

**Interview with Ben Van Etten**  
**Session 3 of 4**  
**January 22, 2003**

1           Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Ben Van  
2 Etten on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2003 at approximately 3 o'clock Lubbock time. I am in  
3 Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Van Etten is in Alabama. Sir, why don't we go ahead and pick  
4 up with a discussion of your time with Air America and if you would just go ahead and  
5 describe some of the operations you recall most vividly and also the personalities, the  
6 people with whom you worked in Laos and Thailand.

7           Ben Van Etten: Okay, first of all the type of missions I think we talked about  
8 before, there was for what I, the H-34 that I was flying, we had three main customers,  
9 which the missions would have been, it was a 713 customer which was a CIA type  
10 mission where we're probably going to be supporting whatever their teams are doing, you  
11 know re-supply or troop transport. The other ones, USAID was refugee support and  
12 villages taking food, rice mainly to areas and other food and then transporting people and  
13 that became a kind of an evacuation mission too at times when they wanted to move a  
14 whole village because the North Vietnamese were coming into that area, they went ahead  
15 and moved the whole village further to the west, try to keep them out of harm's way. The  
16 other customer was what we called the RO, Requirements Office, which had to do with  
17 really support for the Laotian Army, logistics support for the Laotian Army, whether it be  
18 ammo, food or troop transport. I think we talked about a typical work week would be  
19 normally six days on the flight schedule, working out of a location in Laos, again H-34s  
20 worked out of all the way from Ban Houei Sai on the far north all the way down to Pakse  
21 as far south and then quite a few places in between. And you would work for that  
22 particular customer, there was the air ops customer that was in that area and he would  
23 give you direction on what you're going to be doing and where you're going, whatever.  
24 Some areas we did a lot of flying and other areas, flying was limited. Of course we were  
25 paid by the flight hour. We tried to get seventy hours a month minimum, because you  
26 were guaranteed for that much money. So it behooved you to go ahead and try to, you  
27 know if you could to get as much flight time as you could, as quickly as you could, that'd  
28 give you more time off toward the end of the month. They tried to divide the load, so

1 everybody didn't go to the same place every time. The missions were, we also I think I  
2 talked about the green stems before the special missions, which were kind of an added  
3 thing. So to which we'd, a normal daily routine and they were mainly the infil or exfil of  
4 a team, a road watch team or possibly the rescue of a downed airman, downed U.S. Air  
5 Force airman. Generally that, or something that came up all of a sudden that was out of a  
6 real hot area that you had a pretty good chance of getting shot at during that mission.

7 SM: Well, the special missions, I've also, I think I've heard them referred to as  
8 special projects. What, as far as the rotary wing support that you would provide, was it  
9 almost exclusively infil/exfil and SAR or were there other types of missions that?

10 BV: The only ones that I became involved with were the infil/exfil and occasional  
11 SARs. There could have been other special projects that I'm not aware of. I mean I was  
12 aware of but I really didn't get involved in what they did exactly. For example, the twin  
13 pack program, which I wasn't in were, ran specials. I think really what they were, they  
14 were just inserting teams further north than we normally went, possibly even outside of  
15 Laos, but I don't know for sure on that one.

16 SM: When you say outside of Laos, obviously you're talking about inside of  
17 either North Vietnam or China?

18 BV: Yes, affirmative, yes. I really can't say or elaborate or say much about those  
19 because I wasn't ever doing. I didn't do those, and so I don't know exactly what they  
20 did. But special projects and special missions really were not the same thing. A special  
21 project was a special project that you might; one crew or one aircraft may remain on for a  
22 long time. A special mission, that's something that was more impromptu that you can  
23 have, it's, you're going to do it one time and then it's over with. That's really the only  
24 difference.

25 SM: Now for the special missions, did you have to sign any kind of security  
26 agreements for those?

27 BV: Nope, no just a, in fact I never signed any security agreement for anything,  
28 my whole tenure over there. And contrary to what some of them may say, but I never did  
29 anyway and I don't know of anybody else that did either, of the pilots at least.

30 SM: Are there any other pilots that you flew with in the same areas with any kind  
31 of routine, that you remember?

1           BV: Yes. Actually I flew, after I had been there for a couple years I flew with  
2 most of the younger pilots, as I was what you call a training captain also. And would fly  
3 with them try to get their initial training out of the way so they could be upgraded also to  
4 captains. And additionally I flew a lot of Thai copilots because I don't know whether  
5 they thought I could relate to them or something. I don't know, but I didn't mind flying  
6 with them. Some guys didn't want to fly with Thai pilots and Thai crews, but I didn't  
7 care and so I flew with them, quite a few of them too.

8           SM: Were there any, I'm sorry go ahead.

9           BV: I was going to say we also flew solo quite a bit too, in that program.

10          SM: Well, most of your missions were solo weren't they?

11          BV: Oh, probably half and half. If you were working on exceptionally, one of the  
12 bad, which considered the bad area, or if you're working the 713 jobs, normally if you're  
13 working USAID or RO you might fly solo because many times you're just going to be  
14 shuttling either ammo or rice into relatively secure areas. But if you're going to do the  
15 combat assaults or SARs or special missions of course you're going to have a dual  
16 captain on those missions. So I would say it was about probably half and half.

17          SM: And were there any particular reasons why some of the pilots didn't want to  
18 fly with Thai copilots and crews?

19          BV: Oh, I think that some of them were kind of concerned about their proficiency,  
20 which you know when they first started they weren't quite as proficient but most of them  
21 got to be pretty good at flying; that and the language barrier. They all spoke English, but  
22 not real well. But I don't know, other than that but that just some guys' idea. They just  
23 didn't want to fool with the, probably thinking they were maybe taking a chance or you  
24 know?

25          SM: Okay, how about Lao crews, Lao pilots, did you ever fly with Laotians?

26          BV: No, not with, I'm not aware of any of the, I didn't fly with any of the Lao  
27 pilots, any helicopter pilots, just the Vietnamese, I mean excuse me, the Thais, wrong  
28 country.

29          SM: Well, did you fly with any Vietnamese as well?

30          BV: Well, see backing up through my training days, when I was a flight  
31 instructor, I had a lot of Vietnamese students I flew with and the same with the Thais too.

1 That was back in Camp Walters, at Fort Walters. I usually carried at least one H-class,  
2 one of the foreign students like that.

3 SM: Well, that's an interesting question. How about, while we're on the subjects  
4 of foreign students that you were training in Fort Walters, were there other nations that  
5 were sending their soldiers, their airmen to be trained?

6 BV: Well there were a few Israelis. Actually at Fort Rucker there were a few  
7 Israelis, I flew with one of them. There were some, mainly just Thais and Vietnamese at  
8 Rucker, I mean at Walters. I'm not aware of other, there were occasionally what you  
9 might call an exchange student but we didn't have any very big programs to train other  
10 pilots other than Thais and Vietnamese. Laos, I don't recall any Lao pilots in the States,  
11 we trained most of them over there. We had a program going on the side over there that,  
12 I say we, it really wasn't Air American but they used Air America aircraft and Air  
13 American facilities, but it was some U.S. Army instructor pilots that worked over there  
14 with Lao pilots that they did training. They worked in Thailand with them, they were not  
15 in Laos, they were down at Udorn. One of the guys I knew prior to that in the Army, he  
16 was still in the Army when he was over there.

17 SM: Okay, do you remember, do you recall the names of any of the American  
18 pilots that you flew with in Laos and Thailand?

19 BV: Oh, yes sure. In, like we were with Sandy Sant, who unfortunately is dead. I  
20 flew with Dick Cariote, and unfortunately he's dead now; these guys that have passed on.  
21 I flew with Leon Machome and he's passed on, flew with Roger Cook who just died day  
22 before yesterday, I don't know if you'd ever heard of him or not.

23 SM: Yes, sir I did.

24 BV: And I flew with all of the young. You know a guy named Danny Koalick,  
25 and let's see, a guy named Connely, who unfortunately he's dead. Gee, that's unreal how  
26 many of them are gone. Of course when I first got there I flew with a lot of the older  
27 pilots so I could get my training. I flew with John Fanburg, I flew with Mike Terina, I  
28 flew with Pogo Hunter, who he's gone now. Fanburg is too as a matter of fact. I flew  
29 with Jerry Macinty, he's still around. Of course Jerry was a training pilot, or a captain, so  
30 I flew with him for my annual flight check most of the time. A guy named Wayne Webb  
31 also. I flew with, oh heck, I flew with a lot of them. Let's see, I mentioned Mike Terino,

1 flew with J.J. McCauley a little bit at first. Of course Abbedee and you know there's a  
2 few other guys that I was with a lot but I don't remember if I actually flew with them.  
3 They flew in the same flight with me, Jerry Tollman and Tim Woosley, Tim's dead too  
4 unfortunately. John Ford, he's still around.

5 SM: How about the customers?

6 BV: You know, I.

7 SM: You knew them by code name, is that right?

8 BV: Yes, most of them by their call sign. I worked a lot with them on the RO  
9 side. There was an Army NCO by the name of Larry Martin who later actually retired  
10 from the Army as a Sergeant Major years later. I haven't, the last I heard from him he  
11 was working from VaNell Corporation over in, if he's still working, in Saudi or  
12 someplace over there. He was, I remember him pretty well because he was, I worked  
13 with different loadmasters and people, the air ops guys. The customers, a kind named  
14 Fred Cost was up at Luang Prabang and down in Pakse was Jim Butler. There was, let's  
15 see the guy in Savannakhet was named, his call sign was Church Bell. I'm trying to think  
16 what his name was. I can't remember but he was a smoke jumper from either Idaho or  
17 Montana or something in his other life. I worked with, well the, of course Pop Buell  
18 when he was alive and his people, for USAID up at Site 20 and there was just a lot of the  
19 local guys that worked for the customer, that worked for the American customer that  
20 were actually in charge of making sure my loads were right for wherever I was going and  
21 make sure I had the coordinates and signs and so on. I worked with a lot of them, of  
22 course I worked with Tony Poe one time and, quite a bit in fact, he as a colorful guy to  
23 say the least.

24 SM: Well, what do you remember about the customers in particular in terms of  
25 well anything, Tony Poe in particular, but also the other customers you supported?

26 BV: Well, excuse me, of course Tony was kind of like a legend. He'd been there  
27 forever, since World War II days, and the deal about the ear, is you probably heard this  
28 story. That was a true story. The way he could get, he had up where he was; the site was  
29 118 Alternate. I can't remember the name of the village right off of it, up in northwestern  
30 Laos anyway. To get his teams to go out and patrol further out, he gave me a bounty on  
31 ears. They would kill an enemy soldier and they would collect the ear and bring it in and

1 he gave them some kind of, probably about a dollar, but he gave them a reward for it.  
2 And he would take those ears and put them in little plastic baggies and staple them  
3 around the ceiling of his hooch where he was up there, where he lived up there. So they  
4 went clear around but I guessed that stopped after he went to some villages himself and  
5 saw a bunch of kids running around with no ears. They were just snatching them off live  
6 people and turning them in, so I think that was the end of the ear deal.

7 SM: Okay, and I had heard that story from someone else, so I guess that probably  
8 is true.

9 BV: Yes, okay it was the same version, that he.

10 SM: Yes, that he was giving the bounties, but he later discovered that they were  
11 actually. The way it was told to me from someone else is it was someone who actually  
12 either turned in their own ear or he had seen a person without one and asked him what  
13 happened. They explained, well I got some money for it.

14 BV: Yes, I got some money for it, that's about right. So they convinced the little  
15 kids in villages they don't need an ear anyway, so toss them. Yes, that's true.

16 SM: Well, what did you think about the effectiveness though of some of his, I  
17 guess his unorthodox paramilitary style?

18 BV: Who, Tony?

19 SM: Yes.

20 BV: Well, I don't, I just thought he was a warrior. I thought he was very  
21 dedicated. I thought he was trying to do the job the best he could up there with what he  
22 was working with. He loved the Laotian people, the local people and practically one  
23 himself; you know he'd been there for so long. Of course he married a Laotian lady, she  
24 lived in Udorn, but so he, for quite a few years. The assumption is they're still married I  
25 guess, wherever they are, California or wherever they are now. Because I had heard he  
26 made one of the Lao reunions recently, in the last couple of years, so I think he's  
27 probably still around. But I didn't, I know that he was having trouble with the local  
28 Laotian commander for that district up there because he suspected him of dealing with  
29 drugs or opium and Tony didn't like that. So I know they were kind of on the outs  
30 because of that, because their opinion on you know. His opinion was he should not be

1 doing it but he did it anyway. Other than that, I mean he's a guy trying to do a job and I  
2 admired him. He was a definite; he was there for a cause.

3 SM: And as you said already, he was there for the long term.

4 BV: Yes, he'd pretty well settled there, that was his life.

5 SM: Now, what about the other case officers that you had worked with?

6 BV: Well, I'm trying to think; of course I think I even mentioned one of my  
7 stories here about Jim Lewis, who unfortunately he's gone too. I worked with him a little  
8 bit, quite a bit. He didn't have a good reputation of telling the whole truth about the bad  
9 guys. It was no use forcing yourself to go into harm's way if you don't have to. You can  
10 always figure out ways to fly the mission without going right over the guns, but he gave  
11 me the idea that he didn't really care whether you got shot or not, or your aircraft took  
12 fire or not, just wanted to get the mission done.

13 SM: How long had he been there, do you know? How long did he spend there?

14 BV: He hadn't been there very long. He was there for a couple of years, a couple  
15 maybe three years or so. Now, he, I don't know when he, he may have stayed all the way  
16 through the end. I don't know on that because I left in the end of '72 and of course they  
17 still went on for another year there in Laos, before they moved down to Saigon to finish  
18 up down there. So, I don't know when he left the area. What I'd heard, that he got killed  
19 on a mission in Africa or someplace else, that they'd sent him. I'm not really sure; you  
20 know the routine, if you could figure it was like an eight to five war for us. It kind of was  
21 in a way because we returned in our helicopters usually to the town that we staged out  
22 off. You'd fly the missions all day out in the maneuver area, out where things were  
23 going on, but then it was relatively safe back at the base camp. Then the same when you  
24 got off and got back over to Udorn. Of course then you're back with your family and  
25 relaxed and again you know Thailand had. You know you didn't want to go driving  
26 around at night out in the country, but on the other hand I wasn't concerned really with  
27 driving during the day time anywhere in Thailand, even though it was reported some  
28 areas could be Communists or bandits, but I never really, that didn't really concern me.

29 SM: Well while you were flying out of villages or staging areas in Laos, who  
30 provided security in those villages, was it always just a local?

1           BV: Yes, just now like in Luang Prabang or Ban Houei Sai or the towns there's  
2 the local police and that's about it. We didn't have anything special. We just kind of, of  
3 course there weren't that many Air America crews in a town, there may be you know two  
4 guys, four, six, eight guys, maybe MACs, or one of the bigger ones like Pakse or  
5 Savannakhet you could have some fixed wing pilots staying there too, and same with the  
6 up country too, but up in the northern parts. We never, I never had any fear of going out  
7 at night, we'd go down to the bars or go down to the noodle stand or something, relax  
8 after dinner and walk back home and get up the next morning and go. Now, like I said, I  
9 never, and I'm not really aware of anybody else that had encountered any enemy type  
10 problems, you know other than the normal problems you're going to have when you get  
11 drunk and raise hell and that type of stuff with anybody.

12           SM: What about the aircraft, would you store them in a secure compound?

13           BV: No, they were left out at the airfield. Now there were you know a certain  
14 amount of soldiers at the airfields where we were, but quite frankly I guess anybody  
15 could have walked into the aircraft and stuck a bomb on one or something if they so  
16 thought about it. But another thing about that Laotian conflict was that the enemy, at  
17 least the Path Et Lao knew that we were there to deliver, not only to help fight for the  
18 Royalists, but to deliver materials and food, and I think they figured they were going to  
19 get their share anyway, when things like that were delivered out to the different areas,  
20 and especially early on. So, that's why I think a lot of times they figured, well just leave  
21 the helicopters alone because we're going to get some of that ourselves.

22           SM: Well, that's interesting. Did you ever hear or even see perhaps some of that  
23 material being sold on the Black Market?

24           BV: Well, yes I'm not even sure it would be sold as much as it might have been  
25 an agreement that you know if you leave my village alone I'll go ahead and share some  
26 of the rice with you or whatever. I had heard that mentioned before, especially early on  
27 when I was first there. Now, later on of course when the NVA became more and more  
28 involved and really running the show, the Communist side, well then I doubt if there was  
29 much collusion going on then, at that time. But with the Path Et Lao, which a lot of times  
30 were just the brother-in-law or the cousin of whoever was there already, it wouldn't

1 surprise me at all. Did you ever hear that even the Russians gave them aviation support  
2 early on, I mean talking about the very early '60s or late '50s?

3 SM: No, I hadn't heard that.

4 BV: Yes. And I'm not, I'm going to say Air Russia, but yes they had an aid  
5 program going there too, with fixed wing aircraft. I don't believe there were any  
6 helicopters, there could have been but very early after the first coalition governments  
7 were set up there, the Path Et Lao, the neutralists and the Royalists. The pilots would  
8 stage out of Vientiane for example and fly their various missions during the day with  
9 Russia supporting the Path Et Lao and of course the American guys supporting the rest of  
10 them and then at night sometimes they'd get together and have a drink at the bar or  
11 something just like it was, put the airplanes to bed and go on in and for them the war was  
12 strictly a day time thing. Now I don't know anybody in particular that did that, but that's  
13 what I heard, these are fixed wing guys. I'm not aware of any of the helicopters sharing  
14 space out there with the Russians but they did have some fixed wing support.

15 SM: I was just wondering if you ever ran into any on the streets?

16 BV: I never did. They were gone when I got there, that particular program was  
17 gone.

18 SM: Any other foreign nationals?

19 BV: Well, there were, I think, what did they call it, the CIC, I think it was called  
20 the CIC, what it was, it was a monitoring Poles, I think there were Poles, Canadians, and  
21 Indians. I think it was called the CIC and we flew for them too, we supplied their  
22 aircraft. It was a white aircraft, different color than our own aircraft and occasionally I'd  
23 fly that aircraft.

24 SM: Was this part of the International Control Commission?

25 BV: Yes, ICC okay.

26 SM: So you did fly some of them around?

27 BV: Yes, occasionally I would draw that mission. Because they used our, we  
28 supported their aircraft with maintenance and whatever, and pilots too, at least the  
29 helicopters, I'm not sure about the fixed wing.

1 SM: Now would you fly, in terms of the types of supplies you could carry in your  
2 aircraft, did that include building supplies and things like that or was it pretty much  
3 limited to food and ammunition?

4 BV: No, it was, sometimes for USAID we would take whatever they needed,  
5 including live animals. You've probably heard the story, what we would do, he had a  
6 young water buffalo, of course he would make sure it was pretty well tied up, you didn't  
7 want to. They wouldn't kill those until they were ready to eat them because obviously  
8 there were no refrigeration, so he didn't want to kill it ahead of time. So we would fly,  
9 several times I've flown live hogs and live buffalo out to an area where they're going to  
10 have a party. Then of course, your passengers you pick up, they could have chickens  
11 with them and ducks and other live animals. Then of course we flew just people a lot of  
12 times, local folks, especially the Mayos up from the, they live in the higher country and  
13 we bring them down into town, they'd hitch a ride, say hitch a ride, somebody would say  
14 okay, it's all right to jump on that aircraft, go to town, especially up at Ban Houei Sai and  
15 I mean Luang Prabang. We had a high pad called the victor pad that we, unfortunately  
16 had a crash on it that killed two pilots up there while I was there, two guys that I knew in  
17 fact from the Army.

18 SM: What had happened, what caused the crashes, do you know?

19 BV: Yes, it was the pilot was Harvey Potter was the IP or the inexperienced pilot  
20 and the other guy was by the name of John Beardsley, who was actually was a classmate  
21 of his in the Army, Army flight training and he knew him in the Army, but he was a new  
22 hire to Air America, and he was up there training with him and somehow John managed  
23 to, it was kind of a high pad, it was kind of rough pad, a lot of rocks and things on it,  
24 managed to tip the aircraft over during landing or takeoff on the pad. It caught on fire  
25 immediately, and the crew chief was able to kind of scramble away, he got some burns,  
26 but he was not seriously burned but the two pilots, it fell on the right side and the student  
27 pilot was on the right seat and the instructor pilot who was Harvey was on the left seat.  
28 And all he really had to save his own life was just to go right out the window there on the  
29 left side as it. But he stayed in the aircraft long enough to get John out and pull him out  
30 and because they were in the fire a little bit longer they both breathed it. They actually  
31 lived. They were evacuated from there to Japan, some burn center up there or hospital up

1 there for awhile, but about a week, less than a week later they both died because they'd  
2 inhaled the fire.

3 SM: Oh, what a shame.

4 BV: Yes it was, it was too bad. That was that mail pad or victor pad that we  
5 called it up it at Luang Prabang.

6 SM: Were there any particular airfields that you liked to fly into or didn't or  
7 others that you didn't care to for one reason or another?

8 BV: Well, I, the only one I really didn't like at all was a place called 69 Alternate,  
9 and to me that area was always bad. It was over by, I don't know if you heard about  
10 Chinese trail, that road they were building up there or not.

11 SM: Very little, why don't you explain what you knew about it?

12 BV: Okay. Up in the northwestern part of Laos, being again Ban Houei Sai,  
13 which was Lima 25, which was really our most northwestern big airfield that we'd work  
14 out of, that we'd RON at and even actually Lima 54. Well in between that area there was  
15 a large area that. Laos kind of goes out to the west and actually borders Thailand too, and  
16 69 Alternate was right, just about on the Thai border up in that area is where they  
17 worked, but there was a. The Chinese were building a road, it was like supposedly an aid  
18 project but anybody that flew near it was going to get shot at, that's where we had a C-  
19 123 shot down in fact and the crew were missing for, I heard recently that maybe they  
20 found some of them, but they were missing for many, many years, the crew on that one.  
21 But I transgress a little bit, that's when Jim Ryan, the chief pilot fixed wing lost his foot  
22 up there looking for guys, and I was up there that night in a helicopter too, so I followed  
23 him as much as I could. They took an air burst and he lost his one of his feet. Luckily,  
24 they had, there were three guys on board, another pilot that could still fly the aircraft and  
25 the other guy that was helping him throw, they were throwing leaflets out there to the  
26 villages, saying if you, you know offering a reward if anybody give any information on  
27 that C-123, and he was able to put a tourniquet on Jim and save his life that way, or help  
28 save his life because he would have bled to death probably otherwise. But anyway, the  
29 Chinese road, it was the only route from China to Thailand without going over any major  
30 mountains. It was kind of a nice little level route, and that's why, one reason they were  
31 interested in building that I think. It would give them an access to that part of Thailand.

1 But whether or not it ever got finished but I don't think so. We had road watch teams on  
2 that one too, we would take in and count their trucks and you know take inventory of  
3 what's going on.

4 SM: Was there a lot of traffic on the road?

5 BV: I guess there was. I didn't, now when I first got there we used to just fly  
6 right over it, going on up from between, just say Lima 54 and Ban Houei Sai, but in later  
7 years you didn't fly over that trail, you flew around the south end of it, over 69 Alternate  
8 and then on up. It kind of followed, there was a, it's kind of a valley and there was a  
9 couple of rivers in there too, and it kind of followed that. Of course the Mekong River  
10 was still further, from Luang Prabang the Mekong River really goes east and west, and a  
11 lot of places it's the common border between Thailand and Laos, and that area too and  
12 then it turns north again and it's still pretty much the common border, in a lot of places  
13 anyway and on up through, what they call the golden triangle, right up where Burma and  
14 Laos and Thailand come together up there, it includes China. But anyway that road was,  
15 well another thing that happened there is early in the war the U.S. Air Force would bomb  
16 up in that area, and later on they were restricted by how far north they could go.

17 SM: Was it because of the road?

18 BV: No. Well it may have been partially, they just didn't want the Air Force that  
19 far up. They were afraid they were going to maybe get involved with Chinese, or maybe  
20 get shot down in an area they didn't need to be shot down, well they didn't need to be  
21 shot down any place. So anyway for whatever their political reasons were they pulled  
22 them back in a little bit further south in that area.

23 SM: Well, you mentioned that previously you used to just fly over the road but  
24 did that stop for some reason that you can pinpoint?

25 BV: Yes, because we started getting shot at every time we flew over there, the  
26 anti-aircraft would shoot at you so that was.

27 SM: And this was Chinese anti-aircraft?

28 BV: Yes, Chinese that's right. A good reason not to fly over it.

29 SM: What would they shoot at you, do you know?

30 BV: What kind of weapons?

31 SM: Yes.

1 BV: Probably twenty-three millimeters or a quad, 12.7 fifty calibers.

2 SM: Did anybody ever get shot down?

3 BV: Only one that got shot down was that C-123, the one that was missing.  
4 That's the only one I'm aware of that actually took hits from the road but a lot of us were  
5 shot at.

6 SM: Now were there, during your briefings, if you were flying in that area was  
7 there good intelligence about what the Chinese were doing there?

8 BV: Well, the only good intelligence we had of course was if another aircraft  
9 received fire he would report where it came from. Now, we just flat avoided that area,  
10 there wasn't any reason to fly over that road from there on. And obvious what happened,  
11 the 123 got shot down. The next day or the next couple of days after that Jim Ryan's up  
12 there in a Mapar flying, this is like a U-21 and flying and he took a round. Luckily they  
13 were able to fly, continue on, get back home, but when I say he took a round it was some  
14 kind of an airburst. It could have been thirty-seven millimeter but I don't know whether  
15 they actually them, but even a twenty-three is a pretty big round.

16 SM: Now, did you spend very much time transporting Laotian soldiers around  
17 that were, and especially not necessary conventional, like Royal Lao Army soldiers, but  
18 the unconventional forces?

19 BV: Well, the mercenary types were, first of all a lot of them were Thais, from  
20 Thailand and the Thais I had actually, they were actually out of, a lot, most of them were  
21 out of actually units in Thailand, they know that were volunteered or put into that area.  
22 And I flew, I mean you know by percentage of time I would say I flew soldiers around  
23 probably twenty percent of the time of all of my flights and everything, would just fly,  
24 they'd be loaded and fly soldiers with their guns and their packs and go on in now. The  
25 big missions, with Vang Pao, they were joint missions with all of our Hueys and H-34s. I  
26 also flew missions with the Air Force aircraft, U.S. Air Force, ponies they called them,  
27 they were, let's see, I think they were, I'm not sure. They were about the same size as H-  
28 34 except they were a turbine engine. They weren't CH-53s, they weren't that big, I  
29 think H-3s is what they were called. They'd carry about twenty people I think in those  
30 things.

31 SM: Were these the, were they black ponies?

1           BV: Well yes. Ponies is what they were called. They weren't, well to say black,  
2 they weren't really painted black, they were painted a gray, but yes ponies, we flew with  
3 them sometimes. You know there's some, I can talk, relate some funny stories that I  
4 think are funny stories about when we flew with the Air Force. They normally would  
5 stage out of Udorn or NKP, Nakhom Phanom, NKP, that was a forward base for the Air  
6 Force there. We would go in there, Air America crews would go in there with the  
7 briefing, a joint brief with them prior to the mission. Now, the one mission I can recall  
8 pretty well was we landed there, I think we had three or four of our aircraft, and our flight  
9 leader was a guy named Tony Burns, I don't know if you've ever heard of Tony Burns or  
10 not. He's still around. He lives up Pennsylvania, but he was the senior guy on this  
11 particular group of, above all those pilots. So he was in charge of our flight and we're  
12 sitting in their briefing room and first of all, just to get in there, you know NKP of course  
13 is a secure camp. Of course we landed inside that, and then to walk into the briefing area,  
14 the CIC or whatever they called it, it was going through barbed wire and all kinds of  
15 stuff, like it was really a big deal, and then we got into this area and it was, we all, the Air  
16 America guys all kind of sat in the back of the room. And there was all the pilots from  
17 the Air Force were up front and then there were the briefers. First of all some lieutenant  
18 gets up, is going to give the weather brief and he starts about the weather in the South  
19 China Sea and everything and we're only going to go, the mission actually was to go  
20 right across the river, there's a town called Thakhek right there and just over that, behind  
21 that there was a place we called the rooster tail which was kind of a hot area, and that's  
22 where we were going to infil a bunch of troops. I think we were going to shuttle from  
23 Thakhek up into the rooster tail, which was probably not more than three, maybe five  
24 miles max after the pickup so it wasn't a really a big deal, but it was, and it was a shuttle,  
25 we're going to continue to take them up there until they were out, until we got them all in  
26 there. So, anyway, so the mission starts out, he starts giving the weather all over the  
27 world, and then the next thing they're talking about, I guess general concept, enemy  
28 action and stuff like that, and then finally they get to the end and we're talking about  
29 loads and everything and this colonel that was up there briefing, he says, "Okay, Air  
30 America, do you have any questions?" And Tony, Tony is funny, Tony Brerens, he gets  
31 up, he had kind of a British accent, even though, I don't know how he, why he had that,

1 he also smoked a pipe and he gets up like a limey accent and he says. “Well, Colonel I  
2 have one question.” And he says, “What’s that, captain?” He says, “Where the fuck are  
3 we going?” See, they never did tell us where we were going and we cracked, everybody  
4 cracked up when he said that.

5 SM: Did the briefer crack up to?

6 BV: Oh, yes the Air Force there, cracked up when that was over. Because really  
7 the guy, they got us through this big brief but they really never told us where the  
8 objective was, other than it was out that direction [laughter]. Anyway, that was pretty  
9 good, that was classic. Of course, I, come to think I’ve flown with him, I flew with a guy  
10 named Chuck Brady a lot too when he was there. In fact I wrote a story about him. He  
11 was my instructor when I got there and then he quit for a while and then he came back,  
12 was a new hire. So now he had to go through re-training and I was his instructor. That  
13 was kind of, unfortunately he died, he smoked like a chimney, like every, he go the big C  
14 later on he’s gone, just like a lot of my friends that smoked all their life, paid for it.

15 SM: Any other missions or incidents involving the Air Force?

16 BV: Yes, I had another mission one time, down near, out at Pakse with the Air  
17 Force, and these guys were. Well the ponies were out of, I think out of Ubon or that area,  
18 another place in Thailand, and the air support were A-1Es, their call sign was Oboe down  
19 there, and we did the same thing. We had a brief, the brief went, actually I think the brief  
20 was actually on our side over in Laos down in Pakse by the customer down there, but we  
21 shuttled troops from the Pakse area back into a, not too far from there, back into an area  
22 where the enemy had pretty well taken over, it was near the Bolovens Plateau, but it  
23 wasn’t up on the Bolovens, it was kind of down along side it, and we did that. See we  
24 staged in another area too, it was, down there they’ve got the Lima sites all over, the LS  
25 sites, down there there were PS sites, Pakse sites. It was the only difference in that area  
26 we had, some of them were Lima sites but a lot of them were called PS sites, and that was  
27 just another area of Laos or another Corps area that the CIA customers were down there  
28 and training these guys, and after they trained them we would infil them into whatever  
29 they were going to doing. And this particular mission was joint Air Force because we  
30 wanted to move a lot of people in a short time. So in between, let’s see in between the  
31 missions some of us would remain out in the area and kind of in an orbit in case we

1 needed to go in and pick up somebody and then as we were orbiting the area, let's say  
2 about three thousand feet, the Air Force hobos would kind of make a large circle around  
3 us as our cover. This one hobo was actually flying like, kind of like in formation with  
4 me, like my wing and talking to me, and then he said, I remember him saying, "Well, I'm  
5 getting low on fuel, I'm going to need to go back and refuel, but I haven't expended any  
6 of my ordnance so go ahead," they had some kind of a target down there that they wanted  
7 to go ahead and put some ordnance on, so he just kind of dives from me, right down away  
8 from me down maybe, and I'm watching him do all this and he strafes and bombs this  
9 area, or actually puts rockets on it and then bomb it again, dropped a couple bombs on it  
10 too, pulled up several miles away from me and then climbed right back up my altitude  
11 and then rejoined me. And just as he rejoined me he was not more then, oh I would say  
12 three or four hundred meters from me is all, his aircraft exploded in a ball of fire and it  
13 was just unreal. Now, whether he took an air burst or whether it was something, one of  
14 his ordnance that somehow got hung up or something went off, I don't know, but there  
15 wasn't anything left but bigger than a foot. You know it was just a ball of fire, a bunch of  
16 debris falling down, no parachute, no body, no nothing, and I had a good visibility on all  
17 of that. Of course King, I'm not sure if it was King, but whoever the real high Air Force  
18 controller was, said, "Well, gee Air American run down, swoop down and get the body or  
19 get the guy or rescue him." I said, "Hey, if I could see anybody I would," but there wasn't  
20 anything left there at all. That was an interesting story.

21 SM: You hadn't been taking any fire whatsoever and?

22 BV: Hadn't at all and I'm just thinking man, if that was an airburst that got him,  
23 he was only, they could have easily moved it right over and got me too, but they didn't. I  
24 don't know, nobody knows for sure what caused it, because there was no, there was no  
25 any more broadcasting from his radio or anything, it was just blam, that was it, it was  
26 amazing because it was right next to. You know, like I said right up my altitude right  
27 about a few hundred meters away from me.

28 SM: Was he carrying any ordnance that would have a time delayed fuse or?

29 BV: No, there wouldn't be any delayed fuse, but maybe there was something that  
30 might have got hung up you know a bomb. Although I don't know if it, you know a  
31 bomb has to hit something to go off, and same with his 2.75 rockets. They've got to spin

1 so long, so many revolutions away from the aircraft to arm themselves, so I don't know.  
2 Of course the assumption is he took some kind of an enemy round.

3 SM: But a single shot?

4 BV: Well, I didn't see any other ones, I don't know. And he didn't mention  
5 either, normally you say hey. I'm getting shot at or I heard some shooting or something.  
6 But he didn't, it was just one of those things.

7 SM: Very interesting, very sad.

8 BV: Yes, it is sad. I wrote a story once about, oh this was a long time ago and  
9 they were talking about whether or not they were going to recognize Vietnam again as a,  
10 you know give them recognition, and I was in favor of that and I wrote why and part of  
11 that was, well we've got so many MIAs, until they're all accounted for, we shouldn't  
12 recognize them, well my story was and I use that as an example, I said you know there  
13 wasn't anything to recognize out of that poor guy. He was MIA there, because they  
14 never got a body, but obviously there was nothing left to find. And that's unfortunately  
15 the case of most of your MIAs because most of them were airmen, you know pilots. And  
16 when you get shot down at six hundred knots, wherever you are, there's not going to be  
17 much left unless you're just lucky, parachute, and then unfortunately if you don't  
18 parachute right over Hanoi, Haiphong or someplace where they can take care of you, you  
19 know if you're just go into the jungle, well it's a survival thing out there, and even if  
20 you're captured the enemy doesn't want to, especially if you're wounded, they don't  
21 want to take care of you. They've got as much problems taking care of themselves. That  
22 was kind of my story, there aren't any more MIA, there's no more bamboo cages  
23 someplace out there with prisoners that they didn't release, and at the end of the peace  
24 talks and we got our folks released from Hanoi, that was it, that's all they had to give us.  
25 I mean I was positive.

26 SM: Well, do you recall about how many SAR missions, you yourself participated  
27 in?

28 BV: Oh, I was on at least a dozen or more missions. Now, I actually picked up,  
29 on four different occasions I had actually picked up a downed airman out there.

30 SM: Were these all Air Force pilots?

1           BV: All Air Force, and one time I took a guy and moved him to a safer area and  
2 let him out because the Jollys were coming. They picked him up, but I didn't want to  
3 leave him where he was particularly at the top of this hill and left him up there. I think  
4 that's happened before with other pilots too. They just moved them to a safer area, let the  
5 Jollys get their air medal and make their pick up.

6           SM: But, that would allow you also to jump in quickly, even if you were in the  
7 middle of a mission.

8           BV: That's exactly right. You're right there, and time is of the essence of course  
9 in stuff like that. If a guy's on the ground too long, well he's going to get captured. You  
10 know another thing that was, when I spoke before about the one year tour in Vietnam  
11 being too short really, even though it was nice to get in and out, about the time you're  
12 getting some pretty good experience and getting to know your terrain and getting you  
13 know your aircraft and everything, it's time to leave, the same with Laos. The Air Force  
14 tour, the guys that lived in Thailand that flew in Laos or Vietnam to Laos were there for a  
15 short time too, so a lot of them really not. Except for the, the Ravens that's a different  
16 story, the guys that lived up there. They stayed for, some of them stayed for many years,  
17 but that was a different breed, those guys. But anyway, for the normal Air Force guy out  
18 of Udorn or something, that would be flying missions in Laos. When you go into one of  
19 your briefings, you know you'll look at a map and the map will have red marks on it  
20 where enemy fire was. Well, the difference between their maps and Air America maps is  
21 that that gun would move, and we showed it moving. In other words, if it shot at you one  
22 place one day and then you got shot at another place another day, the assumption is that  
23 gun had moved, because you know they're on wheels anyway, and the Air Force never  
24 bothered to do that, they just. So after a couple years, it was solid red and I could be, I'd  
25 be nervous as heck flying into Laos thinking the minute you crossed over the Mekong  
26 River, you're going to start getting shot at, it's no man's land. Well, it's not really the  
27 case. Some areas were worse than others. I mean there wasn't any area that was one  
28 hundred percent safe all the time other than the big towns, but the point was there was no  
29 need to get that nervous. Now, we've had Air Force guys, a couple of occasion with their  
30 F-4s getting shot over Vietnam coming down across Laos to get back home to Udorn and  
31 refuse to bail out. I could see one above me and I said, "Hey, go ahead, we've got a

1 visual, go ahead and bail.” He’s smoking you know, “Go ahead and bail out.” He says,  
2 “Oh, no, negative, negative, I’m going to.” He’s just afraid that wherever he goes in  
3 Laos he’s going to be dead meat. And you know that would take a billion soldiers to  
4 cover that big of an area, and obviously you don’t want to be unfortunate enough to land  
5 right in the middle of an enemy concentration, but on the other hand there’s a lot of areas  
6 there, that there weren’t any enemy. Of course that’s why, by being there for so long,  
7 well first of all before you even started flying on your own you know as a captain, you  
8 had to know the terrain real well, especially where you could be working, but after a  
9 period of time of course you got to know it very well and got to know pretty much where  
10 the bad guys probably were or might go so you just tried to avoid that.

11 SM: Well, the Air Force method of tracking where anti-aircrafts weapons were  
12 emplaced, that doesn’t, it doesn’t make much sense.

13 BV: No, it didn’t. Particularly see along the Ho Chi Minh Trail with all of its little  
14 tributaries I could say, they had a lot of little other roads. We would bomb a road really  
15 bad and while they were repairing it they would go ahead and divert around another area,  
16 some places. But anyway, that area, anywhere along the Ho Chi Minh Trail there were  
17 guns at one time, because they were on wheels. But there’re not guns everywhere, but if  
18 you’d look at their map it was solid red from one end to the other of that trail. And other  
19 areas, you know up at Sam Nua province and areas where it was a heavy Path Et Lao area  
20 and where the North Vietnamese operated out of too. They, a lot of things we could have  
21 done I think. I say we, the U.S. forces could have done out of Vietnam into Laos that  
22 might have helped their cause a little bit more because we didn’t have enough, in Laos,  
23 we didn’t have enough folks to completely block the Ho Chi Minh Trail for example that  
24 would have been one of their. To me it would have been one thing they could have done,  
25 you know gone in with enough arms and enough folks to just block off an area. Don’t  
26 allow them to use it. But we would do, we would bomb them, strafe them, and then leave  
27 so of course they just kept moving. They’d pull into their, usually they moved at night;  
28 they’d pull in during the day in the caves or in areas that were sheltered and then move  
29 out the next day. I had some missions at times to go check on the Trail, I had one  
30 customer; I’m trying to remember his name. His call sign was Greensleeves, but I’m  
31 trying to think, he was a big old, probably an ex-Marine, and he loved to take a tank

1 mine, anti-tank mine and we'd fly out there and land on the trail and he'd bury it right  
2 there, then the next day we'd go out and check it and see if anybody hit it. And that was  
3 his big thing, you know setting his traps out there, then going and checking them.

4 SM: Unbelievable.

5 BV: Yes. There was another guy that liked to take a fifty-five gallon drum of  
6 fuel and strap a grenade, tape a grenade to it and then we'd fly over and you'd kick it out  
7 of the aircraft and of course pull the pin on the grenade, in other words you're making  
8 your own napalm bombs.

9 SM: This would occur over enemy territory?

10 BV: Yes, we'd go over an area, like it could be an enemy, for example. See they  
11 were, enemy, a lot of those what you call French forts that were scatted over all Laos,  
12 most of them left over from the French Indochina days, some of them were occupied by  
13 the enemy, especially up in the northern part. I made that error one time of getting too, I  
14 thought it was a friendly one and I came in, I was high because I wasn't sure. I wasn't  
15 going to let down and boy it lit up like a pinball machine, but I was pretty high so I just  
16 flew on out of it. It was an area that probably, maybe several months earlier might have  
17 been the friendlies.

18 SM: What was the ceiling on that aircraft, what was the limit?

19 BV: Oh, I would, normally we wouldn't fly much above eight to ten thousand feet  
20 at the highest.

21 SM: Could it go much higher if you had oxygen?

22 BV: Yes, it probably could, although the recip engines lose an awful lot of power  
23 as they climb up, so it really would have been hurting for power.

24 SM: And you mentioned that Raven FACs. What do you remember most about  
25 them, any particular facts come to mind? Any particular pilots come to mind?

26 BV: No, there was a guy named Jim Gallagher that I knew. I didn't really know  
27 them by name very much, just by their call, Raven 21 or Raven so and so or Raven 6,  
28 Raven 10. They worked out of, and see they were based out of Luang Prabang, they were  
29 based out of twenty alternate, they were based out of Pakse and Savannakhet area and  
30 probably out of Vientiane too. I'm not sure but anyway, and they would return to their  
31 bases too. They'd work that area. Of course they, they were pretty gutsy, they'd get

1 down there at tree top level, just flying all around looking for targets and then when they  
2 found one of course they would mark it and call in an air strike on it. Did I mention the  
3 time that I was working out of a special forces camp in southern Thailand and got shot  
4 at?

5 SM: No.

6 BV: Okay, well this is a pretty good one. There was a camp down; I don't  
7 remember what the name of it was. It may have never had a name for sure but it was real  
8 close to Laos, down across from Pakse and Kong Island, which was the, Kong Island was  
9 on the Mekong River, which is where the Mekong leaves Laos. Well it's a common  
10 border between Laos and Thailand and goes into Cambodia, so it's right down in the very  
11 southern corner of, is where we were working with it. That camp was on the Thai side  
12 but it was right near that area. What they did at that camp, they would train, there was  
13 two or three Americans there was all, there was like a Master Sergeant and a captain, and  
14 there might have been one other but I can remember the two because when I used to work  
15 for them they were there all the time. What I would do was, they had teams that were  
16 working on the Laos side and I would transport either the teams back and forth or  
17 supplies to them, and I was already told by my boss, do not take the Americans into Laos,  
18 period and so, but they were always, this captain especially was always bugging me to  
19 give him a ride. And I had been shuttling, we weren't going more than like five miles  
20 across the Mekong into this area where they were camped on the other side so one day,  
21 he's been bugging me to go, I says, "Okay, you can go with me this time, but if you get  
22 shot I'm just going to take your body and throw it in the Mekong and pretend like you  
23 were never with me because I'm not supposed to take you." He said, "Oh, no sweat."  
24 So, we flew over there, flew the mission, did whatever, dropped off whatever we were  
25 supposed to drop off. We were on the way back and I was on final approach into the  
26 compound in Thailand, right over an open field, a guy jumps out of a little hooch there  
27 with an AK and I saw him plain as day, pointed right at me and let go with about a blast  
28 of ten shots. And man there was bullets flying all over my cockpit, I didn't get hit but  
29 there was pieces of the honeycomb and pieces of, actually one of the bullets actually after  
30 it ricocheted around there, ended up right on my shoulder. Anyway, I immediately I  
31 sucked the aircraft back up high and got right over the spot, called the little compound we

1 were just going to and I said, hey, did you hear that? Get somebody out there and get  
2 him. And they didn't want to do that, so I said well let me register a mortar for you. So I  
3 got up high and they had a four deuce mortar and they started shooting it out their way  
4 and I'm trying to register it for them, put it on the target, they couldn't hit their ass with a  
5 sack of what. Anyway, I'm kind of pissed because that was a pretty close call and nobody  
6 wants to run, it couldn't have been more than a kilometer from the compound there,  
7 maybe even closer. So anyway I got on the air, whatever our common frequency was to  
8 the Air Force, I said "You've got anybody returning with any ordnance, I have a target"  
9 and they said, "Roger, there's a flight of two A1Es coming back from someplace that still  
10 has their ordnance with them" and I said, "Well good, give them my" they came and got  
11 a hold of me and I told them, they came overhead and I said okay, it's that hooch right  
12 down in the middle of that field. So then they strafed in with bombs, CBU's, rockets. I  
13 mean I'm talking, when they got done there was nothing left down there. Finally one of  
14 them says, "Okay, Air America, what was the enemy?" I said, "Oh, it was one guy with  
15 an AK and he shot me." And they said, "Boy, you're kind of vindictive aren't you?" I  
16 said, "You're damn right, when they shoot at me I take it very personal." And I don't  
17 know whether we got him or not because I was watching and he didn't go out but he  
18 probably had an underground escape area out of that. But when we landed of course then  
19 the captain who was with us, he might have organized something more to go out there  
20 and take a look, but yes I couldn't get the Thais and people there on the ground to go out.

21 SM: And where in Thailand was this again?

22 BV: This was over on the Thai side across from Pakse. It was, the closest Thai  
23 base to there would have been Ubon base, it was a little south of that, right on the, just off  
24 the Laotian, the river there, on the Laotian border. That was another day.

25 SM: Well, how about other incidents where you were shot at and these were close  
26 calls?

27

28 BV: Oh, there were a bunch of them. Of course I, I sent you the story about  
29 Christmas Eve, right?

30 SM: Yes, sir but you can talk about that as well.

1           BV: Well okay. The area that I was going to work this particular day, first of all it  
2 was the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 1970; some dates you never forget and that was one of them.  
3 Anyway because that was really my first mission after I was released from the Burma  
4 intonement there for a while. It was going to be one of these missions where I was just  
5 going to shuttle stuff all day long out of a place called Hmong Suy, which was an,  
6 ARVN, not ARVN. It was a Lao compound with an airstrip there, probably a five  
7 thousand foot strip, pretty good-sized strip and then it was right west of the Plain De Jars.  
8 At that time we had outposts all around it, but we didn't control the Plain of Jars. At that  
9 particular point in time the enemy had it, and so you don't fly over the PDJ. There was a  
10 lot of anti-aircraft there, a lot of, if you could look at the picture of the PDJ it was like a  
11 bone yard out there with lots of downed aircraft laying all over the place from over the  
12 years. But anyway, so the procedure was you would take off from, in this case Hmong  
13 Suy. I was going to pick up the loads, take them out and, we had many compounds, out  
14 posts, all the way around it so I was going to re-supply them. So I had a, I was flying  
15 solo that day because it was supposedly a piece of cake mission day, as long as I didn't  
16 get over the PDJ, and the flight mechanic with me was a guy named Charlie Brigham.  
17 He was a new guy, in fact a guy I'd known in the Army, enlisted guy in the Army, he had  
18 just come to work for Air America and this was his first flight as a fully qualified crew  
19 chief. So he and I, along with a Laotian lieutenant loaded up a bunch of, I think they  
20 were mortars, I believe they were mortar rounds in boxes right in the door of the aircraft  
21 so the idea was we would. You don't want to spend very much time on the ground  
22 around that areas but you come in and discharge your load, kick it off as quick as you can  
23 and then fly on out. So we flew over the area and circled overhead looking for the signal,  
24 and they came up with the proper signal and the lieutenant was on board talking on a  
25 PRIC-77 radio to the ground guys. And he said, he tells me through the crew chief, of  
26 course I'm above, the H-34 I can't see, but the flight man, Charlie Brigannm told me, he  
27 said, "Yes, he says it's okay." And so I start circling on down to land, but I notice that  
28 there were not a lot of women and kids out on the pad, so, usually they're there to watch  
29 the helicopter so when you don't see that, you know that there could be some action,  
30 thing that's been happening around there. So I told Charlie this, I said, "I'm going to  
31 keep the aircraft pretty light on the struts when I land, go ahead and get the load out of it

1 as quickly as you can and then we're going to be out of there." So, I had not any more  
2 than touched the ground, maybe a few seconds and they shot a recoilless rifle at me,  
3 which luckily for us went off just short of the aircraft and then ricocheted up through it  
4 and of course hit the aircraft and I was sure Charlie must be dead. I couldn't see him  
5 from where I was sitting, and I took some shrapnel in my right leg. And so I grabbed all  
6 the power I could and figured, okay, if it flies, it flies if it doesn't, it doesn't because the  
7 next round will get us direct. They usually don't miss with those things, we were  
8 fortunate, and took off and started climbing out and hoping he was okay, and I asked him,  
9 I said, "Are you okay?" And he says, "Yes, I'm all right, but," he said, "I can see you're  
10 not." By that time the blood's starting to run down the inside of the aircraft from my leg,  
11 and I said. "Well, as long as the aircraft will fly, we'll be okay to make it back to Ban  
12 Houei Sai, I mean to Hmong Suy," to get picked up and they can haul me off to the  
13 hospital and I made aid and a flattest porter was right near there working theirs. He said,  
14 "Okay, I've got a visual on you, I'll follow you on into Hmong Suy." I got in there and  
15 Charlie, I jumped piggy back on his back and he carried me, although I probably could  
16 have hobbled over to him, but carried me over to the porter and got in and he took off  
17 with me for Udorn. The aircraft, the round itself put sixty-some holes right through the  
18 aircraft, in one side and right out the other, that's the power of those rounds, and eighty-  
19 two millimeter would have. We were very fortunate, it wasn't a direct hit, it just hit short  
20 and sprayed the shrapnel up on it. But I guess there was nobody else, Charlie didn't take  
21 any hit, it went all around him and I was only, I guess the only person that took any, got  
22 wounded from that.

23 SM: Was that the most serious wound you received?

24 BV: Yes it was. I never got any, that was the only time I really glad, because I  
25 got shot in Vietnam but that was another time but.

26 SM: But I mean in Laos?

27 BV: Yes, well in Laos, yes.

28 SM: That was the most serious injury you received?

29 BV: Yes, that was.

30 SM: You were really lucky.

1           BV: Yes, I was, sure was, very lucky, could have been done. Because that aircraft  
2 was full of av gas, 115, 145 octane, so a direct hit would have been quite a fire.

3           SM: Yes sir. Now, could you, in the event of something hitting your fuel tank,  
4 did you have a quick dump capability, where you could just basically dump your fuel?

5           BV: No, couldn't do that in that aircraft. It was all pretty much self-contained and  
6 the other thing about, back in those days they didn't have the crash worthy or explosion  
7 worthy systems they do nowadays. So if you had a crash landing, same with, Hueys were  
8 the same way. If you had a crash where you split the aircraft apart, well you're going to  
9 probably have a fire because that tank's going to come apart too. In modern days, and  
10 right now, the fuel tanks in helicopters are all fixed so they break away and self-contain if  
11 there's any, and they're also self-sealing.

12           SM: Yes, I was going to ask you that, did you have a self-sealing tank?

13           BV: No, we didn't but later on they, because I'm being an old maintenance guy, I  
14 know all about those too. They have a, the way the work, they've got layers of rubber  
15 and in between that layers of rubber there's a substance called Buna-N. In case you're on  
16 trivial pursuit sometime with your helicopters and anyway, the Buna-N when it mixes  
17 with fuel, if a round went through it of course it would have cause it to, fuel to get on it,  
18 expands eight times its size, real quick, so anything up to a fifty caliber round it will  
19 pretty well plug that whole right up, pretty good, right then, so that's a good deal. But  
20 yes, we don't, we didn't, at that time they weren't crash resistant or self-sealing tanks like  
21 they have now.

22           SM: But if you had the, even if you did have a self-sealing tank on one of those  
23 aircraft, with that fuel would probably a round hitting it set it off anyway?

24           BV: It could yes, because it's pretty volatile. I mean if it, again, you know fuel  
25 has to, you've got to have vapors to get that explosion. So if you want to, say you've  
26 only got a half a tank of fuel, so half of it's full of vapors that'd be a better possibility. If  
27 you were completely full of fuel than you might have a chance and not have a fire.

28           SM: Okay. Now, were you ever short of anything that you needed for those  
29 aircraft?

30           BV: Oh, not really I, maintenance was generally real good and you know we just  
31 operated with what we had. If you can imagine flying that old aircraft, well they weren't

1 that old, it was old technology, but the aircraft, actually the ones we had were pretty new  
2 ones, right out of the Marine Corps. But anyway, with very limited navigational aids, or  
3 there weren't any nav facilities really in Laos. There were a few beacons but that was it,  
4 if they happened to be turned on and flying with those. In the very mountainous terrain,  
5 weather, especially during the monsoon was pretty skoche, bad guys shooting at you,  
6 trying to operate with max loads and then navigate and you navigated by map, you had to  
7 be able to read a map. It was reported that a lot of the maps were not really, really  
8 accurate. You know they were pretty accurate, but not like they would be nowadays.  
9 They were probably made by the French originally. So anyway, you operated that way  
10 with, but that's all you had. In later years back in the military, the stuff they have now is  
11 all GPS navigation and all kinds of automatic pilot stuff, everything, it was not that easy  
12 back then, and then plenty of power too.

13 SM: But, your navigation in Laos in particular, what was the biggest hindering  
14 factor, was it a weather/smoke combination or something else?

15 BV: Probably weather was the worst thing. If the enemy of course you try to  
16 avoid them you know when you're coming in and out and going into areas, figuring okay  
17 the enemy are just over the hill or the enemy are probably over here, you avoid that. A  
18 lot of the pads that we serviced over were real high, right on the tips of mountains right  
19 around there. That's where the friendlies were stationed, so to land on those we had to, in  
20 many cases you couldn't sit all the way down, just put one, you'd lock the brakes and I'd  
21 just kind of ease it so one wheel was on the pad, so they can unload the stuff out of the  
22 cargo door and then you just kind of slide right off and fly right down the side of the  
23 mountain, get out of there.

24 SM: But all the while you're still running, you're hovering?

25 BV: Yes, you're kind of hovering there, that's right, just holding up. And you  
26 have to, you know the higher elevation ones, you've got to plan that you're going to,  
27 when you're a short finaler just prior to landing you're going to be losing your power so  
28 you've got to make that approach to the ground and time it so that you don't hurt the  
29 aircraft any, because you'd be running out of power in a lot of them and you know that,  
30 fly it that way.

1 SM: What, you mentioned, you qualified that generally maintenance was good,  
2 where there any particular problems?

3 BV: I didn't have much problems. I had one incident I can remember pretty  
4 vividly and that's. I was flying an aircraft that I had, I could hear a clicking sound from  
5 the transmission area and I mentioned it. I wrote it up and you write up your faults and I  
6 mentioned it to the, back to the chief pilot when I called in for our daily calls, or I called  
7 him and I said, " You know you need to send maintenance guy up here to look at this  
8 aircraft or do something with it." I was due to rotate out and I was going to leave the  
9 aircraft up country and just get on a fixed wing and fly home. So I mentioned that, that I,  
10 there was something there that, something was wrong with that transmission, it shouldn't  
11 be making a noise like that, so I went up. I went home and actually I picked up another  
12 aircraft and I was out flying the next day again and I came back up in that same area and I  
13 look over and here's that same aircraft I was flying the previous day with that  
14 maintenance problem and it's flying, so I got with the pilot and I said, "Hey, let me look  
15 at the logbook, I want to see what they did to fix that," whatever it was. And they hadn't  
16 done anything, and I kind of got a little upset about that, I raised hell with the  
17 maintenance guys and said hey, I really did hear something and I told the other pilot that  
18 was flying, I asked him, I said, " Did you ever?" He said, "Yes, I was hearing this thing,  
19 I didn't really pay enough attention to it." I said, "Well, there's something wrong." And  
20 sure enough that particular there was something wrong, it was not getting, it had a  
21 bearing that was going on out on the transmission, and I guess they fixed it eventually but  
22 that was you know one of the things that. You know I, of course later, many years later  
23 when I was a very senior Army aviator with a lot of experience and I was a maintenance  
24 pilot, maintenance test pilot and a young pilot would come with a problem, which I  
25 wouldn't belittle him but I would think to myself, he's just probably inexperienced, he  
26 doesn't know what he's hearing, or not hearing but of course the typical corrective action  
27 was checked and found okay, which really that is the typical one, take it out for a test  
28 flight and try to duplicate the problem that they said it had, and couldn't duplicate it.  
29 And you know maybe back then, the older maintenance guy might think that young guy  
30 doesn't know what he's hearing.

31 SM: But it was a bearing?

1           BV: Yes, it turned out to be some kind of a bearing problem.

2           SM: Now, would that have, if a bearing went out, would that be a catastrophic  
3 failure?

4           BV: It could have been, it may not have been, it could have been. If it was  
5 allowed to go long enough, of course you could even have a fire, if it gets hot enough.

6           SM: Just not something you want to mess with?

7           BV: No, you want to change it, especially for flying. It isn't like you can just  
8 coast it to the side of the road and call for a tow truck.

9           SM: Now, were there any serious mechanical failures of any aircraft you flew?

10          BV: No, well I had an engine failure there, one time. In fact, this was an  
11 interesting story too. I was flying solo back from up country, back toward Vientiane and  
12 I got a call from some USAID workers that had a radio in our frequency asking any Air  
13 America aircraft could you come in and give us a ride back to Vientiane, we're at Site so  
14 and so, USAID. I think it was a dam project or some kind of a project they were working  
15 up there. I called them and said, "Yes, okay I'll come over and get you." And, I would  
16 go right near there, so I picked them up and then I flew back. I was flying solo, so there  
17 was nobody up front with me and the two guys I picked up were down below with the  
18 crew chief or the flight mechanic, in fact his name was Rick Strubb. He's still around, I  
19 think he lives in Chicago area and I see him occasionally at reunions. It was going to be  
20 one of his last flights, or maybe his last flight, he was getting ready to go home. So I  
21 flew on up at a real high altitude, up to seven thousand feet I think it was, then locked  
22 down, that aircraft has an automatic pilot too, you just to have to get it all set up, then you  
23 can push the button. It'll hold you where you are, you're altitude and you're heading and  
24 so on. So, I locked down, friction down on the controls and had my feet kind of up on  
25 the console and reading a book, fat, dumb and happy as it was kind of flying, heading  
26 home, homing on the ADF, there was an ADF in Vientiane so I was all tuned in on that  
27 and it was homing it on that and all of a sudden, kaboom, bang. The engine quit on me  
28 and well, you talk about scrambling around up there in the cockpit to get the pitch down  
29 on the helicopter. So anyway, I got it down and we said, "May Day" and they started the  
30 auto rotation. Of course I was seven thousand feet that was pretty high.

31          SM: It gives you some time to play there.

1           BV: Yes, it gives me plenty of time, so I start making a big old circle as I'm auto-  
2 rotating, looking down below me and all there is, is solid jungle. It was just, you know  
3 and I made another revolution and I just didn't see anywhere to land. I'm thinking, and  
4 that was, I think it was in 1969 and there had been several fatal accidents just prior to  
5 that, which were all attributed to pilot error, and the pilots died on them so they really  
6 couldn't defend themselves one way or the other. I'm thinking right now, I'm thinking,  
7 shoot, here's one here I've got an engine failure, it's not my fault and I'm going to crash  
8 and burn probably in the jungle and they're going to call it pilot error and that's going  
9 through my mind. So part of my May Day discussion was, "Oh by the way, the engine  
10 quit. I'm auto-rotating." Anyway, about my third revolution down I saw a little Buddha  
11 parade, it was a neat little clearing, it was a small little rice paddy clearing, but it was big  
12 enough to auto-rotate down into. So I started setting up for that and the other thing that  
13 happened is that, because I was up so high, letting down so quickly the windows, the  
14 front window on the H-34 is made of glass, not Plexiglas, but actual glass and it was, it  
15 got all steamed up because you know it was the jungle. The heat we were descending  
16 down into caused the window to get all steamed, so I couldn't see out in front so I've got  
17 my. I'm looking out the side window with my head sticking out that turning on, do my  
18 auto-rotation into the landing area and I could still recall as I was. I had it made, I was no  
19 short final I started a deceleration and I remembered, shoot there was one lone palm tree  
20 in that rice paddy area, and I'm thinking man, that would be something I hit. I made the  
21 area okay but I hit the darn palm tree but as it turned out I didn't, it was to one side but  
22 that's what was in my mind. During your deceleration, your final, you have no other, you  
23 know there's no go around. Anyway, it was no problem, we got in there and landed okay  
24 and, a helicopter came out later and picked us up.

25           SM: How softly can you land one of those aircraft in auto-rotation?

26           BV: Oh, with practice real softly, you've just to got make it right, you only have  
27 one try. And what you do on an H-34, it's got a tail wheel so you hit that first and kind of  
28 drag it along the ground holding rear cyclic on it so you dissipate all your forward air  
29 speed and then as it settles down, hopefully with very little forward roll on the main gear,  
30 then you cushion it in with your collective pitch and you're there.

1 SM: Okay, so when you landed here, another aircraft came out, picked you up,  
2 what happened to your helicopter?

3 BV: They came out the next day with maintenance and changed the engine on it.

4 SM: Was it they brought a new engine out to the aircraft?

5 BV: Yes, brought another engine out, it swallowed a jug is what had happened, a  
6 valve I mean. The, you know also kind of funny, I got back to Vientiane, of course  
7 Udorn is our base, our main base. So I called back to the chief pilot and he says, "Did  
8 you run out of gas?" I said, "No." The next thing he says, "Were you overloaded?" I  
9 said, "No." And you know, not glad to hear you're, well done, good deal, glad you made  
10 it okay. "Okay we'll see you tomorrow." That was all that was on his, that was Jerry  
11 Macinty was the acting chief pilot then.

12 SM: Did you run out of fuel, were you overloaded [laughs]?

13 BV: Yes. We'd had several fatalities, fatal accidents prior to that just that one  
14 year. It was a bad year, and they were attributed to pilot error.

15 SM: In those respects, I mean lack of fuel and overloaded?

16 BV: No, I don't know anybody that ran out of fuel, but they could have been  
17 overloaded.

18 SM: Did you ever know of anybody running out of fuel?

19 BV: No, I'm not, I don't know of anybody over there that ran out of fuel. You  
20 know there were some dumb things done.

21 SM: Well, not getting personal in terms of naming people, but what were some of  
22 the dumber things that you recall?

23 BV: Oh, I can get personal, this is Larry Frazier, I don't think, you know Larry  
24 Frazier?

25 SM: Yes, sir I do, I interviewed him.

26 BV: Okay, you know the story about him trying to smoke grenade into Don  
27 Henthorn's house?

28 SM: No. This is an interesting story. Go ahead [laughs].

29 BV: Well, okay, this is what, did he tell you how he got fired from Air America?

30 SM: Well, he mentioned that he got fired, and I think he did talk a little bit about  
31 it but.

1           BV: Yes, well this is how he got fired. A friend of ours, whose named Don  
2 Henthorn, another guy, I flew with him quite a bit too, had this house that he shared with  
3 some other guys and they called it the Captain's Club. It was out by a golf course in  
4 Udorn; it was kind of like a party house, there was always something going on there you  
5 know, it was a good place to go out and drink. Anyway, so Larry's flying the H-34 solo  
6 one day and he think he's going to fly, swoop down close to Don's house and try to  
7 throw a smoke grenade out of the, into his window of his house. And, so he's getting  
8 down close and kind of loses a little bit of control of the aircraft and manages to clip a  
9 palm tree that's right there into the landing gear and then puts a bunch of, he uses  
10 something. Anyway, darn near crashes, then he flies back to Udorn, of course there's  
11 still branches sitting in the gear and pretty hard to explain how that happened. Of course  
12 people put two and two together and anyway, he got fired. He stayed over there with  
13 another company for a while. He's going to be one of the sponsors of the reunion in the  
14 Jacksonville.

15           SM: Right the Jacksonville reunion, yes.

16           BV: Yes, Larry Frazier. His wife just passed away unfortunately this year.

17           SM: Yes, sir. Well, so okay, so because he was, it was discovered that he was I  
18 guess engaging in some kind of?

19           BV: Goofing off, yes.

20           SM: Yes, reckless behavior they decided to terminate his employment?

21           BV: Yes, they terminated him. As far as I know that's the only thing he ever did.  
22 Now, we had some, a lot of, some drinking problems there and they. You know it's  
23 twelve hours between bottle and throttle, is the standard rule. Of course if you were  
24 drinking a lot, sometimes twelve hours may not even be enough and for other guys it  
25 probably wouldn't even matter, they could but. We had this one guy who finally got  
26 fired, his name was Robbie Robinson, good old, old pilot, Huey pilot, been there for a  
27 long time. But he'd get in the bar he's get so drunk his head would be on the bar at our  
28 club right there in Udorn. Well, when we started having those accidents and other  
29 problems the customer was getting a little bit more picky I guess you could say. So our  
30 flight ops guy, usually it was like Dick Fore, he's still alive, Dick's still around, would  
31 come in with the next day's schedule and make sure there wasn't anybody still drinking

1 in the bar that prior evening that was on the schedule the next day. And Robbie, and of  
2 course I never flew with him because he flew the Hueys and I was H-34s but I had heard  
3 that many times his other pilot with him would strap him into the cockpit and he'd, they  
4 would just go and he would wake up maybe after the first fuel load and he'd be all right,  
5 you know from drinking all night because he had it pretty bad. But when he got fired one  
6 of our vice presidents from Taipei was there and he mentioned just something about  
7 maybe you ought to be going home or something like that instead of drinking, and  
8 Robbie I guess, gave him some lip about something and he was terminated, like I don't  
9 need to, or I can do what I want to do, or it's none of your business or something like  
10 that, but anyway.

11 SM: Oh, boy.

12 BV: Yes, that got him out of there. We had a lot of funny incidents. I liked to  
13 write a little bit of humor when I write. I've got several that are kind of on the humorous  
14 note, in fact I can send you those, in fact before we get off I need to get your mailing  
15 address because I want to send you those tapes when I find them so you can try to get  
16 them, I mean the eight millimeter movies.

17 SM: Right, so we can digitize the eight-millimeter for you, absolutely.

18 BV: Yes, like I said I don't know what you're going to get and I don't know, they  
19 may be the film may be so brittle that it won't even work any more, but hopefully we can  
20 get something out of it. Another funny story is there was a guy who's passed away too,  
21 another good friend of mine named Dave Anchorburg, have you heard of him?

22 SM: No, sir I haven't.

23 BV: He's in the Ravens, he's mentioned in the book *The Ravens*, but Dave,  
24 another former Army pilot and a good friend of mine too, I knew him many years later,  
25 all the time, he went to Fort Worth where I lived after he left there, and then he flew for  
26 the police department there, Fort Worth Police. He was their chief pilot in fact for like  
27 twenty years or longer; he finally died from lung cancer. But Dave was a jokester, and he  
28 was always pulling practical jokes, he was single and over there he would get a lot of the  
29 wives together in the bar, and he'd have a raffle to buy able to be able to fly up, or no  
30 he'd be signing up a list to fly up country with your husband. And of course it was  
31 absolutely, he was getting all these women to sign up and they'd buy that and then, but

1 one of our funniest stories about Dave was. We had a new pilot over there named Francis  
2 Bennett. I'll never forget him because I was also one of his training captains and this guy  
3 Francis, according to rumor had graded one of the highest stanine test grades that they'd  
4 ever had. He was like a genius, but the guy was really weird. It became evident when  
5 you flew with him now. I went, I flew with him up country and our pre-landing check for  
6 example, on any airplane, you've got certain thing you always, usually you read it off on  
7 a checklist, you know pre-landing check, gear down and locked the mixture rich or  
8 whatever trim on this, whatever that particular aircraft needs is on the checklist. So he  
9 made a little rhyme out of it and he would sing it to you, da-da-da-da, for every approach,  
10 which you know I thought at first, well that's kind of a good way to learn it. You know,  
11 it kind of makes it fun, but finally it got where it kind of got on your nerves, he sang this  
12 damn song every time you landed and that was part of it. So, then the other thing, of  
13 course we got on the ground down there and he and I were together flying out of Luang  
14 Prabang and we were the only aircraft there for this particular, on this particular couple  
15 days we were up there. So at night there was a place called the Tree Bar, which was an  
16 outside bar around a great big tree which was kind of neat, we used to stay at a hotel up  
17 there. In later years Air America built there own hostel, which we stayed there, but  
18 anyway. Francis and I were there at the bar and having a drink after work, and I'm trying  
19 to make. The guy was completely, I don't know, void of personality I guess to say. You  
20 really couldn't talk to him about anything. Of course I figured that he'd probably done a  
21 lot of flying in his life so maybe he wants to talk about flying. So, we're talking, I said  
22 Francis, you must be a, let's see what he'd say? Oh no. First of all he didn't have any  
23 survival gear with him, and I said Francis, you need to have a survival vest with a radio.  
24 He says, "Oh, no I can't check out one of those because if I lose that radio it's worth like  
25 four hundred dollars, and I just can't afford to lose that." Well, that was really pretty far  
26 fetched, and I'd rather have the radio than, anyway, and then I said, "Well Francis how  
27 do you plan to, if we go down someplace how do you plan to survive without any  
28 survival stuff with you?" He said, "Oh, I've got that figured out." And I said, "Oh, yes  
29 what's that?" He said, "Oh, I'll go over to the, a river like the Mekong and I'll get myself  
30 a reed to breathe, and get underwater and breathe with my reed and follow it all the way  
31 down to civilization," or something. Oh, man what a Looney Toon [laughter]. He had

1 hemorrhoids real bad, so he used to always be sticking these darn suppositories in his ass  
2 all the time. On the H-34, the pilots are up high and one day he's got his bare ass sticking  
3 out of the window up there, putting a suppository in, and that's all you can see. Like a  
4 guy mooning the world out there, and here comes this fuel truck, this Laotian driving it,  
5 he darn near, he's looking at him, he darn near drives into the aircraft because it's such a  
6 strange sight [laughter]. But anyway, the funny story with him and Ackenburg is this, he  
7 was up there training with Ackenburg and they're in a, actually working Lima Five-Four-  
8 Two, out of Luang Prabang, and they, I guess on takeoff out of an area up there in the  
9 boonies, Dave says to Francis, "Hey watch for ground fire for us." Well, okay you could  
10 watch, what are you're going to do, but anyway, he said and I'll be darned on take off  
11 they get shot at and they take a bullet hole back in the pylon or someplace in the aircraft.  
12 So, they're flying on out, finally Dave says, "You know Francis, I'm kind of pissed at  
13 you." Francis says, "Why?" He says, "Well, you know we took that round on your side  
14 of the aircraft, and I'm going to have to blame you, you know it's going to cost me a  
15 hundred dollars as the captain, seventy-five dollars for you, and fifty dollars for the flight  
16 mechanic, because of the." And then Francis says, "What do you mean?" You know  
17 he's always worried about money, remember he didn't want to, "What do you mean?"  
18 He says, "Doss never told me anything about that." And it was "Oh yes." He said, "It's  
19 in the bullet hole file." And Francis says, "What do you mean the bullet hole file?" He  
20 says, "Well, you've got to be cleared for that, maybe you haven't been cleared for it,  
21 maybe you haven't read it yet. It's a secret bullet hole file." He says, "When you get  
22 back you go in and see Captain Abbedee," who was now the base manager, "and tell him  
23 you want to see the bullet hole file." So, as soon as we get back he goes up to. Of course  
24 Abbedee's got like a secretary out in front. He gets through her, and finally gets in to see  
25 Abbedee and Abbedee says, "Yes, what do you need?" And he says, "Well, I'd like to  
26 look at the secret bullet hole file." And Abbedee looks at him like the tree fell out of,  
27 "What are you talking about?" So he says, "Well, I was up flying with Captain  
28 Anchorburg." Well, that's all he had to say, he knew right away, he sees "Get out of  
29 here." But every other guy was that gullible. One other thing about that same guy, when  
30 you're normally new there, you'll get a hotel room before you get a house or an  
31 apartment, so he was living in a hotel room, but rather than buy it by the month or buy it

1 by the week or whatever, so it would be a lot cheaper, every time he flew he would take  
2 all of his gear, which was like a suitcase full of stuff and bring it back into the flight  
3 operations locker and put it in there and check completely out and then go back. You  
4 know, rather than just living at one place for. He thought he was saving money there, but  
5 he really wasn't because, anyway, that's just, anyway he didn't last. He never checked  
6 out, he was gone after a few months.

7 SM: Oh really? What prevented him from checking out?

8 BV: Being weird, seriously yes.

9 SM: Being weird?

10 BV: Yes, you can be weird and be a pilot, but this guy was too weird to be. I  
11 mean he was another frequency. He was on VHF and everybody else on UHF.

12 SM: Oh, that's bizarre.

13 BV: Yes, he was strange.

14 SM: Well, you would think just the suppository issue would be enough.

15 BV: That was funny, and he had a little rubber tire he kept with him to sit on too  
16 all the time. He was something else.

17 SM: Well, what were some of the weirder guys that could make it through being  
18 check out, what were their characteristics, their more colorful characteristics?

19 BV: Well, there were a lot of guys like to drink and have a good time and carry  
20 on. A guy named Ted Cash, he's still around. We were staying in Vientiane one time at a  
21 place called the Lang Syne hotel, which at that time was like the nicest hotel in Vientiane.  
22 And the Air America guys would stay up in like a various, we'd be like three or four to a  
23 room. We'd stay on the second floor. Well, Ted took his .38 pistol one time and went  
24 out there to the back, like a back porch on the upper floor of the hotel and shot at the  
25 lights above the police station, which was just down the block. The next thing you know,  
26 that was place was swarming with cops looking for whoever was shooting and everything  
27 else. I'm thinking boy, that is crazy, why would he take a chance like that.

28 SM: Unbelievable.

29 BV: Yes, I wrote a story about another guy named John Shine. This is quite a  
30 story too. He was solo with the H-34 and I was solo up at Lima 25, Ban Houei Sai and  
31 the plan was after our daily missions and everything, and there were a couple of fixed

1 wing pilots living there too, at the hostel there. We would go down and have a beer  
2 together at this little bar, was just like a block away from the place we stayed, the house  
3 there. But as it turned out I didn't get to RON there. Tony Poole was in that area and he  
4 called right before my last mission, said he wanted me to come up there and RON at his  
5 location that night. And so, which I did, so I wasn't with John, so John goes down  
6 drinking, John carried a 357 pistol on his belt and he's sitting down there on the outside,  
7 outside of this bar drinking by himself and he had several drinks I guess and trying to get  
8 the bartender's attention to come out and get another drink. Well, the bartender wasn't  
9 coming fast enough to suit him so he took his pistol and shot it up in there outside and  
10 that's a pretty loud pistol too. Man, immediately there's police there and all the little, and  
11 the police come over to him and tell him that they want his pistol and everything and he  
12 wasn't going to give it to them. He starts walking back up the street towards where our  
13 house is; he's a big guy too. At that time he was probably 240 and 6'6, you know a big  
14 guy and of course here's the little Lao cops, who are probably all like 5'2 and maybe a  
15 hundred pounds, but they all had carbines, they had guns. So, they're trying to tell him to  
16 stop and turn over his weapon. Well, he's not going to do it and he walks back to the  
17 house, and I don't know whether he threatened them at all with the gun or anything, but  
18 he managed to keep on going. They couldn't stop him and he got into the house and the  
19 other pilots were asleep in there. He hollers in the door, he says, "Hey, get your guns!  
20 Get out here!" Well, nobody's going to move and meanwhile the cops all kind of got a  
21 line right across the street in the ditch and they're all lined up there looking, with their  
22 guns pointed toward the house and John goes inside, gets an M-16, brings it out and  
23 along with his pistol. He cocks his pistol, sets it up on the railing on the front porch there  
24 and then kind of crouches behind the post there with the M-16 toward the policeman.  
25 And there's one police man out still trying to talk to him, and then somehow John reaches  
26 around kind of behind his back for his pistol and it goes off and he hits himself right in  
27 the back and, luckily they air evacuated him there. He lived okay. In fact I saw him at one  
28 of our recent reunions. I saw him in Las Vegas in fact, but he got, he was gone then, I  
29 don't think he ever came back, I think he either got fired or, of course he was hurt pretty  
30 bad.

31 SM: He's lucky they didn't open fire thinking he shot the gun.

1           BV: Yes, sure could have opened fire and that old wooden house they were in,  
2 they could have opened fire right into that thing, because they couldn't understand what  
3 he was talking about, other than he was big and intimidating and had a gun, a couple  
4 guns. Yes. He was just; it was just a dumb move, but anyway.

5           SM: Were most of the silly things like that that happened, was alcohol typically  
6 involved?

7           BV: Probably, yes, in most cases. There was this guy, same guy, Ted Cash I  
8 talked about. He had a wife, has a wife named Cathy who back in those days was kind of  
9 a party gal herself and she used to, you know the Air Force guys that were stationed over  
10 like in Udorn and Thailand, unaccompanied of course, a lot of them had girlfriends there  
11 and they would get these party suits on, which was actually a flight suit with all kinds of  
12 stuff on it that they would give to these gals that they wear to parties. Well, Cathy also  
13 had a party suit, and I don't know whether Ted got it for her or whether she bought it but  
14 anyway, she had one and she used to wear it around, like she was like a party girl. Of  
15 course she wasn't Thai so obviously she could attract attention of the American GIs that  
16 were there because there aren't very many round eyes as we call them, gals like that,  
17 American gals. So whether or not she had a boyfriend or not I don't know, but Ted  
18 thought she did. So, one night, there's a hotel up in Udorn called the Charron Hotel,  
19 which was a nice hotel, like about ten stories and had a swimming pool and it was a new  
20 hotel and there was a restaurant that a lot of us went to in that hotel. And Ted and Cathy  
21 are walking out of the hotel one night and apparently an airman or an Air Force guy that  
22 he thought was seeing Cathy met them at the door, and Ted was an ex-Marine, pretty  
23 tough looking guy. Anyway, he went ahead and punched him and punched him right  
24 through the door, right through the glass door of the hotel there. Obviously it wasn't a  
25 real heavy glass door but it pushed him through it, just blap, anyway.

26           SM: So, did he ever discover whether this really was?

27           BV: I don't know. Everybody suspected that she was probably running around,  
28 but I don't know. But anyway, you know another guy over there who's also dead I'm  
29 afraid, his name was Elmer Monzel, ever hear of his name?

30           SM: No, sir.

1           BV: Well, Elmer had one of these Austin Princess cars, you know what that is,  
2 like a Rolls Royce.

3           SM: Yes, sir.

4           BV: And it was neat because when you'd drive it around, people would think you  
5 were like the Queen or the King of Thailand, to ride in the back seat of that and he'd ride  
6 around town. Well, the town of Udorn which was pretty much dirt roads had these  
7 circles, you know like they do over in Europe, you know these traffic circles. And then  
8 sanlaws are little pedal vehicles, you know like a little pedicab where a sanlaw driver  
9 takes people for rides in them. This sanlaw was in front of his Austin Princess one night.  
10 Elmer had a drinking problem too, he was all tanked and the sanlaw wouldn't get out of  
11 the way so he started pushing it with his Austin, and the guy's going twenty miles an  
12 hour, going along, that was a, a lot of funny things, a lot of good times, a lot of good  
13 trips. I don't know really what else to tell you about Air America.

14          SM: Right. Well, let's see here. This will end the interview with Mr. Ben Van Etten on  
15 the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January.