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Interviewers

Interviewed on May 3, 2002
Rome Free Academy High School
Rome, New York

BB: When did you first join the Air Force?
HB: That was 1961, out in Pennsylvania.

BB: Were you drafted?
HB: No, I signed up.

BB: What was it like in basic training?
HB: Basic training, down in Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. I went in February, which was a good move; it wasn't all that hot down in San Antonio, already had lizards crawling out of cracks in the ground. It was fun. You had to learn how to take care of your things; had to learn how to clean out the toilet with your toothbrush (not the same one you use, fortunately), things like obstacle courses, calisthenics, and drills and ceremonies. It kept you busy.

BB: Did you go to technical school afterwards.
HB: Not technical. I went to undergraduate navigator training school for nine months in Waco, Texas.

BB: Did you do anything after that?
HB: After that, I went for radar intercept officer training school, again in Waco, Texas. It was a six-month program leading to, hopefully, flying in the back seat of an F101 Voo-Doo, but we all went, instead, to riding the bus and flying Super Connies [Super Constellation] in California.

BB: In California, what base were you stationed at?
HB: McClellan Air Force Base, just outside of Sacramento.

BB: What did you do out of there?
HB: Part of the 552nd Airborne Early Warning and Control Wing, 965th squadron. We flew the Super Constellation which was the predecessor to the current AWACS [Airborne Warning Control System]. They search for radars (unclear) underneath, height finder radar, like a shark fin on the top, and we patrolled the west coast looking for incoming traffic, specifically traffic that should not be there.

BB: Did you ever find any traffic that shouldn't have been there?
HB: No, not really. No Russian bombers.

BB: Shortly after you enlisted, Vietnam came up and you were assigned to go or did you volunteer?
HB: That was an interesting story. One day, I was called into the operations officer's office and he asked me a simple question, "Think of any reason you can't go to Vietnam?" And I guess I couldn't think fast enough. So, I got to go and it was probably my own fault in some way. I was a combat-ready navigator but probably wouldn't have gone, except I also filled a spot as an administrative services officer for the squadron and they needed one for the taskforce. They could get two people for the weight and cost of having one person over there.

BB: And this taskforce, is this the Big Eye Task Force?
HB: Yes. Big Eye, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Taskforce went over with Super Connies. We even got there a little before SAC, the Strategic Air Command.

BB: How did you get placed in that taskforce?
HB: We took about five aircrafts, I think it was about seven air crews over, plus a bunch of maintenance people. I was combat-ready and could fill the position of an admin. officer, and ended up filling the position of an admin. clerk that they also didn't bother to send over. It was my extra duties that probably got me there.

BB: And all you basically did on this taskforce was search the skies for unwanted traffic?
HB: We had a main operating base on Taiwan, or Formosa, depending on which you want to call it, where we did a lot of repairs. The Super Connie was a big aircraft, so they didn't want a lot of them over in-country, in Vietnam, taking up space where they could land choppers, and fighter aircraft, and the like. So, we would migrate over to Vietnam, fly a series of missions where we would go up to the Gulf of Tonkin and monitor and control Rolling Thunder Missions against the north.

BB: Rolling Thunder?
HB: Rolling Thunder. That was the code name of the missions that were largely F-105s on bombing runs on targets in North Vietnam. We had to control where they were going and keep eyes open for any type of MiG activity that might try to intercept them.

BB: Did any MiG activity occur?
HB: Not so much. They stayed on the ground and we left them alone, and if they came up, they were likely to be history. We did get what we thought was a Chinese MiG coming off of Hainan Island once, but we never engaged and couldn't confirm that.

BB: So, you weren't ever host at over Vietnam?

HB: We may have taken a little bit of ground fire. We had an engine come out when we were low level, in country. Maybe it was ground fire, maybe it wasn't.
BB: Did you notice that you got hit while you were still in the cockpit or did you get out and say "There's a bit hole there?"
HB: No, we put a jug or a piston right through the (unclear) on one of the engines. Of course, all of your lights go on immediately for that engine. You shut it down, feather it, and come in on three.

BB: You weren't in any dogfights at all?
HB: No, none of the good stuff.

BB: Did you notice anything unusual in Vietnam?
HB: There were a number of things. Like if you were in Saigon, because you had wings on there was a price on your head. You were worth money, dead or alive, preferably alive, delivered to the V.C. You walked around with a 38 strapped on. The Vietnamese Police wore white uniforms, referred to as "white mice." Often times, they would try to come up and bum ammunition from you. Whether they were put out into the streets without ammunition or had sold their ammunition to the other side was hard to say. Three o'clock in the morning, there would be lots of little kids out on the street gathering bugs; and, they weren't gathering bugs for pets. It was part of their food supply. I assume they knew which ones were good and which ones were not so good.

BB: What would you do when you were off duty? Were you allowed to leave base?
HB: When there were not quarters on the base at Saigon, Tan Son Nhut, in essence you were flying and fighting a war during the day and you'd come home and jump into a petty cab or taxi and go spend the night in a hotel, downtown Saigon, which was probably riskier than some of the flying we did because they bombed some of those hotels. You'd go to a restaurant and sit in the back, with your back against the wall, watching the door to see if somebody was going to toss a grenade into the room.

BB: Did anything like that ever happen?
HB: No, not to me. We had one of the other crews there that was eating at the Mekong floating restaurant on the river in Saigon. While they were eating there, had a bomb go off alongside the boat; and then, as people were getting off there was another bomb that they had placed by the gangway. A bigger bomb, to take the traffic out. They, fortunately, went over the side into the mud, rather than going out the gang plank.

BB: For your service in Vietnam, did you get any medals?
HB: I got the Vietnam Service Medal for just being there, the Air Medal for flying type operations, the Air Force Commendation Medal for the work I was doing between flights running the administrative functions for the taskforce.

BB: Did you ever see anything amazing happen, like with any other kinds of aircraft, while you were there?

HB: Formosa was kind of interesting. There you are dealing with the Nationalist Chinese Air Force, where there are probably six or eight pilots to every aircraft that they have to fly, and there is a lot of competition to be the lead pilot for a particular aircraft. One day, we're out there on the flight line, and one of their Sabers, F-86s, came in and couldn't lower the landing gear. Without foaming the runway ahead of time, they put it down on the runway, gear up. He pops the canopy and the pilot climbs out. The plane's on fire, smoke and flames everywhere, and he very calmly, slowly, deliberately walks away because if he shows panic, that on top of having cost them an airplane, he'd probably never get any flying time for the next year.

BB: An F-86, is that a big plane?
HB: F-86 is a single seater, fighter aircraft. This is essentially our main airplane during the Korean War. This is after the Korean War and, as surplus, these were issued.

BB: Is there anybody in particular that you served with, like your pilot? Did you always fly with the same pilot?
HB: Mostly, yes. We took the planes over with the flight crew and we pretty much stayed together. Captain Gene Sanders was the pilot; Captain Jim Bomb was the co-pilot. I'm still looking for pictures. While he was over there, he adopted a monkey that went almost everywhere sitting on his shoulder.

BB: Did you ever get a monkey?
HB: No, I never got a monkey.

BB: Are those the only people that you worked with?
HB: No, I worked with a number of people. In state-side, I worked very closely with Major Casey, who was my aircraft commander of for a while and then was the executive officer for the squadron. I did a lot of career guidance and helped him a lot with career guidance for other young officers and, through him, I got involved in serving as the squadron administrative services officer after being an information services officer. I learned a lot of things other than flying as a way of trying to advance my career prospects.

BB: What year did you get out of Vietnam?
HB: I was in Vietnam in '65. I got out of the Air Force in December of '65. My goal in the Air Force were to get advanced education. I went into the Air Force with a bachelor's in English and took a lot of math and science courses and was conditionally qualified for the Air Force Institute of Technology and Electrical Engineering. I needed one credit hour in engineering graphics or mechanical drawing, I did that and then, "Oh, you're frozen to the cockpit for the duration." So, the end of '65, I got out and went to Penn State, wife, and two kids, and me on, essentially selling forty-seven days of leave back and did that for a year until I ran out of money.

BB: It says here that you were a part of the Cuban Crisis?
HB: Yes, early on, after I was at McClellan, about the time I arrived there, was the initial blockade and the stand down between Kruschev and Kennedy. The way we kept track of what

was going on in Cuba was via U-2 over flights, flying up 60,000 feet. Our group went down there operating out of Orlando, McCoy Air Force Base, again with the Super Constellations flying out over the Gulf. In that particular area, watching, tracking where the U-2 was, keeping our eyes open for big traffic or the launch of surface to air missiles, trying to make sure they came back safely. Of course we'd need photographs to see if work on the missile sites was continuing or had been aborted, or if maybe they were just doing it in a different place. Than before

HB: Did you ever encounter any Migs?
BB: No, which was good because, other than having some friendly aircraft in the area, the best we could do is pop it over wing hatch and stick an M-16 out, which was not too effective if the MiG is being launched on you or 4,000 yards behind you.

HB: Now, I heard a story about a paint canon and some kind of a tower?
BB: Down in the Caribbean there's a lot of little islands that they call cays and, to make sure the boats didn't run into them, a lot of them had light houses on them. In the back of the aircraft we had tube that you could put flares in and launch flares to light up the sky if there were an emergency. Well, the tubes were just about the right size for a pint can of paint. Most of our flying over water was under five hundred feet. Whereas looking up at the aircraft carriers, rather than down on aircraft carriers, we were flying just enough to clear these light houses. If your timing was right, we could get one yellow can of paint down the side of one of those lighthouses down there. Not something we should do; not something our leaders would brag about or write up in our performance reports. But, it seemed like a good thing to do at the time. [Both laugh]

HB: During the missile crisis, how long did you participate in that?
BB: That was about a ninety day, temporary duty assignment, rotate crews in and out. Since we weren't at war, they tried to get as many people experienced as possible. It would also minimize the disruption of family life, being in Florida when your family was in California.

HB: Your basic mission objectives were to just go up and monitor the skies over Cuba?
BB: Yes, specifically when the U-2 flights were coming.

HB: How did you know they were coming?
BB: We were tied into the intelligence. These were coordinated activities. We knew what time they were going and we would launch to be on-station, and we were on station at low altitudes so that the Cuban radars wouldn't know we were there. Which brings up an interesting story, one day we came back, probably two hundred feet over the waves and ended up over downtown Miami and jumped up two or three thousand feet and had an aircraft controller over the horn very quickly go "large aircraft over downtown Miami, please identify yourself."

HB: Did you get in trouble for that?
BB: No, they told us later that it probably wasn't the greatest idea to do that. Nobody got court martialed or rated badly on that.

HB: What was it like to possibly be fly one of the first Air Defense Command?
BB: It's kind of crazy because Air Defense Command is notoriously a state-side assignment. We're here to protect the continental U.S but we had a unique capability and you see that in AWACS now. All over the world they monitor aircraft and controlling aircraft. Back then, we were a relatively unique capability that could monitor aircraft and was used during Mercury shots, during re-entry our radars could track the capsule whereas ground based radars couldn't. So, in any case, when we are going to start flying missions across the north of North Vietnam, without air traffic control and combat radar sites positioned on the ground in Vietnam, we were the solution. Figuring I would always be state-side, till I got reassigned. I ended up flying what may have been the first Air Defense combat mission ever, and went eight to ten thousand miles away from the U.S.

HB: It was unique.
BB: That would be the claim to fame. We even got there before the B-52s.

HB: Did you ever witness a bombing?
BB: No. We were out there over water, down two hundred feet. We couldn't see too far away. We did see some Russian trawlers we were keeping track on. So I don't think the North Vietnamese may have known when we were out on-station, which may have clued them in when to expect some of the bombing runs.

HB: What did you do after you got out of the military?
BB: Afterwards, I went to Penn State for a year working on a master's in physics. Then came the Rome Air with HRB Singer, which was headquartered in State College, Pennsylvania. I started working doing project work for Rome Air Development Center, which was interesting. It tied into the Air Force within a year. On two of their projects, I was at the Eglin Air Force Base running an evaluation on a self-contained night attack aircraft, where they took a C-123 Provider Transport and turned it into a high tech bomber with forward looking infrared, lowlight level television, and multimode radar sensors, to try to find activity along the Ho Chi Minh Trail under three levels of jungle canopy, which was always a challenge.

HB: It says here that you travelled to Alaska after that earthquake?
BB: Yes. When you didn't have a war going, special missions would go up. One time we took a C-54 up to Elmendorf in Anchorage, Alaska about three days after the quake. I'll leave behind some pictures of some of these trips including one of the main streets where, to the right of the yellow line is the businesses as they were before and just about the yellow line in the middle of the road, everything else dropped about ten yards down. It was completely smashed. Tornados, earthquakes, it is amazing how you can have so much damage in one place and just a few feet away virtually no damage.

Another time, shortly before I got out, they needed somebody to ferry an aircraft to Hawaii. Which was not too bad. It was a very long and a very slow airplane. It took us about fifteen

hours. It took me about three days, staying at Fort DeRussy on Waikiki Beach to find a ride back. I didn't mind that. The only other time I got to Hawaii was going to Vietnam and coming back; this time it was much better.

HB: After college, what did you do?
BB: I worked for HRB Singer with Rome Air Development Center. The early 70's a lot of that work went away after the riots and (unclear), we started defunding guns and butter, social programs, and cut back on RMD substantially. I went and did some other things for a couple of years, including insurance and the like. Before I came back in the early 80's into defense contracting.

HB: And here we are today?
BB: Here we are today. Working for NYS Tech, New York State Technology Enterprise Corporation, which works with Rome Lab Technologies, or Airforce Research Lab, as it's now called and tries to use some of those technologies to benefit the state of New York, and business, and universities in the state.

HB: I am all out of questions, so I'll have to conclude this interview. Thank you very much for coming.
BB: Thank you for asking me. I'll leave some things behind. See if you can use them; the pictures of where I've been and what I did.