Len Moon Salt Lake City, Utah

Len Moon
-- one hundred the whole year of 1969. And the F4, May of '71 to May of '72 at Korat Royal Thai Air Base in Thailand.

Interviewer
And you flew how many missions in the F100 and how many missions in the F4?

Len Moon
Two hundred and twenty-seven missions in the F100, and two hundred and seven more in the F4. Four hundred and thirty-four.

Interviewer
Where are you from?

Len Moon
From Farmington, Utah.

Interviewer
Did you grow up there?

Len Moon
Yes.

Interviewer
And your older cousin, Jay Hess, did things with you growing up?

Len Moon
He lived just down the street from me, yeah.

Interviewer
Tell me some of the things you did with him.

Len Moon
Well, like I say, he may be seven years older. I can't remember. So there's three or four of them that ran around together, but I was the snot-nosed kid that always wanted to be where they were and do what they did. And he took us fishing and stuff and we had a good time. Then he went in the Air Force, and I served a mission in Texas and came home. And I don't think we ever did correspond. But after being in Texas for a couple years, I knew a lot of pilots in the Randolph Air Force Base and Lackland and all of those areas, and they encouraged me to do it. And I guess the thrill of the whole thing happened when I was growing up in Farmington and worked at Lagoon for seven years and the last couple of years ran the roller coaster. And I'd lean over the back seat and oil the track the first day and I thought that was pretty cool, and the girls thought I was pretty cool. I don't know. I've been a downhill skier and just on the edge of life and wanted to do something wild and **(inaudible 02:12)**. So went to Utah State the first year, and had to go to ROTC so I picked the Air Force and got interested there. And then graduated from University of Utah when I got back from my mission. I had ROTC there, too, so --

Interviewer
You get to Vietnam when?

Len Moon
November of '69.

Interviewer
And had Jay been shot down by then?

Len Moon
Oh, yes. '65.

Interviewer
When did you hear the news, and how did the family hear it?

Len Moon
I'm sorry, I came --

Interviewer
Okay. Oh, yeah.

Len Moon
Let me see. I came home in November of '69.

Interviewer
Right.
Len Moon
I got over there at the end of December of '68. So it was the whole year of '69. But what was your question?
Interviewer
How did the family find out about Jay being shot down?
Len Moon
Well, it was close to three years after he was shot down.
Interviewer
I mean, when you first heard he was shot down and missing in action.
Len Moon
Oh, I was a 238 instructor pilot in Georgia from '63 to '68, I guess. In '65 he was shot down, and again, we didn't hear anything. I did get a story back from his wingman that said that when he was shot down, the whole airplane exploded and they never saw a shoot, so they never felt that he was even alive.
Interviewer
But you thought he was.
Len Moon
I just -- he was my hero, man. You can't kill my hero. *(Laughs)* And I just felt -- I don't know why, but I just -- for the whole time that he was shot down I just felt like he -- and then when I heard the news that he was a POW, then it was reassuring.
Interviewer
Tell us about the postcard.
Len Moon
This was a long time ago, but I never did see it. I heard from -- I guess it was -- I think I was in Vietnam in the F100 when we heard that that card had some significant things. And a couple of things I don't know what was on it, but they could only write I think four lines on the card and then they'd send it home. And that's the first they had heard, and one of 'em had to do it, his son who was old enough to get the priesthood in the LDS Church. And he made mention that, "I'm proud of you for doing this." I can't remember the exact words of it, and so they pretty well knew that he was still alive.
Interviewer
When you heard, did you start thinking about him being down there somewhere?
Len Moon
Well, I figured that he was up north, incarcerated. And one of the plaques above the door when we went out to fly every day, it was a brass plaque that says, "Remember the guys up north," meaning the POWs. And that was kinda reassuring. Everybody would tap that when they'd go out the door and try and remember that that's not a place you wanted to be.
Interviewer
Did you take any hits while flying?
Len Moon
Believe it or not, I didn't get hit until the next-to-last mission in the F4. Never got hit in the F100. And the F100, twelve of us went over as a group and only five of us came home. So it was *(laughs)* fairly dangerous stuff. But I don't know, I was pretty lucky. The other -- well, this is not -- a lotta the guys would drink a lot and get crazy after a mission and stuff, and I didn't drink. And I think that had a lot to do with my planning for the next mission. I knew where the missile sites were and the AAA sites were, and tried to work around 'em. So I don't know. A lot of our accidents are not accidents, but shoot-downs were things that shouldn't have happened.
Interviewer
Were you there during or after Tet?
Len Moon
It was about a year after, yeah. It was '68.
Interviewer
How was the war changing when you were flying?
Len Moon
Well, the F100, we were at Bien Hoa. That's right outside of Saigon or whatever it's called now. So we were way south in the Delta, and we never had anything larger than just small arms shooting at us. If we ever found a 37-millimeter site we could knock that out, and they had a hard time getting those kinda equipment down that far. But they were mostly troops in contact missions. I flew a lot of night missions. And, I don't know, I shouldn't get into the

politics of war, but it was something we should've finished quickly. *(Laughs)*
And the reason I say that, I remember one night I had a young lieutenant -- I was a captain. I had a young lieutenant. We were on the alert pad, which is some revetments right next to the runway, and you're expected to be airborne in five minutes if the Army's calling you. And the **(clacks? 07:57)** goes off and -- about 11 o'clock and we run out in the rainstorm, jump in the jets, take off. And I'm trying to get lieutenant joined up with me in the rain. Finally do that and we head out. And they say, "The ground commander needs you," and da, da, da, da, da.
And we were controlled by what's called AB, AB Triple-C, a C130 that's kind of the lord of the war. We got to the area and they said, "Oh, it's after midnight. It's a Vietnamese holiday. We can't drop bombs on holidays, so go drop your ordinates in the ocean and come back and land." And boy, and the Army guys are down there screaming and want help and need help. And, "Sorry, that's one of the rules of war." And as far as I'm concerned, if you're going to war, you don't have rules. You go to win. And ten years later, and 50,000 guys later we drag ourselves home and still don't win. I shouldn't get too --

Interviewer
We all have opinions and you've certainly earned yours.

Len Moon
Well, in the F4, there's a couple things there that just really bothers you 'cause --

Interviewer
Do you mind talking about that?

Len Moon
Sure. When I was in the F4, the bombing halt was in effect. And I think it was the end of April of '72 when we started bombing again; February, March, April, somewhere in there. So I was there just the last couple of months when we started going north again. And that's when I got hit up by the DMZ. But prior to that, there was a lotta things. I never did see a MiG. We were air-to-ground guys, bomb droppers, and we had escorts above us that were looking for those type things.
I never got up to Ho Chi Minh City, but I flew a lotta missions just above the DMZ. And some of the rules were just crazy. I'd heard that they -- the laser bombs were just coming out at that time, and we were dropping bombs in some of the dams down the air shoot to hit the generators so we didn't blow up the dam and hurt a bunch of people and things like that. That's hearsay, but I heard that.
And we had a couple young pilots that were going out on an evening mission, and where the river comes down there's a place that was called the Catcher's Mitt. The river comes down and it looks like a thumb and then a catcher's mitt. And right across the thumb was a ford the trucks could cross. The water was pretty shallow there, and I guess it was rocked underneath. And they were on their way to a specific mission, and looked down just as it was getting dark and saw 16 trucks crossing that ford in the river. Called up AB Triple-C and said, "There's trucks crossing the Catcher's Mitt." That was just a term that we used. And said, "Request permission to change our mission and go get those trucks," 'cause they're always coming down the trail, the Ho Chi Minh Trail all night. And they says, "Well, the ford air controller's gone back for the night and we don't know if there are some friendlies down there or not, so we can't allow you to."
And this kid, he says, "I understand, we're clear," and he turned his radio off. We went in and hit the first truck and the last truck, and then wiped out sixteen trucks and they exploded all night long. And he got reprimanded really, really bad because they didn't follow the rules. But it was just amazing what we had to go through over there. We wanted to do something but couldn't do it if it was --

Interviewer
So you got hit a few hours before you were going home?

Len Moon
The last week when we were at Korat, Thailand -- the last week before you go home they started letting you go down by Saigon and some of the easier places so you wouldn't be up against the AAA and the MiGs and all of that stuff, just as a, "We'll let you try and fly it safe." And I took off with a young captain. I was a captain. And I had nine big cans of napalm on the airplane. He had high-drag Mark 82 500-pound bombs. We had a planned target down by Phu Cat. It's a little north of Saigon. And it was just starting to get dusk, and we were on way down there. And usually the day missions were pretty much over about the time the night guys start to fly.
And they called up and said, "There's a Marine group up in a walled-in city just below the DMZ. The bad guys are coming over the wall and they need help now." And so we turned northeast and had to refuel on our way up there. And got our refueling done and got in touch with the Marine commander, and he said, "Have you got any napalm?" I said, "Yeah, I've got nine cans of napalm." He said, "Would you please – on the west wall when you get up here, you'll see the city is actually walled in. Just a small village." But he said, "They're throwing ladders up against the wall and trying to come over the wall. I want the napalm right down the wall." He said, "Your wingman, if he's got 500-pound bombs, drop those out into the jungle a little bit to scare 'em."
So we got up there, and I got about ten miles away and could see where I was going, and dived down to treetop level and made sure I was lined up. And, of course, you're going about 600 miles an hour. *(laughs)* And I rippled

'em off, one right after another, right down the wall. And the Marine commander calls up and he says, "That's perfect. That's perfect. They're all scattering towards the jungle." And I never felt anything or thought anything of it. I saw the tracers going by. I mean, they were shooting at us like crazy. But it's amazing to see a tracer when you're going 600 knots. They're usually way behind you because they're not leading you.
And anyway, pulled off the target and the wingman had dropped his ordinates. And after each mission, we look each other over. He come in and come underneath me and come up and said, "Lead, you've got a hole in your root of your wing about a foot in diameter. It's really bad right over your wing fuel tank." And I said, "Well, can you see any fuel leaking?" And he said, "No." I says, "Well, that's the last thing we burn." And so I checked the, the gauges, and it was full. And he says, "It's gotta be right over the fuel tank." And I said, "Well, I still got gas," and "let's head for home." And it was about 200-something miles back to Korat. We got back and landed without incident. Emergency landing because we didn't know if the slats and all that were affected.
Amazing – the F4 has a titanium tube that runs the leading edge of the wing. The airplane was built for the Navy, and it's a perforated titanium tube about two inches in diameter. So when you put the forward slats down, 8- or 900-degree air's coming off the turbine through that tube to flow over the wings so that they can land slower. It slows up the stall speed of the airplane. And then between that tube and the bladders for the fuel tank in the wing there's about a two-inch, it looks like crumpled up tinfoil. It's just a void there, because of the hot air and that thing. That bullet, it was a .37 millimeter exploding shell, it hit the bottom of the airplane. Didn't explode. Went between that tube and the…
I mean, if it had been an inch either way, if it had, or perforated the tube, that hot air would've burned into the fuel and they're just rubber-bladder fuel tanks. Or if it'd hit the fuel tank and exploded, the wing would've probably blown off the airplane. And then when it hit the top of the metal on the airplane, that's when it exploded and it went like this, and it looked really bad. *(Laughs)* So I felt pretty blessed, pretty lucky to -- that I wasn't a little bit slower or a little bit faster. And that's the only time I got hit. But --

Interviewer
How soon after that did you come home?

Len Moon
Well, I had one more mission the next day and then we came home. And so nobody back home knew anything till I got home. *(Laughs)* My wife kept saying every time, she says, "Everybody talks about getting hit. How come you're so lucky?" *(Laughs)* And I was. I mean, 434 combat missions and one hit, that's pretty good.

Interviewer
When did you get word that Jay was coming home?

Len Moon
Okay. We got home, I think it was the middle of May. Close to the middle of May. This was 1972. They're not released until March of '73. And while I'm home, I'm lucky enough to get stationed at Hill Air Force Base as a flight test pilot. All of the airplanes, F4s, that were going into the facility to be re-modded and re-fixed, we'd have to fly 'em and get 'em approved before they could go back out in the field. So I was home. I lived in Farmington.
To back up, just as something interesting. When I left, I didn't think I was gonna go back so soon. I was only home from the 100 a year and a half, and they said, "Okay. All you guys that's got experience, we need you over there 'cause we're sending a lotta young lieutenants and stuff over." And so I'd had a foundation built in Farmington for a new home when they said, "You're going back." And my wife was a month pregnant, so she built a house and had a baby while I was gone and that kinda -- she's my hero, again.
Anyway, actually, when I left, our squadron had never had anybody killed out of Korat. And in July, when the war really heated up after the May group came home, well, we lost three airplanes and four pilots and back seaters all got captures and spent eight months in Hanoi Hilton or wherever. And that's the only ones we really got shot down the year that we were there. But we had already come home. And then I can even remember when the war -- they just said, "That's it." And I think that was August or September. And then they started negotiating to get the prisoners home and everything. And I guess it was some time in February when we knew exactly when they were gonna come home.
So a couple of Jay's friends and I, I said, "We ought to have a welcome home." And she's got the brochure that we mailed out. And by this time his wife had moved to Bountiful. And so we got with the Bountiful people. They wanted to take over. They said, "Well, he lives in Bountiful now." And I said, "Well, he grew up in Farmington and we need to run it from there." So anyway, when he got off the plane, they escorted him all the way through Bountiful and Centerville, Farmington. We had talked to everybody in both towns, all three towns, and asked 'em to put a flag up or put a poster in their window or something. And then we notified everybody exactly when he was gonna come. And it was just one big ole' parade. It was great.

Interviewer
How many people were in the streets?

Len Moon
Oh, I was at the courthouse in Farmington, Davis County Courthouse. They let us do it on the steps of the

courthouse. Closed the street in front. And elementary school kids came and sang, and we bought him a bunch of presents and stuff. So all I heard was it was really a good, good crowd all the way along from Bountiful all the way through Centerville and to Farmington. And I don't know how many people we had at that. I don't know. The Davis County Courthouse steps are right on the main street there, and that whole thing out into the street and across the street was filled. So I'd guess somewhere between two and four hundred people at least.
And we just had a little ceremony and welcomed him home. Let him say some words, and then some of his friends -- he was a great skier and a fisherman, and they got him some new skis and fishing equipment and presented it to him. And it was just great thing to do. And of course you've done a story on him.

Interviewer
What went through your head when you saw him?

Len Moon
(Laughs) Pretty emotional for both of us. He knew that he'd been kinda my hero and he's not a first cousin or anything, but we're cousins and it was just -- well, first of all, when you hear that he's still alive, that's the first thing. And then not knowing whether you're ever gonna see him again. You don't know. And then when it did happen, it was a pretty emotional thing. And we've been good friends ever since.

Interviewer
Do you two ever talk anymore about it?

Len Moon
We don't. I mean, not much. There's something about it. Those you've been with or those that you -- same type of people. I've had several conversations with him, asking just how it was, and he just, you know, he'll tell you little bits and pieces, but it's just something that's the past, and we don't wanna dwell on it because it was very painful for him. It wasn't for me, and then he had problems with his family and things. But there for a long time, I just didn't think he wanted to say anything, so I didn't mention it. But I don't know, over the last year or two we've talked a little bit about it. But I guess I don't wanna know that much about the torture and all that kinda stuff, 'cause you've heard thousands of stories on how bad it was.

Interviewer
Did you guys know how the POWs were being treated?

Len Moon
No. We suspected that the treatment wasn't good. Jane Fonda said it was wonderful. Don't get me started on that. *(Laughs)* Anyway, no. We had no -- you know, even though we knew he was alive, we had no idea where he was, where he was, the Hanoi Hilton or one of the other places. And, you just -- I guess it was a big thing for all of us that whatever they're going through, we don't wanna do that. And you tried to kind of fly better each day so that it wouldn't happen to you, I guess.

Interviewer
Talk about when Saigon fell.

Len Moon
I was a flight test pilot at Hill.

Interviewer
What was happening?

Len Moon
Well, you'll see that kinda thing, and people clinging to the helicopters and everybody trying to get outta there. And I guess it was a sick feeling in my stomach that, “Man, there for ten years and 50,000 people and we don't win. We just say, ‘Well, we've had enough,’ and come home.” And when we first started bombing the North after that three-year delay or whatever it was, I got to lead a 24-ship mission over Vinh. That's the largest city just north of the DMZ. And all we did is took 24 F-4 airplanes and dropped chaff at 20,000-feet in a big quarter so the B-52s could come in. And, and that was part of the thing, I think, that they decided, “It's time to do something 'cause we're getting serious.” And --

Interviewer
Who is they?

Len Moon
Well, the North Vietnamese. I've heard stories of, if they knew -- or they figured that we were gonna keep coming north after that mission, and that's what we should've done in the early '60s. I mean, “Tomorrow Vinh goes down. Then we move the next city north. And when you've had enough, tell us.” And yes, war is hell and people are killed. But when we lose 50,000 and you don't win, it's ridiculous. War is hell, and if you're going to go to war, then you ought to go to win and, and get home and quit messing around. But the politics of it was terrible.

Interviewer
Were you at the airport when Jay came home?

Len Moon
No. I was at the steps organizing everything on the -- you don't want me looking over there, right?
Interviewer
No.
Len Moon
No. I was there. He was escorted by the police and everything, and I can't even remember who -- didn't have a limousine, but it was a big car. And they needed some of us at the -- I think a couple of his friends were with him, his friends that were same age that were buddies from ever and ever. Don Manning and Chris Christianson. Two or three others that he grew up with and went to school with. But I was at the county courthouse organizing things and getting things squared away. Thinking what I was gonna say to everybody to start with. But it was pretty emotional.
Interviewer
What is Jay's relationship to you again? Say Jay Hess is my cousin.
Len Moon
Jay Hess and Len Moon -- my great, great -- I think it's great great-grandmother was a Hess, and that's where it split. We call ourselves second cousins, but it was probably a little more removed than that. But Jay Hess is my cousin.
Interviewer
Talk about Jane Fonda.
Len Moon
Well, and I don't know how much is hearsay and how much is true. I've actually heard some stories from people that I trust, and I guess it was really ugly when she was over there. And some of the things that you hear, I guess they were true. Guys passing their Social Security Numbers to her and she doesn't bring 'em back and all kinds of stuff. And that we were the warmongers and the hateful people. But personally, because I wasn't a prisoner of war, I don't know exactly what went on.
Interviewer
Were you flying missions when she was over there?
Len Moon
I must've been. We didn't get a lot of information when that was happening. I think the majority of it came out after she had got back home. I don't know. I don't even remember seeing anything published on it until years later.
Interviewer
What did you think of the anti-war things going on back home while you were flying missions?
Len Moon
Again, Kent State and all that kinda stuff, we heard about it, but we thought they were just a bunch of draft dodgers, and that type thing, that were raising cane. But then when we came home, we found out that we were not very popular people. *(Laughs)* And I can see how people would think that. I mean, there we are, we're killing people and our people dying and what are we getting out of it? It's a stupid war, which kinda resembles some of the others since then.
Interviewer
Is there anything you wanted to say that we didn't ask you?
Len Moon
Oh, I've gotta tell you one little fun part.
Interviewer
Okay. Please do.
Len Moon
F100, July of '69. We're out on a night mission. In fact, I flew over 70 night missions and that was hairy enough for itself when you're trying to find a tanker in a rainstorm, and then trying to find the target and trying to keep your lieutenant on your wing to keep him from getting lost. And there's story after story.
But in the F100 we were out on a night mission, and we were listening -- we had, it's called an ADF radio. And coming back from that mission, the guys landed on the moon. And I'm listening to that. We're coming back. Usually the leader, which was me, lands first and his wingman lands second. And we were coming back, and they said, "We want your wingman to land first." I said, "Well, okay." I gave him the lead and he landed. And I came in. They said, "We're not quite ready. Go around one more time." And I said, "Ready for what? What's going on?" *(Laughs)* I landed and pulled in to de-arm the airplane guns and everything, make sure everything's safe in the de-arming pit. And then we drop the drag shoot, and then we go back to our revetment.
Well, we pulled in there and they had some big lights. They shined, turned the lights on and told me to shut the engine down. And I thought man, is something wrong with my airplane? Opened the canopy, big daylight lights.

They put a ladder up against it and I'm starting that strap to get down and here comes a kid up the stairs with a camera, and he takes a picture of me in the cockpit. And I thought holy smoke, did we do something wrong? *(Laughs)* And a couple days later, there was an article in the Armed Force -- or the *Stars and Stripes* that says, "As man lands on moon, Moon lands on earth." My last name. *(Laughs)* So I got a little article on the -- that was kinda funny. “As a man lands on moon, Moon lands on earth.” They, they knew. They were planning this the whole time, and --

Interviewer

What were your thoughts of flying a combat mission while we're --

Len Moon

Well, we're not listening to that until we're on our way home because we --

Interviewer

But you're aware that all that's going on for some time.

Len Moon

And it was just, you know, great -- man, wow, we're landing on the moon. We're missing a lot of stuff back there in the States. *(Laughs)* But it was, it was kinda funny.

Interviewer

Did you get to see that at all in Vietnam?

Len Moon

'69, we didn't have any of this digital stuff back then. But we got it in the *Stars and Stripes*. I can't even remember, the first year over there, having even a TV. You know, it was just war all the time. That's just what you're living the whole time. But it was exciting when we found out that they'd landed on the moon.