Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I’m conducting an oral history interview with General Dennis B. Sullivan. Mr. Sullivan is in Colorado Springs, Colorado and I am in Lubbock, Texas at the Special Collections Library interview room. Today is January 30, 2003. Its approximately ten after ten Central Standard Time and sir, we’d like to start this, if you could just give us a little bit of background about yourself, when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood.

Dennis Sullivan: Okay, I was born in 1927 in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. I went to Catholic elementary school and high school in that town. My mother kind of started me a little bit early I guess and I graduated from high school in 1944 during World War II. I was sixteen years old then. In 1945, I enlisted in the Navy, I was a seaman first class. I was probably the last male in our high school class that went into the service at that time. World War II ended while I was still in training with the Navy, but about that time period I had an opportunity to take a competitive exam to try to get an appointment to one of the service academies. My dad had arranged that, so I took a civil service exam and eventually ended up with an appointment to the United States Naval Academy. I went there in 1946, graduated in ’50. During that time, they’d made, established the DoD and made the Air Force a separate service. I was interested in flying and it appeared that, this was before the Korean War, if I would have stayed in the Navy it would have been...
three, four, five years to get into flying training, so I opted for the Air Force. And of
course as soon as I did that, they started the Korean War. I went through pilot training in
1950 at Randolph [AFB] at San Antonio and then out at Williams [AFB] in jets, jets were
pretty early in those days. I had a few T-33s [rides], but mostly old F-80s and upon
graduation there I went through gunnery school up at Nellis [AFB] in Las Vegas and
went over to the Philippines for a short time in a fighter squadron there, which was used
as one of the squadrons to kind of even out the flow into Korea to fly combat tours there
in F-80s. I guess one interesting thing there, in the Philippines, Frank Borman who was
the first astronaut around the moon was a good friend of mine there, and he was also, we
went over there together and then I kind of lost track of him after that, he went into the
astronaut business, but he was a good friend in those days. I flew a combat tour in Korea,
a hundred missions in the F-80 and I guess one of the things that bothers me to this day,
there are four of us that flew together at Williams as one flight going through training.
Two of those guys were killed in Korea, and the other, the third one was killed in
Vietnam, so I’m the sole survivor. After the hundred missions there I came back to the
U.S. and ended up in the Air Defense Command where I stayed for a number of years
and I went through a series of airplanes in Air Defense. I started out with F-86s, the F
model, then ended up 86-Ds. In 1957, we ended up in supersonic airplanes; they started
in F-102s. I flew that for three years in Madison, Wisconsin, then in Newfoundland for a
number of years. After that I went to Command and Staff, Air Force Command and Staff
at Montgomery, Alabama in 1960 and leaving there I went to fly F-106s at McCord Air
Force Base in Washington, another supersonic airplane and a very good airplane as a
matter of fact. 1963, I got a, well it was actually 1962, I got a very strange message. I was
working as assistant Ops officer and a flight commander in that 106 Squadron. I got a one
line message from some obscure office up in the Pentagon and it wanted to know if I
would volunteer for a program of great interest to the Chief of Staff, United States Air
Force, one sentence. I kind of asked around with my commander and other people, I said,
what the heck is this all about and nobody had a clue. So I said, well if they can send me
a short message like that, and the Chief of Staff wants me from something, the only
answer I could send is yes, so I sent back a one word answer, “Yes.” And that triggered
off a whole series of events, all kind of, I went through all kinds of astronaut physicals
[and other extensive testing]; I took about a week and all kinds of things. It culminated in meeting with the CIA guys, they were looking for a few pilots to start flying the [Lockheed] A-12, which was not even really built then, it was almost done. And so in 1963 I was discharged from the Air Force, hired by the CIA, told to move to Los Angeles and get ready to go to work. I ended up at Area Fifty-One north of Las Vegas in the atomic energy site. The A-12 had the first flight in late 1962. When I got there they were just beginning to get into trying to get the airplane operational. The big hold up was engines, so I got there right at the beginning of the thing. We had about eight or nine pilots that were going to fly that thing, so we ended up flying the airplane through the, worked with a few Lockheed guys, but we ended up doing all the flight tests and getting the airplane operational. We lost one of our pilots in an accident during all that testing program there, another good friend, but together we ended up getting the airplane out to past Mach 3 and eighty-five thousand feet or higher and working under all the sub-systems, the cameras and everything else, get the thing operational and a very interesting program, something that nobody else was doing and there was only, as I mentioned, a very limited number of us. The pilots that were flying that airplane operationally, there’s only, there are five of us left, that’s it. But we got the airplane out to speed okay, but the problem was McNamara was the Secretary of Defense, and Johnson announced the airplane at some point in time there, but Mr. McNamara was dead against using it as it was designed to be used. It was designed to overfly Russia as a follow on to the U-2 and we could have flown over China or Russia or any place like that, but nothing happened until about 1967. I think the losses in North Vietnam reconnaissance airplanes, had suffered so high that they decided to deploy us to Okinawa, where they had intended us, they had built a facility there to use anyway, so we went over there and started flying over, primarily North Vietnam on a limited basis.

RV: What year is this?

DS: Well, its generally 1967, in that time period, for about a year or a little more. They folded the program up in 1968, another political decision. What they did was moved the program over to the SR-71, which was a follow on to the A-12, it came along about a year, year and half or two later, same speeds, camera systems in the beginning were not quite as good, it was a heavier airplane, could not fly quite as high and had two
people in it instead of one, but they’re very good airplane nevertheless. I flew that later
one, out of Beale Air Force Base for a while down the road [in the 1970s].
RV: Sir, do you mind, do you mind, before we get into the Vietnam era, do you
mind if we kind of go back and talk about your training and?
DS: Sure, let’s do that.
RV: Okay, first of all, I’m curious, do you have any memories of the Great
Depression, growing up?
DS: Oh, not a whole lot except that when I was a young kid nobody had,
everybody was about the same, nobody had much money or anything like that, but as far
as the family outlook and that, my dad was regularly employed, there was food on the
table, that sort of thing, new clothes and new shoes and stuff like that came by relatively
infrequently. When I was very young I fooled around trying to pick up nickels and dimes
messing around on little jobs. I ended up starting to caddy around a little nine-hole golf
course, you get twenty-five cents for nine holes. So I’d pick up a little money there, fish
golf balls out of the lake and sell them to players on Saturday and Sunday, you know pick
up money here and there, worked in various jobs, worked for a florist for awhile
delivering flowers, things like that. I was fairly young, driving around in an old florist
truck, I was about fourteen years old, lucky I didn’t crash it I suppose.
RV: Yes, sir.
DS: But some of those things hung over into my later life. I ended up at the Naval
Academy for example, I hadn’t swung a golf club in a year or two and I didn’t think I
even knew how to play, but after things got quiet in the fall of the first year, a friend of
mine said, “You play golf?” and I said, “Well, I used to.” We went out and played a
round on the course there. I had four old clubs all, and just junk. A week later comes a
knock on the door and it’s the coach and the pro at the golf course too, he ran the golf
team, and he says, “Come on out and play a few holes.” So, I went out and played a few
holes, he says, “Well, you’re on the golf team, but you’ve got to get a set of clubs,” so
you got the first new Tommy Armours after World War II ended. So I played on the golf
team for four years, you know just those little things in my young life, like learning how
to play golf.
RV: What did your father do for a living?
DS: Well he was salesman for Armor and Company in Germany, a meat
salesman. He had an area in western Wisconsin that he traveled on a once every week or
two basis, and hit all these grocery stores and sold them meat, basically. Made a
reasonable living but no one was getting rich in those days.

RV: Right. Did your mother work?

DS: No, she was a stay at home mother. I had one brother and two sisters, four of
us.

RV: And what age were you to them, were you the oldest or?

DS: I was the oldest, then I had a sister, then a brother, then another sister, boy,
girl, boy, girl.

RV: What are your memories of World War II?

DS: Not a whole lot other than that as I mentioned. When I got out of high school
all of the guys that I knew in school were gone, everybody went off to war. And it
seemed like the thing to do, everybody either enlisted or got drafted, so when I turned
seventeen, I thought well I better get out of the house and head off, and I enlisted.

RV: What do you remember, now your being in high school here during the
beginning of the war, I guess junior high and then high school, do you remember what
was said to you about how the war started and how the United States would win the war
or get into the war?

DS: Oh, yes some of that stuff, although it would be hard to go back and
remember very much of I suppose.

RV: Right, okay. Was there a big patriotic drive to join?

DS: Oh, yes, there was, yes a great deal of patriotic feeling in those days. You
know it was like everybody was going to go. I had a good friend that was a little bit older
than I was; he went off with a National Guard unit when they activated them. I had an
uncle that was in charge of the local National Guard company, they went off to Louisiana
or someplace for training, they didn’t have any weapons spots or anything else. They all
ended up down in, oh New Guinea or someplace like that or the southern Philippine
islands, out in the Pacific there and the one good friend of mine that was a little older,
lived down the street a little ways got killed and the got the Medal of Honor of all things.

He lived about three doors from me. But my uncle who commander that company
eventually stayed in the south Pacific, he was a lieutenant colonel and he had a real
serious heart attack and they had to retire him actually, but he was down there for quite a
number of years, that’s my memory of World War II roughly, just personal things.

RV: Was there anyone else in your family that was a member of the military
besides this uncle?

DS: No, I don’t think so. I can’t think of anybody offhand.

RV: How much of an influence was he on your military career?

DS: Oh, not a whole lot although I knew him very well when I was young, but I
was so young that, when he went, they had a little parade and the whole company went
marching down the street and all that and I think there was a lot of, kind of patriotic
feeling in those days. I don’t know that he influenced me or the decisions I made.

RV: I’m curious about, if you could compare that patriotic feeling you describe in
the 1940s with the patriotism today after September 11, 2001, what kind of comparison
can you draw between the two?

DS: I’d have a hard time trying to do that. I suppose, I guess people are in favor of
going to war with Iraq and anti-terrorism and all that. They seem to be pretty much in
favor of what Bush is trying to do. I don’t know, I think there was more patriotism
involved back there when I was young but the problem is I was really young then and
now I’m older, so its hard to kind of quantify it anyway.

RV: Do you remember the national unity that was in the country at the time?

DS: Oh, yes I think everybody was pretty much united, win the war, buy war
bonds, everything. You know they had the whole program going. Yes, it was totally
different than any of the wars since as far as I can see.

RV: Okay, now in 1944 you graduated high school, you enlisted in the Navy in
’45, is that correct?

DS: Yes, as I mentioned I was sixteen when I graduated so, you had to be
seventeen to enlist, so I waited until the next summer and then enlisted.

RV: What did you do during that interim year?

DS: Well, actually I went down, I went to college really. Eau Claire, they had in
those days Eau Claire State Teachers’ College was just down the road about ten miles. I
took one year of school there.
RV: So you basically, were you waiting for that seventeenth birthday to get in or where you considering college?

DS: Well, I didn’t, I really didn’t have a plan, but after one year down there I turned seventeen, it was either enlist or wait until I get eighteen and be drafted and I said, well it’s probably a good time to go.

RV: Why the Navy and not another branch of the service?

DS: Oh, they were offering to send you right off to a technical school, that I thought would probably be a good deal, I’d learn something, which maybe would help me down the road somewhere.

RV: Right, did that happen for you?

DS: I was in school when the war ended. I was in a converted high school in Chicago, it’s a kind of a radio tech training school and I thought they were doing a good job down there, I kind of liked it. The war ended and everything went up in the air as to what was going to happen and what really happened is within about a week or ten days they decided to fold the school up. They shipped me up to Great Lakes and I worked there, they put me to work discharging people. They had to get a bunch of people to operate as clerks to start discharging all these guys that were starting to get out. So I worked there until, well essentially, as I mentioned I took a competitive exam to try and get an appointment to a service academy and when that occurred I got out of the Navy. When I got the appointment to the Naval Academy there was a provision in the law there somewhere that allowed you to apply for a discharge, so I got out a little bit earlier than I might have otherwise to go to the Naval Academy.

RV: Now, had you gone through any physical basic training at this point?

DS: Well, I went through boot camp, that’s pretty physical.

RV: Yes, sir where was that?

DS: Great Lakes, in Illinois?

RV: Okay, do you have any memories of that?

DS: Yes, you know I had a whole bunch of guys there in that company, and it, they kept you busy full time. My memories of that are: one, I learned how to march; we did a hell of a lot of that. Two: they put you to work part time in all kinds of odd jobs, like working in dining halls, working in, I can remember working back behind the
kitchen and hauling meat out of the freezer, hauling carcasses around, things like that.

You know manual labor, really, but all pretty interesting in a way. You know, it was all good. But, yes a hell of a lot of marching and other types of training.

RV: How did you adapt to the military lifestyle?

DS: Reluctantly I suppose. But no, I could see the need for it. You know in hindsight I think all that marching and stuff is designed of course to teach people to obey orders as a yeoman. And it made the transition into the Naval Academy and that kind of lifestyle fairly easy.

RV: Okay, well tell me about 1946 when you go to Annapolis, how were you feeling about that experience?

DS: Oh, well I was kind of looking forward to it, I thought well, service academy, I’ll get an education, it will give me a chance maybe to do something down the road that I might want to do. My dad kind of tried to point out to me, he said. “Well, if you get an education from a service academy, it will be with you the rest of your life and probably help you.” So, I thought well, you know a young kid with no real prospects of doing anything; it’s probably a good idea to do it.

RV: Now, how did your parents feel about it?

DS: They thought it was a good idea too.

RV: Had they emphasized education to you growing up?

DS: Oh, yes very much so. My mother was very interested in that, trying to get.

The reason why I went to school early in a way is, I went to the Catholic grade school and the nun that taught her, my mother in the first grade was going to retire, and so she pressured them to take me when I was four years old to have the same teacher, so I ended up going a little earlier than I would have gone otherwise.

RV: Okay. Tell me what you remember about your first year at the Academy, your plebe year?

DS: Oh, well that’s easy. The first summer you’re there, it’s almost like the boot camp in the Navy, they keep you really busy. You do a lot of marching to teach you how to march for one thing, you know so you look good in the parades on the weekends and stuff like that, but the rest of that was involved, a lot of physical activity. They had, they taught you all kinds of things, for example at the gunnery ranges and they taught you how
to shoot rifles, pistols and all the basic stuff that you should know. They, we did a lot of
sailing. They had boats around there and they taught you how to sail and you sailed
around the Chesapeake Bay in different sized vessels of all kinds. Taught you a fair
amount about seamanship and things like that. All kinds of activity that kind of took
place without any of the upper class around, they’re all off on training cruises and stuff in
the summertime. But they had a lot of enlisted guys as instructors doing all of the, the
teaching work and all that, so you were really busy physically, a lot of just plain old
physical training, you know a lot of running and everything else. It was a very busy
summer, and a lot of activity. In September then all the upperclassmen showed up and
you got in the academic year, and it was pretty much like school mixed in with marching
and a bunch of other things, athletic activity, you had to do something every, they had
three quarters of the year you had to participate in the sport at some level all the time.

RV: And you did golf?

DS: Well, I did golf in the spring. In the fall I messed around, tried football for a
while. I wasn’t very good at that and I played some intramural football. You ended up at
different levels. Wintertime I needed a sport, and they had a program which I thought
was really good. Every sport that they had at the school would involve a couple of
mandatory sessions with the coach or whoever was an expert on it at the time teach you
the basics of everything they did there, and then you’d have some sessions where you
actually got involved. For example, they had a boxing team, so everybody had to go box
eventually, you know you would get out there with big gloves and wham into each other
wrestling, same thing. The two things that stuck with me for the rest of my life there is I
got involved in handball and squash, and so pretty soon I ended up on the, kind of an also
ran on the squash team for my winter sport, but you learn to kind of lifetime, if you did it
right you learned kind of lifetime sports. I played squash and handball on and off up until
just a few years ago.

RV: Wow, and you learned it at the Naval Academy.

DS: Yes, they, I would never; I didn’t even know what squash was.

RV: Tell me what kind of student you were?

DS: Student?

RV: Yes, sir.
DS: Well, in the, oh things like engineering courses and stuff like that I was pretty much the, pretty close to the top. Those came pretty easily, some of the, oh the things, the literature, English, stuff like that I was kind of mediocre but I graduated in the upper third of the class somewhere.

RV: What were your favorite subjects?

DS: Well, the easy ones of course, all the engineering courses. In fact I could, I could do those without even hardly thinking about them. They came easy, whereas I had a roommate and he just, he struggled all the time with those. I was always working with him, the dreaded, make sure he’s going to pass, whereas some of the other courses, I was getting by okay, without too much trouble but he was better at them then I was. That’s about the way it went. I was interested in flying even back then.

RV: Were you?

DS: Oh, yes I’d, when I was a young kid I built a lot of model airplanes and things like that, I got pretty good at that. Hell, I had some of them fly away but I’d, that was kind of interesting too. You want funny stories?

RV: Yes, sir.

DS: Okay, when I was a young kid in the early teens, if I could five dollars together, they had a little air patch at the edge of town and there was a guy out there, one or two of them had an old yellow Piper Cub and if I could scrape five dollars together they didn’t care how old you were, I could go out and take a flying lesson. So I did that on two for three or four occasions and kind of learned a little bit about flying, and I was probably only twelve, thirteen years old, something like that. So I went out there one fall day, this was on the edge of town and came out and these two guys were sitting there kind of chitchatting, they had an old shack there, and their airplane and an outhouse and they had their Model A Ford parked nearby there, and they were chitchatting about something and I said, “Well, I’d like to have a flying lesson. They said, “well just a minute son here, we got another little thing going on here, we’ll give you your flying lesson a little bit later.” At about that time there was a pumpkin patch right next door and the guy got in the back seat of the little yellow Piper Cub and threw in three or four pumpkins and the guy jumped in the front seat and they took off, and I’m observing this with a lot of interest and they came zooming around and they come swooping down over
their little location there, they’re throwing, the guy in the back seat is throwing the pumpkin out and trying to bomb the outhouse. And I said, boy this is kind of fun, and then a pumpkin would come sailing down, splat, and about the third time they came around the guy threw a pumpkin, about a nice ten pounder and laded right on the roof of his Model A and went right through the roof, smashed pumpkin and everything all over it and that was the end of the great pumpkin bombing raid and that was my last flying lesson too out there.

RV: Okay. So you had an interest in flying from a very early age?

DS: Yes, as I said I built model airplanes when I was real young, I got interested in aviation. I flew, took those lessons when I had a chance, and when I was at the Naval Academy, they gave you some flying training there as part of your experience. You know you go out on the carrier in the summertime on one cruise, they put you in the back seat of some of these old torpedo bombers and stuff like that and motor off the carrier and you could get a feel for what they flying is all about. They had some old, what they call M3Ns, little biplanes on floats at the Naval Academy and they gave you a little bit of flying training and experience there, and those M3As.

RV: Tell me about your first time you were actually up in the air, how did you feel?

DS: The first time I was what?

RV: Actually up in the air flying?

DS: Oh, in the air, flying?

RV: Yes, sir how did you feel?

DS: Oh, I loved it. Yes, I thought it was interesting; I liked it right from the start.

RV: And, at the academy you did some flying during the summers you said, what was your favorite experience flying?

DS: Oh, there I don't remember a whole lot about it as far as, you know I thought it was interesting, the land, getting a little bit of handling the airplane and learning a little bit about it, but they in no way tried to get you trained as a pilot or anything like that. They just were kind of exposing you to flying, to get people I suppose to kind of think about whether they want to make a decision to go into flying or not go into flying.
RV: Right. What other memories do you have of your other three years at the academy?

DS: A lot of hard work in the academic months and in the summers that are busy off on, you generally went on a cruise for the whole summer. You know, the first year we went on the Battleship New Jersey and we worked as a normal, common seaman, chipping paint and everything else, but interesting. Second summer I spent on the Coral Sea aircraft carrier, and the third one I was on the destroyer. The thing I remember about the destroyer, when you get in rough water it flops around a lot.

RV: Really?

DS: Oh, yes. But yes, they were busy but really quite interesting, the summers were okay. They went to Europe every summer too, took my golf clubs along, they parked the battleship near Edinburgh by the Firthaforth Bridge there and as soon as I got a chance, a couple of us jumped off, went out and played golf in Scotland.

RV: Now, how much did you keep up with international events and world politics and kind of, I’m thinking of, after World War II and the ramp up to the Korean War, how much were you aware of what was going on in the world?

DS: Yes, I’m aware of what was going on all the time but I wasn’t, and I wasn’t big into what they were doing and why, but yes I was paying attention.

RV: In 1950 were you surprised when North Korea invaded the south?

DS: Yes, in a way but again I hadn’t really thought about it much, but the Korean War started and I said, well here we are back at war, so off I went. I knew that I would end up over there. As soon as I got, it seems like they crank up the Korean War right at the time I started flight training, and I said, well hell, it looks like I’ll get into war right away, and I did.

RV: Tell me about that, after you graduated 1950, where you went and what you did exactly?

DS: From flying training?

RV: Or after the academy in 1950?

DS: Okay, I graduated; right after I graduated I had opted for the Air Force before graduation.
RV: Was that because your flying, your love for flying or was it because of your bad experience on the destroyer?

DS: Yes, I can tell you exactly why. The Naval Academy you get an assignment, they have a list of assignments for all the grads, and you get your choice of assignments as to what is available based not on your class standing but on kind of a lottery, just a draw. I wanted to go into flying and the number that I got was not very good, it was pretty high up. As I took a look at the options, that was the first year they took twenty-five percent of the Naval Academy into the “new Air Force.” So, the Air Force guys in Washington came down and made a very strong pitch to go to the Air Force because they were going to get their twenty-five percent of the graduating class, only if they’d volunteer to go there. If they did not volunteer they would not get their twenty-five percent. So I looked at the chances of getting into Naval flight training with my number and that was before the war had actually started, and I would have had to wait from three to five years to get into flight training if I had stayed in the Navy, whereas the Air Force guys guaranteed that everybody physically qualified would go to flight training immediately. So, I made a decision to volunteer for the Air Force and they got their twenty-five percent of our class and I was one of them and I went immediately into flight training, went down to Randolph and started flying T-6s, right away.

RV: Now you obviously knew that you were physically qualified at that point?

DS: Oh, yes.

RV: Okay. Well, tell me about Randolph, what do you remember about that training?

DS: Well, went down there and started flying the T-6 and all that was pretty interesting. One instructor had four students and it keeps them pretty busy trying to get them checked out and soloed, so I got a little bit ahead of the power curve, ahead of the other three guys, so he soloed me out right away. I had, I don’t know fourteen or fifteen hours in the T-6 and over at some auxiliary field, he jumped out, said, “Go around the pattern three times and land.” And, as soon as he got me soloed out where I could fly alone, then you could concentrate on the others guys. So, every day I’d come down there and they, I’d have a T-6 scheduled or go up and practice something, and so I would take that airplane up, even though I didn’t have many flying hours and I got pretty good at
doing acrobatics, loops, rolls, spins, you know practice spins, practice everything I wanted, so I just really had a lot of fun cracking that airplane around and learning how to do it. The other thing that happened that was lasting for the rest of my life is I got married.

RV: Okay, at Randolph?
DS: At Randolph.
RV: How old were you then?
DS: How old was I when I got married, let’s see, early twenties, twenty-two or so.
RV: Was that the first time that you had actually flown a plane by yourself?
DS: Yes.
RV: How did that feel to you?
DS: Oh, loved it, right from the start. As I mentioned, I probably had no more than fourteen or fifteen hours in the T-6 when he soloed it right away, he said, “Shoot three landings and then pick them up out of this auxiliary field.” So, I made the three landings, taxied around, he jumped in the back seat and went back to Randolph. He said, “Okay, you’re on, you’re kind of on your own here for a while.” So then I’m flying all by myself regularly, and at the end of the program you get a check ride from one of the higher ups in the organization there and he said, he kind of let you do what you want, plus he evaluates you, and at the end of the flight he says, “Have you ever thought of going into fighters?” And I said, “Well I kind of considered it, yes.” He says, “I think you ought to.” So he got me an assignment to go to Williams in F-80s, you know to finish my flying training. Other guys went off to, half of them went off to big airplanes, multi-engine, that sort of thing.
RV: Tell me about your transition to a fighter.
DS: Okay, went to Williams Air Force Base in Arizona. We had, they had brand new T-28s, which was a prop driven airplane, better than a T-6. We started flying that, and it was a good little airplane. They’re really quite acrobatic and nice flying one. So, they soloed you out on that thing quite quickly and then they got into things that we didn’t do in the first part of the flight training, got into formation flying and a lot more instrument flying than we got in the primary training, and flew that for, I don’t know a month or two, and then went to the next phase which was, they had a lot of F-80As,
which were the first F-80s and they only had a very few T-33s, the two-seaters. So I got
two rides in a T-33, a jet, and then from then out I flew solo in the old F-80s practically
all of the time except for instrument checks. So, right, even in the flying training you
were doing a lot of flying in you own air machine, all by your, you weren’t necessarily all
by yourself, you’re usually with a flight of four or the instructor, practicing formation
flying and whatever, doing things like that. But, the whole thing, well, again real
interesting and kind of a lot of fun, you learned a lot, you really did.

RV: Do you remember any accidents that were happening at Randolph or
Williams?

DS: We didn’t actually have any. At Randolph, they had some foreign students,
there was a French guy, not in our organization but I think he was having trouble with his
love life or something like and he deliberately crashed the T-6 into something and killed
himself, that’s the only one I remember there.  At Williams they had a few accidents, our
class didn’t have any, but I lived out in the desert area north of, in the south, near a place
called Apache Junction north of Mesa. My wife was out there sitting in the sun one day
and she hears the airplane, she used to them kind of screaming over the house, you know,
whining and screaming, she heard one that sounded a little noisier and louder than usual
and she looks out and hear comes an F-80, about a quarter of a mile from the house that
goes straight into the desert with a big Ka-Wam! She went over there and looked around,
epecting to find a wrecked airplane and of course there’s a big hole in the ground, the
biggest piece you could find was about a foot.  But anyway, the guy had jumped out of
the thing and it had gone right into the ground right next to the house almost. That was
not one of our guys there.  We had, I don’t think we had any accidents in our class, I don't
remember any.

RV: Do you remember what kind of tactics they were teaching you, fighter
tactics?

DS: Tactics?

RV: Yes, sir.

DS: Well they didn’t do much there other than formation flying and general basic
skills as to keeping together, working as a flight of four, as a unit.  Following that I went
up to Nellis in the gunnery training, you got more and more into that, plus all the
dropping bombs, shooting guns and the whole thing, aerial gunnery, air to ground

RV: Why don’t you go ahead and tell me about that, what was that like?

DS: Well, moved to Las Vegas, a small town in those days. Nellis, that’s the still
the home of the fighter school. They, that’s been an operational place for a long time.
The main reason is they have a big hunk of air space and ranges north of the base there
where they can do things.

RV: Was this 1951?

DS: ’51, summer of ’51, late summer. And flying, we were flying again F-80As
here, As and Bs are the old airplanes, but right from the start you had an instructor with
three other students and he just took the three and you flew together as a flight of four
most all of the time. And went immediately into, or your flying formation all the time,
you’re getting pretty good at that, but you go immediately into gunnery, panel gunnery,
shooting F-650 calibers and the thing, shooting at panels on the ground, shooting rockets
at the same thing, dropping bombs, both the kind of skip bomb things and dive bomb
runs, learning how you can hit something with the darn thing, that sort of thing.

RV: How were you at that, were you pretty skilled or was it, did it come easy to
you?

DS: Pretty good, you know I had a really good instructor and he made it a practice
to make bets on who scores the best everyday on everything we were doing, and the loser
had to buy the beer after and he’d be collecting a lot of beer, but the only thing I can,
aerial gunnery I can do pretty good, shooting at a banner six by thirty banner, but he was
a real expert at it. I could beat him at some things, that kind of ticked him off. I can
remember, for example we used to shoot these little practice rockets and they were liable
to go any old place, they weren’t very good so, I was kind of familiar with aerodynamics
and all that and when I’d go out to pre-flight the airplane I’d look at all those rockets and
the little fins on them and usually they’re kind of bent and a little crooked and all that, I’d
very carefully straighten them all out, grab and bend them and try to get them as straight
as I could and every time we shot rockets I’d beat him. That ticked him off.

RV: So, how long did that training last, do you remember?

DS: Oh, a few months, maybe three months, something like that.
RV: And the war is still going on and so I assume they were going to get you in there?

DS: Yes, this was 1951; the war is still going on. Then we got assignments out of there, en masse really to go to Korea but they were using three squadrons in the Far East over there to kind of smooth the flow out and give you a little more flying. One was in Philippines where I went, Clark Field, there was a fighter squadron in Okinawa, with F-80s and one in Japan, and so all the guys that were flying F-80s would, at that time, went to one of those three squadron, and then based on when the need occurred to fill the holes up in Korea, it was the 8th Wing there, that was the only one flying F-80s when I got there, and I got three squadrons there. They would follow you in from these other bases, so I spent about two or three months in the Philippines and the same thing down there, we did a lot of gunnery and bombing practice and that sort of thing.

RV: And you said you flew a hundred combat missions actually?

DS: Yes, that was a tour over; when I got there they’d established a hundred missions as a standard tour. If you could go a hundred missions, you went home. There was no and if or buts about it.

RV: Tell me about those missions, what was a typical mission for you?

DS: Well, when I was there, most of it was interdiction of the railroad lines and stuff like that, although that’s just part of it. On an average day we’d fly one or two missions and it usually involved going up and punching holes in railroad lines so it got into all kinds of things. It punched holes in railroad lines; we started bombing some of the bridges across the Yalu River at one time. We bombed the power plants up there and it caused all kind of havoc on both sides of the river. The MIGs on the other side of the river were using commercial power I think, and we bombed the power plants, they couldn’t start the airplanes. But we did all of those things plus when there were, the ground war was getting kind of stabilized somewhere around the 38th parallel, that area, and when they had a big push going one way or another then we’d do a lot of air to ground work with the Army guys. They would go up there with four thousand pound bombs on the airplane a full load of fifty caliber machine gun bullets. And we’d have a forward air controller, and we’d be dropping bombs just over the trench line on the North
Korean side and shooting them up and those kind of missions actually, in some respects were probably the most dangerous because you’re down low and almost anybody could shoot at you with a rifle or whatever.

RV: You could clearly see the troops and what you were bombing?

DS: You could see the trenches, yes, and you had a forward air controller talking to you and marking where you wanted to put the bombs and stuff like that. But, those were kind of interesting. We had people, we didn’t lose many people over there, but we had a few shot down.

RV: Did you ever take fire yourself?

DS: I didn’t get hit over there, but I lost, of the four guys that I mentioned that I went through Williams with, had two West Pointers, two Annapolis guys, in Korea, two of the guys got shot down in Korea, one good friend of mine from Annapolis and the other guy a West Pointer. They were first-rate guys and both got killed in Korea. The fourth one got shot down in Vietnam, so I’m the sole survivor.

RV: How did you feel flying in a war zone?

DS: Oh, a war’s a war.

RV: Well, a lot of people haven’t experienced that and they’d be curious as to know what it felt like to actually fly close air support to ground troops and things like that.

DS: Well, you kind of, you realize that there’s some danger involved of course, and you’re getting shot at and well a couple of times. I can remember one time, it was a, oh we were bombing a bridge or something, and there were a lot of, they started to get a lot of radar controlled heavy anti-aircraft guns that could lock on you and I started out a bomb run, when these things started going off pretty close. I said well, to myself, that guy’s locked on to me so I started zigging and zagging quite a bit because they, it takes a short period of time for the shell to get up there. So if I move off the track I’m on, he’s probably going to miss. Well, that rascal shot at me all the way down the bomb run. I thought well, that’s pretty good, but he didn’t get me. But I don’t know, you get used to it. We had one day, which was, I call a really bad day. We were, I don’t know who decided to do it, but we decided that more altitude and napalm and shoot up a supply area that the Koreans, North Koreans had built up. And we lost, in our squadron we lost two
guys that day. That was the only day that we really had a bad, kind of a bad day, but
you’re down there, fifty or a hundred feet off the ground, dropping stuff, I kind of
thought that was a little bit dumb. There were other interesting missions in the way it
did, we never really Pyongyang much, but I guess early on there I guess somebody
decided that they’d already to stop the, they would use the railroads quite a bit at night to
haul stuff, and they had a great big roundhouse and a bunch of stuff in Pyongyang there.
So one day they said, “Well, we’ll send a bunch of airplanes up there and bomb the hell
out of the roundhouse.” They thought, “Oh boy, we’re going to Pyongyang.” So we did,
went up there and I don’t know how many airplanes they had, quite a few and bombed
the hell out of the poor old roundhouse and the railroad tracks.

RV: What other interesting missions do you recall, that come to mind?
DS: In Korea?
RV: Yes, sir.
DS: Not much. One other one that comes to mind is, I thought was kind of a dirty
trick one. They passed our whole squadron, sixteen airplanes to take off with four
napalm cans on each airplane, just before dark one night, you know late in the day. The
mission was to go to some little village of some sort, and I think what was happening is
somebody had the word that the recruiters were there recruiting guys for the North
Korean army or something, or something like that, I don’t really know the reasoning
behind it but to this day I kind of wonder why we did it, but we went singing in there and
the, it was sixteen airplanes, the guy just kind of, first ones went through the middle, one
took, one flight of four took the left side, one took the right side, I was in the last flight
and we just picked any spot that wasn’t burning and we literally burned the village down.
To this day I’m not sure exactly why, but I kind of always wondered about that one.

RV: What contact did you have with enemy forces in the air?
DS: Well, the MiGs were up there all the time but if they; you’d see them up
there. If they’d try to jump us, we saw them coming, we could turn into them and create
a head on passes. I remember 650 calibers a lot of times, they didn’t want to do that. So, I
never considered the MiGs as a real problem although it was a better airplane than we
were flying. And the whole time during my tour over there we only had one guy get shot
down by one.
RV: Wow, so you guys did not fear those MiGs?

DS: Not particularly. The F-84 is a, it seems to me that they’ve, they had F-84s flying there and it seemed to me they’d get hit by the MiGs more than we would. And then the F-86s were always up there tangling with them up above us, but they didn’t bother us much.

RV: Okay, what did you think of the overall American policy in the Korean War?

DS: Korean War, well. My thinking on wars like that, and Vietnam is a, it just ticks me off, we go into the war and the policy is not to win it. It seems to me that when I was there, the policy was just not to lose it. Yes, we had a lot of guys there who’d get shot at in the ground, they went up to the Yalu River and had to come back and all that, but it seemed to me that politically it was not, not being fought to win the war, it was being fought not to lose it, same way in Vietnam.

RV: Okay, what did you think of President Truman as a leader during that time?

DS: For that time period I thought he was okay.

RV: And what about when he fired McArthur, how did you feel about that?

DS: Well, I was pretty young then and I didn’t give it too much thought I suppose at the time, but I suppose in hindsight it was probably justified but I’m not sure he needed to do that, but I guess it was probably justified, but I don’t know. I don’t have strong thoughts about it.

RV: Okay, what kind of morale did the troops have there in Korea, the guys you flew with and then overall what you heard?

DS: Oh, well I think our morale was pretty good. We all knew each other pretty well, we trusted each other, you flew together and took care of each other and you went over to the bar at night, had a steak or something once in a while, if you could find one, no problems there.

RV: Okay, can you compare it to what you experienced during the Vietnam War, was it any different?

DS: Well Vietnam was different in the respect that I was only flying in a limited way, very high altitude, reconnaissance, one guy in the airplane, same sort of spirit amongst us as a group, we all worked together, knew each other well, we supported each
other, knew their families, knew everything. A great bunch of guys, but when you were
flying a mission you were all by yourself.

RV: Okay, so after your hundred missions are up, what did you do?

DS: I took the assignment they gave me that sent me back to the U.S. to the
fighter squadron in air defense in Madison, WI.

RV: This is 1953?

DS: Yes, right in there. Well, it might have been late, it was actually late ’52 and
got there, oh about September or so and they had 86-Fs and I checked out in that right
away, it was a, the squadron at that time was actually a National Guard squadron, had
been activated during the Korean War. So we had a mixture of old National Guard guys
left over from World War II and newer, younger guys like me. We got along well
together and all that, it was a good bunch. Started flying the 86-F, which I thought was
really a fun airplane, good airplane and the mission was different, air defense so we did a
lot of training with our radar sites in the ground and identifying unknown airplanes flying
around and all that kind of stuff, but in those days we went through one airplane after
another pretty quickly. We flew 86-Fs for a while and I could see the handwriting on the
wall. We were going to get 86-Ds, which was an interceptor version and nobody,
everybody liked the F, nobody wanted to recognize the D was coming along, so I looked
at what was required to check out in the D and you had to have so many hours of
simulator time, so I flew down to O’Hare in Chicago on my own and got the required
amount of simulator time and then went back to the squadron there, just hopped down
there and back in an F-86. All of a sudden, excuse me, an F-86D shows up, some guy
ferried one in to park it there, the squadron commander says, “Anybody know anything
about this?” And I says, “Hah, I filled out the paperwork and I said I’ve had the required
simulator time.” He says, “Well, why don’t you go out and fly it and see what you
think.” So, I went out and cranked it up and off I went, flew it around and he said, “How
did you like it?” And I said, “Well, I like the other airplane better but its okay.” And so
we started getting Ds. The airplanes we had we ferried out to San Francisco and they
went over to Korea, the Fs, and we, as we transitioned into D, I was a flight commander
and a flight instructor, so I started checking other guys out and we got into that and then a
few years down the road the F-102 showed up. So I went out to Palmdale, California, picked up the first one and flew it back.

RV: What did you think of the 102?

DS: I liked it, it was a good airplane. You could get supersonic in it, up to about 1.2 Mach. I flew that for about three or four years. We went to, the squadron as a group, went to Newfoundland in 1957 with that airplane.

RV: From Madison?

DS: From Madison, I flew it in Newfoundland for the three years I was there, kind of liked it up there. It’s different; its wet and everything. Meanwhile my family’s growing up and getting bigger and all that and we had, in some respects they had a lot of fun up there. You know it was kind of out in the boonies, in those days there were a lot of things to do up there really. But we flew up there and in what would be considered pretty bad weather most of the time, a lot of fog, low clouds, rain, whatever, we got pretty good at doing that, flying instruments in the rain and everything, we had a good squadron. Left there in 1960, went to Air Command and Staff in Montgomery, Alabama then went to F-106s up in McCord [AFB in Washington], and then from McCord I went as the A-12 thing.

RV: Okay, tell me a little bit about comparing what you were taught with air defense, then what you did at Newfoundland and your transition to Montgomery, what rank were you at this time?

DS: I was a captain.

RV: A captain, okay. Did you feel like your career was progressing as you wanted it to?

DS: Yes, more or less. One of the problems you had was they kept, because of problems with rank and hangovers from World War II and stuff like that, that they kept bumping back the dates that you could get promoted to Major and higher grades, so at one point there right when I was in that, captain, in that category you had to have, I think it was fourteen years of service to get promoted to Major because of the rank problems in the structure.

RV: And you’d been how long, since 19--
DS: Well, I graduated flying training, I’d been in the Air Force since 1950, so in
1960, ten years, I went to Command and Staff, interesting year, had a lot of, learned a lot
down there and then went to McCord to fly F-106s and that was a great airplane, that
thing could go past Mach Two pretty well.

RV: Which was your favorite airplane of the ones you did fly, besides the A-12?

DS: All of those airplanes?

RV: Yes, sir.

DS: I put the F-86F pretty near the top of the pile as just being a good, fun
airplane, a good performing airplane. They could do acrobatics in it all day long, just
really nice flying airplane. And the F-106 was a very good performing airplane; good
flight control system. I liked the 106. It was really, they corrected a lot of things that
were wrong with the 102. It was really quite a good airplane. It could go a long way; you
could fly from, probably go down to Kendall Air Force Base in Florida, for gunnery
training stuff, shoot missiles. You could fly that thing non-stop from McCord all the way
down there.

RV: Really?

DS: That’s quite a ways for a single engine airplane.

RV: Yes it is. So, what exactly were you doing at Montgomery and at McCord?

DS: At McCord I was the, I came in there, got checked out in the airplane and
because of rank and experience I was a flight commander right away and a Captain. I
worked as a flight commander with five or six guys in the flight and then they made me
assistant ops officer because I’d had a lot of experience, and they had a Major there as the
ops officer, so I was assistant ops officer when I got a message in the mail one day that
sent me off in another direction.

RV: Right, right. Okay, sir why don’t we talk about, when you received this
message, did you know why you had been selected, after you found out that it was the
Central Intelligence Agency, why you had been selected by them?

DS: No, but I can speculate based on what I know now. I think a guy sitting in a
little office up there in the Pentagon was running computer checks on people, looking at
their backgrounds, flying time. I had quite a bit of flying time in fighters at that time
comparatively. I was well over two thousand hours. In fact, in about ten years I was over
twenty five hundred hours of jet time and supersonic airplanes were included in there, plus a combat tour and I think that plus your overall record in this, whatever criteria he put into the screening of records spit my name out as well as some other guys. I was in a group of seven that were being evaluated to join that program. They’d already done one batch of seven prior to the one I was in, and they’d hired four or five guys, so I was in the second bunch that they hired.

RV: Okay, did you have any clue at all at first that it was the Central Intelligence Agency, or?

DS: Oh, I, I had no clue, but I speculated that it might be in a way, you know. You ended up going, zinging around and going on all kinds of little trips. We went down to San Antonio, we took the astronaut physicals and everything, it lasted about a week, the same kind of physical the guys that had been in the space program had taken.

RV: Did they tell you, what did they tell you like, okay we’re going to take you down for a week and do this but we’re not going to tell you who we are?

DS: Well, they told you what they were going to do, but not why and so you went through a series of physical exams, then they got into some psychiatric I guess or, you know profiling or testing and stuff like that too. In fact, before they actually made a selection and told us what we were going to do, they brought the seven of us in the group I was in to a motel, Marriott, right by the river there, by the Pentagon and they had a consultant firm of some kind evaluating us, and the end of that evaluation is they selected three of us and we went over to some obscure hotel room. The guys with the wrong names in a room there and they asked us if we’d want to volunteer for a program without telling us what it was. And, two of us volunteered.

RV: Why didn’t the third volunteer?

DS: I don’t know why, but I don’t think I really want to get into that too much, but he changed his mind later and, he was a West Pointer. He tried to find the people that he could talk to, to change his mind and he couldn’t. He had no chance of finding anybody and that, well, for the record, he actually committed suicide and I don’t want to get into that. But, anyway, two of us were selected and then they told us what it was at that point.

RV: Okay, what did they say?
DS: At that point, then we signed a bunch of papers said we’d do it.
RV: Did you, what did they tell you, what did they disclose to you?
DS: They said, “Hey, we’re developing a follow on the U-2.” They showed us pictures of the airplane. It really wasn’t flying yet; it was just starting to get going. They had a picture of it, what it looked like and after we said yes, and I said, “Whoa, that looks like a goer.” And we signed a lot of papers and they told us what would happen then, that in the month of June of that particular year there, ’63, we just moved our family down, on our own to the L.A. area, find a place to live on our own. We were technically working as a consultant to Hughes Aircraft Company, with ID card. I even went down to Hughes once in a while. They were working on the radar fire control system and stuff for the YF-12, it was to be an interceptor version, so it wasn’t far off that I could go down and talk to those guys and work on that because I had a lot of experience in that area. But that’s what we did. We had an ID card and everything else. I did got down to Hughes every once in a while and chitchat with those guys, but not seriously really.
RV: Did you, were you officially retired from the Air Force or?
DS: I was just, I was a, they went through the entire routine and discharged you from the Air Force, just like you’d quit; the whole thing. The only thing they did was, somebody in their wisdom made it, caused them to maintain your records, just as though you’d never left the Air Force. You got flight checks and everything else in the airplane and they maintained your records as though you were still in, because you had the option at the end of it, at some point in time to go back into the Air Force, or to stay out.
RV: And you wouldn’t have lost rank or anything?
DS: They would have, the deal was they would have, based on the records, if you were, you would get promoted along with your contemporaries along, as your record would have justified it.
RV: Okay, what about a pay raise or cut, was this?
DS: Oh, when they signed you up they gave you; you were being paid as a consultant down at Hughes. You know a private, your own employee so to speak; so you’re being paid as a consultant. It wasn’t a great amount of money but it was enough to get along okay. As I remember we started out at $24,000 a year.
RV: Was it more than what you were making in the Air Force?
DS: Yes, but the lifestyle because you were living on the civilian economy and all that, wasn’t a great deal different, but it was more, yes.

RV: I’m interested in some of the, the way that you were selected, what kind of questions would they ask you as far as the psychological part of the?

DS: Oh gosh, I don’t know. You went through all kinds of things like looking at picture and making up a story, a beginning, a middle, and an end. They gave you, they wanted to determine your, they gave you some IQ tests, stuff like that, all kinds of things, just a general evaluation, I can’t, went on so long I can’t remember a lot of it, but a lot of it had to do with sitting down, they’d ask you things and you’d write answers and all kinds of stuff. And the bottom line at the end was to try to select people out. I, in the long run, they went to a lot of trouble to get guys that they could probably have saved a lot of time and effort if they had just gone out and picked guys that had a combat tour, good operational experience and knew what the hell they were doing flying airplanes, they would have done just as good. In fact we did that, I can tell you that. We picked one guy at the end to do that when we needed one.

RV: And that worked out well?

DS: Worked out perfectly.

RV: And you, you were a part of that selection process?

DS: Yes, what happened was, there was a program went along and we didn’t get operational right away. They were, along about 1967 or so, they decided because they were losing so many airplanes in Vietnam that we ought to go over there and start flying reconnaissance over the North and they moved us to Okinawa all of a sudden. Well, what happened is one of the guys that we had before that, one guy was a test pilot of all things, he quit, quit the program. We had another guy quit. We had one guy they fired. We were a little bit short on pilots, and they said, well we ought to get one and they were going to go out with a big selection process again and two or three of us sat around and we told them, we said, “Hey, knock it off. We can pick two. We’ll give you two names right in the blue suit guys that were working with us right there at the area. We can pick two guys right there that are perfectly capable of doing the job.” So we took those two names and they picked one, we checked him out and off he went.

RV: Okay, did you have to sign a contract swearing secrecy and that you?
DS: Yes, you signed a contract. They gave your wife all kinds of evaluations too, all of the same things before they even asked you to come. They wanted to make sure she was kind of stable.

RV: Right, right. Now, was she made aware of exactly what you were doing or?

DS: Absolutely not.

RV: She didn’t know you were flying A-12s and nothing?

DS: Well, over a period of time she did, but not right away.

RV: Was there a time limit on when you could talk about this or was it they just tell you certain things not to talk about in general?

DS: They never said, they never said much about it, but it was kind of understood that you know, you kept it pretty tight. If you talked to your wife and told her that, “This is it, just you and me,” they didn’t, there was never any real concern about that.

RV: But that was basically it?

DS: That was about it.

RV: So, where did you go after you did the, well let me ask you about the astronaut training? Did you think for a moment that you actually would start going into the NASA program?

DS: No, not at all. It’s just that, because of the altitudes and you’re wearing a full pressure suit, the speeds and things like that, they wanted to apply the same criteria to the selection process, physically at least as they did to the astronauts. So, it was easy to run you through the same physical but I had no, I had no, it didn’t seem to me that we were ever going to end up as an astronaut, I didn’t want to do that anyway at that moment.

RV: Okay, now can you walk me through what happened after you were selected, you signed your papers and you moved to Los Angeles, what happened?

DS: Yep, we went down there. They gave us a couple of weeks to kind of go down there, get settled, find a house in the L.A. area and they said that you’re probably going to commute out of Burbank, where Lockheed was, and we ended up buying a place in Pasadena because I, for other reasons, but it was handy enough. And we did indeed fly out of Burbank. I went over there right after I got in the program and they had a ground school that was run by a Mr. Ben Rich who eventually took Kelly Johnson’s place as the head of the Skunk Works, and introduced us to the airplane, the construction of it, what it
RV: What was your initial impression of the A-12?

DS: Oh, it was amazing airplane to look at. If you looked at pictures of them today, it still looks like something way far ahead of its time. You know, it’s a hundred and ten feet long, weighs about, carries 80,000 pounds of fuel, carries more, it weights 140 thousand pounds at takeoff, a long, very clean looking airplane, it was really a nice looking airplane, when you look at it. My impression was, wow. Yes, it was a good airplane.

RV: So, tell me a little bit about Area Fifty-one, this kind of infamous secret Air Force Base?

DS: Well, while I was there they had, we had a concrete runway, it was a pretty good runway. They had an inside runway which used in the old U-2 days. We didn’t use
that much except that we had, we had a little Cessna 210 that once in a while we’d fly off there. We had a mixture of airplanes; we had the airplanes, the A-12s. We had about six or eight F-101s, 101Bs; the air defense airplanes. We had the Cessna 210 which we could putter around in and you kind of inspect the area early in the morning and stuff for, you know people coming around or anything like that. They had a C-130, they had a T-33, what else. They had a helicopter. We had a hodge podge of airplanes there sort of.

RV: How big was the base in general?

DS: The runway was big. The early concrete runway that we had I think was around twelve thousand feet long. While we were there they extended it clear across the lakebed, dry lake where, it ran right into the edge of a dry lake, they extended it across the lakebed while we were there and it became about 25,000 feet. I mean, it was really long. The base, the housing we had, they hauled in from the Navy, from over around Reno somewhere, Fallin, I think. It was World War II wooden structures and they had about four, I think they had four bedrooms in each one and then a central area. I kind of liked them, they were old wooden things that are, didn’t amount to much, but you had your own private room there, you had kind of a central gathering place. We used one of them, we put a bar in one of them, House Six, that became our bar, kind of do it yourself bar, everybody would show up there. It had one right across, right next to where we were, they used as a dining hall just for the pilots because if we would fly at odd times. They had a big dining hall, which fed everybody that worked there. They had recreational facilities that over a period of time were pretty good. They had, they built a gym with squash courts in it, you know handball courts, good gym. They had the skeet shooting range. At one time they built a little three-hole golf course, par three. What else did they have there, the hangars and the flight line structures were all kind of left over from the U-2 days and they were very adequate, you know it was a good facility really over all.

RV: About how many people worked there when you were there?

DS: Oh, I can’t give you a good number, I’d guess in the probably, two, three hundred area at any one time.

RV: Now, I have to ask to this, this is Area Fifty-one so we’re going to go, what about this lingering thought of alien space vehicles being housed there? Any word of that, any speculation amongst your crew and what you guys?
DS: No, nothing among us and our time period there certainly weren’t any then, in that time period, but they have used it for testing a lot of secret airplanes, you know the Stealth fighters and stuff all had their, originated up there, things like that. But it’s a handy place because it’s away from anything and they could do it in a moderate amount of secrecy.

RV: So, to your knowledge there was no UFO critical remains there?

DS: No, I think that’s a lot of foolishness.

RV: Now, did you get a lot of people who would try to gain access illegally to the area or kind of come to the close to the fences that surround here?

DS: In those days I don’t think we had hardly any. I think as years have gone by there’ve been people climbing the mountains around there and stuff like that.

RV: Right, right. Okay, well tell me a little about your training in the A-12 then, how that went?

DS: Well, all of us, when I got there, all the guys they hired had a lot of experience. They all had combat tours one way or another in Korea; they all had been flying fighters of various types for quite a few hours. I think, as I mentioned, that was probably part of the selection process. So when I got there, actually before I got there they sent me off the Shaw Air Force Base to get current in an F-101. I said, “Gee, I don’t think that’s necessary.” They said, “Yes, but this is the easy way to do it.” So I went down there for a few weeks and flew it around, it was a quick transition, nothing to it. But we got up there and they had the 101s right there, so you could jump right in and start flying. The trainer, the airplane, two seats, was operational and so, practically from the first day I got there, I got checked out in that thing right away. It was, didn’t have engines and it wasn’t built to go out to Mach 3 or anything. One of the games we used to play with it, we’d go up and, another thing we had to get into was, some of us had never done any air refueling and we had modified the 101s with a refueling receptacle, so we learned how to refuel, using the F-101s and then the trainer, or our one trainer airplane of course, we could refuel that and then all of the airplanes were all air refueled all the time. So we got, we all became almost immediate experts on air refueling, we got into that pretty heavily. But we didn’t have to do a whole lot of transition, because I mentioned we all showed up current in the 101, one or two arrived in the trainer airplane, you were current
in that thing, and the transition from that into the operational airplane was just jump over
and go. So the Lockheed, one or two, maybe at that time three, Lockheed pilots were
trying to get the airplane operational get it out to speed, find out the problems, correct
them and get it going. A guy by the name of Bill Park did most of that, but there were
other people involved too. We were flying the operational airplanes as they were
available, right out to about the same speed that the Lockheed guys were, in fact we were
doing a lot of the test work on a lot of the subsystems in the airplane to get those things
up and running while they were operating, mainly on getting the airframe and the engines
and that sort of thing, going, so they’d get out to speed and go properly. One of the big
problems was the inlet system. And, we recognized early on that the way they were
controlling the inlet system was not going to be adequate; it could get out the speed but it
wasn’t very reliable. So they were building a new electronic control to do that. They had
one airplane that had totally manually controlled inlets, that was waiting for the box to
show up and I flew that one quite a bit, and heck, manually controlling the inlets I could
go right on past that the Lockheed guys were going, but I had to be careful not to.

RV: Can you describe what you mean by the inlets?

DS: Inlet system makes the airplane go. The air comes into the engine, and it has
to be subsonic at the face of the engine and the inlet system is designed to transition the
air from the speed you’re going, like Mach 3, three times the speed of sound, down to
subsonic speed going into the face of the engine, so that the engine can swallow the air
and the ambient pressure at 80, 85,000 thousand feet or so is pretty low, way under one
PSI, so the engine was out an inlet system to get air at higher pressure into the engine is
not going to put out any power. So the inlet system is a supersonic, subsonic
compression inlet system. You’ve got that big spike that sticks out the front of the inlet
that moves back and forth about fourteen or sixteen inches or something like that, and
what it does it is gradually moves back as the speed increases, increases the area of the
inlet, makes the hole bigger, the air comes into the inlet at above Mach 3, and it forms a
shock wave right at the narrowest part of the inlet [and slows and compresses]. At that
shock wave, right in the narrow part of the inlet, the air then transitions to subsonic and it
goes into the face of the engine at high Mach but subsonic speeds. So the shock, you
hold the shock wave right in the throat of the inlet and it converts when you’re at speed
up there. You got air pressure well under one PSI at the face of the engine, the inlet
changes that to around fifteen or sixteen PSI, so the engine’s getting a lot of air and
cranks out a lot of thrust. The problem is the air is real hot coming into the engine and
that was one of the limiting speeds on the airplane, was do not exceed 427 degrees
centigrade inlet temperature. Now, 427 is hotter than a lot of engines run coming out the
exhaust, so it was kind of a unique system but it worked. In fact, without that [the inlet
system, the airplane would not go] the airplane wouldn’t run.

RV: Right, right. What, besides that, what were the other major problems of the
A-12 as you were checking it out?

DS: Well, that was a major one to get it out and keep it at speed, and that made
the, going through an electronic inlet made the airplane. That made the performance go.
All the rest of the problems were minor. There were problems with different systems on
the engine itself, they had things, around the engines inlets, by pass doors, things like
that, to control the airflow properly and they were addressed pretty early on by the
engineers and the Lockheed guys and they corrected those as they came on them, but that
was early one. The operational pilots, a lot of the work we did were all the subsystems,
we worked on the autopilots, the radios, all of the other systems in the airplane that
needed to be checked out and in many cases improved, had inertial navigation system for
example. All those things that the operational pilots, we were flying out the same speed
as the Lockheed guys, but we were primarily interested in making the airplane an
operational system that you could use rather than working on just the actual functioning
to make the airplane operate properly at speed. So they worked on the engineering part of
getting it out to speed and safely staying there. We worked on all the subsystems to keep
it, make it an operational machine.

RV: Were there any problems as far as any accidents that happened with the A-12
in the training?

DS: Not really. We, they had problems with tires and things like that, the tires
were exposed to very low air pressure. You know at takeoff, you’re going, when you got
a full fuel load, you’re going faster at takeoff than most airplanes are cruising. If you had
a full fuel load, you didn’t get airborne until about two hundred fifty knots, that’s pretty
fast. And so we had tire problems and things like that that had to be worked on. We had
one guy that blew out a bunch of tires on takeoff and then he landed, well he lost his hydraulic system, he ran off the runway, it didn’t hurt the airplane particularly. We didn’t have any real accidents in there except we lost one pilot in the course of the operational training I guess you could call it. Without getting into the real details, he had to bail out short of the airfield and he was killed due to a problem of the parachute. [Another had to bail out on take-off and was okay.]

RV: Okay, how long did your training last there?

DS: Well, it lasted the whole time we were there. We were always there training, but as far as being operational and ready to go, I would say within a year or so we could have gone operational and used the airplane, but the political wheel in Washington was Lyndon Johnson and particularly McNamara was not there to use the airplane. We were tasked early on, when they shot down a U-2 over Cuba, to go over there, and right away we started running missions, went down to the southern Florida, kind of simulated going over Cuba, without actually doing that but we could have done that at any time.

RV: Did you ever go over Cuba?

DS: No.

RV: Okay. Did McNamara ever come personally to Area Fifty-One and check it out?

DS: Never. Mr. Dick Helms, who ran the CIA, was out there regularly.

RV: What did you think of Dick Helms?

DS: Great guy, I thought he was, he was probably as good a guy running the CIA as they’re going to get. He’s dead now, but I had great respect for him. He was very practical, he knew what he was doing, he was an old spy I guess from the old days in World War II, but very high regard for him.

RV: Would he personally meet with you the pilots?

DS: Yes, and that’s another interesting thing about that program, Kelly Johnson who I think the world of too, he would come down there every Friday, early on and just have one of the engineers with him and meet with just the pilots, nobody else and talk about the airplane, what was good, what was bad about. So you could really open up and get into a lot of detail with him, what you liked, what you didn’t like. But those meetings early on resulted in a number of changes to the airplane, some of the substance in it.
Things like oxygen system, radios, a bunch of things we got them to change and that’s kind of hard to do. But, he paid attention and he listened and when he thought it was worthwhile he made the changes.

RV: Wow, that’s great. I’m sure you guys were very happy with that, having that direct contact.

DS: Yes, I give him a lot of credit for that. He really, in the early days to get the airplane operational or going, he spent a lot of his time just talking to the air crews and then working with his engineers of course. But I think the world of that guy too, he’s also dead.

RV: How many people actually were on a crew that would work on one of the airplanes?

DS: I can’t answer that exactly, but our maintenance crew was probably no more than around one to two hundred people total that worked on the airplane, compared to say the SR-71, the follow-on over at Beale, they had blue suit guys used a lot more people. These were all dedicated, they were all civilian employees with blue suit Air Force supervision. You had a Colonel out there running the maintenance, stuff like that. But the maintenance guys were all contract.

RV: Interesting, were they from, were they flown in also from Los Angeles or were they local?

DS: Yes, they all flew in and out of Los Angeles. Some of them lived in Las Vegas and they had an airplane going to and from there too.

RV: Did you ever get to take any side trips to Las Vegas?

DS: I moved there finally.

RV: Did you really?

DS: After three years I told these guys, I said “Its too smoggy around L.A. I want to move.” They didn’t want any of the aircrews to live in Los Angeles, I mean in Las Vegas, although all of the other guys were.

RV: Why is that?

DS: Well, I don’t know they just thought it would compromise the program in some way, but it really didn’t. So I talked them into it and I sold my house and moved to Las Vegas for the last couple of years.
RV: Now, you were there from ’63 all the way until?

DS: ’68 when they pulled the program.

RV: Okay, now did you know going into it, as you were going through the testing of the A-12 that you were going to be tasked eventually to Vietnam or was that something you found out later?

DS: No, they, we knew initially that the purpose of the airplane was to overfly the Soviet Union and China. We knew that right from the start. As I said, the political will wasn’t there to do that and the Vietnam thing came along as we could do that very easily but there was never any desire to do that I guess up in Washington until they, I think Dick Helms was the one that did that. McNamara had no, he would not use the airplanes there. Dick Helms talked to Lyndon Johnson privately one day I think. And the State Department didn’t want us to do it either. But Dick Helms talked to Lyndon Johnson and told him about this airplane and he didn’t even know about it, what it really could do.

RV: Really?

DS: Yes, he knew about it but he didn’t know what I could do and they were losing a lot of reconnaissance planes about that time over North Vietnam. He said, “Hey, let us go over there, we can do this.” And they did. So all of a sudden we were tasked to do it but it would not have happened without Dick Helms.

RV: Why do you think McNamara and DoD didn’t want you to do this, didn’t want the airplane?

DS: Well, it was the State Department didn’t want to do it because, one: they wanted to close the airplane down. McNamara didn't like having the CIA in the flying business.

RV: Why not?

DS: I don’t know. He just, I think the State Department kind of got to him because the State Department had all the problems with Gary Powers getting shot down over Russia and all that, and they had visions of the same thing. And all that did was make a lot of trouble for the State Department, so the two of them together wanted to get the CIA out of the flying business.

RV: That’s interesting. It would seem that they could deal with a possible political fallout versus a huge strategic and even tactical advantage.
DS: Yes, but I don’t know how those guys think but they were not in favor of using the airplane as it was designed to be used.

RV: By the way what did you think of the Powers shoot down, that incident?

DS: Oh, well I don’t have a whole lot of comment about it particularly. It was unfortunate. I think the CIA wanted him to commit suicide but I agree with him.

RV: He chose not to.

DS: But, you know, he was okay.

RV: Now, were you guys given those tablets or?

DS: No, nothing like that. We were given, that’s another subject though, we were given an awful lot of survival training and evasion stuff, at great length really.

RV: That was going to be my next question, what did they tell you about that kind of scenario, did they train you on what to do and what to say and things like that?

DS: Yes, we actually went through training, like one time we actually spent about a week in the, I think it was in the Washington area, I don’t even know exactly where it was but it was an authentic Vietnam prison camp, you know with the cells and everything. I can tell you where it was, but they didn’t want us to do that.

RV: Where was it?

DS: Well, I’m not going to say where it was, but I know where it was, but they didn’t, they went to great pains not to have us know that, but I know anyway. But it was like a prison camp and they treated us just like we were in a Vietnam prison for awhile and you could, actually you had the option if you really got tired of it, you could say I quit, one guy did. He was one of the guys that quit the program too.

RV: He was out of the program once he?

DS: Well, he wasn’t out then but he was eventually. But yes, they give you a lot of training like that. They give you a lot of survival training. They had experienced Air Force instructors with you; we went down and trained in the swamps of Florida. We trained up in the mountains and the survival training went on, oh, endlessly. We did, we used to do parasail training out on Lake Mead in the full pressure suits, like you’re going to make a water landing, you come down in a parachute, they unhook you and you just, you’re coming down in a parachute slopping the water in a full pressure suit and have to
get into a life raft and all that kind of stuff, but a lot of survival training. It was amazing
how much [survival training] they gave us.

RV: What kind of weapons training did they give you?
DS: Nothing.

RV: Did you carry a sidearm?
DS: Stay current on your weapons. One of the things they said if you actually
went down over Russia or something like that, they said to like, if you actually flew over
Russia and they caught you, just say, “You know, here’s my name and I work for the
CIA.”

RV: Really?
DS: Yes, just tell them flat out.

RV: And so you had no sidearm with you?
DS: No, never carried any sidearms.

RV: Did you want one?
DS: No, not particularly. It would not have been handy to carry. We’re in a full
pressure suit anyway.

RV: Right, right. Okay.

DS: Carried none of that stuff.

RV: What else did they tell you about being shot down say over China or over
North Vietnam, besides the survival training, did they tell you what to say, what not to
say?

DS: Well, the survival training was pretty much you know that, along the lines
that, try to tell them whatever they ask for except certain things. And they even had
training into some, I don’t even remember all the details now, but you had some kind of
an individual code, where if you had a chance you could say some things and if they got,
if they could find out what you said back in Washington, they would know how come
you were there, whether you got shot down or had an aircraft problem or something
because they wanted to know those things. So again, that training went on almost full
time, all the time.

RV: What did they tell you not to talk about?
DS: Oh, not a whole lot. You could tell them you worked for the CIA, anything having to do with what you were doing photography and stuff like that. “Gee, I really don’t know anything about what I’m doing. I was just told to operate this airplane and when I get to a certain point I turn on switch A, and I get to another place, I turn off switch B and that’s all I know.” They didn’t want them to know anything about the quality of the photography or anything like that.

RV: Did you guys know about the quality of the photography?

DS: They didn’t want us to know, but we all did.

RV: How did you find that out?

DS: Well, I’d go, on the training flights for example, like one day early in the program there I flew a mission that went about out to the Mississippi River and back, about an hour and came over Liberal, Kansas, which has a triangular airfield, easy to identify and it was in the fall of the year, so I, just out of curiosity I went over at Ranfield, I went over to the guys that were processing it [the film] and I said, “Let’s see where we got.” So they put it on the light table and I looked down at it, that was the only time I ever did that, and I’m up there about eighty thousand, a little higher and I could, the school band was practicing in the fall for the football games, I could identify every instrument in the band, that sort of thing. They didn’t want you to really know how good the photography was because then you’d be prone to tell them, but that was about the only time I did it. The rest of the time, you know, I’m familiar with it but I didn’t go look at it.

RV: So you, is the, what’s the statement that has come out over time that the U-2 and then the A-12 could actually read a newspaper from eighty thousand feet, was that accurate?

DS: Well, I don't know. You could probably read it, I would say, I don’t know how it is these days, they continue to improve the products as the years went by on all of those airplanes, I’m talking about the 1960s. It was probably good enough to maybe read the name of the newspaper or something like that, I don’t know whether you could read, I don’t think you could read the fine print.

RV: Okay, so tell me you get your orders to go to Vietnam, or to actually go over to, you’re based out of Okinawa, is that correct?
DS: Yes, Kadena. They’d built a facility over there to handle the airplane that
was in the program for quite some time.
RV: Tell me about your transfer overseas?
DS: Well, we flew three planes over and they went, the guys that flew the
airplanes over were the first three that arrived on the scene to start with. They didn’t
know how to sort them out so they said; well we’ll just pick them by seniority in the
program. So the guys that were there a month or two longer than me flew them over.
RV: How old were you at this time sir?
DS: 1960s, born 1927, late thirties, forties.
RV: So you were forty years old basically in ’67?
DS: Yes, getting close to it, yes.
RV: Okay. Okay, so anyway, the three of you go over?
DS: Three guys flew the airplanes over.
RV: How long did that take?
DS: Oh, they took in the neighborhood of, you know with refuelings and all that,
and going the long way around, around five hours or a little more, five and a half hours,
non-stop.
RV: Right.
DS: I flew the last one out coming the other way.
RV: Did you? So, once you arrived over in Okinawa, where were you set up and
what was your base like there?
DS: Okay, you’re on the [air] base at Kadena. They set up housekeeping in an old
World War II area that had Quonset huts over in the far side of the base that was not
being used. They took a look at that rather than being on the main part of the base, and it
was sort of isolated enough that it was kind of nice in a way. These World War II
Quonsets were not fancy but they served the purposes quite well. We lived there, we had
our own little Quonset with a couple of, with enough bedrooms, and we had a big open
area there with out dining area, they had a mess hall there but we used our own little
dining area most of the time with our full time cooks.
RV: Okay, did they keep you guys isolated from other personnel on the base?
DS: No, not at all. We just didn’t talk about what we were doing or even let them know who we were.

RV: Oh really, okay.

DS: Yes, we were just there.

RV: Were you in civilian clothes?

DS: Yes, whole time.

RV: And the A-12s, where were they housed?

DS: They built a, the CIA had built a hangar facility there, over, in anticipation of flying them out of there quite some years before, and they had a hangar facility that we used and then when the SR-71s came in later, and replaced us, they took over the whole thing. Same facility, just moved right in; moved one airplane out, moved the other in.

RV: Now, I assume that you landed at nighttime when you arrived and would you take off?

DS: Not necessarily. I didn’t fly them over but they wouldn’t necessarily arrive at night or anything.

RV: How did you keep the A-12, this brand new airplane, kind of secret from the rest of the people on the base, because they could see it take off and land?

DS: We didn’t.

RV: Oh, so they knew about it?

DS: Oh, yes. You’d taxi out and heck, all these Okinawans and stuff there, they had little farming patches right around the edge of the field and hell, they’d line up at the fence everything, watch them go.

RV: Okay, so what was your typical mission like, your typical surveillance mission?

DS: Okay, down in North Vietnam?

RV: Yes, sir.

DS: You’d take off, you would--we would normally refuel, go up to thirty thousand feet or so, refuel after takeoff because it was easier on the airplane to take off with a light fuel load. If you took off with a fuel load, the bouncing around and the thing was like a big, wet balloon and bouncing up and down, it was hard on air frame. So, we’d take off with a light fuel load, in fact the SRs went to that too when they became
operational, they did the same thing. But we’d take off with a light fuel load, hit a tanker,
thirty thousand feet, gas it up. You would go down, supersonic, you’d be going oh 3.1
Mach, 3.15, about eight-two, eighty-five thousand feet, somewhere in there, and typical
mission would be, you’d stay over the water between Hong Kong and the Philippines
going down there. You’d go around, one kind of typical one; you’d have to circle around
Hainan Island; that was kind of right in the way. So you kind of bend around to the right
around it and make a left turn and go right over North Vietnam, maybe about over Hanoi
or somewhere. You now they’d vary the route a little bit, pass over there going around
eighty-five thousand feet or a little higher, 3.15, 3.2 Mach, camera’s on, take pictures.
You’d make a left turn, and in fact if you made a left turn while you were there, you
could look about seventy-five miles into China with the photography, make a left turn,
started descent down towards Bangkok. You get down in Thailand down there, you’d hit
a tanker down there at thirty thousand feet again, refuel it, gas it up, turn around,
accelerate out going north about the same way. You’d get up to speed, up past Mach 3
just about the time you had to make a right turn out over North Vietnam again, and you’d
come back across North Vietnam in a little different route, but fairly heavy on fuel and
you would be up to speed, up to 3.15, 3.2 Mach, but not quite as high, you’d be over
eighty thousand feet, but not as high as you’d like to be and you’d pass on out of there,
go around Hainan Island and putt back to Okinawa. It would take about three hours and a
little bit.

RV: About a three hour round trip?
DS: Yes, a little over.
RV: Did you like operating by yourself in that airplane?
DS: Yes, I really did, I liked to fly alone. I essentially flew alone all of my life.
You’re all alone in the airplane you don’t have to worry about the other guy.
RV: That’s true, very true. You felt, I guess more in control of?
DS: I was very comfortable all by myself, that never bothered me at all.
RV: Now, how, did you control the cameras or where they remote controlled or?
DS: You controlled them, but there was mostly just switches, switches on, off,
that sort of thing.
RV: Okay, so you were told at what point?
DS: You had a flight plan and you were following the flight plan, and you got to a
certain point, flick on switch A, switch B or whatever, just turn on the switches.
RV: Did you actually take pictures of China as well when you were close by?
DS: Well, as I say, it was a by product, but if you made a left turn over North
Vietnam where the camera is looking off to the right, you know the airplane is in a bank,
the photography would go across the river into China. There was no effort to fly over
China, that was just a byproduct.
RV: Okay, what did you understand about why the United States was in Vietnam
at this point, when you had gotten there? The war had certainly progressed to a point,
this is 1967 correct?
DS: Yes, it was. I don’t know. We went in there, I know this is primarily about
Vietnam but as far as I know we went into Vietnam to prevent the North Vietnamese
communists from taking over the whole place. So they went in there to do that and I’m
not a great fan of going to war with limited objectives like that. We go into all kinds of
wars and we never finish them. It was over in Korea, we quit; it was a stalemate right
about where they started. We never finished that war. Okay, Vietnam we never finished
that one. I think, if you’re going to go to war you ought to finish the damn things, make
an effort, either go in and do it right or don’t do it at all. It’s like Clinton sent people to
Bosnia. They’re going to be there one year; hell they’re going to there forever. Korean
War we still got, I don’t know, forty, fifty thousand troops sitting over there since then.
They got people all over the world, it amazing. The people still in Japan from World War
II, there are people in Germany and all kinds of places, hangovers from World War II.
Some of the wars we faced, we haven’t finished many since World War II.
RV: What would you advocate the United States to do differently, say for
example in Vietnam, what would you have liked to seen done differently?
DS: If you’re going, if you’re going to go to war, you ought to have the objective
of winning the damn war and getting it over with. This business of kind of getting into
stalemate sort of thing, I mentioned I lost two of the guys I went through flying training
with, our little flight of four at Williams, in Korea, and those are just going back and forth
flying around the thirty-eighth parallel at that time. Vietnam I lost the third guy, he got
shot down over North Vietnam. I had a lot of good friends lost in Vietnam. It kind of
ticks me off, not so much that they were lost, but they were lost in a war that was not
to be won.

RV: Why do you say it was not meant to be won?

DS: McNamara up there was running the war from the Pentagon. The typical
example that I think of back in those days is; it was something somebody wrote
somewhere. He says well, he’d select the targets for the next day’s bombing and it was
similar to saying, well we’re going to bomb these wooden bridges on some road in West
Virginia, and then we’d call Washington and say, “You had enough, yet?” They weren’t,
there was not an effort to win the war until Reagan came in, decided to end it by sending
B-52s and stuff over North Vietnam.

RV: You mean Nixon?

DS: Was it Nixon?

RV: Richard Nixon, in the early 70s, right.

DS: Yes, you’re right. My brain doesn’t always operate properly.

RV: Tell me about, well first of all, you said the morale of your guys were pretty
high the whole time, you had a good camaraderie?

DS: Oh, sure, oh, yes. We had a very small group of pilots and maintenance guys
were, I consider as good as you’ll ever find. The blue suiters that were operating in the
group there were a very small organization, very close-knit, very efficient way to run an
organization really, like ours.

RV: Really?

DS: Well, compared to say, the SR-71, we were doing with a few hundred people
what they’re doing with the, in the thousands or more, you know a thousand guys or
more.

RV: Why did they change it?

DS: Blue suit operation, you know that just, the structure that the Air Force has.
You know, they have a big Wing and they have a Wing staff and they have squadron and
they have a lot more maintenance guys, blue suiters and they rotate a lot in and out of
their jobs, so the training is always a part of the program. you have a lot more guys
involved in training and they don’t, they tried to keep them there longer, but the system
doesn’t allow that very much, whereas we had guys that were dedicated to that one
airplane and could do a lot of different jobs and do it very efficiently, so you operated
with a smaller number of guys that knew just about everything there was to know and
they would never rotate out of the job much, they were permanent.

RV: What was the overall feeling at the time, the same question I asked you, what
did you think of what was going on in Vietnam and why the United States was there,
what did your comrades think, what did your fellow pilots think and then the
maintenance crew, did you guys talk about that?

DS: We didn’t talk about too much but I think the general opinion was about the
same. You know if we’re going to fight the war, let’s do it and get it over with.

RV: So, you thought that at the time that there was a limited objective, you could
tell this?

DS: Absolutely.

RV: Okay, despite the fact that Washington was trying to say otherwise publicly
that we were out to.

DS: It was obvious that Mr. McNamara and whoever, he was kind of controlling
things as near as I could tell, his objective, and the State Department probably too maybe
to some extent, I don’t know, objectives were very limited.

RV: Okay, did you ever get visited by one of these higher ups, one of the?

DS: No, I never had anybody ever say that.

RV: Okay, I was just wondering if they even paid you a visit over there to kind of
inspect what you guys were doing?

DS: No, as I mentioned, Mr. Helms came out to the Area a few times but we were
in Okinawa nobody showed up over there much.

RV: Okay, how long were you there total in Okinawa?

DS: Oh, maybe a year or a little more and they decided all of a sudden to retire us
and put the SR-71s in there out of Beale. The problem with that was, is they weren’t quite
ready yet and so there was, there was some turmoil for awhile after they came in and
started operating until they really got going, but they worked out okay in the long run.

RV: Okay, tell me what would happen to your photographs, after you got back
what would happen to the airplane?
DS: Yes, the photography came out and the time we were there, they put on a
another airplane as I remember it and they went straight to Hawaii to a processing
squadron there that would process it, and then farm them out to the guys that would use
them. And they actually went to the Army guys that were using them in many cases, just
to plan the next day’s ground activity and the other stuff, they were looking at, you know
they’d get all the intel out of North Vietnam where the SAM sites were, and as much as
they could about what’s going on up there and I think that went straight to Washington.

RV: So it was a pretty quick turnaround?

DS: A very quick turnaround. Information would be in probably; in the
processing place in the same day you got it. And the next day the information would be
available.

RV: Tell me about the air defenses in North Vietnam.

DS: Well, a lot of SAMs as far as we were concerned. We weren’t concerned
about any low altitude stuff but the SAMs were a problem, and we did have some
defensive systems on the airplane that worked properly. We never had an airplane shot
down or anything like that. I was the only one that ever got hit I guess. I went into, the
last mission I actually flew down there, I went in over North Vietnam, I was the only guy
there, it was about noon. Usually the weather was bad so we didn’t go down there very
often but in October, I guess it was October of ’67, we had three days of absolutely clear
weather and there were two of us over there. I went down the first and third day, a guy
named Frank Murray went down the middle day and I got a lot of activity going in and
out. You got lights and things that tell you when you’re being tracked and stuff.

RV: How did they know you were there?

DS: They could pick us up on radar. We had a very low radar return but we
found out early on, we thought that the cross-section of the airplane was such that they
would not be able to track us very well on radar but we found out the Chinese and the
Vietnam guys, they had radar that could, in the right hands, they could track us.

RV: Okay, did you ever run into any other aircraft up that high?

DS: No, but the flying around the States once in a while there would be a balloon
up there, you know a research balloon or something like that, no airplane.

RV: Well, anyway go ahead about the SAMs.
DS: Okay, on those three days I went down there on the first and third day, late
October ’67 and the first day in and out I got a lot of lights and tracking information. I
didn’t see any SAMs coming up. The third day I, the guy in between had a lot of the
same activity. The third day I said well, I think, there’s not much going on down there
around noon. I said I think those buggers are going to try to shoot at me here sooner or
later, so as I was coming in I had a lot of activity, tracking information, and I don’t know
whether they shot or not, I wasn’t looking around much, I was busy.

RV: Can you explain quickly, I’m sorry, what you mean by you had a lot of
activity, a lot of lights going on?

DS: Lights okay, you had lights that when you were being picked up by radar, the
SAM radar, it would tell you. You had another light that would tell you if they were
locked onto you and they were launching the SAM and tracking you and you had another
light that told you when they were sending guidance signals to the SAM. There were,
they’d transmit the guidance signal to the SAM from the ground and it steers it from the
ground.

RV: What kind of countermeasures did you have?

DS: We had, in those days the only real one we had on our airplane was one that
sent a hardover flipper signal to the SAM when it got close enough to you. I didn’t like
that very well because if it got close enough to you, they’d send a hardover flipper signal
on the same frequency that had to overpower the ground signal, and you could only do
that when it was very close to the airplane.

RV: That’s scary.

DS: Yes, so anyway they tracked me going in on the third day, I refueled and I
said, I know those buggers are going to shoot at me coming out because I’ll be heavy on
fuel and not as high. So, coming out you just about get up to speed as you make a right
hand turn over the, going to North Vietnam and back out to the east, so I left the throttles
right up to the wall to get as much altitude as I could, and I’m going about 3.25 Mach and
I got all the indications again and I said. I made one mistake there, we got a little tiny
periscope you could put up at the top of the cockpit and, just a little prism thing and you
could see behind you. So I put that up and as I went zinging out I got all these launch
signals and stuff and I says uh-oh, so I started looking around a bit and one SAM went
off the right wing, oh maybe a hundred yards or so.

RV: Could you, I’m sorry, could you tell how many had been launched against
you or was it?

DS: No, I couldn’t tell but I saw this one going straight up and it was kind of
spinning so I assume that the ECM, give it a hardover flipper and it missed me, but
otherwise [without the ECH] I think it might have gotten me. So I went zinging by going
up and I think there were three or four more that did the same thing that I didn’t see,
because I started looking in the rearview periscope. Well, what happens is the SAM goes
up and it gets, we trigger the hardover signal, the flipper signal on that ECM equipment.
It misses you going up, then it gets out of the signal and it starts to guide again and it
goes up about ninety thousand feet or a little higher and then it turns over and starts
coming down and tries to chase you up your tail, so its still chasing you. Well, they have
a time of flight on them or they self-destruct or something, oh I’ve forgotten what it is but
its probably one minute or something like that and so these. I’m looking in the rearview,
my little rearview periscope and I could see these explosions going off behind me, boom,
boom, boom, like a flak gunner in Korea, only except they were SAMs, but they could
not quite catch me. They were guiding again but they were trying to catch me coming up
the rear and they didn’t quite do it. But I did pick, I picked up a little piece of metal off
the nose fuse of one of them, it got out in front of me and I just ran over it at very low
velocity, it barely punched a hole in the skin of the airplane, it was about as big as your
fingernail, so I’m the only guy that ever got hit.

RV: Could you, could you hear it happen or?

DS: Oh no, I didn’t know it happened.

RV: But you saw it?

DS: They found a little tiny hole in the airplane when it got down, that’s the only
way they knew it.

RV: Now was that the first and only time you’d been shot at, actually seeing the
SAMs fly by your aircraft or?

DS: That was the only time I actually saw any. On some other, you’ve got to
recognize we didn’t fly many mission down there. I flew the whole year I was there, I
only flew about, four missions would have been about seven or eight passes over North Vietnam, so you didn’t fly very often. The big problem was the weather. We were flying high altitude, its cloudy down there most of the time. The last mission I flew before they retired us, they launched me on one not too long before they sent us home and I, they said that the weather looked pretty marginal, we don’t know, and I got down about the Philippines and I got a radio call and they turned me around, sent me back. The satellite, it didn’t have many satellites in those days, when the satellites came around they had the satellite picture and they said immediately, they said no chance of any photography and they just turned me around.

RV: So that was your very last mission?

DS: That was the last one I flew there, yes.

RV: And the last mission over Vietnam is when you were shot at?

DS: Yes, the last one I actually went over Vietnam I got shot at that time, yes.

We flew some after that but it wasn’t me, we rotated to and from the States, different guys were over there.

RV: Where else would you fly your missions over, out of Okinawa?

DS: Well, that’s the only place we went except, I was not over there when it occurred, but they, when they took the, no, I might have been, I’m trying to remember. They took the Pueblo and there was great confusion in Washington when they did that, that was unexpected and we had a, the boss that we had over there was kind of practical and he says, he told the guys, “Dream up a mission right away to go over North Korea.” We had not been flying over North Korea and he sent a message off to Washington, something to the effect that unless you did not concur we intend to fly an airplane over North Korea tomorrow morning and see what’s going on. I think that stirred them up, up there and I think they approved me and we cranked up an airplane early the next morning, a guy by the name of Frank Murray flew that one and he made a couple, two, three passes over North Vietnam, a nice clear day and right down at Hon Son harbor there’s the old Pueblo sitting there, figuring heck, so it gave the guys in Washington early on information, where the boat was and you could see people and stuff. You can’t identify them, but you can see people on the ground and stuff like that with the photography but then at least the guys in Washington knew what happened to the boat
and where it was and that sort of thing. But that triggered off then, we didn’t fly over
North Korea any more, but the SR-71s that replaced us shortly thereafter ran some
regular flights periodically after North Vietnam after that, doing the same thing.

RV: Okay. Did you ever fly one of the SR-71s or?

DS: Yes. When I left the program I went back into the Air Force there, I went to
the Air Defense Command here in Colorado Springs. I was running all their, I was
Lieutenant Colonel then, running all their test programs and stuff which primarily were
done down at Tyndal [AFB] in Florida, all their weapons systems and this. I got pretty
heavily involved in that, and all of a sudden they promoted me to Colonel and sent me off
to the National War College in Washington and when I left there they sent me, because I
had all that flying experience, they sent me to Beale as a director of operations of the
ninth Wing out there, which had the SR-71s and I was the vice commander, due to take
over the Wing when I got grounded due to going deaf in the right ear and was grounded
for a number of years. So, that caused me a lot of heartburn and problems, but I was out
there and rotated through the commander’s job out there at Kadena, a place, which I was
very familiar with of course because they moved right in the same buildings. So I
operated for a two-year period as one of the commanders of the operating location over
there and during that time we were actually doing a few flights over North Korea and
Vietnam at the same time, but I wasn't a. I got current in the SR-71. They usually didn’t
have the Wing staff guys fly the airplane because flying time was expensive and you’re
not going to fly operational missions, but when I got there, the guy was a Wing
Commander said “You want to check out?” and I said, “Yes, let me check out because it
will provide some, the air crews will know that I’m familiar with the airplane and what
they’re doing.” And so I took one ride in the trainer airplane that they had there and then
they said, I said, “I’ll fly one flight in the A model,” you know the regular operational
airplane “And at least they’ll know that I can fly it.” So I flew one flight in the A model
and got current in it and then went back to my job as Wing DO and vice commander.

RV: How did the SR-71 compare to the A-12?

DS: I liked the airplane okay, but I always liked the A-12 better because it was
five thousand pounds lighter, I was all by myself, I thought it was, flew a little bit better,
not much. It would fly five thousands pound lighter, then it’s five thousand feet higher.
RV: So it was safer actually?
DS: Yes, in a way and at the time we had better cameras too because the cameras, when we put the second seat in the SR, that’s where our big camera was, and they then had to put the cameras out in the chine areas on the sides of the airplane and put in mirrors and folded lenses and stuff like that, and it took them quite a number of years to get the quality of the photography up to where we were when they folded up the other program. Other than that, the airplane was a fine airplane.
RV: Okay. How did you find yourself as a leader, did you enjoy that position, or, initially do you?
DS: Oh, I didn't mind it. I’d never considered myself as being a leader except that when I was put in those positions I operated as one. I thought I was a fairly good commander, yes.
RV: So when you left Okinawa, you went back and you entered.
DS: When I was in Okinawa over there with the SR-71 I was operating as a commander of the operating location there with the, all the maintenance guys and everybody there under me. They had a SAC Wing there that I had to argue with the Colonel over there all the time because he wanted to take over our business, they had tankers and stuff there and I think I fairly effectively kept ourselves kind of isolated from his influence, best I could.
RV: Right, so you actually got, you were put back into uniform once you?
DS: Yes, I was already; I was back in uniform as a Colonel in the Air Force then.
RV: Right, when you came back. What years were you commander over there at Kadena?
DS: I went to Beale [AFB], 1971; I think I left there in ’73. I got grounded. I went deaf in one ear. I was going to be the Wing Commander and I got grounded because I went deaf in one ear and had a lot of vertigo and I was grounded for a number of years.
RV: What happened with that, how did you get?
DS: Never determined, undetermined.
RV: Did it come back?
DS: No, I’m deaf in one ear and I still have, my eye movements are abnormal. In fact I eventually got myself back in flying status by spending quite a bit of time with the doctor guys down in San Antonio and I, to my knowledge, I was the only guy in the entire Air Force that went back to flying status with a totally bad ear, so I flew out my career doing a bunch of other things, but they bumped me out of the SR-71 business at an inopportune time I might point.

RV: Great. How did you feel when you came back to the United States in 1968 about the War effort in Vietnam?

DS: Same as I said before, we’re not trying to win the war.

RV: What was your opinion of the anti-war movement that was festering in the country?

DS: Oh, I was, I didn’t think that was very helpful in all that. I can understand why they’re doing it, but I didn’t. I was not sympathetic to them at all I don’t think.

RV: Did you ever, go ahead I’m sorry.

DS: Oh, I was just going to say I understood why they, they didn’t want to go over there, they started out as guys that didn’t want to get drafted and get over there and shot at and that sort of thing. And I can understand that but nevertheless, I’m more in favor of supporting the country even though I may think its wrong.

RV: Okay. I’m curious as to how you felt about, when the war was ending and you’re actually over in Okinawa when the United States pulls out and the Paris Peace Conference has ended?

DS: Well, I’m gone from it then.

RV: Yes, everything is done.

DS: I’m gone.

RV: Okay, how did you feel about the United States in 1973 when it had pulled out of South Vietnam and then kind of Vietnamese the war, turned it over to the South Vietnamese to fight for themselves?

DS: Well, I can’t give you a good opinion on that, except that it might, the general feeling is that we’re kind of abandoning them sort of. You know I had kind of that feeling that it was not; I was not very comfortable with that.
RV: Did you feel like the United States had achieved peace with honor as was said in Paris?

DS: No, I don’t think so. We never, we got them to the table and got to quit the war but I never thought that the way we went about pursuing the war was, I was never very happy with that. I’m a great believer, if you’re going to go to war, do it. Let’s go full out and get the damn thing over with. I mentioned Bosnia and Yugoslavia and all those places, you can think of all kind of wars there, seems to be the only war we ever finished was World War II.

RV: Right, right. Did you ever have any desire to actually go into Vietnam itself on foot and see the country for yourself, or South Vietnam and see the country?

DS: Yes, I think I would have liked to do that, but I never really had an opportunity to. I was in and out of Saigon a couple of times over the SR business, but there was such a brief trip it wasn’t even worthwhile. You know I got no feeling at all for the country or anything like that.

RV: So you really had no opinion of the country itself?

DS: No, I have no feeling for the guys on the ground and all that stuff. I had friends that were flying out of Thailand and other places, but as far as the actual feel for South Vietnam country, I really didn’t have any. I never spent any time down there really.

RV: I’m curious as to how you dealt with actually flying in a combat zone. I know you did it in Korea, a hundred missions and then you were doing it over North Vietnam a few times?

DS: That didn’t bother me much. I signed up in the military to do that and I think through the years I’ve always figured that that goes with the program. If I’m, if they want me to fly over Korea or fly over Vietnam or fly over Moscow, I’m going to do it.

RV: Do you think the United States should have ever been involved in Vietnam, or should we have left it to the Vietnamese to deal with them, themselves?

DS: Well, of course there’s a lot of hindsight in there, but again I kind of think we probably shouldn’t have gotten involved but once we did we should have pursued it full out.
RV: Do you think the United States government learned any lessons from the Vietnam War?

DS: I’d have to say not much. Maybe with Bush out there and those guys, you know he’s talking about the Gulf War and all that. I’m ambivalent about what’s he’s trying to do there, I think maybe it needs to be done but my feeling was I was really ticked when the elder Bush could have driven the tanks right up into Baghdad and the palace doorstep in just twenty-four hours and they didn’t do it. Didn’t finish that one and then they allowed the, they ended up with the dang guys burning every oil well in Kuwait down, while we did nothing just to put the fire out.

RV: Do you think that the United States government knows how to deal with such a conflict, as Vietnam, kind of a limited war, is that a war that’s possible to fight or something that we can understand now?

DS: Oh, I think they probably know pretty much about how to do that and what should be done. I give the guys a lot of credit that are up there in the Pentagon or whoever doing the planning, I even think they could do that. I think the problem is the political will and the political side of it is whether they want to do it or now. I don’t think there’s any problem of how to do it and what to do, its just the political will of whether they want to do it.

RV: Do you think that the civilian leadership and the military leadership should be separated and do you think that there should be civilian control over the military?

DS: Sure, you know the civilians that, civilians, I think the civilians should run the country and the military should do what they want them to do. I would just question their judgment in many cases, that’s all, but I don’t think the military ought to run the country, no.

RV: Okay, what did you think of the media coverage of the Vietnam War?

DS: Yes, good question and I don’t really have a good answer. You know going back quite a while. I don’t think the media was really getting the overall picture out of what’s really going on down there, that’s my impression, that’s all, I don’t have anything to base it on.

RV: What about today, the media coverage of warfare today and there’s, the information that one can receive is almost overwhelming if you listen to radio and?
DS: Yes, there’s a lot of stuff out there.

RV: The print media, the, yes, everything, what do you think, is this?

DS: Well, that’s okay. I think in some cases we’re still not getting the whole picture but in some cases you’re getting so much that I don’t know whether its worthwhile to get it or not and I don’t know whether its helpful, you know you’re never quite sure how accurate it all is and whatever, but you do get a lot of it in a big hurry.

RV: Yes, that’s for sure. Have you read books on the Vietnam War?

DS: No, not a whole lot, I’ve read some books, yes. I’m trying to think of a few, there was one there about the three Naval Academy guys I remember, its John McCain and Poindexter and Ollie North, something like that, I forget the name of that, The Nightingin.

RV: The Nightingales?

DS: Yes, Nightingale Song.

RV: Nightingale Song, right.

DS: Yes, I thought that was a fairly well written book and that Ollie North over in Vietnam and stuff it kind of gave you a good picture of what some of the activity was over there, but I read a few other books but I don’t recall them at the moment.

RV: What about movies of the Vietnam War, have you seen these?

DS: I haven’t seen many at all. I don’t have, haven’t really looked at any.

RV: Is it a, just basically a lack of interest or are you avoiding it?

DS: Well, to some degree I guess that’s true because I’m not, I kind of hate to go back and think about things like that in some respects.

RV: This is a question that I enjoy asking as far as the culture of the time. What do you remember of the 1960s, in particular, when you hear songs on the radio today or wherever you would hear them, does it take you back to that time, does it take you back to the Vietnam War time?

DS: Yes, I suppose I do occasionally.

RV: Does anything come to mind?

DS: Nothing particular except the guys that were good friends that are gone.

RV: Have you been to the Vietnam War memorial in Washington DC?

DS: Yes.
RV: What was your experience there?
DS: Very moving. There’s a number of names on there I looked for and found
them.
RV: What kind of effect did it have on you?
DS: Well, it’s amazing how many people were there for one thing. That’s a good
memorial because it has all those names out there. I don’t think I want to talk about it.
RV: We’ll move on. Today, sir if you had to talk to young people about the
Vietnam War, what would you tell them?
DS: Well, I think it was a war that I don’t know whether it should have been
fought, but it was not fought in the manner to win and that if we’re going to go to war
then we ought to do it right.
RV: How do you think that kids today should get information about how the
United States conducted itself in Southeast Asia?
DS: Well I think the project you’re doing is right at the top of the list. You know
to really get the different views and different word out from different people that kind of
really get into what happened over there.
RV: Okay, do you want to give a kind of a brief rundown of what you did after
you left Kadena in ’73 and where your career went because you spent a long time in the
military?
DS: Yes, I, I’ll tell you what happened. When I got grounded I went off to
Chanute Air Force Base as the vice commander of tech training center and stayed there
awhile. Finally got myself back on flying status and that then sent me to Mather Air
Force Base as Wing Commander to train navigators of all things. I was there a year, they
moved me down to Randolph Air Force Base in Texas where as a DCS ops running all
the flying training for the Air Force, all the pilot and navigator training and that was a
good job for me. I was into that stuff. I was there two years and I should have gone off to
the Pentagon but for various reasons I didn’t. I went to an air division at, it was in SAC
at Abilene, Texas, Dyess Air Force Base and I spent a few years there, that was kind of a
dead end job in a way, partially my own fault.
RV: When did you make General?
DS: I made General when I was at, I was a Colonel when I went into the DCS ops job down at Air Training Command they immediately promoted me to General Officer running the flying training. In hindsight I should have, from there the next career move I should have gone to the Pentagon, but I had some reasons why I didn’t do that. But I ended up coming back to Colorado Springs where I own the house that I bought in 1968 and only lived in for a year. I rented the thing out and we came back here for the last year I operated as a commander. They wanted a General Officer in Cheyenne Mountain, that facility, and I was the first one that they put out there. I knew that I was within one year of retirement and I took the job primarily to move here to Colorado Springs and that was interesting job, but not one that I would like full time or anything like that.

RV: Tell me about Cheyenne Mountain, what was that like at the time?

DS: Well, it’s an interesting facility. Back in the 50s they blew a big hole in the mountain and build a big caverns in there and put three story buildings in there around the springs and stuff so that a nuclear explosion would have to take two or three pretty big ones to knock the thing down, had great big doors going in and all that. When you’re inside there, its just as though you’re in any other building without windows, they have a lot of nice pictures around to make you think you’re outside or something. I didn’t find, I found it interesting to work up there, nothing wrong with that, and the work they were doing I think was quite necessary. There were a lot of things that were happening, you know we’d get all the satellite information coming in from different types of satellites out there, and one thing that you know we’d get, every once in a while we’d get a call from somebody, satellite thing, “Hey, we’ve got a hot spot in a certain spot” and we’d take a look at it and its not moving. We’d just call somebody like its in Canada or someplace, they’d say “Oh, so go out and look” and then pretty soon we’d get a call back, “Yes, we got a forest fire out there, but its in the boonies and we can’t get to it” things like that. It’s amazing what the satellites would pick up, even going back a long ways. If you had fighters in Russia that light up their afterburner or fire off a missile or something, infrared there could pick up those launches and I’m sure its gotten a lot better since then but I’m sure the satellites still give them an awful lot of information but I was into that back before I retired, but that’s a long time ago.

RV: What year were you there at Cheyenne?
DS: I retired in 1983, yes 82-83. Yes, then I retired.
RV: What would you say over your career was the most tense time for you as a military officer?
DS: Oh, well I don’t remember any really tense times. The worst times were probably when I got grounded and had to move and stuff like that.
RV: Okay, so you’re out in ’82, ’83 and you did a total what, thirty?
DS: Thirty, well I had, I ended up if count the Naval Academy, about thirty-eight years of military service. The four years of the Naval Academy are actually midshipmen, U.S. Navy so I was actually; you know it’s really sort of an active duty thing.
RV: I’m curious as how the Central Intelligence Agency has treated you since you left the CIA and went back into the regular Air Force?
DS: Haven’t had any contact with them other than they took some pictures of me standing by the airplane back early on when we’re up at the area and they lost them somewhere and I talked to the protocol gal one days and she says, “Well,” you know they gave us all a CIA, an intelligence star when we quit, I called up there to say, “Hey, I don’t have any of those pictures.” The protocol gal says, “Well. Let me look around.” She found them down in the archive somewhere.
RV: Really?
DS: Yes, that’s the only time I’ve talked to them.
RV: Well, sir is there anything else that you’d like to add to our conversation today?
DS: No, except it’s been interesting talking to you and I don’t know whether this is helpful to you, but.
RV: Absolutely, sir.
DS: Thanks for including me.
RV: Well, sure, it’s our pleasure and we appreciate your time and we’ll sign off now. Thank you, sir.
RS: Thank you.