RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE BERSE BERKE

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
SEPTEMBER 27, 2010

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Sandra Stewart Holyoak: This begins the third session of our interview with Colonel Berke, or Dr. Berke, on the 27th of September, 2010, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Sandra Stewart Holyoak. At this point, you have prepared the base, or have highlighted what needs to be done to prepare the base, for the incoming wing.

George Berke: Yes. Well, now, it was my turn to check out in the brand-new Phantom aircraft. Certain dichotomies in my career came into very sharp focus at this particular point. What was apparent was that I didn't comfortably fit into the military, even though I loved it. I was always considered something slightly off, is the best way to put it, and I can describe that in great detail in the next phase of my training as a Phantom pilot. I started out with my instructor, was Don Rondeau, who had been a buddy of mine in the 69th and at Alexandria in the 614th. So, we went up and I'd, of course, had some ground school and studied the books, like I usually do. As we're coming around, there was a little place where the brass would grade our landings and there was a line across the runway, about one thousand feet down, which was to indicate the spot we were to touch our wheels down, much as if you were going to do a carrier landing. So, my first attempt, it was not a bad job, but nothing to brag about and I was pleased that I had accomplished that. I went around for another try and Don Rondeau, in his slightly Cajun accent, says, "George, that is not the way we do it." [laughter] He says, "You've got to use the donut." Well, the "donut" is a device for the Navy carrier pilots [that was used], so [that] they didn't have to look at an instrument and it indicated when the plane, despite whatever its weight was, was at the correct angle of attack for a successful landing. This allowed you to control the descent to such a fine degree that, when I paid attention to it, I came down and hit the line exactly and went around again. I came around and I hit the line exactly and I went around again--I forget how many times--and I never missed. So, the commander of the training wing was Chappie James [General Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr.], who I may have mentioned before. He was now a full colonel and he'd served with the 92nd Squadron and with the 81st Wing at Bentwaters. He knew all the fellows who had preceded me over there, including the fellow members of the 92nd. He called them all to the base theater. He called all of us to the base theater and he started haranguing them about how they hadn't really been working very hard or paying much attention, everything else. Then, he says, "Berke, come up here," and [I thought], "My goodness, what is this about?" So, I came up to the stage and he raised my hand over my head and said, "You guys, you let this English teacher whip your ass." [laughter] Then, as everything else, it's a two-edged sword. Yes, I was "the English teacher," despite the fact that I had spent the previous four years with the wing--it was the nuclear mission--the fact that now I was "the English teacher," and this really got me upset, because, at the Academy, I was always "the fighter pilot." So, this duality just followed me all the time. I was always being prejudged, in either atmosphere, as something not quite with it. [laughter] So, my training there progressed and it was adequate for someone who had spent some time flying. As I found out when I went to Vietnam, years later, it was inadequate for somebody who had a desk job. Yes, the Phantom was not designed as a fighter-bomber. The model we had didn't even have a decent sight in it. We had no gun, anyway, and the missiles we had were not taught at all. They were just sort of hanging from the airplane. Every fighter pilot was waiting for a gun to come along, which took several years. So, consequently, their training in any kind of air-to-air combat was completely inadequate, but I went through the course fine, Ed Mechenbier and I--oh, I didn't mention Ed. Ed was from the Class of '64 at the Academy and I looked at records of the young pilots who were going to be back-seaters and I picked Ed as the top and this turned out to be true. We made a very good

team. We flew back across the Atlantic. We picked up the plane at St. Louis, at the factory, and landed in Georgia, as usual, which is the jumping off place. We flew with a flight of two and I'd done this before with other aircraft, but I found it kind of boring in the Phantom, because we had very advanced navigational equipment. You always knew where you were and how fast you were going and where the next place was, and then, you had somebody in the back who was very eager to fly the airplane once in a while.

SH: Can you date this for us?

GB: Yes, yes, sure. This was June--no, not June, excuse me, March, I believe--of 1966, right, maybe even earlier, let's say February. Yes, the training at Davis-Monthan was stretched out by Secretary McNamara to force us to extend our whatever--I hate to use the word enlistment, because we were officers. If you took a course of a certain length, it didn't affect your extension, but, if you took a longer course, it did. He forced the Air Force to make this a lengthy course, so that we would have to serve in Vietnam, which was stupid, because that's what we're going to do anyway. It was just another one of Mr. McNamara's poor judgments, but what it did was, it didn't concentrate the training and it therefore wasn't as effective. [Editor's Note: Robert McNamara was Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968.] You would go days without flying, for example. So, I've had the comment on that. When we got to England, we had eighteen events that we had to qualify a crew for the nuclear mission, eighteen separate events as a crew, and you always had to have the same back-seater and the same front-seater. Instructor pilots could work with someone they hadn't crewed with, but that was only for the very top, top. So, consequently, you had to be very careful and a lot of our training had to be done in North Africa, in Tripoli, at Wheelus Air Force Base. So, there was a continual shifting of people back and forth and back and forth. Our squadron commander, Slade Nash, was a well-known fighter pilot, who had, years earlier, set some speed record, as they did as the planes advanced--whoever got in that plane set a new speed record--but he had spent a lot of time in Taiwan. He wanted to make colonel and go back to Taiwan. He was a ruthless commander and I can describe that. It became pretty obvious, after a while, that he figured out who the best pilot was for a certain activity and that's the only pilot that did it. If it was bombing, (Gummy?) would always sit it and, if it was checkouts, it was somebody else. He was wearing these people out, whereas we didn't start this Phantom wing with inexperienced pilots. I mean, everybody was top, selected for this, being the first Phantom wing in NATO, and, also, taking over the long-range strike role that the F-101 had. We were preparing for targets way up in the Baltic, almost close to Russia itself. So, what was happening in the squadron was that the morale was getting worse and worse and we were starting to make fun of the Colonel, because he was just such an ass-kisser. Any colonel or general--and we had colonels and generals wanting to check out in our airplane, they'd come over from Germany, "I want to try this," and all that--he was just running around kissing ass. There's no other word for it. The ops officer, who was a major who outranked me by several years, didn't seem to be able to do anything about it. I was the assistant ops and I was trying, saying, "We've got to rotate people. We can't just keep using the same old people all the time. They've got to rotate people," and the squadron sort of coalesced around me and we were saying, "Well, we can't mutiny, but this guy is really wrecking this outfit." We managed to get, the whole wing managed to get, combat ready, which was a great celebration. One day, the duty officer said, "Major Berke, you're wanted at wing headquarters," and so, that sounded ominous. "Now what?" I know that Colonel Nash didn't particularly like me and, when he wrote my

effectiveness report, it was noted that I wasn't a team player. So, I reported to Wing Headquarters and I was ushered into the Wing Commander's office. There was a chair and in a semicircle around the chair was the Wing Commander and the Deputy for Operations and the Deputy Wing Commander. It's three bird colonels. I sat down, they're all looking at me and they said, "George, you have to save the 92nd," if you can imagine the shock that was. They explained that Colonel Nash had been abusing the ops officer and his wife, because he knew they were alcoholics and he permitted them to stay with the understanding that he was going to run operations. He said, "They are on their way back to the United States and Colonel Nash has been informed--he's expected to make bird colonel--as soon as he does, he must leave this base. You are now the operations officer," and I said, "I can only take this job if I am assured that he will stay out of operations." They said, "You can be assured," and I said, "I need a better OER [officer efficiency report] than the one he gave me," and they said, "We'll see that that's fixed also." So, I said, "Okay, I will accept." So, we ended the year, our squadron was the best in everything. We had the best flying time, we had the best gunnery scores, we had the best bombing scores, we had the least number of incidents, whatever--it was well-run. I was, if not exactly loved, I was definitely respected, because we got things done. My management style was very unmilitary and some of my subordinates objected to it, "Tell us what to do, tell us what to do." I said, "No, I'm not telling you what to do. I'm telling you what the problem is." I said, "I've had enough of this, that, 'Oh, the Major said this and we have to do that,' and crab, crab, crab." We were always, *always*, overcommitted. When things got especially tough, I got the four flight commanders in, I said, "Look, I don't want you to tell your people that, 'You have to do this and it's lousy and the Major said [so].'" I said, "I want you to figure out the schedule, how it would work, so [that] you can go back to your people and say, 'We've worked this out. It's fair. It may be tough, but it's fair,'" and that's what happened. I just feel like that's the way to run things, but one of my flight commanders says, [laughter] "Well, you're supposed to tell us what to do." Well, he had to use his brain once in a while, too. So, here we were, on top of the world, covering targets deep into the Warsaw Pact. I had the number one target in NATO, whenever I went on alert, and I was very proud of that; of course, that never made it into any of the documents. [laughter]

SH: Do you get to know what that target was at this stage?

GB: Well, it was very interesting. It was the city that kicked my grandmother out in the 1850s--it was Vilnius. The reason it was there is because it was the headquarters of all the Soviet air defense for the Baltic Region. So, what my bomb was supposed to do is take them out, and then, because we got there well before the SAC bombers, then, when the SAC bombers came, there was no direction for the interceptors. The Soviet system was very top down, and so, that's what they were considering. I forgot to mention, even in the 101, I was doing the number one targets. Most of these targets were okay, but some of them were ridiculous, like one right next to Berlin, what we were going to do about that. I mean, our boys, if we ever did that--I might stop and say that when we found out what the Russian targeting was, it was just as bad as ours. I mean, the whole Earth would've come apart if we'd ever had a nuclear war. I don't know what they were thinking of, because, if they wanted to take over Germany, at least to the Rhine, there was going to be nothing there and it would be radioactive, according to their targeting. So, it was all stupid, but our job was to be the best there were and demonstrate that--we were sure there were Soviet agents around--that we could do the job. That was deterrence. If we were sloppy and couldn't

do the job, you might not be deterring people. So, we took that very, very seriously and, when we went on alert, we just dedicate ourselves, like some *kamikaze* pilot. We weren't coming back. The whole idea was to get there and our families would be wiped out, everything'd be wiped out, "So, let's get them." So, that was our attitude. I think it was very realistic. Well, the thing that really blew my mind after that was that I got promoted to lieutenant colonel and some of my friends in the squadron said, "Oh, George can't get over this. He just doesn't know how this happened," and I just so enjoyed being a major, which I felt was the perfect rank. You were in operations and you weren't concerned with other stuff that was more boring and whatever and I was right there, directing the flying and whatever. So, now, I'm lieutenant colonel and, of course, as a junior lieutenant colonel, I couldn't stay in the squadron, because I wasn't going to be squadron commander. Colonel Nash left and we started getting people from Vietnam. Their attitude was, "We were in the real war and this was just phony stuff." They weren't even concerned and I said, "No, no, no, you were not in the real war. This is the real war." That was my attitude. Our job is to keep the Soviet at bay. All of a sudden, our gorgeous wing was being destroyed by personnel in the Pacific, PACAF. They wanted Phantom pilots and they wanted Phantom back-seaters, and so, they started levying. It became obvious that they're going to destroy our targeting capability, because, as I mentioned, you had to train as a crew in eighteen different events and, if you took one, either the back-seater or the front-seater out, the crew was not combat ready. So, the first thing that happened was, the Wing Commander said, "We will, the wing will, volunteer to go over as a wing. We're all crewed up." "No, no, can't possibly do anything like that," came back. "Okay, well, how about, okay, the 92nd Squadron? We volunteer to go as a squadron." We thought we were great, we enjoyed each other. "That is impossible." "Okay, well, take crews." "No." They took the back-seaters from the 92nd, they took the front-seaters, I believe from the 78th; only the 91st was sort of split. Now, all of a sudden, we were just not combat ready. We went to Headquarters USAFE in Wiesbaden and said, "We cannot cover this many targets right now," and they said, "You're right," and the next thing you know, "Oh, Secretary of Defense cancelled that. He doesn't want the Russians to know that we can't cover targets now." [laughter] Yes, so, one of my accomplishments was--I was assistant to the Director of Operations--my job was to put the wing back together again. We had all these guys coming in from Vietnam and they'd had a nasty war over there and, as I say, they weren't really dedicated to what we were doing. We had to keep cycling people back and forth from Wheelus to get certain events. I developed a system. I would brief the Commander every day on how we were coming, "George, how are we coming?" "Well, sir, we've got two more here and we're due in over this and due in over that." Over the course of about three months, we got everybody re-qualified. In the meantime, the few crews we had were spending all their time out in the alert shack. Well, I'll skip that part; as it was happening, I was also the director of plans. So, I made a whole new war plan for us. We got two new directors of operations, the director himself and the assistant. Both of them came in at the same time and I became their mentor, to these two bird colonels, because this is my seventh year in the wing and in the mission and I knew everything there was to know, particularly. So, they listened to me very carefully when they first got there and things were fairly smooth. I had some terrific jobs. I was in charge of all the aircraft and crews who were on nuclear alert and I was in charge of the command post that was the release for any nuclear alerts. I was director of plans, also, and I took on other projects. One that was very satisfying was, the Phantom was a very noisy airplane and, especially on weekends, pilots would come in from the Continent to England and go to London and whatever. Then, when they'd leave, they would be blasting out and waking up all the

farmers then and schools and whatever and causing lots of complaints. Of course, this was affecting our relationship with the British around us and I volunteered to help fix this. The first thing I did was, any transient people had to follow certain rules about arriving and leaving and they were posted, that if they failed to do this, their wing commander would be notified. This happened and we did. The word got around, and so, the noise from departing planes was fixed. I would go around to schools and other institutions and describe why the Phantom was so noisy coming in for a landing. It was all very technical and there was nothing we could do about it. Somehow, when the people involved got this message and the fact that Lieutenant Colonel Berke was there and trying to explain it to them, it worked, and so, the complaints stopped. So, I was really enjoying this sort of thing. I might mention, as far as career goes, that after I was promoted, I was invited over to the Director of Operations. I can't remember how many colonels were there, but the martinis were flowing and, I don't know, everybody was sort of having a great time. I was not at all impressed by this. When my wife and I were walking home from there, I said, "I can tell you right now, this is not what I want. This is not what I want," and the Air Force had become more and more top down. There were controls about everything you could think of doing and you had to call the command post to do this and that. So, initiative was being lost, which, in a fighter pilot, that's your life. It's your initiative that you depend on, and so, it's so bad now that, if a general ever gets to fly in a fighter, Congress is notified--serious. So, the rewards of rank, to me, were strictly political; I mean, you stopped flying and enjoying. When I was first in, in the '50s, why, the generals had their own airplanes. I mean, that was it. You were a general, you got your own airplane. [laughter] So, that was very revealing to me at the time.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Ready?

GB: Yes.

SH: Please, continue.

GB: Yes, as operations control, one of the first things I had to do, our nuclear release officers were transferred out and the job was given to enlisted personnel. Now, this took place down at our alert area, which I was responsible for. So, I trained the enlisted personnel to do that job. When I would come in--also, I kept my combat ready status--and, when I would come in, everybody sort of shuddered a little bit, because they knew I was going to task them. Sure enough, just about every time I went on, I had the command post issue a warning, at four in the morning. We had very loud British hooters, whup, whup, whup, and, see, we slept with our boots on. When the whistle blew like that, you leapt out of bed, you slipped on your G suit, you slung on a pistol and you took your target folder out to the desk. Everybody had a red code and a white code and they were put down, with tape, and whatever the duty NCO said, you either--if you ripped open the red one, you were going to go to war and, if you ripped open the white one, you're going to practice getting out to your airplane. Of course, we always got the white, and then, you would run out with your crew chief and we had certain signals and everything we did. Then, you went up to your cockpit and pressed the start button, but you didn't push it and that was the time. We were rated on just how fast we could get to the cockpit, the ladder off, the

main pin off the bomb and ready to go. I can state, if I hadn't before, that we never even taxied an aircraft with a nuclear weapon on it and, when we had to run up our engines, that we're on alert, there was a fire truck within two feet of our airplane. [laughter] We had very tight control, by this time, of anything we did in the nuclear area. So, the morale was high and we were doing very well, even now, with our entire crew, but we were, once again, overtasked. Computers had just come in and we had an IBM 360 on the base. I decided that I would try to do something about it, since it was my job--the alert area was my job and the targeting was my job. So, I decided to do a work week study and I did it sort of double blind. Each pilot got a letter that asked all kinds of questions, and then, when he finished the letter, it was a blank envelope he gave to his flight commander. His flight commander gave it to the squadron ops and, by the time it got to me, nobody knew who it was and it was guaranteed. I asked them questions about, "How much time do you waste? How much time does the Air Force waste your time? How much time does your squadron waste your time? How much time do you have with your family?" I had a computer guy and we put this all together and came out with the statistics. I flew over to Wiesbaden and presented it to a general who was going to be a four-star, in fact, in Vietnam, General [David C.] Jones. He was very impressed and we actually got some relief. That was my first indication--well, you do something like that and you run it through a computer and you come out with the data, and then, people are going to pay attention to it. This was different from just saying, "We have a problem, General." So, I was, of course, written up for that also, and so, I was really, really effective at this job, until the deputy for operations decided that he knew enough, right, about what's going on and no longer took my advice. Things, as far as I was concerned, would be deteriorating. When I left the 92nd, two months after I left the 92nd, the Wing Commander, in the staff meeting, said, "Whatever happened to the 92nd? They went from first to last," and I kind of went [Colonel Berke clears his throat], but nobody noticed. Nobody noticed that I was here and not there and that was depressing. I wanted to remain with the squadron as a detached officer and that was a big mistake, because they just treated me like, "That's old George." Instead of another squadron [officer], they'd say, "Oh, this is Colonel Berke," and so, things were getting a little depressing. I could not extend anymore to England and I'd really done my job. So, I volunteered for Vietnam. What would previously happen is, anybody who wanted to really get ahead in the Air Force would volunteer for Vietnam and leave the wing, and we lost a lot of good people there. They wanted to get over there, especially to Thailand, and start bombing the North and this worked for some. One of the really depressing things that happened were that Ed, Ed Mechenbier, I had made him a front-seater, he was now an aircraft commander, and my back-seater, who replaced him, joined Ed. They flew together in Vietnam, Kevin McManus in the back and Mechenbier up front. They were hit by a missile and they spent seven years in as POWs. This was really a double blow for me, to have two of my people I trained and friends of mine go down together like that. [Editor's Note: Major General Edward J. Mechenbier and Lieutenant Colonel Kevin J. McManus were shot down on June 14, 1967, and held as prisoners of war until February 1973.]

SH: Where were you when they were doing that?

GB: This was '67; I was doing the jobs I described.

SH: You were still in England.

GB: Yes, oh, yes. Sure, well, yes, it was just those two, but everybody else, almost, we were losing people we'd send over there.

SH: Really?

GB: Yes, and so, we all knew this one or that one, whoever.

SH: What kind of an impact does that have on the whole group then? It has to affect morale, even with the men that are now replacing them being combat veterans from Vietnam.

GB: Oh, yes. Well, morale was rock bottom. Well, for example, when I'd been in Vietnam about a month or two, I got a letter from the Assistant Director of Operations, who I was friendly with. We had good relations with him. He was also not a go-getter and a really fine human being. He said, "George, you might be interested to know this, that shortly after you left, the new commanding general of USAFE came to our base and he went down to the Victor alert area." He had been formerly, as a younger officer, a bomb commander, so, he started asking questions. Well, what had happened after I left, "George is the old head and the old way of doing things." So, they said, "Well, look, you can cover three targets and make it easier. You don't have to just learn one, you can cover any three," and that allowed a lot of flexibility. Of course, the General started asking questions about their targets. It didn't take him long where he said, "The wing is not combat ready," and downed them and forced them into retraining. [laughter] So, if you could get any satisfaction out of something like that, I did, because …

SH: Would this have been in the beginning of 1968 or the end of 1967?

GB: Yes, yes, the beginning of '68.

SH: I think we need to back up and make this transition from England.

GB: Yes, yes, but the point was the difference between what I accomplished in the nuclear release area and what, soon as I left, "Oh, well, we don't need all this stuff." [laughter] Yes, I also started an aero club and we bought a brand-new Piper aircraft and I initiated it by taking my family up to Scotland. The reason we went to Scotland, just for a thing, was because the French were having riots. We were going to go to France and the French were having riots in '68. It was a very unsettled time, and so, it just seemed an appropriate thing to do, to go to Vietnam. I said, "Well, I've been taking the king's shilling." I didn't have to go. One of my colleagues transferred to New Mexico and I suppose he retired from there, but I just felt like this is part of what was going on in the world and in the Air Force and it wouldn't be appropriate for me not to take [my] place. I also felt very competent in my ability by that time. So, when I requested that, "I volunteer," you have some orders cut, the airman said, "Well, what state do you want your family sent?" I thought, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, what state, what state? Well, Hawaii was just a state, just made a state." I said, "Hawaii," and he said, "Well, are you from there, sir?" and I said, "No." He says, "I don't think we can do that." "Well," I said, "let's see." So, he calls the Captain. The Captain comes out, he says, "Well, Colonel, we don't think this is right." I said, "Why don't you just not worry about it and forward it to headquarters and let's see what they think?" Well, apparently, nobody had thought about this and there was no reason to deny

me, at that instant, anyway. Even though I was, I thought, fairly well-liked and respected in the 81st Wing, I suddenly became a pariah, "Who do you know? How did you get this? How did you get your family sent to Hawaii and mine is going to Indiana?" etc., etc., etc. Well, not only did I get [my] family, I got my car. I had just bought a Triumph Spitfire and they said they would ship it to any state in the US. So, I told them there, "Get it to Hawaii." [laughter] So, when we get there, we got furniture and we could ship some personal stuff, but they would ship the furniture. The next thing we knew, we went home and said good-bye to the families and we all got on a plane in San Francisco and flew to Hawaii. I had a friend there whom--well, she and I were good friends and she'd just gotten married--she and her husband found a house for us and set it up with just cots and things, so [that] we could move in. Suddenly, we were settled in Hawaii and I spent about a week there and, again, they went down to the airport and watched me take off for Vietnam. [laughter] Now, let me speak about my assignment. I really felt superstitious about this whole thing. Everybody wanted to get to a certain wing, and then, they knew somebody there and it was a nice base or they had this mission or that mission. I said, "I cannot make this kind of decision. I want the computer to make the decision," because I never want to be floating down on a parachute someplace and saying, "Why did I volunteer for this base?" [laughter] Well, the computer, there was a task in, that the computer said, "Oh, okay, you're a command post-type person," because I got my AFSC, was command post first, and then, fighter pilot second. So, I was assigned to a command post in the Highlands, Pleiku, in the 633rd Special Operations Wing, it was called. I thought, "Well, that's nice, because, really, I don't think the Phantom is very good for supporting troops anyway. I'll be in the jungles and be in the real war, the real war." This is what I was thinking. So, when I got there, what I found was that there was one squadron of strike aircraft, the A-1 "Spad" [Douglas A-1 Skyraider], which was very effective, a propeller-driven aircraft, and the other parts of the wing were FACs, forward air controllers, in various Cessnas. There was me and a master sergeant were the command post for our shift and all the rest of the command post officers were lieutenant colonels from the Strategic Air Command. So, this base commander, Colonel [George P.] Birsdsong, [Jr.], never forget him, was kind of another megalomaniac. He had to have the most qualified people in the United States Air Force for his little, dumpy, two-man command post. This is the way Vietnam was staffed by the Air Force. It was all, "Over, over, over, over." What I saw between what happened to us in England and what happened in Germany to the Army and the other forces, I definitely say this allowed the Soviets to take over Czechoslovakia, because you didn't have to have many spies or agents to know that our forces were all depleted. The top people were always taken over there and, when you got there, you were in line. The fighter squadrons, "Well, we have so many guys, we send them to Taiwan, take an R&R, do this, do that," more people than we needed, higher ranks than we needed, and nobody felt that they were doing the job they were supposed to be doing. This was throughout and this was no different. We were short of everything over in our primary mission in Great Britain and we had more than everything we needed in Vietnam and it was a huge waste of resources and human resources. I did studies of this during my year there, as a matter of fact, but, so, Pleiku was a good example of that. We flew C-47s for our flying time, the "Gooney Birds," and we just did support for the base. We got fresh vegetables and we took airmen here and there, just whatever needed to be done, we did with our flying time. I got to see a lot of the country and the ravages of the B-52 strikes and the fact that it was such a beautiful country, but it was really deadly. Our base would get rocketed every third day and that's because there were three bases in the vicinity of Pleiku and each one got a turn. It was kind of funny--you'd sit up on the roof and watch the First Cav get blasted, and

then, when it was your turn, you went down in the shelter. Every time I'd go out, I'd come back and there would be something busted. I would see a hangar or something that these rockets got. The weather was rainy and things were muddy. One of the saving graces were, there were several people from the [US Air Force Academy] English Department. The head of the English Department had told all the people there to go to Vietnam. I don't know what happened to the morale of the English Department, but there were quite a few people there and we had a little club together.

SH: At Pleiku?

GB: Yes, at Pleiku, and one of the fellows, his mother was very good with goodies and, if you wanted to have something really nice and whatever you could get in a can, we would. So, that helped, but I was rapidly getting bored with the whole thing and I couldn't--the job was nothing. I was impressed with the amount of damage that these A-1s could do. They were slow, but they carried huge amounts of more ordnance. What I found out later was, this one squadron was more effective any day than the wing I went into, with a Phantom wing. They were suited for the kind of war that was going on there and the Phantoms really weren't. The F-100s were in most of the squadrons, that they were kind of halfway, but they couldn't carry that many bombs. So, one day, I was flying with the base operations officer, who's in charge of all these airplanes, and one of the reasons that you stuck with this job was, first of all, they said Colonel Birdsong would never let you go and, secondly, you got a trip to Hong Kong after a certain number of missions, that you proved that you were willing to fly these Gooney Birds around. By the way, in the training of this aircraft, which was a 1930s technology, I really enjoyed it. I really enjoyed getting back to basics. Everything you twirled, dialed or twisted something or pumped something with your hands, and it took two pilots to fly the thing. [laughter] So, that was really an interesting part of it. So, I was flying with this other lieutenant colonel--he was the aircraft commander and he was the base commander--and we took off from a base called Phucat. On the guard channel of the radio [aircraft emergency frequency], where emergencies come, an artillery officer came on and said, "We're laying down a pattern of fire on a certain heading." I looked and that's the heading we were on, and then, I looked ahead and I could see explosions ahead of us. I said to him, "Hey, hey, we're on the wrong [heading]. We've got to get out of here," and he'd just go flying along. I grabbed the airplane, hands and feet and everything else, and tore it across and I said, "You're going to get us killed. I mean, we're going to run into the shells." It was obvious. I mean, I'm not talking about theoretical, I mean, they were coming down. "What? Nobody's ever taken an airplane away from me. You'll never go to Hong Kong." So, well, that sort of set it. "Oh, I can never get out of here? We'll see." [laughter] So, they sent me down to take the airman of the month down to Saigon for a little R&R from Pleiku, and so, I walked into a personnel office. I said, "I'm a Phantom pilot with three years' experience, combat ready, and I need to get flying again and get out of this Pleiku thing." So, I asked for all the bases in Thailand, "No, no, we had too many O-5s," that's a lieutenant colonel. They were all coming from the Pentagon and from other [bases] to get their ticket punched, and so, the only base he had open was Da Nang. When we would come into Da Nang in our Gooney Birds, there was always glass around. They were rocketed almost every single day, even though they had a whole Marine regiment, or division, actually, around them. So, it was not a prime assignment. So, I said, "I'll think about it," and, about three days later, I don't know, it was mud and rain and nothing going on, I called them and I said, "I've decided to take the assignment to Da Nang." He

says, "Oh, well, I already cut your orders." [laughter] So, I came to the 389th Squadron of the 366th Wing. I was back in the 366th--that was the wing in Alexandria.

SH: When is this?

GB: Okay, this is about the end of October of 1968. I arrived in Vietnam in August and that was my DEROS [date of expected return from overseas], date of rotation, would be August. I would leave in August, and I was a fifth wheel in the squadron. The Squadron Commander and the Operations Officer had come in recently and they outranked me, both of them, in time and grade and things of that nature. So, I was called the executive officer, but I had to go to [the] Philippines, to what they called "snake school," jungle survival, which I hadn't done on the way over, because I wasn't getting a combat job. So, this was nice, because I got a couple of weeks in the Philippines that was still counting on my Vietnam tour. I want to make [clear] the way I do things. [laughter] I was walking at the base one day, just about the time I'd finished the school, and I saw a sign, "Headquarters, Seventh Air Force, Stan/Eval," and, well, we were in Seventh Air Force and that was, of course, in Vietnam, but the headquarters was at Clark Field. I walked into this Stan/Eval officer, who's a nice major there, and I said, "You do Stan/Eval, Seventh Air Force?" "Oh, yes." I said, "Could you certify me as combat ready?" "Sure, I could." I said, "Well, I'd sure like to try." So, he said, "Fine," and he got on the phone, get in an airplane. I hadn't flown a Phantom in about four months, but, as I said, I had so much experience. So, I got in there and I did everything absolutely perfect. There was nothing I didn't do correctly, and so, he signed me off. So, when I reported in back to the 389th, the Ops Officer said, "Well, George, we're going to work on you, give you a couple of training missions for a couple of weeks. We'll finally get you combat ready," and I handed this thing right down, I said, "I'm combat ready. I'm ready to fly," and he never forgave me, no. He's that kind of guy and I knew him--even after he retired, I met him a couple of times--he was just that kind of guy. [laughter] Anyway, so, I started flying missions and the first thing I can say about it--there's a lot I could say, I hope I don't leave things out--most bases had a specialty, a certain area that they covered or they flew at night, something; not at the 366th at Da Nang. We had no special area, we had no special time. In fact, as a combat pilot, for example, you would be scheduled, let's say, for a four o'clock in the afternoon take-off, and then, your next time you flew, you were going to get a six o'clock take-off, and then, the next time, you're going to get an eight o'clock take-off and, the next time, you're going to get a ten o'clock take-off and, the next time, you're going to get a midnight take-off, around the clock. This was hard for your body to adjust to this kind of thing. We also flew in every single area, including North Vietnam, and you never had a chance to really get familiar with any particular place, with any particular FAC controller. To me, it didn't make any sense at all, whereas most squadrons had a specialty--if they're going to fly at night, they just flew at night, they slept during the day, that sort of thing. Well, we rotated through the day and the nights and, I don't know, maybe this was convenient for somebody who's keeping the records. [laughter] So, the first thing was, of course, you're getting checked out to fly North and we started at the bottom of North Vietnam, where there wasn't a heck of a lot going on, and you flew in a constant three or four G turn to avoid missiles. I was working my way up there, and then, LBJ said, "We're going to have a bombing halt." Now, that was considered a really serious mistake, but, as far as I was concerned, that was great. I had no desire, really, to join my friends in the POW camp. For one thing, our tactics there, in the '60s, were nonexistent. So, it's hard for me to know where to start about that, but, for example, in our wing, it was forbidden to practice

any kind of air combat maneuvering. After we would deliver our bombs or something, what we should do would be practice, with our radar, with this, with that--no. "Oh, you might have battle damage," this idea that this was safety. Well, of course, it was the opposite of safety, because we never got to practice and, if we ever ran into some MiGs or something like that, we had no recent practice and no training, besides which, I neglected a serious part of my time at Bentwaters, which was trying to get the tactics that I had developed with my colleagues at the Air Force Academy adapted. This was so against whatever protocol there was. I'm the ops officer of the squadron and the new squadron commander comes in. I came from wing and this is the whole squadron meeting and the people that I am supervising and he says, "If you ever talk again about your fighting tactics, you're going to get grounded," and this is the Wing Commander. Yes, yes, that is how bad it was.

SH: This is in Vietnam.

GB: No, this was in Bentwaters.

SH: In Bentwaters.

GB: Yes, yes. When I was the ops officer, I couldn't talk about proper tactics, the use of the missiles we had, the Sparrow and the Sidewinder, and people didn't know how to use them effectively. If you read any accounts of guys in Vietnam, they talk about, "Well, these missiles were no good. They wouldn't guide, they wouldn't do this and do that." That's because they hadn't been taught how to use them, okay. It was very obvious. The scientists and the engineers started developing missiles that you could use in a combat role, but the missiles we had were designed for use by the Navy and launched at fifty miles and not in a turning combat role. So, when you started putting Gs on them, they didn't function--they weren't designed to function. Until that was corrected, we suffered losses against the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese had twenty-one aces, I think we had three; yes, it's in the record. [laughter] You can't imagine. I was a World War II fighter pilot kind of guy and I knew that what you do, you get together with people, you look over what the enemy's got, you look over what you've got and you say, "Here's the way we're going to beat them." This was not done and we suffered grievous losses all through the '60s and it was only until the '70s, when Red Flag [air-to-air training exercises] was started there at Nellis and they really got into the missile tactics. The guys that flew in the '70s--and they also had a gun by then, the Phantom E model came out with a gun--so, now, they had everything. They had missiles that would track under combat situations and they had a gun, but it took until the '70s. While I was there, I was just completely frustrated, because people were being shot down, were either killed or POWs, because they didn't know how to use them. In an article I wrote, I showed this one, there was a wounded airplane and he was heading out to sea and his leader hadn't been shot up at all. The radar plane called in and said, "You've got a MiG coming up on your tail," and the leader said, "Well, I've got to get out of the way," and he left this wounded airplane there. Then, the MiGs shot a missile at him and got him and they had to bail out and be POWs. I said, "Either one or both of them should have turned into the MiG and fired their missiles. Even if they didn't hit them, they were extremely large and had a huge plume. [laughter] Nobody would see these things coming and not break away, but they just had no thought in their own minds to use them or how to use them."

SH: Who were flying the MiGs?

GB: Oh, the North Vietnamese. Yes, it wasn't like Korea, with the Russians.

SH: I just need you to confirm.

GB: [laughter] Yes, well, like I said, I have the list someplace on my computer, twenty-one North Vietnamese aces and it was a "turkey shoot" for them. So, now, let's see, I'm trying to think where I was. Well, what happened with me …

[TAPE PAUSED]

GB: Yes, okay.

SH: Please, continue.

GB: Well, so, my first combat mission, I was told, "Well, we're going to load four cans of napalm. Get on the wing of this leader and do what he says." So, the area we were flying over was considered open and VC [Vietcong] territory, which the whole damn country was VC territory. So, I'm flying this guy's wing and he says, "Okay, now, ready, drop now," and we just napalmed this village. I looked back and I said, "What the hell is this?" "Well, that's okay, it's a VC village," and I'm going, "No, I will never do that ever, ever, ever again. I never will." So, after that, I would occasionally refuse assignments, actually. Well, I was a lieutenant colonel and, usually, an assignment that I refused was one that was questionable. So, I never heard about it, but I was very picky after that, that I made sure that I worked mostly in troops in contact and there wasn't a heck of a lot of that kind of flying. Most of it was, we'd load up with bombs, we'd fly over Laos, we'd pick up a radar. These were people--the people who were running this were really brave--they were up on top of a mountain someplace with the radar and they were supposed to be invulnerable from attack, but they were completely surrounded, had to be supplied by helicopters. They would take radar direction from the intelligence sources that said there was a concentration of North Vietnamese or Vietcong there and they would vector us in. They would say, "Five, four, three, two, one--drop," and we would drop. It was called COMBAT SKY SPOT, and then, "Okay, we're going to set up a firebase, the artillery. So, we want you guys to blow the trees down," and we would do that. [laughter] The FAC would come along and say, "Put a rocket in and here's where they want to have it." "Okay," and so, we would put the bombs there and that would blow enough trees down that a chopper could get in and guys with their chainsaws and form a firebase, all right. Over ninety percent of the missions were this kind of thing. So, what I did, I used my rank and pull to pull alert, just like I was doing nuclear, only this time, I was doing, it was "snake and nape," we called it. [Editor's Note: "Snake and nape" refers to the use of Mark 81 Snakeye bombs and M-47 napalm canisters.] The only way the Phantom could support troops was with high drag weapons, because the Phantom was not designed as a fighter and the sighting system on it was very difficult to master. It was just sort of tacked on. It's hard for me to explain this to a microphone, but it's very difficult to center this sight on the target. In the combat situation, we were coming in at five hundred knots and we were loaded with twelve five hundred-pound bombs, so, we had six thousand pounds of ordnance on board, and a second is a long time. A lot of people, and especially lieutenant

colonels, come in off of just the training at Davis-Monthan, would go straight in with their back-seater and a lot of these are just going into that, or a lot of the missing-in-action, all the big fuss about them, those were people who were incinerated. "Oh, yes, well, we didn't see any chutes, but…" The reason they did that was so that their families could still collect their pay. I believe that, because it was obvious. When somebody goes straight in at five hundred knots, they're not going to be around. This happened quite frequently. In fact, the new deputy wing commander, George Dorman, he flew at Bentwaters, I don't know how often, because that kind of a job, you don't get that much time to fly, but I met him there. He thought I was kind of a little off, because I was wearing a Hawaiian shirt in Vietnam, but, [for] those of us, that was our way of saying, "This is crazy." [laughter] Unfortunately, he was lost that way. So, what we would do is, these high drag weapons, as soon as you dropped them, the napalm would tumble, and then, it would stop and the high drag bombs had, like, little chutes on them and they would drop. So, we would come in at about five hundred knots, quite low, and we had our seats all the way up. When the target passed underneath the nose of the aircraft, we would pickle and that was very accurate and whatever we dropped was going to hit what was under our nose at the time. So, I became very proficient at this and it was very rewarding, because the commander, whoever was left of the infantry or the Marines down there, "Well, we're taking fire from the tree line. I've got wounded. I can't get dust off," which was the rescue helicopter, "I can't get dust off," saying, "Can you do something about this?" "Yes," and so, we would drop either Snakeyes, and then, the napalm. Just a flight of two, we could clean out Vietcong, either kill them or get them to run away from what we were doing, and we're always rewarded by, "Okay, the choppers are coming in, thank you very much," and this kind of thing. That was the kind of mission that I felt was worth risking my life on, and so, as I said, I got quite good at it. I was lucky one time. We carried twenty-millimeter guns underneath. They weighed two thousand pounds, so, you couldn't use them for combat, but the FAC marked a spot and he said, "There's an ammo dump here." You could never see anything, with three hundred-foot trees. So, I fired and blew that up. For this kind of good work and I never got hit, I got a Distinguished Flying Cross out of it, which I put on my license plate. I'm very proud of that and I would like to read my official OER evaluation, which I'm very proud of, when I was a strike fighter pilot at Da Nang. "Lieutenant Colonel Berke is a dedicated officer who has performed in an outstanding manner. His F-4 experience and fighter pilot background are evident at the start of this period. He impressively completed all requirements for theater orientation, alert qualification and lead check in the minimum time. Awarded the Top Gun in the squadron during his first month in combat attests to his exceptional abilities as a fighter pilot. This award is presented to the officer who inflicts the greatest damage on enemy targets in a given month. Noteworthy was the admirable manner in which he immediately discharged his responsibilities despite the great demands required at the onset of flying combat. Citations alluding to courage and outstanding achievement in support of Allied ground forces are examples of his excellent air leadership while flying sixty combat missions. An administrative insight was instrumental in establishing sound managerial procedures which improved the maintenance of operation records. The operating instructions conceived and written ensure continuity of operation when key personnel transfer. Organization of talent was noted as the project officer for the squadron moved to new living quarters. An absence of problems, a faultless move and excellent furnishing of quarters attest to the completeness of his plan. His contributions have enhanced the effectiveness of the squadron operation, despite the changing demands of combat. Strengths: a complete willingness to assist anyone or solve problems regardless of who is responsible are traits desired by any unit. A sincere concern to

help squadron personnel to improve abilities contributes to high squadron morale. An example is the time he spends during off duty to teach English to base personnel desiring college credits, an ability to find time to get the job done."

SH: Who were you teaching?

GB: Enlisted people, I think, or whoever. I'm trying to remember. It was University of Maryland, had courses over there.

SH: Okay, I wondered if it was part of that.

GB: Yes, it was part of that. So, yes, I'm very proud of that.

SH: That is a wonderful report.

GB: And it pretty much summed up [my work]. So, I mean, talking about the move reminds me of a very quaint thing. I mentioned I prepared the 92nd Squadron before I left for training, so that the space was available for the extra pilots and maintenance and that sort of thing. We needed a new squadron building. I took that on and we developed a really nice squadron building that was set up for a squadron, a fighter squadron. It had one distinct feature, which was that the heat and vent system was very good, but it was English and it depended on the output. The output was temperature controlled, but from the output of the thing, rather than from a thermostat someplace in the school. While I was there, it functioned beautifully and, when I went up to wing, after a while, different people transferred and they'd say, "This building is cold. We just can't warm it," and I'd go over there and I'd say, "No, no, no, here's what you do," and that would be fine and that would be fine. Every time I visited the base, it was five years later, it wasn't the squadron building anymore, there were women in there, "This is the coldest building we've ever been in." I said, "No, no, no, here's what you do." [laughter] As far as I know, the building is--well, the base is gone now--but, as long as that building was there, people would, I would teach them how to use the system, and then, they would transfer out, and then, nobody knew how to do anything with it. [laughter]

SH: Having lived there, that makes me laugh.

GB: So, I was quite pleased that I could do this. I have to mention my first mission over Laos. I had two two-thousand-pound bombs and it was to cut a road at a flak trap. During my time at Bentwaters, I was never known as a very good bomber. In fact, my back-seater, Ed Mechenbier, was going out of his mind trying to make sure that I could hit the target. I'm talking about fifty-pound iron bombs that we used on the gunnery range, and I always attributed this to the fact that this wasn't our mission. I was the top guy on nuke strike, I had the top target at NATO--that's what I was interested in. Well, here, I had two two-thousand-pound bombs and I'm in Vietnam and that is the mission. So, something clicked, back in my brain someplace--I rolled in, everything was very smooth. I pickled off both bombs, cut the road and, from that time on, I never missed. It was built in there someplace--now, this was the mission. I have to say, I was very proud of myself and, years later, when Ed Mechenbier was released from POW and I met

him, I said, "There's something you never figured out, Ed, that I was top gun in my squadron." I had to tell him. [laughter]

SH: Show him, prove it.

GB: Yes, that I really could do it. So, I was feeling I was doing my job and, as you could see, I was well-respected in the squadron. I got an R&R at Christmas and I visited my family in Hawaii and that was really great. There was lots of interesting things my wife had figured out, and the children, and it was really great. She didn't have any jet lag or anything [laughter] and she had a nice home to set up for me. The idea that I had got my family there really worked, but, then, things started changing a little bit. We were going to move the squadron to Phucat, and I was in line for that. I was also in line to be the ops officer for the squadron I was in--I'm trying to remember the number [laughter]--and so, my career was functioning. I was also the plans officer for the wing, but that didn't amount to much, nothing like our nuke strike. So, I was counting on moving up, one way or the other, and so, the squadron going to Phucat was given to the base commander. They said, "Well, he's done a good job for us and we wanted to reward him," and then, every time I would turn around, the Deputy of Operations would say, "George, Seventh Air Force wants you up there in Saigon." "Why?" "Well, you've been in two theaters and you've got command post experience," and I said, "Well, I hit my targets and I don't get hit." I said, "You don't have that many O-5s that could do that and I don't see any reason why I should leave here." So, this went on, and then, we got a new wing commander and he came over from the States. Then, I was going to get the squadron and he brought over his people and, the next thing I know, I had orders to Saigon and this was in March. My last flight there was with the new wing commander and he's a brand-new, one-star brigadier general and they are the worst people in the world. I don't care what they were like, but they were all taken back to the States and they were told they were gods. So, we're going, I'm the flight lead and he's on my wing and I'm checking him out. We never have real targets for colonels. So, the FAC said, "Okay, there's a VC position," or was, sometime, maybe a year ago, anyway. He shoots the rocket down and I'm really mad. I'm really mad about this, and so, I punch up all my bombs and I hit the damn thing and blow the smoke away and there's no target for the General. [laughter] Let him know, "Hey," but he said, "George, we really need good people in Saigon." So, that ended my active combat career. Yes, okay, I want to mention one other thing and it's unusual, that I was on alert and they wanted a special mission with regular iron bombs, not high drag. My mission was that the Vietnamese were going to attack this village and they're coming in with helicopters, let's say at eight, absolutely eight o'clock in the morning, and they wanted me to keep the heads down of all the enemy forces, completely distract them. Here I was, going to bomb a village again. This was about my last flight, just prior to the one with the General, and so, I'm sitting up there and I've got my time hacks. I can see the Vietnamese helicopters coming and there's a small lake right in the middle of the village. I get this brilliant idea and I punch up all bombs and I come in--I put every bomb in the lake. So, I did my job, but I stayed true to the, "I'm not going to bomb a village again," and I wanted to make that part of the record here. [laughter] So, I get up to Saigon and the quarters aren't air-conditioned and it's just really depressing.

SH: This is in March of 1969.

GB: Yes, now, we're in '69, and the job is extremely interesting, senior duty officer. So, we have eight-hour shifts and we rotate those, but, when you're there, you're in charge of the air war. The General's over here someplace and the Colonel's doing something else, but the actual air war is yours. So, in that sense, it was a job to which I was extremely well-qualified for and that's one of the reasons they wanted me, because I'd been in the area of Pleiku, I'd flown all around the country--they didn't know that--and then, I flew I Corps with Da Nang and that's where all the action was. So, the job fit me, though it wasn't nearly as satisfying as actually flying. So, the first thing I found out, when I was on the phone one day and I got a call from Da Nang, the fellow who was selected to lead the squadron at Phucat went in. So, I was saying I somehow should have done--I don't know what, something--to get that squadron instead of him. I had the experience. I had the record of accomplishment, in terms of bombing and gunnery, and they gave this guy [the assignment] because he was a good administrator and that. It just seemed to me--I've always felt slightly guilty about this--and I see his name on the Wall, it's always a reminder that, somehow or other, I wasn't impressive enough or something to get the job that I was really qualified for and it was given to someone who wasn't qualified for it and he only lasted a week. So, then, this started things that are strategic in nature that I saw. What I would say [is] that we always had generals visit this facility--it was huge. It was a plastic map of the country at several levels that were being written by technicians, backwards, everything that was going on, and then, all the walls had every flight of the day. Half of it was Vietnamese and half of it was us, and you could always tell the Vietnamese, because you could smell pot. They weren't very serious. Of course, the individual pilots were good. They were, but, as far as the air war goes, they really weren't that serious; at least they were having a good time. We were deadly serious and I had two phone banks with about twenty different buttons and I could get to anyplace, any base, any FAC base, just by pushing the button. I would have instant communications there. My main job was, once again, to running troops in contact, "Somebody's under attack. Get the fighter there with the weapons." In other words, I was at the other end of what I liked to do at Da Nang. What I found, almost immediately, that we were under resourced. We had thousands of airplanes, but very few dedicated to supporting the troops. The first thing I tried to do was to fix that. So, I'd come up with a plan and I went to the Army and I said, "The way we're fighting this war is back to World War II, before we got organized." In the books, they talk about Kasserine Pass in North Africa and the inability of the Air Force to support the Army, because nothing was hooked up. I said, "We're back to that here," and I would say, in this huge command post, it was always visited by visiting brass or brass coming in to take over various units. They would walk in and these were brilliant people--they didn't get to be generals and be stupid. All they had to do was look around at the assignments and you could see their face drop, because this war was being run by the Army and the Army dictated that every maneuver battalion had two fighters, every day, regardless if they had a target or under attack or anything else. So, I went to the Army and I said, "Look, we're inflexible this way. The Air Force is concentration of force and, here, we're spread out. Every maneuver battalion has a couple of dedicated fighters," and I said, "Can't you guys work this out so that we only give you guys when you need them?" He says, "No, we can't, because, if we give up our two planes, we'll never get them back," and I forget how I went around to the Air Force and everybody agreed that was true. "If they give up those two airplanes, they're never going to get them back." Now, this is just more of the absurdities. Others were sending (reci?) aircraft on the same routes every day at the same time. The tactics for Hanoi, you could see a base being set up for guided missiles, but, until the missiles were installed and one was firing at you, you could not bomb it. [laughter]

Yes, that's right, laughable. You could not attack an airbase. You could watch a MiG take off, and then, maybe go after it--that was it. You could not bomb an airbase, you could not bomb MiGs sitting there, you could not.

SH: Why?

GB: Who knew why? What amazed me was that nobody violated these things. I'm glad I didn't get North. I couldn't have stood it. Nobody violated these things and it was called "going downtown." A neighbor of mine was a Navy fighter-bomber pilot. We were [in] the same place. They all obeyed these rules of engagement. You couldn't bomb the harbor, you couldn't mine the harbor, you couldn't do any of that. "Oh, we might get the Russians mad, or the Chinese." Well, later, evaluations and everything, that was false. They weren't going to do anything about it. They weren't supporting the Vietnamese at the point we thought they were. It was easy to ship them missiles and things of that nature, but they weren't going to go to war over them. Our guys, one of the returnees when I was at Bentwaters, I asked him about the missions and he talked about, "Oh, we form up, we have the escorts, we have the tankers, we fuel up. We go over there in huge groups," and he says, "and then, we bomb hootches," the way he described it, these huge efforts with no real targets. It took me right back to the 69th, forming up to go to Vietnam and Eisenhower passing the word down, "You don't have any effective targets for these airplanes, so, don't go." That was General Eisenhower, but we didn't have that kind of leadership. I note in my notes here that the big thing at our wing was haircuts, yes, and you really couldn't have parties at the club. It was run like a girls' school--I hate to use that word, but back then girls' schools [laughter]--to the point where, for example, we had a Marine wing on the other side of the field and I was always very friendly with the Marines, wherever I was. So, I went over there and I asked them, I said, "You guys have really nice parties and everything. What is it going to take for us, me, to bring people, my friends, over here?" They said, "Well, our commander needs a real toilet." So, I went back and Moody (Sutter?), the guy who helped me out in Norway, was in our squadron. I said, "Moody, we need a porcelain toilet," and he's just that kind of a guy. Next thing you know, we got a porcelain toilet and I took it over to the Marines and my friends, now, we could go over and have a good party with the Marines. Another thing about the Marines, I mentioned that they were all around, but, for example, at night, when we took off, we didn't have our lights on and there were VC around there. If they saw any lights or anything, they would be shooting at us. Of course, they never hit us, but you could see these tracers right off the end of the runway. I used to say that one of the things you can't do in Vietnam is go outside the wire and it was enemy territory. It's sort of like Afghanistan now. It all comes back to me--you really can't. Two guys get in a truck and take the wrong turn, they're gone, and that's the way it was over there. So, I was getting very frustrated with the fact that we weren't using our resources and I was like--I called it playing chess--because, when there was really big attacks going on, like a base on the Laotian border, there were several that are famous, I ran out of airplanes real fast that I could control. Now, give you an example, when I was flying at Da Nang and the attacks were big enough that a flight of two couldn't really contain it, we'd fly back very fast, land. We had what we called hot refueling--you don't even turn the engines off--but, "I need more ammunition, I need more bombs," or napalm or whatever. "Sorry, sir, it takes an hour." "Why does it take an hour?" "Because that's the regulation." Can you imagine? I said, "I've got people out there dying. I need weapons." "Sorry, sir, we can't do it." This is another absurdity. I said, "If the Israelis had

this rule, they'd be wiped out. Their turnaround is twenty minutes. You can't do it?" "Oh, we could, sir, but we can't." Everything there was crazy. So, I would run out of resources and I'd call up a base that was near where the action was, I says, "Can you get me 'snake and nape?'" "No, sir," here's what happens, "we're all bombed up for the regular maneuver battalions with hard bombs. So, we would have to download the hard bombs and put up the ammunition you want and that would take about two hours," and by that time--this is life and death we're talking about.

SH: This was never changed while you were there.

GB: No, not while I was there.

SH: Did it ever change, that you are aware of?

GB: I am not aware that it ever changed. All I know is that when the '70s came and Nixon released the B-52s and everybody else, by that time, things had rationalized. For example, the pilots had been actually trained in air-to-air use of their missiles and guns and things of that nature, which we weren't allowed to do in my time. I'm not trying to make any of this up. So, I'm trying to think of any of the other things that I tried to do while I was there. I would go out and, during my off days, (Ray Melton?), my commander at Bentwaters, had a base at Cam Ranh Bay and I would go there and he would give me a mission. The thing was, though, when you're not squadron capable, you always have an instructor pilot in the back. Well, that's okay. So, this is July and I'm being briefed, flight of two, I'm number two and the leader is Captain (Beavers?). I recognized [him as] one of the freshmen I taught English to and, according to these records here, I didn't realize it, he'd already been shot down once and gotten away. So, I'd say, now, I am the brass, "So, we're going to do VC bunkers," long since abandoned, okay. So, we dropped bombs on this thing, abandoned bunkers, and I've got a picture of him looking over at my airplane, make sure all the bombs were off and he would check it out. I land and taxi in and shut down and I say, "I have passed the torch. This is it for me," and it was. I mean, that's it. [laughter] In the meantime, I'm doing my job at TAC and the last incident is, the people I was with, one of them was an F-100 pilot and he was flying out of Bien Hoa and we had a general who ran this operation. He was very good and he rotated back home and we got the former wing commander at Bien Hoa, who was just promoted to one-star, instead of our previous commander. We started noticing that there was some maintenance problems and my colleague was forced--he had lost his oil pressure and was forced to land in Binh Thuy. Binh Thuy was not a fighter base, but they did have--by now, all our bases had cables, just like the Navy--and airplanes like the F-100 had a hook attached to them now. Every airplane had a hook, so that you could land on a short runway and get hooked, just like the Navy, and that was good. So, that saved him, and then, shortly thereafter, only a day or two, a young pilot was flying against a whatever--I hate to use the word target. He was flying in Laos and he noticed low oil pressure and he was way away from anyplace, but he's very smart. He immediately went to full power, full afterburner, and climbed up to forty thousand feet. When his engines started shaking, he shut it down and he started gliding and he managed to glide all the way over Bien Hoa and bail out right between the runways and save himself and the plane went into the jungle. So, you see, the most ridiculous thing, to put this in its frame, is that the Seventh Air Force continually won the flying safety award for the whole Air Force. How did they do that? They never had an accident. It was

always "enemy activity," combat loss, combat loss. So, I'm taking this down and I say, "It's maintenance," I didn't say maintenance error, but I said, "this is an accident." Of course, this is an airplane from Bien Hoa and the General, he says, "No, no, no, call the FAC. This is combat. He was shot down." "Okay," and this is some time later, probably late at night, so, I punched the thing and the FACs way out there, near Laos. "No, goddamn it, Colonel, there was no ground fire, there was no ground fire. I know--it's my area--I know that there was absolutely no ground fire." So, I wrote, "No ground fire," and went off shift. I come back, "Oh, George, you're in trouble," and my notation was erased and, "Ground fire," was put in. Then, my colonel comes to me and says, "I've been directed by the General to downgrade your OER," and that was it, the end for me in the Air Force. I could have actually had that maybe reversed, because General Jones was the four-star there and he would remember me from my study, whatever, but there's a time in my life, like when I was told not to talk about missile attacks, whatever, when I say, "Okay, that's the way they want it. I'm not a martyr. I'm not Billy Mitchell," and so, I said, "This Air Force is not the one I enlisted in in 1944 or came into in 1951." So, I was prepared to leave, and so, I finished. I finished my tour there. I'd got another R&R with a bottle of bourbon, and I just have to mention something about my family. Hawaii was supposed to be such a paradise. Well, so, when I got there, a friend of mine, Jim McInerney, asked me if I'd like to transfer to PACAF when I left--and this was at Christmas, let me back off. I asked the kids and my wife, "We want to stay here some more?" "Oh, no, we're tired of this place. Oh, this is a rock. We want to go back to the States, want to go back to the States," especially my daughter, and Jenny was thirteen at that time, going on fourteen. So, when I went back in the spring of the year, my boys didn't care, they were having a good time, but my daughter was now the friend of Don Ho's daughter, she had a boyfriend with a car and [said], "We can't go." "It's too late. I already got my orders." I'm still living with that. [laughter] So, yes, it was really great that I got to visit my family twice and another thing I was able to do, without violating anything, is, I would get on the phone at the right hour and I would call Pacific Headquarters, which we had direct lines to them, in Hawaii, and I would ask the operator, because I knew it was, like, seven in the morning, I said, "Do you have a line open for a private call?" "Sure, yes, sir." So, I always got the latest, what's going on with the kids and whatever. [laughter] So, it made a huge difference and I felt very pleased that I was able to get my family in Hawaii, and so, that worked out really fine. The question was, where was I going? I knew I was getting out. I was getting up, I already had my twenty, counting my enlisted time, and so, I asked my friends, I said, "Get me to Washington, because I don't want to be in New Mexico or North Carolina when I leave the Air Force." They said, "Well, we can only find one place for you that has a combat connotation, in all of Andrews Air Force Base, and you're going to be the plans officer for the Air Research and Development Command." I said, "Fine," in Andrews Air Force Base. So, we all came home and I rented a home in Fairfax County and I took the job at Andrews. Once again, I got an Air Force Commendation Medal for it, I revised--I was so good at war plans by then and there's didn't exist. So, I gave them a war plan, what they could use the planes that they had in terms of wartime. I was well-liked in the office and everything was just great, and then, I got a letter from the Secretary of Defense saying that, "Reserve officers in your grade are being separated. You can apply for a retirement or not, as the case may be," and why you wouldn't retire would be if you wanted to go to the National Guard. At that point, I was fed up with all of this and I had no desire to fly in the Guard. I wanted to start a new life, and so, when it was my time, I've got this picture of me and the family on the day I was retired and, of course, this is '70s and everybody's got this huge, long hair all over the place. [laughter] To look at it now, I mean, it's kind of

absurd, but, so, I just felt that was the end of my career. I'd done my duty and made a contribution where I could.

SH: When you were sent down to Saigon, what other services were in there at that point? Was it just Americans that were there or were there South Vietnamese, Australians, British?

GB: No, not in the command post. It was us and the Vietnamese. There were liaison officers in the back--I'm talking about direct, the direct control was just ours, because we had the Air Forces there. It wasn't like Korea so much, where we had British, but, yes, there were some Canberras there, come to think of it, but, essentially, no, it was an American operation and it was run by the Army, to the detriment of the Air Force. [Editor's Note: The Royal Australian Air Force's No. 2 Squadron flew English Electric Canberra jet bombers in combat in Vietnam from 1967 to 1971.] We just could not operate the way we would be most effective.

SH: How did you see the Vietnamese? Were they well trained?

GB: Yes, yes, they were well trained. I flew with the Vietnamese on several occasions. On my days off, I could do anything I wanted. I mean, I had the power. I'd get on the phone, "Hey, I want to do this, I want to do that." "Fine," and I flew with the Vietnamese. The video I have actually shows me flying with the Vietnamese.

SH: Did you have a sense that they were committed to this?

GB: Well, the Air Force was, as far as I know, but, you see, you never knew who was what and, for years, it came out, "Well, one of the most trusted guys, the highest-ranking," they all had a foot in the other camp. I'm sure this is going on in Afghanistan and it went on in Iraq for quite some time. I don't care what your rank is, you've got a family, you've got a house, you got--you can be got at--and so, it was hard to blame those people, even though you felt betrayed. There's a book called *In Pharaoh's Army*, I'll think of the author maybe, he was a very famous author of ours, American author, but he was a liaison with the Vietnamese, down in the Delta, when--what was it, the big uprising in February of '68, we called it?--he said that there were, I don't know, I can't number it, like something like two or three thousand Vietcong moved into the city. Nobody said a word, nobody said a word, and that's the way it was. So, going back to how we could have won the war, it's very difficult to come up with an answer for that.

SH: What about CIA?

GB: Yes, well, with the Phoenix Program, where the assassination of Vietcong was pretty successful. Oh, Tet is the one I was thinking of, right. After Tet, the VC were not really a threat anymore, because the North Vietnamese wiped them out by having them charge our guns. We did a lot of work with these LLRP teams, whatever, long-range patrols. We had some incredibly good people in this kind of thing. [Editor's Note: The Tet Offensive, a series of offensives conducted from January 30, 1968, to September 30, 1968, by the Viet Cong against every major city in South Vietnam, is seen as the point when American public opinion began turning against the war. *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War* (1994) was written by Tobias Wolff.]

SH: Were there CIA men in your command post?

GB: No. Well, if they were, I had no idea. That wasn't it. I hate to call them CIA, like Project Phoenix--I found out one of my colleagues at my flight school, we were at a banquet and had a few drinks and I don't know if I asked him, I said, "Well, you were in Vietnam;" everybody knew I was in Vietnam, that I was a fighter pilot. So, he said, "Well, I was in the Phoenix Program," and I really blinked. I just blinked and blinked. He says, "Well, of course, I was in an administrative role." [laughter] "Oh, right, Dick." So, yes, I want to mention this book, *Vietnam Air Losses*: [*USAF, Navy, and Marine Corps Fixed-Wing Aircraft Losses in SE Asia 1961-1973* (2002) by Christopher Hobson]. There are several thousand and they're listed, all the names of the pilots of the airplanes. You can see this.

SH: I saw that. It is just rows and rows, several pages.

GB: Yes. It is immense, and there is hardly anybody who knows the scope and the expense, of course, in human and materiel. I would be at my command post--I was doing my taxes in March, that's how I know I was there--and we would be monitoring the B-52 flights when they were bombing Laos. Their bombing was based on intelligence, once again, and you find out that they've got radio hookups and [they said], "Oh, yes, we've tracked that radio." Then, you find out that they had the antenna, the VC had the antenna, on a boat someplace. One of the greatest strikes, B-52 strikes, in Laos was a mistake. They got the wrong target and that's where the VC were. [laughter] That's where the trucks were, at the wrong place. So, I don't know what to say; I'm tongue-tied at the moment.

SH: What about the battle for "the hearts and minds?" How was the Air Force involved in that?

GB: Well, we flew what the Army and Marines wanted, but I talked to a Special Forces major and he was on his second tour and he said, "It's impossible." He says, "Goes like this. You're walking along a rice paddy and you're coming into the village and here's the women and the kids and they're doing their jobs and everything. Your point man steps on a mine right in front of them. You're approaching this village and they're shooting from it and, well, we're going to shoot back. Well, we're not going to shoot back, because we don't know who's there, and then, I lose this guy, then, I lose that guy, and then, the ambush is over. We walk in the village and nobody knows anything and nobody's heard anything. This goes on, and then, until one day, you just say, 'Give me artillery.' You just can't keep doing this kind of thing." Well, now, in Afghanistan, [US Army General Stanley A.] McChrystal, and I guess they have this under control, to the point where the guys are complaining, but it's different territory.

SH: Those are some of the policies that we hear about.

GB: Yes.

SH: Were there any calls to try to get Vietnamese aristocrats out of this country? Did the Air Force ever participate in something like that?

GB: Well, as I understand it, and believe me, we're talking about in the '70s now--what was it, '73?

SH: No, I meant when you were there.

GB: No, no, we were winning the war at that point, if you listen to MACV [Military Assistance Command Vietnam] and the President. McNamara admits that we weren't, but he said we were and this is all these things coming back. LBJ knew it was lost, but he wouldn't give up, and so, this wasn't a thing. My quarters at Tan Son Nhut--after a while, I moved up to decent quarters--I was right next to General (Chu?), who was the Air Force Commander. He had a tank next to his--that's how I knew he was there--but it was right down the street. [laughter] It was right down the street. Everybody left at once, if they left at all, I mean, yes, the collapse.

SH: Okay, I just wondered, because we hear that there were people slowly, in the late 1960s, being taken out.

GB: I wasn't aware of that, let's put it that way.

SH: I know you were in charge of all the Air Force …

GB: Well, no, no, this is strictly combat. [laughter]

SH: Okay, just combat.

GB: Yes.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: As we come to a conclusion, please talk about your later career. Your retirement obviously takes place while you are at McGuire.

GB: Andrews.

SH: At Andrews; McGuire is in Jersey. I apologize.

GB: Yes, Andrews, Maryland. Well, let's get back to Rutgers now.

SH: Okay. [laughter]

GB: Yes, I just realized that this is a serious part of my presentation. When I would come home, I can't remember exactly, but I'd usually stop there at Rutgers and I'd usually have a chat with Dr. Gross. [Editor's Note: Dr. Mason W. Gross served as Rutgers University President from 1959 to 1971.] He knew I was a Class of '51 and that we loved this school, because of our adversity or whatever it was. [laughter] So, I associated in Great Britain with the RAF anytime I could and I had a reputation, anytime an RAF plane diverted to Bentwaters, my order in at the tower is that they send them over to the 92nd and we would take care of them, if they needed transportation, if

they needed fuel or whatever they needed. So, occasionally, my wife and I would get invited to a dining-in. At one occasion, I was at an RAF base and I was in the club and I was talking to the RAF pilots and they're always interested in where I went to school. Every time I was near any RAF officer, they're interested in where I went to school. In one survival course, it was over in Germany, they asked me and I said, "Rutgers," and they said, "Oh, George has had a classical education," and it was great to hear that and, of course, unusual with Yanks, right. There I was again. So, I said, "Yes, I went to Rutgers," and he looked at me and he says, "Well, my family is a descendant of Henry Rutgers," and I says, "Well, he didn't have any children." He says, "Yes, but on his sister's side. By the way, I have this spoon, a punch ladle, with his crest on it."

SH: My word.

GB: Silver. He said, "Do you think the school would like that?" I said, "Of course, absolutely," and I wrote the President, Dr. Gross, and I said, "I have this. As soon as I'm on my way through the States to go to Vietnam, I will drop it off," which I did. At some point, I wrote him a letter and said that, "In my Air Force career, I was responsible for things that required thinking ahead and no errors, and so, I've sort of developed a knack of looking to see what could possibly go wrong, where there was shortages or things that weren't up to snuff, people weren't trained, whatever." I said, "I think I could be of help to you, some assistance," and, when I came back to the States, I came up here and he said, "I agree with you. I think there's a place for you here and let me handle it," and in terms of--there must have been an election, there had to be something like that. I also met up with people, I can't remember just how, but I was also angling for a job as a dean of the new community colleges that were just going up at that time.

SH: Livingston?

GB: Yes. You're talking about '69, and I thought Ocean City would really be nice. "Oh, yes, you'd be a shoo-in." I've got all this experience as an administrator. So, I had three jobs on the tap in New Jersey and I had planned that, when this happened, we would all move up to New Jersey. Then, there was a change of administrations or something, and who could believe this? Mason Gross was fired.

SH: Really?

GB: Yes, you didn't know that. Yes, yes, he was, and then, all my Democratic friends said, "Don't mention our names and you're not going to get a post at the community college, either." This threw me back. Now, as I understand it, Mason Gross had a sailboat--and this is all, I can't verify any of this--and he had some sort of a lantern on it. It somehow spilled over and he got burnt and he never recovered from this and that was the cause of his death. All I know is that the man lost his will to live, I'm sure. I mean, this was his spiritual home and everything he believed in and the school, the beautiful way that it was expanded and opened to more and diversified were all due to his work. I don't know, you go on the Rutgers website and you know that there's a Mason Gross School of the Arts, but you don't know what happened to him. You're shaking your head and this is incredible. This is hidden and, just as an aside, nobody's ever been able to find the punch ladle, either.

[TAPE PAUSED]

GB: Now, I have no job.

SH: Please, continue.

GB: Ready? So, well, all of a sudden, I wasn't going to Jersey and I wasn't getting a job, and so, I had to find something. The skill I had that was readily transferrable was technical writing. So, I got a job as a technical writer with Montgomery County, Maryland, School System and they had a brand-new IBM 360, a room full of computers and disc drives the size of barrels. So, I wrote user manuals for the programs, such as the finance program and the personnel program. In the meantime, I was writing and I was writing poetry and I soon recognized that the Montgomery County School system was one where you entered as a teacher or a clerk and you moved way up. Here I was in the middle and I wasn't going to go anywhere, because I kept applying for jobs that would get me out of the computer thing. In the meantime, I found out that an Academy professor, Gabriel Ofiesh from the Psych Department, had started a program at Catholic University called educational technology. The simplest way to describe it was the military way to train people, rather than academic. Once again, to simplify it, what you did, and I hate to use the word, because it was so overused, but you had objectives--and this was all new--you had objectives and you stratified your course to meet the objectives, one unit at a time, and such that you could test it at each of these units. If the person couldn't pass the test, then, they re-cycled the information until they passed the test. That was the idea, pass the testing, not grade, "You flunked." No, no, you just re-cycled through the information until you could pass the test and you worked your way down to the end. So, I went to interview with Dr. Ofiesh. So, we were Academy buddies and we'd just both retired from the Air Force, and so, he said, "This school is really moving fast and it's being run by Sister Mary Sarah and she's really putting the School of Education at Catholic U. on the map. She needs an assistant." So, I interviewed with her, and so, I was going to be her assistant. During the semester break, they fired her, sent her to a convent, and this is kind of indicative of the hierarchy, that she was attracting too much attention and I guess they didn't like the idea of a woman being that competent. This was done when there were no students, because she was well-loved by everybody. She really knew how to run a school, and so, there's this huge morale drop. So, Dr. Ofiesh says, "We've just got a contract with the Public Health Service to improve the training of black nurses and it's being run downtown in DC, at what was the Federal City College, School of Nursing. We think you could be a curriculum developer." So, I interviewed for the job of curriculum developer for this project, was going to have a staff of about twelve to do interventions. The idea was that the hospitals were full of black LPNs, licensed practical nurses, but it was hard to get to be a registered nurse and it was the tests for registered nurses that was stopping this. The dean of this nursing school, Mary Whitehurst, was positive that we could find a way to get more registered nurses and she was a master's degree nurse. She had kind of retired from nursing, because she worked with pediatric burns and you can just cringe when you think about that. She was a small, iron-willed, I called her "Blue Steel," part of the black bourgeoisie, as they called it back then, Dunbar High School. The mayor, she knew the mayor, she knew the president of the school, they were all dedicated to advance the Negro, which whatever we called them at that particular time, I can't remember, but they were dedicated, smart people and a privilege to work for. Well, when I came in to work--I was hired after the interview and I came in to work the next day--the

nurses were out with signs. [laughter] They were having a protest, that's the word, and the protest was, they said that I was one honky too many, "One honky too many. Why didn't she hire a black person for this job?" and marching around with them was the project director. By the way, I have to tell you, one of the reasons that I got this job also was I was a Vietnam vet. There was a lot going on, Black Power, whatever, there were people with briefcases with guns in them, and they said, "Well, this wouldn't bother you that much." I said, "No, no, don't worry about me. I've been bombed and rocketed [laughter] and this isn't going to bother me. Believe me," but that was part of the reason why you'd be a good hire, because I'd just come from Vietnam. So, Mary is there and she says, "I can't fire my students and I can't fire my black faculty, but I sure as hell can fire my project director. George, you're now the project director." So, in one day of work, I was suddenly in charge of the whole thing, and so, that started my three-year career as project director of student support services at Federal City College School of Nursing. It didn't take long before I was somewhat prominent in the field and I would be invited to visit places and talk about what we were up against. What we were up against, and what we're still up against, with the black community is the culture and, to give you a short example, I had a dietician, a woman who'd been doing diets for years, flunk the dietician test for a registered nurse. I remember distinctly saying, "How come you flunked the dietician? Couldn't you pick what they wanted?" She says, "No, I didn't like any of them recipes." "Didn't like any of those recipes?" I kept saying--I was teaching the class in this--and I kept saying, "You've got to play Charlie's game. Stop trying to fight it." [laughter] One of the things we did, with educational technology, we had carrels and every student in the class had a carrel and a teaching machine. What I noticed was that they would back their chairs out of the carrel and talk to each other. Here, I got this idea that, "Wait a minute, I am dealing with a culture that is not going to work in a carrel," and that took me to my dissertation topic. Now, I was suddenly working with learning styles. My adviser was a college president, PhD and a well-known author from Michigan. He was my adviser and he was the man who started all this, cognitive style, and there were people from pretty much all over the country. I would rent an airplane and take my staff to these discussions we had and it was really interesting and ground-breaking stuff. Then, he suddenly died and the provost refused my prospectus for my study. No, I had to do a typical "treatment/no treatment," which went against everything we were trying to do with cognitive style. So, anyway, I hired a staff and I set this up in the treatment/no treatment category and, over the years, I gathered information. When I went to collect the data, they said, "No, we didn't; no such thing as no treatment. That's not our job." [laughter] So, I was out, I was flat out--I had nothing to go by. I had this Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics things with empty--I couldn't do anything. So, I kind of gave up on my dissertation. So, the next thing I know, this is after three years, the Red Cross came to me and it was then the American National Red Cross, headquartered in Washington, DC. They said, "We hear good things about you, as far as training goes, and we have a new project we want. You've seen or maybe heard something about cardio-pulmonary resuscitation and this business of banging the chest and all, but that's out," he says, "and we have a program with the National Academy of Sciences and the Heart Association. We'd like to do CPR for the general public and you're the head of it." So, I became the team leader, my first [job] in the Red Cross, and I was called the director of program development. I had a rank with the highest of everything but the top vice presidents. So, I had the power and, of course, the staff in the Red Cross, most of the Red Cross are all volunteers, but there is professional staff at every Red Cross--what did we call them? I forget. [laughter]

SH: Chapters?

GB: Chapters, yes, every Red Cross chapter had professional staff in safety. So, I set up pilot programs all over the United States, and then, we start developing the materials. Well, we had the Laerdal manikins. That was our main piece of material, and then, we broke this training down to--we did a coach-buddy system and the people who came were going to train themselves. We were trying to get the instructor out of this, the Red Cross instructor. Some are good, some are mediocre and some are poor and you can't do cardio-pulmonary resuscitation that way. We had little toy clickity-clacks and we made films of the correct procedures and the instruction books. It'd be phased and you'd do a phase, coach-buddy, coach-buddy, clickity-clickity-click, "This is how you do it," and, when they were ready, when they completed it, they felt they could do it, the breaths, the pushes, all this, then, the instructor came, and this is rather expensive. We had an "Annie" that had a graph coming out of her and the instructor would review the graph and sign them off. This was completely run by the students. Now, we worked this around the country and corrected the flaws and we had two main assemblies, one East Coast and one West Coast. I was big, no other word for it. This thing went off and it worked. I designed the books for it, the colors. Then, I also assisted and demanded that we revise the first aid. We did first aid, now self-instructional first aid. We revised the lifesaving. We had a woman who wanted to do [a program] for the handicapped, so, we did swimming for the handicapped. This is in my three years there. I was supposed to be there as a change agent. Well, this is a very deadly combination [laughter] and, well, I was getting a little big in my days and what really brought this on was the Heimlich maneuver. Henry Heimlich was a thoracic surgeon at Jewish Hospital in Cincinnati and he'd developed this system of upward thrust. He was going national with it, as much as he could, because it was working and it was saving lives, but who knew about it? He wanted the Red Cross and they wouldn't even consider it. So, I invited him to Washington and I had dinner with him and we talked about things. I found out he was an Air Force weather observer in Mongolia. For the B-29s attacking Japan, they had to know what the winds were and he rode ponies and lived in a yurt, [laughter] a fascinating guy. I insisted, I said, "We have to at least look at this. We're doing back slaps." So, well, reluctantly, reluctantly--see, my boss was promoted up and he was in charge of, among others, nurses and they did not get along. He was not happy and they hated him. I guess he was--well, I don't know, but they could not get along. Of course, the head Red Cross nurse is incredibly powerful and well thought of and everything else. So, he wasn't having a very good time and I guess you could say he was Peter Principled. In the meantime, here I am, I am getting national recognition out of this, because this is working and the program is good and everybody loves it. So, things were starting to get a little tense. So, then, this Heimlich, "Okay, what are we going to do?" "Well, our guy's Dr. Archie Gordon in Los Angeles. He's our guy." We do this sort of thing. So, Archie Gordon sets up this--you'd find this hard to believe--but anesthetized orangutans, shove meat down their throat and back slap one and use the Heimlich on the other. Well, Heimlich won immediately. Well, the Red Cross wasn't going to call anything the Heimlich maneuver. [laughter] So, I don't know what it is now, because everything's changed since the 1975, '76 [period], but, anyway, so, we got the Heimlich maneuver into the Red Cross canon. Then, I addressed the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. My topic was foreign body obstruction of the airway, which has to do with the airway, your airway. [laughter] So, here I was, my boss had set this whole program up and hired me and it just galled him that, here, I was getting all the attention; not only that, but I figured out how to get my doctorate. I got a new adviser and he came in, he

says, "George, I want you to look at this one more time, please, before you just give up. You've spent all this time and money and all this kind of stuff." So, I looked and I came up with not a very--I don't know how to put this--it's so obvious, it's so obvious. The reason I had these empty squares was this--there were three categories of students in this. We'd start the year with all the people who wanted to do nursing--they had to take two years of conventional subjects--in an auditorium and I introduced the staff and [said], "We're here to help you and to get through this and this is what we offer. Here's the math man, here's the English, here's this, that and the other thing," from my staff. We had people who didn't come up, we had people who signed up and didn't show up and we had people who signed up and showed up. The people who didn't show up never passed. The people who signed up and didn't show up made the first year. The people who took our treatment passed the second year. It was all effort. That's all it is, and I think that's all it is today--those who want to succeed, those who will accept a little coaching. So, I wrote my dissertation and I got my doctorate. My boss was ABD. We both laughed about being ABD, but he was still ABD and, now, I'm Dr. Berke. My colleagues in the course, the people who'd been there all their lives, said, "We always announce when somebody gets a degree and Bob hasn't even mentioned your name." [laughter] It was becoming obvious and the next thing I know, he says, "I'm going to put you on probation." I'm going, "What? [laughter] You're going to put me on probation? Of all people, you're going to put me on probation?" "Yes," and I'm going, "Well, look, Bob, all right, let's face it, this is not working. I love the Red Cross, just transfer me to Alexandria, or someplace like that. I don't have to have this job. I want to stay in the Cross." "No, no, there's nothing wrong with you. We just need to put you on probation and clean a few things up." I said, "This is not going to work. You're going to regret this." So, a friend of mine said, "I know Jimmy Hoffa's lawyer." So, I went to Jimmy Hoffa's lawyer and I collected--well, I had everything documented, everything he was doing to cross me up, because he sort of took back command of all the people that I was supposed to be running and giving them leave or [saying], "You can take this trip." So, he was suborning me and I had this all [documented]. We had so many memos in the Red Cross--I had huge folders, I still have them in the house--and I gave it to him and he looked it over. He says, "Well, you have a case, but they'll just sit behind their lawyers," and he says, "I could do this pro bono, but it would take years." Now, of course, that would've been a snap, but, back then, just like I would've won with the railroad now, but not then. So, I was wondering what to do and my friend, Bob (Winger?), called me up and he says, "You know, George, I'm on this classified project and we're looking for an Air Force background person with a PhD. How'd you like to come with us?" [laughter] So, I fondly bid farewell to the American Red Cross and, now, I was working on a CIA contract with the Iranian Royal, the Iranian Air Force [Imperial Iranian Air Force]. Now, this was called Project IBEX; it was a billion-dollar thing. The idea was, the Shah visited Israel--and I'm talking about '79 now, the beginning of '79, the Shah visited Israel some years before--and they took him into one of their command posts. He was astonished that they were listening in on all the communications of Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt. This is called SIGIN, signals intelligence, and he said, "I want something like that." So, this company, that is local in McLean, was Quest Research. It was quite small at this time and it was started by a couple of ex-CIA agents and I suspect that they got out of the CIA just to do this, as this is going to be a project. So, they designed a system whereby there'd be a listening post against Afghanistan on one side and a listening post against Iraq on the other side and the USA would get a listening post on the Caspian, aimed right at the Soviet Union. So, this was a three-pronged thing, very expensive, and so, the project was given to Pan American, at that time, was doing stuff like this. They failed completely. The Iranian

managers of this were superb. Most of them were trained during World War II by the US or Britain. They were superb and you couldn't get anything by them. So, they rebid the contract with Sylvania, but the General said, "No, Quest is going to be running this. You guys teach and Quest is going to be responsible for how well you're doing your job." In other words, we were going to be a training audit, and so, the system was set up whereby they would set their courses and what the courses were was, like, for example, digital, because we're using Watkins-Johnson radios, highly specialized. We had language courses, because Farsi speakers had to learn Arabic, all the techniques, and then, the special intelligence courses also, how to run an intelligence network and things like that, not spying, but this is all signals intelligence, how to distribute it, evaluate it and all that. So, Sylvania would pass this down to us and our guys would approve or disapprove or suggest, and then, it goes back, "And give us your tests." Sylvania would give us their tests, and then, our guys would make a shadow test, in other words, asking the same data, taking the same data points and asking it in a different way. So, what happens is, Sylvania gives the test and says, "Everybody passes, okay, fine." Quest comes in, gives our test. If they passed, they get paid; if they don't pass, they don't get paid. You talk about power. Well, the reason they needed a PhD was because Sylvania had a PhD, Dr. Laina Farhat, and we had to have one. Now, I was not head of this project--a retired Navy submarine spook, [laughter] a very great guy, terrific guy, he was head of the project--but I was overseeing the teams and the teams were enlisted, the top, top, top enlisted people in these fields. So, I went out to California to meet people and get introduced and everything else. I was really concerned about this Dr. Farhat. Well, she had married a famous pianist, Iranian pianist, had a couple of kids and got divorced and she had, I don't know, more than one doctorate. She's multi-lingual, multi anything you can think of. So, I'm looking to meet this person that I was supposed to offset and here's this, well, I hate to use the word gorgeous, but she was bubbly and friendly and just the most wonderful person to work with, and I'm just going, "Phew." [laughter] I think it's worth mentioning that after I was there about a week, she had me over and confessed that she was not doing well at all, because they refused to take her advice about cultural things--that was her job--what worked and what didn't work. They just acted like she wasn't there and she said, "I need help," and I said, "Well, our job is to make sure this project works. So, you have my help," and so, we became a team instead of conflicting, and that worked really well. I went over there and I would monitor certain things, but most of the training that we did over there was with language and these were all young women. They were all young women in their blue Air Force uniforms and they're very good at learning a language and what-have-you. Then, we had a school in Massachusetts where the technicians were oriented more--they were taught enough English, they'd go out to California, in Sunnyvale--and we'd have the technical schools. Nobody should ever say that the average Iranian is not smart--they are very smart people and you can tell that, the way they're finagling the whole world. They have been for years, and you don't want to buy a rug. [laughter] No, I was very impressed with them and they were gaming the system. They're bringing their wives over to have kids in the States and all this kind of stuff. I don't want to go into that, this is a long story, but things were working well. I helped out a general's son here in the States, because my boss sent me out to some little cow town school. He says, "I hate to do this to you, Doctor." This is the only job I've ever had where people called me doctor. "I hate to do this, Doctor, but the General's son's having trouble out there." So, I went out there and he was a really nice kid, but he wanted to put speakers into Hondas; that was his aim in life. [laughter] His father wanted him to be something more than that. So, I worked things out with him and the school and put out a program, and so, he asked me if, when I went to Tehran, whether I would

care to meet his family. [laughter] Well, you can imagine my answer to that. So, every time I went over there, which we would cycle back and forth, why, a Mercedes would pull up to the hotel and I would be taken over to his father's house, who was a retired two-star, and I became part of Iranian high society there. I went to weddings and I just had a wonderful time there. Of course, we were under CIA rules, and so, we were always very careful, we always took precautions. We never had the same schedule, we never went to the same place. We were schooled in that and very successful, but it was hard to make connections, because, as soon as you got a good cab driver, you got rid of him. Once he got to know where you were going and that sort of thing, then, you got another one, but that's by the by. Anyway, it was a very successful program and everything was working, and then, Khomeini got into the act. He was sending audiotapes, with the little cassettes, sending cassettes to mothers, "Mothers, mothers, how come you're letting your kids work for this great Satan?" whatever, and he managed to completely undermine the armed forces, which were all young people, right. The Shah couldn't cope with this and, since he died of cancer, I think his cancer was probably working on him, most people said he was no good and he did this and that and the other thing. I say he had thousands of Iranian youth in this country going to school. He wanted to build the country. He was a bit of a pussy and I think he let the secret police and all that do their own thing. I can't believe that he was actually directing them, because that's not the way he acted and that's not the way he acted when he was deposed or the fact that--we all said, "He'd sent all these kids over here, they saw what democracy was like. When they came back, that's what they wanted and that's what they thought they were going to get." We all know how that ended. [Editor's Note: Colonel Berke is referring to the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution in Iran.] The coda to this story, a fit punishment, if you like, when [Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini finally came in, the first thing he did was say, "We can't have women," and he sent all the girls home. Now, you may remember, in '80, this is '79, in '80, Iraq attacked the Iranians and they had this terrible war and thousands and thousands killed. Well, all these plans were piling up in tape. Yes, the system was functioning, the Iranians would've known about the attack, but there was nobody to translate from Arabic to Farsi. [laughter] So, I call that fit punishment, and so, that was the end of that and we were all refugees. So, I went to my high school reunion that I go to and a friend of mine said, "What are you doing, George?" I said, "Oh, I'm a trainer. I train anything or anybody," and he says, "Oh, I need a trainer," and he was working for Exxon Engineering. So, I became a consultant with Exxon in Morristown. I would fly--I had an airplane, I bought an airplane and flew--fly up there and they said, "You're going to be our consultant for life," and the salary was very good. I was working, producing. They had a bunch of stuff in filing cabinets and it was my job, and I had hired help and a secretary and I had an office in Great Falls, to put this all together, interview people and make this huge book on how to build a refinery, which is what they were doing. Then, I also did other training for them and computers send reports in, things that are common today, but we just pioneered that. That was really a great job, and then, all of a sudden, it fell apart completely when they had built out. Nobody needed another refinery in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait and, somehow, this hadn't been planned for. The last batch of engineers, chemical engineers, that they hired, I was supposed to be training them and my friend, he saw the handwriting on the wall, he quit and went private and the fellow I worked for directly was sent to Saudi Arabia. Pretty soon, I'd go in there and they'd say, "Who are you?" [laughter] "By the way, we don't have enough work for our people, so, I don't really think we need a consultant." [laughter] So, that went by the by, and then, one of the people got a job with Fluor in Orange County, California, and he called me and he said, "There are people here who don't know what

they're doing. How about coming out and doing some manuals, training manuals and whatever, for all the equipment that Fleur uses?" So, I did that for a year or two, and then, Bob Winger, again, who is now, unfortunately, dying of cancer, said, "We have a little company here that was doing environmental work, but they don't have any work and they're looking for an Air Force contract. So, they need somebody to get them an Air Force contract." So, "Okay." So, I went on there and we wrote up what we thought we could do and it was the job for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to see if it was possible to ramp up production of precision-guided munitions, all the different kinds, the bombs and the missiles, air-to-air, ground-to-air, all the missiles, "How could we ramp up production? Were they too complicated to do that? Where were the parts?" I wrote the proposal and we were selected. I was told directly by the civilians at Wright Field that it was my input that got the contract. So, I had a lot of clout right then with the company and they didn't know anything about the Air Force, and so, they paid attention to what I said and we really were going gangbusters. I got sideways with the manufacturers, because I said, "This is an Air Force project." They said, "No, this is our project," and I couldn't take that and the bosses in my company said, "We can't do it without them, so, they're right. By the way, we're going to name so-and-so as the head of this now, but you'll still be running it behind-[the-scenes], because they didn't like what you told them, that this was an Air Force project." [laughter] So, away we went, and I don't think anybody's done anything since. It took several years. I mean, we're down to what we called the third level, and I still have these reports. It was really very good work, a lot of digging. I mean, I would go down to Texas Instruments, for example, and say, "You guys really screwed up with that particular design," and they would kind of blush, but, I mean, I enjoyed the job immensely. The first thing that came up before we got this particular contract, we call it "over the transom," was, "The Air Force needs super heavy forging presses for titanium, which the Russians have, but we don't, and Wall Street is willing to finance it, quick." Well, nobody in this little outfit that I was in, [laughter] that was, first of all, environmentalists, managed this--I said, "I'll take it," and I became an instant celebrity. The big lawyers in Washington, the law offices, the white shoe ones, they call them, were calling me up for interviews. I went up to the World Trade Center and I visited several brokerages. I studied the technology and I visited all the forging companies and treated like royalty, because I was going to get all this money. There was a Representative Marcy Kaptur in Cleveland, was interested in this, because Alcoa was there, and her chief of staff, a really great Washington pol, he knew everything. She was a Democrat and, pretty soon, I was dining at the Democrat Club. One day, when I came back from New York City and all these Wall Street folks who want to finance this, I said, "Tell me, what do they mean by 'full faith and credit of the government?'" [laughter] Your face and my face--he says, "No, that means that they can't lose money. They cannot lose money. We're giving them money," and I went to the Air Force and I said, "Can you do this off budget?" "Well, no, we're not going to do this off budget," and, finally, somebody looked at me and he says, "Dr. Berke, this ain't going to work." [laughter] For years afterwards, people were sending me stuff, this new technique and that new technique, and I did work for Shultz Steel out in California. That was really one of my last consulting jobs. So, I really enjoyed that. I liked going into the forges, all this hot metal going, these huge presses, and I just enjoyed that. All I had to do was eat my lunch in the company cafeteria and talk to some of the women and I knew exactly what was going on in that place and what was wrong with it and I would write reports, taking their input. I had a lovely young woman from Worcester Tech as my assistant, and what she could find out from the guys is something else. [laughter] So, we were a really great team, but, then, doing the missile study, that took three years and we were really--we'd brief Secretary

[Casper] Weinberger and things were going great--but we had a succession of chiefs. We got a couple of guys and they decided that they knew more than I did about the Air Force. What we had was, this contract was run through Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and there was a colonel who was in charge of what they called COTR [Contracting Officer's Technical Representative] and they started wining and dining him, and then, they offered him a high-paid position. This is while he was still in charge. Well, the Civil Service at Wright-Patterson is a family affair--I mean, it goes from son to grandson and all--and they took one look at this and called in the cops. The next thing you know, our contract was shut down. My team, we were out in the street. That was really the first of my, "What is this, management? What do you call this?" This team I'd built up, we were all looking for a job. So, I had to call the cellphone, it was a car phone back at that time, and I got a call from one of our clients up in New Hampshire and he said, "Are you aware of the fact that Jane's, from England, is coming to the States and they just bought," he named a company up in Connecticut that did analysis of aircraft. It was an old-line firm up in Connecticut. He said, "Most of the people there don't want to move to Washington," and he gave me the building where they were. I turned my car around, walked in and got hired. I was the group leader of aircraft systems and I brought my best guy from my last project in. So, pretty soon, I had the perfect job--another perfect job. I was going to go to the Farnborough Air Show and I had to know everything about every contract for a military or civilian planes and that meant that I spent my time reading all the dailies, the weeklies, the monthlies--what a terrible job this was. [laughter] We charged. I put out a report every month on everything that we had--every aircraft, whether it was anything that was happening, whether it was getting modified, where the contact was, this and that--and I had to be able--we charged plenty of dough--I had to be able to answer calls on the phone. I didn't get many, but it always was, "Should we buy this? Should we invest in that?" and it wasn't, "I'll get back to you." I'd say, yes or no, or, "Here's why," and I was very proud of the job I did and my team. I trained a guy, he'd just come from the London School of, not Economics, something to do with the military, Richard Aboulafia, and he has been, for the last ten years, the guy to go to. *New York Times*, he's on the *New York Times* and he's on the *Washington Post*, any time they want to know something about contracts or whatever, because he joined a group after we were dissolved and all that. I got to that. I went over to England. I was very happy in my job and I went over to England, the Farnborough Air Show, and the man who ran Jane's at that time took me to lunch in a French restaurant and this kind of thing. Then, he says to me, "I need somebody in the States who reports directly to me. I need to know what's going on," in other words, spy. I said, "I'm very sorry, sir, but I don't do things like that." So, that took care of that. [laughter] We kept losing money, because every time the British guys would come over first class and stay at the Madison Hotel, it came off our budget, thousands of dollars and thousands of dollars, and then, there was a mix-up in language. Trade, to the British, was lower class and we dealt in trade, and so, he said, "We're not going to do this anymore," and he sold us. One day, a big truck backed up and all our files and everything went into it and the people from Connecticut bought it back. This was the second business that was wrecked, this time by the British, and I said, "That was my last job. I can't take it anymore. I build teams; this is the second team that I've built. We were doing great work, customers are satisfied, and then, somebody up top wrecks it." So, I spent about another four or five years; as soon as the [Berlin] Wall came down [in 1989], I formed a team and went over to Budapest. I thought I'd start a business there and we could take over a business, that a young American started a consulting business over there and he'd died. That would be a book talking about that, but we found that, behind the Iron Curtain, the Soviet system, these people weren't capable of

even figuring out input and output. I can describe that. I had worked with the Czechs. The Czechs came over. Everybody wanted to help the satellite countries. I mean, this was it--they were no longer under the Russian thumb and we were going to help them. So, a whole bunch of them came over. The Chamber of Commerce and I met and I got everybody's calling card. I got tired of Hungarian food, because it was burning my gut with all the paprika. I left my friend there and I went to Prague and I said I was probably the first American-American, not Czech-American, in Prague. The Czech-Americans were coming over to try to reclaim their houses that were confiscated and cut up and everything. That's another book I could write. [laughter] So, my job, I had worked with some people right in my neighborhood in Washington, in housing, [to] see about building housing over there, because I was convinced that they had all these Stalin-type concrete apartment buildings and maybe they would like to have American houses. So, well, what they told me is, "Well, we need a factory to make oriented strand board," which is what most of our houses are built of, as installation in construction, instead of regular plywood. So, I let it be known, with the contacts I made over there, that I needed a factory and I was prepared to buy it. So, they sent me an engineer, a Czech engineer who didn't speak English, and his wife, who did. So, this plant was in Pilsen and that's the eastern part of Czechoslovakia and it was still Czechoslovakia--no, no, it was the Czech Republic, excuse me. So, I had this engineer from the people that owned the factory--he was an engineer for them--and I had a translator and I had a car. So, we took off for Pilsen and, pretty soon, we were on a two-lane road in a pine forest stretching and it was snowing. "What a feeling," I'm saying, "nobody in the world knows where the hell I am right now." We passed, on our way out, we passed the secret police headquarters with all the windows busted. This is very recent, very recent, and so, the wife, she was talking to me and, like most women, she was asking about family. So, I mentioned that I had a son who's a naval officer. She got really excited about that and chatting in Czech with her husband, and so, she was asking me about what I was doing, and then, I happened to mention that I was a pilot. Then, she really went nuts, and so did he. They're going back and forth, "Oh, my husband is so interested in aviation. What did you fly?" "Phantoms." "Oh, my gosh," they just went nuts over this, that they had a colonel back in there, too, who flew Phantoms. So, we drove along a little more and he stopped the car and he said something to his wife and she turned around and she said, "Dr. Berke, my husband wants you to know that this spot here was as far as George Patton came and you're the first American since World War II to be here." So, to continue my story, we went to the plant and I looked it over and we could convert it from plywood to strand board. Now, we're going to go to the head office in Pilsen, and so, we enter the head office. Now, this is the engineer from the big company and there's nobody in it. There's nobody in the head office, go down corridors, corridors, corridors, corridors, and they're getting more and more embarrassed and getting red in the face. They said, "Let's go to lunch." So, they take me to a very nice lunch, drinks. I said, "Could it be that they're embarrassed? Well, here's the thing--you're going to ask them, 'What's your electric bill? What's the cost of your raw materials? What have you been selling it [for] when it comes out?'" They had no idea, any of that. Stuff came in, they processed it and stuff went out. That's how it worked in that system and almost any American that went over there, to try to do anything, build houses, this, that and the other thing, failed; got a lot of money came over there. Was going to put their fortune in there and it only took a couple of weeks and I think it ended up around eighteen thousand dollars, instead of millions, I mean. If you wanted to buy a house, you had the cash in a suitcase, and then, you got a key. It's taken them a long time.

SH: Did you get a deed?

GB: No, I mean, there was no mortgages, no deeds, and they put the highest prices you could imagine on property. I wanted to start an office there and I'm saying, "What are you guys doing? This isn't Fifth Avenue New York." They had an absurd idea of what things were worth, because I was trying to set up something on the way to the airport--I had all kinds of projects and things and my time was up. I met a Slovak who got me all of my information and everything else and he was setting up his own company and I had business relations with him for years, trying to do projects. He was an engineer and he said the Germans, the East Germans, would rather have Czech workers than East Germans, because they weren't reliable, didn't work, [laughter] where if they hired Czechs, it got done. I spent years fiddling around with that, living off of my--I started Social Security--and so, that was enough money to finance me, whereas my wife's income and my Air Force retirement kept the house going and the kids going. I fooled around in Eastern Europe for years. I've got all kinds of tales, [laughter] but, finally, I quit. So, what I'm doing now is, I'm a flight instructor, and then, I fly a couple of times a week. I particularly get the hard customers or people who haven't flown in a while, want to get back in, that sort of thing. I'd really like to get back in consulting, but I'm eighty-three years old and I also coach. I coach crew and I like that, and so, I keep busy. We raised a grandson in our house. My daughter was a single mother and Andrew grew up in our house and we were a big help there. He's a brilliant kid and he's had a lot of good education. So, I ought to end there, on my grandchildren are all friends, all the cousins are friends. They love their grandma, they respect me, my kids, same. We're a big happy family and I'm blessed for that.

SH: Thank you for coming up and sharing all this. It has been marvelous. I reserve the right to call and ask follow-up questions.

GB: Okay.

SH: Thank you so much.

GB: You're welcome.

--END OF INTERVIEW--

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 2/25/2015
Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/7/2015