

Veteran: FOWLER, Wally
Service Branch: AIR FORCE
Interviewer: Keohan, Carrie
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{TAPE BEGINS WITH VETERAN SPEAKING}

Veteran: I retired in December of 1978. Always wanted to fly airplanes, and I had an opportunity to do that. I took my basic training in San Antonio, Texas, and Marietta, Florida, and Greenville, Mississippi, where I got my wings in 1960. From there I graduated and went to flying tankers, which was the KC-97, known in civilian as the stratoliner, flown by Pan Am for many years. I flew that for a couple of years, and then I went to KC-135s, which is the Boeing 707. The KC aircraft are for air refueling, and so we working with all types of aircraft. I flew the 97s for about two years, and then flew the KC-135s, and spent the majority of my career with the 135s from California to Michigan to Omaha, Nebraska, and then went to Vietnam in 1967 and came back in 1968. Came back into tankers for a few years and then went to Omaha, Nebraska. My primary job was as squadron commander of the maintenance squadron that took care of the KC-135s, but as such I was chief test pilot for that program, and then in quality control for about a year. Before I went to Osprey, Michigan, I was chief of quality control for all the base aircraft, and my last few years of flying I flew what's known as the assembly liner and flew dignitaries around for about three years, so it was a nice way to finish up flying. After that I went into civil engineering, and I stayed there for about three years before I got out of the service and retired in 1978.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Veteran: I was 41 when I retired.

Interviewer: How old were you when you went in?

Veteran: 21. And I've been in teaching now for about eighteen years, so I have my second career, and I'm very fortunate that I have two and a half careers. My hobby is music, and so I'm very fortunate in that I've had three careers that I love. I didn't want to get into teaching and yet I couldn't get out of it, and I love it.

Interviewer: You took your basic in San Antonio?

Veteran: Yes, and then I went to Marietta, Florida. The Defense Department had contracted civilian pilots to teach military pilots how to fly, and so that was interesting. It was a whole different point of view from flying for military to civilian. In fact, one of the things that happens when many military go into civilian airlines is that they have to "detox" them, so to speak, into how to fly on airlines, because it's a whole different type of flying than it is in the military. But, I enjoyed it, and enjoyed staying in Florida. From there, went to Greenville, Mississippi, and got my final air school there where we got our formation and instrumentation training.

Interviewer: So you had a classroom and practice?

Veteran: Oh, yeah. Classroom and practice.

Interviewer: Was it like going to college?

Veteran: Just like going to school. Weapons classes and systems classes—oh, yes. Learned about hydraulic and electric systems, talked about the engine, talked about flight dynamics, but it's all part of flying. If you're out there flying an airliner and you have electrical problems, you need to know what causes the problems. If you have hydraulic problems, you need to know what causes them and what you do in case you lose them, and so you have to understand the systems before you can be turned loose in an aircraft. It's very convenient to know those things. Then I went to Savannah, Georgia, for two years. I flew the KC-97s there.

Interviewer: That was your job there?

Veteran: I was a pilot, and that was also refueling missions, so that's where I got started in that business. Most of my career was in the refueling business. I got my first

taste of flying over the oceans right after I got there, because we went over to Spain and stayed a couple of weeks, but that was interesting. It was a great little aircraft, and like I said the airlines used it for years, but everyone wanted to transition to jets, because the bombers at that point were all jets, and the aircraft couldn't fly fast enough. I had an opportunity, because I was young, to fly the Boeing 707, or the KC-135, and so I took that opportunity and went to school. I graduated from school after about a years worth of training, and went to a little place called Ospula, Michigan, about ninety miles north of Detroit up on Lake Huron. It's gorgeous country. If I had to go north again, and I really don't want to go north, I'd love to go up there. There's definitely four seasons and lots of snow. I flew there for five and a half years, and then I came to Little Rock, Arkansas, and stayed there for about a year, and then got married. Right after I got married, I got orders for Vietnam.

Interviewer: You knew Vietnam had been going on for awhile. What were your feelings about becoming a part of it?

Veteran: Being in the Air Force, we were gung-ho. If you understand the concepts of that war, we were there because of treaties established long before the conflict. There's two reasons why we were there. One is that we had the treaties that we were dedicated to support, and when you're in the military you sign a contract that you will do what they tell you to do—you'll go where they want you to go. If you don't, they'll discharge you from the service—sometimes friendly, sometimes not so friendly. I was really a career officer, and I wanted to do this. I wanted the Air Force to be my career, and so I went. When I found out what I was going to fly when I got over there—it was a little clean built DeHavalin(?) Corporation aircraft. It was a twin engine cargo aircraft, and we called ourselves “trash haulers,” because we hauled everything from goats, and chickens, and ducks, to rockets, and bodies, and people—just anything they needed hauled from one place to another, we took it. My first assignment was at a place called Bungtau on the southern coast of Vietnam. It was an interesting place and a gorgeous place, and it was a place they called an “R&R site” for the Army. It was also the recreation site for the Vietnamese soldiers, and they partitioned off the town. I spent my first five months there, and we had six Aussie aircraft there,

and the Aussies had been known to party. I met this gentlemen at a party and he was the headquarters commander at Camron Bay, and he came down and asked me if I'd come there and work for him, and I told him "no," and he said the orders are out, so I did. He was running the command post there, and so I flew out of Camron Bay the last seven months that I was there. That was good flying.

Interviewer: I'm sure you made friends while you there. You might not have been around some of the major fighting there, but did you know anybody that died while you there?

Veteran: We roomed in little cabins there called "hootches," and they were board halfway up and then tent the rest of the way. The pilots all lived in one area, and there were fighter pilots, too, and so we came to know them. Two of my friends that I knew there were killed in their planes. They were fire fighters.

Interviewer: Did you want to be a fire fighter?

Veteran: When I was 21, I wanted to be and had great aspirations of doing that, but that didn't happen. In hindsight, as you said, the way it worked it out I had the safest career. We got shot at and we got hit a couple of times, and went back from time to time and I realized it was not like John Wayne said it was. They really were shooting live bullets over there.

Interviewer: What was an average day like?

Veteran: We would fly from our home field. Generally, we would fly either to Saigon or _____, which was a little city about ten miles north of Saigon, but they had a really huge military base then. We would go in and out of one of those two places, and we would pick up cargo and whatever they gave you to take to some little outpost. Most of it was palletized, meaning it was on pallets and we just rolled it in like they do today in back of our aircraft, and then we'd deliver it, and they'd take it out. We did haul passengers, too, from time to time. The interesting thing is that when we landed in Saigon and _____, it was just like the United States. You had 11,000 feet, three hundred foot wire and concrete runway and big taxiways, and a huge air terminal, but when you went out to deliver these things, if you were lucky you had eight, and they were very narrow,

and they were very short. I had come from flying the Boeing 707, which I had 11,000 feet of runway to land on and take off on and then I went and landed on a postage stamp, and so I had to learn how to fly it, but it was fun and it was challenging. Usually we would finish up somewhere around one or two o'clock in the afternoon, and started just about daybreak. Our orders were called "frag orders," because we were fragmented into individual units, so we had to go here and here and here and then come back. We came back to the central place we went to, and we were on our own, so we had a contest within our squadron for who would haul the most tonnage. We would turn ourselves over and say, "OK, we're finished for the day. Do you have anything you want to go somewhere else?" And they would say, "Yeah, we've got this four drums of fuel oil, and we need to take it out to Dong Hua," and we would take it out there. We were determined efficient by how much we could haul, and if we turned ourselves over to those people and hauled that, then we were more efficient, or we got more dollars for our gallons of gasoline that we flew. If you took any pride in what you did, you didn't want to just stop and go home. There were four of us that lived in a hotel in Vietnam when we were in Bungtao. The Air Force had commandeered a hotel, and we lived in the hotel. Our cafeteria was on the top floor, so we would go there and have dinner every evening. We stayed two to a room, and we became very, very close friends. While we were friends, we were still tough competitors, and it was the four of us that would haul the most tonnage. I learned what a monsoon was; I had no idea what a monsoon rain was. Weather was HORRIBLE at times, and our airplane was not a great instrument aircraft. We learned to fly entrance in real weather. The rain was just like somebody opened a pitcher and poured it out. If you had maintenance problems while you were out on one of these little fields you were in great trouble. It was your requirement to get that plane back, and if you had problems, you fixed it the best way you could. We were at a little outpost one evening late, and we took off and couldn't get the gear up, so we went back in and landed and were told we couldn't stay there. I asked why and they said, "We're going to be overrun tonight and they would love to have your airplane." I said, "But you don't understand; I can't get my gear up, and I've got to go over some mountains to get back to Camron," but he said, "You can't stay here. You don't understand." So,

we took off at night—did not get the gear up, and flew between the mountains because we couldn't get up high enough, so all kinds of interesting things like that would happen. I wouldn't want to do it again, but now looking back at that type of thing, it was interesting to do it. I was very fortunate in my career. I had good flying and lots of hours, and after my year, I came back.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in the hotel?

Veteran: I spent five months there and then the rest of the time in a hootch.

Interviewer: What kind of food did you eat in the hotel?

Veteran: Very fattening foods. Chicken fried steaks, mashed potatoes, gravy.

Interviewer: I guess it was like an R&R.

Veteran: It was, but if you're not out in the field fighting, and even those that were operated out of central places. If you did, then the food was pretty well prepared. The ground trips didn't get to come back every night and take a shower and go to bed, for the maintenance people and the people that stayed within that area, they were very well taken care of. It was our duty to supply them. We carried food, fuel, and everything else that they needed?

Interviewer: What one incident sticks out in your mind?

Veteran: I've got two or three. We evacuated a whole city—the four of us—up on the northeastern part near Cambodia. There was a village about to be overrun, and we knew from our intelligence that this was about to happen. So they sent us four airplanes up there to evacuate a village of about 300 people. We could only haul twenty apiece, so it was a chore getting in and out. In fact, we had to take people and their supplies out (luggage and all that kind of stuff). The runway was uphill, of course, and was about forty feet wide and made of dirt. We took them to Saigon, and flew over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The interesting part about that was that technically we were landing uphill and taking off downhill on very narrow runways, and we had to watch out for potholes that washed out. About two o'clock in the afternoon, we were coming in as low as we can, I've got gear hanging, flaps down, and engines pulled back, the windows open, the back door's

down to cause drag, and I look out the windows and a native walks out, and evidently we had disturbed his sleep. The men don't wear tops, because it's warm up in the mountains, and he had a spear in his hand and threw it at us. He'd had all of our help he could stand. I laughed so hard I had tears rolling down my cheeks. Just seeing him throw a spear at that big old plane because we had been disturbing him all day long. In another incident, we landed in a place called Pu Chi. There was a base called Pu Chi and a city called Pu Chi—they were side by side. Pu Chi City was about half Vietnamese and about half North Vietnamese. It was a long time before they determined who was gonna control. We landed there and taxied up to our depot and were going to take twelve Army people out of there, because they were going home, and we were going to take them to Saigon and they would catch an airline and go home.

Interviewer: Were they injured?

Veteran: No, they had just finished their tour and were going home. We had gotten off the airplane and were standing around. When I turned around, the tower exploded—just like in the movies. We knew we were taking incoming, meaning they were shooting rockets and mortars at us. The troops were starting to walk on, and I said, “C'mon—don't waste any time!” We had guys just diving and jumping into the airplane as quick as they could. I cranked up the engines, pulled up the door, taxied to the end of the runway just as fast as we could, mortars going off around us. It was just like a John Wayne movie. I mean, you couldn't have orchestrated it any better. Explosions everywhere, people were scattered and running. We jumped on the runway and took off, and just as we got ready to take off, one of those big old helicopters was right on top of us. The more we tried to lift off, we couldn't because of the downdraft. After I got out from under him, we took off and there were explosions going off around us. After we got out of the traffic, I turned the controls over to my co-pilot and tried to light up a cigarette (I was young and foolish at the time), and I couldn't do it. Once it was all over and you take an assessment that everybody is safe, it's OK. Until now, I had thought I was superhuman, but I knew now I was just like everybody else. Another time, we were flying one afternoon, and it was quiet and smooth. All of a sudden I heard language I hadn't heard in a long time. I heard yelling and things banging.

It was lunchtime, and these people had their little Bunsen burners, and they were cooking their rice and stuff, and about a half dozen of them had a nice stove going in the airplanes. They should've lowered the door and kicked them out {laughter}—not the passengers, the fire. We don't think about things like that. We fly airplanes and we live in a society that doesn't allow us to do that.

Interviewer: So, you stayed there for a year?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: Then you just went back home to your wife?

Veteran: We were assigned to another base after we got back to California. When we left, we were in Little Rock, Arkansas, and then my base after Vietnam was Travis Air Force Base in California, which is about forty miles north of San Francisco, and stayed there five and a half years. My primary duty after that was to come out of the cockpit and be in charge of quality control. I stayed there with that for a couple of years, and then I moved into aircraft maintenance.

Interviewer: So, now you've got a pretty good career going for you.

Veteran: Yeah, I had no intention of going into education.

Interviewer: Did you go to college with the G.I. Bill?

Veteran: Not on the G.I. Bill, but when I went to college we were heavy into Vietnam at that point, and I didn't do well with college, so I had to make a decision if I wanted to get drafted or do something else. The reason I didn't do well is I had other interests at that time, so I took some tests for the Air Force and passed. I had always wanted to fly, and so I did. Everytime I would get in a school they would send me somewhere, and I had to drop out of the school, and so when I came out of the cockpit I had an opportunity to go back to school. There was a bill for me to do that, and so I finished my last year and a half under the G.I. Bill, and got my masters degree in education. I teach drafting here.

Interviewer: Where did you graduate from?

Veteran: University of Texas in Tyler, and that's where I worked on my doctorate.

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