Kim Sawyer: This is Kim Sawyer joined by Steve Maxner conducting an oral

history interview with Al Martin on January 9th, 2001 at 9:10 am in the Special
Collections Library. This interview is part of the Lubbock Area Vietnam Veteran’s Oral
History Project. Mr. Martin, could you begin by talking a little bit about your early life,
when and where you were born, where you grew up?

Al Martin: Thank you, Kim. I was born in 1925 in Ft. Worth, Texas. My dad
and mother worked on the Ft. Worth Railroad. They were operators, using a telegraph,
and this was their life. They loved the railroads. After that we moved to Childress,
Texas for a couple of years and after that we moved to Hedley which my dad was the
depot agent there at Hedley and I spent several years there at Hedley. I grew up I guess
until about 1942. My dad died then in ’42 of a massive heart attack and my mother,
having previous experience with the railroad, went down to Quanah, Texas and got on the
Quanah Acme and Pacific Railroad as an operator, and I was a junior in high school then
and this was 1942. In 1943 I enlisted in the Air Force Cadet Program. In 1943,
February, I was called into the military as an aviation cadet. From there on I went
straight on through the aviation cadet program. I didn’t go to CTD or any of the schools,
I just went straight on through, and graduated Moore Field, Texas in January 7th, 1944. I
was very lucky because a lot of people were put back in class or so and this was right in
the middle of the war and I wanted, if possible, to get into combat so I tried to stay with
the class that I was assigned to and sure enough, I got through. My last three weeks of
training they put me in a P-40 and on my first take off I had to wait for people to take off
in front of me and as I started my take off roll the engine cut out on me, quit on me, and I
stacked it at the end of the runway, tucked the heft gear back up underneath the wing, and
stuck the nose in the ground, and airplane was smoking. I got out of the cockpit and was
waiting for my instructor to come up to me. He did. I can still hear him say, ‘I ruined
your airplane,’ and he said, ‘Don’t worry about that. We got a lot of those.’ But I didn’t,
it didn’t ruin it. It beat it up a little bit. Then I was sent to Mariana Air Force Base in
Florida and completed my P-40 training there, only ten hours of initial work and then was
sent to Windsor Locks, Connecticut or P-47 training, Thunderbolt training, and the last
half of the training I went to Providence, Rhode Island to finish up the P-47 training and
Providence you know is right on the coast and we used to dogfight the F-4Us, the Navy
F-4Us there as practice and we had a lot of fun doing that. I can remember one time there
was a carrier pulling out of the harbor and we were up flying and so we took the flight
down and lowered the gear and looked like I was going to try to land on the carrier and
the carrier was waving me off, shooting star pistols and trying to get me not to land on
the carrier, which I wasn’t going to but this was part of the fun that we had. I pulled the
gear up and went around. The next morning in briefing the operations officer wanted to
know who tried to land on the carrier. Nobody volunteered the information! We had a
lot of fun with the Navy. I was sent after graduation at Providence, Rhode Island, sent
into a pilot’s pool in Virginia and then from there on I was shipped down to Miami to go
across to my ultimate assignment. We went across from Miami to Natel, Brazil to
Ascension Islands to the Gold Coast of Africa and to Khartoum and to Aden and into
Karachi, Karachi, India, or it was India then. There we were in a pilot’s pool also which
there were several hundred pilots there and they were holding us and reassigning us to the
units in the theater there. I was assigned to the 80th Fighter Group, which flew P-47s, and
we were shipped up to Moran, India which is the northern part of India in the Assam
Valley just short of the Himalayan Mountains, at the Burma Putra River Basin. We were
stationed at a tea plantation that they had taken over there and laid for our runway they
used pierced steel planking, PSP, for our runway and we used to run missions into the
Naga Hills which I guess were east of us, east and north of us, towards Burma and then
run missions into Burma also. As the Japanese started to retreat, we were stationed in the
middle of Burma, right in the exact middle of Burma on the Burma Road, and they, like I
was telling you all, they took a bulldozer in and run it back four or five thousand feet
back into the jungle. Incidentally this is the Burmese jungle, this is a triple canopy jungle
which is trees can go up to 250 feet high, and they took this bulldozer and run it back in
there and cleared out the debris and the trees and spread a little gravel on the road and
packed it down and that was our runway. Later on I think they put a little macadam on it
but basically we flew on a gravel runway. The P-47s a pretty heavy aircraft as you know.
They weigh about 11,000 pounds dry and about 14 to 15,000 with everything loaded, and
it would get off the runway and we would just barely get off the runway before we went
over the Burma Road. We were butted into the Burma Road. Incidentally, the Burma
Road was quite a feat. If you know anything about it, it was designed to transport cargo
from India into China and you had to go through Burma. It went through the densest part
of the jungle in Burma, right down the middle of it. We used to watch those six by six’s
go through there with mud up to their hubcaps and grinding away. It was quite a feat,
really. I guess it was an engineering feat to get the Burma Road going. They used the
road even after the war some. We had targets south of where we were of course, towards
Mandalay and we were stationed right on the Irrawaddy River and we used to swim in it
occasionally. But, then when you swim in it you have to get your buddies to pick the
leeches off of you, so that wasn’t very inviting. Anytime you walked in the jungle the
leeches would be on the under part of the leaf and rub off on you and get off on your
clothes and then finally get on your body. Our camp was a typical combat forward base,
combat location. We used British tents, which are tents that have a double top on them.
The British had an experience in hot weather and this top insulates you from the sun, and
it’s quite cool, actually, and of course the sides of the tents are open most of the time.
We used our native’s friends that were close by. They’d make bamboo rugs for us to put
on the floor, on our dirt floor. We were pretty decent living actually. I was a young kid,
still 18 years old. I enjoyed living out there, and I guess being young you took things as
they were and it wasn’t much of a problem. We didn’t have any problems. Most of the
kids, the oldest kid there was 24 years old, the oldest pilot, so we were all young and
could care less about things. Just took them as they came. At night we’d sit around the
bonfire and if we had a monthly ration of, case of beer, and we would imbibe in that sometimes. I can remember one time when we got our beer ration everybody was very happy of course because it’s hot, the temperatures were up to 105 in the daytime with 100 percent humidity and jungle and you could just sit and sweat, so you didn’t have to do anything to sweat. But I can remember one funny thing that happened; we were all friendly with the chaplain of course. Incidentally, this base I’m talking about was Tencoxican, the name of the base in Burma. The chaplain, we were all friendly with the chaplain of course, and he came by and talked to me. I was probably the youngest guy there, and he’d come by and sat down on the edge of the bed and say, ‘Well Al, how you doing?’ and I’d say, ‘I’m doing fine, chaplain, everything’s okay,’ and I routinely stuck that case of beer right at the end of the bed, and he’d look down and say, ‘Oh,’ he’d put his hand down and pull a bottle out and say, ‘What is this, Al?’ and I said, ‘Well chaplain, would you like to have one?’ and he said, ‘I sure would, I’m really thirsty,’ and he drank up half my beer ration before I could get him out of there. We used to get a mission whiskey. Each time we had a mission they’d give you an ounce of whiskey. It’s an old tradition really. The chaplain would dispense that to you. I’m sorry, the flight surgeon would. The chaplain would drink it. But, the flight surgeon would give you a shot of whiskey for each mission. Well we’d save those up and put them in a bottle and he’d give them to us and we’d do what we wanted to with them. I gave mine, since I didn’t drink hard whiskey at that time, I’d give that to my crew chief and he’d give me his case of beer, so we got along pretty well.

Steve Maxner: How many men were on that base with you?

AM: On that base?

SM: Yeah.

AM: This squadron that I was in, I didn’t mention the name of it. It was the 90th Fighter Squadron; the 80th Fighter Group, the 90th Fighter Squadron. We were attached to… I can’t remember what the Air Force was. We had the 20th over there which is the Boinbeus, which would be the Boinbeus. I think it was the 3rd Air Force, I’m not sure. Anyway, this combat location that we were at Tincocican in the middle of Burma, we housed one squadron which was 25 aircraft, 40 or 50 pilots, because we had the headquarters with us, so we had additional people there, and I’d say 200 airmen. So, we
had about 300 people, 350 people there at that jungle location. The tents were laid out in
a tree area. They didn’t cut the trees down for that of course. We were just right in the
jungle. The maintenance facility was at one end of the runway and the revetments, we
put the aircraft in revetments and they were scattered up and down the runway, the
revetments were. We didn't have a taxiway that we could taxi and not get on the runway.
We had to use the runway. It was not that elaborate. If I may, one morning we used to
stand alert at five o’clock in the morning, wait for the Japanese to come across.
Sometimes they’d come across at 6:30 or something like that, but sitting in the
revetments and you were within 150 yards of the runway, the revetments were more or
less covered by the trees, they didn't cut the trees down, and you had to be careful taxiing
so you didn’t hit the trees. One morning I looked up just as the sun was coming up, and I
looked up and there was an ape going from tree to tree, you know, swinging. Well that
became a joke. We figured that a pilot got friendly with an ape, and the ape got to be
pretty smart. Well pretty soon the pilot didn’t want to stand alert early in the morning so
he put the ape in the cockpit of the airplane and put his helmet on, and then he went back
to sleep. The ape was in the airplane and pretty soon they got a scramble notice and
everybody scrambled, the ape scrambled the airplane and shot down a couple of Japs and
became a colonel, the next colonel! The things that you think about and reminiscence
over! The denseness of the jungle was indicated by an elephant, a rogue elephant went
through our tent and tore down a couple of tents one time and the airman killed a lion that
was in a tent area, I’m sorry, it was a tiger. The tiger was so large that you put it in the
back end of a jeep and the tail drug the ground. It was pretty good sized. A couple of
pythons were killed in the area. Pretty wild.

SM: What did you do about the elephant? Did you kill it?

AM: We let him go through. They didn’t shoot him or anything. Mainly he just
came right on through the area, just came out of nowhere. It was quite a shock.

SM: Now the Japanese fly over your base?

AM: They knew where we were.

SM: They knew where you were?

AM: Yeah, and we kept a patrol up. Our mission was to protect the hump traffic
which was cargo aircraft flying from India to Burma…to China, I’m sorry, over Burma.
We were right in the middle of the hump traffic and therefore we would launch a flight of four every morning early and keep it on an airborne patrol to keep the Japanese fighters from coming up and disrupting the hump traffic. They were trying to get in to shoot down the cargo airplanes, the C-47s and C-46s and the C-87s. That was our mission. We’d keep a patrol up all the time, all day long, of aircraft. At the end of the patrol, we had a target. At the end of patrol when we got relieved from our patrol when our fuel was getting down we’d get relieved and go to our target and hit the target and then come back and land, which was pretty efficient use of aircraft. We’d get scrambled. Like I said, we were on alert from about 4:30 or five o’clock in the morning. The Japanese used to come over pretty early and try to intercept and there weren’t too many Japanese aircraft because they were pulling back at this time. They were down south towards Mandalay and that area. But, they occasionally would make a raid over our area and we apparently had a radar station close by and they would tell us that there were inbound aircraft and we would scramble and try to divert them. Most of the time was cloudy, puffy clouds, overcast, to broken clouds, and the Japanese would try to fly in the broken clouds and overcast so we couldn’t see them.

SM: How much lead-time would the radar give you?

AM: About 20 minutes and we would scramble within five minutes so we had time to get airborne and to get any air, quite a bit of altitude, normally at 10 to 12 thousand feet.

SM: You mentioned that these Japanese aircraft would attempt to attack the resupply aircraft, the hump aircraft. How about actually trying to bomb your base? Did they ever try to do that?

AM: They never did, they never did. We had several alerts. It was fairly hidden. You had to know where you were, and they probably weren’t that familiar with that area. We had a couple of alerts that indicate they were going to come in and strafe the area but they never did. We were fairly lucky that way. Back in the area the cantonment area, everybody had tents, everything had a tent, every function had a tent. It was that we didn't have any permanent buildings, and most of the time your tent, the side flaps were pulled up so that you could walk in, talk to the operations in the operations tent or the maintenance tent or commander’s tent and then our living quarters. You had an
intelligence tent, too, that our intelligence officer’s would…and incidentally we did have some F-5s stationed with us. It was P-38 that had a camera in the nose. They were called F-5s and they had a contingent there with us and I think they had two P-38s. Every morning they’d take off just at dawn, early dawn, take off and go out and take a picture of our target and come back and at 7:30 or eight o’clock we’d brief for the mission and they would have a current target picture, which seems strange to me because always it seemed like the Japanese would say, ‘This is where they’re going to hit us today and we’re going to be ready for them,’ but it never turned out that way. I don’t know why.

SM: Do you know what altitude they took the photographs from?

AM: I think from about 3500 feet. They’d come across and take the photo.

SM: Were they good photos?

AM: Oh yeah, they were beautiful. We always would hear those 38s take off. They sound like twin Cadillacs. We call them twin Cadillacs; beautiful sound, inline engines, 1200 horsepower each, and they were beautiful. I always wanted to fly a 38 but I never got to.

SM: Now the targets that you would go after at the end of your time…first of all, how long would your rotation last?

AM: Two to two and a half hours.

SM: Okay, and then you’d go drop your ordinance on your particular target?

AM: Yeah, we carried a [belly] tank with us.

SM: What was the typical type of target that you were…

AM: Bridges, and actually some cantonment areas where the Japanese were camped. We’d get these intelligence photos and they would show movement in a certain area, tracks and all that stuff, and we’d be bombing the jungle in certain cases. But, in certain areas we’d have bridges to blow up and then on the way back we’d do a river sweep on the way back to our base. We’d do a sweep on the Irrawaddy river. Anything that moved below the bomb line was fair game. We saw a lot of times a herd of elephants. We wouldn’t shoot them, even though they worked for the enemy as well as us. One time on a river sweep I saw a pretty good-sized boat down there and it was obviously a Japanese boat. We went down and strafed it and when the water cleared
there was no more boat. It was just blew up. We strafed a field, a Jap airfield and several
of us got hits on an airplane and buildings and things like that; really exciting.

SM: Did your squadron lose any aircraft?

AM: Yes, yes. We lost I would say the losses between operational loss and
combat loss is about the same. I lost a couple of buddies operationally. One guy flew
into the ground. We had a guy that got hit and got within five miles of our base and had
to bail out and it took him five days to walk back and he looked like Jesus Christ when he
got back. He was all ragged out, but very lucky walking through the jungle to get back.
He had enough presence of mind to figure out what direction to walk and he was only
five miles away. We didn’t know where he went down. One time a guy from my class,
we were climbing up on a mission, a flight of four. We went into a cloud. The cloud was
maybe a mile in diameter, you know, and only three of us came out and we never found
the other guy. Obviously he got in there and spun in and got disorientated, but we never
found him. We had a search party and never found him.

SM: In terms of you mentioned a pilot flying straight into the ground, did they
talk about the problem of target fixation when you’re training? Did you think that’s what
happened in that particular incident?

AM: Oh yeah, that’s what happened. That’s always a question, always a briefing
point. Don’t get target fixation, don’t press the target.

SM: How about aircraft losses for the hump flights, the cargo aircraft flying the
hump?

AM: Oh mainly weather.

SM: Mostly weather losses?

AM: I can remember reading about one Christmas Eve there was one very severe
storm over the hump area and your C-47s can only get up 16 to 17,000. I’m not sure they
even had blowers or turbos on them. The C-46s did have turbos and they get a little
higher. But crossing, visual crossing, you could visually cross the hump at 17,000 feet
but in weather you’d want to clear it a little bit. So, you’re looking at 17 and 18,000 feet.
That was the outer range of that C-47s capability. They really had to milk their engines
real easy and take care of them, baby the engines, or otherwise they’d blow them up.

One night there was 67 cargo airplanes that went down over the hump one Christmas
Eve. They got caught in this storm and it was a severe icing storm and 67 were lost. So the main danger over the hump wasn’t the Japanese aircraft, it was the weather.

SM: This was Christmas Eve of ’44?

AM: Probably, I believe so. It was called Black Saturday or something, it had a name to it. They would routinely lose…the hump traffic was…they flew out of I guess four major bases in India and then went into Kunming, China which was the closest one. I’d just reported into my unit, I guess it was in May ’44, after I got into my unit in June they came up and said, ‘Okay, we need some volunteers.’ They didn’t tell us what it was, so all brand new second lieutenants, you volunteered already, and I was a brand new second lieutenant. They said, ‘Okay, you’re going to ferry aircraft across the hump, P-40s.’ This is over in the Chenille squadrons. We went into one of these bases in India and sat around and waited about two weeks for the weather to clear and they launched us all. There were 25 fighter aircraft going across, being ferried across. It was led by a B-25 and a B-25 is a pretty speedy aircraft. We were going to cross at 18,000 feet and the B-25 was outrunning my P-40. You can imagine a gaggle of 25 fighters out here led by one B-25. They didn’t have enough maps for just the flight leaders. They didn’t give the poor second lieutenants on the wing any maps. We hung on…we didn’t get lost from our leader. We went in flights, four to a flight. That’s how you fly. So, only the flight leaders had the maps. This B-25 got up to cruising altitude and just flat went. They’re pretty speedy. Well the P-40, I cleaned it up, I closed the cowl flaps and everything I could do to make it go fast, and I was sitting pretty close to the B-25 and it started to speed away from me. All the guys in the P-40s said, ‘Hey, slow down B-25, we can’t keep up with you!’ Well the B-25 just kept going on, you know, so we just kept losing out, gradually losing out. Well the only way you could make it up is by diving, like gradually dive, and got 1000 foot underneath and there he was right up there but then you’d pull up and you’d be back here. Pretty soon he got [?] because we got into a little bit of weather, but we finally made it into Kunming, which at that time had the longest runway in the world. It was a 15,000-foot runway, but mainly because Kunming’s altitude I think is 5,000 feet and it was a dirt strip. They had plenty of room for me to land on, though, with 15,000 feet of runway! I didn’t have to go around.
SM: With regard to the base camp area, what did you do for sanitation in terms of showering and also for…

AM: Have you seen MASH? Have you seen MASH on the TV? That’s what we did. They had put a large belly tank fully of water, and it of course wasn’t heated or anything. It really didn’t need to be. You go down to the river and clean off and of course you had outside toilets.

SM: Were they slit trenches?

AM: No. They were in a tent.

SM: What about for drinking water?

AM: I guess they took it from the water and we put atabrine tablets in the water, either that or Clorox, I don’t know which. But, every time you went to a meal there was a sergeant sitting at the beginning of the table that you had to take a tablet and he had to see you drop it in your mouth, atabrine tablet. Of course malaria was very, very prevalent there, mosquitoes were bad, so we slept under a mosquito net always. A lot of the airmen got malaria, several of the airmen did, a good percentage of them, and the cure was just more atabrine I suppose. You could look when you take an atabrine tablet you turn yellow, a little yellow, and everybody looked yellow, had a yellow cast to them, like they’d been eating too many carrots. But, when I came home they made you sign a statement that you would take atabrine tablets for six weeks after you got home. Everybody did. I know I had one light case of malaria here, back in the States, and it just was a very light one and I kept taking my atabrine tablets and it went away.

SM: What was it like?

AM: It was sweating and kind of aching, joints were aching. It was a very light case though. But everybody got bit by mosquitoes, it was just one of those things. I keep going back to, at night sometimes we would build a fire, and everybody’d sit around the fire and talk. That was very special times. I can remember sitting around midnight, ten or 11 o’clock at night, and really enjoying the fellowship.

SM: Talk about home and what you’re going to do when you get back?

AM: Talk about flying.

SM: Talk about flying?
AM: Mainly about flying. Pilots, when they get together, that’s all they do is talk about flying. It was special, very special, and I was young and everybody was young. We had a high spirit in our organization. We were very…even though we were young, our flying was pretty good. We were pretty safe flyers, although occasionally you get a burr up your tail and I can remember one time we come back from a mission and we always came across a lake that had cattails in it. Well, that’s a big…go down with your prop and cut the cattails in the lake and that’s what we did. Well pretty soon the season changed and the cattails fell down and you could see a bunch of tree stumps sticking up in the cattail so we were just very lucky that we didn’t hit the tree stumps! Talking about the runway, I can remember the runway was 4500 feet or something like that and there was the requirement to get off the ground around 4,000 feet so you only had about 500 foot to spare and we were carrying two 1,000 pound bombs, a belly tank, and eight 50 calibers full of munitions so we were pretty heavy. When they cut that runway out, they cut the trees down. At the end of the runway they were level but the further out you got, the higher the darn stumps were, so it seems kind of a moot point but you had to climb, otherwise you hit the stumps. That’s kind of a funny antidote to taking off. Nobody got killed in take off. Several people got killed in landing. The British, right at the end of the war, just before the war was ended, the British gave us a Spitfire, and we spent weeks using lacquer thinner to clean that spitfire up and make it shiny. It was a shiny, beautiful airplane, and the people drew lots to fly it, the pilots did, and my lot was number seven. Well everybody…it’s a little different flying British because the brakes are different and so we practiced on that a little bit. Number one, two, and three flew the airplane and everybody got to fly, and it got up to number six and number six crashed the airplane on landing. He crashed it. He didn’t get hurt, but he tore the airplane up so I didn’t get to fly the Spitfire, but I was always wanting to fly the Spitfire.

SM: You mentioned the crashes on landings. What would cause those primarily, coming in too hot?

AM: Coming in racked in…we called it racked in, 20 second pattern. In other words, do you know what a shoe bomb shell is, come in over the runway, a flight of four stacked out, about 200 feet above the ground, [?] Well, younger pilots tried to make a 20 second pattern; in other words, from here to wheels on the ground in 20 seconds. That
means to rack it in on the final approach [?] and [?] air speed when you’re racking in like this, it would stall out and it would spin you, and that’s what…

SM: You’d lose your lift?

AM: That’s where we lost quite a few pilots, even though they’re cautioned not to do that. It’s a pilot’s pride to come in and make a decent approach, landing, and decent pattern.

SM: You mentioned the British aircraft. Did you ever fly with other British pilots or other country forces?

AM: Yes, we had them on several raids with us. We would rendezvous at a certain point and they would go in with us. They were mainly Spitfires. We used to escort some B-25s. There was a B-25 squadron down ten miles from us in the same jungle situation we were in. They had a squadron down there and we used to escort them on special raids, go down south and hit targets. We would go in and protect them and then go in and hit after the B-25s pulled out. We would go in and drop our bombs. We would fly with them so that the Zeros wouldn’t attack them, try to keep them from it.

SM: How about the Burmese Military? Being in Burma, did you ever interact with the Burmese Military?

AM: No.

SM: Or Burmese civilians?

AM: No. The Burmese guards were the only thing we had the guards for the perimeter.

SM: Okay, so there’s some ground personnel that would help secure the perimeter of the base?

AM: Yes, Burmese.

SM: Do you know what tribe of Burmese they were?

AM: No, no, I don’t. But the British also furnished Gurkha guards out of India, and the Japanese didn’t mess with a Gurkha guard; they’re tough. Remember, they’re the ones that carried the blade, and of course they carried guns, too. Gurkha guards, if you were guarded by the Gurkhas, you were okay. You didn’t have any problems.

SM: How large was the contingent of Gurkha guards and Burmese guards for the base? Do you recall?
AM: 150 probably. They were on guard 24 hours a day.

SM: How would you eat in terms of was it you would eat with them, or they would fend for themselves? You were resupplied jointly?

AM: They had their own little camp and probably we supplied them food probably.

SM: How were you resupplied?

AM: By air. I guess when the Burma road started operating, probably got supplies that way too, but everything mainly was flown in.

SM: Did you ever have any problems during monsoon season, flooding problems, things like that?

AM: Yes. The weather sometimes just shut us down. Normally we flew, but bad, bad weather we didn’t fly. Back in that era you can realize that we did not have an navigation instruments, mainly going to a target was pilotage, and just look on the map and if you couldn’t see the ground, there’s no way to get there. We had limited radio facilities. Back in those days, we had a coffee grinder, radio, and very little radar to help us out, and we couldn’t take a fix off of them, off of a VOR. We didn’t have VORs back in those days, or low frequency beam because there wasn’t any in that area so you could not navigate that way. Even our base just had a low frequency beacon they called it and it was only receivable say 20 miles out. It was very low frequency. They did that for protection so the Japanese wouldn’t home in on them. A lot of the days were weather days, especially in monsoons. A monsoon is all consuming. It’s just flat, waters down everything, and the runways were full of potholes. Maintenance goes under cover and slow, and everything’s slowed down. It’s not cold, but it’s [?].

SM: Did you yourself get into dogfights with Japanese? Zeroes?

AM: No, I never did. Back in those days when we were there, like I said, the Japanese were pulling back. We tried to catch one that went into the clouds. We saw him go through, tried to catch him, and never caught him. He got into the clouds and got away. I think I got one on the ground. A couple of guys did get in dogfights with them and shot a zero down. The P-47 was mainly a high altitude fighter because it had a turbo charger and you could get same power at 30,000 feet as you could on the ground with this turbo. It was great addition to flying, of course. The Japanese I don’t think had a turbo.
They might have had an internal turbo, but not like a turbo the P-47 had. They were good up to 15-16,000 and we could of course go quite a bit above them. Of course the P-47 would out dive them anytime. The Japs, I think the Jap airplane weighed six or seven thousand pounds. It had 1100 horsepower engine in it. We weighed 11,000 pounds dry, without anything in it, and we had a 2,000 horsepower engine. We could out dive them but we couldn’t out turn them. We never turned with them. You could dive through their formation and come out like this and then go back up for another round. But you never get in a tight dogfight with them because you couldn’t win. Of course they didn’t have any [?] attacks or anything like that. If you hit them with a burst of 50-caliber, they were gone. We had four 50 calibers on each wing and we harmonized our guns, for example, at 200 yards, at 250, 300 yards, and 350. There was a cone of fire that just like that.

We’d get them in that cone of fire and they’re gone.

SM: Was it difficult to judge distance in the air?

AM: We had a gun sight that would range and that we’d range and we could say if their wings are inside that, you’re in firing range, inside that reticle. It’s called a reticle on your gun sight.

SM: And the gun sight was pretty accurate?

AM: It wasn’t computing. It was a fixed reticle so you had to do your own lead and ranging. But, it was harmonized, we harmonized our guns.

SM: Did you get a lot of range training and fire training before going to Burma?

AM: Yeah, quite a bit. We got, you know, airborne targets that they used to tow that looks like a big rag that you hang out from a tow ship. We had several missions that way and then of course strafing missions on the ground and bombing missions and you could set the reticle, set the gun sight for the number of mills down or up that you wanted and you calculate the release point. It wasn’t very accurate, so it really depended upon a pilot’s skill to put a bomb on the target. They could improve that later on, but our targets were fixed, like the old ringing post almost back in World War I.

SM: Did you feel when you got to Burma that the training you had received prepared you for what you encountered in combat?

AM: Yeah, yeah. We weren’t highly skilled when we went in there but we did have the basic knowledge so that we could improve ourselves as we flew, and that’s what
we did. Luckily, it was a little different than the European theater where you had to be
top notch from the beginning because the Germans had a lot of air opposition. But over
there in Burma, we were allowed time to learn our skills.
SM: You mentioned that there was an area in Burma that was kind of…in
Vietnam they were called free fire zones. This was an area where if anything moved, as
you put it, you shot it.
AM: We had a bomb line and that was the end of our territory and on the other
side of the bomb line was enemy. Free fire zones is like…what do you call it, a little
enclave, they were like little enclaves in Vietnam, and you had friendly over here and two
miles away you had the enemy so you didn’t have a bomb line as such in Vietnam, but
you did in Burma.
SM: Yeah, but there were areas in Vietnam just like I guess in World War II that
at this point we know anything going on over there, or we suspect anything going on over
there, is enemy activity, whether it’s a bomb line or a free fire zone line or whatever, was
there any concern about Burmese civilians in those areas? What was the Burmese
civilian population like in the area around base camps?
AM: There were very few towns. Of course down south there were. We tried
not to hit the villages. Only if we received fire out of the village, we hit it. Mainly we
were hitting roads and troop concentrations. We supported Merrill’s Marauders. We
supported the gooney birds, or C-47s that went in and dropped supplies to Merrill’s
Marauders. We were airborne over them for protection, flight protection.
SM: Did you fly in a close air support capacity while in Burma?
AM: Oh yes.
SM: For ground forces?
AM: Yes, and mainly I think for Merrill’s Marauders. Of course you have to
have a radio on the ground to do that, and we didn’t have many people there in Burma,
mainly British, but I do remember talking to Merrill’s Marauders on the ground. They’d
fire maybe a smoke grenade or smoke rocket and say, ‘Hit my smoke,’ or, ‘Hit 20 meters
south of my smoke.’ That’s the way we did it, though radio contact. But, it was very,
very sparsely…we didn’t do it very often because apparently they just didn’t have the
capability to do it. We had to go by navigation and land recognition, terrain recognition
of where enemy was. Of course if they fired at us we knew where they were. That
would be a target.

SM: What was the radius of operations, of distance?
AM: I think we went down a couple hundred miles.
SM: Anybody ever get lost?
AM: Not that I know of. They got lost temporarily but always found our way
back home. We had one in Vietnam that got lost, and barely made it. But, we flew in
flights of four in World War II; of course in Vietnam we flew in flights of two most of
the time.

SM: So as long as you stayed within your flight group you didn’t get lost?
AM: You had a responsibility of seeing that…if you weren’t the flight leader, you
knew where he was all the time. It didn’t take very long to learn that technique because
you didn’t want to get lost.

SM: How good was the intelligence generally that you received? You said that
you got intelligence briefings and the photographs were good. What about the suspected
enemy concentrations and suspected ground fire that you might receive?
AM: Yes, we knew that every time we would hit a target we would pick up some
ground fire, so we knew that intelligence was there. It was very good of course in
Vietnam but World War II was a little more skinny. But, the photographs were good. I
don’t know the Japs ever figured out, we’d send over a recon just before a target hit, but
they might not have had enough fire power down there or might not have had the big
guns down there. Everybody fired their rifles at you but you tried to stay above that
altitude.

SM: So you never ran into any significant anti aircraft fire?
AM: Well they hit 20 millimeters.
SM: 20 millimeters?
AM: One of our boys got hit head on with a 20 millimeter in the top cylinder of
the engine, right on it, and looked like a steam engine coming back home, huffing; very
lucky to get back, of course. He got hit with a 20 millimeter right in the engine, master
cylinder of the engine, he was very lucky, and got back, though. That was a tough old
airplane.
SM: Yeah, that the aircraft could still fly…

AM: Of course the reciprocal, radial engines are more tough than the inline engines. Inlines of course have got oil coolers and of course mainly oil coolers that get hit real easy, and liquid cool radiators like a car. If you get hit with a rifle in a cooler on a P-51, you have five minutes to get out before the engine freezes on you. So, you’re kind of limited; you didn’t want to get down too low with a P-51, where a Jug, or a P-47 we called Jug, you didn’t have that problem. It would take a lot of punishment.

KS: What kind of medical facilities did you have at your camp there?

AM: Well we had a doc with us, which was a flight surgeon. Flight surgeons had wings on, anybody with a medical doctor, and it was kind of like a clinic you would say here. If anything serious happened, I don’t know whether he could operate or not, but if anything serious happened they air evaced you back to, in my case, northern Assam where the big field hospitals were. I can’t think of anybody ever being air evaced out, any of the pilots, because of that, but I’m sure they would have air evaced you back to a major hospital back in Assam, India.

KS: Besides malaria, were there any other diseases?

AM: Bites from insects and dysentery. Golly, that’s about all. We never had any medical problems other than that, and dysentery would affect people in different stages. Some people were really prone to get it just over a whim, but fortunately I didn’t have that much problem. But, it was a problem, mainly pilots; you just couldn’t fly if you had dysentery.

SM: Why don’t we go ahead and take a step back. What was your life like growing up during the Depression? What do you remember?

AM: I don’t remember being poor. My dad had a job and he made, I think 170 dollars a month back in 1932 I’ll say. He worked for the railroad and we got passes on the railroad and we went to New York World Fair, went down to…I think that was in ’32, but I think in ’35 or ’36 we went down into Miami and into Cuba, across to Cuba, and flew the China Clipper, the airplane, you remember? You probably don’t remember, but…

SM: I’ve heard of it.
AM: Yeah, he’s got a good memory, China Clipper, and we flew that 90 miles across to Cuba. I can remember the Morro Castle there in Cuba where the problem was with one of the battleships, remember, and I can remember the Cuban people being really very nice, very nice, and we enjoyed…we had a laugh, and those were the days of the maracas, you remember, da, da, da, da, and we brought a couple of maracas back and what they were were gourds filled with seeds, and we still have them. I can remember the main drag of Havana, the buildings made out of stone, and they were gray stone. I remember the people being very, very nice, and I think we’re missing the boat by not being friends with Cuba. Even though they’re communists, I think our influence would gradually erode their communism and they’d be right on along with us if we’d put a little forward effort, because they like Americans basically. I remember the bicycle was the main transportation for the kids and every kid had a bicycle and he treasured it like a kid with a new pickup nowadays, same thing; it’s a means of transportation. I can remember that my three friends, two other friends, we’d ride and challenge each other to over the hills and down the hills and follow the leader and all that, and that was a big part of our day when we were real young. I can remember my dad there at Hedley had a cow and chickens, and we’d get the milk and eggs and he’d buy a pig at pig killing time, we had get pork. We had a coil heater made of procuracene, heater, and that’s the only thing we had to heat our house. Of course it had a vent on it. I can remember we got a new stove one time and it had a new invention they called isinglass which was a transparent that you could see the fire burning in the stove, and the window covered by isinglass, it was called isinglass back in those days. I don’t know what it’d be called now, I’ve never seen it now, but it would be the same as plastics nowadays. That was a great, great thing to see the fire burning in the stove. We used to listen to the radio, Amos and Andy, and eight o’clock at night we’d all gather around and listen to the radio. I know that mother did not work at the time. She would always have breakfast time and dinner, everybody ate dinner, just myself and my dad and her, and do the same thing at supper time, and we were expected to be there; none of this going off with your friends at lunch and dinner time, always there, and I think that’s something that we’re missing nowadays. Kids, when they grow up a little bit, go off on their own. Very few families eat together, and I think that’s important. I know that we had simple things to play with. We didn’t have
expensive items, toys. We made our own scooters, and pedal carts, you know, made our
own pedal carts. We went to the blacksmith and had him cut out a pedal and we’d have it
welded to drill plates that were wheels and then we’d put regular wheels on the back of it, and this was a great thing back in those days; simple, but we didn't have much, but we
didn’t want much and we didn’t need much.

SM: How many siblings did you have?

AM: Pardon?

SM: How many siblings did you have growing up?

AM: None.

SM: You’re an only child?

AM: My wife says that she knows it all the time, too. [laughs]. I’m very spoiled, she says, but I don’t think she knows.

SM: So these are things you would do with neighborhood children, other neighborhood kids?

AM: Yes, yes.

SM: Who would come up with the ideas to do stuff like the welding?

AM: I don’t know, it just evolved.

SM: It wasn’t parents, it was you as kids?

AM: Oh yeah. Making pedals, you know what a pedal is? Just stuff like that; put wheels on the side and [?] side. It’s called pedal car and they’re extinct nowadays, like dinosaurs. You steered them from the back and we’d have all kinds of races, but our bicycles were the main thing. It’s funny how a little deal like a bicycle can mean so much to a kid back in those days, just like a pickup to the boys now, just exactly. We’d take care of it, wash it, grease it, not beat it up, not throw it on the ground, we’d take care of it, and that was one thing that…your dad always would say, ‘Take what you want to eat on the plate.’ Do not leave anything on the plate. That was part of conserving, and not wasting things; not waste anything. We didn’t waste anything, and yet we were 160-180 dollars a month. I don’t know what it’s worth nowadays but it was a decent living. We had our own car, we could do basically what we wanted to if we’d just be careful with the expenditure. Dad bought some land with it and would have to go to the bank to borrow money, like a section of land he bought up here close to Amarillo, I can
remember 16,000 dollars, a section of land, and that was like 20 or 30 dollars an acre. He eventually sold it, but we were worried about that 16,000-dollar mortgage. Back in those days, people spoke of mortgages as they’d whisper, ‘Do you have a mortgage on your house?’ It was kind of a stigma; people didn’t like mortgages back in those days, and rightly so because they didn’t have the capability of paying them off like we do nowadays. I can remember just playing in the yard. I didn’t have to have other kids around to be happy like they do nowadays. We played with the other kids, but if they weren’t around or weren’t available I could play out in the yard myself. I never seemed to be lonely like they seem to be nowadays if they don’t have a bunch of kids around. It never bothered me. That’s the difference in thinking, you know, the difference in thinking.

SM: Did you recall any bank closings or property foreclosures and stuff like that?

AM: Oh yeah. I remember bank foreclosures back in ’32 and I read the paper. We always took a paper. We took the Fort Worth Star Telegram. It didn't directly affect me, and maybe a little more so my dad, but we didn’t have any stocks or anything like that. It didn’t bother us that way because I don’t guess we had the money, you know. We had a bank account I’m sure but it wasn’t large, it couldn’t be very much. But, I remember hobos come by on the train and my mother would always feed them. If they needed food, she always fed them, always gave them something, and that was the trend back in those days. If you lived close to a railroad, you had the opportunity of feeding the hobos and they would be riding the trains and going to California or coming back or someplace. But, also, they would say, ‘Give me a meal, and we’ll do some work for you.’ Occasionally we had things to do around the house, but mainly she gave them a square meal. This wouldn’t happen nowadays, it wouldn’t happen at all; of course they weren’t very dangerous back in those days. We never had any problems with them. We always lived close to the railroad because dad worked on the railroad, but hobos were a time that it was not thought too bad. They were people that were just disadvantaged and needed help, needed a helping hand. I can remember the papers being…I can remember the coal strike, John L. Lewis back in those days. I can remember when the nation was really very close to the revolution I suppose because with so many people out of work
and the coal strike, and I remember President Roosevelt coming in and his speeches gave
everybody hope. His innovations as CCC camps, fear and…what is it?

SM: The, ‘Nothing to fear but fear itself,’ speech?

AM: Was a good statement, and it perked everybody up. The gathering clouds of
war from about ’34-’35, everybody knew they were going to get into war, at least in
Europe. They didn’t think the Japanese would attack. Of course we had something to do
with the Japanese attack; we shut off their oil and their steel that we were giving them
that they were going to shoot back in bullets at us. I can remember dusty roads, there was
very few paved roads and the cars drove on these dusty roads and when it rained you
stayed home because you’d get stuck. I can remember a lot of the cars. We didn’t have
many collisions because we didn’t have many cars, but what collisions there were was
when you were passing a car and a guy wanted to turn right he’d always pull out in the
center lane and make a big wide, sweeping turn and just cause more accidents than
anything and that’s directly because they didn’t have power steering. The women could
hardly pull the steering wheel around and I remember several of our friends got in trouble
that way, having car accidents, and of course that was a big deal because you didn’t have
insurance on the cars and nobody could get them fixed. They’d lay up in the auto shops
for a period of time and there weren’t that many auto shops and people were without cars.

It was hard. Winters were cold. The sand blew in Hedley, Texas back in those days.
1933-1934 was the dust bowl back in Oklahoma but it started in Texas. I can remember
laying in bed and pulling the sheet, the white sheet, up over your head to keep from
getting stifling. It was that bad. It was the worst of the sand around Lubbock, only that
was a normal day back in those days.

KS: How did it affect the community? Was it a farming community?

AM: Oh yeah. It would burn cotton down, it was very hard on the farmers
because they didn’t have irrigation back in those days. They were at the mercy of Mother
Nature. The sand storms were bad. Since they’ve changed the method of cultivation,
which have cut down the sand storms 100%. A couple of years ago I don’t remember a
sand storm. Last year we had a couple but they weren’t anything compared to what we
had back in the ‘30s. I can vividly remember pulling the sheet up over my head to keep
from stifling, you know.
SM: In Hedley, there was railroad, farming, and no other business?
AM: Farming, no. The farms also had dairy cattle. My dad was an agent there in
Hedley and the farmers used to ship ten-gallon cans of milk down to Wichita Falls where
they had a creamery. They would separate that, the farmers would separate their milk,
use a hand separator, and ship the ten gallons of cream down to the creamery and they
would make butter and ice cream and all that stuff. That was one of the main things.
When a train stopped, when the passenger train stopped at Hedley, my dad would have
those ten-gallon cans loaded on them, a pull cart, pull it up close to the railroad car, the
[?] car they called it, they’d open the door, and dad would take that ten gallon can and lift
it in there and there would be like 15 or 20 of them that the farmers would bring in and in
the summertime, the cream would get hot and sometimes it would boil over and it smelt
awful, but dad would take gunny sacks and wet them down and pull them over the top of
them to cool them down in the warehouse until the train came by. That’s very vivid to
me and I used to help dad when I got a little older. I helped him load those cans of cream
on there. You had to lift them 18 inches off the handcart into the baggage car, and they
weigh 100 pounds because there was ten gallons at eight pounds per gallon plus the can
of cream, plus the empty can. I used to stake quite a bit of my time up at the station there
with dad and it was kind of interesting. I never wanted to be a railroader, but my
ambition when I was eight years old, I can remember people asking me what I wanted to
do and I wanted to be a second lieutenant in the Army Air Corps, a pilot. That was my
ambition. I remember telling people that and they’d say, ‘Ha ha!’ but it came to be. I
don’t know many people that have said they wanted to do something in life and exactly
do what they wanted to do. Therefore, I was very happy with my career. I spent 30 years
in the service. I got a degree from college and very happy. I got to fly all the time. They
don’t do that nowadays. You fly about 15 years and then they put you behind a desk.
Back in those days, of course I went through three wars and they needed pilots every war,
and that’s how I got to stay in. Occasionally, sometime I would get shifted out of
operations. In fact, when I was called back in 1949 after the war, after I got out of the
service and I was called back in because I stayed in reserve, they sent me to Keesler and I
went to electronics school there at Keesler and was shipped later on to Okinawa as a head
of electronics section in an all weather fighter squadron which we maintained radar sets
on the F-94 Lockheed Shooting Star I believe it was called. That was my job, to run that
electronics section in this squadron. I had about 20 people to maintain the electronics
radar sights and the radios and this stuff of the F-94s.

SM: Is there anything else you want to talk about in terms of your early life
before going into the Air Force? Have we pretty much covered everything before?

AM: In the Air Force?

SM: Before going into the Air Force, in the 1930s and early ‘40s.

AM: No, no questions.

SM: Do you remember Pearl Harbor when it happened? Do you remember

hearing about it?

AM: Oh yeah.

SM: Describe what you felt.

AM: I had a Model-A back then. I was I guess 15 years old. I had a Model-A
back in 1941. Dad paid 37 dollars for a Model A and that was my transportation and that
was my pickup, you know, my nowadays pickup, and that was a neat car. I used to go
everywhere in it and I spent 11 cents a gallon for gas. But I did deliver packages that
would come into the station to the merchants in town and I would get 10 cents a package
for delivering back in those days. That’s a gallon of gas. That’s how I kept the Model-A
up, and then I’d work on it myself quite a bit. But, the is December 7th was a Sunday and
I’d gone to church and I had a date that day, and so we went to Clarendon which is about
20 miles away from Hedley to go to a picture show. I took the girl to a picture show and
came back and I dropped her off about three o’clock in the afternoon and drove into my
home there and my dad met me on the front porch and said, ‘Well, we’re at war. The
Japs have attacked Pearl Harbor.’ I had been watching the paper, reading the paper about
the negotiations had been going on with the Japanese envoys and so it finally came to a
war. From that day on everybody’s life changed; mine did. Everybody was stunned,
didn’t know what to do, thought all the Japanese were spies, and didn’t trust them
obviously. The deal in California where they rounded up those… I voted for that because
later on if they proved themselves they should be turned loose, but everybody was…it
was kind of a hysteria that went on. Nobody trusted the Japanese. It was such a hideous
thing that happened, and where they killed 2400 people there at Pearl Harbor that day and
destroyed our Navy practically and everybody was very…they were stunned.

SM: Were there any Japanese living in your community?

AM: No, not anybody. We weren’t first hand, we didn’t have first hand
knowledge, but of course the press played it up; probably the wrong thing to do, but it
was probably the safe thing to do, you know. The only problem was keeping them that
long; they should have been able to find out if they were. They didn’t have a logic
towards the U.S. but of course most of them didn’t I would say. The true Japanese I
would imagine were really torn between their old nation and the new nation that they
were living in. I don’t know of any acts that happened, terrorist acts that happened, at all,
so obviously they were pretty loyal to the U.S., and probably if they weren’t loyal they
just kept within themselves. They’re a close community. It was not a good thing that
happened, the way we handled it. It was handled in a safe manner, but it was probably
not the most humane way of doing things.

SM: Of course shortly thereafter Germany declared war on the United States.

Was there any talk in your community about doing the same to the Germans?

AM: No, although I’ll bet they were watched. No, it wasn’t that hysteria mainly
because it wasn’t a sneak attack like the Japs did. That was a different thinking process.
The attack was something else, and I marvel at what happened. If you remember, they
made two attacks in Pearl Harbor. They were scheduled for three attacks. The third
attack was supposed to hit the oil reserves and they didn’t do it, and that saved us six
months to a year of action. We could get into the fight that much earlier than would have
happened if they had taken out all the oil reserves. They didn’t do it, I don’t understand
why. The deal with Doolittle in April after the attack in December was a horrendous
thing. We wanted to do something to prove that we could do things, and launching those
B-25s off those carriers was very great. Years later when I was training in A-1s I was
trained in that strip that Doolittle used as a mock carrier and I could still see the white
stripe down the takeoff end of the runway, 500 feet down. That was the length of the
carrier, the white stripe was still there on the runway and that means that you had to be
off the ground by that 500-foot. I can remember Doolittle, of course they lost all the
airplanes, lost 16 of them. One of the pilots was here in Lubbock, his number’s 15 I
believe off the carrier, still lives here in Lubbock, but that was a tremendous thing. Gosh, the people were jumping up and down with joy and everything; it proved that we had capability in the area.

SM: As a future Army Air Corps pilot, I take it this was something you were watching fairly closely as it was unfolding?

AM: Yep.

SM: Did you read much or build much?

AM: I built model airplanes.

SM: You built model airplanes?

AM: And I read model books.

SM: Okay, what about airpower theorists like Douhet, Billy Mitchell’s ideas? Were you familiar or aware of this before you went in the Air Force?

AM: Yeah, Billy Mitchell’s deal on the airpower capability of sinking ships, yes. I was familiar with that. But, I built model airplanes and I built a free flight powered and it would go up and spiral up and then spiral back down. The wind would drift it off to another field and you’d have to go over and get it, but it was a six-foot, a big six foot. I built rubber band models. So, I was coming up in status as far as thinking about Air Force. I really don’t know what I’d have done if I wouldn’t have gone in the Air Force because that was my niche. I loved it, eventually I loved it, and it was my dream to be a pilot and it fulfilled every dream you could ever possibly have because I got to fly all the time. I have 6500 hours of military flying. When I got out, I was 50 years old when I got out, 30 years of service, and the airlines were not taking pilots about that time. They weren’t hiring, and of course that’s where they get most of their pilots is from the Air Force, and rightly so. There are people that’s been in critical conditions many times and they know how to handle emergency situations pretty well and have experience. That means a lot.

SM: Speaking of those types of experiences, did you have any while you were serving in Burma?

AM: No, I didn’t.

SM: No stalls?
AM: No, no, when we came back from a mission we’d kick them out and push it and do acrobatics, and that’s not all bad because it teaches you more about the aircraft. But after we get past the bomb line, inside the bomb line, we couldn’t hardly wait to kick each other out in string and string formation, and we’d go into loops and rolls and Chandelles and lazy eights and follow me and that’s where we got the cattails on the cattail lake. We are lucky to be alive really. We didn’t kill anybody. You defend it by saying that you learn about your aircraft when you’re doing that, and you do have to know your aircraft if you’re going to go to combat. Loops and rolls, and trails, and you trail with a guy that ends up 100 yards from you, it’s very thrilling and exciting. Talking about that, going in on a bomb run and a strafing run, you have to watch yourself mentally because you get so excited and riled up and say, ‘Take that, you son of a gun!’ and you have to watch yourself because you want to bore in and get closer and get more bullets on your target and try harder and it’s very dangerous. That’s how you stick your nose in the ground. You have to be very cautious about target fixation as well as aggressiveness. You have to be aggressive, but not too aggressive.

KS: How old were you when you joined? Could you talk a little bit about that?

AM: 17. I was at Quanah at that time. My dad had died in 1942 and so mother moved to Quanah and I went to work for [?] and the cadet program opened up for 17 and ½ year old people and I had turned 17 and ½ just by that time, so I enlisted against my old mother’s wanting, she had to sign for me, and I went to Ft. Worth to take a medical exam and sure enough, everything worked out, and I was inducted in February before I graduated in May in high school and the principal gave me the diploma, or gave my mother the diploma, at graduation. I was already gone, and she walked up and got the diploma. I was already in the service. I went down to San Antonio, which is San Antonio Classification Center, which it classified you as a bombardier or navigator or a pilot and of course a pilot was high on the chain and everybody wanted to be a pilot. Fortunately, I turned out to be a fighter pilot. They classify you as a bomber pilot, two-engine pilot, multi engine pilot, or single engine pilot. I told them what I wanted and took the test and they said, ‘Okay, sure enough,’ and then I went into a lot of classroom activity as well as athletics. They really stretched you out athletics wise. You did all kinds of things that built your strength up. Back in those days I could run like a deer
forever. When you are 17 years old you could run forever. It didn’t bother me, 
calisthenics didn't bother me. Then I as sent to Uvalde, which was my primary school. 
They had taken over a country club and that was our…we lived at the country club with a 
swimming pool and quarters were real nice and the runway was a grass field. They 
didn’t have a runway. We flew PT-19s, Fairchildls, low wing. One thing the instructor 
told me, they said, ‘Al, you’ll never get hit in combat,’ and I said, ‘Why is that?’ and he 
said, ‘You never fly straight and level! You’re always in a skid or something!’ Anyway, 
I graduated, and then went to Waco Army Air Base there and flew BT-13s, the Vultee 
Vibrators they called them, they vibrated every time you stalled them, they shook like a 
Model A. Then I went to Moore Field for advanced AT-6 flying which is the greatest 
airplane in the world, beautiful. You know what an AT-6 is, Texan, called a Texan? Of 
course it had 550 horsepower and had a machine gun, which you could fire with it and 
just a tremendous trainer, really. 

SM: Where was the machine gun mounted on that aircraft? 

AM: Up in the nose I think, yeah, 30-caliber. They taught you first of all how to 
solo it and land it and they taught you the refinements of acrobatics, precision flying, a lot 
of formation flying, and they introduced you to night flying, and instrument flying, and 
that was a big innovation. Instrument flying is a problem. Then, we went down to 
Matagorda Island for six weeks of gunnery training. This is where we got our primary 
training for attacking ground targets, airborne targets with the target sleeve, and then 
bombing. We dropped some 100-pounders there called process bombs. That refined 
your flying. We got through. Of course this is the advanced and this is where you won 
your wings, and you were a rough pilot. You had all the necessary requirements of a 
pilot but you just needed to be honed a little bit to become a real pilot. My mother came 
down for graduation and even all of her friends gave her fuel chits for the cars, fuel 
tickets to go down and see me graduate. Then I got a month off and then I reported up to 
Hartford, Connecticut, at Windsor Locks. They’re close to the engine factory up there, 
can’t think of it right now, P&W, Pratt and Whitney’s. 

SM: Now speaking of chits, was there a lot of rationing before you left? 

AM: No, they were thinking about it. They rationed meat and sugar, gasoline, 
meat, and I don’t know anything else, tires were rationed.
SM: Yeah, rubber. Did they start the drives yet before you left, the rubber drives, the paper drives, to try and get…

AM: Well they were cranking it up. The metal drives, yeah. There wasn’t much aluminum around, there wasn’t any aluminum cans so they didn’t do that.

SM: There were tin cans weren’t there?

AM: There were tin cans, yeah, they were metal. Everybody was put on a conservation kick and turn the lights out in the house when you’re gone. Everything was downplayed. You didn’t use stuff that you didn’t need to do.

SM: Were there air raid drills or anything like that?

AM: No. They wouldn’t fly in Hedley, Texas anyway. But, I imagine back in…no. The biggest scare was the submarines off the coast of California and the Japanese balloon, the airborne balloons that the Japanese put up and the Japanese current that drifted across the California, that was a big deal. Not many of them landed there, but they started forest fires and all that stuff. The big deal was shelling. You didn’t hear much about it, but it did happen. A Japanese submarine would shell the coast of California in certain areas. But, they got the patrols going out there and that kind of shut them off of doing that. The Air Force ran coastal patrols and they kept planes up all the time, which stopped the Japanese from doing that there.

SM: Were there air droppable torpedoes at that point, or were they just radio in?

AM: No, they were probably bombs.

SM: Oh they would just drop bombs?

AM: Yeah, or airborne depth charges probably more than anything, but there were bombs, too. I don’t think any torpedoes. They wouldn’t use a torpedo on a submarine probably; it’s too small. Oh, they would machine gun it too of course, but if they were on the surface they would shoot back; they were pretty good.

SM: I forgot to ask you, when you mentioned that you had your car, your Model A, was that common for a young man your age to have a Model A car available to them to drive around?

AM: If you had the money.

SM: Was it common in your community? Were a lot of other 16 and 17 year old guys like you driving around?
AM: No, that was probably...no, it was not common. I was one of the lucky guys that got a car. Actually, I think I was 12 or 13 when I got the car.

SM: Did you have to get a license?

AM: No, no license, and one reason because it’s kind of a farm community. But, no, we were talking about that the other day, my wife and I, about how young you were.

My mother took me out driving because dad didn’t have the patience, so mother took me out driving. I learned to shift gears. I had a name for my Model A. He was called Hasta because anytime it went anywhere it hasta have something like oil or gas or water! I had a lot of fun with it. I had a rumble seat in it. It was a coupe. One time watermelon season we boys, three boys, got in there and we were hungry for watermelon so we went out into a, I don’t know, pulled out into the road where watermelons were and a couple of guys got out and we got a couple of watermelons and started bringing them back and the farmer saw us and started shooting up in the air, I’m sure, a shotgun, which just scared the tar out of us and we never did that again! The worst thing I ever did was I guess we pushed over an outside toilet one time and got a couple of watermelons and later on a couple of beers, and that was the worst thing we ever did. We didn’t steal anything and we didn’t know what dope was. The only drugs we had was a couple of beers here and there. We didn’t smoke. We used to pull the bark off of a fence post, cedar bark, roll it up in paper and try to smoke that, and that’s so hot that you can’t believe it. It’s just like a grapevine, and it’s a straight flame in your throat. It’s really bad. We tried to chew tobacco and couldn’t do that. Actually, we were good kids really compared to today. We were tremendous kids compared to today’s kids, some of the kids today. We didn’t get into trouble. We didn’t think about stealing stuff.

SM: There wasn’t a neighborhood bad boy who did get into serious trouble and do bad things?

AM: No, you had some that were kind of on a fringe edge, but not really bad.

We played in the band, high school band. I played the clarinet. I wasn’t very good. It kept us out of trouble.

SM: How about sports, high school sports?

AM: I played baseball. I played a little bit of basketball, but wasn’t very good at that but I was a good baseball player. I played shortstop, and good hitter. I should have
pursued that, but I didn’t. Of course I wouldn’t have had a chance in the service. They
took it all out of everybody, the sports out of you, but I’m not sorry.

SM: Sorry, I didn’t mean to drag us back. Why don’t we go ahead and do a little
training again? Any other questions about the training that you had for him?

KS: No, other than you felt that it adequately prepared you?

AM: You can never train a guy, completely train him, for combat. You have to
let him gradually grow up in combat, and that’s what happened over there. We were
getting shot at but it wasn’t a fierce combat like it was in Europe, that one wasn’t. It
wasn’t like Vietnam. You see the bullets come by you and you wouldn’t think too much
about it, but the only time you think about it is when it hits you. It wasn’t too bad, but
you could see them winking on the ground that they were shooting at you, but they were
small caliber, mostly small caliber. Guys got hit but not in a serious way. A couple of
three got shot down.

SM: What was the most difficult aspect of learning to fly for you?

AM: Instruments, contact flying was not a problem, soloing wasn’t a problem,
but instruments, trusting your instruments rather than your feelings. You have to throw
away your feelings and trust your instruments period and I got caught a couple of times
flying a guy’s wing in instruments and I knew I was upside down or going vertical one
way or the other and I’d glance at the instruments and it was nice and steady, so you just
cant trust your feelings. You have to trust your instruments, and this is where a lot of
people get into trouble, especially the young civilian pilots like Kennedy up there. That
was pure ridiculous. He didn’t take a pilot with him, in a new airplane he wasn’t familiar
with, that was terrible. Too bad.

SM: What about celestial navigation, did they train you in that?

AM: Well, just before I went over to Okinawa I was stationed at Bergstrom down
here and flying, I was still in electronics section but I talked my way into flying F-84s
and they talked to people in F-84s, it had an autopilot, to shoot celestial navigation and
you take a sexton up with you and shoot it. You’d shoot a run line but you wouldn’t
shoot crossways, so you’d be along this line someplace and your time distance would tell
you where you were, but I did get a little bit of training in celestial navigation. That one
unit was a special unit come to find out later on that was scheduled to drop nuke weapons
and they were long range, put heavy tanks on them, they were extreme range airplanes, and that’s why they used celestial navigation and they were scheduled for Russian targets.

SM: Before that point, like in your introductory training, they didn’t introduce you to celestial navigation?

AM: No, not much, no; a little bit, but not much. They were approved that they could fly a sextant in a fighter and navigate, which nowadays is not required with all of your…what is it?

SM: GPS?

AM: Yes, GPS, within what, a couple of yards of where you want to be? Pretty good, that’s pretty good. Now that really is a boon aviation. Back then my last assignment was 141s out of Travis. It was 1970, it was assigned to Travis Air Force Base and they had heavy cargo and a true fighter pilot in a heavy cargo airplane is bad, but I got to fly anyway. I was trying to get back here at Reese. I was stationed at Reese here. I had the T-38 squadron at Reese and I was trying to get back to Reese but my rank was such that they didn’t have a slot open, a rank slot open for me here, so they put me in the 86th Transport Squadron over at Travis Air Force Base and I came down just to check out in the 141s and went back to Travis and flew for two years there in support of Vietnam. It was 1970 so I flew for two years and we flew from Travis to Hickham to Wake Island to Philippines to in country Vietnam, Saigon, and then out of Saigon back to Clark Air Force Base to Okinawa, to Yakota, Japan, and then probably go into Korea for a couple of loads and then back and then directly back into Travis Air Force Base nine and a half hours later. We used a navigator back in those days and that was before GPI was on there, and I understand now they don’t have any navigators at all. When transports come in they just use your ground positioning which is so reliable apparently that they just don’t have any trouble with it. All you do is plug in your coordinates and that’s it. Should be a boom. I remember flying out in the Pacific. You know the Atlantic is just like a bathtub compared to the Pacific. It’s huge. I remember a couple of times going into Clark out of Wake Island. We would have to deviate because of thunderstorms and we’d deviate like 100 miles this way or 100 miles that way, and then you end up not knowing where you were. The navigator was pretty good.
SM: Now after the German surrender in the spring of ’45, you guys…
AM: We were still at war.
SM: You were still at war in the China-Burma-India theater, still trying to
convince the Japanese to give up?
AM: They surrendered in July didn’t they, August? No, it wasn’t August.
SM: Oh, you’re talking about the Japanese surrender?
AM: No, the Germans.
SM: That was earlier in the year, I thought it was in May.
AM: May!
SM: May of ’45.
AM: So we were still at war over there, and August 6th was when…
SM: The first atomic bomb was dropped.
AM: We were still running missions up until about the 1st of August I guess, and
then they said no more combat missions, just fly and maintain the aircraft.
SM: Did they say why no more combat missions?
AM: They kept giving us just a few missions each day and it got down to no
more because they knew the war was about over.
SM: They knew they were going to drop the atomic bombs.
AM: I guess it must have been when they dropped the first one they shut us down
completely, and then the second one of course the war was over after that. We didn’t run
a full measure of missions for about the last three weeks. They knew it was the end, and
of course being in combat for as long as we were, you get a little skittish about the last
mission. You start thinking about the last mission. I’ll tell you about the third to the last
mission there in Vietnam if I may later on because it was kind of hectic. You say well
I’ve been through war and here I’m going to not come back!
SM: So close to the end.
AM: Yes.
SM: When did you hear about the dropping of the atomic bombs?
AM: We had the…what was that newspaper?
SM: The *Stars and Stripes*?
AM: Yeah, and of course we had radios over there.
SM: So you heard immediately?

AM: Yes.

SM: There wasn’t any significant delay?

AM: No.

SM: What did you all think of that, the use of atomic weapons? Did you have any concerns?

AM: We thought it was great because our unit was slated to go into Japan and they knew a lot of us would be lost over there, and of course millions of Japanese were saved as well as thousands of Americans were saved, regardless of what anybody thinks, that’s exactly what happened. It saved lives even though it killed 200,000 people, Japanese. They’re the ones that started it, though.

SM: When did you actually start making your way back to the United States?

AM: They shipped us to Calcutta in a holding camp there, about three weeks later, and then we stayed in the holding camp waiting for boat transportation. We came back on the General Sulton or something like that which is a 20,000-ton ship, personnel ship. We started I guess about the first week in November back, and it took us three or four weeks to get back from Calcutta. We went to the Red Sea and through the Mediterranean and Suez and then Gibraltar and the North Sea, and the North Sea in November is bad medicine, it is really rough; everybody got sick aboard the ship. I was a compartment commander for airmen. We had 250 airmen down in this compartment and I was in charge of it. Well I had to come up for air several times. It was bad. They stopped serving meals for a while. But, we got back and got to Camp Kilmer, New York and put us on a train. I don’t know where we went. I guess we went through the southern part of the U.S. and ended up in Camp Kilmer in East Texas and I was discharged there. They said, ‘Okay Captain Martin,’ I was captain by that time, they said, ‘Captain Martin,’ and I said, ‘Give me a discharge!’ and they said, ‘We’re not going to let you out.’ I said, ‘What?’ I said, ‘I want to go to college!’ I had enough dang sense to say I wanted to go to college, and I did, and they said, ‘Okay, we’ll let you out if you’ll sign to stay in the reserves,’ and I said, ‘Okay, I’ll sign that.’ Fortunately that counted for my return by staying in the reserves so I never broke the continuity of my longevity and later on in the term it paid off because I had 28 years active duty and 2 and a half years of
reserves, which counted for retirement. So, I got home on Thanksgiving Day of 1945 and my mother was waiting. I guess I came back by bus, and had Thanksgiving dinner.
Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Al Martin. It is the 19th of January 2000 at approximately 1:30 we are in the Special Collections Library Interview room and Kim Sawyer is interviewing Al Martin with me. Mr. Martin, why don’t you discuss briefly some of the events leading to you getting out of the Air Force active duty and going to the Air Force Reserve while you were in college.

Al Martin: Okay. After the war, after the war was over with or we came back into the states and went through Camp Kilmer I went to, I can’t remember the camp name… they interviewed you for staying in or getting out of the service. Since I was fairly young and was a captain and had combat experience they tried to keep me and I told them I wanted to get out and go to college and that was the break point. They said they wouldn’t object to that way, but they wanted me to stay in the reserve in case something else happens in the world. And I said, ‘Okay. If that’s the only way I can do it.’ So I got out and signed the reserve chit, which made me liable to come back in, to be the first to be called back in case another incident happened. I got out in November and started my college in December ’46, right 1946 at Hardin Simmons University in Abilene Texas. From that point on I went straight through from summers and winters and got out in three and a half years. I did that because I was a little older than the average freshman. Most of the GIs did the same thing, it was a big influx of GIs into all the colleges, but the GI program was a wonderful program for many. It saved a lot of people’s lives, it really did and it’s really great. We got ninety dollars a month when we were single and 105 if we were married. Shortly after 1946 later on I got married and been married ever since.
SM: And that was reserve pay that you received. The 90 to…
AM: No that was, they call that…
SM: Oh that was the GI Bill pay you received.
AM: GI Bill pay. I didn’t get paid for reserve; apparently they didn’t pay for reserve. They had a hard time starting the program up right after the war, it took them a while to get started and then later on I could go down to Austin and fly T6 down there, occasionally I’d be scheduled down there and fly. Actually the Abilene Airport had a L5, which was apparently a reserve airplane and I flew it occasionally. We did that for three and a half years and then build up for Korea had started. I was notified just before I graduated to report to Keesler Field, Mississippi to enter electronics, airborne electronics training. From there on… from that point I asked them to let me stay in the college program until I graduated, which was only about three or four months, and they said, ‘Okay.’ I could. They tried to bring me in as a first lieutenant and I said, ‘No I was a captain in combat and I would like to go in as a captain.’ They said, ‘Alright Captain Martin, report to Keesler at…’ a certain certain date, which I did. I went through Airborne Electronics school, which is a eighteen months course, I believe it was eighteen months. No I’m sorry it is a one-year course, airborne electronics. When I got out of that school they sent me to Keesler School, the same place as an atomic…went in to their atomic energy training course. When I got out of that course which was about six months long I was assigned to Okinawa in a fighter squadron there as an airborne electronics officer, running the electronics section for the squadron.

SM: Before we go too far further, I wanted to ask you really quickly… While you were in school, while you were in college and you were going down and flying on occasion. Was this to maintain your pilots’ rating for the Air Force?
AM: Apparently so. I think you had to get to maintain four hours a month I believe.

SM: Okay. So you at least flew that monthly to maintain to maintain your Air Force [?], right?
AM: Yeah. They had a requirement to keep your hand in flying.
SM: Did you do any flying there in school, near the school? Like you know, just civilian flying?
AM: No I didn’t.

SM: Just official Air Force flying?

AM: Ah uh.

SM: Okay.

AM: When we got to Keester they had B-25s there and we got to be an IP in the B-25.

SM: Now when you went again, during your college period, when you went to fly periodically to maintain your rating. Did you go in uniform? In Air Force uniform? Or did you go in civilian clothes? Do you recall?

AM: Civilian clothes I believe.

SM: Okay.

AM: I’m pretty sure. It was like I said, it was not well organized and they were just trying to put together something.

SM: It was more important just to keep you current.

AM: Yeah! It was. They had to keep a pool of pilots available.

SM: Now just as you were getting ready to leave school, the Chinese Communists were successful in defeating the Nationalist Communists. Do you remember… oh the Nationalist Chinese, excuse me…Do you remember when that news broke and was that something that was [?]. kicked off mainland China, taken to Taiwan and of course [?] transport transported all those guys over. Did you have any thoughts at the time of the significance of that?

AM: I was having fun in college but I really didn’t think they’d call me back in. It was really strange when they did call. They called me back in… and a lot of my co-hearts were called back in also. We didn’t think, I didn’t think that it was that serious and apparently it was that serious… that’s what happened.

SM: And let’s see… other important events that occurred or other activities that were going on while you were in school. Of course McCarthyism was…

AM: Oh yeah!

SM: Pretty powerful and crept the country a lot of the Atom spies were being revealed and tried. Were these the things that you were…

AM: Yes. I was aware of.
AM: Do you have any specific thoughts that you recall?
AM: Well, I thought the, who were the not the [?] but the…
SM: Rosenbergs?
AM: Rosenberg, yeah I thought that was the most gross action against the United States as there ever could be and apparently it was pretty serious. Apparently they gave the secrets over to Russia, a lot of the secrets of to Russia. I think they deserved what they got.
SM: You agreed with the executions?
AM: Oh yes! Oh yes! I can’t imagine anybody doing that, being an American citizen and doing that. And they did, apparently willingly… that’s bad news as far as I’m concerned. McCarthyism was a little extreme I thought or however most of the people he accused in Hollywood really were communists. I know he ruined a lot of careers or at least labeled them as being communist. If they were, I thought the label was appropriate, if they weren’t then he was wrong. I thought was a little strong [?]. Back in those years that was kind of a history… everybody was running around not scared of communism but aware of it and it wasn’t mass hysteria, but it was pretty close to that if you were a communist. I don’t see anything wrong with that. I really don’t.
SM: Well, when you went to school, we you went back active duty Air Force, the airborne electronics school. What did that involve and what were you trained to do at that one-year school?
AM: I was trained as a section leader inside of a squadron, I would be the electronics officer running an electronic section, which was manned with about twenty five airmen and we maintained all the airborne, all the ships’ airborne sets at that time. My unit over in Okinawa had F-94s, which were two-seater jets that had a RO in the back seat and he had a scope and we would run intercepts, all weather intercepts, on unknown aircrafts and that’s what we did over in Okinawa. I was trained to maintain the set and I knew quiet a bit about the set, but of course we had airmen technicians that were pretty skilled, but I maintained the section, ran the section, scheduled the section, then I flew. At that time I was not checked out in 94s so I flew T-Birds, T-33s to Japan and back and whatever to pick up parts and stuff like that. Later on I went into the commander’s office and told him that although I liked electronics, I was still a pilot. I had more experience...
then most of his flight commanders. Would he consider converting me to a regular pilot in the squadron? He said, ‘Yes. I would.’ So I upgraded right there in the squadron to a flight commander and then later on got to be an operations officer of the unit. Then just before I left Okinawa, it was a two year tour over there, we converted to 86-Ds, 86 Dogs, which are the black nose F-86s, which have radars in their nose… same type of radar and everything. So I checked out in 94s in the 86s and we run our own intercepts. The pilot had to scope up in front, autopilot on the aircraft, which helped a lot… we ran the intercepts from the cockpit, from our own cockpit.

SM: So the radar system, or the systems you worked on the electronic systems were primarily the internal radar systems of the aircraft?

AM: Oh yeah.

SM: Not electronic counter measure systems or electronic eavesdropping systems or anything like that?

AM: No no no. I was all airborne electronic systems.

SM: So you went to Okinawa. When did you arrive? After your training.

AM: I guess it was in ’50, late ’50.

SM: Late ’50. Okay. So you were in Okinawa for the duration of the rest of the…

AM: Two year tour.

SM: Two years which was the rest of the Korean War really, pretty much. From ’51 to ’53.

AM: Yeah.

SM: Did your unit run missions to Korea?

AM: No.

SM: Or over Korea?

AM: No.

SM: Okay.

AM: We did not. We ran intercept missions, they were B-50s.

SM: B-52?

AM: No. B-50s they were propeller driven.

SM: B-50s. Okay.
AM: The propeller driven B-50.

SM: Oh okay, I got ya.

AM: And there was a wing of those aircraft in Kadena, which is one of the bases there in Okinawa. They would go out and bomb Korea from this base in Okinawa and the Japs would try to… the Koreans would try to sneak a fighter in behind the B-50s and we would intercept them and drive them away really. We never shot one down, but they never got in close. And also of the China coast we were running Clandestine missions in there, the Navy was, with their Neptunes and listening… well, I guess they were spying really, and they would come back from the east China coast and sometimes they would have their IFF on and sometimes they wouldn’t. If they didn’t then they were unknowns and we were obligated to go up and identify them.

SM: Go ahead.

AM: Okay yeah, we set three minute alerts in Naha, was our base. There’s two bases on Okinawa, Naha and Kadena, Kadena’s a big bomber base and a huge base, Naha’s a little fighter base and that’s where we operated off of. We were obligated to be aircraft airborne in three minutes and therefore we sat on, back up on the end of the runway in the little pot hooches and the four man hooches that we’d sat off the side of the runway and we’d be basically right there… and when the klaxon went off we would run for the aircraft and be airborne in three minutes and we could do that. It was big weather there in Okinawa; especially in the rainy season it’s something else. Can imagine from sitting in a chair… we didn’t allow the number one people to go to sleep, but if you were asleep and happened to be asleep and the klaxon went off and you were number one to be airborne… well, it’s kind of dangerous because you weren’t fully awake when you got the airborne. So didn’t allow those pilots to go sleep if they were number one. One time I was set an alert and it was rainy and a nasty day and a nasty night it was, about midnight and we got an unknown so I got scrambled and got airborne and they told me the target was eighty miles out. So we went out eighty miles, the East China Sea and there’s nothing darker then the East China Sea at midnight… it is, there’s not any lights out and you can’t see anything, it’s just like in an ink well. So we were flying instruments and we were about a thousand foot off the water and we made an intercept on this aircraft, unknown aircraft and we got up close to him and worked our ways in there. He was
flying about 140 knots and we were just airborne and full of fuel and therefore I put the
gear down and partially flaps down to slow up and we made a curve attack on him or
pursuit on him and looked him over. Got up close to him within 30-40 feet of him and
we were running blackout and he was blacked out and all of a sudden one of his crew
members turned an Aldis lamp on, right on me. Do you know what an Aldis lamp is?

SM: No

AM: It’s a bright spotlight.

SM: Okay.

AM: A real bright spotlight. Of course we were blacked out and turned and
shined it in our face and we were 140 knots [?] off the water. I just backed away from
him and called the patrol and told them… and the guy turned into me at 140 knots and
you know that’s, we were really close to stall speed and flying instruments and black
night. I just considered him trying to kill me, you know. We backed off and I called the
radio control and said, ‘Midas,’ that was the control name and I forgot my call sign, I
said, ‘Request permission to fire.’ He was making unwanted maneuvers on me I backed
off and I said, ‘Request for permission to fire.’ Midas came back and said, ‘Hold your
fire a minute. We’ll look into this.’ And they Navy guy had been on my frequency and I
didn’t know it and he said, ‘No no this is Navy’ so and so, ‘I didn’t know who you were.’
And I said, ‘Midas, request for mission to fire.’ And he said, ‘No no! Don’t do that.
Don’t do that.’ And that’s how made I was. They said, ‘Okay. Just follow him into
Kadena and see that he gets on the ground.’ So I did and when I got on my ground,
landed on my air base at Naha…I called him up and I chewed his tail out and he never
did that again, but he was just about to kill two people, real easy to do that. That was one
of the harrowing experiences I had over there. The weather in Okinawa is very, not
conducive to good weather [?] I should say… cloudy most of the time and rains and
visibility’s down quite low. One time I got up on a training mission and the weather
moved in and the radar went off, the GCA went off frequencies ground control approach
and there wasn’t a way to get down except to try to get my radar operator to guide me in
and we did get on the ground. On the way, on taxiing back to the [?] area I ran out of fuel,
so it was pretty close. Okinawa is a nice place, we really enjoyed it… I got my family
over there and we really enjoyed Okinawa. It does have some limitations on flying.
SM: You mentioned that the Koreans would sometimes scramble aircraft to try to get in behind some of the bombers. Did… were there ever any Soviet aircraft encountered?

AM: No, but there might have Soviet pilots but not any Soviet aircrafts.

SM: Soviet pilots in North Korean communist aircraft models?

AM: Yeah yeah. They thought that’s what happened. I had a friend that had a… B-29’s what we had over there rather then B-50s, B-29s.

SM: Okay.

AM: That was a B-29 pilot and he invited me to go on a mission with him so I did. I went on a bombing mission with him it was under [?] and at night and dropped the bomb and came on back home. We used to get scrambled quite often, they thought the Koreans were trying to sneak in on us and follow you back to the base and shoot you down.

SM: What kind of a bombing run was it, do you know? What were the targets on that bombing mission that you were…

AM: No. I don’t. I don’t remember the target. I can’t remember the target, but I think it was a steel mill up in Northern Korea.

SM: Okay. Now, you mentioned that you brought your family to Okinawa, when you spent your two years there. How were you treated by the Japanese people? Did you have much interaction with the Japanese?

AM: Oh they were Okinawans mainly on Okinawa.

SM: Right.

AM: And they didn’t like the Japanese because the Japanese were so harsh on them when they had… We got along with the Koreans great. We had a maid and a papasan, which took care of flowers and trees outside and got along great with them. And we enjoyed going up to the town and it was like a third world country town of course. We enjoyed going up and bickering with the merchants and buying stuff. They had good vegetables there in Okinawa, I can remember that.

SM: So most of the people you interacted with in Okinawa were Korean?

AM: No, they were Okinawans.

SM: Okinawans.
AM: Okinawans, there not Japanese.

SM: But the island itself is controlled by Japan?

AM: Right.

SM: But the Okinawans don’t consider themselves Japanese.

AM: No.

SM: Interesting. I didn’t realize that.

AM: In fact they didn’t like the Japanese and I am really surprised that we turned
[?] back over to Japan. We kept lending rights for the two bases and I guess probably
rights to put some fruits in there, but we turned the base over… we turned the island over
to them. It’s really a surprise to me that we had a really difficult battle there more or less.

SM: Yes.

AM: There was the suicide cliff, I don’t know whether you knew about that or
not. But the Marines at the end of the Battle at Okinawa, pushed the Japanese right up to
the cliffs and the cliffs were about 100-150-200 feet off the water and the Marines pushed
the Japanese into the Sea, the ones that didn’t surrender. There were many of them that
didn’t surrender and they went right on into the sea and killed themselves. The Marines
had quite a name their for a while… the weren’t allowed on the island after the war for a
while, for a few years because of the action of the Marines, which were war actions. If
they didn’t surrender then what else…

SM: Well, what else do you remember as far as your units operations during the
Korean War and how they were in certain ways perhaps complimentary to what other Air
Force units in theater were doing? Did you… what was your, besides that interdiction of
the occasional air cover, was there anything else that you guys did regarding the Korean
War?

AM: Well, they occasionally pulled some of our pilots up to replace pilots up in
the forward area. They did that. That’s about all… they had, I guess they had a couple
there-squadrons of 94s up in Korea, they were originally in Japan and when the war
started they moved them into Korea. They were just units like ours… occasionally we
would send some people up, but…

SM: Did your unit… I’m sorry.
AM: Sometimes they’d come back to us or sometimes they’d be permanently stationed in a new squadron.

SM: Did your units suffer any loses while you were there? Aircraft, human, anything?

AM: Yes. We had a couple of people that got lost because of the poor navigations. When bad weather set in the ground control radar would go off the air and a phenomena with phenomena that over Okinawa the jet winds, jet streams would be over the top of Okinawa and if you got into a jet stream you would be pushed east of the island, always east of the island. We got a couple of guys that bellied in the water and we picked but they were very lucky. A couple would crash hit into the island and kill the pilots, one in bad weather and one of them was just routine flying.

SM: Pilot error?

AM: Uh huh. Probably. Either that or mechanical error, we don’t know which.

SM: Yeah. Now how much information were you receiving while you were stationed in Naha?

AM: Uh huh.

SM: About the Korean war. In particular things like for instance…

AM: Oh we’d get briefed.

SM: The conflict between Macarthur and Truman.

AM: Oh yeah.

SM: All that stuff. Truman…

AM: Well you had of course the Armed Forces radio you know that might have been a little slanted, but we also had the paper…

SM: The Stars and Stripes.

AM: Yeah. Stars and Stripes.

SM: Now what was the slant that you heard on armed forces radio about the Macarthur-Truman debates.

AM: We heard that the… actually they were pretty much even that Macarthur had demanded to go into China and that was a big conflict.

SM: And nuke them.

AM: Yeah.
SM: He wanted to nuke.

AM: Yeah and he, yeah. And of course Truman didn’t want to do that so that’s why he brought him back and fired him. Of course that’s the right thing to do because he’s the Commander in Chief, not Macarthur. Macarthur got a little bit big for his pants and… he might have been [?], but that would have started a war, another war in China. We were basically… I think we were basically afraid that China would get in the war with full, all four feet. They did put some troops in there, but they didn’t unleash their whole military against us, which would have been bad. I think that was the deciding factor not to go into China or nuke China.

SM: What did you and your fellow airman think about the idea at the time? Do you remember what you thought about nuking China and did you think that [?]

AM: I can [?]. No. I think we were pretty cautious about that because we realized that there was great forces over there that was being held back and they could be released and the problems start all over again. Which they did a little bit, they did send Chinese troops in there, but I think the right thing was done.

SM: Okay. So after you finish your tour in Okinawa you came back to the United States. What did you do then?

AM: Came back to Tucson, Arizona.

SM: Okay.

AM: In an all weather fighter outfit and we had 86 Dogs, 86-Ds, all weather… and out mission was to protect the soft underbelly of the United States from the Mexicans. (laughing)

SM: You’re serious?

AM: I’m serious.

SM: That was the mission?

AM: That was our mission.

SM: To protect the soft underbelly of the Unites States from Mexico.

AM: Uh huh. But of course probably not from the Mexican, but the possibility of Russia putting troops and putting an air force in Mexico.

SM: Right. Come in from the south.
AM: Probably we were held in reserve too. We had a good squadron there in Tucson, really a good squadron…. And killed a couple people but we had a good squadron. The 86 Dogs were brand new at that time and on take off you’d go into burn, after-burner on the take off… you know what the burner is?

KS: Explain it to me. Elaborate.

AM: Okay it’s a… you’ve got a jet engine and at the back end of the jet engine you have a device that throws raw fuel back there and it’s just like a blow torch. It gives you an extra 50 percent push. So if you’ve got… like we had 10,000 pounds of thrust and when you kicked it in and go 15,000 pounds of thrust.

SM: It’s like turbo.

AM: Uh huh. And if you… but back in those days technology was not great enough to allow you to use it for very long, five minutes was the max otherwise you’d burn up the thing and blow up. So therefore, right after take off we’d pull it out of burner. After you got the wheels in the well and cleaned up the cockpit, you would pull it out of burner to keep it from… Well, also it uses fuel about three times as fast too. We had those considerations. But at 100 percent throttle, which is without after burner, you still got part of that thrust and you know, it’s a good airplane.

SM: How fast would usually travel in those aircrafts? How fast?

AM: Would it go?

SM: Well, what was your usual main speed on a mission or a training?

AM: 450 knots.

SM: 450, okay.

AM: That was probably a good cruise.

SM: Pretty quick.

AM: Yeah! Pretty quick, pretty good bird. It was like the F-86 Sabers, it was the same airplane except they put a little larger nose in it and put the radar set in those. But they extended the nose for the antenna.

SM: Okay.

AM: The black nose. You remember?

SM: I haven’t seen a picture of that.
AM: Just like the F-86 Saber except it’s got a black nose on it and the cone is about like that…
SM: And that’s what makes it all weather?
AM: Yeah. Good bird, good bird! Flew like an angel, it really did.
SM: Now you yourself chuckled when you said to protect the soft underbelly of the United States as the primary mission…
AM: That’s what all were…
SM: Right, but was that your attitude at the time too? Did you guys see this as kind of funny?
AM: Yeah, I think so.
SM: Because that likely hood of that happening…
AM: That was a time of uncertainty. Right after the war, well a little bit, you know, after the war.
SM: After Korea.
AM: And that was a time of uncertainty and we had a… air defense command had a, as I remember, forty squadrons throughout the United States. Air defense command is primarily a defensive weapon, primary purpose is to shoot down enemy aircraft and not to be going… you know the range on it was probably, the radius of action was probably 300 miles. We were within 70 miles of the border so we could fight with Mexico a little bit. But there were like forty squadrons and eventually they realized that this wasn’t going to happen and they started tarring down the air defense command. They finally got down to twenty squadrons I think, but they kept Tucson’s squadron for a period of time. I don’t know… they didn’t have any military, any air force there at that time and finally they had a SAC base, we were a SAC base there, Davis Mothen. But it was a bomber base, it wasn’t a… and that was probably one of the reasons they had us there was to protect the bombs from attack, which looking back on it is not very realistic now. But of course they had that many squadrons, they had to base them in certain places so that was a place to put it. A very nice base, beautiful weather. We flew early in the mornings and late in the afternoons… and noontime you couldn’t put your hand on the aircraft it was too hot. So in the summertime we didn’t fly, say from eleven o’clock to four o’clock, the heat of the day. Start cooling off with little night missions because
we were all weather and we were going to fill in… and flew day missions in the early in
the morning to keep up our day proficiency.

SM: How long were you stationed in Tucson?

AM: Three years, four years, four years.

SM: So until about ’56–’57?

AM: ’56…’52 to ’56.

SM: Okay.

AM: Yeah… and then…

SM: And then?

AM: Well I got a call from headquarters ATC, they wanted me to go up to
NORAD. Are you familiar with NORAD? It was near Peterson Air Force Base in
California, in Colorado and Peterson was the base there in town, it was actually in
town…called ENT Air Force Base, I’m sorry. Peterson is the airbase out there. ENT Air
Force Base was the headquarters of NORAD and that’s where all the plotting of the
unknown aircrafts was and they wanted… you know, I was operations officer in the
squadron in Tuscan and that’s the best job in the Air Force, probably. I got to fly when I
wanted to, had 26-28-30 pilots to control… well they wanted me to go up and be a
controller, a duty controller at NORAD, one of the guys that controlled a section of
people that plotted on the board. So after I scratched and fought and lost my… lost it, I
had to go up there and be one of the controllers. It was probably a good job, but as far as
my career is concerned I didn’t want to go, I wanted to fly. What happened, I took over a
section of 20-22 airmen, we plotted the board and we were on eight-hour shifts and had a
rotating shift. They had five of those people just like me and we had five plotting
sections. Of course it took three of those sections to run a twenty-four hour mission,
which we did plot. Therefore we would stay on the day shift for a week and switch over
a night shift and then over to a midnight shift. It took five shifts to do it. We plotted all
the unknowns, we plotted what was known as a critical unknown number that was, for
example the United States, the radar is covering the United States now and we were able
to monitor any unknown aircraft, probably not little bitty piper cubs and stuff, but
anything significant aircraft. We were monitoring them and they’d become either a
known or unknown. If you were unknown you didn’t follow a flight plan or you did have
an IFF aboard. I don’t think that commercials were required to have an IFF at that time, but anyway. If you got into a critical number of unknowns, which is for example in the daytime twenty unknown aircrafts throughout the United States, it became a watch item. And if they were concentrated up, around Alaska or up in New England of that area, they would come especially watch item. And we would send out the ADC aircraft to identify them, whether they were friendlies or unknowns, friendly or unfriendly. That was our job… we’d send these people out day or night it wouldn’t make a difference, the weather didn’t make any difference. In fact we scrambled a couple of times some people from a base up in New York and they were socked in and just scrambled them off, he had no chance to get back at the home base. He had to be diverted into another base so we knew that it was critical whether this guy was a (?) airliner or whatever. Like I say those time were uncertain and we didn’t know what Russia was doing, you know.

SM: Do you recall what the largest number of unknowns you yourself had while you were on watch?

AM: The least number?

SM: The largest. What was the largest number of unknowns that you encountered?

AM: Well I was on there the night, I was on duty when… this is kind of a funny story. BMEWS, Ballistic Missile Early Warning Sites up in Alaska, it’s a huge radar site up there and it’s a stationary array that sets up like this (showing with hands), points towards Russia. It was brand new and they were just testing it out and they were just about to come online and this particular night we started getting unknown up in the Alaska area and they were just, you know, like a hundred and then a thousand unknowns. Well, you know, there’s a general on duty and we woke the general up and said, ‘Hey! We’ve got a problem!’ Of course he went up to the Pentagon and every place… the whole area, we went to a ‘yellow alert’ and just about to go to red and… the only problem was when we got this on our scopes, it didn’t show an impact point, a missile impact point. BEW means Ballistic Early Warnings missiles. They were inbound but they didn’t show a point of, well what do you call it, a point of…

SM: Of probable impact point?

AM: A probable impact point, yeah.
SM: Where those missiles were likely to hit.

AM: It didn’t show that and what we finally figured out that it was was the moon coming up. It was the first time that it had been in the right position and it showed the moon. After we figured it out, we went down from almost red down to yellow alert and back on down. But it was really a tense moment there because we were getting ready to launch our, you know, that was a realm of possibility of launching missiles. That was a very exciting moment! Everybody was running around and didn’t know what to do. It was just very fortunate that it worked out like that. It was a scary moment.

SM: And this is an active radar, correct?

AM: Yeah.

SM: It is sending out a radar signal and you’re receiving back the signal from whatever it hits. And so it was sending out and hitting the moon…

AM: Hitting the moon.

SM: And coming back.

AM: Coming back.

SM: Wow!

AM: But the problem was it didn’t show an impact point.

SM: No. Because of course the trajectory is so slow, the moon just moves so slow. Oh my goodness! Wow! That’s a pretty powerful radar too.


SM: Okay, but what about an incident while you were there where there were actually unknown aircraft?

AM: Oh, okay.

SM: That you knew. The largest number of unknown aircraft and you knew these were definitely, these were aircraft.

AM: Okay. I think we probably had about fifty at one time. About fourteen or fifteen off the east coast and the same number off the west coast and couple in the, a few in the Gulf. And this was… and a couple up in the midpart of the United States up north in Alaska, not Alaska but the Bearing Sea area.

SM: What did it turn out those were?

AM: They were sometimes SAC aircraft on alert.
SM: Oh an aircraft that you guys were getting because they couldn’t follow flight plan.

AM: Well they couldn’t show an IFF.

SM: And they couldn’t show an IFF.

AM: They knew the flight plan, but we had to coordinate the flight plan with the SAC headquarter. As you know we kept airborne bombers during the Cold War up over Alaska, over Canada, and over New Foundland area… kept twenty-four hours a day.

Sometimes the information would not filter down from SAC headquarters at Omaha and if it didn’t then they were unknown. We probably had an unusual number of civilian aircraft too, but was not showing IFF. Of course that caused a consternation too and we were on our tippy-toes on the at deal too. We probably suspected what they were, but we had to prove it and therefore we had to scramble. A lot of time we scrambled aircraft up on the northern, they call it Northern Tier, Minot North Dakota and Rapid City and all that up there had fighter aircrafts that were protecting the north side of the United States, not the soft underbelly.

SM: No. Were there ever any incidents when you had to scramble aircraft and they actually encountered enemy aircraft?

AM: No.

SM: Were there any incidents were you had to scramble aircraft to identify an unidentified aircraft and it was any enemy aircraft? I mean it was a Russian MiG or something.

AM: Yeah. Well no, no. But there were… Remember when the Russian used to run the mail run I guess down the east coast of Cuba with their Bears. Remember their big Bear aircraft?

SM: Oh okay.

AM: Transport aircraft. Well they’d run that aircraft down and I don’t know where it came from… well I guess it came from Russia.

SM: They’d fly over the pole because it’s shorter.

AM: Over the pole, right down to the east coast, off the east coast a little way and they would not show an IFF of course and we scramble on those and those were Russian aircrafts.
SM: How frequently would that happen?
AM: Weekly.
SM: (laughing) So every week you’d scramble and it would be a Bear coming
across the poles delivering a…
AM: [?] plat formation, we’d then take pictures of it, you know.
SM: (laughing) How close…
AM: Intimidated me a little bit.
SM: Yeah.
AM: Ah I’ll get kind of close to them, not too much.
SM: Oh yeah. Was that the only incident involving actual foreign unidentified
aircraft?
AM: Yes I think so. I can’t remember any more.
SM: That’s a pretty amazing system. I mean, having radar coverage… I mean
this is just a continental United States, this is Alaska, Canada, down through the entirety
of the Caribbean, the Gulf, Mexico… this is a very broad array and this is going to sound
like the most bizarre and off the wall question but I have to ask it because of the
popularity of this phenomena. UFOs?
AM: Yeah.
SM: You know, aircraft that are moving at much faster speeds then anything that
we could possibly have. A system like NORAD would have to pick something like that
up.
AM: One story. Okay?
SM: Sure.
AM: When I was a duty officer at NORAD I was on the, it was the midnight
deal, and I think it was South Dakota, the base at South Dakota, and we talked to our
counterparts there at a base and he would be my counterpart. He called me up and he
said, ‘Martin’ or I don’t know, whatever those names, ‘We’ve got something going on
down here.’ And I said, ‘What is it?’ He said, ‘We’ve got something that’s flying up and
down the runway. It’s going so fast you can hardly see it and it turns around and goes
back just up and down the runway. Just like that. We’ve got our air police out there,
looking out there and we don’t know what it is.’ And I said, ‘Well try to get some photos
of it. And log it in your log.’ He said, ‘It went off for twenty minutes.’ I said, ‘Okay.’
Well it did. I called Pentagon and told them what happened, it was Rapid City was were
it was, Rapid City South Dakota. And they said… Okay he did that and I told the general
there on duty what happened and then he talked to the Pentagon. Never, never heard a
word about it. And they guy told me that after it happened, said, ‘This part of the log was
taken out. Taken out of the log.’ You never heard anything about it, you never saw
anything about it, never was mentioned. It definitely wasn’t an airplane.

SM: (laughing) What about NORAD contacts though? Actual radar contacts.
Did anything happen while you were there? That you can talk about.

AM: A balloon contacts and all that.

SM: No. I’m talking about things that can’t be balloons. I mean, things
that…like they said, ‘This things moving way too fast.’

AM: No. That’s the only one when I was on.
SM: Okay.
AM: But there was definitely… He was upset about it.
SM: Yeah. Wow!
AM: I’m sure that they had some other contacts.
SM: Yeah. Okay. Was there any…
AM: Oh there was a… I wasn’t on duty, but remember the lights over, over not
Tucson, over Phoenix? Remember that? I don’t remember the date on that. That was
fairly… ’85 or something like that. Anyway.

KS: I remember reading something.

AM: Those were never explained either.

SM: But at that point the United States was involved in experimental aircraft
projects… the, who knows. I mean, some of the stuff that we have eventually developed,
the skunk works and …

AM: They’re still trying to figure out this deal at Roswell.

SM: Yeah and there’s still speculation over what air-breathing platform actually
replaced the SR-71 because something has replaced it.

AM: Yeah there’s… every once in a while you’ll look up in the air and you’ll see
a white jet stream and then a puff and then a white jet stream and then a puff.
SM: Which indicates as breaking multiple mach.

AM: Yeah.

SM: It’s not just going mach 1. It’s going 2, 3, whatever.

AM: It’s rim jet type.

SM: Anyway. I didn’t want to make this too X-Fileish, but oh well. How about after… How long do you stay at NORAD?

AM: Three years and then I went to Rammstein, Germany. Before I could go to Germany as a…they sent me there and incidentally I flew all the time of course. We flew the, had T-33s at Peterson Field so I flew there, did a lot of flying there. Then I was shipped to, my time was up there and they said, ‘Where do you want to go?’ And I said, ‘I want to go to Germany.’ And they said, ‘Okay. They sent me the 17th Air Force as a plans officer, conventional plans officer. My area of responsibility was south of the Sahara, south of Sahara. Anyway, before I could go I had to be checked out in a 100-type aircraft. So I was sent up to Washington I believe, and checked out in a F-102. That was a requirement. I went over to Germany and my wife came over two months, three months later and we had a three-year tour there in Rammstein Germany, headquarters of the 17th Air Force as plans officer.

SM: Okay.

AM: And I wrote up plans south of the Sahara and you couldn’t get there from here. (laughing) You had to have a tanker aircraft and we didn’t have any tankers at that time, but we had a framework of a plan anyway.

SM: Okay.

AM: It was most difficult down in that area.

SM: What was the proposed scenario for which you were planning to do missions?

AM: Sending fighters down in that area to quell off rebellion or something like that. I guess it was really ended up in South Africa, the state of South Africa down there. They had the airfields of course on the way down, but they didn’t have any maintenance or any fuel, enough fuel… we had to be able to fly the fuel in there to refuel and maintenance and all that stuff. So it was quiet an involved plan, but that’s a requirement. You’ve got to have a plan to start from, a plan that’s just jumping off place.
SM: Just to temporarily to back to the UFO issue, while you were a pilot in the
1940s and I guess more appropriately the 50s and 60s and on… Did you ever receive
briefings about what was the appropriate protocol if you did encounter an unidentified
flying object?
AM: Well first of all, of course we would be flying and we would see it if it was
there… and we were asked, told, asked, since we were officers we were gentlemen so we
were asked to come in and write a report up immediately and then report it to the next
higher headquarters over the telephone. I don’t know of any instance that we’ve we had,
but we were briefed on that and asked to follow those guidelines and not to spread the
word around.
SM: You weren’t supposed to initially radio in the contact?
AM: Well we always did. We talked to the radar on site, we were all controlled
by radar after we were airborne and we’d say, for example, ‘Midas,’ one of our radar
sites. We’d say, ‘Midas, I have an object out here. I can’t identify him, I’m going to fly
up closer to it.’ And you know talk to them like that, it’d be over the air, but I don’t
know anybody who’d be monitoring that frequency, UHF frequency.
SM: Right. And did you ever meet any pilots during your career that did
encounter an unidentifiable object?
AM: Yeah, a couple of them. I can’t remember the stories. A couple of them,
yeah, at nighttime.
SM: Did they seem believable?
AM: Well they were pilots, yeah. Pilots don’t lie. A couple of strange items that
happened.
SM: Well after being in Germany for I guess another two or three year tour.
AM: Three year tour.
SM: Three year tour planning…
AM: From ’61 to ’64.
SM: 61’ to 64’ planning for sub-Saharan African operations.
AM: That’s right. Very, very delicate planning.
SM: Right. Of course all the while you were in Germany the United States had
been building up a divisory efforts and…
AM: My wife was the last bunch of dependents to go over to Germany. Remember, I don’t know if you remember or not, you don’t remember I’m sure. They cut off the dependents going over there during this Cold War. When they started building the wall…

SM: The Berlin Wall.

AM: They shut dependents off going there. She was the last airplane to come across.

SM: Oh wow!

AM: I was torn between having her over there and the risk involved. They had evacuation plans, but they’re just plans. You don’t know what would happen with a massive evacuation of an area, it just goes to hell.

SM: Well, while you were there, a number of significant Cold War events occurred, particularly, initially the attempt of the United States to assist Cuban ex-patriots to retake the island, the Bay of the Pigs invasion.

AM: Oh yeah.

SM: And then the following…

AM: No I was here.

SM: Oh you were here during the Bay of Pigs?

AM: Yeah I was here Reese, I was at Reese during that period of time.

SM: Do you remember how it was covered by the press and what your thoughts were?

AM: Yeah, yeah. Everybody was put on yellow alert and of course being a training base out here, we didn’t have a lot to contribute, but we did contribute some airmen and that would go down in Florida area, the bases around, in Florida down on the coast, the Gulf coast to beef up the units that had been sent down in that area. They had sent unit and airplanes stacked just on top of each other practically. It was a very chance thing. We realized that even in the training outfit, the training squadron, everybody was put on their tippy-toes to be alert. There wasn’t much that we could do because of course our airplanes weren’t armed with any armament at all. All of us realize that it was a real touch and go situation.

SM: What time period were you at Reese? What years were you at Reese?
AM: ’64 to ’69.

SM: Okay.

AM: Five years.

SM: Okay. I’m talking about the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in ’61, in 1961 when Kennedy came into office.

AM: Yeah. Okay.

SM: When we…

AM: Oh I’m sorry.

SM: It’s okay. We tried to send the Cuban expatriates back to Cuba to overthrow Fidel Castro.

AM: Oh I thought that was a… of course I guess I was over seas at that time.

When they had the carriers out there and were getting ready to launch the aircraft, immediately… and Robert Kennedy got a hold of Jack Kennedy and convinced him not to do that. That was, what did we lose 1500 men, 1500 Cubans were killed during that. They were ready to launch aircraft off the carriers to support the invasion. I think it was a bad decision. Of course it was right after he took office and he didn’t have… I guess he took it from Eisenhower, did he?

SM: Eisenhower planned it and Kennedy executed it.

AM: I wonder if he was well briefed on it. Made some bad decisions anyway. I was talking about the missile crisis…

SM: That was in ’62.

AM: When I was talking about… in ’64?

SM: No, ’62. Cuba Missile Crisis August of ’62 or October ’62.

AM: No. Was it?

SM: Yes Sir. That’s why I thought you were still in Germany in October ’62.

Weren’t you?

AM: Yeah, yeah. I thought it was later then that.

SM: No Sir.

AM: But you can imagine what the foreign air forces, their reaction to all that stuff was… and I’m being in headquarters 17th AF at Ramstein. Boy we were working twenty-four hours a day. Really really, it was really tense.
SM: Did you have a lot of interaction with your Germany counterparts? Your
German Air Force counterparts?
AM: Yes. Oh yes. But they didn’t have much then, but whatever they did have,
mainly I guess they had Army units. Boy we had…all the…well the NATO units,
English and Canadian units were over there and Dutch units and French was out of it
though. So French made us move our bombs all the way from their bases and we had to
scramble to put the nuke weapons in our bases. That was a bad deal.
SM: Anything else that you want to talk about before we start talking about
Vietnam?
AM: No… after my three year stint at the Rammstien, Germany, I was assigned
back here at Reese. I was assigned I guess it was in, I don’t remember, we came back in
the summer time. I was assigned here as a, I guess I was Lieutenant Cornel as an ops
officer here on the squadron. But I had to go check out on T-38 and the training
command is quite demanding and if you check out in their locale which is Randolph. I
went down there and went through pilot training on the training school there and that’s a
ten-week course. I got through there and came back here and then took over his
operations officer in the squadron here, one of the squadrons here, 3501st squadron here.
When I got here the air training command had configurated their squadron so that every
training squadron you had a T-37 section and a T-38 section. They were dual and then
you had one commander. Okay I was the ops officer and I was number two in the
squadron and of course the squadron commander flew T-38s and then the ops officer had
to check out in the T-37s and be kind of the representative of the T-37 and he was the
representative of the T-38. You know, you put two airplanes in one squadron it kind of
screws up the deal. I checked out in the 37… the most memorable thing in the T-37s is
they used to do this, they don’t do it know, but is inverted spins. They put you upside
down and start spinning upside down and you’re supposed to pull out of it and they
finally stopped that, but that’s the big maneuver in the T-37.
SM: And they would do this in case you became disoriented and the aircraft and
you would [?].
AM: Inverted spin is a… you had to put it into a normal spin first and then pull it
out of a normal spin. That was the technique that they used. They don’t do that now.
SM: Now was this to try to simulate a stall?
AM: Well that would be the result of a stall.
SM: The inverted spin would result from a stall.
AM: Yeah. It’d be like this and just snap over on you… (showing)
SM: And then just down in an inverted dive. Yikes! So you did that?
AM: (laughing) Oh yeah!
SM: My goodness!
AM: Taught students to do that.
SM: Wow!
AM: But later on, about a year and a half later, the training command changed their tactics and said, ‘Okay. We’re going to have single aircraft squadrons, training squadrons.’ So the 3501st went to T-37s and the 3500 training squadron went to T-38s, only. Then you could concentrate on the type of aircraft, which is obviously the right thing to do. I became squadron commander out there. Had 94 instructor pilots, 260s, 240 student pilots…heck of a day. They’d go to school half a day and then fly half a day and then they’d reverse the different sections.
SM: The classroom…
AM: Classes, different classes do that.
SM: Classroom versus flying time. Half a day classroom, half a day flying.
AM: Yeah.
SM: You mentioned that you recalled that there was a time when you were at Reese that you guys were put on alert. Do you remember when that was? While you were at Reese that you were on alert?
AM: No I don’t.
SM: I wonder were you at Reese in August of ’64?
AM: No.
SM: Do you think maybe it was during the Gulf of Tonkin incident? When the American Navy ships were attacked of the coast of Vietnam?
AM: Yeah, yeah. That was one of them. But of course it didn’t affect us too much in that we didn’t have any armament to go.
SM: Right.
AM: The most they could have done was pull our instructor pilots out and they probably did pull a few of them out. We flew, oh gosh I can’t remember the [?], it seemed like it was 240 sortie a day. A sortie is one aircraft, one mission and that’s a lot of flying. The crux and the safety, the safety catch of a squadron is the mobile control unit out in the runway where they control. You put a instructor out there that you can trust and he’s the one that controls the runway. Tells your pilots they’re clear to take off and watches them when they come into land to be sure that their landing approach is right and not too close together… and when the weather comes up he calls the weather and calls the airplanes back in and it gets to be over the amount of wind that you’re supposed to fly in and all that. Of course our sections, we had four flights and we had a safety officer in squadron, always a safety officer, and we had our check section, which checked out which checked all the students gave in the final check. Of course we were the one’s that awarded them wings and we taught foreign students also. In fact we had several Libyan students and as a commander I tried to pick up a student every class for a acrobatics check or for instruments check or for a contact check, so I always kept my hand in it. I picked up a Libyan student and his dad was the minister of finance in Libya and the guy couldn’t fly…and I worked with him and worked with him and turned him back over to check section and they said he can’t fly. I went to the Reese commander and told him that and he said, ‘Well. He can’t fly, he can’t fly.’ Well headquarters of the ATC said, ‘You’re going to graduate that guy. His dad is very influential and in Libyan government and so you going to fly him.’ He said, ‘Well, just let some other base do it.’ So they took him to Williams Air Force Base in Arizona and they graduated him. Six months later he was over in Libya flying a Goony C-47, Goony Bird, crashed and killed all aboard… They guy couldn’t fly. By in large we turned out outstanding pilots. One reason is that our cross wind out here, we always had a cross wind because the wind is always out of 220-225 degrees southwest wind… the runways is north south, we always had a cross winds. Even when I was flying 141s on my last assignment I was the best cross wind landing pilot there was because I was used to it. We turned out good students. Every one of them were good students, every one of them could fly.

SM: The ones that graduated while you were here? And that was from ’64 to ’68 that you were here at Reese?
AM: Uh huh.
SM: What other the nationalities of students were involved, [?] students?
AM: Iranian, German, Canadian, and in fact we had some Canadian IPs who were integrated into our squadron. I don’t think we had any Mexicans, I don’t believe so.
SM: How about Vietnamese?
AM: No. No we didn’t.
SM: No VNAF pilots came through?
AM: No because they had a special… you know Wichita Falls was set up to train foreign students also and so they apparently had them but we didn’t, we didn’t have any. But they were all good students, they were all…they’d been checked by their own country before coming over here and they had a certain amount of English language capability. We checked out the Shaw’s son here, Iranian. He was a very good pilot, very good pilot. Remember he had a house here in Lubbock.
SM: I didn’t know that.
AM: Kind of, it was a house with a big brick fence around it and kind of a compound type deal. But he was a good pilot.
SM: While you were here at Reese, ’64 to ’68, were lessons learned types of materials being brought back or transmitted to the school? That is lessons learned from Vietnam and the important things that pilots needed to be trained on…
AM: Oh yeah! They emphasis formation flying for example, they’d say we need pilots that have more experience in formations lines, we’d up the number of mission for formation and weather flying was important over there and we increased the number of weather missions that we had and you know… we were responsive to all of that.
SM: Anything else you want to talk about while you were at Reese?
AM: No. But it was an excellent assignment. A good base, it was one of those economical, well run base in a command and our friend Clinton vetoed it, ‘X’ed it out. From the results of that, him cutting the bases down, they had open up another base after they closed it because they were running out of pilot location, they had to open up Moody Air Force Base in Georgia I think. They didn’t open this base up here.
SM: And what did you do after Reese?
AM: Well I went to A-1 over in Vietnam.
SM: Okay.
AM: I was assigned.
KS: Were you at Reese when you received your orders to go to Vietnam?
AM: Yes I was. I received my orders to go in September and I was supposed to over in Vietnam in April, but in the mean time I had to go to a couple of survival schools and I had to go to A-1 training down at Hurlburt/Eglin Air Force Base. We mainly trained at Hurlburt, which is a satellite of Eglin Air Force Base… Hurlburt is very famous in that that is where Jimmy Doolittle trained his B-25 pilots, on that runway there. So we flew off that runway and went down, it was a class about I think of ten people, and we spent sixty hours of flying time down there. We went through all the phases of flying, which is check out of the aircraft, went through ground school first of course. Then I got in the cockpit and flew and checked out and then we ran missions. For example ground support missions and bombing missions and night missions, and then supporting helicopters… we’d go in and find a down pilot and we would support the helicopter by sanitizing the area around the pilot and allow the helicopter to get in and pick up the pilot without being shot down. That was our aim and that was… the missions were fairly difficult in that airplane, of course it was a reciprocating airplane engine and four bladed prop, big airplane, 2700 horsepower and we could carry 15 stations of munitions and that would related to 6-7000 pounds of ordinance and we could dispense those ordinance one by one on each station or do them all at once… and of course we had 420 millimeters in the wings of the aircraft… made a very, very formidable weapon because we could just about do anything that we wanted to. The range on it was… slow aircraft but we could be airborne six hours without any problem.
KS: This is the A-1?
AM: Uh huh, the A-1. A-1 is a Douglas aircraft, was built in 1949 for the Navy and right after the war… no it was designed 1949 and did not get into Korea, but it almost did. They equipped all the carriers with this fighter, it was called a fighter at the time, and you’ve seen it in pictures with the folded wings and the props, the four blade props… that’s the A-1. The Navy called it an AD, but the Air Force called it an A-1. The Air Force bought 800 of these aircrafts from the Navy and rehabbed them and sent them to the 56 Special Operating Wing in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, northern Thailand. They
also had a detachment down in Florida at Hurlburt for training detachment and they used
those down there. They also gave the Vietnamese a couple of squadrons of them I
believe, over there and trained them, trained the pilots. They had 800 aircraft in the
pipeline and that’s what I flew over there. It would cruise, it would take off at say 95
knots and cruise at about 145-150 and in bomb release the air speeds would be around
250, 250 knots, which I assure you if anybody’s shooting at you it’s very slow. It’s very
very slow. It was a tough old bird… it had armor on the side of the pilot and the seat was
an armored seat was an armor seat, had an ejection seat called a Yankee Extraction
System. We were having difficulty while I was over there in the squadron when a pilot
bailed out, thirteen mechanical actions had to be satisfied before the seat went out of the
cockpit and consequently you had fifty percent ejection seat failures. Every time we had
a failure it would kill the pilot and therefore we were kind of reluctant to use the seat and
that was an influence of me in one of my missions when I was shot down and I didn’t bail
out, one reason.

KS: You got your orders to go, this was in 1968, to Vietnam?
AM: Yes.

KS: And then you also mentioned before you were in Southeast Asia you went to
several training schools, jungle survival schools. Could you talk a little bit about that?
AM: Yeah. Okay. I went up to a survival school up in Stead Oregon, Stead,
anyway… That was a survival school and what they did was teach you exactly what they
hadn’t experience what would happened to you incase you were captured. That was a
survival school… they would bring you into a compound, they’d captured you for
example, bring you into a compound and harass you all night long and wake you up with
a numbers count and make you stand at attention and then they’d put you in a little hot
box I guess you would call it… a little bitty box and they’d squeeze you down so that you
were on your haunches and grabbing your ankles. They would keep you that way for
about an hour and a half and it was claustrophobia…

KS: Claustrophobia, yeah.
AM: Claustrophobia type of exercise… and several of the pilots couldn’t take
that and they had to pull them out of the boxes and therefore they’d failed the course and
they’d reassigned them. My thoughts on that was, ‘Heck. This is only going to last a
couple of hours. I can stand on my head for a couple of hours.’ I thought about other
things rather than what position I was in. We couldn’t move, it was really a confining
situation and several people had troubles with that. Fortunately I didn’t. Then of course
you tried to escape from the compound and they would capture you and bring you back
and simulate torture and that lasted for a week or so. We came back to Reese then I was
shipped overseas, went into the Philippines and had a jungle survival school there and
there they took you out… they’d give you some ground school first of course, about three
days of ground school. They’d take you out to the jungle, brief you on what to do and
how to do and when to do and what to watch out for and then they would take you out
and give you a two hour lead time and then the Negritos natives would search for you.
The incentive for the Negritos would be five pounds of rice anytime they found a downed
pilot. But our task was to hide, go in hiding, and cover our tracks and hide in the jungle
until the next morning and if we were successful of not being caught, a helicopter would
come in and pick you up, but if you were caught you’d have to walk back through the
jungle for about five miles. So that was the incentive on us not to get caught. My deal
was when I got out in the jungle, we had a two hour lead time, I found a bamboo thicket
it, and it was thick with bamboo, that’s what it was a thick bamboo thicket… well I
crawled in there, the middle of it, it was about I guess as big as a city block maybe, it was
thick and I straightened all the bamboo, I went in backwards and straightened all the
bamboo up and hid in my tracks and all the things I was supposed to do… it was getting
night, about four o’clock when I bedded down, so I laid down there and I wouldn’t go to
sleep because I’d snore occasionally and if I snored then the Negritos would catch me.
So when I was laying there on my back and my hands were behind my head and just
resting you know, watching the stars… being in the Philippines it’s plenty hot even at
nighttime, I was just enjoying it really… and I heard a rustling sound and I looked over to
my left a saw something go by and run across my forehead and it was a big rat, a jungle
rat. Well I didn’t go to sleep after that, I didn’t have any trouble doing that… but I heard
the Negritos out beating around and I just kept quite so they didn’t catch me. Found out
why they didn’t catch me though, later on after the next day at ten o’clock exercise was
over and I was airlifted back to the base… that the habu, which is a snake, likes the
bamboo area and that’s where the nest and they’re called one steppers because when
they’d bit you you’d take one step and you’d die, the venom is so strong. Well I just
thank the Lord that there was any habus around where I was. (laughing) But they’re little
vipers actually, they’re not very large… and if I had known that I wouldn’t have been
there, but I didn’t know. (laughing)

KS: Did you come into any contact with any other wildlife in that training?
AM: Other then the rat, no.
KS: Just the rat.
AM: Birds were around, but not anything…
KS: Were you told what kind of snakes were poisonous and what to look out for?
AM: Oh yeah. And taught us how to cut the trees to get water out of them. The
vines, they’re called water vines, and you cut a vine a certain way and water comes out of
it and that’s how you could get some water… and how to fix a bed so you don’t sleep on
the ground and keep the insects away from you, what grubs to eat, they’ve got some
grubs that look like potatoes and even look like potatoes and we’d grub those up, they’re
roots of a tree and eat that, the center of a palm tree which you can eat and how to start a
fire and how to keep it going, how to cover your tracks when you being hunted down,
how to when they’re trying to rescue how to use your flares so that the right color is used
at the certain times, how to get out where a helicopter can get down to you, and there’s a
lot of things that you have to know. From there I was sent into Bangkok and there’s a
hotel there that was a military hotel, there station is to the military hotel, and a couple of
days of transportation came in and we were sent to our in base which was Nakhon
Phanom, northern Thailand. Nakhon Phanom is called NKP and it was a pure combat
base, it wasn’t close to any towns, it was just a runway out there, a 10,000-foot
runway…full blow base. It was a good combat base. There was nothing to disturb the
base, we were eight miles from the Mekong River and Laos was on the other side of the
river, which is enemy territory, but there was not much activity right across from us. The
base had all the facilities necessary to sustain combat units. We had three squadrons of
A-1s in there, which was the main units on the base. And then we had some Forward Air
Controllers in there like the 21st TASS, T-A-S-S, which was a Forward Air Control
squadron. Then we had occasionally we had some Puff the Magic Dragons come in and
stage out of out area…we had some Army Green Berets that were stationed there and
they were mainly for a long-range reconnaissance behind the lines type people. They were infilled by a helicopter unit that was there. We used to escort the helicopters out to their drop area where they dropped the Green Berets off behind the lines and then we’d stand of and wait for a couple of three hours to see if they weren’t detected by the enemy. If they were not we would come on back, but if they were detected we’d go in their, sanitize the area around them and let the helicopters go back in and pick them up and recover them. And this happened a couple of times. But our main mission, which was SOW, Special Operating Wing, we had special missions that we flew mainly behind the lines type and supporting behind the lines type. We had a regular interdiction mission that we flew and then one of our main task was supporting the Jolly Green Giants, the rescue of downed airmen incase that we were on a… for example, if we were on a mission and we got a call from the airborne control unit which is an airplane that’s airborne, either the control unit in control of the missions would call us and say, ‘We’ve got a downed airmen down at’ certain location, ‘Would you go over and help with the pick up?’ We’d go over there and maybe escort the Jolly Green in or sanitize the area first and then escort the Jolly Green in to pick up the pilot, or airmen, the crewmen. That was probably the most dangerous mission of all because when we went in to locate the downed airmen we would fly very low, tree top level and he would tell us when we got off right wing or left wing, when he was right down there and direct the helicopter in. By that time that when the helicopter got close by he’d pop a smoke flare and the helicopter would either land or drop a sling to recover the downed airmen. Usually the bad guys wouldn’t shot at you until the helicopter got into a hover, which made the most vulnerable part of their flying. Of course we were flying in circles around the helicopter and if we saw the ground fire we would of course go in and sanitize the area. Of course they’d be shooting at us as well as us shooting at them… it was kind of a dangerous mission. We lost several, several, several pilots on that deal. We were losing one aircraft every four days in the wing, which means that we had 75 aircrafts, we were losing one aircraft every four days. Our numbers came up, we calculated how long before we bailed out, shot down, or killed, and it was six months and our tour duty was a year so we had two chances at it. My experience when I was shot down, exactly six months for me, from the time that I reported in. When we report into the squadron they would take you as a
brand new pilot and give you some ground training and give you some equipment training and take you on a mission with a... we had a what we called an A-1 Fat Face, which was side-by-side cockpit for pilot and co-pilot. The IP would get in and you would be the pilot and he’d be right beside you and telling you, instructing you on how to do things and what their procedures were. We went on for, that went on for about ten missions and it was very well run type of orientation to the theater. It worked out quite well. Sometimes they would send brand new second lieutenants right out of flying school as an example. Well in my case one of my pilots that I graduated went to A-1 school with me and then went over with me into the same unit and he was a brand new second lieutenant and we had about two others like that... two of them were killed. We had requested the headquarters not to do that anymore, they should only send over experienced pilots and they finally did that. Of course the lieutenants that survived were good pilots, but we thought that it was an unnecessary risk that they should put a brand new pledging pilot with no experience, in a reciprocating aircraft. It is more difficult to fly an A-1 then it is a jet. They finally stopped sending those new lieutenants over. But the training that we provided the new incoming pilots, I thought, was extraordinary. It was adequate, plenty adequate and it paid off...I guess our combat losses were all the same, but the operational losses way down. One aircraft every four days was quite a chore; quite a chore to chew and we all recognized that problem. It was a very difficult problem. We tried different techniques of going in on the mission and when to drop, where to drop and what altitude to drop, what speeds to drop, and where to pull off, how to pull off. We finally got it down where the rate was better then it was, but we still lost too many good pilots. Mainly the aircraft was slow. It was a rugged aircraft, it take a lot of its punishment. But by that time they were getting their 37 millimeter guns and their ZPUs, which is a kind of a 50 caliber, high speed 50 caliber put out six thousands rounds a minute and it just kind of holds you down just like a water hose, you know if you got within range of that you were in trouble. I finally worked myself up as a commander, I took over the combat operations center for a while and talked to the wing commander and asked him. He said, ‘Al if you’ll take this over we’ll do something nice for you.’ And I said, ‘I’ll tell ya’ what. If you’ll give the next squadron, I’ll take over this combat operations center, COC. And run until that time.’ And he said, ‘That’s a deal.’ So we
made a deal on that. The combat operations center is the life and blood of a combat unit because there’s where all of your plotting boards, all of your status for your aircraft are marked up on chalkboard, what each squadron how many aircraft they have in commission, how many out of commission, what’s the problem, what’s the problem, how many pilots you have, how many missions you get in… you’d get the missions in from headquarters and you’d figure them out to the squadrons equally of course. There just… the Combat Operations Center is just the communications center of the whole base operational wise- combat wise. So I ran that for about three months and then a squadron came open and I took over the squadron, it was the 22nd Special Operating Squadron called the Zorros, was our basic call sign was Zorro. What a neat call sign it is. We flew at night mainly when I was over there, they had two day squadrons and one night squadron and they did that purposely so that the night people had a much more difficult mission to run running a mission at night. Therefore they kept it that way so that when you learn to fly a night mission you were categorized as a night pilot more or less and it worked out pretty well. We were not survivable in a daytime over the Ho Chi Minh Trail attacking targets, Ho Chi Minh Trail. [?] see a truck or something like that we’d go down and shoot at it, but chances are there was a molt of guns sitting down there waiting for you. Well at nighttime we set up the Ho Chi Minh targets and went in on them at nighttime and like I say a night mission is probably three times more difficult to run then a day mission, usually three times. First of all you’ve got to go blackout and you’ve got to fly instruments even in a clear night you fly instruments and you know, hurling your little pink body off the ground, pulling off at the correct altitude and hitting the target, most difficult as far as I’m concerned. Of course you know there again, we’re using World War II type techniques and the business hadn’t progressed at all. We still had a ring in post for our aiming as well as a reticle for our inside cockpit target, reticle we called it, reticle which is an aiming point in the distance and it’s projected on your wind screen. We were still using World War II type tactics and there was nothing else, you know…you go in and hit a target and pull off. The only thing you could do was pull off a different way and so it’s World War II type targets. Along the end of my tour and the end of the Vietnam deal they were coming in with smart bombs and laser bombs and things like that. But our units were not adaptable to that type of operation. A matter of
fact I think World War I was the same tactics as we had, basically the same tactics we
had. You can only do so much in the air without any new electronic techniques. We
were very successful, I think we had a 1.5 truck kill for every mission that went up and
that’s what we were mainly shooting at was trucks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail or off the
trail in the truck part areas and places like that. In the daytime they would get out and run
the… in Laos there was not any good hiding points for them so therefore we’d catch them
on their main highway. They had a main highway called Route 7, it was just like I-27 out
here apparently because they ran so many trucks down it anyway we’d go and hit those
trucks. We had a 1.5 kill per mission, which is not bad and that doesn’t count the number
of personnel that we kill when we attacked. I don’t know whether we did any good over
there or not, but we darn sure tried.

KS: What were your specific duties as a commander of the 22nd?

AM: The commander of course is responsible for running missions first of all and
he has an ops officer for that, which does the scheduling for the pilots. We have an
engineering officer, which is responsible to get the aircraft ready to go at a certain time.
Then we have an intelligence officer to brief on the mission, although or combat
operations center we sent the pilots over to get the mission and get briefed by the wing
intelligence officer. That’s where we picked up that information, or squadron
intelligences officer did not have much to do except transmit what ever the wing said to
us. We had a morning briefing in the squadrons and we’d bring up new subjects, like
new techniques of bomb dropping or strafing or something like that or something we had
to watch out for on the airplanes that we didn’t know, so problem that would come up.
The commander was responsible for all the missions that were tasked him and we
normally when the task for missions came down from headquarters at say midnight.
They would break that task into three and give each squadron a third of those missions
and it was our operations section responsible to set up the scheduling of who was to fly
and to ensure that the aircraft were ready and the right munitions would be aboard the
aircraft and that our pilots were informed of the time for take off and the time for the
mission.

KS: Were you on a regular schedule or would your missions, you mentioned you
flew at night and during the day, would they change?
AM: Varying on time. We tried to vary the time, but in the day time you know, the first mission would go off at seven o’clock which means you had to get up at five and next mission would go off at nine o’clock maybe. Really we were to set in our ways if the enemy had capabilities to keep us from doing that we’d been in trouble, but we ran varied scheduled missions and they were too, how do you call it, too set in their ways. In other words, they were too…

KS: Predictable?

AM: Yeah. You shouldn’t run a combat squadron like that. You shouldn’t run it where they can take off at different times. For example 10:32 rather then 10:30 or 10:00, you know, vary the times over target… which didn’t do too much. Of course some of the targets we only attacked once. Of course a lot of times we’d be up on a mission and we always flew in pairs of two, you could schedule four aircrafts but you had to have two sets of two, would not allow an aircraft to go out by itself of course because it was too much danger not knowing what happened incase you went down or where you went down. So we always flew in flights of two, at least two, sometimes four.

KS: How long were the typical missions? How long did you stay in the air?

AM: Four and a half hours.

KS: You mentioned some of the techniques with the A-1 were a little bit, I don’t want to say outdated, but do you think they were effective, your techniques? You mentioned you were always changing…

AM: Yeah I guess. Probably we weren’t as affective as the Desert Storm, but we had a pretty, we were pretty accurate on bombing. We could probably get a, a flight of two aircraft you’d get a hooch down on the ground if we needed it with two bombs, one would miss and one would hit. I just marveled at the new techniques that they’ve had with electronics and they fire and standoff, fire and forget missions, fire and forget rockets and things like that… that’s foreign to us because we would never be exposed to anything like that. But they have really made the fighters come into their being, true being because they are so capable now. We had certain limitations that hurt us, mainly the pilot putting the bomb or the rocket right where you wanted to, that was always a problem because you figure in wind drifts, air speeds, slip and slide ball and center, you know all that stuff.
KS: Any other problems with the A-1 that you can think of?
AM: No. Except it was slow.
KS: Slow.
AM: It is very slow when they’re firing at you.
KS: Could you describe the first time that you were fired upon? What was that like?
AM: (laughing) Well let’s see... Went down, we were bombing a spot in a jungle which was a truck park. We got in there and dropped our first bomb…. Nothing happened, there wasn’t any fire around. Came around the second time and it looked like the whole world opened up on you. They started firing their rifles at us and then they had a 37-millimeter in there, which was bad news and started popping close to us. From there on we changed our tactics and went up at higher altitude, but still ground fire is very dangerous to us. Mainly because we were slow…at 200 knots that’s just good aiming speed for somebody just standing off. If your going 500 knots you don’t have much chance to get a guy, but 200 knots and… if you get into trouble and they’re firing too close it’s hard to get out of their range because your so slow, again so slow. It was a beautiful airplane and I loved to fly it, just like a feather but it had limitations. It was a tough old bird, it could take a lot of hits, but remember it’s 1949 technology that they put in that bird.
KS: Did weather ever come into play?
AM: Oh yeah. There was a monsoon over there in Noncom Phoneme in… I think the monsoons started in June and ended in September or October, I guess it was October. The year that I was over there in August it rained 49 inches in one month… you know, just a steady rain. The weather would be down to 200 feet and rain and a mile visibility for example and we’d take off we’ll make it there if we take of a nighttime during that weather, we killed one lieutenant doing that. The weather was really horrendous. It’s a tropical area of course and you had a lot of stratus clouds that laid around and made flying and hitting a target, seeing a target most difficult. Most of… I’d say 40 percent of the time made it most difficult to find the target. We did pilotages of course, there wasn’t any electronic navigation aids to speak of that helped you find the target. So we had to go pilotage, which meant they had to see the ground and navigate by
map and of course that was a limitation. We got used to it because we’d go up there and use the same routes sometimes up to a certain point, and then we’d break it off left or right, but the pinpoint target became difficult to hit. Of course we had four air controllers FACs to help us out in that area because a FAC had an area that he was responsible for an area for example the size of Lubbock County. Well, he flew over it enough to know if there is any at all, type of movement in their…any movement or changes or anything like that. If there was any changes he would know about it and therefore he was able to direct us in. We got airborne and headed for our target, let me give you what we did, how we formed a mission: We’d be scheduled for a mission say at ten o’clock at night and we’d be flying for example nine o’clock the next morning. We’d go eat breakfast say it’s 6:30 and at seven o’clock or eight o’clock, eight o’clock I guess we’d meet for a COC briefing, which is their mission briefing where they would brief weather and target, escape routes, all that stuff. Then we’d go pick up our personal equipment and go out to the airplane. We had a taxi called a ‘Tooneyville Taxi’ that ran from the combat operations center to the flight line and it would drop us off because we were carrying parachutes with us…in the personal equipment area we would pick up our helmet, our personal helmet, we had our personal helmet; a parachute and a let’s see, our gun, we had a six shooter that we’d carry with us; and ammunitions and then go out and get on the taxi and they’d take us out to our airplane and drop us at the airplane. We’d start up at a certain time, taxi out, and airborne! And switch frequencies after we get airborne off of tower frequency you’d switch into In-Route frequency and we’d talk to each other in airborne to make sure that we’re not trading smoke. We’d check each other over. Then we’d go to the airborne controller frequency, which is a C130 up there with all kinds of radios, and he would talk to us. And talk Zorro for instances, ‘Zorro continue heading on course. We’ve got you,’ which meant that he spotted us on the radar. Then we’d get into our, cross over to the bomb line, [?] bomb line, then just before we got into the target area we’d spread out and check our engine [?] real good, set up our intervalometers for what we were going to drop, when we were going to drop it, set our guns, charge our guns, and spot the target, and go on in on the target. Try not to fly around, make a 360 around the target. We’d try to just go up the side of it and peel off and get it, rather then going around it and letting them know that we were in the area. We’d drop our load and make
probable, on a typical mission, four passes, four or five passes dropping if we were dive-
bombing and that would be 500 pounders, a couple 500 pounders, napalm rockets and
maybe a machine gun, maybe a 20 millimeters. But that would be the sequence. Then
we’d join up on the way back, check each other over for bullet damage and come on back
in line.

KS: Now you mentioned early that you were shot down, could you talk about that
incident?

AM: Okay.

KS: Where it was? The events surrounding it.

AM: Alright. It was exactly six months after I arrived there and that was… we
had another Martin in the squadron, his name was Lowry Martin. We briefed, a normal
briefing, typical mission. We went up and we were supposed to contact the Forward Air
Control, no we were supposed to contact at a certain point Black Lion. Black Lion was a
mercenary on a hilltop with the radios and some Laotian friendly soldiers.

KS: This is one person? One individual?

AM: Yeah Black Lion was a covert… and what he did, I think he was a lookout
for the routes that they were using on the truck routes and he was on a, it’s called an
inclade and he was on a mountain top or a hilltop. And he had his radios up there talking
and apparently the bad guy found out that he was up there and so they were attacking
him. He and his, I don’t know how many Laotians with him, but he had several of them
maybe 100…and it was a mountain top and we checked in with him on frequency and he
said, ‘Well so there all around us, come on in. Get as close as you can to the top.’ So we
did, I guess we had a CBU, which is anti-personnel weapons, bomb…

KS: Cluster bomb units?

AM: Like a grenade…

KS: Yeah.

AM: Only larger then a grenade. We dropped a load of those and he said, ‘That’s
good. Just keep doing it.’ So we did it and kept going around and finally got down to
our napalm…let them have it with the napalm and he said, ‘That’s fine, that’s fine, that’s
fine!’ He said, ‘Well we’ve got one more pass. We’ve got some…’ I don’t know what
we had [?] or something, anyway… He said, ‘Good. Come on it. You saved our tail
today.’ So sure enough, went in a dropped it and started back home and that was our
twelfth pass, which is you should never make more then one pass on a highly defended…
but of course we were trying to save some lives and so we did our best. I got hit, didn’t
know it. I got hit in the top cylinder, I think it’s a master cylinder with a small caliber;
probably an AKA-47, I was that low. We were really low and sure enough, got up,
climbed up to 9000 feet and started to pull the power back and the most horrendous
explosion you’ve ever seen in your life… a backfire that is. It was so tremendous that
you could see the cowling expand. It happened the second time and I said, ‘Shit! I’ve
got to pull power or it’s going to blow the whole thing up.’ I pulled the power back and
kept pulling back, pulling back and my wingman said, ‘Hey Al you’re smoking like mad!
You look like your engine’s hit.’ And sure enough it was and cut back to idle power
before I was able to stop the tremendous backfires and that meant that I was going to go
down in Laos. This was it… you’re hitting a target in Plain de Jars in Laos, Plain de Jars
and it’s a flat country or flat area, it’s their rice area where they grow rice. There’s an old
French runway up there that the French used and it’s a Pierced Steel Planking runway,
PSP, and it’s about 2000 feet long and they said… the airborne radar told us that the
airborne aircraft told us that it was ahead about ten miles, we were going to try to get into
that. I was going to try to get into that and this area at the time was unknown, no man’s
land… It could have been friendly or unfriendly, we didn’t know. So sure enough I got
over the top of it, I was about 5000 feet over the top of the airport and I started spiraling
down over it and somewhere, probably a jet aircraft, previously had put a bomb right in
the middle of the runway and peeled the Pierced Steel Planking pad like a banana peel
and I couldn’t hit that. I knew that I only had about half the runway left, but the reason I
didn’t eject was the reason I told you is the problem with the ejection seats. And I’d been
a pilot for twenty-five years… I knew that I could get that [?]. My approach on that was
the best approach I ever made [?]. I was five knots low on air speed and hit maybe 25-30
feet down the runway and immediately pulled the flaps up to get the weight on the
aircraft on the wheels, [?] all my cowl flaps out and did everything I could to slow it up…
stomped on the brakes… it had rained that afternoon, it was slick, grass was growing up
through the PSP; it was just like slick glass almost. I saw the banana peel; saw the
damage of the runway coming up so I had to move it off. So I moved it off on the
approaches and since it… you know the engine on the A1 is sat back pretty close to the
wings, which means it’s a… if you ever dug a wheel in and it started to flip over on you it
would flip real easily and we were warned about that. So I…what I did, I sucked the gear
up and I had forgot one thing, I forgot my belly tank and it was empty of course, but it’s a
big belly tank, 300 gallon belly tank and it’s about 2 ½ feet in diameter and about 12 feet
long, so it’s a big tank. So I pulled the gear up after I got off on the shoulders and
parallel to the runway about 60-65 knots just skiing down the approaches. Sure enough I
kicked the rudder to parallel the runway and everything was going just great! When it
finally stopped, it was smoking of course, I blew the canopy, I couldn’t get the canopy
open, blew the canopy and tried to unhook from my seatbelt… If you know anything
about fighters, you’re belted in several places and it took me eternity to get the belts off
me, maybe ten seconds… the mind is running rapid at that time, every second is like an
eternity, it took about ten seconds… and stepped over the side of the cockpit and ran out
off the wing tip and onto the prairie land. This prairie land’s just like the land out here
about west of Reese, about 3-4 miles west of Reese there’s a prairie land out there just
about like that. It’s a little rougher then that, but… and I didn’t get hurt, I got my knee
banged up a little bit, but other then that I was okay. On the way down I synched my
straps up, closed my zippers on my flying suit, and stuck a water bottle in my pants leg
and you know anything else you could do. Sure enough, got off there and turned around
and looked at the aircraft… it was smoking, but then something caught me attention.
About 2-3 blocks away there were some uniformed people, uniformed soldiers coming up
on me and this being no man’s land you don’t know if whether they’re friendly or
unfriendly. You just flat don’t know. My wingman was out of ammunition and flew
over them real low and laid them on the ground, he was that low and after that happened
two of them stood up and held a white handkerchief or a white flag up and started
walking towards me while the rest of the people were still staying down. By that time I
had my little 38 special out, pointed towards them and what do you do… no help any
place… what happens? My wingman couldn’t help me and it was six o’clock in the
afternoon, just at dusk. So sure enough… oh I forgot to tell you, on my way down from,
after my engine started acting up, I squawked emergency of course and the control said,
‘Hey we don’t have anybody up here to help you right now. You have to spend the
night.’ About that time I heard a little weak voice come up on the radio and said, ‘Hey I’m an Air America’ so and so ‘dropping rice to the friendlies, I’ll come over and pick him up. I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes.’ I told him, ‘Hey drop the damn rice, I’m coming over here. I’m going down! Come on over here as soon as you can.’ He said, ‘Roger. I’ll be there.’ Well, get back to the story of the guys who were advancing on me and their rifles were slung on their shoulders which was a good indication that nothing was going to happen, but you never know. Sure enough, they came up to me and tried to shake my hand… I wouldn’t shake my hand, I backed away from them a little bit and hold a gun on them… Then they finally sat down and lit cigarette and sat down on their haunches like you see the Chinese sat back on their haunches and I could see that they’d been eating or chewing…

KS: Betelnut?

AM: Betelnut. When you chew Betelnut, it’s a leaf, it’s a vegetable, chew it and it turns red and it’s kind of a…it’s not like marijuana, but it’s a little bit that way.

KS: Stimulant?

AM: Stimulant. You don’t know, they get hopped up on that and the whole area chews it. Therefore I figured that those guys were pretty hopped up so I was watching them pretty close, I could get both of them, but I couldn’t get the other 5 or 6 or 8 people. Therefore I kept my distance from them…about that time, which was eternity, fifteen minutes later, this helicopter came in. I could see the light when a helicopter lights, you see the front of the light it shakes because the prop shakes it. Anyway, that’s what happened. It came in, landed 25 yards from me and I said well this is the time whether these guys are going to be friendly or not… this is when they shoot the pilot and shoot me at the same time. But they fortunately were not and they were friendly and I had something in my pocket, like a lipsol and some change, some American change, and I showed it to them… pulled it out of my pocket and showed it to them and pitched it the opposite way from where the helicopter was and they ran over there to that. By that time I was at the helicopter and the guy pulled me in by the nape of the neck and said, ‘Let’s go! This is bad territory!’ So we got in, I didn’t even get buttoned it, we took off to an enclave, a friendly enclave, which was close to the Thai border. General Vang Pao headquarters, which is the Laotian general, the only one that was friendly to us. He had
an airstrip there and the Ravens, which was the Forward Air Control pilots, were
stationed there with him and he had part of his Army there with him. It was a safe haven
overnight. Continue on? Okay, I was brought back by the helicopter to General Vang
Pao’s headquarters, which was called Lima site 22. All Lima sites are numbered from 1
to 100 airstrips, but this happened to be Lima site 22 and like I said this is his
headquarters and this is where he operated from. He used to bring his Battalion
commanders in at night and give them a good hot meal and brief them, and then send
them out by helicopter the next day, to their units. It seemed to work pretty well because
he was an excellent general and they all seemed to like him. I got down to the American
contentions there, on the ground at the Lima site 22, and one of my old buddies was the,
kind of the operations officer for the Ravens. We talked to each other and had a couple
of beers and about that time a phone rang and one of the general’s aides called and said,
‘I understand you have an A-1 pilot that’s been rescued.’ And he said, ‘Yes we do.’
Said, ‘Well general would like for him to come up and eat dinner with him tonight and if
he would like to, if he’s in condition to.’ Well the only condition I was in was I had a
couple, three beers [?]. I said, ‘Yeah! I’d be happy to.’ So we all went up there, it was
about half a mile up in the hills. He had a beautiful home up there and when I opened the
door a little, one of his aides in Thai traditional dress looked like pantaloons, you know,
old time pantaloons all wrapped up around his waist and all dressed up with a hat on. He
opened the door and handed me a shot glass of scotch… and I don’t particularly like
scotch, but it tasted mighty good. I went down and met General Vang Pao and a couple
of lieutenants and we sat down to eat. The meal was in a bowl and it was like cabbage
and pork kind of stewed together and some type of bread, probably like our tacos or
something like that, and hot tea. We had hot tea. It tasted pretty good to me. We sat
around and he asked me what happened and I told him… and he had broken English, but
he could understand me. And is told him, ‘I appreciate it. Thank you very much.’ And
went on back to the Raven operation center down there and found a bunk and spent the
night. The next day my friend flew me back to my unit… but in the meantime I was
interviewed by, they have an intelligence officer there at the Raven village, and he took
all the pertinent information back and transmitted it back to my unit and my headquarters
so that they knew I was not killed and they wouldn’t sent a missing message out to my
wife. I was concerned about that, but they didn’t do it. The next morning when I got up, I flew back to NKP and had a little party and I was declared by the flight sergeant to be ‘Okay.’ So I scheduled my missions just like I always did, but the next it was… do we have a little bit of time? Let’s back up a little bit… when I bellied that airplane in of course the props when they hit the dirt they went Whop, Whop! Three props were bent back and one went forward, that’s they way it always is. The first prop that hits always bends forward, the second and third and fourth prop bent back, but the airplane wasn’t damaged that much, mainly because of the belly tank; the wings weren’t beat up, the flaps weren’t beat up, just the engine and the prop. We noted that when I was interrogated back at Raven Operations Center and so they noted it and sent that information forward. They had decided… they didn’t know whether to destroy the aircraft or try to save it because the number of aircrafts were getting thin and they needed every aircraft there was. So many had been shot down, that’s why there were in need of aircrafts. They got a hold of the Army and the Army agreed to send a heavy lift helicopter in that would lift, I don’t know what it would lift 40,000 pounds probably, to pick this airplane up if we would send an escort out for the helicopter. That’s reasonable of course because it was enemy territory. Three days later they scheduled this helicopter to come in and pick this aircraft up. In the meantime they’d sent a helicopter in to remove the guns and anything they could remove to lighten the aircraft up. Well I had requested that I’d be the escort, me and another fellow would be an escort for the chopper. So we met over the Raven headquarters and then went out to the place where the aircraft had bellied in. In the meantime they had also, sent apparently this bunch of friendly Laotians that I saw and set up camp around the airplane to protect it, to keep the enemy from destroying the aircraft. So the helicopter got over the aircraft and hovered over it and connected to the…they made some slings and slung that darn aircraft out of the boon docks. They put spoilers on the wings to keep it from trying to fly itself, that’s what happens a lot of times, and they put a parachute on the back end of it to make it straighten up and fly as it should into the wind. They got it over to this Lima site 22, in the meantime we were circling the helicopter and nobody was shooting at us or anything. So we got it over there and they put a man in the cockpit of it and let the gear down and the gear came down just like it should and set the aircraft on the ground without
damaging it anymore. Then they unhooked and the helicopter went back to its Army unit
in South Vietnam. Well in the meantime the 56th fighter unit sent a transport in there
with an engine and a prop, a new prop, and installed the engine, put the prop on and flew
it back to the base. And that’s all they did… took the tank of probably, it was squished,
but flew it back to the friendly base, to my base. Then it went through some maintenance
procedures and put its foot back on the line. So I didn’t destroy an aircraft! It was put
back in service.

KS: Did you ever fly that same aircraft after?

AM: No. I would not fly it again.

KS: Okay.

AM: And I had six months tour to go so I just went ahead and completed my
tour. I got hit a couple more times flying… One time I was flying in a holding pattern
waiting to go in on our target and it was nighttime, and we were out there in a holding
pattern about ten miles away from the target…flying at 9500, maybe, feet and the hills
were up to maybe 5000 feet. I was flying along minding my own business and all of a
sudden an explosion off of my right wing lit up the whole area! It looked like a 37-
millimeter went off right outside the cockpit. Of course I zigged and zagged and thought
that somebody was behind me, didn’t know what was happening really! I had a flashlight
and shined it out on the wing and sure enough I saw a neat hole right through my wing
where a bullet had gone through. It’s surprising how much light is reflected when a
bullet goes through metal. You see it on T.V. but this was just like a bright light and it
was only maybe a 50 caliber that hit my wing, it wasn’t a big 37-millimeter or anything
like that. But it just lit up the whole area…it didn’t hurt anything other then a hole in my
wing. It didn’t hit any vital spot…but anytime you were flying if you were down low,
any of the infantry, enemy infantrymen, would be firing at you. You could see them
shooting at you with their AKs and occasionally ZPU, which is a high speed 30 caliber,
spits out 6000 rounds a minute and you don’t want to get tangled up with that. But
anytime you were low altitude you were vulnerable for them firing at you. They fired at
you all the time. I guess that’s why you were hit so many times. One time I came back
with a chunk of metal in my wing, the crew chief came up and said, ‘Colonel, you got a
little low this time.’ I said, ‘What do you mean?’ He showed me the chunk of metal and
Eight months later I started home. I want to say that the guys that were over there in the squadrons and particularly my squadron, the pilots were just outstanding. There was not a bad apple in the bunch! They were outstanding type pilots and pilots were outstanding men, but they were outstanding pilots too. They were going through that deal and when you go through something like that you had to be ‘God on your side’ and you had to be a good pilot, that’s the only way you survive. Fortunately most of them were that way… We lost a couple of guys while I was there in my squadron, for six months. You know, you hate to lose them, but that is unfortunately war and especially flying airplanes… it’s a little more dangerous then people think it is, especially when we fly in those conditions that we were in. But those guys have come back and we have a reunion every year down at, well this year it’s going to be in San Antonio in the Hotel Menger, Menger Hotel, which as got a bunch of folklore about it too, a lot of history. But we always have a meeting and we always toast the parted brethren and get to see these guys. Most of them are out of the service now, some of them are retired, but a lot of them fly for American Airlines and all the airlines and Delta and all that. It makes you kind of proud to see people like that contributing to the nation’s economy because by now they’re captains in the airlines and flying their own aircraft… it makes you kind of proud. Every once and a while I run into some people who graduated out of here and they’re all doing well. It was a tremendous career for me. I enjoyed every minute of it… thirty years of flying is a lot of flying and I had 6500 hours of flying time, which is not a lot for a transport pilot but it’s a hell of a lot for a fighter pilot. Single engine most of the time.

KS: Just a couple of clarifying questions… What kind of helicopter was it that went back to pick up your aircraft?

AM: Oh it’s a Sikorsky helicopter made by Sikorsky and they’re called heavy lift in the Army, it’s their code name… but they are huge. They look like a bridge flying. They don’t have any wings, they just have a cockpit and it looks like bridgetwork. They’re huge! I think each blade is about 65 feet diameter, but they’re huge. It would lift 40,000 pounds, but the airplane on the ground, like my airplane on the ground I think it weighed about 12,000 pounds. They took the 20 millimeters out of the wings to lighten
the load and it didn’t have any trouble getting off the ground. It just lifted it up and took
off with it.

KS: Were you able to call your wife?

AM: Yes! The night I got home, I called her about four o’clock at night and I
don’t know what time it was back here, but I called her and said, ‘Everything’s okay.’

KS: Why chew the details with the girl? Yeah, yeah… I called her. She didn’t know about
anything.

KS: Was unit involved in any civic action projects while you were there?

AM: Yeah.

KS: Could you talk a little bit about that?

AM: Yeah. Our base, the headquarters there had a Civil Action section.

KS: Okay.

AM: It was Christmas time, just before Christmas, we’d asked the wives to send
us candy and stuff like that. Apparently they had contacted this village and said that we’d
like to come in and distribute some candy and the medical team would go in there and
work on teeth and give them shots and stuff like that.

KS: In Thailand?

AM: Yeah, in Thailand. Sure enough that’s what happened…we had to go by
helicopter because there was jungles…went over to this little village and went into the
great building I guess they call it, anyway, that’s the meeting place… and you’ve seen it
I’m sure in pictures were it’s a big thatched roof, it’s a huge building, the platform is up
off the ground, platform about three feet off the ground, and it was probably 100 feet by
100 feet… a good size building. There wasn’t anybody there when we showed up… but
the chief came out and met us and started talking and all of a sudden the people just came
in from every place. The kids were just tickled to death to get the candy and the dentist
worked on some people that had emergencies with them… they were very happy, very
happy! The kids were running around just jumping up and down and we gave them, I
guess some clothing too. But that was a civic action were we tried to foster them not to
be hostile to us, they were close to us of course. Apparently it worked out real well… we
did it several times.

KS: What about USO shows. Did you have an opportunity to see any?
AM: Oh Bob Hope came over! In my three wars I’ve seen Bob Hope all three times he came over. He came over in Burma, down a little old bitty strip in Burma. He came and brought his troops in there and performed and I can’t imagine…of course we were out on the front lines so maybe that had something to do with it. And in Korea he stopped in Okinawa, I saw him there. And in NKP, he came to NKP and of course everybody turns out for him. I got to see him all three times and all of his troops, which I thought was great!

KS: How did it make you feel knowing that he came over… that people volunteered to come over and to entertain?

AM: Oh I think that’s great. That people enjoy that, or the troops did…especially in World War II, he was really active. Jinks Falkenburg came up on my ship, I was getting ready to take off in Burma on a mission and she came up on the ship and you know. Really a neat deal, it was really neat. And we got good food that day in the chow hall (laughing), incidentally, chow halls. In Burma we had a chow tent and like a 20 by 40 tent, a pretty good size tent and some benched inside the bench…but the chow line, which is interesting to me, you have your mess-kit, you carried you mess-kit along with you, which is a cup and then a tray. And you go up to the line and they always have a top sergeant setting at the line and he recognizes you I guess, he gave us atabrine tablets for malaria and we had to take those. Then we went into the, walking down the line and the first big garbage pail, 50 gallon-40 gallon garbage pail, full of scalding water, you put your tray in there and your cup in there and scald it out and then go down the chow line. Of course in Burma we had Spam and that’s about all, Spam and powdered eggs. Are we getting close on time?

KS: You’re fine.

AM: And the powdered eggs would sometimes come out, sometimes they’d be yellow but sometimes they’d be red or something, some other color and they wouldn’t be very palatable. But they did try to improve the Spam by putting pineapple slices on them and they cooked their own bread of course, sometimes it tasted pretty good. But when we got through we’d go through the washing line and they had two wash tubs there, one of them was hot water, no one of them you’d scrape all of your garbage off into this can and then you’d dunk it into the hot water, scalding hot water, you know several times to
clean it off and then into a rinse that was hot water. Then take the mess kit back to your
tent. But that always was fascinating to me because they never, you know, never were
held up on the day or late for starting dinner or supper…always there. It really amazed
me to how they did that. Of course in Okinawa we didn’t have things like that, we
lived… they had a [?] hall. In Vietnam they had a club hall too. It really was an
Officer’s club and it was a little more civilized then Burma.

KS: How did you feel about your service in Southeast Asia?

AM: I thought that I had orders to do and that was my duty. I didn’t question it
and I didn’t say whether this is morally right or not because I was in the service and I sort
of uphold the presence of command. I didn’t bother me… I thought we were right. After
looking at it we probably approached it wrong. When you help a nation out, they have to
want to be helped out…if they don’t want to be helped out you don’t have much of a
chance and that’s what happened over in Vietnam. It’s an agrarian economy, very
austere you know, and communism promised them that they don’t have to do anything
and they’d be taken care of, which is not so, but they do promise them that. I didn’t have
any problems…when I got back from serving over there in 1970, I was assigned to Travis
Air Force base as a C-141 pilot, I was a true fighter pilot, but I don’t know how they got
mixed up and assigned me to a cargo outfit, pilot. But I learned a lot…I enjoyed it,
really. Outside the base, Jane Fonda, Jane Baby you know, was out there one day
protesting…and I was going to Vacaville which is just outside the base there and was
driving my little pickup and she got in from of me and I just kept going… I was going to
run over her. But Charlie, my wife was next to me and she pulled the steering wheel
away from me. When I was over there, Jane Baby was setting in the gun turrets of a 37-
millimeter in Hanoi aiming at the American pilots, mock aiming. I couldn’t stand that.
She doesn’t deserve to be an American citizen and yet she’s up this year for 100 of the
most influential woman in the United States. I don’t know who put her up for that, but
she’s going to be voted on, I’d vote of her.

KS: Is that common after you returned? Protest?

AM: Yes.

KS: Or anymore of that discriminatory…
AM: Yes, in 1970. The American serviceman was not looked on very favorably, you know. But times have changed and maybe the outlook of the American people is a little bit better. Especially those types of people, they don’t have anything to protest… No electricity in California that’s their own fault.

KS: Is there anything else that you’d like to add about your service in Southeast Asia or anything else?

AM: No. My last assignment is out of Travis Air Force base and I flew… the Vietnam deal was still going on in 1970 and I got checked out as an aircraft commander there flying 141s from Travis, sometimes we’d go into Hawaii to gas up and go into Wake Island and spend the night. The next day go into Clark Air Force base, Philippines. Then we’d go in country and take… what we were carrying, sometimes we were carrying helicopters, ammunitions or something, go into Saigon and drop off a load. Then come back to Clark and maybe do that again and then maybe the next day we’d go into Okinawa and spend the night and the next day we’d go into Yakota. Spend the night and then maybe a couple of times we’d fly into Pusan or one of those Korean bases delivering something, goods up there and then fly back to Yakota. Then gas up, the next day gas up and fly directly back into Travis… nine and a half hours from Yakota, Japan and fly the great circle route. I’ve flown maybe thirty or forty times that mission and the great circle route kind of follows the chain, the Alaskan chain, and I’ve never seen the ground there. It’s always been cloudy, never seen the Alaskan ground after thirty or forty times…it’s kind of strange. Anyway. We’d fly nine and a half hours out of Travis. Sometimes we’d take off at midnight at Yakota and climb up and shortly there after the sun is coming towards you, it would be a sunrise and we’d fly all that day. The next morning, now remember we’re going against the sun, we’d see another sunrise and we’d be thirty minutes outside Travis Air Force base. So we saw two sunrises, not that’s really something… never land, never gas up.

SM: Anything else?

AM: Just that I enjoyed my career. One thing that I must say is that I got to fly all the time and they don’t get to do that nowadays. That was my choice, even as a young kid, I wanted to be a pilot in the Air Force and sure enough, I got to be and that’s what I wanted to be and that’s what I was…I couldn’t ask for a more satisfying and rewarding
career. I got to meet a lot of young people that were outstanding and I got to meet some
old friends, I got to keep old friends. It was just a career that I wouldn’t change anything,
I wouldn’t change anything.

KS: This ends the interview with Al Martin. Thank you very much.
Kim Sawyer: This is Kim Sawyer continuing an interview with Al Martin, April 26, 2001. We’re in the Special Collections Library at Texas Tech and Mr. Martin has brought the [?] that he has also donated a copy to the archive. Mr. Martin if you’d like to begin.

Al Martin: We’ll thank you Kim. This first slide is the slide of Southeast Asia, a picture of Southeast Asia, which denotes Thailand and Laos, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and Cambodia. This if you’ll notice right here, I am stationed at a base called Nakhon Phanom or we called it NKP, which is the northern eastern part of Thailand. It was bordered by the Mekong River and then Laos, separated by Laos… we were eight miles from the Laotians, which was enemy territory at the time. We were always afraid or we were always concerned about the North Vietnamese lobbing rockets into our area, but they never did and I don’t know why. Eight miles was within the range of their big rockets and we never figured out why they didn’t try to harass us that way. Okay…this is number two picture and it shows the early morning in the jungle area in the summertime with a nice beautiful sky, a runway, and [?]. We built this runway right out of the jungle [?] out of the jungle and it was 10,000 feet long and a very nice runway. This is another slide, number three slide, depicts a little bit more of the area that we worked in and would show the placement of Nakhon Phanom and Laos, the rice growing area up there in Laos, and North Vietnam, the DMZ, and Cambodia and South and North Vietnam. This is a typical picture, number four, of our air base at Nakhon Phanom, the joined base between us and the Thai airport. It shows you of course it was the dry season; otherwise the guy
walking the foreground would be up to his boot level with water. For example, all of the
year that I was over there in 1969 we had 49 inches of rain in one month and that pretty
well saturated things, but it was of course in the monsoon time. We hardly ever cancelled
any missions even though the weather was down to 200 feet and one mile a lot of times,
but we just didn’t cancel missions.

KS: What was your impression of the Thai Air Force?
AM: I’m sorry?
KS: What was your impression of the Thai Air Force, you evaluation?
AM: They seemed to be pretty good. It was almost like a third world nation, but
I thought they were pretty dedicated people and they flew some pretty good missions too.

This is a picture of our, number five picture of our equipment that we had to fly. This
was called the A-1, the Air Force called it the A-1, the Navy called it the AD, Able Dog
they called it. This is an aircraft made by Douglas and it was propeller driven aircraft,
the last fighter that were propeller driven made in the world I suppose, built in 1950 and
put on the carriers, Navy carriers and were taking off the carriers in 1962. The Air Force
saw the need for such an aircraft with this capability and bought them from the Navy, 800
of them, rehabbed them, cleaned them up, put new instruments and whatever needed in
the aircraft and sent them over to the 56 Special Operating Wing, Nakhon Phanom
Thailand. And NKP, which is the 56 Special Operating Wing had three squadrons and
twenty-five aircraft in each squadron and they also had some other detachments around
there. Basically that was the A-1 capability over in Thailand. Also the South
Vietnamese had a couple of squadrons I believe of these and they were based in around
Saigon. The prop of this airplane, to show you the power of it, had a four bladed
fourteen-foot prop and the engine was a double row, nine cylinders each row, eighteen
cylinder total, 2700 horsepower engine on take off. It could stay airborne for three hours;
we had a 300-gallon belly tank and 15 stations on the wings that we could hang
munitions on, any type of munitions, and armor plated around the bottom of the engine
and on the sides of the cockpit for the pilot. It was a slow aircraft obviously; it would
cruise at about 180-185 knots and top speed would be about 240. It was slow and would
take heavy punishment from enemy gunners. This is our living area, which is slide
number six, our living area with a party house, in between the bashes as we called them,
which were really living quarters. Each room had a place for two pilots to live and a common latrine. We also had an Officer’s mess, but the party house was the favorite place after a mission. Where we’d go and drink our favorite beverage and sit down and write letters or watch TV or whatever, but it was a pretty nice living area. It was made out of teakwood, beautiful wood, and we enjoyed that area. Actually this was a pure combat base, not close to any large cities or anything like that to distract your attention. We were out in the boon docks and it was really a well-made combat base. This is a picture of my squadron of pilots, I had assigned to me 26 pilots and 25 aircraft. If we’d got short of pilots some of them would get sick and go on leave or whatever, the wing headquarters would substitute some of their people to help us out in completing the assigned schedule. We had normally 34-35 missions scheduled a day and that meant that some aircraft would fly twice and some pilots would fly twice. Some of these missions were like I said, four hours long, which really tasked a pilot if he flew twice. We got a three-day pass to Bangkok once every six weeks and that was a big relief…but everybody pulled their own weight over there. There didn’t seem to be any slackers at all. With that [?] low that we had, the airmen worked hard, the pilots worked hard, everybody worked hard over there. Actually our workday was a twelve-hour day. This is a picture, number seven of an A-1 on a parking ramp and you can see that it has name painted on it, ‘Frog Man’ in this case. Each pilot was assigned an aircraft and it was his responsibility to name it or whatever, in good taste of course, and actually sometimes he went out and helped the crew chief maintain the bird. This bird is particularly important because it shows the, it’s loaded up with the anti-personnel weapons on the wings and these were tubes of grenade type weapons that dropped out the back end of the tube and scattered shrapnel when it hit the ground. Each tube had seventeen of these bomblets in it and there were seven tubes just for one station on the bird. You can imagine if we load the wing wall to wall with anti-personnel weapons, we could scatter a lot of hot lead around. It was a pretty good anti-personnel weapon. This is another picture of a pilot naming his aircraft ‘Big John,’ it’s also loaded with anti-personnel weapons, but close into the fuselage you can see a stub sticking out there, that is a mini-gun, 30 caliber mini-gun with seven barrels for the mini gun. It would shoot 6000 rounds a minute, enough to cover a ball field in about a minute of firing. Notice the 300-gallon belly tank there right under
the engine is coated with oil, that’s the typical reciprocating engine. It’s dirty and oily, in fact we carried 37 gallons of oil because it burned oil and dropped oil…so we wouldn’t run out of oil, 37 gallons is a lot of oil.

KS: Is that the PSPs?

AM: That’s a pierced steel planking, it’s a metal overlay over the ground. They just lay out and put together and it makes an instant parking area. They come in I believe 3 foot by 8 foot sheets and they just laid down, hooked together and it would overcome any moisture or anything like that… really an instant parking or runway, it made a runway ramp. Here’s another one, ‘Sweet Sue.’ You’ll notice this is a two place airplane and we call that a Fat Face because you were setting side by side with the pilot and co-pilot, that is just another model of the A-1. The A-1H was a single seat bubble canopy and this is an A-1J I believe. We used that for checkouts and night checkouts of new people, new pilots coming in. That gray object that’s on the wing, inside the wing there, is gas that we used to lay out to deter people from trying to capture our pilots. In other words this is kind of like CS gas like police use in the canisters and if we were trying to protect the pilot from the Vietnamese walking up to him, we would lay that out so that they would not come up and capture him.

KS: Tear gas? Similar to tear gas?

AM: Tear gas, the same as tear gas.

KS: Okay.

AM: It would inhibit a person for about an hour… make you sick for about an hour. It was not deadly or anything like that. But these two place airplanes were a little slower but they did serve a purpose by helping check out new pilots and improved our safety record. This is a line of A-1s on the flight line ready to go. This particular one is loaded up with, starting in the outboard wing: anti-personnel weapons and then your hard bombs, which are, I believe 250-pound bombs. See the one, the third one from the end has got an extender on it, which when it hits to ground it goes off before the bomb sinks into the ground which is another anti-personnel type weapon. Then inside of that is a Tokyo fire bomb, that’s a magnesium bomblets, 1700 bomblets in that bomb…and you drop it around 1500 feet and it scatters out and covers probably an area of a square block. Then you can see the 20-millimeter guns imbedded in the wing there, we had four of
those and they were a very, very effective weapon. Eight is just another loaded aircraft; it
happens to be my aircraft. It’s a night load, I know that because you can see the flares on
the wings, those are the little round objects on the wing…and those are airborne, you
drop those say at 8000 feet, the parachute comes out and the flare ignites, it takes about
five minutes to hit the ground. It has very…it’s like a million candle watts. So you can
bomb or just like daylight underneath the bomb, underneath the flare. If you go on a
typical mission like I’ll show you, this is our most secret location. Our secret location on
the field, which is combat operations center, it houses all the status of the aircraft from
each squadron, all the status of the pilots, all the target material, the weather material, and
the enemy response to us coming into that area. It’s always guarded with a guard twenty-
four hours a day and we go in there for briefing. Let’s say for example, go in there right
now and pick up a briefing. We’d go in there a meet the briefing officer, he has our
schedule, and we’ll say it’s nine o’clock in the morning and be scheduled for a ten
o’clock take off. This guy sits us down, tells us our target, and our target today will be a
cave on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We’ve been watching it and they’re stacking equipment
and fuel inside this cave to be moved further on down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We’ll get
briefed on the target itself, the expect response from the enemy, what type of weapons
they have out there. After we deliver our weapons we best way for an escape to keep
from getting shot at and also the best escape route incase that we are shot down, where
we could go to be picked up by our own helicopters. Also we’d brief on weather,
inbound weather, target weather, and leaving the target weather, and the weather at our
home base here. From here we go to our personal equipment room, which we pick up
our parachute, our survival vest, our weapons that we wear around our waist and this is
what that looks like. And this is number eight, is that right?
KS:  I think. I’ve lost count. So just describe them and I think that will be fine.
AM:  We walk out to our airplane that we’re assigned and it’s all loaded up and
ready to go. Met there with the crew chief, this happens to be the line chief. He’s
responsible for maintaining the aircraft and seeing that the sortie assignment is met. Like
I said we have about 34 sorties a day to be flown by twenty five aircraft and that’s quite a
load in that some aircraft are out for engine changes and you know, various things, parts
and all that. The chief’s responsibility is to keep them in and he did. We never lost [?]
because an aircraft was not ready, he was always ready. This happened to be my aircraft, ‘Miss Charlie,’ which Charldean is my wife’s name and I’m getting ready to fly. You’ll notice I have a flack or no flack in this, it’s a vest, a survival vest, which contains a radio, a pocket radio; extra battery; a survival kit; medical kit; and spare ammunition and the 38 holster on the hip there. We’re ready to go! This is my crew chief… he helped you in the cockpit, because he knows you’ve got all kinds of stuff hanging on you. You notice the target folder out there getting ready to be put in the cockpit and also the helmet. The crew chief was such a reliable guy that no body actually, no pilot did a walk around of that aircraft…he was such a reliable guy we just…

KS: You trusted him.

AM: Assumed that it was [?], that everything was buttoned up, locked up… the only thing we did was check the fusing on the bombs to be sure that they were correctly fused. We didn’t want to go in at a very low level and have an instantaneous fuse on the bomb.

KS: What was his name? Do you recall?

AM: He was Joe… something. And you know, this is I guess number nine, when starting a mission you have to start the… crank the engine up. What we normally did was turn the battery switch on and engage the starter and the way you start a reciprocating engine is that you turn the thirteen blade switch, which means you rotate the prop three times and then turn the magnets on, which fires the sparkplugs and give it a little shot of fuel through the primer and she starts. Of course this is a typical start for a reciprocating engine, look at the smoke, that’s just the beginning of it. The smoke would cover the aircraft and then in about 10 or 15 seconds it clears up and starts running like a sewing machine, but right now it sounds like a steam engine running. The smoke is a typical example of a reciprocating engine because the oil has dropped down into the cylinders before they start and after they started it must burn that oil out and that’s what it’s doing right now. Take the active runway, we always fly in flights of two at the minimum, sometimes it’s flights of four, but mainly flight of twos… Take it out on the runway, get permission to take the active and were lined up on the active runway. You can see the cantonement area there, the area that we just left and that control tower with the white side panel. Other aircrafts are parked on the ramp there, down at the far end.
there you can see an old white goony bird, a C-47. That was our supply aircraft. After
take off, like I said we were eight miles from the Mekong River and the Mekong River
runs basically north and south in this area, which is good because on the other side of the
river is enemy territory is Laos. You can see the weird looking hills over there in Laos
and they’re all Karst, made of Karst, K-a-r-s-t I believe… and it’s kind of like in the
ocean where you have the barnacles, what do you call it...

KS: Coral?

AM: Coral. It’s like coral only it’s on open land out here. Of course this karst is
covered with trees and vines and jungle, but you couldn’t even walk on it’s so sharp. So
coming down from a parachute you’re going to get scarred up, most of the time you’ll get
scarred up…but here they are tracking north here, the river is on our right, the Me Kong
is a famous river. Still going north, haven’t crossed over yet and that’s about eleven
o’clock in the morning. You notice the clouds are beginning together and this is because
the humidity is 99 percent most of the time there and when the sun comes down on you it
will be 98 degrees on the ground, you’re bound to get an uplift which gives you clouds.
Still going north, clouds, getting close to…we’re crossed over the Me Kong now and
we’re in Laos, enemy territory right now. Just before we get to the target, you’ll notice
the clouds are gathered together a little bit more, but basically we take the number
command and shake him out a little bit, losing him up so that we can check the cockpit.
We want to be able to read all the instruments, see that their settings are just right and
you can see the gun sight there that we will be using and be sure that we’re feeding off
the correct fuel tank. We don’t want to your head in the cockpit while people are
shooting at us. And there of course is our target! I’ll show you right there is the
cave…and trucks are parked in this area, housing in this area right here. Ho Chi Minh
Trail runs this way and you can see the trail is all over the place. Ho Chi Minh Trail is
not just one trial, it’s a combination of trails, not like our highway or anything like that, it
runs through the jungle. You knock our one portion of the trial they just switch it over to
another one a block away maybe. Well, I went in… and what you do is you come across
right over the top of the target and start your dive bomb immediately. You don’t want to
circle the target and give the gunners that time to get their guns going. So you go right on
in on them and fortunately I stuck this bomb right in the mouth of that cave, right there.
Number two man-produced bombs to the left of mine, which was the truck parking area. We kept that up until we completed our bomb run which was probably about four bomb runs on it, which was eight bombs apiece which pretty well saturated it.

KS: Did you receive any fire on this particular mission?

AM: Just small arm fire. It looks like when they shoot at you with their AKs and their rifles it looks like firecracker going off down there. It looks harmless down there, but of course it’s really not. We didn’t get any 37-millimeter fired at us or anything like that day, normally we do. Let’s break this mission for a minute and I’ll show you some typical targets that we might have been tasked on, but we weren’t… These is a famous crossing of a river, of a little creek actually and it’s right in the middle of Ho Chi Minh Trail so they had to cross it. So what they’d do is coming up this way, the trucks were coming up this way and they lay a low water bridge right here and that’s bricks, they lay that bricks there that’s maybe five inches below the water line and drive it across. This is done mainly at night, in the daytime if they [?] like that they would not survive. And this is another target we might have been tasked on, this is a famous junction in the road here. This road here comes down the… the northeast road comes down from North Vietnam and the west road here is going into Laos and the south road is going down the Ho Chi Minh Trail towards South Vietnam. You can see it was a pretty popular area by all of the potholes that were there. We tried to collapse the hill into the road, realizing that with in 3 or 4 hours they’d have it patched back up, but at least we harassed them a little bit. On the way home, back to our regular mission now, on the way home we usually climb the aircraft up to 10,000 feet. The reason we did that is to cool off. The aircraft did not have any air-conditioning in it, it just had a hot air going back through the cockpit. You could imagine what the temperature was on the ground when we were taxi, probably 130-140 degrees in the cockpit, after you get airborne it cooled off a little bit when you get adiabatic air temperature, which is local air temperature around, but as you fly and climb every thousand feet you lose three degrees temperature. So at 10,000 feet you’re losing 30 degrees temperature… you’re 90 degrees and the ground, you’ll be 60 degrees in the cockpit, which is, we tried to dry off at that time. You can’t imagine being sweaty all the time and trying to do you work and being hot and sweaty. So at every chance we had we climbed the airplane up at least to 10,000 feet… it did give us some relief. And here’s the
number two man flying close formation to me, a little too close, but he was a good pilot.

Most welcome site of course on a mission is the runway in front of you and that’s our
home base runway, 10,000 feet long…see the whole jungle was just cleared. I don’t
know how they did it, but they got the whole area for probably a mile square runway.
Runway was about 10,000 foot long, so it was a little bit longer then that, so it’s almost
two miles. And the cantonment working area is over on the left hand side. It had rained
that night before because look at the water in front.

KS: Do you know what year this base was built?

AM: I’m sorry.

KS: Do you know what year this base was built?

AM: Yeah. It was…it started operations I think in 1966 and then they just had
PSP for the runway, the Pierced Steel blinking, and later on just before I got over there,
they had a nice runway there. I guess because I was going over there they…

KS: They heard you were coming.

AM: Put a nice beautiful, wide, long runway, but it was really nice. The first day
it was opened, it saved a F-4 that had battle damage. It came in and landed and saved a 4
million dollar aircraft that one day. As you’re looking this way, right over there is Laos,
that’s enemy territory. So almost on take off you’ll get over enemy territory. You know
war is twenty-four hours a day; you don’t stop war just because the sun sets. So therefore
we ran mission twenty-four hours a day. This is a night mission preparing for take off.

He’s got his target and he’ll either flare himself to a target or have a little spotter plane go
in a drop a flare. Usually the spotter planes know the area there, they have a certain area
that they operate under and they know it like the back of their hand. Therefore, they
could drop a flare into a [?] will hit my flare or fifty yards to the north of my flare is your
target, something like that. Otherwise we’d flare ourselves… navigate to the target area,
don a flare to see if we are in the target area and then go ahead and proceed with our
bombing. Night missions traditionally are at least three times more difficult then a day
mission to run because you’re running black out and of course the jungle is blacked out,
which is a black as ace of spades. You’re flying instruments all the way to the target,
down on the target, and pulling up the flying instruments. You only have small red lights
in your cockpit. Speaking of night missions, this is a fellow on a night mission; this is
taken at night with the lens open. You can see it’s a gunners’ moon because it’s a full
moon and gunners love that moon because it silhouettes the planes and they can see you
and shoot at you. We’re of course, not across the bomb line because we had our running
lights on, otherwise we’d be blacked out. There’s only one small light bulb right behind
the canopy in a little dish type of location so that if you’re flying like that you can’t even
see the light you’d have to be above the airplane to see it. That pretty much allows for
your number two man, which you always fly in at least two ships, he’s 500 feet above
you staggered back from you 300 yards and he’s looking down on you and he can see
that white light. That’s how he keeps in formation with you. This is a flared target and
you can see that we had a little bridge that we wanted to take out right there and the flare
is right over the target. You can’t see the flare but you can see the amount of light that
the flare puts out. We’d normally only make two passes at the target, for example, if I
dropped the flare I’d make two passes, drop probably two bombs for each pass, which is
four bombs on the target, pull up and tell my number two wing man to change altitudes. I
would go above his altitude and he would go down to my altitude. He would drop his
own flare and start the same process of two passes and then we would head home. You
know, in wartime there is all kinds of bullets flying by and occasionally even an aircraft
gets hit. That was one of our missions was to support a rescue effort. Our first mission
was of course interdiction, which is bombing the immediate targets, strategic targets were
left to B-52s and people like that, but immediate targets we supported troops on the
ground and ground support, close and ground support. Where we’d be driving right at
the troops that were shooting at our troops and this is what happened on this particular
one. An F-4, which is a jet fighter, got shot down over one of the kind of like one of the
areas that I showed you, highly defended area and they had the co-pilot of the F-4 from
the back-seater come up on the radio and tell the survivors where he was and that he was
alive. Therefore survival mission was mounted. We always kept four aircraft on alert,
five minute alert where we’d be airborne in five minutes to support the downed pilot on
the ground and to sanitize the area around the pilot so that we could bring in a helicopter
safely, a Jolly Green, that would come in, land and pick up the pilot. This load here is,
and I guess it’s what number ten or eleven picture, had a rescue effort [?]. Notice this
anti-personnel weapons right here, little bomblets here, the same as grenades but we had
CS gas right here. And we would be taxiing out for take off and other aircrafts had similar loads, some of them had smoke bombs, this particular one. Here is what it looked like. This happened to be 100 miles east of our base really, that’s close and this is one of the areas that one of the mountain passes that crosses from North Vietnam into Laos and one of the major crossing points for their truck traffic. You can see how smoky it is…we’d been bombing all day and this is the second day for bombing and trying to survival. What happened…we thought the Vietnamese were kind of playing with us and trying not to capture that guy and letting us mount our main effort there so they can shoot at us with their heavy guns…and they had heavy guns in this area. This is approaching the pickup area. Right here you can see the smoke and debris in the air from the jet fighters that were laying some bombs in the area here. Our survivor was right there on this side. The pilot unfortunately landed on the other side of the river and was captured and shot immediately. Therefore we knew we had a problem. The survivor was on our side of the river, the [?] side of the river and he had been evading for fifty hours at this point, that’s two days of invasion. What he had been doing was staying in the river there and using [?] to breathe reeds from and if he can breath that…it was phenomenal what he did.

KS: What was his name? Do you remember?

AM: No I don’t.

KS: Okay.

AM: But it was a… We recovered him… I’ll show you what happened here. See how smoky it is in here? This is from all the bombs and debris that was shot by both sides. So how roughened… this is all volcanic soil here. See the trail here, running down here, a truck trail coming from North Vietnam. Here is where the little survivor was, right there. Our scheme to rescue him was to screen off the heavy guns, which were based around the forest here in the caves, in here. We would screen this off and bring the helicopter up the river here, picked up the guy, and get the heck out of there. Okay. We started laying smoke here…and notice how calm the day was, we were very fortunate there, no wind at all. Right here is some CS gas that was laid, apparently there was some troops coming up here. So we stopped the troops right here and then we kept on laying our smoke. See the CS gas is still there…and we’re laying smoke in this area here,
smoking over here, over here, getting ready to bring that helicopter up right here. This is really a touch and go situation. You can see this right here, it’s a 20-millimeter firing hitting the ground. Apparently one of our ships saw some movement down here, some troops down here and were shooting them up. You can see that the process of the smoke…and here it is fully developed. We started running that helicopter in from the left, came right down and picked up the survivor… five minutes later it’s like nothing happened. There’s where he was. Like nothing happened. And of course the main thing right now is to get out of the area without getting shot down because we had probably 100 aircraft during that 48 hour period, dropping bombs and supporting the effort to save that one guy. When you’re in a fight like that, you always get hit, some people always get hit.

KS: Is this your aircraft?

AM: That was not mine, no. Another aircraft, but you see the 37-millimeter entered right here and blew out the top of the wing. And I doubt if there’s an aircraft today that can sustain that damage and get back alive…it was phenomenal what happened. Here’s another example…flaps were blown off of this airplane here. The bullet hit right in this area right in here and blew the flaps off. Notice this shrapnel pattern, there’s a 90 gallon fuel tank right behind the star there…because we had self sealing tanks, but if it’s damaged enough of course the tank starts leaking. There’s another one of the flaps, see where the flap was hit…and shrapnel pattern. And of course there’s my aircraft. I was shot down on the Plain de Jars after attacking a friendly enclave that was trying to protect the friendly enclave. It was right there… that little hill just on the left side of the screen there, about five miles away. We got airborne and we got called in by the airborne controller and said, ‘We have an area that’s in trouble. Would you go down and help them out?’ So of course we did and the guy was an enclave…it was an enclave of friendly troops on a mountaintop. The North Vietnamese were attacking from below of course. It was our job to sanitize that area and save the troops on top. It was retired Marine called Black Lion, was his code name, and he had some friendly Laotian troops with him, probably around 100 troops with him. We went in and started banging up the area down there where the Vietnamese were and we were getting shot at all the time. We had napalm, we had rockets, we had CBU anti-personnel
weapons, and some hard bombs, and of course the 20-millimeters. So we went in and
twelve passes later we had extended all of our ammunition and of course the last pass was
slow. We were very low and not to fast and shooting up the area. I got hit in the master
cylinder in the front end of the aircraft, in the engine. I didn’t know it at the time, but we
pulled off, we had expended our ammunition and started home. After I leveled of at 9000
feet I had a horrendous explosion, backfire and it kept backfiring, I kept pulling power
back and it kept backfiring and backfiring. I knew that my engine was gone so I pulled
the power back to idle power and kept it from blowing up really. I told the airborne
control that I had been hit and my code name was Zorro. I said, ‘Zorro’s going down!’
And they said, ‘Okay. You have French stripe in front of you,’ an old French stripe that
was built back in the 1950s I guess. ‘It’s a PSP stripe and about 2000 feet long. You can
do that or bail out.’ And I…we were having 50 percent ejection failures in that aircraft
and every time you had a failure it killed the pilot… and I figured after my twenty years
of flying that I was a better pilot than that. So I didn’t risk bailing out, besides there was
no trees…this is the last area of Vietnam, the Plain de Jars it’s called. This is where they
grow rice, so it was pretty level. So I got in on that stripe, it was a 2000 feet stripe, but it
had been damaged by a bomb half way into the stripe so I had about 1000 feet, which is
not very much. So I came in, I had the best course landing I’d ever had in my life, 5
knots low on the [?] glide speed and hit probably 25 feet down the runway… sucked the
flaps up to get the weight on the gear and I was still going about 60 knots when I came up
on this damaged runway. So I just moved it off on the shoulder on the right-hand side,
sucked the gear up because it’s a short nose and should my gear dig into the ground it
would flip over on you and trap you inside. So I just sucked the gears up and I had
forgotten my 300 belly gallon tank and it was on, but it was empty, but it was full of
fumes. It didn’t catch on fire, I just kind of used it as skiing…and sure enough I could
steer it and almost to the stop. It worked out great! It took me eternity to get out of the
cockpit. You know you have all kinds of flip ups, your seatbelts and oxygen hoses and
mic hoses and mic wires… it took me an eternity to get out of the cockpit, probably ten
seconds, but that’s eternity when your trying to… you didn’t know whether the bird was
going to blow up, explode, or whatever. It was smoking real bad. I got out of the cockpit
and ran off the right wing there and turned around after about twenty-five yards. I turned
around to look at the aircraft, sure enough I saw about ten people, ten or twelve people coming up on me maybe three blocks away, in different types of uniforms I wasn’t familiar with. What do you do? You don’t know whether they are friendly, this is no man’s land, you’re 150 miles deep in enemy territory, you don’t know whether they’re enemy or friendly patrol. What I did… I pulled my little trusty 38 out and pointed it towards them and my wingman was still airborne. He came in real low over them and laid them down on the ground and when they got up, well just two of them had a white handkerchief and held it high. We’d been taught that that may be a friendly sign. So two of them came walking up towards me with their rifles slung and that was a good indication. They came up to me, [?] and beetle juice running out of their mouth, I didn’t know whether to trust them or not. So I kept backing away from them… I forgot to tell you that while I was airborne I told the control that I was going down and they said, ‘Well we don’t have any rescue aircraft at the time.’ This was six o’clock in the afternoon in September, so it was fairly late and sure enough I heard a little voice on the air that said, ‘This is Air America chopper dropping rice with some friendlies about fifteen minutes away. I’ll drop the rice and come on over.’ And I said, ‘Drop the G.D. rice and get over here now I’m going down!’ And he said, ‘Roger!’ So he started over…to get back to these people they came up and had the Asian squat and sat down, you know in the Asian squat and smoked a cigarette. I didn’t get within twelve feet of them and I had my gun out. I could get those two, but the other ten I couldn’t get probably. About that time I saw a winking light coming up over the horizon and it was that helicopter. He landed about twenty-five yards from me and I had some change in my pocket and some lipsol and I showed it to those two guys, pitched it one direction and ran in the other direction. They ran over and picked up the American money and I was in the cockpit of the helicopter. The pilot said, ‘Hurry up and get in! This is bad territory!’ and pulled me in by the nape of my neck and I didn’t even get buckled down and we were off the ground. We went into General Vang Pao’s headquarters, which was a safe area, and he ran the Laotian Army from this point. After I got settled down a little bit, he invited me up to have supper with him. The first thing he did was give me a shot of Whiskey, which I consumed rather rapidly. We sat down and had a bowl of soup that was kind of like cabbage and pork and cornbread…tasted good to me! I thanked him and
went on back to the American contingent down, there was a little runway there. The next
morning I was flown out to my home base. Three days later, after I was examined by
the…you always have to get examined by the flight surgeon, I was declared ‘Okay’ and
three days later I escorted an Army helicopter in here, a heavy lift helicopter. You know
the helicopter looks like a flying bridge, a huge thing. It came in and picked this aircraft
up, take it to a friendly area, put the wheels on it, changed the engine and props and flew
it back to my base. It was recovered and was back flying in a week. So I didn’t lose that
aircraft! You can only stand about one of those types of excitements once in a lifetime.
KS: Who was the Air America pilot? Do you recall his name, the pilot that
picked you up?
AM: No but I have it at home.
KS: Okay.
AM: Would you like for me to call it back to you?
KS: That’s fine.
AM: Yes I do…but I sent him a case of Whiskey! See this shot of Laos only, it
depicts a…the red dots depict crashed aircraft and you can see on there that there were
many many many aircraft shot down in Laos. That’s where they landed and maybe,
probably more then half of them of course were killed. That’s only Laos alone, that
doesn’t include North Vietnamese. And of course an eventful day of my last mission. I
had a couple of other aircraft going up on, we drug the airfield at low altitude…came in
and landed. And that’s the last tick of the prop of ‘Miss Charlie’; that was the end of my
missions. I had mixed emotions on it. I made many, many good friends, lost quite a few
people, good friends, but the last tick of the prop that was the end of my combat over in
Vietnam. I’ll never forget it. It was a wonderful experience if you lived through it. Each
one of our missions, each airplane that went airborne chopped up two trucks, two kill
trucks, confirmed trucks. So each mission we killed on the average four trucks plus
ammunitions and supplies that were in the trucks…and that was our contribution to the
war effort. We did slow down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to a cripple most of the time and
that was our main mission. We left the…I left the squadron with mixed emotions
because it was such a horrendous experience. This is the last propeller driven fighter to
ever be made, they’re all jets now, there aren’t any props. So at the end of the day, the
next morning, I came back to the United States. What an experience.

KS: Well thank you very much Mr. Martin.