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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF WILLIAM O'BRIEN

December 30, 2003

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2 (The interview commenced at
3 10:50 a.m.)

4 MR. RUSSERT: Okay. This is an
5 interview with William O'Brien. Commissioner
6 Military Affairs Headquarters, Latham, New York.

7 It is the 30th of December, 2003,
8 approximately ten fifty -- eleven o'clock a.m.

9 Michael Russert and Wayne Clark
10 are the interviewers.

11 BY MR. RUSSERT:

12 Q. Can you give me your full name,
13 date of birth, and place of birth, please?

14 **A. My full name is William S.**
15 **O'Brien. Date of birth December 23rd, 1947, in**
16 **Troy, New York.**

17 Q. Okay. What was your educational
18 background prior to entering the service?

19 **A. I had a Bachelor's Degree in**
20 **Psychology from State University of New York in**
21 **Plattsburgh.**

22 Q. Did you enlist or were you
23 drafted?

24 **A. I was in the draft lottery of**

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2 1969 and in those days they allowed us four years
3 to complete the degree. And if you had completed
4 it, you still went in and if you hadn't completed
5 it you still went in. So you had the -- we had the
6 four year limit. I received my induction notice
7 from the army that particular spring A navy
8 recruiter came up to Plattsburgh with a T-34, so I
9 went for a ride with him in the T-34 and I decided
10 to apply for the Naval Flight Program.

11 So, I took all the test, the
12 flight tests, the written test, was accepted into
13 the Naval Flight Program. And as it turned out
14 literally at the same time I received my -- my
15 notice to show up as a private in the army so it
16 was close.

17 Q. What kind of training and
18 programming did you go through, describe the
19 program or training?

20 A. Yes, I went through -- my
21 commissioning program was the one that you see in
22 the movies with an officer and a gentleman. They
23 call it the Aviation Officer Candidate Program
24 where they take people with four year degrees who

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2 have passed the flight program and they send us to
3 Pensacola Florida, where we went through sixteen
4 weeks of Marine basically Marine boot camp.

5 And at the same time you're
6 taking trigonometry and other flight related
7 courses. At upon the completion of that sixteen
8 week program, roughly four months -- let me make
9 sure my dates are right, October, November,
10 December, January, February, March, six months. So
11 I misspoke. It was twenty-four weeks in total.

12 So, I was commissioned in March
13 26th, 1971 as an Ensign. And I remained at
14 Pensacola for the beginning of the flight -- what
15 they call basic flight program. And depending on
16 what aircraft you are selected for, that is
17 determined by your flight grades, preflight. Then
18 you -- you go through different pipelines.

19 If you're a helicopter pilot you
20 went one way. Jets, you went another way. This
21 particular aircraft that I chose is a P-3 O'Ryan,
22 it's a four engine turbo prop so it's actually jet
23 engines, four jet engines running the propellers,
24 but this is considered a prop aircraft, so I went

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2 through the prop pipeline.

3 So, from Pensacola Florida, I
4 received my commission, and then I went to Corpus
5 Christi for advanced, and then onto Moffett Field
6 California for what they call replacement air group
7 training. Where you -- you get your wings in
8 Corpus Christi and you -- that's like getting your
9 driver's license. Then you learn to go drive the
10 actual car that you're going to drive.

11 So the first time I actually
12 drove the P3 was in Moffett Field, California.

13 Q. Now, why did you select the P3's?

14 A. That's a good question. Because
15 at the time the high -- the push was for the A-6
16 intruder aircraft. I mentioned that just before we
17 started. That was the hot aircraft at the time.
18 It was an attack aircraft carrier base, and they
19 were really looking for guys to fly the A-6.

20 I really loved the mission of the
21 P3. It's an antisubmarine warfare aircraft.
22 Multi-engine and that mission really -- really was
23 interesting to me. So, that's why I chose that
24 pipeline.

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2 So, upon completion of my flight
3 training in Moffett Field, my orders were to BP
4 seventeen -- which was patrol squadron seventeen,
5 based on Barbers Point, Hawaii, and I joined the
6 squadron while they were on deployment to Vietnam.
7 They had been there about a month and a half when I
8 first joined them.

9 That was my first tour of
10 Vietnam. That's a very quick rendition of what the
11 pipeline was.

12 Q. What -- what were some of your
13 assignments in Vietnam, while you in Vietnam?

14 A. Great question. We flew -- this
15 airplane had such tremendous endurance and
16 multi-mission capability, it has great radar. I
17 mean the radar is good enough that you can spot
18 periscope. So, it's got a terrific radar.

19 So, we were used off Vietnam for
20 a lot of things. I would say primary -- primarily
21 the mission was anti -- anti-shipping. At the time
22 the operation at Vietnam was Market -- it was
23 called Market Time, where they were trying to
24 interdict any supplies coming from China, North

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2 Korea, or the Soviet Union into North Vietnam. Our
3 mission was to look at the shipping, get the name,
4 course of speed, and any significant cargo off of
5 virtually any ship in the South China Sea and there
6 were a lot of shipping.

7 Because the route from Hong Kong
8 to Singapore, we called it the Yellow Brick Road.
9 We were flying across the South China Sea, you turn
10 on your radar and it literally looked like ants at
11 a picnic. The shipping would come and go with one
12 particular line. So, in the course of a day we
13 would spend twelve hours at about two hundred --
14 two hundred fifty feet off the water. Flying close
15 enough to every ship we saw to get all the
16 information that we needed. If it was a Chinese
17 Junket, North Korean, or Soviet Union merchant
18 ship, we had a lot more intelligence requirements
19 than just the normal merchant ship. We had to get
20 very close. We had to take a lot of pictures from
21 five different angles as well as an overhead.

22 And if it was a combatant, then
23 we had even more requirements. Including, dropping
24 sub buoys before and after the combatant to see if

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2 it was also accompanying a submarine.

3 That was our primary mission.

4 Q. How did you find out what they
5 were carrying?

6 A. The shapes on the deck. If you
7 remember the Cuban Missile Crisis, those pictures
8 were from the P3, where you can see the distinct
9 shape of either -- either missile warheads or in
10 some cases they had gunboats right up on the deck
11 of the merchant ships. It's very difficult to --
12 to hide the deck cargo, especially when it's that
13 big. So that's the kind of thing we would look
14 for.

15 And also we would be very -- very
16 tuned in to the course and speed. If they seemed
17 to be heading in one direction and then you come
18 back and look at them again and now they're going
19 in a different direction, they're obviously trying
20 to hide something. So, we would go back and look
21 even closer.

22 Now, also in 1972 which is my
23 first tour over there that the Soviet Union set
24 down five Echo-2 class which is a -- what -- what

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2 NATO considers the type-one nuclear submarine
3 class. And an E2 is a missile-carrying submarine.
4 And those missiles could be used against U.S.
5 warships as well as U.S. ground targets.

6 So, in the spring of '72 the
7 Soviet Union sent five E2 class submarines into the
8 South China Sea unprecedented in this day and age.
9 That -- you know, submarines go on patrol in one --
10 you know, only one unit. But this was an
11 ineffaceable pack of E2's. And it caused so much
12 concern at the time that, our first tour was
13 supposed to end in May of '72. And we were
14 extended indefinitely. And they brought another
15 squadron over to reinforce us that we were flying
16 around the clock on those submarines.

17 So, even though our primary
18 mission was anti-shipping, in that first tour the
19 E2's that came down from the Soviet Union got a lot
20 of our attention. So our mission changed back to
21 our primary mission which is anti-submarine
22 warfare.

23 Q. What did you do when you
24 discovered this submarine? And what did you do

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2 when you discovered the --?

3 A. In this -- in this point of the
4 war, we didn't know what their intentions were. We
5 had a lot of -- we had a lot warships in the South
6 China Sea we had seventh fleet, usually two or
7 three carriers that were flying combat missions, as
8 well as battleship New Jersey and a lot of other
9 destroyers and amphibian ships. We wanted to know
10 whether or not these submarines were getting close
11 to those warships.

12 So, the other complication was in
13 the South China Sea is a very noisy area because of
14 all the shipping and it's also warm water. So you
15 get a lot of noise in the water from marine life.
16 Whales and shrimp put a lot of noise in the water.
17 And the way we detect the submarines is we drive a
18 microphone into the water from the air and it pops
19 an RFN antenna up and the microphone can go down
20 selectable depths from nine feet down to one
21 thousand feet. And you listen to all the noise's
22 in the water. And we have operators that are very
23 good at determining what is a merchant ship, what
24 is a submarine. And that's how we tracked them.

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2 Not every flight gained contact,
3 but we had enough contact that you could give the
4 tracking positions of where these submarines were.
5 We would keep our fleet informed as to where the
6 location was and our fleet would take evasive
7 action accordingly. Even though they were
8 missile-carrying submarines, they still had
9 torpedoes. And that was the threat.

10 Q. I guess how long were you on
11 full --.

12 A. Well, our -- I joined the
13 squadron right around the end of January of '72.
14 We -- we stayed through the end of August. And we
15 would -- we flew very heavily so we had a
16 requirement for crew rest of two hours on the
17 ground for every hour you were in the air. And we
18 would hit the limits. So, you fly a twelve hour
19 flight, you were back in the air twenty-four hours
20 after you landed from the first flight.

21 So, we were flying in excess of
22 one hundred and fifty hours a month. And the
23 mission would change every day. Some days you were
24 doing anti-shipping, some days you were looking for

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submarines. And as the war went on, there was a lot of other activity coming out of Thailand. So, on my succeeding tours we had other kinds of missions I'm not even sure now if it's declassified or not.

Q. So how many -- how many people were on board the aircraft?

A. It's a crew of twelve, we could carry up to eighteen or nineteen. But you would have three pilots, two flight engineers, a radio operator, a radar operator, a navigator, a tactical coordinator, two sets of operators listening to the noise of the water and an ordanceman who -- this version of the P3 loaded all the sounds internally. On succeeding miles of the P3 the sounds were loaded externally. And their fire and gas pressure cylinder so that as the plane is traveling in the air and you want the sound to go directly underneath the plane, you obviously have to shoot it backward to make up for the forward velocity of the ship -- of the aircraft.

So, normally a crew of twelve.

Q. Did you ever carry like civilian

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2 observers or anything like that? Or just for
3 military people?

4 **A. Either military or CIA, but**
5 **never -- never civilians.**

6 Q. Well, that's what I meant by
7 civilians.

8 **A. Okay.**

9 **BY MR. CLARK:**

10 Q. Now did you carry any kind of
11 weapons at all on the plane?

12 **A. This -- excuse me, this plane**
13 **carried in the bomb bay eight torpedoes, four in**
14 **the bomb bay could carry special weapons which were**
15 **nuclear depth bombs.**

16 **On the wings we could carry**
17 **missiles. Either the bull pup when I first went**
18 **over to Vietnam and the follow-on missile was the**
19 **Harpone. And now I believe the P3's carry the**
20 **Phoenix missile also.**

21 **So we carry mines on the wings.**
22 **When Hai Phong in 1972 the P3 was the first**
23 **aircraft that was tasked with the mining mission.**
24 **So we were over there at the time so we were**

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2 gearing up to do the mining. At the very last
3 minute they decided that the A-6's were going to do
4 the mining off the carrier. They had a little more
5 airspeed than we did.

6 That was a dangerous mission
7 because they took fire the whole time they were
8 mining. This -- this aircraft is -- it's fairly
9 slow when it comes to that. Our -- our true
10 airspeed was probably a maximum of four hundred and
11 fifty knots, which is pretty slow when you're
12 trying to avoid being shot at.

13 BY MR. RUSSERT:

14 Q. Did you -- did you ever lose any
15 aircraft?

16 A. P3's were lost all through the
17 war. Not in my squadron, through combat we -- we
18 lost a few prior to my joining the squadron through
19 accidents.

20 However, there were two P3's
21 shutdown from -- I'm fairly sure it was VP-26, they
22 were flying at the time out of Sangely Point in the
23 Philippines. And there were a few islands in the
24 South China Sea that the U.S. wasn't aware were

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2 being occupied by Vietcong.

3 So, that -- the aircraft it was
4 believed flew over these islands, they were little
5 tiny things that were unbeknownst to them were
6 hostile, and they were shot down.

7 Q. Where were you based?

8 A. We were all over the place. We
9 flew out of Cam Ron Bay, Vietnam, Da Nang however,
10 most heavily out of the bases that ringed the South
11 China Sea, Okinawa, there was an airfield called
12 Nha on the southern tip of Okinawa out of Subic
13 Point in the Philippines which is basically Subic
14 Bay. The ships would pull into Subic Bay and Subic
15 Point was the airfield.

16 We also flew out of Utapoa,
17 Thailand. And every one of those missions would
18 either come into North Vietnam or South Vietnam
19 or -- or the South China sea Coastline of Vietnam.
20 And then recover into various places. Wouldn't
21 necessarily go back to the same airfield you left.

22 Q. What were you range?

23 A. Well we had -- we had endurance
24 of twelve hours. So, if you do the airspeed map

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2 you know, four hundred knots times twelve hours you
3 could go a long way, depending on how many times
4 you're climbing, you know, how much weight you're
5 carrying. But you know, you could say nominally
6 three thousand miles. It's a lot of range.

7 But -- like a typical mission
8 when we're back on the training cycle out of
9 Hawaii, we would fly one thousand miles in one
10 direction and then operate there for four or five
11 hours and then one thousand miles back. That's an
12 amazing airplane as far as endurance goes.

13 Plus the capability to go low and
14 slow for a long time. Now, the other thing we
15 would do out there to maximize that is when we got
16 on station we called it you're going to and from
17 using all four engines. When you got on station
18 you would shut down, number one and then shut down
19 number four and fly on the two inboard. That
20 would -- so you're flying on two engines and
21 that -- that really stretches your gas. A lot of
22 range in that airplane.

23 BY MR. CLARK:

24 Q. After your first patrol off

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2 Vietnam you left in '72, August of '72. What did
3 you do then?

4 A. Thank you very much. We would go
5 back to our home base which was Barbers Point,
6 Hawaii. And we would normally have about a month
7 of stand down. And the airplanes get maintained,
8 brought back to operational capability and then we
9 would take up operations out of Hawaii.

10 What was going on then were a
11 couple of things. The Russians would send these
12 spy ships off the coast of Hawaii and try to pick
13 up all the electronic information coming out of
14 Pearl Harbor. And we would fly at those spy ships
15 every single day. They were called AGI's.

16 And the other thing that was
17 going on was the U.S. was testing the Polaris and
18 the trident missiles. And they would shoot them
19 from Quadulun Island in the South Pacific.
20 Normally the P3 was used, we'd fly to midway and
21 observe the re-entry of the first Polaris and then
22 the Trident. And you would be designated either to
23 look at the impact area of the warhead or clear the
24 zone where the first stage of that missile would

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2 hit the water. Make sure there were no civilian
3 shipping in the area because they would put out a
4 notice to Mariners to make sure to stay out of the
5 area but somebody always would sneak in and it's
6 funny how often it was a Russian fishing boat who
7 had you know, multi missions.

8 So that's what we do at the home
9 cycle. And typically our -- our home cycle was
10 about seven to eight months and then I went back
11 for a second tour back to Hawaii afterwards and
12 then back for my third tour. And in between on the
13 second tour and then more on the third tour, the
14 U.S. was picking up missions in the Indian Ocean.
15 We flew out of the Diego Garcia Archipelago which
16 is south of India, the Southern Hemisphere. We
17 would fly from there off the east coast of Africa
18 and looking at the shipping all the way from the
19 Stashell Islands all the way up to the Persian
20 Gulf. Then we would land in Iran.

21 There was a small base in the
22 Persian Gulf in -- on the southern coast of Iran
23 called Bandar Pot and the U.S. was flying out of
24 there which was really like taking flight

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2 operations back one hundred years. There was no --
3 no operable tower, no lights on the runway, no one
4 on the ground that knew you were coming or going.
5 You really had to try to get in there during
6 daylight -- and at worst, they literally had
7 somebody on a camel who would light oil drums with
8 a torch so that you could at least see the outline
9 of the airfield if you had -- had to come in at
10 dusk.

11 And when we were flying out of
12 Iran we would fly into the Gulf of Ogden and looked
13 for somebody at shipping. And they also had an
14 anchorage called the guarded Hue Anchorage off the
15 coast of Africa near Jajabuti. And as the Middle
16 East took on more war reports the P3 mission
17 extended up into that area too.

18 And then we would -- we normally
19 spend thirty days in the Indian Ocean going from
20 the Diego Garcia up to Iran back to Diego Garcia
21 then back into Thailand and then either back to Cam
22 Ron Bay Da Nang or the Philippines.

23 BY MR. CLARK:

24 Q. So, would that have been the

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2 reasons in that area where to keep tabs on Soviet
3 shipping?

4 **A. Exactly. Yup.**

5 **BY MR. RUSSERT:**

6 Q. Okay. I guess most of your
7 assignments then basically were -- I'm not going to
8 say routine but involved in basically controls
9 surrounding the South China Sea? Could you tell us
10 about being involved with the Mayaguez?

11 **A. Yup. The only other mission**
12 **before I get into that, that was different, was**
13 **when we were flying out of Okinawa we flew what**
14 **they call Peacetime Aerial Reconnaissance Program**
15 **Missions PARCO Missions which were off the coast of**
16 **North Korea and they were very -- very different**
17 **missions. And so potentially dangerous that we**
18 **also flew with air cover and we flew with a code**
19 **book that we would constantly get usually garbage**
20 **code words that would come up in the HF every five**
21 **minutes. And you would look up the code word. And**
22 **if it was garbage, it was garbage, you kept going.**

23 **But if our intelligence picked up**
24 **hostile activity from North Korea coming towards us**

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2 then those code words meant something else, we'd
3 have to get out of there.

4 That was the only non-routine
5 mission we would fly, the PARCO mission.

6 Q. So ultimately menace --
7 primarily?

8 A. Only if we saw something.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. We had electronic account record
11 capability so you could -- you could pick up
12 transmissions -- electronic transmissions of
13 various bandwidths and that would indicate
14 different kinds of radar which had different kinds
15 of purposes. Fire control radar etcetera.

16 As far as the Rhycliffe incident,
17 that happened at the end of my third tour. We were
18 flying out of the Philippines under the control of
19 that commander of the task group that was out of
20 the Philippines. At that time most of my squadron
21 was Binalbin so in affect when you fly down into
22 the Philippines you come under the command and
23 control of -- at that time it was Commander
24 Messengen who was in charge of the Philippine air

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2 group.

3 So our mission we were -- were
4 sent out. We did our typical Indian Ocean patrol.
5 But on the way over and coincidentally was I
6 brought along my log book and I -- I really
7 sometimes have to look back on it to realize that
8 on April 30th, 1975 when Saigon fell and all of the
9 those famous shots of the helicopters on the roof
10 of the embassy, so we were flying off the coast
11 that morning.

12 We were flying from the
13 Philippines. We were supposed to land in Thailand.
14 And it was an amazing morning because as you can
15 imagine the normal routes you drive to work
16 everyday, all of a sudden somebody took a big
17 eraser and erased all the roads and it was just one
18 big area of blacktop and every car was heading in
19 every direction with no roads. That's what it was
20 like flying that morning.

21 Because all of our air routes
22 that we used -- had -- had used over there for
23 years was just wiped away. The because all the
24 navigation aides coming out of Vietnam were shut

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2 down. So you had nothing to hold it up. So, it
3 was your own navigation. And we were being --
4 being controlled by a carrier who was trying to
5 make sense of all of this mess in the air.

6 And it was very tense, we didn't
7 know it. There were all kinds of rumors that there
8 were Migs coming out so -- Vietnamese Migs that
9 were Soviet built. But there was -- but you
10 weren't sure but there were all kinds of radar
11 targets.

12 So, that morning we finished our
13 mission of -- of basically providing communication
14 systems and shipping surveillance that morning.
15 And we landed in Utaoia, Thailand that late
16 afternoon, which is an air base that the U.S. Air
17 Force is a tenant. It's really a Royal Thai Air
18 Base at Utaoia. And the Navy is a tenant of the
19 Air Force. So, we're a very small piece of
20 Thailand. We flew in there that morning and I'd
21 been in and out of that air base for years well, at
22 that point three and a half years. And what had
23 happened, when Saigon fell is the South Vietnamese
24 Air Force just bolted. Their pilots got in

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2 everything that would fly and just left and a lot
3 of them went to Utapoa. And they landed obviously
4 without permission, not necessarily on the runways,
5 they landed on the grass, they landed on the taxi
6 ways, they landed on the ramps, they landed in the
7 trees. So that they -- when we landed it was as if
8 you took an airfield and just shook it up. Because
9 there were planes upside down, crossways, into each
10 other, into the trees, into the hangers,
11 everywhere. And the Vietnamese pilots just got it
12 stopped and got out and ran because they were
13 afraid they were going to be kept prisoner and
14 given back to the V.C.

15 Luckily they kept one runway open
16 so that operational traffic could land. So that
17 was April 30th, of '75. We left the next morning,
18 we went out about ten days in the Indian Ocean.
19 Ended up back in Utapoa I believe it was the night
20 of May 11th or 12th. I think it was the -- well
21 anyway 11th through 12th of May '75.

22 Our normal cycle at that point
23 allowed us three or four days off where a crew can
24 regroup and get some rest before we have to head

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2 back to the Philippines.

3 And I'll never forget it, it was
4 the night of May 12th. I was in the officer's club
5 with my copilot. The crew had gone out to have --
6 we were down -- we weren't going to work the next
7 day. So we were enjoying ourselves and the duty
8 officer came in and said, you guys have to fly.
9 And we couldn't believe he was serious because we'd
10 been drinking alcohol. And the rule was no flying
11 twelve hours after drinking. But he said, you have
12 to fly. You have to find the rest of your crew.
13 So he was -- he was serious.

14 So, my copilot went out in town,
15 his name was Gary Ruffin (phonetic spelling) and
16 tried to gather the crew. I went down and went to
17 the initial briefing. And what they told us was
18 there was a U.S. Merchant Ship named Mayaguez that
19 they received an S.O.S. from. They had no idea why
20 this ship was sending an S.O.S. They said maybe
21 it's aground, maybe it's on fire, maybe it had an
22 engine casualty, we don't know really know what's
23 wrong. But you got to get in the air as fast as
24 you can. So the crew came in.

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2 We preflighted the aircraft.
3 We -- it took us from about two a.m. to five p.m.
4 to get the plane ready, get it fueled. We took off
5 about five and we started doing a search -- a
6 visual search and a radar search for this ship.
7 And it was all along the southern coast of Thailand
8 and into the Cambodian Air Space.

9 And throughout my entire time
10 over there we had a strict twenty-five mile CPA
11 restriction to the main land of Cambodia and any
12 Cambodia Islands and they were hostile. You could
13 not violate CPA as close as putting approach. You
14 could not violate the CPA restrictions, ever.

15 My first indication that
16 something else was going on was we got a message
17 from our commander that said disregard the CPA
18 restrictions to Cambodia you don't have to worry
19 about it. Then I knew something else was up here.
20 In hindsight, I dearly wish they had told us what
21 they knew. I think -- I think there's a typical
22 arrogance in war where the higher echelon only tell
23 the lower echelon what they think they need to
24 know. And in this case I think we needed to know a

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2 little more than that.

3 So, we -- through the good eyes
4 of one of the other pilots, Jim Carlson (phonetic
5 spelling) we'd been searching about three and a
6 half hours and his -- with his eyes, not with
7 radar, he looked and saw what he thought was a ship
8 tied up on a little bit of an island. So, we
9 decided to go check it.

10 As we got closer you could see
11 that it was a merchant ship and it was anchored in
12 a small lagoon in one of the two islands that we
13 call the Poula Wai (phonetic spelling) or the
14 peanut islands because they looked like two peanuts
15 in the water. They were kind of a navigation
16 visual landmark.

17 So, we took a pass up the
18 starboard side of the ship. And we were getting
19 lower, we couldn't see anything. We couldn't see
20 any sign of a crew, nothing, just anchors, anchor
21 ropes going down into the water. So, we needed to
22 make sure of the name of the ship and as our
23 briefing get close enough to find out whether or
24 not they could tell us what was wrong, maybe hold

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2 up a sign.

3 So we flew around the stern of
4 the ship and we came in low about two hundred feet
5 off the water. We were maybe about five hundred
6 yards of being -- maybe less of the ship. As we
7 came up the stern of the ship you could clearly see
8 the name Mayaquez on the stern. And then as we
9 came around the mid ships, there were two small
10 gunboats tied up in mid ships. I believe they
11 were -- come to find out later, U.S. built 1950's
12 vintage PT boats. They were tied up with these
13 ships.

14 Cambodians had seized the ship
15 during the night. The crew was still on board and
16 there were approximately -- I'm not sure of the
17 numbers, several hundred Cambodians on the ship as
18 well as on the tree line of the island.

19 So, as we came around the mid
20 ships, they just opened up. They started firing
21 with everything they had. And it was about nine
22 thirty in the morning but they were using traces,
23 you could clearly see the tracers going across the
24 wind screen. You could see them in the water. And

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2 then the rounds started piercing the aircraft they
3 went through primarily the vertical stabilizer.

4 Our squadron had big white
5 lightening was our symbol at the end of the tail of
6 the aircraft and most of them went through the
7 white lightening. And the dangerous thing about
8 the P3 is the wings are full of fuel. We have a
9 fuel bladder in separate wings that carry all our
10 fuel. And we'd only been up in the air for three
11 hours so our -- our wings were full of probably
12 forty thousand pounds of jet fuel. So any round at
13 all through the wings we would have exploded.

14 Luckily, they were firing at us
15 and not leading us, so I think most of the rounds,
16 although we did see them across the glass shield, I
17 don't know what miracle -- they never really hit
18 this part of the aircraft. They hit the vertical
19 stabilizer. And I don't know why they missed us.
20 The passage in this book that refers to it which is
21 a quote from the captain.

22 BY MR. CLARK:

23 Q. Could you open up the front of
24 the book?

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2 A. Oh, I'm sorry. This is a book
3 written by Roy Roan (phonetic spelling) he's a time
4 life correspondent who was over there at the time.
5 And it's entitled the "Four Days at the Mayaguez.
6 And he refers to this -- this moment where we came
7 around on that ship and this refers to the captain
8 of the ship. When he went back up to the bridge to
9 begin his own eight to twelve watch the action had
10 started. He looked up and saw a four engine navy
11 plane making lazy passes over the Mayaguez. On
12 each pass the plane would lose a little altitude
13 and totally swept pass the Mayaguez maybe five
14 hundred feet off the water. Well, we were a lot
15 lower than that.

16 Well he sure found himself a
17 hornets nest, the first mate hollered to the
18 captain. Forty Cambodians who had been aboard the
19 Mayaguez since early morning, blazed away with
20 M-16's, AK forty-seven's and M-79 grenade launchers
21 until they were all slipping and sliding around on
22 the deck of the spent cartridges.

23 Now, see, I guess that's one of
24 the reasons they were missing is they were losing

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2 their footing in the step cartridges. The two
3 gunboats opened up with their twin fifty caliber's.
4 It's my believe that there was fifty caliber rounds
5 that went through the vertical stabilizer. Because
6 you could -- you could put your arm through each
7 hole, it was that big of a hole.

8 The two gunboats opened up with
9 their twin fifties. On the beach there were more
10 fifty-caliber machine guns firing away. Some the
11 young Cambodians, the Captain noticed, closed their
12 eyes when they fired. The navy plane continued out
13 over the water. The captain said there's no way he
14 could have flown through that shit storm -- excuse
15 me -- without getting hit. And we didn't.

16 Q. Oh.

17 A. However the control cables were
18 damaged so we could still operate our rudder and
19 our -- our aileron. Luckily the rounds that went
20 through didn't separate any of our control cables.

21 So we went out and we called back
22 to the Philippines, we told them what had happened.
23 They couldn't believe we -- we'd taken fire. They
24 couldn't believe it. When they -- when they

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understood what we were talking about then they made the connection from the Philippines to the National Military Command Center back to wherever they call the room in the White House, the National Security room where this -- what do they call it -- the Day room or the war room.

At the time it was President Ford, because President Nixon had resigned the previous summer. So President Ford, Kissinger, Schlessinger, who was Secretary of State and Bud McFarlane who was National Security Adviser were in the room. And they were asking questions of this gentleman the MCC who were referring the questions on to us. Questions like could you tell what they were -- the people who were shooting at you what they were wearing? It mattered I guess whether they had -- if they had uniforms on or whether they were civilians. They were trying to determine the international political aspects of this. Is it just a rogue civilian crew or is it Cambodian soldiers?

So we told them as best we could that they looked like they were wearing the same

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2 uniform, black. Like black pajamas.

3 Q. Now, you didn't hear all these
4 conversations even --

5 A. Yes.

6 Q. -- in the white house?

7 A. Yes. Yes. I could hear them on
8 HN. You could clearly hear Kissinger's voice
9 especially, very distinctive voice.

10 So, we were told at that time to
11 stay on station and keep on viewing the ship and
12 they would try to send out relief aircraft from the
13 Philippines.

14 So, we returned to the ship about
15 thirty-five minutes later after making our radio
16 calls. And I'll never forget that radio call.

17 I just want to say one thing
18 about it. I think it was probably a petty officer
19 third class or second class on the radio and I'm
20 the one that made the radio call. And gave him the
21 position, the course of the speed of the Mayaguez
22 dead in the water, the latitude, the longitude of
23 the ship.

24 And as typical, we called the

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contact reports. The remarks section is where you add in any of the amplifying information. In this case I went right down through the contact report protocol and the end I said small arms fire, and we've taken hits through the vertical stabilizer. I don't know whether I was super calm or whether I was numb -- but this poor kid on the other end of the radio couldn't -- he asked me to repeat like three or four times because he couldn't believe what I was saying. He finally he left the radio and a commander came on and that's the last I heard of the kid.

But from then on that was the XO of the squadron in the Philippines that I did all my talking with directly.

So when we returned to the island after thirty-five minutes the ship was gone. After all the firing they got that ship underway, they got the boilers on, they pulled up the anchor ropes, they got the gun ships away from the big ships and they were hauling. They were trying to get to the mainland of Cambodia now that they've been discovered.

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2 So, our instructions were to keep
3 tabs on them and -- and do everything we could to
4 maybe make them change their mind. So we made a
5 few passes across the bow.

6 In the meantime I called the --
7 the people we were talking to and I think the
8 biggest gun they have is a fifty caliber, how high
9 can that shoot? I didn't know. They didn't know
10 either. So they did support research and they said
11 they think about five thousand feet. So we went up
12 to about six thousand feet on the next pass, and
13 sure enough they shot at us. They shot at us every
14 time they saw us. It was such clear morning you
15 could see the tracers coming up at you but then
16 after awhile they'd start to tumble and then they
17 would fall off. So they were pretty accurate with
18 that. But they shot at us every single time.

19 We went back probably four or
20 five times and then they eventually decided they
21 weren't going to try to go for the main route. So
22 they pulled into this other island called Koh Tang
23 Island. Two words K-O-H T-A-N-G. And they
24 anchored there. So we continued to observe them at

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2 Koh Tang Island but we weren't allowed to leave
3 until the other relief aircraft came up from the
4 Philippines and all this time we were on the radio.

5 But we were running out of gas.

6 We did not have enough gas to stay as long as they
7 wanted to and still -- there's a requirement up
8 there because airfields are so far apart they call
9 it Prudent Limit of Endurance, PLE. You have to
10 have enough fuel in your tanks to get back to your
11 airfield plus x amount of pounds of gas in case you
12 have to go to another place.

13 So, I said to -- I'm at PLE right
14 now, I -- I have to leave right now. So they said
15 disregard any PLE requirement. Which means, there's
16 a good chance that we were going to end up in the
17 water at the end of this day because we didn't have
18 enough gas to get back to the airfield.

19 So, we were just hoping against
20 hope that this relief aircraft would get out there,
21 you know, as quick as they possibly could. And I'm
22 sure, you know, my imagination it took a lot longer
23 than it did. But for the first time we were shy
24 until that relief aircraft had arrived, it was over

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2 three hours.

3 Anyway the -- when they finally
4 got there I had already started making my way back
5 to Thailand. And he called up and he said, gee, I
6 don't see the ship. Where is he?

7 Oh my God, Oh what a joke I
8 wanted to ring that guys neck. I kept telling him
9 he's right in a little cove, you can't miss him.
10 Well finally he said, oh, yeah, I see him. Okay.
11 Great. So we were booking back to Thailand.

12 When we landed we were so out of
13 gas that -- on this aircraft you exit the aircraft
14 through a door right here (indicating). And you
15 drop a ladder out -- out of the airplane -- the
16 ladder is carried inside and the ladder usually
17 comes down in an angle like so (indicating). And
18 depending on the weight of the aircraft as it
19 squishes the tires down, the angle of the ladder
20 can be less or more vertical.

21 We were so out of gas. Nothing
22 really in the tanks but the fumes. But that
23 ladder -- ladder was virtually vertical. So, we
24 didn't go run and get the tanks to see if -- we

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2 were close to flaming up.

3 In any event, there was an Air
4 Force General right there when landed in Thailand.
5 And he wanted to film -- we'd taken a film with our
6 personal cameras. Which is another point. This
7 changed the navy's approach to what cameras they
8 put in the cockpit. Up until now they were archaic
9 old boxes. But we had guys, having been overseas
10 for so long that we all bought thirty-five
11 millimeter you know, SLR cameras, Canons, and
12 Konics and we had them in our personal -- those
13 were the pictures that they used. That the navy
14 used, the pictures that we took with our personal
15 cameras. So then they -- they decided we better
16 put good cameras in these -- in these cockpits.

17 But the -- the general at -- at
18 Thailand was a U.S. Air Force General, he wanted
19 the film that we took but I couldn't give it to him
20 because the Philippines had ordered us to land in
21 Thailand, refuel, put metallic tape over the bullet
22 holes and take off again. And get all the film
23 back to the Philippines because the marines were
24 going to Solbed Island that and they needed the

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2 film back in the Philippines to brief the
3 (unintelligible).

4 So, there I was, a Lieutenant, a
5 Navy Lieutenant telling this Air Force General, I'm
6 not giving you the film. So, that was a high point
7 in my career. He was -- he was threatening court
8 marshal and everything in between.

9 At the time Utapoa was cranking
10 up, they had some F111's and F4's and they were
11 starting to get their fighters on the line. We
12 took back off and we had to fly right back over
13 that island trying to give the film back to the
14 Philippines. But we flew over the island, now it's
15 night time and they were -- they were shooting. It
16 looked like the 4th of July. They had the C130 gun
17 ship in a port around the island just firing into
18 the tree line. And afterwards the F111's were
19 firing continuously.

20 We made it back to the
21 Philippines with the film. We did the briefing.
22 They sent the marines out and this second book
23 which is called, "The Last Battle" the Mayaguez
24 incident and the end of the Vietnam War by Ralph

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2 Larna. Until I read this book I didn't really
3 understand what happened on that island after the
4 last time I saw it. It was really a --.

5 Q. Do you think that book is
6 accurate as far as you know?

7 A. He -- he's inaccurate as far as
8 the fact that he used this author's information
9 about my flight. The passage I read from what the
10 captain observed, that was accurate. But the other
11 references in here had the aircraft that I flew
12 coming from a different squadron with different
13 names. And it was completely wrong. So those
14 details are wrong.

15 But what this author did is he
16 actually went back to the island and he tracked the
17 actual marines that made the invasion, interviewed
18 them, interviewed their families, and even went
19 into Cambodia, and found the Cambodian soldiers
20 that were defending the island and he interviewed
21 them.

22 So, as far as the after -- after
23 the ship was hijacked, what happened on the island
24 itself, I believe this author is extremely

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2 accurate. And it's a very tragic story. The
3 marines went in and took it, terrible casualties,
4 just terrible casualties.

5 I guess, I don't know if they --
6 they underestimated what they were going in for.
7 But the navy sent two destroyers -- here on the
8 cover of this book you can see one of the
9 destroyers, the -- along side the Mayaguez. And
10 they actually towed the ship out of there.

11 Meanwhile, the crew had been
12 taken to the mainland of Cambodia, put in a prison
13 camp in Cambodia. So, we were not only bombing the
14 island but we started bombing the mainland of
15 Cambodia with B52's. Trying to get them to release
16 the crew.

17 The marine assault, they took
18 terrible casualties. They went in with
19 helicopters, one helicopter was shot down and it
20 crashed on the beach. The other helicopter took
21 heavy fire and tried to lift back off and crashed
22 into the ocean. So here you had all of the marines
23 with full field packs going into the ocean. A lot
24 of them drowned. A lot of them were shot on the

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2 beach. There were a lot of casualties.

3 I think personally the worst --
4 worst tragedy of the marine assault was the day we
5 left three guys behind. There was -- there was a
6 machine gun post on the far end of the perimeter,
7 and we finally were extracting the marines off that
8 island. Through miscommunication or whatever, that
9 last helicopter that managed to find it's way in
10 asked that last officer that was brought on board,
11 is that it? And he said, yeah that's it. It
12 wasn't true. There were three guys down there
13 still firing, still alive, still in their fox holes
14 on the beach. Doing what they were told to do,
15 cover -- cover the guys as they were extracting.
16 They were left behind.

17 To me that's the biggest tragedy
18 of that whole incident of any war. Just never
19 leave anybody behind. They were eventually
20 captured, tortured, and killed by the Cambodians.
21 And I -- I think it's -- you know, if anyone reads
22 this book, those are the three heroes, those guys
23 that were left behind. I -- I probably ever lived
24 here and not knowing their names but for this book

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2 lists all of the casualties from that assault,
3 especially the three guys that were left.

4 But this -- this book when I read
5 it, which was only a few years ago, it only was
6 written in -- at the end of the '90's. I was
7 shocked to learn the details of that.

8 So, we got back to the
9 Philippines. We briefed them on what we -- what we
10 knew. They -- they used that information to go
11 into the -- into the invasion. And I was -- you
12 know, I was rapidly approaching the end of my third
13 tour. I flew one more operational flight out of
14 the Philippines, which was the next day, which was
15 extremely strange. Somebody thought they saw a
16 Soviet submarine in -- in Subic Bay. And the
17 aircraft I happened to fly carried forward looking
18 infrared Flear, it's now on virtually every P3 has
19 Flear. We were the only plane that had it then.

20 So they launched us in the middle
21 of the night to see if we could see a periscope in
22 Subic Bay. It was crazy. There was no submarine,
23 it was just somebody hallucinating.

24 However, we kept it -- we stayed

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2 in the air. And they told us to go out -- at that
3 time the refugees pouring out of Vietnam were -- it
4 was an epidemic of human tragedy. They were
5 getting in these boats that had no navigation, no
6 food, no water, and just launched themselves. They
7 were so desperate. And we were told to go out and
8 fly and count the refugee boats we saw. It was a
9 real tricky situation. Because if you flew close
10 enough to them, that they were sure that you
11 spotted them, they'd set there boat on fire and
12 jumped in the water. So you were forced to try to
13 throw them a raft or food.

14 So, we had to stay away and just
15 count from binoculars. So we did that for three or
16 four hours after the submarine incident, same
17 flight. Then they called us and said you have to
18 break off what you're doing because the Soviet
19 crews Spernhoff had turned, it was heading back to
20 Soviet Union, but we had information that it turned
21 heading toward Vietnam. The Spernhoff is a huge
22 ship. It's the size of a U.S. Battleship. So, we
23 went to try to find the Spernhoff, eventually did.
24 It was accompanied by two frigates and two oilers.

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2 I will never forget this to this
3 day. I had my binoculars on this Spernhoff and I
4 was about to take them away and I could see guns
5 turned, and the ship came hard a port and the guns
6 fired and I couldn't look to see what they were
7 shooting at and all it was was a huge explosion and
8 a bunch of thick smoke in the air, there was no
9 sign of what used to be.

10 There was a U.S. Jet in the air
11 above us. He called me up and said, "Did you just
12 see what I saw?" I said, "Yeah." And he said,
13 "What -- what happened? What -- how do we report
14 that?" So, I didn't know either. So as it turned
15 out I flew back, we reported what we saw and they
16 determined it was a hulk of a refugee boat that the
17 Soviets were just blowing up as hazard to
18 navigation. They were just guessing.

19 That was my last operational
20 flight at the end of my third tour. And you
21 know -- I thought that -- I thought that the last
22 flight of mine was interesting enough, I didn't
23 need anymore interesting flights. But that was the
24 last one. So, from that, I went back to Hawaii. I

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2 checked out of the squadron the next month.

3 My next duty station for the navy
4 was a solo station in Northern California which is
5 a station that has that go out into the ocean, a
6 long way with oil field drums that listened for
7 Soviet submarines. So it's a -- it's a land based
8 facility that does basically was a P3 does. And we
9 had these all up and down the west coast and the
10 east coast of the United States. We still have
11 them. And it's -- it's an early detection for
12 submarines. And all these bases are manually
13 operators who twenty-four hours a day seven days a
14 week running tactically every three months in the
15 water.

16 I -- I was at that duty station
17 for three years and I got out of the navy, active
18 duty part in 1978. I joined the reserves, flying
19 the P3. Out of Willowgrove Naval Air Station in
20 Pennsylvania and I continued to fly the P3
21 against -- doing the same mission on a reserve
22 basis from 1978 through 1990. I became CO of that
23 squadron. And we deployed out of Iceland, Sicily,
24 the Azores and watched the Atlantic submarine

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2 activity.

3 After I left the squadron my next
4 duty station was with the surface side of the navy,
5 not the airside. And I had various duty stations.
6 One was with second fleet out of Norfolk. It was
7 the NATO Arm of the second fleet. The admiral in
8 charge of second fleet is also the Supreme Allied
9 Commander Atlantic who is the -- the sea borne
10 commander for naval forces. So I was on his staff
11 for two years.

12 And then I was CO of the reserve
13 component at the -- at Naval Air Station in Rota
14 Spain. Following that tour I was the CO of the
15 Iceland reserve contingent. And then my final duty
16 station was Suda Bay Crete in Eastern Mediterranean
17 as the -- as the CO of the reserve group that
18 supports that base.

19 And I retired from the reserves
20 in November of 1999.

21 BY MR. RUSSERT:

22 Q. Now were you involved in actions
23 in Kosovo?

24 A. Yes. When we were at Crete, the

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2 base at Suda Bay Crete is an amazing deep water
3 port. And it contains a tremendous amount of
4 ordinance and storage facilities for use by sixth
5 fleet. And it's also a port that can take a
6 full -- a full draft of a U.S. Carrier. They can
7 tie up right along side and take on fuel and
8 ordinance, empty there bilges.

9 So, when we started bombing
10 Kosovo, we activated our reserved contingent to
11 Crete to support the air and the surface navy
12 refueling for Kosovo.

13 And Crete has a large communist
14 population. So our -- our sailors were in a little
15 bit of -- there were several incidents of people
16 lobbing things over the walls and a lot of
17 Communist activity in Crete. But that was our
18 Kosovo involvement.

19 BY MR. CLARK:

20 Q. And some of the things you
21 brought with you --.

22 A. Yeah. This is the -- this is the
23 helmet that we wore in my era of the P3. It's
24 extremely heavy. So, consequently we had -- we

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2 used every excuse possible not to wear it. We had
3 to wear it anytime we were dropping ordinance or
4 anytime we were in a situation where we might go in
5 the water. This has communication in it and our
6 oxygen mask attached here. And we also had visors.
7 When you're bailing out you want your visor down so
8 that the parachutes drops don't get your eyes.
9 Clearer for night sun for day.

10 These weigh about twice as much
11 as the helmets do now days. These are the sound
12 and takeawaders we had to wear upon the aircraft
13 any time. The artillery powers the P3 takes out
14 your hearing in a certain band. And anybody that
15 flies that aircraft has lost their hearing in that
16 band. I have, everybody does. Try to grab this as
17 much as you can.

18 BY MR. RUSSERT:

19 Q. Is this the phone you called the
20 president on?

21 A. Well, yeah. This is -- this is
22 our secure phone. We call it the red phone
23 obviously. This is in the cockpit right above the
24 pilots seat, you can reach it from here

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2 (indicating) and it plugs in. And this allows you
3 to talk in a plain voice over a secure net.

4 And this is just one of the
5 things we carried in our -- in our vest. I had to
6 turn the rest of this stuff in but this is a
7 typical survivoral knife. Obviously it's
8 non-glare. With a -- with a butt end to use as a
9 hammer. And a serrated edges for sawing.

10 BY MR. CLARK:

11 Q. Did you carry what they call a
12 blood chip?

13 A. Yes, we did. Yes, we did. A
14 blood chip was a piece of silk that if we were
15 captured, you could hand this to Vietnamese and
16 they could turn it in for money and there were all
17 kinds of rumors as to how much money they would get
18 for turning you in alive. But yes, we carried
19 blood chips. We had to turn them all in at the --
20 I'd love to have one as a souvenir.

21 MR. RUSSERT: Okay. Well thank
22 you very much.

23 MR. O'BRIEN: Oh, you're welcome.

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This is a transcription of the audio provided to us. It is completed to the best of our skill and ability. The transcript consists of pages 1 through 50 inclusive.

Judith Spriggs *CC* *5/2/2006*

Judith Spriggs

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