

**John Francis Bessette
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke
Interviewer**

**Interviewed on July 18, 2007
New York State Military Museum**

Q: Where did you grow up?

JF: Born and raised in Malone, New York in the northern part of Franklin County.

Q: Your dad was in the military?

JF: My father was in the National Guard in Malone and enlisted in 1910 before World War I in 1917. He was a sergeant and mobilized in the regiment of the guard. He went down to Spartansburg to Camp Wadsworth with the units and about one third of his local company, which was Company K of the First New York Guard. About one third of his company became the core of a Pioneer Infantry Regiment. He became first sergeant of Company K within that regiment. As you well know, the rest of the company went with the 27th Division and had its own path to World War I. My father followed that outfit and toward the end of the Argon Campaign he was pulled from the trenches and got a commission in the Army of the United States. He came home a second lieutenant. An interesting aside I think was that he went over as a first sergeant and went second class in a German converted cruise ship. He came back first class as a second lieutenant and he always liked that. He had a subsequent career as a lieutenant and a captain in the local National Guard which was company I of the 105th Regiment. He was the commander of it from 1926 until 1939 as a captain.

Q: So you grew up around the Malone Armory?

JF: That's right.

Q: You knew it well.

JF: Yes indeed, I knew it my own way as well. I don't know when you want to cover it but when I was a teenager I joined the Civil Air Patrol.

Q: Oh really?

JF: This is a good time to segue into that. I grew up in Malone. I was born in 1936 so I was five years old when we entered World War II. By that time Company I had gone off and mobilized into World War II and they formed a state guard up there. My father became the commander of the local state guard company. I get fascinated by aviation stories and the fact that the only thing up

there that was flying was the local civil air patrol unit, a couple of Aeroncas and Piper Cubs and so forth. To see those things in the air as a six-year-old kid... I loved it. One day I saw a B-17 go over buzzing the town and I happen to be outside in the summer. This is an interesting story I think. The airplane comes buzzing along the town and I knew it was a B-17 because I studied airplanes. It disappeared off to the northeast and 15 years later I am in a bar in Malone at age 21. I am in this bar in Malone and there is a guy sitting next to me and he was an older fella and I knew that he had been in the Army Air Force in World War II so I asked him about his service. He told me he had flown in so and so and was a B-17 pilot and I told him the story of a B-17 flying over and he said, 'that was me'. I said oh and he said we were ferrying the B-17 over to Europe and it did not take much to divert off. I wanted to buzz the town and let the folks know so I came roaring all over the town and headed off toward Maine or where ever they were going to land next. And I did the 'oh boy wow' trick of course and he gave me some advice. He said are you going in the Air Force? And I said right, as a navigator. He said, watch out you better not pray for any damn war. He said about three of us were there, the only survivors of our squadron that made it back, and it turned out it was during 1943 when there was heavy casualties. That was sobering.

Anyway I grew up in Malone. At age fifteen I join the local Civil Air Patrol Squadron and that was in February of '52. I graduated high school in August of '54 and by that time I was an extremely small version of my father because I was a cadet squadron commander, marching and drilling in the Malone Armory. And I thought that was pretty cool. And we did some flying out of the local airport out there at the Malone-Dufort Airport. And I got the bug. I wanted to do something about aviation so I had gotten enough moxie, had done enough academically and was the salutatorian of my high school class. I was going to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute down here in Troy and I was going to be an aeronautical engineer so I signed up for Air Force R.O.T.C. It was partially because I wanted to go into the Air Force and also to avoid the draft implications we all had to cope with in that time frame 1950's. So for '54 and '58 I was at RPI in Troy and did some drilling in the Troy Armory. That armory is slightly bigger then the Malone Armory. Most of our drill was outside in the parking lot next Troy High School and with my mighty Civil Air Patrol background knew more about drilling then the rest of those clods did. Incidentally, I had gone to summer camp in civil air patrol down at Stewart Air Force Base in Newburg in '52 and '53. This was my first exposure to anything close to the real air force and in '54 at Sampson Air Force Base in Geneva, New York, which at the time was the basic military training base for the air force. So I got a little bit of the real Air Force at that time. I did four years of R.O.T.C at RPI. Summer encampment was the summer of '57 at Ethan Allen Air Force Base in Vermont. By this time, when I graduated in '58, I got the commission of gold bar second lieutenant. I had been a senior member of the Civil Air Patrol Squadron in Troy as well during this time frame, when I was in college, so the first kid to pop me a salute as a genuine Air Force officer was

one of my subliminal cadets at school. He had become an R.O.T.C. cadet at RPI so that was kind of neat. So I took my engineering degree... I wanted to go into the Air Force but I didn't know if I wanted to do a career or not. In fact, I didn't think I did. I wanted to be an engineer, one that designed airplanes, get them to fly, do great stuff with aviation. I thought this would be a useful thing to do in the Air Force. And this is an aside that is interesting because I do mention it in the outline that one of my first great influences was Colonel Peter 'Pete' Dawson who was the professor of aero science. He was very influential. He was a navigator. He was one of seven navigators that were full colonels in the Air Force at the time. In the spring of '55, my freshmen year at RPI, he had arranged for field trips. That's one of the things they did in R.O.T.C. to try to influence the college kids into joining the Air Force and making a career by dazzling them with BS. So, Colonel Dawson had organized a trip down to navigator training school which was then in Texas at Ellington Air Force Base in Huston. And well, I thought it would be cool. It was over Easter break and so I said I would like to go on that. Well the staff said you can't go on that because you put down on your paperwork that when you go into the Air Force you want to be just an engineering officer. I said, what do I have to do to go there? He said, you have to say that you want to be a navigator. I said ok I want to be a navigator so I can go on the trip. So, we did that and I went on the trip. I started getting fascinated with the stuff he had. Colonel Dawson had gotten a T-29 to fly us down. Most everyone else, when they went on their trips, went in 'Goony Birds'. Well it's a T-29, which was a fancy twin engine prop plane. It was a navigator trainer. So, he put each one of us eight or nine cadets into the seats of this trainer and he acted as the instructor. He is up and down the aisles showing us the radar and what the stuff was doing and I got fascinated. This was great stuff. Navigation is cool and I crown my achievement by the fact that he came around once and he says okay cadet Bessette where are we? I looked out the window and I looked out my map and said, we are right over New Orleans sir. He said you are absolutely right. Congratulations! On paper there is a big old city down there with the levees and it matched the map directly. I have no skills. So, we did our time at Ellington. Oh, I was fascinated. So, I went back and I changed permanently. Now let me do my three-year stint as a navigator. This ought to be cool. I can actually fly. It was funny, I had no inclination to become a pilot. This was not in my ambitioned scale. I like to be around them. I learned early on that they bs'd very well and they told great stories and all this. But, I really did not want to be in control. But, I did not mind the idea of being a navigator or I could, as we used to say, tell them where to go. There were enough technical aspects to navigation, celestial navigation in particular, that interested me. So, I went off after the degree at RPI and went off to Boeing. I got hired at Boeing and wanted to sample civilian life in an aircraft manufacturing world before actually going into the Air Force. I got a six month deferment. Boeing and I basically wrote maintenance manuals for something called the Boeing Bull Mark Air Defense Missile which was a ramjet combine, sort of a hybrid. Not like today, but a hybrid with a solid fuel rocket to get you off the ground and then ramjets to move you

two and a half mock out towards the bad guy bomber where the nuclear war head would get the bad guy. So, I wrote the maintenance manuals on that for a while and then I got the notice to report to Lackland Air Force Base on January 1959, which is what I did after Christmas break back here in Lowell. I went down there, gold bar gleaming in the sun, and went into nav training. Went on to James Connelly Air Force Base in Waco, Texas which was where you did the real flying training. With a class of about twenty others I went through the whole ropes becoming a navigator, getting the wings in October of 1959. You had your three choices out of nav training in those days. You could go for bombardier training at Mather Air Force Base in California. You could go to Keesler Air Force Base and become an electronic warfare officer. That is, jam the bad guys' electronics and learn about them. Or become an air defense interceptor navigator in the back seat of a player. I chose to be a bombardier and I went back to what I was looking at. I thought it would be fun to blow up stuff like most kids do when they are seven or eight years old, especially those who were growing up in World War II. You had all of these stories, images, and the movies so I thought this would be cool. So, off we go after October of 1959. About half of our class goes to Mather, California. We enter bomb nav training, another version of T-29 trainer, all dedicated to this complicated computer driven Bomb Nav System that the B-47 and the B-52 had in it. At this time all vacuum tube driven, very clunky especially by today's standards but pretty complex. You, as a navigator, had to learn to remove and replace lots of equipment in the airplane. Because SAC would not forgive you if World War III came off and you flew your mission and the radar failed and you did not drop your hydrogen bomb on wherever, assuming there was a SAC left. Along the way, in that training, I started talking to real SAC veterans and people who have flown in the command and I learned about what it would be like to be inside. Basically, at the time, you were going to go on 47's or 52's and you would fly missions that would take you out and back, especially B-52's. You would be assigned some lovely places like Columbus, Mississippi. You would fly twenty-four hour missions and you would land back in Columbus, Mississippi. If you are lucky you would get Europe on the radar set and I wanted to travel. I realized by this time I wanted to see the world. I did not want to see it on a radar set. And another thing clicked into that toward the end of that time, we're talking the spring of 1960, heavily dramatized by the Francis Gary Powers shoot down in his U-2. The word came down that SAC was changing its tactics. Instead of going high 40,000 feet, majestically sweeping over the Soviet Union dropping the bomb, and majestically getting back out because of Soviet Air Defense capabilities we were going to go in low, get below the radar screen and get 500 feet above the train or less. I happened to look at the B-47 and the B-52. I realized that the navigator in that airplane ejected downwards. So, whether you had World War III or not you would have to do a lot of combat training missions at 500 feet or less. I had enough self-regard that I would rather survive. So, I planned a disincentive. I also realized at this time that a good number of people that graduated from that school were not going into SAC. They were taking other assignments. So, I

worked like hell to get as high in the class as I could and I got my preference. You could pick the assignments that were available to you in an order of preference. So, I was able to select something very clunky. I got to become a navigator in an air refueling squadron in tactical air command at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. So, I reported there in August of 1960 into this squadron. They were equipped with the KB-50 Tanker. The V-50 Bomber had been an improvement on the B-29 and in its day in the early 1950's. It was a pretty capable medium bomber, had a nuclear mission at the time complimenting the B-36. But, it was quickly obsoleted, and then it became a trainer, and then it became a tanker and a couple of other specialties. So, I became a navigator of a six man crew, two pilots, the nav flight engineer and two refueling operators and that was three of extremely interesting flying years out of there. I was a first lieutenant, by this time, and became an instructor nav by the time we were through. Basically, what we were doing was refueling fighters and we were refueling fighters mostly out of places like Bermuda and the Azores. We were gas stations in the sky and, by this time, tactical air command was deploying units routinely across the Atlantic back and forth. An excellent training force to reinforce Europe or North Africa or wherever. As an aside, I am now the historian for that unit. A bunch of the survivors and I have a talk about them and their history; why they were important, that they're wonderful and marvelous and all those stories. At any rate, they were three interesting years doing that. First time I saw a refueling I fell in love with the business. Up comes a half a dozen F-100 Fighters, they go up on your wing, they plug into your 'pose-and-drogue' system and take on the fuel and you get to jaw with them on the radios. Then you send them on their way across the Atlantic or the Pacific or wherever else. Loved it. But, time goes on and the airplane became obsolete and in came the SAC run KC-135 Tankers and rightfully took over the business for most Air Command and Tactical Air Command Fighters. After a spell, at Squad Officer School, I made captain and went to a troop carrier at Seward Air Force Base in Tennessee, flying the then fairly new C-130, which was a whole other beast. It was a marvelous airplane, very maneuverable, and still is. It has proven itself, time and again, in the last four years in combat and out of combat and numerous roles. I got to do that for about a year. As an aside, I have a nephew who has been a loadmaster on the 109th Airlift Wing out there at the Schenectady County Airport. I have seen his Arctic and Antarctic time, but I'll get him to talk about that. So, a year of C-130s at Seward. I was just getting good at troop drop. This was a very intimidating job to me dumping sixty four committed 82nd Airborne Paratroopers out in some place and wondering if you have them in the right spot. You don't want to piss off paratroopers by hanging them in trees and I liked them all I guess. The navigator controlled that at the time. You did not have sophisticated electronics like you do today. You did a lot of low level flying and you pop up and you hope there is a drop zone. You put on the green light, follow the procedures, and then they go. You hear a lot of stories about that. But, I was only there a year because back at Langley and my Langley days I had met and got engaged to a WAF lieutenant,

first lieutenant Carol Shure (?). We got engaged about the time I left Langley to go to Tennessee and she herself, after a spell in admin at Langley, went on to get her master's degree at Georgetown in Washington, DC. Our plan was to get married after Georgetown and before her next assignment, and then I would try to switch to try to join her at the next assignment whatever that was. Well, she got assigned to Wiesbaden, Germany so I said I can do that. So, we started the paperwork rolling just as soon as we were married. We were married the third of October 1964 in Washington. We had a honeymoon on our own airplane. I almost did not make my own wedding. I did not mention this earlier but in the troop carrier business of that time, in the sixties, you did an awful lot of 'tdy'. You were everywhere in a moment notice and one of the things we were at in August of '64 was the Tonkin Gulf Crisis. We were mobilized and sent over taking all sorts of trash; jet engines, maintenance people, maintenance facilities, the whole works to support jet fighter units that were deployed into Southeast Asia. We were going for who knows how long. They just said you go, you stay. My squadron commander knew that I was going to get married on the third of October, I hoped, and he got me sent back just in time for my wedding; good hit, very fine man. They needed to send back an airplane anyway. It wasn't like they did it just for me. They needed a navigator anyway. He said, why don't you get married while you are at it. Okay, thank you sir. So we did all that and then we applied for me to go to Wiesbaden, Germany. Carol went over late October of '64 into headquarters US Air Forces Europe and I went to Seward and did the applying and it came through. And after a stint at Stead Air Force Base in Nevada, and going through survival training, I got sent over and I joined a flying unit at Wiesbaden Air Base just outside of town where Carol was working. This became the most interesting assignment of my military life because it was supposed to look like a transport unit just hauling ash and trash around Germany and Europe. What it was really was a covert reconnaissance unit. They were equipped with transport looking airplanes, C-97's, C-118's and T-29's looking like they were really supposed to be doing all of that but they had cameras and electronic devices on board. At first I was in a C-118 unit that specialized in so called special courier flights and we were actually working for an agency, not the Air Force. I'm not sure exactly how far I can go into that but just say we did some interesting flying; nothing too horrendous but it was interesting. And then the mission was taken away from us. And I was relegated to a part of the squad where we did electronic intelligence collection missions along the East/West German border in the Baltic Sea, the East Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Berlin Corridors in particular. Now, I am also the historian for that outfit. I have a talk about them too if anybody up here is interested. The Berlin Corridor Operation was especially interesting because you actually got to fly over the Soviet controlled territory and the nature of the corridors were that you actually did fly over a lot of their military garrisons and air fields and so on. So, with my art inquisitive nature, we were taking photos and collecting info on these guys and we'd land at Temple Off (?) and go out another corridor, pretend we were transport people. Basically the

Soviets know what we were up to, at least in general. The pukey Americans were collecting intel. There's a whole history about all that business which I am trying to write, and I'd like to say get talks. It was three fascinating years. Among the highlights were the missions in the corridors. I didn't do too many of those. Other people did more than I did. But, other highlights were in the Baltic Sea where you would be intercepted by Soviet fighters and that can be interesting. Here, you're flying along and up comes the Soviet interceptors. They fly off your wing, maybe they wave at you and you wave back and you take their pictures and they take yours. They were there to say don't go over our airspace or we will shoot your ass down. We were there to say, yes sir we'll stay right on our course and mind our own business and we will collect our... well, we didn't say that but that was the basic idea. So, there was a lot of tension but there was an implication there that, if we didn't screw up, they weren't going to interfere. By that time, in the cold war, both sides had matured. This is when I say I talk about them. Both sides had matured to the point where neither one of them wanted to start World War III. And we were watching each other very warily as we did the rest of the cold war, just to make sure the other side behaved and kept track of their increasing military capabilities through outfits like my own. We were just a small part of the overall reconnaissance against the Soviets and other adversaries during a whole lot of time frame. Anyway, in February of 1968 those three halcyon years ended and through a very talented and very enterprising personnel sergeant, in our headquarters Air Force personnel, had arranged for us both to go to Vietnam. It was a time where professional officers, professional anybody, had to have a Vietnam tour whether you loved the idea or not. We weren't terribly enamored of the thought. By '68 it kind looked like we weren't going to win the war real easy and even in Germany we understood opposition was mounting to it, but we were professionals. We were going to go. We got a phone call that came from this sergeant in Texas. He called us up at home and said I got a deal for you. Two can go over, and can even go to the same airbase, and I can put you into AC-47 Gunships. Would you like to do that? I said, well ok. I said, what's this about my wife going? This is the summer of '67. He's talking and I said, our understanding is that women can't go unless they consent to go and Carol isn't particularly interested in going right now. He said, ah but we just changed the policy last week. You know, she is going whether she wants to go or not. But, if you really don't want her to go I can finagle it. But, by the time you get back she's going. I said okay, yeah okay. Carol's watching me, listening to all this and she's going like this [shaking his head]. We agreed we'd both go, so we both went. We deployed back to the states in February of '68. I go off to training in Louisiana on a C-47 Gunship and she goes over to Saigon. She is going to be an intelligence officer in Headquarters 7th Air Force at Tan Son Nhut Air Base and I am going to be at Bien Hoa Base nearby, twenty to thirty miles away. Right away we knew we were going to have a problem. We have lots of problems. Our problems paled in comparison to anybody else. That was because we're going to be separated by thirty miles. That's long in Vietnam, at the time, because trying to see your

spouse across that; first off Carol could not leave that air base. She had high security clearances. I had to visit her and often the bus service didn't run because the VC was active in the area and also I had a hellacious flying schedule. I got over there in mid-May of '68 and started flying missions out of Bien Hoa. We had these AC-47 units up and down South Vietnam. They ranged from Da Nang in the north down to Kanto in the south and there were two or three up in I Corps and II Corps. We had one in III Corps, Nha Trang and then Ben Hoa and then Kanto and we had Pleiku and Da Nang and one other place. These flights would have about four or five 'gooney birds' and about six crews to man them and the schedule was you only flew at night by this time. We learned lessons early on, in their ridiculous hubris. Air Force guys were going to fly C-47's over any aircraft equipped VC on the trails in North Vietnamese and the trails and Laos camp and South Vietnam. We lost a few airplanes before some 'dumbo' realized you don't fly some lunky thing in the daytime. So, they started flying at night. It became quite effective and by the time I got there it was in a defensive mode. Basically, you went up and reacted to what the enemy did. We flew boring holes in the sky. Out of Bien Hoa, for example, we would put up two airplanes at fundamentally sunset, fly a little bit after midnight and they would land to be replaced by two more; one over Bien Hoa and one over Saigon. If something happened you would get the word, through the tasking system, to go to coordinate so and so and talk to so and so and say that there was a special forces camp under attack or a south Vietnamese village is taking mortar rounds or whatever is wrong. Go make a right, drop flares, shoot on their command and you would be given a frequency. You'd be given a call sign. You get to the location X and talk with them and the navigator did this; this was my job talking this. We basically figured out that our job as navigators weren't especially to navigate as much, especially at III Corps, which was fairly flat. We had good radio aids. But, was to translate grunt to pilot because I'd get all of this stuff from the ground, hey s... (?), these weeds here off our northwest quadrant and downstream and in between those two trees. It is the middle of the fr... (?) night, we're dropping flares, trying to find two trees and the pilots up there wondering where to go and I finally find it, coordinate, and talk with him. If there was gun fire to be provided, and we were cleared to fire, the pilot would fire. A C-47 would go into a 30 degree bank and the guns were depressed another fifteen degrees so I got a 45 degrees press angle and the aircraft commander had a fighter pilot gunsight mounted, so he would fly like this [tilts head like he was looking out the aircraft to the left]. He would look over there and you, the nav, would talk him in on the target, he would line it up and he had a trigger right there and out would spit one, two or all three guns at two different rates of fire. That was very spectacular the way he was telling me he got to see some of the action and it was important to VC prisoners; very intimidating. We were quite successful doing that, we thought, and we got a lot of rapport back from the GI's on the ground. And it was very gratifying being the guy doing this talking back and forth to relieve the problems these guys had. And I've had a few occasions since running into guys that say you helped save my ass on Two Dan

Mountain. Let me buy you a beer. You know this would be thirty years later. Ok, buy me a beer. What the heck. It may have not been me. It may not be my era or anything like that but this is very impressive. I was very happy to be part of that aspect of it. The airbase itself attracted a bunch very interestingly. I got there after the famous Tet Offensive of '68 but in February of '69 the North Vietnamese tried other versions of it. It was much less powerful but it was still reasonably potent enough for us to lie in a ditch while rocket rounds landed all around our airplane. It was interesting. I can't say I was hugely afraid during any of this. I was varying degrees of bored, because you did fly lots of boring hours waiting for something to happen. I did a lot of reading. A lot of my combat time was taken up at the nav table. It had a nice light and I could sit there reading novels (?) or doing some historical reading or whatever and then would come the call when you went on a target. You were too busy to be afraid. You had different degrees of anti-air craft fire. You had very little. By the III Corps area around Saigon, in our era, the North Vietnamese and the VC had no anti-aircraft weaponry except for fifty caliber machine guns. They were the only thing that threatened us at 3,000 feet above the terrain and you would see this very inaccurate stuff come up, and of course, we did not put on our nav lights or anything. They could only aim at where we had been, where the fire was coming from. I can only remember one target where I felt like ooh, and this was the first time I had significant wonder whether I was going to get through this, in my mind, because it was basically a trap. They had been going for a Special Forces Camp with a good load of VC from all around the camp. It was a very well planned attack. The camp was under severe distress. We got to the scene and once we got to the scene and started putting down flares all the 'Triple A' (?) opens up on us. They are coming from about six different positions around camp and I had a brand new second lieutenant aircraft commander and that guy was beautiful. He flew in and out and around stuff. He was amazing. He dropped the flares like he was supposed to. He hosed down the 'Triple A' (?) sites. It was amazing. Dino, a good Italian name, was his name. That's all I can remember right now but he was great. I've got a tape of it at home. We had to tape our missions because there had been some friendly fire incidents and other things. That had been the first time that I had seen cassette tape recorders. They had them in our airplane so if you had an interesting mission you would try and copy the tape and I've got it at home someplace. When I played it back I realized I was yelling at Dino the pilot. You know, hey Dino, go baby go. You know, all of that stuff. I didn't realize I had it in me, but we suppressed the bad guys around that camp and went on with life. Anyway, we got reassigned. Carol got reassigned May of '69. Now, we have both made major on a list that came out early 1969. Alone, neither one of us had pinned it on yet. We were at this point in our career that I had ten and Carol had nine. We did not have children. Female officers or anyone could not have children and stay in the military at that stage. That only changed in the 1970's so were we going to stay in or not. Was I going to stay in or not? Was she going to stay in or not? A fundamental decision we made at that time was to stay in. What

can they do to us? Send us to Vietnam? We were already here we decided. And the same sergeant back in personnel was still in place. In fact, he sent us a message saying what do you want to do next? He had taken to us. We were that unique. We were that weird. We were a husband and wife team and he liked both of us as people. We got to know him personally and he liked what we were doing professionally. After coordinating with Carol, who was already an intelligence officer, I said I would like to join the intelligence career field. After coming out of Vietnam officers got a pretty good chance of doing what they wanted to do. So, Carol and I heard about a school at Anacostia, Washington, DC called the Defense Intelligence School which specifically was for mid-grade officers who had not been in the career field before and were going to a joint school, Army/Navy/Air Force, and that's what I would like to get in. It fits me. Carol had no formal intelligence training. She became an intelligence officer by virtue of her master's degree in international relations. So she did not know when she got to her first assignment in Germany what a chart was from a map you know. She did not know the fundamentals. She had to learn it on the job, much to the amusement of her NCO's, which is a whole other story. But, she got darn good at it so we got to go to the same school. Carol came back in May of '69 and I came back August of '69. The reason for that, even though it was a year assignment, was that if you wanted to go to this school it only starts in September of '69. Both of you would have to extend your tours from May to August, three more months in Vietnam, and neither one of us wanted to do that. So, we wrote back and said Carol has been an intelligence officer for four years now; very accomplished. Surely she can do something on the staff of the school to help them out during the summer. We had heard of other people doing this and I had been an additional duty intelligence officer. They came back and said Captain Carol Bessette can join the school in May of '69. As for you, have a nice summer in Vietnam. They were not impressed with my intelligence credentials. So, I got back in August and together we went to the school and after that I pinned on my major's sleeves. About a year later Carol did hers. Nine months in this school, god bless, as an intelligence officer and we both got assignments to DIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, in Washington, DC. I got to be assigned with a group that was supporting the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon, actually doing reconnaissance support based on my time in Germany. It was part of the JCS called the Joint Reconnaissance Center. DIA provided current intelligence to them and assessed the nature of recon missions worldwide. The risks to them from various strange players like Libya and the Soviet Union, China, North Korea and so on. There had been enough shoot downs over the decades; nasty incidents that the JCS got tired of it; so did President Nixon, Kissinger and company. We don't want any more incidents then we have to have with the Soviets so we had this special group organized to support the Joint Reconnaissance Center. I was part of that. It was a very interesting three years. Did that and in the summer of '73 we got assigned to Ramstein, Germany. We had another five years in Germany. Myself and a NATO assignment at Carroll, back to US Air Forces Europe Headquarters. So, we went

over as a team in July of '63 into our respective assignments. That's a whole other story that we don't need to get into the details. The same sergeant helped us get over there, too. The NATO Headquarters was called the 4th Allied Tactical Air Force and in the NATO structure, of the time, in time of conflict or crisis. US Air Forces Europe, half of the German Air Force and the Canadian Air Force in Europe would all come under this 4th Allied Tactical Air Force. They would defend the area of southern West Germany. There was another Allied Air Force up north which consisted of British, half of the German Air Force, Belgians and Dutch and they defended the north. I was in that headquarters for about a year providing current intelligence, briefings and papers and participating in the numerous exercises that NATO had trying to exercise this complicated wartime structure. Then the US advocated, and eventually was approved in the NATO structure, something called Allied Air Forces Central Europe which was a combination of the two Allied Tactical Air Forces into one central command. Lots of theories behind it. Burgeoning computer capability of the US, especially, and NATO in general had enthusiasts of this sort of game. Command to control. Want to centralize power. We all know air power doctrine is central control and decentral exit (?) and all of that good stuff. So that was a major challenge to set up this new concept and I became a part of that as a major in the 'intel' business, a minor player but never the less a player. And in 1976 we both came up for lieutenant colonel. I had been up for lieutenant colonel before Carol and I had failed the promotion once. It was the summer of 1975 and I did not make it and it pissed me off which surprised me. I did not realize I would have that reaction. I was told in advance by a friend of Carol's who had seen the list, 'You need to know that you did not make it'. By the time they announced the list publicly I had my head together. To his great credit, there was a great colonel whose name I forget. An American colonel in the NATO headquarters whose responsibility was to supervise all of the Americans in this headquarters in terms of their paperwork and personnel. He called me in and one or two other guys who hadn't made lc . This was a turning point. He said okay, I understand you know by now you didn't make it and I said, yes sir. He said, what are you going to do about it? It wasn't sympathy. It wasn't tough luck or that you are inadequate or anything like that. It was, 'what are you going to do about it'? I am going back to personnel in Texas as soon as you will let me and I'm going to find out what was wrong with my folder and I am going to get cracking. He said that sounds like the right answer so go. So, I went back and did various things. I signed up for Air War College and correspondence and various other things and I got the endorsement of a very remarkable man. He was my NATO boss, a Royal Air Force group captain. A very interesting guy. He wrote an indignant letter to the US Air Forces Europe commander, who was his NATO boss, saying that he was highly pissed that his favorite young officer did not make lieutenant colonel. Here is his virtues and all this. It was written in very good British ease. I've got a copy of it to this day. The next time I had an officer effectiveness report it was endorsed by the commander of US Air Forces Europe. Promote this son of a bitch as fast as you can, and next

time around I got promoted, along with Carol on the same list. We went on from there. We stayed in Europe for a couple extensions until 1978 and in the summer, we were going to be reassigned. By this time I'd been out of a flying assignment since the summer of '69. Nine long years away from the cockpit and I was still a rated navigator; made master navigator. The short for that was 'master gator'. We didn't carry that too far. But there was a crunch, post-Vietnam era crunch. We'd let many people out of the Air Force, after Vietnam, and there was a very great crunch for navigators and pilots both. So, anybody who had wings was being called back out of staff jobs to do these sorts of things. So, they told me that you're going back into the cockpit. I said, well fair enough, it was time and frankly I was itching to go. It was going to be interesting to go back to flying even though, as a lieutenant colonel navigator. But I said I am married to this lieutenant colonel intelligence officer. What can we do about that? They said basically, we don't know but come back to Texas and we'll talk about it. So, I went on temporary duty like I had done three years earlier. I went back on a quick trip, self-funded, and talked personnel stuff. And basically, we could not find an airbase where I would have a line assignment. Where she could have a meaningful intelligence officer assignment at the rank of lieutenant colonel. It was a given, at this time, in the flying business, that you can get a squadron of whatever airplanes overloaded with lieutenant colonels and majors like myself who hadn't been flying for years and were filling slots that were normally captain slots or lieutenant slots. So, I'd go back and I'd just be one of three or four or five lieutenant colonels that were not filling lieutenant colonel jobs. And by that time, I said I will do this for another two or three years and then I will retire. But Carol was a rising star it looked like. And if anybody was going to make full colonel it was going to be her so I said we have to find a place where she had a meaningful job. Well, they came up with things like McGuire, New Jersey on C-141's. I said, well okay, that would be interesting but what can you do for her. The best they could find is a major's billet for intelligence officer where she would not have the security clearances. But, they tried to make it sound good. And, I said, we don't want that if we can avoid it. There were a couple of other bases and none of them worked so I finally decided to retire. And having that happen it freed Carol up and she got a good assignment in the Washington, DC area again. So, we went back to Washington. Again there was a separation of a few months. I retired effectively at the end of January 1979, with twenty years, and Carol was already in her new assignment in Washington in the defense intelligence college as an instructor in what they call deputy dean.

[Someone walked in named Mike]

JF: I am just going to finish the narration on the military bit. Fundamentally, I retired at the end of January of '79 and Carol is still on active duty. I took a job with a defense contractor dealing with NATO command and control issues which fit what I had been doing. But, I did not like it that well. In the defense contractor world you're private enterprise, for one thing. You are working for someone who

is trying to make money. I still had the ethic, serve your country. But, I did this because it was good experience and I could use my background. A company called Betak in Arlington, Virginia. Did that for a year and then in early 1980 openings came up in Defense Intelligence Agency for civilian analysts. I joined them in April of 1980 as a GS-12 and became a civilian analyst on the Soviet Air Force with all kinds of good security clearances. It was a good follow up to my NATO intelligence officer job. I became 'the guy' in the defense intelligence agency on Soviet Air Forces air transport aviation and military transport aviation, which kind of fit my background. I got to do that for 16 years and finally retired as a civilian analyst in 1996, 11 years ago now. Carol, herself, stayed in that college. She came up for colonel twice but didn't make it. She retired in 1985 and became a defense contractor herself, then became a museum guide, then a tour guide in Washington, DC, which is what she is doing now. That sort of wraps it up. She does her thing. I do various projects, family history, military history, military aviation, volunteer historian jobs that I've got and a couple other things along those lines which has brought me to this museum every year since its opening back in '01 or '02; one or two doing research here on the Guard. It's been a pleasure being here.

Q: So, I imagine from being in the Air Force for about twenty years from '59 to '79 you must have seen some changes during the Vietnam War. Were there problems with personnel in the Air Force as far as racial problems? I know on the army side we've heard a lot of details on personnel problems.

JF: In Vietnam, I do not recall any issue coming up. We did have several blacks on the enlisted side of my flight. Basically, the air crew on the AC-47 was two pilots, a nav, a flight engineer, a loadmaster, and two gunners, all enlisted folks. I do not recall any instances of this time. By the late sixties, in the Air Forces environment that I was in a lot of that had gone away. Of course, the normal Air Force environment, while barracksed on airbases, was not quite as intense as an Army environment. And the type of combat we were in was not nearly as intense as units could be in with the risk of life value, in the army or marines corps especially, so I didn't see that much. There was some underlying tensions, you know, with little white southern boys coming in fresh off from Mississippi or where ever that would have their problems with blacks. I heard a little bit of that. Being a captain, at the time, I wasn't involved with that. There was probably some, but I was unaware of it.

Q: Now, during that time period did the peace movement have any effects on the bases you were at? Were there protests or anything of that sort?

JF: In Vietnam itself, we heard about all of this stuff. It was on the news and so on. When we got back to the states, where we'd been out of the states effectively from 1965 early or in Carol's case, late 1964 until the fall of 1969. We were gone for the burgeoning of the peace movement as well as the burgeoning of the Vietnam War and its effect on the whole country here. So, although we knew a lot about it by reading the newspapers and hearing on the radio we did not have

much television in armed forces tv in Europe. So, we did not have the drama of tv in Germany in particular. We had some of it in Vietnam, of course. We were sort of isolated from that until we got back to the states in 1969. We had to live through that here, especially in the Washington, DC area, right up until the fall of Saigon in 1975. We were there when a couple of protests happened at the pentagon itself. That's as close as I got personally to that issue. It was one day when protesters threatened to shut down the pentagon by putting an impenetrable ring of protesters around the whole building. Well, they underestimated the size of the pentagon, for one thing, and also a whole lot of cops and soldiers and National Guard and everything else. The military went through and we showed our badges and uniforms and we got through and every one was very polite. I personally never had any kind of a problem or confrontation. Neither Carol nor I had a problem going back into the states from Vietnam, unlike the stories you hear. Unlike a lot of folks, especially late sixties and early seventies, when the protest movement was the strongest. You got the baby killers and all of that horrible stuff. Aside, one of the few things we learned from the Vietnam era is that whether or not you like the war in Iraq you support the troops. You try to keep the troops insulated from any anti-war stuff. It hasn't totally worked but that's one of the lessons we've learned, I think, is instinctive as American people. So no, the personal effect was irritation at the peace movement. Understanding the peace movement. I understood where they were coming from by watching the war close up for fifteen months. I knew that the North Vietnamese and the VC were extremely bad guys. I also knew we were having deep troubles fending them off. And we as a nation were not as committed as we might have thought we might be early on. I was having my struggle even then. I knew in the late sixties the only way we could win this thing was not so much fire power and all of that kind of stuff. It was, we had to win the war in the Vietnamese people's minds. So, I did some traditional work with the local orphanages and schools and so on, part of trying to be friends with the Vietnamese people. And they were lovely folks. But, it wasn't going to work. We, the United States, we're not going to go in and nuke Hanoi and win the war in some dramatic way like that. It was just a rough thing we had gotten our arms around and very tragic. So, I personally had nothing against peace protesters and Carol was especially that way as a tour guide. She see lots of people, all kinds at the Vietnam Wall, and she has had to cope with a lot of reactions, of one kind or another. People who've let their emotions run. She would tell her background; when she was over there. Some people, teachers for example, would come and say 'as a student I was a peace protester please forgive me'. And she would say, nothing to forgive. And they would hug each other and they do all this girl stuff. A lot of emotional stuff. She's had guys, hardened Marine Corps people, who would finally let go at the Wall. Or Army types. It's been hard. That's our take, fundamentally.

Q: Since your retirement have you joined any veteran's organizations or attended any reunions or anything like that?

JF: Nothing formal like the American Legion or VFW. The closest I could say to that is being in running reunions and being in associations for two of my flying units and going to those and being the historian for them. I do feel an obligation towards people like that to help them or their descendants with helping them find their background. One of my great delights right now is helping people out. You'll get people call and say, my father was in your unit back in the '60's in Germany and what do you know about him? So, I'll dig around in the files I've got or luckily our collective memories come up with what happened old Bill.

Q: It's got to be pretty rewarding to be able to help a family member like that.

JF: Yeah, it is especially interesting and we've had accidents. To my tanker business, for example, in over a twelve year's existence of these KB-50 tankers we had maybe sixteen fatal crashes. We lost a bunch of people, ninety plus. And once in a while somebody will come in and say my father was a refueling operator on airplane so and so and he was a lost. The family member never heard of why or how so I would dig around. I would figure out what I can from the accident reports and details. Find people who might have known him and get them in contact. I like that very much.

Q: Anything in closing you would like to add? I think you pretty well covered about everything.

JF: Nothing that can come off the top of my head. This is a sort of thing twenty minutes after we shut down or when I'm on the road...

[tape cuts out]

JF: I will always be happy I grew up in that small rural town in northern New York. My parents were who they were. Growing up in rural America; it's not the rural south. It's the rural northern New York. But, it's a lot. The accents are different. It was great. I had good teachers. The school systems encouraged the hell out of us and it's a great environment up there. I was happy to go to RPI as well, even though I did not become an engineer. It was a great educational experience and if you want to zoom in on this shot. That shows the two of us at our retirement in 1979. That's Carol and myself.

Q: I am going to stop this right now. We are running out of tape and you have more photographs, so we will get it on another tape.

Q: What have you got next?

JB: I've got three of the standard Air Force portraits that they took of Officers at various stages of their careers, particularly after they got promoted. I don't know why I want to show you my youthful self, but it is all part of the record! This me and there is a Second Lieutenant brown bar as I entered Nav Training down in Texas in January 1959. A beautiful soul. (John shows an 8x10 black and white photo as described)

JB: The next one is only about four years later, but I got my wings there, so I am very proud. I'm a First Lieutenant and beginning to get the bags under the eyes. But that comes with the loss of immaturity, or whatever you want to call it. That was in February of 1962 (8 10 black and white of John as described)

JB: And this is one of those shots they took of you when you were a Senior Officer and you were supposed to look determined and far sighted and ready to take on the world and become a Colonel if the Promotion Board lets you. This is me having just made Lieutenant Colonel in July 1976. (8x10 black and white showing John as described) A lot has changed since then over the last decades. That is fundamentally it.

Q: Let me ask you also, when you were in Vietnam, did you get to see Bob Hope or any USO shows?

JB: No, curiously, I don't recall them ever coming to Bien Hoa when I was there. Actually paradoxically, I got to see more entertainment when I visited my wife in Tan Son Nhut in the Officer's Club there. There was sort of a reason for that. She was in a headquarters's unit and had a lot of comparable Staff Officers working with her and for her. She was a Senior Captain at that time and the Officer's Club was the place you went. It was teeming with people. Even though Thompson Air Base itself occasionally got rocket attacks, it was a pretty lively Officer's Club. There was a lot of entertainment for hire, whether it was through the USO, I'm not sure but I don't remember seeing any headliners in country.

At Bien Hoa, the atmosphere was very different. In particular, for our unit. Bien Hoa hosted a fighter wing of F-100s plus various auxiliary air units like Army aviation units there like our Spooky Gunship outfit. We were quartered well away from the Officer's Club. Since we flew all night, and slept during the daytime, not many of us went to the O Club. It was a trek over there and back in your Jeep. And there wasn't much actually going on except drinking. If you were on alert to go fly, you better not be drinking! When we had parties there, we had them in the morning when the flying shift got off duty. So we did not have any professional entertainment at the Bien Hoa Officer's Club, but what I remember is we would have a party over in the corner with all the guys that were just coming off of flying. And all the guys who didn't fly last night, but were getting tired and about to go to sleep.

Basically, we slept from 8 am to 4 pm. We had air-conditioned quarters, thank God. We would have these raucous parties over in one corner and we would compete to see who popped the champagne corks the farthest across the room. See who you could hit. The highest ranking guy you could get on their table or whatever and piss them off. (laughs) Most of them understood and didn't bother us so that was okay.

We did have a month's TDY (Temporary Duty Yonder) myself and a few other crews up into Southeast Asia to Udorn Air Base in Thailand. We were flying

missions, this is in March of 1969 in support of friendlies in the Laotian Mountains. They were under heavy attack from the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese at that time. It looked like a serious breakthrough, so we were doing all we could that Spring. So we were flying missions up into the mountains of Northern Laos and that was my first experience in the mountains doing this kind of flying, that was pretty intimidating.

The base also hosted four F-105 units that flew over the North. That was especially intense, probably the most intense Air Force flying that anybody did in the Southeast Asian conflict. This is where you really got the SA-2 missiles and the Triple A was bad. These guys took heavy losses a lot. So these guys were very hyped, and the parties in that O Club were non-stop. They were flying twenty-four hours a day, doing reconnaissance as well as some ground attack. So whenever you went into that club, there was a party going on. It was quite intense, I would say more intense than Bien Hoa. In Bien Hoa, where we were under attack a lot by mortars and rockets, most people had the good sense in the evening to not wander far from a shelter.

Q: Did you ever have any close calls with incoming rockets?

JB: Prefaced by saying, the detection system around Bien Hoa was very, very good. By this time of the war 1968-69, they had a series of radars that could detect rocket rounds in the ascendancy, as they came up. The security police hit the sirens before the rockets even got to their apogee, so you had fifteen or twenty seconds to get to a shelter before the first one hit. We made sure there were shelters near all of our quarters. People built sandbags shelters that were made more sophisticated over the years. So there was little danger there and there were not that many attacks and they were very erratic. They couldn't aim these rockets. They were unable to get close enough to Bien Hoa to fire mortars, so rockets were the main thing.

In one case though, it was dramatically different and that was what we called the Tet '69 Offensive that I mentioned earlier. In February 1969 at the time of Tet, they did a surprise attack. We got a warning that something was up and had augmented manning and so on. We had already flown the first shift of the evening, I was airborne for the first shift of the particular night that that started from sundown to midnight. Nothing much had happened, we landed and went to the chow hall. Then we were going to go on ground alert in case anything else did happen the rest of the evening.

We had heard word through the Intel channels that something was up, so it wasn't a huge surprise. We were in the chow hall line when the sirens went off and "crump, crump, crump" happened and we said "holy shit" and got out of the chow hall into the nearest ditch, not a shelter, but a ditch. Then came another round of rockets, and then a third round. Some of them came pretty close to the chow hall so there was stuff flying around well above our heads. But we found

these nice, convenient ditches that protected us. Unless the stuff was very close, we were okay. That was pretty close.

Then there was a let up so we got into a couple of Jeeps and raced to the flight line. We knew what we were supposed to do, we didn't have to check in with anybody. Somebody might have, I don't recall if we had a walkie-talkie system or not. But we raced straight to the flight line. The engines on our aircraft were already warmed up and turning over. We leaped into the airplane and roared out of the runway while another round of rockets hit while we were taxiing out. We took off amidst the rockets. All you could do was take off against the rockets and hope that nothing would hit you. Well, nothing did. We got airborne and sent to about three different targets before we exhausted our ammo and flares.

Some of the Triple A around those targets was pretty interesting.

Long Binh, Army headquarters, took heavy attacks that night I remember. It was the next night after that when the attacks continued that the Air Force's only enlisted, until recently, Medal of Honor incident took place. It was a hitherto undistinguished Loadmaster in our very flight, John Levitow a native of Connecticut and Airman Second Class at the time, who won the Medal of Honor. His Spooky Gunship was flying over Long Binh and took a mortar round in the right wing. It blew a hole in the right wing of his AC-47. It took shrapnel all down the cabin and decked the two gunners and himself who were in the back. The airplane was uncontrollable briefly. What happened in this instance was he had a flare, his job was to drop the flares. He had a flare in his hand, and he had already set the timing on it when this explosion took place. He was knocked on his ass. The flare was rolling around inside the cabin and the timer was going. He had taken multiple shrapnel wounds. The testimony was he could not even use his arms, he was virtually paralyzed. But he used the rest of his body and inched the flare over to the door, and inched it out where it exploded just beyond the airplane. So he saved the crew. They landed and as they hauled the wounded people away, the Aircraft Commander said "I'm putting you in for the Air Force Cross." We heard about it that morning.

So I raced out to the flight line that evening and got all these pictures of the AC-47 that was all riddled with shrapnel. It turned out someone said "The Air Force Cross? Hell no, we are putting you in for the Medal of Honor!" and he did get it. I'm proud to have known the guy. Like so many Medal of Honor winners and those kind of people, they don't broadcast it ahead of time. You just find yourself in a situation and then it is your inner workings that get you to do what you are supposed to do.

Q: Do you know if he is still living?

JB: Unfortunately no. He died maybe in 1999 or so. There is an Air Force Enlisted Heritage Hall down at what they now call Gunter Annex in Alabama near Montgomery. It is essentially a museum to the Air Force Enlisted man. In

there they have Levitow's story among others and a replica AC-47 parked outside with the markings of the airplane that he was in that night. They have a dummy inside there showing him moving the flare along the floor. It's very impressive. But being the nutcase that I am, I noticed that they had the wrong squadron markings on the airplane. So I have given them slides showing what the airplane really looked like and the next time they paint it to fix it. John was quite a guy. We had flown in the same crew a few times and I had him pegged as a guy who was smarter than he acted. He went in basically to avoid the draft and just did what had to be done. But there was something there, I didn't know quite what it was, but there was some potential there. Sure enough, he went on to a career in the Veterans Administration helping Connecticut Veterans. (tape cuts off for a few seconds) That's my brush with greatness in that story anyway. (John laughs)

Q: Okay, well thank you very much.

JB: You are very welcome Wayne. I appreciate you doing this for me and all the other guys too.