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Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with William Tilton
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
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Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

NOTE: Text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner, conducting an oral history interview with
2 Mr. William Tilton. I am in Lubbock, Texas. Mr. Tilton is in Washington, D.C., is that
3 right?

4 William Tilton: Correct.

5 SM: Okay. It is the 24th of August, year 2000 at approximately 9:10 Lubbock
6 time. Mr. Tilton, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of
7 yourself?

8 WT: Yes, I was born in Adams County, Pennsylvania near Gettysburg and raised
9 by a father who was in the Air Force. World War II he was in the Army air corps and
10 then went back for the air lift and so forth so I had extensive background in that, and
11 went to Germany and various places with them so that by the time I was of an age to look
12 for employment coming out of college I was already interested in the Air Force and in
13 aviation. I wanted to go to work right away out of college; in fact, I was in Wichita Falls,
14 Texas where my father was stationed at the time and the draft was still very much alive
15 and I was a prime candidate. This was in 1960, or actually early '61. I applied for jobs
16 in Wichita Falls. I appeared to be very attractive to some employers but they all said I
17 had to have my discharge papers before they could put me through the training program
18 and so I realized that I was going to have to go into the service and check with the Army
19 for a short tour and nothing was appealing there and found out that the Air Force offered

1 a commissioning program so that's what I did. I enlisted for purposes of training, went to
2 San Antonio to Lackland Air Force Base and 3 months later I was a 2nd lieutenant in the
3 Air Force with orders to Reese Air Force Base at Lubbock for pilot training.

4 SM: So for you, joining the Air Force was in part I guess family tradition, the
5 fact that your father was in the Air Force, and also that you realized that you were going
6 to be drafted eventually so you kind of had control over what happens to you in that
7 respect? Was that a factor at all?

8 WT: Yeah, actually I wanted to go to California and get in the movie industry as
9 a cameraman, but I realized that was pretty unlikely to happen and my resources weren't
10 very great and as I say, I did have...I was fond of the Air Force. As I realized that I
11 wasn't going to be a dependent anymore, I was going to be away from it, I realized that I
12 liked it very much. So, I did have a tendency to want to get in the Air Force.

13 SM: Okay, now what was the training like for you at Lackland and what did that
14 encompass? What were the most challenging aspects of it?

15 WT: Well the training was a fairly new program. It was officer training school
16 which was designed to replace the officer candidate school that they'd had before which
17 is twice as long and mainly designed for enlisted people to get commissioned. Officer
18 training school was...required a college degree and it was mainly to take care of...well, I
19 learned later that the Air Force designed it to be very flexible. Being only 3 months, they
20 could change the size of the classes and control the rate of input officers into the service.
21 But, it was billed as being a very straight forward, no nonsense training course and that's
22 what it turned out to be. There was no hazing and so forth. There was an upper class and
23 a lower class and you had to go through the usual good training things like inspections
24 and drill and so forth, but it was also sort of a gentleman's version of a training course.
25 We did go through the obstacle course with the enlisted men and we had to do things to
26 teach us military discipline, but I thought it was great training.

27 SM: There weren't any disciplinary problems or anything like that when you
28 were going through that training? Anybody have a hard time coping with it?

29 WT: No, not at all. It was you know, you expect – you see movies of military
30 training – so you expect it to be a little rough and they make sure you aren't disappointed,
31 but it helps you to appreciate what you can do and put up with and its just like all good

1 military training; when you come out, you feel like you've been tested and not found
2 wanting.

3 SM: What was the physical training like?

4 WT: Well of course we had athletic activities and it wasn't...I mean, it was as
5 strenuous as any program. We had done a lot of sports and running and a lot of drill out
6 in this drill field in the afternoons. Yeah.

7 SM: A lot of push-ups, sit ups, and pull ups, that sort of stuff?

8 WT: Yeah.

9 SM: Did you feel that it was effective in getting you physically prepared for the
10 rigors of flight school?

11 WT: Yeah, I did, and that continued in flight school, too. But yeah, I was...I've
12 never been very athletic, so it was a little bit challenging for me. At Shepherd before I
13 went in I tried to build up my stamina somewhat and it was trying at times, you know, but
14 I expected that and let's say I wasn't disappointed.

15 SM: What was the daily physical regimen like? I mean, like how many miles
16 per day and that kind of stuff?

17 WT: I don't remember.

18 SM: Okay.

19 WT: It doesn't seem as though we had an awful lot of track work. It wasn't an
20 intensively physical program. Academics was a stress more than physical.

21 SM: And what did they stress? What was the stress academically?

22 WT: Let me see, they covered Air Force history, a lot of doctrine, and we got
23 some introduction to space. We had a lot of leadership courses and there was also some
24 international relations and some things to teach us how the government works and where
25 our place was in the government, what the meaning of being an officer is, and how it fits
26 in with the political functioning of our country, really; stress on the civilian control of the
27 military, and things like that.

28 SM: What about the emphasis of the training that you received there, especially
29 the course work, the academic aspects, on the historical use of air power, the efficacies of
30 air power, or the problems with using air power, the limits of air power, and that type of
31 issue? Was there much of that?

1 WT: There was a pretty good coverage of the higher-level doctrinal concepts that
2 you're talking about. There was none of the tactical. In fact, I've always thought the Air
3 Force was fairly short on tactical training as contrasted with the Army which has always
4 taught battlefield tactics, you know, but the Air Force leaves the tactical to people who
5 are in specific types of operations. So, we got a lot of the political and philosophical
6 background, the strategic...some strategic philosophy or concepts.

7 SM: Do you remember a discussion of Douhet?

8 WT: Yes. Douhet was mentioned and if you had mentioned some other names
9 I'd probably recognize them. My mind isn't that great. They did definitely give us
10 reading materials and lectures on - let me see, Admiral Mayhan was another one about 4
11 or 5 prominent names in classical and in recent military theory.

12 SM: And what about since you went in in the early 1960s, was there much
13 discussion about the recent applications or uses of air power in particular World War II
14 and then the post war study - the strategic bombing survey - that was done, and then in
15 the Korean War; the differences between the use of tactics or strategy, air strategy?

16 WT: I don't remember much discussion of the Korean War. The Air Force, at
17 that time, was mostly interested in strategic warfare and the strategic bombing survey of
18 World War II was mentioned and I already knew about that because my father was an
19 intelligence officer in World War II and he'd talked to me about that. He was very
20 interested in...he had been in 8th Air Force in England and he was very interested in the
21 outcomes of that study. But, I don't recall that the Korean War was taught very much. It
22 was mostly World War II and then the cold war, the strategic bombing and missile...well,
23 I don't think missile was taught too much. We were talking about bombing, really, and
24 mutually assured destruction that we were...I think that was talked about then. I think
25 I've got that...I may have been introduced to that in squadron officer's school later on,
26 but that I can't recall. I'm mixing those things up, maybe.

27 SM: What was your father's opinion in the discussions that you had with him
28 about the strategic bombing survey? The outcome of that study, of course was rather
29 interesting and controversial, whether or not the bombing was truly effective, the
30 strategic bombing in World War II. What was his particular interpretation? Do you
31 recall?

1 WT: Yes. I remember him telling me that he spoke with a German factory
2 manager after he was there in the occupation after the war and discussed with him how
3 effective the bombing was and he said if a bomb took out a lathe during the night or lathe
4 squad the next day, they would just rope off that lathe and then go on working. He told
5 me that story to illustrate that it wasn't nearly as effective as some of the photos made
6 them think it was. He also told me that they were astounded to find out that while they
7 were out going after ball bearings thinking that would bring the German industry down,
8 that really the survey found that the electric power grid of Germany would have been
9 much more vulnerable and if they'd gone after that they may have achieved what they
10 were trying to do with the ball bearings. But, he felt that they were more effective than
11 the bombing survey seemed to conclude. I guess that would be natural.

12 SM: And what did you think of the bombing survey as a young officer in the
13 Air Force?

14 WT: What did I think of the bombing survey? Well, I suppose I thought it was a
15 useful thing. I don't remember thinking it was wrong. I have a copy of it, actually, that I
16 found at an antique store, but I thought it was very interesting and the conclusions were
17 probably pretty close. I realized that my father had a vested interest in saying that it was
18 more effective than the survey did. He realized it, too.

19 SM: Now while we're on the subject I'd like to keep with this thread. How did
20 that effect your perceptions of American policy as it unfolded in Vietnam, because of
21 course the emphasis became really strategic bombing, the progressive squeeze to talk, the
22 targeting from the White House of particular areas of north Vietnam or the Ho Chi Minh
23 Trail, but a very strong emphasis on the use of air power to try to effect some kind of
24 change in Southeast Asia?

25 WT: Yeah, of course we had the rules of warfare, or not the rules of warfare but
26 the principles of warfare taught to us at officer training school and I felt that early on in
27 the Vietnam War our leadership was trying to avoid the rules of the principles that had
28 been handed down through history trying to fight a war without fighting a war and
29 ignoring those principles that nobody had ever proven wrong before. The principles of
30 surprise, of mass, were ignored. Early in that period I thought perhaps that the political
31 needs over shadowed the principles, but as the war went on I decided that that wasn't true

1 and that they shouldn't have got in it at all if they didn't intend to fight it as a war. They
2 shouldn't it was criminal, really, to subject the military to throw us into a battle that they
3 would not allow us to fight the way battles have to be fought. I felt as though
4 the...particularly Secretary McNamara was not only naïve but unschooled in warfare and
5 yet was obstinate and I felt that back then that it was obstinately clinging in what he
6 believed in, that it was wrong. The F-111 development was an indication of how he
7 would conduct himself because the military came to him – I think it was 3 times the Air
8 Force came to him – and said that the F-111 that they chose was not the one that they
9 thought we should buy and each time he told them to go back and think about it some
10 more because he wanted that one and finally he just overruled the Air Force and said,
11 “This is the one we’re going to buy.” That, I think, should have told us something
12 because the same thing happened with targeting policy and conduct of bombing [pauses]
13 and things. The military knew better, but Secretary of Defense - being the command
14 authority - overruled it in every case, and of course in our country the military’s obliged
15 to obey that and that’s as it should be. But, I don’t think Mr. McNamara was the right
16 man for the job at that time.

17 SM: Now do you think there was some initial enthusiasm towards McNamara
18 because, if I understand correctly, his background was actually in the Air Force when
19 World War II was targeting, or with the Army Air Corps because it wasn’t the Air Force
20 yet?

21 WT: I don't know. I didn't know that, or if I did I've forgotten it. I just know him
22 as an automobile executive.

23 SM: Yeah, right, as the former CEO of Ford Motor Company.

24 WT: Yeah, and I knew he was a good manager and that’s the way...if there was
25 any enthusiasm that I heard in the Air Force it was that he would help us to be efficient
26 and as soon as we actually got into a shooting war, that melted away. I don’t recall
27 people having much admiration for him after that. We didn’t realize, I don’t think we
28 realized that President Johnson didn’t necessarily agree with that. I think President
29 Johnson may have...I found out recently that he did not agree with the proofs of some of
30 the bombing pauses and some of the gradualism that McNamara was using but since it

1 was his Secretary of Defense he gave him free reign to do it, but I thought it was Mr.
2 Johnson's responsibility also so I blame them both at the time.

3 SM: So when did you finish your training at Lackland, the officer training
4 school?

5 WT: It would have been the 8th of August in 1962... '61.

6 SM: '61?

7 WT: Yeah.

8 SM: Okay. And then you went on to undergraduate pilot training at Reese?

9 WT: Yeah. Actually, I went to survival school first because there wasn't a slot at
10 pilot training and they had to do something with several of us so they sent us out to Reno
11 to Stead Air Force Base before they moved the school.

12 SM: Reno, Nevada?

13 WT: Yep.

14 SM: For I guess primarily desert survival training?

15 WT: No, it was the main Air Force survival school, which is now up in Spokane.
16 It was general survival. I mean, they taught us the theory of all water survival and arctic
17 survival and everything.

18 SM: Was it called SERE at the time, survival escape and resistance evasion?

19 WT: That doesn't sound familiar.

20 SM: Oh, okay. It was just survival school?

21 WT: Yeah.

22 SM: Okay. Did they emphasize any particular area where you would most
23 likely have to?

24 WT: The emphasis in survival school at that time was surviving in the Soviet
25 Union with a lot of lessons learned in Korea taught to us, but it was assumed that you
26 would be on a crew and we went out in crews for our field training and it was like a B-47
27 crew...well, I guess more than that, but it was about 6 or 7 of us on the crew so maybe a
28 B-52 crew and the emphasis was on escape and evasion in European type of environment
29 and the simulated prison experience was also...assumed that you would be a prisoner of
30 either the Soviets or the Chinese.

1 SM: Would you describe that training in particular, in the POW training that
2 you received?

3 WT: Yeah, we were to attempt to escape, we were to attempt to subvert our
4 interrogators by using our wits even though they didn't recommend that; they wanted us
5 to try it to see how it would work out for us. We only spent...I think it was about 48
6 hours, 36 hours, something like that in the prison compound. One of the things they
7 tested us on was chain of command and to see if we really knew who was our...what the
8 chain was. They would take people out and see who became the commander and actually
9 we got down to where two of us had become 2nd lieutenants on the same day and decided
10 who had crossed the stage first to determine who outranked whom. In the interrogation
11 part, they showed how a dossier would probably be kept on us; in fact, they knew that my
12 father was an officer in the Air Force and tried to haze me and say, "Wouldn't your father
13 be proud to see you now looking so stupid," things like that, and mind games that they'd
14 play with us. It was pretty good training. It gave you a chance to see what it might feel
15 like. They had some simulated torture but of course it wasn't, and they did have a box
16 that you had to squeeze into for a while.

17 SM: How long would they keep you in the box?

18 WT: Well, it depended. I didn't stay in there very long. I guess if it seemed to
19 bother you they might leave you in there longer.

20 SM: Okay.

21 WT: There was one guy they said they were telling him they were going to put
22 him in the box until he told something that he was supposed to not tell and he said,
23 "Okay, we're going to put you in the box now. Just knock when you're ready to get out,"
24 meaning when you're ready to tell us. As soon as they locked it, they knocked. They
25 took him out and said, "Well, tell us," and he said, "Oh no!" So, sometimes we played
26 games with them, too. I never really attempted very hard to get out myself. I would get
27 in some groups that were planning escapes. One guy escaped about three or four times
28 and we kept seeing him riding back in the back of a jeep. They played Chinese music
29 and gave us some propaganda speeches over the loud speakers and they didn't let you
30 sleep and we had some...the food that they gave us in the prison camp was just some hot
31 water with...I think they boiled some cabbage in it or something. It was really pitiful.

1 Of course, it wasn't really all that strenuous because you knew you were going to get out
2 very soon, but it was interesting. It wasn't nearly what I'd heard about. Everybody
3 warned you that it was really bad and you'd hate it and they tried to scare you and make
4 you feel apprehensive about it, but it wasn't so bad.

5 SM: And there was not any physical contact between you and your captors or
6 your pseudo-captors?

7 WT: No, not really; threats, but they didn't really do anything.

8 SM: And in the training overall, the survival training overall, what was the most
9 challenging portion for you personally?

10 WT: I'd say the trek, even though I enjoyed it very much. I got real hungry.
11 They put us out there for a week, I think – it seemed like it was a week – and we started
12 with a crew that told you...they'd give us a rabbit which we had to kill, skin, and cook
13 and then after that...we had a little bit of survival rations and some pemmican and things
14 like that, and we had to catch things, whatever we could do, and that survival food started
15 to taste pretty bad after a few days of eating it. But, we were in a game preserve because
16 it was hunting season and over on the California side. They took us from Reno over into
17 California; extremely beautiful area. It was tall pine trees with about two foot diameter
18 trunks and really quite mountainous and we had to...it was a simulation of an escape and
19 an evasion from one area to another, so we had to get from the drop off point to a pick up
20 area without being captured. Of course anybody that got on the roads got captured
21 immediately, had to take a punch and got set back out again. I didn't get captured. I
22 went over some mountains instead of around them, but that was fun. It was strenuous but
23 as I say, it was also very enjoyable. The most challenging thing...well, some people – I
24 guess I came from the country and it didn't bother me – but some people got pretty
25 nervous about being out there with game, I guess and getting lost and so forth. None of
26 that bothered me. I really enjoyed it. I was with...when it came down to a two person
27 team it was my roommate from Reno, from Stead. He was pretty much of an outdoors
28 person also and so we really hit it off. He had smuggled some chewing gum or
29 something which we shared. That was challenging but also very enjoyable. I have fond
30 memories of it.

31 SM: Did you have maps of the area?

1 WT: We had a...probably a 1 to 500,000 scale map. It wasn't very good. It was
2 a contour map but the contour intervals were hundreds of feet, and so that was part of the
3 challenge was to try to figure out from this not very detailed map where you were and to
4 do some good navigation. The other guy's name was Alex. Alex and I both were...we
5 had paid attention in class on the navigation, anyway, and it worked really well. We
6 were very successful and got right where we wanted to be, mostly traveled at night so we
7 wouldn't get captured.

8 SM: What time of year was this?

9 WT: It was in the fall, early fall. Let me see, I graduated in August and I went
10 right out there so I guess it was September and October. I started pilot training in
11 November.

12 SM: Was it getting cold at that time of year?

13 WT: Nights were chilly. I don't remember that being a problem. It would have
14 been more of a problem if it had been hot but it was up high, and no; it was a real good
15 time of year and we had plenty of gear, sleeping bags...or did we? I don't think we had
16 sleeping bags. We just...yeah, we made a bed out of pine boughs, and just laid down.

17 SM: Okay, and what about wild life?

18 WT: I heard some beavers chewing trees down and that was about it. We caught
19 some fish, but we didn't see any small game that we could capture.

20 SM: No large, threatening game either; mountain lions or bears or anything like
21 that?

22 WT: Nope. If they were out there, we didn't see them.

23 SM: Alright, and then after you finished your survival training...is there
24 anything else you wanted to talk about in survival training?

25 WT: No.

26 SM: You thought it was effective?

27 WT: Yes, very.

28 SM: Okay.

29 WT: The academic instruction was excellent and they had a demonstration lab
30 and that was excellent, also.

31 SM: And they taught you how to make traps and snares?

1 WT: And all kinds of things that you can make with parachutes, things that you
2 might have if you went down without a kit, and how to convert pieces of that into useful
3 tools and shelters and things like that.

4 SM: Alright.

5 WT: Also, a lot of first aid things; getting over the gruesomeness of fixing
6 somebody's wound. You can urinate on somebody's wound to clean it, you can set a
7 bone even though you might throw up a couple of times before you do. It tells you to do
8 what you have to do. It was good.

9 SM: And you had to kill the rabbit, eat it?

10 WT: I didn't do it but it wouldn't have bothered me. Like I say, I grew up on a
11 farm...or not on a farm, but in the country. One of the other...actually, we got one of
12 the city boys to do that, to teach him he could do it. Yeah, then we made stew out of it.

13 SM: How long did that last?

14 WT: One meal; one rabbit and 6 or 7 of us, it was gone.

15 SM: Oh, okay, yeah.

16 WT: I didn't like the smell of it. It was real gamy and at the end I borrowed
17 somebody's canteen cup for a cup of coffee – they had a big trashcan full of boiled coffee
18 – and I went to drink out of it and it still smelled of the rabbit stew that I knew he had had
19 a week before and it kind of turned my stomach. That was the worst thing about the
20 rabbit stew was this guy's canteen cup after a week. He hadn't washed it, I guess.

21 SM: How long were you out there?

22 WT: Out on trek? I think it was a week.

23 SM: About a week? Okay. How much weight had you lost by the time you
24 started survival training to the time you finished? Do you recall?

25 WT: No, I don't. I wasn't too heavy in those days so I don't think it was a
26 concern.

27 SM: Did anybody ever get injured?

28 WT: I know I was really hungry when we got back. Go ahead.

29 SM: Did anybody ever get injured or hurt?

30 WT: Not in my class. We heard of some classes where people kind of panicked
31 out on the trek, cases where they got separated from the rest and wouldn't allow

1 themselves to be rescued, and they had to kind of corral them because they kind of got a
2 little bit off their rocker, you know. But, that didn't happen that I'm aware of in my
3 class. Everybody came through fine. I don't even remember a single injury except
4 pinched fingers and things like that.

5 SM: Alright, so you went from there to the UPT [undergraduate pilot] training at
6 Reese Air Force Base?

7 WT: Right.

8 SM: And you mentioned on the questionnaire that you filled out that you thought
9 it was good training in terms of instrument formation flying, instrument training and
10 formation flying, basic skills, but that the military training was redundant and resented?

11 WT: Yeah.

12 SM: Would you explain the type of training you're talking about?

13 WT: Well, of course we were all officers and Reese had recently been an OCS,
14 officer candidate school, type of cadet training. I mean, they were aviation cadets before
15 us. In fact some of our flight instructors called us Mister instead of Lieutenant which was
16 okay, I didn't care about that. What I didn't like was that we had all been through plenty
17 of drill and leadership training and so forth and we felt as if we were trained. Our
18 counterparts that were going into civil engineering and so forth went into whatever it was
19 but we were in pilot training and for some reason the air training command felt it
20 necessary to give us additional leadership training and drill which was a repeat of what
21 we'd already just had. Some of them were ROTC graduates and they'd had 4 years of it,
22 you know, and some of us were from the academy; one or two in my class had washed
23 back from the academy classes and they resented it more than we did, actually. But yeah,
24 we felt as if it was kind an affront. We could have been doing something more useful.
25 But, it was only about 15% of our training.

26 SM: Most of it was flying?

27 WT: Yeah, academics and flying. Pilot training is about half academics.

28 SM: What kind of aircraft did you train on?

29 WT: T-37 and the T-33. Reese was one of the first bases to get the T-38 but that
30 was after I left.

31 SM: And what was most challenging about this training?

1 WT: The most challenging was at the outset. I had never flown except 5 or 10
2 minutes in a Piper Cub once that I paid for in Gettysburg, so the relationship of me to the
3 ground was very strange. It was something my instructor was not at all patient about. It
4 took me several flights to feel as though I realized where I was - hard to explain - and
5 also it seemed as though...I've never been able to explain this to anyone, but I
6 couldn't...I didn't feel right that the airplane was going to fly. I knew it, but one day I
7 just...I'd been taught aerodynamics by that time and I came to picture how the wing was
8 creating lift and once I literally understood the principles I suddenly felt much more
9 comfortable and that was when I got over that challenge which was before I soloed - it
10 was early - and I tried to tell my instructor and he just laughed. He didn't understand
11 what I was talking about. But, from then on the only other...I loved pilot training after
12 that. The next other most challenging thing was instrument flying and I think I made it
13 harder for myself by not applying myself to the academic side of that. I had...if I had
14 done more preparation before each instrument mission, I think I would have learned it
15 much faster and easily. But, it was challenging.

16 SM: And were these daytime flights with hoods or nighttime flights without?

17 WT: Both. I don't recall flying at night with the hood. It wouldn't have made
18 any difference, but instrument flying was hooded in the back seat of a T-33. But, we had
19 night flying in both the 37 and 33.

20 SM: And what happened during your more difficult periods with instrument
21 training? Were there periods where you got lost? What was the outcome?

22 WT: I remember an instrument landing system approach to our Lubbock airport.
23 We used it sometimes because they had an ILS over there and I remember one time when
24 I had to get lined up on it by using the ADF - the automatic direction finder - which is a
25 very antiquated compass system now, but I was fooling around on that ADF trying to get
26 oriented and it wasn't getting any believable indications on the ILS indicator. My
27 instructor said, "Okay, pull your hood back and look out," and when I did I was going
28 across the runway at whatever, 1800 feet right about the control tower and I look down at
29 Lubbock airport and I was just completely...I should have been 6 or 7 miles north of
30 Lubbock airport and I wasn't, and I felt pretty stupid but other than that, actually, it
31 wasn't that bad. I had some trouble doing my mental arithmetic and some of the things

1 that they had us do that they probably don't even bother with anymore, and we also had a
2 range orientation, which is really old history. That was kind of challenging.

3 SM: Could you describe that a little bit, range orientation?

4 WT: Well, in the old days they had radio direction finder. It had four quadrants
5 and you could hear dots and dashes in your earphone depending on which quadrant you
6 were in and so there was a kind of a process you had to go through to fly around
7 that...over the range to eliminate the possibilities until you figured out where you were,
8 or at least which quadrant you were in. I don't remember anymore how you do it, but its
9 time consuming and really, really old fashioned stuff. I don't know why we bothered,
10 really, because I'm sure nobody does it anymore.

11 SM: And what time period were you here at Reese engaged in that training?

12 WT: That was November of '61 until October of '62. Actually, it was mid-
13 October to mid-October; it was a year. 63-C graduated in October '62.

14 SM: And up to this point, what kind of weapons training had you received
15 throughout the entirety of your Air Force training?

16 WT: We fired the .45 automatic pistol at officer training school and again
17 at...I'm pretty sure that's what we had at Reese. I don't think they went to the 30 until I
18 went to special air warfare indoctrination center. So, it was a .45 automatic; no rifle for
19 officers.

20 SM: Throughout the entirety of your time in training?

21 WT: Up to that point. When I went to go to Southeast Asia I got the M-16 and
22 the .38 revolver and lots of orientation to heavier weapons, too. But yeah, up until the
23 time I got out of pilot training the .45 automatic was the only weapons that we had been
24 taught.

25 SM: And all the way up through to this point, had the emphasis been pretty much
26 on the use of strategic air versus tactical air?

27 WT: No. In pilot training, it was more tactical. They were training us to be
28 fighter pilots. Most of the instructors either came from fighters or wished they were in
29 fighters, and you knew that they wanted you to want to be in fighters. That was
30 considered the most aggressive thing and aggressiveness was so valued that it was a
31 grading item on our flight sheet. They didn't want anybody to be...you could, I guess

1 you could look at it as teaching someone to get on an interstate highway and teaching
2 them not to stop on the entrance ramp. They want you to get aggressive, accelerate up to
3 speed, and get out there. That's the way it was in pilot training. They wanted to see
4 somebody who was prepared to plunge right in, but as I say, the fighter pilot was the
5 emphasis there and they kind of actually said derogatory things a lot of times about
6 transports and bombers, crude aircraft. They said it unofficially.

7 SM: That's interesting because at the time as far as the emphasis within the Air
8 Force, how would you describe what the balance was or where the predominance of
9 command support...wasn't it on the strategic side?

10 WT: Definitely.

11 SM: Strategic air command?

12 WT: Definitely was; in fact, SAC was very unhappy about the way air training
13 command was running that I've heard, and I could believe because yeah, SAC was the
14 only command that had spot promotions where people got promoted to at the whim of the
15 local...I don't know how it worked, but I know people got promotions that others
16 couldn't get just because they were on SAC crews and SAC was keeping its people. They
17 weren't rotating into other commands. Everybody knew that, but nevertheless in my
18 class we had one SAC aircraft and it went to the last student in the class. Nobody wanted
19 it.

20 SM: Nobody in your class wanted SAC?

21 WT: They didn't want SAC and they didn't want a B-52.

22 SM: Wow, why?

23 WT: People thought SAC was a terrible place to be, that you didn't have any free
24 reign and you'd be flying in very strict conditions that wouldn't be interesting and
25 challenging and just be very routine.

26 SM: Was there any sense that it was kind of a doomsday type mission?

27 WT: No, I don't think...even though it is a doomsday scenario, I've never heard
28 crews feel too bad about that because everybody assumed that if that came, why the
29 whole country was lost anyway.

30 SM: Right.

1 WT: I think crews always understood that our job was to present such a terrible
2 threat that it was unthinkable to use it. I do need to take a little break.

3 SM: Oh, certainly.

4 WT: Should I just leave you on... [tape pauses here]. Let's see where were we?

5 SM: Well, let me ask you a question real quick about your instructors. You
6 mentioned earlier I guess...well, how many of them had World War II and Korea – or
7 Korean – war experience, and how much did they talk about their particular experiences
8 and lessons learned, things of that nature from their real military war experience?

9 WT: In pilot training, they were pretty young. I think my...probably the flight
10 commander, the senior guy in there, he had Korean War experience. I think there were
11 several others who did, and I don't recall them saying much about it except talking about
12 the early jet fighters and what fuel controls were like, things like that, but not about
13 combat experience. Most of that kind of talk revolved around things that had happened
14 in training people. I don't recall very much...I got that later, but not during pilot training.

15 SM: Okay. And when you got that later, what was the emphasis as far as the
16 lessons learned, do you recall?

17 WT: That would have been when I got in KB-50s and...no, I don't recall it, that
18 we got much...you're talking about tactical lessons learned...no, not really. People
19 talked about the Korean War a lot but it was mostly just anecdotes of exciting things that
20 happened, not useful tactical stuff.

21 SM: How about other things that were going on in the world like the Berlin air
22 lift, or the...oh, let's see, the Cuban Missile Crisis which would have been occurring just
23 as you were leaving that training, and stuff like that?

24 WT: Yeah, in pilot training they were starting to talk about Southeast Asia; in
25 fact, my instructor most of the way through was one guy, a guy named Sides, because he
26 was in T-37s and his ears got bad because the 37s very hard on your ears, so they
27 transferred him to T-33s and he asked for his same students back so when we went over
28 there we had him. He, actually on a cross country we stopped at Shepherd and he met my
29 father and asked him what his opinion was of whether he should volunteer for Vietnam or
30 not. At that time, the Air Force...you had to be what they called blue ribboned. In order
31 to get to Vietnam you had to have someone make you look like you were superior to

1 other people. They only wanted the very best to go to Vietnam and I think he qualified
2 pretty easily; in fact, did volunteer for Vietnam and went over there as an advisor. So, we
3 were talking about that in pilot training as a problem area in the world, that the United
4 States was trying to help out. The insurgency of the Viet Cong was known at that time.
5 There were things in Africa, but I believe they happened a little bit later - in the Congo
6 particularly - and a show of force in Saudi Arabia that occurred when I was in KB-50s.
7 But, that wasn't...let me see, yeah, there was some talk about the Berlin air lift which my
8 father had been the intelligence officer for, and maybe that's why we talked about it
9 because I remember I was pretty interested in that.

10 SM: In terms of what was going on in Southeast Asia, what did you think the
11 United States was trying to accomplish at that time?

12 WT: You know, that's interesting. Well, that was squadron officer's school, they
13 gave us the book, Protracted Conflict and The Ugly American, we read both of those, but
14 in pilot training I guess I had been aware of Indochina problems since high school. I
15 followed the French problems there and I followed very closely during the siege of Dien
16 Bien Phu, so I already knew a lot about Indochina, as we called it in those days, and I
17 guess I'm just trying to remember what we thought. It was just another area that the state
18 department was involved in. I guess we figured they were trying to save a small, friendly
19 country from being overrun by a communist belligerent in the '60s, you know, or in the
20 '50s and its carried over into the early '60s. We were still very much shocked by the
21 communist takeover of China and I think I wrote in my paper that the democrats were
22 very restricted in what they could do because the republicans were pointing out that they
23 had lost China and I had no doubt of the domino theory that people nowadays think is not
24 true. I think everybody, in my experience, in my circles, accepted that as obvious. It was
25 just a matter of time until Thailand fell and South Vietnam and Burma and who knows,
26 maybe India. If you look back, that was going to happen. So, I'm sure that we felt that
27 was an important place for our country to be, trying to strengthen a little country to
28 withstand that.

29 SM: And what kinds of conversations did you have with your fellow officers, Air
30 Force officers, when the Cuban Missile Crisis began to unfold?

1 WT: Okay, that occurred just after I graduated from pilot training; in fact, I was
2 on leave in California. We went to UCLA, some buddies and me, to watch Breakfast at
3 Tiffany's actually, pretended we were students, and they interrupted...no, I guess they
4 had it on the television monitor out in the lobby of the little student theater and President
5 Kennedy came on and we thought that looked pretty serious. One of my buddies was the
6 guy that took the B-52. We assumed that he was going to have to get to his unit right
7 away which is at Shepherd, by the way, so we got him to a phone and he called back and
8 they said, "No, stay away. Continue your leave," but I was the one that had to get back
9 because my squadron...I went into KB-50s, tankers, at England Air Force Base just
10 outside of Alexandria, Louisiana and that unit was sent to McDill shortly after that so
11 when I got to England, I cut my leave short, stopped in Wichita Falls to see my father
12 retire and then went on down and checked in on Monday morning. The unit was leaving
13 and actually they had left; most of the crews and the aircraft were gone. They couldn't
14 tell me where...well, I couldn't tell my wife where. They told me. We weren't supposed
15 to know that they were at McDill at Tampa, Florida. What did we think of the Cuban
16 Missile Crisis? We thought that it could turn into a shooting war; we really believed it,
17 and I think it could have. It was pretty close.

18 SM: Any serious fear that it would go nuclear?

19 WT: No. I didn't think that until later when they started to reveal some of the
20 things that had happened. I didn't think that either the United States or the Soviet Union
21 would play things that risky; not nearly as close as they actually did.

22 SM: Did you have an opportunity to discuss it with your father when you went to
23 his retirement ceremony or after?

24 WT: Yes. The only thing, he had seen the photographs I guess for some period
25 before Kennedy announced it and realized that it was really important. These were
26 missiles, and they were on Cuba. So, they announced that Kennedy was going to give a
27 speech and the press all speculated that it would be about Berlin which at that time was in
28 some sort of a crisis. So, my father realized that it was much more serious than that and
29 close to home. General Wilson – not the Wilson that was the 13th Air Force commander,
30 but another Wilson – was the commander of the training wing at Shepherd and of course
31 my father was the base intelligence so he was in charge of the intelligence training school

1 at that time when he retired so it was his job to keep the commanding officer informed,
2 got himself on the schedule, and briefed General Wilson on the fact that what the
3 President was going to talk about was missiles on Cuba and the general said, “No, no
4 Tilton, get out of here. Everybody knows its Berlin.” So, I think during the retirement
5 ceremony my father gave him a little nod and the general said, “You’re right.” But that’s
6 what he talked about. He was kind of proud of himself for figuring it out. As far as what
7 he thought about the missiles being there, I’m trying to recall. I think he thought they
8 were testing us to see if we could figure it out and if we really would do anything about
9 it. That would have been my father’s opinion about that.

10 SM: And what about the actual presence of tactical nukes, short range tactical
11 nukes that were ready to go just prior to Kennedy’s decision? I mean, he was almost on
12 the verge of committing American forces to attack, and did you ever have a chance to
13 talk with your dad about the fact that indeed there were tactical nukes ready to go and if
14 we’d attacked that might have actually...

15 WT: I don’t think any one of us knew that at the time. I’m guessing that would
16 have been later.

17 SM: Okay.

18 WT: But, he thought it was very serious that the Soviet Union had put missiles on
19 Cuba. He knew that it was.

20 SM: Well, let me ask you a question. What did you think of – as a young officer
21 in the Air Force and in the discussions that you might have had with other young officers
22 – what did you guys think of President Kennedy?

23 WT: We were pretty excited actually although we tend to be republicans and I’m
24 definitely a lifelong republican, and from that standpoint I didn’t care for Kennedy but
25 actually I was caught up in his charisma quite a bit and I thought that he was pretty good
26 for the military. So, yeah, I don’t think...it was domestic things that I would have
27 criticized Kennedy for because he didn't get any of his programs through. But, I thought
28 he was a good president as far as dealing with foreign powers. His inaugural address
29 inspired me, and I think it did generally other people, too, in the military. We have a lot
30 of resolve, we’re going to do these things and he acted like that he meant it as he was
31 president.

1 SM: Do you recall what your parents thought of Kennedy?

2 WT: Pretty much the same thing, I think. I don't recall. Actually, they didn't
3 like him very much but my father probably thought he was fairly good in foreign policy,
4 same as me. I guess I'm my father's child in that respect, but no; I was my own person
5 and I did think that Kennedy was good in foreign policy.

6 SM: So you went to tankers? Now during the Cuban Missile Crisis, what in particular
7 did you find yourself doing in terms of preparing for a possible mission?

8 WT: Well, because I got there fresh out of pilot training and all the instructors
9 were in Tampa, at first I did very little. It was all I could do to get a ride. There weren't
10 many missions being flown. Then, one of the instructors came back from Tampa and I
11 started getting trained. But, I was just getting trained to be qualified in the aircraft. By
12 the time I was qualified, the Cuban Missile Crisis was history.

13 SM: What was the most interesting or challenging part of learning how to fly a
14 tanker?

15 WT: It was a very complicated airplane and it was very, to me, it was very slow
16 and cumbersome, extremely slow to roll, and power settings were set by calling to an
17 engineer to set them. We had auxiliary jets on the KB-50 and the pilots handled those,
18 but the main reciprocating engines were...he called out manifold settings and the
19 engineer responded and set them. It was like driving a ship compared to what I'd been
20 flying. It just felt so strange to me. It was like herding a building around instead of an
21 airplane, and that was challenging. It's very complicated because it had multiple fuel
22 systems and had 2 kinds of propulsion. It was all electric and I as used to hydraulic and
23 that was very different. Even the landing gear and the flaps were operated electrically
24 rather than hydraulically, which was a whole hold over from B-29; it's almost the same
25 airplane. [coughs] Excuse me. So, in learning reciprocating engine, handling
26 reciprocating engine was complicated and challenging, but I liked it; it was interesting to
27 me.

28 SM: Did you choose to fly these, or were you just given that assignment after you
29 finished your pilot training? How did that work out?

30 WT: In pilot training, assignments...they get a block of assignments equal to the
31 number of students who are graduating and the...while you're in your course of training,

1 you get graded on everything and those grades are all totaled up in the rank order and the
2 first man chooses from the whole list and the last man takes what's left; very
3 straightforward. We got in a room, they gave us the list of the assignments up on the
4 board, and they call out the names in order and say, "What do you want?" and that person
5 would say what they wanted. Well, I was near the top in flying but I was near the bottom
6 in academics – I just didn't apply myself – and so I was about third from the bottom I
7 think, yeah, because there was a KB-50, a C-124, and a B-52. That was what was left, so
8 I took the B-50.

9 SM: And, let's see here...

10 WT: The fighters went first, by the way.

11 SM: I was just going to ask you that, yeah. So, I assume the fighters went first.
12 So, did you stay with the KB-50s until you went to Vietnam, there at England Air Force
13 Base?

14 WT: No, I had a year there. They were phasing them out of the inventory and
15 they started doing that actually before I got in them because they had several squadrons at
16 Langley. So, I was there a year and I, at that time, managed to bail out of one that was
17 burning and exploded before I even got to the water in October of '63.

18 SM: Did your whole crew escape?

19 WT: No. The aircraft commander and a passenger both were lost...

20 SM: Oh goodness.

21 WT: ...and six of us got out. I was the co-pilot. That was a month before
22 Kennedy was assassinated.

23 SM: Now how did that work as far as getting out of an aircraft like that? There's
24 not an ejection system is there?

25 WT: No, we had to drop the nose gear which was...had a well and the fuselage;
26 was right below the cockpit and that well was behind the pilots and right beside the
27 engineer and the engineer had a switch which could lower just the nose gear by itself and
28 then he raised a hatch cover and that was the main entrance to the front of the aircraft
29 anyway on the ground, and we were trained to go and stand behind that hatch and pitch
30 forward into it which I did, which everybody that went out did, and so its just drop out
31 the bottom, basically. In the back of the aircraft there were 3 airmen – 2 airmen and a

1 sergeant – and they had to go back and get out of the pressurized compartment and then
2 go out to an entrance door that was in the tail section of the aircraft and hold that door
3 open or latch it open and jump out, but the latch was broken on that door. It was broken
4 by one of the airmen, he was...it's a long story. The door was warped and they were
5 holding it shut with ditching bolts, bolts that you would use if you had to ditch the aircraft
6 and those are a little bit more difficult to undo and while he was trying to...instead of
7 trying to undo the ditching bolts, this young fellow – he was just really nervous, he was
8 the first one to see the problem – and he started kicking at the door and broke the latch so
9 that when they tried to latch it open they couldn't and the sergeant had to hold it open
10 while the two airmen jumped out and then of course he couldn't hold it for himself and it
11 shut on his feet so he was outside the aircraft with both feet in. He managed to kick one
12 of them free and broke his leg when it pulled him out; very, very bad fracture which he
13 tried to put a tourniquet on before he hit the water, and they operated on him for I think it
14 was 6 hours there at Kinley Air Force Base in Bermuda and then sent him to Kessler Air
15 Force Base where they thought he'd have to be re-operated on, but not so; they did an
16 excellent job at Kinley. But yeah, it was a really bad injury. They told him he'd never
17 fly again and he retired as a boom operator in SAC.

18 SM: Now you mentioned one passenger didn't make it.

19

20 WT: We had a mechanic up front who was back in the navigator's compartment
21 and was afraid of water. He had told his friends that he would never bail out over water.
22 I didn't know that. Of course, I don't think anybody in the crew knew that, but we
23 learned it later and he was supposed to be the first person out of the front and the
24 engineer was marshaling everybody and this guy refused to go out so he told the
25 navigator it was his turn and he went out and then he tapped me. The engineer and me
26 sat back to back. He reached around and tapped me on the arm and told me it was my
27 turn so I stepped across the [?] and bailed out. Then, the engineer bailed out behind me
28 and then as I said, the aircraft then exploded into two parts while I was still swinging in
29 my parachute. The aircraft commander never got out of his seat. He was found on the
30 reef wedged between the seat and the instrument panel.

31 SM: What caused the explosion? Did they ever determine it?

1 WT: Oh yeah. I told you we had auxiliary jet engines?

2 SM: Uh-huh.

3 WT: The left one had...the compressor section was pretty corroded on it from the
4 low altitude search we had been doing out in the Azores and a corroded compressor could
5 lead to compressor stalls very easily; aerodynamics aren't right anymore. That engine
6 had been in what we called a cold stall the previous mission, which it wouldn't accelerate
7 but the exhaust gas temperature didn't seem to go up like it normally does in a stalled jet
8 engine. So, on the day of the mission, and we were actually flying home from Bermuda
9 to [Eglin] Air Force Base and of course we were at max power and the jets...in fact, we
10 had been. We pulled them back to 98% about 7,000 feet. That left engine, that turbine
11 exploded. Well, the turbine on that airplane, the turbine of the J-47 engine was in perfect
12 alignment with the flap well, where the flaps go into when they come up, and that well
13 had 5 pressurized fuel lines in it and of course it just turned into a blow torch, literally,
14 because you've got fuel being pumped under pressure into a high velocity wind situation
15 and the wing was more than half on fire when I looked at it after I got in my parachute. It
16 looked like almost all the wing, it looked like...well, no, half it looked like, and when it
17 exploded - I'm pretty confident that it exploded - the wing blew apart because we had
18 15,000 pound jet fuel tanks in the bomb bays, two of them, but those were intact sitting
19 on the reef so it wasn't that.

20 SM: So the fuel tanks didn't explode that you carried?

21 WT: The fuel tanks in the wing probably exploded.

22 SM: Yeah, but the tanks that you carried to refuel other aircraft, they didn't
23 explode?

24 WT: They didn't even burst. They were rubberized canvas and they were sitting
25 right there on the reef full of fuel.

26 SM: They survived the impact?

27 WT: Yep. That's what they told us. The divers saw them.

28 SM: That's amazing.

29 WT: Yeah, it is. It certainly is. You'd think they would have burst open.

30 SM: Now you said they found the aircraft commander wedged between the seat
31 and the console?

1 WT: Yeah.

2 SM: What about the mechanic that...

3 WT: Not the console, but his instrument panel.

4 SM: His instrument panel, I'm sorry. What about the mechanic?

5 WT: Never found him.

6 SM: Never found him?

7 WT: They searched the rest of the day and searched the wreckage and they never
8 found the...anything.

9 SM: How long did it take them to pick you up?

10 WT: About half an hour; I had called a mayday to departure control. I was
11 testing radio frequencies for them and so when we had a call from the back, the sergeant
12 said we were on fire. He said the whole left wing was on fire. The airmen that saw it, he
13 told me he punched his mic button but he just couldn't speak. He told me that later.
14 Sergeant told us and the aircraft commander looked out the window and said, "Oh, it sure
15 is," and he didn't even hesitate to call bail out. What he saw must have been pretty
16 dramatic. After I hit the water...I'd just been through sea survival at Langley Air Force
17 Base - which is also not there anymore, they moved it to Florida - so I knew most of the
18 things to do and the only thing I did wrong was not to cover my...not to replace the clip
19 on my parachute release. The only reason you replace that clip is because it has sharp
20 edges and it could cut your raft, but everything else was just the way they taught us in
21 class, and we did have a one-man raft in our survival kit. I got in that, I opened my
22 survival kit, everything was completely soaked and full of sea water, and the radio was
23 useless - I just threw it out in the water - and it had flares and signaling devices, a sea
24 marker, a dye marker, and a signal mirror. There are two types of signal mirrors, at least
25 there used to be, and I had been trained on the kind with the dot in it and this was the kind
26 with the cross so I really didn't know how to use it. Instructions are on the back, but I
27 didn't have time to do that. But, I did put dye marker in the water. Actually, I waited
28 until I saw an airplane because I knew they'd be out. The guy that responded knew we
29 were bailing out, and I saw a C-54 which was their search aircraft coming toward me and
30 I lit a smoke flare and threw dye marker in the water and he came over me and wagged
31 his wings and then I pointed in the direction where I had seen parachutes and that's where

1 he headed; I don't know if he saw me point, but he definitely saw something. He
2 dropped markers in the water also, and then shortly after that a helicopter approached and
3 that was an H-34, Navy, from the Naval station that used to be at the west end of
4 Bermuda and they came in and picked me up in the collar and the engineer was already
5 on the helicopter and we went and picked up the navigator. So, the front end survivors
6 were all on the helicopter together and they dropped us at the Navy base and then later
7 took us in in a station wagon over to the Air Force Base at the other end of the island.
8 The guys in the back were in much more trouble because our aircraft commander had a
9 policy that everybody would be strapped in there, had their survival kit hooked to them
10 and strapped to their parachute when we were over water which was regulation anyway,
11 but of course those guys are in back and nobody could see them so they were relaxing.
12 As soon as they got off the ground they unbuckled everything. The result was that none
13 of the three had a survival kit on them. The sergeant tried to...he picked up a passenger
14 survival kit which is...much less stuff in it, but it was blown out of his hand of course
15 during that terrible experience he went through. That was one of the first things to go.
16 So, all they had was their underarm life preservers which are orange, but they're awfully
17 small. But fortunately those three were picked up also. They were in a group, and they
18 were in the water longer than we were because we were closer in. They went out earlier
19 than the front end did.

20 SM: Any serious complications besides the broken leg?

21 WT: No. Airmen Webster, the first one to see it, I think had emotional problems
22 from it and asked to be taken off flight status, which he was. But no, there were no
23 other...in fact, the flight surgeon, I remember him commenting that...of course he gave
24 us a physical inspection as soon as we got in the hospital and he was surprised at how
25 little groin bruising we had from the parachute straps. We must have had them pretty
26 good and tight, which we did.

27 SM: Um, in the way you described it, it sounds like the fracture that the sergeant
28 in the back suffered was a compound fracture.

29 WT: Oh, it was; a compound fracture and many little bits of bone and a lot of
30 seawater in the wound. The doctor was very young. He came into our...we were all in
31 one ward together, all the survivors except for that sergeant and after the operation the

1 surgeon came in and told us that he was very new, hadn't been a surgeon very long, and
2 that he did the very best that he could and wanted to assure us of that but he was afraid
3 that when a real experienced surgeon got a hold of this leg they'd probably have to go
4 back in and do some work, and as I said, instead of that they praised his work and said it
5 was excellent. They didn't do anything further to him except put him through
6 rehabilitation. At Kessler they told him...that was in October, so they told him that it
7 would be 6 months before he'd be out of a wheel chair and a year before he would be
8 fully on his feet and that he would never fly again, and in fact at Christmas time he came
9 to visit us on crutches with a cast. He was very determined, and his mental attitude had a
10 lot to do with it.

11 SM: Where you bailed out, there was the potential for sharks?

12 WT: Yeah, I got in my raft very fast. Not only sharks, but barracudas are in
13 those waters. It was in the Gulf Stream and it was a nice balmy day, the water was very
14 warm, and I could see [imagined or expected; not literally] sharks. You know, I was
15 worried about sharks but of course I had no idea that we had somebody in the water with
16 an open wound.

17 SM: Yeah, see, that's what I was going to ask you about.

18 WT: But he never saw any. He was scared to death.

19 SM: I would imagine.

20 WT: He was bleeding into the ocean, and...

21 SM: They can smell it.

22 WT: ...bleeding enough that he felt the need to try to make a tourniquet on the
23 way down, but no sharks ever showed up that we know of.

24 SM: Well none of them got bit.

25 WT: No.

26 SM: ...avoid them. Wow. They didn't have a boat, but the other two, the
27 engineer and the navigator, both had their survival kits? They had boats? They had the
28 rafts to get into?

29 WT: One man rafts, yeah.

30 SM: Wow, quite an experience.

31 WT: Yeah, it was.

1 SM: Well, let's see; when did you find out you were going to Vietnam or to
2 Southeast Asia?

3 WT: Okay, I was...after I was in KB-50s for two years, I went to Texas, to El
4 Paso for a year at Biggs Air Force Base and after that the units were all disbanded. The
5 commander of the group at Langley had been the investigating officer for the accident so
6 he knew me, and when we were dismantling the base and the units he asked me...he said
7 I deserved a nice tour because of whatever and whether I wanted it, he had some special
8 air mission squadrons that had C-47s and T-29s and I said, "That's what I would like,"
9 and he sent me to Atlanta, to Marietta, Georgia, to Dobbins Air Force Base. The
10 operations officer there got orders to Vietnam. He was getting ready to retire, had no
11 intention of going to Vietnam, so he generated an emergency mission to Langley Air
12 Force Base which was tactical air command headquarters, of course. We were under
13 TAC, and he came back that evening and said his orders had been cancelled. Then, a guy
14 named Bruce Hoon was about the only other young officer in the unit. He and I both got
15 orders to squadron officer's school at Montgomery, Alabama and it was while we were in
16 squadron officer's school that fall, in the fall of '65 that we both got orders the same day
17 to special air warfare indoctrination course and subsequently to Vietnam. It didn't take
18 me too many years to figure out that we were traded off for that operation officer's
19 assignment. Things happen that way, I guess, which suited me fine. I knew that I was
20 going to go sooner or later and the sooner the better. I was kind of eager to get into it, to
21 tell you the truth.

22 SM: Well, a couple of quick questions before we get to your service in Southeast
23 Asia; first, about that accident and your comments about the officer in charge of the
24 investigation. What kind of a debriefing did you have to go through after the accident,
25 and was the accident or the problems that occurred with your aircraft when the explosion
26 occurred, was that common amongst the aircraft and was that part of the reason why they
27 went ahead and shut down the units with them?

28 WT: Okay, I'll start with the last question first. It was the only time that I knew
29 of that it happened. In fact, the manual was very misleading. The only finding that could
30 have born a penalty or caused a change from the accident investigation is that the manual,
31 where it said that a cold stall didn't show any rise in EGT should have said that this is

1 extremely damaging to the engine. It implied that it wasn't a bad thing, so they were
2 faulted for not writing it up correctly in the manual. But, the aircraft was being replaced
3 by the KC-135 at that time. It was very challenging for fighters to refuel off a KB-50.
4 We did refuel F-105s frequently but they had an awful time when they started getting
5 heavy and we couldn't stay with them. We would orbit at various points across the ocean
6 and they would come to us and get fuel and then go on to the next tanker whereas the 135
7 can cruise with the receivers. So, it was something that was obsolete and it was very
8 troubled aircraft anyway. It was very complicated, as I said, and we had a lot of
9 maintenance problems with it; very expensive, I'm sure, to maintain. As to how the
10 accident investigation was conducted, after accidents – and this is today, in the private
11 sector as well – in their wisdom, people who handle these things have set up a legal
12 system where there's an investigation that can carry no penalty. Anybody who speaks in
13 that investigation can speak freely and their testimony is protected, and of course that's to
14 get at the facts. Then, there's a collateral investigation which is a legal proceeding and
15 can result in penalties and you can have a lawyer there and you're encouraged to not
16 incriminate yourself like any legal proceeding. The accident investigation took place as
17 soon as possible so they convened the board at Bermuda, at Kinley Air Force Base in the
18 library at the base, and the...as I said, the group commander was the chairman of that
19 investigation board. Actually, I think he was the deputy commander at that time and later
20 became the commander, but he was the chairman of the board and I don't remember...I
21 think there were three or four officers on the board; probably a medical person and a
22 flying safety officer, I don't know. But, I was the only pilot, of course, in the survivors
23 so they were most interested in talking to me, and I was able to give them a lot of
24 information. There was one thing I resented which had no historical interest, but I still
25 kind of burn about it because in the cockpit when Curly said, "Bail out," and then started
26 to struggle with controlling the aircraft, because he was flying it at the time it happened,
27 and I'm sitting there thinking, "Now what should I be doing?" and he started to say,
28 "Mayday," and I came to my senses and realized that that was the best thing I could do
29 and so then I completed the call and explained what was going on and told them we were
30 bailing out. The accident investigation board listened to the tapes and said that Curly
31 made the call and I told them that he didn't, he just started to, and they never believed

1 me. I read the investigation years later and it still says that he made the call. It's a small
2 thing, but anyway, the board then interviewed each crew member and they asked us not
3 to discuss the accident among ourselves until after they had finished; of course we had
4 spent...we could hardly sleep the day before talking about it. There's another element to
5 the investigation which is routine and that is when they first brought us back they put us
6 in the hospital and the flight surgeon's responsibility is to go around and give a very
7 quick initial interview to each person, what happened, because a lot of times I guess they
8 get information then that people forget later. So, that was part of the investigation that
9 was part of the non-criminal. Then, the collateral investigation was actually conducted
10 back at England Air Force Base by deposition; I just sat with an attorney, they swore me
11 in and then asked me some questions, had it typed up and asked me if this was what I
12 thought I'd said and I signed it and that was it.

13 SM: So there was no negligence? There was no punishment?

14 WT: Only that thing in the flight manual.

15 SM: Yeah, that thing in the flight manual.

16 WT: Yeah.

17 SM: Alright. Now, you went...when you found out you were going to Vietnam,
18 to Southeast Asia, what went through your mind?

19 WT: Well, there's a little personal problem here; my wife and I had been
20 interviewing to adopt a baby. We hadn't been able to have our own and so we had been
21 working with the adoption services there in Georgia so I knew that my wife would be
22 pretty upset so I didn't act happy but I really was. I was excited. I wanted to go and I
23 wanted to see what it was like and get into it, and I think most of us felt that way. I didn't
24 know very many people who were trying to avoid it except like that operations officer
25 who was trying to retire instead.

26 SM: Did you know what you'd be flying over in Vietnam?

27 WT: I had...yeah. It was on my orders, and I think I knew that the 0-1 was the
28 old L-19. When I was a kid I knew what an L-19 was and I had made a model of one. I
29 don't remember if I had to find out what the 0-1 was or not, but it said that on the orders.

30 SM: The 0-1 Birddog?

31 WT: Yeah.

1 SM: So your primary duties included FAC?

2 WT: Yeah, I was forward air control.

3 SM: That was it?

4 WT: That was it. It said that on the orders, it said forward air controller and I
5 knew what that was because during the Korean War they had done some of that in T-6s
6 and I had read about it and I think they used Piper Cubs also but I remember reading
7 about T-6s directing artillery fire and air strikes. So, I knew it would be pretty exciting
8 and for me having come out of tankers and flying transports at Dobbins, I thought that
9 was pretty good; I was going to get into the combat part of it even without being a fighter
10 or a bomber pilot which is exactly what happened; I got a front seat on the war.

11 SM: But, no concern over the fact that you'd be in such a slow moving target,
12 low flying target?

13 WT: Yeah, somewhat, but I knew that they didn't all get shot down so I knew
14 something must be going on and when I got to training I found out that people on the
15 ground considered it pretty hazardous to shoot at us which was what the case; they didn't
16 shoot at us unless they were pretty darn sure they were going to bring us down because
17 we could bring the big stuff in on top of them real quick.

18 SM: And what did the...I'm assuming you had some conversations with your dad
19 before you left and your mom. What did your parents think about you going over?

20 WT: I didn't even see them. They were in Arlington here in Virginia. I'm sure
21 that our letters – I probably even have letters that I wrote to them, my parents kept the
22 letters, but they probably didn't tell me because I know my father wasn't even eager for
23 me to be a pilot and he was especially dismayed when I was in officer training school and
24 said I wanted to be in fighters, so I don't think they would have been very happy about it,
25 but as I say, we didn't...I told them that I was going and I'm sure I put a very positive
26 thing on it. I didn't want them to worry.

27 SM: What about your wife?

28 WT: She was devastated. The first thing that happened with the adoption was
29 they said they were not in the practice of placing babies with single parent homes and
30 cancelled everything. So, my wife was really, really devastated and told me later that she
31 assumed that I wouldn't come back. It was just really a tough...but she didn't really

1 reveal much of that at the time. We were at Montgomery and sent her back to Marietta to
2 sell the house and I would – for the rest of that training – I went back every weekend to
3 visit. But yeah, she was very...she didn't reveal too much of it at the time, but she was
4 not happy.

5 SM: And on the political side of things, a lot had happened prior to you getting
6 your orders.

7 WT: Yeah.

8 SM: The Diem Coup, the Diem assassination, Kennedy's assassination, and in
9 particular with what was going on in Southeast Asia, what did you think about that
10 removal...

11 WT: Before I got my orders I was very interested in it. We talked about it in
12 my...what did they call that? We had a little student unit of about 15 of us, section we
13 called it; my section leader was a captain who was eager to go. Two of us were pilots
14 and we both said we were eager to go, and they had intelligence reports everyday,
15 unclassified intelligence reports that we could go out in the hallway and read. There were
16 stacks of them that would tell about various skirmishes and things that were happening.
17 At [squadron] officer's school was where we read Protracted Conflict and The Ugly
18 American and we got some indoctrination in guerilla warfare, and it looked like we were
19 trying to pretend we were assisting the South Vietnamese while we were actually fighting
20 the war. I heard that my instructor was over there and that he was bombing from the
21 backseat of a T-28 that was ostensibly being used for training and we already had heard
22 things like that, so we knew that we were in a shooting war that our country was trying to
23 pretend we weren't in. We knew that in '65.

24 SM: What did you think of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents and resolutions?

25 WT: I thought it was trumped up at the time, and I'm still not sure, but I thought
26 it was...I thought Johnson was...I had strong feelings about President Johnson. I thought
27 that he was extremely effective and I thought that he was, as a senator, surprisingly
28 responsible in dealing with the opposite party and power. When he became president I
29 felt as though he used a lot of his political scheming and underhanded tricks. Whether he
30 did or not, that's the impression I had. I knew that he knew how to make congress do his
31 will. In fact, when he got...when he became president I told my wife that it was a good

1 thing because he knew how to manipulate congress and it was a good thing was what I
2 thought. But, I didn't necessarily think that later. I felt as though Johnson was just
3 drummed up the... somehow managed to make that happen or make it look like it was
4 something that was a cause of the war. It reminded me of – don't take this wrong, but –
5 of Hitler's tricks during the time that he was the chancellor and was trying to take power,
6 some of the political machinations that he did before he actually became... I don't mean
7 to compare Johnson to Hitler.

8 SM: No, no but in terms of the political manipulations that they both engaged in.

9 WT: Right. That's what I assumed at the time even, and as I say, I'm still not
10 sure although I've heard that it might have been a real thing.

11 SM: Yeah, it's contestable to this day. It maybe the official version versus other
12 people's interpretations, and they're still in conflict.

13 WT: Yeah, yeah.

14 SM: What about Kennedy's assassination? How did that affect you? How did
15 that affect the men around you? How did that affect your family?

16 WT: Well of course like everybody, I can remember exactly where I was when I
17 heard about it and so forth. In fact, I was on leave that I was given after the accident.
18 They gave me a 30-day leave and we went back and I took my wife up to Pennsylvania to
19 meet her in-laws. We'd only been married since January of '63 and she'd never met my
20 parents and all the people up there. There was so much going on in my life that as far as
21 how it effected us in what was going to happen to the country... well, it did, but it was... I
22 mean, we were shocked, and not that we were sorry to see so called Camelot go, I was
23 never caught up in that and I didn't think that Kennedy was getting anywhere. I didn't
24 think he would be re-elected. I thought his programs that he'd proposed were going
25 nowhere, which is historically true. I thought that Lyndon Johnson would be able to do a
26 lot more as President and as I said, I didn't regret the change in power but of course I
27 regretted the assassination. I thought that was a real shock and a terrible thing; kind of
28 scary. What did other people think? I don't remember discussing it with... because our
29 squadron was disbanding, it was changing from one to another, and we were thinking
30 about operational things more than we were about political change in the country. Also, I
31 have to say something about both tanker squadrons I was in. It was the least

1 intellectually interesting people I served with in the whole time I was in the Air Force.
2 Most of them were...had come out of aviation cadets, they had no education except high
3 school and did little...were little concerned about world affairs and philosophy and things
4 like that. It was on a lower plain of intellectual stimulation. In fact, I was thinking of
5 getting out of the Air Force because I thought that maybe the whole Air Force was like
6 that even though I'd been around it all my life, and then when I got to Dobbins I ran into
7 a better group of people. When I got to Southeast Asia I found out that the Air Force was
8 full of really great people. So that conversation seldom happened.

9 SM: I see.

10 WT: There were outstanding exceptions to what I just said.

11 SM: Now at the time, no ideas about...you know, you mentioned earlier some of
12 the political machinations Johnson...no notions that this was something orchestrated
13 domestically as far as your interpretation of events? Of course JFK, the movie done by
14 Oliver Stone, makes some pretty interesting allegations.

15 WT: No, I had no thought of that, of a coups?

16 SM: Uh-huh.

17 WT: Not until years later did it start to...did I sometimes think maybe that had
18 happened, but at the time, no. What did I think of the assassination? Well of course the
19 events happened pretty fast there and I was pretty astounded. We thought maybe the
20 Soviet Union had had some part in it when things came out about what's his name.

21 SM: Lee Harvey Oswald?

22 WT: Yeah, Oswald. But no; I didn't think of it as some kind of [experiment
23 power]. You know, I did at some point. I don't think it was right then, but I did kind of
24 wonder. I've dismissed that, but I do remember. You know, there was a book written
25 when Lyndon Johnson was trying to get nominated, you've probably heard of it, A Texan
26 Looks at Lyndon which really accused him of murder and other bad things. So, I did
27 have...I read that back when he was trying to get nominated, when Kennedy got
28 nominated, and so although I didn't think the book was probably true, I did have the
29 tendency to think Lyndon was capable of some pretty bad things.

30 SM: What was, in terms...you mentioned the differences between Johnson and
31 Kennedy in terms of domestic, or potential domestic policy and potential success

1 because of Johnson's ability to manipulate congress. What about the differences between
2 the two with respect to foreign policy? You mentioned that you thought JFK was
3 probably good for foreign policy.

4 WT: Yeah, and I did not think that Johnson was. I thought that he'd been fairly
5 much of an obstructionist in foreign policy and concentrated on civil rights and union
6 things. Things were going on at the time which I guess what I admired about Johnson
7 was his civil rights because I was a strong advocate of especially black what we called
8 Negroes in those days. I came from a Quaker background in Pennsylvania and I really
9 felt as though, as a people, they had been mistreated and so I liked what he was doing in
10 that regard but his foreign affairs, I didn't feel as though he knew much about them and
11 would pursue them in a very good way so I didn't feel good about his foreign affairs
12 background and I learned later that he was probably more responsible than anyone for
13 making it impossible for Eisenhower to help the French at Dien Bien Phu. Whether or
14 not we should have, he made sure that we couldn't as the senate majority leader, I believe,
15 but I didn't know that at the time.

16 SM: Alright. The training that you received just prior to going to Vietnam in
17 Marietta, Georgia, is that correct?

18 WT: Yeah.

19 SM: That was...

20 WT: It wasn't training.

21 SM: Oh, I'm sorry.

22 WT: You mean the training that I got to be a forward air controller?

23 SM: Right.

24 WT: No, Marietta I was flying transports.

25 SM: I'm sorry. Where did you get your training to fly...

26 WT: I went to Hurlbert Air Force Base.

27 SM: Oh, okay, Hurlbert Field.

28 WT: Yes.

29 SM: Down in Florida?

30 WT: Right.

31 SM: Okay. Fort Walton Beach?

1

2 WT: That's correct.

3 SM: What was that training like? I would imagine it was kind of an easy
4 transition going from tankers to the Birddog.

5 WT: Yes, it was. It was very easy as far as flying goes. First we had an
6 academic course, special air warfare indoctrination course, and they taught us how to
7 read Army maps, universal transverse mercator maps and how to adjust artillery, some
8 guerilla techniques that we would be facing, a lot of survival training. It was just
9 classroom. Also, theory of tactical air control...well, not theory but how it is practiced,
10 how we interface with the Army, and then the flight training we went down the flight
11 line. Two of the instructors were old KB-50 buddies of mine anyhow, and my instructor
12 handed me the checklist, a mimeographed document with a staple in the corner. That
13 was about...I think we had a manual, too, but the checklist, the first day we went out and
14 flew and I went through the checklist, that was the way I had been trained in other
15 aircraft. The second day I left it in my car and I said, "I've got to go back to my car and
16 get my checklist," and he said, "Oh, you know it don't you?" and I says, "Yeah," and he
17 said, "Well, forget it." So, from then on I never used a checklist in the 0-1. Aircraft are
18 usually pretty religious about that.

19 SM: Yeah, I was just going to say!

20 WT: But it was so simple. In fact, the main point, besides teaching us how to do
21 short field landings, how to do controlled air strikes, the flight training was to teach you
22 that it was really an airplane and not a toy because they'd already had some really
23 unfortunate accidents in Vietnam where people were treating them without the respect
24 that an airplane is due. A famous guy named Mack the FAC had been killed by that time
25 taking off after his going away party, inebriated, and stalled on take-off. That got in
26 Time Magazine because he was very popular with the press and that was well known.
27 So, that kind of flying, showing off and [?], they were trying to teach us not to do that.

28 SM: Now what about the aspect of this aircraft as a tail dragger?

29 WT: There was some concern about ground loops.

30 SM: Was that hard for you to get used to?

1 WT: No. I got used to it almost immediately but I'd been flying the C-47 which
2 is also a tail dragger although its not even similar. But, I knew that the tail end would
3 want to swap ends with the front and of course they had a heavy emphasis on that
4 because they used to say that every class would have a ground loop in it and in fact we, I
5 guess maybe...I don't know if we made history or not but we did not have a ground loop
6 in my class. Somebody did spin around, but he didn't hit a wind tip so I guess that was
7 technically a ground loop. Well at first my landings were terrible and the instructor just
8 laughed, and then short field landings were challenging but fun. Of course the actual
9 training to be a forward air controller, we used one of the ranges out there and we used to
10 use A-1s for our strike aircraft and they were in training also and they had some old
11 automobile bodies and oil drums and things set up on the range that we used for targets.
12 They taught us how to do a rocket pass; go on beside the target and pull up the nose
13 sharply and roll over, do a wing over maneuver so you get the nose pointed down straight
14 at the target at a pretty steep angle, maybe 70 or 80 degrees from vertical...I mean,
15 horizontal, and fire your rocket and try to get it fairly near the target and use it as a point
16 of reference to tell the fighters where the target really was. You didn't try to hit the
17 target, you just wanted to point of reference on the ground.

18 SM: And these were smoke rockets?

19 WT: Yep, white phosphorous, 2.75 inch folding fin.

20 SM: Would you ever carry actual live ordinance? Not the white phosphorous,
21 but I guess anti-personnel?

22

23 WT: No. In training we didn't even...of course we didn't carry our side arms or
24 M-16s, we just carried...we did have smoke grenades, but that was also for marking
25 when you ran out of rockets. We used those at Hurlbert, also.

26 SM: How about field-improvised things like...I've heard of guys carrying peanut
27 butter jars, grenades?

28 WT: Yeah, I've heard of it. Nobody in my experience did it but I knew it
29 happened. But no, there was a very innovative development group there at England. I
30 forget what they call them, but they're pretty well known, and they were the people that
31 dreamed up napalm I guess originally. We were supposed to call incindy gel because

1 napalm...that was one of our first introductions to all of the political correct problems of
2 the Vietnam War was that when they told us to call napalm incendiary gel because napalm
3 sounded bad in the press; same stuff. But, that development center was coming up with a
4 lot of innovations that would be much faster than the normal research and development
5 cycle. As far as in-field innovations in our experience, when the maintenance people put
6 a quarter inch steel rod on the front of the cowl and wrapped some tape around the end, it
7 was about 18 inches long, and put a little metal strip inside the window, the front
8 windshield, and that was for aiming.

9 SM: That was your sight?

10 WT: Yeah.

11 SM: Yeah, okay.

12 WT: Pretty crude, but you could fire all 4 of those rockets at the same time and
13 they could go 4 different directions, so they weren't accurate at all.

14 SM: Well, let's see. We've been going almost [pause in tape]. Thank you very
15 much. This ends the first interview with Mr. William Tilton.

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Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with William Tilton
Conducted by Steve Maxner
August 31, 2000
Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

1 Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. William
2 Tilton. Today is the 31st of August, year 2000, at approximately 9:15 Lubbock time. I
3 am in Lubbock and Mr. Tilton is in, let's see, you're not in Washington D.C. right now,
4 are you?

5 William Tilton: Springfield, Virginia right now.

6 SM: Springfield, Virginia, okay. Alright Mr. Tilton, would you go ahead and
7 describe your trip over to Southeast Asia and what were your first impressions when you
8 got off the aircraft. I guess it would have been in Vietnam or Thailand?

9 WT: Actually it was in Saigon.

10 SM: Oh, Saigon, okay, so in Vietnam.

11 WT: Well, my orders were to the 19th tactical air support squadron and I believe
12 that even...I don't know if I knew then...I guess I didn't know then where I was
13 supposed to go but I knew that I was assigned to the 19th TAC which was at Bien Hoa
14 and I was to report to the 505th TAC control group at Tan Son Nhut which is the air base
15 at Saigon because the 19th came under...all the Tics came under the 505th at that time.
16 So, I completed my training at Hurlbert, took my wife to Monroe, Louisiana and found
17 her and apartment, got her all set up there, and we had family...she had family in Monroe
18 and I got my first commercial flight ever from Monroe to San Francisco on Delta, and
19 then from San Francisco I went up to Travis Air Force Base. Let's see, the next morning
20 – I just stayed in the motel there – but the next morning I went out to the terminal at
21 Travis and ran into some of the people from my class at Hurlbert and one of them said

1 that we were supposed to go to jungle survival school. I think this is something that
2 would be pertinent for you. Apparently there was some...it was Air Force policy that
3 people going to Southeast Asia were supposed to go to jungle survival school in the
4 Philippines prior to going over to Vietnam and of course we had our boarding passes
5 already for our contract flight out of Travis and one guy did go and insist on being sent to
6 jungle survival. He was the one that told us about it, and got on the C-141 and went to
7 the Philippines. The rest of us said, "The heck with it!" We were kind of eager to get to
8 Vietnam and didn't want to spend part of our tour in the Philippines. So, we ignored that
9 and I guess you could say so did the Air Force. So, we were on a Continental Airlines
10 contract DC-8 from Travis to Saigon by way of Tokyo, stopped in Tokyo to refuel I think
11 at Yakota and they wouldn't even let us off the plane. The Japanese customs officials
12 said it would be too much trouble. So, it was very cold too. This was the middle of
13 March...end of March, and I remember I was sitting near the doorway when they were
14 throwing lunches in; it was really cold. About 6 hours later we were in Saigon and it
15 wasn't cold at all. That was my first impression. We landed sometime around midnight
16 in Tan Son Nhut and my first impression was the overwhelming heat and humidity that
17 was just really heavy. The whole place was real quiet and the terminal, there was a large
18 passenger terminal at Tan Son Nhut which had been mortared not too long before that
19 and as soon as we got there we also heard that...let's see, I think this was [?], there was a
20 hotel that had had the front blown off of it. I forget the name of it, but there were a lot
21 of...it was a contract hotel that was full of American officers and it was just about the
22 time when everybody was getting up in the morning to shave and get dressed so that most
23 people were in their rooms and there was quite a loss of life and as I recall the detail for
24 that – and of course this is all a matter of record – but I think a Citroen full of...a little
25 French car full of plastic had been driven up in front of the hotel and detonated. It had
26 been a suicide mission, but it blew off about 7 or 8 stories of the front of the hotel.
27 Anyway, we heard about that in the terminal, and I remember there was hardly anybody
28 there. There was one person in a hammock that had mosquito netting over it sleeping.
29 This person was sleeping and they took us into the...they took us right into the currency
30 exchange and they told us on the plane that the officers could get off first. Well, of
31 course there were only 5 or 10 officers on the whole aircraft. It was full of passengers,

1 but only 5 or 10 officers so we got off first and got on the bus and then I guess we filed
2 into the terminal. We got off first in front of the terminal and then all the enlisted people
3 got off and of course when we got into the currency exchange area we went clear to the
4 back. Then, they started taking everybody from the very front so we were the last ones to
5 go through; kind of little tricks that people play on officers from time to time, but there
6 was several of us and we kind of laughed about it, and several of us said, "We're going to
7 be here for 12 months anyhow, so what's it matter?" But, that took quite a while,
8 actually. They took all our money, all our currency because we were using military scrip
9 in Vietnam at that time so they took all of that and exchanged it for...I don't think we got
10 any piasters, it was just scrip. Then, we waited quite a while. They were taking us in a
11 small bus to the cantonment area for processing and we were of course on the last bus for
12 that, too and I remember when we got on the bus there were several of us standing and it
13 didn't matter but the driver was out in front talking to somebody. This was probably
14 around 3 in the morning by this time, and...no, it wasn't that late but it was middle of the
15 night, and one of the officers on the bus, the captain, started to shout at the driver to hurry
16 up and kind of got abusive about him standing there talking to his buddy and several of
17 us told him just to be quiet, and reminded him that it doesn't matter where you are, you're
18 going to be here for 12 months anyway. But, he was just getting kind of strung out and I
19 think everybody felt kind of stupid. Anyway, we end up at the cantonment area where
20 they did some initial personal processing and gave us a briefing about venereal disease
21 and hand grenades being thrown into vehicles and just the general...the dangers of being
22 there that everybody needs to know; some of the rules and procedures that pertained to
23 Americans stationed in Vietnam for all services, and I got a message that I was to report
24 to the 505th TAC control group at 7:30 or 8 o'clock, something like that.

25 SM: Well let me ask you, in those briefings that you received, did they talk much
26 about rules of engagement...

27 WT: Not about combat things; this was strictly living in Vietnam. They might
28 have given us a few things about the customs of the Vietnamese, but it was strictly for
29 someone who is in fact probably not going to be in combat. So, not at that time. This is
30 just for everybody on the plane, and then they assigned us each a bunk in the little
31 barracks they had there right at the cantonment area. What they called the cantonment

1 area was a passenger processing place for incoming personnel. So, I finally did get a
2 bunk in there and it was covered with mosquito netting and of course it was still really
3 hot. One thing that happened while I was in the processing area, there was a liquid
4 oxygen plant several hundred feet away and there was a guard on that plant and all of a
5 sudden there was a very loud explosion in that direction; it sounded like an explosion of
6 something gas – not gasoline, but gas – and the guard spun around and crouched and
7 brought his weapon up. I'm sure he was thinking he was being attacked, but he looked
8 around and didn't see anything coming so then he finally went back to his composed
9 posture. The next morning when I left there was a huge pile of what looked like ice
10 crystals in that small complex. The liquid oxygen plant, all it had was a roof. It was not
11 in any sort of a building. It was a small apparatus and some tanks, and I understand the
12 explosion was something had burst on the equipment, just a malfunction, but we were all
13 pretty jumpy anyway and so was that guard which made me realize that you didn't get
14 less jumpy just because you had spent a lot of time there because he was a Vietnamese.
15 Anyway, I got my bunk and tried to get some sleep and I noticed that all over the room I
16 could see people lighting cigarettes, so there were a lot of people not sleeping. My good
17 friend Bruce Hoon came by my bunk. He had been in my last assignment with me and he
18 had gone to - I think I told you this the other day - he and his wife had gone with us to
19 Maxwell Air Force Base for squadron officer's school. We both got our orders on the
20 same day, and he was assigned to Pleiku. He came by my bunk. He had been there for
21 several days and he was getting ready to ship out and somehow found out where I was
22 assigned and came and said goodnight or goodbye because he was leaving and I didn't
23 see him again until about 1997 and I found out in this little company that I was working
24 for in Rockville, Maryland, his cousin was working also and we got to talking. So now I
25 found out he lives in Florida. Anyway, he went off to Pleiku and the next morning, well,
26 I think I might have fallen asleep a little bit but I got up and cleaned up, got my uniform
27 on and went over to the personnel area and that's where the 505th TAC control group
28 wanted me to report and they were talking in there while I was waiting to meet with
29 somebody. They were talking about Karl Worst. Karl Worst was apparently involved in
30 a mid air collision in Thailand or in Laos where I ended up. Of course I had no idea of
31 that and it just happened a few days before that. That's W-O-R-S-T, and I recently

1 learned there's a good chance they have found his wreck sight, but he was involved with
2 a mid air of an F-105...with an F-105 on his last mission. The conjecture is that, being
3 his last mission, he had the typical fear of being killed on his last mission so he wound up
4 pretty high; high enough to be run over by one of the strike aircraft. Anyway, I just heard
5 people talking about this. They were working on the casualty report and a letter to the
6 next of kin and so forth.

7 SM: Just out of curiosity, what was the average altitude that you flew your
8 combat missions [?]?

9 WT: We were typically...our minimum altitude was supposed to be 1500 feet
10 and we actually flew anywhere from 500 to 2000.

11 SM: Was there a maximum altitude that you were supposed to...a ceiling that
12 you were supposed to stay under to prevent that kind of an accident with fast movers
13 coming out?

14 WT: No. We were to prevent it any way that we felt it was appropriate, and if
15 there was some reason why you had to be at 10,000 feet, which...well, I never put a
16 strike in at that altitude, but let's say for some reason you needed to be pretty high, you
17 would make sure the fighters knew where you were and I'll get into that a little later, but
18 that was a concern, of course, because we flew in pairs and one of them was high. We
19 did have some tricks to keep from being run over.

20 SM: There weren't any kind of proximity alarm systems on these aircraft?

21 WT: No.

22 SM: You wouldn't know if an aircraft was within a mile or whatever of you?

23 WT: No, you wouldn't have any way. You just had to use tactics that prevented
24 the aircraft from running into each other.

25 SM: And you said that he was in an accident with an F-4?

26 WT: F-105.

27 SM: F-105, okay. What happened to the 105?

28 WT: Pilot bailed out of that one. We found the wreckage sight for the 105 but
29 never could find anything from the 0-1 that we could identify. Both of them went down,
30 but the 105 pilot didn't know what happened so we couldn't confirm that it was a mid air.

31 SM: All he knew was something...

1 WT: Yeah, he never saw the 0-1.
2 SM: He just saw something or something struck him and he had to bail out?
3 WT: Something, yeah, his aircraft went out of control and he was out of it.
4 SM: Wow.
5 WT: He was...oh yeah, I checked in and they didn't need me at 8 but I did
6 process there and during the processing they told me I was to go to [Han Quan] which
7 was in support of I believe a special forces unit of the Army just straight north of Saigon
8 and my friend Charlie Loots who also went through training with me at Hurlbert was
9 supposed to go to Song Be which had the adjacent portion of Vietnam. We would have
10 been in adjacent search areas, and Charlie actually did process and go to Song Be where
11 they gave him instructions on his bunker position during attacks and so forth and he spent
12 one night there and then came back to Bien Hoa to go through his combat checkout and
13 that's where I went. As soon as I was done processing, though, they sent us to a briefing
14 in the tactical unit operations center there at Tan Son Nhut and the briefing...here's
15 where we got the rules of engagement and the very...well, we didn't get the strict rules of
16 engagement for the [?]. We got some of the rules of engagement for Vietnam and we got
17 a briefing on the tactical situation and just some military...some good military
18 intelligence stuff and the only thing I really remember very distinctly about that is that in
19 that secure building was the only place in Southeast Asia that I ever had anything stolen.
20 I had my sunglasses in my cap. While I was in the briefing somebody lifted them out of
21 my cap. That's the memorable thing about that. From the briefing I went and got in the
22 vehicle and got taken to Bien Hoa and that's about 15 or 16 miles northeast or north
23 of...northeast of Saigon. The driver all the way up there was telling...there was several
24 of us and he was telling us stories of having...let's see, he topped in the middle of Saigon
25 at a traffic light and I guess he was driving a pickup truck and I guess he saw a little kid
26 grab a hold of the tailgate and just saw the top of his head. So, he jumped out of the cab
27 and the kid had dropped some device or something in the back of his truck I think, but the
28 kid ran away and he was just telling us some of the dangers of the area; impressed us.
29 But, the road from Saigon to Bien Hoa was supposed to be secure or safe because - this is
30 something that many people told me, but I don't know if it was true - that the US
31 government was paying a fee, a tax, to the Viet Cong to keep it safe. Anyway, we drove

1 up there and checked in at the 19th task. I spent several days there. I had several
2 checkout missions. My first flight was out of Bien Hoa. I was the last student of a
3 Jewish Air Force pilot who was leaving the US Air Force and going to Israel to join the
4 Israeli Air Force as a fighter pilot. So, he was kind of excited and we had a good time.
5 He took me out to Phan Thiet on the coast, had me land at several Army installations,
6 then came back down the coast and picked out a...he had a little airfield there that was to
7 be my short field landing demonstration and it was just a very short strip. It was a
8 true...it was 1,000 feet, I think, so it was a real short field and not just an imagined one
9 that we do on the long runway. I came in over the water and the airstrip started about 50
10 feet up from the water. I just pulled flaps and my first approach I decided wasn't good so
11 I brought the flaps back up and made another attempt and the next time I had it all set up
12 just the way I wanted it and I came in on time just over the landing...just at the threshold
13 of the runway I chopped and set it right down immediately just the way I'd been trained
14 and I let it roll to the end which didn't take very long, and I was slowly turning the plane
15 around and bringing the flaps up to take off and the instructor said, "Don't dally around
16 too much," he said, "This field isn't secure." That's the first he told me that, so I slapped
17 the power to it real quick and got out of there. Then we went down to Vung Tau which I
18 think belonged to the Army, I'm not sure. It was the larger strip and they had had caribou
19 there but we shot a landing there and the thing I remember about Vung Tau was that there
20 was a...the runway was between the operations area, area of buildings, and [a parking
21 area of] parked aircraft and as I was on final approach there was a mechanic with a tool
22 box walking across the runway and I wasn't used to seeing that sort of thing in the Air
23 Force so I was worried about not being able to land and I just about went around but he
24 managed to get out of the way in time and I went ahead and landed and took off again
25 and went back to Bien Hua and got signed off on my...just [?] my airmanship. I do
26 remember one other thing that might be interesting about that flight was that the first
27 thing we did was to climb up over the Saigon river downstream from Saigon itself to do
28 some stalls, just to show that I had command of the aircraft. You know, people [build
29 these things]. My problem was that it was breathtakingly beautiful. It was so beautiful
30 that I wasn't interested in doing the air work thing in particular but we got with it and got
31 that taken care of. But, it was just incredibly beautiful. It was intense green areas in the

1 Delta, the river Delta below Saigon from there to the ocean and it sure didn't look like a
2 combat zone, I'll tell you that.

3 SM: Let me ask a question about a comment you made earlier about payments to
4 the VC to keep the place secure.

5 WT: Yeah.

6 SM: What was that based upon? What source of information did you have? Do
7 you remember?

8 WT: Oh, I heard it from just other...nobody in authority told me that, put it that
9 way; nobody who really was in position to know it. That's why I never knew if it was
10 true.

11 SM: Do you know if it was an American or a Vietnamese?

12 WT: American; other Air Force people told me that.

13 SM: Did you believe it?

14 WT: Yes, I did, and I guess it's because of as many sources I heard it from but
15 that didn't make it true, either.

16 SM: So you heard it from more than one person?

17 WT: Oh yeah. I heard it back in the States before I went over there, in fact. We
18 hauled fuel up and down that highway and the fuel trucks would have been very good
19 targets. It was just an open highway, you know, it was a pretty good highway. So yeah, I
20 believed it and I still do.

21 SM: So there were no incidents where the VC or anybody attacked or mined or
22 anything like that on that particular area...in that particular area?

23 WT: That's right. I've never heard of any.

24 SM: So that is quite suspect?

25 WT: Yeah, yeah, it is, and I don't know how they would arrange such a
26 payment.

27 SM: What did that make...how did you feel about that, even as just a possibility?
28 How did that affect your morale to know that, or to even think, that the United States
29 government or representatives thereof were actually making payments to the enemy so
30 that they wouldn't attack certain areas?

1 WT: I guess I don't think that it really made me feel any bitterness or anything.
2 I probably just wrote it off as being...doing what they had to do to get the materials to
3 Bien Hoa and I guess in a wartime you do whatever has to be done.

4 SM: Right.

5 WT: Probably wouldn't be considered ethical by a lot of people.

6 SM: Well I guess the question that comes to mind is what were they doing with
7 that money, and more than likely weren't they buying munitions and weapons?

8 WT: They were buying munitions, sure.

9 SM: Yeah, and then using those to kill Americans!

10 WT: Right, yeah.

11 SM: So here we are supplying the enemy with the necessities of killing fellow
12 soldiers?

13 WT: And you could carry that a little further and say that since we weren't
14 trying to protect that road, they didn't have to have forces there to try to attack it.

15 SM: Exactly, it's an uncontested area.

16 WT: Then you could also say that since they weren't attacking that road, we
17 didn't have to put a bunch of forces there to protect it, so it's a trade-off. We were in
18 war with those people, no doubt about it, and we were doing what we had to do and they
19 were doing what they had to do, so I still take a kind of an unconcerned look at that as
20 that its probably a necessity but not a good thing.

21 SM: It didn't call into question, for you, the true depth or the level of
22 commitment of the United States?

23 WT: No, but it certainly did tell me...I think it struck me as the amount of...the
24 presence of the Viet Cong which was everywhere. It seemed everywhere. [?] seemed
25 that way, too. No, I don't think it had any impact on me as far as the commitment; a lot
26 of other things did, but not that.

27 SM: Can you elaborate on that?

28 WT: Yeah, but as we go along it will come out in the picture.

29 SM: Okay, okay.

30 WT: Because at that time I thought we were...well, I thought we were trying to
31 treat it as a minor action, which we were advisors and gone beyond the advisory point.

1 SM: Well how much interaction did you have with the Vietnamese people?

2 WT: At that point the only interaction I had with the Vietnamese people would
3 have been in a restaurant. I mean, I was among them on the street but I wasn't on the
4 street very much because I just wasn't there long enough because a lot of people did, but
5 it was in shops and restaurants and things like that.

6 SM: How about Vietnamese soldiers or airmen and the ARVN or VNAF?

7 WT: Okay, the next day I did because the next day I was taken, I was flown by a
8 major from a unit near Cu Chi [interviewee error: Duc Hua]. I can't remember his name.
9 I have that in some notes; I'd have to look them up. I went to this detachment of the
10 505th for my combat check-out and the...we had to...they gave me a briefing on what we
11 were going to do and then we had to go to a [Dai We] with that lieutenant I think, I forget
12 their ranks, but we had to go to a Vietnamese, VNAF, Vietnamese Air Force officer and
13 tell him where we intended to do some air strikes and get his permission. Well, the area
14 that we wanted to do was up in the corner near the Parrot's Beak. There's a corner of
15 Vietnam that was pretty much of a free strike zone. It was considered all under the
16 control of the Viet Cong and you hit anything there you thought was worth it. The
17 checkout pilot, I can't think of his name right now, he was a wild man. He...let's see, we
18 went up past a sugar processing plant and then turned to the east...turned to the west
19 from there up into this corner of Vietnam and the first thing he did was to show me where
20 the Cambodia border was because he told me that, "If you wander across it, you'll be shot
21 down." He said there was a heavy concentration of forces just across the border in
22 Cambodia and that there wasn't...we weren't so much concerned with international
23 incident or violating the neutrality of Cambodia as we were of great danger in an area that
24 we could not strike; we were not permitted to get in there and perform air strikes so we
25 avoided that. I was in the front seat and he was in the back seat and the first thing, we got
26 to an F-100 and so he had me direct an air strike of...let's see, first we got rid of our
27 napalm and there were some compounds which was...looked like a farm house
28 surrounded by trees with some out buildings and I can't tell you why that was a good
29 target. I'm not even sure that I felt comfortable about it at the time except that this was a
30 free strike zone and anything in there was to be struck with the concurrence of the VNAF
31 but I couldn't tell you what the military significance of that compound was. But, the F-

1 100s, they had no problem. We saw the target, we didn't have to use the rockets to show
2 it to them, and they came right in and did a very precise drop. One thing this...my
3 instructor said to me was that something along the lines of, "Oh boy, we might get some
4 ground fire today!" He seemed to think that was a great prospect and of course that
5 wasn't something that I was real eager to mix up with. Then, we had the F-100s come
6 around and strafe some tree lines because that was a favorite...I guess people walking
7 down the road would naturally dive into a tree line for cover so if you found an area
8 where you thought they were, why you could have them strafe some tree lines so we did
9 that. I don't remember ever seeing anything on the ground that looked like a target
10 during that checkout flight. But, at some point during the air strikes I got called to by the
11 instructor pilot. He wanted to know if I was looking at my altimeter. Instead of 1500
12 feet I was up around 4000. I had just been climbing without even realizing it, which
13 made me feel kind of stupid, but obviously the reason was that I was trying to get away
14 from the ground. Then, I went back down and got to where I was supposed to be, but that
15 was my first exposure to potential combat and kind of is a measure of what it does to you.
16 I wasn't exactly thrilled at that prospect, I guess. I was scared. Then I went back to Bin
17 Hua after that mission and I remember one other thing that really struck me as the worst
18 thing is that I went in the dining hall at that unit down near Cu Chi [Duc Hoa] and I just
19 drank a huge amount of lemonade. I was incredibly thirsty, probably again from the fear
20 and nervousness. One thing I didn't mention is one the way to Cu Chi [Duc Hoa], the
21 pilot that took me there was pointing out a village where the - I think it was on top of the
22 tunnel complex - but the village was so VC and so incorrigibly in enemy hands that they
23 just took armored bull dozers and removed it; evacuated the people and took it away from
24 the face of the earth. They were still in the process of dozing that as I remember. I think
25 I saw the dozers working on it.

26 SM: What did you think about that?

27 WT: I was hoping it would work. I had heard about the tunnels and the fact that,
28 as I remember, they actually put the whole division, I forget which division it was, but
29 they actually sighted a whole Army division on top of what they thought was the worst,
30 most concentrated complex of VC activity; I guess on the theory of putting them there
31 would get rid of the VC. I don't think it worked, but at the time I hoped it would. I - to

1 get back to my answer - I hoped it would work. We got back to Bien Hoa and I guess
2 probably the next day I went in and probably reported to operations to see what was
3 going to happen next because I expected to be given a plane and sent to Hong Quan and
4 there as some discussion going on between a captain and a lieutenant in there, or a
5 lieutenant and an... anyway, and a couple of officers in there were having kind of a heated
6 discussion which they obviously didn't want me to hear, and the just of it was that they
7 had been told to send 4 pilots to TDY, temporary duty, to Nakhon Phanom, Thailand and
8 they had 3 of them from other units there in south Vietnam but of course I had just
9 arrived and just been checked out and they wanted me to be the 4th one but one of the two
10 officers thought it was... you shouldn't send a brand new person to this particular duty.
11 He had just come from there. But, the other guy prevailed and I think they gave me an
12 opportunity to just say that I didn't want to go, but I said, "Sure!" I didn't really... I felt
13 like if the Air Force wanted me to go there, then that's what I should be doing and so I
14 guess they were telling me that I could make a big... same thing as the jungle survival,
15 that if I wanted to make a big case of it, I could probably get out of the orders, and so I
16 was put in on a 4 ship, a 4 plane formation with Dick Strong was the lead aircraft, his
17 wing man was Jim Kormanik who was later my roommate there, much later, and then I
18 was the 3rd in formation and on my wing was Glenn Bremenkamp and I'm in touch with
19 all 3 of those guys.

20 SM: Right now?

21 WT: Yeah. We left, and in the aircraft that I went off to pre-flight, another door
22 that didn't match the rest of the aircraft, it was a different color; the aircraft was gray and
23 that door was olive drab and it had about a 2 inch square patch right in the middle of the
24 door and there was a similar corresponding patch on the map case inside so obviously a
25 round had gone through the door and it looked to me like it had to have hit whoever was
26 sitting in the cockpit, and I asked the mechanic about that, the crew chief, and he said,
27 "Oh no. This was Lieutenant so-and-so's plane and it missed him, and so when he
28 changed planes he took the door with him because that was his lucky door," and that's
29 why it didn't match the aircraft. But he had shipped back to the States and that plane
30 was... well, I'll tell you about that plane but that's what I took to Thailand. This was a
31 part of another build-up at NKP, which I have learned about more recently that an

1 experiment in flying FACs covering the Ho Chi Minh Trail started, I think, in January of
2 '66. There were, I think, 12 pilots; no more than that, and it was created as a detachment
3 of the 505th TAC control group. That was just about the time that Lieutenant Colonel
4 Louie Johnston, or Johnson, was...he'd been in command for a short time. He had first
5 set up a radar sight at [Dong Ha] near the DMZ and then he was sent over there to set up
6 this...take over this unit and create it into a squadron. So, it became...there was already
7 the 19th, 20th, 21st, and 22nd TASS so it became the 23rd TASS which ultimately was the
8 last one to be decommissioned. I think they fought in the Gulf War in many other roles,
9 but that was the initiation of it and I believe there had been a 23rd TASS before that,
10 maybe in Korea or someplace, but it was created at that time for patrol of the Ho Chi
11 Minh Trail, the main segment of it. We flew up the coast. We got a briefing on that, too.
12 We were briefed to fly at 10,000 feet and we were given some frequencies to call the
13 Navy to see if they were flying on shore artillery from destroyers and we never could get
14 anybody on any of those frequencies so either they weren't there or we were given the
15 wrong frequencies. We didn't feel too good about that. We were, I think, we were given
16 all of this advice to land at Na Trang for lunch and refueling and then spend the night at
17 Da Nang, which is exactly what we did. Again, the beauty of the shoreline was a
18 remarkable thing that I noticed there. I remember very clearly passing...I'm trying to
19 think of it, the Navy base up there that they also built a runway. Can you think of it? Its
20 one of the best harbors in Asia.

21 SM: Cam Ranh Bay?

22 WT: Yeah, Cam Ranh Bay. We passed that and we got several pictures of it. It
23 was a huge complex, of course, with a big aluminum runway.

24 SM: Aluminum? Not PSP?

25 WT: Right. It was solid; no holes in it, and it was an excellent temporary
26 runway suitable for jet fighters. The PSP wouldn't have been any good for jet fighters.

27 SM: That's a good point.

28 WT: So in order to make runways they could use with their very small footprint,
29 they just wouldn't have worked. To make a good runway for them they came up with
30 this aluminum planking. I don't know the dimensions of them, but they were large
31 rectangles of aluminum interlocking and they were several inches thick. They laid those

1 on sand and it made a great runway. I think it was a little bit slick when it was wet, but
2 I'm sure they later replaced it with concrete but at that time that's what they had. We
3 landed at Na Trang and had lunch in a special forces dining hall and I can't remember
4 what the conversation was but I remember we were very interested in the conversation
5 that several of the Army officers were having there. Glenn left his sunglasses but we
6 went back and he got his back, and that's Briming camp, and then we...oh yeah, when
7 we left Bien Hoa, Dick Strong, the lead, developed an oil pressure problem and oil started
8 coming back from his prop. We had F models with the variable pitch prop and he had a
9 leaking seal and had to go back into Bien Hoa. So, we waited in Na Trang until he
10 caught up with us. Apparently it didn't take him long to fix it or else he got a different
11 plane and he came back and rejoined us. So then we went on from Na Trang into Da
12 Nang and each of these legs took us 2 or 3 hours. The 0-1 is good for about 4 hours; its
13 got that 40 gallon fuel and burns about 10 gallons an hour, so at Da Nang at that time the
14 Vietnamese air force and the Army of Vietnam were having an internecine war. They
15 were the top generals; I think Key was the top Air Force general at that time...were at
16 odds about jurisdiction or something, so all the US personnel had been evacuated from
17 the city into the air base. I'm going to switch phones because this one's losing its battery.

18 SM: Okay.

19 WT: Can you hear me?

20 SM: Yes sir.

21 WT: Okay. So all the US forces were on the base and we were given a tent. We
22 were assigned to some bunks in a tent, a large personnel tent, and there were, at the main
23 gate, there were tanks outside the main gate and VNAF were inside with their rifles and
24 everything and it was kind of a stupid thing. I really felt as though it was not a good
25 omen to see the forces that we were supposedly supporting busy fighting each other. I
26 don't know if there was any bloodshed in that action but it was a really stupid use of
27 their energy and our money. We were in a tent that was also full of battle repair
28 contractors, battle damage repair, so they were telling us about some of the aircraft that
29 they had been repairing, but for a meal we went to the officer's club and they were so
30 overwhelmed with people because of the evacuation that they just...you paid a flat
31 amount and they gave you a raw steak and pointed you toward a barbecue grill that was

1 made out of a half of a 55 gallon drum with a screen over it; it made a great barbecue pit.
2 They had several of those they collected up around the base, and a big tub full of baked
3 potatoes, you know, and it was a good meal but it was a do-it-yourself, you know. That
4 night I remember we sat in the bar which was just crowded to the gills, it was totally full,
5 and there was a small group of enlisted men who'd formed a pretty good little country
6 band and they were playing and some of the people in there'd gotten kind of rowdy and
7 were demanding that they play Yellow Bird and that seemed to be repeated again and
8 again all evening and the reason was that there were 2 B-57 outfits out of Clark Air Force
9 Base in the Philippines that rotated; one was the Yellow Bird and I believe it was the
10 Blue Bird, and of course that was their theme song for Yellow Bird and they were the
11 ones that were in Vietnam at the time. I came to have a lot of respect for the B-57s, but
12 that night it was pretty funny, but we left and we understand it was several hours later
13 before they were able to close the club because these guys insisted on hearing Yellow
14 Bird just one more time, and wouldn't let the band leave. The next morning we went
15 over to the hanger where the...I think it was the 21st task, I'm pretty sure it was in there,
16 but whoever it was they gave us a briefing on crossing the mountain and they're main
17 message was two places to avoid and one was Tchepone which was on Route 9, the same
18 road that goes past Khe Sanh and goes clear over to...I think it hits the Mekong River at
19 Savannakhet, but it's the major east-west road in that part of the world that crosses from
20 Vietnam over into Laos. It was an infiltration route for a long time and it's the reason
21 why Khe Sanh was important and Tchepone was, well, you remember the Vietnamese
22 Army invasion of southern Laos, tried to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail? I forget the
23 name of that, was that Lam Song?

24 SM: Lam Song 719.

25 WT: Okay, Tchepone was their objective. In 1966 we were briefed that it was
26 an extremely dangerous place and they showed us all the anti-aircraft gun positions
27 around Tchepone on a photograph that was marked with grease pencil and it looked
28 incredible and in fact it wasn't true; maybe these had been, at one time or another, but
29 they weren't active. If they had been active, it would have been the most terribly
30 defended place in the world, you know, just all marks.

31 SM: What kind of anti-aircraft systems did they have there?

1 WT: I don't remember if they briefed us on that, but I'm sure that they
2 had...these were most of the 4 hole gun pits which would have been probably a 37-57
3 millimeter because usually the what we called quad 50s, the 12.7, was mounted on
4 vehicles or portable. It wasn't down in this prepared gun pit. By the way, back at Bien
5 Hoa when I was there those two officers were arguing and they finally told me that I was
6 going to NKP and I said, "Is that a good place?" and the guy that had been there came
7 over and grabbed me by the lapel or by my flight suit collar and said, "Have you ever
8 heard of quad 50s?" which yeah, I'd heard of them, but I just didn't know what to say
9 about that. I said, "Yeah, I guess so," and I also did hear that somebody had got their
10 purple heart because he'd been hit in the wind screen and a piece of the plexi glass had
11 come back and cut his face and so he had a battle wound. But, that's all I heard about it
12 at Bien Hoa and now we were getting this briefing about Tchepone, but I didn't know
13 that that would be in our area of concern. Naturally, it wasn't; it was just below our area
14 of concern when I got to NKP. The other place we were told to avoid was Seno which
15 for a totally different reason. We were told that's where the UN commission kept their
16 white aircraft and that since we weren't supposed to be in Laos we weren't to be seen by
17 them. I had a vague knowledge that...maybe it was more than vague, I knew there was a
18 neutrality agreement that we had concluded with some of the countries over there and I
19 didn't know how much involvement Russia had, Soviet Union had in that, or China, but I
20 had a vague notion that the other guys were violating it and therefore we were, too,
21 because I'm sure you're curious as to whether that bothered me or not. I'm sure I didn't
22 think it was a very good thing, but it looked like it was probably another one of those
23 necessities, but I certainly did avoid Seno; I never did go near it.

24 SM: Now did you have to coordinate your operations with the other groups
25 working in the area, in particular Air America and the CIA operatives on the ground?

26 WT: No; at least I was never aware of it and was never told to and was never
27 told that we were doing that, and I don't think we did.

28 SM: You didn't witness yourself the Air America aircraft and pilots?

29 WT: A few times. I saw them kicking out rice one time and I recently learned
30 something about that from one of the people that did it, and a few times I saw them on the
31 ground; I even talked to some of them at various places, and I saw some T-28s attacking

1 on my first flight, but I don't...that wouldn't have been Air America, it would have been
2 Royal Lao Air Force but Air America was supporting them. No, it's surprising. I think
3 maybe they were warned about us, probably. It wasn't a safe area for anybody to operate
4 in, and the only interfering aircraft in our...our over the trail were Army that I ever saw.
5 I believe there was some high level disagreement about that, too, but it wasn't a
6 coordinated thing. We went ahead and flew across into NKP, though, and then my first
7 impression of that was, "What a great relief!" At Bien Hoa, I had thought about...at
8 night I had a hard time sleeping because I knew that mortar attacks were possible at
9 anytime, or rocket attacks, and during the day you're at risk if you're off the base, and
10 also at the base we were told never take off or land with the same pattern, you know;
11 always switch it up so that they don't know where to expect to see you because they were
12 not too far from the base, and going into Thailand it was great. I felt like it was a quiet,
13 secure country and there were some things going on there but nothing like Vietnam. We
14 were met at the planes by a guy named Ben Witterman who was...I think he was a major
15 and he was the operations officer at Thai, and he was a little bit curt, very correct and
16 brief and we were shown where to take our weapons. It was a connex, a shipping
17 container where they stored weapons off the flight line and they had some mechanics
18 there to tie the aircraft down and I don't remember the processing there but we were
19 assigned a place to sleep and I was given an upper bunk in a very small hooch with some
20 of the officers from the radar sight there called Invert. I think it was channel 98, but that
21 was the radar that controlled that whole sector where we operated. There was...one of
22 the people in that hooch seemed to be kind of...well, he was not friendly, and when he
23 left the hooch I asked one of the other guys what his trouble was and he said, "Well, he
24 doesn't like all these new people coming on the base." The compound seemed like an
25 over-grown Boy Scout camp when I got there. I think it was April 1st of '66, or maybe
26 that's when I was at Tan Sin Nhut. It was one of the first few days there. I guess it was
27 the 9th, the 9th of April that I actually got to NKP. It just seemed like, I mean, in the
28 officer's latrine there was a few cubby holes where you could keep your DOPP kit, your
29 toiletry kit, and that's the sort of thing you only do where there's just a few people and it
30 was just very small and it grew so rapidly and I'm sure the people that had been there
31 under those conditions resented all these new people coming in and ruining their ideal

1 little community. But, we got all squared away that day and the next day I got assigned
2 to a mission in Thailand. They gave me a Thai, a very young officer. I think he was...he
3 had not yet been to pilot training but was supposed to go and I was to go wherever he
4 directed me. So, we flew in the direction of Savannakhet...I mean, in the direction of
5 Sakanakhan which is west and then beyond Sakanakhan there's an area of low hills about
6 half way from there to Udorn and he had me orbit over those hills and I asked him what
7 they were doing down there. I could see Army units, and they said they were looking for
8 some communist troops. After a while, a lot of zigzagging back and forth across these
9 hills trying to keep him in radio range; after while he told me that they had caught the
10 leader in a cave and I said, "Okay," and I asked him what they were doing with the leader
11 and he said, "Oh, they already shot him."

12 SM: Oh, man!

13 WT: Yeah. Now, this is the Thai Army we're supporting in this case.

14 SM: Was that generally their policy to shoot prisoners?

15 WT: I don't know. I never heard anything more about it, but that was
16 the...that's just what he told me. Very little contact with...well, we did have a lot of
17 contact with the Thai Army right at NKP but very little contact with anybody in country
18 that was doing things like that.

19 SM: Did you have much concern when you were at NKP, when you were based
20 there, about Thai terrorists, Thai communists?

21 WT: We did not; we should have, but we didn't.

22 SM: What do you mean you should have?

23 WT: But, people on the base did. They had some real big scares and the base
24 really clamped down and stopped people from coming in and out of the gate and but the
25 people in our unit, I guess we kind of laughed about it. A couple of times we were sent
26 out to look for people that had been spotted. One time there was a force of Thai...of
27 Viet...of what did they call the Thai communists force...was approaching the base and
28 before we could even get airborne they said that they had found out it was some hunters
29 with rifles 10 kilometers away and then later on when we got moved to some hooches
30 that were way out in a brand new area, our squadron put up such a ruckus about getting
31 out of the hooches that we were in that they finally moved us to these new things before

1 they were even ready to. They didn't have power yet; they put a generator down there for
2 us and a field telephone and we were about a quarter of a mile off the main base, or not
3 even that far, but we were not on the main base anymore, we were at the edge. One day
4 Jim Kormanik and I decided – it was after our flight – and we decided just to walk out to
5 the fence and so we were in our flight suits and we just started walking through the
6 woods, it was kind of a scrubby forest, and we came across a house, a farmers house I
7 guess and some other things, and then we came to the road, the road to town, and never
8 did see a fence. We got a ride back to the base on a pick-up truck, an ice cream...I mean,
9 an ice vendor was bringing ice out to the base and he gave us a ride, but we were kind of
10 surprised that we never came across a perimeter; not even a fence. We didn't have as
11 much security there as an air base here in the United States would have, and we asked
12 about that and they said well, there were patrols, but no patrol ever saw us. Later on it
13 got much better than that I know, but it was kind of a surprise.

14 SM: How about US Army personnel? Did you ever have any contact with
15 Special Forces units that were in the area training Thai forces, Thai Army forces, or
16 anything like that?

17 WT: Never did; wasn't even aware of it.

18 SM: Were there any Army soldiers stationed at NKP with you to help with base
19 security or anything?

20 WT: No, there were not. In fact, it was a Royal Thai Air Force Base and
21 presumably it was protected by the Thai. Yeah, in Vietnam it was the US Army that was
22 in charge of base security, or supposed to be. We did have one Army officer who came
23 around every once in a while. We saw him in operation once in a while. He had a big
24 bushy moustache and a huge gold bracelet, you know, the Army baht bracelets? It's
25 really for money.

26 SM: The thick link bracelets that you could then, if you got shot down or you
27 were out in the bush and something happened you could barter that for some form of
28 assistance?

29 WT: Right. It wasn't for jewelry, it was for...

30 SM: No, it was security.

31 WT: ...means of carrying money around.

1 SM: Did you buy one yourself?

2 WT: No, I didn't, but I did find out that this major was, well, I never knew
3 exactly what he was doing except that he was the guy that cared about the road teams that
4 were carried out and deposited in hills.

5 SM: These were road watch personnel?

6 WT: Yeah, they were Lao who were from the areas where they were put to
7 watch the roads.

8 SM: Did you carry people in your aircraft for this?

9 WT: I carried people in the back who were talking to them.

10 SM: Okay.

11 WT: A few times.

12 SM: CIA personnel?

13 WT: We didn't get much of a briefing on these people.

14 SM: These were American civilians?

15 WT: No.

16 SM: No?

17 WT: These were Lao.

18 SM: Oh, Lao?

19 WT: They were real short and they would hook their little hand held radio into
20 my VHF antenna, which was mounted on the roof on the aircraft. They could reach right
21 up and cup right into it and then they would sit back there in the back seat and jabber
22 away and a lot of times they didn't speak English. They couldn't give me much
23 guidance, and they never told us where to go. They were happy to talk to whoever they
24 were able to wherever we went. We also had a large number...well, I guess about 20
25 Thai Air Force pilots assigned there and they often flew with us. They also were in
26 the...I guess they advised a squadron. I'm not sure what all they did, but they were there
27 at operations and the ones right next to us, they had a building right next to us, and I got
28 to know some of them pretty well but we never talked about operational things.

29 SM: Was that pretty much standard operating procedure, if you weren't involved
30 with something you were kept in the dark about it, like special compartmentalized
31 intelligence?

1 WT: Yeah. Well, not that where you would say high security level, but yes; if
2 you don't have a need to know, then you're not told and you don't know and that would
3 even go for secret level. You know, the handling of security was not nearly as rigid even
4 though a lot of things we dealt with would be considered top secret and we treated them
5 as though they were top secret. We didn't have, I guess, a lot of time for the proper
6 handling of things, the proper receipting, and some things we did. The daily frag order
7 was I guess top secret; it should have been if it wasn't and of course we had to be briefed
8 on that and we received that in a print out. Nobody signed for it, just took it and sat down
9 and scheduled the missions. There was one occasion in which I made a top-secret
10 telephone call in the clear because of the time factor. We had a road team that was on top
11 of a mountain we called Diamondhead which was out along Route 912, otherwise known
12 as the new road to us, and this team had been placed there the day before and they were
13 calling to some of the FACs that they were under...they were being approached, they
14 were under attack, and people were coming up the sides of the mountain toward them,
15 and we needed somebody to get in there and pull them out, and so I called...I was duty
16 officer that day so I was back at the squadron and I picked up the phone and you couldn't
17 get through on anything and so I just...see, I don't remember exactly how I did it but I
18 did make an in the clear, unsecure phone call to get assistance in to them but we weren't
19 in time anyhow; they got overrun.

20 SM: Were there any survivors?

21 WT: Our first combat mission was several days later, I guess the next day,
22 because I went over and spent the night at Udorn. I took...that Thai pilot finally got
23 airsick. He couldn't take the twisting and turning, which is not uncommon in the back
24 seat of an 0-1 so I took him back to his unit at Udorn and left him. I think I spent the
25 night there. The next day was my first combat orientation riding in our area and I went
26 out in the back seat on my first flight and the first thing...we heard that the squadron was
27 told that they B-52s had bombed Mu Gia Pass for the first time that morning which is a
28 matter of historical record, so the pilot that I was riding in the back seat with took me up
29 to Mu Gia Pass first and we went pretty high altitude. I think we went up about 6 or
30 7,000 feet, which the mountains on both sides of the pass area pretty high anyhow and we
31 could see that, yes, there were many craters but it looked like the road was not really

1 damaged very much. There might have been a few craters on the road, but most of them
2 were all over the hills and up the valley sides on both sides; they were just all over the
3 place – that’s the way a B-52 raid is. It’s not exactly very precise method of bombing.
4 So, we reported after that mission, that the road was either open or very readily repairable
5 and we got a message back two days later that we were not to give bomb damage
6 assessments for SAC; they would do their own. I’m sure they didn’t like us because the
7 rumors had been that they had collapsed cliffs and the road was under a burden of
8 landslide soil and they had closed it, closed the pass, and in fact they had really not done
9 much damage at all.

10 SM: Do you know how many tons of bombs they dropped?

11 WT: No, I have no idea, no idea at all. I don’t know anything about that strike
12 except that it was B-52.

13 SM: And it wasn’t as effective as they claimed?

14 WT: Well, I don’t know what they officially claimed. It wasn’t as effective as
15 the rumors they were putting out.

16 SM: What did you think about that? Here we’re spending phenomenal amounts
17 of time, energy, money, bombing north Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, areas of south
18 Vietnam; was this a common occurrence for you to witness that the bombing wasn’t
19 nearly as effective as rumor or even perhaps reporting?

20 WT: I can’t say that was a common occurrence because I don’t remember any
21 other time in which I saw one thing and heard another that was from a semi official...I
22 have to think about that, but I do know that what I thought was B-52s is not a way to
23 close a road. I thought that SAC was being very dishonest to tell us not to give a bomb
24 damage assessment because obviously they didn’t like what we said, and I imagine SAC
25 was thinking, “Well, these guys aren’t trained reconnaissance people,” but we could see
26 with our own eyes, I mean, we were close to it, and it didn’t take any training to see that
27 that was ineffective and I thought they should know it. But, if they just wanted a role in
28 the war or something, well then they were going to be back there. I think finally that
29 word did get clear up to the top that it wasn’t a...I think that, I don’t know because they
30 didn’t come back while I was there. I think they did bomb that...I think they did some
31 very effective bombing later when they there was more concentrated targets like troops,

1 and I believed at the time that they were probably effective in south Vietnam but it
2 certainly was no way to try to interdict a road. On that mission also...it was my second
3 mission was the most dramatic strike of the whole time I was there. We heard about it as
4 we were leaving. I was in the front seat with one of the older guys, one of the guys that
5 had been around for a while, in the backseat. This is the way we did our orientation, and
6 we heard that there were some trucks burning along Route 23, the main road down from
7 Mu Gia Pass towards Tchepone, really, but it's a long way, but that was the main route
8 of the trail and so we saw a column of smoke and headed right for it. What had happened
9 was that some of the other FACs earlier had been out there just doing some VR – stands
10 for visual reconnaissance – and they had been shot at with small arms, and so they decide
11 to bring some strike aircraft in and probe around and see why someone would bother
12 shooting at them and the first plane to drop some bombs into the road area got some fire
13 started immediately. We found later, the next day after all the smoke cleared and the
14 leaves were all burned off that there were...I think there were 16 trucks – looked like
15 tank trucks – plus innumerable other vehicles and things that were in that area. I've got
16 many photographs of it because we often went back and looked at it on our way out. But,
17 it was very dramatic. The guy in the backseat had me circle it and we stayed there and
18 we put more air strikes in on it. We had some B-57s and we started...we were hearing a
19 lot of secondary explosions so we got a grease pencil, I did, and we started marking them
20 on the side window which is where we usually kept our strike information and I don't
21 remember how many there were but there were hundreds and hundreds of secondary
22 explosions; probably small amounts of fuel collecting and exploding off, but it could
23 have been ammunition. We didn't know what it was, but they were loud. You could feel
24 them, actually, and they were in towering flames. I didn't have my camera with me but
25 he did and I have a picture that he gave me that he took of that day. The next day it was
26 still smoking. That was a pretty good strike. I also heard at the very beginning about
27 what they called the new road. Just before I got to the 23rd task some FACs had
28 discovered a section of road joining route 911 which was under bamboo trellis so they
29 started to – I guess they put air strikes on it – but they started to follow it and they found
30 it was a whole new route which started, it came across the border in what is now known
31 as Harley's Valley and went through Ban La Boui and passed Diamondhead and down

1 and joined route 911 so we called that 912. I guess that was an official designation. It's
2 on the maps. At that time it was just called the new road, and this was, I guess, the
3 Vietnamese answer to having Ma Gia Pass struck quite a bit. So, we went over and
4 looked at that and that was...well, I'll get back to that probably, but that was pretty much
5 my orientation to this operation. The routine thing that you might be interested in was
6 that at that time we would take a jeep and go up to Invert, the radar sight, and our
7 intelligence officer had a briefing room there or little reading room and we would be
8 given some maps of a particular area. We had a whole region blocked off in areas and
9 we would be given a 1 to 250 – 1 to 250,000 – scale map of the general area that we were
10 going to. I think there were 3 different 1 to 250s that covered our whole area, so we
11 would be given 1 or 2 of those depending on where we were going to go and then some 1
12 to 50,000 scale maps of the specific areas that they wanted us to look at and usually they
13 would assign you 2 or 3 of them to go for VR. We weren't given any air strike orders at
14 that time, in the early time, and the northernmost part of our area started at Nape Pass
15 which was an early infiltration route that had become...I guess it was too hard for them to
16 use. We were able to get at it too well, and they had abandoned that and pretty much
17 were coming through Mu Gia and then by this time they had started coming in over
18 above Ban La Boui. There weren't too many...I don't think they ever developed too
19 many passes across the, you know, routes across the mountains; across the border
20 between North Vietnam and Laos. Those were the main ones and we were able to
21 concentrate on those. There was so...we always looked up at Nape and somebody
22 everyday, at least several times a week, was assigned up there. But, most of our activity
23 was right around the junction of the new road and the existing road. I was shown on my
24 initial mission what they called choke points and the first place that we looked at on that
25 initial mission when I was in the backseat was around Mahaxay which is not far across
26 the river from NKP and that area on Route 12 had also been abandoned by the
27 Vietnamese; it was just too close to us, and there were a lot of bomb craters that
28 were...looked like maybe a year old and there were some relics I think from the French
29 times. Some of the gun pits and things were rumored to be from the French times, and up
30 towards Nape there was a row of trucks, 20 or 30 trucks in a row that we were told...the
31 rumor passed from pilot to pilot that those were from when the French were there. I later

1 saw that in a photograph in Aviation Week before the end of the war with a caption that it
2 was trucks that American fighters had destroyed. I thought it was pretty funny because I
3 knew exactly what it was. We never dropped anything on them at all because they were
4 junk. It was like attacking a junkyard. So, the choke points were a major matter of
5 interest and one of those early flights they showed me the major choke points and alpha,
6 choke point A was the little cut in some of the karst. I might mention karst because that
7 characterized the whole area; of course karst is a limestone outcropping and its usually
8 very vertical and very rugged. The weather is very rough. The mountains you often see
9 in some of the idyllic Chinese art are often [karst] mountains and that's what this looked
10 like, the whole area; it looked like something out of one of those Chinese paintings – very
11 beautiful, but very deadly, and we used it to our advantage and we also respected it with
12 dangerous force.

13 SM: Quick question about operational matters; now was it more often that you
14 would go get a briefing like you described, you go to the intel shack, you get your maps,
15 there are a series of targeting areas that you'll be going into where you go in and you
16 bring ordinance in on those if there's any activity, or would you also...or how frequently
17 would you have people on the ground directing you in to help them with a developing
18 situation with engaging enemy forces?

19 WT: Okay, yeah, I can give you a quick answer to that because...the answer is
20 we never had American people on the ground.

21 SM: How about Thai, support for Thai people?

22 WT: We were never in direct communication with people on the ground for
23 support. There was some sort of a war going on. We called it Cricket West. Of course,
24 our whole thing was called Operation Cricket. Cricket West was only about 20 or 30
25 miles across the river, and that's where the Royal Lao and the Pathet Lao forces had their
26 front line, and there were trenches there, there were strong positions that were being held,
27 and occasionally...and in fact on my first flight I saw these T-28s putting in air strikes
28 near that. We were told to stay away from it; we were to over fly it and we were told
29 nothing else about it, just to avoid it, and we asked and asked about that, complained
30 about it. We felt as though we should at least be told what was going on. The first time I
31 was ever shot at that I knew of was there. I was flying back from a mission and I went

1 across an area where there had been a road. I had an interest in it, but it was also along
2 this front line and I heard a single round. Maybe it wasn't the first time, but it was one of
3 the early times I was shot at. I heard a single round, and it may have been just somebody
4 taking a pot shot. I'm not sure it was Pathet Lao. People do shoot at airplanes
5 sometimes, even here in the States. But, I heard it and I complained about it and then
6 another time we were coming back from a mission and I had some rockets left and there
7 was something I had seen near that area but I was pretty sure it was on the Pathet Lao
8 side and I was trying to tell the pilot of the other aircraft about it and he couldn't see
9 where I was talking about so I just armed a rocket and rolled in and fired, and left a
10 plume on the ground there and I said, "Okay, you see my smoke?" "Yeah," so I said,
11 "Well, go look 200 meters to the west of that," or something, wherever it was, and he saw
12 what I was talking about and we went ahead and landed and didn't say anything more
13 about it and about 3 or 4 days later I came in, I had a late mission, and when I landed I
14 think I was...the other guy and I were the last to come back that day from the day's
15 missions and the squadron commander was in the intelligence building. By this time we
16 had moved to a tactical unit operations center, and he came over to me and he said, he
17 told me, "Billy," he said, "You didn't shoot a rocket around the Cricket West area the
18 other day, did you?" and I said, "Let me see...yeah, sure did," and he was just astounded.
19 He said I was the last one that he would have thought would have done that and that he'd
20 asked everybody else and many had said no but they wouldn't have hesitated but they
21 hadn't done it and I said, "Well, why is that of interest to you?" and apparently the rocket
22 had landed near a Royal Lao soldier. Of course, I couldn't see, and it was reported to the
23 Air Attaché in Vientiane and they had complained that we had done it and he said the Air
24 Attaché said something along this line, "We're going to have to decide what we're going
25 to tell the Air Attaché because he's going to be down here on Thursday to find out what's
26 going on," so I said, "Well, they won't brief us on that area, we have no idea what's
27 going on, and nobody's told us that there was anything wrong with that." So, we started
28 getting briefings on it. We got a lot of information about it after that. In fact, later on in
29 my tour there I was operations officer there, I had the duty, and we didn't like the duty.
30 That's when you didn't get to fly, and we started...we were asked to put air strikes in to a
31 cave area that was supposed to be a headquarters area for the Pathet Lao so I took our

1 radio jeep up to the hill next to Invert and set the throttle on it so the radios could all be
2 powered up and I acted as the high man you might say. I made initial contact with the
3 flights of fighters and stacked them up because we got a lot of fighters, and they came in
4 flights of 4 and we had to actually you might say park them in orbit and I would feed
5 them to the FACs that were working the air strikes as they were ready for them and they
6 would take the fighters over where they were going to put them in and then when they
7 were done with their air strikes they would give them a departure route so that they
8 wouldn't interfere with the ones that I had stacked up and I spent hours doing that that
9 day. I don't remember how many hours but it seemed like it was 5 or 6, so we did a lot
10 of support that particular day. That was directly what we were not to do when I first got
11 there. We got word back, too. We heard that we had done a lot of good and we had
12 destroyed the headquarters complex and I don't remember what the assessment was but it
13 was gratifying.

14 SM: Did your unit suffer many losses?

15 WT: Yeah. Well, it seemed like a lot to us. Of course the first was Carl Worst
16 who was in that mid-air collision and some of the guys that were there when I got there
17 knew him very well. We started getting these frag orders – maybe we had gotten them
18 before that and I just didn't think much about them, because most of our assignments
19 came from the intelligence people but one morning in the middle of April or early April, I
20 guess it was about the middle, Joe Brown got told – got ordered – to VR Mu Gia Pass. I
21 don't know, I think maybe he was supposed to put air strikes in, I don't remember. But,
22 the squadron commander by that time had already gotten a commitment from 7th Air
23 Force that FACs were not to be ordered into Mu Gia Pass. It was an agreement that he
24 felt very confident that he had with them, so he was furious when this order came through
25 sending FACs into Mu Gia Pass.

26 SM: And that was because it was too dangerous?

27 WT: Yeah, and Colonel Johnson, he had been flying around 1 or 2 missions, just
28 a few missions – normally he didn't fly the missions and he really felt very protective of
29 the pilots. I mean, he knew we had a job to do and he wanted us to do it but he didn't
30 want us to put unnecessary risk and he told Joe...I was in the operations building when
31 he was there and told him not to go. He said, "I have been promised by 7th Air Force that

1 we would not get orders like this and this is a mistake and you don't have to go," and Joe
2 said, "No, no, that's okay," and I talked to Louie Johnson about that more recently and he
3 told me that he followed Joe out to the airplane trying to talk him out of it, but that's
4 where they went and his remains have been found. But, that was the first recollection I
5 heard when his wingman reported that he was down, that they were under heavy fire
6 from...as I recall it was 37 and 57 millimeter. Of course, he was not sure what it was but
7 they were under heavy fire. The rescue people went out there and they weren't able to
8 get near it, and so that was our first loss. About that time I became very good friends
9 with a pilot that I was assigned to fly with several times, a guy named Lee Harley, one of
10 the finest people I've ever met. He was really a great guy. He was very religious and
11 had a great personality and Lee showed me all over the area. I mean, he showed me all
12 the dangerous spots and all the places where we were likely to find trucks and he showed
13 me all the choke points. He was very, very fond of the choke point idea. He and I flew
14 almost every mission together, you know, with either one of us in the lead and the other
15 one of us as high man, and then on the 18th of May, I was on Bangkok on my first four-
16 day weekend. Once a month we got 4 days instead of weekends, and so I was in
17 Bangkok and I got back on the 19th and nobody would...I was kind of excited to tell
18 people about what I'd seen and done in Bangkok and nobody wanted to talk to me. In
19 fact, they wouldn't even look me in the eye. So, I took my bag down to my hooch and I
20 guess Lee, he was in the same hooch at that time and this was about an 8 or 12 man
21 hooch, so I put my bags down and I asked the maid where Lee was and she said, "You
22 don't know?" and well, it had developed that he had been shot down the day before and
23 that was how Harley Valley got its name. He had been with Tom Morris. They had put
24 in some air strikes I think in north Vietnam which is just...Harley's Valley actually
25 crosses the border. No, it doesn't, it crosses the map line at the border. You have to go to
26 two different maps, but it's just inside the border of Laos about a mile, and the road
27 beyond there was of interest to us and it was kind of exposed so they were probably
28 trying to close the road. I don't really know what the mission was, but they were on their
29 way back and Lee was high man, which means he was in trail. They were under about a
30 1000-foot ceiling of clouds on the Lao side. That's probably why they were in north
31 Vietnam because Laos was covered with clouds, and Lee was reading the bomb damage

1 assessment off to our squadron, probably on VHF, and Tom said he just stopped abruptly
2 in the middle of a sentence and so abruptly that he sensed right away that something was
3 wrong and he called him and didn't get an answer so he reversed course and looked back
4 and didn't...I don't think he actually saw anything. He estimated where the plane must
5 have gone down, but it must not have been accurate because it's never been found. He
6 immediately came under heavy ground fire; he may have even taken a couple of hits. I
7 know that the number two man for Joe Brown took quite a few hits when he was trying to
8 go back and look for Joe. He took quite a few hits in the aircraft but I'm not sure if Tom
9 did or not but Tom was definitely in great danger. He told me that he dropped to the tree
10 level and of course went full power - everything in the quadrant to the front - and
11 zigzagged at low level and was still taking all sorts of ground fire and was well aware of
12 it, and got out of there and then rescue tried to get near it but they couldn't. The ground
13 fire was intense. That was the 18th of May. Then in June the A-26s had arrived by that
14 time and another good friend of mine, Warren P. Smith, he'd gone through Hurlbert with
15 me. He was an older guy; in fact, he told me it was his third war. He'd been in the Navy
16 as an enlisted man and he was now, I think, a captain or maybe he was a major or just
17 about to be a major, but he was more senior. I was a brand new captain, and WP we
18 called him - WP stood for white phosphorous also, but - so we called him Willie Pete
19 which was our nickname for white phosphorous which is the warhead we use for
20 marking, and so Willie Pete was his nickname. He was lead and Skip Opdyke, I don't
21 remember his real name but his nickname was Skip; I knew Skip Opdyke from pilot
22 training. He'd been one of my academic instructors at Reese and he was...I don't know
23 how long he'd been at NKP but he come up from Vietnam like everybody else and I had
24 flown with him a few times. He seemed very untalkative, very reserved, because I was
25 kind of happy to see him because I recognized him from pilot training. I found that he
26 was very reluctant to go. He would go where he was ordered to but he obviously was
27 very, very scared. I'll put it that way. He did go where he was ordered. If he was behind
28 you, if he was your high man, he was often a kind of nag. He'd say, "I wouldn't go there.
29 That's kind of dangerous," if he saw you going someplace that he thought was pretty
30 risky. He was really a bother that way. He was probably doing this to Warren that day
31 and again, they were under low clouds just like Lee had been which we were always

1 cautious about that. It was a very dangerous thing to do, fly under low clouds; you really
2 were silhouetted against the clouds and this was not an all weather plane, so most people
3 didn't fly in the clouds if they could avoid it. Warren, just all of a sudden they came over
4 a ridge, they weren't even too close to the road, and ground fire erupted. Warren made
5 one radio transmission and said, "Oh my God, I'm hit," and then Skip started to call on
6 our VHF which everybody listened to, it was our squadron frequency, and called that
7 Warren had...we had a FAC down, so other pairs of FACs converged on that area and
8 they found Opdyke circling south of that ridge and gave him a heading to fly back
9 because I guess he was pretty excited and disoriented and they told him how to get home
10 and they called for rescue and the jolly green's came out and attempted to approach the
11 area where the aircraft was, we could see it, and the ground fire was so intense that they
12 weren't able...they actually landed as I recall about 100 feet from the plane maybe or a
13 couple of hundred feet and the PJ got out of the helicopter and started walking toward the
14 wreck and then they started really taking a lot of small arms fire from all around the
15 perimeter of the clearing and he had to run back and jump in the helicopter or he would
16 have been left, probably, and they lifted out of there and I think they took quite a few hits
17 but they weren't...he said that he thought the plane had burned. It looked like it was
18 black inside and he didn't think there was anybody living in it and our planes were
19 painted black inside, so we discounted that, but it was also broken apart and I've got
20 some pretty good slides of that. That afternoon I went out and tried to look at it and I
21 took a lot of heavy small arms fire. I wasn't able to see anything. I don't remember how
22 long after that, it was probably a week later, I went back and everything was quiet and
23 took pictures of it at a fairly low altitude so I have some fairly good slides of it but you
24 can't really see if there's anybody in there. Now I understand since then that a witness, a
25 Vietnamese witness saw his body and saw it buried. I don't think it's been found yet.

26 SM: Now one of your responsibilities or additional duties as you listed was as
27 casualty reporting officer. What would you do in an instance like this as the casualty
28 reporting officer?

29 WT: Okay, the first one that I had to report on was Lee Harley because
30 somebody else took care of Joe Brown; Karl Worst, of course, before I got there. Well,
31 the squadron commander has to write a letter, first of all, to the spouse or next of kin and

1 it was my job to draft that letter up. Then, I had to inventory the personal effects and
2 package them up and ship them back, and you get some guidance on that. You're
3 supposed to go through all their stuff and not only mark down what you found, but if
4 there's anything that would be embarrassing to the family, you know, you're supposed to
5 use your judgment. You're actually a summary courts officer with legal authority to
6 remove and destroy something like that and I found one thing in Lee Harley's stuff which
7 I don't think I'd like to have get back to his wife, but it doesn't matter. It was a letter
8 from a friend of his in college and it had nothing to do with Lee, but just the guy was
9 bragging about some of his exploits with women and things of that...that family
10 obviously was very religious and I don't think it would have been something they wanted
11 to get. Otherwise, I came across his diary and I read that and made sure that it was
12 nothing embarrassing or negative in there and which it was fine, and I packaged all that
13 up. I put it off for a while which I felt kind of bad about. I don't usually put things off
14 like that, but I didn't really want to do it and I finally did and so it was probably several
15 weeks before I shipped it back and a pair of his shoes had gotten moldy so I cleaned them
16 off with alcohol to get the mold cleaned off and got everything packed up and I wrote his
17 wife a letter about our friendship and how much I admired Lee and how much everybody
18 in the squadron admired Lee and things that I thought she would like to hear, which were
19 true, and I never heard from her. After Colonel Johnson came back, he went to see all the
20 spouses that he could find and he told me that Lee's wife was very bitter and it was
21 something about the way it was handled or something and I wonder if it was something I
22 had done; maybe I delayed too long sending some of the stuff or maybe she didn't like
23 my letter to her. Only recently I came in contact with his sister who was trying to find
24 out about her brother and I told her about this and she came back and told me that they
25 still had my letter and that they liked it very much, that it was fine, and that his wife
26 never had anything like that, but that they had been advised not to correspond with us.
27 They had been told that it would make things very difficult for us if they were to
28 correspond with us, so she never answered it. We weren't told anything like that. But
29 anyway, there was one more casualty while I was there and that was Tom Wolf who was
30 on an orientation flight with an A-26, a Big Eagle strike aircraft. When they first arrived
31 we flew in the jump seat and gave them an orientation to our area and of course it gave us

1 an opportunity to direct a strike from within the strike aircraft which was kind of nice. It
2 had 8 .50 caliber machine guns in the nose plus a lot of ordinance in the wings and in the
3 bomb bay and Tom apparently had been strike in Harley's Valley and the A-26 was shot
4 down during a...I think it was a CBU run, but I'm not sure what they were dropping.
5 But, I know that they were firing the guns and possibly getting ready to drop some
6 ordinance and then they pulled up and then nosed in. I think that was witnessed by
7 another A-26, so they were all killed on impact no doubt. That was the last casualty that
8 we had while I was in the squadron. There was another one...I left in January and there
9 was 2 or 3 killed in the same day in February of '67. We thought as though it was a high
10 casualty rate, but compared to some units it wasn't.

11 SM: What did you think about the casualty reporting system? Did you think it
12 was adequate? Do you think it did the best it could possibly do in a bad situation?

13 WT: It probably did, and I don't recall that I had any feelings that it could be any
14 better. What I hated was that we couldn't tell...we really couldn't tell the next of kin
15 anything about the circumstances. "They were engaged with the enemy in Southeast
16 Asia," and that was about all you could say. We were given a briefing on not
17 corresponding with our spouses about where we were, what we were doing. We could
18 say we were in Thailand and the secrecy was at a very high level. We weren't supposed
19 to keep diaries about our combat action. I wish I had. I kept little notes, and I have
20 written about a 300 page journal about what happened over there from my memory and
21 from these notes and from letters that I wrote to my wife and my father, and looking at
22 maps and things like that because I was starting to forget things and I didn't want to let it
23 get away from me. I didn't' keep a...I don't know anybody that kept a diary of our
24 combat activities which would have been most interesting to me. I did have a map that I
25 brought back, two of them, of the 1 to 250 maps, universal transverse and Mercator type
26 of projection, the type the Army uses, in which I marked quite a few interesting things.
27 But, I wish I had a bunch of those 1 to 50,000s with all the markings we had on them.
28 But as far as the casualty reporting system, yeah, it was probably the best that could have
29 been done at the time.

1 SM: Now you also listed as additional duties that you were the photo officer.
2 You described, for instance, going in after a week or so and taking pictures of that
3 downed aircraft. Is that what you mean by that, photo officer?

4 WT: Yeah, but also a lot of us had hand held cameras and we got some hand
5 held cameras from the Air Force, too, that...I forget what they called those...it had a kind
6 of film that could be developed...I think it could be developed in the aircraft on the way
7 back. It wasn't a Polaroid system. It had a can that you could...I really don't remember
8 it. Maybe we processed it right after we got back but it was a large format. It was about
9 a two-inch wide film and it might have been 70 millimeter. It probably was.

10 SM: These cameras weren't mounted on your aircraft, were they?

11 WT: No, we had no cameras mounted.

12 SM: Okay.

13 WT: This was a job that I was so interested in photography and there was a small
14 dark room there that the squadron just created that position and made me the photo
15 officer because I was so interested in using the photos. I thought we could do a lot of
16 reconnaissance that way because you don't always have a lot of time to loiter over
17 something and you're in a moving aircraft, but a lot of these things we could take a
18 picture of and then go back and study the pictures at length, and find things that we had
19 missed when we were flying over them. But, it was never very useful. I don't remember
20 that much came of that, and eventually the dark room was...something happened, they
21 closed it or something and so we didn't even have that facility available to us. We had
22 photographers. I think they were based out of a unit that was at Saigon and [Karat] that
23 was an official Air Force unit that was combat photography and not reconnaissance
24 photography, but just to film history and these guys used hand held cameras, also, and the
25 movie cameras mostly, and they would ride with us quite a bit. There was one guy that
26 used to ride with me so much I let him fly a lot of times just for fun. He wanted to be a
27 pilot. We would try to take them into some really interesting places. I had to give them a
28 lot of credit because they were depending on us to take care of them and it was kind of a
29 gutsy job, but I'd love to see some of the film they got. They must have got some pretty
30 good footage. I've never seen any of it that I know of. One time I took a contractor out.
31 His name was Pat Patterson. I remember that because that's my father in law's name.

1 His job was to take some 35-millimeter hand held camera pictures of the jungle canopy.
2 So, I took him to some of the areas where it was...well, I guess I tried to show him a
3 representative sample of the canopy that we worked with which was very thick in some
4 places and kind of scrubby in other places, but he was a civilian.

5 SM: What about your duties as an intelligence liaison officer?

6 WT: Okay, this grew out of the fact that we couldn't get information about
7 Cricket West and I was the one that I guess made the most noise about that, I don't know.
8 I must have complained the most. It was ironic that it was my rocket that kind of broke
9 the dam on that. I liked the guys at intel. I liked to talk to them and learn, and of course
10 my father was an intelligence officer so I had a kind of a preconditioned interest in it, and
11 so I set up briefings and that was the liaison part of it, setting up regular briefings on
12 things and special briefings on other things.

13 SM: Anything specific stand out?

14 WT: No, not really. It wasn't...the most important meetings we had in that
15 building were our tactical board that one of my fellow students at Hurlbert was Major
16 Pitts; I can't remember his first name [Earl], we called him Snake, of course, but he was a
17 very, very effective officer. He was excellent. Ben Witterman left and Major Pitts took
18 over as operations officer and he had the idea of forming a tactics board to come up with
19 good interdiction tactics, so we...it was voluntary. I think several people were named to
20 it in name but the rest of us were welcomed to meet and almost everybody did as I recall
21 and we would talk about ways to stop the trail up and what was effective and what
22 wasn't, and that met as long as he was operations officer. Later in the year we had some
23 more senior people come in. We younger people didn't admire them very much. We
24 called them old women, and they were not interested in tactics; in fact, they disbanded
25 the tactics board. Major Pitts did get promoted to Lieutenant Colonel but he was
26 outranked by several people who arrived as lieutenant colonels. I would have liked to
27 have seen him become a squadron commander, but it didn't work out that way. The
28 squadron commander that we got - I don't remember his name, but I have it in my notes -
29 he was very reluctant to have us do...as I recall, he said, "We'll just do what we're
30 ordered to do." He didn't want us to take any initiative at all which was dismaying to me
31 and got me in trouble in December. Do you want me to go into that?

1 SM: Yes, please.

2 WT: It's something I'm very proud of, actually, but I'm not proud of the part
3 about what got me in trouble with him. My roommate had left, that was Nick Kormanik
4 was the last roommate I had and we were in a building with...the new building had 2 to a
5 room and we put footlockers between the two sides of it so that we actually felt like we
6 had a private room, and when Nick left of course we had some vacant space and a major
7 came up from Saigon with a starlight scope, what he called it, which was a low level, low
8 light level television. It was a scope that was designed to be mounted on an M-16 rifle
9 and it was carried in a heavily padded aluminum case and these were very, very
10 expensive and he had two of them and since I had space there they bunked him in that
11 other side of my room and he told several others that he was up there to get us to test
12 these scopes at night. Well, there were two things about the 0-1 that were kind of fixed
13 rules and that was, in our area, that you didn't fly in weather and you didn't fly at night.
14 It was too dangerous, and of course we were 90 to 100 miles – which equates to an hour –
15 away from our safe haven and so I guess the decision had been made early on that first
16 you couldn't see anything to do any good out there at night and second, if you went down,
17 you probably couldn't be rescued. So, we were a day time, good weather operation, and
18 here this guy was promoting the idea that we could go out there at night and none of us
19 thought much of it at first but of course I was kind of a captive audience and he...the
20 more he talked about it, the more it sounded like a good idea. I was also very near the
21 end of my tour. I was scheduled to leave in early January, and you may wonder about
22 that because I didn't come over in January, I came over in April, but I had curtailed 2
23 months off my tour by flights into north Vietnam. Every time we went over north
24 Vietnam it was considered a counter and I think every I think it was 20 counters you got a
25 month curtailed off your combat tour which is the same rules applied to the fighter pilots
26 in Thailand and I had 43 north Vietnam missions during that time. So anyway, I knew
27 that I was about near the end of my tour but I was also one of the old experienced heads.
28 I mean, I really knew the area pretty well by this time and I was to find out how well I did
29 know it. There was another pilot there named Hatfield Brubeck who had recently come
30 up from Vietnam but he had spent most...he had already been there for most of his tour

1 so he had a lot of experience but not in our combat area, and the two of us volunteered to
2 do this test. Tell you what, let me take just a short break.

3 SM: Yeah, I was just going to ask if you wanted to take one.

4 WT: Maybe 3 or 4 minutes.

5 SM: Okay, I'll just pause it and I'll be right back. [pause]. Okay, go ahead.

6 WT: We went to the squadron commander about this proposal. I don't know if I
7 was there when major first approached them, but the answer was no; we weren't
8 supposed to fly at night and we weren't going to. Major explained that a general in 7th
9 Air Force which was our operational command had approved this test and expected that
10 we would do it, even though I don't think he had anything in writing to say so, but...and
11 also I think we argued, tried to persuade the squadron commander that it was a good
12 thing to try because I remember being in some heated discussions with him as a group of
13 us. Well, he wanted to determine that we really did volunteer to do it for one thing and it
14 was just obvious that he was very nervous about sending anybody out there at all. So, we
15 finally got his very grudging approval with the stipulation that...let me see, there were
16 several things. One of them I distinctly remember was that it had to be in moonlight; we
17 weren't to do it in total darkness. I don't remember what the other stipulations were. It
18 was only going to be one aircraft because there wasn't any point have a pair just to risk
19 running into each other. But anyway, he gave us the permission and so we got all set up
20 and what the original plan was to have the major in the backseat and then switch off
21 alternate nights with me and Hatfield in the front seat. I have the whole story written
22 down, but I can tell you the important things about it. We discovered very early that...I
23 knew the area so well; I knew it much better than I realized and that I could navigate
24 better than...I was the only one that could really find his way around of the three of us
25 because Hatfield just hadn't been there long enough. We also found that Hatfield was
26 awfully good with the scope and Morrison I believe was the name of the major, and
27 Major Morrison was better, more used to us, at Invert on the radio and so that's how the
28 thing evolved after a night or two. I think the first night...I think Morrison and I went
29 out the first night and Hatfield and Morrison the second night. The very first night we
30 didn't find any trucks and the moon was really bright, but we noticed that there were flare
31 ships, C-130 flare ships off in the distance dropping flares and the second night I believe

1 he and Hatfield got shot at. They roared into a bank with the...the maintenance people
2 had put little metal cups around our running lights so that we could turn them on and be
3 seen from above without revealing ourselves to the ground, but he had rolled into a bank
4 and he said he immediately erupted some ground fire. I don't recall that I was shot at
5 while I was flying any of those missions. Anyway, that's how it evolved; it was Hatfield
6 and me, him in the backseat with a scope and me flying, and I could...I was surprised. I
7 could tell where I was by seeing the glow of the skylight reflected off a river bend, or by
8 looking at the silhouette of the hilltops. I recognized everything. I had looked at that
9 terrain so much during that period that I knew where I was all the time. So, we got
10 Hatfield back there looking for things and we decided that we were going to ignore the
11 orders of the squadron commander [that is] his condition. We weren't seeing anything in
12 the moonlight, so the moon was setting of course it changes every night, but it was setting
13 after midnight so we decided that we would take off late enough to get out there when the
14 moon had set and as I recall the moon was pretty full when we started this, it was pretty
15 bright, and so in the real darkness we started seeing trucks and I'm not sure of the exact
16 sequence of what happened night after night but this lasted about a week and the last
17 night we knew we were going to find trucks so when we were briefing in the operations
18 building, the tactical unit operations center, there was an A-26 crew in there briefing at
19 the same time and so I went over to the pilot and I said...told them what we were doing
20 and I asked them if they were going to be in our area and showed them where we were
21 going to be flying and they said, "Oh yeah, we'll be operating near there," and we said,
22 "Well, if we find anything, we'd like to have you strike it," and they said, "Oh, yeah, that
23 would be great." They had another mission which they, of course, didn't tell us about but
24 they would be available. So, we fellows already had our strike aircraft all lined up and
25 when we got out there there was a C-130 that was dropping flares around the vicinity of
26 choke points Alpha and Bravo, which is near the intersection of Routes 911 and 912, and
27 he seemed to be in a racetrack orbit dropping these parachute flares so that there was a
28 continuous light over quite an area and we found that about...if we went about 5 or 10
29 kilometers away from that light, it was just ideal for a starlight scope and yet the trucks
30 would probably be moving because they would think that they were in total darkness, or
31 that they weren't visible. That's not where the action was, and that proved to be the case.

1 I started going down the road, where I knew the road was, and I think I could see
2 occasionally because this was an area that was...there were some groves of trees but the
3 road also had to cross large patches of open ground and there were some areas that had
4 been defoliated. So, even though it was in the trees you could see down into them, and
5 just flying along like that back and forth across the road and Hatfield said something like,
6 "Holy shit, there's some trucks," so I started flying where he told me to and he said,
7 "Look down now, look out the right," or something like that and I looked down and what
8 I saw in this very dim light was my...without the starlight scope, I could see these 5 large
9 looking trucks, they looked like they were covered with tarps, just kind of rolling back
10 and forth - I imagine the road was pretty bad - and moving along the road, and obviously
11 they were oblivious to our presence so I pulled off and moved away so it wouldn't give
12 away our position because I must have been at a pretty low altitude when I saw these
13 trucks because I saw them really big. I can still picture what they looked like, and we
14 assumed that it was pretty noisy in the cabs of those trucks. I didn't know if they could
15 hear us or not, but the road was so bad and the trucks probably had a little loose parts on
16 them so we always assumed that it was probably pretty loud. I called the A-26 and asked
17 him if...and I told him that we had some trucks and could he come down and hit them
18 and he said, "Sure," and whenever I told him I assumed that he was on the perch, that he
19 was nearby stationing himself for a strike, whereas in fact he didn't. He was engaged in
20 something and instead of telling me, "No, I can't, it'll take me 10 minutes to get there,"
21 or something he just said, "Yeah, go ahead and mark it and I'll be able to strike." Well,
22 we had...we were carrying flares on our stations that normally had rockets on them, we
23 had some parachute flares and we also had a couple I think of the flares that can float.
24 You can drop them in a lake or river and they'll make a point of light, but these are
25 airdrop flares that I was going to drop. So Hatfield again directed me to the correct area
26 and the trees...the trucks were in a grove of trees when we first saw them. We could see
27 them down through the trees, but it wasn't where we wanted them for the strike so we
28 watched them from a distance, maybe a kilometer away, as they went down through the
29 trees and made a wide circle around them and Hatfield looked ahead and saw where there
30 was a clearing that they were coming to and as they approached the clearing I again told
31 the A-26 that we were about to have a strike set up for them and Hatfield had me fly right

1 over the top of the trucks, I armed a flare, and he said, "Okay, drop," and we had planned
2 when he told me to drop I was going to drop the flare and then make an abrupt turn. He
3 said, "Drop now!" and I squeezed the trigger and the flare dropped off the wing and
4 ignited and I made a hard right turn and pulled away from them and looked back and
5 gosh, those trucks were right under the flare. It was like daylight. It was just perfect, and
6 I called the A-26 and I said, "The trucks are under the flare." Well, this is Laos. There's
7 no lights on the ground in Laos at that time. There weren't even campfires because its too
8 dangerous, so it's a totally dark...it was like being over the ocean at night. It was just
9 totally dark. One flare, and we were a good 10 miles south of that C-130, so that flare
10 must have been very distinct by itself and the A-26 said, "Which flare?" so he must have
11 been north of the C-130 somewhere.

12 SM: Oh no.

13 WT: That's what I said! By the time he got down to where we were it had gone
14 out and we couldn't find them. We dropped another flare but the trucks had fled into the
15 trees and we weren't able to find them. We had some pretty choice words for the A-26
16 pilot. We went back looking for trucks and he was working that road and he called me
17 after while and said he'd found one of them, but it wasn't moving. So, I went down
18 there. He wanted me to go...he had dropped some flares and he wanted me to go look at
19 it and I said, "You want me to go in underneath those flares and look at that truck?" You
20 know, that's worse than flying under clouds, and he said, "Well, if you're afraid..." So, I
21 said, "Alright, I'll go look," and we went over and looked and it was one of our...of
22 course we recognized the road was strewn with derelict trucks and we had to know where
23 they were because you don't want to waste ordinance on them, and even we had seen
24 trucks we knew had been killed and had been hauled to another location and covered with
25 brush to look like they were camouflage hoping to get us to strike them, and they were
26 there day after day. That was a little game that we played with the people on the ground,
27 and he found two or three of those during the night while we were out there that he
28 thought he'd found some of our trucks and they were just derelicts and we'd come by
29 and say, "No, that's not a truck. That's dead." His squadron commander, toward dawn –
30 we had gone back by that time – did find some trucks south of that and of course we like
31 to think that it was the same trucks but our strike failed, but we knew why it failed and

1 our test was done by that time. We had learned what we needed to learn. It would have
2 been nice to go out some more. The part that got me in trouble was that Major Morrison
3 then asked me to write up a – asked both of us, Hatfield and me – to write up a report,
4 and I don't remember if we both wrote one or if Hatfield and I got together and I wrote it,
5 but I wrote and typed up about a two page summary what had occurred, what we had
6 learned, and my recommendation was that they form a group of experienced – people that
7 had been there for at least half a tour – make it kind of an elite thing so that it was
8 desirable that people would volunteer for it and maybe give them a distinctive uniform
9 like a black uniform or something, which in fact they did, and paint the airplanes black or
10 dark. And I had a friend named George Williams who was flying T-28s at that time at
11 NKP in the commando unit and they weren't allowed across the river and they were very
12 eager to have a mission. They were supposed to be doing...what did they call it [civic
13 action]? It was the humanitarian mission in Thailand and they had a name for that but I
14 can't think of it right now, but he told me in the officer's club, during this test, he knew
15 about it and asked me if I had a recommendation that I recommend the T-28 to be used
16 for the strike aircraft. Well, I was happy to do that so I put that in there, too. I never
17 heard another thing about the test, I've never heard anybody acknowledge that that was
18 probably the first test of the starlight scope as an interdiction tool. I've heard of other
19 tests later on, and it certainly was implemented. They did in fact, in '67, start the night
20 strikes and they used T-28s, which they lost several of right away. George Williams, I
21 believe, was not lost. I think he survived the war. I've never run into him again, but I
22 had known him from KB-50s. But, that was the test and I took the report and handed it to
23 Major Morrison and as he left he said, "You know, I can get you a medal for this because
24 I'll just tell the general." He was very pleased with what we had done for him and he
25 said, "What do you want? I can get you a..." what did he say? I think a silver star [DFC]
26 is what he suggested, and I said, "Well, you know, I'm probably going to get...everybody
27 gets a medal when they leave just for serving a tour here." Just pretty much you picked
28 your various mission and wrote it up and they made sure that you got recognition. So I
29 said, "Nobody in the Air Force gets a bronze star, so if you can do that," I said, "Get me a
30 bronze star." So, that's the highest medal I got out of that war because the squadron
31 commander was furious that I didn't run that report through him and he's absolutely

1 right. I do not deny that at all. It was very wrong of me to go around him, but I knew
2 that that recommendation wouldn't get past him, he was so dead set against it.

3 SM: Also, I mean, just because you circumvented the chain of command once,
4 that doesn't warrant you receiving what was the standard end of tour award!

5 WT: Oh yeah, that was dirty pool. I also got a lukewarm officer effectiveness
6 rating out of it which didn't hurt my career, but it didn't help it any. Most people
7 got...actually, it was worded nicely but his endorsement was more or less, "Tilton was
8 here." The guy that...my flight commander was very fond of me and I thought he wrote
9 a real nice report but the endorsement was important and it was very lukewarm, plus he
10 and the operations officer were just killing with faint praises kind of thing. But he didn't
11 spend a lot of time chewing me out about it. He told me as soon as he found out that I
12 had done it that he was very disappointed and angry that I hadn't run it through him as I
13 should have and I think I apologized to him because there's no denying he was absolutely
14 right, but that was...I didn't have a very high opinion of him and I didn't think he was
15 an effective squadron commander in the fact that the mission was not important at all to
16 him. The operations officer, I actually had some reason to have some contempt for him.
17 He was the chairman of the awards and decorations committee and one of our pilots had
18 been sent over to Dong Ha to help work some action in the demilitarized zone and - so-
19 called - and he had come back with over 30 holes in the back of his aircraft. He had been
20 trying to defend a downed I think A-1 pilot who did not get picked up. He was overrun
21 by people on the ground, but the pilot - our pilot - that was out there was fired on quite a
22 bit while he was trying to get help in to this guy and that's the sort of thing that some
23 people, if the guy had been rescued, they'd start talking medal of honor. Its pretty drastic
24 what he did, and he came back and they talked about fixing the airplane but they didn't
25 talk about this thing and he knew I was on the awards and decs committee and asked me
26 one time about it and I said, "Well, give me the information and I'll submit it to the
27 committee. It should have already been brought up." So, at our next meeting I brought
28 this up and it was Major Schopen I think, or maybe Lieutenant Colonel, and he said,
29 "Well, we don't award stupidity." That was his answer to that so I thought, "Well that's
30 kind of dirty," but that wasn't why I had contempt for him. That was bad enough that he
31 did that but I knew that he was...he never would fly very far out into our combat area. I

1 never knew him to actually go out and tour out on the trail, and one day there was...you
2 could justify that I suppose by being one of the senior people and his job was at the base,
3 but he did fly some missions. One day an F-105 came back from north Vietnam pretty
4 shot up and as he approached the Mekong River he lost control and ejected, and he
5 landed in a rice paddy area that was on the western side of the front line between the
6 Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao forces. So, it really was not a dangerous area and he was
7 just sitting in a rice paddy with his ejection seat and his parachute and Schopen went out
8 and orbited around him while the jolly green got started up and came out and took the
9 pilot up and took him back to NKP, and so he wrote himself up for that mission of
10 defending this...protecting this downed fighter pilot and I think he got a silver star for
11 that which is a fairly high medal. I don't remember exactly, but I remember that we
12 younger pilots thought that was border on criminal that he would do that for himself and
13 then wouldn't even discuss somebody that was truly heroic.

14 SM: Alright, this ends CD number 2 of the interview with Mr. William Tilton.
15 Okay, this is CD number 3 of the interview with Mr. William Tilton in an interview dated
16 31 August, year 2000. Okay Mr. Tilton, go ahead.

17 WT: Let me see, we were talking about the decorations there and then we had
18 wrapped up, I guess, the night test of the starlight scope. That occurred in mid December
19 and as I said I left on the 9th of January so it was very close to the end of my tour.

20 SM: Let me ask you this; for your first tour, what was the bravest action you
21 witnessed, either enemy or friendly?

22 WT: Bravest action I witnessed? Well, I guess it was a rescue I saw. Well, if
23 you talk about enemy, those people...I guess the bravest thing was a driver running up
24 the road – he'd probably been trying to check on his truck which had been destroyed –
25 and we shot at him. I don't know if he got away or not; he ran into a clump of bamboo,
26 but we shot him with a rocket and an M-16, Tony Ensevino and me. Tony was the guy I
27 couldn't think of his name earlier. He took me on my first ride out there. Americans, I
28 watched a rescue of somebody down between two low ridges; I mean, they weren't' more
29 than a couple of hundred feet high, kind of parallel, and apparently the downed pilot was
30 in between those and they were trying to get an A-1...I mean, a CH-53 down in between,
31 a jolly green, and the A-1s were trying to suppress ground fire on both sides of those

1 ridges but apparently it was okay down in between the ridges but the ground fire was
2 tremendous and both sides I could see lots of tracers and then further down closer to the
3 coast I saw F-4s attacking guns. I don't know if they were coordinated with this rescue
4 or not – it may have been a coincidence but, it looked like it was. Crown is the
5 coordinating aircraft for the rescue and I don't think I was on their frequency. But my
6 high man and I went down, this is way into north Vietnam - we went way down to see if
7 there was anything we could do to help and orbited not too far from it. The guns must
8 have been very large, or at least 57 millimeter. I don't know the larger sizes, the radar
9 85s and things, but these had a high burst flak and you could see the muzzle flash and
10 you could see the flak and the F-4s were diving toward them. I don't know what kind of
11 ordinance they were putting on them but they were right hand to hand almost in an
12 airborne sense, and finally the A-1s got the ground fire suppressed to the point where the
13 jolly green was able to slip in between the two ridges and pick the guy up and pull back
14 out again and nobody got shot down. I remember one of the A-1s passed me pretty close
15 and I was amused because he was not must faster than I was. I was doing about 100
16 knots and I asked him what he was doing and he said 130. It looked like he was passing
17 me real slow, and we waved to each other. I can't think of anything that was more – that
18 I witnessed – that was more in the teeth of things. We all flew in areas that we knew we
19 were liable to be shot down any minute, but I never watched anybody being shot down
20 and I never watched any ground action that was any more face to face with the enemy
21 than that.

22 SM: I'm sorry, go ahead.

23 WT: Well, I guess you could ask me another question. I'm kind of...

24 SM: Okay, yeah, I was just wondering whether or not you felt – as you were
25 getting ready to leave from your first tour – did you feel that you had accomplished
26 anything? Did you think that the American policy was working, was effective, was going
27 to help win the war?

28 WT: We had a lot of discussions about that, actually. I guess in some I did feel
29 that we were doing some good and I thought that we were going to win the war, and in
30 fact I didn't think that I had too much longer to go, but I didn't know about bombing
31 policies and things that were coming up. There was a lot of frustration about trying to

1 stop the trail, and I don't think we realized how important it was but we knew that it was
2 important. But, since then I've come to know that it was very, very important to the
3 Vietnamese, to the north Vietnamese. It was critical to them. I don't think they could
4 have conducted the war if we'd been able to stop the road, but of course interdiction is
5 seldom 100% successful, and most of the time we didn't feel as though we were being
6 very successful because for instance if you crater a road and came back a few hours later,
7 you'd often find that it had been repaired already, so a good crater was nothing to be too
8 excited about. Choke point Alpha was a place where if you could have put a wall across
9 the road, you would have stopped it and they would have had to find an alternate route.
10 They would have had to go a long way out of their way to get through there, but we
11 cratered Alpha all the time and there were large outcroppings on both sides of it and a lot
12 of the rock that we burst loose with the near misses ended up in the road in the holes, so
13 we were making gravel for them. That was kind of frustrating. There were some places
14 like choke point Foxtrot was near Tchepone, was at the very southern end of our area,
15 and it was on...it was where the road ran along a river and there wasn't much room for
16 them to move around so it was an excellent choke point and we cratered that quite a bit
17 and I'm sure that slowed things down a lot. But, our squadron got the presidential unit
18 citation for an action that occurred in May. Glenn Bremenkamp was the FAC. He had a
19 flight of 4...I think they were F-4s, but I'm not sure; it was either F-4s or F-105s. Each
20 one had two 2,000 pound bombs. It's a great road-cratering bomb, but of course because
21 it has such a large lethal zone when it explodes and because its so heavy, the strike
22 aircraft has to drop it at a very high altitude and of course that makes it less accurate. So,
23 Glenn went to choke point Bravo. Now Bravo was not too far below Alpha, maybe 10
24 kilometers south and west. The road turns abruptly after it comes out of Alpha and goes
25 west and then turns south again and where it turns south is where choke point Bravo was.
26 It was in between some low hills but not tight. There was...I think there might have been
27 a stream near it. I don't know exactly why they chose that as a choke point; it was
28 obviously the second one chosen but it wasn't nearly as obviously good as Alpha. But,
29 Glenn decided to put these 2,000 pound bombs on choke point Bravo. The rainy season
30 was starting to warm up on us. We were starting to get more and more clouds and
31 thunderstorms so our operation was getting more difficult, so he went ahead and

1 deployed these guys into that particular target and asked them to drop one at a time which
2 they were willing to do and there was no ground action and undefended target so he went
3 ahead and did that and he told me that the first 7 bombs were just all over the place,
4 weren't even close. They were just, he said, making toothpicks or making salad out in
5 the woods, and of course one 2,000 pound bomb goes off and makes quite a circle of
6 destruction, makes a nice, big crater and then the trees are flat, are wiped out at the
7 beginning of it and then gradually slope up as you go to the perimeter and there's a big
8 pile of green in the middle where the debris went back to the ground. The last bomb,
9 the...usually when you're directing strikes you give some guidance to each pilot as he
10 comes in, where to hit in relation to the last bomb or some point of reference and Glenn
11 said he didn't even bother with this. They were so inaccurate he just said, "Oh, you're
12 cleared to strike." He watched, but he didn't expect anything and that bomb hit either on
13 the road or right beside it. Judging by the width of the road, if the road was 10 feet wide,
14 it was a 70 foot crater is what we estimated and it started filling with water right away.
15 By the next day it was up to the brim; it was a pond, and there were no fresh truck tracks.
16 That stayed closed for 2 months; that's why we got the presidential unit citation.

17 SM: Yeah, now how deep were the craters that were...

18 WT: I don't know; certainly not...it wasn't spherical, completely spherical. It
19 was probably no more than 10 or 20 feet deep.

20 SM: Still, that's a big hole to fill up.

21 WT: Yeah, they didn't try. Well, they may have tried, but I'll tell you why I said
22 that but let me just tell you that we went daily, or tried to, to look at this to see if they'd
23 gone through it. As the weather got worse, some days we couldn't approach it. But, if
24 there was any other mission we had, that was the one thing that we tried to get somebody
25 out there to look at Bravo and see if it had been reopened. Now, I have heard...I have
26 read that they...the Vietnamese pretty much gave up on operations during the rainy
27 season, during the period of the rainy season and 1966 the Mekong River flooded....well,
28 they're still talking about the flood of '66, so the rainy season must have been extra bad
29 and extra heavy. So, I don't know how much of that cessation of operations was due to
30 our making that crater and how much the fact that they just couldn't operate because the
31 roads were so bad. But, 911 and 23 were mostly passable and the lower part of Route 23

1 was a bypass around some hills and I remember that it had become impassable because
2 the long stretches of Route 23 were just water. You could see that from the air. So, they
3 quit using 23 before this. But, the road traffic had still been heavy up to the day before
4 this happened so if they were going to stop, we made them do it down that day. One
5 day...it happens that this also coincides with a shortage of white phosphorous war heads
6 and what we got was the standard AT high explosive armor piercing which was useless
7 for marking; it made a little brown puff, but that's all they had for a time and Charlie
8 Lutz and I, he was one of my classmates at Hurlbert, went out to check on Bravo and by
9 golly there was a bulldozer sitting there. I'm sure we could have gotten some strike
10 aircraft but we couldn't have put them in there. The clouds were too thick, they were all
11 over the place. We had to fly through canyons of clouds to find our way out there, so
12 there was no chance of bringing any ordinance in on it, so we decided to...since we had
13 the explosive warheads, HE warheads, we decided to attempt to hit the bulldozer
14 ourselves and just kind of a lark, really, because these things are very inaccurate but we
15 weren't being shot at so we just went ahead and lined up on the thing one at a time and
16 we went in, I think we fired one rocket at a time and tried to get as close as we could and
17 fired the rocket and pulled up and neither one of us was sure we'd hit it. Both of us
18 thought we probably had but we didn't see explosion on the tractor and we didn't see any
19 tread fall off or anything like that, but it never moved again so obviously we put it out of
20 commission. Then it was, as I said, 2 months later before the road was repaired through
21 there but in the meantime they did try to run a bypass around Bravo which we called
22 Charlie and there was a stream that was worse than Foxtrot. It was about 50 feet from the
23 stream up to the road I think and the road was cut in very soft dirt along the stream and
24 every time we cratered that thing the next morning there would be trucks stopped at it and
25 that went on for a while. I remember Glenn Bremenkamp several times had the first
26 mission and he would go out there and find trucks lined up there. I've got some pictures
27 of trucks that were struck right there at Charlie but they abandoned that and then they just
28 didn't seem to be moving. We did find a bunch of boats that looked like they'd been
29 washed up on the shore of a river one day, about probably 30 or 40 of them, long narrow
30 boats that we presumed they were using to try and move freight and there was a heavily
31 used foot path; possibly they were pushing those bicycles. You know, they would put I

1 think 4 or 500 pounds of material on a bicycle and push it. We didn't know if it was that
2 or water buffalo or what but there was a heavily used foot path around that crater at
3 Bravo.

4 SM: How frequently would you have to bomb choke point Alpha to try to keep it
5 out of commission?

6 WT: Well we pretty much realized that we weren't' stopping Alpha, so not
7 frequently. After a time we pretty much decided that Alpha...it was beat up, and if you
8 didn't have anything else and you had fighters and they needed to drop their bombs
9 someplace we'd certainly go ahead and put them in there but I don't think Alpha was
10 very effective because of the fact that the rock around there was so hard and they kept
11 it...they were able to repair it very quickly. Now Delta was about half way between
12 those choke points and Foxtrot at the south end. Delta was out in an open flat area. It
13 was where a stream crossed the road, and we felt that if we could soften that area up that
14 that stream would make it into bad mud and we could make it impassable that way. Delta
15 began to look like the surface of the moon and it was astounding to me that they were
16 able to keep driving through there but they must have had a repair team very close
17 because one time...well the time that the Tony Enzivino and I saw the truck driver on the
18 road we had gone to Delta, put in an air strike, and freshly cratered the path that was
19 through the dust thing, and this thing must have been a mile across. Then we went on
20 west of there, went up on the new road and did some visual reconnaissance and on our
21 way back we passed the scene of this other strike where this truck driver was trying to
22 check his truck out and then we went up past Delta again just to fly past it, I guess, and
23 the road had been repaired. They must have been trying to move a lot of spray through it
24 that time, but it was astounding to us that they had been able to come in very much
25 exposed; they had to be because it was so beat up around there and they had come in
26 there and made a passable road again and there were no truck tracks, but you could see
27 that it had been made usable. Then Foxtrot, I mentioned Skip Opdyke to you earlier, he
28 was very nervous, and he was supposed to go to the...to look at this potential choke point
29 near Tchepone and he made a disparaging remark, called it the Tchepone sand pile and
30 said it wasn't any good and so they gave him an alternate mission and we pretty much
31 ignored it for a while until somebody that was on a VR down there came back and said,

1 “You know, that’s a perfect choke point,” and so we dubbed it Foxtrot. I don’t know
2 where Echo was, but that proved to be our best choke point. Now Skip Opdyke had a
3 rough time of it. I don’t know if you want me to go into that or not.

4 SM: Sure.

5 WT: He was...he wasn’t eager to fly but he did, and then he started to develop
6 some psychosomatic problems and had a sore muscle around his neck and he was...he
7 still flew but when we saw him around the base he always had his one shoulder kind of
8 scrunched up and said he was in a lot of pain and he took a lot of naps and bunked a lot.
9 Finally the flight surgeon sent him to Korat because he couldn’t seem to get rid of this
10 pain he had in his neck and the hospital at Korat diagnosed him with brain cancer and
11 told him he had just a few weeks to live and sent him to Japan to a large military hospital.
12 He came back not too long after that and we said, “What happened?” and he told us about
13 this and I guess that was the first we heard about the brain cancer. Japan they said he
14 didn’t have brain cancer, he had an overdose of the pain killers they’d been using on him,
15 been overmedicated for it, and sent him back to his unit. The next day he was...that was
16 the day that he was the high man for Willie Pete Smith and when he came back to the
17 squadron he didn’t come in our building. All the FACs were living in one building at that
18 time. This was back in June, and before we had moved into separate units and it was one
19 big room. Well he didn’t come in there. He went in with the Thai pilots who were in an
20 adjacent building and spent the rest of the day with them and I didn’t understand that. I
21 understood that he was very shook up. It was a bad experience for him and he was
22 already a...he was having a very hard time with this combat operation. Now up to that
23 time we were sent on temporary duty basis to the 505th TAC control group detachment.
24 Officially, on the 1st of April, it became a squadron although we didn’t learn about it until
25 a few days after I’d gotten there and Colonel Johnson came back from a trip to Saigon
26 and told us that...or maybe he’d been at Udorn at 7 slash 13th headquarters and told us
27 that it was the 23rd TASS and that we were going to be given the option of staying there
28 on a PCS or a permanent change of station basis or going back to whatever unit we’d
29 come from in Vietnam. Well, most of us opted to stay there PCS but at that point after
30 Willie Pete Smith was shot down Skip Opdyke asked to be transferred back to Vietnam
31 and I thought it was Da Lat but recently somebody who was up around Pleiku told me

1 that it was [Kontum]...that's where he'd gone back to at least. But presumably it was an
2 area that was much more peaceful than what we were doing. Some parts of
3 Vietnam...we VR'ed the whole country, the whole south Vietnam and some parts of it
4 were known to be very low action. So, he said that's why he wanted to go back and he
5 was very open about it, but it was too hot for him up there in the trail and he wanted to go
6 back to what he'd been doing. So in the mean time, of course they had to arrange that,
7 and he volunteered to be the full time duty officer so the rest of us didn't have to do that,
8 so we were happy about that. I mean, he wasn't very effective out there and didn't want
9 to fly and he was a nag when he was your high man, and none of us wanted to be duty
10 officer so we were happy about it. It seemed like it might have been a month but maybe
11 it was less that he got shipped out. Toward the end of my tour, sometime in December,
12 one of my classmates from Hurlbert came from Vietnam and wanted a deposition from
13 me and from others about the way that Opdyke had been doing and of course by that time
14 Lieutenant [Charlie] Lutz and I had been there longer than anybody so he interviewed us
15 both and he kind of suggested that they were going to...well, he told us why, they were
16 going to charge him with cowardice and he suggested that some of the things he'd heard
17 about the way Opdyke had been doing which made me pretty angry because to me, if a
18 person...a person can't control their fear. I mean, you're going to be afraid or not. If
19 you're afraid and you still do what other people are doing without being afraid, then to
20 me that makes you probably a braver person so in a way, Skip was braver than the rest of
21 us because he was doing the mission even though he was just terrified. So I didn't like
22 the fact that they were trying to railroad him, but...I didn't really satisfy this interviewer,
23 but I learned later that he was tried and convicted, found guilty of whatever the article of
24 the UCMJ is and I don't know what happened to him after that. It was back in San
25 Antonio. But, I had a friend back there off, Jim Kormanik I mentioned earlier, who was
26 in air training command and personnel headquarters was there, too. He was able to find
27 that out for me. But, I thought that was unfortunate event. Let me see, well, I've kind of
28 lost my train there, too.

29 SM: Well, you...was there any other actions or operations that stand out that
30 you'd like to discuss or do you want to go ahead and transition into leaving?

1 WT: No, something just came to mind that I mentioned earlier. There was two
2 things that I was going to get back to and one was our actual strike tactics and how we
3 avoided mid air things I mentioned earlier, and the other one is the presence of the Army
4 and our interface with them. I'll cover that first. The first thing was that our aircraft was
5 equipped with three kinds of radios, which that and some other things that were done to it
6 made it over max gross weight even before you put people in it; it was above the design
7 gross weight that Cessna has built into it. The radios were...we had a UHF, a
8 very...probably the poorest UHF in the Air Force inventory. I think it only had like 13
9 frequencies and it was very low power, but it was adequate. We were able to
10 communicate with the fighters. That's what we used for our strikes, and we always used
11 the frequency that they gave us. We also used that to talk to the control tower and air
12 landing and we used it to talk to the control ships, the Invert radar sight and the airborne
13 control and the cricket control that came up later. VHF was an excellent radio but about
14 the only thing we used it for was to talk to our squadron, so we were all on VHF and if
15 we wanted to talk to everybody in the area we could communicate on VHF. Every FAC
16 that was airborne plus our squadron if they were up high enough for them to hear would
17 hear it, and I mentioned high man every now and then. The reason we called the second
18 aircraft in the formation the high man was that...to make communication possible when
19 you were down in those valleys and way out in the mountains, you needed somebody up
20 high enough who could communicate back 100 miles to Invert, to NKP, and also to
21 contact fighters who might have been pretty far away coming in so the high man would
22 fly up maybe 3 or 4,000 feet or above the hilltops and do your communication and he
23 would do what I was doing at that radio jeep the day that I told you about; the high man
24 would marshal the incoming flights and station them and bring them in, feed them to the
25 low man, the lead aircraft who was actually directing the air strikes. The third radio we
26 had was FM. That radio was intended for use in Vietnam for close air support of troops.
27 We had no close air support role in Laos, so the radio was useless to us. Well, we had a
28 need for inter plane communication between the two so we thought it would be real
29 clever if we just picked a frequency and used that. So what frequencies to use? What we
30 did was to take our call sign and...let's see, we added I guess we just what did we do,
31 like a 3, 4? I think we put a 4 in front of it. We put a number in front, so if my call sign

1 was 27, we would use 42.7 if I was lead, and if that didn't work, if it interfered with
2 somebody, we would use the call sign of the high man as our alternate frequency. Well,
3 that worked fine most of the time but sometimes when we were up on the mountain
4 ridges there, the border between Laos and Vietnam, we would interfere with US Army.
5 We could hear them chattering and we used to just say, "Go alternate," and just change to
6 the other frequency. One time I remember that I was talking back and forth between the
7 other pilot and we would kind of chatter about things we were seeing and I heard
8 somebody say, "What's that?" and then another unfamiliar voice said, "Oh, that's some
9 of those Air Force guys on our frequency," so it wasn't the first time we'd been heard.
10 Then we just went to the alternate frequency, but one time a 2nd lieutenant came up to our
11 squadron. He was a communications officer and he told us his job was frequency
12 allocation. Well, I don't know how much you know about frequency allocation but we
13 were definitely violating probably international law by doing our frequencies this way,
14 but certainly we were violating military policy and so he asked us about our different
15 uses of our radios. They got it on the FM and whoever was talking to him described our
16 method and he just threw up his hands and said, "I don't want to hear about it." It was
17 very effective for us. The other brush I had with the US Army was that I had somebody
18 call that they were seeing an airplane that was...let's see, there had been an air strike and
19 there was a tire burning on the road that had been blown off a truck, it was just sitting
20 there burning, and this airplane was flying over it and it wasn't one of ours, it was an
21 Army plane, and so they weren't able to contact them and they even tried on guard, on
22 guard frequency; everybody's supposed to monitor that and nobody responded and they
23 tried flying in front of them and they didn't seem to see them and it was just...they
24 wanted to clear them out because they wanted to continue the air strike and we had
25 fighters I guess and I think I was one of the planes. Sometimes it gets this far away you
26 can't remember whether you discussed it so much or whether you were actually there but
27 I can picture this. I think I was one of the planes, but they said...or we said that the plane
28 had turbo prop engines and it looked like it had a whole row of vertical tails and Dick
29 Strong heard us, I think we were on VHF saying this, and he said that it was...what's
30 that, a Mohawk, I can't think of the designation of it but you know what it is. Well
31 anyway, whatever it is, it was a Mohawk. I recognized it but I didn't know the

1 designation then and Dick Strong came back and said what it was. We never did reach
2 them. They just...what we finally did was we had the strike aircraft drop a bomb or so
3 not far away but safely enough away that they would see it and maybe realize there was
4 an air strike going on. I think we even fired some rockets and that didn't do any good,
5 but we had them drop some bombs and then the Mohawk left and I only recently learned
6 that the Army felt it had a role I think on Route 9 at that time so this may have been a
7 legitimate flight that was the point of conflict between the Air Force and the Army on
8 rolls and missions. Before I get back to the other topic, I'll mission that the roles and
9 missions conflict that we had...and this was another case of disobedience; we were given
10 instructions that whenever we had Navy or Marine aircraft and Air Force aircraft, strike
11 aircraft, available to us that we were to employ the Air Force first. Now I don't know if
12 there was any reasoning behind that other than inter surface rivalry; I really don't. I
13 never heard the high level reason for that and I can't imagine anything else. But at the
14 squadron level, we thought it was irresponsible and stupid and unrealistic and we ignored
15 it utterly and the reason is very simple; the Navy and Marines came off of carriers, and
16 even though they may have had sufficient fuel, they had carrier times that they had to hit.
17 It was very strict. The carrier would steam into the wind only for a certain period, and if
18 they didn't get back...I don't know what the consequences were if they didn't get back to
19 meet their carrier time, but it was bad enough that they were never willing to stay. They
20 would say, "I got a minute and a half," and you got a target and if you had something you
21 could ride in on, you would, whereas the Air Force would come in, sometimes off the
22 tanker, loaded with fuel; in fact, on occasion they would have to orbit the target area until
23 they burned fuel down enough to where they were light enough to make a strike, and if
24 they got low on fuel during the strike they could just go up and hit a tanker. They had no
25 carrier time. They land back at their base at their leisure. So, it was blatantly ridiculous
26 that this rule came down and we just ignored it. We put whoever had the shortest time
27 available to them was who got into the target first.

28 SM: Yeah, that makes sense.

29 WT: We used common sense, but that was an example of I think...I don't know
30 where that originated. As to strike tactics, I can expand on that a little bit. We were
31 doing visual reconnaissance and during the early part we seldom had a target that was

1 useful. Intelligence didn't know much. If there was something we wanted to strike and
2 we couldn't get strike aircraft, we would make it sound extremely lucrative when we did
3 our debrief and usually the next morning one of our frag order targets would be that one,
4 so we kind of played the system that way. In the early days when we had something we
5 wanted hit we would have to call Invert and they would get us some of the fighters that
6 were either on their way to north Vietnam or had come back because of the weather
7 problem, and divert them to us. Later on we did have strike aircraft that were designated
8 for us, and we had the airborne command post. In the actual strike, we had a briefing that
9 we had been trained to give which would give the fighters the information about the
10 target, what kind of target it was, it would give them general run in directions that we had
11 chosen, we'd give them the enemy action that we knew about or anticipated, and
12 elevation information; just things that they needed to know for the strike. We would ask
13 them what ordinance they had available and if they had any problems with us they would
14 tell us. Usually we asked them to drop the bombs just a few at a time; if they were large
15 bombs it would be one at a time but usually a 750 pound bomb was our most common
16 ordinance and we asked them to drop those in pairs if they would and usually they would
17 do that so that they had more chance of coming back and correcting errors. Then we
18 would – this was the lead aircraft – would mark the target and tell lead, the fighter lead,
19 where the target was in relation to the mark and you'd say, "I think I see it," and then say,
20 "Okay, you're cleared in from the southwest," or wherever we had chosen for run in and
21 we would establish positive identification of the lead aircraft before that by one of several
22 means and then the number 2 man would usually inform the flight where he was and my
23 procedure usually was to try to find a hilltop or piece of karst that I could fly low over
24 and I figured if they hit me, then they'd hit the karst. I was close enough to it that it
25 would be something that a fighter pilot would be avoiding by plenty of distance to protect
26 me, so if I could get down there that low and still be effective for communication, that's
27 what I did but we always told them where we were and we tried to keep aware of where
28 they were but that wasn't always possible because they move a long way; an F-105, for
29 instance, can go out of sight pretty easily, especially if there's haze. In fact, sometimes
30 they had trouble getting back and finding us after a run over the target. For rendezvous,
31 we had our 1 to 250,000 maps were marked with radials from Invert. We did not have

1 TAC and distance measuring equipment but the fighters did and they would...we would
2 give them a radio and distance from Invert where we were located and they would fly to
3 that point and then they would say, "Okay, I see a small plane," and then you'd say
4 "Well, I'm going into a right turn," or a left turn and then he'd say, "Okay, I got you."
5 That established visual, and then we usually wouldn't bother with the high man because
6 they knew we were pretty close together or the high man would then say or explain. On
7 one occasion, this was probably my closest brush with death – well, one of them – not
8 from enemy action and that was that I was in visual reconnaissance probably below
9 Alpha and Bravo, Charlie area, probably below those chokes along...there was a river,
10 and I was flying back and forth. I was the low man and my high man was 2 miles away
11 and there were other FACs operating north of us and all of a sudden there was this huge
12 explosion under me and my windows all oil canned with all the tremendous percussion
13 and at first I said, "Well what in the hell was that?" on the radio and I didn't know what
14 had happened but a bomb had gone off underneath me, at least a 1,000 pounder, it might
15 have been 2,000 pounds; a large bomb. What had happened was that I apparently had
16 been in a left turn at the same time as the other FAC was being identified so the fighter
17 thought that he had seen me and he thought he had the FAC. Well, then that FAC went
18 ahead and put in an air strike thinking that the fighter...I think he was using a bend in the
19 river as a reference point. It was marked with smoke, but he thought the fighter had seen
20 him and he was real clear of the intended target but I was right over it. I wasn't over his
21 intended target, I was right over what the fighter pilot took to be the target but he didn't
22 see me so he went ahead and dropped his bomb and it was right underneath me. We of
23 course got on the VHF and started hollering about who was putting in an air strike and I
24 don't remember who it was but he apologized and we figured out what had gone wrong.
25 I don't remember that changed our tactics at all, but it certainly shook me up. I wasn't
26 even very high. We didn't find any damage to my aircraft, you know, there was a danger
27 of shrapnel. My other closest brush was when I was doing VR not too far from Cricket
28 West, was in the very steep karst and had a lot of caves at the base of them and as we got
29 to supporting that part of the war we also went I and tried to hit things in those caves and
30 I was going back and forth and back and forth and looking at something interesting and I
31 looked up and I saw nothing but a flat wall of rock in front of me. I instinctively banked

1 hard left and rolled and pulled hard on the stick and just...I almost hit my wheels on it, it
2 was so close. I thought I was dead, but I managed to squeak through that one. Anyway,
3 let's see, I guess I covered how we avoided mid air collisions?

4 SM: Uh-huh.

5 WT: It did bring to mind when I almost saw an F-105 crash into those same
6 walls of karst. I was putting an air strike into the caves at the base of these walls and the
7 lead aircraft on its first run...I told them it was an undefended target, you know, but it
8 was kind of hard to hit and they were going to strafe, they were going to fire their
9 [Vulcan] cannons into these caves and this first strike aircraft came past me and
10 descended below me and I probably wasn't very high - I knew it was undefended there -
11 and he descended down toward these caves with this wall of karst in front of him and
12 then I saw a stream of something coming back from his aircraft which I assume was just
13 going into afterburner because he just almost immediately after that went...I was looking
14 at the top of his aircraft, you know, he just pulled the nose up abruptly and I just was
15 waiting to watch. I just knew he was going to hit the karst. There was no way he could
16 possibly pull out, he'd gone way too far, and it was just a terrible, terrible feeling to
17 watch him zap into these watch and it just appeared, from my angle, to just barely
18 pull...made it and got above them. So, he came around and then I figured out what I'd
19 seen coming back from his aircraft was gun gasses. He was strafing at low altitude. He
20 couldn't have strafed very long; of course you don't burst those very long. I felt a little
21 sheepish, that maybe this guy, his aircraft, performed better than I thought but I didn't see
22 how an F-105 could escape that situation. The other three didn't go down near that far,
23 so when Lee came back around for his next pass, I said, "You know this is an undefended
24 target and it may not even be a very important one. I wouldn't push it so hard," and he
25 said, "Well, I just..." a very short answer but he didn't go anywhere near...he didn't
26 come nearly as low as I was after that. I think he scared himself pretty badly, and the
27 target fascination, of course, is a well-known phenomenon.

28 SM: By that you mean basically you follow yourself to the ground as you're
29 going to the target?

30 WT: Right, yeah. We had an incident later. I was not there, I was in Bangkok
31 and I came back and they told me that we'd had a very unfortunate incident the day

1 before which an F-4 had gone in on a target and when they pulled off both engines
2 flamed out and there was no chance to do anything about it and they ejected and it was a
3 successful ejection and they weren't captured and the rescue forces were called, the A-1s
4 which we called sandies and jolly greens and they went out and the first jolly green
5 picked up the two F-4 pilots and as they headed back toward NKP they had an over
6 heating transmission and of course that's a critical part of the helicopter so they had to set
7 it down and the other jolly green landed next to them and they all transferred to that one
8 and lifted off again. It was getting...it was late in the day and they couldn't leave it
9 sitting out there so they decided they were going to have to destroy it with an A-1 which
10 is unfortunate. We'd already lost an F-4 to a flame out and now they're going to lose a
11 jolly green to intentional destruction which they did, but unfortunately one of the A-1s
12 got target fascination apparently and just flew right into the ground. That was the only
13 loss of life in that thing. We lost 3 aircraft and one life and no enemy action that anybody
14 saw during the whole time.

15 SM: Okay, so we'll go ahead and pause for the day. This ends interview number
16 2 with Mr. William Tilton.

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Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with William Tilton
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
September 13, 2000
Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

1 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. William Tilton. It
2 is the 13th of September, year 2000 at approximately 10 a.m. Lubbock time. Okay Mr.
3 Tilton, what did you think about some of the general tactics and the strategy employed by
4 US forces as you witnessed them while you served in Southeast Asia?

5 WT: Okay, at that time we were aware that the...of course the importance of the
6 supplies going down the trail. That's what we were trying to do is interdict the supply
7 train, and I don't think we were aware of supplies coming through Cambodia. We knew
8 it was a sanctuary but we didn't...I don't think we knew of the volume, nor did we
9 realize that the DMZ had been used as much as – that is the demilitarized zone in
10 Vietnam – had been used as much as it had up to then. But, we were aware that the so
11 called Ho Chi Minh Trail was a major supply route and we felt that interdiction was very
12 important but we also knew that interdiction is seldom totally successful. So, now as far
13 as...that's the strategy issue. We felt we were doing an important thing as far as strategic
14 big picture goes. Tactically, we felt pretty frustrated. Picking off one truck at a time is
15 not a very efficient way to do interdiction and we weren't getting...sometimes we would
16 get 6 or 10 trucks but often it was just one at a time. It was probably one that broke down
17 and wasn't able to reach a hiding place during the night. During the period in '66 we did
18 get A-26s in and they started nighttime raids and we felt that that would probably be
19 pretty successful but I don't think it was amid the expectations that we had for it. Choke
20 points seemed like a very good thing to go for, way to go for us, but as soon as...in mid
21 '66, of course the rainy season came in. We were having an awful time keeping

1 surveillance over those checkpoints, and without being surveiled at all times, they were
2 pretty much open. If you went away for a couple of hours, you'd find somebody going
3 through or at least the repair had been made. During the night those were used pretty
4 heavily. So, we felt pretty frustrated. But, in May, there was a...I don't know if I
5 covered this in the previous segment, but there was a large crater we estimated about 70
6 feet in diameter at choke point Bravo which was not too far...just maybe 10 or 15 miles
7 south of the intersection of Routes 911 and 912, and at Bravo it was kind of soft dirt and
8 this crater started filling with water right after it was made. Glenn Bremenkamp was the
9 FAC and I believe the fighters were F-105s – they were either F-105s or F-4s – and they
10 had 2 2,000 bombs each. They weren't hitting anything that he wanted. The last bomb
11 on the last fighter, he just told them they were cleared and he didn't even bother giving
12 them a correction from the last bomb and it just lobbed in there and happened to hit just
13 right beside the road and of course closed off the road. It started filling with water right
14 away and each day we would go out and try to get a look at it; some days the weather was
15 so bad we couldn't, but there was a foot trail that led past it. I think I mentioned it before
16 because I remember talking about the bicycles. Anyway, that was closed for about 2
17 months and the 23rd TASS got a presidential unit citation for that. I think that the rainy
18 season may have been as much a factor as that crater. In the dry season that would have
19 been filled in or bypassed.

20 SM: Well let me ask you this.

21 WT: Go ahead.

22 SM: What did you think about the broader strategy as it was being employed
23 while you were in Southeast Asia? In particular, what was your evaluation of the higher
24 echelon leadership, American leadership in particular, and the strategy of attrition that
25 was employed by General Westmoreland and the body count war?

26 WT: Well I can tell you my opinion later. I don't think that we were too aware
27 of that at that time. That was still during that quite a strong build up phase and we didn't
28 really know which way the war was going to go at that point. But later on, I became very
29 disillusioned with the strategy. I think it was more the fact that things like bombing
30 pauses were tried. General Westmoreland may have been doing the best he could with
31 the rules that the politicians were giving him because I don't think there was much left to

1 him other than if he could have designed an all out effort as was finally done after the war
2 had been lost politically. Then I think he could have done something in the '60s, but as it
3 was...now the first bombing pause came after I left the first time and I was just astounded
4 that we would do something like that and even notify the enemy that we were doing it. It
5 took away...all the basic rules of warfare were just flaunted and I was just stunned, and I
6 know that FACs saw trucks lined up at the borders of Laos waiting for that bombing
7 pause to commence so that...I think the leadership didn't give the Vietnamese credit for
8 the intelligence that they had. I think that we had a much higher appreciation for their
9 cleverness and intelligence than leadership back in Washington did, and in those
10 circumstances I think we would rather have not been there even though we felt as though
11 we should be. We also had discussions about this. I remember having some very big
12 arguments about whether south Vietnam was worthy of our efforts, and concluding that
13 yes, they probably were; the common people were, at least, and certainly Thailand and
14 Burma, Cambodia, and so forth, we did believe in the domino theory and felt that if
15 nothing else we at least were there to prevent things from spreading any further. But, I
16 don't think that we had really formed an opinion about the way the leadership was
17 conducting the war in Vietnam yet at that point.

18 SM: What made you question whether or not South Vietnam was worthy of your
19 effort and sacrifices?

20 WT: Well we knew that the political leadership there was very...well, for one
21 thing the fact that the Army and the Air Force of the south Vietnamese were more eager
22 to fight each other than they were to fight the VC was one of my first real observed
23 problems, but also it seemed to us that the Vietnamese people didn't support their own
24 government pretty well. It seemed to be clear that if they'd held the election that was
25 agreed upon when the French left that the communists would have prevailed and that's
26 why we didn't allow them to hold it and everybody pretty much knew that. The
27 communists were very popular, we knew that, because they had resisted the Japanese and
28 then the French, but particularly the Japanese. Everybody knew that the Vietnamese
29 hated to be occupied; that was one of the strongest things in their culture. They
30 remembered that the Chinese had occupied them for...what was it, 900 years or
31 something like that, and never integrated into the Chinese society. We knew some of

1 these things about their culture but they didn't seem to have the firm conviction that they
2 were firmly convinced that they wanted to fight the communists as they were. It wasn't
3 the thing about corruption so much as just we weren't sure that they were politically
4 where we would like to think they were whereas the Thai were. That was an issue that
5 we never resolved, really; it bounced back and forth.

6 SM: Was this part of your discussions with fellow pilots as far as the political
7 aspects of Vietnam, the fact that first the Diem government and then the revolving door
8 government that followed the coups, that they had questionable allegiance from the
9 public of south Vietnam?

10 WT: Yeah, it was definitely horrible. We were well aware of all the things that
11 were going on like that, at least as far as they were being reported.

12 SM: Had you read any particular books that helped you understand some of the
13 political dynamics in Vietnam at the time that you [?]?

14 WT: I read *Street Without Joy*...

15 SM: Yeah, Bernard Fall.

16 WT: Bernard Fall, yeah, which gave me I think a very good history of how they
17 had gotten up to that point. I checked out everything I could find in our library which
18 had a few things in it there at the compound. I hadn't read much except news reporting
19 prior to going over there, but for some reason I'd always been very interested in current
20 events as a child so I had kept up mostly with Time Magazine I guess and a few other
21 journals, even when I was in...as far back as say 9th grade. So, I was more aware of
22 Indochina than most of my fellow students. So a lot of the things that I found out when I
23 went over there I already was aware of somewhat. I remember having a bit of a cynical
24 approach to it because I'd heard about the leadership and I think this was in Vietnam.
25 Everybody seemed to have a Mercedes. This was in the early period after the French left.
26 It could have been Cambodia but I think it was Vietnam. It was too long ago for me to
27 remember but it was just the indication of the fact that maybe they were just taking
28 advantage of Uncle Sugar and not really being convinced that they...they weren't being
29 dedicated to the task the way the VC were.

30 SM: Is there anything else that you would like to discuss with regard to your first
31 tour in '66?

1 WT: Well, of course I've got lots of anecdotes and things, but no, I think we
2 pretty well covered where we were at that point. I did discuss...I think the last time I
3 talked about the night test of the starlight scope?

4 SM: Yes, we did discuss that and your report that kind of alienated you with the
5 commander.

6 WT: Yes, very much so.

7 SM: Well, let me ask you; after you left, some pretty...and in the time between
8 your leaving from your first tour and going back in 1971 as a KC-135 crew commander,
9 a couple of interesting and important things happened; of course Tet '68, Johnson's
10 decision not to run for reelection, the Vietnamization of the war implemented by Nixon –
11 what did you think of these events?

12 WT: I went to Alaska, so I wasn't as exposed to the ferment counter culture that
13 was going on in the lower 48 States. We got a lot of our news late and not as
14 dramatically I think, but Tet, all I had was the news reports and of course the press made
15 it sound like we were being thrown out of Vietnam and it was a long time later that I
16 learned along with the rest of the public that actually we won it, but we lost it morally.

17 SM: I'm sorry, do you mean in terms of morale or in terms of...

18 WT: The public. The public was led to believe that this was indication that the
19 communists were much stronger than we had thought and they could do something like
20 this whereas actually they almost lost...if we had followed up with that, I think we'd
21 have ended the war because they really threw everything they had into it and it was a
22 very dramatic show and I'm sure it was a terrible blow to the troops there but its kind of
23 like the Battle of the Bulge; it was doomed to just further weaken them in the end, but I
24 didn't know that. I was very dismayed with Secretary McNamara and I just felt as
25 though when Johnson chose not to run, most of the reason for that was the way
26 McNamara was conducting the war and that goes back to what I was saying earlier about
27 the bombing pauses and the half way measures that were just bound to drag it out and
28 actually aid the north Vietnamese in succeeding and they were very [?]. I knew this then,
29 how good they were at playing the US public and McNamara just played right into their
30 hands on those things and obstinately refused to change. I don't think Lyndon Johnson
31 agreed with him, but he let him do it and of course that's where the buck stops, he had to

1 take responsibility for it, but I understand now that he was very dismayed with the
2 bombing part. That's the method of carrying on the war; if you're going to fight a war,
3 that's a political decision but once you decide to conduct your affairs that way, then you
4 have to fight it. You can't mix diplomacy and warfare. I think they have to be carried
5 out separately, and that's a principle that I think has come down pretty reliably
6 throughout history and I don't think anything in the 1960s had changed to make that any
7 different. Johnson sort of understood it but McNamara didn't understand it at all. I was
8 pretty surprised when Johnson bailed out, but it didn't disappoint me. I was very
9 disturbed by the way the public had turned against the military, and not just because I
10 was in the military. I think I would have been almost as disturbed even if I had not been
11 in the military because I thought that that [?] was misplaced; the military had no power
12 over the things that were going on, and shouldn't. I mean, the military in our country is
13 controlled by the civilian power and that's as it should be, but the civilian power was
14 misusing it. The Army was not standing up for it, and I was especially, especially
15 dismayed by the way senators would get up and trash the military on the floor. When I
16 first got in KC-135s after I came back from Alaska, we got a very large pay raise; I think
17 it was as much as 40% but I don't remember; it was very large, and most of the crew
18 members were all for it but I wrote a letter...I think it was to the white house. I wrote a
19 letter saying that this was...made me feel like a mercenary that they were trying to keep
20 me in the service by paying me a lot more when simply treating us the way we viewed
21 ourselves, with some honor and some respect, would have made a lot more people stay.
22 That was a duty to our country that was being disregarded and trashed on the floor of the
23 senate especially, and I really resented that and made it clear in the letter. Let me see,
24 what was the last event that you mentioned?

25 SM: Oh, the Vietnamization.

26 WT: Oh, when Nixon came into power. Well, I thought Nixon probably did
27 about the only thing you could do at that point. Vietnamization was probably the only
28 thing that was palatable with the American public. You couldn't just walk out. Even
29 though a lot of people advocated that, I don't think it would have been...it was very, very
30 difficult to do, even on a practical basis, and certainly I don't think politically it would
31 have worked. So, you had to pull out gradually in order to open some way to maintain

1 what we had gained, and Vietnamization seemed like the logical way to me. What really
2 I've never gotten over is the fact that at the end, Nixon finally let everybody loose and we
3 went in and did what had to be done to prevail militarily at the same time that congress,
4 obeying the will of the people obviously, gave the signal that we didn't intend to stay
5 there and pursue it and restricted any further funds being spent and Nixon had no choice.
6 The Vietnamese at that point, I think, were beat. They were really ready to come to terms
7 and I am convinced of that. I think we threw in the towel just when we had won. But, I
8 don't blame congress. The thing had been stretched out for so long that the American
9 public had obviously lost all stomach for it and wouldn't have stood for anything else
10 probably. They had no interest in winning so to speak. So, we ended up winning every
11 battle and losing the war; that pretty much sums up my opinion of it.

12 SM: When you went back in 1971 as a KC-135 crew commander, why don't you
13 go ahead and describe your duties and responsibilities in that particular position and the
14 operations that you supported over Southeast Asia?

15 WT: Okay, strategic air command, or SAC, had a very efficient operation set up
16 at U'Tapao near Satrahip in southern Thailand by the time I went over there on Operation
17 Young Tiger which was the refueling operation to support B-52s and fighters, and I never
18 refueled any B-52s during that operation because most of them had started operating out
19 of...had been operating for some time out of UT which they didn't need to refuel, so all I
20 refueled was fighters and B-66s. We went on temporary duty and that was I think a four-
21 month tour, possibly. My crew went over as a passenger crew. They would send one
22 aircraft over with a [ferry] crew to fly it and two passenger crews. I went by way of
23 Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii, and as soon as we arrived at UT and got set up in crew
24 quarters they gave us a very thorough preparation in very SAC style; they gave us a
25 description of how the operation was to be run, and this was how it was set up: The
26 tanker crews would start off with a given take-off time and I believe it was several weeks
27 that we flew at that time and then we would slip 4 hours later and that continued
28 throughout the time that you were TDY. Every...I think it was 2 or 3 weeks, your new
29 take-off time would be 4 hours later so that they...because they rotated all the way
30 around the clock. It was pretty much...I think it was the same level of effort at all times
31 night and day. So, we knew way in advance, again typical of SAC, we knew way in

1 advance when you were going to fly. You didn't know where or what aircraft, but you
2 knew when. The routine, the daily routine, was that a troop bus would come by and pick
3 us up and take us down to operations and we would pick up our classified materials and a
4 navigator would get the scramble box that he had to encode so that we could have secure
5 communications, and they would give us an assignment out of an anchor, an anchor being
6 an orbit point; aircraft number and so forth given to us, we'd get a weather briefing, and
7 then we'd proceed to the aircraft, do our pre-flight, meet our take off time, and the KC-
8 135s are a very well maintained and a very reliable aircraft anyway so take off times were
9 almost always met. Once or twice I carried maintenance people along right to the end of
10 the runway getting something fixed, but very seldom late, and if a plane was late or had
11 to cancel they always had some spares ready to fill in the gap. Command post was very
12 flexible and able to react to things like that very easily, and missions were pretty routine.
13 We climbed out of UT up past Bangkok and Korat and over towards the east where these
14 orbit points were spaced along the Mekong River. We had strict orders not to enter Laos
15 with a tanker. It made a lot of sense; there's no point in risking an asset like the KC-135.
16 However, this was violated on just a very few occasions and one of them in particular I
17 remember an F-4 had loitered too long in north Vietnam and he was screaming for fuel
18 and somebody went in to get him and I believe that he flamed out just before he got to the
19 boom, but as I recall it I think that the tanker went into a dive and was able to glide into
20 the boom and get a drink, but that's a matter of history so that could be checked on. It
21 was quite an anecdote. It didn't happen to me, just something I heard about. These orbit
22 points all had names like cherry and orange and peach, so if you were assigned to cherry
23 anchor, that was the orbit point you were going to be in, and I may have some of these a
24 little bit off but as I recall the B-52s had all the air space above about 24,000 feet, so the
25 anchors were all below that and I believe we were spaced at 4,000 foot intervals down to
26 about 10 because it was very low for a jet operation. In fact, I've learned recently that
27 people on the ground at NKP and Ubon actually saw us refueling sometimes. We would
28 go into that orbit. Wherever there was space, they would assign us an altitude and the air
29 traffic control weapons controllers at Invert or was it Lion or whatever its called there at
30 Ubon would steer us to the orbit point they wanted us at and give us an altitude and slip
31 in there. Then they would start sending in receivers. They would give us a call and say,

1 “We’ve got a flight of 4s, 4 F-4s,” and say a certain call sign and pretty shortly they
2 would show up and they’d get off one wing and it seemed like they usually got off your
3 right wing and one at a time they would slip over onto the boom and typical off load
4 would be 8 or 9,000 pounds of fuel for an F-4 or an F-105. An F-100 would be much
5 less, maybe 3 or 4,000 pounds. Then one at a time they would slip over to the other wing
6 until they were all fueled up and then they would leave as a flight usually inbound to
7 North Vietnam. Usually I don’t think they needed fuel nearly as often coming back in
8 less they stayed up there a little longer than they were scheduled to. But, my memory
9 could be bad on that one. Once in a while we got RB-66s...that was usually at night.
10 They were doing reconnaissance. Once we went over into south Vietnam and refueled F-
11 100s with a drogue, a 9 foot hose that could be fastened onto the end of the KC-135
12 boom which the boom operators called the donkey dong and the F-100s would get, as I
13 said, there’s a much smaller off load there. Another time we were sent on what they
14 called a round robin, which took us...it was about 30 days I think. We left Thailand as
15 again as a passenger crew went to Okinawa and there we were on alert some days but we
16 also flew a radio relay plane that was equipped with large relay transmitters and I think
17 that mostly they retransmitted guard transmissions. We orbited over the Gulf of Tonkin
18 for many hours, 10 or 12 hours on a very boring mission. There was one incident that
19 happened that wasn’t boring and that was a MIG came after us, but again we were
20 protecting an asset that there was no point in risking. We were under the control of an
21 aircraft carrier that was stationed out in the Gulf and then they saw this MIG come down
22 from an airfield near Hanoi. They warned us and steered us south. It was hopeless for
23 the MIG, he never could have caught us. He came out maybe 100 miles or so and then
24 reversed and went back, maybe 200 miles, but he was never anywhere near us, and after
25 the air traffic controller was sure that the MIG was no longer a threat, then he returned us
26 to our station, our orbit stations. After our time was finished there at Okinawa, we took a
27 plane as the flying crew to Guam and then back to UT. We spent 3 to 4 days in Guam on
28 strip alert, which meant we couldn't leave the airfield. We were in our flying suits and
29 we could go down to the airstrip at any time to take off and refuel somebody, but of
30 course we didn’t get called. I remember when I left Guam I had about 40 or 50
31 passengers, near capacity, for a 135 and had to abort the first take off attempt because I

1 had an engine that wouldn't come up to full thrust, which I felt kind of sorry for the
2 passengers because there were very few windows in a 135 and it is hot and they didn't
3 know what was going on and the boom operator had to go back and tell them. All they
4 did was open the cowling and tweak the fuel control a little bit until it got in the right
5 range, but it was an abort item right there and then. Then we went back to UT and picked
6 up where we left off with the sorties until our tour came to an end and I went back to
7 Louisiana. That's pretty much the story about Tiger.

8 SM: Any refueling missions with intel birds; U2s, SR-71?

9 WT: No, no.

10 SM: Was that just something that didn't have to occur because of the...

11 WT: No, those aircraft used special fuel and so the Q model 135 would refuel
12 them.

13 SM: Okay, so it was just a different model refueler?

14 WT: Yes.

15 SM: Okay, I got you. So you never had to worry about missile lock as far as
16 surface to air missiles? You never had any incidents involving...

17 WT: That's correct; however, I observed one incident. A tanker – I don't know,
18 I think he just wanted to take a look – but I saw...this was at night, we saw one...we saw
19 some ground fire is what we saw, and I don't think that we were aware that a tanker had
20 gone over there, but we learned it when we got back to maintenance. I don't remember
21 how we knew that the tanker went over there, but we did, we found out. But, we saw
22 something over in Laos and my co-pilot said, "What's that?" The navigator saw it, too,
23 and I said, "That's ground fire." I recognized that it was tracers going up and it was
24 either 37 or 57 millimeter. It was fairly...it wasn't 50-caliber size. It was pretty high,
25 and I reported that to maintenance because we were not supposed to go over there. There
26 was nobody crying for fuel or anything like that; I think the troop just wanted to go over
27 there and was curious, and he didn't even know he'd been fired at until I reported it;
28 probably behind him, but as I say it was at night so it had to be...I don't know how they
29 even knew the tank was there. Of course it probably had running lights on it and
30 everything, so maybe that's how because we were in a no-threat area in Thailand and...

31 SM: Right, but when he flew over Laos you'd think he'd turn his lights off.

1 WT: You'd think so, but...I had the advantage of having been there before.

2 SM: Yes sir.

3 WT: I knew what I was seeing. My crew didn't until I told them. What it was, it
4 did turn out to be...it was confirmed.

5 SM: What happened to the pilot?

6 WT: I don't know. I hope he got some kind of discipline because that was not
7 only risking the airplane, but he was risking his crew for no good reason. So, I had no
8 sympathy for him. That was the only incident, really, that I observed. As you say, if I
9 ever got a missile lock I wouldn't have known it because we didn't have any detection at
10 all.

11 SM: Oh, okay.

12 WT: We weren't ever supposed to be exposed to a threat like that; the aircraft
13 wasn't designed for that.

14 SM: Right, but at the same time refueling, if you were in the active act of
15 refueling, that's a very vulnerable position.

16 WT: Yes.

17 SM: They would purposely put you in areas that they would think are as safe as
18 possible, I'm sure.

19 WT: Right. The worst thing was weather. We had a lot of thunderstorm
20 activity, so we had to do a lot of dodging around clouds and things with the receivers in
21 tow sometimes. I remember one night the navigator was trying to steer us through clouds
22 and he would give me different turns. We got into a place where they actually closed in
23 around us so that we had no choice but to pick the thinnest looking return and fly through
24 it and as we started to get into it I started to bounce pretty hard and I told the boom
25 operator to release the receiver which he did and he said that the Saint Elmo's fire – are
26 you familiar with that?

27 SM: Yes sir.

28 WT: Okay, well we had it pretty heavy that night and he said the boom looked
29 like a cross because it has those little elevons to steer it with and it was all lit up and the
30 fighter was like fire from wingtip to wingtip – the canopy was covered with it – and we
31 bounced around for a little while in that and the rain got really heavy and then came out

1 of it. There were a few times like that that were pretty tense, but I guess weather was the
2 most. Then we had another incident that we induced ourselves which we shouldn't have
3 done and this was [in balance]. The fuel from the KC-135 was pumped out of the [F]
4 body tank and the body tanks are where the cargo holds would be in the airliner version,
5 707. So, all the fuel that's pumped over board has to go into that AFT body tank before it
6 is. The center wing tank, which is the same tank that blew up on that flight 800, that's
7 the biggest tank on a KC-135 just as it is on a 747; it's a huge tank. The copilot was
8 draining fuel from that tank back into the AFT body tank drain valves that can be open
9 and the rule was that when you were draining fuel, you put your hand on the...you grip
10 the edge of the fuel control panel between the pilots so that you wouldn't forget that you
11 were draining. We were leaving orbit to go back to base and we'd gotten down to the fuel
12 level that we were supposed to be at and it was in the middle of this draining operation
13 when I got a lot of radio calls, probably asking us for a strike report, we refueled how
14 many fighters and how much off load and so forth. The co-pilot started to give those and
15 he took his hand off the fuel panel and I noticed...now the auto pilot would re-trim the
16 airplane as needed and I looked down and I noticed that the trim was all the way forward
17 and then I glanced down and saw that those drain valves were open! I immediately shut
18 them and I looked over at him and of course he looked at me and said, "Man, we've
19 really got an out of balance situation." The problem is that you can't land in that
20 condition because you won't have enough elevator authority to keep the airplane nose
21 down as you slow down. Well, we had the ability to pump fuel overboard but we
22 were...they became very strict about that and they would have sent us out over water to
23 do it and we'd have a lot of explaining to do why we needed to do it and it was our fault.
24 So I put out drag devices, spoilers, and that enabled us to run the engines at a high power
25 setting and try to burn fuel. We only burned out of the AFT body tank and we calculated
26 that we could get our weigh in limits by the time we got back to UT. We called for an
27 early decent because jet engines burn a lot more fuel and are much less efficient at a
28 lower altitude than they are high altitudes, and that helped us, too. So, we never needed
29 to dump. We were able to land, but we were still pretty far aft in our balance point so
30 that when we parked the nose strut was extended way up and they had an awful time
31 getting the tail stand underneath the tail. The maintenance people said, "What happened?"

1 What's going on here?" We just shrugged. We didn't say anything to them. We never
2 did explain it to them. But, that was something we could handle but it was a good thing I
3 noticed it when I did; we'd have been in real trouble.

4 SM: While you were there for your second tour, were there ever any accidents,
5 serious accidents?

6 WT: There were some, but not while I was there. There were some 135
7 accidents and I think some B-52 accidents, but no; nothing like that then.

8 SM: Now were these passed on to you just by...through anecdotal stories, or was
9 it passed on to you as part as the official briefing that these are the things that people have
10 done in the past and screwed up really bad?

11 WT: We had that passed to us. We also had a system that if you did something
12 that was wrong that people didn't know about, that you would be able to write it up and it
13 would be anonymous.

14 SM: Oh okay, you could spread it anonymously?

15 WT: Yeah.

16 SM: Okay, did you do that for your...for that particular incident?

17 WT: I probably did. I made another mistake that I know I did because I
18 remember doing it, but I can't remember about the out of balance situation. I probably
19 did because that's the sort of thing that helps people know not to do it, but there was a
20 time when – I'm going to sound like a real screw up here, but...

21 SM: Don't worry, this is just for posterity.

22 WT: Yeah, I know. See, we were cleared onto the runway to hold which is a
23 common thing with air traffic controllers. They'll tell you. They're not quite ready
24 because they don't have a clearance ahead of you but they knew they were about to get it
25 so they'd just have you come out on the runway and hold. That was a break with our
26 routine because normally at UT we made a rolling takeoff. As soon as they cleared us for
27 takeoff we would start the engines up and as we turned on the runway they would be
28 accelerating and we'd just never hit the brakes, just keep on going. But, on this particular
29 day...no, I take that back. That's what caused the problem. The routine there was not
30 like back in the States where we did have a rolling takeoff. At UT the routine was to pull
31 on the runway, hold the brakes, bring the engines up to full power and then turn on the

1 water and make sure you had full water injection on all four engines, and then release the
2 brakes. This was not like Stateside, but because of the high temperatures and marginal
3 operating conditions, heavy loads, that was our procedure. On this particular day they
4 told me to pull on the runway and hold. Well I pulled on the runway and held the brakes
5 and then started bringing the engines up right away, it as by habit, not thinking about the
6 fact that he had said to hold. As soon as the engines were producing full power, I
7 released the brakes and about 2,000 feet into the roll the tower cleared me for takeoff
8 which was fortunate because I would have had to abort the takeoff definitely if they
9 hadn't, but that I did write up because that was clearly a procedural mistake that I
10 shouldn't have made, and a warning to other people to watch out for that change in
11 routine; that's what often gets people.

12 SM: Any other interesting, anonymous submissions that you recall that other
13 pilots made?

14 WT: Not that I recall, no. Well, quite a few. People don't realize that...

15 SM: Human error.

16 WT: Yeah.

17 SM: Well, at least the Air Force had something in place to allow for the
18 anonymous submission so that those lessons could be passed on without fear of
19 retribution; a wise policy.

20 WT: Yeah, and in SAC it had changed. They had a different philosophy than
21 tactical air command had about the way a crew operated, and it was also a very strong
22 safety of flight item and I believe the airline had been emphasizing this for some years
23 now but I was in TAC when a pilot got a check ride. If you started to screw up, if
24 anybody else in the crew started to say anything about it they would violate the whole
25 crew because they were giving him hints. In SAC, it was just the opposite; if the pilot
26 starts to screw up and somebody didn't say something, then they would get smashed for it
27 because we had a crew concept that yeah, maybe the pilot got dinged for screwing up but
28 everybody was supposed to be watching it and watching... busting an altitude – when air
29 traffic control gives you an altitude and you go through it – there should be several voices
30 in that cockpit shouting out, “Watch your altitude!” and in TAC we didn't do that; it was
31 just the opposite. You'd just sit there and watch the guy screw up.

1 SM: Well, then that could lead to accidents!

2 WT: It did, yeah, exactly right, and they finally recognized that. I don't know if
3 that change occurred all over the Air Force or not, but between the time that I was flying
4 a crew aircraft in TAC, a KB-50, and the time I got back into the crew aircraft with TAC,
5 that [?] may have reversed.

6 SM: Any other major differences between TAC and SAC that you recall?

7 WT: Yeah, SAC was much more organized from the top down and I resisted
8 getting in SAC because I'd heard that you didn't have any lead way and so forth but
9 actually in practice you had lead way if you needed it professionally but you really knew
10 where you stood, you knew when you were going to fly, where you were going to fly,
11 and you knew where you fit in the whole operation; much more stability, and I think it
12 was much more professional. The attitude of that crew was just one example. TAC...of
13 course I was in KB-50s which did not have the best people. Maybe in fighters I would
14 have been more positively impressed, but in KB-50 tankers, I didn't think very much of
15 the people I was working with. I mentioned that before.

16 SM: Yes you did.

17 WT: SAC, I had a great respect for the people I was working with. They were
18 extremely good, had a great attitude; things went quite well.

19 SM: How much do you think the differences between TAC and SAC were the
20 result of the heavy emphasis professionally and bureaucratically placed on SAC and the
21 fact that they were the larger recipient of support because of the Cold War?

22 WT: I think that was a major factor. In SAC, of course, it was still living under
23 the influence of General...what was his name?

24 SM: Pierce [Curtis] LaMay?

25 WT: Yeah, thanks, even though he had retired by that time. I saw him once in
26 Alaska after he retired, but that was before I got in SAC. But SAC definitely was living
27 the legacy that he had left and that wasn't...everything goes for the mission and you go to
28 the nth degree to organize it and make it happen right. Plan as far as possible ahead, and
29 just great effort, and he had gotten major resources for SAC that TAC didn't get. A lot of
30 those had been taken away by the time I got in SAC, and an awful lot of the
31 crewmembers had come from other commands which, long before I got there it was all

1 inbred in a sense. It didn't let people go and it moved around within SAC, but they had
2 gotten the cross pollination that I think was very healthy for SAC by the time I got there.
3 A lot of things that people objected to were no longer a factor. Its about 12 o'clock here,
4 I'm afraid I'm going to have to.

5 SM: Oh yeah, okay. Let's go ahead and stop interview number three.