Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I am conducting an oral history interview with Colonel Ralph C. Erchinger and I am in Lubbock, Texas. Today is December 20th, 2005 and it’s approximately 1:17pm, Central Standard Time. Colonel, you are in Austin, Texas. Before we begin the interview, sir, I would like to get your consent to conduct the interview, that you understand some of the terms I laid out for you before we began talking, that you are going to sign the interview agreement once sent to you, and that you are aware that this interview will be made public and accessible to the public and that by doing this interview you are consenting to donate the interview to the Vietnam Archive. Do you understand that and agree to that, sir?

Ralph Erchinger: I do.

RV: Very good. Well, let’s start with kind of early years of who you are. I’d like to know where you born, when you were born, and a little about your childhood.

RE: Well, I was born in Hammond, Indiana to German immigrants. My father came over to this country in 1926. He was a master cabinet maker, having learned his trade in Germany and once he got a little bit established he sent for my mother and she said, ‘Baloney, you come over here and get me yourself. You said you were going to do that.’ So she sold the ticket that he sent and he went over to Germany, married her in their hometown of Tunigun, and came back and in short order I was born. They were married on March 1, 1930 and I was conceived within a couple weeks after that, born December 14, 1930.

RV: Now, why did he go to Indiana? Did he stop on his way over?
GE: Well, he had a brother and a sister precede him to the United States. He was one of twelve kids and he fought for the Kaiser in World War I and there was some family dissention and difficulty. I don’t know that this is relevant but I enjoy telling it.

RV: No, please go ahead.

RE: They had heavy inflation in Germany, and my dad was a very skilled cabinetmaker, and his dad said, ‘Well, son, this inflation is crazy. The money’s worth less every week and we’ve got to do something about it. So you build a house.’ So my dad borrowed money from anybody that had any in the family, built a beautiful house in the town and then after it was all done at some point he paid back all those loans, but he paid it back with inflated money, so he wound up with a nice house, and the rest of the family came up a little short, and they didn’t feel good about that. So that was one circumstance. Another circumstance was he came from a farming family, and they were very well thought of. My mother, who was already more than a glint in his eye did not meet with full favor and so for those kinds of reasons he said, ‘I’m going to the United States to find my way.’ And there were [was] similar stuff going on with his younger brother, Andrew. He was sort of a wild character and he wasn’t comfortable with his stern father so he came over and settled in the Rio Grande Valley and started an orchard down there. And then along with his coming over my dad’s younger sister Agatha was sort of a mail-order bride for a German farmer in Illinois who had lost his prior wife. And sort of through family and friend contacts became aware of my Aunt Agatha. So she would up coming over and going down to the Rio Grande Valley initially for the same family who sponsored my Uncle Andrew. So they came over, worked their way in the Valley a little bit to pay off what it cost for them to come over. And then she came up to Illinois to marry Fredrick Hubner. So with those contacts in the United States, my dad came over. He went initially to the Valley and there was—I don’t know exactly what the contacts were, but he knew of some people in Indiana and decided that he sure wasn’t going to stay in the Rio Grande Valley because then, as now, it was more difficult to have a good living in the Valley than it would have been in the Midwest. So he went up and found a job as a cabinetmaker and one thing led to another and things went well.

RV: Well, if you don’t mind me asking, did your father tell you about his experiences in World War I and what Germany was like after World War I?
RE: Yes.

RV: Can you talk a little bit about that and what you remember?

RE: I wish I had interviewed him more but I do have—I interviewed both of my parents at length, recalling childhood, how they met, why they got married and all that stuff, but not too much about the war. People in my folk’s village apparently all went into the same branch of the German military. They were all what they called Pioneers or engineers and among other things, they dug the trenches. And I had one uncle that was killed in World War I out of that family and another one in World War II. He [a third uncle] was a blacksmith on call and was disfigured [in WWI]. They didn’t expect him to survive or keep his vision, but he did both but he was disfigured. I’m not sure whether that was due to an explosion or mustard gas. But my dad came through it with only some shrapnel. He still had shrapnel until the day he died in one of his shoulders from a grenade that went off in the area. So I have no details of his experience, but it was less than pleasant. He was not eager to talk about it, I guess. And then after the war when they came home—I also interviewed my Aunt Agatha that I had mentioned before, so I got some perspectives from her. They just talked about the terrible rampant inflation and the scarcity of food, which was a problem on my mother’s side. My grandfather, her father, worked in industry as a factory laborer, so they rarely had meat in those years. That was not a problem for my dad and his family, but both of them talked about how the money was so inflated that eventually it would take a wheelbarrow full of paper currency to buy a loaf of bread. So, stories of that type, and I guess it was my Aunt Agatha that talked about how difficult it was for their mother to send the sons off to war and then have some of them not come back.

RV: It sounds like your father was a very determined individual, a kind of ingenious individual who was determined to make his own way. And coming over to the United States is a huge move. Do you remember what he told you about his transition and your family’s transition to this country and his initial impressions and kind of how he made it here?

RE: Oh yeah, that was very pleasant. He had only good stories to tell about his arrival in the United States. Early on he was able to buy a Model-T Ford, and he drove it up from the [Rio Grande] Valley. That was still in the Roaring Twenties, and he was sort...
of a Dapper Dan. He sort of bragged about the fact that he could have gotten any number
of young ladies in the United States, but nonetheless he went back and married his
sweetheart, my mother. He did talk in later years, after retirement and all, about his
regret that he did not go into industry, which he could have done, and joined a union and
gotten a retirement. He worked for a small sole-proprietorship cabinetmaking firm and
didn’t have any particular retirement other than social security. But other than that, he
had a very good experience in the United States, even in terms of the Depression when
many people were out of work. I recall on one occasion, I guess it was 1937 or 1938, he
was temporarily out of work, and so I vicariously [experienced] a little experience [of]
the Depression as I was with him in the car while he was looking for work. But he did
have a car; he was able to buy a 1937 Plymouth. That was the first car he bought while I
was around. He didn’t own a car after he got rid of that Model-T and after he’d gone
back to Germany to marry my mother. Let’s see. I was going to make another point. I
forgot what it was right now.

RV: Well, maybe it will come back to you. Can you tell me about his character
and who he was and who you saw him as your father?

RE: He was a stern but compassionate, loving man but he was certainly the ruler
of the roost, which was the tradition in Germany throughout his young life and even
continuing through World War II, I would say. Very self-confident, very assertive,
strong character. He remarked about his childhood being one of extremes, that all he
could think of at home was Arbeiten und beten. ‘Arbeit’ is work, ‘beten’ is prayer.
Working and praying. So as he reflected on that I think what he was saying is they were
too extreme on both. They were sort of fanatical workaholics, and they were also a little
fanatical about their religion.

RV: What religion?

RE: Protestant. His area was Protestant in Wurttemburg, close to Austria and
Switzerland.

RV: Did you grow up learning about your family’s homeland? Did he talk about
Germany and that area of Europe?

GE: Yes, and I regret to say that he and my mother both, but my father
particularly, had a bias against Jews even though he worked for a Jew. And I did hear
deprecating remarks of that type, and I recall a certain pride in the early years of Hitler’s rise and feeling good about Germany becoming stronger again and perhaps righting some of the wrongs of the Versailles Treaty.

RV: Right. And that’s exactly what I was going to ask you about next is [are] his thoughts and feelings or your family’s thoughts and feelings about World War II. You are born in 1930, so you must have memories of this war that are pretty vivid.

RE: Yes, but in spite of what I just said, I don’t think there was ever any feeling that the United States should not prevail. They saw themselves as Americans without a doubt and I’m sure they had mixed emotions about all the developments of the war and certainly the terrible destruction and the experiences my dad had in World War I as they affected their understandings of World War II. So it was a mixed bag, but I never had any inclination that there was any thought that the United States should not prevail.

RV: Right. So they considered themselves purely American.

RE: Absolutely.

RV: Okay. Tell me what you remember about your early years of your childhood and I guess with the Great Depression. But maybe you could start with describing your house, your home, and kind of the atmosphere in which you grew up.

RE: Well, when my folks came over they initially had rented a second story apartment, which was basically an attic apartment, and my mother recalled it was terribly hot, and she was pregnant with me. And shortly after I was born they moved to a rent house on Ingram Avenue in Calumet City, Illinois, which is where I grew up and where they spent the rest of their lives [They spent the rest of their lives in Calumet City]. And my dad wanted to move there particularly because he wanted to get close to work. The apartment they were in required that he ride a bus to work and the house that they moved into was within a twenty minute walk where he worked.

RV: Do you mind spelling the name of the city in which you grew up?

RE: Calumet, C-a-l-u-m-e-t City, Illinois.

RV: Very good, thank you.

RE: So that was on Ingram Avenue on Calumet City. There was one small story that was humorous that I remember probably because I was told about it. But in prohibition, my dad developed a skill of making wine. So he made wine at home and that
also was an opportunity for company. A lot of people liked to come over and sample my
dad’s wine. On one occasion they tell me they wondered what had happened to me. I
wasn’t around in the living room anymore or wherever they expected to see me. I was a
toddler and they found me on the stairway going downstairs where that wine cask was,
and my mouth was under the wine cask, letting the wine drip in (laughs). And I recall
that, or I know that I grew up with German as my first language. By the time I went to
kindergarten I was bilingual. My mother learned English along with me, and she worked
at it more than my dad did. They both continued with an accent throughout their lives but
my mother with a little less accent. And I think education was such an important thing
for my folks that I guess my mother perhaps worked at her studies along with me as I
went through [school], and I probably was more diligent in my attention to academics
throughout primary school then I might have been otherwise. I remember particularly a
time in the seventh grade I was having difficulty diagramming [sentences] and got really
upset about it. My mother got alarmed at my being upset and came in to talk with the
teacher, and she just laughed. She said I was one of the best students in the class, nothing
to worry about, but an example of parental concern and interest. So I was not deprived in
any way of parental guidance and fostering a relationship with education.

RV: It sounds like it, that it was emphasized in your family a great deal. Tell me
about the size of your family. Brothers and sisters?

RE: One brother, five years younger, Walter.

RV: And what do you remember about the Great Depression? Really, these are
the first 10 years of your life.

RE: You know, I do not remember privation personally. We were frugal, but I
was always well clothed. At some point it became sort of common for guys, if not gals,
to wear jeans to school, and my mother wouldn’t let me wear jeans. That was just
inappropriate and not dignified in her mind. I mentioned my dad looking for work.
Other than that, only stories. My dad talked about their savings having been heavily
diluted because they had put them in gold bonds, and then the banks crashed, and they
got about forty cents back on the dollar for their gold bonds or something [like that], and
that was upsetting. But they made it through the Depression quite well and I don’t have
any memories of privation of any kind. In fact, I prided myself I think from an early
point in recognizing a difference in myself and my values from those of most of my peers in school in terms of thrift and the value of money. I worked starting at some early point. Some guy stopped me—well, I guess my first job was getting milk from a creamery about a fifteen-minute walk away instead of getting it from a milkman. So I got to pocket the difference between what we paid the milkman and what I got by going to the dairy. And then I had a magazine delivery route delivering *Liberty* magazine. That must have been about 1940 or ’41 and then I had a paper route, then I worked in three different grocery stores, and I was a J.C. Penney stock boy and a salesperson and so on. That was not typical of the kids I went to school with.

RV: How so?

RE: Most of the kids did not have jobs.

RV: What was it about your family? Simply the work ethic that your parents—

RE: Yes, I think so.

RV: Well, tell me about your relationship with your brother. Did you all get along? You’re the older one and was there a sense that you needed to help look after him?

RE: Yes. There was a five-year difference, and I thought we got along just fine. But in later years, my brother divorced his wife, and he got upset with my wife and me because we didn’t also divorce her. We thought she was a pretty good gal and continued to maintain a brother-in-law and sister-in-law kind of relationship. And I tried to be a healing influence, and my brother didn’t like that. And as we worked through that stuff as a family, both my sister-in-law and my wife mentioned that they sort of thought my brother always looked up to me, if not resented me and perhaps my folks even played favorites a little bit. He didn’t go to college, although he is very successful. He went to Coyne Electrical [School in Chicago] and was a lineman and worked his way up into management. At this point in life he probably has been more financially successful than I have. And in that divorce process our communications were really curtailed and strained. But that healed after a few years, and I think we’re pretty good buddies now. But he still lives in Illinois, and we’re in Texas. We call each other on our birthdays, and we have visited each other a bit. So it’s a mixed bag, but in general I’d say we’ve had a good relationship.
RV: Do you want to talk to me a little bit about your mother and who she was and who she was throughout your life?

RE: My mother was a sweetheart, more religious than my father. She was with some religious hiking groups in Germany. Her father was a laborer in a [Hohner] harmonica factory. He was extremely stern and demanding, even by typical Teutonic German standards. He was a tough, tough taskmaster. My mother remarked, for example, on one occasion she was charged to take care of a younger sister. She was in the middle. My mother had an older sister and two younger ones. So she was sort of babysitting, and she was probably only about six or seven or something like that at the time, and something happened. The younger child got into some jam or something like that. A very, very minor infraction, and the father got extremely upset and spanked my mother so hard that, as she explains it, she couldn’t control her bowels. So she had a very stern, stern upbringing, but she grew up well, as did all of the kids in the family. And she wound up going into industry in a bookkeeping, secretarial kind of capacity. So for her day, she was somewhat liberated and [independent and] she took pride in that. As I got to know her in that way, she resented my father being such a penny-pinching taskmaster and dictator of the household, wanting her to account for every penny. I recall—and probably this was in the late thirties or early forties—my mother had to keep track in a book every penny that was spent. She did not work. She did not have an income of her own in the United States. My father was the only income producer. And they would argue about a number of things but most commonly involving finances. Oh, I guess we never mentioned their having bought a home. Speaking about the Depression, my dad was able to keep working, and so they were able to establish credit through relationship with businesspeople who knew my father and his dependability. So they were able to get a loan, buy a home, and they rented it out for the first year or so in 1937, I think they moved into this home. [That was at 103 Warren St. in Calumet City] So that’s another example of their working through the Depression fairly well. So anyway, in that home then, that they owned, at an early point my mother rented out a front parlor and converted it into a bedroom. I remember she got seven dollars a week, I think, and that was her money (laughs). She managed to find a way to have a little bit of discretionary income.

RV: Right.
RE: But that was after we moved into this house then there was a mission church being established, meeting in the American Legion Home, which was just five minutes away from us. And it was at that point that I was enrolled in Sunday school.

RV: How old were you?

RE: I suppose I was eight years old. And from that time to the present I have been a member of the Lutheran Church. That was the United Lutheran Church in America as a kid. It later became the LCA, Lutheran Church in America and today it’s the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

RV: And you’re still a member today?

RE: Yes. And religion and involvement in church life has been important to me ever since that [early] age three to the present. I have always been involved in church. I have served on church councils; I’ve been on stewardship committee more often than not, almost continuously the last twenty-five years. I’ve chaired the stewardship committee for many years and am presently. I served on the Synodical level in several capacities, including a tour of about five years on the—what do they call it? Where we have young people interested in seminary—candidacy committees, following them through their time in seminary and involved in [guiding them and] approving or disapproving them in any point in the process. So I feel very good about my religious upbringing and my religious development and my continuing faith to the present.

RV: Well, we can talk about that as we go through your life, especially about how your military career played into that and how that played into your military career. Tell me a little bit about your education, your schooling as a youth, and then moving into middle school and then high school.

RE: Well, I went through elementary school in Calumet City, kindergarten at Wentworth, which was close to our rent house on Ingram Avenue. And then starting about first grade at Lincoln School in Calumet City, close to our new home. I was always a good student, and I think I was valedictorian [salutatorian] in grade school. I didn’t make that in high school, but I was on the honor role all the time. I served as editor of our yearbook, was on the debate team, the swim team in high school, went out for track. Our high school had three tracks, commercial, shop—industrial, I guess they called it—commercial, shop, and college prep. And low and behold it just felt natural for
me to go the college prep route even though I didn’t have any family heritage indicating
that. My folks were happy about it, but they didn’t particular push it; they weren’t
advocates. And I applied for a Naval ROTC scholarship and won it in high school. So I
had a four-year, all fees paid scholarship, and I chose Miami University in Oxford, Ohio
for a variety of reasons. It was far enough away that there was good separation from the
folks and close enough to where it was comfortable to travel. It was a relatively small
school, enrollment of five thousand, but it had the advantages of a large school. And they
had an excellent reputation in business, which was what I wanted to pursue. Because by
that time I was working as a salesperson for the J.C. Penney Company and had gotten to
know the manager who just sort of influenced me, and my goal at that point in life was to
become a manager of a triple-A J.C. Penney store. So I majored in merchandising and
marketing.

RV: Okay. If you don’t mind, let’s go back to your high school years.
RE: Sure.

RV: Tell me about—you were on the debate team. Obviously you had some good
intellectual skills. Tell me about your favorite subjects and the activities you were
involved in and sports activities.

RE: Well, I never played football; I never liked football other than tag and touch
and stuff like that, nor baseball. But in high school I went out for both track and
swimming my freshman year, and the swimming stuck, so I was on the swim team all
four years. My primary event was backstroke, and I enjoyed that. I don’t know. I guess
I just sort of enjoyed academic pursuits, and among my course in college prep, there were
opportunities in journalism and rhetoric, and I guess somebody asked me to go out for the
debate team, and I did. Latin was the only foreign language that we had, so I took Latin.
That was my least favorite subject, but the Latin prof was one of my favorite pros. It
was a very good experience. Harvy Lambke brought in Roman and Greek mythology as
well as the study of Latin. So that was pleasant, although I hated Latin. And as it turns
out I found that in terms of my particular strengths, I don’t have a strength in language
because at a point later on I once wanted to go into the attaché service and had to take a
language aptitude test, and I flunked it (laughs). So that explains why I didn’t like Latin.

RV: Right.
RE: I don’t know. I suppose social studies and economics and English were perhaps my favorite subjects, but I always did very well in math and physics and chemistry also, I just didn’t like them as much.

RV: Why were those your favorite and why the others your least favorite, do you think?

RE: I don’t know.

RV: Were you good in those?

RE: Perhaps as a result of my mother’s interest in developing a good capability in the English language, I perhaps focused on it a little more than most. And yeah, I think I was good at it. I was good in English and grammar. But I don’t know. I still like to write and edit, and I’m not sure why.

RV: Did you parents expect you to try to go to college?

RE: No, not at all.

RV: Okay, this was your decision, then.

RE: Yes.

RV: Why did you make that decision? Did you see it more as a business opportunity that you knew that you needed that to go certain places in the business world?

RE: Oh, I wasn’t particularly focused on the business world, no. As I grew up I had friends in all walks of life. I recognized that education was a stepping-stone to bigger and better things and just a part of development. I developed an attitude of stewardship pretty early on, going beyond thoughts of just finances but making the most of what we have as gifts from God. And just as a natural part of the development cycle, it just made sense to me to go on to college. I did well in grade school; I did well in high school. I had every expectation of doing well in college. I guess the decision to go to college was cemented when I won the scholarship to go to college. I’m not sure I was determined to go to college until I won the scholarship.

RV: Right. Well, that certainly makes a huge financial difference. It makes it easier. What years were you in high school?

RE: I graduated in ’49, so I was in high school from ’45 to ’49.
RV: If you don’t mind, tell me post-World War II—what do you remember about events like Pearl Harbor and VE Day and VJ Day?

RE: I remember delivering papers when Pearl Harbor happened. No, that’s not right.

RV: It was a Sunday.

RE: I was delivering papers in ’45 when the war ended. No, I don’t know what I was doing in Pearl Harbor.

RV: Okay. What do you remember about the attitude of the United States? You’re a young child and you’re watching this evolve. What were your thoughts on the war?

RE: Hmm. Well, let’s see. So I would have been eleven. Golly, I don’t recall having any thoughts.

RV: A lot of young kids were kind of fascinated with the soldiers and the airplanes and the whole thing, and they would see the news clips, the newsreels on Saturdays and the theater. Do you have any memories like that?

RE: Well, I guess any of that stuff might have been filtered through my dad. I don’t know what the years were, but I remember my dad being stirred up by Marshal music. When there were marches on, I can recall his sort of marching around the living room a little bit in circles, and my being caught up in that as a kid, too. So that would seem to indicate there was a little bit of glorification of war. I hate to say that and I don’t know that that was the case but I remember that marching experience as being sort of a joyful one. It may not have anything to do with attitudes toward the war, but other than that, I just don’t recall anything from that standpoint. However, another perspective I guess I have, since we had no family involved in the war here and my folks’ extended families were predominantly in Germany, we were caught up in sending care packages to Germany. And I on a number of occasions would pedal my bicycle to the post office with the care packages in the basket. And I remember my mother always sewed them up so that there was a cloth covering over the box. And I remember being a part of assembling those packages, including bringing some sewing needles. I was working in a Royal Blue grocery store at that time, I remember, and brought some needles home to put in one of those packages because one of my mother’s sisters was a seamstress. Let’s see.
My mother was the caregiver and was the primary person in sending these. I also recall my dad having objected to some of those packages only because it cost money to put them together and mail them over there, and he was so tight-fisted. On the other hand, there was a compassionate side to him. His brother Andrew who had settled in the Rio Grande Valley at an early time, he wasn’t doing very well, and he got really homesick and wanted to go back to Germany but couldn’t afford it, and my dad loaned him the money so that he could go. And this was about 1937 I think, or ’36. And eventually after he had come back, he died of tetanus in an accident in the orchard where he scratched himself with some rusty barbed wire. And so eventually that debt was forgiven, and that was a little tough for my dad to take, and my mother kept telling him he needed to get over that. That’s sort of a long way around, but in terms of the wartime experience, that’s probably the most vivid memory that I have, is the care packages going to Germany toward the end of the war and after the end of the war.

RV: Right. Well, you’re in high school during this kind of post-war celebration for the United States and kind of recovery. Do you remember Harry Truman? Any memories of the President?

RE: Yes.

RV: Can you tell me about that?

RE: Oh, golly. I guess I was not a political person by any stretch of the imagination. I seem to recall sort of—it was rather awesome to have this haberdasher, this very plain person who didn’t seem presidential at all and oh my goodness, what was going to happen with this guy as president? I don’t recall anything about the decisions to use the atomic bomb or any of those things at the time. I don’t know why not. I can’t say that I have any memories beyond that.

RV: Okay. Were your father or your mother, were they particularly political?

RE: No. I would guess—I don’t even know how they voted, as a matter of fact. They were more patriotic than they were political, I think. My mother particularly was very proud of her citizenship. But I couldn’t tell you whether they were Republican or Democratic.

RV: Wow. So there was no discussion, really?

RE: They didn’t talk about that at all.
RV: Okay. You’re in college at Miami from 1949 until ’53? Is that correct?
RE: Yes.
RV: Okay. Tell me about that experience. What was college life like for you in academics and things like that? And I know you joined the Naval ROTC. We can talk about that in a moment. But tell me what it was like to go to college there at Miami.
RE: It was wonderful. As I mentioned I wanted to get a little bit of distance from home. My mother was a bit overprotective and over-attached, and I recognized that so the separation was good for me. I was not homesick. She was homesick for her kid if there was any homesickness at all. I just jumped right into things and was very comfortable. I lived in a dormitory my freshman year and joined a fraternity at the end of my first semester and lived in the fraternity house annex my junior year, I guess, and in the house my senior year. I worked while I was in the fraternity. I washed dishes, which paid for my meals. Marketing was my chosen major. I felt good about that. Because I was in the Naval ROTC, I had to take trig and physics as electives. They were not related to my major.
RV: Why did you join Naval ROTC?
RE: For the scholarship.
RV: Okay. So you’re kind of tied into that. Was that a good thing for you? The money’s good, yes, but how did you feel about going into that military side?
RE: Wonderful. Early on I felt that it was the patriotic thing to do to serve my country. There was no negative feeling about ROTC anywhere that I could detect in those years. Yeah, so I participated, and actually it was glorious. Between my freshman and sophomore year I had a training cruise in the Pacific that got off to Hawaii. I was on a destroyer and the DD870-Fechtler. I was a five-inch mount first loader. It was at that time that the Korean thing broke out, and they needed our destroyer, so I transferred to the heavy cruiser St. Paul for the last week or so of it [the cruise]. But we were out in the Pacific dropping depth charges and various maneuvers. We had a couple of days in Honolulu and Waikiki Beach, so the ROTC experience was fine [and great fun].
RV: Did you adapt well to the military regimen?
RE: I would say so. I grew up with stronger than average discipline at home and discipline of the military was no problem at all, not in the slightest. I need to say that it
was during my year between my sophomore year and my junior year and the summer
training that was at Little Creek, Virginia, amphibious training with the Navy that I was
disqualified as a result of a physical during my sophomore year. I believe it was because
they were looking for attrition. They had too many people in the program. But in any
case, in responding to one of the questions as it went down in the interview, ‘Do you
have any sinus problems,’ I said, ‘Well, no, but I was prone to having colds in high
school, and I was on the swim team.’ So they pursued that and sent me to Wright-
Patterson AFB for a check up and an in-depth follow-up, and the Air Force found me
physically qualified for anything, flying duty and submarines, so I breathed a sigh of
relief, went off to Little Creek, Virginia for training, and while I was there my
disqualification came through. So on my way back, I stopped off at Miami and signed up
for the Air Force ROTC, and that’s how I happened to be commissioned in the Air Force.

RV: What do you remember as the most positive experience there, in your early
Naval ROTC? You stay in the military for the majority of your entire career, twenty-nine
years. What was it, or can you see the seed of your long career starting out right there at
Miami?

RE: Absolutely not. I was in the ROTC for its scholarship opportunities and to
pay back by way of commitment for a minimum period of military service, which would
have been four years in the Navy, only two years as a result of my Air Force
commissioning because I didn’t have a full scholarship with the Air Force. And my
commitment to a career did not occur until our first assignment in Libya. My wife and I
were together at Wheelus Field in Libya, and the career people were complaining like
crazy about the difficulties of living in a foreign culture, not having the conveniences of
the corner drugstore and a butcher shop, and the Gibly was blowing dust through their
glassless shuttered windows; [at the same time,] my wife and I just had a ball climbing in
our little Volkswagen Bug and bouncing through the desert and discovering the ancient
Roman cities of Leptis Magnus and Sabratha and getting to know the people and getting
an understanding of another part of the world. We thought, ‘This is amazing. The career
people hate it? We’re getting out and we love it? We’ve got to think about this.’ She
was working as a secretary for Caltex at the time so together we said, ‘Well, this looks
like a challenging life, satisfying; we like the things most people don’t like about foreign
countries, so yeah, go ahead.’ So I applied for pilot training and a regular commission. They both came through and we had no regrets after twenty-nine years of military service.

RV: After you finish Naval ROTC, going back to Miami, then you get into Air Force ROTC. Can you recount that in a little more detail about how that happened because the Air Force is going to be the career?

TR: Well, there’s no more to it than what I just said. Because I bounced out of the Navy, I bounced into the Air Force, and I just continued the ROTC commitment with the Air Force.

RV: Was there a choice between branches or was the Air Force the only choice for you?

RE: Miami had only Naval and Air Force ROTC. If there had been a choice there was no doubt in my mind the Air Force was more appealing to me.

RV: Tell me about that; why was that? Was there an initial or early interest in flight in your youth?

RE: No, I would say not. And I guess that statement may reflect bias from later years rather than anything at the time. But I think just in general, Army service, being a ground grunt did not appeal to me. Flying certainly did. Well, I guess, as a matter of fact, now that I think about it, I have a cousin by marriage who was in the Marines. Married one of the daughters of this aunt Agatha that I mentioned, the farm wife in Milford, Illinois, and he came back from the Marines, and part of his G.I. Bill, he learned how to fly. He took flying lessons. And as a kid, sometime probably around 1946 or ’47, I was in Milford and he took me up on a flight in a Piper Cub or something out of a little local airport, and that was my first time ever in an airplane and we flew around the town and the farm and looked around, and I thought it was great. So that was my first flying experience, and I liked it, so possibly that has something to do with it.

RV: Tell me about those two years in Air Force ROTC. What kind of things and what kind of training did you have to do?

RE: Oh, there were minimal courses—Air Force indoctrination. The Navy had a lot more academic requirements than the Air Force did, and we studied engineering in the Navy and all kinds of stuff. I don’t actually recall what my courses were in the Air Force.
ROTC. They were sort of minimal, and the lab work was minimal. General Air Force history, I suppose, and perhaps leadership. I could tell you what it was in later years because part of my career later on was to establish an Air Force ROTC unit at Norwich University in Vermont. I don’t want to get ahead of your interview.

RV: We’ll talk about it when we get there. I am hearing—you have already stated this to a point—but you must have done fairly well academically at Miami.

RE: Yes, I was not exceptional. As I recall I probably wound up with maybe a 2.9 on a 4-point basis. I don’t know. Maybe I had a 3.2. My wife walked in since we started this. She wasn’t here earlier. Yeah, I was a good student but not an exceptional student.

RV: Well, when you graduate from Miami, what are your options here? What are you going to be doing?

RE: Well, as a matter of fact, I was initially scheduled to go on active duty upon graduation but in January [June] of ’53—and I had orders to that effect. In January [July] of ’53 I got orders or a letter canceling my orders to report on active duty and asking me what my preferences were for when I should be called to active duty because they had a reduction in forces, and they could not accept all the people that were scheduled to come on board. So I indicated the sooner the better; I’d like to get my commitment out of the way, and in the meantime then I contacted the J.C. Penney manager that I had come to know in Hammond, Indiana. I lived in Calumet City, and the store was in Hammond, Indiana right next door, and by this time Coon Swenson, the J.C. Penney manager, had a store in Columbus, Ohio, which happened to be the city my wife was from, Columbus, Ohio. So I contacted him, he set me up with some interviews, and I was accepted as a management trainee at the J.C. Penney store in Louisville, Kentucky. So that’s where my new wife and I went for six months until I was called to active duty.

RV: Okay. Two questions. Tell me about meeting your wife and how that happened, if you don’t mind.

RE: Oh, well, I don’t mind at all. I was a member of Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity, and on Sunday evenings, we didn’t have meal service in the house, so we had to go someplace else to eat, and one of my fraternity brothers said, ‘Well, let’s go over to—’ (asks wife) was it Westminster House? The youth at Westminster served an
evening meal at the Presbyterian Church. So Buzz Bourne and I went over there, and that was my first time with that group. And as we were standing in line waiting to be served, I said, ‘Hey, Buzz.’ He was a member of the Westminster group. ‘Hey, Buzz, do you know that gal?’ I just pointed to Ellie. ‘Oh, sure, I know her.’ ‘She looks pretty interesting.’ So I guess he fixed me up with a date, and we started dating. She was a junior, I was a sophomore, and I had a sort of a girlfriend at the time at Bowling Green University in Ohio, and it didn’t take too long for that to come to a screeching halt, although I did have an obligation to take her to some dance, I guess the Navy ball. And that didn’t sit too well with Ellie, but she understood. And so it just clicked. The following year, my junior year and her senior year, as I walked her home to her dormitory after a date, she sort of hemmed and hawed, and it boiled down to she needed to know where our relationship was going because she had to make a decision about Yale Divinity School where she had a preliminary application and had been accepted. She wanted to go to divinity school and pursue work toward Christian education. So I responded to her hemming and hawing and said, ‘Yeah, let’s get married.’ (laughs).

RV: That sets it straight right there.
RE: Yeah.
RV: And she was game?
RE: She was game. So she cancelled her divinity school plans, and we planned to get married after I graduated, so she taught kindergarten for a year in the Upper Arlington school system in Columbus, Ohio.

RV: Another question I wanted to ask you was your viewpoints then on the Korean War. What do you remember about that?
RE: Oh, just that we were in it. I didn’t have any strong feelings one way or another. It developed, and we needed to prevail.
RV: Okay. Well, after you moved down to Louisville, tell me about your life there.
RE: Oh, that was hilarious.
RV: Okay.
RE: We went down there, looked for an apartment. My income was pretty minimal. Ellie remembers what it was, two hundred and fifty dollars a month. And so
we finally found an apartment that suited us that was a walk-up apartment, and it was pretty much an efficiency apartment. The bed came folding out of the wall, didn’t it? We didn’t have a bedroom, did we? [Wife talks in the background] Right, it was a bed living room. Was the bed down all the time? Okay. Well, it was a combined bedroom and living room, but we didn’t discover until we started moving in that the kitchen had a surprise for us.

RV: What’s that?

RE: There was no running water in the sink (laughs).

RV: Oh boy.

RE: There was an adjacent bathroom, so we had to pour the water out of the faucet in the bathroom for all our kitchen needs (laughs).

RV: Wow (laughs).

RE: So we were there for six months, and Ellie got a job to supplement our income. She worked as a secretary in I guess it was the regional office of the Kroger Company grocery store. Oh, and then she went as secretary of the dean of the business school. What school? The University of Louisville. My experience with Penney’s was good, but it certainly reinforced what I already knew, that the life of a J.C. Penney manager was one of work, work, work. In those days, it wasn’t unusual for a manager to spend sixty or seventy hours in his store.

RV: Wow. That’s quite a bit.

RE: Yeah. Things are different these days, I think. Well, depending on what you’re doing. That’s one of the criticisms of Americans these days. We’re working more and more hours, and many young professionals do put in those kinds of hours.

RV: Yes, sir, absolutely. So how long were you there at J.C. Penney before you were then called into the Air Force?

RE: Six months.

RV: Okay. When you were called, what were your thoughts and feelings, do you remember?

RE: Oh, joy. I wanted to get it out of the way as soon as possible, and we looked forward to the experience. But there’s some funny stuff associated with that, too. We didn’t have a whole lot of household goods, but we had some, and we packed them into a
trailer. We looked in the newspapers for a trailer to buy and finally bought probably the 
least expensive thing we could find. And lo and behold, it was out of an old Ford 
Chassis. And I don’t know if it was a Model-T or a Model-A, but the spokes were 
wooden. Can you tell me what that was? Was that a Model-T or a Model-A?

RV: I don’t know. I want to say it’s a Model-A.

RE: Well, anyhow, it had wooden spokes on it. And being called on active duty I 
did not have a final assignment yet. So we packed our stuff into this trailer and hauled it 
down to Lackland AFB in San Antonio. At some point those wheels gave away (laughs), 
and it got really rickety, and also the axel came loose. So I guess we got to San Antonio 
with it, but while we were there we had to find a new trailer, so we got one with a more 
modern Chassis, and it held up. So in Lackland then, we had Air Force processing and I 
guess we must have been there for about six weeks or so. We rented an apartment, and in 
the processing, we were [I was] given a battery of tests and what have you. The bottom 
line was, they needed to determine what they were going to do with me. Typically we 
had three choices, but they were short of people for electronics, and because I had 
mathematics and college physics, I was required to put down electronics as one of my 
choices. I wasn’t excited about that. I didn’t see my aptitudes or interests in that 
direction, so my first choice was in a still photographic officer. That was a specialty. My 
second choice was also a somewhat romantic one, air traffic controller. And to avoid 
getting electronics, my third choice was supply officer, which I didn’t find attractive, but 
I felt it suited my college degree in business so that was where to go. And then my fourth 
choice had to be electronics. The needs of the Air Force prevailed, so I went to Keesler 
AFB as an air electronics officer trainee. Now that particular course I went into normally 
lasted for one full year, and the normal input for it was college graduates with degrees in 
engineering. Well, they had only a two-year total commitment including training out of 
us ROTC-types, so they couldn’t send us to school for a year after processing and with 
transportation, so they designed a shred-out course of just six-months duration, again for 
electrical engineering graduates, but they didn’t have enough of them. So my classmates in this 
highly specialized course were myself as a business major, a major in animal husbandry, 
and a journalism major besides a few with engineering degrees. So that was an
interesting experience. We got through it, but we were graded on what’s called a T-score. Are you familiar with the T-score system?

RV: Yes, sir. Go ahead and explain it, though, for people who don’t know what it is.

RE: Alright. Well, I don’t know how to explain it particularly except that you’re graded on a curve, and a certain number will pass and a certain number will fail, so if you had a bunch of horses take the exam, some of the horses would pass, and some would fail (laughs). But we got through it and as a matter of fact, the primary responsibility of an officer in electronics is management rather than technical expertise. And I thought it was a little bit silly for them to give us all this detailed technical education when we would be running electronic shops and we had NCOs and airmen who were highly proficient in what they did, and they didn’t need or rely on us for technical expertise.

RV: Okay. You mentioned photography. Is this something you had developed as an interest over the years?

RE: Yeah.

RV: Can you tell me about that?

RE: We had a friend, a neighbor in that rent house in Calumet City until we moved out when I was more or less seven years old, Andy Berwanger, and he was a man of many interests, one of which was photography. And that friendship continued when my folks moved away. As a result of his interest in photography, we were visiting on occasion, and he took some movies. So the first family movies that I have of us as a family were when I was perhaps maybe ten years old. Maybe even less than that. So that’s a part of my family history, those particular movies. So that was one part of it with the movies, and I don’t know, I guess my father also documented our family history early on. He took a lot of pictures of me as a baby and as a kid so with those two influences I early on had my own 35 mm camera. My first one was an Argus C-3, whenever that year was, somewhere in the early forties I guess. And so photography has been with me ever since, and early on, I had my own movie camera, and so I’ve been taking slides and movies and then video, and video came out about 1981. So that’s why we have a nice, complete family history. And as a matter of fact, that hobby of photography was of interest to the Navy captain or admiral who interviewed me as a part of my scholarship
process for the Navy scholarship. I recall his questioning me at some length about my
photography hobby and movies and different kinds of cameras, and I had a cassette [8
mm] camera as opposed to a reel camera. So we had some discussion about that, and I
guess that interest in photography was among the things that impressed him, and he
thought that I’d be an okay candidate to be a midshipman.

RV: What was it exactly about photography that you liked then and like now? Is
it a certain kind of expressive art? What’s unique to it for you?
RE: That’s an interesting question. I’m not sure that I particularly thought about
it that way. It was something that I liked to do. I certainly think about it now as a form
of artistic expression and pursued that from a relatively early point on and studied
photography and looked at it. In fact, I took two elective courses in college that were
strictly above and beyond any rational reason for taking them in terms of a degree. One
was photography and the other was cooking (laughs).

RV: Really? (laughs)
RE: And I got an A in cooking. My wife got a B. I lord that over her.
RV: I bet you have not let her forget that.
RE: (laughs) Pardon?
RV: I bet you’ve not let her forget that.
RE: No, but my wife won’t let me forget either. Why, honey? [Wife talks in the
background] (laughs) Did you hear that?
RV: No, I did not. What did she say?
RE: I had a single, middle-aged woman for a teacher.
RV: Oh, okay, I understand (laughs). Okay, well, going back to Keesler, tell me
about this—you’re basically fulfilling your commitment, and you’re not looking career
here. You’re not looking long-term. You just want to fulfill this commitment and move
on.
RE: Right, exactly.
RV: And how did your wife feel about this? Was she eager for you to get on with
the career?
RE: Do you want to talk with just me, or would you like to hear from her how she
felt about it?
RV: Well, either way.

RE: She felt good about it. She’s been a wonderful wife all the way through, and she had a great experience there. She worked as a secretary for technical training Air Force [at Keelser AFB], but we have had a wonderful social life throughout our Air Force career, beginning with this experience at Keesler. There’s definitely an aspect [and feeling] of family as far as we’re concerned in our experience within the Air Force.

RV: Okay. You move on in October 1954 to Wheelus Air Base. Tell me about that. That’s got to be very different for you.

RE: Well, to say the least. I preceded my wife over there.

RV: Describe where that is and what the base is like for people who will be listening to this.

RE: Wheelus Field, Libya is in what was formerly an Italian colony until after World War II. The Italians invaded Libya and Ethiopia and colonized Libya. It’s between Egypt and Tunisia and predominantly desert.

RV: Okay. How large was the base?

RE: Oh, it was a rather large facility. We had people coming in from Europe for firing range activity. It was a support base as well as a MAC base. I don’t know what the size was, but I would judge it probably had a population of a couple thousand.

RV: And you’re there of October ’54 through December ’55.

RE: Yes.

RV: And when did your wife come over?

RE: It must have been about December. I got there in October; she came about the following December. I got an apartment on the economy. When she came in, we moved right into it. It was a second-floor apartment in the city of Tripoli, just down the street from the presidential palace. At the time we were there King Idris was the ruler. At some later point, the fellow who’s still there, Muammar al-Qaddafi, overthrew the government and became the dictator.

RV: What was Tripoli like? How would you describe that in the 1950s?

RE: Tripoli was a very sunshine-y, tropical city with lots of palm trees and date trees, paved streets. One of our favorite restaurants was The Lantern, featuring Italian food. They had a big old red wine cask in the corner but certainly [Tripoli was] a city of
The Italian colonial flavor still prevailed. This was just nine years after the end of the war when the Italians were kicked out as rulers, but and the Volkswagen sales and repair shop, for example, was [still] run by an Italian and had predominantly Italian mechanics. There were a lot of very poor people who had donkey carts and camels that you would see around and sheep on the roads. The roads were very narrow and while paved, they were not in good repair. But there were asphalt paved roads which run along the coast to Egypt and to Tunisia. The by far most interesting cultural aspect was the recognition that during Roman times there were three Roman cities there, Leptis Magnus and Sabratha, which were then being excavated and have been and were very impressive and that continues to today, and the third was Oea, O-e-a, which is on the site of present-day Tripoli, the capital and main city of Libya. Another major city is Benghazi, which we know about from World War II stories, but I didn’t spend any time at all in Benghazi.

RV: So you were able to actually get out and live in the culture and live amongst the Libyans.

RE: Yes, we had time off. We’d climb in our Volkswagen and drive out. I don’t recall just how far away these two sites were, Leptis Magnus and Sabratha. One was maybe thirty or forty kilometers, and the other one might have been forty or fifty or so. But it was exciting.

RV: How did they treat you as Americans?

RE: Well, with their hands outstretched. ‘Bakchis’ was the common word you would hear from a youngster on the street. I think ‘bakchis’ meant ‘free’ so they hold their hand out, and they’d like some kind of a handout. As I recall, the average per capita annual income of a person in Libya was thirty-two American dollars when we were there, so people were extremely poor. Oil had not yet been discovered; it was being explored, and of course they have it now. But there was no feeling of insecurity [on our part]. The people had been governed by the Italians and were accustomed to control. There was no particular feeling of independence or resentment about anything, so I don’t know what the feelings of the people might have been toward us, but we never had any concerns about security or discrimination or anything of the sort.
RV: Okay. Well, this might be a good time to take a very quick break before we get into your full Air Force career here, that we’re getting ready to launch into when you go into pilot training next. Let’s take a break just for a moment, sir.

RE: Okay.

RV: Tell me about the transition away from Libya if there’s not anything else you want to say about your living experience.

RE: Oh, I think not. It was pleasant and the transition from Tripoli…well, I don’t know if you’d be interested in the way we went back. We went back by surface transportation.

RV: Tell me about that.

RE: It was wonderful to be able to circuit the Mediterranean. We went to, let’s see, Izmir, Istanbul, Athens, Livorno, Italy, or maybe it was Naples, and Casablanca before crossing the Atlantic. The seas were rather rough to the point of—we were in a Liberty ship. I don’t remember the name of it, but it bounced around a good bit.

RV: Did you have your sea legs about you?

RE: (laughs) I think I got a little bit green, but basically we had our sea legs and we were okay. I think I did get some movies of the pitching ship. It was really rough. So that was a little bit of an experience of transition but not a problem. And then I came back from [went into] pilot training. I was excited of course when I was accepted for both pilot training and a regular commission.

RV: Tell me about applying for that regular commission and going into pilot training. How did that come about exactly, and how did you make this decision?

RE: Well, I mentioned that Ellie and I were happy campers at Wheelus Field in the face of the career people that were very disenchanted. So based on our experience to date and what we knew of the Air Force, we mutually decided that a career in the Air Force would be satisfying. For that reason, I applied for a regular commission which has promotion and longevity benefits and a professional recognition as opposed to being just a reserve officer, and pilot training because I wanted to be a pilot. I would not have stayed in if I hadn’t been accepted for pilot training. So it was joyful that I was accepted for that.

RV: And you then moved to…?
RE: Malden, Missouri for primary pilot training. Malden was a civilian-contract training base, and I trained in the T-34 and the T-28. That was approximately six months in duration. Following that we moved to Enid AFB. No, Vance AFB in Enid, Oklahoma where I got my wings. And each of those was about a six-month period. At Vance I flew the B-25. We were the last class to go into B-25. At this time, once we completed the primary training, there were two tracks for pilots, either multi-engine or single-engine, the single-engine being predominantly fighters and the multi-engine being bombers and transports. You could express your preference, but based on your aptitude test, you might or might not get your preference. I did request multi-engine, and that’s what I got.

RV: If you don’t mind, let’s talk a little bit about Malden and your primary pilot training. Tell me about the experience and what you remember and how they trained you to fly the T-34 and T-28.

RE: We had our days split in two. We had half a day of academics and half a day of flight line instruction. In the academics you had a variety of courses, including engineering of the particular aircraft, navigation, meteorology, techniques of flying and then on the flight line, your flight line instructor would have some assignments for you and things for you do to, and we would be scheduled to fly with him most days but not all days. That was pretty much the same routine in both primary and advance pilot training. I might mention that we lived in a trailer. It was a Spartan thirty-foot mobile home that we bought at the beginning of training and sold at the end of our training.

RV: Okay. What was the first flight like there at Malden for you when you’re going to get this training?

RE: Golly, it had to have been exciting (laughs), but I can’t recall the specific flight or the specific feeling, just in general that it was an exciting, exhilarating feeling, flying. The high point was when we first started getting into aerobatics. We called it aerobatics. Not acrobatics, but our mindset was acrobatics by going into loops and emblems and approaching stalls and so forth.

RV: How were you at flying? Did this come naturally to you or were you really challenged?
RE: Oh, I don’t know. It was comfortable. It was not scary. I didn’t come close to washing out anywhere. I’m not sure how it comes naturally or unnaturally. I think it was a good fit.

RV: When you say it was scary, what do you mean?
RE: It was not scary.
RV: It was not scary to you.
RE: It was not scary.
RV: So you were okay in the cockpit.
RE: Yeah, absolutely.
RV: Okay, so it felt very comfortable for you.
RE: Yes.
RV: Tell me about your classmates. Where were you amongst them as far as rank, and not rank in the military but rank in your class, and what did you observe from the other pilot’s training?
RE: Camaraderie (laughs). I think the rank is relevant. Since I had been on active duty for a while already, I went through as 1st lieutenant, and there was a 1st lieutenant navigator who outranked me who was the class leader. I don’t recall what the breakout was, but there were several of us that were experienced officers and then a number that came in I think [newly] commissioned. We did not have any cadets. We were all commissioned officers. Well, I don’t recall who washed out. We did have some wash out, and that was a concern. Some people just didn’t have the motor ability or coordination to be successful and solo. I guess the solo experience, the first time you solo in a particular airplane is always a little bit exciting when you go up without an instructor pilot.
RV: Do you remember that for you?
RE: Not specifically, just in general that it was a good feeling. I remember in general the concern that before you solo, knowing that some people don’t get to that point, so there’s always a concern about ‘will I make it or won’t I make it?’ just in general among the classes, and if some people have difficulty, they have greater concern and others not so much.
RV: Do you remember any particular incidents from this initial training?
RE: I do not.
RV: Okay.
RE: It was sort of nice and routine.
RV: Okay. And when you went up to Enid, same kind of thing? You’re flying a
different aircraft, obviously, but this was again a comfortable feeling for you and a good
feeling?
RE: Yup, very much so.
RV: Tell me about the B-25. I think people would be very interested to hear
firsthand about that airplane.
RE: Well, of course that’s the airplane that bombed Tokyo, and it’s just a nice
airplane. There were a number of different versions of it. Some of them had guns in the
nose, and some did not. I don’t know what to say about it (laughs). It was a monster
machine for us in pilot training, having come from the T-34 and the T-28. It seemed like
a big thing. Today it seems rather tiny by comparison, but you’ll still find them around
here and there in museums, inside and out. I don’t know what else to say about it.
RV: Well, did it handle particularly well? Was it kind of a bulky flyer, or was it
maneuverable?
RE: Well, everything’s relative. It didn’t handle like the T-34 or the T-28, being a
much bigger airplane, so it’s a new experience to learn to fly a big thing like that, but
there weren’t any particular problems. Once you master it, it handles very well.
RV: Okay. And your classmates there, same camaraderie, same good spirit?
RE: Absolutely. Every place we were in the Air Force it’s the general feeling of
family and good relationships.
RV: So when you finish advanced, you’ve been trained in the single-engine,
you’ve been trained in the multi-engine, and the multi-engine is what appealed to you?
RE: Yes, that was my preference, and I was happy to be in it.
RV: Why was that?
RE: I could say a single-engine pilot is a special breed as far as I’m concerned and
deserves our greatest respect. As a multi-engine pilot you are a crew commander. As a
fighter pilot you are the whole crew yourself, so that requires very rapid thinking and
judgment and the master of all tasks. So it appealed to me to be more than a lonesome
stranger in an airplane, and I’m happy to have a crew supporting me. Not only a co-pilot, but in most cases, a navigator. For example, a pilot in a fighter has to handle his radios, get his takeoff clearance and all of that stuff at the same time that he’s taxiing. When he makes an instrument approach, he needs to refer to his letdown charts to all his advance planning, everything all by himself. When you’re in a multi-engine aircraft, you and your co-pilot and, if you have one, a navigator can all be involved in this process, so there’s a certain amount of security in flying this, you might say big, lumbering aircraft as opposed to the sweet, swift little fighter. And I’m a rather conservative person, so I suppose that goes into the personality inventory which, in my self-appraisal, I was better suited for multi-engine, and I don’t know for sure how that came across in the personality inventory tests, but I suspect that supported it also.

RV: Okay, well those are good reasons for wanting to fly the larger aircraft. You move on from there down to Florida to Palm Beach AFB. Let me ask you, before we move there, how was your wife dealing with all this moving around?

RE: Oh, great trooper, no problem.

RV: Okay.

RE: The Air Force was a joint adventure. It was an adventure for both of us. I think we would not have remained in the Air Force if that hadn’t been the case.

RV: Okay. So, moving to Florida at Palm Beach, this is your advance pilot training, and you fly what was originally the SA-16.

RE: Yes.

RV: Tell me about that aircraft and that experience down there. Again, you’re down there for a little over six months. Excuse me, three months.

RE: Oh, how much fun can you have? You go to Florida, and you’ve got Lake Okeechobee for your training platform, and there you are flying an Albatross that can land on the water as well as on land, and some versions are equipped with skis so they can land on snow. It was just fantastic. I loved it.

RV: How did you get selected or chosen to go there?

RE: Well, I don’t know. There was a need for X number of pilots to go into SA-16s, and I requested multi-engine. I’m not sure that I had anything to say about that, that I specifically selected SA-16. I don’t remember for sure just how that went.
RV: Tell me about the Albatross. What kind of aircraft was this?

RE: It’s a Grumman twin-engine airplane. There are prior versions of seaplanes like that. I think we trained in what was an A-model. Later on, they modified them to B-models. They had a broader wingspan, which gave them a little more endurance and a little shorter takeoff run for takeoff. Noisy. We would often fly with our windows open. They were noisy enough with the windows closed, and through my Air Force career, I did most of my flying in the left seat, the aircraft commander’s seat, and I have lost a good bit of hearing in my left ear (laughs). But I am comfortable with or without a hearing aide. Most of the time, I feel like it’s more of a nuisance than a help, so in general, I don’t use a hearing aide. And I’ve got his phone up to my left ear without a hearing aide.

RV: Okay. Tell me about how the Albatross got its name. In my research of American Air Force aircraft, the Albatross is one of the more interesting, I believe. Tell me about how it got its name.

RE: Gee whiz, you probably know more about that than I do. I don’t know how it got its name other than an albatross is bird that flies around water. That’s all I know.

RV: Well, yes, and it’s unique-looking and unique-handling is what I have heard about this aircraft from other pilots. It is different from the B-25, obviously, in a number of ways. What kind of transition was this to flying the large B-25 to a smaller Albatross? Is it easier for you? Is it more difficult? More responsibility? Less responsibility?

RE: None of the above, I guess. In general, it’s a different version of the same horse. They both have two engines. The thing that’s different is the overhead throttles. In the Albatross, your engines are on the wing, and the wing is high to keep it off a great distance from the water, so your cable controls and what have you go from your overhead throttles. So that perhaps took a little bit of getting used to, and for extreme short field work, some of the SA-16s were equipped with jet-assisted takeoff, JATO bottles, which could be put on so you could really take off from a short runway if you needed to. And incidentally, later on, that’s why I was so very comfortable in the caribou that I flew in Vietnam because it also had overhead throttles, so that was just a natural fit for me.

RV: You’re there just for a short period of time, training in the Albatross, and then you move on to Clark AFB in the Philippines.
RE: Correct.

RV: So it’s your second overseas assignment, and tell me how that came about.
And you’re going to be there for a lot longer tour.

RE: Well, flying an SA-16, I was destined to go to a rescue squadron, and that was my squadron of assignment in the Philippines. I may or may not have had any say in that. I suspect I did not, but we were elated. It was another overseas experience. It was an accompanied tour, but there was limited housing, and for that reason, I had to get over there first and arrange for housing, which I did. We found off-base housing in a village adjacent to Clark Air Base called Balabago. It was a little subdivision of the larger town, Angeles. So it was a nice little house. We had a comfortable time in it, and it wasn’t the matter of maybe six months or so and we were able to move on base into base housing which was ultra-comfortable. I guess the most unusual thing for us about the assignment was everybody had maids and household help, so we had a maid. And that was a bit uncomfortable to begin with. We didn’t feel like we were aristocrats, or it was appropriate for us to have maids, but everybody did, and once we got used to it, why it was pretty nice.

RV: (laughs) It’s a far cry from Louisville and no running water in the kitchen.

RE: Right, a little bit of a contrast. But literally, everyone had maids, enlisted and officers alike, and their compensation was typically, I believe, thirty dollars, a dollar a day, and that was probably twice or more what they would earn on the economy in the native line of employment. [Speaks to wife in background] Honey, did we pay help thirty dollars or thirty pesos in the Philippines a month? Yeah, it seems to me it was thirty dollars a month. Anyway, it was very minimal.

RV: Tell me about the Philippines, the culture, and what Clark was like.

RE: Clark was a major facility. Its heritage was at Ft. Stotsenburg, an Army post while we had the Philippines under our guardianship or as a territory or whatever it was. Very large facility. Nearby is Mount—I don’t know if it was geographically named Mount Ariat, but that’s what we called it. It was also called Huck Mountain. At the time we were there, there were still some remnants of Communists insurgents called Hukbalahups, Hucks for short. We never came under attack or saw any direct involvement, but every once in a while, the Philippine constabulary would be involved
with them, and that continues today and in various parts of the Philippines. But in
general, the people are quite intelligent, and since they’d been under American colonial
rule for some time, most of them, virtually all of them, spoke English and spoke it rather
well. The common additional language in Luzon was Tagalog. In different places they
had other dialects or other languages. It was a country of great contrasts. Manila is a
very nice city, and wherever you went, there were very wealthy people, but the contrast
was that there was practically no middle class. You either were extremely wealthy or
extremely poor and just concerned about where your next bowl of rice would come from.
There was another high altitude small base, basically an R&R recreation base in Bagio,
and that would always be a nice destination for us to cool off. [The elevation here is
about 6,000 feet, much cooler than below.] So quite a few people would go up to the
high town of Bagio, which had its Bagio Recreation area, and Ellie just said at the
summer capital for the Philippine government also. And while we were there, we
traveled a bit. In particular, the most exciting trip we made involved a commercial tour
of the Banawi rice terraces, considered by some to be among the ancient wonders of the
world. But it really is amazing to see the mountains cultivated and growing rice. And as
we traveled, we became acquainted with two particular groups, the Ifugao natives and the
Igaroots.

RV: Can you spell those, perhaps?
RE: Ifugao, I guess would be I-f-u-g-a-o and Igaroot, I-g-a-r-o-o-t, perhaps. And
in one place, they put on a little dance for us, and the part of the discussion involved the
fact that one of them, I think it was the Igaroots, had not too far previously had still been
involved actively in headhunting (laughs). But in any case the significant part of that was
to be traveling on these mountain roads, to some extent, fearful for your life on this one-
way road, and you’re driving along in this open bus, wondering if it was going to make it
from point A to point B. I’ve got some movies where I’m just shooting down, and
there’s the bus, my leg hanging out and a straight down mountainside, a sheer drop. But
it’s just amazing to see miles and miles and miles of these mountains completely covered
with rice terraces and the engineering that was involved in producing that. So, in general,
while we were there, the Filipinos were courteous, appreciative of the American
presence, appreciative of the economic impact of the American presence, grateful for the
American liberation of the Philippines during the war and for them having been granted independence. It’s always a mixed bag. There are always political overtones involving the base, the rights agreements, and of course, some years back, we didn’t get together on base rights, and so we no longer have an active presence in the Philippines the way we used to. When I was there, the major Navy presence was at Subic Bay at Cubic Point.

RV: So tell me about your duties there at Clark. You’re a member of the Air Rescue Squadron.

RE: Well, I was there as a new pilot, so I flew as a co-pilot probably the whole time there. I’m not sure that I was ever an aircraft commander of the SA-16, and a high percentage of our flights were orbits in which we would provide navigational aides for other people, other aircraft transiting from one place to another and they needed a radio beacon which we would provide. And then of course our main reason for being there was to rescue any downed airmen that would need help. But the reality was that the high percentage of our missions involved responding to civilian calls for help, and we would rescue people that had been involved in gunshot wounds, difficult pregnancies, appendicitis, just all kinds of stuff.

RV: And did you mainly fly in the island of Luzon, or did you go to the other island as well?

RE: Oh no, we flew all over the Philippines. A number of trips to Mindanao and away from the Philippines, we had missions to Indonesia, Jakarta [Jakarta, Indonesia], and I recall having flown to Saigon on occasion.

RV: I was going to ask you about that, if you did make your way into South Vietnam then. Do you remember that trip into Saigon?

RE: All I remember is I picked up a couple of marble pieces as souvenirs—a vase, sort of an urn-like little vase. I got into Singapore also for some reason. I don’t know why we went there. The most interesting mission happened within six months of my arrival in the Philippines. We were called to come to the aid of a merchant mariner who had some severe problems and was thought to be acute appendicitis. So we went out to get him. It was in the area of Spratly Island in the South China Sea. The seas were somewhat marginal when we got the call, but they were acceptable, but by the time we got out there, they were really marginal. But we were able to get in. It’s a matter of
analyzing all of the conditions. You consider the wind direction, you consider the swell
system, and then you consider the waves, so those are three different things. And we got
the plane down in good shape, we got over close to the ship, and we went out with a
rubber raft, picked him up, and brought him in, and got all buttoned up for takeoff, but
the seas kept getting a little worse, so it’s getting a little bit tricky. So we made our run,
and no, we could not get up on the steppe. The steppe is the point at which your hull
comes out of the sea, the big bulky part of the hull of the aircraft, and you’re just sitting
around the back portion of the hull, and that’s called being on the steppe. And then it’s a
matter of short order. You get up to speed, and you’re airborne. Well, we couldn’t get
on the steppe. We couldn’t get on the steppe. We made about three different runs, and
then on our fourth run I think it was, a particularly large wave caught us and knocked off
one of our tip tanks, our float tanks, and so that then left us without stability, and the
wing dipped into the sea, and wouldn’t you know, we had to abandon our aircraft.

RV: Wow.

RE: So we got out our raft and we got close to the Spratly Island and we got up to
shore. Anyway, to make a long story short we washed up onto Spratly Island and we had
to camp there a couple nights, practiced our survival skills. And eventually the Navy
came to our rescue, so that was very embarrassing. The Navy rescued Rescue. And
while we were on the island we tried to enjoy some turtle eggs. We found some big
turtles on there, and we found out that doesn’t work very well.

RV: How so?

RE: They’re very rubbery, and you don’t crack the shell. It’s a whole different
breed of cat, so we just used the stuff that we had from the airplane.

RV: Tell me about what actually the Air Rescue Service’s mission literally was.
You’ve described primarily who you served, the civilian population, but in essence, what
was a typical mission like? How would you go about it?

RE: Well, typically you’ve got training missions of course, and then other than
that you’ve always got a crew that is on alert, twenty-four hour alert, and we had an alert
facility right in the squadron, so we would literally sit in our alert condition. If something
would come up, we’d respond immediately to the call, whatever it is, whether it’s a
civilian or military need. Other than that, we would have scheduled orbiting missions
where we’re just provided navigational aid, and those were scheduled much in advance, pretty much the same as our training schedule.

RV: So you’re seeing most of Southeast Asia here, as you’ve described. How would you describe the atmosphere there in Southeast Asia? One, your basic observations, but also how these various countries and the peoples that you interacted with, probably on a limited basis I guess, when you’re flying into Singapore and into Jacarta. How did they interact with you as an American?

RE: Other than the Filipinos, I don’t think I have any recollection of quality of interaction. In general…hmm. I don’t know. In general, they were relatively poor, and if we’d come in, it would be an exciting event when our aircraft would come into a village or a low population area where somebody was hurting and needed help. If it was a city, they’d have their hospital, and they wouldn’t have called on us to begin with. So we were looked upon as I don’t know, pretty important, significant, unusual events people. Having said that, it depends on the nature of—at the time, foreign aid was a pretty significant thing, American aid, and I think a couple of those trips of ours we were taking aid shipments, if I remember correctly, to Saigon if not Singapore. And people were always happy to get that. If it was officialdom, it was sort of just an official thing, but when you’re involved with the populace—well, I’m thinking specifically of an air show in some small place where we parked our airplane and had some leaflets or something to hand out. And golly, those leaflets were precious, and everybody really wanted them. People are so poor and had so little that I guess the idea of receiving something was always in their mind if there’s something to be gotten.

RV: Do you remember what the leaflets said?

RE: Probably describing our airplane (laughs). ‘This is an SA-16.’

RV: Okay. Let me ask you about what you’re understanding at this point in the process. What was your understanding of what was happening in Vietnam, in North and South Vietnam? In 1954, there’s the Geneva Accords, and the nation is split in half, and there’s supposed to be elections, and they don’t happen in 1956, and you have the emergence of the Republic of Vietnam, and the United States is a key support of this country. What did you feel and understand about the situation while you’re stationed there at Clark?
RE: Probably not a great deal. We were not talking about domino theory or any of that stuff at this time, were we?

RV: It was out there. President Eisenhower mentioned it in 1954, but it’s not—it’s out there in the public, but it’s not out there in a significant way.

RE: It probably was in our military circles. Along with our education in the Air Force, I went to squadron officers school while I was at Keelser. Maxwell, when was that?

RV: What, at Keesler?

RE: From Keesler to Maxwell. I guess that was my second tour. No, that was later on. I wasn’t there yet. I don’t know at what point, but whenever the domino theory became a part of my understanding, I certainly subscribed to it a hundred percent.

RV: Can you tell me why?

RE: Well, international Communism was a recognized threat, and I had no argument with that. When was Krushchev on the scene? What were his years?

RV: He was there in the 1950s and was out after the Cuban missile crisis. He was out in early ’63.

RE: Well, probably while I was in the Philippines he had not yet said that we will bury you, but my understanding was that international Communism was an objective of the Soviet regime, and it was a real threat, and at some point, it certainly looked to me like Vietnam was an appropriate place to try to come to grips with that. The fact that we were limited later—at this point in history, if I had any thoughts at all, they certainly would have been along those lines.

RV: Okay. Well, Eisenhower first kind of mentions it in a press conference, I believe in March, 1954, so it was in the vernacular, it was out there in the public, but things really haven’t heated up for the United States yet in South Vietnam. So you’re kind of right there on the cusp of the pre-war period, and it’s a very unique perspective. And you’re there until May 1960, and then you’re going to transfer back over to the United States to Keesler in July 1960.

RE: That was a big letdown.

RV: Tell me about that. It has to be just a huge change going from the Philippines down to Mississippi.
RE: Well, the needs of the Air Force always come first, and their need for people in electronics was paramount, so I had no choice. The only decision I could make was to say, ‘I need to get out of the Air Force,’ and I didn’t feel that badly about it. I felt dedicated that, as an officer, my primary vocation was being an officer, not being a pilot or electronics officer or anything else. So I had the attitude I could do whatever I was asked to do and that’s what my job was, to do whatever I was asked to do. So, I put my shoulders back and went to Keesler, and while there, accepted the fact that the needs of the Air Force were such that it looks like I was going to be stuck in electronics and I might as well do it right. So I applied for and was accepted for the Air Force Institute of Technology. I wound up getting a double E degree. In ’64 that came to fruition. The pendulum had swung and the needs of the Air Force were such that I had the option to go back into flying. So I was given a choice to go into a flying assignment or to go to AFIT. It didn’t take me long to decide I’d go back into flying. So that stopped the AFIT business.

RV: And I can imagine you’re probably relieved at this point to get back into the pilot’s seat.

RE: I don’t know if relieved is the word but happy for sure.

RV: And you’re stationed there still at Keesler, is that correct?

RE: Yeah.

RV: Okay, so tell me what your duties were there.

RE: Well, I had a variety of duties. Initially I was the air electronics—not the air electronics. Airborne—

RV: Early warning?

RE: Was it Airborne Early Warning to begin with?

RV: I believe so, sir.

RE: Okay, I don’t have my sheet in front of me, looking at it. So I was an Airborne Early Warning instructor and branch chief and responsible for training, and as such, I developed my lesson plans and taught, and then before that, I became a squadron commander, and I commanded a training squadron, which, as I recall, had somewhat over a thousand people in it, mostly students but also permanent party. So that was a second taste of command-type responsibilities. While I was in Libya, I had an additional duty as
administrative officer, and in that capacity, I had to write letters when someone in the squadron died and various things like that. As the squadron commander of Keesler, I was big daddy for all kinds of family difficulties—credit collection letters, people put in jail, family squabbles, divorce matters, and so on and so forth, besides being responsible for training and preparing for inspections of the units and so on so it was a broadening experience.

RV: Can you tell me about the Early Warning System, what that entailed?

RE: Well, there were two major electronic components to that—computer system ANFSQ7 and 8 had to do with the dew-line. Do you remember the dew-line, along our northern perimeter? That was in the early days of computers. What we now can hold in our lap, back in those days would occupy a three-story blockhouse building with vacuum tube computers all over. We were involved in the maintenance, not the operation of those systems. Something would go out, we’d have to find out what it was and put it together. In preparatory to that, before I became a computer maintenance officer, they sent us up to IBM Kingston for some computer maintenance training also, in programming and what have you. That was in Kingston, New York.

RV: Were you still—you keep saying the phrase, ‘What the Air Force wants—basically the needs of the Air Force come forward.’

RE: (laughs) The needs of the Air Force, yeah.

RV: Right. How are you feeling about the Service at this point? You’re having good experiences, it sounds like, on a unit level with the people with whom you served, the social aspect of this, and you’re developing your skills. How you do feel about the Air Force in general at this point?

RE: Wonderful. Very professional organization. I’ve always felt wonderful about the leadership and in general the decisions that were made. However, on a personal level, I got quite a gut ache, in that every time I’d turn around, having a major vocational shift and in some cases, competing with people who have been in the career field continuously and here I am bouncing in and out (laughs). I have one tour as a pilot, never had a proficiency previously in electronics, just getting up to speed as a pilot, then I go back into a different phase of electronics. So that caused me some personal gut aches
and consternation, which I didn’t like, but I viewed it as a circumstance of serving as an Air Force officer and that continued throughout my career.

RV: Okay. You’re there until July, 1963, at Keelser, and you’re getting ready again to go for another three-year assignment, and you go back to Randolph [AFB] in Texas. How did that transition come about?

RE: Well, that’s a result of the opportunity to get back into flying when I was about to accept the Air Force Institute of Technology in a double E degree. I instead was about to go in back into a flying assignment and that assignment was at Randolph in the C-47 program and training third-country nationals. That’s a multi-engine aircraft again, a different one for me, but one of the oldest twin-engine aircraft in the Air Force, the C-47 or civilian version DC-3. So we had two different courses at Randolph, one a transition course teaching pilots who hadn’t flown a C-47 how to fly it and then an instrument course, teaching multi-engine pilots how to fly on instruments and get an instrument rating in the B-47. So I taught in both of those courses and enjoyed it a great deal. We had students from Iran, Iraq, Bolivia, El Salvador, I think, Nicaragua for sure, and Libya. We had some Libyan students as a matter of fact. So that was very interesting. And we had talked earlier with regard to the B-25, how was it flying? The C-47 is a tail-wheel aircraft, so there were some specific things that you needed to learn in landing a plane with a tail wheel instead of a nose wheel, and single-engine procedures are always interesting and challenging. And in the C-47 you really had to learn to apply leg pressure if you simulated or had an actual engine failure, to push hard on the rudder to maintain directional control. So that particular aspect of training was a lot of fun for me, but challenging also, until the students developed their proficiency.

RV: Tell me about the students. How were they with the training? Were they adept at picking up?

RE: They were highly variable. Some of them were minimally proficient and others were quite proficient.

RV: Do you remember which individuals from which countries made better pilots or were more proficient than others?

RE: No, I don’t think I want to make a judgment about that. I did observe that there was humility on the part of some and an arrogance about others, and I think I
probably observed the arrogance as much in some of the Nicaraguan students as any of
them for some reason. I don’t know. And I wouldn’t want to generalize this. It could be
that the particular students that caused me to form that opinion just happened to come
from an aristocratic family. It might also be that everybody that got into pilot training
would come from an aristocratic family. I don’t know. But there were some significant
differences among the students in that regard.

RV: Okay. And what were you told and what was your reason for training these?
Were these simply the countries—I’m not going to answer this for you. I understand
what you were doing, but for those who are going to be listening and reading this
interview, can you tell me a little bit more about what your mission was and what the Air
Force and the United States’ mission was toward training these pilots from all these
different countries?

RE: Gee whiz. I have to think about that a minute. I don’t think we were told
why we were training them. I guess we could speculate why. For some reason, we must
have felt that it was in the United States’ national interest to support the development of
this pilot proficiency or capability for the particular Air Forces that were in question.
That certainly is interesting when you consider we had students from both Iran and Iraq
(laughs).

RV: Yes, I know, it’s very interesting. What can you say? Do you remember
about the Iranians and the Iraqis? What can you say about them?

RE: Not a thing. I can’t tell you. And as I think about it, I wouldn’t want to stake
my life on the accuracy that we had both Iranians and Iraqis. Certainly at that time when
we were training them, I don’t think I was aware of any overt hostility or conflict
between them. So I wouldn’t want to stake my life on exactly what the nationality was. I
know I had Libyans, I know I had Nicaraguans, I know I had Bolivians, and I’m not sure
what it was with regard to Iran and Iraq.

RV: Okay. You’re there in 1963 to 1966. What was your reaction to November
1963, the Kennedy assassination?

RE: I’m trying to think. Where was I at the time? I think I was in a cross-country
flight. I might have been in Eglin AFB in Florida, and I guess it was just a shock. I
know somewhere along the line when we had the Bay of Pigs activity, we had some kind
of a support mission, and I flew to some base, I think Homestead, Florida, but I don’t remember why or what for or what we carried. Just shock with regard to the Kennedy assassination.

RV: What did you think about President Kennedy?
RE: Hmm. Well, I thought he was my Commander-in-Chief (laughs).
RV: Right.
RE: I think I felt in general that he was an admirable, conscientious president. I didn’t understand all that was involved in the Bay of Pigs business, and I thought that that was a fiasco and somehow our involvement was not what it should have been.

RV: I failed to ask you about Dwight Eisenhower, again, seen as your Commander-in-Chief, but a real shift politically and policy-wise in Washington. Tell me about President Eisenhower.
RE: Well, I’m not sure I thought much about him other than admiration for him as a military commander and that he did a satisfactory job as president. Somehow I didn’t feel like his stature among his predecessors was the same as his stature of commanding general, but I thought he was effective and a good president.

RV: Okay. And at this time the Vietnam War is going to basically ‘start,’ quote, unquote, in 1965 with the deployment of the Marines to Da Nang. But of course before that, you’ve got the Gulf of Tonkin incidence and a lot of other things happening. Do you remember kind of the buildup to our direct involvement there with ground troops?
RE: Not particularly. In general, the coverage in the news media, and I’m sure I took things at face value. I’m sure I did not question the Gulf of Tonkin incident the way we do today. And that activity is what took me into the Caribou training as if—I guess we’ll get there.

RV: Right, when you go to Ft. Benning. So as an Air Force officer were you more focused on your career, more focused on your assignments versus paying attention to just this war that is brewing quite significantly?
RE: I’d say that’s accurate, yeah. I was more into the Air Force, the Air Force mission, and my mission within the Air Force rather than really examining the politics.
RV: Right. Would you say that that would be true throughout your career?
RE: Yes, I think so.
RV: Why is that? Was this kind of a function of your personality, or was this your strong duty to country and to your branch of the Service?

RE: Hmm. I think it’s probably a function of my conservative personality. On the other hand, I don’t see myself as such a compliant person. I am very questioning in general and inquiring, and I didn’t go to—I took Command and Staff at the Industrial War College by correspondence. I was in Squadron Officer’s School in residence, and certainly we looked at our military service as an instrument of national policy, not divorced from politics. But political discussions, I guess, are typically viewed by most of us in the military as sort of in a separate category from our military service. Not to say that we don’t have the right and duty to involve ourselves in politics. We are citizen soldiers, and we are citizens first and soldiers second, I think, not the reverse. I wouldn’t want to make too much about separation from politics. I don’t think I’d want to say that I was divorced from political discussion, but I don’t know that I got all heated up about it either.

RV: Right. I wasn’t implying that you were divorced from it but it sounds like you were very focused on what you were doing versus worrying about the larger picture.

RE: Sure. Well, I knew that I had direct influence in what I was doing. I don’t know—political discussion, I was not in a position to influence others politically and whatever discussion I’d go into in terms of influencing my vote would be another thing. I’m not sure where we’re going with this. I’d be happy to respond to any specific questions.

RV: Well, I’m asking because one of the consistent themes that I’m noticing is that you are not aware of, or if you’re aware of it, you simply don’t take that in as you move through your duty stations of this larger picture. Again, you’re aware of it but you’re not really engaging in it, from what I hear, and I just wanted to see if that was accurate. Because as we move into the war period and you go over in 1966, I want to understand where you are and your thoughts about what you’re going to get involved in and what you see your role as.

RE: Well, the big part of this, I think, involves the absolute belief of the concern about international Communism, that it’s not an idle threat, that we are engaged in a conflict for the preservation of our way of life. And I didn’t see Kennedy or Eisenhower,
either one, negating that perspective. So I think I am fully engaged in that. I wrote a
paper in Squadron Officer’s School back in that Keelser tour period regarding the threat
of international Communism and discussing whether or not the nuclear option might be
used as a last resort if it ever came to that. And I said at that time I was confident that the
United States and democracy would prevail over the Communist threats but that that
would come about as a result of an information explosion. And as the Soviet people,
people under the Soviet control, had a more accurate and complete understanding of the
realities beyond their country’s borders, that the destruction would come from within.
And I think in general that’s what occurred.

RV: That’s exactly what was predicted.

RE: To say I was not engaged, I must not have responded appropriately or what
have you, because I certainly was from a big picture perspective and by no means would
I want anything I’ve said to imply that I was just a military person, obedient to my
superiors without personal conviction. I certainly had powerful personal conviction that
the direction that we were going as a nation was appropriate and the correct one.

RV: Do you remember discussion between yourself and your fellow officers
about this bigger picture?

RE: I really don’t.

RV: Or their sense of the larger picture, not specific conversations?

RE: I don’t recall any discussion ever outside of academic circles where we
questioned national policy or specific involvement, and I don’t know what they would
have been. While I was in the Philippines the Chinese were acting up, for example, and
there was what we called the Formosa Straits crisis, involving Matsu and Quemoy, and
we deployed to Taiwan at that time. We had a detachment near Tainan, Taiwan, and so
the Communist threat was being expressed by the Chinese, as well as the Soviets. No, I
absolutely don’t recall anyone questioning what we were doing or why we were doing it
in those days.

RV: Okay. Well, this might be a good time to stop for today and pick up with the
story as we continue in another session.

RE: Okay.

RV: Thank you very much, sir.
RE: Thank you.