Today is the 22nd of January 2004 and I am beginning an oral history interview with Captain Ronnie Lee Houston of the United States Air Force. I am in the Special Collections Library interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University in Lubbock and Capt. Houston is in The Woodlands, Texas. Is that right?

Ronnie Lee Houston: That is correct.

LC: Okay. And can I call you Ronnie?

RLH: Sure.

LC: Ronnie, where were you born and when?

RLH: I was born December the 29th 1944 in the giant metropolis of Ozona, Texas.

LC: Okay. You sound a little facetious about that.

RLH: (Laughter)

LC: It was a tiny place I take it and probably still is.

RLH: It is.

LC: Okay. And it’s down on I-10 now. Is that right?

RLH: That’s correct.

LC: Okay. About how far from the border with Mexico is that?

RLH: Ninety-three miles.

LC: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your father and your mom? What’s your dad’s name?

RLH: My dad’s name is, was Sam Houston.
LC: Sam Houston.

RLH: That’s right. And my dad’s dad’s name was Sam Houston, but I don’t think we are really any relation.

LC: Is that right? So you’re a multi generation Texan?

RLH: The best thing that ever happened to me was I was not the first-born child. I have an older sister named Sammie.

LC: (Laughter) Yeah, you slipped the noose there, huh.

RLH: Yeah.

LC: Okay. And is Sammie still with us?

RLH: Yeah.

LC: Where does she live?

RLH: Lubbock.

LC: Oh really? Oh super. And what did your dad do for a living?

RLH: My dad, in the early days, very early days was a cowboy. And then he worked in the oil field as a roughneck for a number of years until he got a little old for that and then we went to work as a truck driver for the county.

LC: Okay, and so he was a county employee till the end of his career then?

RLH: That’s correct.

LC: And what about your mom, what was her name?

RLH: My mom’s name was Reba, and her maiden name was Haire. She and my dad lived almost all of their lives in Ozona and she was a nurse.

LC: Oh really?

RLH: At the hospital there in Ozona.

LC: Was she born in Ozona?

RLH: No, she was born in Kerrville [Killeen].

LC: And how far away would that be?

RLH: One hundred and fifty, one hundred and eighty miles.

LC: Oh really, okay. And how do you spell her maiden name?

RLH: H-a-i-r-e.

LC: Okay. She was a nurse, so did she go to college for any bit of time?
RLH: No, she was an LVN, and she went to school in San Angelo, Texas after she was at least forty years old.

LC: Oh okay, wow.

RLH: Went back to school.

LC: Do you know what motivated that decision?

RLH: I think it was money. She needed to have a job that paid something.

LC: And your dad was pretty much anchored in Ozona.

RLH: Well, my dad was not illiterate, but very uneducated person. I think he went through possibly the eighth grade. That's what he told me, I'm not sure he really went that far; and so he was a manual laborer all of his life. When he worked in the oil field, he very often was unemployed. So my mother worked as long as I can remember. And in Ozona, as you might imagine, the job market's a little slim, so when the children, (there were three of us), got old enough that we could sort of take care of ourselves, she went back to school in San Angelo and we moved up to San Angelo for the year she went to school. I would've been in the ninth grade, so I would've been fourteen years old.

LC: Where did you all live in San Angelo?

RLH: Well, we lived on the southwest side of town.

LC: Did you have a relative or friend there that was able to provide a place to live or did you rent?

RLH: No, we bought a little house.

LC: Oh really, okay, super. And was this something that your mom…do you think she had a particular love for the caring professions or…?

RLH: Oh absolutely.

LC: Okay. And had she done some care work before she…?

RLH: She had taken care of some elderly people.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: And she knew that that was a job that she would never be out of a job.

LC: True, right. And was she happy do you think in the work that she did?

RLH: They finally had to make her retire.

LC: (Laughter)

RLH: She was still working when she was well into her sixties.
LC: Super, wow. It’s great to find something that you love. It makes a huge difference.

What about your sister? Now she was a couple of years older did you say?

RLH: She’s seven years older.

LC: Seven years older, okay, and are there any other siblings?

RLH: Yes, I have a younger sister, three years younger.

LC: And what’s her name?

RLH: Her name is Celia, C-e-l-i-a and her last name is Steward, S-t-e-w-a-r-d. They live in San Antonio.

LC: Okay, so the whole family’s pretty much stayed in Texas.

RLH: Yes.

LC: Okay. When you were a kid, were you aware of any relatives who had been in military service at all? Did you have any legacy or heritage around military service?

RLH: My dad had been in the service in the twenties and the only reason my dad ever went in the Army, I don’t think they even had a draft back then, but he had an older brother who spent over thirty years in the Army and had talked my dad into coming and joining the Army and being with him. My dad did it for a couple of years and I guess he decided that wasn’t for him and left.

LC: Where was your dad posted, do you know?

RLH: In San Antonio.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Went all the way to San Antonio.

LC: And your uncle, what was his name?

RLH: His name was Newell, N-e-w-e-l-l Houston.

LC: So he was career Army?

RLH: Oh yes.

LC: And when did he enter the service?

RLH: It would’ve been in the twenties.

LC: Okay.

RLH: He was born in ’98, so it was probably just after World War I when he joined.

LC: Do you know whether he was subject to the draft or anything?

RLH: I don’t think he was. I don’t think they had a draft back then.
LC: During World War I at all? So he had chosen...this was a chosen career.

RLH: He chose that.

LC: What was his MOS, do you know?

RLH: It was in the medical field, but I'm not exactly sure. He started out as an enlisted man and during World War II, earned a commission and I'm not sure exactly how.

LC: Did you have much intercourse with him? I mean, did you talk with him and stuff like this?

RLH: Oh, a few times. We weren't a real close family, but we would visit with him periodically.

LC: Did he tell you any kind of war stories from say World War II?

RLH: Not really.

LC: Okay. Where exactly did you go to school and can you describe the school that you went to. Now I mean grade school particularly.

RLH: Well, all of my schooling was there in Ozona, Texas. I was born there in a house, not in a hospital, didn't have a hospital; and went from elementary school through high school. It's a very small school as you might imagine, probably less than one thousand students in all of the entire school system. So, we had one elementary school and that went through grade six. Then we had a junior high that was seventh and eighth, and high school was nine through twelve and they were all Ozona schools.

LC: And so you knew everybody pretty well by the time you got through.

RLH: I still have my friend that I've had since first grade.

LC: Is that right? Can you tell me about how you performed academically as a student there in Ozona?

RLH: Well, I did very well.

LC: Okay.

RLH: I was fortunate that I was not a...I didn't have to study a lot. I made pretty well A's. I think when I graduated from high school, I had a 90.5.

LC: Wow. Were your parents encouraging of your academic work?

RLH: My mother was very much so. My dad was indifferent.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Neither of my parents ever even completed high school.
LC: Right. When you were in high school, did you play sports?
RLH: Yes, I played football and track.
LC: Okay, what did you play on the football team?
RLH: I played…well plays; I played defensive back and offensive running back.
LC: Now was that six man or was it…?
RLH: No, that was eleven man.
LC: Okay. And did you enjoy the sports?
RLH: Oh I loved it.
LC: Yeah. Was it something that kind of pretty much everybody did?
RLH: If you wanted to be one of the in-crowd of the boys, you had to play football.
LC: Really?
RLH: Just like every west Texas town.
LC: And did you do it because you enjoyed it or because the social implications were important?
RLH: Oh, I enjoyed it. I liked the camaraderie and I enjoyed the sport.
LC: Did you get to travel at all with the team around to other towns?
RLH: To other towns, yes, but not out of the state or anything like that.
LC: Had you by the time you graduated from high school been outside of Texas?
RLH: Yes. We had gone…my older sister was married to a man who was in the Air Force only for four years. He joined the Air Force because he was about to be drafted. And they were in California and we visited them there and then they were in Nevada and we visited them once there.
LC: Did those trips have any kind of impact on you in terms of your thinking about your future?
RLH: No, I was pretty young.
LC: Okay. Did you have any jobs during the summers? What kinds of things did you do?
RLH: Yeah I worked. When I was about twelve, I worked in a local grocery store bagging groceries. And then when I got into high school, I worked at a local truck stop pumping gas and changing tires. I did that for almost all of my senior year in high school plus the two years that I went to junior college.
LC: Can you tell me about junior college? What was the motivation for you to go to college?
RLH: There was never another thought in my mind. My mother made sure that I knew that I was going to go to college. I was fully capable of going to college. They had no money whatsoever.

LC: Right.

RLH: So my mom took me up there and I arranged loans through what was then the National Student something…it was federal money.

LC: Right.

RLH: And I borrowed the money to go to school.

LC: And where did you end up going?

RLH: Well, I went to San Angelo Junior College then, which is now a four-year school, but it was junior college the first two years I was there. It became a four-year school the year that I left there.

LC: Which was when?

RLH: 1965. I started in the fall of 1963 after I graduated from high school and I went two years.

LC: What did you have in mind as your career plan that your study was supposed to support?

RLH: Well, of course like everyone else, when I started out, I had no idea and as I went along, I decided that I wanted to major in business and continued that of course when I went on to Tech.

LC: Did you find the curriculum there challenging enough or was it kind of a walk through for you?

RLH: No, it was challenging.

LC: Was it?

RLH: I did much better in high school than I did in college.

(Laughter)

LC: Was that because it was harder or because you had other things that you were doing?

RLH: I did not have good study habits. As I said, when I went to high school, I hardly had to study. So I had poor study habits at best.
LC: Were there particular classes once you got to the junior college that you knew you liked or...?

RLH: Well, I liked the business courses, but I also liked the...well, I enjoyed the history and the civic classes and even thought about being a teacher at one time. I changed my mind; I decided I couldn't make any money.

LC: I think that's probably universally accurate. In terms of the business study, what did you think you might want to do with that? Did you have any ideas that were forming while you were still there at San Angelo?

RLH: No not really. It all looked so remote and by the time I left there and went to Tech, was when I really started taking business courses. I mean, the first two years is just basic courses primarily. I mean, I was faced with the draft and I knew that when I graduated from college for at least the next two, three, or four years minimum, my life was going to be taken care of.

LC: Right. Your decision to move on to Texas Tech, can you tell us how that came about?

RLH: I had visited the campus because my older sister lived there and I decided that I liked it. I had a choice to go either to Tech or my other choice was to the University of Texas where my best friend for all my life was going. And I was quite torn to be truthful, but I decided on Tech just because I had a little bit of family there.

LC: And did that make it seem more doable to you or like a safety net that you had in the area?

RLH: You know, I was so independent; I didn't draw any funds from home because like I say, my parents had no money.

LC: Right.

RLH: So I didn't need a lot of support. I was not good at going home and visiting parents other than in the summer, I would go home and work to earn enough money to go back to school in the fall.

LC: Right. Would you describe yourself as a pretty fairly dedicated student? You were dedicated to picking up your study habits, getting your grades in order and moving forward.

RLH: Absolutely. My one thought in mind was to get a degree in four years.

LC: And you did that, didn’t you?

RLH: Absolutely.
LC: Do you remember when you first arrived at Texas Tech?
RLH: Sure.
LC: It would’ve been in the fall I suppose.
RLH: Actually I went in the summer.
LC: Okay.
RLH: Because my student loans, I needed to get my grade point up a little bit in order to borrow money in the fall.
LC: Okay, I see.
RLH: So I came early and went to summer school and took nine hours.
LC: Wow.
RLH: Made an A and two B’s as a matter of fact. So I got my grade point up so I could borrow the money.
LC: And that’s the summer of 1965?
RLH: ’65.
LC: Okay. When college classes resumed at large there in the fall, do you remember that first fall term?
RLH: Sure.
LC: And the atmosphere on campus?
RLH: Yes.
LC: Did you observe much in the way of political activity on the campus?
RLH: Not really. This would’ve been 1965, so it was very early. There was not a big number of people who were antiwar at that time. And we were more concerned about all of the to do over drugs.
LC: Okay, can you describe that? What do you remember about that?
RLH: Well, how awful it was if you were caught.
LC: Okay.
RLH: And neither I nor anyone that I had any dealings with there used drugs and as a matter of fact, thought it was terrible of anyone who would.
LC: Do you mean marijuana specifically or were there other things?
RLH: Well, probably marijuana, but any drug.
LC: Okay. And that was kind of...
RLH: That was the big thing, was drugs.

LC: Really, really? Wow. Do you remember the student newspaper at all? Maybe not that first term, but just in the general way?

RLH: You know, I read it on an irregular basis. It was there and it was free.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: But I don’t remember too much about it.

LC: Okay. Where did you live as a student?

RLH: The first year I was there, I lived in Snead Hall and at that time, it was the athletic dorm.

LC: Right.

RLH: I was not an athlete, that’s just where I wound up. So I had a lot of friends who were athletes. And the last year that I was there, I lived in an apartment out west of town on 19th street, out by Lubbock Christian College.

LC: Okay. Do you remember being involved or feeling involved in the sports activities on campus?

RLH: No, I mean I’ve watched football games and a few basketball games and that’s about it.

LC: But you didn’t make a habit of going and…?

RLH: I went to every football game that I could go to that was there.

LC: And did you ever think that maybe you should’ve been playing?

RLH: Oh no, too small.

LC: Really, oh okay. Were you involved in any student organizations while you were here?

RLH: No, I worked the whole time I was there. In fact, I worked thirty-five hours every week and took at least fifteen to eighteen hours.

LC: Now where were you working?

RLH: The first year I was there, I worked in a small supermarket out on the east side of town, doesn’t even exist anymore. And did that the whole year, then I went home that summer after what would have been my junior year and worked in the oil field. When I came back in the fall, I took a job with Scoggin Dicky Buick.

LC: Okay, right. And they’re still here.
RLH: I filed the warranty claims to the factory.

LC: Okay, so you had done quite a number of different things.

RLH: Sure.

LC: Did you feel like you were accumulating some business acumen observing...?

RLH: Particularly the last job with Scoggin Dicky.

LC: Okay, and why was that? What did you learn there?

RLH: Well, that was more in a business that you weren’t using your hands.

LC: Okay.

RLH: I mean, in a supermarket, I was a cashier. I mean, that’s no brains.

LC: Right.

RLH: And in the oil field, you’re using your back.

LC: Right.

RLH: And that was the first place I ever went that I actually used my mind and actually

was in the world of business.

LC: So you had fun with that job?

RLH: Yes, I enjoyed it.

LC: Okay. By say your senior year, so 1966, ’67, on campus, were you noticing any

increasing political activity? Do you remember anything about that?

RLH: You know, the only thing I remember is more fun things than anything else. I don’t

remember any particularly strong political activity.

LC: What kind of fun things do you remember?

RLH: Oh, I remember they had a sit-in at the school of business one time and it was not

even a protest, it was more of a fun thing.

LC: Okay. What was motivating it, do you remember?

RLH: Oh, I think it started out, they were going to be antiwar, but nothing happened. I

mean, they stayed there for three or four hours and left.

LC: Okay, until they got hungry or something like that. (Laughter)

RLH: Yeah, just a bunch of kids.

LC: Right. As you moved toward graduation, the man power build up in Southeast Asia

was accelerating and I wonder if you were thinking more and more about your entry into service or

your vulnerability to the draft?
RLH: I think I thought of it every waking moment. When I graduated from high school, I had applied to the Naval Academy and just missed getting in. I was first alternate. So I knew that a physical was not a problem because I had taken all the physicals to get into the Naval Academy.

LC: Okay. Was that process managed by a particular congressman?

RLH: Yes.

LC: Okay, do you remember his name?

RLH: Ralph Yarbrough.

LC: Oh really? Okay, who became Senator Yarbrough?

RLH: That’s right.

LC: Okay. Did you have any family connection with him at all?

RLH: No.

LC: How did you come to his attention as a potential candidate, do you remember?

RLH: Sure, competitive exam.

LC: Okay. What was it that motivated you to kind of put yourself in line for that in the first place?

RLH: Well, I thought it would be a great place to get an education, number one. No, that’s number two.

LC: Okay, number one would be…?

RLH: Number one was they paid me and it didn’t cost me anything.

LC: Right.

RLH: And I had no money.

LC: Right, the whole schmeer would’ve been paid for.

RLH: That’s right.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: But it didn’t happen.

LC: Okay, but you had been…

RLH: I’d taken two very extensive physicals, so I knew that I was physically fit and that was not going to keep me out of the draft. When I was in college, I made a foolish mistake once of thinking I was going to graduate a semester early, which I would have had I been able to go to school the summer before my senior year.

LC: I see.
RLH: But I had run out of money and went home and worked.

LC: Sure.

RLH: So the draft board back then, every year, you had to report to them that you were still in school and progressing and when you expected to graduate. And as I say, foolishly, I put down that I expected to graduate in January. Well, I didn't even think anything more about it until in January of 1967, my last semester, I needed nine hours, I was notified that I had been reclassified 1A eligible for the draft.

LC: Oh boy.

RLH: And back then, you were fully allowed to have student deferment as long as you were in college and progressing toward a degree. So I called them and they said, 'Well, we can't change it.' So I begged and pleaded, 'Don't draft me until I graduate.' And got sort of an, 'Okay, we'll try.' So I knew then that I needed to do something. And I knew I wasn't going to move to Canada, so my other choice was to see about joining some other military. And I didn't want to go back to the Navy because I was sort of aggravated at them.

LC: I see.

RLH: So I said, 'Well, I'll try the Air Force.' And when I went to the Air Force recruiter there in Lubbock and told him that I was thinking about joining the Air Force after I got out of school. He said, 'Well, we'd love to have you. We'll make you an officer, but you have to go to Flight School.' I said, 'Well, I can do that.' He said, 'Well, it's not that easy. You have to take all the exams and the physicals and so forth.' So I said, 'Not a problem.' So I took the exams and I took their physical and was accepted for Officer School and for Flight School and told the guy that I needed to go head and sign something saying I was committed so I could be a draft dodger. And he said, 'Not a problem', and he went ahead and we did an early, I guess it was I joined up, but I didn't go on active duty. And so I was taken care of and I knew I wasn't going to be drafted or at least I didn't have to report for the draft because I'm already in the Air Force.

LC: Right.

RLH: So I graduated...I can remember this like it was yesterday. I graduated on June the 8th, 1967. I packed my bags and drove home and got there on June the 10th, and my draft notice was waiting on me.

LC: Wow. Do you know of other guys, friends of yours maybe from school who took the same route?
RLH: Remember, we had a very small school. There were only like ten boys in my
graduating class.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Out of all those boys, two ever had to serve in the military. One of them joined the
Navy because, like me, he didn’t want to be drafted.

LC: Right.

RLH: And he was an officer. That’s my best friend, and myself. None of the others were
ever drafted, none of the others ever served.

LC: What about your friends here at Texas Tech, were they…

RLH: I had a few friends who were in ROTC. Most of them didn’t seem too worried about
it.

LC: Really?

RLH: And I’m not exactly sure why.

LC: Because it was on your mind constantly.

RLH: Oh yeah.

LC: Ronnie, can you explain why it never occurred to you to go to Canada?

RLH: It was not something you did. I was raised that I was an American and I did what I
was supposed to do. That thought never crossed my mind.

LC: Were you paying much attention, given your heightened interest in the possibility of
the draft, to what was going on in Southeast Asia?

RLH: Well, I mean, I had a general awareness of it and I knew that it was ramping up at
that time, but I also knew it was going to be a long time before I went. I mean, I made a conscious
decision to become an officer because number one, I wanted to be paid if I was going to be in
there.

LC: Right.

RLH: But the other thing was, you were going to spend quite some time in school.

LC: In preparing for a particular…

RLH: That’s right, you had to go to Officer School and then you had to go to flight training,
then there was another school after that, and I knew it was going to be some time before I went.

So, when I first went in, even though I was aware of what was going on over there, I was not too
concerned about it because I knew it was going to be awhile.
LC: Did you think that might even...?

RLH: Might be over.

LC: Might even dissipate, okay. Did you have any opinion about President Johnson and his policy of committing troops to the Southeast Asian conflict?

RLH: When I first went into the Air Force, right after I graduated from Officer School is when President Johnson made his announcement that he did not intend to run for reelection.

LC: Right, that would be March 1968.

RLH: And I was in Flight School at the time and I remember vividly watching television and seeing this going on and thinking then, you know, I didn’t understand what was going on. And I thought to myself that, you know, this is not good, that things must be getting rough if you’re not even willing to be president of the United States when this is going on. But remember too, by this time, I was totally surrounded with military people.

LC: Right, right.

RLH: I mean, I had little contact outside of them. I mean, it was a very intense program.

LC: And while you were at Tech, as a student before you graduated, there was a lot of intensity to what you were doing. You were working a lot, you had heavy load of classes.

RLH: That’s right.

LC: So, figuring out the...

RLH: I didn’t have time for that other stuff.

LC: I see, okay. After you graduated in June, did you have any kind of a break before you actually reported to Officer Training School?

RLH: I had all summer. I graduated in June and I did not report to Officer School until August the 17th.

LC: And what did you do that summer?

RLH: Went back to work in the oil field.

LC: And did you make any money?

RLH: $1.62 an hour.

LC: That’s not very darn much.

RLH: (Laughing) That was a lot of money then.

LC: Yeah, I suppose it was pretty good then.

RLH: It was all spending money.
LC: Yeah. Were you just kind of living large on that money or were you stocking it away?

RLH: Well, I saved some because I knew that I wouldn’t make much money when I first went in the military and I lived at home with my parents and I gave them a little money. And I probably had three or four hundred dollars by the end of the summer.

LC: Did they have a reaction to your enlistment?

RLH: They understood why I did it because...I mean, I explained to them that, ‘Look, if I don’t, I’m going to be drafted anyway.’

LC: Right.

RLH: And my dad thought it was great because he thought that I should make a career of it. I was going to be an officer and a general someday. And you have to remember, he had a small town mentality, he was uneducated. He could read and write at a minimal amount and he thought that was the greatest thing anybody could ever do. He had an older brother, remember, who was an officer and he looked up to him.

LC: He was proud of you.

RLH: Oh yeah.

LC: What about your mom?

RLH: Now, he didn’t say that, but I knew it.

LC: Yeah, I understand that. What was your mom’s take on your enlistment?

RLH: She didn’t say a lot. She understood also that I really didn’t have a choice.

LC: That you were trying to do the best with what you thought you were presented with.

RLH: That’s right. I had limited options at that point in time.

LC: When you reported, did you actually drive down to Lackland, or how did you get there?

RLH: Yeah, I drove to San Antonio. I think my car barely made it. That was about a four-hour drive, and reported, if I remember right, I got there in the middle of the day. I drove up that morning and then they swore us in again. And then they told us where to go...they told us they were going to put us on a bus and I told them I had a car and they told me that I could go head and drive it and told me where to go.

LC: Okay, and was it somewhere still on the base that they needed you to go to?

RLH: Where I went was to the induction center in downtown San Antonio, was not on the base, it’s not at Lackland.
LC: Okay, what happened when you got there?

RLH: When I got there, they had an in processing place where everybody went. And the first thing they did was to issue you some uniforms and get your name down for the payroll purposes and all of that and then they fed you, told you where to go and go to bed.

LC: And then the next morning...?

RLH: I started hard and heavy.

LC: Do you remember that first morning?

RLH: I remember...I think mostly I remember having to get up and they were trying to march us over there and what a bunch of lummoxes we were.

LC: (Laughter) This is the first time you’ve been sort of immersed in sort of military culture at all.

RLH: That’s right. You know, I’ve never been around anything like that.

LC: Right.

RLH: I mean, these are people who are going to tell you everything you do all day long.

LC: Yeah, how did you adjust to that?

RLH: I had no problem.

LC: Really, okay. And presumably, there may have been people around who didn’t adjust as easily.

RLH: Oh, there were people who failed to complete the course.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: Well, there weren’t that many who failed a course per se. There were people who gave up. And remember too, back in those days that unlike now, you couldn’t quit. In other words, if you decided you couldn’t make it in Officer School, they took you across the road to Lackland proper and you became an enlisted man.

LC: Right, those were the only choices.

RLH: That was your choice.

LC: Right.

RLH: I mean, I kind of enjoyed the life.

LC: It sort of fit you?

RLH: Yeah, I didn’t have a problem. I mean, for the first time in my life, I didn’t have to worry about, ‘Did I have enough food’; I didn’t have to worry about, ‘Did I have something to wear?’
I didn’t have to worry about how I was going to get back and forth. I mean, we were self-contained right there.

LC: Yeah. So, what new worries did you take on and when do you exchange those for what…were you concerned about the book training that you had to do, the weapons training, were there any challenges there?

RLH: No, it was not difficult.

LC: It was not difficult?

RLH: I mean, there was physical training, there was no weapons training.

LC: Okay, none.

RLH: We had classroom probably six hours I would say and probably two to three hours of physical training in the afternoons.

LC: What kind of classroom work were you doing?

RLH: Primarily military rules and regulations; how to wear a uniform, how to salute, how to march, some history, that sort of thing.

LC: Okay.

RLH: How to be an officer really.

LC: How to be an officer, right. And were you ranked in regard to other people?

RLH: Oh, you were at the bottom of the pecking order.

LC: Okay. Did you have a rank at this point?

RLH: No, we were considered cadets. We actually were in the regular…it was sort of strange. When we signed up, we were considered enlisted in the regular Air Force, paid as a sergeant, but paid at a rate of having four-year service. So we got a little bit more money than just a normal enlisted man.

LC: Okay. Speaking of the length of time, what had been your sign on agreement with your recruiter?

RLH: It was to be four years after the completion of flight training. It’s actually four years from the day you graduate from flight training. So the time you spent at Officer School and in flight training did not count toward your commitment.

LC: So the clock hadn’t even started yet?

RLH: That’s right. So it was basically five years three months.

LC: Okay. How long were you actually in the Officer Training School?
RLH: Almost exactly three months.

LC: What do you remember about your instructors?

RLH: Sure.

LC: Anything particular, do you remember whether they were...had they been over to Southeast Asia any of them?

RLH: Most of them were what we called unrated. They hadn't been through any kind of Flight School. They were people who joined the Air Force and were just putting in their time to get out. The actual classroom instructors themselves for the most part were young 1st lieutenants.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Seems like there was one captain who was over them. The drill instructor people who took us out and did drill to practice marching and did physical training and that sort of thing were enlisted people.

LC: Did any of them leave an impression with you?

RLH: Well, not really, because, I mean, we were primarily wrapped up in just trying to finish the course work. It was a two-step process. You spent half the time when you first got there as what is called the lower class. There were two classes at once; upper class, lower class. As a lower class, you were as low as you could get. So all you did is get up everyday at 5:30, go eat breakfast, go to class, do your physical training, do your study at night, go to bed. When you became an upperclassman, you moved across the hall, a new class came in. Now, what they did was assign people to be in charge of the new classes coming in from the cadets in the upper class.

LC: Okay.

RLH: And I became what they called flight captain. I had twenty-five guys I think that I was in charge of. So I became the guy that made sure they got places they needed to be on time.

LC: How did you get selected for that?

RLH: My lead instructor chose me.

LC: Okay, do you know what the basis was or did he just kind of pull you out of the line and say...?

RLH: No, I mean, it had to do with if they thought that you knew...if you had learned and progressed.

LC: Okay, you had performed well and so this was...

RLH: Yeah, that was my reward.
LC: I see. Did you…
RLH: I got a room with a sign on the door that says, ‘Upper flight captain’.
(Laughter)
LC: You got your own room?
RLH: Yeah, well we shared a room. We had two guys in a room.
LC: Well, that’s still not too bad.
RLH: Yeah.
LC: Did you enjoy that position?
RLH: I did, I did.
LC: What kinds of things were you actually responsible for; making sure they got to places on time or…?
RLH: Yeah, make sure they went to bed on time, got up on time, got to class on time, got to meals on time. And I did a little bit of counseling. If they were having a problem, they’d come see me. Not to any great extent, but I mean, I do remember one fellow that came to me, said, ‘I give up, I quit.’
LC: What’d you say?
RLH: Well, you know, I talked to him and tried to figure out why and it was just that he couldn’t… he was sort of a chubby fellow. He couldn’t stand the physical strain. He thought it was going to be easier if he was an enlisted man, which I don’t think physically it would be.
LC: Probably not.
RLH: And I tried to explain that to him and I couldn’t talk him out of it, so I went to the officer who was in charge of my class and told him.
LC: What was the end result?
RLH: He left.
LC: Really? Did he go over to the other side basically?
RLH: Yeah, but I don’t know what happened to him from there.
LC: Okay. Did you feel like you had not been able to solve that problem and should have or did you just…?
RLH: I didn’t feel like I did.
LC: Okay.
RLH: After talking to him, I didn’t feel like there was much I could do. And as I say, I was pretty much self-motivated and independent and I didn’t understand people who quit and gave up.

LC: Yeah, and I think that’s probably a good recipe for success is not just necessarily try to figure that out, just keep moving.

RLH: Yeah.

LC: When did you find out that you were going to go to California? Was that already in the cards?

RLH: Well, let’s back up a little bit.

LC: Okay, sure.

RLH: When I graduated, it was in November of ’67, from Officer School and I was assigned to flight training at Laughlin Air Force Base in Del Rio to go to pilot training. And I was there about six months and my vision went bad and they kicked me out.

LC: Wow, what happened to the vision?

RLH: I had I thought 20/20. I was just scraping by on the vision anyway.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Even from day one. And by the time I got there, you know, they checked my vision. As a matter of fact, I snuck my way through because when I first got there, they were doing it and they had hundreds of people that they were checking their vision and this guy who was doing mine had wandered off to do something else, came back and said, ‘Where were we?’ And I said, ‘We were done.’

LC: (Laughing)

RLH: So he signed off and then I started having problems in depth perception. So, they told me, ‘Well, you can’t do this.’

LC: Did you have your heart set on being a pilot?

RLH: Yes, I was crushed.

LC: Can you describe the problems that you had? You said it was depth perception, when did you actually find that out? Was it in the course of the training flight or something, how did you learn this?

RLH: As you advance, you solo in the aircraft, and they turn you loose and you go out on your own and there were three aircraft that you flew. The first one was a little small Cessna prop job.
LC: Yes.

RLH: Second aircraft was a small jet. I was in the second airplane, I had soloed and I was getting toward like the mid-term exam in that particular airplane. And I started having problems with landings and I just couldn’t get myself...I couldn’t align myself properly because the way you land in a jet is you travel down the runway, you pitch out and do a circular motion back to the end of the runway. And I just couldn’t get the timing down and as a matter of fact, instead of getting better, I got worse. I mean, this is after I’ve already soloed; I’ve been out several times by myself.

LC: Right.

RLH: So they sent me back to the flight surgeon and that’s when they said, ‘You can’t see.’

LC: Do you know what your vision was at that point?

RLH: 20/50.

LC: Yeah, and that’s way not good enough, right?

RLH: Well, you have to have 20/20 uncorrected. And you know, the guy, of course, the first thing he asked me is, ‘How in the world did you ever get here?’ I said, ‘I don’t know, I just did.’

LC: You said you were crushed, do you remember and would you like to describe that feeling of knowing that you had to do now something else?

RLH: Well, by that time I was that far along, six months, I was halfway through.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: And we started thinking about when you graduate, what airplane are you going to fly. And I thought like all little boys, ‘I’m going to be the world’s greatest fighter pilot.’ And then faced with the fact that not only are you not going to be the worlds greatest fighter pilot, you’re not even going to be the worlds greatest trash hauler, because you’re not going to be a pilot. And in the Air Force, that’s the top of the heap.

LC: Sure.

RLH: So, I knew then that probably this was not going to be a career. So, faced with that, I decided, you know, I needed the flight pay, so I decided, well I would accept Navigator School.

LC: Okay.

RLH: So they sent me to California, that would’ve been in June of ’68.

LC: By the summer of 1968, and I want to talk to you about Navigator School, but let’s just stop for a second. That summer, I wonder if you were paying any greater attention or...
RLH: Oh absolutely.
LC: Did you have much time to be thinking now about Vietnam?
RLH: Remember what happened in June of 1968?
LC: I remember what happened in April 1968.
RLH: April was Martin Luther King.
LC: That's right.
RLH: And June was Bobby Kennedy.
LC: Okay, yeah, after the California primary.
RLH: Right.
LC: Do you remember those two events?
RLH: Absolutely.
LC: Okay, can you tell me...let's take Dr. King first. Where did you hear about it?
RLH: We were doing physical training out in the field. We had...and I believe I'm correct in this number; we only had one black person in my class. I mean, this person was in tears and not having lived around black people, I went to a segregated school. The first time I ever went to class with a black person was at Tech.
LC: Really?
RLH: And they probably had five of them then.
LC: Right.
RLH: I even talked to him and tried to get an understanding of why he was so upset. And you know, up till that time, I thought that...I hate to show my upraising, but they were second-class citizens. I'd never eaten in a restaurant with a black person, never ever.
LC: Yeah.
RLH: And having one there in the class was sort of unique.
LC: Where was he from?
RLH: He was from the south. I think it was Alabama.
LC: Was he able to tell you why he was upset?
RLH: He explained it to me, I'm not sure I totally understood.
LC: Okay, but he tried.
RLH: We felt like Dr. King was a troublemaker.
LC: Really?
RLH: I mean, he wasn’t doing much of anybody any good; it was our fault. ‘Our’ being the white class. And that was probably the first time that I ever thought, ‘Maybe there is something wrong here.’

LC: Did you kind of give thought to it over the next couple of three days?

RLH: Yes I did, and I talked to my friend a couple of more times about it.

LC: Really? Do you remember more about what he said?

RLH: He was upset because he said that there is no one else who is trying to make life better for the black people. Certainly not the federal government, which I believed was true. Now, Lyndon Johnson had some great ideas, you know, they just never panned out.

LC: Right.

RLH: And it always seemed to me that that’s the way politicians were. They always told me what they were going to do, and it never happened. And this was the first person who, to this friend of mine, who had ever really been believable as someone who wanted to help the black man become something more than what they were.

LC: Did your thinking about race relations really kind of begin at that point, really started thinking about it?

RLH: I think so. I really hadn’t put a lot of thought to it. I mean I had no great biases because I had never lived around any of them.

LC: Right, right.

RLH: I mean, I met my first Jewish person when I went in the Air Force. I mean, we lived kind of an insular life.

LC: Well, very small town.

RLH: Yup.

LC: In, you know, southwest Texas really, right?

RLH: That’s right.

LC: What about June 1968 and Robert Kennedy?

RLH: I thought that we were falling apart.

LC: Where were you when you found out that he had been shot?

RLH: Same place, I was still there.

LC: Okay. Were you out in the field or…?

RLH: No, actually we were in class and they came in and announced it to us.
LC: Really? Do you remember the feeling in the room?

RLH: It got very quiet.

LC: What did you make of this latest development? Did you think about the impact, had you been impressed with Kennedy at all?

RLH: Well, of course, it was the whole Kennedy thing back then.

LC: Sure.

RLH: I can well remember when John Kennedy was assassinated. I know exactly where I was, what time of day it was. So, for this to happen again, I thought, you know, what has happened to our nation that we can do this to one another. You know, how can we hate each other that badly?

LC: Did you have any sense that Kennedy had died as a result of being a political target of some kind or did you…?

RLH: Well, I thought it was political.

LC: Okay. You didn't think necessarily though one kooky guy with a gun theory sums it up?

RLH: I thought that he...remember that the person who did it was a foreigner.

LC: Yes, that's right.

RLH: Sirhan Sirhan. And I thought he was put up to it by someone who didn't want Kennedy to succeed. I mean, the Kennedy's were...there were two sides, they either loved them or hated them.

LC: Tell me about your experience during and after the Kennedy assassination in 1963. Where were you?

RLH: I was a freshman in college.

LC: And where were you when you found out that it had happened?

RLH: I had finished a class and gone back to my room and I don't remember...I think I was just changing books or something and I heard it on the radio. We didn't have a television, we just had a radio.

LC: Right.

RLH: It was early afternoon or late morning, one or the other. I may have been going to lunch, but I remember hearing it and of course, I was appalled and it was before I knew that he had died, when he had just been shot.
And there was a fellow that I knew pretty well who was from New Jersey. Now why in the world someone from New Jersey wound up at San Angelo Junior College, I don’t know. But he had been sort of a friend of mine and he was outside playing in the little ball field that we had there and I opened up the window and hollered at him and told him that Kennedy had been shot. And he said something defective, ‘Well I hope he died.’ And I couldn’t believe somebody would say that.

Where do you think that was coming from? Did you know that guy well enough to have an idea?

I never talked to him again.

Really?

I mean, I don’t care who it was.

Yeah, you were just appalled by that?

I could not believe someone would say that.

We dismissed classes, that was on a Thursday I believe.

Yeah, Friday actually I think, but yeah.

Well, we had no classes the next day. They called off classes and we went home. And it was a very troublesome time.

Did you pay attention over that weekend to events? Were you kind of glued to it and trying to find out what happened?

Actually, I went home and worked.

Did you? Okay. Did that leave an impact on you?

Oh very much so.

What kind of things do you think…well how did that influence you?

Well, my parents when I grew up were southern democrats and my mother was virtually in tears and of course, my dad didn’t care one way or the other or didn’t say anything anyway.
RLH: And, you know, I felt like again that our world is falling apart. I mean, this was the first person of that magnitude who had been assassinated. I mean, after that, there were other people.

LC: Right.

RLH: But this is the first. And I was eighteen years old. I was not particularly a political type person. I mean, we couldn’t even vote back then until you were twenty-one. But I remember how sorrowful it was, how upset the whole nation was, I watched every bit of the funeral on television that I could watch.

LC: Do you remember the Oswald shooting?

RLH: Oh yes.

LC: Were you actually watching it live? Do you remember?

RLH: I don’t think so. I think I was at work, but I watched it a hundred times after that.

LC: Yeah. What did you make of that assassination? Did you think that Oswald was the lone nut or was there something else going on?

RLH: I don’t know that then I knew. I thought it was strange if he was.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: That’s about it.

LC: Back in 1968, after Robert Kennedy was killed, did you have any sense that there was an impact on for example, US involvement in Southeast Asia? One of Kenney’s campaign issues of course was the Vietnam conflict. Did you see a link there between what your future was going to be and the death of Kennedy?

RLH: I think that’s about the time we first really began talking about getting out.

LC: Yes.

RLH: And, you know, I don’t know that I ever made up my mind right, wrong, or indifferent at that time, whether we should be there or should not. I mean, there was still a great feeling, particularly among us who were in the military that we could win the thing. You know, I was not aware of the severe restrictions put on the people who were there, that you know, it was not our intention to win a war, but simply to contain the enemy.

LC: You didn’t appreciate that distinction, yes.
RLH: I didn’t know that then. We were still bombing North Vietnam. That stopped
 sometime in ’68. But it was not something put forward as a permanent thing either. It was like a
temporary halt that stretched into two years or longer, longer than that, four years.
LC: Were you paying any attention to Richard Nixon at this point as candidate for
president?
RLH: Richard Nixon was the first time that I could vote because Johnson was just before I
was twenty-one I believe.
LC: Okay.
RLH: So the first election I could vote in was that one and I voted for Nixon and I felt like
that he was a man who you could believe in, number one, who would either win the war or get us
out, one or the other. You know, he would make that decision. And in retrospect, I was totally
wrong in my thinking.
LC: Why do you say that?
RLH: Because I think he got himself into a quagmire and he didn’t know what to do.
LC: But in 1968, you thought that basically better him than Humphrey?
RLH: Oh yes.
LC: Okay. What was your opinion of Hubert Humphrey?
RLH: That he was wishy washy and that first thing he wanted to do was give up and say,
‘Okay, you win.’
LC: And that increasingly maybe didn’t sit right with your impression of the win ability of
the war?
RLH: Well, as I say, at that time, we still felt like we could win the war. And it hadn’t gone
on to the point of late ’69 or into the 70s when there were so many protests and so much antiwar
activity. It was just beginning back then. And it wasn’t anywhere I was.
LC: Right, at Del Rio or anywhere near there.
RLH: No, not at all.
LC: Yeah.
RLH: Or even really in California.
LC: You went out to California in, did you say, in June of ’68?
RLH: June of ’68.
LC: Okay. Was it actually before or after the assassination?
RLH: After.

LC: Okay. And to begin navigator training, how did you feel when you knew that you were going to start off with a new program? I mean, could you get into it?

RLH: Well, I changed my whole lifestyle. I got married.

LC: Oh, okay.

RLH: My fiancé was going to Tech and I’d been out now a year and I called her and told her I was being reassigned and going to California and asked her if she would go with me and she said, ‘Well, only if we get married.’ And I said, ‘Well, that’s why I’m calling.’

LC: You asked her to marry you over the phone?

RLH: Yup.

LC: And what’d she say?

RLH: Well, remember, we’re three hundred miles apart.

LC: I know. What did she say?

RLH: She said yes.

LC: Super.

RLH: So, I hung around awhile and got married and then the two of us, that was our honeymoon, was to drive to Sacramento, California.

LC: Okay. What was she studying at Tech?

RLH: She was in the fashion design.

LC: Okay. Had she completed her degree?

RLH: No, she lacked a year.

LC: Okay. Was her intentions to continue to go to school or…?

RLH: Absolutely.

LC: Okay. And was she able to do that out in California?

RLH: No. What she did, she took a few courses, but we moved a lot.

LC: Right.

RLH: And I’ll explain that to you in a minute.

LC: Okay.

RLH: I knew that at some point, I’m going to go to Vietnam for a year and I explained that to her and she understood it and it was our intention that when that happened, she went back to school. That was going to be her project while I’m gone.
LC: Okay, that was smart. And she thought that sounded like a good plan?
RLH: Yes.
LC: Okay. Where were you assigned in Sacramento or near Sacramento?
RLH: Well, it was called Mather Air Force Base, M-a-t-h-e-r.
LC: And that was specifically so that you could attend a navigator-training course?
RLH: That's exactly right, that's all there was there.
LC: That's all they had? How long was that course?
RLH: Ten months.
LC: So you would be there until well into 1969.
RLH: Right. I started around the first of July probably and finished toward the end of March in '69.
LC: Did you spend much time off base at all?
RLH: Well, we had an apartment, but it was right adjacent to the base.
LC: Did the two of you, you and your wife; were you able to go into Sacramento much?
RLH: Well, yeah, we had a car.
LC: Okay.
RLH: We, you know, went to Lake Tahoe and went up in the mountains and went through San Francisco, and no, we never even had anyone that said anything bad to us.
LC: Okay. And did you ever observe in Sacramento or elsewhere when you were traveling around as you had time to go around, did you ever encounter or see people on the street protesting against the war at all?
RLH: Saw it on television and that's it.
LC: That's it?
RLH: That's it.
LC: Okay.
RLH: Remember, Sacramento was a small town back then.
LC: Yes, that's right, and actually, still not that big. How did you feel when you saw those protests on TV?
RLH: I thought, 'What a bunch of wimps.'
LC: Really? Can you talk about that for a second? What did you...?
RLH: Well, I don’t know that I was so much pro war as I was anti-antiwar. It was my feeling that, okay, so it’s not a great war, but I thought that our reasons for being there were good and just and I was willing to do my part and I just felt like the people who would run away to Canada or burn draft cards were people who didn’t have the strength of character to do the right thing.

LC: What did you understand if you can remember about the United States purposes over there that you thought were actually good purposes?

RLH: Well, remember, by then, I was getting the military end of it.

LC: Yes, absolutely.

RLH: And I mean, we firmly believed that our purpose in being there was to save a small country from falling to communism, which would cause a domino effect all over Southeast Asia.

LC: Did you think that was a reasonable explanation for why we were…?

RLH: I accepted it.

LC: Okay. Do you ever remember anyone having discussions kind of maybe off base or certainly out of class about whether that was an adequate justification?

RLH: Not really.

LC: Okay. So it was pretty much generally accepted and the idea was to get on with the business at hand.

RLH: That’s right.

LC: Can you describe a typical day at Navigator Training School? What kinds of things did you do?

RLH: Well, we spent most of our time in class. By then, of course, we’re commissioned officers and we’re treated as such. We didn’t march to class or anything like that. We did march I guess between classes once in a while, but we were primarily in a classroom studying for the entire day. About two times probably a week, we flew and those flights normally took all day long.

LC: Wow. Can you describe some of those training flights?

RLH: Yeah, sure.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Well, it would depend on what type of navigation that we were studying at that particular time. We did a lot of constellation navigation. So we had our little astrolabe. We had to learn how to use that thing and shoot the stars and all that. We always had an instructor with us.
These were old prop driven two engine planes, not pressurized, so we didn’t fly very high. And we would either, I mean, we had specific routes, either overland or over water. When we finished with the astrolabe, then we went into LORAN navigation. And then we went into dead reckoning and we also had class. We had to learn the Morse Code. We had classes in star recognition. They actually had a small little…what am I trying to say.

LC: Planetarium?
RLH: Planetarium, and we had to learn the locations of stars and constellations and such.
LC: Was this kind of stuff intrinsically interesting to you?
RLH: Yeah, I mean, it was enjoyable. It wasn’t drudgery.
LC: Okay.
RLH: And it was nice too because it wasn’t like being in Basic Training or something. I mean, you were treated as a human. I mean, you were treated as adults.
LC: Right. What was your rank at this point? You said you were…?
RLH: 2nd lieutenant.
LC: Okay. Your sort of status has improved a little bit now and did you feel like an investment was being made in you at this point?
RLH: Yeah, I mean, you know, I enjoyed it and it was not difficult to me. Physically it was not that demanding. I mean, remember, I’m twenty-three years old; I can stand on my head for thirty days.
LC: Sure, yeah.
RLH: So, you know, getting up at 5:00 in the morning is no big deal. I remember, we carpooled and we did things together. We would go places on weekends together. I mean, we stayed within our little small world. My wife did have relatives there that we would go and visit, but most of the time, we were there at the base. We didn’t have enough money to do much of anything.
LC: Right, so you were kind of constrained by that.
RLH: Yeah, my wife worked for a while.
LC: Where did she work?
RLH: She worked in a department store called…it was Weinstocks. I think Foley’s bought them.
LC: You said you went up to Lake Tahoe one time.
RLH: Several times.
LC: Oh, several times. Do you remember those trips?
RLH: Sure.
LC: Did you go skiing or what were you doing?
RLH: Went skiing a couple of times, skied at Squaw Valley and another place, always also
go to Bear Mountain, which is south of there. My wife didn’t ski, but she went up with me once.
We went and drove around the lake and you know, picnicked and that sort of thing.
LC: Where have you learned to ski or did you just kind of pick it up?
RLH: Tried to pick it up there.
LC: Okay, okay. And those are some serious sails too.
RLH: Sure, it was fun.
LC: Yeah. Did you have a feeling along with your training that the war was probably going
to last long enough for you to actually get…?
RLH: It was beginning to look like it, yes.
(Laughter)
LC: Okay, okay. Nixon took office then while you were still there at…?
RLH: Yes.
LC: Okay. How did you feel about the early part of his administrations, say the first, you
know, whatever happened there?
RLH: Well, I mean, there was a general feeling that here’s someone that will take action.
LC: Take control.
RLH: He’s going to be in charge and he’s going to stop this nonsense of restrictions that
are designed simply to contain rather than win and it’s going to get better from here. I mean, that
was the general feeling. As time went along, it became pretty obvious that was not going to
happen. And you sort of almost got the feeling that Richard Nixon wasn’t running [the war], Robert
McNamara was.
LC: Interesting. When did you kind of come up with that formation?
RLH: Probably in ’69.
LC: Really?
RLH: I mean, you wondered who was in charge.
LC: Because you had some expectations around his…
RLH: That’s right, something was going to change, but nothing did.
LC: Yeah. And you just kept kind of moving forward in the system towards...
RLH: I had no choice.
LC: Right. Were you becoming more adjusted to the idea that you were going to be a navigator rather than a pilot?
RLH: Oh yeah.
LC: Right. And sort of making that transition.
RLH: We figured out, after we had been in Navigator School for a little while, that you know, what all aircraft you could be assigned to.
LC: Okay.
RLH: And they had begun putting navigators in the backseat of fighter jets.
LC: Do you know the background to that decision, different aircrafts, different requirements, do you know?
RLH: Well, I'm not exactly sure what you're asking me.
LC: Previously, fighter pilots had been flying alone.
RLH: That's right.
LC: And at this point...
RLH: So they came out in '63 or so, that's when the Air Force began purchasing the airplane that I flew, which was the F-4 Phantom Jet.
LC: Which was a two seater.
RLH: Right.
LC: Right.
RLH: But it was originally two pilots. They're sitting front and back.
LC: Yes.
RLH: And in about '67, '66, '67, somewhere along in there, they figured out that they couldn't train pilots fast enough. So they decided that they could make do with a navigator in the backseat of this thing. The Navy version of it was designed strictly from day one for what they called a radar intercept officer, which was similar to what I did.
LC: Okay.
RLH: But the Air Force version was fully functional as far as flight controls, front seat and backseat, Navy was not because the Air Force put two pilots. So we figured out that, you know, you could go ride in the backseat of one of these and it's almost as good as being a pilot.
LC: Right, and did you say that you would have full set of controls in front of you?

RLH: Absolutely.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Now you had some different duties, but at least I was going to be able to do what I always wanted to do.

LC: Which was be in a jet fighter aircraft.

RLH: That’s right. So, you were assigned…your assignment upon graduation from Navigator School depended on your standing in class. They came out, they said, ‘Okay, we have forty-five graduates. Here’s forty-five airplanes.’ The guy who graduates number one picks number one. He can do whatever he wants to, whatever’s up there on the board. And right on down the line to the forty-fifth guy who gets what’s left.

LC: And how did you do?

RLH: And I think it was forty-four, forty-five people who graduated. We had six F-4s available and I thought then that, you know, those were going to be the first six that go.

LC: Right.

RLH: Well, I was wrong because I picked like nineteenth I think, and I got the next to the last one.

LC: What went first? What was selected first?

RLH: C-130.

LC: Why do you think that is?

RLH: I have no idea; I thought he was crazy.

LC: And you never…?

RLH: You have to understand too that not everyone who was there thought like I thought.

LC: Right, and you had been through part of the program with pilot training.

RLH: That’s right.

LC: So, you probably did have a different take on it.

RLH: That’s right, and I knew it was fun.

LC: Yeah, but it was also really…you know, jet fighter aircraft is the top of the line.

RLH: That’s the top of the heap.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: We looked down on everybody else.
LC: Well, I guess I’m surprised by that selection too. But anyway, you got what you wanted.

RLH: I got what I wanted.

LC: Don’t question it, right. (Laughter)

RLH: That’s right.

LC: Your next assignment then was to go and do the training to be the backseat man, right?

RLH: Well actually, I graduated right at the end of March, first part of April and we had two other schools, survival schools that we had to go to.

LC: Oh okay, tell me about those. Where were they?

RLH: The first one was just a general Survival School and they sent us to Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington. And this is probably the second week in April. I mean, it’s colder than everything up there, still snow on the ground. It was a two week school and we spent probably the first three, four, or five days, something like that in the classroom just talking about identifying plants and what do you do if this happens and how do you do this and so forth, general stuff. And then they take you out at night, is when you first go out and they put you through an obstacle course. At the end of the obstacle course, you’re captured and taken to a…it’s almost like a concentration camp. Well, it’s not; it’s an isolation camp. They put you in a room that’s about four feet by four feet by six feet, which for me was not a problem.

LC: Right, like a cell.

RLH: Yeah. And remember, it’s at night; the whole interior of it is painted black. They had light bulbs at the most that were 40-Watt light bulbs in the hallway that you could see a little bit of light under the door. But you’re basically stuck in this little room and they left you there for a couple of hours. It’s cold as all get out, and then they came around and bang on the door and told everybody to strip off every piece of clothing. And they came back around and took all your clothing, so you’re standing there for an hour naked. And I mean, they’re just trying to reduce you down to nothing is what they’re trying to do. And they’d come around every once in a while, bang on the door and make sure you’re still awake. And then they come and get you and they take you out and they put you in this little adjustable box. It’s made out of bamboo actually and they can make the thing as small as you could possibly fit in and the idea is to, number one, for you to get an idea of what they can do to you.
LC: Right.

RLH: And number two, to see how long it takes before you break. I mean, they tell you, ‘I'm going to put you in the box and you're not coming out till you ask to come out.’ So, it's sort of a challenge.

LC: Yeah, to you to not ask them.

RLH: That's right. So, I mean, we had people that, I mean, it just drove them nuts immediately and they called and they let them out. And I think they finally came and took me out. I said, ‘I'm not giving up.’

LC: How long do you think you were in there?

RLH: Oh, probably an hour at the most. I mean, there were a lot of people and they were trying to get them through, you know, they weren't going to leave you forever.

LC: No, I know. But it was a matter of will for you.

RLH: That's right, and you know, I was small anyway, so I could fit in the box.

LC: And pretty tough it sounds like too.

RLH: Well, I was not going to give up.

LC: Okay, what other things happened there?

RLH: Well, then they took you back in, they gave you back your clothes and left you there for another hour or two and then they came and got you and interrogated you.

LC: Okay, how did that happen?

RLH: They took you in a room and there would be one person at an old metal desk and no other furniture, no chair for you to sit on. You had to stand there in front of the desk at attention. And this guy, we didn't realize it, but when we first got there, they made us fill out a little information questionnaire thing and I didn't even realize at the time, that that was the information he was using to question me. So again, he was trying to break your will. I mean, he was asking stupid questions though. I mean, I never will forget that...now remember, I'd gotten married in June eight or nine months before, ten months before, so he starts hammering me about why I don't have any kids. Am I not a man? You know, stuff like that.

LC: Sure.

RLH: There was no physical hitting.

LC: But humiliating.

RLH: Humiliating, and they did this two or three times.
LC: And how did you do with it?

RLH: I just didn’t answer them. I mean, I knew they weren’t going to hit me.

LC: Right, right.

RLH: I just gave them name, rank, and service number and went on. We probably stayed there twenty-four hours and then they put us in kind of a compound and we were there for two days. We were in a general area that we could…they wouldn’t let us stop and talk, but we had to keep moving, but we had a little Quonset hut like thing that we could get into. It was not heated or anything, but they fed us. Now this is…we’re into the third day now, I think they fed us one time the whole time.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: And we had to cook it ourselves and it was rice and some kind of fish. But the last night we were there, they came around and said, ‘Okay, we’re going to allow x number of people to escape and see if they can evade’, and I didn’t get picked.

LC: Do you remember what happened with the guys who did get picked? Do you know anything about that?

RLH: Oh nothing happened to them.

LC: Okay.

RLH: I mean, it was just to see if you can get away.

LC: Yeah, were they able to at all?

RLH: A couple of them did. Yeah, they got all the way back to their BOQ and went to bed.

LC: Wow, great. Were there more incidents from that Survival School that you remember, what happened next?

RLH: Well, after we finished all of that stuff, then that’s when they took us up in the mountains. And again, we were not allowed to take any food with us. We had adequate clothing. You know, I thought we were going to go up there and learn how to live on the land, but I mean, we really didn’t do that, they just kind of took us up there and starved us. We had six people in my little group. We had two pounds of raw beef and a live rabbit. The two pounds of raw beef, they showed us how to make jerky out of. They gave us a parachute panel that we had to make a tent out of. I mean, it wasn’t a tent; we had to cut pieces of wood and so forth. We made the jerky, we killed the rabbit and ate the rabbit and made the tent, slept there for a couple of nights and then
they gave us a compass and a map and said, ‘Here’s where you are, here’s where you’ve got to be
two days from now, go’ and sent us two men together.

LC: Two men teams?

RLH: Yeah.

LC: How’d you do with that?

RLH: Well, the fellow that they assigned to me was a retread. He had failed to complete
the course the first time.

LC: The Survival School course?

RLH: Right.

LC: Okay.

RLH: And they told me that, and they said, ‘Your job is to get yourself and your buddy
through this thing.’

LC: How’d you feel about that?

RLH: It was a challenge to me.

LC: Okay.

RLH: I said, ‘I can do that.’ And you know, I questioned him before we ever started, you
know, ‘What happened the first time, why you didn’t make it?’ Well, I finally figured out was that he
got dehydrated. Because, I mean, we’re up there, I mean, we’re like five days in the mountains.

LC: Right.

RLH: And it’s very cool. You have to make yourself drink water because otherwise you’ll
get dehydrated, you get sick. And you don’t have anything to eat, so you know, I said, ‘Here’s how
we’re going to do it. We’re going to travel thirty minutes, we’re going to stop and drink. Then we’ll
travel thirty minutes, and we’re going to stop and drink.’ The first thing that happened is they told
us the whole first day that someone’s going to try to capture you.

LC: Okay.

RLH: And so I did the march and stop and drink, march and stop and drink, and this guy
was doing fine. So we heard someone coming after us, and I told him to hide and I hid away from
him and when whoever it was found him and asked him where his partner was, he pointed right at
me and I told him, I said, ‘What kind of idiot are you?’

LC: Uh yeah, oops.

RLH: Buddy, you know, I know why you dehydrated because you’re stupid.
LC: (Laughter) Oh no.

RLH: I told him that if we get captured again and he turned me in, I was going to shoot him.

LC: Yeah, right. What was the fallout for you from that?

RLH: Oh nothing.

LC: Oh okay.

RLH: I mean, it was just... you know, you were to do your best, don't get caught.

LC: Okay, and you guys got caught.

RLH: We got caught.

LC: Right.

RLH: And they didn't do anything to us.

LC: Okay.

RLH: So they turned us loose and we started out again and I think we were on the trail two days and the first night, we again walked into a partisan's camp and this is the first meal we've had in forever, and I still laugh because people couldn't eat it. They got physically ill because they would try to eat so fast and try to catch up. I mean, you're very weak.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: Now me, I weighed probably one hundred and forty pounds when I started and I probably weighted one hundred forty pounds when I finished. But I mean, anybody that couldn't eat it and they didn't feel well, I said, 'Here, I'll eat it for you.'

LC: (Laughter) So you kind of capitalized on that?

RLH: Oh no problem.

LC: (Laughter)

RLH: And then the next day we got up and trekked across another few mountains and drank more water and made it to the bus.

LC: And all this time, you're using your navigation skills?

RLH: Oh yeah, using the map and the compass.

LC: Okay.

RLH: And it was a terrain map, so you know, you can tell where the mountains are and so forth and so on. You had a compass; you knew how to get there.

LC: Okay.
RLH: It wasn’t very difficult.
LC: Had the classroom work you said you had done at the beginning of the Survival School, did it help you at all during this?
RLH: Well, somewhat, but we didn’t have enough time to stop and forage for food because we had certain places we had to be.
LC: You needed to keep moving.
RLH: You had to keep moving. So what I really wanted to do was eat.
LC: So that was motivating you on.
RLH: Oh yeah.
LC: Okay.
RLH: Get done with this and it’s amazing too, and they told us this would happen, that the one thing that you’re going to dream of, that you want to eat is something sweet. Now I don’t know if it’s a subliminal suggestion or what, but all I could think of was a Dr. Pepper and a Baby Ruth. I mean, I was dying for one. That’s the first thing I got when I got back.
LC: Wow. (Laughter) Your arrival back, was that the end of basically the two weeks?
RLH: Well it was, except at the end of this, I had probably two or three weeks before my next school and they called us all together and said, ‘We have another school that we would like for you to attend.’
LC: Now ‘you’, meaning everybody in the group?
RLH: No, only those people who were going to be flying combat missions in fighter aircraft. They had another school that they would like for us to attend, but it was not mandatory, but it was strongly suggested that we go. So, we said, ‘Okay, we’ll go.’
LC: All right.
RLH: And what it was, it was one hundred percent classroom, but they took you in and taught you how to encode a letter home.
LC: No kidding?
RLH: And that was the whole thing.
LC: Okay, how long did that one last?
RLH: A week, five days.
LC: Can you tell me what you learned there? How did you do?
RLH: Well, it was a little anagram box that you put together that you numbered and lettered. It's been so long, I can't remember how to do it anymore. But they also assigned someone that you corresponded with on a regular basis to practice your skills and it was designed that if you were shot down and captured, that you could send messages, primarily names of the people there with you.

LC: By using a type of...?

RLH: By using codes in this letter.

LC: Was it something like taking the alphabet letters going across?

RLH: Yeah, that's right. I mean, you made a box and it was numbered as I recall in each letter. You only used probably half the alphabet; it was fanatic [fantastic].

LC: Right.

RLH: And you tried to learn to encode names and it would be every, let's say sixth letter or seventh letter, whatever, and you had to make it fit.

LC: Did you pick that up pretty easily?

RLH: It wasn't that hard.

LC: And Ronnie, what was going through your mind having been to Survival School and now to this school and you knew what the purpose of it was and what it implied about potential for what could happen to you, how were you dealing with the fact that, you know, what they were training you for?

RLH: Well, I wanted all the training I could get if I was going to go do this, but I also knew that we were no longer bombing North Vietnam. So the chances of being shot down over North Vietnam were pretty slim.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Or at least for the near future.

LC: Okay.

RLH: So it was more of an exercise of, you know, just get it out of the way.

LC: Okay, you didn’t really kind of take on the possibility in your mind.

RLH: Some people did, but I didn’t. I never thought I was going to be hurt, never ever.

LC: Really? You were just kind of were walking around thinking that you were going to be fine through this?

RLH: I knew I would.
LC: Really? That’s interesting. I’ve heard other men say that too.

RLH: Well I can tell you that later later.

LC: Oh okay, later later. After the encoding school, which by the way, where was that?

RLH: That was also in Spokane, Washington. It was right there, same place.

LC: Fairchild?

RLH: Yes.

LC: Okay. So, you and a group of how many guys were in that?

RLH: Probably fifteen.

LC: Okay. And then did that group kind of stay together as you then went onto…?

RLH: No, we had various schools that we were going to.

LC: Okay and where were you sent?

RLH: I was sent to Tucson, Arizona to Davis Monthan Air Force Base.

LC: Okay. And this was the point at which you were going to get into an F-4, correct?

RLH: Right.

LC: Okay, how long did this assignment for training at Tucson last?

RLH: It was two parts. Total was…I got there in May and I finished the middle of December. This would’ve been 1969. The first month, four weeks or so, something like that, was what they call Radar School. Just learn how to use the radar that that airplane had. Everyone who was going to fly the F-4 went to the same Radar School.

RC: Pilots and…

RLH: Everybody, whether you were a pilot, navigator, whatever you went…no matter what base you were eventually going to, Radar School was there.

LC: Okay.

RLH: As I recall, they trained F-4 people there and at George Air Force Base in California and at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida. Those are the only three places, but all of us went to Radar School.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Once you finished that, then you began the actual aircraft training.

LC: And that would last for the rest of the session?

RLH: Right.
LC: Okay. Let's talk about the Radar School first. Were there particular characteristics to
the F-4's capability of the radar that you needed to learn?

RLH: Yes, very limited capabilities.

LC: Okay, can you tell me about them?

RLH: The radar, there were actually two radars; one on the older model aircraft and one
on the newer model aircraft. We trained on the older model.

LC: Which was the F-4…?

RLH: C and D [C-Model].

LC: C? Okay.

RLH: Well, actually the C, C-Model.

LC: Okay.

RLH: What we were trying…first of all; you were just learning how to operate the thing.
This was a dual mode radar. The one we had used in Navigator School was one mode and one
mode only and that was ground mapping for navigational purposes.

LC: Right.

RLH: This one had two modes. One was ground mapping to navigate with, but the other
was air to air. And that was to look for enemy aircraft and worked totally differently.

LC: Okay.

RLH: So we had to learn a totally new skill there.

LC: And the anticipation is that you'll be using both of those at the same time.

RLH: You'll be using both, yes. Right.

LC: At the same time, you'll be able to…

RLH: You can switch back and forth.

LC: Okay. How hard was this to learn the air-to-air radar?

RLH: I didn't think it was very difficult.

LC: Really?

RLH: It was kind of fun.

LC: Okay, can you tell me about it? Why was it fun, what was cool about it?

RLH: Well, this is the first time that I ever really dealt much with computers. I mean, this
thing you could actually lock onto a target and track it.

LC: Okay, visually on a screen?
RLH: Yeah, I mean you pick it up visually, then you had a little joy stick that you used to move a little cursor over the top of the target, then you click a button and lock onto it and it gives you...it doesn't give you...you have a little bit of elevation information, primarily it's heading and distance.

LC: Okay, and by lock on, what do you mean?

RLH: Track it automatically.

LC: Okay.

RLH: I mean, you slewed the radar to it by clicking this button and then that was in turn connected to the missiles and the missiles could then home in on that aircraft via your radar.

LC: So there's some kind of guidance between the two?

RLH: That's correct, both for radar missiles and for heat seeking missiles. Heat seeking missiles slewed the head to the radar heading.

LC: Okay, can you explain that?

RLH: Well, the radar actually directed…it actually tracked the enemy aircraft and told the radar guided missile where to go.

LC: Okay.

RLH: The radar missile had to have that lock on the entire way.

LC: Okay, in order to continue on.

RLH: In order to...yes. And the heat seeking missile however, you lock on to it and that caused the head of the heat-seeking missile to point at the airplane and sense the heat. Once that happened, you had an aural signal that told you that the heat seeking head was now tracking that aircraft's heat envelope.

LC: All by itself?

RLH: All by itself. So then you could fire the missile and you no longer had to track it.

LC: And once the missile...

RLH: Once it left, it's on its own.

LC: Right, and you're then looking for the next route basically.

RLH: That's right.

LC: Okay. I'm going to want to know later how this worked out in practice. On the F-4 C's, so that was the older model.

RLH: Yes.
LC: Okay, but it did have this dual radar capability?

RLH: Yes.

LC: Okay. Is that why you trained on the entirety of your time in Tucson?

RLH: I didn’t understand.

LC: The F-4 C, was that the aircraft that you trained on for the whole time?

RLH: Yes. All of the D-Models and E-Models, which were the later models, were in Southeast Asia for the most part.

LC: Okay. So the radar picking up the use of this basically different tool was not a problem?

RLH: No.

LC: Okay. Were there any guys in the group that you were going through with who did have a problem with it?

RLH: Well, I think some caught onto it faster than others, took some remedial training, but it wasn’t a difficult thing.

LC: So pilots are going through this part of the training too.

RLH: Only the backseat pilots.

LC: Oh, okay.

RLH: The front seat pilots had some radar training from pilot training, but they depended on the backseater to do that.

LC: To handle this.

RLH: Yes.

LC: Right, while they’re flying it.

RLH: Right.

LC: Okay. And what was the…?

RLH: He was my driver; take me to work.

LC: (Laughter) Right, and you’re in charge of the payload.

RLH: That’s right.

LC: Okay. In general, what was the sort of relationship between the different guys who were taking this class together? Were you all kind of knowing that you were going to Vietnam and kind of…?

RLH: I think this was my first realization that I really am going to go to Vietnam.
LC: Okay, why do you think that kind of dawned at this point, do you know?

RLH: Well, because the class before us, first of all, had one guy who graduated who did not go to Vietnam.

LC: Only one?

RLH: One out of probably one hundred people. All of the assignments we saw were either to Vietnam or Thailand and after we’d been there a very short period of time, they came down and they gave us what they called a dream sheet. This is, where do you want to go next. And one of the questions on there of course is, ‘Are you a volunteer for Southeast Asia?’ And you have to say yes or no, but you figured out it didn’t matter.

LC: You were going anyway.

RLH: You were going anyway. And down at the very bottom of it, it had this little statement that said, ‘Pipeline, SEA.’ So I asked someone, I said, ‘What does that mean?’ ‘That means exactly what it says, that you are in the pipeline to go to Southeast Asia.’

LC: What was the point of asking that question then do you think?

RLH: You know, for people who are going to be career officers, it was important that they be volunteers.

LC: I see, I see, okay. That does make sense, and this was their time to indicate that.

RLH: Right.

LC: Okay. After the radar-training element of this particular school was completed, did you have to relocate or did you…?

RLH: No, I was still there.

LC: Okay, your billet didn’t change; the only thing that changed was what you were studying and doing during the day.

RLH: That’s exactly right.

LC: Okay, once the portion of the training that’s actually learning the aircraft began, can you describe a general day, a typical day?

RLH: Sure.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Well first of all, the majority of the people there had never flown as anything other than a navigator and a big multi-engine prop job.

LC: Unlike you.
RLH: I had been in a jet before. So, you spent...

LC: And flown it, right? You had flown it.

RLH: Oh yeah. So, the first couple of weeks at least was all ground school and they taught you about flight controls and flight characteristics. You know, why does an airplane fly, what propels it, what makes it turn, what does this do, what does that do? And, of course, also practicing with the radar and the weapons system gear and so forth; they had dummy mockups there for you to practice with.

LC: Okay, right.

RLH: And then the great day came you're going to get your first flight.

LC: Right, and for you, all that was pretty much review.

RLH: Yes.

LC: Okay, so the great day comes...

RLH: And, I think in the first flight was probably nothing more than take-off, fly straight level, and come back home. It was nothing exotic. And the very first day, we lost an airplane.

LC: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that. Can you tell us, who was flying the aircraft and what number was it?

RLH: Oh, I don't know the number.

LC: But was it an F-4 C?

RLH: It was an F-4.

LC: Okay.

RLH: And they were just doing an orientation ride out over a gunnery range, just going out and turning around and coming back, and something happened to the flight controls. It was an actual physical problem with the aircraft itself, and I knew the guy who was in the backseat, was a navigator also. We were about half and half, half navigators, half pilots, but we all had the same job. He happened to be a navigator and someone that I had graduated from school with and I knew, and the front seater didn't make it. The backseater did.

LC: Okay, did you find out later what had transpired in the plane?

RLH: Well, it's been a long time remember, but something had happened to the flight controls and they lost control of the aircraft, but they were straight and level and had plenty of altitude, but they were traveling apparently at a pretty high rate of speed and the canopy...when he came out, he was spinning and the canopy risers actually twisted and collapsed the canopy. So,
his canopy collapsed and he was killed. The backseater, everything worked fine, just as
advertised.

LC: He just ejected and…
RLH: Had him back the next day flying.
LC: And came down safely. And how did he do? He was kind of a friend of yours, how
did he do after that?
RLH: He was always pretty quiet after that. He made it through; we had no one who did
not make it through.
LC: What about the impact of this accident on the rest of you guys?
RLH: Well, remember, first of all, it was the first day we flew, so we didn't know the pilot
that well.
LC: Okay.
RLH: His friends were very upset.
LC: Yes.
RLH: And we had a down day of non-flying and we had a memorial service. But I mean, it
became obvious right then, this is pretty serious business, you can get hurt doing this.
LC: That's for sure. Do you remember that memorial service?
RLH: Oh yeah. It was there on the base.
LC: Can you describe it at all? What happened?
RLH: Well, it was a small chapel and I mean, everybody and everybody came.
LC: Yeah.
RLH: And it was pretty packed and it was short. But in the military, you just have to learn
to go on. I mean, if it bothers you too much, you're not going to function properly and you can get
hurt.
LC: Yes.
RLH: So, it was a short-lived thing and we went back to work.
LC: Do you think that this incident maybe helped teach that lesson about you have to just
keep going to other guys who were on base at that time?
RLH: Oh yeah, I think so, yes.
LC: Did it have a personal impact on you other than the one that you were...it sounds like you were kind of already wired for which is I just need to keep doing this, this is what I'm doing, did it slow you down?

RLH: Well, I did have positive think that it is possible to get hurt, but I'm still at this point bullet proof and immortal.

LC: Yes, a young man.

RLH: I'm personally not going to ever have a problem.

LC: Yeah, okay.

RLH: It'll always be someone else.

LC: Okay, and this incident did not really did that.

RLH: No.

LC: Okay. The training at Davis Monthan went on for quite a long time.

RLH: Ten months I think, well not that long; May through the middle of December.

LC: Were there any more incidents that happened during that training period that you remember?

RLH: No, never had another one.

LC: Okay, and how did it feel to you to get back into a good plane?

RLH: Oh, it was...well; I hadn't flown an aircraft myself for quite sometime.

LC: Right.

RLH: So, I happened to be crewed with a fellow that...I mean, we got along famously. I mean, I even keep up with him today.

LC: Okay.

RLH: And he said, 'The one thing you are going to do is learn how to fly this plane because if something happens to me, I need somebody to get me home.'

LC: And was that pretty much the decision of the pilot?

RLH: Yeah.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Well, it was the decision of the backseater too because he could just say, 'No, that's not my job; I'm not going to do it.' And I know a lot of people that were that way.

LC: Really? You weren’t one of them though I take it.

RLH: I was not one of them. This plane has an autopilot and is called Houston.
LC: Okay.

RLH: So I flew every moment I could fly. I had never flown formation. He taught me how to fly formation. I picked up skills that I had not had before.

LC: And you are learning this kind of off the books really.

RLH: That’s right.

LC: I mean, in addition to...

RLH: To and from the mission.

LC: Okay. And did that kind of create a bond between you and the pilot?

RLH: Oh, I thought the world of him, still do.

LC: What’s his name?

RLH: His name is Jerry Gray.

LC: Okay, where’s he from?

RLH: He was originally from Ohio. He made a career of the Air Force and retired at MacDill in Tampa, Florida, still lives there.

LC: Did you and, I guess it would be Captain Gray at this point?

RLH: Yeah, he was captain.

LC: Did you and he stay together as a team?

RLH: Yes.

LC: Even when you deployed overseas?

RLH: Yes.

LC: Okay, and did you fly primarily with him once you were in country?

RLH: Probably half and half.

LC: Okay. Can you tell me about the actual content of the training during this? This is now learning the aircraft, what was it that you were actually supposed to be learning in addition to what you were?

RLH: Well, we were learning to use the weapon systems themselves. We were learning how to navigate because you had limited navigational tools other than what was in the airplane itself. We didn’t have an astrolabe to shoot the stars.

LC: Right.

RLH: We had a map, we had a clock, we had a radar, and we had a TACAN. A TACAN is nothing more than a tactical air navigation radio that gives you the heading and distance to a
particular radio station. That was primary means of navigation. Then you had what was called an
Inertial Navigation System, which was nothing but a series of gyroscopes that gave you general
heading and bearing information to a target. They were not that accurate, they were designed to
get you to the general area. We also used it somewhat for bombing, but it was so inaccurate, it
was to be almost unusable.

LC: And what you were using to actually bring you to a specific target was beacons, radio
beacon or…?

RLH: Well, no, primarily visual.

LC: Okay.

RLH: We did use radar later, but we didn’t in Vietnam very much.

LC: Right.

RLH: We got where we were going primarily by using the TACAN not to get to the TACAN
itself, but to guide us to where we were going and we used the Inertial Navigation System to get us
in the general area.

LC: Okay, and then visual?

RLH: Yeah, then visual.

LC: Okay.

RLH: And you have to understand in Vietnam, you were not allowed to bomb a target
without a Forward Air Controller there to direct you.

LC: Right.

RLH: So you’re not going to be bombing the wrong thing necessarily.

LC: Right, and the Forward Air Controllers were flying in what kind of aircraft?

RLH: Small light aircraft.

LC: Okay. And you would be in radio communication with them?

RLH: Always. They in turn were in radio communication with any ground troops.

LC: So that between the two aircraft, you could put together precisely where the ground
troops needed to come.

RLH: Right, and not bomb the good guys.

LC: Yeah, and where you ought to be bombing.

RLH: That’s right.

LC: Right. You said something about learning the weapon systems?
RLH: Yeah, we had conventional weapons, no nuclear weapons we were learning there because we were going to Vietnam, and it was all hard bombs and dumb bombs, not smart bombs like they have now.

LC: Okay, can you draw a distinction? What's the dumb bomb?

RLH: A dumb bomb is an unguided weapon that you direct by using manual visual bombing. You don't use a radar, it has no internal guidance system, it just goes where you point it.

LC: And sort of once it starts falling, it falls.

RLH: Once it starts falling, it's going where it's going.

LC: Okay. And so you had those.

RLH: And we also had...well, that's primarily what we dropped.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Either hard bombs or what we called cluster bomb units, which are small bomblets.

LC: Okay, and hard bombs are...?

RLH: Five hundred pound bombs, anti-personnel, generally shrapnel type stuff.

LC: Right, and five hundred pounds is the actual load of weight.

RLH: They actually probably weighed four hundred, but they called them five hundred.

LC: Okay, do you know why that was?

RLH: They were actually left over from World War II.

LC: Really?

RLH: And they calculated the load that a B-17 could carry using five hundred pounds per bomb just to make sure they weren't overloaded.

LC: Oh I see, so it was a margin of error kind of thing?

RLH: That's right.

LC: Okay, and you were learning how to actually drop them with the...?

RLH: Well, the front seater did all of the actual bombing per se. I was learning more how to get him in the general direction and keep him from killing himself and me.

LC: Okay, and how might he do that if he wasn't on the ball?

RLH: He was the guy that was responsible for flying the airplane and I was the one responsible for making sure that I knew where we were, what our attitude was or altitude was, and we didn't get ourselves into trouble that we couldn't get out of.

LC: Did you learn other weapon systems while you were there besides the bomb drops?
RLH: Oh, we learned a little bit of gunnery, machine guns, and we also had handgun training and rifle training.

LC: And that would be for you if you were ever on the ground.

RLH: That’s right.

LC: Okay. What weapons were you actually trained on?

RLH: The M-14 and just a smidgen less the 38-Caliber.

LC: Okay, and when you were flying, were you supposed to be carrying…?

RLH: We didn’t there, but we did in Vietnam, carried a handgun.

LC: Okay, you had a sidearm then when you were actually flying?

RLH: Yes, yes.

LC: Okay, and actually, I’ll ask you this now just as we’re talking about it, what ammunition did you have with you for that in Saigon?

RLH: Just ball ammunition, whatever you could carry.

LC: Okay, and you got to kind of decide how much you wanted.

RLH: We decided how much.

LC: Okay.

RLH: That’s another story.

LC: Okay. I’m going to make a note. Did you have any…there was no machine guns onboard for you to use should you eject, right? That was not an option.

RLH: This particular model of airplane did not have an internal gun.

LC: Okay.

RLH: They came in a later model, but they had one that they could attach much like you attach a bomb. It was not particularly accurate, but we did have to learn how to use it.

LC: Okay, and that suggests the question of what were you to do if you encountered enemy aircraft?

RLH: Well, first of all, we did a lot of radar, air-to-air radar training.

LC: Right.

RLH: We’d go out and chase each other and try to track each other down with the radar, lock on and either pretend to fire a missile or sneak up on someone.

LC: Okay, that sounds like, actually that kind of training would be pretty cool.

RLH: It is.
LC: Yeah.

RLH: It's hard work.

LC: I believe it.

RLH: You know, it's physically demanding.

LC: Yeah, and what was physically demanding about it? Could you say to somebody who's not ever been in a fighter aircraft...?

RLH: Well, number one, you're in a very enclosed space, very small space. You have an air conditioner, but it's not adequate to keep you seventy-two degrees. It keeps you reasonable, but you sweat like a pig. You pull a lot of G's because you're turning and moving very quickly up, down, I mean both vertically and horizontally.

LC: It's very hard on your concentration.

RLH: So, I mean, when you weigh three times your normal weight, it kind of takes a toll on you.

LC: Right.

RLH: After an hour and a half of going out and we called it arm wrestling, I mean, you're pretty worn out when you get back.

LC: Okay.

RLH: But it was fun.

LC: Okay. Were you taught specific maneuvers in there?

RLH: Oh yeah.

LC: Can you describe one or two of those? Did they have names?

RLH: Oh sure. We had what was called the scissors maneuver, which is nothing more than a rolling vertical...pardon me, rolling horizontal maneuver designed to lose air speed. We learned how to reverse; we learned how to maneuver yourself, to watch the other aircrafts movements to judge what you need to do by his movements.

LC: Okay.

RLH: In other words, not let him get your what we called a six o'clock, which is behind you to shoot you.

LC: Right.

RLH: To do two things, try to get to his six o'clock, but avoid him getting at your six o'clock.
LC: And there’s specific moves you can make in particular situations.

RLH: Oh yeah, you know, either using…primarily it was zooming, using your air speed either up or down, and learning how to quickly slow the airplane and cause him to overshoot. In other words, if he’s coming around behind you and he’s probably gaining on you, is how to quickly lose airspeed by pulling your nose up and doing a barrel roll and pulling back through and he overshoots and now you’re at his six o’clock.

LC: Yeah, now you’re behind him.

RLH: That’s right.

LC: Okay. And were you taught how to do…?

RLH: You didn’t see me using my hand there did you?

LC: Oh no, but I’m using mine. (Laughter)

RLH: I did.

LC: Did you learn any of these maneuvers? Did you practice these while you were on the ground? I mean, were there any mock aircraft or anything?

RLH: Oh we talked about them constantly, just like we were just talking, using our hands and they actually gave us a long stick with a model airplane on the end of it and you had one in each hand and you’re practicing these maneuvers.

LC: That’s amazing.

RLH: Now remember, the backseater navigator, he’s not doing that per se.

LC: Right.

RLH: I mean, we did it to know what was going on, but the front seater is driving the plane.

LC: Right, he’s the one making decisions about when to and how to.

RLH: But we could also…we were allowed to make suggestions.

LC: Okay, and this is part of building the team between you and the pilot.

RLH: Sure, that’s right.

LC: Okay, and did Captain Gray kind of, you know, invite you into these conversations to let you…?

RLH: Oh absolutely. He spent lots of time with me.

LC: Okay.

RLH: See, he had been a backseater.
LC: Oh, is that right?

RLH: And he went back to school to upgrade to the front seat.

LC: Had he flown missions?

RLH: Not in Vietnam. He'd been in New Mexico.

LC: Okay.

RLH: No, he'd been in Germany.

LC: Really? And how long had he been overseas over there?

RLH: He spent...he'd probably been in the military now five or six years. He had served three years, three or four years in Germany and a little bit of time in the States.

LC: So he's pretty experienced relative to some of the other guys.

RLH: Oh yeah, sure.

LC: Yeah. I was asking about some kind of, you know, trainer aircraft or did they sit you in a somatic...?

RLH: We had what we called a simulator.

LC: Okay, can you describe that simulator and how it might appear to someone say, from the computer generation? You know, how accurate did it feel, was it like a rocking horse basically?

(Laughter)

RLH: Well, this was back in the days before digital; everything was analog.

LC: Yes.

RLH: So it was pretty mechanical. All of the knobs were non-digital mechanical. I mean, if you want to turn the volume up, you twist the knobs, you don't push it until it's number six.

LC: Got it.

RLH: It had very restricted movement. It had a small television that was designed to let you think you're looking outside the airplane, but it really didn't, it wasn't very realistic.

LC: Okay.

RLH: So you're primarily flying instrument flight rules. So most of the simulator that we did was practice bombing or practice emergency procedures. By practice bombing, I mean, using the radar or practicing emergency procedures.

LC: Such as...?

RLH: Well, what do you do when you lose an engine? What do you do when you lose your hydraulics, what do you do when this light comes on?
LC: So the instruments would take you through a particular incident?

RLH: You had a panel that had a series of lights on it. One of them was called a master caution light. It was a big red light that came on to tell you that one of your other lights is on. Then you had probably a dozen lights that had various sensors that said, ‘Fire’ or what have you. And there were two sets, one for each engine.

LC: And so the big red light is to draw your attention to...

RLH: That’s right, it’s called a master caution light.

LC: Okay, and that’s to let you know something’s wrong somewhere; you need to look.

RLH: Something’s wrong. And usually, you had a light that would tell you what it was. Not always. I mean, it may be something that you just had to figure out.

LC: Okay, by the instrument readings.

RLH: Right.

LC: Okay. About how much time did you spend in the simulator relative to your time in the actual plane? Was there a ratio that you were supposed to observe?

RLH: It was probably twice as much flying as simulator time at that time.

LC: Okay.

RLH: I mean, remember, we were going to war, so we were learning to fly. And fast.

LC: And fast.

RLH: Yes.

LC: Okay, there was a lot of...

RLH: They were pushing us through.

LC: Right. And was there still at this point, pilot crunch, pilot shortage that you were aware of, such that they were continuing to push people through?

RLH: They were trying to get people over because it was right at the last of the big build up.

LC: Yes.

RLH: Late ’69.

LC: Yeah, so the anticipation was that...

RLH: Classes were large and as a consequence, you had people who were less than well qualified.

LC: Who were passing out of there?
RLH: That's right.
LC: What about the instructors?
RLH: I usually thought they were pretty good. They were all people who had combat experience and had quite some time in the airplane. They didn’t send people that were failures at something else.
LC: Right, these weren't people who were marking time.
RLH: No.
LC: Okay.
RLH: These were career people.
LC: Had any of them been in Korea that you know of?
RLH: Oh I'm sure they had.
LC: Okay. Did you get to talk to them kind of off the record about their experiences over the classes that you take?
RLH: They kept their place and we kept ours. We were students, they were instructors and you know, we really didn’t get into it. We spent more time with among ourselves.
LC: And were you actually sort of breaking out now in crews at this point?
RLH: Yeah, we were pretty well assigned to one person.
LC: Okay. And your assignment to Captain Gray had come at the beginning of the training?
RLH: Yes.
LC: Okay.
RLH: You kind of paired off to be truthful.
LC: Really?
RLH: You found somebody you liked and you were comfortable with.
LC: And it kind of just was allowed to be that way.
RLH: Yeah, and then so they just said, ‘Do you want to fly with him?’ And we said, ‘Yes.’
LC: Okay, was it pretty easy for everybody to find someone to work with or was there little predicaments?
RLH: No, there were people that were kind of…you know, when it came time to pick the team, they were always the last one picked.
LC: Yeah, yeah, like in school.
RLH: Yes.

LC: But I take it that you weren’t in that group, you got picked pretty early I’m thinking.

RLH: Oh, we hit it off right away.

LC: That’s brilliant.

RLH: And I don’t even know why, we just did.

LC: Yeah, do you remember first meeting him? Were you sitting next to each other?

RLH: I don’t remember the first time, I really don’t.

LC: The instructors that you had, do you remember particularly any one person who made an impression on you?

RLH: No. The guys in the front seat spent more time flying than we did because they had to get familiar with the flight controls in that particular airplane. So they had an instructor often in the backseat. When I flew, probably eighty percent of the time, I flew with Jerry Gray, not an instructor. The first few flights I did, but after that, I was always with him. We trained as a crew.

LC: Were you also developing confidence at this point in the aircraft itself?

RLH: Oh yeah.

LC: Can you describe that process?

RLH: Well, they took us through a basic course of how the systems work in the aircraft so you became familiar with what makes what do what.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: And what the maintenance requirements were and why certain things worked the way they did. So, you got a little sense of somebody’s taking care of this. They took us out to the maintenance area and they showed us the various areas. These are the guys that take care of the engines; these are the guys that take care of the hydraulics. These are the guys that do this.

LC: Right.

RLH: So we figured out that every system and every piece of the airplane has someone who’s responsible for it.

LC: And that created some confidence too that you knew there were specialists standing behind every system?

RLH: I always thought it was well maintained.

LC: Okay. And what about the weapon systems and the guidance systems? Did you also feel like this was the best there was, you know, this was…?
RLH: Oh, it was state of the art.

LC: Yeah, yeah.

RLH: They didn’t come any better. I mean, we didn’t know that the INS was awful or the radar was less than adequate. Well, we always thought it was not a real good radar, but we thought it was the best there was.

LC: What were the faults that you knew existed?

RLH: Well, because it was a dual mode radar, there were radars that were better at air-to-air gunnery, but they were radars that were designed specifically for that. And there were radars that were better ground mappers by far than what we had, but it was as good as you could put in the dual mode system.

LC: So, in terms of, you know, assessing the technology, at that point you thought it was incredible.

RLH: Pretty good stuff.

LC: Yeah, that’s really only the time and place that you know…

RLH: Well, I see what people can do now and I think, ‘Oh, we were dumb.’

LC: Yeah, yeah, but at the time, it was awesome, huh.

RLH: Yes.

LC: How familiar did you become with the maintenance of the operation?

RLH: I always felt like not as much as I should be.

LC: Okay.

RLH: We were so busy, we didn’t have time to stop and spend time with the enlisted guys that took care of the airplane. We always tried to be nice to them.

LC: Sure.

RLH: But there were people I think that spent more time with them than I did and I’ve wished a thousand times that I got to know them better and knew more about what they were doing. I have a good friend who stayed in the Air Force, flew that same airplane the whole time and at the end of his career, when they started phasing the airplane out, they made him maintenance officer and he learned all of those systems. I mean, he tells me things that I never knew.

LC: Wow. Yeah, and in general, you knew that you had to rely on the maintenance guys.

RLH: Oh yeah.
LC: So it was important that you have some kind of relationship with them.
RLH: Every time when you finished a mission, you came back and you sat down with the
maintenance debriefer and told him every little thing that didn’t work right or did work right or
something that had been a problem in the past, was it still a problem.
LC: Right.
RLH: I mean, we had maintenance debriefing.
LC: Did you have a sense that you were going to be flying the same aircraft, the same
exact aircraft over and over?
RLH: No.
LC: Okay, there was no sense of that.
RLH: They put your name on an airplane to give you a sense of ownership, but that’s not
the airplane you flew.
LC: Okay, you flew whatever was available.
RLH: Whatever was there.
LC: Okay. As the training was drawing to a close at the end of 1969, you are facing
deployment overseas. How stressful was that?
RLH: Pretty stressful.
LC: Okay.
RLH: I mean, we were all certain that we were going to Southeast Asia. Everyone wanted
to go to Thailand and not to Vietnam.
LC: Right.
RLH: But we knew that wasn’t going to happen. And they brought a map and posted it on
the board and put a little pen in every F-4 Base in Southeast Asia.
LC: Okay, about how many pens did you see?
RLH: There were one, two, three, five, six. There were three in Vietnam and three in
Thailand.
LC: Right.
RLH: And most of the names were common names that people had heard and I saw this
one little spot, I said, ‘Where the heck is that?’ And it was a place called Phu Cat. P-h-u C-a-t.
And they said, well, that was a new base that had been built only a couple of years before and
there were two squadrons there and I said, ‘Oh my god, that’s where they’re going to send me.’
LC: You just knew it?
RLH: I just knew it, and I was right.
LC: Have you always been intuitive like this or do you just kind of know?
RLH: I don’t know why I knew, because it was someplace that nobody else wanted to go I
think.
LC: (Laughter) Well, when did you actually find out what your departure date was going to
be?
RLH: Well, probably a month before we graduated.
LC: Okay, and your graduation was set for what point in December, do you know?
RLH: December the 15th. Well, actually, December the 15th was the date we left. It wasn’t
a graduation per se.
LC: It was just kind of now you’re done.
RLH: But you had a couple of week period of downtime prior to that because you had to
go get all of your inoculations and do your out processing paperwork.
LC: Did all that happen still at Davis Monthan?
RLH: Yes.
LC: Okay. And about how many guys completed with you at the same time?
RLH: There were probably at least fifty in my class.
LC: Okay.
RLH: Half the front, half the back.
LC: And you’d gotten to know most of them pretty well at that point.
RLH: Oh sure, and we’re pretty good friends.
LC: Okay, and you were all going over at the same time more or less.
RLH: Yes, now not all at the same place.
LC: Right.
RLH: There were, I think six or eight of us that went to Phu Cat.
LC: In essence, though your tours would be simultaneous.
RLH: Correct.
LC: Okay. Did you get some time off there at the end of December before you had to
report?
RLH: Yes. We left December the 15th and drove back to Texas and visited my folks and then went on and visited my wife's folks. They lived right outside of Dallas.

LC: Okay.

RLH: And then we went back to Lubbock to enroll Penny, my wife in school and it worked out. I mean, think about the time.

LC: Yes, January.

RLH: It worked out perfectly.

LC: Yeah, she would begin then in January.

RLH: That's right. So she...we got her an apartment, got her signed up for school and got everything situated that we could and then I left from Lubbock and had to get to Travis Air Force Base right outside of San Francisco in California.

LC: Do you remember her reaction to getting enrolled? Did she feel that this was going to help keep her mind off of worrying basically about you?

RLH: Oh yeah. She had worried quite a bit about going back to school because her parents were pretty upset.

LC: About her...?

RLH: About her not having finished.

LC: I see, yeah, okay.

RLH: And I mean, it was a big sacrifice for them. They were poor people too.

LC: And they had sent her through or helped her.

RLH: That's right. She had gone there three years and so when she did go back, there was a great sense of relief on their part and my wife was glad to be able to go back both for herself and for her parents.

LC: And also because she's now like occupied.

RLH: She has something to do.

LC: Yeah. And how did your folks do with this visit right before your deployment?

RLH: Well, my dad kind of ignored it. We were not real close. My mother was very upset. She came up to Lubbock to see me off and they all of course went to the airport to see me off and everybody cried.

LC: Yeah.
RLH: And I flew out of there, I had to go to Dallas and then transfer from Dallas onto a plane going to California.

LC: Okay, and you had to report at Travis?

RLH: That's correct.

LC: Okay. What happened at Travis? Did you stay there a day or two or did you go right through?

RLH: Actually, I flew into San Francisco, which is as close as you can get.

LC: Right.

RLH: And my friend from all of my life who was the only other person that went in the military was in the Navy, stationed right outside of San Francisco. He picked me up and I spent the night with him and his wife.

LC: Great, yeah.

RLH: And then he drove me to Travis the next day.

LC: Had he been over to Vietnam?

RLH: No, he never went.

LC: He did not?

RLH: Never left the States.

LC: Okay, what area of the Navy was he in?

RLH: He was actually in...it would be...he was a computer geek.

LC: Okay. Oh really?

RLH: In the early days of computers, very early.

LC: Right. All of this was in the early days of computers. I think that’s one of the things that’s going to be very interesting.

RLH: He was actually in Navy Intelligence and he was in California stationed at a base that had huge antennas designed to trap Soviet radio traffic.

LC: Okay, do you remember what the name of the base was at all?

RLH: No, it was at a place called Vallejo.

LC: Oh okay. How was that reunion, you spent a little bit of time with them?

RLH: Oh, we were glad to see each other and he had come to see me once when I was...when he was going to California, I was in Arizona and he had come by with his wife to see me. So, it was just returning the favor.
LC: That’s great. How did you feel about driving to Travis that next morning?

RLH: Actually I was sort of glad to get started.

LC: Get it going.

RLH: Just to get this over with.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: I wasn’t particularly frightened. Again, I’m twenty-three, twenty four years old, I can do most anything.

LC: Right.

RLH: And it took forever, I remember that.

LC: Getting over there?

RLH: Yeah, just sit and wait, sit and wait, sit and wait.

LC: Oh okay, sure. Do you remember the flight over?

RLH: That’s one of the strangest things I’ve ever been through in my life.

LC: Why is that?

RLH: Well, we had a set of orders that said you are to depart Travis Air Force Base, California at 2pm on January the 15th, 1970. Fly to Clark Airbase, Philippines and attend Jungle Survival School and forwarding orders from there to Phu Cat, Vietnam. I mean, that’s the orders.

LC: Okay.

RLH: We had a charter aircraft to take us to the Philippines.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: We left probably; I’m thinking it was like on a Friday because we had to start this Jungle Survival School on a Monday. So we basically had two days to get there.

LC: Right.

RLH: Our route of flight and they told us this before we left, we were going to Hawaii and refuel, be there a couple of hours, and then leave there and go to Wake Island I believe it was, refuel again, and then into the Philippines. Well, we took off, went to Hawaii and refueled. And of course, everybody ran in the bar and got a drink.

LC: Right.

RLH: Got back on the airplane and flew forever and ever and ever and it was very cramped quarters. It was an old DC-8 that was originally designed to hold about one hundred and forty people and they had stretched the thing by adding eight feet and got it up to like one hundred
and eighty five people without adding anymore galley space or anymore toilets or anymore
facilities. You were just packed in there. We ran out of everything you could run out of. We ran
out of water, we ran out of milk, we ran out of soft drinks.

LC: Yikes.

RLH: I mean, it was miserable.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: And we landed and we got off the airplane and we’re at Midway.

LC: Oh.

RLH: And we’re thinking, ‘What, this is not where we’re supposed to be.’ So I took it on
myself and walked around and asked a pilot, I saw him getting off the airplane, I said, ‘I thought we
were supposed to go’…I can’t remember, it seems like it was Wake, but I can’t remember. I said,
‘Why are we at Midway Island?’ And he said, ‘Well, because we lost an engine.’ And so I said,
‘You didn’t bother to tell us this.’ He said, ‘Why, were you going to get out and fix it?’

LC: (Laughter)

RLH: I said, ‘Well, do you got any idea how long it’s going to take to fix it?’ He says, ‘No,
they have to bring in an engine, it’s going to be a couple of days’, and sure enough, we sat there
for two days.

LC: No kidding? Oh no.

RLH: So, they finally got the thing going again and we fly on into the Philippines and we
were late, so we missed our starting class.

LC: Yup.

RLH: So, when we got there, they said, ‘Well, you’ll just have to come back and start next
Monday. And this is like late Monday or early Tuesday, something like this, you know, what do we
do now. They said, ‘You get a room.’

LC: Get a room and hang out for a week.

RLH: Yeah, so we said, ‘Well, okay.’ So we went over to the visiting officer’s quarters and
they said, ‘Well, we’re full, we don’t have any rooms.’ I mean, we’re like probably twenty, thirty
guys.

LC: Yeah, with nowhere to go.

RLH: With nowhere to go, and so we asked the guy, we said, ‘Well what do we do?’ And
he said, ‘Well, get a hotel downtown.’ ‘How we get there?’ And he said, ‘Well, we’ll get a vehicle to
take you out to the main gate and there will be taxis out there.’ So, they just took us to the front
gate and dumped us and I think he may have called and found a room. I think we may have known
where we were going, but we got to the front gate and it was these old World War II left over jeeps
called Jeepneys, piece of junk.

LC: Okay.

RLH: And we piled as many as we could in one and told him where we wanted to go and
we’re thinking, you know, this is going to be a great deal of fun and we pull up in front of the hotel
and first of all, it is a total dump. It has an armed guard in front of it with a machine gun. You
know, what, I didn’t know we were in a war zone already.

(Laughter)

LC: That’s a little off-putting.

RLH: Yeah, you know, you go in and they said, ‘Don’t drink the water, we have bottled
water here’, and they had like a five-gallon thing of water there on a water cooler, and we’re
thinking, they probably just filled that with a water hose.

LC: Yeah, probably.

RLH: I mean, we hung out. And we spent a lot of time at the Officer’s Club and the bar
and watched the...this is the last place we’re going to get to see round-eyed women.

LC: Okay, right.

RLH: And so we watched the officer’s pool a lot, because there were families there.

LC: Right.

RLH: And, you know, the next Monday, we started school and went through that, which
was not a difficult school at all. They took us out in the jungle and taught us how to survive. You
know, ‘You can eat this, don’t eat this, this is how you hide.’ And then the last day, the next to the
last day we were there, they sent us out again with a map and a compass and said, ‘Try to get
here. You’re going to spend the night out, try not to get captured.’ And they had these little local
natives called Negritos who are very small people.

LC: Yes.

RLH: And their job was to find you. And they gave you these little wooden nickel looking
things they called chits, and if they found you, you had to give them one.

LC: Right.

RLH: And they could then in turn, take this and trade it in for a pound of rice.
LC: So that’s their incentive.
RLH: That’s their incentive. And you had three. Two that were just normal colored and
one that was red. The two that were normal colored were good for one pound of rice. The red one
you kept till last and that got them five pounds. So now they’ve really got an incentive. They want
to capture you as many times as they can. Well, we hid out in some tall grass, this other fellow and
I. I think it may have been Jerry Gray. I mean, we did really well except for one thing. I snored
and they found me.
(Laughter)
RLH: And the guy laughed at me, he didn’t speak any English, but he was making snoring
sounds at me and laughing. So I had to give up the one chit, but that’s the only time we got
caught.
LC: Okay, so other than that, you kept your other two.
RLH: Yeah, we kept our other chits.
LC: Were you getting acclimated to the humidity and heat? Was that a problem for you at
all?
RLH: It was pretty hot, but it was not a big problem. The Philippines actually is pretty nice.
LC: Okay.
RLH: And when we finished the school, it was like on a Friday and they told us to go over
on Saturday to transportation and get a hop on into Vietnam. And several of us were talking and
saw, you know, ‘What if we just don’t go?’
LC: It worked last time.
RLH: Yeah, ‘What if we just don’t show up.’
LC: Right.
RLH: So we went back to the Officer’s Club and by about the following Wednesday, we
started thinking, you know, ‘We could get in trouble here. We probably should go on’. I mean,
we’re two weeks late now.
LC: Yeah.
RLH: So, we finally gave up and decided we’d go over and we went to transportation, told
the guy we wanted to go to Phu Cat, Vietnam and he looked at us and said, ‘You want to go
where?’
LC: (Laughter) Right.
RLH: He said, ‘I can send you to Da Nang, I can send you to Saigon, I can send you to Cam Ranh, which one is it?’

LC: So what’d you pick?

RLH: We picked Cam Ranh.

LC: Okay.

RLH: So six or eight of us, whatever, get on the airplane, we’re all going to Phu Cat and we land at Cam Ranh and go over to transportation again and tell the guy we wanted to go to Phu Cat and he looks at us and said, ‘You want to go where?’ ‘To Phu Cat.’ And we pointed it out to him on a map, and he said, ‘I don’t have anything going there. Go spend the night and come back tomorrow. Maybe I’ll have something tomorrow.’

LC: So another day goes by.

RLH: Yeah, so we went to the BOQ, and ‘we don’t have any rooms.’

LC: Right.

RLH: So, I mean, we’re in a war zone now.

LC: For sure, yeah.

RLH: I mean, you’re not going to sleep out under the trees.

LC: Right.

RLH: So, you know, we thought and scratched our heads and one guys says, ‘You know, they fly twenty-four hours a day here, so somebody’s not sleeping in their bed. So let’s go over to one of the fighter squadrons and ask them if we can borrow their bed.’ So that’s what we did.

LC: And did the guys who were out on mission or whatever that night ever find out do you think?

RLH: Oh, we asked them, they said, ‘Sure, I don’t care.’

LC: Oh okay, they said, ‘We’re out of here, so go head.’

RLH: Yeah, go head. And of course, we spent a lot of time in the bar and made some friends there and went back over the next day and the guy said, ‘I don’t have anything going there, come back tomorrow.’ So, we did the same drill.

LC: Right.

RLH: So finally we go back over the next day and the guy says, ‘Well, I don’t have anything going to Phu Cat, but I have one going to Pleiku, which is only about thirty miles away.'
It's at least closer. So I said, 'Okay, we'll go to Pleiku', which is probably two hours flying time. It may be thirty minutes from Phu Cat, but two hours from Cam Ranh.

LC: Right.

RLH: So we get on this little C-7 Caribou, which is the nosiest thing in the whole world, us and a bunch of goats and sheep.

LC: Literally?

RLH: Yeah, going to Pleiku up in the Highlands in the middle of Vietnam.

LC: Right.

RLH: And we fly for a long time, we start making approach and all of a sudden, the guy makes a go around, never touched down.

LC: He pulled it up out of the approach?

RLH: Yeah, we were wondering, you know, what the heck's going on and fly another thirty minutes and he lands and we get off, we're at Phu Cat.

LC: What happened?

RLH: So again, we asked the pilot, 'What the heck? I thought we were going to Pleiku.' And he said, 'Oh, those guys were under fire, we didn't want to go in there.' So we said, 'Well, welcome to Vietnam and we're here.'

LC: Yeah. Did that kind of jar you a little bit that you know...?

RLH: I began to have an understanding that I was in a war zone.

LC: Okay, and was that pretty much like the first kind of wakeup?

RLH: Yup. Well, that was a small wakeup; it gets better.

LC: Bigger wakeups coming.

RLH: It gets better.

LC: Okay.

RLH: We go to the fighter squadron we're assigned to and say, 'Okay, we're here.' And they look at us and say, 'Where the heck have you guys been?' So we give them the song and dance about our flight was late and we couldn't get here and they finally said, 'Okay, fine. We don't have any rooms available, go over to the BOQ and get a room.' So, we all trooped back, walked over to the BOQ and the only thing they have is over in enlisted guy's places. So, we go over there and we figure out where to go eat, go figure out where the Officer's Club, the bar is and about
midnight, we probably went to bed and somewhere around three, four o’clock in the morning, they start sling ing rockets and mortars in on us. I mean, it’s like they knew we were new.

LC: Right.

RLH: And we’re on the second floor, not the first. I mean, the guys on the first floor have a brick revetment in front of their room, so they’re not going to get hurt.

LC: But you guys are up in the...

RLH: We’re up on the second floor.

LC: A little more exposed there.

RLH: So we all jumped up and put on our flak jackets and helmets, and ran down, got behind the revetments and figured out that they really do know we just got here. I mean, this is our welcome to Vietnam.

LC: Was that kind of spooky?

RLH: Yeah it was. And I have a picture of me that very first day.

LC: You do?

RLH: I look like I’m twelve years old.

LC: Really?

RLH: And I have another picture about maybe six months later and I look like ten years older.

LC: No kidding.

RLH: I was showing them to my assistant, she couldn’t believe it. She said, ‘I can’t even believe it’s the same person.’

LC: Really? I mean from…would you attribute that change to stress and lack of sleep…?

RLH: Hard work, heat.

LC: Yeah, and all the rest of it, yeah. Wow, I’d like to see those pictures sometime. How did you come to have your picture taken right away when you first got there?

RLH: One of the guys had a camera.

LC: Did you have a camera?

RLH: Not then, I got one later.

LC: Did you? Yeah. A lot of guys had them, right?

RLH: Oh yeah, everybody brought a camera. Everybody had a camera, everybody had a stereo, and everybody had plenty of booze.
LC: Yup. By 1970, that was pretty standard, wasn't it?
RLH: Yes.
LC: That first night the mortars that were coming in, did anyone else get upset besides you guys?
RLH: Oh yeah, everybody ran down and got behind the revetments.
LC: Okay, I wondered if any kind of older hands were like…?
RLH: Well, they weren't as upset. Some guys just stayed in bed because they were downstairs anyway.
LC: Yeah.
RLH: But we had to get down from the second floor.
LC: Sure. How much sleep did you get that night?
RLH: Not much.
LC: And how did things start up for you the next day, do you remember?
RLH: Well, we went back over to the squadron and they started looking for rooms for us. It took two or three days I guess to get a room at the squadron itself. So, we were kind of stepchildren at that time.
LC: Yeah.
RLH: And then they assigned us our first few flights with some senior guy that had been there for a while and we got our orientation rides and so forth. They kind of sat us down and talked to us and decided who was a keeper and who was just there to put in time and so forth and so on, gave you an extra job. You know, here's what you're going to do besides fly.
LC: Okay, like what?
RLH: Oh, my job…I had two jobs. One was I took care of all of the radar film that we used for training purposes and I also was in charge of the squadron vehicles, make sure they're maintained and enough gas and oil changed and so forth and so on.
LC: That almost sounds like a full time job.
RLH: Oh, it was more irritation than anything else.
LC: Really? Did you have guys that you could…like bodies you could kind of put on the problem. 'You go fill this up, you make sure…'?
RLH: Oh no, I got to do it. I was the junior officer, I was the guy that went and filled it.
LC: You actually had to do it? Wow.
RLH: Go get the oil changed; go fill it up with gas.

LC: You had time to do this when exactly?

RLH: Oh we had lots of time.

LC: Really? Okay, you’re going to tell me about that I’m sure.

RLH: That was probably one of the biggest problems was free time.

LC: Okay, time hanging?

RLH: Yup.

LC: Okay. Tell me about your orientation rides.

RLH: Well, you got two rides. You’ve got a day ride, which was really they just took you out and flew you over South Vietnam and then over the edge of Laos and then by a base in Thailand and come back in land. Just giving you a general layout of the area, and then your second ride was a night orientation ride. They took you up and you refueled off of a tanker and actually went to a given point, navigated to a given point and came back.

LC: What aircraft were you actually in?

RLH: It was just…

LC: Was it an F-4 C still?

RLH: No, it was a D-Model, it was a newer model. Totally different model from the one I’ve flown before.

LC: Okay, and you were appreciating these differences at this point?

RLH: Oh yeah. It was a little bit different; it wasn’t hugely different.

LC: It was something you could move right into.

RLH: Oh yeah, sure.

LC: Okay. What were the differences that you noticed right away?

RLH: Primarily the air to ground radar. The old one was much less capable than the one that we had over there. We actually had a fixed crosshair on the C-Model that you had to steer to that…you had to steer at one fixed point.

LC: Okay.

RLH: With the D-Model, you had physical crosshairs that you could do what’s called offset bombing as you could pick a known point, dial in how much offset from there to the target you want to hit, and it would actually move the crosshairs and say ‘bomb here.’

LC: It would actually compute?
RLH: Yes.

LC: Okay. Well, that sounds like an upgrade.

RLH: Oh, greatly.

LC: Okay. So that was something you could get used to pretty quickly.

RLH: Yeah, but I mean, we had practice, we had a mock up when I was in Radar School. We didn’t have the actual aircraft, but we did have mock-ups to practice with.

LC: Okay. How did you feel after those orientation rides?

RLH: Oh, I was gung ho ready to go.

LC: Really? What about Jack Gray or Jerry Gray, I’m sorry? How was he feeling?

RLH: Well, he was pretty much the same way. He’s a lot more laid back and he was older than me by four or five years, a little more mature. He was married, had a kid, and he was a career military officer. I mean, he wanted to get through it, he didn’t want to embarrass himself, he wanted to have a decent record, but he didn’t have any agenda.

LC: Okay, not I have to have so many kills.

RLH: No, not at all.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Me, I wanted to fly every time I could possibly fly. I wanted to kill everybody I could kill and go anywhere I could go.

LC: That sounds like actually probably a good balance that probably worked well, the two of you.

RLH: Yeah. I mean, I was the guy that would go over when I wasn’t doing anything and sit in the squadron and see if anybody got sick.

LC: And what would he do when he didn’t have to be in the squadron?

RLH: Go back and write letters to home.

LC: Okay. So you probably did your share of that.

RLH: I did my share of that.

LC: Yeah. Ronnie, tell me a little bit about Phu Cat the base. Where were you on the base and how was it setup? What was your housing like?

RLH: We actually had very decent housing.

LC: Okay.

RLH: Phu Cat was built in late ’66, early ’67; we got there in ’70. So, it was fairly new.
LC: Right.

RLH: It had a lot of amenities that other places didn’t have. It was almost like a stateside base. Our rooms were suites. We had our own room with a door between us and the room next to us and we shared a refrigerator. We had a common toilet/shower facility in the middle of it. It was a long barracks building, but we had individual rooms.

LC: Wow.

RLH: So you had your privacy.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: I mean, it was actually pretty nice. We had excellent food. I mean, you had the opportunity to eat four times a day.

LC: Wow.

RLH: And because we were in Vietnam, we paid very minimal amount to eat.

LC: Okay, what do you mean by that?

RLH: Oh, it’s like one dollar for breakfast, $1.64 for lunch, and $1.20 for dinner. I mean, it was very nominal.

LC: Right.

RLH: We had what we called a Mamasan, which is a native woman there who kind of kept the rooms clean, and the toilet facilities and showers clean. They polished our boots for us.

LC: Did you have pretty much the same woman the whole time?

RLH: Yeah, she handled the whole barracks building.

LC: What was her name, do you remember?

RLH: Her name was Ca, C-a.

LC: Okay. Did you get along with her okay?

RLH: Oh yeah, wonderfully.

LC: Did you pick up any bit of Vietnamese?

RLH: Oh, little drabbles. I learned to count and say hello and things like that.

LC: Okay.

RLH: But she didn’t really speak English. I mean, very minimal.

LC: And was she pretty good at the job that she was doing?
RLH: Oh no. They came over and polished your boots when you made them and they
made your bed and if you wanted anything else done, you had to just about insist. I mean, you try
to convince them not to steal your stuff.
LC: Okay.
RLH: I told her that she…I figured that she’s going to take what I have if I don’t set a limit.
So I said, ‘Okay, each day you can have one coke, one, one coke, holding up a finger.’ She’d look
at me and say, ‘Two coke.’ ‘One coke!’
LC: Did it work?
RLH: Yeah, I really think it did. Once in a while, she would come and ask me, could she
have one coke for Papasan, who was the guy that took care of the grounds outside. And I would
usually say yes. And we’d work a swap everyday and she’d need a box of soap and I’d tell her I
need a grass mat for my floor, you know that sort of thing.
LC: And so she was kind of able to get things?
RLH: Oh yeah. I mean, sometimes I would just give her things. I mean, I only needed
one grass mat, how many boxes of soap did she need.
LC: Sure, yeah. Phu Cat was not a closed base then?
RLH: Yes it was.
LC: Oh it was, okay.
RLH: The only people that came on that base were the people who worked there. There
were no American women at all except one lady who was the librarian. She was very popular.
LC: I’ll bet. Was this a young woman?
RLH: Yeah, but not very pretty.
LC: (Laughter) Was she military or civilian?
RLH: No, she was civilian.
LC: Okay, and do you know what service she was with?
RLH: She was with…
LC: Red Cross or…?
RLH: Probably Red Cross, I’m not really sure.
LC: Now did she actually live on the base?
RLH: Yeah.
LC: Wow, where did she live?
RLH: They had built her a…her quarters attached to the library.

LC: Now, she wasn't stunningly good looking.

RLH: She stayed to herself.

LC: Really?

RLH: She was sort of shy. I mean, even though she wasn't what I would describe particularly good looking, I'm sure there were still a lot of guys that were willing to be really nice to her.

LC: I'll bet you.

RLH: But she was kind of shy, she stayed to herself.

LC: What was her name, do you remember?

RLH: Don't remember.

LC: Do you remember where she was from?

RLH: No. I never really talked to her.

LC: Did you not go to the library much then?

RLH: No.

LC: Did some guys go to the library for books?

RLH: Some guys went to the library a lot.

LC: Did they go for books though at all?

RLH: I don't know.

LC: (Laughter)

RLH: You'll have to ask them.

LC: Okay, well, I'm going to get a roster and I'm going to find out. (Laughter) But it's interesting that there was a facility, I mean, actually a library facility there. Were there other things besides the bar?

RLH: Oh yeah.

LC: What else was there?

RLH: They had a swimming pool.

LC: Wow. You're kidding?

RLH: No, it was a nice pool.

LC: Wow.

RLH: We had a skeet range.
LC: No kidding?

RLH: We had a tennis court; it was very nice. It was two courts, side by side and they had the regular rubberized cover, you know, the expensive stuff.

LC: Yeah.

RLH: And while I was there, the wing commander who’s the head over the whole thing was a big tennis player. He decided that he wanted the tennis courts lighted so he could play at night when it was cooler. And he put these lights and everybody thought it was a great idea and they’d go over and play tennis, but it didn’t take them long to figure out that that didn’t work because they had guard dogs that went around the perimeter and the perspiration from the people playing tennis drove them nuts.

LC: It would set them off.

RLH: So they told us no more night tennis.

LC: Right. Where did the sentry dog guys live, do you remember?

RLH: Yeah, they lived in kind of the center of the base. We were up on the north end.

LC: Okay.

RLH: It was called officer’s country and it was away from everybody else. It was two fighter squadrons. There was a squadron of Forward Air Controllers in those little light airplanes and there was a squadron of a little freight hauler airplane called a C-123.

LC: And were all those pilots, the pilots of those aircraft kind of hanging out with you guys?

RLH: No. We didn’t have anything to do with them. We were fighter jocks. They were trash haulers.

LC: Trash haulers were completely separately…?

RLH: Oh, they were beneath us.

LC: Okay.

RLH: We didn’t even like their dog.

LC: They had a dog?

RLH: Oh, we all had dogs.

LC: Okay, who was there dog? What was his name?

RLH: Don’t know, and we hated him. Our dog was Sabre and we loved him.

LC: Sabre was a good dog?
RLH: Sabre was a great dog.

LC: How old was Sabre?

RLH: Well, Sabre was named after the airplane they had there before us, which was the F-100 and they had left in '67, this is '70. I would say he was four or five years old.

LC: So Sabre kind of got handed down as the guys would come in?

RLH: Yeah, he was the squadron dog. He used to ride the bus with us. He knew where the chow halls were, when to get off.

LC: I bet he did. (Laughter)

RLH: He recognized that they had better chow at the alert shack than they did at the regular chow hall, so he would go there with us.

LC: So he had taste.

RLH: Oh yeah. And I'll tell you how good his tastes were, hated enlisted men, loved officers and could tell the difference from the way they dressed.

LC: Sabre was a smart dog.

RLH: He was and Sabre loved to go sit alert with us because when the alert horn went off, he tried to bite anything in sight.

LC: No kidding, really?

RLH: Just went crazy. Our job was to run to the airplane and be off the ground in fifteen minutes. Well, there was a little bridge over a drainage ditch between us and the airplanes. That was Sabre’s stopping point. He would run out of the building to the bridge and not cross that bridge.

LC: Wonder who taught him that?

RLH: I have no idea, but he knew better. He did not go.

LC: That’s amazing. And then we would sit and wait for you guys to come back?

RLH: Yeah. He’d be there when we came back.

LC: That’s incredible. Who’d he sleep with? Who took care of him? Was there somebody who kind of...?

RLH: He slept outside. I mean, if he looked sick, we’d take him to the veterinarian and that sort of thing.

LC: So you had a vet on base for the sentry dogs?

RLH: Oh yeah, because of the sentry dogs, yeah.
LC: And how did Sabre deal with the sentry dogs or were they never ever together?
RLH: They were never together. Sentry dogs always had people and they were not pets.
LC: No. Did you ever have an encounter or how did you learn that the sentry dogs were not to be dealt with at all, do you remember?
RLH: Well, they told us that.
LC: Okay.
RLH: And you know, we were allowed if we wanted to, to go over and ride the perimeter with the guards. I did that once just for the heck of it, just to see what it was like.
LC: Right.
RLH: And they told us when we were in jeep, do not get out of jeep because the dogs will get you.
LC: And they meant it.
RLH: Oh yeah.
LC: Yeah.
RLH: And we believed them.
LC: Did you have a kind of respect for the guys that were walking with the dogs?
RLH: I wouldn’t have done…I thought that was an awful job. You could get killed doing that stuff.
LC: Yeah, we’ve talked to a couple of those guys and yeah, I don’t think I would…
RLH: That was a rough job.
LC: Yeah, yeah. But there was a vet right there on base.
RLH: Oh yeah, took care of the dogs.
LC: So Sabre had it made.
RLH: Sabre ate steaks with us. If we didn’t have steak, he went to the chow hall with us. He knew where to get on the bus and knew where to get off the bus.
LC: When you left, you probably missed him a little bit.
RLH: Oh yeah, we did. And in fact, when they closed the base, there was some guys that came back from over there and that was the first thing we were asking, ‘What happened to Sabre?’ And they said, ‘Well, we took him to Thailand with us.’
LC: Oh really?
RLH: So, he was still alive in ’72 when they left.
LC: He got relocated.
RLH: Yup.

LC: Ronnie, just for the record, can you say what wing and squadron you were with?
RLH: Sure. I was with...the wing actually changed while I was there. We started out, it was the 36th TAC Fighter Wing, pardon me, 37th TAC Fighter Wing.
LC: Okay, 37th.
RLH: 37th. And in March of 1970, they closed Cam Ranh Bay.
LC: Right.
RLH: It was the 12th TAC Fighter Wing at Cam Ranh Bay, and it was an old well-known loved nomenclature. So, they just simply transferred the name to us. So we changed from the 37th to the 12th.
LC: The 12th TFW and that was in March?
LC: And you were with which squadron?
RLH: I was with the 480th TAC Fighter Squadron, the War Hawks.
LC: War Hawks.
RLH: War Hawks.
LC: War Hawks, do you know how that name came about?
RLH: I have no idea.
LC: Okay. Did you guys actually kind of identify as War Hawks?
RLH: Oh yeah.
LC: Did you have insignia and everything that went with it?
RLH: Oh yeah, if you wanted to see it, there’s a website. You can go look at the 12th TAC Fighter Wing.
LC: Okay. Did you feel a connection to the actual wing that you were with?
RLH: Not the wing, the squadron.
LC: Okay. What was the difference for you?
RLH: Well, there were two squadrons, two fighter squadrons and the wing. We were kind of rivals. I am going to have to take a break for a minute.