

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RON SIMONETTI

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Stanislaw Gutgarts: This begins an interview with Mr. Ron Simonetti on April 28, 2008, at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Stan Gutgarts. I would like to begin by asking you a few questions about your childhood. Where and when were you born?

Ron Simonetti: I was born a long time ago, May 2, 1940, in Woodhaven, which is in Queens, New York.

Stan: Queens, New York. Please tell me about your mother, your father and a little bit about your family history.

RS: The family came here from Italy in the 1880s. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Please, continue.

RS: Okay. As I was saying, the family came to the United States in the 1880s, from a town in Northern Italy called Chiavari, which is about twenty miles south of Genoa. Actually, it's on the Italian Riviera, and I can't understand why they ever left, [laughter] and there are still some Simonettis there. Apparently, they run the movie theaters over there. We were over there about, I guess, about ten years ago.

SH: Were you really?

RS: Yes. It was really good. My father was born in Brooklyn. My mother was born in Queens. I don't remember where in Queens. My mother is still alive. She's ninety-six years old this year. [laughter]

SH: Did your father's parents immigrate? Were they the ones who came over?

RS: Actually, it was ... the people before my father's father.

SH: Okay, as in your grandparents' generation.

RS: Yes, yes, it would be, like, my great-grandfather. ...

SH: What was your father's background? What did he do? What was his profession?

RS: He actually didn't complete high school. I think he completed three years of high school. Then, he had to go to work and he went into the insurance business and he did that, both property and casualty and life, and all of that stuff, for over fifty years, with a number of different agencies and brokerages in the city and, also, on Long Island.

SH: Is your mother's background the same as your father's, from the same area?

RS: No, my mother's background was, I guess she was kind of, like, upper middle-class. So, she was into riding horses and stuff like that, and she never went to college or anything and really was a housewife.

SH: Did they talk about how they met?

RS: No, not really. I don't know how that occurred. [laughter] It was beyond my time.

SH: Did they talk about how the Depression affected them?

RS: They didn't talk about it, but, well, both Nancy's parents and mine obviously went through it, and they tended to be a lot tighter with the dollar, a lot more frugal, a lot more careful than succeeding generations have been.

SG: Is this something you experienced as a child?

RS: Well, ... you know, I could see it and it was there. I mean, they were just of a different ilk than I was.

SG: Were there any military experience on either your father's or your mother's side, in any of their families?

RS: My mother's brother was a paratrooper in the Pacific during World War II.

SG: Nothing on your father's side?

RS: No, no, no.

SH: Did you ever talk to your uncle about this?

RS: You know, the World War II guys don't like to talk about it, and he's long since passed away and he never did talk about it, but it reminds me, my great, great, great-grandfather on my mother's side was a general in the Civil War, Union general, and he actually rode into Richmond with Lincoln when he went there [Richmond].

SH: Really?

RS: That's the extent of the military experience. ...

SH: Do you have memorabilia from this point?

RS: Not really, no, no.

SG: Do you have any siblings?

RS: I have two sisters. One is relocated to North Carolina. Her husband's retired. The other one is an attorney up in Connecticut, handles mainly family law.

SH: Are they older or younger than you?

RS: I'm the oldest.

SH: You are the oldest. These are your little sisters.

RS: Yes. My first sister is three years younger than I am. My other one is nine years younger.

SG: Where did you go to school?

RS: Well, we started in Queens. I started at St. Elizabeth's Parochial School in Queens. I got to the fourth grade, and then, we moved to a small town called Carle Place in Nassau County, on the Island. ... It was actually sort of a developing place, because they were building the schools as we went out there. It's exactly one square mile and they had one old school when I first got there and they built three others, including the high school, and I played football there, which is part of the story for Rutgers. ... Actually, I guess it was the last two years I was at Carle Place High School, one of our running backs was Matt Snell, who played for the New York Jets when they went to the Super Bowl and won it, [Super Bowl III in 1969]. ...

Nancy Simonetti: The one and only time. [laughter]

RS: Yes.

SG: What position did you play?

RS: I played guard and tackle, and I still have Matt Snell's cleat marks on my back, where he ran over me all the time. [laughter]

SH: You trained him well.

RS: No, but, actually, I came to Rutgers on the scholarship, on two scholarships. The person that my father worked for at the time was a Rutgers graduate, also, and, apparently, an active alumnus, and I'm sure he had something [to do with that].

SH: Do you remember his name?

RS: Yes, it was I. Victor Levin, (Isadore?) Victor Levin, I think it was.

SG: You received an academic and a ...

RS: There were two. One was an alumni scholarship, Alumni Memorial Scholarship, the other one, I think, was Upson or Epsom ...

SH: The Upson Scholarship.

RS: ... Scholarship, and, between the two of them, it covered all my ...

SG: Tuition?

RS: Tuition, yes.

SH: Wonderful. Can we back up a little bit? I know Stan has some questions about your growing up years. You moved into a new development. What was that like, to move out of the city and into something like that?

RS: It was interesting, because right across the street from where we moved, they were building the houses that Nancy's cousins moved into, which is how I met Nancy when we were both twelve years old, [laughter] and it just goes on from there, more or less. [laughter]

SG: In regard to your family, you grew up Roman Catholic, is that correct?

RS: Yes.

SG: Was it a strictly religious family?

RS: No, no.

SG: Okay. Were you involved in any other high school activities, outside of football?

RS: Oh, I played baseball for one year, wasn't too terribly good at that, and that was pretty much it. ... It was a lot of fun, and I guess I was a "B+" student.

SH: Did you have other activities that you were involved in at school, or had you been in Boy Scouts as a younger man?

RS: I was in Boy Scouts for, I guess, about two years, and then, the group just kind of broke up.

SG: Where did you spend your summers in Carle Place?

RS: Oh, we spent them up in the State of Maine, where we still go. We started going there in, what? '52, I guess.

NS: Yes, fifty something years. The whole family goes.

RS: So, we're going up again this year, too.

SH: What part of Maine?

RS: It's Sweden, Maine. It's about fifty miles west of Portland and probably about twenty, twenty-five miles east of North Conway, New Hampshire. So, it's not far from the Maine-New Hampshire border. It's in the lakes region, mountains, stuff like that. So, when we started, of course, Nancy and I were twelve. Now, our grandchildren ... [laughter]

NS: Yes, my siblings and ... all their children, and, now, their grandchildren, [go]. So, I would say, oh, like, almost sixty of us go.

RS: Yes. We're kind of getting forced out the top.

NS: Yes. The oldies are getting forced out. [laughter]

RS: They kind of watch us walk down the hill, you know, to make sure we don't fall.

SH: For the record, this is Mrs. Nancy Simonetti who is joining the interview. Since you have been going back to this spot, like I said, you were in the first development in the area that you are in, now, you are also seeing the changes that are going on in what would be the rural Northeast United States.

RS: Yes, it's pretty much [the same as when we were] growing up, yes.

NS: It's pretty much exactly the same.

RS: But, what was there is there.

NS: Still there.

RS: So, the new stuff has sort of been built in-between and in-between.

SH: This is up in Maine.

NS: Yes.

RS: Well, up in Maine, it's exactly the same. The only thing that's different is, they have hot water now, [laughter] and showers. ...

NS: The cabins are the same; everything's the same.

SG: It remained a roughly rural area.

RS: ... The books and magazines in the book racks are the same, [laughter] and cups and saucers are the same, because they all have logos on them.

SH: Is this a place that you rent?

RS: Yes, we rent. One of the family members is one of the owners and trustees of the place. It's called Timber Ledge. ...

NS: It's unique.

RS: It is unique. It's eight cabins and a lodge, is what it is.

NS: ... No phones, no TVs, no nothing.

SG: Is it in the middle of the forest?

NS: Yes, in the middle of the forest, on a lake.

RS: Yes, it's protected land, right on the lake.

SG: It sounds very nice.

SH: On Long Island, what was that change like, to go from Queens to Long Island?

RS: It was actually pleasant. I didn't much care for St. Elizabeth's Parochial School, because we got beat up every day, you know. ...

SH: You want to talk about that. [laughter]

RS: No, no, no. [laughter] That'd be one of those fifteen pages ...

SG: Omitted.

RS: But, ... going out to Long Island, ... it was good. The school was small. We knew everyone. Of course, what happened, at first when I went there, is that the classes aged out and they needed to go to the junior high or high school. The ones ahead of us actually left because they had to go to schools in different villages, but they'd built the junior high and the senior high in time that my class was either the first or the second class through it.

SH: Did you go to the shore? Did that figure in, the beach, for you?

RS: Well, the beach is always there. Long Island is really narrow; there are tons of beaches. We went to Jones Beach a lot, Bar Beach, which is on the North Shore, the town of North Hempstead.

SG: Do you have to pay for Jones Beach back in the day?

RS: I don't think so, back then. No, you had to pay to ... go through the toll booth to get access to it, but you didn't have to pay to get there [on the beach]. Of course, if you wanted to rent anything, if you wanted a chair or a blanket, you had to pay for that.

SG: Not much has changed.

RS: No.

SG: How did you find yourself coming to Rutgers? Why Rutgers, of all places?

RS: Well, actually, it was kind of interesting, because my senior [year] in high school, I was visiting so many colleges, I almost flunked out of high school. I went to Brown and Bowdoin in Maine and South Carolina, University of South Carolina, I'm glad I never went there; at the last minute, Dartmouth. ...

SH: Were they recruiting you because of your football skills?

RS: Yes, football, yes, and I came to Rutgers, also. I actually visited the campus during the scholarship weekend and met Dean (Kaufman?), who was the Dean of Men at the time, and Dean [Howard] Crosby and a few other people.

SG: Was it the scholarship or was it the atmosphere?

RS: Actually, I liked it because they put me in the Beta House, Beta Theta Pi, which I later joined when I came here. We had a hell of a weekend [laughter] and I thought, you know, "Gee, it's ... a really good school." I liked the atmosphere and [it] always had a terrific reputation and, you know, it was close enough to get back to Long Island, if I ever had to go there.

SH: Did you have a major in mind when you came?

RS: Yes, I did. Originally, in high school, I always wanted to be an automotive engineer, because all the kids were into cars then, and, in my senior year, I was having some trouble with calculus and solid geometry. So, I thought maybe I'd better be a business major. So, when I got here, we had to take "Development of Western Civilization," I think it was, and I always liked history. I always read it, from the time, I guess, I was about eight or nine or ten, or something, and I still do, [laughter] as my wife will agree to, but I really enjoyed that course and it was really easy for me, I guess because I enjoyed it. So, I had to go down and see the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences to change my major and he really went through it, "Are you sure you want to do it? Are you absolutely positive?" "Yes, I am." So, I did and I really enjoyed it.

SH: A scholar-athlete.

SG: What did you have in mind? With a history major, what did you see yourself doing?

RS: Well, I thought history is basically useless, unless I wanted to be a teacher, but I really enjoyed it and it was easy. ... Because it was easy, I kind of had a wonderful time here at Rutgers, particularly being a Beta, as Nancy will vouch [for], but I wasn't sure [about a career]. ... You know, we had to take two years of ROTC and I was always interested in airplanes, also. ... In fact, when I was younger, my father always used to take me to Idlewild [now JFK International Airport], when they had the observation towers, where you could watch them all,

hour after hour after hour, and I always had this feeling that I'd like to fly. So, I joined Air Force ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] here, and then, decided to go forward to the senior, the last two years ...

SH: For Advanced ROTC.

RS: Yes. Once you do that, you know where you're going after you leave. [laughter]

SG: Right. It was mandatory at the time though, that you join some ROTC program.

RS: Yes. You had to take the first two years, because this was a land-grant college, by virtue of becoming the State University of New Jersey.

SG: You spent your four years living at the Beta House on the College Avenue Campus.

RS: The first year, I was at Demarest Hall, as a freshman, and then, the second, third and fourth year, I was in Beta House.

SG: Did you play football all four years?

RS: No, I played three years. Actually, I think people get me confused with someone else. My pledge son at the Beta House was Tony Simonelli, who was really a good football player. I was not that good, [laughter] not nearly as good as he was, but, ... you know, all Italian names sound the same. ...

NS: Some of them.

RS: Some of them. [laughter]

SG: Was there any initiation as a freshman? Was there anything you had to do? Did they make you wear any kind of hat?

RS: ... There was a hat for the University, and then, ... for, of course, Beta House, there were a lot of things you had to do; the burlap bag. ...

SH: [laughter] Before we move on a little bit, tell us how that worked. How was the University freshman initiation different? You were still at Demarest when you were initiated.

RS: Yes.

SH: Then, your initiation comes your sophomore year at the Beta House, am I right?

RS: Actually, what happened [was], ... the day we came to the campus, they had so many new freshmen that they didn't have room for them. ... Particularly in the dorms across the street, Livingston and Frelinghuysen and the other one, they had people living in the hallways, because there weren't enough rooms. [Editor's Note: Mr. Simonetti is referring to Campbell (originally

Livingston), Hardenbergh and Frelinghuysen Halls, also known as the "River Dorms," due to their location on the banks of the Raritan River.]

SH: It was that crowded, still. This is 1958, right?

RS: Yes. 1958, September 1958, and, as we came that week, we had to get the dinks, you know. We had to wear them, to show we were freshmen, and then, the welcoming ceremony, they had it over in the field house. I don't even know if it's still here, might be, but they kind of had it roped off into groups of, I think it was five chairs, and the welcoming thing was, "Look around you, [at] all of the people in those roped off sections, because, if you graduate, the other four won't be here." That's what the dropout rate was. [laughter] ... Actually, I used to remember how many people came in, I think it was about fourteen or fifteen hundred, and my graduating class was four hundred and some odd.

SH: It really was a huge attrition.

RS: Yes, it was, yes.

SG: Do you have any explanation for that? Did people simply have to go work?

RS: It could have been that. I know a lot of people flunked out.

SG: Flunked out.

RS: Some of them just didn't like college life and they left and, gradually, the halls were emptying. There's plenty of room for people to live in.

SH: Was some of the overcrowding due to men coming back from Korea on the GI Bill? That was over four years later.

RS: ... Yes, that was quite a few years later. I think that had all settled out. I don't know. It seemed to me that ... the admissions people just accepted people with the idea that so many would drop out. I don't know how it is today.

SH: I think that plays into it as well, but that is a huge attrition.

RS: Yes, it was huge. I was surprised. I was really surprised.

SH: Other than the deans, were there any other administrators that you met or had any interaction with?

RS: ... I don't think so. We had an advisor and there was also someone in Demarest Hall, I think it was a graduate student, that was there to answer questions.

SH: Like a proctor?

RS: Yes, yes, exactly.

SH: Preceptor, I think, is the right term.

RS: Yes.

SG: Preceptor is what they are called now. [laughter] Was there mandatory chapel service at your time at Rutgers?

RS: No, no.

SG: No, that had already passed. Were there social events on campus?

RS: Oh, there's homecoming, you know, all the big weekends, and there were a lot of activities, a lot of different clubs and activities.

SG: Were you involved in any clubs?

RS: Not really. Beta Theta Pi, I know we had an ongoing party for [a long time], [laughter] but the pledge week for that was actually in January, as I recall.

SH: Okay.

RS: And then, they would pick who they wanted to be in the fraternity. It seemed like it was around the first week of February, or maybe the beginning of the second week of February, and then, you went through the initiation rigmarole. [laughter]

SG: Right.

RS: And I think the initiation was actually in May, if I'm not mistaken.

SH: Of which year?

RS: Of freshman year.

SH: Freshman year.

RS: Yes, because we had to sign up to live in the house before the end of the freshman year, because, when I came back, that's where I went. ...

SG: Were there dues for the fraternity at the time?

RS: Yes. ... There was a fee to join it, because you had to get all the, you know, ... pins and all that stuff and we had to pay for food. ... I forget how much it was per month. I think it was about eighty a month.

SH: Which three years did you play football, freshman, sophomore and junior?

RS: Yes, freshman, yes.

SH: You did not play in your senior year.

RS: The last year, I didn't play because, as I mentioned, with the Air Force, I went into the advanced and passed the eight-hour Air Force qualifying test to be a pilot. ... We actually flew out of, I think it was East Brunswick. They had a little private field down there and we flew Aeronca "Champs," very small, fabric-covered airplanes, [one of the Aeronca Champion aircraft series].

SH: Was that Hadley Field?

RS: It may have been that. Yes, it was right by the railroad tracks, with the big wires.

SH: Conducive for good flying skills. [laughter]

SR: No, conducive for hitting the wires. [laughter]

SG: Talking about ROTC, what were your first few years like in ROTC? Did you join ...

RS: I joined because I didn't want to be rolling around on the ground with the Army guys, and the ROTC program, I thought, was a little dry, you know, because I knew most of the stuff that they were teaching. They taught me how to march, which the Air Force does not do very well, even today, but it was mainly to, you know, get ...

SG: Discipline?

RS: Get to flying.

SG: I see.

RS: Well, they did have the discipline. They did teach you [discipline].

SH: Where had you learned what they were teaching you that made it dry?

RS: Well, I saw a lot of it in history books and stuff you could buy off the shelf, you know, and they didn't have Borders then, but in stores like that.

NS: If I could just add, Ron is a history freak. You know, we could not have more books at home. He has one room filled with history books and military history books, all kinds of history. He gets about one a week from Amazon.

SG: Wow. [laughter]

RS: Thank God for Amazon.

NS: Just as a background.

RS: I try to sneak them out. [laughter] ...

SG: Were your instructors in ROTC World War II vets?

RS: No, these were active Air Force, active Air Force, yes, both enlisted and officers.

SG: Did some have experience in World War II?

RS: I think the commander, who was a colonel, probably did. ...

SG: Some of the younger guys probably did not, then.

RS: Yes. Most of the captains did not and most of the enlisted people didn't, but I think, probably, the colonel who ran the detachment ... probably did. I think he probably did.

SH: Fourteen years after the end of the war.

RS: Yes.

SG: After that, you went into Advanced ROTC, which was Air Force training?

RS: Yes, yes, Air Force.

SG: Can you take us through that?

RS: ... I think every Wednesday afternoon was when we had the drill part of it. There was a class for it, as I recall, twice a week, and you had to make all these classes, all the drill periods. The only time I actually got out of the drill periods was by flying on Wednesdays, which worked really well. I'd try to fly every Wednesday, if I could. [laughter]

SG: You were actually already learning how to fly at this point, in your third year at Rutgers.

RS: Yes, ... in my senior year at Rutgers, yes.

SG: Your fourth year.

RS: ... I think we flew thirty-six or thirty-eight hours. Normally, you soloed after about eight hours, and then, the final event was a checkride from an FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] guy.

SH: Really?

RS: Yes.

SH: You actually left here with at least a private pilot's license.

RS: I could have had it. All I had to do was, basically, take the test for it, which I never did.

SH: That is the key. [laughter]

SG: What did you leave here with? What rank? What assignment were you given?

RS: I left here the day, June 6, 1962, they had the commissioning ceremony. I still have the invite. I found it. I opened up some stuff I hadn't looked at for over twenty years, and that was, I think, ten-thirty in the morning, and then, the graduation was in the afternoon, I think probably at three or four. I think Sikorsky, Alexander [Igor?] Sikorsky, was the speaker that day. [Rutgers University President] Mason Gross, of course, was there. I intended not to actually attend the ceremony. I figured they'd mail my diploma to me, but I found out, during that day, that you had to actually attend the ceremony and pick up your diploma then or you had to come back a year later, which would have been extremely inconvenient for me. So, one of my fraternity brothers, Jack Hallisey, had to go a little longer, take some more courses, so, he generously lent me his cap and gown and I graduated that day. [laughter] I was a little bit of a flake, I guess, back then. [laughter] ...

SG: Were there any war stories being thrown around, back in your ROTC training days, by some of the other guys?

RS: Not really. They were pretty straight-laced. ... They'd try to make it as much of a dry program, I guess, as they could. ...

SG: Do you think it was because they did not want to talk about it or because they were just trying to keep it dry?

RS: ... I remember, one of the instructors was non-regular. He didn't fly. He was an administrative officer, so, he had no war stories to tell anyway. One of the other guys was a fighter pilot. He did have war stories to tell, which were kind of interesting. The colonel, you very rarely saw him, he did fly in World War II, as I recall, but he was a commander. ...

SG: Right, you are not just going to talk to him.

RS: Yes. He'd give speeches and directions to all of us, and then, he'd leave and the captains would make sure we did what he wanted us to do.

SH: Was there a rivalry on campus between the Air Force ROTC and the Army ROTC?

RS: The only rivalry was with the Queens Guard and the Scarlet Rifles, that I know of.

SH: Really?

RS: And they had competition, back then, and it was always, "Who did better?"

SH: Were you part of that at all?

RS: For awhile, I was part of the Queens Guard.

SH: Did you get to travel with them? I know they had competitions.

RS: Well, I didn't, because I was involved in the football and that kind of tied you down for a good part of the year. It actually started in the summer and, you know, you'd miss, sort of, half a year, with the football [season].

SH: Before you came to Rutgers, after you graduated high school, did you work?

RS: Yes, I worked in the summers.

SH: What was your job?

RS: It was a menial job, in factories, stuff like that, plastic factory, I think.

SG: Did that carry on through your college years, during the summers as well?

RS: Yes. I'd go back there, because this place was not very far from where I lived. I could actually walk across the tracks and go there every day. So, I worked there and, actually, during the winters at Rutgers, the Pennsylvania Railroad used to hire us to go out and melt the ice on the switches.

SH: Really?

RS: Yes, right at the train station here. They did pay pretty well.

SH: Was this something that was only offered to football players?

RS: No, ... because they needed people around the clock, so, it was whoever could make it, whenever they could make it.

SH: I know the football program is very active in making sure there are good paying jobs.

RS: I think probably more now than it was before. I think Coach [Greg] Schiano has really got a handle on stuff.

SH: Who was your coach?

RS: We had two. That single-wing guy; oh, he later went to Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania, a mean son-of-a-gun, boy. Oh, we're practicing one day and the quarterback, who

was really a blocking back in the single-wing, looked up when he shouldn't have and had all his front teeth knocked out. So, he comes running back to the huddle and says, "Coach, Coach, my teeth, my teeth," and the Coach's reply was, "Well, you shouldn't have looked up," yes. ... The next guy, I forget where the heck he came from. It'll come to me when we're driving back. ... [Editor's Note: John R. Steigman served as head football coach from 1956 to 1959. John F. Bateman took over in 1960.]

SH: You can add it when you edit the transcript, yes.

SG: In terms of what compelled you to join the US Air Force, I know you said you liked to fly and you did not want to be in the mud; was there any other reason, perhaps your parents steering you that way?

RS: Well, no. ... Actually, it was just reading a lot of stuff, you know. I used to read all the World War II stuff and, you know, how hard it was in Korea and all that.

SG: Were your parents fine with continuing along this path after the mandatory two years?

RS: Not really. It was more up to Nancy than it was to my parents. ... I graduated the 6th of June, we were married the 16th of June, same month, same year. So, "the commander-in-chief" is over here, you know. [laughter] Mom and Dad didn't have too much to say about it.

SH: Nancy was your girlfriend all through high school or college.

RS: No, no. Actually, she lived in Queens, I lived on Long Island, but her cousins lived right across the street from me. ... Her family used to come out in the summer a lot and, as I say, we all went to Maine and we actually got together in 1960, in Maine.

SH: That would have been, if my math is right, your junior year.

RS: Yes, between my sophomore and junior years.

SH: Okay.

SG: While all this is going on, Vietnam was in the background. What were your thoughts on that?

RS: Well, Vietnam hadn't really started by then. ... This is, we're talking about, I graduated '62; Vietnam ...

SG: It was just on the back-burner of the Cold War.

RS: It was going on, because, really, when the French left; I'm reading *The Best and the Brightest* by David Halberstam.

SG: Right. The French left around 1955.

RS: '56.

SG: 1956, right. [Editor's Note: In April 1956, the final contingent of French soldiers left Vietnam.]

RS: Yes, and we actually sort of took over from the French, because we were supplying them the whole time they were over there, and then, when they left, it sort of left a vacuum and we had advisors over there, turns out it was eighteen thousand, which nobody here knew, because the President never really told anyone about it.

SG: It was not an issue at the time.

RS: It was not an issue, definitely not an issue, until, for me, I didn't become really aware of it until 1965.

SH: In the early 1960s, when you started flying, who was the enemy, so-to-speak, at that time?

RS: Soviet Union.

SG: Were you confident that there might be a showdown or a confrontation?

RS: Oh, yes, yes.

SG: That was what everybody thought at the time.

RS: Yes.

NS: Ron just really wanted to fly. It had nothing to do with me. He wanted to fly and he was going to fly no matter what. That's the truth, Ron. [laughter]

RS: Well, it's true.

SH: We have now heard from "the commander-in-chief." [laughter]

RS: Yes, that's right, but the only potential enemy that we saw then was [the] Soviet Union.

SH: Was it something that was discussed here on campus, in the academics as well as the ROTC?

RS: Oh, yes, definitely, definitely, yes, ... some of the history courses.

SG: Was it stressed in your ROTC training, in terms of the enemy might be the Soviet Union?

RS: Oh, yes, no, definitely, yes. I'm just trying to think; I took some courses with Professor [Traian] Stoianovich and his courses led [to that]. It was all Russian history, right up to present day, which was 1960.

SH: Did you take his Balkan courses?

RS: No, his was mainly Russian history. I know that he was from the Balkans, but I don't recall taking courses there.

SH: Who was your favorite professor?

RS: Well, there were quite a few of them, Winkler, Henry Winkler, Peter Charanis, a woman professor from Douglass, who I can't remember her name. She did medieval history. ...

SH: Was Charanis still the firebrand?

RS: Yes, he was used to running around Bishop House yelling, "Constantinople has fallen," and he was always back in 1453. [laughter]

SH: I love the stories about him. He is one of several characters that I hear about.

RS: ... Yes. You'd be sitting in class, "And there he goes again," you know. [laughter]

SG: This is a professor?

SH: Yes. [laughter] The History Department was over in Bishop House. Whether they were taking his class or not, they heard him.

SG: Right.

RS: Yes, yes. Professor McCormick, also, American history; yes, there were a lot of good ones.

SH: Yes, some great ones.

SG: From 1962 to 1965, you were training.

RS: Yes. November 10, 1962, I reported to, Nancy and I reported to, Reese Air Force Base, Texas, which is right outside of Lubbock, Texas, in the middle of nowhere, and that's where I went through pilot training. ... We flew 132 hours in a T-37 "Tweety Bird," which is a straight-winged airplane. They've retired them now. They were all built in '57, '58.

SH: It was, like, a new aircraft, actually.

RS: It was sort of newish when I flew it. ...

SG: Were there kinks or problems with it or any adjustments being made?

RS: No, it's a very simple airplane, really, but we did spins in it, which you don't spin any airplanes, any military airplanes, today, because they don't do the same thing, you know. You can't recover them, and then, the second half of it was the T-38, which they are still flying today. T-38s were right off the assembly line. We were the first class, in my group, to fly them. ... I remember flying the squadron commander's airplane one day, which had six flying hours on it.

SH: Wow.

RS: Yes. They don't measure airplanes in miles on the odometer; it's flying hours.

SG: Brand-new, basically.

RS: Brand-new, yes. The crew chief used to Simonize them and was really proud of them. They had a new car smell. It was spectacular, because you'd pull out on the end of the runway, line up with the runway, put the throttles up to military thrust, which is full power without the afterburner, make sure all the gauges were in the green, and then, just pop it forward into afterburner, and from the time you released brakes to forty-five thousand feet was three minutes. Yes, that's impressive.

SH: In your training, what was the scariest moment that you remember now?

RS: In pilot training?

SG: Any close calls?

SH: Was it when you first started?

RS: Not for me, really. ... Well, in my case, I had one take-off where one of the afterburners blew out, and so, I had to stop on the runway and it blew a tire and the airplane went into the grass, but the airplane was fully repairable and all. We had one person in the other pilot training group; we had two pilot training groups on the same base, the 3800th and 3801st Pilot Training Groups. I was in the '01st. There was a student in the other group that was going out on a night flight and he forgot to turn the battery on and he got off the ground; everything was fine. He got up to altitude, and then, he lost a generator, which knocked out full electrical power, and, because he didn't put the battery switch on, he couldn't get the engines going and he had to jump out.

SG: This is still in training.

RS: Yes. The airplane landed, wasn't damaged much. He jumped out at, like, thirty-thousand feet. Of course, the gear was up and it landed in a field and a farmer found it the next day and went over and looked inside and accidentally pulled the ejection handle in the backseat, which fired the seat out and started a fire and destroyed the airplane. Otherwise, they could have fixed it.

SH: Oh, my lord.

SG: Wow.

RS: Yes.

SG: How long was pilot training before you actually became a pilot?

RS: Actually, it started November 10th of '62 and went for fifty-five weeks. I think we graduated in December, 7th or 8th, of '63.

SG: Then, from there ...

RS: From there, I came home on leave and Nancy was home at that time, having our daughter, and back to New York. ... I guess I was there for about a week or ten days, and then, I had to go to gunnery school, down at Schilling Air Force Base in Kansas. That was by Salina, Kansas.

SG: What was your rank at this time?

RS: Second lieutenant.

SG: You were a second lieutenant.

RS: I was commissioned a second lieutenant, here at Rutgers, in the Air Force Reserve and went through pilot training as a second lieutenant, and then, my first assignment was as a B-47 co-pilot at Pease Air Force Base [in New Hampshire], with the 351st Bomb Squadron, 100th Bomb Wing. ... Before I went to Pease, I had to go through gunnery school and survival school and nuclear weapons school.

SH: Where did you do these schools at?

RS: The gunnery school was at Schilling, at Salina. ... In a B-47, the co-pilot was less of a pilot than a navigator, an ECM [electronic counter measures] operator, [and] a gunner. The seat swung all the way around, so [that] you could operate the guns. You couldn't bail out from that position. It was impossible to do it, so, you were kind of stuck there, but that's why I had to go to gunnery school, to learn how to fire those guns. I shot down a drone, actually. ...

SH: You did? [laughter]

RS: Yes.

SH: I have always wondered if somebody actually did that. [laughter]

RS: Yes, and then, went to survival school at Stead Air Force Base, which is right outside of Reno.

SG: This is still in 1963, or is this in 1964?

RS: This is actually, all this, the Schilling and the survival, was, say, from the middle of January of '64 to probably the end of February of '64.

SG: Right around this time, Vietnam was starting to emerge, in 1964.

RS: Not really. We're not hearing anything about it, yet. You know, we still have the advisors over there, but, where I am, we're not hearing anything. I mean, even going through survival school, I went through it in the winter, with the big snowshoes.

SG: Was there any escalation between Russia and the US, tensions?

RS: There was always tension with Russia. ... Where I wound up, in SAC [Strategic Air Command], and probably the other commands, although, you know, I don't know about it, every day I was on active duty, we were at war.

SG: That was the way you approached every single day.

RS: Yes, absolutely.

SH: Where was survival school?

RS: At Stead Air Force Base, outside of Reno. Right now, it's up in Fairchild Air Force Base [in Washington State].

SH: Okay. You were talking about snowshoes.

RS: Yes. We did it in the Cascades, in the middle of winter, six feet of snow on the ground.

NS: You were out there for a couple, what?

RS: Yes, we were out there; well, the whole course, I think, was two weeks.

NS: And they had to boil up the rabbits. ...

RS: Yes, ... they gave us a rabbit. They take out their live rabbit and we had to kill it, you know. ... They tell you that, if you get hungry enough, you'll eat anything; I found that not to be true for myself. I lost, what? twenty-two pounds. [laughter] Everyone said, "You look wonderful." I said, "I'm dying here, you know." [laughter]

SH: No care packages in survival school.

RS: Well, you know, when we got out, everyone goes into Reno and they order a big dinner, because they're starving for a week or ten days, and then, you can't eat it, you can't even touch it, because your stomach shrinks, yes.

SG: Eventually, you end up flying the B-52. Were you training for it at this time?

RS: Well, no, I was going to a B-47 base.

SG: B-47

RS: Okay, this was at Pease Air Force Base, which is now closed, right outside of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. ... What they normally send you to was what they called CCTS, Combat Crew Training School. Well, the B-47 had been around for so long and they were starting to phase them out. They'd already closed the school. So, we got all of our training, all the ground training on systems and everything, at the base itself, and even the flying training, the flight checkout, in the B-47.

SG: What happened after the training in the Cascade Mountains? You were posted overseas, is that correct, or was there another post?

RS: No.

SH: Back to Pease.

RS: Back to Pease. Actually, I went from pilot training to New York City, on leave, and then, from New York City to Salina, Kansas, then, to Stead in Reno, and then, weapons school was at McConnell Air Force Base, outside of Wichita, Kansas, and then, I went to Pease.

SG: You were back at Pease.

RS: Now, this is, I'd just arrived at Pease for the first time.

SG: Okay.

RS: And then, I got all of the ground training in the B-47 there, and, also, I think they gave us about eight flights, with an instructor, and then, I was combat ready, certified (to war plan?), and then, I could pull nuclear alert with everyone else.

SG: Where did you go from here, at the end of this? This is the end of 1964.

RS: This is '64 until '66, when we flew the B-47s to the "Bone Yard," out at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.

SH: Where did you take your nuclear training? When was that?

RS: That was in McConnell Air Force Base.

SH: That was what you did in McConnell.

RS: Yes.

SH: What did they tell you, because you stay in and you do so much with nuclear weapons? Had anything changed, that you know of? We now know about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but we also have heard stories of how little they knew about how to ...

RS: Well, the technology definitely improved. A nuclear weapon is an electrical machine and that machine starts when you drop it out of the bomb bay and it pulls the pullout cables out. The radar navigator or the navigator in a B-47 has the controls for the nuclear weapons and he can select certain functions and select certain bombs to go first, whatever. The pilot had a switch, a ready/safe switch, which he had to move to "Ready." Otherwise, that wouldn't go and, in a B-47, I had this lever, back in my position, that I had to unlock the racks, in order to allow the weapon to be dropped. So, each crew member had a function and one person couldn't do it alone and that was the entire reason for that, that one person; "Dr. Strangelove," couldn't get in an airplane and go up and drop it all by himself.

SH: I wanted Stan to realize that.

RS: But, the weapons got smaller, all the time. The ones that we basically started with was the B28 Y1, which, originally, was a Mark 28 Y1, which was 1.1 megatons, one million, one hundred thousand tons of explosive equivalent, but the actual explosive part itself, I found out towards the end of my career, when I got to Ellsworth [Air Force Base in South Dakota], because we did all the missile maintenance for their rockets, a B28 Y1, the bomb itself was the size of a basketball. You could not possibly pick it up, it weighed a ton, but all the rest of it was the frangible nosecone, which collapsed when it hit the ground, [with] the parachutes in the back, because these things were designed to be [dropped from any altitude]. You could either drop from high altitude or low altitude, and low altitude could be as low as a hundred feet. So, obviously, this thing came out, the parachutes deployed, it landed gently on the nose. Eighty-six seconds after it come out of the bomb bay, it went boom.

SH: How would that affect someone who was flying?

RS: Well, we had to fly at a certain speed to get the hell away from it. "Safe escape speed," they called it.

SG: Did the bomb have to be readied on the ground, by someone on the ground?

RS: In the air, in the air.

SG: It would all be done in the air.

RS: It was always done in the air. Now, the ones that they used in Japan, ... they could have been done on the ground or in the air. As it turned out, they sent the Navy guy to insert the critical parts, so, it would work, but it could have been done on the ground as well.

SG: Let us try to move on to Vietnam; when did that emerge on the scene? Now, we are right around 1965.

RS: Okay. What they did, actually, in '65 and '66, they closed all B-47 bases, basically, so, they had the people to send to Vietnam.

SH: Is that why they closed it? It was not because of the equipment.

RS: Yes. Well, they had planned on retiring it, but not as quickly as they did. The last two bases were Mountain Home [Air Force Base, Idaho], and Pease, but we had two bomb wings at Pease, sixty B-47s each. That's 120 B-47s at Pease.

SH: You said you took it to the bomb ...

RS: The "Bone Yard," yes, Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. That's where they take all the airplanes when they're done with them and they recycle them. ... Actually, what they do, a lot of times, is take the parts out of the ones that are in the "Bone Yard" to keep the ones that are flying still flying. They did that for years with the B-52s that were retired, ... because a lot of the manufacturers went out of business. So, they couldn't get these, particularly structural parts, manufactured anymore. So, they go to the "Bone Yard," take it out and ship it back to wherever they needed it.

SG: How long were you doing this for, flying the "Bone Yard" missions?

RS: Actually, I only did it once. One thing that I didn't say was that, during the time I was at Pease, the first year, anyway, we used to go pull what they called "reflex alert" in Spain, in Torrejon Air Force Base, just outside of Madrid, and they'd send us over there for three weeks at a time. The first week, we'd be on alert, the second week, we'd go and we'd be off on "C-squared," combat crew rest and relaxation, and we'd just pick a place we wanted to go to, like Copenhagen, and they'd fly us all up there. The alert people were always on alert. The airplanes were never unmanned. It was just that we were off that week, and then, we'd come back and pull the last week on alert, and then, fly back to the States.

SH: Were there actually two crews for each plane?

RS: It worked out to be about one-and-a-half.

SH: Was it?

RS: Yes, ... because there was always overlapping tours, our twenty-one days, maybe someone would come in the week later. So, every week, people were coming in, ... and that went on forever.

SH: There were a lot of things going on that we did not talk about. To back up a little bit, the fall after you graduate from Rutgers, President Kennedy is shot.

RS: Well, the fall after I got out of Rutgers was '62 and it was the Cuban [Missile] Crisis.

SH: The Cuban Crisis; I actually missed a whole year.

RS: The week before I went to ... Reese Air Force Base was when the Cuban Crisis hit.

SH: What did they do with someone flying like you were?

RS: Well, I was a student, so, I wasn't really involved, but what they did with the [aircraft], the B-47s deployed to a bunch of civilian airfields, a lot of the attack fighters deployed all over the South.

SG: It was an elevated mobilization.

RS: Oh, much elevated, yes. [laughter]

SH: They were sent to civilian airfields.

RS: Yes. They'd send B-47s to Buffalo, New York, civilian field, to a lot of different civilian fields, yes, dispersal.

SH: What happened when Kennedy was assassinated?

RS: I was flying a T-38 that day.

SH: Do you go on alert when the President is killed?

RS: I don't think they moved the DEFCON [Defense Readiness Condition] up at all for that, ... because there was no external threat. I was still a student, so, I wasn't combat ready, but I found out when I landed. I heard that he was shot.

SH: What was the reaction?

RS: Sad.

SH: Were there any doubts about Johnson and his ability to take over, as former Vice-President?

RS: I think so.

SH: Was there any discussion at the club?

RS: Not really. You know, we knew that he was going to take over, but he was, you know, a Senator and no one really knew very much about him. He was from Texas and I don't think there was really too much.

SG: There was not an up swell of support for Johnson or anything like that.

RS: It was more mourning for Kennedy, yes.

NS: And shock, I think, and it was just horrible. It was an awful time.

SH: I just did not know how the military was called upon to react.

RS: Well, you know, being a student, I was really not in the main line of it. ... As I say, I don't think they went to an increased DEFCON or anything.

SH: Okay, fair enough.

SG: I guess we stopped off in 1966.

RS: Yes, and I think it was probably March of '66 that I got orders to Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts, but, first, I had to go to the B-52 school, the combat crew training school, at Castle Air Force Base, outside of Merced, California.

SG: Was this right when the B-52 debuted?

RS: The B-52 debuted in 1955, when I was in high school.

SH: Were you aware of that then?

RS: Yes, I was, yes, I was, because they made so much of it at the time, ... when it came out, just as they did the B-47. The B-47, to me, was a lousy plane to fly, because I was always in the back and the instrumentation was archaic and it was grossly underpowered. It was designed to be a 125,000-pound airplane. When I flew it, it was 230,000 pounds, with the same engines. For a 198,000-pound take-off on a training mission, with water alcohol injection, [laughter] ... the take-off distance was normally about 9,800 feet, of a twelve-thousand-foot runway. When I went to B-52s, here's this airplane that's more than twice as big. ... The particular model that I started on, the max gross weight was 450,000 pounds and we calculated the take-off distance in it was going to be something like seven thousand feet. [I said], "This is obviously an error. It's going to take us at least five miles to get this thing off the ground," but it worked as briefed.

SG: Was there a big adjustment? I assume it was, because of the size of the plane.

RS: It actually flew better.

SG: Flew better.

RS: Flew much better. It was a more modern system, more modern airplane. Boeing learned a lot by building the B-47 first, which they were able to do because of the captured German data that they got at the end of the war. They wouldn't have been able to build any of their airliners if they hadn't built the B-47, or the B-52, that's true, yes. I can bore the living daylight out of you. [laughter]

NS: Yes. [laughter]

RS: Nancy's going to drop off.

SH: No, this is really important stuff, I think.

RS: ... I think the thing that I didn't cover is, when you get to be combat ready, you have to certify a nuclear sortie. You have to go through all the positive control stuff, which is really what requires a "top secret" clearance. You only need "secret" to have access to the weapon, but all of the tickets and the other stuff, which covered a lot more data than just flying the B-52 [needs "top secret" clearance], and that was the same with both of them, with the '52 and the B-47.

SH: Do you remember people coming to Long Island and checking with the family?

RS: Yes, they did. I heard about it from some of my neighbors, ... to get the clearance, you know, "What did he do? Is he in jail?" from a lot of them. [laughter]

NS: Yes.

RS: Yes, and then, later on even, I guess the last couple of years, I had this other clearance, what they called SCI, "secret compartmented information," which only the wing and vice commander at our base could have access to it. What it was, it ...

SH: This was at Ellsworth.

RS: Yes, at Ellsworth. ... Basically, I had the same data that you'd get in the intelligence reports, but it told [you] who they got it from, what the sources were. ... We used to do; I'll wait until Ellsworth to get to that. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: You were talking about security clearances.

RS: Yes. That was at Castle Air Force base, B-52 training. That went from April through June, I believe it was. We had the ground school out there, and then, we flew, I believe it was eleven sorties, eleven missions. ... You get your check ride, and then, went back to Westover, got to Westover, had to go through all of the positive control stuff again, get certified, study the war plan, flew a sortie or two, you know, for the airfield familiarization, and so that they knew I could do it. Then, they put me on ... a crew that had the worst aircraft commander in SAC, as far as I could tell, Jim Eldridge. I mean, he was okay as a pilot. It was just that there was an opening on his crew for co-pilot, because his co-pilot had just gotten out of the service and went with Pan Am, and his record was that he'd never upgraded a co-pilot, or recommended upgrading a co-pilot, to aircraft commander, which was the natural progression. I guess I actually flew with him, we went through the first augmentee tour, over at Guam, was from February through April

of '67, which we thought; "thought." The squadron commander said, "Well, this is your chance to get a little taste of the war." So, we went over there. We spent the two-and-a-half, three months over there. Little did we realize, it was to train us on what they were doing over there, so [that] we could come back the following September and the September after that.

SG: And retrain?

RS: So, we could be the cell and wave leads, because you had to have the experience. You couldn't just arrive at Guam and be a cell leader, an airborne commander for the particular mission, you had to have experience. ... I guess we went through the first augmentee tours. I was with him, I guess, for about a year. This guy was unbelievable. He'd take off and, as soon as the gear and the flaps are up, on climb out, he'd fall asleep. So, I'd be flying the airplane, and then, we'd wake him up for air refueling, and then, after that, we'd go down low level. This could be in the daytime or the nighttime. So, finally, I remember, one night, right after air refueling, we finished that and, again, he fell asleep and we were going to fly low level, at night, at what they called Bayshore Bomb Plot [Scoring Station]. It was over in Lake Michigan. ... Actually, we entered it in North Bay, Canada, flew low level over the land, and then, came out over Lake Michigan, and the actual simulated targets were by Petoskey, in Michigan, which is a nice, little resort town, right by the nuclear reactor, you know. [laughter] So, I didn't wake him up for the low level. We just flew the low level, you know, and we're down there, I think we were down there probably for about an hour-and-a-half or so, and climbed up to altitude and we're on our way back to Westover on autopilot. All of a sudden, he wakes up with, "I got it, I got it." [laughter] [I] said, "Oh, don't worry about it. We took care of it for you." ... About two or three weeks after that, three of us on the crew put in our resignations, to get out of the Air Force, the EW [electronic warfare officer], the navigator and myself, and, of course, they'd asked each one of us why we wanted to get out. Well, the navigator and the EW were going to get out anyway, and I said, "Well, I'm a Reserve officer. I'm not regular. If you wanted to have a career, you have to be a regular and I'm not on any list to upgrade to aircraft commander." So, about two weeks after that, this would now be, probably, '68, ... so, we'd gotten back from our first six-month tour. So, we had the two-and-a-half-month, the three-month tour, and then, September to March. ... Well, anyway, when we got back, they notified me, "You have a regular commission and how about going to Castle, if you pull your separation papers?" which I did. So, I went to Castle. There were three of us who went out there, three pilots, co-pilots.

SG: You became an aircraft commander at this point.

RS: Yes. This was for the training to become an aircraft commander, and then, finished that, I guess, probably about, what, about July, something? ... Well, anyway, in September of '68, we went over again. ...

SH: To Guam?

RS: To Guam, and, when we went over there, they'd put me on the crew with an instructor pilot. So, I could fly either the left or the right seat, and he'd let me fly the left seat, pretty much all the time. ... After we'd been over there for about a month, all of a sudden, he got a staff job, I got the crew. So, my first solo mission as aircraft commander was a combat mission over there,

[laughter] but we flew out of Guam, because Guam was the home base, and the missions out of there were about eleven-and-a-half hours long and, for about two years, we flew out of Kadena Air Base in Okinawa. ...

SG: What kind of missions were these, at the time you were there?

RS: They were all bombing missions, the ones out of Guam, and we had internal bombs and external bombs and the B-52D model, which is the version we were flying at that time, which flew most of the war over there, could carry eighty-four internal five-hundred-pounders and twenty-four external five-hundred or 750-pounders. So, we had 108 bombs on ... the airplane. ... Taking off out of Guam, ... we always flew in these three-ship cells, you know, one behind the other, and the leader would be at, say, thirty-two thousand; here's where Nancy drops off. Number two would be a mile behind at 32,500. Number three would be another mile back at thirty-three thousand. ... Out of Guam, we'd normally refuel out over the Northern Philippines, take on about eighty-four, eighty-six thousand pounds of fuel, and then, fly on to Vietnam. ...

SH: I have read that the most dangerous part of any mission is the refueling. Is that true?

RS: I actually enjoyed it. That was a hell of a lot of fun. It was very challenging, because, sometimes, you were doing it in clouds and turbulence and, occasionally, a thunderstorm. [laughter] ... We'd pick up the tankers on radar and we had to have, in cell, the way we did the missions out of Guam, you had to have two miles visibility, in order to complete the rendezvous, because from two miles out is pretty much visual, even though the radar [operator] still had it on the radar. ... We'd fly it into what they called pre-contact position, where you're just getting into the downwash of the tanker and, if you did it right, you wouldn't even have to adjust the power when you got there, because the downwash would stop you, and then, add just a quarter-inch of throttle and move forward to contact, then, retard the throttles a quarter-inch at contact-made.

SH: Are there three tankers for the three aircraft?

RS: Yes. There'd be three tankers and they'd be [in] echelon to the right. Each of them would be five hundred feet and two miles apart and we'd assume the echelon formation when we started the descent, so that we were all coming in in echelon. Then, we'd pick up our own tanker and hook up. The problem was that you only had about eighteen minutes to get this fuel and you could take it on at sixty-five hundred pounds a minute, which took, basically, about fifteen minutes to do this. ...

SH: You only got a three-minute window of error.

RS: Yes. So, if you missed it, you'd have to refuel on the way back and everyone in the world would know you couldn't get your gas and you'd be in big trouble. So, you wanted to make sure you could do that, but, anyway, the missions out of Guam were about eleven-and-a-half hours. The ones out of Kadena were around about eight-and-a-half hours and the ones out of Thailand, U-Tapao in Thailand, were the shortest, two hours and forty-five minutes, or maybe three-and-a-half hours, depending [on] where we were going.

SH: It was originally Guam.

RS: It was originally Guam. The tankers, they had tankers at U-Tapao, in Thailand, but they were only there to support the fighters and they must have had about fifty tankers at U-Tapao, but, at the beginning, it was just strictly a tanker base, but Guam was just B-52s, and then, the tankers that we used came out of Kadena. Kadena was the base that our support tankers came out of.

SG: What was your overall impression of the war at this point, now that you were actually flying these missions? What was your view of the conflict in general?

RS: You know, we were told what to do. We didn't get a vote in it. I would say the thing that really bothered us was that it never seemed to end. It was just going over and doing the same stuff.

SG: Did you feel like no progress was being made or was it just the tedious nature of it?

RS: Well, I guess we felt it was kind of a toss up. Most of our missions were supporting the Army and, in a lot of cases, we were directly supporting them. So, we were stopping attacks. The Marines up at the DMZ, we bombed up there all the time and, a lot of times, those troops were in contact [with the enemy]. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SG: At this time, the anti-war sentiment at home was starting to really increase. Did you guys see this or hear of this? Did you know it was going on?

RS: Oh, yes. We started to hear it and, you know, the anti-war sentiment was against us. Well, we were just doing what we were told to do. We had no vote in it.

SG: Of course.

RS: ... But, when we came back, we always came back to our base. If we came back by tanker or if we flew a bomber back, we'd land at Westover. So, we didn't run into any people off base at any civilian airports. ...

NS: We had some protests outside the base.

RS: Outside the gates, but they wouldn't let us go out, yes.

SH: Were you working off base at that point?

NS: ... A lot of the times, when Ron would go to these various places, he'd be gone for six months at a time, I would go home. I would go home, stay with my mother and father, because it was very difficult to spend the winters of Massachusetts, with two small children, by yourself. [laughter] I was one of the lucky ones that could do that. Many women couldn't do that. ...

SH: When you first started flying the missions out of Guam, was it exciting?

RS: It was exciting, yes, because it was challenging. ... Generally, when we first started, the targets were in the South [South Vietnam] and we used to call them "yellow streak" missions, because there was no threat whatsoever, and the main challenge was the weather. The weather was generally horrible there. It was a tropical climate. They had thunderstorms, every twenty minutes, go over the base. The airplanes were so heavy; [on] Guam, Andersen Air Force Base is up on a cliff. It's six hundred feet above the ground. So, when you'd take off, you'd always take off over the cliff, because that's where the prevailing winds were, and you'd get the gear up and, as soon as you got to a thousand feet, you could start the flaps up. It took about forty seconds for the flaps to come up and, for the last portion of it, you were actually in a descent. ... We actually lost five hundred feet to gain the air speed to get the flaps up, which is a little eerie, because you're sitting there and, of course, I told the crew, "We're in a slight descent." ...

SG: As soon as you would go off the cliff, you would dip down to gain momentum before you could lift off?

RS: No, no, what we'd do [was], ... the take-off, fully loaded D [B-52D], is at 155 knots. So, you just pull the nose up five degrees on the attitude indicator and, as soon as you were off the ground, you'd pull the gear up and you'd just hold the five degrees until you're at 180 knots. That was ... the speed that you could start the flaps up, but you had to be at least a thousand feet above the ground, with a thousand-foot-a-minute rate of climb, which was easy. You got that all the time, unless you had an engine out, and then, the flaps would start coming up. Of course, we had water injection, you know, those models which gave you extra thrust from the engines, and it was [in] the last twenty percent of the flap retraction, we lost a lot of lift, but you also had to hit 220 knots by the time the flaps were full up. Otherwise, you were in trouble, because you'd start to get down into stalling speed, but to keep the air speed rising to 220 and keep the flaps coming up, you actually had to; what you really did was just set level flight on the attitude indicator, but it would put you into a descent, and then, the increase in air speed would gradually increase the climb rate. ... Are you asleep yet?

NS: I'm getting there. [laughter]

RS: But, it was like that, at night, particularly, and we actually had an airplane take off at night, we were back in the States at the time, but it disappeared, totally disappeared, and they never found it again. Of course, the water off Guam is thirty-five thousand feet deep. It's the deepest part of the ocean. [Editor's Note: Located in the Marianas Trench, the Island of Guam is made up of two fused volcanoes and ascends 37,820 feet off the ocean floor.]

SH: I see what you mean.

RS: And, interestingly, about nine months after that, they had another B-52 taking off in the daytime; well, what they thought happened with the first one was that the pilot became disoriented and just flew into the water.

SG: Did the crew bail out?

RS: No, they were all killed. The second one took off and, as soon as he got over the cliff, the wing folded, broke off, and they went in, too. So, that told them, basically, what happened the first time around, that it wasn't crew error, but structural failure.

SH: Did they realize what was causing this? Did they ground all the planes until they checked it out?

RS: Oh, yes. They checked them all out. They sent them back through Boeing. Every time there was some kind of problem, it seemed like they'd bolt another railroad track on the bottom of the wing and, as the war went on, with the D models, they started to become range degraded, because of all the extra metal on the bottom of the airplane, because it created drag.

SH: Was this to hold ...

RS: To hold it all together.

SH: It was not to protect it from flak or antiaircraft fire.

RS: No, no, it was just to preserve the structure.

SG: Did you experience any antiaircraft fire or flak in flying missions over Vietnam?

RS: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

SH: Even when you were flying in the South?

RS: No, not in the South. Well, yes, we flew one mission, the first time I went over there, for that short tour, when I was still a co-pilot, and the target was west of Saigon and that's what they told us. "Your target is going to be west of Saigon," and it was one of these ground-directed bombing missions, which we had. We could either use our own radar or we had ground-directed [assistance].

SH: You were not using your own.

RS: Well, we knew where we were, because the radar was out there looking everywhere, you know. So, he was able to tell us where our target actually was when we dropped the bombs, although, ... the MSQ site (Combat Skyspot), which was; I'll leave it be, but, anyway, they would pick us up, like, five minutes before the scheduled release time and we'd check in with them and authenticate with them. ... Then, they would actually direct us, you know, "Turn this way, that way," and they'd give us, you know, "180 seconds to go; 120 seconds." At thirty seconds, we'd open the bomb doors and they'd give us a hack, you know, "Five, four, three, two, one, hack." The leader would drop. ... Number two and three, based on how far they were from lead, had a certain number of seconds they'd wait and they'd release. Well, when those bombs hit the ground, I've never seen anything like it in my life. It seemed like the whole world

exploded and it burned at least for forty-five minutes, because our route of flight out of there was one of these big box patterns and you could look back and see. We evidently hit a fuel and ammo dump in Cambodia, and you asked the question, "Were we shot at?" Well, after we did it, I'm seeing these tracers go over. Now, we're at thirty-two, thirty-three thousand feet, the only thing that can get up that high is eighty-five and a hundred-millimeter. ... When we got back, and you had to go through an intelligence debriefing or whatever, ... I told them, I said, "I thought we saw some eighty-five [or] a hundred-millimeter flak." "Oh, you didn't see that. They don't have that over there. There's no way." I said, "Well, I saw it. It went right over the top of the airplane. I could see it through the windows," you know. "Oh, no, it's not there at all." ...

SG: Was it the oil refinery blowing up or was it actually antiaircraft fire?

RS: No, that was [when] they were shooting at us, but the intel guy wouldn't believe it and that was the last intel briefing I ever went to, or debriefing, yes. [laughter] I just told them, "Oh, I didn't see anything that time."

SH: At that point in the Vietnam War, we did not know anything about Cambodia.

RS: No, no, we weren't bombing Cambodia at all, but I "guaran-damn-tee" it, that was Cambodia, because we had it on the radar.

SG: At the time, the South Vietnamese ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam], you viewed them as, obviously, allies.

RS: Well, they were allies, but they were totally useless, totally.

SG: You were not doing any bombing to support them.

RS: We were bombing to support them, but I think they were in full flight by the time we got there. [laughter]

SH: Who would do the ground directing? Was this the Army?

RS: No, this was Air Force. When we were in the States, flying training missions, we went against what they called these radar bomb scoring sites, RBS sites, and they were at different places throughout the country. Some of them were fixed sights, some were on railroad cars. So, what they did was just pick them up, put them on a boat, send them to Vietnam and they had a number of them over there, "Milky," "Lid," "Bongo," [were] call signs of some of them. ... Well, one of them was right outside of Saigon, another one was up by Pleiku, another one was, I think, in the Da Nang area, up on Monkey Mountain.

SH: They were actually Air Force.

RS: SAC Air Force people doing that, yes.

SG: Around this time, we have Nixon coming in with the Nixon Doctrine and Vietnamization. What were your views on this shift in strategy?

RS: ... I don't know. I don't think we had much hope for it at all, because it was just going on and on and on, and we were just doing the same thing, half a year at a time, over and over, and I thought, and I think most of the crew guys [who] are over there thought, we'd have to, you know, go to Hanoi.

SH: Did you ever have to land in Vietnam?

RS: No, never. I know some guys who did, because they had battle damage, but I never did myself.

SH: Your missions always started out in Guam.

RS: No, it started in Guam or it started in Kadena or it started in U-Tapao. We'd go from base to base. ... We could fly 110 hours a month, or not more than 330 per calendar quarter. So, if we flew out of Guam all the time, after one month, we'd be done. So, what they'd do is, ... we'd be at Guam for a week or ten days, and then, they'd send us to Kadena and we'd fly out of there [for] a week or ten days, and most of the time we actually spent at U-Tapao, which was better.

SH: You were flying the B-52 out of U-Tapao.

RS: Yes, yes. Well, we flew tons and tons of sorties out of there.

SH: However, it was only supposed to be a ...

RS: It started as a tanker base, and then, they were building it. They took apart a mountain that was just northwest of the base and they built more taxiways and they built these, I guess they were made out of steel, but these emplacements, ... B-52-sized, so [that] they could put the airplane in there. ...

SH: What year was that?

RS: First time I went to U-Tapao, ... I think it was 1967, late '67, maybe November '67. We were the first ones into Okinawa. They had us take off in the middle of a typhoon, which they called a "tropical disturbance," which was so violent that it was hard keeping the damn thing upright and, on the way back, they finally said, "Oh, this is a typhoon; divert to Okinawa." So, we did and the Japanese weren't happy, but, of course, Okinawa, at this time, was still controlled by the US military and I guess we told them, or insinuated, that we were just going to fly a training mission back to Guam. So, at two AM in the morning, ... we took off, loaded with bombs, and we had all the Japanese outside the gates, with their placards. No, they were definitely not too happy about that, [laughter] but I think we flew about a year-and-a-half or two years out of Kadena until it reverted back to the Japanese, and then, we couldn't do it anymore.

SH: It goes back to the Japanese before the war is finished.

RS: Oh, yes, about the middle of the war, I think '69, maybe '69, sometime. [Editor's Note: Okinawa reverted to Japanese control in 1972, although the US Armed Forces maintains a large presence at several bases on the island. The Japanese government's Three Non-Nuclear Principles, adopted in the years prior to the reversion, prohibits the introduction of nuclear weapons into the country.]

SG: I have a question about the media. Did you have access to television, radio and magazines, or not?

RS: We had access to magazines, although, usually, a little late. We had the *Stars and Stripes*, which was a military paper. We didn't really have television.

SG: Radio.

RS: Radio? We were out in the middle of the drink. [laughter]

SG: Did you feel the media started to change, that it started to undermine the war effort or anything?

RS: I think, when we were in the States, we saw that, definitely, yes.

SG: When you came back to the States, not overseas.

RS: Yes. No, we never heard anything over there.

SH: Was Mrs. Simonetti writing to you about what was going on?

RS: Oh, yes, yes. I don't think you wrote much about ...

NS: Well, at this point, after this drug on all this while, I was really anti-war. You know, I just wanted it to be over.

RS: Yes, we all wanted it to be over.

NS: I just didn't see any point, but, when you're in the military, you're apolitical. You know, you're just apolitical, and so, I had a lot of trouble with it at home. ...

RS: Nancy saw more of it than I did.

SH: That was what I was wondering, does a spouse protect her husband and not tell what it is?

RS: I think it was pretty much open. When I was home, I, you know, sort of got it from her, but, you know, it's hard. People were blaming the military for all this stuff and, you know, we had no ...

SG: No say in it.

RS: No.

SG: We are approaching 1973 and the Paris Peace Accords. I am sure you were relieved at this point. Were you?

RS: Well, what happened was that, in November of 1971, I was reassigned to a group they called First Combat Evaluation Group, at Barksdale Air Force Base. At Westover, in 1970, I was assigned to Stan/Eval, Standardization/Evaluation. What that is, I did flight checks for the pilots and co-pilots. So, I was their flight checker, in that there were three crews in each squadron that were Stan/Eval crews. I guess I ought to mention that in, I think it was '69, March of '69, we were on alert at Westover. It was cold, very cold. I think it was minus fifty-five, and we had to put an airplane on alert, change the airplane we were on and go to another one, which we wound up doing in the middle of the night, like, eleven o'clock at night, because maintenance just had to do this, and we did. We went through the checklist, put it on alert, and then, every day on alert, we had to go out to the airplane and do a daily alert preflight, and, as part of the preflight, the radar navigator had to check the status of the weapons. ... He had this box down in his compartment where he could select each weapon and it would show the continuity between the weapon and his selector. So, he's selecting each bomb and it's supposed to be safe and whatever. So, we're going through our drill and, all of a sudden, I hear the radar navigator shout and I said, "What's wrong?" He says, "One of the bombs has armed itself. Call the people in the command post." So, I did and they said, "Well, you're probably overreacting." I said, "Well, you'd better send them out anyway." So, we opened the bomb doors. These two guys came out and [said], "Wow," because, on the weapon itself, there's what they call a ready/safe switch and, when it's safe, ... [it] has three different symbols. ... If it's safe, they're all green and they all have an "S" on them, and, if it's not, it's red with a "R" on them, and that's what they saw. So, they actually called an accident investigation board on it and the guy who headed it was a colonel. He was the deputy commander for maintenance at Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico, and he was the guy who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, Thomas Ferebee. [Editor's Note: Colonel Thomas W. Ferebee was the bombardier on the *Enola Gay* when the B-29 dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.]

SH: Really?

RS: And what they found was that, when they manufactured the bomb, they drilled too deeply and, you know, they put it together in modules and they'd build on each module and they went through and they accidentally, I guess, hit some of the wiring in the next module and it [triggered it]. ...

SG: The bomb was ready the whole time.

RS: Well, it switched from the time we're put on alert, because it was safe at night, but, when we went out in the morning, it was not safe. It was ready.

SH: What did you do?

RS: Well, you know, we called the command post, they sent the two guys out, the weapons guy and the safety guy, and then, ... they went back and told the command post, and then, we had to get out of the airplane. They took the airplane away from us, and then, a day later, Ferebee and his team showed up.

NS: And what did they do with the bomb?

RS: Well, they had to take the bombs out. They had to take them back to the shop. Well, actually, they took the bomb down, took it out of the rack, prepared it for shipping, and they shipped it back to Kirtland [Air Force Base], in New Mexico, in Albuquerque, and they actually took it apart to find out ... what was wrong with it.

SH: What was the danger that it would actually explode? [laughter]

NS: Explode.

RS: Zero.

SG: There was no worry.

RS: No, no. ... Like I said, you had to drop it out of the airplane; those cables had to come out.

SH: Right.

RS: Yes. They never dropped it. We never dropped it.

SG: There was not really a pending threat.

RS: No, but it was a major malfunction that this had happened, you know, super, major malfunction. [laughter]

SH: You have to go up and find an alternate target right away. [laughter]

RS: No, no. Well, you know, you saw in the papers, this past year, where ...

NS: They were shipping these things.

RS: ... A B-52 flew from Minot to Barksdale, from North Dakota to Louisiana ...

NS: With bombs.

RS: ... With six live weapons on it, without knowing it.

NS: It was a mistake.

RS: Yes. It was a mistake. [laughter]

SG: I did hear about this. They were flying over, ready and armed.

NS: Yes, yes. [laughter]

RS: It's called, "We have a new wing commander now. We have a new squadron commander." That's what they do. That's a big boo-boo.

NS: Yes.

SH: I think that is always an amazing thing for those of us who live across the country, or have lived across the country, that stuff like this is being shipped around.

RS: Normally, by cargo planes, normally, but the thing that's always impressed me is how little the population knows about what's going on, and some of it is scary, really scary.

SH: I think that is part of the problem. Everything is in sound bites or we just never find out.

RS: Yes, yes. We haven't even gotten to the "Buck Rogers" stuff yet. [laughter]

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: We are back on.

RS: But, anyhow, in '71, November '71, I was reassigned to Barksdale. ...

SH: This is in Louisiana.

RS: Louisiana, the First Combat Evaluation Group. ... This is SAC's Standardization/Evaluation [group], where we evaluate the state of our people, as well as crew members all over SAC, who fly B-52s and tankers, whatever. So, that got me out of Vietnam.

SG: You were out by 1971.

RS: Yes. [That was] November '71. My last tour, I got back March of '70.

SG: You had been over there for three years.

RS: '67, '68, '69, '70.

SG: Almost four years.

RS: I wasn't done with it yet, but that got me out of the crew member part of it. CEG also did analyses of aircraft accidents. So, whenever an airplane crashed or whatever, we got to work

with Boeing and the numbered air forces, SAC Headquarters. We also had inputs into the flight manuals, any flight manual changes that had to be made, technical stuff.

SH: As horrible as it had been for those four years, was this something where you thought you really could make a positive contribution?

RS: It was, because we did a lot of stuff that was on the cutting edge of what they were getting. For example, ... SAC was getting the EVS, the low light level television and the FLIR [forward-looking infrared] system, the electro-optical viewing system, they called it. It was a combination of low light level and, also, forward-looking infrared, which [is the] infrared they use in targeting on fighters today, also got into the short-range attack missile, which we had for a number of years, which really worked. It was a good weapon, nuclear, of course, and a lot of the other changes and improvements that were being made to the airplanes. We did a lot of work with the D models that were still over there in Guam, because they were having to be modified and whatever, just to keep them going there.

SH: Were you able to input the fact that they had really compromised this aircraft because of this added weight?

RS: That was starting to come about. I mean, Boeing were the ones who actually had to do the analyses on that, as the buildup [continued], but, you know, we had to develop certain procedures. ... In an airplane as large as a B-52, ... they use fuel to offset its structural load. So, the fuel actually offsets the bomb load. You're limited to a certain weight you can fly at, unless you have X amount of fuel; so, you know, things along those lines.

SG: Was Boeing the exclusive provider for the Air Force, or were they contracting out to other parties?

RS: Oh, they had Boeing, plus, also, ... they had five air logistics centers at the time, where we'd send the airplanes to programmed depot maintenance. That's what they called them, depots, and, normally, the program was that, every three or four years, they'd send an airplane through there, where they'd do major work on them, maybe re-skin it. ...

SG: This is what you did between 1971 and 1973.

RS: '73, yes.

SG: What happened in 1973, with the signing of the peace accords? Did anything change or were you still working on CEG?

RS: Well, I was ... at CEG from ... November '71 to June of '74. So, this was beyond that period. We were getting airplanes back from overseas and what they did at the end of the war; ... they started off, I think, with about 155 B-52Ds. They lost a number of them over there, but, of the ones they still had, they remanufactured eighty of them and they were basically new airplanes after that, but they had to go through Boeing and, basically, put new wings on them and

beefed up the fuselage, all that, ... you know, very large scale. It was like starting from scratch and building over again.

SG: You remained with the Air Force for at least another ten years, I believe.

RS: This was '74; I was with them until '86.

SG: What were you doing in this span?

RS: Well, in June of '74, I was reassigned as operations officer for the 524th Bomb Squadron at Wurtsmith Air Force Base, and this is [the] 379th Bomb Wing. I'd just become a major at that point. What happened during Vietnam was that the experience, I think in all the commands, but in SAC in particular, the experience all left. When I first got to B-52s, you had to be a lieutenant colonel to be an aircraft commander, or a senior major. I got a crew when I was a "slick wing" captain, no star, no wreath over it. You had to have two thousand hours to be considered to upgrade to aircraft commander.

SG: Why do you think that happened?

RS: Well, that's what SAC came out with. That's what SAC Headquarters determined, you had to have a certain level of experience in order to be trained enough to be able to do this.

NS: But, he means why ... it lessened.

SG: Why?

RS: What happened was that the people got out. ...

NS: They didn't want to go to Vietnam.

SG: They just left.

RS: They retired or left, yes, retired.

SH: The rates just opened up because of that, not because you were losing crews.

RS: Yes. ... They were losing fifty-two percent of the crew members per year.

SH: Because they were getting out, not because they were being lost in battle.

RS: They were leaving. Right, right, they were getting out of the service, just because they were going over there and over there and over there, and they just said, "The hell with it," and they got out. So, what it did, by the time I got to Wurtsmith, instead of having two thousand hours, "Now, we're going to make you an aircraft commander. With twenty-five hundred hours, we'll make you an instructor pilot." I was making guys with eight hundred hours aircraft commanders,

checking them out, and with twelve hundred hours as instructor pilots. That's how the experience level went down, but, I have to tell you, the guys coming up were better.

SH: Why do you think so?

RS: Well, they were all college graduates. They were more accepting of the training, of the procedures and techniques, where [with] the old guys, you weren't going to tell them anything. They had a certain way of doing it and they were going to do it their way.

SG: Set in their ways.

RS: Oh. [laughter] Some of them were World War II guys, Korea; I mean, they really had some old heads there. Some of the bases, like March Air Force Base in California, Southern California, was so desirable [that] everyone really wanted to go there. As a result, every aircraft commander they had was a lieutenant colonel, and, one of the days, in the briefing, when we're at U-Tapao, the crew in front of me was from March. We're right behind them and they're calling off the aircraft commanders' names, because you had to let them know, "We're all here," you know, and the co-pilot on that crew in front of me, the guy was a senior major. ... At that particular point in time, if you wanted to get checked out, you had to go to a maybe not-so-great base.

SH: Where is Wurtsmith?

RS: It's on the lower peninsula of Michigan, right where the "thumb" is.

NS: You've never heard of it, a resort area? [laughter]

RS: Oscoda, Michigan. It's right under the staple of the Rand-McNally map. That's gone now, too. They closed it.

NS: Runs out and said, "We're going to Michigan, a resort area." I said, "Really? What's the name of the town?" "Oscoda." "Never heard of it," and, when we got to it, it was not a resort area. [laughter]

RS: And there was no town, really. [laughter] Yes, that was something. It was good. We were there two years, until June of '76.

SH: What were you doing there?

RS: I was the squadron ops officer, the number two in charge of the squadron.

SH: Are you doing a lot of flying or administration?

RS: Oh, yes, everything. ...

SG: This is over at Oscoda.

RS: Yes. When I first arrived there, the squadron commander was an ex-F-105 pilot, and he was getting his ticket punched. He was in the first Air Force Academy class, and then, he got an assignment he couldn't turn down, back to the Pentagon, and so, he left, and there was no squadron commander for ninety-some odd days. It was me, and my ops officer, who was a captain now, you know, [laughter] but it worked great. ... [In] 1975, we won the award as the best wing in SAC, got the Omaha Trophy, and passed every evaluation. [Editor's Note: The Omaha Trophy was initially presented in 1971 on behalf of the citizens of Omaha, Nebraska, by the SAC Consultation Committee, with the request that annually it be awarded to the outstanding SAC air wing.] SAC was crazy with these evaluations. We had operational readiness inspections, of course, from the SAC/IG and evaluations run by CEG, that group I was in in Barksdale. We were not too well liked by the rest of the people out there and we flew "bar nones," which was an ORI without the SAC Inspector General on base. We let the IG [Inspector General] team on base, and then, there was a team that evaluated MSET [Maintenance Standardization and Evaluation Team]; I mean, maintenance, there was one that did security, there were people who did the weapons. ... It seemed like every week, you were being evaluated by someone, but we did well there.

SG: You guys did well.

RS: We did well there, yes.

SG: Do you still keep in touch with any of the other crew members?

RS: Yes, strangely enough. They have a B-52 Stratofortress Association, which one of the guys called me [about] last September, in fact. ... That's when I found out they had that, and they're having a reunion in Langley, Virginia, in August.

NS: Now, with the Internet, you know, you can. Ron talks to them all the time.

RS: Yes, ... I talk to a lot of them, and then, they're having the Arc Light-Young Tiger [Association reunion] going on, I think this month, which we're not going to, but Arc Light is B-52 operations in Vietnam, Young Tigers, the tankers, [KC-135 airborne tankers], but the answer is yes. Yes, we talk to them a lot.

SH: Before we go from 1974 to 1975 to finish out in 1986, did you fly tankers as well? Did I understand that?

RS: Yes, yes, later on, I did, tankers and EC-135s, because they were at Ellsworth.

SH: Okay, you have not done that yet. That is not part of what you have spoken about so far.

RS: No. ... I've flown them as a passenger, an unwilling passenger. [laughter] We used to call it "the Mailing Tube," because it was so noisy, uncomfortable, but that was basically SAC's cargo system.

SG: You have also received numerous awards. Are any of them particularly special to you?

RS: One of them is a Distinguished Flying Cross. I actually got that for a mission down south, outside of Saigon. We were supposed to go out and bomb this area, where we had been attacked on the ground, and I actually went through three airplanes before I found one that could fly the mission, because one was up on jacks, another one, the radar didn't work. So, finally, the third one [was functional], but, by the time we were ready to go with the third one, it was way beyond the time that we could even catch up with the rest of the mission. So, we took off anyway and had the command post, basically, clear us across all the airways going into Cambodia and into Thailand, and flew a lot closer to Cambodia than we normally did, and I flew the thing as fast as it could go. ... We finally hooked up with them as the bomb run was going on. It was one of these ground-directed bombing missions and just hooked on there at the end and dropped them, ... but it was particularly on the navigation team. They really performed well.

SG: This was over South Vietnam.

RS: Yes, yes, outside of Saigon.

SG: Speaking of Saigon, it fell in 1975. What was your reaction? What was the general sentiment at the time?

RS: Sorry, you know, because we spent so much time over there, but I think we felt it was inevitable. ... You know that December '72 [Colonel Simonetti was referring to Operation: LINEBACKER II] was how we got out of it, you know, just stopped the torture, but ... we never thought that they had the wherewithal to keep themselves independent. They [the South Vietnamese Armed Forces] were nothing the whole time that we were supporting them.

SH: Did you do any of the bombing runs over Hanoi?

RS: No. That was December of '72. I was at Barksdale then, but we did bomb in the North, but in the southern part of the North. We bombed Laos quite a bit, Mugia and Ban Karai Passes, Con Thien and Gio Linh at the DMZ, and they were also in the missile threat area. We picked up missile signals all the time there.

SH: Did you really?

RS: Yes, and, of course, Khe Sanh, we were there in force, I mean.

SH: Were you really? Did you know what the outcome was at Khe Sanh?

RS: Oh, yes, yes. They actually had us; normally, we weren't supposed to bomb any closer than a half-mile from our troops, but the North Vietnamese tried to get as close to our troops as they could, because that was their only safe area, and so, they brought us in close, almost to the wire.

SH: Did they really? You have to know that, even when you are flying over; it is not something that you find out later.

RS: Oh, no, we knew it then, yes. It was hard, too, because, when that was going on, that was a period that the jet stream went right over that particular part of the world, and it was, you know, like 130 knots, and we're following other B-52s, but we're really not. To stay in formation, we're flying like this, in order to handle the drift, to keep everyone going that way, so that, you know, the closer they brought us to them, the more concerned we were.

SH: Is there a bombing assessment team that goes out after that?

RS: Yes, they sent the Army out. ... In fact, my neighbor was in the Army at the time, and he was on, Bob Carbonari ...

NS: Oh, yes.

RS: And he used to have to go out and check the areas, you know, but this was only in the South, only the areas they had access to.

SH: To go back to Stan's question, he was talking about the Paris Peace Accords and the fall of Saigon. What are you hearing about that? You said you just felt sorry.

SG: That it was inevitable. Basically, you knew it was coming.

RS: Yes, yes, that they were just too weak. ... Whatever we did, we could never get them to really do anything. It wasn't that we were supporting them; we were replacing them with our troops and ... it turns out they're running the black market. They're supporting our guys with [nothing]. "Hey, this is your army. Where are you?" and we gave them all sorts of equipment. I mean, we gave them the same stuff that we had.

SG: You pretty much assumed that, as soon as you guys pulled out, there would be a collapse.

RS: Yes, yes.

NS: Sound familiar, huh, for today. [Editor's Note: Mrs. Simonetti is alluding to American involvement in Iraq.]

RS: Yes.

SH: You talked about being at U-Tapao, but were you ever on the ground in Saigon?

RS: Never, never, flew over Vietnam from the air.

SH: Thailand was the only country you landed in.

RS: Yes, but you know what was funny, I can't tell you how many times we were flying bombing missions, in the daylight, up by the DMZ, which was in the SAM [surface-to-air missile] area, and we have all this electronic countermeasure equipment on, but, when the B-52s

held, with all three airplanes, and they all have their equipment operating, it just totally whites out the scope of the SAM operator. They can't see anything. They know we're there, but they can't lock onto anything and they can't track it. ... We're flying along, you know, we have our parachutes on and survival kits and guns and all this stuff, and I look down and there's an airliner, a Braniff Airliner, flying right under us, and I'm saying, "Hey," you know, yes, yes. [laughter]

SH: Did this happen often?

RS: More often than you would think, yes. ... It could be a Pan Am [flight]. I mean, we're up there, all geared to, you know, picking up the SAM signals, and here comes "Joe Airline," coffee cup in hand, you know.

SH: Dropping off troops.

RS: Yes, yes, crazy.

SH: I think that is a good definition of that whole scenario.

RS: Could be, could be.

SG: Did you take advantage of any benefits, when you came back, that were afforded to veterans?

RS: Well, when I was at Wurtsmith, I got my master's from Central Michigan University.

SG: Was this through a program, a veteran benefit program?

RS: Yes, it is. It was funded by the Veterans Administration, but, also, if you wanted to progress in your career, you had to have a master's and you had to have the military schools. So, I've probably had more schools than most people on the face of the Earth, undergraduate pilot training, B-52 combat crew training, central flight instructor school ...

SG: Gunnery school.

RS: Gunnery school, ... squadron officer's school, Air Command and Staff College, Industrial College of the Armed Forces. After awhile, it's just, "Enough." [laughter]

SH: Where did you go from Michigan then?

RS: Back to Barksdale. From June of '76 to June of '79, I became the chief of the Eighth Air Force Standardization/Evaluation Division. ...

SG: You are a major at this point.

RS: Yes, a major, and I'm responsible for all of the standardization, whatever, east of the Mississippi. ... I had a team of, I think it was ten people, and we would go out and we would fly with them, ... you know, give them instructional stuff. It wasn't an evaluation or anything. ... Then, we had a bunch of staff work. We had to do the numbered air forces' commanders' input for any accident that happened in his air force, Eighth Air Force, and answer all sorts of stupid questions that the staff might come up with. [laughter] You know, they always wanted to do more training by flying less, fewer flying hours, which never worked.

SH: Your family was able to be with you.

RS: Oh, yes, we were there, and we liked it. We liked Barksdale.

NS: Oh, we loved Louisiana, loved living there.

RS: Yes.

SG: You spent three years there.

NS: Six years, all together.

RS: Yes, well, total; first, I was with First Combat Evaluation Group, then, Wurtsmith, and then, back for three years.

NS: A great place.

RS: Yes, it was good. We had a house down there for twenty-seven years.

SH: You must have liked it. Where do you go from there then?

SG: This is 1979.

RS: Okay, from there, '79, June of '79, I was assigned as commander of the Second Bomb Squadron at March Air Force Base.

NS: California.

RS: California.

SH: You got March.

RS: I got March. [laughter] We're not going through the normal process, ... and that was good. That's probably one of the most rewarding assignments you can have, because you have a whole squadron. In the Army, it's to be battalion commander; in the Air Force, it's squadron commander. ... Of course, Nancy played a big part in that, because, while I was with the husbands, she was with the wives, caring, feeding [the group].

NS: You become the social [director].

RS: Yes.

SH: Is there training?

NS: None.

RS: Absolutely none, you're on your own. [laughter]

NS: ... Once you get any kind of people that you're in charge of, the wife automatically becomes the social director for that group. It could be as small as a crew, nine people, or as large as a squadron, two hundred people, or whatever. You automatically become the social director of this group.

RS: Running coffees, and if someone gets sick ...

NS: Oh, luncheons, and on, and on. Two for the price of one, they get. [laughter]

RS: Yes, that's exactly what they got. That's where that started.

SH: What about the people that came back from Vietnam that, perhaps, are in your group now? I am asking this question of both of you. Were there people that were really impacted by what they had been involved in that needed extra care?

RS: Like post-traumatic stress?

NS: ... Not Air Force.

RS: No, not a one. In the Air Force, and particularly in SAC, because we had this personnel reliability program, because you're working with nuclear weapons and the tickets to launch nuclear weapons, anything that you did affected your status on the personnel reliability program. I mean, if you took an aspirin, that could ground you. I'm not kidding. You know, if you went down to the local drugstore, off base, you're not supposed to do that. You're supposed to go to the flight surgeon and he's going to give you whatever, and, if he gives you whatever, then, you might be grounded and off PRP, but, if you ever saw a psychiatrist, they would take you off PRP forever, and that was the end of your [SAC career].

SG: It was a sense of detachment then. How would you account for the discrepancy there?

RS: Well, you know, also, what we did was so much different from what the Army and the Marine guys did. I mean, we were never on the ground, we didn't live out in the jungle, we didn't see the atrocities. The closest I got to Vietnam was thirty thousand feet.

NS: And they would come back to the base and they would have an air-conditioned room, have a maid to do their clothing. They would ... go to the officers' club for dinner. So, it was just an entirely different experience of war.

RS: Yes, totally different. The Army experience, I can see where those guys had trouble with [post-traumatic stress], and, still, today, I mean, in Iraq.

NS: Terrible, terrible.

RS: But, today, in Iraq, I wouldn't expect B-52 crews, or the fighter crews, to have that at all, because it's a whole different world.

SH: Yet, you were impacted by it, by the idea that this was so futile.

RS: Oh, yes. It just seemed to go on and on.

NS: What bothered us the most was the same thing that's happening today, that we were the only people that we knew fighting the war, us and all our military people, like 130,000 military people, the same as today. Nobody else's life is impacted by Iraq but the military people, and that we had that same, same feeling, and it's a very difficult thing to live with.

RS: Yes.

SH: Okay.

RS: That was great. [I] enjoyed squadron command, was a very successful tour. Again, we passed all the bells and whistles and got time to spend in sunny Southern California, saw San Diego a lot, you know, went all up and down the coast and everything. That was great. ... Then, from there, well, that was June to the beginning of October, June '79 [to the] beginning of October of '80, and I was assigned to the Air Force Inspection and Safety Center (AFISC) at Norton Air Force Base, which was about fifteen miles away from March, and [I was] assigned to the Air Force Inspector General's staff. I was the SAC airplane guy there. I was the only SAC airplane guy there. B-52s, tankers, FB-111s, that was my area.

SG: Did you stay with this until the end of your Air Force career?

RS: No.

NS: No, we had one more move.

SG: One more move.

RS: Yes, and that was good, because I learned a lot about the Air Force. I was in SAC all the time since I left Training Command to become a pilot. Everything after that was SAC. So, now, we'd go out and, you know, I was a SAC airplane guy and there was a SAC missile guy and there was an airlift guy, there was a Security Police guy, a Logistics Command guy, a Systems

Command guy. So, we would visit all these bases. Now, I'm learning about all the rest of the Air Force. ... It was very interesting. I learned a lot. ... I'm not sure I did anything for the Air Force during that time, but I learned a lot. [laughter]

SH: I am not surprised that SAC was such a separate entity. Was it because of the nuclear weapons?

RS: Yes, basically, yes. Well, TAC [Tactical Air Command] had some nukes, but the "big stick" was SAC. It was SAC and "the rest of the Air Force" for so many years.

SH: SAC is really the golden boy.

RS: Oh, yes, they really ran the Air Force, until, maybe, [the] mid-'80s.

SH: That will take you right up ...

NS: To the end.

RS: Yes, to the end. ...

SG: Twenty years later, just one more question, what was the Cold War sentiment right now, now in the early 1980s?

RS: Well, it actually; you know, when we were in Vietnam, we were expending all these resources, spending a lot of money, wearing out the B-52 fleet. As you know, Kissinger sent over the Gs, B-52Gs. We had 168 of them and they went over there, and, of course, they had never expected to go. They didn't have the same ECM [electronic countermeasures] systems. They sent them over to the tropics. The B-52Ds had a preservative put on them, like an oil, that was on the metal, because it rots like crazy over there. The Gs never did.

SH: What were the Gs predominantly for?

RS: Well, they were nukes, primarily nukes. The Ds were conventional and nuclear, but the Gs and the Hs were nuclear only.

SG: They were reconfigured for more conventional missions.

RS: ... No, they never did. They could never carry external weapons. They only carried internal weapons, and they could only carry twenty-nine. We had eighty-four. So, what they added to the mix was only, you know, numbers of airplanes. Plus, they didn't have the ECM that could protect them, and that's why they lost so many of them.

SH: Is that why?

RS: Yes, yes. ...

SH: The Gs and the Hs, what was their range and their protection? They were preventative.

RS: The Gs and the Hs, their max weight was 488,000 pounds, versus 450 on the C, D, E and F. I flew all of them, by the way, C, D, E, F, G, H, but the Gs, because they carried more fuel and less weapons, they didn't have to refuel. They could fly to Vietnam from Guam and back, and they only flew out of Guam. They never went to U-Tapao. ... In fact, in '73, April of '73, I went over the last time, I forgot this, as a bomber Charlie at Guam, a wing launch control officer. During the whole time I'd gone over as a crew member, everything we did at every base was radio silent. You never said a word, because we had the Russian trawler right off the island. ... So, it was just absolutely silent on the radios, and then, all of a sudden, twelve airplanes'd take off, turn west and, you know, they never heard anything. ... By the time I went over there in '73, now, all the crew members, as I mentioned, are getting younger, and particularly the G crew members. They're really young, to the point that, you know, they hadn't refueled in awhile, because they didn't have to on their missions. ... A lot of times, they'd have problems that came up that weren't covered by the book. So, I, there were a couple of us, from CEG, and I was still assigned to CEG at the time, there was another captain and myself who did this for this hundred-day period, but we'd basically be helping them take care of whatever problems they had, and they had a bunch. They were blowing engines and hydraulic systems, and [saying], "This doesn't work. How do we get it to work?" and, basically, none of it was in accordance with the flight manual, which, when ... I'm in CEG back home, that's what we're making people do, and I'm telling them to do exactly the opposite. ...

SH: You had worked on that manual. [laughter]

RS: Yes, but we had one G model that was in such bad shape. It was parked all the way up at the end of the field. We had 109 B-52s there at Guam, and this one was a putrid green color, zinc chromate. They painted it in zinc chromate, which is an anti-corrosive paint, because, if you walked up to this airplane and just went up to the landing gear, ... did that, you could put your finger right through the metal. That's how rotted it was. They had to send a special team out from Boeing to get it fit for a one-time flight back to the depot, ... but they were just rotting. ... You know, they hadn't been treated to operate in that kind of a climate. They sent one back to Barksdale, before I went over, and this was going to be one that we flew for our own proficiency. We went out to fly it. The day we went out to fly it, one of the engines just fell off the airplane, which is [due to] corrosion, yes.

SH: There is no way to tell this from any kind of an inspection.

RS: Well, you know, this is the first time that that airplane, that type of airplane, had really been in that kind of environment and they just sent them over. It wasn't that we have this plan, "In six months..." or, "We're going to do this and that to them." They just sent them.

SG: I am sure they learned their lesson.

RS: Oh, yes, they did, but, by the end of Vietnam, basically, the stuff we had was junk, and, of course, the Russians were rearming themselves like crazy then. Nobody knew this.

SH: These are the B-52s that we hear about that were lost.

RS: Well, it was a combination of Gs and Ds, but they lost the Gs mainly because they didn't have the ECM. They couldn't put out enough power to jam the radars, so that they lost an inordinate number of Gs.

SH: They were actually hit by enemy fire.

RS: Yes, SAMs.

NS: So, Ron, get to '86. [laughter]

RS: Okay. So, January of '83, I was reassigned to the 28th Bomb Wing at Ellsworth. I made colonel when I was at Air Force IG, and I hadn't pinned it on yet. I was still a lieutenant colonel, but I was reassigned as the assistant deputy commander ... for operations at Ellsworth, 28th Bomb Wing. ... We had never wanted to go there (originally?).

NS: Rapid City, South Dakota, from California? I was, like, in denial. I said, "I'm not buying a winter coat." So, we got up there ...

RS: In January.

NS: In flip-flops and shorts. I had to run to Sears and buy clothes and stuff. I was in denial. [laughter]

RS: Yes, we left in January. I was wearing shorts. [laughter]

SH: This is January of 1983.

NS: Yes.

RS: Yes, January of '83. Okay, so, I was the assistant deputy commander for operations, and, today, they call it the operations group, and the big difference is that operations now owns maintenance. When I was there, it was [where] you had a deputy commander for maintenance, deputy commander for operations and you had to kind of negotiate, because ... I could ask for more sorties, whatever, but it was [that] you had to work with maintenance. I think it works better if you own maintenance, [laughter] but we made it work up there. ... I went up there in January. I guess it was June or July, I became deputy commander for operations. I don't think that was in the thing [pre-interview survey], and, at that time, we were putting a whole new radar system in the B-52Hs, which we had there at Ellsworth, and a lot of the other wings were getting that, but they're having a lot of trouble with it and they were having trouble integrating it. What it did, it took the radar system and, instead of having a bunch of different blobs, it was so clear that it looked like an Esso road map. I mean, you could pick out roads and all sorts of [things]. I could pick out where I was with it, because it was really a good system, but I was the DO, deputy commander of ops, for about nine months, and then, became vice wing commander for two years. The interesting thing, when we were there at Ellsworth, was that we had the 44th Missile

Wing co-located with the bomb wing there, and we were responsible for the maintenance on their missiles, which is how I got to see the B28 Y1, what it really looked like, but, because we had these two missions together, both the flying mission and the missile mission, we got a lot of visitors. We got all of NATO over there. We used to have to have these dinners from the Air War College. They'd send their students up there, and one of them was interesting, because we had, on one side, an Israeli Kfir squadron commander, but, on the other side, an Egyptian MIG-21 squadron commander.

SH: At the same dinner, the same table.

RS: At the same dinner, at the same table.

SH: Nothing broke out.

NS: Nothing.

RS: No, they were kind of looking at each other, but I'm sure they met up, up above, but, also, at Ellsworth, we had the PACCS mission, the Post-Attack Command and Control System, which was kind of "Buck Rogers." SAC planned that in the event of a nuclear war, that we'd still be able to control the war, even after a nuclear attack, by having the "Looking Glass," [the codename for an aerial command center], you know, the airplane that's always up with the general onboard. We flew that mission every Friday, and we had the same airplane. What they had was a system that was the Airborne Command Post, out of Andrews, and that was linked to a radio relay mission out of Grissom, in Indiana, which was linked to Ellsworth. ... Our regular sortie was the Western Auxiliary Command Post. ... It was a radio link that, from Washington, DC, or anywhere in the air, all these airplanes were linked together, along with the three or four over the missile fields, so that you could talk normally over the radio and it was the clearest radio transmission, but it was changing frequency every one millionth of a second, and all controlled by atomic clocks.

SH: There was no need to do code or anything. You just spoke.

RS: No, you just spoke normally.

SH: Really?

RS: And, to this day, it can't be broken. ... The airplanes, they all looked like tankers, ... and some of them had booms, but they could all shoot the missiles from underground from the air. In fact, we did it. I was onboard one at night. We were off Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. We're probably about fifty miles out over the ocean and we actually launched a Minuteman missile out of the ground there.

SH: You launched it. It came out of Ellsworth.

RS: Well, it was a missile that came out of one of the missile bases. I'm not sure which one, and they take it out to Vandenberg and they put it in a missile silo there.

SH: It is shot from Vandenberg Air Force Base.

RS: Yes. No, the only thing they do is take off the nuclear package and put in a test package, and they shoot it into Kwajalein Atoll, out in the Pacific, but the thing that impressed me with that [was], you know, whenever you see a picture of the missile coming out, it's always slow motion, barely getting up. Well, it's not like that at all. It comes out, "Boom," and it flew right over the airplane, and it must have been five seconds later, just like a rifle bullet, and they put an anti-collision light on it, a red light. You didn't need a red light on that thing, [laughter] blinking red light, and what idiot put that on there?

SH: Is this when people were calling in with UFOs?

RS: Maybe, maybe. [laughter]

NS: So, that was 1986, and, *finito*, we were done.

RS: 1986, yes, and July 31st was my last day.

SG: Retiring a colonel.

RS: Colonel, yes.

SH: Was it a mandatory retirement at this point?

RS: No, I could have kept going.

SH: Why did you get out?

RS: ... I thought everything was done, you know, did everything. I wasn't a wing commander, I was number two, and, you know, enough was enough. Nancy was ready. In fact, originally, we were going to go back to Louisiana, because we had a house there, and, at the last minute ...

NS: I got to choose.

RS: Yes, she got to choose.

NS: Either California, West Coast, because our daughter who was going to be staying in California, or to come home to New York, where we had a large extended family, and I said, "I want to go home." So, that's how we wound up here.

SG: You moved out to Long Island at that point and stayed there.

RS: Yes.

NS: Yes.

SH: There are a billion more questions that I could ask, [laughter] but have you stayed connected to Rutgers at all?

RS: Not very much. No, we've been really kind of busy, and although it's somewhat close, we have New York City in-between. ... I've come to a couple of football games.

NS: Yes, we had the football games.

RS: ... [We saw] one of my fraternity brothers.

SH: Did your children wind up coming back or are they still in California?

RS: My daughter's a Californian, and my son lives here, in Wading River, which is twenty minutes from where we are, but he has the two grandchildren. It's big playing cards there. [laughter]

RS: Yes. Last summer, I think it was, we came to Rutgers and brought the two kids.

NS: We brought them here. That's how desperate we were for something to do. [laughter]

RS: ... They went to the Student Center, across the street.

NS: Yes, it was cute.

RS: And the two of them ran into the store down below, and, you know, once they saw the store, "Phew," they're gone. Next thing I see is, you know, the hand.

SH: A big foam finger.

NS: "Number One."

RS: I see that waving around, with the grandson, and the next time I see him, he's got this ...

NS: The big red hat on.

RS: The big red wig on. ...

NS: We had to buy all that stuff.

RS: And then, I see the hand again, and it's the granddaughter, two-and-a-half years old, running around with it. [laughter] So, we ... got all that, but they loved it. They really did, yes, and the grandson is always after me to come back.

NS: But, you can ask Ron, the best four years of his life was at Rutgers.

RS: ... [I] had the misfortune of mentioning that once, after I was married. You never want to do that. [laughter]

SH: I was just going to say, I do not think she has forgotten it, how many years later?

RS: Forget anything? Forget about it.

SH: I would like to reserve a rain check, if there is more that we really should sit down and talk about.

RS: Okay.

SH: I thank you and everybody for being here.

SG: Yes, thank you very much.

NS: Thank you.

RS: My pleasure.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by David Kelley 3/1/09
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 7/27/09
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 7/30/09
Reviewed by Ronald R. Simonetti 8/26/09