RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTHUR L. SNYDER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH
and
PETER ASCH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Arthur Snyder on January 6, 2006, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and …

Peter Asch: Peter Asch.

SI: Mr. Snyder, thank you very much for coming in today.

Arthur Snyder: Thank you.

SI: The purpose of this interview is to cover the fifteen-month gap between leaving Korea and when you were discharged from the service.

AS: No, when I came back to the States.

SI: Yes, when you came back to the States. When did you leave Korea and what happened after you left?

AS: I left Korea in the fall of 1952 and went to the 581st at Clark Air Force Base. I returned to Japan for January, February and March of 1953 to fly B-29s in Korea, and then, returned to Clark, where the 581st was headquartered. Do you want to know what we did in that period of time?

SI: Yes, please.

AS: We, being a CIA outfit, would hit the trouble spots in the Orient. One, we went up to Dien Bien Phu, French Indochina, where the French were fighting, called French Indochina then, it's Vietnam now. We were with the French B-26s, until they collapsed in 1954. I think it was May of '54. The United States has never acknowledged that the Air Force was there. The French said that they never wanted us there, and the Air Force said, "You will be there," so, we were there until they collapsed. We came back to the Philippines, Clark [Air Force Base]. The next trouble spot was Formosa. Chiang Kai-Shek had been kicked off the mainland, China, and he and his troops were stationed in Formosa, I guess that's … now Taiwan. It looked like the Chinese were going to invade Formosa and take over. We were supporting Chiang Kai-Shek. We were sent up there to try to train the Chinese pilots, Chiang Kai-Shek's pilots, to be better pilots than they were. We were there about three months training them. They treated us very nicely as guests. I believe, the head of the Chinese Air Force was Tiger Wang, who was supposed to be Chiang Kai-Shek's son. They went so far as, I remember, one night they arranged a date with a Chinese girl who graduated from Smith College and spoke fluent English. We had good food and living conditions, and we trained the pilots for a few months. Eventually came back to Clark, when that ended, then, they were having probably Communist uprisings in Thailand, and we were sent up there to do some bombing, from Clark Air Force Base. We never did really know why we were there. When you're in the CIA you're told what to do and not necessarily why you are doing it. So, we went there and had some bombing runs. One bombing run we had trouble with the plane; we had to land in Bangkok, and we waited for parts to fix the plane. It had to be flown from Clark Air Force Base. I ended up with amoebic dysentery. In the hospital we didn't have any air conditioning then, I remember being in a bed with mosquito netting around. The

officials were so happy to have us there. They made, while I was in the hospital, they made me a set of bronze cast hardened with caribou horn, flatware set, a setting of twelve, serving, forks, knives, even down to twelve swizzle sticks, really needed them. That ended. We came back to Clark.

SI: How long were you in the hospital?

AS: Two weeks, with amoebic dysentery. I'm a universal donor, blood donor, but I was told that I could never give blood again, after I got amoebic dysentery. Eventually, back to Clark, this is probably the summer of 1954. Our usefulness had basically ended for the 581st, the CIA, and the wing was disbanded and we all went in different directions. I came to Randolph Air Force Base. Outside of the time in the CIA, I have always been in the Tactical Air Command. The three major branches are: Strategic Air Command, bombing, long-range bombing; Tactical Air Command, which is frontline support; and Air Training Command, which is schools. I had always been, outside of time in the CIA, I had always been in TAC. So, I ended up back at Randolph Air Force Base, in TAC, learned how to fly the B-57 and then became an instructor.

SI: In your interview, February 24, 2005, you talked about how you had done so many missions in the B-26, and then you had to finish up your tour, so that's how you had gotten into the 581st.

AS: Correct. If I had completed fifty B-26 missions, I would not have gone to the 581st.

SI: Once you got into the 581st and you were transferred to the Philippines, did your tour end or were you held longer to finish your missions?

AS: No, my tour was extended but not because of that reason. I had what was considered a critical MOS, Military Occupational Specialty, being a pilot. So, they extended me for a year, but not necessarily because of Korea.

SI: The first trouble spot you were sent was to Dien Bien Phu. What were you told about what was going on there? You mentioned that you were just told where to go and what to do, and not the why, but did you have any idea why you were going?

AS: There, yes. The French were in trouble. They were being beaten by the Vietnamese, and we were sent there to try to help support them. We would do bombing missions, strafing, and napalm, in support to the French troops, that is why we were there.

SI: How many missions went to Dien Bien Phu?

AS: Eight or nine missions I would say. We didn't try very hard there because you soon got to know that the French did not fight like the Americans did in Korea, and you didn't have much of a desire to take a chance being shot down when the French weren't, in our opinion, doing their share.

PA: Were you stationed in Vietnam?

AS: Yes, called French Indochina at that time.

PA: You flew from Clark though for the other missions.

AS: Yes. We were in Dien Bien Phu when we were flying there, yes.

SI: What were the conditions like in Dien Bien Phu at that time?

AS: Well, they were collapsing. They were not like … We were confined, basically, to the base there. In contrast, just to mention that when French Indochina, before the fighting, we used to go to Saigon for vacation, and that's Ho Chi Minh City now, I guess. It was under French control; it was a fun town. We used to go there from the Philippines for vacations and they had a lot of entertainment, good food, it was a nice city at that time.

SI: You mentioned that on the official level the French didn't want the United States Air Force there. On a personal level, when you were on the base, how did the French treat you? Was it hostile?

AS: No, no. The French really did want us there, even though they said, officially, … they didn't want us there, but they welcomed all of our help. We also had C-118s there that were flying ammunition and supplies for them, from the 581st. I was not involved, but the C-118s did try to support them with supplies. Officially they said they didn't want us there, but they absolutely did and they treated us well.

PA: How large was the American contingent on the base? Did you have your own support or was it just the planes and their crews?

AS: There were probably twelve planes, B-26s, with mechanics and everything necessary, yes, but it was primarily French.

SI: What kind of resistance would the enemy put up on these missions? Did they have anti-aircraft?

AS: No, small-arms fire. No, no anti-aircraft.

SI: Can you take us through a typical mission at Dien Bein Phu? You probably were not going very far, to the hills surrounding the base?

AS: No, they would, typically, they would say that they were going attack a certain location and ask us to go in and napalm and try to kill anything prior to them coming in. Basically, the same as B-26s did in Korea.

PA: How long would these missions last?

AS: Two hours, hour and a half, they weren't long.

SI: Did the US contingent suffer any casualties?

AS: No.

SI: The Vietminh had dug into the hills around Dien Bien Phu surrounding it, were you getting shelled or mortared?

AS: We got out before that happened. We were out before the French collapsed. We were not there any longer. We were long gone before the, I think they eventually did overrun the base but not while we were there.

SI: So, there was a front some distance away from Dien Bien Phu?

AS: Yes.

SI: In between your time Dien Bien Phu and then at Formosa, you were at Clark. Were you doing training there?

AS: Yes, primarily training. Actually, we were, the 581st mission was really collapsing and the need for them was winding down and, frequently, we were not very busy at all; played a lot of golf.

SI: You mentioned in the previous interview that you thought that the officers in the 581st had a rough time after leaving the unit, because the CIA affiliation damaged their careers.

AS: Yes.

SI: When you were staying in the Philippines and interacting with other Air Force units, was there any hostility or problems between regular Air Force units and the CIA affiliated unit?

AS: No, basically, all of my affiliation at Clark was with the 581st. I didn't have much contact with other people.

SI: You unit was self-contained?

AS: Yes.

SI: When you were in Dien Bien Phu and other areas, did you wear Air Force uniforms or civilian clothing?

AS: We basically could wear whatever we wanted. We did not wear uniforms, no.

SI: Were you ever instructed on what to do in case you were captured or shot down?

AS: Yes. We knew we were in violation of the Geneva Convention, the 581st, and that we wouldn't have protection from the United States if we were shot down, we knew that. We

carried Geneva Convention cards, but they really didn't have any value. The Air Force also told us they would deny we were in the military if shot down.

SI: What did you think of the Philippines? Were you able to get off of Clark Air Force base?

AS: Yes. We spent a lot of time off the base. Most Filipinos speak English and, even though there's hostility there now, when we were there they were very friendly. They appreciated what the United States did in World War II. They, basically, liked us very much. They were nice. They're poor but they were very nice.

SI: While you were in the Philippines, did your unit do anything to counteract the Huks or the other Communists in the Philippines?

AS: No, we didn't. The Huks, the Hukbalahap, would try to get on the base and steal, and quite a few of them were killed by Americans while they were trying to rob and steal from the base. I don't think they were trying to take the base over, they were actually just trying to steal, the Huks. But there's a very active Hukbalahap movement at the time and the base had … were very careful to either kill or arrest any Huks that they catch on base.

SI: Were you ever there when they caught somebody?

AS: I didn't actually see any stealing. But they have monsoon rains there, just tremendous amounts of rain during the monsoon season, so they have ditches, deep ditches as big as this room [twelve-feet-by-eight-feet] for the water to run through, and I did see a Huk that was shot dead laying in the ditch but it was dry at the time, it was not the monsoon season.

SI: Going back to Dien Bien Phu, what is your most vivid memory of that period? Were there any missions with close calls or any that stand out?

AS: No, no, because you soon learned that the French didn't fight very well. I mean, they basically lost every war they ever fought, and you weren't going take the chances that you took in Korea. We did have small arms fired at us occasionally.

SI: Was this the French Foreign Legion?

AS: No.

SI: It was the regular French Army.

AS: Yes.

SI: Do you remember the name of your base in Formosa? Where was it close to?

AS: I should remember it, Kadena, we lived at Kadena Air Force Base.

PA: Was your mission solely training?

AS: That's it.

PA: If the communists had tried to take the island would 581st have fought alongside Chiang Kai-Shek's forces?

AS: No, I don't think so. Their ability to fly was far below the Americans, and they would do a lot of reckless things. They wouldn't fly patterns like we would, or anything, and we were there solely to try to teach them to fly better. We were not there for combat.

PA: Were you successful in training?

AS: Not too well, I don't think so. We tried.

PA: Was it hard with the language barrier or did they have ample English translators?

AS: No, they could actually speak enough English that we could get by, no big problem.

SI: Did they strike you as being unprofessional, or was it that they had never been exposed to this type of training?

AS: They just, I don't know if they're unprofessional, they just didn't have the training or the … we followed instructions a lot better than they did.

SI: Discipline.

AS: Yes, discipline may be a better word, yes, thank you. They just didn't have the discipline that we had. They were trying. They just didn't have the training we had.

PA: They were flying American-built planes?

AS: Yes, they were.

PA: The B-26s?

AS: No, they were not flying B-26s. They were flying F-80s, which was one of our first jets.

SI: What was the base like? What were the conditions like there? You mentioned that they were very friendly.

AS: Oh, well, we were on an American base.

SI: It was an Air Force base.

AS: Yes, an Air Force base. Conditions were fine.

SI: In Dien Bien Phu, your presence was very secretive. Was it more open on Formosa?

AS: It was open, oh, yes, because the whole island was controlled by Chiang Kai-Shek. No, it was completely open. You could go anywhere, do anything you wanted, there were no restrictions.

PA: There were regular Air Force stationed there as well, were you able to interact with them?

AS: Yes, yes, we did.

SI: We have interviewed a number of people who during the Second World War were attached to the Nationalist Army as advisers. Several of them thought the Chiang Kai-Shek's soldiers were corrupt and not really committed to fighting the Japanese, or the Communists. Did you get that sense?

AS: … I never got the feeling that they were dishonest. They had been in the service a long time. They were loyal to Chiang Kai-Shek, because they all came from the mainland to Formosa. No, I didn't get the idea, the feeling that they were dishonest. I didn't know them that well, personally, though either.

SI: What would a typical training exercise be like? What was your role in it? Did you take somebody up with you?

AS: Yes. Sometimes we would do that but it was more ground work, actually, and to try to get them to follow the rules and regulations that they cut a lot of corners on when they flew. They took a lot of chances that we wouldn't take flying.

SI: You came back to Clark and then you were sent to Thailand.

AS: That's correct.

SI: Do you remember the base in Thailand?

AS: We were not at a base in Thailand. We flew out of Clark Air Force Base and we dropped bombs where we were told to and we fly back to Clark Air Force Base, except as I said the one time when we had mechanical trouble and we had to land at a public airstrip. No, we always flew out of, to and from, Clark.

SI: How many times do you think you went to Thailand?

AS: Six, I think about six. We really never had a clear understanding, except we were told that there were some communist uprising that they're trying to suppress. We really didn't know much about it.

SI: Were the missions similar to those in Dien Bien Phu, dropping napalm?

AS: No, they were strictly bombing, and from a high altitude.

PA: Was this over a city area or out in the country?

AS: It was not cities, but it was developed areas, and I wouldn't say it was wilderness either.

SI: Were they encampments?

AS: As far as we could tell, we were assigned targets and we dropped from high altitude, the bombs, and unless we had trouble we turned around and came back. We didn't really have much of an explanation why we were doing it, being a CIA; we did what we were told.

SI: The mission where you had the mechanical failure, was it a real crisis situation?

AS: Well, we couldn't make it back to; we knew we couldn't make it back, so, we landed there. It turned out to be a comedy of errors, because the plane that flew the parts over blew a tire on landing and so he couldn't go back either, and so we had to wait for another plane and that's why we were there so long, plus the fact that I got sick.

PA: When you landed did you identify yourselves as American Air Force?

AS: They knew it. They knew, I mean they were friendly. They treated us very nicely. We were there to help them. Actually, they even took us on a tour of opium dens I had never seen. Really debilitating, people would go in there and just have opium until they died.

SI: The men who flew these missions, were they the same men you served with in Korea? Did the unit change?

AS: No. They're the same, exact same, yes, same crews …

SI: Were there any loses in any of these areas?

AS: No, no, there were no loses.

PA: You mentioned that you were all split up after the 581st was disbanded.

AS: Yes.

PA: Were you able to keep in contact with them?

AS: Yes, we have a reunion every two years. Next year we're going to Reno, Nevada. I haven't been to Reno since I was stationed at Reno, at Stead Air Force Base survival school. Before I went to Korea, I spent three weeks up on a mountaintop at Stead, but I haven't been back there since then.

PA: Does most of your crew attend the reunions?

AS: There are two from my crew that still attend, that's all, the bombardier and a gunner. Now the bombardier I got a Christmas card from him and he obviously has a nervous disorder, Parkinson's or something like that, because I could hardly read his Christmas card, but I assume he'll be there. Usually, we have about thirty members attend the reunions. It gets smaller with each meeting.

SI: How long have you had these reunions? Did they start after you got back or was it more recently?

AS: More recently, I think maybe 1990, but they had them every two years since then.

SI: For a time that would have been the only place you could have discussed what you went through.

AS: That's correct, yeah. We didn't even have those meetings for about twenty-five or thirty years, yes.

SI: Did you anticipate what happened in the Vietnam War based on your experiences?

AS: You know, I think it happened pretty much as I anticipated that the French would collapse and then we would go in there and I didn't think we were ever going to be very successful. It's just not a place that we could fight successfully in my opinion. I feel the same way about Iraq. You can't be successful there either.

SI: You came back to Randolph and you went into B-57s.

AS: Correct.

SI: How was the transition going from B-26s and B-29s into the B-57?

AS: The transition was from conventional engine to the T-33, which is a jet trainer, two seats. So you transition with an instructor to the T-33, and once you learned how to fly that you then transitioned into the B-57, but you didn't go directly from conventional engine to the B-57.

PA: How hard was the transition between the speeds of the conventional engine to the jet engine?

AS: The truth is I feel any twelve-year-old with reasonable ability could fly T-33. It's not a difficult plane to fly. It's remarkably easy to fly. It's not a difficult transition.

SI: What did they tell you the mission of the B-57 was?

AS: Oh, simply the B-26 was frontline support, napalm, rockets, bombing. The B-57 was the replacement for the B-26 for frontline support. They were phasing out the B-26 into the B-57,

and it was not very successful. They used it in Vietnam where the B-26 could take a lot of small arms fires, holes, and come back. The B-57 turned out to be very delicate. It got, you know, it couldn't take much punishment before they collapsed. It really was not successful. They replaced it with the A-10 Warthog, which they still use and it's a great plane. That was the transition, B-26, B-57, A-10s.

SI: You didn't fly it in combat, but did you have a sense that it wouldn't be as durable as the B-26?

AS: Yes. Yes, I did to some extent, yes.

SI: What gave you that impression?

AS: Well, one of the problems it had was, it had a liquid oxygen system instead of compressed oxygen as other planes had, that made it very susceptible to fire. If you hit the liquid oxygen that plane would explode. It was British-designed, the Canberra, and the way they start it was with black powder to ignite it; just many things about it I didn't think was very successful, and they found it was not a good plane. Also, we had two training accidents that killed both crews.

PA: Did you ever have any considerations about staying in the Air Force as a career?

AS: No, I just wanted out as fast as I could get out, no. I never intended to stay in the Air Force.

SI: Could you tell us, for the record, which awards, decorations you received?

AS: I have the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with two oak leaf clusters, and seven other medals. I can't think of the names of them, but they were for combat in Korea. One was issued by the South Korean government. I also have two that were issued by the State of New Jersey for people that flew in combat, the names of them I can't remember.

SI: Were any medals issued during the period you were with the 581st?

AS: Yes, the Air Medals. Also, the DFC was for a B-26 mission.

SI: Obviously, you could not tell people why you received that medal, but was there a story concocted?

AS: The Air Medal simply represented a certain amount of combat missions, not a specific mission. The Distinguished Flying Cross was for a specific rescue mission. That's it.

PA: You mentioned in your first interview that you had started out as ground support and then you transferred into flying.

AS: I was base salvage officer.

PA: Did you run into any other pilots who had done a similar jump?

AS: There were others, yes, maybe no one that was a base salvage officer, but other ground jobs, because there are two types of people that went through pilot training. There were officers and there were cadets. Cadets would have been an enlisted man that was accepted into the program to go to training, and an officer would have had some type of ground job before they went into flight training.

PA: It was a pretty regular occurrence?

AS: Yes.

PA: You had an encounter with a Soviet MIG over Soviet Russia, but the planes you ran into over Korea, were you aware if Soviet pilots flew any of them?

AS: The MIG-15s were largely flown, before the Chinese pilots started flying them, the Russian pilots flew them and our F-86s regularly encountered Russian pilots in the MIG-15s.

PA: At that time did you know they were facing Russian?

AS: Yes.

SI: Do you remember any fighter interceptors on any of your mission?

AS: No, we flew at night and the MIG-15 was not a night fighter. It was not equipped to fly at night. Our danger would come from radar-controlled searchlights that will lock on to us, and then, antiaircraft, but, no, at night we never had other planes, except the one mission I had over Russia.

SI: The communists did not have a night interceptor.

AS: No, they did not.

PA: I was looking up the B-26 and it had several nicknames, including the Widow Maker and a couple of other more racy nicknames. Was there a reason for such nicknames?

AS: Yeah. The Widow Maker was because there were so many crashes flying the plane. It had a sharp sink rate and the wings were relatively small for the weight of the plane, and it would sink very fast and there were many, many accidents and people got killed in it and it got the name of the Widow Maker because of all the people that got killed flying it.

PA: It was not an official nickname.

AS: No, it wasn't. I don't think it is a name they liked.

PA: Overall, did you feel the B-26 was a good plane?

AS: Absolutely. It was the only overpowered conventional engine plane we're ever in, like the B-29 was underpowered. It didn't have enough power. The B-25 didn't have enough power. The B-26, if you could control it, you could take off with one engine, it had so much power, and it could take a lot of small arms firing and still come back. You could lose an engine and still get back. It's an excellent plane.

PA: Was it maneuverable enough that if you did encounter fighters, without escort, you would be able to outmaneuver them?

AS: Well, I never had that happen actually. Obviously, you could turn tighter than a jet, because it's a slower flying plane, but I never encountered any.

SI: Were you given a cover story to explain what you were doing during your year, over a year, with the 581st?

AS: A year and a half anyway, no, we were never given one, we didn't go any place. I mean, we were in the 581st, we were told not to talk about what we did, and we didn't.

SI: Even after the war?

AS: Oh, after the war, this paper I showed you, 1998, was issued, that was the first time I ever saw anything about the 581st and now there has been at least three books written about it, you know, since then.

SI: If anybody not involved with the 581st asked you, would you just avoid the subject?

AS: Yes, we would, yes. Most 581st career officers, even now, will not tell you what they did.

PA: Were you able to write home or was security very tight?

AS: No, we could write home. We didn't tell them what we were doing, but I was overseas a long time compared to most people, by probably two and half or three years. I was in the Orient and didn't see my parents or anything for obviously that period of time. So, yes, I did write home and, in those, days we couldn't telephone, there were no lines. The only communication we had was writing. There were no restrictions to speak of.

SI: You were never given a leave back to the States all that time between going to Korea and coming back?

AS: No, a total of over two-and-a-half years.

SI: What was your rank when you were discharged?

AS: First lieutenant. Another six months I probably would have been promoted to a captain. I was just not quite long enough to get captaincy.

SI: Was that standard, or do you think you were held back for any reason?

AS: No. I don't think so. The Korean War was over and, so, you're not going get a battle promotion. So promotions were basically in peace time a certain period of time between second lieutenant and the first lieutenant, which was eighteen months. I think from a first lieutenant to a captain was either three or three and half years, and, if you performed up to the standards at that period of time, you'd get a promotion, but I was not eligible.

PA: You mentioned being in the 581st impinged the staff officers' careers.

AS: Correct.

PA: Do you know if any of the pilots stayed in the Air Force and were able to advance or did the stigma of the CIA carry over??

AS: No, I mentioned in the last interview about Gene Veedi, who was shot down in World War II and in Korea. He stayed in and became a colonel, full colonel. There were two or three career officers that became full colonels. Nobody that was in the 581st, including Colonel Arnold, ever got a star. Nobody, and no one from the 581st was ever given a "command" assignment.

SI: In Korea, in addition to the bombing missions, you also carried out psychological warfare type missions.

AS: Correct.

SI: Dropping leaflets and other psychological implements, did you do any of that type of work in any of the other places?

AS: No.

SI: It was all strictly dropping ordnance?

AS: Yes.

SI: Is there anything else that we are missing in that fifteen-month gap between Korea and your discharge?

AS: No, I don't think so. I think it was pretty thorough.

SI: If there is anything else that you think of and you would like to come back, we will be happy to have you, and if there is anything you would like to add to the transcript please go ahead. Thank you again for coming in to add this addendum. Thank you very much.

AS: Thank you, Shaun.

SI: This concludes our interview.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Peter Asch 1/25/06
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 2/1/06
Reviewed by Arthur Snyder 4/3/06