Jerald Cannon
Liutenant Colonel
Air Force
Temonton, Utah
"Escalation"

Interviewer

State your full name.

Jerald Cannon

Jerald David Cannon.

Interviewer

Where are you from originally?

Jerald Cannon

Tremonton.

Interviewer

And you went to high school there?

Jerald Cannon

Yeah, went to Bear River High School. Graduated from Bear River High School.

Interviewer

And how did you get into the Air Force?

Jerald Cannon

I wanted to be a fighter pilot all my life. My mother was a grade school teacher; my dad was a high school teacher. My mother saved papers of me during the war, gone along the edge of the paper, a Flying Tiger in a Japanese Zero and the dot bullets up to it, and I've still got some of those. And I always wanted to be a fighter pilot, and that's all I ever lived for was to be a fighter pilot.

Interviewer

So how did you get in the Air Force to become a pilot?

Jerald Cannon

When I graduated from high school, you had to have two years of college to get into Aviation Cadets, and so I started school at Utah State and halfway through my second year, they changed and said, "We don't have enough cadets, so you only have to have a high school education." So I quit college and joined the Aviation Cadets.

Interviewer

What year was that?

Jerald Cannon

1954.

Interviewer

How did you get into fighters? I know it takes a selection process.

Jerald Cannon

Well, it took me three months in pre-flight and then a year in pilot training. And at the end of the year, commissioned my wings and I went to Europe for three years flying multi-engines and then finally was able to get back into fighters in 1958.

Interviewer

What fighters did you fly first?

Jerald Cannon

I flew the T-33 in pilot training, and then when I came back after three years not flying jets, I got back in T-33. Then the F-86, the Sabre Jet. And then I got in the Super Sabre, which is the F-100, and I flew that for the next 10 or 12 years. I don't know exactly, but I flew it for about 12 years and then very briefly, I was in an F-111 program. And then that kind of folded and then I was a Chief of Airmanship at the Air Force Academy. And then I got in the F-4 when I went back the last time that I was in Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand.

Interviewer

So tell us about getting to Vietnam and how that all started.

Jerald Cannon

I was stationed at Georgia Air Force Base in 1962, and then prior to the Cuban Crisis, they moved our whole wing to Homestead--which would tell you that somebody was a little nervous. But they moved us all to Homestead, and we used to go on rotations six months at a time. I was in Turkey for five and a half months, just getting ready to go back home and you were over there without your families. Our wing was rotating a squadron to Vietnam three months at a time, and then they said, "We need a permanent squadron there." We didn't have enough people at the base at home to man a squadron, so they asked us to have three more guys volunteer to come back from Turkey, join that squadron, and go to Vietnam. So I had two weeks to leave Turkey, fly up to Istanbul, New York, Homestead, and get my family and move 'em back to Utah in two weeks and be back to Homestead in time to go to Vietnam in November 1965.

Interviewer

So you went to Vietnam. Tell us what happened when you got there.

Jerald Cannon

We were stationed at Bien Hoa, and that was at the base just 30 miles north of Saigon. And we were just there for a year and flying close air support missions in the south, supporting the Army, the Special Forces. Some missions up north--we'd fly up to Da Nang and then fly in the southern part of North Vietnam from Da Nang, which is right up at the north end of South Vietnam at that time.

Interviewer

So you were flying strictly air to ground? You were bombing missions?

Jerald Cannon

Yes. Close air support to the Army; bombing missions whenever they got at the Special Forces Camp or Long Range Reconnaissance or something needed some support while that was our primary thing. And then the rest of the time, Forward Air Controllers--back, they called 'em--were flying around in South Vietnam lookin' for enemy activity in the jungle.

So they were light airplanes, and they'd fly around over the jungle lookin' down in as best they could hunting for targets. And if they got a target, why then they'd call us and we'd take off and go to wherever they were, and then they would mark the target and that's where we would support 'em with either bombs or napalm or strafing 'em or whatever.

Interviewer

Was it different than what you expected?

Jerald Cannon

No, as a matter of fact, it was just exactly what I thought it was gonna be. I'd been flying practice missions, if you will, for 10 years, 12 years, and so I was ready to go. And so it was just exactly what I expected. And I had talked to some of the other guys that had done that and had come back to Homestead--the ones that had been rotating back and forth before I got to go--and so it was no different.

Interviewer

Do you remember any memorable missions on that first tour that come to mind?

Jerald Cannon

Well, I remember on one time, Vietnam, the weather was always really bad. The weather was one of our biggest problems that we had, and I was on alert one night and one of the Special Forces Camps got attacked. And they said that's when they would attack--usually when the weather was bad--'cause then we couldn't get in there to support 'em and they were on their own, and all they'd have was a mortar probably in there for artillery. And I flew five missions in one night in the weather--really bad--supporting a camp. They used to send us out to these camps. They took me out to this one camp and dropped me off in a helicopter, and so there were, what, ten Special Forces guys there, and then they had 400 Vietnamese irregulars around there that they used for their Army, so to speak. And we did that just so I'd get to know the guys that were there and know their voices and know what building they were in. If the walls were overrun and they were only in the command bunker, they were only in the mess hall or whatever it was, I'd know which building that was and so that they could tell me, "You know, you can take the mess hall out, but don't hit the command post," or whatever it would be. And that happened on one night when I was on, and that camp was being attacked, and so five times, you know, we'd fly out and drop ordinates and come back, land, and rearm and go back out there, and the weather was really, really bad. So we're trying to stay under the

weather and keep the camp in sight and keep the other two guys in the flight in sight as we're trying to attack where they wanted us to attack. They thought the enemy had mortars that they were hitting the camp with, they thought they knew generally where they were and trying to direct us into those areas. And of course, they had people attacking the wire, if you will. They called the fence "the wire," and they had people trying to get across the wire. And so we were trying to attack right close to the camp. They didn't never overrun the walls, but just off-hand, I think that was probably the most hairy one I had--one of 'em. As I say, a lot of times, it was just the weather was the hardest part of it.

Interviewer

So you'd be flying at night in weather. Would you fly on instruments? How would you do that?

Jerald Cannon

Oh, no. You had to have visual contact with the ground if you were gonna deliver any kind of ordinates. So we're underneath the clouds, you know. If they had a couple of hundred feet, why, then we're staying a couple of hundred feet above--into the clouds or bottom of the clouds above the ground. So it really made it tough when the weather was really stinking.

Interviewer

How can you see at night?

Jerald Cannon

Just lookin' out, you know. You could see the fire on the ground. You'd see tracer bullets goin' out from the camp, and you'd see tracer bullets comin' into the camp so you could see where it was and you could just see it.

Interviewer

So you flew some missions to the north at that time. Tell me about one of those.

Jerald Cannon

I never got 'em up in the Route Pack 6, they call it. Route Pack 6 was Ha Noi, Hai Phong, and that was, of course, way up in the mid-part, and Route Pack 6 was the most hairy. That was the most defended. That was where most of the guys got shot down was up in Route Pack 6, trying to bomb up around Ha Noi and Haiphong Harbor and up in that area and the Thanh Hoa Bridge that they spent hundreds of missions trying to bomb that old French bridge, tryin' to knock it down. It took till they got laser-guided bombs till they could finally hit it enough to knock it down. So I didn't never fly up in the north where the SAMs were heaviest and where lots of my friends got shot down and were in the POW camps up there. I was in the southern part and we were trying to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail where they were comin' out of North Vietnam going over into Laos and Cambodia and comin' down and then comin' back into Vietnam from Cambodia and Laos. And so up from Da Nang, that put us up closer than--it was too far from Bien Hoa up to there, so we'd go up to Da Nang, land up there, and then we'd operate out of there in the southern part of North Vietnam.

Interviewer

Did you fly into Ben Het at all, that Special Forces Camp right where you were talking about, near Laos and Cambodia?

Jerald Cannon

Is that the one where Bernie Fisher landed and picked up his friend?

Interviewer

It might have been, but we had a fellow that was in Special Forces at Ben Het and it's right where you're talking about.

Jerald Cannon

Do you know Bernard Fisher?

Interviewer

Yeah, sure.

Jerald Cannon

Okay. Bernie and I flew together at Homestead for four or five years, and when I first went to Bien Hoa, he was at Bien Hoa, so I flew with him three or four times in his old A-1. It was a two-seater, and so it was just fun to go out to fly with Bernie. We were really close friends. We used to skin-dive together and stuff down in Florida. But the camp that he was at isn't the same one that you just mentioned, but it was a camp just like that, you know, the same kind of up-and-down the border there.

Interviewer

So of course, you were worried about ground fire all the time, weren't you?

Jerald Cannon

Yeah. I came back nine times with bullet holes, if you will, in my airplane, and I have some scraps of it where they cut it out of the sheet metal and fixed it. And nine times, they put a rifle bullet through mine. And one time they put a dent into the wheel well and blew one of my tires out. The F-100 had fuel tanks in the wings, and one of the rounds, it hit me in the wing. The hole was probably an inch in diameter, and so the fuel was just pouring out of it and then all the tanks in the airplane are hooked together so it was siphoning the fuel out of the other tanks also into where it was all going out. And I didn't feel it, but one of the guys said, "Wow, you're trailing. You're really trailing smoke or something." And we were close enough to Bien Hoa that I was able to go back before I ran out of gas, and I got it on the ground virtually out of fuel when I got it on the ground.

And so that was a little test through that day, but, you know, it wasn't till they got on the ground that I knew, you know, how low it was gonna get. The other time I had a blown tire, I felt a big thump when it hit when the tire blew up. That's when we got back to base, why, I put the gear down and another guy flew up underneath me and he was lookin' up into the bottom of the airplane, lookin' at whatever he could see, and he could see pieces of the tire were flapping in the wind, so to speak, but it wasn't really that hard to land, even with the tire blown out.

Interviewer

Tell us about bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail and your impressions of that.

Jerald Cannon

Well, in the jungle, it was really hard. You know, the jungle over there, some places it's 200 feet high, and it has different layers. They'll have a layer that's only maybe 40 feet high of that kind of trees and brush, and then they'll have a 60-foot canopy, if they will, and then really higher stuff. So sometimes all you could see was where the FAC put his mark. He'd put down what they called a, "Willie Pete" - that was a white phosphorous rocket, and he'd fire a rocket down into there and you'd have to wait some time for the smoke to come up from the trees because the trees were so heavy you couldn't see it. And so you'd have to wait some time, and then pretty soon, you'd see the smoke start coming up. Well, he'd tell you, you know, if you're flying east to west, he'd tell you whether you're six o'clock to where his smoke was or twelve o'clock 'cause, you know, he didn't know where we were comin' from exactly. But when he'd tell you that the target actually was, oh, 100 meters east of his smoke, then we'd know where the target was. So a lot of times, you couldn't see anything. You could just see the smoke comin' up. Sometimes you could see a truck if it was enough open space that you could see or if the FAC found a place where they had materials stockpiled, usually they didn't put 'em out enough in the open you could see 'em, but sometimes you could.

The place you could really see 'em was in Cambodia. Just across the border in Cambodia, you could see it over there all the time, but they'd say, you know, "You can't bomb over there." So they'd bring stuff down, put it in Cambodia, and it'd just sit there like a storehouse for 'em. At night, why, you know, they'd bring five-gallon cans. Instead of 50-gallon drums that you could see over there, they'd put it in a five-gallon can and carry it on their back, but I couldn't go over there and bomb 500 50-gallon drums sittin' over there in Cambodia.

There was some nutty ground rules, you know. It was very, very frustrating sometimes at how... and I don't know. Maybe I'm not supposed to have that, but anyway, you know, it was crazy that you couldn't bomb where you knew things were in Cambodia because they just said that you weren't supposed to do that and so that was kind of frustrating. But on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, back to your question, sometimes you could see the target, sometimes you couldn't see the target and you just had to bomb where they told you that the target was, you know, in the jungle under that canopy there.

Interviewer

That's your first tour. We're going to jump around here. You did three tours in Vietnam, correct?

Jerald Cannon

Yeah, kind of. My first tour at Bien Hoa was in '65, '66. The first time I ever went over there, our squadron, I don't think anybody had less than 1,000 hours in the F-100. I mean, we were really experienced. When Tet came there were squadrons over there, and I had been training people to fly the F-100 and they had gone over there and their experience level just got really, really low. And so that's when I had a chance to volunteer to go back again. I volunteered the first time, and then the second time, they said, "We need some experienced people," so I said,

"Take me. I'll go." And so then I went back over there, but I was there just under five months the second time, and I was up at a base called Phu Cat, which was about halfway up country between Saigon and it's the northern border of Vietnam. And so then that was my second tour was after Tet or up to the tail end of Tet. And there were a lot more good targets at that time because they were out in the open more as they were tryin' to overrun the country, if you will. So we had a lot of really lucrative targets during the second tour. And then the third time that I was over there, I was actually stationed in Thailand at a place called Ubon Ratchathani, and it was on the eastern border of Thailand and Cambodia and that was at the tail end of the war.

They actually had stopped bombing in the north then, and they were just bombing down in Cambodia. And so then when I finally got my squadron, why, then we weren't even bombing Cambodia. So we were just training, training, training, because we thought we were gonna start bombing back in North Vietnam. So then we were just gearing up, getting ready to go back north and, boy, I was excited for that. I just couldn't wait to get goin' back north, you know, because all the time when we're in the south, all the real action--heavy action--SAMs and that sort of stuff was up north. And we felt like we were actually almost missing the war even though you were doing what they wanted you to do where you were with the equipment you had, you still felt like you were missing out. And I felt like I was missing out 'cause I had never gotten up to Route Pack 6, if you will. And so then when I was a squadron commander, why, that's what we did. We just trained and trained and trained to be ready to go back north.

Interviewer

We're talking about things that happened over 40 years ago now.

Jerald Cannon

Was it that long ago?

Interviewer

Yeah.

Jerald Cannon

Okay. I didn't think I was that old.

Interviewer

Tell everyone about Tet--why that was so important and what a critical time that was.

Jerald Cannon

Well, that was the point where they thought they were strong enough that they could overrun every place. So they got all cranked up, geared up, stocked up, and then they just made major attacks from Da Nang, which is clear up in the north end of the country, all the way down. They were all geared up, and they attacked every place all at once clear down into the bottom of the country south of Saigon. They thought they were strong enough that they could overrun and capture those places and drive us out. Well, they found out that they couldn't, but it was really a heavy, heavy period of combat when they came out in the open, so to speak, and tried to attack these places.

Interviewer

Did the methods you were using change during your second tour from the first?

Jerald Cannon

Not really. It seemed better to me the second time because they were out in the open and it wasn't all just, you know, night and the stinkin' weather and stuff like that. They were trying to do kind of sneaky hit-and-run overrun this place and that's all. And so that's when we'd get called in during my first tour or places that the FAC could find where there was enemy activity or storage of materials or something and supporting the Army usually in the night and the weather. That sort of thing. But the second time, there was more of it that was out in the open, so it was daylight, if you will and it was easier to see and coordinate and get the right spot.

Interviewer

Were you aware of the protests back home?

Jerald Cannon

Yes. Between the second time I was over there and when I went to Thailand, I was at the Air Force Academy. And one of my friends went to the airport to pick up his wife; he had his uniform on, his ribbons on, his hat on. He goes up to pick up his wife and a couple of guys--and I shouldn't characterize 'em, but, you know, I have a real thing, and I'm sorry if I offend anybody, but long hair and beards just drive me crazy because that's what I saw when I got home. Anger by people who were opposed to the war, and they vented their opposition on me or me and my friends. That's who were doin' what our government was asking us to do, and then they would take it out on us personally, you know--spittin' on you or givin' the old--thwtt--boy, I hate that. I'm sorry, I do. It just drives me crazy, and my wife is on my case about it, but I had so much anger directed towards me by people who protested the war, and it's their right to do that, but they don't need to be in my face. So I don't know whether that's the answer to your question or not, but yes, I was very aware of it and my family took some heat at home because I was over there "killing women and children"--you know, that kind of thing. So yes, I was very aware of it, and it still lingers with me. It had stayed with me all these years. And my wife says, "You've gotta get over it," but I'm working on it.

Interviewer

What happened to your family?

Jerald Cannon

Well, you know, just comments that people would--if they knew that I was over there and she was home, and just ignorant comments, you know?

Interviewer

So tell us about any unusual missions that you remember that stick out.

Jerald Cannon

I remember when I was tryin' to go over some of the things with my wife about what happened and one that I can remember that was a little unusual. We had a target where there were two kind of big ditch banks--not canals, but

two big ditch banks. In Vietnam, you have to know it's rice paddies. Just about everything is rice paddies, and people live on the ditch banks, if you will, and the intersections.

Well, we were striking this one place and I come in and strafed an area, and then I pulled up and rolled over to get back up to the circle that we were in. You always flew in a circle so they never knew which way you're coming in from. So when I strafed, which is shootin' the guns. My wife said, "People may not know what that means." Anyway, I had fired my guns, and then while I pulled up and banked and I'm looking almost out of the top of the canopy--not quite, but in a quartering look--I looked out here, and I could see a guy standing on a ditch bank by a tree and he's standing there with a machine gun. And he's going, "Brrrgggg," as I go by. And as I'm lookin' out of the canopy, it was almost--you know, I just kept lookin' at him as I pulled out. And so I thought, "Well, I'll be darned." So I did the same thing. I came back around, and that guy's still there on that tree line with the machine gun shootin' at me. And he's tryin' to track me, which is a mistake on his part 'cause he's shootin' behind me then. If he had just got out in front of me and held it out, I would've flown into it, but he's tryin' to track me, and so he couldn't hit me. Well, second time around he's still there doin' the same thing. Well, third time around, why, I didn't strafe back where the target was; I strafed up at the tree where he was. I think that surprised him. With those guns you can just cut trees down so even if he's behind the tree, why he's gonna be in real deep trouble.

So it was just interesting to see a guy that close just aimin' at ya and pullin' the trigger on ya.

Interviewer

We're going to be interviewing Bernie Fisher. We're going to try and go up and see him.

Jerald Cannon

Wow.

Interviewer

So tell us about Bernie Fisher.

Jerald Cannon

Bernie was a great guy. We had so much fun down at Homestead, and he was a great pilot. I think he was the only guy that ever tried to dead-stick an F-104--a little stubby, short-winged thing, they called it "a man in a missile," and Lockheed built it. But when you lost the engine in that thing, boy, it was the worst fighter there was for gliding. Anyway, he dead-sticked it down at Homestead, which means the power was out, he had no engine. We practiced things like that, but he was just estimating where it was.

But Bernie was a great pilot, and it was a lot of fun. Like I said, at Bien Hoa, we flew three or four missions together just for fun, and then I forget where he went, but up mid-country a little bit more, flying the A-1. A-1's an old propeller engine-driven airplane, and so he's down much lower when he's dropping his bombs than what we were 'cause we had to be higher. So much different for us. Riding with him, he's rolling in about where we were pulling off in our jet, and so he would just pull the throttle back, put speed brakes out, and that thing just looked like it went straight down.

He could put a bomb right in the front door of a hooch of Vietnamese. Hooch is a grass building out there. But yeah, Bernie was a great guy, and that mission of his would just blow your mind.

Interviewer

Incredibly nice guy. Tell us about some of the guys you flew with.

Interviewer

Well, when I left Turkey and came back home, three of us came back home, and one of the guys, his name was Lou Kanaar. We flew, oh, about halfway through our tour over there. He got shot down, and we were in South Vietnam. And he got shot down and he ended up down in the jungle and he got on his radio and there wasn't any rescue-type helicopters around, but there were Army helicopters all over the place. And so this one guy said, "If you can get over to the river there by ya, I can let down next to the water, and if you can swim out and grab my helicopter landing skid, we can probably get you picked up." Well, he didn't wanna stay in the jungle there at night, they probably would've picked him up quickly because there are Vietnamese all over the place. And even if they weren't VC, they got paid if they could capture an American and turn him over.

So he wanted to get out of the jungle before nightfall. So he got over next to the river, and the chopper came down close to the water, and he got into the water and swam out to the chopper, got a hold of the skid. Two of the guys that were inside got down, put their foot on the skid, and they got down and got a hold of him, and he had a gun belt on. And unfortunately, it was one that he had had made over there. It was kind of the thing to do is have a holster made with a gun in it rather than having it in your G-suit pocket or whatever. But anyway, so he got a hold of the railing, and then he got a hold of the bottom of the chopper and these two guys got a hold of his belt. And so they were lifting him, and he was trying to lift himself and the belt broke. And so when he lost all that support, he couldn't hold himself and he went back in the water. And I think he must have hit his chin on the skid, the pipe there. He hit his chin on it and he went in the water. And one of the guys in the helicopter, he jumps in after him. He said he felt him with his foot one time, but Lou never came up out of the water, and so they looked around and had Army guys out there lookin', but they never could find him. And they finally found his body several weeks later when it was down the river a ways--a little river into the Mekong, which is the big one, and that's where they finally found him. So one of the two guys that I came home from Turkey with was killed.

And Jim Poteet, the other guy, he came in and tried to land at Bien Hoa one night when it was just raining--and you've never seen rain until you've seen rain over there. And he ran off the end of the runway, couldn't get stop. Ran off the end of the runway and gear collapsed, and he got a command post job, so he didn't even get to fly fighters the last half of his tour over there. I lost one other fellow that he actually took a flight that I was supposed to be on, and I can't even remember why I couldn't go. But I had a meeting or something. Anyway, this guy took a mission that I was scheduled on, and he was trying to drop napalm. And as he went in, just as he got to the target--you were only a little ways out when you drop napalm because it goes, "choo," forward with you as it comes off. And just as he got over the target where he would release napalm, why, his airplane just, "pooh," just big ball of fire

and, of course, he never got out of it. The airplane just went right into the target, actually. So that was a second good friend of mine that didn't make it back. So, those kind of things--we didn't lose as many as the guys up north did, for sure, but still pretty tough.

Interviewer

You never had to worry about enemy aircraft?

Jerald Cannon

Not enemy aircraft, no. I only saw one big once when I was out at Da Nang up in the south end of North Vietnam, and one little speck--well, they said it wasn't big, I never was close enough. Our airplane, the old F-100, at that period of time early on, it was a great airplane for air combat, but as newer airplanes come on, the F-4, specifically, then our airplane was not air-to-air combat kind of an airplane. They would've waxed us up there and shot us down real easy. And then when I got in the F-4, why then we were no longer goin' up north, so I missed that part of it and again, I felt like I had been cheated that I didn't get to do that. But I'll show you a picture, though. The only airplane I shot down, it was an F-100, and I'll explain that to you. We were doing practice ACM and the guy tried to do a whifferdill to get me and he's got in a flat spin and had to bail out of the airplane over in Turkey. But no, I never shot at an enemy airplane.

Interviewer

What was the morale like in your squadron? Was it high?

Jerald Cannon

Yes. Really very high. Somebody said, "Why do you keep goin' back? Why do you keep volunteering?" Three times. Every time I went, it was a volunteer. It wasn't a set of orders that said I had to go.

They said, "We need..."

And I said, "Take me."

So that's the way most of it was early on. Maybe later on, it wasn't quite so... but I thought that was really good because being a fighter pilot is a totally different atmosphere, if you will, than if you were an Army guy. We took off from a nice cement runway, and when we got through we went back and parked our airplane and went back to where our bed was and we had a hot meal at the Officers' Club. And the Army guys, when they got out of the field, if they got a day off, then they could come to our base and get a nice warm bed and a warm meal they thought they were uptown. But they only got to do that occasionally and that's how we lived after we went and we did what we were doin'. Only ten percent of the pilots get to be fighter pilots, and so you're the elite of the elite, if you will. So it's just something that you've gone after--most people, forever. When they'd say, "Why do you keep volunteering?"

I say, "Well, it's like practicing football. If you practice football all year and a big game comes along and you don't get in the game, you feel like you've been cheated." So it felt that same way to me at that time. That's what I had trained to do, that's what I wanted to be, and that's where I wanted to be when there was some shootin' goin' on.

And most fighter pilots had that same feeling. They were there because they wanted to be, most of 'em, where some of the other people that had less interesting, less exciting, more sleeping in the mud, why, their morale could've been low. And I know it was as I talked to some that came in from the field and we had a chance to talk to 'em. Their lives were miserable, and ours were not so miserable. So I think ours were great in relation to how it might have been for some.

Interviewer

And you visited that Special Forces camp, correct?

Jerald Cannon

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

Did that open your eyes to a few things?

Jerald Cannon

Well, yeah. It showed me that those guys were really dedicated people. I mean, those Special Forces guys, boy, my hat were tipped to them because they were out there in the middle of it with enemy, if you will, sleeping in the camp with them, and never knowing exactly who was gonna do what when they got attacked. Maybe they would fight and then maybe they wouldn't, and you and eight or ten other Americans, that's all there is. And so those guys really laid it on the line to do what they were doing out there, and I thought they were really, really great guys. Of course, Special Forces are the elite of the elite in the Army. But it was a great eye-opener for me to go out there and see how they lived and what they had and what they had to put up with.

Interviewer

Did you ever have a chance to see a Bob Hope show when you were there?

Jerald Cannon

Oh, yeah. I don't know how many Christmases I was over there. I think I saw two Bob Hope shows.

Interviewer

Tell us about it.

Jerald Cannon

Oh, man. What to say? Bob Hope is Bob Hope. They were the most fun. The guys just went nuts, and you'd seen the newsreels of 'em. And boy, there again, Bob Hope, what a wonderful guy and how he sacrificed his life, his time to try to boost the morale of military people, not just us over there, he did it forever. And they were really great. And the guys were just so excited about seeing him and having him come. Maybe you were sitting way back in the back, you were still there and he was there. Of course, if you were in the front row it was a lot better, but he was a great, great morale-boosting guy.

Interviewer

What's it like to spend Christmas away in a war zone like that?

Jerald Cannon

Well, that's a tough proposition. Being a fighter pilot at that time was a tough time. I was gone 50 percent of the time. We were gone six months here or three months there, two months there, and then at six months' time, here again. And we were just gone all the time. It was very, very difficult on families. Lots of divorces. And then they stopped us going on rotation--"rot" they called it--stopped the rot from six months. They cut it down to three months so you didn't have to be gone quite so long.

But of course, then when you went to Vietnam--and it was a year generally--it's tough. It really is hard. You miss a lot of things that happen. Norlan Daughtrey was a real close friend of mine. He got shot down, and he was in an F-105 and it got hit by a SAM. And he was in The Hanoi Hilton for seven years or somethin' like that. And lots of 'em, it was interesting. Pam and I were talkin' about it this morning, you know, some of 'em got divorced while they were in the POW camp. Some of them didn't even know if they were alive, but some of 'em got divorced and some of them didn't. But even when they got home, Norlan, he came home, and he was home, six months, eight months, or something like that, and then they got divorced. They said you were just totally different people from what you were when you were before, because you've changed, they've changed, and things just didn't work out. So there was heavy divorces on the guys that were in the POW camps. But if you were just gone 50 percent of the time, you still have a lot of time.

And Christmas, of course, is the very worst time of the whole thing. Nowadays, the guys can call home and they get to talk to 'em on the video. I'd send my wife a letter, and she wouldn't get it for ten days, and in that ten days, they've shot down four or five fighters so she never knew whether that was... She'd get the letter, well, she'd know that ten days ago, he was there, but they've shot down five or six more fighters between the time I mailed that letter and when she got it. So it was just a constant thing. And you couldn't call home. You couldn't. All you could do was send him a letter, and that's all you could do. Now it's a little better in that the guys can at least call home.

Interviewer

How did you feel about your brother pilots and POWs? Tell us about your feelings about that.

Jerald Cannon

Well, that's somethin' that's really very difficult to identify with. You can't. They put us in survival training, and in survival training, they put us in a POW situation where they put us in a dugout, like they had some of the time over there to begin with. And then they treated you as badly as they could within reason. And even though you knew you were gonna get out of there in a week, you can't imagine how bad when they keep you awake all the time. You just don't get any sleep and very little or poor food. Even by the end of a week, you're ready to climb the walls and how some of those guys had to put up with that for years is unbelievable.

And then I don't know. Maybe you don't know the story. Jane Fonda. She was the most despised person you can possibly imagine in the fighter squadrons--and you can cut this out when you edit this thing--we had pictures of

Jane Fonda in the bottom of the latrines so that you could just tell her what you thought as you were at the urinal. But we had guys in North Vietnam that were POWs, and one of the things you wanted to do was get your name out so that they knew that you were there alive because once the North Vietnamese had to admit you were there, then they had to admit what happened to you. A lot of guys, they said, "No, we never saw 'em." Like a friend of mine, the chopper was over him ready to pick him up. I mean he was within two feet of the cable when they grabbed him. And so he was in good shape when they got him. Well, they said, "Ah, we never got him." Never heard from him again. They never acknowledged that they had him. So the thing you tried to do was get your name out so the people knew that you were there.

Well, they took some guys and they scrubbed him up, gave them a shower, cut their hair, cleaned them up and got some that didn't have any facial bruises or cuts or whatever. And then they make 'em look good and they put 'em in a line, and Jane Fonda's comin' through after she got through sittin' on her Quad 40 millimeter aircraft guns, if you ever saw that picture. Well, then she's goin' down through there and bowing and the guys were shakin' hands with her. Well, they had written their names on a slip of paper and they hoped that maybe she would take those names back home. She goes through the line, takes a piece of paper from each one of 'em. When they get through with the line, she walks over and hands it to the Vietnamese commander. And when they got those guys back to the prison cells, they beat those guys unmercifully. Two of them died from the beatings that they got after that particular incident.

So fighter pilots hated her with a passion, and I still hate her. I'm gonna have to forgive her before I can get to heaven. I hope I'm not gonna die tomorrow because I certainly hate Jane Fonda, and I will forever because of that kind of thing. And back home, people thought, "Oh, Jane Fonda's over there helping the guys, helping everybody." She did more harm than you can ever imagine for the morale and for the two guys got beat to death. And then somebody wants to make her one of the top 100 women of the century. There's an email goin' around in the fighter pilot business saying, "Call your congressman and say, 'Don't let Jane Fonda be one of the top 100 women of the century.'" That's our feelings.

Interviewer

Is there anybody special at that time, a friend that you were really close to?

Jerald Cannon

Well, I flew with some interesting people. Chuck Yeager was the squadron commander in one of the sister squadrons when I was at Georgia Air Force Base, so I got to fly with Chuck a time or two on a mission, and so I knew him. We were not friends. We were not close at all, but he was the most notable person that I knew. James Jabara, who was a triple ace in Korea, was one of my wing commanders. He crashed in a Volkswagen and killed himself, or his son was drivin' it and he got killed in a Volkswagen. But he was one of my wing commanders. One of the fellows I met over in Turkey, I had three times over in Turkey, though, by the way, but he was over there permanently with his family, and so I met him over there. He was our LDS group leader over there. And so he

happened to be Pam's cousin--Pam's my wife now. My first wife that was with me all the time when I was in the service died of cancer three years after I got out of the Air Force. Big plans sure went down the tube. You know, we were gonna do all these things that we planned to do while we were in the Air Force, and she had to put up with all of the being gone and everything, and then when I got out, and then she passed away of cancer. But anyway, this fellow I met in Turkey was Pam's cousin, and so they spent a long time trying to get us together and they finally did. So he's probably my best friend in the Air Force for two reasons. He introduced me to my wife, but he's just a great guy.

Interviewer

Tell us about refueling mid-air over Vietnam. You helped develop those systems, right?

Jerald Cannon

I was back at Georgia Air Force Base in Victorville, California when we first got into the air refueling business. They took the old B-29 bomber and re-engined it and put bigger engines on it, and they made it the first tankers. And the old KB-50 had three places. You could refuel three airplanes at a time, actually, and they had a big pot out on the end of the wing. And when you got in position, they'd reel out a hose and they had a hose that had about, well, 70 feet of hose on it, I guess. It was a big, old hose--maybe four, four-and-a-half, five inches around--but on the end of it then they had what's called the basket, and it was just metal fingers. And then it had a cloth on the end that could catch the wind that would hold it open. The hose, when it came out, if the air was rough, why, then that's swingin' up and down, oscillatin' up and down. So you'd have to get next to it. Originally, we had a probe down underneath the wing and you couldn't see it. You couldn't get over there far enough to see the probe down there, so you had to know where it was and then you had to get the basket floating up and down like this.

And then, of course, it's not goin' in or out this way, it's just stuck. Then you had to get it just right. If it was stable, you'd just get it right and push your power up, and then your probe would go up and it would hit in the basket. And then it had some little dogs that would come out, close around on it and hold it. It wouldn't lock in there, but it would tend to hold it on. Then you had to push the hose up in. You had to keep accelerating until you got up to where you were in, oh, 20 feet of the tanker with it. And there was a series of lights up on the side of it. Red meant don't do anything, amber was hang loose, and green was they're pumping fuel. So you'd push it up in there far enough and they could start pumpin' fuel into you. And then as your airplane got heavier and heavier, you had to keep pushin' the power up a little more, a little more, a little more to stay up there. And then sometimes you didn't have enough power, and then you'd just drift back and back and back, and then eventually, it would come loose. Or if when you got the fuel that you're supposed to have, why, then they'd just say, "You've got your fuel," and then they'd lock the reel so the hose wouldn't go out with you, and then all you had to do was pull the power back a little bit and back up, and then it would just, "thump." You could just feel it come off. That little probe was hard to see, so then they put one out and up and out, and so at least you could see it. But if you looked at it, it just made it worse because you chased it.

But you had lots of problems. Sometimes when you'd miss it, why, then you'd go past it, and then you had to pull the power back and come back. And if the hose got up over your wing, you could pull the slats off, which were the front end of the wing. There was enough metal on there, pieces that were kind of grabby, if you will, bolts and stuff--you could pull your slats off, which happened, or it could hit you in the canopy and bust your canopy, which happened on quite a few occasions.

Interviewer

So by the time you got to Vietnam, these kinks have been worked out?

Jerald Cannon

Oh, no. No. By then, though, the F-4 didn't use the probe and drogue. That was the old system. And then they went to the new ones with the old 707 airliner, made it a KC-135 and made a tanker out of it. And then they had a boom that came down from the airplane. The guy was in the back that had some controls, and there was a big, old long boom that stuck out, and then he'd put that down. And then you'd pull up under that, and then there was about a six- or eight-foot piece of hose. And in the F-100, you had to plug that in and push it up a couple of feet and you're right underneath the tanker. And so you could still do the probe and drogue that way. The F-105 still had to use that, so when they were doin' up north, they had to use that system. The F-4 then, all you had to do was pull up underneath the tanker farther, and then the guy controlled it in the back and he just had control of the boom and he could just plug it in a receptacle that they had in the F-4. You flipped a button, and this thing would open up like that, and then the tanker's up there and all he had to do was just, bonk, push it down in there with a trigger. And when it went in there, then you just had to stay in this little--the box, they called it, and you couldn't go too far forward or back, left, right, up, or down. You had to stay right in the place. And that was a lot better.

Because the old KB-50, if we were goin' from South Carolina to Spain, we'd take off, go to Bermuda, go 200 miles east of Bermuda at 31,000 feet. Then we had to go down to 12,000 feet to get the tanker to get refueling, and then you had to climb back up to 31,000 feet and go on. Well, when we got the new KC-135s, we could just fly with the tankers. If you wanted to, you could fly all the way over there at that altitude.

Interviewer

What was your opinion of the Vietnam War at the beginning, and did it change at all as far as the political thoughts of the mission?

Jerald Cannon

The political thoughts. Yeah, shouldn't ask a fighter pilot about political thoughts. Well, early on it seemed like the thing to do. I felt like if you read anything about the French in Indochina and how the French--the Michelin rubber plantations. I've dropped hundreds of bombs out on the old Michelin rubber plantation that was out there. But early on, I felt like we were tryin' to help some people who wanted to prevent somebody else from putting them under a communist system, which, you know, of course, to me, a communist system was as bad as it can get, you know? So I felt like I was over there, tryin' to help somebody retain their freedom. So I thought it was the thing to do, and I

still think it was the thing to do. I think a lot of things got really screwed up. I can tell you about a mission I got onto one time that was unfortunately happened more than it should.

Interviewer

What was the mission?

Jerald Cannon

Oh, we went on a mission one time in the south, and we get in touch with the FAC and he says, "Okay," where we're at, you know,

and, "Yeah, okay. We got the area in sight."

And so I said, "Okay. Well, I'll mark it."

And so he rolls in, puts a Willie Pete in there, and he says,

"Okay. There's the target, that's the village, and that's what we want you to hit." And the new flight leader that was number one--I was number three, kind of checking him out--and so he rolls in and drops a pretty poor bomb. It didn't even hit the village, per se, and so I'm the second guy that's comin' in, and as I'm comin' basically up a road, the FAC says,

"They're comin' out the road to the south. You've got 'em out in the open." So I come around, and as I come down this road, I just didn't have a good feeling about it. As I'm lookin', I can see people, if you will, comin' out of the village down the road, and I had this feeling that there was something wrong. And so instead of dropping napalm and taking out a real bunch of people, I just went over 'em and rolled up and looked down at 'em. People think if you're goin' 450 miles an hour, you can't see the ground or what's on the ground, but you can see really well. And so instead of dropping napalm on 'em, I just flew past 'em and rolled up and looked out, and it was a bunch of women and children and the families comin' out the south because they knew that village was gonna get bombed because they had seen the Willie Pete and the first bomb had hit up there. And I said to the flight leader, I said, "Hey, don't anybody drop anything else. That's not a good target." And then I told the FAC, I said, "Go check the coordinates on this thing." Because that can happen, you can get coordinates mixed up and get the wrong place. So he goes back, check the coordinates, comes back, and he says, "No, that's the coordinates. That's a good target."

And I said, "Well, we're not gonna take it. Get us another target. We're not gonna bomb that target or we're not gonna strike that target." And he was a little upset, but anyway, he goes back to the 7th Air Force to the command post there and said, "They won't take the target. Have you got something else?" And they didn't have anything else, so we had to take all of our ordinates back home. Boy, did I catch the devil over that, because 7th Air Force, they said,

"That was the target, and that's what you're supposed to be bombing."

I said, "Well, too late now," because I would not bomb that target and took the ordinates back home, and I caught a lot of grief for the next couple of weeks.

Then they found out later that the Vietnamese guy who was a political guy who was over that area was not getting his under the--it was like protection money you pay to the mafia, you know? If you don't pay the guy the protection money, he can frag your--and when you say "frag it," that's the listing of the targets. And this guy had the power to put this village on the list to be struck if they weren't paying him. And so that's what it turned out to be, and I was forever happy, knowing that I didn't kill 20 or 30 people--women and kids--when it was a graft kind of thing that got them put on the target in the first place. And that was not uncommon. You had people who--the assistance that we'd give 'em, they stole it. But then you have to think about what we have versus what they have. If you have nothing, it's easy to take something that's right there when you don't have anything. So you have to be a little more sympathetic to the people, but not the kind of guy that I'm talking about that was taking graft money, if you will, to set people up. But that happened, and those are the kind of things that prevented the thing from working over there, was too many people that did things that did not support the plan, if you will, the way it should've been supported. And I think that was the thing, too -- it wasn't the Vietnamese people. There were a lot of Vietnamese that I met, people that came and worked on the base and worked, cleaned our thing and brought chickens that we'd have to feed our boa constrictor that we had in our ops building. Lots of them were really neat people. And there were squadrons of Vietnamese people that were flying A-1s that Bernie was flying. And one day at a bar, one of the Vietnamese pilots was in there, and it was a Sunday and the guy said,

"Well, how come you're not flying?"

And the guy said, "Well, it's Sunday."

Well, they didn't fly on Sunday, and this guy, he got all indignant and to make a long story short, he started wrecking on this guy, and another guy said,

"Look, buddy. How long have you been here?"--an American. And the American said, "Well, I've been here two months."

And he said, "This guy's been fighting in this war for five years. Where's your family? Oh, they're home safe. His family is right outside the gate."

I mean, you know, things like that, you know, just were kind of aggravating.

Interviewer

Are there misimpressions that people have about the Vietnam vet? Are there things you'd like to correct about them?

Jerald Cannon

I was goosed on up in Idaho one time, and this farmer's place that we were on, he surprised me. He just said, "I'd really like to just thank you for doin' what you did, for goin' over there and fighting and doing what you did for our country." Because a lot of people felt like it helped our country, even though we were helping them over there, it was something the country ought to do. And so he just thanked me profusely, and that was the first time anybody had ever said to me, "Thank you. Thank you for your service." Now I've had it said to me more later than earlier.

People tell me when Pam and I go singing, she always introduces me. She tells about herself, and then she introduces me--that I did this and this and this. And I get standing ovations from people, and after it's over, I have people come up and thank me. And I've had a lot more thanks in the last ten years than I've had in the previous however many it is--30 or 40.

Interviewer

Can you explain what a SAM is and the dangers of SAM? How was the war different from what you thought of as a child wanting to be a fighter pilot?

Jerald Cannon

Well, my impression to be a fighter pilot was all the air-to-air against you and the other fighter pilot in the Japanese Zero or the German ME-109 or Focke-Wulf 190, whatever it happened to be. That's what my childhood vision was of being a fighter pilot was just air-to-air. Shoot the other guy down; your skill against that guy's skill. And at least in my part of the Vietnam War was in the south, and my biggest concern--I'd never even thought about getting shot. Even though I saw this guy shootin' at me with a machine gun. They were always shooting at you. Nine times I had bullet holes someplace in my airplane. You know they were coming pretty close if they can put it into your airplane. But to me, the biggest threat was the weather. The weather was the thing that always was the hardest part of the mission. Well night and weather were the two things. When you'd get 'em both together, it made the mission much more difficult.

And instead of doing the air-to-air, fight the other guy, we're delivering ordinates on the ground on the enemy. Now they did that in the Second World War. The guys that were flying the B-17s and the B-24s, theirs is a totally different kind of a mission. They're flying, if you will, straight and level and dropping bombs. And then if you were a gunner, why, you were in the back shootin' 'em out. So that kind of a mission is totally different than what I was doing. Now we had guys flying B-52s that would come in on a mission they called Arc Light, and it was B-52s dropping bombs. I think you could put 103 500-pound bombs on one B-52, and so they would just drop 'em in a string. They'd just start releasing 'em and they'd drop 103 if they had that many loaded on. Maybe they didn't always load them that heavy, but you were just bombing just north of Saigon in Vietnam. They had what they called a War Zone C down there, and that was where the Michelin rubber plantation was, and that was jungle right there. Well, they would just drop those strings of bombs because they knew that that area was an area that they were operating out of that they've got these spider holes. And I mean, they had holes dug out 20 feet sometimes to avoid being hit with bombs. But the B-52s would come in and drop a string, and they may have four of 'em in a row. So boy, I'll tell you, you could feel the ground shake at our base in Bien Hoa and we were 20 miles away, ten maybe sometimes. Ten or 20 miles away, you could still feel the earth move a little, and of course, you could hear 'em as they just, "Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom," across the ground. When you try to compare World War II with Vietnam, it's almost an entirely different kind of thing.

Now when you get up north, they did some B-52 bombing, but most of it was fighter planes, the F-105 and F-4 and

the Navy's F-4s. And I don't know what else they bombed with, but, they were rolling in on a target. And you asked a question about a SAM. A SAM is a Surface-to-Air Missile, and it was a radar-guided thing, and so they would pick you up on radar and then when you got in closer they could shoot a missile at you and it was tracked by radar, and that's how most of 'em got shot down was by a Surface-to-Air Missile. And it would come up. They had a missile called an SA-2. It was a Russian-built missile, and that's how most of the guys got shot down was got hit by that missile. When you were either coming in on a target or pulling out, when you get in that SAM envelope, we called it, where they could actually track you and lock onto you and they were great at it. They did a good job.

Interviewer

Did your base ever come under attack?

Jerald Cannon

Yes. As a matter of fact, I've got a box full of shrapnel. They could come get close to the perimeter of a base, and then they could fire ten or twelve mortar rounds just one right after another and just change the elevation on a thing, and they could just walk it right down through the base wherever they had it. I've got pictures at home where mortar rounds hitting in the revetments where they had built for our airplanes to sit in. They'd walk down a bunch of C-7 and they must have damaged eight or ten airplanes so bad that they just towed them down to the end of the field and kind of pushed them down into a big ravine because there were so many holes in 'em. A mortar round hit right on the top of a horizontal stabilizer, and so here's part of it and the other part's just hanging straight down, yet the rudder was just filled with holes and the rest of the body. There were so many holes in 'em, it wasn't practical to fix 'em.

So yeah, they could walk mortar rounds through your base really easy. So right outside the door of where we slept, we had a bunker there, and if we were getting under attack, why, we were supposed to--we always didn't, but we were supposed to go out and get in the sandbag revetment 'cause, like I said, they could walk a series of mortar rounds right through you.

Interviewer

How do your war experiences affect your daily life today? Do you wake up thinking about it every day? Do you share your stories with people?

Jerald Cannon

Well, people have you speak. I haven't been for a while, but for a long time I was a guide down at the Hill Air Force Base Museum, and I've flown ten of the airplanes that they have out there. So you just take people through and tell 'em about the airplane and tell 'em what the airplane was for and what it did and maybe some of the things that you did. And then I speak to scout groups, church groups, young men's groups, The Kiwanis. Groups like Kiwanis will ask to have come and tell us about what it was all about. And so yeah, I do some speaking. I do. And occasionally, people come and when they come in my door, why, they see my stuff. And my hunting' moose heads, buffalo heads, elk heads, and my Air Force stuff is all mixed in my house. We may talk about hunting or we may talk about

the war stuff.

A lot of people have post-traumatic shock, but those are guys I think that were right there when they saw their buddy get whacked and he's right there or they're in a place where they see a lot of blood and whatever. We never saw that. I never saw a drop of blood over there except an Australian that stuck his head up in a ceiling fan, trying to stop it with his head. That was the only time I saw anybody bleed in Vietnam. So I don't have post-traumatic shock. I have only good feelings about it because I was doing the thing that I love to do. And when I think about it I think about the good things that happened that I did that I enjoyed doing and that I kept volunteering to go back to do because I just love to fly. I was a test pilot in the F-100, so I would fly Saturdays, Sundays, weekends, holidays, test-ops, wherever it was, I would go fly. And that's what I love to do. So to me, when I look back, it's a very, very pleasant experience. I forget about the separation from the family because that's over and gone. So I only think about the positive things and I don't have this thing of waking up in the night and worrying about it. I wake up in the night only 'cause my leg hurts. I have good thoughts about it, not bad.

Interviewer

And you think about it every day, probably, right?

Jerald Cannon

Well, yeah. Every time I hear an airplane go over, I look to see what it is, and a lot of times, I can tell what it is. My wife tells people all I have to do is hear it and I can tell you what kind of airplane it is, and in some cases, that's the truth. I love airplanes, and so when I hear airplanes, I think about flying. I don't necessarily think about the Vietnam War, per se, but I think about flying. And that my life was flying and even though I don't fly anymore, it still is. That's the thing that's number one, after my family. Number two in my life is flying and what flying is all about.

Interviewer

What does it feel like to fly?

Jerald Cannon

Well, John Stockton and Karl Malone both got to ride in an F-16, and so they come down and they just said, "Wow." Bob Considine came over and came to our squadron, and we gave him a ride in the backseat of an F. And I mean, he was just totally aghast when it got over. Things were happening so fast, so much talk going on, so many different things goin' on. And I've got this newspaper article he wrote about it. I took an Army guy up on a flight one time, and we were going out. It was just in the States, and we were just doin' what we call a road reconnaissance. And so I had him in the backseat, and I'm flying down this road and we're looking at the Army stuff that's down there and he said, "Wow, I can see the trucks. I can see the people." Some people think that if you're goin' 500 miles an hour and you're down close to the ground, you can't see anything. Well, you can. You can see really well. So it isn't just a big blur when you're flying.

First time I ever went supersonic was in an old F-86. It wouldn't go supersonic at level flight, but if you got up high enough, did a split S and came down, lift the full power straight down, it would start to roll because of the engine

counter-rotation. If you didn't try to stop it you could get supersonic. And the only way you knew when you went supersonic was all your pressure instruments would just jump a little bit. Just give it a bump like that, you're supersonic. You get down in the thicker air, things slow down automatically, goes subsonic, the instruments jump. So you got a little pin that you put on your collar, but other than that, you didn't even know you went supersonic. If you're doing something where you pull Gs, that's an experience that most people never have an opportunity to do. We used to pull five, six. Our airplane was stressed at like, eight. Well, in the airplanes now, they can get 'em up to nine Gs and you can just pull a lot of Gs and that's quite different. But you don't do that for very long.

Whatever you're doin', you're either pulling out or making a turn. Eventually, you roll out or pull out--one of the two--so you don't pull Gs for long periods of time. It's just ten seconds, 15 seconds or something like that and it's over.

Interviewer

Escape and Evasion--did you do through that course?

Jerald Cannon

I went through survival school at 'Stead, and then I was involved in teaching the cadets Escape and Evasion at the Academy, but I didn't go through any of the Army Escape and Evasion programs, no.

Interviewer

When you're on a bombing mission, can you describe the sound? When the bomb hits, do you feel a concussion in the plane?

Jerald Cannon

No. Usually, you're far enough away from it you don't feel anything, no. And you don't hear the bombs because you're far enough away from them. No, you don't hear any different sounds on a bombing mission than you would any other time. You roll in, and you don't have any Gs on the airplane when you roll in, and you're adjusting your sight to the target and you're either adjusting or not and whatever it is. And when you get to the right release altitude then you just hit one of the buttons that's on your stick and it comes off. You can feel the thing bump when the bombs come off because they have a plunger that pushes them away. And so you feel 'em thump when they leave the airplane. Not all of 'em have that, but most of 'em have that thump you feel when a bomb or a napalm comes off. But after it comes off, there's no feeling. And hopefully, you're far enough away from it that you don't feel any of the shockwave 'cause you don't wanna get any of the shrapnel that would come. A napalm, when it comes off, you can feel it thump and then usually they tumble and then you're pulling up and they're, of course, slowing down some. But if you bank up, why, then you can see where it has hit.

They have a big Snake Eye bomb, they call it, that if you just had a regular bomb, they have a fuse in a bomb that makes sure it gets far enough away from your airplane. I don't know if you've ever seen a bomb, but a bomb has a little propeller on the front of it. When you're on the ground, there's a wire in it to keep it from turning. And then when you drop the bomb, that wire pulls out, the little propeller turns, and then that arms the bomb. Well, you wanna make sure that you're far enough away from that bomb when it goes off because that shrapnel's gonna

come off at supersonic speeds, which you're not going supersonic so if you're too close to it when it explodes, you can get shrapnel kind of damage. Well, to drop a bomb low, usually we're quite high when we drop 'em--like, 25,000--35,000 feet, like that, when you drop the bomb. And then you pull out 'cause you have to keep going some, and the bomb keeps going straight. You wanna be far enough away from the thing when it hits. Well, if you're lower, then you gotta find some way to keep away from it. So they have what they call a Snake Eye, and you drop that about the same altitude you drop napalm, and when the little wire pulls out, then four great big fins pop out like this. Four of 'em that are that long, that wide, and each one is that long. And they're folded up against the bomb when it's on your airplane. When it falls off, those big fins pop out like that, and it slows that bomb down so you're going off and it goes, "bonk," like that, and then you're going off and then it goes like that. Then you could drop it much, much closer to the target. And all that's for separation to get you out of the way of the bomb when it goes off.

Interviewer

Can you explain what you know are the immediate effects and symptoms of napalm? Tell us what napalm is.

Jerald Cannon

Napalm is usually just a big tank. It looks like a fuel tank. It's a jelly-like mixture. When it's not mixed it's a powder and then when you put the liquid on it--and I was gonna say the gasoline--probably some ordinates guy would say, "It isn't gasoline," but it's something. They put another liquid stuff with it and mix it so it's like a really unset Jell-O, if you will. It's really loose, sloppy kind of stuff. And when you drop it and the armed safe wire that I was talking about pulls out of it, then there's a fuse in there that's made out of something like white phosphorus that burns really fast, hard, hot. And so that's the thing that ignites it when it hits the ground. Then the fuse ignites, burns, and then it sets all the rest of it off. And when the tank hits the ground then it ruptures or the fuse ruptures it. And so when it spreads out, this jelly goes--I don't know--a couple of hundred feet. Depending on how fast you're going, I guess, would make a difference of how far it spreads out.

So it spreads out and it spreads out on everything. It sticks to the trees; it sticks to buildings; it sticks to the ground. It probably even burns on top of water a little bit, I've been told. I was never into that particularly, but I was told that it takes so much oxygen to support the combustion that it draws all the oxygen out of the air so that somebody who is in a spider hole that they used to dig to hide into and had a little lid on it to keep out of sight, even though they don't get napalm actually on them, it takes so much oxygen out of the air that it kills them anyway.

Now that's secondhand. I'm not an ordinates guy, but I've seen lots of napalm on the ground, and it really burns big areas. But it's more long than wide, if you will, and it burns for quite a while. And anything that it gets on, it's gonna burn it up.

Interviewer

When was your last mission?

Jerald Cannon

Well, my last mission would've been 1969.

Interviewer

In Thailand?

Jerald Cannon

No. 'Cause see, we had stopped bombing up north when I was in Thailand, so it was when I went over there after Tet. I don't even remember the dates, '68, '69. I'm not exactly sure what is. It was just after Tet. That's the last time I flew a mission where we dropped ordinates.

Interviewer

But in Thailand, you were maybe going to go back into combat, right?

Jerald Cannon

Right. Yeah.

Interviewer

And so what year was that?

Jerald Cannon

'73.

Interviewer

Was the war winding down by then?

Jerald Cannon

Yeah, it stopped bombing up north and so that was when they were negotiating. You know, somebody's gonna say, "That's not right," just kind of my recollection was that that's when they were doing just the negotiations. But we had said, "We'll stop bombing," but we were ready on it. We could've gone the next day. We would've been ready the next day because that's what we practiced to do every day. Every day, it was just practicing. We had a bombing range that you could go out to the bombing range and practice what you'd be doing the next day if they, all of a sudden said, "Okay, we're gonna start." Several times, they had short stops and then started again, if I remember correctly, but then it stopped. You know, it may sound a little bad, but I was quite disappointed that it didn't get going again because, again, that's what I wanted to do, that's what I was trained to do, and I wanted to get up north to Route Pack 6.

Interviewer

How can we tell the difference between a bombing and napalm?

Jerald Cannon

If you see a big fire ball, if you will, of black smoke and a big fire ball, then that's always napalm. Unless you dropped a bomb in a gas storage area, then you could get, you know, that, but it'd be going up more than the kind you see if you're looking at a war movie and you see a big, old fire ball, why, that's napalm. Usually, a bomb, you just see "pwwtt" and out. You can see the shockwave in the movie a lot of times. If you look real close, when a bomb goes off, you can see the precursor wave, the shockwave, just moving out through the trees. You have to

know what you're looking for but you can see it a lot of times. At least in the movies that I saw of our bombing 'cause we always had strike cameras on our airplanes. So a camera that shined back in the direction you just came from, so it was directly on the napalm or the bomb, and you can see the shockwave going out from a bomb.

Jerald Cannon

They had bombs in Second World War that they used up, if you look at the history of it, at Dresden, they had what they call fire storms and they dropped stuff that had phosphorus on it. And if you're familiar with phosphorus in your chemistry class in high school, it burns. You can't put it out. The only way you can put it out is put it under water. And they dropped bombs up there in Dresden and some of the other places in Germany 'cause when the bomb would go off, it would splatter this phosphorus all over buildings and stuff and set it on fire. And it got on some people, and they're on fire and you can't shut it off or scrape it off. The only way you could do it was get in the canal under water and then it would go out. But if you got your back above water, why, it would start burning again.

Jerald Cannon

It's ugly when you sit and talk about it now but you're at war. I'm sorry, you know? And the purpose of it wasn't to burn people; it was to set buildings on fire. And it did that, unfortunately, sometimes it got on people. And Dresden if you read about that, it's pretty gruesome. But napalm was like that, too. If you got that splashed on you, you were burning. But it did its job, did what it was supposed to be. It did what it was designed to do. It's ammunition designed to do mission, and it did it well.

Interviewer

By the way, what's your favorite airplane to fly that you ever flew?

Jerald Cannon

Well, you know, you have to qualify. The funnest one to fly was the F-86 because it was so stable, it was so neat, and it was so unencumbered with all the other things that the other airplanes could do. It was just strictly an air-to-air airplane, and it was really a lot of fun to fly. But it didn't have any capabilities for dropping bombs or doing all the other things. I like the F-4 'cause it had two engines. We had got one guy in an F-100 lose an engine between Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and Bermuda at night in the weather, and his engine quit and he ended up--"thunk," down in the ocean. Well, in the F-4, you got two, so if you get damaged with one, you got one at least that can get you out of the target area where you've just bombed some guy. You don't wanna be in his area because he'd be awful mad at you. So the F-4 was nice in that it had two engines. But just fun to fly was the F-86. But I love the F-100.