INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBINSON RISNER

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: General Risner's office, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: May we begin by my asking you when you were assigned to Southeast Asia originally?

R: I was assigned to Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, in July of 1964. You see, I flew from Okinawa to advanced bases like Korat, Thailand, and Danang, South Vietnam.

G: Now, of course, this was before the Gulf of Tonkin incidents and before the commitment of American combat troops. What sort of missions were involved?

R: I was not flying missions in Vietnam before the Gulf of Tonkin. I was assigned to Okinawa as a squadron commander of an F-105 unit, and it wasn't until after the Gulf of Tonkin that I started to fly any missions at all into Southeast Asia.

G: What kind of missions were involved when you did start flying them?

R: The first one that comes to mind was cutting a road called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It came through Laos. We cut the road by destroying a bridge there, and on that particular mission I flew out of Danang. However, our units were rotating from Okinawa into Korat and back home again, and it was there that I flew my first mission into North Vietnam, on March 3, 1965.

G: That would have been after the Rolling Thunder program was initiated.

R: No. No, that was before. The first air force strike into North Vietnam was in early March of 1965, I believe.

G: Right, right. Rolling Thunder I think began--well, the first two retaliatory raids [were] after the Pleiku incident, which was, I think, February 7 when the barracks at Pleiku were mortared and a number of Americans were injured and killed. Were you on those retaliatory strikes, the initial ones before the actual Rolling Thunder systematic program began?

R: No, I was not on that.

G: Okay. You said that you had a road-cutting mission earlier. Was this one of the code-named interdiction programs like I think the Yankee Team missions were called?

R: It might have even have come under the code name of Rolling Thunder.

G: Okay. Now, of course in retrospect, everyone is expected to have a view on the war. Did you have a view on the war at the time when you were flying?

R: Yes, I did. I still have the same view; it has never changed. And you might place me in a category by what I'm going to say, but I don't think it's atypical. First of all, I knew some about Southeast Asia. I had read some of the history. I knew a little bit about their culture. I believed absolutely in what we were doing, and that was trying to preserve the remainder of Southeast Asia which had not fallen under communist rule. Again, I have a tendency perhaps to be a little idealistic; even after thirty-three years of flying fighters

for Uncle Sam I still believe that man was created equal. Not that we have equal capabilities or talents, but that all men should have the right to choose their form of government, et cetera. I believed that strongly enough that when offered an opportunity, I wanted to go to Southeast Asia and participate in that effort. Every man in my unit was a volunteer. We all felt very strongly, and my feeling has never changed. I think what we were doing was a good thing. I think it was right. I think we did have an obligation to all of Southeast Asia, and it dates back from the time the French were being, you might say, thrown out of North Vietnam, the commitment made by President Roosevelt, and it goes on. We do have a commitment to all the free world, because there is no other country that stands between militant communism, international communism, and the rest of the free world except the United States. We do have a commitment. Whether we like it or not, whether we always want it or not, it's still there. We inherited it because there is no one else. If we don't want communism to take the world, as they have said they're going to do, then it's up to us to pick up the gauntlet. That's what we were doing and I'm glad that I was able to participate.

G: Now, I'm not challenging you but--and this was a much more often-heard view later, I think, not so much in 1964, but there were still a few voices which were raised, saying opposing communism is well and good, but look what we're propping up. Did you have any thoughts about the failings or shortcomings of the South Vietnamese regime?

R: Well, certainly. You know, this could be debated forever. It would never be settled, because you will never have the meeting of minds that come from different schools of thought. If you have three different people and they're all bad, but varying degrees bad, then you take the very best one you can of the three, if that's the only three you have to choose from. Well, that's what we were doing. Nobody in their right mind is going to say that the--I guess you could call him the president or the prime minister of South Vietnam was all good. He was a benevolent tyrant.

G: You are referring to [Ngo Dinh] Diem now?

R: Yes. And another thing: before the American people could ever begin to understand--and this is not putting down Americans' knowledge or their intelligence or anything else--but it's a fact that until you understand the culture of that part of the world, you can never understand how we could have done business with a person like Diem. Now, that doesn't mean that Diem was all bad, he wasn't. But he certainly didn't measure up to what we would like to think of as a government or a head of a government.

You see, greasing a person's palm, embezzlement, this type of think is the norm, this is the mode of operation in that part of the country. You can't even get a driver's license unless you grease a few palms. That's the way they do business; that's the way they live. To them it is not immoral or wrong or unethical. So those are some of the things you would have to understand before you could say, "Well, President Diem certainly didn't measure up to American standards, but

he was the best thing they'd ever had." Because it got worse. You know, they had many coups there, running one right after the other one.

G: Now, it's clear that you had, as many did, an ideological commitment involved, at least an anticommunist commitment if for no other reason. Isn't it also true that a good many professional soldiers and airmen went simply because, as I think one of them was quoted as saying, "Well, it's the only war we've got, and if you're a professional you go where the war is"? Was that a very common attitude?

R: Perhaps. That is kind of a trite statement; this is kind of a hanger-on type of phrase that many military men use, and it's kind of a flippant type of attitude like, "Well, I'm in the military to fight and that's the only war going." In reality, you can hardly find a single person who wants to go get shot at. You don't find many of those, and you don't find many who like to kill people. I haven't run into a single one. So what I'm saying, you will hear little remarks that really are not meaningful. Just like during World War II, bad language, obscenities, were the mode of operation. The typical military man used profanity to express himself. Well, that kind of got straightened away after World War II and you don't hear much of that anymore. People don't need to use obscenities or profanity to express themselves anymore.

What I'm saying is, what you heard is not a true reflection of the typical military professional at all. Like many others, I was dedicated. I had left the service for four and a half years between

World War II and Korea, but I loved the life; I loved the professionalism of the people I worked with. I loved their dedication and their loyalty, their stick-to-itiveness. I admired many traits or characteristics of the people with whom I worked. They were so dedicated to what they were doing. They worked terribly long hours. So many of our enlisted men had to work at an extra job, to moonlight in order to support their families, and yet they stayed in. They didn't have to stay in; they were smart enough to have gotten a much better job. So this speaks of some dedication. One thing you hardly ever heard among military men was, "I'm in because I'm patriotic." That was taboo. You never talked about patriotism. Just like when I grew up, you never talked about sex. Now it's kind of an open subject on the TV screens and everywhere else you go. Things have changed.

You've kind of asked a roundabout question; I went over there because I really believed in what I was doing. We were protecting some of our friends, and yes, I'm dead set against communism. I've seen it close up. I watched it for seven and a half years from cracks, from interrogation stools, from torture chambers. I've seen it. I don't like what I see. It doesn't in any way compare with capitalism or democracy. The communists' big selling point--and they've got a good one, [it] sells to the majority of the world's people. It sells to the have-nots--and the majority of the people, probably 90 per cent of the world's population are have-nots. That means they don't have a lot of money, or a lot of material wealth. Most of the wealth is controlled by other people, people who are

smarter, people who've got more guts, people who have more determination. Well, the communists say to the have-nots, "We're going to give you equality. That means that there'll be nobody better than you and nobody richer. You'll have every right that anybody, including the president, has." Well, if I was a down-and-outer, if I'd have never amounted to anything, if I was lazy, even, or if I had no aspirations, if I was content to chop cotton or dig ditches or something similar, that would appeal to me like nothing else. I would say, "Man, I'm going to be equal! There's nobody going to be able to look down on me." Well, that's their big seller. I don't think it's right, because once they sell a country and they get them hooked, they find they don't have a classless society, they have a faceless society where there is no identity, there is no initiative, and you cannot run your own life. You're no longer the master of your fate.

(Interruption)

G: My notes say that you were the commanding officer of the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron, who were called the Fighting Gamecocks, I think.

R: Yes.

G: Flying F-105Ds out of Korat?

R: That was where we were assigned, but we were flying combat missions out of Korat.

G: All right. What sort of missions did you begin with, from Korat?

R: The first mission I flew out of Korat was to destroy an ordnance depot, where they kept arms and ammunition, and that was in March of 1965.

G: Did you fly against the Thanh Hoa bridge at some time?

R: Yes, I led the first strike on the Thanh Hoa bridge, and we didn't knock it down. We lost some airplanes; I was shot up pretty bad and had to recover at an emergency base. That was the third of April, 1965. The fourth of April we went back, and again I led the mission. I circled overhead and watched every airplane come in and drop his load. I called them in, each of the flights, so that we didn't get all messed up, because it was a maximum effort from all the bases. I counted three hundred and forty bomb impacts on that bridge--those are seven hundred and fifty-pound bombs--and we still didn't destroy that bridge. Probably by the morning of the next day they had that bridge pretty well repaired, because they just swarmed over it like ants all night long. It took many, many months, it took years, before they finally dropped that, and it took a smart bomb, one of those that's guided by laser beam, before they ever dropped it.

G: My information is that it was either a two thousand- or three thousand-pound smart bomb that did it, and they did it easily.

R: It's true.

G: There's been a lot of controversy concerning the bombing and the nature of the bombing--I'm speaking in general now--over the North. What kind of restrictions did you have to observe on your missions over the North? That is, were you restricted in terms of flight path, the path that you would take on your final leg? In order to avoid hitting civilian targets, this is what I'm getting at.

R: Well, we were not restricted, so to speak, on how we got in to the target. If our target was closely adjacent to civilian targets, yes, we would try to plan our final run so as to avoid civilian population, civilian targets. We were even restricted for quite some months--in fact, until after I was shot down the first time we could not attack targets of opportunity. That means if we saw trucks and tanks on the highway we couldn't attack them. We also could not go very deep into North Vietnam.

The thing was kind of a gradual war, so that we were restricted as to what longitude [latitude] we could pass. We would go maybe fifty miles into North Vietnam for a few months and then it would be seventy-five miles. Meanwhile, it gave the Vietnamese time to prepare for us to come on up another few miles; they'd have all their guns back where they could really hammer us, their surface-to-air missiles, their fighters. We gave them every opportunity in the world to get ready. It was an error on our part, and I've never criticized our presidents, even though we had more than one during that period of time, because I feel they were getting the best advice they could get and it was not all good, very frankly. Maybe it was better than we suspect, though, because I am told that their advice was, "Don't go too far too fast or China will enter the war, just like Korea." And I think this held us back to a great extent. I feel sure that until the time that President Nixon went to Peking and made some assurances to Mao Tse-tung or someone that we were not going to try to invade North Vietnam or attack China, that we had to go slow and easy.

G: It seems to me, just as a lay observer, that restricting final approaches to targets, especially targets which are going to have to be hit repeatedly, like the Thanh Hoa bridge, would be a tactical handicap and an advantage to the enemy gunners if they know the direction that you're going to come from every time.

R: Let me clarify that a bit. They pretty much left it up to the units to plan their approaches. Nobody from Washington, for instance, said, "You've got to attack on a certain heading," because you're right, that would have really lined us up for the slaughter. Nobody did that to us; we did have the flexibility of planning our own missions. We were knowledgeable of civilian population if it was in or close to that. We did our best to avoid it. We did not attack civilian targets. We did preserve civilian lives to the best of our ability, knowing full well that in wartime some innocent people are going to get hurt or killed.

G: Did you have an opinion on the way that Hanoi was apparently able to convince some Americans that we were, in fact, bombing the civilians? Harrison Salisbury, I think, of the New York Times, was perhaps the best-known example of an American who came to believe that we were in fact in some cases bombing other than military targets, and doing it purposely.

R: I look on people who subscribe to enemy propaganda in several different ways. One, they're very naive. Two, they're very liberal, or they are anti-establishment; they will believe anything that is bad, wrong, or detrimental to our government. Or three, they're either

left, or pro-communists. You can put all these people that seem to be riding the rails or on the same frequency with the Vietnamese, you can put them in one of those categories. I am not able to always categorize them immediately, but we had some people over there like Jane Fonda who was aiding and abetting the enemy. And whether or not Ramsey Clark always knew what he was doing, I don't know, but he was also aiding and abetting the enemy.

As far as the people who chose to believe we were bombing civilian targets, all they would have had to do, and some of them did do this, [is] avail themselves of the opportunity to come into our ready rooms and our intelligence briefings, look at our frag orders. There were no top secrets about a lot of that stuff. They could have learned, and a lot of them did learn to their satisfaction, that we never attacked civilian targets. At no time, knowingly, did we ever attack civilian targets; in fact, there were some pilots who were severely punished or chastised because they accidentally, and without as much precaution as we thought they could have exercised, hit something other than a military target.

G: Were the restrictions as well on the types of ordnance that we were allowed to use against targets? I'm thinking of--

R: Yes.

G: --antipersonnel--

R: From time to time there were restrictions on the ordnance.

G: One of the pieces of evidence that was cited in this particular case was that someone showed Harrison Salisbury the remnants of I think

what was called a lazy dog bomb which was dropped on a village. And this was "proof," quote, unquote, that we were using antipersonnel weapons against harmless villagers.

R: Where was that dropped, in the North or in the South?

G: In the North. Of course, this was later--

R: As I said, if he wanted to believe a North Vietnamese communist over Americans, only in America is he allowed to do that, and it doesn't present any credibility whatsoever as far as I'm concerned, to any thinking person who reads all of the presented evidence. They would never believe a person like that. It's just like we were tortured and forced to make statements on tape and also in writing that were prejudicial to the good of the United States. We were forced to do this under severe torture, and we lived in abject misery knowing that we had betrayed our country and we couldn't die. They wouldn't let us die; they only tortured us. And yet there were people who believed that we were [willingly] making statements which were detrimental to the pursuit of the war. How could a sane, thinking, rational person imagine that because we had become prisoners of war that we were going to change and now suddenly we're condemning the war and the President and so forth? It doesn't make sense. Everyone should have said to themselves, "Well, they've forced these guys to do this." But you had a few who were gullible enough to believe the enemy over our own people.

G: You have recounted the circumstances of your shootdown and capture elsewhere, and I don't intend to make you go through the same material

again. Is there anything else about your shootdown and capture which has not appeared in print and which you wish had, perhaps?

R: I don't really know how much of it has appeared in print, but to put it very simply--

G: Well, I was thinking primarily of your book [The Passing of the Night] and the larger book on POWs which was done by Reader's Digest, I think [P.O.W.].

R: Yes, I think that is factual, but I don't recall all the facts presented.

G: I had occasion to remark on the number of times pilots were injured when they ejected. Was this simply because they were coming out of high-performance aircraft, or is there something else behind it?

R: That is the main reason pilots were injured; they were coming out of high-performance aircraft and they were not always coming out under controlled conditions. Sometimes those airplanes were doing all kinds of weird things. And then when you bail out of an airplane doing six hundred or six hundred and fifty miles an hour, the wind blast is almost enough to tear your arms off. And sometimes we incurred great damage just from encountering a tremendous force while ejecting from the airplane in a big hurry; sometimes because it was on fire and out of control, sometimes because it was headed towards terra firma and we didn't want to be aboard when it impacted.

I bailed out twice over there, both times in an out-of-control situation, and I sustained minor injuries. When I hit the ground the second time I tore the ligaments in one knee very badly, and that's the only damage that I realized.

G: Do I remember correctly that you came down over water the first time?

R: Yes.

G: But you were not injured either time on ejection; it was the sudden stop on the ground apparently.

R: Well, the first time I ejected the only injury I got was I got some facial abrasions from the parachute, because I was inverted when I ejected and my parachute did some funny things before I got all straightened away.

G: I see, the straps cut you?

R: Yes, they hit me across the face.

G: How vital a factor was this in the survival rate of prisoners? In other words, did it affect their survival?

R: Very rarely did a pilot fail to survive because of a malfunction of our survival equipment--survival equipment including our ejection seats. Now, due to technology they continued to improve on our ejection seats. The F-105, when I flew it, had a pretty forceful ejection, a powder charge in a cartridge. The plane that came out subsequent to that, the F-4, and then subsequently to that all the rest of them, had what we called rocket seats. They were slower burning; you didn't get such an abrupt jolt on your seat. There were some people who received some compaction fractures--[they] were not disabled but certainly were put in some pain and took a while to recover--from some of the old seats. But they were the best that could be had; they were as safe as technology could make them. Our aircraft have always been the safest in the world.

G: Now, how did this injury factor affect the survival rate once you were captured? In other words, if you were badly injured on ejection or landing, did that prejudice your chances for living out your period of years in Hanoi?

R: No, I don't think so. There were many pilots who were injured by antiaircraft and surface-to-air missiles prior to ejection. Sometimes parts of their ejection system or their parachute or their own bodies would be injured or damaged before ejection. I'm sure that some of them were hit while they were in their parachute, most of them by accident if they were hit. I don't think many people were shooting at guys in their parachutes. I know of no such incidents.

G: Were you aware, during your period as a prisoner of war, when bombing pauses were instituted? Was it obvious?

R: Yes.

G: Was this because you simply noticed that there was an absence of bombing?

R: Yes.

G: You could tell it physically? You didn't have to have the word passed down by the grapevine?

R: No, normally we didn't get the word passed down; you just knew that the planes weren't coming over and the antiaircraft guns weren't going off and the sirens weren't blowing.

G: Was there any correlation that you could tell between bombing pauses and your treatment as a prisoner?

R: No, I think not. I think, more than the bombing pauses, that our plights sometimes were affected by the political feeling of North Vietnam. I say this because on Monday, if we were in a position where we could see through a crack, we'd watch all the guards go in for their morning briefing, their weekly briefing, and we'd wonder how they were going to be briefed. Some weeks they were told to be nicer to us and it was just so obvious they had been told how to act. Some weeks they were told to just be as mean as they wanted to be. As far as we were concerned, it depended on the political atmosphere. For instance, after [George] McGovern, who was at that time senator of South Dakota went to Paris without any authority whatsoever, met with the DRV and the PRG, both the South Vietnam communists, the VC, and the North Vietnamese, and came back and made a very articulate speech, pro-North Vietnamese--

G: How did you know this?

R: Because the Vietnamese were jumping up and down with joy. They forced me to listen to that tape nine different times. Because they were sure it was going to change my thinking to have a United States senior senator making a fiery speech which was all pro-North Vietnamese, all antiestablishment, antigovernment, antiwar, anti-almost everything I stood for. They were sure it was going to change my thinking. And it certainly didn't do that, it just made me look down on a man who would cripple our war effort, you might say.

G: Were you aware of the antiwar stance being taken by certain other

prominent Americans? I'm thinking primarily of people like Dr. [Benjamin] Spock, Senators [Wayne] Morse and [Ernest] Gruening, and--

R: We certainly were. They even provided us with congressional testimony by the antiwar advocates, of some of the people that you've just [named], Gruening especially, from Alaska, McGovern and some of the others, yes. And in fact on more than one occasion they would get propaganda movies showing marches on Washington, showing marches being led by Spock, carrying caskets, all kinds of garbage.

G: What was the effect on prisoner morale of this sort of thing?

R: Oh, it was ridiculous. Some of their attempts at propaganda were so amateurish our children wouldn't have believed it, because they were so clumsy. It had no effect. We started with a thesis that they were all lying; they were going to lie to us [at] every opportunity, so we said, "Nothing is true. Everything is false." We started from that, and if we found any truth, why, it was great. But we just started from the basis that everything they were going to give us was to benefit them and nothing was to benefit us.

G: Now, that's an interesting point, because I gather the impression that one of the great advantages you had, maybe the only advantage you had, in your relationship with your captors, was their apparently almost total ignorance of the American culture. They couldn't tell what was credible and what was not.

R: That's quite true. That helped a great deal. If it had been the Russians, for instance, some of whom have lived in America for years,

who are trained in our culture, then they could have made much greater inroads.

G: Why do you suppose the North Vietnamese didn't get the Russians to help them in this?

R: Well, I think the North Vietnamese were getting help, but they were getting it mostly in the area of military aid and military technicians. They have a great deal of pride; you will find [this] in a lot of people with a small stature. Theirs was a pygmy country with pygmy-sized people, and I don't mean to make any adverse comments about our Vietnamese friends. I have some very close friends from Vietnam. But I mean the North Vietnamese had a lot of face and they were intensely sensitive to public opinion. World opinion meant a great deal to them, and they felt so proud that they were in direct contact with the imperialists--I'm repeating some of their words--and they were so proud of that. "And really," they said to me, "we have won. It doesn't make any difference what the outcome of the war is, we have won. We've proven that a tiny country our size, with a people who really have not come anywhere near your country in industrialization and technology, can still hold you at bay." And they said, "It doesn't make any difference how the war comes out, we've still won."

G: Speaking of foreign assistance, one of the books on the prisoners mentions a particularly vicious interrogater that some of the prisoners called Fidel. Did you ever have any contact with this individual?

R: No. However, I was aware of a Cuban there, who I'm told was going to show the North Vietnamese how to break the spirit of the Americans, to

turn them into socialists. They were attempting to do that to some in order to release them back into our society as, you might say, a malignant germ. But it didn't work.

G: You mean sort of like Lenin was transported back into Russia in 1917?

R: Yes. But all the Cuban accomplished was to arouse a tremendous amount of hatred.

G: Was it the general consensus that he was a Cuban, then?

R: Yes. Yes.

G: Have you learned any more about that since that time?

R: I personally haven't; I'm sure the CIA knows who they were.

G: Well, I have opportunities to interview some CIA people from time to time, I'll ask.

Now, on March 31, 1968, President Johnson made what has been since known as the March 31st speech, when he announced that the bombing was going to be restricted to below the twentieth parallel and that he was not going to seek re-election and in fact would refuse a nomination. Did the word get to you and the other prisoners very quickly about that?

R: Yes. That was given to us through the liar's boxes. Every cell had a speaker in it, at least from 1967 forward mine did, and the others had it from 1966 forward, I'm told, where you would get propaganda some four hours a day.

G: What did you make of this development?

R: Well, since I didn't have the facts at hand, I didn't know what to make of it. I figured something was up, and of course, being a born

optimist, I hoped that this meant that there were some negotiations going on that I wasn't aware of and perhaps it would mean a quicker end to the war. So I was hopeful.

G: And then, of course, negotiations were begun, or at least talks were begun, just a few days later in Paris. Did this reinforce your idea?

R: Yes. Yes, it reinforced my hopes at least, but we had no facts except what we were getting through the propaganda line; we just knew they were talking. And the propaganda went on and on and on: how they couldn't agree if the South Vietnamese were going to sit at the table, and then was the table going to be round or square, and then could the VC sit at the table, and it just went on for months. We were getting all this, and of course we were getting the view presented through the eyes of the North Vietnamese. So we were accomplished--how shall I say it?--we were accomplished in seeing through all the garbage we were being given through the propaganda line there. At least we got something--we knew some of the stuff that was going on, in other words.

Now, I might add, there were some of the people, some of my contemporaries in the prison, who felt betrayed when they stopped bombing the North. They felt the pressure needed to be kept on, increased, intensified. I have since read an article or rather excerpts from a book written by a British correspondent who was in Hanoi during that time.

G: Would that be Mr. [John] Colvin?

R: I don't know. I can't remember his name, but I just read this recently and I think the name of his book was Outside the Wall. He talks about the fact that the Vietnamese were on the brink of capitulating. They didn't have anything left. We had just gutted them, as far as their capabilities to continue to provide insurrection down south and so forth. We'd hurt them much worse than we knew. According to this British writer, if we'd have held out, if we'd have kept the pressure on up North, he says they would have had to give in. So we pulled the pressure off at the wrong time, we gave them a chance to reinvigorate themselves, and of course the rest of it is history.

G: I suppose the next important development was the total cessation of bombing, which took place in November just before the election. Was the reaction similar to that development?

R: The reaction was, I think, even greater by some of the guys who felt we had really been betrayed.

G: Did that affect their ability to resist--?

R: No, I really think not. When I say this, I didn't know about the other guys and how they felt until 1972.

G: You were in solitary almost all that time, is that right?

R: Yes, and certainly isolated from the other guys. We were put together December 26, 1971. I was put with forty-six other PWs.

G: Yes, there's a very vivid description of that event in both of the books on POWs, books in the field.

R: That's the first time that I learned that some of the guys were bitter

that the bombing had been stopped altogether before any kind of an agreement.

G: You mentioned two people who visited Hanoi during this period, Ramsey Clark and Jane Fonda, and in rather negative terms. Did you have opportunity to exchange views with your fellow prisoners about these visits?

R: Oh, yes. I think the consensus was that those people did us grave harm; not only us as prisoners of war but the men on the battlefield, our government, our country was done a great disservice by Ramsey Clark and especially Jane Fonda. Ramsey Clark met with a few of the PWs, I'm told. In fact, they played a tape for me and it started with, "This is Ramsey Clark." I know that he was there at that time, and it sounds like his voice from other tapes I have heard. In this tape he is telling a few of the PWs that met with him that if they wanted to resist the war--from the prison, mind you, and here they are, military men, prisoners of war--he was telling them if they really felt that the war was [wrong] and they wanted to resist the war by writing articles and whatever, that he would defend them when they came back to the United States.

He was there at a time when they had a committee--they called it a war crimes tribunal--visiting North Vietnam. They were from the communist countries, and he toured the country with them but in his tapes or his statements he would say, "I'm not a member of the tribunal." But he was with them; his statements cooperated with them. They would make all kinds of accusations, like we were bombing the

dams and the dikes. Well, they had gun emplacements and they had surface-to-air missile sites and all kinds of military targets in that area, and of course we bombed them. He would come back and say, "Well, I went out and viewed the craters of a bombing that was done last week, and I didn't see any guns at all." All the guns were mobile. They weren't about to take him out and show him something that would cause him to say something that didn't help them. It was just the most naive or stupid statement I'd ever heard. And here I was in solitary confinement, being tortured, living on food substandard for a pig, and we had people like Ramsey Clark out there tooting the North Vietnamese horns.

And I'll tell you, Jane Fonda did such a great disservice to our country we'll never be able to forgive her. I have heard her depicted--I have read in a national magazine that she is a communist. I didn't know that before then. But I listened to her vile-mouthed tapes that she made in North Vietnam condemning the United States, pleading the cause of the North Vietnamese. As you know, she went around to many of the antiwar coffee houses near the bases. She led demonstrations on the college campus, "burn your bra," "burn your draft card," "burn the American flag." I'm telling you, if Congress had been successful, right after I came back they would have made it an act of treason to aid and abet the enemy at any time we had an armed conflict with a country. But it didn't pass, and so she got away scot-free.

G: Have you ever had any contact with either of these people?

R: No, I was called by a very prominent figure, who is even more prominent right now.

G: Is this figure to remain nameless?

R: Yes. This person said to me, after he came to the phone, "How would you like to appear on national television opposite Jane Fonda and Ramsey Clark?" I said, "No, sir, I wouldn't like that." And he said, "Why?" I said, "For me to appear on the screen with Jane Fonda and Ramsey Clark would be giving them some credibility, which they don't deserve. They are absolutely wrong in everything that they've done concerning the war. And secondly, I wouldn't want to be cross-examined by a professional trial lawyer on national television." And he just laughed, and he said, "You know, when I was coming to the phone"--he'd called me several hours before that--"I thought that was a screwball idea." Well, I said to him, "Who is Jane Fonda? What is she?" And he said, "She's just a dumb broad." Well, later I was to find out she was more than that. According to one of the magazines that came out a few years ago, she was depicted as an out-and-out communist.

As far as Ramsey Clark, nobody's ever been able, at least no one that I've talked to, [to] figure out what happened to him. His father was a very outstanding statesman, and they just shake their heads at Ramsey Clark.

G: What program were they proposing that you appear on national television, do you know?

R: No, they didn't tell me. I assume, you know, like NBC. I appeared on national television quite a number of times right after the last prisoner was released, because up until that time no public statement had been made about our treatment because we were afraid it would harm some of the prisoners who had not yet been released. On the day that the last person was brought out I think we were on CBS, and then we were on [the] "Today" show twice, and several others, just telling the whole world what it really was like, and what the North Vietnamese [did], how they treated us.

G: Yes, I think I saw those programs. I had a good friend who was in Hanoi.

Your book refers to the attempted rescue at Son Tay. How did that word filter through to you?

R: It was kind of peculiar. First of all, we heard all the action. It was twenty-five miles away, but the noise of the antiaircraft and the engines of the aircraft and so forth was pronounced. We could hear it. There hadn't been any strikes north in quite some time, and we couldn't understand what was going on, but we could tell there were a lot of airplanes involved. About three days later the North Vietnamese began to bellyache on the radio, talking about the "commando raid," they called it, into North Vietnam. But they said they foiled it, and that they shot down hundreds of airplanes and killed thousands of commandos. Well, now, to give you some idea of the accuracy of their statements, they shot down one single airplane, an A-1 who was in a support role, and the pilot was picked up. They didn't capture a

single one, didn't kill a single one, and the only injury was a bullet burn across one man's thigh. That was the grand total.

G: Well, what was the effect on morale of something like that?

R: Well, a few days after that we had a chance communication with some South Vietnamese prisoners, and it only happened one time while I was up there. But they told us that the Americans had come into the camp, and they told us where it was. They had their stories all mixed up but they confirmed the Americans had come into the camp, and [they] said that there were no Americans there but "the rescuers had taken out a bunch of South Vietnamese prisoners," which ended up false.

But the Americans had come into a PW camp only twenty-five miles from Hanoi. I'll tell you, that raised morale right out the top of the roof! To think that old Uncle Sam had reached his arm clear back into the heart of Hanoi to try to get some of us loose, oh, that was tremendous.

G: They, I understand, moved all the prisoners soon after that.

R: That caused them to really get apprehensive about our capability of going any place in North Vietnam and releasing a whole camp, because that particular mission was absolutely successful as far as getting in and getting out without any damage to any of our men. The only thing is, the camp was empty.

G: And the trouble with that is it's hard to repeat the exploit once you've done it once and--

R: Yes. I'm sure the North Vietnamese did a lot of preparation. But they were apprehensive enough to close the outlying camps and move

everyone into the camp in downtown Hanoi, behind one wall, which covered almost a block, so that we were all together for the first time.

G: You mentioned the so-called Christmas bombing under President Nixon in 1972 earlier. What was your vantage point at that time for observing what was happening?

R: I was in a room; it was just an open cell block. We had elevated slabs of cement to put our grass mats on; those were our beds. We also had room to walk between the two rows of beds, and we had about a twenty by twenty-foot courtyard which we were allowed out in a couple of times a day at that point. That was in 1972, and there were twenty senior officers in there. We had a huge wall--it must have been twenty-five feet tall--to keep us from seeing by climbing out. That's where we were the night of the first B-52 raid. It was after dark, must have been eight or nine o'clock when we heard all these jet engines; sounded like two or three squadrons of fighters because we knew no bombers ever came up there. Then the bombs started going off about a half a mile short of our camp--and just walked right on past. We knew that they couldn't be fighters. When we realized it was bombers, pandemonium broke loose. Everybody was jumping up and down and hollering and shouting, clapping each other on the backs, because we knew when they committed the bombers that America was really serious and that we were going to see some changes, we were going to see some results. And as you know, we saw results in about eleven days, even though they had a halt of the bombing for Christmas.

I didn't learn this until later, but Ross Perot, the Dallas businessman, was either himself or had some people in daily contact with the North Vietnamese ambassador to Laos. He was a younger man and he was not quite so stuck in the concrete of tradition that he couldn't think or talk. And they asked him during the lull in the bombing during Christmas of 1972, "What do you think your government will do?" He said, "I see they only have two choices. One is to negotiate seriously"--and they'd never done that before--"or commit national suicide." And as you know, it only lasted four days after Christmas, and they came to the conference table to seriously negotiate for the first time.

G: Were you aware of President Johnson's death in January of 1973? I'm not sure where you were on that date. I have January 22.

R: Yes. It was on the radio, propaganda, you know. They made a lot of it. Of course, they called Johnson all the bad names, and they said the American people were against Johnson. Of course, this was a big lie. They would, for instance, take ten people that were protesting; they would blow it into ten thousand, you know, the card-burners, and the demonstrators, and the flag-burners. Well, when they showed us propaganda movies several times and showed people marching on Washington, they would say, "Two hundred thousand marched on Washington." We'd watch and their movie camera would show this group of people carrying the flags and banners, and long-haired, long beards, scraggly, hippies and Spock and a bunch of other people. Then they'd move the camera up a block and take a picture, and you'd see the same group with the same

banners and the same flag come by, and they'd just keep doing that. You'd see them six or seven times, and that made it two hundred thousand people.

G: It's interesting, because of course there were some very large demonstrations which, one would think, they could have gotten some better propaganda usage of.

R: Well, they didn't do too hot, I'll tell you. Their attempts at propaganda were very amateur.

G: When did you realize that you were about to be repatriated?

R: On the twenty-sixth of October, 1972. Some twenty-one of the senior officers were in this one big room; we had a speaker's box. We got propaganda morning and evening. In order to separate the wheat from the chaff, we had appointed three of the POWs to listen to that squawk box in the evening; the rest of the people didn't want to hear it, and I didn't blame them. But we wanted to know if there was anything of interest that would come over it, so during the hour that it was on we had what was called quiet time. People could go about their activities but couldn't make any noise and had to talk in whispers. The three who had been appointed stood very close under that speaker, then the next morning we'd get a briefing.

On the twenty-sixth of October it sounded differently. And it turned out what we were hearing was practically verbatim the agreement that was finally signed between the United States, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam. As it got along towards the end it was describing how we would be released, what contingents, how the exchange would be

worked. It said that each prisoner would be given a printed copy of what we were hearing on the air, that they first must be read it and then we would be given a copy. Then at the end of the tape the voice said, "But the perfidious and warlike Americans did not show up in Hanoi to initial the agreement, and therefore there won't be a formal agreement signed three days from now in Paris, and therefore you will not be going home for Christmas, if ever." And that sounded so typical.

But during the period of time this was playing, we had some strange visitors who came to the barred door. Previously we had lived in solid cells with solid doors so we couldn't see out. [At that time] we could see out into the twenty-foot courtyard there, with the big high wall, so we did have a view, and at night you could count twenty or thirty big rats out there playing in this courtyard. But the Vietnamese came up and stood at our door to see our reaction. I passed the word very quietly: "We have visitors, business as usual." So the guys went on with whatever they were doing; they had kind of stopped to listen to the "liar's box" because it was unusual.

Well, everybody went on about their business and as soon as it was over, they unlocked the door and took me down to the camp commander's office for interrogation. He said, "What did you think of the program?" And I said, "What program?" He said, "The radio program." I said, "Well, you must know by now we don't listen to that." He said, "Oh, yes, I know, you want to cry." I said, "Why should I want to cry?" He said, "You all want to cry." I said, "Why is that?" He

said, "Because you are very sad because you will not be going home, and maybe you won't be going home at all." And I said--you see, I'd grown much bolder because they'd stopped torturing, for all basic purposes--"Don't you know that we stopped believing you long years ago? As far as we are concerned, we are political prisoners. We are held for ransom. Otherwise you would have been glad to exchange us for some of your own, as it was proposed years ago. Because we have many, many more times as many prisoners. We have been so tortured and deceived and lied to while we've been here, don't you know we wouldn't believe anything that you told us?" He said, through his interpreter, "You are a very fine actor." And they took me back to the cell block.

Signs increased from that day forward until we were finally taken out of our cells and put on a bus and driven across a pontoon bridge--the bridges had been bombed--over to Gia Lam airport, and there we were brought out of North Vietnam on a C-141 on the twelfth of February.

G: Can you talk about the repatriation process? I'm sure there was a fairly formalized process--

R: Well, it was formal and yet it was fairly simple. Our bus drove up and parked on a ramp a block or so from where the ceremony finally took place. And we sat there for maybe an hour, and people were kind of subdued, you know. We had been issued clothes and shoes, and it appeared this might be the release and yet, as I said, we had grown very wary of the North Vietnamese. Then finally, a C-141 circled and came in for a landing and, boy, what a beautiful sight! It had a red

cross on the tail and "United States Air Force" painted on it and our hopes really went up. Then they drove the bus up closer to the tables where a huge crowd of correspondents, a lot of military, both North Vietnamese and USAF military, were gathered.

As they unloaded us, we stood in a double column. They started reading our names one by one and we stepped across a painted line on the asphalt, to where there was an air force colonel there to shake our hands. From there we had two escorts to the airplane. They didn't know if we would be able to make it; they just didn't know what condition we would be in. They had a litter, or a bed, for each one, but nobody used them. I didn't see a single person in a litter, and everybody had a cup of coffee and a glass of orange juice in their hands immediately. We hadn't had any [coffee], not very much, and no orange juice, of course. There were two cute nurses aboard and they made us very comfortable. The C-141 started its engines; he rolled out on the runway and gave it the power. I still remember the feeling as the airplane began to gather speed. The tires were bumping over the asphalt lines in the runway, and the bumping became faster and faster, and everybody just stopped talking; there was total silence. I noticed people's fingers, white around the seats. It was such a dramatic moment. Then the nose of the airplane came up and we ran on for a few more feet before the airplane left the ground. The guys jumped out of their seats and there were tears and shouting and those little old nurses got more kissing than they had had in many years.

G: Was it at this point that the captain announced that he was empowered to perform marriages?

R: (Laughter) Yes. It was while we were climbing to altitude. The captain of the ship did come on the air and he said, "And by the authority vested in me by the United States government, I am empowered to perform weddings," and the two little nurses turned white. (Laughter)

G: Now, when you returned to the United States, clearly there were medical tests in store for you, I'm sure debriefings of all kinds. What was that like? Can you describe any of that?

R: Well, it was just as nice as it could have possibly been. We had intelligence personnel assigned to us to debrief us. If we wanted to go for hours, they would hold forth for hours. If we didn't feel like it, they'd cut off and catch us when we did feel like it. The physical examinations were supposed to have taken two weeks and I was finished in a week. They found, much to their amazement, that our teeth, even though we'd had no dental care at all, were in better shape than our contemporaries who'd never gone to prison. That was because we realized we had no dental care and we were meticulous in the care of our teeth. We would break a little sliver of bamboo off and pick our teeth immediately following a meal, and generally we had an old toothbrush--they issued us one almost every year. We used to put a splint on the bristles after we used it, to hold the bristles upright. I brushed most of the porcelain off of some of my teeth.

Forty-five minutes after each meal. I just didn't know any better. But I'm told I probably preserved my teeth by taking such good care.

They really found very little wrong--nothing wrong with me that they could help. We all had parasites, six or seven parasites internally, and they killed those, of course, but the only thing they found that they could help me or repair me for was one bad tooth which they said would have to be pulled. I later had a root canal and I still have that tooth.

G: That's astonishing. Now the treatment in some cases, by all accounts, was simply horrendous.

R: It was bad; it was as bad as you can imagine.

G: There just seems to be a great disparity between the survival rate and the condition of those who survived.

R: Yes.

G: Were there no lasting physical effects?

R: I'm sure there probably are some, and there are probably some that have not showed up. You see, there are statistics showing that the mortality rate after a prolonged imprisonment as a prisoner of war is approximately one-third higher for the ten years following the imprisonment than it would be had you not been in prison. The guys were worried about that, of course. They wondered how many years we were forfeiting, not only by being over there, but how many more would we forfeit by the early termination of life. As for myself, I'm a very firm believer in the Almighty Being, and I remember telling some of them, you know, my close buddies, that I wasn't going to lose any

years. And they said, "How do you figure that?" And I said, "The God that made me can repair me. Or he can let me live a life so rich that it'll make up for all the years I've lost. I'll just live a greater life in the years allocated."

Well, a funny thing happened when I came back to the hospital where I was to spend two weeks. After one week they had finished all of the tests; this included batteries of psychiatric tests and physiological, psychological tests. The flight surgeon sat down with me and said, "If I didn't know you, had I not met you and if I had not read your previous records, from the tests we have gathered this week I would say you're about twenty-five years old." And I said to myself, "Oh, another welcome home speech." Well, I forgot about it, but about fourteen months later I went back for my yearly checkup, and I spent a whole week, a duplication of what I'd gone through previously. And I'd forgotten what the flight surgeon had said. I sat down with the flight surgeon at the end of the week for my out-briefing, and he repeated almost verbatim what the other flight surgeon had said. He said, "You know, in every test that we have performed, for instance, your lungs, your heart, your muscle tone, every functional part of your body that we can test indicates that you're between twenty and thirty years old. Your heart is that of a twenty-year-old." And so I finally believed them.

If you wonder how this could be, on a grossly substandard diet, so substandard that most of us lost some of our visual acuity, maybe all of us lost some. Some will never be able to read or write, or

drive a car, because of diet deficiencies, beriberi and some of the other aftermaths. But most all of us exercised hours a day, and you might say, "How could you do that on soup and bread?" I don't know. We did it. I just know we did it. I exercised in my worst years, when my nerves were so bad, I exercised sometimes fifteen, eighteen hours a day.

G: You give a very graphic account of that--

R: Yes. Well, I had to do that to retain my sanity. I was near the breaking point. I couldn't permit the enemy to know how close I was to breaking, and so the moment I awoke, regardless of the time--it might be two in the morning--I'd just jump up and start running. Now, I couldn't run very far, seven or eight feet in either [direction]. But I could run in place. I'd run four or five hours, because I had the sensation that at least I was moving. Then when I would get some of the pressure, the panic feeling out of me, I could then do other things, like sit-ups and push-ups. I would do those by the hours.

G: Without trying to draw any comment from you on this, I think most observers would say that this is all very true but General Risner is not necessarily typical; in some ways he may even be extraordinary. Don't respond to that. What about the others? Is this a typical experience?

R: Let me say that the more senior the officer, the more notoriety they had received before being shot down, the more severe was their treatment. The less senior, the junior people, some of them weren't tortured at all. They [the North Vietnamese] said they were misguided;

they were misled by people like me. My picture was on the front cover of Time magazine, two feature stories, one following the other, and I had been a jet ace in Korea. They brought North Koreans over to view me and talk to me. They thought I was much greater, much more important to the American people than I was. You see, they have a very small country. When they decorate a person, they call him "People's Hero Number One, Number Two, Second Class, Third [Class]," et cetera. And they get preferential treatment. They don't realize that America is filled with daily heroes but they don't last long. In other words, here today, gone tomorrow.

G: Now, you're being too modest, General.

R: Well, you see, so many of the guys performed in a heroic manner over there. You couldn't take a single person and say, "Hey, that guy's a hero," really. I also didn't always meet my own standards, I'll be very frank with you. When torture lasted long enough and I found I couldn't die, you know, torture didn't kill me, they only made me suffer until I could not maintain the standards I had always set.

G: I understand.

R: So you can't say a person is always a hero, because not all their actions may be heroic. The thing that I asked myself every day, many times a day, was "Are you doing your level best? Will you be able to look your children and your wife in the face and say in absolute honesty, 'I did my best'?"

G: Have you been in contact with lots of the POWs?

R: Yes.

G: Has your physical experience been duplicated? It seems to me there are bound to have been some lasting effects for some of the fellows.

R: I know of no people who didn't have a problem when they were shot down who is suffering even [a] mediocre amount of disablement due to their prison experience. I know of none.

G: That's remarkable.

R: It is remarkable.

G: The cuffs and the ropes, aside from the pain that they induced, but the effect on circulation to the hands would have seemed to have been exactly the sort of thing that a doctor would say would be guaranteed to impair the use of the limbs thereafter, and yet, no aftereffects?

R: There is a syndrome that the medical people know about and that's not highly publicized. It says basically that due to past experiences and statistics kept, that a person incarcerated for a prolonged period of time under less than desirable conditions [such as those] that we were in, will suffer increased mortality rate. They will also suffer from some mental and physical maladies. We have not really seen that manifested. Maybe in minor degrees that you wouldn't recognize, but basically speaking, the POWs who came back from North Vietnam are competing successfully with their peers who were not shot down or who were not captured. Or they are successfully competing out in the business world, if they got out of the service. I'd say the vast majority of them--and I just attended a reunion, a biannual reunion, in Washington a couple of months ago where I saw about two hundred and fifty of them. Everyone looks good, healthy, is holding up their end

very well, and I can't really explain it except to say that we really tried hard and we had a lot of help from an invisible source.

We encouraged each other to physically and mentally exercise every day. And I might say that the batteries of tests given us showed that we had not atrophied in our mental abilities except in one area--and this was my own case--was in the area of abstract reasoning. I had suffered some, because what is there in a seven-by-seven foot cell, with a dim light that burns at night, and very little light during the day, what is there to cause you to do some abstract reasoning? So I had suffered in that area, but in other areas, we had actually improved, because we were forced to use our minds if we wanted to come back more than a vegetable.

G: Now, some prisoners, of course, behaved perhaps less well than they might have been expected to. Was there any problem with recrimination among the prisoners over there?

R: A little, yes. Yes, there is a little. A few of the prisoners--there were either nine or twelve prisoners who were released early. Some of the guys feel they should not have accepted early release, and they don't feel too kindly about them. I don't feel that way. There is one man who, as far as I'm concerned, deliberately and intentionally aided the enemy. And I preferred court-martial charges against two of them. Instead of court-martial, they allowed them to resign from the service, for the good of the service. But two out of five hundred and fifty-three is not bad.

G: That's not even the classic two-percenter.

R: No, and as far as I know, they never gave any strategic information. One of them, I believe, had a physical and a mental-related problem that caused him to be misled. I forgive [him]. There was one, though, who I look upon as a guardhouse lawyer-type of individual, and he was not good for the service. All the POWs know who he is; they all hold him in very low esteem.

G: For the benefit of anyone who is interested, I think they can deduce, if they wish, who the people are from the book P.O.W, which I think treats the subject to some extent.

R: Yes.

G: Did you follow the case of the marine POW, Bobby Garwood, who was a captive, I believe, in the South for a long time. Were you able to follow that with any degree of--?

R: Yes, I followed it, just as you or anyone else did, in the papers. I know none of the intricacies. I don't know of any information that wasn't presented publicly, so I don't know if I'm qualified to speak on that. If what was alleged, and if the facts that he was convicted for were true, let me say this, any man that will desert should be executed. Any man who will carry arms against his own country should certainly be executed. If we don't hold to that, what kind of a discipline are we going to have eventually? I am not saying that Garwood should be executed, but I'm saying if he was guilty of all he was accused of then he should not be permitted to live.

G: There was, of course, in existence, and some people thought it had the force of law although it did not, a code of conduct for prisoners. It

was a fairly stern code I think we all agree. Do you feel that the code of conduct provides a source of inspiration or that it is too strict or what are your feelings about that code of conduct?

R: I think it's a necessity. The Code of Conduct--it's called the Fighting Man's Code of Conduct--has some basic rules of conduct that gives you a goal to shoot at and gives you a standard to maintain. Very frankly, I don't know of a single person that was able to maintain it if they were tortured long enough. Okay? That particular Code of Conduct said, "You will give the enemy only name, rank, serial number and date of birth." We found, after prolonged pain, that we were forced to give more than name, rank, serial number, and date of birth, so we could not abide by that. But it did not make it less useable. It still was good in that it gave us a goal to shoot at. When we were down on our luck, when we'd been tortured, when we'd been forced to give more than name, rank, and serial number and date of birth, we could always look up and keep climbing until we got back on our feet. And that's what we shot at. That's what we tried to maintain.

We had many, many hours of meetings about the Code of Conduct, knowing that at times it was unrealistic because it could not be maintained under torture. But we finally came to the conclusion it's better to have a goal that you cannot maintain 100 per cent of the time than to have a substandard goal that you can maintain 100 per cent of the time.

G: Have you ever heard of the rule of thumb that the French followed after Dien Bien Phu, for example? I believe I've got this right. Which was that if you're captured and they want you to say something, say it. We'll know where it's coming from.

R: Well, we talked about that to the intelligence community. We talked about it to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We said we thought of this, and this is on your shopping list. We don't advocate it, but this is a thought. Suppose at the beginning of any conflict the president goes on national television, and on the radio, in the papers, and says, we may lose some men and they may be captured, and if they do, we have instructed them rather than to be tortured, they will say whatever the enemy tells them to say. So you will know not to believe anything they say until they are released and are free once more. You see, we all came in for a lot of extra punishment because we wouldn't say what the enemy wanted us to say. We wouldn't do what the enemy wanted us to do. They were after propaganda, false propaganda.

Well, that was proposed, but the only thing that has ever been done, and I am glad about it, the Fighting Man's Code of Conduct is completely intact, as it was before we were shot down, with one exception: President Carter changed the word "only." He took out the word "only" from the phrase, "I will give only name, rank, serial number and date of birth to the enemy if captured." It now says, "I will give name, rank, serial number and date of birth to the enemy." Some of the guys, after the torture was lifted, wouldn't even sign for a letter from home; they wouldn't sign for a package. They kind of went

off the deep end. I think that's probably good that they took the "only" out. We won't have to live in so much agony in our own minds, knowing that we have not upheld the Fighting Man's Code of Conduct, simply because we could not.

G: Of course, a great deal of attention was paid in designing that code to the fact that the prisoners, if they chose, could reveal damaging intelligence. But my impression is that the North Vietnamese didn't very often want that kind of information. Is that so?

R: That's true. It was a peculiar thing. It was almost as though they were operating under a code of their own. They did try to get strategic secrets from me, but they didn't push it. They never tortured me for it and therefore they didn't get it. They would like to have known, for instance, I'm sure, where were we targeted for nuclear weapons, but they just asked it in passing. I said, "I don't know. Nobody knows that. They don't tell anybody that." And they believed it, I guess. I don't know of anyone that was really interrogated heavily on [that]. Now, tactical information, as soon as they captured a guy they wanted to know where the next day's targets were going to be so they could get ready. Most of the guys didn't know.

G: And of course that's very transitory information anyway.

R: Oh, yes. After you've been there a week, what do you know that's of benefit? Then of course they wanted to know something about the airplanes, and I guess they caught us later, but we just lied up a storm. I told them that an F-105 can whip a MIG-21 seven ways to Sunday. And of course it took about three counties to turn that 105

around in. Of course, the 105 would just outrun anything in the world on the deck; it was faster than lightning. But we just lied out our ears, until they would catch you and torture you.

G: It's an interesting conjecture, and I don't often ask people to conjecture, what the situation would have been like if the enemy had been different, the Russians, for example, who would have obviously been very interested in all kinds of technological stuff and would have known if they were being lied to very often. What would be your thoughts on this in a situation like that?

R: They would have made much greater inroads as far as intelligence was concerned, but still the guys would have lied, they would have deceived. We'd have had a lot of suicides, when you get right down to it. Most guys, rather than give strategic information, I think would have killed themselves.

G: There were several efforts in any case. Weren't there several suicide attempts in any case?

R: There were some, yes, and perhaps there were some successful ones that I don't know about. Yes, we missed some prisoners who were one day hale and hearty, and they disappeared, never showed again.

G: Was that frequent at all?

R: No, it was not frequent.

G: Did you ever find out what happened to Ron Storz?

R: No. They left him in Alcatraz, that small prison camp. When they moved all the rest of them out they left him there. I think Ron was perhaps a little irrational at the time, and they just let him die

there, that's my opinion. They had a peculiar feeling about mental imbalance. We had three guys, one had been beaten into insanity, he was mentally gone--

G: Is that the one you called the Faker?

R: No.

G: Someone called him the--there was one, I think, who was called the Faker.

R: Yes, there was, yes. Then we had two others who wanted to give the impression they were flaky, you know. One of them wanted to give the impression he couldn't use his arms. He did this the whole time. Another one denied himself almost everything that would sustain life. He even threw food away. He was down to just skin and bones, even threw some of his clothes away in the winter. But of those three, two of them started improving after we got a message to them saying torture was ended, and they started eating after a direct order. [But] they moved them and we never heard from them again. They said they died. They had let themselves go down the road too far to come back, and sometimes that's not too difficult. Twice I experimented with acting insane, thinking that maybe they'd put me with somebody. They would have just taken me out of the camp and put me somewhere alone and I'd have died. I found it too easy to go into my act, too hard to come out of it. I would act like I was playing with a dog, and all kinds of crazy things. I did it for several hours one day, and I did it almost a full day one other time. It was so scary, I gave that up.

The Vietnamese seemed to figure that a person that had a mental problem had a communicable disease. They would isolate you, the opposite of the needed treatment.

G: Perhaps not worth their attention or time any longer.

R: I don't know what it was. They either didn't understand or didn't think they were worthy of their time. I don't know.

G: What is your opinion on a subject which is still controversial, and that is the conjecture that all of the live prisoners were not repatriated?

R: Well, I have always believed that all of the prisoners held in North Vietnam were repatriated. They were very desirous of establishing diplomatic relations with the United States. They also were very desirous of getting some what they called reconstruction money from the U.S., about two and a half billion dollars. I believed that it would have been counterproductive to have retained any POWs. I'm sure that they were aware that if any additional live prisoners were discovered in North Vietnam they wouldn't have gotten any reconstruction money because the American people would have been really angry.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

Postcript

In the past year, during which time I have worked with DIA and others, I have become convinced, as has H. Ross Perot, that American POWs are being held in Laos and Vietnam against their will.

Robinson Risner
December 1986

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Robinson Risner
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