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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Walter Bjerneby
Conducted by Kelly Crager
June 10, 11, 16, 2008
Transcribed by Cecily Darwin**

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

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager with the Vietnam Center and Archive
2 conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Walter Bjerneby. Today is ten June 2008.
3 I'm in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Bjerneby is kind enough to join us from his home in
4 Greeley, Colorado. Good afternoon, Mr. Bjerneby.

5 Walter Bjerneby: Howdy.

6 KC: I really appreciate you taking time out of your day today to conduct this
7 interview with us. So let's go ahead and get started with some biographical information.
8 Could you tell me when you were born and where?

9 WB: Okay. January 22nd, 1931, Ketchikan, Alaska.

10 KC: In Alaska?

11 WB: Yep.

12 KC: In the teeth of the Great Depression.

13 WB: Well, the Depression didn't hit Ketchikan very much, so my parents tell me.

14 KC: Is that right? What was the explanation for that? Do you know?

15 WB: I think probably because right then it was very heavily involved in the
16 salmon and halibut fishing. Apparently there was always demand for the product. The
17 town was pretty small, about four thousand, but they had eight canneries there and about
18 fifteen hundred fishing boats based there.

19 KC: Wow, so the entire economy was based on that, I would guess.

1 WB: Yeah.

2 KC: What part of Alaska is this city in?

3 WB: It's southeastern Alaska, a very rainy place there, about two hundred inches
4 a year. It's the first major city you come to when you hit north of Seattle in Alaska, that
5 is.

6 KC: Right. What were your parents' names?

7 WB: Pardon?

8 KC: What were your parents' names?

9 WB: My dad was Walter R. Bjorneby and my mother was Mary Maxine
10 Bjorneby.

11 KC: What did they do for a living?

12 WB: My dad was running the accounting and finance department in the local
13 power and light, power, light, and water company. He was the fifth CPA (certified public
14 accountant) licensed in Alaska.

15 KC: Oh, wow.

16 WB: My mom's parents came up there in 1904 and she was born about 1910 in
17 Douglas, Alaska.

18 KC: Now you say 1904, that will lead me to my next question here. What was it
19 that brought your mother's parents to Alaska in 1904? Was it the gold rush?

20 WB: I really have no idea except they were probably looking for good jobs. They
21 had left Wyoming going to Oregon and then went up to Alaska. Her father was a mining
22 superintendant then he ran a hardware store and then became chief of police in
23 Ketchikan.

24 KC: Terrific. What did your mother do?

25 WB: My mother?

26 KC: Yes.

27 WB: Well, she got married at age twenty and then I came along and she house-
28 wifed.

29 KC: Very good, do you have any—?

30 WB: She had to raise five kids.

1 KC: Five kids. Now what was the breakdown of the children, brothers and
2 sisters?

3 WB: I'm the oldest. I've got a brother a year and half younger than I am and then
4 [three] sisters. One sister about five years younger and then two more sisters about
5 probably twelve and fourteen years younger.

6 KC: How would you describe your childhood growing up there in Ketchikan?

7 WB: Oh, it was great, a great place to be a kid because, number one, there
8 weren't many children around. I think there was probably twelve in my kindergarten
9 class. We had one school K-12. There were so many men and people up there without
10 kids they just kind of tolerated our presence. We could go anywhere and just about do
11 anything and the only thing they did was warn us when we were in danger and push us
12 away so we wouldn't get killed. They used to let us go inside the canneries and watch
13 them work in there.

14 KC: Wow. That's certainly a—

15 WB: Of course, our house is right on the outside of town. It was just wilderness
16 outside of that and we roamed all over the place.

17 KC: Sounds like a very good place to be a kid.

18 WB: Oh, yeah, it was super.

19 KC: What sort of things did you do as a pastime as a child there?

20 WB: First, keep in mind that it rains about nine months of the year and when I
21 say rain I'm talking it can rain an inch an hour. It can rain thirty days straight. So you do
22 a lot of reading. When my grandfather was a mining superintendant, they lived up on
23 Prince of Wales Island and Mom was home schooled like her brother and her two sisters.
24 We all lived in the same house in Ketchikan, a two-story house with an attic. They still
25 had all those books. My brother and I would read them all and we just cut our teeth in the
26 *Book of Knowledge* and read the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and all the other books they
27 had. We didn't play outside too much in the winter. We would put on Sou'wester hats
28 and rubber raincoats and boots and go out and play as long as we could. Of course, we
29 went to school and walked to school in that stuff, about three-quarter of a mile to school.
30 In the summer we were up and gone before the parents ever got up because it was
31 something like fifty-four north latitude so it becomes daylight pretty early. We would just

1 go out and run around the woods. If we wanted some money we would pick blueberries.
2 For a big coffee can you could get a quarter for blueberries.

3 KC: That's a lot of money back then.

4 WB: Yeah, it was. Let's see you put—food prices are pretty high up there, but I
5 think bread was about a quarter a loaf, just to put things in context. We'd fish a lot. We'd
6 fish for lunch, actually, because we were kind of taught by granddad and my uncle, eight
7 years older than I am, and my dad how to take of ourselves out in the woods. We would
8 always have matches and a match safe. We'd have a jack knife. We'd always have the
9 line and hooks and sinkers and stuff like that in our pockets. Then we'd cut an alder
10 branch and go up and catch some trout and build a fire and cook them. Let's see. I can't
11 think of much else. You couldn't get lost up there because you had the sun to navigate by
12 if it was summer. I'll tell you about that northern latitude, you could place tennis at ten at
13 night.

14 KC: In the summertime as long as it wasn't raining I guess, huh? Well, where did
15 you go to school there?

16 WB: Well, there was Main Street School, was the one they had in town. Like I
17 said, K-12, it was I believe a large two-story building kind of up on a hill on the north
18 end of Main Street. I believe it's gone now. When I look at Google Earth I can't find it.
19 So it must've burned or been torn down and rebuilt or something. It was kind of funny up
20 there because it rained so much we hardly ever had any good snow. So when they did
21 have good snow they closed the school for a day. So we would go up and sled on Main
22 Street. They'd actually close all the traffic off Main Street and let us slide down the thing.

23 KC: That good snow is important for a kid.

24 WB: Yeah, they pretty well watched out for us. You couldn't get away with
25 much because everybody knew who you were.

26 KC: What sort of subjects did you like in school?

27 WB: Oh, science, English, reading, history. I never studied any languages there
28 because in 1942 we moved down to Montana and then California. I asked my folks how
29 come we left there. We left sometime around August '42. They said they were worried
30 about tuberculosis because in that rainy climate and they had brought a lot of people in
31 from the Aleutian Islands and, of course, tuberculosis is pretty rampant out in the

1 Aleutians because of the cold, wet weather all the time. Dad knew he could get a job
2 down in southern California so that's where we ended up.

3 KC: Where in southern California?

4 WB: Oh, kind of up around the beach towns. We lived at Manhattan Beach for a
5 while and Hermosa Beach and Palos Verdes and then went up to Ventura. Ventura is
6 where I went to the junior college there. California has got an outstanding junior college
7 system. The public junior colleges, not private, are totally integrated with University of
8 California, same subjects, same syllabus, everything was the same standards.

9 KC: Oh, wow.

10 WB: I was there going to school when the Korean War started out. I had always
11 wanted to fly because there were only two ways off the island Ketchikan is on, one is by
12 boat and the other is by airplane. We'd always go down to the harbor and watch the
13 seaplanes fly out. Back then they didn't have a runway. The place is fjord country so
14 there's just not that much flat ground around. I was always fascinated by airplanes. When
15 the Korean War started out the draft board was after me and I went down and talked to
16 them and I said, "I want to fly airplanes. Can I join the Air Force instead?" They said,
17 "Sure, go ahead." So I enlisted in the Air Force and that started my military career.

18 KC: Were you able to finish your college degree before you entered the Air
19 Force?

20 WB: No, I had three years of college and I just found out that I didn't like my
21 major.

22 KC: Which was?

23 WB: I loved chemistry, but I didn't like the repetitiveness of it and working
24 inside. I found I really wasn't suited for an inside job. I was going in the Air Force to
25 cure that mostly.

26 KC: When did you join the Air Force?

27 WB: I went in August 1951, fifteenth of August.

28 KC: So it was shortly after the—well, I guess it would've been 1950 so it wasn't
29 shortly after.

30 WB: Yeah, well, I had been in—the war started in June of '50.

31 KC: Right. What was your impression of the war?

1 WB: Pardon?

2 KC: What was your impression of the war and U.S. policy in the war?

3 WB: Looking back on it it's kind of a lack of effort, I thought.

4 KC: On the part of—

5 WB: On the part of the U.S. and the part of the U.S. populace.

6 KC: Can you explain that a little bit to me? What do you mean by that?

7 WB: Well, I don't think we ever used our full strength and we never—see, I was
8 familiar with World War II and how we fought that war. We had troops camping on the
9 ballpark out in front of us when I was a kid in Alaska. I never knew what they were for
10 until much later, but they were part of an engineering battalion that put in an Army
11 airfield on the island across the strait from Ketchikan. If you remember, everybody was
12 involved in World War II.

13 KC: Sure.

14 WB: I was an air raid messenger, Civil Defense air raid messenger as was my
15 brother. My dad was an air raid warden down there in California. I can remember the
16 paper drives and the aluminum drives and the metallic tin drives or what everybody
17 wanted to run. They got their toothpaste tubes and stuff like that, and of course rationing.
18 The Korean War was pretty much business as usual and you fight the war with what
19 you've got. The funny part about it was most of the Marines' equipment was ex-Army
20 equipment from World War II that the Army was going to leave in situ in the Pacific and
21 the Marines just loaded up everything they could get their hands on and took it back to
22 California and parked it out there at, not China Lake, at Daggett out there by Barstow,
23 California. It was a big Marine base. What they did there was in the interim period after
24 World War II they overhauled everything, otherwise they wouldn't have anything
25 because they're always on the short end of the Navy budget.

26 KC: Sure, sure. Well, that being the case when you entered the service in 1951
27 what were your expectations? We know you wanted to fly, which is why you joined the
28 Air Force.

29 WB: Well, I took all their tests and I scored very high. The sergeant in charge of
30 assigning people reviewed my test and he looked at me and says, "Well, you made nines
31 on everything. I've got three positions for you, turret mechanic, radar mechanic, and

1 radio mechanic.” I said, “Well, I’ll take airborne radio mechanic,” because I had taken a
2 course in radio maintenance in college just for the heck of it just as an elective. I
3 understood electronics pretty well. Off I went to Scott Air Force Base. I had made private
4 first class out of basic and I made corporal out of radio school and then I went on to
5 aviation cadets. I worked on the flight line at Webb Air Force base down there in Big
6 Spring, Texas, for about five months, I think, before I went to cadet school. Of course,
7 you take—you go TDY (temporary duty) from my base down to San Antonio to take the
8 what they call the stanine course which is a whole big bunch of written tests and a psych
9 evaluation and some psychomotor tests and I passed all that stuff. Then I went off to
10 flying. I found out the Air Force, everything pretty much made sense to me. I could
11 understand why they were telling me what I was supposed to do and even KP (kitchen
12 police) made sense to me once I understood that you can’t afford food poisoning when
13 you’re feeding five hundred guys in the mess hall.

14 KC: Sure. Now was this something that would stretch all the way back to basic
15 training, all the way through?

16 WB: Well, in college, high school and college I had become part of the volunteer
17 fire department in Ventura County. So I was used to team efforts and obeying orders and
18 pitching in and working my tail off to get the job done because there in California, I don’t
19 know what it is like now that they’ve got the professional fire crews, but back then it was
20 totally—they had a small cadre of professionals and a whole lot of volunteers. We didn’t
21 have the fancy gear that they have now. They just hand you one of their big rakes or what
22 I call a mattock, Pulaski or a McCloud, or a double-bitted axe and I was one of the few
23 guys that could use a double-bitted axe.

24 KC: Because of your experiences in Alaska?

25 WB: Yeah, because we used to build cabins and stuff like that. There [on the fire
26 line] you just sleep rough and work until the job is done. Basic training was a piece of
27 cake compared to that.

28 KC: Is that right? Most people, that’s not the affection of most people.

29 WB: Even over in tents we had caught some sleep in. When you slept out in the
30 fire line you picked the nicest place with soft dirt where you could grub the weeds and

1 stuff out of the way and you can kind of nestle down and slept until you could see again
2 and then you went back to work.

3 KC: So pretty easy or non-stressful basic training is what I think I hear you
4 saying here.

5 WB: Oh, it was stressful for some guys. The mamma's boys had problems, but
6 everybody else got along okay.

7 KC: You went for advanced training in Illinois, you say, around the St. Louis
8 area.

9 WB: Yeah, the Scott Air Force Base.

10 KC: Scott, yes.

11 WB: That was a six-month course and it was very interesting because they went
12 through electrical theory first and taught guys Ohm's Law that didn't know what it was
13 and how to use test equipment. Then we built a receiver and all the time we are taking
14 Morse code training and they want you to do fifteen words a minute, which I could back
15 then, but I sure can't do it now. Then you build a transmitter and then you start working
16 on the regular gear, trouble-shooting and seeing how it works. That was pretty
17 interesting. I liked airborne radio because it was not these giant huge cabinets you see at
18 broadcasting stations and radar stations. The only one thing wrong with it was if you had
19 to get inside the airplane in the summer, man, boy was it ever hot in there.

20 KC: I bet it was.

21 WB: It was something like 140% the ambient temperatures because of the sun on
22 it. Oh, and experiencing a Texas norther.

23 KC: Go ahead and explain that to me.

24 WB: You don't know what a norther is?

25 KC: I know, but for those who will be listening.

26 WB: Yeah, it's a very cold front coming down from Canada. Texas, people think,
27 "Oh, sun, desert," and stuff like that, but boy I'll tell you, you get out in that flight line.
28 It's about twenty-five degrees and the wind is blowing about forty miles per hour and
29 you've got twenty airplanes to pre-flight and the sun isn't up yet. It's cold. That and if
30 you get an ice storm then it gets really interesting because driving becomes very, very

1 hazardous. You get that cold front hits the warm moist air from the gulf. Then you can
2 get sheet ice all over the place.

3 KC: Where did you go from Scott once you finished your training here?

4 WB: Scott, I went down to Big Spring by train which was the main primary
5 method of travel back then, train to I forget where and then a Greyhound bus into Big
6 Spring. I got into Big Spring about eight o'clock at night. The place looked pretty good.
7 The lights were on, neon [signs], roads are paved. I said, "This ain't bad at all." I walked
8 up a side street and about two blocks later I ran out of pavement and in the dirt and I said,
9 "Hmm." Some of the New York guys were really shocked when they saw the place.

10 KC: Now what were you doing there in Arkansas?

11 WB: Oh, yeah, coming out of Ketchikan, man, any city was a big city to me then.

12 KC: Sure, sure. What was your primary purpose there in Arkansas? What were
13 you training for here?

14 WB: Not Arkansas, what Arkansas? I wasn't in Arkansas.

15 KC: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you went to Arkansas after Scott.

16 WB: No, I went down to—I left Scott already to go to work in the flight line in
17 Big Spring.

18 KC: Oh, okay, I'm sorry.

19 WB: My next stop was San Antonio for aviation cadet pre-flight and that's
20 basically three months of finding out just exactly how bad you want to fly.

21 KC: Okay, good. Explain that to me.

22 WB: Well, it's stress, busy, busy, busy. You've got very little time to get
23 everything done. You're going to class and you're wearing your uniform. They wake you
24 up early in the morning and you neaten yourself then you neaten your area and you make
25 your bed so you could bounce a quarter over it, everybody knows that; shined shoes,
26 immaculate uniform, which was pretty tough back then with those old starched cotton
27 khakis. Then you go to class, break for lunch, and come back and you have PT (physical
28 training) in the afternoon. They break ranks, in five minutes you're out in the road in PT
29 clothes. So you go out and you do your exercises and whatever sports you can play on
30 that rocky field they had out there, throw the ball around, play a little bit of soccer, stuff
31 like that. Then you've got five minutes and they fall you out in front of the barracks,

1 march you back to the barracks and fall you out and then you've got five minutes to be
2 back out there, after a shower, in uniform again.

3 KC: You were picking it up and setting it down, then, I would assume.

4 WB: Yeah. If you don't want to do that all you have to do is say, "I quit," and
5 you're back where you came from. But there are a lot of guys there that wanted to fly and
6 the interesting part about it is about seventy-five percent of us were enlisted guys.

7 KC: Is that right?

8 WB: Yeah. We had one master sergeant in the group. You could tell on their first
9 formation because they were still wearing their old uniforms, but they had taken the
10 stripes off. The cotton is faded out except where the stripes were. So you could see I had
11 two stripes and some guys had three or four and then we had this one master sergeant
12 who already had ten years in the service, but he had a chance to learn to fly and so he
13 went for it.

14 KC: What kind of training and classes did you go through here?

15 WB: Pretty much how and why we have an Air Force and how it interfaces with
16 the other services and what the various parts of the Air Force do, fighters, bombers,
17 transports, the air-sea rescue stuff, trying to show you what your choices were. Actually
18 not your choice, what you could ask for or what your instructors would decide you were
19 better fitted for. Flight theory, a lot of that, how airplanes work and how the controls
20 interact and how the engines work, communications procedures, flight rules, getting you
21 ready for the actual flight training.

22 KC: Right.

23 WB: Of course, all the time they're taking a look at you, back in the corners
24 they're making notes on you and says, "Will this guy work or won't he?" and checking
25 your attitude and how smart you are and stuff like that.

26 KC: You say they were going through the options, if you want to call them that
27 because they were obviously going to make the final decision. What—?

28 WB: I don't know what it cost to train a pilot now, but back then it cost them
29 about one million dollars.

30 KC: Wow. What did you hope to do?

31 WB: Oh, I wanted to be a fighter pilot.

1 KC: Fighter pilot.

2 WB: Yeah.

3 KC: Any particular plane that you had your eyes on or whatever they would give
4 you?

5 WB: Yeah, right back then it was a Sabre jet.

6 KC: That's what you hoped to fly coming out of here.

7 WB: Yeah.

8 KC: What about your flight training. When does that begin?

9 WB: Let's see. I got to San Antonio about January of '53 and three months later
10 left for Bainbridge, Georgia, for primary flight training. Back then things eased up a little
11 bit like they did in the three months of basic training or pre-flight training. There's a new
12 class that comes in every month. So you're the new class when you first get there and
13 then you're the second class and at last you're first class. You're the guys that are
14 introducing the third class to the "glories" of preflight training. That's also another thing
15 they rate you on, how you behave yourself there, how much common sense you've got.
16 Anyway we showed up at Bainbridge, Georgia, and it was run by an outfit called
17 Southern Airways at the time. They had Piper Cubs and North American T-6Gs,
18 Harvards. The trainer that shows up in just about every movie now is [Japanese] Zeros
19 because they've got a round engine. They've got the glass canopy and they're not that
20 far off from Zeros except in performance. They don't even come close.

21 KC: Sure.

22 WB: Back then they were all painted yellow so everybody could get away from
23 them and realize that this is some idiot flying the airplane and he really doesn't know
24 what he's doing, so stay away from him.

25 KC: Just as well say student driver on the side, I guess.

26 WB: Anyway, they had civilian instructors. Ours was a feisty little guy named
27 Billy Douglas. He had quite a history. He was a crop duster pilot and he was taking time
28 off from crop dusting to instruct there in Bainbridge. He had been a licensed pilot in
29 World War II. He had flown Piper Cubs over there in Europe. He was very hard-nosed,
30 didn't put up with anything at all. My friend, what the heck was this guy's name? I can't

1 even think of his name right now, but he and I were the only two guys in the state with
2 this instructor because the other guys couldn't stand him.

3 KC: Did everyone else wash out?

4 WB: No, they just left and got another instructor. You could do that one time.

5 KC: All be darned.

6 WB: Personality problems.

7 KC: Sure.

8 WB: You could do that one time. The second time you were on the edge and you
9 might fly with one of the military check pilots to see what kind of person you were. If he
10 didn't like you, you were gone. Anyway, Billy Douglas taught me to fly precisely. I
11 could see what he was doing. I was about twenty at the time, smart enough to realize
12 what he was doing and to accept his approach to his problem which is teaching me to fly.
13 I really paid attention and worked at everything and learned how to fly precise
14 instruments and learned how to fly what they call stick and rudder, seat-of-the-pants
15 flying. I really enjoyed it. When we finished there after six months they give you a couple
16 of weeks leave and then I reported to Big Spring, Texas, where I had worked on the flight
17 line only now I'm an aviation cadet and flying the T-28, which is a rather modernized
18 version of a trainer, much more up to date than the T-6 but not nearly as romantic. It was
19 sort of like the difference between a '36 Ford pickup and a 1960 Cadillac.

20 KC: Before we get you back to Big Spring, if you will, since you seem to
21 remember Billy Douglas pretty fondly in some ways, take me through a typical day with
22 Billy Douglas.

23 WB: Well, I can remember—we started out in the Piper Cub and it was pretty
24 funny. I had three hours of instruction in an Aeronca when I was going to college and
25 found out that going to college and keeping my own car running and paying for flight
26 instruction just flat didn't work. So I went ahead and stopped learning how to fly.
27 Anyway, he introduced himself and that was about it. We went out into the—they were
28 giving us twenty-five hours in a Piper Cub at the start because it was a cheap airplane to
29 fly. You could pretty well tell whether the guy is any good at all in the Piper Cub. It was
30 a little 850-pound airplane with 108 horsepower and the student sits in front and the
31 instructor sits in the back. He had a one-way microphone headset up there. He didn't

1 particularly care if I had anything to say or not so I wore the headphones and he talked
2 into the mic. We get out to the end of the runway and he says, "Take off," and I turn
3 around and I said, "I don't know how." He just looks at me kind of disgusted-like and
4 says, "Take off." I said, "Oh, okay." I shoved the power to it and had pretty much the
5 idea of how it worked because I had made a lot of model airplanes. I had already read
6 everything I could about airplanes because I was really hooked on them. We got airborne
7 and we were out there flying around. He shows me how to do a forced landing in case the
8 engine quits and then he says, "There's a watermelon patch over there." He says, "If you
9 ever have to make a dead stick landing I'll expect to find you in a watermelon patch."
10 Before the twenty-five hours were up Jim, the other student, and I knew where the
11 watermelon patches were to [land] in. He was a pretty good guy. He didn't mess around,
12 act friendly or anything at all when we were training, but when we got towards the end
13 then he relaxed some. He and his roommate in his farmhouse would take us out to their
14 place for beer and steaks. So that was pretty cool.

15 KC: Very good. Okay, now take me back again to Big Spring after this time in
16 Georgia.

17 WB: Just one more comment on Douglas and what he taught us.

18 KC: Oh, please.

19 WB: Number one, I had talked about preciseness when flying. Well, he put you
20 under the hood in the T-6 and then you had to navigate using the radios. You would fly
21 along and fly along and fly along and then you would make an approach, which is you
22 come over the radio [station] and record the time you pass over and punch the clock and
23 say a minute and forty-five seconds later on this one particular heading and one particular
24 air speed, actually it isn't a heading, it's ground track because you have to adjust for
25 wind. You have to point the nose up in the wind a little bit to keep going the same
26 direction over the ground. A minute and forty-five seconds or so later you would say,
27 "We're over the field," and he would say, "Come on out and take a look." You would
28 open the hood and look out and by God, you're over the field. He would say, "Nice job,"
29 and that would make you feel pretty good. Then as far as the stick and rudder flying we
30 would do precision acrobatics, make the airplane start off a spin with the nose pointed
31 along a road and stop recovery of the spin with the nose back on the road again, that sort

1 of stuff just as precisely as possible, precise on air speeds, precise on the heading, precise
2 on altitude. What he was doing was forming habits, conditioning us to be very precise in
3 our flying. Later on that saved my butt a couple of times.

4 KC: Later on in training or later on—

5 WB: In the actual Air Force.

6 KC: In the Air Force, okay.

7 WB: Okay, Big Spring, we're there and this was an interesting place. We were in
8 Section Four with a Maj. Risdon B. Wall. He was kind of unique and he wore Air Force
9 wings on the left side and he wore RAF (Royal Air Force) wings on the right side
10 because he had been a member of the Eagle Squadron in the RAF in World War II. He
11 gave us a welcoming speech while we were all standing attention. He didn't bother to
12 give us at ease so we are all standing at attention and he's telling us, "You will learn how
13 to fly precisely to our rules et cetera, et cetera," with a lot of salty language mixed in
14 there. After it was all over and our heads are spinning a little bit from the lecture he said,
15 "Now if any of you take offense at my language and you would like it repeated without
16 the salty language remain." Nobody did. They washed out something like, I don't know,
17 forty-five percent of the class there at Big Spring.

18 KC: You say forty-five percent out of a class of how many?

19 WB: I really don't know. It must've been pretty close to a hundred because we
20 went off to different bases. Anyway, they weren't fooling around at all. We flew the T-
21 28. The T-28 was pretty easy. It was a little bit faster than a T-6 but just another airplane
22 with fancier instruments and a better arranged cockpit. Then we went to the T-33 which
23 was the jet trainer. It took a lot of getting used to because the difference between a
24 propeller airplane and a jet is that big propeller out in front can do two things. It can
25 accelerate you fast or it could slow you down fast. Well, a jet doesn't do this. It kind of
26 coasts like, oh, a 1951 Buick with a Dynaflo transmission. You push the throttle
27 forward in a jet and it'll take a little while to pick up speed. Not the new ones, the old
28 ones were like this. I can remember walking, taxiing out on the runway my first flight
29 alone in the airplane and I'm thinking to myself, "Do I really want to do this?" I get out
30 there in this, "Oh, hell yes." Ride it up and let go of the brakes and off we went. That T-
31 33 is a very old airplane. The first ones were made out of P-80 jet fighters where they

1 extended the fuselage about 33 inches for another seat, but they still do about 550 miles
2 an hour.

3 KC: The first time you were up in a jet, what was going through your mind?

4 WB: Oh, gee, here I am. Wow.

5 KC: You had arrived.

6 WB: It's got a—a T-33 is a beautiful airplane to fly and look around in. It's got
7 this tremendous huge transparent plastic canopy and there's no frames on it or anything
8 like that. The only frame was up on the windshield right in front of. You can look out of
9 that thing in all directions and, man, you're moving four hundred miles an hour and the
10 controls are really light. You have a little trouble flying in the first place because the
11 ailerons, the roll control is boosted, is boosted something like fifty to one and in effect it
12 has power steering. So you're always sitting there kind of wing rocking until you learn to
13 hold [the control stick] very, very still.

14 KC: Now how old were you the first time you flew this jet?

15 WB: First time I flew the jet?

16 KC: Mm-hmm.

17 WB: That would've been '53 so I was twenty-two years old.

18 KC: Twenty-two years old with all this power and speed. That must've felt pretty
19 good.

20 WB: Oh, yeah, but later on, later on there's a whole quantum change in power
21 and speed.

22 KC: Sure, sure and we'll certainly get there. So while you're going through all
23 this training, and very successfully by the sounds of it, in the summer of 1953, of course,
24 the Korean War—well, there's a truce in the Korean War.

25 WB: Yeah.

26 KC: Did you have some idea that maybe you wouldn't get involved in the action
27 in Korea?

28 WB: Well, that was kind of remote. We didn't pay a heck of a lot of attention to
29 it because it's out of your hands. You've got nothing to say about it. Yeah, I was kind of
30 wanting to get over there and find out what was going on, but there had been so many
31 little games played in the negotiations bit that we just—you couldn't anticipate anything.

1 KC: Sure and it sounds like you were busy enough preparing and training there at
2 Big Spring. Before we get you out of Texas this time what other planes did you train on if
3 any?

4 WB: Well, that was the four airplanes, the Piper Cub, the T-6, the T-28, and the
5 T-33 were it. There at Big Spring in April of 1954, April 28th, 1954 is when we
6 graduated. You get your commission, your second lieutenant commission in the Reserve
7 Air Force and you get your wings at the same ceremony.

8 KC: So you've made it. You're a full-fledged pilot.

9 WB: Yeah, actually you're a pilot all right, but none of the guys on the active
10 duty squadrons consider you anything except another dumb second lieutenant.

11 KC: Well, once you had finished here what did you hope to do next?

12 WB: This is where we got our assignments and I didn't set any records, but I was
13 high enough in the class to get the F-86 Sabre jet. I forgot to say that out of primary
14 training, which was Bainbridge, the instructors and the military check pilots, they all got
15 together and decided who was going where, who was going to single engine and who was
16 going to multi-engines to fly bombers and transports. A lot of that was attitude and ability
17 because if you don't have aggressiveness you're wasted in a fighter.

18 KC: Sure.

19 WB: So they sorted us out and we went to Big Spring and the rest of the guys
20 went to Reese Air Force base to learn how to fly multi-engine airplanes. I've got a good
21 friend here in town and he flew multi-engine airplanes all his life and he said he thought
22 it was the greatest thing in the world because he said, "You take off, gear up, flaps up,
23 and trim the airplane for flying, set climb power, reach back and somebody puts a cup of
24 coffee in your hand." I looked at him and I said, "What?"

25 KC: That's completely different experience from your side of it. Well, where did
26 you go after you received your wings?

27 WB: Well, after Big Spring I went to Nellis Air Force base to learn how to fly the
28 F-86 Sabre jet. That was kind of an interesting experience because there were no two-
29 seaters. The first time you flew a Sabre jet you were all alone. Here's about twenty-five
30 of us in the class and they're giving us the ground school for the Sabre jet which takes
31 about a week that teaches the systems, the unique things about the airplane. I remember

1 the first day we sat in class, it was right at the beginning. They turned on this movie and
2 there's this big blue screen up there and all of a sudden the music from Sabre Dance,
3 Khachaturian's Sabre Dance starts and here comes an F-86 doing rolls coming across the
4 screen. Everybody in there's going, "Oh, wow," 'cause we're going to get to fly that
5 airplane.

6 KC: I bet.

7 WB: There was something really unique about this because the first you go out
8 the instructor is standing on the steps outside looking in the cockpit at you as you start the
9 engine. He's going to make sure you're not going to burn up the engine because those old
10 things were pretty tricky to start. If you shoved too much gas in it too early you could
11 over temp it which meant an engine change. Anyway, he would leave once he saw the
12 airplane was up at idle and the next thing you knew he was sitting in his cockpit yelling at
13 you to hurry up because he's all done and he's ready to go and you're still going through
14 the procedures, first time you had been in the airplane sitting there with the whole thing
15 and ready for taxi. You take off and he's right there behind you and he's following you
16 all the way through to make sure you're not doing anything dumb. You go out and fly the
17 airplane around a little bit and do some acrobatics and have fun and he says, "Okay, let's
18 go back and shoot some landings." You go back in there and you shoot two touch-and-go
19 landings and then the third one is full stop because now you're out of gas. You come
20 back in and he says, "What do you think of it?" You say, "Man, oh, man," the greatest
21 thing in the world since sliced bread. Then they turn you loose for eight solo rides. I
22 always thought, "Man, they had a lot of guts to do that."

23 KC: That seems rather quick.

24 WB: How smart are w? We were twenty-three years old and they say, "Don't go
25 out and fly formation, don't buzz." Of course, you meet your buddy and you're out there
26 flying formation with him. I can remember this friend of mine and I we're letting down
27 alongside each other coming up, I forget the name of the lake, it's north of Parker Dam
28 on the Colorado River. We're sitting there looking at each other side by side about 30
29 feet apart and we were doing about 350 and letting it down until we're blowing up water
30 with our exhaust, jet exhaust. Then about that time we see a couple of boats ahead of us
31 and we don't want to be caught buzzing so up we go, go off someplace else and harass

1 somebody else. That airplane goes supersonic in a dive so we sent a lot of time booming
2 people just for the hell of it. I can remember one time in there I don't know how this ever
3 started, but I was the number four man in trail, oh, a couple hundred yards apart. We're
4 down in the bottom of the Grand Canyon, I mean about a hundred feet off the bottom.

5 KC: My goodness.

6 WB: Yeah, it was fun.

7 KC: Twenty-three year olds in charge of a piece of equipment like that.

8 WB: Yeah. Anyway, they taught us how to use the airplane, taught us how to
9 stay in formation, how to stay and do the flight tactical formation where you get your
10 four airplanes to spread out in two and two, the two elements about five thousand feet
11 apart and the two fighters each about fifteen hundred feet apart. So you can look around
12 and see and then maneuver, stay together as a flight and how to dogfight and how to
13 shoot air-to-air.

14 KC: That was the next thing I was going to ask you is about weapons training on
15 these planes. Had you gone through much of this yet?

16 WB: Yeah, we had [six] little practice bombs that would fit in the dispenser of
17 the airplane. So you would dive bomb, a sixty degree dive from about fifteen thousand
18 feet and bottom out at about a thousand feet above the ground and try and hit the target.
19 We would fire training rockets out of it which are extremely inaccurate. If you ever hit
20 anything with one of those things you're just lucky. How to strafe, we did low angle
21 strafe and then high angle strafe. High angle is at sixty degrees and it's at that angle
22 because if a guy's down in the fox hole and you do a low angle strafe you're not going to
23 hit him. But if you strafe from that sixty degree dive the bullet is coming down about
24 seventy degrees because it drops during the path. Also on high angle strafe if you time it
25 right and you know where the target is you can move around so the sun is right at your
26 back. Have you ever seen the pilot's rainbow?

27 KC: No.

28 WB: Next time you're in a commercial airplane look out the window if the sun is
29 high in the sky and you can look out on the other side of the airplane and the sun's rays
30 will diffract around the airplane and form kind of a little circular rainbow or an iris on the

1 cloud. You can see it on the ground when you're flying. So if you put that right in the
2 target you're coming right out of the sun.

3 KC: Is that something that you picked up on your own or was that something you
4 were trained to find?

5 WB: Oh, the guys mentioned it. If you're coming in fast enough, if you're doing
6 say .95 on the approach they can't hear you coming because you're traveling right at just
7 about the speed of sound.

8 KC: Sure. When did you finish up training here?

9 WB: I finished up at the end of July.

10 KC: We're still in 1954?

11 WB: Yeah. We got our assignments out of there and I was going to Okinawa to
12 the 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing. I also had a date to get married the fourteenth of
13 August. I met this girl at Big Spring and we clicked. I actually met her when I was a
14 corporal down there.

15 KC: The first time around.

16 WB: Yeah. She was a graduate of, what is it called, Tessa then, Texas State
17 College for Women. She was working out a debt to the state of Texas working in the state
18 hospital there at Big Spring, but somehow we just clicked. We're still married. She's
19 sitting here right alongside of me.

20 KC: That's terrific, terrific. So you get married and are on your way to Okinawa
21 and this was in August of 1954, you say?

22 WB: Well, I had thirty days of leave now. So I didn't leave for Okinawa until
23 about the middle of September. Of course, that's quite a trip back then. You fly out and
24 you're on an airplane with propellers on it and flying west takes you about thirty-seven
25 hours to get to Japan. People are familiar with the jets don't appreciate the difference.
26 There's quite a difference.

27 KC: I'm sure there is. Was your wife able to come with you?

28 WB: No. I was a second lieutenant and the—I forget what their priorities were,
29 but she didn't join me for about ten months.

30 KC: But she did join you in Okinawa eventually?

1 WB: Yeah. We really enjoyed Okinawa. It's quite crowded now, but back then it
2 wasn't crowded at all. It's kind of like the fact that you are overseas and for instance
3 there isn't any fresh milk over there. It all comes out of an iron cow back then and it was
4 pretty tough to get fresh vegetables. On the other hand the climate's about like Florida in
5 the summer outside of the fact that you do have typhoons now and then to harass you.
6 The flying was fun. The squadron was a good group of people, very, very close. Our
7 mission was to—at first we had Sabre jets and the mission was day alert which every
8 time the weather got bad we'd turn the alert mission over to the night fighter guys. Then
9 about six or seven months later they took our Sabres away and made us night fighters so
10 we stayed on alert all the time and then we had to fly at night and in the weather which
11 was a change.

12 KC: Take me through a typical, I won't say mission, but take me through a
13 typical exercise there night flying.

14 WB: Oh, night flying?

15 KC: Mm-hmm.

16 WB: Well, I can really talk about sitting alert and getting scrambled off the alert
17 check. We had [F-86Ds] which is a single-engine airplane rather heavier than the Sabre
18 jet. It did have an afterburner and had a radar set, a pretty good radar when it was
19 working. The trouble was the mean time between failures was maybe an hour and a half
20 which means it was a heck to maintain. The airplane itself had about 450 vacuum tubes in
21 it. You can remember the old TVs, there's a finite chance that one of those tubes is going
22 to blow about every time you power in the airplane. Anyway we learned how to use the
23 thing. It didn't have guns on it which was pretty sad come down. It had twenty-four
24 rockets. Where it came from was—this is the Cold War coming up and the Cold War was
25 in being now because they were afraid of Stalin's aggrandizement in Europe where he
26 had taken over those countries. The big thing was Poland and East Germany and all the
27 rest of it. They figured out you can't fly an airplane up the stern of a bomber anymore
28 and expect to get him because he's got radar control tail guns back there. The boffins up
29 at MIT figured, well, we build a radar set in the airplane and put a computer in it and it
30 can track the bomber and you would come in on a 90 to 110 degree crossing paths and
31 the computer can fire rockets at him. The rockets were big enough that one rocket can

1 knock him out of the sky. So that's when they switched from guns to rockets. Missiles
2 hadn't come along yet, but they were still working on them, or they had started working
3 on them.

4 KC: Did you go through much training here with the rockets?

5 WB: Actually what happened was they gave us the interceptors and the flight
6 manuals and left us alone. We didn't even have any instructor pilots. We'd read the flight
7 manuals and say, "Okay, this is the way you're supposed to do it." Basically all became
8 very good on instruments and very good on [effecting] the computer steering which gave
9 you a dot and you had to keep it into a little circle in the center of the scope and you kept
10 it in there by flying the airplane to keep it there. After shooting, oh, a couple of hundred
11 practice intercepts that all became unconscious effort. It's just an automatic reaction. The
12 big problem was keeping the airplanes in commission because they were fairly
13 complicated and again none of our mechanics knew much about it, either. It wasn't until
14 about six to nine months after we got the airplanes we started getting people in from the
15 States that knew what they were doing. And also people to train us and make sure we did
16 everything just right. It was interesting and it was more of a learning experience than
17 anything else because the good, [reliable] interceptors didn't come in until later on. This
18 could do the job, but everything had to work. Like I said, with the mean time between
19 failure the thing had it just wasn't a sure thing every time you went on the airplane that
20 everything would work.

21 KC: Right. Well, your wife joined you I believe you said ten months after you
22 got there. Where did you guys live in Okinawa?

23 WB: Sir?

24 KC: You said your wife joined you I believe it was ten months after you got to
25 Okinawa. Where did you live when you were there?

26 WB: Well, back then if some people—if people had money, if you were getting
27 captain's pay or major or something like that you could actually have a house built there.
28 You didn't get to own the land. You had to rent the land and then sell the house to
29 someone else. I had to wait, being a second lieutenant and pulling down \$331 a month
30 and that includes the \$100 a month for the flight pay. I had to wait for a military home.
31 What we got was a Quonset hut. I don't know if you're familiar with a Quonset hut.

1 KC: Yes, I am. That's not a terribly romantic first home.

2 WB: No. It was kind of a shock to my wife because she had seen all the
3 brochures on military housing on Okinawa and they're all regular U.S. type square
4 houses. She saw this semi-circular thing sitting on the ground that needed a bad coat of
5 paint and she was a little bit shocked, actually a few tears came to her eyes. I had
6 thoughtfully bought a bottle of champagne and it was sitting in the icebox. So a couple of
7 glasses of champagne later she was cheered up.

8 KC: Ease some of the pain, some of the shock.

9 WB: It was a nice location, very pretty location. It was on the western side of
10 Buckner Bay, which is a big bay in Okinawa. So we sit there and there was a green
11 hillside and it's in kind of a shallow valley. You would look out the front door and there
12 was Buckner Bay out there. Then there was a little all-ranks club there in that housing
13 area which is about ten miles away from Naha Air Base on the eastern side of the island.
14 All in all it was a very, very nice place. Our car was coming over on the freighter was
15 going to take quite a while to get there. So I had bought a Lambretta motor scooter. The
16 speed limit on the island, the whole island, was thirty-five miles an hour so a motor
17 scooter was very handy for getting around. We went all over the place on the island on a
18 motor scooter.

19 KC: What did your wife do when she was there? Did she find a job or did she
20 stay at home?

21 WB: She taught school.

22 KC: Really?

23 WB: Yeah, the military, the Army, had just passed a rule that unless you had a
24 high school diploma you couldn't stay in the Army because they still had a lot of guys
25 from World War II with nothing but grammar school education, the eighth grade. She
26 taught them enough to get their GED, brought them up to speed in English and spelling
27 and writing and stuff like that, history and a little bit of social studies background. She
28 said it was just a joy teaching these guys because they all wanted to learn. Right after
29 World War II they had a whole lot of guys left over that didn't have high school
30 diplomas. There were officers in there like me that didn't have a college degree so
31 somebody decided, well, everybody needs a college degree if you're going to be an

1 officer and needed a high school—oh, what the heck was that? There's change falling out
2 my pocket. Anyway, she enjoyed that teaching. It was fun.

3 KC: How long did you remain on Okinawa?

4 WB: We got out early because it was a three-year tour, but she was going to have
5 a baby and they won't let you travel after seven and a half months so we got out about a
6 month early. It was really kind of a confusing sort of thing because that had thrown a
7 curve into personnel. They hadn't really figured out where we were going yet and it
8 wasn't until, oh, I think two weeks before we left that we found out we're going to Kelly
9 Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. I was going to be in a ferrying squadron
10 delivering U.S. airplanes. It turns out that somebody has to pick up the airplane in the
11 factory and take it where it's going. If an outfit is losing airplanes, say they're obsolete,
12 then somebody has to pick up the airplane and take it down to Davis-Monthan [Air Force
13 Base] to what we call the Bone Yard where all the old airplanes are stored.

14 KC: So after being trained to be a fighter pilot and having these experiences that
15 you had so far and understanding how—and how it made you feel about being able to
16 finally do these—

17 WB: Oh, I was flying fighters.

18 KC: I'm sorry.

19 WB: I was still flying fighters. I was delivering fighters from the factory and
20 picking them up at the Bone Yard. It was interesting because I had never taken a cross
21 country in a jet in the United States. I had gone on what we call round-robins, take off
22 from Big Spring and fly up to Lubbock and fly over to Clovis, New Mexico, and fly back
23 to Big Spring and stuff like that, but I had never left Big Spring and gone and landed any
24 place else. So here I am, a typical [mission] would be to pick up an airplane at let's say
25 Columbus, Ohio, and take it down to Davis-Monthan and leave it there, turn it over to the
26 salvage yard. I would go from Davis-Monthan out to Los Angeles on commercial air and
27 pick up a North American F-86D and deliver that to Chalmette, Louisiana, to Alvin
28 Callender Field to the Air Guard down there. I would go from Alvin Callender to
29 someplace else and pick up another airplane and take it wherever they wanted. It was a
30 great experience for me because I really learned how to fly out on my own instead of
31 with radar control or flying on some captain's wing or something like that. I'm now a

1 first lieutenant. My wife hated it. She had a brand new baby and I would be gone three
2 weeks at a crack, back home for a week and then gone three weeks more. That outfit
3 started folding up. They were going to shift all the responsibilities for delivering the
4 fighters to Tactical Air Command. I thought it was kind of funny because I had always
5 thought it was because Military Airlift Command, that was the transport outfit back then,
6 had all the transports. Of course, they're very safe and they never crash or hardly ever
7 and fighters crash about, oh, back then about five times or ten times more. So they got
8 tired of having this happen and they said, "Okay, TAC, you want fighters, you get this,
9 too." So there's 120 pilots in the outfit and it's folding so where are these guys going? I
10 mean, what jobs do they have? This is after the Korean War. So the Air Force is kind of
11 on draw down phase because a lot of them were going to B-47s to fly bombers. Some
12 guys were going to transports. A good friend of mine went to fly a C-124, a big [four-
13 engine] prop transport we used to call it Old Shaky. I'll tell you how slow it is. This
14 friend who was flying supplies to Vietnam in them in a Reserve outfit, it would take him
15 two weeks, one week to get out there and one week to get back.

16 KC: Wow.

17 WB: Anyway, I was ferrying an airplane through Richards-Gebaur Air Base,
18 which is just on the south end of Kansas City and I landed there late Friday night and I'm
19 going to stay the night. I was sitting in the club eating dinner and this gentleman walks
20 over to the table and I look up and it's my old wing commander from Okinawa. He says
21 "Hi," and says, "What are you doing?" and I told him that I was in the ferry squadron
22 down in San Antonio and it was folding up and I didn't know where I was going. He said,
23 "Would you like to fly for me?" "Oh, boy, would I?" He had F-102 squadrons there. F-
24 102 is the big gray delta wing interceptor. I said, "Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I sure would." He
25 says, "Don't worry about a thing. I'll take care of it." When we left San Antonio about
26 two or three weeks later I had orders for Kansas City. We stayed there almost six years.

27 KC: Now when was this? When did you take him up on his offer?

28 WB: This was in, let's see, my daughter was born in '57 in San Antonio so this is
29 about January of '58 we left there and drove up to Kansas City. I checked out in the F-
30 102 and flew it. I got over a thousand hours in it there and from Kansas City we went to
31 Thule, Greenland. The F-102 is a fine airplane.

1 KC: Tell me about that. You seem to be pretty pleased with the F-102. Tell me
2 about that plane and your experiences with it.

3 WB: We had a very good outfit and very good maintenance and for some reason
4 we had four Hughes tech reps so they [virtually] taught all the radar mechanics how to
5 take care of the airplane. The radar in that airplane was superb. We could pick up a jet
6 transport over land even with the clutter from the ground and everything. We could pick
7 up a 707 seventy, seventy-five miles away. I had very little trouble with the radar. The
8 airplane would, when it was brand new, it would do about 1.3 Mach. It had about 950
9 miles of range in it without external tanks and about thirteen hundred miles with external
10 tanks. It could fly straight level at fifty-nine thousand feet. It wasn't the fastest airplane in
11 the world because it had a lot of black boxes in it, about 110 of them. It carried six Falcon
12 missiles and twenty-four rockets. It had a few weak points. It had a terrible canopy
13 design. The V-shaped windshield wasn't bad. That was a low-drag windshield, but the
14 canopy had a solid iron bar over the top of it and if you couldn't get rid of the canopy,
15 you couldn't eject. Where all the other airplanes had plastic up there and if the canopy
16 wouldn't leave you just went up through it.

17 KC: Right.

18 WB: Another design fault was the fuel was all in the wings. So your fuel was
19 split in half, half in one wing and half in the other wing. There was a fuel flow equalizer
20 that was supposed to feed the fuel equally from both tanks. Well, most of the time it did,
21 but if it didn't then you had to turn off the boost pumps on the low side and feed off the
22 high side and equalize the fuel. If you forgot those boost pumps were off then you could
23 run one side dry and now you're facing an air start. That wasn't a really good idea. When
24 they built the 106, which was a follow-on version of that same design with a bigger
25 engine and more smarts in the aerodynamics. They put an engine feed tank in there. So
26 the wings fed the feed tank which always stayed full until you're running out of fuel, but
27 the deuce was very easy on the controls, very precise and a very good instrument
28 platform. The gear was a little fragile. I had heard of a Navy pilot who made a Navy
29 landing in it and collapsed the gear because he just drove the airplane straight into the
30 runway. That's the way they land on a carrier.

31 KC: Sure.

1 WB: I liked the airplane, liked it quite well. I became an instructor pilot in it and
2 a flight examiner and also a test pilot.

3 KC: This is all in Kansas City?

4 WB: Yeah, all in Kansas City, yeah.

5 KC: If you will, Mr. Bjorneby, run me through a typical or a routine day there in
6 Kansas City as a trainer.

7 WB: As a what?

8 KC: You said you were a trainer in the F-102.

9 WB: Oh, you mean to check out a guy in the 102?

10 KC: Yes.

11 WB: Okay. We had an outfit out of Massachusetts that was getting the F-102.
12 They sent a couple of pilots down here to check out and basically what you do is you
13 send this guy through what they call the FTD, field training detachment. They have the
14 important parts of the airplanes all out on big panels so you could see actually how the
15 gear works, how the flight controls work and everything else. He goes through that thing
16 and he studies his flight manual and he's got a big questionnaire to fill out. You sit down
17 there and discuss it with him. Anything he doesn't quite understand you sit there and
18 chalk talk it or actually take him up in the airplane and show what you're talking about.
19 He has to take a blindfold cockpit check and that's one of the things you do with them.
20 You sit there and you call out the controls and he puts his hand on it with his eyes closed
21 and tells you what it is and how he's going to turn it on and off and select a frequency on
22 the UHF (ultra high frequency) radio panel, you count the clicks. If you're flying in
23 formation at night glued on another guy's wing you don't dare take your eyes off him. He
24 says, "Go to channel four," well, you back it off to channel one then count two, three,
25 four and you're on channel four because you can't take your eyes off him. If you lose him
26 you'll never find him again.

27 KC: Right.

28 WB: Okay. You actually go out and demonstrate a walk-around inspection of the
29 airplane, show him how to start it, get in there and take him for the first dollar ride and if
30 he's a good pilot he's flying it. You're going along to keep him out of trouble. I know
31 one thing the 102 did have was a two-seater. It was a very strange design. It was side by

1 side making it one of the more ugly airplanes in the Air Force, but it flies pretty good.
2 You could do about anything he can from the right seat. So he's flying it and the one
3 thing you had to watch out in the 102 was the delta wing as opposed to a straight wing or
4 a mild swept wing. It's got a tremendous change in angle of attack as the speed changes.
5 When you lift off the ground the nose is actually tilted up about fifteen degrees. I don't
6 know whether this was serendipitous or not, but that happens to coincide with the tip of
7 the pitot boom, that big spear up in front of the airplane. The tip of the pitot boom is on
8 the horizon and you've got about a fifteen degree angle. That comes in handy on takeoff
9 and also comes in handy on landing.

10 KC: Sure.

11 WB: But if you ever get slow in that airplane, if you get too slow you've got to
12 drop the nose to pick up speed because even in afterburner there's too much drag. You
13 could fly the airplane down at about 115 knots in afterburner, but it's not going to climb.
14 I mean, you're using up all the power you've got just to hold what you have and you have
15 to lower the nose to accelerate out of it. A little thought will show you if you get too slow
16 or too low on the final you may find out that an afterburner is not enough to break the
17 rate of descent, you're going to land short. That's one thing these guys had trouble with
18 because they had been flying strictly straight-wing airplanes, the F-89 Scorpion. Once
19 they got used to that change in attitude, in effect, you had to maintain a stabilized flight
20 condition, power balanced against air speed against rate of descent, rather than make a
21 last moment adjustment. You just couldn't do that in that airplane.

22 KC: Was this a plane that they grew accustomed to and that they liked more than
23 their previous planes or were you able to find that out?

24 WB: Well, this airplane was a lot more fun to fly and a lot more performance and
25 so, yeah, they liked it.

26 KC: All right. Well, let's take you out of Kansas City. When did you leave
27 Kansas City and where did you go next?

28 WB: I got an assignment to Thule Air Force Base or Thule Air Base in
29 Greenland, the 332nd Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, still flying 102s. It turned out I was
30 the fifth guy for the assignment. Well, apparently the first guy used pull to get out of it,
31 the second guy retired, the third guy was sick, and the fourth guy had a sick wife and I

1 was the fifth guy. That's about, oh, seventy-six north latitude. Thule is not the greatest
2 place in the world.

3 KC: Sure. What did you think about this assignment?

4 WB: The one thing they did was give me my choice of three follow-on bases.
5 They couldn't guarantee which one I was going to get, but I would get one of the three.
6 My choices were Homestead Air Force Base to fly F-104s, Webb Air Force Base which
7 was now—which Big Spring had turned into—it had gotten a name—to fly 104s, and
8 Castle Air Force Base in California to fly F-106s. They said, "You've got Homestead,"
9 and that cheered me up a lot. I wasn't happy about leaving my wife because I wouldn't
10 see her in about five and a half months when I got two weeks leave at mid-tour. It's one
11 of those things, you're in the Air Force. This is part of your duty so you do it.

12 KC: Sure. And you had just the one child at this time?

13 WB: Oh, we had two children.

14 KC: Two children.

15 WB: The first one was born in '57 and the other in '59. The second one was born
16 in Kansas City. It's kind of funny because they were born in the Catholic [St. Mary's]
17 hospital downtown. It took us about three days to think up a name and the nuns were all
18 running around in circles because if a baby dies without a name apparently it goes to
19 limbo, [purgatory] or something like that. I was Episcopalian and my wife was Methodist
20 so we didn't worry about that too much.

21 KC: What name did you eventually settle on, by the way?

22 WB: The first daughter's name is Karen Lee, Karen for my sister and the second
23 one was Lisa Marie. We really had a heck of a time picking a name so we finally settled
24 on that one. It also has to kind of go with Bjorneby.

25 KC: Sure. Well, tell me about your new assignment.

26 WB: Okay. Thule, Greenland, is up on the west coast of Greenland about three
27 quarters of the way up the peninsula and is on the south side of a deep fjord. The big
28 reason it's up there is because it's the first ballistic missile early warning site. This is a
29 tremendously powerful long wave radar. It looks nothing so much like four big drive-in
30 theatres with their screens arranged in a curve. Out where the projector would be is where
31 the transmitter is and that's about a three-million watt radar. This thing scans those

1 screens and the beam is reflected back over the transmitter up into space. What it does it
2 transmits two [beams] of radar energy kind of like a lower sheet and a higher sheet. The
3 idea is if you get something out there that triggers a response to go into the lower sheet
4 and X time later triggers a response to the upper sheet you know the direction it was and
5 the distance and the time between gives you the velocity. If that's a ballistic missile it can
6 show you in a very large oval on the United States if that's where it happens to be aimed,
7 about where it's going to hit. It's about three hundred by five hundred miles. The only
8 funny part about it was it turned out that they hadn't put in time gates on the thing. So a
9 very large object a very long ways away could do a pretty good simulation of a ballistic
10 missile, but this very large object turned out to be the moon. So they had to put in some
11 time gates to only let the specified signals in the specified window of time to be
12 processed by the computer.

13 KC: Yeah, I think you'd want to make that a little more specific, wouldn't you?

14 WB: The funniest thing about it was it was a very big installation and the screen
15 that you're looking at for the map is probably a foot wide by about ten inches high. It
16 seemed kind of an anti-climax to look at that thing.

17 KC: What was your—?

18 WB: Say again.

19 KC: I'm sorry. What were your duties here at Thule?

20 WB: Oh, I was the weapons training officer in the squadron which was to make
21 sure the pilots are all up to speed in tactics and the airplane. We worked on new tactics
22 and things like that. We didn't have—this was more of a half squadron. We had ten
23 airplanes. We had about fifteen pilots and we all lived in one place. We sat alert there,
24 never got a scramble, did training and worked with the GCI site which is a radar site on
25 top of a three-thousand-foot mountain about twenty miles away from the base and flew
26 [with its guidance]. The only good about the whole place was flying because if the
27 weather was terrible, of course, we didn't fly because we had no place else to land. The
28 nearest real air field was 675 miles away. The weather up there's uniformly great unless
29 it's terrible. See, there's not much of a choice between terrible and great. I mean, there's
30 no in-between weather to speak of.

31 KC: What did you do to—?

1 WB: What generally happens is they get a big high pressure area on top of the ice
2 cap and we end up with Chinook winds like we have here in Colorado where the high
3 pressure area starts moving downhill towards us. The icecaps are about ten thousand feet
4 tall in the middle of the place and is about six hundred miles across. You get this—all of
5 a sudden it becomes deathly still and the temperature rises to about thirty or thirty-five
6 degrees. It may have been sitting down fifteen below. Then about two hours later the
7 wind starts blowing and pretty soon all the snow in Greenland is moving sideways at
8 about sixty miles an hour. Then you don't go anyplace. That's what they call a Phase
9 Three. Regardless of where you are you're not supposed to go outside.

10 KC: Well, that leads me to my next question, what did you do to pass your off
11 duty hours or during one of these Phase Threes?

12 WB: Well, I read a lot of books out of the library. I probably should've taken
13 some correspondence courses, but I didn't. We would go down to the BX (base
14 exchange) about three times a week and see what was new on the stores, on the store
15 shelves. I built a lot of model airplanes. I didn't fly really enough. Ideally you fly about
16 four times a week, but we flew two to three times a week each.

17 KC: And what were the planes here again, 102s?

18 WB: Say again.

19 KC: Were they 102s in Greenland as well?

20 WB: Yeah. We had I think nine single-seaters and one two-seater. We could give
21 guys rides in the two-seater. They were pretty flexible on that. I took the base commander
22 up once. He wanted to know why we [flew] closed traffic patterns and I said, "Training."
23 He looked at me and said, "Is that only the reason?" I said, "No, it's a lot of fun." That's
24 where you come in and shoot a landing and you go around and make a real tight pitch up
25 into downwind and you come back in and land again.

26 KC: Well, when did you leave Thule?

27 WB: I left Thule in August of '64. It was something like fifty-two degrees when I
28 left there and I was wearing blues. Oh, I forgot to say we had a softball league up there.
29 Until you've played softball with the sun shining through the fog at thirty-five degrees
30 you don't know what a sore arm is. Anyway, I got down to Kansas City and I was going
31 to call my wife to come get me. [It was about ninety-five degrees.] I said, "Ah, the hell

1 with this,” and grabbed a taxi cab. It was about twenty miles to home. The taxi cab pulled
2 up in front of the house and I got out. My girls saw me and they came running home to
3 Iva and said, “Daddy’s home, daddy’s home,” and she said, “Stop kidding.” “No, he’s
4 home, he’s home, he’s really here.” [Good thing she was home because I didn’t have
5 enough money for cab fare.] The next assignment we were going from Kansas City down
6 to Homestead, Florida. That was the best between-assignments drive we ever took
7 because I had had my wife—we bought a ’61 Chevrolet station wagon there in Kansas
8 City. They made them right there in town, but it didn’t have air conditioning. You know,
9 back in ’61 air conditioning was something nobody had thought too much about.
10 Anyway, thinking about it [and south Florida], I had her take it down to Sears and put on
11 a hang-on air conditioner. That trip we drove about three hundred miles a day. About two
12 in the afternoon I would tell the kids, “Okay, look for a motel with a swimming pool,”
13 and, of course, they would be all eyes.

14 KC: Of course.

15 WB: Find a motel and about 3:30 we would be checked in and that was it for the
16 day.

17 KC: Very nice. What were you doing down in Homestead once you got there?

18 WB: I was the, what the heck was my first job? I guess I was the weapons officer
19 again. This is a pretty important job in the outfit because you’re the guy responsible for
20 the efficiency of the pilots, the combat efficiency. Getting into the 104 outfit was a whole
21 different deal. I had always wanted to fly that airplane. I don’t know if you know what
22 the Starfighter is, but the guys that like it love it and the other guys hate it. It’s a very,
23 very potent airplane, tremendous performance. It was designed by Kelly Johnson at
24 Lockheed in response to the demands of the day fighter pilots in the Korean War where
25 the F-86 couldn’t get up to the MiG. It didn’t have enough power and it didn’t have the
26 lightness to get up there. So they couldn’t chase the MiGs, they had to wait for the MiGs
27 to come down after them and then reverse the tables and go after it. But a 104 was
28 superlative performance, but the Air Force boffins, the Air Force [brass] didn’t like it
29 because it couldn’t go out there in a real thick cloud and shoot a guy down and that’s
30 what they wanted.

1 KC: So it wasn't performance, wasn't the problem it was weapons issues were
2 the problem.

3 WB: Yeah, because it was built simple all the way through, some beautiful
4 engineering. One of the hardest things to do is take a complex engineering problem and
5 come up with a simple answer. Compared to the other airplanes in the Air Force the 104
6 had it over them head and shoulders. Where the 102 had all these magic things on it so
7 you could go fire six missiles at a guy inside a cloud and have a pretty good chance of
8 hitting him, the 104 carried two Sidewinder missiles which were infrared homing which
9 means they had to see him. It had the gun on it which meant you had to see him for that
10 one. Something nobody ever thought about was about eighty five percent of the time
11 that's all you need. It's a pretty easy airplane to maintain. The only thing that would slow
12 you down would be parts, but we had every payday afternoon off because all the
13 airplanes were in commission.

14 KC: How much time did you spend flying the 104?

15 WB: Oh, not as much as I wanted. I got about 730 hours in the thing in about
16 three and a half years.

17 KC: Seven hundred and thirty hours and it still wasn't enough for you.

18 WB: Oh, no. I'll tell you what. I'd been flying the 102 up in Thule at forty-four
19 below [weather]. That thing would hit about 145 knots in about thirteen hundred feet
20 when you would get airborne. I got in the 104 and it's a two-seater where the back-seater
21 sits about six inches higher than the front seater and he could see over your [head], see
22 real well. Everything is duplicated in both cockpits. So he could fly the airplane from the
23 back if he had to and it was my instructor back there. I run up the engine to full military
24 power, I check all the gauges and everything is okay. I let go of the brakes and light the
25 afterburner simultaneously because you've got to let go of the brakes otherwise it'll skid
26 the tires because it's got that much power. I look over and I'm checking the five gauges
27 on the engine I have to check after the afterburner lights off to make sure everything is
28 okay. I check three of them and the guy in the back says, "Rotate," and I look up and
29 we're going 180 knots.

30 KC: Oh, wow.

31 WB: Yeah.

1 KC: That's quite a change.

2 WB: It's really important that you do this quick because if you exceed 250 knots
3 with the main gear doors open—they open up sideways like a hood on an old car—they'll
4 stay open because of the air loads. Then you have to come out of afterburner and pull
5 your nose up, slow down, and recycle the gear and then you look like an idiot. Anyway,
6 this was the 1956 airplane and the engines by the time I got in there in '64 the engines
7 were getting kind of tired. By tired I mean that they had become roughened inside so
8 there's a little bit of air drag because there's quite a bit of stress in that airplane when you
9 go up to Mach-2 because of the temperature rise and everything else. The engine frames
10 become warped and they were leaking air. This don't sound like much until you realize
11 the air is leaking out of it before it ever gets into any fuel squirted into it, it's about 650
12 degrees Fahrenheit. What happened would be if you got too slow up at altitude you'd
13 have an aft fire warning light. The acceptable remedy for that was speed up. Lighting the
14 afterburner with an aft fire warning on isn't really the smartest thing in the world because
15 maybe you do have a real fire warning back there. So they gave us a new engine later on,
16 this is quite a bit later on, about the summer of '67. What that new engine did was give us
17 about twenty-five percent more available thrust. By available thrust I mean thrust over
18 and above that needed to make the airplane maneuver not just flying but maneuvering.
19 This made the airplane rather fantastic because now you would be doing your 185 knots
20 at about twenty-two hundred feet ground roll. You would be doing, oh, about a mile off
21 the end of the runway and go through 600, say, in 43 seconds to about 610 knots.

22 KC: That's incredible.

23 WB: Yep. Forty-five thousand feet in ninety seconds from brake release.

24 KC: You say they replaced these engines in '67, were you still in Homestead
25 then?

26 WB: Yeah. What they did was General Electric had come out with a later version
27 of the J-79 engine, the same engine that went into the F-4 Phantom. It was the engine that
28 went into the F-4E for the Air Force and the F-4S for the Navy. Somebody had said,
29 "Will that fit in the 104?" Somebody else said, "Yeah, probably." They found out not
30 only would it fit in the 104, but the job's not a simple job, but not a very [costly]—what
31 am I trying to say? You didn't have to modify much. You just had to do about 120

1 different things to put it inside the airplane. They were all small and they could all be
2 done at the squadron level. What it did is give the airplane superlative performance.

3 KC: Without an awful lot of work.

4 WB: It would go supersonic in level flight without using the afterburner. In other
5 words you could cruise supersonic without using the afterburner.

6 KC: That must've felt pretty good, huh?

7 WB: Oh, yeah, it was super. The other thing about the airplane was, what am I
8 trying to—I'm gonna think here a little bit. It was a fighter pilot's airplane. It was
9 designed completely towards high performance. It didn't fly well at slow speeds so you
10 kind of had to horse the thing around. It took a lot of pulling and hauling down around
11 250 knots to maneuver the airplane. Below about two hundred it wouldn't maneuver
12 much at all. As a matter of fact, it had three position flaps up in which case if you made a
13 zero flap landing you came down final at 220 knots. It had a takeoff flap, if you try to
14 land that thing your final approach is 165. It had a land-flap setting where they blew air
15 from the engine back over the trailing edge flaps. If you knew what you were doing you
16 could come down to about 145 in that thing. If you had no wind or wind straight down
17 the runway you could come down to about 135. You had to be careful because your
18 ailerons weren't very powerful down that slow. But at 135 knots you can stop that thing
19 easily in three thousand feet of runway.

20 KC: But you say the, I guess it would be the speed and the maneuverability at
21 high speeds that made it the, as you said, a fighter pilot's airplane.

22 WB: It took a little bit of getting used to because the speeds were far in excess of
23 anything anybody else used. Between six hundred and seven hundred knots indicated are
24 what we used for fighting speed and the thing was nobody else could match you. You
25 could come in and attack a guy and he would turn hard and he could out turn you but as
26 long as you can keep the sights on him you kept pressing in. When the gun sites
27 saturated, remember this is what they call the disturbed sight where the site piper, center
28 of the site itself, moves on the wind screen. If he's turning you have to pull the nose up in
29 front of him and the sight shows this by moving down on the wind screen. As long as you
30 have the site over him that's where the bullets are supposed to go. Okay, if you exceed its
31 capabilities it'll get down so far and the target'll finally be well under your nose. When

1 you realize, okay, we've got this point where the sight is just not working anymore
2 because it's trying to put too much lead on him then you quarter roll to level [flight] and
3 go straight up and he can't follow you. I mean, you could do this at only five thousand
4 feet and go over the top and at fifty-five thousand feet look down at him. Now you just sit
5 there and reposition. Really the way you use this airplane is you always fly in twos. So
6 one guy presses the target and forces him to react while the second guy repositions, puts
7 himself in position to continue the attack when the first guy has to leave and go up and
8 reposition himself. By doing that you could defeat anybody.

9 KC: What types of weapons was the 104 equipped with?

10 WB: It had the 20-millimeter Gatling gun on the lower left side of the front and it
11 fired 20-millimeter cartridges. Let's see, muzzle velocity is about thirty-two hundred foot
12 a second and it fired sixty-seven rounds a second. It had 750 rounds in the ammo
13 compartment and it was very, very precise, very, very controlled dispersion of [the
14 bullets]. As a matter of a fact, the dispersion was three mils which meant that at a
15 thousand feet all the bullets were inside a three foot circle. It had a big brass bushing
16 around the muzzle so the muzzle didn't wobble around or anything like that. It was
17 electric driven. It had a twenty-five horsepower electric motor on it. The gun on the F-4E
18 is the same gun, the same thing with the F-14 and the F-15 and 16. They're hydraulic-
19 driven and they've got about fifty horsepower. They fire six thousand rounds a minute.
20 That's a hundred rounds a second [out of the gun's six barrels].

21 KC: Incredible.

22 WB: When you fire this thing you usually fire about a half a second burst.
23 There's only a couple times I've ever fired more than that. I fired six second bursts in an
24 F-4 on a firepower demonstration once and that covered—kind of sprayed a football field
25 with it.

26 KC: Right, right. Now all this work on the F-104 was there in Homestead, is that
27 correct?

28 WB: Yeah.

29 KC: Okay. Well, let's take you out of Homestead. Where did you go from there?

30 WB: Okay, I was sitting there at Homestead and I had been there about three and
31 a half years and I got a call from ADC (Air Defense Command) and they said, "We're

1 going to send you to Alaska to fly the F-102.” I said, “Why send me?” He says, “Because
2 you’ve got a return date from overseas and we can’t send you anyplace else. We can send
3 to Alaska with your family.” I said, “What am I going to be doing over there?” They said,
4 “Flying 102s.” I said, “I don’t want to fly the 102 anymore. I got too complacent of the
5 airplane.” Speaking of complacent, going to the 104 sure changed that.

6 KC: I bet it did. Was it just because that you felt complacent or because you had
7 been in the 104 and logged over seven hundred hours in one of those you didn’t want to
8 go back to the 102?

9 WB: No, I actually got too confident in the 102.

10 KC: Explain that to me, please.

11 WB: It’s something you don’t want to do in airplanes. You’ve got to keep sharp.
12 You’ve got to keep your head out. You’ve got to always keep complete track of what is
13 going on in flight. The situations change out there. You listen to the radio and you can
14 hear the weather going down in front of you. So do I need to go to there or do I have to
15 go someplace else? If I have to go someplace else, where can I go? If you just sail along
16 flying dumb and happy one of these days you end up in a place where you run out of
17 answers. If the only answer you have then is eject that’s not too cool.

18 KC: Right.

19 WB: For instance, I know of one case where a B-52 actually ran out of fuel in
20 California. You get into a place between bases where he didn’t have fuel enough to get to
21 anyplace. They all had to jump out of it.

22 KC: Do you think that was partly due to the complacency that you were
23 concerned about?

24 WB: Absolutely.

25 KC: Definitely.

26 WB: Absolutely. Well, I was confident enough in the 102 once the weather got
27 really bad at Thule and I was out there flying around about 150 miles away and they say
28 come on home, the weather is getting bad. They were right. It was. The first [time] I saw
29 the runway I was twenty-five feet above it, but I knew I had a three-hundred-foot-wide
30 runway about eleven thousand feet long. If I flew the ILS (instrument landing system)
31 precisely as I went through minimums or reduced my descent rate to something the

1 landing gear could stand I could fly down onto the runway without ever seeing it. The
2 instrument landing system is that precise. It puts you on the center of the runway plus or
3 minus about three feet, but that's confidence.

4 KC: I was going to say that's an awful lot of confidence right there.

5 WB: Well, that was part of my training. Billy Douglas took care of the first part
6 of it and in Okinawa we had to shoot touch and go's in a T-33, safety pilot up front, us
7 sitting back underneath the hood and let GCA (ground-controlled approach) talk you onto
8 the runway. So I knew it could be done. But the alternative was flying up over the ice cap
9 and jumping out of it.

10 KC: Which isn't much of an alternative.

11 WB: Well, it's something to think about. Before you ever fly up there they make
12 you spend a night on the ice cap anyway. You go out and build your own little fighter hut
13 out of slabs of the crusted snow and you're in there with a parachute in your arctic
14 sleeping bag and you spend the night out there just to prove that you can do it. I always
15 thought [survival training] was to teach the city guys that it isn't automatic death to be
16 stuck out in the woods.

17 KC: So I assume you take your assignment to Alaska.

18 WB: Well, I couldn't do it.

19 KC: Is that right?

20 WB: I told them a lot of friends are going to Vietnam and I was a professional
21 fighter pilot and military officer, a lot of my friends had come back and a lot of them still
22 stayed over there and never made it back. So I told them I want to go to Vietnam instead
23 and this buddy of mine up there at ADC personnel said, "I'll take care of it." The next
24 thing I know I've got an assignment to F-4s in Homestead right at the same base because
25 there's a training wing right there full of F-4s. The only difference was that when I got on
26 the runway back down to the flight line I turned right instead of turning left. So they
27 checked me out in the F-4 and then this friend of mind, Pete Tutless, said, "Come down
28 with me into the same class." It was kind of like a vacation. It's a six-month course to
29 learn how to fly this stupid thing. We each had about three thousand hours of fighter
30 time. So it was nothing new to us. We went to the ground school and flew the simulator
31 and got in the airplane and flew around. They asked Pete what he thought about the

1 airplane and I said, “Well, it’s kind of sluggish,” but after flying a 104, yeah, it’s gonna
2 be sluggish.

3 KC: Now how old were you when you started your training on the F-4?

4 WB: Oh, Lord. This was ’68. So I was thirty-seven years old.

5 KC: Thirty-seven years old.

6 WB: Yeah, but the thing was that when we got through training because the
7 amount of fighter time we had they kept us there as instructor pilots. It wasn’t until 1971
8 I got to Vietnam.

9 KC: Well, before we put an end to this session today and we’ll pick it back up at
10 a different date, tell me about your impressions of the F-4.

11 WB: It was what I call cookbook engineering.

12 KC: Can you explain that to me?

13 WB: Suppose you were a junior engineer and you’re given a task to solve a
14 problem. I suppose your first impulse would be to reach up on the shelf and grab a book
15 and open it up and find an answer. Okay. That’s my impression of how the F-4 was
16 designed. Of course, they had a lot of constraints because the bloody thing had to fit
17 inside a carrier which means they had to build a very compact, dense airplane. The F-4
18 had some control problems which could’ve been solved by making it about eight to ten
19 feet longer, but they didn’t have the space [because] it had to fit onboard a carrier. Where
20 the 104 had I think truly inspired engineering solutions the F-4 was pretty much plebeian.
21 Nothing really state of the art in the thing. It was a good airplane. It was the jack of all
22 trades. It was never great at any really one thing. You could do a lot of things quite well.

23 KC: Yeah, my understanding is the versatility of the F-4 was what made it so
24 useful, I won’t say necessarily popular, but made it so useful.

25 WB: Yeah, but there were a lot of things—you know, what does it take—eighty-
26 five percent to get through graduate school? That’s about where I would put the F-4.

27 KC: Is that right?

28 WB: Yeah.

29 KC: Well, let’s go ahead and put an end to today’s session, Mr. Bjorneby. Hold
30 on just a second while I turn off the recorder.

31 WB: Okay.

Interview with Walter Bjerneby
Session [2] of [3]
June 11, 2008

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager of the Vietnam Archive continuing an
2 interview with Mr. Walter Bjerneby. Today is 11 June 2008. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, and
3 Mr. Bjerneby is joining us again from his home in Greeley, Colorado. Mr. Bjerneby,
4 when we left off yesterday you were discussing your time in Homestead, Florida, flying
5 the F-4s. Why don't we pick it up from there?

6 Walter Bjerneby: Yeah. Well, I had been through the air-to-ground and air-to-air
7 training in Nellis in 1954. This was 1968 so it had been quite a time. It was pretty much
8 the same, different airplane, different switches, little bit different sight but still nothing
9 really new. The airplane was bigger and heavier. It had, like we talked about earlier, it
10 was a jack of all trades. It had a very powerful radar set, carried eight missiles. So it was
11 a pretty decent interceptor. The radar was about the same as a 102, but that was a design
12 function, it had a little bit different display on it where you really couldn't resolve targets
13 hidden in the noise level like you could on the 102. [Instead of a cathode ray tube it had a
14 storage tube.] It makes about a three-decibel difference in signal strength which is pretty
15 significant. Three decibels is about double because it's a logarithmic scale. Am I getting
16 too confusing now?

17 KC: No, no, no. That's just the kind of things we need to hear.

18 WB: Basically, everything on the F-4 was run through signal processing and you
19 didn't see the raw data on the scope. You just saw what it threw up there and as a result
20 anything down in the noise level was cancelled out. It's like looking at a TV set full of
21 snow and every now and then you can see a picture in there. You could say that's raw
22 radar, okay, because your mind can—the human mind can make out patterns. The big
23 advantage [of the cathode ray] is the target is there all the time and the noise is flickering
24 so you can see one spot that's there all the time and everything else is flickering even
25 though it's the same value, [dim intensity], you can detect it.

26 KC: So did you become accustomed to this pretty quickly?

27 WB: Oh, yeah. I had been looking at radar sets probably twenty-five hundred
28 hours by that time. Of course, I had been through school in the Air Defense Command on

1 the F-102 to become a weapons officer. It's a three-month school down there. We really
2 got into the nitty gritty and the techniques, how to solve problems and really work at the
3 radar. The funny thing about the whole thing was in the 104 because we were sitting
4 down there at the south end of Florida and, of course, Cuba is across, 90 miles away
5 about 125 MiG-21s. We kept our air-to-air combat skills polished. Whenever possible we
6 would maneuver against each other working very hard for at least five minutes at the end
7 of each mission regardless of what we were doing whether it was running intercepts or
8 possibly going up to Avon Park and shooting at a ground target. We did, in the 104 we
9 did fire air-to-air gunnery. We had nine four-ship missions a week. So everybody stayed
10 sharp on that. We always flew in pairs. So we maneuvered in pairs and we learned how to
11 support each other, engaging the third or fourth party. So when we got to the F-4s Pete
12 Tutless and I, we had to learn how to hit a bombing target and all their weapons
13 deliveries and stuff like that. Then we got into the air-to-air phase and that was pretty
14 funny because the way TAC trained they had a six-month cycle and you ran through all
15 these events. You would do air-to-ground and you would practice nuclear weapons
16 deliveries and you would do mid-air refueling, you needed some night work, combined
17 with the tankers to spend about four and a half hours up there in the dark. Eventually you
18 would get around to air-to-air and you would run through the air just that part with the
19 radar first because that's finding the guy and finally you get to the [air combat]
20 maneuvering part of it. Once you finish that you get into air-to-air shooting at the towed
21 dart which is about twelve feet long and about five feet across the fins. You look at
22 directly from the tail it looks like a plus because it's got these cross triangles, twelve-
23 foot-by-five-foot triangle. It looks ever so much like the folded paper gliders we used to
24 make in school.

25 KC: Sure.

26 WB: You know, the very simplest ones that looked like pointy triangles. It was
27 pretty hard to hit but you had to fly very smoothly and let the site compute what was
28 going on and you were tracking the targets smoothly, yeah, you'd hit it. I finally got to
29 the point where I was hitting it about, oh, eight and a half times out of ten. That was with
30 an M-61 gun that really doesn't shoot a shotgun pattern. It shoots a very tight pattern.
31 Anyway, we got into the air-to-air phase and Pete and I ate those guys alive. They were

1 stunned because they thought we just flew around straight and level looking at radar and
2 we laughed and we told them we had been doing this probably three times a week for the
3 past three and a half years. Well, it gets much like martial arts. Your body reacts to what
4 you see without you thinking about it. A couple of times I noticed that myself, I would
5 actually anticipate what the other guy was doing. Anyway, we finished our training there
6 and we were waiting to find out where we're going. Pete and I got hijacked into the
7 instructor business and they kept us there as instructors because we each had about three
8 thousand hours of fighter time. This was kind of a shock. We hadn't expected that and we
9 certainly didn't expect sitting in the back seat of the F-4 for twenty-two missions as we
10 learned how to instruct. So that was kind of interesting. Instructing in the F-4, the only
11 time it kind of opens your eyes is when you're riding in the back seat and the guy goes in
12 low, too long, and/or strafe and you know, hey, I've got about one second to find out if
13 this guy is doing something wrong and save this situation. So you're kind of on
14 tenterhooks in a situation like that.

15 KC: I think that would be a little tense, I would think.

16 WB: Oh, yeah, and after a while you kind of accept it and you get used to it and
17 you learn to read the guy. It doesn't take you too long to figure out if he really knows
18 what he's doing. The hardest thing to do there was to wash out a guy and there was one
19 guy that we had to wash out of the program because he would get what we call tunnel
20 vision where you concentrate entirely on one subject. If he was, say, shooting at a ground
21 target, there's a foul line two thousand feet out from the target and you're supposed to
22 break off and pull up when he gets to that. The reason is, there's two reasons. Number
23 one, if you [concentrate] on the target you can actually fly right into it and people have
24 done that. The other one is that there's a lot of rocks and stuff down on the ground, old
25 bullets sitting down there, and one of your bullets can hit one and kick it up and if you fly
26 into that thing at 420 knots it'll go through the windshield or go down the scoop and wipe
27 out the engine. That's not a good deal.

28 KC: What would you say was your most harrowing experience as an instructor of
29 the F-4 there?

1 WB: I really didn't have any. One, I had a guy over-G an airplane on me and that
2 really irritated the hell out of maintenance because they had to take the engines out and
3 ship them back to depot.

4 KC: Well, explain to me what happened there.

5 WB: Well, the F-4 had some peculiar aerodynamics. One of the reasons is that
6 it's built chunky, short, very short coupled. So it's got a fairly high, fairly fast response to
7 changes in pitch. I was sitting in the back seat. My student went up there and was dog
8 fighting another guy and they were going fast. They were going supersonic. The guy in
9 front braked it into a hard turn which slows the airplane down. The airplane is going
10 transonic when it went through the other guys jet wash and the guy up front responded by
11 yanking back on the stick and it put about ten and a half Gs on the airplane which is
12 about three and a half over the limit, ten and a half, the rules are really strict. You have to
13 pull the engines out and you send it back to depot to get checked out because if the—the
14 big problem is dents in the bearings from the over-strain. That engine spins at about right
15 around eight thousand RPM (rotations per minute). Of course, it's got a lot of power and
16 a lot of thrust and a lot of stress on it. If you wipe out the bearings the first thing you
17 might feel is a little vibration in the engine and you've got about five minutes to get the
18 airplane on the ground. So they're very strict about that.

19 KC: Sure, that makes sense. Now how long were you an instructor here at
20 Homestead?

21 WB: Let's see. It was August of '68 when they nabbed me to be an instructor and
22 there was a big fiasco there. This really caused a lot of rancor among the troops. Let me
23 think, in 1969 they formed two new squadrons down at Homestead, the 560th and the 68th
24 Attack Fighter Squadrons. A lot of us and a lot of the graduating class of F-4 front-seaters
25 and back-seaters were shanghai-ed into these and we didn't mind because at least we
26 knew where we were going now. We had five months to get the squadrons trained and
27 ready to go overseas. We were going to Phu Cat in Vietnam. Just about the time we got
28 that squadron trained and everybody really worked hard at doing this, we're talking about
29 sixty crewmembers and probably about two hundred maintenance guys. We had our
30 planes all up and everybody was getting sharp, we knew what we were doing. It got to
31 the point where I'd take the new students out and if they were nice I'd teach them to hang

1 on the wing regardless of what was going on we would go up and do barrel rolls in a
2 flight of four. Of course, they just really got a big charge out of that because they felt they
3 could really handle the airplane, and they could by that time.

4 KC: Sure.

5 WB: Anyway, the Air Force canceled the move because the Air Force was
6 building up while LBJ (Lyndon B. Johnson) was building down. We got the word we
7 weren't going and then they said, "Well, we won't send you to Korea," and that was a
8 laugh because about a month later they sent us off to Korea. Well, in getting ready to go
9 overseas everybody had prepared. We had moved out of the—the guys who were living
10 in military houses moved out of that and other people sold some houses, a lot of guys
11 sold their boats and extra cars and stuff like that and found places for their wives. I
12 moved my wife and kids off base to an apartment complex because we figured, well, a
13 year later I'll be coming back here. At the same time the Air Force pays you, I think, I
14 forgot how much money it was, but it was significant about three or four hundred dollars
15 to defray the cost of a move like that. Since we weren't going they wanted it back.
16 Everybody said—this one guy said, "Well, I sold my twenty-five foot boat at a loss and
17 now you want the money back." A lot of people were saying, "Okay, you go ahead and
18 do it we're getting out." Finally somebody put a deal through Congress that let us keep
19 the money, but we still took a hit, you know, because when they scratched or cancelled
20 the overseas move now the squadron stayed at Homestead. When we went to Korea we
21 went there what they call TDY, are you familiar with that term?

22 KC: Sure, sure.

23 WB: Temporary duty? Okay, we sailed over there and that was an interesting
24 flight. We left Miami at about, oh, eight in the morning and the next stop was Hickam,
25 Honolulu, Hickam Air Force Base, nine refuelings to get there. The nice thing about it
26 was that the guys there met us at the airplane with a cold beer because the F-4, unlike a
27 lot of airplanes, has no facilities for relief, okay?

28 KC: Okay.

29 WB: In the airplane I guess we were eleven and twenty, eleven hours and twenty
30 minutes before we got out of the airplane. I drank the beer and then ran out and found a
31 john someplace. The next day we took off for Guam. An interesting thing here, I'm

1 leading six airplanes and we've got three tankers to go with us and the idea is that you
2 need that spare—you could make it with two, but you need the third one in case a guy
3 loses an engine he has to drop down to about 15,000 feet and 250 knots which is the best
4 place for single-engine flight. Well, if you're out there at a thousand miles from land it's
5 nice to have a tanker along with you to keep you full of fuel so you'll make it. Otherwise
6 you're going to be swimming. Anyway, we took off and the tanker aborted right after
7 takeoff. So now we're heading for Guam. I think it was at Wake Island the two tankers
8 we had left gave us all the fuel they had. From Wake down to Guam it's about nine
9 hundred miles. So here we are. The back-seaters are checking each others' indications,
10 inertial navigation system and all the little black boxes said we're going in the right
11 direction and counting off the miles for us. We all pretty well agreed within a couple
12 miles, the inertial navigation is pretty accurate if you're just flying straight and level. I
13 was cheered up because at two hundred miles I saw the Marianas chain coming into the
14 top of the radar scope. Up to that point we were kind of navigating on faith.

15 KC: Right. What was the—?

16 WB: I got into Korea after spending the night at Guam and danged if those idiots
17 there wanted us to take over alert immediately. I'm going, "No, we're not going to do
18 that. You guys are gonna sit alert we will come in tomorrow morning, but first you better
19 brief us in all the rules and procedures here, besides my guys are wiped out. They need
20 some sleep." We sat alert for six months over there in Korea, mostly air defense alert and
21 trained a lot and practiced all of our training over there. It was great flying over there
22 because they don't have the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) to mess with. They
23 don't have too many phones to call in and bitch about people coming fast at low altitude
24 over their heads. One thing was kind of neat. We sent out two airplanes every morning
25 and what it was is to keep the soldiers, both ours and the ROKs (Republic of Korea),
26 aware of threat from the air. What we'd have is a ground FAC (forward air controller)
27 down there in a jeep and the [FAC] would sit there and say, "Well, I'm up in the little
28 river off the big river on the left hand side." We'd look down and there'd be big rivers
29 and little rivers all over the place. Finally he and I, us, figured out how to communicate to
30 each other so we could pinpoint him and then he would direct us in on an Army camp.
31 We would be coming in about sun-up and the guys would be out there doing their daily

1 dozen all exercising like hell. If you come right out of the sun, like I said earlier, you're
2 right in the Mach, you're up about .95 Mach. The first time they know you're there is
3 when they hear you. You could scream over the top of their heads and pull up and look
4 back at them and they're all running around, where they're supposed to go.

5 KC: Good morning, fellows.

6 WB: Yeah. That's it. That was kind of a kick doing that.

7 KC: So you're here in Korea for six months. Then did you go back to Homestead
8 again?

9 WB: Yeah, I went back to Homestead and did some more instruction and flying.

10 KC: Still on the F-4?

11 WB: A bad thing happened to us. The State Department worked some sort of deal
12 with Egypt and gave them F-4s. Well, the F-4s they gave them were ours. We got them
13 all fixed up and now we had to get them absolutely brand new and ship the F-4s and our
14 ground support equipment to Egypt. That left us with no airplanes and nothing. They
15 started shipping the guys out all over the place. That was too bad because it was a good
16 squadron, good morale, good commander. I was the ops officer when they did that. I got
17 promoted to lieutenant colonel and got the ops officer's job and it was fun.

18 KC: This would've been 1970, 1971?

19 WB: It was, yeah, '70 when they gave our airplanes away which was—I never
20 did like the State Department and that didn't help any there, either. I always thought they
21 were, I don't know, a lot of their decisions they made didn't seem to be in the real interest
22 of the United States. Anyway about, I guess, about May of '71 I got alerted for Vietnam.
23 I arrived over there in June '71, made a stop in the Philippines to go through jungle
24 survival school. The thing that impressed me there was that the jungle, everybody talks
25 about how tough it is and all that, it doesn't even come close to the marine temperate
26 fauna and flora that they have up there in southeastern Alaska because it seemed much
27 more open to me. I could see where you wouldn't have too much trouble surviving if the
28 Vietnamese weren't out there trying to get you.

29 KC: Sure. It's interesting that you would say that. Normally what one hears is
30 how difficult the jungle was to adapt to, but of course with your background—

1 WB: Well, they don't know what difficult is. In Alaska, that's fjord country. So
2 every stream runs down to the ocean and if you're trying to go along the coast the
3 absolutely best way to travel up there is by boat. You know, they talk about the Asiatics
4 coming across the Bering Sea thirty thousand years ago and I'll bet they traveled by small
5 boat along the coast because if you try and march through that place you're just going up
6 and down, up and down, up and down. If you can imagine crawling anywhere from fifty
7 to a thousand feet up and over these ridges and there's going to be one about every two
8 miles at the least. You know back in—at the start of World War II when the Japanese
9 invaded the Aleutians all the people that knew anything about it were kind of dithering
10 about, you know, "Oh, they're going to march down. They're going down here. They're
11 going to march across Alaska and invade America from Alaska." My dad just broke out
12 laughing because he had been on a survey crew out there and he said, "Yeah," he says,
13 "They'll make it, in about fifty years." His first job when he got to Alaska was a chain
14 man on a survey crew because he was just a young kid right out of college, you know.

15 KC: Sure.

16 WB: He said, "Well, that's just tough." Of course, Ketchikan wasn't so bad, but
17 he'd been far enough out in the woods there to realize two miles a day would be good
18 traveling because in a lot of places you just have to slice the stuff out of the way with a
19 machete and then they have this neat little thing that grows down along the river banks
20 called Devil's Club which is a light green palmate plant growing up to about three or four
21 feet high. On the stems and underneath the root vein, I mean the leaf veins, were these
22 very brittle thorns. It's not the big ones that give you the trouble. It's the little ones that
23 break off and then you can't hardly see them and they fester out. It's just another kind—
24 and the fact that you're going to be wet all the time. Anyway, I got to Vietnam and my
25 job there was this is kind of a redundant title, operations-operations officer which meant
26 that I worked directly for the director of operations and I had the command post under me
27 and the combat missions scheduling outfit which we call the frag shop because you have
28 one basic order to go out there and do battle. It's got all the details and rules and stuff in
29 it. Then they have fragmentary orders issued every day off that thing and detail the
30 missions and everything else.

31 KC: Now when did you get to Vietnam, Mr. Bjorneby?

1 WB: I got—about June 20th of '71.
2 KC: June 20th of '71. Okay, now—
3 WB: Yeah, so I was forty years old when I got over there.
4 KC: Now what outfit were you assigned with? Was it the 366th?
5 WB: 366th Tac Fighter Wing at Da Nang.
6 KC: Okay.
7 WB: I was attached to the 4th Fighter Squadron or “Yellow Squadron,” for flying.
8 It was interesting because I got out there and the very first mission they give you is a
9 practice mission because most people coming in there aren't used to flying the airplane
10 heavy-weight. It makes a lot of difference because on a normal training mission you go
11 up at about forty-two or forty-four thousand pounds of heavy weight and now you're
12 taxiing the airplane at sixty thousand pounds.
13 KC: Sure, it makes a big difference.
14 WB: What it means is that if you want to maneuver you've got to have the speed.
15 I lost a good friend because he forgot that he was flying a 105 which needs speed to get
16 that weight around and he rolled it in on a pass and was too slow to recover from it.
17 KC: Now was that there at Da Nang?
18 WB: No, that was in combat.
19 KC: In combat.
20 WB: But it wasn't at Da Nang, no. I think he was flying out of Takhli, the 105
21 base. Yeah, the instructors gave me, “You pass, you're good.” The next guy I flew with
22 was wing commander because he really wanted to see what he had here, kind of an
23 overweight, balding forty-year-old lieutenant colonel. Some of them are pretty
24 dangerous, but I've been flying since I was commissioned. So I did good, hung on his
25 wing and did everything a good wing man was supposed to do because that's what I had
26 been teaching for X number of years. So I got to fly, got in the command post, never had
27 much to do with one before that, but it was no big deal, pretty busy. I had a couple of
28 complaints coming up from young back-seaters who were there as command post
29 controllers because they're working an eight-hour shift and that left them no time to fly
30 and they wanted to fly. So I said, “Okay, we'll go to six-hour shifts,” and that worked
31 great, cheered them up, went flying. Another thing I did was go through all the alert

1 check lists. They're on rolodexes. So I just reviewed all those things and cleaned up the
2 English on them because some of them were kind of weird.

3 KC: How so?

4 WB: The one thing I do know how to do is write. Well, a lot of people don't
5 write very well. The one thing I could do was write. So 995 people out of 1,000
6 understand what I'm getting at. That was the schooling in Alaska because we were
7 always two generations behind the U.S. in what we did. The school having no money, it
8 always got the cast-off books from Washington State.

9 KC: So what else were your duties here in Da Nang?

10 WB: Okay. Let's see. I talked about the frag shop. I talked about the command
11 post. Oh, man, I'm trying to remember what the third one was. Oh, operations
12 administration, all the administrative guys worked for me. There was one funny thing
13 happened there. A senior master sergeant came in to be NCOIC just about the time I did.
14 He came to me and he said, "Colonel BJ, we've got 850 top secret documents." I looked
15 at him and says, "What?" He says, "850." I said, "We're going to have a fire," because if
16 you ever lose a top secret document in the Air Force you've got a problem. You've got a
17 real problem because there's going to be an investigation and you're going to be the guy
18 under the gun. When I got through we had about twenty that we really needed. There
19 were some operations plans there and I just looked at those things and said, "This thing
20 was written fifteen years ago. Why do we have it?" It must've come over to Da Nang
21 with the 366th when it moved over there. It was for something that was just so improbable
22 that I figured if we really needed this thing they could fly us one.

23 KC: Right.

24 WB: Anyway we just went out there and burned up all that stuff. We just direct
25 spoiled your problems. Um, what else? Okay, I also owned, for some reason, I don't
26 know why, I owned the arresting gear for the airplanes, the big cable deceleration devices
27 when an airplane comes in and no brakes or a real slick runway you use this thing on the
28 tail hook to get you stopped. The funny part was the Marines had been there and they had
29 what was called a MOREST, a mobile arresting gear. That thing was sitting on the
30 middle of the runway and it really worked good because you could recycle the thing in

1 about thirty seconds. When they said, "Please ship it to us." Well, I ignored that one
2 because we were really using it.

3 KC: You'd like to have that one around.

4 WB: Finally after about five months a team came into get it because we were
5 going to hang onto that thing as long as we could because it was a good rig, but then we
6 got an NCO in that really knew how to run the BAK-12 barrier. This is a pretty fancy rig.
7 It's got an engine to rewind it when you fire it up, a gasoline engine. It's got two B-52
8 brakes one on each side of the runway. Of course, it's got big thick nylon tape, nylon tape
9 is about, oh, I guess about eight inches across and maybe an eighth of an inch thick. It's
10 hooked up to a strip of one and one-eighth inch wire cable that stretches across the
11 runway. A guy comes in and he's lost utility systems so his brakes are shaky or it's a real
12 slick runway. It just rains and all the stuff that gets on the runway the rubber and the fuel
13 spray and stuff like that and the first time it rains, man, that's just like grease. So you land
14 on that and you're going to have trouble stopping even in eleven thousand feet of runway
15 if you land too fast. The guys would go into the barrier and they would drag it out to six
16 or seven hundred feet. There's a bunch of signals that we borrowed from the Navy and
17 we would sit there and hold up two fists and he puts his brakes on and they tension the
18 cable. They partially rewind it and it actually pulls the airplane backwards a little bit. You
19 open your fingers and he lets go of the brakes and the airplane coasts back and the cable
20 falls off the hook and you just give him a thumbs up and he raises the hook. He could do
21 that from the cockpit. The cable is on it no longer, not on it anymore. You just gave him a
22 thumb over your shoulder and he taxis away and meanwhile the guy who is running the
23 barrier got that guy's engine fired up and it's roaring away and the cables are being
24 rewinded like mad while the next airplane is coming down final.

25 KC: About how long would it take to cycle?

26 WB: Thirty seconds.

27 KC: Thirty seconds.

28 WB: Yep. So what happens is the guys come in and it's just rained and it's a real
29 wet runway instead of five seconds on the pitch out they take ten seconds interval which
30 when the flight of four pitching out, that spreads them out enough because in that ten
31 seconds one guy is going straight ahead at 300, 350 knots and the other guy has turned it

1 downwind at two hundred. So they've got their 30 second space on final right there. It
2 works very well, very well, indeed. It's kind of interesting being out there in the middle
3 of the night with the rain coming down and supervising all this stuff going on. Anyway
4 that's one—when I was getting ready to go home, that among other things I think earned
5 me a Bronze Star.

6 KC: Terrific. Now at one time you are—you moved to become the commanding
7 officer of the 390th Tactical Flight Squadron, is that correct?

8 WB: Yeah.

9 KC: Now when did that happen?

10 WB: About six months.

11 KC: Six months into it.

12 WB: The CO of the squadron was leaving and I went to the DO (duty officer)
13 and said, "Hey, I want that squadron." He said, "You've only got six months left." I said,
14 "So what? I want that squadron. I've earned it." He said, "Well, yeah, I guess you can
15 have it." So he gave me the fighter squadron. I'll tell you, that's the finest job in the Air
16 Force.

17 KC: Is that right?

18 WB: Anything else, there's just nothing to it. Having the guys there and making
19 sure they know how to stay alive and going out with them and getting the job done. You
20 know, I was flying with the 4th and being an attached pilot I never got that much and I
21 just figured well I'll go home here in a year with about eighty missions and I said whoop-
22 tee-do because they were of course looking out for all their own guys first. I got the
23 squadron, oh, I guess about the middle of December. Dang, if about three weeks later
24 they put us on night missions escorting gunships. I've got to say that's the hairiest
25 mission over there. Everything else was a piece of cake.

26 KC: Tell me about one of these hairy missions.

27 WB: Okay. The thing about escorting the gunship is, number one, what you're
28 there for is to suppress any anti-aircraft as these AC-119s or AC-130s fly over Laos up
29 and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They've got all this magic gear on them. They've got a
30 low-level light TVs. They've got infrared. They've got things that can locate ignition
31 noise from a truck and pinpoint it. They've got guns sticking out the left side of the

1 airplane and they've got a couple of observers sitting there looking through their scopes
2 and they put a crosshair on the target and that information goes into the computer in the
3 airplane which is measuring things like air speed, altitude, temperature, wind effect, and
4 everything else, adapted aim point according to the ballistics of the weapon chosen and
5 it's got steering information going to the pilot. He's got these two cross pointers, sort of
6 like an instrument landing system gauge, plus and minus, and then they move around and
7 he flies the airplane to keep [the pointers centered] and the gun's aimed right at the target.
8 So when everything is okay he's squared away and then the gunner back there looking in
9 his scope presses the trigger and wham-o either a, let's see, 20-millimeter Gatling gun or
10 a 40-millimeter Navy anti-aircraft Bofors cannon or then a 105-millimeter howitzer, a
11 lightweight howitzer developed for the airborne troops would shoot away at the truck. If
12 they miss it off to the left, say, twenty feet they would move their aim point twenty feet to
13 the right and shoot again and wham-o, they nail him. Well, the other guys took a real dim
14 view of this. They were out there with, oh, 14.5-millimeter machineguns, 23-millimeter
15 and 37-millimeter anti-aircraft and 57-millimeter anti-aircraft [guns]. They shoot at him
16 and that's our signal to come in and drop a bomb on them. I know that sounds real
17 simple. In the first place everything is blacked out. The second thing is you've got to
18 watch out for the AC-130 because if you hit him you've done their job for them. He sits
19 down there at about oh, seventy-five hundred to ten thousand feet off the ground going
20 around a left hand turn and you're hanging over him about five thousand feet higher
21 going around in a left hand turn and the only trouble is you can't fly formation on him
22 because you have to fly faster than he does, which means that you're going to lose sight
23 of him because if you go past him and you have to look and pick him up again. He's got
24 five hooded lights across the top of his wing, but you can only see them in about 270
25 degrees of the circle. So you've got to be very careful and pick him up again. Then you
26 don't have a chance to get into position to drop on the gun. You sit there and you spot
27 him and say, "Gunfighter in, you're in sight." He says, "Clear." Then you roll on the gun
28 and you take whatever angle you can get and you take whatever airspeed you have and
29 you adjust your aim point to where you think the gun is. If he's smart he'll stop shooting
30 and now you're looking down at the black ground.

31 KC: Right.

1 WB: Unless there's a moon out you don't have any landmarks. So one of the
2 things we used to carry was a couple of incendiary clusters left over from World War II.
3 If you dropped one of those, if you get any place near him, if he shoots again he's inside
4 the pattern for these little fires that this thing leaves, 180 thermite bombs in it. They're
5 sitting there burning blue white. If he comes up again now you've got him pinpointed.
6 Sometimes you do get kind of lucky or he's dumb and he can hear you coming and he
7 shoots at you, then you drop three five-hundred-pound bombs on him and if you're any
8 good at all, you can get him.

9 KC: As he gives himself away. Tell me, what kind of munitions did you typically
10 carry on one of these escort missions?

11 WB: Very typical was eight five-hundred-pound bombs and two of those
12 incendiary clusters. They're pretty heavy. They weigh about eight hundred pounds
13 apiece. It doesn't look like they belong on a jet at all because they've got absolutely flat
14 noses. The idea for the flat nose is they've got little tiny fins on them because they're
15 actually carried by B-29s. These are the thing they dropped out and they kind of wobble
16 around and fall down to a given altitude or a given separation time. They open up their
17 canister weapon and they toss out about 180 thermite bombs. They're about the size of
18 three-cell flashlight. They burn at about, oh, I don't know, twenty-five hundred
19 centigrade. So thermite to get it going and magnesium to keep it going. Have you ever
20 seen a magnesium fire or an old photo flash bulb you know what the color of the flash is,
21 it's kind of a bluish white.

22 KC: How long could you expect one of these to keep the target or the spot
23 illuminated?

24 WB: They'll burn about five minutes.

25 KC: Five minutes, so that would be plenty of time for you.

26 WB: Oh, yeah. If we didn't have those we had a couple of the cluster bombs, the
27 CBU-24 with 665 mini frags in it. That wasn't very effective because if they build a nice
28 tight bamboo roof over the gun position they could hide under that and they'd get hit,
29 bounce off, then hit the ground and go off. I knew an old TAC pilot over there. He was
30 commander of the 4th when I was there, a good friend of mine, Paul Craw. What he
31 would do would deliberately drop them low so they would hit the ground intact and

1 explode as a bomb. He says, “That was pretty effective.” It was the answer to the Korean
2 type super-charges, the Chinese used where they sit there and launched three thousand
3 guys at you in a screaming charge. That would do that job all right. They’d take care of a
4 charge like that.

5 KC: About how long would one of these, excuse me, about how long would one
6 of these missions last with the gun?

7 WB: About four and a half hours.

8 KC: About four and a half hours.

9 WB: Yeah. Well, we go back to when I first got the squadron, PACAF came in
10 with a safety inspection. They’re not supposed to pull operational readiness inspections in
11 combat. That’s because if you’re doing the combat okay, that’s what you’re supposed to
12 be doing.

13 KC: Sure.

14 WB: Anyway, I guess these guys wanted to get a month’s free tax, you know,
15 they stepped in Vietnam and one month they got—they didn’t have to pay income tax
16 that month or something like that or a five hundred dollar exemption, whatever the hell it
17 was. Anyway they’re out snooping around all over the place and they just rode the hell
18 out of the squadron before I got it. The airplanes had been there about seven years. The
19 old saying is, you know, rode hard and put away wet. They didn’t have anything really
20 major wrong with them, but what they had was a lot of the—it’s like if you never took a
21 car, never took care of a car and you just drove the thing for ten years, you know there’s
22 going to be lots of little things wrong with it.

23 KC: Sure.

24 WB: Anyway they wrote them all up. The crew chiefs were just down in the
25 dumps when I took over because the airplanes had been doing, oh, 200, 250 discrepancies
26 on each one of them. One crew chief said, “I’ll never get it fixed.” Anyway, I’d go
27 around and talk to them and say, “Yeah, we’re going to get it fixed because, number one,
28 there’s nothing wrong with the airplane. There’s nothing there that keeps us from flying
29 it.” Well, we did have about three airplanes that had a couple of things that were pretty
30 dangerous that had to be fixed, but the other seventeen were flyable. I would tell them,
31 “Okay, we’ll fly the airplane. When it’s not flying we’re going to be working on it and

1 fixing all this stuff. Your job, of course, is to fix the things. My job is to get you the
2 specialists and the parts you need to get this done and I'll do that." I went over and gave
3 maintenance control a really hard time in getting things we needed to fix the airplane.
4 Sure enough, in about a month they were all top shape and the crew chiefs were really
5 happy. One thing crew chiefs don't like is sloppy maintenance on their airplanes. If they
6 can't get that specialist, they can't get the parts or anything like that, it really puts them
7 down in the dumps. I can't say too much about the crew chiefs in the airplane, in the Air
8 Force. Man, are they good people.

9 KC: Now you took over the squadron in December of '71. So about January of
10 '71 or, excuse me, January of '72 you have it whipped back into shape, if you will, is that
11 a fair assessment?

12 WB: Yeah, probably about the end of January. It took about six weeks, maybe six
13 to eight weeks. We were sitting there and the one thing I was doing besides all this night
14 flying, I did do about forty of those night missions.

15 KC: Forty of them?

16 WB: Yeah. Did you ever hear of Tchepone?

17 KC: No.

18 WB: Never heard of Tchepone?

19 KC: No, I've not. Explain that to me.

20 WB: That was kind of a transportation nexus for the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

21 KC: Okay.

22 WB: The one thing they had there was a lot of anti-aircraft guns. When I talked
23 about that moonlit night it was up there with the [AC-130]. He was doing okay and then a
24 gun shot at him. By the way, you can tell the different kind of guns, 14.5 looks like a
25 string of dark red beads, 23 looks like a short string, ten maybe, of lighter red beads. The
26 37-millimeter has got them and they're bigger and they're spaced out. The 57-millimeter
27 is just a white ball that looks like it's moving in a straight line, very high-velocity weapon
28 and it didn't have much curve to it. The rest of them had perceptible curve in their
29 trajectory. Anyway, there was a high, thin overcast and the moon above it. I hadn't
30 thought much about that. Somebody opened up on the [AC-130] and I rolled in on it,
31 dropped my bomb on the gun, pulled up and I guess they could see my engines or the

1 airplane silhouetted against the overcast because all of a sudden it's just like if you went
2 out and sat down on, oh, say I-10 down there at night and you would see all the red lights
3 going past you at eighty miles an hour that's about what it looked like.

4 KC: Wow.

5 WB: I knew I should've moved, I should've pulled out of it, but I said, "No, they
6 haven't hit me yet. I'll stay right here." We just motored on out and finally got out of
7 range of them. Tchepone had a very bad reputation back then because it had a lot of what
8 we call nine-level gunners. The FSC-skilled designation, nine is as high as you can get.
9 They sure had plenty of ammo and they liked to use all of it.

10 KC: Now was this as close as you have come to being hit?

11 WB: Yeah, I never did take a hit. As a matter of fact, all the time I was there I
12 had two airplanes hit and one of them the crew elected to bail out of it. They couldn't get
13 a main gear down and that was a real sad deal. I'll get into that a little later on. After
14 getting the airplanes all fixed I sat there and figured out, well, what can I can do for my
15 troops? In the new Air Force the squadron commander can't promote them. I couldn't
16 give them any time off. There wasn't really any place to go. I sat there and thought and
17 finally I said, "Okay, we'll see if I can get the squadron a day off." I went and I talked to
18 the DO and I talked to the DCM (deputy chief of mission) and cleared it with the wing
19 commander. What I did was hit up the pilots for some money and put in fifty bucks of my
20 own and got hold of the first sergeant and said, "I want steaks, I want beans, I want
21 potato salad, and I want beer and soda for the troops. I want to take them to China
22 Beach." He says, "Yes, sir." So we went out and set everything up and nineteen of my
23 NCOs volunteered to stay back in case we had to fly the airplanes. I drove out to China
24 Beach. I had a beat up old pickup truck that I ran around in. One of my young airman out
25 there, he's looking around at China Beach and it's just like it was in the movies. He says,
26 "Hmm, this is decent." I had a beer with the guys and ate a steak and went back to the
27 squadron to find my guys are sending out airplanes. The other two squadrons have fallen
28 flat on their butt, this was a Sunday. They had fallen flat on their butt and my airplanes—
29 my nineteen guys launched twenty-one sorties. I thought that was pretty good, good
30 outfit. Anyway, let's see, where were we?

31 KC: Well, let me—

1 WB: The invasion started.

2 KC: Okay, sure, sure. Let me preface this a little bit, if you don't mind. My
3 understanding is that the 366th was the last of the tactical fighter wings left at that time, is
4 that true?

5 WB: I don't know. I wasn't much on that at all. Pretty much it must've been
6 because the monsoon hit which meant that we couldn't get underneath the clouds. So the
7 invasion hit and they came across the DMZ (demilitarized zone). We knew this was
8 going to happen because we had been doing some north mission work.

9 KC: Sure, sure.

10 WB: Our FACs—we had fast FACs. They flew F-4s and they went out and
11 recce'ed at low level. They could say, "There's huge supply dumps up there."

12 KC: Right.

13 WB: Thanks to the rules of engagement we couldn't do a thing about it. I mean,
14 here's these big beautiful targets and we couldn't hit them. They wouldn't let us do it, so
15 much for the State Department.

16 KC: So you were bound by those decisions to avoid those supply depots.

17 WB: Oh, yeah.

18 KC: Okay.

19 WB: Oh, yeah. Anyway, they came across the DMZ and, of course, they just ran
20 wild on everybody. They had everybody out numbered up there.

21 KC: This was the so-called Easter Offensive.

22 WB: Yeah.

23 KC: At the end of March of [1972]. Now prior to that, forgive my interrupting,
24 prior to that there was an effort to hit the area around the DMZ a little harder, is my
25 understanding.

26 WB: Sure, that's where John Lavelle got in trouble.

27 KC: Okay, explain that to me. You're talking about the commander of the 7th Air
28 Force, correct?

29 WB: Yeah.

30 KC: Okay, explain that to me.

1 WB: Actually, the rules of engagement had one little deal there if you got fired
2 on you could return fire. So what he would do would send guys out to troll, go out there
3 and flaunt yourself a little bit and hope they fired at you. Instead of hitting the gun that
4 shot at you, you'd find the biggest target of military significance and clobber the hell out
5 of it.

6 KC: Right.

7 WB: Okay. Well, Kissinger or somebody didn't like that so Lavelle got retired.

8 KC: Yeah, I believe he was brought to the—in front of the man, if you will,
9 Secretary of Defense Laird, I believe also was certainly involved in that. Now there was
10 intelligence—

11 WB: Well, I think McNamara was secretary of defense by then.

12 KC: Well, this would've been '71 and '72 so it would've been Laird in Nixon's,
13 the end of Nixon's first term. But nonetheless there was intelligence saying that there was
14 a gathering of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) forces in that area. Now, these night
15 gunship missions, escort missions, the gunships that you were involved in, was this part
16 of the effort to try to reduce the NVA build up?

17 WB: No, these were over the trail.

18 KC: Just over the trail, okay.

19 WB: Yeah.

20 KC: Okay.

21 WB: No, NVA build up, no, we didn't do anything about that at all until after the
22 invasion.

23 KC: Okay, okay. So on March thirtieth, as I understand it, the invasion
24 commences, the artillery, and then of course the full-fledged invasion. You're essentially
25 a new commander, new CO of the [390th] Fighter Squadron. What happens to you at this
26 point? What happens to you and what happens to your fighter squadron once you know
27 that this large-scale operation, this invasion has taken place?

28 WB: Well, frustration for about, I've forgotten the exact time, for about eight
29 days maybe ten or two weeks I don't know.

30 KC: Why the frustration?

1 WB: The monsoon was there, okay? So you've got clouds to the ground and it's
2 raining like hell underneath it and we can't work air to ground. We can't get under there.
3 So what we're doing is radar-controlled bomb drops on targets that the Army has called
4 into us. Of course, we don't have much Army up there at all. It's all ARVN (Army of the
5 Republic of Vietnam) now.

6 KC: Mm-hmm, with the Vietnamization process, et cetera.

7 WB: Yeah. We've got Army advisors in there. We've got Marine advisors
8 working with the Vietnamese Marines, but I'll tell you what, I'm going to have to go
9 back to the bathroom right now.

10 KC: Oh, sure. Would you like for me to call you back?

11 WB: Yeah, would you do that, please?

12 KC: I'll be glad to.

13 WB: Give me about five minutes.

14 KC: You bet.

15 WB: Okay, bye-bye.

16 KC: Okay, Mr. Bjerneby, we had just introduced the topic of the beginning of the
17 Easter Offensive in March of 1972, you as the commander of the 390th. What is taking
18 place within your squadron right now? What are you having to do as a result of this
19 invasion?

20 WB: Actually, I guess I'd say more of the same. We probably increased the
21 number of missions, hard to say, twenty percent?

22 KC: From what to what?

23 WB: You know, I don't even recall the numbers.

24 KC: Okay.

25 WB: I was flying on those night missions. I was probably flying every night. I
26 didn't make much of an effort to fly with a lot of different people. That was pretty much
27 the ops officer's business. I saw my job as mainly putting out any fires that I saw start
28 which I didn't have and making sure the maintenance guys got all the support possible.
29 We had a kind of a problem there because we were supposed to have something like 152
30 people and we only had about 135 in maintenance. Because of the fairly cramped
31 conditions we had for parking the airplanes, we had what they call wonder arches, sort of

1 like a giant Quonset with about a foot of reinforced cement over the top of it. The
2 airplanes were parked into these because whoever wrote the plans on handling the
3 airplanes said we needed five guys every time an airplane came in. So if you've got four
4 airplanes coming in you need twenty guys right there to receive them and get them back
5 into the wonder arch without a ding in the wing tip or something like that. Of course,
6 we're doing this twenty-four hours a day. We didn't have as heavy a night series as we
7 did a day, but still you had to keep the guys—had to make sure the guys were there to
8 work and get a fair schedule. Some of the guys didn't like working nights. So they'd
9 trade with the guys during the days and some guys would do this just to get a rest. You
10 just had to make sure that everything was covered. We didn't have the problems you run
11 into back in the States because, well, number one, the guys couldn't get off base. Okay,
12 they had to stay on the base so you didn't have to go bail your guys out of Dade County
13 jail like I did down in Homestead one time. You didn't have to worry about your guys
14 getting wiped out in car accidents. Yeah, they fired the rockets at us, but I only had one
15 guy ever got injured by one of the rockets because they were sitting five miles away from
16 us aiming the things by guess and by God and throwing them down there. That's one
17 thing I think I did for the guys. Some people were pretty shook up at night and they
18 would be wandering around wearing these big old bulky nylon laminate flak jackets
19 which is kind of like wearing a Kapok life preserver. I wouldn't wear one and some guys
20 says, "Why won't you wear one?" I said, "Hey, I'm out there in the daytime and they can
21 see me and they're trying to hit me and they haven't hit me so far. So I figured the
22 chances of getting hit in the night are pretty damn remote." It was not much of a point in
23 wearing one because they're so bulky. Anyway, maybe that cheered the guys up some,
24 but I was always wandering around. My hours with the squadron never changed because
25 what I was doing was—how did this work? I would come in off the night mission and
26 sleep about four hours and get up and go to a wing standup which was about 7:30 in the
27 morning. I'd come back from that and go walk around the squadron a bit and see how the
28 guys were doing, the old management by walking around deal. I see how the daytime
29 flying was doing. If there was any paperwork then I would take care of that. Then after
30 lunch I would sleep for about two to four maybe, no, not four, two hours. Then back
31 down to the squadron again. About seven o'clock I would start briefing for the night

1 mission because we would be on station about nine and get back in at about 1:30 in the
2 morning. I did this for, gee I don't know, almost two months.

3 KC: What was the nature of these missions with the 390th? Were they interdiction
4 missions, what—

5 WB: We were pretty much ground support because we were in some in-country
6 interdiction, yeah. We had F-4Ds and the F-4D did not have the sophisticated radar
7 homing and warning gear that the E model did. Because on the D it was an afterthought,
8 it was put in the airplane anyplace where they could put it. As a result it was pretty hard
9 to maintain. It had a lot of fairly fragile coaxial cable. If this stuff was mishandled it
10 could break on the inside and you wouldn't know it until you checked it out with the test
11 equipment. Another bad thing about it was there was a big panel on each side of the F-4
12 right over the wing called panel 38, 38L, 38R. It's held on by, God, it must be 120, 10-32
13 screws or something like that. This thing is such a integral part of the airplane that if you
14 take it off you may have trouble getting it back on if you moved the airplane because the
15 body would flex a little bit. They didn't like to take it off, but there was some of the radar
16 homing and warning gear inside of it, which was a tremendous mistake. So anytime you
17 had to work on that stuff the airplane would be down about four to six hours just because
18 they would have to take out all the screws and if they broke one off then they would have
19 to drill it out and go into there and get the damn panel back on after everything is hooked
20 up. The F-4 was a real bear to maintain. For instance, the radio was underneath the rear
21 seat. Okay, if the radio goes bad, and they do every now and then, to change it out you
22 have to get the ejection seat technician in there to safe the seat, remove the seat bucket
23 itself, change the radio, put the seat bucket back in and then call the ejection technician
24 back to make the seat operable again. It's just you're looking at about, oh, fifty-three man
25 hours per flying hour I think was what it cost us and that's bad.

26 KC: And that's just in maintenance.

27 WB: Yeah. What that led to when they wrote the contract to build the A-7,
28 Chance Vought A-7, they included in the contract, "We wanted the airplane flyable at
29 eleven hours, eleven man hours per flying hour." There was a penalty for if it took more
30 than that and they got a reward if it took less than that. I think they made very thorough
31 design preparations to make sure the airplane would be easy to maintain.

1 KC: Was this, do you think, part of the lessons learned from the F-4?

2 WB: Oh, yeah, you bet. In the rear seat on the right side below your right elbow
3 there's four black boxes stacked there. If you want to work on any one of them you have
4 to go through that seat rigmarole. As a matter of fact, you had to remove the seat to get in
5 them. It was just a bear.

6 KC: All right, let's—

7 WB: Let's see.

8 KC: Let's get you back in this invasion or back into these missions, interdiction
9 and et cetera. Where were the bulk of the missions the 390th participated in?

10 WB: A lot of it was busting up roads because you can see the roads from the air
11 and they would pick a choke point, one of old Alfred Mahan's choke points, where the
12 road runs through a canyon or something like that. You would try and collapse the
13 canyon across the road, and collapse the sides of the canyons across the road with bombs.
14 Or you would go out there with delayed-action bombs and park them in the road to
15 disrupt traffic because they would go off after a set interval. We even had some—they
16 would take a five-hundred-pound bomb and put special fusing in it and the thing becomes
17 a mine. It's got a magnetic and audio detector. If this thing is sitting in the road and a
18 truck goes over it, it will go off.

19 KC: These types of missions—

20 WB: If they had a truck park and the FACs could spot these. The FACs would fly
21 over one section of country and get to know it very well. It's like flying over half of Weld
22 County up here and looking for changes day after day after day. We also had photo recce
23 of all kinds including pictures taken by U2s and stuff like that. You could also track these
24 things, they had a very fancy thing that, oh, I'm trying to think of who dreamed this thing
25 up, it was called Igloo White where they dropped in sensors all over the place and they
26 could actually hear trucks go past and guys talking as they walked past. If the thing was
27 sitting there in a place what they—had been a truck park in the past and it detected a lot
28 of business then we'd have a target.

29 KC: Now I would think, and correct me if I'm wrong here, but I would think that
30 the nature of this North Vietnamese operation which was mainly, especially in the area
31 where you were, main force NVA units, I would think that this would've really played to

1 the Air Force strengths in the war, meaning that there were large troops movements, there
2 was armor. It was much more conventional than much of the earlier parts of the war. Is
3 this true?

4 WB: Well, yeah.

5 KC: That's very leading question I know, but I ask it anyway.

6 WB: When they got out in the jungle, you know, that it's a triple canopy jungle
7 so it's very hard to see anything down there, but of course when they start those open
8 movements, yeah, you could go in and get them. We're talking about the ending of the
9 monsoon. Before this we were dropping on geographical points and basically what you're
10 doing is you're flying a set heading, set altitude, set airspeed, being vectored very slightly
11 right or left by the ground radar. I mean I'm talking half a degree, I'm serious when I say
12 that, half a degree. Then he'll give you five seconds to drop four, three, two, one, drop
13 and you press the button and off go the bombs. Of course, the computer has figured out
14 that that point in space and at that speed, at that heading, at that altitude, the bombs go
15 down and hit the target. Whatever it is you don't know, the bombs go down through the
16 clouds. This is where we had the funny thing with the Navy, four Navy F-4s on my left
17 wing, two A-6s and two A-7s on the right wing and we're all there for a radar-controlled
18 bomb drop, I think I mentioned that in the last thing. Once the monsoon lifted then
19 hurrah. Well, first mission, we're going north and we're going hit a—what the heck were
20 we bombing? It was a military complex where there was supposed to be something like a
21 regiment of troops, NVA troops were coming in by train and they were going to transship
22 to the trucks. They launched eight F-4s off and I'm leading one flight of four. We figured
23 out to go in under the radar because I knew a little bit about this from my air defense
24 experience. So I looked up the radar order of battle and saw what they had guarding the
25 coast and figured, okay, we'll go out forty miles out in the water and we'll stay under a
26 hundred feet and they'll never see us. We take off from Da Nang and we sit there flying
27 at 420 knots. That's about the most economical cruise speed for the F-4. There's two, 360
28 and 420. You notice they're multiples of 60s. That makes navigation easier ahead, that's
29 six and seven miles a minute. Anyway we're forty miles off the coast over the blue water
30 and there's blue skies now and white cumulus back over the mainland with the green hills
31 and everything looks great. We're buzzing along there at about five hundred feet because

1 we haven't gotten into bad territory yet, but all of a sudden looking out there's five Navy
2 destroyers in line ahead heading north and they're about five miles inland, five miles
3 toward the shore from us. What I can see is that each one of them is flying two great big
4 U.S. flags on their foremast. I hadn't ever known the U.S. Navy had battle flags like the
5 Royal Navy does, but these things I'm looking at them five miles away and I can see the
6 U.S. flags, they must've been, hell I don't know, fifteen by forty feet or something like
7 that, they were huge.

8 KC: Wow.

9 WB: Boy, you talk about getting a pumped up feeling looking at that.

10 KC: I bet.

11 WB: Anyway, we got into—we were going to turn inland and we dropped down
12 to a hundred feet and we pushed it up to five hundred knots and we're flying down about
13 fifty feet off the water using a radar altimeter to stay straight. I've got my guys out in
14 loose wing and heading for the target using the inertial to find it. We come in and as we
15 near the coast we pull up because I want to cross the coast at four thousand feet to get out
16 of the light flak making it harder for them to hit us. The target is about, oh, ten miles
17 ahead. So the time comes to climb up—what we call pop—the bombing altitude which is
18 fourteen thousand feet now. I light the burner and kick my guys out in echelon left which
19 is I've got all three of them on the left side now and move them forward. This is a little
20 bit different because usually you're stacked back about forty-five degrees and I briefed
21 them I wanted them forward about thirty degrees. As we got to the top at fourteen
22 thousand feet still doing about five hundred knots and climbing at afterburner, but
23 looking at the target and that's right where it's supposed to be at about two o'clock. So
24 I call leads in and pull the nose over the target and roll over on my back and pull the nose
25 down and roll around again to wings level. When the dive angle looks good I go across
26 the target at ninety degrees to the egress heading. What my guys are doing is they're
27 rolling in and they're coming across at slightly different angles, for target coverage. You
28 have to go straight across and the guy goes thirty degrees off from me and the other guy
29 is thirty degrees off from him. The third and fourth guy is heading right on the egress
30 heading towards the coast as he goes in on his pass. I hadn't realized it because I had
31 designed this thing for target coverage. So what it did is when you come off the target I

1 can look out to my right on egress heading and we're all lined up, four sitting right there
2 all lined abreast going like hell. But anyway, we went over the top, on the target. I had a
3 sight setting for forty-five degrees and five hundred knots at eight thousand feet. As I
4 squared away on the dive and I looked below me and I don't know—did you ever see the
5 Navy pictures of Okinawa where the carriers are trying to shoot down all the *kamikazes*?

6 KC: Yes.

7 WB: That's what the sky looked like.

8 KC: Wow.

9 WB: They were talking about all the flak over Baghdad. I wasn't impressed at
10 all. I looked down at this stuff and, man, it looked like every gun in the world was
11 shooting at us. I said to myself, "I wish I'd have a sight setting for ten thousand feet
12 instead of eight." So anyway we got down to eight thousand feet I dropped. On this
13 mission we were carrying what they call CBU-52 and these are cluster bombs. We had
14 six of them each. There's I think 335 grapefruit-sized bombs in it. The idea is that you
15 spread out the destruction instead of making one hole with one bomb. Then you put these
16 things all over the barracks. As we came off I didn't see it because I was scooting straight
17 ahead, but the number four guy saw my bombs go in and he said, "Well, they just
18 plastered that complex." We never did get any BDA (bomb damage assessment) off of it
19 or anything like that because it's up in North Vietnam.

20 KC: Sure.

21 WB: I'm sure they knew we were in town.

22 KC: I bet they did.

23 WB: Because there were eight F-4s there. So we put forty-eight of those things in
24 on them. Anyway, nobody got a scratch and I can tell you the F-4 at 4,000 feet with all
25 the junk hanging on it will do 740 knots in afterburner.

26 KC: Just getting away from there.

27 WB: Well, the other thing we had, of course, were the SAM (surface to air
28 missile) sites behind us going away. We wanted to get out of Dodge as quick as possible.

29 KC: Well, talk to me about the SAMs. Talk to me about the SAMs that you—

30 WB: Sir?

31 KC: Talk to me about the SAMs that you encountered during this time.

1 WB: By the time I got there they pretty much had the SAM figured out. It's not
2 like in '65 and '67 where nobody had any jammers. We had SAMs fired at us, but we
3 also had good jammers. The SAM would go undirected. So we would see this thing sail
4 off. Now one of things we did after the invasion when they got down there the NVN
5 (North Vietnamese) put seven SAM sites just north of the DMZ. There were within about
6 a fifteen-mile circle so they all covered each other. Well, my squadron got the job of
7 taking them out. We got five of them.

8 KC: What did you think about that when you received orders for that?

9 WB: Oh, I thought it was the greatest thing in the world.

10 KC: All right, okay.

11 WB: Yeah, because I wasn't particularly worried about it. I figured that we could
12 sneak in. We used the same tactics coming in off the water, coming in fast. We were
13 doing about 550 knots on the deck and then pop up. I don't care what kind of outfit
14 you've got. Unless your guys are sitting right there ready to go right now, an outfit could
15 be in and out in two minutes, you've got a heck of time trying to stop them. Of course,
16 we varied the times and varied the targets and we had a really neat thing worked out with
17 our fast FACs. We went up there once and we were supposed to hit a target. On the
18 runway the command post called me to go over to their channel and they gave us a new
19 target, encrypted, of course. We launched, headed for the new target and on the way we
20 got called again by the airborne command post. That's that C-130 up there with all the
21 boffins sitting in it, and got another target. So I had three target changes after we taxied.
22 Next thing I know, we're up there roaming around North Vietnam about forty miles north
23 of the DMZ trying to find out where the fast FAC is we are supposed to rendezvous with.
24 Finally I asked him in the clear, "Where are you?" and he tells me where he is and he's
25 thirty miles south of us.

26 KC: Oh, no.

27 WB: Yeah and about that time number three says, "Lead, we've got two SAMs
28 coming up at ten o'clock." Well, that gave us a target. So we dodged those guys and we
29 had our jammers on and they went sailing off God knows where. So we went up and
30 bombed the SAM site and went home. I called the 7th Air Force on the—they've got a
31 scramble phone. I don't know if you've ever used one of those things.

1 KC: No.

2 WB: But if you talk real fast it screws it up. I was really mad. I called this guy
3 and said, "You had us roam around up there like idiots right up there by Vinh because
4 somebody screwed up the CAC (command and control)." I never did find out whether the
5 guy in the backseat screwed up the encryption or decryption or the guys screwed up the
6 target info or whatever. I'd get talking fast and he would finally break in and say, "Slow
7 down, slow down." Finally we worked out a system and it really worked pretty good.
8 What would happen, we had those seven SAM sites. We had six of them now. The fast
9 FAC on his pass, morning pass, he would make two passes. He would run over the
10 country and go back to the tanker and then run over it again. Well, we'd study three of
11 the SAM sites, start to study three of the SAM sites and just for ease we called them Alfa,
12 Bravo, Charlie. He would make his pass in the morning and pick one of them as a target
13 and go up and hit the tanker and as he was leaving the tanker we'd be coming up the
14 coast and we would just check in with our call sign, "Gunfighter 41." That's all we'd say
15 and he'd come back and say, "Bravo." So we'd head for target Bravo. Five minutes out
16 we would call, "Hawaii," just that one word and he would click his mic button twice, two
17 minutes out we would call, "California," and he would say, "Marking." He would go in
18 and actually put smoke rockets on the radar van. If we knocked out the radar van they
19 were done. They'd have all the SAMs sitting all over the ground and that wouldn't do
20 them any good at all.

21 KC: Sure.

22 WB: So, as he's coming off the target we're coming over the top and we kill the
23 radar van and all head home. That thing was all over and done with in less than two
24 minutes. Sometimes we would get fired at, most of the time we didn't get fired at because
25 they're down there drinking tea or whatever the hell they're doing, cleaning the place up.
26 Ubon poached on us. We went after the sixth SAM site and the rascals had moved it
27 between the time he passed back and taken a look at it. I guess they hitched up a semi to
28 it or something like that and moved the radar van. Ubon poached the other two, but we
29 got all seven SAM sites. So it was more of a challenge than anything else.

30 KC: Now were these SA-2 sites?

31 WB: Yeah.

1 KC: Okay. Now my understanding is that the NVA also had SA-7, a portable
2 heat-seeking missile as well. Did you encounter those?

3 WB: One of my flights was the first [F-4] flight that was fired at with an SA-7. A
4 young pilot came back and his eyes were big and he said, "It was red and it came after
5 me." He says, "I out-turned it and it went off someplace." I looked at him and I said,
6 "That's an SA-7, SAM-7, a Strela. I had read about the thing in an intel brief quite a
7 while [back] actually when they were using them against the Israelis. I said. "If you're
8 doing 450 or better it can't catch you." I said, "Here's what we'll do." I got the squadron
9 together and I said, "Okay, you don't go below ten thousand feet unless you're on a pass.
10 You don't go slower than 450 knots and if you're dropping bombs do it at 500. Always
11 keep the airplane moving just like in high flak areas. You never, never flew straight and
12 level or in any one particular attitude for more than two seconds unless you're releasing
13 the bombs. All the time I was there I had two airplanes hit. I said, "Here's what we'll do.
14 If you see one of these things fired, number one, there's a big puff of smoke on the
15 ground because that's the ejection charge that comes out of the back of the launcher." I
16 said, "If you're in position call in on the smoke and drop all your bombs on that spot."
17 And you know, they left us alone.

18 KC: So your changing tactics actually worked pretty well, then, by the sounds of
19 it.

20 WB: Well, yeah, because the guy could sit there and get maybe ten five-hundred-
21 pound bombs dumped on his head if he shot at an F-4.

22 KC: Sure, sure.

23 WB: But they did get a lot of slow movers. A buddy of mine was flying the A-1s
24 down there and he managed to struggle back home with a couple of cylinders blown out
25 of his engine.

26 KC: Yeah, my understanding is that they were pretty effective at least early on
27 with these, with their SAMs.

28 WB: The guys we were firing at were pretty ignorant about the whole affair.

29 KC: Okay. Explain that to me. What do you mean by that?

30 WB: Well, okay, as a weapons officer in air defense I studied all the missiles, our
31 own and everybody else's. So I knew what their limitations were. You get something like

1 that and the early infrared missiles, they are a hell of a lot better now, unfortunately, but
2 you take a Sidewinder, the old AIM-9B, the first Sidewinders that came out. You put two
3 Gs in your airplane that thing will lose you because it'll get into a turn, it'll start lagging
4 behind and when the seeker head gets so far off it reaches the gimbal limit and then it
5 goes blind. So really a thirty-degree bank can defeat that thing.

6 KC: Okay.

7 WB: But you get the new ones, now they can pull fifty or sixty Gs and they're
8 pretty deadly.

9 KC: Right.

10 WB: But the Strela was a first generation, what they call MANPAD, Man
11 portable air defense missile. Like I said, it has to be fired at your tail because it's not an
12 all-aspect missile. If you're doing 450 knots it just doesn't have the energy to catch you.

13 KC: Sure.

14 WB: You're sitting there in an AD Skyraider, yeah, it can catch you. If you're in
15 a helicopter it can bloody well catch you, or a light airplane. If you're smart and you have
16 those whatever [flares] the Army's got that you set there and you swat their bottom and
17 they launch out or even a Very pistol. If you fired a Very pistol out the window the Strela
18 would go after the Very pistol, Very pistol flare. The Army hadn't thought that far ahead.

19 KC: That's very interesting that you say that. What other missions, other than the
20 SAM, the SAM sites and the interdiction missions, did you fly in response to the
21 invasion?

22 WB: Well, after we knocked out the SAMs we started running what I call three-
23 a-days. We would take off from Da Nang loaded for ground support and go to work
24 somewhere around Dak To or Pleiku, recover down at Bien Hoa because, like you said, I
25 guess we were the last F-4 group in the outfit. Fly a local out of Bien Hoa up around An
26 Loc, recover back down at Bien Hoa, take off from Bien Hoa to go home to either An
27 Loc, Pleiku, or Dak To and just pound the hell out of them. We'd take off from Bien Hoa
28 for the local and we would be full of five-hundred pound bombs because that's all they
29 had down there. We'd have to fly around in a circle to burn off some fuel because you
30 didn't want to go to work with fuel in the center line.

31 KC: Sure.

1 WB: Check-in with the FAC and I can remember I checked in with one guy,
2 there wasn't much going on and the usual is, "What do you got?" I said, "Well, three F-4s
3 and forty-eight five-hundred pound bombs, six passes with the guns and we can go to
4 work. He says, "How do you want to do it?" I said, "One pass, one bomb." He says,
5 "Great, let's get to work." We just sat there for about thirty minutes dropping one bomb
6 at a time.

7 KC: Now this was in support of ground troops U.S. and I guess primarily ARVN
8 ground troops by that time.

9 WB: Yeah, ARVN. An Loc was pretty much a mess by the time we got through
10 and by the time everybody else got through with it.

11 KC: Well, I think we can understand what "mess" would mean for those on the
12 ground, but explain to me what you saw as a mess there at An Loc.

13 WB: Well, pretty much all the buildings down because the NVN was hiding in
14 the buildings and, of course, they're pretty much all made out of wood anyway. The
15 NVN would be hiding in the building and the FAC would know where they were and he
16 would put his smoke down and say, "Okay, twenty-five meters northwest of the smoke,
17 get it." They'd say, "Okay, Two, where that bomb hit move your bomb ten meters to the
18 right," or ten meters west or north, or something like that. Another thing was twelve
19 o'clock was always north. So if you wanted to hit twenty meters at eleven o'clock that
20 gave you a pretty good clue. Anyway that's about the way it worked. You've seen
21 pictures of—it wasn't as bad as trench things in World War I where everything was just
22 turned up and plowed over, but everybody was out of the place except the combatants by
23 that time.

24 KC: Now in response to—once again, in response to the invasion beginning in
25 April of 1972 the administration initiated what was known as Operation Freedom Trail
26 for a very brief time. Now this certainly included carrier-based craft off the coast. Was
27 your outfit involved in this as well?

28 WB: I have no idea what you're talking about.

29 KC: Oh, why did I say Freedom Trail? Freedom Train. No idea about that?

30 WB: Nope.

31 KC: Okay. That must've been primarily a naval operation.

1 WB: What was it?

2 KC: Again, it was in response to the invasion. It was interdiction missions and
3 bombing missions north of the DMZ.

4 WB: The administration could put all the names on it they wanted to, but unless
5 we had a *New York Times* or something like that we wouldn't know about it.

6 KC: You wouldn't know. Sure, sure that makes perfect sense.

7 WB: We just have missions to go out and go up and down the trail and bomb the
8 hell out of it. Yeah, I can remember we went up there one place. There was pretty heavy
9 traffic on the road so we went up with four airplanes and each put twelve of those mines
10 on the road to try to block the traffic. There was one mining mission that was really wild.
11 One of the FACs had noticed tank tracks across the DMZ river, [Cua Viet], on the bar
12 where it flows into the ocean as the tide went out. Apparently they were coming across
13 there with their tanks. It was a pretty good sandy [shoal], you know, and when it dried out
14 a little bit it held the tanks okay. Anyway, we took four F-4s and put forty-eight of those
15 mines right across that place. We ended up getting seven tanks and a large motor boat
16 and a barge when they went across those mines. I thought that was kind of neat.

17 KC: Is that the first time you had ever come into contact, in combat, I mean, with
18 armor like those tanks?

19 WB: Well, no. There was one time there when we were flying just south of the
20 DMZ and there were tank tracks that left the road going into a copse of trees. This was
21 quite a while after the invasion. This must've been May or June or something like that.
22 There was something in those trees. So we put some bombs in there and then we ended
23 up with a nice big fire so somebody had taken a tank and tried to hide it in there. The
24 only trouble is that lateritic soil over there is pretty bright red and when you see these two
25 big wide red tracks going into this small clump of trees, maybe the size of a double tennis
26 court, and you say, "Okay, somebody is hiding a tank in there."

27 KC: Right.

28 WB: Sure enough, it was. I got another tank with the 20-millimeter cannon. I
29 remember back in the old days they said you couldn't do it, but the Korean War vets had
30 told me just exactly how to do it. You come in behind him at a thirty-degree dive and you
31 shoot into the engine grating behind the turret. Of course, that has to be open to let the air

1 come in and out to keep the engine cool. The other secret is there isn't any armor between
2 the engine compartment and the turret itself. So if your bullets go in just right you're
3 going to set off his ammunition and that's exactly what happened and it looked just like
4 one of those World War II gun camera films where some guy is shooting up a tank and it
5 blows up in his face.

6 KC: How did that make you feel when you pulled that off?

7 WB: I felt kind of wide-eyed because I really hadn't expected to see all that crap
8 coming up like it did, pulled seven Gs getting out of it.

9 KC: Now you're involved in this on the Laos, Laotian border as well, aren't you?

10 WB: Well, yeah, of course, where is the Laotian border? How the hell do you
11 know that?

12 KC: Well, sure, sure, sure, but you had operations to the west.

13 WB: Well, yeah. That's where Tchepone is.

14 KC: Okay, all right.

15 WB: Over there by the Bolovens. I don't know, have you ever heard of how they
16 kept track of where they were over there?

17 KC: No, explain that to me.

18 WB: Okay. The Mekong River flows down there and it's very visible, mostly
19 kind of a light brown like the Mississippi. There's various ox bows and curves in it.
20 There's one called the Catcher's Mit, one was called the Scrotum, and the other was a
21 Light Bulb. There's a bunch of other descriptive terms for them, but once you see them
22 from the air you can see why they're called that. You can probably see that if you can get
23 a hold of a military map that shows that clearly. You can see how you can find
24 descriptive names for all those river marks.

25 KC: In May of 1972 the Navy also, of course, plays a big role in what was known
26 more famously as Operation Linebacker beginning May of '72, that spring. What was
27 your role, your squadron's role in that, if any?

28 WB: Actually, we didn't have any.

29 KC: Okay.

30 WB: A friend of mine was in on that. He did something pretty cool. I should've
31 probably elbowed my way into that because at that time I considered myself the best air-

1 to-air pilot in the whole wing because I had done so much of it. I was also one of the best
2 radar pilots in the whole wing because I knew exactly what was going on and had a lot of
3 experience with it. I just took the job they handed me and stuck with it. Anyway, this
4 friend Paul Crow took off and he was going up there as an anti-MiG escort for the B-52s.
5 Well, the tankers were late coming in. So instead of turning around and coming back
6 home he flew up the tanker track to meet them. He managed to get fuel and stay there
7 throughout the whole mission, the whole first Linebacker mission with the B-52s. But
8 that was Paul's third combat tour over there. He was actually one of the quintessential
9 TAC fighter pilot, a very good man, good squadron commander.

10 KC: Now your time in command (cracking and popping sounds). It seems that
11 we have some technical difficulties here, Mr. Bjorneby. I'll tell you what. I've got a
12 number of other questions for you, but given the time of the day and the fact that the
13 phone sounds like it's flipping out on us a little bit, why don't I put an end to today's
14 session? I'll get in touch with you about finishing this up maybe next week, how does
15 that sound? Hello?

Interview with Walter Bjerneby
Session [3] of [3]
June 16, 2008

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an interview with Mr. Walter
2 Bjerneby. Today is 16 June 2008. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, and once again Mr. Bjerneby
3 is joining us from his home in Greeley, Colorado. Mr. Bjerneby, when we left off last
4 time we were discussing the Easter Offensive and the role of your squadron, the 390th, in
5 defending northern South Vietnam as a result of the Easter Offensive. You were
6 describing some of the missions, the interdiction missions, the tactical support missions,
7 et cetera. Let's pick up from there, if we will.

8 Walter Bjerneby: Okay. As I mentioned earlier the monsoon clouds precluded us
9 from doing any direct close-air support or ground support so we were restricted to
10 primarily radar bombing and bombing off a Pathfinder which would be an RF-4 with the
11 Loran bombing system on it. That was pretty much like dropping the bombs into the
12 clouds and, of course, you never know what's down there and everybody swore that the
13 Pathfinders were accurate enough to hit things. Something else we used to do was B-52
14 escort. Of course, they were doing radar bombing from thirty or thirty-five thousand feet
15 in cells of three. We would be about, oh, two to five miles behind them in a flight of two.
16 The idea was that if any MiGs came past they would either bounce us or try and get past
17 us to the B-52s. We didn't think too much of this particular outfit, but then we didn't
18 much—we didn't worry about it too much because we were pretty confident of our
19 ability to handle [the MiGs].

20 KC: Sure.

21 WB: We'd fly in pairs about three thousand to five thousand feet apart with the
22 back-seaters checking each other's tails and the front-seaters flying on the B-52s about
23 two thousand feet low, like I said, and about two to five miles back.

24 KC: Now you mentioned that you didn't have an awful lot of confidence in what
25 you call "this outfit." Can you explain that to me a little bit, please?

26 WB: Say again, please.

27 KC: You said that you didn't have much confidence with this outfit, the way this
28 was set up. Can you elaborate on that for me, please?

1 WB: I don't quite understand the context here.

2 KC: Okay. You were talking about the support missions you were flying with the
3 B-52s and you mentioned that you were not particularly confident, that you didn't care
4 for this arrangement that much, but that you were confident in your abilities and your
5 squadron's abilities.

6 WB: Oh, yeah, because actually if you think about it we're sitting back there as
7 decoys.

8 KC: Sure, sure.

9 WB: In other words, we're trolling for the MiGs. As a flight of two I would've
10 preferred to have a flight of four back there, but then the MiGs didn't come down or
11 didn't try for the B-52s like that, which was kind of a surprise to me because I would've
12 traded a MiG-21 for a B-52 any day of the week.

13 KC: Of course, of course. Why do think the—?

14 WB: Especially on the North's side.

15 KC: Why do you think the MiGs were reluctant to engage?

16 WB: I don't know. They'd lose the MiG because he would have to make a high
17 speed run on the B-52 down there south of the DMZ. He wouldn't have the fuel to get
18 back home and especially wouldn't have the fuel if he got engaged. But on a one-pass
19 attack if he came in, say, about 1.7 or 1.8 Mach with radar guidance into the B-52 he can
20 get into position and fire his missiles and then do his best to evade the F-4s and fly the
21 airplane to a known spot with the last amount of his gas and bail out. I don't guess they
22 went in for that.

23 KC: Hmm, interesting.

24 WB: But I sure would've done it if I had been running the air defense bit on the
25 other side. Of course, I spent a lot of time in air defense so.

26 KC: Right, right, certainly from earlier in your career, as I recall.

27 WB: Oh, yeah.

28 KC: What else about the efforts here in the—

29 WB: The other thing would be to establish choke points during the day to
30 interfere with the transportation network. Then the only time they could repair them
31 would be at night and then the AC-130 gunships would be up there and they'd know

1 these spots and they would hawk them, sit over them, and if they find a backup of trucks
2 or something like that then they'd sit there and knock out the trucks one by one. That was
3 pretty impressive because you couldn't hear what they were talking about because they
4 didn't say much over the radio, but you could sure see what they were doing because you
5 would sit there and they'd shoot once or twice, maybe three times and then a truck would
6 catch fire depending on what it was carrying. If it was loaded with ammunition then all of
7 a sudden you'd see this big golden fireball pop up and then the Wilson cloud chamber
8 effect. I don't know if you're familiar with that when the shockwave comes off—

9 KC: No, please explain that.

10 WB: The humid air condenses behind it because of the sudden drop in pressure,
11 sudden drop in temperature and you see this white milky wave go spreading out from it.
12 Then he moves off someplace else. Usually when they blow up a truck that would all
13 excite the anti-aircraft gunners and then they'd start shooting at the AC-130 and then
14 we'd go to work.

15 KC: Okay, trying to knock out the anti-aircraft, I would guess.

16 WB: Oh, yeah. If he keeps firing while you make your pass then you have a
17 pretty good idea where he is.

18 KC: What type of methods did they employ to combat your effectiveness on
19 firing at them? What would they do to meet the threat coming from you after they had
20 fired on the gunships?

21 WB: Oh, shoot at you.

22 KC: Just flat out shoot.

23 WB: Oh, sure, yeah, that's about all they could do.

24 KC: I didn't know if there was any other pattern that they employed to confuse or
25 to conceal themselves before you made your pass or not.

26 WB: No, they really can't. If there was a nice big hole, of course, they could get
27 in it, but every now and then—there was one time I was working with an AC-130 and
28 they had a—I'm trying to remember what they are, B-57Gs I think, it's got all kinds of
29 low level flight TV and infrared and laser spotter, the whole thing. He was sitting there
30 spotting targets for the AC-130. It was a clear night, no moon. I was sitting way above
31 both of them because the B-57 is a little bit lower than the AC-130. The AC-130 was

1 stacked up, oh, I don't know maybe fifteen or seventeen thousand feet. I guess that was
2 the other way around. He was dropping laser-guided bombs and the AC-130 was spotting
3 for him, I guess is what they were doing, because they were using laser-guided bombs
4 which are very, very accurate. As a result I was up about twenty-four thousand feet
5 staying out of their way. The AC-130 would drop a flare and guide the B-57 onto the
6 target, transmitted instructions on exactly where to pinpoint the thing. The B-57 would
7 drop one of those five-hundred-pound bombs and hit the target. All of a sudden
8 somebody down there decided they'd had enough of that stuff and they started shooting
9 at him with, I think a 37. I just happened to be in the right position at the time and just
10 rolled right over into a Navy dive bomber approach where you just roll right over on your
11 back and pull your nose down to the target and roll out. We were pretty steep, probably a
12 sixty-degree dive and all of a sudden about eleven thousand feet and my mind says, "That
13 looks about right." I pickled off one of the Mark-36 incendiary clusters, M-36 incendiary
14 clusters. As we pulled out we looked back at the target and all of a sudden where the gun
15 pit was, just a whole lot of fireworks came out of it because I guess about the time the
16 canister opened and scattered out its little bomblets they all went into the gun pit and set
17 off the ammunition. It was kind of neat because my back-seater was a RIO, radar
18 intercept observer, from Air Defense Command. He had more flying time in fighters than
19 I did.

20 KC: Wow.

21 WB: He just, "Yay!" It's kind of neat when everything comes together and works
22 like that. I had been over there, oh, about ten months by that time. I had kind of an
23 organic computer built into my head for dropping bombs by that time.

24 KC: Mm-hmm. Well, when you see an explosion like that and you say just
25 timing and somewhat fortuitous that everything worked out exactly, but regardless, what
26 do you feel? What emotions are you going through when you see this explosion and
27 knowing that what you've done was successful?

28 WB: Oh, kind of like hitting a homerun.

29 KC: Okay.

30 WB: Just you're doing your job and everything came together and, yeah, there's
31 a bit of luck added to it when you do something like that. Also, you've got to take a little

1 bit of credit because you had everything lined up and you did your best and you got a
2 success. I never worried, never thought about guys on the other end of it because, hell,
3 they're doing their best to get me and I'm doing my best to get them.

4 KC: Sure.

5 WB: I figured we each got to shoot at each other and that's fair.

6 KC: I guess so. What else, if anything, before we get you out of, I believe it was
7 in June of 1972 when you left Vietnam. Is that correct?

8 WB: Yeah.

9 KC: Is there anything else you would like to discuss concerning your time there
10 in Vietnam?

11 WB: There was one thing that bothered me and that was the amount of resources
12 that went into trying to make the thing like back home. I was kind of disgusted by the
13 efforts of the BX (base exchange) to come in there and sell hi-fis and stuff like that and
14 cameras and stuff like that to all the troops. I didn't think, you know, this is kind of a
15 waste of time and a waste of the troops' money to do this. It just didn't seem right to me.

16 KC: Do you think that it had, or maybe a better way to ask this question is this,
17 what kind of effect do you think that had on the morale of the troops? Do you think it was
18 generally positive or do you think that in general it was a distraction? What would you
19 say to that?

20 WB: I think it was more of a distraction than anything else because I had been
21 overseas from the time I was a second lieutenant on up to this time. Having the BX down
22 there doing more than the normal canteen stuff, which is your day-to-day living stuff—
23 what it ended up was, it was really cluttering the troops' barracks. Because not only did
24 they want to keep all their hi-fi stuff there and the tape recorders and loud speakers and
25 things like that they also want to save all the cardboard cartons so they could ship them
26 back to the States. Believe me, I was there when a rocket hit one of the other squadron's
27 barracks and five guys were killed before they could get out of it because the thing went
28 up like a paper bag on fire, all that clutter and stuff in there.

29 KC: Sure. Now where was this at? Was this at Da Nang?

30 WB: This was at Da Nang. You know they used to fire the—the bad guys would
31 get in there and they'd get in to about five to six miles and consult the ballistic tables and

1 set up their rockets at just the right heading and just the right angle and then they would
2 put a timer on them. Something as simple as a old car battery wired up to the igniters and
3 then a spring-loaded switch or a lever switch and the other end of the counterbalance
4 would be a bucket with a little tiny hole in it. When all the water ran out or enough water
5 ran out the lever would swing down and make the contact and off would go the rockets.
6 They were shooting at the base. They couldn't hit a target at that range. They would
7 consult the ballistics tables and aim for the center of the base and the rockets would land
8 around someplace.

9 KC: Did you know any of these men in this barracks who were killed?

10 WB: No, they were in the other squadron. I didn't know them. I did have one of
11 my guys injured. I've forgotten his name by now, but he got some shrapnel. The rocket
12 hit actually at the mouth of one of the empty shelters and by the grace of God there
13 wasn't a fueled F-4 in there or it could've been pretty messy. My guys at night used to be
14 pretty shaky about the idea of the rockets out there. That was one of the reasons I used to
15 walk around without a flak jacket on. You tell them, "Hey, it's just luck. They don't
16 know where you are. They don't know where their rocket is going to land. It's not like
17 they're aiming at you."

18 KC: Sure. Now, you mentioned in the questionnaire that you filled out that one of
19 the reasons that you felt that you needed to go to Vietnam was the fact that you had
20 friends who were involved in the air war in Vietnam.

21 WB: Yeah. Well, there's a hell of a moral effect here, ethical and moral. I'm not
22 talking about the ethics and morals of warfare. That's something you've got to do. They
23 had kept me, held me back from Vietnam. I had already lost friends over there. I lost
24 friends that I loved. The first friend I lost was about 1963. He had volunteered to help the
25 crew of a C-47 out of Korea. They were doing leaflet drops. He was just down there
26 getting some flying time, kicking the bundles of leaflets out the door and dang if they
27 didn't shoot down the Gooney Bird. I had served with him in Kansas City in the F-102
28 squadron. That's one and then there's a bunch of others that left and went over there.
29 When they were going to send me to Alaska to fly the F-102 I said, "No, I can't do that.
30 I've got to go over there." It's just—I think Kipling says it well, "You take the shilling

1 and you perform your duty.” I don’t know how much you know about Kipling, but he’s
2 the military’s author.

3 KC: Sure, sure. I’m certainly very familiar with that phrase, for sure. You also
4 mentioned that you had friends who were shot down and who were prisoners of war of
5 the North Vietnamese in the infamous Hanoi Hilton. Would you feel comfortable enough
6 about talking about these men and what you know about them?

7 WB: I don’t know what to say about them except it’s like having your brothers
8 over there. You’ve got to realize that when you’re in a good fighter squadron you fly
9 together, you party together, you take care of the other’s family and kids. When you lose
10 one it’s like losing your brother. I lost, I never bothered to add up the number, at least
11 two dozen good friends over there. When I was held back as an instructor I was doing my
12 best to teach these guys how to get ready for it, going on what I had been told when I
13 went through the training and what I was being told all along there by the guys that had
14 been over in Vietnam. And also passing information I got from the guys that had flown in
15 Korea and taught me how to stay alive when I was a young second lieutenant and first
16 lieutenant. I was very, very happy to find out that when I got over there I hadn’t been
17 blowing smoke in these guys’ ears, that everything I told them was just straight and the
18 way it was. It kind of put a seal of approval on what I had been doing before.

19 KC: Sure, it would validate all your efforts before, for sure.

20 WB: If I had found I had been telling them bad that would’ve really got to me.
21 But the one thing that I was really very happy about the whole tour was I never lost a
22 man over there. All my guys got home. Later on, maybe five years after I got back one of
23 my flight leaders ran into me at the Homestead officers’ club before I retired and he said,
24 “You know,” he said, “One thing, you always knew what to do,” and that really made me
25 feel good. I was never caught out by anything the enemy ever did or weather or anything
26 like that. I remember one time when we were coming home I tried to do a mass raid and
27 this was really kind of thrown together. We didn’t have enough tankers. I was in one of
28 the last flights launched. I know we were up on our tanker. Pretty soon I found out that as
29 my number four man cycled off the tanker I was down to the fuel I started with because
30 they had eight of us on one tanker. Finally I said, “Aw, the hell with this.” We headed on
31 up and we’re on the tail end of the strike going in and all of a sudden these guys come

1 boiling back out. The weather was so bad that the fast FAC had gone in there and seen
2 everything, but the weather had gone down between the time he came back out the first
3 leaders went in there. So they had to abort the strike. Then everybody is heading home
4 and I know everybody is low on fuel. So what I did was turn my flight around, pull the
5 power way back and we went into a max endurance [profile]. Later on the ground one of
6 the guys said, “How come we came back so slow?” I said, “Well,” I said, “Did you listen
7 to all that noise going on in front of us? The guys were trying to get in low on fuel,” and
8 he said, “Yeah.” I said, “We didn’t have that problem because I knew what was going to
9 happen. So I just waited them out.” Where if you tried—if everybody gets in there first,
10 then everybody is choked out. I had seen this happen before in ADC. It’s not a good deal
11 to be stuck there and twenty guys trying to get into the same airfield and the weather is
12 down and everybody is out of fuel. Pretty soon guys are sweating, either getting in or
13 bailing out.

14 KC: Something I’ve heard throughout the course of this interview with you is
15 preparation, the importance of preparation. It seems like this has certainly paid off for
16 you in your career, certainly in your time in-country, in Vietnam.

17 WB: Yeah. The fighter business is a hell of a lot of fun, but it also, like
18 everything in the aviation, it’s serious. You can’t go into it fat, dumb, and happy. You’ve
19 got to be totally aware of the, what they call situational awareness now, that’s the big
20 buzz word. But the main thing is you’ve got to think about the flight and nothing but the
21 flight. I was kind of interested to find out I developed this. Once I got in the airplane
22 that’s all I ever thought about was the airplane, the mission, and my guys and what was
23 going on around me. When I talked to some other very experienced pilots and they all
24 had the same mental attitude. Anything else, you can get yourself stuck out on a limb
25 with no place to go. You always have to have an answer available when conditions
26 change on you because one thing you learned really quick is that the weather guys really
27 don’t know what’s going to happen. When I was teaching aviation up here at Colorado I
28 used to use that as an example. I would say, “What is the weather forecast for today?”
29 The guys would say, “Well, snow.” I said, “Do you see any snow out there?” “No.”
30 “Well, that’s about how good your forecast is when you’re flying. So you better have an
31 ace in the hole someplace in case the weather is lousy where you’re going.” You can hear

1 this develop ahead of you by just staying attentive to the radio. You can tell when other
2 guys are starting to head off in different places, other fields than the ones they intended to
3 land at or you could hear ATC (air traffic control) telling the guy, “Okay, you’re going to
4 hold thirty minutes and then make an approach.” You tell a fighter to hold thirty minutes
5 and he probably can’t.

6 KC: Especially if he’s low on fuel. Now, this issue of preparation, being ready,
7 leads me to kind of a larger question that I would like to ask you about your experiences,
8 what you saw during your time, 1971, 1972 and that has to deal with Vietnamization, not
9 the overall process throughout South Vietnam but in particular the Vietnamese Air Force.

10 WB: I was pretty impressed by the Vietnamese Air Force.

11 KC: Okay. Explain why, please.

12 WB: Say again.

13 KC: Explain why, please.

14 WB: They didn’t play games. They were very serious about what they were
15 doing. They were good pilots and they were excellent marksmen. They could bomb well.
16 They could shoot well. They stayed together. Another indication of how professional
17 people are, are their radio transmissions. We normally didn’t hear them, but when you
18 did hear them they never talked very much. Communications discipline is very, very
19 important.

20 KC: Do you think all of this was a matter of their pilots’ innate ability or do you
21 think it was a matter of the training they had received? Did you think it was a
22 combination?

23 WB: Well, what I think was that they didn’t have—they had good training and
24 they had good selection, too. I don’t know how much weeding out they had. I suppose
25 there were a few political guys that could make it do just like—well, you know, our Air
26 Guard outfit you will find that there are a few guys, well, like in the Air Force, too, there
27 are a few guys that could make it through that shouldn’t. They might’ve had, oh, a
28 general officer for a daddy or a senator or something like that, but that’s pretty rare. I
29 mean, that’s less than one percent. Most of the guys are really sharp. Of course, there’s a
30 bell curve of ability in every aspect of human life. That’s a sideline and maybe I ought to
31 jump ahead in the future to explore this avenue. We have squadron reunions. My first

1 squadron was the 25th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron. That's the one I was in in Okinawa.
2 A lot of guys, a lot of smart guys in that outfit. We had the reunions and most of the guys
3 are getting too old to go to them anymore. We had our last one just a while ago. We go
4 out to Las Vegas because that's where it all started, at Nellis Air Force Base. Then we get
5 a briefing at Red Flag and then the general officer would come in and I would talk to
6 him. I remember asking him, "Whatever happened to the fighter pilot career duty line?"
7 where if you're a really good fighter pilot they keep you in fighters instead of talking
8 about career progression and all that great thing where you're all going to be general
9 officers if you stick in long enough. He said they kept trying to get it through personnel,
10 but they can't. This is a tremendous mistake because I will tell you right now that in any
11 fighter squadron you'll find three to five top-notch fighter pilots. You'll find a whole lot
12 of guys that are just plain average and you'll find a couple down at the bottom that are
13 just serving time, who don't work at being the best fighter pilot they could be. It's a damn
14 shame because now the airplanes are costing fifty million bucks. Okay? So why not have
15 the best possible guys you have to fly the airplanes and keep them there until they're
16 physically or mentally unable to fly the damn thing? I know at forty-five I could match
17 up with the aggressors out at Nellis and beat them because of my experience. I still had
18 the eyesight thanks to glasses and I still had the reflexes. To sit there and take a guy as he
19 reaches major and say, "Okay, now career progression, you've got to go into a staff
20 position or something like that," and that to me is just a waste of experience." I fall back
21 on World War II where one hundred German pilots each shot down one hundred
22 airplanes. So these hundred pilots in the German air force cost us ten thousand airplanes
23 because they were cracker jacks, top-notch pilots and they stayed in combat. People say,
24 "Well, our top guy shot down about forty airplanes." Their top guy shot down about 352
25 because they kept him in combat.

26 KC: Sure, as we know—

27 WB: That's a good deal because you've got to pull the guy out every now and
28 then after about six months and let him cool off and put him back in. The idea that
29 somehow fighter pilots are fungible, and that's the way our personnel works, that's not
30 true. Not true at all.

1 KC: What about, and getting back to the Vietnamese Air Force here, you
2 mentioned one of their great strengths was their professionalism and the way they
3 approached. What weaknesses do you think the Vietnamese Air Force had and this could
4 be in terms—?

5 WB: You know, I really don't have that much experience with the Vietnamese
6 Air Force. They flew their stuff and we flew ours. Yeah, we operated out of the same
7 base, but I really can't speak to that.

8 KC: Okay, very good.

9 WB: I do know that if you do some research in the books I've read and, of
10 course, this is all second hand you found they had some very, very gutsy AD pilots,
11 Skyraider pilots, and very, very gutsy helicopter pilots. The rest of them I don't know
12 much, except from what I've read.

13 KC: Okay. Well, in June of 1972 you're going back home. First, what was, when
14 you officially received your orders to go back to the United States, what was your
15 feeling, your perception on leaving Vietnam at that time?

16 WB: First, let me say I had volunteered for a second overseas tour.

17 KC: Okay.

18 WB: To go to USAFE (United States Air Forces in Europe) to Europe. Number
19 one, I did not want to go to TAC Headquarters. Number two, I did not want to go to the
20 Pentagon. I turned down two Pentagon assignments. I had been requested to go up there.
21 I had also turned down an interview to be a general's aide. Number one, I don't think I
22 had the temperament to be a general's aide and, number two, I didn't want to leave the
23 airplanes.

24 KC: Sure.

25 WB: Number three, I didn't think I had the temperament to survive a career in
26 the Pentagon because about the third time some general told me my idea was lousy I
27 would've told him to stuff it. I'm just—I call a spade a spade.

28 KC: Sure.

29 WB: I don't put up with guys downgrading my reasoning. Let's say I score pretty
30 high on an IQ test. Okay, that's good enough. I read a lot. I've got a pretty good mind, a
31 hell of a good background in engineering and science, although I don't have a degree. I

1 always, always knew as much as I could about the airplane. Like I told my students, what
2 you don't know about aviation is not going to hurt you, it's gonna kill you.

3 KC: Sure.

4 WB: So you have to be able to sit there and say you're out there alone in the
5 airplane at night and the engine starts making funny noises or something strange happens
6 to the airplane you better know what's going on or else you'll find yourself ending up in
7 your parachute if you're lucky.

8 KC: Again, that takes us—

9 WB: Anyway, I was assigned to the Berlin Air Traffic Center and that kind of
10 confused the hell out of me because I didn't even know what it was. It turns out it's a four
11 power British, French, Russian, and U.S. The consortium that controls all the air traffic in
12 and out of Berlin because, you know, it was a four-power occupation back there. Well
13 anyway, the invasion kind of screwed up everything and nobody knew if I was coming or
14 not. When I got there I found that somebody else had winkled into the job. I was there
15 without a job so they—so I'm sitting there at Tempelhof as director of operations and
16 safety, and finding that compared to the pressure of Vietnam and everything else, training
17 pressure, this isn't much at all. So, hell, I went there and signed up to finish college. I
18 didn't have a college degree yet. I went to the University of Maryland and found out they
19 didn't have any—I would've liked to have gotten a degree in physics or something like
20 that, but they didn't offer it, didn't offer a degree in math either so I got a bachelor of
21 arts. The only trouble was that although I had something like eighty-six semester hours I
22 needed another sixty-four to complete my degree. So willy-nilly I went to work and I'm
23 up there in Berlin and my kids are going to school there and we're enjoying the hell out
24 of Berlin because that's probably the—as far as I was concerned, that was the neatest
25 place in Europe. I had been to London, been down and roamed around Switzerland and
26 been over to France and Paris and a bunch of the cities over there and up to Holland, but
27 Berlin for me was more fun than anything else. Of course, being part of the occupying
28 forces we could go over into East Germany, or East Berlin anyway. I used to take my
29 wife and kids over there for dinner just to show them what the other side looked like. As
30 a result, my kids went off to college, but they didn't have any of these left-wing ideas that
31 some college kids can get because they had seen socialism in action. So I got there in '72

1 and I've got to say that the first time over there I'm walking along in my blue uniform
2 with my wheel hat on and all my ribbons. My wife is alongside of me and she's wearing
3 a Bavarian loden coat and I didn't realize at the time, but she was the only woman with
4 any color on her costume on the street. She was wearing a red scarf and this loden coat
5 had embroidery on it and a fur collar. She said later that all the women were dressed in
6 grey, brown, or black. That's all they had. Then walking off, you go of, what the heck
7 was it? Stalin Allee or Karl Marx Strasse and you go two blocks down the street and
8 there's bomb damage. It just kind of watered my eyes, you know. It's very Potemkin
9 village-esque there.

10 KC: Sure, sure.

11 WB: Anyway, I had been there, I guess, Christmas party, and General Malloy
12 dropped in, who was commander of 17th Air Force. I had briefed him on our trip when we
13 came back from Korea there in the TDY. He was going over there to command the Air
14 Force part. I briefed him on what our experiences had been there. He saw me up in Berlin
15 and said, "What are you doing here?" and I told him what had happened and he just said,
16 "Stand by." About one week later I had orders to go down to Bitburg to take over the
17 deputy base commander job. They had had some problems down there and I won't go
18 into it except that they relieved the base commander through no fault of his own. The
19 deputy base commander was so, I guess, enraged by the totally unnecessary [and unfair]
20 relief of his boss that he just said, "I'm out of here. Find me another job because I ain't
21 going to take the job."

22 KC: Wow.

23 WB: Anyway, they got a senior colonel from USAFE and he went down there to
24 take over the base commander's job and I went down there as the deputy base
25 commander. I'll tell you how old this guy was. They wanted to send him to Vietnam
26 because he had flown the F-5. He said my, "My F-5 was a P-38 with cameras in it and it
27 wasn't a jet." He said, "I don't have any jet time." They said, "Oops, sorry." It turned out
28 he had been P-38 recce pilot [in China in 1944] in World War II. He had already put in
29 thirty-six years of service. Anyway, he didn't go to Vietnam. The first year I was a base
30 commander, deputy base commander, that was fun. The second year was kind of a replay
31 of the first. The third, man, it was just more of the same piled higher and deeper. I found

1 out real quick why all those base commanders I had known earlier in my career were kind
2 of sour. Let's see, it was interesting, but it was just never ending, okay? It's like being a
3 mayor in a town of about twelve thousand because that's what we had, about twelve
4 thousand people. We had fourteen hundred apartments to take care of. I was the head
5 vehicle guy and somehow I had 580 vehicles under me. I carried a radio and got really
6 sour on that. That's why I don't carry a cell phone. Let's see, it wasn't like flying at all.

7 KC: Sure.

8 WB: Anyway, I put in my four years in USAFE and I got my college degree and
9 it was time to go home. They said fill out my dream sheet and I told them that I want to
10 fly F-16s anywhere. After they got through laughing up at [USAF] (United States Air
11 Force) personnel they sent me to Homestead.

12 KC: Is that right?

13 WB: Yeah. Anyway, I ended up in Homestead and as a passed-over lieutenant
14 colonel I hadn't been selected for full colonel, which was probably real wise on their part.

15 KC: Why do you say that?

16 WB: I'm not the smoothest guy in the world.

17 KC: Okay, I thought that's where you were going with that.

18 WB: Anyway, I got into what they call a Reserve affairs program. Every active
19 duty wing has got attached some Guard or Reserve organizations. You go down there as
20 an advisor and help them with the Air Force operational procedures, things like that. You
21 stand by and if they call for help you get it for them or you can arrange TDYs to air bases
22 and stuff like that for summer camp. Then about three months before they get a federal
23 inspection to see if they're doing everything right, you take a team of about twenty-five
24 guys to their base and inspect everything. I found this to be extremely interesting because
25 I'd brief all my guys, "Okay, find out if they're doing everything the way they're
26 supposed to and if they're not point them in the right direction. If they've got any good
27 ideas, steal them and we'll take them back home." The first time you go in there, man,
28 you're just like the bastard cousin at the family reunion. Nobody wants to talk to you,
29 they give you a set of wheels and the thing can barely run. When they find out you're
30 really there to help them and it's not one of these, you know, where we're FEMA
31 (Federal Emergency Management Agency), we're here to help you and everything goes

1 to hell. But you're really interested in helping them operate better and stuff like that. Like
2 at this one outfit I went to was a crackerjack outfit but they're pre-flighting every
3 airplane, every day. They know they're not going to fly some and I says, "Why are you
4 pre-flighting the airplanes you're not going to be flying?" They said, "Well, we've
5 always done it that way." I said, "Well, if you're not going to fly the bloody thing, why
6 waste a guy's time on it? Have him go do something productive." They said, "Dang, we
7 never thought about that." It was kind of funny because there were three guys in their
8 maintenance control and between all the three of them they had about eighty years of
9 service.

10 KC: Wow.

11 WB: The Guards, Air Guard, a good Air Guard outfit's a crackerjack outfit
12 because all the guys are there because they love it. There are a lot of father and son teams
13 in there. The only thing is they're kind of wearing them out now because they keep
14 sending them overseas and you just flat can't do that.

15 KC: Sure, sure.

16 WB: I remember in '58 and '59 ADC had guys who were going remote. They
17 would be home two years and then they would be up on the DEW (distant early warning)
18 line for a year. The guys would do that about twice and they'd get out of the service
19 because either the wife is, maybe one out of three, one out of four will put up with it, but
20 the other ones won't. They said, "We don't want you going." They say, "If you go up
21 there again and we ain't going to be here anymore." It got that serious with a bunch of
22 guys. That's what they're running into right now. What do you do? DoD doesn't
23 understand it. The thing is, the Brits do. If they'd pay attention to the Brits they would be
24 in better shape. Has any of the guys you interviewed talked about the stresses of combat?

25 KC: Oh, yes, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely

26 WB: Okay. The one thing I think, being forty when I went over there, okay, I
27 found the duty in Greenland to be more stressful than being down in Vietnam.

28 KC: Okay. Explain that to me.

29 WB: You're two thousand miles on the end of nowhere and quite often in the
30 winter, or not in the winter so much, but in the spring, you lose contact with the States
31 because icebergs would rip up the cables. There wasn't any way you could talk to

1 [family] except by the MARS (military affiliate radio system) set up, military amateur
2 radio service. If the weather was bad the mail couldn't come in. While I was up there my
3 wife got sick and there was no way for me to go down and help her out. Then there's just
4 too much time, you know, a lot of spare time. You can't fly enough to keep you busy to
5 wear you out or anything like that. Everything is kind of secondary. Fighter pilots are
6 pretty active. We sit there and play basketball and play handball and stuff like that, but
7 still it's just not the same.

8 KC: Sure. There's no substitute for being in the plane.

9 WB: Down in Vietnam I had plenty to keep me busy either in the operations shop
10 or another command post and stuff like that, making sure that everything was going okay
11 all through the day and night. Then the squadron getting in shape, that kept me busy.
12 Man, the time just flew past. We were up in Greenland it was all different. I wasn't
13 worried about the combat and chances of getting shot down and stuff like that because,
14 hell, it was safer flying over there than it was flying out of Homestead in 104s.

15 KC: I read that in the questionnaire that you filled out for us a few years back.

16 WB: Yeah, our loss rate at Da Nang in the wing was about one half what it was
17 in the squadron there at Homestead.

18 KC: That is very, very surprising.

19 WB: Well, I would compare the F-104 to a Formula One racer. Okay, very, very
20 high performance, but you have to watch yourself all the time. Okay? Do not take
21 chances or play games with that airplane. If you fly it by the numbers, you fly it the way
22 it's supposed to be flown, you're okay. Just after I left the squadron there was a guy
23 killed and I always heard that what happened to him was split flaps where the flaps on
24 one side come down and the other one stays up and you're just a bit too slow, the thing
25 will roll you over on your back at fifteen hundred feet and you're into the ground before
26 you can do anything.

27 KC: Right.

28 WB: It turned out that wasn't it. He just pulled it around too hard on final and the
29 thing stalled and flipped on him. Okay. That's what I mean you've got to fly the airplane
30 right.

1 KC: Sure. I would think that the temptation in a high-performance plane like that,
2 especially with young pilots who are aggressive and who want to push the envelope, that
3 the temptation would be great.

4 WB: Yeah, well, the thing you need then is a crusty old guy like me as a flight
5 commander and say, "Listen, kid. You can't do that." But this guy was a major and he
6 should've known better.

7 KC: Well, where did you go after Homestead?

8 WB: Well, oh, I retired from Homestead.

9 KC: Retired from Homestead, and what year did you retire?

10 WB: Let me continue a little bit more on the Homestead bit.

11 KC: Oh, please do, please do.

12 WB: I had been there about three months in that wing job watching the airplanes
13 fly. Suddenly I found out that they were so short of instructor pilots that they were
14 cancelling sorties. Of course, that hurt them because they're training students there. This
15 was an RTU (reinforcement training unit) at the time. It wasn't a TAC fighter wing. It
16 was a training outfit. I went to the DO and I said, "I used to be an instructor pilot here [in
17 1971]. RTU instructor pilot here. How about checking me out and I can help you out?"
18 So he talked to a commander of a fighter squadron that I had flown with before and he
19 said, "Yeah, B.J. is a good instructor and a good pilot." So they checked me out again and
20 here I am forty-five years old and they're checking me out in the F-4. I found I could do
21 everything okay except I had lost my instrument cross check. Well, I went down to the
22 simulator after they got through during the day and from about nine o'clock to about one
23 in the morning I flew that thing Monday through Friday. At the end of Friday my
24 instrument cross check was back and I could fly instruments just as good as I used to.
25 From then on it was great and any time I had any time off I'd be flying the airplane. In
26 three and a half years I got another thousand hours of F-4 time. So that was just gravy.
27 About, oh, let's see, it was about halfway through '78 and the direct deputy commander
28 for maintenance was an old friend of mine. He had been running, working on the flight
29 line at Richards-Gebaur when I was there as acting QC (quality control) [officer] working
30 with maintenance out of operations at the squadron. He said, "B.J., come on down here. I
31 need help with quality and control." I says, "Okay." My commander let me go down

1 there so I became head of quality control. We had 120 airplanes and, I don't know, about
2 75 buildings to worry about on the base. I found out that they really didn't have any
3 trouble in quality control itself. It was just how the rest of the outfit viewed them and
4 stuff like that. They were bitching about quality control nagging them and things like
5 that. I just went around and put the word out, you know. We need good airplanes and the
6 way you get good airplanes is you work on them. The way you find out what you need to
7 do to work on them is you write up things wrong with them. The only way to keep good
8 airplanes is you write up everything wrong with them and when you get a chance you fix
9 them. If you can't fly the airplane because it's unsafe, yeah, that's great, keep it on the
10 ground until it's rated safe again. I checked out again as a test pilot and I would take four
11 guys out with me to the airplane. While I'm getting ready and pre-fighting the airplane
12 they're going around the airplane themselves. If it's ready to fly, okay, fine, I take the
13 airplane and just check everything, write down everything I could check out on the
14 airplane. One of things I used to do is take the airplane and turn it upside down and pump
15 the stick back and forth, shake anything loose. A couple of times I've written up the
16 airplanes because there was so much junk in there it was a hazard to fly because if the
17 cockpit ever comes off, I mean the canopy ever comes off on you and all this stuff blows
18 up in your face you might end up blind for a while.

19 KC: Sure.

20 WB: I'd come down with little pieces of safety wire and dust, pebbles and stuff
21 like that down the back of my neck and it didn't really cheer me up too much.

22 KC: I bet not.

23 WB: Okay, I finally found out the problem and it just continued to get worse.
24 You've got to remember Carter was president then and he was cutting back on all the
25 money. The Air Force has funds compartmented. They have operations and maintenance
26 funds and they have funds for new airplanes and stuff like that. What they can do is
27 shovel this stuff back and forth a little bit and they'll take those administration and
28 operation and maintenance funds and siphon them off a little bit into the new projects and
29 that's what was happening to us. We ended up—number one, we're having trouble
30 getting parts for the airplanes and, number two, being a training outfit we didn't have the
31 priority for skills that the other outfits did. When I found out that we were about twenty

1 percent too many first-termers and about twenty-five percent too few reenlistment types,
2 you know, experienced troops. I says, “Well, there’s our problem.” I finally went to the—
3 well, not yet. I was sitting there knowing we were gonna lose the airplanes and knowing I
4 couldn’t do a damn thing about it. We had four airplanes that were grounded for parts
5 because we couldn’t get the parts we needed to fix them. Two of them had an estimated
6 delivery date at twenty-two months, which told me they hadn’t even ordered the parts for
7 them yet.

8 KC: Right.

9 WB: I mean, they were unique items that had to be manufactured to fit the
10 airplane. Finally we did lose an airplane up in Canada on a Maple Flag exercise. His wing
11 man called him and said, “You’ve got fifty feet of fire coming out of your left engine.”
12 He shut the engine down, but it didn’t shut off the fire and they ended up jumping out of
13 the airplane. They got out okay, but the airplane went into the Muskeg swamp up there
14 and that’s just mud, mud, mud all the way down. Of course, they never were able to haul
15 the airplane out and see what caused the problem. My blood pressure was going up and
16 the fun was going out of it and finally I went to my boss and said, “Boss, I’m going to
17 have to retire. This is wearing me down.” He looked at me and he said, “Yes, B.J., I put
18 in my papers, too.” I said, “When are you leaving?” He said, “The end of March.” I said,
19 “I’ll go out right alongside of you.” So I did. After I made that decision my blood
20 pressure dropped about twenty points and I started sleeping at night.

21 KC: I can believe that.

22 WB: Oh, another thing that was kind of neat, I mentioned Aggressors. It was
23 about August [1978, and I was] about forty-seven. They had a couple of spare slots so the
24 assistant director of operations and I and a couple of back-seaters got fragged to fly two
25 F-4s against one of their F-5s.

26 KC: Oh, is that right?

27 WB: Yeah.

28 KC: Tell me about that.

29 WB: It was pretty neat because we set up and came at him and I’d had now about
30 twenty-two years flying fighters. Randy had, he was the DO, he had about twenty. Of
31 course, we both knew how to fly the airplane to its limits. We did and we whopped this

1 guy's butt. He came back down and he was shaking his head because he was a real hot
2 shot, twenty-five, twenty-six year old [fighting] two [old] guys. One's overweight and
3 balding and the other guy is kind of thin-haired and kind of wrinkled-faced. I kept kind of
4 nodding off during the briefing because I had heard it so much. We went up there and
5 whipped him and he came back down shaking his head and he says, "It's not often we
6 find F-4s flown to their maximum performance." I looked at him and I laughed and I
7 said, "Randy and I have been doing this for over twenty years."

8 KC: That must've been pretty satisfying, I would think.

9 WB: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was. You know you can still do it, you can still cut the
10 mustard.

11 KC: Sure, in spite of all the things that you've seen.

12 WB: Yeah. Well, I was blessed with good eyes. I didn't have perfect eyes. There
13 were two guys in the 104 squadron that had vision that was at least 20/10. Mine was 20-
14 15, but they could see a 104 head on at ten miles. Hell, it's only seven feet across the
15 fuselage. So you can see it's like picking out a little dot out there in the sky. But I've also
16 got pretty good reflexes, they're still on the order of a quarter of a second. I can catch
17 flies.

18 KC: Wow.

19 WB: But it's just luck of the genetics.

20 KC: Sure. Well, once you made this decision to leave when was it? Was it March
21 of '78?

22 WB: No, this is March of '80.

23 KC: Of '80, okay.

24 WB: I made the decision in January.

25 KC: Okay, okay. Well, what did you hope to do once you retired?

26 WB: Well, I hadn't planned on doing anything. My wife had to always handle the
27 finances and I sat on my tail for about six months. Without saying a word she went off
28 and got a job. The kids are gone now and she got a job in the, what they call the Schick
29 Center which is counseling and guidance. After I had, parentheses here, after I had
30 completed my college, got my college degree, it was such a change from the Air Force
31 run-of-the-mill business and so interesting because I had all my previous college had

1 been engineering sort of stuff. So here I am taking commercial law and I'm taking money
2 and banking and all new stuff to me. So I told her, "Okay, you're going to go get your
3 master's degree." She already had a degree in psychology from Tessy, the state college
4 for women down there. So she went off to get her master's degree in counseling and
5 guidance and she really enjoyed the heck out of that because they got to travel around
6 Germany quite a bit and meet everybody and see what was going on. When we got back
7 down she went to work at the Schick Guidance Center which was an anti-smoking, anti-
8 drinking, anti-over eating and stuff like that. She enjoyed that. That was pretty much fun.
9 Then I dumbly realized the reason she's doing it is to augment our retirement pay, which
10 it really wasn't attuned to handle \$1,000 a month house payments. So I went to work for
11 Air Florida in quality control and that was a wake-up call because they handled things
12 completely different than the Air Force does.

13 KC: I'm sure.

14 WB: But it was interesting. I got my A&P (administrative and personnel) license
15 there. I was sitting there working away and a guy came up to me and says, "B.J., the
16 inspector's here. Why don't you go take the test?" I had actually taught the test as sort of
17 a part-time job, I worked for Burnside-Ott [in Miami]. Usually explaining to the military
18 helicopter guys how everything else worked, how things worked on jet airliners, so they
19 could understand the FAA written test because they could do the practical stuff, but they
20 had no idea what the big air cycle machine and the air conditioner/pressurization system
21 on the jets, how a big jet engine worked compared to what they had.

22 KC: Sure. That makes sense.

23 WB: I would just—we'd go through the test and I'd say, "Okay, why is this the
24 wrong answer?" They wouldn't be able to answer and say, "Why is this the wrong
25 answer?" I'd explain the reasoning behind the whole thing. So they would get the very
26 basic grounding and then, if nothing else, by starting with the basics they could reason
27 their way to the right answer. It worked pretty good because I only had one guy ever
28 flunk the test and I asked the FAA guy what he missed. He said, "Well, I can't really tell
29 you this, but I can show you this one question and you'll probably get a pretty good
30 idea." If I remember the question right, what are high pressure oxygen cylinders made of?
31 He had selected copper. You put high pressure oxygen in a copper tank and what you're

1 going to end up with is a big copper balloon because it's just not that strong. Of course,
2 the answer was steel. It turned out when this guy was sneaking off to the restroom during
3 the breaks, he was taking a good slug at the bottle he was carrying with him. I thought
4 they did a pretty good job there. Anyway, so I was ready for my A&P test when they
5 gave it to me. The practical was pretty funny because I went out and here's this great big
6 old eighteen cylinder R-2800 engine and he starts asking me this question about it. There
7 were two other guys taking the test with me and they wouldn't be able to answer it and
8 he'd ask me and I'd say, "Yeah, okay. This is the magneto and this is how it works," and
9 stuff like that and went through the whole thing. After I had answered about ten of those
10 questions he just left me alone and started working on the other guys. So there I am and
11 I've got my A&P license. Anyway, Air Florida—what happened next? Okay, the guy that
12 was the electronics engineer for Air Florida went off to start an airline with two other
13 guys and they came back and said, "Come on along, B.J. We want you to help us out in
14 the operations area." So I went along with them and we started to set up an airline to run
15 a triangular run between New York, Miami, and Puerto Rico. We would have three
16 airplanes and fly two on the route every day, one going one way and one going the other.
17 The guys who dreamed this thing up had been to the MBA (Master's of Business
18 Administration) program at the University of Miami. Everything looked pretty good and
19 everything was going along real well. We even got our [FAA] operating certificate. All of
20 a sudden we show up one day for the meeting and the president isn't there. We try and
21 find out where he is and after a bunch of hours of fumbling around we found out he has
22 taken off for Brazil with all the money.

23 KC: Oh, no!

24 WB: Yeah. This guy was just under forty and he had a couple million bucks
25 backing him, but he had never filed an income tax. He suddenly realized that, hey, as
26 president of an airline he's going to be under governmental scrutiny and having never
27 filed an income tax he was in trouble. So back to work again.

28 KC: Wow.

29 WB: This time I found out about a job opening at Eastern in their technical
30 writing place. So I went down there and I got hired. One of the guys down there knew me
31 and he said, "B.J., I was hoping you'd show up," because he knew I was a pretty good

1 writer and I really knew the aviation subject. Well, anyway I was writing the flight
2 manuals for the DC-10 and the L-1011 having a lot of fun. Then an opening came up in
3 the ground school, as an instructor in the ground school.

4 KC: And you couldn't keep your hands off this, could you?

5 WB: Yeah and they says, "Come on over here." It was a pay raise. So I did. I
6 really enjoyed that because I was instructing in the ground school and getting paid to talk
7 about airplanes and also teaching in the simulator. That was a lot of fun, too. This is
8 about the time Eastern got bought up by Texas Air and they're trying to expand and
9 they're setting up—they had ties with three commuter airlines. The big trouble with the
10 commuter airlines at that time was finding experienced pilots because they would recruit
11 pilots and they would find out that maybe twenty percent of them would wash out of the
12 ground school because ground school over there, you know, they've got a commercial
13 approach to the bloody thing. The feds say you have to have eighty-five hours of ground
14 school. Well, they give it to them in six days.

15 KC: Wow.

16 WB: Yeah. So it's like drinking out of a fire hose, as one guy explained it to me.

17 KC: Yeah, exactly.

18 WB: If you don't have a pretty good grounding in how these systems work you
19 ain't going to make it and you're not going to pick up those smarts logging fifteen
20 hundred hours in Cessnas as instructor pilots, which was the best way to build flying
21 time. Back then the airlines somehow all decided that a pilot needed fifteen hundred
22 hours to apply, but it really didn't matter what the hell it was in. So if the guy spent
23 fifteen hundred hours in a Cessna-150, he was ready to, well, not truly, but just as good
24 as some guy that built up fifteen hundred hours in a bigger airplane. But the trouble was
25 yeah, the guy could fly and he could instruct and he could chew gum and walk at the
26 same time, pass all the physicals and all that, but you hit the ground school and they're
27 just too fast for him.

28 KC: Sure.

29 WB: But it turns out that every time they washed a guy out like that they lost
30 about eight thousand bucks. So somebody said, "Well, why don't we set up flight schools
31 that include courses on how these big jets operate and stuff like that taught by guys that

1 know this?" So we set up the first one at Miami Dade [Community College] out of our
2 ground school and it worked well. So the second one—I got the second one up here in
3 Greeley at Aims Community College. I went up here in November of '87 and set the
4 program up. They already had a flight school. The reason they picked this place here was
5 because of the weather because they have about 330 flying days every year. Of course, all
6 the guys down in Miami says, "Colorado? You're going to freeze your tail off if you go
7 up there." Well, I didn't think so. I spent that six years in Kansas City and the weather
8 here was a hell of a lot better than it was in Kansas City.

9 KC: Yes, yes indeed.

10 WB: Well, I went up here and found they had a pretty good little operation.
11 Basically all I had to do was, number one, convince the students that the way to be a good
12 pilot was fly precisely and, two, if they came out shiny then they would be considered for
13 a job in the commuters. Of course, when we started off we had [over a hundred] students
14 because there were a lot of people here that really wanted to fly. I convinced the school to
15 buy two good digital twin-engine [AST-300] simulators that were about, oh, I don't
16 know, pretty close to \$100,000 a piece. The school bought them. I had flown the thing
17 down in Florida. It was at Florida Atlantic University is where I hopped in one and after
18 about ten minutes I decided, "Oh boy, this is a pretty good piece of gear." It was very
19 responsive. The big trouble with simulators is a lot of them have a lag like our F-4
20 simulator would have about a quarter of a second lag before anything happened and you
21 could feel it. But these things were right on the money and they paid the extra to add the
22 visual because I always thought that when you're teaching instruments the really hard
23 part is transitioning from instruments to the runway. What you've got to do is be able to
24 fly instruments and still gauge your approach to the runway because if you go from
25 instruments to runway and all of a sudden you get a sudden snow shower or something
26 like that you've got to go back on instruments.

27 KC: Right.

28 WB: You may have a real problem there. But if you just sit there and keep
29 looking at your instruments and bring your runway into the cross checks so instead of
30 looking at six gauges, you look at six gauges and the runway on the cycle, a very quick
31 cycle, probably one or two seconds at the most. Then you'll do okay because you're just

1 flying the airspeed, attitude, and heading and rate of descent and adjust that to bring you
2 to the proper position on the runway. It works like a charm. Our first guy we sent out,
3 first graduate we had and he was shiny. He had already had a master's degree in business,
4 but he wanted to fly airplanes. He was about [thirty-four] years old. He went to this
5 airline over there in Virginia and he took his check ride starting off about two in the
6 morning because that was when the airplane was available. The guy with him was a
7 captain for the airline, the other guy being tested. He outflew the captain.

8 KC: Wow.

9 WB: Yeah. So we were really thrilled about that.

10 KC: I bet.

11 WB: When we started off at the beginning in telling the guys there was no
12 substitute for precision and we set out the parameters. If you wanted an A for the ride you
13 had to hold your heading within five degrees. Your airspeed was [within] five knots, and
14 your altitude was under fifty feet over the whole flight, no momentary excursions. Of
15 course, that requires complete attention and concentration.

16 KC: Sure, very exacting.

17 WB: Yeah. Somebody asked me once, "What do you think your graduation rate
18 would be?" I thought a bit and I said, "Two out of three," and it proved to be really right
19 on the money.

20 KC: Is that right?

21 WB: Of course, that's about what it was in the service. So I had a pretty good
22 parallel to go from.

23 KC: Right, right.

24 WB: Well, the other thing was that my teaching about the big airplanes required
25 me to write five new courses. One was on mathematics which was just a practical
26 mathematics up through logarithms and trig, but with an emphasis on application to
27 aviation; the management, management and decisions, and then aircraft systems and
28 aircraft power plants and then performance and safety. Of course, that used about all my
29 knowledge I had built up over the years. As usual, when you teach a course like this you
30 learn more yourself than the students learn, I think.

31 KC: Sure, sure.

1 WB: So the first time I ever found out exactly how a jet engine operates was by
2 writing the course and figuring it out for myself.

3 KC: Teaching forces you to study and to understand, not just to know.

4 WB: Sir?

5 KC: I said teaching forces you to study and to understand not just to know what
6 to say but to understand how it works, for sure.

7 WB: Yeah.

8 KC: Well, when were you—when did you hang it up there? When did you retire
9 from there?

10 WB: I stopped full-time teaching in [’96], but I still had to teach the two courses
11 on the aircraft systems and aircraft engines [and performance] because there wasn’t
12 anybody to replace me. I taught that for two more years until ’97 and we found a retired
13 United DC-10 pilot who was quite happy to come in and teach those because he enjoyed
14 teaching. In ’97, yeah, that was about right. Maybe it was [’97], I’m a little hazy on that,
15 but I retired completely and sat back and relaxed and took my wristwatch off.

16 KC: I’d say you earned it.

17 WB: I somehow managed to stay busy, but that’s about it.

18 KC: Okay. Well, let me ask you a few questions, general impressions, general
19 interpretations of things relating to your Vietnam experience. The first question that I
20 want to ask you is as a result of your Vietnam experiences, what did you learn about
21 yourself in the time you spent there from what you were involved in, what did you learn
22 about yourself in your experiences there?

23 WB: That’s a hell of a question. I’m not that introspective.

24 KC: Was there part of you that you think was more positively or negatively, for
25 that matter, developed as a result of your experiences there?

26 WB: Oh, positively I think, kind of an affirmation of my values, my way of
27 thinking. Affirmation of the worth, the energy I put into becoming the best pilot, the best,
28 I guess, leader. You see, I was never really interested in becoming the best officer in the
29 United States Air Force. I wanted to be the best pilot. Another one of the reasons I
30 suppose I never made colonel because I couldn’t get really serious about the, I don’t
31 know what it is, the image or something like that.

1 KC: The more political aspects of it, for sure.

2 WB: Yeah. Well, that's one thing I kind of ignored. I certainly never played any
3 of the games. One of the things that hurt me was I didn't pay too much attention to the
4 professional schools. I started the War College by correspondence and gave it up because
5 it seemed to me aimed at becoming chief of staff and it didn't help me out at all with the
6 job I was doing at the time.

7 KC: Sure.

8 WB: I did complete the Industrial College of the Armed Forces course because I
9 could see how that worked. I knew pretty much—I knew a fair amount, I shouldn't say
10 pretty much. I knew a fair amount about the industrialization required to fight World War
11 II from my readings. So that was interesting. I don't know, the political work, the
12 buddying up to people and stuff like that, that to me was kind of a waste of time.

13 KC: All right. Well, let me ask you another larger, more interpretative question, I
14 guess, and that is looking back on it from 2008 what do you think, what in your opinion
15 does the Vietnam War mean to the United States and to Americans?

16 WB: Well, it's very hard to say what would've happened had we stayed out of it,
17 okay. The thing was would Philippines, for instance, had gone communist. I don't think
18 we realized at the time that there was a basic enmity between the Vietnamese and the
19 Chinese. Yet the Chinese supplied them during the Vietnam War. Would Thailand have
20 gone communist? We don't know. I do think—I did buy into JFK's deal that we would
21 support a democracy anywhere any time and pay the price. I do believe that people
22 should be able to choose their own way and the idea of a cadre from the North can come
23 down and force the South Vietnamese to go their way just didn't sit well with me at all.
24 Could we have done better over there? Well, hell yes we could because there was a lot of
25 dumbness in that war.

26 KC: Sure. Explain to me what—

27 WB: Most of it came out of Washington.

28 KC: That was the question I was going to ask you next. You say a dumbness or
29 lack of a real thought behind these things—

30 WB: The Marines had a really good program and the Army ignored it. The
31 Marines went in there and worked right with the people, sat down there and protected

1 their villages and stuff like that. The Army was always over there trying to fight World
2 War II again. It just flat didn't work. I couldn't get anybody to realize it. One thing that
3 really irritated the hell out of me was all these guys, a lot of stars telling, "Yeah, I knew
4 we were doing wrong and I thought I could straighten it out," and nobody ever resigned
5 and protested.

6 KC: Sure. What do you think about the strategy employed?

7 WB: There wasn't any.

8 KC: The strategies employed in—none, you say there were none. Okay. Expand
9 on that for me, please.

10 WB: Like I said, the Marines worked with the people, protected them, and kept
11 the—actually, I call them VC (Viet Cong), but they weren't really VC. They were down
12 from the North, the people who had come in there and absolutely terrorized the villagers
13 into at least passivity and at the best working for them. The Army never did this in their
14 area. So what they had was every time they would send guys out—well, let's see, let me
15 back off. There's enough coming out now so you know that the North Vietnamese had
16 moles in the [HQ] (headquarters) down there in Saigon. So they pretty well knew what
17 the Army's programs were going to be and where they're going to send out their troops
18 so if they were fast enough they could get in there and ambush them. The other thing was
19 that for one reason or another they never did a really good job of stopping the flow of
20 supplies into South Vietnam. You saw what happened when Linebacker struck in, what
21 was it? Oh Lord, I guess '70.

22 KC: It would've been '72, the summer of '72.

23 WB: Yeah '72. That's where SAC (Strategic Air Command) kind of went in
24 dumb, but they got the job done. I don't know if you have read the *Eleven Days of*
25 *Christmas*. That explains it pretty well.

26 KC: No, I've not.

27 WB: You haven't?

28 KC: No, I've not.

29 WB: Okay. That'll show you how SAC sent their B52s at first fat, dumb, and
30 happy and lost fifteen of them.

31 KC: This is, what, Linebacker II, I believe.

1 WB: Yeah. But Linebacker II put a shock into the Vietnamese right there and it
2 showed what America could do if it really wanted to. I've talked to some of the guys who
3 were in the Hanoi Hilton at the time. They said, "Boy, you talk about a change of
4 attitude," of the Vietnamese guards when one of those B-52 strikes came in. The question
5 is, why didn't we do it in '65?

6 KC: Sure.

7 WB: Why didn't we mine the harbor in '65? Why didn't we knock out the
8 northwest railroad in '65? Why didn't we go across into Laos and cut off the trails?
9 Because we nicked and dined the whole damn thing.

10 KC: That's one of the comments I wanted to mention, as well, the comments you
11 had in your questionnaire was your critique of gradual escalation.

12 WB: Oh, yeah. I was trying to think of who the hell was that, Maxwell Taylor?

13 KC: Yes, Taylor and McNamara as well.

14 WB: Oh, McNamara. That son of a bitch. I was reading *On Yankee Station*. I
15 don't know if you've read that book.

16 KC: No.

17 WB: About the carrier war. About halfway through it my jaw muscles were
18 hurting. What is going on? I was grinding my teeth.

19 KC: Is that right?

20 WB: Apropos of nothing. I look up at my wife and startled the hell out of her by
21 just blurting out, "If McNamara was here I would punch that SOB right in the nose,"
22 because that gradual escalation that's what cost me a lot of my friends.

23 KC: Sure, sure.

24 WB: Because Sun Tzu said it directly, when a tiger jumps on a mouse he uses all
25 his strength.

26 KC: Let me—I'm sorry, go ahead.

27 WB: I don't know if you've ever heard that or not.

28 KC: Yes, yes.

29 WB: He wrote that, what, two thousand years ago?

30 KC: Something like that, yes.

31 WB: Yeah, you think we would've learned that by now.

1 KC: Well, let me ask you another question and, again, it's a pretty general
2 question and maybe somewhat introspective if you would like for it to be. What do you
3 think has been the greatest influence on you or how has Vietnam, your experiences in the
4 Vietnam War affected you the most?

5 WB: Well, the only thing that affected me out of Vietnam was the loss of my
6 friends. It's like losing a large section of your family. To have some of them lost in such
7 a stupid way. I had a friend knocked out by a flak trap coming back up the same route,
8 the same way, the same time about the fourth day in a row. That's not too smart.

9 KC: No, absolutely not.

10 WB: The one thing I learned a long time ago was surprise is half the battle.
11 That's when I talked about knocking out the SAM sites that we used radio silence under
12 the radar as far as we could. Give them the minimum amount of time to respond and
13 never took a hit doing it. Anyway, I don't know. I just can't see doing the obvious thing
14 all the time and I can't see—actually, I can't see anymore going to war unless the vital
15 interests in the United States are at risk. Because it just costs too many people, tears up
16 too many lives.

17 KC: Would you categorize Vietnam, the situation in Vietnam in the 1960s as
18 being in the national interest of the U.S.?

19 WB: Like I said earlier, who knows what the alternative would've been because
20 at that particular time, communism looked like the way to go, didn't it?

21 KC: To many people, for sure.

22 WB: Nobody had really seen the weakness and the contradictions built into it
23 themselves. I read a book a long time ago about—it was entitled *The Nomenklatura* about
24 the elite class in Soviet Russia. I looked at that thing and said, "Huh." My wife reminded
25 when the Berlin Wall fell that I had said about fifteen or twenty years earlier that they're
26 educating their people and they're going to get to the point that the people are too smart
27 to put up with that crap. That's exactly what happened. When that wall fell, man, I didn't
28 think that would ever happen in my lifetime, but boy it did. The way it fell was so funny.
29 Did you ever catch the TV interview of the general that was second in charge of security
30 over there in East Germany?

31 KC: No, I did not.

1 WB: Oh, man, that's the funniest thing. He was sitting there and he looked dazed
2 and this is within a couple of days after the Wall opened up. Somehow somebody had
3 started a rumor that on New Year's or was it before Christmas? Christmas Eve or
4 something like that. Anyway right in there, they were going to open the gates and let the
5 families reunion, have a reunion, reunite for the Christmas holidays. It turned out this
6 spread all over Germany and at every gate up and down that eight hundred miles of wall
7 there were people gathering on both sides for the gates to open. The head security guy
8 was out and I've forgotten who was running East Germany at the time, but they were
9 both up in Moscow. So this number two guy is sitting there and his people keep calling
10 in, "All these people are out here." He says, "We've got thousands of people sitting here
11 waiting for the gate to open in Berlin. What do we do? We haven't heard a thing about
12 this." He's sitting there and he's thinking, "Well, I can get the people away with
13 machineguns or I can open the gate." Finally, he broke down and about 11:30 he said,
14 "Open the gates." Once those gates were open they could never close them.

15 KC: Right.

16 WB: That's what happened. I just thought, "Man, what a place to be in." Then
17 later on—after Germany got reunited, then they put this guy on trial. Shoot, I wouldn't
18 have put him on trial, I would've given him a medal. A humanitarian medal if nothing
19 else.

20 KC: Sure.

21 WB: Anyway, of course, back in the '60s everything was working fine.
22 Everything looked swimmingly for the whole communist affair. China had gotten over
23 that Red Guard crap and Russia was really doing good in space and setting new records.
24 According to that they were riding the crest of whatever it is, Soviet progress. But pretty
25 soon the flaws started showing up.

26 KC: But those flaws weren't visible in 1965.

27 WB: Well, back then they were very well hidden and everybody swallowed
28 everything that was going on. The real problems—of course, the real problems were—the
29 same thing when you have the hierarchy setting down goals, okay. Well, if those goals
30 aren't met you're in trouble. So you report, yeah, everything is swimming, everything is
31 great, we're doing ten percent better than we were last year and you're lying like hell.

1 This is cumulative, okay, because somehow the goals got ahead crazier by year by year.
2 It was like going on a team. Just because you won last year don't mean you're going to
3 win this year, but everybody expects you to win and when you don't win you're in
4 trouble.

5 KC: Right.

6 WB: So what happened was they kept setting themselves new goals and they kept
7 telling everybody we're doing it, we're beating all the norms. They ain't. Where you can
8 see it is, well, they had a lot of programs on TV so their air force you're looking at that
9 and you're seeing three foot weeds growing out of the cracks of the pavement and you
10 say, "Well, they're not flying very much."

11 KC: Yes, for sure.

12 WB: You'd sit there. They've got a real problem now because it's the old rising
13 aspiration deals. Things are improving and we're expecting them to keep on improving
14 year after year and if they don't, you've got a problem.

15 KC: Sure. Well, Mr. Bjorneby, let me ask you if you have anything else you'd
16 like to add to this interview, especially concerning your Vietnam experiences?

17 WB: Well, it was interesting. I'm glad I went. Like I said, it was kind of an
18 affirmation of what I had been doing in my career in the military. I didn't find anything
19 that was a tremendous surprise over there. I kind of wished I had seen a MiG or two
20 because that's what I worked on all my life, air superiority, but that just wasn't where my
21 squadron was going.

22 KC: Sure.

23 WB: I had a lot of young guys in the outfit. As a matter of fact, I had more flying
24 time than all the guys in one of my flights. The young guys were eager and did the job
25 and came in there without too much experience and left with a lot. It's nice to pass the
26 torch along to them, give them a good start on the rest of their career.

27 KC: Sure.

28 WB: I can't think of much else. Thank the guys, the old vets that taught me what
29 to do and I turned into one myself teaching the newer guys what to do.

30 KC: That's part of the cycle.

31 WB: You hadn't got anything more? I can't think of much more.

1 KC: No.

2 WB: I will say I was very, very fortunate to have an understanding wife that put
3 up with all this.

4 KC: And still does.

5 WB: She says, I asked her once, “Weren’t you worried about me flying?” She
6 says, “No.” She says, “I wasn’t worried about your flying. I was worried about your
7 driving.”

8 KC: Well, that sounds like a good point to go ahead and stop the interview. Stay
9 on the line, if you will, and I’ll chat with you for a moment afterwards.

10 WB: Okay.

11 KC: This will end the interview with Mr. Walter Bjerneby.