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National Museum of the Pacific War



**Center for Pacific War Studies
Oral History Program**

**Maj Gen (Ret) John Alison
WW II - U. S. Army Air Corps - Pilot
[Flying Tigers]**

Date of Interview: March 7, 2004

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Fredericksburg, Texas

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**Interview with Maj Gen (Ret) John Alison
(World War II - Flying Tigers)**

Today is March 7, 2004. I am William Cox, and a volunteer with the Oral History Program at the National Museum of the Pacific War, otherwise known as the Nimitz Museum, in Fredericksburg, Texas. I am here visiting with General John Alison (Retired) concerning his experiences during World War II.

✓ **Mr. Cox:** Where were you born and when?

General Alison: I was born in ___?___, Florida, in 1912.

Mr. Cox: What were your parents' names?

General Alison: Grover Alison was my Father, and Eloise Price Alison was my Mother.

Mr. Cox: I think you told me you didn't have any siblings. Is that correct?

General Alison: No, I had two younger brothers. One of them has since deceased, but the youngest one is still alive.

Mr. Cox: Where did you go to school?

General Alison: I went to grade and high school n Gainesville, Florida. Fortunately, the University of Florida is also located at Gainesville. We were right in the middle of a depression, so as we lived not far from the campus I naturally went to the University of Florida.

Mr. Cox: Did you have part-time work that you helped pay for your college?

General Alison: No. Fortunately my Grandfather had left enough money to put me through college, so I suffered no hardships.

Mr. Cox: When you were in college what did you study?

General Alison: Engineering, Mechanical and Industrial. I graduated with a degree in Industrial Engineering.

Mr. Cox: In what year did you decide that you wanted to go into the Army Air Corps?

General Alison: When I was about 12 or 13 years old. Some how or another I just thought being an Army Aviator would be the greatest thing I could do.

Mr. Cox: Did you have an occasion to fly at any time?

General Alison: No, my Mother and Father did not want me to go to the flying school. They didn't know what kept airplanes up in the air. They knew it was dangerous and I guess in those early days it was fairly dangerous. So they definitely didn't want me to go. One of my uncles got me a job with the State Department of Civil Engineering. I didn't want it. Right at the end of my college career I took the Army physical examination and passed it and went right from school, almost from graduation from college, into the Army Flying School at Randolph Field, Texas, which is located at San Antonio.

Mr. Cox: How many were in your class?

General Alison: I don't recall exactly. I would think approximately 40.

Mr. Cox: Was the training pretty strenuous?

General Alison: If it was, I didn't know it. It was for some. When I went through the school the training methods were not as sophisticated as they are today, and I think we lost some kids simply because they couldn't stand the strain of some of the very strict instructors who shouted at them. If they did something wrong they really jumped on them. I was fortunate because I had wonderful instructors who conveyed the basic principles of flying that you needed to know to get through the flying school.

Mr. Cox: What type aircraft were you trained in at that time?

General Alison: The Primary Trainer was the Consolidated PT-3, which was a biplane with lots of wood, canvas and wires, but it flew. It was a good trainer.

Mr. Cox: What colors were on the Air Force trainers?

General Alison: I think light brown, or khaki. I don't remember exactly.

Mr. Cox: About how many flying hours did you get before you got your wings?

General Alison: I think I had maybe close to 320 flying hours.

Mr. Cox: Quite a few then.

General Alison: That is a lot more than they gave the kids later when we were building up for World War II.

Mr. Cox: OK. So when you got your wings, what was your first assignment?

General Alison: We had Primary and Basic Flying Training at Randolph. Then we

moved to Kelly for Advanced, and at Kelly you specialized in fighters, bombers, attack aircraft and observation aircraft. I was lucky enough to be assigned to the fighter section. We trained in P-12 airplanes. It was an absolutely lovely, little, light airplane that was a delight to fly. I just thoroughly enjoyed the Flying School. I had good instructors and they made it easy for me.

Mr. Cox: What type of training did that consist of when you were flying – tactics, etc. Was any of that brought into it?

General Alison: Just very elementary tactics at Kelly Field – led standard formations, they drilled us in formations that the tactical units were using. You would fly in echelon or in the “V” formation. It was very rudimentary - very basic. The most important thing was learning how to handle the machine.

Mr. Cox: Were they pretty difficult planes to fly?

General Alison: No. The P-12 was a joy. It was fun. We were trained in strange field landings. We would actually just go out and land these little airplanes in a meadow somewhere. I never will forget that one time we landed in this meadow and on takeoff I ran through a covey of quail. I had quail all over that plane. The propeller threw one bird just right thru the wing. The airplanes were covered in fabric. We landed in absolutely unprepared fields. In Basic, of course, forced landings you were supposed to pick a field. The Instructor would cut the engine

and then you were supposed to pick the most likely place you could land. He had already surveyed it; he knew where you should land. If you were landing at one of the fields that he was familiar with you could go right on in and make a forced landing.

Mr. Cox: Since you were the student, did you sit in the front seat or the back seat?

General Alison: In the front seat. The Instructor sat in the back. On the P-12 though it was a single-seater.

Mr. Cox: OK. Approximately what was your top speed?

General Alison: A little bit faster than you could run.

Mr. Cox: Did you do aerobatics and that sort of thing in it?

General Alison: Yes. Actually we started the DP-3's in primary. Our class was the first class in the flying school to get the modern, low wing training airplane. We had the Seversky BT-8 and the North American BT-9. They were both modern, low wing airplanes. Then, of course, when we went from basic to Kelly Field we got into the tactical airplanes. The P-12 had been the Air Force first-line fighter. Compared to today's airplanes...

Mr. Cox: Where did you get your first gunnery practice?

General Alison: Not until I got to Langley Field into a tactical unit.

Mr. Cox: Did you go to Langley after you left Kelly?

General Alison: After I left Kelly I was assigned to Langley.

Mr. Cox: OK. Was there a different type aircraft that you flew?

General Alison: Yes, I was assigned to the 8th Pursuit Group, which was at Langley. There were two groups there. There was the 2nd Bomb Group, which had B-17's; and the 8th Pursuit Group, which had a two-place pursuit plane made by Consolidated, called the PB2A. You had a gunner in the rear.

Mr. Cox: So, you said B-17's — that must have been about the first models of the B-17's?

General Alison: They were the first, and only, B-17's that the Army had. They were just getting them. It was an experimental group to some extent. They were developing their tactics. LeMay was there. He was a 1st Lieutenant. He was really very active in developing the use of what became the strategic bomber.

Mr. Cox: What year was that?

General Alison: 1937.

Mr. Cox: How long were you at Langley?

General Alison: Almost four years. We moved from Langley to Mitchell Field in 1940 (the 8th Group), and very soon after that we began to break up because we were expanding for World War II. We weren't in it, but we were almost in it. I think it was the 1st Pursuit Group (we called it Pursuit Group, not Fighter Group) and it was at Selfridge Field in Michigan. The 20th, I don't know where that was. It may have been

at Barksdale. Then they had one in Hawaii, and then the 8th Group at Langley. This was the nucleus out of which was formed the World War II Air Force.

Mr. Cox: At some point in time there in that training I am under the assumption that you went into maybe a Research Group or something and was working on the P-40?

General Alison: No.

Mr. Cox: How did that occur?

General Alison: No, we had the P-40 and shortly after I arrived, maybe a year or six months, we got the P-36, which was the forerunner of the P-40. We also got what was the operational test quantity of the P-37's, which was a P-36 with an Allison engine stuck out on the nose and the pilot moved way to the rear in order to balance the airplane. When you taxied it you couldn't see out of it, particularly being small you had a hard time seeing out of it. It was just another airplane to fly. I guess in the latter part of 1939, or about mid-'39, we got the P-40's.

Mr. Cox: Did you have something to do with demonstrating that?

General Alison: Yes, I was at Mitchell Field. The 8th Group had moved to Mitchell. We had just begun to break it up, and we had formed the 57th Group out of the 8th Group. I was in the 57th Group, and also was Squadron Commander of one of the squadrons. I believe it was the 56th Squadron. I received a telephone call from someone in Group

Operations and said that I was to take a P-40 and fly to Bolling AFB. Something about demonstrating it to some Chinese, so I got in an airplane and I flew down to Bolling and reported to the Commanding Officer at Bolling Field. In his office was General Chennault and a group of Chinese. There were several Chinese Generals and a sales representative of Curtiss-Wright Company, who I knew, and their chief test pilot was there. I was introduced by the Commanding Officer at Bolling to all those present, including General Chennault and I believe the senior Chinese General was Peter Mow, who was very popular with the Americans. The Commanding Officer said that they would like to have me demonstrate the airplane. Of course I questioned him a bit because prior to World War II, with the anti-war sentiment and every time we lost an airplane it was in the headlines of the papers and how much it cost – how much had been wasted when that airplane was lost. So we were very restricted in flying, particularly low flying, acrobatics. Here I was, right in Washington, D.C., and I was told to do this. I said, “Well sir, what would you like for me to do?” He said, “We want you to demonstrate the airplane.” I said, “Is there anything special? You know we have these restrictions on what we can do.” He was very frustrated because he didn’t want to tell me to go out and really wring the airplane out because they were so sensitive over accidents. I could that the Curtiss

people were a little bit worried that I wasn't a very impressive looking soldier. Here I was asking all these questions. The Curtiss-Wright representative said, "Well, could our pilot fly the airplane?" I said, "Yes, certainly. It is fine with me, but the Commander here will have to call Mitchell Field and talk to my Commanding Officer. I'm sure there is no problem. I'm certain that he will approve your test pilot flying the airplane." The Commander at Bolling, and I don't remember his name, didn't want to do that. So finally, I guess in frustration, he said, "Well, just go out and fly the airplane." So I said, "Yes sir!" It was a cold day and the wind was coming out of the northwest, down the Potomac River. Bolling was a very small airfield, but there is a runway pointing directly into the wind. I got in the airplane and taxied down to the end of that runway. The Chinese and the Curtiss people walked out into the middle of the field. I knew what the P-40 would do. We were limited to 980 horsepower, but the engine was capable of a lot more than that. It had red lines and you were not supposed to exceed them. Naturally, being a kid, I had exceeded them before and I knew that the engine would run at full throttle for almost a minute before the engine would start to detonate and you would have to cut back on the throttle. I lined the airplane up, pushed the engine up to 980 horsepower and let it start running down the field. Of course I got airborne almost immediately because

I had a strong wind, and I retracted the landing gear. When I retracted the landing gear I just opened the throttle and got the maximum horsepower out of the engine. The airplane was light. I didn't have it refueled before I flew. Of course it didn't have armor plate, it didn't have bullet-proof tanks, it didn't have all of the radio equipment that you really needed in an airplane, so it really would perform. I did essentially just a half loop right off... I held it until I got up speed and until the landing gear was almost up, and then I just pulled it straight up. Of course the airplane responded beautifully. I went up and did a half loop, then I cut the throttle. They were standing in the middle of the field. I put the wing tip right over the group, opened the throttle and held the airplane in a tight turn at somewhere around 50 or 100 feet with my wingtip pointing right at the group. I came out of that into a Chandel, which wouldn't get me into any trouble, and landed. It was a very short demonstration, but it was cold on the ground. It did show what the airplane would do. It showed the power and the maneuverability.

Mr. Cox: Obviously you made a good impression.

General Alison: Well, I didn't know whether I did or not. I taxied back in. Of course I got back to the hangar before the group did. I got out of the airplane, shut it down and went inside because it was cold. The wind was blowing hard. As the group approached the hangar and came in

I was looking out the window. As they came in the door I could see from the smiles on their faces that they were not displeased. At least the Curtiss people weren't displeased. They began to talk and one of the Chinese Generals said to Chennault, "What we need is a hundred of those airplanes." That is when Chennault stuck his jaw out, he looked at them, he went to the gentlemen and said, "No, what you need is a hundred of those." He came over and he tapped me on the chest. I didn't know, but of course what he was trying to do, and this was necessary — the Chinese Air Force was exhausted. It had been almost decimated by the Japanese. The equipment, I don't want to say non-descript, but they had different kinds of airplanes. They had the Russian, the Italians, and a lot of people had been trying to train Chiang Kai-shek's Air Force. Chiang Kai-shek hired Chennault. What Chennault wanted was a hundred American pilots and a hundred American fighter airplanes because he knew that the Chinese Air Force had to have a rest period to reconstitute itself. The only short-term remedy you could get was to get professional pilots and the best airplane that you could buy. It happened at that time it was the P-40, but of course, our Air Force and the Navy Air Force were essentially disarmed at the beginning of WW II. If you will remember, it took six months for Admiral King to get enough destroyers to protect the East Coast of the United States. I think that we lost 500 freighters right off

the coast of the United States from attacks by German submarines simply because the Navy didn't have the resources to protect.

Mr. Cox:

The Gulf of Mexico is full of sunken tankers.

General Alison:

It was sometimes worse on the other side of the Atlantic, so the Navy needed to build up, the Army Air Corps need to build up. So neither Admiral King, nor General Arnold, wanted to give up their resources – 200 American airplanes taken out of the production line and 200 American pilots, which were badly needed to train this enormous Air Force that we were going to have to build to fight to fight WW II. It certainly was a penalty to both the Navy and the Army Air Corps, but Roosevelt either saw it himself, or was convinced by some of his advisors, that if — And this is what Chennault said - Unless we can give the Chinese Air Force some relief and stop the indiscriminate bombing of Chinese cities ... I had seen the newsreels of the Japanese bombing, coming over unopposed, and just laying their bombs through this packed Chinese city of Chungking. The Japanese were intent on breaking the morale of China. They had already taken all of the coastal cities and some of the more productive interior parts, and if they could have broken the morale of the Chinese people, the Chinese would have collapsed. All of the resources of China would have been available to the Japanese to fight us. Although we were not yet in the war, I'm sure that the people who ran our show understood

that sooner or later we probably were going to be in the war. There was over a million man Japanese Army penned down in China, and if China had fallen at least a portion of that would have been available for the Japanese to oppose us in the South Pacific. The Japanese wouldn't have won the war, but they sure would have made it tougher on us, and we would have lost a lot more people in the Pacific than we did.

Mr. Cox: We have about 15 minutes, and I want to touch on a couple of points, so – Before you went to China and took over as the Air Force Commander of what was the Flying Tigers, you were also involved in some lend/lease programs to ...

General Alison: Yes, I had been sent to England with the P-40's prior to Pearl Harbor. Actually I went over in April of 1941. A friend of mine, Lt "Hub" Zemke, who later became famous of the Commander of the 56th Fighter Group. I think it was possibly the highest scoring group in the European Theater. He and I were in the same group at Langley, the 8th Pursuit Group, which had P-40's. We were sent over to assist the RAF in the integration of P-40's into the RAF. It was a great and pleasant experience. The British let us fly their airplanes. We landed in London the night of the biggest air raid of the war in terms of casualties. We were in the West end of London, which was not hit as hard as the East end where the workers' homes were. The objective

of the German Air Force was the same as the Japanese Air Force – to destroy the morale of the British people and get them to opt out of the war, which, of course, they couldn't do. This was the last big raid, and we arrived there in the evening just as the air raid sirens were going off. It was quite an experience. I say the West end wasn't bombed as heavy as the East end, but we stayed in the Dorchester Hotel and we took a straddle of bombs right over the hotel. It shook us up a bit, but the hotel was not seriously damaged. The last bomb fell in Grosvenor Square where our Embassy is located. The next morning after breakfast we walked to the Embassy. I noticed that none of the buildings had been hit directly along the route that we walked, but there was dust and dirt everywhere. I thought the British were not very tidy. This was my first experience of being in a bombing attack. I couldn't put two and two together and realize that all of this had resulted from the bombing.

Mr. Cox: How old were you at that time.

General Alison: Oh, I think I was 28. By that time I had been in the Air Corps for five years. I was one of the fortunate ones, or we were – my generation because we got in ahead of the big influx and I had five years to practice.

Mr. Cox: I didn't mean to interrupt your story, I just wanted to get a time frame there.

General Alison: As a comparison, you asked me how many hours I had when I graduated from Flying School. I had over 300 hours of flying. When I got to Langley the B-17's (the big Flying Fortress airplanes of the Air Corps), and we couldn't afford to lose one, the pilots had to have 2,000 hours of flying experience before they became the Captain on a B-17. When the war started we were so short of pilots and airplanes both, and of course Roosevelt stepped up the production of aircraft, and in order to get pilots to fly the planes, they had pilots with 200 flying hours flying the B-17's. You can do that, but I would hate to be in an airplane and have a young pilot with only 200 flying hours, or less than 200 flying hours, flying the plane in combat. There were ten American kids in that airplane in the back end.

Mr. Cox: A lot of responsibility.

General Alison: Yes, a lot of responsibility, and of course we lost quite a few airplanes because the pilots really didn't have enough flying experience before they had to go into war. I had spent five years just practicing before I had to go to war, so I was very lucky.

Mr. Cox: The planes that you did the lend/lease to Russia – that involved being in Russia?

General Alison: We were in England, and we thought we were going over for perhaps three months temporary duty in England as observers and to help the RAF. Britain was just holding on by the skin of their teeth at that

time. The British really wanted America to join them in the war against Germany. They could not have been nicer to us. They made our visit to England extremely pleasant. It was one of the most enjoyable experiences of the entire war. It takes too long to go into what we did in England, but when the Germans marched into Russia the President sent his Assistant, Harry Hopkins, to Moscow to find out what we could do to help the Russians. We were not at war, but I guess the President anticipated going to war. Whatever we could do to help the Russians stop the Germans would certainly be to our advantage and the British advantage if we did actually have to go to war. Mr. Hopkins went to Moscow and he took an Army Air Corps General.

Mr. Cox: How did you move by transportation from England to Moscow? What was the route?

General Alison: I was told to be down at the railroad station at 11 o'clock at night. I didn't know where I was going. Well, I knew I was going to go to Moscow, but it was highly secret, not a word about this. The American Ambassador, Mr. Hopkins, and a small contingent were down at the railroad station. We had a 5-car train for three of us. We went non-stop to the northern tip of Ireland, got in a RAF PBY flying boat and flew almost to the North Pole, and went around northern Norway, and then flew south. We landed at Arkhangelsk, then from

there we flew in a Russian DC-3 (C-47). I had heard, and I guess this was true, the Russians had DC-3 (C-47's) built in the factory in Russia, which was put up by the Douglas Company behind Pratt & Whitney engines, which Pratt & Whitney had sold to the Russians. I think all of this was a legitimate sale, but I never understood the details and never really asked too many questions. Anyway, we flew in the DC-3 from Arkhangelsk to Moscow and we initiated arms talks with the Russians. When Mr. Hopkins left he didn't take me with him. He left me there and Zemke joined me with the first load of P-40's which came to Arkhangelsk boat. We put them together and delivered them to the Russians.

Mr. Cox: You were a Military Attache to the US Embassy in Moscow?

General Alison: Yes.

Mr. Cox: What was your rank at that time?

General Alison: 1st Lieutenant. Of course I was completely unprepared to be a Military Attache.

Mr. Cox: It is usually a little higher rank than that, but that's OK since you were probably well qualified.

General Alison: No, I wasn't qualified.

Mr. Cox: You mention that the time you were in Moscow hearing some noise that was unique to your ears. Would you tell me what that was? I think the Germans were approaching Moscow.

General Alison: The first 14 nights I was in Moscow the Germans bombed us every night, and I guess they kept on. The German Army was approaching Moscow and they got close enough that we could hear the German guns off in a distance. We felt that the city was going to fall. Finally they got so close... The military attache had a dacha. Everybody had a dacha, kind of a summer place outside of the city.

Mr. Cox: Still do.

General Alison: Yes. I spent many a weekend sometimes at the Ambassador's dacha, sometimes at the Military Attache's dacha, but finally they moved us into town because the Germans got too close. Then one night, I guess around 10 o'clock or so, they said "leave." We were all ready to leave. We got on the train and I think it took us five days and six nights, or six days and five nights, I can't remember, to go 500 and some odd miles by rail to the provisional capital of Kuybyshev on the Volga River. That was a rather painful, but fascinating trip by rail.

Mr. Cox: From there you went on down to Iran?

General Alison: Yes, from there I went to Iran and Iraq.

Mr. Cox: That also tied in with the lend/lease to Russia?

General Alison: Yes. It is a long story.

Mr. Cox: I was just touching bases because we are running out of time.

General Alison: Well, I went there and I delivered B-25's and A-20's to the Russians. Then, one day I got this magic telegram from General Arnold telling

me to report to China. I was in Tehran when I got the message. I got in a Russian B-25, which I had already delivered to them, and I flew it to Basra. I left it standing on the ramp and bought a ticket from BOAC. I went to Karachi, India, and then from there to China.

Mr. Cox: Were the Flying Tigers still in effect at that time?

General Alison: Yes, they were there. Their contract was up on July 4th, and I arrived in China mid-June, or maybe two weeks before they were disbanded. Here they were, they were the only real resistance to the Japanese, and the United States had no one to replace them. We had no units we could send to replace Chennault's American Volunteer Group, so we kind of went over as individuals. Bob Scott was an individual. I don't know how Bob got there, but he could manage most anything. Bruce Holloway was sent over as an individual. I was picked up. I was in Tehran. I was told to go there as an individual. The ones that were individually sent, along with Tex and Ed Rector, and the few AVG's that remained became the China Air Task Force. Later it became the 14th Air Force. We were really a shoe-string Air Force.

Mr. Cox: Did you become the Commanding Officer of that group at that time?

General Alison: No. When I got there Chennault had three of his AVG Squadron Commanders who stayed – the 74th, 75th and 76th. Frank Shields, a real fine AVG pilot became Commander of the 74th. Tex became the Commander of the 75th, and Ed Rector became Commander of the

76th. I was very fortunate. I had gone over with a detachment of the 16th Squadron out of the 51st Group, which was in India, and I was lucky since I got in as just a pilot. When I arrived in Karachi, I said, "I want to go to China. Give me an airplane." They said they didn't have any, but they said, "Unfortunately for you, we've got two flights that are leaving in the morning to go to China." They said they had no seats. I was talking to a personal friend who really ran the outfit over there, and he said, "John, I just don't have an airplane for you." They called me early the next morning and said, "How long will it take you to get out here?" I told them I would take a cab and be there as quickly as I could. He said, "Well, I've got a seat for you." The leader of the second flight of these 12 airplanes, celebrating going to war, had gotten drunk the night before, got into an altercation with the Military Police and they had beat him up, and he was in the hospital. So, I took his place leading that second flight. There were two flights of the 16th Squadron. We went to China and we flew with the AVG until July 4th, but most of the AVG were gone by that time. General Chennault put me in as Deputy to Tex. Then when Tex left I took the Squadron.

Mr. Cox:

I hate to cut this off because there is a lot more story here, but Tex is the driver and we have to honor the Generals.

General Alison:

I wish there were more time to.

Mr. Cox: Before we end this, I want to thank you for taking the time to give us this tape, and on behalf of myself I want to thank you for what you did in World War II, and after World War II. Thank you.

General Alison: Bill, you are very nice, and I appreciate those kind remarks. I'm not sure I deserve them.

Mr. Cox: Yes you do.

General Alison: Anyway, the Special Operations Command in the Pacific just took a long Oral History about three weeks ago when I was in Honolulu. They say they are going to send me a copy of it. If they do I'll try to have it copied and I'll send you a copy.

Mr. Cox: There is so much to cover – so many little details that only you experienced. It wasn't somebody else even though there were some of them that experienced similar things.

General Alison: There are so many things that I remember. I was with the 75th the time I was Tex's deputy and the time that I commanded it. From there I became the Deputy Group Commander of the 23rd before they sent me back to the United States.

Mr. Cox: May I ask one question? If the P-40 didn't have the maneuverability of the Japanese plane, the worst thing you could do was to turn and then you lost your speed. They talked about a tactic. What was the tactic that they developed to avoid that?

General Alison: I don't know whether they did. Most people didn't turn with them,

but I thought I was good enough to do it. That is something I had really practiced and I would take on all comers. I wanted to try that against the Japanese. Of course I didn't ask the permission of General Chennault because he had told us not to do it. I did it, and every time that I did it, the Japanese caught up with me so quickly that actually they could hit me while I was in the turn. I wouldn't do this at low altitude. I would only do it up where I had some room underneath me. When they got close and in a tight turn, I would quickly level the airplane, push forward and do the first half of an outside loop. That is something they could not follow so I would get away.

Mr. Cox: The details were not discussed on that yesterday.

General Alison: I got hit so many times.

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Transcribed by:
W. Cook
Hunt, TX
e-mail: jrcook@ktc.com
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