Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University beginning an oral history interview with Mr. Larry Schiff. Today’s date is the 14th of September 2004. I am in the Interview Room in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas. I’m speaking with Larry by telephone. He is in Orefield, Pennsylvania. Good morning, Larry.

Larry Schiff: Good morning. How are you?

LC: I’m doing well. Thank you. I thought we would begin by getting some basic biographical data. Where were you born, Larry, and when?

LS: New York City, 1939.

LC: What part of the city?

LS: Bronx.

LC: Whereabouts?

LS: Oh where were we living at the time? I can’t remember what it was called. We moved two or three times.

LC: Did you?

LS: Before we moved to Pennsylvania. One of those times my parents gave up their apartment and moved in with her parents because my father got drafted, then he got rejected three times.

LC: Really, why?
LS: Bad feet and bad eyes.
LC: Oh is that right?
LS: He was 6’4” and a half. And in those days that was huge.
LC: Absolutely. That’s even huge now. I mean seriously.
LS: I don’t think it’s huge. It’s big.
LC: It’s big and in the forties absolutely. Wow!
LS: Since they gave up their apartment they had no place to live so we moved in with my grandparents until they found an apartment in 1944. April of ’44 we moved again. That was the last place I remember. Then we moved to Pennsylvania.
LC: Now if you don’t mind Larry, can you tell us anything about your grandparents on either side? Where they arrived from, I know that they immigrated.
LS: One pair [my mother’s parents] was from Russia. They knew each other before they got on the boat. My father’s mother met this man on the boat who eventually became my father’s father [my father’s parents were from Poland].
LC: They met on the passage?
LS: Yeah.
LC: That’s amazing. What part of Russia?
LS: I have no idea.
LC: Is that right, no kidding.
LS: If you remember reading what I filled out in the questionnaire I had at least one place; maybe twice I said my family was very secretive. I never knew a lot of things.
LC: To what do you attribute that? Is that personality driven?
LS: I have no idea.
LC: As a kid growing up, do you remember anything about the war?
LS: Oh yeah. I’m even told that the memory that I have is pretty good. I remember Pearl Harbor Day believe it or not.
LC: Tell me about that, that’s amazing. You were just a little kiddo.
LS: I was born in February ’39 so this is December of ’41. It’s almost two [three] years later.
LC: What do you remember?
LS: It was a Sunday. I know some kind of party going on because the bathtub was full of bottles and ice at my uncle’s apartment. Then all of a sudden everyone was around the radio and it got quiet and then the party broke up and when I asked my father about that, oh it must have been about ten years later he said, “How did you remember that? You were too young.” He said, “That was Pearl Harbor Day.” I didn’t know what it was. He told me that.

LC: Sure, that’s interesting.

LS: So I remember that. I remember being in New York on the coast. We had blackouts and air raid drills constantly.

LC: Do you remember those sounds of the air raid warnings, that kind of thing?

LS: No. Where we lived you couldn’t hear a lot of it. It was all done locally with the air raid wardens running up and down the street yelling, “Air raid test, air raid test, lights out, lights out,” something like that.

LC: Do you remember having curtains that you had to bring down, anything like that?

LS: I don’t remember if there were special curtains. There were curtains, but I don’t remember if they were special or not.

LC: Was it scary?

LS: I was too young to be scared.

LC: What about your parents or other adults? Did you kind of pick up anything from them, that this was kind of all stations alert alert or anything like that?

LS: No, I just didn’t understand what was going on I guess. Other things I remember that had nothing to do with that but it did have something to do with the war. They used to bring captured equipment from the European theaters and then Africa to the Chrysler Building in Manhattan and put them on display. My father use to take me there periodically when they had a change in display. I use to crawl all over these Japanese and German vehicles and tanks and whatever. And they had American bombs out on the sidewalk, one they called a blockbuster. I thought it was huge. Now that I see pictures of the same bombs later they really weren’t that big. It’s how small I was.

LC: Right, exactly. And your dad took you down there huh?
LS: Numerous times. Well, usually on a Saturday because if he had to go into work a little bit he would take me with him. He worked for some advertising company at that time. He took me with him. So I remember what went on in World War II. I remember they were always listening to things on the radio; probably news broadcast type of thing. You used to buy a vinyl LP records and now you buy a CD with the same thing on it [old radio news programs].

LC: Well you were not the only child, is that right?

LS: No, I had a younger brother. He was born in 1946.

LC: So after the war then.

LS: If you count the months it was about the time the Japanese surrendered. In later years I worked that out.

LC: Do you remember VE or VJ Day?

LS: I don’t remember VE Day but I remember VJ Day very vividly. I was on the toilet. (Laughter)

LC: Okay go ahead and tell me about it.

LS: We lived in a fifth floor apartment building in the Bronx and I hear all this noise out in the streets and its summertime was August. I lean out the window and I see people running around and newspaper and toilet paper being thrown out of windows so I threw the roll of toilet paper out before I had the chance to use it.

LC: That created a dilemma.

LS: That’s how I connect to VJ Day.

LC: (Laughter) That’s actually very interesting.

LS: There was one other real interesting thing. We captured a German submarine in World War II. You probably read about it, the U505. When they captured it they had to keep it secret but then after VE Day it went on tour in the East Coast. My father took me to see it so I was on a German submarine.

LC: What do you remember about that trip, about that experience?

LS: Well I remember, I deduced in later years that it happened sometime between VE and VJ Day because the thing in the paper said to get tickets to get on the sub you had to bring fifty pounds of scrap newspaper. They were still collecting scraps for the war effort. So deduced that it had to be somewhere between VE and VJ.
LC: What were your feelings as a little kid getting on this?
LS: Oh I was just all excited about going on this thing.
LC: Have you absorbed that the Germans were the enemy or the Japanese were
the enemy? Had you gotten hold of that?
LS: I think I did [by that time] because I might have done that because that was
the was everybody else was. I use to draw pictures of airplanes and it was always the one
with the Japanese and Nazi markings getting shot down.
LC: So you were clear anyway whose side was the losing side.
LS: I don’t know whether it was the who’s losing and who is winning but it was
who is supposed to win. I think it was more from that angle.
LC: Oh okay, who’s supposed to win. Well, tell me a little bit about your mom.
Did she work outside the home at all?
LS: She did no work outside of the home that I know of until we moved to
Pennsylvania and then it was my father’s store that she worked in so they ran the
business.
LC: Now your dad was in advertising at least during some part of the war.
LS: Through 1948. Then they moved their office to Chicago and he elected not to
go. I repeated history many years later by not going where my company wanted to send
me.
LC: When was that for you?
LC: Where were you?
LS: I use to work for Bethlehem Steel.
LC: Okay, where did they want to send you?
LS: They wanted to send me to Indiana, Burns Harbor, Indiana, about seventy
miles from Chicago.
LC: No way huh.
LS: I could have toured that submarine again.
LC: That’s right. It is over there.
LS: Yes but it’s all cut out. The whole side is cut out. I was on it when it was in
the water.
LC: That’s right it’s at the either, what is it the Field Museum or something over there?
LS: Museum of Science and Industry.
LC: Let me ask you about the move to Pennsylvania. Was that hard on you?
LS: I think I enjoyed it for some reason. We had been to Allentown, that’s the city we moved to. We had been to Allentown a few times because two people that my grandmother, my father’s mother met on the boat from Poland settled in Allentown and she kept in contact with them over the years. We use to visit them in the late forties. That’s how my father got in on the information about a toy store that was available and then borrowed money and then we moved.
LC: So he decided to become his own boss?
LS: He tried it for about three or four years.
LC: How did it go?
LS: It didn’t go too well because of the big stores. Our location wasn’t that great. Well we didn’t have malls in those days. The store happened to be located across the street from one of the Sears buildings in town where they had their Sears Automotive Center. At Christmas time they moved all their toys in there. So you would hear people outside looking in our window saying, “Oh that’s nice. Let’s go over to Sears and get it.” You had a lot of that. I helped in the store also from the time I was about twelve or thirteen.
LC: What kinds of things did you get to do?
LS: Unload what was coming in. When my mother was upstairs cooking and my father eventually had to get an outside job to help support us I guess I would be in the store when customers came in taking care of them.
LC: Now what did your dad do to sort of get over the hump or to try to secure you guys during this period?
LS: It goes back to 1948 when it all started, when he lost the advertising job. He ended up working in the grocery store, what part of Manhattan is it? Greenwich Village. I remember that. Then we moved and then after about three years, two or three years he got a job, believe it or not, at Bethlehem Steel where I use to work.
LC: What did he do?
LS: He was just a laborer out in the plant and the yard. If they needed somebody
to paint something on an I-beam he painted numbers on them, identifying numbers, clean
up this and clean up that. He was at the bottom of the heap at the time. When I went to
work there I got in the sales department, I was in customer service.
LC: But your dad was basically out in the yard?
LS: I don’t know how many years he did that, two or three. Then he did get an
office job. He wasn’t an accountant. He was an accountant without the sheep’s skin, a
heavy bookkeeper. He was good at that. He got a job through some friends at a brick and
tile manufacturing company, Quakertown, which is about fifteen or twenty miles south of
Allentown where we lived. In Orefield where I live now it’s about nine miles outside of
Allentown going in the other direction.
LC: When you were growing up there can you tell me a little bit about the
schooling that you had. Where did you go to school?
LS: Well I started in New York. I went the first six years in the Bronx, PS 94,
wonderful school. Then we moved that summer. I didn’t quite finish the year. I missed
the last four days. My mother had a hassle with the school with whether they were going
to promote me to the next grade or not.
LC: Because you missed the four days?
LS: Yes. We didn’t know when we would [were going to] move. It was going to
be one of those things where the moving company was going to come one day and then
we’re gone. We didn’t know the date at that time. It could have been anywhere within a
two week period so she just took me out of school so I would be at home. It ended up
being four days later.
LC: (Laughter) But anyway you were moved on to the next grade I take it.
LS: I moved on. I started seventh grade in Allentown. It was amazing. The school
I went to in the Bronx was the one they chose for what they called progressive education.
They pushed everything a little faster. When I moved to Allentown when I was in seventh
and eighth grade I was redoing everything I did in the fifth and sixth grade in New York.
I didn’t have to study. I never studied.
LC: How did that affect you?
LS: I think that’s what affected me all my life as far as trying to get any further. I can’t study. I don’t know how. I pick up things over a period of time from real life.

LC: But there was something that happened there.

LS: Those two years of not having to study I think just set my mind that I don’t have to study.

LC: Those are critical years too for getting habits down.

LS: I had my ups and downs and had about an average average for high school.

LC: Well tell me about the high school. Was it in Allentown?

LS: Yeah.

LC: Which one was it or was there only one?

LS: There were…one when I went, there is two now. It was called Allentown High School. Now it’s called William Allen High School. William Allen was the founder of Allentown.

LC: While you were there as a student at the high school, did you play sports?

LS: I was too frail for that at the time. I was as tall as I am now almost when I started high school. I was 5’9 and a half. I weighed about 120 pounds, a skinny runt. I didn’t put on any weight until after I got into the Air Force. The only sports I ever played in the Air Force were baseball and softball.

LC: What about any kinds of extracurricular activities? Did you join any clubs; was there any kind of activity?

LS: It was really crazy. I think that the problem that I had was I was the outsider for all those years. It was six years, my junior high and high school.

LC: Now do you attribute that to not having grown up with the other kids?

LS: Yes. That and the fact that I was from New York and these people in those days hated New York. Now that’s all you have around here. People from New York and New Jersey have taken over the real estate business.

LC: How did you know they didn’t like people from New York? How did that become real, how did you know that?

LS: Well you would be let’s say out in the, we used to play out in the back alley behind our home, softball and baseball and one time somebody asked me where I lived
before and I told them and after that he never bothered with me. That was my first
connection.

LC: Did they pick up on an accent?
LS: That’s part of it. I’ve lost most of it over the years. I don’t think I talk like a
New Yorker.

LC: There’s a lot there. You know Midwesterners, for example, you can kind of
call out a speech pattern and hear.

LS: It’s funny how you can pick up accents. It’s really funny.

LC: Yeah it is.

LS: If I make a call to an 800 number with this out sourcing that we have now in
this country, I can tell where they’re from in most cases. The majority of them are either
in India or the Philippines anyway. And the Filipino accent I can never forget. I spent
four years there all together, two different trips. That was strange. When we get to that I
have a very strange story for you, unless you want to hear it now.

LC: Go ahead and put it in now why don’t we so we don’t forget about it.
LS: When I was in the Philippines and I got there in ’63, was my first trip there. I
got assigned to a small detachment whose office was in the US Embassy room in
downtown Manila. We also worked with an Army office with the advisory group in
Quezon City. There was no military base there. I was allowed to live in a house. The Air
Force would give me money or the advisory group had houses that they rented and just
assigned people so my commander talked with their commander and got me in one of
those house so I wouldn’t have to worry about renting one on my own, which I am glad
they did because I don’t know whether I would of liked that by myself. This way there
was two or three other guys in the house all the time. But then eventually I started dating
a girl and we broke up and we got back together again two or three times. I dated her I
think the last year I was there on my first tour. Said goodbye to her, wrote letters to her. I
went on two R&Rs (Rest and Relaxation) from Vietnam to Manila and saw her. Then we
got together and then all of a sudden we had our differences. I don’t know what it was.
This was in ’68. [The following is furnished to try to clarify the information contained in
lines 5 through 25 on page 9. Late Jan ‘63 arrive at my new unit—a small detachment
(less than ten people) in the Philippines. Our office was located in the US Embassy in
Manila. The closest US military base was Sangley Point Naval Station, Cavite and Clark AB—both a good 1 ½ to 2-hour drive from Manila (in opposite directions). We also worked closely with the Joint United States Military Advisory Group to the Republic of the Philippines (JUSMAG-PHIL) located in Quezon City, a suburb of Manila. The portion of JUSMAG we worked with also had only 6 or 7 people assigned. They were Army. With no US housing in Manila (except JUSMAG) everyone in my unit rented on their own—reimbursed by the Air Force. We also received a clothing allowance to buy civilian clothes—we did not wear military uniforms. I was the first single person ever assigned to my unit and after 5 days in a local hotel it was time for me to find less expensive housing for me. JUSMAG rented a few 3 bedroom houses located in the area surrounding their HQ (Headquarters). My commander contacted JUSMAG and worked out a deal—I never knew the terms of the deal—they had a few empty slots—I moved into one of them—already living there was an Air Force Master Sergeant. A few weeks later an Army SP4 moved in to the other empty room. It was a great “barracks.” This is getting lengthy—but to understand the entire thing you have to read this. The US and Philippine governments had an agreement that Filipinos could become associate members of the US Military clubs in the Philippines. The biggest stipulation was any drinks and cigarettes purchased must be consumed on the premises. To try to make this “short”—I was introduced to a girl who was in the NCO Club (Non-commissioned Officers) with a group of people she worked with. We dated on and off for almost 2 years—one of her girlfriends was dating my Army counterpart and after he left another of her friends started seeing his replacement. Now comes the part that makes this necessary. The latest replacement is from Stoystown, Pennsylvania, about 4 hours from where I live. If the name of the town sounds familiar it is near where flight 93 crashed—9/11. I met him during my first R&R—to pick up the pace, he married the girl—they live in Stoystown. Through them I found out (about 12 years ago) that my ex-girlfriend married a Canadian and lived in Vancouver.] Then I left, came home, I was discharged, and I never heard from her in ages. I didn’t try to find her wherever she may be and then out of the blue a girlfriend of hers married someone out near Stoystown. He was stationed in the Philippines. We got together and while I was out at their place out in Stoystown. It was out towards Pittsburgh. It’s hard to put into words. We were sitting there talking over old
times and whatever and she picks up the phone and makes a phone call. She called my
ex-girlfriend whom had married a Canadian and was living in Vancouver at the time. So I
spoke to her for about a half hour. She wanted me to write. I said, “No I can’t do that.”
Then that died. Out of the blue about a month ago I answer the phone and it’s a girl,
female with a Filipino accent. I couldn’t place the voice. The voice eluded me. I’m
usually good with voices if I have heard them before and I know where they came from.
She said, “I was a friend of Bill.” Then it hit me, I remembered the voice, remembered
this girl. My ex-girlfriend’s name was Cora. She said, “Cora isn’t doing too well. So I
tracked you down and would like you to call her.” So the past month or so I’ve been
calling her. We’ve been sending e-mails back and forth. She’s seven years older then I
am.

LC: Is she still living in Canada?
LS: She’s still in Canada.
LC: In Vancouver?
LS: A place called Surry, which I guess must be a suburb of Vancouver. See I’m
65, she’s 72. So we talk on and off and then it dawned on me after I made two phone
calls to her I don’t have an international plan. I wonder what these calls are going to cost
me. I called the phone company and it was seventy-four cents a minute.

LC: Ouch.
LS: I’m going to get about a 200 or 300 dollar phone bill in the mail the next day
or so.
LC: You need to go to Sam’s Club or something and get a calling card.
LS: What I did, I signed up for Verizon International, four dollars a month, seven
cents a minute.

LC: And how are the conversations going? Is it easy to talk with her?
LS: At first it wasn’t. My wife was sitting right there the first time. When I got the
call from her girlfriend my wife was here. It’s out in the open because my wife knew all
about my past. She’s seen all my movies, seen all my pictures. I just thought that was
very strange that showed up at this time.
LC: It’s very funny. Things happen and you just don’t know really why. Is she all
right?
LS: Well I talked to her yesterday and she’s planning for the winter to go into
some kind of nursing home. Her next door neighbor will see how the house goes. She’s
going to rent the house for the winter. She said she’s done that before so I guess she
knows what she’s doing.
LC: Where did you actually meet her?
LS: At the advisory group’s NCO Club. I was eating dinner because I hadn’t had
a chance to get to the PX (Post Exchange) and commissary yet. So that must have been
February, March of ’63. The waiter puts a drink down in front of me. I said, “What’s this
for?” He said, “That young lady in that group over there bought you a drink.” So I had to
go over and talk to her. That’s how we met. That’s the way it was in those days over
there. Well first of all I guess I got to throw something in so everybody understands it.
The advisory group had an agreement with the Philippine government to allow Filipinos
be associate members as long as everything they bought was consumed on the premises.
So there was no black market involved.
LC: So everybody was buying a drink at a time type of thing.
LS: It was just a group of them. They come there to see who is around, say hi, and
in this case I ended up with an extra drink. (Laughs) So that’s how we met.
LC: Well Larry, let me take you back to high school and we’ll get you graduated.
Your academic work in high school how did that go, still not so great?
LS: Just fair. Some of it good, some it not so good. My mother forced me into
taking what they use to call college prep and I bombed because I can’t study. So I filtered
back into what they use to call the general group. That’s where I was. When I graduated I
wasn’t really prepared for anything. My mother was very forceful of forcing things down
my throat and my brother said she did the same thing to him in later years. I ended up
going to what they call a Penn State Extension. They have satellite buildings around the
state. I was taking some kind of drafting and technology course. I did good on the
drafting end of it, but as far as the other part like history and English and whatever,
pssshhh.
LC: No way huh? Was there none of that…did it interest you even though you
didn’t have what you’re thinking of as the study skills?
LS: I think I took it just to make my mother happy.
LC: How long did that last?
LS: One semester, then I joined the Air Force.
LC: So that would have been if I’m correct, the fall of 1956. Does that sound right?
LS: That’s right. Boy, you’re on top of it.
LC: I studied up a little bit.
LS: So I was lounging around the house for a month or so and my mother almost kicked me out saying, “You have got to find a job.” So I went and saw the Air Force recruiter. Because I was an airplane buff from way back, building models and things like that. I always had an interest in aviation. I could never afford to get a pilot’s license.
LC: Had you thought about anything else, any other opportunities say during that month when you were kind of hanging out? You knew you probably had to do something. Did you apply for other jobs, anything else?
LS: I couldn’t apply for anything. I had no experience in anything. You look in the paper they want people with experience. They didn’t have job fairs and things like that in those days.
LC: That must have been pretty discouraging too.
LS: Well it didn’t matter to me. I was only 17 years old.
LC: So as soon as you turned, if I’m correct, as soon as you turned…?
LS: Turned 18. That’s when I joined the Air Force.
LC: Do you remember going to the recruiter’s office?
LS: Yes, I said that. I went and saw the recruiter. I came home and I told my mother I got a job and she said, “Where?” I said, “I joined the Air Force. I leave in two weeks.”
LC: Did she have any idea you were thinking about that?
LS: No.
LC: What did she do?
LS: She was mad. I said, “There is nothing she could do about it. Another week and a half I’m going to be 18. I can sign the papers. I don’t have to have you co-sign.” I was mad, she was mad. That’s the way it was all those years.
LC: Got it. And what about your dad?
LS: He had no comment. What went on between them over the subject I have no
idea, once again the secrets.

LC: Were you pretty much looking forward to…once you made the decision was
it like, “Okay I can’t wait to go?”

LS: Yeah I was that way.

LC: Okay.

LS: Then they put us on a bus to go down to Philadelphia, go through the
induction process, the medical things and whatever. Then they were going to put us on a
train to go to Texas to basic training. They didn’t have enough room so they went
alphabetically. I was in the group that stayed behind one day so I got a free day in the Air
Force for doing nothing. There was a group of us. I think there was six or seven of us.
They gave us what they called meal vouchers. I’m trying to remember how this went,
meal vouchers and hotel vouchers and whatever and put this one in guy in charge who is
what they call a retread. He had been in the Korean War and got out and now he’s
coming back in. He has to get a refresher of basic training. I think the main reason they
did it is so that they could give them new uniforms in a legal manner because if he was in
during the Korean War, this was 1957, his uniform not only wouldn’t fit him but they
would be in bad shape. So I think it was a legal way of getting new uniforms, these guys
are called retreads and getting about two weeks of basic.

LC: (Laughter)

LS: That’s my opinion as I look at it now.

LC: Okay. Well there’s a method behind it that’s for sure.

LS: So we went to eat. He said the first thing is he is going to go inside and find
out do they take the meal tickets and do they give change if we don’t spend it all because
a lot of the restaurants don’t do that. So we found a restaurant that gave change then we
went to see the movie Oklahoma on the Air Force with the change.

LC: Do you remember how much it cost?

LS: No.

LC: Do you remember seeing the film?

LS: I remember the film. I remember the theater. I remember getting back to the
hotel and going to sleep and the next day on the train. That took three days.
LC: Yeah I was going to say how long was that trip, three days huh?
LS: Three days to San Antonio.
LC: Did you have a sleeper? Or what was the arrangement?
LS: Yes they had what they use to call a pullman cart. The upper and lower bunks opened up after you...they were invisible during the day and a guy comes down a certain time and starts putting the bunks down. So the seats disappear.
LC: What did you guys do during the days, play cards or look out the window?
LS: I looked out the window mostly because I wasn’t a card player. There was card playing going on. It’s funny, there was also card playing going on in the plane when I went to Korea.
LC: Yes, that’s a theme I think.
LS: That was before jets. It took over 40 hours to get from California to Japan.
LC: Wow. That’s just practically unbelievable, even by contemporary comparison if you think forward to the future. 40 hours to go that distance, wow.
LS: Now they go around the world in 40 hours. (Laughter)
LC: Yes, a couple of times.
LS: So the trip was kind of dull or were you antsy to get there?
LC: Yes it was dull. We bought a lot of magazines and shifted them around. A guy would throw a magazine out in the isle, “Here is one for you. I’m done with it.” You would trade magazines. Things like that. We had a couple hours lay over in St. Louis and a couple of us walked outside the terminal, didn’t go further than about a block away. I remember it was very hot even though it was February.
LS: Really?
LC: Yes, it was very hot in St. Louis that particular February day. We hit St. Louis, was it the first day or was it the second day, I don’t remember. I know that we left Pennsylvania on the 13th of February because I took the oath on the 12th, which was Lincoln’s birthday. I remember that. That’s how I remember dates. I associate things.
LS: When you came to the end of the trip what happened? Did you guys all have to stay together?
LC: Yes we were all together. We got on this Air Force bus. It was just like the movies. This Air Force guy in there with a funny hat was yelling and screaming at us to
do things, just like you see in the movies, very similar. They just try to intimidate you, 
that’s about what it is, and they did. (Laughter)

LC: Yes I was going to say did that work? How did that go down with you?
LS: Well it was something you accepted. It was all part of the game.
LC: Were there guys who resisted that?
LS: I didn’t notice any in our group. I’m trying to remember. I have faces in front 
of me, I don’t have any names. I got faces. No, I don’t remember any problems with any 
of the guys. If it did it didn’t show up. It was probably early, the first week or so. You 
really didn’t know everybody because we were one of many small groups at that point. 
We broke away from our big group because there wasn’t enough room on the train.
LC: About how many guys in this group that you were going through with?
LS: For the whole group in basic?
LC: Well yeah…
LS: Or just the group from Pennsylvania?
LC: The group from Pennsylvania that came down on the train.
LS: There was seven or eight in the hotel. About seven or eight. I don’t remember 
the exact number.
LC: Then once you get to basic and your smaller group from Pennsylvania all get 
melted in, how many in that training?
LS: I think it was 60. The number 60 sticks in my mind so we’ll go with it. I’m 
good at that too.
LC: (Laughter) Going with it. Well tell me a little about the routine that you guys 
had to fall into.
LS: Well eventually you get into a routine because that’s what they want. They 
want you to do the same thing in a certain order everyday. You get up early, I think it was 
4:30, a quarter to 5, get dressed real quick and cleaned up or whatever, shave, go outside. 
I think we had 15 minutes to do this before morning formation. We had to march over to 
somewhere and do some garbage pickup, other things that they assigned you to do and in 
between all of that you had physical training and classes on Air Force history and what 
were the other words I used to use? I would have to go looking through the questionnaire 
I filled out for you.
LC: Well did you have any problems with the physical training stuff; you had 
mentioned before that you were a very slight guy?
LS: Yeah. I was very poor on pull-ups from a bar. I would jump up to a bar and 
wrap your hands around it and pull yourself up. If I did one I was lucky because I had no 
strength in my upper body whatsoever. So when that came about it was, “Okay Larry, do 
two laps.” And I would be running around the perimeter of the PT (Physical Training) 
field and by the time I got there they were through with all the pull-ups and those kind of 
things. That came in handy. I guess I should have mentioned, there was no place to throw 
it in. I was a pretty fast runner.

LC: Were you?
LS: I was clocked, without any training whatsoever I tried out for the track team 
in high school one year but I didn’t make it. The first time I ran the 100-yard dash I did it 
in 11.7 seconds, which for a 14 year old was amazing the guy said. I was only a fraction 
behind their star.

LC: How come you didn’t get on the team?
LS: That’s all I was good for was the 100 yards. After that my legs are heavy. I’ve 
always had heavy legs.

LC: They wanted to skew it; your work that you did to make up for not being 
able to do pull-ups was this run around the track?
LS: Run around the track twice.

LC: Did you have any opportunity for weapons training?
LS: They started out; let’s see after about four or five weeks they handed out 
these old War World II Carbines, M-2s they called them. They still use them I think. We 
had what they called dry fire in the barracks, no ammunition whatsoever. You could put a 
penny on the site and squeeze the trigger and hope the penny doesn’t fall off. Then the 
following week we went out and learned how to shoot the thing without any score 
whatsoever, just to see if you could hit a target. Then we went out to the firing range for 
actual firing for record they called it. I did pretty good. I got 200 out of a possible 220.
That was the first time ever that I ever fired a rifle.

LC: That’s not bad.
LS: Actually I hate guns. Anytime I had to go to the firing range I was afraid somebody was going to hurt me. (Laughter)

LC: (Laughter) Well as you were going through the basic training process were you thinking about or hoping for a particular kind of assignment? What did you have in your head?

LS: I figured it was Air Force, I got to get involved with airplanes somehow and it worked out just the opposite for 12 years.

LC: I was going to say did you think that you were going to fly? Did you think you were going to be a mechanic? Did you think that you were going to be a…what part of that, any?

LS: I had no idea what they had other than what you say like a mechanic or a pilot. Pilots had to be college graduates so I was out for that.

LC: Did you know that?

LS: Yeah, I knew that.

LC: Okay.

LS: I just wanted something close to airplanes. And I never got close until I got to Vietnam.

LC: (Laughter)

LS: The Caribou outfit for one year was the only flying outfit I was in the whole 12 years I was in the Air Force.

LC: No kidding. Did they do any testing on you?

LS: I had tests. You said engine mechanic. That was my lowest score by the way.

LC: That was not going to happen.

LS: That was 60.

LC: I’m sure I would have scored substantially less than that.

LS: My other 60, believe it or not, was administration that I ended up in.

LC: Whoops! What did you score the best in?

LS: Radio operator, but the school was full. Then I would have been involved with airplanes.

LC: Yes, absolutely.
LS: The school was closed. It was full. So they said, “All those that have no
school openings with their scores or whatever will get reassigned for on the job training
somewhere in something.”
LC: So that was a little amorphous and unclear.
LS: So I ended up at Plattsburgh, New York at a big SAC Base (Strategic Air
Command) on the base newspaper. I knew nothing about writing for papers. I knew
nothing. (Laughter)
LC: (Laughter) Well tell me about getting up there. This would have been, am I
right, the summer of ’57?
LS: Right.
LC: And did you have your assignment before you left?
LS: Oh yeah.
LC: So you knew you were going to be writing?
LS: I didn’t know what the job was. They just said, “You’re going to Plattsburgh,
New York and this is your unit.” That’s all they told you.
LC: Did you tell your parents where you were going to be going?
LS: Oh yeah, I came home first. I flew home. First time I had flew commercial in
my life.
LC: That must have been an experience in 1957.
LS: Went from San Antonio to Washington. I don’t think we had a stop in
between.
LC: Really? They don’t fly that anymore.
LS: I think the, yeah, the plane from Washington to Allentown, believe it or not,
was an old DC3 from the thirties. They announced it was the last DC3 flight out of
Washington for Eastern Airlines. They were going to be getting new planes starting next
week.
LC: That’s kind of neat. That’s was sort of a landmark.
LS: But they didn’t give us anything to prove it.
LC: I was going to say of course it could have been a little scary too. You’re
thinking wow.
LS: Not really. I saw one fly over here about two weeks ago. There’s no flying
those planes.
LC: A DC3?
LS: Douglas DC3.
LC: Amazing.
LS: They were built to last. That’s why they were so rough in flying. You fly now
and you look out the window at the wings and the engines that are hanging on these
hangers or whatever they call them, everything is flexible. It absorbs a lot of the shock.
Its rides are smooth whereas the DC3 was solid like a rock. Every bump in the air you
felt. I got airsick.
LC: I can well believe that.
LS: I was home for; let’s see, about two weeks. Then I flew from Allentown up to
Plattsburgh, Eastern Airlines again which doesn’t exist anymore.
LC: That’s right.
LS: I had a long layover in Syracuse. Saw the Boston Celtics arrive for a
basketball game.
LC: Did you?
LS: They came off the plane. I saw them get their bags and whatever. I had an
aunt and uncle living in Syracuse at the time. My aunt picked me up at the airport. I had
about a three-hour layover in Syracuse waiting for the next plane. She came and picked
me up and took me to her house, gave me lunch, then took me back to the airport.
LC: Well that was good.
LS: I thought that was neat.
LC: That actually was. It made the layover go fast.
LS: Then I got to Plattsburgh. How did I find a ride? I took a taxi from the airport,
no, somebody there at this little airport. It was a one-man airport. He says, “You assigned
to Plattsburgh?” I said, “Yeah I just got here. I don’t know where to go or how to get
there.” He said he would call the base and send somebody out to pick me up. They came
in a pick-up truck and I threw my duffle bag in the back and got it in the pick-up truck
and got sent to the base. They took me to what they call the transit barracks. I saw on a
bulletin board where I’m suppose to go, had all these instructions, so took care of all that.
LC: Where were you supposed to go? Was there a particular part of the base?
LS: Wherever the personnel office was. They said new arrivals report building such and such, room such and such at a certain time everyday. They had these; this is in all bases now. You have to do what they call clear in or clear out if you’re going the other way. They initial forms as you go through the various processes. That’s typical of all the Air Force, I guess the whole military. I guess it’s still done the same way.

LC: What was your first impression of the base? How big was it?
LS: Well it was large, very large SAC Base. Eventually I found out where they put me. For the first night was in the new part of the base. They had an old part of the base across the highway, that’s where I ended up.

LC: What was the, can you describe the differences between the two?
LS: Well the old base was an Army installation in the twenties and thirties, old red brick buildings that surrounded a parade ground. Where the new base was very modern, it was all brand new. It only opened up about a year before I got there, something like that. It was too far to travel when you didn’t have a car. You didn’t have bus service, you had to walk everywhere. It took you forever if you had to go from old base to new base without a car.

LC: There’s no shuttle or anything organized?
LS: No, they didn’t have anything like that.

LC: Okay.
LS: I didn’t have much need to go to a new base in most cases. If I did I would be going with one of the other guys from the newspaper. They had two or three that had been there a while. They were in the communications business. In fact two of them worked for the local radio station. I think he’s still up there.

LC: No kidding, wow. Well Larry, for someone who doesn’t know about the base itself what was the main order of business. Who, if there is a squadron, which one was it? Who was assigned there?
LS: I don’t know what squadrons there were. They had a compliment of B-47s. They were nuclear carrying bombers, six jet engines, three on each side. It was the first swept wing jet bomber that we built.

LC: So this was a SAC base. You mentioned that before.
LS: Under General Curtis LeMay at the time.
LC: Yes, the famous General LeMay. Who was the base commander, do you remember?
LS: I have no idea. The only thing I remember was I was in the 8th of the 20th Air Base Group. That’s all I can remember out of it.
LC: And tell me about your work day when you sort of finally got into the routine. What did you do?
LS: Not much; answered the phone. Went for doughnuts.
LC: Sounds tough, Larry.
LS: Then they published a newspaper was it twice a month or was it once a month?
LC: And this was a base newspaper.
LS: Base newspaper.
LC: Were you supposed to run around and interview people?
LS: I never got that far. They said they were going to train me to do certain things. The first thing I did was I went with one of the other guys to the printer. They had to get it printed off base. He had to take something to the printer. Then we also dealt with the local newspaper. They allowed us to use some of their equipment. If you want to publish a picture in those days, if you want to publish a picture in the newspaper you had to put the original glossy on a drum, on this machine, what’s it called, I can’t think of the name of the machine.
LC: Roneo? Was it something like that?
LS: No. It would spin and read the ups and downs the black, and white, and gray on the picture that you wanted to put in the paper. The other thing was some kind of plastic thing you wrapped around a drum. It’s blue in color. I don’t know what kind of material they called that but this machine optically read the picture that you wanted put in with a needle and under some heat it made impressions and what you were putting it on just to go in the newspaper and let’s see, how did that work? The high points would go on the, oh this is so hard to remember, it’s been so long.
LC: That’s okay; you can take your time. It’s very interesting because this is sort of changes in technology.
LS: You know these lead plates that they use in the old presses?
LC: Yes.
LS: Well, to make anything that picks the ink up is a high spot and anything you want white is the low spot so wherever it was black it wouldn’t cut too deep or it wouldn’t cut at all. Wherever it was white it cut deep into this material. That’s how it formed the picture. They used the word pixels in those days. Not on the screen. So I learned how to use that machine.
LC: Was any of this old hat to you? Had you done anything like this before?
LS: No.
LC: So this was totally brand new?
LS: I came in out of the blue. Where I was very green, is that the color you want to use?
LC: Right. And this was totally on the job training too, is that right?
LS: Strictly.
LC: Who were you working with? Do you remember who kind of showed you the ropes?
LS: One guys name was Dave something. He was another one of the members of the staff. I can picture this other guy. I can’t think of his name. He had a part time job at the local radio station as a DJ.
LC: Did you end up kind of hanging out with these guys too during the course of the workday or even after?
LS: Not really because the two of them were at the end of their enlistment which made them four years plus older then me. I was only 18 years old. I was a kid. So you didn’t really hang out with the guys you worked with half the time anyway. The one guy Dave, he was married anyway so he lived off base. The other guy drove a Jaguar. I remember that.
LC: Wow that’s cool. Did you enjoy doing what you were doing or did you want something more?
LS: Some of the things I enjoyed, some I didn’t. I really was not a writer. I did learn how to hunt and peck on the typewriter pretty good, newspaper style. I got involved with one of the other guys. I can’t think of his name, he used to run the base tours. Like if
a school called up and wanted to go in and tour the base and that kind of thing. I went
along on a couple of those. Ever try to keep 50 kids on the bus taking their cameras out
when you told them no picture taking from here on?
LC: Diabolical.
LS: That was the biggest problem you had with kids on the school buses in those
days. Now they carry guns.
LC: That’s right. Things change so much.
LS: So I did a little bit of going on these tours. Believe it or not we were in the
middle of a tour, which had to be registered with the flying outfit on the new base
anytime we were going to have a tour. So they toned down things a little bit. We were
surprised. We saw a U-2 take off one time. That was a highly secretive plane at the time,
1957. That was only three years before Powers got shot down over Russia.
LC: Can you describe that? Do you remember that?
LS: I was dumbfounded first of all. I’ve seen pictures on and off of parts of the
plane. I looked at it and I said, “That’s a U-2.” I watched it going down the runway and
the two out rigger wheels on the wing tips went flying off. They had to be recovered by
ground crew and they landed only on their center tires. I didn’t know that at that point,
that’s where I picked that up from.
LC: But you watched it happen?
LS: Yes I watched it happen. They screwed up. I don’t think the kids knew what
they saw. I don’t even think the guy I was working with who was running the tour knew
what he saw either. But me being the airplane buff, I used to write to airplane companies
to get pictures.
LC: Wow. So you would have naturally been drawn to any plane that was taking
off.
LS: Yes. I do that all the time. I hear an airplane now, I look up.
LC: Yeah. So how fast did that U-2 get away?
LS: Once he got off the ground he put his nose up and went straight up and away,
gone.
LC: Straight up pretty much?
LS: Yes. That was one of the first planes to be able to do that.
LC: Yes, absolutely. That must have been pretty thrilling I would have thought.
LS: To me it was.
LC: Yeah, absolutely. Did you know what the purpose of the U-2 aircraft was, I mean in general?
LS: At that time no. Then all of a sudden, about a month later there was a big news release about the U-2. They have been testing them at Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico and Plattsburgh, New York and I started thinking, the wheels in my head started turning. They do that when I hear things like that. I said, “Plattsburgh, that’s cold weather. Puerto Rico, that’s hot weather. They are testing it in different weather conditions.” What else could it have been? That’s probably the only reason it was even at Plattsburgh.
LC: Was for the service air conditions.
LS: To try things out, how would it take off in cold weather versus hot and visa versa? How would it perform in cold weather versus the hot? That was before they had areas set aside where they can do it without being watched. Area 51 in Nevada.
LC: When you were at Plattsburgh, the tour that you had there was just six or seven months, is that right?
LS: It wasn’t long. This was funny. It was just before Thanksgiving. Two other guys that got assigned to the base newspaper with me, there were three of us all together, three of us that came out of basic together.
LC: Okay, you stayed together at Plattsburgh.
LS: The other two guys were packing to go to one guy’s house in Connecticut for Thanksgiving weekend. I was just coming back into the barracks where the orderly room was located on the first floor. One of the clerks from the orderly room sees me coming in and come running out and calls me and says, “The 1st Sergeant wants to see you.” Whoops what did I do now, you know. I go in there and he says, “Sit down.” I sit and he flips a couple of papers around and he says, “How would you like to go to Korea?” I thought about it a few seconds and I said, “I’m not really doing anything I like here.” He says, “Get up in the morning and go to work and quit work and go back to your barracks and that’s about it.” The winter is terrible. You’re right in the middle or coming up in the winter and it was colder than I can even begin to imagine. I said, “Yeah that sounds like a
good idea.” He says, “Well alphabetically you’re third on the list. The other two are
ahead of you.” I was always last alphabetically. Nowhere near the end. He said, “If you
can talk these other two out of going you’ll go.” So I said, “Okay I’ll be back in ten
minutes.” I go up to find them. They are packing and without saying when, I just said,
“You guys don’t want to go to Korea do you?” You figured they are packing to go away
on a four-day weekend. They think this going to happen and, “No we don’t want to go.” I
said, “Good, you come down to the orderly room with me and sign the waver that you
don’t want to go and I’ll go.” That’s how I got to go to Korea.

    LC: Smooth.
    LS: I get to Korea and there’s that magic number three again. Three of us on the
plane going to the base newspaper at Osan Air Base. None of us had another newspaper
experiences except the short little bit we had between basic training. They had a similar
job at other locations. We get to Osan and they tell us, “We have too many people here.
We only needed one, they send three.” So I call it the military point system. They pointed
at me and one other guy and says, “You and you, you’re going to the radio station.” I
said, “Radio station? I’ve never even been inside one before.” “Well you’re going to play
records.” So I played records for a year. I enjoyed it.

    LC: I was going to say that actually sounds pretty good.
    LS: I wasn’t that great. I was an amateur. The Army guys in the network were the
pros.

    LC: But you were a DJ. Tell me about the station itself. What was the physical
layout? Did it have its own building?
    LS: Three Quonset huts made up the station.
    LC: And we’re talking about Osan Air Base.
    LS: Osan Air Base, 1958, there were three Quonset huts. The first Quonset hut
was the station itself, which had a studio, the main broadcast studio and an equipment
studio where they kept all the electronics and a record library and a little reception area in
the desk and some chairs to sit in. The second and third Quonset hut was our living
quarters. We lived right behind the station, which was neat. We didn’t have to go very far
to go to work. Had to go far to go to the bathroom in the morning.

    LC: So tell me about the schedule. Did you go on shifts?
LC: First of all they sat me down with the station manager; he was an Air Force
Tech Sergeant. I had to back track a little before I found out. A few nights before the guy
who did the midnight to six shows, rotated back to the States. They needed somebody to
fill in so they picked me. So after a few days of training it was my turn. This Tech
Sergeant who took over the midnight to six, which had been all rock and roll and requests
and things like that, he ruined it and played nothing that anybody wanted to hear. So
when he put me on my own, which was after the third day, I picked out a record to play.
I’ll tell you what the name is in a minute. I picked out a record to be my first record on
my own and I opened the show. In those days it was very conservative radio, Armed
Forces versus what you hear today. It’s nothing like it is today. There is an opening script
you had to read over what was the theme song, I think was the Chuck Aldimo Quartet
*Leap Frog*. I toned down the theme and read the introduction to the show and then I add,
“Tonight we’re going to make some changes,” or something to that effect. I said, “Here’s
our first record that we picked for you.” I start the record and there goes Chuck Berry’s
*Roll Over Beethoven*. The Tech Sergeant was sitting in the chair on the other side of the
studio. He got up and walked out shaking his head. (Laughter) I went from there.

LC: Did they have good selection? Who was buying the records and all that?
LS: It was all Armed Forces radio records. They were 16-inch transcription desk.

They had eight songs on a side.

LC: They were made somewhere within the Air Force?
LS: Armed Forces Radio was located in Los Angeles.

LC: Okay and they produced these disks and sent them out?
LS: They got permission from the songwriters and the unions and the artists and
record companies to use these records. So we didn’t have everything. We had most of
everything. We did a lot of substitutions. We weren’t allowed to play anything but Armed
Forces Radio records; of course we cheated a little bit.

LC: And where would you get…?
LS: When you’re working from midnight to six.

LC: So you could…where did you get the, sort of if you want the non-regulation
records?
LS: PX.
LC: Okay. Your own collection?

LS: We laughed at some of these rules because besides the records with the songs, weekly we would get prerecorded programs of like the *Arthur Godfrey Show* and Don McNeil’s *Breakfast Club* kind of thing, I’m trying to remember the old shows from those days, that we had to play. I remember there were two records that were on the list that we weren’t allowed to play, was Dean Martin’s *Return To Me* and the Everly Brothers *All I Have to do is Dream*.

LC: Those were on the ban list?

LS: They were on the ban list because they never got permission. All of a sudden in one week on two different shows, those transcribe shows we got from California, here is Dean Martin singing *Return to Me* on an Armed Forces radio disk. On this other one here is the Everly Brothers with their song on an Armed Forces radio disk. So we just kept those transcription disks and played them. Tech Sergeant at Randolph Station said, “I don’t like this. We’re not allowed to play these.” I said, “It’s on one of their disks they played it for us. They set precedence.” So we continued.

LC: Right, if it has already been played once we might as well go ahead.

LS: We started collecting those. We started going through a lot of these older transcription shows that were still hanging around. We found a lot of banned songs. The word banned did not mean there was something wrong with them.

LC: It didn’t mean content. It was about the permissions having been secured.

LS: They didn’t have the referral from the doctors to get…?

LC: I’m with you, in HMO language. (Laughter)

LS: Putting it in today’s language. See what I mean, that’s how I got by in radio, coming up with stuff like that.

LC: (Laughter) And you had fun with this.

LS: Oh, I had a ball.

LC: Who else were you playing? Who else did you like to play?

LS: Rock-n-roll, country and western, big bands, I did it all.

LC: So you were quite eclectic, is that fair?

LS: Whatever that word means.
LC: You were playing lots of different things. Not just you know sort of all
country and western. That was your thing.
LS: I’m still the same way. I have about 100 CDs here. You’ll find anything from
folk songs to rock-n-roll, oldies, country and western, big bands; I’m still the same way
when it comes to that. I like a lot of Glenn Miller. Other than from the rock side, the big
band side I like Glenn Miller the best.

LC: What about modern stuff. Did you get into grunge or hip-hop?
LS: I got out of it long before that.
LC: Okay, but I mean in terms of your own listening now.
LS: I just didn’t like anything passed about ’67, ’68. I started losing interest in
what came after that.
LC: Is that right? Do you have any thoughts as to why that is? Is it about the
music?
LS: It’s the music. I didn’t like it. I liked the Beatles until then. Then they did
their change and went psychedelic. It was almost like somebody put a wall up. I don’t
have anything past that.
LC: That’s interesting.
LS: I don’t think it had anything to do with the war in Vietnam, just because this
was in ’57.
LC: Well music definitely changed that. I know popular music, I don’t think
there’s any question about it. Larry let me ask you, did you stay on the midnight to six for
the whole year?
LS: For most of the year. Because we were short handed and we started taking the
feed from Tokyo from midnight to six. I did the early morning, mid afternoon, early
evening, I was spread out.
LC: Tell me about this taking the feed from Tokyo, what does that mean?
LS: We had a landline from Armed Forces Radio in Tokyo. Their stations
broadcast 24 hours a day. We use to get our news from them or the Army station up in
Seoul by just flipping a switch. We would just leave the switch up and be on the air with
whatever they broadcast.
LC: Was that a policy decision that somebody made such that you wouldn’t be
doing…?
LS: Well we didn’t have enough people to fill it to 24 hours. My station manager
got to the information services offices who was also in charge of the base newspaper
and said, “We’ve got a problem.” There were no new people coming in. The Army who
ran the network didn’t want to send us anybody.
LC: So the solution was pretty clear then, just to allow the…?
LS: I think they went ahead and did it just to see what the Army would do, maybe
they would send somebody but they never did. That was the last, let’s see, I think they
started…that was in November ’58. Then in February I left. Late January, early February
I left and played the required *California Here I Come* that we weren’t supposed to play.
LC: Was that your final disk as it were?
LS: That was my final. That tape got stolen out of my car in Cleveland. That’s
another story.
LC: How did that happen? Go ahead and tell me.
LS: I was stationed with somebody in a radar site in Michigan. He was from
Cleveland. I had the car and he had the money and the place to go to. I stayed with him at
his place for a couple of days. I had the tape recorder in the back seat and it disappeared
one night. They got about ten tapes, one of which was the last show.
LC: That’s a pity. Now were you recording your own shows?
LS: Periodically I would put a tape on the machine.
LC: But as a general rule you weren’t recording your own broadcast or the station
wasn’t recording your broadcast?
LS: No, the station wasn’t recording. We didn’t have any of that. Everybody was
on their own. It was very loose.
LC: It sounds like a pretty good gig.
LS: It was but it was not the best I had.
LC: Which one was that, just so I know?
LC: In Manila, okay.

(Laughter).

LC: Well before we get there you had a new assignment. When did you find out you were going to be leaving Korea?

LS: Oh about December I guess I got the orders. I was going to Syracuse, New York of all places.

LC: Did that send a chill down your spine knowing you were going back to northern New York, upper New York?

LS: Well Syracuse isn’t as far north as Plattsburgh. Plattsburgh was up 20 miles from the border. It was only 65 miles from Montreal, but Syracuse remember is where I had an aunt and uncle living. I used to visit them a lot.

LC: So this didn’t sound too bad then?

LS: No, this sounded pretty good. I got there in the end of March I guess it was [this was when the Boston Celtics were at the airport], end of March of ’59. October I get told I’m being sent to Michigan. “We’re overstaffed.”

LC: What job did you do when you were in Syracuse?

LS: Base newspaper.

LC: Was it essentially the same?

LS: About the same stuff I did in Plattsburgh. It was a small town. Wait Syracuse wasn’t small. It was pretty big, but they use a small town printer. It was 15 miles from where our office was. That was a strange set up there too. There wasn’t really a base, very small installation. It straddled the highway there too, just like Plattsburgh. I was only there about eight or nine months. In November I left to go to Michigan.

LC: And you were at Port Austin, is that right?

LS: Yeah. 7th of the 54th Radar Squadron.

LC: What was the work of that airfield, that station?

LS: We were part of the air defense system. For a 24-hour operation they were tied into the air traffic control system of the civilian flights. This was the first computerized air defense system. Ever hear of what they call the SAGE (Semi-Automatic Ground Environment) system? S-A-G-E?
LC: It rings a bell but can you tell for someone who doesn’t know, what can you
tell us about it?
LS: The SAGE stands for Semi-Automatic Ground Environment. What that
meant beats the hell out of me. (Laughs) That’s what they called it.
LC: So they were monitoring civilian aircraft?
LS: They were part of the control system, like you have today. It’s more
sophisticated today then it was then. Basically what they did was they had search radar
antenna that spun around 12 times a minute catching all the targets in the area for X
amount of miles. I never knew how far. Then they had what they called a height finder
that would just rock back and forth sending a signal up and down, up and down. So at the
sector headquarters when they needed to know how high this plane was flying they would
push a button, they would put in a height request at the radar site and turn a dial to get a
line to cut the target in half, target on the screen in half and then push two buttons and
transmit back whatever the computer said how high he was off the ground. It wasn’t
sophisticated at all.
LC: So they were essentially monitoring in two dimensions, both how far out and
how far up?
LS: Right. And the reason they were hooked into the civilian system was just to
be able to keep up to snuff on operating the equipment I guess. I didn’t know that much
about it. I wasn’t involved in that. What they did have, for some reason someone from
my job title which they call me information specialist, now it’s called public affairs. All
the ever did, the guy who did it before who was gone seven months, they did without, put
out a weekly newsletter. That’s all he did. So I did the same thing.
LC: And yours came out on a weekly basis too?
LS: Yes, the weekly newsletter, what’s going on around the base. Everybody
knew what was going on; it was such a small place. You walked from end to the other
and it’s a minute. (Laughs)
LC: So what kinds of things could you put in there?
LS: I put a lot of stuff that was furnished by the Air Force. They would send this
packet every week of things you could throw in your…to get the information to the
troops kind of thing. Then I put the movie schedule. Eventually I became the
projectionist. I needed the extra money.

LC: How much could you earn being the projectionist?
LS: $6.75 a showing.
LC: No kidding. That was pretty good back then.
LS: No, it was $5.75. For 1960, ’61, ’62 that was pretty good.
LC: Now did you get off base much?
LS: Oh yes.
LC: Where is Port Austin in relation to say Detroit?
LS: Okay, put your left hand up and picture Detroit at the bottom of your thumb.
Go up to the tip of the thumb, back up a half a mile, that’s where we were.
LC: Were you near Caseville, or those sorts of little burgs?
LS: Yes. Caseville, Harbor Beach, I can’t think of some of the other names.
LC: I don’t know, Bad Axe?
LS: Bad Axe. We use to call it Nasty Hatchet, there at the county seat.
LC: Right okay, okay. So I’m with you now. So what’s to do up there?
LC: That’s what I thought. Did you go to Saginaw or what did you do when you
would have time off?
LC: Believe it or not this little town, all the girls when they got out of high school
would go to Detroit to work. So the oldest ones were high school girls. Here I was at the
time, let’s see when I got there in ’59, I was going to be 21 within two months, but like
all the other guys I dated high school girls. They all did. That’s all that was there. Didn’t
do much of anything, watched TV a lot. I watched a lot of movies because I was the
projectionist. That’s one of the reasons I took it. It wasn’t really the money as much as it
was that it gave me something to do three nights a week, so three different movies every
week.
LC: I mean the picture that I am getting is that you were pretty bored. I mean is
that true?
LS: There I was. That was my worst assignment because of the location.
LC: Yes. It’s pretty isolated. There is still not much there.
LS: The only thing that kept it off was what the Air Force would call an isolated
list was Bad Axe 17 miles away had a hospital. If they were over 25 miles away we
would have been in what they call an isolated location. I only would have been there a
year.
LC: But instead you were there…?
LS: Three years.
LC: Three years, wow.
LS: What happened then, towards the end of the…let’s see I left there early
November of ’62 so it must have been September I got the orders. I was supposed to go
to Japan. Nobody knew what this outfit was. It was 6499th Support Group. Nobody could
tell me anything about it. I get to Japan, the personnel at the radar site screwed up after I
told them that I had to extend because I didn’t have enough what is called retainability to
be taking an overseas assignment. They said, “Oh they’ll take care of that when they pick
up your records at Selfridge,” which was outside of Detroit.
LC: Yes, the Air Force Base.
LS: I said, “No I pick up my pay records there. The personnel records are mailed
from Battle Creek.” “We’ll take care of it.” So I get to Japan and I don’t have enough
retainability. I have a three-year tour and I only have 18 months left on my enlistment.
This guy checking me in gets these forms out. I knew exactly what they were. They were
extension forms with all the carbons in between how many copies he had to make.
LC: Sure.
LS: He types away. I just play dumb. He puts it in front of me and says, “Sign
this.” I said, “What’s this?” “Extension, you don’t have enough retainability.” “I’m not
signing that. I might not like it here.” He said, “Wait a minute.” He went to see some
officer I guess that had called in. I said, “Sir, I brought that up with the personnel guy at
the radar site I was stationed at. He didn’t do his job and now I have a chance to see if I
like it. If I like it I’ll extend.” That’s when they sent me to Manila. They had a
detachment there, it’s only an 18-month tour and they had an opening. So that’s how I got
to Manila.
LC: So it was just kind of, I don’t know random luck. They wanted a place for
you that was 18 months and this was the first one that they came across.
LS: The only one they had. By opening my mouth again, like I got to Korea by
telling the guys, “You don’t want to go there.”
LC: Yes, exactly.
LS: That’s two out of two.
LC: Yes. When did you arrive in Manila then, Larry?
LS: Late January of ’63. I was lugging a suitcase and a duffle bag.
LC: Where did you get off the plane from?
LS: I got off the plane at Clark from Japan.
LC: So just the short flight then, relatively short.
LS: It wasn’t really that short. It was an old C-46 and it was Civil Air Transport. It
was just like Air America. We landed in Okinawa, went from Tachikawa to Okinawa to
Clark. This outfit that I was in was an intelligence outfit that’s why nobody knew
anything about it. I got to Tachikawa to check-in on the flight. They made me a security
guard for some classified stuff that they were carrying.
LC: Well how did that occur? What did you have to do, pick up a briefcase and
carry it around?
LS: No, they had these cartons with classified manuals in it that were going to
Clark Air Base. They made the security guard. I was the enlisted guard and then there
was an officer. On the first flight from Tachikawa an Air Force Captain said to me, when
I got up to go into the cargo compartments to set with the manuals because that’s what
they told me I’m supposed to do. He said, “Where are you going?” I said, “I’m supposed
to sit up there with those cases.” He said, “No, sit here. As far as I’m concerned you were
in there.” The next flight from Okinawa to Clark was a Navy officer. I forget which level,
they are a little different. Their Lieutenants are like our Captains.
LC: That’s right.
LS: I forget what his name was. He made me sit on a stool in the cargo
department the whole flight, take-off, landing. (Laughter)
LC: So it was pretty loose, this monitoring of the classified…?
LS: Oh you just had to make sure nothing was thrown off. Who was going to
throw it off? They would have to open the door and throw it right over you.
LC: Right. (Laughter) So by the time you arrived at Clark had you been absolved of responsibility?

LS: Yes. I turned in the weapon that I essentially said I wasn’t going to sign for because I never had a .45 in my life. Never handled one. They said, “You’re not going to handle it. The clip stays over here on this side of the belt and the gun stays over here. You don’t do nothing.” They said, “It’s for show.” (Laughter)

LC: (Laughter)

LS: Now doesn’t that make you feel good?

LC: Absolutely.

LS: So I get to Clark, it’s about two or three in the morning. I’m at the terminal, the old terminal there, and I had to wait until somebody showed up to tell me how to get to where I am suppose to go. I didn’t know I’m supposed to get on a bus to go to Manila. Somebody shows up, this one officer. I said, “Sir, I’m supposed to take a bus to Manila. How do I get on that bus?” “Let’s get you a ride.” He made a phone call and somebody came in a perverbial pick-up truck, took me to the bus terminal. It should have been part of the air terminal. It would have been nice. I got off the bus inside the embassy compound and there is a military post office. I go in there and ask them, “How do I find detachment for 6499th?” He says, “Go in that building over there in that door. Go half way down the corridor and it’s the first door on your right. If you come to another corridor you can make a right, just go passed it and go in that door.” I remember dragging my suitcase and my duffle bag through the door. See usually what they did, they didn’t know when I was coming. The usual procedure is they would be told what my flight is and whatever and somebody would drive up to meet me. Nobody met me.

LC: Did you find out whether they knew you were being assigned to them?

LS: They knew I was coming. They didn’t know when.

LC: They just didn’t know when. Okay, well Larry, let’s take a break there.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Mr. Larry Schiff of the US Air Force. Today’s date is the 5th of October 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections and I’m speaking to Larry by telephone and Larry you’re in Orefield, Pennsylvania, is that correct?

Larry Schiff: Correct

LC: Okay, good morning.

LS: Good morning.

LC: Larry, you mentioned to me in an earlier discussion that you had seen the Boston Celtics at the airport, but subsequently remembered that there was a change to the timeline. Can you just clarify that?

LS: Yes. Originally I mentioned I ran into them on my assignment to Plattsburgh, New York and I thought about it a couple of days later. That was June of ’57 and in those days basketball was long over by then. So it turns out in my mind to correct it I ran into them at the airport at Syracuse, New York when I got assigned there. That would have been in February of ’59, which puts it right in the middle of a basketball season.

LC: Right and you had mentioned to me before that in ’57 anyway that basketball season ended earlier, is that right?

LS: From memory it’s probably March or April, it was around the same time hockey season ended but today everything runs almost year round. They play for a year to eliminate two or three teams then go into another season.

LC: I think that’s pretty accurate.

LS: I don’t follow it anymore. I think it’s ridiculous. It’s all for the dollar so I don’t worry about it anymore.

LC: Yes I’m sort of more of a fan of college sports but that’s getting that way as well. Larry, if you don’t mind could we go back to Port Austin just for a little bit? I know
it’s not your favorite place but you did go through a period in which you were retraining. Can you talk about that for a little bit?

LS: Well the position that I had was an information specialist, which was tied into public affairs and base newspapers and the like. At a radar site like Port Austin they normally don’t have anything like that. How I got there beats me because when I got there I had absolutely nothing to do except make up a…it started out as a monthly newsletter. I tried to go twice a month and there just wasn’t enough information to put in it. Then all of a sudden Air Force came down and said, “We’re eliminating these positions at all the radar sites.”

LC: The information specialist?

LS: The information specialist and the people would have to be trained into another field. They gave you a few choices, one of which was administration. I forget what the others were. I went to the NCOIC (Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge) of radar operations to find out how to get into their field because promotions were better. They tried. I actually worked a couple of nightshifts pushing buttons at the radar screen, things like that.

LC: Really?

LS: Yes.

LC: Did you like that?

LS: It’s not whether I liked it better then something else but the opening for promotions were more available.

LC: Oh okay so that was what you were operating on.

LS: In those days because of the people that got promoted real fast during the Korean War and stayed in the Air Force was top heavy. And promotions for a number of years were what they call frozen. You had to know somebody to get something. So I tried to make an opportunity for myself but it didn’t work out because headquarters turned it down. So then I picked administrative specialist out of a hat and went from there. Really the training was read this book. There was only one other administrative specialist at the site. He worked in the orderly room and he never had any time to help me.

LC: Because he was so busy?

LS: He was so busy. He said his plans were to use me to help him.
LC: Okay but he didn’t have time to train you?
LS: He didn’t have time to train me so actually I ended up in the communications electronics office, which was close to the war, was going on anyway.
LC: And doing what?
LS: As an administrative specialist. They needed somebody to type reports for them, things like that. The funniest thing, I just remembered this. The funniest thing in training for this and doing the administrative work they said they made arrangements for me to go to the local high school at night for a typing class. They made arrangements to get a typing class started.
LC: That’s amazing.
LS: I went and then they said, “Well there’s not enough people here for the nighttime. We’re going to have to go...we’ll have to revert back to daytime.” Well I had to work in the daytime.
LC: So how many typing class sessions did you go to?
LS: About three. I still use my hunt and peck system.
LC: I was going to say did it change anything?
LS: No.
LC: Too few lessons to make a difference.
LS: I was too slow that way. I couldn’t get the work done so I reverted back to my old ways to get the work done. That didn’t help matters at all. They promised having somebody to help me, half days. He showed up once. So I reverted back to my old system and then I got reassigned. Then my orders came to go overseas.
LC: This was your trip to Manila?
LS: Manila by way of Johnson Air Base in Japan. The headquarters of that unit was located at Johnson.
LC: What was the unit again?
LC: And with the headquarters in Japan but detachment at the US Embassy in Manila, is that fair?
LS: Right. They had detachments all over the Far East.
LC: What was the support group’s mission overall? Do you remember?
LS: It was military intelligence.
LC: Okay.
LS: Which was a known fact to everybody so I can say that.
LC: Most of the stuff has been declassified at this point too, even operational things. Did you spend time in Japan, kind of reading in?
LS: About a week. I had to wait for the flight. I had no work to do. I sat around and one of the guys in the barracks said and another one, another guy who has a car, “We’re going down to Tokyo.” I said, “I’ll go.” I had only been there once before, when I left Korea we met some friends that were stationed in Japan and we toured downtown Tokyo. He had a car, too. Without a car you can’t get around too well.
LC: Do you have any impressions of that trip to Tokyo that you can share with us?
LS: I don’t remember much of it. I remember more of the first one then I did the second one for some reason. Maybe instead of just hitting a few bars like this group was prone to do, which wasn’t my way of doing things, even in those days. The first one we went downtown and went to a restaurant of all things, an Italian restaurant and had pizza in downtown Tokyo. The Tokyo Tower had just opened so we went to see the Tokyo Tower. It’s that big radio and TV transmitting tower they have. They have two or three levels. You can get off the elevators and go shopping in stores, go look out the window, take pictures and etc. That was pretty interesting. But with this second group in 1963 they were more heading to the bars for drinks.
LC: Your time in Japan lasted then just a week.
LS: Actually it was five days. I got there; I don’t know what day of the week it was. I got there one day, went to check into the unit and the next day they were typing up forms and handing me papers among other things. Then they said I’m going to Mania. I said, “Fine.” I didn’t care.
LC: And you flew into Clark if I remember correctly.
LS: Right.
LC: And then went to the US Embassy compound?
LS: Yes. I took a bus from Clark down to Manila.
LC: Can you describe the embassy building itself?
LS: Just saw it in the movies I have.
LC: Your own movies?
LS: They are in there. There’s two buildings. The older building is what they call
the Chancery, that’s where the office of the ambassador and his staff are physically
located, and also the cashier where you go to change your dollars into pesos. The office
building, which is built later, is much more modern, about a half a block away. That’s the
building I ended up working in.
LC: Is it a contained compound?
LS: There was a fence around it, although it could be jumped fairly easy. It was
only a couple of feet higher than my head. I’m 5’9 and a half so it wasn’t very high. Of
course back in those days it wasn’t too much of a problem, although in the Vietnam
movies when you get to my R&R I aim the camera down the street. There was a little
demonstration, anti-American demonstration going on at the office building.
LC: Do you have any idea what year that was?
LS: I had no idea what it was. I steered clear. I was surprised we weren’t told
about it at the orientation.
LC: I wonder what that was about.
LS: Probably wages.
LC: Okay.
LS: But you don’t know. Only the typical, “Yankee go home,” and you get
around the world even then.
LC: True. Well tell me about your work at the detachment there.
LS: It was mainly typing intelligence reports. These officers and NCOs that were
there would go out. I don’t know what the full procedure was, they’d interview people
who had been certain places that they had paid them to go and then I would end up typing
the report.
LC: Did you find out at any time about any clearances that you had been put
through such that you could do this work?
LS: Well I had a secret clearance when I left the States. I had that from other
assignments, almost everybody got those. I think I got that even before I got to the radar
site. I don’t remember when the initial secret rating went through, but then all of a sudden
I get a letter from my father, “Did I do something wrong, there were people going around
the neighborhood asking questions about you.” I said, “I don’t know.” Then it dawned on
me what it might be because the only way they could find anybody that I knew was off of
the names I’d left on the forms when you go from base to base to be given clearance even
though you have a security rating like I had secret. At each base you have to fill out a
new form to update things for the files and I had put some names down, people in the
neighborhood that I knew and knew me. Those were the only people they went to so I
figured well that must have to do with that form. I went and asked the Colonel I worked
for, “Did they put me in for a top secret clearance?” He said, “Yeah you’ve had it for
about two or three months, we just didn’t need to tell you about it.” (Laughter)

LC: You didn’t even need to know about your own clearance?
LS: I never got involved with anything top secret the whole time I was in the Air
Force after that.

LC: That’s actually very interesting that they didn’t even tell you you’re clearance
had been upgraded. It was sort of only on a need to know basis.
LS: Right. I didn’t need to know he said. It was there just in case.
LC: Now who was the Colonel do you remember his name?
LS: Last name was Fikes. F-I-K-E-S.
LC: What can you tell us about him?
LS: Oh he was a pilot also. He was a hell of a nice guy to work for.
LC: Is that right?
LS: It was almost like there was no rank going on in that office, which I really
enjoyed.

LC: Yeah absolutely.
LS: And we wore civilian clothes, which made it easier to enjoy.
LC: So you got to show up in civvies?
LS: The Air Force gave me a clothing allowance. I had to buy civvies when I got
there.

LC: Wow that’s very interesting. So you’re showing up to work in what may have
felt less like a military environment than anywhere you had been yet.
LS: It was just like a civilian job. We had an unmarked Air Force pick-up truck
with Philippine plates on it. Colonial said every once in a while, “Larry take it home with
you, put some miles on it. We have to justify keeping it,” Anything happens he’ll back
me. Nothing every happened.
LC: He sounds like a pretty good guy to work for.
LS: He was.
LC: What was the compliment of personnel who were around you? Can you
describe how many people and what they were doing?
LS: Oh boy how many? Well the Colonel, the Master Sergeant who was in charge
of the office of the administrative end that I worked for. We were in the outer room and
then what we call the back room was one, two, no more then three or four others.
LC: And those were the people who were generating the reports that you then
typed?
LS: Right.
LC: What would they do? Write them out in long hand?
LS: Most of the time.
LC: And then you tried to decipher their handwriting?
LS: Decipher it. There were some problems. A lot of them wrote like doctors or
like I do know. (Laughter)
LC: Right. (Laughter) Were there other parts to your job that you can tell us
about? Did you manage the paper work as well like make sure that it got routed out the
appropriate way and all that?
LS: There wasn’t very much routing to do. You put one in the file and you sent
one out to headquarters and they took it from there. Headquarters being in Japan.
LC: Okay so back to the 6499th….
LS: Everything got funneled back to them.
LC: And how would the paper get transmitted, did it go everyday, by courier?
How did it go?
LS: Since it was secret it would go registered mail. So everything went registered
mail. If it was confidential it could go certified mail. This is from my memory. I think
that’s right, yeah. Secret went by registered mail. Confidential went certified. Top secret
would be courier. We didn’t have any top secret that I knew of, we may have. I never saw one.

LC: But you didn’t probably type that stuff up.

LS: They spent thousands of dollars of getting me a clearance and I never saw a top secret document. Your tax dollars at work. (Laughter)

LC: That’s right. There’s a lesson in here.

LS: That’s why I said that.

LC: Exactly. (Laughter) Future listeners, beware. Larry, let me ask you a little bit about the ambiance, how connected was your detachment to the rest of the people working in the office building that was part of the embassy complex?

LS: Hardly any connection other than with the military attaché, I got involved with him. FAA (Federal Aviation Agency) had an office across the hall from us but we never got involved with them except when I borrowed their airline schedule book, which I used for myself on my trip home after two and a half years.

LC: Who was the military attaché?

LS: I don’t remember the name. I did meet him. I was there about three days and had to go to a party, what they called a welcoming, going home party. All the new people had to go and all the people leaving had to go. The ambassador was there, the attaché were there. I went to more parties the first two weeks I was there then you can shake a stick at.

LC: And was that a way of kind of getting you into the flow and seeing people?

LS: No, that was a way of life there.

LC: The parties?

LS: The parties were going on all the time, almost every week somebody was having a party for some reason and it wasn’t costing us anything.

LC: And you got to go to those?

LS: Oh yeah.

LC: Wow. Did you enjoy doing that?

LS: I’m not a party person but I went anyway. The food was free.

LC: Right and probably better then what you could get somewhere else.

LS: Oh I did a lot of cooking myself, too.
LC: Oh that’s right. You were living off…?
LS: There was no base.
LC: Yeah you were just off in the economy.
LS: They made arrangements with the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group, known as JUSMAG. They were out in Quezon City about six or seven miles from the embassy. They arranged for me to live in one of their houses. They rented houses from Filipinos. Usually they were three bedrooms. There were three GIs in the house.
LC: How did you get back and forth to work?
LS: That pick-up truck or the driver came and got me.
LC: There was a driver?
LS: We had two drivers.
LC: Okay. Now I take it that these would be Filipinos?
LS: Right.
LC: And they are employees of the embassy?
LS: No, they were employees of our detachment.
LC: Okay. So you and the other handful of people in the detachment had at your disposal these drivers?
LS: We had two or three vehicles and the two drivers.
LC: Okay. And they would take you wherever you needed to go?
LS: Mmm-hmm.
LC: What else did they do besides that?
LS: The drivers?
LC: Yes.
LS: They would sit outside of the motor pool waiting for us to call them. That’s all they did.
LC: Wow. Did you form any kind of relationships with those guys?
LS: Not the one who drove the Colonel around most of the time. His name was Domingo, I just remembered that. The other driver his name was Tomas, Thomas. We talked a lot of baseball together. One time I went with him and a couple members of his family to a village I don’t know how many miles from Manila it was. His brother was driving and I played on their softball team one day.
LC: Oh is that right?
LS: Yeah. It only happened one time because I usually played… the advisory group had a team for a while. I played one season with them. I played a season with the Marine Guard team from the embassy. They played at the Manila Polo Club.
LC: So it sounds like baseball was an important sort of social thing that was going on as well as good…
LS: Oh I enjoyed playing for years. I played until my youngest son was all done. I was almost 50 years old and I could still play or at least help out the kids.
LC: How many games would you play in the course of a year?
LS: Oh I don’t know.
LC: 20? More than that?
LS: Maybe a little less than that. It wasn’t much. It was only a short season where it wasn’t too hot and it wasn’t raining.
LC: Yes, what time of year?
LS: Spring. Our spring, they don’t have a spring. They don’t have seasons like we have here.
LC: Right, but in our terms, March, April, something like that?
LS: Yes. I usually use what time of year it was as to what was going on and over there it all jumbled together because there was no seasons. It didn’t help my mind to remember things.
LC: You didn’t have anything to plug it into?
LS: No.
LC: (Laughter) Larry you also had some personal involvement that was developing over this time. Is that right?
LS: You’re talking about my girlfriend?
LC: Yes.
LS: On and off with her for the whole two and a half years I was there.
LC: Did you think you might like to stay in the Philippines? I know that later…
LS: I had thoughts of that. I also read the bases agreement and that was going to expire and I said to myself, “Well what do I do when it expires and they kick me out of the country?” Things like that.
LC: So you were already concerned even at this time?
LC: Were there any incidents while you were over there, international incidents that particularly caught your attention?
LS: Actually no there was nothing that I could remember other than reading in the *Stars and Stripes* about the Gulf of Tonkin thing in ’64.
LC: You did read about that?
LS: Yeah, well what they put in. What went into the local papers was kind of a different story. You didn’t know who to believe.
LC: But you knew that something was going on.
LS: Something was going on.
LC: What about the President’s assassination, do you remember that?
LS: I remember where I was going when I was told. You got to remember with the time difference it was like one or two in the morning over there. I got up on a Saturday, was it a Saturday? It had to be a Saturday morning because we didn’t go to work. I got up and threw my slacks on to go out to the bathroom and one of the other guys who was living in the house, happened to be my boss, he was one of the guys living in the house. He was sitting at the dining room table drinking a cup of coffee and he said, “Kennedy is dead.” I said, “No, you’re just joking.” I used other language, but I won’t mention it.
LC: Sure.
LS: He said, “No here it is in the paper.” That’s where I was when I was told that Kennedy was shot.
LC: It was in the newspaper.
LS: Well the newspaper, to my boss, to me as I’m ready to walk into the bathroom.
LC: Over the next couple of days did you try to get information about what was happening in the States?
LS: No, there wasn’t any reason to even think about that. We just went ahead and continued our job. I guess at the main bases, probably like Clark and whatever they probably tightened security for a few days or a week or whatever.
LC: But it didn’t affect you very much?
LS: I don’t even remember having to go to Clark in that time period or not. We didn’t go all the time but once every couple of weeks we made trips up there. Go to the exchange and the commissary and whatever.

LC: How far was Clark from where you were?
LS: About 40 or 50 miles.
LC: And would the drivers take you out there then?
LS: Yeah.
LC: I wonder if you recall the embassy having any kind of, well for lack of a better word, visitation or anything like that going on after the President was killed. Having local dignitaries come and sign a book or something like that.
LS: They probably did but we weren’t involved with it. That would have been in the Chancery building, not in our building. I was always in the administrative building.

LC: Did you have any personal/political feelings around the assassination and what it might mean for the future?
LS: No I was a little young at the time.
LC: Weren’t really paying attention on that scale.
LS: No.

LC: Did you have any impressions of Johnson at that time?
LS: No I didn’t even know who he was at the time.

LC: Is that right? Just didn’t pay that much attention to that stuff.
LS: No, I was more interested in sports and my girlfriend.

LC: Now let me think. You were, well let’s see this is still in ’60?

LC: So who were the best baseball teams at that time?
LS: The Cardinals were in the ’64 series. I remember that one, but I forget who they played.

LC: Who were you following?
LS: I was an old Brooklyn Dodgers fan for years up till the time I stopped following baseball for the same reason I stopped following other sports

LC: Just the over commercialization.
LS: And the big bucks that they get for not doing anything and the problems they cause. These guys that do things you know they just kick them out and say, “The hell with you, we don’t need you.” But they are afraid to do it because these guys have more money then the people running the thing.

LC: That’s right.

LS: They’ll buy their own team.

LC: They could turn around and buy them out, exactly. Overall Larry, was the time in Manila a good time? Was that change to the newer…?

LS: Of the 12 years that I was in the Air Force that was the best time frame.

LC: Was that because of the work, the climate, the people?

LS: Everything put together. The climate, the type of work I was doing. It was interesting. I thought I was accomplishing something instead of just filling out a form and filing things, the wearing of the civilian clothes, not living on a base. The whole thing was a complete turn around from what I was doing before and after.

LC: The contrast with Port Austin probably couldn’t be any greater.

LS: Oh God. I went from the bottom to the top as far as what kind of assignment it was.

LC: And then what happened after your two and a half years there?

LS: Then I got stationed at Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts.

LC: Now how did that come about?

LS: Well that was my…what I got assigned after my tour was over in Manila.

LC: Okay. And this is the period when certainly American ground forces have been deployed to Vietnam. Were you aware of that?

LS: We read about things in the Stars and Stripes. They were sparse as far as how much information they gave us but we were aware of that. I am trying to remember. I think our group headquarters would send us a blurb about once every week of what’s going on from their point of view.

LC: Sort of a general update.

LS: That was classified. I got to see that. As far as the build up goes that really didn’t get going until I got there in ’66, ’66-'67.

LC: Yes the huge balloon.
LS: But they went to well over half a million and whatever.

LC: Were you surprised or disappointed or otherwise moved by your orders to go to Massachusetts?

LS: No, there was no surprise there. I had put in for the northeast, but McGuire as my first choice. I figured Springfield, Massachusetts was close enough. I could get home every so often, which I did. It was about a five or six hour drive.

LC: Tell me about your set up at Westover.

LS: There I worked in the orderly room as a clerk. Nothing technical, it was one of those forms, fill outs, and reports.

LC: For somebody who didn’t know what the orderly room was, can you just describe its function?

LS: Well it’s an administrative office for the unit. Everything goes through there.

LC: And what was the unit that you were assigned to?

LS: 3097th Aviation Depot Squadron.

LC: And what was there overall mission?

LS: Nuclear weapons and storage. They kept all the bombs. In fact when I first arrived there I got to the gate and asked the air policemen for directions to this unit and he said, “Oh you’re one of those guys.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “You’ll find out.”

LC: What did he mean?

LS: I don’t know other then we were unique, that’s where the bombs were stored. Where the security was very high. You couldn’t get near the place unless you had clearance. So he gave me directions and I’m driving, I’m driving, I go all the way around the end of the flight line and runway, around to the back, and all of a sudden here’s all these vehicles with flashing red lights and flashing yellow lights and this air policemen comes up to me and I roll the window down and he says, “You got to move over here to the side of the road until after these vehicles go past you.” Do you know what I mean by a straddle carrier that’s like they use in those big lumberyards to pick up pallets of wood?

LC: Yeah, ok.

LS: The thing that goes on top of the pallets and…?

LC: Something underneath, too.
LS: I’m not talking about a small forklift that will pick up one pallet at a time. I’m talking about they pick up pile of pallets of wood at one time.

LC: Okay.

LS: Well they use these things to transport the bombs to the planes. Everything was covered with canvas. I didn’t know what was going on here at that point. Then the wind blew a little bit and uncovered one of the carriers and I saw what it was and I said, “Well, I guess that’s where I am going.”

LC: So everything was pretty much covered up with tarps?

LS: Yeah, they had it covered so people couldn’t take pictures of them. We were isolated as far as where we were in relation to the rest of the people on the base. We were about four or five miles from the other side of the base. That’s all I can say about that unit.

LC: What about the security getting on and off the base. How tight was it really?

LS: Security on the base I felt was kind of loose. Where we were we had a triple electric fence. When you went to go to work you had to give them your badge. He would take it and go to his pile of badges and pull out your badge there, the one that we call the inside badge, and then check that picture against me. Because I could have doctored my badge but his copy that was on the wall stays there unless I’m working.

LC: So they had some kind of double check with photo id. .

LS: Right. So you had to look exactly like the person in the picture or you couldn’t get in there.

LC: Okay.

LS: Where I worked was in walking distance to the gate. Everybody else that worked in maintenance had to take a bus that was about a half a mile down the road.

LC: So there was some kind of shuttle that would move them?

LS: Yeah they had this bus running back and forth all day long. The only time I ever got down to the maintenance building was to deliver mail, if they had a meeting down there or training session or whatever, I would get down there, but that was few and far between.

LC: Who did you report to there?
LS: It was a Staff Sergeant that was in charge of the office. I can’t think of his
name. Oh wait a minute, his last name was Walke. W-A-L-K-E. He was Staff Sergeant. I
was still an Airman 1st Class time at the time.

LC: Okay. What kind of working environment was it? You described the Manila
environment. How was this different?

LS: Oh it wasn’t as loose, but it wasn’t as bad as some places I’d been to. Some
places were really nitty gritty on having everything just so. What I use to laugh at was
some of the outfits, I was never in an outfit like this but I heard about somewhere they are
so strict on you that you don’t even enjoy doing the work. You don’t enjoy getting up and
going to work but I was never in one of those outfits.

LC: Well that was lucky because I certainly, in interviewing other guys, have
heard about some of the spit and polish they had to go through.

LS: Now the Army and the Navy, and Marines were really into that. The Air
Force at the time was getting away from it because it was just 1947 that the Air Force
broke away from the Army. I guess they tried to make it more like a regular job over the
years. It didn’t get that way until everybody got together again in Vietnam. Then the Air
Force started picking up some of the spit and polish from the Army.

LC: Probably just by comparison.

LS: An example would be when I got to Vietnam and I got assigned to an Army
outfit, we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves but that’s okay. They had a morning
formation every morning that you had to go to.

LC: Now where was this?

LS: This was at Qui Nhon.

LC: Okay. Well let’s go ahead and talk about your move from Massachusetts to
the new posting.

LS: Okay, by that time I had volunteered to go back to the Philippines. I put in a
volunteer statement. And it didn’t surprise me at all that I got Vietnam because that’s
only 600 miles away from Manila. (Laughter)

LC: Right.

LS: So I got it. My mother was frantic when I called home and said, “I’m going to
Vietnam.” But I went.
LC: Now this would be in September of 1966?
LS: Well let’s backtrack. I got to Massachusetts, when did I get there? Late July, early August of ’65. It was late August of ’65 that I got to Westover. So it was early August or late July that I left there of ’66 to go to Vietnam when I stayed for a 30 day stay at home.
LC: And tell me about arriving out in Vietnam. What was your route? How did you get out there?
LS: I had to go to some base in California for three days of M-16 training. That’s all the training they gave us on the M-16. I had never seen one before.
LC: You did pretty well though, is that right?
LS: I did better than I thought I would. I’m not a gun person. Whenever I went to the shooting range to qualify I was always worried somebody was going to get hurt—me.
(Laughter)
LC: (Laughter) But you handled the three days with the M-16 fairly well?
LS: The whole training session we felt was sort of a joke. You learned how to tear it town, clean it, put it back together again, then you learn how to fire it. You fire it and you’re gone. It’s not like the Army or the Marines where if it becomes a part of you.
LC: What was the point of that training do you think?
LS: Well the M-16 was new at the time and none of us had ever even had one in our hands. I guess they made it the central point where everybody had to go through there before going to Vietnam. Just like flight crew members had to go to Clark Air Base for jungle survival for two or three weeks I guess it was.
LC: Tell me about arriving out there.
LS: Arriving?
LC: Where did you arrive in Vietnam?
LS: Tan Son Nhut.
LC: Okay you flew into Tan Son Nhut.
LS: On Continental Airlines of all things.
LC: What was that flight over like? Do you remember?
LS: We saw a movie; I know that, a Steve McQueen movie or a western. I can’t think of the name of it but one of these days I’ll remember it.
LC: That’s okay. All right we can add it in later if it comes to you.

LS: It was a typical military contract flight. The seats were even closer together then some of the airliners are today.

LC: That’s amazing.

LS: Oh it was close. I made that remark to my wife yesterday, not yesterday, yeah yesterday. What’s today? Tuesday, Monday?

LC: Yes, Tuesday.

LS: Sunday when we were coming home. I said, “I had less room going to Vietnam.”

LC: So you guys were crammed in there.

LS: Really tight.

LC: Was there any mood or atmosphere on that plane?

LS: I didn’t talk to anybody. I didn’t know anybody on the plane. I didn’t talk. I didn’t know who was sitting next to me.

LC: You didn’t strike up a conversation?

LS: He was quiet and I was quiet.

LC: Would this have been all services on the plane?

LS: It was everyone. Everybody went through Travis Air Force Base to go to the Orient be it Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, any of those places.

LC: When you got off the plane what happened?

LS: Well the first thing I remembered was they opened the door and the heat hit you. I thought it was worse there than in the Philippines.

LC: Did you really?

LS: Maybe it was because of the time of year, I don’t know. I got to the Philippines it was January of ’63. When I got to Vietnam it was late August of ’66. So you had half a season as far as the world goes, or half a year. I think that probably made the difference. It felt hotter to me. Other than that it was pretty near the same as the Philippines as far as the weather goes. Like I said it was only 600 miles away from Manila.

LC: Right. Was anyone there to meet you or what happened?
LS: No, this was typical. When you got there the first thing they did was, since it was nighttime, I think it was nighttime when we got there. I remember looking out the window and seeing fires burning all over the place whether they were fires for them to keep warm because this is their cold time of the year. No it wasn’t; it was the hot time. The fires could have been for cooking, could have been the result of battles. I don’t know.

LC: But you could see them nonetheless?
LS: I could see fires burning all over the place. I was just trying to get a look to see what was going on in the dark.

LC: Absolutely.
LS: They assigned you to the transit barracks. It’s nothing but a big room with a lot of bunks. Everybody in one big room, which is typical at least at the places I had been, like when I was in Japan going to Korea and coming home from Korea. It was the same kind of set-up and then they tell you where to go in the morning to report in and you go there and they give you a new set of orders to go someplace else. Nobody stayed at Tan Son Nhut or very few did. It was mostly clear through there to be funneled elsewhere.

LC: Did you already have your actual assignment?
LS: No I had no idea where I was going. They said, “Report to Tan Son Nhut.” I thought that was where I was going to be.

LC: When did you find out where you were going to be going?
LS: That first full day.

LC: What did you learn that day?
LS: All I learned was they gave me instructions to go to the aerial port and get scheduled on a flight to Qui Nhon. That’s all they told me, nothing else. Other than it was called Project Red Leaf and nobody knew what that was.

LC: What did you later on find out that it was?
LS: The takeover of the Caribous from the Army to the Air Force.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about getting up to Qui Nhon and what did you find when you arrived there?
LS: Getting up there was on a C-123, that’s all I remember. It wasn’t very eventful. My first and last ride in a C-123.

LC: This though is really your first look at Vietnam.

LS: There really was not much to look at. I was at Tan Son Nhut; I saw a lot of things stacked all over the place as far as supplies went, out in the open. There was no place to put it I guess. Tan Son Nhut was not only a military base but it was also a commercial international airport. So you saw civilian planes. Well I went over on a civilian plane. The Air Force didn’t have enough planes to carry all these people.

LC: Right, so they were using these contract flights.

LS: Well they were using contracts on and off for years because when I went to Korea we were flying Tiger Lines. So that didn’t make a mark on my mind because I had seen it before.

LC: Right. When you got to Qui Nhon, was there anybody to meet and greet?

LS: They didn’t even know I was coming. I had to find my own way. I had to ask “Where it is the 92nd Aviation Company?” Then I would have to ask, “How do I get there?”

LC: And how did you get there?

LS: They said, “Well you got to call over there.” I said, “Well where is the phone?” “I don’t know.” I had to find a phone.

LC: So you pretty much just had to put it together yourself?

LS: That’s the way it was.

LC: Yeah.

LS: It’s not like a group of military people with somebody in charge that knew where they were going moving from place to place. Like when the Marines would move a unit or the Army would move a unit they were self-contained. Then in Vietnam they started replacing individuals. The Air Force was always on an individual basis. When you traveled you were not going with anybody else that you knew. You met people on the plane sometimes who were talkative and sometimes that weren’t. It was a completely different world from the Army and Marines, who would send whole groups of people at one time.
LC: That’s actually an interesting observation that the Air Force was already
doing things that way and the one year tour situation that caused a lot of havoc for the
Army and Marines was SOP (Standard Operating Procedure).

LS: They ended up with replacements going in the units that would hurt the units.
Instead of having everybody have the same experience. Hey I just read a book like that,
that’s why I said that. I read that in the book.

LC: What book was it, do you remember?

LS: I can’t think of the name. I just gave it to somebody. My wife found it in the
suitcase when we were packing and she went down to the basement. She opened up the
suitcase to see all the odds and ends that belong in there were there or did we leave
something in there. She found a, I remember getting it last year at the reunion.

LC: And just for reference you’re talking about the Caribou Association reunion?

LS: Right. I’m trying to remember how I got the book. It was some sort of a
drawing. You had a ticket with a number on it. That book was written by former
serviceman. What was it called? It was called ’Nam Vet. ’N-a-m V-e-t. That’s the name
of the book. Who the author was, I don’t know. He was, I guess, retired military.

LC: But it made some observations about the fracturing effect of the one-year
tour?

LS: Yes. I never thought of that the way he wrote it in my life. When I read it a
couple of weeks ago I thought, “Gee, now that I think about it that would happen.” I
always thought the individual moves were better, like the Army, because in the Marines
because for group moves they have to have their own motor pool, their own mess hall,
which duplicates things. The Air Force had central supplies, a central mess hall,
everything was centralized.

LC: Well tell me about the work that you found yourself doing at the 92nd.

LS: Well I got there, I didn’t have a desk. I didn’t have any filing cabinets. I had
no regulations or manuals. It was start from scratch type of thing. My big deal the first
month or so there was to walk down to the weather station twice a day and pick up a
weather report. We didn’t have fax machines in those days. (Laughter)

LC: And that was one of the premiere missions of the day.
LS: That’s all I did. I had nothing to do. The Army wouldn’t let us help out with their reports but then later on they did when there was more Air Force people then Army people. It switched around. After, let’s see, I got there in early September so about early November, mid November I started taking over some of the things because the Air Force wanted a duplicate report of what was sent to the Army everyday. I had to spend hours on the phone calling this report into Saigon.

LC: When you say calling it in, what do you mean?

LS: Well it was in a format where you give them a number and a letter for each block on this report. No English language at all. It had to do with how many planes did you fly, how far did you fly, how many landings and take-offs, how much cargo did you carry, where did you go, that kind of thing.

LC: Yes.

LS: I think it was broken down by individual planes, yeah because it had serial numbers of the planes on the form. I had nothing to do with making up the report. The people that did the operations work made the report and handed it to me to finalize it, to type it up and call it in.

LC: And you had to read the data down the…?

LS: I had to read it.

LC: Over the phone?

LS: Over the phone and the phone line, just like in the movies, terrible, cut out, try again. The one time I did get through and the phone just rang, and rang, and rang, and rang, nobody answered for an hour and a half. Then I got out of Tan Son Nhut phonebook and tried to decipher in my mind who’s close to these people by building number. I actually found somebody in the same building and I got a hold of him and asked him could he get so and so over there to pick up their phone when it rings. Here it wasn’t ringing there. I heard it ring, but then didn’t have one, their phone was out of order.

LC: So did he help you out?

LS: He got the guy to come over and get on the phone. Those were the kinds of things that took all the time. Then the greatest thing that ever happened was on the second or third of January, a couple of days after we moved to Phu Cat the OPS
(Operations) guy comes in from his…we were in tents to work. There were three tents. The other Caribou squadron and ours and in between was the OPS tent. Our guy comes in and says, I took the report; I had the report finished for him. Had it all typed up and I said, “What time do we call it down?” He said, “You don’t call it anymore. You see that radio over there?” He said, “Give me that report.” He called it in by radio in five minutes, all done.

LC: What was the difference? How did it come to be that you could do it over the phone and it took so long and you could do it over the radio and…?

LS: Well the Army didn’t have the radios. They were not in radio contact with their headquarters.

LC: Oh my goodness. So once you got to Phu Cat then you’re in a different…?

LS: Well it was all Air Force. The Air Force had taken it over. And our headquarters I think was at Cam Ranh Bay, I’m not sure.

LC: I think that sounds right.

LS: I think the wing was at Cam Ranh Bay.

LC: So you’re radioing to?

LS: I didn’t have to do it. I wasn’t trained in the use of those radios. It was operations job. I was an administration clerk. He said, “You can go back to your desk.” The majority of the things I typed in other than that report and then there were pilot’s time sheets for how many hours they flew. I got involved with that. The only other thing was efficiency reports on individuals. Where your boss writes a nice flowery report and puts an X in the highest block and whatever. I typed a lot of them for the Lieutenant Colonel I worked for.

LC: Who was that?

LS: Fields. F-I-E-L-D-S. I don’t know his first name.

LC: What kind of guy was he?

LS: Oh he was a hell of a nice guy. They were all pilots that were there. They were completely different from the desk jockey’s that I worked for in other places. They were kind of loose, you know.

LC: And he was in charge of what?
LS: He was the operations officer at that point. He wasn’t the first one; there was another one before him. That was Major Cleek, C-L-E-E-K. He was the OPS officer when I got to Qui Nhon.

LC: For the squadron?

LS: Right.

LC: And we’re talking about the 459th?

LS: 459th.

LC: Okay. Where were you living at Phu Cat?

LS: The Air Force had built wooden barracks. Took about 15 minutes or 10 minutes from where we were riding a bus.

LC: So they bused you back and forth?

LS: Back and forth to work, right.

LC: So how big, if you can describe the size of Phu Cat base?

LS: It was typical of any other large Air Force base. It had a 10,000-foot runway I guess. It had a parking ramp almost the whole length of the runway, maybe not the whole length, maybe about 2/3 of the way.

LC: And Larry essentially were you working what we might visualize a nine to five?

LS: It was a little longer than that. We would get out there at 7, 7:30 in the morning and leave maybe 6:30 after everything was all tied down and closed up.

Sometimes we left a little earlier. Then you had to take the bus to lunch and in between the bus ride, the waiting in line at the mess hall, and waiting for the bus to come back, and the bus ride back it would take two, two and a half hours to go to lunch.

LC: Wow. Was it worth it?

LS: No, that’s why one of my pictures on the website is me eating C-rations for lunch.

LC: I was going to say that’s an awful long time to spend going back and forth.

LS: Have you ever been to the website for the Caribou Association?

LC: Yes I have.

LS: There are 50 of my pictures on there.

LC: Oh are there? Okay.
LS: A couple of me and one of Nancy Sinatra.

LC: I want to ask you about the shows that you went to and in general what you

guys did, what you did for fun. What you specifically did. I know that you probably

weren’t doing the same thing everybody else was.

LS: Fun, there was none. Other then the USO (United Service Organizations)

shows. I’m not a drinker, I never was so I didn’t get involved when they opened up, I

guess they opened up a small NCO Club there. I’m not sure. Things I did, in the barracks

I got a tape recorder and somebody else got a tape recorder, we were trading tapes back

and forth, copying tapes, which is illegal, but nobody cared.

LC: Right, music I take it.

LS: Yes.

LC: What kind of music were you listening to?

LS: Oh just about any kind. Anywhere from country and western to even some

classical but not much in the way of classical. A lot of big bands. A lot of rock-n-roll

also. I got a little of everything.

LC: The same kind of mix that you had enjoyed when you were doing the DJ?

LS: That’s where I developed all that. Up till then I was anti rock-n-roll.

LC: But you were sort of getting into it a little anyway.

LS: I did a lot of that in the barracks. When anybody got any movies or pictures

back from processing it was show and tell time. That’s mostly what we did.

LC: What about letters back and forth from the States?

LS: I would write a letter then my father would answer it and I would answer his.

LC: What about your mom, did she write to you?

LS: No, it was mostly my father. He would type it where he worked.

LC: Were you also still in communication with your girlfriend?

LS: Yes, I was writing letters to her.

LC: Okay.

LS: That would take a little bit longer back and forth because of international

mail. In fact I had a funny feeling that my letters to her went to California and then back.

LC: They very well might have.
LS: Whereas the military letters, if you left the word San Francisco out, just put
APO (Army and Air Force Post Office) and the number it would not go back to the States
because her girlfriend was going out with one of the guys in the advisory group that had
got there after I did. I started putting her letters in an envelope addressed to him.
LC: Got there faster?
LS: Oh yeah got there within two or three days. Everybody did things like that
when they had contacts in different countries in the same area.
LC: Now tell me about the USO show that you mentioned.
LS: Well there was more than one. The main one, the first one I saw was Bob
Hope. I had missed him two or three times before. I missed him by a month when I got to
Korea, a month or two. When I was stationed in Manila he was at Clark and I couldn’t
get any transportation. So I missed him there. So we got a phone call in our hanger on the
flight line at Qui Nhon, we were still there, this is December of ’66. Got a phone call
where we have to move all our planes to the other end of the parking ramp. We only had
about six sitting on the ground at the time. All the others were flying. I started thinking I
said wait a minute there is something going on here. Then they pulled three flat bed
trailers and put them side by side and started building what I call the stage. Then I went
to the OPS officer, this is Major Cleek, and I asked him if I could borrow the jeep to go to
the PX to buy some film for my cameras then I’m going to sit myself down in front of the
stage and wait for Bob Hope. He said, “Bob Hope is not coming, but if you want to sit
out there in the rain go right ahead.” So I sat five and a half hours in the rain and I saw
the show and I have it on film. No sound but I have it on film.
LC: Did you film most of the show?
LS: Yeah, it’s spread out. I think I have six to eight minutes worth of what I shot.
I think I got everybody in it. I was only in the fourth row right in front of the stage
without a telephoto lens. It was one of the inexpensive Kodak, just aim and shoot movie
cameras. Getting back to the show as far as who was there was Anita Bryant, Phyllis
Diller, Vick DaMone, a Korean group called the Korean Kittens, and Miss World who
was from India at the time. That was a trademark of his show. He always had Miss World
on every year, a battalion twirler, and Joey Heatherton. That was the group.
LC: I know you were busy filming this or at least in parts but did you enjoy it?
Was it fun to be there?
LS: Oh yeah. Well here was something that I had missed a couple of times before
and I always watched Bob Hope on TV anyway when he first went on TV and it was a
big thing for me to be out there watching him as soaked as I was. The rain stopped and
the clouds parted just long enough for the show.
LC: How many people were there, do you have any clue?
LS: You would have to watch my movies to see. You’ve probably seen things on
TV about Bob Hope and doing all of this and they show some of the crowds.
LC: Yes.
LS: It was one of the larger crowds. How could you count them? I don’t know.
LC: Were the guys into it?
LS: Yeah, oh yeah. They were climbing on tops of buildings, on top of poles.
They had these maintenance ramps that they used to get to the engines on the planes out
there that people were standing on.
LC: How did the people get there? Where did they come from?
LS: Most of them from right there at Qui Nhon and other military places around
the area.
LC: So the nearby bases for the most part.
LS: I don’t know how the Army or the Marines handled things. The Air Force we
were so small at Qui Nhon I don’t know how they would of handled it at a big base but I
got a funny feeling that they probably take groups of people and transport them. They set
it up and say you’re going kind of thing. For me it was a volunteer.
LC: Were there other people who were sitting out in the rain too waiting?
LS: Oh yes. The crowd grew, and grew, and grew, and grew as time went by, as
people found out about it.
LC: What about when the show was finally over, how did everybody disperse?
Do you remember that?
LS: After leaving the parking ramp I don’t know what kind of transportation they
had. Evidently whatever they had was waiting for them.
LC: And what about you, how did you get out?
LS: I was only about 100 yards from the hanger where I worked.

LC: So you just kind of ambled back over to the hanger?

LS: They always have the shows either out on the ramp there for the big ones or inside our hanger. Roy Rogers and Dale Evans was there. Martha Ray was there at another time. They used my desk for a dressing table.

LC: Is that right? (Laughter) Did you go to the performance by Martha Ray for example?

LS: For some reason I didn’t. Why I don’t know. I haven’t the faintest idea why I didn’t go over there. Wait a minute, the Roy Rogers one I didn’t go to. I did go to Martha Ray but it was so crowded I couldn’t even get to my desk.

LC: Was it really? It was really packed?

LS: It was really packed.

LC: Did you take any film of that?

LS: No, that would have needed a light.

LC: Oh because your indoors, yeah.

LS: Indoors and it was nighttime.

LC: Was it fun?

LS: I don’t really remember the Martha Ray show that much for some reason. Possibly because I knew so many of the people that were standing there watching and we were all talking most of the time. I was bragging how she used my desk. Then the other show I went to see was later on. I guess it was March, April, I can’t remember exactly when in ’67. Somebody found out that Nancy Sinatra was giving a show at one of these Army units 10 or 15 miles away and they said, “We’re going to run two trucks over there.” So here we are in the back of this two and a half ton truck, which is not fun to ride in on bumpy roads. It took us a good 45 minutes to get there and when we got there it was so crowded you couldn’t get near it, enough to see anything. So I just started moving around and ended up at the side of the stage which had a tarpaulin over it. I guess for wind and rain protection because it was an overcast day but it didn’t rain that day and then somebody moved the tarp out of the way and you could see her through it. So I started filming through that. I got about three or four minutes of her on the movies and then with my still camera later on when she was walking from wherever they had for her
dressing room for her out to the plane, which was a Caribou by the way. They used a
Caribou to haul her around. It wasn’t our unit, it was another unit. Maybe that’s how we
found out about it. Somebody must have called in and said, “You’ll never guess who I am
carrying.” That kind of thing. Then the word spread from there. I think that’s how we
found out about it. But she was walking from the make-up tent I’ll call it to the plane and
I was no more then four or five feet away from her. I had a still camera. I took a still shot
of her. No make-up, no wig, she didn’t look the same to me after that. (Laughter)

LC: Was she gracious about it?

LS: I couldn’t tell. She was just walking by.

LC: So she didn’t really notice that much.

LS: I think I remember reading somewhere that she did some anti-war stuff later
on.

LC: Oh is that right?

LS: I’m not sure. I think I remember reading somewhere about Nancy Sinatra and
anti-war.

LC: But it would seem that by having gone over there she wasn’t anti the guys
who were over there.

LS: That and she was in like a couple of, I forgot the name of that show, *China
Beach* episodes where supposedly all I remember seeing is the blue boots. They were
made for walking.

LC: There you go. Let me ask a little bit about actually being in Vietnam. Did
you, I know by the nature of your work you didn’t have a lot of opportunity for this but
did you form impressions of the Vietnamese themselves?

LS: None whatsoever. The only contact I had was that we went to the laundry
downtown because we didn’t have one on the base. So we didn’t get involved with them
at all. I was worried they were probably VC (Viet Cong) to begin with. You had to worry
about it. You didn’t know who was and who wasn’t or whether there were any that
weren’t. Who knows?

LC: And you’re actively concerned about that at the time?

LS: Oh yeah. The whole year I was there I was scared about a knife in the back.

LC: Were there Vietnamese civilians working on the base?
LS: Not when I got there. Towards the end they started, they got these young girls
to clean the barracks, do the laundry. There weren’t too many like in other countries
where I was but then again these other countries like Korea and the Philippines we had
been there a long time so they had a lot of people working on a base. In fact at Clark I
was the main employer of the area.

LC: How so?
LS: There was nothing else.

LC: I see, you mean the US was the main…
LS: Yes.

LC: Yes absolutely. I’m sorry. And when you first got to Phu Cat though there
were not civilians.

LS: The only ones that were there, there weren’t any Vietnamese civilians that I
knew of. The other civilians were the construction workers. RMKBRJ Construction who
were building the base. They had Koreans, they had Filipinos, I don’t know what else. In
fact they were still running the mess hall when we got there. They had two different
buildings, one alongside the other. On one side was American food and the other side you
could get Korean and Filipino food. If I didn’t like what they had on the American side I
went to the Korean and Filipino side.

LC: But that changed while you were there?
LS: Yeah. Let’s see we got to Phu Cat in January. I would say somewhere in
April or so, just from my head, the construction was almost completed and the Air Force
took over the mess hall.

LC: What about others of our allies? Did you see or come across ARVN (Army of
the Republic of Vietnam) or South Vietnamese Air Force people?
LS: No. I don’t think that came until later when they started training them. That
came a couple of years later. There was a lot of training.

LC: What about Koreans or Australians?
LS: The Korean Tiger division was responsible for the security of the area around
Phu Cat and Qui Nhon that’s why it was very quiet there.

LC: That’s why it was quiet?
LS: Yes, because the Koreans played dirty like Charlie did. It wasn’t like the Americans. They would say, “Well we can’t do that.”

LC: Well when you say that what do you mean Larry? What impressions did you form?

LS: If they capture somebody they think nothing of executing them. Just like you see that picture in the paper of that Vietnamese officer or whatever killing that guy in Saigon during the Tet Offensive. Remember that picture?

LC: The very famous photograph with him holding the gun to the guy’s head?

LS: Yeah.

LC: Yeah, uh huh.

LS: The Orientals are that way about life. In fact the majority of the world I think is that way. When you sit down and think about it. If you go to the Middle East you got that problem with all these suicide bombers. I’m always digressing away from where we were.

LC: That’s okay. I was just asking you about the Koreans and you were giving your impressions about how they were operating and the Tiger division.

LS: That’s how I heard stories. I never saw anything, but you hear stories about it. There was a small Korean detachment maybe a mile, mile and a half from our OPS tent when we first moved to Phu Cat. We walked down, this is in my movies, the guy I walked down there with was given a grenade by one of the Koreans and they threw it in the water and it exploded and that’s how they went fishing for their lunch. That’s in my movies.

LC: Was that common place as far as you could tell?

LS: I don’t think so. This guy I went with said he had been there a couple of times before and they would talk to him for a while and then they would leave and go back. So I don’t know what brought it about other than the fact that you happen to run into them. We didn’t even know they were there until he found them. I never wanted to walk anywhere too far away from where I worked.

LC: Yeah right because of the insecurity essentially.

LS: But then we heard about the Koreans being in charge of that area and the stories about how the VC would try to get on the base at night and the Koreans would
always catch them. The Koreans were good at Charlie’s game whereas I don’t think the
Americans ever had enough training on it. Also we had all these restrictions, political
restrictions. I don’t want to get into that either.

LC: Okay. Larry, let me ask you about your coming to the end of the time with
the 459th. Were you keeping track of how long you were going to be in Vietnam?
LS: Oh yes, everybody had the short timer calendar, how many days to go and so
many days and a wake up kind of thing.

LC: Right, so you had one as well.
LS: Everybody had one in their locker.

LC: Were you particularly you know like driven, anxious to get out of there?
LS: I don’t think anymore than anybody else. I was more anxious to get to the
Philippines because that’s where I got assigned to.

LC: Had you put in a request?
LS: I requested that.

LC: How did that turn out in 1967?
LS: Well initially when I… I have to back track to one of my R&Rs. I went into
my old office at the embassy to say hello because there were still people there that I
knew.

LC: Now this is your R&R from Vietnam?
LS: Right. Actually I had two R&Rs. How I got the second one I can’t remember
but I got two.

LC: And both of them you went to Manila.
LS: I went to Manila both times. Why not, I had a girlfriend there, I knew my way
around. The second time I didn’t even have to stay at a hotel. I stayed at somebody else’s
house. One of the JUSMAG houses, they had an empty room. They said, “Larry, why
don’t you come in here?”

LC: What did you do when you were up there about getting back to Manila?
LS: I went to my old office at the embassy and saw the Colonel. Colonel Fikes
was still there. I asked him, “Is there any chance of getting back here?” So he wrote a
letter. I typed it, right in my old seat. He sent it to his headquarters but it got turned down
because they were going to eliminate the position. That’s how I ended up at Clark. That was close enough.

LC: So they were eliminating the position within the detachment.
LS: The one I had at the embassy, yes.

LC: When did you get your orders for Clark then?
LS: Early August I guess, early August.

LC: Were you pleased?
LS: I knew I wasn’t getting Manila. I figured they would probably bend over backwards to give me Clark. That’s one less body they have to send across the Pacific. It’s a money saver.

LC: Well Larry, let’s take a break there.
Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Larry Schiff of the US Air Force.

Today’s date is the 13th of December, 2004. I’m on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections building. Larry is speaking to me by telephone from Pennsylvania.

Good morning, Larry.

Larry Schiff: Good morning, how are you?

LC: I’m very good thanks. How are you?

LS: Fair to midland I guess.

LC: Okay. Well let’s take you to a place that was a little more difficult then what’s happening today anyway and that has to do with your last day in Vietnam.

LS: Oh yes, that was interesting.

LC: Can you just take us through what happened?

LS: Well after a year of being in Qui Nhon and Phu Cat and going to other places just for maybe one day at a time type of thing. Nowhere was there ever any attack when I was there, no bullets flying, no explosions, nothing, it was so quiet. So my last day I had to report to the aerial port squadron. I had a little shack at the terminal at Phu Cat. I think I had a midnight flight or a one in the morning flight and I had to be there about eleven o’clock at night. Somewhere along there, don’t hold me to the times.

LC: Okay, no problem.

LS: So there’s three of us waiting for this plane to take us to Saigon where we find out when we would leave Vietnam. So I was sitting there waiting and we hear this C-130 flying overhead and we said that must be it because it’s supposed to be a C-130. Sure enough the plane lands and you hear the props; the engines reverse to slow down. All of a sudden it goes quiet, absolute quiet. You couldn’t hear anything. I said, “Where is the plane? What happened?” We hear nothing. They come out and tell us that half an hour later the plane blew a tire on landing. “He’s stuck in the middle of the runway. We can’t get another plane in here out of Saigon for maybe three or four hours.” The back of my
mind, “Is this starting, is something going to happen now where I should be out of here?” Is it going to happen while I’m still here and it didn’t. I was very anxious for the three or four hours I had to wait for that other plane.

LC: What about the other guys? Were you hanging out?

LS: They were just going TDY (Temporary Duty). See I had an unusual thing. I wasn’t going back to the States from Vietnam. I had wangled another tour in the Philippines at Clark Air Base so it was a plane that very few PCS, that’s Permanent Change of Station, people were ever on. In fact they even said that when I was down in Saigon checking in on the flights. They looked at my orders. “Are you on the right plane?” They said. They kept saying, “You’re booked wrong.” It was unusual.

LC: It was unusual in the sense that most guys were rotating out of a tour and going back to the States.

LS: Right, like from Phu Cat I would go to Da Nang to catch a plane to go to the states. People further out would go to Tan Son Nhut. All the TDYs to the Philippines went through Tan Son Nhut because that’s where most of the people were that were going there anyway. They did something right there. It was an anxious time, the last three or four hours at Phu Cat. Then when I was at Ton Son Nhut I had to ride a bus that had this wire mesh covering the windows to keep the hand grenades out. We had to go through town to go from where we were on the base to the terminal. We had to go through civilian streets. You weren’t in a protected area at all. I was worried there. It took about an hour for that bus to go from point A to point B. I sort of worried then, too. So the last few days packed it all in for me.

LC: Larry, explain for someone who wouldn’t understand the source of the anxiety can you kind of describe why and what you felt might happen and why you felt it might happen?

LS: Well I felt that after the year of been lucky and nothing happening, it would all happen now and I’d be caught up in it. I don’t know how else to explain it.

LC: The other guys that you were say on the bus with, going to the terminal…?

LS: As far as Tan Son Nhut I didn’t talk with them. I didn’t know them.

LC: Okay.

LS: They were from other units, mostly in the Saigon area.
LC: Was the mood on the bus basically a reflection of your mood? Was it the same?

LS: I don’t think so because they still had plenty of time to go.

LC: So they weren’t jamming it all in the last couple of hours.

LS: I was leaving. I was the only one on the plane that was not coming back to Vietnam hopefully.

LC: How had you arranged or found out about your next posting?

LS: Well, I went on R&R twice to the Philippines. We went over that before.

LC: That’s right.

LS: This Colonel that I worked for when I was there in 1963 through the middle of ’65 tried to get me back into my old office which was located in the US Embassy in Manila, one of those prime assignments. Well they deleted the slot in between my first R&R and second R&R.

LC: Yes I think you said that the job disappeared.

LS: Yes. Oh speaking of first and second, remember I said I didn’t know how I got a second one?

LC: Yes.

LS: Because it was very unusual. I was rummaging through some papers since the last time we talked and I found an obscure letter, copy of a letter from the squadron commander. I was nominated for Airman of the Month and I won. That’s what I got out of it, an R&R.

LC: That works.

LS: (Laughter) I forgot all about that.

LC: That’s interesting. Do you remember anything more about it now that you’ve seen the letter?

LS: No. It was a typical letter as written by a squadron commander in those days. I found the letter that the OPS office had wrote to the squadron commander nominating me and you would think that I could walk on water, one of those kinds of deals. That’s how I got the second R&R. When I went back on the second R&R he told me about the slot being deleted. “Would I like Clark Air Base?” I said, “Sure.” So he made the arrangements.
LC: Do you remember the flight from Vietnam?

LS: The only thing I remember of significance was that I asked the stewardess to let me know when we were over halfway to the Philippines.

LC: Why did you do that?

LS: The point of no return.

LC: Oh okay.

LS: Which she did and I relaxed. Other then that it was very quiet. Very quiet flight. I do remember it was Braniff Airlines and it was painted green. It was when Braniff was going through their Technicolor planes.

LC: Their Technicolor phase?

LS: Yes, they had different colors flying all over around the world.

LC: So it definitely was a private contractor then.

LS: Oh yes the majority of the flights in and out were carrying people. Very few people went on the military planes. They were set up for cargo or air refueling or that kind of thing.

LC: Especially at this point when the build up was really on.


LC: Right, and we’re talking about August of ’67, is that right?

LS: That’s when I left, right. About the last week, the last few days of August.

LC: Now tell me about the assignment that came to you in the Philippines at Clark.

LS: That was with the 5th TAC Control, Tactical Control Group, I’ll spell that out. There was a unit that would send people TDY to hot spots on short notice to help in communications, radar, things like that. One of the places that I remember they went to was when the USS Pueblo got high jacked by North Korea, they wanted me to go. I just had been out of Vietnam for six months. I said, “Find somebody who was there at a different time, further back.” How did it work? “Somebody that had left Vietnam after I did that’s going, I’ll take his place.” I knew that they wouldn’t find anybody. So I talked my way out of it. That was the only one they tried to send me on.

LC: Was that during your time at Clark?

LS: Yes I was at Clark from the end of August of ’67 to early February ’69.
LC: What exactly were you doing?

LS: I was assigned to the group administrative section where we, among other things, ran the mail room, handled classified documents going in and out, if somebody at the department needs regulations and manuals they came to us to order them, all kind of things. If they needed copies we had the only copying machine in the group at the time.

LC: Tell me about your sort of day to day. Where did you live?

LS: When I was at Clark?

LC: Yeah.

LS: Well when I first got there I was still an Airman 1st Class, E-4 rank. They put me in these very overcrowded barracks. But it was clean compared to what I had the past year so it was heaven; you know that kind of thing.

LC: Sure, sure.

LS: I don’t remember the time frame but somewhere in the next six months before the end of ’67 because of the slow promotions in the Air Force, everything was sort of locked up because of the Korean War situation. All these people had made all these ranks then everything froze up. So they decide to make E-4 to have the privileges of E-5s and above. I think their main reason was there weren’t that many people for the NCO Club and the Airmen’s Club was crowded. So that’s how we all put it.

LC: So they started shifting people over there.

LS: Yes. We didn’t know it was Air Force wide, we thought it was just Clark Air Base. It ended up becoming Air Force wide. So they pulled me out of that crowded barracks into a less crowded barrack where they took a two man room and made it three men. At least it was in a room. It wasn’t an open bay kind of thing. Then a couple of months later this one guy that use to ride with me. I had a car shipped over by the way. It was one of the perks.

LC: What kind of car was it?

LS: A ’66 Buick Wildcat Convertible.

LC: Sweet.

LS: (Laughter) Not the type that you would take to the Philippines. It got ruined over there. I couldn’t sell it. I shipped it back.

LC: It got ruined because of what, the weather?
LS: Combination of the weather. The cheap gas, even what was sold on base was
the same as the local. Their high test had a lower octane then the regular was here. You
open up a can of motor oil and put a little on your finger and you can feel the grit. There
was dirt in a brand new can of oil. So that car got ruined over there. But this one guy that
use to ride with me to work from the barracks said, “Why don’t we try living off base?
They are looking for people to move off base. We can rent an apartment.” We looked and
found something that wasn’t too far from what we call the side gate of Clark, not the
main gate because that was too crowded. We moved into an apartment just about the rest
of the time I was there except for maybe the last month or so.

LC: Tell me about the set up of the apartment and how did you find it?
LS: One of the local bars that was run by an ex-Air Force guy and his wife and we
were talking, “We’re thinking of moving off base and we don’t even know where to
begin to start looking.” He said, “Well he knows somebody that has an apartment for
rent.” That’s how you found out things. Same thing as here.

LC: Yeah, just kind of grapevine stuff.
LS: That’s how we ended up with a refrigerator. We heard somebody was
leaving, was moving back on base and had a refrigerator signed out from family services.
If we could get transportation we could have it. They didn’t have anybody to pick it up
and take it back into the base. We had trucks in our unit. The Air Force at that time, I
think still today, has on each base has what they call a centralized motor pool where
every unit draws their vehicle from them. But being the type of unit it was, 5th TAC
Control Group had their own motor pool like the Army does. So we had transportation
and drivers available.

LC: Now can you explain for somebody who wouldn’t know why the tactical
control group would have its own vehicles?
LS: When they go on these TDY trips to support other units it’s the only way to
have vehicles. They had to ship them.

LC: So they can’t be dependent?

LS: They can for a little bit, but then as soon as the ship comes in with their
vehicles they take over.

LC: How big was the 5th Tactical Control Group?
LS: I have no idea of what the size of it was. It was a group as opposed to a squadron. As opposed to, I don’t know what’s lower then a squadron, I guess that’s it, that’s what’s lower.

LC: Did the group have aircraft?
LS: No, another one of my many non aircraft assignments.
LC: Right, non. You’re Air Force, non Air Force.
LS: Only the Caribou unit in Vietnam was the only flying outfit I was in.
LC: Who did you report to?
LS: Who did I report to? It was a Chief Master Sergeant that ran the, if that’s what you mean.
LC: Not necessarily his name but just kind of what was the chain that you were in?
LS: Oh it’s typical of any administrative office. The guy with the lowest rank had the lowest position and you just went on up through there. We were such a small office.
There was two of us that had the same rank and the basically the same job. We had two younger kids that came in that liked to do mail runs and things like that.
LC: Now was this a good assignment for you?
LS: It was pretty good because it was where I wanted to go. I had my car. I went to Manila every weekend, stayed at some friend’s house down there. I think we went through that somewhere along the line when I was stationed there in ’63 through ’65 then two R&Rs in one of them. It was something that I enjoyed because I had some place to go. When you showed up at Clark Air Base you had to sign in for the first time. You had to go to an orientation at the base theater where they had all these speakers and they had movies to show you and slides to show you and that kind of thing, telling you all about Clark Air Base and the surrounding area. They didn’t go too deep into the surrounding area. But they had a lot of negative things to say, “Be careful out there, this is what’s happened in the past six months,” kind of thing. They made it sound worse than what it really was.
LC: Do you remember the kinds of things that they told you to watch out for?
LS: Oh the going ons at the bars. “Watch out for the girls, they’ll steal you blind,”
that kind of thing. Well I didn’t have to go to the bars; I had my friends in Manila. I had a
girlfriend there; we talked about that.

LC: Right. So you were already familiar with everything?
LS: Well I spent a lot of time going back and forth from Manila to Clark to pick
up things that we had to pick up. We went shopping there all the time. There was no base
in Manila. You either went to Clark or you went to Sangley Point Naval Station, the other
direction from Manila.

LC: So would it be fair to say, Larry that you felt pretty comfortable there and
were happy there?
LS: Oh yes. I could have been happier if I could have had my old job back but
second best is better than none.

LC: Right. And you were there until early ’69.
LS: Right, I got out. I got discharged at Travis on the 4th of February of ’69.

LC: Now before I go to the discharge and you’re separation from the Air Force I
just want to ask, during that time that you were in Manila were you paying attention to
events in Vietnam. Did you try to keep up with what was going on?
LS: Back in ’63, ’64, ’65 is that what you’re talking about? Or when I was at
Clark?

LC: Right, at Clark, after you had left.
LS: Oh whatever was in the *Stars and Stripes* was about all you had and they
published what they were told to publish.

LC: Did you pay particular attention to it or were you like…?
LS: Oh you could see it going on; the big build up going on because everybody
passed through Clark. Flight crews took jungle training and everybody had to pass
through Clark to get to Vietnam anyway. And because Clark was so crowded to support
Vietnam and so many people were going through, a week wouldn’t go by where you
would run into somebody that you knew somewhere else in the past. They wouldn’t
remember names like I was picking up my laundry at the base laundry one day walking to
my car and somebody yells out, “Hey! Port Austin!” It was a guy from the radar site in
Michigan that I had left in 1962.
LC: He recognized you?
LS: As soon as I turned around, he recognized me but forgot my name and I
forgot his name. You meet so many people over the years and you go back and the only
way you’re going to remember any names is if you look through some papers you might
be carrying or stored away some where like in special orders and things like that.
LC: So did you hang out with that guy for a bit and say hey and all of that?
LS: Well we did a lot of talking that day. We went over to somebody else’s house
who also had been at Port Austin. There was about, see there was a half a dozen people
that they had run into in the past six months.
LC: Isn’t that funny.
LS: Then one day I walking into the NCO Club for lunch and I see one of the
guys, remember I said when I was stationed in Manila we lived in three bedroom houses?
LC: Right.
LS: Shared a house, well one of the guys that I shared one of the houses with was
sitting there in the, I don’t know what you call it, it’s not a vestibule it’s kind of big, this
big room that you walk through before you get into the club itself, for lack of better
words. He was sitting there with two of his friends. I saw him and I said, “Steve what are
you doing here?” He said, “I’m going over to ‘Nam. I’ve got to go through jungle
training here for three days.”
LC: Wow. When something like that would happen, when you came across
somebody who was on their way to Vietnam did you have anything to say to them about
your own experience over there?
LS: In the conversations you talked over the different things. I always pushed the
fact that I never got shot at. Which what they said was wow, because you’re always
reading about attacks everywhere.
LC: Did you, speaking of that, pay attention to developments around the Tet
Offensive?
LS: Oh yes. That came up right then and there. That was six months after I left.
You don’t find out too much about where you were and the people you knew because
they don’t publish that. I found out more since I joined the Caribou Association. They got
us hooked up with the Vietnam Archive by the way. I’ve found out more of what went on, how we lost planes during the Tet Offensive, people were killed, things like that.

LC: Sure. But at the time of course you didn’t know?
LS: But between the time I left Vietnam and I went to the first reunion and started talking with people I knew nothing about what went on.

LC: Let me ask about your decision to separate from the Air Force, How did that come about?
LS: Well first being in the job that I was at, they got a computer printout. For some reason they started using computers and everybody was getting these printouts. It was personnel orientated as to how things were working about in the one-year tours, were they helping or hindering things. They were trying to decide that. So everybody was getting copies of these things. Seeing what they were forecasting, how soon you would go back to Vietnam if you had been there before. That kind of thing. I found my name on the list and I started looking through the thing and it worked out that everybody in my career field, which is administrative specialist, would go back to the States for a year and then go back to Vietnam. So I started figuring things out. I said, “This is no good because it’s not going to end. It’s going to keep going.” I decided I was going to get out. So when it came time for going to personnel to fill out what they call the forecast request for return to the States, what bases, what area of the country that you want, even though you don’t get it half of the time.

LC: Right.
LS: They are suppose to have a section at the bottom of the front page on this thing because I had been through this before that you sign that you have enough retainability, do you understand what I mean by retainability and return to the States?

LC: Why don’t you go ahead and explain it?
LS: To return to the States and be reassigned you have to have at least six months more than the end of our tour date, like my end of tour in the Philippines was February of ’69. My discharge date should have been August of ’69 or beyond. They give you that six months too. So we pay them to transfer you back to the States instead of just going for discharge.

LC: Because they would get a six months….?
LS: Right. So I was still undecided that morning that I had to report to personnel
to go through this whole process. I was still undecided when I left my barracks to go
there. I got there and I’m looking through, they handed out the forms after they told us
what they were supposed to do and I’m looking at it. I flipped through every page; there
must have been half a dozen pages. I read this very carefully and there was nothing in
there about a forecast, having to have the six-month retainability. The same thing I ran
into in 1962 when I left Port Austin. I think we went through that, I think I told you the
story.

LC: Yes, yes you did describe it.

LS: So I filled it out, fat dumb and happy. I’ll forecast. I won’t tell them anything.
Let’s see what happens. I won once before. I can win again. And about two months later
here comes my assignment in a blank envelope with just my name on it from personnel.
Everybody knew what these envelopes looked like. I had put in for McGuire Air Force
base in New Jersey, the Northeast, the state of Pennsylvania if there were any bases
anywhere. The northeast area in general to be close to home for a change. I get my
assignment, its Cheyenne, Wyoming. I don’t want to go to Cheyenne, Wyoming. So I
figured I would take a chance. I would call up personnel and say, “I’m not going. I want a
discharge.” They put me through all kinds of…I had interviews with Captains, and
Majors, and Colonels and I convinced them I wanted to get out so I got discharged.

LC: Now what was really driving this? Certainly you had many opportunities as
you said you had a lot of interviews and so forth to kind of take it back.

LS: It was Vietnam that set me that way.

LC: And why do you say that, Larry?

LS: Because it got worse. It wasn’t getting any better. At that time we were still
sending people in and not doing anything the right way, of course what was the right way
I don’t know. We have the same problems today with all these terrorists.

LC: That’s an interesting point and we can pursue that. I am wondering how you
felt about Nixon and the promises he was making in 1969 when he first came into office
about “Peace with honor,” and withdraw the troops and that sort of thing.

LS: First of all I couldn’t understand what he meant by, “Peace with honor.” We
already had it the other way. All these years we were trying to do things there. I guess
maybe the worst part of it was the majority of the Vietnamese didn’t even want us there anymore.

LC: And how did you know that? Or what was your sense?

LS: People that were in contact with the Vietnamese more then I was. Like this friend of mine whose house I use to stay in, in Manila when I was stationed at Clark, when I visited Manila on weekends. He was in a position where he would know more than what you read in the papers. We just said between us it doesn’t look too good. He got out also. He was in the Army eight or ten years at the time and he got out at the end of that enlistment for the same reason.

LC: Thinking that you both were probably going to get sent back.

LS: Well I know I would go back at least once, maybe twice before we would get out of there and we really didn’t get out a 100% until ’75 even though the truce or armistice or whatever you want to call it was ’73. What was my train of thought?

LC: You were saying that you were more or less sure that you would have to go back to Vietnam.

LS: Oh yeah because everybody was going back. You saw them. You would run into somebody you know and he would say, “Oh I’ve been to ‘Nam once since the last time we saw each other and I’m going back again.” I think pushing myself into Clark Air Base for a year and a half put me off and well into the future or I would have gone back, too.

LC: When you were going through essentially the exit interviews, which probably had some component of trying to get you to change your mind…?

LS: No at that point there was no request to change your mind. What they were trying to get people to do was sign-up for the National Guard and Reserves.

LC: Oh okay. Did you consider that?

LS: No because when I was Phu Cat the barracks to the left and the barracks to the right had Reserve people and National Guard people from the States on TDY. That’s what they were doing to fill the gaps, like they are doing now. So what good would that do? I had no obligation. The obligation in those days was eight years, a combination of active duty and reserve duty. Well I had twelve. I wasn’t worried about being automatically assigned to a Reserve unit or something like that.
LC: What did you have in mind as the likely next step for you once you left the Air Force?

LS: I had no idea whatsoever. Twelve years in the military, not any connection with the civilian market whatsoever. I didn’t know what to do. So I waited for my car to come back and then I started looking in the papers.

LC: Now did you move back to Pennsylvania?

LS: Yes, I moved in with my parents right away to save some money because I wasn’t working.

LC: And what were you able to come up with as a job?

LS: Well after about, well let’s see, I got back, my plane landed February 5th, that I remember, which by the way is a coincidence. My wife who I didn’t know at that time, that was her birthday.

LC: Oh really, wow. That’s an interesting coincidence.

LS: I arrived back in Allentown on my wife’s birthday but she didn’t know it and I didn’t know it.

LC: Is she from Allentown?

LS: Yes.

LC: So she was in town that day probably.

LS: That I thought was interesting.

LC: It is very interesting.

LS: So I started looking for jobs. I would go to different places. I didn’t know what I could do that would match what I did in the Air Force, probably nothing. I went to the state employment agency, took a test that was exactly the same as I took when I was in the ninth grade and had the same results. I liked indoor, but not outdoor work, that kind of thing. I don’t know whether you’ve ever seen these aptitude tests where you stick pens in the…make holes in the paper.

LC: Yes, those are the olden times kind of tests.

LS: Yes.

LC: And then they were machine read.

LS: Yes, exactly the same test I had when I was in the ninth grade. I got to see exactly the same results in the graph at the end. This guy came out of the office and I’m
sitting there and he says, “I don’t what to tell you. These are the results.” He gives them
to me and I said, “That’s what I had in the ninth grade with the same test.” “We have
nothing for you.” Then he says, “Do you have a car?” I said, “Yeah.” I went to the
employment office that’s located in Allentown. They had one in every city in those days.
Now they centralize by county I think. So I said, “Yes, I do have a car.” He said, “Let me
make a phone call.” He goes back into this office to make a phone call. I thought it was
strange; he never called me into his office. I don’t know why.

LC: Sort of like buying a car where they say let me go talk to my…

LS: Either that or they don’t me to hear anything if he has to get on the phone
about something. So he comes back out and he says, “Do you know where the Bethlehem
employment office is?” Being Bethlehem, the city, it’s right next to Allentown. I said,
“Not too familiar. I’ve been away from this area for twelve years.” So he gave me
directions to get there and gave me an envelope to give to this person there. I gave this
envelope to this person over at the other employment office and he takes it out and he
does some marks on it. He said, “You put such and such information in this block, fill it
out this way.” They gave me explicit instructions on how to fill this form out, which I
thought was kind of funny because it was straightforward, name and where you live and
what you did. He said, “Make sure you put something.” There was something about one
of the blocks I had to put a little letter, a code letter in that I take from the back of the
form. He said, “Make sure you put this code letter in.” Everything had to be in my
writing. He couldn’t write on it. Then he sent me to the personnel office at Bethlehem
Steel, which is now gone. They don’t exist anymore.

LC: But a huge company at that time I am sure.

LS: Huge company at that time. They were the number one employer in this area
at that time. They had something like 40 or 50 thousand people at their plant. I gave them
the form and he comes out and he says, “Can you come back in a couple of days to take a
test?” I said, “Sure I can.” He told me where to park my car and everything because
parking was horrendous in those days. I took this test and I had an interview with
somebody. He said, “Well, we keep your file open for six months. If you want us to keep
it open after six months…” I have to call in kind of thing. I figured, “Well this is just the
beginning, there will be somebody else.” My experiences since I had been home, I was
always getting a second and third call. I guess in those days it operated a lot different then
today. I was coming into the house after getting my car worked. My car had come back
and I had to get some work done on it with the transmission and something else. I was
just coming back in and the phone was ringing and I pick up the phone and it’s
Bethlehem Steel and they want to me to come in for another interview. So I went and
they took me around. I went to five different people in about two hours. The fifth person
said, “We’re going to hire you.” This was on a Thursday I guess it was, a Thursday or
Friday. Following Monday I report to work. It was the week of Good Friday, so Friday
was a holiday. It was also pay week, they paid every other week at that time. So it was
pay week, I got a one week’s pay because they paid you up to date, they didn’t hold
anything. So I started on Monday, worked four days, got a holiday, got a paycheck. How
bad could that be?

LC: And you thought, “Well this isn’t too bad.” What did they have you doing?
LS: I got put into the Sales Department. What they call the service unit, where
you were a go between, between the district office and the salesmen and the mill and you
entered orders. The orders got sent to us. We got them ready to be put together, to be
typed by the, what they called the input girls into what they called a computer. All it was
in the way of computing, you could get reports out of it and transmit orders to the mills
this way and they would all be the same format and exactly the same thing but that’s
about all. It didn’t do much of anything. Everything went in on the punch tape. That’s
why the girls had to sit there and type everything.

LC: Yes, they’re inputting the data either on cards or tape.
LS: That I furnished to them. I could go real deep into how everything worked but
that’s where I started and then got a few raises here or there. I was there about three or
four years and I got promoted to what they call the inside sales office where you
supported the salesmen directly. He would come see you with an inquiry. You would go
back out to the scheduling and get the shipping date. You’d go back and call the salesmen
or the customer, sometimes they called direct. I could go on and on and on about how
things worked. It was a sales job where you didn’t go out and sell. You were a support for
the outside sales force.
LC: Was this something that you kind of got into? I mean clearly you stayed with
them.
LS: Yeah. It was constant training. You’re always under somebody’s wing. The
first six months is what they call a probation period. After six months they kept me and
gave me a little bit of a raise and about every year after that your raises came almost
automatically. Between that and the cost of living raises I did pretty good in the 25 years.
LC: So you stayed with them 25 years?
LS: 25 years. They wanted me to move to Indiana with them when they closed the
plant here, closed the offices here.
LC: What year was that?
LC: Wow it survived all the way until ’93.
LS: At that location. As far as the company it’s only been out about two years
since they went bankrupt if that. I’m trying to remember when they, this semi-quasi-
government outfit, pension benefit guarantee corps took over my pension.
LC: Yes I was going to ask whether Bethlehem Steel actually going into the tank
affected your retirement.
LS: I kept collecting from Bethlehem Steel up until when was it? Where are we
now, 2004, 5? Maybe three years ago, four years ago, they were still in existence.
LC: Is it a government agency?
LS: Oh the government agency is still in existence, yeah.
LC: That’s taken over.
LS: It’s a quasi-government thing. It’s called Pension Benefit Guarantee
Corporation I think, PBGC, something like that. I didn’t get cut at all but some of these
people that were there longer and had real big pensions, like if you worked there 35 years
and had a nice salary when you got out to retire, you got a big check. I’m talking about a
person doing the kind of work I was doing would be two, three, four thousand dollars a
month.
LS: I get 800, but they got cut. They are closer to my 800 now then they were
before, much closer because of the guidelines of this PBGC outfit.
LC: Larry let me ask you some questions about your experience as a Vietnam veteran and as a veteran of the Vietnam era. Not only did you serve there but throughout the period you were in the Air Force and the service. Let me begin by asking did you pay much attention when in 1975 when South Vietnam finally collapsed?

LS: I watched the news all the time. That was a carry over from the radio network. I had to get my news everyday. I still have to get it. (Laughter) I watched it and I saw what was happening and I wondered why it took so long to get this far. That’s all I thought about it. I knew it was coming especially when we started pulling out because there was no way the Vietnamese were going to handle it on their own.

LC: And why do you say that? What makes you think that?

LS: Because of their history. They really didn’t want us there to begin with. We were interrupting their lifestyles.

LC: Did you have any particular feelings about the fact that this part of Vietnam that had avoided Communist government was now in 1975 completely overtaken by a Communist government?

LS: I didn’t think too much about it because there was nothing I could do about it. Even over the years it happened and I’m surprised it’s only now that they are going back and trying to do thing with Vietnam.

LC: You mean the US?

LS: Yeah.

LC: Do you think that’s a good idea, a good development?

LS: Why not? We have enough problems of our own with our economy. It can’t do anything to hurt it.

LC: So you would essentially think it’s probably not a bad idea to explore greater commercial relationships with Vietnam anyway.

LS: Like I said I think it’s going to help this country more then it’s going to hurt it. It may create more jobs here. Not as much as it should because everybody is outsourcing now.

LC: Right.

LS: That’s going to come to a halt eventually because I got involved trying to call customer service from the people that made my computer and end up out in India or the
Philippines, or you call certain 800 numbers that you’re calling to find out something or place an order with a company or whatever. I would do that and the accent was right there. I picked up the Filipino accent right away having spent a total of four years in that country. So after we’re all done and I’m placing my order and I’m all done and they’ll say, “Can I help you any further?” I’ll say, “Why don’t you tell me what part of the Philippines you are from?” That throws them back because they don’t get that too often. Then we get into a little conversation that I was there for four years. It gets interesting once in a while.

LC: Were you saying that you thought that the United States probably isn’t going to continue the kind of technical information outsourcing to the other countries like the Philippines?

LS: It’s going to come back because the quality of what’s going on. To place an order is no problem but to solve a problem. They don’t have full command of the English language. They have a good command for most things.

LC: Right, but there is a lot of idiomatic usage.

LS: But I have found that some of the answers I get back end up being that they push a button and the computer spits it out and I guess they hope it matches the problem.

LC: Right.

LS: Because I had two different problems or two different calls I made to the same company over a three-month period and got the same answers back in a different sequence. One told me to do this in this sequence and the other told me to do that in that sequence. And the wording of the paragraph. I print out everything when I get instructions because my memory is gone so I print it out and I can flip back and forth from page to page, it’s easier for me.

LC: Sure. So you’ve got them side by side and you can see that one has…?

LS: I’ve got them side by side and I said, “Gee, I knew it looked familiar but this is ridiculous.” I’m afraid to do things, anything on that computer that somebody tells me to do anymore to try to correct something.

LC: Let me ask you about the sort of big picture of US involvement in Southeast Asia generally and maybe we should set the Philippines apart here for a minute because we can talk about them separately but do you think that the United States policy makers
who made the investments, the military investments in South Vietnam made the right
decisions?

LS: No.

LC: Why is that?

LS: They kept pouring all this equipment in and pouring all the people in but
didn’t use them correctly.

LC: What could have been done? Do you have any ideas on that subject?

LS: We’ll start at the top. We could have blown the hell out of them.

LC: Meaning nuclear devices?

LS: No, non nuclear but we could of done it before they had the sophisticated air
defense. We had to get permission to do everything.

LC: Okay, meaning heavier bombing.

LS: Sure. An example: when you hear the word bombing mission, what’s the first
thing that comes into your mind?

LC: Well if we’re talking about Vietnam…

LS: Oh you have separated it already.

LC: Yeah. If we’re talking about Tokyo in 1944- incendiary bombing, carpet
bombing, civilian causalities.

LS: Well yeah the carpet-bombing type of thing. The thing was in World War II
when they would send out a bombing mission they would have sometimes three or four
groups that each had three squadrons, which each squadron had 17 planes going on a
bombing mission. Granted the sophistication today they could hit the target better but in
Vietnam we weren’t much better then World War II along those lines. There was no such
thing as a smart bomb. I don’t know what they did have. They may have had GPS
(Global Positioning System) or the beginnings of it at that point but that doesn’t do much
good because it wasn’t really that accurate anyway. So what we would see on the ground
when we would see planes flying over, I would see B-52s, never more then three. You
can go in a straight line and you see these things on TV where they show B-52s dropping
bombs and it lands and it’s a straight line that goes on forever and ever.

LC: Right.
LS: That’s fine but if the target is a half a mile back what good are these bombs up here? See what I mean?

LC: Yes and you’re also saying that we didn’t commit the number of aircraft to each individual mission.

LS: Right. Even the smaller planes like the F-100 which was designated a fighter bomber. I took movies, in my movies there is a scene, you got to look real hard, five miles away where two or three F-100s making a bombing runs on this village we found out later that supposedly had VC in it. They made three passes dropping one bomb at a time and then they came back and made three passes each firing their, whatever guns they had, machine guns, cannons, whatever they had mounted and they left. That was it. They probably tore it up pretty good but not completely.

LC: Did you ever get a sense from guys that you might have seen passing through the various posts where you were, that these were guys that may have been flying or crews or mechanics talking about this kind of stuff, talking about how they weren’t using full payloads?

LS: You usually didn’t get involved talking with people you didn’t know. If you saw somebody you knew, okay. Since I had never been in a flying outfit before or since it wasn’t…the only one I ran into from Vietnam, I was at Clark about three months the time. My car had arrived and I was driving somewhere and it happened to be near the flight line. There was a Caribou sitting there being worked on. There were sending him to the Philippines for corrosion control, right when I left. So I parked the car as close as I could get to where the plane was parked and I had to wait for two planes to go pass on a taxi. I went out to the Caribou and I asked, “Is anybody here from Phu Cat?” The reason I could tell it was from my unit, the top of the tails of the plane were color coded for the 459th that I was in was white and etc, white, orange, red, blue, green.

LC: So you could actually ID the aircraft.

LS: Right. And then later on I started putting code letters on the tail so everybody knew where they were from. Not good for security. KN was a 459th and whatever. So I went out to the plane and said, “Anybody here from Phu Cat?” And this one guy who was kneeling or was on his hands and knees and doing something to the floorboard of this plane he turns around and says, “Larry, what are you doing here?” I said, “I’m stationed...
here, what are you doing?” So he was Airman 2nd Class which he couldn’t go to the NCO Club at Clark but because the Clark Club was kind of light on patronage let’s say, for some reason, I could take him as a guest in my club, no I couldn’t, I couldn’t take him. There was no room. He could take me as a guest into the Airmen’s Club. I said, “What are you doing tonight?” He said, “Hanging around the transit barracks. Nothing else to do, I have no transportation.” I said, “Yes you do.” I said, “Well I’ll pick you up. I got a car.” He said, “What do you mean you got a car?” I said, “Come out and look.” He said, “Oh my God.” He said, “A big car like that in this country?” I picked him up at the Airmen’s Club, we went to dinner, had a few drinks. That opens up another incident that happened that night completely unrelated to the two of us.

LC: Can you say that?
LS: Do we want to go back to 1963, 4, and 5 again?
LC: Okay.
LS: We’re sitting there ordering drinks after having dinner at the Airmen’s Club at Clark and the waitress was taking the order. She went clockwise from the guy next to me so I was the last one. I guess I looked the oldest so they waited for me last. “And what does James Bond want?” She called me James Bond. The outfit I was in at Manila was an intelligence outfit and everybody knew it.

LC: Even the waitresses. (Laughter)
LS: And this waitress at Clark Air Base Airmen’s Club that probably only saw me once or twice three years before or two years before had me picked. So the people working on the base at Clark were all agents.

LC: I’m thinking you might be right.
LS: The next time I went to Manila early enough where I could stop in at my old office I told them about it. I didn’t want to call them on the phone. I can talk about all this now because it’s all down the tubes, declassified, and whatever.

LC: Yes, almost everything is at this point.
LS: But I thought that was very strange.

LC: That’s interesting.
LS: Then the girl disappeared. She didn’t come back. Somebody else brought our drink and I didn’t see her again.
LC: That’s interesting as well.

LS: I think it was the following weekend I was going to Manila and I asked my boss if I could leave about two hours earlier, I wanted to stop at the embassy. I had something important for them that I can’t talk about.

LC: And that’s when you just kind of gave them the word about her and what had happened?

LS: Yeah. And they said they had inklings of things like that. We’ll pass this on to whoever at Clark Air Base because there was a department for that, but I didn’t want to walk in on them. I didn’t want to give them the information. It would get lost in the shuffles because I was at the lower grade then if they heard it from the Colonel that I used to work for.

LC: Yes, that might have more impact. Well you were saying that you thought that one of the things that the US could have done differently is to you know make a more dedicated effort with bombings.

LS: Sure if we could have just kept bombing and bombing and bombing instead of bombing for two weeks and stopping and saying well know are you going to come back to us now or are you going to call it quits and you wait six months. That’s what Nixon was doing. That’s no good. They build everything back up again. Just like these tunnels they had that they show in movies or on the news.

LC: Sure.

LS: Blowing up tunnels and then walk away. Two weeks later that tunnel is in operation again.

LC: Do you think this was primarily a, and this is just you know your opinion, whatever you think about it, but…

LS: It’s probably my opinion that was gathered hearing all kinds of things over the past 20 years.

LC: Sure. Well it’s of interest because veterans have lots of different views on these questions. I wonder if you think it was primarily a function of political leadership, Washington making bad decisions or failing to make good decisions, whichever.

LS: Well the decision to handle it like they did, like we find a target. We send the information back to our headquarters. They send it to Washington. They send it to
whoever in the Defense Department. “Yes you can do this.” It had two signatures on it.
Then it starts going back again. By that time what was there isn’t there anymore in most
cases and we bombed nothing while they sat ten miles away watching it. I heard a lot of
stories like that. I take stories like that to be true. I don’t think these guys made this up.
There is too much of it.

LC: Let me ask about your coming back to the States and you told about the job
search. Did you experience discrimination or upset from people because you had been in
the military?

LS: Well most people wouldn’t even know I was. Those that did who I worked
with, a lot of them were in and out of the military at one time or another. Things hadn’t
come to a head yet at that point and by the time it did I was in this group so many years
there wasn’t any of that going on, at least where I worked. I just don’t remember many
incidents in this area here.

LC: I was going to ask was there much in the way of an anti-war movement?

LS: I don’t think so.

LC: In Allentown? I can’t imagine that there was but it’s entirely possible.

LS: I don’t remember seeing, hearing, or reading in the newspaper about anything
in this area. It’s mostly big cities where they got the most punch out of their lies, that kind
of thing. That I read into it at the beginning when you start watching the news at 6:30 and
all three networks showing almost basically the same thing about the protests and
gatherings, draft card burnings, etc.

LC: Did all of that seem pretty remote though to you? I mean you’re watching it
on TV but when you go to work or when you’re going around on the weekends you’re
not really confronted with that stuff.

LS: Yes, it just never hit here or anywhere we went.

LC: Any opinion as to why that’s true?

LS: Like I said they were targeting an area where they get more and better
coverage. If they came to Allentown and had a demonstration in center square, anti-war
demonstration in center square the chances of it being seen on the evening news with
Walter Cronkite or what’s the other one I use to watch on NBC? Huntley-Brinkley, see I
told you I was a news nut. I remember all these names.
LC: Well frighteningly I remember them too.
LC: Wow.
LS: 1950. (Laughter)
LC: Larry, I think what you’re suggesting and I just want to pull this out a little bit to clarify is that a lot of the demonstrations were organized by outside people who picked a particular location.
LS: That has been in our history and what’s happening now is the same thing. If we could somehow pull the people out that are instigating these things there wouldn’t be 90 percent of these anti-antis.
LC: There’s sort of a hard-core group of people who are orchestrating these things.
LS: Yeah.
LC: Let me ask you about the government’s treatment of veterans over the time period since you left the Air Force. Has the government treated veterans appropriately?
LS: I don’t know. I haven’t had any problems so I haven’t had any contact.
LC: You haven’t accessed the VA (Department of Veteran Affairs) at all?
LS: No.
LC: Wow. Okay.
LS: I don’t even know what I’m authorized to get. There was an article in the paper about that locally here two or three weeks ago and I was going to call and then I was listening to the radio in my car going somewhere and there was somebody, they were having a discussion about the veterans and what benefits they can get. There was an item in the newspaper. Somebody wrote a letter to the editor, that’s what it was. He went to the VA and filled out all the forms and whatever and then handed it to one of two individuals that was in this big office and they said, “Well you can go home now. You’re number 1600 on the list.” They are so far behind.
LC: Well that’s not very encouraging is it?
LS: No it isn’t. I haven’t gone for anything because I guess I’m on the lucky side as far as health benefits and prescription benefits. None of this that is going on now has affected me in any way shape or form. I had everything when I worked at Bethlehem
Steel. When I got my first job after leaving there they had decent coverage. It was a new
car dealership. I worked in the parts department. I did that for about three years. Then my
wife started working for the county here, she has a government job. It’s good coverage
and I’m on it. I’m on hers. Now I have a Medicare card but I didn’t take Medicare part B.
Do you understand what that is?

LC: Go ahead and just say that.

LS: Well part A is the hospital end of it and part B is your everyday going to the
doctor, getting shots, getting blood tests. So I don’t have Medicare part B. I elected not to
take it because I have the coverage on my wife’s. Part A is free. Everybody gets that.
That’s the hospitalization kind of thing, but I’m on my wife’s. For that it is primary and
Medicare is secondary.

LC: So part B, which is the diagnostics and probably office visits and that sort of
thing, you don’t have to access that.

LS: I don’t have to access it so I don’t have it because there is a premium for that;
you have to pay for that.

LC: That’s right. Does it bother you that other veterans not in as good of a
situation as you are with regard to benefits and so on have to wait for 1600 people to be
seen before they get evaluated?

LS: Sure it bothers me. What happens when I lose what I have now? I’ll have to
get involved with them there. I can’t even sign up for it now because I’m covered.

LC: Yeah it’s sort of a catch 22.

LS: I’m lucky. My wife is six years younger then me.

LC: Right now it’s not an issue.

LS: Right now I’m doing pretty good.

LC: Do you think the government has funded VA programs to the extent that it
ought to have? Even though you haven’t had to…

LS: They haven’t funded anything that is good for the average person in years.
They haven’t funded enough. They look out for themselves. People with the big bucks
get more. I could never understand why they had a cap on social security deductions out
of people’s pay. You reach a certain amount then you didn’t have to pay into it.

Everybody should pay their fair share. Their fair share is that percentage of your gross
pay, period. If you get somebody that makes 200,000 dollars a year, he doesn’t pay any
more than, I think the number is in the 80,000 right now, I just read it recently, doesn’t
pay any more then somebody making 80 something thousand dollars a year. Now where
is the fairness in that?

LC: Right.

LS: And where does it come from? The people in charge are the cronies that give
the money to the people who can pay the most towards their campaign.

LC: Well while we’re on the topic of sort of contemporary issues, do you see any
similarities or parallels between the Vietnam conflict and the Iraq?

LS: I think it’s worse now. It’s the same thing but worse.

LC: Now why do you say that, Larry?

LS: Because in Vietnam at least they were shipping enough equipment over. They
were shipping too much, whereas now they don’t have enough.

LC: Meaning the guys in…

LS: We don’t have enough people either and it’s all the result of they wanted an
all volunteer force.

LC: Right and you mentioned earlier the Reserves have been called and are being
deployed for basically unlimited times. Some of them have been given limits but then the
limits have been withdrawn and they are still over there.

LS: They call that a contract but the way they right it, you can’t win.

LC: I don’t know that for a fact but that sounds right to me.

LS: Oh they had copies of this one individual that was suing the Army or the
Department of Defense; they had copies of these forms and regulations printed in our
paper. I should have saved that. That was about two weeks ago. That’s gone now.

LC: Interesting though. Can you draw any sort of strategic parallels between the
two cases?

LS: The only thing that is similar is you don’t know the enemy. They are not in
uniform. They too were that way up to a point in Vietnam. When North Vietnam sent,
after 1973 when they sent everybody in on it or even before that. We had inklings and
some contacts with the North Vietnamese Army or NVA they use to call it. I wasn’t
involved in any of that. Remember I didn’t get shot at.
LC: Right. I just wonder if thinking back and you know you’ve had time to think
about, if anything strikes you as similar.
LS: That’s the part where the similarities are. Everybody is wearing civilian
clothes that you’re fighting. You don’t know who to fight, who to shoot. And when you
kill one of them they right away say you’re killing civilians. We shouldn’t be putting that
on TV either.
LC: What do you think about the coverage of the Iraq invasion?
LS: There is too much. We have reporters in with the troops. They say, “Deeply
embedded.” I like that terminology. I don’t think that should be allowed. Number one
you got a real problem in that he’s a civilian so somebody’s got to watch out for him to
take somebody else out of the fight. I use that word in a general way. I don’t mean there
is a fight going on all the time.
LC: Right, but certainly he’s got some minder there whose watching him.
LS: Yes, and they still get hurt.
LC: Oh sure, absolutely.
LS: I don’t know why they decided to do this.
LC: You mean go into Iraq?
LS: Not to go into Iraq. That I think we should have done and done the same thing
that I said we should have done in Vietnam, we’re not doing enough again. It’s the same
old story. We’re in a little area here. We take care of it and then we move to another area
and where we left is filled in again. It’s like you’re trying to clean up an oil spill and you
clean here and then you move on to the next area and where it is and then you clean there
but the first area got some more.
LC: Would you say that the problems that stem from that are really the…lie with
the military commanders or decision makers?
LS: No they are under the direction of the politicians, just like Vietnam. They
claim not.
LC: But they said that in Vietnam as well, didn’t they? I think so.
LS: I don’t believe anything a politician or a high-ranking individual in the
military tells me anymore. That’s how bad my mind has gotten over the past 35 years.
LC: Well you said that you had begun to go to the Caribou Association meetings. Is that the only veteran’s group that you’re involved with or are there others?

LS: There are others. There was one I found from the radio network in Korea. They don’t have it; it’s not a formal thing. They just send e-mail back and forth. It’s more of people that were there more recent than I was. I was the only one from 1958 so I stopped answering or contacting them. There wasn’t anything for me to contact. I tried finding others and all I found from the radar site I was stationed at in Port Austin was something called a Great Lakes Radar something or other. I found somebody’s name and e-mail. It actually had an e-mail address with his name that I knew. In fact he is from North Carolina but he said his daughter lives in Charleston and for that first reunion that I went to a year and a half ago, or a little over a year ago in Charleston, he said he might be in Charleston at that time and maybe we could get together. Then all of a sudden the e-mails stopped. I sent some and I never got answered. Him being older then I am anything could have happened. He could have passed on for all I know. That’s what I like about this Caribou group. If somebody passes on, or the information gets to them they put it on the website.

LC: Yes, they are organized.

LS: They are very organized. Nothing seems to be happening right now. I try checking it about once or twice a week. There isn’t much going on right now.

LC: Now by checking it you’re meaning that you’re checking their internet website?

LS: Yes. I go to the website. I go for latest news or latest something or another and click on that and then I go down to the bottom of the page. It has the date of the last time it was updated. If the date changed from the last time I remember looking at it then I go searching.

LC: This is a tough time of year. Things tend to fall off a little bit. Where is their next meeting, do you know?

LS: They are going to, I think they finalized somewhere in Utah, Hill Air Force Base.

LC: Oh okay.
LS: Because there is a Caribou there that’s in pretty good shape. It’s been refurbished for a museum and our group, mostly the people who, the 537th Squadron whose plane it was at one time donated most of the money to get it painted and it’s suppose to be a dedication kind of ceremony and they are combining that with the reunion.

LC: And Larry is that something that you’re going to try to make time to attend?

LS: It all depends on how my budget is. If nothing happens that I have to spend 3000 or 4000 dollars at the house then I’m going.

LC: Then you’re good to go.

LS: I take it on a year-by-year basis. Because it does cost me a small fortune as far as my budget is concerned. I’m not one of these retired Generals in the group.

(Laughter)

LC: But for you has it been an important connection to make?

LS: I think so. Yes, that and I’ve really enjoyed it too. I take my movies there. I take the tape and if nobody is using the VHS thing I put my tape in. I did it two years in a row and the second time around more people watched it then the first.

LC: I can well believe that having gone to a number of reunions where people were doing that.

LS: I had a request, somebody wanted a copy. I couldn’t turn them down. So I made a copy and mailed it to them. I just mailed it Thursday and I haven’t heard anything back from them.

LC: Larry, thinking about your military service and you’re experience as a Veteran and as someone who has given thought to your own experience and how it fits into, essentially the wider history of this era, is there anything else that you would like to add to the interview that I’ve perhaps forgotten to ask you about?

LS: I don’t even know where to begin again. I can’t think of anything at this point. Was there something that we talked about earlier that we wanted to go back to? I can’t remember that either.

LC: Well I’ve been keeping pretty good notes and I’ve checked my list, checked all my items off the list but I think maybe for today we’ll draw a line here. I want to thank you for your time and for being willing to participate. We really do appreciate it.
LS: Oh I really enjoy it. I enjoy going over old times with somebody younger than me.

LC: Thanks a lot.