Richard Verrone: Okay sir, why don’t we continue, we’ve been talking a little bit about Air America and your time at the ranch. Can you tell me what your specific mission was, as far as the planes that you were working on at the ranch, what were their specific missions over Laos?

Gerald Kumpf: Okay, you know I can’t speak to that directly, everything that I got, I mean it was so classified we weren’t supposed to know what the airplanes were doing. All we were supposed to do was fix the damn things, but of course words gets out and everybody’s curious about what’s going. Essentially our major mission was to support the Hmong, the Montagnards in their efforts to contain the, or draw off if you will the North’s troops into fight, into Laos, especially the Ho Chi Minh Trail portion of it. A lot of people think the Ho Chi Minh Trail was run through Vietnam, but its not, I mean the key to the whole war from Ho Chi Minh’s and General Giap’s positions was Laos. As long as they could run their supplies down through the Laotian mountain they would be able to infiltrate at will and that was what their major goal. The Hmong were there to help contain and draw off their forces to, and to attack the trail wherever they could and run any kind of, I don’t know I guess you could say, what’s the word I’m looking for.

RV: Like a blocking party or a hit and run assaults?
GK: Yes, yes, you’re right, hit and run and things like that, intelligence and what not that they could draw. So in our efforts there, what we’d be doing out of the 21st TASS was essentially doing rice drops and supporting the troops in there. There were quite a number of Montagnards and Thais and the Royal Laotian troops that were working together in there.

RV: Right, did you ever meet any of the Hmong?

GK: Yes, I did. As a matter of fact one of the trips over to Chang Mai I was fortunate to be able to go on one of those, and where they had all the generals’ meeting and they had a big confab. They were really appreciative of America, Air America’s help as we were appreciative of their help, and they kind of threw a benefit part for us, for the troops there one time and so I got to meet and talk with them.

RV: What were your impression of them?

GK: Great people. One other time, this, when I got to know them more, this one trip I got to go into Laos, it was kind of by an accident thing, we had another aircraft that had a problem with oil pressure and I flew in with him and we ended up spending the night in country there.

RV: Wow, under what circumstances?

GK: Well, it was a strange deal. The aircraft, we couldn’t get it back out because we did have an oil pressure problem. It wasn’t an instrumentation problem and we ended up having to change the engine. So we had to wait for the engine to come in and get the engine changed and so we spent the night there. But it was at one of those base camps up right near the foot of the mountains and it was the first time in my life I’d ever been out someplace where literally did not have electricity. This village was totally dark, lit by torchlight, and these people were out here fighting a war for us like that, it was real strange. But during the night I met a lot of people and through an interpreter who had looked us happened to be a mechanic with Air America for 123s, he came up to help change the engine and I talked with a lot of the folks, we were sitting around and they really, really were appreciative of Air America, of course I mean we were their lifeline so, it was interesting. They had an absolute hatred of the North Vietnamese. I guess for centuries now the Vietnamese had been trying to eradicate the hill thripes people. There’s
been basically a program of genocide that had been going on and they were really
grateful that we gave them the wherewithal to fight back.

RV: Did you find that they were a peaceful people that wanted to be left alone or
were they more aggressive?

GK: No, I thought they were peaceful. They were only aggressive in; from the
standpoint of wanting other people to leave them alone is what it was. They had some
strange rituals, I mean they were relatively backward people in a lot of ways but still like
us they had the desire to live and to live as well as they could and to be left alone, but
they were a freedom loving people and that was one things that stands out. They didn’t
want to be subjected to the communist rule if you will, and plus they had another big
hatred which came as a complete surprise to me. I didn’t realize what had happened. I
guess the Vietnamese had come in and kidnapped several thousand of the Montagnards
during the course of ten or fifteen year span before the war, kidnapped these kids and
took them to the North, they even took some of them to Russia from what I understand
and trained them in the insurgencies and all of these things, as sappers and what not and
turned them back against their own people and the Hmong really have a hatred for the
Vietnamese for doing that, which is understandable, take your own kids and turn them
against you.

RV: Yes, do you keep up with the Hmong today, I mean do you think about them
or do you try to read about them?

GK: Every once in a while I do because it’s really strange. When we left, we’ll
talk about that later too but when we left the country, I guess we took out as many as we
could, especially Vang Pao’s advisors and stuff, they shipped them up to Montana and
surprisingly when I went in, over to the university, one of the girlfriends I had, she
worked with the Hmong up there in Montana in a social capacity.

RV: Okay, did you notice when you were there that day and night the weapons
that they had, were they American weapons or did they have their crossbows or was it a
mix or what?

GK: It was a, basically a mix of American and communist. Some of them carried
AK-47s; most of them had American weapons. That was the big thing and it was all
RV: Okay, all right. Now you were flying 123s or 130s, C-130s?

GK: 130s, 130s, but the 123s operated right next door to us off the ramp, I could see what was going on there. The 123s were full-time Air America, they weren’t military supplied aircraft, they were owned by the Air America, CIA operation.

RV: Right, okay. How many flights did you actually take in country, into Laos?

GK: Into Laos, twice, just twice. That one time that I told you about, and another time I went in, it was a similar situation, we had an in-flight problem they couldn’t solve and I went in to get them out. That was the first time I went in on what they call a combat assault landing, man is that exciting. It’s an amazing feat that those pilots do when they do that.

RV: Tell me about it.

GK: You come in high so you can avoid the ground fire right; the small arms fire if anything. So if you’re coming in on a field that’s got any kind of enemy activity around it that’s what they’ll do and essentially you’ll come in, instead of making a downwind leg as they call it where you fly around the field and then come in and land a normal approach. On a short field like that and if you got combat going on down below, they come in almost directly towards the end of the runway off to the side, off to the right or the left or this particular time we happened to be off to the right and you’re off maybe a quarter mile or so and as you get within a few hundred yards of the runway, they reduce the throttle down to next to nothing. They pull back on the stick to go into a stall mode and they stall the aircraft, dip it off on one wing. And the airplane, they call it a falling leaf sometimes, the airplane will fall down sideways, just like taking an elevator, vroom, all of a sudden your stomach is up in your throat and you fall sideways like that and as you come down the airplane makes an arc in the air and skips up on the other wing and then falls back down off the other wing. So you come in very fast, you’re dropping right near the end of the runway and then at the last minute they straighten it out and you’re on the ground. It’s really an amazing feat the way they do that, its all choreographed, coordinated to think like that.
RV: Tell me about these Air America pilots, what were they like, how would you
describe them?

GK: Well, I was thinking about that as a matter of fact while you took a break
and only one of them that I really recall well, Old Bill and he’d been with Air America
forever. I talked to him one time, he started out flying C-46s back in China with CAT I
guess it’s called, and he eventually ended up flying with Air America and he was a hell of
a guy. He wasn’t married, had never been married, he liked to drink a little bit, not a great
deal. He liked brandy and he was the happiest fellow that I ever saw. He was jovial, big,
heavyset guy, could barely fit in the pilot’s seat and never would have made it in the
military but he’s the one that I went in on that combat assault flight with and I’d let that
fellow fly me anywhere. He was fairly old at that time even, probably in his fifties and
which to me then that was old, now it’s young. But he was quite the guy and he was
always ready to fly and loved his movies and loved to take his time off afterward and I
never saw him in anything but this pale blue flight suit that he used to wear all the time.
The rest of them, I don’t recall them, don’t remember much about them but Bill flew our
airplane a lot.

RV: How about their reputation, what did you hear about the Air America pilots?

GK: Good, I never heard anything bad about them and they pranged one of our
airplanes, rest of them have always managed to survive and bring them back. We did
lose one aircraft, that was right at the end of my stint in Naja there. They took one in and
didn’t bring in back and the flight crew never came back, so.

RV: How would you rate the efficiency of Air America versus the Air Force?

GK: How would I do, rate them?

RV: Rate the efficiency as far as just getting to job done, on the ground, in the
air?

GK: I’d say, yes, well because the one that I was with we were Air Force anyway
all the way around, I mean we were wearing civilian clothes but substantially it was
basically the same. We were a little a tighter unit in the Air America portion because
there were fewer of us you know, we went down with nine people total and that was to
cover all the maintenance of the aircraft, stem to stern, top to bottom and we also assisted
in loading, unloading, whatever, all the ground crew functions so it was a little more
efficient from that standpoint, a lot fewer people involved, but only one aircraft or two at
the most so that’s easier to take care of than eighteen or twenty-four.

RV: Okay. How long did you stay at the ranch this first time around?

GK: Well, it was, like I say it was twenty-one days in country and twenty-one
days out and that lasted until we moved from Okinawa, went to CCK in Taiwan and they
closed up the operation there at Okinawa, the 21st TASS and we didn’t even, the airplanes
no longer went down there, we were flying C-130 B Models at that time and when they
moved down to CCK they switched over to the E Model.

RV: Okay, now did you fly back into Takhli or did you go to Udorn or Ubon?

GK: Udorn and Ubon both, kind of split halfway in between those. I went back to
Takhli only once after that loss in CCK. When they first moved to CCK I didn’t go with
them immediately. As they were closing up the base, they closed down our operation and
they just started up the new one, but new people up at CCK, but when I got orders to go
to CCK, right after they closed up Okinawa I requested to get back into E-Flight and they
let me back in there.

RV: Okay, did you have sign any new papers or did you just go right back in?

GK: Yes, I had to re-sign the, go through the top-secret security clearance thing
again and all that with the new commander and all that. It wasn’t a big thing; I was out
only maybe forty-five days before I got back in from the time I was out and back in.

RV: Okay. What kind of background checks did they do, do you know?

GK: Yes, as a matter of fact my father and mother got a hold of me and when, it
was in between, I went home on leave when they closed up Okinawa, I went back home
on leave for a few days. I was back about two weeks I guess and I came back home and
my dad asked me, he says “What the hell did you do, rob a bank, what?” He says, “The
FBI was all over this town talking to everybody about you.” So they did a pretty
thorough check I guess, went and talked to individual people about me and all of that,
previous employers, friends, what not.

RV: What did you tell your dad when he asked that?

GK: Oh, I just, no, they were just checking for my top secret security clearance,
then he said, “What are you doing?” and I said, “Well, I can’t tell you.”

RV: So when you get back to CCK, tell me kind of what happened there.
GK: Well, I got back into CCK and the operation there was a whole lot different of course different commanders, and all of this and it was a little bigger operation. I think they had more aircraft and different things that they were doing. The tightness of the unit had slipped away somehow or another. Everybody when we were at 21st back at Okinawa was real tight, we hung together, partied together and all of that stuff all the time and now we got a mixed crew, mixed bag of people coming from different places, there were only about three or four of us left from Okinawa that got back into it. The rest of them are all new people, didn’t know what the heck was going on and kind of feeling their own way around. So it just, it didn’t gel quite as well.

RV: What rank were you at this time?

GK: Oh, let’s see I was a staff sergeant and I made tech sergeant, when did I make tech sergeant, while I was at CCK I think, so I was a staff sergeant then.

RV: And this again, for the record this is April ’71 to August ’72, is that right?

GK: Yes, that’s about right.

RV: Now when did you TDY into Udorn and Ubon, when did this happen?

GK: Well that was same, it’s like when we got.

RV: Same thing?

GK: Yes, it was basically the same thing, twenty-one days in, twenty-one days, out and the only difference was rather than being at the Ranch where were totally civilian and looked at as Air America employees versus military employees, went into Udorn and Ubon, it wasn’t quite the same. They stuck us, sometimes downtown, depending on what was going on around base. Sometimes they stuck us in barracks on the base in the corner someplace. We still worked in civilian clothes and all of that, but they tended to try and control us more, like the military does whereas when we were at Naja we were basically here, you guys are civilians and you go do your thing and we’ll not bother you. Then all of a sudden here they’re trying to stick all these military restrictions on us and complicating things beyond no end.

RV: Did you have the same duties?

GK: Essentially, yes. It was essentially the same duties, just different locations and with the quarters and everything were ragged. They stuck us when we were, for example at Ubon or Udorn, I forget, I always get the two confused, anyway I even did
then, “We’re going to Ubon.” “Well, which one is that?” But anyway, they were Air
America operations that had been set up, one of them was a, they flew porters out of most
of the time, that’s that little two-seater, three-seater thing that they fly around, little drops
and ferrying people and there are C-147s and T-28s, Texans, and so they weren’t really
set up to handle the big aircraft like a C-130. So we kind of had to squeeze our way in
and when we first started out there, it caused a little bit of problem simply on the ramp.
The one time I remember, I guess it was about our second trip out we flipped over a C-
147 that they had sitting on the ramp, C-130s coming in trying to do this back up routine
and turned around and he was backing into a parking spot and the prop wash just caught
the tail end of the C-147 so it took up on his wag. Yes it was too tight and too cramped
so they had to, we co-opted some of the space from, you probably know better than I do,
where was Triple Nickel at, which base was that at?
RV: That was out of Udorn.
GK: Okay, I was in Udorn. We co-opted some of Triple Nickel’s ramp space over
there.
RV: Okay, can you describe the two towns if you can remember looking back; tell
me about Udorn, what was that like?
GK: Well, you know, I don’t know. All I remember is the hotel. We stayed at a
hotel down there and it was a big hotel. It was I don’t know, five stories, sometime like
that and big swimming pool and all that, good dining room and we pretty well just stayed
right there in the hotel. Everything you wanted was right there and I never went
anywhere downtown and we were ferried right directly from our ramp to the hotel by Air
America vehicles so I never really had to go anywhere else.
RV: Okay, same kind of deal at Ubon?
GK: Yes, pretty much the same, except when they try to stick us in the barracks
like I said and they would do that trying, I guess it was cost consciousness or something
like that.
RV: How did you guys get along with the other personnel? You know you were
kind of, you weren’t indigenous to the base, you were coming in and out, in and out, how
did they treat you?
GK: Well, we never really associated with that much, because Air America was always in a compound on the base someplace and it was always well protected and we drove through the base, the main gate and over to the compound and into the compound and that was it, we never really associated with them much. We were discouraged from going to the PX or anyplace like that. I mean there were occasions where we had to but you run out of the stuff but most of the time we didn’t. We just pretty well stayed isolated from it, pretty much so. And of course the military themselves, they never stayed in hotels or anything downtown, they would go down to the whorehouses and never really saw them much.

RV: Okay, can you compare, well first of all tell me about the Thai people themselves, what was your impression of the Thai?

GK: I like them except the way the women talk, its like a bunch chickens chattering and I used to, we used to giggle and laugh about that sometimes because sometimes you get a bunch of Thai women together and they start to chattering away and it sounds just like a bunch of chickens squawking. But other than that they were fine, I liked the Thais, they were good people. The guys are, got balls like you can’t believe, you know, they really could kick somebody’s off in a minute if they can’t and I don’t care how big the guy is, they really are, they are something else that way. We ferried a lot of the Thai troops in and out, we were helping the Laotians and what not. I got to meet a few and talk with a few when they come back and they were kind of like us, its really fun to ferry troops back home out of the war zone because they jump down out of the airplane and kiss the ground and they’re glad to be home, just like we do.

RV: Can you compare the Thai with the Vietnamese and the Lao and I guess also with Japanese and the Taiwanese, you got an amalgamation of Asian culture here.

GK: Oh, yes.

RV: What are your thoughts about all the different cultures?

GK: Well, I like them all; you know I’ve been married to two Asian women. I married a Japanese woman and married a Korean woman and went to bed with one of the Thais and Filipinos, yes. I like them all. They all have different idiosyncrasies, some of them, its embedded in their culture, the way they act and react to the world about them but there’s nothing that I dislike about any of them.
RV: Which culture did you feel most comfortable in?

GK: I think probably the Japanese. I got to understand the Japanese more and I
spent so much time on Okinawa and in Japan and those were my first TDYs and all that,
and I learned a little bit of the languages, so I probably had more intimate conversations
with the Japanese as well. That’s probably why, its just simply because I understood a lot
better than the others.

RV: Okay, during your time at CCK and in and out of Udorn and Ubon, is there
any incident that stands out in your mind, anything that when you think back to that time,
that you go, oh yes, this is, I remember this specific guy or this specific thing or was it a
blur?

GK: Pretty much a blur until, there’s one thing that I remember but that doesn’t
happen until '75 down at Khorat, but I’ll remember that. That was the day Saigon fell.

RV: We’ll talk about that, we’ll get to that.

GK: But the rest, yes, its pretty much a blur. It was hard work, hard partying and.

RV: What would you guys do for entertainment?

GK: In Thailand yes, just partied with the girls a lot and drank a lot. By that time
too marijuana was a big thing, especially in our unit too. I mean even the officers did
that, marijuana. Hard drugs, nobody did. I don’t know of anybody that did. A lot of the
guys drank, but most of the guys smoked, we all had parties together and you’d go to a
guy who had had this party on the off trips. It was always fun, everybody always brought
a boot of weed back with them and they would share it with their friends and then we
came over. Like I said we all partied together and he’d have joints rolled in a bucket on
the bar and everybody had a bar in their house, it was just a naturally accepted thing. Of
course it wasn’t much different back here in the States either. My brother was telling me
about that. He’d go to a party and everybody’d be smoking, but we just had better grass
over there.

RV: Right, right. That’s what I hear actually.

GK: Yes, it was good stuff. The first time, the first time I encountered any kind
of drugs at all was at Chang Mai, the trip that I told you I went up there on that one night,
and what it was, it was in the food. They had opium duck. They seasoned it with opium,
kind of a glaze that they put on the duck. I ate that and then, wow, it was weird, I was on cloud nine all night.

RV: Best duck you’ve ever had.
GK: Yes, best duck I ever had. The only time I ever liked duck. And then one of the guys had told me about that and he says, “Well here, try this. This is what they call Buddha weed” it was basically a Thais stick that they call it, which is, you probably heard about all these things, right, the Thai stick with the bricks that they used for ink and all that. Well what they would do is they would spray it with opium solution of some kind and then when you smoke that you really get a super mellow high, so that’s how I got started on that stuff. One thing that was interesting though, is we treated it, and I think every officer probably had done that too, you never, ever did that stuff during daytime or working hours. It was always after the shop was closed down and it was party time at night and by midnight it was all cut off.

RV: Did you guys ever associate with the fighter jocks or any of the other personnel that were on the base with you?
GK: Nope, never did. We were so isolated and of course we had been indoctrinated to avoid them as much as possible.

RV: Why was that?
GK: To keep this war secret in Laos you know, that’s it, the whole secret war. They didn’t want anybody to know what we were doing I guess.

RV: Looking back do you think that we could have done things differently for Laos? Should we have not neutralized the country or do you think that with neutrality we should have had more covert operations?
GK: Well, I don’t know. The covert ops that went in there, military action wise I don’t know much about it at all. I’ve heard about some of the things that went on, ours was just to support the Hmong. In hindsight I think that we probably did just about the right thing. Otherwise, if we would have gone in there, into Laos with the military forces, I mean Ho had the whole damn Ho Chi Minh Trail running up and down there. I mean its not just one trail when people think of that. Its like a damn tree branch its you know going every direction. He was running his own supplies down into Laos anyway to support his troops, so I think all it would have done was remove that buffer between
communists and Thailand and Thailand probably would have been right up against it, they’d be coming across the Mekong and fighting there the next thing you know. So it was probably a good thing just to do it the way they did it. That’s my personal opinion.

RV: Okay, okay. Were you flying the same kind of things, the rice and the food mainly the second time around or?

GK: Yes, but we also got into some hardware drops then. The war was getting heated up and Ho had been really making incursions down into Laos and hitting our radar sites and stuff there. So there were often times that where we did end up flying in ammo and stuff. It didn’t, ammo wasn’t a daily occurrence, our main mission was still flying in food but there were a couple times we were snuck right over a stockpile of weapons and ammunition and snuck a load out. When they did that it was funny, because they had, I don’t know how the Air America, the whole operation, they would have different flight crews that would come out and fly the hardware and rice drops and system, rice drop.

RV: Did you see any Air American airplanes flying opium anywhere?

GK: No, I didn’t. I never did.

RV: Did you hear about it?

GK: Yes, I’ve heard about it and I don’t know whether that’s true or not. You know it may be but as far as I know its not happened. If it did it would be amongst the smaller planes, the ones that go hopping around the country, I don’t know where they did it. We never did, I don’t see any reason for it. Our planes usually just flew the supplies in and flew back home; they never did much hopping around in country.

RV: Right. Have you seen the movie Air America?

GK: Yes, we have, we laugh at that.

RV: Okay, what do you think about that?

GK: It’s a joke. It has nothing to do with what Air America was really like. I mean we had a few crazy guys and we did a few crazy things ourselves, but nothing like that.

RV: Okay. So after CCK and Taiwan, you came back to the States, is that correct?

GK: Yes, we left CCK, yes went to Castle Air Force base in California.
RV: How different was it for you to be back in the United States on a duty station or back permanently stationed at Castle, how bad of a, or how much of a transition was it for you?

GK: Well, it was kind of like getting back into the military all of a sudden. You know I’d been some used to flying with Air America and having, making all the decisions on our own, essentially to all of a sudden here we all are back taking orders again and it is a transition, it’s a little shock. You lose your independence and all of a sudden spit and polish, plus I’m back into SAC, which is the worst all of the Air Force again as far as disciplines goes, they want everybody to be a carbon copy of everybody else. It was, yes it was a strange situation.

RV: What did you do at Castle, what were your duties?

GK: I worked at the instrument shop there and at that time they were starting to, the Air Force was getting away from their separation, isolation, I don’t know what you’d call it, the various disciplines, you know I mean, instead of having somebody take care of this instrument, somebody take care of that instrument, you’ve got one guy to take care of them both right. So that’s what they were doing, they were starting to get back into that mode of that specialization, that’s the word I was looking for, and get rid of so many specializations. And so that was interesting, so it kept me busy and working and I was a shift supervisor at the time, volunteered for night shift, stayed on the night shift as much as possible, and that way I could be in charge without all these officers hanging around and telling me what to do.

RV: Did you still have an aversion to officers?

GK: Yes, I always have. Well, not really there’s a lot of officers in both military, Marines and the Air Force that I really liked and I really respected, but there’s a lot of them that shouldn’t be in charge of a Boy Scout troop, let alone military organization.

RV: Okay. How did you deal with those guys personally, did you just try to avoid them?

GK: Exactly, yes, that’s what you try and do. Work around them, work over them, work under them, just avoid them as much as you can. Most of them that I dislike are the micro-managers. I like the ones that say here’s the task, go do it. The ones that try to micromanage you, those are the ones you really have to try to avoid.
RV: Right. Now when you were at Castle, that’s when the United States permanently pulled out of South Vietnam, technically January ’73. What did you feel about that, how did you feel when the United States was out of the war, directly out of the war I guess I should say?

GK: I thought it was a mistake, like probably everybody did.

RV: A mistake to pull out or a mistake to be there?

GK: Yes, a mistake to pull out, you know this peace with honor thing really wasn’t and we all knew that. There’s no way that the South could continue on the war without the U.S. support. I mean the North’s got the entire China and Russia supporting them and here’s the poor South with nothing, we’re just leaving them with a few helicopters and some artillery pieces and walk away and say okay, here’s peace. Yes, right. How long is that going to last?

RV: So you did not have much faith in the Vietnamization policy?

GK: No, not at all. Nobody did. I mean anybody’s that been there and they saw what was going on, would say this is a farce.

RV: Was that because of what you witnessed in the Vietnamese or is that because of the nature of the war itself?

GK: Both, both.

RV: Okay, how so, can you explain that?

GK: Well, the Vietnamese attitude themselves, I mean they’re war-weary by now. You know, especially after the Americans were over there. They had a relatively stable period probably for ten years in between the time the French left and the Americans got totally involved, and then all of a sudden we come back in and its total war again. So they’ve been, put them through hell and they were getting war weary, but they knew that they couldn’t stop any kind of communist aggression at all, and the communists had never kept their word on anything anyway. They’re no better at it than we are. So you go in there and say okay, well and plus you allow them to leave their damn forces in the country when you leave, what do you expect, geez? Yes, they knew that they wouldn’t be able to hold them off forever, they would just bide their time for awhile and let the international community forget about them a little bit and they were going to walk in and of their thing, exactly what happened.
RV: How much did you keep up with the war when you were out of country?

GK: More than I did when I was in.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, yes. When I was in, when you’re in it, you’re involved in it, you don’t watch the news, you don’t do anything. You’re just so friggin busy and when you’re not busy, you’re busy playing because you just want to forget where you’re going, but when you get out of it and you get away, then you become curious again, plus you have more time to do things. And so yes, I pretty well stayed glued in front of the TV news then. And its funny because when I got to Castle, that was the first time I really realized how much news coverage was going on. I mean most people in America saw more combat than I did because they saw it nightly on the TV and I was just too close. I couldn’t see the forest for the trees. But when you get back away from it then you get to see what’s really going on. Yes, I remember lots of nights sitting and watching the news.

RV: How did that affect you emotionally, seeing so much coverage, seeing that combat on TV?

GK: It was, it made me angry a lot of times. One of the things was, because you know I’ve seen things that happened and I remember some riot that happened. This was the first time, this happened in Okinawa and the Japanese were protesting American presence in Japan right, and they were trying to kick us out. This was going on the same time the Vietnam War was, and they had big protests going on in Namnue, it’s a GI bar town outside of Naja, Okinawa. And I lived in an apartment down there, this was when I was in Air America too. Anyway, I lived in an apartment down there so I was out on the balcony watching this protest going on in the street, and there was a minor scuffle that led on between a couple of GI, or bar owners rather, not GIs, bar owners and the people were protesting the American presence there, and I saw it take place and it just lasted thirty seconds, forty-five second or whatever little push and pull between a couple of people but then I saw the damn thing on the news that night and of course the camera was right down there in their faces and man, it just exploded that little, bitty tiny situation into international news all of a sudden. So that’s one of the things that made me angry when I see the news because the news tends to, especially pictorial news tends to sensationalize any minor situation.
RV: Do you need to take a break?
GK: Pardon.
RV: I’m sorry, I thought you needed to take a break, my mistake. What did you think of the media coverage overall of the Vietnam War?
GK: Well, I couldn’t say because I didn’t see much of it other than the Stars and Stripes, that’s about the only thing we got to see over there. Every once in a while a flight crew from the States would bring in a newspaper, you could read through that, but that wasn’t that frequently and if they did usually those newspapers would disappear really quickly by somebody that was directly involved in landing or manipulating the aircraft so I never got to it. So my news was restricted basically to the Stars and Stripes which covered you know little crappy things that were going on. I remember I made the front-page news when I got my bonus and re-enlisted. I had the biggest bonus that they had ever given out for re-enlisting at one time, yes.

RV: I was going to ask you about the Japanese in Okinawa, and you said you liked that culture more than others, but yet this was a, the Japanese have always kind of resented our occupation of Okinawa. How much of that did you see, this resentment, the problem that’s ongoing even now?
GK: I saw quite a bit of it. My ex-wife, Japanese, she was Okinawan; her father was the governor of Okinawa.
RV: Really?
GK: Yes, and it was prior to reversion to Japan, and so I talked to a lot of people about it and it was kind of a spilt on Okinawa. A lot of people did not want to go back, revert to Japanese rule. They wanted to stay under American rule and/or get their own independence, and that was probably actually the majority of the people that wanted that. The reason the reversion actually took place was political in nature between the United States and Japan itself versus the will of the Okinawan people. They had very little to say in it.

RV: Did you find the Okinawan people friendly toward you personally?
GK: For the most part, for the most part. There are some of course that hated Americans and would have liked us to get out, but they were the very minority. Most of the Okinawan people like American people and were willing to say so and they liked our
presence there. I mean, you know Okinawa survived on the American military for a long
time and they still do to a great deal because in Kadena it’s still going on.

RV: Yes, and you went back to Kadena in March ’74 after your time at Castle in
California.

GK: Yes, I did.

RV: Now, how did that transfer come about, was it just your unit being
transferred?

GK: No, I volunteered to go back. I wanted to go back over. See my wife didn't
like America. She did, she didn’t mind America but she was just, she was so homesick
and wanted to go back so bad and so I volunteered to go back.

RV: And you stayed quite awhile?

GK: Yes, the vast majority, I think I came back to the States once in ’79 to go to
Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina and then went back over to Korea then.

RV: Did your wife come back with you in ’79?

GK: No, she didn’t. She wouldn’t come back. She had a business by that time.

We bought her a beauty salon, bought a building and all of that, so she wanted to stay and
run her business there.

RFV: How did your parents, your family feel about you spending so much time
overseas especially in Asia?

GK: That depends. My mom and dad, they were both dead by that time. They
both died in, Mom died in ’74, ’75 and my dad died in ’73, two years before. But my
sister, she was fine, she says “You like it over there because you can control those
Oriental women. They’ll do what you say.” Which is actually totally wrong. Oriental
women, it’s basically a matriarchal society over there so they’re used to a lot of power.

Both my wives, they controlled the paycheck you know.

RV: Now tell me about some of the TDYs you had on your March ’74 to
November ’79 stay at Kadena, you went all over Southeast Asia. Tell me, did you go
back into Vietnam at all?

GK: No, never got back into Vietnam. We did go to Thailand a couple times
again and I went to Philippines a lot. I went down to Australia, New Zealand, stopped in
New Guinea once, places like that. It was basically military exercises again because you
know outside of the war, we were preparing for war again.

RV: Did you do the same kind of thing, were you still aircraft support?
GK: Yes.

RV: And I take it because you stayed with it so long that you enjoyed that.

GK: I did, yes I did. I enjoyed the travel. I enjoyed going to different places. I
volunteered for every TDY I could get, and I enjoyed fixing airplanes.

RV: Okay. You were going to tell me about an incident, I think in Thailand
during this last tour and I think perhaps it’s the fall of South Vietnam and where you
were, how you felt, what was happening around you?

GK: Well it was in ’75, when Saigon, when the North had attacked again. We
went F-4s, I was in an F-4 outfit at Kadena and we went down to Khorat to fly cover for
the withdrawal of the embassy there, flying all those helicopters, you got all those
pictures. Initially they were also fly 141s out of Tan Son Nhut and before the communists
closed the runway with their fire, and so we were, went down to support the aircraft and
we flew cover missions out of Khorat Thailand with armed force and our unit was there.
Our pilots all came back remember off the last mission that night after the embassy fell.
They all came back empty, there wasn’t a bomb or a missile left on their airplanes, they
all wanted to fire the last shot of the war, so they hit at anything they could on the way
out. They all dove down in and they talked about, one of the guys, I talked to one of the
pilots, he claims he got the last hit of the war.

RV: Oh, yes?

GK: Yes, he fired a sidewinder of all things, [?]. Yes, the sidewinder of course if
people don’t know is an air-to-air missile, seeker.

RV: How did you feel with the fall of South Vietnam?

GK: That was the night that the entire base, I mean it was the strangest, strangest
night of the war, what can I say. We all felt super sad, everybody, the town of Khorat
down there was just packed with GIs, everybody was down there getting drunk,
screaming and yelling and having a strange time. I think we were not celebrating
anything other than maybe the end of an era and of a time, end of the war. We knew,
finally there, the sad way is the loss, and we felt somehow that we let everybody down, all the GIs did.

RV: Still feel that way today?

GK: Yes, yes. You know I felt the same way when we pulled out, when Air America pulled out, we stopped in our operation. We’re leaving them; we’re letting them rot on the vine. They’re not going to survive by themselves.

RV: Were you able to ever say good-bye to people, to the Thai or to the Hmong?

GK: No.

RV: You just leave, you just left.

GK: We left, that’s it. One day we didn’t come back and I can imagine how they felt.

RV: How difficult was that for you?

GK: It was bad; you know I still cry about it.

RV: Were you surprised at the rapidity of the fall of South Vietnam?

GK: No, no, not when it came. I’m just surprised that they waited that long before they came in. They were strong enough to come back in hell; the day after we left they could have done it. It was just a political decision on their part to wait, I’m sure. You know keep the international community off their back. Because you know I mean it was a negotiated peace, right?

RV: You mentioned a little while ago the term peace with honor; I wanted to ask you about that. Did you think the United States achieved peace with honor as the leadership said?

GK: Hell, no. No, especially the honor. If they’d had said we achieved peace, okay that’s fine. We got an interim peace but there was no honor in there at all, none at all. We walked out; we left those people hanging on the vine. We make all kinds of promises, and we’re going to come in here; we’re going to do this, we’re going to do that. We don’t and we really never had a chance to win a war anyway. I mean it really wasn’t a war. What were we trying to do over there, just keep the communists from taking over the south, right? We don’t even go in there and attack their country other than drop a few bombs around Hanoi, you’re not going win a war that way.

RV: What would you have advocated differently?
GK: Well, if you’re going to go for it, if you could have kept the Chinese out, what I would have done is I would have started negotiating with the Chinese and say, “We’re not coming to your borders.” You know the Chinese have got their history, they always have to have a buffer country between them and any potential aggressor, and to them Vietnam was the bloc and they wanted, but if we could have negotiated with them, say, “Hey, stay the fuck out and let us go in there and we’ll just take down the North, take down their military structure and show them what capitalism can do for them.”

Capitalism works. I mean is got a hell of a lot of withdrawals but I’ve seen it work. I was in Japan in ’61 and I saw what happened between ’61 and ’71. I mean a ten-year span; I mean capitalism made that country jump a notch. I’ve seen the same thing happen in Taiwan when we went there. The living conditions of ninety percent of the people improve, the living conditions of ten percent of the people deteriorate, let’s put it that way, and I figure a ninety to ten ratio is not too bad.

RV: So would you have advocated an invasion basically of the North or just do whatever was necessary?

GK: Yes, that’s what I would have done. I mean, its what happened in World War II, if you’re going to take down an enemy you’ve got to take him down. You’ve got to take the war to him; you’ve got to fight him to the end. If you don’t they’re going to do what’s happening in the world now, look at Saddam Hussein.

RV: How many people, when you came back, I guess after the war you were in Okinawa and then when you came back to Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina, how many people asked you about the Vietnam War, discussed it with you?

GK: Nobody.

RV: Why do you think that is?

GK: Want to forget it; everybody wants to forget it or they don’t care, apathy.

RV: Why do you think they don’t care or why do you think they want to forget it?

GK: Well, I think they don’t care simply because we often don’t care and nobody cares really as long as you’re happy and you got your rice bowl filled and you’re going about your business. Why bring up upsetting subjects, you know, and so that’s probably the apathy part of it. Those who want to forget were directly involved in it and no longer,
you know they got too many bad memories, they don’t want to bring them up, feel bad about them. I was real, a lot of trepidation in my mind here just doing this interview.

RV: Really?

GK: Yes, it frightened me a little bit; do I really want to talk about this?

RV: How has it been for you to talk about it all again?

GK: Oh, it’s not bad. In a way it’s probably cathartic to do it. I think, its funny, I never, it never upset me of course nobody ever talked about it much except a few GIs every once in a while, some of us GIs would sit around and talk about, no civilians at all would ever ask us about it. But nobody was ever afraid or upset or cried or anything all the time I was there, anything I was in. But after, god we get to talking about it, the next thing you know we’re all sobbing in our beer. What the hell is going on here?

RV: Do you think that the United States lost that war?

GK: No, we didn’t lose the war, we gave it away. I mean we could still be there fighting, if we want to keep fighting it the same way we were. If we wanted to win it, we had to definitely do something different.

RV: How many lessons do you think the United States government learned in Vietnam?

GK: None, we’re still making the same mistakes.

RV: Really, how so?

GK: Well look at, here we are talking about going back to war with Kuwait, or Iraq again, an incomplete job. Well, what the hell. Didn’t we learn about incomplete jobs in Vietnam? We haven’t learned. The same thing in Korea, look what’s going on in Korea, we haven’t learned anything.

RV: You spent some time in Korea too, this is your last year I believe, or a little over a year.

GK: Yes, the last year I was in about thirteen or fourteen months, something like that, fifteen months.

RV: What prompted you to get out of the military?

GK: To retire?

RV: Yes.
GK: I told myself one time; I didn’t like lifers. You know there’s a difference between a career man and a lifer. A lifer is somebody who’s just all, just do it by the book and nothing exists but the book, and will not look at any ideas, new ways of doing things. I remember it was, I was toying with the idea of re-enlisting, going for thirty years, not longer, getting out and I was running a support section at the time, support section supervisor and this young lady came up, she had a good idea, she says, “Why don’t we put multi-meters in all the toolboxes?” Well of course, I mean it was financially impractical to do that, plus damping takes up too much room and I says, I says to her, “Well that’s a stupid idea” essentially that’s what I said to her. And after she left she got a real hurt look on her face and I said, “What the hell are you doing?” You’re not talking to a machine here, that’s a human being, use a little logic. I said, you’re turning into a lifer and I didn’t like that. I says I got to change occupations here, I’m turning into a lifer and I really was because I had things up and it was running so freaking smooth, I could take a week off and come back and everything would still be flowing smoothly and I thought that was great and I didn’t want to change and that’s the point where I knew I was in trouble and I decided I better try something new in life.

RV: Do you miss the military or did you miss it?

GK: Oh, yes for a long time, yes. I used to, I still do once in a while, I go onto a military base, it’s like coming home.

RV: Have you suffered any PTSD since your time in Southeast Asia?

GK: Yes, yes I did for a while. There were a couple things I haven’t told you about. Yes.

RV: Do you want to take a break?

GK: No, no.

RV: Are you okay?

GK: Yes, yes. It was just flashes, memories coming back.

RV: How do you think a . . . Go ahead, go ahead?

GK: No, I was just, you were asking about PTSD. Yes, it hit me real bad about I guess a guy goes through a mid-life crisis, and all of a sudden I was acting like a weepy woman for a long time. You know I just, the littlest thing and all of a sudden I’d be sitting there crying for no reason and I couldn’t figure out what the hell was going on. It
was weird. It lasted for about a year and a half, maybe two years, and I finally talked to
somebody about it.

RV: Was that another veteran?

GK: Yes.

RV: Did you find that your experience was common?

GK: Yes, yes, quite a bit, a lot of guys. One of my professors at the university he
was teaching a course in Vietnam history, and he showed a movie to me, he says, “Come
in the office Gerald, let me show you something.” And it was me.

RV: It was you?

GK: No, it wasn’t me but I mean in this guy.

RV: You saw yourself.

GK: Yes, I saw myself in it, yes. I said, oh, that’s what’s happening and it was
about posttraumatic stress disorder. He recognized the symptoms in me. So that was an
eye opener. So I did a little studying on it, work your way through it. I guess it
something you never get over, forever. I mean I’ve seen, watch the History Channel, see
these old World War II vets doing the same thing, yes.

RV: Well most veterans I have spoken with have said that that was a life-
changing event for them. No matter what they were doing really there, whether they
were in the rear or in the front or somewhere in between. How do you think the war has
most affected your life, the time you spent in and out of the war?

GK: I don’t know. It made me even more of a pacifist I think then I was before,
that’s it, if anything.

RV: Okay. What would you say was the most significant thing you learned about
yourself there?

GK: You know, I don’t know. I was talking with my son about that the other
night. I really, inside myself I don’t feel much different now than I did when I was ten
years old. My philosophy of life and my attitudes toward life and everything had pretty
much been set since then. Other than the fact like I said, I think the older I get, the more
pacifistic I get and that started actually back in the war. I mean I’m definitely against war.
If there’s any way to avoid it let’s avoid it, but if we have to fight it, let’s fight it to win.
RV: Right. Is there anything that you would change about your experience, besides better food at Da Nang?

GK: That’s a good start. Well, you know I’m happy where I’m at, so if the trail has to be followed to get where I’m at in the same way no, I wouldn’t change anything. If I could get to the same place I’m at by a different route, yes. If we could avoid the whole nasty situation; in hindsight we sit here and say, well we were stopping the communist aggression, whatever, there’s only three communist countries left in the world. It was falling under its own weight. If we could have seen that and just let it do it, but I don't think it would have. I think if we didn’t do what we did in Vietnam and say “Hey, we are drawing the line in the sand here and we’ll stick by that,” then I think during that ten years a lot of things changes; of course Russia getting involved in Afghanistan and all of that. It all slowly revolved around, say, “Hey, we’re going about this the wrong way, we don’t need to fight all these wars.” Now, the big powers have learned that, we have to teach George Bush and a few of the smaller powers.

RV: Looking back at your service, how do you feel about your service today?

GK: You mean about the quality of it or what?

RV: Well just, just what comes to mind?

GK: Well I think, you know I served my country and that was one of the things I wanted to do, but there’s a lot of people would disagree. They would probably say what I did was wrong, but I think what I did was right and I think what we did was right. I don’t think we should have just let communism roll over the country there. I’m pretty sure their philosophy was basically Khrushchev’s idea at that time was this two-step forward and one step back thing. Let the world community cool its heels for a while and then we’ll go in there and keep on rolling until we take over the world. And I think if they would have been able to do that easily, they would have continued doing that until they would have been at our shores. So I think what we did do, it was psychologically if not physically an appropriate thing.

RV: If you had to talk to say a group of college students today, or the younger generation about the Vietnam War, what would you tell them about that?

GK: Well, basic, I don’t know. I’d probably avoid it. I wouldn’t say anything, just like everybody else, wouldn’t even bother. No, I would say that we made mistakes
there but I don’t think we were wrong to have gone there. I think the way that we got there may have been wrong, supporting puppet regimes and all of this, rather than letting the people themselves decide. I think the South Vietnamese people for the most part did want us there. They had their detractors and the people who preferred to go the communist route, but I think they were in the minority they were very vocal and the Buddhist monks burning themselves didn’t help, but I think that say, okay here’s what we need to do and if we would have gone into Vietnam or go into any war, such as we’re doing, we have to have a clear cut goal. Let’s say that the North is the aggressor, they are aggression into the South, these are two separate countries by United Nations mandate. And they’d been separated by treaty that they are separate countries, they are not one and they don’t need to be joined again, and you’ve got the North physically coming down and attempting by war to join two countries and that’s wrong. It’s the same as if Canada decides they want to be part of the United States and they attack us, what are you going to do? I say, all right now, so we have a declaration of war and that makes that you can take on the aggressor in his own territory and let’s don’t create artificial barriers here. Again, this is a very simplistic view; you’ve got China to worry about and all this and we know what China does when you get close to their borders, if we remember our history from Korea that is.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?

GK: Well, they’re struggling and they’re eventually going to give away the name communism and become like the rest of Asia. They’re going to want a piece of the pie as well I think. They do right now. I think that we embargoed them for too long. It was terrible, a few years back I was reading. In a country that developed paper and a lot of people don’t realize that, paper was invented in Vietnam, they didn’t have enough paper to print their own schoolbooks and that’s terrible. The embargo placed on simply because they have the name communist behind them.

RV: Would you ever want to go back?

GK: No, I have no desire to go back to Vietnam. Vietnam never did, probably of all the, the Pearl of the Orient there, they talk about other than Saigon is the rest of it, I had pigsties I’d rather go visit.

RV: Okay, what about Thailand or?
GK: Oh, yes every once in a while I get the urge to go back to Thailand but now AIDS is so rampant over there, who wants to go near it and all of the Asian countries, the Philippines the same way. That poor country there with their communist problem, not, basically, they call themselves communist, but the Muslin problem as well but there’s lot of little reasons I don’t want to go, but then again I would like to, maybe a nostalgic trip. Of course I’ve got to realize that I’m three times older than I was then, my perspective’s going to change.

RV: Any good books on Vietnam that you’ve read, on the war?

GK: Yes, there’s one. Its just called *A History of Vietnam*, I like that it’s pretty straightforward, it doesn’t look at the political analysis as much; it just gives a basic straightforward history of it.

RV: Okay, how about movies on Vietnam, do you go see those?

GK: I’ve seen a couple, nothing that’s really impressed me other than *Full Metal Jacket* was the most interesting, but I think that was more from the first half of the movies. It’s basically two movies and a half, and the second part, one of the things that really was interesting to me was the reaction to the Marines. The first time they were in combat. Its, when I think about it, you know back then when the four Vietnamese, the Vietnamese that were killed on my watch, yes it was more of a feeling of glee than remorse or regret or any kind of humanitarian look at it. You don’t say, there’s the enemy, we killed them, hey good job, that’s what we’re trained to do. But now I’m sure my outlook would be different.

RV: Have you ever been to the memorial in Washington?

GK: No, I never have.

RV: Would you like to go?

GK: I don’t think so. I went, the traveling Wall came through Laramie when I was there, I went to that, but its, no I’m beyond it. I’m not into that kind of thing. I mean its nice that the GIs have something to say here, and there’s a bit of your past, bit of your history, something to memorialize it for you but I don’t know, I just don’t want to.

RV: Okay, okay. Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?
GK: No, as a matter of fact I haven’t. Well I take that back, I play tennis with a
Vietnamese guy. He was young, he’s a young fellow and he has very little recollection of
the war. He was like four years old when he left so de doesn’t know much about it, I
know more about it than he does.

RV: Right, okay. Well, sir is there anything else that you want to talk about today
or add to our conversation?

GK: Well, you know one thing that is interesting to me anyway, from a technical
standpoint is after the war how depleted the military hardware was and how long it took
to get it replenished. It wasn’t until Reagan finally decided to spend a little money but
when the Americans withdrew from Vietnam of course after a long ten, fifteen years of
military spending there, the military all of a sudden had a, just shrank to nothing.
Manpower went down to nothing, spare parts went down to nothing and it was a real,
hard struggle to survive militarily in any kind of a usable fashion after the war.

RV: There was also a discipline problem in the Army, especially.

GK: Yes, that’s what I understand and we had some of that in the Air Force too. It
was really, really hard with the, the kids were coming in, the new kids that we were
getting in were just absolutely undisciplined in any regard, many of them and we were
constantly discharging them for unadaptability and what not. It was really bad for a long
time. It really was and drugs were rampant, they were just rampant in the ‘80s, it was
bad. I mean, here’s how bad it was. At Shaw Air Force Base when I went there in ’80,
all of a sudden the windows and doors were getting busted out of the barracks every
weekend. I mean the doors were getting knocked down and all of that. I knew what the
problem was; they had started sending dogs through all the barracks because the drug
problem was so bad. Well the dogs at that time were trained to get on one thing and so all
of a sudden the marijuana disappears out to the barracks, so what are the guys going to
turn to? Well, they want something else; they don't want to just drink. They go to
cocaine, crack starting to come in at that time. Well, you get kids at that stuff and they
just go wild, they go bananas. So the commander he came over, I happened to be, my
wife was overseas, I was there living in the barracks so I was the senior man in the
barracks and the commander come up and he says, “Gerry, you’ve got a big problem
here,” he says, “What are you going to do to fix it?” I said “You keep them goddamn
dogs out of here, we won’t have any problem.” So he says, “Are you sure?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He says, “Okay” so he stopped bringing the dogs through, so I had a big barracks meeting, I said “Okay you guys, the dogs are no longer coming through. The next window that gets broke, the next door that gets broke, you’re going to be out on the street begging with a tin cup.” Those guys went back to smoking grass, left the hard stuff alone and things went back to peace but that’s, I mean that’s a terrible thing to do, but it’s the only way I could solve the problem because drugs were just so rampant everywhere. I mean you go off base people were smoking dope, snorting coke in the bars, in public. I mean I’ve seen kids light up a joint sitting across the street from a cop. I’m serious it was that bad in the ‘80s. So, yes, and I’m sure that had a lot to do with the discipline problems too.

RV: What about the military today, what’s your impression?

GK: Better, much better. Its, the discipline is back; the troops are looking sharp again. I go down to Fort Bliss here, down at Texas and troops down there are looking good, everybody’s back in business and seems to be rather much more orderly than it was here for ten, fifteen years back.

RV: Okay, was there anything else you want to talk about?

GK: That ought to do it.

RV: Okay, well we’ll go ahead and end the interview now with Mr. Gerald Kumpf. Thank you sir.

GK: Thank you.