

Interview with Ben Van Etten
Session 2 of 4
January 15, 2003

1 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Ben Van Etten on
2 the 15th of January, 2003 at approximately 2:55 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas
3 and Mr. Van Etten is in Alabama. Sir, why don't we go ahead and pick up with some of
4 your general observations about serving in Vietnam and missions and things like that that
5 you were participating in?

6 BV: Okay. Just, as I had mentioned previously that Vietnam was an area that
7 depended on your luck of assignment whether you got to live in an air conditioned villa
8 in Bien Hoa or Saigon or Vung Tao and probably spend most of your days there or
9 you're actually out in the boonies fighting a war. The helicopter pilots at least had the
10 advantage of being able to, even though we lived in the boonies of occasionally being
11 able to fly to town or fly to Vung Tao or fly to Saigon and maybe get an overnight there
12 or something, to get a decent meal at a restaurant and a bath or something. But other than
13 that, for most of the grunts and for most of the helicopter folks, you stayed out there in
14 the field and everyday was fly all day or, and sometimes in the night depending on what
15 the missions were and just your only rest was just right there. You just relaxed in your
16 hooch or probably had a cocktail or beer and that was about it. I can't, I think we talked
17 previously about you know a typical mission scenario, how we would, if we were going
18 to move in for in-field type operation or move in for an air assault, we would have a brief
19 usually the evening before and then normally they would take off before daylight so we'd
20 be ready to start this at first light or shortly thereafter. Of course again a typical one was
21 the proposed landing zone. If nobody was there yet, you're going to be the first lift in,
22 they would go ahead and prepare the zone usually by artillery and air strikes, just to make
23 sure there's nothing there and nobody hid out, hiding out waiting for you. And then we
24 would do the infil, as our troops occupied the area and moved to wherever their
25 objectives, or toward their objectives, we would withdraw and back to our base and wait
26 for a call to either bring in more troops or go in and re-supply them, or bring out
27 wounded. In a lot of cases we took in hot meals for them in marmite containers from

1 their main base, we would take in Sunday chow, or not Sunday; just their chow for the
2 day and that could be hot meals for them sometimes.

3 SM: Now, when you'd fly those types of missions, were you restricted
4 geographically to where you would do that, or by the units, or would you provide support
5 for whomever needed it?

6 BV: Well, yes generally we were in, supporting the III Corps area and sometimes
7 the IV Corps area, which is south of Saigon, III Corps area being north of there, including
8 Saigon and the north of Saigon. And we would support units that were in that area,
9 obviously there were other helicopters based up in the II Corps area and I Corps was
10 probably mainly the Marine Corps up there supporting them. We supported wherever
11 within our corps area wherever the action was, which for many different units and may
12 several divisions and also the ARVN folks too, the South Vietnamese Army.

13 SM: Now did you fly ARVN forces into hot landing zones very frequently?

14 BV: Once in a while, not as much as we did the Americans but we did
15 occasionally support ARVNs and even by themselves, especially down in the IV Corps
16 area. Because that's, at that time we didn't have, and I think in later years but when I was
17 there they didn't have much U.S. infantry down in the IV Corps area down in what they
18 call the Delta area. It was mainly just ARVNs down there.

19 SM: Well, did you ever have any problems with ARVN?

20 BV: Not really. I you know, I didn't really deal one-on-one missions with them.
21 I was usually as a part of a flight, which we were you know, was already a plan. You
22 know troop movement, which wasn't any big deal. It was just pretty much they would go
23 as planned and there wasn't any commo. We didn't really need it with them, they had
24 their own command and control, probably in another aircraft that would be speaking their
25 own language to whoever they needed to and all I would do as a pilot was just to follow
26 in and fly in where they're supposed to and drop them off or pick them up, whichever it
27 was and take them wherever they needed to go. Not really any problems, they. Well like
28 I said, I never really had any problems. I've heard of other people that did but I never
29 really had any with them.

30 SM: You said you've heard of other people who had problems?

1 BV: Well, just by simply through translation, through interpretation of what they
2 wanted, whether or not they would give you the right suppressing fire you needed and
3 that kind of thing. I think a lot of that had to do with who their advisors and cadre were.

4 SM: So mostly language problems. That is that they wouldn't have English
5 speakers with them or they wouldn't be able to communicate well with the aircraft
6 commander?

7 BV: Yes, that's about right. There's you know of course there were people that
8 were with them, Americans with them too that we would probably would, normally we
9 would deal with the American that was their advisor. So he would already know what
10 they were going to do and he would have his, probably have an interpreter with him to be
11 able to speak to their commander and so again. And you know different than later years
12 at Air America where we did work one-on-one and individually with the local folks there.
13 But in Vietnam I didn't really get, other than hauling them around and re-supplying them
14 and I didn't really get that involved with their discussions with them or anything.

15 SM: All right. Did you ever have problems, or ever hear of problems of some of
16 the ARVN soldiers not wanting to dismount the aircraft in the hot LZ?

17 BV: I never had that problem, but many times we'd watch them and as soon as
18 they, you drop off an American battalion and they're going to immediately charge the
19 perimeter and set up, they're there to fight. Well, the Vietnamese ones that I worked with
20 a lot of times, the first thing they'd want to do is leave the aircraft line of fire and start
21 cooking their rice, worrying about the meal rather than what the possible objective might
22 be.

23 SM: And while you were flying these missions, what were the biggest anti-
24 aircraft concerns that you had, as far as weapons?

25 BV: In Vietnam it was mainly just small, thirty caliber. I didn't ever, encompass
26 any what you consider AA like we did in Laos. Sometimes there was a 12-7, a fifty
27 caliber in the area but I never personally got close enough to get bothered by any. I
28 knew, I was advised where they were and just stay away from there and that's what I did.

29 SM: Before your missions in Vietnam, I assume you went through some kind of a
30 flight briefing, flight operations center. How were those conducted, how effective were
31 they in giving you the essential information you needed, how accurate?

1 BV: Well, when I was there, it was early in the game, in '65 and they weren't real
2 accurate I would say. I mean we knew generally, our intelligence folks knew generally
3 where the enemy was or probably was and of course that was the reason we were taking
4 troops in was to try to flush them out and so you know a lot of those were kind of
5 unknowns at that point. We, like I said that's why we conducted missions where you just
6 fly in formation, the troops, you'd stay up at altitude four, three thousand feet or so until
7 you got directly near your objective and then you would swoop on down and let them
8 out. But en route you didn't give a, you didn't know whether there were good guys or
9 bad guys just hanging out down below you, so you didn't give them an opportunity to
10 shoot at you. All of our flights, or most of our flights, that was a formation to fly, of
11 aircraft of ten or fifteen, twenty aircraft, would also have gunship support with us, either
12 helicopters or Air Force, but see our own helicopter gunships, of course we had commo,
13 instant commo with them. If anybody received fire, of course you dropped smoke right
14 there where you received the fire, continue on, of course suppressing yourself with your
15 door guns, but meanwhile the gunships would come on in and try to figure out where it
16 came from and give it a whack. Let them know they shouldn't have shot at you.

17 SM: Okay, how about going into LZs, were you concerned at all, or very much
18 about RPGs, things like that yet?

19 BV: Not RPGs, I never, just small arms. Like I said, our main, of course I've
20 been mortared a few times going into the LZs, often, occasionally. Of course you just
21 don't want to spent a lot of time in there if you're getting mortared.

22 SM: Yes sir. When you went out on missions, do you remember were you
23 surprised very often by what you encountered?

24 BV: No, not in Vietnam. Generally it was pretty cut and dry. We're going to, I
25 think I mentioned on our last meeting, you know there were a couple of units, infantry
26 units that really took a whack and that was generally for the same reason. They were
27 sucked into a major ambush that was waiting for them and they usually did it either at
28 night or just about at night where we couldn't and then they would lose commo you know
29 when their radios would get shot out, so you wouldn't know, you know you couldn't go
30 in there after anybody. You couldn't see anything, and so you just have to kind of orbit

1 overhead until daylight to get on in there and rescue whoever was left. Of course those
2 are surprises, to them especially.

3 SM: Yes, sir. Now, while you were flying in Vietnam, did you ever have to
4 conduct an impromptu SAR, search and rescue of downed pilots or anything?

5 BV: No, not really. Our unit was very fortunate. We didn't have any bad things
6 happen for a long time, for at least nine months while we were there, and where you had
7 an aircraft go out and either get lost or get shot down. If anything happened, for example
8 I personally had an engine failure during one of the missions, but it was just the next ship,
9 I made a landing in an open area and the next aircraft that was empty came right down
10 and picked us up so there wasn't any search and rescue. I was just rescued, there wasn't
11 any searching involved in my episode. That was what, this was true of most of them in
12 our unit because we, I don't recall any individual ships going out and getting shot down
13 that I can recall. In later, other missions I could have, or again when I, going ahead to
14 Air America days, of course there was a lot, in fact they were mainly single ship missions
15 with Air America. But we were always usually with a formation of ships in Vietnam or
16 at least a couple more, so you could watch each other.

17 SM: Now, would you factor that in? I mean it sounds like, for instance would you
18 have a couple of aircraft that were empty and flying along with you in formation in case
19 something like that happened?

20 BV: No, we didn't do that in Vietnam, we did that in Air American, but not in
21 Vietnam. We didn't have an SAR bird, a designated bird. It was just, pretty much rely
22 that somebody in the flight obviously if it was happened going out, well then you're all
23 empty, most of you are empty, well if it happen going in, well then you're coming in, you
24 should be okay, coming on in anyway, where you're going to get shot at is either on they
25 way out or on short flight on the way in. No, we didn't designate an SAR.

26 SM: And any other specific missions that you recall while you were in Vietnam?

27 BV: Well, I can recall certain missions in certain areas that were worse than other
28 ones, where you definitely got a lot of resistance and then other ones were just more or
29 less a piece of cake, there wasn't any shots fired that you were aware of. Excuse me,
30 again we talked about last time the Michelin plantation, what a nice, pristine looking
31 arrangement that, with all the rubber trees and all the plantation with all of its nice

1 buildings and tennis courts, swimming pool and that kind of stuff within the plantation,
2 but of course that became a battle zone later. I can recall one incident where we had our
3 B model aircraft, which were the gunships at that time. Some of them were mounted
4 with a forty-millimeter nose gun that would shoot about, a short, not a rapid fire, but
5 several every second on up, forty-millimeter round, which is about like a grenade. We
6 had that fixed where the enemy were using, they would stay within the rubber plantation
7 trees, you couldn't see them real well, but you knew they were in there. So to kind of
8 shake them up you would drop those grenades along the, periodically right along let's say
9 the third or fourth row of trees within the plantation, see what came out. Also we would
10 drop CS and CN gas in there, which was as you know, it's just tear gas is all it is, it's not,
11 when they smelled that they didn't know what it was, and of course they were told we
12 would probably use poison gas so they would literally come rolling out, thinking they
13 were going to die, but they were usually captured or taken that way and that happened
14 around the Michelin plantation when I was up there, especially earlier in the war.

15 SM: How were they delivered?

16 BV: We took some of them and literally took the gun tubes on the side, the rocket
17 tubes, I mean not the gun tubes, the rocket tubes on the side of the gunship and they were
18 kind of like spring loaded in there and so the pilot could eject one or two, just kind of
19 throw them out in front of him as he's flying along low and slow along the area where we
20 thought they were, and they would, they were just like canister, you know they were little
21 like a can, that's what they looked like.

22 SM: Right, and were there always in conjunctions with ground operations by
23 American forces?

24 BV: No, we just used them once in a while, tried different tricks to try flush the
25 bad guys out of the area. Like I said, the only gas we had was CNCS, which was tear gas
26 is all. But again, the enemy didn't know what it was I'm sure and they didn't have
27 protective masks. Now, well like again in the future stories, in SAR missions in Laos it
28 was commonly to put down the CNCS gas to keep the gunners down, the enemy gunners
29 down as we came in made a rescue. We'd use protective masks or we had Air Force
30 ones. Of course the enemy didn't generally have them so they had to, they were just,

1 that's why they were temporarily incapacitated, so you could, you'd want to go in and
2 make the pick up.

3 SM: Again, we're jumping ahead, but just out of curiosity, when you would
4 deployed CNCS gas in Laos, you would actually also be wearing a gas mask, why?

5 BV: Yes well, actually we, the Air Force didn't I? I was involved with, near that,
6 but their SAR birds were the Jolly Green Giants and their, and you know other bomber
7 type aircraft and even slow moving ones like A-1Es, but they had that capability yes.
8 They would drop, and they would actually be, they were larger than just what we'd use in
9 Vietnam. They actually had, I don't know how big they were, maybe twenty, forty, fifty
10 pound or gallon containers for that kind of stuff. That would, we called it, I think the
11 word was bedroll or something. They would blanket an area with that stuff if they
12 needed to to keep the anti-aircraft down when they went in and made the rescue.

13 SM: Again, back to your Vietnam time, with the Army, let's see, when did you
14 leave?

15 BV: I left in, let's see, it was around September or October of '66. I think it was
16 around October '66, October something.

17 SM: Over the course of that year, did your opinion, what was your opinion and
18 did it change at all concerning what the United States was trying to do in Vietnam?

19 BV: Well, no it really didn't change much I mean other than see during my tenure
20 we were more or less trying to get organized, trying to get our feet on the ground. The
21 divisions and the build up were still happening, the folks were still coming in and we
22 were still there to win the war. I know in later years it became repetitive and that's when
23 you have a lot of other problems happen with the troops on dope and stuff but we didn't
24 have any of that when I was there, that wasn't going on. Now, there was, we had some
25 good times. I was going to mention, some of my good deals in Vietnam. I got to be a, it
26 was just the luck of the draw but for a week I got to be Ann Margaret's pilot and Johnny
27 Rivers' over there, and they were. We literally took her around to different outposts
28 where she met the troops and Johnny Rivers too and his folks, and then of course she put
29 on a show back at their main garrison, that was kind of neat. Then I saw Bob Hope at
30 Christmas time in the winter of '65 and went down to Saigon to see him. And then we
31 ended up hauling some of his people up to some of the other outlying areas where they

1 went, put on smaller shows than the one he put on down there. I also hauled Charlie
2 Bergen, I mean Edgar Bergen and with you know Charlie McCarthy and them, and
3 Robert Mitchum and James Drury who used to, I don't know if you ever heard of him he
4 played the part called *The Virginian*. All Robert Mitchum and James Drury did was just
5 kind of go around and meet troops, just talked to guys; they didn't put on a show or
6 anything.

7 SM: Did you get to see Ann Margaret perform?

8 BV: Yes, I was her pilot.

9 SM: So, I imagine that you were able to stick around whenever you'd drop her
10 off.

11 BV: Yes, I'd stay with here and she put on her show and then we'd pick her up
12 and go on, take her back to town and I didn't stay in town with her unfortunately, but I
13 would take her the next day out to someplace else. Her and like I said she was traveling
14 with Johnny Rivers and his. He had some people with him, background and so did she
15 actually. She was nice, real nice, real young then, very nice gal.

16 SM: What else would you do for entertainment?

17 BV: Well, other than those type of things we had movies, kind of movies at our
18 garrison area there. I'm trying to remember what we had for a theater. I don't, whether
19 we just had a sheet on a wall or what. I really don't remember much on that but other
20 than just sit around and drink and wait for the next day's missions. And then
21 occasionally, we'd get to fly to Vung Tao or we'd go down to the beach there for the
22 afternoon or something, relax that way, but that was it in Vietnam, there wasn't much R
23 & R in Vietnam. Now, I did have an R & R week of R & R to get out of country. I went
24 to Japan, Tokyo for a week.

25 SM: Okay. How was that?

26 BV: That was neat. I was, we were with some of the, actually it was the first
27 group of GIs that went up on that particular one, and they had just opened it up on a very
28 limited basis for Americans to come into Tokyo. Of course you couldn't wear a uniform,
29 you couldn't, you know you didn't want people. They didn't want you to let anybody
30 know you were coming out of Vietnam. En route we stopped at Taipei and had a lunch
31 there at the Grand Hotel, Madame Chiang Kai-Shek's hotel in Taipei. Of course years

1 later with Air America I got real familiar with Taipei, but it was neat going up. We go in
2 and had a nice lunch buffet with fresh strawberries and cream and things that you hadn't
3 had in Vietnam and then went on up into Tokyo, and I think there was a group of about
4 ten of us and stayed at various hotels. I had a nice week. Me and this other GI that I was
5 with up there, the first day we met this, one of the, I think it was like the maitre'd at one
6 of the restaurants within the hotel, the New Hotoni Hotel. Nice big, at the time it was
7 brand new. It was a nice big hotel and they, the Japanese guys took us out that next
8 evening to show us the town, which was really kind of neat. We went all around to the
9 different sections within Tokyo. I don't know if you've been there, but there's different
10 sections you know. Some of them really like the **Ginza** is the highest priced section and
11 you've got other sections that are less priced, and we went to visit a bar and a lounge at
12 each one of them. And these guys since they were in the restaurant business they knew
13 somebody at each one of them so we had a good time that night.

14 SM: Did you find that Americans were fairly welcomed there?

15 BV: Oh yes. They were, you know we weren't advertising that we were soldiers
16 in Vietnam, although the guys we were with we told them. But yes, we were just like any
17 other, treated like other tourists, I guess.

18 SM: And that was, you were treated well both in Taipei and in Tokyo?

19 BV: Yes, well Taipei was just a matter of getting on the bus and going to that
20 hotel, but we were. Yes, that was a, it was a nice stop for us.

21 SM: Okay. In Vietnam, what was your food situation like?

22 BV: We had a, we built our own mess hall, and we called it a club and we, I'd say
23 we built it within, you know it was like within the first month we were there, we hired the
24 Vietnamese laborers thing and just build a club. And there, at first we just ate C-rations,
25 but then as soon as that was built we had a kitchen set up and actually you could go there
26 and eat a hot meal. In time, sometimes C-rations were better than the meal, but anyway
27 you'd go there and get a steak or go get a whatever, and a drink. And in that club we
28 built is where they would have, USO shows would come in and we'd have entertainment
29 that way too. Maybe once a month or so, there'd be somebody there. Some, not really
30 big name people, people probably out of Las Vegas or out of Hollywood or something
31 would come in and entertain us. But and we did that anyway. Like I said, we built on

1 our own hooches, built our own everything, the revetments, where the aircraft were and
2 the, just what we could carry with us. Now another, a side note, when Vietnam was first
3 getting built up in '65, we had some older more experienced soldiers in our, old warrant
4 officers in our unit that knew how to get things. Of course we arrived without a whole lot
5 of stuff. I mean we had our basic what you consider issue, but we didn't for example, the
6 club that we built, that we didn't have all the supplies you would need to put a club. You
7 know, all the silverware and plates and all the other things you'd need, tables and chairs
8 you'd need for a club. So we took one of our Jeeps, it was a brand new Jeep. We had
9 several, and traded it to somebody and I don't know who it was since I wasn't in on it.
10 But I know that we traded a Jeep for all the stuff to supply a club to some other
11 Americans someplace that already had that. Of course eventually they'd just write them
12 up as a combat loss and so it's gone. We also, we had, we were just living in GP medium
13 tents to begin with, and then one day one of our little guay, which was a hauling truck
14 just comes up with, probably twenty or thirty brand new calvinated refrigerators right in
15 the, still in the boxes, and one was parked in front of each tent where we all were. So we
16 could have, because that was always a problem, getting cold water or keeping the drinks
17 cold, so on. There wasn't much ice around up there at that time. Now we had the
18 problem, we didn't have enough power to run them, so the next day somehow somebody
19 acquired two big Air Force 150 kw generators, which agreed to, that's enough power
20 there to run a small town so we had them set up too and then finally, so we had power to
21 run our refrigerators. But that was all done by scrounging; I think more or less you just
22 drive with a little forklift and a low boy truck, you drive into the docks at Saigon where
23 all this stuff is and look official and act like you know what you're doing and grab up,
24 just pick them up. Another thing, we also got at that time the M-16 was just coming out,
25 of course our issue weapons was just a .45 pistol and I had acquired, all of us had
26 acquired an extra one, like I had a Thompson that I got from somebody and somebody
27 else had a shot gun I think with them. But we carried, but one day they came in and the
28 guy had boxes of brand new M-16s, so each of us got an M-16 to stick it behind our seat
29 there on the aircraft. At that time the infantry still hadn't got them all, they still had M-
30 14s, a lot of the infantry people, but we had a. So they'd get on an aircraft, we would
31 haul them and we'd be wearing a Vietnam jungle suits with that M-16 strapped behind

1 the seat and they'd be wearing regular fatigues with an M-16, an M-14, but anyway that
2 was just the scrounging business.

3 SM: Well, were there, did you experience any shortages of anything in particular?

4 BV: No, we had everything we needed I think. We had our own flight surgeon
5 with a small medical detachment with us, so as far as medical, you know that type of
6 thing, it was all taken care of for minor ills and aches and pains. We had, so the food was
7 adequate, it was okay, it wasn't great but it was okay, and of course we each had our
8 own. Eventually each two-man hooch we built ended up with a refrigerator so we always
9 had cold drinks in the refrigerator and that type of stuff. Then with C-rations of course
10 back, which in later days was MREs, but back then it was Cs and we always had plenty
11 of them to munch on. So there wasn't really any shortage; I suppose you probably heard
12 about the, what they call the shitters, the latrines, where they actually burned them. They
13 were, you could picture like a four or five holer outhouse and then underneath, which it
14 was just screens around the outside of it, but underneath it was like cut-out barrels where
15 you'd go into and then everyday or so they'd dump some JP-4 or diesel into those and
16 light them on fire and that would just burn off the. Of course that was always an
17 interesting, our shower was a, we got some B-52 wing tanks and mounted them up high
18 enough and then run some little faucets out of them so the spigots out of them so you just,
19 we just fill them with water and you have your shower. Of course sitting out there in the
20 hot sun in Vietnam, you'd have warm water.

21 SM: I would imagine it'd get downright hot,

22 BV: It got warm, but it, of course, half the year it rained so much that even though
23 it was warm you got cooled down by the rain. Another, I'm thinking about another little
24 sidelight. We had a, like a trench we had a dug in behind where our couple little, where
25 our flight platoons lived, at first in tents. We had some trenches kind of dug in behind it,
26 just in case we got mortared or something we could jump into that trench. Well, what we
27 were doing and this was, it really wasn't the wet season yet. It was still kind of dry at this
28 time. You'd eat your MREs or whatever else you had and you'd just throw your garbage
29 into that trench. Well, eventually, of course that attracts rats and mice and of course who
30 eats those but snakes, so eventually we realized we'd built our self a little snake pit right
31 behind there. So, one night we did get mortared, the first time, and I was, it was the

1 middle of the night and I just got out there and set behind some sandbags and figured
2 that's where I'm going to sit. I'm definitely not going to jump into that trench out there
3 [laughs]. Although we did clean it out the next day, in case we got mortared again, we'd
4 know it wasn't full of snakes or something.

5 SM: Well, did you eat any local cuisine, like snakes?

6 BV: Not like that, no, not there. The only local cuisine we would eat, I would eat
7 was if I happened to go to Saigon or Vung Tao or Bien Hoa, where you know, go to a
8 restaurant, local restaurant, noodle stand or something. I never, with the Montagnards or
9 that kind of thing like we did; now in Laos we did that type of stuff, but not in Vietnam.

10 SM: And what about interacting with the Vietnamese people, did you have much
11 contact with civilians, Vietnamese civilians?

12 BV: Not really, only the house girls that came in daily to do the chores around
13 the, you know, do everybody's laundry and clean up around the hooches and that was it.
14 That was really our only interaction other than you know with soldiers that we hauled,
15 but that wasn't. I really didn't have that much interaction in Vietnam with the local folks.

16 SM: Okay. When you, well how did you feel when you were getting ready to
17 leave?

18 BV: Happy to get out of there. I didn't have any bad feelings about the things not
19 being run right. We did a lot of missions that we kind of thought were kind of poorly
20 planned but then we would think well, we hadn't ever done that before, so hopefully live
21 and learn. A problem with Vietnam was that the rotation normally for most folks was a
22 year. So let's say an aviator comes in and he's going to spend his first couple months
23 getting trained and getting trained up so he's effective. Then he's going to fly real good
24 through his middle part of his tour then toward the end he's going to be a short timer and
25 probably not going to want to fly much. He'll just, what we called join the sea gull
26 platoon, which means you just eat and shit and walk on the beach and only fly if
27 somebody throws rocks at you. The problem with that is, now unless your rotations
28 would come in on a regular basis where you've always got old guys there training new
29 guys, but like in our unit we came in all together, so therefore we were all about to rotate
30 together. So toward the end of our tour they started trying to stagger us, either they
31 would send some of us to other units to fly, or out of our unit so we'd bring in people that

1 had like a mid-tour time there from that other unit. So they would be there to help train
2 the new guys. During my tour of course we always had an experienced guy to put in the
3 cockpit with the new guy, which is real important over there. In later times of course
4 your experienced guy had probably been a month longer than the other new guy, which
5 I'll guarantee you when a young pilot gets to Vietnam and he's just out of flight training,
6 like I told you earlier I was lucky enough to go to a high time flying unit in Germany first
7 and had a couple of years of fast flying under my belt before I got to Vietnam. But a lot
8 of guys didn't have that. When you're, if you can picture, you're flying an overloaded
9 aircraft, you know it's combat. You're flying fast. You're flying formation. You're
10 trying to read a map. You're trying to land and take off in tight areas. You're directing
11 door gunners, other things going on. Maybe you're getting shot at, so you've got to be
12 pretty cool, or you learn to be pretty fast. If you make it through a tour in Vietnam as a
13 helicopter pilot, you're definitely one real hot pilot by the time you got out of there, if
14 you lived that long. You know if you lived that long and didn't have an accident, or bad
15 accident. So, but you learned by, most of them just had to learn by experience, getting in
16 there and doing it and hoping they make it, and since once they leave they're in good
17 shape, but again back to what I was talking about, the year's tour. They probably should
18 have made it, looking back, maybe a little bit more than a year. Of course the initial
19 thought was, like I think I told you before, is the guy, "Well yes. We want to get that
20 Vietnam rotation and get the medals and get those points on our records and then we'll
21 get, because who knows how long this war is going to last?" You know their thinking
22 was it was only going to last a couple years at first. You know I was going to get in
23 there, kick ass and get out and it's over with. Obviously it didn't turn out that way but
24 that was the thought. So that was probably the idea for the one-year rotation, to give as
25 many soldiers as they could a chance to get to Vietnam. And that was the big difference
26 when I got with Air America. You'd have guys who had been there for ten years doing
27 the same thing.

28 SM: Well, upon leaving, did you already know where you were going, what your
29 plans were?

30 BV: I knew I was getting discharged and that was my plan. I went to, I flew out
31 of Vietnam, ended up, landing in Oakland I think it was, that area, the San Francisco

1 area, California, and got discharged right there and then got met by a friend of mine that
2 was living there in California, one of my high school and college friends. He met me,
3 because I'd written him, told him when I was coming in and I stayed overnight with him
4 and next day got on a plane for Dallas. My wife was in Mineral Wells at the time and got
5 to Dallas and she met me and we were home. It wasn't, you know there weren't any
6 protestors, there weren't any, I didn't see any, wasn't even aware of anything like that at
7 that point. I don't think any of that had really started, you know where your plane's
8 landed and coming from Vietnam and of course the California area, I just got out and
9 went about my business and really didn't notice anything like, but I think that happened
10 to other people.

11 SM: Well, during the whole time you were there, what, did you ever come up
12 against what you were told were NVA units, were they all Viet Cong?

13 BV: Well, I don't know. My assumption was they were probably a mixture all
14 the time. I never had the eyeball contact with the troops, the enemy troop, like the grunts
15 would. Mine was just flashes when somebody's shooting at me, and of course I'd shoot
16 back but I really didn't, and so I didn't know. All I knew is that they were bad guys,
17 Charlie.

18 SM: What about during briefings, did you recall if suspected enemy activity in a
19 particular area where you were operating, did they say explicitly yes, there are NVA units
20 in this area or anything like that?

21 BV: Yes, that's what most briefings were about. They would generalize and say
22 okay, we happen to know that this particular regiment or something was operating within
23 this area because the villagers have told us and they've been spotted and hum-ma hum-
24 ma, that kind of thing. Or we've had some of our vehicles ambushed or booby-trapped or
25 land mined along this particular route. Therefore, the assumption was yes, they live in
26 the jungle and probably underground in a lot of cases, and that's where they're going to
27 be. So we're going to, we try to pick our landing zones as close as we can but not right in
28 the middle of them, obviously.

29 SM: Over the course of your tour did you notice if progressively you were
30 encountering more NVA as opposed to VC?

1 BV: Yes, they were getting more and more as the tour went on. Like I said, we
2 had been there for a while before we actually had confirmed kills of NVAs. The rest
3 were mainly VC and same with the prisoners. I just happened to think of another story.
4 Sometimes one of the aircraft in each platoon normally would have what they call a
5 command and control console in that aircraft, and what that crew would do is you would
6 fly probably the commander or maybe the higher division commander or his staff in that
7 console, and they would be. And then you would continually be orbiting above the area
8 wherever their operation is going on, and they would be talking to the folks on the ground
9 and doing it on their own frequencies, although we could monitor all that up front of the
10 aircraft anyway, along with that. But anyway one time I was given the command and
11 control mission, and they came and told me, said okay, there's a general names General
12 Depew that's coming down, he was in the 25th a one-star. I think he made four stars later,
13 but anyway, Depew, and he's going to become the 1st Infantry Division commander and
14 he's, and right now the 1st Infantry Division, we were supporting them on a big exfil
15 mission and he said he's interested in watching that operation, so fly him and I think he
16 had, he was by himself actually. He didn't even have an aide with him, by himself, so
17 just fly him and pretty much let him, take him wherever he wants to go and let him
18 observe. And we had a command radio in the back of that so he could monitor our call or
19 whatever he wanted to do. So, we're flying this general around and watching all the
20 different exfils, it was an exfil mainly for that evacuation of an area that they were
21 finished with, and there was a call. And said, "We've got a VC prisoner down here and
22 we don't have any place." What are we going to do with him because all the aircraft was
23 getting full of Americans leaving and we didn't know what we were going to do with that
24 enemy prisoner? And so the general kind of looks at me and says, "Can we pick him
25 up?" I said, "Yes, if you want to, sir." So we went down and picked him up, and the
26 general jumps out with his M-16 and he goes and marches this prisoner, because I'm sure
27 the people on the ground didn't realize. He had little tiny black stars on his collar, you
28 couldn't really tell. He just looked like an older soldier, and he's kind of short too. He
29 was probably five six or so, anyway his name was Depew. So, anyway he marches the
30 prisoner back to our aircraft and we take off and of course the procedure then, in fact I
31 even called I said, "What do you think we should do with him, until?" I think they're S-3

1 or something. And they said, “Well we can’t take him because we’re all heading back to
2 our main base, why don’t you call Special Forces because they’ve got interrogators and
3 all that and take him there.” So I called a Special Forces camp, not too far from there
4 Du Kua and I told them, I said, “I’m coming in with a prisoner, I need somebody to meet
5 me and take him.” They had like a compound but outside the compound was a small
6 airstrip and obviously I’ll land at the airstrip and have someone come out and meet me
7 and pick up the prisoner. So, the general again he marches. We land, this sergeant
8 comes running out of the Special Forces camp. The general just marches him on up to
9 the sergeant. He’s got him, but I don’t think that anybody realized along the way that
10 was actually a general that was doing all that prisoner escorting. Anyway, that was kind
11 of a neat thing for him. He made two-stars right after that then I think like I said he was
12 three and four later.

13 SM: That’s amazing. Did you pick up many other prisoners over the course of
14 your tour?

15 BV: Occasionally, I’d pick up a prisoner. Mainly I’d pick up wounded
16 Americans. You know there was the dust off units, but if you’re already working an area
17 and a guy just gets shot or gets wounded, they’re going to load him off the first chopper
18 available. We just, in fact we’d fly him down to the hospital down at Long Binh, I think
19 it was called the 93rd Evac I believe. 92nd or 93rd, but anyway it was the closest hospital
20 in the area, we’d just fly them right directly there. We’ll call them ahead and say we’re
21 coming in with a wounded guy and they’d meet us and get him. We did a lot of what you
22 could consider a dust off mission were done by just regular Slicks.

23 SM: What would you say was the hardest mission you had?

24 BV: The what?

25 SM: The hardest mission, most difficult mission?

26 BV: Oh, in Vietnam I would say it was probably things that went in with the
27 nighttime and then were trying to fly at night and do the same thing. For example, a lot
28 of areas you could only land one aircraft at a time, so everybody would orbit over head
29 and then as your turn came up you would go down to the landing point, which was
30 probably just on the road down there in between the trees, pick up wounded, if that was
31 wounded we were picking up, pick up as many as you can and then kind of hover straight

1 up out of there and then fly away. Well, one night we were in a flight of probably ten and
2 maybe ten or more aircraft and you're following the guy in front of you and you're in a
3 large, very large orbit overhead and then the lead would go in, as I'm going down and
4 then he'd bake his pickers, I'm coming out, then the next guys would say okay, number
5 two's going in and then finally it would get to you. So, the only thing you can really see
6 along the way is the lights of the guy in front of your because it is dark and once he's in
7 and out, well then finally you would circle down, you knew about where you were going,
8 then you would wait for either a flashlight or a kev light signal of some kind down there
9 where you're headed, but it's pitch dark now, so you more or less hover straight down
10 into the area because we knew there were tall trees all around it. Everybody had
11 mentioned that, so that made it a little difficult to get in and out of there. I got in weather
12 a couple of times over there. Weather was always bad, especially during the monsoons
13 and there weren't, it was lightning going on and all that, and it was easy to get the vertigo
14 situation and I got in that situation one time. I worked out of it of course, but that was
15 kind of exciting. Then ended up, me an my crew ended up one time staying in a field
16 location by ourselves. It had gotten really foggy and rainy and it was late at night and we
17 were trying to do missions out there and finally we landed at this place and we just
18 couldn't, we didn't have enough visibility or anything to get out of it. Now, we knew
19 there were enemy around there but we didn't know where. We just shut down and sat in
20 the aircraft seat all night, and the door gunners sitting with their guns ready and we were
21 sitting with the, until we could get first light to get out of there but nothing happened, but
22 we would have been an easy target for somebody raiding in there. That happened one
23 night and then a, let's see, another mission was, let me think, we were really, you know
24 they weren't hard, I mean they were just, where I got medals and things for to me wasn't
25 any different that most of them. Every day was something, going in and picking up
26 somebody and getting them out of there. It was just normal procedure, you didn't really
27 worry about it that much. Well, you worried about getting shot of course. Now, you
28 know the other things, and this was true in Laos that your television or your movies can't
29 depict very well, there's a couple things. One is the intense noise of bombs and guns
30 going off and bombs going off around you or rockets going off. That's very, very loud,
31 and if you're close enough to like a napalm, the heat of that is something else too. So

1 even though maybe you're a hundred meters away from it, it's just like a blast to you. If
2 you're down where they're trying to suppress fire around you so you can take off again or
3 land, and that's what you usually do. You'd coordinate an Air Force strike along with
4 you're trying to take off if you know there are bad guys over there and they're going to
5 shoot at you as soon as you get above the tree line. So you try to suppress them with, as
6 their strike in the area, then that's when you take off, get out of there. That's the type of,
7 that, you can't depict the smell, some areas where there's been bodies, there was one area
8 where we hit this machine gun nest that, or the Air Force did, and there was like four or
9 five charred bodies in it and they were just left there and man you could smell them a
10 thousand feet in the air, you know just flying over it. And the smell of combat, the smell
11 of burning, the smell of napalm, the smell of things you know like a lot of gunfire. And
12 then the other thing is the fear that you feel for a little bit at least as you're going in on a
13 mission. There's just a bit of a, you tighten up a bit, as they say the pucker factor, and of
14 course I'll have to say that after literally thousands of missions over the years I got pretty
15 well used to it. But you know at first in Vietnam, that was pretty exciting. Those were
16 the type of things that Hollywood really can't depict because it's hard to convey smell;
17 it's hard to convey that much noise and it's hard to convey fear or apprehension like
18 you'd feel.

19 SM: Well, what was your biggest fear, was it fear of getting killed?

20 BV: Fear of getting shot, probably, yes at that point. I didn't worry about
21 crashing. I felt I could handle the aircraft pretty well by that point, so that wasn't and the
22 same with the guy that I normally flew with, this guy, Captain Silva, Ed Silva. He and I
23 normally flew together, most of the time and I trusted him too. I didn't have to, see I also
24 flew with a lot of real, real young pilots too when they would come in. Of course their,
25 you let them fly as much as you can, but you've always got to be real close to the controls
26 yourself because, so you don't crash but I wasn't that, with Ed I wasn't that concerned.

27 SM: This will end CD number one of the interview with Mr. Ben Van Etten.

28 Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Ben Van
29 Etten on the 15th of January, 2003 at approximately 4:00 Lubbock time. This is also the
30 beginning of CD number two. Was there anything else that you wanted to discuss about
31 your time in Vietnam before we move on?

1 Ben Van Etten: No, not really I, there were humorous side stories that I don't
2 know if that's any, if it's even relevant but they're kind of.

3 SM: Well, what comes to mind?

4 BV: Well, one in particular was, our commander as I mentioned on our last, the
5 other time we talked was kind of weird. Remember we used to joke about having him in
6 combat with you and that kind of stuff and sure enough he turned out there. Well, he
7 would like to fly on the command and control bird a lot of times over head when there's
8 going to be, where we're doing a mission, a large multi-ship mission. And his co-pilot on
9 this one particular mission was a guy named, another major names Martinez, who his
10 nickname was Marty and he was actually the S-2, which are the intelligence guys
11 supposedly. And we called him Major Smarty, and the reason, and he thought that was a
12 compliment because he was the S-2, you know, smart, but it was just the opposite; the
13 guy was so ignorant that that's why everybody called him Smarty, and it was an inside
14 joke about everybody. So anyway, Major Smarty and Major Reed were flying the
15 command and control ship, and we were landing, we landed in a landing zone that as
16 soon as we hit it, it started quite a bit of fire, incoming fire and so of course the idea is
17 you discharge your troops as quickly as you can and then of course you get out of there as
18 quickly as you can. But you go out in formation, you don't. The number four ship
19 doesn't fly past the number three ship and so on, obviously it would be dangerous to do
20 that. So, I'm back in about the oh, eighth or ninth area towards the rear, and as soon as
21 we discharged our troops and we're getting ready to go, the number two aircraft, quite a
22 bit in front of us catches on fire, it took some kind of a hit and caught on fire. Well, the
23 crew there announces, "I'm on fire. I've been hit. I'm evacuating my aircraft." Of
24 course all he had to do was get out of his aircraft, him and the crew of four, the two
25 gunners and the two pilots and just get in the next empty aircraft and we're out of there.
26 But, Reed comes over the radio and says, "This is an order, this is Tomahawk Six," that
27 was his call sign. "This is Tomahawk Six," he said, "I order you to everybody hold your
28 place, we're coming in to get them." Well, number one that was dumb. Who wants to
29 stay on the ground any longer with that incoming you may be the next one, and Reed
30 doesn't need to come in because like I said, turned out all they had to do was get in the
31 next aircraft. So, whatever the guy's call sign was, let's just say its Tomahawk Three-

1 two, he says “Tomahawk Three-two, this is Tomahawk Six, I’m coming to get you.”
2 Well, of course Tomahawk Three-two hasn’t been answering because he’s already
3 evacuated his aircraft, and everybody knew that. And so we’re all sitting there, what you
4 call light, you know where you’re ready to go. We’ve got the pitch partially pulled up
5 where we’re light on the skids and ready to move on out, and of course that aircraft’s
6 burning and Reed again says, “This is an order, nobody move. Everybody stay, hold
7 your position, we’re coming in to get them.” So Him and Marty, Martinez, which neither
8 one of them could fly worth beans and they came in and did this hairy side flare and
9 come down and hit the dirt hard and right near the burning aircraft and darn near tipped
10 their own aircraft over. Well, as soon as they landed, next thing you hear is screaming on
11 the radio, “Tomahawk Six has been hit! Tomahawk Six has been hit!” And he’s going on
12 about how he got the bullet, so our gunships, which their call sign was Gunslinger and
13 they’re kind of orbiting the area right now and looking for target and the Gunslinger,
14 “Roger, this is Gunslinger Six to Tomahawk Six, where did the fire come from?” And,
15 this is a classic, and of course we’re sitting there waiting to get out of there, meanwhile
16 while all this conversation is going on, and he says, “The bullet came in the right
17 window, of our right door window, it shot off my trigger finger, it hit my chest protector
18 and shot off my trigger finger.” Luckily he was wearing a steel chest protector, “And
19 then hit Tomahawk Two-Alpha on the way out and went out the other side.” “Roger,
20 Tomahawk Six, but where did the fire come from?” He goes through this long
21 dissertation again about it came in this door and it ricocheted here and it shot his finger
22 and on and on and then he says, “And I’m out of here to the hospital” and he takes off
23 again and they’re going to fly themselves to the hospital. Meanwhile nobody else took
24 any hits and the rest of us were out of there. Well, anyway that’s not the end of the story.
25 The next day, see I was with him in Germany and of course I knew his family and
26 everything and so I figured, well he got wounded I guess I better go visit. And that was
27 my day to kind of fly the ash and trash guys going to Saigon, fly the mail around to
28 people that were in the hospital and that kind of thing and so, well I’ll just land down at
29 the hospital and visit and take him his mail and visit him for a minute, being his old
30 buddy. So, the 93rd Evac hospital is really grim. You can imagine, this was a prefab type
31 building, corridors and corridors of burn cases, amputees, you know all these really

1 serious wounded guys. So I'm walking down this long corridor and I ask this nurse, I
2 said "Where's Major Reed at?" And he's said, oh, he's at the end bunk down this base so
3 and so and so. I'm walking down with his mail and I kind of walked in behind him and
4 he's sitting there having an interview with his hometown newspaper and his bed's all
5 jacked up where he can sit up you know and then he's got one of these, there's like a rope
6 coming from the ceiling, coming all around a bunch of pulleys and round to hold his hand
7 up, and all it was, he got a wounded. He didn't lose his finger, he got shot in the finger,
8 and it's all bandaged up and it's up in the air. It's being held up by this pulley type
9 apparatus, and then in his other hand he's got his chest protector, which had a, the one
10 from the mission, which had a good mark right in the middle, if he wasn't wearing that,
11 he would have caught it right in the heart. But anyway, so that really saved him, but
12 anyways and he's telling this hometown reporter or somebody, some interviewer about
13 how he and his partner saved the day and went in to save these pilots and what a hero he
14 was, and I'm sitting there listening to this and he doesn't know I'm standing there and
15 finally I moved around where he could see me, and I just say, "How are you doing, here's
16 your mail and I just walked off." He knew right away, I could just tell by the way his
17 face dropped that I heard his bullshit [laughs]. So, anyway the other funny thing was
18 when they got back finally, and he wasn't that wounded, but he did get rotated to another
19 unit, but anyway, when he and Martinez got back they put themselves in for the DFC,
20 both of them, yes, the Distinguished Flying Cross. Well, that was another joke, of course
21 everybody knew the whole story there, around the, and his got turned down but that gave
22 the rest of us an opportunity to go ahead and put in for a, that's how all of us got DFC out
23 of other missions that we said, well heck if he thinks that was DFC well, there was a lot
24 of other missions that were a lot more heroic than that bucket of worms was. So,
25 anyway, yes that's the story of Major Reed.

26 SM: Well, that brings up an interesting question. What do you think was the most
27 heroic or the bravest thing you witnessed in Vietnam, during your first tour?

28 BV: I don't think anything. I think all the pilots, you know I didn't, I wasn't on
29 the ground with the grunts, so I don't know, hand to hand or that type of thing.

30 SM: Well, but from your perspective?

31 BV: But for the pilots.

1 SM: You guys did some pretty hairy things.

2 BV: Yes, it was just a normal everyday mission; it was just a day's work. I don't
3 think anything really that heroic. We had one of our pilots volunteer to go back. We had
4 an aircraft that was down, but it probably could have been with a little bit of minor
5 maintenance, fixed to get out. He was a, he worked with a maintenance pilot, so he went,
6 he volunteered to go in to get that aircraft out, which they did, they went in and got it and
7 I thought that was pretty good because you know they were going to be shot on the way
8 in. Of course years later, you know that was Vietnam. When I got to, you know the real
9 war was in Laos, and that's about where the, talk about sticking it out. But even
10 personally, on you know our mission, we went in and picked up wounded guys and that
11 was just part of the job and went in, being mortared. Luckily the one time we were
12 mortared in, it was down in the IV Corps and that's mainly rice paddies down there, it's
13 pretty flat terrain, and the rice paddies had some water in them, at least they were muddy,
14 they had so little water. And so when the mortars started coming in and actually the
15 enemy just used these, usually like a sixty-two millimeter mortar, which wasn't a very
16 big round, but unless it hit you of course, it would be pretty big. But as far as shrapnel
17 traveling a long ways, you know like an R-4 deuce mortar is a pretty big one, but luckily
18 the mortars that came in near us went into the mud and then went off, so all that was
19 really doing was spraying the area with mud. That was pretty lucky because they were
20 hitting fairly close to us on that day, there was three or four of them went off before we
21 could get out of there, but luckily nobody took anything bad because it was dissipated in
22 the mud. That was the, you know those are, just like to me it was just the daily routine.

23 SM: Well, when you left Vietnam and got back to the United States, at what point
24 did you realize you wanted to go ahead and get hired on to become a pilot instructor?

25 BV: Well, I was had, I was in Vietnam; of course I was aware of Air America. I
26 think did I send you that one I wrote about how I'd planned to go to Air America
27 eventually?

28 SM: Yes, sir sure did.

29 BV: Okay. So that kind of explains it. I had a, you know I couldn't apply until I
30 was out of the Army. At that time they weren't taking people from active duty. You had
31 to be out of active duty. So when I got back to the States I sent them, I think I called

1 them and they sent me an application, I filled it out and then sent it to them and went to
2 work immediately for Southern Airways as a flight instructor there at Camp Walters,
3 which was the Army Primary Helicopter School. Actually that was where my wife was
4 from anyway, so we just went back there, so I worked there and waiting to see what was
5 going to happen with Air America. And they called me, as I mentioned in my story, my
6 other story, that they called me with a job situation but it was to go back to Saigon, fly
7 Hueys and of course Air America you can take my family and I just didn't want to move
8 the kids, or at that time three kids with a fourth on the way, to Vietnam, and I told them I
9 said I'd like to live in Thailand. I mean I knew about the Udorn Thailand operation and
10 they fly in Laos, H-34s and I said, mainly H-34s, they had Hueys up there too, but I said
11 that's what I'd rather do. Of course the answer was no, we don't have any openings
12 there, we only have a need for people in Saigon, so good-bye, so that was it. So, I
13 continued to work with Southern Airways, and it was just about eighteen months to the
14 day when I got, I don't remember if it was a telephone call or a telegram, from the same
15 hiring agent up in Washington DC that hired the Air America guys and the CIA case
16 officers, named Red H.H. Dawson, and he said if you're still interested in Thailand, give
17 me a call, which I did and went up there for the interview the next day. I told him I was a
18 flight instructor but my students were all soloed by that time, so I told my boss that I
19 wanted to go up and interview the next day and said my students solo and I'll be back
20 Monday, it was like Thursday, so be up there Friday and be back to work Monday, but
21 anyway that's when I got hired, so I started on another adventure which I was looking
22 forward to.

23 SM: Yes, sir. So, this was 1969 when you got hired?

24 BV: '68.

25 SM: Oh, it was '68?

26 BV: Yes. Yes, I left the Army in '66 and then eighteen months later was.

27 SM: Hired on with Air America. Now, did you? You had heard about Air
28 American back in 1963?

29 BV: Yes, long, actually I'd heard rumors about it in '63 and then when I.
30 Actually even before I became a pilot, went to flight school, I'd heard about it, mainly
31 just rumors and so on and then, because at that time, active duty Army aviators, and

1 Marine Corps aviators would go there like a tour of duty with Air America and then stay
2 there for a year or so and then either go back to the military or resign from the military
3 and stay with Air America, which a lot of them did both. Anyway, so I'd heard about it
4 and I was really interested in what they did as far as just the adventure. I wasn't a, and
5 then I knew they made good money too and that was, you know those are the initial main
6 considerations was adventure, the challenge of that type of flying and the money.

7 SM: When did you, when did you leave Air America?

8 BV: I left in let's see, the latter part of November of '72, so it was just short of
9 five years, or November, December, anywhere, the late fall of '72.

10 SM: Now, did you know at the time when you got hired in 1968 that Air America
11 was actually an owned and operated airline for the CIA?

12 BV: No, I didn't for sure. I mean I'd heard that, that was the rumor but it wasn't
13 put out even by the company. It was, at that time you were going to go to work for a
14 private company that was owned by the Pacific Corporation, a private outfit, which as
15 you know was a pseudo company in Delaware, a corporation set up for that, but it was
16 really, your principals were government officials. Anyway, we found out later, which is
17 fine. But that was a good; I was looking forward to that; that was an adventure. The deal
18 was I was hired and, of course a lot of this now is in that other thing I wrote you, I don't
19 know if you want me to say it again.

20 SM: Well, yes I guess what we could do is, we could do one of two things. I do
21 have them in front of me. The one that describes your experiences getting hired is called
22 *Lofty Goals* and it really it kind of depends on whether or not you feel its okay for us to
23 include this in the transcript. Include it, allow people to have access to it. Its up to you.

24 BV: That would be okay. I can probably elaborate a little more on some of it.

25 SM: Right and we would want to do that.

26 BV: I can kind of paraphrase what I've said, I mean I know what I've, the first
27 nine months, excuse me the first ninety days was my training and probationary period,
28 and then after that if you were still with the company and everything, good grades, then
29 you could bring your family over if you wanted to, which I did.

30 SM: Well, what did your wife think about you seeking employment with this
31 corporation?

1 BV: Oh, she was always game. She had been to Germany with me already, so
2 that bit of traveling, and we had three small babies at that point. Actually the fourth one
3 was born just about the time that I was getting really hired by Air America. So when she
4 came over that baby was only like a few months old, three months old, three or four
5 months old, but no, she was looking for the adventure too. She thought it was neat, she
6 was just game to do whatever I wanted to do and she's always been that way.

7 SM: When you were hired, after you received the contract, sent it back, describe
8 the process of getting over, back to Southeast Asia.

9 BV: Well, I was sent plane tickets to, I don't really remember which direction I
10 went, but I ended up in Taipei, I guess, going over the Pacific. I mean I don't know
11 whether I went through Seattle or California or what. I was in Dallas at the time or Fort
12 Worth area, actually Mineral Wells. So I obviously departed out of, probably Love Field
13 back then. I doubt if, I don't think DFW was there yet, but out of Love Field, and then
14 headed west through. I don't even remember the route, but anyway we ended up in
15 Taipei, and that's where Air America's far eastern headquarters was, was in Taipei.
16 From there we did the in-processing with the company and went through, I took another
17 flight physical with them I believe at that point, and then I also got an ATP training, Air
18 Transport Training there too, of ground school. It seemed like we were there a couple
19 weeks, and it just happened that there were three other guys on the same plane going over
20 with me, and we got together on the long flight, figured out that we were all going to Air
21 America. Two of them were Army retired guys, one guy was a younger guy, probably
22 about my age that was a fixed wing pilot, and I was the chopper pilot. So, we went to
23 Taipei, in-processed, ended up from there, after about two weeks or so, ended up in
24 Bangkok and went through H-34 ground school, at least three of us did. Dixon, who was
25 the fixed wing guy, I don't remember what happened to him at that point because he
26 ended up going to Vientiane to fly copilot on I think C-123s or Caribous to begin with,
27 and then we ended up going to Udorn of course flying H-34s. But the in-processing, of
28 course and then at that point the two guys I was with knew a lot of, several other guys
29 that were with Air American from the old days, and one of them met us down there in
30 Bangkok and I already had went over there and took us around had kind of chauffeured
31 us around too and got us started. A couple things I distinctly remember about that, of

1 course the ground school was interesting and all that and we went through that. I was
2 already rated in that aircraft but it was a matter of getting refreshed on it. And then,
3 there's the way we got from Bangkok to Udorn, our base, we went on a train, and the
4 train is what they call the night train, it took all night, you get on at like six in the evening
5 and then you'd arrive up in Udorn about six in the morning. So, there was like little sleep
6 bays on it so you could sleep, but that was the ride up. I believe it was train, now that I'm
7 looking back it may have been a bus, come to think of it, but anyway it was a long ride up
8 there whichever way we went. Of course in later years we drove it with our own car all
9 the time. But got up there to Udorn, checked in to a hotel where they recommended we
10 stay while we started our in-processing up there, getting our flight gear together and
11 getting ready for flight training, which began right away. I think I mentioned on my story
12 there, I hadn't been in an H-34 for several years, let's see it'd been, one, two, three, about
13 three years I guess since I'd flown one. So I was a little rusty and my first ride happened
14 to be with the chief, the senior pilot, Abbadee, Abb as we called him and he was kind of
15 a, I don't know, not unfriendly but just kind of pretty serious about his work. He was one
16 of the first pilots with Air America, if you read nay of that, you probably saw his name in
17 some of the history. Anyway, Abb flew with me and my flight was not good. Like I said
18 in my story I wondered if they ever fired anybody after the first flight because I, it was,
19 my free flight was all screwed up, even my starting procedures. I didn't know, with the
20 checklist I had to look around and find all the circuit breakers and find all the different
21 items that you've got to go through on checklist, which I didn't, because I hadn't been in
22 that cockpit for a long time. So it was getting reacquainted and then we flew and then, so
23 anyway, I think I mentioned that I was scheduled to fly with him the next day, the same
24 guy again, so that night I got out there with a flashlight in the hangar with a checklist and
25 memorized it. I probably spent several hours out there getting squared away wherever all
26 the circuit breakers and all the other things were that I needed. The next day the flight
27 went very well. It was a good flight, like a hundred percent improvement, and from there
28 I never flew with him again but it was, I think I related that story about the shut down
29 procedures.

30 SM: Yes, sir, yes.

1 BV: He says that's the last time you'll ever sharp shoot me, and I'm thinking well
2 jeez, what does that mean?

3 SM: Yes, what do you think he meant by that, because you were just?

4 BV: I don't, the guy was weird. I will say that. I got to be pretty friendly with
5 Abb in later years and of course he became vice president, one of vice presidents of Air
6 America and base commander or the base manager, and it turned out that we went R & R,
7 see one of the neat things, did I send you the Hong Kong story? Probably not.

8 SM: Let me see, I've got *Lofty Goals*, *Snake House*, *Up Country Work Schedule*,
9 *Detour to Burma*, *Christmas Eve, 1970* and then I've got *Rescue* and the *Ball of bombs*
10 *Flight Two*.

11 BV: Yes, which is the other half of the *Rescue*, same day. Okay, well there's a,
12 I've written a lot of other stories, but one of them. You know our, the work schedule at
13 Air America was neat because you flew, when you were flying of course you were up
14 country and you flew, hopefully ten hours a day or more if you could, or, because that
15 was the idea to get as much flight time as you could. You were paid for seventy hours a
16 month, that's how your pay was based. So as quick as you could get that seventy in, well
17 then anything you flew over seventy was overtime, so you made more money that way.
18 The other thing is, if you flew it fairly rapidly well then you wouldn't have to spend as
19 much time away, you could be off. Of course when you weren't flying you were off. I
20 usually was home or played gold, there was a golf course there in Udorn, a little nine-
21 hole course that I played at, and I played, that's usually what I did. But every month you
22 had what you called STO, scheduled time off, which was a, you had to be available for
23 flight schedule twenty-one days a month, so the other roughly the other week of the
24 month was your time, your scheduled time off. So you normally time that or arrange that
25 so that sometimes you had the last week of one month and the first week of the next
26 month, so therefore you actually had two weeks off in a row so that gave you a chance to
27 travel, if you wanted to go to the States or wherever, and of course one of our favorite
28 things as to go down to DePatia Beach on the Gulf of Siam, south of Bangkok and just
29 relax down there on the beach and eat seafood and play gold and usually you'd plan that
30 with other friends of yours and their families, as I said anyway, Abb and his family
31 occasionally would be down at the same time we were, so we'd get together for dinner,

1 whatever. So I got to know him that way a little bit better. Normally we had the same,
2 tried to keep the same group, we had the group of friends that we would try to do these R
3 & Rs with. We must have made, probably during the time, probably made fifteen to
4 twenty trips to Hong Kong. It would only cost, I believe it was something like twenty
5 bucks on Café Pacific to fly to Hong Kong for each of us and we got a fifty percent
6 discount at most of the hotels. So we always would usually stay at the Peninsula, which
7 was, at the time was the best hotel in Hong Kong, pick you up with a Rolls Royce at the
8 airport and unpack your bags and you know all these niceties, it was a real classy place.
9 Normally it was full, but Air America had some office space in that building, so
10 whenever we'd call for a reservation they'd always find room for us. So there were some
11 neat things. Hong Kong was a neat shopping area of course, everything was available, of
12 course like everybody else I had a gold Rolex I bought in Hong Kong. It was a
13 presidential Rolex, and back in those days when the price of gold was \$35 an ounce it
14 was a, I think they cost about \$700 for the one that's probably nine or ten thousand now.
15 And we had customized clothes made and shoes, and you know all the different things,
16 fun things you do in Hong Kong, plus we bought, during our time over there we order a
17 house full of, pretty much a house full of furniture to have made for us, to be made for us
18 over there; Chinese rosewood and teak and all the good stuff. So, when finally he'd
19 finished after practically five years we had it shipped home. So, anyway those are neat
20 times, but when you're off the work schedule.

21 SM: You got to travel like that very inexpensively.

22 BV: Yes, we did because the way that worked is that Air America was
23 considered, or Air Asia or CAT was considered an airline, just like Pan Am or any of
24 them, so we got the normal airline, inter-airline discounts for number one, and the other
25 thing was every year they would give you the equivalent money in airline, or MCO as
26 they call it, change orders for travel, what it cost for you and your family to go full fare to
27 the States and back. Well, that was enough, because I could actually go all the way
28 around the world for \$199 on TWA, with as many stops as I wanted back then. I had an
29 80% discount on Pan Am, at least a 75% discount on most every other carrier and then
30 within the continental U.S. at least a fifty percent discount. So, I could take those MCOs
31 and get discount tickets, so that would allow us to travel to Hong Kong or to the States

1 several times a year and still be working on what my allowance was for that annual trip,
2 or that annual entitlement. So that was a good deal, so therefore we traveled quite a bit.
3 We'd go to Amsterdam a lot. We liked to take the, if we went the eastern route to the
4 U.S, we would go through Amsterdam and then on into, all the way into Houston on
5 KLM, through Toronto. I think it was through Toronto, anyway it was Canada and then
6 on to Houston. Of course we were living in Texas so we'd just rent a car in Houston and
7 go on up through Mineral Wells. I mean that's where our home of record was at the time,
8 where Linda's family lived. We kept a house there too, during those years. Then, or
9 we'd take the other route which was usually on Pan Am or TWA or one of the U.S.
10 carriers, and that would go through Japan and then Hawaii, or sometimes Northwest into
11 Seattle where my family was, where I was from, but anyway, we would, or stop in
12 Hawaii, then go on through L.A. and then all the way into Dallas. So it gave us a neat
13 break either way, for a long trip. Of course the kids traveled with us, and even when we
14 were in Thailand and they went with us to the beach we'd take a house girl with us to
15 baby-sit and help with the kids that way, so it was a neat life.

16 SM: Sounds like it. Well, when you got to Udorn, well actually when you first
17 got to, I guess it was Taipei, Taiwan and you went through your initial training, what
18 kind of briefings did you receive about Air America, the role that they were playing in
19 Southeast Asia, missions, stuff like that?

20 BV: Nothing really at Taipei. It was simply, a lot of things were just kind of
21 implied to be classified and they didn't talk about it. All we talked about was aircraft,
22 which could have been aircraft, in Udorn, it could have been aircraft at Houston, you
23 know a plane's a plane, so we talked, because you were there to get a license and a
24 physical. Same in Bangkok, we didn't get into either rumors about this and that but we
25 didn't get into that. I didn't start hearing about the missions up country until I actually
26 got up to Udorn and of course a part of our in-processing, of course part of your daily
27 procedures when you fly was an FIC brief they call it, which is your intelligence brief
28 and they had it together. Now, I could tell right away once I got working up with Air
29 America the difference between their operation and the Army's operation in Vietnam was
30 like night and day. It's un-describable. First of all the level that we were allowed to
31 participate as just a pilot in command of an aircraft or captain over there was at the

1 highest level. We were in on the decision making on how we were going to do the
2 mission, it wasn't just thrown at you like yes you will do this and that's how it's going to
3 go, no discussion. There was always room for discussion up there. Then the other thing,
4 there's our intelligence briefs were very well updated and coordinated and very accurate.
5 Any time an aircraft was fired at in Laos, that information immediately was relayed back
6 to the different system and was noted on the briefing board in the FIC. At this date at
7 14:00, fifty caliber rounds were fired at an aircraft right there, or a thirty-seven millimeter
8 was spotted right here, or a twenty-three millimeter anti-aircraft, different ones. So, you
9 had a good idea where not to go. Now, in Laos of course the difference was we were
10 unarmed, we were generally by ourselves flying there, so you didn't have a bunch of
11 aircraft with you, so when we did a mission infil/exfil, we did have an SAR bird on those
12 missions. We would have an empty bird if we were doing what they call a special
13 mission, where you might get, one of us may get shot down, so you got the empty bird to
14 be able to get you out. And, when I was, the senior pilot, of course when I was new I
15 wasn't, but after a few years I was one of the senior H-34 pilots and so I would be able to
16 plan how the mission was going to go as far as the flight portion of it. You know who
17 was going to lead, who was going to land, who was not going to land, it was doing, what
18 each crew was going to do. Of course what I always did, I always led the mission
19 because I wanted to be first in, first out and I wanted to navigate too. Most of the guys
20 were really good, but I trusted myself better to make sure we were at the right place at the
21 right time, and then I would pick whoever I felt would be the bravest to be the SAR. I
22 figured if I got, first one in got shot down, well then he would come and get me. And
23 you know Air America was like everywhere else. They weren't all heroes, there were
24 some guys that were timid, there were some guys that you couldn't trust for sure if they'd
25 come and get you or not, if there was a lot of shooting going on, and other guys you
26 figured they would.

27 SM: Well, when you left Taipei and went to Udorn.

28 BV: Yes, by way of Bangkok.

29 SM: By way of Bangkok, well how long did you stay in Bangkok?

30 BV: About another week or so.

31 SM: What happened there?

1 BV: We had H-34 ground school. Are you there?

2 SM: Yes, sir. I'm here.

3 BV: Okay, my, somebody's trying to call in on me here, but that's okay.

4 SM: So a week of ground school, and then from there on to Udorn to actually start
5 flying missions?

6 BV: Yes, well first it was training.

7 SM: Additional training?

8 BV: Initial training, flight training, right there at the Udorn base, but then that was
9 only for a couple days and then, I think I stayed there about three days of training, two
10 days with Abbedee, and I think I had one other flight with somebody and then went up
11 country with a captain, with a training captain for a four or five day mission.

12 SM: Now, where were you actually licensed through, you had a Chinese license, a
13 pilot's license?

14 BV: Yes, I had a, the only requirement by the contract was an FAA commercial
15 license, and that's another funny thing. Some of the early pilots, of course especially
16 ones that have just come right out of the military, didn't have a pilot's license, and they
17 had been flying there for a long time and suddenly it was realized, that hey so and so
18 doesn't have a license when that block was not checked right during your annual or
19 whatever, and so they had to get these guys licenses, which is kind of funny, because they
20 were obviously very experienced pilots but they just had always been military flying. I
21 had a pilot's license and then of course the physical, which goes with that which was
22 taken care of by the company over there. While the ATP requires every six months,
23 however we didn't have to operate as an ATP pilot, only as a commercial pilot, so it was
24 every year we had an annual physical.

25 SM: Okay, now so the first two months that you spent there at Udorn you went
26 through, you continued H-34, really flight training, refamiliarization. Did you ever fly
27 over the border or was it always in Thailand itself at this point?

28 BV: Well, we started out in Thailand, like I said for the first few days in Udorn
29 and then from there went on, we flew up into Laos and trained on the missions.

30 SM: Okay, so even though it was training, you were basically participating in
31 regular Air America mission operations?

1 BV: Affirmative, yes. It is, the pilot's in command, the captain was you know an
2 experienced guy and he would. In fact a lot of our Air America flights were solo in the
3 helicopters, even up country.

4 SM: So even before your ninety day probationary period was up?

5 BV: No, well yes, before my probation, I was upgraded to captain, because you
6 can't fly solo unless you're a captain, but I was upgraded to captain about sixty days after
7 I got there, which was great. It was quicker, I always assumed that I would probably be
8 upgraded somewhere around the ninety day period but I made it in sixty days, which was
9 good. You had to be recommended by the, every time you fly up there you know they
10 write a report on you, how you did and what you did and then based on that then they'll
11 give you a flight eval, their chief pilot will, to see if you're ready and then they signed
12 you off as a captain for pilot command.

13 SM: Okay, who was the chief pilot that signed you off, do you remember?

14 BV: Well, I think actually the guy that signed me off was the chief flight
15 instructor was probably either Jerry MacInty or Wayen Webb. The chief pilot helicopters
16 was Wayne Knight. I see him at the reunions; he lives in Australia, really a super guy,
17 super guy. In fact all of them, I enjoyed the helicopter crews a lot over there and never,
18 ever will it be another group of that caliber professional helicopter pilots in one unit, just
19 because they all most, had already been to Vietnam before they even got there and flying
20 that terrain and those conditions year after year after year, you're real good or you're not
21 going to make it.

22 SM: Well, in those, the first sixty days that you were flying, when you finally
23 received your captain's ratings, about how many hours do you think you flew?

24 BV: I flew about, oh, probably about a hundred and sixty hours there, probably
25 about eighty hours a month; eighty to ninety a month.

26 SM: That's pretty good.

27 BV: Yes, it was enough to keep me real proficient, and that's what I flew
28 throughout the tour. Like I said you're paid for seventy, so they want you to fly at least
29 seventy a month, and then sometimes we'd fly up to a hundred a month, normally you
30 wouldn't get more than a hundred, but they tried to follow the FAA rules too. Part 91 is

1 not more than a hundred hours in a thirty day period without so much rest and so on, if
2 they could they'd follow that.

3 SM: Well, describe for me if you would the first mission you flew solo?

4 BV: Okay, the first one up there was solo, in fact that was kind of, I don't even
5 remember what we did. We went up and we supported somebody and I flew probably
6 rice and people around from villages to villages and that kind of thing, but I remember I
7 had a Filipino crew chief. A lot of the crew chiefs were Filipino, or flight mechanic they
8 called them, but crew chief. Good guys, and really the good thing about the Filipinos,
9 they can adapt to any language. They not only spoke English real well, they spoke Thai,
10 the spoke Lao. They spoke of course their own Hispanic type Filipino language. So they
11 were handy too especially at first because they could speak any language, but of course
12 we had Thai crew chiefs, we had Thai co-pilots, we had, of course Americans too,
13 obviously crew chiefs, but anyway on that very first flight, I was, or that first. I don't
14 remember if it was first night where we RONed or what, but after a couple days I was
15 told to fly back to an RON and remain overnight in Vientiane, which is a pretty good deal
16 because there you'd stay in a hotel and it was kind of like coming back to town.
17 Upcountry I'll get into the hostel business, we usually stayed in hostels up there. See, I
18 didn't send you the Luang Prabang story did I?

19 SM: No, no sir.

20 BV: Okay, well that explains how some of the hostels are. But anyway, he would
21 generally fly to an area up there and work for a customer for up to six days. You'd just
22 stay with him or live up there in either a hostel if Air American had one or a local hotel
23 up there in the. And for the helicopter, for the H-34 pilots, we flew everywhere in Laos,
24 every major area in Laos we lived at, all the way from the farthest north which was Ban
25 Houei Sai, all the way down through to the furthest one south which was Pakse down
26 near on the Cambodian border and about fifteen bases in between, we could stay, could
27 RON at. Most of the larger ones had a hostel where you would; you know there was a
28 cook there. The food was actually pretty good and then you would sleep and fly out of
29 wherever that local airfield was, with your customer, air ops guys, his office was out
30 there at the airfield and he would give you your missions, your loads, where you're
31 going, what you're going to do and so on. Each time you come back in they would have

1 another mission for you. Usually what it was, he's just hand you, you wouldn't get out of
2 the aircraft, he'd hand you a piece of paper with some coordinates on it and the signal for
3 the day at that coordinates, you had to always fly in high, look down for a signal, they'd
4 put out with cloth either a O, an I, a T, an X, or something and as long as that was what it
5 was supposed to be then you would go ahead, that meant you were clear to land. My first
6 trip solo, or on my own, we were returning to Vientiane and there's an area called Twin
7 Peaks which is a, and that's what it is, two little mountains kind of together. You know
8 Laos has a lot of mountains, and we're flying, but Vientiane kind of in a, it's down on the
9 Mekong River, so it's really flat down there, so coming out of the mountains toward
10 Vientiane, I had estimated that the flight time from Twin Peaks was about a half an hour
11 to Vientiane. I didn't have much more fuel than that on board; I had about forty-five
12 minutes of fuel. And I could have landed there at Twin Peaks, because there was a
13 refueling point but see if we refueled by hand, you'd land, you'd get a drum, a fifty-five
14 gallon drum, you had hand pump and you'd just pump your 115/145 Av gas into your
15 helicopter, your crew chief would. You could help him and you'd filter it through a
16 chamois, through a filter, through a chamois into a funnel and into the aircraft. So that
17 would take about you know ten minutes to do a fifty-five gallon tank. Of course the
18 aircraft would hold well, about two hundred gallons all told. You know you could be, a
19 lot of times you didn't want to waste as much time you wanted refueling if you didn't
20 need to. So I said oh, we can make it. So I started on back and I'll be darned, as I was
21 leaving Twin Peaks, the thirty minute little fuel light came on, which tells us you've got
22 about thirty minutes left of fuel. I didn't worry about it, I'm heading on down toward
23 Vientiane, come to find out it's like a fifty minute flight. So I was still about probably
24 ten miles, fifteen or twenty miles maybe from the airport and reading zero, and even the
25 flight mechanic kind of looks up. He's down below, an H-34, if you can picture, when
26 the pilots sit up high up in the front and then the passengers and then the crew guy are
27 down below, and of course he's looking up between my legs up toward the fuel gauge
28 and he says, "Hey, we going to make it?" And I said, "Yes, no sweat, we'll make it." I
29 was worried about that and we did make it okay, but when we finally, when I finally got
30 over the end of the runway, I figure well if it quits now at least I can land on the runway
31 and then taxi it on into the parking area to refuel. There couldn't have been much, I

1 didn't even ask how much fuel it took, I was afraid. I was thinking boy, my first flight
2 alone and hear I'm going to run out of gas, get fired [laughter]. That's something, it's
3 been closer, there was a lot of exciting times over there flying, but that's. You know I
4 don't remember a whole lot of specific, well I do remember, of course the rescues I
5 remember, and I remember certain missions that were scarier than other ones. There's a
6 lot of really interesting terrain and interesting local folks, the different tribal people that
7 live in the different areas of Laos. You know Laos is, has like ten different languages.
8 They don't all speak the same language in Laos, so you've got these different, the Mayos
9 and the Hmongs and the different tribes. Of course the ones we supported, we supported
10 a lot, I mean that were with us with Vang Pao. You know his people up in the, they were
11 the hill people up in the high country. We call them Mayos, they were Hmongs, with an
12 H. Hmongs spelled with an H and good fighters, good soldiers and of course we worked
13 a lot with them. And then of course the Laotian Army guys, they were you know okay.
14 We flew them somewhat, but depended on what the mission, what the customer was.
15 There were three main customers. I always called customers: there was the 713 customer,
16 which was the CIA, and they were actually the case officers that had the various, a lot of
17 them had battalion level commands there you know and we had mercenaries too from
18 Thailand and we'd work with them, but that was mainly the Hueys out of what they call
19 Site Twenty alternate which was Long Chen that was that secret base up there, you
20 probably heard about it. That's usually where they, and I didn't fly. I flew out of there
21 somewhat, but H-34s flew everywhere else and the Hueys flew exclusively for that
22 particular job.

23 SM: Was there a specific reason as far as aircraft capability or limitation for that?

24 BV: Well, I don't know. Of course the Huey was more pleasant to ride in for the
25 customer because it didn't make as much noise as that H-34 with that big old 1820 rotary,
26 nine cylinder rotary engine on it, shot fire and smoke out the exhaust you know, but for
27 that reason they'd probably rather ride in a Huey because it was kind of. And they were,
28 Hueys are better at a higher elevation because they're going to have a turbine engine. An
29 H-34 at sea level and a Huey are equal in power but as you get higher the recip engines
30 loses their power. Then you've got to really rely on a good pilot technique to be able to
31 land and take off with that thing, with a load. But I would think also that there are

1 probably different contracts, aircraft were assigned. The 713 contract or the CIA would
2 probably paid for those Hueys and they probably felt they owned them I guess. I'm not
3 really sure how that worked accounting wise but that was what I figured. Whereas we
4 worked U.S. AID, USAID, which was always interesting work. It was usually hauling
5 rice, but a lot of times it was hauling refugees and picking up sick people and taking
6 bodies of soldiers back to their villages, usually they were just wrapped up in a poncho or
7 something, or a blanket. They'd load them aboard your aircraft and give you a
8 coordinate and you take it to the village and unload it and go. Or pick up people that they
9 told you to pick up you know that type of thing.

10 SM: When you transported soldier's remains back to their villages, the dead
11 bodies, would anybody accompany them back with them?

12 BV: Sometimes, yes, sometimes no. They would know we were coming, so
13 somebody would meet us, but in fact I've got another funny story there. We were flying
14 out of Site 20, which is a place called Sam Tong, which was near Long Chen, near Site
15 20 Alternate but it was over the mountain from it. And that's where, have you ever heard
16 of Pop Buell?

17 SM: Yes, sir.

18 BV: Okay. That's where he had his headquarters, it was a USAID strip there,
19 also Father Bouchard, Luc Bouchard the missionary, and he was famous. I used to give
20 him rides occasionally. But anyway Pop Buell, that was his area, and I was working out
21 of there and it was raining real hard and that runway was kind of a slant, so it was like,
22 during the real hard rain it was like a river you know but he would taxi the aircraft on up
23 to the loading area, which was kind of on the edge of the runway and they came out with
24 this body wrapped in a poncho. It was getting later toward the evening, it was probably
25 going to be my last flight of the night because it was raining too so the visibility wasn't
26 real good. You didn't fly after dark if you could help it because a lot of reasons. You
27 know the mountains are dark up there and it's pretty bad terrain. Of course if you went
28 down nobody could find you probably and the other thing there really wasn't that big of a
29 reason to fly at night. I got the, he gave me the coordinates and I took off and flew with,
30 I think, just my flight mechanic and they body below. We went over toward what I
31 thought was the village and circled it and circled it but nobody put out a signal so I

1 wasn't going to land without a signal. And to this day I don't know whether I might have
2 you know hit the wrong village but I never heard any different. Anyway, I got back with
3 the body. I came back, it was dark, I taxied up to where we parked the aircraft for the
4 night, or near there. Actually first I taxied down to the load area, where the guy met us; I
5 said hey, I've still got the body. He said, "Oh, just push it out of the aircraft and taxi up
6 to your parking area and we'll resume in the morning." So, we threw it out but if you can
7 imagine it was still raining hard and there was like a river. So the next morning we got
8 down there, that body's still laying there but now it's half covered with mud because the
9 water had washed all this dirt on it. I'm looking and I told the load guy, I said hey, the
10 Lao, but that spoke English and I said what about that guy? Should we go back? And he
11 said, "Nah, never mind." He said. "We'll take care of it later. He's dead, he doesn't
12 care." So anyway, I just did whatever I was doing for all the morning. Flew other trips
13 and everything, kept coming back and that body was still laying there. Still half buried,
14 nobody's even touched it, in the mud and finally in the afternoon it was gone. I didn't
15 take it, I don't know where it went, who took it but anyway, that was just one if there
16 ever was.

17 SM: Well, when you got there, to Thailand and then started flying your missions
18 up country, were you surprised by the amount of activity both American in support of
19 Laotian and also enemy, that is Path Et Lao and North Vietnamese?

20 BV: Well, no I wasn't because I knew the Ho Chi Minh Trail area was a major
21 route for Vietnam, and I knew that was busy. Now, yes I didn't, and it didn't really
22 happen right at first, but it was happening. The enemy, the North Vietnamese were
23 actually taking more and more Laotian territory, and starting out at the extreme northeast
24 with San Nua province which juts up against North Vietnam, actually it's between North
25 Vietnam and China. It's you know quite a bit north, but they would come in through
26 there and then head on down south through the different routes, the Ho Chi Minh Trail,
27 which was the eastern part of Laos and then finally wander back into either Cambodia,
28 continue on down to Cambodia or do a turn east into Vietnam. There was a lot of activity
29 there, but the enemy would move by the seasons just like, for example, during the wet
30 seasons they would take ground because we didn't have a lot of Air Force support, or the
31 Laos didn't and we didn't have a lot of air support because the weather was bad. But

1 during the dry season when the weather was pretty good then they would lose ground
2 because we'd get in with the Air Force and be able to bomb the areas heavier and that
3 way we'd have our own offensive with the Laotian army and Vang Pao's army, to drive
4 them back out of those areas. So it was like a seesaw, every year was, the Plain of Jars in
5 fact. You've heard of the Plain of Jars, right?

6 SM: Yes, sir I have.

7 BV: PDJ, okay? Neat area. There are these large stone jars all over, just sitting
8 around this big large plain; it looks like a large golf course. It's about probably oh I don't
9 know, ten or fifteen miles across in all directions. It's high elevation too, it's like three
10 thousand feet or higher and real pretty terrain, and it's good farming and good for raising
11 cattle and stuff up in that area. But these burial jars are only in that area and that's one of
12 the mysteries of the world according to legend, nobody really knows what they were for.
13 They figure well maybe they were burial jars or they cremated, but there really wasn't
14 any proof of that, and how did they get there, who knows? Supposedly they were a
15 different type of rock that was even found in that area, so you know how did they get
16 there. They weighed tons each and it was one of the interesting, like these runways, the
17 mystery runways that supposedly aliens built here. They wonder how those things got
18 there. Anyway, that was a neat area to work, the Plain of, but it was a bad area. The PDJ
19 was an area, well as I related in that one story, the Christmas Eve where I got shot up that
20 time. I was supported the outposts around the edge of the PDJ, and I got shot from there.

21 SM: So when you say the, in terms of the monsoon activity, what months were
22 the best months for your activity in terms of controlling the PDJ?

23 BV: Probably March. I think, I'm trying to remember how the seasons went. I
24 think the driest seasons were like February, March, April, in the spring, that area. Of
25 course the only problem is when the weather was dry like that then they would so the
26 slashing and burning over there. That's how they cleared their.

27 SM: Smoky season.

28 BV: Yes, and that was the smoky season, and it really got pretty smoky too in that
29 part of the world but that's just the way, you learn to fly in it but.

30 SM: How long would that last typically?

31 BV: Oh, about four or five months probably.

1 SM: A smoky season would last that long?

2 BV: Yes, it would last a long time, several months at least anyway.

3 SM: But of course that's less debilitating in terms of your operational capability
4 than rain, than the monsoon?

5 BV: Yes, the monsoons were not only the rain but of course the low visibility
6 clouds that would. And I'd gotten into situations over there where you know you really
7 couldn't fly instruments because there weren't any nav aids. So you don't just go
8 charging off into the clouds because there's eight thousand foot mountains up there, and
9 seven thousand foot mountains. So, anyway you've got to know where you are. So you
10 don't go IMC on purpose and especially with an H-34, which doesn't really have the
11 power to climb out very fast if you climb right up through it. If you had a lot of power
12 you could do that, but you just. So you had to stay VFR, and try to stay below the bad
13 weather, above the small arms range, which was hard to do both sometimes and then
14 avoid the bad guys, which you generally knew where they were, so you just avoided
15 those areas by experience. You know picture you're flying an old aircraft, a heavy
16 aircraft, an underpowered aircraft, no nav aids, single engine, single-pilot in many cases,
17 trying to read a map and do all the things. It kept you busy [laughs].

18 SM: How many hours could you stay aloft without refueling?

19 BV: About two and a half to three hours at a time I think, I believe. And then a
20 lot of times we would, if we could, we would hot refuel. There were some areas where
21 you didn't even have to shut down, you just refueled while you were running so you
22 never got out of the cockpit, just kept sitting there.

23 SM: Now, was that particularly dangerous?

24 BV: No. Just keep the, as we called it the money machine; keep that fan above
25 you turning.

26 SM: Okay, good enough. This will end the interview with Mr. Van Etten on the 15th of
27 January.