and I think Tony is aware of the race issue only. I don’t know that he ever thinks of people by any ethnicity. Because I think all of his friends were all of mixed lineage. While we try to hold on to some traditions without the bigger family around, he doesn’t do much of that. So I think he’s just immersed in Americana. But unfortunately there, in law enforcement, he’s in an area of Florida where there’s still a lot of racial prejudice, and there’s not, in his community which is St. Augustine, Florida, there’s not an evident Black middle class as there is here in Stone Mountain. I mean, we live in an upper middle class racially integrated neighborhood. And we dine in our neighbors’ homes and we party together and we go out together. And Tony comes here and he’s always amazed at that. He comes to a dinner party here. We may be along with him and his wife, the only white people there. And these are all, all our neighbors are all professionals. So for him, when he comes here it’s that experience and when he goes back to St. Augustine, all he sees unfortunately in the Black community is poverty and the drug use is in the community as a whole but it also, he tends to, I don’t know he tends to see it in the Black community because, I don’t know why that is. His view is, he struggles with that, I think. He doesn’t see ethnicity but I think he does see racial difference.

RV: Do you think you had an advantage coming from New York City, such a diverse populace and then going down to the South and having to adapt to their ways?

AB: You know, I think I did but I don’t know that all of my friends did. Some of the Italian-American families, there was terrible racial prejudice and ethnic prejudice. There was lots of you know, some of my friend’s parents didn’t like Germans. They had all of those awful slur names that they had for each group. They were dagos and wops and they were kikes and they were chinks. I mean, all those awful words that people threw around. And the Irish always were considered to be drunkards. And I didn’t see it
that way, but I can only speak for myself. I think some of my friends carried off some of
those prejudices and others like myself didn’t. I don’t know, we can have a whole oral
history about why people feel those jealousies is what I see them as. I don’t know why
people feel embittered towards people they don’t even know.

RV: That sounds like its kind of personality driven.

AB: Somehow, yeah.

RV: How did your parents feel about you being in the military?

AB: They were extremely proud. Extremely proud. We never finished up how I
got flying lessons.

RV: Exactly. Let’s finish that. Go ahead.

AB: So, when I was at Biloxi, they had an aero club like they do at most Air
Force bases, and for, heck, it was like $5 a ride and I don’t know you paid the instructor
maybe another five. For the first time I had a little bit of extra money and I was getting
per diem down there to live off base. So I took flying lessons from an old guy who had an
Italian name. I think he was, there were a lot of Italian-Americans that lived in New
Orleans. Anyway, his name was Antonio Grande and it so happens that we have family
connection to the Grandes. And not that that really mattered. But I wound up taking
lessons with him. And he was just a wonderful charming old guy. And so I took lessons
all through solo and cross-country almost up to the point of getting my license. Then I
finished up my schooling and I had to go to my duty assignment. And I was at radar site,
and we didn’t have an aero club at the radar site, so I never got to finish up. Then I just
put that aside and got involved in other things until I applied for and was accepted to pilot
training.

RV: Tell me about your training there at Kessler. You were a communications
maintenance officer. Is that correct?

AB: Back then there weren't any computers. There certainly wasn’t any wireless.
We didn’t even have fax. That was something that was coming, a marvel on the horizon.
So we had Teletype, we still had switchboards at the radar site. We were just going to
automated switching so they were still using operators and pulling cords and plugging
them in. And we were just getting into the transistor age, and so we studied, the Air Force
takes square pegs and beats them until they fit into round holes. I was supposed to be a
mechanical engineer and here I was learning about electronic technology, which was fine. And we learned about Air Force communication networks, radio and landlines and telephones, which were of course all mechanical back then. I don’t know that we learned much management theory. It was mostly to give us a background in the equipment we would see in the field, all the AN equipment. And I assume that’s Army Navy. I don’t know. It’s a World War II designation. All the equipment was still painted brown, and so we learned just some general introduction to the equipment itself.

RV: How long did that training last in Biloxi?
AB: Essentially three months.
RV: Okay. And from there you said you went to California to a radar site?
AB: Right. I was assigned to a radar site on the Santa Cruz Mountain Range.
RV: Was this in ’62 as well?
AB: Yeah. ’62. Actually by the time I got there, the Air Force for some reason, sent me all the way to the radar site first so I went out there in July of ’62, then drove back across country, which was a wonderful experience, two lane road back then, Route 66 and all that; two lane road back to Biloxi. That was interesting driving through the South. And then I did the schooling and went back to the radar site. So I was probably back there for the holidays of ’62. Then I was there for about the first few years of my career.
RV: Until about ’65.
AB: Yeah because I was in a AFSC that was called a critical specialty so I couldn’t get released for pilot training until I finished my commitment.
RV: Tell me what you remember about the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Fall of ’62.
AB: Well, yes. We were at the school and all of the sudden (interrupted by click and beep from phone)- are you there?
RV: Yes, sir.
AB: Yeah. This headset… sorry. The cryptography center was under armed guard. I’m going to take a drink of water, just a second. Do you need to do that?
RV: I have been actually. Okay, go ahead.
AB: So, it was really peripheral. It didn’t affect us much. We didn’t have to do very much. I remember being intrigued with the aircraft reconnaissance operation that was going on. I think we lost an F-101 and then we lost a U-2. And when I got back to the radar site though because it was still ongoing I think. Do you have some dates in front of you?

RV: This was in October ’62.

AB: How long did it go on?

RV: 14 days, 13 days actually.

AB: I don’t know now why I remember we went to an increased DEFCON at the radar site. I don’t know what the heck that was about. I was so immersed in all that was going on in my life and school and everything else, and I was taking some outside classes in television technology just because I had the opportunity at night. I was busy. I was relatively unaware of how serious it was, I think. I don’t know that I had much of a big world perspective at that point in my life. I was maybe what you’d say a typical engineer. I was more focused on equipment and things like that. I wasn’t really into politics then. While I was aware of the racial thing, I didn’t become involved in any civil rights issues. I was really immersed in my life and had probably pretty tunnel vision at that point.

RV: That’s one thing I was going to ask you is when did you kind of get a larger context view of what the United States was doing in Southeast Asia in the initial stages of the conflict?

AB: Yes. We can talk about that when we get there. But that was a real change of heart for me.

RV: Tell me about your duties in Santa Cruz. What did you do?

AB: Well, here I was a brand-new brown bar lieutenant at a radar site where when I first got there, we were mostly an automated site. We were just going back to what’s called BUIC, B-U-I-C, Back up Intercept Control. So that was just coming back in. They had gone to an Air Defense command. Boy, we could talk about this for hours and hours. Air Defense Command had gone into this sort of remoted operation. So at the radar site we provided radar height and range information, two different pieces of equipment, very high powered radar equipment was sent back on land line, which wasn’t even secure. That startled me on, “What the heck are we doing?” sort of questioning. We sent that
information to, it was supposed to be a center in San Francisco, and maybe for budget reasons they closed that and so we sent it to Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Air Defense Sector lab. And they had controllers there, and it was supposed to be this rather automated equipment and then they would send the intercept information back to us on land line and this was my primary responsibility, we had a, what they call a GATR, Ground to Air Transmitter Receiver Site. So we had both voice radio and this new fangled transistorized equipment that sent digital or path data to the interceptors and these were F-102s and F-106s. F-106s had a notorious reputation. They spent so much time on the ground for maintenance problems because the airplane was extremely high performance aerodynamic and high Gs and so forth, and it was still [electronic vacuum] tube technology. So the equipment evidently was not compatible with the performance of the aircraft and so the equipment would always break down and so the airplanes were mostly grounded and so there was this threat that they were going to paint them yellow like the rest of the ground equipment at the airplane. So as I got to the site, my job was to supervise the telecommunications center, which was Teletype and this, you know, switchboard operation and that was where we did our cryptography. So I was the Crypto officer. And I was a staff officer to a lieutenant colonel. I worked, actually, under a major who was the, he was the radar so he was the electronics officer. I worked actually for him and then through him to the colonel, but I had some staff responsibilities to the colonel and I also managed all the enlisted people that were at this GATOR site. So we had round-the-clock maintenance technicians. Very, very bright enlisted people, terribly underpaid. And that was one of my first real issues with the way the Air Force was run at that point with the promotion system. So my duties were to supervise those people and so I was going to say, here I was, 22 years old and I was counseling sergeants on their financial responsibility to their families, helping develop a supply inventory system for spare parts. It was really interesting until I started thinking about the bigger picture, and then I was starting to have my first confusions about the way the world worked. It was really, really challenging just being responsible for I guess initially about 75 people including, you know, I mean I had tech and master sergeants that worked for me. I never failed to understand [appreciate] their age perspective, their experience, and take their counsel. But I still had to sign the papers and make the decisions. At some point you
realize that’s what you have to do. And you know, you do that and give them all the
respect they deserve and take their counsel seriously and never abuse that. I was broken
in by a chief master sergeant, Steven Kish who, I overhead him say when I wasn’t
supposed to hear him saying he was wet nursing again. He used to refer to himself as a
“titless WAF” [women of the Air Force] because he had these administrative
responsibilities. But I couldn’t have done my job without Steve and I always let him
know that.

RV: How were you as a leader?
AB: I did what I had to do. I don’t know, you just, I think for most of us, you just
do the job. One of the things I really enjoyed about the Air Force experience, you know
you just get thrown in. I didn’t have the experience these people had. I didn’t have the
age my NCOs did, and yet I was the one that was responsible and at some point you just
do the job and I have just always tried to do it in a way that I respected the people that
reported to me. I still had to write their performance reports. , I mean, I didn’t write Steve
Kish’s. The major did. I think that would have been really an insult to him. I think the
major also wrote the, I essentially wrote the report, but he was the signer even for the
master sergeants, and that only seemed proper. I did write the reports on tech sergeants,
which are E-6s rank. You know, but that’s what I had to do and that’s what I did.

RV: Tell me about the technology there. This is kind of part of the infancy stage
of some this. What was your impression there of the technology?
AB: Well, the new stuff was, you know it wasn’t brown, first of all. It was gray,
and it was interesting equipment. I worked with the, we were also putting in a new
telephone network with AT&T which eventually became, it’s still in use, and I can't think
of the name of it right now, but we had a, I have a pair of golden retrievers here and
they’re needing a break.

RV: Do you want to take a break?
AB: Yeah. Maybe we could do that.
RV: Okay. Go ahead.
AB: I was just saying that encouragement I think is an important factor in how we
get to be the people we are. And I think in my family, and the environment I grew up in,
being able to work with your hands was something that was valued. The people you grow
up holding in admiration. So you know like I said, my grandfather and one uncle particularly important role models to me, and some neighbors. They all did with their hands. So part of it is I think we emulate and attempt to emulate the adults. That’s why kids also suffer in the other direction is because the role models are not there or they're so negative, and so you emulate what you grew up with. I think family is so important in that respect. Then of course the values that are held up in the home. And you know, on the racial and the ethnic prejudices, I think it’s the gossip that gets talked about. I think I struggled more with a sense of anti-Semitism for a long time myself because that was talked about in the family, and I’ve never understood whether that’s from jealousy or what’s there. Stereotypes are so damaging. But in my family, other than some occasional comments by my father that I recall and I think I recall them because I was sorry to hear my father say that. I don’t know that he was, you know Dad was not a terrible racist by any means. But there weren't many Blacks in our area, so they didn’t get talked about. Then when the Puerto Ricans started immigrating, that was talked about and that got negative press. Again, I know you can never speak for, you can't be inductive, you can't go from the specific to the general for why things are so, but I think those were some of the things that were so for me just to finish that out.

RV: You said you were reflecting upon that during our break.

AB: Yeah, while I was out walking, letting the dogs stroll around. I’m sitting out now on the deck in the sun because its so beautiful.

RV: I can hear your wind chimes. Let’s continue talking about your duty in California. We’ve talked about your leadership qualities, and we were talking about some of the equipment and the technology and that’s where we had left off.

AB: You were asking about what it was like to be in this, I guess the supervisor or deal with what responsibilities we were given. I mean, you had to answer to the colonel and he was looking for, when you went to the staff briefing, you’re the one that had to address why this was so and why that was so and why this airman was in trouble or. So when, you know, you went back to your section, you just dealt with what had to be dealt with, because that was what was getting attention somewhere else. You also rely on the other young lieutenants and sort of pool some strength from them, pull some strength from them. I had a young captain that was a Westpointer who took an Air Force
commission, and he was a real mentor. And so you got some guidance from them. You had to deal with what was on your plate and in your inbox so you just, you just did. And you learned to do that. You might, and I had a couple of enlisted people who would test you, so to speak, but most of them were wonderfully professional people, and they were trying to do their job and they understood that you could facilitate them doing their job by, they gave you the information and their support. Then I could do my job, make sure they had the equipment, help them deal with their personnel problems they had, and so you had a symbiotic relationship with them. And the ones that were successful understood about rank and just didn’t make that an issue. They treated you with the decorum that the military required, and I think as long as, if you let them sense that you were in their corner pulling with them and not arrogant about your role, as I remember saying to one sergeant, “You know, I put my pants on just the same way you do. I just have my job that I have to do and you have your job. We work together as a team.” Most of the good guys, they understood that you had to do your role as the officer and they were great about it. They made it easy. Most guys didn’t test you or push that issue.

RV: Did you find that true throughout your career?

AB: Yes. I mean, that was true even to the airline. I might have just as much experience as the captain when I was the first officer of something. In some cases, you might even be older than the captain. But, he was the one that signed for the airplane and that was true out on the line. I mean, I had an instructor when I was in pilot training who was a second lieutenant and I was a first lieutenant. But John was just doing his job and his job was to be the instructor and my job was to be the student. That was perfectly fine.

RV: You said that during your time in California is when you kind of started to get a bigger picture of the world and the world context. Tell me about that.

AB: Again, this is interesting. I was just reminiscing this to my wife, Joy the other night because we were out in California. I remember standing on the radar site one night and there was a, SAC would try to penetrate the Air Defense Identification Zone, the ADIZ, and because they always had the most advanced electronic counter measures. And our electronic counter counter measures always were lagging behind for budget because SAC had the big budget, Strategic Air Command, under Lemay, General Lemay. So the only way we could ever find them was someone in the FAA would be good enough to
help us know where SAC had filed to penetrate the ADIZ because they did have to do
that. And we would have our intelligence sources, and so we would know the area to look
but we still necessarily didn’t have an easy time finding them because they would have
their jammers on and our counter jammers were not always good enough to cut through.
But anyway, so there was one of these missions going on, and I was saying to my wife, I
don’t know why I wasn’t on what they called the DIAS, the room where we had the
plotting board. Back then you still had a plotting board and had people that plotted the
airplane and an officer and an enlisted person would be on the scopes and they would be
directing the interceptor if they could find anyplace to direct it. Anyway, I don’t know
why it was not necessary for me to be always on the DIAS with the colonel, but one of
my jobs was to float around and go out to the transmitter sight or up to the radar tower
and check and see how things were going and just talk to the folks and see if there were
any impending problems that needed to be dealt with preemptively. So I was outside all
by myself and standing looking up the Santa Clara Valley towards San Francisco and the
glow from the city was up there and I thought if the Russians, who were our enemies
back then, if they were to launch ballistic missiles and they were going to do an airburst
over San Francisco, they sure weren't going to do a ground burst, and I’d look up at the
radar facility and I’d think, “That damn thing’s not even going to be here.” That
overpressure would wipe us out plus the electronic, called the EMF, electromagnetic
interference from the radiation burst would, the radar just wouldn’t be there. Circuitry
wouldn’t be there and electronically it would be devastated. What the hell are we doing
here? This really a futile effort. And we couldn’t even find the SAC bombers and our
interceptive air defense command was not getting much of a budget priority. I think it
was mostly for the public just to say that we had this protecting. I wonder about that even
today. We’re protecting the homeland. So anyway, I started looking at this and thinking,
“Boy, you know you could really screw yourself into the ground in negativity,” and I
couldn’t afford to do that. But it felt hypocritical to talk mission to the folks that looked
to me when I didn’t, I wasn’t really believing anymore that we were going to be there to
do our job when the war came. That started to present a real hollow feeling. I don’t know.
Somewhere, I think I rationalized I just needed to do what I was asked to do the best I
could, and, you know, maybe I didn’t understand all the big picture and I still had my
own career. That starts, that’s sowed some seeds of disillusionment for sure. You know, that I was just doing what I needed to do so my own career could advance. And I started to feel out of integrity and didn’t feel very good and then pilot training came along and I forgot all that because I was so excited until I got to Vietnam and then it started all over again.

RV: When did you start pilot training?

AB: Well, I went up to Hamilton Air Force Base for a physical. I thought I was going to make the Air Force a career.

RV: You’d decided that?

AB: Yeah. I liked the people I worked with and the military life had been for me to that point quite lovely. Even though I was at a radio site, I was right outside San Jose and had access to San Francisco, and when you were not working you went off the site. Living up at the site was just beautiful. We were up at 3,000 feet, actually 3,500. So often you’d look down on the weather. You’d be in the sunshine. Of course, some days we’d be in the clouds and they’d be in the sunshine, but living up there was just nice and I liked a lot about the military life. I liked the people. Anyway, so when I decided I was going to stay in, I noticed all the officers had wings, and so I started talking to a few of them that were sort of mentors and they said, “If you’re going to stay in and make higher rank,” and it was certainly true at that point, “you needed to be rated.” And many of them were navigators. So I thought, you know, I knew I couldn’t be a pilot, so I’d apply for navigator training and that was still fine. I’d be around airplanes and that was great.

When I went to Hamilton, Richard, you’ve already found out I’m a talker.

RV: Yes, sir. Go right ahead. This is what this is about.

AB: Okay. And you need to shut me down when it’s…(chuckles). I try not to get off on too many tangents. But you have some good questions. You’ve helped direct me.

RV: You feel free to talk as much as you want to.

AB: Okay. So I went to Hamilton to take the physical and while I was in college, my mother who, and my mother like most son’s mothers is just my sweetheart, she would do just about anything for her first born oldest son, Italian family. You know about that. We had a family optometrist who I went to to see about reading glasses after I found out I had this vision issue. He was a great guy. See, here’s another instance where this man
was Jewish. Many of my teachers as was very typical and may still be typical in the New
York City public school system, were Jewish. And so I had lots of very important people
in my life from elsewhere. Anyway, he was doing experiments on eye exercises,
strengthening eye muscles and he needed test subjects. And my mother was willing to
pay some modest amount of money so I could do these eye exercises and I never thought
about them. I guess that continued. I didn’t start that. I said high school, I think it was
actually college. And so I would go to his office and work with him and do these
exercises but I never realized how significantly they improved my eye muscle, which
turned out was the issue with my vision problem. So when I went to take this navigator
exam, I finally went through, I did all the doctors and all the tests and finally went
through the eye doctor and I went for my debriefing. So the doctor says, “Well,
everything looks fine. Your paperwork should just be great.” I said, “Well, what else
would I have to do?” These questions just sort of popped out. “What else would I have to
do in order to, what other exam would I have to have taken to be able to apply for pilot
training?” He looked at my paperwork and he said, “You can apply for pilot training.”
After I picked myself up off the floor, I remember riding back to the radar site the most, I
don’t remember much about the ride is all I can say. I was just on cloud nine. And I got
back and of course the colonel was a pilot and the officer I worked for was a pilot and my
mentor had been a pilot. So they were just all ecstatic for me. And so from that point on,
and I don’t remember, it was not quite a year before I went to pilot training, which was
May. Let’s see. We started April of ’65. So sometime in ’64 I applied, and then got back
the acceptance probably by that summer or something. So from that time on, of course,
my only focus was going to pilot training and waiting for the class assignment.

RV: And where was the training going to take place?

AB: Eventually I was assigned to pilot training at Del Rio, Laughlin Air Force
Base.

RV: When did you actually leave to go to Del Rio?

AB: Say that one more time.
RV: I’m sorry. When did you actually leave to go to Del Rio?
AB: I think I, let’s see. I think we went home. We probably took and extended
leave in March and went home because that’s the first time I’d been back to New York
City. How did you go from California to New York back in those days? You certainly
didn’t jump on airplanes like you do today. The fares were prohibitive and I didn’t even
know anybody that flew on a commercial airliner.

RV: This in 1964?
AB: Right. I’m sorry. No. The trip actually was in March of ’65. So I went home,

saw the family. My sister got married I think. So I was able to be there for the wedding.

That was all fortuitous and then I went off to pilot training.

RV: Tell me about pilot training. What was it like?

AB: Just heaven for somebody who always wanted to be around airplanes. I

mean, you started right out and I guess we actually started; I’m trying to remember now.
At Delta you did extensive ground school before you ever saw a Delta airplane. But I
don’t, I think we started flying pretty early on. We probably had some initial classroom,

but pretty quick they had you down the line because unfortunately at that point we were
still washing out 50% of the guys. That was unsettling, you know. You’d be at a table

with three guys and then your instructor and the next day there would be two of you and
your instructor. John just disappeared. A lot of times the guys never said anything
because they were embarrassed and the instructors didn’t say anything except they didn’t
want to gossip about anybody. So John just wasn’t there anymore. And then you found
out that John was gone.

RV: Did you ever have a fear of washing out?
AB: Oh, yes. I had a very laconic captain who was my initial instructor in a T-37

and I was doing great. I was scheduled to be the first in my class to solo. I was doing
really well and I was doing well academically.

RV: So you had classroom training and then you had--
AB: Yeah. You did classroom part of the day and flight line part of the day. Most

of the flying was in the morning but it wasn’t always so. Anyway, his name was Roy

Woodson. I really had a lot of admiration for him. He was a nice guy but he was quiet. At
least I didn’t have one of those “glare shield pounders” as we called them. The guys that
would beat on the glare shield and coached you while you were flying. Like all teachers,

there’s different methodology. Anyway, Roy was just a great guy and I had a nice
relationship with him. And I went up for my pre-solo ride and he didn’t like something,
but he didn’t tell me what he didn’t like and he just what they called, ‘gave me a pink’ which was a down. And so I was not up to solo. Well, you know. Gee, that hurt. So I went up the next day and I was all ready again, and he did the same thing to me. And I didn’t know what was going on and he didn’t tell me anything. Well, now, somebody else was scheduled to solo. That prestige was gone and boy, I was starting to get a real sinking spell. And I was fortunate. I was living off base again, and one of my neighbors was another instructor, a young lieutenant, and he was just a couple of apartments down from me and so I knew him from hanging around the pool or just seeing him. And so I went down and talked to him and bless his heart, he spent several hours that evening and we just talked. And without seeing me flying, he finally deciphered that I was throwing out, we had, you had there a thrust reducer but what they are, they’re a deflector so that you can keep the engine spooled up and producing power. But the engines in a T-37 are quite small and you don’t want the lag time. If you needed power, you could just retract these deflectors and you’d have instant power. But I was throwing them out and then not advancing power soon enough to compensate for that degradation once they were in the thrust string. And so I was dropping air speed a little bit. But I don’t know why Roy just never pointed that out to me. He was a check captain so he would give evaluation rides. And maybe he, he got caught in a quandary. I don’t know. I never got to talk to him again because then he was no longer my instructor. I wound up being assigned to that second lieutenant. But I went up the next day and just did what this lieutenant had coached me. I did fine. Roy got out of the airplane and I soloed and went on. Then I got reassigned to a younger, actually he was a first lieutenant. The second lieutenant was later in the T-38s. So, that was really unnerving. We’d already seen people fall by the wayside and now, that was really awful.

RV: How did it feel when you soloed for the first time?

AB: As we all said, you suddenly heard noises in the airplane you never heard before. It’s so amazingly quiet when you’re just there in the airplane by yourself. You hear every pump. You hear valves cycling. Then the confidence level. And with Air Force pilot training, I thought for sure the Naval and Marine or the Naval training or whoever, the other pilot training programs all do the same thing. They really work to instill a sense of confidence. So you do a lot of things to build confidence. And you go
out and do acrobatics and so forth. Those solo flights then became treasured moments because you were out there by yourself with just the airplane. And it was great. And then you have all the camaraderie, a lot, a lot of camaraderie. A lot of social activity and a lot of hanging out. So, you know, it’s just, it’s another age of innocence if you will.

RV: How long did the training last?
AB: 55 weeks.
RV: Okay. Pretty significant amount of time.
AB: Oh, yeah. Back then it cost just under $400,000 to train an Air Force pilot. That’s in 1966 dollars.
RV: When you think back about your pilot training, what do you remember most? What comes to mind?
AB: The T-38 aircraft, which is the advanced trainer. And of course back then they were brand new. I mean, I flew one that had just been delivered, and I flew it solo and it smelled like a new car, you know. Of course, they were a high performance aircraft, and I remember sitting around the pool watching the guys in the traffic pattern going into, at the base when I was only in T-37s and wow, just couldn’t wait until we got to T-38s because you got to wear a G-suit. T-37s were called the tweety bird. So there was nothing glamorous about it. So T-38s were just, that and formation flying, turning out of traffic when you’re on the wing and looking up at the lead airplane and its just framed against the blue sky. It’s quite a memorable sight that I can still pull up.

RV: How did you do ranking as far as your class was concerned?
AB: I wound up finishing in the middle of my class, and I had another harrowing time on my final formation check in the T-38s and that cost me a couple of places in the class. So I missed the last fighter slot by one. Well, it’s just the way it goes.
RV: What happened that you said, that incident?
AB: There’s a maneuver called the formation rejoin, and you separate from the lead aircraft and then you have to close on him into position, you know. We flew about a three-foot wing tip separation. And I didn’t do it smoothly and I didn’t do it well. It was sort of awkward and jerky. And it was on my check ride so I wound up getting a down on that. I mean, we lost guys in T-38s and that was really surprising to see somebody go that far and still get washed out. And so, boy, you know I really felt the pressure. So I had to
go up for another ride and I went on the next day. I did fine. But doing that poorly the first time cost me a couple of slots, I mean, a couple of numbers in the ranking.

RV: Tell me what the Air Force was teaching you guys as far as doctrine and strategy was concerned? Was that touched upon during this 55-week course?

AB: (laughs) Absolutely nothing. And the whole time I was in, even when I was in Vietnam, one of the things that really still bothers me is not once did we ever, ever go to a briefing in which anybody talked about our mission. The only thing we were talked to about, nor did anybody ever ask me my opinion. By that time I was captain with six, seven years service and a potential career also. Not once did anybody ever, I mean we never had a general or colonel come in and talk to us about what we were doing. The only thing they talked about was on time take-offs. I mean, can you believe this? This was a war but we’re talking about on time take-offs. The amount of reliability for, which I understand; reliability is important. But how you do the mission, to me, should also be important. I mean we were doing airlifts so we weren't timed on target for bomb delivery.

I had that mission too, but that was treated differently. But still, nobody ever came and talked to us. I once had to brief a one-star [general] about the bomb mission. I was dropping those daisy cutters, and he came for a briefing on the weapons system but even he never asked us anything about what we thought. He never said anything about what our role was there. You had to interpret that all for yourself. And that was really disheartening. So I’m sure we’ll get to another place where we’ll talk about this more.

Hold on. Here’s my wife and friend. I started to really just formulate my own reason for being there. When I saw the Marines at Khe Sanh, which I arrived in Vietnam on a Monday and [that] Wednesday I was air landing and air dropping into Khe Sanh during the siege. Yes, and you’d look out the window, here I was all excited to be flying over there, and I’d look out and look at those Marines and realize, just look at the expression on their faces, and especially the ones that were not getting to board my airplane to leave there you know, and understood that there was a seriousness to this that I didn’t understand. I just heard some commentary on NPR either yesterday or this morning in which somebody was saying the same thing. You train for all this but then it seems like an adventure and then when you see, as I did. I remember a Black soldier, either a Marine or Army, head wrapped in bandages, bottles [I-Vs] into both arms because
sometimes we did air evac flights. The C-130 was a wonderfully versatile airplane, and he was dripping blood onto the floor of the airplane and two bottles were going in. And you know, I started to realize or at least formulate to myself, rationalizing, my job was to support the troops in the field and that was my job. And at that point, I couldn’t care less about the politics. My job was to do the best job I could for the Marines and the Army and get them what they needed because that’s the only thing I could affect at that point.

RV: To what do you attribute the Air Force’s kind of lack of asking what your opinion was or getting your input after a lot of experience on missions?

AB: Now, you’ve invite me to step into the vernacular. I always felt like the Air Force sucked up to the suits.

RV: In the suits, you mean the politicians, the people in Washington?

AB: Politicians, yes. And I understand and want our military to be totally subordinate to the civilian government, but the Air Force always seemed to just suck up to whoever; generals make, as I understand it, make rank. The colonels I know that didn’t stay on and were extremely gifted and talented and I admired, they didn’t stay on because of the politics, and you get to be a general by being very political. I have two neighbors, both African American, both were 06s in the Army. Both very, very successful. One of them went on to be the CEO of a major city’s convention center and the other one was a senior executive at a major food business, big food business, national. Neither of these guys, and they both said, they both were friends of Colin Powell, they both said you had to be political to go on. Anyway, so I always thought that they, the generals, and I didn’t have much interaction with generals, of course. I knew two and both one-stars. Our generals always seemed to just, we never even had a uniform that looked like a uniform. It looked like a business suit. You look at a Marine, you know that that’s a military guy. You look at a Naval Officer; you know that’s an officer. You look at an Air Force guy and for the longest time, we didn’t even have silver braid. You had blue braid on blue suit. I always felt like it was to be as inconspicuous as possible. I just always resented that.

RV: Why do you think that was?

AB: I don’t know? They didn’t want to be military. You know, it was like, of course then we had, I grew up in the era of Secretary McNamara who I hold in deep
disdain, and, you know, his job was to create numbers that justified whatever the
decision-making. And I understand about justification. I have an MBA, but I also know
what bean counters can do to a corporation. I felt like that’s a mentality he brought to the
Pentagon and the Air Force in particular sucked up to that, to get. You know Lemay was
one of the last of the generals who had any personality. After that what memorable Air
Force general sticks out? Hap Arnold and General Lemay and Jimmy Dolittle probably,
but other than those, I don’t think of any Air Force generals. But I know about Army
generals. I know about Admirals. You know, the Air Force just, I don’t know. It was
always about money for these very expensive weapon systems, perhaps. Again, I’m too
far down the line to offer any real insight into that but that’s what it looked like from the
field.

RV: Did this feeling increase the longer you were in the Air Force or did it
develop more after you got out of the service in 1970?

AB: It got pretty strong over there [in Vietnam] because I didn’t feel like. I saw
some really poor commanders who, you know, C-130s, maybe if you’d had been in a
fighter unit, you had more gung ho, but in C-130s, we had a lot of colonels, lieutenant
colonels who had been pulled back to the line because they were running out of pilots.
And so they started bringing guys who were from the Korean War and so forth and that
was fine. But these guys came back and the only thing they were doing was covering
their “six o’clock” because they all hoped to make 06 [full colonel]. I’m going to tell you
one story but I think it says a lot. I was with my squadron commander, lieutenant colonel
who I liked. I mean, he was a guy that one night I was at the officer’s club and my wife
and I were celebrating an anniversary, and he saw us over there and he somehow knew
about that and he sent a bottle of champagne over. I was really impressed. That was just
so thoughtful and he was a nice guy. And then I was in his office one day for some
operational matter and the telephone rang and it was the wing commander who is an 06
and while [Lieutenant] Colonel Lancaster’s talking to me, he reaches into his bottom
drawer and pulls out a pair, now we’re flying in Vietnam, right? He pulls out a pair of
spit shined shoes to put on to walk over to see the colonel. I thought, holy shit! I mean
people are dying out there and this guy’s worried about his spit shined shoes to go see the
colonel? And that really, that was like a crushing blow to whatever vestige of pride I had.
RV: How long into your tour did that happen?

AB: That was, I was an aircraft commander and that was probably well into my, almost second year over there. We did a longer tour because we weren't, again because of McNamara’s and all the number crunching that went on, we weren't based in country. We did all of our flying in country but they based us in the Philippines, and that way we didn’t count against the force structure of 500,000. So I wound up, I flew 1,000 sorties while I was there in 22 months and I got credit for one Vietnam tour. That’s just the way it worked. I’m sorry, Richard, but if you really don’t mind me talking, I still have somewhere in my papers, I got threatened with a court martial.

RV: While you were in Vietnam?

AB: Yeah. Here’s the gist of it and I have the paperwork to prove it. My story is documented officially. I had an air evac mission, and so that meant you picked up an airplane. You configured it with litters and you spent the day going out to pick up [wounded soldiers] from the field hospitals, people that had been, the pronunciation is triage, triage?

RV: Triage.

AB: They’d been triaged, and they had had the initial medical care, and then we needed to take them to the hospitals either at Da Nang or Cam Ranh or Saigon. And I had, we have a unit on the airplane called the ground power. It’s not a ground power unit. It’s a GTC, gas turbine compressor, which is built into the airplane but you start it. It’s small, and then you use the air and electricity from that to start the aircraft engines. That way you’re self-sufficient. You don’t need a ground unit when you go out in the field because we landed at dirt strips and pieces of road or whatever they had. That unit was not working. Well, that would mean that when I went out to a dirt strip, which we were going to do, I would have to leave probably two engines running which would mean when we had the ramp at the back of the airplane down, that all those fumes would be coming into the airplane, the dust, and, you know, we had litter cases and I had medical personnel. So we had plenty of time to fix that unit, and I had a 13-hour day or at least a 12-hour day. I can't remember and I only needed about 7 hours to make all the stops we were scheduled to. So I could accomplish all that and have the unit fixed before we started. I’d be behind a little bit, but we’d be in much better shape. So the sergeant, my
flight engineer told me about the problem. I said, “Okay. Let’s get them to fix it. I’m not
going to take the airplane until we’re ready,” because of the mission profile. Then all of
the sudden, I’m sitting there looking at some paperwork for the airplane and all of the
sudden there’s a maintenance sergeant there and he says, “I understand you want to have
this airplane fixed.” I said, “Oh, yeah. Absolutely.” We had plenty of time. I explained to
him. So he goes away. Well the next thing is the captain is standing there asking the same
questions and then finally, I don’t remember where it went from there, but eventually it
was a full colonel, the maintenance officer, the wing maintenance officer standing there,
and he starts berating me for not wanting to fly the airplane. And I told him where we
were going. I knew they didn’t have any ground units. And he orders me to take the
airplane. And so I asked him, I said, “Colonel, that’s a direct order. Is that right, sir?”
And he said, “Absolutely. You get your ass up in that airplane!!” or whatever.

RV: Where was this taking place?

AB: Cam Ranh Bay. Fortunately, I had a medical; I don’t know that he was a
doctor. He was a medical administrative officer so he was responsible for the medical
mission in the back of the airplane. And he and I had worked together before, and I really
always tried to do the best job I could because that was what I understood my purpose
there. And I thought, as we flew around, of course he [the maintenance colonel] told me
that there were ground power units at the places I said there weren’t and everything else.
He had said all this in public. And when we were flying around during this course,
[when] we got to these places, they didn’t have any ground power units because it was
listed in, we had a supplemental book for those little dirt strips so that we had some idea
of what was there and how long it was and how wide. I still have a copy of that. Of
course, he had lied to me, and I knew he was lying. He just wanted me, he wanted an on
time take off. That’s what he wanted. He wanted the airplane dispatched within the
window of opportunity that gave him an on time reliability. So I was really pissed by that
point because I’d go in the back of the airplane and here the engines running. I’d leave
the copilot and the engineer up there. And it just stank of jet fuel, exhaust fumes and it
was dusty. And I got angrier and angrier as we went on. So I decided to write all that up
and I filed a report with my squadron operations officer who was a great guy. He was a
guy that had his feet on the ground. He didn’t keep spit shined shoes in his drawer.
RV: Was this the same colonel who did that?
AB: No. No. No. It was an 06 that did it. At the squadron level we had only 05s. So I gave a copy of my report, we made a copy when we got back. We did have copy machines back then. And I gave it to the medical officer and fortunately he filed that same report with his endorsement on it to his chain of command, which went through the Surgeon General or whatever he was called in Vietnam. So the next day, myself and my operations officer are called to the wing commander’s office and this guy threatens me with a court martial for my performance the previous day, borderline insubordination, and et cetera, et cetera. And so, the phone rings, and all of the sudden this full colonel jumps up out of his chair and is standing at attention talking into the phone. “Yes, General. Yes, General. Yes, General.” When he hangs up the phone, he turns to me and he says, “You're dismissed from here. Don’t let me see you again.” So, my operations officer, as we walked out he just winked at me. He said, “I’ll find out what’s going on.” Well, that medical officer’s report went to the medical chain of command to MACV [Military Assistance Command-Vietnam] headquarters in Saigon, and that was the general who called back down and wanted to know from this colonel what the hell he was doing. That day I was out flying and went through Saigon and I was told, “Prepare to receive an 06 being brought back to Cam Ranh Bay.” So you have a VIP code. So we had him on board and he came up and of course we invited him to sit on the flight deck, which is much more comfortable than the back of the airplane, and he observed the crew and he talked to us. And I sort of had inkling that this 06 may have something to do with this issue. It turned out he was the investigating officer; so he got to watch me and my crew perform, and evidently was favorably impressed and I never heard another word about that. And my operations officer just told me, he said, “Don’t you ever even worry about that again.” I’m sorry. That story makes me feel good to tell because I was right, but it was that kind of situation that was terribly disillusioning to wanting to do the right thing and the system, and you know seeing an 06 behave like that, that’s really troubling.
RV: And that’s a very good example of what you’ve been talking about.
AB: And that’s really why I brought it in because it did show a really unfortunate, unpleasant side, and it’s really consequential to mission accomplishment. I mean, kids are
out there, their lives are on the line, and our only job was to support them. Some of these
people, their only job was to worry, pardon me, about their next promotion.

RV: How did you feel about, what did you think the attitude was of the rest of the
men you were working with in your unit in relation to this issue?

AB: (laughs) Well, I was laughing because there were the captains and the
lieutenants and the sergeants, and we all just watched with some detached amusement
from this, I mean it really was, it was silly to watch grown men doing some of the things
we watched the majors and the colonels doing. So these guys were all called back and
they’re all worried about their promotion and they’re all trying to find jobs to do so that
they can get a performance report. That was, it was terribly hard on them. I understand
that. I mean, these are guys that had 16 to 18 years of service, and they could get
drummed out before their 20th year and they would lose their retirement. So I understand
that they’re feeling a lot of pressure. They have families. But, so these guys are
scrambling for “make work jobs” in the squadron because in the Air Force unfortunately,
the other thing is you don’t get promoted on being a good pilot. You have to have some
kind of job, as we call it, additional duty. And some of it was the most asinine, trivial
stuff to have an officer, just air enlisted men and I don’t meant that pejoratively, but you
didn’t need an officer and a pilot to be doing some of these jobs. But we were doing them
so that when you got your performance report. I was the manuals control officer, and you
know we had to invent this system to control the issue of manuals. I had lots of sergeants
that could have done that, and that would have been good for their career, but you
certainly didn’t need to have a captain doing it. And I could have been more involved in
say, maintenance issues or something or whatever. So these guys were all scrambling for
their performance reports. And one day at a briefing, a squadron briefing, the colonel 05
is standing up there and he finally puts down his notes and he looks out, it’s all officers at
this briefing, all pilots or crew and he says, “I don’t understand something. When I was a
young lieutenant, if I went to a briefing, I took pad and pencil and I took notes.” And he
says, “Lieutenant Cox,” who was a for real free spirited, young lieutenant, “how come
you don’t have notes and a pad in front of you?” Lieutenant Cox gets up and says, “Sir,
I’ve been coming to this briefing every morning this week and every morning it’s the
same old shit.” (laughter) But that was really true. Did you ever see Catch-22 or read the
book?
RV: Yes, sir.
AB: Okay, well then you know what some of that was about. I finally understood
what was going in Catch-22 when I went to Vietnam. Cox was right. The colonel finally
left in a fit of rage, and there were other instances like that. We watched in some
detached amusement. By that time I decided I couldn’t stay. If this was the best we could
do in wartime, I wouldn’t want to be a part of the peacetime. And I love the Air Force. I
just didn’t like the system.
RV: Right, right. I gather that completely. Based on--
AB: I was just sad that we could be doing so much better a job.
RV: How much do you think that war is an opportunity for officers to progress
their career?
AB: Oh, hell, I remember being in the briefing room stupidly talking or
innocently talking about coming back with a chest slathered with decorations. We all
thought it was very important to have combat experience. I don’t know that it is, not in
the Air Force. It may be in the Marines and the Army, but I think in the Air Force it was
how you did as a manuals control officer. And that was so sad.
RV: Okay, sir. We just took a brief break. Why don’t we pick up with when you
finished your pilot training after your 55-week program? You said you were about mid
way and you missed getting the fighter pilot selection by just a few slots. Is that what you
wanted to get?
AB: Of course.
RV: I guess that’s what everybody wanted.
AB: I’ve come to understand not everybody, but I think most of us, yeah.
RV: And so how did you feel, and how disappointed were you and what did you
do?
AB: Well, you know I think like most human beings you have this wonderful
ability to rationalize, and it really turned out well for me. I would have gotten in the back
seat of an F-4. First of all, you wouldn’t be a pilot. You’d be a systems operator. And
then the guys, it turns out that did get those slots, they had to sign up, they had to agree to
stay on past their initial commitment before they could upgrade. So that meant spending
your whole time as a backseater. And the C-130, I knew that, first of all, I’d get to go
more places, and I would get to upgrade a lot sooner to aircraft commander, which is
what you want to be doing. And some guys were already talking about the airlines and of
course, it seemed like, hell, after Vietnam maybe a 141 [C-141 jet transport] assignment
and then you’d have all this big jet time and you’d be an attractive candidate for the
airlines if you wanted just to have that in your back pocket. I don’t think I stayed there
very long. Some of my good friends who had done better in the class standing took C-
130s because it’s a versatile airplane and it did. It turned out to be a really great
experience. I don’t really know, if I could have been in a single seater, I might have
traded the experience, but I’m very happy for what happened.

RV: So you chose C-130s.
AB: Right. I certainly didn’t want to go SAC B-52s, which was the scorn of the
pilot community, and we always felt like the guys at the bottom of the class went to SAC.
That’s not fair. Those guys did a good job but the mission was awful, and I happened to
be a tenant unit in C-130s on a SAC base and I found out that really was true. The heyday
of SAC was over and it was just boring duty.

RV: This is 1966, right?
AB: Yeah.
RV: And you had to go for C-130 training I take it.
AB: Yes.
RV: Where did you go?
AB: I went to Seward Air Force Base near Nashville, Murfreesboro, and that was
wonderful. I had just a delightful time there. Two pilots and great guy for an instructor
who I am so sorry. I don’t know how to be in touch with him. I have to look in my
logbook to find out. And he trained us to fly the airplane as though we were airline
captains, always trying to be as smooth and as thoughtful of your passengers. He said,
“Some days you're going to have litter patients back there and you don’t want them to
even know they’ve been moved.” And he was a great guy with a great attitude, and we
just went out and you had some more ground school but we did all our simulator training
with him and all our flying with him and we just always had a really wonderful time just
touring around the Murfreesboro/Nashville area at low level in C-130 and he made it a very positive experience.

RV: So it was just two of you training?

AB: Well, there was a class, but you were only in a smallish, and I don’t remember even how many guys were there. But it was only when you were in the classroom academic systems training that you saw the other guys. You just hung with your instructor and flew.

RV: I’ve heard from other pilots, C-130 pilots included that what kind of instructor you get is absolutely key to what kind of pilot you’ll be and your experience in the service.

AB: Absolutely, yes, yes. That was true in what they call UPT, undergraduate pilot training because once I no longer was with the captain, I had two lieutenants [instructors] and one was an Air Force Academy graduate and he had a great attitude. And then I had that young second lieutenant, and they both treated me with respect and in fact I outranked, of course, the second lieutenant and yet we had a wonderful relationship. Yeah. You’re right. It makes a big difference. And they were both really good pilots and so you really could look up to them. They were great.

RV: Tell me about the C-130 as an aircraft.

AB: It seemed really big at the time. It doesn’t seem so big now that I’ve flown commercial. And it was exciting. You got to work with a crew, so crew concept came in there. You had a flight engineer, a navigator, a loadmaster in the back and you had a copilot. We were trained in the left seat so we were trained as an aircraft commander, which was really nice rather than just being trained as a helper. And the airplane is, it’s hard to imagine, it would have been, that such a large airplane could have been as agile as it was. So we did all the short fieldwork and it was such a variety of missions. And all of our flight engineers, they were so great. They were, I think I’ll use that word. They were very professional. They were all highly experienced. We never had novice. They were a key, key member of the crew. Your engineer pre-flighted the airplane so he discovered what maintenance was hiding if they were hiding anything. In the field, of course, if you got stuck at some little Army post like say in Vietnam, say some fire base, your engineer was the one that was going to get you out of there if you had trouble with the airplane.
There was nobody else. They were just really dedicated, great, hard working. I tried to always make it a point I think as many aircraft commanders did to always make sure my crew was fed and housed when we were out, because in C-130s, you did a lot on your own unlike what used to be back then, military airlift command, MAC. We didn’t operate [with] so much control out of the central command posts. When you were dispatched, you were fairly autonomous, and so your job was to take care of those people and the first aircraft commanders I flew with set a very high standard for that, so again, that makes a big difference in how you behave, I think. You learn.

RV: How did the C-130 handle comparatively? I mean you were flying T-37s, T-38s.

AB: It was a huge let down if you will from the T-38. Eventually I got selected for some special missions and that reinvigorated that pride. I think everybody, certainly pilots because it was so competitive to complete the program and even get in the program. Everybody’s generally fairly egotistical and takes pride in doing a good job because, you know, you're always trying to meet your peers’ expectations and your peers had pretty high expectations. And so getting selected for those missions, I got to do more things with the aircraft including more formation flying, and then some of those special weapons delivery and we prepped to do a mission on the Laotian trail, the Ho Chi Minh trail. So those were all bonding opportunities or pride building opportunities with your crew and if you were in a multi aircraft mission with other crewmembers. I used to party with some of my instructors, (can’t hear what is being said because of sound of wind in phone) over in Vietnam. He was an F-4 pilot when he was over there. John used to rag on me all the time for being a shoebox driver. I really envied him strapping on the F-4 and going out. But he used to let us party at their squadron and they were really good and they used to rag on us. But the always were really good to us. Anyway, the airplane was enjoyable to fly. It’s an outstanding instrument airplane. It’s a very reliable airplane. I always, I suffered combat damage but never had any problem getting my airplane back. It was a fairly forgiving airplane, and it was exciting to fly certainly for a four-engine transport. It’s amazing what you could do with that airplane.

RV: How long did your training at Seward last?

AB: I think it was probably about another three months.
RV: And from there did you end up going overseas?

AB: No. I went to Dyess Air Force Base. While I was at Dyess Air Force Base, I upgraded to aircraft commander. Actually, no. I take that back. I upgraded when I got to Vietnam because I was at Dyess for just about a year and while I was there, I went ahead and put in volunteer papers for Vietnam and for fighters repeatedly. I was still hoping to do that.

RV: When was this at Dyess? Was it ’66, late ’66?

AB: Yeah. Later ’66 and I wound up going to SOS while I was there and then from SOS I went back to the squadron checked out and left in the very beginning of ’68 and then arrived in country and was there until I got out, I mean, until about November of ’69.

RV: Okay. What did you do at Dyess? What was your rank there?

AB: There you were just a copilot and that’s where you had to play with, still had all those colonels and majors and running around trying to find something to do. And again, I had a good aircraft commander. He was a young captain and I got my captain’s bars while I was there. But he always treated me real well and then I flew for a lieutenant colonel as his copilot and he was another good guy. And we got to go to Europe and flew just about everywhere in the States and it was just an exciting time, all this traveling which, of course, as a New York city kid, I’d never been outside New York city. This was pretty fun.

RV: Well, this is in the mid-’60s. Tell me what you knew about what the United States was doing in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

AB: Well, you know I didn’t know much. Honestly, again. I didn’t know much. I don’t know that I was much of a newspaper reader back then. My family, my dad read the Daily News in New York City, and that was a pretty trashy paper. But I mean, that was what working people read back then. There are a couple of other papers just like it. Only my very educated, a couple of uncles read things like the New York Times, which is what I read now. I don’t know, I just didn’t. My life was plenty busy and I had school and so I didn’t read newspapers and I didn’t stay up much on politics. I started to become politically conscious during the Vietnam War, but I don’t know that I was very politically conscious in pre-Vietnam, my pre-Vietnam experience. Going to Europe was interesting,
meeting Germans, Germans who had been POWs in America. It’s amazing how much
corversation you can have with a non-English speaking person using sign language,
some broken English and broken German and a few beers. But I didn’t have any big
picture of the world. I was pretty ignorant on all those counts.

RV: Did you know why the United States had intervened in the Vietnam conflict?
AB: When I went to SOS at Maxwell, we had briefings and we actually read
counterinsurgency warfare and we read some things by Mao Tse Tung and that started an
education process. I was not a reader. I mean I read textbooks. But when I was in college,
my senior year, I had a wonderful opportunity to take a class. Are you still there?

RV: Yes, I am.
AB: I’m sorry. This phone, oh the battery’s going down.
RV: Okay.
AB: Well, we’ll talk until it, if it quits, you’ll understand why. Let me go get a
different phone while we’re talking.
RV: Let me pause this.
AB: He was a history professor, and he was in the liberal arts school and I was in
the engineering school, but I wound up having, in order to graduate on time, I had to take
a class, and it wound up his class in order to get the credits I needed. And he was a
person, as an educator, you’d love this guy. I have since talked to him just in the last few
years. His objective, it was American History and he said, “Here’s the textbook. We’re
going to have mid-term on the first half, final on the second half. Now, here’s what we’re
going to do in class.” So he wasn’t even going to talk about the book. That was up to us
to do which, God, as an engineer that was frightening, and what we were going to do in
class was read books like The History of Totalitarianism or The Public Philosophy and
discuss them. Well, I didn’t read books and I certainly didn’t discuss things like The
Public Philosophy. And so he said your grade was strictly on the exams and so I decided,
“Well, hell. I’ll go to his class. I’ll sit in, but I’m not going to participate and I’m not
going to read all those books. I have too many things to do.” And the conversations and
that’s the way he conducted it, sitting in the round and we moved all the chairs, and
everybody discussed the books. Well, being a talker, I felt really left out and pretty soon I
was reading a book a week along with all the other students on things like The History of
Totalitarianism and participating. And he awakened in me a love for reading. That was my education. It all happened in that one class. So, going back to my political awareness, I was aware of political systems but I was not really aware of world politics.

RV: Had you heard about on the news or just from your--

AB: Well, I knew there was a war going on and I was excited to go there and participate, but it was all out of, again, that naiveté and self-centered perspective of getting combat experience and flying in Vietnam, sounded like a great thing to do if you were going to be an Air Force pilot.

RV: So you put in papers to volunteer to go in to the war zone to do this.

AB: Oh, absolutely. F-105s. F-100s, whatever they’d let me fly, but they wouldn’t let me fly any of those because I was already in C-130s which again was a critical AFSC.

RV: How did your wife feel about this that you were applying to go to war?

AB: I couldn’t tell her. She would never have understood. She understood that I had a commitment to this patriotism for my country, but by that time we had a child, and I just was very self-centered at that point in my life and I just did what I needed to do.

RV: So you’re at Dyess and you're putting in the papers and how did you find out you were going to go? Did you end up just putting in for C-130 work?

AB: No. My assignment came down just as part of a normal cycle because I never volunteered to go on a C-130. I thought if I did that that’s exactly what they would do, and I wanted to go in a fighter. But they wouldn’t let me out of my commitment to 130 training. So it just came as part of the regular cycle and I got my notification while I was at SOS that I had orders to Vietnam.

RV: How did you feel when you got those orders?

AB: Oh, I was elated.

RV: You said you were based where? Not in country.

AB: No. We were based in Mactan Air Base in Cebu. No, it’s off Cebu. It’s on Mactan Island in the southern Philippines opposite Cebu. And that was, Richard, there’s no way to describe how idyllic that place was. This is a place where every Filipino loved an American. We were still Joe. And you could go anywhere anytime of night anywhere and people would, “Hey, Joe!” And I had a little motorcycle and it broke down and people just came and helped me. I mean, you were a special person, and Filipino culture
had an unreasonable reverence for military rank. So you were an officer and so this
prestige, I can't tell you the circles that I moved in in Manila when I was later on up at
Clark, just because you were military, a U.S. military officer, I guess from the MacArthur
era. And I really loved the Filipino people because they were very warm, very kind
people and so artistic. I just, I enjoyed the food and it was just a great experience. And
Mactan was really isolated. So it was just idyllic.

RV: Where did you live at Mactan?

AB: Most of the guys lived in screened in huts called hooches, and for some
reason I got assigned to room with the base chief of military police who was a captain,
my rank. But I lived with him and the OSI agent, Officer Special Investigations. I never
had to worry about anything. I had those guys as roommates. And we lived in what had
been a Filipino officer’s quarters but they were dormitory style but semi-private rooms.

RV: Right, right. Okay, and you said that you were there for a certain amount of
time and then you’d go in country for how long?

AB: You’d generally fly two weeks in country. I think we did 16 days, and then
you’d come back for seven to ten days and then on those days you might fly to Japan or
some other Asian destination, move stuff around, do some training and you’d get some
down time. When you’re in country, you flew, I believe it was 12 on, 13 off and you
rotated around the clock. So you started out with early morning departures and you
wound up flying through the night, and in the middle of that 16 days, I believe it was 16
days, you had 48 hours of break and it didn’t necessarily, it didn’t start in the morning,
just whenever you came off that rotation you had 48 hours off and then you went back to
the 12-13 and you kept cycling.

RV: So you would do 16 days, have 48 hours off and then you’d go back to the 16
days or would you go back to Mactan?

AB: No, then you go back to Mactan. You had an insertion day, as one of the 16,
and you had an extraction day at the other end when you flew back to the Philippines
because you took the airplanes back to and they did major maintenance on them, you
know heavier maintenance as we called it. So the 14 days, you worked 12 of those and
you flew a 12-hour day every day of those 12 days.
RV: What kind of things did you haul around when you went back to Mactan the seven to ten days you said you went to other Asian countries, what kind of things would you transport?

AB: You know, I don’t remember. The parts I remember was going to Japan and going shopping and seeing Japan. At that point, it didn’t really matter what was in the back of the airplane. Sometimes it was not much of anything. Those were busy work, a lot of them. Sometimes you moved material or you brought something back, but it never seemed anything of any real consequence. In country I always knew what was in the back of my airplane. It was more important, whether I had munitions back there or food back there or people back there or whatever. Vietnamese Army or prisoners of war. Sometimes we hauled them too. Those things I was real keen on knowing what was going on.

RV: Of course. Before we get into talking about Vietnam specifically, tell me what your impressions were of Asia in general and the different countries you went into and the Asian culture, Asian people.

AB: If we include the Philippines, I’ve talked about that, and the Filipinos were the people I had the most interaction with and they were wonderful people. You got invited to people’s homes. You got invited even to; I had a house girl. I’ll eventually tell you about that, when we got to Clark. So she invited us to her barrio as they call it, the little village and she wanted to show off the officer that she worked for but it was a true, warm invitation. I got to eat with her family and be like the guest of honor at a wedding when it should have been the bride and groom. They were wonderful. The Japanese, I didn’t spend enough time. The language barrier was there. You could speak English to Filipinos. Almost all of them spoke English. But I never stayed in any of those countries long enough to learn any languages. Okinawa was the same way. People were subservient but very distant and polite and gracious, but only in a very formal manner. You know in Asian culture I think that may be reasonably and not pejoratively descriptive of Asian culture. Bangkok, I didn’t spend enough time there. I had to go back there after I got out. My wife and I went back there a few years ago. Those are great people but I just didn’t have the opportunity to interact with them. They were like Filipinos. They were wonderful.
RV: Did you know how long your duty was going to be overseas? Did they tell you?

AB: Well, see, I was supposed to be there for a year, and then the Air Force decided to close Mactan and turn it back to the Filipino Air Force and so we moved to Clark. So my one-year assignment, I could still go home or I could bring my wife and child over and that really was exciting because they would have a chance to live in a foreign country and living in the Philippines, you can afford a housekeeper and a live-in babysitter, a cook. It was a pretty heady lifestyle for, you know, a young kid from New York. So I elected and encouraged my wife to come and she did. And so then you still did the same thing, but your family was back at Clark now when you came back.

RV: When did you move up to Clark? Do you remember the date or roughly the date?

AB: Actually I do. August or September and I think actually its August of ’68. So I spent the rest of ’68 and almost all of ’69 there. I don’t remember how they determined your rotation date, but I had a normal rotation. You got some credit for the part. You were unaccompanied and its remote, I think. Maybe not remote, but its an unaccompanied assignment to Mactan and then accompanied, and they make some adjustment for the time. Normally, I think Clark would have been otherwise a two-year commitment. So I had about 20 to 22 months there.

RV: How different was Mactan from Clark or Clark from Mactan?

AB: Oh, awful. Awful in many respects because it [Clark] was the headquarters, what was it 13th Air Force? And so you had rank there and you had all the bullshit you know of the inspections. I mean we were flying in country and you come back and you’re expected to wait on, if you have to transact business at the personnel office or supply, you have to wait behind everybody else, and you didn’t have the time that everybody else had. And they afforded us a chance to go R&R, and you had to sit in line to get, it was not by lottery or by any rotation, and yet you’re flying in Vietnam and nobody does anything to assist the crews that are flying the mission, and the only reason for Clark is to support the mission, but it seemed like base personnel had an edge on everything. They got the best things out of supply. They always got the new uniforms, the new equipment because you weren't there to protect yourself. I also felt very resentful to our officers, our
seniors for not insisting that the operational troops. I mean I had to go and fight for my
enlisted people to get them stuff that they needed when that should have all been done for
them. So that was discouraging.

RV: This is more of what we were talking about earlier, the Air Force
bureaucracy.

AB: Bureaucracy, right. And, boy, they had a big bureaucracy at Clark because it
was a headquarters base and you always had to defer to honestly all the trivial stuff when
to me, everything should have been on the mission of making the combat crews have
everything they needed and the airplanes get the very best attention. The general’s
airplane was still the one that was shiniest and I understand that that’s the way the world
works, but it’s just disappointing that guys that were being asked to go over there. And
we weren't like fighter pilots; we certainly weren’t like the poor guys on the ground that
were getting shot at all the time. But we did get shot at and we did do without a lot and
we worked hard as hell and nobody was helping us and that felt frustrating. I never felt
like my superiors were supporting us the way they should have. They should have
insisted. I mean I can't describe some of the awful food we ate in Vietnam. And I didn’t
understand that. That was not necessary. The Navy didn’t eat like that but that’s another
thing about the Air Force. Sometime we should talk about what it was like for the
spouses.

RV: Well, why don’t you go ahead and tell me?

AB: Well, I remember right after I went to Vietnam and we were there at Khe
Sanh. And you know mail was absolutely the lifeline. Its like for the young people over
there now [Afghanistan and Iraq], the soldiers and sailors and airmen to be able to
communicate with their families. So they do email. We just did mail, surface, snail mail.
But the Air Force or the military did get priority and all our mail went back and forth
without postage or at least from us it went without postage and it went airmail. And
there’s nothing like getting a letter. I can't tell you. It didn’t matter what it said. It didn’t
have to say anything. And if it had a picture in it, that was just incredible, so that you
maintained a connection with those who you cared about. For the spouses, like my case, I
went over there so they knew I was up doing stuff at Khe Sanh and my wife is watching
and she’s with her brother and his children and they're watching news and they show. It
wasn’t a C-130 but it was a C-7, which is the Caribou, and they show it getting shot down
over Khe Sanh. And the kids of course, they were little kids, they jump up and down,
“Aunt Tessie, Aunt Tessie. It’s Uncle Tony!” And she comes running in and they play it
again or something, I don’t know. And for her it was just devastating. And I think of
course, for the American public, that reporting, they always say, “Bringing the war right
into the living room,” really was very hard on the spouses. And at Clark Air Base, they
would dispense Valium like you might think you’d dispense aspirin. Oh, awful.

RV: To the spouses?

AB: To the spouses, and of course there’s encouragement for social life at the
club. So people including my spouse. I’m not married to her anymore, and that’s sad but
that was part of the strain of it all, and I think some of this happened to the POW wives,
they started drinking at the club. They were popping valiums, and they were doing this as
a group so there was all this group support for this sort of behavior. And of course there
was lots of marital infidelity going on just because of the stress. I mean, guys were doing
that in country and wives were doing it back at the base because there was always
transients coming through. It was terribly stressful for the families because… We never
lost a crew in my squadron but we lost a crew in a sister squadron. And it wasn’t like the
fighter pilots. They tend to take a higher toll and they certainly had the POWs. It was
only later in the war that the B-52 crews got captured. I think it was still very hard on,
there was this disconnect between your family was, your husband, which at that time it
was all husbands, were in country and you were back here at Clark and there was all this
partying and liveliness and of course the wing people and the base support people, they
were all there as couples and partying and stuff. “Why is my husband over there?” I think
all those questions, it was just very hard on the spouses.

RV: Tell me what your first impressions were of Vietnam when you first flew in?

AB: It’s going to be hard to separate to just the first impressions.

RV: General impressions.

AB: It’s an enchanting country, topography, coastline. It’s beautiful, its harsh, and
the first time, because I got there right after Tet, and all that was still going on, they were
still, the battles were still going on at Hue and we were still supporting the Marines at
Khe Sanh.
RV: So you first flew in country in early February ’68?
AB: I believe that’s correct. Yeah. It was just right after Tet, and we were at Tan Son Nhut at that point. So we went down and eventually got to actually see the city go from the pearl of the orient to this place with concertina wire everywhere. Before that I guess it was a pretty gay lifestyle in many respects, but then they started doing the bombings of the restaurants and things like that, and everything started to change. And although we were not supposed to have a private weapon, nobody checked back then. It’s not like airline security today. So I had two weapons that I took with me over there. That’s another thing. The Air Force would send us out on a combat mission, and here we are landing on a piece of road which I did several times, and you don’t know who’s in the trees and you have a P-38. Now, give me a break. What the hell are you going to do with that? So, you know, not a magazine with the aircraft commander having the key that you unlock when you got out to the airplane of M-16s, but a P-38. Not even a .45 caliber. So it was such a joke. So before I left, I had a friend who had been an air commando in SOS, and he took me down to a gun store and I bought a Browning combat side piece that held 13 rounds because I wanted the maximum number I could have with me in the gun and then an extra clip and then I bought a .25 caliber Beretta, which I could carry. You didn’t go into Saigon in uniform because you didn’t want anybody to know you were a pilot. That was just good street smarts. So you always went in civilian clothes. So I had this little .25 caliber Beretta with a little belt holster that I could tuck into my pants and drape my shirt over it. So I figured, I’m not going to fend off an attack, but at least I was going to let somebody know if they were coming at me that I could shoot back.

RV: That’s interesting you felt that vulnerable in Saigon.
AB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Because of those restaurant bombings and because I had this Air Commando friend, he told me, and by that time I had already lost one of my classmates who was an Air Commando. He was on, I guess they were B-26s, yes that’s right. He was on a B-26 and they got shot down and then one of our instructors was already a POW, F-105. So you started to get a sense that this was for real. Anyway, in Saigon you just had to be careful and that’s just what it was.

RV: What were your impressions of Saigon?
AB: Oh, you know a big city. Some of the things I share with my wife Joy, that always impressed me was how the women, who are incredibly thin. I mean, it always seemed like you could grab them around the waist with your hand, they would walk with such poise in these oudais which are the split pants and the skirt, the split skirt and the pants underneath. And they would glide through the streets, which had mud and garbage on them and everything else and they would be completely oblivious of the smells, the sights. That’s one sight. The other was just the destruction, the lack of public sanitation just because it was a city under duress. The teeming hoards of bicycles and little motorcycles, scooter type things and the people trying to live their life while you’re there for this war and they’re there trying to live their life and run shops and go about their daily business. That awareness develops as I got to spend time in some of the small hamlets and I’ll tell you about that at some point. (recording stops for a break)

RV: Okay, why don’t you go ahead?

AB: I don’t get to talk about Vietnam much anymore, and you ask such probing questions that it is interesting to hear what I have to say myself. Saigon was, you know, you could see the beautiful architecture. You could get a sense of what it must have been like. I just finished reading The Quiet American. Have you read that yet?

RV: Yes, I have.

AB: That’s a really poignant book and I think it’s poignant for the current situation as well. It’s really telling. You used to go to the Continental Hotel and have a coffee, but it had to be done with more watchfulness perhaps than they used to do. We used to go to the top of some the hotels like the Majestic, which was turned into an officers’ quarters now. When I went back to Vietnam with my wife a couple of years ago, we actually had breakfast [there]. It’s now a four-star hotel. We had breakfast up on the same roof that we used to party up in. And you’d be partying up there having cocktails and somebody’d be grilling steaks or something and you’d be watching the flares drop and there’d be a firefight going on. It was all those disconnects. Some of the disconcerting things was watching the black marketeers. You had to really work to get sometimes some of your ration of uniform, your combat boots. Because over there they allowed us to wear essentially camouflage. You didn’t have to wear a regular flight suit and of course you wore all that black insignia so it was not so visible. And you wore
combat boots rather than what the Air Force used to issue as regular black flight boots.
And sometimes they didn’t have any in supply, but you could go down in Saigon and you
could buy it on the street. And you could see military tools. In fact, I still have in my
possession a small set of jeweler’s files that I bought on the street. I know those were
probably military issue. I should have probably never bought them but I did. Then this
other disconnect, Richard. You’d go into the BX and guys that were already rotating back
to the states would order, in Vietnam now, not talking about even the Philippines, in
Vietnam. You could order a brand new, which one of my copilots did, an XKE to be
delivered in the States. And you’d just give them a delivery time. So you’re there to fight
a war and everybody’s in the land of the big BX. You would see Koreans especially, they
were the ROKs, Republic of Korea. They had a fierce reputation, good troops to be on
their base when there was an attack. They never took any prisoners. They were just really
fierce, ruthless guys, and you’d see them coming out of the BX carrying televisions. You
used to go to an air conditioned movie or the air-conditioned officer’s club and watch a
USO show and then go out and fly a combat mission up to the DMZ. All these
disconnects were sort of odd on the psyche.

RV: How did you deal with that?

AB: I just participated. I mean, I did what we did. You made the best of it. I
mean, you’d fly all night, you’d come in in the morning, you’d go to the officer’s club,
you’d have a Bloody Mary and a big breakfast and then you go to the air-conditioned
movie, just watch. It didn’t matter what was showing, and just watch the movie to be in
the air-conditioning and then as air crew, we did get air conditioned quarters most of the
time because you had to sleep in the middle of the day, in the heat of the day, and then
you’d go back to your room and you’d sleep so you can get up and eat and go fly.

RV: That was your typical day.

AB: That was often the day. Some days, because sometimes you flew during the
night and you had to sleep during the day and other times it was more normal. So
sometimes you’d go down and then when you had your 48 hours, you could go down in
Saigon and we’d generally go, at least the officers would go and we’d go together and
have lunch or something like that. You had to choose the places more carefully for
security reasons and that sort of thing. And of course some guys went for the flesh bars.
What is the name of that street? Some of the guys may have mentioned it, Tu Do Street or something, where they had all the bars and stuff. I don’t know. We didn’t hang there. I do say honestly, I think a lot of the enlisted guys spent a lot of time there. But they had a Vietnamese officer’s club on the base that offered a full-service facility if you get my gist.

RV: A Vietnamese officer?

AB: Well, but you could go there as an American and they were happy to have you there. They had the girls there with the silicone-implanted breasts and like I say, they offered any service you wanted.

RV: This was on base.

AB: On base. Yeah. But it was on the Vietnamese jurisdiction, not U.S. government.

RV: Well, I’m interested, you’re describing Saigon, did you have particular restaurants where you always frequented or particular bars where you frequented?

AB: No. We didn’t go to too many bars because if we did any drinking it was usually back at the base or it was because it was really cheap and it was safe. But sometimes you’d go to lunch. I had a pair of shoes made while I was there. They’re custom made and a tailor so sometimes I’d do that. And sometimes just to see some of the sights, that started the influx of the refugees, and it was really apparent how Saigon was changing. I mean, there were people trying to live everywhere as they fled from the countryside into the city. It took a good bit of effort to go into Saigon proper. So most times we didn’t go in there. You could do things at the base. We had a music library where you could go and make, of course it was reel to reel back then, you’d make reel to reel recordings. I recorded a lot of classical music while I was there. I still have them. Of course, nobody plays reel to reel anymore. But did things like that, and we’d go to the library and I did a lot, a lot of reading and a good bit of hanging out at the club or just, you only had so much time because you really needed to feed yourself and rest because you had 12 hours and you had to do all of that. So it was mostly on the 48 hours that you did any sort of visiting in town.

RV: Right. Do you remember how much you’d pay for a pair of boots on the black market?
AB: Well, I didn’t buy boots on the black market, but if they were military issue, they could have been two or three to five dollars, I don’t think anymore than that. What I was talking about was having actually a custom pair of beautiful grain leather loafers made.

RV: Do you remember the books that you read? You said you did a lot of reading there. What were you into at that point?

AB: That’s a long time ago and I really don’t remember. I’ll try to leave that percolating. Maybe tomorrow or something I can dredge up some answers. But I was reading a pretty broad array. I used to read *Playboy* magazine with a dictionary because as an engineer, I wanted from that experience with Professor Cannon, I really wanted to expand my language skills and so forth. Of course, I looked at the photographs, but I was really interested in reading. Hefner used to publish a lot of good authors back then and so they were interesting articles. They were articles about subjects I wouldn’t normally have otherwise been exposed to. I mean, they were political; they were social commentary. They were humor and psychology, more layman psychology of course, but I enjoyed that exposure. And the level of English language use was better than *Popular Science* or the other things I would have normally have been reading in my earlier life. So I read that and I used to read it with a dictionary so I could increase my vocabulary.

RV: Did the guys rip you and say, “Hey, Borra. What are you doing reading *Playboy* with a dictionary?” (laughter)

AB: You know, I’m sure some of them did. I probably didn’t do it in the ready room or something like that. But we always took a book with us because, again, at least the three officers on the crew, the copilot, the AC and the navigator, we’d all have college, and there weren't many that. There were some Korean [War era] and older guys era that didn’t have college gained commission. So there was always books to exchange and talk about and when we landed someplace, say not on the road somewhere where you stayed vigilant and in the cockpit, but say if you went from Saigon to Tan Son Nhut, I mean to Cam Ranh Bay or Da Nang, while you're there they have to offload the airplane and onload the airplane and fuel the airplane. So there’s time. Sometimes we’d just go underneath the airplane where it was cool, or if it’s at night you’d find some place where there’s some light and read. Sometimes you would just visit, but there was time for that.
and later on we moved from Tan Son Nhut up to Cam Ranh Bay and so you were right there on the water. And so on your off time, often we would just go down on the beach and just read and sun or whatever.

RV: How much time on average would you say that you would have? I guess it would depend on your cargo, but when you would land and offload and kind of wait.

AB: I’d say probably anywhere from 30 to 40 minutes. This was when you were on a safe base.

RV: Right. Of course.

AB: Right. Because the other places, often times you only unload and you try to scoot things out as fast as possible.

RV: What was Tan Son Nhut like?

AB: That was headquarters MACV so at the club you saw some rank. Those guys generally socialize, I think in a different area than we did, all the staff guys. Where I was was mostly aircrew. But it had a full range of activity. There were a variety of mess halls you could eat in besides the O Club and some of them, occasionally you’d run across a sergeant that really, there was one in particular that took real pride in his mess hall and you’d contribute 10 cents with your meal towards a condiment fund. And he would have bottled salad dressings. And he’d have spaghetti night and you’d get a free can of beer. Of course liquor was incredibly inexpensive. I think a 24 can case of beer mostly cost about $2.10 believe it or not. He’d have spaghetti night. I’m sorry, he’d serve steak with beer. He’d serve pasta with wine. He had seatbacks made for all the chairs that had squadron logos on them. He was obviously a guy that had just tremendous pride and what a delight to eat in his mess hall. Then there were others where the food was just atrocious.

RV: Such as?

AB: Do you know what chip beef on toast is?

RV: I can only imagine.

AB: In the military they often call it SOS for shit on a shingle. Well, this place would make it where they had put so little effort into it. First of all, it looked like gruel. I don’t think they used milk. And then when you’d put your fork into it, you’d hit dry pockets of flour that would just pop open and puff so you can imagine what that tasted like in your mouth. And then when they spooned, I learned you never blame the clerk.
You blame the manager. So we had Vietnamese that worked on the serving line and somebody’s got to teach them and insist that they do certain things. Well, if you don’t do that, they’re just going to do whatever is easiest and they’ll spend most of the time talking to one another. So you get really poor service. Then they would ladle the pancake syrup over the pancakes, your eggs and potatoes. And sometimes you would just want to scream but nobody cared. That’s why I said I was disappointed that the seniors didn’t ever. They never ate with us. They never looked at that, and you complained about it and they never did anything about it. And I had to get my crew [food] during the middle [of the night]. When we flew those night missions, you had to find some nourishment for them. And it was strictly up to you. They didn’t make any effort to help us get crew meals.

RV: They didn’t have a night mess hall?

AB: No. They had a flight line place, and I can't tell you how despicable the grease of what they served out of there was. And sometimes that’s all there was. And when you went out, like say, I remember being at Qui Nhon on the coast, at every base you eventually found, we all shared information. You always found out where there was someplace where you could get food for your crew. But we all had to do that. Nobody ever set up a system for that because they were, most of the [senior] officers stayed back in Clark, and they only came in country. The despicable thing they would do along with what we call the wing weenies was they would fly in the last day of the month on an insertion mission and then leave on that same airplane or the other airplane going back as the extraction mission on the next day and they would get combat pay for the two months and that was their contribution to the war. Now, I understand, some of those guys, they, not by choice, they were working at the wing and some of those guys were doing good jobs but you saw a lot of people who you knew were just hanging out back there avoiding coming over. And they got the same combat pay you did and they got the same credit for a tour. And that was disheartening.

RV: How much resentment was there?

AB: GIs always loved to gripe. I’m sure we did our share of that. You certainly couldn’t dwell there. You had the camaraderie so that you just looked at them with
disdain and you knew you and your buddies were doing the job and you took pride in
that.

RV: Sir, why don’t we go ahead and take a break for today?

AB: I was just going to ask you the same thing. That would be great.

RV: Okay, we’ll pick up tomorrow.
RV: This is Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Anthony Borra. Today is March 26, 2003. It’s about 8:37 am Central Standard time.

Mr. Borra, we’ve just been discussing before we were recording that you wanted to follow up on a few things that we discussed yesterday. Why don’t you go ahead?

AB: Okay. Good morning, Richard. Yesterday you had asked questions, which as I let them sit in my mind last night, I realize you had really been, if you will, probing or questioning for a sense of what formulated some of my reactions and responses and so forth of the Vietnam experience. I thought some more about incidences that had taken place in that regard. I mentioned that I had gone to SOS, Staff Officer School just before leaving for Vietnam. One of the major projects if you will, or activities that they had us do at SOS was what was at least then called the Air Force Power study, and I really was looking forward to that because I had supervised a lot of enlisted maintenance personnel at the radar site and had seen problems with the promotional system and we were losing, in significant numbers, really highly experienced and highly valuable technicians, electronic technicians to the beginning of what became the Silicon Valley industries. I really thought that when I got to SOS that somebody really wanted, somebody in the Air Force really wanted us to turn out important papers that would address issues that the Air Force should be aware of. I had eagerly looked forward to that and had already started doing preliminary work on it before I even went as soon as I knew that I was going to get to go. And what I found out when I got to SOS was the power study was about format and not about content. And it was about following instructions and creating a paper that satisfied guidelines on essentially how to write a particular type of report for more than just the standard Air Force, tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them and sit down and shut up, you know that you use for making a presentation. I understood the value of that. But it turned out the content of my report was of seriously little interest to anybody. That was really disappointing. I had some real thoughts about what we might do in the area of retention and it didn’t matter. That was
deeply disturbing because at this point I was still considering career and believing. You’d
also asked me about some of the books I had read, and that West Pointer that I had as a
mentor at the radar site, he had gotten me to start reading biographies of great leaders.
And one of the books I had read in that series, was the autobiography of General Lemay
called Mission with Lemay and the same author that wrote many of the Civil War books,
Canter McKinley or MacKinley Kantor.

RV: Bruce Catton C-A-T-T-O-N?

AB: No. It’s not Bruce Catton. I think it’s MacKinley Kantor. I have the book
upstairs and I’m sorry I didn’t go up and look at the title. But in any case, Lemay had
made strong the point that we shouldn’t quite the organization and, if you will, just be
critical of it, but we should do what we can to try to change the organization, and I
believed that. I thought, as he pointed out in his autobiography, that I could make a
difference too. Rather than just be upset with the Air Force and leave that I could help
make the changes that would make it better. Well, that became, if you will, it felt like it
became a pipe dream that I really couldn’t influence it. I left with that bitterness or sour
taste in my mouth when I went to Vietnam. So I think that my observations of what I
found in Vietnam were tainted or influenced by that.

RV: Did you feel that the Air Force was just simply too big to be changed in any
significant way by one or two people, one or two officers, not general officers?

AB: One is, I realized that some of the same things happen in industry. I was with
the major airline Delta. If you have the ear of the right people, you can be heard. But the
Air Force seemed to be so large and so ingrained, and I don’t want to take a lot of time to
go too far in that, but it was typical of something that happened under an Air Force
Maintenance system called 661. I don’t know if that’s still in business? It was a system
designed to accumulate data in the aircraft [maintenance end of the] business. It was a
SAC system and it was applied to ADC at the radar site. It truly was another matter of
trying to beat that square peg into the round hole regardless of whether it fit or not. We
could have modified it, we could have changed it, but everybody seemed to, if it came
from above, your only job, I mean, I understand about following orders in combat. But
that’s not what we’re talking about here. We’re talking about a maintenance system and
trying to get valuable feedback for supply and for reliability. And rather than modify the
system, everybody just fell in lockstep to just do it. And everybody knew it wasn’t producing good results, but if it came from above, you didn’t ever tell the Emperor he didn’t have any clothes on. I was going from an idealist, I was quickly having to confront the reality that you were but a small part, and no matter that you cared. It was very, very frustrating to add realism to what at the times seemed like fantasy.

RV: How did that effect your attitude in Vietnam once you had arrived?

AB: I started to develop a bit more cynicism, less willingness to just go with it. Because when I got there, it really mattered. People’s safety was at issue. Supposedly the objective was at issue. You know, I told you I got involved in this Daisy Cutter mission. I was in one of the early lead crews so I was coordinating with Army units and radar units on the ground. Many of them were Air Force because they would bring in the B-52 Arc Light [precision bombing] strikes. But I got to visit some Army installation and headquarters to brief on our mission, and also to coordinate with their people because they were generally taking [identifying] the targets and that sort of thing. I remember seeing a status board and the status board said, “Number of Rounds Authorized”, “Number of Rounds Expended”, and “Number of Rounds to be Expended.” I thought wait a second; this is war. You don’t just have to expend rounds. That didn’t make any real world sense.

RV: So you had like a quota.

AB: Exactly. Well because, I came to understand by talking to a couple of peer Army officers, it was akin to the Air Force. I was telling you I was a tenant unit at a SAC base, and as we got to the end of the fiscal year, SAC would have to drive around the base, their B-52s in the traffic pattern, low altitude with gear and flaps down for really the purpose of burning fuel so that they would get their same quota next year because if they didn’t use up their quota, it’d be reduced. And that seemed like a terrible waste of national resources when in fact we had a war in Vietnam. When I got to Vietnam, I quickly realized we were picking up, in this case, munitions that were delivered by ship to Saigon that had to go to Cam Ranh. Why they couldn’t have been taken there by the ship, that’s question one. But then what we did with the airplanes, we ferried them [and] the munitions from Tan Son Nhut to Phan Rang and then C-123s, because I wound up having made friends with, at Delta, with a 123 pilot that was there the same time and we
were talking about missions. They used to ferry those [same] munitions from Phan Rang to Cam Ranh. So they got credit for a sortie and we got credit for a sortie. The war was a war of numbers and when I mention Secretary McNamara’s role in that, you know we sort of got caught up in statistics.

RV: Do you think that was indigenous to the Vietnam War or do you think that was something else?

AB: It wasn’t indigenous to the Vietnam War, but we carried it into a combat situation, which to me that was almost, I mean, I can't use the word treasonous but it’s really pretty despicable. You’re using airplanes which are a valuable resource. You’re using crew, which are human lives and you’re doing this to accumulate statistics when we’re there to support the Army. Well that sortie could have either not been flown, and been easier on the equipment or whatever; but you can always justify this training. Well, you know we were getting, like I said, I flew 1,000 sorties in 20 to 22 months. I figured out I got plenty of training. I reread the book Catch-22 when I was there because I started to understand, you know, the futility of some of the things we were doing or the folly of some of the things we were doing. So a certain cynicism set in and like I said, because I would fly those air evac missions and see the consequences of what we were doing there, that bothered me deeply.

RV: Do you think that the war was run, or what degree do you think the war was run by the military industrial complex in the United States?

AB: That would be just wanton speculation on my part. I don’t have any data.

RV: What kind of feeling do you have about that?

AB: It’s easy to be cynical and perhaps buy into that. I was just disappointed that we were doing that with both the airplanes and the people. If we were doing that in the Air Force, I couldn’t help but wonder what else was going on.

RV: How much did that effect the morale of your unit or I guess you personally? You said that you became a bit more cynical perhaps. You did your job obviously, but you thought more about what was happening. How did it affect the morale of your unit and what was the overall morale of your unit in general?

AB: Well, people did what they had to do. I think amongst the officers there was more outspoken cynicism. We had a lot of sharp people. And our enlisted people were
just as sharp and they knew all that was going on. They had just learned to exist within the system. Again, I was fortunate, I always had a very high caliber crew. Most of the time I was there I had almost all instructors. So I had an instructor engineer and an instructor loadmaster and an instructor navigator. They knew what was going on but they had a lot of time invested in their careers, and they knew enough to just, it's amazing how tactful sergeants can be. I mean, because they have to watch an awful lot of incompetence on the part of you know, I remember when I was a young second lieutenant. They [young lieutenants] do some pretty, I mean, they’re innocent but they're ignorant [inexperienced] or not very brilliant actions or requests and they have to learn to tactfully tell you you don’t do it that way. So they’ve [the sergeants] learned how to exist in the system. I mean if I felt powerless, I know that they felt even more so because of the rank structure. So they worked around it. They’d do what they had to do to get the job done but in certain, (loud click) they learned how to work around the system.

RV: Did you all have enough supplies in the field for your airplane? I know you talked about the problem with getting food for your crew, but overall, how would you judge the system?

AB: No. You know, I never flew an airplane that was out of service or was any safety issue or anything was compromised for a lack of, maintenance was excellent and I always salute those people. They did a great job of maintaining those planes.

RV: We talked about Tan Son Nhut air base and what that was like. Tell me what Cam Ranh Bay was like?

AB: It was, of course very different. There wasn’t any downtown diversion. There was the natural, like the nature activities to enjoy. There was the beach. There were some isolated beaches all within the compound so they were well secured, where it was just peaceful and quiet and it was so easy to forget you were even in the war. It was an opportunity really to disconnect and catch your breath and at the same time it was ironic because you’re in a combat zone and you were playing on the beach or playing volleyball. I was a runner and would run on the beach. And then you know, you’d lay around and read, and it was a great way to take a break from what we were doing. And I often felt the sense of guilt because I knew the kids in the field weren’t getting it. But Air Force duty generally is a better duty and I guess that’s always been true.
RV: What about your barracks and where you live and that kind of thing?

AB: We had air-conditioned quarters for sleeping. They were blacked out and so you could go in there regardless of the time of day and get really adequate rest conditions. Food continued to be an issue but we eventually discovered that the Navy had a mess there. They had [Lockheed] P-3s [anti-submarine patrol planes] there, and they would fly in fresh fruits and vegetables from Sangle Point in the Philippines off Manila Bay almost every day. So you could go over there and not have to eat the Air Force mess food, which was not very good. We never brought in any food from the Philippines. That was a matter of command. I always felt like our seniors could have made things different but they didn’t.

RV: Tell me about the relationship you had with your unit, with your crew and then with the guys that you lived with in the barracks.

AB: Our barracks were not by any means what you think of when you think of Army barracks. For aircrew, the most you ever had to share with was one other crewmember. It’s hard to remember. I remember when we stayed at the Merlin Hotel in Saigon, you always shared the room. Usually the pilots shared the room and the navigator must have shared his room with another navigator. That’s just the way it traditionally was. But at Cam Ranh, I think we may have even had individual rooms. They were small, but at least you had privacy and that was very nice. The enlisted people shared quarters and so you had a loadmaster and engineer. I don’t know that they, I’m not sure whether they bunked together, or engineers. I think the engineers bunked together with an engineer from another crew. They sort of had their own little circle and then the loadmasters had their circle. But they shared similar quarters and they were air-conditioned. I don’t think there was much discrimination between the enlisted and officers in that regard. We generally all ate at the open messes with your crew. I think I had typical experience in that I had the same crewmembers for at least, you always had them for the full rotation in country for the 16 days, and it seemed like I know I had some of my engineers for long periods of time. So we would rotate in and out of country together, so we had fairly good crew integrity because I had instructors with me, we usually had one or more students, if you will student. They were just getting [an] in country check and they were highly experienced people. But they’d get an in country
check with us or some may have been in fact upgraded. So we’d almost always have extra people and I usually had a different copilot each time because I was giving in country checks and orientations, and so I’d usually have somebody new in the seat next to me. So I think maybe we had a little tighter bonding because we had to rely on each other to watch the students and we had maybe one more level of responsibility, and if you had a student even thought the person’s qualified, if they’re being observed, people do strange things under pressure or whatever. So you always had to watch them because they might lock up and that, that’s just part of the game.

RV: How did you deal with somebody who locked up?

AB: When I say locked up I mean just do something. I mean I’ve done it myself I think at times. Just do something you know that it’s not really right you do it. And you just have to follow up behind that. I’m not trying to make very much of an issue of that. I just think you just tend to be a little bit more watchful because of that.

RV: Were there any individuals with whom you became especially close?

AB: Well yes, one. It’s interesting I still, because of the Air Force Health Study, I still exchange cards with one of my flight engineers and have visited with him and also with my navigator, one of my navigator’s, he was an Air Force Academy graduate because we used to read a lot and we shared a lot of conversation, a lot of books. And like I said, because the copilots generally came and went, we [my navigator and I] tended to bond. It’s not uncommon for the pilots to bond tighter, but I wound up bonding with my navigator because he and I spent months together and we always had students. So I still am in regular communication with both of them.

RV: What would you all do for entertainment?

AB: Well, a number of us ran. You’d do some, certainly some socializing at the club together. You’d eat meals together and we would often lay around on the beach and read. Now, not with the enlisted people because they usually, they wanted, and I understood, they wanted to be away from the officers and kick up their heels and not have to be worried about “sir” [rank] and all that stuff. Those guys, again, I always tip my hat at them because they always maintained an appropriate air of decorum even though we were slogging through the same stuff together, they were just great. I always just held them in really high esteem because they could do their job and not let the formalities get
in the way of. I don’t want to say that. They did what they did and it was always
“Captain Borra,” always “Captain Borra” no matter what the situation and how they
remembered to say that when things were tense, it’s just the way, they were great. They
were really great people.

RV: What about drug and alcohol use amongst the men in your unit or just what
you witnessed in general?

AB: No. You know, of course, the military; I used to run an officer’s club at the
radar site. The military did a lot to promote alcoholism. I used to give away drinks at the
club sometimes because it was so cheap and I used to pay I think, $3.16. I don’t know
why that sticks out, for a bottle of Jim Beam. And you could sell that at 25 cents a shot
and still make money, you know.

RV: Did you do that? Did you buy a bottle and then sell shots?

AB: Oh yeah. We used to go to the Moffet Club and we were too small to have
our own liquor delivery; I, as a club officer. It was a small club at the radar site, but I
would go to Moffet and re-supply our bar and we’d have happy hour and sometimes the
drinks were free. I just made so much money. You didn’t have to pay for the building and
you didn’t have to pay for the utilities and so there wasn’t much overhead. And we paid
an airman or a sergeant on their off duty time some wage to tend bar, and so we had a
little officer’s club and I could sell the drinks like I said, very inexpensively.

RV: So you guys set up. Was it just you or was it the men in your unit set up an
external club for other officers to come in and drink and hang out?

AB: Well yes. It was a, officially under Air Force regulation, it was a constituted
officer’s club however that works. I mean, just because we worked our radar site didn’t
mean we couldn’t have, and the commander very much wants to have a place for social
interaction.

RV: So he didn’t care that you guys were running it and pocketing some cash?

AB: No. That was a designated additional duty. There was nothing, this was a
totally up front operation. When the inspectors came, one of the things they inspected
was the club and the club books. As long as you weren't cooking the books or you know
taking anything. We didn’t have to show a profit to any shareholders. All I had to do was
cover my expenses and as long as the Air Force didn’t have to spend any money, I mean,
again, the facilities were provided but that’s part of the base facilities. I assume that’s true for the club on the big base.

RV: How much profit did you make?

AB: Well, we didn’t. I always just.

RV: You distributed it.

AB: I don’t know what you. You know with profit, the only thing you would do was improve the club. You know, have new decorations made or something like that. I don’t remember now what you could requisition from supply, but you could get probably some furniture, but if we wanted nicer stuff, you could buy that yourself. I think, I mean that’s just totally normal. [No one profits from an O club operation. It is run for the members’ benefit but not to make money.]

RV: How many men were doing it with you?

AB: Doing what?

RV: Running this club.

AB: I was the club officer there. We’re all, yes we all worked at the radar site so the radar site, when I got there, there were probably a half dozen officers of which I was one, and by the time I left there because we put that back up intercept control system, we probably had a dozen to 15 officers at the maximum. That was my additional duty was to run the club.

RV: Now, this was in Vietnam or California?

AB: No, no California at the radar site, I’m sorry

RV: Oh, okay at the radar site.

AB: I didn’t run a club in Vietnam. Now, there were some things that went on in Vietnam you know that were done illegally like they were booking shows, and this scandal happened when I was there. They were booking shows, some club officer and his NCO decided they could make money, and they were booking shows that were fictitious and then paying some agent. I think it was the lieutenant’s wife back in the States. She set up some bogus company, [an] entertainment company, and they would send checks, pay checks, write checks to the company for these shows and I don’t know, somehow his supervisor went one night to see the show that he had signed some paperwork for and there wasn’t any show. And then he started looking into it and he had
the OSI look into it and they found out. There were lots of things done in Vietnam that I
guess like any war, construction projects and other things.

RV: Did you get to see any USO shows?

AB: Yes. I actually hauled USO performers around. That was always interesting.

Again, this is sexist, but you get to see a round eye. Of course that was always a big, for
some reason, a big treat. There was plenty of beautiful Asian women but it wasn’t very
often you’d see a round eye.

RV: How much contact with women was there for you?

AB: Very little. You could go, like I said, in Saigon you could go to Tu Do Street
and do that. And on the base at Saigon some of the officers, I always suspected they were
MACV officers who were there sort of, you know, all the time. Some of them seemed to
have live-in ladies, but we generally didn’t other than on the base there or in downtown
Saigon. Cam Ranh Bay, the only women you saw were civilian Asian employees who
worked in the mess halls or something like that or cleaned the barracks and that sort of
thing.

RV: Did you have a lot of contact with those civilians who were cleaning the
barracks and working?

AB: Well, the only time that happened of any consequence was I did a special
tour for a month or so at Chu Lai. I ran the command post on a shift basis, for, actually I
was a duty officer for, and I don’t know how this happened, but we were tasked to man
the command post for a C-130 outfit out of Taiwan. Why they couldn’t do it themselves,
I don’t know. I spent a month there running that command post and so I lived in quarters,
I think by myself. Either that or we were on shift and you never even saw the other
person. That’s probably what it was. So we had a woman that cleaned the house for us or
the barracks. It was one of those Quonset huts. So I would see her often enough. And she
spoke broken English and I was able to communicate with her. She was always very
intent on protecting my stuff. It was funny, one day I took my alarm clock and for some
reason I stuck it in the drawer or stuck it in my bag. And when I came back to the room,
she was berating this work party of Vietnamese laborers. She thought they had taken my
clock. So she was protecting my stuff. I was deeply embarrassed that I caused her to lose
face since she was yelling at these people and they hadn’t done anything.
RV: Did you pay her or did the Air Force?

AB: No, no. That was just the Air Force you know just had the rooms cleaned and linens changed and that sort of thing just like if you were staying in a hotel.

RV: Was that your main contact with Vietnamese civilians?

AB: No. While I was at Chu Lai on my off duty time, I volunteered to go out with the civic actions group, and we went out to the hamlets around the area and worked on [projects like] their schoolhouse. Like in this one village we refurbished the schoolhouse and put up a flagpole, and then we would some days go out and distribute food or various personal items to, again, remember I mentioned all the refugees. So we would take items to give out to the people, some of who were quite desperate. That was a real eye opener for me because I got to, being in the village and through the interpreter and because the village chief spoke some English, I got a real sense. I was there one day and we working on the schoolhouse, and a Vietnamese politician, I believe he was a senator, came up from Saigon. And in the conversation before and after and watching the interaction while he was there, which was a brief visit because he wanted to get out of there before dark [smart man]. I came to have a real, at least for me, I felt a real understanding that the form of government that we were trying to put in place there was in fact a puppet government. My understanding came to be, right or wrong, that the Vietnamese people cared deeply about family, especially their children, about the land, and about living their culture. And we were destroying that if you will out of, like the *Quiet American*, out of our good intentions. What we were doing was, if you remember the strategic hamlets, we were forcing people to leave their land and come in to these, and that’s what this was. This was a hamlet. We were forcing the people to come into the hamlet and that’s not where they wanted to be. They wanted to be on their ancestral land. And, Richard, I couldn’t get any sense that they cared a thing about democracy, about what was going on in Saigon, about electing politicians who they certainly didn’t know. And like, we know all too well that politicians come out to get votes and whatever that takes, to say whatever needs to be said. The average Vietnamese didn’t relate to that. Those were our ideals and I really wonder, you know, what we’re trying to do in the Middle East, whether that’s really going to take. I know certainly people want freedom but in the case of the Vietnamese, they wanted the freedom to live the kind of life they had lived, and we were
destroying that. So that was only our concept that we were bringing them this wonderful
gift from the West. I find myself in the same quandary now because of course I support
or men and women in uniform over there because they’re being asked to do the job
they’re doing, and yet I’m not so sure that our reason for being there is well thought
through and that we’ll be successful.

RV: How possible do you think it is to teach other people who don’t have a
democratic tradition such as the South Vietnamese, what democracy is, how it works and,
then this is how its good for you? How feasible is that?

AB: We’re certainly not going to do that in Iraq in a short stay. I think that’s a
cultural shift, that’s a paradigm shift, and paradigm shifts don’t happen in any brief
period of time. I think it would take probably more than a generation, and so what do we
normally consider that? Ten years?

RV: 20, 25 years.

AB: Yeah. 25 years. So you know in Vietnam we certainly didn’t create any shift.
I mean people didn’t want to live under communism. Hell, Communism is a failed
system and that’s all too apparent now. And there was nothing laudable about what the
North Vietnamese wanted to do as we certainly saw evidence later. But what we were
trying to do was equally; it was not self-government. I mean, it was just like what the
British did in, you know, in the late 1800s when they were trying to bring the wonderful
enlightenment of the British Empire to what had been the Middle Eastern Empires and
propping up the Ottoman Empire with really an installed government. You can't put in a
government that the people don’t want and the people didn’t want what was in Saigon. At
one point, we had put Catholics in charge of a Buddhist country. And I know I don’t need
to tell you this, you’re the historian.

RV: I want to know what you think.

AB: But all those things as I did my reading and, you know, as I, again, I was
fortunate. I was serving with intelligent people, both enlisted and some of my enlisted
people were voracious readers, and of course some of the officers were as well. It just
became much of the discussion because we were trying to install a system that didn’t fit.

RV: So you all talked about this?

AB: Oh, yeah.
RV: What would the civilians say to you if you could communicate through a
translator or what would you tell them when you were in these villages doing the civic
work?

AB: Well, I mean, you know, Asians are very self-effacing. Their conversation
tends to be very indirect. But if I talked to Vietnamese officers, if there was nobody else
around, they would smirk about the quote “institutions of government” that were in
Saigon. They wouldn’t necessarily, they were always very tactful, but they certainly held
in disdain many of the senior politicians. And they did not want communism. I mean, I
understood that. There was never anything wrong with us trying to keep the communists
from taking over the country, but I can't say that I had as much conversation with
Vietnamese as I would have liked. Language barrier and we didn’t have that much
opportunity to mix with them.

RV: What did you think of the ARVN or the indigenous forces of South Vietnam?

AB: There were some conspicuously elite, proud, units and there were the
conscripts and that was a joke. They were ragtag and I watched the Vietnamese officers
beating a couple of soldiers because they wouldn’t get on the airplane. I mean, they
didn’t want to go. They were conscripted for the duration, and I don’t know what it was
like for their pay and so forth, but they had dragged their families with them. I can't
imagine that they had any morale to speak of other than pitiful morale. The elite units
were of course completely different and the Vietnamese Air Force officers, their pilots,
they strutted around like bantam roosters.

RV: Did you have a lot of contact with their pilots?

AB: No, no. Not really. They were great if you needed air support if you could get
them but mostly it was our own guys would come out in the Sky Raiders, which is a
World War II era prop plane. That was the best protection you could have. Jet fighters
like the F-4 and F-100 were a sad excuse for support when you went into a hot area
because they couldn’t stay with you. That’s where fascination with the jet airplane was
irrational or what was the word for this cycle, irrational exuberance? Everything needed
to be jet powered. Well, the best airplane you could have on your wing was a piston
powered Sky Raider because it could fly at your speed and stay right with you and be
there when you needed them.
RV: How much contact did you have with home while you were there? You said you wrote letters.

AB: Right. And there was a wonderful opportunity through MARS [Military Affiliated Radio Systems] radio. And those folks were great and we eventually had some single side band on the airplane so you could call and get connections [back to the States], and I remember, it was the Christmas/New Year period of ’68. I was orbiting off Nha Trang. I couldn’t land because the grunts on the ground had gotten themselves inebriated and were shooting their weapons in the air and they were under the approach path and they had to hold all traffic. It was at night. It wasn’t much traffic. So we were orbiting off Nha Trang and I was able to call home and talk to my wife and that was just sort of memorable. I couldn’t land because of our own troops.

RV: Were you able to keep up with news back in the United States at all?

AB: My dad was pretty good about sending articles, some. Because we were in the Philippines, we had more than just access to Stars and Stripes, so we were able to get a better sense of the news. I got to see some television back there. I didn’t stay very current although some how through, GIs pass information, one to the other and of course it gets filtered but you seemed to stay abreast of much of what was going on.

RV: Did you ever take any R&Rs?

AB: I got to take one to Hong Kong.

RV: What was that like? Were you alone or with your wife?

AB: No, with my wife. You know, that was where you had to go through this ordeal back at Clark to get a slot because you weren't there all the time. And that was one of the things that it seemed like the aircrew should have, at least a certain number of slots should always have been reserved for the aircrews because we were in country and everybody that was back at Clark had first pick at all the stuff. It didn’t seem appropriate. And a lot of my enlisted people didn’t get to take any R&R like that. I thought that was really unfair. I was able to pay somebody to stand in line for me because I wasn’t there. That’s not right. Anyway, so I went to Hong Kong. You know, the first time in Hong Kong was, it was just overwhelming. I mean you talk about capitalism and consumerism. So it was great to have good food. We had good food at Clark, but it was interesting to have more exotic cuisine there. I used to get to go into Manila and I liked doing that. Like
I said, you got to mingle with any level of Filipinos beside you, certainly not the Presidential Palace level, but I remember going to events at the top of one of the Sheraton’s [Hotel] in Manila and just treated royally. But Hong Kong: shopping. I had two suits made. You get fitted in the afternoon, and the next morning they’re back at your room with two finished suits and they do the final fitting and then that afternoon you have your suits all finished and ready to go home. All of that was again, a real disconnect from what was going on in Vietnam.

RV: Did the R&R help you when you got back to Vietnam?

AB: No. In my case, I think R&R was much more important for folks like Army and Marine that were in country on the ground and didn’t get to have much playtime. For me it was incidental. I don’t think it made any difference but I think it was much more important to those other guys.

RV: Did the war change your religious views at all or affect them in any way?

AB: Yes. I think it; it certainly didn’t strengthen for me. I only can say this for me; it didn’t strengthen any religious views. As a matter of fact, it may have destroyed what spirituality I had. I’m talking this off the top of my head. I haven’t really thought this through. I’m at a different place now in my life. I’m older and I’m on a spiritual quest. Let’s say it this way. That was a period in which my idealism came crashing to the ground. I think, now that you’ve asked the question, I suspect that it had an impact on my spirituality and my religion. I was always in a religious quandary. I was raised Catholic. I never fit in with the ceremonial part, and so I really rejected the religion, if you will. I mean I rejected the spirituality part. Okay, so I rejected Christianity. But I didn’t pick anything else up. I just left it. I didn’t take on some hostile view. I just was uninvolved. I went to, I got a scholarship to Manhattan College. Ironically, it was a Catholic college. I thought, “Well, here I am at the college level and I’ll really be able to engage Catholicism on a more intellectual level.” Well, it was catechism all over again even though I took four years of theology, and it was like stuffing castor oil down. I just did what I needed to do to pass the classes and get on with other things. So that was unfulfilling. I think the cynicism that evolved and like I said, the destruction of my idealism, and it’s not necessarily bad to have your idealism squelched in the sense that I came to see the world as it really was and not as I made it up to be. I’m not a cynic now. I
still am very committed to community activities, community projects and that sort of thing. But it’s from a different place now. I have a deeper regard for life and for other people’s views. So I think it made me stronger in many, many ways but not in the ways I thought it would. So it was a real growing and maturing process. So I left Manhattan without any more, maybe even more cynical, and I’ve just left that all alone. But in the reading I did, one of the other books that I remember reading while I was there was Chaim Potok’s The Chosen. And if you remember, the rabbi’s son really has to grapple with making choices, his own personal choices, and I guess that spoke to me because I had to make some choices and one of those was deciding not to pursue a military career. But that was influenced also by family. My marriage was coming apart, and I saw my wife was on Valium and alcohol and I just didn’t like what was going on.

RV: I don’t know if this is too personal a question, but do you think the war and your just being over in Southeast Asia and your duties, being away for those periods of time in country, what you described what life was like back at Clark; how much affect did that have upon you relationship with your wife and your family?

AB: I think it had a great deal of impact and mostly on her. She didn’t deal with it well and that just really spilled over. Relationships always have their great points and their not so good points. I think for her it was more than she could handle. And she didn’t do very well with it. So, yes it was a contributant. I don’t know that I’d still be married to her if I hadn’t gone to Vietnam. I think there were other issues as well, but that certainly caused that to come to be.

RV: How soon after the war were you divorced?

AB: Not until 1974. I came back in almost the end of ’69. We had serious, serious problems.

RV: Did you ever witness any racial issues during your time in country?

AB: No. We had very few African Americans or people of color in the Air Force units. I just didn’t see many. We had, I don’t remember that we had any officers that were. From Delta, I have African American pilot friends who were in 130s but I didn’t know any of them there. So when I was there, I don’t remember there were any officers in the squadron that were African American, and the few sergeants we had were few and I never had any of them on my crew so I never even got to know any of them. I didn’t
witness any. But I hauled a lot of Marines and Army folks around of color. But I was never aware. I was still pretty naïve about that I guess, although I knew what went on in the South, but in the military, I was not aware of it. I was naïve of racial tensions.

RV: Would you like to take a break?
AB: I’m fine. Do you need to take a break?
RV: No. I’m fine. I just wanted to check.
AB: I’m outside with the dogs sitting around in the sun.
RV: Let’s talk about the tactics you used in the field in your flying. You described a typical day at the base and kind of your rotation of hours and everything. Tell me what would happen in the air. First, did you prefer flying at nighttime or daytime?

AB: I liked flying in the daytime. It was more interesting and you got to go to the short runways. Again, I was young and eager and I wanted very much to always be on the board assigned to the hardest, toughest missions and the shortest airports because they were the ones that demanded the best of you. Nighttime was pretty much a piece of cake because generally when we landed we always blacked out the airplane, turned off all the exterior lights and you’d see the tracers coming up, but you know. Two things got me. You always have that ignorance or naïveté of youth that, “Anything is never going to happen to me” and the other is you know, “I’m invincible.”

RV: Did you really believe that?
AB: I don’t think I disbelieved that. I didn’t go around saying, “I’m invincible,” but I never expected anything would ever happen to me. First of all, I was too good (laughter). How could they dare do that? I had my airplane hit a couple of times and I lost a prop and that sort of thing, but that was just, that was part of the excitement, if you will.

RV: Would you say that was the most difficult experience you had while flying was getting hit and losing a prop?
AB: It wasn’t just getting hit. It was when we came back to Tan Son Nhut. I had 35,000 pounds of gravel rocks on my airplane in barrels. We were taking them to the Army over at Song Be for a gun emplacement so they could stabilize the pad that they put these 175mm howitzers on. So I have a heavily loaded airplane, and I come back to Tan Son Nhut on three engines, and that’s fine. I trained for that all the time. And we

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make the approach and here I am coming down on short final and they had a trainee in
the tower and he clears an airplane onto the runway in front of me. So now I had to do
the three engine go around at heavy weight. That really was not pleasant and I was really
quite upset, and everybody knew about it when I got done with that flight. I learned not
to chew on the people too much but I was really upset because I mean, it put my whole
crew in our airplane and the people in the other airplane at great danger.

RV: How did your first experience combat?

AB: I guess wide-eyed.

RV: Was it when you were shot at in the plane?

AB: Yeah. You know, you realize you’re seeing puffs of smoke and you realize
people are shooting at you, but you’re busy. I guess that’s one of the things about being
aircrew. I don’t know what it was like for the engineer who’s just sitting there watching.
I was always busy with the airplane or my duties because when you’re at lower altitude,
you’re definitely busy. But I remember turning around. We were dropping at the A Shau
valley to Americal Division I believe, and we sadly saw one of our airplanes get hit and
they had ammunition aboard. And as they tried to land on the valley floor, their airplane
was burning, the airplane exploded and was just gone. I turned around and looked at the
engineer and his eyes were, and he was a master sergeant. He was an old guy, a neat guy.
And I think he was the ranking flight engineer in our squadron. And his eyes, I had never
seen a human’s eyes look that big. I realize that for him, he was seeing it as an older
person, and he wasn’t seeing it as an adventurer. I don’t know that I was standing there
looking at it as an adventurer, but it was just part of what went on and it was horrible, but
you were too busy and we were getting ready to air drop and I had to get back to what we
were doing. We were in a stream of planes flying up the valley.

RV: Did you think about that later? How did that kind of thing affect you when
you weren't busy?

AB: No. I don’t. It’s just one of those memorable things that happened, but I don’t
know that I reflected on it a great deal, I mean. Because of the air evac missions, I got to
see a lot worse.

RV: Tell me about that. How did you deal with seeing those wounded and seeing
the dead?
AB: Yes, the body bag flights were the most sobering. The first time, and I was fairly new there, we went out and picked up body bags, and they all had to be loaded and we couldn’t stay on the ground very long, so we just all got out and loaded. I remember I was the copilot at that point, the aircraft commander and I. Hold on. I’ve got to get the dog. He just grabbed some of my notes out of my hand (talking to dog). Come over here Suhka, Suhka. I’m sorry this has to be on the recording. You don’t have to. Thank you, out, out. Thank you. We picked up a body bag, my aircraft commander and I, and what remains were in the bag just rolled to the center of the bag and we just looked at each other. And there is. My son is a police officer. He’s had to go to crime scenes where someone has been dead for some period of time in a house, and as he describes it also, there’s something about the smell of death that is just- there’s no escaping it. There’s no, there’s nothing else like it. That’s the way all of these body bags had that odor of course, and sometimes there would be body fluids that would seep out through a, like maybe where the zipper was or something, and that was pretty awful to think of what had happened to some of those kids that were in the bag. Then when you did the litter flights, air evacuation. One: you had to marvel at these wonderful flight nurses and medics and doctors that went with us, and how they cared for these kids. In spite of all the rush that had to be going on and everything else, they still cared for them in an obvious loving way and that was quite touching. But it was also to see the fear, the fright on some of their faces.

RV: The medical personnel or the---

AB: No, the wounded who were not unconscious. I mean, just understandably scared. I imagine, start wondering what’s going to happen to them. What their life is going to be like? How they’re going to manage with whatever has happened to them? You know, talk about feeling awkward and inadequate to say anything meaningful. What do you say to somebody that’s obviously just lost a limb? Everything’s going to be okay? That’s so foolish. That’s one of the very humbling and real feelings of being unable to measure up to the task. Somehow, I thought as an officer I was supposed to know the right thing to say. And I didn’t have any right things to say. Those were pretty hard times, if you will.

RV: What did you say or how much conversation did you have?
AB: Well, generally, I learned to say things like, “We’re going to get you to the big hospital as soon as we can. We’ll try to keep you...” I mean what I learned to say to my passengers on Delta, “We’re going to do all we can to make this flight as pleasant as possible. We’re going to get you where you’ll get even better help. The folks here, these are really great nurses and they’re really going to care for you on this flight.” I mean, those sort of things, just something that was real, something that I could deliver rather than wanting to say something to soothe their anxiety, but all I could do was try to put them at ease for what was coming next and that sort of thing.

RV: What would they say to you?

AB: Not much. Maybe, “Thank you, sir,” or something like that. Again, it’s always interesting that even under that duress, a young soldier will still, “Thanks, Captain,” or something like that. Some of those guys would say you know, “Gung ho, sir,” or something like whatever their unit morale call was. And of course, hell, how could you do anything but just have such respect for them. They were putting as brave a face as they could on and they were scared.

RV: How often would you pick up casualties?

AB: Maybe you’d get an air evac flight once a rotation in country but not necessarily. And sometimes you might, you know, and you didn’t do body bags very many times. A lot of that was done with the choppers; so, just occasionally, not regularly.

RV: What kind of things would you haul around? Give me an example of the stuff that you carried. I’ve heard all kinds of stories.

AB: Well, you heard about the rocks and of course you heard about the Kotex. We hauled huge boxes of Kotex, and they used those to swab the gun barrels. Of course that was always up for a few laughs, especially the first time you did that. Hauled gun barrels. That was interesting. Two 175 mm howitzer gun barrels are about all you can put in the airplane just because of their weight. Hauled trucks and trailers and pallets of food, pallets of napalm. We I mean we used to, we had a mission in which we dropped pallets of jellied gasoline with igniters and they would put out a carpet of fire.

RV: So you actually dropped napalm.

AB: Well, yes. This was called, I don’t know that it was called napalm, but it seemed to have the same effect. Only a GI humor would understand this, but we used to
call that Operation Toast and you’d go out with usually a flight of three and you’d all
three drop this out on an area that the Army wanted. I dropped daisy cutters. We’d carry
two of those and they were 14,000 pounds each.

RV: Tell me about doing that. How would you do that?

AB: It was a really, I mean it was a real pilot mission. It required extraordinary
crew discipline because everybody had to be very focused on what you were doing, and
you had to fly. You linked up with, remember talking about before, it’s called Pencil
[beam] radar. They were the folks that got it in the B-52 Arc Light strikes. So it was a
very narrow beam radar so they could keep you on the beam just about all the time rather
than rotational 360 degree sweeps. And so they would vector you in very precisely and
you had to fly the airplane within a few degrees of heading and a few feet of altitude and
a few knots of air speed because you went into the area first and did what we called the
wind run. Using the Doppler radar we had on the aircraft, you could determine the winds
at several different altitudes and we dropped just above small arms fire range. But you’d
have to drop down below that first to do a wind run. You wouldn’t necessarily do it right
over the target, but near enough to the target that it would be valid. Then you’d give that
information to the controller. Actually, our navigator plotted what we call and offset
point, so that as the weapon went out, it went out with a small drogue [para]chute and it
[the weapon] had a known trajectory and you would offset so that you would have a drop
point before that. You would give that information to the radar controller and then he
would bring you in to the actual designated target, which he had plotted on his screen.

Then at the predetermined point, you would release the weapon. And then the airplane,
when the rear weapon exited the airplane, you used a parachute extraction system to pull
it out so it was on, they were mounted on what they called married pallets, two pallets
together because it was such a long weapon. When the first weapon left the aircraft, there
were some gyrations in the airplane as the CG changed, but it was when you released the
front weapon, which was too big to move inside the airplane because if you had any
turbulence or anything, you could easily have a loadmaster lose a foot or something like
that. So you had to extract the forward most weapon from that [forward] position. Well,
as that much weight transited the length of the cargo compartment, you imagine what’s
going on with the CG of the airplane. So, you know it was a challenging mission. You
had to be selected for it, and my whole crew felt very proud, if you will, that we were
good enough to be one of the few crews designated to do the mission. For those reasons, I
always had good morale on my crew because we always did things like that and we were
short field qualified, so we would go into the shortest places and the hottest places.
Generally the younger officers got passed with all that just because your reaction time
and so forth, you know, experience, yes. So you didn’t take a brand new guy, but, you
know, I understood, as you get to be a senior captain at Delta, you start to appreciate what
the quickness of reaction time and so forth is of young pilots. You have experience and
they have their bag of tricks as well.

RV: What was the most difficult experience you had while flying?
AB: In Vietnam?
RV: Yes, sir. And then in general if you want to talk about that too.
AB: Probably, we took a munitions resupply to an Army Special Forces camp
near the Cambodian border near Khiem Cuong. They were under siege and they were
running out of ammunition, so they really needed what we had on board and the Air
Force had assigned us those damned F-4s as air cover. And as I indicated, they can’t do
very much because they make a pass and then while they’re gone, you’re just a sitting
duck until they can come around [again], and it takes them a while to make that big circle
that is necessary for their aircraft. So finally these guys couldn’t stay with us any longer.
And we couldn’t land while it was as hot [with enemy fire] as it was. And so they left and
the crew, we were waiting for some Sky Raiders but then there was sort of a lull and I
got, I don’t, you know, I don’t remember how I did this, but I got everybody’s assent that
we would deliver while we had the chance even though we didn’t have any air cover.
And so we did and we landed, and as soon as we landed, the VC started walking in
mortar rounds trying to find us, if you will. And the crew just performed admirably, and
we unlocked the pallets and opened the tailgate and I think [the flight] engineer, maybe
the navigator ran back and helped them. And we kept the airplane ready to go and then as
soon as they had that configuration back there, we rolled down the runway and just
spilled the pallets out on the runway as we left. It was challenging and it was tense. And
we got the goods to the guys and they were extremely grateful. And when we got
airborne the Sky Raiders arrived and then they, they worked over the VC position and
then Special Forces were able to get their material. And so it was, like I said, for those reasons, a sense of satisfaction that we had done a good job. That’s probably one of the incidents that I remember most.

RV: Did you want to talk about in general in all of your time of flying, a difficult incident?

AB: I’ve been pretty fortunate. I don’t have a lot of harrowing stories. The Air Force folks and Delta maintenance technicians who were an incredible group of, you know, the word’s overused, but professional. My airplanes have always been well maintained. Its just circumstance. I had a wind sheer incident before I retired. That’s exciting.

RV: With Delta?

AB: Yeah, with Delta. You reach into the bottom of the bag of tricks and fortunately we get excellent training, and the Air Force did the same. We had the resources to do an escape maneuver and the passengers never even. They knew that we were in weather but they never knew how severe the situation was or how tense it was. That’s what the crew does.

RV: How would you evaluate the enemy?

AB: The only enemy I ever personally saw were POWs that we were taking down to Con Son. It’s an island down off the Delta [Mekong] off the coast. I think that’s where they had what were known as the tiger cages. And they were scared, and I mean they were young and they certainly didn’t look any different than the other Vietnamese and they looked just as scared as any young American kid I’d ever seen. Other than that, I really don’t know anything about the enemy. It was always just puffs of smoke or red tracer fire coming up from the ground and I never saw anybody. I made some notes separate.

RV: Okay, why don’t you go ahead with your notes, sir.

AB: Okay. You ready to start?

RV: Sure.

AB: You had asked me earlier about some events that were seminal for me if you will. Two come now to mind. One is, one of my, remember I told you when I was in pilot training I lived in this apartment complex, and a couple of instructors lived there and not
the one that helped me personally, but another one that lived there, his name was John 
Quinn, the kind of guy that has just a click in his heels and in a bathing suit he looked 
sharp, you know. He just had a bearing about him that was sort of captivating. If you 
wanted to cast a fighter pilot, you’d cast John Quinn. He’s just that kind of guy. He’s a 
great guy. He’s just easy going at least on the outside as far as I knew him and all, and 
John lived there with his young wife. He went to Vietnam while I was at Dyess and then I 
caught up with him over there. And I used to party with him at that club at Cam Ranh. 
Our tour overlapped, I guess actually a good bit. And he was the one who used to refer to 
me as the shoebox driver. Those guys [the fighter pilots in his unit] used to do things like 
they’d pull a couple of tables together and open up a couple of cans of beer and wet them 
[the tables] down and then they’d do carrier landings. They’d jump and slide on their 
chests. And the idea was to somehow stop before you fell off the other end. Those were 
the kinds of things they used to do in that club. It’s stupid and silly, but you know in that 
environment, it was a big pressure release valve. So I’d usually, during my rotations, go 
over to John’s area and look him up, and one day I walked into his hooch and I think they 
had a slightly bigger building and there were like four rooms and a common area. And I 
walked in, and I went to go in John’s room and it wasn’t John’s room. All the stuff was 
different and something was really odd. And I started to leave. I thought maybe I’d gone 
in the wrong building and somebody was coming in. And I asked him, I said, “Am I in 
the wrong building?” or whatever I said, it’s like I say, memory. And I wanted to put that 
on tape that all of this is memory and I understand memory really gets colored over time. 
So whoever listens to this if anybody ever does, that should have been in the front. But 
John had been shot down and he was dead. They were working a target and they took .50 
caliber, and I got to talk to his back seater who said the last thing he saw was John 
slumped over in the front cockpit and the airplane was obviously going down, and he 
couldn’t get any response from John. And so he set, I think he said he tried to set the 
system so that, I think the back seater punched out first anyway so that the rocket exhaust 
doesn’t go over the back guy. So the back seater goes out first. I don’t know whether 
John’s body ever left the airplane or it crashed with the airplane. I don’t remember that 
now. But John died. And so that was, I felt compelled to go and write his wife some sort 
of note. I didn’t know her well, but out of respect for John. And Richard, that was the
hardest, at that point in my life, probably one of the more difficult things I ever had to do. And you know I eventually said something to the effect of, as trite as it was, “John loved to fly. John loved what he was doing. He was proud of what he was doing...” and some drivel like that was about all could crank out. I was almost sorry I sent it, and yet I felt like I needed to send something whether it had any meaning to her or not. Because at the same time, knowing what I was already knowing about what was going on, I’m not sure I fully. But I could honestly write that. Maybe it was just that I was angry that I couldn’t write something more because I really didn’t feel like there was anything more that was truthful and not hurtful to say.

RV: Right. Did you ever talk to her after that?

AB: No. I don’t even remember where she lived. Somebody in the squadron was nice enough to get his address and send it out for me. Then another event that was, that you asked me about religion and that whole process of what happened to my idealism. I was at the club at Tan Son Nhut and I believe he was, I know he was Army. I believe he was a warrant officer. He was a helicopter guy. Somehow I don’t know, I wound up at a table with him and maybe he knew one of my guys in my squadron. I don’t remember how it all came together. But anyway, he wound up eating with us. And he got to telling us about flying out over the rice paddies and how, and understand that they saw things. I mean, for example, they had a helicopter that was on the ground and a farmer just came up and as I understand it, jammed like a hoe or something into the tail rotor which then broke the tail rotor and disabled the helicopter and it wound up sinking into the rice paddy. The point was, they never knew who was the enemy. But he started telling stories about they would just go along and no matter who was out there in the rice paddy, just raking them with machine gun fire. And that didn’t feel right. That’s when we already had the awful incident for example where a number of American servicemen were on Tu Do Street and the VC strapped some explosives, plastic on a child and sent him toddling, and it was a very young child evidently, toddling into the bar and everybody was coo-cooing this little kid and then he exploded. I can understand that those guys saw that sort of thing. I’m sure you’ve heard other stories or read stories in all the reading you’ve done about some of the things that went on over there. Some of them were just mind
numbing. But listening to this one officer talk about this machine-gunning people in the
rice paddy, what could I be proud of, of what we said we were doing in Vietnam?

RV: What did you say to him?

AB: I don’t remember. I try not to think about that. I do know that I eventually
got up and left in disgust. Other guys, I mean, I’m sorry to say, but I know guys that were
in the first Gulf War incident who were just so gleeful as they were showing. Some of
these guys were reservists Delta guys who’d gone over there, and would drop shooting
ammunitions into those building with the precision weapons. You know, I understand
they were proud of the fact that they delivered those weapons, but as we came to find out,
not everybody that were in those building were combatants. You know, and you add into
that the pejoratives, “rag head” and so forth. We were doing the same thing over there.
They [the South Vietnamese] were our allies but they were always referred to as gooks. I
don’t know if any other GIs told you the joke about the, I mean I think it’s a joke. We
were no longer going to refer to our esteemed allies as gooks. We would in the future
only refer to them only as worthy Oriental gentleman, which GIs immediately turned into
“WOGs”. So you know that play on GI humor. But there is, I guess there’s always a
problem. I’m sure it happened to the British and the French when you are in somebody
else’s country, and you look at them with a certain disdain because you’re the prevailing
power. And, you know, we did that there. I had one navigator who was an extremely
intellectual person. He really was a misfit. He was so overqualified for what he was
doing. And the 130 was, for a navigator in country was a really sad excuse for him at the
time. We mostly could have done without a navigator, but here’s this guy.

RV: Wait hold on. Why do you say that?

AB: Well, because you did most of the navigation by map reading, and the pilots
did it. It was mostly a pilot mission. You, know you, need a navigator in a C-130 for over
water. I mean we had nav-aids over there. The navigators mostly didn’t have much to do.
They did a lot of the paperwork. My navigator, the Air Force captain guy used to kid
about in retirement we were going to sit around and read the old cargo manifests and
stuff. There was a lot of make work for them because they didn’t have much to do. And a
lot of missions could have been flown without them. I think a lot of them didn’t have
very much extensive job satisfaction. I think they did a great job of maintaining high
morale in spite of. The other four members on the crew were always busy with real, real, duties and most of the time the navigators didn’t have much to do. And if you’re a smart person as you are, you know how difficult it is to sit at idle for long periods of time. And they maintained a good attitude. Anyway, this guy was extremely intellectual, and one day we were having a conversation between the pilots and I think the engineer or something. Somebody said something about gooks, and I don’t remember his name but he really forced me to confront what had just been said. That made me really understand. There was nothing funny about that at all because it really said something about the underlying attitude we, the Americans, were bringing into that conflict. We didn’t think very highly of the Vietnamese. You asked me before, and I think that’s largely true because it was not a sophisticated, by our standards, culture. We didn’t understand that culture. It’s a very sophisticated culture. We just couldn’t see that. You know you’re there to, most guys, it’s there to put in 365 days and get the hell out of there and get out of there alive and not go back home in a body bag or [on] a stretcher. That cynicism really played out. So there was racism, but it was racism towards our host. I don’t know that there was any. I mean hell; we had warm embracement with the Aussies that were there. I’m trying to think of whatever allies. I didn’t have much interaction with the ROKs, the Koreans, maybe again because of the cultural and certainly the language. But with the Aussies, of course, they’re a great bunch of people, but so are the others a great bunch of people. We just have this perhaps inability culturally and language wise to communicate with them. I don’t think, you know, we held the ROKs in high esteem solely because they were ferocious fighters. We didn’t like the way they smelled. We didn’t like their food and all that end conversation. And it certainly was true about the Vietnamese. And you know, they’d get on the airplane and they chewed the beetle nut and certainly the civilians do. I don’t know about the soldiers that way. But there was that, and you never could tell how old they were. This woman that kept my hooch when I was at Chu Lai, I don’t know whether she was 25, 35, or 65. I have no idea. I think she was younger, but her body was so aged looking in many respects. And they worked hard no matter what age they were so you never could tell unless they were exceptionally old people or children. So we really disconnected from them and we brought a very insular
subculture of our own there. That is just in the background of a lot of what we were
talking about.

RV: I appreciate all of that very much.

AB: Yeah. I just wanted to get that out there because I think that should be in the
background.

RV: Tell me about your experiences with the Tet Offensive.

AB: Well, you know, I got there at the tail end of the first one and I was there for
what I call Mini-Tet of ’69. It was just shocking to see. You know, they [the VC-Viet
Cong] came on the base at Tan Son Nhut and they also came on the base at Chu Lai at
some point. I mean, they came on a lot of the [bases]. But they were just told to blow up
the airplanes so they blew up a lot of the wrong things. They didn’t blow up weapons
delivery airplanes like fighters. They would blow up an old C-123, you know because it
was big or a DC-3 and not the gun ships. They hit a lot of targets, but fortunately and
unfortunately, they didn’t necessarily hit the targets that would have hurt us the most.
They shot up the Merlin Hotel and upstairs, I wasn’t there that night but there were
aircrews staying. That’s all that stayed in the Merlin Hotel. They fired a rocket-propelled
grenade essentially into the lobby. It killed the Vietnamese military police that were
guarding us or guarding the crews, but then they didn’t penetrate the building, and if
they’d gone upstairs no one, like I told you, we had P-38s and we weren’t even allowed to
take those off the base believe it or not. That’s why I had my own private weapon. But
they could have just gone upstairs and just slaughtered crewmembers but they didn’t.
They just did their shock tactic. And that’s why I think it is correct that it really was not a
victory for them but psychologically, it really impacted the American public and the
government, I guess, responded. And that’s not taking anything away from the ferocity of
what went on at places like Hue. When my wife and I went back, its sad to realize that
the whole Citadel is mostly in ruins. That’s a historic place of centuries of age and there’s
not much left of it; certainly none of the buildings inside [remain] because they were all
beautiful, wooden pagoda type structures [the burned down].

RV: Do you remember seeing the mortar round, the holes in the walls, the bullet
holes and some of the scene?

AB: Oh, yeah. I mean down all over Saigon, on the base.
RV: I was talking about the Citadel at Hue. Did you see some of the leftovers from the war there?

AB: Yeah. They’ve undertaken a real public works project to restore the essence of it. I don’t remember. You can always find pock marks, but they’ve cleaned out all the debris and they’ve actually rebuilt a few of the buildings to give you a sense of what was there and they have planted some of the gardens.

RV: So you were in Saigon, you flew into Tan Son Nhut and you were in Saigon in the aftermath of Tet.

AB: Yeah. You know, and like I said, you started to see the influx of the refugees. Khe Sanh is what I was most impressed with from the Tet because I really could see in the faces of the Marines, I interpreted as, “What am I doing here, take me away from here? I want to be out of here.” And when I went back, I have a photograph of myself standing on what used to be the runway at Khe Sanh. It’s really interesting to hear the birds singing in the bushes and see the greenery and the peacefulness and then think of, you know, how stained, if you will, that soil is with American and Vietnamese blood, and how many lives were either destroyed or shattered there. Today, it’s just like any other place that after a conflict it was peaceful and quiet. Flowers were growing and birds were flying.

RV: Did you run into the little kids selling supposed trinkets?

AB: Oh, yeah. They wanted to sell dog tags. I don’t know whether they were bogus or not. I certainly wouldn’t buy one. I saw a pierced steel planking, PSP, which the Army used to lay down and create sort of instant runways that (indistinguishable?). And I used to land on PSP. I saw that being used as part of a fence or you know part of a like a grid along a foundation of a little house out in the surrounding area. The irony of it all.

RV: You flew recent fly missions into Khe Sanh right after Tet.

AB: Yeah. We air dropped and we also landed up there.

RV: What was it like landing there with that activity going on?

AB: It just, you know, there was so much going on, the incoming [artillery fire], the outgoing [artillery fire]. Normally we would try to get in in a period where there was not much incoming. And you see the destroyed bunkers, and then you see the wounded waiting to get on the airplane, be put on the airplane or the body bags. So you would
bring them munitions, food, whatever supplies were needed and then you’d take out
[folks] and sometimes you’d bring in new Marines to [be], you know replacements, [or]
so you could take out wounded folks or nothing. Rarely was it nothing. So it was
something leaving. You were busy and [when] you landed, you kept engines running.
You were poised to try to get out of there immediately, and briefing the takeoff and
evasive maneuvers you might use or whatever. So it just all happened in almost in a blur.
But there were moments where you got to look outside and see the Marines, and that’s
when I came to understand what it was, or at least think I had a sense of what it might,
how much more harrowing it must have been for them. Then there was, you know there’s
always the GI humor. I remember at the bunker up at Khe Sanh, someone had spray
painted, or maybe they didn’t have spray paint back then, I don’t remember. Somebody
had painted on the side of the building, and it said something like, “I think I’m beginning
to love Ralph.” Anyway--

RV: Did you ever undergo rocket attacks while at Cam Ranh or Tan Son Nhut?

AB: At Tan Son Nhut and at Da Nang. We had landed at Da Nang. It was a night
mission, and I don’t think it was early morning hours but before midnight. But I don’t
recall. And they were offloading and onloading the airplane and the navigator, another
Italian named Valente, Chuck Valente. I shouldn’t put this on the record but that’s just
what I did. I always, always taught all my navigators how to essentially make an
approach and landing in the airplane. Just, you know, on another crew we had a navigator
that got shot, of all embarrassing or un-glorious things, in the buttocks. But, you know,
there was always a possibility that a pilot could be shot and perhaps someone else could
land the airplane. So I just wanted all my navigators to know. Chuck was one of those
guys that I taught how to land the airplane. But he and I and the copilot were walking
around. It was an otherwise beautiful night, and all of a sudden the siren or maybe even
before the siren, all of the sudden, “Clam!” And then a few more, I don’t know whether
they were rockets or the big mortars [that] landed and fortunately in the aircraft area we
always parked in a revetment so it isolated the airplanes, one from the other. And at the
end of each revetment, so they were like U-shaped, there were sandbags, above ground
foxholes. So we ran over and jumped in those, and we suddenly realized that it was all
quiet because it was just a hit and run sort of thing. And we ran over and checked our
airplane and checked on our enlisted guys and everybody was fine. And then we noticed
the maintenance truck across the way, and there was a guy slumped over it, and it had
been, the side of it, it was a big panel truck. It had a hole in it, and so we ran over there
and the sergeant sitting in it had taken part of the shrapnel to the abdominal area. And he
had an arm wound and bone was protruding. That was the first time I had actually seen
that kind of human carnage right in front of my face.

RV: Was he dead?

AB: We checked on him the next day when we went back through there. We
wound up calling [that night of the attack], getting on the radio and calling for the air
police [and] medic, and they came and he died during the night or the next morning or
something but he did not survive. It was pretty obvious he had some horrific wounds. So
yes, that was one. The other one fortunately is much more humorous than that. When you
sleep, in spite of everything that was going on, you slept really deeply. That maybe again,
nostance and the fact that you worked hard during the day and you sweated profusely.
We used to essentially fly in camouflage t-shirts because it was so hot. Anyway, we were
deeply asleep. Because the threat level had gone up, we were not at the Merlin. We were
sleeping in hooches down near the flight line. Even with the noise level and everything
else, you could still fall asleep. So I was sound asleep and all of the sudden my world
started shaking and somebody yelled, “Incoming, incoming!” Well, of course the first
thing I did was stand up and try to put my pants on and there was this more senior officer
in the hooch. I was pretty new there I guess. He said, “What the hell are you doing? Get
down on the floor!” I was putting on my pants because I thought we were going to have
to run outside. Well, you know what difference would it make if I had my pants on or
not? You know, I was in that stupor and I just went to sort of an untrained [normal
conditions] behavior because I didn’t have much experience, and I never did something
like that again, of course. But that was the only other time. They had sandbags about
halfway up the hooch and so we just got in a corner and hopefully in that case the only
thing would be a direct hit to that building that would cause you injury. That was the
other extreme of the experience.

RV: What would you say was the most humorous incident that you witnessed in
Vietnam?
AB: Well, it’s only humorous in a GI sense. I used to make a point of getting five
cans of beer, and we’d washed them and then put them in our, [we] washed the cans on
the outside to clean them, and then put them in, we carried two [insulated liquid]
containers. Usually, we’d get mothers or wives to send us Kool-Aid, and so you’d have
one dispenser that had, they would have normally been used for coffee making but we
didn’t want any hot things, so we used it just for the insulating value. And we’d put water
in one and made Kool-Aid in the other. And in the water and in the Kool-Aid we’d put
some of these cans because you had ice in there so it was cold. Then at the end of the day
when we came back to Tan Son Nhut, we could have a cool can of beer in the crew truck
or the bus that took us from the revetments back to flight operations. I mean, hell, we’d
been working all day. We were off duty now. You’re going to go to the club anyway and
For my enlisted guys, they really looked forward to that. And some asshole turned us in.
And you know, it’s humorous only in the sense that it mattered to somebody. I mean God
Almighty, we’re at war and, you know, what harm did it do? But, you know, God forbid,
somebody that had some kind of desk job, he had some rule to enforce, by God he was
going to enforce it. You know, that’s dark humor, but that’s the kind of humor that was
over there, that asinine stuff that went on. And the other was graffiti just in the
bathrooms, which I’ve written down some in a file but I couldn’t find it last night.

Playboy magazine at some point had an article on GI humor from Vietnam, and it was
really good but I couldn’t find it. I’m just going to read you some of the things I wrote.
One is, and this is in order of just what’s here in the book. “God is not dead, he’s an
MIA.” “C-130 crews—the unwilling led by the incompetent, hauling the unnecessary for
the ungrateful.” “There’s not gravity in Vietnam. This place just sucks.” “When I get
discharged I’ll have to fornicate for six months to get back my self respect.” “I like it
here. Signed, [Vietnam President] Nguyen Van Thieu.” “Sodomy is uptight and out of
sight.” That’s just perverse. “Death before re-enlistment.” “I regret that I have but one
life.” Like I said, a lot of dark humor. “Death is nature’s way of telling you to slow
down.” Some of this is just too gross.

RV: That’s okay. You can read all of it if you want.

AB: “Gull: definition: eats shits, squawks a lot, protected by the government, (i.e.
a lifer)” “What if they gave a war and nobody came?” “Mickey Mouse wears an Air
Force watch.” “Suicide is the severest form of self criticism.” I don’t know why this stuff was on the john walls but it just was and after a while I just thought it was, in that environment it seemed funny.

RV: This was at Tan Son Nhut or at Cam Ranh?
AB: Oh yes, everywhere.
RV: And you wrote this down?
AB: Yeah. I used to carry a little notebook in my pocket to just, I had MARS frequencies in here. For example, I had people’s; yes for example I had Sergeant Kish’s address so I could send him a note from Vietnam. That was the chief master sergeant that broke me in, wet-nursed me, and folks I’d met, family. Just all kinds of things, and its just a little flip up sort of notebook; High Frequency [HF radio] frequencies, a variety, some operationally, tire pressures, some NOTAMs [Notice to Airmen], altimeter setting information, just a variety of things.

RV: Any others you want to read?
AB: Oh, so “Who is the enemy?” That was a real ironic question. “I can't seem to relate to this environment.” “Incest is a game the whole family can play.” “I think I love Ralph,” I already told you that one. “Jesus is the answer. What was the question?” “Cinderella’s godmother was a fairy.” “One buzzard or vulture to another: “Patience my ass! I’m going to kill somebody!”’” “I never met a nymph I couldn’t like.” “Charlie Chan wears a Seiko.” Remember Charlie Chan and Seiko watches were the rage back then. “Hilda,” Hilda was the call sign for the central command post for the C-130 airlift operation of all the airlift in Saigon. “Hilda chews beetle nut.” “Attribute of an Air Force leader: administrative courage.” “Traffic separation: the condition that exists when two planes in flight fail to collide.” “This Air Force is alllll right!” “My recruiter sold me out.” That’s about it. Oh, and here’s some interesting humor, if you will. Here’s the various, what we called back then C-rations. Now, they call them ready to eat meals [MRE-Meals Ready to Eat]. Some of them had particularly interesting things. Like some had ham and it was like Spam but it was like ham and maybe peas or something. That was pretty good.

RV: Lima beans?
AB: Lima beans. That’s the one. That was one I always enjoyed. Some had chocolate bars in them. Some had cheese and crackers. And I don’t know, this says, vanilla cream crackers. That’s what it is, not vanilla ice cream. And I wrote down the numbers on the outside of the box because we didn’t normally get C-rations, but we often hauled pallets of them and we’d also haul pallets of reconstituted milk and sometimes fresh vegetables. Like we’d take them up to the DMZ and we called it the grocery run. And we’d do that at night. And we’d take them up to the guys up on DMZ, the Marines at Quang Tri and Dong Ha. I got to visit Dong Ha by the way, on this trip back. I actually got to go in some of those tunnels, which is quite amazing. So the loadmaster, if he was a good loadmaster, he knew how to, it’s not malicious but, but pilfer out of the center of the pallet so it didn’t look like it was disturbed, and repack it so that we would have some food because like I said, we didn’t get anything. So you know we’d eat and then we’d open up the cargo door at altitude and just throw all the garbage out so we could get rid of all the evidence. It’s awful now when I think about it, but that’s what we did. So we’d eat as many raw vegetables we could cram down our mouth just for the sake of getting something fresh, drink milk. Sometimes we’d have ice cream. We’d eat those little Dixie cups like they were going out of style and we knew what C-rations had the good things in them. You’d trade for them or whatever. Anyway, that’s just in here in the book, tells you what matters.

RV: That’s interesting, that’s real interesting. Tell me about the leadership in Vietnam. You mentioned that in one of the sayings there that you copied down. What were your feelings about that?

AB: Here’s a little bit of humor. Here’s what the enlisted guys did. We had a colonel over here, interesting because he was later my commanding officer back in the States and endorsed, unbeknownst to him, he was, somehow he was back at the wing and honestly I don’t know how he didn’t remember me. He was one of the colonel’s involved in that fiasco with the airplane that I told you about yesterday when that air evac, threatened with a court martial. He wound up endorsing one of my walk-on-water OERs [Office Effectiveness Report] without knowing who I was, that it was me. So that sense of detachment, that’s interesting you know. And as an aside to that, when I was at SOS, we did a mock promotion board and you realize what a precarious business officer and
enlisted promotions are because they gave us, I mean I don’t even know why they told us this. We actually ran a promotion board just like they would run it, I don’t know down at Randolph [Air Force Base] or wherever they were doing that. Maybe at the Pentagon. Where you sit down and you scrutinize captains for major and there’s only so many [candidates] and you only have so much time, and you just, you just thumb through those and so the thing you’re really going to notice is where the boxes are marked on the front. You’re familiar with the form I assume? So where the boxes are marked on the front; so if you don’t walk-on-water, you don’t stand even a chance. So everybody gets to be, I mean unless you have no sense and you don’t know what the game is, everybody gets a walk on water or near walk on water OER on the front side. And on the back, that’s why it was important to have something that the guys could write you up about. Well, at least when you were in country, they could write some things about missions you did or something like that. But that said something about how precarious it was and here was this colonel endorsing my OER and you know he barely knew who I was. I don’t think he would have given me such a glowing. Because he didn’t write it; all he did was sign it. And that was another lesson in cynicism, I guess.

RV: Well, what does that say about leadership to you?

AB: Well, I understand that the colonel up at the wing depends upon his subordinate, the squadron commander or the ops officer to tell him what’s right. I mean that’s true in an organization, commercial, big business or anything else. You have to depend on your people. But to me it says about the leadership in a bigger way is that good people don’t necessarily get the promotion. But welcome to life, I guess, I don’t know. It’s just that I went in thinking I was going into something purer than I did. So it wasn’t just cynicism about the military because you know I still loved the military. I still had strong, strong feelings. And the people in it do an incredible job in spite of what they’re forced to deal with. I don’t know whether I’d be quite as cynical as I was back then because now I maybe more understand. I mean I did see officers who got riffed with 18 years of service because they only had a reserve commission, and they didn’t make major, I mean they didn’t make lieutenant colonel. And there was no reason why those guys couldn’t have continued as pilots. They were great pilots. Some of them were instructors. And not everybody, and that was the same thing I noticed for the enlisted
guys and that’s what I wrote in my power study about. Not everybody’s designed to be
the manager, but that doesn’t mean you can’t reward people who are doing a good job at
least with pay and recognition. And the airman promotion systems didn’t do that nor the
officer promotion system. I mean, there could have been a separate career-track for
technicians, and that’s what I wrote my study on; and there could have been a separate
career-track, say for example, flight crew. So you just had the very best pilots and
 navigators doing what they do so well, and that would have been true, say for the
sergeants. And they don’t have to be the one that administers paperwork. Often times
you killed, essentially, spiritually, military spirit, career spirit. You killed a guy by
putting him in a supervisory role. That’s not what he was cut out to do. So that’s what it
said about leadership and it also said that if you happen to work for, it happened to one of
my friends, a really conscientious guy who had strong, overly strong, if you will, sense of
ethics. That sounds like an oxymoron but in the sense that this guy would write you a real
OER. Well, if we got real OERs, there’d only be a few walk-on-water guys in the
military because we were, I guess we were essentially a bell curve, like most other things
we can do. But you can't get promoted that way. When you get an OER that’s say, two
blocks from the right side, or at least that’s what it used to be, that was the kiss of death.
And if you got marks even one block to the left of the right edge, you know that put you
in a different category and when the slots were few, you weren't going to get promoted
either. And so Lemay used to insist that any crew member that flew for SAC was a, I
think back then it was a nine, a straight nine, which meant you got it [marks] all down the
right hand side. And I mean, you know that was ridiculous. Why were SAC
crewmembers [better than anyone else]? They were at one point on the beat, and the later
they fell to the basement. That’s a commentary about leadership. I’m sorry. We went real
far from where we were going.

RV: No, that’s fine. Kind of on the heels of that, tell me what was the bravest
action you saw in Vietnam.

AB: I may pull my cards on this as I lay them out. I don’t know. We were at Tan
Son Nhut one night, and there was another rocket attack and they managed to find
because it was purely chance. They managed to find the reveted area. Once it [the rocket
or mortar round] landed in a reveted area, it didn’t matter if it hit the airplane directly or
not because it was contained in these steel, high steel walls, and so the glass was
contained and so the airplane was history. But they hit an Army intelligence gathering
airplane. One of those, they were Mohawk aircraft, the Grumman. So it was burning. But
again, because it was a revetment, it contains it, so it did just what it was supposed to do.
And as sergeant or some enlisted, I guess it was a crew chief so it was probably a fairly
young kid, called on the radio. He was roving the flight line and he explained and I had
some kind of duty that night. I guess I was, I don’t know whether I was a standby crew or
something or maybe we were just in the ops area or maybe we were waiting for
something later. Anyway, I was there. So he wanted somebody to help him move a
couple of C-130s. It was just interesting that people just left whatever they were doing
and put themselves in harm’s way. Nobody knew whether another airplane was going to
explode. That was the concern because there was fuel flowing around it. Some airplanes
just got hit with shrapnel and punctured fuel tanks and people just ran over and did what
they needed to do. You know I’m sure in a human drama, as we know from accounts that
people did exceptionally brave things on the battlefield, but we weren’t on the battlefield
like that. And yet in this case it was sort of the same thing and people just responded to
provide what needed to be provided to rescue anybody that was hurt over there. It was
bravery in the sense of putting themselves at risk for a fellow soldier or airman, that sort
of thing. I think that speaks of most of the bravery.
RV: Is there anything else you want to talk about regarding your in country
experience before we move to your post Vietnam experience?
AB: Let’s see if I have any. Yeah. Nobody [talked to us about the conflict], we
had one, one lecture and that was back in the States. That was not even over there on
escape and evasion. And I thought that was a real shortcoming.
RV: Just one lecture?
AB: One lecture on escape and evasion. And I wound up reading a number of
books on POWs or experiences from other wars, World War II, Korea, and also like
harrowing expeditions and how people survived harrowing circumstances. They may not
even be war time. Then I made a personal effort to gather more information from the
intelligence folks on what you could do for yourself. And so some of the things that
would, what Leiping said back then, and I don’t know whether they were all true but
supposedly you could contain things in your like jockey shorts that they wouldn’t, in the
culture of the Vietnamese, they wouldn’t disrobe you. I don’t know if that was true or
not. But it made me, if you got captured out in the field, you could still have something in
there. And I don’t even remember some of the things. So I created what we called a jock
pouch so I could have just a few things like a little piece of signaling mirror and I really
don’t even remember what. But when we were briefing to the possibility of going to drop
bomblets on the Ho Chi Minh trail, there was a real chance, I mean we lost lots of
fighters along the Ho Chi Minh trail, so there was a real chance of C-130s and then I got
tagged to be the daisy cutter. So I don’t even know if we ever flew that mission. I got
pulled out of that pool and put into the daisy cutter missions. So I didn’t get to do that
training. So maybe those guys got a little bit more. I don’t know. But we all should have
had that [lectures]. I tried to create ways to, what I would do with my mind if I was a
POW. That concerned me, since I didn’t have strong religious conviction and because I
tend, I have an inclination, predisposed, to try to listen to what other people’s point of
view is. I was afraid that brainwashing would really be hard for me because I didn’t have
a lock, and because of my developing cynicism if you will. That I wouldn’t do well as a
POW because I could listen to other people’s arguments and if I was under duress, I
might not see the fallacy in their reasoning. I tried to prepare myself and what would I do
with the down time [imprisonment]. I think I was a very type A personality, and I think
I’ve changed some but only of recently. And I was afraid that the boredom would be
extremely hard for me. So I decided one of the things I would do was build a virtual, we
didn’t use that word back then, but a virtual house. Use all my engineering talents and I
don’t know where I picked that up out of somebody’s tales but he, I think he was a
Korean POW and he built a house. He nailed every nail, pulled every wire and he did it
all like in real time. So it just took him months you know to put up the walls and all of
that. Try to imagine doing the task. And so that had some appeal. It was something I
could get immersed in, try to do math and mental problems to keep my mind occupied
and not think philosophically or psychologically. Whether it would work or not, I don’t
know.

RV: Did you talk about this with your fellow crew members?
AB: I don’t recall, Richard. Probably, but that’s not a good answer because I
don’t think much about it. I think we discussed some of our, a few of us without being,
no one was very morose. Bravado was the name of the game. But I think we probably
discussed it and certainly would have told about the book you were reading. And you
know no one, in thinking on this Vietnam experience; no one ever talked to us about the
Geneva Convention. You know, I was listening on NPR yesterday. They were talking to,
Terry Gross on *Fresh Air* was talking about, to a lawyer, a law professor about the
Geneva Convention and what’s going on in Iraq and I thought, yeah. That’s why I wrote
it down last night. We never discussed the Geneva Convention.

RV: You weren’t even aware of how you were supposed to be treated.

AB: No. I was not aware of how I was supposed to be treated nor really, maybe I
remember you’re supposed to give name, rank, and serial number, but so what. That
doesn’t help you very much. And I thought that was unfortunate. Listen, on that note, I
didn’t even get to go to survival school and yet they sent me to Vietnam. I didn’t go to
jungle survival school and I went to Vietnam. The only thing I got to do was go to water
survival school in Florida because they had a slot and they had to fill it. Now, what the
hell did I need to know about oceans? For a C-130, yes. But I mean specifically going to
Vietnam, I didn’t need to know about surviving in the ocean, I needed to know about
surviving in a prisoner war camp and escape and evading. And you know, I didn’t even
get to go, and I think that’s sad.

RV: Was that a common experience amongst the other pilots?

AB: Unfortunately, yes. I mean certainly for C-130 crews, and some guys got to
go. Why we all weren’t allowed to go, I don’t know.

RV: That’s very interesting. It’s a bit disturbing.

AB: Well, it was. When I was in Air Defense Command, I mentioned that Air
Force 661 maintenance system. I had to go to a conference at Stead Air Force Base,
which was another one of those radar centers. And I found all the dark clothing I could,
and one night - I can’t believe I did this- I snuck out at Stead Air Force Base out to the
camp, which was the mock POW camp. I don’t know what would have happened to me if
I got caught, and found a vantage point to watch some of what was going on inside that
facility. And they had the guys in there and they had like the box where they put them
you know and make them be cramped up. I was familiar with that from the little bit I did, thanks to those guys, those sergeants that ran the survival course for us when I was a ROTC cadet at Lockborne [Air Force Base]. Even though that was two or three days, those guys were so dedicated and they taught survival. That was the only thing I had to fall back on. But when I looked at that camp [at Stead AFB], it was a mock, like a Russian POW camp, and all the officers were in Russian uniforms and the POWs were aircrew. I eventually had a Delta contemporary that went through that school. So at least I had a sense of you know, yeah, if that’s what they're making up there, then that must be what you could expect. Of course it was somewhat different in North Vietnam if you were captured by the Asians. I was just disappointed and like I said, no one ever talked to us about the war, the objectives, missions, and that is a valid indictment of poor leadership.

RV: Let’s take a break. I need to change out this disk. Okay, did you know exactly when you were leaving Vietnam? You know, you were there your 22 months.

AB: Yes, eventually at some point, because I had dependents there, I had a posted DOR, date of return, and of course you look forward to that. And you have to start planning because by that time I had acquired all this stuff that we do living there. Of course, in the Philippines I was able to buy furniture and artwork and memorabilia and all that stuff. Nothing like the American military going to war. I got to ship my Volkswagen over there. I had to sell my GTO, which I was really sorry about. But I shipped the Volkswagen over there and that was a good car to ship there because it was an easy resell because it was in demand. So you had to have time to do all that and I did sell it over there.

RV: How did you get back? Did you fly civilian air or did you catch a military flight?

AB: No. You know, it was odd going over there because you go by yourself. You don’t go with a unit or a group. I had orders. I took my family back to the New York area. We visited family and I helped locate her and our son in Virginia where her brother was, and then they took me to Dulles and the military had worked out an itinerary for me that I made a request and they honored it. I just went off to Dulles and I had a ticket and I got on, I don’t remember the airline, I got on a jetliner and flew to the west coast. I took,
I guess. I don’t remember whether I flew into San Francisco and they took us to Travis or it was a military flight out of Dulles and took us right to Travis. I don’t recall. Then from Travis I spent the night and then boarded a TIA was the charter aircraft, a big stretch DC-8 with more seats than is imaginably possible to put in an airplane, crammed us all in there and not segregated by rank or service or anything else and then flew us to the Philippines. We get to the Philippines and here I am then sitting around the O Club, exhausted, tired, and the time change and everything else, have a couple of My Thais and I’m completely wiped out and watching all the round eyes jumping in the pool and stuff like that and then hit the sack and then next day a C-130 took me down to Mactan and then it started from there. I did some orientation flights there maybe or something. I don’t even remember. I’d have to actually get out a log book. And then coming back, I don’t know whether we left from Manila, whether they took us down to Manila, but that’s interesting. I think we did, I think we left from Manila airport but I don’t remember. And I wound up, but I do know we came back. Yes, that’s what it must have been because we came back on. I think we came to San Francisco, so it must have been a charter flight. I don’t, I think that’s what it was, but I had my wife and my son with me. And then we boarded, we bought tickets I guess on TWA. And flying was so different back then, and we bought tickets on TWA and then we did an all nighter back to New York City, and the flight attendants, I just remember they were so wonderful because they took care of our son, occupied him and we got to sleep. They didn’t have many people on the airplane. It was late night, they were delighted to have, and he was a good child, easy baby to work with. They occupied him, but essentially, that’s it.

RV: How did it feel for you leaving Southeast Asia?

AB: Well, of course I was really excited about going home.

RV: You were or were not.

AB: I was, yes. Again, you're asking memory and memory can be colored by what we think and what we should say or like. But I do think I was excited by that time about coming home. I wanted to go to AFIT [Air Force Institute of Technology] and so I had taken some correspondence courses when I was in Vietnam. That was kind of interesting too. I took an expeditionary writing course through the University of Wisconsin under Air Force auspices. It was really interesting to be communicating with a
professor who was very supportive [of the War] at University of Wisconsin at Madison. And you know, of course that turned out to be a hotbed of protest later. He himself was wonderfully supportive, and I wrote a lot of my stories based on things that were happening over there and I had taken some other courses. So I was looking forward to coming back and going to AFIT to get a graduate degree. That’s another part of why I really, I finally did decide to get out, because they couldn’t promise me, they couldn’t even tell me whether I was going to get to go or not or anything else. Richard, here I was with my orders in my hand a year later getting ready to separate from the Air Force, and here comes my letter of acceptance and welcoming to the AFIT program. I thought, “You son of a bitches. Why couldn’t you have told me that?” Of course I wasn’t going to change my place then.

RV: When did you make the decision to get out?

AB: When I came back. I came back to, again, to Dyess Air Force Base.

RV: This was in November ’69, is that right?

AB: Yes. I remember my marriage was just in a crisis and my wife felt like if I got out. She always had this dream that tomorrow if she only had one more material thing or whatever, you know her life; we’d have a house. She just bought into that sort of fantasy. You know, I came from a family that you didn’t divorce, and from a culture where you didn’t divorce. I mean I remember some of them, when I look back at them, they were such awful marriages, some of my aunts and uncles, but you didn’t divorce. And so I remember talking to my cousin who’s my age and I grew up with. And, you know, I said to him one time about one of my uncles, because he was young and only five years older than me. “I wonder why Frankie doesn’t get divorced from his wife?” And Ronny said, “You don’t divorce.” So that was from a peer and it seemed like he was right. But at some point I went in and put my papers in because nothing was happening on my AFIT. I didn’t get fighters. The only way I could get fighters. I had asked, when you’re over there you ask for a preference statement. What kind of assignment you’d like back in the States. So I applied for every airplane in the inventory other than the C-130 and certainly not a B-52 or a tanker. And then they ask you where you want to be based. So I put other locations that didn’t even have C-130 bases and then I said, “And if I must be assigned to a C-130 unit, I would at least like to be assigned,” because you had
somebody at Randolph [AFB] that was supposed to be your career counselor, and I talked
to this guy by phone or something and talked to the folks over there at Clark, and I don’t
want to go to Dyess because I’ve already been there. I’d like to go someplace else. Well,
of course, what did I get. I got C-130s right back to Dyess. And I thought, “Well, shit. It’s
meaningless. Why did you even make me go through that paperwork exercise?” And then
they couldn’t tell me anything about AFIT, and the only way I could get a fighter
assignment, which I would have stayed in if they’d done that, was you had to volunteer to
go back to Vietnam. I thought, “Well, kiss my butt.” At least give me an assignment here
and I need to be experienced before I go over there in a fighter. That just turned me off
and so to save my marriage and everything else, which of course I didn’t do anyway
[save my marriage], I put my papers in to get out. Then I had a Date of Separation.

RV: What kind of transition did you have back to the United States from
Southeast Asia and what about discussion of the Vietnam War with civilians and friends?

AB: I was thinking about that while we were on break, trying to remember what
was some of that like. Of course the flight attendants were wonderful on the charter flight
and on the TWA flight. They made me really feel welcome. I was in uniform. And when
I got to New York, we got a cab to take us, and the cab driver was very nice to us and I
remember giving him more tip than I could believe I gave anybody. I was just so excited
to be home. And then my family and the neighborhood, here comes the son back, of
course. It was very insular. Then we, I went to; we had to go back to Dyess. I don’t even
know how we did that. Somehow, I don’t even know what we had for transportation. I
think we wound up flying [commercial] back to Abilene. I must have gone there first and
then had her and our boy come. I got base housing. Texas was, of course, as it always is
and still is, it’s so conservative and so it was very supportive of the military and it was a
military town. And then I lived on base, which of course was insular. So I was shielded
from the protests. I didn’t encounter that until post military career later. I was aware of
what Jane Fonda had done, and very upset about that and yet I had during that last year in
the military, we had a lot of young lieutenants and they were from this new culture, if you
will. They had a foot in both. These were some of the most rebellious guys I’ve ever seen
in uniform. One of them whose father had been an 06 [a full colonel] in the Air Force, he
was getting chewed out about something, the length of his hair or something because
hair was in [civilian fashion] at that point. And this major said something to him, “Lieutenant,” [I’m not going to name his name], “Lieutenant So-and-So, you have one of the worst attitudes I’ve ever seen. Do you have respect for anybody?” or something like that. “For any officer?” And he [the lieutenant] said something like, “Yes, sir.” And the major said something about, “Well, who is that?” And he said, “It’s Colonel Sanders, sir.” Of course the major didn’t get it. And so he must have pondered it or something. Anyway, he dismissed Bruce. And Bruce is walking down the hall and this guy yells out, “Lieutenant-What’s-his-name, get back in here!” He finally figured out who Colonel Sanders was. That was sort of the, you know, the funky clothes were in and drugs. That’s the first time I was aware. Nobody ever used drugs in front of me that I know. I’m quite certain. Those guys, some of them rode motorcycles, and I felt an affection for them because they were so honest, but I’m pretty sure that some of them were doing probably marijuana or something like that. I never saw them do it and nobody ever showed up in the airplane, but I’m pretty sure that was going on. So they were like my first introduction into what was going on back in the States. They were pretty outspoken about a lot of that.

RV: What did you think of the antiwar movement?

AB: Well, you know, like with Jane Fonda, I still have a sign down on my memorabilia wall down in the basement that says, it’s one of those awful pictures of her in a Vietnamese gun emplacement and my buddy wrote on it, “I wouldn’t walk across the street to piss on this girl even if she was on fire.” And that sort of summed up the way we all felt. That was reprehensible. I gladly fought to protect the right to voice opinion. But that doesn’t mean you go and fraternize with an enemy that we’re fighting with. And I came to respect elements of the protest movement because I didn’t believe we should be there either. And that’s what America is all about. We’re a democracy. You’re supposed to voice your opinion. You know, there was a lot of counter culture that was caught up in that, and that sort of unfortunately, did a lot of damage to the protest movement. I think the protest was very valid and as we know from what the hell was going on, I mean Kissenger and Nixon kept us in that damn conflict until they could get an “honorable peace,” [“Peace with Honor”] whatever the hell that meant. And then look
at what we did to the Vietnamese; I mean, we abandoned them. I feel very bitter about
what our government did and our civilian leadership.

RV: Did you keep up with the War once you got home?

AB: Oh yeah. I mean, it was all over the news.

RV: What about the policy of Vietnamization, turning the war over to the
Vietnamese? Letting the South Vietnamese fight it for themselves?

AB: Richard, we just turned our tails and abandoned them. I don’t think we, you
know, we never helped them put in a real government. I mean we installed a government.
It was so chaotic. If you remember at the end there was one general after another
replacing, and we assassinated [Diem] the predecessor to Nguyen Van Thieu. And then, it
was all very confusing, very disturbing, and I really hold deep disdain for what Kissenger
did because they maneuvered for their reputations, I mean him in particular, as a
diplomat. Regardless of the fact that kids were dying while they lingered over the
stupidity of the diplomatic parlance. And, you know, I understand diplomacy is
diplomacy, and I’m not ignorant of that process, but people were dying and if we weren't
going to do anything more than give a largely untrained army all kinds of military
equipment and then leave. I mean, how did I know or how was I aware that the
Vietnamese people didn’t have any loyalty to the government? What was the chance? It
didn’t take scholarship. It just took a pair of open eyes and ears to understand that we
hadn’t shifted the paradigm. They may not have wanted communism but they didn’t
understand anything more about communism in my opinion than they understood about
democracy because that was not their focus. Their focus was very local. So there was no
paradigm shift. There [the average, rural Vietnamese] was nothing in place to support a
democracy. I mean, there was so much corruption in the Vietnamese government. Look
how long it took the Philippines to finally get rid of Marcos, and its only recent that
there’s any real sense of democracy there. Before that it was a sham; I mean it was a
dictatorship. I know that because when I lived in the Philippines, I had a Filipino family
that I knew back in the States, he went to Brooklyn Tech with me, then son. He was an
[U.S.] Air Force officer and the family retired back there because they could live so well,
and I used to visit them in Manila and they lived in Makati, which is you know like, the
neighborhood where everybody had just all kinds of [corporate] board positions and lots
of money. And you’d hear them talk and it’s all about deal making. Anyway, look how
long it took for the Philippines, you possibly have read the book *In Our Image*? That’s a
good example how long it might take to make Vietnam a democracy, and we didn’t
invest that and that’s why I’m worried that we’re not going to invest that kind of effort in
Iraq. And it’s certainly not going to happen in a few days.

RV: What do you think the United States could have done differently in Vietnam?
AB: That’s out of my area of expertise. Anything I say there, there’s no

scholarship in it.

RV: Well, it doesn’t necessarily have to be. Based on your experience and you
have distinctly described the Vietnamese civilian attitude and you had that contact with
them.

AB: Somehow to provide, to help them build. I mean, they have wonderful
commercial sense. When we went back to Vietnam now, you go to Saigon, which is Ho
Chi Minh City. Nobody there calls it Ho Chi Minh City. Only in the north do they call it
Ho Chi Minh City. Capitalism is evident everywhere. I mean, they are incredibly
industrious people, and when we went to North Vietnam, the folks there are still being
repressed by the system, but you can't help but see how tenacious and hardworking. They
recycle all kinds of materials. They’re still recycling war materials, and they turn it into
products. People are the same all over the world is what I’ve come to understand. We all
want the same thing. We want a sense of, I’m philosophizing, but people are the same.
They work hard. Their family is important. Their culture is important and, you know, we
could maybe have done more to help them. I mean, you have to go all the way back to the
Domino Theory. Maybe that was part of the problem. We didn’t need to worry about the
Domino Theory. I mean, Thailand has done okay and I don’t know. We went there to
fight communism so the best thing we could have done is not go there. As my
understanding is, we didn’t allow the elections [between North and South Vietnam] to
take place because we didn’t want the communists to win. Well, maybe it would have
been just as well. Certainly the Vietnamese people might have actually suffered a lot
less, and we wouldn’t have done all that destruction to their country, killed so many of
them and us. God knows how many Vietnamese died in all that. So yes, the best thing
we could have done was not go there. I mean that says it I think.
RV: Do you think the United States learned any lessons from its Vietnam experience?

AB: Hell, no. Unfortunately not. I don’t think so.

RV: Why not?

AB: Well, because I think we’re meddling in Iraq attempting a regime change and what you need is a paradigm shift. I don’t think we understand the forces at work in the Islamic world. There are deep-seated problems there; resentments towards colonial powers, towards the West. Again, this is all my opinion. Perhaps a belief that Islam was a great power, it should still be a great power, that we have neglected I think [the current Bush Administration ignores] the Middle East crisis between Israel and the Palestinians to our peril. I don’t think that anybody there is really going to think. I mean, we’ve propped up the Saudi family. Our interests are for resources and oil.

RV: So today’s conflict is an example of how we have really not learned about what we did in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

AB: I hope I’m wrong, but I cannot see that we will make the necessary commitment, time wise to shift the paradigm. We were already largely, I mean, we’ve fallen way behind on what we need to be doing in Afghanistan as far as I understand. Here we are now in Iraq. So, it’s going to take a tremendous amount of commitment, money, and I don’t see us doing that. I really don’t. You know, you can encourage people. I don’t think you can make people [do something]. If you install a government they don’t [want]. If you install a government, they resent it. If you expect them to install a new government, then you really have to work for a paradigm shift and that doesn’t happen quickly.

RV: Do you remember how you felt in April 1975 when South Vietnam fell?

AB: Really disappointed. I’m really sorry for the Vietnamese and embarrassed. I mean watching that last helicopter leave. I was then with Delta, and some of our guys were flying C-5s in reserve and we had that C-5 that had all the children on it that went down. That had nothing to do with it. That’s an accident but that was sort of like symptomatic of the disaster that was going on. I mean, I had no expectation that as we pulled out of there they were going to administer the country because there was nothing set up for them to do that. Their government always teemed in chaos because we meddled
in it so much. It was not their government. It was our government. When we propped
up Ky and Thieu and, you know, all those folks left and they left the people to suffer.
Think of how loyal. I remember when I did some of that civic action stuff, I wondered
what happened to all those people that were loyal to the Americans. I mean, even the
Montagnards. We abandoned them. When you think of what it took to help rebuild
Germany and Japan, are we going to invest that? We have the ability to do it, but will we
do it, that I’m not so confident. And we didn’t do it in Vietnam. Ten years and all that
money and the internal crises going on in the United States, we weren't going to stay and
continue to do that.

RV: Let me ask you about the media coverage of the war. Did you think that the
media did a good job covering the Vietnam War or was it something different?

AB: Well, I think the media did a good job in the sense that they were there and
they enabled, I think that’s why there was such a strong attempt to control the media in
the Gulf War, Bush 41. It’s going to be interesting to see what plays out this time. But the
fact that Americans at home got to see what war really is. If we’re a democracy and
we’re supposed to be voting on the decisions that spend the funds to do that and send our
sons and daughters, loved ones over there to fight, I think it’s important for people to
know what it is. Unfortunately government, and this administration [in particular] seems
like a real propaganda machine, seems to really want to glorify all that and man, its hard
work [making war]. People suffer and die. And you know, I’m not unwilling to do
something that’s necessary for something that’s right, but there are grand plans made, and
if its such a grand plan, then you should be able to tell the people they’re going to pay for
it with their sons and daughters and their money, why it’s a grand plan. So that gets us
back to the current situation, and if it’s such a grand plan and we have such intelligence, I
can't see at this point why we still don’t know what it is.

RV: Looking back at your personal service in country, in Vietnam, how do you
feel about it today?

AB: Well, I’m still proud of it because, you know, as I said, I rationalize what I
did helped our folks who were there. And I’m sorry we were there, but once they were in
conflict, I did a part to assist them.
RV: Is there anything you would change about your service besides being able to fly fighters?

AB: There’s always a wish list of things. I try to look at my life as a series, I mean, an accumulation of experiences, and I’ve been at a pretty good buffet. People that I’ve crossed paths with, things I’ve done. They’ve molded me to who I am today and I like who I am today.

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

AB: Respect for other people and the contribution that everybody made. The awakening of a real sense of how people are the same no matter what they look like on the outside, and a need to be an informed citizen, to, not to be cynical, but to be measured in your response to news and calls for action so to speak. The need to be thoughtful before you endorse or reject ideas and so forth, and a sense that in spite of who we can be, America and this wonderful it’s still, I guess it is an experiment in personal freedom that we can do wrong. That’s probably enough.

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

AB: Well, I spoke about it awakened me to the real world versus the world of my idealism. That’s pretty significant.

RV: What you just spoke of, those are emotional things that you learned there, more human factors versus policy or mechanical things or larger picture. You spoke of the human side of the things that you experienced and learned. Have you taken that with you; do you think in your life?

AB: I’d say yes. My wife and I are fairly active in civil rights and I became quite a women’s liber. I did find myself to be somewhat of a misfit at the airline because I tend to have quite liberal views about much of life, and most of my peer group is in many cases extremely conservative. So, I also found the need to be more reflective and quiet. I think I got to some sense of saturation on all the camaraderie and bravado and that continued on the airline, and then I felt myself withdrawing from that more and more.

My goal now is to live a more spiritual life. And I don’t mean that in the sense that I want to be of a particular religion, but I just want to have more of a sense of the sanctity of life and the divinity in every person. Because you strip off the body’s bag, the skin
bag, you know, there’s not much difference in us. There isn’t probably any difference in
us. I lost a good friend here [in Atlanta]. He was an Army colonel and he died of a heart
attack. He was retired. And I went to the funeral home when no one else was there and
just sat with the body and got a real sense of, you know, he and I were just alike. But
once that soul left him, all that’s left is the body and so the body is nothing. Yet, we
seem to interact with people as though the body is everything. So, I think, you know, the
Vietnam experience put me in confrontation with my young naiveté, which is fine. It’s
just part of growing up and maturing; that was serious life. College was over and all the
other stuff took on a different, it wasn’t so important anymore.

RV: What would you tell the young generation today about the Vietnam War?
How would you approach that with them?

AB: I tried to do this with my son. Of course, the Vietnam War is not on their
radar screen. I can only imagine what it was like for the Korean veterans. There isn’t
any glory in war. People really do suffer; suffer terribly in war. People all over the
world are really the same, some of the same stuff and don’t discount other people. We
went over there calling them gooks and WOGs and all sorts of pejoratives and that’s
foolhardy, like calling Arabs rag heads. And people can be very passionate about very
different ideas than yours, and people will fight tenaciously for what they believe, for
their culture, and certainly if they feel that their family is under threat. Don’t
underestimate your enemy. General Giap, he was a hell of a military leader. We
certainly looked at all of that the same way looked at the Japanese in World War II. I
mean I understand emotion gets involved in that when there’s conflict and all, but, you
know, don’t lose sight of the fact they’re human beings and their minds work real well
just like we like to think our minds work real well. I’d like to see us continue to work
towards peaceful solutions. I understand we have a real problem when you have
somebody like Kim II Jong or Saddam Hussein. This policy of estrangement with Cuba
seems totally asinine. I mean we can learn from history, we just don’t. You need to read
history. You need to be able to in times, like the current times, troubled times, to be able
to see that others have been here before and have done thus and so, and it wasn’t any
better. And we really ought to be working for a more peaceful. I mean, if we destroyed
the UN, then where will we fall back to? I’ve said enough.
RV: If you’ve done this, what good books have you read on Vietnam?

AB: I was going to ask you as a historian what you thought about *A Necessary War*? I’ve heard it called a deconstruction, a revisionist book. I thought there were a lot of valid points in that. So I’ve read that. I’ve been reading on *The Uncensored War*. It’s by [Daniel] Hallin. *Once Upon a Distant War*, that was [David] Halberstam and Neil Sheehan and so forth, the correspondents. I read Sheehan’s book *A Bright, Shining Lie*. That was quite telling. And then I went back and reread *Johnny Got His Gun*. I had read that, I think, when I was in Vietnam. I also went back and read *Catch-22* one more time; I think the third time. I have my little library collection here. I’m just going to go look at some of the titles. I know one was called *Once a Warrior King*, and it’s by an Army lieutenant who lives in south Georgia. I actually sent him a note. I read a couple of James Salter’s books, *The Hunters* and *Cassada*. I went back and read Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* because I thought it said something about that. I read *Paco’s Story, Faces of the Enemy*, which was putting the propaganda aspect of the war. It’s not directly related, but *The Nightingale’s Song, Silent Warrior* that’s about Charles Henderson, a Marine sniper, a book called *Nam*, some pocketbooks, *Going Downtown*, let’s see about the F-105s. That was really sad to read because I had friends that were. One in particular was a F-105 POW for six years. And they had to deal with some of the same nonsense even in F-105s. It was really disappointing. *Fields of Fire*, then I went back and reread *Andersonville*. That is by MacKinley Kantor that co-wrote the other [LeMay’s autobiography]. Then there’s Bruce Catton’s *Hollow Ground*. You mentioned him. I read some Civil War, *Everything We Had*.

RV: Right, Sanatoli.

AB: Yeah. And I went back and reread *The Red Badge of Courage, Home Before Morning*, which is a wonderful story about the nurses. Then, Joy, what was the book we just leant Kerry? It’s a wonderful book and if you haven’t read it. We just came across it. RV: A book on Vietnam?

AB: Yeah. It’s a novel, but it’s about a Vietnam era Army nurse and dealing with life post-war and her reflections on the war. It’s just wonderful. Yes, it’s a new novel. It’s for somebody and it’s for a woman’s name. I can’t remember what her name is and we had lent it to somebody so I don’t have it here. Of course, *We Were Soldier, Once and
Young, and another one called Fast Movers, and it’s a just recollections of a bunch of
World War, and I know that’s not Vietnam, but to me it all points to the same thing, and
then Bruce Catton’s The Glory Road. The Final Days.

RV: What about movies on Vietnam? Have you seen these?
AB: Well, I’ve seen just about all of them, because I was interested to see what
different people would say.

RV: What’s your impression?
AB: Well, it’s sort of all over the place. I didn’t think that We Were Soldiers,
Once and Young did any justice to the book. And that’s maybe too flippant, but I think
the book was always so much better. I thought Platoon did give a sense of how brutal the
fighting was. There’s one movie and I cannot find it that I saw in the theatre, and it was
me and one other patron in the movie. I went to a late showing of it and I don’t remember
what it was and I did go see the movie In Country about the POWs. I did that with the
Colonel that I was telling you about that just died on me. We went to see that together. I
used to talk a lot with him. I also read Dispatches and The Rape of Nan King. I know
that’s all related because I was in the culture. I can't remember what that book was, I
mean what that movie was, but it was one of the brutal scenes in it was they caught a
North Vietnamese sniper and it turned out to be a female. Best and the Brightest that’s
another one. They caught this woman [sniper] and then they raped her before they killed
her, sort of out of anger. I thought that book said something about what happened to
humans when we’re immersed in war and what can happen to [any of] us. And that’s one
of the things to maybe remember what happens to us when we go to war. It really does
change us. We have to be willing to deal with that and pay a price for that. Apocalypse
Now I thought the opening scene with the helicopters and “The Flight of the Valkyries”
playing in the background and the “I love the smell of napalm in the morning,” you
know, all of that. I understand its critical commentary or sarcastic commentary, but
that’s true. That’s part of what I heard guys saying so to speak. And what does that do to
your soul? What does that do to your sense of the sanctity of life and if you put people in
those categories, you know, they’re human beings just like you and when you forget that
then you forget something about yourself. And Joy [my spouse] and I got to, this is not a
movie, but we got to go to a presentation. They had a motivational talker there, and he
was Charlie Plumb and he was a naval POW and he wrote a book called, *I’m No Hero.*
Just being with Charlie Plumb, he knew Mike McCustian, my [pilot] instructor who gave
me my final mav check that was in the T-38s that was the POW for six years. He
actually mentions Mike in his book. So I got to ask him about Mike and so forth. I wrote
to Mike a couple of times but I think he was trying to put that behind him. So, I didn’t
hear from him. But *I’m no Hero* is quite a telling tale again, about how the guys stuck
together and made it through that [POW ordeal] and I was interested because I told you
my concern of how I would have felt [dealt with being a POW]. *Full Metal Jacket* was
sort of bizarre in places but part of it was good. I thought “Tiger…” something, *Tiger
Land?*

RV: Yes. A more recent one.

AB: Yeah. I know it focused on this conflict between the guys but again it has
something to do with as you train kids to kill, you know, what unintentionally gets
released in people. So I thought that was a good movie. Good is not the right word, but a
meaningful movie.

RV: Do you ever turn on the radio and hear a song that takes you back to
Vietnam?

AB: Of course one of my favorites movies, and this is really odd while I was at
the [USAF Agent Orange] health study, and we went to see, *Good Morning, Vietnam.*
And I thought it was such a sad movie because, you know, what Robin Williams does so
well as a comedian is tell us about the things we really don’t want to look at. He
uncovered all that *Catch-22* stuff in that movie. For some reason it caused me to
remember the pain and suffering. I went to a restaurant and sitting there was the flight
surgeon, a lieutenant colonel and a couple of other people from the staff that were
running the health study that they [USAF] do at La Jolla [California], the Scripps Clinic.
And they were hooting it up about the movie. I became so emotional, I had to leave and I
remember went back to [my hotel]. I remember calling Joy from a hotel and, Richard, I
was crying. I can feel it coming up now. You know, it just brought up a lot of, it’s not
funny, you know; war is not funny and that’s not what Robin Williams was trying to do.
He wasn’t trying to get you to laugh so much I think. If he’s a real good comedian,
which I think he is, he’s just really, taking you safely by the hand, so that you can look at it and if you reflect on it, I think you understand there’s a lot more. So, obviously, that movie has a real mixed bag for me.

RV: Very powerful for you.

AB: Yeah.

RV: What about any music from the time period?

AB: Oh, the music. “American Woman” and when Jimi Hendrix plays the guitar, the rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner”. It just puts me right back there. Some of those, I’m not good on remembering names, but I can hear them in my head that there are a few others that take me right back. But “American Woman” that Jimi Hendrix and a few just, man it’s like. It’s like “Beam me up, Scotty boy” and it beams me right back.

RV: Have you ever been to The Wall in Washington?

AB: Oh, yes. A number of times.

RV: What was that experience like for you?

AB: Well, one of my college classmates is on that wall. A young kid who was an only son and I remember I had to go see his mother after, when I got back and, you know, they were an Italian family, Tony Covali. Tony was younger than everybody and he was in a B-26, the Air Commander that got shot down. His family, his mother especially, that was her baby and he was dead. And she died with him. There’s no other way to describe it. So going to The Wall and seeing his name there, and then I lost one of my pilot training classmates, Barry Brown, a young lieutenant, young wife, new baby, actually they had the second one before he left. He went over there in Puff the Magic Dragon and the DC-3 with the, C-47 I guess we called it, with the guns and stuff. And we was up over Pleiku and they collided with a flare ship and they all died, and Barry had just gotten there. I hadn’t even gotten to see him. I was hoping to run into him while I was in country. So finding his name and I found John Quinn’s name, the F-4 pilot, and a few of my other instructors from pilot training. It’s really powerful. It’s a really, I guess like everybody else, it’s an engaging memorial. It’s not like most memorials which are just statues. It’s more akin to Battleship Arizona. You look down there and you realize that’s a coffin. And you look at that wall and for me, there’s a real sense of the number of people that died over there. And Joy and I were in New York City for an art exhibit and
we’re at the Whitney and an artist had put together a memorial on sort of like on vertical
plates or sheets, and you could open them, you know like if you’ve ever gone to a poster
shop where you flip through the posters and art and everything. Well, you flip through
these [plates] and there was hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who had died. I’m
sorry that doesn’t get seen more because for the sense of the human toll of intervention.
It’s not like World War II because we’re not the friend that you, sometimes like,
somebody that was just running rampant over other countries and so forth and we don’t
need to go there, but to see the Vietnam Memorial, understand there’s a real price, and
for me it was a catharsis of sorts because, you know, it’s a fitting memorial because it’s
not a glorious time in our history. Wonderful people and everybody did what they had to
do, and that part’s wonderful but not what we as a country and a culture were doing in the
war.

RV: What was it like—oh, go ahead.

AB: No, no, that’s--

RV: What was it like for you when you went back to Vietnam?

AB: It was so disturbing that we cut our vacation short and came home. I just
couldn’t stand it anymore.

RV: Really?

AB: Yes, that’s just the way it was. To be in Hanoi and realize just what a rotten
system communism is. And the people up there are still, you know- I went there [during
the war] thinking we were going to really help people, their lives get changed for the
better. When I went to Hanoi, for me, it was realizing there was nothing wrong in that, in
holding to that thought that we were going to do something good because when you go to
the North, Hanoi, you see people still stifled by this communist oriented regime. And
communism has shown and it’s collapsed well enough that there’s no doubt, that, I think,
it doesn’t work. And I think there’s all sorts of intellectual argument, which I’ve always
believed that it [communism] doesn’t work. And communism is a, my understanding, is
an economic system. Socialism is a political system. So they really are two different
things. We’ve gotten those confused, and we talk about them as though they were the
same word with the same meaning. And socialism fits. I mean, hell, socialism is alive
and well in many European countries, Sweden for example, right? And Germans seem to
love certain elements of socialism in their country and it serves them well. We’ve spent a
fair amount of time in Germany because of a friend. So, going there [Vietnam], it was
disturbing to see that like I said, when I was standing there at Khe Sanh and thinking of
the, and the Rock Pile and all along the DMZ and at Dong Ha, and think of all the pain
and suffering and it didn’t change anything. So it was terribly disappointing. And, you
know, people still just, like I knew them while I was there, just struggling through the day
still having to fight around or work around the system in order to live their lives. And you
know, when you go to Saigon, you see that capitalism is alive and well. So, it could have
worked maybe. Somehow it could have worked. So you asked me that question before
and maybe that’s part of the answer to that. Maybe it could have worked. Maybe we
could have made a change for the better, but we didn’t. Not the way we did it, which for
all those lives lost and affected, it’s a damn shame. So it just became really painful for
me to think of all that was done and nothing changed. You know it’s still mired in the
same thing, and the more I was with that, the harder it got, and I started to just really feel
uncomfortable and Joy started to feel uncomfortable. And I felt like I just didn’t need to
be there anymore. I know we’re coming up on 2:00.

RV: Well, is there anything else that you want to talk about?
AB: No. There really isn’t. You have such appropriately leading questions and
you take me places that I’m sort of numb now. If there’s anything you think we need to
[cover] or you’d like to ask about?

RV: I think we’ve covered a lot.
AB: I guess we have.

RV: Well, we appreciate your time and we’ll go ahead and end the interview now
with Mr. Anthony Borra. Thank you sir.

AB: Richard, thank you very much.

RV: You’re welcome.