INTERVIEW II

DATE: February 11, 1981

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES U. CROSS

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: General Cross' residence, Dripping Springs, Texas

Tape 1 of 2

G: General Cross, let me ask you a little bit about your flying for the President. First, he made two trips to Vietnam, is that right?

C: That's correct.

G: And did you fly him on both of those?

C: As a matter of fact, I did.

G: You have talked about those, or at least one of the trips, I think, perhaps it was the one after the Manila conference, on your other oral history. Do you have any recollections about the other trip?

C: The first trip, which was to be the--I believe the President's diary and his papers probably call it the Asian trip, which was in 1966, as I recall, about mid-October until early on in November.

G: That was the around-the-world trip, is that right?

C: No, that was the trip to Asia where he met with the Asian leaders [and Ferdinand] Marcos, and then they had a meeting of the SEATO treaty nations. I believe that was in Bangkok, if my memory serves me correctly, and then from there we came back through Korea, through Alaska and on into Washington sometime early in November 1966. That was the so-called Asian trip.

The trip around the world was in 1967 around Christmas time [and] was in connection with the death of the late Prime Minister [Harold] Holt of Australia. We went to that for the memorial services, and then from there we went to Vietnam, and from Vietnam to Pakistan, just for refueling, principally, although we did meet with the President of Pakistan [Ayub Khan] while we were there, about two hours. Then we went on to Rome, where the President met the Pope, and then on back to Washington. That's perhaps the trip you're talking about.

G: You're right. Now, there was about fifteen months between those two trips.

C: In that order, yes.

G: And the mood of the country was changing about Vietnam. Was the President's mood changing, too, could you tell?

C: I suspect it was. He was getting awfully uptight about Vietnam, and he'd tried everything in the world, you know, to change the mind of the communist regime in North Vietnam about the war and get them to the negotiating table, and so forth. He'd tried bombing halts. He'd tried increased pressures on them in various points, and we'd put more troops in over there. I say we had; he had, more or less at the request of General [William] Westmoreland, and the Joint Chiefs, and those others that were involved in such decisions. I got the impression, just from the President's mood and his testiness about it that perhaps the situation was worrying him more and more, and certainly the demonstrations that were occurring in the United States, the so-called peace movements and whatnot that were demonstrating all around

the country and in front of the Pentagon and whatnot, were obviously giving him lots of pause for concern.

G: Did he come to the cockpit on those trips that you recall?

C: Oh, I suspect that he did. He was often up there on trips that we made, not only those but on others. I always had a good relationship with the President, and of course I was the military aide to the President as well as the pilot, and so lots of times if he felt in the mood just to get up and walk around, well, he'd come up there and have a word or two. Indeed, there's a picture here somewhere of him sitting in the cockpit with me. There it is right there.

G: Do you recall what trip that was?

C: No, I sure don't. It seems to me, though, that that wouldn't have been either of the Asian trips. It seems to me that he had come up there on that occasion, was sitting in the seat behind my pilot's seat, and we were talking about the decision he'd just made not to run again for president.

G: Oh, this is right after the March 31, [1968] speech.

C: Right after the March 31 speech, and I believe that might have been the next day or two. He had already talked to me about it, but he was prone lots of times to talk to you several times about the same subject. He'd approach you in different directions. He'd approach different people to get opinions and whatnot, and I'll never forget it, he said to me on the occasion of that particular visit to the cockpit, "Well, what did you think about my decision that I announced last night?" or whatever the day or two before was. I said, "Well,

Mr. President, I think the country needs you, but certainly I'm with you. Whatever you think is fine with me." And he in a joking way said to me, "Well, what are you going to do now that you don't have me to look after you?" I said, "Mr. President, I'm a big boy. I'm a full colonel in the air force, and I expect I'll make out all right." (Laughter) It was a rather joking reference to--

G: Did that tickle him when you said that?

C: Oh, yes. Well, you know, I had a good relationship with the President. While I couldn't say that I ever was one to put my feet under his table, so to speak, I tried to maintain a relationship with some levity and good nature, and even though it was always he was the boss, and I damn well knew that, but on occasion, when the opportunity presented itself such as that, I would try to make light of--

G: How was his mood on that occasion?

C: I thought he was rather pleasant and just really sort of at rest, sort of at peace with himself. I really never did know the total commitment that he had to either wanting to run again or not run again. You know, that wasn't--

G: There's speculation that he himself didn't know until he finally announced his decision.

C: Well, I wouldn't be surprised. It certainly was a surprise to me, although I will say this about that particular announcement: I had worked, on the night of the speech, until pretty late in my office at the White House, and it seems to me like it was about a nine o'clock Eastern Standard Time speech that he was to give, and I left the White

House about eight o'clock that night. I wanted to be home in time to watch the speech on television. And so I left about eight o'clock, and that time of the evening I could drive home, and of course I drove my own car. I had a White House car, but I drove the car myself. And I had a White House car because it had a radio in it, and I had to be in contact all the time. So anyway, I could drive home in about twenty-five minutes; I lived over close to Andrews Field in Maryland. And I drove home, listened to the radio and listened to the commentary about the President's upcoming speech and what he was going to say about Vietnam, and you know, the usual things that you do. And when I got home, my wife had me some supper, and I ate supper and sat downstairs. I had an easy chair in front of the television; my kids were all around, and I sat down and watched the speech.

Well, I must say that it was a shock to me and a great surprise, because there had been no indication whatsoever amongst the White House staff and the sort of inside channels, so to speak, that indicated that the President was going to say anything like that. And so when I heard him say that on television that night, I was truly shocked, amazed. I wasn't concerned particularly, because long before this announcement came I had conditioned my family, my wife, to [the idea that] we had better start getting our house in order, so to speak, that we'd better start getting our house painted up and fixed up, and that we really ought to think about selling the house, moving into public housing over at Andrews Field, in the event, one, that the President didn't run again, which he had indicated, you know--"Well,

I may not run again." You know, that was his way. "You know, you better get yourself fixed up and living out there in one of them Andrews houses. We're liable to be traveling all over the world the next four years, and your family is going to need to be taken care of." And so way back in January or so, I had already begun to make plans to just sort of take care of our family situation, get our house painted and get it up on the market and get it sold, and if we were to stay with the President, we'd move into public housing. If the President was not to run again, and we were indeed to be transferred, at least we'd be ready come January 20, and certainly there's no guarantee, when someone such as myself is working for someone like the President, that they're even going to retain their job. You know, I mean it's a high-pressure situation, and you're liable to make a mistake and if you do, well, you're on your way.

G: No three-year guaranteed tour of duty.

C: That's exactly right. And so I had been there for a little over three years as military aide to the President and pilot, and I thought, "By golly, Cross, you'd better get your house in order." So we were already in the process of getting our house in order so that we could indeed move out should anything untoward [occur] in the way of his not being in office again or us not being with him. So all those kind of things came up that night, and shocked I was, but I wasn't unready.

G: Did he ever ask you to express yourself about Vietnam?

C: Oh, yes, he did. I won't say that he really wanted a hard position from me, but on two or three occasions, maybe we'd be walking down the

hall in the White House, or maybe I'd be at the Ranch in his office, and he'd say, "Well, by God, I've tried everything in the world to get those people to come talk. What do you think, Cross?" He asked me this on two separate occasions. I said, "Well, Mr. President, you know I'm a hawk, and my feeling is that we ought to go over there and just bomb the hell out of them, just knock their britches off." And he'd look at me sort of with those little baleful squinty eyes, and he'd say, "Well"--he said this both times when he asked me--"Well, hell, Cross, you don't have no damn political sense. You'd have us in a war with Russia in a minute." And I said, "Well, perhaps I would, Mr. President," figuring now's the time to withdraw from that, which I did, and get on about my other rat-killing.

And the funny thing about it was on both occasions when he asked me this particular question, I gave him basically the same answer, and I got basically the same retort from the President. Perhaps modified a little bit, but that's essentially what he said. And the funny thing about it was just a few months before he died, after he retired from office and so forth--just to give you something about how the man had almost total recall about things he'd done, and things he'd said, and what people had said to him--my wife and I were invited out for dinner one night.

G: Out to the Ranch.

C: Yes. And we were there with some other friends of the President. I remember specifically Jay Smith was there--he used to be an Austin automobile dealer--and old Bob Present, who is the chairman of the

board of Capital National Bank, and I don't recall the other guests. Roy Butler, I think, and his wife were there. And we were talking about one thing and another, just socializing, you know, and the subject came up about Nixon, who at that time had just unleashed the B-52 bombers against the North Vietnamese, I mean, really giving them hell.

G: That would have been the Christmas bombing, probably.

C: That was the Christmas bombing, that's right, of 1972. And it looked like that Christmas bombing was really bringing them to their knees and was going to bring them to the table, particularly as pertained to the POW issue. And the President [Johnson], now, was talking about this and said, "Well, by God, Nixon's really giving them the business," something to that effect. And he turned to me, and I was sitting on his right or his left; I happened to be right at the head of the table. He sits at the head of the table and my wife was on one side and I was on the other that particular evening. He turned to me and he said, "Well, I'll say one thing, Cross. By God, you told me that twice, didn't you?" And I said, "Well, Mr. President, the times were different, and perhaps my advice wouldn't have been wise at the time," or something to that effect. But I thought it was ironical that he had indeed asked me about that on two occasions, once in 1967 and I guess once in 1968--

=

G: And remembered it four or five years later.

C: And remembered it in 1972. And he died--what?--just a couple of months later.

G: February, I guess.

C: January.

G: January, that's right. That must have been just before he died, then.

C: Well, it was right about Christmas time.

G: Did he ever--you mentioned the word "sounding board" a while back, and of course Lyndon Johnson had the reputation of using everybody at one time or another as a sounding board.

C: He did indeed. He did indeed.

G: Did he ever bounce ideas about Vietnam off you, maybe not to hear your advice but just to see what it sounded like?

C: Indirectly, I suspect that he did. He would talk to me, perhaps just drop a ten-word comment and expect a response. How he used what response I gave him, I don't know. And lots of times--it's just really hard for me to speak for him, but I do know that he bounced ideas off of everybody, everybody that was around him that he trusted. And I always felt like he trusted me, because I've got some documents, some papers in my safe over here that indicate to me that he trusted me. And I felt like that I was one of those people that he would talk to, and there were those on his staff that I have an idea that he knew who they were, but that's about the extent of it, you know. In my case, it wasn't a matter of him knowing who I was, because he knew who I was, and when he wanted me, he damn sure hollered and got me. (Laughter)

G: Do you remember any specific comment he made to you or--?

C: About the Vietnam War?

G: Yes.

C: Oh, gosh, he spoke about so many things, like, "I've tried every damn way in the world I know how to get those people to the negotiating table." And he'd comment about some of our failures over there, about how they were knocking the hell out of us in Khe Sanh, and so forth. And I told him one time--in fact, when Khe Sanh was really being pounded, and our casualties were high, and we were completely encircled, and it looked like perhaps that we might even lose that thing, you know, when they were just all around it.

G: Like Dien Bien Phu.

C: Yes. And he was trying to rally the forces, so to speak, to make a stand and not lose it. I told him, "Mr. President, I know those boys over there feel like they've been forgotten. We keep sending more people and more tanks and more"--well, not tanks, but--"more helicopters and more ammo and so forth, and they keep taking a pounding. If you had a direct representative over there, I'd like to go over there and just go in there, just fly in there and let the boys know that the President is thinking about them." He said, "Oh, hell, no, you can't do that. Goddamn, you'll go over there and get killed."

Those kinds of things were the sort of thing that he and I would talk about. He never asked my advice on policy. Hell, he had four-star generals, and had [Robert] McNamara and later--what's his name?--Clark Clifford came in as secretary of defense. Those were the people that he asked for advice about policy.

G: How did he react to Tet? Of course, that was right around the same time as Khe Sanh was heating up.

C: That was Tet, actually. Well, he just felt like that he'd done everything in the world that he could to contain that war into a small police-type action, and perhaps that's the wrong choice of words, and lo and behold, here the Vietnamese who were running down that--what did they call that Laos--?

G: The Ho Chi Minh Trail?

C: --the Ho Chi Minh Trail, claiming they weren't, and we were bombing it, and yet they were still getting down there. He just felt like, doggone it, we've done everything in the world we can, and yet here they are still trying to end-run around us and take over South Vietnam. They say they're not; you know, they claimed they weren't, but they were. They were saying that the Viet Cong were who was responsible for all that fighting down there, yet it was the North Vietnamese that were doing it. We had the film and everything to prove it.

So he was upset about it. He just felt entrapped, I think, by the whole situation. I don't know whether he felt like the military wasn't doing its job, don't think he did. I think he just felt like that it was one of those no-win situations that people find themselves in. I really can't say what his innermost thoughts were. I know he anguished about it a lot.

G: Now, you have mentioned, just in passing, that you don't think that he faulted the military particularly for the situation in Vietnam.

C: No, I don't really think so. In fact, I think that General Westmoreland, who I felt like was a personal friend of the President, I think he just had a lot of confidence in General Westmoreland. I think he felt like that General Westmoreland was doing everything in the world that he could over there, and that most of the time--of course, anybody, when things aren't going like they want them to, they'll lash out at somebody, and in this case it was the military that was over there, and lots of times, I'm sure, he felt like just saying, "Aw, that damn general over there," or "them damn colonels ain't--" But in general terms, I think he felt like that the military was doing its job as best it could under the constraints that they had to operate under, but that's just a feeling that I had. I know certainly he thought the world of General Westmoreland.

G: Let me just ask a couple of follow-on questions to that, because we don't have a great deal on Lyndon Johnson and the military, per se, and I just have a couple of specifics. You may or may not know about them. One of the things that drew a lot of comment in military circles during President Johnson's tenure in office was his appointment of General Harold Johnson as chief of staff of the army, because General Johnson was not, by a long shot, the senior man in line for that job. Did you ever hear any inside talk about how that happened?

C: I never did. The only thing I remember--let's see, was that for chief of staff?

G: Chief of staff of the army.

C: Chief of staff of the army. No, I don't.

G: Well, of course, you were--

C: I was thinking about General Adams, who replaced General Westmoreland in--

G: Creighton Adams, yes.

C: --in South Vietnam.

G: That was [Creighton] Abrams, rather.

C: Abrams, that's right.

G: I thought Creighton Adams didn't sound right.

C: No, [Milton B.] Adams was the commander of Strike Force down here, I remember that. But Abrams was the guy, and I remember some comment about him. But as far as General Johnson being the chief of the army, I can't comment on that. I don't know. I presume, though, most of those appointments, you know, came through my office, and prior to the time that they were actually signed by the President and sent to the Hill for confirmation. I think that most military appointments that would come to the President, as a general rule, are on the recommendation strictly of the Secretary of Defense or through channels, the Secretary of the Army in this case to the Secretary of Defense, who would then send it on through my office for the necessary administrative handling, and then I'd send it on to the President just for signature. And I had the idea, perhaps not in the case of the Joint Chiefs, the chief of the army and so forth, that most of them the President oftentimes didn't know personally; they were just recommendations that had been made and sent up. Now I suspect, in the case of

the Chief of Staff of the Army, that he probably knew him, but why the choice was made I can't really say.

G: You were liaison to the Joint Chiefs, were you not, for the President?

C: Well, in a sense I was. I was the military aide to the President. But the liaison with the Joint Chiefs, any president, I don't care who he is, whether it be Lyndon Johnson or John Kennedy, or whoever, the military aide to the president, military assistant to the president, is not in a policy job, and he wouldn't be in the same context that, say, the national security adviser is to a president, and accordingly, you can't say that you're liaison in the sense that you're channeling policy information. You're liaison in the sense that there's a jillion things that a president requires in the way of administrative support from the military or the Defense Department. Well, the military aide to the president provides that channel, essentially. There's very little in the way of policy that ever goes through the military aide's office. Administratively, yes, logistically, yes. The logistics of running the yachts, for example, that's all the military aide's department. The communications system that's extensive and so forth, that's the military aide's department. The airplanes and the helicopters and Camp David, the--well, that's essentially it. The automobiles, the army runs that garage and so forth, that all comes under the military aide. The emergency evacuation plans and that sort of thing, the defense of the White House, if indeed you ever got down to a situation--which we did one time. In about April, I believe, of 1968 when they were having the riots in

Washington, we got to the point where we had to get ourselves positioned. We didn't ever show our hand, but we had to get ourselves in position to have troops available to defend the White House in case it got down to storming the White House gates.

G: You sort of went on a yellow alert?

C: We went on a yellow alert, that's right. In fact, we went more than a yellow alert. We actually had troops stationed in the basement of the White House, a small contingent. We had a larger contingent of troops in the Post Office Department, which is just down from the White House a block or two.

G: Were these paratroops, or do you recall?

C: They were some paratroops, I believe, and some other infantry troops. We had quite a contingent of people.

G: But never showed them.

C: Never showed them. We felt that would be an error. But we had them there.

G: It would be provocative to show them before you had to.

C: You bet. You bet. And so that's the sort of thing that the military office, the military aide to the president provides, rather than, as the question you put to me was, if I served as liaison to the Joint Chiefs. Certainly I knew the Joint Chiefs, all of them, personally.

G: Administrative liaison.

C: Administrative liaison. Logistics sort of things we did. That was our responsibility.

G: This is similar to a previous question, but let me put it to you again. Did your position that way ever get you in a kind of a tight spot between the Joint Chiefs or any single member of the Joint Chiefs and the President?

C: No, they always respected our position, the high level people. Oftentimes where we got in tight spots, like I'd related to you earlier, when I was without portfolio and he was vice president, or part of the time before I was appointed to be military assistant and the President was using me because I had known him a long time, and because he trusted me and didn't necessarily trust some of the people that he had inherited from the Kennedy Administration, particularly in the military office. They wouldn't do what he wanted them to do, you know, they--

G: Are you referring to General [Chester V.] Clifton's operation?

C: Yes, General Clifton and some of the others that worked for Clifton. I've got a story I'll tell you about that in a minute that's a direct quote from the President, that he told me.

G: That's what we want.

C: Okay. To answer your question, that sort of thing never got me into any conflict with the Joint Chiefs. As a general rule, when the Joint Chiefs get to that position, they're pretty savvy individuals, and they understand that a president, no matter who he is, is going to demand certain things and going to have to have certain things. Whether he personally demands it or not, he is going to have to have it, and that there are people on the White House staff, principally

the military office, which I headed, that have to go to the Pentagon and more or less crack the whip to get things when they're needed. In other words, the presidency tolerates zero errors. It's pure and simple. And when a military assistant, be it Jim Cross or be it whoever the man is up there now, has to have something, he generally has to have it instantly. Well, the military oftentimes, steeped in tradition, steeped in regulation that they have to go by and so forth, sometimes some of the underlings will say, "Oh, we can't do that. You've got to get fourteen requisitions," and the usual military red tape to get it done. "Hey, pal, we can't wait," we've got to say. Well, sometimes some of the underlings would sort of bow up their bureaucratic backs and say they couldn't do it. If it ever got to that, all you had to do was--you meaning me--pick up the phone and call the chief of staff of the army or the air force or the secretary of defense, or whoever you had to get in touch with, and the word got sent that, well, we have to do this, and so it got done. And so, no, I didn't get into any hot water, so to speak, as you put it, with the Joint Chiefs or with the secretaries of defense. Sometimes there might be some miffed feelings down underneath when we asked for certain things and those individuals felt like, well, that was in their bailiwick, and they chose not to do it because of politics, or because of regulations, real or imagined. You know what I mean.

G: Yes, indeed. In that same line, did the President ever express in your hearing personal opinions or comments about any particular ranking officer that would lead you to believe, well, the President

thought very highly of this particular officer, or not so highly of that one? And I've just got a few names that have occurred to me: General [Curtis] LeMay, for example.

C: Yes. Could we take a short break here?

(Interruption)

G: We were going to talk about General LeMay, and you said you had a story about President Johnson saying something about General LeMay.

C: Well, it actually dates back to an earlier time than the presidency; it goes back to when he was the vice president.

G: That's fine.

C: I had been associated with the Vice President about four or five months. I hadn't known the man, really, until December 1961, when I was picked by my squadron to take the then-Vice President Johnson on his first Jetstar trip. I took him from Washington, where he wanted to leave from National Airport, to Chicago, and from Chicago, at O'Hare--I believe it was O'Hare; it might have been Midway, I don't recall--in any event, we went from there to his ranch at Stonewall. At the time, his ranch [had] a five-thousand-foot runway that ran rather sharply uphill, and the air force was just violently opposed to his going into that--or me, in particular, taking the Jetstar into that ranch. Well, we had landed the Jetstar on four-thousand-foot runways and narrow runways and so forth, and if you do it one place then why not do it someplace else? And even though the air force raised lots of objections to it, the pressures were applied through his military aide at the time, a fellow named Howard Burris, a

colonel. Howard was a nice man, [is] still living in Washington, I understand. And we went ahead and made a preliminary trip to the Ranch; I made the trip myself, empty. We got down there and landed and shot a couple of landings at the Ranch and looked everything over, and I came back and I told my commanding officer, Colonel Tim Ireland [?], "Well, we can do it, Colonel Ireland." He said, "Well, you better tell them we can't do it." I said, "Well, sir, all right, I will." Which I did.

And through questioning of Colonel Burris and others, and indeed, I think the Vice President called me personally and asked me what I thought about it, and I said, "Well, sir, my group doesn't want us to do it but it can be done." He said, "Do you think it's safe?" I said, "Yes, sir. I wouldn't go if I didn't." He said, "Well, let's just do it. By God, we'll call General LeMay, or call whoever we have to." Of course, that was out of my bailiwick. I wasn't about to call General LeMay; I didn't know the man, and a major in the air force doesn't call General LeMay anyway.

Well, to make a long story short, I went ahead and made the trip, and everything went fine. Then from that point forward I began to be more and more thrust into a role with the then-Vice President. Come January--this was December of 1961--come January of 1962, I made the trip that I mentioned to you a a while ago where I went from Washington to Bergstrom Field, picked up the then-Vice President at Bergstrom. He drove his own automobile, by the way--that was before they worried too much about Secret Service--drove his automobile up to

the airport, and he said to me, "How long is it going to take us to get to West Palm Beach? I've got to meet the President at four o'clock." I said, "Mr. Vice President, I just don't think we can make it. You know, I had mentioned to you last night that we needed to be off from here by twelve-thirty local time to be there at four o'clock. It's one o'clock right now, and that puts us thirty minutes behind just going in." He said, "Well, you just do your best, now. I think you can make it, so let's get going." So we popped it to it, and sure enough, we made it at exactly four o'clock. And the President [Kennedy] met him.

At the same time [about the same time] of landing, Secretary McNamara came in on another plane from Washington. On that occasion, the President [Johnson], or the then-Vice President, during later conversations that night with McNamara told McNamara that he wanted me to be assigned permanently as his pilot. Well, just--and I'm getting to the story about LeMay here in just a moment--[it was] as a result of that per-manent assignment, which filtered down through air force channels a few days later, that I was indeed to be the permanent pilot for the Vice President, even though without portfolio and still assigned over there in the VIP squadron.

About a month later, or a month and a half, the Vice President called me and he said, "The President wants me to go down to Grand Turk Island, where John Glenn is going to be landing from the first orbital space flight, and pick up John Glenn, and we're going to bring him back to Cape Canaveral for a big ceremony there, and then we'll be

coming on back to Washington. I'm going in my Jetstar, and I want you to get it arranged." I said, "All right, sir," which we began to make the arrangements. Well, there was no fuel at Grand Turk. There were no trucks at Grand Turk to refuel from, even if they had fuel down there. And so we finally made arrangements, with a great deal of anguish and whatnot, to get some KC-97s, two of them, flown to Grand Turk, parked down there with fuel on board. They had their refueling booms that they could refuel in flight, but they couldn't do it on the ground. Well, we managed to get some modifications and some work done so that we could run a hose out of that tanker so that we could refuel our Jetstar on the ground down there and be able, then, to fly back to Cape Canaveral. The Jetstar simply didn't have enough fuel to go from Florida to Grand Turk and back to the Cape. We had to have fuel.

Well, LeMay got into this to the extent that he was then chief of staff of the air force. Of course, obviously he had been instrumental in having the tankers assigned to SAC and had set most of the policies that prohibited, pretty much, the use of tankers for anything except refueling SAC airplanes. In the process of trying to get this set up, I had to call the Vice President two or three times, and he kept insisting that we get it done because, by God, the President said he was going to meet Glenn and he wanted to meet Glenn, because of the international honor that would accrue to him and to the country as a result of the television [coverage] and whatnot. So I had to make two or three calls to, I believe, David Jones, who is now chairman of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff and was at that time aide to LeMay, to get this thing set. But we finally got it all set.

Well, lo and behold--oh, and by the way, the Vice President wanted to go nonstop from Washington to Grand Turk, which was a bit of a go, of and within itself. It's sixteen hundred and some odd miles. Well, we worked that out, figured that we could do it, and we were going to leave, as I recall, at about four o'clock in the morning, 4:00 a.m., on the appointed morning, and I don't recall the date off the top of my head, and we were going to fly real slow, just cruise, so that the Vice President could nap on the way. We had a couch in that little plane, and he'd stretch out and roll up in his blankets and take him a good nap and be fresh when we got there. And I was going to fly at extremely high altitude so we'd get good fuel consumption and just drift along.

Well, about seven o'clock that night, the night before we were to leave the next morning at around 4:00 a.m., my operations officer, a Major Lantine [?], called me and he said, "Say, have you checked the weather lately, Jim?" I said, "Well, sir, I just checked about an hour ago, and everything looked pretty good." He said, "Well, look out the window," and I looked out the window, and the fog was so thick that you could just cut it with a knife. So then I began checking the weather more closely, and lo and behold, it was dropping down all over the eastern coast, Eastern Seaboard, and it was a quarter of a mile visibility or less, in some cases zero-zero, and projected to be that way all night long. Well, here we are facing an international event

of great significance; the Vice President is supposed to be there to pick up John Glenn. And the fog, by the way, was going to be there until way on up into the next morning, even up to the time when there was some question about whether or not we could, even if we were at Grand Turk, get back into Florida. And it had stretched darn near to Cape Canaveral. There was some question whether or not it might even cover Cape Canaveral.

I called the Vice President, and I said, "Mr. Vice President, I have some bad news. The weather has just settled in on us. It wasn't forecast. It was supposed to have been good all night, and here it is. If you look out the window it's just awful." He said, "Yes, I can see it. What's our options?" I said, "Sir, I don't know, except that it's just fog, and we could go except that the air force prohibits us from taking off in anything under a half-mile visibility." And he said, "Well, what have you got out there?" I said, "Well, it's zero-zero right now; zero ceiling, zero visibility." He said, "Can you make a zero takeoff?" I said, "I could make it, Mr. Vice President, but the air force won't let me." He said, "Goddamn it, LeMay told me that I could have anything I want. I don't know why in the hell it is, that every time I want to do something, you and all them damn colonels and all them generals over there, by God, they won't let me have anything I want. By God, you just pick up the phone and call General LeMay and tell him that I said that I want to go and that he should permit you to make this takeoff."

Well, I didn't know General LeMay, and I felt like that it wasn't my place to do it, and so I called up Colonel Ireland, who was the wing commander. I told him what the Vice President told me. He said, "No, by God, you can't go." So I thought, "Well, Colonel," I said, "Now, look. The Vice President told me to call General LeMay personally. I feel like that I don't have any choice. I called you first, but I want you to know that I think that I don't have any choice in the matter. I mean, after all, he's vice president of the United States, and I don't want to defy the man." "Well, by God, you can't go. We got rules." I said, "Well--" And so then I anguished. I was a major, and here is my colonel, you know. And I thought, "Well--" So I called Colonel Burris, who was the aide to Johnson. He said, "You better call General LeMay." So I did, I called General LeMay.

G: Did you have any trouble getting through, I mean--?

C: No, uh-uh. No, sir. I called him, and I told whoever answered the phone who I was, and that the Vice President had asked me to call him, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, and that I needed to talk to him.

So I called General LeMay and talked to him. He said, "Well, I don't see any problem. Can you make it?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Well, just do it." And so there was a lot of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth and so forth. The Vice President, then, after I called him back, said, "Did you call LeMay?" I said, "Yes, sir, I did, but there's still a hassle about it. The people out here are just simply up in arms about it, and they don't want me to go." He said, "Well, we're going, if you think you can make it." I said,

"Yes, sir, I think I can make it." He said, "Well, what time do you want to leave?" I said, "Well, I don't care, Mr. Vice President, but I think it would be better if we got off pretty darn quick. It may get so bad that we can't even see the runway lights. If it gets to that, if I can't see a couple of runway lights, then I'd say no, we'd better not go." He said, "All right, we're going to get ourselves ready and come on."

So, sure enough, he and I've forgotten now who came with him, but there were two or three other people, and we went to the airplane, and I never will forget it, he stood on the steps of that little airplane right there, that little Jetstar [indicating photograph], and he looked out across the ramp, and he said, "Boy, it's pretty bad, isn't it?" And I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "You think we can make it?" And I said, "Yes, sir." He went back, took off his clothes, laid down and went to sleep. In the meantime, my commander, this Colonel [Ireland], came out there, and he had a station wagon, a Ford station wagon, an air force car, and he led me down the taxiway. It was that bad. We couldn't see hardly to taxi, and he led me down in a car. And once we got on the runway, well, we lined up, both electronically with our compasses and so forth, which were very, very accurate, plus the fact that I could see two runway lights. I could see the light here and then plus one.

G: The closest one. Oh, I see. That's not a whole lot to azimuth on.

C: No, we had about a fifty to a hundred-yard visibility, is what we had. We got cleared for takeoff, and of course, we knew that the tops of

the stuff was very low, that is to say we'd be on top of it just momentarily because it was just fog, and so we took off and didn't have a bit of trouble. Got to Grand Turk, and we had about a three or four-hour layover, since we'd left early. We left around midnight. And everything worked out fine. We slid on into Grand Turk, and picked up John Glenn, and Chris Kraft, I believe, and Jim Webb, who was the head of NASA at that time, James Webb, and we came back right on schedule to land at Cape Canaveral. But that was the occasion when he said, "By God, LeMay's always told me I can have anything I want, and now you're telling me I can't. By God, you just call LeMay and call his hand."

G: If LeMay tells me I can, I'm not going to let you tell me I can't. (Laughter)

Did he ever say anything about General [John P.] McConnell, for example?

C: General McConnell--yes and no. I think General McConnell he liked a great deal. McConnell's a salty old cuss, and when I was first appointed to be the military aide, McConnell called me and he said, "I want you to come see me." I didn't know him at the time. So I went in, walked in to see him, and I noticed right away that he was a salty cuss, had his feet up on his desk, and he was wearing a brown leather belt with his blue uniform, had his coat off, you know. [He] invited me in and made me welcome, made me feel right at home, too, as a matter of fact. And he said, "Well, goddamn you, you sure surprised everybody." I said, "How's that, General McConnell?" He said,

"You're a lieutenant colonel and a new one at that, and now you've been appointed to be military aide to the President and pilot. You're replacing a major general over there, and there's a hell of a lot of people in this goddamned Pentagon that's going to be out for your hide. They got lots of long knives. I just felt like that I better get you over here and tell you that when it gets plenty rough, when it gets to the point where you can't take it, and them long knives are carving your ass"--that's just the way he put it--"I'm the only son of a bitch over here that can help you."

As a result of that conversation, I thought, "By golly, this is a good friend to have, J. P. McConnell," and I stayed close to him the whole time I was in the White House. I think that the President liked him because he was that kind of a man, just an old down-to-earth, salty sort of a character. And when Bus [Earle] Wheeler was about to retire as chairman of the Joint Chiefs in, let's see, it would have been in about March of 1968, February, maybe?

G: I think that's right.

C: When did they roll out the C-5? When did the President make his trip to Puerto Rico?

G: Now you've got me. I don't have that.

C: Where he stayed down there three or four days.

G: Oh, gosh, I can remember the incident but I can't place it.

C: Well, you know the period I'm talking about. We were in Beaumont, Texas for some kind of an appreciation dinner for old Jack Brooks, Congressman Brooks, and from Beaumont we were to go to the Lockheed

Marietta, Georgia plant for the rollout of the C-5 transport. In the process of making that trip from Beaumont to Marietta, the President called me on the intercom and said, "Say, I want to take a little vacation. We need to go somewhere where it's warm and pleasant. Has the air force got any facilities in the Caribbean?" I said, "Well, sir, they've got Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico." That was before it was closed. He said, "Well, you just set it up, now, and as soon as we leave from Marietta we're going to go straight on to Ramey and let everybody play a little golf. You get hold of General McConnell and tell him I want him to come down here and join us." So I called General McConnell on the radio-telephone and told him about it, and he was to meet us then at Marietta--well, he was going to be at Marietta, anyway, for the rollout, that's the way it was. And I told him, "The President wants you to go with us to Ramey, stay two or three days, and play some golf." He said, "Fine. But I'll take my own plane." I said, "No, the President wants you to go with us. You can send your own plane down there if you want to, but the President wants you to go with us." He said, "All right."

So we went on, made the rollout there in Marietta, stayed three or four hours or however long the deal took, and when we got ready to go, McConnell had already come aboard, and he was aboard the plane, Air Force One. When the President got aboard, he and McConnell shook hands and then McConnell, being an old air force guy, he decided that he'd come up front and sit with me in the cockpit, which he did. I

let him sit in the same seat the President is sitting in right there. [indicating photograph]

G: Kind of an observer's chair.

C: Yes, the observer's chair, right behind the pilot. He sat up there for a few minutes for the takeoff, and then he went on back, and I guess [did] whatever they do back there in the cabin with the President, have drinks and eat or whatever. We stayed in Ramey it seems to me like two or three days, and he and McConnell played golf every day. I got the impression--now, I don't know this for a fact, but I know that Bus Wheeler was about to retire as chairman, and I got the impression that the President might have been looking him over. I have no way of knowing this. I don't know whether there was any consideration whatsoever, don't know where there's a piece of paper or a scrap of evidence to indicate, but I got the idea that the President might have been looking him over to be the chairman. And I was hoping he would, because like they were two of a kind as far as personalities. McConnell was a sour-talking, salty old bastard, if you'll pardon the expression, and like I said earlier, I thought he was a hell of a good man, and I really was kind of hoping that that's what it was for and that he would indeed get the job, if that's what they were down there for.

Finally, when we got ready to go on the morning after we'd been there two or three days, it was about seven o'clock when I got a call from Marvin [Watson] or Jim Jones or somebody that was with us that the President wanted to leave that morning. So I got everything,

got all my people to hustling baggage and closing up, and getting things to the plane, and getting the plane ready, and all the jillion things that we had to do to get everybody on board, and notifying everybody. So I got my assistant, I believe it was Haywood Smith, to notify the various people, and I wanted specifically to get General McConnell. Well, nobody could find General McConnell, and I finally ran him down in the officers' club, and he'd just walked in wearing his uniform and everything, and he was going to have some breakfast. I ran in there and I said, "General, the President is fixing to leave. You'd better get on board that airplane." He said, "No, no, hell, no. Jim Jones told me that the President is going to leave at ten-thirty." I said, "General, don't believe Jones. He doesn't know what the hell is going on. I know what's happening. I know the President." Jones was a Johnny-come-lately up there, and a young, inexperienced fellow at the time. I said, "You better get on that plane, now, and I want you to go. I'm going right now. My crew's down there and the plane's ready to go and people are getting aboard it." "No, hell, no, I'm going to eat my breakfast." I said, "General, we'll feed you breakfast on the airplane." "No, I'll be there in a few minutes."

Well, by God, I hustled out of there just as fast as I could, and I got to the plane just about five minutes before the President did. Of course, we were ready to go. And the President in the meantime--and of course, I had a walkie-talkie radio and everything else, and I knew what his position was and everything--the President in the meantime was making a slow drive through Ramey Air Force Base,

waving at people, and stopping and shaking hands. But I knew he was on his way. Lo and behold, up the President rolls, and he came up to me and he said, "Well, how's the weather?" I said, "The weather's fine, Mr. President," putting off the inevitable I had to tell him. He said, "Everybody here?" I said, "Everybody's here but General McConnell. He'll be here in a minute." I was kind of stretching--

G: Playing for time.

C: --playing for time. I knew the President wanted to go over there and shake hands with everybody, which he was fixing to do. He said, "All right." And the President wouldn't wait for nobody. He wouldn't wait for Mrs. Johnson even, if it suited him.

Anyway, I sent somebody, I forget who, I said, "Go get General McConnell and tell him to get here." Well, they managed to drag the General out, but in the meantime the President had finished shaking hands and he was ready to go, and McConnell wasn't there. And we waited about ten minutes. I will never know, but in my heart I think that that might have been the key right there that kept J. P. McConnell from being the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when Bus Wheeler retired.

G: That's marvelous. That's interesting.

C: Now, that's just Jim Cross's heart talking, you know. In other words, I don't know. I don't know whether he was even being considered for the job.

G: How did General McConnell get back then? Was his plane--?

C: No, no, he came back with us.

G: Oh, he did make it.

C: Yes. But the President was mad! Oh, he was mad.

G: He didn't say anything in your presence?

C: Oh, he didn't say anything. No, I don't think he'd ever say anything to anybody. He wouldn't say anything to McConnell. See, the President, the way he operated, if he got mad with somebody, I mean really sore, particularly if they weren't somebody that he was real close to, hell, he just turned them off. I mean, he'd be polite--

G: Just cut them out.

C: Just cut them out. You take somebody like me that he was close to, if he got mad with me, oh, he'd tear me up. In other words, he didn't mind eating me alive and spitting me out in little bitty pieces. But that was because those of us that were close enough to him, he knew he could do that, and it didn't affect our loyalty whatsoever to him.

In a way, it might be related to what you've just said, that shows the character of the man. One time, oh, it was mid-1966, 1967, somewhere along in there, the President called me. My office was in the East Wing of the White House, just exactly opposite the President's office, except that I was on the second floor. The President's Oval Office is on the first floor of the West Wing; mine was on the opposite side, second floor of the East Wing. The President called me one morning, in typical fashion. He said, "Where are you?" I said, "Mr. President, I'm in my office." He said, "Come over here, I want to talk to you." So I said, "Where are you, Mr. President?" "I'm upstairs." So I went up to the bedroom.

G: In the Mansion, what they call the Mansion?

C: Yes, in the Lincoln Bedroom, that's where he slept. I went up there, and we talked and did whatever, he gave me a thousand things to do, you know. What he'd do, he'd tell you, "I want you to do this--" and you'd better write it down because he'd give you fifteen items, and if you didn't write it down you'd forget it. And so in the meantime he's getting ready to go to the office. He was still talking, so you don't just--when he starts walking, hell, you walk with him. He doesn't say, "Come on," you just, if he's talking, you better be right there. So he started on over to the elevator, and we went down the elevator, and he was talking all the time, and I'm writing notes. Started on across the basement that goes under the White--you've been there, I suppose.

G: No, but I know about it.

C: All right, and then it goes by what used to be the Roosevelt pool, and then you turn left and go either out in through the glass doors to the Oval Office or you go just a little ways further and go in the other side of the Oval Office; it's inside or outside, your choice. Well, we busted out of the basement of the White House, going along that colonnaded area there past the Roosevelt pool, and I don't know what prompted me to do it, but in the meantime somebody else had joined the entourage. There was myself, the President, and it might have been Marvin Watson, I don't know, I can't recall. The President turned to me and smiled and said something which required a response. And I remember thinking--sort of a closeness, at the moment. So I grabbed

him by the arm and was going to be walking and talking, holding him by the arm. And he drew back. And I said, "Uh-oh, Cross. You made a mistake. You overstepped your authority." And that goes back to what I said earlier in our conversation about not putting my feet under his table. He's the kind of a man that was close and warm, but aloof.

G: If there was going to be any grabbing done, he was going to do it.

C: He was going to do the grabbing, you betcha. And I never forgot that little lesson, right there. You know, I was close to the man, but I wasn't that close. (Laughter)

G: Let me ask you about a couple of more military personalities, before we get off of that, and then I want to take up a little more about Vietnam. You mentioned General Bus Wheeler a little bit ago. Do you remember anything regarding the President and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs?

C: I think he had a great deal of respect and pride in General Wheeler. I think he valued his advice and counsel. I think he considered him to be a good friend. I've heard him say lots of fine things about General Wheeler during the course of the years that General Wheeler-- I guess General Wheeler was chairman of the Joint Chiefs damn near the whole time I was up there. I don't recall the exact tenure that he had. Is he still living, by the way?

G: No, I think he's passed on. He had a bad heart, you know, toward the end.

C: Did he? Well, I hadn't heard, I had not heard what happened to

General Wheeler. But I know the President had a lot of respect for him and appreciated his counsel and advice.

G: How about--well, here's one that'll be close to home, General [William W.] Momyer.

C: I don't think he knew General Momyer very well. During the time of Vietnam, of course, General Momyer was the Seventh Air Force commander. He had been down here at Randolph, in charge of the Air Training Command, as a lieutenant general. The President promoted him to four-star general, sent him to Vietnam in about 1966, I guess, somewhere along in there.

G: He planned most of the bombing of the North, didn't he? Wasn't that part of his bailiwick?

C: Oh, yes, he was the commander of Seventh Air Force, which was the whole deal over there. And the President knew him, but I wouldn't say he knew him close and personally like he did, say, General McConnell, or like he did Bus Wheeler or some of the others, General Johnson. I know he knew General Johnson. I don't know whether he knew him beforehand, but I know he knew him quite well as long as he was chief of staff of the army. General Momyer, on the other hand, was--

G: Seven thousand miles away.

C: Seven, eight thousand, ten thousand miles away, and General Westmoreland, of course, was the commander over there, and President Johnson conferred on a regular basis, by telephone and whatnot, with Westy.

G: Oh, he did call him by phone?

C: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, hell, he used to call me over there by telephone, which was, you know, a colonel in the air force in a combat zone and the President calling to see how he felt.

G: That must look a little strange going through the military switchboards over there, don't you think?

C: Well, I don't know how it came through, but one morning about four o'clock in the morning the telephone rang in the BOQ where I was asleep, and I was flying combat at the time.

G: Where were you at the time?

C: I was at Tan Son Nhut, yes, you know, just flying recce out of Tan Son Nhut. We'd lost four or five airplanes in four or five days over there, reconnaissance airplanes. The President knew I was flying reconnaissance, and in the process of those planes going down, I guess he was worried about his ex-pilot and old friend. And the phone rang at four o'clock in the morning, and I didn't even hear the phone ring. It was just in a hall, you know, a bunch of rooms on both sides of the hall, typical H-type barracks like we had in World War II. Somebody answered the phone, and they came, knocked on the door and said, "Colonel Cross"--I was a colonel at the time--"the President wants to talk to you."

(Laughter)

I said, "The President?" "Yes, the President of the United States." So I went to the phone at four o'clock in the morning. It was the President, wondering how my health was, and whether or not--he said, "Well, now, goddamn it, don't you get shot down over there."

G: That's good.

C: It wasn't long after that before General Brown called me, General George Brown, who's now dead, and he was Seventh Air Force commander at that time; he'd replaced General Momyer. General Brown called me just a few days later, maybe a week, and said, "Cross, this is General Brown." I said, "Yes, sir?" He said, "How long will it take you to get out of here?" I said, "What do you mean, sir?" He said, "I mean, get your bags packed and get home." I said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "I got a call this morning from General [Joseph] Nazzaro, who got a call from the President, that they want you out of here, and I want you out of here tomorrow." I said, "General Brown, I can't leave tomorrow. I'm grounded right now with a terrible cold, and my ears are perforated, and this morning they had to draw fluid off my ears." He said, "Well, by God, you get out of here. I don't give a damn how you do it. You get out of here."

(Laughter)

G: Take a slow boat, correct?

C: Yes. They were concerned--in fact, nobody wanted me over there flying combat anyway; they were afraid I'd get shot down and there'd be a political hassle because I'd been aide to the President and everything.

But to get back to your specific question about General Momyer, I didn't feel like the President knew him real well, because he would have dealt on a regular basis with Westmoreland, and Westmoreland would have had to relay the instructions to Momyer. He knew Momyer.

In fact, when I retired, Momyer came to the retirement, a master of ceremonies, I suppose you'd say, and the President and he had a good chance to--because the President also came to my retirement--and they had a chance to renew their friendship in a sense.

G: Was that at Bergstrom?

C: Bergstrom Field, yes. Which they did.

But the most eventful thing that I can remember about Momyer and the President was when we made our trip around the world in 1967. There was some question about where we were going to land in Vietnam, or in the war zone, as we made our way from Australia on up into the war zone area, and then whether or not we were going to go back through Japan and Alaska, or whether we were going through Italy to see the Pope.

G: The President hadn't made up his mind quite yet, I guess.

C: I was personally persuaded that he had, that he'd made up his mind right after we arrived in Canberra. I'll tell you about that in a few minutes, if you've got the time. But for the record, publicly he had not made up his mind, and indeed we hadn't made up our minds where we were going to land when we arrived in Thailand. We had two choices: we were going to land at Udorn, which was a fighter base that was taking the fight to Hanoi, and--oh, Christ, what was the other place?

G: Was it U Taphao?

C: U Taphao? No, that was at--oh, I'll think of it in a minute. Anyway, it was the other base where they were operating 105s out of Thailand.

Well, as we approached--and by the way, we're not flying Air Force One, we were flying one of the backup planes.

G: I think you've told that story, that Air Force One was in pieces all over the hangar.

C: Yes, yes. And we were flying one of the backup planes, which any time the President is aboard it, it's Air Force One, but it wasn't the number-one plane, 26000 tail number. And so--Khorat was the air base; Khorat Air Force Base was where we finally landed.

But as we made our way from Darwin, where we'd landed for fuel on this shorter-range Boeing 707, I was in contact with General McConnell and the Joint Chiefs and others who were trying to decide what base we should land at up in Thailand to give: one, the most safety that we could to the President; two, let him accomplish what he wanted to do, which was meet with some of the combat troops; and three, permit General Westmoreland and General Momyer and those who were in charge there to set up some sort of an arrival and show for the President. With all these other factors in mind, keep in mind that we had a big, large contingent of press people on board a DC-8 airplane--or it might have been a 707, I don't remember which--plus we had our own plane and a backup plane, which was carrying Secret Service and other citizens that we had to have on this round-the-world trek, communications people and God knows what all. It was a nightmare is what it amounted to.

So as we made our way on up across that South China Sea and so forth, I was in contact with General McConnell, and about an hour out

of either landing at Udorn or Khorat, we finally decided that it would be Khorat. And so we made our plans then for our letdown into Khorat, and when we got there it was pandemonium. I mean, boy, it was just pandemonium with people and trucks and planes and combat planes and everything else. We slid on in there and we got off the plane, and of course obviously they didn't have much facilities for the President to have a real plush residential place. Most of us didn't even have a place to go, no place to get anything to eat. It was just really pandemonium. We sent the President on off to give a talk at the officers' club. When I say the officers' club, it just happened to be the biggest spot that he could gather together a bunch of folks, and he went on over there and made his remarks, whatever they were. I wasn't present, I had a jillion things to do, and I couldn't go with him. I sent somebody else. I had all sorts of logistics and plans to be made. We were still at that point in time undecided as to what time we had to leave to arrive in Rome, if indeed we were going to Rome. I was persuaded that we were, but everybody else was telling me, "No, we're not going to Rome, we're not going to Rome," but I had to be prepared and had to get clearances to overfly countries. There were just a jillion things that had to get done, and none of it much got done. We just sort of blundered along and--well, to make a long story short, the President went over there, made his little remarks, and then he was tired and discouraged and disgusted and uptight, and worried about his security, I suppose. Although he never would admit

that, I'm sure he was. Here we were right in the middle of a combat zone.

So they were going to take him to a complex of house trailers where he was to spend three or four hours of resting, and that was his quarters. Well, they took him over there, and apparently it was General Momyer's quarters when he stayed at Khorat. His headquarters, of course, was in Tan Son Nhut, which was Saigon. But this was one of the better places, and it wasn't much.

G: Did it have air conditioning, at least?

C: I can't recall. I was there, but I cannot recall whether it did or not. I remember that Marvin Watson called me and he said, "You better get over here." I was down at the plane trying to use the phones and whatnot to try to coordinate things that needed to get done. So I jumped in a military police vehicle or whatever and hustled over to where the President was.

And when I walked in, the President was just madder than hell. I don't know what he was mad about, other than just here we were halfway around the world, and the facilities were poor, and the communications were poor. Any time a president moves, you've got legions of people that have to set things up, communications and--I'm sure you're familiar with it from your days with the [LBJ] Library up there. Well, we hadn't had the advance time, we didn't know where we were going, there was very little that had been set up. Transportation was practically nonexistent, certainly the kind that the President was used to riding in. All of a sudden instead of riding in a Cadillac limousine, he's

riding in a jeep, you know, that kind of a thing, or an army truck. And the food was poor. Things are just catastrophic insofar as what the President is accustomed to.

Well, I get up there and the President is madder than hell, and he's just eating on Marvin's ass and anybody else that gets in his way, and he wanted to get General Momyer. So somebody sent for General Momyer, and I don't remember now where we found him, but we got him and he walked in. I had known General Momyer when he was down here at Randolph Field, didn't know him well, just speaking acquaintance and knew what he looked like was about all. General Momyer walked in, and the President just ate him alive, I mean just really ate him in little bitty pieces and spit him out. And General Momyer just shrivelled up, you know, and thought, "Oh, boy," and I felt sorry for the man. Of course, I'd had it, too, but I was used to taking it all the time, it didn't bother me. I understood that the man [Johnson] had to have an outlet, and there were people like me that were there for that purpose, and I knew that he didn't really mean what he said, and so I just--

G: Shrugged it off.

C: --shrugged it off, didn't let it bother me. But General Momyer had never been accustomed to that, and here's a four-star general, you know, just getting, I mean, just really tore up. So afterwards, when things cooled down a little bit, and the General got off outside, and I got outside, I told him, "General, don't worry about it. That's the way he is. It's just an outlet that the man has to have, and he

doesn't mean what he's saying. Just go on about your business." I don't know, I am persuaded that General Momyer probably didn't really like the President, but I don't know, I never heard him say that. That's just an opinion of mine, subject to somebody else's interpretation or denial.

G: Not at all. You've mentioned General Westmoreland and General Brown. How about General Abrams? I think we mentioned him, too, but we haven't said anything about him. Do you remember any time the President expressed himself about General Abrams?

C: Let's take another short break here.

G: All right.

(Interruption)

G: You were going to tell us an Abrams story, I believe.

C: Well, I don't know that much about General Abrams. I remember when he was appointed to be the commander of MACV. Prior to the time that he had been appointed, there was a mission that was to go to Southeast Asia, a fact-finding mission, for the President. And General Johnson, or General Wheeler or whoever was making the recommendations to the President, recommended General Abrams to go on this fact-finding mission over there, to see what else was needed to prosecute the war, or were we prosecuting it too hard, or not enough, or whatever.

And of course, back during the Kennedy years the four big jet airplanes--we had three baby 707s and then we had the one that was Air Force One--had been more or less available to the cabinet members, through the air force, whenever they needed them or wanted them.

Well, when I came to the White House, the President said, "I want those four big airplanes over there right here when I need them. I will say who rides on those airplanes, when and where." I said, "Yes, sir, Mr. President." So we just took the control of those four big airplanes, the President's plus the other three, completely out of the hands of the air force, and we scheduled them right out of my office, and I never scheduled one of them without I cleared it [with him]--I've got a hundred notes over here in my files where I'd write a little note to the President: "Dear Mr. President: Secretary So-and-so wants to use one of your big airplanes to go to so-and-so, and he'll be there during this period of time, and these are the people that he expects to go with him. Do you approve? Yes. No." And the President would check yes or no. And if the President disapproved that plane going, well, it sat there on the ground. For the most part, I got so I wouldn't even send requests in to the President, because he was the one that would always tell me, "You tell so-and-so to take one of my planes and go so-and-so."

But anyway, when the fact-finding mission for General Abrams got ready to go to Vietnam, the request came in that he wanted to use one of the 707s, one of the first-line 707s. So I did my duty and wrote a little, short--the President liked them brief and I just wrote a little bitty, short, brief memo to the President. And of course everything went through Marvin Watson; he was the chief of staff at that time. But I'll say one thing, it'd get right in; even though Marvin was the funneling point, it would go right in. In other words, if I sent a

memorandum to the President, and I needed an answer in ten minutes, I'd get it in ten minutes. It was--

G: And he'd take whatever flak might come of that, I guess.

C: Well, yes. Or if he didn't take the flak, maybe the President would pick up the phone and call me and say, "What in the hell is this about?" But one thing you could expect was action, if you needed action. Now, in this case, I don't believe it was that urgent, I think it might have had a day or two to mull it. But I sent the memo in to the President: "Dear Mr. President: General Abrams, who is going on a fact-finding mission to Vietnam, wants to use one of your big 707s. 970 is available, and et cetera, et cetera, if you choose to let him use it. Yes or no?" It wasn't too long before Marvin Watson called me and says, "Who is this General Abrams?" I said, "He's the vice chief of the army at the present time, and he's going on this fact-finding mission." I felt like that Marvin was just simply mirroring the President's views. Marvin wouldn't make a decision on his own. That's not to suggest that Marvin wasn't a decisive man; he was. He was just a damn good chief of staff that oftentimes would take the heat for the President, as you put it a minute ago, and make the decision himself, but he only made that decision perhaps when the President had in private expressed to him, "No, I don't want that guy to have that airplane." Well, Marvin came back and said, "Who the hell is this General Abrams?" Whether that was the President's view or Marvin's, I don't know.

But to make a long story short, Abrams didn't get one of the President's airplanes. I got the impression that Abrams was just some three-star general--at that time he was indeed a three-star, I believe, he might have been four--that was being pushed by the Defense Department on the President. The President didn't know him from anybody, didn't care, and certainly didn't want one of those generals riding one of those big fancy 707s to Vietnam on a mission, when he could have caught a commercial airliner. That's kind of the way the President thought.

G: Let him get on a 141 with everybody else.

C: That's exactly the way the President thought. That was the man's process, you betcha; that's exactly the way he felt. In fact, don't get on a private 141, let him get on there with the rest of the troops and just ride like the combat soldiers. He didn't believe in these generals having their own private planes, and et cetera. That was just kind of the way the man was built.

G: So General Abrams had to find some other accommodations.

C: Well, as I recall, we sent one of the C-135s, which had been sort of halfway equipped out over at Andrews there, to take him to Vietnam. And most of those people who went, unless they were the Secretary of State, they didn't get the President's plane, and unless the President himself had said, "Eugene Black, I want you to go and take care of this World Banking matter, and take one of my planes." If the President didn't say, "Take one of my planes," even Eugene Black had to go on one of the C-135s, which didn't have any windows, and you

know, they were not all that nice. And some of those guys were kind of prima donnas. Eugene Black was one in particular. He'd say, "Well, goddamn, if I'm going to go do this for the President, I think I ought to have one of his good planes."

G: It wasn't that easy.

C: And then he'd raise hell, you know, till he got one, is about what it amounted to.

G: Who would he raise hell with?

C: I guess everybody in the world, me in particular.

(Laughter)

And all I was was just a messenger boy. But he's raised lots of hell with me about getting a plane, and of course I'd just dutifully pass along what had been told to me, and finally, in the final analysis, I guess, somebody else higher than me would make a decision to go ahead and let him have it, and then I was the fall guy, the bad guy.

G: (Laughter) The President might call you and say, "Where is my plane?" Is that it?

C: No, the President always knew where those planes were; I mean to tell you, he always knew. And in fact, he was sort of sneaky in a way. I never will forget one time we were at a social gathering there at the White House, I've forgotten what it was about, I was there, though, and Vice President Humphrey was there. I was sort of always close to the President, to be available if he needed me, and had one ear kind of tuned to what was going on, but out of sight, just around the corner. That's kind of the way you are supposed to be.

I think that he probably knew that I was right there, but I was ignored, which is the way it is supposed to be, except when he wanted me, and snap your finger and "Yes, sir," I'd pop up. Anyway, he had Hubert Humphrey there, and he buttonholed him about something, I don't know, they were always talking about something. He grabbed me and he said, "Hubert, now I don't know why in the hell you don't take some of those big planes of mine, those yachts over there, Sequoia and so forth over at the Navy Yard, and see if you can't get some of these damn congressmen and some of these ambassadors and so forth, and let's get this program across. You go down there and get some of that good shrimp curry that we like"--the President liked it, but I don't think Hubert did--"have them fix you some of that good shrimp curry, and you just get down there and you take those guys and let's see if we can't get these programs." I don't know what particular programs they were talking about, but what the President was trying to get across was these ambassadors and these congressmen and so forth, that "I want you to use those yachts and use those planes of mine, and let's see if we can't get these damn programs passed." And he said, "By God, you call old Cross, here, he's in charge of all that. You get whatever you need, and if you can't get any satisfaction out of him, by God, you let me know, and I can damn sure take care of it." Cross. Well, Humphrey takes him at face value. Well, I think, "Uh-oh."

G: You're in the middle.

C: No, I ain't in the middle. Well, yes, I'm in the middle in a way, because what happens is the President, I know damn well, doesn't mean

what he's saying. In other words, even though Humphrey is supposed to be able to use these planes and use these yachts and so forth, he's not going to use them unless specifically approved on each occasion by the President. Well, Mr. Humphrey the next day, or two or three days later, gets in contact with my office, wants to use a plane or wants to use one of the yachts, and right away I start throwing a roadblock in his way, see. I say, "Well, Mr. Vice President, we need to know who is going to be in your party, and what you want for supper, and we'll have to check the yachts out, or check the plane out. They may be already committed for something else, and I'll need to know this twelve hours in advance, at least." The reason I've got to know it twelve hours in advance is because I don't ever approve one of those things, even for the Vice President, without it running in and out to the President, and I can't just say, "The Vice President wants one of your yachts," I've got to say "The Vice President wants one of your yachts because--" and then name off who is going to be there, and what they want to eat, or one of the planes, whatever. And I run that in on a little memo, and the President says yes or no. Well, even after he's told Humphrey what he's told him at the social gathering there in the White House, I've still got to run through this exercise, and it's just as likely as not to come out disapproved. In which case, I can't say the President disapproved it; I've got to go back and say, "I'm sorry, Mr. Vice President, the planes are all out for maintenance," or "They're all committed," or "The yachts are broke." So that's the way it was.

G: Even Humphrey didn't have carte blanche, as far as the yachts go.

C: Absolutely not, absolutely not.

(Interruption)

G: Let me ask you, when did you leave the White House staff? Was that not in the spring of 1968?

C: That was the first day of June 1968. That's an interesting story, by the way. (Laughter)

G: Well, please tell it.

C: It was sometime around April, after he'd made his announcement that he wasn't going to run again, might have been early April, [the] fifteenth, somewhere in that period of time. The President called me over to his bedroom early one morning about eight o'clock. I was in my office, and I hustled down under the White House and caught the elevator and went upstairs. And he was in the bedroom; he was laying there in the bed reading and whatever else he did early in the morning about eight o'clock. He got right away into naming off, do this, and do this, and down at the Ranch, and in the White House, and just gave me all sorts of chores that I had to perform.

But I got the impression that even though I was getting this usual "scratch this down, and do this, and do this, tell so-and-so, call so-and-so," that there was another purpose to the meeting. I just had that feeling. Well, sure enough, he finally got to the question. He said, "Well, now that I'm leaving the White House, what are you going to do?" And I repeated again what I had said on this particular trip, you know, that I mentioned to you, about "Well, Mr.

President, I'm a big boy, and a colonel in the air force," which essentially I said again. He said, "Oh, now, goddamn it, don't get so noble. You know, when I get retired down in Texas, I'm going to need a friend down there. I'm going to need a general and somebody that's my friend. Oh, by the way, McConnell told me they're going to make you a general." And I said, "Well, I thank you for that, Mr. President. I know that the air force wouldn't be making me a general unless you told them." He said, "Oh, no. Hell, you've earned it. Now, they're going to make you a general." I said, "Again, Mr. President, thank you."

He said, "Your wife's from Austin, isn't she?" and I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "[Are] her folks still living down there?" and I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Are they retired?" I said, "Well, no. Her daddy works at the post office, he's not retired." He said, "How would you like to live down there around Austin, down there at that base, be down there at that base, in charge?" I said, "Sir, there's nothing I'd like any better. I'd love it down there, because my wife's from there, and we've been married for"--I don't know, twenty-five years, or however long it had been, nearly thirty years, I guess. I said, "We've never been around that area, and it would be wonderful to be down there in the South. That's where we want to live when we're retired." He said, "Well, I need a friend down there, and I need me a general that'll help me out. Every time I--I'm going to be poor and don't have no"--you know, putting on his usual act. He said, "I won't have any airplanes or helicopters, and I'll need somebody to

get me in that hospital down there if I get sick. By the way, you need to fix that hospital up down there now. You might get sick, too, sometime, and you'd want a nice suite down there for yourself. You'll need a helicopter down there for yourself, too, won't you?" I saw what he was getting at, and I said, "Yes, sir." (Laughter)

G: Absolutely.

C: Got to have my own helicopter. Never had one in my life, but-- (Laughter) He said, "When could you leave?" I said, "Well, sir, I can't leave for a while. I've got kids in school." He said, "Can you leave next week?"

(Laughter)

I said, "No, sir, I can't. My kids won't be out of school until about the end of May, and I've got a house to sell," which I was in good enough shape at that point to put the house on the market and sell. I said, "I probably could leave around the first of June." He said, "Oh, by the way, McConnell tells me that if you are going to stay in the air force and make a career, you need to get some combat time in Vietnam." I said, "Well, yes, sir, you recall I tried to get you to let me go to Vietnam as your representative to Khe Sanh. I want to go." He said, "What would you do over there?" I said, "I'll fly. If I'm going to be at Bergstrom Field, I'll go down there and get checked out in those reconnaissance planes, and I'll go over there and fly combat and reconnaissance, and then I'll be flying them when I get back to Bergstrom." And so--

Tape 2 of 2

G: You were telling us about the President telling you that you were going to have to get some combat time.

C: Oh, come to Bergstrom, yes, yes. And I told him, "Mr. President, I want to go. And of course, as quickly as I can get to Bergstrom Field and get trained, I'll be going." At that point, that was just about the end of the conversation, he in his usual style just sort of ended the interview and--well, it wasn't an interview, he ended the conversation and went on, "Well, God bless you," and went on about whatever else he had to get after, and I went on about my rat-killing. I still had at that time I guess another forty-five days to serve.

Oh, there is one other point that he talked about, and I think it's quite important to this history. That is he said, "By the way, after you leave, who is going to fly my plane?" I said, "Mr. President, there's no better people than you've got over there right now. Colonel [Paul] Thornhill, who has been our copilot since way back when you were the vice president, is a well-qualified aviator in his own right. He's our copilot, but that doesn't make any difference. He's fully qualified, and indeed, when I'm not here he flies the plane, and when we send a backup plane, if I choose, I oftentimes send him as captain of the backup plane. We've got another fellow named Major Short, Don Short"--who was our next pilot--"also a well-qualified ten thousand hours or better pilot. They're both just fully qualified to be your pilot. You've known them, and they know your family and your family knows them." He disclaimed that he knew them,

but he did; you know, that was the way he operated. He said, "Well, all right. You tell Paul." That gave it away right there, his name was Paul. (Laughter)

G: Hadn't known him, eh?

C: Yes. So I did. I told Paul, quite obviously, that I'd be leaving, and that he'd be taking over. He was a lieutenant colonel and Short was a major. Short would be moving up one seat, and then they'd grab one more pilot out of the pool out there to take over the third pilot spot, which we needed three pilots: myself and the other two, or Paul plus two.

And he said, "Okay, who are we going to get to be my aide after you leave? We need to get somebody that's a general. If they're going to make you a general, we need somebody to come in to replace you that's a general." And what he was trying to do, he was a great one for letting precedent set up how things were going to look in the press, see. You'd have to understand him to understand what I'm talking about, and I understood exactly what he was talking about. They were going to promote me ahead of a bunch of other colonels, see, and I knew that, and I knew that it wasn't just my name come to the top of the list. I was being promoted ahead of a bunch of other people.

G: How long had you been a colonel?

C: Two years. Two years. As a matter of fact, this picture right here, April 25, 1967, was given to me by the President at dinner one night at the Embassy in Bonn, Germany, when we went to the funeral of Konrad

Adenauer. This was my birthday, and the President knew it, and invited me to his house that night--the Embassy, really--for dinner. And while at dinner he gave me a watch, one of those gold presidential watches, inscribed [with] my birthday and "From the President," gave me this picture, and he gave me a promotion to colonel.

G: That was a pretty good birthday.

C: Yes, as a matter of fact. And he said, "The air force is making you a colonel for your birthday." I was a lieutenant colonel. And so I stayed a colonel then two years, and I had been a colonel a little over a year when he told me they were going to make me a general. But they wouldn't make me a general right away, that I had to go to Vietnam and back, and that I would be a general when I took over Bergstrom Field.

G: But you'd been nominated before then, is that right?

C: Yes. I was nominated at the time that he told me, which was there in the White House that morning in mid-April, which was just about one year after I'd been made a colonel.

G: I see.

C: In other words, I wasn't in the eligibility zone to be a general. I was too young, and I hadn't been in grade long enough, and so forth. But if the President chose, he could do anything he wanted to, which he did.

But anyway, in order to make it more legitimate, and I realized that this was what he was trying to do, he wanted to get me to nominate somebody to be his military aide in my place over there that was

a general. Well, there was a fellow named Bob Ginsburgh, who worked for Walt Rostow. Ginsburgh was a brigadier general in the air force, and a pretty good fellow. I liked Bob. Of course, he wore civilian clothes, and a lot of people didn't even know he was a general. I did. And I said, "Well, Mr. President, Bob Ginsburgh works for Walt Rostow down there"--and we're only talking about a few months--"If you give him the title, you can talk to Walt about it, and I'd be glad to talk to Walt, too. If you want to give Ginsburgh the title as military aide to the president, and then more or less charge him with the responsibility to leave things pretty much as they are over here, if that's what you want"--and I knew that's what he wanted; he wanted things to operate just about like they were. "You've got a good staff of people over here. There's Hugh Robinson"--the black lieutenant colonel that worked for me from the army--"there's Haywood Smith, from the marines"--and Haywood was the ranking man. And there was a fellow named Sam Latimer from the navy that worked for me. I said, "They'll give you all the support you need over here. What you can do, in effect, you know Haywood"--and he knew Haywood, and liked him--"you can let Haywood be the titular head, but as far as having a name over here, Bob Ginsburgh will be your man." He said, "Well, that sounds all right. You talk to Walt about it, and then I'll talk to Walt, and that's the way we'll set it up."

Which is exactly the way they did it. They announced that [General] Bob Ginsburgh was going to be the military aide to the President, replacing Colonel Cross, who was to be named a general

sometime in the near future, and that essentially the office would operate pretty much as it had in the past, but that General Ginsburgh would take that as an additional duty to his other duties as assistant to Walt Rostow. Which he did, and he held that position for, I don't know, six, eight weeks, and then they decided that it didn't really mean anything, it was just sort of a paper transaction anyway, and I think Ginsburgh just kind of slid out of the picture, and Haywood Smith ended up really as the head of the military office after I left.

That's the way that that came about, and that's the way I came to come back to Bergstrom Field. I went through the training. It took me about, I don't know, two or three months to get qualified in those jets.

G: You were flying RF-4Cs?

C: RF-4Cs, which was quite a transition, oh boy. I'd always been flying big old, nice, comfortable transport planes, and suddenly I'm wearing G-suits and oxygen masks, and although I was in good physical condition and slim and trim and stayed in good physical shape, it was quite a move for me to go into that. But I managed it fine, and went on and flew combat in Vietnam. I was over there about, I don't know, two months, or thereabouts. The President got worried about me and sent for me. (Laughter)

G: He'd sent you to Vietnam, but after a little bit, he said, "That's enough, Cross, come on back," is that more or less it?

C: In effect, that's right. In effect, that's exactly the way it happened. Now, he never told me that; he never said to me, "I got

worried about you and I sent for you to come back." But the facts are there, and I've given you the facts exactly as they are. When General Brown called me, he said, "You get your butt out of here." (Laughter)

G: Let me ask you just a few things about your tour in Vietnam. You went as a full colonel?

C: Yes.

G: Am I correct in saying you went to a reconnaissance squadron?

C: Squadron, I did, and I was the ranking member of the squadron.

G: You were the squadron CO, then.

C: No, no. I told them I didn't want a thing to do with it. I told them, "I'm here just to fly combat. I realize I outrank the commander," which I did. I may have even outranked the wing commander. It didn't matter to me, because I wasn't over there to take charge of anything. I wasn't qualified to take charge of an operation over there, didn't want to. I suspected that I wouldn't be there very long anyway--I say I suspected, I knew damn well I wouldn't be there very long, because I expected to be home in time for the President to come home from Washington.

G: Did you have a reason for thinking that, or was this just intuition?

C: No, no, I knew, because he told me. He said, "I want you to be running that base when I get home."

G: On January 20.

C: On January 20. I didn't start until the first of February, but I knew and the air force knew that that's what his plan was for me, was to be the wing commander of Bergstrom Field.

G: Obviously, you were not just another bird colonel flying F-4s. People knew who you were when you arrived in country.

C: Oh, yes. General George Brown, who was the four-star general in charge of the air force, called for me to come see him right away. I hadn't been there two days, when I got a call to go see General Brown.

G: What did he have to say?

C: He told me right away, he said, "I don't know what the hell you're over here for." I said, "Well, I don't know how to answer that question, General Brown." He said, "Well, I don't think they ought to have let you come."

G: Puts you on a spot, doesn't it?

C: Well, no, because I had been up at a very high level for a long time, and I understood what prompted the General's remarks, and he didn't say them maliciously. He just was stating a fact, and if I'd have been in his boots, and I'd have had a colonel come over there that had been a military aide to the president, I'd have probably felt the same way. The feeling that he had, and indeed that a lot of the high-ranking people had, was that I could be more of a liability to them than I could ever be an asset, which is true.

G: Explain that for me just a little bit.

C: Well, suppose that I had gotten shot down, let's just say, down there over the Mekong or maybe even on up further north, where we were doing a lot of work. And it was combat. You know, I got shot at; I never got hit or anything like that, and I don't know how intense the fire was when I was shot at. All I could see was just a few tracers, you

know, flying up. Let's look at it this way: suppose I'd got shot down, suppose I'd got captured. It's obvious that the Vietnamese would know who I was; if they didn't know immediately, they'd know shortly. That couldn't be of any advantage to the United States, to the air force. The press might have grabbed it and said, "Why in the hell did you let him go over there in the first place? Look at all the propaganda material that you've let them have." So the generals would say--say, Brown would say, "The President let him come, and the President wanted him to come over here." Well, Brown couldn't say that. Yet the press would be saying, "We know that the President wouldn't want something like this to happen. Why in the hell did General Brown let it happen?" So it's a no-win situation, you see, for those that are in charge, and while selfishly I couldn't see that and understand it at the time, because I wanted to get my--at the time, I didn't know what my plans were about staying in the military, and I wanted to have my opportunity to have served over there. I mean, why not?

G: Well, it makes it easier when you deal with your peers later on after the war.

C: You betcha. You betcha. In other words, if I had intended to stay in, which at that time I didn't know what I was going to do, didn't know what my chances were. I felt like that having been the military aide to the president and so forth might be a disadvantage to me later on, and that the more distance I could put between me and that role that I had had, including going to combat, and the rougher the

combat, the more distance I had, you see, then the more legitimate I could be in whatever future role I might play in the air force. As it turned out, I finally decided that I'd had too many scars left on me from my days in the White House, and that in fact I was probably coming to the end of the road as far as my role in the air force was concerned.

C: Did you ever have reason to substantiate your suspicion that your role in the White House might hinder you in any way?

C: Oh, yes. Well, that's a normal thing. You feel that way, unless you can put it far enough behind you. A good case in point is Al Haig. Haig, now you see, he was a contemporary of mine. In fact, he worked for Joe Califano in the White House when I was military aide. Califano wanted Haig to be the military aide in my stead. Well, Haig managed to tightrope it there in the Johnson White House and then back out and go to the National War College over at Fort McNair. From the National War College he went to Vietnam and was a lieutenant colonel and commanded a brigade or something over there, and then when he came back, he came back at precisely the right time and got into that assistantship at the Defense Department. And from there he worked his way back into the Nixon White House with Kissinger, because he'd had previous experience over there with Johnson and them, and so he was a bridge man [?] into the Nixon years, you see, sort of. Then from there, when Kissinger went to State, Haig was the principal force in the National Security Council that dealt with Nixon, particularly as the Nixon presidency began to crumble. And Haig, smart operator

that he is, very, very deft and skilled in preservation of Al Haig's interests, jumped back into the army, because he got Nixon, who knew him and liked him, to jump him from two to four stars, and he took over as the vice chief of staff of the army. And of course when Ford came in, he worked that deal with Ford on the pardon deal for Nixon and squeezed Ford into appointing him as the commander of SHAPE.

G: Rather astute performance.

C: Oh, he's slick, he's slicker than hell. He ain't all that bright, but he's slick.

(Laughter)

G: I think I know what you mean.

C: I read the other day when they nominated him for secretary of state that he graduated two hundred and fourteenth in his class of three hundred at West Point.

G: Well, Eisenhower and [George] Patton weren't very high up in their classes, either, I don't think.

C: Oh, really?

G: No, not particularly. I think [Douglas] MacArthur was possibly a number one or two, and Robert E. Lee was, but somehow the number-one man in his class is always so damn smart, I don't know what happens to him, maybe he's too smart for his own good. (Laughter)

About Vietnam now, did you ever get the feeling that you were being regarded with some suspicion by high-ranking officers while you were over there?

C: No. No, I did not.

G: That didn't apply?

C: No.

G: They weren't circumspect around you or anything like that?

C: No, no. And I didn't have that much contact with them anyway. I wanted it that way. I didn't go over there to look over anybody's shoulder; I wasn't a spy for the President, and I don't think anybody felt that way. I think though that what happened was that in my years in the White House as aide that some of the people who had been in various positions in the Pentagon, that later might sit on a promotion board, for example, there are certain petty jealousies that accrue to one in his career, and particularly in my case, where I jumped over a bunch of people, because the President put me over them. Not because I had pressed for it. I hadn't; I hadn't been out beating my own drums for myself. It's just that I happened to be in the right place at the right time, and I got along with Vice President Lyndon Johnson, and the next thing you know I jumped way ahead of a bunch of people and was appointed military aide, much to the dismay of several people, Joe Califano included.

By the way, Al Haig was a lieutenant of Joe's, see, and Joe was coming in to the White House about the same time that I was, and Joe, having had Al Haig under his thumb in the Pentagon, wanted Al Haig to be the military aide so that Joe could continue to call the shots, so to speak.

G: Did Califano push that, to your knowledge?

C: Oh, you bet, you bet he did. And the fact of the matter is, Califano called me just within a matter of hours after it was announced that I was going to be military aide and said, "Say, you better come over to the Pentagon and see me. You know, I run the Secretary of Defense's office that supports the White House. Although I'm going to the White House as a special assistant to the president in about a month"--which he did--"right now I'm the fellow that's in charge of your dealings with the Pentagon. I want you to come over here and meet Al Haig and Alex Butterfield--you know Alex Butterfield--and Bill Knowlton." Bill Knowlton later became head of West Point. And all these guys worked for Califano, see, in the Pentagon. He said, "I want you to come over and meet these guys, and I'll show you around over there."

So I went over a day or two after Califano had called me, didn't know Califano from nothing. I went over there and sat down with him and had lunch, went up and met all the people, saw his office and so forth, and then he started putting the pressure on me about once I got in the White House that everything would have to funnel through them, and that this is the way we do things, and so forth. One of the things that I'd learned from the President was that he didn't want business as usual, that he wanted some changes, and that I was the man that he selected to make the changes. So I just kept my own counsel about it and decided, well, I'd deal with whoever I had to to make whatever changes I had to, in accord with the President's wishes. So Joe and I never did get along, as a result of that.

G: He's a strong-minded individual.

C: Joe is the kind of a man that wants to grab unto himself all the power that he can get. In other words, he'll just pull everything to him if he can. If you're weak enough to let him do it, why, he'll take it. That's the kind of fellow that Joe is, and Al Haig is of the same cut of cloth.

G: When you were flying--now, you flew reconnaissance jets, RF-4Cs, I think it was--did you fly over the North any at all?

C: Never did. We weren't flying over the North when I--

G: Your squadron wasn't--

C: Nobody was.

G: Of course, [inaudible] Tan Son Nhut.

C: Nobody was. Oh, we flew over the North out of Tan Son Nhut when they finally started going back over the North again, but they weren't going over to the North when I was over there. See, we had everything above the nineteenth parallel pulled back. No flights over the North, not even reconnaissance.

G: I thought they had continued some of the reconnaissance flights.

C: No.

G: Wait a minute. They stopped that in late October of 1968, didn't they?

C: Yes. And that's when I was over there, see, October-November-December.

G: I see. So you were flying reconnaissance in South Vietnam?

C: Yes.

G: Did you fly any over Laos?

C: No.

G: I know they were still doing some of that and had been for a long time.

C: I think we flew a mission or two over Cambodia; it seems to me like we did. I've forgotten now. It's been so long ago. That's been going on thirteen years. Let me think. Not in the context that we got into any depth about it, I think [in] just idle conversation we might have talked about it a little bit, but not too in-depth.

G: Did he ever express any regrets about having wished he'd done something differently, or not done that particular thing? I don't have anything in mind when I ask that, I'm just--

C: No, other than what I said about the bombing. I think that perhaps he might have, in a sort of a philosophical way, thought, "Well, by God, you told me I ought to bomb, and now Nixon's doing it with some success." I don't know whether that was just idle conversation or whether he really did indeed feel like that maybe he should have. I think that probably in the final analysis he thought before he died that he had done everything he could. That's just a feeling I had.

G: You think he was satisfied--?

C: Under the circumstances and in the time frame that we were working in. We had certain constraints at that time that maybe we don't have today.

G: In that line, in line with constraints, you hear a lot of people say that we had too many constraints on the way we fought the war. Now I

know that you might not have any knowledge or expertise about anything other than the air force, and maybe not but a limited part of that, but I know that pilots talk. Did pilots complain about not being allowed to use a certain tactic, or a certain piece of ordnance, or being restricted to certain approaches to targets, or things of that sort?

C: Yes, I think that's a legitimate comment, and that, yes, I believe they did. I heard a lot of conversation both here in the States, up at Bergstrom Field, and idle bar talk amongst pilots and others that might be hangar-flying. Yes. That, yes, we should be turned loose. I think Momyer felt like that, that if given a free rein that he could have perhaps waged a more successful operation than he was permitted to do. The only thing that you'd have to be concerned about would be was Momyer, or Westmoreland, or any of those commanders over there, fully apprised of what the consequences might be insofar as Russia entering and a nuclear holocaust.

G: Escalation in general.

C: Escalation in general. So it's hard to answer. I don't know.

G: Did they ever mention, or did you have any reason to suspect what targets they weren't being allowed to hit that they wanted to hit?

C: Oh, I think that probably they would've preferred to have hit some of the industrial centers, the bridges and the dams and so forth, in other words, really knock them out good. Then that would cripple their ability to continue coming down this Ho Chi Minh Trail, because they wouldn't have fuel supplies, or they wouldn't have trucks and

tires and whatever else it took to be able to make it down that Ho Chi Minh Trail.

G: Were there any POL [petroleum, oil, and lubricants] facilities that you know of that we weren't being allowed to go after because of [inaudible]?

C: Oh, yes, I think that--what was it, Haiphong? I don't think we ever bombed Haiphong and the POL facilities there, and the harbor facilities, and so forth.

G: And that's where it was coming in?

C: Sure, you bet. And of course, the hydroelectric facilities, that big dam up there, what was the name of it? I've forgotten, now. But we weren't ever allowed to bomb that. We had the bridges that permitted the Chinese to make shipments of trucks and whatnot, weaponry, in from China.

G: And if you didn't get them at entry, it was just too hard to interdict them after that?

C: Yes, it was so scattered after that, whereas if you knocked out their ability to bring it in, you see, or for example, if you knocked out 50, 60 per cent of their hydroelectric capability, then their pumping stations and their factories and God knows what all else couldn't operate, and therefore, you couldn't wax a war effort against us with what they could muster in the way of--

G: Were there any other constraints that you think Momyer kind of chafed about besides the hydroelectric and the ports and the bridges to--?

C: Not to my personal knowledge. And not having been in the planning operation over there, and not really knowing that much about what there was in the way of facilities that were potential targets.

G: You didn't have the target list.

C: I don't have the target list here right now, but I venture to say that if I were a Commander Momyer, if my name was Momyer and I'd have been over there, and I was expected to wage a war against those people, that I'd be wanting to bomb every single thing that had any potential whatsoever of making war against us. Now, I wouldn't necessarily want to bomb people, hospitals and schools and stuff like that. But wherever there was an electric power plant, any sort of heavy industry, port facilities, bridges, roads, key roads I'm talking about, railroads in particular, railroad switching facilities, railroad rolling stock, trucks and roadways--

G: We did go after those things, didn't we? The trains and--

C: Yes, we did, some of it but not all of it. We went after--

G: The stuff way up north we left alone, is that right?

C: I believe that's right. I believe that's right. And of course, another thing. You can go after railroads and, say, switching yards, which we did, but unless you go after all the other things that have to do with railroads--you need to go after the foundries where they're repaired; you need to go after the steel mills that make the steel to make the wheels out of; you need to go after the boiler factories that make boilers so that when you shoot up a railroad

engine, and it needs a new boiler, they can't get it out of their factory over there.

G: There's no convenient bottleneck there that you can stop up and stop the whole thing, is that what you're saying?

C: Well, there are some bottlenecks, but you need to get them all. You need to get every bottleneck that you can find, I think, and that's strategic bombing as espoused by people as far back as Billy Mitchell.

G: Absolutely. Now, how about a little more tactical, regarding certain kinds of ordnance, perhaps? I know there was some constraints on the types of ordnance that were being used.

C: I can't answer that, I don't know. I don't know what the restraints were. I don't know what kind of ordnance we had. I don't know what they were using in tactical operations. Certainly I wouldn't have been in favor of using tactical nuclear [weapons].

G: Oh no, I wasn't even thinking about that.

C: I don't know whether Momyer or some of his people might have been for that or not. I don't have any idea.

G: The specific thing I was thinking of was a) an antipersonnel weapon called, I think, Lazy Dog Bomb.

C: I don't know anything about it.

G: There was some controversy over using those in the North--why would we use an antipersonnel weapon against a strategic kind of target? The answer always was "we're using them to suppress flak," and I didn't know whether you had any comments or any knowledge of that or not.

C: I don't even know anything about them.

G: How about--I know sometimes we were using very restricted approach patterns, because you might have a population center associated with the target, and you didn't want to overfly it this way, but rather that way.

C: I don't think that we ever did that. I don't really think we ever did that. There might have been some restricted approaches insofar as coming in on a target from the standpoint of radar avoidance and gun avoidance, but I don't believe we ever avoided going over a particular area just because there were people there, or something like that. We did have some routes. Of course I never made any of them, but I know a lot of my friends that were flying up there said they always come in behind this range of mountains if they're coming in low-level, but the reason was to avoid the SAM sites, where they knew the SAM sites were, and so forth.

G: And radars.

C: And radars, insofar as they could. Of course, I understand they had the most sophisticated and best air defense system up there that's ever been devised.

G: Well, I've heard it said that it was more intense, certainly, than World War II.

C: Yes. And those SAMs, I think they were less effective than they were just to scare you to death. In other words, the SAMs were not all that good; if you were prepared with your electronic countermeasures and kept your eyes open, and so forth, you didn't have to worry too much about the SAMs getting you, although there were quite a few

planes shot down with SAMs. I think in large part the ones that got shot down made an error, you know. When they managed to get hit, they had--in some way or another, somebody had made an error when one of their SAMs got one of our planes. That's not to say that a few weren't gotten by good expertise on the part of the North Vietnamese, but for the most part, from what I knew about SAMs, if you had all your equipment functioning, if you followed the tactics that you were supposed to follow, generally speaking you could pretty well be assured of not getting knocked down by a SAM. But it was a very heart-rending experience to think about having to go in and face those SAMs, you know, because they--

G: One mistake was all you got.

C: That one mistake was all you got.

(Interruption)

C: --vintage Lyndon Johnson.

G: We are always interested in that.

(Interruption)

G: You said you had a vintage Lyndon Johnson story, and I love those.

C: Well, going back to the question you asked about the trip we made to Australia, and then from Australia into Khorat Air Force Base, and later on into Rome and seeing the Pope and so forth. When the decision was finally made that we were going back to Vietnam and visit the troops--as I recall this would have been Christmas Eve Day in 1967--quite obviously General Westmoreland was concerned about security for the President, but at the same time the President wanted to see

the troops and General Westmoreland wanted the troops to see the President. So what they'd done, they'd made some rather extensive logistic arrangements to get a lot of the troops back at Cam Ranh Bay, at the air force base back there, so that the President could arrive and talk to a lot of the troops, give a little pep talk, and award a few medals and so forth. And prior to the time that we'd left Washington, we had anticipated that the President might give some Purple Hearts and some various medals in the hospitals that he visited, and we knew that if he went to Vietnam, that he'd walk through a hospital. So we were prepared for that.

G: Did he tell you he was going to see a hospital if he went?

C: No, but I've got ordinary intelligence for an old country boy and so I just assumed that, well, something like that is going to happen. So we were prepared for this sort of thing. But after we took off from Khorat, which as I recall was about 5:30 a.m., before daylight on the morning that we left, and we were going to fly down the coast of Thailand and Cambodia and Laos, and then across over Saigon going into Cam Ranh Bay. Well, when we got airborne and it was just good daylight and the sun was coming up to the east, Marvin Watson came up front. We were about forty minutes out of Saigon, which made us really about an hour and a half out of landing, touchdown, at Cam Ranh Bay. Marvin Watson came walking up in the cockpit, and he said, "Where are the medals?" I said, "Well, we're all set." He said, "You got the medals for Mr. [Ellsworth] Bunker and all the generals?" I said, "What medals?" He said, "The President is going to give a

Distinguished Service Medal to all the generals and all the admirals." And I don't know how many there were, but there must have been eight or ten of them, Westmoreland and Momyer and so on. And so I said, "No." And he said, "Well, you better get them. He's going to give some medals." I said, "Well, Lord, what am I going to do?"

Fortunately, I had a real good friend named Ernest Triplett [?]. He was a colonel in the air force, and he was the head of the Military Transport Service office headquarters at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, which was the principal air base in South Vietnam. I got on the radio-telephone. Of course, obviously we had real good communications on Air Force One; we talked to darn near anybody anywhere in the world, anytime. So just in a matter of a few minutes, maybe five minutes at the outside, I had my old friend Ernest Triplett, whom I hadn't talked to in years, had him on the phone, and I said, "Ernie, this is Jim Cross, and we're coming in overhead Tan Son Nhut here just shortly. The first airplane you see on the ramp out there, you go out there and you put handcuffs on the pilot and hold that plane. We're going to be back in touch with you shortly. If I'm not, somebody will from MACV headquarters, and they are going to have a package of medals for you. You put them on that plane, and just as fast as that plane can get to Cam Ranh Bay, you get it there and make sure that the package is marked for my personal attention at Air Force One. It'll be fairly obvious to the pilot where Air Force One is. I'm a fairly obvious fellow, too, and I want that package into my little grubby hand." "Okay, Jim, you got it."

In the meantime I had the radio operator on the phone also trying to locate this fellow Bill Knowlton, who I told you about. Bill Knowlton was the chief of staff for General Westmoreland at MACV headquarters in Vietnam. Bill was a good friend, later to become the director of West Point. I got Bill, and I said, "Bill, I need some medals. I've just learned in the last five minutes that the President is going to award Distinguished Service Medals to all the admirals and all the generals, air force and army and so forth that are over here, that's going to be at Cam Ranh Bay. I need some medals. Can you get them?" He said, "Well, yes." I said, "Now, Bill, this is urgent. We're going to be in Cam Ranh Bay in about forty-five minutes. Now here's what you do. You get the medals together, instantly, right now, and trot them straight down to Colonel Triplett. Colonel Triplett is the head man at the MATS-MAC headquarters at Tan Son Nhut airport." He said, "Well, we're right here. We're just side by side." I said, "Yes, I know where you're at. Get them over to Colonel Triplett. He's holding an airplane." I wasn't sure that he was, but I'd told him to, and I knew Ernie Triplett was a can-do man, and so I figured, well, he had some kind of an airplane. He said, "All right, it's done." So I hung up from talking to him, and then I wrung my hands the rest of the way into Cam Ranh Bay, wondering, "Is it going to get done?"

Well, lo and behold, [in] just a few minutes I got a call back; it was Triplett. He said, "I have just launched a plane. It's en route. It'll arrive at Cam Ranh Bay about ten minutes behind you." I

said, "Thank God. We're going to make the deal, because what's going to happen [is] the President's going to get off, he's going to review the troops and going to ride around, maybe go to a hospital, no telling what. And so I'll have thirty, forty minutes before he hops up on this platform and starts to make his talk. And then after he makes his talk, the last thing he's going to do is award the medals."

Well, all this took place. Sure enough, the President reviewed the troops, and rode around and did this, that, and the other, and the next thing you know, he's mounting the platform. Still no airplane. I'm still wringing my hands. And there's a colonel, his name was Gianetti [?]; I'll never forget the guy. He was a PR man, an air force colonel, was sort of hustling around there just into everything. And I grabbed this Colonel and I said, "Now, Colonel"--when I first got there I said, "Colonel, I've got a package coming in, and I have got to have it. It is absolutely, purely urgent. When it comes, and it's coming in on an airplane from Tan Son Nhut, every airplane that lands on this runway, I want you personally to meet the airplane and find out if that package is on it. I don't know which one it is. I don't know the tail number; I've forgotten the tail number," or something. Anyway, he said, "Okay. You got it."

As luck would have it, the plane landed. But instead of the Colonel doing his job, he'd turned it over to some corporal or something, and the corporal didn't understand the urgency of it, and the darned thing got lost and got shuffled off somewhere, and I thought, "Oh, my God." As fortune would have it, we finally located the

package of medals, and I ran just as hard as I could run--now mind you, I'm wearing a full-dress blue uniform, just like that one right there [indicating photograph], and [it's] hot over there in South Vietnam, about nine or ten o'clock in the morning at this time. And I ran with that package under my arm from where I got it over to the platform, and the President was just getting ready to make his award. And as he's talking about "And I hereby award to General So-and-so"--I tore open the first package and handed it to him. Marvin Watson and I were tearing open packages, and fortunately, we got them all right. In other words, each service has a different Distinguished Service Medal. We got them all right, and I thought, "Whew! Oh, boy."

Well, the President then lapses into another speech, in which he said, "I'm also very, very pleased to award to a very distinguised citizen, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, the Medal of Freedom." He turned to me--what medal, what Medal of Freedom? Marvin was standing there, and I'm standing there just looking dumb. And the President came with them little bitty daggers, you know, and he said, "Well, I see the military's done it again." Well, that hadn't been on the program. None of it had been on the program, and we'd managed to get the Distinguished Service Medals for all the generals, which was all I was told, but the Freedom Medal for Ambassador Bunker, hell, that had to come out of somewhere else, you know, in Washington. We had no such thing.

G: They didn't stock Medals of Freedom at Tan Son Nhut.

C: No. Anyway, after it was all over, the President made apologies to the fact that he didn't have the medal, that the military had let him down, his military aide, Colonel Cross. This went out over the-- (Laughter) Everything got back to normal, and we finally got all together and started to get on board the airplane. The President came up to me, and he got right down in my face. He said, "I don't know how in the hell it is, every time I want to do something, you can manage to screw it up." I said--and I rarely ever made excuses to the President, but in this case I said, "Mr. President, I wasn't aware that you were even going to present a medal." He said, "Well, goddamn it, you could have at least handed me a box to give him." (Laughter)

And he's right. If I would have been all together and thinking, but of course we'd just accomplished the near-impossible, I felt like, and I had such a letdown, that suddenly when he sprung this other deal on me, I really did not have the presence of mind to reach and get an empty box. And I could have; I had some empty boxes right there. I could have just got an empty box, and I could have walked up there and I could have told him, "Mr. President, now we didn't have or couldn't get a Freedom Medal." I could have whispered in his ear, see, if I had had the presence of mind to do it. But everything had been drained out of me by the previous exercise, and when he--I just couldn't recover.

G: I know exactly what you mean. It's a case of you gave your best shot,

you got the job done, you think you're finished, and then somebody says, "Oh, by the way, give us your best shot one more time."

C: Yes. And it happened so suddenly, I just simply could not muster what it took to come up with it. But all I could say was, "Mr. President, you're right. I should have." Which he was; he was absolutely right. I should have had the presence of mind to have come up with it. But that was vintage Lyndon Johnson, and I'll never forget it.

(Interruption)

John Connally and the President and I were riding around the Ranch. He'd asked me to come out to the Ranch; I was over at Bergstrom Field. This must have been in October.

G: Of 1968?

C: Just before I went to Vietnam. We were riding around out there in one of those Lincoln convertibles, talking about one thing and another, and I'm riding in the back seat and he and John Connally are in the front. I don't recall what all we talked about, just idle conversation, really. And they were talking--principally them, I'm more or less just listening, about his appointments to the Supreme Court. He was going to take Abe Fortas from his position on the Supreme Court, elevate him to the--

G: Chief justice?

C: Chief justice. That was going to leave Abe's vacancy open, and then there were two other possibilities, as I recall, that were about to resign or might resign under certain circumstances, and he was enjoying, I mean literally just relishing the thought that he was

going to be a president that got to make four appointments to the Supreme Court.

I didn't say a word, because that's way out of my area, certainly. I didn't know anything about the Supreme Court and didn't know anything about the individuals. I knew Abe Fortas, of course. I also knew from reading the papers that Abe Fortas was going to have a hell of a time getting confirmed, and it seemed to me, just as a novice politician--if indeed I could be called a politician; I wasn't, really--but it just seemed to me that that was a bad move. Leave Abe Fortas where he was and then pick somebody that's less controversial to be the chief justice. But instead, what he ended up doing, by doing it like he did--unfortunately for the President, I think, and unfortunately for the country--he actually, instead of getting four appointments to the Supreme Court, he had none. Well, I'm sorry, he had one. He had Thurgood Marshall.

G: Thurgood Marshall. Because he couldn't get Abe Fortas confirmed as chief justice, and therefore didn't open up his slot, either.

C: Yes. And then there was one other, I think, that he was--I guess that's the way it was. I've forgotten exactly how it went, but there was one other, William O. Douglas might have been thinking about resigning at that time. And so what he was--he was sitting there really relishing the thought that he was going to be a president in this century that got to appoint four men to the Supreme Court--

G: How did Connally react to that line of thought?

C: Connally was much like I was, although Connally is a very powerful man and certainly not in the same class as I am. He, nonetheless, around the President was little old John Connally, just like I was always little old Jim Cross, and Connally, I don't think, had a great deal to say about it. I think that Connally figured, "Don't beard him too much in his own lair here."

G: Be a sounding board and just hush.

C: Yes, and just grunt and scratch and acknowledge, but don't give too much advice. (Laughter)

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview II

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of James U. Cross

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, James U. Cross of Purmela, Texas, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on February 11, 1981 at Dripping Springs, Texas and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

James U Cross B/Gen USAF (Ret)
Donor

22 October 1987
Date

Frank G Burke
Archivist of the United States

11-10-87
Date