

*The  
Kerr County Historical Commission  
presents*

*An ORAL HISTORY*

*of*

*RONALD LEE GIRARD*

*Born 1939*

*Kerrville, Texas 2011*

*Kerr County Historical Commission*

*ORAL HISTORY PROJECT*

Interviewee: Ronald Girard

Interviewers: Francelle Robison Collins  
Bonnie Pipes Flory

Date: October 31, 2017

Place: Kerr County Courthouse  
Kerrville, Texas

*The Oral History Project is a project of  
The Kerr County Historical Commission,  
a volunteer organization. Oral History  
Committee chair is Francelle Robison Collins.*

Transcribed and Edited by Jeanie Archer Webb

*Kerr County Historical Commission*  
*ORAL HISTORY PROJECT*

Name: Ronald Lee Girard

Date of Birth: December 18, 1939

Place of Birth: Manila, Philippine Islands

Education: Tivy High School 1957  
Schreiner College  
Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos

Father: Leonard F. Girard  
Mother: Eloise Ida Zumwalt  
Siblings: Jerry Girard, Sue Girard  
Wife: Karen Eckhardt

*SUMMARY*

Ronnie Girard is a descendant of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Kerr County settlers Zumwalt and Sublett. After graduating from Tivy High School in 1957, Girard attended Schreiner College, then joined the US Air Force, where he became a navigator on the B-52 and C-130, among others. In the 1960's he participated in developing experimental supersonic aircraft for the Central Intelligence Agency at a top secret Nevada test site called Area 51. The airplanes, known as A-12's, were able to fly at 95,000 feet and could reach Mach 3.2. These airplanes remained secret for over 20 years. After discontinuation of this program, Girard was based in Thailand, where he flew 140 missions over Laos during the Viet Nam war. He retired from the Air Force as a Major, completed his college degree from Southwest Texas State University, moved back to the family property in the Hunt-Ingram area, and worked for the Kerrville Post Office for 20 years as a rural mail carrier. He married postal office colleague Karen Eckhardt, a native of Fredericksburg. Girard has 2 children from his first marriage.

## An Oral History of Ronald Lee Girard

*My name is Francelle Robison Collins and I am with the Kerr County Historical Commission, Oral History Project. Today is October 31, 2017, and I am here at the Kerr County Courthouse, Kerrville, Texas, with Bonnie Pipes Flory. We are talking to Ronnie Girard, who understands that we are making audio and video recordings of this interview and that a typewritten transcript of our interview will be provided so that changes can be made. The audio and video tapes, however, cannot be edited. This information along with copies of any family pictures and documents provided by you will then be turned over to the History Center, Schreiner University Archives, and the University of North Texas Portals to Texas History where they will be available to the public unless specific restrictions are placed on them by you. These restrictions will be noted in the Release forms after you have had a chance to review the transcripts. Are you clear on what we are doing today?*

RONNIE: Yes I am.

FRANCELLE: What is your given name?

RONNIE: Ronald Lee Girard.

FRANCELLE: And when and where were you born?

RONNIE: December 18, 1939, in Manila, Philippine Islands. My mother was born in Hunt, Texas. My great grandfather was born in Hunt, Texas. I was born in Manila because my father was in the military and he was stationed over there.

FRANCELLE: Was that a military hospital you were born in?

RONNIE: No, the name of it, and I think it was destroyed during the battles of the Japanese was Sternberg General Hospital there in Manila itself because they didn't have facilities there at the air base.

FRANCELLE: Do you have any siblings?

RONNIE: I have an older brother and a younger sister.

FRANCELLE: And what are their names?

- RONNIE: My brother Jerry and my sister Sue.
- FRANCELLE: And what is your father's name?
- RONNIE: His name was Leonard F. Girard. Nobody knew that name, he went by Smoky Girard.
- FRANCELLE: Did he smoke?
- RONNIE: No, he played football on one of the Army teams way back before there was the Air Force. And some guy reminded him of Smokey, so he got the name Smokey. Yes, he did smoke, but he quit some years ago.
- FRANCELLE: Did you say he was born in Hunt?
- RONNIE: No, he was born in Kankakee, Illinois. My mother was born in Hunt.
- FRANCELLE: And how did they meet each other?
- RONNIE: They met at the Kerrville airport, which used to be between Kerrville and Ingram. My grandfather who ran the airport, had a café there. My mother worked in there waitressing and stuff like that. Well one day all these airplanes and troops from Brooke air force base, flew all the way across country to here, which was about 50 miles. And they did what they called maneuvers out here. They flew single engines and stuff. But the way they met is all these G.I.'s were in a line and they'd order sandwiches and food. And I guess my mother must have been pretty attractive because, hey how 'bout a date, chick? And the last one in the line was my Dad, and he said hey how 'bout a date, and she said yes. And the rest is history.
- FRANCELLE: So he flew back in on other occasions, then?
- RONNIE: I don't remember that! I suppose, anyway they were in San Antonio for several years during the war.
- FRANCELLE: And what was your mother's given name?
- RONNIE: Eloise Ida Zumwalt was her maiden name.
- FRANCELLE: And that family's been around a long time, the Zumwalts.
- RONNIE: Since the 1870's. And her mother's family was Sublett, so they've been here since the 1850's. And I'm a Filipino.
- FRANCELLE: Zumwalt and Subletts, now were they ranchers?

RONNIE: Yes, in fact that's how the Zumwalt's got here. They were in Gonzales, they got there in the 1830's. And amongst other things they fought the Indians and they fought the Mexicans and the Republic of Texas said well we owe you a debt of gratitude but we have bales of land. So my Grandpa took this claim in west Kerr County, I think was several thousand acres. But he ended up selling to Stowers Ranch, part of Stowers Ranch is part of his old place. And I think he also sold some to a man called Dee Secrest.

FRANCELLE: Well could they get as much land as they wanted?

RONNIE: No, it was based on what they did, you know. But it did take a whole lot to get a whole lot of land.

FRANCELLE: Now tell us about your great great grandfather please, who fought at the Alamo, is that correct?

RONNIE: No. Did I say that? My great great grandfather's niece, no, daughter, was married to this guy who fought at the Alamo and died. He was one of the immortal 32 or whatever it was that came from Gonzales.

FRANCELLE: So both sides, the Zumwalts and the Subletts, came here on land grants?

RONNIE: I'm not so sure about the Subletts. In fact, he was in the Union Army back in the 1850's. He was stationed at Fort Mason. In fact, I've got a roster that says...and then he got out and I don't know whether he got out, that's part of the family that doesn't talk – but got out and first thing you know about 1861 he had a homestead up there by Hunt, which is now Schumacher Crossing.

FRANCELLE: Well, how did your Dad decide to get into the military?

RONNIE: My Dad got in the military because he hated the farm. And his parents were farmers there in Illinois.

FRANCELLE: So tell us some qualities about your Dad.

RONNIE: Well, he was a good man and you could believe what he said. Supposedly he was a world class pool player. Also while he was stationed over in the Philippines he was in a golf tournament and he won the championship of the Philippines in golfing. He was good in all kinds of sports. He played football, I told you how he got the name Smoky. He played football and a lot of athletics. He was tough, wished I were. And so he was a good man and highly regarded in the community.

FRANCELLE: So he got right into flying, so then that was his choice?

RONNIE: Well he wasn't a pilot, he was a mechanic and kept them flying. In fact when he retired from Nellis Air Force Base, Las Vegas, he was the chief

sergeant on the flight line, he was in charge of the whole flight line as far as NCO's were concerned.

FRANCELLE: How about your mother? Tell us some endearing qualities about her.

RONNIE: She was just Eloise. I don't think she ever had an enemy. She enjoyed life, she'd drink a beer, it was acceptable, my Dad would too.

FRANCELLE: Was she a good cook?

RONNIE: She was in the restaurant but she was doing waitress work, maybe she flipped a burger, I don't know but she certainly didn't continue that afterwards. I don't think she worked again until Dad retired many years later, and she worked part time I think just to get out of the house, at Billy Red's store, whatever that was, Piggly Wiggly. She worked for a while at Piggly Wiggly and just a little bit to get out of the home, my Dad didn't like it.

FRANCELLE: They went overseas, was your older brother born over there too?

RONNIE: My older brother was born in San Antonio. They hadn't left San Antonio yet, and he went overseas and I was born there. Then after they came back, before Pearl Harbor – not much, Sue was born in Orlando, Dad was stationed at the base there. They had several other bases around during World War II, where he was stationed.

FRANCELLE: So he wasn't actually overseas during the war?

RONNIE: Yeah, he was. Part of the time he was in England fixing airplanes, but as far as actually flying combat missions, no he didn't.

FRANCELLE: So all three of you children, all of you have been in the military, correct?

RONNIE: We've all been in long enough to retire.

FRANCELLE: So you must have gotten that from your Dad, I mean enjoyed the travel?

RONNIE: Oh yeah, sure, I mean when I was a kid, after we left Ingram and I went to San Antonio to Hot Wells for a year and Dad was stationed over in Wiesbaden, Germany or thereabouts, and while we were there we went all over Europe and got to see things that, I can remember that stuff, it's very nice. And then when I was in the military, the two years I was in tact airlift, I flew everywhere, all over Europe, all over South America, yep, I've been around a lot.

FRANCELLE: Well was your Dad, did he have his pilot's license then, or no?

RONNIE: He just fixed them.

FRANCELLE: And did you know any of your grandparents?

RONNIE: Oh yes. I can remember my great grandmother Sublett and my great grandpa Sublett and my Mother's parents and my Dad's parents.

FRANCELLE: So there's some longevity in your family.

RONNIE: Yeah, late 80's or early 90's most of them lived.

FRANCELLE: Now, where you live, is that still the homestead?

RONNIE: Well, I guess you'd call it the homestead. When Dad retired in 1952 from the Air Force, they moved back here and they found this place and they bought it. And Mother and Dad lived there until after Dad died and then Mother had to move to Kerrville so she said I'm gonna give this land to you three kids. Well my brother was in California, my sister was back on the East Coast, and my wife and I offered enough money so they sold their share to us. So we have the old homestead here on Henderson Branch Road.

FRANCELLE: Do you ranch or farm?

RONNIE: I keep deer in the freezer.

FRANCELLE: You're a good shot. Do you do dove hunting too?

RONNIE: I haven't done that in probably five years. Just like I used to shoot squirrels but the wife says, you kill 'em, you cook 'em, she didn't want to mess with them. So I haven't shot a dove in a few years.

FRANCELLE: There's not enough to eat on that dove, really, to go to the trouble of, even the shells that you have to buy to kill it.

RONNIE: And sometimes my cousin and I would go 50 miles away dove hunting and come back, and of course it was just an excuse to drink beer.

FRANCELLE: And so where did you start school?

RONNIE: I began first grade in Ingram. I went half a year in Ingram.

FRANCELLE: How far is your place from the Ingram school?

RONNIE: I open up the back gate. You know there in Ingram there was that Tea House. That was our home. And so I could just open up the back gate and go to school. So I went about half the first grade and then we moved to San Antonio and I went to Hot Wells school then I started the second grade and at mid-term the teachers I think got tired of me so they asked



mother and daddy if they could pass me up to the third grade mid-term. And they said yeah, and so I was just starting the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, we moved over to Germany which in those days you didn't fly. You took a ship. So it took I'd say from the time we left San Antonio till the time we got in quarters and going to school about a month, in Wiesbaden Germany. So I finished third grade. And I think the fourth grade is the first grade I completed in one school. And then I was in school in Las Vegas for part of the fifth, all of the sixth. Part of the seventh back in Ingram again, and of course I came here for high school at Tivy because they didn't have a high school in Ingram.

FRANCELLE: Did you enjoy moving around that much?

RONNIE: I had no choice. I felt – I hated to lose friends. I had a million friends because I'd meet somebody new everywhere we went but I couldn't really be close to them or anything like that. I enjoyed school I guess.

FRANCELLE: And ya'll finally settled here.

RONNIE: Yes, by the time I was 12, we got here in 1952, until I was 19 when I got out of Schreiner Institute College, then I got in the Air Force and I was gone for 20 years.

FRANCELLE: So it was four years that you attended Tivy? And what were you involved in at Tivy, what did you enjoy the most there?

RONNIE: Well, I played football, I enjoyed that.

FRANCELLE: And who are your friends from high school?

RONNIE: Tom Pollard for one, Steve Drane, Judy Maxwell, she's a distant cousin of mine. Bob Blackburn, Wilma Council was a good friend of my sister's and she was a good friend of mine too.

FRANCELLE: That's the way it went, everybody had brothers and sisters that were friends that came over. And what year did you graduate?

RONNIE: 1957.

FRANCELLE: And then what did you do?

RONNIE: I went two years to Schreiner. See, I told you I skipped that grade, so when I graduated I was 17 and I was not emotionally ready to study. So I didn't do well at Schreiner.

FRANCELLE: Were you a day student?

RONNIE: Yes. But I didn't want to stay in for the two years. So the folks said well son, what are you going to do next? We can't put you through any more college. Well, my brother just went in the Air Force and I'll go check on that. So I went down and talked to the recruiter and told him I was interested in going to the Air Force Academy and becoming a flyer. Well I went down there and took the eye test. And in order to be a pilot you have to have 20/20 vision. I didn't. So I said what can I do? And they said, well, you can become a navigator and still wear glasses. And I said well is the pay the same. And they said yeah. So I said I'll be a navigator. So I went to aviation cadet school for a year at both Lackland and at what used to be Harlingen Air Force Base. And in June of 1960 I got my silver bars and navigator wings.

FRANCELLE: So you have to have 20/20 vision without glasses?

RONNIE: As a pilot. To start. Now some of these pilots have glasses. But when they got in they didn't.

FRANCELLE: So what if you have contacts?

RONNIE: In 1959 I don't think they had contacts.

FRANCELLE: They did in '60, I remember that because my friend got contacts and I remember when the wind blew at Tivy we always had to hold her hand to walk her to the other building, the sand got in her eyes.

RONNIE: Well I can squint and I can read 20/20 but they dilated my eyes and looked at the focal length or something.

FRANCELLE: Wonder if even if you have glasses on and you have 20/20 vision I guess they're thinking you might lose your glasses in the flight, I mean I wonder what the thinking was or if that's the way it's always been. And so then, keep going, what did you do after that? You were a navigator.

RONNIE: So I was just a basic navigator. From there I went to Mather Air Force Base, Sacramento, started my undergraduate navigator training to be a B52 navigator.

FRANCELLE: Tell us what a navigator is.

RONNIE: A navigator basically, they don't need them that much anymore with GPS and INS, but basically tell them where to go and what's your estimated time of arrival.

FRANCELLE: You're looking at logs?

- RONNIE: Looking at logs and your radar scope, now later on as a navigator when I was in gunships, they had to have navigators because, anyway that's another story but maybe we'll get to that later.
- FRANCELLE: So the pilot sits there, the copilot sits there, and...
- RONNIE: And I was in back. Now in B-52's, I was downstairs at the bottom of the airplane. Downstairs sits a navigator here and a radar navigator here. And the radar navigator basically drops bombs. I started out, I was a navigator and then later on I became a radar navigator.
- FRANCELLE: Well did you push buttons or anything?
- RONNIE: Yeah, there's computers to do that
- FRANCELLE: So, what would you do to push a button, I mean what would happen that you would need to do that.
- RONNIE: Well I'd say, OK, we're checking over such and such point, we need to go to the next point. And it says your next heading will be such and such, and I'd tell the pilots.
- FRANCELLE: So, you're very important to the pilot.
- RONNIE: Yeah, especially when you're in gunships, they didn't know where we were.
- FRANCELLE: Well, once you'd gotten into being navigator, they still wouldn't let you be a pilot then, you said once you get in...
- RONNIE: No, I think the government, I didn't try because I think the government would realize that we have a big investment in being a navigator, so let's not start all over again. I started out operationally in B-52's and I was in those for about 6 years, uh stationed at Castle AFB in Merced, California, and March AFB Riverside, California. Well, I went to squadron officer school, I was supposed to do better I guess other than just being a navigator, I broke my leg. This is a long story I don't know if it's worth telling it. So I got back to March AFB. They changed from our old B-52's to the newer model B-52 which had a different navigation system and you had to go to school for that one. Well, what they had done while I was still at squadron officers school, they had a local school there at March, but I would have to go off to a school. That was the big buildup for Viet Nam and there was no room in the schools so they didn't know what to do with me. So I worked in what we call bomb nav, in navigator things and I stayed busy, but still here's a navigator back on flying status after my leg and we can't put him up in B-52's because he doesn't know this new equipment. Of course I could have learned it real quick. So first thing I know, a message came in to personnel, they asked me if I would be

interested in working in a classified job at a classified location in the western United States. And I thought what in the world is this? How'd you find me? So I said yeah, sure. And for this job, it's not the average job because the average job you just get it. Well this one I had to go back to Washington, D.C. and get interviewed for it. I went to the Pentagon first and then they said, OK, tomorrow you go downstairs on the concourse and you take this little bus and we went off and first thing you know we were in McLean, Virginia, CIA headquarters. And so for the next two-three days I was in a black box. During the day, I mean I went home and slept at night, I went back to the hotel. And they would ask questions like you wouldn't believe. They knew people that I had forgotten I knew. So when I got on the airplane going back to California, I said, I failed. And then within a month I got orders to go to Las Vegas. At Post Office box 882, main Post Office, Las Vegas, Nevada. That was my assignment. They said when you get there you call this number. So I did, and my boss – later on was my boss – said I'll pick you up in the morning at 5 o'clock. So it's still black, they picked me up and we went driving off into the desert.

FRANCELLE: Now did you know this was the CIA?

RONNIE: I had had that brief interview there while I was there at the Pentagon, and they asked if I'd want to work for the CIA, and I said sure. I thought, man, that's neat. Better than being a B-52 navigator. So I got orders to go there and first thing you know, that morning, Colonel Smith picked me up and we got in his car and we drove off in the darkness. Those of us that were in the military that were assigned to the 1129<sup>th</sup> Special Activity Squad were Air Force, but the CIA paid us and they told us what to do. And when I got out to where I was working, we had two commanders. And they were kind of equal. We had a full Air Force colonel and we had a CIA guy. They worked together real well. Our airplane was a CIA airplane. We drove out 60 miles along the highway there to Mercury, Nevada. And I said hey this is not bad. And we got inside the Nevada test site, which is huge, and we drove another 60 miles inside the test site to Area 51.

FRANCELLE: Had they already used those words, Area 51?

RONNIE: I didn't know what it was, and you didn't either, back in 1961 or whatever it was like that. So I traded the badge I had picked up to go through the test site in for an Area 51 badge and then we went in there and I said do you know what sort of airplane it's gonna be? All I know is it's a big post office! So they took me down to the hangar and showed me the A-12. The A-12 was the predecessor of the SR-71. The SR-71 was copied off of our A-12. Except our A-12 was a single seat, and the 71 had two seats. Same engine, same size, so that the SR-71 was heavier than our A-12. We were first operational in '62 and the 71 was operational in '64. So they had the same airplane except they put two seats in. The A-12 only had a

pilot, there was no navigator or anything like that, but my job there was to mission plan and brief and debrief and to go off, we had a little air force there. We had a C-130 among other things, and we'd go all over the United States and pick up classified cargo, which is not the story.

FRANCELLE: Was the plane big?

RONNIE: It was big.

FRANCELLE: And just one person flew it.

RONNIE: Yes. It was the fastest airplane going.

FRANCELLE: How fast did it go?

RONNIE: Mach 3.2 That's about 2,000 miles per hour. We could fly, the 71 could go Mach 3.1, and we could go 3.2. And we could go up to 95,000 feet and they could go up to 85,000 feet. But we were still secret and LBJ blew the cover on the SR-71 so they could talk about the SR-71 but we didn't exist as far as people were concerned. Lyndon Baines, on national news one night he says, we got this here airplane, it can go such and such.

FRANCELLE: So he wasn't supposed to say that.

RONNIE: Presidents can.

FRANCELLE: He shouldn't have said that, then.

RONNIE: .Probably shouldn't have. But our airplane remained secret for another 25-30 years. It wasn't aired to the public until like in the 1990's or something like that.

FRANCELLE: There was only one of them.

RONNIE: No, we had about a dozen of them. Five of them crashed. We lost 2 pilots and then we also had...

FRANCELLE: Were they being tested then?

RONNIE: Yeah, well, one was being tested at Area 51 and crashed. And then we went operational in Okinawa, flying missions over North Vietnam and North Korea, and one of the pilots went out on a test flight and just disappeared. Well, when you're going 1800 miles an hour...and they spent a week looking and didn't find anything. Off the coast of the Philippines. His name was Jack Weeks. Our pilots were all like me, they were Air Force recruited to the CIA. But these guys resigned their commission. I was still a Captain in the Air Force, but these guys resigned their commission, they were civilian pilots and they were getting paid

what we thought then was pretty big bucks. But it was a pretty big hazard too, flying those things.

FRANCELLE: So did you pretty much stay there in Area 51 the whole time you were involved with the plane, then?

RONNIE: No. I stayed there or in Okinawa. We flew three airplanes over Okinawa, and they were flying missions as I said over North Korea or over North Vietnam. And so kind of split the squad to Area 51 and some stayed in Okinawa. Kadena Air Base.

FRANCELLE: So you were in charge of making the mission...

RONNIE: Well I wasn't in charge. In the mission planning room there would be like four or five of us, and I was the last to get there and I was kind of a junior officer, so no, I wasn't in charge but I did a lot of cut and pasting!

FRANCELLE: And so would they say then what the mission was going to be and you would help chart it out?

RONNIE: The mission would come in off the deal, it would say where to go, and from that we would draw up the chart. After we'd draw up the chart we made long strips and then a guy would take pictures with a camera so you'd have this all on film, and they could run it through the periscope and he could see his mission that way. And it would give action points -- at such and such points you climb or you'd turn or you'd turn on your electronic equipment or whatever needed to be done.

FRANCELLE: So how many years was that plane in....

RONNIE: Not enough. It became operational in '62, and they put it in storage in '68. To me it was a wonderful airplane.

FRANCELLE: And you have no idea why they took it out of....?

RONNIE: Well, they say it was a matter of politics. As I say, we had a faster, higher flying airplane, but the SR-71 belonged to SAC, Strategic Air Command, and the A-12 belonged to CIA. And they said, CIA don't fly airplanes. So they parked our airplanes.

FRANCELLE: Who said that?

RONNIE: "They." Washington. So they put our airplane in storage there at Palmdale. And then after about 20 years or so they divided them out to museums and places like that, and one of them right now, one of our A-12's is there at CIA headquarters. Sitting there.

FRANCELLE: Have you gone to see it?

RONNIE: No. They would let me in, I'm sure, even though I wasn't an employee for two or three years, they paid my salary and stuff like that, but when a project is over with, you get debriefed.

FRANCELLE: Shipped you back to the Post Office?

(laughter)

RONNIE: No, in fact I think I was present that day at Area 51 when they said, you know, you guys, you've all been debriefed. So we didn't know anything more about the CIA after that.

FRANCELLE: Was that an exciting time for you to be at Area 51?

RONNIE: I thought it was wonderful. It was just totally unlike anything I ever saw. I told you we had a C-130 cargo plane to fly around all over, and we'd land at a base, and someone would say, why do you have a silver C-130? The rest of them are all olive drab. We just do. Well, where are you from? We're from Edwards Air Force Base. Because we couldn't say we were from Area 51, so we – many, many times lied for our government as to where we were, what we were doing, you know, it was expected.

FRANCELLE: Wow. Now has that been replaced, or would you even know?

RONNIE: They had following airplanes, but I was gone. I say they put everything in storage at Palmdale, and I stayed there for another 6 months at Area 51, flying in that C-130, and again, I was a navigator, carrying cargo. We'd take SR-71 engines down to West Palm Beach or all over.

FRANCELLE: And did you go to Vietnam?

RONNIE: Yes, I did. So, the project was over and it was time for me to move on. To make a long story short, they had assigned me to regular C-130's. Just tactical airlifts C-130's, navigate and drop equipment. So we went all over South America and Europe. We'd go over there for two months at a time and we spent more time gone than we did at home. So for about three years I was in just regular old C-130's. And then I got this deal that says, congratulations, you are on the list to be a Major. And I said, wow. Two days later I had orders to go to gunships. So they said, we're going to promote old Girard but we're going to send his butt over here to AC-130 spectre gunships. So I thought, that'll be alright. And so we were to fly out of Oban airbase, Thailand, but that's only 20 minutes or so from Laos, and then you fly up a little bit from Laos and you're in Viet Nam. Most of our missions were in Laos.

FRANCELLE: Twenty minutes flying, did you say?

RONNIE: Just to get to the Mekong River, which, and over, the other side was such and such. Most of our missions were in Laos and our job was to blow up trucks. A secondary mission that we had there was to what they call TIC's, Troops In Contact. Friendly troops would be in contact, the bad guys would be around the perimeter trying to get them, and so we would go around there with our 20 millimeter cannons, gatlin guns, or our 40 millimeters, and that was it. No more bad guys. But most of the times we were shooting trucks. We had nights when we'd get one or two trucks, we had nights where we'd get twenty trucks. So it just all depends. I flew about 140 or something combat missions in the old 130's. Every mission they shot at us, antiaircraft.....we had two or three of our guys in the back looking out and they would call, triple AAA (antiaircraft) at three o'clock, and we could listen to the voice and tell how close that stuff was getting. Triple A three o'clock... Triple A seven o'clock (voice becomes more urgent) and then if they said My God, you knew it was real close. Several times I actually could hear the cannon going off right over our heads. We only took one hit, others took more than that. While I was over there we lost I think five airplanes. The whole time our crew, 16<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron, was in Thailand, we lost 52 people.

FRANCELLE: When you took that hit, did you have to get back to base then fast?

RONNIE: No, because it was way in the back of the airplane and they had blown a little piece of shrapnel into the back and didn't affect it. In fact we were sitting there getting out of the airplane and the crew chief said, hey, did y'all know.....? So I don't think we even took credit for a hit or anything like that. But there were some people – this one guy took about five or six hits while we were over there. We called him "Magnetass" because he was a magnet, attracted all the Triple A.

FRANCELLE: Now, when you were doing the CIA work, what about your family? What did they think you were doing.

RONNIE: They didn't know. I would leave on a Monday morning and drive off in the desert and come back on Friday. In Las Vegas. But they didn't know where I was, they didn't know what Area 51 was, they didn't know I was working with the CIA. I was just working at a classified location on a classified project. They didn't know what I was doing.

FRANCELLE: But you wore a uniform.

RONNIE: Yes I did. Either a flight suit or just an everyday Air Force uniform.

FRANCELLE: So at what point were you able to tell them? When it was declassified?

RONNIE: Well, years when by, my wife became my ex-wife, and I saw her about ten years ago, and I said, did you know what I was doing, and she said, noooo. So I told her and she was really interested. And then I showed her this



thing here. She was in North Carolina, she said, well, I wondered what you were doing.

FRANCELLE: So you would just say I don't want to talk about it, I guess, huh?

RONNIE: Well, I told her, well, it's classified, I can't talk about it. So she didn't ask any more questions. And my friends didn't either.

FRANCELLE: So then after you got out of the military, and what year was that?

RONNIE: 1979.

FRANCELLE: So you'd made Major by that time?

RONNIE: Yeah. I went 2 years to Schreiner College but while I was in the Air Force I did not complete my degree. I picked up another year of college. And then after I retired, the Air Force put me through another year so I got my degree finally. But because I didn't have a degree, I didn't have the pedigree to be a senior grade officer so I stayed on as a Major. Some of my friends went on to become Lt. Colonels.

FRANCELLE: And where did you finish your degree?

RONNIE: What was then Southwest Texas. But I really did very little on campus. I went to night school at Lackland or Ft. Sam or San Marcos. But it was good.

FRANCELLE: And then what did you do?

RONNIE: I moved back to Kerrville.

FRANCELLE: You were ready for that?

RONNIE: I always loved Kerr County and I never intended to do anything different when I could. So I went down and talked to the local post office. They hired me. Because for one thing I have veterans' preference. But I still made real good grades anyway. I would have been hired. And I worked at the Kerrville post office for 20 years.

FRANCELLE: What did you do there?

RONNIE: I was a rural carrier, carried mail. Mostly Upper Turtle Creek. Out Medina Highway, some of Kerrville South.

FRANCELLE: And you were living at your place.

RONNIE: Yeah, I'd commute daily, eight or nine miles

FRANCELLE: And who did you work for there at the post office?

RONNIE: Well, of course, Clark Klein was my immediate boss for a while. It must not have been real important. Mr. Wally was the guy who was postmaster when I first started there.

FRANCELLE: And so you remarried?

RONNIE: Yes I did. Because one day – I was a senior substitute, hadn't gone on full time yet. The postmaster called me in to his office and says, Girard, we've got this new employee coming in here from Fredericksburg and I would like for you to show her around. And I thought, hmmm. And she came in...and we became the best of friends. So I showed her around for a while. And then she went on her own.

FRANCELLE: She had her own route?

RONNIE: Yeah. About that time I went regular and had only my one route instead of me bouncing around. So I got my own route and so for years she bounced around different routes as a substitute. But we became good friends...

FRANCELLE: Is she from Fredericksburg?

RONNIE: Yes, her family's been there for generations.

FRANCELLE: And what was her maiden name?

RONNIE: Eckhardt. The family's mainly from a great community which is north of Fredericksburg, 10 miles or so. They were farmers.

FRANCELLE: Did she have children when you married?

RONNIE: She had two and I had two.

FRANCELLE: Did your children live here?

RONNIE: Actually they both are living in Austin right now. And her children live here. Recently, we started taking care of her grandkid. This went on for a couple of years, taking care of him. His dad was not too stable and his mother was off somewhere in Austin, we don't know. We decided we better adopt the kid if we could, and we must have caught them at a weak moment because they said yes. So they signed off on it. Took us about a year and a fair amount of money, but he's now our son. He's eleven now. And smart as a whip, I don't know, he certainly didn't get it from me.

FRANCELLE: So you're starting all over. Does he go to Ingram schools?

RONNIE: No, he goes to the Coventry, or whatever it is, over here at the First Baptist. And he likes it there, it's good for him.

FRANCELLE: So what's the best thing about being back in Kerrville?

RONNIE: Karen, my wife. I just love it here.

FRANCELLE: And you've reconnected with old friends.

RONNIE: Yeah, and of course made new friends. Kerrville is home, it's been home for the family for generations, you know, and we have Mother and Dad's place there, it's about 60 acres and we bought another 12 acres next to us, so we've got plenty of room.

FRANCELLE: Do you garden ?

RONNIE: Yeah, but mostly it ends up being just tomatoes. I like to garden. We have several acres of grass around there, some of it St. Augustine as well as just grass. So I stay busy mowing that during the summer, and those Honey-do's....

FRANCELLE: Now did your brother Jerry, did he stay in the military?

RONNIE: He did, for 20-something years, yes.

FRANCELLE: OK, and he was a pilot?

RONNIE: Yes. He went through the Air Force Academy. And I wanted to go but they wouldn't take me with glasses. And my sister went.....

FRANCELLE: What did he retire as?

RONNIE: As a Lieutenant Colonel. My sister went to nursing school there at Breckenridge in Austin. I don't know whether she got her 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant bars there or, anyway, she got them shortly after. And she stayed in the military long enough that she's a full Colonel with an eagle up there when she retired, a nurse. And I'm quite proud of her.

FRANCELLE: Well y'all have lots to talk about when you get together.

RONNIE: Yeah, we do.

FRANCELLE: But you're the only one that's come home to the homeplace, then.

RONNIE: Of the three of us, yeah. I don't think you could drag my brother back to Texas. He's a city type. And my sister is just doing things all over. At the moment she lives in the Village or whatever there in Florida, that big....

FRANCELLE: You said Orlando.

RONNIE: Well she was born in Orlando and this thing is down close to Orlando, but I think they call it The Village, like 30,000 people live there. But she stays busy, you don't know where she's gonna be next. She was in the Peace Corps and she plays her baritone in Austria or someplace.

FRANCELLE: She comes home for reunions, I've seen her.

RONNIE: She does, doesn't miss them. She stays busy.

FRANCELLE: Well, I think you did a lot of travelling so you're probably not interested to do much travelling today, I imagine, you saw...

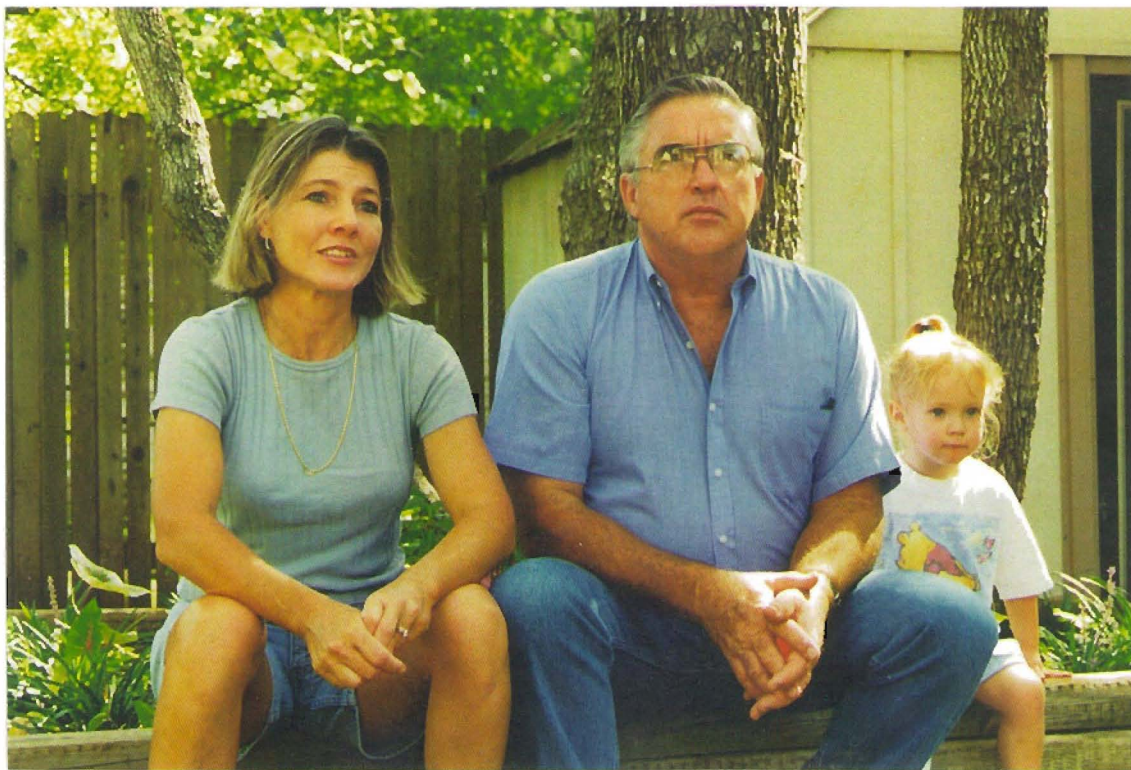
RONNIE: Oh I love to travel. Several times we've gone down to Mexico, with Bob and Mary Blackburn, and we've gone to Las Vegas with them, and we go to Las Vegas every once in a while. 'Cause that was my home. We went to Alaska a few years back, we sent to Europe once, and that's basically it. Most of the time if we leave the country we go to Mexico.

FRANCELLE: Well thank you for your time and your service, we enjoyed it. We've learned a lot.

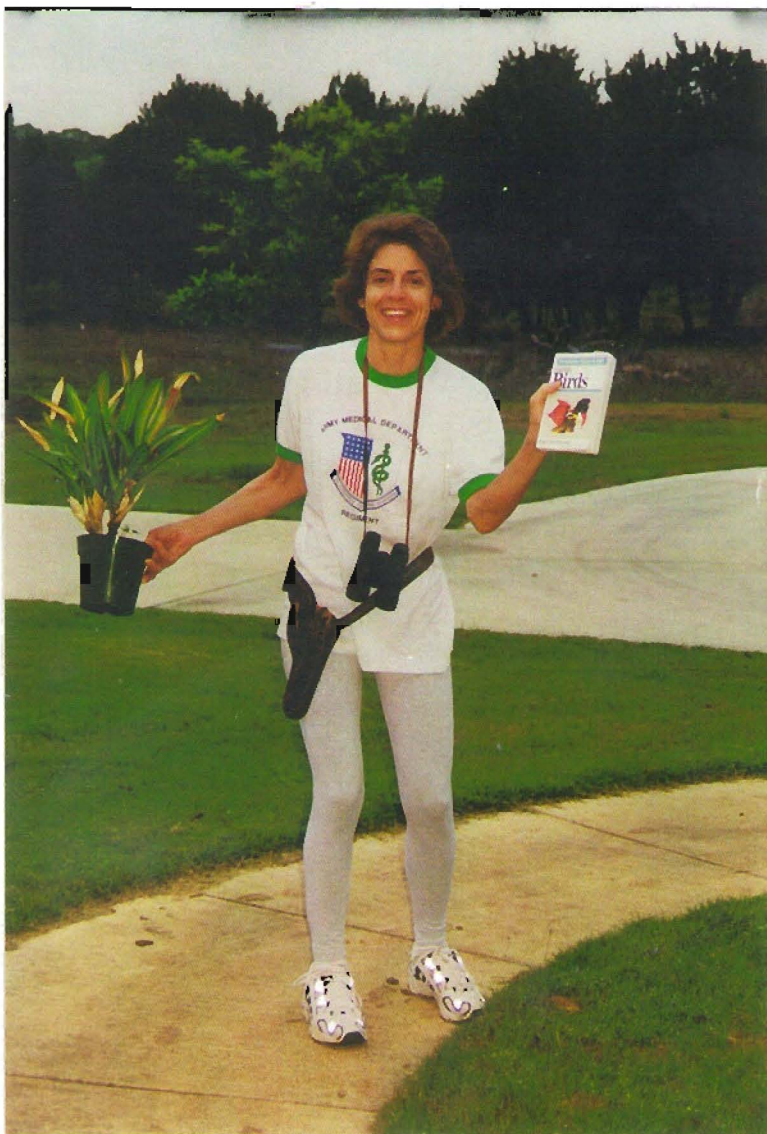
RONNIE: I'll tell you one thing, it's all true what I told you.

End





RON, WIFE KAREN AND GRAND-DAUGHTER TUESDAY WENDLE



RON'S SISTER SUSAN GIRARD MCMARLIN



RON'S PARENTS ELOISE AND SMOKEY GIRARD

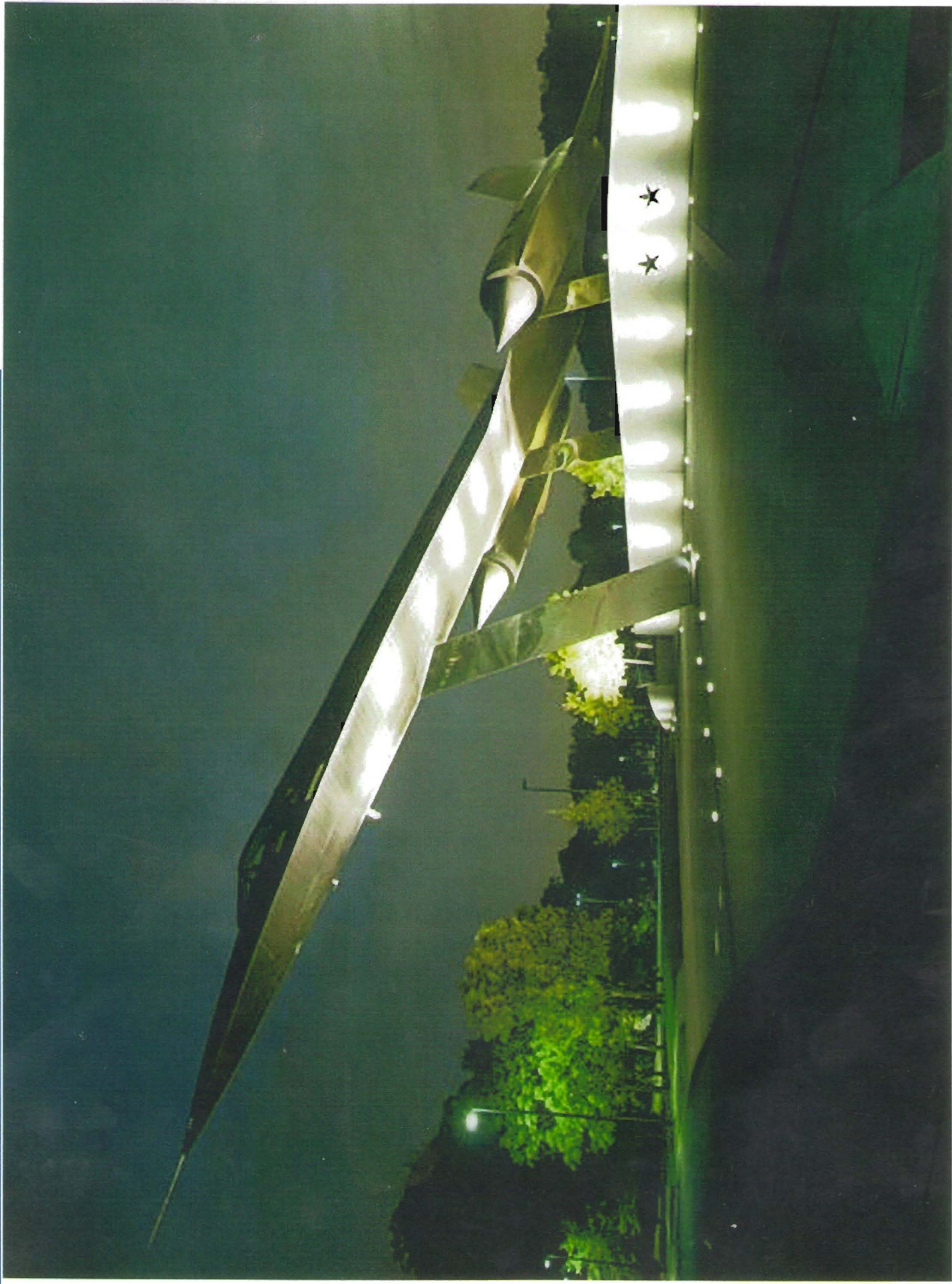
FLYING SUIT PATCHES WORN BY RON IN VIETNAM 71-72





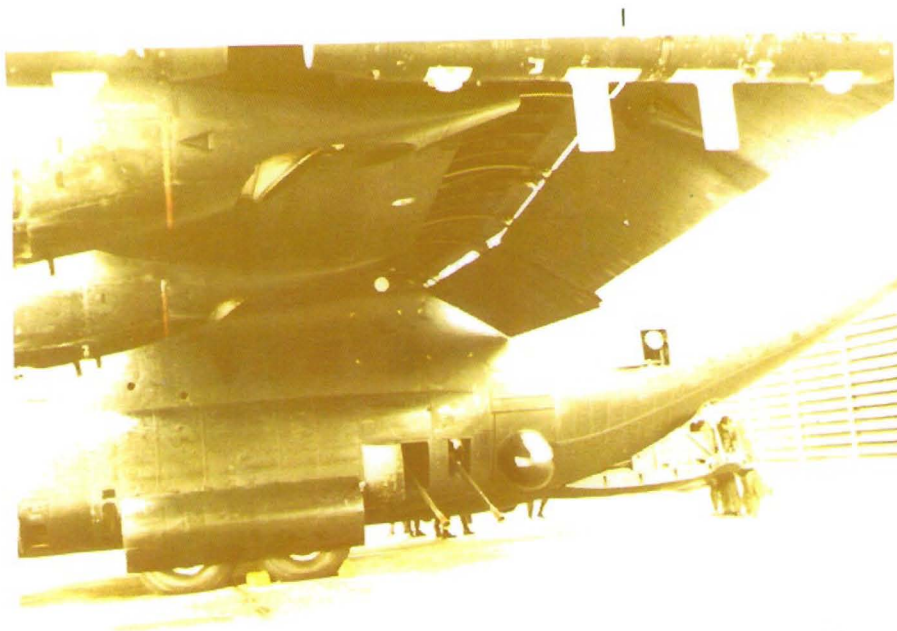
FRIEND, FRANK MURRAY, PILOT OF CIA A-12 AT AREA-51

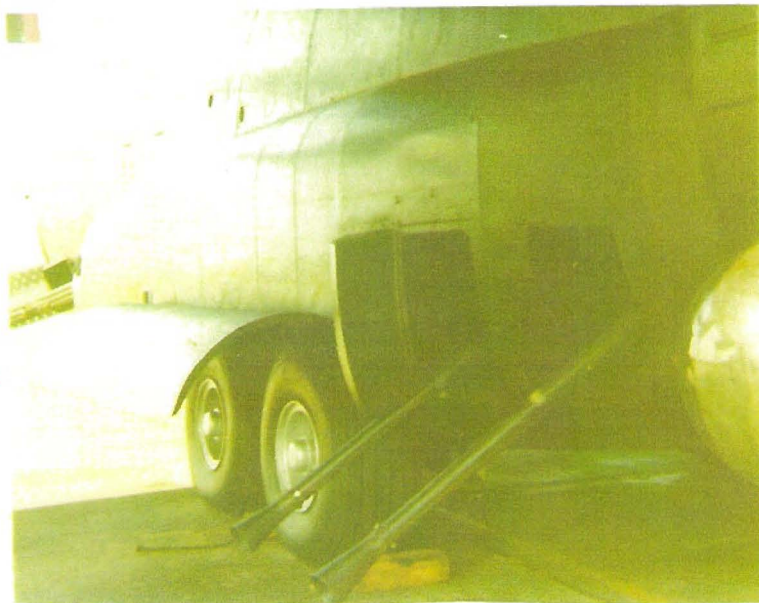






RON ON FLIGHTLINE WITH AC-130 AT UBON AB, THAILAND





AC-130 40MM CANNONS



AC-130 20MM GATLING GUNS

# 60-6924

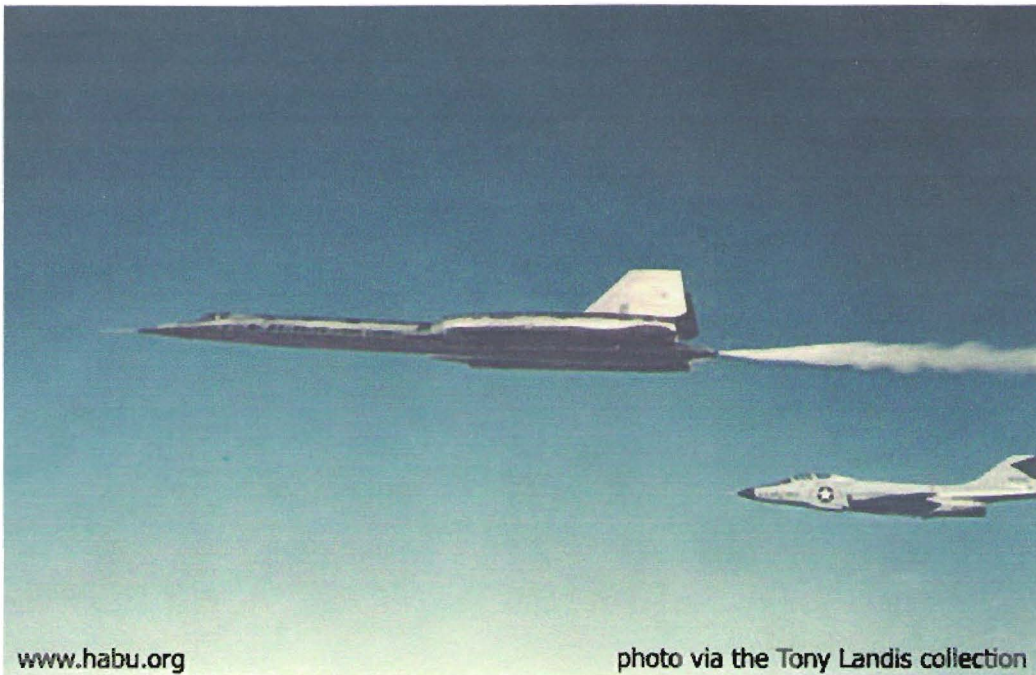


*The first A-12, 60-6924, dumping fuel during an early test flight - photo courtesy of Tony Landis*

The first blackbird wasn't even black.

Most people who know about the blackbird, or at least don't mistake it for "the stealth," are familiar with the SR-71. What many don't realize is that the SR-71 was the last in a series of aircraft based on the same airframe concept. The first in that series was the A-12 (not to be confused with the US Navy's A-12 Avenger, otherwise known as the Flying Dorito). Lockheed's A-12 was an internal designation that was never adopted by the Air Force, primarily because it was built for the CIA.

The A-12 was built under the codename Archangel, since it was a follow-on to the U-2 which had been built under the codename Angel. The first concept in the Archangel program was called the A-1, the next A-2, and so on. Those who hold the opinion that everything Kelly Johnson and his Skunkworks team touched turned to gold, might be disillusioned to know that the aircraft didn't start to resemble the final configuration until about the 7th design. The original concept more closely resembled a grossly oversized F-104, and would have been fueled by liquid hydrogen.



www.habu.org

photo via the Tony Landis collection

*Another fuel dump from the same flight; this photo is unusual in that it shows an F-101 flying chase - in almost all other photos the chase plane is an F-104 - photo courtesy of Tony Landis*

The first flight of an A-12 took place on April 26, 1962, less than 30 months after the CIA gave Lockheed the go-ahead on the project. Considering that everything on the airplane, including the engines, airframe materials, fuels, lubricants, fluids, tires, and navigation systems, had to be designed from scratch, then considering that there was no "prototype," the A-12 will probably remain for all time as the single greatest leap in aviation technology, ever.

*continued...*



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# ROADRUNNERS INTERNATIONALE



## RON GIRARD



I am a Roadrunner because I was a proud member of the 1129th USAF Special Activities Squadron at Area 51 from November 1966 until the project basically closed in January 1969. It was easily the most rewarding job I had while in the Service.

Because family or interested friends may read this later, I would like to include some biographical data before telling about my Roadrunner experiences.

People who live in Texas almost always have to tell others about how long they or their families have been there. I am no exception. My great-great-great grandfather, Black Adam Zumwalt, was in Texas before it was a republic. His half brother, Andrew Kent, was a member of the Gonzales relief force and died at the battle of the Alamo.

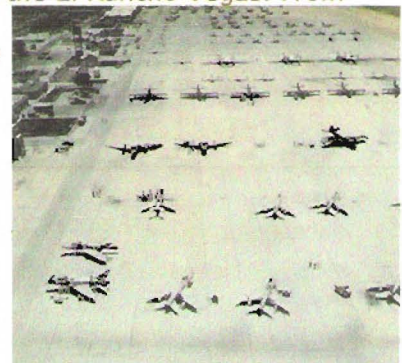
My great grandfather moved to the Texas Hill Country about 1860 and homesteaded. The family ranched there for the next 90 or so years.

In the 1920's my father, who was from Illinois, joined the Army Air Service, which became the Army Air Corps, then the Army Air Force, and, finally, the Air Force. While stationed in San Antonio, he and his squadron came to Kerrville on maneuvers in the mid 1930s and that is where he met my mother, who was a Zumwalt. They married and I was born in 1939 at Clark Field in the Philippines. As a result, I have a dubious claim of being a Texan.

In 1947, we lived at Brooks AFB. The Air Force came into being, mach 1 speed was broken, the AT-6 (later the T-6) still flew at Brooks, and the first P-80 (later the F-80) landed and I became hooked on flying when I sat in the cockpit. Because of force cuts, my father was RIF'd to Master Sergeant.

We spent the next two years in Wiesbaden, Germany. There, I learned who the Russians and Soviets were. The Cold War began for me. The Berlin Airlift began and an endless flight of C-54s flew over our home on their way to resupply the beleaguered people of Berlin. Joseph Stalin now replaced Hitler and Hirohito as someone to fear and hate.

In 1950, my father was transferred to Nellis AFB, Nevada. Las Vegas was different then. The Golden Nugget still had wooden floors and about the only thing on the Strip was the El Rancho Vegas. From Nellis, you could peer across 7 or 8 miles of almost open desert and see North Las Vegas. My father sometimes took me dove hunting in Paradise Valley. Today, all that remains of that is the Paradise Road. The F-80, F-84, F-86, F-89, and F-100 were on the ramp at Nellis.



The Cold War progressed. Soon, we began to hear of Frenchman Flats and we would awaken early in the mornings to a brilliant flash of light across the mountain to the west. Moments later, the old converted barracks we lived in for family housing would begin to rock back and forth and we would feel a wind from the blast. Atomic testing began in Nevada. Later, we were to hear of the Rosenbergs.

My father retired in 1952 with 30 years service in the Air Force and we moved back to the Texas Hill Country. My brother was appointed to the second class at the Air Force Academy in the mid-50s by then Senator Lyndon Johnson. I tried to go to the Academy, but failed the vision tests. My dreams of being a pilot were dashed, but my love of the Air Force and flying remained. I found I could become a navigator and receive a commission through the Aviation Cadet program.

After receiving my navigator wings and gold bars at Harlingen AFB, I completed navigator/bombardier training schools at Mather AFB and Castle AFB, CA. At the time, China began testing hydrogen bombs and I flew as navigator of several Seafish missions in a B-52 near the Hudson Bay region gathering airborne particles from the explosions. It was an odd feeling having the aircraft and crew tested for radiation with Geiger counters upon arrival back at Castle AFB.



Shortly, I learned what the life of a SAC crewmember was like. I began pulling Alert and was also introduced to Chrome Dome 24 hour airborne alerts.

Both called for our B-52 to be loaded with H-bombs. We were on Alert and stayed on Alert in October of 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the Crisis, we had over 40 B-52s at Castle AFB loaded with weapons and ready to execute the war plan. Fortunately, Khrushchev blinked first.

In 1963, our unit, the 330th Bomb Squadron, was deactivated and we moved men and B-52s to March AFB and became the 2nd Bomb Squadron. Soon, we began Reflex missions to Guam to pull Alert. Also, I received a very intriguing message while at March AFB. I was asked if I would be interested in working on a highly classified project in the western United States. Without hesitation, I said I was interested. Soon, TDY orders came sending me to Washington D.C. for an interview.



Upon arrival in D.C., I went to the Pentagon as ordered. From there, I was sent to another building where I received my first interview.

There, I was asked if I would consider working for the CIA. Again, I gave a prompt answer in the affirmative. The next day, I caught an unmarked bus at the Pentagon and went to CIA Headquarters in Langley, VA. There, the interview began in earnest. I spent hours each day for the next several days being asked the most personal questions you can imagine by a very skilled specialist. Upon completion of the interview, I felt rather strongly that I had failed the interview and that I had better resolve myself to being a B-52 crew dog for the rest of my time in the Air Force.

A month or so later back at March AFB, I was delighted to receive my orders. I found I was going to Las Vegas. Further, I was assigned to P.O. Box 882 at The Main Post Office. I was told to contact Walt Smith when I got into town. All this was about the most exciting thing that had ever happened to this semi-Texas boy.

On 20 Nov 1966, I called Walt Smith at his home and he told me he would pick me up in his car early the next morning and that we would go to an unspecified location for several days and he would further brief me the next morning on the way. I was relieved that the work had nothing to do with Post Office Box 882. I did not sleep well that night because of my burning curiosity and just a little anxiety.

After leaving my apartment the next morning very early, Walt drove out the Tonopah Highway from Las Vegas about an hour until we arrived at Mercury, NV. I thought this wouldn't be too far to drive, but Walt went through the checkpoint at Mercury and kept on driving northward through the darkness. At that point, I became less curious and more anxious. Sixty miles later, we had passed by the above ground atomic test locations and we arrived at a guard shack. Walt told me we were about to enter Area-51. "Area-51" meant nothing to me or the average American in 1966 so I had to wait a few more minutes until I was able to make out a group of buildings and then some hangars before I became aware of what it was.

Walt had us dump our suitcases in our rooms and then took me out on the ramp to see what it was he was being so darn secretive about. I cannot fully describe the feelings I had seeing the A-12 the first time. To me, the aircraft was incredibly beautiful, but a little sinister looking, too. Walt told me I would be planning missions for the aircraft, holding briefings, doing debriefings, and flying primarily on our C-130 (Boxer-30). He went on to say that we would also be able to fly in the backseat of the F-101's from time to time. Then, he took me into the chow hall where Murph served up a great breakfast. At that point, I dismissed any possible regrets I had about being there and never looked back.



I was further impressed by the security. We had roving patrols our in the desert, miles of isolation, then a guard shack. Then we arrived at the building where I was to help in mission planning. The building was surrounded by chain link fencing topped with barbed wire. There was a guard on the gate going into the building and our two mission planning rooms had cipher locks on each door. Also, each room had plenty of safes to store mission materials in.



I quickly learned the drill for mission planning. There was a lot of cutting and pasting and a great deal of technical planning. We got our share of flying. As previously stated, our aircraft we flew in was mostly the C-130. We used it often to haul our A-12 engines and Beale's SR-71 engines

to and from depot. That was mostly out of West Palm Beach, Fl. We





also went into Rochester, NY to pick up or deliver film for the A-12 cameras. We often got into Edwards AFB and North Base, too.



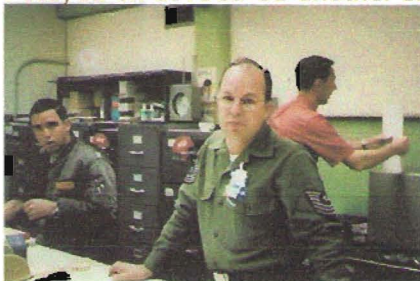
Flying backseat in the F-101 was a lot of fun, but we also performed a function by having an extra set of eyeballs looking out of the aircraft. We would follow the A-12 until top-off refueling. At that point, the A-12 would leave us behind as it rapidly climbed and increased airspeed.



The next several years were very memorable. I spent my time between Area-51 and Kadena AB. We had remarkable successes and terrible setbacks. Our operational missions over Vietnam and Korea provided our country with extremely productive information. Our loss of Walt Ray, Jack Weeks, Lt Col Simon, and Lt Col King was tragic.

Then came June 21, 1968. Frank Murray climbed into 131 and took off climbing to the north. Moments later, he overflew Area-51 on the way to Palmdale for the final disposition of the A-12 fleet. Several seconds later, his sonic boom reached us at the Area. As the sounds diminished to a faint rumble, we knew it was over.

I stayed on at Area-51 another six months, mostly acting as navigator for the C-130 that still operated carrying jet engines or classified cargo for the CIA. As they say, life must go on and I received orders to be a C-130 navigator at Sewart AFB and then on to Little Rock AFB in the 62 TAS. We provided airlift and made troop and cargo drops in many places during the next two years. Then, I received notice I was on the list to make Major. Not by coincidence, I received orders a week later for AC-130 Spectre

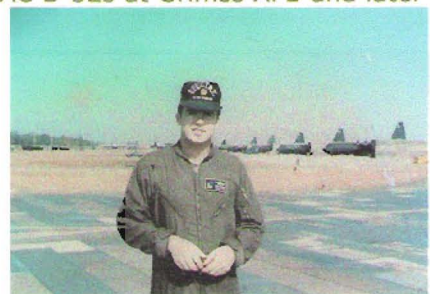


Gunships in Vietnam. The Cold War had become a Hot War and was up close and personal to me.

I arrived at the 16th Special Operations Squadron at Ubon, Thailand in July of 1971. Our primary mission was to destroy trucks and equipment on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We often found ourselves helping friendly troops in contact with the enemy, too. We quickly learned what it was like to get "hosed" by 23, 37, and 57MM AAA fire. A SA-2 SAM can ruin your whole night when fired at you and you realize that the AC-130 has no ejection seat and the plane doesn't 'jink' very well.



Returning home, I was assigned to SAC B-52s at Griffiss AFB and later at Dyess AFB. SAC did manage to get me checked out and returned TDY to Anderson AFB, Guam before hostilities in Vietnam ended. I flew my final 10 combat missions from there. Sending the greater part of a



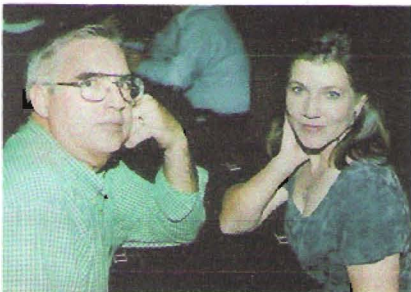
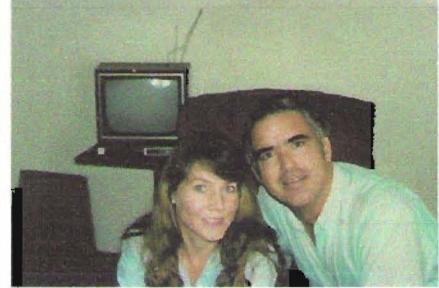
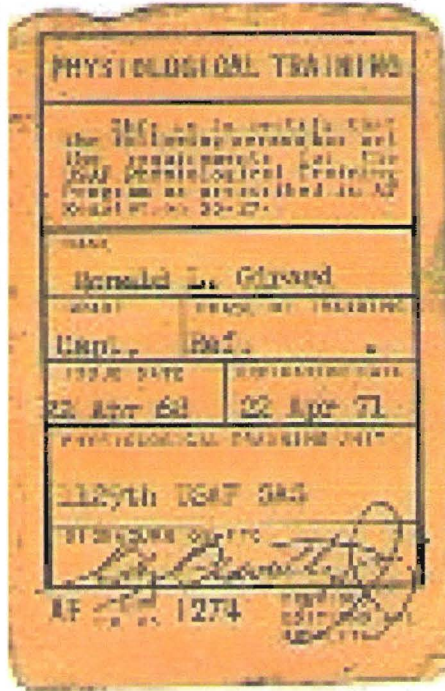
hundred 750 pound bombs hurtling earthward from 8 miles up served to fill any primordial needs I had. Afterwards, I spent most of my remaining eight years as the Wing Navigator or working in Current Operations. My final job was working primarily as Red Flag Project Officer at Dyess. Las Vegas seems to be a reoccurring theme in my life.

Military awards include the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Meritorious Service Medal, the Air Medal with 10 OLC, and the AFOUA with OLC.

Education includes Squadron Officer School at Maxwell AFB, AL and a BAAS from Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, TX.

I live with my wife and best friend, Karen, near Kerrville, TX on old family land. Karen and I enjoy my two daughters, Stephanie and Melissa, and her daughter and son, Tamara and Chad.





A few of my footlocker goodies

Links to more good stuff out of Ron's Footlocker in Texas

<a href="#">PCS Orders to 1129th</a>	<a href="#">Travel Manifest</a>	<a href="#">1129th SAS Unit Citation</a>
<a href="#">TDY Orders Overseas</a>	<a href="#">Air Crew Proficiency</a>	<a href="#">Reassignment Orders 1968</a>
<a href="#">TDY Orders CONUS</a>	<a href="#">1968 1129th SAS Orders</a>	<a href="#">1971 Letter from Slip Slater</a>



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