



Benjamin Bowthorpe

Salt Lake City, Utah
Lieutenant Colonel
Air Force
Fighter Pilot
"Escalation"

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Benjamin Warren Bowthorpe. I usually go by Ben.

Interviewer

And where were you born?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Salt Lake City. Holladay, Utah, 1934.

Interviewer

And so you grew up in Salt Lake City?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Uh-hmm.

Interviewer

And when did you actually go into the Air Force?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

When I was 18, been out of high school about six, eight months and I had finished one quarter up at the University and they were just about ready to draft me into the Army, which I didn't care a whole lot for. So I said "Well, I think I'll just join something." And the Navy was about nine or ten months and the Air Force was about two or three months so I just joined the Air Force.

Interviewer

What year was this?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

1953.

Interviewer

And that's just the beginning of the Cold War?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yes. That's why I was able to get into pilot training because with the beginning of the Cold War they were going to need a bunch of pilots. You used to have to have four years of college or at least two years of college to apply. But then when the Cold War started they lowered the requirements. If you had a high enough grade on your entrance exam in the Air Force and could pass the physicals, you could go to aviation cadet training.

Interviewer

And did you know you wanted to be a fighter pilot?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, but I really didn't think I'd be able to since the thing was as soon as they came by and says, "That's the way you can do it." I said, "Hallelujah. We'll give that a shot."

Interviewer

So how long was your training?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Well, it started in January of '54, and it was 18 months and I graduated in July of '55.

Interviewer

And in '55 had anyone heard of Vietnam?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

No. We were still thinking about Korea but it was done and gone. Nobody had mentioned Vietnam. They didn't even mention them in '60. The Army guys were probably thinking about it 'cause they were sending a few troops over there early on, you know? We didn't start thinking about it much until about '63. Then they started sending a few pilots down there just to fly fact airplanes, to call in air strikes and so forth. But as far as running bombing missions, they weren't doing anything until '65. And I was stationed in Okinawa at the time. I had my family there and had been there for four years and I was about ready to go back to the States and I had extended for an extra year so I could go through F-105 training. Leave my family there and go back to Las Vegas to F-105 school and stayed there for another year or so. But I was getting ready to go back to the States in about June or July, somewhere along in there, of '65. But in the meantime, during the April, May of '65, we were sending ten or fifteen airplanes at a time down to Korat, Thailand to fly whatever missions they might have us to do. So I picked up 15 missions there.

Interviewer

This is very early in the war?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, and it was like nobody had any idea of what the best way to do this was. There was high altitude, low altitude, how many missiles they had, how many they were going to have. So it was just like bull to the wall and have at it the best way you can get there, low level. And just out of our group of guys we lost five or six guys that were shot down. Some were killed. But the majority of them were shot down and made POWs and they were there

for eight years. So most of my friends were there for the whole shebang.

Interviewer

What were bombing? What target should we have been bombing?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Airfields and ships. Instead of bombing the little trucks on the highway, we should've been going up to the source of the goods or ammunition and supplies and bombing the ships that were bringing 'em in or bombing the airfields where they were bringing 'em in by airplane instead of out here bombing a little guy in a pick-up truck hauling some stuff down the road. We're spending probably \$10,000 to drop on a \$50 pick-up truck down there, you know? And that's the kind of stuff we hit, some pretty small trucks, bicycles. We didn't care, as long as he was carrying something - wagons, donkeys pulling them. Water buffalos. Water buffalos kind of explode when you hit 'em.

Interviewer

... freighter than a water buffalo?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Every now and then you'd get a water buffalo there. With that high explosive incendiary ball, it would kind of dismember a fella on the spot. But the trucks, we could take those out right away, but the bad thing is you had to find a straight stretch that he was gonna be on, because if he was going like this and you're trying to get him, it sometimes got a little testy. But between one of the four of us you could usually get it.

Interviewer

Do you want to say anything about your friend, Don Wood?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

No, I knew him from back in Cannon Air Force Base because he was a Mormon guy and went to BYU and stuff like that. And then he left the squadron that we were in in New Mexico about a year before I did. So he was already in Okinawa in the squadron that I was going into, so he was selected to be the guy to meet us and greet us, or meet me because Barbara had to wait back in the States until I could find a house on the economy. They were pretty tough to find. But she had to wait back there until I could find a house. He was the guy who was our greeter. He met us and tried to take care of us and help us out a bit. And he got encephalitis one time and he's the only guy that I'd ever known or anybody had ever known that had ever gotten this encephalitis, whatever it is, an infection in the brain or something. He got that and he was up in Japan in the hospital for a month, and then back and forth, and in and around, and then after six months of going back to all these places he convinced them that he was well again. And that had never happened before because a single engine fighter pilot, you know, a single seat, they don't want you flaking out on them. Because we had a guy that one time was flying. Two of them were flying over from Okinawa to Taiwan and this is when China was very ugly towards us. Mao Zedong was making all kind of threats and sort of thing, so we didn't mess with China. They were flying along direct from Okinawa to Taipei and when they were about 30 minutes from Taipei he just - pop - he just died. They assume it was probably an aneurysm of some

sort.

Interviewer

He died in the cockpit?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

He died. And so the guy who was with him kept yelling at him and doing whatever he could do, putting the nose under the wing and was trying to push up on it, wiggle it around. What he was really trying to do was to turn it 'cause it was heading right towards China and no telling what they would think that was. There's an airplane coming over there with no radio contact and he can't change his IFF or he can't do anything, he's dead. An airplane that's coming towards China, they don't know what's in it or what's going on. And in the meantime, this guy had radioed everybody he could think of and says, "You gotta tell the Chinese this airplane's coming and there's nobody in it that can turn it." The world was really uptight and tense there for a while. And he finally got it. He turned it a little bit at the time. Because the auto pilot would fight you back. And he got it turned where it went across Taipei and just barely skimmed past the edge of China and went up and ran out of gas up by Korea and crashed up there. They never did find him but that's where they figured that's where he would've run out of gas. Anyway, they worried about this guy who had encephalitis. But he was really a nice guy, everybody loved him and he was one that somebody said they thought they saw him pulling up and then he lost sight of him and he went in and they never did find him or hear anything from him or nothing. And his wife was from Orem or Provo, Marilyn. I never did look her up after we got back for some reason or another.

Interviewer

Thank you.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

... trucks or train if we could find one. But we couldn't bomb any airfields, that was against the rules.

Interviewer

Why was that against the rules?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Because the chief of staff and his crowd in the Pentagon, McNamara and group, they were running the show. Normally in all the training that I'd ever heard, the best thing you want to do is stop their supply of arms and whatever. And that would be Ha Noi in Hai Phong Harbor. And even in '65 there were ships from China and Russia lined up to go into Hai Phong Harbor to unload this stuff and we couldn't go anywhere near Hai Phong or Ha Noi. Wasn't that fun?

Interviewer

So you were flying into the north?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, we were flying into the north but we just couldn't bomb right around that circle there, but they still had a lot of

guns and missiles all the way down to the border. And they were just shooting people down, coming and going and giving us stupid targets, you know? Bridges. Airfield with airplanes on it. MiGs are getting ready to take off or whatever they're going to do, but we couldn't touch that airfield. Now is that stupid enough or whatever? And everybody felt the same way. It was crazy. And that's why I say we could've done the same thing in '65 that we could in '72 or '73 when they had linebaker and the B-52s decided they would go over there instead of just down in the south blowing down trees.

Interviewer

How many missions were you flying per week?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Three, four. I got fifteen before I went and we got back to North Carolina at Seymour Johnson and as soon as we got there we thought, man, we're gonna be kind of fat city here for a while. As luck would have it, they closed the runway because they had to do some repairs so they sent us down to Florida to fly some kind of training mission; practice bombing that we had done forever. But do some more of that for a month. And then while we were down there they said, oh, by the way, we're not going back, but we're going to let you go home to pack a bag because then we're going to Southeast Asia. So they took our whole squadron and we didn't have enough airplanes so we had to stop my McConnell and pick up a few more and then in-flight refuel and off to Takli in Thailand.

Interviewer

And you're in Thailand?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yup. And every day we're sending out missions and we would fly probably at least two, three, four a week. So by Christmas time - this was in like July, August - before we got into it... The missions that counted were in North Vietnam. I had already gathered up 15 before I got there so I had a little bit of a head start on some of other guys so I was going along and by Christmas I had almost 100 already. Nobody had decided how many we were going to fly yet. Like in World War II it was 25 or something like that. And in Korea, I don't know how many they had there, it might have been a hundred, I don't know. But they finally decided it was going to be 100 and I said, "Well, hallelujah, I only got about five or ten left to go." And then they slowed things down for a while throughout Christmas or whatever, and we still flew a few night missions and stuff like that; practiced radar missions. We'd fly cover for a B-66 in the middle of the night; in-flight refueling. And we'd keep doing stuff like that and then finally I got 100 and another guy got 100 the same day, Don Tutton, and we couldn't fly anymore. They sent me down to Saigon to talk to 'em down there. This is how you do it, you know, I was down there, they're busy bullshitting and didn't know what was going on. So anyway, we messed down there for a week or so and then came back and waited around for another month and we finally was going to send the whole squadron back. But the day I completed 100 missions they sent the commander of pack AF, who's a four-star general. He flew in to meet me at the airplane and say, "Congratulations," and, "How'd you do?" and all that stuff. And, "I want you first couple of guys, as soon as you

guys get ready to go, leave early and come back to Hawaii" - where his headquarters were - "and talk to the people back there about tactics and so forth." So we did that and stayed there for another week while the rest of the guys got all the stuff together and then they come through. So then we went on over to Travis, which is in California, and caught another flight from there back to Seymour Johnson and got there at the same time as the rest of the guys did.

Interviewer

Tell me about some of your missions. Some of the ones that really stand out.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Well that one was kind of an eye opener. It was in October, we'd been there, a couple, three months and I was the flight leader that day, a flight of four. And we were bombing a North Vietnamese barracks, crowd killer, whatever. I don't know what was in there. It might have been empty, I don't know. But anyway, as we were coming in, we'd fly the mission, we'd take off, we'd fly up to the Mekong River which is right on the edge of Vietnam and Laos and hooked up with a re-tanker and refueled all of the tanks that we had empty and press on until we got about a hundred miles from the target. And then we led down to anywhere between 50 and 500 feet to stay below the radar and any missile. They had to be higher than that before they can get any guidance for ya. And we come in, just navigating by whatever we were on the ground. There was no navigational aid; we didn't have any of this GPS, none of that stuff then. It was needle ball and air speed, you know? Here we go. There's a river, there's that bend in the river. Okay. Right on time. Yup, yup. And everybody else is kind of back here riding a little bit higher and I'm the only one doing the navigating really because they're looking around making sure anything is going on or if they start shooting at ya you can usually see a flat going off up above you, hopefully, above ya. And then as we were coming along and I was probably at about 100 feet and I felt this bump and I look around, nothing's going on. And then pretty soon the firelight starts flashing and I thought, oh - and then that's not good, you know? And then the first thing in all of our books, our checklists is, "If on fire, eject." And so I'm looking in the mirror, I can see a whole lot of fire going out the back and all of the firelights are on. And by now I'm only about four, five minutes from the target. And I said, "Well, shit. I might as well be here as there." So off I went. And my wingman, he says, "Hey, Ben, you're on fire." And I said, "Really?" I knew that, I got all these red lights flashing in here. He says, "What are you gonna do?" I said, "Well, we're gonna press on and give it a shot here and hopefully it goes out." And he says, "Are you shitting me?" So I said, okay, everybody, the target's over there, here we go, and we have to pull up to bombing altitude which is usually about 15,000 feet or so and then turn over and come down. And I went up about 12,000 and I said, "Yeah, I'm just pushing this too far," so I turned the afterburner off and coasted over and coming down and I went down probably a thousand feet lower than I was supposed to and it was close enough where I could hardly miss. So a whole load came off and the guy that was behind me said, "Yeah, you got a good hit," and all that. And I went sailing on down there and I said, "Don't get behind me 'cause I'm gonna drop the tanks off and everything else off and take her as far as she'll go." "Yeah, but you'll lose flight controls and all of that sort of stuff."

And I says, "Well, I know, but I got my hat in my pocket and both hands on the stick -" except when I talk on the radio. And I says, "The only thing I'd like is if you'd move out a little bit further," because he was right there. And he says, "Okay." And he says, "Why is that?" I said, "Well, because every time I look out there I can see my reflection of the airplane's on fire, it makes me nervous." So he says, "You gotta get out, you gotta bail out." I said, "Shit, it's still running. Still running." And he kept trying to convince me that it was the thing to do because the history is if it's on fire it's usually gonna burn through the flight controls and once it burns through the flight control hydraulic lines then it's just libel to go up, down, sideways or whatever. But I says, "Well, I'll just ride a little high here and keep an eye on it, you know?" And I could see that the hydraulic system that was probably on fire was the utility system which controls all the breaks, the nose wheel steering and the flaps and the landing gear, speed breaks and all that sort of stuff that you don't really need to fly. So I says, "It's the hydraulic system and hopefully when all that burns up maybe it will go out." And he says, "Yeah, but half of your airplane's burned. It's all gone on that side and half of the stabilizer on that side is gone." I said, "Well, it's still flying, works all right." And after we got out about 100 miles outside where the missiles weren't and then I said, "Well, I'm gonna start climbing up a bit here." And then pretty soon, as I started climbing up there, the fire went out. He says, "God, the fire went out." I says, "Yeah, but the light's still flashing and I got my hat hanging over that so I can't see it." And he says, "But the fire's going out but pieces keep falling off." "Well, it's still flying okay so we'll keep on going." And we got going back a little slower than normal and as we got down near the border I told my number three guy to take his wingman and go on back to the home base and I would be landing at the closest base and let my wingman come with me. So we got back there and we got close. I said, "Go ahead and land because when I land I can't steer it anymore and I'm winging that one shot on the break so you better land or I'm not gonna have any place to land." So he landed, then I landed and coasted her down and got out. Said, "Hallelujah!" kissed the ground. And went in, and talked to all the folks, and laughed, and scratched, and a couple hours later they put me on a little T-28, put me in the back seat and flew me back to the home drome in that little propeller-driven jabby. And got back there and went to the officers' club, had a drink or two, and then we went again the next day. Don't give you any time to think about it.

Interviewer

Did you think about it later?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, every time I'd see a glitter of light, it would get your attention. When we first got there, I'd only been there about a month and they got a big mission to go on a whole bunch of airplanes, so every time they did that they got a squadron commander to take off and fly and he was the eye in the sky and telling everybody, "Okay, this flight's in and that flight's out." And it was our squadron commander's time and he went up and they were up there probably 25, 30 minutes and a missile got him just dead center. The airplane just blew all to pieces and never to be heard from again, you know. He had nine kids. He was a great guy. And the ops officer had nine kids, too, and he was with him but he was in another plane. We were all in single-seat airplanes, of course. But that's the way it went and

we'd lose about one a month, it seemed like.

Interviewer

And did you ever get used to that?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

It kind of made you feel bad. In there briefing one time and this guy, as a matter of fact the chaplain comes in there one day and he's a squirrely little fellow from Alabama. "Tom Reitmann's down." And we thought, "Well maybe he probably bailed out or something." And he'd taken a direct hit with a triple-A, you know? He was done, gone. As a matter-of-fact they just retrieved his bones just in the last several months and they buried him - was it today, Barbara, or yesterday? Barbara Yesterday.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

They buried him at Arlington and a bunch of the guys were going to go up there for that.

Interviewer

So explain to people what it was like to be in the air. How big is this thing? And refueling and all the radar the Russians had set up, the things you have to face moment by moment.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Even though they had radar set up at their missile sites they were building new ones daily, you know? They were bringing 'em down because they're fairly portable, and they were getting better ones and even as we were there, they were getting better ones. And they were bigger ones. The old ones were huge. So if you were flying along you'd never fly above the clouds 'cause the first thing you'd see is that sucker coming up, and if you were above the clouds it's already on ya and you've had to stroke. So therefore you always stay away from the clouds. And if you see a big flash on the ground where they just lit off, here it comes just like a big telephone pole coming up there. And so you'd just turn into it as hard as you can and then as it's coming up you can turn this way faster than it can and it will usually get by ya. The big thing is to see it first. And they always had the maps plotted with all the known gunnery areas: 57, 37, 85-millimeters. They had guns that could shoot up to 30,000 feet. They had pretty good guns. And it was somebody getting shot down, either our squadron or another squadron, seems like all the time. We had a guy from Utah, Don Wood, who was a good friend of mine. And he was in a different squadron because he had come back earlier to McConnell, which is in Kansas, and he had gone back over there with a different squadron, and nobody ever saw him get shot, never heard him say anything. Somebody just thought they saw him going and he went in. They never did find him. A lot of people, they're still finding 'em, like I say. But a lot of guys... Yeah, one time one squadron lost four guys in one day. And that kind of got your attention but then they'd just say, "Well that's what they're paying me to do, that's what we're trained to do." We had guys that couldn't cut it. They'd just walk in and says, "Here's my wings, I ain't gonna do this anymore. I've had a gutful of this, I don't need this." So anyway, at the time you just resolve yourself that this is what you're gonna do, and do it the best you can and be alert all the time. And here's a target down there that you're supposed to hit, and as you roll in and start going

down, you can see this guy just booming away. And you wonder where he's aiming and pretty soon you can see these things that look like a big sized V-8 juice can that's on fire - (shooting sound) - "My God, that was close." And two or three of those go by and you don't know whether to go this way or this way. So you just kind of sit small in the chair, and keep going until you get down there and drop it in. Either you make it or you don't make it. It's a little bit iffy there at times.

Interviewer

With everything going on in the air and everything going over the radar...

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Well, you plan a lot before you start out. You plan everything along the way and, when we take off first thing we're gonna do is climb up to 25,000 feet, and find a tanker and rendezvous behind him, pull in behind him and then pull in. In the old days we had KB-50s or KB-29s that had 60-foot hoses hanging out the back. And like any F-100, you have an eight or ten foot pipe sticking out there. And it was behind it. So you'd have to come in and come in, "Okay, that looks like it's lined up with it," and say, "Okay, now I got to give it a shot." And then you got to hold your position really steady and hope you can come in and punch it in this. They had a funnel about that big around. The big thing is that if it got close to the airplane, and the wind on the airplane would blow it out or down or it would whip around and smack you in the canopy, sometimes it would break a canopy. You'd go home. But then we got the 105, it had a great refueling system on it. We had to pull a lever, and the hose came up right here on the nose, and then they had the boom, a KC-135 tanker that B-52s use - same tanker. They put a hose on it so we could use that and then later on they modified them again. That was probing a (drobe? 38:44) what you called this and the other one was a receptacle down here that they put right on the nose where you could pull right up behind it. And then the guy in the tanker could fly it right in there. And it was just so neat you couldn't believe it. F-4s, they had it behind the back canopy so you just had to pull up behind him and the guys they moved forward two feet or up two feet. Okay, now hold it there, and then he'd plug it in and then you'd just kind of hold that position for ten minutes or so until it filled up and back off. So you did that on every mission.

Interviewer

What about MiGs?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

I didn't particularly see. We were primarily the bombers, the 105s. And then the F-4s, they carried a lot more missiles. We could carry 'em but the F-4 had a bigger wing and it would turn faster. It wouldn't go as fast. The 105 was the fastest mother going. If you wanted to get away you could just have that sucker down and then nobody could catch ya.

Interviewer

You could carry a lot of ordnates too.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, we could carry eight 750-pound bombs or two 3,000-pound bombs. But with the eight 750-pound bombs we could carry a 450 gallon tank on each wing plus a tank in the bomb bay, it had a bomb bay on it that we carried a nuclear weapon in. And we carried 390 gallons in that. And then if we were carrying these big bombs on the wings, these 3,000-pounders, and you could really make a pothole in the ground with those down there, you could always fly over a rice paddy and say, "Well, I wonder what guy was dropping in. Nothing around here but a mighty big mud hole down there." But anyway, it would carry a 650 gallon tank on the center on the belly. So you were at 50,000 pounds on one engine, that's a pretty heavy load to take off with every day. But it was something to do to pass the time.

Interviewer

What about the gun? You had a big gun?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, we had a Gatling gun that would fire 6,000 rounds a minute. You could blow - catch another airplane and get him on the target and put that on him, it would cut him in half in no time. That thing was really a great gun. And we had this one time we were up there and they had a four air controller down there putting around in a little airplane and he says, "Hey, you guys, I got some targets over here for you." And all these thatched roofs for houses - whatever you call 'em, village thing in a circle, probably half a block, maybe 100 yards long and then open in the middle. And he says, "That looks just like a friendly village down there, but there are trucks there during the day so nobody shoots at 'em, but the trucks are parked inside there now and that's what we want you to do is to wipe that village out." I says, "Well, all right. We'll do that." And roll in, come down there and line up with this thing - (shooting sound) - go up there just look back and that entire village, that one side was on fire burning up. Because each of these rounds fired was about like a hand grenade. It was called high explosive incendiary so it would not only penetrate, it would explode and it had a fire inside of it that would set stuff on fire. So it was pretty devastating. Wiped out that whole village in a couple of passes.

Interviewer

From the air could you see that things were escalating on the ground with our troops?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

No. We never flew missions down south. They had F-100s out the kazoo down there and so they didn't have no missiles, no guns to speak of because our troops were down there. And so they took care of any threat. They could be on alert, the F-100s and they could take off and be to most any site around and say, "Hey, here comes a whole crowd of 'em down here. Go down there with your napalm and all that sort of stuff." We occasionally would put napalm on 'em if we found a bunch of trucks or something like that that we could get to before they would hide 'em or get them away somehow. But as far as troops, very seldom see of any or know of any that were up in the north because all the Army and all the fighting was going on down south. All the troops that were going on were down there.

Interviewer

Were you hearing from home?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Writing her pretty much every day and she wrote me almost every day. And we'd get them a couple at a time. And probably take about a week is about all to get 'em. Air flighted them over there.

Interviewer

And this is the very beginning of Vietnam. Are you hearing anything from home about social objections to this?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Oh, yeah. We knew that was going on and raising hell and that was one bad thing when we came home, a lot of the Army troops coming home, they'd just as spit on ya as not, you know? That was really ugly. And that took away from a lot of it, you know? But fortunately, we were all together, we were all in the same squadron and we came back together which wasn't the case later on. It was everybody was an individual and they started replacement people. But when we went there we went there as a whole squadron. And there was about five of us that got shot down and two, three of 'em spent the whole time there in POW camps. And then of course a couple of 'em got killed like Colonel Killian and Tom Reitmann. They were definitely killed. They were calling them missing in action, of course because they couldn't find 'em, but when we came back two of the guys that were flying with them saw 'em, watched 'em. Never did bail out. So they went in with the airplane and the squadron commander, the whole front part of his airplane was just blown off and told his wife that they might be calling them MIA but he's gone. But one thing about it, if you got shot down or missing or killed or whatever they called it - mostly just MIA 'cause they didn't know - you still got all your promotions that you came up in primary zone for, and your wife got all your pay, and benefits and everything. She could still stay in the house back home but that wouldn't happen until later on when the guys just went over there singles, you know?

Interviewer

What did you think of all that?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

I didn't really think about it a whole lot. When I was going in there and that thing was on fire, and I knew where I was, I was only about 20 miles from Ha Noi so I know there was a whole bunch of folks around there and if they caught ya, if you were lucky they'd just keep you alive. Otherwise they could kill ya. They had a lot of guys, see people down there, had strung 'em up, laid them on the ditch bank, cutting 'em up and stuff like that; whether it be Air Force, Navy, or Marines, whatever the pilots were. But they all knew the risk which is what you dealt with. This is like the Army guys, they don't feel like it, but they do it every day. And I would fly over and say, "Yeah, we flew over them a few times just because we were going that way and those poor suckers down there, what a way to earn a living." Of course those guys were being drafted.

Interviewer

What was your base like in Thailand?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

An old base way back in early '60s, mostly early in the '50s. They built a lot of air bases around the world, which had nice runways and taxiways. Places like Thailand, and Taiwan, and the Philippines, and Japan, all those kind of places that were friendly to us, and North Africa. Like I spent a year on Iwojima. That was my punishment.

Interviewer

So how did you recreate over in Thailand?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

There was nothing to do, absolutely. There was the officers' club but they had three refrigerators that had ice makers which would last for each guy to have one drink, and so the rest of 'em were no ice, which kind of took the edge off of it. I don't even know if there was a library of any kind. There was a chow hall we went to every once in a while. The officers' club, it was a good place to lose weight. You'd go downtown, there was a little village downtown that had restaurants that weren't too swell. There was this one place that had these great steaks, and we thought, "We ought to have one of those," and found out they were water buffalo. They were water buffalo that were tougher than a boot.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Most of 'em. We had a little hooch that we lived in, which was about that far up off the ground because it was all covered with water underneath there, like a swamp and you'd spray it all the time for bugs. Of course you sleep with a mosquito net on and lay with your arms in. Or if you lay against it you'd get drilled up the arm with mosquitoes. And it had a tin roof and screen sides. And we had thunderstorms, hail. A hail storm on a tin roof, you could look at each other and see each other move his lip but that's all, you couldn't hear a thing. And then outside all the walks were wooden. So you'd walk out of the water, and then in the middle between the barracks there were probably ten of these little hooches; five up here for the enlisted guys, and five down here for the pilots. And you had a gal who swept the floor and she washed all your clothes and dried them, hung 'em up and dried 'em. So we always had a clean flying suit.

Interviewer

So your war was not quite...

Benjamin Bowthorpe

No. I felt so bad for those guys; they'd been sleeping in the same clothes and in the same mud for probably days, you know, some of 'em. And they never know when they're going to get overrun by hundreds of those guys. I tell you what, God bless me. Whew, I feel so bad.

Interviewer

So if you could've designed the way the war went, what would you have done differently? Tell us what was wrong and what would've made it right?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Well, of course I didn't know all the facts that these people had in their mind like McNamara, and Dean Rusk and the boys back in those days. Mostly when I was there, it was Lyndon Johnson. Shit, he'd stand out there in the breeze and his ears would flip back and forth and they were the guys that were picking out targets for us.

Interviewer

In the White House?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Or wherever, in the Pentagon.

Interviewer

And why is that so awful?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Well, hell, they had no idea what kind of targets you want to hit, obviously. They would send us in on a wooden bridge when there'd be a bigger bridge down the way, but they didn't want to hit that. Or the big thing was the airfield. Now why wouldn't you hit an airfield? It has their airplanes on it. Now they could take off, and come up, and have at us best they could and land real quick and we couldn't go back and hit 'em. That doesn't seem right to me. And like Hai Phong Harbor, ships out there waiting and that line got longer and longer as the war went on. And they could just come in there and unload those as quiet as you please, having a great time.

Interviewer

So do you think we learned?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

No. They'd do it again. Just look at what we're in on there now. I wonder who's doing what to who back over there now, you know? My thing is I just can't imagine giving away the lives of so many young men for absolutely no reason for ourselves. Why did we do it? And they got people that are running around with bombs tied to themselves, and they figure it's a wonderful thing to die for whoever he is, Islam, and I think that's great. If they want to do that, that's great. But just let 'em have it at it themselves, you know?

Interviewer

So you arrived home when?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

I came back in about April of '66.

Interviewer

So you watched the rest of the Vietnam War having been a war veteran. What did you think?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

The same thing I told you before. We came back and we turned into a training squadron so we started getting all the old SAC pilots and learned them to be fighter pilots. And of course a lot of them were excited about that just

because they knew they were never going to do anything except go over there in B-52s and just drop a ton, a hundred bombs over there and blow down trees and never know what you hit except you flew for 12 hours to get over there and back, you know? We would stop. One time after I had come back, they needed us to go fly some replacement airplanes over there. So we got four of us and we went. I forget where we went to pick 'em up, probably in McConnell in Kansas somewhere, and checked 'em out, and went to California, and then in-flight refueled across to Hawaii and then in-flight refueled which was two refuelings; one over Enewetak, and another one over Wake Island, and then we'd land in Guam and that's where all the SAC boys were sitting with the B-52s. And when we got there it was just about getting ready to be beer call time, you know? It was also time that two or three B-52s were coming back from a mission. And when they got back everybody had to leave the club because it was for the warriors, these guys that had been up there burning gas. And these guys come back and they saw us sitting there. "What are you guys doing here?" And so we told them, we were just passing through. "What are you doing passing through here?" "We're taking some replacement airplanes over there." "What kind of airplanes?" "105s." "No shit?" They were just overwhelmed, they couldn't do enough for us. Buying all the drinks, everything we could handle, you know? And we could take these bomb plugs out of these bombs and they got decals on 'em and dropped on the VC. They were giving us all this stuff. You'd thought we had just won the war single handed. And they said, "We just feel so dumb." They didn't know what they did. And then finally when they got to the end of the war, they probably kind of wished they were back blowing down trees because they lost quite a few airplanes over there. The B-52s, when they started going in there and bombing that harbor and stuff.

Interviewer

When you heard the news they were starting to do those things what did you think?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

I thought, "God, hallelujah. Why didn't we do this ten years ago or back in '65?" We could've had the same B-52s, the crews over there. We had a lot less missiles for them to shoot at us. But God, by the time they came around doing that they had those suckers stacked deep all over the place down there. But that was somebody else's job.

Interviewer

So you're home, you're stateside and you're seeing the growing protests, what did you think?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

That was very hard to take, actually. And I couldn't really say that, "Oh, look at me, I was over there bombing those people to save you guys." But hell, I wasn't saving 'em from anything. I was just over there doing what I was told. There was no threat to us as a country. Could you think of any threat that they were putting on us? No. Nowadays the Arabs, they're putting a threat on us, that's a little bit easier. But the VC? They never did anything to Americans. They might have to people who own the tire plantations or something like that over there, but as far as the local population, they weren't a threat to them. And so therefore, how can I justify, I was saving your hide so I did what I was told."

Interviewer

In 1975, April, we see the images over the TV of the Saigon embassy being evacuated. Tell us what you were doing and tell us what you thought.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

I thought these people, they came across there so fast that it was unbelievable. After all that we had done, 50,000 people we had lost, another name on a black granite wall in Washington, D.C. and that's it. That's all we got for that. And they're toasting them. That's a little tough to take, but that's part of being in the military is you do what they say. The flying part, I love that. That's a great job, you know? A lot of guys - a lot of guys - as soon as they got out, they went to work for the airlines and started making some pretty good money. And they used to come down to the base and say hi, you know? "How you guys doing?" And then we started having these River Rat conventions. We had started just a couple of years before the end of the war, they started those in Thailand, having reunions. Because there's a lot of guys that had finished their tours and so they were stationed back in the States somewhere doing something and still pilots. And they still have those. Still have 'em. This last year we had one and next year it's down in Phoenix and there's a lot of guys there. And now they're just kind of running low on the old boys because they're all 75, 80 years old. But that's part of the game too, it just keeps passing by, you know? But I was lucky enough to be one of them.

Interviewer

What were your thoughts about Vietnam prior to being sent over there?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

I was told that they had guns and missiles so forth and I says, "Well, that ought to be fun. We can go down there and drop a few bombs on somebody that's there instead of just on steel targets," which you've been doing forever, you know? And we spent a lot of time on alert because the Cold War threat. We spent every other week, or we'd spend a week on and a week off of being on alert 24-hours a day with the aircraft loaded with nuclear weapons. And you knew what was gonna happen there. It was a one-way trip. You didn't come back from that beauty because I was running out of gas 500 miles from the coast line.

Interviewer

And where were you stationed?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Okinawa.

Interviewer

Where were you during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

I was in New Mexico. That was in what, '62? Something like that.

Interviewer

So your attitude about the war before you left, did you think it was a just war?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

It wasn't nearly as broadcast quite as much that early on, you know? It got worse after they started bringing back body bags; that really turned the protesters and so forth. Whereas where I was we were kind of secluded on Okinawa. We went over there in '62. We were over there and we just went on full-time alert.

Interviewer

So you were already in Asia?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, I was already over there and we pulled alert there all the time because our targets were Russia and places like that. God, if you could ever see the big map in the sky of what was gonna happen if they ever decided to say, "Oh, my God, here they come at us, we're gonna launch everything." Oh, my God, there wouldn't have been nothin' left anywhere. By God, they have circles drawn. It covered every square inch of Russia.

Interviewer

So did you feel like this was part of the Cold War at first?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

No, that was a different ball game down there because the Cold War was strictly for nuclear war as far as I was concerned, because that's the alert that we had been put on. Even when I was in New Mexico they sent us over to Turkey. We had four people on alert with loaded weapons on the airplanes 24-hours-a-day ready to go, and hit targets up in Europe and as well as all of the fighter pilots in Europe were the same way. They always were sitting alert with nuclear weapons on board. But what I thought about the war was it wasn't quite as well known, the protests and so forth early. We were still in the midst of it. The Cuban Missile Crisis, that got our attention because that put us on 24-hours-a-day sitting in the cockpit. We sitting there so if they said "Go" - we had all the codes and all that - if that all worked out we were off and it was nobody that could call you back.

Interviewer

So Vietnam was a separate entity.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

That was something else, yeah. And I don't know when they ever started quit pulling alert over there in Europe and in Okinawa, Japan, Korea.

Interviewer

Any other memorable missions?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Not quite like that one. If you go in there and you see a lot of crazy stuff going on and people getting shot down, how helpless you are to see that happening. God, you see guy, boom, and he's on fire, or he's hit and he's going

down so he's ejected, and he's bailing and he's going down. He's just hoping somebody's gonna come get him and sometimes they can and sometimes they can't. They did risk rescue quite a few guys in fact, and I see those guys when I go to this reunion. And every couple of years we have all the guys that were on Okinawa together, we were all there for like four years, and so all of us were there and right then is when we lost a bunch of guys 'cause we were the first ones going down there. Didn't have any idea what was going on, the tactics, what to expect, and so there we were. It was a little spooky. But then I was only there for 15 missions and then we left and went back to the States and then I went back again for the full schmeer. I don't know, when things are going on back in the States when you're over there, it's kind of in a different world, sort of, and you're flying missions over there and training for the job and hoping that you'll get - you know, everybody was kind of anxious about going down there just because that's what you're training for. But after you got down there and found out that they weren't playing games, they were trying to kill us, hmm. As a matter of fact, the first student I had when we went to replacement training unit, that's what they call us, RTU, the first student that I had was an instructor that I had in pilot training. I thought, "Gad, you still in the Air Force?" "Yeah, I've been flying SAC, get down, come down here and fly with the big guys now." And he probably scared me as more than I scared him because you're riding in the back seat of this airplane and the windows are right here so you can't see this way, you can only see straight up or straight out but you can't see down here except there's a little hole a little bigger than a cigarette pack on each corner. And so you're looking at this and looking at this and seeing that ground coming up at a horrendous rate of speed. And on the higher, like dive bombing where you're going to pull up at a reasonable altitude is one thing, but then when you start strafing where you come down... and you say, "It's now or never, buddy." Whew! That got my attention a time or two.

Interviewer

Did you talk about Vietnam when you got back to the States?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, we did. Just mostly among ourselves because we were in a small town, like Goldsboro, North Carolina. So there was very little of that going on there like up in Ohio or Kent University, places like that and California where they were all just raising Cain back there. But little city where we were and even in the universities, I didn't hear about it like the big universities like Duke University - I think it's a church school, I'm not sure - but then Greenville and other colleges around, but I never could recall much of any unrest going on there.

Interviewer

But you shared some of these stories when you got back with your family and friends?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Oh, yeah, I did. And I got the one, the picture there, they put a picture of me and a little story about that Silver Star that I got for that mission. And so not too many people get a Silver Star, a lot of 'em do, but I was kind of proud to get that. So I talked about that. And all the guys that I knew when I was a kid, thought, "God, I didn't believe old Ben would come out to be a lieutenant colonel." I was very small when I was in high school. When I graduated from high

school I was only five-foot-two and weighed about 95 pounds. And so when I joined the Air Force I grew about six inches in the first year and then the rest of the way in the next year up to six feet. So I grew ten inches in two years. And they're thinking, "God, what are they feeding you in there for?" But other than that it's like a walk on a summer day. And it's a lot easier to talk about now than it was then.

Interviewer

Can you tell us again about how no one had heard about Vietnam at that point?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

No. They didn't ever say we were going to go to Vietnam. We were gonna deploy down south. It was kind of a secret that we were going down there. We're going down south. So as far as what anybody would say - most people were kind of excited to go, the first time or two. But then after that, after we started losing guys then they said, "This is not much fun anymore," you know? But as far as a sentence, yeah, then we started saying, "What's the purpose of this, all this war going on down here?" And we were stationed at two different bases in Thailand, everybody's going down to Thailand and we were more or less safe there, which made it so much better than the Army had it. Well the Army had some safe places, too, but not a lot.

Interviewer

Talk again about hitting the Ho Chi Minh trail just to pass the time away is one of your phrases. What did you mean by that?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Well that was for the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Interviewer

Tell us what the Ho Chi Minh trail is?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

It kind of went from Ha Noi all the way down to South Vietnam and it was their main source of supply for all of the weapons and stuff in South Vietnam; for the guns and ammunition that they had down there to fight the troops. And so that was one of our main purposes was to hit that Ho Chi Minh trail and stop that traffic. That was our sole effort, to stop the traffic of weapons and stuff going in there. And we found one train that was moving. And as luck would have it, we had two or three flights in the area and so one flight went in and blew up the railroad tracks on one side and another one blew up the tracks on the other side so it was kind of trapped. And by the time everybody that was in the area came up there and took a shot at it, it was in pretty bad shape. It was trapped.

Interviewer

Your mission to go after the Ho Chi Minh trail was exactly what?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

To stop the truck traffic from carrying guns, bullets, arms, supplies - any supplies that the Viet Cong needed to fight the American troops in South Vietnam. That was their primary source right there, that trail, the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Interviewer

How busy was it?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

When we start first started there, before we went down, you could go up there and find trucks every day.

Interviewer

How many?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Three, four, ten, twelve. But then it didn't take 'em long to find out that in the daytime you'd better undercover somewhere because there's gonna be somebody roving up and down that road and we hit it daily. Road wreckie.

"Where are you going?" "Well, we're gonna go road wreckie, kill a few trucks."

Interviewer

So you'd fly around and wait until you saw a target?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah. Well you'd never where they'd be because they were moving all the time. And it was kind of an open... There was a pretty good-sized area where there were rice paddies where they had roads that go through it initially. And then after the first year a piece of the road had a pot hole in it and they were filling pot holes pretty regular to keep the trucks moving.

Interviewer

If you saw a truck, tell me what you would do.

Benjamin Bowthorpe

We'd call out and say, "Okay, we have a truck down here at 11 o'clock, low, just to the left of that pond right there. Everybody see it?" "Yeah, okay. I'm rolling in," if I was the leader, "I'm rolling in." And then the next guy...

Interviewer

What would you do? Would you put it in the sight?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, I got a gun sight, if I was gonna strafe it. I would set the gun sight setting on there and turn the gun on, come down and drop that. Or if it was bigger, and I had some bombs then I could set the settings for bombs, and then I'd have to say, "Okay, we're gonna use bombs if we still got some, we're gonna use bombs," so that everybody get up to such-and-such an altitude and roll in. "I'm rolling in." "Okay." "And I'm off to the left." The next guy would come down and say, "I'm off to the left." Everybody would come down and (bombing sounds).

Interviewer

In the cockpit at low altitude, can you feel that concussion of that bomb?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

No, not if you break off as soon as you should because there's 750-pounders that we could drop two at a time or

four at a time or all six at once if we were dropping on a big target. There was one bridge called the Thanh Hoa Bridge that we must have dropped a million bombs on that sucker and it was still standing when we left there. It was a hell of a bridge. I don't know what it was made out of, but bombs would go right through it. Just unbelievable. You'd approach to it, you'd approach to it, clear on it, and overnight they'd have that sucker back running again to get those trucks going across it. Amazing.

Interviewer

Did that impress you that they could do that?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah, it did. Impressed. I knew that those people were like that because they make do with what they got. They've never had much of anything so they make do with what they got. And they got a truck, they could put it together with a wheelbarrow probably, and make it run somehow. And we bombed a lot of trucks.

Interviewer

Did you use napalm?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

We did, a couple times if it was a chance that there were some troops down there, like if they were moving troops from North Vietnam down to South Vietnam, which they had to do periodically, imagine. And we did and then we could go down and set up for that, and hopefully we could see 'em, get a target. And if they're in the trees it's not too good, because napalm will stick to the trees and the trees are tall. That's another thing, if a guy bailed out. When we first starting going over there, if a guy bailed out, he's libel to bail out, come down through the canopy of the trees and the canopy right here will stop the parachute and he'd still be 50, 60 feet from the ground because there was nothing underneath the canopy. And then if the guy was unlucky he would hang right there until somebody came by and shoot him. Or if the canopy of his parachute slowly pulled through the limbs of those trees and come lose, then he's gonna drop 50 or 60 feet down there, and he'd usually break a leg, or back or something. And so after that we found out that we've got to carry a rope with us. So underneath the backpack of our parachute we had to carry a hundred foot stretch of rope that we could tie through the ring of the parachute and let ourselves down to the ground. So that saved quite a few guys.

Interviewer

When you dropped the napalm, you had to get really low for that, didn't you?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

Yeah. It was usually about 50 feet or so.

Interviewer

What is it like to be going at such a high speed and so low?

Benjamin Bowthorpe

It's not bad, you do it quite a bit over there. We was doing 25, 50 feet quite a bit, or if there was nothing around and

we'd raise up. You could look down more often, and see what time, your order is on target, and how much time you had to be there and all that. So you varied just a little bit. Okay, I'm raising up, rolling down. And if we could stay usually below 500 feet it was pretty safe unless they were throwing rocks or pitchforks or whatever they had. I could see those folks when I was going along there, when I was on fire. I was drawing a crowd on the ground. These mothers were down there, and I could see the pitchforks, shovels and I just had a hard time convincing myself that would be a good place to be. So I stayed there.

Interviewer

In the cockpit?