Mark Taylor: This Mark Taylor, it is 3:06 on April 15, 1990. I’m interviewing for the first time Mr. David Wright. This interview is taking place at the home of Mr. Wright. This is part of the Vietnam Archives Oral History Project at Texas Tech University. The first question I have for you is how did you get involved in Vietnam? How did you get into the military, what branch of the military were you in and what did you do in Vietnam?

David Wright: I was in the Air Force and I got into the Air Force basically through the ROTC program in college. So when I graduated I went into pilot training at Randolph Air Force Base and selected fighters as my first preference and so after training, the first place – my first assignment and only assignment in F-4s was to Vietnam – Phu Cat, Vietnam.

MT: Okay. And what year was this?

DW: I got to Vietnam in October of ‘69 and left in October of ‘70.

MT: What were some of the types of missions that you would fly?

DW: Well, most of the missions we flew was at Phu Cat, being in-country, was a mostly close air support and we had a lot of alerts where we would have four to six to eight airplanes on alert. We’d fly in flights of two and would just sit until the ground forces called in for close air support. We would carry mostly high drag 500 pound bombs and sometimes we would carry the gatling gun. The model of our airplane didn’t have an internal so they had to load it. It was one of, you had a fighter without a gun, that’s what
it was. And then we would carry some napalm, but mostly it seemed to be high drags
which, you know, gets you much – where we’d go in at a very low altitude and drop the
bomb and then the drag slows it up so you can get away from it so it doesn’t, basically,
shoot yourself down. And so we did those close air support missions and when we flew
nights we would fly – which was basically every other week, we would fly to the Ho Chi
Minh Trail, basically, and Laos and drop everything in the world on the highway
network to try to keep the trucks from moving supplies down into southern Vietnam and
Cambodia.

MT: Okay. How effective would you say these attacks were? There’s been some
criticism that close ground support wasn’t really all that effective. What would you say
from the pilot’s viewpoint, from what you saw?

DW: Well, it’s, you know, the missions all blur now, there’s so much. Some are,
you know, very very vivid, still, and that, you know, some of our guys down on a road,
you know, you could see a guy lying out by a jeep as we’d come by and our speeds were
so isolated from most of that and trying to at least give them some support. Some things
that stand out would be Doc Si Ying which was a Special Forces camp up in the tri-
border area between Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam and we hit that thing for
somewhere in the neighborhood of two or three weeks and we literally flew constantly up
there, everybody, as soon as you went on alert the phone would ring and you would go
and it was like a holding pattern so that you had one flight working it constantly because
the a regiment, or something, was trying to take it over. I don’t know what the final count
was as far as people killed, but I know that those that got out, got out for one simple
reason, because there was air cover there. I mean, it was amazing. I remember seeing a
caribou which was a twin engine cargo plane, slow, urrrr. We were up holding above it,
we were the first ones in at that point in time and they said, you know, watch, and this
caribou comes in to drop supplies to them, and he gets nervous because you could see it
was starting to get dusk and there was kind of a ravine around two sides of the thing and a
Special Forces camp usually had a little square, not much to it, all of it underground
bunkers and a runway. So this guy’s coming down the runway and the trees are twinkling
with the ground fire coming up at him. I mean, these are just rifles this isn’t anything big,
these are just so many rifles are shooting at the guy. Well, he got nervous and he – he
broke off and he dropped and the parachute was laying on the fence with the stuff on the
runway, the parachutes were drooped over the fence of the Special Forces and the flight
leader on our first strike, he said, ‘Do you see the parachutes?’ and we say ‘Yeah.’ And
he said, ‘Hit them. The Charlies are already carrying the stuff off.’ I mean, it was
unbelievable, this place was, you know, so some of those things stand out that we did a
lot of good, I think, at least for our guys. But other times -- I remember the first day we
went into Cambodia and I was on the very first flight. We left and flew to Cambodia after
Nixon opens up so that we can fly in, you know, hit them in their sanctuary. It looked like
a depot with everything stacked up and everything, and we hit the trees. We hit bunkers
in the trees that you couldn’t see, you know, with all this stuff around – and so a lot of it,
too, you know, frustrating in that respect. Because you just couldn’t see anything. One of
the times I got hit, I didn’t even know we got any ground fire and we didn’t know it until
we got back and we started refueling the airplane and gas started shooting out of the hole
in one of the wing tanks and, you know, we reported we didn’t see a thing. It’s, you
know, flying at 400 knots and that kind of stuff, you just -- you’re really isolated from the
real things that the guys on the ground, for sure.

MT: So what would you comment on the ability of the North – what was probably
their best anti-aircraft weapon, or if they had very many of them, how effective were
they?

DW: Well, the main – I guess the most effective was the 23 millimeter because it
had a pretty big shell but they could move it fast – you know, fast enough and it would
shoot a string of six tracers and you could see them. Kind of funny talking about them,
you kind of dodge them, you know. You don’t think about dodging a bullet but it just – it
was like an unreal - like a dream. When they were shooting at you, you could tell
automatically by looking at it when you see the six, I guess it was five or six, seems
like…I want to say six, but you could see those glowing red things coming up at you and
you could tell if they were going to hit you or not. I mean, it was just amazing to watch
them shoot at somebody else and see an airplane here and see the guys shoot like this
(indicating). I mean, it’s one of those things that you could see the bullets going and the
airplane. I mean it was just the way they’d lead you. The bigger ones tended to be more,
you know, like the old days you see on the World War II where they just barrage an area
and when we flew – when I was in the B-52, flew to Hanoi – a later tour, I was in Guam then, just flying to Vietnam, that we would fly – and you could tell where your target turn was going to be after the target – when we flew to Hanoi at night because of all of the ground fire. I mean the flak, and, of course, we flew at night. Those big guns shoot so slow, of course, if one of them gets you, it’s bad news because, you know, you almost kind of have to run into it or it has to be dead on but 23 millimeter was the gun that they could, you know, and the canisters and all those old – just the old type, they could really – with a good gunner they could pretty well hit you pretty close. Of course, ground – I think the smallest, the .50 cal probably did as much as anything and that’s why you kind of stayed a little high if you could, try to stay above a couple of thousand feet, but then you couldn’t do that in a close air support, either.

MT: How would you comment on the ability of the VNAF, Vietnamese Air Force?

DW: You know, we didn’t really come in contact with them at all. So I don’t know how good they were or how bad they were or whatever. I don’t really have anything to base it on. Like Da Nang, I went up there one time and was just like a kid, you know, a country boy going to a big city. It was amazing all the different people there. Phu Cat was just – we had two squadrons of F4s, one squadron of EC47s and then we had some of those crop – cropdusters – some of the 119s that sprayed defoliants and that’s all we had there and then everything else was support. And then we had one little Korean – which were bad mamas, Korean soldiers that were attached but no, you know, Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Arm or Air Force at all.

MT: How often would you fly during a given week or given month?

DW: It just depended on just basically the situation. We would probably fly – I got 213 missions in the year. And I was over there, basically, ten days [months], but I guess when you take away R&R and some of the boondoggles we had, I was probably in country about ten and a half months eligible, so I flew, you know, ten and a half, so what’s that, say twenty – twenty-one or -two missions a month. I remember when we were flying at Doc Si Ying I had something like 15 missions in basically four or five days because we were literally flying, you know, as soon as a crew would come available, as soon as airplanes would come available, we were sent up. Other times it was a little
slower. The war was following a calendar kind of like everything else. When it was raining, trucks couldn’t move, so therefore we wouldn’t have many, you know, missions to close the highways because they were already closed. So it – it kind of just depended on a lot of different things, you know, the Army guys would get the close air support. If the weather was nasty they didn’t seem to go out and get in as much trouble as they would, it would get you know…

MT: Right.

DW: It was just, you know, averaged out. I remember sometimes we were awfully busy and other times we didn’t do an awful lot.

MT: Did fatigue ever play a part in any of the missions? It seems like there was a lot of flying time.

DW: Not really because our missions usually really only lasted about an hour and a half and you breathed a couple of hours before takeoff and so really, when you think about it, get up and go in, and of course, you didn’t have to worry about shaving and all that kind of stuff, in fact most of survival schools told you don’t, you know, not to shave prior to missions. Most of the guys shaved afterwards. So really all you do is get up and put your flight suit on and drag down to detail for briefing and then two hours later you were in the air, so three and a half hours, probably four hours later, you were back home. So that really wasn’t much of a problem as far as that. The fatigue, I think, in the B-52 was a little more because we flew – the missions were so long, because those were eleven hour missions. We had no problem at all, the most of it was just simply boredom and you did everything in the world in your spare time just to pass the time.

MT: What would you say was the overall performance of the U.S. in Vietnam?

DW: Well, I think overall that the military was highly restricted by the political powers that be and that we weren’t allowed to fight the war the way it should be. I think that’s – unfortunately, it could have been ended a lot earlier if we could have done things that we needed to do, just like with the Christmas bombing of ‘72 we had to bring B-52s and we finally went to the north, we lost a lot of B-52s but 10 or 11 days and finally brought back the Peace Talks and, you know, then the POWs were released within a month or at least the first ones, and it was basically over, you know, in that respect. So, at least we got out of it and I think we did too much of the hitting trees and not hitting real
targets which, you know, closing Haiphong Harbor instead, you know, of allowing
someone’s ship to come in there and we wouldn’t hit it because it was a foreign ship, you
know, that type of thing. We should have gone in there and blown it out of the water and
nobody would have brought their ships in there, I mean it would have been that simple,
but we’re always so worried about the political end of things.

MT: Were you involved in the LINEBACKER Operations?

DW: Yeah. I hadn’t heard that in a long time. I was at Guam in ‘70. See, when I
came out of Vietnam as a backseater I had to volunteer for another tour or I was open and
SAC was real short pilots and so they took something like – they got first shot, like 70%,
so I went out of Vietnam, went to B-52s and then I upgraded in my first flight as an
aircraft commander, was taking off at Guam in the middle of the night going to Vietnam
and so we flew – I was TDY out of Barksdale and we started that in April and had one
tour of five months and back home for a month and back for my second tour so I was at
Guam when all that started around Christmas. Flew to Hanoi, let’s see, it was the 18th,
19th and 20th of December and I flew on the 20th to downtown Hanoi and then we flew the
26th, which was the biggest tonnage drop, I guess, in history. When we hit – my target
was the – was somewhere in Haiphong so I went up there those two times.

MT: How good were the defenses around Hanoi and Haiphong?

DW: They were pretty good. That night we went in with – we had – the first
night, on the 20th, we had 24 airplanes and six of them came out. No, excuse me, we lost
12 airplanes, we lost 12 out of 24 that night and it was, you know, all SAMs and the
MiGs didn’t really do much at all. In fact a couple of gunners shot some MiGs down, but
then we…one night, I guess it was that night, the 20th, our F-4 MiG support was – I heard
them come on the frequency and we were coming in. That was a fourteen and a half hour
mission. We took off from Guam and then got to Vietnam, South Vietnam and went
around a tiny box, it was like an hour time, two times so everybody could catch up to go
in. And that fatigue came in there, I guarantee you. A MiG apparently jumped a flight –
our flight of F-4s which were MiG cover so we never really talked to them. I just told
them we were at the IP inbound and understood that they were engaged and a MiG came
right in front of the airplane. I mean just literally, it was one of those deals, you know,
(indicating) and then right behind it was the F-4 with all of his lights on, I mean, just, you
know, just – they were having a good time and we had something like 35 SAMs shot at us before we even got to the bomb run and we couldn’t even count them all. They were – some were close but most of them weren’t close at all and the on the 26th there was nothing. They shot everything they had basically those first three nights. Our problem was that third night they knew exactly what we were doing, the way we were coming in, the way – because we hit the same targets at the same times, which was so stupid, three nights in a row. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist real hard to figure, you know, that here they come again, what they’re going to do, you know, I mean it was just but it was so complicated to get that many airplanes in and out. They just didn’t change anything which, you know, for the mission planners, I think is, you know, it’s just another good example of poor planning and so, you know, that was a good old LINEBACKER.

MT: What were some of the defenses on the B-52s and how effective were the SAMs?

DW: The ECM was supposed to keep them away and, you know, we – as many SAMs as they shot – there were a lot of them that, you know, missed by a long way, but, you know, the Wild Weasels would go in early. Supposedly, the Wild Weasels would go in early and try to put a lot of the SAM sites out of commission. They would bomb the air fields to keep the MiGS on the ground and there we’d come, so there was a lot of preliminary stuff. The only thing we had was the ECM because I had the B-52 in a 90° bank once trying, you know, but you can’t do much, you just kind of – you’re turning but I don’t know what you’re, you know, you just can’t do anything or you’ll be a missile all of a sudden, because the wings will come off. You just can’t pull anyGs. That’s all you had was the ECM and the support from the ES66s that did a lot of jamming and stuff like that – you know, the fighters who were doing the patrol trying to confuse the radar operators. It was a big effort to get us in and out.

MT: Another thing I would like to ask is when you came home what was some of the atmosphere like back home?

DW: You know, I never, you know, I’ve seen all the movies now and it’s given me a, I don’t know, an interesting look. Like *Born on the Fourth of July*, have you seen that?

MT: No, I haven’t.
DW: You know, it’s given me even an interesting look about the protestors, you know. I can see their points. I can see the veteran’s point of, you know what they went through and that type of thing. But, I never was, and I don’t know if I just lived in a make-believe world, but my friends, none of them...you know, when we came back – was Dina Kay, she lived in Fort Worth, she was in a overseas wives club, but most of her friends, their, you know, husbands were gone from the base, she found, you know, she did her shopping at Carswell and we just never really came in contact with any of that stuff and it just – you know, I would say the acceptance, you know, the friends we had then we still basically have now and it never was a negative type of thing at all. And I don’t know if I just saw fit but didn’t – you know, I was in the Air Force and still away from, you know, and I just really think it was different. I think those guys that were on the ground and went through a lot of that stuff, I – you know, I can relate to some of it but very, very little.

MT: Another thing I’d like you to make a comment on a little bit is how has Vietnam affected foreign policy, maybe a little bit that you’ve seen, maybe toward the drug thing, or toward Central America? You could see the policy then and atmosphere of the United States was then versus now.

DW: I think now it’s going to be real hard for us to go into any long-term commitment to a, you know, a country like you know, like Panama and the Falklands, I think we’ll probably still do things like that as far as – because the politician wants the military to go, and so I think they’re going to do it. But I think it would be real hard to keep and everything I think, for awhile. Until everybody forgets, you know, and another generation, it will be really almost impossible to keep our service people in a country, you know, for any extended period of time. You know, just like the Panamanian thing. We went in there and did that thing in what., a couple of weeks, and then we’re out and it’s not – it’s not a thing, it’s just advisors and, you know, and, you know, one plane load after the other of people in the thing. And so I think that’s changed and it will be a little harder to get involved, you know, on a long-term basis, that type of thing. I don’t know if our foreign policy has changed that much, I don’t think we fear Communism near as much, especially the way it’s changed so much. They don’t – people don’t need us to tell them Communism isn’t any good, they know it themselves. Now, you know, with East
Germany and Russia and that kind of stuff that’s going on, that’s changed, you know, for the better.

MT: Okay. Well, I really don’t have any other questions, is there anything else you’d like to comment on?

DW: I don’t know. I’ve thought a lot about this and I really believed in what we were doing and you know, it was even from the very beginning, you know, when I thought about it, being a pilot and all that stuff, I didn’t really think about going into Vietnam but it was, you know, when it was all said and done, there was no place else I could really go whenever it was over. But I wasn’t really disappointed. I hated of the things that I missed but it was really a time that I really matured, you know as a 24-year-old kid. It really taught me quite a few things about life and that’s good. It really, I think it changed a lot of the way that I look at things, you know, never be the simple little – everything’s going to work out wonderfully and all that kind of stuff. It really affected me more than I thought it did seeing some of these movies and reliving it brought some of the stuff back.

MT: Thank you for the interview.