Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an interview with
Mr. Robert Turk. I am in Lubbock, Texas at Texas Tech University, Special Collections
Library interview room. Today is February 10, 2003. Mr. Turk you are in Coppell,
Texas and why don’t we start sir with some biographical information on you, tell me
when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood.
Robert Turk: I was born in Binghamton, New York in August of 1945 and my
father returned from, (he was an Air Force pilot also), and he returned from the war just
before I was born and separated although he [left the service but] maintained his reserve
status and thus I lived in Binghamton for the first seven years of my life and then my dad
went back in the service near the end of the Korean War and then he remained in the
service until he retired [in 1970]. Then, so we moved all over the place in the ‘50s. The
latter part of the ‘50s we ended up in San Antonio where I lived for four years and went
through most of high school and then early ’62 we moved to California where I graduated
from high school, came back to Texas at Baylor University where I was [also] in the Air
Force ROTC.
RV: Okay, so your father, was he a pretty big influence on you joining the
service, or going through the ROTC program?
RT: He let me choose but he was kind of my idol, yes.
RV: What was it like growing up in Binghamton, what do you remember?
RT: Not very much. We moved from there when I was seven, anything I remember is most of dad’s mom and [is that] my grandparents lived there, and at least for the first few years, most of the aunts and uncles did, then everybody started scattering out all over the place. We moved from Binghamton to Buffalo to San Antonio for training, over to Florida, then up to Alabama. The main thing I remember about being in Alabama was those were the years that, or that was the year that Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus and I remember little bits and snippets of that. Then we moved up to Ohio and New York and then down to the San Antonio area.

RV: So you moved quite a bit.

RT: Right. Back then they had more money than they do now.

RV: How did you adjust to all the moving around?

RT: Well, the family was very, very strong part of our growing up. We didn’t have lifelong friends like a lot of my friends did so the family was the basis of our security and safety and that was pretty much the way it was, so I always thought there was something a little screwy with myself until I got into college and found out that everybody was in kind of the same boat, it just manifests itself differently with some others than it did with me. But it helped me come out of myself and be a little more extroverted than I probably would have been otherwise.

RV: Okay, did your mother work when you were growing up?

RT: No.

RV: How many siblings did you have?

RT: I have a sister.

RV: Okay, is she older or younger?

RT: She’s younger.

RV: Okay. And tell me about talking with your dad that you did about World War II and his service in the Air Force.

RT: He never really talked about it too much until, (he just died a year or so ago) and he started to talk a little bit about it as he got older and more ill, but not very much. All they ever really told us was the reason they got married so early, they were both eighteen when they got married, was because the world was coming to an end and the war was starting and so we have a very good family history [book]; my mom did a
picture book of you will if [of her] following dad around all of [during] his training, from
I think ’42, maybe ’43 on to the time that he went over sees in early ’45 and he flew his
missions, got shot down twice; he got shot down on his first mission and his last mission.
He was interned in Switzerland at the end of the war, trying to escape, [but the war ended
and he came home].

RV: Wow, what did he fly, was it…?
RT: He was a B-24 pilot.
RV: B-24s; okay.
RT: And then when he came back in [the Air Force in ’53], he ended up flying
tankers, KC-97s, until he eventually got changed over to B-52s [because he was gone so
much in those years] and so I spent most of my career trying to avoid [duty in] SAC.
RV: After having seen what it did to dad and those involved in the strategic air
command?
RT: I hardly ever got, my senior year, I hardly ever saw him because he was
either on alert or briefing debriefing from a flight, so I didn’t get to see him much my
senior year.
RV: Tell me about high school in San Antonio. Did you play sports?
RT: Yes, I wasn't a varsity quality athlete, but I played football, basketball,
baseball, some with school, some with like Pony league, Babe Ruth league stuff like that,
but then I started working when I was about fifteen and the money kind of helped so I
ended up working but I’ve always played sports.
RV: What did you do, what was your work?
RT: Oh it was, my first job was, what was the name of that place, I can’t
remember the name of the store it was a discount chain store and when they found out I
wasn’t sixteen they let me go but I was helping them open up their store, that was my
first job, conflicting with my baseball schedule and after that I ended up working in a
grocery store as a bag boy.
RV: Okay, did you continue playing sports in California, when you went there?
RT: Yes, but you can’t senior year you come in, you can’t play for one year
because of [thin] eligibility [rules] so I went out for football and got injured, my foot, so I
ended up dropping out of that but I did play basketball, but again I couldn’t play varsity
sports because I was a transfer. They wouldn’t let you come in until your second year. I
played on what they called varsity ramblers and we were just kind of a bunch of guys that
went over and nobody came to the games we just had a good time.

RV: What were your favorite subjects in high school?
RT: Well, English, social studies, those kinds of things.

RV: Were you a good student or fair?
RT: No, I wasn’t any good, I was, I probably could have done a lot better,
basically a C+ student.

RV: And you went to Baylor, is that right?
RT: Yes.

RV: And was education emphasized in your household, is that something that
your?
RT: I was the first one to get a college degree. Dad was one of the last officers to
be in service without a college degree, which made it very difficult for him in the
competition and he didn’t make Major for years, matter of fact there was only, let’s see
he made Major my senior year of college in ’66 and then I made Captain in ’70 so there
was only like three years there that there wasn’t a captain in the family. But he retired, he
never served as a Lieutenant Colonel but he retired from reserves as a Lieutenant
Colonel. They wanted me to do good in education but they didn’t have any, I mean it
wasn’t like, here’s how you do it.

RV: So how did you end from California going back to Baylor, over in Texas?
RT: Well, I was, we grew, as I said the family was very close and we grew up, my
folks were always in the Baptist Church. I have since left it but they [Baylor], that was
the biggest Baptist school and I [had] applied to the Air Force Academy and I was too
late there plus my grades probably wouldn’t have even come close [to qualifying] but I
was accepted to Baylor and to California Baptist College and went to Baylor. Back then
it was fairly inexpensive; it was the second cheapest private university in the country.
Semester hours were like fifteen bucks a semester hour so I got my education fairly
inexpensively, but it was an excellent college for me.

RV: What do you remember most about those years?
RT: About Baylor?
RV: Yes sir.

RT: I loved it, it was just, I just grew up, grew out and became more of an individual. It was one of the first things, (even though mom and dad paid the bills), something that I did. I was in student government for three years and loved that and if I had to have a better grade point average I’d have been, we had elections for who’s who in college and all that, but I had to have a 3.0 and I had like a 2.79 or something.

RV: So you were a decent student.

RT: Same thing, I was a C+ student until I got into grad school, then I began to get all As, but I don’t think, it wasn’t because of anybody else I just didn’t apply myself.

RV: How did you get into ROTC?

RT: Well, my dad was in the service and it just made sense to me. Vietnam was going on and I kind of sensed that I wanted to fly so this was going to be a way to do it. I had good physical attributes, good eyesight, coordination, and scored well on the AFOQT, and so I just did that instead of having to do PE and stuff like that.

RV: Now, you joined, when did you join, your freshman year or was it your sophomore year?

RT: Yes, I was in Air Force ROTC the whole time.

RV: Tell me about wanting to fly, when did that kind of enter your mind, was that when you were a boy or when?

RT: Oh, yes. I had books when I was little, one of the first books I remember reading was Doolittle’s *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, I think I still have that book somewhere and had another one called, I can’t remember the name of it, I’ve got it tucked away somewhere too, something about ace flying or something like that and *High Flight* was always one of my favorite poems, even before I flew and really knew what it meant, so it had just always fascinated me. I didn’t do it very much when I was little but [sometimes] would fly Piper Cubs and stuff [with dad] and I’d go with him every once in a while.

RV: When was the first time you ever flew with him?

RT: When I was little I remember going up with him in a friend’s Piper Cub and then we really, I think one time off the record he took me out on the KC-97, they were not flying but doing an engine check the end of the runway so I got to taxi out there and
that was when I was, I think I might have been, I was pretty old then, I’d have been in high school.

RV: It almost seemed like you were destined to fly, your dad in the service.

RT: My neighbor in San Antonio was also out there, he flew fighters so he took me up with him in a private airplane a couple times and I loved that too.

RV: When did you first actually get to fly yourself?

RT: In ROTC.

RV: Tell me about that experience?

RT: I was one of the, I forget how many pilots, four or five that they had chosen and we went through training [at Waco Municipal Airport] there and I soloed in November of ’66, out of all, I guess there were eight of us there at the college and a lot of interesting experiences, learning instruments and stuff [acrobatics] but I wasn’t really a very good pilot but I was persistent. We, well let’s see we finished up and only two of us finished out of that program. I think four of us went, graduated and went to pilot training. Only two of us finished and the other guy was killed in a C-47 in Vietnam, so I’m the only one left out of that particular [ROTC] class, that group.

RV: You said you weren’t; go ahead, I’m sorry.

RT: That’s all right.

RV: You said you weren’t a very good pilot, why do you say that?

RT: I’m not a natural.

RV: Did it come hard to you?

RT: I don’t know. Well I just wasn’t a natural, so I had to work hard at it and I always thought that that if they didn’t have a war I probably wouldn’t have made it through, but they needed the pilots. I didn’t graduate at the bottom of my class, but I was, there was only, I was in one of the first classes at Randolph and I think we lost a few to washouts but when we got done we had about thirty-five left and I was probably in high twenties or low thirties, but I did get pretty much my choice because I knew I couldn’t do [fly] a fighter and got [requested] cargo planes.

RV: Now, you said you went to Randolph, was that your basic training there?

RT: Yes.

RV: When was that, 1966, when you graduated?
RT: No, I entered in ’67 and I finished in ’68, end of August.

RV: What did you do in that intervening year after you graduated?

RT: From college?

RT: I graduated from college in 67.

RV: Oh, okay I thought it was ’66, my fault.

RT: No, I graduated in ’67 on one day, the next day I got married and I worked for a couple months the with the YMCA with Waco and then I entered the Air Force down in San Antonio and went through pilot training, the ‘year of fifty-three weeks’, which was really fifty-seven weeks. We finished around; I think it was August 31, ’68.

RV: How was basic training for you, can you describe that for me?

RT: It was the first thing I ever really did on my own and I was very proud of my wings. We flew half days and we had academics half days and that flip flopped every other week, whether you flew in the morning or the afternoon but academics morning and afternoon and it was just, you [were] just very well scheduled [and busy] all the time.

RV: Did you do okay with the academic portion of it?

RT: Yes, all except one class, applied aerodynamics did me in.

RV: Really?

RT: Yes.

RV: Did you find yourself improving as a pilot as you went through training?

RT: Oh, I don’t know about that. I remember my dad was in Vietnam while I was in pilot training.

RV: What did he do over there?

RT: He was, I think base ops officer at Pleiku and so we were writing back and forth, so I sent him a letter one day when I was flying the T-38 and we went supersonic, I said ‘Well, I guess I’m the first one in the family to be supersonic.’ And he didn’t say anything except congratulations and all that stuff, but while I was in Vietnam, later on he was [flying] base support here at Carswell, [AFB (Fort Worth, TX)] which was producing the F-111, B-111, whatever you want to call it, so he sent me a letter over there and said, ‘Well you may have been first, but I went many times more faster than you did.’

RV: Was this a friendly competition between the two of your or just joking back and forth?
RT: Yes, he was just kidding. That’s about the only thing I ever remember him saying about that, but and then when I, he got back from Vietnam in time to pin on my wings, so that was really cool. He also pinned on my mom and my sister pinned on my bars. So he came down for graduation then he left for ‘Nam and I started pilot training and he got back in time to see me finish.

RV: That’s great.

RT: Yes it was.

RV: What did you know, I mean I was going to ask you, what did you know about Vietnam, were you keeping with world events and what was going on?

RT: Oh, yes.

RV: With your father there, of course you were.

RT: Well, even before that in college, remember the ‘60s was pretty tumultuous but Baylor was backwater as far as that went, it wasn’t any Berkeley by any means, but it was interesting. I was pretty much anti-war so I was kind of tossing that around between that and really wanting to fly and I decided I really wanted to fly more than I wanted to be politically correct, but most of my friends were against the war for whatever their [a number of] reasons were. So we had [There were] some demonstrations my senior year that were very interesting because Baylor of course is a religious school and I remember one of these demonstrations where these people were just praying for peace in front of the chapel and people [students gathered] would get around and yell at them and turn on water hoses and stupid things like that. This one guy that I knew was a ministerial student was yelling at them, seams [blood veins] bulging out of his head he was so angry at them [those praying for peace] and he turned to me and (I was in my ROTC uniform because it was that day to wear it or something) and turned to me and he says, ‘I can’t believe you’re not yelling at them too.’ I just said, ‘Well, I can’t believe [that] you’re a ministerial student.’ There was a lot of high emotions going on, but there weren’t that many [people] that were aware of or agreed with [those] demonstrating. They eventually, well, of course, eventually, we got around that and so I was, like I said I went on to pilot training and got to fly and then of course my first assignment was over there [in Vietnam]. I was thinking about this that I remember distinctly a four-phase approach to the war.
RV: As far as U.S. policy is concerned?
RT: Well, I was against the policy and I’m always against the policy so that
doesn’t bother me but the way I personally felt about it was interesting in the sense that I
was against the war and I was just kind of like, doing my job kind of a thing until the first
time I got shot up pretty bad on a mission and then I was kind of rabid about these guys
are out to get me and I want to get them first and that stuff, even though I had no way of
shooting back except to shoot a gun out the window. Then, kind of a pensive phase, a
third quarter where these people are just kind of defending themselves kind of thing, and
then the fourth quarter was, you know I just hope I get out of here and going back to kind
of being against the whole [war] thing because one of the missions that I did was fly with
my commander. I was a lieutenant you know, I wasn’t any big deal over there so, I was
flying with a commander [my detachment] one time [afternoon] and we flew these two
scientists around to show them the spray patterns that the Ranch had been using in the
northern part and mostly in II Corps, some in I Corps, but mostly in II Corps so we flew
for four, five hours one afternoon with these guys. I was [later] reading a magazine, what
was the name of it, New Republic, which I thought was a pretty sharp magazine because
it, like, this is much later but got here after I was back home but it broke a lot of
Watergate stuff six to eight months before the mainstream press did about [the] ITT
scandals with milk scandals, some other things. Anyway, these two guys’ [scientists]
articles showed up while I was still in Vietnam. Their conclusions and so on, which I
thought were precipitous without any other knowledge, they were like correlating data for
birth defects in the civilian population to the [our] missions. And what I was, I mean I
wasn't any great shakes academically or anything else but I knew that they didn’t have
any data before that [the war] to compare it to so there was absolutely no way someone
would be able to say they [the missions] caused to be [an increase of birth defects in the
country]. So, and I thought that was always unfair because after all we weren’t accepted
back in the States very well, we were [called] baby-killers and everything else, [so] with
them not being scientific about it, it made the how would you say that, it made me feel
like most of the [media] comments really truly were unfair. So, anyhow, I guess that
really means anything but.
RV: Well, no it does and we can talk a little bit more about your feelings toward the war in general a bit later. Before you went over, when you were in basic at Randolph, what were your attitudes toward the war? You said you were kind of anti-war at Baylor but once you got back in the service?

RT: Yes, I was still anti-war.

RV: Were you really?

RT: Yes.

RV: How about the people that you were with, your comrades there?

RT: Most of them were pro-war.

RV: Was there a reason why you were anti-war, did you feel like the United States did not need to be over there in Southeast Asia?

RT: Yes, from what the people that I ran [hung out] with in college and the reading I was doing I thought we had overstepped our bounds.

RV: Why did you think the United States had committed itself to Southeast Asia by that point?

RT: Well, I didn’t know then what I know now about the falseness of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, but I don’t know, I just didn’t feel like it was enough of a threat to merit our response. I’m not sure that I can verbalize that as much as I could back then but it’s been a long time since I thought about it.

RV: Do you feel like your training prepared you adequately for what you did in Vietnam?

RT: Yes. I’d have been dead if I wasn’t.

RV: Okay, what kind of weapons training did you have in your basic training there?

RT: We just went through the pilot profile, you know the T-37s, T-38s, T-41s to start with and that’s what we did.

RV: Which of those planes did you like the most?

RT: I loved flying the 38 because it was so fast but it took me awhile to get used to it.

RV: Now, because of the way you performed there, is that why you went into cargo flight?
RT: Yes, I was not, like I said, I wasn’t natural. My instructor pilot, I started to
tell you this earlier, but my instructor pilot, I remember this very distinctly or my dad told
me or something, told me that he normally worries about his students because he wasn’t
ever sure that they understood the magnitude of everything because he hadn't been able to
show them everything, but he said in my case there was an exception because I’d made
every possible mistake I could [have made]; so ever, for what that’s worth.

RV: So when you finish your basic did you, you get to choose or did you hope for
where you wanted to go or did they kind of assign you to an airplane?

RT: They had a list that came out, I can’t remember how soon it was before we
graduated but they had this list and it had all these airplanes [available] listed and I don’t
even, (I’ve got that list somewhere in my records, but I can’t remember, I can’t find them
right now) but I had picked all cargo airplanes because I just figured that that was what I
was more suited to, if so I picked the 123 [near the top] and that was the one that I ended
up getting. Some of the guys, I was happy that I got it and it was not something to brag
about but then it wasn’t anything to be ashamed of either.

RV: Where did you go for your training for the 123?

RT: We went to Hurlburt Field in Florida and I studied, noticed that Jack Spey is
one of the guys you’ve interviewed, he was my instructor pilot. He was a super guy. I
mean, he knew so much more, of course lieutenants don’t know anything anyway, but he
was a great instructor.

RV: What did you learn, what did he teach you?

RT: He taught me how to fly an airplane without being scared of it. He taught me
to fly, I don’t mean to say that he disregarded instruments but to fly in such a way that I
just, I learned things from him, that I, they didn’t have time to teach me in basic pilot
training. They’re trying to get you through the program but Jack was, he was very, very
good. He was probably the best instructor I ever had.

RV: Okay. Does anything stand out in your mind, any incidents that happened,
either during your basic or your advanced training at Hurlburt Field?

RT: That’s all, that would all be advanced training there at Hurlburt.

RV: Right, right, but either at Randolph or at Hurlburt, does anything stand out in
your mind, any incidents?
RT: Of what?
RV: Oh, just anything, any particular incidents that you have in your memories about those times that stand out?
RT: That was a good time then. Everybody was flying, everybody was having a good time, good fellowship, camaraderie, had a great group of guys in our class and we shared a lot of times together and a lot of good times and bad times. Of course when you’re younger you just kind of enjoy that stuff I guess and you don’t appreciate it but it really was a good time.
RV: When did you finish your training there, your advanced training at Hurlburt Field?
RT: Oh, let’s see. It was, I don't remember the exact date, it was, I think January of ’69.
RV: Okay, and you said in your questionnaire that you sort of volunteered for Vietnam, what do you mean by that?
RT: Well, by the airplane that I had picked and all that, I mean that was the only place they were flying them but there weren’t very many, there weren’t that many choices.
RV: How did that come about, that you actually were assigned to Vietnam?
RT: Well I just got the 123 and that’s where all the missions were and that’s just the way it was.
RV: Okay, how did you feel about going over there at that point?
RT: I didn’t mind. I mean, I didn’t, I can’t say that I guess, but it was just, you know I said earlier that my mom and dad had told me that the reason that they were the way they were, that they got married so young was because the world was coming to an end [World War II] and I got married and my wife wanted to have a baby in case I didn’t come back, I think she’s told me since then and so I didn’t particularly want to be there. I never did see my son until he was eleven months old, so I resented that but I’ve always said that the war was [okay]; the flying was wonderful, it was just that if I could have come home on the weekends, I’d have been much happier.
RV: How did you feel about going into a war zone, did it bother you at all?
RT: No, it’s where the job was.
RV: Okay, and how did you get over to Vietnam exactly?

RT: The longest damn flight I ever had in my life. We were, I don’t remember, I think it was twenty-two hours, we flew from Travis to the Philippines because that’s where we were going to go for jungle survival school and that’s all I remember is I was in the middle seat all the way over there and I read about two novels. I couldn’t sleep because I was in the middle and to this day I hate the middle [seat of a flight]. I will do almost anything to avoid the middle [seat] of a commercial flight.

RV: What was the jungle survival school like?

RT: Oh it was kind of fun, it was, what did we do. We went to, compared to the survival school we had up at Fairchild, [Washington] it was a piece of cake but we ended up going out in the jungle with the Negritos and they would do stuff like, we had an E & E thing after we did a few days training and it was just a really, almost fun time to be out [in the jungle] there like that. We shot off the survival rockets and the Negrito kids would come out there with their little slingshots and try to shoot the little caps, we’d fling them out [over the cliffs] there like Frisbees and that was a real entertaining part of the time also. It was [the school] a good thing, plus you didn’t have to be in Vietnam and you were getting credit for Vietnam, so that was another good part of it.

RV: Were you there for two weeks?

RT: Roughly. I can’t remember the exact dates on that.

RV: And where did you fly into Vietnam?

RT: Into Saigon.

RV: What were your first impressions when you got off the plane in Saigon?

RT: It was just like in one of those movies, I can’t remember which one it was, I think it was Platoon, where they show Saigon and it was just like that, I mean I felt like I was back there when I saw that in that movie.

RV: Were you stationed there at Saigon or were you shipped somewhere else?

RT: No, we were at Bien Hoa.

RV: Okay, how long did you stay there in Saigon?

RT: Just somebody came and picked us up from the squadron.

RV: Okay, so very, very briefly.

RT: Yes, we weren’t there very long, because Bien Hoa isn’t that far away.
RV: Right, and did they drive you up to Bien Hoa or fly you?
RT: Oh, it was just a short drive.
RV: Okay. And what were your quarters like at Bien Hoa, what was the base like?
RT: Bien Hoa was a dusty place. My particular quarters, since I was among the lowest ranking lieutenants I was the only one [hooch] that had [was not] a non-air conditioned hooch. All I remember is the geckos in the john and when my son was born my dad was able to call [me on Autovon] and he got right to the hooch next door that had a phone and I didn’t have a phone in mine, so I heard the phone ringing but they had the door locked and I couldn’t get to it. So, my announcement of my son’s birth came in one of those yellow government notes, ‘Your son was born’ and I still have that somewhere in my mementos. I can’t find a lot of this stuff anymore, getting old or something.
RV: What were those first few days like for you at Bien Hoa, how did you feel?
RT: Oh, they took us, the Ranch Hands were a pretty hard drinking bunch and they used about any excuse they could to have a party. The Ranch Hands were changing over from having the earlier part of the squadron history was pretty much all captains and above, and they pretty much would do whatever it took to try to get Silver Stars and all kinds of battle stuff for whatever reason.
RV: What do you mean, what would they try to do?
RT: They’d pick hard missions where they knew they were going to get shot up for instance and so for some reason they didn’t have younger pilots until about the time I got there, which was early ’69.
RV: Okay, so tell me about, you said they, how did people receive you there, how were you?
RT: Oh that, everybody just, its kind of a like a fraternity I think. Yes, they kind of like, here we go, lets, here some new guys let’s get them acclimated so they can help out.
RV: How did they acclimate you?
RT: Oh, they just had drinking parties and some of the older guys were pretty good about helping us figure out what the mission was, but it was just a good squadron. They took care of us as much as they could, but we were lieutenants and they were all
pretty much older than we were, but as the year went on there was more and more
lieutenants in the squadron, so then we became the old heads and some of the… we
didn’t get very many older pilots and navigators after that [time] I don’t think.

RV: What was your typical day like there?
RT: In Bien Hoa?
RV: Yes.
RT: They were different in Da Nang and Bien Hoa. Bien Hoa I was like brand
new and I didn’t know what the heck was going on. I would be like duty officer or
something, which meant that I would coordinate, just follow the book, whatever the book
said to do for the duty officer. I don’t really remember what I did; I just did a lot of stuff
[things].
RV: How much flying did you do?
RT: Well, we’d fly pretty consistently but it took about, see I upgraded, I think in
April, I got there in March, early part of March and it took about a month to upgrade, so
you had to fly several missions, and I really, I’m sorry I just don’t remember, I don’t have
the training book or anything to say how many it was, but it was a lot of missions.
Remember that one of our interesting things is that my wife and another guy’s wife were
together in a house, a little house in San Antonio and he got shot down in his copilot
check, the only time we got a plane shot down that year and [we] sent the message back
[home], they got the part about getting shot [and] that he was all right before they got the
part of what happened, the way the stuff worked as far as the mail and so on [was free,
but not consistent]. So, that’s just one of a bunch of stories like that I guess.
RV: Well, what kind of training did they give you, did you fly a mission the first
time, just basically with your briefing and then go out or did you have to fly a certain
number?
RT: You’d just ride in what they called the jump seat, and usually they put you on
something pretty interesting like a heavy suppression mission pretty early on to see how
you’d do I guess.
RV: How did you first experience being shot at, or combat?
RT: Well that was, I don’t know, its kind of like fog, it happened and you’d just
kind of like wow, that’s what its like and you just learned to focus on what you needed to
get done to stay. The first one was, I didn’t get hit like that [that bad] but one of the guys
had his earphone caught, the cord shot off, you know cut in half, he couldn’t talk to
anybody. I remember one training mission was really funny, the pilot was a lieutenant
colonel and the lead guy in the back that was running the spray machine was Hispanic.
His language skills [accent] were difficult, it was difficult to understand him and he had a
Hispanic student that was even more difficult to understand. We started getting shot up
and one of the bullets hit the pressurized hose in the plane, which immediately turned it
into fog as it where, and all we could hear back there is Spanish. None of us spoke
Spanish so finally the colonel got on there [the intercom], ‘Get the instructor out of there,
I’ve got to find out what’s going.’ Because he asked me to turn around, I couldn’t see
anything because it was a big, huge cloud. Finally we got the second student [whose first
language] was English speaking, so neither the instructor nor the first student could say,
we got somebody on there that spoke English and that’s when we found out it was just a
hit in the hose, so we dumped our load and got out of there.

RV: How many missions would you usually fly during a day, just one?
RT: Two, usually two. You usually get up [very early], I’m thinking now in the, I
spent most of my time in Da Nang, at the detachment [there].
RV: How long were you at Bien Hoa?
RT: After I checked out as a copilot I went up to Da Nang pretty soon, so it was in
April and I stayed at Da Nang until I got out. The flying was different [It was
challenging flying] because in the Da Nang, they mostly sprayed [in mountains] like
down in flatlands [at Bien Hoa] and the copilot’s job there was pretty much sit there and
not do anything.
RV: Were you the copilot or the pilot?
RT: I was the copilot for five months and then the [aircraft commander for] seven.
I checked out as an aircraft commander and became pilot and I had seventy-two hits,
seventy-two or seventy-four hits and sixty of them were as a copilot and only twelve to
fourteen as a pilot because I learned pretty quick that if you stayed low they couldn’t hit
you.
RV: Why was that?
RT: Because you’re going so [fast], after shooting a rifle, it’s pretty hard to, and
the lower you are, the harder it is to hit you.
RV: How much, would you get shot at every time you went out or was it
sporadically?
RT: It was sporadic. We would usually know and if we did a heavy suppression
mission, where we had heavy fighter support, helicopters and all that around then we’d
know there was going to be some [ground fire], that’s the kind of mission that my friend
got shot down on, took a bullet into the aileron cable, so they lost control of the wings
and if it hadn’t been the fact they had three pilots, probably would have lost the plane, but
one of the pilots worked the jet to provide thrust which took over for the lift, when the
wings would start dropping and they could do a straight in approach, ended up crash
landing south of Bien Hoa somewhere. But it was right in one of the places where there
was an Army landing strip nearby.
RV: Can you describe kind of what you would do on a mission, how would you
go about, was it one plane, three planes, formation, things like that?
RT: Well in Bien they were flying bigger formations. Most of the missions in Da
Nang were three plane missions. If something was wrong they’d do something like, we
did do some two-plane missions, but tried to have at least three on target. Down south,
like I said its more flat so they were trying to, I mean they were, most of the planes were
down there so that’s why that was the case but we did, up in the north we did a lot of
mountain flying and so up there the copilot would really have to, because the airplane
was so heavy it took the pilot both hands to fly it, physically, so the copilot did the
power. That’s why if you’re on a flat mission, copilot didn’t have to do much because he
just got down there and set the power and you motored along but when you’re flying up
in the mountains it was power off, power on, you know going to max power, meto power,
max power and then perhaps even getting the jets in there if you got in a bind. So, I liked
to mountain fly a lot better because it was much more challenging and because there
weren’t as many people up there I was able to upgrade to aircraft commander faster. And
we did some more interesting missions, we did a few crop dusting missions with Agent
Blue instead of Agent Orange because they [the villagers] would grow farms in the bomb
craters and we’d go in there and spray that with Agent Blue to deny them some food up
in the hostile areas.

RV: Okay, how much support did you have, did you have support flying with you
every mission or was it?

RT: Yes, you always had fighters and you also always had a FAC. The FAC
would mark the beginning of the run. I was in the process of checking out as a lead pilot
near the end of my tour and had a conflict with my boss and never did get to finish but
the mission, well, being the lead pilot was a little bit different, you did more things than
you did as a regular pilot. You basically were in formation and you tried to stay on lead
and therefore and the lead always had a navigator to plot our course so that we could
correlate that into the herbicide spray pattern.

RV: How about the effectiveness of the Agent Orange, the defoliant, was it
working?

RT: Yes. We had three different types of agents; we had agents White, Orange
and Blue. Basically it worked, Blue would burn in seven days, Orange would burn in
fourteen and White would burn in twenty-one days and it worked sort of like when you
and I fertilize our yards and got a bag of fertilizer and we put it in the spreader and it
spills over the side and that particular spot usually dies because it has too much fertilizer
there so it grows too fast and that’s pretty much the way it worked.

RV: How many times would you have to spray one area?

RT: I do not know the answer to that because it depends. We could get a burn,
we’d get a burn but, for instance we’d spray along the Cambodian border, I remember
spraying there one mission out of Bien Hoa once and it had a triple canopy type thing and
we were working on the top canopy and that would take the top canopy off and then we’d
go in and go after the second canopy, the way I understand it and then the third canopy so
that air, FACs and so on could see any movement down there along the trails.

RV: Okay, how far off the ground were you, what altitude?

RT: Our missions were always between fifty and 150 feet which is why I say if I
could fly my mission at fifty feet and not get hit, but if I was at a hundred I would get hit
so I flew a lot of missions down around fifty feet and if people were uncomfortable with
that, they would be like pulling up on it, that’s what caused the conflict with my boss
about lead pilot. The way our formations worked, you would stack up, in other words, the two plane is higher than one and three plane’s higher that two, so it made sense to me lead pilot should be lower, my boss, I think, was afraid of [flying lower] some stuff and he kept staying up high, one day he tried to put me up in the clouds because he didn’t realize that I had to be above them to stay in formation.

RV: So you could see the ground really well, did you ever see people, villages, flying over those?
RT: Sure, saw Army troops too.
RV: Yes, what about the claims by the Army troops and some of the civilian population in Vietnam that they were sprayed with this stuff?
RT: Of course they were, they were there [on the ground]. We didn’t stop. One of the times we really got shot up bad was when we accidentally got over a pretty big town that had huge South Vietnam flag flying and we were really surprised we got shot up that bad but the navigator got off a little bit and I do not remember where that was exactly. It’s been so long I hardly even remember any of the names any more.

RV: How much contact did you have with the three agents themselves?
RT: I was safety officer so I went through them everyday, to walk through them. I didn’t so anything stupid like drink it but there were people who did.

RV: Why were they doing that?
RT: To show that they were harmless, they tried to show that.

RV: And what’s your opinion of it, was that stuff harmless or was there any side effects that you know of?
RT: Well I’ve been participating in the Agent Orange study for the government and we’re in our last segment right now. My personal opinion and its only that, because I’m not a doctor is that the agents, the reaction to the agents is an allergic reaction. It may cause cancer and all this other stuff but not everyone reacts to it the same way, but that’s strictly an opinion. Its only because I know that all of us were exposed pretty much the same, although in my job as the safety officer I walked through the stuff a lot, that was the only additional exposure I had. And like that time that the airplane was shot and the pressure hose and it filled like a cloud of that stuff, we were all breathing it so and it was on our skin. But I didn’t have to, I guess live in it like if they were camped out and
got sprayed, I don’t know what that means, what difference there is. But even the guys on the ground did not all get ill.

RV: Have you suffered any effects from it?

RT: I don’t think so.

RV: Now, you said you were shot at quite a bit, were you ever wounded?

RT: No.

RV: Anybody in your plane ever wounded?

RT: No, although there was one time we got, we were coming, spraying down a hill and then making a turn at the bottom and we took a bullet right in over the pilot’s head, I was copilot. We used to call him magnet ass, because he’d always got shot. He flew a little bit high but the Plexiglas hit us all and I thought I’d been hit, then it took me and it was pretty traumatic because it took awhile to, I just remember the fact that the bullet came in and it kind of knocked us a little silly. We weren’t really talking too much and the guy in the back threw out the smoke grenade, the fighter saw the person that shot us and killed them and meanwhile the other fighter came in and put down some suppression fire with twenty millimeters on the side, scaring the living daylights out of us. It looked like, you haven’t lived until you’re flying one hundred feet off the ground, you’ve got a twenty-millimeter going off right next to you.

RV: What was your impression, general impression of the enemy?

RT: I don’t think we were too much involved with the North Vietnamese, we were probably mostly with, you mean the people that shot at us?

RV: Yes, sir.

RT: I don’t think most of them were, there were probably some VC that knew, they mostly knew not to shoot at us but to shoot at the fighters, they wanted to get the fighters down, but they would shoot at us and I think they were mostly farmers who were upset that their crops were getting taken out.

RV: So these could have been South Vietnamese civilians firing?

RT: Possibly but I don’t know that, I don’t know.

RV: Okay, how about tell me a little about your briefings you would have, tell me about the intelligence you would get about hot zones, cold zones, what you could expect, where you should go, things like that?
RT: You mean on the ground, to avoid?
RV: Sure, yes. You would be briefed before your missions obviously.
RT: Yes, the lead pilot would get all the intelligence stuff and he would pass it on to the crews. The only mission that I really remember was going to be kind of awesome was we were going to, the whole squadron was going to go spray over in Laos, Agent Blue, they were going over some target right near the border and I was a brand new aircraft commander, I don’t think I’d been on a mission yet as an aircraft commander but I was going to be the number eight ship in this twelve ship formation, it was a huge deal. And the Navy, I mean the Army intelligence told them initially that they expected to lose fifty percent of the squadron to the [ground] fire and the Air Force thought that would be okay, I didn’t think it was okay but the Air Force apparently did. And then we were getting ready, the night before and the intelligence and it upped the estimate to seventy-five percent loss and the Air Force cancelled it [the mission]. So, I was so young I don’t really remember that much except that the information came from the Army and it was usually somewhat reliable. We knew where the Arc Light bombings were going to be, occasionally we’d stray into something wrong but most of the time we were pretty much up on the information to keep us out of harm’s way.
RV: Did you ever feel like the people around shooting at you knew you guys were coming that day?
RT: I think they did on some of the heavy suppression missions because it was a big show, you know they had a lot of fighters and they had a lot of helicopters and they had us and I think in that case they knew but it wouldn’t have taken a rocket scientist to figure it out.
RV: Why do you say that?
RT: I mean if you’re concentrating your FACs and all of a sudden you get helicopters and you get fighters in larger numbers. I mean normally there were two [fighters] with us but sometimes we’d get more. Then they’d know that something was going to happen and again they mostly shot at the fighters. They’d take us if they could get us, but I was telling somebody a story the other day, I was spraying one time with my detachment commander up, right on the DMZ in I Corps, and these guys, I think those were North Vietnamese. They had this machine gun nest right on the cliff and we, in this
case were stacked down, I don’t know why either, but we were stacked down the hill and so all they had to do is just put the machine gun level and they could have hosed us pretty good, but they were after the lead plane and they had the machine guns up and fighters got them too because they were exposed, but that was kind of an interesting situation.

RV: Are there any other missions that stand out in your mind looking back at those years?

RT: I remember them when I’m shooting the breeze with people and start remembering stuff, different missions; there was a lot of interesting missions there. I didn’t like being a copilot because some of the pilots didn’t make really good decisions. Well, that’s like true of any pilot, you know just think you’re better than anybody else.

RV: Was there ever a time where you had to take over the aircraft?

RT: No. There was one time though I went back and I told the ops officer I never wanted to fly with that guy again because he liked to go real near the karst formations, nearer than he needed to be and like I said the copilot did the power and I could see where he was flying, and I said, ‘You want more power so you can get over this?’ ‘No, leave it like it is’ and we just barely cleared it. My most memorable mission was, I had a copilot with me from down in the what we call the Flatland Ranch, out at Bien Hoa, he came up to get a little more flying time and we were spraying Khe Sanh, long after the battle, but Khe Sanh has a bunch of finger ridges near there, so in order to stay there you have to put power off, power on and so when we got down on target I started calling, ‘Power off, power on’ telling him when to put the power on and when not to and eventually I figured, well done it five or six times, he ought to get the idea, so I didn’t say something, we were down in this big valley next to a huge ridge and he didn’t put the power in. So then I started calling power and he was froze, he was looking at this mountain coming up in the wind screen, its like ‘Give me power’ and I reached over and I hit the prop levers up and put the throttles to max and we still weren’t going to make it, so I said, ‘Give me the jets’ and he’s scared, he knows we’re going to die, and its ‘Give me the jets’ and he didn’t, he didn’t get them so I reached down, I hit every switch down there and got the jets up, went right up the side of the splash [ridge] to about two thousand feet and my detachment commander is the number three airplane, I was number two and he says, ‘Where you going Bob?’ My heart was beating, boy I thought we were
[goners], that was a little closer than I wanted to be. We continued spraying on into the, out towards the east and since we got over the ocean and went in, back into Da Nang and landed. I ruined the enlisted guys tape that day because I was swearing at that guy for at least a half an hour all the way in, how he almost killed us.

RV: Are there any other missions that stand out?
RT: I can’t recall too many at this time. They might come back as we talk.

RV: Tell me about life at Da Nang, what was the base like for you there?
RT: We had our own little area within the officer’s compound right near the BOQ and the theater was right across the street and we had racquetball courts and chapel was nearby, enlisted guys lived in a barracks on the other way [side of the base], on further away. We each had, there was either one or two of us in each room. Of course Da Nang attracted a lot of rocket attacks, to this day that certain kind of siren goes off my stomach will twist.

RV: Really?
RT: Yes. There’s nothing like standing out in the [hall] wrapped in a towel when that thing goes off and you’ve got to run and roll under the bed.

RV: What were those rocket attacks like, would you, did you have a bunker you were assigned to run to or not?
RT: We didn’t have a bunker there that I remember anyway. We pretty much kept our flak jacket under our beds and just rolled under there. There was one up by the chow hall, there was a couple of days that it was pretty bad, and they’d walk them down the flight line. They got one through the tail one day; the rocket motor bounced off the tarmac and went through the tail, one of the planes. Had another one under the plane I was supposed to fly so we cancelled, [flying that day to] take care of all that stuff.

RV: Did you have air-conditioned quarters at Da Nang?
RT: Yes, thank god for being a pilot.

RV: What would you guys do for entertainment?
RT: Ah, man we’d go to the movies, that’s about it, had a lot of parties, drank; it was a hard drinking squadron, I didn’t drink that much but some of the other guys did.

RV: How about drug use, did you see any of that?
RT: No. There may have been some among the enlisted guys but it was pretty obvious there were some in the Army and you could tell walking by them, but I never saw any of the flight people that did it. Now that doesn’t mean they didn’t, I just didn’t seem them.

RV: How much contact did you have with home?

RT: Well, we did tapes and letters with my wife and every once in a while get one of the MARS calls and of course they [mail] came in bunches so it would be very depressing when you didn’t have anything and if you got in an argument or something that was even doubly so.

RV: What do you mean, like during a MARS call?

RT: No, no this would be a MARS call is usually [during the night. You’d up and if arguing with your wife, call and clear the air. While waiting for your calls you could hear others calls.] the way you’d get up, get over with, think somebody was angry or something and so you’d call and it was pretty sad listening to some of the other calls while you were waiting too.

RV: Really, well what would you hear?

RT: Can we take a break for a minute; I need to go to the restroom.

RV: Absolutely. Okay sir, you were saying that during these MARS calls it was hard to listen to some of what these guys were saying, tell me about that, what do you mean by that?

RT: Well, when you do a MARS call, they call you like one or two calls before your call would be placed. You’d listen in to some really heartbreaking conversations You usually only heard one side of it but you can pretty well figure it out, Dear John letters, stuff like that. It was not good.

RV: So you would actually hold on to the phone there and wait for your time to be patched in?

RT: Yes, because you were connecting to the person here [in the States and the MARS people], or in Vietnam and they had their calls all lined up.

RV: How many did you get to make?

RT: When my son was born I went down to Saigon and made one from the USO, which was the best call, although I didn’t figure out the time right and they had to wake
my wife up in the middle of the night, but oh it was, I would say every other month or so, five or six, during the course of the year.

RV: Okay, how often would you write home?
RT: Daily and she would write to me daily.

RV: But you said the letters would arrive in bunches sometimes?
RT: Yes, and we also did tapes. I’ve got the tapes but I don’t think I have a recorder any more to listen to them.

RV: Okay. How did you keep up with news back home in the United States, or did you?
RT: I kept up, like I said, with the magazines that I read. I’d taken I think *Time* at the time and this *New Republic*, I’ve always taken a lot of magazines, so I was, I would read those and I’d get them a little late but I’d get them, most of them were not that crucial to note and of course you had the daily *Stars and Stripes*.

RV: Right, okay. Did you ever have any contact with the indigenous forces, the Vietnamese Air Force or ARVN?
RT: No.

RV: Okay. What did you think of ongoing U.S. policy?
RT: Wait, wait a minute, ARVN being our southern, the South Vietnamese.

RV: Yes.
RT: Not in a battle capacity but I, when I was down in Saigon or in Bien Hoa, in Bien Hoa I volunteered for awhile to go out and teach English at a Vietnamese orphanage, so that wasn’t really through the ARVN but they would like provide transportation out there and then the guy was, the headmaster would come and pick us up in this big, black car. I went out there probably two times before I got transferred up to Da Nang.

RV: Just two times?
RT: Yes, while I was only there about six weeks.

RV: Right, right. How did you get involved in that?
RT: I don’t remember. I just remember somebody saying this was something you want to do, you can do it and I also tried to take classes like in econ and so on.

RV: How did you find the Vietnamese civilians?
RT: You’re talking about like the mamasons and all that?
RV: Any of them, yes, whatever, whoever you had contact with?
RT: Well, I really didn’t have that much contact. The gentleman who ran the
orphanage seemed to be quite competent, kind of a Papa Bear kind of guy but if you think
of the Mama-sans, there were those that were pretty energetic, those that were totally
lethargic and those between. And I didn’t interface very much with any males, so it was
just the mamasons kind of thing.
RV: How did you get on with them?
RT: Okay. They did their job.
RV: Did you learn to speak any Vietnamese while you were there?
RT: No, I did not.
RV: What did you think of ongoing U.S. policy while you were there, did you
follow kind of, did you see a course to the war, did you see something that was kind of
never-ending, or what did you think about what was happening?
RT: Well, I got the feeling that we were; we were definitely spinning our wheels.
The stuff that they kept denying was going on was going on, the raids into Laos, the raids
into Cambodia, just I don’t know. I never felt that I had any real input into the, into what
was going on anyway, so I was just watching it just like I did when I was a college
student. Funny thing though, I don’t remember being, [having the] same feelings I do
then as I do about this stuff going on with Bush and Iraq now.
RV: Why do you think that is?
RT: Maybe I’m older and been shot at enough that I don’t want anybody else to
get shot at for stupid reasons. Maybe that’s it. Like I said, when you first get shot at or
after you’ve been shot at it enough, you’re starting to say, hey, guys I’m just doing my
job. So, you kind of react strongly about that, about them shooting at you but I’d
eventually figured out they’re like I said, farmers protecting their crops and stuff like that,
but I never really got any [thought differently], the policy I thought was wrong continued
to be wrong. It bothered me for instance when I got back, the My Lai Massacre trials and
stuff like that, blaming things on the lieutenant when you knew darn well that problems
rolled way up farther than that, even though the lieutenant made the mistakes and should
have been held accountable. I do remember that, I thought that was totally wrong. Even
a captain wasn’t enough, that kind of thinking went clear up into the command structure, but as I got further along looking at my compatriots when I was a lieutenant colonel on staff base I thought my contemporaries had the highest integrity and esteem, so it really doesn’t match, I don't know and then I wasn’t in the Army so I can’t tell. The Army seems to have a lot more problems than the Air Force did, but I did not agree with our government policy, but had already decided I wanted to fly so I abrogated that a little bit by going ahead and doing that and I’ve never felt like I could, I never wanted to despoil the uniform by doing something stupid in uniform, because there was plenty of people who sacrificed a lot for us to have the freedoms we have.

RV: What did you think of the leadership, the military leadership in Vietnam?

RT: The immediate leadership?

RV: The military leadership.

RT: The immediate leadership that I had experienced, well (squadron) I thought was, they kept things in perspective and they knew what we had needed to do and they kept everything [running] pretty well. You got up to the Wing Structure and most of those guys are gunning for general, so they were trying to make themselves look good, I can’t remember the guy’s name exactly, but he’s, he was the Wing Commander and he came and flew with us a couple times, it was like flying with a wet rag. He just didn’t, he wasn’t any fun and he didn’t, he was entirely too serious about, about everything and not in a positive way, so we all figured out he wanted to make general and that was what this tour for him was. It was to do that. When you are a lieutenant you might want to be a general but you don’t really see the way to do it yet so you don’t do stuff like that.

RV: Right. What about the political leadership of the country during the Vietnam War?

RT: I’m, you know I hate to give away my political leanings but I always was more supportive of the Democrat leadership than the Republicans and of course Nixon took over while I was over there and I never did like Nixon at all but none of those guys were in a position that they could do something straightforward because the way it either came to them or the way they had approached the problem and I don’t know if that’s the old man talking or the young man, I just didn’t like Nixon as a person. Probably disliked him most of any president I’ve ever served under.
RV: Tell me about the relationships that you formed with other men in your unit.

RT: In Vietnam, they didn’t want to room with me because I snored. So I pretty much was able to have my own room and that’s an interesting question. I had some friends that were very close that I’d gone through pilot training with, that were in the squadron but two of them stayed down in the south part, they weren’t up there in the north, who were good friends. And I’d fly down there once in a while and spend time with them. I don’t recall any life long friendships from Vietnam. That’s mostly because we were all going different directions in the way back. I have more that I’ve kept up with from my pilot training class than from Vietnam. That’s a very interesting question; you were mostly just trying to get through it. And my approach was not the same as most, I didn’t drink that much, a lot, some did, some of had their own, I didn’t have enough money to go buy these big powerful, tape decks and a lot of these guys, the bachelors did, because I had a wife and a kid so I was just pretty much on my own.

RV: Did that bother you or did you, you were happy with that?

RT: I’m pretty much that way anyway, so.

RV: Did you ever see any racial issues amongst the men?

RT: Not in our squadron overtly unless, obviously we were all very aware of the race problems and you didn’t want to get in a situation where [it arose], well the only time I could remember is when I, we did get, bunch of us did get pretty well plastered and we were coming back and two of the biggest black guys I’ve ever seen were on the way home and one of my buddies said something like, ‘Hey, Black Power, brothers,’ so on and they just laughed at us because we were all so potted. We were sensitive to it; tried to not provoke any incidents and, I was, I don’t know what you mean exactly like a racial incident where something happened or?

RV: Right, any of it.

RT: I was kind of proud of the fact that I thought that people, there may, they were able, if they had personal prejudices whatever, they were able to subdue those. I don’t recall any, to be honest with you. I remember more when I got back to the States than during Vietnam time.

RV: What would you say was the bravest action you witnessed while in country?
RT: Well, going into known heavy targets with eyes open and pressing on knowing you’re going to get shot up, I guess was one way to say it. I can’t think of any individual act per se, but the squadron was pretty good about it, we did our job. And I don’t know that we got shot up more than any other squadron, but I remember, I think it was twenty-five hundred hit party that we had some time during my tour there, (that was a lot of hits). I don’t know if more, our job was [we were] particularly able to get hit but…and sometimes they would troll for it a little bit but for the most part it was just our mission, we were down low and slow, and they could hit us.

RV: What do you think is the most humorous event you remember?

RT: The humorous?

RV: Yes.

RT: Oh, I got one of my tires shot out one day on a mission, on one of those missions where we were out spraying Agent Blue on the farms and ended up, I didn’t know it was shot out and my crew chief didn’t see it until we landed and it was one of those, ‘Oops.’ We listed over right smack in the middle of Phan Rang airport, so nobody could land over us or behind us. I guess some of the Caribous could but, and they needed to go back to Da Nang and get a tire and fly it out, so there we were and we pretty much botched up traffic for most of the day, except for helicopters and Caribous. And my, one of my other young cohorts did finally have to land because he was running out of gas and he landed over top of us right after it happened. I was number two, he was number three, but he stopped it okay, there was plenty of runway. There was a lot of little things like that.

RV: What kind of entertainment as far as USO shows were you able to attend?

RT: I was never able to attend any.

RV: Really, did you have a desire to go?

RT: I wanted to go to the Bob Hope show at Christmas but I was not in any shape to go.

RV: What do you mean?

RT: I had, that was the night that I was talking about that those of us that don’t normally drink had gone to excess and the show was the next day and I just didn’t feel like going. And I don’t recall any other USO shows being there. I think there were more
at Da Nang on the Marine side over there on the west side and we were on the east side, so we just didn’t, I don’t really remember any other than the Bob Hope Christmas Show and that was on Christmas Day, so.

RV: What about R&Rs, were you able to take any?
RT: Yes, I went to Hawaii. If I hadn’t scheduled my wife to go back before me I probably would have gone home with her.

RV: Oh, really?
RT: Yes.

RV: So you were able to spend some time with her there?
RT: Yes.

RV: How long did you have?
RT: A week.

RV: What did that do for you as far as recharging you for going back to Vietnam or the opposite?
RT: I didn’t want to go back. I don’t know if anybody did but it [R&R] was something to look forward to and it really happened, let’s see I got there in March, so it was eight months into the tour, which meant that I was more than halfway. I knew that going back [to RVN] was not the end of the world that I’d be going home soon.

RV: Right. What did you think of the media coverage of the war, I guess then and now.
RT: Well it wasn’t [very good], I really don’t know from a macro sense, but they appeared to be trying to make the country think beyond the box of what should be. I mean, what America had [done] before that was World War II and the heroes come home and all that other stuff and whoever tried to show that this wasn’t the same old war, but I thought they did a pretty good job of that and they were starting to cause doubt of some of the official positions which we knew were false over there, body counts and so on, so I kind of trusted them quite a bit.

RV: How about now, looking back on it?
RT: I think they did a good job. Of course the stuff like playing up Hanoi Jane and stuff like that, that’s showboating.

RV: Did you guys ever have any contact with the media while you were there?
RT: I don’t recall any. I just remember flying those two scientists around.

RV: Well. Tell me how you returned from Vietnam; did you know your specific date upon which you could go?

RT: Well, it was roughly around Valentine’s Day. We all had those, I forget what they call it, the going home letters and you’d send them back and forth and cross off the days. The same guy that was my copilot when he almost killed me at Khe Sanh was also the administrative officer at the squadron, so when it was my turn to go, the squadron commander had made a rule that everybody’s OER, Officer Efficiency Rating, had to be completed before you left, so there was kind of a, he was typing mine while I was waiting to get on the airplane. Needless to say, back then they didn’t have computers and they didn’t like a lot of typos so he had to restart it a few times and I [had to] grin and bear it to get out of the way, but it wasn’t as high a rating as I had hoped it would but, but lord only knows what that meant. Later on, in the long run it didn’t mean much I guess but it wasn’t as high as I thought it would be but the neat thing was getting that piece of paper and jamming it in my briefcase and running out there and being the last one on the airplane. They were holding the airplane for me, so it was like I got to be in there in ten minutes, you’ve got to get this done. So, I made it, I remember, I’m listening to somebody talking about this the other day, I figure it was universal that as soon as the gear hit the bottom of the airplane coming up everybody cheered and we settled in for a much more pleasant ride back even though it was probably similarly long, but at least you were going home. And I enjoyed it.

RV: Do you remember what kind of reception you had when you returned back to the United States? Did you get out of uniform, or did you stay in uniform?

RT: I was probably in uniform, I landed at Travis, but don’t forget I graduated from high school there so I had family friends and I called them and I think, I don’t know how soon, I did change because they came out to pick me up. What I had planned to do was to stay there for a couple days and go up to where I was going [to transfer] which was Mather Air Force Base, which was nearby and get on the housing list and then go on leave and go home and pick up my wife and child. And my folks, my dad was still in [the AF] so as a matter of fact he was just getting ready to get my sister married and then he was going to retire after that year, which was in 1970. So, I was calling them, the line
was busy and then I called them again and they said, ‘Well, you’re not going to do that, you’re going to go home right away and then your dad’s going to fly you out here on a KC-97 or a 131’ or whatever it was he was flying, so that sounded good to me because I was anxious to get home to my wife and child, so they came and got me and took me to SFO and I must have changed there into civilian clothes and threw everything in bags and flew home and met my wife. We...hardest thing was driving again.

RV: What’s that?

RT: The hardest thing was driving again.

RV: Oh, really?

RT: Yes, because I hadn’t driven in a year and she hadn’t had anybody to live with for a year so it was kind of interesting adjustment for both of us. She was very, very young, so it was a traumatic adjustment but no, I didn’t have anybody spit on me or anything, so just went home and saw my baby for the first time and then a few days later we flew out from Texas to Mather. It was the first time my dad and I flew together.

RV: Did you have any difficulty transitioning back to life in the United States?

RT: Well, driving was hard. No, not to life because I was in the military, but just in personal relationships. Like I said, my wife had been living alone taking care of the baby for a year and I’d been living alone being at war and just getting back in sync took quite a bit of effort. But, it was rewarding, we’ve been married now, thirty-five, almost thirty-six years so [now].

RV: That’s great. How much did you talk about your Vietnam experience with other people?

RT: Well, if they asked I talked to them about it, most of them don’t care so I don’t talk to them. But every once in a while, once I start I start remembering stories and get on a roll, probably stupid stuff, but stuff I remember.

RV: What did you think of the continuing war effort in Vietnam, had you opinion changed any?

RT: No, I thought it was wrong and I knew we’d ultimately get out. The interesting thing was, the squadron shut down in ’71, shortly, not too long after I left. Somebody was killed messing around [when] they moved I think from Bien Hoa to Phan Rang and somebody came in, did some sort of fancy pitchout and ended up crashing,
killed a couple people and it wasn’t long after that they shut the squadron down, but the
most interesting part to me of course was the Mather and my squadron, my Wing
Commander had been a POW and when all the rest of them got out [of North Vietnam]
they really dumped on him because he was supposed to have not left when he had the
opportunity and so he was ostracized. He was, I think about to be, either was on the list or
was going to become a Brigadier General and he was a nice man, he was a friend of my
father’s. [He] had been in a B-57 and shot down; [he was a] good commander, [I] liked
working for him but couldn’t get over this thing when the POWs got back in, was it ’73,
’72, I can’t remember what year it was, but I think it was ’73 because I was in the T-43 at
the time and he lost his slot and ended up retiring out of there, which I thought was kind
of interesting.

RV: What was your opinion, go ahead?

RT: Understandable but I didn’t necessarily agree about it but what I was going to
say was I took another remote tour in 1975 with United Nations and I was serving in the
Middle East, in Damascus, Syria, with a bunch of Russians when Saigon fell.

RV: Tell me about that, what were your feelings?

RT: It was very interesting. I mean they, I mean I didn’t have any feelings one
way or the other, except that I was glad we were finally out of there, but they kind of
tried to provoke or evoke a response from me about it. I said, ‘No, I never agreed with it
in the first place.’ That also was the year that the Soyuz mission in space, or the
friendship mission in space where we were together, that was kind of interesting too.

RV: They said, did they tease you about the Soyuz mission or…?

RT: No, they were, they overreacted a lot.

RV: They what, overreacted?

RT: Overreacted a lot, gave a lot more import to things than I thought it merited
but in any case we, the fall of Saigon, the kind of like, kind of pimped me to see what I’d
say and I didn’t say much.

RV: Did you think that the United States had withdrawn properly and kind of, this
peace with honor deal that Nixon and Kissinger had talked about, was that something that
you could agree with or was that something that you just, you didn’t buy?
RT: Politicians don’t have to deal with honesty so they can say whatever they want. I didn’t, I don’t know, I didn’t have any real, I was just glad we were out of there and however he wanted to do it. That was just about the only way to get out was to, [as has been said] you know that was said many, many times, let’s call the war over and say we won, and that’s kind of what we ended up doing and its okay with me.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamization policy of turning the war to the Vietnamese; did you think they were capable of taking care of?

RT: Of course not. They didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell.

RV: Why was that, because of them because of them or the North or both?

RT: The people in the North had more to fight for in my opinion than the people in the South. The people in the South were, they were probably doing it for home and country but they didn’t really know why. People in North had to have the socialist agenda drummed into them to the point where they became kind of automatons. That’s just my opinion but I think that’s why they, they were more, I don’t want to call them just robots but they had the feeling they were fighting for their own nationality and I think the South Vietnamese were like yes, well, its what everybody else is doing, here I am, I guess I better do it. But to be honest with you I did not read, and never have, as deep in the histories as I have say of the Middle East so I have a much better understanding of some of the relationships in the Middle East then I do that of Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

RV: So you haven’t read a lot of books on the war, the Vietnam War?

RT: I’ve never really felt like doing it.

RV: Why not?

RT: Like I said, it was the year that I wanted to get through.

RV: What did you think of the anti-war movement that went on in the United States during the war?

RT: Well, I knew many of them and I agreed with them. It was kind of a different era than now, you know we’ve had a generation without real war since Vietnam and there were enough people there that were very conscientiously objected to that kind of use of force for a political agenda that it was not just something to do, they honestly believed that and the reason I say that is my best friend was a CO but he was a pastoral student so he had an automatic exemption and for some reason he decided that he wanted to
abrogate that and make his draft board identify him as a conscientious objector. So he
had some big tutors [names] writing stuff [recommendations] for him. He had, I can’t
remember if it was Reinhold or Richard Nieber who was out of Northwest or Columbia, I
think it was Columbia University, one of those places. He had some people out of here in
the State [Texas] that were very high powered [highly regarded] Texans, Jack, oh what’s
his last name, Kilgore, he had another guy, I can’t remember his name right now, but
he’d written a big theological dissertation back in the ‘60s and then he had me and I’d
lived with him in the dorm for like three years and that I spent at least half of another
year in a group together with him and I knew that this guy was a [true] conscientious
objector, this wasn’t a fad or anything else, he honestly responds to everything as a
conscientious objector did [would do]. So, for whatever reason he formed a trial and then
I remember him telling me that he had all this high powered help, but none of them
mattered, what mattered was that I could tell them that I’d been to Vietnam, been shot at,
but I knew him and knew that he was truly a conscientious objector and that he would not
respond with hostility to almost anything. So, he said my letter actually carried more
weight than all these big shooters did because I had all these medals and [honors] stuff
from Vietnam.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?
RT: Well, I didn’t leave anything over there; I don’t want to go back. I thought it
was a beautiful country that was marred by all our bombings and [other activities] stuff
and [it was] just physically beautiful. There were some good people there. I suppose its
like anywhere else, but it was not a pleasant year so I don’t really want to go back.

RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States at all?
RT: Some, but not a lot. Right now I’m a minister in the Methodist Church and
we have some Vietnamese that attend here, so I minister to them as well as I can having
most of them were ousted in ’75. One lady here has had a kidney transplant, a couple of
them and is very, very ill and she’s a young lady, so I’ve been really ministering to her
and her family quite a bit, so its not like I hate them [the Vietnamese], its just I didn’t
leave anything over there that I want to go back for.

RV: Right. If you could change about your experience there, what would it be?
RT: Be able to go home on the weekends.
RV: Yes, you said that earlier.

RT: That was a, it was pretty lonely time you know, just being away from my family at a crucial time when our baby was brand new. I just recently, when my dad died I found some movies with my son so for the first time ever I saw him actually moving around as a baby. I had a lot a lot of still pictures but I didn’t have any movies and I didn’t know they had these.

RV: How did you think the war has most affected your life, or has it?

RT: I felt like that year was gone, it was, people, I don’t know about you, but people talk about major things that happened and ’69 was the year of Woodstock and I wasn’t there. I wouldn’t have been anyway, but, because I wasn’t into that stuff either, its just, it was a lost year as far as I was concerned but it did give me a perspective on life that I never would have had any other way.

RV: That was my question then, was that the most significant thing you think you took from that lost year?

RT: Yes, I lost a year but I have been shot at, I know what its like and I know war is not glorious and I can talk to people about that with some authority, I mean I’ve at least been shot at so when I don’t agree with President Bush’s particular position right now, I can say well, look I’ve been shot at. This is not something that’s going to be fun. It’s not glorious, it’s not like in the movies, you don’t see them starring in another movie next week, [where] they’re dead; they’re gone.

RV: What do you think the United States government took from Vietnam, did it learn any lessons from its experience in Southeast Asia?

RT: Yes, I think, I think that it gave us the seeds for, as a bridge between our glorious experience of World War II and then I think most people felt that we suffered ‘defeat’ which allowed something like Ronald Reagan to come in and say something like, ‘Well, I’m going to bring us back to those glorious era of pre-Vietnam,’ and it worked. I mean, I think that history’s a cycle and no matter what, there would have been a response to the war even if we’d have like beat them in two years and come home, there would have been a response saying, perhaps a little bit like what’s going on now in Iraq, because of what happened in the Gulf War, so who knows? But I think that’s was the U.S. took
out of it, was we lost in the sense [that] we didn’t win the way we thought we should have and that affected our politics and everything.

RV: What would you tell a young person today about the Vietnam War?
RT: That depends on what they’d ask. I have done that. One of the kids last year, sixth grader’s teacher or something had them go find a Vietnam veteran to interview, usually around Veterans Day that happens. I just listen to whatever their questions are and answer them as specifically as I can. But you know, this is a good example of a person that, I mean you can effect policy but you really can’t and I can’t remember what the little girl asked me, but they were specific enough questions I could answer them, we don’t get off into policy and stuff like that because most of those kids couldn’t handle it anyway. But I think that that fits in, if someone’s a historian I think it fits in with the historical response to anything like that.

RV: Okay, have you been to the Wall in Washington?
RT: Oh, yes.
RV: What was that like?
RT: Very powerful. There are four of my friends on there, two of them were instructor pilots of mine and one, the person that was in college with me and then another one from pilot training so, that was, I don’t know I just think that that’s, that was a very fitting memorial. It’s very powerful for those of us who have been there and I [don’t know how anyone who wasn’t there would feel about it] of course cannot identify if I wasn't there. I’ve heard other people say it’s powerful anyway, but to put your hand on somebody’s name is, it’s like touching them again.

RV: The United States population today, I mean that’s one way they can remember Vietnam is through that memorial and through words of veterans, but they read books, they listen to Vietnam era music and they see movies about Vietnam, what do you think about that, that medium. This is how American has learned about this war is through watching Mel Gibson, what do you think about the movies that have been made on Vietnam?
RT: Mel Gibson, what did he do Air America?
RV: Oh, he did that, I wasn't thinking of that. I was actually thinking of We Were Soldiers.
RT: You know, I haven’t been watching very many war movies lately. The last
one I really saw was Saving Private Ryan, which wasn’t even about Vietnam but it hurts
so much to see that type of thing. I do remember I saw Full Metal Jacket and I couldn’t
sleep for like two days.

RV: Why not?

RT: I don’t know except that movies just reminds me of times that I was over
there. Deer Hunter, which I saw early on didn’t relate to it at all because that was a
really screwy movie. There was one year I think, I don’t if it was ’72, ’73, somewhere in
there when they had Jon Voight starring in Coming Home with I think Jane Fonda and
[Don] Sutherland, or somebody like that, I thought that was the best of the three movies
they had about coming home, because I don’t remember why, its been years so, but I
thought, I can’t remember the other movies either. But that one appeared to be more
realistic because there was so much. I had a friend for instance whose wife cheated on
him while he was over there and it screwed him all up for a long time.

RV: While he was there, or when he got back?

RT: It happened while he was there. Matter of fact, he got to go home one time in
the middle of the year and of course I didn’t know what was going on so I was kind of
jealous of him getting to go home, but when I found out why I wasn’t jealous at all. But
it was the human side as well as the conflict of the actual battle, and of course pilots,
we’re abstract from that, the guys that are out in the jungle, they’re the ones that probably
really get screwed up with those movies and reminding them. There’s just a few scenes
every once in a while, I say I’ve been there you know, I’ve done that; I don’t want to do it
again. But the movies were, I did not think they were truly related to me specifically.

RV: What about music from Vietnam, is there anything that brings back that time
period for you?

RT: The one song that I truly (wish I hadn’t heard) [disliked for the memories it
cursed] was Leaving on a Jet Plane, (John Denver’s song) because I left a pregnant wife
on a jet plane and all that, that was the one song that always got me and it still gets me
every once in a while. I’m getting a little better about it now. But, just being away at
that particular critical time. I’m a, pretty much a family guy and somewhat of a loner so
that, and the other one that I really remember is Bridge over Troubled Waters which
came out while we were over there and that was a Simon and Garfunkel hit. But I was,
I’m sorry I’m just, Richard I’m not very adept at music stuff, I just, *Proud Mary* and all
that. Every group over there sang *Proud Mary* and that kind of song I remember that,
and just, there was some good music and I’m just not much of a music person, I don’t
know why.

RV: Do you suffer from any PTSD incidents at all, or did you?
RT: I don’t, I don’t think so. The most visceral response that I’ve ever had was
the siren and turning my stomach, then you just tell yourself, well you’re not there.

RV: Right. What do you think about the U.S. government and the way it’s taken
care of its Vietnam veterans?
RT: Well, like I said I’m in the Agent Orange study and I thought that was pretty
well managed and I think it’s going to be a landmark study case for that type of a thing. I
don’t know what you know about but it’s, there were twelve hundred exposed and non-
exposed people in a double blind study and we’ve been covered over twenty years and
they’re just about to finish up the last round. I did mine last summer and I’ll just watch
the results with some interest, which is why I say my opinion is that its just, a lot of these
people have had allergic reactions to this stuff. But not anything other than, one of the
things I remember most is when I retired from the Air Force, in 1988, I went over to
Carswell over here and the room was full of people retiring and some of the enlisted guys
and a couple of officers, so there was a lot of people in there, insisted that the government
had promised them health care for life and I really don’t remember that. Its almost like
perhaps it was done by recruiters, not official policy because I could swear they
specifically said they weren’t. I mean there was no guarantees beyond your time. They
took great care of me while I was then and drew various things, of course I’ve been
working since in a couple of different careers and I feel very adequately cared for and I
get kind of irritated with people who keep wanting to prick the government for a little
more money here and there. So, that’s my opinion, strictly my opinion.

RV: Well, that’s what this is about. Is there anything else you’d like to add to our
conversation today?
RT: I can’t think of anything. You’ve asked some very good questions, some I hadn’t even thought of. Maybe I’ll come up with some polemic idea to call you back about and say, ‘Hey, put this on the tape.’

RV: Sure, sure. Well, we’ll go ahead and end the interview now with Robert Turk. Thank you very much sir.

RT: Thank you.