

Interview with Col. Ralph C. Erchinger
Session 2 of 2
February 8, 2006

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history
2 interview with Ralph Erchinger. Today is February 8, 2006, and I am in Lubbock, and
3 Colonel Erchinger is in Austin. It is around 1:36pm, Central Standard Time. Sir, let's
4 revisit something we had talked about in our previous session, and that is your thoughts
5 and feelings on Communism and what was happening in the world as you saw it in the
6 1950s and 60's.

7 RE: Yes, well, I was stationed at Clark Air Base in the Philippines with Air
8 Rescue Service from '57 to '60, and I just was caught up in general affirmation of the
9 realization from my perspective of the threat of international Communism. The Soviet
10 Union was very strong, China was on the build, and there was just no doubt in my mind
11 that that was a legitimate threat. As I've conducted my service in the Philippines, we
12 were primarily concerned with orbiting on station to provide navigational aides for other
13 aircraft transiting the Pacific, as well as of course rescue missions for military and
14 civilians. But there was one occasion in which, for some reason, we were called upon to
15 support some international aid materials into Vietnam and Vientiane as I recall.

16 RV: That would be in Laos, Vientiane is.

17 RE: Okay, that was Laos, then.

18 RV: Which makes it even more interesting that you're doing that.

19 RE: And so we went into Laos, and I don't know, we were talking about the
20 various kinds of things in the aid program, and sewing machines seemed to be a
21 significant part of our aid. Yeah, that was Laos, Vientiane and Huck Mountain. I
22 brought back a couple of marble souvenirs, a little urn and this set of carved fish. So we
23 were involved in international aid, and it may be that we took a load of sewing machines
24 to Vientiane. But just in general, I think my feeling and that as far as I know of all of us
25 in the unit without much political discussion at all, we just accepted the fact that
26 international Communism was a legitimate threat, and as things unfolded with our
27 increasing involvement in Vietnam, it just seemed appropriate. In retrospect, looking
28 back upon the Vietnam experience, most of us in the military didn't like the political

1 constraints on our involvement. On the other hand we weren't so sure that we wanted to
2 go into any extremes in invading China and so on. But the domino theory was one that I
3 subscribed to, and I think in general, all of my contemporaries did. So just in general,
4 that's sort of the posture that I found myself in at that time.

5 RV: Okay. Well, obviously this kind of global Communist threat was on the lips
6 of everybody in Washington, the policy makers. Did you feel that Eisenhower and
7 Kennedy and then moving into Johnson—and we'll get into some of the Vietnam stuff in
8 more detail in a bit—but just in general, what was your opinion and feeling at the time of
9 how these leaders of the United States handled this global threat?

10 RE: Well, on a macro basis, generally supportive. On a micro basis, various
11 judgments were questionable. The Tonkin issue, which Johnson used to escalate our
12 involvement, based on today's knowledge, seemed to have been fabricated, but at the
13 time, there were no indications of that type. So I suppose in hindsight, you might have
14 some opinions different than what we had at the moment as things were transpiring, and
15 in general, I guess we were supportive of how things went.

16 RV: Okay. Well, let's continue with your career. We talked about the C-47
17 instructor pilot time period you spent at Randolph AFB in Texas. From there you went to
18 Ft. Benning, Georgia to transition into the Caribou. I really would be interested in
19 hearing your description of this unique airplane, the Caribou, and how it handled from a
20 pilot's point of view.

21 RE: Well, from my particular military experience it was a wonderful gift and a
22 marvelous experience. I thoroughly enjoyed my twin-engine experience, beginning with
23 my first assignment in the Philippines with the SA-16 Grumman triphibian. It had
24 overhead throttles with two engines, as did the Caribou, so I was extremely comfortable
25 with the cockpit configuration. The Caribou, from my perspective, having flown the SA-
26 16 and then the C-47 in both the instrument and transition programs at Randolph—the
27 Caribou was a marvelously more powerful aircraft, and I loved the short-field takeoff
28 capabilities of it and the short-field landing capabilities. So for me it was just absolute
29 fun, and I loved it.

30 RV: Tell me about the short-field takeoff and landing capabilities. How short are
31 we talking?

1 RE: Well, it had a unique flap system called the fowler flaps, which extended the
2 wingspan significantly, increasing both drag and lift, and that's what made it possible for
3 the short-field takeoffs and landings. On an extreme basis I think we could land in as
4 short as four thousand [hundred] feet and less and take off in slightly more than that,
5 depending on our weight load. [On a short field takeoff, the Caribou, at maximum gross
6 weight, could get off in 540 feet; short field landings could be accomplished within 525
7 feet. Realistically, we rarely need to land on strips shorter than 1000 feet.] And
8 interestingly, I just read recently that the Australian Air Force is looking into a major
9 rehab operation to continue using the Caribou in Australia because of its unique
10 characteristics and payload, and no aircraft since then has duplicated that capability as
11 economically. We have other aircraft which can even take off vertically, but they are
12 extremely expensive aircraft and more expensive to maintain, so I read that they're
13 looking at some new engines I think from England to put in them, but basically the
14 aircraft is the same De Havilland aircraft that is produced in Canada. So it was a lot of
15 fun, and in Vietnam, I wound up being a standardization and evaluation officer in the unit
16 and developed circling tactics and what have you, so that we could circle down over an
17 airfield, minimizing our exposure to enemy fire and land in a short field. So for me it
18 was a lot of fun. I say that in contrast to many of the pilots that came into the Caribou
19 program from both Military Air Lift Command and Strategic Air Command, where they
20 were accustomed in prior experiences to very large four engine aircraft, either turbo-prop
21 or mostly pure jet and accustomed to long approaches and long landings and long takeoff
22 runs. So for them, the transition into the Caribou was a bit more startling and required
23 some new techniques to be developed, but for me, it just fit like a glove, so that's why it
24 was so enjoyable for me.

25 RV: Can you describe the airplane physically, what it looked like, what it's
26 payload was and maybe the length and width of its wings?

27 RE: Oh golly. I'm sure you have that data available in the literature.

28 RV: Sure. But from your opinion, what do you remember about what you could
29 and could not carry? How much room was back there?

30 RE: Well, I'd say a relatively small aircraft. It seems to me our payload might
31 have been on the order of six thousand pounds perhaps, three tons, and we typically

1 carried twenty to thirty people and/or pallets of materials that were loaded from the back
2 end. It had a ramp, which lowered in the back, and we would carry ammunition and food
3 stuffs, live animals quite often, and combinations thereof. We might have a load of
4 indigenous people, civilians, more commonly ARVN, the Vietnamese military, and a
5 combination of supplies that would go with the people. So it was a modern version, you
6 might say, of the C-47. It was somewhat similar, a little more payload, a little more
7 power, a lot more convenience having the ramp lowered in the back similar to a C-130
8 four-engine turbo-prop.

9 RV: Now at Ft. Benning, you trained there for a few months. You said it was
10 pretty easy for you and enjoyable.

11 RE: Absolutely.

12 RV: Was that enough time for everyone to train up?

13 RE: Oh, I'm sure it was, yes.

14 RV: What kind of training was it? Was there classroom and flying, or was it
15 mainly flying?

16 RE: Yes, a combination.

17 RV: Okay. And when you first got into that Caribou, what did you feel? What
18 were your thoughts about it? And I've heard a lot of stories about the Caribou and
19 mainly very, very positive things like you just said. What were your first impressions of
20 this airplane once you got into it?

21 RE: Oh, I had seen pictures of it before, and I just felt like it looked like an
22 unusual aircraft but well-suited to the purpose for which it was designed, as a bush
23 aircraft, to land on relatively unimproved fields and nicely designed. Looking at it, it
24 would appear to have a rather grotesque, unusually high tail, which was required because
25 of the short takeoff run and a rather extreme upward pitch angle, so that you didn't drag
26 the tail. Yeah, I don't know what else to say. It's a little different looking airplane but
27 nice, and in first flying it, compared with what I had been flying, it was wonderful to hear
28 the roar of those engines.

29 RV: Well, you receive your orders there at Ft. Benning to actually deploy over to
30 Vietnam, what do you remember about when you received your orders and your feelings
31 then?

1 RE: Oh, no particular feelings. We knew they were coming, and if I remember
2 correctly, I didn't have final orders. The orders were to Saigon, and then I was re-
3 designated, I think, to the specific location once I got there, which was at Vung Tau, and
4 I didn't realize it at the time, but it turns out that Vung Tau was the Vietnam in-country
5 rest and recreation place also. Forces would be sent there from other parts of Vietnam to
6 rest and recuperate. It was sort of Vietnam's version of the French Riviera.

7 RV: Yes, yes. Was it strange to be stationed at such a place?

8 RE: Well, of course it's a strange country, strange compared to the United States,
9 but not particularly strange for me, having been stationed in the Philippines previously,
10 and so I had no super feelings of how weird or how strange it is [was] or how exotic. The
11 degree to which I might have had such feelings, I suppose I had them in our first
12 assignment in the Philippines, and even there we'd previously been in Libya, so foreign
13 service had by that time become relatively routine, and I felt pretty much like an
14 international citizen.

15 RV: Okay. What were your first impressions of Vietnam?

16 RE: Goodness. My introduction to Vietnam was landing at Tan Son Nhut Airport
17 in Saigon, and it was a major airport, so I guess that experience was just—I don't know,
18 not particularly illuminating or spectacular, just another big airport in a major
19 metropolitan area. Indigenous personnel didn't seem particularly different from those in
20 the Philippines. I suppose I had an early appreciation for the distinct dress of the high
21 percentage of the people wearing—I forgot what you call the women's garment but the—

22 RV: The ao dai.

23 RE: That's it. Long flowing garment, quite attractive, and sort of a pajama
24 trousers was very common in both males and females in civilian attire. I had a very early
25 impression of simplicity on the part of the majority of the Vietnamese and a pretty early
26 impression that golly, most of them really were more concerned where the next bowl of
27 rice was coming from rather than being caught up in politics. And the degree to which
28 we interacted with them, Americans were perceived very favorably in our association. I
29 don't know what else I might say.

30 RV: Okay. What was your exact assignment? How was that explained to you,
31 what you all would be doing there in the 61st Aviation Company?

1 RE: Caribou pilot, CV-2, which is what it was called with the Army. Started out
2 as a co-pilot and in short order was upgraded to 1st pilot aircraft commander. And as my
3 experience unfolded, I guess I became a flight commander and chief of stan-eval
4 [standardization and evaluation] for a period of time.

5 RV: So they put you first as a co-pilot to see how the airplane flew over in that
6 territory and what you would be doing?

7 RE: Yes.

8 RV: Okay. Can you remember what that was like, your first flight out over
9 Vietnam and the missions, as a co-pilot?

10 RE: (laughs) It was just interesting, and as far as flying goes, sort of a lot of fun.
11 This was with the Army until the first of January, and so we were basically Air Force
12 guys working with and for the Army, under Army control, and things were somewhat
13 loose to a very significant degree. Aircraft commanders got their initial frag orders,
14 where to fly and what their purpose was, and typically, we did not have orders that
15 carried us through the day, and we would quite often respond to requests as they were
16 passed on at intervening stations. We'd land at one place, and they'd need to have us
17 carry some materials or people from their field to another field, and so we would do that,
18 and then we'd get there, and perhaps they had something that they'd want us to take
19 someplace else, or by the time we got there someone else had relayed a request. So my
20 impression was that things were somewhat looser than what we had been accustomed to
21 [in the Air Force], although I hadn't flown missions of that particular type. But it was
22 pretty loose, and then later on under Air Force control, we had central control, and we
23 pretty much had our missions planned out and knew where we'd be going all day long. I
24 might say that there was a tremendous variety of missions that we had. There were
25 occasions when I would fly as many as twenty-three or twenty-four different sorties, a
26 sortie being a takeoff and a landing from one place to another. So sometimes in the
27 course of a day, and the day might vary from typically eight hours to sometimes as much
28 as sixteen or seventeen, most commonly eight to ten or twelve hours. So we might have
29 one long mission and return to Vung Tau, and that would be it. On other occasions, we
30 would more typically have a series of sorties, perhaps eight to twelve, but on occasion it
31 was as many as twenty-four.

1 RV: What kind of missions exactly were you flying?

2 RE: Primarily military support of Special Forces. I'd say that was the reason we
3 existed. The Special Forces typically were in locations where a small airstrip would need
4 to be developed, initially just bulldozed out and then eventually pierced steel planking
5 would be put in place, and they would be very short fields, in many cases, immediately
6 adjacent to a Special Forces camp, which would be built up with a combination of
7 trenches and sandbags and watchtowers and barbed wire and such things.

8 RV: And you would take all of these supplies out there to them?

9 RE: Hmm. I don't know about the 'all.' If there were air strips adequate, and
10 there would be in some fields—there could be 123s and possibly even 130s coming in
11 and in some cases, particularly when they'd be under attack, you'd quite often have aerial
12 drops. That was not a common procedure for us at Vung Tau, but we did practice them.
13 We were proficient in both air drops and what we called lolex, low-level extraction, in
14 which we would fly in at treetop level, come down just skimming the ground with our
15 cargo door open, and at a given signal, the cargo would be pushed out, in most cases with
16 a parachute helping pull it out and slow it down as it hit the ground, and in a few cases,
17 just shoved out without a parachute.

18 RV: That sounds like amazing flying. How long did it take you to learn
19 something like that?

20 RE: (laughs) Oh, I suppose you could say that you never learn it completely, and
21 the more you did it, the more proficient you became in terms of knowing exactly when to
22 call the signal for extraction and have it come down exactly where you wanted it to. But
23 I think we had some of that training at Ft. Benning, and that was just a matter of a
24 refresher. I suppose some people never learned it, and they dumped their loads beyond
25 the field and some were Johnny right on the spot. So I supposed you could say it might
26 take a series of five practice sessions to learn it, but having said that, how well you
27 learned it and how much you improved with practice might be a variable.

28 RV: Would you mind describing how you do that when you come into—you're
29 down on treetop level like that and how difficult that must have been?

30 RE: You circle the field, see exactly where you want to set it down, and in that
31 process, you determine at what point you're going to lead the extraction, so that as the

1 chute pulls the cargo out and recognizing the delay in having people get it shoved out.
2 You've got rollers in the back of the aircraft, and the rollers extend onto the ramp. So
3 when the signal is given for extraction, you simultaneously, the crew in the rear of the
4 aircraft puts pressure on to push the load out, and simultaneously as a pilot, you nose up
5 the aircraft, so that the aircraft is pitched up, and it makes it easy for the load to roll out
6 the back. So it's a matter of judgment, how much you need to lead the point at which
7 you do all this, so that by the time the load is out, the parachute grabs it, slows it down, it
8 hits at the front end of where you want it to land, and then it slides on down the space
9 where you expect it to slow down. And if your judgment isn't right, why, the load might
10 come down at the very end of the drop zone, and I've got to confess, on one occasion, the
11 first time I did this, my load went into some barn-like building which was at the end of
12 the drop zone, so I did not do a good job on that occasion.

13 RV: How long did it take you to learn how to get that right?

14 RE: Well, I probably only did it four times in my whole career, and it was sort of
15 an exciting experience each time, and I'd say I probably never learned it to the point
16 where I could predict with absolute confidence that I would drop it to the pinpoint basis.
17 So you could say I learned it in a week, or you could say I never learned it (laughs).

18 RV: What kind of crew did you have on board the Caribou?

19 RE: A pilot, a co-pilot, and a crew chief, a three-person crew, typically.

20 RV: Okay. And did you all stay together as a team or would that kind of—

21 RE: No, we did not have crew integrity. It would vary depending on the unit. To
22 some extent, we tended to repeat a crew, but we really did not have crew integrity.

23 RV: Was that a problem?

24 RE: No. The units were relatively small. We all knew one another, and it was not
25 a big thing.

26 RV: Tell me about that. Who were you serving with? What was your unit like,
27 the individuals in it?

28 RE: Well, most of us that went over early typically flew similar aircraft to the
29 degree in which it was possible. I had come from C-47 and SA-16 experience, but I
30 guess that was the intent, to get as many people with that kind of experience in, but even
31 initially, we also had some brand-new pilots right out of pilot training, and this was their

1 first assignment, and we had people from SAC and MAC, many from desk assignments,
2 so we were a very mixed group in terms of experience, but we had the common
3 experience of Ft. Benning training before we came over there, so we all knew the aircraft.
4 Let's see. When I got there my roommate and I, Tom Martin, were roommates in a small
5 compound where we had a room in Vung Tau, which was sort of across the street from
6 the officer's club, which was a sort of a small hotel with dining facilities. So we lived in
7 there I guess our whole tour, but at some point while we were there we [the squadron]
8 acquired some kind of a little building in which we developed our own little club. We
9 called it the Copa Cabaña, I think. We built a bar, and we hired a local gal to be our
10 bartender, and so that was our typical gathering spot. It seems to me that may have
11 happened about halfway through my assignment.

12 RV: This was there right there where you slept and where you lived?

13 RE: No.

14 RV: Was it adjacent to where you lived, or was it within the same proximity?

15 RE: Same proximity. I can't tell you exactly what that set up was or what else
16 was with us now. That's funny. Yeah, I don't remember, and I don't remember just
17 what the protective—if that was in a compound or what our situation was.

18 RV: Well, while we're on the subject, tell me about where you lived. What was
19 that room with Tom like, the quarters where you lived?

20 RE: Oh, I guess it was a whitewashed stone or cement block building with a front
21 door, sort of like a motel, I guess, although it was just a room. It had a couple desks in it
22 and a couple of beds.

23 RV: And did you have air conditioning?

24 RE: By golly, that's a good question.

25 RV: I know that a lot of pilots did have air conditioning when they were there.

26 RE: Yeah. I don't remember, but I would guess probably we did because I don't
27 recall being uncomfortable. So I would guess we had air conditioning, yeah.

28 RV: What would you all do with your down time? Obviously you had the bar
29 there. That's a significant thing, but what would you do with the time away from flying
30 and really your entertainment?

1 RE: Well, there were nightspots. Restaurants were relatively inexpensive, so we
2 would eat out on some occasions; we would eat in the club on some occasions. There
3 would be special events. Once we had our own club, we would typically gather in there,
4 sometimes for the evening, some for a drink or two before we went out to eat.
5 Correspondence was a significant thing for me. I had an extensive regular
6 communication with my wife and my folks, and we had little tape recorders. We would
7 exchange audiotapes back and forth, little cassettes that we mailed back and forth, as well
8 as writing letters. And there was an Australian Caribou unit also stationed at Vung Tau,
9 and we would quite often socialized with them, particularly on a few occasions where
10 there were squadron parties, and they were beach parties in which we'd have outdoor
11 barbeque and drinks and just general camaraderie on the beach. [Many of us also spent
12 considerable time taking correspondence courses.]

13 RV: Tell me about the Australians. What were they like?

14 RE: They loved their beer, and they were jovial, good pilots, a lot of fun. We
15 didn't have extensive contact with them, but they were there, and they liked the airplane,
16 and it was, as I said, probably more of an institution in Australia than they were [it was]
17 in the United States.

18 RV: Did you work with any New Zealanders?

19 RE: I did not.

20 RV: How about South Vietnamese Air Force personnel or any others. You've
21 mentioned ARVN. Tell me about the South Vietnamese military. What were they like?
22 What impression did they make on you?

23 RE: Well, the only contact that I had with them was in transporting them on
24 occasion, so I guess my contact with them was as cargo or as passengers. I never
25 communicated with them as such. It was not a part of our duties. They were not
26 involved in our immediate control and conversation, so other than observing them, I
27 wouldn't have a whole lot that I could say about them.

28 RV: Did you hear about their reputation? What did you hear about them as
29 troops?

30 RE: Nothing.

1 RV: Okay. Tell me about the Vietnamese civilians. What did you think of the
2 folks that you—you said you hired a girl to be your bartender?

3 RE: Oh, charming. Generally attractive, nicely dressed. As a matter of fact,
4 mixing with them in town, they were accustomed to serving a vacationing population, so
5 perhaps they were even more cordial and accommodating. Well, I don't know. That's
6 probably the case wherever there were U.S. military, that they would interact with
7 whatever indigenous people in the surrounding area. But they were very friendly, very
8 accommodating, and I don't recall just how it happened, but I became acquainted with a
9 Vietnamese artist, and I had him paint my family from photographs that I had with me, so
10 I have a painting about thirty by forty inches that's hanging in our bedroom. The canvas is
11 about thirty by forty inches, and he did a great job.

12 RV: Wow. So you were able to mix freely with the locals.

13 RE: Absolutely.

14 RV: Tell me about being in an R&R facility. When you go into town, you are
15 seeing men come in and out and this Vung Tau has a reputation for being this beautiful
16 resort area. What was it like being in this R&R atmosphere?

17 RE: Well, I don't think, other than knowing it was an R&R destination, I don't
18 think there was any carnival or resort atmosphere, per se. Vung Tau is a lovely city
19 coastal area, so it was very attractive, and it had a number of restaurants, but I was not
20 conscious at all of any vast number of U.S. military strolling the streets or anything like
21 that. Certainly no more than I would at Bien Hoa or Da Nang or any place else. It was
22 just—I would just say that Vung Tau is an attractive town and an enjoyable place in
23 terms of restaurants and beaches and what have you, so it was nice and relatively
24 isolated, so I think in general, there was a feeling of much greater security, and certainly
25 during the time we were there it was before the TET Offensive, and there wasn't any
26 super sensitivity to [about] security in general wherever we flew.

27 RV: Right. You're there in 1966. You get there in October, 1966. What did you
28 understand at that point why you were there? Obviously to perform your daily missions,
29 but what about the United States and why it was in South Vietnam? Did your view
30 change once you were there and saw it and lived it?

1 RE: No, I don't think so. I suppose the gnawing question was always there with
2 me. As I had mentioned early, the average Vietnamese didn't understand politics. They
3 knew that they were under French domination for many years and were interested in
4 independence, but in general, their main concern is feeding their family and where would
5 their next bowl of rice come from? The Viet Cong and the battle between the North
6 Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese, the concern about the North Vietnamese
7 dominating the South, that seemed unjust. The notion of encroaching, Communism and
8 combating that, it was legitimate to be there, and that view did not change on [my] part
9 from before I got there until after I had left. And the idea of success or failure, we
10 seemed to be successful throughout the time I was there, and the doubts would come in
11 subsequent years, particularly after the TET Offensive.

12 RV: Okay. Sir, I'd like to get back to the Caribou and some of your missions.
13 What missions stand out in your mind? What do you remember as the more significant
14 ones?

15 RE: Well, the mission that stand out in my mind, and I can't tell you where it was
16 right now. I think you've got the documentation of wherever it was that I got my
17 distinguished flying cross, but that particular mission was at a field that was under attack,
18 and we had to come in with ammunition. That was one of the few missions that I flew
19 where ammunition was our primary cargo and was urgently required. And that particular
20 airfield had all kinds of activity going on—helicopters flying all over the place and just
21 exactly how we were going to get in and offload and get out again in a short time was
22 questionable, so that was sort of exciting. So that mission stands out from that
23 perspective.

24 RV: What was the action? Basically going into a hot area carrying ammunition
25 and performing well?

26 RE: What was the action?

27 RV: I mean, why were you awarded the DFC? What was special about the
28 mission?

29 RE: Oh. Well, it was hazardous getting in, and I don't know. I hate to heap
30 praise upon myself, but the challenges of getting into a field that was under attack with
31 multiple missions taking place simultaneously and safely getting in and safely getting out

1 in a short field took a little bit of doing, and we got in safely, and we got out safely. So
2 (laughs) I suppose a survivor can get an award.

3 RV: Well, tell me about the first time you came under fire. Do you remember
4 that?

5 RE: Oh, I didn't come under fire a great deal. That may have been the only
6 occasion. We would be fired upon whether we knew it or not, and some of our sorties
7 would pick up an occasional bullet hole in the aircraft not knowing that we had been
8 under fire. So I can't say that I was exposed to a great deal of hostile fire while we were
9 there.

10 RV: How did it feel to be under fire? Do you remember your thoughts or
11 feelings, or did you even think about that at all?

12 RE: No, I didn't have any particular thoughts. My thoughts were about the
13 mission we had to do, analyzing the situation around the airfield, figuring out just how to
14 get in and how to get out, get it done. There weren't any particular feelings about the
15 hostile fire. I suppose there had to have been a little bit of extra adrenaline flowing with
16 those circumstances, but all of our missions required an analysis of what was going on,
17 surveillance before you go in, and if things looked threatening, just minimize your
18 exposure and minimize your risk. And in the caribou particularly, our primary tactic was
19 to fly in high, weather permitting, descend in a spiral, and so you're coming in directly
20 over the field, minimizing the exposure to any forces that might be away from the Special
21 Forces camp that could be shooting at you. So without particularly knowing how great
22 the threat was we typically would take evasive action whether we knew it was necessary
23 or not.

24 RV: Was that something taught to you, or did you all figure that out on the fly
25 right there?

26 RE: Well, yeah, we figured it out, and we were taught it. As I said, that was a part
27 of what I caught onto and put into our standard operating procedures while I was chief of
28 stan-eval.

29 RV: I wanted to ask you about that. You transition from co-pilot to pilot then to
30 flight commander. What's the distinction between pilot and flight commander?

1 RE: Oh, nothing. A flight commander is an administrative role where you
2 supervise a flight involving several aircrews, so you just have some additional
3 responsibility besides being a pilot.

4 RV: And then you went to flight examiner. What was that role?

5 RE: A flight examiner would take a newly assigned pilot after having been
6 instructed by instructor pilots within the unit for his final examination to certify him as an
7 aircraft commander for proficiency. So it's just a role for a more proficient individual
8 examining a relatively new person and certifying him. So it's a person who certifies the
9 pilots for whatever level they're being certified for.

10 RV: Were you trained for that and taught that while you were there at Vung Tau,
11 this position and what your duties were as the examiner?

12 RE: Well, I guess that's a part of—as you're trained to be a pilot, that's
13 proficiency. As your proficiency gets to the point where you are accepted as having
14 standards, why, you just do the same thing that someone else has done with you. So the
15 training is continuous. You're being trained, you could say, to be a flight examiner once
16 you're being trained to be a pilot. Once you achieve the standards you're supposed to
17 have, you practice them. As you fly more your proficiency develops. A chief of stan-
18 eval would typically certify a flight examiner, and that flight examiner, at some point,
19 would become chief of stan-eval and certify another one. So the training is sort of on a
20 continuum. I'm not sure there's any special training for a flight examiner, per se.

21 RV: How were these individuals, how were you selected to do this? Was this
22 everybody going through this or were individuals selected?

23 RE: All pilots. You're just there. If the unit loses a flight examiner to rotation,
24 you need another flight examiner, so the operations officer would look around and know
25 who's the most proficient person, and that person becomes the flight examiner.

26 RV: Seems easy enough then.

27 RE: Sure.

28 RV: What other missions stand out in your mind besides your DFC mission?

29 RE: Hmm. I suppose, just generalizing, mission in the monsoon season. While I
30 was there, we would typically fly on visual flight rules or visual flight rules on top, VFR
31 and VFR on top. VFR on top means that you've got an overcast condition that's

1 relatively low, so you can't fly on visual flight rules, so you fly through the clouds, and
2 then you're on top of them, and then you're visual. So you would depart Vung Tau, let's
3 say, and you spiral up until you're above the clouds, and then you fly to your destination.
4 You can't see your destination because of the under-cast. You're flying VFR on top, and
5 then you have to let down through the clouds to your station. When you're on instrument
6 flight rules, you are flying on radio navigation or radar navigation, and you're under
7 direct control of controlling forces on the ground. Well, when I was there we didn't have
8 that throughout Vietnam, so that's why we had to fly VFR on top. You get to a
9 destination, and you'd have local controllers on the ground that would know who was
10 flying up there, and you could come in on a very high frequency or radio range low
11 frequency. In a few cases it was an ILS, instrument landing system, and in a few cases,
12 you could make ground controlled approach, a GCA radar approach. On a particular
13 mission, I recall having flown to Da Nang. All their radio aides were out, so we had to
14 fly over the field and just let down in a spiral through the clouds until we broke out in the
15 bottom, and it was pretty marginal, and that was just a little hairy. It was difficult to see
16 and get around, so the adrenaline was certainly flowing on that mission. And sort of
17 routine, another mission, flying relatively close to the North Vietnamese border, I made a
18 ground controlled approach in a heavy rain shower, and we broke out just at minimums,
19 and the field was there in front of us, and that was a little bit exciting.

20 RV: Can you explain what you mean by 'broke out at minimums?'

21 RE: Ground controlled approach [(GCA)] is a controlled approach under a radar
22 control where they are following you on their radar, and I, as a pilot, am flying on
23 instruments, maintaining a glide slope and you watch your rate of descent. [The GCA
24 controller tells the pilot when to re-cend, 'too high,' 'too low,' 'go around', etc.]
25 Typically it might be at three hundred feet per minute that you're descending, and
26 depending on the particular approach, your minimum typically would be at three hundred
27 feet [above terrain]. That means you should be in visual sight of your destination airfield,
28 so that you can complete your landing visually. You should see the end of the runway or
29 the runway lights once you reach the altitude of three hundred feet above the terrain, so
30 that would be the minimum. So as I'm coming down just looking at my instruments
31 where at the point where we're four hundred feet above the ground, and we don't see the

1 runway yet, and we're just getting to the point where we're three hundred feet above the
2 ground, at which point we need to execute a missed approach where we apply the
3 power again and proceed on our missed approach course and climb up to altitude again.
4 So breaking out at minimums means I'm just about ready to execute that missed
5 approach, and there through the fog and the low clouds, we can just see the end of the
6 runway, and so we come off with the power and finish our landing and slick right on the
7 runway.

8 RV: Okay. Can you describe what kind of cargo you would carry? You
9 mentioned it before, but what you do you remember carrying the most?

10 RE: Oh, I think in terms of U.S. military forces, it would be brown boxes of
11 foodstuffs. Could be palettes of frozen steaks and various and sundry foodstuffs. Quite
12 often we would have palettes and crates put together by Vietnamese supply folks. This
13 kind of stuff we would most commonly be picking up at Saigon or Bien Hoa, and it
14 would be crates of vegetables, crates with some hogs in them and/or a combination of
15 forces. When we'd come into a Special Forces camp, we'd have a load of that kind of
16 stuff, and typically we might have a load for several destinations. Some of it would be
17 left off at this Special Forces camp, some at another, and particularly under Army
18 control, while we'd be dropping off some here, we might be picking up something at
19 another. Most commonly, the pick-ups would be not this kind of stuff, but of people that
20 needed to go from one place to another.

21 RV: Tell me about the American troops you carried around. What was your
22 impression?

23 RE: We didn't carry very many Americans. It was mostly Vietnamese troops.

24 RV: What were your impressions of the Americans you did carry?

25 RE: Let's see. During the time I was there, it could just as well have been in the
26 United States. I mean, they were not grim-face doughboys like you were getting ready to
27 drop them off in combat. They were generally smiling, jovial, not grim, folks that might
28 be the same as getting on a bus in the United States or an airplane in the United States.

29 RV: Would you talk with them?

30 RE: Sure. I don't recall any particular conversations. There was no reason not to
31 talk with them. Sometimes if we had a quick offload and onload, we would, as pilots,

1 just stay in the cockpit, or at least one of us would. The engines might still be running if
2 we had a relatively quick offload and onload, but more commonly, we would shut down
3 the engines, and both pilots would walk on back, supervise with what's going on, talk
4 with anybody that was around a little bit, get back on, and move out.

5 RV: Would you describe what your typical day was like?

6 RE: My typical day would be get up at five thirty, go over to the club, have
7 breakfast, report to the squadron at maybe six thirty or quarter to seven, have our briefing
8 for the mission, climb on the airplane for whatever our departure time was, most
9 commonly probably about seven or seven thirty, take off from Vietnam [Vung Tau], and
10 as I said, during Army Control, proceed onto our first destination and take it from there.
11 We might or might not have an idea of how long our day would be at that point. Fly
12 anywhere from—I guess for a typical day, fly to one Special Forces camp, offload,
13 onload, fly to another Special Forces camp, offload, onload, fly to Tan Son Nhut, unload
14 everybody, pick up a load of materials that they had for us to take to another location,
15 let's say another Special Forces camp. We'd land there, they'd have somebody that
16 would need to go someplace else, we'd take them there, and by that time we might have a
17 call to go to another place, pick somebody up, drop them off, and about this time it might
18 be anywhere between four o'clock and nine o'clock at night, and we'd need to get back
19 to Vung Tau. We'd fly back to Vung Tau, debrief the day's mission, and go eat, and that
20 might be as early as three o'clock in the afternoon, more commonly five or six o'clock,
21 occasionally as late as midnight.

22 RV: So it really depended on how much you had to fly and the weather and things
23 like that.

24 RE: Well, occasionally the weather would influence [take-off] at times, but most
25 commonly it would be how far away our last mission was or how many missions we had.
26 Most commonly, our mission day would not involve the extremes but would be on the
27 order of eight to ten hours. Occasionally, it would be midnight or possibly even later.

28 RV: Was that difficult, flying that many hours, eight to ten hours a day in a war
29 zone?

30 RE: Well, no, because it was not the norm, and you would not have two of those
31 days back to back, and if you had a really late mission like that, you would most likely

1 have the next day off anyway. In fact, most commonly your missions would be on
2 alternating days. Not necessarily, but most commonly you would have missions on
3 alternating days.

4 RV: And would it be seven days a week?

5 RE: Yes.

6 RV: Okay. I want to ask you a little bit more about your life away from the
7 missions. What were your religious services like? Did you have access to churches or
8 services of that nature?

9 RE: As a matter of fact, we did not. In most of my Air Force career, religious
10 services were a regular part of my life and my family's life, and I guess this experience in
11 Vietnam was the one exception to that. I don't recall attending a religious service in my
12 time in Vietnam, and that was an exception to our military service.

13 RV: Right. Did your spiritual views or feelings change because of your war
14 experience?

15 RE: Not at all.

16 RV: Okay. What was the worst place to fly into?

17 RE: Worst? Well, the most difficult is the one that we had talked about.

18 RV: Was there a location where you all would go, 'Oh, I've got to fly here?
19 That's not very fun.'

20 RE: No. Because of the characteristics of the aircraft, particularly for me, I really
21 enjoyed short fieldwork. I just thought that was wonderful, and I never flew into a field
22 where I felt any concern about being able to land safely and in the distance necessary. So
23 having been experienced to short field landing and reversing the props in the SA-16, that
24 was my bag, and I loved it.

25 RV: Why did you like it so much?

26 RE: It was fun flying. It was just that I love flying, it's seat of the pants flying
27 combined with instrument flying and [you could feel the] aircraft. It was not driving a
28 truck. It was flying an airplane, and you knew you were a part of the machine, and you
29 could feel it, and it was just an exhilarating experience. A lot of fun, flying that airplane.
30 I also enjoyed the SA-16. I also enjoyed the C-47. You could do more with the Caribou

1 than the others, and it was more responsive, and it had pretty good power for the size of
2 the airplane.

3 RV: Did you all carry any kind of weapons on your person?

4 RE: We did. We carried a 38 on every mission.

5 RV: And nothing else on the aircraft?

6 RE: No. Every aircrew member had a weapon. I think the enlisted typically
7 carried an M-16.

8 RV: Where was your favorite place to come into. I know you said you like the
9 short strip flying, but was there a particular location that you went into consistently that
10 you really did look forward to or enjoy?

11 RE: Oh, Vung Tau, our home base.

12 RV: Coming back home.

13 RE: Sure. Other than that, no. There wasn't any place. Well, there's where the
14 weather would place a factor. If you had to fly some place in lousy weather with
15 minimum navigational aides, that's the circumstance that was looked upon by [with] the
16 least favor because that would be the most threatening with minimum nav aides and not
17 being able to fly visually. So that inherently was our most hazardous work.

18 RV: Okay. What was your impression of the enemy, of the North Vietnamese
19 and the Viet Cong? This was somebody I take it you didn't really see.

20 RE: Exactly. The enemy was pretty much a nebulous factor for us as assault
21 transport aircrew. In the video of the movies that I took there that you have on file, I took
22 some pictures where we had clear weather and flying along we would occasionally see
23 evidence of smoke from attacks of suspected concentrations of enemy troops.
24 Occasionally we'd go into a Special Forces camp and have time to be toured around, and
25 I took some pictures of a couple of Special Forces camps that you have on file. And so
26 we'd have conversations, and vicariously we could share in the Special Forces
27 experiences where they would go out on firefights and/or have come under attack in their
28 compounds, and we vicariously could understand the exchanged of mortar fire
29 sometimes. But firsthand experience, I never had any at all in terms of contact with
30 enemy forces.

1 RV: You said that you communicated home quite regularly with people in the
2 United States, and you exchanged tapes, is that correct?

3 RE: Yes.

4 RV: How did you get access to the tapes? Were you able to buy them there in
5 Vung Tau?

6 RE: Oh sure. I probably brought them with me from the United States. American
7 forces brought their comfort with them from the United States. Any facility of any size
8 had its post exchange, and you could buy comfort items in the Post Exchange, and I am
9 sure they had videotapes. In fact, they probably had the recorders there also and cameras
10 and cigarettes and sundries and stuff available. And the Special Forces, I suspect a part
11 of what they would be requesting would be stuff like that that somebody would include,
12 and that's probably a part of what we carried in. We carried in BX kind of supplies as
13 well as rations and ammunition.

14 RV: What else would you all do for entertainment? Do you remember music
15 being a part of your life there?

16 RE: Well, let's see. I don't remember live music particularly, but certainly there
17 was whatever the equivalent was of boom boxes at that time. Sure, we had music. I
18 think there were occasions where we'd have unit skits in part of our beach parties and
19 occasionally our self-built and private clubs. The private clubs thing was pretty common
20 in the military units over there. As far as bands or combos, I don't have any recollection
21 of anything like that at Vung Tau, but I know that in Saigon, there was off-post
22 entertainment of that type. I never had occasion to go off post in Saigon or Bien Hoa, so
23 I couldn't elucidate on that. But as far as I know, other than eating in a restaurant, I don't
24 recall any live entertainment in Vung Tau on the part of the economy or in our part in our
25 private military clubs. That's not to say there wasn't any, but I wasn't aware of it.

26 RV: Sure. Did you take an R&R?

27 RE: I took two of them as a matter of fact.

28 RV: Tell me about them.

29 RE: I went to Hong Kong for an R&R, and I had been to Hong Kong previously
30 while stationed in the Philippines, so that was no new experience for me, but I
31 particularly wanted to go because my movie camera that I had brought with me was

1 stolen out of the aircraft one time when I left it in the cockpit on an occasion where we
2 left the airplane, and somehow someone got up there and got it. So I went to Hong Kong,
3 and we did our thing, and I bought a new camera, a Super 8-mm Canon camera. But my
4 main R&R was to Penang, Malaysia, and I had never been there before, so that was
5 interesting to see a bit of a different culture. It was in some respects similar to Hong
6 Kong, a great number of shops in the metropolitan area. I recall going to a botanical
7 garden and taking some pictures there and just generally wandering around in the
8 peaceful, nice environment.

9 RV: How did you pick Penang?

10 RE: Oh, I don't know. I probably had a limited number of choices, and that was
11 the most exotic of what I could have. Depending on the time that you got your R&R,
12 there were limited opportunities. I'm sure I would have selected Australia if I could have
13 gone there. I don't recall if that was one of the places or not. I don't recall what my
14 options were.

15 RV: Okay. Well as you move through Christmas of '66, do you remember how
16 you spent that Christmas?

17 RE: Nope (laughs). I probably flew a mission. I have no idea. There was
18 nothing special about Christmas other than a feeling of being apart from family and
19 missing the normal Christmas.

20 RV: Well as you moved into 1967, were you counting the days before your time
21 was up?

22 RE: Well, that was sort a routine thing that everyone did, but I don't remember
23 making a fetish of it particularly. We knew when our time was up, and we knew we were
24 working until that time.

25 RV: So there was no short-timer calendar or anything like that?

26 RE: I didn't have one. A lot of people did.

27 RV: How did you get along with everybody over there? Was it a tight-knit
28 group?

29 RE: It was no different from other Air Force experiences in general. If anything,
30 we were more intimate because nobody had extended family with them, and so to an
31 increased extent, we within the unit were our own family, and whether you were a night

1 clubber or not, your main routine social outlet was to gather at the club in the evening for
2 a little while. whether you were drinking a beer, a mixed drink, or soft drinks. And that
3 might, for most of us, not have been a part of our non-overseas routines. So I suppose
4 that in itself lended or contributed to extended familiarity and intimacy among us.

5 RV: Sure. Was alcohol or drugs a problem that you saw?

6 RE: No. I know that Vietnam is presented as a major contributing factor to a
7 growing drug culture. Within our flying unit, I did not see any evidence of it being a
8 problem at all, and as far as excessive drinking, I would say that I didn't experience it in
9 any fashion any different from a civilian base in the United States. I didn't mean a
10 civilian base, a U.S. base. You always have a few problem drinkers in society, and I did
11 not see it in our unit particularly. I think the stereotype is probably of more typically
12 Army units with less limited outlets for activity than we probably had at Vung Tau.

13 RV: Well as you drew closer to your time to leave, I wanted to ask you about
14 some that is controversial, is this one-year rotation policy, and it's different from other
15 wars in the United States' history. What did you think about this one year in and one
16 year out?

17 RE: Well, I guess I would not understand the controversy particularly. I think
18 since it's unaccompanied without family, it seems appropriate. The special training that
19 was required for us did not seem excessive, and it provided for an equitable distribution
20 of inconvenience. It seems to me it was very appropriate. I know that there are many
21 instances where people that wanted to go again went for a second experience as
22 volunteers. I don't think—I'm not aware of any Air Force folks that involuntarily went
23 back for a second tour. So I was not caught up in any discussion of controversy
24 regarding a one-year rotation period.

25 RV: So you thought it was okay to pretty much to do your year and leave versus
26 serving for the entire length of the conflict.

27 RE: I would not have been happy to have done that.

28 RV: Why not?

29 RE: Because I love my family, and one year's separation is pretty tolerable. More
30 than that sounds pretty intolerable.

1 RV: Okay. Well tell me about leaving Vietnam. What was that like? How did
2 you feel?

3 RE: I felt fine. I knew from the beginning it would be a year. As the end of the
4 year approached, I acknowledged the year was coming up. There certainly weren't any
5 regrets about leaving. There was a joy of anticipation of reunion with my wife and four
6 kids, so it felt fantastic.

7 RV: What was the flight like home? Did you fly a civilian airline or a military
8 airline?

9 RE: It was a military contract flight as I recall. Boring, long flight but bringing
10 me where I wanted to get to, so that was fine.

11 RV: What was it like coming back into the United States? Was it strange after
12 being gone?

13 RE: Oh, not strange. There wasn't any anti-military or anti-war sentiment of any
14 great magnitude at that time. There certainly was no feeling of rejection among any
15 people that I encountered in coming back, no particular flag-waving or anything either,
16 other than the joy of family and church folks welcoming you back.

17 RV: Did people ask you about the Vietnam War, what you did, and did they want
18 to discuss this?

19 RE: As a matter of fact I don't recall a tremendous amount of interest or inquiry
20 about that. It seems strange, but no, I don't recall much discussion other than in general,
21 'How was it and what did you do?' No, no particularly great curiosity.

22 RV: Did you find it surprising at the time? Did it bother you?

23 RE: No, I didn't have any particular feeling about it. I guess the war was not
24 particularly controversial, I think, through my return in October of '67 so no, the main
25 thing was, 'Gee, nice to have you back again, Ralph.' And I guess I should say that our
26 home church was a very important factor for us. Our pastor was a very frequent visitor in
27 our home with my folks and sort of a foster father/grandfather figure within the home,
28 providing support for my wife and my kids.

29 RV: How much did you talk to your wife about what you had done?

30 RE: As much as she wanted to. I held nothing back. I think the reason there
31 wasn't a whole lot of discussion is because I shared my experience pretty much week by

1 week by audiotape, and so my wife was pretty current on the experience, and there
2 wasn't a whole lot we needed to talk about in coming back.

3 RV: You were pretty forthcoming with her in the tapes, then.

4 RE: Oh sure. I wasn't privy to any military secrets particularly or wasn't asked to
5 withhold anything, so yeah, I had nothing to hide, nothing held back and nothing new to
6 talk about when I got back home.

7 RV: Did you follow the war on television when you got back? And when you
8 came back you came back in October of '67. Where did you go from there? Did you
9 have some time off? I know you went in '68 to St. Mary's for your MBA.

10 RE: I had a bootstrap extension to get my master's degree in personnel
11 management, and let's see, at that time I got my assignment to Athens, Greece, didn't I?

12 RV: Yes, you did. That was coming up.

13 RE: So that was sort of an exciting thing for us, and that required my transition
14 into C-130 turbo-prop aircraft for the special missions that I flew in Greece. And that
15 mission in a classified mission, and I've never been informed that it was declassified, so I
16 can't really talk about that.

17 RV: You're talking about the one in Greece?

18 RE: Yes.

19 RV: Okay. You're there from June '68 to July 1971, and you came back in '71,
20 and you went to Vermont.

21 RE: While I was in Greece, I got the assignment to Air Force ROTC. Oh, I felt
22 horrible about that.

23 RV: Tell me why.

24 RE: It just seemed out of the mainstream of Air Force activities. I thought it
25 would be a career death mill in terms of being promotion-limiting, and I did my darndest
26 to get out of that, and then I was promoted to lieutenant colonel. While I was in Greece, I
27 got the assignment as a major, and I said, 'Oh boy, they probably won't want me as a
28 lieutenant colonel,' so appealed on those grounds. 'Oh, that's fine.' (laughs) So I was
29 assigned as detachment commander then in Northfield, Vermont at Norwich University,
30 which did not have an Air Force ROTC unit. So I was the first Professor of Aerospace
31 Studies and established the Air Fort ROTC unit at Norwich University, which is the

1 oldest private military college in the United States, having been established in 1819 by
2 Alden Partridge who had been a superintendent at West Point. So the Corps of Cadets
3 was modeled after that West Point experience, and ultimately the civilian Corps of Cadets
4 at Norwich became the model for the ROTC program as it was instituted and established
5 by the Army. And at the time I got there, the Army ROTC had been there forever. They
6 already had a Naval ROTC, and we became the Air Force ROTC unit there.

7 RV: What was it like to establish that and be there in that kind of setting, building
8 it from the ground up? Was this more satisfying?

9 RE: Oh, it was wonderful. As much as I resisted the assignment, and among other
10 things, I guess the reason I resisted it was because I had so little continuity in my Air
11 Force career. I've often said every assignment I had seemed to be a rather complete
12 change from everything I had done before. So up until this point, I had been a technical
13 instructor, having been trained as a technical instructor, and then I became a flight
14 instructor and was trained as a flying instructor, and now in the academic environment, I
15 was trained as an academic instructor and became an academic instructor besides all the
16 other stuff I had done in the Air Force. So that was a bit disconcerting on one hand, but
17 challenging and exciting and the antithesis of boredom. And it was a wonderful
18 experience working with the civilian administration and being at once the commander of
19 an Air Force unit and at the same time a professor of Aerospace Studies with academic
20 credentials with Norwich University, reporting to the dean and the president and having
21 associations with them. So it was nice to have a command reporting line through an area
22 commandant, reporting to the university on the military side and with the president of the
23 university on the civilian side. And during that assignment, lo and behold, I was
24 promoted to full-bird colonel, and as a result, I stayed on for a total of four years at
25 Norwich University.

26 RV: It sounded like you were a bit surprised that you were promoted to the full-
27 bird colonel. Was that expected for you?

28 RE: Well, I was hopeful of it, but I think typically to make it to O6, in general,
29 one needs to have a command sponsor and a command identity. In other words, you
30 would more typically be a Strategic Air Command resource. The Caribou pilots that
31 went to Vietnam from a Strategic Air Command unit, after their year in Vietnam, would

1 go back to their Strategic Air Command unit or Military Airlift Command or Tactical Air
2 Command. Well, I never had that kind of identity, but in retrospect, I sort of did keep
3 going to education in training, so I did sort of have an air university identity perhaps, but
4 with that varied mishmash of a background, I was not expecting to make O6, although I
5 was hopeful of it.

6 RV: After this you went to Oklahoma to Altus AFB.

7 RE: Yes (laughs), the circle goes around. My initial activity was as an air
8 electronics officer, and now toward the end of my career, lo and behold, the electronics
9 picks me up again. Not having a command identity particularly, here I came into the Air
10 University and what are they going to do with this colonel of varied background? So
11 exactly how it came about, I have no idea, but I certainly did not have any informal
12 communication or any pull in terms of assignments. And as always, I went where the Air
13 Force sent me, so I wound up as a communicator again at Altus AFB in Combat
14 Communications.

15 RV: And your position there was deputy commander for the combat
16 communication group.

17 RE: And as an O6, I was deputy commander. My boss was an O6, and that
18 assignment was of limited duration. The unit was identified for de-activation [after I
19 arrived], and so I got a new assignment as, let's see, what do you have on your sheet
20 there?

21 RV: Where you went after Altus?

22 RE: Where I went to Randolph—

23 RV: Bergstrom.

24 RE: Bergstrom AFB.

25 RV: Director of Disaster Preparedness

26 RE: Director of Disaster Preparedness for the Central United States, yes.

27 RV: Tell me about that position. What did that entail?

28 RE: There were three areas for disaster preparedness, the eastern United States,
29 central United States, and western United States. Each of the directors of disaster
30 preparedness was an O6 on active duty, but the disaster preparedness was under Air
31 Force Reserve [management], so my immediate commander was an Air Force Reserve

1 general at Robins AFB. Our units involved Air Force Reserve, military and civilian
2 technician people within the unit, and we supervised disaster preparedness programs on
3 all the Air Force bases within our geographical areas, which were active Air Force units.
4 There were regional centers of FEMA, with which most people are familiar, particularly
5 with Katrina in our recent experience, so we had dual military and civilian spheres of
6 influence.

7 RV: Was that a satisfying assignment for you?

8 RE: Well, it was again challenging and required new learnings. I suppose it
9 would not be perceived as a wonderfully ideal situation where you're not in a typical Air
10 Force chain of command and control, but at this point, I recognized I was in my terminal
11 assignment. I had the opportunity to recognize that, purchase our home with the idea of
12 remaining in place after retirement, and as a matter of fact, somewhat similar to my Air
13 Force ROTC assignment, I did find it challenging and interesting and rewarding. Our
14 concerns at that point were still focused on atomic, biological and chemical warfare and
15 those kinds of threats, and so we had those things on both a national civilian level as well
16 as a military base orientation.

17 RV: So when you got out in September 1982 after a very long, distinguished,
18 multi-task career, looking back on your career, what was the most significant
19 assignment? Which one did you enjoy the most?

20 RE: I'll tell you the only valid answer to that is the total Air Force experience.
21 My wife and I both just count our blessings and give thanks so often for the opportunity
22 to have experienced the world in such a unique and wonderful fashion, beginning with
23 Libya and the travels that we were able to perform from there and then the Philippine
24 Islands and then my experience in Vietnam and our experience again from Greece and
25 from those locations to have traveled so much and within the United States to have
26 traveled. And so the experience of humility and wonder and an appreciation of what we
27 have as Americans and recognizing the reality of the lives of so many in so many other
28 parts of the world and to be able to appreciate that more completely, being a part of so
29 many of those populations, as opposed to just quickly traversing a country as tourists, to
30 be able to mingle with the local populous and be able to appreciate individuals and the
31 culture more deeply than just rapidly [all this was a rare privilege]. So it's hard for us to

1 say that any one experience was more significant or more appreciated than any other.
2 Having said that, I personally was fascinated by a particular experience we had while
3 stationed in the Philippines. We were able to travel from a vacation resort area in Luzan
4 called Bagio, the winter capital which is about a mile high in elevation, so it has a very
5 nice climate. But from there, we took an organized tour through the Bantok and Banawi
6 rice terraces. And they were featured at least on this tour as one of the wonders of the
7 world, and indeed, I would consider them such. To see mile after mile after mile of these
8 phenomenally beautiful and extensive rice terraces from the base of a mountain to the top
9 of a mountain under cultivation by manual labor, who knows for how many centuries
10 already taken place. So that was a particularly marvelous experience for us, and for me,
11 competing in wonder with our opportunity to travel up the Nile and see the wonders of
12 the Egypt of the Pharaohs, which is also a part of our travel experience.

13 RV: You did see quite a lot of the world, for sure. I wonder if I could ask you just
14 a couple of general questions before we end the interview.

15 RE: Okay.

16 RV: Looking back, what do you think the lessons learned were from Vietnam for
17 the United States?

18 RE: Beyond my experience, just in general, from our historical perspective today?
19 Well, from a military perspective, we should not engage in active warfare without having
20 a defined military objective, and we did not have a defined military objective in Vietnam,
21 and of course among the various discussions around that, were proponents of atomic and
22 nuclear warfare to combat the Chinese as they got involved and what have you. I am not
23 advocating anything of the sort; I'm just saying that it's ill-defined to engage in warfare
24 of a guerilla type where you don't have a defined objective in which you can say, 'This
25 would be victory.'

26 RV: Do you think the United States has learned those lessons?

27 RE: (laughs) I think it's a continuing process. I think some might want to draw
28 parallels with that and some of our involvements today, particularly Vietnam and
29 Afghanistan, and I guess I wouldn't want to say that they are the same. But I think a
30 second lesson is that we are pretty naïve folks in the United States in having a sort of
31 know it all attitude when we really are pretty deficient in really understanding other

1 cultures. I don't think we understood the Vietnamese psyche and the Vietnamese culture.
2 I suspect that we are rather deficient in understanding the Afghani and Iraqi—you've got
3 to use the plural—cultures because even in Iraq it's not a single culture, and I think we
4 underestimate the result of our involvement sometimes and what we thing might follow
5 logically is based on some faulty premises based on a lack of understanding of the social,
6 economic, mystic, whatever it is in the indigenous mind and psyche. Now, exactly what
7 lessons to be learned out of that are, I don't know, other than to be a little bit less
8 confident of projected outcomes or to be somewhat more humble and to endeavor to be
9 more complete and more sophisticated in analyzing a situation, and certainly appreciating
10 the limits of military power. Military power is an instrument of national power, but it's
11 not necessarily the decisive instrument that we tend to think that it is.

12 RV: What about for yourself? What kind of lessons did you learn for yourself?

13 RE: What lesson did I learn for myself? Well, not necessarily in life, but in
14 general, life is a continuing learning process, and in life, I have learned and continue to
15 learn many things such as I am not perfect. There are limits to my control. Ultimately,
16 the only complete control I can exert is the control over myself. What did I learn?

17 RV: What about say, a significant thing that you found out about yourself there or
18 a significant experience that affected you?

19 RE: No, I think I could not say anything about a single significant experience. I
20 tend to look upon the whole as the experience and appreciate every day on its own and
21 every moment as a moment to be appreciated and savored and whatever contribution I
22 make is a partial contribution among those of others with whom I am associated. I as an
23 individual have unlimited potential, but I as an individual have limited impact (laughs). I
24 don't know. That probably adds up to humility. I don't know what more to say about it.
25 I can't give you any specific talking points, spectacular, reportable incident of great
26 consequence.

27 RV: Okay. Well tell me, have you seen movies or read books on the Vietnam
28 War, and if you have, what is your opinion of them?

29 RE: Oh, yes. I think typically the movies very, very, very, very, very greatly
30 dramatize the individual GI American participant's experience. In that, the typical
31 experience of an American in Vietnam during the time I was there and my exposure even

1 to the Special Forces on the ground was one of great boredom punctuated by periods of
2 great terror. So those periods of great terror and spectacular firefights and such are what
3 provide the drama of Vietnam movies which tend to make that appear on a continuum of
4 day by day experience. But for the average American soldier in Vietnam while I was
5 there, those are exceptional moments and for most, only that. Now for some it may
6 reflect a majority experience, but for the majority, particularly during the year that I was
7 there, the average GI experience was rather humdrum as opposed to as dramatic as the
8 Hollywood movies would make them seem.

9 RV: Okay. Any books that you've read that are significant to mention?

10 RE: No, I'm sorry to say that I cannot point to any books and how they reflect
11 what my experience has been.

12 RV: Okay. Well, sir, let me ask you about this oral history interview. How has it
13 been talking about your experience in Vietnam and really your whole career, but really
14 the war experience you had there?

15 RE: What is the question?

16 RV: What has been your experience of this oral history interview, talking about
17 the Vietnam War?

18 RE: My experience in our talking with one another?

19 RV: That's correct.

20 RE: Oh, appreciation that you're interested (laughs) and that there probably will
21 be some wisdom from the accumulation of interviews and what they distill down to as
22 opposed to making too much of any one interview. And so I appreciate what you're
23 doing from that perspective. I am very surprised at the amount of time you're allocating
24 to this interview and the depth to which you're inquiring into just about anything you
25 could think of, I guess (laughs). So I'm a little surprised that you would take as much
26 time as you are to talk to me.

27 RV: Well, sir, we'll go ahead and end the interview now, and I want to thank you
28 for your time in doing this with us.

29 RE: Good.