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**The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Project  
Interview with Ronald Barnes  
Conducted by Kelly Crager  
29 July 2008; 31 July 2008; 6 August 2008; 7 August 2008  
Transcribed by Cecily Darwin**

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech  
2 University conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Ron Barnes. Today is 29 July  
3 2008. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Barnes is joining us from Edmond, Oklahoma.  
4 Good morning, Mr. Barnes.

5 Ron Barnes: Good morning.

6 KC: I am really pleased that you could take time out of your day to talk with me  
7 this morning. Well, let's get this started with a little biographical information about  
8 yourself. Can you tell me when you were born and where?

9 RB: I was born in 1937, the 31<sup>st</sup> of January in Blackwell, Oklahoma. We moved  
10 within two years of my birth to Dumas, Texas, a nice little town in the panhandle area out  
11 there and lived in Dumas, Texas, for about three years where my father received a job  
12 with the U.S. Bureau of Mines, Energy Department in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, and that is  
13 where we moved and that is where I grew up.

14 KC: What were your parents' names?

15 RB: Pardon me?

16 KC: What were your parents' names?

17 RB: My mother's name was Mae Barnes and my father was Carl Barnes.

18 KC: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

19 RB: No, I did not.

20 KC: You were an only child. So you father worked for the Bureau of Mines there  
21 in Bartlesville. What was his job?

22 RB: He was engineer technician. They were testing fuels and their effects on  
23 engines at that time and then all through World War II and even into later dates when  
24 they got into some exotic fuels for future aircraft.

1 KC: Did your mother work outside the home?

2 RB: Yeah, she was a secretary for Phillips Petroleum Company.

3 KC: So both of them were involved in the oil or the energy business, then.

4 RB: Yes, uh-huh.

5 KC: Very good. How would you describe your childhood there in Bartlesville  
6 growing up?

7 RB: Well, of course, we grew up during World War II and the rationing was on  
8 and everything. We were not an affluent family but we were still able to make ends meet.  
9 We played, listened to the news on the radio and whenever we could go to a movie we  
10 would see the news clips there and get some information in the paper. Of course, 90% of  
11 it at that time was about the war effort in both Europe and the Pacific and that's the way I  
12 grew up. We played a lot of soldier and cowboys and Indians and sports and things like  
13 that.

14 KC: Now, if you were born in 1937, I believe you said, that was toward the tail  
15 end of the Great Depression. Do you have any memories of what it was like growing up  
16 in Texas and Oklahoma during that time?

17 RB: Oh very, very, little other than the fact that we didn't have very much. We  
18 had, all the furniture in the house was somebody else's or something that we were able to  
19 pick up from a church group or something like that. We didn't have any of our own. Of  
20 course, we were renting the places we lived there for quite a while. Then that was about  
21 all I can remember there. We would play outside and play with toys that you made,  
22 primarily, or some of them were made for you.

23 KC: You mentioned that these toys that may have been made for you and church  
24 groups helping to support in different ways. Would you say that this was a—it sounds to  
25 me like this was a pretty close-knit community, very community oriented where  
26 individuals help one another out. Is it safe to say that?

27 RB: I would think that would be a real safe thing to say especially during that  
28 period. Families and the people that you met were basically in the same boat and  
29 everybody tried to help out. We didn't have the TV or the DVDs or anything like that so  
30 you made your own entertainment. Quite often it may have been playing cards or some

1 board game or something like that. It was just a little different era than what we have  
2 now.

3 KC: Sure, sure. Now, growing up during the Great Depression especially in two  
4 places hard hit, or most of your time, of course, in Oklahoma, very hard hit by the  
5 depression. Economic circumstances like that could lead individuals to be very, very  
6 selfish, have a very much a me-first attitude but it seems that during the depression that  
7 largely wasn't the case especially in the more rural areas. It seems that you see more of  
8 this sense of community.

9 RB: No, I would agree with you. I don't ever remember running into that for  
10 many, many years the me syndrome didn't start until really and truly, oh gosh, I would  
11 say the '70s maybe. I really don't know.

12 KC: Sure. You also mentioned that growing up during the war, World War II that  
13 is, it was certainly a very or at least the way it was perceived at home was a very clear cut  
14 right and wrong for the war. The Germans and the Japanese and to a lesser degree the  
15 Italians, of course, were bad, were evil, wore the black cowboy hats so things were much  
16 more cut and dry and, like you said, in your community it was a cowboys and Indians  
17 kind of thing. You played soldier. There was a very clear sense of right and wrong and  
18 community and fellowship during the 1940s, it seems to me is what you are saying. Did  
19 this have any influence on you later on, say, when, and we are jumping way ahead here,  
20 but when you got to Vietnam was this something that stuck with you, do you think?

21 RB: Oh, I would think so. When I was probably about six, seven years old a  
22 friend of mine had a birthday party and we went to the party and afterwards the two of us  
23 were playing together and his father took us out to a local airport and we got to ride in an  
24 airplane, a Piper J-3 Cub. Two of us sat in the seat, we were that small, and the pilot sat  
25 in the other seat and took us up. It was just a big thrill for me and something I wanted to  
26 do and that is kind of what I wanted to do through that orientation. Of course, during that  
27 time the military was training all over the country and you would see the military  
28 airplanes come over big and fast and powerful. It was always exciting to watch and that  
29 was something I wanted to do.

30 KC: So you have this very early experience with flying and it sounds like it is  
31 something that certainly stuck with you for later on in your life. Let me ask you this, what

1 was school like for you there in Bartlesville? Was there a particular subject that you  
2 liked? How did you get along in school?

3 RB: Well, I was not a good student. School was basically easy for me but I didn't  
4 make good grades because I didn't apply myself. But I loved mathematics and I loved  
5 history. Everything else in between was just I had to go to class.

6 KC: What about sports? Were you into sports?

7 RB: I enjoyed baseball and football and stayed with those up until high school  
8 timeframe. I found out I wasn't really a high caliber player in football and I could do real  
9 well in baseball but I had the opportunity to go to work and get some money and I did  
10 that. I worked every day after I got out of school and on Saturdays. I used the money  
11 actually to go out and pay for flying lessons.

12 KC: Really? Now, this is while you were still in high school?

13 RB: Yes, uh-huh.

14 KC: When did you graduate high school?

15 RB: I graduated and I had my pilot's license before I graduated from high school.

16 KC: Is that right?

17 RB: Yeah, I was one of the youngest pilots in Oklahoma there for a couple of  
18 years, I guess.

19 KC: Incredible. What year did you graduate high school?

20 RB: '55, 1955.

21 KC: 1955, okay. Now, in 1955, of course, we are right in the middle of the Cold  
22 War, the Eisenhower administration. You had graduated high school. How closely, if at  
23 all, were you following world events and America's role in the world?

24 RB: Well, again, the world—the Cold War really didn't strike me too, too much  
25 other than the fact that the Russians were not to be trusted and they were trying to  
26 dominate all of Europe and we were trying to keep them out. Everybody at that time was  
27 un-assure of whether or not there was going to be another war there for quite a while. Of  
28 course, we had just come off of the Korean conflict and everybody was still fairly well  
29 oriented towards some type of warfare. I think a lot of us were disappointed that there  
30 wasn't a definitive answer in Korea and probably still are today.

1           KC: Sure. Well, graduating high school what did you hope to do with your  
2 career? Were you oriented toward the military or were you hoping to do something in  
3 civilian life?

4           RB: Well, I went to college to be an engineer.

5           KC: Where did you go to college?

6           RB: I started at a small junior college in northern Oklahoma and then I wound up  
7 at that time Oklahoma A&M, which is now the [Oklahoma State University.]

8           KC: Okay.

9           RB: Like I say, I didn't apply myself very well and was not really 100%  
10 interested. I found that there were other activities in school, like chasing girls or maybe  
11 drinking beer or something like that. That is kind of what I did and my grades showed it.  
12 I had applied for the Air Force Academy, the first class of the Air Force Academy and  
13 had not been accepted as a primary. I had a letter which would let me go to their prep  
14 school but I was not accepted into the class. Then a friend came through who was a  
15 personnel officer at Randolph Air Force Base there in San Antone, Texas, and he was in  
16 charge of military personnel. I told him I wanted to fly airplanes and get in the Air Force  
17 and he said, "Do you have thirty hours of college?" I said, "Well, I think I do." He said,  
18 "Well, why don't you apply for aviation cadets and I will see what we can do." I applied  
19 for what was then Aviation Cadet Training and was accepted and went to pilot training  
20 school and went through that and got my wings and commission in 1958.

21           KC: Now, where did you go to pilot training school?

22           RB: Well, of course, being a cadet we had to start off with the Air Force basic at  
23 San Antone there and then went to Hondo, Texas, for primary flying school and to  
24 Greenville, Mississippi, for basic flying school where at that time we were flying the T-  
25 33 jets.

26           KC: Okay. Take me through the time here at Hondo to begin with. What was a  
27 typical day like for you there?

28           RB: Well, at Hondo it was—we would get up at 4:30 in the morning and do our  
29 military formations and go to the mess hall, which was actually an excellent facility, and  
30 have our breakfast, get ready for whatever the day had to offer. It was split normally. You  
31 would have a morning of academics and then the afternoon you would go fly or you

1 would have flying in the morning and the afternoon would be academics. Then we would  
2 come back in and there would normally be a physical training session and then you  
3 would have another supper in the mess hall. The evening normally would be yours except  
4 for those who were on restrictions or something and had whatever duties they needed to  
5 get done.

6 KC: What kind of classes were you taking here at Hondo?

7 RB: Pardon me?

8 KC: What kind of classes were you taking?

9 RB: Well, at that time it was primarily meteorology, engineering, aircraft  
10 engineering talking about systems of the airplane and everything. You would take Morse  
11 code, like I said, meteorology. I am trying to think of some of the others. I can't think of  
12 all of them right now, but they were all oriented toward a flying atmosphere at that time.

13 KC: Now, what kind of planes were you flying here again?

14 RB: We flew the T-34 to start out with, that was basically an airplane to eliminate  
15 those with limited ability. Then we went into the T-28 made by North American and that  
16 was the primary trainer at that time. Both of them were reciprocating engines.

17 KC: Now, you had already had your pilot's license for quite a while by this time.  
18 Did that help you or hinder you in any way when you were in flight training here?

19 RB: I don't think it hindered in any manner, helped maybe a little bit. The Air  
20 Force was going to teach you to fly their way and some of the civilians, you know, just  
21 weren't in the same mode as the military. The civilian pilot was normally easier going  
22 and smaller banks and just taking the airplane up and having a good time with it where  
23 the Air Force was teaching you to fly the airplane as a weapons system.

24 KC: Sure.

25 RB: I know of a couple of young man who had private pilot's license but washed  
26 out, but all in all most with a pilot's license made it through.

27 KC: Sure. Now, I have spoken with a couple of individuals here in the past who  
28 had their license before going into the Air Force and both of them told me that they kept  
29 it very, very quiet, that they wouldn't tell their trainers that they already had a pilot's  
30 license. Was this anything for you? Did you follow that?

1 RB: That's true. But it didn't take a couple of instructors I had very long to say,  
2 "Well, you have done this before."

3 KC: Uh-huh. You think it would be hard to fool them.

4 RB: So then they would ask you the direct question. I said, "Yeah." Flying was  
5 always—actually, I enjoyed it. It was simple for me. I enjoyed it very much.

6 KC: So from Hondo you go to Greenville, Mississippi.

7 RB: Uh-huh. Greenville, Mississippi, and that was what they call basic flying  
8 school. We went into—our class had both aviation cadets and student officers in there.  
9 The student officers were, of course, commissioned officers who came from various  
10 areas, some of them straight out of ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) or one of the  
11 academies or they were prior Air Force personnel. A lot of them were navigators or flight  
12 engineers on big airplanes and were coming into pilot school. The others were aviation  
13 cadets like myself. When we made the move from Hondo to our basic flying school we  
14 still had B-25s flying training. Most of the cadets wound up going to B-25s and a few of  
15 us wound up in T-33s at Greenville. I was fortunate by going to single-engine jet. That is  
16 what I wanted.

17 KC: You wanted the single-engine jet. Okay, very good. So how would you  
18 describe you training here at Greenville on the T-33?

19 RB: Well, we—at Hondo we had civilian instructors who were quite good. In  
20 Greenville we had military instructors who were good but they were not as tactful, if I  
21 could put it that way.

22 KC: Sure.

23 RB: As the instructors in Hondo. It was strictly "Here's the way you do it. If you  
24 don't do it correctly we are going to wash you out." At Greenville we learned to fly the  
25 airplane and then we learned formation flying and night flying navigation and low-level  
26 training and things like that. They knew it was really the basic training for your Air Force  
27 career.

28 KC: What would you say was the washout rate for your class? Do you know?

29 RB: When we went into San Antone down there we had 400 and some odd cadets.  
30 They came down—"they" being the Air Force—came down and said, "We don't need the  
31 big numbers anymore because the Korean War is over. Anybody that wants to can get out

1 and spend two years in the Air Force and be finished with their obligation.” Well, we lost  
2 a lot of people right then. Then we go to Hondo and they started eliminating the people  
3 and I would say we wound up with a little over 160 people that finished primary flying  
4 school. Now, Hondo was not the only base but there were others. One hundred and sixty  
5 aviation cadets probably finished. We go to Greenville, Mississippi, and we graduated  
6 with forty-six cadets and there was probably, again, that number that went to B-25s and  
7 graduated there. Now, those were strictly aviation cadets. Student officer-wise there was  
8 not much of an attrition in the student officer ranks for two reasons, they were being paid  
9 the big money and it was easier to wash a cadet out who you weren’t paying the big  
10 money.

11 KC: Sure, sure.

12 RB: And keep them going like that. They did have a quota but I have no idea what  
13 that quota was.

14 KC: Sure.

15 RB: Our washout rate was pretty good at that time.

16 KC: What was most likely to washout one of these candidates?

17 RB: Oh, that is hard to—ability to fly was always one that would wash out,  
18 whether or not you could fly formation or fly instruments or that type of thing, that was  
19 always a way that people would wash out. The other way was academics and for cadets  
20 we had our military training we had to go through all the time so any combination of  
21 those three could get you washed out.

22 KC: Okay. Where were you in all of this?

23 RB: Flying-wise I was pretty high. Academic-wise I was probably in the lower  
24 third and military about the middle. It wasn’t too, too bad.

25 KC: So what do you think about the quality of your training here in terms of both  
26 what you were flying, the academic preparation, your instructors? How would you rate  
27 your training?

28 RB: I would rate it quite good. I think by the time we finished flying school we  
29 were proficient enough that we could fly our aircraft and some of the other ones. Were  
30 we experienced enough to go out and perform a complete task? That would be a

1 challenge. We were much better prepared than the pilots coming out of flying training in  
2 World War II for their jobs. We were better equipped than they were.

3 KC: Sure. Had any of your instructors seen combat, say, in the Korean War?

4 RB: No, I did not have any that I remember. At primary flying school at Hondo,  
5 Texas, we had a lot of World War II- and Korean-vintage pilots who were retired or got  
6 out of the service for whatever reason. My first instructor at Hondo was a P-51 pilot in  
7 World War II and he thought that airplane should have been retained for pilot training. I  
8 think it would have been a little advanced for some of us.

9 KC: I would think so. Well, where do you go after—

10 RB: They were good.

11 KC: Where do you go after you leave Greenville?

12 RB: After I left Greenville I was taken to B-47 training in Wichita, Texas.  
13 Wichita, Kansas. I am sorry.

14 KC: At McConnell?

15 RB: That is a long way from a single-engine.

16 KC: Yes, yes indeed it would be.

17 RB: It was a six-engine jet bomber, as you know. A crew of three, pilot, copilot,  
18 and radar bombardier.

19 KC: Now, you have been training in the single-engine jet, the fighter, the T-33.  
20 What was the transition like to the large six-engine bomber?

21 RB: Terrible. (Laughs)

22 KC: Explain that to me. Why was it so terrible?

23 RB: I hated it.

24 KC: Why?

25 RB: The reason why that happened was the Cold War and the need for Strategic  
26 Air Command to maintain itself. The Strategic Air Command was in the middle of  
27 fielding B-52 bombers and B-47s and they had the KC-97 tanker and they had just started  
28 in at that time with the KC-135 aircraft, so they needed pilots and they needed crews.  
29 Basically, anybody who was changing bases, coming back from Europe, finishing flying  
30 school was susceptible to being sent to the Strategic Air Command. When I arrived at  
31 Wichita the class that I went into training with there was no one in that class who had had

1 multi-engine flying experience. All of us had been single-engine pilot training or single-  
2 engine fighter somewhere. A lot of disappointed people.

3 KC: What about the actual flying of this much, much larger plane?

4 RB: Well, the B-47 was a very, very pretty airplane in the air. When it was  
5 designed it was the state of the art. The art had caught up with it and it was a very  
6 demanding airplane. It had a critical center of gravity, gross weight, air speed, altitude, all  
7 these things. Depending on how heavy you were is how high you could go and how fast  
8 you could go. The airplane was very demanding. It was not a stable aircraft at all. In fact,  
9 it was designed on a sine curve where it was basically in motion all the time it was in the  
10 air. The engines were J-47 engines, one of the first fairly good jet engines. They were  
11 very susceptible to coming apart and they did every once and a while.

12 KC: Now, you said it was in motion the entire time you were in the air. Can you  
13 explain what you mean by that?

14 RB: Well, if you take the sine curve, you know, it is just a basic wave type thing,  
15 varied flight, and that is the way the airplane flew in the air. It was not noticeable hardly  
16 at all. About the only time you could even get an idea that you were in that position was  
17 when you were taking celestial shots of stars and things like that you'd get a little sense  
18 of motion but not very often. The main thing about the airplane was that it had limitations  
19 on altitude and gross weights and speeds. For instance, I will tell you kind of a funny  
20 story. We were a new crew, myself and Bob Kridler was the aircraft commander and I  
21 was the copilot and Bob Prosser was the navigator-bombardier. Bob Prosser was a  
22 captain, Bob Kridler was the 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant and I was a spot-promoted 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant. We  
23 had just received our certification of being combat ready and were sent out and we flew  
24 out of Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri. We went to air refuel with the tanker and  
25 this was the first time we had ever refueled behind a KC-135 tanker. Oh, it was  
26 wonderful, keep the air speeds up and everything. We took on a full load of gas and were  
27 supposed to go to initial point for a bomb run on Dallas. We had a bomb scoring facility  
28 at Dallas. We climbed up to what was our, what they call optimum altitude at that time  
29 which was 26,000 feet that was the highest we were supposed to go, anything above that  
30 you shouldn't be up there. We got over toward the initial point, called the bomb sight to  
31 ask for permission to make our bomb run. We were scheduled for, say, eleven o'clock at

1 night. I don't remember what time it was but somewhere it was very dark. They said that  
2 all the altitudes at the bomb plot were taken. Could we take 36,000 feet? We said, "Sure."  
3 It's a jet airplane, it will climb up to 36,000. We put the throttles up and we climbed up to  
4 36,000 feet. Everything was going smooth. We were heading to the initial point, got over  
5 the initial point, the navigator told us to turn right about forty-five degrees for our bomb  
6 run heading. We turned right and all of a sudden that nose of the airplane went up and the  
7 tail went down and it started falling. We couldn't control it. We were basically doing a  
8 falling leaf type maneuver. The only thing I could think of was here is a B-47 going to  
9 crash in downtown Dallas. We got down, I think we finally recovered at about 20-, 22-,  
10 23,000 feet or something like that and we called at the bomb plot and told them we  
11 couldn't make our scheduled time and we would be back later. We went off and kind of  
12 learned about flying from that.

13 KC: Well, what was the problem? What caused that?

14 RB: Well, the center of gravity of the aircraft and the weight we were at at that  
15 time, the wings and speed were just not capable of supporting it up at the higher altitude.

16 KC: Okay.

17 RB: We could get up there as we got lighter and the center of gravities would  
18 change and the airplane would become more stable but at that time it wouldn't make it.

19 KC: Well, as this plane is beginning to tumble about 14,000 feet, what is your  
20 role? What are you doing?

21 RB: We actually fell tail first.

22 KC: Oh, my goodness. What were you doing here?

23 RB: We were trying to keep it right side up. From one side of the cockpit to the  
24 other controls were being pushed and pulled and nothing was happening. We had  
25 absolutely no real control over the airplane at all. The only thing that was halfway  
26 effective was the rudder and that we tried to keep us from falling straight backwards.

27 KC: Now, were you the copilot on this?

28 RB: Yes.

29 KC: Okay. What is your role here? You say you were pushing buttons and you  
30 have no real control. What are you doing in particular?

31 RB: Pardon me?

1 KC: What were you doing in particular to try to deal with this situation?

2 RB: When the nose went up we, of course, pushed the control column forward  
3 trying to get it to come down and it wouldn't respond. Then we started to fall off of, I  
4 think it was the right wing, if I remember right. We couldn't bring the wing up with the  
5 ailerons on so we kicked the rudder in and it kind of came up a little ways and kind of  
6 stayed in that position. We fell I don't know how far and then it started to kind of slide  
7 over to the left hand side and again we tried to control columns and ailerons and nothing  
8 was happening and so we moved the rudder and that kind of helped stabilize it, keep it  
9 more or less going tail first. Oh, by this time the nose had started to drop down towards  
10 the horizon and it finally went below the horizon and we started picking up some air  
11 speed and as we picked up air speed we began to get some control on it and that is when  
12 we finally regained full control of the airplane.

13 KC: You mentioned that you were thinking about this B-47 crashing into  
14 downtown Dallas. What is going through your mind on a personal level? I would think  
15 that fear would have to be foremost.

16 RB: Right then the only thing we were thinking about is trying to get the airplane  
17 up and I had that crazy thought about, "Oh, my god. We are blowing up half of Dallas  
18 with 198,000-pound airplane." That didn't last very long on the thought on Dallas, to be  
19 truthful. It was a fleeting moment because we were really busy.

20 KC: I can imagine so. After you saved Dallas from this impending disaster, what  
21 else were you doing here in this bomber training?

22 RB: Well, of course, the bomber was designed to carry nuclear weapons and that  
23 was primarily our job. We had alert situations where we would stand home alert at  
24 Whiteman. We would have several airplanes on alert loaded with nuclear weapons,  
25 targets assigned, crews assigned. We would be in an alert facility for a week at a time.  
26 We also had what they called a reflex deployment. We would fly to a forward base,  
27 usually in our case was [Zaragoza] Spain when I was at Whiteman. Sometimes they  
28 would go to North Africa, which was still friendly to us at that time, and other times  
29 England. We would go to those bases and airplanes would go on alert and you would  
30 spend a week on alert, a week off, and another week on alert and then you would return  
31 home. This was fairly frequent, about every other month. When you were not on alert in

1 England, you were on alert back in the States, and flying training missions when you  
2 were not on alert.

3 KC: Now, how long were you with the bombers here?

4 RB: Oh, I wasn't with them very long. Let's see, I was with them about four  
5 years. Then I flew the KC-135 for eighteen months.

6 KC: What led you to do this?

7 RB: I did that in Washington state at a place called Moses Lake and then at  
8 Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington.

9 KC: Is this something that you requested, the KC-135?

10 RB: No.

11 KC: They just sent you there.

12 RB: I didn't want to have anything to do with a multi-engine airplane but that  
13 wasn't my choice and they sent me to the 135 and I went up to Moses Lake, which we  
14 knew the base was closing when we were assigned there. They closed the base and  
15 moved to Fairchild and at that time the Vietnam conflict was starting to heat up. I had  
16 volunteer statements out all over the place to go to Vietnam in anything single-engine.  
17 Finally one day I got a notification that if I wanted to I could go to forward air control  
18 training and I accepted it.

19 KC: When were you sent to work with the KC-135s up in Washington? What year  
20 was this? Do you remember?

21 RB: That had to be 1965, I believe.

22 KC: Okay, and you were there for you say eighteen months.

23 RB: Eighteen months, uh-huh.

24 KC: So you are looking at 19—

25 RB: It may have been '64.

26 KC: Okay, so you are looking at 1965, 1966 something like that probably.

27 RB: Yeah, '66 something like that.

28 KC: Okay, now—

29 RB: Because I was in Vietnam in '67.

1 KC: Okay. Now, you had been in the United States Air Force for quite a while  
2 now and were obviously pretty successful although you didn't always get your choice of  
3 assignments, obviously.

4 RB: Well, when you were in the Strategic Air Command you had very little  
5 choice of anything. They would send you where they wanted you.

6 KC: Sure.

7 RB: Because you were their asset.

8 KC: Sure. Well, how closely, if at all, were you following what was going on in  
9 Vietnam?

10 RB: Oh, it was quite close. I think Vietnam started at a time when a lot of us who  
11 wanted to get back into single-engine had that opportunity and we realized it and wanted  
12 to head that way. There were some people who saw the Vietnam conflict as getting larger  
13 and they wanted to have nothing to do with the conflict or, I guess they were scared, if  
14 that's a good word. Anyway, they resigned their commissions and got out of the service.  
15 Most everybody in went on to do their job. I would say that would be the majority of  
16 them. No matter what you were assigned you were going to do the job.

17 KC: Uh-huh. Now, you mentioned that you had—that you were willing to  
18 volunteer to go to Vietnam after the bomber training and after refueling, the KC-135.  
19 Now, when you made up your mind, or when the Air Force made up its mind, that you  
20 were going to Vietnam you wanted to fly single-engine there again, I assume.

21 RB: Yes, that is correct.

22 KC: Now, were you flying single engine when you got there or were you still  
23 flying the refueling?

24 RB: No. I left the KC-135 and was given an assignment to Luke Air Force Base  
25 to fly F-100s. That was basically refresher training into a single-engine and also update  
26 tactics. It was what they call the lead-in course so that you could say that you were a full  
27 fledged fight pilot when you got your forward air controller certification. Because my  
28 subsequent aircraft after the F-100 would be forward air control training at that time in  
29 the O-1 aircraft or the O-2, which were both single-engine prompts.

30 KC: Now, what lead you to the FAC (forward air controller)? What was it about  
31 this that drew you to it?

1 RB: What was the lure to it?

2 KC: Yes.

3 RB: Getting out of SAC (Strategic Air Command).

4 KC: (Laughs) Okay. Tell me about your FAC training, then.

5 RB: Okay. Well, in those days—I will give you a little quick piece of what was  
6 going on. The Army wanted to control airstrikes and the Air Force said, “No, you can’t  
7 do that. Army personnel are not qualified. The only people that are qualified are fighter  
8 pilots.” They would send pilots like myself back through fighter school or whatever it  
9 was to become qualified again and then put us into the forward air control. The Air Force  
10 showing the Army that the Air Force was providing qualified fighter pilots to direct air  
11 strikes in Vietnam. My assignment was to forward air control duty after being qualified  
12 in the F-100 and I would go to Hurlburt Field in Florida, not Destin. It’s—I can’t think of  
13 the name of it right now. Down by Eglin Air Force Base. Hurlburt was the field where  
14 the B-25s trained for the first attack on Japan in World War II. Anyway, that’s where the  
15 final flying training was going to take place. Now, we finished up the F-100 school and  
16 went to Florida there, Fort Walton Beach, Florida, was the town. We started going  
17 through forward air control training and it was basically an academic type affair telling us  
18 how the chain of command, how it works with the air strikes and how you can request  
19 different air strikes and then going out and operating as a land party directing air strikes  
20 and then flying the aircraft, getting checked out in it and directing air strikes from the  
21 airplane. That was basically the training. From there we went to survival school in the  
22 Philippines, jungle survival, and then from the Philippines into South Vietnam itself.

23 KC: Describe for me this jungle survival training there in the Philippines.

24 RB: It was interesting. We took part in this at Clark Air Force Base in the  
25 Philippines. We had, of course, survival instructors. Each group usually consisted of  
26 about four to six people. We would go out into the jungle and do a little march through  
27 the jungle basically to show you how much noise you made as you went through the  
28 jungle. Then we would go to our base camp and set up there. They would show us the  
29 different plants that might or might not be edible and different ways to identify them.  
30 Also, we were associated with some Negritos, which were native aborigines in the  
31 Philippines. They showed us how to start fires without matches and how to identify a tree

1 that might have water in it and how to get the water out of a tree because water would be  
2 your biggest problem in the jungle. Then a little bit about the wildlife there. Then we  
3 were finished with the survival school there. They did have an escape and invasion part to  
4 this. I believe it was the last day and night you were in the training you left your base  
5 camp and went off in the jungle and the Negritos were supposed to hunt you down and if  
6 they found you, you gave them a chit and they got so much rice for finding you. You  
7 spent the night wherever you dug in, in the jungle.

8 KC: How well did you do here in this survival training?

9 RB: Pardon me?

10 KC: How well did you do?

11 RB: There wasn't any grade or anything it was just something you did. If you paid  
12 attention you might learn something, if you didn't want to that's too bad, tough luck.

13 KC: Well, how long did this training last?

14 RB: About a week.

15 KC: About a week, okay. Now, here you are, you left the United States, you  
16 volunteered to go to Vietnam, you are going through jungle training in the Philippines. Is  
17 this starting to bring home some of the reality of the war you might be facing when you  
18 get to Vietnam?

19 RB: No, not really. I don't think anything could really prepare you for that once  
20 you got into it. What we did notice in the Philippines that those of us who were forward  
21 air controllers they were pushing real hard to get us in and out of there very fast to get the  
22 training over with and get us into Vietnam itself. We all had a, oh, I guess for lack of a  
23 better word sometime of apprehension that something was going to happen or something  
24 that they needed us pretty bad. We were kind of wondering what was going on. Other  
25 than that I don't think it set in. We all knew we were going to go in and do some forward  
26 air control duties. Now, what that would be we didn't know. We didn't have any idea of  
27 the unit we were going to be assigned to, where we were going within Vietnam itself,  
28 none of that was available to us yet.

29 KC: Sure. When you leave the Philippines you arrive in South Vietnam. Did you  
30 arrive in Saigon or Da Nang?

1           RB: Yes, arrived in Saigon. In fact, I had met two young enlisted personnel who  
2 were my seat mates in the airplane and they were correspondent types. They were media  
3 personnel for the Air Force. When we got to Saigon they took me downtown to the, I  
4 believe it was the Caravelle Hotel and I spent the night there in some ABC newspaper  
5 room that was reserved for them. They let me have it for the night. It was a pretty neat  
6 deal, I thought. I got to see some of the correspondents who were wandering around. I  
7 never recognized any of them but there was ABC, NBC, CBS and, oh, CNN, I guess, and  
8 whoever else was there. I don't believe it was CNN. I don't even know if they were  
9 operational then.

10          KC: No, they wouldn't have been then.

11          RB: It was kind of a neat deal.

12          KC: What was your impression—?

13          RB: The next day I had to be at Bien Hoa, the air base there north of Saigon.

14          KC: Well, let me ask you this, you mentioned the media so I feel obligated to ask  
15 this question: What was your impression of the media and its coverage of the war at this  
16 point?

17          RB: Terrible.

18          KC: Explain that to me.

19          RB: I have—I lost all my respect for any of the media during my tour in Vietnam.  
20 I did not think and do not think today that they are objective in their reporting at all.

21          KC: Now, was this your impression when you first got to Vietnam or was this  
22 something that built up over your tour there?

23          RB: I think it built up over my tour. I don't think I was really that much calloused  
24 on them at that time. I thought everything was fair and objective up until then. I learned  
25 that if they could sensationalize an interview, they would do it. Whether or not it was  
26 completely truthful or not that didn't really matter.

27          KC: Now, you were keeping up with the going-ons in Vietnam as you mentioned  
28 before, so the media coverage you are receiving in the United States was this a feeling  
29 that you got about the media while you were still in the United States following the  
30 conflict?

1           RB: Well, now, I will back up just a little bit. In the KC-135 I was flying into  
2 Guam and Okinawa and Thailand and flying missions out of there in the KC-135, so I  
3 was fairly well familiar with what was going on over in that area from personnel  
4 observation and *The Air Force Times*, the newspaper, and things like that. I guess my  
5 idea of the media—when I first went over there it was not as calloused as it is now, I  
6 guess.

7           KC: So when you were in Washington with the KC-135s flying these planes you  
8 were making missions to Southeast Asia then, is that true?

9           RB: That's true.

10          KC: Oh, okay, that is whole phase we didn't get to. Well let's back up a little and  
11 talk about that, if you don't mind, and then we will get you back to Saigon since we just  
12 got you to Vietnam there. What was this all about? What were your missions to Southeast  
13 Asia? Describe those for me.

14          RB: We would leave the States and fly normally to Guam would be the first stop.  
15 Out of Guam you may or may not fly in support of the B-52 strikes that were taking place  
16 at that time. Normally we would go from Guam to either Okinawa or Thailand. The first  
17 ones I went on were in Thailand theirselves and we flew out of Bangkok itself on what they  
18 called a Young Tiger mission type thing. We were at Bangkok flying in support of the  
19 fighter-bombers who were making the missions into North Vietnam, the F-105s, F-4s.  
20 Then if we flew out of Okinawa predominantly we were supporting B-52s flying out of  
21 Guam at that time.

22          KC: Okay, and these were all refueling missions, then.

23          RB: Yes.

24          KC: In air refueling missions in the 135. All right, now, you had mentioned you  
25 had experience in this from the other end, in the B-47, I believe it was. Describe for me,  
26 if you can, a typical, if there is such a thing, a typical refueling mission of, say, a B-52  
27 from your perspective in the refueling.

28          RB: From the KC-135 standpoint we would go to our refueling coordinates  
29 whatever they might be and you would echelon usually three airplanes out to one side  
30 and the B-52s would make contact with you and with the radar and everything they had  
31 they could close on you. Of course, come right up to the tanker and start taking on their

1 fuel. Then when you received or the B-52 received the offload amount that it was  
2 designed for or the amount that was specified on the contract there, not the contract but  
3 the flight plan, and they would break loose and go on their mission.

4 KC: About what altitude would you be refueling them?

5 RB: Oh, usually around 26,000 feet.

6 KC: 26,000, okay.

7 RB: Between 20- and 26,000. It was quite often depended on weather. If the  
8 weather was real bad at a lower altitude we would go on up a little higher. You would  
9 have what we called a rendezvous altitude and that would be the one you would start out  
10 at.

11 KC: Okay. Now, were you refueling over land, over water, or—

12 RB: Over water predominantly.

13 KC: Now, was there a reason for this?

14 RB: No, that was just about all there was out there.

15 KC: Okay, very good, very good. Now, how long were you flying these missions  
16 to Southeast Asia, refueling missions?

17 RB: I would go over there—let's see. I did it twice. That would be about five  
18 months at a time.

19 KC: Okay, and when did this start? Was this back in '65?

20 RB: That was '65.

21 KC: '65.

22 RB: Uh-huh.

23 KC: You did this until, what, 1966 and I guess you were back in Vietnam.

24 RB: Yeah, then I was out of the KC-135s and into the forward air control.

25 KC: Okay. What was your perspective of the U.S. role in Vietnam while you are  
26 flying these refueling missions in the 135?

27 RB: Well, I couldn't really get too much perspective out of it. We knew the B-52s  
28 were bombing and seemingly they weren't having very much effect. Just big airplanes  
29 and big formations and sometimes they would have thirty airplanes dropping bombs in an  
30 area. It didn't seem to really be slowing anything down. The bombing up north, we were

1 losing airplanes and seeming nothing was really slowing things down. The restrictions on  
2 the bombing were significant to the point where I don't think they were effective.

3 KC: Now, you say it didn't seem like these missions were slowing anything  
4 down. What was giving you your sense of this? Where were you picking up this  
5 information? Was it scuttlebutt or something you were reading or hearing in the media?

6 RB: No, it was basically the fact that they would go into an area and bomb and  
7 then a few days later the supplies and everything would continue to flow down. Places  
8 were being attacked and no real significant stopping of men and materiel.

9 KC: Sure.

10 RB: Of course, the bombing raids that were going on up north were  
11 predominately with fighter bombers and they would strike their targets but the targets  
12 they were striking were basically small stuff. They couldn't hit the ports where large  
13 ships were unloading war supplies. They couldn't bomb within the city limits of certain  
14 cities and things like that. The dams were off limits, which would have flooded areas and  
15 shut down the hydroelectric power. There were just too many restrictions.

16 KC: So at this early time you have, is it fair to say that you have doubts about  
17 American strategy here in terms of using airpower against North Vietnam?

18 RB: That's a question I really don't know whether or not I had the answer for it at  
19 that time. I don't think air power was being turned loose the way that it should have been  
20 and probably the closest it ever came to being turned loose was when Nixon was in the  
21 presidency and we were allowed to start sending B-52s into North Vietnam. I think that is  
22 significant there.

23 KC: Sure. Okay, well, I'm glad we got that on the record. We might have missed  
24 that otherwise. Okay, let's take you back to Saigon. You have gone through your FAC  
25 training. Describe Saigon for me. First, how old were you when you went to Saigon for  
26 the first time here?

27 RB: How old was I?

28 KC: Yes.

29 RB: Oh, let's see. I was thirty.

30 KC: At thirty years old. Okay, what was Saigon like to Ron Barnes a thirty-year-  
31 old newly arrived in country?

1           RB: Well, I went into the hotel and went up to the bar, which is up in the top area  
2 of it. Everything was just like a major hotel back in the United States. It had a dining  
3 room and a bar and what have you. I looked out to the west, if I remember right, and off  
4 in the distance I could see tracer bullets from an Air Force gunship going down to  
5 whatever target he was shooting at and this was some distance from where we were.  
6 Other than that it was no different than a scene in a hotel in any place you had ever been  
7 in the United States.

8           KC: It would seem odd to me to be in a, well, like you say, a very westernized  
9 place like this hotel and be able to look out the window and see the war going on.

10          RB: That was kind of odd. I thought that was kind of neat, you know. I tried to  
11 think of some poetic way to put it but it was just looking out the window and you could  
12 see the war away and here in the hotel it was nice and quiet.

13          KC: Well, what about Saigon? Can you describe that for me?

14          RB: Well, I didn't get to see that much of it. We got in Saigon probably about  
15 mid-morning and by the time we got our bags and everything from the aircraft and got on  
16 the bus that took us down to the Carvelle Hotel it was toward evening and I got into the  
17 room and ate a good meal and then went up the room, well, went up to the bar and then to  
18 the room and we went to bed. I was tired. I got up the next morning and I had to get a bus  
19 to Bien Hoa and that was about my extent of Saigon at that time. I did go back later,  
20 though.

21          KC: You went back on was it R&R (rest and relaxation) or something like that?

22          RB: No, during Tet of '68 I had to go help out there. They were being shot up  
23 pretty good.

24          KC: Okay, well, we will get there eventually throughout the progress of this. So  
25 you make it up to Bien Hoa. What were—had you received your orders by this time?

26          RB: No, I hadn't. There was three of us that were on the same airplane coming in.  
27 Two had got off and gone to Bien Hoa the day I went into the Caravelle Hotel. The only  
28 reason why I went to the hotel is I had met these two young men who wanted me to come  
29 up there with them. These other two guys were both lieutenant colonels and I was a  
30 captain and they had gone on to Bien Hoa. I got to Bien Hoa the next day, of course, and  
31 saw them both walking around the compound where we were supposed to check in and I

1 talked to them for a minute and asked them whether they had received their assignments  
2 and they said, yes, they had received theirs. I think one of them was going with 101<sup>st</sup>  
3 Airborne and one was going with the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, if I remember right. They said that my  
4 assignment was over in the commander's office. I had my pay records with me so I  
5 wanted to make sure they were taken care of so I went to the pay office first and gave the  
6 comptroller my records so that to make sure the wife got paid at home, you know. Then I  
7 went over to the commander's office and I walked in and went into his office and he said,  
8 "We have three assignments for forward air control duty," and then he said we had one to  
9 the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and one to the 9<sup>th</sup> Division and one to the Special Forces. He said,  
10 "Yours is the Special Forces," and I said, "Okay."

11 KC: What did you think about that? Special Forces could have meant a number of  
12 different things?

13 RB: I left and went around and I saw these two guys again and they asked me  
14 what assignment I got and I told them the Special Forces and they said, "Yeah, we knew  
15 about it." He said, "We had talked to them and they said there is only one guy that can go  
16 for that," and I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "It is a volunteer assignment." I said,  
17 "Boloney," and he said, "Yeah." I said, "He just assigned me." About two hours later I  
18 was in the operations area or something, anyway this colonel comes in and he comes over  
19 to them and he said, "I want you to know that assignment that you have is a volunteer  
20 assignment. You don't have to go unless you want to." I said, "Well, I would have never  
21 volunteered for it but since you assigned it me I will go ahead and go," and that is the  
22 way I wound up with it.

23 KC: Now, what did you think about this? The Special Forces could have meant  
24 any number of different things. What is going through your mind here?

25 RB: Well, think of the worst thing you can think of and that's where I was. I  
26 really didn't care. I was there to do the job and I was going to go to it do the best ability.  
27 If they needed me at the Special Forces deal, that is fine. I accepted it and went on from  
28 there.

29 KC: Okay, well, where did you go after Bien Hoa?

30 RB: Well, they wanted to give us what they called in-country indoctrination so we  
31 had to go down to the southern part of South Vietnam. Can Tho was the air base we went

1 to. We went down there to get checked out in the airplanes and get some little practical  
2 experience on shooting the rockets off into the marsh areas to see how they would react  
3 there and also just get the general feeling for what the training was like. We were down  
4 there for about a week, maybe, and that was about it, about a week, maybe ten days. Then  
5 we came back to, I came back to Bien Hoa to do a week of training with a long range  
6 reconnaissance patrol. I was sitting there in the barracks one day and a major came up  
7 and said, "We need to have you go to Tay Ninh. That's where your unit is and they are  
8 needing help." I went out and they had an airplane waiting for me. I put my bag in it and  
9 got in the airplane and they flew me to Tay Ninh. I got out at this little strip they were  
10 using which was called Tay Ninh City and there were a bunch of people around and I had  
11 no idea where to go. I asked the guy in airplane, I said, "Who do I go to?" He said, "I  
12 don't know, but I am not staying here." He turned around and took off. I was standing out  
13 there and I saw a tent and I walked up to it and the guy looked at me and I said, "I am  
14 Captain Barnes, your new forward air controller." He said, "Oh," he said, "Well, our  
15 commander is out right now. They just got shot down in the helicopter they will be back  
16 in a little while and we will get there." That was my greeting to the Special Forces unit I  
17 was assigned to.

18 KC: This was a very, very short time from landing in Saigon to being out  
19 essentially in the middle of nowhere at Tay Ninh with very little knowledge of where you  
20 were going to be going, what you were going to be doing. Like you say, you had some  
21 training with the long range reconnaissance patrol. What is going through your mind  
22 here? You are thirty years old and you have been barely greeted here at Tay Ninh, what is  
23 going through your mind?

24 RB: Well, I really didn't—I just thought, "What in the hell is going on?" That is  
25 exactly the way I felt. I had an A-1 bag, you know, full of—well, it just had my clothes in  
26 it. Of course, I had my M-16 rifle or CAR-15 I carried, just not much, a little bit of flying  
27 gear. I asked this guy I said, "Well, where can I put this stuff?" He said, "Oh, why don't  
28 you take that cot over there. He just got killed yesterday and won't be needing it." I  
29 thought, "Oh, this is the biggest bunch of bullshit I have ever seen in my life."

30 KC: Now, did you think this guy was lying to you?

31 RB: No, I thought he was bullying me, really.

1 KC: Yeah.

2 RB: But he wasn't. About thirty or forty-five minutes later I hear this helicopter  
3 coming in and it lands out in front there and people get off of it and run around to  
4 wherever they were going. Another helicopter comes in right behind him and the same  
5 thing. One guy starts walking up this way and that guy said, "That's our commander  
6 there." So as he came up I got up and I saluted him and I said, "I am Ron Barnes, the new  
7 forward air controller." He said, "Yeah, glad to have you." He said, "I will be with you in  
8 a few minutes. I've got some things to take care of." He said to one of the sergeants, he  
9 said, "Why don't you find him a place?" The sergeant said, "Okay." So he walked off  
10 and a little while later he came up and he said, "We need to have a briefing of all the new  
11 people." I came over to the operations tent they had there and he got up in front and he  
12 said, "My name is James Gritz. I am commander of detachment B-36, U.S. Special  
13 Forces on Special Project Rapid Fire. I promise you two things: violent contact with the  
14 enemy once a week and if you get porked we will get your body out. That's the end of the  
15 briefing." That was the briefing.

16 KC: Wow.

17 RB: He meant it. Of course, this guy he goes by the name of "Bo" Gritz now. Is  
18 quite a hero in Special Forces circles and has written several books. He and I became  
19 good friends. We still see each other and correspond today but he was a very, very good  
20 field commander. The unit was on a special project. Primarily we were reconnaissance  
21 and intelligence gathering. We had probably at full complement, thirty-six Americans,  
22 which included my little group, and probably 250 Cambodian mercenaries if we were full  
23 strength.

24 KC: Now, you say your little group. Who was included in your little group?

25 RB: Well, when I got there I had myself and another captain by the name of Ken  
26 Kopke, Air Force Academy graduate and that was it. We had two airplanes, no we only  
27 had one airplane when I got there. We got the second airplane shortly after I was there,  
28 O-1s. Then I got a crew chief. Well, that's going down the way. For about six weeks that  
29 is the way we operated with one or two airplanes depending on which one was shot up  
30 and what we had to do with it. Then later on after Tet of '68 I picked up a crew chief and  
31 two radio operators.

1           KC: Okay, now, you have made your way to Tay Ninh and you know you are  
2 going to be part of this B-36, Special Forces detachment B-36, and Project Rapid Fire.  
3 You have just been briefed rather briskly. I don't want to say coldly. I don't think that is  
4 the case, but it is certainly very truthful.

5           RB: That particular day was a bad day. We had lost two or three Americans and  
6 one killed and I think two wounded and several Cambodes in a fight so he wasn't in a  
7 real, real good mood that day.

8           KC: Sure. Now, you are already married and we will touch on that later on.

9           RB: Okay.

10          KC: You are married, you volunteered for service in Vietnam. I can't imagine that  
11 sat very well with your wife.

12          RB: Well, she knew I hated SAC. Not hated SAC, I just didn't like flying big  
13 airplanes.

14          KC: Well, you find yourself not just in Vietnam but you find yourself in Tay  
15 Ninh, you find yourself attached to the Special Forces and being a married man you know  
16 that you are going to have contact, violent contact with the enemy I believe is the way  
17 you put it, at least once a week. If you were shot down or killed they would get your body  
18 out. You have got to tell me what you are thinking about here even before you go on your  
19 first mission. This has to be very, very strange.

20          RB: Well, again, I guess I was thinking, "What in the heck did I get myself into?"  
21 I wasn't particularly worried about being shot down or killed or anything like that. I just  
22 wasn't sure what I got myself into. After a little bit I was hoping that I was capable of  
23 doing the job I was assigned to do because quite often I was the only link between the  
24 guys on the ground and whether or not they lived or died.

25          KC: Okay. Well, describe the O-1. That is the Bird Dog, I believe.

26          RB: Yes, uh-huh.

27          KC: Describe the O-1 to me.

28          RB: Well, it's a Cessna aircraft. It had a 245-horsepower Continental engine in it.  
29 The ones we had in Vietnam were carburetor type engines, which for some reason  
30 somebody somewhere took the carburetor heat out of the engine, which I believed cost  
31 me one of mine one day in an accident, but that's just me. We could lean the engine out

1 quite a bit and stay in the air and stay for a fairly long time over a target area. I carried  
2 eight rockets and two flares if I was going up at night. I carried CAR-15 with several  
3 rounds of ammunition and I carried several hand grenades. Sometimes I would throw  
4 those out the window at the VC (Viet Cong) at different times. The airplane was slow,  
5 ninety knots. It had very good visibility and one of the things about it, you keep the  
6 windows open over in Vietnam. You could hear a lot of times from which direction the  
7 fire or the bullets were coming from so you would know kind of what direction to look.  
8 All in all, it was a great observation airplane just when you got into trouble you couldn't  
9 get out of the way very quick.

10 KC: Sure. Now, you had been trained on jets, you have been trained on bombers,  
11 the KC-135 and back to fighter training again and now you are in a prop-driven plane.

12 RB: I called it my FO-1 for fighter.

13 KC: That must have been quite a change to you to adjust to that.

14 RB: Oh, it was. It was kind of like I was back flying as a kid in Oklahoma, you  
15 know, the same type of airplane, single-engine light airplane. It was really easy to fly. I  
16 did some stupid things with it. The helicopter people were always rubbing me about the  
17 airplane and everything. One day we had a very, very strong wind and the helicopter  
18 [pad] at this one base had a big circle with an H in the center of it for them to land on.  
19 The O-1 had the capability of putting down sixty degrees of flaps so I put down sixty  
20 degrees of flaps and virtually had no forward movement across the ground even though  
21 the airspeed was still up because the wind was blowing strong enough. I came down and  
22 landed in that H. I told them, "See, I could get the airplane in the same way they could."  
23 The only problem was I couldn't take it off. We had to hook a truck to it and tow it over  
24 to the runway so I could take off.

25 KC: (Laughs) Well, tell me what is your, as a forward air controller in this O-1,  
26 describe for me what your job is going to be on these missions with B-36.

27 RB: Well, as I mentioned our primary role was intelligence gathering and  
28 reconnaissance. We would send out small teams. If they were a reconnaissance team they  
29 would usually be four to six people and we would insert them into an area and then they  
30 could recon to a designated point and then we would pick them up. If it was an ambush  
31 team to gather information they would usually be anywhere from twelve to sixteen

1 people. We would put them in and they would set up an ambush and then after the  
2 ambush was initiated we would extract them. Those were the two basic things that we  
3 did. Each one of those, then, I supported them either by air strikes or being a radio relay.  
4 On a reconnaissance team I would fly not over the team or anything but over the area  
5 where I could make radio contact with them and they would give me a situation report  
6 and I could radio it back or take it back with me. Then if they got into trouble—you  
7 know, help them out with air strikes. Ambush, we knew there was going to be a fight  
8 there so I would be off to the side some distance away. They would call up and usually  
9 give an indication that contact was imminent or something like that, if possible. Then the  
10 fighting would get started and I'd get over into the area and help protect the troops or  
11 whatever is necessary to extract them so that we kept our losses to a minimum and got  
12 out any prisoners that we were lucky enough to get.

13 KC: So at what altitude were you generally flying here?

14 RB: Oh, anywhere from below treetops to about 1,500 feet.

15 KC: So you were somewhat exposed, obviously.

16 RB: The last airplane I had had 220 some bullet holes in it.

17 KC: Wow. What type of enemy weapons bothered you the most?

18 RB: You know, that is a good question. I would say the .51-caliber gun was one I  
19 hated to come up against, anti-aircraft gun. That one was a pretty good weapon and had  
20 pretty good range. I got hit one day by a gun, I have no idea what caliber it was. I had  
21 flown over this area. We were in a pretty good fight and I had flown over this area  
22 looking to see whether or not the VC were trying to come around behind or coming to  
23 outflank us or something. I hadn't seen anything and I came back over a little while later  
24 and there was a big gun there. I had no idea where it came from or anything else and I  
25 saw it go off. Of course, I was trying to get out of the way of it and the shell went off in  
26 the air. I don't know if they shot at me once or twice, fifty times, or what but that put  
27 about twenty or thirty holes in the airplane. I never saw the gun again. I don't have any  
28 idea what kind of gun it was.

29 KC: So what did you do after your plane was hit?

30 RB: Pardon me?

1           KC: What did you do after you plane was hit? Were you still able to fly it or did  
2 you have to go back?

3           RB: Well, I got hit a little bit, too. I had a lot of blood in my eyes.

4           KC: Oh, you were hit personally?

5           RB: Yeah.

6           KC: Oh, wow.

7           RB: Finally able to get the blood out of my eyes where I could see. I was worried  
8 about hitting the ground because I wasn't very high. I think flying pretty erratic maybe  
9 that helped, I don't know. Anyway, I got the blood out of my eyes and was able to see. I  
10 went back in and one of our Special Forces medics, Parker. I don't know his first name I  
11 just called him "Doc." Parker looked me over and said, "You are not hurt too bad." He  
12 just put some bandages up on my forehead and everything where the cuts were. I said,  
13 "Yeah, I know it." We looked over the airplane and the airplane wasn't hurt that bad so I  
14 got in it and went back out to the fight.

15          KC: Wow. Take me on your first mission in support of the B-36.

16          RB: Oh, the first mission was a real bear. We had inserted an ambush team. It  
17 consisted of about sixteen people. They really didn't go very far, didn't get a chance to  
18 set up or anything and they were met by a superior force. How big we don't know. It was  
19 pretty much of a knock-down-drag-out fight. We started putting in airstrikes around them  
20 and the VC were up very close. Couldn't really break contact there for a while. We had  
21 one prisoner, trying to get him out. We sent a helicopter in to a landing zone to get him  
22 out and we had a couple wounded we want out. The helicopter came in and landed, we  
23 got the wounded on board plus the prisoner. The helicopter started to lift off and the VC  
24 hit it with and RPG (rocket-propelled grenade). Pete Stark, the medic that got onboard  
25 with the wounded, it blew both of his legs off. The helicopter crashed and Pete got out  
26 and pulled the helicopter pilot out even though his legs were gone. He started  
27 administering first aid to the guy and put tourniquets on his legs and helped out with  
28 somebody else and then the pain got to him too much and, of course, he had to get some  
29 morphine in him. But he got the Distinguished Service Cross for that.

30          KC: Incredible.

1           RB: Then we were able with the airstrikes and everything to help them break  
2 contact and we got other helicopters in and got everybody out that we could. It was pretty  
3 much of a bad fight there for a while.

4           KC: What became of Pete? Did he survive this?

5           RB: Yeah, Pete survived. He lives now in South Carolina. I am in contact with  
6 him frequently. He is a real tough little guy. He came back and, of course, got his legs  
7 and everything. He has participated in kayak races and marathon races and things like  
8 that. He is quite an individual.

9           KC: Wow. What do you remember the most? I mean, you explained this story  
10 your first time out, first real combat. But what sort of things, more visceral things, do you  
11 remember about this first action, this first episode in combat?

12          RB: Well, the confusion that was associated with it. It was hard for me on the first  
13 mission to determine just exactly where our guys were and where the enemy was. There  
14 was a lot of smoke and, of course, the fire from the helicopter. I put in the first ordnance  
15 which were bombs by F-100s out of, I think they were out of Bien Hoa. I am not sure.  
16 Anyway, we put the bombs in and the guys on the ground said, "That's too far away, not  
17 close enough." The next thing I had was some napalm and I put the first canister of  
18 napalm in what I thought was pretty close and they said, "That's too far away." I said,  
19 "Well, throw some smoke so I can see exactly where you are." I saw the guy throw the  
20 smoke and he threw it behind him and I said, "Okay, I've got it." I put the napalm in  
21 quite a bit closer. The napalm was the stuff that actually broke contact with the enemy. It  
22 was in close enough that the VC had to back off. Then we had our helicopter gunships  
23 that were in putting down fire also and, of course, they were mad on account of one of  
24 their guys who had been shot down in his helicopter. It was just a very intense fight there  
25 for, oh, about twenty, thirty minutes maybe.

26          KC: When you make it back to camp you have time to think about this. What do  
27 you do when you get back?

28          RB: Well, during the battles and everything I didn't really have much time to  
29 think about anything other than the fact what was at hand. When we get back I would get  
30 nervous, sometimes shake depending on how intense it was.

31          KC: This is when you get back?

1 RB: Yeah, when I got back.

2 KC: Okay.

3 RB: But I never had the problem while I was out. I was just busy trying to get  
4 done what we needed to get done. That—I never really thought about how close the  
5 danger was, I don't guess. I would laugh about the bullet holes in the airplane every once  
6 and a while. You know, "Here is one that came in here. Ha, ha," you know. I would get  
7 nervous after I got back.

8 KC: What sort of things would you and the rest of the soldiers do once you got  
9 back from an engagement like this?

10 RB: Well, most of the guys really, especially for the first few months, didn't  
11 really know me. It was a hard relationship. They would speak to me and everything but  
12 very few would sit down and talk or anything like that. Then as the days grew on then  
13 more and more would loosen up and talk to me. That wasn't too unusual on account of  
14 you didn't want to get to know people real well on account of some of them didn't last  
15 very long. Only the guys that had been there for a while they just started talking to them  
16 and, you know, feel more comfortable around them, they felt comfortable around you  
17 because you had been there for a while and as you gained your experience there was less  
18 likelihood that you would be gone the next day.

19 KC: Well, that brings up a good point here. What type of relationship did you  
20 have? I know you mentioned that they don't want to get to know you because of the  
21 turnover and things like that, but did you get a feeling from them that you were someone  
22 worthy of their respect for what you were doing? Did they look at you as someone who is  
23 far removed from the situation? How did they view you? When I say "you," I mean you  
24 personally, but the position you held, as well.

25 RB: Well, I think at first they viewed me as a complete outsider. Of course, I was  
26 a captain and they were enlisted predominantly. As I began to prove myself in their eyes  
27 then things began to be a little more comfortable with them and they would spend more  
28 time talking to me or things like that. Actually, we just kind of evolved into where we  
29 could sit down and speak to each other. Now, the new guys that come in, you just didn't  
30 get close to them.

31 KC: What about with the officers?

1           RB: Officers didn't last very long. We have, oh, Gritz who was a major at the  
2 time, he was there. Our executive officer would—I think we had three or four different  
3 executive officers that come in. I am going to switch telephones here for a second, if you  
4 don't mind. This one is fixing to run out.

5           KC: I will tell you what, Mr. Barnes. Let's take a little break right here and I will  
6 call you right back. Okay?

7           RB: Okay. Sounds good. Thank you.

**Interview with Ronald Barnes**  
**Session [2] of [4]**  
**31 July 2008**

1           KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Ron  
2 Barnes. Today is 31 July 2008. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Barnes is joining us  
3 from Edmond, Oklahoma. Good morning, Mr. Barnes.

4           RB: Good morning.

5           KC: You mentioned a moment ago that you would like to spend a little more time  
6 discussing how your unit operated. So why don't we go ahead and pick up from there?

7           RB: Okay, we can do that. The organization was originally designed for a mobile  
8 guerilla operation. In this mobile guerilla operation the unit would go out basically with  
9 two rifle companies and operate behind enemy lines. They did that on two or three  
10 occasions. These are all prior to me getting there. One of the occasions was when the  
11 USAF (United States Air Force) lost a U-2 reconnaissance airplane and it crashed in  
12 South Vietnam. One of the requirements was to try and find that airplane and get the  
13 black box out of it that it had on its reconnaissance mission. This task was assigned to our  
14 unit B-36 and they went out for several weeks and finally found the VC encampment that  
15 had the black box intact and overran the encampment, recovered the black box, and  
16 brought it back to Saigon. (clears throat) Excuse me. That was one of the  
17 accomplishments that the unit did. They went out on another one which lasted for about  
18 four weeks in the jungle and they destroyed several enemy base camps, several  
19 encounters with the enemy and basically out-guerrilla-ed the guerilla. It was quite a feat,  
20 really. When I joined them we were still doing somewhat of those type of organizational  
21 activities with company-sized units but primarily we were into smaller unit ambushes and  
22 reconnaissance. Our operation was called Project Rapid Fire.

23           KC: Okay.

24           RB: So that was Project Rapid Fire. That's basically why the Air Force had  
25 assigned forward air controllers to this Special Forces unit because of its unique  
26 operations. I always hate to use the word "unique" because everybody uses that same  
27 word, but it really applied to this unit. We only did about two company-sized operations

1 for two to three weeks while I was with the unit, but they all turned out to be productive  
2 in intelligence, reconnaissance, and also contact with the enemy.

3 KC: Now, what specifically was the mission in the area of operations for B-36  
4 with the Special Project Rapid Fire?

5 RB: Well, we primarily operated in 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps area. The areas of operation are  
6 normally along the Cambodian border, Laotian border, and into areas where they would  
7 not send an American unit and, of course, the South Vietnamese wouldn't send anything  
8 in there. We would go in and find the enemy, determine the strength and come back and  
9 report as to whether or not it was really a worthwhile target to send in a larger unit,  
10 primarily American, or continue the way we were operating because there wasn't that  
11 much of a threat. We would go into an area, say, like Tay Ninh Province and set up in a  
12 runway area if we had one. In Tay Ninh we had a Special Forces team there and we set  
13 up close to them in the Michelin rubber plantation and used a small air strip there. When  
14 we'd get into an area usually we'd get a probing type of attack during the first week we  
15 were there. It wouldn't be very strong. They were trying to find out exactly what we had  
16 and how we operated. The second week they would leave us alone because they found we  
17 were pretty well armed and had a good idea of what we were doing. If we had to stay  
18 three and four weeks in one place we could pretty well be assured we were going to have  
19 some type of a ground attack, whether or not it'd be a mortar or rocket attack followed by  
20 a ground attack or whether or not it'd just be a straight ground attack. That seemed to  
21 follow us wherever we went. We would go to Tay Ninh, Song Be, Duc Hoa, Rang Rang,  
22 various places like that.

23 KC: Now, the longer you were there does this mean that the VC were with their  
24 own reconnaissance judging how strong you were and then bringing in reinforcements for  
25 these attacks?

26 RB: Yes, they would. They really didn't like us too well.

27 KC: You don't say.

28 RB: We were pretty much a thorn in their side. They would try just really to  
29 eliminate us as much as they possibly could. When we would start in doing our  
30 reconnaissance and ambush type of work they would bring reinforcements into an area

1 just so they could try and kill as many of us as they could. It was an interesting way to  
2 operate, really.

3 KC: Could you take me on a—and I am going to use the word “typical” and I am  
4 sure there was no typical operation like this—but could you take me on a—through the  
5 process of setting up one of these ambushes and reconnaissance, say, at Tay Ninh  
6 province or wherever.

7 RB: Okay. About wherever we went our basic concept was the same. We would  
8 alert one of our teams that they were going to be going out on, say, an ambush in about  
9 two days. This team would take itself and the members that were going to go on the  
10 ambush and separate themselves from the rest of the unit. We had a little area over at the  
11 side. That is where they would eat and sleep for the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours.  
12 Primarily what they were doing was trying to cleanse the environment that we operated in  
13 from their bodies so they could smell and be more attuned to the jungles that they were  
14 going to go into.

15 KC: Okay.

16 RB: We would take that team when they were ready to go, the team leader would  
17 already have had meetings and discussed just exactly where they were going to be  
18 inserted and where they were going to try and set up the ambush and what we thought  
19 they might find in the way of enemy in the area.

20 KC: How big might this team be? How many men?

21 RB: Usually on an ambush we would have anywhere from twelve to eighteen.

22 KC: Okay.

23 RB: Usually have a left and right kill zone with two people in each one and have a  
24 rear kill zone, excuse me, they weren't kill zones, they were left and right security with a  
25 couple of people each. Then you would have a rear security with two to three people and  
26 then the kill zone with six or seven people in that and that would be the center. Basically  
27 if you take your Texas Tech T that's about the way it was set up.

28 KC: Okay.

29 RB: That would be a classic example.

30 KC: All right, very good.

1           RB: We would insert the people into the area with our helicopters. We had slick  
2 helicopters, six slicks assigned and that is for troop carrying. We usually have two light  
3 fire teams or one heavy fire team of helicopters, three or four helicopter gunships. We  
4 would insert our troops there and they would immediately get into the jungle and set their  
5 ambush up. If they had a chance they would give a call. I would normally fly some  
6 distance away, in fact, a pretty good distance so not to draw attention to them in an area.  
7 If they could they would get a call in to me saying that contact was imminent and I would  
8 relay it on and we would get all prepared. Back at our base camp we would have a  
9 reaction force with all their equipment lined up by the runway standing by in case our  
10 ambush team got into a big fight and we couldn't extract them once they made contact  
11 and did what we wanted them to do. That was the way we would set up. The ambush  
12 would be triggered whenever, it just depends on what came through and how much. That,  
13 of course, would always start a fight. Our guys would, if we had a chance to get a  
14 prisoner we would get those, if not we would have to withdraw and usually would  
15 withdraw to an extraction landing zone which was pretty hotly contested. After a while  
16 the VC or the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) whichever one you want to call them had,  
17 oh, lookouts I guess was just as good a word as anybody, at the different areas where they  
18 felt a helicopter could set down. These people would be aware that our helicopters were  
19 coming into that particular area and they would make contact and we would usually have  
20 a fight at the extraction zone.

21           KC: Okay. Now, what would be—?

22           RB: That's the way we operated.

23           KC: Now, during this time what would be your role? A better way to ask this is  
24 were you typically engaged in the fighting or were you more there for reconnaissance and  
25 relaying information or did it just depend on each particular situation?

26           RB: Well, I very seldom acted as a radio relay of any type.

27           KC: Okay.

28           RB: The initial like contact imminent or something like that. Once the fight  
29 started I got involved quite a bit with it. I controlled the helicopter gunships trying to help  
30 out. The person on the ground who was in charge, the team leader, would call me up and  
31 tell me where he wanted the ordnance because that was where he was pinned down the

1 worst. We would start in flying the ordnance in that area where he designated. I had on  
2 my airplane—well, standard load would be aid to marking rockets, white phosphorous  
3 type.

4 KC: Okay.

5 RB: Then I carried a sack full of hand grenades. Sometimes that helped but that  
6 wasn't too smart on my part to do that, it was a little dangerous. Sometimes I would get  
7 down and throw hand grenades out the window. But most of the time I used the marking  
8 rockets to direct both helicopter gunships and Air Force fighter-bombers.

9 KC: What kind of ordnance would they be hitting this area with?

10 RB: Well, our helicopter gunships would be using high-velocity rockets, 2.75  
11 rockets with a high-explosive warhead it along with mini-guns, kind of like an M-60  
12 machinegun. The Air Force aircraft primarily would be loaded up with 500- or 750-  
13 pound bombs and napalm.

14 KC: Okay.

15 RB: Of all the ordnance that was the most effective napalm was the one that  
16 would break contact.

17 KC: Now, what type of Air Force planes would you be calling in? What kind  
18 would generally—?

19 RB: Normally we would get Air Force F-100s. We would get some VA-37s every  
20 once and a while. On limited occasions we would get the South Vietnamese F-5s and A-  
21 1s, but you've got to remember that our unit was made up primarily of Cambodian  
22 mercenaries. The South Vietnamese did not like the Cambodians very much, therefore  
23 there was an ethnic type thing and sometimes the support from the South Vietnamese was  
24 not real effective.

25 KC: Now, you say you are using Cambodian mercenaries. Why were they  
26 involved?

27 RB: Well, when Jim Gritz, Bo Gritz, formed B-36 he had his choice of what kind  
28 of individuals he wanted to get and he decided not to take South Vietnamese—and I  
29 know this is going to sound terrible—but they were not reliable and wouldn't fight. He  
30 had a choice then between Chinese mercenaries and the Cambodians. He leaned heavily  
31 towards the Chinese and was thinking about having this force formed up with Chinese

1 Nungs, what they called Chinese Nungs. (clears throat) Excuse me. The Chinese are very  
2 intelligent and everything and sometimes they assess things and take off on their own so  
3 he decided that wasn't a good deal.

4 KC: Sure. Now, you say these Chinese, were these ethnic Chinese who were  
5 living in the Vietnam-Cambodian border?

6 RB: Yes, uh-huh, yes. They were indigenous to South Vietnam.

7 KC: And they were the Nung. Okay.

8 RB: Yes. Then the Cambodians were a fairly intelligent people and they were  
9 willing to fight because what they were really—we hooked up with was the Khmer Serei  
10 Cambodians, which were a Free Cambodia, and they were working towards the freedom  
11 of Cambodia which, of course, at that time was a communist state. We worked with them  
12 and part of the payment for the Cambodia mercenaries went to the Khmer Serei to help  
13 with their endeavors to overthrow the Cambodian government. So we had some pretty  
14 loyal troops.

15 KC: About how many Cambodians would you say were helping make up B-36?

16 RB: Well, about 250. It may go up as high as 300.

17 KC: Out of how many in B-36?

18 RB: Pardon me?

19 KC: Out of how many in B-36?

20 RB: That would be 250, 300 the Cambodians.

21 KC: Okay, okay.

22 RB: American-wise we'd only have thirty-six Americans or something like that.  
23 The ratio was not too good. We had two basic Special Forces A teams plus a  
24 headquarters and intelligence section.

25 KC: Okay.

26 RB: That was our make up.

27 KC: What kind of relationship did you see between the Americans and these  
28 Cambodians?

29 RB: It was quite good. There was a lot of interaction with our troops because the  
30 Special Forces individuals, the sergeants, you know, had to work with Cambodians all the  
31 time so we had several training sessions that trained all the time and worked together.

1 They'd show them how to use the weapons and how to set up ambushes and things like  
2 that. There was pretty good interaction among the troops and the Cambodes seemed to  
3 like us quite well.

4 KC: How about you personally? Did you have much interaction with them?

5 RB: Yes, I had quite a bit. Once the Cambodes realized I was the forward air  
6 controller and I could bring the Air Force arsenal in to help them out when we got into a  
7 fight, I was kind of considered a god.

8 KC: I bet you were right popular, weren't you?

9 RB: In fact, one time I came back from a conference where I had been up at Da  
10 Nang, not Da Nang, Nha Trang, for about a week and they were on a—we were getting  
11 retrofitted with individuals and new weapons and things like that. They were on a march  
12 for about two miles and the road was lined with Cambodians on each side of the road and  
13 as I came back to the camp that we had the Cambodians were lined up and as I go down  
14 the road they were shouting my name and yelling. I was kind of like Caesar going into  
15 Rome.

16 KC: Wow.

17 RB: It was kind of funny, really.

18 KC: Once you—once contact is broken between B-36 and the enemy, whoever  
19 they might have been, you are extracting them from these landing zones and as you said  
20 it was often times very contested, hot landing zones to extract them. When you get back  
21 to your base what do you do then? What is your typical routine?

22 RB: Well, we'd—once everybody was out I would quit putting in the airstrikes  
23 and we would come back to the base usually, of course, the helicopters would be there  
24 long before I would get there because I would stay around and put in some ordnance in  
25 the area. The wounded would be taken care of along with anybody we might have killed.  
26 Then the team leaders would go over to the intelligence area where we had an officer  
27 assigned and a Special Forces sergeant, who was probably one of the best intelligence  
28 officers I have ever seen, and started talking about what they had seen. If we had a  
29 prisoner there'd be some interrogation there. When I get back in I'd sit down with him  
30 and tell him what I had seen from the air and what I expected to happen. They put  
31 together their intelligence report from that.

1           KC: Okay. Was there any one particular mission like this that stands out to you  
2 more than any of the others, other than the first one? You discussed that a couple of days  
3 ago.

4           RB: Well, I will tell you something that happened. I was just a small part of it, or  
5 a part of it. Along about the very first week in January of 1968 we had captured, I believe  
6 the last week in December, a VC who was fairly talkative. He had told us that there was  
7 1,000 kilos of rice stored in this one area.

8           KC: Which area was this, by the way, Mr. Barnes?

9           RB: Pardon me?

10          KC: What area was this?

11          RB: This was Tay Ninh up just right at the Cambodian border along, I can't even  
12 think of the river there. I can't think of the name of the river.

13          KC: Oh, that's fine.

14          RB: But it is in the Elephant's Ear area of Cambodia. Gosh, I can't think of it. I  
15 just can't think of the name of the river up there.

16          KC: That's fine.

17          RB: We decided we would go in and destroy that stockpile of rice. We put thirty-  
18 five guys on the ground to go in and destroy this rice area. It turned out that we had put  
19 the team down between the second and third bunker system of an NVA regimental  
20 headquarters.

21          KC: Uh-oh.

22          RB: They immediately were taken under really heavy fire. The only thing they  
23 could do was assault, so they did and they overran the headquarters complex. Inside there  
24 we had code books and documents, one-day pads, maps, plans, and we wound up picking  
25 up about thirty-five, forty pounds of documents. Then we tried to get them out and we  
26 couldn't do it because the NVA and VC who were in that area, they had been evidently in  
27 Cambodia having a little fun and when the fighting started, of course, they came back and  
28 started taking up their positions. We wound up putting 400 people on the ground. Got a  
29 reaction force from our camps at Long Hai and started putting people on the ground  
30 trying to make contact to get these guys out and we couldn't do it. There was an area  
31 about, oh, 100-150 yards maybe that long and wide. We could get them that close but the

1 bunker system that was in between they just couldn't come across it. The VC were in  
2 there real heavy. We were putting in air strikes and I went back to get some more gas and  
3 more armament and my other forward air controller, Ken Kopke, was up there and we  
4 had put in bombs and everything and couldn't do any good. He asked the commander, he  
5 said, "What do you want me to do?" Gritz said, "What have you got left?" He said, "The  
6 only thing I have is napalm." There was a pause and he said, "Okay, put it in." So we put  
7 napalm in between two of our units. Probably no more than 100 yards separated the two,  
8 if that. A very dangerous napalm run. Well, the napalm run was successful and we were  
9 able to extract the guys with all their dead and wounded that they had. Brought them back  
10 and we took a look at the plans, or the intel people did, and called Saigon and they sent a  
11 special courier up to us to get the information. It went to Saigon and never even went into  
12 headquarters in Saigon. It went straight to Washington, D.C., from there to the Pentagon  
13 area or wherever they meet or wherever it was. Then it turned out to be quite a bit of it  
14 was the Tet Offensive for 1968.

15 KC: Sure. Do you know the specifics or some of the specifics about what those  
16 documents said?

17 RB: No, I really don't other than the fact that it talked about a tremendous troop  
18 buildup, attacks on [provinces], primarily provincial capitals. That's all we had that  
19 Sergeant Beaty could talk about on account of that's all he really had a chance to look at.  
20 I couldn't give you specifics on that situation. About two nights later after that attack  
21 where we got everybody out I went back up into that area about, oh, midnight, two  
22 o'clock in the morning and had a Starlight scope spotter in the backseat of my airplane  
23 and we caught about eighty, ninety somewhere around there, VC in the open using the  
24 Starlight scope and we were able to take out quite a few of them. I kind of followed  
25 where they were coming from because they were in a line marching south and I went  
26 back up to the Cambodian border there and there were—oh gosh, my memory fails me—  
27 six or eight trucks unloading supplies from Cambodia coming into South Vietnam. No  
28 one would let me put ordnance on them because I wasn't being shot at. Well, it didn't  
29 take but about two minutes to fly over that area and I started receiving gunfire from  
30 several hundred guns. So we put a bunch of ordnance in up there and I have no idea what

1 the effect was because it was night time and I couldn't tell. But trucks—once I started  
2 putting in ordnance they went deeper into Cambodia and we didn't go in to get them.

3 KC: Two questions come to mind here, Mr. Barnes. First, why did you make your  
4 way back to the scene at midnight or two o'clock in the morning? Did you receive orders  
5 to do this? Was this something you wanted to do on your own?

6 RB: I just did it on my own. I figured that I could find some VC up there and  
7 maybe we could go in and set up another ambush or something in an area that we could  
8 get some more information. That was my job was to find the enemy and take care of them  
9 and that's what I was trying to do.

10 KC: Was this something you commonly did?

11 RB: Oh, I would go out, yes. I would take my airplane. Like I told you earlier, the  
12 standard load was eight marking rockets. Well, I would load one side of my airplane up  
13 with high explosives and go out and if I saw something that looked like it needed to be  
14 shot I would shoot at it. I did that frequently.

15 KC: Okay. Now, the other question that I have about this is you have already seen  
16 the large cache of food, you saw the large number of NVA as well as VC in this area and  
17 then you go back and you see a bee hive of activity there again, especially with these  
18 trucks and a large number of VC. Did this give you any signal that maybe there was  
19 something larger coming at that time?

20 RB: Yeah, we all thought that there was going to be a large attack. We didn't  
21 know where it was going to take place. We didn't know whether or not it was going to be  
22 at the Army base at Tay Ninh which was, oh, several miles from where we were located  
23 or the big Army base a Cu Chi or where it might be but we knew we were getting a large  
24 infiltration of supplies, troops. In fact, one night I was up there and I sunk two sampans  
25 on the river—which I still can't think of the name of it—that were loaded with supplies.  
26 We knew something was up, we just didn't know what.

27 KC: Okay.

28 RB: Then around the 28<sup>th</sup> of January they took us out of Tay Ninh because we  
29 weren't much of an effective fighting force then. We were probably down to about, oh,  
30 eighteen Americans and probably less than 150 Cambodians. We were pretty well shot  
31 up.

1 KC: Now, was this a result of that big firefight earlier that you discussed?

2 RB: Yeah, they begin to take their toll after a while, of course. Every day we were  
3 out we had somebody out on patrol or ambush so the fighting was pretty constant from  
4 then.

5 KC: Okay.

6 RB: It just took its toll.

7 KC: What about—you were so close to the Cambodian border. Were you  
8 involved in any cross-border, jumping the fence, cross-borders actions, missions there?

9 RB: I hate to say very many but there were a few, I guess. Primarily we went in  
10 when we were being attacked, if that's a good way to put it.

11 KC: Okay, so it was more of a hot pursuit kind of thing rather than something that  
12 was planned.

13 RB: More or less, yes.

14 KC: Okay.

15 RB: Of course, we might have to initiate the hot pursuit in Cambodia.

16 KC: Was this something that was commonly done?

17 RB: No, not really. We didn't need to at that point in time. There was plenty of  
18 activity on the South Vietnamese side of the border.

19 KC: Sure.

20 RB: The only time we would go over into Cambodia itself was if we had good  
21 intelligence that there was something that we needed to take a look at. It might be a  
22 supply depot or a training area or something like that.

23 KC: Now, given all of your navigational training and skills, how difficult or was it  
24 difficult to tell when you were on one side of the border in South Vietnam or on the other  
25 side in Cambodia?

26 RB: Sometimes it was fairly difficult. There wasn't any fence or anything like  
27 there is down on the southern border of the United States. It would be more like the  
28 northern border of the country up in Canada and America. If you don't go across the road  
29 into a check point you are kind of by guess and golly whether or not you are five miles in  
30 the United States or five miles in Canada. It would be a similar situation there. We had

1 the border marked on our maps but even so some of the maps were fairly inaccurate in  
2 those areas.

3 KC: Okay. Later in January of 1968 you say that your outfit is beginning to pull  
4 back. The attrition, the numbers aren't there and, obviously, I would think that your unit  
5 would need some sort of rest to leave the area.

6 RB: Right.

7 KC: Okay, this leads us—before we lead us to the Tet Offensive, what did you do  
8 in the meantime as your unit is pulling back before the Tet Offensive begins?

9 RB: Well, when the time came for us to leave Tay Ninh I took my airplanes and  
10 took them to the base at Bien Hoa so they could get looked over. I had plenty of bullet  
11 holes in them that had been repaired at different times and I just wanted the airplanes to  
12 be checked over and things like that. Then, of course, being Air Force I had to check in  
13 with the Air Force side of the house. In the meantime our SF (Special Forces) unit went  
14 to our main camp at Long Hai which was on the, oh, near the town of Vung Tau, north of  
15 the town of Vung Tau which is on the coast over on the eastern side of Vietnam. I went to  
16 Bien Hoa and the other FAC and I thought, "Well, shoot. We might take a quick trip to  
17 the Philippines," or something but we wanted to go back down to Long Hai where our  
18 troops were to make sure that we weren't going to miss out on anything. So we grabbed a  
19 helicopter that was going that way and went to Long Hai. When we got down there, of  
20 course, about the only thing going on was the guys were gathered at the club and trying to  
21 drown themselves in Australian and Vietnamese beer. We thought, "Well, we will just  
22 maybe go to the Philippines for a couple, three days and relax," when we got word that  
23 the Tet Offensive had started.

24 KC: Okay. Now, this was something—I am sorry—this was something that was  
25 obviously throughout all of South Vietnam and it came as a major surprise in a variety of  
26 different ways and something you mentioned earlier that you were involved in. Take me  
27 through your experiences in the Tet Offensive of 1968.

28 RB: Well, like I say, I was down at our camp at Long Hai when we got the first  
29 radio reports that both Saigon and Bien Hoa and some of the major places were being hit  
30 by VC. I told the other forward air controller, Ken, I said, "We need to go up to Bien Hoa  
31 and get our airplanes and bring them down here because they don't know how to protect

1 anything anyway.” So we got one of our helicopter pilots to fly us up to Bien Hoa. Well,  
2 he flew us into the Special Forces camp which was outside of the air base there and as we  
3 got out of the helicopter we were being shot at. I told Ken, I said, “This doesn’t seem to  
4 be right,” and he kind of agreed with me. We were able to find a jeep that they would let  
5 us have and Ken and I took the jeep over to the air base and on the way over we received  
6 a few sporadic, just shots of automatic weapons fire but nothing really bad. We got over  
7 to the base and I went down to get my airplanes and the guy said, “We really need you to  
8 go to Saigon to help out.” I said, “Nah. We are not going to go over to Saigon and help  
9 out. We are going to go to the Philippines and take a little rest. We just came out of the  
10 jungle.” He said, “No. This is really a major attack and we need to have you go to Saigon  
11 and help out there. They need some help.” We told him we would and somewhere around  
12 ten o’clock at night, I guess it was, they finally got our airplanes back in shape where we  
13 could fly them. Ken and I took off for Saigon. As we landed at Ton Son Nhut I couldn’t  
14 make contact with anybody in the tower or anything like that. I landed on the runway and  
15 I was being shot at as I did my landing row. I called Ken up and I told him to turn his  
16 lights out and I said, “Land short.” I said, “Don’t land long at all on account I am being  
17 shot at down here on this end of the runway.” So I taxied up and there were a bunch of  
18 people behind sandbag emplacements and things like that. I had one guy motion me in so  
19 I went inside and there was a big compound that had four or five O-1s inside there. We  
20 got out of the airplane and they wanted to know who we were and what we were there  
21 for. I told them, “Well, we were there to help out. We were told to come on up to  
22 Saigon.” I have no idea of the names of the individuals or anything but a lieutenant  
23 colonel who evidently was in charge of the Air Force people there said, “Well, we will  
24 have to get you a special briefing because you are in the Saigon special area and you can  
25 only do this that and the other.” I said, “Well, whatever you want.” About an hour and a  
26 half later they said, “Well, we are going to dispense with the briefing. We just need to  
27 have you go out and provide support to the troops.” They gave us some frequencies to  
28 contact different people with. About, oh, I don’t know, four or five o’clock in the  
29 morning I took off. The fog had set in and it was kind of a foggy morning, couldn’t get  
30 up very high unless you were in the low clouds. I received a call from somebody that told  
31 me that there was an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) artillery training group

1 that was sustaining heavy casualties and they want me to go over and see what the  
2 problem was over there. I flew over to this area and as high as I could get was about 400  
3 or 500 feet and I flew across this compound and I could see the artillery pieces but no one  
4 around them. I made contact with the Army ground personnel who were there and it  
5 turned out he was a Marine Corps sergeant, Spanish-American it was obvious by his  
6 voice. His call sign was Swampy Toes. I asked him what was going on and he said,  
7 "Well, the VC have four of my guns and I can't get to them." He said, "I have my dead  
8 and wounded behind the berm and we are trying to protect what we have." I looked for  
9 him and finally found him and, sure enough, it looked like cord wood behind the berm  
10 there. So I start in throwing some hand grenades out the window, fired a rocket into the  
11 VC area trying to keep their heads down and make them think that I was going to put in  
12 an air strike, but we didn't have anything to put in. A little while later I saw a helicopter  
13 gunship just in the fog and I called it on the emergency frequency and he responded and I  
14 had him come over and it actually turned out to be two helicopters, gunships. I had them  
15 spray the area with what ordnance they had and I called back to Tan Son Nhut there to  
16 get permission to get some air power in. They told me that I was unauthorized to expend  
17 ordnance in my position because the province chief wouldn't allow me to do it. I told  
18 them, well, that was fine with me but the VC had these artillery guns and they were about  
19 ready to turn them around and fire on Tan Son Nhut, which is only five miles away and  
20 they want to be on the receiving end that was fine with me. It wasn't about a minute later  
21 I had permission to use air power.

22 KC: I would think so.

23 RB: The only problem was the cloud cover. I get to shooting out of the window  
24 and throwing some hand grenades, not very effective, really. I would throw a grenade and  
25 get back up in the clouds and make a turn because the airplane was pretty susceptible at  
26 that altitude.

27 KC: Sure, and you are, what, 400 or 500 feet still?

28 RB: Yeah, at that, yes. Finally the fog began to break and there was one area  
29 where I could bring airplanes down so I start in doing that and we put ordnance around  
30 and everything. This Marine that was on the ground there he called me up one time and I  
31 put some ordnance in very close to them and he called up and he said, "Smokey, this is

1 Swampy Toes.” I said, “What do you need, Toes?” He said, “I don’t want you to forget  
2 where I am.” I said, “I know. I know where you are. Just keep your head down.” He said,  
3 “My head, she is down.” We continued to put some ordnance in and a little while later I  
4 see some people start scurrying around the artillery pieces and I call him up and ask him  
5 what is going on and he said, “Smokey, I am getting ready to fire artillery.” I said, “Don’t  
6 do that. You will blow me out of the sky. I am not very high.” He said, “Don’t you worry.  
7 Max ordnance six feet.”

8 KC: Wow.

9 RB: What they had done is lower the barrel on that gun and it was firing direct  
10 fire six feet above the ground. He fired off three of four rounds into a building that  
11 housed several VC. We were able to save that day and get his people fixed up and get  
12 some people in there. I had to stop the ordnance on two or three different occasions. I saw  
13 lots of kids. I wasn’t going to kill any kids if at all possible.

14 KC: Sure.

15 RB: I would stop the fighting, not stop the fighting, stop the aerial delivery of  
16 ordnance on two or three different occasions to get these little groups of kids that were  
17 being shepherded by what appeared to women, it could have been VC for all I know, out  
18 of the area and get them to a safer position. Of course, doing that gave the VC enough  
19 time to consolidate position but that’s the way it went.

20 KC: That’s a very good point. Let me ask you a question or two here. What kind  
21 of—I would think there would very, very conflicting as an individual who is involved in  
22 this. One, you have got to do everything you can to call in support to save this group of  
23 ARVNs and the Americans that are with them from this massive VC attack knowing  
24 what it was and then you see women and children and, liked you mentioned, they may  
25 have been VC for all you know but, of course, you can’t bring yourself to call in fire on  
26 them. But by not calling in fire at that time you are allowing the VC to reconsolidate their  
27 position. I would think that would be incredibly conflicting. Can you go into some detail  
28 about what’s going through your mind at this time?

29 RB: Well, I wasn’t thinking so much of the VC consolidating their position. I was  
30 just thinking was I am not going to kill these children or expose them to anymore than  
31 just absolutely necessary to what was going on. I wanted to get them out of the area and

1 go back into the fight. As for thinking so much about the VC consolidating, no, I really  
2 didn't think of it that way.

3 KC: Okay.

4 RB: There was just a lot of VC around so I guess it really didn't matter, that you  
5 were going to be shot at for quite a while anyway.

6 KC: Sure.

7 RB: I really didn't consider the VC redoing their position as much as I just wasn't  
8 going to expose the children to that kind of ordnance.

9 KC: Sure, completely, completely understandable. Once you have—once this  
10 group is safe, like you said, you got—I assume helicopters were bringing in  
11 reinforcements and they reacquired control of the area. What do you do next?

12 RB: Well, I just went—I called up and everything was pretty well secure in that  
13 area and I called up and told them I had finished and they sent me off to another place  
14 that was having some problems.

15 KC: There around Tan Son Nhut?

16 RB: Well, around Saigon itself. We flew probably, oh, fifteen to twenty miles  
17 radius around Tan Son Nhut, just wherever the action was taking place that's where we  
18 would go and see what we could help out with.

19 KC: Well, where did you go, if you don't mind my asking?

20 RB: Well, I went to an area that was north and west of Tan Son Nhut along a little  
21 river there. I was looking for a large VC unit that was supposed to be pulling out and  
22 going to another location. I never did find the VC as such. I had a guy on the ground who  
23 had a real nice house by this river. He was pointing in a direction for me to go take a  
24 look. He kept emphatically pointing in that direction. I went over in that area and the only  
25 thing I could see was a big warehouse area. It was kind of the opinion of everybody that  
26 the VC had got into these warehouse buildings and they were probably hiding in them.  
27 The controller there at Tan Son Nhut called up and told me that they wanted the  
28 warehouse destroyed so they had some fighter-bombers come over. I told this F-100 pilot  
29 who was leading the formation, I said, "I am going to have you hit that big warehouse  
30 down there." He said, "You mean I get to hit the whole building?" (Laughs) That was the  
31 first he had ever had any real target like that and I said, "That's what I have been told."

1 You could just almost hear him holler “Yippee!” Anyway, we went in and destroyed the  
2 building and I didn’t see any VC. Then I went back about, oh, nine hours later to this  
3 guy’s house and that house had been destroyed and I assume he had been killed, too.

4 KC: What do you think destroyed the house? Was it American airstrikes or was it  
5 VC?

6 RB: I couldn’t tell. I have no idea. I have a feeling it was South Vietnamese  
7 airstrikes.

8 KC: Okay.

9 RB: They—I don’t know how much you have had on your interviews about the  
10 ethnic dislike over there, but it was prevalent.

11 KC: Sure.

12 RB: In Saigon there was a large community of Chinese and the area was called  
13 Cholon. They were business people. They had quite a bit of the business and a lot of the  
14 South Vietnamese were jealous, especially people who were higher in the government  
15 and had money. During Tet of ’68 the VC came through Cholon, quite a large group of  
16 them, anyway, into Saigon. Well, that gave the South Vietnamese reason to go in and  
17 bomb Cholon and they bombed it and they bombed it and they bombed it, destroyed quite  
18 a bit of the section. They had no qualms about doing it because it was Chinese. It was just  
19 the same as we had with our Cambodian soldiers. South Vietnamese they didn’t get along  
20 at all. In fact, when we were up at Song Be. The Song Be ARVN Ranger detachment set  
21 up an ambush for our troops and it didn’t go too well. A lot of the ARVN didn’t make it  
22 through the ambush. But they didn’t like our Cambodes. They didn’t like Montagnards. It  
23 was just a lot of ethnic hate over there.

24 KC: Well, now is a good—

25 RB: A lot like Iran and Pakistan and all those places over there now. People just  
26 hate each other for nothing but ethnic types of operations.

27 KC: Well, let me ask you this question and we will get back to the Tet Offensive  
28 afterwards because you have broached the subject. What was your general impression of  
29 the South Vietnamese, of the ARVN, of the air force, etc? What was your general  
30 impression of them?

1           RB: Uh, the air force was good. They were skilled pilots. A lot of them had been  
2 over there in combat for years. They did not really come in and take the chances that our  
3 Air Force pilots would take. If they could deliver the ordnance from a higher altitude they  
4 would do it. I did have some South Vietnamese air force units that came in and provided  
5 excellent support, but they were also very cautious. The South Vietnamese army units  
6 that I was associated with, or not associated with, but worked around and observed I  
7 would give them probably a D minus.

8           KC: Okay.

9           RB: I wouldn't give them very much credibility at all. There were some units that  
10 were very good, especially as you went further north. But in the III Corps area they were  
11 not that good.

12          KC: Can you give me specific details or examples of what you have seen that  
13 would lead you to believe this?

14          RB: Well, in the town of Cu Chi, not Cu Chi, Duc Hoa. The town of Duc Hoa was  
15 a headquarters for South Vietnamese division. The VC were all over the place. They were  
16 in the town. They were on the outskirts. They basically operated freely. The South  
17 Vietnamese would send out a patrol and they wouldn't even make contact. They would  
18 come back in with nothing. We would send out an ambush team or a recon team in the  
19 same area and we'd be in the fight. Basically, they were search-and-avoid type of  
20 operations. They'd go out and not do anything. Maybe they might make contact every  
21 once and a while but it would be haphazard and usually they wound up shooting for a  
22 while and then getting the heck out of the area. I would think that most of the time that  
23 the Viet Cong knew they were coming. I think they were infiltrated. The whole  
24 organization was infiltrated with the VC enough that the Viet Cong wouldn't have to  
25 make contact.

26          KC: Okay. Did you have the chance to observe the ARVN during the Tet  
27 Offensive and if so what was your impression of them there?

28          RB: I did not see any of the ARVN at all. The only one I had was that Marine  
29 with the ARVN artillery group and that was the only group that I saw during the Tet  
30 Offensive.

1           KC: Okay. Well, what else? I mean, you have already described two very intense  
2 actions that you were involved in. What else were you involved in during this time in the  
3 Saigon area during the offensive?

4           RB: Well, at the airbase itself, Tan Son Nhut, on one side of the field the  
5 perimeter fence. I believe it was the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cav had sent some troops into an area  
6 and they had been ambushed and had to pull out. They left one American in the town  
7 there. So they asked me to go over and see whether or not he was still there, see if the  
8 body was still there. I went over and, sure enough, he was still there. I wasn't being shot  
9 at by anyone and I just got down as low as I could to look and he was still there and  
10 nobody was shooting at me. I made the report that he was still there, didn't seem to be  
11 any VC in the area but it was super place for an ambush because of the way the houses  
12 were in kind of an A formation type around where he was. You could be ambushed very  
13 easy if you went into that area. They told me, well, they'd have to think about it. They  
14 sent me off to another area where they thought some VC might be in a group of  
15 individuals that were kind of a church area, a synagogue, not a synagogue, but a Buddhist  
16 temple area. So I went over there and in the meantime I guess the cavalry decided they  
17 were going to go in and get this kid out. They went in and, sure enough, they were  
18 ambushed but at least they were prepared for it and they were successful on getting his  
19 body out and brining the rest of their troops out. I wish I would have been there in that  
20 fight. I would have liked to gotten involved in that one but I wasn't.

21           KC: What else do you care to discuss concerning your role in the Tet Offensive in  
22 that area?

23           RB: Well, as the VC began to pull out it was harder to find complete VC units.  
24 We set up operations going back to B-36 after things began to wind down there in  
25 Saigon. I told them I was going back to Bien Hoa because they really didn't need me  
26 anymore and so we took our airplanes back to Bien Hoa and our unit had now deployed  
27 and was going up to the town of Duc Hoa, I guess it was. Gosh, it's a long time ago. I  
28 believe it was Duc Hoa.

29           KC: Okay.

30           RB: We joined them at Duc Hoa and we were trying to find the VC as they were  
31 pulling out of Saigon. We would find small units but we never ran into a large group until

1 we got up near the Cambodian town of Ba To, which was in Parrot's Beak area of  
2 Cambodia, jutting down into South Vietnam. It kind of looked like a parrot's beak. On this  
3 there was a town, a Cambodian town called Ba To. We put in an ambush team along a  
4 canal and another one out in kind of a rise area. During the night the team that was down  
5 in that rise called up and told us that they were going to stay quiet and not do anything  
6 because they had hundreds of VC around them. They were a team of about fourteen  
7 people.

8 KC: Now, had B-36 been replenished with supplies and men? Had you been  
9 reinforced in this time?

10 RB: Right that's—during the Tet Offensive they got reinforced and we got some  
11 of our wounded who had been in the hospital back so we were fairly well up to near  
12 strength, anyway. We were probably twenty-five to twenty-eight Americans and most of  
13 the Cambodians were back that were our mainstay and we, of course, brought in some  
14 fillers who were new to the unit. But they were being trained. While I was up playing  
15 around during the Tet Offensive they were out having a good time in Long Hai. But  
16 anyway, this team that I was talking about that said they were just going to, they said play  
17 dog on account they didn't want to make any noise at all. We told them to go ahead and  
18 do that and we'd be in to get them the next morning. The other team we had out on the  
19 canal had the VC sneak up and turn their claymores around on them so we knew we were  
20 up against a pretty good unit there. That particular one was led by Sergeant Handywork.  
21 He was a very, very good man to have on the ground. The only thing he wanted to do  
22 then was get in a good fight with them. We kind of waited to see what was going to  
23 happen. Well, they set up a .50-caliber, a .51-caliber machinegun and were shooting at  
24 our helicopters pretty well. I went down and turned on my landing light and, of course,  
25 that .51-caliber gun started shooting at me. Well, I had two of our helicopter gunships  
26 behind me that had their lights out and when he opened up they were able to find him and  
27 they silenced that gun pretty quick.

28 KC: Tell me what that's like. You mentioned in our previous conversation that the  
29 .51 was something you certainly were concerned about.

30 RB: Yes, it was very deadly.

1 KC: So tell me what it was like to basically—you have your light on, you are a  
2 decoy for this.

3 RB: (Laughs).

4 KC: I'm sorry?

5 RB: I don't know why I did that. It just seemed like the thing to do at the time, I  
6 guess. I turned it on and it sure gave the VC something to shoot at. He opened up and, of  
7 course, I was maneuvering around and everything trying to avoid and then when our  
8 gunships started, opened up on him, well, that helped out quite a bit, you know. We were  
9 able to get them but I sure wouldn't turn my light on again after that. They got real close.

10 KC: Sure.

11 RB: Anyway, we called in some Spooky, a C-47 gunship, who happened to be in  
12 the area. He came over and I said, "My guys tell me there is VC moving all around over  
13 here." I can't see them, of course, being night time and I need some help. He dropped a  
14 set of flares. Well, the flares started off behind me and wound up in front of me which put  
15 me in the middle of the flare pattern. There may have been three or four VC but it turned  
16 out there were several hundred and they all started in shooting because they could see me  
17 and I was maneuvering to get away from it. I got out and I told him that we had a good  
18 area to fire. He said, "Well, that's Cambodia." I said, "We are receiving fire from it. We  
19 are allowed to shoot." He said, "That's right." So he started in shooting. Well, the VC  
20 started in shooting at the AC-47 which was very, very unusual.

21 KC: Now. what kind of—what were they firing at you and the AC-47?

22 RB: They were firing anywhere from .30-caliber machineguns on up to the .51-  
23 caliber machineguns, the VC were. Of course, in the Spooky aircraft he had I believe it  
24 was three mini-guns firing out the side. He said he was going to have to change altitude  
25 to get higher. He went up to his maximum altitude which pretty well knocked down any  
26 of the small arms except maybe the .51-caliber. He was firing from there. In the  
27 meantime I called up and got some F-100s in from Bien Hoa to fly into this area. The  
28 area was the town of Ba To and AC-47 gunship was going to provide flare support for the  
29 F-100s on their attacks. He dropped his flares and I told the lead what I wanted him to do  
30 and he would come in and drop a bomb and then I would adjust from that. He came in,  
31 made the dive bomb run, dropped the bomb, pulled off and hit his afterburner to get away

1 faster. It looked like the whole world followed him up with tracers, there were just  
2 hundreds of tracers following him. Of course, they were all shooting behind him on  
3 account of he was accelerating out. I told the number two airplane, which turned out to be  
4 this guys first night mission in Vietnam, I told him where I wanted his bomb to be so he  
5 started down and I looked over at his airplane and he had left his lights on.

6 KC: Uh-oh.

7 RB: Instead of the whole world following him after he left the whole world turned  
8 was shooting at him on his way down. About two-thirds of the way down his bomb run  
9 he lit his afterburner and, of course, that just drew more fire. He dropped the bomb, got  
10 away, and he came up and said, "Good god, Lead! Is it like this every time?" The lead  
11 airplane said, "Nah," and then he said, "Turn your lights off next time and it won't be as  
12 bad." So they came around and the lead told me, he said, "Smokey, this is going to be our  
13 last pass." He still had one bomb and two napalm onboard and he was going to drop them  
14 in sequence and I told him okay because it was a very intense fire. He came in and  
15 dropped his and the number two man came in and dropped his and they pulled off and  
16 headed back to Bien Hoa. We started getting secondary explosions, all sorts of them.  
17 Then the people at, I guess it was Tan Son Nhut, controllers anyway wouldn't let us put  
18 any more ordnance in over there for some reason. So we pulled off and Spooky headed  
19 back to Saigon. My guys on the ground told me that explosions went on for almost eight  
20 hours after we left.

21 KC: And what was the cause of the explosions?

22 RB: Pardon me?

23 KC: What was the cause of these explosions?

24 RB: Primarily ammunition and petrol, fuel going up. We had hit the remnants of  
25 the 9<sup>th</sup> Division who had pulled out of Saigon after Tet. They had stored a lot of ordnance  
26 and fuel and things like that in the town of Ba To

27 KC: Okay.

28 RB: We had several hundred VC killed that night. It was a pretty good little fight  
29 there for a while.

30 KC: Why don't we take a break for just a few minutes?

31 RB: Okay.

**Interview with Ronald Barnes**  
**Session [3] of [4]**  
**6 August 2008**

1           KC: This is Kelly Crager of the Vietnam Archive continuing an oral history  
2 interview with Mr. Ron Barnes. Today is 6 August 2008. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and  
3 Mr. Barnes is joining us again from his home in Edmond, Oklahoma. Mr. Barnes, when  
4 we left off last time you were discussing the post-Tet 1968 Offensive and the efforts to  
5 follow up trying to run down VC as they made their way out of the Saigon area and back  
6 to the Cambodian border and you discussed an action that you and your outfit took part  
7 in, in the Cambodian town of Ba To. This was in February of 1968, as I recall. Could you  
8 pick up the story from there?

9           RB: I am sure I can. After the battle was over we had several explosions that  
10 continued on for several hours. It became advised—we had two ambush teams out, one  
11 set up on a canal and another one set up on a little high area. We extract these two teams  
12 because of the amount of activity in their area. We finally were able to get these teams  
13 out and come back to our base camp, which was at Duc Hoa at that time, and regroup a  
14 little bit to determine our further actions in that area. We felt that the VC were using the  
15 canals, rivers, and areas like that to move supplies and men back into Cambodia for  
16 sanctuary to get regrouped so we started setting up ambushes along those types of areas.  
17 We actually probably set off twenty or thirty different ambushes during the period of time  
18 we were there, all of them fairly successful turning into, oh, I wouldn't say anything  
19 major in fights but we did have contact with VC units probably in the range of ten to  
20 thirty people, most of which we were able to take out; not all, of course, but quite a few  
21 and then extract our people. All during this period of time we kept seeing the build up  
22 along the Cambodian side of the house or the Cambodian border, inside Cambodia, of  
23 VC. We decided to have a fairly large almost a company-size insertion along the border  
24 to see what we might determine to be enemy build up there or whatever we could find so  
25 we put down about seventy people. They started to sweep through this one area. It turned  
26 out to be really not very fruitful from the standpoint of finding the VC, however we did  
27 discover a lot of material and destroyed it or brought it out. That area was highly—oh, I  
28 don't know if the word highly is a good idea—but it was quite full of VC and North

1 Vietnamese army movement. We could hear tanks engines at times but they were always  
2 on the Cambodian side of the border and I could never find the tanks. We were pulled out  
3 of that area and sent back to an area called Rang Rang where we did some operations in  
4 that area.

5 KC: What type of operations, (clears throat) excuse me, what type of operations  
6 were you involved in, in this area?

7 RB: Primarily there we were setting up ambush teams trying to find groups of VC  
8 or routes of—well, they were actually coming out of South Vietnam trying to regroup  
9 and we were just trying to find the routes where the VC were taking out and we would go  
10 in and interdict those routes. We did find quite a bit of VC activity in Rang Rang but no  
11 large units at that time. Then we had a few days off, about a week if I remember right, to  
12 regroup a little bit. Then they sent us back to Duc Hoa and out to a Special Forces camp  
13 called Duc Hue which was again very close to the Cambodian border in the Parrot's Beak  
14 area. We conducted operations out of this Special Forces camp for several days, less than  
15 two weeks. We did make contact with some VC units, one in particular where we  
16 encountered some fairly large .51-caliber machinegun fire and maybe one gun of higher  
17 caliber. We really never did get into a major confrontation with the VC there. I think they  
18 had learned our tactics quite a bit and stayed away from the areas we were operating in.  
19 After our time there at Duc Hue we were pulled back again to our base camp at Long Hai  
20 and told we were going to Song Be up in the, starting in the highlands area which was  
21 northwest of the Saigon area. Song Be is a very, very hotspot for NVA activity and VC.  
22 We went up and set up in the main street of town using the main street of town as a  
23 runway which had been designated as a runway by airlift people and sat off to the side of  
24 it there. We began to conduct operations in the Song Be area and were running into fairly  
25 large groups of Viet Cong, making strong contacts on almost all of our ambushes. It was  
26 decided that we would put down a full company, around 110 people, into an area and  
27 make a sweep there for several days. We inserted these people into the jungle there and  
28 got set up to go and were calling in artillery fire from friendly artillery stationed at Song  
29 Be. One of the 175-millimeter rounds landed short and it landed right in the middle of our  
30 company area killing several people and wounding several others. So that kind put a  
31 damper on our operation and we pulled back from that.

1           KC: Now let me ask you, were there any Americans killed in this or were they  
2 mostly Cambodian?

3           RB: Yes, there was two Americans killed and I think it was six Cambodians.  
4 Gosh, I don't remember. It was twenty some or more people wounded by the artillery  
5 shell.

6           KC: Did you—

7           RB: Because—

8           KC: I am sorry. Did you know any of these men who were killed or wounded?  
9 Were you close enough to know?

10          RB: One of them was a young captain, or a lieutenant, who had just been there a  
11 couple of weeks. I had met him, hadn't really established any type of rapport with him  
12 and the other one was a sergeant, a long-range reconnaissance patrol individual. I only  
13 knew him by passing. That would be about it. One thing, like every other unit over there  
14 in Vietnam, you didn't really get to know new people very well because they may not be  
15 around very long.

16          KC: Right.

17          RB: You only began to interact with ones who had been there for a while because  
18 they had learned what was going on. I kind of felt that if we could get a guy through the  
19 first four to six weeks of contact with the enemy he would stay with us for a while. Then  
20 there was a period along about six, seven months that it began to get a little bit careless  
21 and if he didn't get hurt in that period he normally made it all the way through. That is  
22 just my opinion of what happened. We really didn't get to know people until about, oh,  
23 three or four months into their tour. Even after I returned from over there I did not know  
24 the full names of several people. I knew their name or maybe their last name and I could  
25 see a picture of their face and everything but to really say that I knew them, no. That's  
26 kind of my answer to your question on did I know any of these people.

27          KC: Sure, sure that makes sense. That is certainly a very common theme among  
28 people over there.

29          RB: I think that was pretty common throughout all of the units in Vietnam.

30          KC: Sure.

1           RB: After we pulled out of our company type of operation we put in a small recon  
2 unit into an area there that we felt had strong VC presence. This reconnaissance unit was  
3 to go in and just take a look in the area and come back and make a report. They had been  
4 on the ground about twenty-four hours when they came upon a VC base camp which was  
5 inactive at the time. There wasn't anyone in there but they did find communications wire.  
6 This communications wire was laid very well along a small road that from the air you  
7 couldn't see it at all. The road was very well camouflaged with overhanging trees and  
8 things like this, but on the ground it was very usable. We brought them out and inserted a  
9 team to tap this communications wire. The team had some Special Forces people with it  
10 but also had some Defense Intelligence Agency people involved in this operation, also.  
11 We went in tap the wire and the team wasn't on the ground more than about five hours  
12 when the Viet Cong who, like all good soldiers, they walked the wire at different times to  
13 make sure it is still in good shape and three of these individuals were walking the wire  
14 and they came down and our group hid but evidently one of the individuals who wore  
15 glasses something came off of his glass or something anyway they saw him and, of  
16 course, opened fire. We had to return fire and this group became surrounded by the Viet  
17 Cong. It took several hours to get them into a position where they could move and we  
18 finally were able to get them to move to an area where they could hide. We couldn't pick  
19 them up right at that time but they could hide. We waited until the next morning to go in  
20 and pick them up and we were able to get everyone out except for the person who had  
21 been killed and we had to go back in and get him the next day.

22           KC: Now, how many people were in B-36 surrounded here and what was the size  
23 of the VC force after the fire had started?

24           RB: Well, we had six people total in that communications tapping group. I would  
25 imagine there was somewhere between fifty and a hundred VC within the area.

26           KC: Wow.

27           RB: I put in several airstrikes trying to break cover or make a break where they  
28 could move to cover and it was getting very, very hard to do. Along about evening I  
29 didn't have any more aircraft over there and, of course, it was getting darker. The VC  
30 seemed more intent on shooting me down than taking care of the guys on the ground. I  
31 don't know what got the change of attitude or anything else but anyway I was able to

1 make some runs like I was going to mark with a rocket. I would call, every time I started  
2 to make a dive I would call the guys on the ground and tell them I was getting ready to do  
3 that and get ready to move because the VC would start shooting at me and then they  
4 could make a move. I said they can't shoot at both of us at the same time, although fifty  
5 some people could. But the guys were able to break out that way and get to a place where  
6 they could hide.

7 KC: What made you want to do this? Why put yourself in that position?

8 RB: Well, they needed—if we didn't do something to get them where they were  
9 going to either be extracted or could hide they were going to be killed and so it just  
10 seemed like the thing to do.

11 KC: What were the VC shooting at you with?

12 RB: Primarily small arms, AK-47. I did not see any big caliber guns, a .51-caliber  
13 or anything like that so it was all .30-caliber type ammunition.

14 KC: Any hits? Were you hit at all?

15 RB: The airplane was hit several times but I wasn't hit on that, no.

16 KC: All right if you can here take me through what your thought process is. What  
17 are you thinking when you are making this effort to relieve pressure on this small group  
18 of individuals and you have fifty to a hundred VC shooting at you?

19 RB: I don't know if I had a thought process. (Laughs) That is a heck of a  
20 question. I never considered that. The guys on the ground were in trouble. There wasn't  
21 any doubt about that. A couple of times I had to tell the leader of the team just to slow  
22 down and take a deep breath and let's talk this thing out and see what we could get done.

23 KC: So you were in constant communication with the group?

24 RB: Yes. He was telling me where to put—where he needed the airstrikes and  
25 that's what I was doing. Then when the lull came between the aircraft coming in that's  
26 when the VC would make more of a move on him. Well, during those lulls that's when I  
27 found that they seemed to be more interested in shooting me down. That's when I came  
28 up with the idea of "Why don't I make some simulated runs and let them shoot at me  
29 while the guys moved and maybe they could break contact that way?" That was basically  
30 it.

31 KC: That certainly sounds like it worked, obviously.

1 RB: It did. I was real pleased, I hated to leave them that night after it got so dark  
2 out there but they said they were in a good hiding spot and evidently it was.

3 KC: Now, how were they extracted?

4 RB: The next morning we had our full complement of helicopters and gunships  
5 and troops and had some airpower up there with us and we were able to in and actually  
6 make contact with them and start putting in airpower around the area, not directly where  
7 these people were but in the area to kind of confuse the VC as to where they were. They  
8 began to move through the jungle toward a landing zone that we had picked and we were  
9 able to pick them up there.

10 KC: Were you able to meet these individuals once you got back to camp?

11 RB: Yes, uh-huh.

12 KC: What was their reaction to you? What you had done?

13 RB: One of them kissed me. (Laughs)

14 KC: Is that right?

15 RB: It was a pretty joyful reunion. I will attest for the fact that we left Doc Parker  
16 out there and we had to go back and get him the next day.

17 KC: Now, were these all Americans in this team of communications?

18 RB: We had two Cambodes in there and the rest were Americans. The one that  
19 got shot was a guy by the name of Parker. He was one of our medics. In fact, he was the  
20 one that bandaged me up a month or so earlier.

21 KC: You had mentioned him earlier. That's right. That's right.

22 RB: Yeah. He was a real nice guy but something happened and they were able to  
23 see him and, of course, that was his downfall.

24 KC: Well, it's something I think that you would have been very, very proud of.

25 RB: Well, I was proud of that. I think I saved those guys' lives. I know the ones  
26 that I've met since then all tell me the same thing. That wasn't really—the thought was  
27 getting them out. I did want to save them, yes.

28 KC: Sure. Where do you go after this episode?

29 RB: It was just one of those deals you had to do so you did it. But Song Be was a  
30 very bad place. The North Vietnamese, I think it was the 5<sup>th</sup> Division along with elements  
31 of the 271<sup>st</sup> and the 273<sup>rd</sup> if I remember right, VC regiments were in that area and

1 probably some others, too. They pretty well controlled that whole area up there. There  
2 was an ARVN Ranger detachment battalion at Song Be itself. I didn't think they were  
3 very good but they—evidently I have read some things since then that they had made  
4 contact and did some pretty good work. One of the things that I do know is that, again, I  
5 mentioned earlier about ethnic hate, they did not like our Cambodians. When we set up  
6 there was a lot of tension in the area between the Vietnamese Rangers and our  
7 Cambodian soldiers we had.

8 KC: Sure.

9 RB: They had a soccer field where we went over and practiced some of our  
10 maneuvers and quick reaction drills and on the way back from that soccer field the  
11 Rangers ambushed our Cambodes. It wasn't a very good ambush and they came out on  
12 the wrong end of it, the Vietnamese did. I think we wound up killing something like  
13 twenty of them.

14 KC: ARVN Rangers ambushed the Cambodians in B-36?

15 RB: Yes.

16 KC: Why in the world did this happen?

17 RB: Well, they didn't like the Cambodes, for one thing, and the Cambodes that  
18 we had, of course, were mercenaries and they were paid more money than the  
19 Vietnamese. That meant that any of the young ladies in town who did things for money  
20 would go to where the money was and that upset the Vietnamese. Not only that but the  
21 fact that they were Cambodians up there to begin with. For some reason they decided to  
22 ambush our group coming back from training. We had a little fight there for, oh, it must  
23 have been thirty minutes or so.

24 KC: Now, were Americans involved in this as well?

25 RB: Yes they were. One of the Americans, a company commander—I am going  
26 to say O'Brien was his name but I don't really know if that is it or not—was holding his  
27 rifle and one of the bullets from the ARVN Rangers smashed in the very tip of his rifle  
28 when it hit the rifle and smashed the tip so he couldn't use it. We had in the camp itself  
29 they started lobbing M-79 grenades into the camp and we had a few people wounded  
30 there. We had no one killed in our side of the house but had five or six wounded from  
31 that encounter.

1 KC: Where did the orders, if you know, where did the orders for the ARVN to set  
2 up this ambush for your outfit, where did they come from?

3 RB: I have no idea. I would not even venture to guess whether or not they even  
4 had orders to do it or whether or not just a group of them broke off and decided to do it. I  
5 have no idea. I do know after it was over with we didn't have anymore problems with  
6 them.

7 KC: What was your role in all of this?

8 RB: What was I doing?

9 KC: Yes.

10 RB: I was down on the ground hiding (both laugh), trying to find me a hole to get  
11 into.

12 KC: Now, you knew the whole time that this was an ARVN Ranger outfit  
13 ambushing you.

14 RB: Yeah.

15 KC: Ostensibly, you were to believe that the ARVN was on your side.

16 RB: Well, that's the—

17 KC: What do you think about this?

18 RB: What I was always taught and that's what I believed. I was very much  
19 surprised but I also had by that time found out there wasn't any love for our Cambodians  
20 anywhere we went. They put up with us at Tay Ninh. At Duc Hoa they didn't really like  
21 us being there, that was an ARVN division headquarters area. They didn't like us at that  
22 area. they didn't like us at Rang Rang too much and it was just because of the fact that  
23 they were Cambodian.

24 KC: What did this due to your—I noticed that you mentioned that you weren't  
25 crazy about the ARVN Rangers and although many people, many veterans who had  
26 contact with them said that they were usually very, very good. I can see why this would  
27 certainly color your judgment here.

28 RB: Well, that was the only encounter I had with the ARVN Rangers up there.  
29 Like I say, I have read in a couple of reports, books that that unit did go out and make  
30 contact with the VC every once and a while. The area was completely controlled by the

1 NVA and the VC, which meant that the detachment up there, the Rangers, weren't out  
2 very often doing very much. So I didn't have much respect for them.

3 KC: Were there any repercussions from then this other than, obviously, from the  
4 dead Rangers?

5 RB: No, not really at all. There wasn't anything. They came down from Saigon or  
6 2 Field Force Victor or any of those places talking about what had happened.

7 KC: Now, your allies can attack your unit for whatever reason at this time and  
8 you see no punishment, no discipline, no repercussions from this. What is going on in the  
9 mind of you and the other Americans, if you could say?

10 RB: Our mind is we kicked some butt and nobody wanted to admit it. (Chuckling)

11 KC: Huh. Wow. That's incredible. So do you think it was political in nature?

12 RB: I think it was all due to the fact they just hated the Cambodians.

13 KC: Okay.

14 RB: I think that was completely it and I think that was probably recognized  
15 wherever the hierarchy were that reviewed what went on. It was over with and gone.

16 KC: Wow, that's incredible. Incredible.

17 RB: Going back to the time of the events and everything, we stayed up at Son Be  
18 for about four weeks, I guess it was, and then we withdrew from there back to our camp  
19 at Long Hai to regroup. Then they had started changing commanders in B-36, this was  
20 actually started at Duc Hoa. We ran through a series of Special Forces commanders after  
21 Bo Gritz was gone. He left while we were at Duc Hoa. We had a man by the name of  
22 Walker, a major, and he—I have got to go back a little bit here.

23 KC: Please.

24 RB: Our unit was extremely good in the field. We were a very, very effective  
25 fighting force. If we had a little bit of time to play we played fairly hard and maybe get in  
26 a little bit of trouble.

27 KC: Okay, explain that too me in a more detail. When you say you played hard,  
28 what were you guys doing?

29 RB: One night after our big fight that we had up there in Tay Ninh everybody was  
30 sitting around very nervous still after the fight. The commander at the time Jim Gritz, Bo  
31 Gritz, said we need a little R&R so we packed up the helicopters and we flew to Bien

1 Hoa to the Special Forces compound there. They had a Vietnamese officers club in that  
2 compound area. We didn't know it but that night they had a big formal party at the  
3 officers club and General Ky had been in attendance and everything. By the time we got  
4 there it was fairly late and things were beginning to wind down at the officers club for  
5 that party. But we went down there to get something to eat and something to drink. They  
6 told us there wasn't any room for us, that they wouldn't let us in. That didn't sit too well  
7 so some of our guys began to clear the place out.

8 KC: Are you talking about the Cambodians or the—

9 RB: Well, no, these were—now, this group that went down there were all  
10 American.

11 KC: Okay.

12 RB: A few fights broke out and then somebody through some CS gas inside and,  
13 of course, that cleaned out the place or helped clean it out and we were able to get  
14 something to eat. By that time a company of MPs had arrived and invited us to leave. We  
15 had a little confrontation there, not too, too bad but a little bit. One of our guys got ran  
16 over by a jeep, an MP jeep and broke his leg. Anyway, it was a standoff. We told them  
17 we would leave and go back up to the Special Forces compound and that worked out to  
18 be satisfactory. We went up there and slept off whatever had happened and then we were  
19 kicked out. The commander, Colonel Hayes, told Gritz that no one in B-36 was allowed  
20 back at Bien Hoa unless they were there on official duty and had to be in class A  
21 uniform. We left there and went down to Vung Tau to the Grand Hotel down there and  
22 had various means of getting into the hotel. One of them was repelling through the roof,  
23 one was landing a helicopter very close by and jumping out. It was just kind of an  
24 interesting time. Anyway, we were rounded up by some more MPs down there and told  
25 that we needed to leave, which we did and went back to Tay Ninh and that was our little  
26 rest period.

27 KC: Now, let me ask this question here, if you don't mind. Now you are dealing  
28 with young men, largely, in the Special Forces but by the standards of Vietnam you are  
29 not a young man at this time. Shouldn't you know better?

30 RB: Oh, yeah. I knew better. But it was a heck of a lot of fun. I didn't do all of the  
31 stuff. I kind of stood by and watched a little bit. We were, you know, told that—let's see,

1 one of the commanders, I think it was Colonel Hayes again, told Major Gritz he said,  
2 “Why can’t your guys be good soldiers as they are good fighters in the field?” He said,  
3 “You’d have the most fabulous unit in Vietnam.” Gritz told him, he said, “That wasn’t  
4 what they were there for. They were there to fight.” It’s kind of flipping the answer but  
5 that was kind of the mood. Anyway, we got in trouble a few times. We came back to our  
6 camp there at Long Hai and regrouped. We were going through these different  
7 commanders. Walker was one that was being controlled by Colonel Hayes who was, I  
8 guess they called him a C-team commander. Anyway, he was the commander of the  
9 Special Forces there in III Corps. He was the one that was calling the shots from Bien  
10 Hoa telling us what to do. Well, Walker wasn’t an extremely efficient or very good leader  
11 and he was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Baldwin. Baldwin was a Korean War vet and  
12 Special Forces type. He had a good ego personality, wasn’t exactly dynamic when it  
13 came to the field. He could lead pretty well but wasn’t anywhere near the caliber that  
14 Major Gritz was, Jim Gritz He stayed with us for a while, stayed with us up through Song  
15 Be. Then we went back to Long Hai. He left down there and we were—let’s see, we  
16 received a guy by the name of Lawler, Major Lawler and then Lundy. They both came at  
17 the same time from Nha Trang who had been in charge of recon school at Nha Trang.  
18 They began to integrate some of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mobile Strike Force, Mike Force unit, into our B-  
19 36 and change the mission a little bit. So the next time that we went out, which we went  
20 back to Duc Hoa, we were doing more standard Army unit type of operations, going out  
21 with larger numbers and going out maybe for a couple of days and sweeping an area  
22 rather than ambush and reconnaissance. It completely changed the picture on B-36.

23 KC: Well, let me ask you a couple of questions here, Mr. Barnes. One is what do  
24 you think about these rapid changes in the leadership from Gritz? Why was Gritz  
25 replaced?

26 RB: He had been over there I think at that time for two or three years.

27 KC: Okay.

28 RB: He was being replaced to go up to a higher echelon and into a different type  
29 of operations. He was at that time being groomed a little bit for a higher command and  
30 that’s why he was replaced.

1 KC: Okay. What is the effect on you and others in B-36 when you have this  
2 dynamic leader like Gritz that you obviously looked up to and trusted and you have a  
3 succession of individuals who were, well, who weren't Bo Gritz?

4 RB: It was kind of depressing. I think our effectiveness began to deteriorate. I  
5 know that on a couple of occasions I had to get the guys together and just say, "Hey, the  
6 things we are doing right now we are going to get somebody killed on account"—well,  
7 for instance there would be too many guys talking on the radio. You couldn't make heads  
8 or tails out of what was going on and there would be too many guys on that radio and so  
9 we had to get that out. One time one of the team commanders on the ground put a  
10 helicopter between his kill zone and the VC to extract some wounded. We are lucky we  
11 didn't lose the whole helicopter and crew there. They were just getting careless. So we  
12 sat down a couple three different occasions and talked about that ourself, the ones of us  
13 who had been there for a while.

14 KC: Now, was this something that you did in secret, something that you kept from  
15 Walker or Baldwin?

16 RB: Oh, I don't know if we did it specifically to stay away from them. We just sat  
17 around in different groups, maybe in the tent where we lived and talked about it, you  
18 know, or something like that. After one operation I was pretty much upset with the  
19 ground commander and one of the individuals on the radio. We went into the operations  
20 tent along with the helicopter commander and talked about what went wrong on that  
21 particular one. I just told them, I said, "If you keep this up we are going to get somebody  
22 killed." They all were in agreement. They knew we hadn't done it right. To give you an  
23 example on Walker, and I hate to put this out on any individual, but he was the  
24 commander of the unit and we were up there at Duc Hoa and I told you we had the two  
25 ambush teams out and had pretty good contact with the enemy and he kept asking me,  
26 "What should we do? What should we do?" Well, that isn't the way a commander is  
27 supposed to act. If I am going to be the commander I will make the decision but I am not  
28 going to sit there and keep asking somebody else, especially over the radio, what to do.

29 KC: How long had he been in-country at this time?

30 RB: He just couldn't make a decision.

31 KC: How long had he been in-country?

1           RB: He had been in Laos for a year and then he had been in South Vietnam for  
2 about nine months when he was assigned. You have got to remember, too, he was  
3 assigned by this Major Hayes or Colonel Hayes after the incident at, I guess it was at Duc  
4 Hoa where he had this little incident with Colonel Hayes. He reported to Hayes every day  
5 and Hayes told him what he wanted him to do. After our little incident with Hayes at Duc  
6 Hoa he made the statement that he was going to get us all killed. Well, we were very  
7 leery of what was going on. I could say we were a good unit in the field sometimes and at  
8 base camp we were not really that good.

9           KC: Sure, it certainly sounds like that. Well, my next question to you is this, you  
10 mentioned that you are brining in elements of was it the 3<sup>rd</sup>?

11          RB: 3<sup>rd</sup> Mobile Strike Force.

12          KC: 3<sup>rd</sup> Mike Force is being integrated into your unit. You say it is changing. It's  
13 becoming a little more conventional.

14          RB: Yes.

15          KC: You obviously sound disappointed with this. Can you explain to me why?

16          RB: I think that was a real mistake by the Army at that time. The unit was still  
17 very effective and with the correct leadership could have performed more effectively and  
18 also provided intelligence, which I think they sorely needed. Prior to this happening and  
19 several months before, General Westmoreland who—going back to Bo Gritz. Bo Gritz  
20 was a personal friend of Westmoreland's and Westmoreland had mentioned in a press  
21 conference that there was only two units in all of South Vietnam that was giving him  
22 reliable intelligence information; one was Delta project and one was B-36. We were well  
23 known up at the highest levels in South Vietnam. I think this integration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mobile  
24 Strike Force and the change in operations that we had completely changed our  
25 effectiveness and ability to get information.

26          KC: Why do you think this change came about, do you care to offer?

27          RB: You know, I really don't know. I have thought about that several times over  
28 the years. The only thing I can think is that the Army hierarchy did not really care for  
29 Special Forces operations and they were trying more and more all the time to get the  
30 Special Forces to be more like conventional units. When they moved elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup>  
31 Mobile Strike Force in we became more and more conventional. My last time with B-36

1 we had redeployed up to Tay Ninh again and we had some of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mobile Strike Force  
2 people with us there which had Vietnamese and some Chinese along with other  
3 Cambodians. We went into an area up there in the Elephant's Ear with a—oh, let's see. I  
4 think we had fifty-some people on the ground and we got into a very, very big fight. It  
5 was pretty obvious that there were several hundred VC in the area and we had a good  
6 fight. I was lucky that particular night that AC-130 Specter gunship was made available  
7 to South Vietnam. Normally those Specters operated in Laos, North Vietnam and  
8 Cambodia, not Cambodia, but the northern tiers of South Vietnam. But this particular one  
9 happened to be down flying near Saigon so they brought him over to help us out. I never  
10 had a AC-130 gunship before and it was a real eye opener. That particular machine just  
11 tore the enemy up. In fact, when daylight came the ground commanders found over fifty  
12 dead within ten feet of their perimeter.

13 KC: Wow.

14 RB: It was really something, man. I was up there and the gunship came over and  
15 he identified me and I told them where the troops on the ground was and then all of a  
16 sudden he turned on a big spotlight. I had never seen this and I said, "Oh, they are going  
17 to shoot you," you know, "That's going to draw a lot of fire." He said, "Don't worry." He  
18 moved the spotlight around and he said, "Is that about where it is?" The ground  
19 commander and I both confirmed it. All of a sudden the light went out and I said, "They  
20 shot your light out." He said, "No, I turned it off." I said, "Well, okay." He told me to get  
21 back out of the way and I did and all of a sudden the whole sky seemed to erupt with  
22 gunfire from his airplane and it went all over the place. My guys on the ground were just  
23 hooping and hollering. They thought that was the greatest thing they had ever seen. They  
24 asked him to bring it in another ten feet and he did. It was just an amazing display of  
25 firepower and that's when they got all of them close and, of course, that broke the back of  
26 the VC and they pulled out. Our guys didn't have any more problems. In fact, the whole  
27 time that they were on the ground there the next two days. It was just amazing.

28 KC: The AC-130, like you say, the Specter was a very complex system, a very  
29 effective system, for sure, with all the firepower that they could bring to bear. Now, the  
30 way the Specter approached this, I assume, was circling the AO, circling to the left,  
31 circling to the left, and pouring this constant fire in. Is that correct?

1 RB: Basically that's right, yes. He had a, so I have found out since then, an  
2 infrared sensors on there and their computers onboard. I guess they could see basically  
3 everything that you could possibly look at on the ground. They were able to concentrate  
4 their fire very, very effectively. The airplane just seemed to do nothing but put out a  
5 bunch of strings of tracers down on the ground. It was very, very effective.

6 KC: Let me ask you this question. You discussed the racial or ethnic, I should say,  
7 problems, hatred between Vietnamese and Cambodian, etc., that we know obviously is  
8 there. With the integration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mike Force into B-36 you have Cambodians but you  
9 also have Vietnamese, like you said, you have some ethnic Chinese who were involved  
10 here. What did this do to the make-up? Did you see any problems resulting from this?

11 RB: Well, basically our unit who—our Cambodians who were basic B-36 pretty  
12 well took over command of these Vietnamese and Chinese that were in 3<sup>rd</sup> Mobile. All of  
13 these groups, Cambodians and the Vietnamese and the Chinese, were controlled by our  
14 NCOs (noncommissioned officers). We had excellent NCOs. We pretty well were able to  
15 keep you on—there would be some individual fights. Some people would get hurt every  
16 once and a while but all in all we were able to keep control of them pretty well. I don't  
17 know if I told you about the tree with the solider and Buddha where we had problems  
18 with one time.

19 KC: No. Please tell me about that.

20 RB: Well, I was trying to think of what the area was we were in. I really can't  
21 remember the place we were in, but anyway we were on a fairly large group on the  
22 ground about fifty, sixty people predominately Cambodian with about six Americans.  
23 They had been going across the area in a reconnaissance-type formation and it came time  
24 to eat so they all set up a perimeter and sat down to eat. This one Cambodian went over  
25 and sat down underneath a tree and the wind came up a little bit. When the wind came up  
26 it broke a branch off of the tree. The branch came down and hit him in the head, hit him  
27 in the chest, collapsed a lung, and he died. All of the Cambodes knew that that was  
28 Buddha, that this guy had done something bad against Buddha and Buddha had made  
29 himself into a tree and when the guy sat down there he broke his branch off and came  
30 down and killed him and they wouldn't touch him. They were getting ready to leave on  
31 account of these bad spirits in the whole area. Our guys had to pick this guy up and carry

1 him about three kilometers to a landing zone where we could get a helicopter in to take  
2 his body out. That's some of the thinking that went along with these Cambodian soldiers.

3 KC: That must have seemed rather odd, to say the least, to someone like yourself.  
4 What is your general opinion of this mindset, the way they approached things and the  
5 way they understood the world, the way they acted?

6 RB: It is unusual. The Cambodians always had a gold chain with a Buddha on it  
7 and when they would go into—it was not right to fight but they would take that Buddha  
8 and stick the Buddha in their mouth and that way Buddha couldn't see what was going on  
9 and then it was okay to fight. That's the way a lot of them going into the battle was with  
10 the Buddha in their mouth. It was just a different type of thinking and a way of acting but  
11 Buddha was there and everything and he controlled everything. As long as they kept  
12 Buddha happy they were okay.

13 KC: Well, you mentioned that you had limited time today so why don't we end  
14 this session here?

15 RB: Okay.

16 KC: We will pick up another time.

17 RB: I think we are getting pretty close to the end.

**Interview with Ronald Barnes**  
**Session [4] of [4]**  
**7 August 2008**

1           KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Ron  
2 Barnes. Today is 7 August 2008. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Barnes is joining us  
3 from Edmond, Oklahoma. Mr. Barnes, prior to our conversation this morning you  
4 mentioned that there were a few other issues dealing with the attack of the Rangers that  
5 you experienced at Song Be and a couple of other things you wanted to discuss before we  
6 get you out of Vietnam. So why don't we go ahead and pick up with the incident at Song  
7 Be where your unit, where B-36 was ambushed by a group of ARVN Rangers.

8           RB: Okay, we can do that. The ambush wasn't very well executed and it was, of  
9 course, met with our response from our unit. We knew who was conducting the ambush,  
10 the ARNV, so one of our company commanders, Captain O'Brien, stood up during the  
11 fight and showed that he was an American and that they were attacking Americans.  
12 Along about the same time I had made it over to our communications area where I had a  
13 jeep with three different radios, a VHF and UHF and an FM radio, and made contact with  
14 two F-100 fighter-bombers that were in the area and asked them to come over and make  
15 some low passes just to show the support. The leader was somewhat reluctant. He said he  
16 would come over and fly over but he wasn't going to come down very low. He did this  
17 and made about three passes. I had him go in and out of afterburner to draw attention and  
18 that was one of the things that I think helped stop this ambush.

19           KC: Now, were they reluctant, the F-100s, were they reluctant to come in because  
20 they would be showing this force to ostensibly who were the allies, the ARVN Rangers?

21           RB: No, they would be showing the force from our side of the house of B-36  
22 because everybody knew that we had a rapid response from the Air Force in support of  
23 our unit. The airpower could be put to use where ever we needed it. I think that may have  
24 had a little bit of influence on the little fight that went on there.

25           KC: Okay.

26           RB: The other thing they found out right away is that we were well armed and  
27 well trained. We had M-16s and M-60 machineguns along with M-79 grenade launchers.  
28 They, of course, were still armed with the M-1 and M-2 carbine rifles and they were

1 really out-gunned in that regard. The other thing that may have had quite a bit of  
2 influence was the fact that after the ambush was initiated the initial tac response from our  
3 unit killed quite a few of the Rangers. I think they were more than willing to kind of give  
4 up the fight. That's about all I can remember of how the fight ended. Now, what  
5 happened afterwards? I don't know. I do believe that Captain O'Brien talked with ARVN  
6 Ranger advisors who would have been Americans who had no idea that the ambush was  
7 being set up. The commander of our unit at the time, Lieutenant Colonel Baldwin, I am  
8 sure met with the Ranger advisors and possibly the Vietnamese commander and the  
9 providence chief about the incident but there was nothing further that went on as far as I  
10 know.

11 KC: Okay. Now, there was also something you mentioned, (clears throat) excuse  
12 me, about your plane being shot up. It seems that it was taken to Bien Hoa to be fixed.  
13 Could you explain what happened there to me?

14 RB: That was going back several months to about April. In the Duc Hoa area, if I  
15 remember correctly, the airplane had had some bullet holes in it from several different  
16 engagements we had and it was getting down to a point I just couldn't tape all of them up  
17 to stop everything. I needed to take it back and get it repaired. I was going to take it back  
18 on the next day and that night we received a mortar attack in our position and one of the  
19 mortar rounds landed somewhat close to the airplane and put several holes in the machine  
20 itself. When we looked at it the next day I decided it wasn't something I wanted to really  
21 fly. One of the pieces of the tail section had several holes in it and I didn't think it would  
22 work real well on the flight from Duc Hoa to Bien Hoa. We called for airlift to pick the  
23 airplane up and take it back. A Chinook helicopter came over and they hooked it up and  
24 took it back to Bien Hoa. About three days later or so I received a message from Bien  
25 Hoa that the airplane had been repaired and that I could pick it up. I had a loaner that I  
26 had received from the people at Bien Hoa, so I got in the airplane and flew it back to Bien  
27 Hoa and turned it in and went over to pick my airplane. I started going through the forms  
28 that they had telling me what all had been done and whether or not the airplane was fit to  
29 fly. I opened the cover up and—or opened the cover and there was a piece of paper with a  
30 set of car keys attached to it and on the piece of paper the maintenance people had to  
31 said, "To the driver of 786," Those were the last three numbers in my tail identification

1 number, “After 226 bullet holes in the airplane we think you own it,” and that’s what the  
2 car keys were for. I thought that was pretty funny and I kept the paper for several weeks  
3 but somewhere over there I lost it. I don’t have any idea where it went. It was good  
4 humor, it was a good break.

5 KC: So 220—you had been hit by, I guess, small arms fire is what they are talking  
6 about there. Two-hundred and twenty six times. Did you have any idea you had been hit  
7 that often?

8 RB: Oh, no, not really. I knew it had quite a few. I think some of those holes, of  
9 course, probably came from the mortar attack but I knew I had several holes in there.  
10 Now, those holes really had been accumulating for months. I had taken it back on two or  
11 three different occasions and had some of the bullet holes repaired. I think this was just a  
12 total over the months, the 226 holes. They weren’t all at one time.

13 KC: Uh-huh, of course, yes, absolutely.

14 RB: The airplane was pretty good. Unless you hit the engine or knocked out a  
15 control service or actually hit the pilot, it was going to stay flying with you. It was pretty  
16 good in that regard, but the other thing was it was so doggone slow and vulnerable that  
17 you couldn’t get out of the way.

18 KC: Now, you are talking about the O-1 birddog, is that correct?

19 RB: Uh-huh.

20 KC: Now, we are getting close to your time in Vietnam being at an end. Is there  
21 anything else you wanted to discuss about your experiences while you were still in  
22 Vietnam before we move on?

23 RB: Well, there was one which I have a little bit of pride in. Again, this was in the  
24 Duc Hoa area and our unit was going through, I think I mentioned our succession of  
25 commanders. Major Walker had just been replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Baldwin and  
26 we had been in operation for about a week, ten days, with him. I can kind of had a rapport  
27 with Colonel Baldwin and we had been on several small fights together. We got into a  
28 very large engagement just around what was a sugar mill that had been on the river. I  
29 can’t think of the name of it or even the name of the river right now. But we had run into  
30 a fairly good sized VC force and we were in a pretty good fight. I was in my airplane  
31 [putting in airstrikes] and things along those lines and Colonel Baldwin was in a

1 command-and-control helicopter. Well, during the fight the helicopter had to go back for  
2 gas and when it came time for them to leave the scene I was still there and Colonel  
3 Baldwin called up to the ground commanders and to everybody else who was on the  
4 frequency and said that they were leaving the area at the present time and that Smokey  
5 was in command over the whole battlefield. I kind of took that as a real honor to have  
6 that done since I was an Air Force officer and put in command of an infantry combat  
7 company that was in contact with the enemy. I thought that was a pretty high honor.

8 KC: I think that really is. Why do you think he chose to do this? Why you?

9 RB: Well, I think he had a lot of confidence in me. Really and truly, airborne and  
10 looking at the battlefield, you can see things that you can't see from the ground and so  
11 you really get a bigger picture. As long as you are capable of staying within the area you  
12 can direct things quite a bit better than just from a guy right on the ground who has very  
13 limited vision and maybe can't see the enemy trying to flank or something like that.

14 KC: Sure.

15 RB: I thought it was a pretty good honor.

16 KC: Tell me, how did this particular engagement go while you were in charge of  
17 the outfit?

18 RB: Well, we prevailed all through the day and finally the Viet Cong broke  
19 contact along about evening and we went into a defensive perimeter for the night. The  
20 next morning when daylight came we were basically left alone. They had pulled out of  
21 the area, we prevailed and they had taken most of their dead and wounded with them. We  
22 did find a few VC that they didn't get and we also picked up several arms that they  
23 weren't able to take away from the battlefield. All in all, I think it went quite well.

24 KC: How long were you in charge of this? Was it the final day there?

25 RB: It was the final afternoon up until about dark, probably, oh, I would say six  
26 hours, maybe not that long.

27 KC: Okay. What were you doing during those six hours?

28 RB: Well, I was basically contacting the guys on the ground and still putting in  
29 airpower, telling them which way I was bringing the airpower in from and what we were  
30 going to try and do and getting their inputs. On one occasion we used some of the  
31 airpower, Air Force and the helicopters to kind of lead a counterattack against the enemy

1 on the canal side, or the river side, which pushed the enemy back a ways and that was  
2 about all we did.

3 KC: All right. When do you receive your orders to leave Vietnam?

4 RB: Oh, we were at Tay Ninh. I knew I was coming up on my departure date and  
5 about two weeks prior to that I had gone back to find out what all I had to do and they  
6 said basically just clear the base it only takes a few hours and then you would be sent to  
7 either—you would either pick up an airplane from Bien Hoa or from Saigon and they  
8 would, the depot people would more or less take care of you from there. I went back up  
9 to Tay Ninh and I was getting ready to leave and we had a new forward air controller in  
10 and I was trying to get him up to speed and that's when we got in that big fight with the  
11 Specter gunship at night time. We finished up that and the next day I got on a helicopter  
12 about evening and flew back to Bien Hoa and went in to the 19<sup>th</sup> TASS, Tactical Air  
13 Support Squadron, and started my out-processing. Of course, come evening time people  
14 were shutting down so the next day I finished the out-processing and they put me on a  
15 bus to Saigon, Tan Son Nhut, and a day later I was on an airplane. Now, my orders out of  
16 Vietnam were to Japan and I was being assigned to 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force headquarters. I had to  
17 check in at Japan before I could return to the States. That was just the way things were  
18 done at that time.

19 KC: So this was just a very temporary duty there in Japan, then.

20 RB: No, it was permanent.

21 KC: Oh, really? Okay.

22 RB: A three-year assignment.

23 KC: It was a three-year assignment in Japan.

24 RB: Yes.

25 KC: Wow.

26 RB: So I got to Japan and I asked to come back to the States to pick up my family.  
27 Money was tight and they wouldn't let me do it. They told me the only way I could do it  
28 was to take leave, so I took leave and hitchhiked a ride back to the United States and  
29 made it home to pick up my family who were at Bartlesville, Oklahoma. I spent about ten  
30 days there prior to going back to Japan making sure that we had all the travel  
31 arrangements set up. My wife and boys, I had three boys, all had reserved seat flights to

1 Yokota, Japan, and I had to hitchhike back on American Air Force vessels going to and  
2 from. I actually got there one day after they did. They were picked up by my sponsor and  
3 taken to the quarters, set up and I got there the next morning. That's the way I got to  
4 Japan after Vietnam. On the way to Oklahoma when I was hitchhiking from Japan I got  
5 to Hawaii and I bought an airplane ticket to Tulsa, Oklahoma. We flew into Los Angeles  
6 on, oh, I don't even know what airline it was. Anyway, it was very, very early in the  
7 morning when I arrived in Los Angeles and I was going up the ramp area to the lobby of  
8 the airport and I had three teenagers walk by me and, of course, I was in uniform and they  
9 started spitting on me. I didn't really care for that too much so I got in a little fight.  
10 Finally the fight broke up and I went upstairs and I thought the police would have been  
11 called so I got a haircut. That was the only thing that was open at that in the morning was  
12 a barber shop, so I sat down and got a haircut. I didn't need a haircut anymore than I  
13 needed to fly to the moon but I was just waiting for the police to come by but they didn't.  
14 I got on the airplane and went to Bartlesville. It wasn't a very good reception that I  
15 received.

16 KC: It certainly doesn't sound like it. What's going through your mind after  
17 coming back, obviously, from this dangerous mission or this dangerous time as an FAC  
18 in Vietnam and you have these young Americans who clearly don't know, don't have the  
19 perspective that you have, what are you feeling about this? What are you thinking when  
20 this happens?

21 RB: I was quite upset. I did not realize or know the anti-war sentiment that was  
22 going on back in the States at that time, especially I guess in the California area there was  
23 a lot of it. I didn't understand what was going through these kids' mind. Now, these were  
24 probably seventeen-, eighteen-year-old kids, I had to assume, they were pretty good  
25 sized. I just didn't have any idea why somebody would start spitting on you, you know. I  
26 was kind of upset about it. In fact, I was real upset about it.

27 KC: I can imagine.

28 RB: I maybe overreacted. I don't know. But one of them got hurt a little bit and  
29 the other one wasn't feeling too good and the third one decided he didn't want to do  
30 anything. That was about it.

1           KC: Did this give you kind of a preview of what was to come in terms of the anti-  
2 war activism and the way veterans were received, were treated upon coming home?

3           RB: Well, I—

4           KC: Or is this an isolated event? It was just the one time for you?

5           RB: Yeah, it was a one-time deal for me because after I got the haircut I wandered  
6 around the terminal and nobody else did anything and then I boarded the airplane to  
7 Tulsa and got off the airplane at Tulsa. I was looking for a ride to Bartlesville. They  
8 didn't have air connection to Bartlesville. I walked in the terminal area and one of the  
9 young lieutenants who had been in our Special Forces unit several months earlier had  
10 walked through the door and he saw me and I saw him and we both went to each other  
11 and gave each other a hug and he asked me what I was doing there and I told him I was  
12 trying to get to Bartlesville. He said, "Well, don't you worry. I will drive you." So he got  
13 in his car and drove me to Bartlesville which was about sixty miles down the road. It was  
14 just a fortunate meeting between Paul Brunton, who was a lieutenant in our unit, and  
15 myself there at Tulsa. But I didn't have anymore problems at all with the anti-war  
16 sentiment or feelings or anything like that. Of course, the time that we had, two weeks,  
17 went by very fast with family and friends and things like that.

18           KC: You go back to Japan, and this is still in 1968 correct?

19           RB: That's correct, uh-huh.

20           KC: You go back to Japan. What is your duty there? What are you doing in Japan  
21 for the next three years?

22           RB: I was assigned as a 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force emergency actions officer, basically sitting  
23 in a control room and receiving messages and sending them to different units throughout  
24 the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force command. Of course, we were at the control and beckoning call of the  
25 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force commander. It was not a real, real dull job but it wasn't a real, real active  
26 job, either; primarily just command post duties.

27           KC: Tell me about this change from the incredibly active and constantly  
28 dangerous time that you spent with B-36 to now being in the Air Force, the regular Air  
29 Force, if you will, with—I would imagine that discipline was different that the overall  
30 approach of individuals in the Air Force—

31           RB: About drove me nuts.

1 KC: Okay, explain that to me. Why did that drive you nuts?

2 RB: I had a little hard time adjusting back to a more simple way of life. I was a  
3 little aggressive. My wife told me that she wasn't real, real sure about me there, whether  
4 or not I was going to be violent or what. I wasn't. It took a while to calm down, maybe  
5 about a year or two. It was a hard adjustment, really. I wanted to go back and probably  
6 had I not been married and had three boys I probably would have stayed.

7 KC: What was it that was drawing you back, or this desire to go back?

8 RB: My family was drawing me back, really.

9 KC: I am sorry. Where was the desire to go back to Vietnam coming from?

10 RB: Oh, what was that? Camaraderie, maybe? Being with an organization like B-  
11 36 which was really at the time I was with it a very special organization, one that you  
12 really felt like you were doing something, getting the job done. Of course, I don't know if  
13 there is a lure of combat or not but anyway it was something that you just felt like that  
14 was something you needed to do. I was there in Japan in the command post and my  
15 brother-in-law, who was a lieutenant colonel, Air Force, was shot down and killed at Da  
16 Nang. He was a forward air controller up there. I put in paperwork to be reassigned back  
17 to Vietnam. I think the personnel officer there in Japan, who was a friend of ours, got the  
18 paperwork and I don't think it ever went anywhere. I think he destroyed it.

19 KC: Just an effort to protect your family, protect you.

20 RB: I don't know that for a fact but I never heard anything back on my volunteer  
21 assignment to go back to Vietnam.

22 KC: Sure. Did you apprise your family of this desire to go back?

23 RB: No, I didn't. I don't know why. It is just something that I thought I would do.  
24 If I got the assignment I would let them know then that I was going back.

25 KC: Okay. Did you have any regrets about leaving Vietnam when you did?

26 RB: Yeah, I did. I wasn't sure that the individual who was taking over from me  
27 was capable of doing the job. I had that regret. I didn't have a very long time to try and  
28 train him, show him what we were doing and things like that, but evidently with the  
29 change of operation and everything we had going and his ability it worked out fine. I  
30 hated to leave the troops that I knew but it was—that was my regret there. As for whether

1 or not I had a regret that leaving Vietnam because of the big picture of Vietnam and the  
2 war, no, it was primarily the unit.

3 KC: Yeah, you hear that an awful lot. Okay, let me ask you some larger questions.

4 RB: Okay.

5 KC: The first one is, and feel free to answer this in as much or little detail as you  
6 would like. What is your opinion of American policy toward Vietnam, Southeast Asia,  
7 but Vietnam in particular during this time?

8 RB: I was never a fan of McNamara and Johnson and their limited-action  
9 concepts. I think McNamara was a very intelligent man but he was short on ability to  
10 reason with somebody who had been there before. If he had his mind made up it was like  
11 talking to a piece of concrete. He had his idea of how the war should go and how the  
12 money should be funneled. Johnson, I think, was a sincere man who hated the losing of  
13 troops but he had no idea what to do. The bombing stops that they had were terrible. It  
14 gave the enemy a chance to recoup and regroup and rearm and it cost American lives.  
15 The reduction, or not the reduction, but the idea that we could not bomb certain targets in  
16 North Vietnam was a terrible mistake. I think that was shown at the end of the war when  
17 the B-52s went north and all of the targets were open, that rapidly and the North  
18 Vietnamese had to come to the peace table and we were able to prevail in that regard. I  
19 think that the South Vietnam leadership was under the opinion that we will do minimum  
20 and let the Americans do it all for us and we will take the spoils after everything is over. I  
21 don't think they ever really got fully behind the war in training or equipping of their  
22 forces. I just don't think they were into in a 100% effort and they were letting the  
23 Americans do most of the fighting. That's about my feeling on them. Our government  
24 made a terrible mistake and I think they are making the same mistake in Iraq and  
25 Afghanistan.

26 KC: Do you think that the United States should have been involved in Vietnam  
27 from the very beginning? Do you think this was a worthy cause?

28 RB: I—looking back I have my doubts. At the time when we were all in this and  
29 the Cold War was going full tilt and everything I think everyone believed in the domino  
30 factor that the communists were going to take over one small country at a time and it  
31 would just be a domino effect in the Asian area. I think at that time we were probably

1 right. Now, I do feel that some of the attacks like on the *Maddox* and things like that  
2 which brought us into the bombing phase of the war and then finally into putting troops  
3 into South Vietnam may or may not have been 100% enemy attack. It's kind of  
4 questionable there but at the time we all thought they were.

5 KC: Were you following the war closely or not after you leave Vietnam?

6 RB: Pardon me?

7 KC: Were you following—how closely were you following the war after you left  
8 Vietnam?

9 RB: Oh, quite a bit. In my position there in the command post we received daily  
10 communications and then later on I became a director of operations for the inspector  
11 general's office in 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force. A lot of our assets that we had in Korea and Okinawa  
12 and Japan itself were funneled at different times into Vietnam due to losses or whatever.  
13 On the Chinese island of Taiwan we had a large repair depot for not only aircraft but  
14 trucks and things like that. So 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force was involved quite a bit in the resupply of  
15 Vietnam, therefore we were able to get dispatches and things like that frequently. So I  
16 followed it quite heavily.

17 KC: Okay.

18 RB: I did so even after we left Japan and came back to the States.

19 KC: What do you think or how do you think your experience in Vietnam affected  
20 you the most? How did your experiences in Vietnam affect you the rest of your life?

21 RB: Oh, it gave me—well, that's a hard question to answer. It is one of those  
22 things that you never forget, your combat experience, the people that you were with,  
23 those remain with you all the time. I am a member of the Special Forces Association and  
24 we go to conventions with my Special Forces friends. Then I am also a member of  
25 Special Operations Association which has to do with individuals who were conducting  
26 special ops all over the world. Then I'm a member of the Purple Heart Association. We  
27 had those different associations, you get with the people you were with and, of course,  
28 you talk over old times and everything gets bigger.

29 KC: Sure.

30 RB: The lies get better. It's good to relive that portion. Do you ever forget? I  
31 don't think you ever forget. It's just something that is going to be with you the rest of

1 your life and you carry on. You know, it wasn't the end of the world at all. It was a time  
2 in your life, an exciting time if you want to call it that, but you still have to carry on and  
3 do whatever job you decided you are going to do for the rest of your life.

4 KC: Is there anything that you would change about your experiences there if you  
5 could?

6 RB: I used to never have a temper and was fairly easy going. I think I am still  
7 fairly easy going but I get mad every once and a while now. I'm not a violent person in  
8 any way shape or form, but I don't take a whole lot, either. It is just that would be the  
9 only way that I think I've changed on that.

10 KC: Is there anything else that you would like to add to the record before we wrap  
11 up this interview?

12 RB: No. It's been quite a long time and you brought back a lot of memories time-  
13 wise and names and things. I hope I've got them in somewhat of a logical sequence. I  
14 find it a little hard to do at times. I appreciate the opportunity. I think Vietnam was one of  
15 the first—what's the word I want to use? Not fallacy but one of the first times that we had  
16 a hard look at ourselves as Americans and the conservative group stays conservative and  
17 the liberal group has grown more active and more powerful and I don't really like what  
18 I'm seeing in the way of our leadership in the country nor in the fact that our values that  
19 we had and cherished up from World War II to Korea and things like that, I believe are  
20 being eroded by a liberal left who had no backbone. That's my regrets there.

21 KC: Sure. Well, Mr. Barnes, I want to thank you very much for taking the time  
22 out of your very busy life and speaking with me these several days here. Thank you very  
23 much.

24 RB: Well, thank you, and I appreciate the opportunity.