

**Oral History Interview of  
Ken Hite**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson  
December 6, 2013  
Lubbock, TX**

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## Transcript Overview:

This interview features Ken Hite. Hite discusses his military experience serving in the Air Force in Korea. Hite also talks about growing up near Earth, Texas, attending Texas Tech and later West Point, and his interest in flying over the course of his life.

**Length of Interview:** 02:36:38

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## Keywords

Earth, Texas, Korean War, Texas Tech University, West Point Academy

**Andy Wilkinson (AW):**

Let me to say to start with, this is the sixth of December, 2013. Andy Wilkinson here with Ken Hite, H-i-t-e at his home at Raider Ranch, a very nice place. Do you mind if I scoot that box over a little bit and just sit—

**Ken Hite (KH):**

Oh, you need a—

AW:

This will be fine. Yeah this will be fine. Set this recorder—

KH:

I know it's not explosives.

AW:

Yeah. I would have been nervous if it had been. Let me get my notepad out and yeah I think we're good here on the recorder. Okay we're set. Let's start with just some real basics like what's your date of birth?

KH:

Nineteen twenty-six.

AW:

What month and what day?

KH:

July 16.

AW:

And where were you born?

KH:

Vernon, Texas.

AW:

Vernon? You told me that you were in Earth. How long were you in Vernon?

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KH:

Until we bought land on the former XIT Ranch, had done that the year before I was born. We moved out in 1934. I had just finished the first semester of the second grade. And we had eleven years of school back there.

AW:

What were your folks doing? What was their occupation?

KH:

Well, I kind of thought about what we were doing in this business and looking at the family genealogy, we had Hites in Georgia, one of whom had a plantation, and my cousin did the research on that because when he died, everything was probate, so it was in the records, and he was a confederate. He had lots of slaves and land and farming I suppose, but I came from a long line of farmers to put it that way.

AW:

That's all right.

KH:

And we were pioneers out here. The land was still—had buffalo grass on it and our farm, I learned, dad's sister and husband moved out to it first, and we continued farming near Vernon, north of Vernon.

AW:

So north of Vernon—you were still in Texas, not in Oklahoma?

KH:

Yeah.

AW:

Yeah, we were still in Texas.

KH:

Were you farming cotton near Vernon?

AW:

It was cotton, corn, and grain sorghums, and raising cattle and horses. This was—tractors hadn't really pervaded the farming industry back then. We had a dozen horses and mules out there.

KH:

When we were walking, you were telling me about your first experience horseback with a—

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

Well, I was going to—I just mentioned that because you had your hat on.

AW:

And you mistook me for a horseman.

KH:

Nothing big happened with me on horses. Mother didn't want me to do the rodeo bit. So dad conceded. Dad let mother do a lot of things that he could have done, but he didn't, he was too busy with his business. But anyway, as I just told you, I was born in 1926 in the Vernon General Hospital, and when I started to recognize things, I learned that we lived at White City, and White City was ten miles north of there, and it consisted of a cotton gin owned by Mr. White and a general store owned by a Mr. Bell. My first horse ride down there, after I got checked out was about half a mile, we were going along at a pretty good pace heading east, and we still had a little less than a half mile to go. The horse got the end of a fence around the livestock area and made a right turn. Well, I didn't make that turn. Anyway, I learned that I had—by myself and the hard way. I got up and got on. It was at Vernon that I first developed an interest in airplanes.

AW:

How was that?

KH:

One weekend Dad came in and said, "Okay everybody, y'all get ready, we're going to go down to Vernon Airport." "Well, what's happening down there?" Well there's some special airplane coming in and he's going to take passengers. So all five of us, my older sister and brother and mother got in the car and he drove us to the airport. And we got there and he did all the necessary things, we sat in the car, and so he said to my brother Robert L.—my dad's name was Robert, so at home we called him, my brother, by his middle name, Lowell. Today I call him Robert L., Dad's gone. I have a son named Robert, and my sister has a son named Robert. My brother has one named Robert, so you have to be careful. Give them a different middle name. So he went first, and boy it was a noisy airplane. I didn't see much of that, I was in the car, and my sister was talking with my mother. "I'm kind of scared to do that," and she said, "Well you don't have to do it if you don't want to." And "Kenneth, you're too little." I was always too little. I was five and six years behind. But I could do a lot of the things that those guys could do. So my dad and



my brother came back, and the airplane was a Ford Tri-Motor. And they had lots of people out there that took rides because it would hold I don't know how many—it'd hold a bunch of passengers.

AW:

Very famous airplane, too, in the history of aviation.

KH:

It was really unique. It was kind of like some of the German aircraft.

AW:

It had a high wing, right?

KH:

Yeah. Yeah, it had a high wing and an engine on the nose and two engines out on the wings.

AW:

And they were made of tin, right, the corrugated metal.

KH:

It looked like corrugated roof on barns around the place.

AW:

And wasn't that one of the first aircraft built with metal without fabric coatings? Do I remember that correctly?

KH:

I don't have really much on the history. I just don't have any accurate information on the history of at all. But they landed and taxied up, and my mother said, "Oh there was an accident." Dad and Lowell walked up to the car, and Mother wanted to know what happened out there. Well, they were properly briefed, and this individual got out the door, which is on the left side of the aircraft as you face forward, and instead of turning left, he went around the—like he should have—he turned right and walked right into the prop and was killed. And Dad explained that and "Oh I don't think you ought to go." He said, "Well—" He was briefed, he was told the dangers involved and to turn left and go around the tail and clear the engines, but he didn't do that, and if you do what you're told to do, it'll be okay. And so finally my mother conceded, and Dad and I walked up and approached the airplane properly and boarded and took off, and this was a sit down. It wasn't bucket seats, it seemed like it was kind of like a loveseat. I don't remember any arms in between the positions, it was kind of a bench, like the older cars at the time. I was watching Dad, and he seemed to be enjoying it. He was really setting a good example for me. He



said, "Look outside," and I looked outside, and everything was pretty, going along real smooth. And I said, "Can I stand up dad?" "Sure, walk around." Boy, I thought that was great, and we landed—I was only five-years-old at the time, but some things back there really stick in your mind, not only that, but they are repeated in the family. So that was my first—I was really interested. I wanted to know more about airplanes and everything from then on. My brother was getting to the point where he was almost a teenager, and—

***Pause in Recording***

AW:

Now that we've got the battery back in after the surprise collapse of the battery. I think it was going fine until you mentioned that everybody had packed up and moved after your airplane trip in the Tri-Motor. And you'd come back to the Plains and you said there was a pioneer house—

KH:

No, we did not. That was just a local, go for a flight.

AW:

Right—but I mean—

KH:

But we did, we came in and a kind of caravan style in a car, and I think maybe a trailer, might have been a truck.

AW:

You came out to the Plains at essentially the beginning of the Dust Bowl. What was that like? That must have been a shock.

KH:

Well, it depended on the location that you lived relative to other cultivated land, and we happened to be just across a main road going north-south. We were just east of it, and we had a kind of a sometime farmer who had rented or bought land across the road, and his soil kind of came over to our house. Some of it deposited on the farm, I'm sure got some good top soil out of that. But the Dust Bowl was—some scary things happened. Someone had announced on the radio that the world was coming to an end. Things that people had never seen were happening out there in West Texas, and its only sixty-three miles northwest to Earth where we moved, I might add that my granddad had bought land out there about four miles away from where Dad lived. And at the time they bought their land to go see each other, you'd just kind of head that way, you know, through the high buffalo grass, and sometimes other people had been that way,

so you'd have the grass knocked down, and I guess it eventually became like a two-lane road or like it was yesterday after the snow cleared out, you went down the—

AW:

You saw the ruts.

KH:

—ice, yeah, so yeah, ruts. So the Dust Bowl was somewhat bad, and the house that we moved into was kind of a construction house because it had a well, a windmill, and water was down at twenty-five feet. I remember that and a barn and an enclosure—what we called it a cow lot and then a water trough from the windmill. It was pretty basic. The house was a single wall tarpaper house. You know, the house I lived in that was built in 1975 over here didn't keep all the dust out. But I mean when a sandstorm came and we were home, Mother would have us get a bandanna and wet it and put it around our face to keep from breathing in the dust, kind of filter the air a little bit, and we'd wear that as long as the wind was blowing, rewet it if dried out.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

I'm looking at the house from different perspective. My first experience is I was pretty young. I don't know how my brother and sister would look at it. They were in their teens pretty quick. When I was I the third grade, they hit their teens, but you just didn't go anywhere for one thing and you had livestock, and they did the instinctive thing, they just turned their tail towards wherever the wind was coming from, kept their eyes out of it. I remember the family that had that farm, their name was Figli [?], and they apparently were of Italian descent. And all of them played stringed instruments, and I remember going over to their house, and they'd get out mandolins and guitars, and we'd have music. They were good neighbors socially. But they hadn't learned what we learned somewhere along there with how to manage that situation. After it rains out there, and it's just like any wet dirt, but then it starts to dry, and you get a little dry crust on the top. That's where the dust storms—the dust feeds the dust storms. The storms always came seemed like from the west or northwest, southwest, anyway kind of over there. And when you'd see them coming in, sometimes they'd looked like a—it's just a rolling red thing coming at you, and it's called now—weatherman call that the roll cloud, and that's the windy part of a cold front moving in.

AW:

I've heard some people from that time that called them high-rollers. Did you ever hear that term used? I'm just curious.

KH:

Yeah, I did, but it was reference to a way you did with your money and how you spent it.

AW:

Never got a high-roller.

KH:

I've been stationed in Las Vegas.

AW:

Was it an economic hardship for a farming family in the mid-thirties there by Earth?

KH:

No, we were pioneers; we lived like pioneers. And what we didn't—depending on how the crop was, we'd buy more food from the store, and we had clothes. Mother had a sewing machine. If she didn't have it, she would make it, all the way from a cotton sack to clothing.

AW:

Was it a foot-powered machine or did you have electricity?

KH:

Oh, it was foot-powered pedal thing, Singer made those things.

AW:

Treadle machines, I think they called them, yeah, because the electric power you probably didn't get until the—

KH:

We didn't get electric power until about 1943, '44, and the real electric association or whatever it was, REA came through. And we all got electricity and refrigerators. We had ice boxes.

AW:

Where did you go to school?

KH:

I went to school four miles away from Spring Lake, up from Earth. We lived one mile east of Earth, right on Highway 70, right where our land butted it, we sat back quite a ways from Highway 70. We went to school at Spring Lake. It had about 430 or so students. They had school busses pick us up, eleven grades. Good teachers. Our neighbors were on the school board. They had been there longer than us. It was a real close relationship that we had with the school

teachers and school board, and you knew since—God says love your neighbors, he said it, and we did. So we knew everyone as kids, all the families, the mother and dad just about. We knew who to play with and who not to, what houses to go to and what not to. You'd know all the family names for five or ten miles out around you that were out there, and so—but we learned that that little crest of land if you ran a harrow over it with iron teeth and broke the crust, it wouldn't blow. That's all you had to do.

AW:

Yeah. That's the genesis of what they call now a sand-fighter, the same sort of thing, only instead of the harrow blade, it just has spikes, and they call that a sand-fighter to do the exact same job.

KH:

This one you just drug. Of course Dad had sold all of his horses and bought a tractor with iron wheels, and he used that on it, they put the rubber tires on it, what have you. Boy, it was a big iron thing and I got to drive it sitting between Dad's leg, ride it and steer it, I should say. Right away, I may have been seven or something like that, I was seven when we moved out there, it was sometime in that timeframe, but was there poverty? Yeah. But what you didn't have you raised yourself. We had a large garden, and Mother grew everything that she could possibly want to eat out there just about that the climate would allow, tomatoes, peanuts, potatoes, and okra and corn and you name it. And so everybody, we were just like everybody else. Everybody was pioneer. We had as much to spend I guess as anybody else did. We were all about the same. Dad would help neighbors when they needed something, things they couldn't do by themselves. The Dust Bowl kind of receded, those big rolling clouds. We thought that that red soil came from New Mexico, or started there, a lot of it. And they had land, a lot of it that they didn't break and cultivate right away. They might have been just starting up farming over there. I don't know the history of where it came from. That's just the common thought that we had.

AW:

So you graduated from high school in Spring Lake?

KH:

Yes.

AW:

And so that would have been about 1940—

KH:

Three.

AW:

Three. Yeah. What did you do then because by '43 we were at war.

KH:

Well, let me get something before we got to the point. We had built another—Dad built a regular house with running water and all that sort of thing. And eventually when my brother and sister went off to West Texas State College, I got the whole basement to do what I wanted to do down there, and I developed an interest in airplanes in conjunction with my cousin who lived in the big city of Amarillo. And they had a—when I visited him, I found out they had a model airplane shop. I had been reading *Flying Magazine* and *Model Airplane News* and magazines like that. I was very interested in that. I had a thought that sometime along in there that not only—and I had built flying models—I learned a little bit about aerodynamics, you know, you don't get the pitch higher than horsepower you have to pull it. I was tickled when my brother had been off to school, and I wanted him to fly the airplane. I said, "Don't get the nose too high." Well, he did and it stalled out and crashed.

AW:

This was a model airplane?

KH:

Yeah a model airplane.

AW:

What kind of motors did you have?

KH:

Rubber band.

AW:

Rubber band.

KH:

Ultimately, I built a gas powered one.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

One cylinder.

AW:

Do you remember what brand? I just wonder because I built them when I was young too.

KH:

It was called a U-Control airplane, and it had wires and a little swivel in there and a handle, and you activated the elevator and let it fly and tie it on a line. It crashed pretty soon. The wings were covered in thin balsa wood, and the name of the model is just right on the top of my memory.

AW:

Yeah, I remember we had—and this of course was years later in the fifties, not that much later—but we had the Tester was one brand and then there was a McCoy motor.

KH:

Yeah.

AW:

And boy we had a great time building those, but we spent a lot of time rebuilding them because we crashed them pretty often.

KH:

Well, as I did this, I thought, time after time, and putting Japanese tissue on them and spraying dope on it.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

And I don't know whether the fumes from that acetone were toxic or not. One of my friends started calling me Dopey. I don't know whether it was from my actions or for what I was doing.

AW:

So did you have to get your supplies and everything from Amarillo—

KH:

Well I—

AW:

—for your model aircraft?



KH:

I got one kit up there I think, and then I did mail orders through the *Model Airplane News* Magazine, and that's the way I kept on going all the time, you know how you make the fuselage, learned all the things, basics that you need to know to fly, and I thought, Boy—I had my chores, I did what everybody else did except the girls, Mother and sister, anyways, three of us, my dad and my brother and I, I did the normal things out on the farm. And after all you'd make twenty-five cents an hour. But there was an airplane I would see, and you didn't see many airplanes out there before World War II, but I'd seen an airplane, and now I believe it was a Douglas DC-2, not the DC-3, not the Gooney Bird, but the one that preceded that, and it would come from the northeast and it would go southwest kind of, mostly north and southwest. I thought, Well that airplane is—after all, where am I? I'm out in the cotton patch with a hole in my hand and barefooted, and there are stickers out there, goatheads, not a very pleasant thing, but I—I'd watch that as soon as I could hear it, I'd catch it with my eyes and watch it till it was out of sight, and I was really interested in that, and I also I guess sort of thought that, Hey, I'd rather be there than here.

AW:

No goatheads up there.

KH:

So that and I'd learned about the Piper Cub and those things reading, and we had a friend, older than my brother a little bit who had an airplane, he was going to Texas Tech, and he kept his airplane down here, and he'd fly out there. And when he would fly—was going to fly up—he'd tell his brother who was just a year younger than I, and he'd tell me about it and said, "Do you have any gasoline over here? Dad told me I couldn't use his tractor gas for Olem Cupp's airplane."

AW:

What was his name?

KH:

O-l-e-m C-u-p-p.

AW:

And he had his own airplane he'd fly to Texas Tech. Do you, as an airplane enthusiast, do you remember what kind of airplane he had?

KH:

That one I believe was an Aeronica that he flew, I don't think it was a Piper Cub.

AW:

The Aeronica for the people listening to this, that's A-e-r-o-n-i-c-a.

KH:

A-e-r-o-n-i-c-a. Yeah.

AW:

So he'd ask you if you could round up some gasoline for him.

KH:

Yeah, and I'd ask mother or dad, and they didn't mind five gallons out of a fifty-five gallon barrel out there. And so we'd bring a—take five gallons of gasoline—Leroy Cupp, his younger brother, and he'd land south of Earth and taxi up along the runway, not a runway, alongside the fence where there was a little roadway where implements drove. He'd gas it up and take us up for an airplane rides.

AW:

Really? Nice.

KH:

And he'd come back and let us off and come back to Lubbock.

AW:

That must have been a lot of fun.

KH:

Well, it was. It was.

AW:

Did that have an open cockpit or was it closed?

KH:

No, it was closed.

AW:

Closed. High-wing, low-wing? I'm not familiar with—

KH:

High-wing.

AW:

High-wing. So you got a good view of the—

KH:

It was a little more advanced than a J-3 Cub. That was a tandem. This one you sat side by side or something. I'm not sure how both of us got in there and out, but he didn't do any acrobatics or anything in particular, just let us take a look at the countryside, talk to us. I wanted to fly. Then when my brother was old enough in 1940, he was in his third year of studying agronomy at West Texas State Teachers College. But he decided that he wanted to join the Army Air Corps aviation cadet program. So he had—a lot of those pilots that went to the aviation cadet programs and didn't have any college, if they had some college, but he had quite a bit of college. He whizzed through the exams, and next time I saw him, he was a lieutenant in the Air Force. So we were siblings, but there was enough distance between us that our communication levels were a little different. And I'm not sure how he got his interest. I'm sure that Tri-Motor flight had something to do with it, but he flew the open cockpit, PT-13 Stearman for basic training, and after that he flew the T-6, North American T-6 with a radial engine.

AW:

Where did he do his training?

KH:

Out in California, Santa Maria, California, Moffett Air Base, the ones that come to mind.

AW:

So he would have been in active in the Second World War.

KH:

Yes, he was.

AW:

And what theatre?

KH:

Sorry.

AW:

What theatre or theatres was he in?

KH:

Well, remember, okay Pearl Harbor, December 7, '41? My dad died on July 4, 1941. My brother was in flight training and out in California flying with the Army Air Corps. My sister was visiting Farmington, New Mexico. She went out and stayed a year with an aunt, met a young man who was a naval aviator, married him, and that kind of changed the family structure from

five to two, Mother and I. I'm not directly answering your question. But that being the case, I found out that I was a farmer. I could do okay with the plows that were on the Farmall, but I found out that I wasn't big enough to change from one to another. They were too heavy. I don't know, suddenly Mother showed up with a tractor made by Ford again with a powerlift. And I could do everything I needed to do with that one, so I became a farmer, but you mentioned—we were talking about how the neighbors knew each other for help. After—**[knocking on door]** we have a maid. I don't know whether my wife heard that, excuse me.

AW:

That's all right, I'll just pause it while you check.

KH:

So I went through high school. I was salutatorian in the grade school, the lady that read books all the time was the Valedictorian. I found out that you—when you were in one of those two positions, both of you had to make speeches, and they gave me kind of a speech. I didn't write it myself. I had it memorized completely, and the teacher said, "Well, take a copy with you," and I said, "No, I know what it is." And I got up there, and I had never seen so many people. The whole school was out there in the basketball court, which was also the auditorium, and I left one paragraph out I found out when I got off stage. I don't know what difference it made, but then being a farmer, I just turned a junior in high school. I had a neighbor by the name of Ray Kelly—the Kelly family out there that were pioneers. He was son of some of those. He came over and talked to mother and to me, and said, "I have a four-row Farmall, and I'm going to come over here, and y'all provide me the gas, and I'm going to plow the—I'm going to cultivate the crop out there," and he cultivated it in one place, and I cultivated it in another place, and it was done a lot faster than I thought it would be, considerably. But that's just the way it was. Families took care of each other.

AW:

So you continued to farm, though, while you were going to high school?

KH:

Yes. Yeah, I farmed. Someone asked me—I was making good grades, the principal, his name was May Peaver, and she said, "Are you going to be valedictorian this year?" And my answer was "No, I don't think so ma'am." "Well, where do you find time to study with farming?" I said, "I study in the study hall." We had a study hall every afternoon. And I noticed you never take any books home. Well, I've was already studying when I go home on the bus. Farming—I didn't miss school, somehow I got it done. I was the only one driving the tractor. Then came senior year, and everybody had plans and someone, a girl that I knew was going to Baylor or somebody—some were going to West Texas, some to Texas Tech. And I thought, Well I've got to stay here and farm. That's the only thing that I got to do. And one day Mother asked me,

“What do you really want to do?” And I said, “I want to go to Tech and study in aeronautical engineering.” And she said, “You get after it; I’ll pay your tuition for the first semester, buy your books and get you a place to live, and you get a job.” I had a friend that ran the projection booth of a theatre out in Earth, and his family was moving away, and he talked to me and convinced me to come up and learn how to do that job. I found out after he left that I was the only guy in town who knew how to do that, so I had a job, so that’s what happened to me here. We went down to talk to Dean Allen because I didn’t have all the credits I needed for engineering. I’d had algebra one, but needed algebra two. So Mother and I and Dean Allen’s big office and everything, what an exciting moment that was, and she explained what we were going to do and he’s going to have to get a job, and Dean Allen says, “Well what do you know how to do?” I know how to run a movie theatre projection machine, and he says, “Just a minute,” and he called Joe Bryant who owned the Midway Theatre, and I think some out here on College Avenue as it was then. But when we finished the interview, he said, “Well, if you can get that algebra two by extension.” How does that work? He explained how that works. You have a professor who gives you assignments. You go up and talk to him and take your homework, and that’ll get you through if you do good. So I did that in addition to my other load. I normally carried, engineering, you know, you carried probably sixteen, seventeen hours.

AW:

Yeah, and not easy hours either.

KH:

No. And sometimes if you needed more hours, you’d go to summer school. I was able to pay my room and board and tuition, buy my books and do it myself.

AW:

What theatre did you work at?

KH:

I worked at the Midway all times.

AW:

Midway. And who took over the farm while you were at Texas Tech?

KH:

No, it was in high school. I just had two years of farming.

AW:

Oh okay.

KH:

When I came—when she asked me what I wanted to do, and she told me I could go to college, I said, “What are you going to do, Mother?” And she’d hired the agricultural teacher, not hired him, but she made a deal with him to farm the farm. That’s probably a third and fourth kind of thing. And so she would be able to continue to live comfortably, but wouldn’t reach all the way down to Lubbock.

AW:

So Dean Allen got you a job at a theatre in Lubbock, is that right? What theatre?

KH:

He called Joe Bryant, and the Midway theatre was there on Broadway just about a half block off of Avenue Q, the building is still there.

AW:

Yeah Phil Price, is that his ad agency on the south side of the road there?

KH:

I haven’t—I haven’t checked.

AW:

Yeah I think it is, and later it was called—

***Pause in Recording***

AW:

All right, now we’ve changed batteries. And we’ve changed our storage card, and so we’re back in business. You had been saying that Texas Tech was about twenty-three hundred, twenty-five hundred students—?

KH:

Yeah.

AW:

—including this navy program called V-5, which was officer training.

KH:

Yeah. It was part of officer’s training. I’m not sure that they got their commission. I don’t know anything more than that. The only thing else I know about it is there was a guy, a tennis player, that drove a Lincoln Continental, which was kind of square-boxsy when everything else was



round. It was tan, and his name was Don Butch, and he was in the Navy V-5 program. And most people didn't have cars or bicycles. We had a city bus that cost a nickel, I think, a ride—something like that.

AW:

And he had a Lincoln Continental.

KH:

I didn't think he'd made it in that program. He came from California.

AW:

So when did you graduate, and the degree was in aeronautical engineering?

KH:

Well, I graduated from high school in 1943, and did a year—a little bit—when I first of all I got down here on July 16, I had just—fifteenth—I was sixteen. My birthday was on the sixteenth, so I had just turned seventeen. But as soon as I hit eighteen, I was down at the recruiting office. I didn't want to be drafted and have somebody tell me where I was going to go or what service I wanted. I wanted to fly. So I enlisted in the Army Reserve Corps, enlisted in that and went to basic training, you know, get a haircut and get your clothes too little or too big two sizes. Went down to Keesler for basic training, military training, and then took the air force entrance exam. They called it a stanine test, did things like tracking a spot on a record with something that you couldn't press down, you had to eyeball it, and it's a test of coordination. It kind of had a loose swiveling front on it, and all that had a mock airplane, and they tested for rudder control capability and some things like that, and had quite a few written tests. So I became an aviation cadet. But they didn't call me up until October of '44 and—this is a sequitous [sic] way to get to the point, but—so I was called up then. And I'd already started—I had finished the first year, and it started the second year in September. I was in school about a month, and they called me, and I went off to the aviation cadet program that I just talked about and was stationed over at Oswald after all that because they had found that when Europe fell, we had too many pilots. So I was waiting for a flying class for ten months, and at that point I did best operating a movie theatre at Roswell Air Base.

AW:

At the airbase.

KH:

Yeah. And I got to be barracks chief down there, and I remember when the war was over in Japan, I came home and nobody was there. And I finally found someone, "Where are they?"

“Well, they’re all downtown getting drunk.” Well, I don’t know what drinking is really. That was the case. I went down and walked down the sidewalk, rode the bus down.

AW:

And this was—

KH:

And peaked in to see what everybody was doing.

AW:

What town was this?

KH:

It was after the evening movie. I’d guess it was—

AW:

But it was in Roswell.

KH:

Nineteen-thirty or ten.

AW:

We were talking about Roswell. I didn’t know they had bars in Roswell then. Did they? Yeah.

KH:

In the restaurants they served it. I don’t know if they had a bar or not.

AW:

So they were celebrating. Yeah.

KH:

But I never was in one, or in a restaurant down there. Am I on track?

AW:

You’re perfect. This is what we want, these great stories, great stories. But so now the war is over and you’re in Roswell?

KH:

Well, before the war was over, they had noticed that I'd taken chemistry at Texas Tech or something is what I was told and, "We're going to send you to Chanute Field Illinois, and you can go to weather school, and I was barracks chief down there, and I met some good guys, one that went to University of Illinois down at Champagne-Urbana, we were at Rantoul, and Forrest and I got to be buddies and went to football games together, and I found out how they live up there in the Big Ten, and right across from campus were all the beer joints you wanted. Anyway, I guess we might have stopped by there one night—we went to a football game, but they had a really wonderful running back, Illinois did. I'm not certain who they were playing, but his name was Schiffledecker [?]. And anyway, before the game was over we were calling him swivel hipper. One beer was too much. So then we got a letter. I have it around here somewhere, but I believe it was—might have been from the secretary of defense who was—I'm not sure—might have been General Marshall, we were an Army Air Corps then. Anyway, a man of obvious authority explaining the situation, "We don't need you now, you can revert to enlisted status." We had wings and called us on the line trainees while we waiting, and I thought we were enlisted I made corporal up there at Chanute. But he didn't stay as an enlisted man or go home and go back to school on the G.I. bill. So that's where my help came from, too.

AW:

Yeah. So did you wind up back at Texas Tech?

KH:

Back at Texas Tech. That was for one year of re-correction [?]. I took a year off because my brother was coming home. After Pearl Harbor, with the morale of the United States like it was, and now Japan's whipping us, and we had just sent a bunch of supplies and armaments and airplanes and guns to Europe, you know. Now we'd been attacked by Japan. And everyone apparently was down. That's what President Roosevelt said anyway in one of his speeches, and he got busy, and as fast as he could, put together a strike back on the Japanese mainland, and they selected Jimmy Doolittle to lead that raid, sixteen B-25s. They found out that—the Navy didn't have an airplane with sufficient range to get close enough to Japan, it was out about 400 miles. Because of their range capability, they wouldn't be able to do any strikes. They would be able to fight and protect the carrier. So that's why they finally settled on an Air Force medium bomber, the B-25, and that's my brother standing by one right there.

AW:

Oh yeah.

KH:

And that's another story. I have an hour Powerpoint on that, but not now.

AW:

That's one I'll want to cover with you later after we get your story down. We talked about that a little bit I think at your home when you were having your estate sale when I met you. So he had gone on that raid and he was back for visiting.

KH:

But he also spent the rest of the war in a prison camp in Shanghai, China and Peking, China and were interrogated by the Japanese—the thing is we'd received a letter from Jimmy Doolittle, he was missing in action. I was able to get out of the Army Air Corps in time to come home. I had just missed a semester. I missed two semesters while I was in the Air Corps ten months, and then I just took off the spring semester so we could get reacquainted with my brother and get him back into society again.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

And started back into Texas Tech in '46 and got another year. And my brother had quite a bit of rehab to do. They didn't do anything for you much back in those days. There were so many people. They'd give you your back pay and let you enlist in the reserve, which he did, which I did too. So—

AW:

So after you take that time off then you get back to Texas Tech to finish your education.

KH:

And my brother, then we had time to get acquainted, kind of on a manly basis, and on a mature basis.

AW:

Yeah because you're now grown up.

KH:

Yeah. I'm now eighteen, and I've been in the Air Corps, too, so we could talk to each other. He talked about his flight training and how much he enjoyed it and how that there were some people out there, trainees, that he thought were really special in the way they handled people and the way they taught you and what have you, and he said they all went to West Point. And he said, "I would have liked to have gone to West Point I think and been one of those guys." But that's the first time I had ever heard the word mentioned hardly except for a football game. One day we were listening to a football game and visiting my cousin who is eighteen months younger. And

he had been a paratrooper, but again like I—wasn't in an end time for hostilities. We were listening to an Army-Navy game up at his house outside Amarillo there. And for some reason my brother asked, "Do you think you could make it through West Point?" And my cousin, we were like brothers, we were the same age and our mothers were close. We were like siblings. He said, "I think I can." So I sat there, and I hadn't been too energized except that I suddenly said, "I believe I can too." Well, anyway I was asked again if I wanted to go by my brother, and what do I have to do, and he said, "Well, you have to get three letter of recommendation and send them to George Mahon with your letter. And he's the guy that makes the appointments to West Point." So I got a letter from Marshall Kelley who was the postmaster, and I thought he was a very high up, responsible—he was a very responsible and had a great character, was a great Christian and a really fine man of family. And then I don't know what had happened to the former owner of the theatre out at Earth, but I could have got him but he wasn't around. So I got a letter from my sister and one other person, a third person who I can't recall right now, and sent them into George Mahon, told him what I wanted to do and would he helped me, and I got an appointment at West Point. Due to the timing of everything, I was the second person that had asked him, and so I got a first alternate position, if the primary candidate wasn't chosen, I'd get to go. And I don't know how this happened at all. I figured now Mahon had two people in his district. John Shillenberg from Lamesa had the primary appointment. Somehow George Mahon came up with two primary appointments with a horse trade. Now are you going to use yours or what? And so we both got primary appointments and took all the tests they had up at Fort Still, Oklahoma, and all the things that West Point required, and I heard in economics class; it was Mr. Wisc, W-i-s-c, he was teaching economics in a big room here at Texas Tech. and he mentioned somebody going to West Point, but it wasn't my name he mentioned. He had it wrong. I was the guy, and I didn't know it. Then I found out about it, so I joined the class of '47 up at West Point.

AW:

In fact, I've got a very good friend, two very good friends that I graduated with here in Lubbock and they went to West Point the same year. George Mahon got their appointments, but one of them had to go as an athlete and the other as a scholar, and I just remember that. But they went straight out of high school. What was it like going after to West Point after you already had a year of university or college somewhere else. Did that make a difference, or did you still need four years?

KH:

That filled the gap between Spring Lake and West Point; it made one huge difference. I'd had trigonometry, calculus and an advanced phase of math. I had a real strong math background. They had one course at West Point that was called engineering. And that covered everything.

AW:

All in one—



KH:

All engineering matters referred to you because you were an engineer, civil, mechanical, aeronautical. But I remember Mr. Highman was the man who wrote the textbook. He was my instructor in trigonometry. And they wrote the calculus book, Mr. Hardaway, I believe was my calculus teacher, and we met in the ad building, up on the second floor.

AW:

What was West Point like, not just as a school, but that must have also been a cultural transition for you from—?

KH:

You know you hit it right on the head. Due to the timing of our appointments, the class of '47, first met up at West Point on July 1, but due to all what happened to me, I wasn't ready, and they gave me until July 15 time to go up there. My brother then was stationed at Mitchell Field on Long Island, flying B-25s, he and his wife, and it became time to go up with him, and I go visit with him, found out you had to go by train. I went up the east side of the Hudson and then go to Grand Central Station. Anyway, I did all that, caught the train in, and got my ticket and went up there, and the train station—it has a train station there at West Point and train stopped, and I was the only passenger that got off, and I looked and everything was up on a plateau or something up there, and I got my bag and started to walk up, and here came a cadet, sharpest dressed guy I had ever seen. It was summertime. He had on a white hat and very, very likeable guy and easy to talk to until we got up on the plateau, and I had one last question, after I looked I could see the campus. We were right close to the academic building. I said, "Isn't this co-educational?" I mean, he laughed. What have I done? That's one question I didn't ask before. It was a very strict society, and they divided us up into army regiments, and they weren't all one regiment. First Regiment would live in this area in these barracks. They were all permanent granite. Barracks are brick and granite, and most everything was grey kind of granite around there, a lot of, maybe it was a trim. And there was the second regiment and that was on the other side of a big open area, and that was called the area, and anytime a freshman, which we called a plebe was in that area, he had to march at attention and salute all upper classmen. Back here at tech as a freshman, I had a hat given to me and it said Slime Hite, it had the bill turned up, it as green. And we couldn't walk anywhere on the circle, we could only walk in the gutter. And upperclassmen seemed like it was almost a part of the uniform to carry one of those big old boards, and he might get a few licks for whatever he wanted to haze you about, and they'd have you bend over and give you about ten, and then you got to sign their paddle, so he wouldn't do it again. It just happened to us once whoever didn't like what you looked like, was wearing high school trousers, and the gravel from when the wind came would sting my ankles. I figured, I talked to my roommate, we'd better get longer trousers. Okay, we digress.



AW:

No, no, no, that's great. So did you like West Point?

KH:

Sorry?

AW:

Did you like West Point?

KH:

Yes. First of all, it gave me a father figure that I'd lost at age fourteen, father figures—they were people of authority that were running the program, and outside of the classroom, they were cadets. You had a plebe year; you had a whole year of nothing but formality and discipline, and you'd go to classes and that was fun. That was an academic atmosphere. And boy, did they whizz—go fast. It was way beyond what I could have done out of Spring Lake High School, and not to—in my case, not to say anything but the best for Texas Tech, but it turned out that it was my prep school for West Point. I was a farmer's son, and the chief of staff of the air force's son was in the class, and the son of the President of Costa Rica, Ted Picado, was in the class, but there was social equality. It was just a bit of information what your parents did. We were all challenged to do the same thing, and if the general's son didn't get it done right, he could be kicked out of here just like I could have.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

And we graduated about 475. General Vandenberg, his son's name was Sandy, great guy, and graduated also, but wasn't because of that—they weren't training pilots at Stewart Field like they had during the war, but the Air Force didn't have—in 1947, the Army Air Corps became the Air Force, and that was the name change and became an integrated school. We had integration with several black guys as smart as we were that graduated right along with us and competed on the track team together, and socially that was quite a different situation. We had people from South America. We had a student, Maxino, from the Philippians—no, that was his last name. Anyway, that's kind of an incomplete—

AW:

No, that's a really good, that's a great description, especially about the part about how it was such a leveling experience. I mean to put you all on the same level, meaning your performance was what made you different and not your parents.

KH:

Not some people, didn't bear that as well as I did because of those ten months in the military. They were very invaluable to me. The people that are right out of high school, if the parents were financially able, they had numerous prep schools that were oriented strictly on getting you ready to go to West Point. So I found I could compete with those guys. I just got there a different route. So the real points you ask me—

AW:

No, no, this is exactly it. So when you graduate from West Point, there is now an Air Force.

KH:

Oh yeah. Oh sure.

AW:

So how did you get from—because if I remember correctly, when we were talking before at your house, at your estate sale, you talked about being in the Air Force and flying. So how did you get from West Point, moved over into the Air Force?

KH:

General Vandenberg was chief of staff of the Air Force in 1951 when we graduated. And he had bargained with the Army, and he took about 147 into the Air Force, and my eyesight—I was 20/20 when I got here—I hit the books, and I was number 89 in about 475 at that point in time in my senior year when I met this lady down the hallway and my interests changed from books to—anyway, we had to pass a physical exam and the standard was 20/20 vision, and I took mine, and mine was 20/30, took my physical. I thought, Well that's it, I guess I'll have to go armored or something. And you chose whatever you could qualify for. But the eye doctor for some reason called me back in. I may have told one of the other doctors how much I wanted to go into the Air Force, I'd wanted to fly for a long time, my brother was a pilot, and I really wanted to fly, and he looked at his eye exam and he said, "How much leave do you have?" Well, it depended on when the class over at the base and the class we were assigned to, it turned out that I had two months leave. He said, "Don't you read a newspaper, don't you read a book, don't pick up anything, just go have fun on your leave. So I got married during that time period, and I came back to Moultrie, Georgia, contract flying school. Spence Field, Moultrie, Georgia, and took my physical exam, my eyes were 20/20. They stayed 20/20 for about the next seven years. It was just they didn't adapt well.

AW:

Just out of curiosity, how did you meet your wife since this was not a co-ed school?

KH:

Well, she saw it from a different viewpoint then I did. But we were at a football game. Army was playing Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania, and it was being played in New York City, Yankee Stadium, and all the cadets were lined up, and a lot of them were marrying someone from back home or whatever. I was a bachelor, so my roommate and I decided we'd sit on the aisle of cadets that were there, was a large number. And it was just kind of like this, across the aisle, there was this beautiful lady, and I looked, three of them, one man and two ladies, he wasn't sitting by the one I thought was prettiest by far. And I watched them, and I could tell that his date was sitting right by him, and she was sitting on that side of the date, so after the game, somehow I talked to that young man that brought those two girls to the football game and asked him where they were going after the game. They said, "Oh, we're going to Joe Kings's Rathskeller over in New York, on Manhattan," that's where it was. So we went—and they said they had piano player and he's good. They have good German food, and so we went to Joe King's Rathskellar and sat down near the piano player right over there with this guy with his two women, one his date, and went over and got acquainted. And we talked and liked each other and exchanged addresses. It doesn't matter where she lived, but anyway, I got a letter a while after that, and the mailman was kind of smiling, and it had apparently, seemed like it had a perfume on it. I hadn't been around anything but boys. They smell different. And I opened it up, and it was addressed to Cadet Ken Hite, U.S. Military Academy or whatever. And I opened it up and read the letter, I told my roommates about it, the letter, and I started to read it, it said, "Dear Bob," and I thought, Well, told my roommate, "Hey, I don't think this is going very far." We got that straightened out, I found out the only way out of the academy was to get on a Varsity Team, so I'd run track at Tech, so I got on the track team.

AW:

So you couldn't leave the campus if you didn't have a way out like being on a—

KH:

No, no, that was home. [inaudible]

AW:

What was your event? What were your events in track?

KH:

I ran the dashes. For winter track, we had a regular winter track schedule, I ran the 60-yard dash primarily, and some 300-yards, but 60 was my best. I don't know what I could do the 40 in. That's what they do for football players, but it worked—this is just the way it was. I was outrunning everybody on the track team at 60 yards, and I had a friend by the name of Jimmy Cane from North Carolina who was a half-back on the football team. And he had been moved from the junior varsity to the varsity. And so he came down, he was running 60 yards, and I was

beating Jimmy. I was beating the fastest guy on the football team. Jimmy got better, and it was really tough. He beat me sometimes, and I beat him sometimes. He could beat me in the 300. I hadn't run the distance as much. I had been on the first track team here at Texas Tech and made trips to Border Conference meets and whatever—[phone rings] I hope my wife gets that, sometimes she doesn't because—Margaret? I guess she got it.

AW:  
Okay.

KH:  
So we'd get down to New York to track meets, and they'd been running in spring track. I'd run 440s, and I could do better than a 220, so I ran primarily 100s and 220s, and in one the team was coming down to New York to compete in a runner's match against Naval Academy, take a deep breath here, and so the senior track man asked me if I'd like to run the 440. Well, I haven't done too well. "Well, we need you to run the 440 relay." We went down to Madison Square Garden, and that was the first time I'd been there, and it had a wooden track and short spikes.

AW:  
A wooden track?

KH:  
Uh-huh. A wooden track with spikes about like that, steel spikes.

AW:  
That must have been tough if you fell down on that wooden track. It had to of been covered with splinters, wasn't it?

KH:  
I never did fall down unless I was knocked down by another football player.

AW:  
That's what I mean, though. It must have been a tough thing to run on.

KH:  
Yeah, they found lot better way to do that. I don't know how they do it now. But we ran that race, and there were enough guys better than I that we won. I got a nice medal, and Hey this is pretty nice, Millrose Games. And I have a track sweater, and if I can get away from my wife, with a letter and a gold star. People asked me what that means. I said, "it means we beat Navy." It didn't mean you were captain of the team. Anyway, so I was corresponding with this young lady, Margret Fletcher. So I invited her to the track meet. And we'd go out and have dinner

afterwards, and then I came down some other times, came down to run the 60-yard dash, in this building—60-yard, this is interesting to a track man, but the track man with the 60-yard run was about—a run on a track about seventy yards long. And they had a big rope like this with an eye on each end of it that your chest hit. And if you had enough skill it didn't flip you backwards, but it was supposed to stop you before you'd get to the wall over there.

AW:

That's how you slowed down on that—

KH:

It didn't have any curve to the track there.

AW:

Golly, so you had to be fast starting and fast stopping.

KH:

Yeah. We won one meet at Cornell, and it was different. We were running against Cornell, and we wore tennis shoes, and that was the first meet I competed in with the track team, and there was a guy from New York City named Joe Cancelari [?]. And I don't remember all the names like that, but I got off to a good start, I was ahead of him, I was beating him. There was a bunch in the crowd, and "Hey Kenny, get going." I lost a quarter of a step on him, and he beat me. I got second. I had to get used to the environment.

AW:

Yeah. So you married right out of when you graduated?

KH:

No, I was a freshman.

AW:

No, I mean when you graduated from West Point you married Margret.

KH:

Yeah. Oh yes.

AW:

Then you had gotten your eyesight was okay, so now you're in the Air Force.

KH:

Yeah. Okay. Sorry I—



AW:

No, I diverted you by asking you how you met a pretty young woman at a school that wasn't co-ed.

KH:

That's the whole story.

AW:

What was your first assignment in the Air Force? Where did you go from—

KH:

Well after—well, first assignment I had basic training in Georgia, advanced training, and we got some rides in a T-6 there and T-6s to begin, some rides in a T-6. Then we checked out of an F-80 single-seat aircraft. They gave use three rides in the dual aircraft for familiarization, they were the same, just had two seats, and then put you in that and do it right the first time because nobody else is there.

AW:

Yeah. It strikes me that that's not very many rides before you had to do it and do it right.

KH:

It seemed like it was—to my knowledge it didn't vary.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

But the aircraft wasn't—first of all, it had no torque, like a prop, so you didn't have to worry about the rudders except when you started doing certain maneuvers. All you had to do with the rudders was keep it straight. You had electronic trim on the stick and—

AW:

So you didn't have to be real strong?

KH:

You'd trim it, so the air pressures would be neutral, and that would occur by—you know how it's trimmed, it had tabs on it, on the elevator and the rudder. No, it didn't, just the elevator. So it wasn't that big a jump. We'd flown formation. We'd done L, everything you could do in a T-6.



AW:

And pardon me for backing you up again on this, but I'm a little familiar with an F-80, but not familiar with a T-6. Describe that aircraft. What was it like?

KH:

Well it was a—it had a radial engine, it was tandem, it was painted yellow, had a long green house [?], and it was—the exhaust was huge I thought. You could put your head in the thing on that engine. I don't know how many horses it had, 550 maybe I have no idea. But we took sufficient rides till the instructor felt you were ready to solo. And I did, "Now do it just like you did it with me," and I did except I didn't round out soon enough, and I got a bounce and a balloon. I got it on the runway the second time, and we tried to land the airplane somewhere nearly three-point if you did it just right, and then a lot of people were not able to keep their airplane straight because as the airspeed slows, it takes a lot more rudder. So people would wind up off the runway. But it wasn't that bad. I never had an incident in my entire flight training. So we went from Williams in the F-80 up to Nellis and flew combat crew training. And we knew we were going to Korea. The war had been going on a year. We'd had several cadets that we knew that were upperclassmen that had been killed, and we knew we were going—that's what we were training for. And I was able to get that assignment because a bachelor in the class was getting married, and he needed more leave time, and we had a new baby and just a very short leave period. And he was going to the F-84 at Luke, and I wound up going to the F-80 at Nellis outside of Las Vegas, ten miles north and did well enough in the F-80 that myself and my flight mate—let's see Bob was my classmate—yeah we had an instructor and three students, and that'd make a flight of four. That's the way for visual protection and maneuverability and firepower. One of my roommates, dead on an airport back in Carolina, and the instructor kept pushing him, kept pushing him, steeper dive angles—we're dive bombing. And he got it steep one day and didn't pull it out scattered everything all over the desert. So Bob Hall and I were the only two left. They had an accident investigation. We told it like we saw it. The instructor overextended his capabilities. We couldn't wait to get to Korea believe it or not when we finished in the F-86. They sent us out to Camp Stoneman, which is out where Travis Air Force Base is in California to catch our flight overseas, and we'd already found out in flight school who the people there knew that had the best squadron we thought in the unit we were going to which was the Fourth Fighter Interceptor Wing, and I had picked the 334<sup>th</sup> squadron and he picked—Bob picked the 336, and we couldn't get a flight out. Oh and I might tell you that—how I got—I'm going to regress just a little bit.

AW:

Sure.

KH:

We had kind of a family reunion of the three—my brother, sister, and I—at my sister's, my brother and sister's wife's house back in Pennsylvania. After an oil stint in Pennsylvania, then—so my brother came out, he flew a B-25 out with crew and everything, five man crew, but he came over, and they all—what his crew did. We had couple day visit, and he was on a training flight, so navigate long-range training flight. And he picked me up after the reunion and said, “Do you want me to—how about me flying you out there in a B-25?” Boy that'd be great. So we did that. I found out that it was noisier than heck if you were behind the engines, behind the props, and the nose wasn't occupied, so I got permission and went up in the glass nose and went across the USA, watching it roll by on my stomach, or some other comfortable position. I didn't have a seat up there I don't think. I'd have to go back there to sit down. It normally would have a gunner's seat and everything. But we flew into Nellis where I just got my training. And there was one airplane ahead of us, there's an F-80. And he was—my brother was taking spacing back there to enter the traffic pattern, and they were doing the overhead four-G turns to down wind and turn to a final standard fighter approach, make tight turns, get them all off your tail, so you can land. I don't know what your experience is flying—

AW:

Well, my experience is as a passenger except one time a good friend of mine who had flown in the Air Force, in fact did some CIA work in Cambodia, so he had some experience in flying in a hostile environment, but he let me take the controls while we were way up in the air and it was delightful. It was one of the most—I understand the—

KH:

What kind of airplane was it?

AW:

It was a twin turbo Cessna twelve place—

KH:

[phone rings] Let me quiet this thing down. No, I'm not going to take that call.

AW:

You know what surprised me, Ken, was how that I thought it was pretty big airplane for us, you know, that's twelve passengers and two engines, but when we were up there, and he said, “Well take the stick for a while,” it was a slightest touch and the plane responded instantly. It was a feeling quite different from driving an automobile, or something else, it's very unusual. I could see how a person could get addicted to being in the air.

KH:

Exhilarating really.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

You're flying the best that technology can make, and they're paying you for it. Hey that's a good deal. I'll do this without pay.

AW:

Yeah, just don't tell them that, right. So and I interrupted you—you're flying into Nellis and are you still in the nose of that—?

KH:

So here comes this F-80 in front of us, making his pitch out. He pitched out and something went awful bad. They later decided that a bolt had come out—it had a mechanical connection with the elevator, an aluminum pipe about like so—a bolt had come out where that was connected, maybe the nut was left off, and he pranged, as we describe it, right in front of base operations, and there was this huge fire going, and we were the next airplane to land and my brother looked at me when he got a chance and “Ken I don't know if you picked the right profession.” We gassed and went on out to Travis Air Base, and before my brother left, I went down to [inaudible] with them, somewhere along there. He said, “It's going to be cold in Korea.” I know it is. I'm going to go to the base exchange and get a coat when I get there. And he had on this blue thick wool coat, it's way down, to keep you warm. He took that coat off and said, “Here take mine.”

AW:

Really?

KH:

He gave me the coat, so I wore that, and I needed it in that airplane. And I did buy that when I went to base exchange, too, it was waterproof, but I had a—catch-as-catch-can, and my friend Bob Hall came running up to the BOQ one day and said, “Hey I got us a flight.” “Well, how'd you do that?” “Well, I signed on as a courier. And I can take one person with me.” “Well what's a courier.” Well, I'm carrying a pistol and some secret information for somebody important out in the Far East.” And so we got out there before anybody else to that base, and at Fifth Air Force asked for the squadron we wanted to be at and got it, and Boots Blesse was the commander who became a jet ace and shot down ten MiG-15s.

AW:

Tell me his name again.

KH:

B-double o-t-s was his—everybody called him Boots. Fredrick Blesse. He's a recently deceased last fall.

AW:

P-l-a—

KH:

P-l-e-s-s-e, recently deceased last fall.

AW:

P-l-a--

KH:

P-l-e-s-s-e. His dad was an M.D., and after I served with him, I went to his squadron, went to Nellis as an instructor, and asked to be in his squadron and served with him again, and anyway, we—he's one of the sharpest pilots I ever flew with.

AW:

Wow, that's very interesting. How are you doing on time, because there's some—?

KH:

You're the one on someone's schedule. I'm not working.

AW:

I've got plenty of time, but this I don't want to wear you out on the first one because it's going to take more than one of these interview to get a good grip on your history. You've got so much to tell, so much to offer.

KH:

Well—

AW:

So whenever you're ready to take a rest, just let me know.

KH:

I had complete and fascinating and very fortunate Air Force flying career.

AW:

Yeah, and that's what I mean, I want to go into a lot more detail, so when you get a little tired today, let me know, and then we'll schedule for the next time.

KH:

Sure, a good place to break.

AW:

This one is? Now?

KH:

No, pretty soon.

AW:

Yeah. Well, tell me what it was like flying in Korea.

KH:

What was—

AW:

What was it like flying in Korea? What was your job?

KH:

Oh okay. We'd learn to do all the acrobatic maneuvers, standard acrobatic maneuvers at Nellis before we got over there. So we were well prepared. We were much better prepared than our opponents were.

AW:

And you were flying a fighter?

KH:

A junior birdman. And let me give you the hierarchy.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

In the fighter business, at the time, because of some recent changes in tactics, because our former squadron commander had been shot down whose name was George A. Davis of Lubbock, Texas. He got shot down and earned a congressional medal of honor. His wife still lives here. One son is

deceased and I think had muscular dystrophy, spent his life in a hospital bed, and he hadn't even met his father when he was born. The other one is still here; he was running a hobby shop kind of thing out in south Lubbock there last I was in touch with him. I never did—we went to the same organization which is the retired officers club meetings or she went to those even though her husband wasn't here, she was eligible, but I didn't know here there, but when I found out some things, I was able to help her a little bit to get some things done that she didn't know how to do. Like I said, the hospital bed, her son—she just didn't have any business experience at all, and George A. Davis is a separate story. It was told very well in the A-J recently.

AW:

So—

KH:

That's exactly the way I remember it from being there. What he was doing, he was flying with a two-aircraft formation. Then what this did, it diminished his capability a great deal. We flew in fingertip formation.

AW:

What do you mean by fingertip formation?

KH:

Are you familiar with that?

AW:

No.

KH:

Okay. Generally, you stack up about a thousand feet. Okay this is a flight leader—we call him number one, his wingman is number two. He's a shooter. The wingman's job is to cover the rear because at low, at six o'clock, you can't see. So he covers the rear by cocking his wing up and doing things, so we don't get attacked and not know the aircraft is coming after us. So this is one, two, and this is three. He's a shooter too. One and three are shooters. And he's eyeballs.

AW:

So the aircraft on the outsides are the lookouts?

KH:

They're the wingmen.



AW:

Wingmen and then the two in the center—

KH:

This is the leader. This is an element leader. Two aircraft fly as an element. George Davis got shot down after he had sent—it tells in the story even—after he had sent one man home because he lost his oxygen, and you never fly as a single in a hostile environment because you can't see behind you and ahead of you, so he sent his wingman, well he sent both wingmen home. And so there was George A. and his element leader, both shooters, nobody to cover the rear. Anyway, they made sure that we didn't expose ourselves like that again.

AW:

And how did they—?

KH:

Davis shot down two MiGs and was shot down himself, killed in action.

AW:

And how did they change that as a result of that?

KH:

Well, they changed that by emphasizing flight integrity. In other words, don't do it if you don't have a complete weapons-system array and flight integrity. If you don't have four aircraft and two guys to look behind, go home.

AW:

Go home. Got it. Got it.

KH:

That cut down on losses.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

But he had found a dozen—aircraft was a MiG-15, Russian. Some were flown by Russians, quite a few of them, and then some by the North Koreans and perhaps by the Chinese. But they heard the voices of the Russians, and the North Vietnamese were flying also. They were flying out of—after McArthur pulled everybody back from the Olive River, all the army, when Truman

decided to fire him because he had done so well, he had taken the whole damn peninsula, and next was China. President didn't want to do that. It's a good decision, political.

AW:

When you say shooter, these are fighter planes, so you're not doing bombing, fighter bombing, you're doing—

KH:

Shooting at other airplanes.

AW:

At other airplanes—at the enemy fighters and enemy I guess bombers for that matter—yeah anything.

KH:

Yeah, anything. That was later that task passed through missiles carried by the airplane, heat-seeking missile called the sidewinder.

AW:

Right, but you were using guns.

KH:

We were using six .50 caliber machine guns.

AW:

And that's different. That's a different whole way of doing business isn't it than using the missiles.

KH:

I've got a couple of .50 caliber cartridges back there, but I don't want to show you that mess. My neat office is under there.

AW:

Now, my roll top desk is so bad I can't even get the top to shut.

KH:

Well, I have to shove it back.

AW:

So it wouldn't scare me. I'm used to it.

KH:

So Boots Blesse came up with this—these tactics—and he described them in a one page piece of paper, which is in my file—how to do it, why, and all of that—and the title of it was “No Guts No Glory,” but not exactly related to what it was talking about.

AW:

No. That’s—so when you would go out on a—did you call them a mission, a patrol?

KH:

No, we just called it combat mission.

AW:

A mission. So you—did you have an objective in mind, or where you out and about looking for the enemy, or did you know where they were going to be—I’m not quite sure—

KH:

Well, it’s an eyeball thing. We were looking for the enemy, and we had to see them. We didn’t have radar telling us anything, or any of that. It was—the Yalu River cuts off Korea from Manchuria—right there—and that was the political boundary after MacArthur was told to get out and withdraw.

AW:

But, when you would go out for a combat mission, you would be looking for the enemy aircraft. You weren’t necessarily supporting a ground movement in Korea because—

KH:

Oh, well, we might be supporting a fighter-bomber mission.

AW:

Okay, got it.

KH:

Or we might be protecting—we might be protecting a reconnaissance aircraft which is a lone aircraft, we might be his protection, or we might just be on a patrol. And if it’s a patrol, we go wherever we think the enemy aircraft is, and get the advantage, and shoot them down.

AW:

How did you find enemy aircraft in that environment because this isn’t—these airplanes—your airplanes and their airplanes are moving a lot faster, and if you don’t have the radar, you’ve got to see them a long way off, don’t you, to have the advantage?

KH:

Well, you know, it depends if we're talking like aircraft, yes, and we improved with the F-22 to the Ultimate, but Washington doesn't want to buy anymore, I don't think.

AW:

How did the F-80 stick compare to the MiG—the 15s?

KH:

Oh, nothing in the world can—that we know of, and we've flown Russian aircrafts against the F-22 that we have—that we've got from other countries, not from China, or not directly from Russia—nothing can touch the F-22, not even the latest model of aircraft that the US builds, and the F-35 that they did select—it's kind of like a—the difference is, it's like a committee, sort of. It has features for everybody, and it's going to be a NATO fighter, Allied fighter, a U.S. fighter, and it's heavier and less capable. It has stuff in it that we don't need because they do.

AW:

Okay, so—maybe I'm not understanding. When you were in Korea, were you flying an F-22 or an F-80?

KH:

No. F-22 is a most recent—latest model aircraft.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

Now, we were—I was flying an F-86.

AW:

F-86? And how did it compare to the—?

KH:

I don't know. Here's a five-pedal one right there—and it had a swept wing. It was the first aircraft built with the swept wing technology that the Germans had developed. And the MiG-15 was—used the same technology before we did in their MiG-15. So we were strictly eyeballs. If we're on a patrol, we're looking for MiGs, and we're looking anywhere. We're doing 360-searches. We don't fly like the airline pilots. You do that, you die. So we would spot the aircraft visually. We knew where their bases were. You could see them across the Yalu River, and we weren't supposed to go over there. I've been there. I think Larry Combest would have sued me if—being head of the intelligence committee in Congress. One day at a luncheon, mentioned

some of these things, but I knew the classification time had expired. I happened to have the job of classifying and declassifying one time. So—but he didn't. I thought I just revealed a great military secret. Well, yeah, I've been over there. So that was the best way to shoot down a MiG because you can see them, with the ground relief below you, and you can see several aircraft around an airfield. If you could get over there you could really tear them up. Well, we had some people that had special clearance to go over there, and fighting as a young man—mid-air fighting, or flying, is a young man's game, really. Flying fighters is a young man's game for sure because your eyesight's what keeps you alive. It's what finds the enemy, and that's why they have the 20/20 vision requirement.

AW:

Because they're over there on their side doing the same thing. They're looking for you.

KH:

Yeah. So we had a squadron commander after Blesse named James Jabara. He was one of the top air aces in all the Korean War. He had shot down fifteen. He was a triple ace. Shoot down five aircraft, you're an ace. But the thing is that—we called him Jabby or Blinky—he'd been—I think he'd flown in World War II, and he'd had some other—all sorts of experience, really a great guy. Well, he used to pick myself and a friend—name of Dick Frailey. We later named him Fearless Frailey—and we named Jabara, if we didn't call him Jabby, we called him Blinky. And he'd picked us. We flew with him quite a few times. First time I flew with him, we went into Antong Air Base and his plan was to get in low so the antiaircraft couldn't do any good—maybe small arms or automatic—and catch them in the traffic pattern—get behind them—come in behind them, so you could shoot them down there. Well, we went—we were up about forty-five thousand feet, going in, and he started to descent, and it was really a wild kind of descent. You know, like this. And we were covering back behind us all the time. We weren't trying to help—we're not second guessing the shooters. They do that. That's their business. Well, we came down into the traffic pattern, and he hadn't—without our eyeballs, he didn't see everything. (laughs) And instead of catching the traffic pattern going this way and coming behind them, he caught them—

AW:

Coming at him?

KH:

Coming at him and, you know, it was a 700 mile closing speed. Maybe they're down to 200 and we're at 500 or 600.

AW:

Yeah. So you don't have much opportunity to shoot somebody like that, do you?

KH:

We didn't get anything that day, but some people did. So you might find them there, if there were fighter bombers doing something, they were down around five or six thousand feet. We'd fly a couple thousand feet above them where we thought the MiGs might be. Or if a fighter bomber mission had been in there before, you might find the MiGs down low. I found one, one day. I was checking out for flight leave—I flew ninety missions over there. Had about fifty-six, and I had enough experience they weren't going to check me out [?] and we were—we got up there and we were—we'd been patrolling the Yalu River looking for MiGs up high, and as we turned around to go home, I saw a couple of—I saw a couple of—later I found out there were four MiGs, and I just had an instant to make a decision. So I did what they call a Split S—like this, with the flight—and came down behind him. And my flight's supposed to be covering me. My wingman's supposed to be covering me, and I thought he was until I got on the ground and found out that wasn't the case. But I—the man who was checking me out—

AW:

Now, they're supposed to see you do this. You don't have to say anything to them. They should see you and cover you that way, right?

KH:

—I'm sorry?

AW:

You don't tell them, "Here's what I'm going to do." You just do it, and they're watching you.

KH:

I just said, "I've got bogeys below." Well, and they're supposed to fly—I'm the leader. They fly—

AW:

So they're supposed—

KH:

They fly their formation with me, and while they're looking back. And anyway, I was going down about like this, and my flight leader, who was the boss, who was checking me out said, "You're going to overshoot them. You better put out your speed brakes." Well, I didn't think so, but I had to do that. So I popped my speed breaks out and set the speed brakes in—just enough, and I killed off some air speed and wound up two thousand feet—about two thousand feet behind him. Had a radar arranging gun sight.



AW:

Was that too far behind him?

KH:

It's really a—really too far. The closer you get, the easier it is. Anyway, so I started shooting at him. I had my pippier. You have a little light up in the windscreen, like some cars around with the dot in the middle. That's the pippier.

AW:

That's your gun sight, in effect.

KH:

—arranging circles which give you the size of a target and the distance—kind of thing. Now I sat back there at full throttle, and after I fired a burst I couldn't get to him. So I dived to get some airspeed and ease back up to shoot at him, and I was still about the same distance. I just couldn't gain on him. But I finally hit him in the wing route in the left side of the aircraft, and saw sparks and fire. And the flight lead wasn't helping me a dang bit that day. When they say *bingo* that means I've just got enough fuel to go home, and so everybody goes. So anyways, flight lead said, "I'm low on fuel." he just said it on the radio, "Let's go home." "I want to see what happens to this guy." "Let's go home." I never saw what happened to him, so I couldn't say I shot him down.

AW:

Yeah, you couldn't—that couldn't be confirmed if you—

KH:

And so all I could say was I damaged him, and so I took a damage. That's one—see, I'm a brand new—I'm a wing man, really, but I was really thrilled to get a damage. I never did get in that position again—as good a position again. That was perfect. You had—it was—that's some how the way it was, and I recall another instance where I was flying with a different individual—not a squadron member but one who flew combat with us—I think—from up in the administrative parts of the fighter wing. And he was a really good one. And I was flying his wing, and he sees a flight of MiGs coming towards us. And they turn off a little bit to the side, but before they do—he just took some Kentucky windage, and shot at him, and blew the thing up.

AW:

Yeah, when you say Kentucky windage, you mean like shooting clay pigeons. He was giving them a lead to figure out where they were going to be by the time the bullets get there. Is that what you mean?

KH:

Yeah. Well, it's a guess-and-by-golly. Use everything you have and fill in the gaps on what you don't.

AW:

I love that phrase. Well, you said ninety missions. How often did you fly a mission, and how long did a mission last?

KH:

Well, we had wing tanks—drop tanks—and we'd burn the fuel out of those first and then drop them, and that'd release the drag. Our missions—excuse me, just a minute. I'm not going to take long. I have a—have my flight time. Those missions would last an hour, about an hour and a half. It was only 200 miles from our airbase to the Yalu river, and there was that airspace up there. And the missions that we flew over North Vietnam were sometimes as long as three or four hours because we'd get air refueling—mid-air refueling going up and coming back. Couldn't get there without a tanker. But anyway, I said I was going to show this—not because of anything—my daughter put it together—but it has—she did a pretty good job.

AW:

Oh, that's great. Yeah.

KH:

And here's the inside of a T-6, and that's me, taken from the back seat. That's my birth announcement, and they didn't know how to spell my name.

AW:

Because you're K-e-n-n-i-t-h?

KH:

Yes. And here's a—yeah, that's a T-6. That's a T-6. It's a low-wing, retractable gear—getting my wings from my brother, and this is in the quarters at Kimpo Air Base where we were flying the F-86. And this is the F-86, here. These are, I think, children.

AW:

Uh-huh. And this is you at—?

KH:

West Point.

AW:

West Point graduation, and, I guess, this is you on the track team? And this is an actual photo of—

KH:

This is a 440-relay. That was a really good one. That's Doug Wiener. He's a black guy, really nice fellow.

AW:

And this is in Korea, also?

KH:

Yeah. That's all of our—all of your group out in front of the squadron, and it has the number of kills and whatever. We really clobbered them, and it was—they had an aircraft that would fly higher than ours would, had bigger guns than we did. It was training, difference was training, and—let's see. This is an F-105 thing. And we were having a party that night to send our assistant officer home who was going home, and this is my—a member of my squadron, Jim Walbridge—he was on an F-105 bombing, you know, fighter bomber mission hitting a target somewhere around the Mu Gia Pass between Vietnam and Laos, and he got hit with flak. He bailed out, landed in a tree, had his emergency radio, and it puts out a beeper and rescue aircraft we call Jolly Greens, they were HH-53, large helicopters. They located him, hovered over him, lowered a cable to him—you have with a horse collar on it. You put your arms in it like that. If you put them in like this, you fall out, so we pretty well put both arms through—and they brought him back in time for the party, and he brought the helicopter guys that saved him.

AW:

So that's who it is in the picture with you—the two helicopter guys who rescued him and—

KH:

Yeah. These two guys right here.

AW:

That's a—I guess you would want to bring them back after they rescued you.

KH:

And. I think this is—

AW:

Would we be able to make—scan copies of these?

KH:

Sure. I don't—

AW:

It would be great to be able to scan these and get you to give the names and information again for us when we have the copies.

KH:

Yeah. I'm—let's see, talking about what the T-6 looks—that's my brother at graduation.

AW:

Oh, that's your brother?

KH:

Yeah, graduating from flight school, and you can see the prop and the radial engine. He was awarded the DFC—Distinguished Flying Cross—for his mission over Japan, and—but he was declared Missing In Action, when he—we didn't know that he was still alive until one day we picked up a *Time* Magazine and he was on the front cover—

AW:

And that's how you found out?

KH:

—with a hat on and a blindfold getting off a transport kind of like a C-47 or the DC-3, and with a Japanese officer—swords and guns on each arm—and we knew he was alive at that point in time. The mission was April 18, 1942 and this was early in '43. But we didn't know he was—they didn't change he's missing in action. We didn't know—after *Time* it was kind of, Well, I think he's dead. Well, no maybe he's alive—that kind of thing. And they wanted—they sent the Distinguished Flying Cross to Reese—and that's Colonel Gilbert, the commander out there—and they decided to present it to my mother, or—and she tried to get me to stand in for her, but I didn't. And so that's her, my mother there, and she's getting a DFC, his DFC, but—

AW:

But at that time, she believes him to be still Missing In Action?

KH:

Yes. Where did they get that picture? Well—

AW:

You mean *Time* Magazine.

KH:

The magazine in Japan published it, and an American correspondent—no, a British correspondent discovered it in the magazine and sent it back to London, and they sent it back to the U.S.A. And we didn't—I have the picture, but it's not here. It's right over here somewhere.

AW:

Now, did—when *Time* ran it, did they know the name of your brother? Did they know who the American was, or did you just happen to recognize him?

KH:

Oh, he was very visibly—

AW:

I know it. I mean, you recognized him, but did they know at *Time* Magazine or—?

KH:

Well, apparently, a U.S. correspondent was involved somewhere in there. I don't know. But they recognized it, I guess, as—the British recognized it. You know, they had an embassy. I don't know—we didn't have an embassy over there at that time. Anyway, I can't say exactly.

AW:

Just curious.

KH:

That's the circuit that I have researched and validated. Well—

AW:

So when did your tour of duty end in Korea?

KH:

Oh, well the truce was signed in September. My duty ended in October of '53, and I was there about eight months, I think—seven or eight months.

AW:

And what—when your tour of duty was done there, where did they send you? That'd be a—

KH:

Back to where I learned how to fly and made me an instructor.

AW:  
To Nellis?

KH:  
At Nellis.

AW:  
Okay. Let's—when we take up next time, let's start there. Would that be good?

KH:  
All right.

AW:  
And if you've got your schedule, we can set a time and place.

KH:  
Okay, well now that I'm started and kind of know where you want to go, I can pull out that picture of my brother.

AW:  
Great.

KH:  
And Ray Westbrook decided that he didn't think he could scan it. It's a black and white picture.

AW:  
Well, I'll bet we can. We've got some really good equipment over there at the Southwest Collection, and I'd love to give it a crack. And certainly Ray would be welcome to use it. We'd be glad to do that.

KH:  
Yeah. Incidentally, it would have helped—Ray was really under a short deadline to get that article that he did on—he wanted to interview my brother, but he's not physically capable right now, and in Skil-Care Nursing down in Tennessee. So he decided then that he'd come talk to me about my brother and decided to talk to me about the things that I did, so he crafted that article and put it together. He'd asked for more space, he said, but I don't know whether he got what he wanted. But some of the information came out incorrect. He had two dogfights mixed up into one, made a good story out of it. That's an engagement—two fighters. So he had my brother's picture and my name underneath it.



AW:

Well, that's why we want to.

KH:

—that he'd scan that. And I could have helped him, but he didn't—he just—he was lucky to get the space and get the—

AW:

Yeah, they work under a very different deadline than we do. We're—as I told you when I first talked to you about this. We were thinking of collecting this information for people to listen to and look at and study fifty to a hundred years from now, so we want to take our time and make sure we get everything correct which it is why it would be very nice for us to get a chance to scan the pictures, let you look at them, and you provide the captions—the information about it so we can make sure we get that accurate. And that way—

KH:

Let's see—excuse me, I'm a modest guy, but this is relevant. And I told you this story, but—the news release is attached, and—

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

I've got that black—

AW:

Boy, that's a—Sabre Jet Pilot 734 out of the 772 MiGs. That's pretty good record. No, that's great. And, for instance, we'd—this is the original, right?

KH:

That's the original—

AW:

We'd want to scan this, too, because this is wonderful stuff.

KH:

And—when—this is jumping up to Southeast Asia and the F-105 which [inaudible] out there. At the end of a hundred missions—when I first got over there, they were—about fifty percent of the pilots were getting shot down and bailing out. Maybe a Jolly Green would pick them up. Maybe

they'd go to prison camp. Maybe they'd be killed—but when you finished, they gave you one heck of a parade around the base. And I'll just show you this. This is—

AW:

So this is—

KH:

This is me about to start the parade.

AW:

After a—yeah, I see. It says, “A Hundred Missions. F-105.”

KH:

And I—they—someone—one of the Thais wove that thing out of flowers.

AW:

Oh, how nice. Now, so that wasn't—your ninety in Korea plus ten in Vietnam. This is a hundred in Vietnam.

KH:

A hundred over North Vietnam.

AW:

—over North Vietnam.

KH:

Not South Vietnam. That was a different war, entirely. That was a ground war.

AW:

Yours were all over North Vietnam.

KH:

Yeah, they had a demilitarize zone and divided Vietnam in about half. And that's the only thing that could live up there. It was really controlled by the Vietnamese. We could just visit there occasionally. I just—I guess that was one of my hobbies. Every air force picture I could get ahold of, I'd stuff in an envelope. And when we moved, they got disorganized on me, and I still have some boxes that I hadn't found.

AW:

Well, when you're able and interested, we would really like to—do I need to move this for you, this pile of stuff I've got—?

KH:

Okay, I wanted to look in here. No—that's—anyway, it's in—it's location is like this, see? Photos, photos, photos. And—might have one of this. Remember me telling you about James Jabara?

AW:

Mm-hm.

KH:

Okay, and Fearless Frailey?

AW:

Mm-hm.

KH:

The plane view—looking at from above at the MiG-15 and the F-86—is pretty much the same, so Frailey was flying with another flight, that day—and I wasn't flying with Jabara. No, we were doing something else, Fearless and I—but he found a swept-wing aircraft, got behind it, and shot it down. Well, Fearless Frailey was the pilot, ole Blinky.

AW:

Shot down his own craft.

KH:

And, you know, after a long period of time—I have that in writing by someone else, and he tells the whole story because he was my roommate—let me give you this. This is—

AW:

Sure. Is this a copy I could take?

KH:

Yeah, that's yours.

AW:

Thank you.

KH:

That's where I've been, militarily.

AW:

Now let me ask a quick question down here, where it says Air Medals, is that—?

KH:

I overwrote that.

AW:

That's seventy and not ten?

KH:

No, it's eight.

AW:

That's—what number should that be?

KH:

Should be eight.

AW:

Eight. Okay, let me just.

KH:

Yeah, that's didn't—

AW:

Yeah, it's a little—

KH:

It looks like a seventy, but it's not. I had it as ten at—wait a minute, see, it's eight. Yeah. And I checked all my military records, and I found that inaccurate.

AW:

No. I just wanted to make sure I knew what it—

KH:

This is another thing I'll send with you for background.

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AW:

Great, thank you.

KH:

It doesn't have—it's not complete. It doesn't have my tour at the Air Force Academy, for example. I just apparently forgot it or didn't have—

AW:

Well, great. This will be very helpful. Well, what is a—I'll be traveling all of next week. In fact, I'm going to go ahead and stop this while we make these arrangements. For this day's worth—we've got a lot more to talk about, but thanks for the time today.

*End of Recording*



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