Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Myron Everton. I am in Lubbock, Texas, at the Special Collections Library interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Everton, you are in Potomac Falls, Virginia. It is Thursday, October 31st, 2002. Sir, if we could begin with some basic biographical information. Where were you born and when were you born?

Myron Everton: Well, I was born in Columbia, North Carolina, in a little township called Gum Neck on September 30th, 1926.

RV: Okay. Did you grow up there in Gum Neck Township?

ME: Except for three years in another town in North Carolina when my family moved temporarily, I grew up right in that township until I was sixteen years old and graduated from high school there.

RV: So you basically spent all of your youth there in Gum Neck?

ME: Mm-hmm.

RV: What was life like for you there in Gum Neck?

ME: Well, we’re looking back now to the late 1930s and very early 1940s. This little community I lived in still did not have electricity.

RV: Oh my gosh.

ME: And no telephones. I was on a farm. My dad also worked for a local lumber company down there. Life was a little bit slow in those days compared to now, but it was a pretty decent place to grow up.

RV: You said your dad worked for a lumber company.
ME: Yeah he—
RV: And—
ME: Mm-hmm.
RV: Sorry.
ME: Go ahead.
RV: Did your mom work?
ME: My mother was just at that time a housekeeper. She did work when the war started. The family left and moved up to Norfolk, Virginia, and both of them took war jobs up there. That was about the time I graduated from high school.
RV: Do you have any distinct memories of the Great Depression in the ‘30s?
ME: Yes, quite a bit of it. Living in the country and on a farm we were relatively self-sufficient for food compared to people in the cities. My grandfather had been fairly successful in earning a livelihood and he helped support the family and keep them up. We never really suffered from a lack of food or adequate clothing or anything like that. We had an automobile. We had an old battery operated radio that we could keep up with the news. This kind of thing didn’t affect us near as much as people who lived in cities and lost their employment.
RV: Did you work in your youth?
ME: Oh, yes. I had to help keep that farm. I could plow a straight furrow as far as the mules could pull it.
RV: So what kind of work did you do on the farm?
ME: Looking after the livestock, feeding the cows, the work mules, the chickens, helping raise the crops, harvesting corn, soybeans, and of course we had big gardens, spring, fall, and summer. You took your turn working at all of those to help out with it.
RV: Was that the only job you had, I mean that’s a huge job, but was that the only job you had growing up, working—?
ME: Well, in my senior year in high school, I had just turned sixteen. I was given the job of school bus driver. In my senior year, I was also one of the two school bus drivers that we had.
RV: For your fellow students or—?
ME: Yes, hauling the fellow students.
RV: That’s interesting.
ME: Yeah.
RV: Do you have any memories of school, school and growing up and particularly high school?
ME: Well, I’ll tell you this, Richard. The school in terms of comparison with today wasn’t much. We had—our high school had grades eight, nine, ten, eleven. There were only eleven grades in North Carolina in those days. We had two teachers to teach all the subjects for all four of the levels. The net result was that in some courses particularly mathematics and science, we received very little. We did have a pretty good teacher for French. The Social Studies and the English were done pretty well, but our highest level of math was algebra and the teacher really didn’t understand it himself at my best recollection.
RV: Okay. Did you have—?
ME: So—
RV: Oh, go ahead.
ME: So anyway, when we graduated and left there I wouldn’t say that we were very well prepared to face the world compared to the kids that go out today. You know, you made it up as you went along. I was leaving, going out in the middle of World War II. 1943 is when I graduated. I enrolled down at Norfolk where my parents had moved in a night school training program to learn be a commercial radio operator. I had some ambitions in that direction. I was interested in radio. The mathematics was the toughest part for me, but what you essentially had to do was sit down and learn what was required to meet that course. So I got my license and that eventually led to my first, I don’t call it military service exactly, but I was in World War II as a commercial radio operator in the Merchant Marine. Eventually in fact was commissioned as an ensign in the United States Maritime Service. It’s education as you go, I guess.
RV: Right. Sounds like you took advantage of what you could.
ME: Yeah.
RV: What were your favorite subjects there in school?
ME: I was a social studies type. I was really interested in history and English to a degree. The sciences were interesting, like Earth science and that type of thing. Not
the sciences that required the heavy mathematics because I simply didn’t have the
background. Those were the places my interest lay.

RV: What aspects of history were you interested in?


RV: Did the war play a part in your interest in history, what was going on while
you were there in high school?

ME: Oh, that’s quite possible. Let’s see, at ’41 I would’ve probably been
approaching my junior year when the war started. Of course that got everyone’s attention
in a hurry. I think generally I even had the interest in elementary school level, studying
the history of North Carolina and the history of the United States and what have you. I
was sort of an avid reader. We didn’t even have a library in that little school, but we did
have a room with a lot of books you could go roam around in. What saved the day for us
in those years, we had the bookmobiles that would roll out from the county or regional
library about twice a month and come through the community. They would let you check
books out. So I did a lot of reading, particularly fiction.

RV: Okay. Do you remember any of your favorite books you read?

ME: Oh, I liked the westerns. Zane Grey was my favorite author.

RV: Uh huh. Okay. Yeah. I know of Zane Grey. So your folks moved to
Norfolk and did you stay there in—?

ME: They moved just after the beginning of my senior year so I stayed with my
grandmother to finish my high school. Then I went down and joined them in 1943,
summer of ’43.

RV: What kind of jobs did they take in with the military or support, I guess?

ME: You know, Norfolk’s a big Navy town. My dad was working at the Naval
Operating Base on the Security Force there. My mother was working, I believe, on the
Air Station as a person that when they would pack and repair parts, they had to pack them
for shipment. She was working—it was a non-skilled job. She worked packing and
working in the shipping department there. That’s pretty much where they stayed till the
war was over.
RV: Okay. How different was it when you moved up there to Norfolk, how different was it for you to get out of where you had grown up there in this very small community?

ME: Well, I had to learn how to ride a streetcar didn’t I? I took a job as a helper for the engine overhaul mechanics at the Naval Air Station. I had to learn to ride the streetcars down to the job. Then I got enrolled in this night school training program for the radio operators. You very quickly learned how to make your way around. Sort of like going on a new college campus, I guess. We did have a tremendous influx of people from down in Tyrrell County who were moving into that area looking for work. Some of my old friends were up there in the area. I would stay in touch with them, friends and relatives. So it was not completely new to me.

RV: Now you said you were interested in radio operation, commercial radio operation, what led you to that interest? How far did you follow it?

ME: Well, I stayed actually four years in the, sailing with the merchant ships, finished up the war, and then stayed on another couple years after that as a radio operator and a Merchant Marine. It was—for one thing at that period of time, it was a very well paying job. It was paying probably double the salary by going to sea that I could make trying to take any other job I could find around the Norfolk area.

RV: Were you trying to get a job like at a radio station, looking at that option?

ME: Not particularly, more interested in communication as you would have it in the military services or what have you. Not going commercial for broadcasting or anything like that. Didn’t have much interest in that. When the war ended, we began to send all these ships up the river to the bone yard. By 1948, I’d say, it was pretty clear, ’47, ’48, that this was not going to be a career field you’d want to stay in. It was too hard to keep a job. So I was looking around and I had this opportunity to go into the Aviation Cadet Program for the Air Force. So I took it. That was the whole ship for me. Of course I made a career out of the Air Force after that.

RV: Going back to your Merchant Marine experience was it the pay that drew you in to that working with the radios there on those ships or was it trying to contribute to the war effort?
ME: Well, I had an uncle that had been in the Merchant Marine for years. He was always telling all these good sea stories. I think that attracted me in that direction. Then knowing that when I turned eighteen I’d be drafted for the Army or somebody, this looked like a very viable alternative that I could control my own future, you might say. In fact that’s just the way it went. When they sent me my draft notice I reported to the board, took my federal communications licenses and everything with me and they just sent me right on over to the War Shipping Administration and signed me up right there to go into the Merchant Marine.

RV: Did your family have any other military experience at—?
ME: No, I’m the—as far as I know I’m the only person in my family that’s ever been involved in the military.

RV: Okay. Any of your children now have they been involved at all?
ME: No. I have five children. The closest to the military, one of them is technical director at the National Security Agency. That’s a similar type government service, but it’s not the military.

RV: Yes, sir. How many brothers and sisters did you have?
ME: I have three sisters.

RV: Were they younger or older than you?
ME: They’re all three younger. One of them is about three and a half years younger and the other two were extremely late in my parents’ life. One’s about nineteen years younger and the other ones about twenty-one years younger. So it’s two families really.

RV: Right. Right. So describe your experiences and what your duties were in the Merchant Marine during World War II.
ME: Well, during the war we manned the radio room twenty-four hours a day on the ship. I was sailing Liberty ships.

RV: Can you describe what those were?
ME: There really wasn’t much duty at all because we had radio silence the whole time we were at sea unless you were sinking. Now you did regularly receive messages and so basically our big job was to be sure we got all of our messages that were sent to us and get them in to the captain of the ship and the crew, the deck crew. We received
regular weather reports and we also did some inner ship communication using light
signals. My first trip was about sixty-two ships in convoy out of Hampton Roads into the
Mediterranean. These ships were all plugging along across the ocean at six knots, six or
seven knots. So it’s a long trip.

RV: Yeah I can imagine.

ME: Of course you were under German submarine surveillance a good bit of the
time. Occasionally they’d take a shot at you with a torpedo if they thought they could get
it. We lost a couple of ships out of our convoy on the first trip over. My ship never took
a torpedo hit, but on the second trip that I made over that same route to the
Mediterranean, we were on the right flank. This ship was equipped with a long steel web
net that they would drop over with the booms on each side of the ship to hold it about
fifteen feet out. You’d drag it through the water. If a torpedo comes in, that net will
catch it. We caught a torpedo. When we lifted them at the end of the day to check them
out, there it was hanging in it.

RV: It had not detonated obviously.

ME: No. It didn’t detonate. They kind of used the hoist equipment to jerk it and
snap it off until the thing fell off and went in the water.

RV: Did you feel like the convoy was a successful or efficient way to get
supplies over to the European theater?

ME: Well, at that time it was basically the only way to get them over there. We
didn’t have the big airplanes we have today that can move so quickly, but when you think
sixty-two ships and the immense load that they can carry, that’s a lot of stuff being
delivered.

RV: It sure is.

ME: It takes a while to get there and of course finding a place to unload it could
also be a problem. My [second] trip was in to Southern France. We got up to Marseille
and this was almost immediately after the invasion of Southern France. We got the ships
into the harbor there and we had to wait about five or six days before we could get close
enough in that we could unload.

RV: About how many missions did you run, or convoy missions did you run
across the Atlantic?
ME: I ran two during the war. Then the war ended over there in spring of ’45 and I started out in late ’44. So I got two convoys during wartime and then the war was over and then I stayed on after that. Submarines weren’t shooting any more, but boy the Mediterranean was still full of mines, so was the English Channel. It was quite a while before they got all the minesweeping done to make it safe.

RV: Now you came back and you stayed in Norfolk, is that correct?

ME: Came back and sort of stationed myself out of Norfolk to catch ships to travel on. Very often if you got on a ship, if you wanted a job you had to stay on it because if you dropped off somebody else took your position. A couple of ships I stayed on quite a while, as much as a year, year and a half with most of the same crew.

RV: You were working the radios then?

ME: Yeah. Once the war was over and clear they went down to just one radio operator. So you were on and you sort of set your own shift to make it fit the best schedule for the ship. That was pretty good work.

RV: How long did you do that?

ME: I made my last trip—ended my last trip in December of ’48, December ’48 because—then in May of ’49 I was in the Air Force.

RV: Okay. Now what prompted you to join the Air Force?

ME: Well, my second interest behind radio had always been to fly. I had a great curiosity about it and really thought I’d like to try it. On one of my breaks in the Merchant Marine while I was at Norfolk, a recruiting team was there recruiting for Aviation Cadets or other people and they actually contacted me and tried to recruit me as a radio operator for the B-29s. I went down and talked to them about it. Then finally I told them, I said, “Considering the salaries you guys pay for radio work and the salary I get where I’m working now doesn’t make much sense for me to go into the Air Force.”

He said, “Well, how would you like to fly?” Boy, he had my attention. I said, “That sounds better.” So I took all the examinations, again coming out of the Gum Neck High School down there I hadn’t had a lot to do, but I managed to pass an examination that gave me the equivalent of two years of college, which you had to have to get in the program. Then I passed another examination for the flying skills part of it and managed to make the physical a few days later over at Langley Field. Just like that I was on the
list to come into the program for flying training. That was all wrapped up in I guess around August or September of ’48, yeah ’48.

RV: ’48 or ’49?

ME: It would have been ’48.

RV: ’48?

ME: Yeah. I wrapped up all these exams and I had time left to make one more short trip in the Merchant Marines. So I went over to Brest in France and back on a quick turn around and got back. Then just stayed ashore until it was time to go to training in Texas.

RV: Tell me about your training in Texas. Was this in San Antonio?

ME: No, San Angelo. Goodfellow Air Force Base in San Angelo. I reported down there in May of 1949 and was assigned to class 50-B Aviation Cadet Training. It was a one yearlong course broken into two parts, primary training and then basic training. The primary training was basically learning how to fly an airplane and also learning the basic military skills that you needed to be an officer in the Air Force. The program was modeled very much along the lines of the Military Academy except it only lasted one year. So instead of four years, you had four quarters. You advanced at the end of each three months to the next level of military training. In the mean time you’re down at the flight line about half of every day working on your flying training.

RV: How did you react to the military life, the discipline and everything? You’d been in the Merchant Marines and then you go to the Air Force. What was that like, the transition like for you?

ME: Well, it was a very difficult thing and you had to go into it understanding that they were going to put you through a lot of—they’ll make you jump through the hoops, how’s that? In the first three months as a freshman so to speak, plebe, whatever name you want to give it, you were under absolutely strict regimentation. You marched everywhere you went even if you were by yourself. Some people would call it harassment or hazing, I guess, but I think it had a point. For instance, we were out at about 5:45 every morning. We had formation. We were checked. Then we were marched off to breakfast. Our breakfast during that first three months, you sat at attention at the table, eyes straight ahead, and ate a square meal. In other words when
you picked up your spoon it went straight up level to your mouth and straight in and it
came out the same way. Well, that’s a hassle, but you learn to live with that. Then when
you finished you asked to be excused from your headman at the table. They would
excuse you to go back to clean up your barracks and shave and this kind of thing, do your
toilet duties. On your way back, walking, marching by yourself, at every intersection or
street you had to stop and you had to look to the left, or actually do a left face to the left
and then an about face to your right and then a left face back to the front and then bend
over and look between your legs behind you. Then you would stand up and say, “All is
clear sir,” and you walked across the street.

RV: Was there somebody you were actually speaking to or you just—?
ME: Anybody that was there. If nobody was there you said it anyway cause sure
if you didn’t somebody’d see you and you’d be in trouble. Well, you know, that relaxed.
The upperclassmen were the ones that primarily enforced this because they had already
been through it, you know. They were ready to nail you if you didn’t do it. Anyway, we
put up with that for that first six months and we learned how to fly the old AT-6 or
Texan, a trainer plane. At the end of that one, we sort of graduated from that phase of the
training and went out to another base, to either advanced multiengine or to advanced
fighter. I asked for and was interested in flying the multiengine airplanes. I had much
more interest in flying those than I did the fighters. That’s what I did. I wound up right
there in your backyard at Reese, Reese Air Force Base.

RV: Right. To go back, what was it like for you to first get into the cockpit of an
airplane and actually fly?
ME: Well, you know, that was an interesting exercise. I’d never really—I’d
never been in an airplane except as a passenger a couple of times in the back. It was
quite a thrill. It took a while to get accustomed to the fact that I’m up here in the air. I
was not a real fast learner on the flying skills. I had to work pretty hard at it. As a matter
of fact, on my first check ride to go solo I flunked. They reassigned me to another
instructor who was a good ol’ Southern boy from Louisiana that talked like I did and in a
matter of a week’s time he had me soloed and gone.

RV: Really?
ME: Yeah.
RV: What did you do wrong to flunk the first time?
ME: Well, it’s hard to say. I think I was probably just nervous, edgy because—the instructor I had was a real, he was chewing you out all the time. I want to be careful what I say since I’m recording here.
RV: You should say whatever you want to say.
ME: Well, he was a horse’s tail. I’ll put it that way. I think he just had me so much on edge that I was making mistakes I didn’t need to make. When this second instructor picked up on me, it was a whole different world. Just like that I began to—I had no trouble. I went right on through, soloed, finished, got on, did fine. That was a real stumbling point for me at that particular place.
RV: Right. You said you were interested in flying the multiengine planes versus the single engine. Why was that?
ME: I think it was just, probably survival instinct. I’d like to look out the window and see some fans on each side. Then when one quits I don’t have to come down by parachute.
RV: Right. Makes sense.
ME: Yeah. I don’t know that that was it, but I just had the feeling that I really would like to fly those larger airplanes and I did. That was a good decision for me. I did fly some single engine later on, but I never flew single engine jets. In fact, about three and a half, four years after I’d finished training at Reese, I went on my first assignment. I was back at Goodfellow as an instructor in the same airplane, the AT-6s.
RV: Now when did you first fly a multiengine airplane?
ME: At Reese.
RV: At Reese.
ME: Yeah, as a student, aviation cadet. When we arrived at Reese, we continued in the AT-6 for about two months, but a different approach. We were learning to fly by instruments on it, rather than flying by visual.
RV: What airplane were you flying at Reese?
ME: We started in the AT-6 with the instruments. Then from the AT-6 we went into the B-25s. That was the real multiengine experience. It was twin engine. It was a
World War II Billy Mitchell Bomber that had been stripped of all the combat equipment, was being used as trainer. It was really a great airplane to fly.

RV: How different was it for you to fly that plane versus flying the single engine planes?

ME: Well, it was a whole world of difference. In the B-25 you had a tricycle landing gear and a cockpit upfront where you could see something. In the old AT-6, sitting back with a conventional tail wheel landing gear with the engine out in front of you, you couldn’t see anything except out the sides. Then the B-25 with two engines was a very well balanced airplane. You could fly it. The old T-6s had been around so long and been bounced by students so long that the wing loading was unbalanced. You come in for a landing and as you slow down and loss the speed to the point where the airplane was stalling and converting to a ground roller, one wing always seemed to stall ahead of the other one, which means the airplane would try to roll [over] with that. Those things you didn’t see anymore with the B-25s. You just bring them in and it was a much easier airplane to fly.

RV: How long were you at Reese?

ME: We were there all together for six months.

RV: This is in 1950.

ME: Yeah. That was in 1950. I graduated on May 12, 1950. I had started on May third I think it was in 1949 at Goodfellow. So it was a yearlong program. We were graduated and had a ceremony in the old base theater there. We’d get our wings and get our gold bars.

RV: How did your parents feel about you becoming a pilot?

ME: Oh, I think they were satisfied with that. If they had any feelings about it, they never expressed them to me other than good feelings. My mother was worried about me during the war on the ships and you don’t want to drop—they’re gonna sink your ship and you’ll die and all this. They didn’t mind the airplanes too much I think.

RV: How would you rate your training you received for this year of primary basic training?

ME: I thought it was well done. Except for the one instructor I had that was such a pain, the curriculum was good. The ground school to support it was tied very closely to
what you needed to have, but not a lot of extraneous stuff. Most of our ground school people were civilians, working for Civil Service. I particularly remember one of them, a fellow by the name of Mr. Kemp I thought was really great in the ground school there. The same thing I can say, I guess, for Reese. The military instruction was done all by, that military career [instructors] it was all done for the most part by military officers. They were pretty good at their job, had no question about that.

RV: At this point had you received any weapons training?

ME: We just received some very basic introduction really to firing on the range with rifles, the Springfields. Anyway the older rifles that they—I’ve forgotten what it was. It was not the M-16. It was before that.

RV: Okay. Now where did you go after Reese in 1950?

ME: Okay. From Reese, graduated as second lieutenant, finally free to get married. Went back to North Carolina and got my bride. We moved to Sacramento, California, to Mather Air Force Base. I was assigned as a line pilot flying B-25s. We were training the bombardiers that would go on to the B-29s. They had a bombing range out there at Beale Air Force Base not far from Sacramento. What we’d do, we’d load up these practice bombs with students, bombardier students and their instructors, and take them up there and fly around the bombing range for two or three hours while they got their bombing training practice. Stayed out there—how long did I stay there—a little over a year and a half. I managed, by the way, while I was there through the Air Force’s Boot Strap Training Program to complete my bachelor’s degree from California State University at Sacramento. So that was the biggest advance in my career that I got out of that.

RV: Okay.

ME: And all—pardon?

RV: What was your major in?

ME: In history, social studies and geography. That was the one that was easiest for me to reach in the limited time I had. From there my unit was, the whole unit was moved down to Waco, to James Connelly Air Force Base down there. We continued a similar type of training there with the B-25s, but using radar rather than visual bombing. We stayed there just a little while and then we moved to Shepherd. The whole unit again
and continued the same work at Shepherd. Then the unit was closed down because the B-29s were being taken out of the inventory and replaced by B-50s. They no longer needed that kind of training. So they let us ask for what we wanted to do and I thought I’d like to be a flight instructor so I asked for that and sure enough, right back to Goodfellow. I did have to go through a six-week flight instructor training school down at Craig Air Force Base in Alabama to get prepared for that. Then I went back and stayed at Goodfellow until ’54, late ’54, trained a lot of students while I was there.

RV: This is during the Korean War or just after.

ME: Yep. During the Korean War and following it. The biggest break that came when I went back to Goodfellow was about a year after I got back there, they decided to make it a basic training school rather than a primary and use B-25s. Well, the B-25 was the airplane I really knew how to fly by then. So I was given an opportunity to go down to Georgia to the Air Force’s Instrument Instructor School for instrument pilots. At that time, it was the premier, outside of test pilot school, that was the premier school that all pilots wanted to go for. I stayed down there I guess twelve weeks learning to fly the airplane under every possible condition of instrument flight. I considered that to be one of the biggest impact on my flying career cause I’m pretty sure it saved my life a time or two later on.

RV: Really?

ME: The fact that, I mean, when I left that school I figured I could fly anywhere in the world and do anything. That’s how good it was. It was a great school.

RV: Now how did they put you through these—were these simulations or did they actually put you up in the plane and—

ME: There were simulators. You flew those, but I was routinely able to—we’re talking now in the ‘50s not with all this modern stuff we’ve got today. I was routinely shooting touch and go landings under the blindfold inside the cockpit. You never see the ground. That took a lot of confidence in your ground control operator, GCA (ground-controlled approach) guy or what have you. Of course I had an instructor pilot sitting in the seat that could see what was going on, but you knew you could do it when you finished that school.

RV: How long was that school?
ME: My best recollection was either twelve or fourteen weeks. I think twelve weeks. You flew, you know, five days a week you were out there flying or in the simulators flying.

RV: Now at this point you’ve been in the military now for, what, five years?

ME: Yes, I was commissioned in ’50 and this would’ve been around ’54.

RV: Okay. Did you think that you were gonna continue making a career out of this or did you have thoughts of getting back into the civilian life?

ME: Well, I had to make a decision. Let’s see. It was about the time I made the decision to go ahead and stay in. I was a reserve officer and having finally gotten a college degree behind me, what have you, I was considering applying for what we call the regular commission for the Regular Air Force or Regular Army or regular whatever rather than remaining in the reserve. I actually finally did apply for it and did receive a regular commission. So I’m a retired regular officer rather than a reserve officer. That was the career commitment then when I did that.

RV: You felt comfortable with making this decision.

ME: Yeah.

RV: You thought the Air Force was gonna provide you a—

ME: Well, my wife and I, we took about a three week leave, came back to North Carolina and shopped around the job market and looked at things I—most likely field for me to go into would be education with the training I had. It didn’t look too favorable to be honest about it so we decided to stay with the military.

RV: Now you went back to San Angelo and you were a flight instructor. You trained on B-25s, is that correct?

ME: Well, when I went back there I was back in the T-6 again.


ME: Yeah as an instructor sitting in the backseat where you really can’t see anything and you’ve got some kid off the street in the front seat that doesn’t know what he’s doing.

RV: Did you have some controls back there?

ME: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. That was very interesting. I found a great deal of satisfaction teaching those kids how to fly I’ll tell you. It was challenging. Quite often
we’d pick up a student—I had a French kid that not only had never flown before, but
didn’t speak English too well. So we’d get an occasional student from some of the
foreign Air Forces there too. That was a good time. When I got back from the IPIS,
Instrument Pilot Instructor School, I went with the, what they call it, the base
standardization board which put me at a level where I was supervising a lot of the other
instructors and making sure they were with the program. I continued that until they
decided to ship me to Labrador. I wound up going from Goodfellow up to Labrador in
1955.

RV: What did you think of American Policy in Asia at this point, this is Korean
War, just after Korean War? Were you following regularly what was happening in the
world? I guess you kind of had to to a point in the military.

ME: Oh, yeah. You followed it pretty well. Of course you had an interest in it. I
lost my best friend all through cadets when it went in the mountains out there, in a B-26
in Korea, night [flying]. So these things kept your attention all the time, but I tended
pretty much to agree with the decision to go into Korea. I pretty much agreed with the
decision to go into Vietnam, we will be talking about later, except I just disagreed with
the objectives there.

RV: So you’re transferred to Labrador. What was your duty there?

ME: I was assigned up there initially as a single engine pilot because I was
qualified in both. I was flying one of these little bush pilot type airplanes. We had
what’s known as a composite squadron there. We had the de Havilland Beavers which
was the bush pilot airplane on floats. Then we had some C-47s. We had an SA-16
amphibian. That’s two kinds of helicopters, I guess.

RV: Were you trained on those?

ME: I was not trained on the helicopters so I didn’t—I flew them a little bit as a
copilot from time to time just to help out and because it happened at that time to have the
extra duty of being the squadron flying safety officer. So I liked to keep an eye on
everything. The single engine assignment they sent me on didn’t last, but about two
months. There wasn’t really a job there. So they just moved me over to the C-47
transports which is a two-engine thing. It wasn’t too difficult for me to check out in that
and that’s what I flew in Labrador.
RV: Okay. Was this the first time you had flown a transport plane?
ME: Mm-hmm. Yeah. It was the first time I had checked out in a C-47. I had flown the T-29 Convair which was a much later model airplane than any of the others in California. They had selected about six of us to check out in that and I was fortunate enough to be one of them. That was a great airplane. But anyway the C-47 was tricky. It was a tail wheel plane. It was a leftover from World War II. It was not very well equipped to be flying in Labrador and north of there because it didn’t have the cold weather capabilities that you really need up there. Labrador was the, that year I spent up there was the worst year I had in the Air Force.
RV: Why is that?
ME: The equipment that we were flying with—this was 1955 and ’56. We were building the distant early warning radar line about three hundred miles inside the Arctic Circle to the north. A lot of our flying was in support of that. The area was unmapped. We didn’t have the radio navigation aids. The C-47 had nothing but real old World War II navigation equipment on it. To be honest about it, it was a good bit of flying you do up there. You didn’t really know where you were. In the wintertime if you go down up there you’re just dead. That’s all she wrote. We had a fair number of missions from Goose Bay north. We have what you would normally speak of as a point of no return. You take off from Goose Bay. You’re going up to Frobisher Bay which is where we would normally go up to. There was a point about two thirds of the way up there when you didn’t have enough gasoline to come back to Goose. So you were going on to Frobisher. Well, your communications in those days were all high frequency radio and very, not very good. You might be bugging along up there and you pass the point of no return. You finally get a hold of Frobisher and talk to them and, “Well, we got some fogs moved in.” Now that’s when you begin to get stomachache.
RV: How many times did that happen to you?
ME: Well, I went up on—are you with me?
RV: Yes, sir.
ME: Okay. I went up on one trip up there with—let’s see, I had a pilot, myself. I had a co-pilot, navigator, and we had two flight engineers and we had a three man team from the Air Force’s Arctic Desert Tropic Institute. We went to Frobisher and started
from Frobisher and worked our way all the way across the continent to Alaska and into Alaska. We were stopping at these various little radar sites that were being built. If there was a lake nearby them, we would land on the lake. Then these guys from the Arctic Desert Tropic Institute would get out and drill holes in it to see if they could calculate whether or not it would support the weight of us, and the C-124 Globe Master that they wanted to fly in with the antennas that were gonna be put up. These antennas were being built down here in the states. When they had the antennas built and calibrated, they would cut them exactly in half so that they could then load the two halves into a Globe Master and fly them up there, but they needed the Globe Master, the big four engine heavy transport. So our job was to land on it and see if it would support an airplane. RV: Oh my gosh (laughs).

ME: The bad part about all this was, you got there with your C-47 on these little outlying places. You didn’t dare shut your engines down because you couldn’t get them started again.

RV: Cause it was so cold?

ME: Yeah forty below zero, fifty below zero. So these guys were having to climb out and while you sit there and engines at the slowest idle you can. Then they drilled their holes and get their information and then you’d pick up and go. Of course you have to spend the night somewhere. Then you do shut down. That was always an interesting experience with the airplane. You had to, the system was there to pump raw gasoline into your oil tanks after you landed and were preparing to shut down for the night. You diluted the oil with raw gasoline. Then you ran the engines enough to get some of that circulated and then you shut them down for the night. The next morning to try to get them started you had to pull three big arctic heaters out of the airplane and hook them through hoses up to the front of each engine and one hose up into the cockpit of the airplane. Then you get those big heaters cranked up and going and that was an interesting exercise too because they don’t start very well at forty below either.

RV: Right. How long would it take you for you to de-ice or heat up the plane?

ME: It took about three hours from the time you started until the time you could start your engines, two and a half to three hours. Then when your engines started you had to sit for another hour running at sort of a little bit of a fast idle to evaporate the
gasoline out of the oil that you put in the night before because if you took off
immediately with the oil that thin, your engine bearings would go—you’d burn up your
engines.

RV: Sounds like a really arduous setup, tasks to do to land and to take off.

ME: Well, and on airplanes the landing gear has—normally, there’s some lights
in the cockpit that tell you whether the gear is up or down and whether it’s in transition.
For instance, if the gear is up the lights will be off. You’d drop the handle or the switch
to lower the gear, a yellow light comes on for each one to show they’re in transition and
then when they get in to their—there’s a red light I guess that comes on. Then when they
get full down and are locked in position, you get a green light. So you’re always looking
for the green lights before you come in to land. In the arctic at that temperature in the C-47
you just had to forget that because all those switches were frozen. You put the handle
down and you waited long enough and you hope for the best. It was stressful.

RV: I can imagine. Did you ever have any close calls, any problems?
ME: I had one or two that were pretty bad in it. We were flying from Frobisher
Bay back down to Goose at about—thank goodness I had her up to about eleven, twelve
thousand feet even though you’re not supposed to go above ten without oxygen. It was
under cast and I was wanting to stay above it, feel the sunshine. We had two or three
passengers on board that were coming down. We were along the coast there. In that
whole area it’s an area sort of like the coast of Norway. It’s just one big, not ravine, I
can’t think of the word now, gorge. Gorges go in that. That’s not the right word for it,
but anyway you know that that’s what it’s like down underneath you, it’s just—some of
them even have ice flows going down them and what have you. Anyway that’s the kind
of terrain that you knew was down underneath that cloud. All of a sudden I see the fuel
pressure on my right engine falling fairly rapidly. It started almost immediately to go
into the procedure. The first thing with a C-47 you did was switch tanks and turn on
booster pumps to pump fuel to a bunch of things like that. She went all the way dead and
quit. Then I saw it fluctuating on the left one and I thought, oh boy. By one going a little
bit ahead of the other, the left one caught back up. So I had one engine going, but by
then I had drifted down into the clouds. I really don’t know how close I was to those
mountains and gorges down below us, but it couldn’t have been very far. We got the
thing leveled off staggering along at minimum air speed while I tried to get that right
engine restarted after the fuel pressure came up. Finally got it started and it barked and
backfired and carried on and got it running and got it going. Come to find out that the
trouble was that at the time this happened, we were running on an auxiliary tank that was
mounted back in the cabin to get us the length of the trip. One of my passengers had
propped his feet on the shut off valve and it shut the fuel off back there. When I switched
tanks of course I switched back to the internal tanks, but that could’ve been deadly.


ME: It would’ve been another one of those crashes. I had several cases where
landing on those lakes, on the ice, you’d wind up going down them sideways which is not
a thrill either because if you had any crosswind at all and you’re landing on ice, you have
no control over what happens after you slow down to about thirty, forty miles an hour.
That big ol’ tail sitting in the back is like a weather vane and it just blew the ship around
and you’re going down the strip sideways. Brakes are, makes no difference putting on
brakes when you’re on ice. I considered it my worse year. It had been a long time since I
had many dental problems. I had seven fillings that year. I don’t know if that caused it
or not, but—

RV: Something happened.

ME: Something was happening. I didn’t have as much hair at the end of that year
than I had when it started either.

RV: I can understand that. Where did you go after this year in Labrador?

ME: I came back to a real nice assignment at the University of Cincinnati as an
Air Force ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) Instructor. I was supposed to come
back to my old favorite school, East Carolina University, but the orders got changed at
the last minute and I wound up in Cincinnati. We did three years of Cincinnati in the Air
Force ROTC Program, just teaching and working with the kids there.

RV: You’re teaching in the classroom?

ME: Yeah. Teaching in the classroom and also one of those years, the last year I
was there, I was commandant of cadets. I was spending more time on the military
training with our training sergeants and what have you down in this gym and out on the
football field. When I left there I felt like I probably did a pretty good job there because
when I left I received an invitation to apply for one of the positions at the Air University
down at Maxwell Air Force Base as a professor on the faculty there. So I did. That’s
where I went for the next four [years] down in Montgomery, Alabama.

RV: How did you enjoy the teaching? This would be your third assignment
basically as an instructor and a teacher and a mentor. Did you feel comfortable with that
kind of position, that job?

ME: Well, I enjoyed that work and the opportunities were offered to me so I took
them. I was aware from the beginning that this was probably not gonna ever get me to a
position of being a general or even a full colonel probably, but it was work that I liked
and I wanted to do so I stayed with it. Had a great tour at Montgomery, one of the best
tours I ever had.

RV: That was for four years, is that correct?

ME: Four, yes four years. It was a three-year assignment with a fourth year
optional. So we stayed the four years.

RV: At this point you had obtained your bachelor’s degree, is that it?

ME: While I was at Cincinnati, I got my master’s degree.

RV: Okay. What was that in?

ME: That was in education, education administration.

RV: So what did you teach exactly at the air, at the War College down there at
Maxwell?

ME: Do again.

RV: What did you teach at Maxwell? What was your—?

ME: Oh at Maxwell?

RV: Yes, sir.

ME: I was primarily involved in teaching teachers how to teach, how’s that?

RV: Okay. Interesting.

ME: I was assigned to the faculty at the academic instructor school. All of the
officers and all of the NCOs that were heading out to the major teaching jobs in the Air
Force were sent down there for a six-week course on how to teach. That is just all that
course was about. It was really good. In addition to that, in the areas I worked in I did
some lectures at the Air War College. I did some lectures at the Command Staff School
and the Squadron Officer School and also at the Dental Officer School over at Gunter Air
Force Base down in that area. I was working in all of those areas.

RV: Now this is, you're there I guess from 1959 to ’63, is that right?
ME: Oh, let’s see. That sounds about right, ’59 to ’63, that’s right. In September
’63 I transferred to Panama to United States Air Force Headquarters down there.
RV: Okay. Now how much were you aware of what was happening in Indo-
China at this point?
ME: Well, quite a bit. Being there at the Air University we got regular briefings
on what was going on. Of course I was always free to walk in and sit in on some of the
classes where this was being discussed at the Air War College and at the other schools.
They pretty well kept us aware of what was going on I think. Incidentally, I didn’t
mention it, but when the Cuban Crisis popped up that’s while I was at Montgomery.
RV: In October 1962.
ME: Yeah. They plucked me right out. My wife didn’t even know where I was
for about three weeks.
RV: Where did they send you?
ME: I was one of the guys who could fly that T-29 and I was hauling folks.
RV: Were you stationed down at Key West or did you—
ME: I just flew back and forth between Key West, Washington, all up and down
the east coast and around, wherever they needed somebody moved. Finally, they didn’t
need me anymore so I was released back to my regular job. That was a scary time too.
RV: I was gonna say how did you feel? That was a very precarious time for the
world. How did you feel being a part of that?
ME: I was glad that I could help out in dealing with it. You can bet your boots I
was following everything that was going on that I could in the news and what have you.
Like anyone else, I was concerned about my family. I wasn’t there to lead them in to
anything or help them with anything.
RV: Right. How many kids did you have at this point?
ME: At that point, I had—the fifth one was born there in Montgomery. Five of
them and the fifth one was born in Montgomery.
RV: Okay. What did you think of President Kennedy’s decision making during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

ME: Well, I felt pretty good about it. I could see that we were just about ready to go to war and we were.

RV: Do you feel like he made the right decisions as far as actually, or I guess this is not to blame him, but basically pushing the United States up to the brink of war to meet the Soviet threat?

ME: I don’t think we could tolerate nuclear missiles under Soviet control in Cuba. From there they could’ve hit just about anywhere in the United States at that time. They were medium range missiles. You didn’t want to let them get in there and then have that threat hanging over you when you try to move. It worked. I basically think that the people advising him were giving him good advice, whoever they were.

RV: Right. Okay. So after Maxwell, after your tour there for four years I guess at Montgomery, where were you sent?

ME: From there I went to Panama.

RV: Why did they transfer you down to Panama? Was this—?

ME: Well, I had the background for it. I had both my civilian education and my military. I went down as an assistant training officer at the command level to help with the oversight of all the training that was going on down there. Now just about the time I got down there, things began to come alive down there because Cuba was stirring up again and we were working with just about every country down there in Central South America trying to counteract that threat wherever we could. Up to that point, it had pretty much been a real sleepy backwater ever since World War II wound down. So they were bringing in people, bringing in things and we had opened up a Tropic Survival School down there to train our pilots and people. So it was a good time to go down. I was the Assistant Command Training Officer for training. Then the last year I was there, I was executive officer for the DCS Operations. He pulled me out of the training and brought me up to run his office for him.

RV: Did your family move down with you?

ME: Oh, yes. Yes. We had a nice, nice quarters right there on base at Albrook. It was a real good tour for me. It’s the only time my wife got to go overseas with me.
The climate was pretty good and there were a lot of things to do and see down there. Schools were excellent for the children.

RV: Good. What airplane were you flying mainly down there or training these guys in?

ME: I was mainly—my primary job was not flying anymore, but I still maintained my instructor pilot status. I was giving flight checks and flying missions in the C-47 and occasionally in the T-29s. We did not have the T-29s in Panama, but there were two or three of them out in the embassies down there. I would go down and do check rides with those guys. I did quite a bit of flying. I flew all over down there, both Central and South America from time to time, but most of my work was back in the office.

RV: How did you feel about being back in the office, having more of an administrative desk job than—

ME: That was fine. As long as I was getting enough flying to keep me happy.

RV: So how long were you in Panama?

ME: Panama for—let’s see I went down in September of ’63 and left in spring of ’67. So about almost four years, three and a half years.

RV: Okay. What did you know about U.S. policy in Vietnam? Obviously ’65 is when we had troops on the ground of the first time in mass, but what did you think of U.S. policy in Vietnam? This is before you went over, obviously, and—

ME: Yeah. Didn’t know enough to make a good judgment on what the policy was doing, but it seemed to me like a good move to go in and try to help these people stop the march of communism, so to speak. At that time we had the old domino theory. If Vietnam falls, Thailand and Cambodia are next and Indonesia and so forth. It kind of made sense.

RV: So you bought into that or that was something that made sense to you?

ME: Yeah it did. I reached and I got my fingers tangled up in some wire on my desk. Just a second let me—I had my feet moving too much, I guess. Okay. That’ll take care of it. My major job was in a whole other sector then. We were working Che Guevara and the communist threat out of Cuba and the uprisings in Peru and Venezuela.

You could look about around that area most anytime of any month and find a little
uprising going on somewhere. So that’s where our attention was being held. We did get
regular briefings in the headquarters on what was going on in Indo-China. Of course we
had access to Armed Forces Television. We were getting news through that as well as
the local Panamanian stations. I had a concern at a later time and actually a concern
developing at that time. It didn’t seem to me that we were really trying to win the war.
The objective had somehow been screwed around to the point where our real job over in
Vietnam appeared to be to go over and keep the other guy from winning. You got to
draw a line between those two faults. Keeping the other guy from winning is not anyway
for you to win. I don’t think we ever really got away from that.
RV: You were thinking this before you even got in-country?
ME: Yeah. Yeah.
RV: If I could go back briefly just for a second, what kind of information and
what kind of operations were you guys running or trying to run against Che Guevara and
being aware of what he was doing in Central and South America?
ME: Well, most of what was going on for our part was just supporting the
embassies and the military assistance groups that were—in most of these countries we
had some kind of military assistant group helping, offering training to their people. Our
position was to help put together these training groups and get them in there and let them
do their job. We did have an Air Commando Squadron stationed there at Howard Air
Force Base that did a lot of this kind of work for us. They would go in-country with a
team of five or six people to train the people on civic actions. We had a lot of that going
on in several countries. We actually had one, believe it or not, we had one guy whose
almost full time duty was going in and teaching these people how to use artificial
inseminations on their cattle and sheep and stuff to improve their herds. This was just a
part of what was going on down there, still going on today too. You don’t hear much
about it, but this is happening all over the world those Special Forces are doing those
things. They do a lot besides fighting.
RV: Yes. Yes. In 1966, Che was captured and killed by the Bolivian
government. Did that have any repercussions on what you were doing there in Panama?
ME: Oh, just made us feel better.
RV: That one guy outta the way.
ME: Yeah.
RV: Okay.
ME: Let’s see. Let me put this in the proper place. I got there in ’63 in September. My family arrived just before Christmas in December. Then I think within a month we had a fairly substantial Panamanian uprising, I guess we’ll call it, in which they were shooting across the Canal Zone and into the Canal Zone, particularly Panama City where we were. Of course we were in, just about in lockdown position all over. I was over at Albrook in the headquarters and my family was living temporarily over at Howard while we were waiting for regular quarters. Howard’s on the opposite side of the canal. So I couldn’t get back and forth to see my family for about four days. It was pretty nasty around there. I’m guessing and remembering that this was more of a student problem than anything else from the—periodically the students at the University of Panama there would rise up and rebel up against something. In this particular time anyway, the real losers were the Panamanian people because they took that opportunity to ransack the stores and what have you. They were creating quite a problem over in the Canal Zone by shooting in there. We helicoptered over a team of sharp shooters from the Army training post over on the other side of the Isthmus. They pretty soon eliminated the sniper problem that we were having. I don’t know how many people they shot, but in about a matter of three or four days this sniper shooting wasn’t happening anymore. These guys came over there with their rifles and their night scopes and what have you and went to work.
RV: So you were overseeing, coordinating some of the training, the civic training that was going on?
ME: Yeah. That and just managing the training for the Air Force people that were down there too. Certain amount of training has to go on with all of them periodically. That was the involvement there.
RV: What were your impressions of the Panama Canal?
ME: Well, it was interesting.
RV: That’s something I’ve heard often.
ME: Yeah. At the time I wondered if the Panamanians would be able to manage it. At a later time as I’ve thought about it, I figured they probably could—the
Panamanians had been basically doing most of the work for years, but not at the administrative level or the highest technical levels. They certainly had a core of workers that could step in and do it. It appears that they’ve been successful with it from all reports that I get. There’s some question now about how much longer they can continue to operate it and make it pay for itself because of the big ships that are being built that go around it. I’ve seen just recently that they’re now doing a study down there to see if they can build a second canal across there that would be, with longer locks and deeper drafts. They can handle bigger ships, but that’s a long way out yet.


ME: Yep.

RV: How did they come through to you?

ME: How did they—?

RV: How did you get these? Were you expecting to be sent over there or were you—?

ME: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I was anticipating it because the Air Force were by that time for about three years had been working on the premise that nobody should go back a second time until everybody been the first time. Since I haven’t been over there, I figured I was prime material and I was.

RV: When you received your orders did you think you would be flying or did you think you’d have a desk administrative job over there since this is kind of what you were doing in Panama?

ME: Oh, I knew I’d be flying. They were looking for aircrew members.

RV: Okay. When did you go over actually?

ME: Oh, let’s see. I left Panama right around Memorial Day, I guess, late May anyway. Took my family to Florida, left them in the Miami area. I went on then to training for nearly five months worth of training before I was prepared to go over. The first stop on the training routine was to Sewart Air Force Base in Tennessee to do what we called transition training into the C-130.

RV: What was that like?

ME: Well, that was—I really enjoyed that. It was hard. I had never flown four engines before. I’d always flown two or one, mostly two engine airplanes. So I had to
get acquainted with four. I had never flown an aircraft with jet engines, which the C-130 is a propjet. It’s actually a jet engine that’s geared to propellers. So that was all new. I had never flown anything that was bigger than the biggest barn I ever had. So I enjoyed that. First time I got in that big baby and got in the cockpit with my instructor that was gonna teach me how to fly it. You know, I’m looking up there and I said, “Boy, this is a big thing.” He says, “Don’t worry about it son.” He said, “You just fly this cockpit. If you get this cockpit on the ground, the airplane will be behind you.” That was a pretty good philosophy.

RV: That makes a lot of sense.

ME: Yeah.

RV: Makes a lot of sense. I guess it eases your worries about what’s behind you.

ME: That’s right. That’s essentially what it worked out to be. You learned how to fly yourself. You made that airplane just a part of you. So anyways I was there. I don’t recall exactly the length of time, probably a month and a half or somewhere in that range anyway until I was proficient in flying the plane. Then they sent me down to Pope Air Force Base outside of Fort Bragg there in North Carolina. Here is where you learned how to use this airplane as a weapon system and what do you do with it. The use of a C-130 basically is to either haul troops, haul cargo, jump troops out the back or drop cargo out the back or some of the other procedures that we learned like dropping it on slids, sliding it along the ground without actually touching down. You do all that while you’re there. If you’re good enough you graduate and you move on.

RV: Was the C-130 air-conditioned?

ME: Oh, yes.

RV: It was?

ME: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

RV: Okay. Were the four engines, you said it was more difficult, was it just harder to handle with four engines, I guess, of course with the jets also?

ME: Well, the thing that you immediately notice when you transition to the jet props is the power. Those things are powerful. C-130 you can hold your brakes locked, run her up and get her at full power, crack the flaps and it practically leaps in the air. We routinely—we had to show proficiency at landing on a two thousand foot long landing
strip with it as a part of the training. In Vietnam, we actually used it a lot on the air strips
that were only about two thousand feet long. When you consider the airplane loaded, it
was around one hundred and sixty thousand pounds in those days, that’s a lot of airplane
to put down on two thousand feet at about one hundred and sixty knots and get it stopped
before you go off the end.

RV: So, at Fort Bragg they were teaching you to use this thing as a weapon. Did
you feel comfortable with that kind of training?

ME: Oh, yes. That’s what I wanted to do with it, learn how to use it.

RV: Did you feel like your training was adequate?

ME: It was very, very good. All the flying training I received in the Air Force,
the people knew what they were doing and were doing a good job of teaching. The only
one I ever had a problem with was that first instructor that couldn’t teach me to solo.

RV: I’ve actually heard that from a number of Air Force veterans that their flight
training has always usually been very excellent.

ME: Yes. I thought so.

RV: So after Fort Bragg, how long were you there at Fort Bragg or Pope
actually?

ME: Again, my memory tells me it was probably about four weeks. Maybe it
was six weeks. I didn’t bother to look up the exact dates coming and going. Then from
Fort Bragg I had to go to Washington State to go through the Air Force Worldwide
Survival School. That was a six-week long course.

RV: How was that for you?

ME: That was tough.

RV: What did you go through?

ME: Well, from the day you hit they’re working on your physical conditioning.
They get you in shape. You’re running everywhere you go with big heavy combat boots
and all that stuff on that you wear. You go through a strong course of POW (prisoner of
war) operation. They can be real nasty.

RV: What do they do to you, a POW? How did they prepare you for that?

ME: Well, of course you get lectures and you see movies and films, but then they
put you through some exercises that are supposed to be teaching you how to evade. I can
tell you that you never, almost never completely evade. They manage to catch you. It’s
planned that way.

RV: Your instructors?
ME: Yes. We actually did some—not like the Marines or the Army did it, but we
did actually crawl under barbed wire with live fire over us and all of that as a part of the
training for escaping and so forth. Then when you’re caught they give you about two
days of, it seemed like two years, about two days of time to be squeezed into black boxes
and hammered and beat around on and this kind of thing to see how well you hold up.

RV: How did you handle that?
ME: Okay. You know, it wasn’t fun, but you figured it might come in handy
some time later. The idea was to try not to let them break you. There were a few guys
that didn’t finish.

RV: If you didn’t finish were you not allowed to continue with your Air Force
career or your tour that you were getting ready to go into?
ME: Well, you wouldn’t be going [there] and that pretty much ended your career
for all practical purposes. Now, the most difficult part of it for me was the final exercise,
which was three or four days in a field, I’ve forgotten for sure. They take about four or
five of you out in a little group. They drop you off and they hand you a live rabbit and
say goodbye. Now when I say they take you out, they take you about forty, fifty miles up
in the mountains in northern part of Washington State, almost to the Canadian border. I
was there in late November so snow was already on the ground. It was cold, bitter, nasty.

Well, we killed our rabbit. Of course we’ve had some instruction on what you’re
supposed to do to evade. One of the things was if you think you’re in trouble you
disperse. Anyway we ate our rabbits. They told us that we’d probably be picked up the
next morning if we didn’t get out of there. So we got out early the next morning. We
had killed a rabbit, cooked it and eat it. We started trying to make our way over. We had
a map that we were supposed to work our way around to different points and contact
some partisans who would furnish us with food and this kind of thing. We’re supposed
to try to forage off the land. I’m here to tell you with snow on the ground in the
mountains of Washington State in November, you don’t eat much off the ground.

RV: That’s hard to see what’s on the ground.
ME: You don’t catch many fish either. In any event, the reason it was so difficult for me was that rabbit did something to my stomach. I developed a good case of dysentery. If you didn’t finish that part of the course you had to go through the whole course again. Now there’s incentive.

RV: Absolutely.

ME: I was determined to finish it and they tracked us with dogs. If you got caught you had to go through again. I managed to evade all the way down. I got to the late afternoon of the last day of the course.

RV: Were you still in a group at this point or were you by yourself?

ME: No. By myself. I evaded the dogs a couple of times by then by staying quiet and away from them when I could hear them coming. I was really sick. So they had a system set up that you could signal if you were hurt or sick. So I called, put up the signal. In about a half an hour medics showed up wondering what trouble was and I told them. He says, “Well, you want to come in?” I said, “No. I want you to do something about it so I can finish.” He says, “Okay.” He says, “I’ve got some”—I can’t recall what the medication—it was something they had to give you a shot in the hip, mescaline or something. Anyway, he says, “Drop your pants.” Man, he hit me with that thing and it did hurt. It stopped the vomiting and dysentery. I made it through the night and got in the next morning and found the bus to take me back to the base. I think it’d been a lot better experience if I hadn’t gotten sick, but I was really—I lost a lot of weight on that trip.

RV: I bet so. Were your instructors there Vietnam veterans? Had they been in-country?

ME: The instructors in that survival school were real professionals. All of them had been in the business a long time. One of the instructors there was an old friend of mine that was on my instructor team at the Tropics Survival School in Panama, which I didn’t mention to you. That was one of the, under my supervision in the headquarters, was a tropic survival school that we trained people who might go down in the tropics. So I had some experience with survival schools. So I knew what I was getting into, but he was there. When I finished that night he called me up and he says, “I want you to come over. Kay’s cooked up a big ham for our dinner tonight.” You can imagine the shape I
was in. So I says, “Bob, I’m gonna come.” I says, “Please tell Kay if I don’t eat very
much to understand what the problem is.” He says, “Yeah. That can happen.” I still hear
from him now. He’s one of my regulars on the internet that we pass stuff back and forth
occasionally.

RV: What rank were you when you were in survival school?
ME: Lieutenant colonel.
RV: Lieutenant colonel. Okay. Now did they treat you any differently being a
fairly high-ranking officer?
ME: Nope.
RV: Not at all. Were you grouped with other people of similar rank or were you
with basically everybody?
ME: No. You just went through with a group. If my airplane goes down, I’m the
senior guy, but I’ve got some guys who probably might only have three stripes back there
in that loadmasters compartment. So you have to be able to work with everybody.

RV: Another question about your training at Pope Air Force Base in North
Carolina. Were the folks training you on that C-130 for combat maneuvers and using it
as a weapon, were they Vietnam veterans? Had they been in-country?
ME: Just about all of them had already done tours over there because I was very
late getting around in there to be called. So I was on the tail end of it more or less. Most
of those guys had—a lot of them had been over twice. Prior to the Tet Offensive in ’69,
things were pretty quiet for a long period there. A lot of these guys just liked to go over
there and fly because that’s where they got to do their stuff, what they were trained to do.
Besides, they got extra money.

RV: Combat pay.
ME: Yeah, combat pay.
RV: Right. Right. So after the survival training, where did you go from there?
ME: From there I headed over to Mactan Island in the Philippines which was
where my unit was legally, formally stationed.

RV: What unit were you with then?
ME: 774th Air Transport Squadron, I guess it was. Yeah, 774th Tactical Air Lift
Squadron, that’s the right name.
RV: Tactical Air Lift?

ME: Tactical Air Lift Squadron and that was the 463rd Tactical Air Lift Wing.

RV: Okay.

ME: I should comment as to why we were in the Philippines.

RV: Yes.

ME: At that time, President Johnson had decreed we would only have—what was it—six hundred thousand men in Vietnam or some such number. In order to keep the number of people over there below that stated goal, several of the flying units were stationed in the Philippines or in Taiwan or Okinawa. All the C-130s were stationed off in the islands. We would take a crew in for sixteen days and fly missions for sixteen days. Then we’d go back. The airplane would get its maintenance and catch up. You’d get three days of crew rest, five if you were lucky. Then you would go back in again. So we never had a permanent duty station in Vietnam. We were always there on temporary duty.

RV: Hence, you couldn’t be counted in actually.

ME: Well, if you stayed fifteen days, you could count it as wartime service.

That’s why they had the sixteen-day rotation.

RV: All right. So when you flew over to the Philippines, you know you’re going into a war zone. How did your family react to this?

ME: Well, like I said, we’d been a military family all our family life. That was just an accepted part of what could happen. So while they would just as soon I didn’t go I’m sure, they didn’t, I think, they didn’t really question it.

RV: How did you feel going in to the war zone?

ME: Oh, I was kind of looking forward to go over there and fly that airplane and see what I could do with it. I was excited about it.

RV: How about the other people in your unit going over? Were they having kind of a similar feeling?

ME: Well, I can’t say that everyone was not wanting to be there because I had some people that I knew that were not. I know of at least one or two guys that I always wondered about. One of them had been in Panama as an air commando, you know. He just lost his gut for it and they had to give him another job in the squadron that didn’t
involve flying in Vietnam. He couldn’t hack it. I had one or two others that I know actively were seeking jobs back on the islands that would keep them from going into Vietnam as aircraft commanders. There wasn’t too many of them. I guess one or two.

RV: Now after you’d arrived in the Philippines, how long before you began your rotation into Vietnam?

ME: Oh, four or five days.

RV: So pretty quick turnaround?

ME: Yeah. Well, what they did is they sent me in with an experienced crew the first time to learn the ropes. We flew in. I was in the seat part of the time and part of the time I wasn’t, but I was able to go through the whole routine for the sixteen days with them and then came back and put together my own crew and went in again.

RV: Okay. Did you find—before we get into kind of what you did on a daily basis, did you find that after you’d gone on this initial mission that you were really gonna contribute to the war effort, that it was a very worthwhile mission that you were assigned?

ME: Well, I felt like it was. We were committed to defend that area. That’s what my job was, to go over and support that. So I felt like we were doing a good job and I was satisfied with my part in it. I bring up the same concern I’ve had all along, that I had before I got there is that it just didn’t seem to me that we were trying to win the war. We were just trying to keep the other guy from winning.

RV: So can you describe what your daily routine was like? I know things probably are different here and there, but basically what was this routine like, flying these missions?

ME: Well, what we would do when we hit Tan Son Nhut Air Base there where we were stationed in-country.

RV: That’s where you would stay for the sixteen days?

ME: Yeah. Yeah. My squadron flew in to Tan Son Nhut. They had another squadron out of Okinawa I believe it was that flew into Nha Trang. So we had different units going to different places where they had room for them. It would boil down to something like this. We would fly in today, get in, get processed, and they would let us know where we’re gonna be staying. We’d be on the schedule, usually for eight o’clock
the next morning. It was for a twelve-hour day. So you would report at your eight
o’clock. They would give you your assignment schedule for the day. It could be one
long flight all the way up to the edge of almost practically to North Vietnam with four orive stops going up, two or three coming back, that kind of thing. Or it might be one
where they’ve got a big troop movement going on where you would go out and just
shuttle troops from one place to another. Sometimes the shuttle flight could be just
twenty minutes or less or thirty minutes. You learned about that each day when you got
there, what your job’s gonna be that day. Then your navigator would go ahead and check
the weather and start drawing up the navigation tacts. You would take your crew chief
and your loadmaster, get out to the airplane and preflight it and make sure everything was
in position for it. Your loadmaster would be working on his load going out. Usually by
nine-thirty, ten o’clock you’d be off the ground and going. You would fly your missions
that were assigned. Then you’d come back in toward the end of your twelve-hour duty
day. You had fourteen hours off. This is important because it means that each day you
show up for your flight two [hours] later in the day. Like, today you took off at eight
o’clock, tomorrow you’re coming in at ten, the next day you’re coming in at twelve and
you’re gonna stay sixteen days. So pretty soon as I noted in some of the stuff I sent you,
you find that you’re getting breakfast with hamburger steak and supper with eggs and
bacon.

RV: Right. So everyday it’s two hours later, everyday.
ME: Yeah. It’s almost disorienting after a while. You forget what day it is or
what time it is or anything else. Everything gets thrown off in your mind.
RV: Was that efficient to you or do you think it would have been better to have
more of a regular schedule?
ME: Well, I really have no idea why they went to the fourteen hours. They
needed the twelve-hour crew day because of the nature of these little short field missions
back and forth to get max utilization out of the airplane. I guess it must be based on some
physical documentation that I’m not aware of that you need at least fourteen hours of
crew rest. So that’s what they gave us.
RV: Now when you would show up there and check out your assignment, would you guys—I guess, you became very familiar with some of these stops where you would go, what you’d be doing. Were you aware of how hot this zone was gonna be?

ME: You’d be briefed on that. You got intelligence briefing as a part of that setup every morning on your area and the broader picture too.

RV: Were there particular places in Vietnam that you guys just did not want to fly?

ME: Well, there were some that were very dangerous. The A Shau Valley was one of them for a long time. The problem there was that in order to get in there and land or to go in to airdrop either one, you had to make a long approach down a valley with high mountains on each side that usually had a lot of these big machine guns and that kind of thing waiting for you. We lost a few airplanes in there. When you had that kind of an assignment, it got your stomach going a little bit.

RV: You said that you flew or you state in your questionnaire here, your answer is that you flew 392 combat missions.

ME: Yeah. I looked that up so I could answer the question accurately in my records that I have. Three-hundred and ninety-two combat missions was what I was credited with there.

RV: Okay. When, where, and under what circumstances do you remember your first encounter with the enemy in combat? I know that you wrote that you had not, you didn’t have significant contact, but can you describe what you did have?

ME: Well, almost every time as I indicated in the stuff I wrote that you flew into these little outlying airfields, the Viet Cong would snipe at you with small arms fire when you flew by. If you were low enough they thought they could hit you, looking for a lucky shot, I guess. Sometimes they’d get one. One of the navigators in my squadron just standing up looking out took a bullet through the bottom of the airplane and right up into his rectum area. So every once in a while they would get hit. In my own particular case, to my knowledge, I never came home with a hole in the airplane I was flying. That was just luck. There’s no way I can say it ‘cause we had them getting hit everyday with the small arms. You developed some tactics that you’ve been told about. Any of those airfields, I never came in below three thousand feet till I was over the field. Then I just
throttle back and do a big sweeping turn down and land. When I was taking off in that
sort of situation, I never take off straight ahead and hold it straight ahead. As soon as I
was off the ground and going good, I just sort of flew, turn, and vary the rate of turn from
time to time until I got back above three thousand feet and then head on out to wherever I
was going. So that was my way of trying to deal with it.

RV: Did they train you to do that or was that your—did you come up with that
personally?

ME: Yeah. We were trained to do that kind of landings to come out of a spiral
like that and get in a land, yes. I guess you’d call that, that we’re trained to just do it.
The other thing in all these little airfields that we really had to use fairly often for some of
these rapid delivery things, because if you shut your motors off you were inviting rockets
to be fired in. So what you did is you unloaded on a run. Just about everything we
hauling over there other than people were on palettes. These palettes can be mounted on
rollers. So you would land, turn off the end of the runway, and do a fair like a fast taxi up
to the unloading area, then slow it down a bit. In the meantime your loadmaster has
lowered the back door down to where it’s pretty close to the ground or the pavement or
whatever. Then he unlocks the rollers and you just use the momentum of the airplane to
roll out from under the stuff and leave it laying there. Thump, thump, thump like a
chicken running and laying her eggs. They keep the tailgate coming right back up and
you just keep right on rolling till you’re back down at the other end of the runway, turn
around and go. That’s the effect of making you less easy target, that’s the way I’d put it.

RV: How about offloading troops? How would you handle that?

ME: For offloading troops, you’d have to stop and drop the backdoor and just let
them all scramble out. Talking about loading and unloading, one of the interesting things
that—I don’t know that it was ever a written policy, but the statement was pretty well
understood that when you went in to haul some of these Vietnamese civilians and what
have you to move them from one place to another when it was in a hot zone, you’d pull in
and drop the back door down and have as many walk in as could get in and then lift the
door up and go. It was impossible to overload the airplanes with Vietnamese standing
up.

RV: How often did you carry Vietnamese civilians around?
ME: They were moved from time to time in heavy combat areas to give them some protection. Thank goodness that was before the day of suicide bombers.

RV: Right. Let me get this straight. You went in, this is December ’67 is when you went in-country, is that correct?

ME: I went in, in December of ’67 about the mid, probably mid December by the time I got in there and started flying regularly. I got a two-week break about halfway through the tour to come back and see my family. Went back and—

RV: You actually got to come to Miami?

ME: Mm-hmm.

RV: Wow.

ME: They flew me back to San Francisco and I bought my own tickets from there.

RV: Sir, let me ask you about that. This is mid tour so did you get out of your uniform to fly from San Francisco to Miami or did you stay in uniform or how did you handle it?

ME: That’s when you found out how bad things were back here. When I got off the airplane at Travis Air Force Base, the contract airplane that flew us in from Tokyo I guess, down through Alaska and what have you, I was advised to wear civies before I went to the airport over at San Francisco to pick up my airplane to Miami.

RV: That was because they told you, you might encounter some problems?

ME: Yes. San Francisco was a little bit of a hot bed anyway I guess. It would be wise for you to change into civilian clothes before you catch a bus over to the airport in San Francisco.

RV: Did you encounter any problems at all?

ME: No.

RV: Cause they couldn’t tell.

ME: I had on civies.

RV: Right. Okay. What was those two weeks like for you when you came back?

ME: Back in Vietnam you mean?

RV: No. No, when you came back to visit your family for two weeks.
ME: It was wonderful. My wife did not have much to say to me about how they were being hassled off and on when I came back on leave. Not till I came back after the tour that she told me how much they’d had to put up with, particularly the two boys.

RV: At school?

ME: At school, mm-hmm.

RV: What did they have to put up with?

ME: Oh, kids taunting them, you know. Your dad’s over there killing people. Your dad—that kind of stuff. Of course the thing that was a real killer was that the television every night showing all these dead bodies. They kept worrying that they’d see their dad in that bunch.

RV: How old were your boys then? Were they in college or high school?

ME: Oh, no. They were in elementary school.

RV: Oh, in elementary school.

ME: Yeah. Let’s see. Spencer would’ve been about seven, about seven and nine, I guess, eight and ten, in that range.

RV: How about your wife? What kind of trouble did she encounter?

ME: Oh, she mostly encountered it in stores, when people would find out. The kind of thing she’d hear when for whatever reason it would become known that her husband was in Vietnam, someone would have a comment about, “Well, what’s he doing over there?” She had real good support at the church that she was attending and she had real good support from military friends in the area. Most of the neighbors around her were supportive, but you always had these people for whatever the reason might be realize you were military and started talking about the military being a bunch of bad guys. Like I said earlier, she’s a military wife and a good military wife can handle anything or else they wouldn’t last.

RV: Right. That’s true. How much were you aware of what was happening back in the United States when you were over in Vietnam concerning politics, the anti-war protests, just all that stuff that was happening in the late ‘60s?

ME: Well, during the time I was over there, most of what I got was from news magazines. We’d get Newsweek and Time and all those magazines over there. So if you want to take time to read them, you can pretty much stay on top of what the media was
saying anyway. We did get commander’s call updates and things like that in the base theater periodically that let us know what they had to tell us. We got the—my gosh I can’t remember—the Armed Forces newspaper.

RV: *Stars and Stripes?*

ME: *Stars and Stripes.* We got the *Stars and Stripes* just about everyday. I don’t know that—I think they pretty well reported AP (associated press) and the other people so we were getting—we were not in a vacuum.

RV: Right. Okay. What did you think of the media’s coverage of the war?

ME: Well, it seemed to me that they were biased toward the end. I’m not sure about the beginning. I didn’t see as much of it at the beginning, but the real problem with it is that they made it so live for the American people. Wars have always been like that, been gory and bloody and people are getting killed, but reading in the newspaper that some people got killed and seeing them getting killed on the television is two different things. So look out for the next one. We’ve seen right now how things explode when the media gets it so quickly. Our World Trade Center affair and more recently right here in Washington with the snipers that’s been going on, it’s almost like the media takes charge at times. I don’t particularly say that shouldn’t happen because we need that for the state to make our democracy work, but sometimes you want to choke a few of them.

RV: I understand.

ME: Yeah.

RV: Let me ask you a couple of general questions about Vietnam. What was your impression of the country when you first arrived there?

ME: Well, it was very different from the impression I left with because if you noted in the stuff I sent you, I arrived there about a month before, a month and a half before the Tet Offensive.

RV: Yes, sir.

ME: All the aircrews were being housed at a hotel downtown. Our meals were being served in a dining room. We had laundry service. It was really a pretty nice way to do it. With the Tet Offensive they had to pull us all back on base, the air crew members anyway, to have us readily available and not stuck downtown when they need us. That sort of ended my contact with the Vietnamese people for the most part. I don’t
think I mentioned in the notes I gave you, that when the Tet Offensive first began, I had a
course to help defend that hotel I was in.

RV: Really?
ME: Yeah.
RV: What happened?
ME: Well, the Viet Cong moved in and actually were all around us shooting at
the hotel. They had got into the lower level. We had Vietnamese militia type guards.
We had to get shotguns with them. I didn’t do any shooting. I was up on the roof just
watching it all. Excuse me. I’m choking up here. I should’ve sucked a cough drop while
we were stopped. Let me get a sip of coffee here. Yeah I had a little fun. I had my
camera with me and I had my tape recorder with me. So I got up on the roof of the hotel
while the shooting’s going on and was taping the sounds and shooting pictures of it. I
brought that back with me when I came on leave to my family to show it to them. I don’t
know. I may have that somewhere around here. I think I kept the tape. It was on an old
two and a half inch reel. Anyway, that was an aside. We had to move back on base.
What the Air Force did was they brought in a bunch of these modular trailer units where
they can have a room in each with a bathroom and an air conditioner. That’s what the
aircrew would stay in.

RV: So you had pretty nice private quarters?
ME: Yeah. I had a little cubicle about maybe ten by ten and a bathroom, but it
was certainly adequate and being air-conditioned and being separate like that, it was quiet
so you could sleep during the day. That was why they had to do it. They had to have
something that when you’re on that rotating shift that you can get your crew rested.

RV: How much contact did you have with the Vietnamese civilians?
ME: Well, very little after that Tet Offensive began because we were restricted to
post. The only civilians you see there are the ones that were working there that had been
vetted and what have you. I had not much contact after that. The little bit of contact I
had, I thought they were pretty nice people. The Vietnamese that I met since then who of

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RV: Let’s talk about the Tet Offensive. What was your experience with that? You’ve already described your initial experience with it, but what happened out at Tan Son Nhut and you’re out there?

ME: Well, once they managed to get a convoy in and got us out of the hotel and got us back on base—

RV: How long were you there at the hotel waiting?

ME: Just a day, a day and a half I guess. They got in pretty quick with it. They needed us down there to fly so they had to come and get us. Then I suppose probably it may well have been the next morning when I was—my crew time had one of those two o’clock in the morning goes. We were about half way through our preflight getting anything ready to go when the Viet Cong attacked the air field at Tan Son Nhut. They came in big time with rockets, machine guns. Airplanes were easy targets. They were just lined up, both fighters and cargo. Pretty soon they had airplanes burning everywhere.

RV: Were you actually in your plane or were you—

ME: We were at the plane and out on the ramp by each airplane. They had a little small sandbag type dug out sort of thing. Of course when the first rocket hit, I called for the crew to get in the sandbag. I was in the cockpit with the co-pilot and the engineer. We scrambled down and got in. The loadmaster came around and got in. Three was four of us, five of us I guess. Yeah, five of us. No. Five of us. Pilot, Co-pilot, engineer, navigator, loadmaster. For about thirty minutes, we took a continuous barrage of these rockets coming in, spattering places all over. The airplanes were beginning to burn up and down there. The rocketing had become less intense. I suggested to the crew that we—since we were out there—that we try to get some of the airplanes that had not caught fire yet and pull them off the line and move them down in a dark area down the line on a taxi way to try to keep them from burning. So that’s what we did. I think I took the loadmaster with me and the co-pilot took the flight engineer. The navigator went with one of the other of us. Anyway we moved the airplanes several, two, three, my memory’s not all that good anymore, but we moved several airplanes that were sitting between burning airplanes you might say and got them out the way. In the process of doing that, we discovered some people who’d been injured by the shrapnel and
stuff. So we took a pickup truck that had been left there by somebody when it started, loaded those guys up, three or four of them, and hauled them over to the base hospital. Then we got back down to our dugout at the flight line about daybreak. It was a pretty interesting night.

RV: Did you have any weapons with you?

ME: We had our, just our 38s revolvers, ones we only had when we were flying.

RV: So that was basically—after that night was over, how soon did things return to normal operations there at Tan Son Nhut?

ME: Well, by noon the next day the troops had pushed the Viet Cong back off the airfield and got them back out, far enough out that they couldn’t lay rockets down on it anymore. Then the big thing was the clean up. It was really a mess. Within a day or two we were flying again with the airplanes that we had. We were pretty severely crippled by lack of planes. Of course what they did was they flew other airplanes in from Mactan and Okinawa and what have you to replace the ones that couldn’t fly.

RV: After Tet did your frequency of missions increase?

ME: I’m trying to remember if we brought in anymore. I don’t recall that we actually brought in anymore air crews than we’d been bringing in. I think what we saw was a diversion of the use of them, different uses of them.

RV: Right. What was that?

ME: They just prioritize the flights to back up the need for moving troops and what have you. Less cargo and more troop movements, that kind of thing. We had a tremendous capability to build up over there with all the C-130s and the C-123s. We moved a lot of people around.

RV: What were your general impressions of the enemy, of the Viet Cong and of NVA?

ME: I had respect for their fighting abilities. You had to to see what they were doing against the odds they were working against. I don’t have any first hand experience to evaluate how well they were trained or anything else. I didn’t ever have to work at that level. I did get out in the field some for about two months, I guess, when I took an assignment as a forward airlift commander to work the end of my year over there. I was working with a team of, communications team, of the Air Force Blue Berets. We had a
couple of jeeps and about a six of those guys. We would go into, let’s say there was
gonna be a big movement of troops from one point to another point, we would go into the
point where they were coming and act as the air traffic controller for bringing the
airplanes in and making sure they unloaded as quick as they could and got back off to
make room for the others to come in type thing. I’m bounced around to two or three
spaces out in the field with that. That was kind of interesting. It was also, you know, you
had to really be watching because by then you were out there where you could step on a
landmine or all kinds of things. I had to let those boys tell me how to do it. They were
trained and I wasn’t. That was an interesting part, but they pulled me back in after about
three assignments or four assignments on that and gave me a job right there at Tan Son
Nhut as a coordinator, I guess you’d call it, between the 824th Air Division and our 774th.
The 824th Air Division was running everything in Vietnam. Our tactical air lift wing was
furnishing them materials so there had to be somebody on site that coordinated the
scheduling and the requirements and that kind of thing. Again being a lieutenant colonel
with now eight months or so experience there, they gave me that job. That was kind of
interesting.

RV: Now did you volunteer to take the field job to go out there or did they assign
that job?

ME: Yeah. I didn’t have to take it, but I was asked if I’d go and I said, “Sure.”

That’s one more way to see what it’s like.

RV: Anything really memorable happen when you were out in the field? Do you
remember?

ME: I was up at—I’m trying to remember the name of the—there was a little site
we were on moving a bunch of Marines in right up against the North Vietnamese border
about three or four miles south of the border. I was up there about five days. We took
fire every night. You were sleeping in the little shack type thing. Right by your cot you
could roll right into a trench along side of it. We brought in a lot of troops up there on
the move and then we moved on somewhere else. We were taking rocket fire from some
guys out in the boondocks there.

RV: What—

ME: And—
RV: Go ahead. I’m sorry.

ME: No.

RV: When you were flying some of these recent fly missions and picking people up and doing things, did you pick up KIAs (killed in action)?

ME: Yeah. That was always your priority. Any mission you were on, if you had combat break out and they had severely wounded or wounded people, when they called, you would be aborted from what you were doing to go take care of that. I remember one night I was pretty far north. I had actually delivered the stuff I took up and was just about empty coming back down. I got a call to go into a firefight and pick up some wounded and get them down to, I guess it was Da Nang or Nha Trang, one or the other where they could be transported by helicopter out to the Navy Hospital Ship. So we pitched and went in. It was one of these little strips that were lighted with flare pots, not your favorite landing place. We went in and got on the ground and we just shut down one engine, didn’t—no, we didn’t shut down any engines. We just shut them all the way back and dropped the back end. They brought in three or four guys in body bags and then four or five more that were pretty severely wounded. We got them strapped in to litters. By the time I got on the ground, my loadmaster and engineer had already rigged the back in to take wounded. They had the litters down, the straps ready, everything in place. They walked them in, laid them in there. They strapped them and we pulled up the door and we were rolling, getting out of there. Took them on over to—dropped them off. When I rolled out at the end of the runway and turned, they had me stop and drop the door and the helicopter pitched right behind me and picked these guys up. From the time they were wounded to the time they were in that hospital off shore, it couldn’t have been more than an hour, hour and ten minutes.

RV: Wow, very efficient.


RV: How did you feel carrying the wounded and the body bags?

ME: You don’t feel good about it, but that’s the consequence. You’re glad it’s not you, I guess, even though you don’t want to say that. That feeling always crosses your mind.
RV: Going back to your life at Tan Son Nhut, did you feel like you had enough supplies there, food, anything you would need for every day life?

ME: Oh, yeah. By the time I went over there, Rich, in ’68 or late ’67, ’68, this war had been going on for a long time. They had hauled a lot of stuff in. Whatever mistakes came out early on had been pretty well fixed, I think. It was all running, I thought, real good. So some little side lights about it, nice things that happened, there were at least two maybe three times I went over to officer’s club for dinner. I’m sitting there with my navigator and my co-pilot getting our meal and ol’ Tex Ritter ambles up and pulls up a chair and says, “How’s it going boys?” He was my favorite. These guys, a lot of them would come over there and just spend a week or ten days. Sometimes they would make arrangements to get on an airplane and fly out and talk to the boys out in the boondocks. I always, I thought highly of that man ever since.

RV: What did you guys do for entertainment? Did you have USO (United Service Organization) shows? Officer’s club?

ME: Well, the USO shows that they had if they had them at Tan Son Nhut always came when I was up in the air or somewhere else I guess. I never caught one there, but we delivered these people all over Vietnam to give their shows. They would fly in there and we’d pick them up and haul them up to Nha Trang or Da Nang or one of the other fairly good sized bases where they could do their show. They would do it and—

RV: Do you remember any of the people? Anybody come to mind that you remember taking around?

ME: Welch. The lady with the—

RV: Raquel Welch?

ME: Raquel Welch. Yeah. We took Raquel Welch up one time.

RV: Did she sit up near you guys or did she stay back in the back?

ME: She sits anywhere she wants to.

RV: Did you fight over where you wanted—? (Both laugh)

ME: Actually that happened to be the day I was putting the people on the airplanes. One of the other guys got to fly her. I did get to escort her out and get her on it. Bob Hope was over there, but I never did see him, but he came through during that time. A lot of the troopers came in to play for the troops. Johnson came in. That was a
big command performance. He came in to Da Nang. I guess that was our biggest strip
over there. We had to fly people in from all over South Vietnam so he’d have a big
crowd.

RV: Oh, really?
ME: Yeah. I brought a C-130 load up from somewhere and sat out there till the
speech was over and then load them up and took them back.

RV: Did you get to listen to the speech?
ME: Nope.

RV: Did you guys fly anywhere else in the Southeast Asian theater besides
Vietnam?
ME: Oh, yeah. I flew a few missions up to Korea, several to Japan, Okinawa,
Thailand. We were in and out of Thailand fairly often. We didn’t go into Cambodia.
We’d over fly it occasionally, but I didn’t ever go into Cambodia.

RV: Did you ever fly Laos occasionally, I guess, going over to Thailand?
ME: Never went into Laos or Cambodia.

RV: Okay. What experience did you have with ARVN (Army of the Republic of
Vietnam) or with any of the native or indigenous forces that we were training and
supporting there?
ME: In my case, just about none. We had no training requirement levied on us to
work with them. It was strictly being done by the training teams that were sent over there
for that purpose.

RV: Did you hear anything, any rumors, any scuttlebut about the South
Vietnamese military?
ME: Most of the things we heard was that they trained out pretty well and what
have you which amazed me when we left at how quickly they folded.

RV: What do you think of your overall leadership in Vietnam, not yours
personally, but your immediate supervisors and then overall?
ME: I was pretty well satisfied with it. I thought they did a good job. They kept
us well informed of what we were trying to accomplish and how we were trying to do it
and made sure we had the resources to do it. No complaint in that direction.
RV: Did you witness any alcohol or drug abuse? I guess, well, alcohol is a drug, but did you see any of this?

ME: Like everybody else I’ve read all these stories about how the troops got into it, but I tell you what’s the gospel truth, I didn’t see it in the Air Force units that I was around over there. I think that the reason is that we were not stuck there like the GIs were. We were in and out. We did our sixteen days and we were back to the Philippines. We had a nice little officer’s club, nice little enlisted club and the guys could sit around and have a few beers and then they’d go in again, you know. I think the attraction of the drugs was just not as much there for the guys in the Air Force as it was for the people who had to be out there in the bushes.

RV: Did you ever encounter any racial issues there?

ME: No. None at all. I had an African-American navigator for a good while. He was really good.

RV: But no problems?

ME: No. I had at one time or another I had black loadmasters and what have you that were working with me. These guys were all professionals.

RV: Did you ever have any exposure or were you ever around Agent Orange?

ME: I’m sure I was around it because I landed on the air base where it was being flown from several times and on occasion would walk over to take a look, see what they were doing, when I had a little few minutes between flights. Now, I did not fly or spray it, but I think you may have noted in the things I sent you that I’ve been involved in the Air Force’s twenty-year health study following up on that. By the way, I’m going out, end of January for a twentieth and final session on that, a twentieth year and final session to Scripps Clinic in La Jolla, California. Up to now, it appears that the Air Force people who were involved in working with the Agent Orange, for the most part have not suffered any great problems with it, but there has been definite link established to what we would call adult onset diabetes. Most of the other things that have troubled the ground troops didn’t happen to the Air Force people because when they went to work in the morning and worked with that stuff, when they went home that afternoon they had a shower. They didn’t have to leave it on. Because they were working with it, they were more aware of the hazards of it and more careful about the handling. Those poor GIs that got it sprayed
RV: Yeah. It is a different problem. What would you consider was the bravest action that you witnessed while you were in Vietnam?

ME: I think probably the bravest action that I know of, and I’m looking at the flying people with this, would be two or three of our guys that literally landed with stuff exploding around them to pick up GIs who were trapped and get them out. I have no idea how many times that happened, but quite often. In only one case am I aware that the aircrew got killed trying to do that. He landed and got his load on which was about two thirds Vietnamese with a few Americans and just at lift off took a direct hit apparently with a rocket and just balled up. Another one, this one was not necessarily, I guess, the bravest thing, a friend of mine died on a run down in the A Shau Valley not too far ahead of me. He had a load of ammunition on board. Apparently he got his rear door down and was on his final approach in to drop the stuff out. He was hit by machine guns I gather from what little bit they could figure out. It messed up his elevator so that he could not bring the nose of the airplane up. It just kept flying into the jungle. He flew right over the drop zone at about one hundred and fifty feet and into the jungle beyond it. He had, I think, two French newspaper reporters on board with him.

RV: Looking back at your Vietnam experience, is there anything you would change about it today?

ME: There’s nothing that I personally would change about the way mine went. I think that it was a difficult assignment in some ways, but I was doing my duty for my country as it was said at the time. That’s what I was in the military for. It was my career. I personally think that I did a good job for them over there. I have nothing there to apologize for or maybe nothing to brag about either.

RV: Well, you underwent quite a bit there. How did you get your orders to leave Vietnam? Your one year tour was up and you—

ME: Well, I actually, I was over—I was telling you about being over there at the end of my tour as the liaison officer or coordinating officer between my group and the 824th Air Division. You’re always indispensable, right? If you noted, I went over in
November and I left at the end of December to come back. I began to question the fact that I didn’t think I was all that indispensable, particularly since I wanted to be home for Christmas. The wing commander says, “We gotta get you out of here.” So he did.

RV: Do you remember your flight out of country? How did you feel when you actually left Vietnam, the ground and airspace?

ME: Well, I felt pretty good about it. I flew the airplane back.

RV: Oh, you did?

ME: I told them I wanted one last flight so they let me bring the aircraft commander with me, let me fly it back out and landed it at Clark Field, Philippines. We had been moved from Mactan to Clark by then. Walked off the airplane and I was pretty sure from what I’d been told that that would be the last flight I’d ever make in the Air Force. So that’s why I wanted to do it. I came back to the Pentagon and assigned in the Foreign Military Training Division there as an officer on staff. There’s so many Air Force officers in the Pentagon that only about ten percent of them are allowed to continue flying. They don’t have the resources to let you keep flying. So about the first thing I learned when I checked in was that I was grounded.

RV: How did you feel about that?

ME: Well, the first thing I wanted to know was am I still gonna get my money. They said, “Oh, yeah. Technically, you’re not grounded, you’re just not”—they had a term for it that I don’t even remember now but, “You’re not grounded, but you’re not gonna fly airplanes, but we’re gonna keep on paying you.”

RV: That’s a good deal I guess.

ME: I couldn’t argue with that.

RV: Right. Did you have any problems transitioning back into—you didn’t go right back to civilian life, but did you have problems transitioning back from Vietnam to the United States?

ME: No. No. My work at the Pentagon was in many ways a continuation of what I’d been doing over there because we were doing all the planning and what have you for the training of the Vietnamese Air Force. I teamed up with Don Krekelburg on that one and we worked. We were back over there a time or two coordinating after that over the next three or four years. Then when the whole thing went down the tubes, Don
called me. He had retired and was down in Alabama then. I had retired and was teaching
in the public schools here in Fairfax County, teaching World History, World Geography
any surprise? Anyway, he called up and he says, “Myron, you listening to the news?” I
said, “Yeah, Don.”

RV: Was this April ’75?

ME: Yeah. I said, “Doesn’t sound like we did a very good job, does it?” He
says, “Well, I’ll tell you it really hurts to see all the work we put in that go down the
tubes.” Cause we had a lot of the planning and what have you effort to get that
Vietnamese Air Force on it’s own when we pulled out. So anyway, that’s the way it
went. I have to say that when I came back I sort of put all of this behind me and put it out
of my mind to tell you the truth, Rich. In order to, I had to really go back and do a lot of
research just to fill out that questionnaire that we’ve been working from here and get it all
together, dates, times, places, names. I had pushed it out—much the same as I try to do
Labrador. I’m not one that tends to have nightmares about things like that and what have
you. I rate my career in the Air Force as the best thing that could’ve ever happened to
me.

RV: I was gonna ask you about that. Your decision way back when you finished
your maritime duties and you got in the Air Force, it sounds like you’ve had a very
productive and full career.

ME: This will probably cap that for you. My wife and I moved into this place we
are now called Falcon’s Landing in ’96 right around my seventieth birthday. This is a
retirement community, about four hundred and fifty of us of all retired military officers
from all services. It’s been fantastic to get back with all these guys. We’ve got
everything from a four star general down to a few majors. It’s a great community to live
in and we’re really having a nice older late life experience here.

RV: That’s wonderful. That’s wonderful to hear.

ME: I turned seventy-six last month.

RV: Wow.

ME: So I’ve got a lot to look back from.

RV: Yes, sir. What are your perceptions of Vietnam today? When you hear
about the country, see the country on the news?
ME: I think it’s just waiting to be opened and I don’t know why we aren’t pushing a little more to do that than we seem to be. It looked like a golden opportunity to me right now to go in and get the country turned around and more on a road to a more democratic form of government than they have. They’re a bright people. They’re a nice looking people and it’s just a shame that more can’t be done for them. The Vietnamese that have migrated over here that I’ve had contact with in the school system and I taught for four years and became a guidance counselor for another fourteen or fifteen before I retired completely. My Vietnamese students by and large were terrific. With that kind of raw material to work with, it’s a shame that we can’t get that place opened up to where their educational system will be better than it appears to be anyway and give them a chance. China’s breaking out now. Maybe we ought to try to help Vietnam break out.

RV: What do you think about the United States policy towards Vietnam looking back at it in retrospect?

ME: You mean following the end of the war?

RV: Yes, sir. This is kind of looking at it in general, what are your overall impressions of it?

ME: I think we did what we had to do for the first ten, fifteen years anyway, with the POW problems that were there and what have you. Look at how we handled Europe when World War II was over. I see that kind of approach as the way to try to do it. It took a long time for Russia to come around, but it looks like maybe they’re coming now.

RV: Have you read any good books on Vietnam that you would recommend to people that you find authentic or worthy of people reading?

ME: I really haven’t.

RV: How about movies? Some of these movies that have been coming out on the war, I mean, starting back in ’79 with Apocalypse Now coming all the way to We Were Soldiers which came out just this past year.

ME: I haven’t seen We Were Soldiers yet. I guess, I’ll have to get to see that.

When we have movies here at the community, every Wednesday night, I’ll put that one on the list to bring in.

RV: So We Were Soldiers is the name of it.

ME: I’ve seen the advertisements and the write-ups on it.
RV: No other movies about Vietnam stick out in your mind?
ME: The one about the riverboats in Vietnam, the Navy river boats.
RV: Okay. Was that *Apocalypse Now*?
ME: Yeah.
RV: The guy was going up the river?
ME: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That one I did see. I was intrigued with it, particularly
now since Senator Carey has got his problems with it and Admiral Zumwalt’s son
supposedly died from Agent Orange that he got on the river. Like I said, I kind of put it
behind me. I didn’t go looking. Once Vietnam fell I was crushed I guess.
RV: Are there any songs that when you hear on the radio today remind you of
your time in Vietnam?
ME: Yes. At our little officer’s club at Mactan Island we had Filipino music
groups come by two or three nights a week to play for us. One particular group, a trio
with a young lady appeared to be about eighteen to twenty years old I especially liked,
but she’d come in and sing that song *Strangers in the Night*. I could just sit there and
shiver. The Filipino people are especially talented in music I think. They had some of
the best groups. We had a large number of them were imported into Vietnam to play for
us over there in the officer’s clubs and that kind of thing. They were really good.
RV: Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam and see?
ME: I haven’t had any great desire to go back. My wife and I both have wanted
to travel since we got out of service and we’ve done all over Europe and the
Mediterranean. We’ve traveled some in Central [and] South America a little bit, but
we’ve never had much of an inclination to go to the Far East. Going to Honolulu in
February.
RV: Okay. Getting closer. What kind of lessons do you think the United States
learned from Vietnam?
ME: Well, I think we’ve learned that you better marshal your resources and apply
them when you go into one of these things or else you better not go. We saw that in the
Gulf War. It worked like a jewel. Now we’ve got to see how well they’re doing it with
Iraq, I guess. The idea of the piece meal build up, add a little more pressure. If that
doesn’t work, add a little more pressure, didn’t work worth a damn over there. I just got
sad, just felt like we never really went in there to win the war. We had the means and the
assets to end that war almost from day one and we just didn’t use it.

RV: Why do you think we didn’t use it?

ME: Oh, well, Johnson being the good politician wanted guns and butter both, I
guess, and didn’t seem willing to bring on the sacrifice it would have taken to get on with
it and get it over with. That’s just the feeling I have.

RV: What do you think the most significant thing was that you learned while in
Vietnam or is there something that sticks out in your mind that you personally learned
while there?

ME: I can’t put a finger on any significant thing that I learned there other than be
alert and be careful.

RV: Okay. If you were to walk into a classroom today, you know a college
classroom or a high school classroom and you were to have to tell young people today
about Vietnam, what would you tell them?

ME: I think about the best I can do is what I’ve been doing with you here today is
to tell them about my experiences and then try to draw a conclusion from that. I think
that Vietnam could be a self-sufficient and productive country from what I could see
there. They have a climate that’ll permit agriculture. They have the land that will
support agriculture. They certainly have—if they wanted to try to get in the tourist
business, have the natural attractions in terms of their beaches and their mountains. Why
these things haven’t developed, I don’t know. You know what? I was down in Belize
last week on a cruise with my wife. Belize is in worse shape than Vietnam.

RV: Really?

ME: It’s a small little country, but it’s poor. I mean, gee, it’s poor. I guess
there’s a lot of places in the world like that, but Belize is going to develop because
they’ve opened up to tourism now. They make an arrangement to handle as many cruise
ships as’ll come bring money. It’s such a small country. That’s gonna have a huge
impact for them because I think the brochure that I picked up said there were only two
hundred and seventy thousand people in the country.

RV: Sir, is there anything else you’d like to add to this interview or you need to,
feel like you want to say?
ME: I think not. If someone is listening to this twenty years from now, I want them to know that the Americans that I knew in Vietnam were all serious about doing their job and doing it well. I know we’ve had stories about the fragging of the officers and what have you in some of the other services, but I didn’t see any of that. The guys that I dealt with were all very professional and competent. That’s about as much as I can say about it I guess.

RV: Okay. Thank you, sir. We’ll end the interview now.