

**Oral History Interview of
Ken Hite**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
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Lubbock, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Ken Hite. Hite talks about his experiences serving in the Air Force; he focuses specifically on Cambodia in this interview. Hite also talks about how he got interested in a military career and his hundredth mission.

Length of Interview: 01:09:33

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Cambodia	5	00:00:00
Cambodia continued	9	00:13:50
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Working in military planning and policy	18	00:39:56
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Hundredth mission	29	01:00:22
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Ken Hite (KH):

—You know, just—it's just appealing to me—as a piece of art, I don't know how it stands but—

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Well, if you like it then it's a good piece of art. This is Andy Wilkinson and David Marshall with my favorite retiree military commander, Ken Hite. This is our third interview I think, and today is the thirteenth of January, 2014. And we're at his house in the morning and he was just pulling out a picture of the *Mayaguez*.

KH:

This is the *Mayaguez*, it was all about this ship, and they were along the area near Koh Tang, K-h-o [sic] in Cambodian is island. So like I say Koh Tang Island and nobody would worry except the Cambodians I guess.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

For redundancy

AW:

Koh means island?

KH:

Yes.

AW:

Yeah, so island Tang.

KH:

Yeah. And in Korea K-o means island. But this ship had been stopped by a Cambodian-looking boat off the coast of Cambodia on the southwest side there's a string of islands. And he was headed into the Gulf of Thailand. He was just about in the Gulf of Thailand going with his cargo to Bangkok. We had Air Force units there. All of our bombing campaign over North Vietnam was flown from Thailand and classified secret, a very public secret. Usually secret means we just don't want you to see it—we know about it, but that didn't work because all the wives and family were home, and we couldn't stay in Nirvana forever. So my job was Deputy Commander for Ops for 7th Air Force, and I'd been asked by the Command Officer to come up to the command post, which was blue-chip, and went up there and he had word that the Cambodians

had captured one of our cargo ships, and he'd also found two airplanes that were airborne. And so—

AW:

Of our planes?

KH:

Yeah. We had two F-111 airborne on a training flight. They didn't have munitions at all, but I sent them down to investigate to see what it looked like. And at some point in time, we saw a boat leaving, and they flew over the boat and tried to see whether it was Americans or Cambodians or what was on there, whether it should be taken out by some other airplanes. But they couldn't get a definite fix on it or reach a definite conclusion. Then we got intelligence that the crew had been captured and been taken to Cambodia. And President Ford at that point said, "All resources you need are available to you." At one point President Ford wanted to bomb Cambodia, and we had from 7th Air Force, which had been moved from Saigon, where it was originally, up to Nakhon Phanom City in the northern part of Thailand along the Mekong River, and we told him. This headquarters was made up of Lieutenant General John Burns and Major General Archer, and I was a colonel, still am, I retired as a colonel. We also had an army officer there. He was the head of the U.S. army support group. He was a super liaison and officer. But that being the case, there was a meeting held in the command post with those three gentlemen. I was there with them quietly watching, large decisions being made, and they wanted to act right away. Time was of essence. And it was decided that they would use the HH-53 Jolly Green Giants, the large helicopter that had two passenger capacity and a winch to pull down pilots out of the jungle and that sort of thing. But it was means of transportation.

AW:

It was more a transportation helicopter right?

KH:

Yes. It was. It was not a Huey with guns and that sort of thing. So the organization that owned those was right there next to our headquarters in Thailand, and it was to say they evaluated the capability of the air base defense people that were, each of the airbases around there, and made a quick decision, and I might add that right after this—let me say, at the beginning of this incident, there was a network of communication set up between the national military command center, commander and chief PACAF, the Air Force and navy components that make up CINCPAC, the headquarters of PACAF and the Navy and Marines and 7th Air Force. So we could all communicate. So that was approved by the JCS to use those air base defense people.

AW:

When you say airbase defense you're talking about people that are there to guard and defend the base?

KH:

They're there to guard the airbase.

AW:

Right, but they're not people who would normally go out and assault—make assault.

KH:

Oh no, they wouldn't do this normally. And the threat down there didn't seem to be a great military threat.

AW:

And the need for speed was, correct me if I'm wrong, but if I remember my reading, the need for speed was, once they were in Cambodia would be very hard to find them right, the captives?

KH:

Yeah. I might add that at this point in time not only did the president let us know through the command center that anything and everything was available to us, but he wanted to bomb Cambodia. As a matter of fact it was heavily considered and militarily resisted with logic. There were no targets suitable—

AW:

Yeah for bombing.

KH:

And I don't know who else that might excite getting on that peninsula which was a confluence of power of Russia and China and the USA.

AW:

Well, you just named two that might have gotten excited, Russia and China.

KH:

Well—anyway so that's just a blip along the road. In the meantime, the first helicopter to take off from Nakon Phanom, the air base there, it didn't have a full load, so they were going over to Udorn, which is another air base along the Mekong River, right adjacent to Vientiane in Laos, the capital of Laos. It got airborne and had flown for maybe fifteen minutes, and the pilot declared an emergency. He had a chip-light on which indicated that the bearing in the rotor was

about to go. And a matter of fact it did go and all people and crew crashed and burned. And at this point in time, we started the consideration—this was a really fast moving operation and it was being evaluated whether we should bring in Marines from the third amphibious force in Okinawa or not. And it was decided that yes we would. And so we would cease work on the police air base defense people and the Marines would be inserted by those helicopters one at a time. Their helicopters are not long-range and they have to be carried by ship.

AW:

No, and their not particularly fast.

KH:

So it was decided that we would use RH-53s to insert them.

AW:

How far was the base in Thailand from the target in Cambodia? How many miles or hours? How close was that? I'm not quite sure I know.

KH:

It's a guess—I had responsibilities in Cambodia, but I was only down there once, and it wasn't a long ride in a T-39, but I would estimate 500, 600 hundred miles.

AW:

But a lot further to Okinawa from Cambodia.

KH:

Yeah. Sure. Okinawa was four hundred miles from Taiwan and then Taiwan on down.

AW:

Yeah, and so to get those helicopters from Okinawa they'd have to come by ship. And that would take what, days?

KH:

Days.

AW:

That's tough.

KH:

They flew the marines down to U-Tapao Air Base, which was in southern Thailand where our big ships are operated. We operated airborne tankers, aircraft and B-52s could come in there. It

had that capability. So it was C-141s brought them from Okinawa down. And then we had numerous subordinate commands. Ultimately it was the 7th Air Force Operation, but it became a joint operation. So the intelligence developed and then somewhere in there a Cambodian fishing boat came motoring back up towards the ship, and it had all the American crew on board. Bad intelligence.

AW:
Yeah.

KH:
Had that happened before all this other stuff happened, we wouldn't of gone through this exercise.

AW:
Yeah.

KH:
Because the idea was that there was someone in Cambodia connected with this, and we had evacuated Cambodia with Operation Eagle Pull, sometime before. This is maybe an aside, but there was a congresswoman from New York who was sent out to take a look at Cambodia, brought a group with her. And they decided we should withdrawal from Cambodia. That was what they recommended, and that's what we did. Okay, the result of that—I have my picture on—I wrote a kind of engraving thing on the wall that's in my wife's bedroom to remind me that after that happened, a country of seven million was reduced to a country of five million, two million Cambodians, they took all the people out of—all of our friendlies out of Phnom Penh, the Capitol and put them in the countryside and too many of their heads were seen on posts as skeletons.

AW:
Yeah.

KH:
It was a vicious bloody operation because of that one decision. It was not a highly expensive thing to maintain Cambodia although all the Cambodian friendlies were withdrawn into enclaves around the country and being supplied by us. We had a contract aircraft, C-130s that dropped ammo and supplies in there to the Cambodians, so that's kind of the situation. Now we had the Khmer Rouge and no friendlies.

AW:
Right, and so your intelligence was a lot harder to get, was it not?

KH:

I'm sorry?

AW:

It was a lot harder to get any useful intelligence in that situation, was it not?

KH:

Well of course. And we got intelligence in all sorts of ways, army aircraft and whatever.

DM:

People on the ground also?

KH:

Sure. Communications intelligence.

AW:

Keep going—

KH:

Let me listen to you. Do you have questions?

AW:

No. I was going to ask—and this is still part of the aside before we get to that—

KH:

Why don't you guys sit down.

AW:

Yeah. Before we get back to the—

KH:

This is a combination of bedroom, den, and everything.

AW:

And museum.

KH:

My wife has osteoporosis, and she sleeps in the hospital bed over there, but I found a room for the computer.

AW:

Well as part of that aside, just because to me it all ties to this stuff, was the Khmer Rouge in such—was it as strong a position as the communists had been in Vietnam, or would they have been—?

KH:

Oh no, Sihanouk had abdicated and gone to China, and they had a series of dictators, but they had no great military forces.

AW:

So holding it and not pulling out would have been a lot less of a chore for the United States than Vietnam had been.

KH:

Oh no comparison.

AW:

Okay I just want to make sure I understood that.

KH:

So that, plus some of the reasons, we had operations going in Laos that President Kennedy started when he sent the CIA in after Dien Bien Phu and the French lost control of Indochina. And Eisenhower sent over C-47s to help the French. And since that time I've been to Dien Bien Phu—I was sent up there on a combat mission because we had seen a train in the area, and we didn't find it but we found—my lasting impression of Dien Bien Phu was a range of mountains with a river down through, and a railroad track from China, and Burma was just over the hill in the Golden Triangle. They had withdrawn there for their last stand, and they had no chain of supply coming in, so Eisenhower did a merciful thing in providing C-47s and some airlift to help them, but it was too late, they lost it, and that's when Kennedy moved in. So the war over there was not the Vietnam War, it was the Southeast Asian War and My Lai [?].

DM:

What did the Khmer Rouge have? They had these swift boats. Did they have any type of other naval vessels, did they have any kind of aircraft?

KH:

The Cambodians? I have an order of battle that I'd have to refer to, it's lying probably over there, and so there's papers I'd like to get it out and show it to you another time. I believe it'll show some of the things—the Vietnamese had also infiltrated Cambodia, and they had interests there as well.

AW:

Yeah, some of the things that I read about when I was reading up for today's visit, mentioned that at this point in the conflict, Cambodia was maybe more worried about the Vietnamese than they were the U.S. since we'd pulled out of Cambodia.

KH:

The next thing after Eagle Pull in the evacuation of Cambodia was Frequent Wind, the evacuation of South Vietnam, the friendlies and our own forces and the babies. Remember Operation Babylift that Ford initiated.

AW:

So after it was decided to put the Marines in instead of the air base defense people, how did this unfold?

KH:

Okay, our intelligence then had shown that there were probably two company-sized Cambodian group in there with all the things that an infantry kind of unit would have—all the weapons. And they were up on the northeast, northwest corner of the island, which sat kind of like this. That being the case, we got a brigade of Marines that came over from the Philippines, and two companies came down from Okinawa. We really had the forces to put in there and do whatever we needed to do, had more than we could ever use available to us, and helicopters, I'd have to guess we had sixteen or seventeen HH-53s to do the job, and it was decided that we'd insert the Marines, and they really put up a strong resistance. I don't think there were any HH-53s that didn't either get shot down or have bullet holes in them. And we lost quite a few marines in the insertion process. The idea was to insert the Marines on the east side of the island and cut off that northern tip of Koh Tang. I have come to a point that maybe—but it's important to me as a military man because we had, quote, all the help that we needed, and the national military command center was trying to help us make decisions.

AW:

Which sounds like help maybe you didn't need.

KH:

For example, the Secretary of the Air Force walked through the command center and asked the Chief of Staff, the Air Force—and this was oriented towards the evacuation of Vietnam, I digressed to that point. And he wanted he wanted to know how many people were on those helicopters. One of the landing zones was atop the U.S. Embassy. We had other landing zones, but that was the primary one. And there was a huge banyan tree in the backyard of that. And we had arrange for someone to put cordite around the base and cut it off at the ground and drag it out of the way, so it could be used as a landing zone, but it was during this process—because it

couldn't be used as a landing zone because the Vietnamese crowded in there. It was full of people. The only place was on the roof, and it was one stairway up there. So the Secretary of the Air Force was wondering how the safe it was I guess. I don't know what the expertise they bring, brilliance I guess and not information.

AW:

In a case like the *Mayaguez*, how many people would you guess were involved in the decision making process. It sounds like communications back and forth, different branches and—

KH:

Actually, the Air Force and the Navy's mission is to train and equip air force's ships and what have you to prompt and sustain combat. When we go to war, the joint staff takes over, where all services are represented. So then PACAF and the naval fleet and the seventh fleet, I believe it was, were out of their decision making team. They had information that they might need, but the decisions were being made by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Military Command Center and CINCPAC, Admiral Tyler was a CINCPAC and 7th Air Force, and we got so much help during the—to get back to the *Mayaguez* thing, then we had—CINCPAC had been questioned or was interested after the initial insertion, and losses of lots of helicopters and everything. How many helicopters that we had and what was the in-commission status and how long it would take to get all the bullet holes fixed, so four stars is asking that question, and our seventh Air Force Chief of Staff General Archer answered the phone and was fielding them, and suddenly he said, "Ken, will you take this call?" And Admiral Gylar [?] I had met one time when he came through going out there to be a commander he came around to various places to be briefed, and my interest was in Korea and Japan at that time, but I briefed him on that, so we recognized each other, and I went down the lines just like a squadron commander might have to do to tell his boss, you know, What's in the commission, how long it would take to deplete parts, whatever, what do we have that we can fight with. Does that answer any questions?

DM:

I'm also curious to know how—from the time you received the intelligence about the *Mayaguez* to the time of the insertion, how much time lapsed?

KH:

It's difficult for me to tell. We had three officers that could make decisions in the command post. Command post was a part of my—I had about 400 or 450 man staff, and the command post was under it. It was mine. I didn't operate there, but I had people to run it. So whenever—well, throughout that operation, either myself or General Burns or General Archer were in the command post to make any decisions. Should we do this, should we do that? Because the command post chief was not in the decision making—he's and information making, gathering business, communications business. So I'm setting a trap to say that I don't know. I don't know.

AW:

Now when the Marines did come in, they came in on helicopters operated by the Navy or the Marine Corps and not the Air Force?

KH:

I don't think—when they came in where?

AW:

In the insertion in the—

KH:

Oh in the insertion they were flown in by the Air Force.

AW:

By the Air Force. But you had Marines onboard.

KH:

The Marines were the fighting troops. They were just delivering the troops. And one of the individuals was a forward air controller, and his helicopter got shot down. He was floating in the bay and his LPUs, his survival gear, but he still had his radio, and he was floating on his back out there, and the carrier was nearby and they had A-7 aircraft off the carrier, and he was directing him. I mean he never quit. He hadn't felt about his life, he was okay, he was floating. It was like a "You're bulletproof if your young," and if you missed a collision, don't worry about it, it was a miss.

AW:

It was a miss and not a hit. Did this controller survive? Do you know?

KH:

I think so.

AW:

That's good. I'm glad to hear that.

KH:

And I have a summary. It's an after action report, but the maps have faded and everything. It has a lot of this information that you're talking about, and the envelope—where is the envelope with the—?

AW:

Right under the photograph was the cargo ship.

KH:

This answers a lot of the questions, and then it would have to be tabulated from the briefing. I had that there for a purpose. In the briefing—this briefing pulls it together as well as anything. Colonel Reid did the perfunctory introductions and whatever, and then the individuals that were involved in the combat briefed their part of it, what happened, and all that data that's in here—and some of which was taken an exception to by an officer who was assigned to an HH-53 unit there at Nakhon Phanom. And that's always the case. You and I go to war, and we're in two different airplanes. We all see it differently. All of our experiences are different. So I think it's logical that certainly headquarters wouldn't know it all. But all we knew at the time was right here, and they were briefing the Air Force and Navy and Marine units in the Philippines, and in Okinawa. And I'm not sure where all they went. He was just turned loose to do it, had his briefing and his slides.

AW:

Are these things that we can archive, either to copy and return to you or put in the archive? I notice some of them are marked confidential. Is that confidentiality still—?

KH:

No, I sent them to the air force at Montgomery at the Air University Library and had them declassified.

AW:

Okay.

KH:

And there'll be a notation at the top there.

AW:

Got it. Yeah I see it. Yeah.

KH:

So that's open information.

DM:

Is that the case with most Vietnam-era materials now or is most of it still classified do you think?

KH:

Well, classification systems that I knew after a certain period of time, they would automatically be considered declassified. And that was the case.

AW:

Oh it was with this one.

KH:

Well, that was the case with this one. I was doing this—the dates are on here, in 1998 and just to be safe and protect myself I had them declassify them. See that?

AW:

Right. Are these things you'd like to donate to the archive?

KH:

Well, yes I'd like to identify what we're going to do. **[phone rings]** I can stop this here.

AW:

Sure. Or take it if you need to, Ken.

KH:

I'm sorry?

DM:

He said go ahead and take it if you need to take it.

KH:

No, I don't need to.

DM:

Okay.

KH:

My wife's in the other room. She'll get it. Probably for her anyway. So anyway, I lay these things out as—we might want to talk about what you might be interested in and I'm interested in how you'd handle them—

AW:

Sure.

KH:

You digitize things and—

AW:

Yes.

KH:

And you have a virtual setup.

AW:

Yes and no. We digitize things that particularly are subject to deterioration. For instance, that after-action report you were just showing me, you said these maps have faded. Well that's one reason we would want to digitize that because that will give us a copy that a hundred years from now will still be legible, and if we left it just on the paper at some point it's going to disappear.

KH:

Yeah. Well, I asked the Air Force when I sent them down there to please make me a copy, and I said free copy.

AW:

Yeah, and we do that same thing, and the reason that we would want these materials is that they—not that they don't exist anywhere else as you just said, the Air Force has copies and so forth, but what we're interested in as an archive is that—again 200 years from now, somebody can learn about Ken Hite growing up in Earth, Texas, watching those airplanes fly over, getting a chance to ride in that airplane before you moved out to Earth, and the leaving high school early, coming to Texas Tech, going to West Point, you're whole career. And because you were in some very important and interesting places in times, and then these materials would just be supplemental to that. And so that's a thing that we're interested in. What might be of value is that we arrange for you to come let us take you through our archive and show you how we handle them. Now we don't put everything in a virtual collection, The Vietnam center does, and they do it for a couple reasons. One is they are very focused on one thing, the Vietnam War as they call it. And they started with a collection we call Born Digital. They began early enough that everything that they've done, they've done with digital recordings or digital cameras. We've been collecting things since the university began in the 1920s, so we have a lot of paper and photographs and audio tape and video tape and film that we're slowly getting digitized, first for preservation, and then next to see what are those materials we want to make virtually available, But not everything, we just don't have the resources to make everything virtually available. For instance, we were talking over the phone about your last interview, and I listened to that part. I still think that its—

KH:

You think it's all right?

AW:

I do. I think it's admirable you talk about your family obligations and why a person would make one decision versus another, and that's—

KH:

Well, my wife was just overloaded. A lot of people in the Air Force avoided assignments at the Pentagon because it was such an intense and demanding job. For example, I was just a colonel, but I was a specialist on a couple of countries, and I was called—I had a problem, my job was—I was in the plans business there. I had to get the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force to agree on all the joint plans. And I worked with their planners.

AWDM

That sounds like a big job.

KH:

And I chaired a group, and we sat and talked it through, and I made the decision to send it forward, and ultimately it got the blessing or it didn't. I'd never had one kicked back, but that being the case, I got a call right before the end of work at about six one day that "You are going to have to brief the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the morning at six a.m., and they wanted to know—we had a—I was working a policy paper, U.S. policy towards Japan. I had talked to Executive Officer and explained to the chairman that's the ACS executive officer and explained that we were having some hang-ups, and we needed the service chiefs to get behind their planners so we could get on and make some decisions. So with all the chiefs there and the chairman—someone said, "Are you going to stay here until you get your briefing written?" And I said, "No, I'm going home and going to sleep." So I came in at four and put it together and walked down and met the executive officer, and he took me to the NMCC [**National Military Command Center**] and I was all calm, cool, and collected, but just as we got in the door he said, "Gentlemen, Colonel Hite!" And I mean the adrenaline—I thought it'd be a little more gentle than that. So I talked to Admiral Moore and told him what we needed. They talked to us, I wasn't part of the Air Force chain of command or chain of operations. So I talked to him, and things smoothed out. We got a lot of decisions made. We got the policy paper over. Every agency in Washington seemed to have to approve it. And the National Security Council approved it, and it became policy towards Japan.

AW:

This is exactly the kind of thing that will be interesting to people in the future. We can read about what the policy is and we can probably read papers that were presented, but to have Ken Hite

talking about it and what it was like to do that. And the demands on you as a not just a colonel but as a father and a husband and a brother and all the other things we tend to forget. We start to think about people, especially in the military as being sort of like these robots that can do this job, and we forget that they're people, and there's a people side too all this history. And I think that's the real value of it. So these papers are most important to your archive in the fact that they just support what you've already been saying to us. We'd be glad to take you through. I'll come pick you up and then take you over there and show we operate it and bring you back home.

KH:

Okay. Well, you tell me when.

AW:

We'll look at our calendars right now. I can't stay too long today. I have a board meeting I've got to do at noon, but we'll look at our calendars right now and pick a time maybe next week would be good if it's good for you.

KH:

Well I think it is. I get body repair every once in a while, so I'll have to look and see.

AW:

Yeah. So do I.

KH:

What doctor wants to see me.

DM:

And how long you'll have to wait in the waiting room to see him probably. Quite an investment of time. Next week I am in good shape Tuesday and Wednesday in particular, the twenty-first and twenty-second. Do I need to move this out of your way so we can have access to your calendar. I remember you—

KH:

You want to see this? Let me give you something to read.

AW:

I have a roll top desk at my house, but I think I told you, Ken, that I can't even close mine, you're way ahead of me.

DM:

That's a real nice roll top.

KH:

Made in Taiwan.

AW:

Oh really. What kind of wood is this? Is this mahogany?

KH:

Teak.

AW:

Teak. Oh gosh.

DM:

Oh wow.

KH:

That's just the pine of—

DM:

Yeah of that place but pretty exotic to us. I tell you, those are some incredible souvenirs, aren't they? Some of these furnishings.

KH:

That felt like a calendar, but it's not. Okay. I've just—you got to this point. I have made some progress, you should have seen it before.

AW:

Is this your letter opener, Mr. Hite?

KH:

Yeah. That's a Japanese samurai—

DM:

Samurai letter opener.

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KH:

And you can always—you can always end it if it gets too tough. I'm proud of that, getting to talk with Dick Cheney one time—he was out here, Larry Combest brought him out—let's see, it was before he was vice president. He was secretary of defense, is that right? I found out how those politicians—Larry was a very good friend, but he was a politician, and he was talking to Dick Cheney, and I was just kind of standing over there with my wife, and suddenly he wheeled and was out of there and I was standing there looking at Dick Cheney, you know it wasn't one of these—it looked like it just happened you know. Larry had it planned, I think he wanted me to talk because I had some questions, and thank goodness for the National War College. I have a picture of it in the entry out there. I got a degree in international affairs at Georgetown concurrently—it was at night school, and I got some credit at the National War College. My West Point diploma got caught in a rain storm, and I just learned that Costco of all people can think they can rejuvenate it.

DM:

Really? I was wondering if West Point would reissue. Will they reissue a diploma if yours is damaged?

KH:

I hadn't asked. All the people are gone.

DM:

But they have records—

KH:

I have the diploma, it just has watermarks on it, so it's not framed. Some of the signatures are-- but they think they can put it back.

AW:

Well, that's pretty—

DM:

That's great.

KH:

I might make another copy.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

I'm sorry. I'm going to have to call you back on—

AW:

That'd be fine. Tuesday or Wednesday would be best for me and you've got my card right?

KH:

Okay. Yes I do.

AW:

And just call me—there we go—and let me know what time of the day would be best, and I'll come pick you up. The only reason I'm offering to pick you up, I know you can drive, but parking on campus is not the easiest thing, and I can take care of that.

DM:

And that starts next week, too. The students all come back next week.

AW:

Actually, it starts the fifteenth.

DM:

This week, does it? Oh well, that's true.

AW:

Yeah, no. Our lives are over with as we know them.

KH:

And, David, your occupation?

DM:

I'm an oral historian at the Southwest Collection just like Andy. Our offices are right next to each other, so I just wanted to meet you.

AW:

He has a particular interest in the Second World War.

DM:

And Korea.

AW:

And Korea. But also, David is—we try to make sure that more than one person knows kind of what we're doing so that if we had an important interview and I was taken ill or something then David would know—be familiar enough with to come help.

KH:

Every combat mission I flew in Korea.

DM:

Oh is that right?

KH:

I didn't do that for Vietnam.

DM:

Do we have a copy of that or are we going to get a copy of that? See that kind of biographical information—

AW:

I'd like to get a copy of that.

KH:

I have two copies.

DM:

Oh okay.

KH:

In one of them I deleted one mission because I didn't want to make another person feel bad. He cost us shooting down a MiG by loop, but he didn't do it, you know, you live and die with your eyeballs in the Korean War, you didn't have all the sophisticated electronics and whatever.

DM:

Right.

KH:

So and let's see, I also have something similar on Southeast Asia. I put this out in case it came up. I think you saw this.

AW:

Yes that's a great photograph.

KH:

But Heck and—

DM:

Those compilations that you're talking about, your combat record for example, those are an archivist's best friend. We love to see where people have taken these materials and put them together because that gives us such an insight, an easy insight, into your life and your career, so we would love to get copies of those if we could.

KH:

Yeah. Well, I've got to trash them. After all I'm also—I'll fix to end this life like everybody else. I don't know when. My brothers ninety-three, I don't think that has anything to do with my life. I'm eighty-seven.

AW:

We're a better alternative than the trash.

DM:

The word trash scares us.

KH:

I'll put that in positive terms. I've been looking for someone that could make some use out of them. It's really a pleasure, and I felt very fortuitous when you showed up at our house over there.

AW:

He put the hard sell on me on that bar which was beautiful. Our house is so tiny we have no place. It unfolded, it was made out of—

KH:

It was teak and marble.

AW:

Teak and marble.

KH:

This marble, it came from Taiwan, there's a mountain out near Taipei.

AW:

Oh yeah, I see that now. That's the same color as that top of your—

DM:

Oh it matches?

KH:

So that's where the top of the bar came from.

DM:

It was the same manufacturers that made this and the bar.

KH:

Yes.

AW:

Isn't that nice? A matching stool-top desk and bar.

KH:

And you look at it, and clever they are, they made everything like this, so that it could be shipped by parcel post. That limited the size of the components.

AW:

As you mention that, I see that the pedestals on either sides are broken in half aren't they.

KH:

Yeah.

AW:

Yeah.

KH:

This is just put together here in the middle and held together by this and the top lifts off.

AW:

And do these pedestals come apart also? In two pieces? I see the border—

KH:

Yeah, they do.

AW:

Wow.

KH:

They're fastened under here.

AW:

That's amazing.

DM:

So you can actually transport it pretty easily. What wood work, incredible wood work.

AW:

We didn't have the tape recorder turned on when we were looking at your screen. Of course the tape recorder wouldn't have captured it anyway, but that open screen with those little squares.

DM:

The nails.

KH:

Are those persimmons, or what are those?

AW:

No, the nails where you were showing us how they nailed together—and you couldn't get a hammer in there. I don't know how in the world he did that. I was really impressed.

DM:

That is incredible.

AW:

Well, when we get you in next week and show you, you'll have a better idea, but all these photographs you have and the prints, we have the ability to copy those and do a very good job of copying them, including the big prints of the aircraft. We have huge—we have one scanner that's as big as this room. You walk inside of it.

KH:

Yeah—this is a something that I had to show the F-105, if you come over and take a look.

DM:

I've been looking at that from across the room.

KH:

When the puffs of smoke got black, they were eighty-five millimeter or one hundred millimeter, and on a similar mission to this, we flew in flights of four aircraft, and I was the wingman, one of the lesser persons in flight. But I saw the flack and it wasn't frightening or anything. It hit behind us when it started and some hit between us and the lead was very astute, he said, "Eagle 3 or Eagle 4" or whatever my call sign was, "You better start moving around. They're shooting at us pretty good. You'll be next." So I started—I quit trying to look after the flight and started looking after myself. This is what technology will do for you. That little thing right there, once we got that, our losses—at the time I got—in my F-105 squadron, half the people could expect to be hit and either bail out, captured, picked up by Jolly Green, or go down with the airplane.

AW:

Now what you're pointing to, this is slung under the wing on the outer edge?

KH:

Yeah, this is a QRC-160 ECM pod.

AW:

And what does that mean?

KH:

It's electronic counter measures.

AW:

Electronic counter measures, ECM.

KH:

Okay so we had in addition to these guns—the guns were radar sighted and on Xpan. We could put some kinks in their aiming point with it, but mainly they helped with surface to air missiles, SA2—all the equipment over there that we had was made by Russia, Soviet Union. So we figured out back at Nellis back at R&D fighter location, a formation where we could jam a whole block of air with X, Ka and L band, and they got the guidance band, and we were the first ones to get them about a month after I arrived in combat. And first time we went up with them, they must have fired every SA2 they had, that's what everybody thought. But the thing is they just went up in the sky and exploded. It was like a Fourth of July celebration. And suddenly the

losses are from you having a fifty percent chance of getting through without having to jump or go with the airplane.

DM:

Incredible.

KH:

It changed down to twenty, twenty-five percent, I guess.

AW:

So cut it in half.

KH:

Yeah. At least cut it in half—the technology, which we are not having—or not doing right now. It costs lives.

DM:

It seems like you would have to wonder. Have they come up with something new that we haven't counter measured?

KH:

Oh of course.

AW:

Anytime you went on these missions, seems like you would have to concern yourself with a little bit, have something new.

KH:

Oh yeah, Air Force does, I'm speaking as a Blue Suiter, and their requirements, deputy and intelligence and everything, all the information available is looked at all the time.

DM:

So this ECM, did it send a signal that scrambled their ability to locate you?

KH:

Well it—you know technically it had a little prop on the front and had a generator. As an operator, I just know it made their signals ineffective. Their missile would not guide, and it would not explode at the right altitude. That was technology back then.

AW:

It's pretty remarkable.

KH:

This was some of the more important stuff. Old Bob Hope came over and brought all of it—

AW:

And Joey Heatherton, my goodness. That might be enough to make you enlist.

KH:

Here's the happiest moment of my life, one of the most happy—

AW:

Was that on your hundredth?

KH:

Yeah.

DM:

Oh the mission.

AW:

Hundredth mission.

KH:

We had a custom of doing a parade, and we flew with flying suits that didn't have our names on them. So after our hundredth mission we'd have someone bring one out with the hundredth mission and everything and our name. That's what's happening here, I'm getting out of my airplane.

AW:

Now when you flew without your name on the suit was that a security measure?

KH:

Name on my chest. Yeah on my flight suit.

AW:

I mean the reason you didn't have it on when you flew was that a security measure?

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KH:

Yeah. It would make it easier during interrogation.

AW:

Right.

KH:

And so then they—this is a marine howitzer, small howitzer, and that's a bottle champagne. They towed that behind—

AW:

That's another very important piece of technology.

KH:

They towed that behind this truck, and everybody when they finished a hundred got that parade. We went all around the base, and we got over to the officers club then, and there was a little bit of a party.

DM:

That's quite an accomplishment, you know. I mean, how many people made it to 100? What percentage could—? I mean so many were shot down.

KH:

Well, it's a function of time, and I'd say eighty, seventy-five percent made it.

AW:

And you went on beyond 100 to how many missions?

KH:

I had—the non-counters were missions flown over Laos. Some missions were flown over Laos and Vietnam. The North Vietnam missions were counters. It was a separate war from South Vietnam, absolutely.

DM:

Right. Can you not say how many missions that you flew over Laos?

KH:

No, I don't have any—I just don't have any count.

DM:
Right.

KH:
I have my flight records and—but they don't show destinations any—they didn't—they used to, but they don't.

AW:
Right.

KH:
In the Korean War they showed exactly where you went.

AW:
What about combat missions in Korea. How many?

KH:
I flew ninety before the truce was made in 1953.

AW:
I just talked to a man up in Plainview a few weeks ago who was on the—flew the hump during World War Two. He flew eighty-four, and I thought whoa.

KH:
Eighty-two.

AW:
He said he flew eighty-four missions.

KH:
Eighty-four.

DM:
Over the hump.

KH:
And boy, that was high altitude.

AW:
But now ninety, one hundred, that's just—

KH:

Well my brother wasn't so fortunate. He flew one.

AW:

Quite a story though.

KH:

—and caught hell.

AW:

Let's get a plan for next week. You call me, and we'll come by and pick you up.

KH:

You have a meeting don't you?

AW:

Yeah I do.

KH:

Do you have a second?

AW:

I do, yeah.

KH:

Okay. You asked me what interested me in the military. Another part of it was my family's attitude, and that's my mother's attitude.

AW:

Did your mother write this?

KH:

Sorry?

AW:

Did your mother write this?

KH:

I don't know. I don't really know.

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AW:

Yeah, it's beautiful.

KH:

It probably should show anonymous there. I know there's some words I think she rewrote something.

AW:

It's terrific.

KH:

She wrote the part—the feminine part.

DM:

How many other people from Earth and that area in your time period went into the—I guess it was Army Air Corps—was it Army Air Corps when you entered or Air Force?

KH:

Army Air Corps, well no, yeah, in 1947 Truman changed it. Army Air Corps became a separate service.

DM:

I'm not sure what year you entered.

KH:

I entered West Point in '47.

AW:

'47 okay.

KH:

And graduated in '51.

AW:

So you graduated—it was Air Force.

KH:

There were very few five-year courses up there.

AW:

They wouldn't let you do that. So he graduates from West Point, but into the Air Force.

DM:

Interesting.

KH:

That was a trade between the chiefs of the Army and the new Chief of Staff of the Air Force, who was Hoyt Vandenberg. He had a son in class of '51 with me, Sandy Vandenberg. It wasn't a back door deal. It was upfront. It was a necessary thing. We didn't have an Air Force Academy until 1955.

DM:

Right. But how many other kids from Earth went that direction?

KH:

Well, we had people that joined some service while they were in high school. And I don't know, a good number of people from that area went into the service, I know that. I don't have as many uncles as Preston Smith has brothers, but I almost do and my dad's family was a family of ten. One was killed as a baby on the way to church in a horse wagon, it ran away, but I had an aunt who was a nurse and served as far away as Australia in the Army as an army nurse captain and—

DM:

Well, Mr. Hite let me ask you, I have specific interests, like Korean War for example, and I know that Andy is interviewing you, but if I have some specific topics I would like to talk to you about can I give you a call and try to set up something? I'll talk to Andy first to make sure we're not duplicating questions or anything like that, but I might want to delve in a little bit more on some subjects.

KH:

Also, my view of World War two is based on ten months service as an aviation cadet waiting for a class that never materialized, but the Korean War, I was a second lieutenant, so I have a view from way down here you know. There's some interesting things I just didn't want to forget them. My wife said, "What are you going to do with all of that stuff?" And my sister's husband was a naval aviator and flew combat out in the Pacific, and he just burned it all.

DM:

We hear about these stories, and it really bothers us—we hate to—so—

KH:

So you'll help me with the space problem I have?

AW:

We sure will.

DM:

We certainly will. You ran into the right person for sure.

DM:

I'm going to say thanks one more time, and we'll get ready for another one and stop this tape.

KH:

Okay, Tuesday or Wednesday. Now I've got to find my calendar.

End of Recording

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