

**Veteran:** **BERCAW, Vaughn**  
**Service Branch:** **AIR FORCE**  
**Interviewer:** Brown, Chandra  
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**Highlights of Service:** **Germany, during Cold War (nuclear mission); Thailand (bomb loading crew), during early days of Vietnam War**

Interviewer: This is Chandra Brown. I'm interviewing Vaughn Bercaw 4/22/2002. We're at 4823 Skylane Drive in Baytown, Texas 77520. Are you aware that our conversation will be recorded and that the tape and transcription will be placed in the Lee College library?

Veteran: Yes, I am.

Interviewer: Do I have your permission to do that?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Veteran: I enlisted while I was still in high school as a senior. I left four days after I graduated and went into the military.

Interviewer: And this was in '61?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: Where did you go?

Veteran: They bused me down to Detroit, and that's where I took my physical and all the preliminary stuff when you're inducted in. And I left from there, and they put us on a train to San Antonio for Lackland Air Force Base, and I took approximately a month of basic training there at Lackland. We left there and they put us on another train and took a long journey up to Denver, and there I went to Lowry Air Force Base, which was a training base there for the field I was in, which was

aircraft weapon training. I spent 36 weeks (I believe it was) in training there from June to July...left there the end of July and left in December.

Interviewer: What did your training consist of there?

Veteran: Primarily basic aircraft weapons systems; different aircraft—fighters and bombers and gun systems. I didn't get a lot on the plane I was assigned to because it was a real new airplane, and they didn't have a lot of training yet. All they had were books that we could study on the airplane. Basically the different bombs and missiles, rockets, guns, and all that. We just took basic instruction on all that. It was fun, and I did real good at it. Colorado was nice.

Interviewer: From Denver?

Veteran: From Denver, I went home for about 30 days, and then to \_\_\_\_\_borg, Germany, and that was a three-year assignment. I was assigned to a F-105 Maintenance Squadron, but there were three squadrons on the base. Let's see, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the 53<sup>rd</sup>, I think, and another one, but there was a combined maintenance squadron called 36<sup>th</sup> Camron, that I was assigned to, and we worked all the airplanes on the base, and not just a certain squadron. The primary mission there—and of course that was during the Cold War—and it was a nuclear mission primarily. All the training, except for the gunnery system, was nuclear-based. Just uploading and downloading practice munitions in different nuclear bombs. Just had to keep qualified. And then also we had a what they called a Victor Alert Area, where they kept planes on standby for the pilots that lived out there. And they had several airplanes that were ready to go on a moment's notice to fight a nuclear war if need be. And we would go out there and periodically, when they'd change out an airplane, there was only people at the plane and one of the \_\_\_\_\_ out there for a certain period of time, and they'd take the bomb off it and move it out and then bring another plane in, and we'd put another brand new weapon up, and then we'd float it on and everything, and that was our duty out there.

Interviewer: Why did they only leave them there for a certain period of time?

Veteran: Well, this was a pretty complicated airplane when it had maintenance problems, so before they had a problem with it they just changed them out so that they could

take the plane back and check it all out, because all the time they were sitting there they weren't flying, and so they'd change them out and then you'd get them back on the regular flight line, and then they'd bring another one out there. They may have stayed out there three or four weeks, then they'd take 'em back and bring another one out. It was just a rotation system so that planes would get the same amount of flying hours. The practice missions they would fly, we would put small twenty-five pound bombs—they had a dispenser that would hold six of 'em—and that's what they would practice with. They were supposed to simulate the same flight characteristics as the regular ones would that weigh a couple of thousand pounds. And they had a practice range there not too far from base for bombing. Air-to-air gunnery couldn't do that in Germany because it was populated, and we couldn't do a lot of firing anywhere around there, and so we would take thirty-day assignments down to North Africa—Tripoli—to Wiels(?) Airbase, and that's where they would do the air-to-air gunnery missions. So in the three years I was there \_\_\_\_\_ down to \_\_\_\_\_ about a month at a time, which was a change, especially in the winter time when it was so cold in Germany. It was right on the Mediterranean—beautiful beaches.

Interviewer: OK, so you went from Germany back to Wichita, Kansas?

Veteran: Yes, after three years in Germany, there was only one time in Germany that I loaded any conventional bombs, when we were in Southeast Asia, and that's that alert they called one time. But they called alerts whenever the weather was so bad and they couldn't fly, or just thought it was a good time to do it. About two o'clock in the morning you'd hear Mack the Knife being played over the loud speakers out there, and you knew it was time to get up and get out to the flight line, and they'd give you a plane to load up and just practice all-out nuclear war mission, I guess you could consider it. But one time they called an alert, and we went out there and they brought us a trailer out there that had six 750 pound conventional bombs on it, and they told us to load that on what they called a Mer-rack, it was a six-station rack that hung under the center line of the airplane. I'd never seen one before, but we finally figured out and got it on there. It took forever, but we got 'em loaded up. It probably took us three hours to do what later took us twenty minutes. I didn't understand why they did this. It was in late

'64, so I imagine they were testing us because they knew the things that were coming, you know—the Vietnam conflict was just starting at that time, and they hadn't declared war, and they never did, but along the higher horizon that they would need this type of support. So this was kind of a practice to see what we could do. Later the majority of the missions flown over North Vietnam were in these 105s. I guess it was January of '65, I headed back to the States—took a leave at home for about a month, and headed down to Wichita, Kansas.

Interviewer: Were you married at the time?

Veteran: No, no, I wasn't married. I bought me a '61 automobile and drove down there. I had never seen the Plains before, but I sure seen enough wheat and grass {laughter}. And then I was assigned to the 355<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, I think it was—Fighter Wing. We pretty much stayed with the same load—the nuclear mode...not much conventional. The crew was formed as a toolbox—we had all of the special tools for a nuclear load, and we pretty much stayed in that mode. And I was only there about four months when they rotated a group of us over to Thailand, which was a TDY, or a temporary duty assignment.

{Tape stopped then restarted}

I'm going through my paperwork here, and I found this document that was in my records, and it's called a Human Reliability Certificate, and this is for what they called a Human Reliability Program in the Air Force, and it was a program to evaluate anybody who handled nuclear weapons by psychologists or a doctor that would verify that this person was sane, I guess, and fit to do this job. And it's funny, because I never talked to a doctor. I was evaluated in July of '62 while I was in Germany, and then again in November of '65 when I was in Thailand. But I don't know if they'd really want to interview everybody, because if they really interviewed them, they probably would have rejected half of the people they interviewed, because we were a crazy bunch.

Interviewer: So they just gave you the certificate, but you never got interviewed by someone?

Veteran

Somebody signed the certificate saying I was sane, which I guess I was, although there's a few I worked with I wouldn't call real sane, but they did the job. We left in June of '65 to head over to Thailand for what they originally called a 90 day assignment, but later changed it 120 days, because we stayed more than the 90 days on this particular TDY. Then we left on 9 June and didn't get back until the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, when we got back to McConnell. At that time, the main duty was to support the Vietnam War, or I don't think it was really called a war at that time—it was an action of some type. But we would load conventional weapons on the F-105 for various missions...primarily 750 pound bombs to drop on sights in North Vietnam—bridges, rail yards, whatever the government would let them drop it on. This wasn't like World War II where they just bombed and bombed until they gave up. We bombed what the government said we could bomb, and it didn't always seem to be the right targets a lot of times. Pilots would come back, and you could tell they'd be mad. There'd be ships in the harbor or samsites that they were building at that time that they wouldn't let them bomb, for some reason. The military wanted to, but our esteemed leader, Mr. Johnson and his defense secretary, McNamara, thought they knew better how to fight a war than the military did, so it was a sorry, sorry time, because they just wouldn't let the military fight the war. They tried to fight it from Washington diplomatically, and then that's what happened. If they were given the green light to go out and win that war, they could have done it within a month. They would have had the North Vietnamese on their knees begging for 'em to quit, but they were afraid of Russia and China, and so that's not the way it was fought. A lot of men died because they didn't want to fight the war like it should have been fought. I imagine you've heard that before. But I worked the night shift—they did most of the loading at night, and then would take off at first daylight and go to the mission up there in North Vietnam or wherever—they also had mixes in Cambodia and South Vietnam that they would support. And we would load all night long whatever they told us to put on the airplanes—either bombs or rockets...sometimes napalm. Not a lot, but at that time we would load some napalm. And then about five o'clock in the morning or so, this B-66 would come in—and we called him Bad News Charlie, because he'd have the word on whether they were going to fly that mission or not. It may have been a change,

you know. And if there was a change, that meant we had to out that and take everything off that we'd put on that night and put something different on, depending on the orders. I guess they didn't understand cryptic messaging at that time like they did later, so they sent somebody over there—you know, fly over there, to tell them what their actual mission was. But normally they would fly the missions. And sometimes a plane would get shot down, and then of course we'd go into what they'd call Rescap—we'd load napalm and rockets where they could fly close support for the downed pilot, and they'd come back and they'd turn right around and head back to help out while the helicopters are going in to rescue them. In the Vietnam War, there was more 105s shot down than any other airplanes as far as by enemy fire, and that was our guys, you know. They were always wanting to go back and help. And we had commander calls. I remember one in particular where we went to our normal commander's call, which would be like a meeting when our guys would get instructions and tell people what was going on and everything, and they'd show us strike films, and things like that. But that had one film of a pilot that had got shot down, and he was telling his story of how he got shot down, and the big effort that was made to rescue him, because he was rescued. Very interesting. They had planes on top of planes at different levels fighting. Everything from those A-1 prop planes flying close support to the 102 fighters way up high, you know, in case any MIGs come in, and things like that. But it was a neat time. We didn't have some of the supports, you know, like tools. We were still using our big toolbox for special weapons out there, and we were loading conventional bombs, and a lot of those tools didn't do us any good at all. We ended up leaving them there when we left. We just took the tools that we could use, and some of the special weapons tools we had to take back, but the rest of it we just left there in boxes. But we had our personal tools that helped out.

Interviewer: Did they just not send ya'll any, or were they supposed to send them with ya'll?

Veteran: No, we had our personal toolboxes with the regular tools you'd need for a maintenance job—wrenches, sockets, and screwdrivers. But some of our bomb loading tools that you'd need. We had what we called NJ1 bomb\_\_\_\_\_, which is

a little motorized vehicle that you would use to load bombs—it was hydraulically operated. {Veteran goes across the room to locate photographs.} That's me.

Interviewer: So, ya'll had plenty to eat. Is that on the base?

Veteran: No, that was downtown. I'm there holding my breath. See—that's the hogs head there? This is their meat market.

Interviewer: So, ya'll didn't have any problem with going downtown and getting food?

Veteran Some places you could eat—some places you wouldn't even go in because you couldn't breathe. Very spacey and stinky stuff. Yeah, we got time off, but the first time we worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, so we didn't have much time to go down there. When you'd go down there you could buy steaks or Cokes. You may take a bottle with you. You wouldn't drink their liquor, because it had a problem. They wouldn't let anybody buy at what they called the Pli-6 Store on base, which was the spirits store, like a liquor store. But anybody under 18 or maybe it was 21, they wouldn't let them buy liquor, because it's like in the states here. The guys were going downtown and they were drinking the Thai whisky, which is just terrible, and you could taste and smell the formaldehyde in it. Guys were going blind drinking that stuff, and so finally they changed it so that anybody over 18 could buy liquor, and so you'd go to the Pli-6 Store and you'd buy a bottle of whiskey or Imperial or P&M, we called it putrid and \_\_\_\_\_. It was a dollar and ten cents, and we'd take it down and buy Sprites and mix it, and that's what we'd do for our relaxing time, I guess you'd call it.

Interviewer: You said you were there for 120 days?

Veteran: We were there until August—from June until the 27<sup>th</sup> of August, and then sent us over to Okinawa to the Kadene(?) Airbase in Okinawa for almost two months. We were there until 29 October and then back to Kraut(?) again for another month. And I don't know why they sent us back to Okinawa—just to give us a rest I guess, because we worked from June to the end of August just non-stop everyday, and they were wearing the airplanes out, I think, so they sent them back to Okinawa to get some maintenance. The airbase at that time was pretty small.

They didn't have much on the base. The dining hall was small, although the food was pretty good. They had a small officer's club and airmen's club. They were starting to build the base up, and they were lengthening the runway, so it may have been in that period that they were working on the runway that they sent us back to Okinawa.

Interviewer: What did you do when you were in Okinawa—more training?

Veteran: This training, they were doing some flying and we'd support that, but it was just back to bomb dispensers and small bombs to simulate, but you can use the same bombs to simulate that's conventional. We didn't work an awful lot. We may work one day, and the next day maybe not. It depended on how many missions or sorties they were going to fly, and they may not need everybody. {Cuckoo clock begins chiming—can't make out comments.} And then we went back to Korat for another month just doing the same thing we did before. Working everyday loading all night and sleeping during the day.

Interviewer: And where was that?

Veteran: Back at Korat, Thailand.

Interviewer: How do spell that?

Veteran: K-O-R-A-T.

Interviewer: That was the name of the base?

Veteran: Yes.

Interviewer: Why did ya'll load at night—because they were bombing all day?

Veteran: Yeah, the missions would take off in the morning, and they'd bomb in the daylight. They didn't have many missions at night. There was a few—sometimes the Wild Weasels, of course they didn't have Wild Weasels the first time we went there, but they did have some missions at night, not a lot.

Interviewer: {Unable to understand interviewer's question.}

Veteran: Went back to McConnell Airbase in Kansas.



Interviewer: For more training?

Veteran: Back to the same old thing that we did before—general supporting of airplanes on the different missions they flew. The bomb dispensers with the six bombs and guns, some missile firing, too. Sidewinder missile, the air-to-air missile that they used at that time and still use. They'd carry a five-inch rocket in a missile, and they'd go up and then they'd hit part of the rocket, and they'd home in on it and fire the other missile. Then while I was there we had a trip out to George Air Force Base in California for some more training out there. And then I had a trip, a TDY out to Las Vegas, and that was really interesting because they said they had a plane waiting down there at the ranch for us to go to Las Vegas on, so we went down there. There was just about six of us that was to go out and evaluate tow targets that they used for air-to-air gunnery practice. And then we got down there, it was an old C-47, a goony bird they called it. We got on the airplane, and a guy hands you a parachute and says, "put this on." I thought, "they've really got a lot of confidence in their airplane." And it was a long flight, because the plane was so slow. And we had to stop in Albuquerque to refuel to go to Las Vegas. It was cold—it was in the winter time, and there was very little insulation on the airplane, and it was cold. I can remember that. And I stayed at McConnell for about a year until the following {END OF SIDE A}

{SIDE B BEGINS} ...this time I went home for leave—my home was in Michigan, that's where I grew up. East Lansing, Michigan. And then I got a flight out to California, and then got on a plane back to Thailand, and of course we went into Bangkok. At that time, after being in Thailand the first time and then going back, the first thing when they opened that plane's door, I could tell from the smell I was back in Thailand. It has a big smell, and they could fly me around the world, and if they landed in Bangkok, even with my eyes closed, I'd know where I was. Just a certain smell. The second time I went back, we got one day off a week, which for our crew was Sunday. So we'd head into town and we'd buy a bottle of whiskey or something and go into town and buy Sprites or whatever, and so we spent a little more time in town at this one place we went (we called it Mama-san and Papa-san), and we went over to their house. If we

got too tipsy, if we had a little too much to drink, they'd put us in one of those little sam\_\_\_\_\_ they called them, which is a three-wheeled bike-cart thing, and they'd send to the house and we'd sleep the night there and go back to the base the next morning. But one of the crew members and me would usually go down there together, because Peterson, the crew chief, he couldn't hold his liquor. He'd pass out before he got two drinks down him. {Evidently showing photos at this point} This is Pete, this is John DeVore here, and this is me, this is Terry McFarland—once in awhile he'd go with me, but he didn't do a lot of drinking. He was from Florida—he was from Missouri, I think. I'm not sure where Pete was from.

Interviewer: Where are they now?

Veteran: I don't know.

Interviewer: You don't keep in touch or anything?

Veteran: No. I need to get out on the Internet and see if I can find any of them. There's a site on the Internet they call Classmates, and you can register on there, and then you can go to the military site and put all the places you were stationed, and they'll have a list of people who registered at the same site, and you may recognize one of them.

Interviewer: When you went back to Korat, you were doing the same thing?

Veteran: Yeah. This time it was a little more organized. The first time we were there, they didn't have a lot of support equipment, like I said before. So they would bring bombs in on flatbed trucks and take them off of the trucks and lay them on the ground down at the end of the ramp. And you'd unload these bomb lifts, and you'd have to run down to the end of the ramp, pick up a bomb, and bring it back to the airplane, load it, and then just keep going back and forth until you got 'em... There was usually six bombs, which took a lot more time to load an airplane that way. The second time we were there, they brought the bombs out on a trailer—six bombs on a trailer with all the fuses and everything all there, and all you had to do was take 'em off the trailer and put 'em on the airplanes. Increased the productivity, you might say. You could load an airplane in about half the

time we did before. And they had lengthened the runway, so they weren't scraping the treetops when they took off anymore. It's really neat if you're out there at night and one of those things takes off. It's just amazing the fire coming out from back of that airplane. In full after-burner, you'd get a blue flame about fifteen or twenty foot long coming the back, and then they used what they called a water ejection. They'd actually inject water into the after-burner, which makes steam, which gives them extra thrust, and that would turn it to orange, and there would be about thirty-five to forty feet of flame coming out the back of that airplane with full thrust. It was pretty neat to watch.

Interviewer: So, how long were you there this time?

Veteran: I was there another nine months.

Interviewer: And what year was this?

Veteran: This was '67. I came back from Thailand after the second time when I was at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona the end of August '67. The permanent assignment that we had over there was one year, but because I'd already spent three months there the previous time, they knocked that off, so I only had to stay there nine months. I didn't have to use that time, but I did so I could get back earlier.

Interviewer: At Williams Air Force Base in Arizona, what did you do there? Did you do the same thing?

Veteran: No, it was a different airplane, and it was a training squadron. We went to the F-5 fighter, which is an international fighter made by Northrup which was used mainly to train form pilots. We would load practice bombs and guns in support of pilot training primarily for form pilots there. Let's go back to Korat the first time. One night we was out there working. I had just gone down to get a bomb at the end of the ramp. We were picking it up, and all of a sudden I heard the loudest noise I had ever heard. I mean, I thought it was a bomb that went off, to be honest, and I was just kind of waiting for the next one, which didn't happen. Because you can't outrun it—it doesn't do you any good to run. Then all the noise died down, so I headed back to the plane I was supposed to load, and the

plane right next it, that sidewinder missile had fired off of it. That's what had made all that noise. It's a heat-seeking missile, but it fired safe so it wouldn't harm, but it only flew a couple hundred feet at the most, and hit an airplane jack that was out there on the edge of the ramp, and the mortar blew up. But in that two hundred feet, it had gained enough speed that they found the nose of it a quarter a mile away, and the warhead went through one building. The influence fuse ended up in the pilot-ready or pilot's briefing room. A chunk of it hit a truck down there that a guy was sleeping in. It was a pretty bad thing. You see, they always carried these sidewinder missiles in case they were attacked by a MIG or something like that, and they could fight back, but normally they didn't fire it, so they'd come back with the missile hot, and then what we did we'd take the missile off, put it on stand, and then go ahead and check out the electrical systems. For every load, you'd have to check out the bomb release system, make sure you'd get the bullets down there to release the bomb. That's what they were doing when the missile went off, and I don't know if they ever figured out why the missile fired when they were at the bombing system, but we would take it off, check out the systems and then load the missile back on and then the bomb, so we never had that problem. But this group was taking a shortcut. The second time I was there, one morning or night I was in the bathroom shaving in the barracks, and I heard a real loud noise come down from the flight lane—you could hear it. Some of the guys said, "What was that?" I said, "A missile just fired down there in the flight lane," because it was the same sound I heard from a year before. It wasn't as loud because you were further away, but sure enough they had another one fire, and this time the airplanes were going kind of toward each other. When the planes set down on the ground, the missiles are pointed downward—kind of tilted downward, because when the planes are flying, it flies kel-heavy, so then the missiles would be kind of level. And it fired, and the guy that lived across the hall from me in McConnell was prepping two liquid fuel lockets—they were thousand pound warhead M-83s—C model. And they were getting them ready to load on an airplane, when the missile took the whole front wheel and undercarriage out from underneath the trailer. He got some shrapnel and got hurt a little bit, but if that thing had been another two feet higher, it would have slammed into one of those missiles, and we would have had a big mess on that

airbase if one of those warheads had gone off or hit the rocket motor, because that liquid fuel is added to chemicals and when they're mixed they ignite very ferociously, providing the thrust for those rockets. That would have been a mess.

Interviewer: When you came back home for the week, you said you lived in Detroit?

Veteran: No, East Lansing.

Interviewer: Were you welcomed back home? How did they treat you when you got back—your friends and family?

Veteran: I never had anything negative said to me that I can remember from being in Southeast Asia. I know that there was a lot of people who said they got spit on, but I had any adverse reaction. And I went back over to Williams there in Arizona, and didn't have any problems there. I don't know, there was probably certain places like California and some of the more liberal states that they had those problems, but I didn't personally.

Interviewer: And then you went from there to Arizona.

Veteran: Yeah, to Williams Air Force Base, which is southeast of Phoenix, out in the desert. My thoughts about that place was I didn't want to be there, because when I drove down into the valley, it was 118 degrees, and I didn't have air conditioning. I had a Jeep at that time, and there was no air conditioning, and it was miserable. That's where I met my wife, too, in Arizona. I stayed there about a year and decided to get out. I got out in December of '68. We got married at the end of August. I knew if I had stayed in the Air Force, they would have just sent me right back over there, and I didn't want to go back over there again. We were married, and so I got out and went to school for a couple of years and finished college. Then I got a job with Northrup, that built the airplanes I was working on here in Arizona. I got a job with them over in Saudi Arabia.

Interviewer: What was your degree in?

Veteran: Basic engineering. I would have been an engineer if I could have passed all the math courses, but I'm not a good mathematician.

Interviewer: Me, too.

Veteran: But when I started radio training at Saudi Air Force Base, they had the same bombing systems and gunnery systems.

Interviewer: Did your wife go with you?

Veteran: Yes, she did. She worked there, too. She was a secretary at the consulate for the school for the American students, and she worked for an officer. Got to be program director secretary. That's where we saved all our money.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}