Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone; I am continuing my oral history interview with Colonel Stephen Katz. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Colonel Katz you are in Inglewood, California. Today is January 21, it’s a little after twelve PM Pacific Standard Time. And sir, since we last talked I’d asked you if you remembered anything that you wanted to add to things that we had, subjects we already discussed and you mentioned that you did, would you like to go ahead and talk about that?

Stephen Katz: Yes, we were talking about my family’s feelings about my going to Vietnam and flying in general and I neglected to mention that we’d had a second air tragedy in the family. My sister’s husband was killed in a private plane crash, actually a mid-air in the summer of 1969, so that of course I’m sure weighed very heavily on everyone’s mind in the family.

RV: Yes. When you family wrote to you and when you wrote back to them, did you discuss your mission specifically or did you kind of downplay what you were doing?

SK: I pretty much downplayed it. No need for them to worry excessively, just that I, what I was doing was kind of interesting and I had an interesting mission on a particular day, but I did certainly try and downplay it.

RV: When you got back did you kind of fill them in on what you really did and how dangerous it was and everything that happened?
SK: No, I didn’t. Of course, other than my wife, my family’s all on the east coast so I didn’t get to see them very often. In fact my nephew, last time I saw him said something to me about, “Gee, you never say anything about your service in Vietnam.” And my answer was, “Nobody ever asked me.” So no, I didn’t particularly get to talk to them about it.

RV: A general question, did you feel like you were well supplied while there, did you have what you needed or were things that you and your crew did not have?

SK: No I think we were, we were more than adequately taken care of.

RV: How would you rate the overall morale of the troops in Vietnam when you arrived, then compare it to the time when you left?

SK: Well, I can only speak for the people in my squadron and of the fighter people that we dealt with and the aircrew because that’s really the only people I saw. I think everybody was thrilled at the mission that we had, certainly rescue was a very gratifying line of work, and everybody was very devoted and dedicated and as far as I was concerned the morale was as high as I’ve seen in any other flying squadron or probably higher than I’ve seen it in another flying squadron, either pre or post-Vietnam. I won’t say that everybody was glad to be there because of the separation of the family but fortunately with our mission, everybody had a chance to go home at least once taking airplanes back to the States. That plus the R & R and I think the certainty of knowing when your tour would be up as opposed to let’s say the people that are in the Persian Gulf are right now who don’t know when this thing is going to be over, if ever.

RV: Right, exactly. So I guess that was some comfort knowing you had a date by which you could kind of set your clock?

SK: Exactly, exactly and I think that, and I would, what I heard I’m sure the ground troops felt the same way too.

RV: Speaking of those ground troops and just the American soldier in Vietnam, a lot of myths and misconceptions have kind of sprung up over the years since the War about just various aspects of the War that we were using not enough, or too much bombing or not enough bombing or there was too much drug use or very poor leadership, is there anything that pops in your head about these misconceptions about the American fighting soldier or the flyer that you would like to kind of correct or comment upon?
SK: I would think that those, those are exactly misconceptions; I didn’t see any of that. There, certainly you read stories in the *Stars and Stripes* and people, unpopular officers could, at least in the Army, have a grenade thrown into [under] their bed or something like that, but I didn’t, I really didn’t see any of that and certainly not among the people that I saw, that I dealt with. We didn’t deal much with the Army troops other than occasionally you’d carry a passenger or so. This, I’m talking about my PCS in Vietnam as opposed to the times that I flew in and out before and after my PCS tour, but I didn’t see any that with people. I’m sure there were people who drank too much and obviously there had to be people using drugs, but we all knew the consequences to our careers and also, you didn’t want to jeopardize your ability to prosecute our particular mission, which we all held in very high regard and took very seriously.

RV: What would you say was the most interesting thing that you hauled, either when you were, basically I guess when you were flying in and out of Vietnam, before and after?

SK: Well, the most interesting thing that it ever hauled which would be after Vietnam, and we can get into that a little bit later, would be in 1975 I was on one of the very last missions to go into Saigon, this would be roughly the 30th of April, 1975. We flew into Saigon and picked up a whole planeload of Vietnamese refugees and their bags and baggage and animals and chickens and goats and all that stuff and what they did on the 141, I was flying 141s by then, they took all the seats out and they put cargo straps across, from wing to wing across the floor of the aircraft in rows of six or seven feet [apart] and they seated all these people on the floor and [they would] just kind of hang on for dear life as we took off and we took them from Saigon to Guam. And of course I have no idea what happened to those people after that, but it was really interesting to see how those people were just packed in and you had to feel sorry for them because they certainly didn’t know what the future would hold for them and you know that they probably left a lot of things that they hold dear back in Vietnam and every now and then we’d run into, there are a lot of big Vietnamese population down in Orange County and you always wonder gee, I wonder if that was somebody that was on my flight. That was probably the most interesting thing. One of my huge regrets was that in January of 1973 when they started the POW recovery missions I was, unfortunately had gall bladder
surgery and I was grounded for about four months I think, but my squadron had the first
141 that was sent into Hanoi to pick up the POWs and I would really, I will always regret
that I didn’t get to fly one of those missions. By the time I was get back on flying status
that was all over. So, that was probably the most interesting thing was the refugee
missions, most interesting thing that I didn’t do, and of course I would have like to been
in on the Son Tay rescue but I was not chosen because I was not as experienced as some
of the people that go to go.

RV: Comparing yourself to when you first got in to Vietnam during this one tour
then when you left, what had changes most about yourself do you think?

SK: I think I was a lot more confident in my ability to handle things under stress
because those rescue missions were very stressful and being a navigator you’re pretty
much, hours and hours of boredom flying from say Hawaii to Guam or east coast to
Europe you’re just, its pretty much routine. You get up and see the celestial fix every
forty-five minutes and fill out your log and that sort of thing. So nothing much happened
and all of a sudden you’re in the thick of things and people are being shot down and we’d
have to respond to them, so I think I gained a lot of confidence in my ability to work
under pressure.

RV: Do you think that was the most significant thing you learned while there?

SK: Yes, I really do think so.

RV: Okay. I wonder if you could comment on the media coverage of the war,
what did you think of it then, when you were in the service, actually in Vietnam and a
little bit after and then looking back at it now?

SK: Oh, boy. I don’t, nothing really comes to mind about the media coverage
because when I was in Vietnam all we ever got to see was the Stars and Stripes and that
was a, I think to some extent that’s kind of censored. I remember a few things like
Dartmouth College had a big uprising and kicked the ROTC unit off the campus and that
was in the paper. I haven’t given them a cent in thirty years because of that. I just
resented that a great deal, but I really don’t have anything very profound to say about the
media coverage. I think its, the, I think it unfairly biased the public against the poor
soldiers who were only following orders and a lot of them got very bad reception when
they went back to the States, and still, and to this day there’s a lot of, I think there's a lot
of stigma against Vietnam veterans, although I suppose that’s dissipating. You know, if a guy is, let’s say in L.A., if he’s involved in a crime and he happens to be a Vietnam veteran that [fact] always seems to get rather prominent play in the papers.

RV: Well look at the media coverage today with what’s happening in the Middle East and a possible upcoming conflict with Iraq again and the media is everywhere and its almost, you could be on the battlefield practically at times and that’s very different, the exposure the public gets started in Vietnam, with the more of what it is today, but today is very different. Do you think today’s media does a good job portraying war or should it be more limited or what?

SK: Well I think so far the coverage is fairly decent. I would have to contrast actual coverage versus editorializing. I think the average coverage of the soldier in the field, what I’ve seen is very positive. I haven’t, I don’t know that, and I’m not talking about certainly people that are getting killed and injured and being separated from their families, but I have not seen anything about the individual soldier or Marine that I thought was unfavorable. There was a huge story on the front page of the Los Angeles Times today, which I haven’t read yet, about the Marines being deployed from Twenty Nine Palms and what the consequences are to, to both to their families and to the city of Twenty Nine Palms itself, economically and, you know businesses are going to have to close. Another item that I just listened to on the radio a little while ago, the [Los Angeles] sheriff and the police chief and the fire department chief are, I won’t say complaining but they’re concerned that a number of their people are in the reserves and the Guard and they’re losing them and really with no, its just going to be a big shortcoming. I’m sure that weighs heavily on the public’s mind. I’m very disappointed at these marches and demonstrations and so forth, they seem to be the, I have a response ready for the first person that asked me to sign a petition against the war as I am a very strong supporter of President Bush.

RV: What would that response would be?

SK: That response would be, “Do you know I think I recognized you, aren’t you the person that spit on me when I came back from Vietnam?” And I would be interested to see what their answer would be?

RV: Did that actually happen to you?
SK: No, the only thing that ever happened to me once, while I was at Syracuse,
the airline used to give you a discount if you flew in uniform and I flew from Syracuse to
New York City to spent a couple days with my parents during a break. Some young
women sitting in front of me turned and looked at me in my uniform and said, “You’re a
baby killer,” completely out of the blue and then she got up and walked away.

RV: What year was this?
RV: How did you respond to that?
SK: I didn’t, I was kind of stunned. I really didn’t say anything, I couldn’t think
of anything clever at the time. Now, I can think of a lot of things I wish I had said but I,
you don’t want to create a disturbance on an airplane, so I just [said], “you’re entitled you
your point of view.” I was a student at Syracuse University, I wasn’t. I think, I will
always make the point when somebody asks me about Vietnam of saying I was very
happy to be in the rescue business, if I had been dropping bombs on orphanages and
things like that I wouldn’t be quite as proud of my service as I am because I was in the
rescue business.

RV: Did you feel like you had good leadership there in Vietnam?
SK: Oh, absolutely. I think we, it was pretty much a hand selected bunch of
people, the officers and the enlisted guys we had, I thought, there are always people that
you like more than you like others, but I thought that everybody was certainly dedicated
to the mission. We took care of each other. I think most of the, almost all the people in
the unit came out of there with a big career boost as far as performance reports and
decorations were concerned. We tried very hard to promote those sort of things and
make sure the people were well taken care of.

RV: What about overall military leadership for the Vietnam War, as far as the
American side, what do you think about that?
SK: Well, having read a number of accounts what Lyndon Johnson went through
and McNamara and those folks, I certainly couldn’t give them very high marks. I guess
you know Robert Caro, the historian? I will be anxious to read his book about the
presidency during the Vietnam War. It just seemed like Johnson was kind of haunted and
trapped and didn’t know which way to go or how to extricate himself from it. I don’t
think Nixon had a very profound view of what needed to be done but that’s in the
hindsight. At the time they were the commander-in-chief and I was sworn to do what I
was told, and I was happy to do that. That was how I made my living.
RV: What was it like for you, say that last month in Cam Ranh when you were
getting short, you knew your time was up and you were leaving Vietnam, how did you
feel?
SK: Well, I was happy to be going back, I felt, I had been there for twenty-one
months, I had a good assignment to look forward to thanks to a little help from a couple
of friends and I was ready. I figured I had made my contribution. I had come, had done
what I came there to do, which was to be productive and get the Vietnam tour out of the
way and frankly try and do myself a little bit of good from a career standpoint, which it
turned out that I did. But the war was kind of winding down; I knew that a couple
months after I left the squadron was going to have to move again and I was happy not
have to go through that. They wound up moving to Thailand, to Kohrat, so I was
satisfied that I had done what I wanted to do. I wound up going back a number of times in
the 141 again, but that was a completely different mission, but I was ready to go back and
be with my wife and get on with my career.
RV: Did you fly back on a civilian flight or military flight?
SK: A civilian flight, charter flight.
RV: What was that like?
SK: That was very nice. It was certainly more comfortable than any other way to
travel. I’ve done that several times, flying. I want to say it was Flying Tiger, I know I
flew Flying Tiger a few times, Pan Am a few times, it was very comfortable and I just
enjoyed it.
RV: What kind of reaction did you have when you got back to the United States,
where did you land, on the West Coast?
SK: Oh, yes. I guess, I guess we landed, probably landed at Travis and then I
would have, gee, I’m not sure, my guess is that would have gone to airport in Sacramento
or San Francisco and flown down commercially to Los Angeles.
RV: This was 1971?
RV: Okay, do you remember kind of the mood of the nation at that point and your coming back from this rather unpopular war? Did you encounter any problems at the airports or with civilians?

SK: No, none at all, nothing that I can, nothing that I can recall. In fact the only unpleasant thing that I can recall as far as interfacing with civilians was the one woman on the airplane, the young lady on the airplane that I mentioned earlier.

RV: Did people ask you about your Vietnam service, or did you talk about, say your wife, family members first, and then with others whom you were?

SK: Oh, I answered questions if anybody was particularly interested in it, what I did and I had a few pictures that, I wasn't a big picture taker but I think I had kept my wife pretty well informed about what I was doing and having been in the service [herself] I think she had a reasonable idea what was going on. Other than my wife, the rest of my family was on the other side of the country and I didn’t really, at my retirement ceremony, which was in 1986, they read a number of things and I remember afterwards my sister saying, “Gee I never knew, I really never knew much about what you did over there. I was very impressed.” But I, as I’d mentioned earlier, nobody particularly asked about it and I didn’t, I certainly didn’t feel like I had done anything heroic so I didn’t really volunteer a whole lot of information.

RV: We’ve already touched on this a little bit but in ’72 the war was headlines as far as Vietnamization policy, turning the war over to the Vietnamese, we talked about that a little bit but also tell me what your thoughts were about the anti-war movement and the public’s reaction to the war at this point?

SK: I was very, very upset about it. I thought the public was completely out of line and particularly--take a drink of water here--particularly that the fact that people that were taking their resentment out on the individual soldier and airmen, I thought that was really uncalled for and I truly hope that that doesn’t happen again. I’m sure, the leadership was blamed, but so was the individual soldier, many of whom didn’t want to go and they were drafted. My sister told me once that if my nephew had been drafted she would have encouraged him to go to Canada but he wasn’t, so that didn’t become an issue and I’m not sure how I would have felt about it. Probably not very well although in
retrospect now I remember how devastating it was to my family when my cousin was killed in World War II, so maybe that would have been a good decision.

RV: Did you keep up with the War once you go back to the United States?
SK: Oh, sure because again I was flying, flying 141s and going to Vietnam very often.

RV: What was your assignment?
SK: Okay, after I left Vietnam my assignment was to Norton Air Force Base, which is in San Bernardino, or was in San Bernardino, [California] as a navigator in a 141 squadron, and it was really the assignment that I wanted because my wife wanted to stay in southern California, in fact it was kind of odd, she went ahead and bought a house and said, “Okay, now get yourself an assignment out here” and we still live in that same house today. I took forty-five days leave, which I had a lot of leave accrued. And I reported, during which time I did go back east and visit my family.

RV: How did they react to you coming home?
SK: Well, obviously very relieved. My mother and father, let’s see, ’72, my parents lived another fifteen years or so after I came back, but yes they were very relieved. I was the only son and my mother was one of those people [who] could see, if anything bad was going to happen, my mother was sure it would happen. There’s a term for that but I’m not sure, I don’t remember what it is now.

RV: A pessimist?
SK: No, it was more than that I guess, in any case it was a nice time to be going, you know, always good to go back home and see them for a few days. Went to Norton, checked into the squadron, almost immediately I was sent off to the C-141 transition program in Oklahoma at Altus. I completed that, as soon as I came back I was, had a couple of instructional rides in the airplane and I was qualified and started flying again, flying the 141s.

RV: How did the 141s compare to the 130s?
SK: Oh it was like a Cadillac, it was, I couldn’t. In fact, I can tell you, I don’t know if you’ve ever flown in a C-130.

RV: No, sir I have not.
SK: C-130, when you start the engine, you taxi out to the end of the runway, you then spend about ten or fifteen minutes doing engine checks, you know check [to] make sure the props reverse and make sure that the things are appropriate to the airplane, that the airplane is safe to fly and everything is great, and that of course was a turboprop. The 141, I, my first ride as a student I was literally hanging up my coat when we were starting to roll down the runway. I had no idea that things were going to happen that quickly and it was just, you know, you taxi out, you got your clearance and away you went. I was totally unprepared to start navigating at that point, but that was my first, that was my first mission. No, it was a great airplane, it was nice to have a bathroom, which we didn’t have on the 130 and it moved a lot faster, was a lot quieter, it was a great airplane.

RV: So what was your mission, you were flying cargo, just like you were before your deployment there?

SK: Yes, cargo and passengers and we had an airdrop mission as well which I didn’t participate in to any great extent, I was pretty much flying the line. I became an instructor after a while, came up for promotion to Lieutenant Colonel and then I made that, primarily I guess on the strength of getting some really good OERs out of Vietnam, many of which I wrote but that’s another story.

RV: Do you want to talk about that?

SK: Well, yes I can. It, I’m always amazed that people that didn’t really have the Air Force figured out, it was, and I was lucky, I had a couple of good teachers along the way and I--take another sip of water here. I had people that would tell me, this is what you need to do. Getting promoted is pretty tough, especially as you work your way up and you have to look and see what it is for the promotion board is looking for, because they’re looking to promote people, but they’re also when you have a fifty or sixty percent promotion opportunity a lot of guys are going to fall by the wayside. I’ve been on a promotion board after I made colonel but there were some elements that it seemed to me that you had to have and [it] always amazed me that people wouldn’t take the trouble to get them. For example I knew that having a Vietnam tour would help, I knew that having some good medals would help, which I did, I got the DFC and air medals, like fifteen air medals. Education was important so I made sure that, I knew that getting a Master’s
Degree would be very important so I went ahead and did that. Are you familiar with the term PME?

RV: Yes, sir.

SK: Okay, I never attend the PME [in residence] but I knew that, I made sure that before I came up for captain I had completed Squadron Officer School, before I came up for major I had completed the Air Command [and] Staff, these are by correspondence, and before I came up for lieutenant colonel I had completed the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. If I didn’t get promoted I didn’t want to say to myself, gee, if I’d only done so, and it was really easy to do that stuff. To this day in fact when I was down at La Jolla for the physical, talking to the on site Air Force coordinator; that it amazed me that people didn’t do the things that they needed to do. Another example is in the front of the promotion folder is a photograph of you, of an individual in uniform and because I’m not particularly good looking and I have some scars on my face I went, rather than using the Air Force photographer who I went to and I didn’t like the picture that he took, I went to a professional photographer. It cost me about a hundred bucks to get a really good picture taken and the Air Force was fine with that. That’s the picture that I turned in to go into my promotion folder, so I did everything that I could to make myself look good to the promotion board. Now, we started talking about OERs. When I was in Tennessee, I was squadron administrative officer so we handled all the OERs and APRs and writing one is a chore and I’ve written hundred, mainly for people that were too lazy, that didn’t know how to do it. You always wanted to make sure that you knew when your OER was due, for a couple reasons. Number one it is a good time to stay out of trouble, number two if you had a, let’s say, you’re partly through one of the correspondence courses it would be good to get it finished before that particular OER went in. And what I would find was that when my OER was due, about a month before I would go into my reporting official and I would say, “You know I’ve got an OER due next month, would you like me to give you some notes.” And the guy would always says, “Oh, sure.” And what I would do was write a completed OER, I write very well and I would write a completed OER and I would say, “Here’s some things that you might find useful” and most of them would turn that OER back in verbatim in final form. He’d put in the X’s himself, that would be a little presumptuous to put the X’s in, but they thought gee, that’s great, that’s one less
thing I have to do at home or on the weekend or take my time from, so when I wrote my
OER it was a pretty good OER. And if I; I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true, but the
things that I thought were important I tried to write in a very favorable light. There were
a few OERs that I got that the guys said, “No, I’ve got a pretty good idea and I’ll take
care of it.” My last OER which I got before I retired was written by a general who didn’t
even have to write it. There’s no requirement to do one for somebody that’s retiring, but
he liked me enough that without any help from me whatsoever he wrote a beautiful OER.
Well, I found that a lot of people just didn’t know those things. I got a tip from
somebody, who said “The best money you can ever invest in your Air Force career is to
get a subscription to the *Air Force Times,*” and I subscribe to this day. Are you familiar
with the *Air Force Times*?

RV: Yes I am.

SK: Well now, for a couple reasons, it keeps me informed on issues like medical
coverage, although you get a lot of stuff now on email. I get email from Tri-Care and
these things, but I deal with military people in my current job every day, and it kind of
keeps me in touch with what’s going on so I can talk to those folks with a little bit more
familiarity rather than from a point of view now, gee, I’ve been retired since 1986 so
what’s happening in the military today is pretty much fresh in my mind as far as pay
raises and assignments and things that not only affect me in the job, but when I talk to
people I know, we have a fairly common ground on which to discuss things. So, again, I
could, it never ceased to amaze me that people would not do things. It was so easy to do
a correspondence course, particularly then, they’ve toughened it now, they require papers
and things like that, but in Industrial College of the Armed Forces, they’d send you a
book to read and at the end of the book, they’d give you a multiple choice exam. Well,
gee, that wasn’t that tough, it was something to do. I was gone a lot, and instead of going
down to the club I’d drink I’d pull out a book and answer half a dozen questions and put
away and the next crew rest I’d do some more and a couple of, after a couple trips I was
through with that particular volume and mail it in and then the next one would show up in
the mail. A lot of guys, after they got passed over, all of a sudden they’d sign up for the
war college in some kind of desperation, by then its just about too late.

RV: I can imagine.
SK: So, I guess that was kind of a long-winded answer to your question, but.

RV: No, that’s fine, that’s fine. How many missions did you fly back into
Vietnam after January 1972?

SK: I would guess, well we’d try to get every, at least one mission a month
because, in fact there was something that our scheduling officer took pains to keep track
of, because every month that you went in you got combat pay and tax exemption. By
today’s standards it was a very modest one. Now it’s a huge exemption but I certainly
went in every month and stay for a week or ten days. I, there’s another thing in the Air
Force, in those days where if you were TDY for three hundred sixty [five] days in a three
year period you got credit for an overseas tour, so I volunteered for as many missions as I
could get and in fact I did get credit for an additional overseas tour, which made me less
vulnerable to have to go back again before I retired. So I flew a lot, although not
necessarily into Vietnam. I flew, for example during the, I think it was 1974 the wars in
Israel. I flew a couple missions into Israel with munitions, but being, being a west coast
base we generally tended to fly more west than east and the folks at McGuire and Dover
and Charleston, did the east coast. I also flew a couple missions down to New Zealand,
the Antarctica support missions. It was some interesting flights. The 141 was a great
airplane, you had room to bring stuff back with you, if you went shopping. That was the
first that was my first three years at Norton.

RV: Did you notice while you were flying in and out of Vietnam if things had
changed on the ground, I know you didn’t spend a lot of time there, but what if anything
did you notice had changed about the War and about the country?

SK: It felt a little bit more secure. We weren’t as concerned about mortar attacks
on the airplane and things like that. But, as with a lot of the things that I did, you land,
taxi in, open the doors, unload, load, and away you’d go to the next base. There wasn’t,
really was not an opportunity to do much sightseeing. We had a mission which I
volunteered for as often as I could, they call it Thai Pax Shuttle, where we would fly from
California into Bangkok and then fly around several bases in Thailand and moving
people from base to base and take those people whose tours were up and taking them
back to the States. You’d fly about every other day out of Thailand; Thailand was a pretty
nice place to be. But I don’t really, I don’t really notice anything in particular, we didn’t, people were obviously relieved that it looked like things were winding down.

RV: Did you feel like the United States policy had been successful, or another way to put that, do you think that U.S. achieved “peace with honor” that Nixon proclaimed?

SK: No, not really.

RV: Okay.

SK: If you’re asking me to contrast what I felt then with what I think now, again I was, I was a loyal supporter of the President and probably in those days. If somebody had asked me that question, I would have said oh, absolutely. Now, I don’t, I’m not sure what we achieved other than losing an awful lot of people.

RV: What kind of missions, what kind of things were you flying in and out of there? Were you bringing in, just basically your supplies, same kind of thing?

SK: Just people and, people and freight.

RV: And you mentioned getting on toward 1975 you were hauling people out of Vietnam?

SK: Right.

RV: Was that that one time?

SK: No, I’ll tell you what happened. A very sad, very tragic event happened, which as it happened turned my whole career around. In April of 1975, I don’t know; if you remember this story, stop me, a C-5 taking off from Saigon crashed. Do you remember that story?

RV: I do, but go ahead and tell it because it will put it into context.

SK: Okay, well the C-5 crashed. I was at Norton, by the way, when I was, my wife was, we had houses on the coast and its probably, I think it was 115 miles from where I lived [in Los Angeles] to Norton, so I had a BOQ room and I would go home between missions. I remember being in the BOQ room and hearing on the radio as I was getting dressed to go off to the squadron that the C-5 had crashed and a number of people had been killed and of course that was a terrible tragedy. And then I went off to a squadron, did whatever I was doing that day. I had, by then I had been promoted to lieutenant colonel and was squadron training officer which was mainly records keeping
type, making sure people got scheduled to go to an altitude chamber or whatever, got their shots and whatever check rides and so forth and that the paperwork was filled out right and filed. And there were three or four of us that worked in there, if I was gone on a mission somebody else would fill in for a week or so, and then the day after the accident, well, let me back track a little bit. One of the people who was killed was the chief of the command post at Clark Air Base, a lieutenant colonel who I didn’t know, I found out later he had been at Norton and some people knew him, by the name of Vince Willis, and he was, for whatever reason on the airplane, probably to get his combat pay I would imagine, which a lot of us did, just a second, and he was killed. The day after the accident I was in the squadron and word came out that they were looking for a captain pilot to go to TDY to Clark for thirty days to be what you call a ramp coordinator, which is basically a guy who drives a car up and down the ramp helping aircraft get off on time. It was an extra set of eyes and ears and hands and a radio to help the crews. Its kind of a crew coordinating job, anyway they wanted a captain pilot and after about thirty minutes it became obvious that nobody was interested in volunteering for that, and I was very bored with what I was doing, I was basically a file clerk in the training job, and so I went up to the guy who was canvassing and I said, “You know if they’ll take a lieutenant colonel navigator I’ll go.” And so they quickly called the guy who was pushing the assignment and about four hours later I was on my way [to Clark]. And everybody was relieved because they didn’t particularly want to give up a pilot, and I, it was kind of my last chance to get back to Vietnam and see what was going on for myself, just a change of scenery and I thought again, maybe that’s something that will look good if it goes well, something to have done. So I got to Clark and we flew, there was another guy who we picked up at Travis and he was a captain pilot and he was going to do the same thing that I was scheduled to do. We flew pretty much non-stop to Clark, in what we call and air crew stage where you landed, let’s say Hawaii and another crew would come out of crew rest and pick up the airplane and take it on to the next stop and so on. We got to Clark, very, very tired. We luckily had about a four break in Guam. I was able to grab a shower and shave and so forth, and I showed up at Clark. I knew some of the command post people because I had flown into Clark many times and I got there, it seems like it was late at night and I talked dead tired, I talked to a major who was acting as the command post
chief and I said, “I know you wanted a captain and a pilot, don’t let this rank bother you,” I said, “I’m here to do whatever needs to be done.” He said, “We really don’t need a guy like you to be driving a car on the ramp, what we need is somebody to work in the command post as a duty officer,” because he, his name was Larry Cope, he was a duty officer and now all of a sudden he was in charge of the command post, so I said okay, fine let me get some sleep and I went off and slept until I was ready to go back to work. I went back down and I became a command post duty officer with never having been in a command post in my life. Luckily we had some very good NCOs there that pretty much carried it and having been aircrew member for such a long time and dealing with command posts from the other side of the window, I had a reasonably good idea of what to expect. It went very well, and I got, I had a little bit of time off and that’s when I flew that refugee mission that I mentioned. It was a requirement in MAC, I want to say that if, that if, there was a number and I don’t remember what it is, but if you had like thirty or more passengers you had to carry two loadmasters in the event they had to evacuate the airplane, to help the passengers evacuate, so they would take extra crew members and designate them as a loadmaster. I had a couple days off and I said, “Gee, I’ll happy to go,” and so I met with a crew [which] turned out to be a Travis crew and I said, “I’m here, I’m your extra loadmaster.” I said, I talked to the navigator and I said, “I really need to get some missions, some navigator missions because we had quarterly proficiency requirements and it was a new quarter and I needed so many over water missions, so many celestial missions and I said, “If you don’t mind, I’ll navigate the leg from Clark to Saigon, and Saigon to Guam and you know, you can fly it back.” And “Oh absolutely,” he was happy to do that. So I got the flying time and I got to fill a lot of my quarterly training squares and then my time was up and I went back to Norton and went back to the squadron, back to do what I was doing. I also, another, after, another example of somebody doing me a favor, somebody mentioned to me that there was a school, the Navy post-graduate school at Monterey, are you familiar with that?

RV: Yes, sir.

SK: Okay, they have a course called Defense Resource Management and its one of those courses where the Air Force would get however many classes they had a year, maybe four or five classes a year, they would, the Air Force got the quote of maybe one
or two, and this guy had been to the course and he said, it’s a great thing to do, its really a
month’s vacation and he told me who to call. I found some civilian in the bowels of the
training command; I said that I was interested in going. He said, “Well I got a quota,
we’ll give it to your command we’ll tell them you’re interested.” And he told me whom
to call at the MAC command and the guy said, “Yes, we’ve got to send somebody, might
as well be you.” So I got to spend a month at the Navy postgraduate school. Have you
ever been there?

RV: No, I have not.

SK: It’s, during World War II, the Navy either was given or commandeered the
Del Monte Hotel which was a very upscale resort and that is now on the campus of the
Navy postgraduate school. It’s really first class accommodations and I did, I spent a
month there doing, it was kind of an MBA refresher course, but it was a gentleman’s
course, no tests, no grades, some guys didn’t bother going to class, nobody seemed to
care, we wore civilian clothes and there were a lot of civilian DOD people in the class,
and that was just kind of a fun thing to do. Then in the fall of 1975, the, a guy who had
just been selected to be the chief of the command post at Norton told his boss that he
didn’t want to do it, he didn’t want the job. He had been, had had some command post
experience in a previous assignment; he really thought that he needed a flying job. So it
became time to find a new chief of the command post and I had been told by the same
guy, his boss, the deputy commander for operations that I was doing a good job and I was
very well regarded, but if I stayed in the squadron I would retire as a lieutenant colonel. I
said, “What do you suggest?” And he said, “Well, we’re trying to fill the command post
job and we don’t have a whole lot of people that want the job.” And I said “well,
[okay].” He said, “As far as I am concerned its the toughest job on the base because the
command post is twenty-four hour, seven day a week job and you know Christmas, and
you never close, there’s always people on duty there. It’s a huge responsibility.” And
because I had the experience with the command post in Clark, they decided they would at
least think it over. Now, In MAC, the MAC command, where there had never, ever been
a command post chief who had not been a pilot, and so that took a, they had to kind of
think that over, the idea was if there’s an in-flight emergency we need a pilot that can tell
the people on the aircraft, help him with emergency procedures. It turned out that maybe
that wasn’t all that important. We had a wing commander who was a general, by the
name of Kit Carson who was a wonderful guy, and if General Carson liked you there was
nothing he wouldn’t do for you. If he didn’t like you, your life was hell on earth. I have
his picture, he passed away a few months ago, I have his picture here in my office,
anyway he liked me, why I don’t know, but he liked me and he went to bat for me, said
“It doesn’t have to be a pilot, we got a guy [a navigator] whose been in a command post,
reasonably smart, let’s give him a shot at it.” So I again, never having been in a
command post other than my thirty days at Clark, all of a sudden I’m the chief. I might
add that they offered the job to two other guys who turned it down and both of them
retired as lieutenant colonels. Let’s see, so I became a chief of the command post at
Clark, or at Norton. I don’t know if you want to talk about that specifically or?
RV: Well, let’s talk about 1975; this is in 1975, right.
RV: Tell me how you felt in April 1975, you said you flew in there on the 30th
and you helped some?
SK: Into Vietnam.
RV: Yes, you took out some refugees, how did you feel when the country fell?
SK: I really felt sorry for the people. We were on ground for a couple of hours,
and people were running up and down, Vietnamese civilians were running up and down
the ramp trying to sell stuff. I bought two orange vases, which I have, much to my wife, I
brought home, my wife had been hating them for thirty years, she keeps hoping we’ll
have an earthquake and they’ll break, for like five dollars each and they had the thing like
this ceramic elephants which were very popular [but] I didn’t buy one. And just so
desperate, people, they didn’t know what the future was going to hold for them and there
was just an air of boy—It was obvious that Saigon was going to fall very, very soon, and
you know it was probably a pretty good, we certainly felt that this would probably be the
last time that any of us would ever get there, and it would probably be a good idea to get
the airplane loaded and get the hell out of there, which we did with our load of refugees.
It seemed very hectic time, very exciting time and a tragic time and a time that, you just,
your heart just kind of went out to those people to have to leave them behind and I still,
frequently when I see Vietnamese people I know what a lot of them had to go through to get here to the States.

RV: Have you had a lot of contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?

SK: No, not really. Occasionally I go to a Vietnamese restaurant or something like that. They’re more concentrated down in Orange County, which is the next county south of here, but they have areas that are promoted as the sign on the street will say Welcome to Little Saigon, just like we have a Korea town, a China town and a Little Tokyo, enclaves like that but other than going to a Vietnamese restaurant I don’t really see many Vietnamese.

RV: What kind of lesson do you think the United States learned, I mean after this, as you described, it was kind of tragic ending and the people, a lot of them having to flee their own country, what do you think the United States took away from the Vietnam War? You remained in the service so you were able to kind of maybe see if some of the lessons were integrated into doctrine or the tactics or the procedures.

SK: Well, I, you know, they, that was probably pretty much above my pay grade. I didn’t, I didn’t notice any particular, anything particularly in the military, there wasn’t, I wasn’t really at the deep thinker level, and I certainly had second thoughts about the Gulf War. I was really hoping that the U.S. would not have to go there and I feel the same way about Iraq now. I think we may be getting involved in things that maybe shouldn’t concern us, concern us all that much and I think that, I really saw a very dire consequences from the Gulf War. I didn’t think it would turn out as successfully as it did and I, you know I’m still hoping that the situation in Iraq will be resolved. I honestly think that Saddam’s going to pack it up and move out. We’ll see if that prediction holds any truth or not.

RV: Do you think the United States will, or do you think the United States did fight any differently say in the Gulf War, and might fight differently now because of lessons learned in Vietnam?

SK: I don’t really have a good answer to that, I don’t know.

RV: Well, personally speaking about your Vietnam tour and your flights in and out there, you spent quite a lot of time there, is there anything, just looking back now that you would change about your service there?
SK: Oh, no I don’t think so. I had the assignment that I wanted and it turned out to be a great assignment. I think I was there for the right length of time, I was there, I don’t think anybody else in my squadron was there, stayed as long as I did, and we talked about that last week. No, I am very pleased with the way it went and the way it turned out and with what I did.

RV: Do you feel good about your service today?
SK: Oh, sure. Absolutely, I’m very positive about [that], I have a picture here in my room of the, my office here of a C-130 refueling helicopters over the Mekong River. Yes, I’m very proud of what I did.

RV: Would you ever want to go back to visit?
SK: Not particularly, but that has more to do with the rigors of traveling than anything else. I loved to travel [but] I’ve got a physical problem, I have a blood clot in my leg and I can’t walk a whole lot of, very far, like I probably couldn’t walk a hundred yards without stopping to rest, and I got that from flying, I might add, and not being able to, right after 9/11 not being able to get up and move around an airplane. But there were a lot of places I would like to go, I would rather go, if it wasn’t so damn far away, like a month in New Zealand would be wonderful. I don't know if you’ve been in airport lately but I’m not sure that I really want to go through the hassle, particularly LAX. The time that I flew I was in line for, this was less than a month after 9/11. I was in line for two and a half hours, a line of at least two thousand and that was just to get up to the security checkpoint, and they’re not a whole lot better right now. I’ve only flown once since then and the only reason, I went to Phoenix for a reunion, and the only reason I did that was because I was able to fly out of Long Beach airport, which is a much more passenger friendly airport. I would, I don’t particularly, well I don’t know, I suppose if I, if, well Vietnam, there are places I would rather go than Vietnam, but not because I have any hostility or any problems with Vietnam itself, I’m not sure that, I like my comforts and I’m not sure how comfortable one would be in Vietnam as far as first class accommodations and that sort of thing. We’re more into going on cruises. My wife is not a good traveler, she has arthritis, anyway, but it’s a long answer to a short question. I would, if I could snap my fingers and be in Vietnam I would not having any problem with spending a week or so there, but not to be on an airplane for twenty hours.
RV: What’s your perception of Vietnam today?

SK: I, what was the book, I just finished reading a book by Nelson DeMille; I don’t remember the name of it, about Vietnam. Well, it seemed like, very friendly to Americans, they’re certainly encouraging tourism, it’s a very, at least the northern, what used to be North Vietnam it seems to be still pretty repressive society. They, they’re trying very hard to make it attractive to tourists, I’m not, I guess the people are living a lot better now than they have at any other time in their lives, but I have nothing but positive thoughts towards Vietnam, which I can get on my soapbox and say, “I don’t understand why we’re so friendly toward Vietnam and Japan [but] we’re so hostile to Cuba,” but that’s another story, I don’t understand that policy at all.

RV: Well comment on that, I mean that’s an interesting point.

SK: Yes, I’ve been to Cuba, although not since the ‘50s, and it seems to me and I know why. Because there are a lot of electoral votes in Florida and a lot of Cubans would turn their backs on any politician who normalized relations with Cuba, but I, it seems, it just makes no sense to me that the Cubans who have never done anything to the U.S. are being treated so shabbily when there are great trade opportunities and they’re fine people. Why we are, why we have this embargo in place, other than for political reasons it makes absolutely no sense to me. One of the few things that my sister, who is as liberal a democrat as you’ll ever want to meet, that’s one of the few things that she and I agree on [politically].

RV: Do you think that’s a good idea for the United States to open up trade with Vietnam then as it has?

SK: With Vietnam, sure. We need, our balance of trade I think was negative forty billion dollars over the past month or the past quarter, we need to sell as much overseas as we can, so I have no problems with that and I would have no problem with Cuba.

RV: You mentioned that you have read a recent book on Vietnam, have you read about the Vietnam War since you came back and?

SK: Oh, I’ve read a few books. I read, let’s see The Best and the Brightest, by David Halverstam, Neal Sheehan’s Bright Shining Lie or something, was that the name of it, I read that. Nelson DeMille’s book was fiction and it’s a good, happens to be an author that I like very much. I pretty much those two, I don't have as much time for
leisure reading as I would like and I, it happens to be, a subject which I love to read about
happens to be Antarctic exploration, so the little time that I have which is usually
between ten and eleven o’clock at night, I read those sort of things, a lot of fiction. But
those three books, that’s probably the extent of my reading about Vietnam.

RV: Do you go see Vietnam War movies?
SK: Not a moviegoer. Again, my wife can’t sit that long so we tend to, we just,
gosh I haven’t been to a movie since I retired from the Air Force.

RV: Hmm, wow. Have you ever been to the Vietnam War Memorial in
Washington?
SK: No, I haven’t. I have not been to Washington. It was one of those things that
I would like to do although when I mentioned it to a friend of mine whose retired he said,
“You know the problem with that thing is that its all surrounded by people selling T-
shirts and souvenirs and its kind of schlocky” and I have not seen that. I would, if I went
to Washington it’s certainly something that I would like to do, but I have not and I do
know a few people whose names are on the Wall.

RV: Right. If you were to talk to young people today about the Vietnam War, say
in a classroom setting or just answering questions to people of a different generation who
really have no memory or very little knowledge of the War, what would you tell them
about Vietnam?
SK: Not to blame the soldiers. That I think the American, as I mentioned earlier,
I think the American people should be ashamed of denigrating the American fighting
man who again was doing what he had to do and many of them, many of them [were]
drafted, I was a volunteer but a lot of people went that didn’t have to go and a lot of them,
a lot of them did not come back. I don’t talk to, I just don’t have any children of my own
and I don’t have the opportunity to do any of that sort of thing.

RV: Do you think the U.S. government has taken care of its Vietnam veterans and
veterans in general?
SK: Umm, I think it takes care of them about as well it does of any other veterans.
A lot of the guys, a lot of, certainly in L.A. and in many other places you’re seeing a lot
of homeless people who are Vietnam, at least say they are Vietnam veterans. My
freeway off ramp there’s a guy that has, an old guy with a beard and looks like he hasn’t
had a bath in six months, and he always has a sign, you Vietnam veteran please help and
people tend to think, oh gosh, he was in Vietnam, he must have seen an awful lot of
combat. A lot of them, first of all I don’t think are veterans, a lot of them never saw
combat, a lot of them never went to Vietnam and I think, I feel very sorry for the guy
who was in the A Shau Valley or Khe Sanh or one of those, yes, another book that I read,
General Moore’s book which is, *We Were Soldiers*, just finished reading that a few
months ago, or *We Were Soldiers Once and Young* is the title of the book. Umm, but I
think those who want help, I think are getting it to the extent that the budget permits. I
know that the budget’s tight and money is not available for a lot of the, a lot of the
Vietnam veterans but its not available for a lot of people in general, so in answer to your
question I think a reasonable accommodation is being made to those people that want to
be helped and who deserve to be helped.

RV: Do you want to give us a brief rundown basically of when you became base
commander, 1975, kind of where your career went after Vietnam, you talked about that a
little bit, but.

SK: Yes, actually not base commander but chief of the command post.

RV: Excuse me, chief of the command post.

SK: Yes, which is roughly thirty-five to forty people. Okay, I did that from 1975
to 1978 and it went very well. We had, during that time we had two higher headquarters
inspections, which were what they call CCSET, Command and Control Standardization
Evaluation Team, but its, both of those we got top bloc ratings, that was very well
received. In 1977 I had my first shot at Colonel, are you familiar at all with the OER
system that was in place?

RV: To an extent I am.

SK: Back then; let me give you about a two-minute dissertation on the OER
system from about 1975 to 1978. The Air Force was very much concerned about OER
inflations, you know ninety plus percent of the people were given top block ratings and it
became very, very difficult for promotion boards to differentiate between who was truly
outstanding and who maybe had gotten an inflated report. This is, by the way where the
tie breakers like professional military education and those things were important to have
[come into play], so in 1975, about maybe ’76, the Air Force devised a system whereby
all officers of the same grade, let me just use Lieutenant Colonels for an example, all
Lieutenant Colonels in a Wing would receive a report at the same time, so the Wing
Commander, let me use a round number of a hundred, if the Wing Commander had a
hundred Lieutenant Colonels, every one of their reports would land on his desk at the
same time. He would then be allowed to give twenty-two percent a top, a number one-
block rating. He could also give up to an additional twenty-eight percent a second-block
rating and the remaining fifty percent could be rated no higher than a three. There was,
the ratings were three to six, six was the axe murderer, that would, the system [worked
so] that if you were in the top twenty-two percent, you loved it, if you were in the bottom
fifty, nobody likes to think of themselves as average. Now, in 1977 I got a one, which put
me at least [to] the promotion board, well in this particular Wing Commander’s eyes, this
guy was a number one, was in the number one category. Much to the surprise of other
people, although not particularly to me, I was passed over, and my boss called me in and
said, “I’d really thought you’d make Colonel, I’m sorry that you didn’t. We can find you
a job here at Norton and you can stay on here for awhile until you’re ready to retire or do
whatever you want to do.” And one of the smarter decisions I ever made in my life was
saying, “You know, I really love the job that I’m doing, I’d like to keep on doing it for
another year and hope to earn another one,” and I remember his comment to me was, “As
far as I am concerned, you’ll get a one, but I can’t predict what the Wing Commander
will do.” And I said, “Fine, that’s fair.” So I took the job for another year and low and
behold I got another one. And this was, this sends a signal to the promotion board that
even though this guy had been passed over for promotion, the Wing Commander still
says he’s in the top twenty-two percent, and there’s a fifty percent promotion
opportunity. So, make a long story short I did get promoted the second time, and in fact
it turns out, because of a number of flaws in this system [which caused good people to get
passed over], my line number was ninety. They take everybody on the selection list and
you get a number from one to however many were promoted, let’s say a thousand based
on seniority. I was number ninety and there were guys who had been passed over who
had higher numbers than I did, so the Air Force saw that this system wasn’t working all
that well. Some of the flaws were, you could be hand selected to work in the Pentagon
on the Air Staff and that, from the vast pool of Lieutenant Colonels in the Air Force,
you’re a guy that is really doing a top job and his boss, your boss can only give twenty-two of you a one and conversely down in a wing doing grunt work, a guy like me will get a one also, so people would say, “Why the hell do I want to go to the Pentagon, put up with all that agony when I can be down here in the trenches and do just as well and I’m not competing against [those] who are sharper than I am?” So, the system has evolved now, it was in place for three years and again, if it worked for you it was great, and it worked for me. A lot of people it didn’t work for and it was tough. So, I got promoted to Colonel and then the Air Force had to find me a job, and that’s a problem that persists to this day is, and in fact, several years ago in the *Air Force Times*, the *Air Force Times* disclosed a letter from the commander of MAC saying, “We’ve got to find jobs, we’ve got a lot of Colonels and we don’t have any jobs for them, let’s find something for them to do.” General Carson, for whom I had worked and mentioned earlier, was by now the Deputy Commander for Logistics at Military Airlift Command. He was a one star general and he selected me to go to Scott as the number-three guy in the supply branch of the Military Airlift Command. I did not want the assignment, but I couldn’t afford to turn it down, number one out of loyalty to him, number two because if I turned it down I would have lost a promotion. The requirement in those days that was you got a two-year commitment, so you know the worst, I said to my wife, she was very upset that I was going to be leaving and--The worst that can happen is I’ll stay there for two years and if I can’t stand any more I’ll retire, or if I can’t get anything better, I’ll retire. So, we decided she would stay in California, in our house, and I would go to Scott. Got to Scott [in September 1978]. Now I had never, my knowledge of supply was, this is where you went to get a new flying suit and supply is a very technically oriented field, although unfortunately in the Air Force supply, career supply people did not prosper and one reason is that people like me come in at the top and choke off the promotion opportunities for experienced supply people. So I did the job. I was there for about six months before General Carson left, and I started looking around for something else, someplace else to go. The weather was awful, the job was boring, I knew nothing about it, it was literally a “put your feet up on the desk and read the newspaper. Somebody brought you a piece of paper; sign it.” I did not make much of a contribution to the Air Force and I’m very candid to admit it. So every month or so I would wander upstairs to the personnel office
and I would talk to a Major who was in charge of senior officer assignments, and I don’t remember his name other than I saw him a few years ago, he by then was a two star general. And I would say, “Boy, how about getting me out of here.” The numbers, I was number three guy [in supply and] so the number two guy in supply was an old friend of mine with whom I had served in Vietnam. He was just as anxious to get out of there as I was, in fact he sent me a picture, which I don’t know if I still have it or not, of Scott Air Force Base in his rearview mirror as he was driving away. He didn’t like it any more than I did. Anyway, he [the assignments guy] said, “Well, would you be interested in the Philippines?” one day as I was up there. And I said, “Doing, what?” I said, “Sure, doing what?” He said, “We have a vacancy for the commander of the Aerial Port Squadron at Clark,” he said, “We can’t fill it. We’ve offered it to five people, and they’ve all opted to retire rather than take the assignment, nobody wants to go to Clark.” And I said, “Hell, I’ll go. I love it over there and it gets me out of here and its warm.” And I’d never been a squadron commander so that was something I could do that would be fun, so they talked to the Deputy Commander for Transportation and he called me up and said, “Now, I’ve looked at your records, I realize you don’t have any aerial port experience, but you seem like a bright guy, if you want to do it, the job is yours.” And I was also interviewed by the Wing Commander at Clark who happened to be at Scott, had dinner with him one night, and talked to him about the assignment and luckily the number two guy over there in the squadron was an old friend of mine, so I knew that I had a pro that I could work with and low and behold I was on my way to Clark for an eighteen month unaccompanied tour, my wife again was going to stay in California, she would not have liked the Philippines. I don’t, do you know what they do in an aerial port squadron?

RV: Why don’t you go ahead and tell me.

SK: Okay, well, you’re responsible for at least two things; in my case it was three. Number one is, you’re responsible for all the passengers moving in and out of the Philippines. Number two: you’re responsible for all the freight moving in and out of the Philippines, including mail and household goods, although we didn’t do the packing and the paperwork on the counseling for household goods movements, when the shipment was packed it would be sent down to us and put on our airplanes, and number three I had a combat mobility branch. They were, so we had a nice passenger terminal, a good
freight operation, had some very good military and civilian people over there and my
agreement with my number two guy was you run the port and I’ll run the squadron and
that worked out great.

RV: How long were you there?
SK: Eighteen months.
RV: Okay, and this takes you to 1981?
SK: No, this is from, let me see; yes ’79 to ’81.
RV: Okay, and after Clark where did you go?
SK: After Clark they, the Air Force kind of felt they owed me something because
I took an assignment that nobody else wanted and I said, “I want to go to southern
California, where my wife is.” So I went to George Air Force Base, which is in
Victorville, California, was, it’s closed now. In fact, with the exception of Scott, every
Air Force base which I’ve ever been stationed is now closed. So, I went to George, I had
an assignment to George Air Force Base as the deputy commander for resource
management, and in that job responsible for the comptroller, the contracting, supply,
transportation and resource plans. And, let’s see, I was the third, the term is RM,
resource management, I was the third RM in a year in that position and very candidly it
didn’t go very well. We, about, let’s see, I got there, roughly, the day that I landed at
Travis coming back from the Philippines was the day that President Reagan was shot. So
that will put it in the context of, or a time context for you [and] went to George, George
was a fighter base and I found that fighter pilots were a very different bunch of people.
In about July we had a management-effectiveness inspection and that went very poorly.
We, battalion finance was unsatisfactory, contracting was unsatisfactory, logistics plans
was unsatisfactory. Before I had a chance to make a whole lot of changes we were
busted. I’m not sure whether I would have made any difference, but in any case it did not
go well, and about a year later they brought in another guy who turned out to be very
good, happened to be a friend of mine and I was offered the chance to be the Inspector
General at George, which I, because I wanted to stay in southern California, I accepted
that job and did that. The IG does basically three things, you handle complaints for
members, you handle Congressional inquiries and you’re in charge of inspections on the
base getting the various people on the base ready when the higher headquarters
inspection teams arrived. So I did that from, I guess 1983 to 1986. I was out for a couple
months because I had a heart attack. That was, I guess about twenty years ago, had not
had any problems since and that takes me through retirement.

RV: And what made you decide to retire?
SK: Time, thirty years.
RV: Thirty year mark.
SK: Thirty years, that was as much as I could, well [was legally] allowed. And I, I
said at the time that I didn’t know, when I retired, I knew that when I retired I would be
fifty-one years old, and I had no idea whether I would ever be able to get a job and I said,
you know the smartest thing I can do is stay in as long as I can and maximize my pension
and the law said I can stay for thirty years, and by god, I’m going to stay for thirty years
and that’s what I did.

RV: So, over a thirty-year career, what was your biggest memory, what sticks out
to you about that?
SK: Well, my Vietnam tour number one, the tour at Clark, the chance to be a
squadron commander, that by the way went very well, again had another management-
effectiveness inspection, I came out excellent, which was great. I should mention, I was
also, while I was at Clark, not only running that port but I was responsible for the aerial
ports in Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand.

RV: Wow.
SK: Well, nominally, basically went to each of those places once and said, “Hi,
I’m your boss, and okay” back to work. Anyway, that was kind of a nice tour, so
Vietnam would be number one and I guess Clark would be number two.

RV: Well, is there anything else that you want to add to the conversation we’ve
had last week and this week about your military experience, specifically Vietnam?
SK: No, I have been very fortunate, I, it took me about six months to find a job
[after I retired] and the thing I, what I do now is ship household goods for military
people, primarily, although we do ship freight as well, and I like it because it keeps me in
touch with the military on a day-to-day basis and I had no idea that I would be starting
my seventeenth year in March, and I had no idea that the job would turn out this well. I’ll
tell you, I just to have to throw this in, the highlight of my time since retirement, I have to
tell you, you may get a kick out of this, was I actually had a chance to be a contestant on
Jeopardy.

RV: Did you really?
SK: Oh, yes.
RV: How did that go?
SK: It went, it went great. I came in second. It was a lot of fun; it was something
I always wanted to do, and for years afterward I heard from people who had seen me on
television, including my college roommate who was the United States ambassador to
Honduras and his wife whom I, I had been at their wedding, his wife whom I knew was
in their embassy residence, watching Jeopardy and there I was and she immediately
called him, you know, turn your TV on, and there was his roommate.

RV: What year was this?
SK: This would have been, I guess probably 1988, so that’s my, other than my
military career, that’s probably my single most, greatest distinction.

RV: That’s pretty exciting.
SK: Yes, it was. It was a lot of fun, something I always wanted to do. My main
concern was not to embarrass myself, and I was at the point where, if the guy who came
in number one had missed the final question I would have won, but he got it right and I
got it right, it was an easy question.

RV: Right. Do you remember the questions?
SK: It was about where, I think where [King] Richard II was buried, which turned
out to be France and I guessed that one right.

RV: So you made a good showing for yourself and the Air Force?
SK: Yes, I guess. It was a lot of fun. Alex Trebeck couldn’t have been nicer. Are
you a Jeopardy watcher?

RV: Yes, sir.
SK: Yes, he was, couldn’t have been [nicer], and something I would, my wife’s
doctor to this day is insanely jealous because he’s taken the test twice and didn’t pass. I
took the test with about fifty people, and four of us passed. It’s a tough test and they; do
you have time to?

RV: Oh, sure go ahead.
SK: It was a very difficult test as you can tell from those statistics and when we
done taking the test they excused everybody but the four of us and the guy said
we’ll play a little bit of a game here, just to get you familiar with it and see how you
react, and we played a little mock Jeopardy game. It was right on the set and he said,
“Okay, now, I’ll tell you this, we may call you in a week, we may call you in six months,
or you may never hear from us again.” So I said okay, and we all left and I waited about
six months and I never heard from them and I said well, obviously I didn’t have what
they were looking for, and one day I get a phone call from a lady who says, “I’m so and
so from Jeopardy. She said if you’ll do something for me, I’ll do something for you.”
And I said, “Okay, what do you want?” And she said, “We have a senior tournament
coming up and we’re bringing in, I guess, fifteen people from all over the United States,
and, who are seniors,” and by definition a senior is fifty years [or older] and she said,
“We would like you to be a standby in case for some reason one of them doesn’t show
up, and so that means you have to be in your office, you have to be able to get here in an
hour or two and you have to bring clothes.” They have the myth that the shows are taped
on separate days, but in fact they’re not, they do five shows at once and so you have to
bring a couple changes of clothing with you, so you can change between shows. So I
packed my bag and put it in the car, and a couple hours into the day she called me, and
said “Everybody has shown up, but we will call you within two weeks to be on the
show.” And she did, and I was.

RV: That’s great.
SK: Yes, it was super.
RV: That’s great. Well, is there anything else you’d like to add to our interview?
SK: No, I don’t think so. I think, I meant to look for it and I haven’t found it, I
was going to find my Air Force [log], I kept a little logbook of all my Vietnam missions
and I think I know where it is, I’m just, I’m so busy watching football games I forgot to
look for it.
RV: We’d certainly be interested in having that as part of our collection.
SK: Yes, its just hand written scribbled notes, but if you’d like to have it and I can
find it, I’ll send you an email and get a mailing address.
RV: Please do. Let me go ahead and sign off here, all right. This will be the end of our interview with Colonel Stephen Katz. Thank you, sir.