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INTERVIEW I

DATE: March 12, 1984

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN E. STAVAST

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 2

G: [Can we] begin with your assignment to duty in Southeast Asia? When did this take place?

S: Well, I was very delighted to go to Southeast Asia. I felt we were fighting a good war, and I went over there in May of 1967.

G: You went in May of 1967.

S: Went in May of 1967.

G: Then there's a glitch in the *Daily Texan* article, which has you being shot down sometime other than what it could have been. I think they said that you were in captivity starting sometime in 1966, which is clearly impossible.

S: No, that's not correct.

G: Okay, so you went in May of 1967. What was the nature of your assignment?

S: I had been in tactical reconnaissance for a long time, and I was going over to be a tactical reconnaissance pilot in an RF-4C.

G: I see, an RF-4. Is this the same airplane they fly at Bergstrom?

S: That's right, same one. I first flew the airplane in 1962, can you believe that?

G: The same airplane?

S: An F-4. No, not the same, but an F-4 I first flew in 1962.

G: Well, except for some modifications, it's the same airplane.

S: It's been around a long time.

G: Yes, it has. What sorts of--now, you were flying reconnaissance missions. So is it correct to say that you did not have to bother with restrictions of the sort that were placed on the pilots carrying ordnance and delivering--

S: That would be kinda safe to say. As an example, they were restricted to stay away from the Chinese border, and we were not. As a matter of fact, some of our missions went right alongside the border. There were absolutely no restrictions on us except the restrictions of our mission, and what we could do and what we thought we could get away with, as far as the capabilities of the aircraft and weapons system.

G: Would it be correct to say that one of the restrictions was that you were not supposed to violate Chinese airspace, or--

S: We were not supposed to violate Chinese airspace, but we did not have to stay away from the borders, because a lot of the tactical implications were right next to the Chinese border. Most of the trains they would make up during the day, because they knew they were safe, and then they'd run them down into Vietnam during the night. Of course, they had marshalling yards up there. We would like to go in there and take pictures of them.

As an example, one night--my backseater and I flew thirty-three missions at night, which I considered to be safer, except for very few missions, a lot safer than the daytime missions, because they couldn't see you, and we did not have to use afterburner; we did not have to go supersonic. In the daytime, we always were supersonic and using our burners

and using up fuel like crazy, and a lot of times picking up a tanker on the way out so we'd have enough fuel to get back to get back to home base. But at night, you always could see them when they were shooting at you. Daytime too, usually, except for the heavy artillery, the heavy antiaircraft stuff like 85-millimeter, stuff like that. You didn't see that till it blew up, and it made a little black cloud. But at nighttime, most of the stuff I saw them shooting at us with was behind us, in the rear-view mirrors.

G: So they weren't leading you.

S: No, they didn't know where we were. And you know--

G: Weren't these radar-directed guns?

S: They had radar-directed guns, but when you're going six hundred and fifty knots, or six hundred and seventy knots, and you're at two hundred to five hundred feet, you take a radar thing by surprise, very much so. We also had anti-electronic pods onboard the airplanes, which were quite--they were quite effective. What that did was disrupt the antiaircraft pattern of where you could be. In other words, it showed them a great large envelope where you might be, but it didn't pinpoint you like you would be pinpointed had you flown through without the pods.

G: An interesting question that's occurred to me about electronic warfare. Were there any restrictions placed on what you could use against the North Vietnamese defenses? I'm thinking in terms of how much do we give away to the Russians, who are obviously monitoring this?

S: Obviously, we gave some things away. However, our electronic stuff was such that we knew what the Russians' frequencies were and how many they had, and these pods had the capability of transmitting on about twelve different frequencies at one time and causing this

envelope. They were more effective when you had two airplanes, but they were still effective when you just were one airplane, especially at low altitude, because--we'd come in, say, to Thud Ridge. You know where Thud Ridge is?

G: Yes.

S: Okay. We'd come into Thud Ridge. Then at Thud Ridge, we'd be at about three thousand feet, and then we'd paint Thud Ridge beautifully on the radar, you know, on the navigation radar. Then, once we'd go past Thud Ridge, we'd drop down towards Thai Nguyen, and then get right on the deck, and go around. If Hanoi was part of the target, we'd go around the turn and come down the north railroad towards Viet Tri and then pick up Hanoi as a bonus target in our infrared or in the side-looking radar. Okay.

G: Okay.

S: Then when we come in from the northeast railroad, which was down over Thiep, and the most dangerous run I've ever made in my life, either in the daytime or at nighttime; they had all their guns at Thiep, or Viet Tri. This one night as an example, we came up the Chinese border, right along the border, bouncing, terrain-following, over the thing--it's a lot of fun--and this particular night it was bright enough I could see the ground going by. We started--Jerry, my backseater, Jerry [Gerald] Venanzi, he's now a lieutenant colonel in the air force--

G: Can you spell that last name?

S: V-E-N-A-N-Z-I. A super troop. He was a second lieutenant at the time. He said, "It's time to break left." I said, "Well, I don't see that mountain ridge that we're supposed to pop down over." He says, "Well, the radar shows it." Sure as the dickens, it was on the radar, but I couldn't see it. Being an old head like I was, I would just about as soon rely on my eyes as I

would on a radar. However, he was right, and I decided to go ahead and drop down in the valley, and as soon as we dropped down, they started firing all the way down that valley. This was down the northeast railroad--oh boy, what an interesting night that was. They were firing sympathetically. You know, one gun [would] start firing, and then the rest of them would start firing, and all the way down the valley, clear in front of us. It was the only time I saw anything in front of me at night, and I mean (laughter) I saw a bundle.

G: Well, the night would just magnify the effect of the tracers.

S: Oh, yes, it really does, because those things are like white-hot golf balls, the twenty-three millimeter, especially. But the sky was just full of that junk, and I couldn't believe we were getting through there without any of that stuff touching the airplane. They were firing into their own positions, you know? From the right side of the valley to the left side of the valley, they were both firing at an unknown target. They didn't know where we were; they were just firing. That's the way they did a lot of their things, and they were firing into their own positions. You could see the things arching, and just must have been dropping right into the other guns. I was totally amazed, and we got some pictures of that on the infrared. That night particularly we saw eighty, I think it was eighty-two trains made up on their way out of China into South [North] Vietnam. That was about a fifty-five-mile run, which we accomplished in about five minutes, because we were going pretty good.

G: At six hundred knots, more or less?

S: Six hundred knots; about six-forty, actually. When we got to Kiep, it was just--I had my backseater always fly with the hood up, because I wanted him looking at the jazz--you know, to keep us on track, instead of worrying about the damn antiaircraft (laughter). We got home, and I was debriefing with the intelligence officer of the squadron and telling him

what a real hairy mess that had been, the only time I had really been scared, and Jerry couldn't believe it. He said, "I don't know if I want to go fly with you again or not."

(Laughter)

G: He hadn't known how bad it had been.

S: He didn't know how bad it was.

G: You say your backseater was a second lieutenant. What was your rank at the time?

S: I was a major.

G: I see. Now, it was mentioned in the article in the *Texan* that you had worked on plans to bomb Hanoi. Is that an accurate statement?

S: No, I didn't say that. I said I was aware of the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] plan in 1964, and I became aware of it because I was a student at the Air Command [and] Staff College. They briefed these plans and explained to us how they wanted to use those plans to stop the war.

G: Now, is this--

S: That's what a military man is for, to stop wars, not to promulgate them or keep them going.

G: Is this the plan that is sometimes referred to as the ninety-four-target plan?

S: That might be it, but I'm not really sure on that. This plan included almost all the waterways, canals, and dikes of North Vietnam, and the railroad bridges and the highway bridges.

G: So it was essentially targeted on the communications system.

S: Exactly, and their ability to irrigate their rice fields, because all that water comes out of either the Black River or out of the Red River, and had those things been destroyed, and kept out of commission, Vietnam would have been brought to their knees very very rapidly. Of course, had their communications lines been disrupted and kept closed, they

would have no longer been able to process the war, because they were getting all of their armaments, either via the boats in Haiphong harbor--and Haiphong harbor happened to be another one of those things. Mining Haiphong harbor was not a new plan; it had been there since day one, whenever they started actual activities against North Vietnam.

G: Right. Was there debate over the efficacy of bombing the dikes? Was there debate among the pilots, or other planners, insofar as you knew, about whether it could be done, how well it could be done, and so on?

S: It could have been done. It could have been done.

G: Okay. Well, let's go back to you--

S: And it would have been a lot safer than trying to go after those dumb airfields, you know, where they had their heaviest antiaircraft guns. Going after POL [?] is one thing, but if you stop the POL from getting in the country, you don't have to go after their POL dumps, do you? That was part of the plan, to shut down Haiphong, and shut down the rail lines. I don't know why Secretary [Robert] McNamara didn't want to do it that way, and he talked the people into doing it another way.

G: Did you ever talk to anybody outside the air force who was involved in analyzing the same subject, like in the CIA, for example, or do you have a--

S: (Laughter) Not in CIA, but in DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency], I have talked with a couple of people, and--well, let me put it this way. They've contacted me; they contacted all the ex-POWs and all the combat pilots in Vietnam and wanted to have a little interview with them and find out certain of the things. Most of our debriefings after we'd flown a mission went to DIA.

G: Okay. Did you ever get any feedback on your missions? Did they ever tell you whether you'd gotten great stuff or terrible--

S: Oh, yes. I was aware of my first Silver Star before I got shot down for a mission that we'd flown, and that was one of those night missions. As a matter of fact, it was (laughter) the one I just described to you. That one came with a Silver Star and a Distinguished Flying Cross. I don't know how they give you two medals for one mission, but they did (laughter). [Maybe] they gave us the Silver Star for the whole target, and then they gave us the Distinguished Flying Cross for picking up pretty darn good photography of Kiep airfield.

G: I see. Well, that is a kind of unique exploit. (Laughter) How long were you flying then, before you were shot down?

S: The RF-4?

G: Yes.

S: Oh, I was only flying the RF-4 since January of 1967. I went to Mountain Home to go through the RF-4 RTU [Remote Terminal Unit?], but I had been flying the reconnaissance in either the RF-84 or the RF-101 since May of 1956. So I was quite experienced in reconnaissance. Like I said, the 101 and the 84 were purely daytime-type airplanes, and we only flew in the daytime. So picking up a night mission took a little bit of training and a considerable amount of discipline and faith (laughter) that the stuff worked, and it worked beautifully.

G: You had a map-of-the-earth kind of a radar if you needed it?

S: Yes, sir. We had terrain-avoidance radar, terrain-following radar, and ground-map radar for navigation. When we were in real tight spots, you could use the terrain following and navigate by that, too. Actually, it was a lot of fun, in the training part. I never have been

afraid of flying at night like some guys were. You know, an airplane flies just as well at night as it does in the daytime, and it doesn't have to see. You're the guy that's supposed to be able to guide the thing. I really did enjoy the night mission in the airplane, and I was really amazed by the capability of the airplane. It's still--there it is, still going, with about as advanced a tactical reconnaissance capability as there is in the world today.

G: Did you know Jim Cross?

S: General?

G: Now, yes. Brigadier.

S: Retired general?

G: That's right. Commanded Bergstrom for a short time.

S: Yes, I knew him. He just moved to Round Rock, or Georgetown? Just moved up out--

G: He was at Dripping Springs.

S: Dripping Springs, yes.

G: I knew he planned to move, but I didn't know that he had.

S: He's gone from Dripping Springs, yes.

G: He was LBJ's pilot for a long time, and he flew RF-4s. He had to come down and qualify, because he was going to Vietnam and hadn't flown anything but multi-engine for fifteen years or so.

S: You know, it's really strange, but we had retreads from the Air Defense Command that were ex-F-102 pilots, and we had some B-47 pilots go through the training, and you know, those damn B-47 pilots were just as good as the F-102 pilots.

G: Is that right?

S: Oh, they loved the F-4. And they refueled better than anybody else because they had to honky that B-47 up behind a tanker and fight that dude, so they were really good formation pilots and good refueling pilots. I was really impressed with them.

G: I'll tell you some stories about General Cross later that he gave me clearance to tell, but (laughter) what were the circumstances of your capture?

S: Okay, this one, we shouldn't have been flying on this day (laughter). You know, obviously, it was a bad day at Black Rock. But we had completed ninety missions over North Vietnam.

G: Where were you based? Let me ask you that.

S: Udon Thani, right down ten miles from the Laotian border, in Thailand. But we had completed ninety missions in North Vietnam. Sixty of them had been over Hanoi, which was what they called the Barrel [?] missions. Once you get to ninety, they would usually give you the rest of your hundred in pretty easy counter-type missions--in North Vietnam, but easy counters. There were some areas of North Vietnam that weren't as dangerous as Laos or South Vietnam. However, this particular time we were really short on combat crew-qualified aircrews, and so they told me to go, take this presidential-interest mission from--it was a mission from Thai Nguyen, which is where the steel mill was, that was going to be hit at eight-thirty in the morning. In the south, the north railroad was going to be hit at eight forty-five.

G: You called this a presidential-interest mission. What does that mean?

S: It meant that President Johnson assigned it. He wanted to see the results himself. He's the one that assigned the strike on the Thai Nguyen steel mill. That's the way I understand it, now. When the TWX [teletypewriter exchange] comes in and gives you your mission, it

says, "Presidential-interest," it's a JCS Priority One. You know darn well somebody's jumping on their cans if it's got that thing tacked to it. This was a JCS Priority One, "Return at all Means."

Well, in any event, this was a beautiful Sunday day, and I don't like beautiful Sundays to fly over North Vietnam. But it was this beautiful Sunday, and they gave me the wrong call sign, which was a Kingdom call sign. My call signs were all in the Lancer, Spear Two, or whatever, you know. I said, "Don't you guys know what the call signs are?" They said, "Don't bug us about call signs, go. Go fly the damn mission." So I was really upset with it. I told them I wasn't supposed to be flying, and I didn't want to go flying. But this was directed to me from headquarters in Saigon by, a quote, friend of mine.

G: Is he going to remain nameless?

S: Yes, I think so. But he knows--he feels bad about it. He knows damn well I shouldn't have been on the mission, because it was a violation of policy, but they really did not have anybody else to go. I had a brand-new wingman, he'd never been in North Vietnam before. He'd just finished his theater--what we called theater indoctrination, which I'd completed with him, which teaches you how to fly pod formation, two pods in this airplane [and] two pods in this airplane. If you get too close, it's just like one airplane. If you get out like this it's like four pods instead of two pods, and it's really quite effective.

In any event, our target was [to] pick up the steel mill at Thai Nguyen, which was still smoldering and dusty, and the smoke and dust were all down the railroad, too. I don't know how in the world they expected to see anything on the film. All the damn gunners and everybody in the world was madder than the dickens, because they'd just gone through an air raid, and here comes a couple of snotty-nosed RF-4 pilots come busting through their

airspace and giving them a sonic boom, and they were mad. So everything in the damn world was being thrown up at us, because half of them missed it; there wasn't an airplane shot down in the bombing raids. There was a flight of eighteen F-105s went in to hit the steel mill, and a flight of twenty-four F-4s took all the way down the railroad, all the way to Viet Tri. That's what we were supposed to do, go in and give them post-strike photography of the two targets, and then pick up the bridge just north of Hanoi as an ancillary target.

We were on our way into Thai Nguyen, and we'd just picked up speed, and what I mean by that is that we'd just dropped off the tanks and gone supersonic. You punched off all the fuel tanks. Every mission, we punched off all the fuel tanks, which was very expensive. Except at night, we didn't do it at night. We didn't have to. Thai Nguyen has some very dangerous SAM [Surface-to-Air Missile] sites. I had been fired at from Thai Nguyen before, but I never was really that concerned about SAMs, because you always see them coming. You know, you don't even have to be really looking, because they are so bright. They're like a bolt of lightning, continuous, and they're moving so rapidly that you can tell instantly, somehow you can tell instantly where they're headed. They fired three, a salvo of three at us, from the SAM site, and we broke left a little bit and then broke back to the right to watch them go by, and here's this wing man, right in position like this. I said, "Oh, my God," I said, "Get back out in formation!" He's an old ADC [Air Defense Command?] pilot; I'm not going to mention his name, either, but he was really upset, because right as soon as I'm hollering at him, and here he is, he's breaking harder than I am, and here comes three SAMs from five o'clock.

First time I ever saw a SAM fired from behind. They never fired them from behind. When we got debriefed after we got home from jail, it looked as though they were firing

those SAMs with some new type of visual guidance system, picking you up visually, because we flew at about twelve to fourteen thousand feet, relatively easy to see from the ground, very hard to hit with antiaircraft. You go through their envelope, SAM envelope, very rapidly. In less than thirty seconds, you're out of their envelope; you're in it and out in thirty seconds. So they've got to really be on the ball to hit you. When I say thirty seconds, I'm talking about--we were accelerating, and you would accelerate throughout the entire program, which is a safe thing to do, because their radar gives them a fixed speed, never shows you accelerating. The next time the radar hits you, it shows a different speed, but they have to work with that speed, and by the time they're doing anything about it, you've already gained another .15 or .2 Mach on them.

So at Thai Nguyen we were going 1.25 Mach, and accelerating, when this SAM blew up right behind my airplane. It really knocked the airplane, it just--whoo!--and bounced it around. I said, "Oh, my God, we've been hit." Jerry says, "What the hell was that?" He had his hood down, you know. I said, "Don't worry about it. I think we just got hit by a SAM." He said, "Oh, my God, let's get out of here!" I said, "We're going, man." We were 1.4, 1.5, going down the line, and what we'd do was dive down and get out of the turn, and then climb three thousand feet, because then down the railroad we'd have to go straight. We did not have to stay level, but we had to go straight, which is not a very nice thing to do. Nobody goes straight when they're getting shot at. But we were going straight, and we get down there, and I told the wingman to cross under me so we'd make sure we got double coverage of the bridge. He was crossing under me like this when we got down to Viet Tri. By the time we got to Viet Tri, we were going about 1.65 Mach, which was standard, and--damn good airplane, to accelerate like that.

Then, by the time we got to Hanoi, we were doing about 1.65, which is just about as fast as she'd go with those pods on it, and I was pulling back because my wingman had a slower airplane, when all of a sudden, I noticed my hydraulic system, PC-1, dropped instantly to zero. Jerry says, "We got a PC-1 warning light." I says, "I know it." The utility went to zero. We still got PC-2, and that's all, so I started slowing that airplane down. I had just pulled it out of afterburner when it went out of control. PC-2 went, and we were about twenty-five miles southwest of Hanoi, towards Hoa Binh, which is on the bend of the Black River, their first military camp on the Black River. The airplane went out of control. What happens when you lose all hydraulic pressure, the elevator, the slab, goes full nose down, which means the airplane goes full nose up. We were still doing about 1.5 Mach, and that's an awful thing to do to an airplane (laughter). I mean, it really is awful.

G: How many Gs does that pull?

S: Well, it was over nine, because--it was way over nine, as a matter of fact, because before I blacked out--I wasn't unconscious, but I couldn't see because of the Gs, and my G-suit wasn't working properly, or I would have been able to see, but--it happened so suddenly. The airplane went up. Just before I lost--the right wing panel broke up. The folding part of the wing on the F-4, folds up, and that thing broke off, went right over our heads, and that's the last thing I could see. The airplane was tumbling violently, and I was hollering at Jerry. Of course, everything, all the electronics and everything in the airplane had gone dead, the interphone--I was screaming at the top of my voice for Jerry to bail out.

The airplane slows down extremely fast when it presents itself flatways to the air, you know. Finally, I was pulling on the handle, pulling on the handle. Then I heard Jerry go out, and then I went out, got out of the airplane. Just after I got out of the airplane, it blew

up. It just went bonkers. I mean, I've never seen an airplane do that. Then of course, it spun--it was just going violently, just very rapidly, because it missed half its wing, and that makes it like adding a nailer onto the thing. It was really going very violently and crashed into the ground and blew up again. I suspect that one of the fuel tanks, forward fuel tanks, blew up first, or got busted because of the strain on the airplane, and then the fuel ran down into the engine compartments and that blew up first, and then when it hit the ground the other fuel tanks blew up.

But there we were, floating down twenty-five miles southwest of Hanoi, in a very, very hostile environment, and thank God the parachutes worked and everything.

G: Were you hurt getting out?

S: No. I was hurt when I landed, but I wasn't hurt getting out of the airplane.

G: What injury did you have on landing?

S: I landed on my butt (laughter).

G: Compression fracture?

S: I didn't know it at the time, but yes, that's what happened. What happened, as a matter of fact, I landed in between two tall karsts, and my parachute was spilled by a tree. I couldn't avoid it. I was coming down in a grove of trees, and there's no way to avoid the damn things. My parachute got spilled and then blossomed just before I hit the ground, and thank God, I landed in a bamboo area, bamboo shrubs, and that cushioned my fall, but I still hit pretty hard on my bottom side.

My survival kit worked fine, and it was just like advertised and everything was advertised. It wasn't any equipment's fault at all that I got banged up. I was at such a point that I was not aware that I was hurt. I was later on, but I wasn't at the time.

G: Where'd your wingman [backseater] come down?

S: He came down about two miles west of me. The backseater gets out first, and why he was west of me is beyond me. (Laughter) But he was out first, and then I got out. I think probably one of the reasons why he was west of me--I don't know which direction the airplane was actually going when we finally got out of the thing, because like I said, I was pulling on the handle even though I couldn't see where we were going. I wanted to get out of that airplane before it ran into the ground. I would estimate--and the wingman said that he didn't see us get out, but he said the airplane went out of control [when] we were right at twelve thousand feet. It doesn't take very long to cover twelve thousand feet when you're doing 1.5 mach.

G: Right. Was your wingman [backseater] hurt?

S: No. Very strange circumstance, too; they announced that he had been captured that very night. They got him about two o'clock in the afternoon; I heard the gunshots going off, and I said, "Oh, my God, they've killed him." Then I was on a path, a trail, obviously a well-traveled trail along a little stream. Then I heard people coming, so I had to quick gather my wits and get rid of my parachute. All I did was try to pull it out of the tree, which I couldn't do because it was stuck in this bamboo stuff. I could hear these people.

They're the chatteringest people in the world, I'm not kidding you. They just go all the time. They were yappa-yappa-yappa-yappa-yappa. I didn't know whether it was people or monkeys coming up the trail, but (laughter)--and I don't mean that derogatorily, because I couldn't understand the language or what they were doing. It was villagers coming up from the village. They had seen me come down in the parachute. They were going to capture me and collect the reward. But I ran up a hill with my water, and my gun, and my

two radios, one of which was badly smashed; I didn't realize that until I got to the top of the hill. I was hiding in some bushes when these people came up, "GI, GI. You okay, GI?" You know, and they just walked right by me. Right--I mean, no farther from me to that door.

G: About three feet?

S: Yes. I was hiding under these bushes, and they went right by me. I was really upset. Then they disappeared. Then it got really quiet, you know, for a long time. I pulled out my radio, and I was almost afraid to use it, because it was so quiet I was afraid somebody would hear me two miles away. But I couldn't get a thing on the radio, and nobody was calling me on the thing. I found out later that they had decided not to send any rescue mission up that area because they had only just lost a helicopter there a week before, and I met the helicopter crew, part of them, that were in that helicopter that got shot down.

Well, about nine o'clock that night, it was getting dark, and I was just starting to think about--there was a full moon, and I was just starting to think about moving out and heading south, when all of a sudden, a bunch of these small creatures started to move around me. I don't know what they were, little rats, little mice, little--like rabbits and stuff, chipmunks or whatever you want to call them. I said, "What in the hell's going on here?" (Laughter) It was the regular army people coming up looking for me. They were really combing the area, and the next thing I knew, there was an AK-47 pointed right at me and hitting me in the chest. The guy says, "Up Up!" So I put my hands up, and I was captured.

G: And that was the end of that.

S: That was the end of that. They treated me very well. They let me drink--when I ran out of my own water, they gave me water, or lemonade, and let me keep my cigarettes, and let me keep my boots. They wanted me to take my boots off at first, but one of the

clearer-thinking people, knowing that we had about five miles to walk out of there to the nearest road, countermanded that and made them keep my boots on me. They didn't mistreat me at all the whole time. Regular army guys. I suspect that they had seen some combat, so they were quite aware--could appreciate my position.

G: Yes. Well, what was the most difficult phase of your imprisonment to deal with?

S: Well, the first week (laughter) was difficult. There were difficult times, and most of them involved either what we called purges or torture of some sort or another. This first week was extremely difficult, and, of course, included constant torture. For seven days and seven nights, I was tortured in their torture cell, a place they called the Blue Room. Some of their methods were extremely ingenious. The interrogator bragged that they would not leave any scars; however, they did. I have scars on my arms and back [and] buttocks.

G: Who was your interrogator?

S: I don't know what his name was.

G: Didn't have a nickname?

S: I tried to describe him to the rest of the guys in the camp, and some of them remembered seeing a guy like that, but we didn't have a nickname for him. Most of the interrogators that got nicknames were interrogators after you got out of the torture--what we called New Guy Village, and got into the regular prison system, into the regular POW system, like the Rat, and the Rabbit, and those guys, and Fidel. They were not in the torture room area. This guy was a pretty good-sized guy, and he spoke beautiful English. Most of the time he had two big helpers, and these guys were big guys. Sometimes he had three people in there. Their job was to punish you when you failed to answer one of his questions. He never touched me, but he directed everything that happened.

As an example, they'd get mad at you and put you on your knees with your hands over your head, or sometimes your hands would be tied behind you. One of the things--if you didn't answer a question or refused to do something, they'd give you a judo chop to the side of the head, right here--

G: Right in front of the ear.

S: Right in front of the ear; just knock your brains out.

G: What kind of information were they trying to elicit?

S: They wanted me--they didn't want information, especially. What they wanted us to do was confess our sins, our crimes, and to confess being a war criminal. They wanted us to sign a piece of paper that--they had a standard piece of paper that they wanted you to write in your own handwriting, but there it was for you to do, you know. They wanted us to write letters to the GIs down south and tell them that they were fighting an illegal, wrong war. They wanted us to write letters to our senators--not congressmen, senators--back in the United States and tell them that we were victims of *their* war, and I wouldn't do that. Every time they wanted me to do something like that, I'd get so damn mad that I wouldn't do it. Finally--oh, one other thing they did want, they did want me to list the names of the men in the squadron when I was shot down, and I didn't do that. Even had I wanted to, I couldn't do it, because I forgot them all. As soon as they started beating up on me because I wouldn't do it, then I forgot all their names, as a self-protection mechanism, I suppose. A psychiatrist that talked to me at March Field said that it was not an unusual occurrence.

G: So you couldn't have told them if you had wanted to.

S: Couldn't have told them if I wanted. As a matter of fact, I run into people today that were in the squadron when I was shot down; I don't know who the hell they are. I forgot my squadron commander.

G: Yes, that was in the article in the *Texan*.

S: I forgot my squadron commander, and when he saw me, he says, "John, how in the hell are you?" I said, "Who in the hell are you?" (Laughter) Made him madder than the dickens. (Laughter) But he was a good guy. It wasn't that; it was just that--

G: You were tortured for seven days and seven nights, and this--

S: The only way I knew that is because when I got out of torture, when I was carried to a cell, the guard who came to bring me back to health told me. He spoke English. He was just a guard, a very gentle man, older guy. All he was supposed to do, I suppose, was to keep us from getting sick, because we'd not had any food; all we'd had was a glass of water. This is fairly typical of some of the other guys that I've talked to. A glass of water a day. They finally got enough other people shot down that they had to get me out of there and go to work on somebody else.

Just before they released me, I would have--I was just damn near ready to sign one of those damn fool confessions. I mean, I was at the end of my rope. But I never really had to and I'm very, very thankful for that. I'm just a stubborn Dutchman, but boy, pretty soon that stubbornness just starts to disappear. The torture that they can put you through. Let me just give you an example of one of the things that--one of the things that most everybody experienced was what we called the suitcase trick, where they'd take wide nylon straps about an inch and a half thick [wide?], and what they are is parachuting harness straps, and they wrap you up, starting at your ankles, and they come up around your calves, through

your groin and back around, clear around your back, and then around your front, like this, and then around your wrists, like that, and then they can pick you up like you're a suitcase. And you can't breathe, you *cannot breathe*. It's one of the most terrifying things when you--there you are, hanging, and you can't breathe.

The other thing that they did with me is they had these what we called long spikes, and it looks like a giant needle that somebody would sew with, and they'd put leg irons around you, and they're like U-bolts, like this, and they put those on the needle, and then it's got a hole in one end and they put it on a hook and lift you up by your ankles, one side at a time. A lot of people had their ankles broken. Why the heck my ankles didn't break is beyond me, but that's extremely--it's just fantastic pain, drives you crazy.

G: And it's not the sort that calculated to mutilate you, either.

S: No, no, no. If they put bamboo under your fingernails, that'd be a scar for life, stuff like that. They bragged about not--"We won't leave any marks on you. Nobody will ever believe you if you say you were tortured." But they did. They broke this right arm in that suitcase trick. My right ear is--I had a brain concussion, skull fracture, from that—

G: Chopping?

S: Yes, and my right ear is totally deaf because of the inner ear on that thing--not the inner ear, but some bones in there, I don't remember now what they call them, are all fused together. It was really severe. That's the worst time I had in prison.

G: Do you know anybody who did not break if the Vietnamese wanted to break him?

S: Yes. Yes, and they killed him.

G: Who was that?

S: I was afraid you were going to ask me that. He was a young guy; what the heck was his name? Lance Retlow, or something--Lance [identified later as Earl Cobeil]. They killed him.

G: I can look it up in Hubbell's book on the POWs.

S: Lance Something and another kid from Michigan, who--they beat him crazy; they drove him crazy. The last time, they tried electric shock and everything to get him out of it, because they didn't want to kill him, but they did. Because these torturers were ignorant, mean guys, you know. They didn't have any knowledge of how seriously they were damaging somebody. What the heck was that kid's name?

G: You say they tried electric shock. You mean as in a mental institution? I see.

S: This guy was finally, after they stopped beating on him, he was so out of it, he would react to nothing. He was just—they put him standing up out in the sun, and they stood him up in the sun just outside of my room, and Ted and I used to watch him--

G: Ted who?

S: Ted Coffle [Copple?]. We used to look up through the crack and try to get his attention. That's why I'm amazed that I can't think of his name at the moment, because we used to call his name. Jesus.

G: He wasn't the one they called the Faker, was he?

S: No.

G: But he died.

S: Died there in camp. So did Lance, because of mistreatment, because of torture. Ed [Edwin] Atterberry died. Ed Atterberry from Austin, his family is here in Austin. Thaylia doesn't like for me to talk about Ed, because it bothers her so much when she sees or hears

something where he's been mentioned. A theater at the base is named for Ed. He was an old friend of Shirley--my wife's and I. Shirley and I met in France, when we first brought the recce unit over to France back in 1959, and Ed was a friend of ours there, Ed and Thaylia. He'd tried to escape, and they beat him to death for that.

G: How do you know this? Did you--

S: He was beaten to death about thirty-five feet from where I lived, SANITIZATION SANITIZATION SANITIZATION SANITIZATION SANITIZATION SANITIZATION SANITIZATION SANITIZATION SANITIZATION SANITIZATION.

G: Yes. I know about that.

S: That was kind of tough to take, because Ed was a good friend.

G: Were you aware of any relationship between the various phases of the war and the kind of treatment that you got in camp?

S: Yes, yes.

G: Describe that.

S: Okay. Well, first of all, during the--I was shot down in September of 1967. I was received into their camps right in the middle of one of their communications purges, when they were trying to get everybody to confess that they had been communicating with other Americans, which was, of course, strictly against the rules. It was strictly against the rules to speak out loud, to tap on the wall, to communicate in any way, shape, or form. We didn't have any papers; we didn't have any pencils. The toothpaste case made a fairly good pencil, and the toilet paper made a pretty good--which--there is nothing, there is no paper in the United States that is equal to the Vietnamese toilet paper.

G: How would it compare to a corn shuck, would you say?

S: Well, I'd rather have the corn shuck.

(Laughter)

G: Okay.

S: Okay? Because this stuff was really awful. But in any event, when the bombing was going on, we were well aware of that, and then when the bombing was restricted in March, I think it was March or April of 1968.

G: Yes, March 31.

S: The Vietnamese told us that the war was almost over and pretty soon we would go home. So now, since we have treated you with such humane and lenient policy, why don't you do this, and why don't you do that? Of course, nobody fell for that malarkey. We were very disappointed when the bombing stopped. Some people were kind of excited about it because it did indicate maybe there was (inaudible). But I didn't figure that stopping the bombing of North Vietnam was going to stop the war, because the Vietnamese people just aren't that way. As soon as you stop fighting them, then they figure that's a sign of weakness, and that's exactly what they thought. It gave them--the ultimate horror of the whole damn thing was that it allowed them time to build their--they were damn near down to nothing, as far as munitions go.

G: Now, where do you have this from?

S: Because we know. When there's really heavy firing from antiaircraft weapons, artillery and the SAMs, they're pretty well loaded. Okay? When all of a sudden there's an air raid going on overhead and there's hardly any firing, except just a small amount, they're hurting. There was a lot of pulling of WEGs [Wild-Eyed Guesses], just pulling them out of our head, but

when the B-52s bombed up there in 1972, there wasn't any return fire. They were out, they were done, they were finished. That's why the war stopped. We could pretty well tell. Then when they stopped the bombing entirely, our morale really went down because there was no sign of any progress. They'd tell us, you know, that we'd--somebody once in a while would go to an interrogation, and the guy would have to brag that the Americans are thinking of quitting the war, and they're going to be defeated, and so on and so forth.

I got really kicked in the butt one time. I had an interrogation with the camp commander in the Zoo [in the suburbs southwest of Hanoi], and the Rabbit, and this was about 1969, just before Ho Chi Minh died. The camp commander was speaking through an interpreter to me. That son of a gun; he could speak English as well as I could, but he didn't want anybody to know it. He was telling me that, you know, through the interpreter, and the Rabbit was sitting there, shaking his head, "Yes, yes, this is true, this is true. You poor Americans, we feel so sorry for you." He was telling me that their victories were becoming more and more, and the victories of the North Vietnamese were really something.

Well, we had been given an issue of the *Vietnam Courier* about two weeks before. It told of the battle of Tet, and the Tet offensive, and then the big battle at Khe Sanh. I told the camp commander, "It seems to me that your damned victories are getting closer and closer to Hanoi all the time." (Laughter)

Boy, I should have had a clue right then, because the next thing I know I was over in the bad boys' room on bread and water for a couple of weeks, and with a fan belt to the butt, but they only did that for about an hour.

G: Is that where you got the scars?

S: Yes. Fan belts are very tough on backsides.

The other time I got really badly tortured was they accused me of communicating, and although I had been communicating, they never did ever catch me communicating. I was in irons, wrist irons and leg irons, hanging on the wall for about seven days. Some guys were there longer than that, seven days, four days. Some guys were hanging like that longer than that. It's an extremely humiliating thing to happen to you, because there's no way you can do anything; you just hang there. Can't sleep, can't do anything. Can't--well, you've got to go; [when] you've got to defecate, you've got to defecate; and [when] you've got to tinkle, you've got to tinkle. But there's no way you can do that with any respect at all. They know that, and that was--a lot of the things they did were to try to degrade and dehumanize us, I think. (Inaudible)

G: Sounds like they were pretty expert. Were you aware of the antiwar movement in the States?

S: Yes, we were.

G: How were you made aware of it?

S: They would tell us, and one time, Christmas, right after Ho Chi Minh died, one time at Christmastime they brought--oh, I would say twenty-five or so of us into the building we called the Theater, and they showed us a film of the San Francisco peace march. They said it was like that all over the United States, and this was only one example, and that kind of jazz.

G: Did you meet--

S: It was San Francisco.

G: Yes. Did you meet any of the delegations that went to Hanoi?

S: No, I never--I was asked to go meet a Canadian delegation; I told them I wouldn't do it. They wanted me to go, and I said, "Well, you're just going to have to make me go, because I'm not going to go." They dropped me and picked up another guy and tortured him into going. I don't know why they didn't torture me. I guess they figured I just had been in a session a week or so before; it was during one of their purges. He went down to visit this Canadian delegation, and I'm not going to tell you what his name is, but he was a good friend of mine, lived about three doors down. They give you a list of questions that the people are going to ask you, and they give you the answers to those questions, and nobody deviates from them.

I don't know why Jane Fonda thinks that she was so remarkable, because she had the same thing, and the people that met with her had the same thing. She had absolutely no awareness at all of what was going on inside the prison system, and then she comes back home and says that we're all being well treated. My god, well treated! I don't know what she thinks good treatment is, but I would just expect her, before she would say that again, to go through one week of it. When I came out of jail--when I was shot down, I weighed a hundred and ninety-five pounds, and when I came out, I weighed a hundred and five.

G: On return you weighed a hundred and five?

S: A hundred and five pounds. When I turned sideways you couldn't see me. One good thing about being that thin is that you can do a whole lot of sit-ups and push-ups. (Laughter)

G: Not as much weight to haul around. That's a relevant question. I've talked to a couple of POWs now. They all have the same story to tell: the horrible treatment, the tortures, and so on, poor medical care, non-existent medical care--

S: No medical care.

G: Yet they all seem extraordinarily healthy and hearty, and their mental state seems super-normal, if there is such a word. How do you account for this?

S: Well, the only way I can is that some of the food we got was a lot better for us than we thought. Then we had a mental thing that was part of leadership and a responsibility towards our fellow prisoners. We were charged to keep our morale high. It was in our best interests, and the people that didn't and the people that lost out and went on starvation kicks, some of those guys died over there. Because once you start starving your brain, which is the first thing that goes, you get into a dilemma. Your brain starts to thinking that you're more and more of a hero because you're starving yourself to death. And the more you starve yourself, the more your brain keeps the dementia up, and the guy finally starves to death. I can think of a couple of guys that that happened to.

G: You get into a kind of a downward spiral, and you never get out of it.

S: That's right. Just like a flat spin.

G: So it teaches you to think positive, is that what you're saying?

S: That's right. Ed [Edward] Martin, who's now the commander-in-chief of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, was my roommate for damn near three years. He and I--we'd have an occasional argument, but most of the time we wouldn't argue. We'd catch ourselves starting to argue about some petty damn little thing, and we'd stop and say, "Hey, listen, Ed. This is dumb." Or he'd say, "John, what the hell. It's not worth it." We got to the point where if one of us snored, the other one wouldn't say anything about it. No point in it. All it would do was create a friction there that was some way of grinding us down.

So we made up our minds: we were going to exercise every day, and we did. We exercised almost all day long and had our naps, and we worked problems. And we had

some pet ants (laughter) and little spiders. You know, those little jumping spiders? Those little guys are really terrific. We'd watch the geckos trying to catch those little jumping spiders, and believe you me, those spiders are a lot smarter than the gecko. (Laughter)

Geckos would jump after a spider and go clear off the ceiling and splat on the floor, because he didn't have any way of going back, you know, but the spider could jump down there and then go back and laugh like crazy. Of course, that was all in our imagination that he was laughing. (Laughter)

G: You were reading something into that.

S: Yes.

G: You mentioned Fidel.

S: Fidel, yes.

G: Did you meet Fidel?

S: Yes, I have met Fidel. He was a real live honest-to-gosh--and there were two of them there, you know, not just him. They were really treated with some sort of VIP status in there. He never had anything to do directly with me, except one time they had--for some reason they were cleaning up the camp. We liked to go out and work, because we could broom talk and also see things. It's amazing what you can see when you're outside of your five-by-eight room. So this one time, Ed Martin and I were out sweeping up the walk in front of the Theater. The Theater was the torture room for the Zoo. I lived in the Pool Hall, in room--one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight--eight--nine, I lived in room nine; there were ten rooms in the place. The Theater was only thirty feet away from where my room was. So we were cleaning all around the Theater, and Fidel was supposedly in charge of the camp cleanup that day, and we saw him drive into camp. He had a car.

G: Which was a remarkable thing?

S: You better believe it is. Only the first time I had ever seen an automobile in that camp. He drove into camp in this car. It was a four-door sedan of some sort. I don't know what kind of car it was, obviously a Russian thing, or maybe Chinese, I don't know. Then he came over, and said to us, "How are you doing at the cleanup? How long you gonna be before you get this place cleaned up? You gotta be quick; you gotta be quick! You damned Americans are so damned lazy you can't do anything quick."

G: What kind of accent did he have?

S: Sounded like an American; obviously [he] had been educated in the United States of America. Didn't sound like any--he didn't have any accent. He sounded like an American. Ed says, "Hey, look at that guy. He hasn't turned a day's work except to beat people's heads in for the last twenty years." He was a real mean sucker. He's the guy that beat this kid, made sure that this kid was beat up to death.

G: Did you ever--

S: Damn, I wish I could think--Earl Cobeil. Earl Cobeil was the kid that he beat to death. Or he caused his death by beating, and he knocked his brains out of his head. His roommates had to feed him, force-feed him. Then the last time we saw him, Ted Conklin [Kopfman?] and I were in the Room One of the Pool Hall, now, with Fred Cherry. Three men in a two-man room, boy, that was fun. We would look through the crack, and they marched Earl Cobeil out to get him some sun. He stood in one place, didn't blink his eyes, for an hour we watched him. I'd watch ten minutes, or what we thought was ten minutes. Ted would watch, Fred would watch, Ted would watch, I would watch. None of us saw him

blink his eyes. He didn't move. He didn't flex his legs. He didn't do anything but stand stock still in the sunlight for one hour.

G: Sounds like a state of catatonia.

S: Completely. Completely gone. He didn't know what was going on. They had to wash him. The Vietnamese washed him. We saw them give him a bath; they'd pull him out. We could just barely see where the area to the--Room One, the Theater was, that had been a torture room. As a matter of fact, it was the room where Ed Atterberry got killed. They were taking pretty good care of this guy, because apparently, they didn't want him to die. This was right after Ho Chi Minh died. You know, that's kind of ironic, because when Ho Chi Minh died, our treatment became quite a bit better. But all the way up to that time, every time we went to an interrogation, the interrogator would tell us that the only reason we were alive was because Ho Chi Minh was our friend, keeping us alive.

G: Uncle Ho.

S: Uncle Ho. Bless his heart.

G: Have you ever had any feedback about Fidel? Do we know who he was, for sure?

S: No, they don't. One of the Senate investigating committees wanted to talk to everyone who had ever seen him or could verify that he did in fact exist. They told me that they were probably going to find him, but you'll never know it, because we're not going to tell you. If he dies, he'll die in such a way that nobody will (laughter)--because he did really hurt a lot of people, him and the Rabbit. They were the two, probably, and the guy that initially interrogated me, those three people were probably the most vicious. The Rabbit was another very, very well-educated man, obviously educated in the United States, knew how we thought, knew what we were thinking of, knew all about the United States.

G: That's very interesting. I wonder--

S: He looked like a rabbit; his ears were really kind of long and stuck out like--that's why he got that name.

G: I had heard of him, but I hadn't heard how he got his nickname.

Some of these things, now, we've already talked about. Did you know about the attempted rescue at Son Tay?

S: Oh, you bet. We didn't know what was going on at the time it was going on, but some of the POWs in the camp with us were Thais and were Vietnamese from the south. About two weeks--let's see, right after Son Tay, the day after this great thing, it sounded like there was a revolution going on. We were kind of hoping, "Boy, I hope these guys are tearing their throats out," you know, "tearing at each other." The bombing went on, the noises, and it was twenty-some miles, twenty-five or twenty-six miles west of Hanoi, but in the still of the night, about two o'clock in the morning, that sound really carries a long way. As an example, when they were bombing Hanoi, we were up on the Chinese border, a hundred and twenty miles away, and we could hear it just like it was right across the street. But in any event, that noise went on and on and on, and we were all awakened, you know, tapping on the wall, "What in the hell is going on? My land, they're really having a battle over there!" It was just going on and on and on. Finally, it quit; everything went quiet. Then we heard sirens, and then it all went quiet, so we went back to sleep.

The next day, six o'clock in the morning, right after the gongs had gone off, the guards were there. "Wrap up! Wrap up!" Which means, wrap all your stuff up, and we didn't have a whole hell of a lot to wrap up. You'd wrap up your blanket and wrap up your rice mat, grab your pot and cup, and get ready to move. That's when they moved us all back

into Hoa Lo [a.k.a., "Hanoi Hilton"], into the central prison, the first time we'd all been in that place all together.

G: Now, where had you been? You were in Dogpatch?

S: I had been--no, no, no, I have been to Dogpatch, but Dogpatch is after this. When Son Tay happened, I was with Ed Martin in the Zoo, okay? Before that, I had been in Little Vegas, which was part of Hoa Lo—didn't know it, because they lead you around blindfolded. You don't know where you are. But I've been in Little Vegas and have been to the Zoo Annex, and then to the Zoo. When Son Tay happened, I had been in the Zoo for about three years.

Then they wrapped us all up and they took us all to Hoa Lo, and, my land, here we are in this great giant room, with twenty-six other people, twenty-seven of us in that room. It was fantastic, you know? Here we'd been, two of us, like this, for almost three years, and all of a sudden, we're in this great big room, and it had beds, like this, but the beds were slanted down on either side.

G: What do you mean, like this?

S: It was just a slab, concrete slab.

G: Okay.

S: The lower part was raised up about two feet off the floor, and the center part was raised up about three feet off the floor, and you were expected to sleep with your head up at this end and your feet down at that end, and everybody together, you know, thirteen guys to the side. Only there was twenty-seven of us, (laughter) and it was kind of tight on one side, I'll tell you.

But we had a wide-open, big window--first time we ever had a window--a wide-open window, of course with bars on it, but it was so high you couldn't see out of it,

even if you--you'd have to get up on the center of the bed to look, and then all you could see was the roofs of the buildings across the square.

Well, we soon found out that there were other--the whole place was a quadrangle of rooms like that. Some rooms had as much room for as many people as maybe fifty people in one room. When we finally got organized, which was about two days later, we found out--we named this squadron over here Zero. That's where Robbie [James Robinson] Risner was, and all the honchos, all the colonels, and so on and so forth. Jack Flynn was over there, too, and all the navy guys. Then my squadron, Squadron One; I was the commander of Squadron One. They called us SCOs.

G: They called you what?

S: Squadron Commander, or SCO. Then Squadron One was here; Squadron Two, Squadron Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, and Eight, and that formed our quadrangle. There was another room off over here that had contact with Zero, but they didn't have a squadron number. I don't know why. My main job then became the camp communicator; my squadron's job became the camp communicators. So we could pass messages, because we were the only room that Zero could get in touch with, to communicate with, and the only way we could communicate with them--we tried tapping through the wall, but the wall was about twenty feet long. There was a connecting wall with a door--archway through it. So we finally started just talking to them. (Laughter) We'd try and clear the area, as best we could, during siesta time, and we'd just talk to them, and they'd talk back to us.

G: They were setting camp policy?

S: Yes, they were setting camp policy and the rules, and they were asking for inputs, too, for that camp policy. It was not completely autocratic, but it was--once they made up their

minds, that was the way it was going to be. They didn't do anything that was outlandish. They did not do one thing that I disagreed with. In other words, everything they did was in complete accord with the way we should act in prison.

That's where I first talked with Robbie Risner. He was getting support for some sort of program that was kind of a voluntary thing, but he wanted to see it go, and some people didn't want it to go. Oh, I know what it was. It was voluntarily stopping writing letters. Those people that could write, were allowed to write letters. They were asked to voluntarily stop for a month.

G: What was the purpose of that?

S: I can't recall the exact purpose, except to put pressure on the Vietnamese, because--by now I'm talking about, in 1972, and so the Vietnamese are probably beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel, as far as the war being finished with, and they weren't treating us the way that we thought we should be treated. They never did allow us to have a religious service up until this time. Shortly afterwards, they did, and we blew it. (Laughter)

G: How was that?

S: Oh, you won't believe it. I had this guy that wanted to be the preacher, and he was pretty good. He was a very--quite a religious man, and he remembered a lot of things about his religious upbringing. For example, he knew all the beatitudes, and he knew pretty well how to give a communion service. Well, the first time they allowed us to have a prayer service--they allowed us to have prayers. I had gone over and argued with the interrogator, my camp guard, they called him, about letting us have a church service. He said, "Okay, but you cannot sing loud, and you cannot do this, because I do not want the rest of the camp to join you in singing." So I said, "Okay." So what's the first song we sing at this

church service? "Onward, Christian Soldiers." That hit the Vietnamese like a ton of lead; they didn't like that at all. So that was our last church service in that camp.

(Laughter)

G: That was a little too militant for them?

S: That was too militant for them, yes. They didn't understand. "'Onward, Christian Soldiers'--I thought you guys said you were going to be singing religious songs!" They had some background in religion, the Vietnamese did. You know, right across the street from Hoa Lo was a church, a Catholic Church. They had Catholic churches and Lutheran churches in Vietnam.

G: Lutheran?

S: Yes, sir.

G: I didn't know that.

S: Oh, yes, sir.

G: I wasn't aware of that. Everybody knew about the Catholics.

S: We knew what time of day it was because the church clock would bong. If it was one o'clock in the morning, it would go bong! The only time it bonged was on the hour. It wasn't one of those half-hour jobs. It was a cruddy bong, but it was a bong. You could tell it was a clock, coming from a clock somewhere.

When we were down to the Zoo, we could tell what time it was only by the radio programs. We finally got to memorize the radio programs. The radio programs--nobody in Vietnam owns a radio. Maybe they do now, but in those days, probably everybody would rely only on the state radio, and the state radios were posted on posts, in the streets, on the corners. There was one aimed right at our camp when we were in the Zoo, and that thing

had to--you know, at five o'clock in the morning, our gongs would go off, and then this radio would come on, and it would go, "Bongggg, bongggg, bongggg," five times, and we knew it was five o'clock in the morning. Now would come the propaganda, and yippity-yappity blub blub blub, you know, all the news and jazz like that. There was news for hour after hour after hour. The first time they had any music on the program--the radio would shut down at noon, and then everybody would have a siesta until two o'clock. Then at two o'clock the radio would be on, and it would go "Bongggg, bongggg," and then they'd play about half an hour with music.

G: Was this in English directed at you?

S: No, no, no, no, it was all Vietnamese. It wasn't really directed at us. It was just aimed at our--somehow it was aimed at the camp, so we got the full blast of it. How those people live with that crap is beyond my comprehension. You got the radio whether you wanted it or not.

G: Kind of numbing after a while, wouldn't it be?

S: We all had speakers in our rooms that sometimes worked and sometimes didn't, and once a day, they would come on with, "Here are de news. This is your camp commander. Sit on the edge of your bed. Here are de news." Then they would give us their propagandized idea of what the news was supposed to be. Sometimes we'd get it; sometimes we wouldn't. Sometimes during Tet the guy'd get drunk, and he'd turn the dang--and he'd play music on it, and he'd play it at absolute full volume, just enough to drive you out of your skull. Then they tried to get Americans to do the news reading. Some of the newer shootdowns did do that, after about 1972, 1973, but we never recognized who they were, or what camp they

were from, because we didn't know who they were. They didn't ask any of the old heads to do that, but you could tell they were Americans, guys that had just been captured.

In 1972, they started shooting--when they started the bombing over again, which raised our morale fantastically, that was kind of a disturbing thing that people were doing that, but there was no way we could get to them. We found out later when we got home that all they guys that had just been shot down, other than Swordfinger--Swordfinger was in the Zoo just before we went back to Hoa Lo. We had been in Hoa Lo, and then they moved me and my gang, the entire squadron, minus about three guys, out of Hoa Lo, to the Zoo again, where they had refurbished the place. Maybe it had been bombed or something.

G: Who was Swordfinger?

S: He was Bob Shortfinger [William Schwertfeger?].

G: Shortfinger, okay.

S: Yes. He was shot down when we were at the Zoo, after the bombing had started again. We knew somebody, one of the guys in Room One--I wasn't in Room One, but one of the guys in Room One--still the same old loose door there had been a year or two before when I was in that room--was looking through the crack and saw a guy carrying his bucket over to the swimming pool and dumping it in the swimming pool, which was a good place to dump it. (Laugher) That's what the Vietnamese used the swimming pool for, was garbage and trash, and it didn't smell very nice.

In any event, we saw somebody nobody had recognized, and obviously a recent shootdown. So one day we were out sweeping, and one of the guys just sweeps up to the door of the Theater. This guy's being kept in Room Two of the Theater--no, Room Three, way back in the back of the thing. They had four rooms in the Theater, around, kind of like

dressing rooms would be. Two of them in the back, one of them had been a latrine and was no longer in use. Then the two up front by the stage were kind of like for dressing rooms, or had been. This place had been an old film colony, down on the south side of Hanoi.

So this guy takes his broom and sweeps up to the door, and he walks in the Theater, and there are Vietnamese in this Theater. They look around to see what this guy is doing, and he just keeps sweeping, you know. He's sweeping, cleaning this up. They didn't pay any attention to him because they thought that maybe he was supposed to be doing that. He walks back to this room and drops a note in the door to the guy, tells him who we are, that we're there, you know. Hey, here's the communications code, here's how to do this, here's how to do that. The whole thing in a big note. He sweeps by, the Vietnamese look around at him--they were playing ping pong, is what they were doing--look around at him, and he just walks back right on out of the place, sweeps his way back to where we were (laughter).

G: That's pretty bold.

S: Pretty bold, yes.

G: Well, sometimes that's how you get away with things.

S: He was pretty smart.

G: You've mentioned the Christmas bombing and the fact that it raised your morale. From what vantage point did you observe the resumption of the bombing?

S: Well, the first time, we were in Hoa Lo, in what we called Camp America. I was in Squadron One. We couldn't see an awful lot of things going on, but we could see and hear the antiaircraft. We'd all have to get down, lay on our beds, and there'd be a guard up in the window with his AK-47 in case we wanted to have a riot during an air raid, which was kind of dumb, I thought. Who in the hell wants to riot during an air raid?

Anyhow, they would be bombing fairly close, and they were having dogfights, and we saw a MIG get shot down right out through that window, you know. We were just yelling, "Yay!" Two F-4s got the guy, shot him down. It was a lot of fun. Lot of times like that. Then when we went back to the Zoo, the bombing continued, the raids continued up there, with fighters. We went back to Hoa Lo for a very brief period of time, and they started bombing.

One night we heard a fantastic amount of bombing going on. It was obviously a B-52 raid going on, and they moved us out of that camp up to the mountains. It was right across from the Chinese border. As a matter of fact, we were right on the other side of the border from an artillery impact area. It was a camp built for Americans, because all the buildings were facing at different angles, and you couldn't look out of one vent and see into another vent. But their carpenters had not gained any proficiency, because the doors still had these great wide cracks, and we would communicate between the doors. In 1972, I was the SRO up there. I had been SRO in five different camps; this was my fourth camp, because I was SRO at the Plantation, too.

G: That stands for Senior Ranking Officer.

S: Senior Ranking Officer in the camp. I had my communications guys go to it and try to establish contact with everybody, and within seventy-two hours, we had established contact with every other building in that camp. Just with finger flashing.

G: Was Johnny [John Charles] Blevins one of your communicators up there?

S: Johnny Blevins was a communicator. I've forgotten to bring his address.

G: I'll get it from you. When did you realize that you were about to be repatriated? Or were there some false starts? Did you think at various times it was going to happen?

S: Well, like I said before, the Vietnamese had told us quite a few times that the war was going to be over soon, and we'd be going home. So why don't you do this, and why don't you stop acting like that? When the time came for us to be aware of what was going on, we were aware that the bombing had stopped down in Hanoi. Like I said, we were a hundred and some miles north of it, but boy, when a B-52 drops a load of five hundred pounders, or thousand pounders, you can hear it for a thousand miles.

The treatment up there got better and better, and they let us outside to mingle, all the buildings. We did not have to have a communications team again, because they would let all the buildings out. This was just before--this was in January of 1973. Then we were getting better food; we were getting tinned fish, you know, canned fish from Russia, Russian mackerel. Oh, was that good! We knew the war was over. Once in a while, we'd have a nice fresh loaf of bread to eat with that fish, and then when they ran out of fish, they started giving us buffalo meat, water buffalo meat. It's extremely greasy, and you had to eat it while it was hot, or it would just turn into a candle. (Laughter)

We were getting the idea that things were getting better, and they were trying to put some [weight on us?]. When we went back down to Hanoi, things were worse down there because the food shortages in Hanoi were pretty fantastic. We went back to rice and green weeds a lot of times, and pumpkin. I think pumpkin is what saved our lives. There was a lot more nutrition in pumpkin than I had ever known about.

G: Vitamins.

S: Vitamins. Well, pumpkin is--I've got a couple of anecdotes about pumpkin, but I really liked it. It was a lot better than green weeds. Green weeds--I mean, when I say green weeds, I mean *green weeds*. There was no recognizable vegetable in there, like spinach or

something like that. It was just green weeds. Grass, dandelions, crap like that. They give you a bowl of that, and they give you a bowl of rice, and that was it. Twice a day. That's why all of us were so darn skinny when we got out of there. Some guys weren't that skinny. Ted Kopfman, I think he could drink water all day long and still weigh a hundred and ninety-five pounds. (Laughter)

G: I sympathize with him.

S: But in any event, when we got back down to the Plantation, they kept us all locked up again. Then the camp commander wanted to talk to me. They always knew who the SRO was. I don't know how they did that, but they did. They always knew. This was the same camp commander that had had me spanked with a fan belt some three or four years previous, because--

G: The one who didn't have a nickname.

S: Yes. Because I'd said their victories were getting closer and closer to Hanoi. Okay, well, he told me in perfect English this time, he says, "Tomorrow I want you to invite--" not perfect English, but pretty darn good--"I want you to invite all of your people to come outside at ten o'clock." I said, "Well, do you mean to tell me that it's now legal for me to communicate with them?" He says, "Yes. Now you can communicate. Now you must tell them. Tomorrow morning you come out in the courtyard by the volleyball court, and you will stand in ranks, and you will be very, very quiet, and you will not speak, and you will hear what I have to tell you." I said okay.

So I passed the communications all up and down the rooms of the plant, and the next morning, sure enough, ten o'clock, the guards were there opening the doors. We hadn't had breakfast yet, and usually we had breakfast by ten o'clock. We all go outside and stand.

I told everybody to be quiet, you know, just get over here, form up. [We were] seeing people we hadn't seen, we knew, but we hadn't seen them before, and wondering who the heck they were. Then the camp commander made the announcement that the Paris Accords had been signed and that we would be leaving Vietnam on the fourteenth of March, 1973, in American airplanes. I said, "What kind of crap is that?"

You know, for all the time we had been in there, not a one of us had ever imagined that we would come home in an American airplane. Not one of us. We thought of all sorts of ways that we, if we ever did go home, how we would do that. But none of those ways included coming home in an American military airplane.

G: It never occurred to you that an American airplane would land in Hanoi to pick you up?

S: No, that wasn't the problem. The problem was that I can't imagine the Vietnamese allowing that to happen. They're so proud, you know, losing face like that. Everybody in Hanoi knew what an American airplane looked like. They all studied it. For an American airplane with the USAF on it and a big American star on it, they knew what that was when the C-130, when the guide plane landed. The first time that guide plane came down, we were all out having a bath. We had a nice, big bath area at the Plantation, with all the water we could ever use. At some of the other camps we didn't have that much water. As a matter of fact, up in the mountains they'd have to turn the hose on for us for only half an hour at a time. That was all the water we got for bathing. But here the Plantation had an ample supply of water, and troughs for everybody. The whole damn place could have a bath at once, if they wanted to. So we were standing out in the brick bath area, and I remember thinking we used to get a kick out of--we'd all try and wait to have our baths until the train came across the bridge, passenger train. (Laughter) All these Vietnamese would look down

into our bath area. You can't imagine the looks that would come across their faces. They'd look down and see all these round-eyed, white-bodied people--

(Laughter)

G: Scandalize a few Vietnamese ladies?

S: Oh, gee, it was funny. Because they are very, very bashful and shy, especially about their private parts. Nobody ever came close to messing around with my privates, in torture sessions or anything.

G: They've got a thing--

S: As a matter of fact, when we got some clothes from home, some shorts, we were not allowed to wear them unless we sewed the fly up. They'd pull their pants down to tinkle, like women do. They don't have flies in their clothes.

G: Very puritanical.

S: That's fantastic, when you think about it.

In any event, this one-day we were out having a bath, and the train had just gone by, and we heard an airplane. Somebody says, "That sounds like an American airplane." I said, "Yes, it sure does." And by gosh, it was a C-130. It has a very--its own sound, you know.

G: A C-130.

S: A C-130. It was coming in to land at Hanoi International Airport. He had his landing lights on, his wheels down, his flaps down. A lot of planes flew over the Plantation to land at the airport there, some C-47s and a lot of Russian airplanes and airliners. Never had seen a jet land there, although they had jet fighters on the station itself. This guy flew right over the camp, and he jazzed his engines a little bit to let us know he knew where we were, and it

was the airplane bringing in the Canadian investigation team to investigate our camp conditions and stuff for the International Red Cross. As a matter of fact, some of those guys have just been invited to our next POW reunion, because we were unaware of who, in fact, they were. But now they've made themselves known to us. They could not speak to us. One of the rules was that they could only come and look in a room--we could talk to them, but they couldn't talk to us. So we were telling them what our names were, and "Boy, you Canucks really look good." They were in uniform, you know. Actually, they were investigating for the International Red Cross. They brought with them the first Red Cross packages that any of us had ever had.

Then, about three days later, a C-141 or two came in. You know, that's really a pretty airplane when you haven't seen one for a long time. You know darned well that we'd won the war when that happens; when we're coming home in American military airplanes, the United States won the war. No doubt in my mind. It's really quite a thrill to see that.

Then they went through a great big rigmarole of having us change our clothes, get rid of all our old prison clothes. We were supposed to turn them all back in. The guys, these people are so inept that when we were supposed to be packing our little bags to go home that morning, this guy was supposed to come around and check to see that you had what's on your list of clothes. You know, like you're supposed to have a shirt, a pair of pants, and then two under t-shirts and two pairs of shorts. Some of them were pink and gray, and some of them were all black. I got all mine home. (Laughter)

You know, he inspected them, put them on the edge of my bed, and as soon as he walked around to the next bed, I started putting them in my little blue baggie they gave us. Because I didn't have anything else to put in the dang thing, so I put them in the bag. He

just inspected everybody's clothes. Somebody says, "Why are you taking those home?" "So I can show people what we really lived in, instead of this crap that they've just handed us out." You know, they gave us some relatively decent clothes the morning that we left.

G: So you've still got them?

S: Yes, I still have them. And I have a tube of toothpaste, and my old Vietnamese--a pack of Truong Son cigarettes, and my cup, which is one holy mess. (Laughter)

G: I'm just making a note of that.

What was the repatriation process like? What kind of processing did you go through? Medical checkout and so forth?

S: It was very--well, what do you mean? In Hanoi, or when we got back to Martin, back to the hospital?

G: Let's start--

S: In Hanoi, they came around, and they issued us all these clothes. They had measured us for these new clothes, because they were Western-style clothes: a pair of slacks and a pair of--it looked like GI clothes, you know, kind of a greenish, almost the color of these slacks. Kind of a greenish color; long-sleeve shirt, and a jacket and a long pair of trousers, and black shoes. And socks. We didn't want to wear them, but General [John] Flynn had decided that we were not going to cause any fusses or flaps about it. We were going to get out of there and get--you know, "There isn't anything dishonorable about changing clothes, so don't worry about it, you yahoos." So we changed clothes. Then the buses started arriving. That morning we'd had a very good meal, fried rice with some stuff in it, and coffee.

G: Rare luxury.

S: *Real* coffee. And some grapefruits, Vietnamese grapefruit, which isn't really all that great. But it was a pretty good meal. Then we got on the bus with our things, and everybody was assigned a seat to sit in. They had guards all the way up and down the aisle to keep us from the--and then they had the bye-bye people out in the roads leaving the camp. You know, they had their cheerleaders out there trying to instigate the people into throwing rocks at the busses and making--you could tell they were trying to start trouble. But the people were just smiling, "Bye-bye." They didn't know that camp had had Americans in it that whole time. Somebody must have known, because on the trains, when the trains went by, they could see us in the bath area, and they knew damn well we weren't Russians, living in that junk.

But in any event, we went across the old bridge over to the airport--the airport's on the other side of the river from Hanoi--and drove past some recently demolished railyards. I mean the whole railyard, the whole thing, nothing but twisted rails, bombed-out locomotives, railcars, just one total shambles. And not rusty yet, so it had just happened during the B-52 bombing raids. Then we came onto the airport; we could tell we were on the airport because they had a sign there, and part of the sign was in French, which--the French word for airport is *la place avion*. They had that--I think that's what it means. Anyhow--

G: Sounds good.

S: --they had the C-141s, two of them sitting down at the far side of the field, and we got off--they called our names to get off the bus, the Vietnamese did. Then we went through a very, very brief--each person, individually, went through a very, very brief turnover, change of command kind of a thing, from Vietnamese control. The Vietnamese officer in

charge would call your name, and you'd walk up, and you were supposed to salute him, but none of us did. Then he'd say, "You now released to American control." Then we went over and saluted the colonel who was waiting there to greet us and shook his hand, and boy, that was a happy, happy, damned experience. They had two people on each airplane to escort us. They walked out--were all standing there. When they'd call our name, and we were each released, then they'd come and take your bag and lead you to the airplane, you know. Boy, the airplanes were ready to go; they didn't mess with any pre-takeoff checks. When they started up those engines, that guy taxied out and whoof! Off we went. It was absolutely fantastic, absolutely.

They had milkshakes on board that thing, and you know, anything we wanted, almost, except they didn't have hot hamburgers or hot dogs. But they were kind of afraid to let us have anything to eat, because everybody'd been told, you know, that we shouldn't eat right away, that we ought to be given a bland diet. That crap! That was the biggest mistake anybody'd ever made. They'd darn near had a revolution on their hands in that hospital when we got to Clark Field.

G: You had a stopover in Clark?

S: We stopped at Clark for--I was there three days and nights. There they had introduced us to American food, and a little bit of wine, a shopping trip to the PX. They were very leery of us getting loose, because everybody knew we were coming back through there, and there was obviously some communist agitators outside the gate, probably trying to start trouble. But we had a PX shopping spree. I ate and ate and ate and ate and ate. (Laughter) My first meal consisted of about five eggs over easy, and two steaks, and a big bowl of ice cream,

and a couple of glasses of milk. And no, it did not make me sick, not a bit. (Laughter) Never did get sick from eating.

But there we went through the examinations, and that's where I found out that I had a broken back and had broken my arm. I knew my arm had been really badly hurt, because I couldn't use it for a long time--and a skull fracture, and most likely a brain concussion, and a very bad what they call brain scan [?], because of the brain concussion, which is what grounded me, although I went through flying refresher training down at Randolph, just as though I weren't grounded.

But it was really a wonderful thing. Then the biggest, probably the most exciting, thing that happened was there was a lot of mail waiting for us there at Clark, from everybody in the world, and our families. Then they had arranged for phone calls, and I got to talk to my wife Shirley about three times. (Laughter) Shirley kept asking me what I'd been eating. I told her what I'd been eating, and she said, "You shouldn't eat all that junk! You'll just make yourself sick." Her sister, Marilyn, was with her, and she says, "Shirley, stop telling him not to eat! The poor guy's been starving to death, for criminey's sakes, for five and a half years!" It was really cute, and I could hear that exchange going on over the phone.

Then I talked to my folks, my parents, in Colorado, and got some more final--a couple of things done on my tooth; one of my teeth was broken, and they put that temporarily together. Then the flight from there to March Field in California wasn't that boring, because we had all the magazines we wanted, you know. I got to see my first copy of *U.S. News and World Report*, which is my favorite periodical. Also, my escort officer--every one of us had an escort officer coming out of there, and this guy, Jim

Steinbrenner, was really a super guy. He had found out from somebody that I was a geography nut, and that I really did like the Rand-McNally road maps, and he'd bought me one. He bought me this watch, by the way.

G: What kind of a watch is it?

S: It's a Seiko. I had one just like this, and it was supposed to be bailout-proof, but the one I was flying with when I was shot down came off my wrist in the ejection, and Seiko gave me the money for it. They did. (Laughter)

G: Good company.

S: Yes, they are. In any event, Jim gave me a Rand-McNally road atlas of the United States, you know, America, of all the different states and the highway systems, and I was particularly interested in finding out how the interstate highway system had developed, and I was amazed at how much of it had been completed in the time I was shot down.

When we got to March Field, of course, my family, Shirley was there, and all the friends, and there was thousands and thousands of people from my home town, Claremont. It's right outside of Riverside, and that's where my hometown was at the time. Most of them were there to see me. They had signs: "Welcome home, John!" The mayor was there, and the whole dang kit and caboodle. Of course, Shirley was there, and they kept everybody back until Shirley and I got to go up and hug each other, crying so damn hard we couldn't see straight. My dad and mom came up, and my brother and sisters, and aunts and uncles from all the parts of the country had come out there. The Air Force flew my folks from Colorado out there, but the rest of them traveled out of their own--at their own leisure and expense.

Then they had private rooms for us in the hospital, but those rooms were not for us to stay in. They were there for our medical examinations, our psychiatric debriefings, and feeling-out stuff, you know, and primarily for the intelligence debriefings. They were quite comfortable rooms, but they had us all in VIP suites over in--I mean, I've never seen quarters like that on a military base. They were really nice, you know. They had a living room and bedroom, a wet bar fully stocked with booze. I had a martini and got so damn drunk on one martini (laughter) I didn't have any more to drink for about two weeks.

G: Your tolerance was way down.

S: Oh, the tolerance was next to nothing, especially since I was so thin. So every time after that, I thought something strong to drink was a bottle of soda water. (Laughter)

I could darn near get bombed on a bottle of soda water, I was so skinny. It didn't take me long to put on weight. There were so many good things happening. Nancy Reagan came out to have lunch with me. She'd heard some story about me and Ray [Raymond] Merritt, how long it had taken us-- Ray Merritt was from Pomona, okay, and I was from Claremont, and we had never met until we were in jail. The only time we met was knocking through the wall, and we talked through the wall all the time, but I never met Ray until we were back in the United States of America at March Field, never met him. Nancy Reagan had somehow heard that, when Governor Reagan and Nancy were in Sacramento. She came out, and she wanted to have lunch with myself and some of the guys from Los Angeles. There were about five of us that she had lunch with. Not our wives, just us. I thought that was kind of strange. But she is an absolutely delightful person, and she was very intent on finding out how we were being treated, and she wanted to know if we

wanted to come out to the governor's house for dinner and all that kind of stuff. Of course, they invited all the California POWs to the governor's house for dinner.

G: Sure.

S: It was just a super bash, a lot of fun. By the time that happened, I think I was able to just about handle one martini (laughter).

G: I'm going to have to shut us down temporarily here.

S: Okay.

(Interruption)

G: --about the repatriation process, and--what kind of medical--I'm sure you went through some kind of battery of medical tests, and you said some of the results that--

S: Brain scans.

G: You said that your brain scan was not entirely satisfactory. Is there a possible--

S: Very bad, as a matter of fact. I don't know exactly (inaudible); it just showed that I had a possibility of blackouts. That's what they told me.

G: I see.

S: A possibility of blackouts, and memory loss, and I have experienced some of that. It's a good thing they debriefed us right away. But now the last physical I had--they give us a physical every year down at San Antonio, down at Brooke.

G: Brooke Army Medical Center?

S: No, Brooke Air Station.

G: Okay, I know where it is.

S: The Aviation School of Medicine. They were complete physicals, I mean, everything. Whooee! They found out a few very interesting things about us down there. We had all

experienced above-average bone loss, pretty fantastic, as a matter of fact. And we had all developed the ability to night-adapt almost instantly.

G: What does that mean, exactly?

S: Well, military aviators used to have to go through a process of getting night-adapted, getting used to the dark so you could see in the dark, for a couple of hours before you flew at night, especially in combat. It takes about twenty to twenty-five minutes for the average person to night-adapt, to get where he comes out of a lighted room, say, and walks outside at night, and pretty soon he can start seeing objects at night. It takes him twenty, twenty-five minutes in order to do that, the average person. We could do that in about twenty to twenty-five seconds. They would have us in this very bright room, looking in through these glasses. Then they'd shut out all the lights, and we'd be looking at a chamber that was minimally illuminated, and we could in twenty, twenty-five seconds tell them what was in that little chamber.

They had all sorts of things. They had some letters, pieces of paper like this, and they wanted you to read it, little objects, little models of cows and airplanes and cars. "What kind of car is that?" you know. "What do you see?" "Well, I see a little model of a car." "What kind of car is it?" "Gee whiz, it looks like a Cadillac." Or something similar to that, and these people were absolutely flabbergasted by that, because we were the first group of people that they'd ever encountered that with.

G: Did they ascribe that to something in particular in your experience?

S: Because we'd been in the dark so much.

G: I see. Your night vision was that good. I would have thought that on such a poor diet your visual acuity in other respects would have deteriorated.

S: Well, mine did. I wasn't wearing glasses when I was shot down, but boy when I got out, I couldn't see until I put some on. These are trifocals.

G: Yes. You lost across the board?

S: Across the board, yes, from--primarily close-up vision. You know, I know that's my hand there because I just put it there, but I couldn't describe it to you if I had to without these glasses.

G: I see.

S: Then the middle-distance vision. My far vision is still okay; I don't need glasses to drive an automobile, but I do need the glasses to be able to see the speedometer and how much gas is in--the gas tank gets us. I didn't need glasses to fly the airplane. I needed glasses to see the instruments in the airplane, and glasses are a hell of a cumbersome thing for a fighter pilot to wear. They're always slipping down, or if you're perspiring, they're always getting screwed up or something, you know. So it was a real bear.

G: And you're at a point in time, I guess, where contacts are not really practical.

S: Well, not for trifocals. They do have bifocal contacts now. I don't understand how those work. (Laughter) But they say they do.

G: What about the intelligence part of the briefing? What were the intelligence boys interested in?

S: Primarily they wanted us to recall any other names that we'd had, and most of us had memorized the names of--oh, gee, I had about five hundred people listed in my memory bank, names. We'd just go over them like saying the rosary, just go over them time after time after time, so that you finally, it was a part of you, that you knew all those names. By now, of course, I've forgotten a lot of the names, and most of the names were

fictitious in the first place. My name was in the thing about three times. I had my own name down there, and I didn't recognize it, because [they'd] get out in communications; get out improperly. Then when somebody finally found out what my name really was, they wouldn't take the old way out, and they had the new way. There was a Stuyvesant in there. (Laughter)

G: That was you.

S: That was me. John E. Stuyvesant. But in any event, they wanted to know as many of the things then--and then the senate investigating committee guy came and wanted to talk to those of us who had any contact with Fidel.

G: Fidel.

S: Fidel, yes, and his assistant. Of course, I knew all about Fidel and his programs, from some of the people, from communicating with the other guys. Fidel worked with the guys that were back behind us in the Pigsty, a building we called the Pigsty; I don't know why. Never did connect that. But I lived in the Pigsty a couple of times; it was a hell of a lot better than the Poolhall. (Laughter) Bigger rooms.

But in any event, things like that, and they wanted to know what we saw on the railroads, you know, when we were in the Plantation, and we saw tanks going south; railroad freight train after freight train with tanks on them, I mean big tanks, light tanks, and heavy armor. Didn't see much else, though. Everything else was in boxcars or passenger trains.

G: Did you ever see any Russians?

S: I never saw any that I could identify specifically as a Russian. We saw quite a few Western-type people, probably from Poland or some of those places. We'd see them

peeking out through the cracks when they were visiting some of those camps. They would usually be around around Tet, around their Tet time, when they were having a holiday or something like that. Some of them may have been Russians. I know we had Russian food, because some of the people could read and understand the Russian language, and that's how we knew we were eating Russian horse mackerel, or mackerel. Yes, horse mackerel, that's what it is. It was darned good, too.

G: I'm trying to think of what--is horse mackerel a nickname for tuna?

S: No, no. It's a mackerel. It's a bigger species of mackerel than the Eastern Shore mackerel that we know. Boy, was it good, especially after all that time with nothing but rice and weeds, and pumpkin.

The other part of the thing that was such a thrill, there were a lot of freebies. Ford Motor Company gave us an automobile to use for a year free of charge. They paid for everything; I mean they paid for everything. All we had to do was promise to run it in to a shop for service once a month. I would have bought that Ford. That was one of--of course, I was absolutely flabbergasted with it. We had had a 1962 Cadillac that Shirley kept while I was in jail, and by the time I got home, that thing had almost two hundred thousand miles on it. But she wasn't going to sell it until I got home, bless her heart. But I had then promised her that I'd get her a new one, so instead of buying a Ford, I bought her a new Cadillac, a 1974.

The other neat thing was that Sears and Roebuck gave us all free clothes. We'd go in there, and we just tried on clothes, and they'd alter them. We tried on clothes for a whole afternoon, you know? Everything I tried on was free of charge, shoes, boots, leather jackets, you name it. It was fantastic, a lot of fun. Kind of felt a little bad about it, and then

people said, "Don't feel bad about it. They want to do it. They'll feel bad if you don't take them up on it."

G: Well, they were right.

S: So that was a nice thing. And all the parties: the BIVA [?] had big parties for us, the President had a party for us in the White House. We had a party at the governor's house in California. Being able to travel around the United States and seeing how beautiful it was, and wasn't all--you know, the Vietnamese kept telling us that it was one holy mess anymore, that the antiwar riots had torn this place down, the cities were all in shambles, and stuff like that, which of course was--we didn't believe them. But it was nice to come home and reaffirm our belief.

G: Was there any--I hesitate to use this; it's kind of a can't[?] word--culture shock when you came back to the States?

S: A little bit. You mean the long hair, and the--

G: Long hair, short skirts, marijuana, and--

S: Short skirts didn't bother me all that much. (Laughter) The marijuana wasn't as big a news then as it is now. But no, that didn't bother me. I figured--it bothered me a little bit to see guys running around with hair longer than my wife had, you know. "How in the world can anybody let themselves run down like that" is the way I felt. But the miniskirts, they didn't last very long. I don't know why.

G: They were kind of on the downside by that time, I think.

S: Yes, I guess they were.

G: Didn't stay popular too--

S: Some of the guys were met by wives in miniskirts and kids in long hair, and stuff like that, and most of them didn't like it. I remember one guy in particular, his wife showed up in these high leather boots, you know, and very, very short leather skirt, and a leather jacket, with all the bangles and beads on the dang thing. I'll tell you, she looked a holy sight. He was so--he didn't even recognize her when he got off the plane, and I hear that they got divorced about one month later.

G: Is that a common thing? Has there been a lot of marital trouble, would you say?

S: No more so than the national average. There were quite a few guys, and it makes it--it hits home a little harder, because you knew these guys for a long time in jail. When their--you heard all about their wives. We knew all about them. Nothing else to talk about. We knew everything about everybody: where they had gone to school, what airplanes they'd flown, how many times they'd been married, who their wives were, how many kids they had, how old their kids were, you know. You'd just talk with the guys, through the wall, tapping, or through the cup, and they would eventually find out everything about them. We'd meet a lot of the gals, and see the guy for the first time since jail, or see the guy for the first time since whenever, or run up to a guy and say, "Hey! I'm John Stavast." The guy would say, "Oh, yes. Well, I'm Pete Poofnik[?]." And I'd say, "Well, that must be Mary Lou," or something, you know. My gosh, you'd never seen the guys, but we'd talked with each other so many times, like Ray Merrick and his wife, Dottie. Dottie was just flabbergasted when I finally met Ray out at March Field, and then Dottie was sitting right beside him, I said, "You must be Dottie." She said, "How do you know my name?" (Laughter) It was a lot of fun. The kids the same way; we knew the kids' names too, of course.

G: Have there been any recriminations about POWs who perhaps didn't behave as well as they might have in the camps? Has that been much of an issue?

S: Not with all of them, but that has been--as a matter of fact, right now there are thirty-five POWs in California being sued for libel, because they've--and I participated in this, too. As a matter of fact, I just volunteered today to go out and act as a witness. A couple of the guys, a marine lieutenant colonel and a navy commander, were complying with everything the Vietnamese wanted them to do, and they were getting treated pretty well for it, too. As an example, when I was SRO of the Zoo, I should not have been because this marine lieutenant colonel was in the Zoo, but he had been relieved of all command authority because of his activities with the Vietnamese. So I was the SRO. I saw for myself how they lived. Their room was open, when the guard--you know, their room was open all twenty-four hours a day. They could go out, and they played volleyball with the Vietnamese guards and ate guards' food. I know it wasn't the same kind of food that we had, because they lived at the end of this Pigsty. This one time I was in the Stable, and Roger Ingvalson was the SRO of the Pigsty. He could walk down there during an open period of time and see into their room, and they had five pairs of shoes each, blankets, I mean good blankets, not just the crud that we had, and a fish aquarium, fish aquarium in the room, books, all sorts of books. We never had a book in our hands the whole time we were there. You know, it wasn't the Ritz, but it was a whole lot better than the way we were living. Oh, I know what really, the one thing they had that really got a lot of us: they had American soap.

G: American soap?

S: American soap. You know where they got that. They got that from packages that wives and families had sent to the POWs over there, and the Vietnamese had confiscated them.

In any event, we told them to stop--and they were--some of the times, you could tell it was one of those guys reading the news on the radio. They were writing letters, and they were telling us that we were all wrong, and they were right and so on and so forth. Well, this guy Miller, Edison Miller, ran for, was appointed to a board of supervisors in Orange County, California, by Jerry Brown, to fill an office vacancy that a guy had died, you know. One of the county supervisors in Orange County in California had died, and Jerry Brown, then governor, puts this yahoo in there to fill out his term, which was only about going to be about another--

G: Ed Miller was the marine, wasn't he?

S: Yes, Edison Miller. In any event, then the election comes up, and I heard about it, and everybody out there hears about it, and so we all—I wrote a letter to the Orange County, whatever the newspaper is, and one to the *Los Angeles Times*, and they both published my letter. I told them--I said, "Citizens of Orange County, beware. That guy was a bad guy; he incriminated other POWs," and he did. He pointed the finger at Roger Ingvalson and told the Vietnamese during an interrogation--they were interrogating Roger Ingvalson, and Miller was on the same side of the table as the Vietnamese interrogators, telling the Vietnamese that that guy had tried to get him to stop writing letters for the Vietnamese, and do this and do that. Can you imagine that? All Roger's entire building was put on bread and water for a week.

So then a letter came around from a group in California and wanted us all to sign this letter. It stated specifically what [John] Hubbell said in his book [*P.O.W.: A Definitive*

History of the American Prisoner-of-War Experience in Vietnam, 1964-1973]. Have you read that?

G: Yes.

S: Then you've read some of the bad things he said about Miller. I just referred them, I said, "Refer to page four hundred and seventeen of Hubbell's POW book. I don't have to write a letter about it."

So then he brought suit. He named all of us that had signed the letter, but for one reason or another, he didn't follow up on anybody but a very few people outside of the state of California. He took us to court, state court, and one of the California court of appeals turned it down, said that you can't bring suit against somebody out of state. Well, the California Supreme Court just last week said, "Yes, you can. You can bring suit against them if they're from another state." The way I understand the code, however--and I just finished studying some business law--if I'm in Texas and he's in California, he's got to bring suit against me in a federal district court. But anyhow, the case is going to go to court. My part was thrown out because he never did serve me with papers. But the lawyers out there have asked me if I would go out and testify, and I just sent them a letter telling them yes, I would. You pay my freight and I'll come out and testify against that yahoo. (Laughter)

But the nerve of that guy is absolutely fantastic. We knew he had a lot of nerve when he was in jail, but to bring suit against somebody because they're telling the truth is really--I hope he really gets burned on that one. I really do.

G: What is your position on a code of conduct? There's been a lot of soul-searching about that.

S: Yes, I know. But I think the one we have for professional military people is a very good one, I really do. It worked for us. It's kind of hard, sometimes, but when you're professional military, you're not expected to be-- You know, I don't say that that should be universal, for the draftee kid, you know, the young kid that just gets thrown into the army and all of a sudden, he's over there fighting somebody's damn war for them without even knowing what's going on. You cannot inculcate that type of training in a person in that short a period of time. It's something that you have to live with for a long period of time. You have to understand where you are and who you are before that can happen, and a lot of those kids had not had that opportunity. I have no ill feelings towards them whatsoever. Because you know, they were really put in a difficult spot, and ground combat is not fun.

I was in the army in World War II, and as a matter of fact, I was attached to the 117th Infantry Battalion, in France. We marched across northern France, and I'm telling you it's just not fun. When I realize how old I was then, seventeen and eighteen years old, they didn't have any code of conduct then. It was if you were ever captured, you weren't supposed to talk about anything that you knew of, but that's all there was. You just weren't supposed to do it. There wasn't any direct seven-point code of conduct like there is now. It, of course, was derived after our experiences in Korea, because people thought that perhaps some of the guys that had been captured in Korea opened their traps a little too much.

But dammit, once you're captured--I have mixed feelings on it. Once you're captured, unless they have some really fantastic idea that you know something that is really gravely serious, what's it going to hurt? They probably already know anyhow, like the Vietnamese. You know, I didn't tell them the guys in my squadron. Because I forgot. Before I left that camp, the interrogator came to me, and he said, "I want you to know that

somebody told us who was in your squadron." And there was a list of the squadron. Some of the guys, I recognized the names. But it wasn't the list, it wasn't a list of the guys in the squadron. Those guys, all the guys in that squadron had already gone home, finished their missions and gone home. So they tortured somebody to get that, and he gave them that information, but it wasn't current.

So I knew some of the guys, but they'd already gone home by the time I was shot down. And then what the hell were they going to do with it? They could get it by the janitors in Udorn. The janitors, they had Thai, or who knows what kind of janitors, going around cleaning up those buildings. They didn't have GIs cleaning the buildings up. The GIs were all working too damn hard to worry about cleaning up a building, so they had janitors there. A janitor sees a flight schedule, what the hell? He sees the flight arrangement. All he's got to do is sit there and know a modicum of English and the alphabet to sit down and copy down the names, and--

G: Were you afraid that they were going to try to get sensitive information out of you? I mean, really sensitive?

S: Yes, I was. But I didn't know that much about it. You know, I wasn't that--the only thing I knew about was tactical reconnaissance; what the hell is sensitive about that? Got some damn cameras in the airplane. The infrared system, now that was a little bit sensitive, but the only thing I knew about the infrared system was that the liquid nitrogen cooled that thing down to seven hundred degrees below zero, you know (laughter), and the damn thing worked. You turned on this switch, and you let her cool down for five minutes, and you can expect it to run, and it'll run forever, you know. We'd take off with it on and fly the whole mission with it on and land with it on. You never run out of film. Well, I shouldn't say

never, because some of the guys did, occasionally, without properly checking it, but I didn't.

I think that some of the people that are missing are missing because they strictly adhered to the code of conduct and were killed because of it.

G: Do you have any feeling for--

S: Like some of the ex-SAC [Strategic Air Command] guys.

G: Yes. Do you have any feeling for this MIA situation; do you suspect that there are guys who are still alive?

S: As inept as those people are, it's very possible.

G: You mean--

S: But I don't think there's anybody over there that the Vietnamese have intentionally. There might be people in Laos, because even the Vietnamese cannot control the Laotians, all of them. That's a very sticky wicket for the Vietnamese. They don't mess around much in Laos, because those people, a lot of the Laotians, are very, very tough. If there are any Americans over there, they're probably under the control of the Laotians.

There might be some American work teams doing one particular thing or another for the Vietnamese; who knows? The Vietnamese were very scrupulous about not letting us work. The only thing they'd ever let us do was janitor work, sweep up, carry bricks. They were building a brick wall for our buildings after they'd been knocked down by a bombing raid or something like that, but never anything that had any technical merit, anything that required the use of intelligence. [They] never let us do anything like that, so I don't know. I think there's a possibility, not intentional, a possibility that yes, there could be Americans alive over there. I don't think it's intentional because if the Vietnamese, who've said that all

the Americans have come home, ever got caught at it, it would be extremely damaging to their quote, "credibility," and it would be very embarrassing to them also, and communists have been known to kill for less than embarrassment.

G: It just struck me as curious that with all of these highly-qualified jet jockeys in one place, that the Russians never dropped a little bug in the Vietnamese ear and said, "Look, we'd really like to know about the true characteristics of this airplane, or how they plan to cope with the SAM, or something about ECM [electronic countermeasures?]."

S: That's a very direct possibility. Look at it this way. If the Russians and the Vietnamese had collaborated on a few points like that with particular individuals, and if they got the information out of the guy, they wouldn't let the guy loose alive after the fact.

G: Because then we would know what they know.

S: That's right. So it's a very definite possibility. I just thank God I'm one of the people that wasn't asked those questions, and none of the other guys that I know were asked those questions. One guy was asked some questions about one of the guided bombs, because he'd just been up there on a--and I can't remember the name of the weapon. It's one that's guided by--

G: The TV?

S: Yes, the television camera.

G: Not the Bullpup, is it?

S: No, it's--I don't know what it is. But I know that he was asked a question about it, because he was shot down right after one of those things had bombed some sort of a plant with no airplanes around it. He was shot down by a MIG, and he was asked some questions about that, that he never had to answer, according to him. But I have no doubt in my mind that

they killed a lot of people after they broke them, after they got what information they wanted. There's no doubt in my mind that they can't break anybody in the world that they want to. I know. There's a certain limit to the torture that a human being can endure, and--

G: Did you see the PBS series on Vietnam, that ran a couple of months ago for about thirteen successive installments?

S: No, I don't think so. What was the name of that?

G: "Vietnam--"

S: Myth?

G: No, I can't remember the title, but it ran on Channel 9 in one or two-hour segments, I forget which, a total of thirteen hours.

S: No, I don't remember that at all.

G: They very effectively contrasted General [James Robinson] Risner with a female VC who had been captured by the Saigon people in the south.

(Interruption)

S: --(inaudible) is that we had problems that we'd work, and later on when we were all together in Hoa Lo, we had enough people in there, we'd have language lessons, and some of the guys that were quite expert in some of the languages. I learned--I improved my French quite a bit, from a kid who'd been all through high school, four years of high school French and four years of college French, and he really knew his French. I, of course, had been stationed in France for three and a half years, and I had been able to pick up a little bit of it, but was not really current with the idiom, and some of that stuff. That's what I picked up from Bill [William] Butler.

G: From who?

S: From Bill Butler. He's now out of the air force. As a matter of fact, he's a veterinarian in California. (Laughter) He just loves animals; he was an animal nut. He loved snakes and couldn't stand spiders. (Laughter)

G: That's a little strange, isn't it?

S: Yes, it is, it's a little strange.

G: Well, how bad were the spiders for him to put up with?

S: Well, listen, these were big guys.

G: Tarantula-type spiders?

S: Well, they were really fat, and no, I never had one bite me. But everybody--you know how spiders are. These weren't like tarantulas; they were extremely fast, and they lived in the rocks in the mountains of North Vietnam. Then, of course, we had a lot of snakes around, too.

But one of the things we did when we were really close was shut down, when we weren't supposed to talk. Somebody would think up a problem, and then everybody'd be on their honor to hold off starting to solve the problem until everybody had received the problem through the communications system, which sometimes took a while. One of the problems that Ed Barton [Martin?] and I, who is now the commander of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, Ed Barton and I solved, and we were very proud of that, was that we figured out how fast the earth is moving in relation to the sun as it orbits the sun. We did that without any pencils, without any paper, with no way to keep notes, except in here. We came up with that answer in about three days.

G: Tell me how you did it.

S: What?

G: How did you do it? What--

S: Well, we knew the formula for the circumference, how far the earth is going in one year, then we'd divide that by three hundred and sixty-five, how far it goes in twenty-four hours. Then divide that by twenty-four, and that's how far it's going in one hour. That's pretty far: sixty-seven thousand miles in one hour; that's moving right down the pike. (Laughter)

G: Yes, it is, even with an afterburner that's--

S: Another problem we figured out, that he and I won; we worked on a lot of them, but these are the two ones that we're famous for. Another one we figured out was if you want to look into where the earth is going, if you want to see where it's going, and if there's anything in the way out there, which way would you look and at what time of day? Say you were on the equator.

G: On the equator?

S: Yes.

G: Well, I think I would look straight up at about six o'clock in the evening.

S: That would be pretty good. Or you can look straight up at sundown, or you can look straight east at noon.

G: Okay. Good.

S: (Laughter) And you'll see where we're going. (Laughter) I mean, somebody ought to know.

G: I hadn't thought of that. How esoteric did these problems get? I mean, surely, they didn't get too mathematical, because that would--

S: That one was quite a mathematical process; it's not difficult in formula or anything like that. It's just a matter of going through all those steps and memorizing them so that you

knew what your solutions were. Of course, the first thing was, everything agreeing on what the formula for the circumference of a circle is. (Laughter)

G: You have to go back to the second year in high school for that one.

S: So then we finally agreed on that. (Laughter)

G: How are your teeth after all this experience?

S: Bad.

G: Bad?

S: Primarily because of the rocks in the rice. They were the same color as the rice, and they didn't bother cleaning the rice that well. All of them are broken.

G: Chipped them?

S: Chipped and broken, and had to be fixed, and that took quite a while. I was almost out of the War College before I got all my teeth fixed, that's how long it took.

G: Well, let's see. You were in jail for about six years.

S: Five and a half years.

G: Five and a half years. You were a major when you went in--

S: I was a colonel.

G: Had you been promoted--

S: I was promoted about three days before I was shot down, but I didn't know it. I'm glad I didn't. Then I was promoted to lieutenant colonel.

G: Why were you glad you didn't know?

S: Well, because the higher rank you had, the worse your treatment was.

G: You might have been stuck over there with the rest of the senior officers.

S: Yes. My treatment, Lord knows, was bad enough, but they were treated worse than we were. A lot of them were in solitary confinement. See, a major, to a Vietnamese, is a pretty high-ranking man. All the camp commanders, all the *thếiu tás* [majors] were majors. Which is a very high rank; there were very few colonels--

G: What is the spelling for that?

S: *Thếiu tá*? I don't know.

G: Okay. We'll look it up.

S: But they were quite flabbergasted that there were colonels flying airplanes up there.

G: Well, I know that in the North Vietnamese army, a senior captain is a battalion commander.

S: Yes. But they have a lot of different grades of captain and major, too. We've got one grade of major, and one grade of captain, and they've got about three of each, as I recall.

The other story I wanted to tell you about was about pumpkin. When they had an abundance of pumpkin, they would give us some pumpkin soup, and I mean it was just cut-up pumpkin, put in water and boiled and then they gave us that for soup.

G: No seasonings or anything?

S: No seasonings. But it was a lot better than green weed soup. It was pretty good stuff. And--

G: Was this just the regular--did you ever see them before they cut them up? Was it regular old orange pumpkin like we see?

S: Yes, just like we have here. This one night, we were getting our evening meal, and the cook fires were about, oh, down on the other side of the camp headquarters. It smelled pretty good. The guards would usually come around from door to door, and he'd bring the food for the entire building on these little sticks. You know how Orientals carried stuff. He had the soup up front and the rice or bread or whatever it was on the back side, and he'd carry it

in the middle, and he'd set it down, and get the dishes out from under where they were stored, bowls. Then he'd knock on door one and open the door, you know, go in, guys would come out and pick up their bowl of soup and rice, go back in and sit down and eat it. He'd go to room two, room three, room four, room five.

Room one got this soup this one night, and they started knocking on the wall. "Best damn stuff we've ever had; the damn war's got to be over! You can't believe this stuff!" When we got ours, it was really outstanding soup. It had onion in it; it had salt and pepper and some sausage kind of meat in it, and it was really good! We knew the war was over. We found out some time later, I don't know exactly how, that our guard, who disappeared, had given us the guards' dinner that night (laughter). I'm telling you--oh, it was good. It was in the middle of 19--

G: Do you suppose he made a mistake, or--

S: He made a mistake. It was in 1968, you know, right in the middle of a purge! The same way, we got beer one time. All of a sudden, in the middle of the afternoon, a guard comes around, opens the doors, and he hands us each a bottle of beer. Just out of the blue. You know, just a couple of days before there had been a purge punishment session. All of a sudden, here's this guy handing me a bottle of ice-cold beer.

G: Cold?

S: Cold beer! Yes.

G: In 1967--

S: We never did figure that one out. Never did figure that. That was in 1968, too. Never did figure that out.

G: I can tell you that in 1966, I was in the First Cav Division, and I was drinking warm beer. Of course, I had more than one bottle.

S: We surmised that probably whatever refrigeration system they had had broken down or was bombed out or something like that. Probably--the bombing had already stopped by that time, because this was in July of 1968. We never did really find an answer to that one; that was really strange.

G: That is strange. (Laughter)

S: Oh, by the way, when the guards come around to feed you, he'd start with Room one and go around to Room ten, and then when he got finished feeding the guys in Room ten, he'd be back at Room one wanting to pick up those bowls. Then he'd have one of the rooms wash the dishes, and that was a treat, to be able to wash the dishes. That was usually the honor of the day, to be asked to go out and wash the dishes. He'd go all the way around, so you had less than--you had about ten minutes to eat, and that's why we all developed a rapid eating habit (laughter). We could eat faster than anyone thinks.

G: Have any of these habits stayed with you?

S: Yes. I still eat fast. I'm afraid somebody's going to take it away from me. If you argue with him when he wants that food back, if you argue, you learn real fast not to argue. You learn to eat fast, because they bring a goon squad in and work on you for a little bit. You never argue with a guard. I tried that once, and I learned better. I told him I wasn't finished eating, you know. Woooo! The next thing I know, here are these giants in the goddamn room with me (laughter), telling me how it's done.

G: How big was the biggest Vietnamese you saw?

S: Oh! One guy--what the heck did we call him? He was taller than I am, big guy.

G: That's a huge Vietnamese.

S: He was a big man. Well, they get those guys, those big ones, up out of the mountains.

G: How tall are you?

S: I'm six-foot-three. Or I was six-foot-three the last time I was measured. I still weigh a hundred and ninety-five pounds.

G: So you gained ninety pounds since you were repatriated.

S: I had to buy a second set of clothes, because the first set of clothes I got, you know, I waited to take my trip to Sears until I'd gained about forty pounds. Would you believe I still have some of those clothes that are still as good today as they were then when I got them from Sears? Shoes, and leather jacket, really a nice leather jacket; must have cost a couple of hundred bucks, back in those days.

G: What psychological devices did POWs use to keep together, to hold their mental balance, to get through an experience like this?

S: I'm not aware of any particular device that we used, except to always make sure that we were loyal to one another, and let guys know that, hey, listen we know you might be hurting right now, and we're behind you, and don't worry about it. You know, get up back on your feet and come back in punching again next time. That worked pretty well. I don't know. We just kept everybody going.

G: What about the guys who weren't communicating, the guys who were in solitary?

S: Well, when I was in solitary, I just kept myself busy imagining that I was designing houses or taking trips that I had been on before.

G: Playing it back?

S: Yes. Going back through the Colorado Rockies, and flying some of my missions that were funner than the dickens, you know. Going seven hundred knots on the deck is fun. I did that quite a bit when I was in solitary. Also, I thought about my family back home and how they were doing. I thought that, you know, I hope I was not too much of a problem for them.

G: Do you have children?

S: No. My wife had a hysterectomy while I was in jail.

G: I see.

S: But there's no particular device. The only thing I think is, the big thing that helped us is the fact that we were all trained, and we were all professional, those of us that played the part. The guys that didn't, I don't consider them to be professionals.

G: Did you read Hubbell's book on POWs?

S: Yes.

G: Were you interviewed for that book?

S: No, I wasn't. Some of the SROs weren't. As a matter of fact, I turned him down.

G: Why was that?

S: Well, would you believe that while I was a prisoner of war, I had over seven hundred people, at different times, seven hundred officer efficiency reports that I had to write after I got out of that place?

G: Wow.

S: While I was in the War College. Navy guys, a marine, couple of marines, and air force guys. Mostly navy, which was a different procedure than the air force officer efficiency reports. So I had to get those out so those guys that did good work for me would be

recognized and get their promotions on time. I didn't have time to--the only thing, I made damn sure that I had time with my wife. We had parties, and we had good times and went to good restaurants and went to the football games in Atlanta, and baseball games in Atlanta when they had them, and went to Florida a couple of times. But other than that, they did it kind of bad, when the guy called. They tried to set up an appointment through General Flynn's secretary with all the guys. They didn't really tell her when she called me about--they really didn't tell her what they wanted. I just thought it was some other guy from a newspaper wanting an interview. I'd already done enough of those, and I told her, "Just tell him to go to the *Los Angeles Times* and get my interview out of it," because it's in the library right here in the War College. Then later on, I found out some of the guys were going to seminars with this guy Hubbell, and I thought that was kind of interesting (laughter), but I didn't have any desire to participate.

G: What do you think of Hubbell's book, overall?

S: I think it's very good; it's an extremely accurate account of what went on there, as far as I'm concerned.

G: You'd recommend it to someone who wanted to--

S: Yes, sir. As a matter of fact, I have recommended it to a lot of people. All of the executive council of the Air Force Association has read it, on my recommendation. Right now, I've got it lent out to somebody, my copy, and I don't even know where the sam hill it is. Shirley ought to know where it is.

G: Well, sir, I'm going to have to cut us off here.

End of Tape 2 of 2 of Interview I

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview

of COL. JOHN E. STAVAST

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions hereinafter set forth, I, _Karen H. Clary_ (executor of the estate of Shirley Stavast, Col. Stavast's widow), hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the recording(*s*) and transcript(*s*) of the personal interview(*s*) (hereinafter referred to as Materials) conducted with Ted Gittinger (Interviewer) on March 12, 1984, for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The Materials shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and reviewed by archives staff for information that would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy and/or information the protection of which is essential to the Nation's security.
(2) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the Materials.
(3) Copies of the Materials may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.
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Karen H. Clary — 21 OCTOBER 2022

Interviewee's Representative — Date

Susan K. Donius — December 21, 2022

Executive for Legislative Archives, Presidential Libraries, and Museum Services — Date