RV: This is Richard Verrone and I am continuing my oral history interview with Colonel Jack Keith. It is 9:00am central standard time, October 25th, Friday morning.

Colonel Keith we left off yesterday discussing, we’re just staring to discuss the Tet Offensive and your experiences with that. You said when the Offensive began you were in bound back to Bien Hoa, is that correct?

JK: Yes, I had gone to the States to see my wife. During most of the fighter pilots within that year you had one shot where you could meet your wife in Hawaii, normally Hawaii, but my case I was able to go all the way home. I came to Miami and on my way back I was able--I’ve go tot get rid of my little puppy here a minute. I was on my way back in a 130 I believe it was into Tan Son Nhut and then in to the air base. Tet happened that night. I arrived the morning after the evening of Tet. Everything was still kind of in chaos at the base. Because many of the VC came aboard, and I don’t think we had too many casualties. I believe they had quite a few. Then there were some prisoners. I’ve got a little bit of that in my memoirs too, a few pictures.
RV: Yes, sir. What kind of activities did you have there at Bien Hoa?

JK: We had the 3rd TAC fighter wing with three fighter squadrons. Plus we had a few air defense birds dispersed within our local area, which their parent outfit was in the Philippines. That outfit in the Philippines, the 405th I believe it was had a few of these F-102 air-to-air birds positioned at several of the bases including our base at Bien Hoa. We must have had about six of them I guess right out in front of our operation.

RV: During this attack was any equipment damaged? Any of the birds damaged in the Tet?

JK: I don’t think there’s anything substantial, probably just a few bullet holes while we were skirmishing with these people on the ground. We always had the Army troops on our perimeter with their various equipment. They took them on and a few of them did get aboard and I think most of them were killed. I think there were somewhere around 70 I guess.

RV: What was your feeling immediately after Tet and then say four or five weeks after Tet? Had the war changed in your opinion from what you could observe?

JK: No, I didn’t see any great change. We continued on just like we always did with our daily frag orders and went out and did what we were supposed to do. Didn’t remember any problem. It might have picked up a little on the rocket damage on our base. They launched rockets. Their point there was almost every night. That was interesting.

RV: Did you increase your number of sorties during the day after Tet?

JK: No, I don’t believe so. I think we went on pretty much the same.
RV: What could you tell about the overall American policy? This is 1968 going into 1969, did you feel like the United States was wining the war or making progress in the war? Or were you more separated from that political atmosphere?

JK: We didn’t see too much of that. We heard there was a little problem in the States, around some of the colleges, the students displaying against the war over there, but I really never noticed anything much as far as changes. We just continued on pretty much the same way that I had from the beginning.

RV: What can you say about the media coverage of the war? Were you exposed a lot to the press as the commander of the 531st?

JK: I don’t recall any press people. We have visits occasionally by the high-ranking military our generals and so on from the States would come in and sit within the squadron. We’d brief them and there’d be occasionally a reporter or two. I remember in my stay over there, every once in a while they would put somebody in the back seat of an F and I would fly them. I flew two or three of those people. I think they were probably press types. They didn’t ask me much. They just milled around there on the base for a little bit, I guess maybe asking questions of some of the people on the line. Ted Kennedy popped in one day, but I saw him land. I was riding around on a jeep ordering the runways and I was going to go over and pick him up. A helicopter came and dropped him off at the base of the control tower. Before I could get over, a jeep whipped up something that he probably had scheduled and he took off and never saw him again.

RV: You never go tot meet him and talk to him?

JK: No.
RV: Now you did have one interesting, well first before I ask that, you took an actually couple of members of the press up on one of your sorties?

JK: Yes.

RV: That’s interesting. Who gave the orders for that? I guess that came from above?

JK: Yes. It probably came out of 7th Air Force. I imagine we probably had a written letter of some type that had come in and talked to the wing commander. And then the wing commander would talk to, in our case talk to me, or the DO who was my boss, deputy of operations. He would ask me, “Do you mind taking somebody up in the backseat?” One time it happened to be the commanding General Momeyer.

RV: That’s exactly what I wanted to ask you. You had General Momeyer on one of your runs. Tell me about that experience, what was that like?

JK: That was the deal again, just asked me one day if I would mind taking the commander up in the back seat. I said, “No it’ll be fine.” So, we were setup on the alert pad when you only have three or four airplanes ready to go on five minute alert. We briefed there on a pre-planned attack, which came from his operational people in Saigon. Of course they wanted to try to get him a good target, something interesting. I told the DO I’d be glad to take him up. We briefed there in the alert pad and that pre-planned unit, which normally out of that pad you go off on emergencies where the hot things that are set to happen within minutes, and then they call you and you go. But on that one it was pre-planned so we briefed. General Momeyer kind of set there to one side. He got aboard and we took off, had a flight of three. I don’t know how much I put in there, what information you had there, but we went off a certain coordinates into a contact airborne
FAC, which we did. He took us, we’re heading toward this target, and the command post
came on and said, “We’ve got another, a different target for you.”

RV: Is that because they were trying to find a really good one for him?

JK: Yes, first the one we were going for, they thought I guess was pretty good.

So, his people in the command post there in Tan Son Nhut said, “Go for this particular
one, number one.” Like I said, we were just really getting together and smoking towards
that target. They came on and said, “We’ve got a target change.” So he didn’t say
anything, and they gave us some more coordinates in another FAC, call sign. So we
turned off to a degree and went for this man. We had probably gone off on that heading
for five or ten minutes and they said, “Gee, we’ve got another change.” So, they came in
for the third time, gave us these coordinates. At that point General Momeyer kind of
commented in the backseat, said “Well, its kind of tough getting a real good target.” His
troops were just trying to get something real fine because there were some reporters back
at Bien Hoa waiting for him to come back. We went onto the third target, which we
finally hit. We had bombed and strafed, and he had--

RV: Do you remember what target that was sir?

JK: Gee, no, I sure don’t.

RV: He had commented to the wing commander, I didn’t know about it. He had
said I hope this pilot doesn’t go up there and go through some of these killing maneuvers,
you know all these steep dives and these massive pullouts because he wasn’t too fond of
that. But I always used a nice 30-degree dive no matter what I used, whether it was
rockets bombs, Napalm or strafe. One reason you can get real proficient. I had these
nice easy deals, fast, up around probably 500 knots in these shallow dives. That thrilled
him to death I guess. When he came home the news media with their cameras and so on
got some pictures of him. I think he ended up in *Time* magazine about that time.

RV: His photo there on the runway?

JK: He was just standing there beside the airplane, you know? It looked like
another half a dozen of them kind of ganged around him. I imagine some of them were,
I sure, some of them were probably military types, reporting types. So that was it. A
couple of days later he sent us down a nice a letter and said it was a good run. He had
flown hundreds on his own, several years before. I think he was a Thunderbird too. He
indicated that it was a good run and it brought back good memories of the time that he
had flown the airplane. It didn’t really bubble you over. It just said, “You’ve
accomplished what I expect.” I’ve got a copy of that letter in my memoirs.

RV: Right I read that.

JK: Did you?

RV: Yes, sir. How much talk was there on the radio when you were flying out to
the targets? What were you guys talking about if at all?

JK: I’d be talking primarily in flight lead with the FAC and going ahead and
talking about the fix, where it was, what the target was and things like that. My wingmen
they were all listening, but they don’t say much unless I ask them for something. He
didn’t say anything other than that comment after that third change. He commented
something other than that I don’t think he said much at all.

RV: Were you usually the flight leader?

JK: Yes, in any flight I was in, I was, because I was the senior man. Any of our
guys could be in the lead. We’d usually have flights of two or three normally. That’s
about it in Vietnam. You never went off in any great numbers. Like in Korea we would go off with the entire wing mustering on the runway at one time you may have 40-50 airplanes. Then you’d go off in these gaggles, looked like geese. In Vietnam because of the nature of the targets and the operation, it was just pop off in flights of two or three all day going after these various targets.

RV: Did you ever go off alone?

JK: In a single bird?

RV: Yes, sir.

JK: No, I don’t believe so. I may have gone off in a single bird to a depot, to turn an airplane in. We had a depot over there somewhere in China. I might go off for something like that with no ammunition.

RV: In China or in Taiwan?

JK: Yes, Taiwan. We’d go over there maybe and dump an airplane and then come back by courier. Other than that, there was never any single type operation.

RV: I’m sure you learned your bombing tactics and maneuvers; your strafing tactics and maneuvers while you were in flight training?

JK: Very little. That’s where you’re initiated in those things, but it was after you’d get out of there, especially into the tactical fighter business that’s where you’re doing it everyday. We had ranges say in Europe, the big one was El Outiya down there in Tripoli and then we had one in France. We had also had them in England out in the mud flats. So, anytime we had to go live with munitions, we would go to those particular ranges. Then in the States we had the same thing. Out in the Arizona area and things like that we had ranges, which they use today. So there was always ranges around that
we were scheduled for temporary duty every few weeks or months to go out and do this.

We were always shooting and bombing.

RV: How difficult was it for you to develop these tactics? I guess by the time you were in Vietnam you were fairly proficient at this?

JK: Sure. By Vietnam I came right out of Germany on that one, that Allos position. I hadn’t been shooting right in there. I was flying T-39s out of Wiesbaden, Germany, which was a little North American six-passenger twin-engine jet. I flew that just for my flying time, but I hadn’t done any shooting from the time I took that allos position in Germany. Probably would that be a year, 18 months before I ended up shooting in Vietnam. I was trying to think. When I went to Vietnam I went to those survival schools, but I did not take any of those refresher deals. Like, a lot of times say when I went to Korea you went to Nellis and did a little shooting real quick to refresh yourself. In the case of Vietnam I just popped over and went into the airplane and continued to do it.

RV: When you were out on a sortie and you were approaching a target, you could see the truck or whatever it was you were going for, the building, the bridge, you could see it in your sights coming up?

JK: Yes.

RV: I guess your computers onboard helped you target. Is that correct?

JK: F-100 we didn’t have any computing gear. We had great gunfights and things like that. It was just a matter of putting the pipper, the little thing you aimed with. It would be like the sight on a rifle. You put that on whatever you were after and depending on what ammunition, like strafing with four 20mm canons, you just like any
gun; you just put that pipper on what you were after and shoot. When you bombed of

course, you had to figure winds and things like that. Then you’d put that pipper,

depending on your angle of dive and everything, you’d put that pipper at a certain point

where you would gain maximum coverage of the target with the bomb or rocket or

Napalm or whatever you had.

RV: How did you gauge the winds? Was that done?

JK: The weather people used to brief us. We had what do you call it, displays on

the walls every so many hours, showing the winds and the weather and things like that.

We just watched that and sometimes if there was any smoke, you could gauge it that way.

I remember one time the weatherman gave us wind from a certain direction and speed.

We had a target, a couple of buildings I think it was. I’d go in at my 30-degree angle

probably doing about 500 knots. Put the pipper right where I’d wanted it and went ahead

and pitched the bomb. I would pop them off one at time. You could see the bomb go just

like a football, you could watch it. And it hit way short by probably 100 yards or so. I

thought gee, that was really bad. I swung around, put the pipper up a little higher and

pitched again and watched the bomb go, same thing. I came back and was checking the

weather and the winds and everything. In that case we were given a bad windage. But

that’s the only time I remember that it affected us that much.

RV: You could actually see the bombs hit?

JK: Yes.

RV: When you pitched, the bomb would actually go out kind of in front of you?

JK: Yes, coming down maybe in my case 30 degrees, 500 knots and maybe a

mile or so coming from the target as you released it, maybe a little more, couple of miles.
And the bomb would just, if you would have continued to hold that heading the bomb
would have gone right along with you dropping as it went. Of course you’re coming
down too at that angle. But we’d usually pitch over to one side and bank, drop the wing
so you could see better. Then you could see it going. It looked like a peanut or a
football. It’d disappear into the growth and then kind of a big mushroom. In Korea I’d
seen deals like that where I’d pitch a thousand-pounder in the same type of glide or a
power on approach coming down hill, and you’d see them hit, go in the ground and then
come back up.

RV: Really?

JK: Yes.

RV: Wow.

JK: They’d go in a little bit and come up, and then finally blow as the fuse took
affect. It was really weird to see a thousand pound bomb go up, like skipping a rock on
the water you know?

RV: Yes, sir. I bet so. How accurate would you say the bombing was that you
guys were doing?

JK: Once in a while you’d have a little problem. Sometimes too, the targets
weren’t that well defined. The FAC would go in with his rocket, you’d pop a Willie Pete,
smoke rocket sends up a white column. You’d pop that say into a kind of growth area.
Then you’d see that smoke coming up, you’d say that’s it. Just put your bombs right in
there. But you couldn’t see just like out in the forest somewhere, we couldn’t see
buildings, we couldn’t see people or munitions or anything in many cases. But we were
putting them right in where they wanted, then he’d come in with these BDAs and tells us
how many arms or legs he saw.

RV: Right. One of the big debating points that historians and veterans of the war, since
the war, has been about strategic bombing and the effectiveness of strategic
bombing in ground support and how that affects overall diplomacy and foreign policy.
What is your opinion on that? Do you think strategic bombing makes a big difference in
the outcome of a war like Vietnam where it was kind of semi-conventional at times and
then a lot of guerilla warfare most of the time?

JK: You’re taking primarily probably SAC drops. Strategic blanket bombing?

RV: That and I guess you were taking out targets in ground supports and things
like that?

JK: Yes. We were hitting, like I say normally we would carry 200 to 400 to 500-
pounders or 750s, 1,000 maybe on the fighters. The most we would put out of each
fighter could have up to maybe normally two in a flight of three, then you’d have
anywhere up to six to a dozen bombs compared to a B-52 which came out of there like
something else. I remember the SAC business up there in Hanoi was on and off type
thing. Hit or don’t hit them, this type of thing. What was it I remember it must have
been terrible, awfully demoralizing to the people up there. Of course they buried, went in
underground and everything, but it had to be a tremendous shock on all those people.
Some of our people that were in the POW camps when they came back they said when
they had a lot of that strategic bombing up there some of the guards used to get kind of
good. Like they thought, “Gee, this was it. This is the end of it.” It was almost like,
“Gee, you remember me? I never treated you poorly” and chatting with some of the guys like it was any day it was going to be over.

RV: Interesting.

JK: That’s about it I guess on that end of it.

RV: Speaking of the POWs there, what kind of POW training did you have? I know they sent you to survival school, did they cover what would happen if you were shot down? I know you were operating mainly in the South. But if you fell into enemy hands, what kind of training did you have for that?

JK: Like I said when I went over, I went to Spokane, that air base there, and I went through that escape and evasion thing. That primarily was living off the land. Then when we jumped off, we went to the Philippines first and attended another camp there. They had a makeshift prison. They had our people who were supposedly the Vietnamese guards. They’d give you a rough time and they’d do everything but torture you. The only torture you get is where they put you on the ground or get your legs and arms all tied up to where it’s uncomfortable. A lot of yelling and carrying on, a lot of night works and pouring water down your neck and throat and stuff like that.

RV: How long did that training last?

JK: That was probably about a week. Then they put us out in the countryside like jungle area. They had a little old negrito, little colored Filipin, kind of short like pigmy type. They would dump us out of a truck at night and just say go. Thirty minutes later, an hour later, they’d turn all these little guys loose and they’d try to find you. If they found you, each of us carried a chip, like a dog tag. When anybody would find you we’d give them a chip and they’d give them so much rice for each one of these chips. I went
off and it started out just before dark I guess. It ended up the next morning well into
daylight. I happened to find a little hill type thing, real brushy and full of mice and rats
and things like that. I crawled up in the top of that area and they usually sent us out in
pairs. In my case they sent three of us out. When the little Negritos got one, they
usually figure, “there’s one more.” In that case they got two, so they discontinued
searching that spot. So I managed to make it through to daylight, and I never got caught.
That was the extent of that. They tried to give you an idea of just what it could be like.

RV: How much did you think about that while you were flying?

JK: About POW?

RV: Yes, sir.

JK: I don’t recall really thinking about it much at all. If we got knocked down in
the South, we’d end up in Hanoi too. If we got that far, whether they’d keep us there or
torture you or kill you in the South. If they didn’t you’d probably end up up there
something, which you see when all these people are repatriated, most of them are
officers, they’re all pilots, a lot of them from the B-52. I never really thought of that too
much. I didn’t have the butterflies like I had in Korea. In Korea I kind of figured with all
that distance, 600 miles of enemy territory, chances of getting knocked down. I didn’t
have that problem in my stomach in Vietnam.

RV: Did you ever witness any B-52 strikes from the air or from the ground?

JK: No, I’ve seen some in the States where they put on practice things you know?

RV: Yes.

JK: And flown in a couple in those nuclear airborne, 24-hour jobs. But other
than that never really saw anything firsthand.
RV: How much bombing did you do if any on the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos or in Cambodia?

JK: Yes, I’m not sure just where we were. We had what they called I think it was a nightspot. It’s in my memoirs. The fighters would go up at night. We had a commitment in our wing to where I think it was a couple of weeks or whatever it was, one squadron would get that night duty. Then there’d be a little break and then another squadron, another squadron. Our time came up, and the subject came up of one squadron taking the whole wing’s night bombing deal within one squadron to relieve the other squadrons. We would just take it for a month. I think it turned out to be 28 days. What we would do is we would go off every few minutes with a flight of three, carrying 500-pounders. I think it was two a piece. We’d go up to 20,000 and the SAC radar people on ground would control us. Of course its pitch dark and we’re up there at 20,000 you can’t see anything. We had what they call a rosette, a little gauge in the cockpit. It would show: fly right, fly left one degree, two degrees, and so on. The SAC guys are talking to you and they would say, “You’re 20 seconds from drop.” We were sitting there tucked in together in a flight of three. We’d get kind of a count down on that gauge. When it said, “bombs away,” we’d just hit the button. Then we’d come back and land. That went on like that all night for about a month. I heard that we were over the Ho Chi Minh and other areas trying to cut the supply lines.

RV: Right, how effective do you think the bombing on the Ho Chi Minh trail was overall for the United States?

JK: The 52s I think we involved it that a lot. I think it had to be pretty effective. Because God, the people on the ground just don’t know when that stuff’s coming down.
A lot of them have delayed fuses, anywhere up to maybe a week or two. Then they can pop off any time. When they get the coolies in there, that tried to recover the trail, these things just pop up, could blow up anytime. That’s got to be terribly demoralizing.

RV: That’s got to be very disconcerting, I would imagine. Did you ever have any contact with ARVN or the indigenous forces in South Vietnam?

JK: No, I didn’t. They were around, but we didn’t do anything coordinated. The only thing I would know is whatever they would want as far as coverage from the fighters that went up through the system to Tan Son Nhut along with our guys so we could be covering them too and not know it. They may tell us, you’re going to be bombing some of the ARVN targets and so on. Actually talking with them and that type of thing, no not at all.

RV: You said that you followed or provided cover for some of the defoliant spraying?

JK: Right.

RV: Did you ever have any contact with the actual defoliant, with the Agent Orange or anything else that you are aware of?

JK: No. You mean get it in the cockpit?

RV: Yes, sir any type of exposure.

JK: No. It wasn’t any big deal over there at that time, regarding a possible sickness from this thing. But we were up high enough, we just, it just never did get down unless we had to go down and shoot up something, but we never did. You’d see these multi-aircraft right on the trees shooting along there with this big cloud coming out behind them, but we were setting off to the side a little bit and 2,000 or 3,000 feet above
them just watching. So I never got in any of that spray at all. The only time we’d get
into something like that would be some of the birds, the fighters, especially the little
twin-engine job that was assigned on our base. They carried tear gas. We’d be out
marshalling on the taxiway to take off in our birds. These guys would come up and once
in a while they’d drop a, they carried these things by the dozens in each airplane. Once in
a while one would drop off the wing and kick off. You’d have to go on 100% oxygen
because a cloud would go through your airplane while you were sitting there. Of course
it burns your eyes and skin. That’s the only time I ever inhaled anything like that.

RV: Did you have any other R&Rs? You said you went to the States to see Jodie
once and you went to Australia once. Did you take any other R&Rs on your tour?

JK: No, that was about it. I went to Australia, called my wife from there and I
went home. Going into Taiwan or something like that once in a while. That was just out
and back, no problem. It’s kind of strange. I’ve got to wait a second.

RV: Ok, go ahead sir.

JK: When you’re over in a situation like that, no matter where in combat
wherever it is, R&Rs and things like that just don’t mean too much. You can get kind of
bored. Then you miss what you’ve been doing and the excitement and everything and
you kind of can’t wait to get back. You’d rather be back in the thick of things than sitting
over somewhere in Hong Kong or somewhere relaxing.

RV: Was that the mood basically of a lot of the men you served with there?

JK: I kind of think so, whether they’d say anything or not. I don’t know whether
I mentioned in your thing there, we had one squadron commander there, had his wife
over, she was in Bangkok, had a nice apartment looked just like the States. If he could
get away occasionally, he would go over for a day or two. He invited me one time and I
went over and spent a couple of days. They had nice places to eat, things like that. He
was the only one I knew of that had a wife over in that area.

RV: How much were you able to keeping contact or keep up to date with news in
the United States? Did you have a TV in the barracks or were you able to keep up with
what was happening back Stateside?

JK: No TVs or anything like that. I guess maybe radio once in a while. Maybe
Stars and Stripes would come in. Of course they had the Stars and Stripes paper. Didn’t
hear an awful lot about some of the campus problems, things like that. Especially to the
degree that it’s developed.

RV: How did those anti-war protests affect you guys over back in Vietnam?

JK: Gee, I don’t really know, feel any affect as far as myself and my troops were
concerned. We just had 24 hours a day and busy, getting the little sleep that we could
get, and things like that. Always meeting schedules and always watching for ground
attacks, rocket attacks and things. What was happening in the outside world really didn’t
mean an awful lot to us.

RV: Were you able to ever attend any USO shows?

JK: No, I never did. That was funny. Including Korean and Vietnam never saw
a show. Jack Benny walked into our mess in Korea one afternoon after he had a show
somewhere. There were two of us sitting there; we came in on a late mission, popped in
the mess hall to eat, in a little Quonset hut, and Benny walked in with three or four of his
people. He just said, “Hi guys” and sat down and ate and that was it. In Vietnam once in
a while an actor or Congressman Kennedy there he popped thorough, just a fleeting thing.

This one guy who played Daniel Boone in the TV series.

RV: Fess Parker was that his name?

JK: I think it was another. I recognized him as who he was. He came out to the alert pad while we were there and chatted a little bit, looked a little uncomfortable.

RV: He looked a little uncomfortable?

JK: Yes, they usually come in with some kind of jumpsuit or fatigue type uniform. Of course it was hot and humid over there. Sat around with some of the young pilots and chatting with them and getting his signature for their kids. Other than that, that’s about the extent of my shows.

RV: Sir, let me pause it for just a second I’m almost out of time on this disk.

You describe in your memoirs a little bit of life on the base there at Bien Hoa, can you describe that? What was it like there everyday?

JK: Yes, when I first arrived and the met the DO and everybody, they kind of just tell you’ve got some quarters over there and you’ve got something over here. In my case they kind of let you go and take a look. The quarters were these rectangular shaped tent areas that look like I mentioned, like the Boy Scout Camps or something. They have a wooden floor and they have the canvas sides maybe half way up and then some halfway point to the top have mosquito--What do they call it?

RV: Mosquito netting?

JK: Yes, it was actually screen. Mosquito screening. Then the roof was either canvas or maybe a hard top. Wooden top with a little tarpaper or something. They would probably house, each one would house maybe four to six pilots in the bunks and
mosquito nets and things. That was where you lived. Of course as time passed and you
got a position like me where you got a squadron, I ended up in a trailer. Kind of a small
trailer or maybe part of trailer. That was ok, where you had just a bed and a lamp and a
little head and a place to wash and shave and things like that, but very small. We had a
mess hall that I can’t remember too much about. We had a club, officer’s club. That
wasn’t too bad. Again a field type out in the sticks. There I remember they’d have
occasionally a singer or somebody come through. The gal who was in the accident and
they said she lost her head, she was decapitated. What was that?

RV: Yes, sir. I remember I can't think of the name right off, right now.

JK: She went through one time [Jayne Mansfield]. But I don’t remember much
about the club because I was always busy. Maybe go over and have a coke or something
once in a while. I remember we had a guy William something, he was a full bird here in
Homestead, the 31st wing during the Cuban thing when I was a major in charge of the
command post. He was kind of a funny little guy. He looked about 5’5” kind of a belly
on him. They had picture of him on the bulletin board there at the club with him sitting
there with this big blonde, well endowed there sitting on his lap. Both of them with a big
grin, evidently she had gone through. That was about it as far as that type of thing. The
rest of the time I think they had a little dinky PX of some kind where you got your
shaving materials and things like that and could buy the Stars and Stripes. I think they
had maybe four or five barber chairs where the local guys trimmed you. They’re
primarily with non-electric shears, scissors and things. I remember they had scissors with
long handles where they would hold one handle in the left hand and take the other handle
and shear you like you cut hedges you know?
RV: Yes, sir (laughs).

JK: It was really kind of strange there. In Saigon they had a bigger PX. It took 15 minutes to drive into that PX, they had a little more. But around the base the rest of the things were just hangers, usually small like nose hanger type things. There wasn’t any tremendous deal like you had here in the States. They had the billets around where the troops lived also. Supply warehouse, things of that nature, and a few I guess administrative type things. Not an awful lot to anything. Nothing that really stood up. It was like everything kind of sheared off maybe one of two heights, floors. That was about it. Then of course around the strip had potholes from rockets and things like that. A lot of construction people, these civilian contract type, filling holes, repairing taxiways and things like that.

RV: These were civilian contractors form the United States?

JK: Yes. Usually out there in the various areas, islands or whatever there are certain people, certain big construction firms and you’d see the names like, Wackenhut, or whoever it might be. And you’ll see that name all through the area, which means that he’s got that whole contract for everything. You’d see that no matter whether it was Guam, the Philippines, anywhere. And of course there are different people, different big construction people. But they’re working almost daily.

RV: Did you guys have any pets on base?

JK: We had the big snakes.

RV: Tell me about that.

JK: You’d see dogs around. I really like dogs as pets. We’ve got a little yorkie here.
RV: I saw the picture you attached.

JK: You did?

RV: Yes, sir.

RV: The military police they get a bunch of the, what do they call them? Cur dogs that run around, they’re ill-kept, terrible looking. Can’t really maybe even pet them or whatever. They’d get to the point where they’d get on the runway. They could become a little scary. The MPs would go around in a truck and maybe shoot them with a shotgun, which I didn’t like. Then we had Ramrod the snake. He was about 10 foot long, good-looking python. Before I picked a squadron I knew they had this snake. Our squadron name was Ramrod, so they named the snake Ramrod. Kept him primarily in our operations shack which would house a bunch of one-floor plan and enough space for guys to just mill around, briefing room type thing. So we just left the snake in there and he’d go wherever he wanted to go.

RV: Where did they acquire this snake?

JK: They’re all over the ground out there.

RV: Did you see a lot of them out there?

JK: I saw a few, but not being Army type, they saw all kinds. We had Ramrod there, and of course he was a big draw. Anytime we had visitors come in, senior type Air Force commander and all of them came by. They’d sit and look at that big guy curled up in the corner.

RV: He had free reign of the building?

JK: Yes, he just went wherever he wanted to go. We had a cage outside the building that had chicken wire to enclose it. One of the airmen put him in there for a
while, I don’t know if someone was coming by or what, but he was in the shade.

Eventually it moved around to the point where the sun hit it, and he died of a stroke. So we buried him in a 10-foot pipe. They had all the fanfare and *Stars and Stripes* got pictures and a spread in the paper. But when we lost him, the Army guys around the perimeter heard, of course they read it in *Stars and Stripes* so they brought one over.

Well, they brought many over. They’d catch them in these big garbage 20-gallon things. Ramrod was a beautiful phosphorescent green beautifully marked guy. Never bothered anybody. He struck one of our pilots because he was molting and it also affects the cover on their eyes. We think the snake just looked up and saw this guy. They opened that mouth and I guess hundreds of teeth, little bity needles. He just bang, hit that guy in the arm and it brought a bunch of little beads of blood. It really shocked that guy.

RV: I’m sure.

JK: Because he used to kiss him and hug him and he thought that was the greatest snake. From that point on he kind of didn’t like him anymore. But when the Army troops found this out every once in a while we’d end up with a big 20-gallon bucket out in operations. We’d open it up and here’s a tremendous snake in there. In one case it was probably, I’d say maybe 18 feet long and as big around as your thigh and dark. He didn’t have that beautiful green glowing color. He probably lived in the growth out there. Because of that he was almost black. He had a terrible disposition. So we piddled around with him for a little bit and realized this wasn’t going to work. We put him out beside our Ops office in the grass, and a little old Vietnamese papa san who kind of helped around the area saw this, and gee, he reached over and grabbed this guy by the tail and was trying to pull him back.
RV: Back on the base?

JK: Yes, it was right there beside our operations office. I think that little papa
san I think worked for us. He grabbed this snake by the tail and as he was pulling back,
the snake would horseshoe back like it was going to bite him. He let him go again. And
he kept that up for a bit; then finally we said, “What are you going to do with that big
snake?” He said, “Feed the baby.” Feed the family you know?

RV: Right.

JK: Then we went off flying or something. I don’t think he ever got him because
he was a little spooked because he was such a big snake. They came in and snakes were
just every day or so or getting another one from these Army guys. It finally kind of
dwindled out. I guess they thought we’d had enough there after a while, but we never
kept one in at any length after Ramrod died. When I took the squadron Colonel
McLaughlin retired as a two-star. He said, “You’re you going to get rid of that snake
aren’t you? You know when you take over that 531st?” I said, “Yes sir, I’ll get rid of it.”
As soon as I took over geez, I realized the guys looked at that snake like you would look
at you little dog. I wasn’t about to get rid of him. I just told him, “No way.” This one
commander used to get a bang out of--He had this staff car, like a squad car. He’d say,
“Put that snake in the back” in the backseat. We had an oriental full bird who was our
wing maintenance officer. Scared to death of snakes. So I put that snake in the backseat,
and old McLaughlin would go pick up this full bird oriental extraction and put him in the
front seat. He put his arm up on the back of the seat here, the front seat and was riding
along. All of a sudden he’d see that snake and my God, he’d bail out of that car. That’s
the type of fun they had with him. Anytime we’d brief anybody, when they’d come in
the visiting fireman type, he’d be up behind me, up against the wall or all coiled up.

These guys would be listening to you but their eyes sticking out watching that big snake.

Of course he wouldn’t move, he’d just sit there. They could go forever without eating anything. They’d usually end up eating mice and rats.

RV: Would you guys feed Ramrod?

JK: Yes, if we ever found a bunch of mice or rats we’d just put them in his cage and he’d go around picking them up. That was about it as far as pets.

RV: That’s a pretty memorable pet I would say. So for entertainment you had I guess Ramrod, you had the officer’s club there. Were you in charge of allowing your men under you to go on R&Rs or was that someone else’s call?

JK: I don’t recall signing anything any R&Rs. I think they could go off occasionally. Usually in a situation like that they sometimes will have a courier. Courier was a C-47 years ago. That used to go to Shanghai and places. We’d jump on that once in a while. I’m sure at Bien Hoa there; of course Saigon was a pretty fine town for the troops. But you had to be real careful because you could be hand-grenaded or stabbed or things like that without even knowing it. I was trying to think, I imagine there was an occasional deal maybe they’d go to Taiwan or somewhere in a courier. But I was tied up primarily with my guys and my pilot. Of course I had about 300 troops. They were also tied in with the overall general maintenance, which this full bird Oriental type oversaw these guys. Of course he had an adamant administrative section, things like that. Then we had a real top zebra, you know the big senior NCOs with all the stripes. They would take care of anything. I remember me talking to my troops and telling them, “The door is always open.” You know my door, if you want to come in and bring up something you
do it. They’d all sit there smiling and nodding their heads. “Fine, outstanding.” Then when I would walk out these zebras real discretely would say, “If I ever catch one of you guys knocking on his door, you’re dead.” So they took care of all of that. Once in a while I would have a little steak-out right there in the ground or around the Ops type. They’d track a 55-gallon drum and charcoals and steaks and cokes and things like that. Then you’d sit around and chat with the guys.

RV: Did you feel like you had a good rapport with them men under you?

JK: Yes.

RV: Did you ever encounter any racial issues while there?

JK: Not a bit, don’t recall a thing. The only thing that I can remember, not racial, I had a little guy that came out of what’s that Father Flanagan’s place?

RV: Yes.

JK: Boys Town.

RV: Yes, sir I think so.

JK: Nice looking little guy about 5’5” or 5’6” something like that. Just as pleasant as could be. He was a real terror. He got into everything. He had all kinds of fake ID cards and go to town and try to sell things from the PXs and things like that. That’s the only guy I can really remember. He just got so bad that when I left I told the-- and I’d talked with him and God he sounds so sincere and so good. He was going to get off this business and all this getting in trouble. Some lieutenant colonel took over, I told him, “The only problem I know of in the squadron is this little guy.” I said, “But I think he’s squared away. Boy, he’s really been great for the last month or so.” This is before I went home, the squadron commander came up to me and he said, “Remember that kid
you were telling me about?” I said, “Yes.” Then he went off and said, oh god, he’d got
caught and he had all these ID things and he’d been selling things to the natives and that
sort of thing. Finally he cut his wrists. He got in so deep under so many areas that he
pulled that insanity thing so they immediately just put him through the medical system.
That’s that guy you said was real great. I guess they probably ended up sending him
home, but that’s the only kind of weird thing I can think of.

RV: What ethnicity was he?
JK: Just a little Caucasian guy.

RV: What was the bravest action that you witnessed while in Vietnam?
JK: Bravest?

RV: Yes, sir.
JK: Considering all the guys and everything, I can’t think of anything other than
they were scared to death a lot of them. For a while every night with these rockets going
off. Every time the rockets go off everybody dives into the bunkers. Then I run over to
our troops, to their barracks and they would all be, say 200 or 300 of them all be in a big
clump in the center of the barracks and on the floor. Then the rest would be in bunkers
where they were available. That would go on for maybe an hour until the rockets were
all cleared and then they would come out. I don’t know of any flight or anything where
someone was Congressional or Silver Star type thing. Although there are some silver
stars coming out for heroism or bravery. A couple of accidents there that I have. Maybe
you have it there where the man was buried in the cockpit.

RV: I was reading about that. I was going to ask you if you had any memorable
events with the birds there and those came to mind.
K: That was one where it was really hectic after being buried underwater in that cockpit for almost an hour, he came out alive because he was sucking oxygen through the system.

RV: Can you describe that event?

JK: Yes, I’ve got that in my memoirs. I don’t know how much I gave you. This guy was a captain from a base north of us. He was flying an F. Had a young enlisted man in the backseat, photographer. They were over just west of us somewhere and he got hit. It affected the fuel system where he started losing fuel. So, he immediately declared emergency and headed to our place, which was the closest base. Tan Son Nhut is just a couple of minutes from us. But we were a hot fighter base so he headed to us. He had wingman I think and he got in to Tan Son Nhut ok, just to get out of the way. This guy set upon the final approach and I imagine the fuel gauge is really going down. He lined up on the runway and we didn’t have any real activity at that point as far as landings and take offs. And he being in a May Day situation he was all set. So, he set up the final approach a little high and a little fast because if it quite he wanted to be sure to make it. So, he asked the young trooper in the back if he wanted to bailout or stick with it? The pilot captain who retired as a major general he said that he was going to stick with it. The young airman said, “I’m with you.” So, they come in and he was how we say long and hot, high and hot. Because of the situation like that, you can end up hitting the nose wheel first, which you don’t want to do because it’s like a tricycle and it will start to porpoise to the point where you lose control. That’s what happened, and sheared the nose gear off and left the right side of the runway probably a third, half way down the
runway and tore the wings up pretty much. It ended up in this big crater. The crater was full of water. It was about the depth of my den here. I’d say six to nine feet.

RV: He was upside down?

JK: Right he was upside down. At that point, the aircraft had twisted. Like the tail instead of sticking up vertically behind your head it was pointing towards the ground. There that thing sat in that hole, muddy water bubbling around. The wing commander at that time had his radio equipped bird or squad car. So he was listening to everything from the tower. I was in our squadron jeep, wreck and ordering the runway again. I saw what was happening so I took off over to that spot, and got there. Bubbles are still coming up you know? So Caitlin was the name of the colonel at that time who was the wing commander. He immediately got a dozer with some native driving it. The driver couldn’t speak English so the colonel just “follow me” type of thing. He got him over there and tied a cable around the darn fuselage and everything, and at that point it was still heavy even though it lost wings and everything else. It weighed probably 10,000 pounds something like that. So they tied the cable around it started pulling and banging away. It wasn’t like pulling it up vertically. They had to kind of drag it horizontally. You just can’t do it. The cable snapped so the colonel took off, found another dozer so both dozers were over there working at it. In the mean time I called the Army outfit west of us and asked them if they had a super chopper. They had these tremendous weight carrying choppers. We had a pilot upside down in this thing. He said, “Ok we’ll check it out.” But to them they had so many problems, so many deaths and so on they never did show. I don’t know how much effort they put in. As they kept working and then the dang airplane started to burn. First, what was left of the gas and oil came up and it sent
these big columns of black smoke. Of course the dozers and the colonel and everybody
had to get back because they didn’t know what was going to happen. Then came the
white smoke from the burning metal. Then finally the 20mm canon ammunition started
going off. That was popping around the area like crazy.

RV: Did you all go for cover at this point?

JK: Yes, we all just got back away from it so we wouldn’t get hit. As things
quieted down, we all kind of went back again and checked in. We had a flight surgeon
tent, which was not too far from there. So he jumped in the water and went underground,
got under water and was feeling down around the cockpit. The cockpit was open just a
hair. The fact that it was upside down, the canopy bubble was forced against the ground
at the base of that hole with all of this water above it. Which meant the cockpit and
everything was flooded and it and been for almost an hour. So, the flight surgeon
reached in to see what he could find and he touched the pilots shoulder. At that point he
felt the pilot come up and grab his hand. So, the flight surgeon came out of that hole
yelling, “He’s alive! He’s alive!” So, then they did they went crazy. They started again
cabling it and trying to pull it just to one side where they could maybe get it up on the
side a little bit where they could get that canopy out of the way and get him out of there,
which they finally did. The pilot come out puckered up like a prune, but he was ok. The
little airman in the back was killed when they hit. He was dead. The thing was the pilot
knowing his bird and everything, he popped his oxygen mask to his face and it was full of
water of course. He had it on when he landed. He held it real tight to his face and
exhaled and blew all that water out around his ears after he swallowed a cup full of dirty,
disgusting murky water. Then he reached down and put his oxygen to 100% then he got
a self-contained until in the aircraft. Normally you would have plenty of oxygen if you
didn’t rupture something in that craft. So, he sat there for that hour inhaling that oxygen.
That’s what saved him. They said there wasn’t but a couple of minutes left after he was
rescued the oxygen was depleted. They said, had that young enlisted man lived and they
both drew on that system they’d both be dead. The flight surgeon sat there with the
captain for an hour like you and I here with a tape and he just bled that whole thing out.
He asked the pilot, “Did you know you were on fire?” He said, “No.” He said, “Did you
hear the ammunition going off?” He said, “No.” He said, “How long did you think you
were under there?” He said, “About 15 minutes.” And he said it was almost an hour.
That was a hectic deal and the man lived. Then what, 30 some years he retired now as a
two star living I think on the southeast coast here somewhere. I sent him a copy of
everything I had, but he didn’t answer.

RV: Do you remember a really careless act with any of the birds?
JK: Careless?
RV: Yes, sir.
JK: I sure can’t think if any unless it’s something in my records here. Not there,
everybody’s so serious. It wasn’t like when you were younger out dusting off people and
buildings and things like that. Because you’re doing that everyday here, shooting and
bombing. That pretty well took care of that. Oh yeah there’s one deal. I don’t know if
you’ve got it there. Where the pilot came back on his last mission and it didn’t happen
very often. Usually a guy got his last mission and he was ready to get that thing on the
ground and get ready to go home. He came back and he was going to overfly the control
tower right on the top, you know right on the treetop. He came tearing across, I was
sitting right near in a jeep. Actually I was rolling along, I had a couple of my troops with
me. He came tearing over the control towers at about 500 knots. He’d just finished 250
missions probably. The wing came off, left wing I think it was. Like I said, he was at a
tree top level. He was going so fast and without that wing the airplane just yawed almost
90 degrees I guess and just kept going. As it was going it was shedding everything. It
was raining pieces. We were kind of ducking as this stuff came down. At a distance I
remember one of the guys in my jeep kept saying, ”Eject.” Just talking to himself,
“Eject, eject, eject.” He got to about a mile and it started to fall vertically. At that point
he ejected just as he kind of went below the tree level. The seat came up out of the mess,
but he was dropping at about the same speed that seat was going up. He just kind of
coopied out and fell back into the wreck and died. The wing came off and killed one
American troop enlisted man. The body of the airplane killed a few Vietnamese. That
was a situation where I tell my troops, boy, don’t ever do something like that after a
mission without. You always want to land and have the airplane looked at. Because of
you have any kind of internal structural damage from munitions shot at you or whatever,
you could have a problem. We didn’t know but he very well could have had some
material damage in that airplane that would have cause the wing to come up. It was 500
knots in that airplane under rough air isn’t anything at all.

RV: Why didn’t he eject any sooner than that?

JK: Just too dizzy I think. Probably when he’s going like that you’re slammed up
against the side of the cockpit you know? You have to pull up your arm rests, they blow
the canopy and then the triggers are exposed and then you pop those and it shoots your
seat. If the canopy for some reason fails it will blow you through the canopy and
everything will be cool. It works.

RV: Sir, what were your impressions of the Vietnamese civilians that you had
contact with?

JK: Civilians?

RV: Yes, sir.

JK: I always thought they were nice, little people. Within our squadron on an
Ops building, flight line we had probably four or five little guys and one little gal. We
had a little snack bar where you’d serve coke and I think candy bars, maybe some kind of
little sandwiches, I don’t know. We had that two people to one little grandma san, mama
san, probably 50. They’d sneak cokes and things home. I’d give them cokes. I
remember handing them a couple of cokes and telling them to go ahead and take them
home. The little girl who was kind of the English speaker of the bunch she said, “You
know they take cokes all the time.” I said, “Well, that’s ok.” I guess she said something
about they cost a couple of dollars downtown or something. They were fine. Of course
once in a while I would go to the PX, which was a 15-minute drive east and south to
Saigon. Of course you’d hit [see] people all over the place, kids, little children and
whatever. They always seemed like little, fine people. Never saw any nastiness from
them, but you used to hear about how they’d ride through Saigon on a little motor
scooter. Some guy with his girl on the back, his girlfriend in their little silk kimono type
thing and she’d maybe pop somebody on the street corner, some military. That type of
ingig was fairly common. Then the time I got caught in a shoot out going into Saigon. I
think that’s information you have yet or not. Just before I left for home, I took or staff
car and was going to drive 15 minutes into the PX, look around a little bit and then 15
minutes back. Probably then 45 minutes, round trip. As I approached Long Binh, which
is an Army unit directly east of us just a few minutes; there’s also a hospital there and
post. The traffic kind of tightened up. I thought, gee, I’m not going to make it to the
main north/south double lane asphalt that goes in to the city. So, I backed off a little bit
and turned out into the brush and got on to a back route. I didn’t get any distance there
and I got in the same thing. Then I could hear the gunfire up in front of me and bullets
zipping through the trees. By that time, my god I was swamped. It was like a scene in a
movie. There were hundreds of little Vietnamese people with the stuff on their heads and
the kids and the animals and whatever, mostly on foot. They had this little old dirt road,
just packed. I finally realized especially when the bullets started zipping through there
too that I wasn’t going to be able to go any further there. I finally settled around. At that
point I had hundreds of these people around me. I wondered if someone might stick me
or shoot me or something, but I had my .38 in my shoulder holster, which we always
carried. It wasn’t any problem. I wound the windows up o the squad car so they
wouldn’t slip something in there. Most of the vehicles had bars and heavy screens, like
the buses, little duty buses and things they had. They were all so secure they could
possibly throw anything in. But this squad car was just a standard squad car with
windows that would go down and there’s no screening, so I popped those up. Finally S-
ed around a little bit and eight hours later I made it back to the base.

RV: Eight hours (laughs)?

JK: Eight hours instead of 45 minutes.

RV: You said nothing happened to you at all? You just had a long journey.
JK: Yes. I kissed the ground a little bit when I got back.

RV: That’s right before you were leaving country?

JK: Yes. I left in a couple of days. I thought, “Geez, this is going to be tough. If I lose this staff car old Bob Corey is going to be disturbed with me.” I finally got back and told him about it.

RV: Did he give you a hard time?

JK: No.

RV: Did they tease you?

JK: Did they tease?

RV: Did they tease you about it?

JK: No, I think he was the only one I told the story to right there. I’m sure he told McLaughlin all of them, but I left so soon I never heard anything about it.

RV: Sir, looking back at your Vietnam experience is there anything you would change about it if you could?

JK: No, I can’t think of anything. It’s all quite an experience. It’s just part of your 30 years. It’s interesting that no matter where you go or what combat theatre or whatever things are similar a little bit. I don’t know if you could call it pleasant. I was always pretty comfortable. Of course you miss your wife, stuff like that. I can’t think of any changes. I’m just glad I didn’t get shot down.

RV: Yes, you flew 156 combat missions.

JK: Right. I would have like I mentioned flown probably 250, which is about he average, but I briefed for 250. As a squadron commander I was for the balance of those mission I would be called by the wing commander or some higher authority to do
something. I couldn’t say, “Well stand by or I’ll call you back.” I had to drop everything. So, I always had a man, a pilot brief with me. When I was preempted for something else he would get the mission. I ended up briefing for 150 to 156. We had one young lieutenant, Air Force Academy graduate, first lieutenant. He flew 250 he was the one that lost our air pressure and bailed out. They picked him up in a chopper. He was probably about 24 maybe. Of course like some, there’s a few that, he wanted to really get the experience so he signed up for another year. He totaled 500 missions with one bail out.

RV: Wow.

JK: So he was very fortunate. Because some go down on the first and some go down on the last.

RV: Right. From Vietnam you went to Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama.

JK: Right I was selected to go to Air War College at Maxwell. So I checked in there May of ’68. It’s about a college year. I think I was in school 10 months, something like that. Didn’t have to fly because you just don’t have that time. When you get up to that point they still allow you your flying pay without flying. So that was great.

RV: How much of a transition was it from Vietnam to Maxwell? I mean you’ve made so many moves and transition in your life, coming out of this war zone, how was that for you?

JK: No problem. I flew a commercial jet out of Tan Son Nhut up to the west coast I think it was. Probably jumped a regular commercial run to Miami and picked up Jodie. We drove right up to Maxwell whatever, the few days I might have had between
the assignment, and picked up an apartment in town, in Montgomery. Wasn’t any
problem, just another move.

RV: After you got off the flight, back stateside and you flew to Miami, were you
in uniform then?

JK: Yes.

RV: Did you have any negative reception anywhere along that route?

JK: Not a bit. I made full bird just before I left Vietnam. The most shocking to
me or anything regarding an anti-war thing was even now, once in a while they show this
campus stuff. I thought, “My God, was it that detailed, that many people concerned?”

No one threw anything. No one said anything. To me it was just like another assignment
in the States. Beautiful. I stayed there for that almost a year. That was a nice school,
had an awful lot of great speakers everything up short of the President and BOD guys,
top Air Force generals and commanders of various FACs, MACs and all those places.
All kinds of top civilian speakers. That speaking program that was fabulous. It was
almost a speaker a day and then pulling all kinds of war games and things like that,
working military budgets and things like they do everyday.

RV: How much did you follow Vietnam, the War and American policy once you
had gotten back stateside?

JK: Followed it how?

RV: Followed it in the news. What the United States was doing in country.

JK: I didn’t really watch it. I’d see it on tele and again in the War College there,
I was really up to it again, you’re really in deep. I think we had a TV in the apartment,
I’m not sure, but I was studying so much I’d usually go in the den, close the door and
start working. I’d kind of wonder and then I heard this business how we were going to
move out and the ARVN were going to take over and win that thing. At that point, I said,
“We’re finished.” If we moved out of there, the Communists will move right in and they
did. That right there when I heard that and then Westmoreland and the bunch I think
surely felt the same way.

RV: Do you remember how you felt in April 1975 when Saigon fell?
JK: I kind of thought it was inevitable, so it wasn’t any great shock. I saw some
of that on tele with the embassy and the choppers and thing like that. So, many of the
natives trying to get out of there too and get to the States. That was a sad deal, but. Like
I say, when they started talking about us leaving and the locals taking over I thought it
will be days and then it’ll be over. It was anything big fight.

RV: Just a matter of time?
JK: Yes.

RV: What is your perception of Vietnam today?
JK: What little I see seems like they’re fabulous the way they’ve come out of that
terrible tearing up of their country. I don’t know how their problems are politically and
that type of thing. Gee, with all that terrible bombing and stuff like that, you see pictures
of Congressman and groups from schools and colleges over in there out walking around
like it was Disneyland. Gee, it’s kind of hard to believe. Of course the time to me has
really passed fast. It’s been 30 years since I retired, and it seems like a month. Time has
gone so fast I’ve been retired as long as I was in the military.

RV: Right, I guess you have.
JK: Thirty years on their own, my god. I see pictures of cities Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh now and it’s kind of hard to believe that they’re getting along so great.

RV: How much contact have you had with Vietnamese here in the United States if any?

JK: Not a bit.

RV: Looking back at when you were over there are there any songs that remind you that take you back to that time period when you were in Bien Hoa?

JK: No, not a bit. Not really that I can think of.

RV: What about books on Vietnam? What would you consider some of the better books if you know of any that chronicle the War or parts of it?

JK: Yes, I’m kind of lazy. I haven’t read anything at all. It’s all very interesting what I see. I see a lot of the stories on TV, factual things, not Hollywood stuff. Things like that, I’m real interested in that. I get kind of antsy or bored. I’ve got to kind of keep moving or things kind of pass around me. Sit and bury in a book is kind of rough for me. I had a book or so here written by a Frenchman who I gave him some information. He had a coverage of Vietnam with all of our organizations over there, but it’s all in French. It’s a good-sized book, probably 300 or 400 pages. Someone like you contacted me and I sent him the book. I don’t speak French or read French, but my name and pictures and stuff are through there. I just sent it to this man who I think he was looking for information on his father’s experiences. So, I don’t have that book.

RV: Have you seen any of the movies that have come out on Vietnam?

JK: Yes, I’ve seen a few.

RV: What do you think of those?
JK: Kind of bloodthirsty. I don’t know how true to life. I don’t recall any of
them by name. Some of them I don’t stick with too long.

RV: What kind of lessons do you think the United States government learned if
any from Vietnam?

JK: One thing it’s a heck of a lot bigger, broader situation than a lot of us
thought. Maybe looking at the little Iraq today, I think people are thinking back of
Vietnam. Geez, we started out and we had so many hundreds of thousands of troops and
Westmoreland was indicating rightfully that we were doing well, but we could use a few
more. And things like that. A lot of people said he was lying and hiding the facts and all
that, which I don’t think he was. It’s just the situation. Again, I guess the Hussein over
there, that situation; his country might be a similar type thing as Vietnam. I guess a lot of
our guys felt too that we lost so many people over there it was a crying shame and they
still end up Communists. Only the whole country now. I don’t know if you can call it a
mistake or not. Like I say in my situation it’s kind of selfish. You’ve got all these fighter
guys in the wings are ready to go. All you’ve got to do is like a junkyard dog, you head
them in the right direction and they’re off. I never gave it too much thought one way or
another. Just to get my job done and not end up as POW.

RV: For young people today if you were to say walk into a college classroom or
high school classroom what would you tell them about Vietnam?

JK: Probably just about what I’ve been talking to you I guess what I thought. Of
course in my case it was just kind of localize. I’m sitting there around Bien Hoa Air Base
and Saigon. In Saigon just a couple, three visits. Everything else is just out and back in
an aircraft. That’s about all I could cover. Of course some of these people that were in
the North they’ve got some real terrible stories, and then those of course would end up as
POWs. I know a few people that ended up there.

RV: Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam?

JK: Like now, just to look around?

RV: Yes, sir.

JK: We do a lot of traveling through military transportation, air. We’ve hit
Europe, South America, Australia and these places. Europe maybe every couple of years,
Vietnam, Japan, China those areas I’m not too eager to see anymore. But Europe and
places like that are just more enjoyable, more like home you know?

RV: Right. You spent a lot of time there.

JK: Yes, and you can rent cars and things like that. It’s a lot like home. We’d go
over, rent a car and grab a map and just take off. Of course some areas I know about like
home. But Vietnam I don’t know. Maybe China with Chinese law you know. My wife
kind of thinks she might like to hit that area, but I tell her it’s not quite as easy renting
cars and getting around as it is in Europe. Especially Japan where you’ve got the islands.
I just don’t have any real drive to go over in that area right now.

RV: After Maxwell you went to Langley for what four years, three and a half years
about?

JK: Right.

RV: You had a desk job. What made you retire? You just got your 30 years in?

JK: Yes, I was getting up there I was in plans, operations and plans there again
no flying, but got flying pay. Just like in the college. And Momyere who was 7th Air
Force commander over there was also our commander there in the building where I was.
I participated in a study or so on future plans and equipment and so on of the Air Force. As I got some of the toughest work in my 30 years was working in studies and things like that. Then got along with everybody, everybody was fine. I started getting up there close to retirement and I heard first, I got call from the Pentagon, from the Colonel’s Assignment. Then they say I’ve been selected as the air attaché for Israel. They asked me how I felt about it. I thought well, let me think about it a little bit. He said I would have to go to Washington for a year to language school then I would go over there for a tour, which was a senior attaché with the ambassador of Israel. I thought well, let me think about it. I talked to Jodie, went home and I said how long are you going to give me? They said, take a few days, you know. And I said the fact there’s a policy if a full colonel is offered a position and he doesn’t take it, they retire you almost immediately.

RV: Really, okay.

JK: So I asked them if that policy was in effect. They said, “No this is a special deal.” He said, “You think about it, call us back.” I talked to Jodie, and at that time she said oh god, go over there and whatever. Of course she’s a biblical nut. Later on, after it was all over she said, “See we should have taken that.” I called the guy back and said, “No, I think I’ll pass it up.” He said, “Ok.” And they don’t tell you anything beyond that point on what kind of a future they might have lined up for you or what. I just bowed out and went back to doing my work. In the meantime a guy I worked with, another full bird, he went off to out in the west, not sure, it wasn’t Texas, right in there somewhere. He took over a wing, a wing commander of a transport outfit, not a fighter or bomber, but a transport thing I believe it was. So, he and I worked together on a study and we got along fine. He stared sniffing around; he was going to try to get me to come out there. I
heard about it, so they started a check on me. They want everything about you and so on. You and others or who’s going to be the best man and stuff like that. I certainly didn’t want to go. He had the tactical unit, which would be like a tactical fighter or strategic bomb thing. What I would take would be the base. You become a base commander, which is like a custodian for the whole works. But he is the prim Donna. What he says goes around that base. Anything he wants all he does is ask you or tells you. I’d been tactical all my life and I didn’t want to go into that custodial dang thing. I hadn’t talked to him, but I heard all this from someone else. Right away I thought I better, because that one if they’d have called me which could be any minute, then if I turned it down they would retire me right there.

RV: Probably, yes sir.

JK: I went over to personnel and said, “I think I’ll retire.” Of course I don’t think the guy had any inkling of what was going on. He was a lieutenant colonel. I said, on such and such a date. So I set a date up there that I wanted and so ok. So he went ahead and said, “We’ll put her through.” It wasn’t just a couple of days this Claude Turner who was my buddy out there at the base called me and said, “Hey I’ve got good news for you.” I said, “What’s that?” He said, “You’re coming out here to take over the base.” I said, “Really? Did you know that I’m retiring?” He said, “What? What’s this?” I said, “Well I got right up there at 30, and I think I’m about ready to go.” Not indicating that it wasn’t my daily way because I’d like to think so. He said, “Well ok, I surely wanted you out here.” The he wrote me a letter, a nice long letter and thanked me for everything in the past. Said it probably wouldn’t be too long before he’d be joining me. I understand
he’s since retired and dead. Then I just went ahead and did my thing. I volunteered for
Vietnam again about that time.

RV: Oh you did?

JK: Because I had a year or so to go, and I talked to the Pentagon guys and I told
them. Of course they know the guys in assignment. I said, “You’ve got me on retirement
and I’ve go a year or so to go.” And I said, “No problem. I’m sitting here in a desk job. I
can put another year in Vietnam.” The guy said, “No, not when we’re pending
retirement.” I pleaded with him and told him that I wasn’t trying to get out of the
retirement or anything else. They wondered what hanky panky may have been going on.

I went on with them for the longest time. They finally came back and said, “No we can’t
do it.” They called the guy I worked for, was a couple of stars general there and in the
next office. Said, “Hey this guy Keith’s trying to pull something.” He said, “What’s
that?” He said he’s trying to get back to Vietnam, which would extend my 30 years on
into something else.

RV: Would you have gotten paid more if you went back into a war zone?

Combat pay?

JK: I think we may have gotten what do you call it? I’ve always got flying pay.
I think we got some kind of combat pay or something, but nothing to worry about. But
the old general called me in and I sat there a minute and chatted with him. He mentioned
it I said, “Geez, I told those guys I’ve got a year or so in, which coincides to a year in
Vietnam. I could be over there shooting and doing something rather than sitting here
shuffling papers.” I went on with him for the longest time. He got all bottom lined he
said, “I thin you’re trying to pull something.” I thought, “Oh, get lost.” I was serious. I
just wanted to get over there and do something rather than sit around there. I thought, well, if you aren’t going to believe me forget it. I just went back, and then what was it he said, “If you wanted to accept that base out there with Claude Turner, we could scrap that retirement thing.” As long as it favors the service, they can do anything.

RV: Right.

JK: But if it’s something that you want and they don’t, then it’s just a concrete wall. They would just tear that up. I thought no I didn’t want to do that. But then that business there, the fact that I had gotten the word and everything that had gotten a little hot. They wondered how come he turned that down. The thing that bugged them was they put a lot of time and effort into checking you out for a position. You and others. When it doesn’t work out they get a little angry. So this general and a couple other people in there got in hot water because I had managed to work the thing out to where it was to my benefit. I don’t know what happened but I know the general was retired and another colonel was retired that were involved in that thing. Whether it had anything to do with that mess there and I was still gone. They were all giving me, oh gee I feel sorry for you leaving and all that sort of thing. A year later I was going and they were out. It was kind of a strange set up. Another friend of mine called me and said, “How’d you work that?” He was wanting to put in another year, he had over 30, but the was trying to work a deal where he had a home in Norfolk and he wanted to work it out to his benefit. He tried the same thing and they said, “Oh, no you’re not going to try that. One guy got away with it and it’s no longer something an individual can do.” Whatever happened I guess it was kind of strange.

RV: Well, sir is there anything else you want to add to this interview?
JK: No, I guess that’s about it. I came home and I had never been in any
business at all. All we do is travel and maintain the house and a couple of cars. A lot of
my friends check the internet. They’re in real estate, insurance, or have gone in and
completed another tour, or another profession. If you believe me. I guess I was a little
lazy and we just get along fine doing all of our traveling and everything. I’ll go ahead
and send you a copy of my memoirs and that pamphlet I’ve got. The only thing, the
pamphlet is the only one I’ve got. Like I say it’s a little 4X6 manual about 140 pages. If
one of your people could just burn a copy and then send this one back. I may never need
it again, but once in a while, like with you I took a look at it again. But it covers 7th Air
Force network throughout all of Vietnam. With all the terms and everything if you ever
wonder what ever these initials or whatever stands for you can look it up in the glossary
there.

RV: Sir, let me sign off, really quickly. This will conclude our oral history
interview with Colonel Jack Keith.