

Oral History Transcript (Phone Interview)

Interviewer: Isaac Thompson

Interviewee: Bruce Fister

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(Before the audio recording begins I had asked Mr. Fister how he was doing)

Mr. Fister

I guess I'm OK. I spent a good part of the day out in the boat and it was pretty rough.

Isaac

Oh yeah.

Mr. Fister

Yeah. It's my fault though.

Isaac

Waves are choppy.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, it was, yeah, it was pretty much so. It was pleasant going out. I went down. Well, you don't know.

Mr. Fister

You know where Emerald Coast Marine is in Niceville?

Isaac

Oh, yes, Sir.

Mr. Fister

Yeah. So we live right next door to that. So I went from there all the way down to LaGrange Bayou. It goes way back up in there and you go under the Mid Bay Bridge and then you go for a while. Anyway, it's like going back 100 years in time.

Mr. Fister

It's just yeah, it's just crazy. So anyway, you want to interview me about Vietnam?

Isaac

Yes, Sir. If that's all right with you

Mr. Fister

Yep. Well, sure.

Isaac

I really appreciate you taking the time to let me call you

Mr. Fister

No, its...yeah, I'm glad to share the experience. You know, kind of give you a little background on this.

Isaac

Oh yes sir. Yeah, I was curious, like where you grew up and just what your life was like before you got involved with the military.

Isaac

I'm not sure if you volunteered or you were drafted or what happened.

Mr. Fister

Well I was born and raised in Cincinnati.

Isaac

Ok yes sir.

Mr. Fister

Are you recording this?

Isaac

Yes, Sir, I am. Is that all right? I can...

Mr. Fister

No, it's fine. I was going to suggest that you do. I don't. I don't know if I had, if I were doing it, I'd use GarageBand or something to do it.

Mr. Fister

But that's fine that, that makes it a little easier. But yeah, I was.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. So that I can remember it all.

Mr. Fister

Well, I was born and raised in Cincinnati, OH and had a real stable upbringing. Lived in the same place all through my high school years and had good parents. They made me toe the line but they were good. Had a younger brother. He's four years younger than I am.

Mr. Fister

He's...uh he is also a Vietnam vet, but unfortunately he passed away a couple years ago. But then I uh...I applied to go to the Air Force Academy and unbeknownst to me, they accepted me. It was crazy. I was actually looking to play football.

Isaac

Oh wow

Mr. Fister

But that didn't turn out that good. But I was also a high school gymnast and so I pursued that and I was....I was OK. I mean our our team was always in the top 20 teams in the country, which is remarkable because real most of the people didn't have any experience and we had a really great coach. He's a Japanese-American and yeah, he would have been in the Olympics except he sustained a shoulder injury and that kept him out, but....

Isaac
Yeah.

Mr. Fister
Anyway, so I went to the Air Force Academy and when we got out, you know, we all back in those days, everyone wanted to fly airplanes. So, uh, I went to Reese Air Force Base. Reese is closed now, but it was in Lubbock, TX or outside Lubbock.

Isaac
Oh, OK.

Mr. Fister
Yeah, so anyway, that's where I learned to fly.

Isaac
Yeah

Mr. Fister
And almost all my classmates back in those days, we all wanted to fly airplanes and that's pretty much what we did. We had really notable people. A guy that was in my squadron at the Academy, he flew F4s and he flew 285 missions in North Vietnam.

Isaac
Wow

Mr. Fister
So he was really a good combat pilot.

Isaac
Yes Sir

Mr. Fister
But I flew C123s in Vietnam, which is the....just search for it on Google and you'll see what.

Isaac
Yes sir, those are the transport planes, aren't they?

Mr. Fister
Yeah, yeah, it's an old piston pounder. There aren't many people alive today have flown R 2800 engines. That belch smoke and backfire, you know.

Isaac
Yeah.

Mr. Fister
So anyway, that's that's what I did for a year in Vietnam, and I flew all over the country.

Isaac
I was curious, I was gonna ask you a bit about your your pilot training like kind of what that involved, you know.

Mr. Fister
Yeah, sure. Well, you know pilot training was in two phases back then. It was, the primary phase was in T37s and we had no previous, none of us had any flying experience.

Isaac
Yes sir

Mr. Fister
If we did, it was by accident Now today there's logistics training and all that sort of stuff, but we never....you know the first time I flew an airplane was in the jet. So....after my 6th ride was I was up solo.

Isaac
Oh, wow. OK. So...uh...they had you ride along for...

Mr. Fister
Yeah, I had an instructor pilot

Isaac
Yes Sir.

Mr. Fister
OK, and he flew with me in the first 5 missions and then the 6th one. Let's see, I don't know, we took off and we flew a couple of trips around the pattern, landed, he jumped out of the airplane, and I went out and was on my own. So the curriculum from that point on was some with an instructor some you were by yourself and you know the kind of progress through you learn basic flying skills with acrobatics and formation flying and then instrument flying and so the first six months was T37s and the last six months I flew T38s That airplane's is still flown today, believe it or not.

Isaac
Oh, wow. The uh...

Mr. Fister
That's the...

Isaac

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off.

Mr. Fister

No, no, it was a great airplane to fly. Everybody called it the White Rocket and you know, you had two engines in it and you took off and struck the burners and the thing climbed straight up. And I had it. I was by myself one day and I went up and got to something like 55,000 feet, which you're not supposed, not supposed to do without a suit

Isaac

Yeah. What's the....what was the ceiling? What was the, you know, the flight ceiling? Did they give y'all like a certain point you weren't supposed to go past or anything like that without the suit

Mr. Fister

Yeah, 49,000 feet.

Isaac

Oh, OK

Mr. Fister

So.

Isaac

Were those a lot smaller? I'm guessing those were a whole lot smaller than the....what was it again?

Mr. Fister

The T38.

Isaac

Yes, Sir.

Mr. Fister

You see them flying around here once in a while. Um, NASA uses them and...

Isaac

Oh, OK.

Mr. Fister

I don't know what else they're used for today, but they're not an Air Force training aircraft anymore.

Isaac

Yeah, I'm guessing....was it a lot different to get used to flying the bigger aircraft, you know in

Vietnam--the the transport that you flew?

Mr. Fister

Well, yes, you know the C123 had big, reciprocating engines and that's a different animal altogether. First of all, in the jet you just push the throttle forward and you go. In the big reciprocating engines, you have throttles, you have mixtures and you have prop levers. And, uh, you have to work all those in the right order. So if you're going to add power.... for example for take off, OK, you're going to take off with max power. So the top levers have to be full forward, which what that meant was it would give you up to 2800 RPM and the mixtures need to be full forward because you didn't, you didn't want to modulate the mixture through the carburetor.

Mr. Fister

So you wanted as much gas as you can get. And then then we had water injection. So you push these little buttons that would inject.

Isaac

Oh wow

Mr. Fister

Yeah, it injected water into the cylinders.

Isaac

Yeah, to cool it off?

Mr. Fister

Cool it off exactly.

Isaac

Yeah, ok

Mr. Fister

You get another couple inches of torque out of it that way. So anyway, everything had to be in the right order. So when you got up to cruise, you wanted to, you wanted to bring the RPM back. So what, you had to bring the throttles back and then the RPM back

Isaac

Kind of level it out?

Mr. Fister

Yeah And then you take the mixtures and you lean the engine out. So the way you did that is you just pull the mixture level, lever back until you saw a rise in the torque and then drop off a pound or two. That's where you wanted it.

Mr. Fister

So you're getting basically you're getting more miles per gallon in that arrangement. Yeah anyway you know, you don't need all those technical deals but it was interesting flying. The

shortest airfield I landed in was 1700 feet and this is a 42,000 pound airplane so it's pretty big and I mean, but by today's standards it's not but anyway it was.

Isaac

What was...you said 1700 feet?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, runway. [location, unintelligible] We went off the side of the runway because the steering cable broke. We were out in this special forces camp and we call our headquarters and they send another airplane out and drop the steering cable and we had, we fixed it on the spot and got out of there.

Isaac

Yeah

Mr. Fister

The special forces guys didn't like our airplanes overnight 'cause they they were mortar bank magnets, you know destroy 'em.

Isaac

Oh, yes sir.

Mr. Fister

So anyway, that was the kind of the deal. I had one runway to go to every now and then. It was 2000 feet long and it had a 4000 foot, 400 foot drop off on all four sides. Now when I say that, that that's true, halfway down the runway there was a turn around place where you could pull aircraft in and offload the cargo and then.

Isaac

Oh, OK. Yeah.

Mr. Fister

To the end of the runway and take off, so.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. Where was that? Where was that...that runway, that airstrip?

Mr. Fister

Well, the name of the town that was... But back in those days there really wasn't much of a town, but it's called Giania. You can go [look at a] map of Vietnam today and find Giania. That airfield, I have not been able to find it.

Mr. Fister

I think they probably did away with it and and Giania is a much bigger town now, so.

Isaac

Yeah. And how....

Mr. Fister

Well uh...I'm sorry, go ahead.

Isaac

Oh yes sir. I was curious how old you were when you initially went to Vietnam and how, uh, 'cause you said you attended the Air Force Academy and then you were at the air base in Texas, right?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, I was at Reese and when I graduated from Reese I went to Dover, DE and that's where I flew the C141. You know, I had a little diversion to Tinker Air Force Base which is at that time where the C141 training was and then I flew out of Dover in a C141 for a year. Then I went to Herbert to get checked out in the 123 and, uh, anyway by May of '67 I was in Vietnam in the 123.

Isaac

Oh wow

Mr. Fister

So I did that for a year and came back and got requalified for 141 and went to Charleston Bay, South Carolina and flew.

Isaac

Yeah. You've been all over.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, flew there from 1968 to 1971. And yeah, and those four years of flying the 141 I got 3000 hours in the airplane.

Isaac

Wow

Mr. Fister

You know what, we were flying hard I mean it was all in the Vietnam era. So we were flying from Charleston. Typically we go from Charleston to McGuire and get a load and then go to Elmendorf and then go to Yokota, Japan and then from there to Constantine and Vietnam back and.

Isaac

Oh, so you continue to, you continued to fly missions that went into Vietnam even after you were no longer stationed there?

Mr. Fister

Yeah. And I was, you know [unintelligible] was in Saigon, which today is Ho Chi Minh City.

But that was, yeah, it was a commercial airport as well as a military field. And and then the other locations were a couple airfields in Thailand.

Isaac

Wow. Ok.

Mr. Fister

Well, the course of that whole adventure was I flew all over Southeast Asia, you know, C141, so.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. Which aircraft did you prefer?

Mr. Fister

Well, I guess the C123 was the most fun to fly, but I, you know, I've got, so I got about 1100 hours in the 123. I've got 2000 hours in the C130 and 3000 hours in the C141 and then little bits and pieces with different airplanes. I've flown MH60 and HH MH53 helicopters.

Isaac

Oh, wow. Ok.

Mr. Fister

So I did that a little bit. Well, when I was the commander of Air Force Special Operations Command we were flying those those two helicopters and I needed to be able to fly them. So I went out to Kirtland Air Force Base and learned to fly them.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. Well, so with the C123, that was, that was what you flew during '67, right? During the the Tet Offensive, right?

Mr. Fister

That's that's true. I can remember that ever so clearly. I was...I was in the Trang air base, OK. And at the end of the day and I was getting ready to return to Phan Rang which was where our wing was at that time and I got a call, says "you have an emergency load to take down to a place called Pantheat." OK that was an army airfield.

Isaac

OK

Mr. Fister

And you know what had happened is Tet had started. It actually started the night before, but it rolled. It didn't start everywhere in the country. It started up in the northern part of the country and rolled South.

Mr. Fister

So it took a 24 hour period for it to really come to fruition.

Isaac

You said it took a 24 period?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, it didn't just start everywhere all at once. It started up in the northern part of the country and, and spreads southward.

Isaac

OK.

Mr. Fister

Yeah. And actually if you can get a hold of, you know, you can, you can get a map of Vietnam easy enough. And all this makes more sense but, so, in any event, Matrang, they said you got to...they're they're out of electrical power. The bad guys had blown all their...all their generating capacity up except for, they had enough to light one side of the runway.

Mr. Fister

It was a 4000 foot railway which was plenty of room that was no problem. But the only thing is they never told me.... They couldn't tell me what side of the runway was lit, so.

Isaac

Oh no.

Mr. Fister

Yeah. So anyway, off we go. And so as I approached Tan Tiet, there was tracers going up, up and down the beach and I got on downward and I was

Isaac

Tracer rounds?

Mr. Fister

Pardon? Yeah, yeah, they were tracers.

Isaac

Were they firing at you or were they...

Mr. Fister

No. No I don't...yeah, I had the airplane blacked out, so they probably didn't even know I was there.

Isaac

Oh yes sir.

Mr. Fister

And I don't know who was shooting who. They were red tracers and I think those were from the good guys.

Isaac
Yes sir.

Mr. Fister
Because I'm not sure the bad guys had tracers, but nevertheless there was a little power going on there. So I got on downwind and turned base and final and then just before--probably about 1/4 mile or less out--I flashed my landing lights so I can see which side to to line up on and land. So anyway, I landed and it was not eventful, uh, but that was the beginning of Tet then for me. And then I took off from there and I had to go to Saigon to Tan Son Nhut to get gas

Isaac
OK.

Mr. Fister
Or you could make it up the coast of Phan Rang So you go on the Saigon and Saigon, except for the runway lights, the whole complex, this is a big airfield. It was all blacked out and so we taxied in and I had four people on the crew. Each of us took an M16 and you know one was off the nose.

Mr. Fister
One went off each wingtip, one off the tail. And we provided our own security while the refueler came in and you know, refueled the aircraft.

Isaac
Were you engaged in combat? Like did anything happen or...

Mr. Fister
No

Isaac
Were you fortunate enough to just get the gas and get on your way?

Mr. Fister
That's what we did....

Isaac
That's good.

Mr. Fister
I mean there was fighting going on in the airfield, but it never, they never found me so.

Isaac
Yes, Sir. That's good.

Mr. Fister

And I mean, it's, yeah. It's not that...it wasn't that big of a deal, really. So anyway, we took off and made it back to the home field and everything was OK. But yeah, that was...so Tet was kind of a, you know, for the the war in Vietnam, that was a big deal.

Isaac
Yes, Sir.

Mr. Fister
Then I'm trying to think that was in, well, it's in January 19th, 68, and you know, about 10 days later I found myself flying in the battle of Que Son

Isaac
Wow. How how old were you at the time? Tet and Que Son?

Mr. Fister
26

Isaac
OK

Mr. Fister
So you know, you know, Que Son was a Marine outpost. They had I think 6800 Marines that were holding off two battalions. No. That's not right. Two North Vietnamese divisions

Isaac
Oh, wow.

Mr. Fister
It was the....they had the terrain, it was in their favor. And it wasn't just at the airfield. They had hill 881 N 881 S that they occupied. And so anyway, you know, these were daytime missions in the Que Son.

Mr. Fister
And what I didn't realize until after all this happened is that they were shelling, they were shooting from Laos in the Que Son. I just never thought....I didn't realize that.

Isaac
They were shooting what in the Que Son?

Mr. Fister
Well, they were probably....probably 155 millimeter.

Isaac
Oh, wow. Ok.

Mr. Fister

Artillery. And then there was a ridgeline north of Que Son parallel the runway but it was a probably a mile north of the runway and that was occupied by the North Vietnamese. And they could, you know, they could see when we landed and then they'd start lobbing these mortars in on the field and I'm convinced that they had the field laid out in grid squares so that, because it didn't, it wasn't an accident that these dadgum mortar rounds just kept following me and

Isaac

Oh, they had it sighted? You think they had it sighted?

Mr. Fister

Yeah. Oh yeah. I'm, I'm certain that they did and I had, the first time I went in there. My load was 8000 pounds of HE rocket heads.

Isaac

Oh no

Mr. Fister

If that would have gotten hit, it would have been a bad day.

Isaac

Yes sir.

Mr. Fister

Yeah. We went through the offload area slowly and offloaded the load. And then I took on as many Marines as I could, you know, get on board without stopping, turned around, took off opposite direction.

Isaac

Wow, Wow.

Mr. Fister

Yeah.

Isaac

Under fire and everything?

Mr. Fister

Yeah. Well, yeah I mean the mortars were there. You know, the thing about about it is you don't know when you're getting shot at most of the time unless you get hit. And even then, I've, to my knowledge I only got hit twice and the whole year I was over there.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, but I was...uh...I guess, I'll put it this way. I was a reckless pilot. They had a hard time. Either they had a hard time tracking me or they thought I was going to crash and burn anyway so they didn't want to waste any ammo.

Mr. Fister

And so yeah, but I mean, I'm, I'm being a little bit glib, but I was really good at flying that airplane so I could do things with it that a lot of other pilots couldn't do. So.

Isaac

Yeah.

Mr. Fister

Anyway, you know, I went in there four times and the, you know, one time I had to stay on the ground a long time because I had.

Isaac

Is this Que Son four times?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, yeah.

Isaac

Yes sir. I'm just trying to keep everything straight.

Mr. Fister

Yeah. Yeah, it was, yeah. From a period of January to early April of 1968, I had to go into Que Son four times. So it's, you know, it's not that big a deal really except that we lost 10 aircraft in that whole little operation.

Isaac

Wow.

Mr. Fister

And of the 10 aircraft, we lost five crews.

Isaac

OK. The other crews were able to to parachute out or to land successfully or whatever?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, the, you know, the C123 he had big windows in the cockpit. So we were, you know, that was the deal if we got hit on the ground and we're just going to bail out of the windows and jump out and anyway it was that's OK. But there were a lot of, you know, we went to a lot of small unimproved airfields. And I think I was in, I think I landed in 73 different airfields in South Vietnam.

Mr. Fister

I flew, uh...

Isaac

Wow.

Mr. Fister

I had over 1000 hours of combat time and I flew 1320 sorties. So this is a busy, busy year.

Isaac

Yeah.

Mr. Fister

But a lot of it was, you know is at least we thought it was pretty routine, a lot of it. So anyway.

Isaac

What was the crew? What was like the....what did the crew of the C123 consist of?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, we most of the time we had a pilot, a co-pilot, a flight engineer, and a code master.

Isaac

OK.

Mr. Fister

We would take on a a navigator if we were doing an air drop.

Isaac

OK. Yes, Sir. Like dropping, dropping supplies in the air?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, yeah. There were bundles, basically.

Isaac

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like resupplying troops in the field?

Mr. Fister

Yeah. Uh huh.

Isaac

OK. Did the plane have any armament? The C123?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, it did. The pilot and the co-pilot had armor plating on the sides and then the seat and the back of the seat.

Isaac

OK, yeah.

Mr. Fister

And when we went into some place like Que Son where we knew we were going to get shot at,

we would wear a black vest. But uh, they were terribly uncomfortable, so I didn't wear it very often.

Isaac

Yes sir, I guess you get hit...

Mr. Fister

Yeah. It's not like you're riding in the airliner, OK. We flew with the windows open and it was, you know, it's 95 degrees and 95% humidity over there all the time.

Isaac

Wow.

Mr. Fister

So well, but really there are a lot of, you know other air crews that flew aircraft that were unpressurized. It was. They were uncomfortable, but that's.

Isaac

Yeah Did the plane, did the plane have any guns on it on the C123?

Mr. Fister

No, it didn't. The model I flew didn't. Now there were, there were some models and I've never seen these. They were flying, I think they were flying out of Laos and they had tubes in the floor of the aircraft where you could drop bombs through.

Isaac

Oh, wow. OK. Interesting.

Mr. Fister

Yeah. I don't know anything about that aircraft, really. I've never seen one, so.

Isaac

Yeah, I've never heard of that. That's really, it's really interesting. It's really neat. Might have to, might have to look into that.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, just search for C123 you'll....you'll come up with different versions of it.

Isaac

Yes sir. So what were some of the....were those in Que Son? Were those the most stressful, some of the most stressful missions you flew or?

Mr. Fister

Yeah. Well, let me put it this way. I was too young and stupid to really get stressed out very much about any of it. The most stressful ones were when the weather was bad and you know we didn't we didn't fly instrument procedures, OK, because you just didn't do that, I mean they

weren't available for the most part.

Mr. Fister

So you take off and and stay below the weather and sometimes it drove you down like 100 feet above the ground and...

Isaac

Just the wind and everything?

Mr. Fister

Well, it's just that's that's how low the weather was.

Isaac

Yeah, yeah. You just had to stay below it?

Mr. Fister

Yeah. Now you could find a, you know, a hole where you could climb up and get above it. But then you have to find a way to get back down through it and.

Isaac

Oh yeah. It's a risk.

Mr. Fister

And so I did that one day and it was a, it was a good airfield. It was a 3500 foot alum aluminum matting airfield. That's what the material is made of. It's good airfield.

Mr. Fister

And I was on top and the problem is, yeah, you, you know there, there wasn't anything like GPS, OK.

Isaac

Yes sir

Mr. Fister

So you'd take off for some place and you'd fly a course and...and timing for the distance and then look for a place to let down through if you got above the weather. And I can remember doing this to some field over in the western part of the country and I found a place and I let down and I got...I got below the weather and I mean this was stressful and I came in and landed and I got out of the airplane and this is a artillery base. A couple of these 155 millimeter cannons went off and I jumped about 10 feet in the air. But anyway that's....anyway most of us would try and stay below the weather even if it was pretty far, you know, pretty low.

Mr. Fister

And keep in mind that we we flew so much we knew the whole country. I mean, I knew, I knew the country You know, like the back of my hand.

Isaac
Yes, Sir.

Mr. Fister
Yeah I knew the terrain and everything and and we, you know, I always carried a map. Something, you know, just doesn't happen today is you just map read it's like following the map in your car. But I had a chart that I plotted all the all the courses that went from every place to every place. So when I got out there I didn't have to bother planning on anything. I just knew, you know, the field I was taking off from and where I was going and I already had the course plotted and I knew what to expect and off we went, so.

Isaac
Yes sir. And I was kind of curious, like what did y'all do during your free time? You know when you weren't... And it sounds like you were pretty busy with all the all the combat hours and all the sorties and the missions.

Isaac
But I was just curious, like, you know when you were on base or whatever, you know what you would do?

Mr. Fister
Well, first of all, I flew 2 out of every three days.

Isaac
OK.

Mr. Fister
When we are up at, you know, I spent the first two months in Nha Trang and it was probably a lovely city when the French were there and we stayed at a villa downtown and so it was within a couple blocks of the beach. So we could go to the beach, which is totally stupid because we didn't have any security and I know there were bad guys running around that place, but we just weren't that bright. The place where we lived in this villa, we didn't have any security, but the next, about half a block down there was a building where all the Koreans stayed and those guys didn't take prisoners. So we felt pretty safe being next to them.

Isaac
Who stayed there?

Mr. Fister
South Koreans

Isaac
Oh wow OK.

Mr. Fister
Yeah.

Isaac

I was curious like did they, did they grant you all like leave to go and just kind of...because it sounds like you, you know you were able to go to the beach and such or you said that you said that you didn't have security. So I was just curious kind of how the, how the procedure of that went like you know when you weren't...you said you flew 2 out of the three days. I was curious like on the day off like if y'all were able to just kind of go about you know and have leave to kind of go where you wanted or how that worked?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, I mean, I'd take--when we were in Nha Trang--I'd take walks around the city or go to the beach. But after two months we were all consolidated at San Rang Air Base and so the whole wing was there that was a big base. So there we when we weren't flying, we'd play tennis or we'd go off the base. We, everybody had a little motor bike and ride around looking at stuff.

Mr. Fister

But, I don't know, I didn't do that much. Sit around and read. San rang, there were six of us in what was a plywood shack, basically. It was air conditioned, which was really good

Isaac

Yeah.

Mr. Fister

So you know, we'd be out and about and you know just around the base the officers club was up the... Up the street a little ways and you go up there and have have your meals

Isaac

OK, I forgot, yeah, I forgot to ask you like what rank you were and everything.

Mr. Fister

Well, I was. When I went over there, I was a Lieutenant, and halfway through my tour, I got promoted to captain.

Isaac

So, OK, yeah, wow. And I forgot to ask, like who you flew with with the squadron or what... I'm sorry, I'm trying to think of the term.

Mr. Fister

Well, I flew with the 310th Air Commando squadron.

Isaac

OK Yes, Sir.

Mr. Fister

And the squadron was part of the 315th Air Commando Wing.

Isaac

Yeah, so, OK, very cool.

Mr. Fister

So does that make sense? So you know a squadron?

Isaac

Yes sir It's like a sub unit of the wing is what you said, right?

Mr. Fister

I mean we...think of it in terms of aircraft, it'd be maybe 12 to 16 aircraft and So you and the crew ratio would probably be about 1.2, so so probably 20 crews and then There was consolidated maintenance, so there's separate maintenance squadrons that worked on the airplanes.

Isaac

Ok. Do you still, do you still talk to some of those guys from your squadron and everything?

Mr. Fister

No, I don't. We had a reunion a couple years ago, so I got to see a couple of guys that I...

Isaac

Oh, OK, yeah, good.

Mr. Fister

But nah, we kind of want our own way though, for the most part. And, you know, that's just kind of how it was.

Isaac

Yeah, I was curious, you know, if you ever had to evacuate, any wounded or anything like that, if you ever had to, try to...because you said you had various situations where like you got the emergency call with the beginning of the Tet Offensive. And I was curious if you ever had to, you know, evacuate any personnel, I mean I guess that would be more of a more of a helicopter role, wouldn't it? But I was just, you know, wondering about that.

Mr. Fister

We had air evac missions and we'd go get people, people pick them up, and take them to a hospital in Saigon or Nhe Trang. I remember I was at this airfield, doesn't matter where it was, but there was a South Korean on the stretcher on the ramp and he was dying and and I didn't have permission to take this guy anywhere. So I said put him on the airplane. I grabbed some army corpsman, put him on the airplane to take care of him, and I flew flew up to Nhe Trang where there was a Korean hospital and fortunately he was alive when I got off the airplane and hopefully he survived.

Mr. Fister

But. If he would, you know sometimes you just do stuff and but it could have turned out bad. If

he'd have been dead when he got off the airplane that probably that could have been an international incident. I don't know

Isaac

Oh, really? Because you weren't authorized to.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, I wasn't supposed to do it.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. But it sounds like you did the right thing.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, so you go take your chances, you know,

Isaac

Yeah you've got to do what you got to do.

Mr. Fister

Yeah. So anyway, it's, I mean, everybody else's squadron probably does it.

Isaac

Yeah. Did they issue you a sidearm?

Mr. Fister

Yeah. I had a Smith and Wesson .38 revolver. I think it was. Six shot revolver and then we all

Isaac

It's a double action, right?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, double action revolver. It's a good weapon, actually. I didn't appreciate it back then because I thought I needed something with more firepower but I mean it was, it was a fine weapon for what we needed, really.

Isaac

Reliable.

Mr. Fister

And yeah, that's a good thing about the revolvers. They don't break. And then we each carried an M16.

Isaac

Oh, OK. Yeah. That's interesting. I didn't know that pilots carried rifles. That's cool.

Mr. Fister

I got on an airplane. I put the M16 right behind my seat.

Isaac

Wow. OK. I didn't know that. I knew that pilots typically got issued a sidearm--revolver or a pistol but I didn't know that. Yeah, that's cool.

Mr. Fister

See our strategy was if we were, if we were shot down, we were going to stay with the aircraft and wait for somebody to rescue us.

Isaac

Oh yes sir. Defend the aircraft.

Mr. Fister

So we just fight it out with...my little Fanny pack had 250 rounds of ammo in it.

Isaac

What had what had the 250 rounds?

Mr. Fister

250 rounds. Hey, listen, I'm going to go to the restroom. I'll be right back.

Isaac

OK. Sounds good. Thank you.

Mr. Fister

Ok I'm back again. So I carry the Fanny pack with 250 rounds of ammo in it and I guess that, you know, everybody did what they felt like doing. Is what boiled down to, so you know, everybody kind of operated that way?

Isaac

How many clips is? How many clips is 250 rounds? Is it a 20 round clip or how many? How many bullets?

Mr. Fister

15.

Isaac

What happened...did they let you keep it after the war? Or did they make you give it back?

Mr. Fister

Oh no, all that was tightly controlled. You'd show up in the morning for a mission and you go to the armory and check out your weapons and ammo.

Isaac

Oh, yes, Sir. Ok so it wasn't like if you were a Marine or whatever, where you just have that and

it would be your rifle.

Mr. Fister

No, because, you know, we were on a base.

Isaac

OK, yeah that makes sense.

Mr. Fister

So yeah at the end of the day you'd check it back into the armory.

Isaac

Ok...what was I going to say, when you returned home did anyone, were you were you well received or like did anyone give you grief about serving in Vietnam? We have a family friend who served in Vietnam and he tends to be pretty reserved about you know his time in Vietnam. But he told us that people were very rude to him when he when he came home and I was just curious about your experience with that.

Mr. Fister

Well, I didn't experience that. I know it happened a lot, but you know what I remember...I think I came back to McCord Air Force base. And they got me commercial flight back to Cincinnati, OH where my wife was. I didn't experience those problems, and so, but I know some people did. But I also remember when I got back to McCord I changed clothes.

Mr. Fister

To travel the rest of the way on civilian airline

Isaac

Yes sir.

Mr. Fister

But I didn't, you know, there wasn't any reason for that. Not particularly

Isaac

Reason for what?

Mr. Fister

I didn't have any particular reason for changing clothes. I just would rather travel in civilian clothes.

Isaac

Yeah, I understand. Yeah. It wasn't a matter of like "I don't know what people will say"

Mr. Fister

No

Isaac

You finally get to change back to civilian clothes.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, but today there's...people are real complimentary about those of us that served in Vietnam.

Isaac

That's good I'm glad that people appreciate it.

Mr. Fister

And actually the veterans are, you know they're held in pretty high esteem I think in the country today.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. Yeah thank you very much for your service.

Mr. Fister

Well, I'm just glad I could serve somebody like you. So that's what's important.

Isaac

Thank you, I appreciate that. When were you...you said you returned home to your wife. Did you marry her before you went to Vietnam, or when were you all married?

Mr. Fister

We were married about a month and a half after I got out of the Air Force Academy. And and then we headed to Lubbock, TX.

Isaac

Yeah, OK, yeah. And did you, did you like, write letters to her and whatnot?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, I mean, that's the only way we could communicate. When I was in Vietnam, was just letters. And it yeah, it was super snail, super snail mail. I mean, it'd take two weeks for a letter to arrive.

Mr. Fister

And we also made tape recordings and sent them back and forth.

Isaac

Oh, OK. Yeah, I didn't think about that. I guess you could do that too.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, and so when I left our little boy is is 57 now but anyway, he was maybe he was three months old when I left.

Isaac

Wow. Yeah, that must have been hard.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, well, it was. It was, but it was harder on my wife.

Isaac

Oh, yeah.

Mr. Fister

She had to carry the load by herself. She had good family support because she found a place to live in Cincinnati where you know, both her parents and my parents lived. So she had a good support system.

Isaac

Good. Did some of your friends serve in Vietnam as well? Any of your friends from, I assume several of them from the Air Force Academy would have, but any anyone you knew from high school or anything like that?

Mr. Fister

Oh gosh, no not that I can think of I'm sure there was some, but I don't....It doesn't ring a bell

Isaac

I was curious, you met my grandfather through the the Auxiliary Coast Guard, correct?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, Coast Guard Auxiliary, Yeah, Bob, Yeah.

Isaac

Oh, no, Tres

Mr. Fister

Oh, Tres

Isaac

Yeah

Mr. Fister

Right, right.

Isaac

Yes, he's he's such a funny guy.

Mr. Fister

He's a good guy, yeah. Yeah.

Isaac

So he does, he does turtle watch, you know where they are finding the nests and stuff like that.

Mr. Fister

Oh really.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. The sea turtles come and you know bury all the eggs and they mark off the zone where the nest is and they count up all the eggs and everything. Do you ever do you, you know, like the the American Legion and different, you know, different veteran things. I was curious if you were involved in any of that.

Mr. Fister

Well, I'm a member of the American Legion, but I really, I'm not active in it.

Isaac

Yes, Sir.

Mr. Fister

So I, you know, I support it and I get the magazine and there's the American Legion Post about a block from where we live. I just have never gone over there.

Isaac

That's in Niceville, right?

Mr. Fister

It is, yeah.

Isaac

Are there multiple in Niceville or just one?

Mr. Fister

As far as I know, there's just one.

Isaac

You know what's, you know what's funny? I'm trying to think where it is. I can see it in my mind and I can't, I don't know what street it's on, but I used to--when I was in middle school I was in the Boy Scouts. We would meet at that American Legion sometimes they would let us, they like partnered with us. They would let us use it for for some of our meetings. They would let us store some of our our Boy Scout equipment like the the propane tanks and stuff. And so, you know, if we were getting ready to go on a camp out, we would, we would all meet at the American Legion and we would, you know, pack up all of our things.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, that's great.

Isaac

Yeah, they're, they're good people.

Mr. Fister

Yeah.

Isaac

I never, I never knew any of them well, but they seem they seem very involved in the community and stuff.

Mr. Fister

No, they are Yeah, I enjoy their magazine but I'm not active in the local post.

Isaac

Yes Sir. I'm curious, how old are you now, if you don't mind me asking?

Mr. Fister

How old am I? Ha

Isaac

Yes, Sir.

Mr. Fister

I'm 81

Isaac

OK. So you were like 20, you said 26, I believe when you were in the Tet Offensive?

Mr. Fister

Yeah

Isaac

OK, very neat So have you talked to--I assume my grandfather would have brought up the fact that he was a pilot with American Airlines, right?

Mr. Fister

Oh yeah, he's got heck, he's got about 20,000 hours flyin' time.

Isaac

He has a lot. I didn't know the specifics. I think he said it was about three years. I think. I'm not. I'm not sure. I'm not sure if that's right or if I'm mistaken.

Mr. Fister

That's probably right

Isaac

He said it's about three years in the air. That blows my mind. That's incredible.

Mr. Fister

No, he's got a lot of time.

Isaac

Yeah. So you continued to fly. When you were in Vietnam, you were like stationed in Vietnam for a year and you came, you came home and you were in a different air base. Not the one, not the one in Texas. I forget. I believe you said.

Mr. Fister

Charleston. Charleston Airport.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. And you were there for you were there for how long? Four years, I think you said?

Mr. Fister

Little over three years.

Isaac

OK. So you flew missions that would still, they were still in Vietnam, right? Like you would fly from there you said to a different place and then to Japan and then right?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, our missions were typically from Charleston up the coast to McGuire Air Force Base, where we'd get a load and then we'd fly to Elmendorf in Alaska.

Isaac

Oh, wow. OK.

Mr. Fister

We'd get off the airplane, a new crew would pick it up and continue on to Yokota and just outside of Tokyo. And another, they'd give the airplane up to another crew who would fly it to.

Isaac

OK, yeah.

Mr. Fister

Thailand or Vietnam and back. And anyway, it was. It was a stage system

Isaac

You flew the first leg of it or whatever

Mr. Fister

The airplane kept moving, but the people didn't move with it.

Isaac

So did you ever, did you ever fly into Vietnam after you were stationed at Vietnam? Like, did you ever fly the other other legs of the journey? Or did they always pass it off to another crew and then to the third crew?

Mr. Fister

No, I flew fairly often into Vietnam.

Isaac

When was your last mission that went into Vietnam? Like, when did you stop flying into Vietnam altogether?

Mr. Fister

Sometime in 1971, I guess. May or June, because that's I left the flying business for a while to go to Graduate School.

Isaac

OK, yeah. What did you study at graduate school?

Mr. Fister

Air Mechanical Engineering.

Isaac

Yes sir that sounds interesting. So your first, your first mission was... You called them sorties, didn't you?

Mr. Fister

I had 1320 sorties. OK, so what's that sound like? What it looks like is, on a given day, I'd fly 7 or 8 sorties.

Isaac

OK.

Mr. Fister

And that would basically equal a mission. OK, that's just the way they kept score.

Isaac

So the the seven or eight would equal a mission?

Mr. Fister

Yeah, so you know what what you would do is you'd show up at the operations building and they'd give you an itinerary that you're going to fly and it would have seven or eight different stops on it

Isaac

OK, I understand. Yes Sir. I wasn't familiar with the term sortie, but yet that makes sense.

Mr. Fister
Yeah

Isaac
You said from about to '67 to '71 was when you flew in Vietnam?

Mr. Fister
Yeah

Isaac
But you were only stationed in there around a year

Mr. Fister
Right. The rest of the time I usually go into Vietnam once a month, maybe twice. There were other places in Southeast Asia that needed the support. Couple bases in Thailand and the Philippines and Okinawa.

Isaac
OK, wow. Okinawa. I didn't know that.

Mr. Fister
Yeah. Well, today that's the Philippines. It didn't used to be be that.

Isaac
So much has changed in that....Southeast Asia.

Mr. Fister
Well, it should have been part of the Philippines. Okinawa should have been part of the Philippines a long time ago.

Isaac
I'm trying to remember what happened. What happened to it?

Mr. Fister
Well, it's, you know, it's just like another territory of Japan.

Isaac
Oh, yes, Sir. And how long did you continue to fly with at the Air Force after? You said 71 was around the last you flew in Vietnam. Did you continue to fly with the Air Force or was that about the last?

Mr. Fister
No. In 71, I went back to Graduate School and when I got out of Graduate School I was a test manager, military airlift command headquarters. When I was there, I'd fly once.

Isaac

What'd you say? A test manager?

Mr. Fister

Yeah. Operational test manager.

Isaac

OK.

Mr. Fister

So you know for any new equipment we were going to buy, I would test it, yeah. And in that capacity I'd fly once or it was, they were just proficiency flights, it was no big deal.

Isaac

Yeah. when did you retire?

Mr. Fister

1996

Isaac

Wow. That's a long career. Awesome.

Mr. Fister

Well, 32 years plus the time at the Air Force Academy.

Isaac

I'm trying to think how long my grandfather flew. Somewhere around the same time frame, I think, yeah.

Mr. Fister

Oh, I'll tell you what. He flew more years than I than I did, I'm pretty certain of that.

Isaac

I think he may have done 39. I could be wrong. He loved it.

Mr. Fister

Yeah

Isaac

Yeah, I'm pretty sure they made him retire. As a matter of fact, I don't think he wanted to.

Mr. Fister

Now old is he, do you know?

Isaac

I'm trying to think. I think they made him retire at 65. I don't think they let them fly past that.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, it might have been earlier than that. I think now they'd make 'em retire at 62.

Isaac

I could be wrong, it might be 62. I know they made him retire. In fact I didn't know that they they did this until he was telling me about it, but on the very last flight he ever flew when he lands they spray the plane. There's fire trucks there that like spray the plane with the water. Kind of like a celebratory tradition, you know.

Isaac

Yeah, he's, he's, been all over the place. He lived in Antarctica for a year, actually.

Mr. Fister

Really?

Isaac

I'm serious.

Mr. Fister

Was he at the North or South Pole?

Isaac

South Pole, Yes Sir.

Mr. Fister

National Science Foundation

Isaac

I think that was before he started working with American Airlines. I'm pretty sure that was in college as part of like a research thing that he was at the South Pole for the year.

Mr. Fister

Oh, well he would have been assigned to the National Science Foundation. That's the only outfit that works on the South Pole. I've landed, I've been in this field, I can't remember the name of it now.

Isaac

The one at the South Pole.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, it's actually, it's actually on the Ross Ice Shelf.

Isaac

Oh, wow.

Mr. Fister
Not all the way on the South Pole.

Isaac
Yeah

Mr. Fister
But I was there, I wasn't flying the airplane, my boss was, but we landed there and then got a real neat ride on Navy helicopters all over the place. It was fascinating.

Isaac
I would love to get to, yeah. I haven't been able to travel much in my life and I hope to, I hope to travel some. I hope to be able to see some more of the world.

Mr. Fister
Well, I've been in 53 different countries.

Isaac
Wow.

Mr. Fister
And I've flown around the world twice.

Isaac
Really?

Mr. Fister
Your grandfather's probably done more than that.

Isaac
That's awesome though. That's so cool. I was curious, on a different note, if you happen to have any pictures that you'd be willing to share with me of you or the the aircraft or just any pictures in that time frame because we're supposed to you know compile like a project for our Vietnam War class. So if you had any pictures that you'd be willing to share with me that you could send to me, I'd really appreciate that.

Mr. Fister
I can do that. I got a bunch of 'em

Isaac
And you don't, you don't need to find them right now. I just mean like after after you get off, just sometime, you know, if you're free. If you wouldn't mind finding a few of those, I'd really appreciate that.

Mr. Fister
No, it's no...it's easier they're on my phone. I'll just ship them to you.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. OK. If you have them digital, that's even better. Any pictures of--so you said, do you have anything like physical, Like I'm trying to think, I don't know. Like if you have anything that you brought back from Vietnam that you have a picture of or anything like that too, Anything like that would work.

Mr. Fister

No, I don't think I do. I used to have a mountain yard crossbow, but I finally got rid of that.

Isaac

OK, yeah. If you'd just send the those pictures at some point I'd really appreciate it.

Mr. Fister

Yeah. I can send the pictures I'll tell you, I had a lot of memorabilia and I finally got tired of carrying it around and got rid of it all. Actually, some guy had a museum he was starting to, So I got it all and gave it to him.

Isaac

Yeah, that's a good thing to do.

Mr. Fister

Yeah

Isaac

All right. Well, I won't, I won't take up any more of your time. Thank you once again, thank you very much for your willingness to let me call you and and just you know, for sharing some of your story with me. I really appreciate it.

Mr. Fister

Yeah, I'm glad to do it. Wish you the best.

Isaac

Yes, Sir. Thank you very much.

Mr. Fister

OK.

Isaac

You have a good evening.

Mr. Fister

You too. Bye-bye.

Isaac

Take care. Bye-bye.