

Fields of Friendly Strife

Interviewer

I just push that button. We should be recording now. We are. There's my voice going on there. So this is, today is May 13th, and it is a May 13th, 2008, and it is

R.C. Jones

It's 14th.

Interviewer

Wednesday. That's right. May 14th. Thank you. May 14th, 2008. A day behind. We're with Robert Campbell Jones.

R.C. Jones

Correct.

Interviewer

USMA Class of 1965. Is that right?

R.C. Jones

Yes, sir.

Interviewer

And we're engaging in a conversation here for the Center for Oral History, so we're gonna start with your life story, sort of at the beginning. Tell me where you were born, into what family, and your family's particular history.

R.C. Jones

Well, my life story starts, I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 3rd, 1943. Of course that's during the Second World War. My dad was a pilot in the Army Air Corps and he happened to be, I think, passing through Billy Mitchell Field in Milwaukee and was stationed there for a short period of time, and that's where I happened to be born, at Columbia Hospital in Milwaukee.

Robert Campbell Jones

And from there, my dad spent five years in the military, in the Army Air Corps, Air Force, predecessor to the Air Force, during that time, from about '41 to '45. And so we lived with my grandmother while my dad was overseas. He was a pilot and flew mainly in North Africa, transport airplanes. Until he came home in 1945, we lived with my grandmother in Madison, New Jersey, which was my father's hometown.

Robert Campbell Jones

After he came home, we moved, and my dad got out of the military, out of the service, and he had two or three different jobs, as I recall. He was a pharmaceutical salesman and we lived in different towns in and about Northern New Jersey, East Orange, and then Bloomfield, and finally we lived in " we moved to Chatham, New Jersey, which became my hometown, really. Most of my schooling was in Chatham schools and I went to

Chatham High School, graduated in 1961. I played sports and everything at Chatham. I played football and was recruited by a number of schools and one of them being West Point.

Robert Campbell Jones

Growing up in New Jersey, West Point was a big name, of course, being so close. We were about 75 miles from West Point and I remember my parents really wanted me to " my mother, especially, really wanted me to go to West Point. I had a tour of West Point through the football office and I was sold then, too, so fortunately I was accepted and we started in " the class of 1965 started in 1961.

Interviewer

Did you have to be sponsored, of course, and who was your sponsor?

R.C. Jones

Well, you have to get a congressional appointment to go to an academy, and I believe it's still that way. Through the athletic office, they received a number of appointments that were not handed out to " they were kind of, in those days, I guess, they were just extra appointments, so I received one of them. And actually my appointment came from another state but once you're at West Point, you're all kind of the same, so that's what started, like I said, the career at the military academy.

Interviewer

Do you remember the first day you came to this campus?

R.C. Jones

Oh, yes. Everyone remembers the first day. Of course things have changed a lot here now, but basically you were dropped off, my parents dropped me off in the area of the gymnasium, and you walked through the sallyport into what was then North Area. And all the " I won't say they're bad guys, but all the cadets, the upper classmen, were waiting on the other side for you. As soon as you went through that sallyport, your whole life changed. Thoughts went through my head about I wonder if my parents are still here. I could probably get a ride home with them.

Robert Campbell Jones

But no, you're in there and of course everyone's kind of " they're kind of yelling at you, or whatever, giving you orders and everything, and you don't know where you're going. I was barely 18. We started on I think it was the 5th of July 1961, is when we had to report. You have to report early because the first summer you're there is called Beast Barracks or New Cadet Barracks, and this is kind of a basic training time period where you learn how to shine your shoes, how to be a soldier, and so that first day, that was a rude awakening.

Interviewer

What sorts of things did you go through with your Beast Barracks?

R.C. Jones

Well, you're assigned to companies. You're organized and everything. I'll back

up one bit here and say that it's kind of amazing because that first day, they take you in, you're issued a uniform. They teach you basically how to march well enough to get from here to there and then you're given haircuts. And later that afternoon, they have a swearing in ceremony at Trophy Point and you're basically in a formation then and you march out to Trophy Point. And the parents have stayed there, most of them, I think, and they watch you being sworn in. I'm sure in their eyes it was incredible that in a few hours you could be transformed as quickly as they did.

Robert Campbell Jones

But Beast Barracks or New Cadet Barracks was a hard time for most people. You're not used to that type of life structure. You're up at reveilly or before. You're learning how to shine your shoes and you're learning all these things. Things were a lot different in those days. It wasn't so much hazing but there was a lot more, I would say, physicality about things where " and I think a lot of these things were probably not productive but learning how to eat on the edge of your chair and only take small bites. And in those days, if you made a mistake you'd pass your plate out.

Robert Campbell Jones

That's all changed now for the better. You're burning so many calories and you need so much food in this time period that there's no reason for you to be starved. In my era, we all lost weight that first summer. I mean I came in at about what I am now, about 185, and at the end of the six weeks or so I was 165. And there were other guys a lot bigger than me that came in, football players that were linemen, that weighed 230, 240, 250, and at the end of the summer, these guys were 190 or so. You lose a lot of strength and that just wasn't a good idea, so I'm glad that part has changed.

Robert Campbell Jones

And then you'd have plebe knowledge you'd have to know. You'd have to learn " memorize things. "Give me the chain of command from the president down to you." And I'm talking about through the entire military chain of command, the cadet chain of command, all the way down to the lowest person on the earth, which is you. Then you'd have military training, too. We went out and learned how to dismantle a rifle, an M1, and how to clean it. It was just a whole basic training.

Robert Campbell Jones

And they had a cadre of upperclassman because the rest of the corps was out doing different things, depending on what year you were in. So they only had a skeleton cadre that was teaching us, and some officers, too, of course, and that was till the fall, or towards the end of August or September when school start again and all the rest of the corps came back for classes.

Interviewer

Who do you remember from your class?

R.C. Jones

Oh, I remember lots of folks. Just playing football in those first couple of years, I had a lot of friends that played football. A lot of them, we're still very good friends today. Dennis Lewis is a very good friend of mine and we were actually in the same Beast Barracks Company together looking at each other with laughing bags over our heads.

Robert Campbell Jones

We had shower formations that you had to stand against the wall before you took a shower and you had to sweat through your bathrobe before theyâ€™d let you in the shower. And fortunately, Dennis and I both were pretty good at sweating, and so youâ€™re sitting there braced against the wall with a chin in and everything. And heâ€™s on one wall and Iâ€™m on the other wall, and looking at each other, and he looks stupid and I look stupid. And so he starts laughing and I start laughing, and the upperclassmen didnâ€™t want you to be laughing like that, so then theyâ€™d come over and put a laundry bag over his head and one over my head, and thatâ€™s called a laughing bag. And theyâ€™d say, â€œOkay, start laughing now inside the bag.â€ So itâ€™s, â€œHo, ho, ho, ha, hee, hee, ha.â€ and itâ€™s not funny anymore, so I mean it was those type of things.

Robert Campbell Jones

Rollie Stichweh and a whole lot of folks that I remember. I mean, God, my classes, weâ€™ve become very close still. Now I think a lot of it is because probably of Vietnam and my class was right in the middle of that when we graduated, and we were just a close â€“ I think probably as close or closer than any other class here, even to this day, and weâ€™ve been out for 40-some years now.

Interviewer

Who was the football coach then? What was the team like and â€“

R.C. Jones

Well, I think Iâ€™m gonna have to remember here. I think a guy named Dale Hall was the coach that recruited us, but then shortly after that, Paul Dietzel from LSU came to West Point and he was â€“ we called him Pepsodent Paul â€“ cause he had a big smile all the time. He brought the Chinese bandits system and the three-team deal to West Point and we did pretty well. Unfortunately, we did a lot better in those days than weâ€™re doing now, and I hope that changes, but he was the coach while we were here.

Interviewer

Describe maybe the Chinese bandits. I donâ€™t know that story.

R.C. Jones

Well, he had a three platoon system where you had to I think it was like a black team that kind of went both ways and then you have another team that just played offense, and the Chinese bandits were just defensive guys. And so that was supposed to kind of incite a stronger defense and everything.

Interviewer

Howâ€™d they get the name?

R.C. Jones

I donâ€™t recall that. I really donâ€™t, how they did. That came, I think, from LSU. He had been a very successful coach at LSU. He coached Billy Cannon and all those folks down there, and I donâ€™t know if they won a national championship but they were real good.

Interviewer

What position did you play?

R.C. Jones

I was a quarterback and played defensive back, also. In high school, I was mostly a passer, and coming here, it was more of a kind of a run type offense, so I wasn't the fastest guy in the world, and of course Rollie Stichweh was around and he's one of the finest athletes I've ever known. He became the quarterback. I was hurt playing baseball, also, my sophomore year, and I played baseball while I was here. I was hit in the ear with a baseball and it kind of ruptured some of the bones in my eardrum in my right ear, so they had to operate and give me a new eardrum.

Interviewer

You were hit at bat by a pitched ball

R.C. Jones

Well, actually it was at practice. We were practicing double plays and I was a runner from first to second, and the ball was hit to the second baseman. He turned and threw it to the shortstop who was coming across the second base. He kind of submarined the ball as he was coming across the base, and I looked up, and I saw his arm coming, and I just turned my head. I'm sliding into second base, and I turned my head, and the ball hit me square in the ear. So after that, they replaced the eardrum right here in the hospital. I had an operation and I couldn't play any more contact sports after that.

Interviewer

You had a permanent hearing loss, then?

R.C. Jones

No. Actually, the hearing was fine but just the fact that I had the operation. Because to be commissioned as an officer in the Army, or I guess any branch, you have to meet certain requirements, medical requirements, and one of them is having good hearing and a good eardrum, and whatever. They didn't want to take a chance that this thing would be blown out again, or whatever, so they just said, "No, you can't play contact sports."

Interviewer

That must have been a big disappointment for you.

R.C. Jones

Yeah. I don't know if I ever would have played at varsity. I played as a JV as a sophomore here, but it would have been nice to try. I played baseball the rest of the time.

Interviewer

All right, so tell me now as you are a cadet here the war hasn't really started yet I guess until '64. '64 is the first escalation, isn't that right? I'm trying to remember now.

R.C. Jones

Well, it was the Gulf of Tonkin incident and everything, but I think we had advisors and everything, military advisors, way back.

Interviewer

Oh, going all the way back to the 1950s, really, but how aware were you of the war in Vietnam as you were a cadet here?

R.C. Jones

Well, we knew that obviously it was going on and it was

Interviewer

This is where if you could say, "We knew the war in Vietnam was going on."

R.C. Jones

We did. We knew the war in Vietnam was just hatching. It was coming along and we knew that as a graduate that you would probably have to confront that. It wasn't a full blown thing yet, the war in Vietnam I mean, but we knew that there were graduates from earlier classes that were being assigned as advisors and going to Vietnam in different capacities, and so I think most of us knew that when we graduated, we were gonna be facing the same thing.

Interviewer

What was your attitude about that? I mean had you come to West Point knowing that you "there was a good chance that you might go into combat or were

R.C. Jones

Well, in 1961, probably not. In other words, thinking about, well, I'm gonna go to West Point and then after that I'm gonna have to go into Vietnam or any type of war, I mean I don't think in 1961 it was such a big issue then, but as time went on here, it did become more and more so.

Robert Campbell Jones

And I think that our attitudes in those days, for most of us, was that it was the right thing to do. It was a just thing, and we were obviously young, and we were trained to be soldiers, and obviously to follow orders, and to do the things that your commanders and your commander in chief asked of you. That was the deal and I think most of us were pretty gung ho along that line, that we thought that this was the right thing to do to go defend the South Vietnamese and try to stop the spread of communism in those days, and the domino effect, and all those things that were issues.

The Perils of First Flight

Interviewer

So when you graduated in 1965, then, tell me about that and then tell me about where you were posted first.

R.C. Jones

Well, when we graduated, my class in 1965, I had to back up a second. I had always,

because my father was in the Army Air Corps as a pilot, I had always wanted to be a pilot, also. So believe it or not, even coming to West Point, I wanted to go in the Air Force even at that time, and getting into the Air Force from West Point in those days was possible, because they had a certain number of people that could change branches, transfer branches, exchange.

Robert Campbell Jones

And so our class, the class of '65, we had a set quota of graduates that could choose another branch, and I can't remember what it was, 10 or 15 percent, or so, and our classes were a little smaller then than they are now. We had about 600 in our class, a little bit less, so that meant about 70 or 75 cadets could choose another branch.

Robert Campbell Jones

And so they had a little system how in the order of merit you could choose, and so I wanted to go in the Air Force, and so I chose Air Force, and I was lucky enough and in the right position in the class to get Air Force. And I think about 60 or so of us went Air Force, and 8 or 10 of my classmates went in the Marines, and we had two guys actually went Navy. But today, it's all different, and I don't even know if you can do that anymore.

Robert Campbell Jones

But graduating on the 9th of June, 1965 was of course a big day. We all had our cars and all that. We left the post and in those days, we got two months graduation leave, and I don't know. They may still do that. It was kind of a special deal, because once you're in the military, you get 30 days a year, whether you're a private or a general, that's what you get, but for this one specific time they gave us two months, and so from the 9th of June to the 9th of August was my leave.

Robert Campbell Jones

Well, I was going to go to pilot training; the pilot training class didn't start until September, so they said, well, you almost have another month here, so they gave me another month leave. I didn't complain too much about that, especially when on the 9th of August, all the rest of my classmates that went in the Army, they had to report to either Airborne training or Ranger School.

Robert Campbell Jones

Because in those days, as a graduate, you went into one of the five combat arms. Well, the military's changed now, and you have other choices, which I think is better, but in those days, you were trained to be a combat leader out of here, and so every single graduate that went into the Army had to go to Ranger School and Airborne.

Robert Campbell Jones

So on the 9th of June, I was a lifeguard down in New Jersey at the beach and another friend of mine were toasting all my classmates, while they were reporting to Fort Benning for Ranger School or Airborne; so I never did go to Ranger School or Airborne training. But anyway, that was pretty much the summer and then we had to go to pilot training. I went to pilot training down in Del Rio, Texas at Laughlin Air Force Base and started my career in the Air Force.

Interviewer

What was that like?

R.C. Jones

Pilot training now? What was pilot training like? Pilot training was hard. I mean it was very intense, and of course in those days they needed pilots, so my class started, I think, with 90 or so cadets—or not cadets but trainees. It was funny, because I was in a class—they had a class in those days about every eight weeks, so there were like six classes a year or so.

Robert Campbell Jones

Well, there are certain classes that are called Academy classes, and those are the classes—starts in September, because the Academies graduate and, you know, whenever. And so in my class of say 90 to start, I think we probably had maybe 50 or 60 Air Force Academy guys and then two of us from West Point. So we were definitely in the minority, but we said, well, the odds are about right here for this. But there was one other fellow from my class, Jimmy Hall, Jim Hall, who was another ’65 graduate, and we together went to pilot training in Texas.

Interviewer

Had you flown before?

R.C. Jones

Never had flown before. I mean I’d been in an airplane as a passenger, but I never had flown myself before.

Interviewer

What did it feel like to be at the controls?

R.C. Jones

It was great, and the first couple of flights we flew a Cessna 172, which is the basic initial training thing. And we actually had civilian instructors, and this fellow named Ronnie Westmoreland was my instructor, and he was from Texas, and he was just a good ole boy. And he was a civilian and of course here we are, we’re supposed to go in and salute when we get in, and he didn’t even know what we were doing. “Sit down.”

Robert Campbell Jones

He took me up the first time, and I get in there and I’m all eyes and everything, and he says, “You got it.” I said, “Well, what do I do?” “Well, you push the throttle in.” “What do I do?” He says, “Just hang on.” He said, “Here we go.” And he said, “I’ll just fly by itself.” He said, “Just keep it straight with the rudders and keep it straight on the runway.” And sure enough, the thing comes off and here I am flying this thing, and it was just, wow, this is really cool.

Robert Campbell Jones

We had about, I can’t remember, maybe 20 or 30 hours in that airplane. After eight hours, you could solo if he signed you off to solo. I liked to tell people it was because I was the best pilot I was the first to solo in my class, but it just scheduling wise it kind of turned out that way. So I was the first one to solo, but I remember on one flight we were up and he

did all kinds of things, teach you spins, put a [Cessna] 172 in a spin, and here weâ€™re going spinning towards the earth and whoa! And he said, â€œNo, just let it go. Itâ€™ll come out by itself.â€

Robert Campbell Jones

And then another day, I rememberâ€™ll never forget this. Weâ€™re flying out over the prairie and outside in West Texas; this is dry sheep country, and he said, â€œOkay,â€ and he pulls the throttle back and the engine goes to idle. And he says, â€œOkay, what are you going to do now?â€ And I said, â€œWell, I guess Iâ€™m going to try to land somewhere.â€ Thereâ€™s some flat areas and stuff and some tumbleweeds here and there. He says, â€œOkay. Head on over that way. See what you think.â€

Robert Campbell Jones

So I pull it over there and he saidâ€™weâ€™re getting lower, and lower, and lower, and lower, and he said, â€œWell, you think thatâ€™s where you want to land?â€ I said, â€œWell, thatâ€™s what I would do if it was real.â€ He says, â€œGo ahead and land.â€ I said, â€œRight out there?â€ And he said, â€œYeah.â€ So here we go, and this is bumps and everything, and rocks and all this, and weâ€™re bumping across. Of course, this thing had big tires and so we go rolling across like the desert.

Robert Campbell Jones

And heâ€™d done this before with people. I know he had, but my eyes were this big watching this, and so here we go, and he says, â€œIâ€™ll take this off out of here. Itâ€™s a little tricky.â€ So, we turned around, turned it back, and took off the other way. I know this wasnâ€™t part of the syllabus to do this, but this is stuff thatâ€™s this is real training. I mean this is really what happens. If this happened to you and you lost an engine, this is exactly what youâ€™re supposed to do.

Interviewer

How long were you in pilot training there?

R.C. Jones

Well, pilot training is one year in the Air Force, so we started in September of â€™65 and then finished the next September, and we went through different phases of airplanes. They called this a T-41, which is a [Cessna] 172, and then we went to the [Cessna] T-37, which is a small side-by-side jet trainer, and then the advanced trainer was a T-38, which isâ€™believe it or not, they do still use, and itâ€™s a supersonic airplane.

Robert Campbell Jones

Itâ€™s a little motor scooter. Boy, itâ€™s a sports car. Itâ€™s a really fast and neat airplane, so that was fun flying that because this thing would climb and climb. It held the climb record at 40,000 feet for many years, and so flying that airplane was a lot of fun. I think I had 120 hours on that. You graduate in the Air Force with about 240 hours total and then you get your wings, and from there you go on to whatever your assignment, or your next airplane, might be.

Everything We Were Going to Do in Vietnam

Interviewer

Now as youâ€™re doing this, are you hearing from classmates who now are already in

Vietnam?

R.C. Jones

Yes. Some of them, yeah, obviously theyâ€™d been shipped right over. I mean, unfortunately, I think there were a couple of guys that had already been killed over there. Some of the guys were killed early.

Interviewer

Friends? People you knew?

R.C. Jones

These were guys that I knew, my classmates, and stuff.

Interviewer

Can you name a couple ofâ€™

R.C. Jones

Well, no one really close. Bobby Arvin was killed , I think, a little bit later on, and there wasâ€™m trying to think of a couple of the other fellows that were killedâ€™I mean very quickly after we graduated, within a year or so. We knew that what they were doing was really tough downâ€™right down in the jungles, and youâ€™re down face-to-face.

Interviewer

These were infantry, I take it?

R.C. Jones

Yeah, these are all Infantry guys or whatever. Theyâ€™re front line guys, so theyâ€™re right out there in the whole dealâ€™so we knew. And I had a couple of other friends, too, that didnâ€™t go here that were over there, and one guy was a Marine, and he was killed. And so, we knew that bad things were happening over there.

Interviewer

And you knew in your pilot training that you were destined to go to Vietnam?

R.C. Jones

Well, thatâ€™s true, because the day we got to pilot training, in the initial briefing, the wing commander got up, and we were all in a big auditorium. In my class, we started with 90 or maybe 95, and so weâ€™re all there and a lot of people had their parents and friends there dropping them kind of at pilot training.

Robert Campbell Jones

And the wing commanderâ€™s a full colonel. He got up and he said, â€œGentlemen,â€ he said, â€œIf thereâ€™s anyone here that does not want to go to Vietnam, you can stand up and leave right now.â€ So we pretty much knew that weâ€™re all going. My assignment when I graduated from pilot training was an F-4.

Interviewer

An F-4?

R.C. Jones

An F-4 Phantom, so that was like a pipeline right over to Southeast Asia; so we knew that was going to happen.

Interviewer

Alright, so you graduated from pilot school. Where do you go from there?

R.C. Jones

Well, after pilot training, you finish pilot training and now you're just a basic—you have your basic wings, so you're a "lick winger" and you're a new guy. You really don't know that much. You basically know how to fly, but you have to learn how to fly the specific airplane now and learn the tactics and gunnery, and everything else in this case, with an F-4.

Interviewer

Had you flown an F-4 before then or no?

R.C. Jones

No. The only planes I had flown were the ones we flew at pilot training.

Interviewer

And how would the F-4 compare to the ones that you knew from pilot training?

R.C. Jones

Well, every plane you flew in pilot training, from the T-41, which is a little 172. You go up to a T-37, and the first time you get in that, it's like you're going so fast you can't believe it. Your mind is ten miles behind this airplane. Then you go from the T-37 to the T-38, and you're the same deal. You're so far behind initially because everything is happening so much faster.

Robert Campbell Jones

You go from T-38 to an F-4—it's the same thing. The F-4 was a Mach 2 airplane. I eventually flew it at 1,500 miles an hour, and it was a kind of a jack-of-all-trades airplane. It did everything. It bombed. It strafed. It could do air-to-air, dogfight with other airplanes. It could carry nuclear weapons, anything. So, it was a great airplane for its day. Now the airplanes they have today, they're obviously a step or two ahead of that.

Robert Campbell Jones

Well in between times, I'll say here, we had to go to survival school, and basic Air Force survival was at Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington. So we went there for three weeks, and then we had water survival, which is down in Homestead Air Force Base in Miami, and then to radar school, which is in Tucson, Arizona, and then to Eglin Air Force Base in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, which was our basic check out in the F-4.

Robert Campbell Jones

We, and I say we, as this fellow Jimmy Hall, Jim Hall, who was a class mate of mine, we were together all the way through pilot training, all the way through all this other training, all the way through F-4 training, and eventually together in the same squadron and as roommates until the day I was shot down like two years later.

Interviewer

Where's Jim Hall now?

R.C. Jones

Jim Hall is a retired schoolteacher now in Beach Haven, New Jersey.

Interviewer

Are you still friendly?

R.C. Jones

Oh, yeah, absolutely. I speak to him fairly often, so we're still good friends.

Interviewer

So you are in Florida in

R.C. Jones

At Eglin Air Force Base on the panhandle of Florida, which is where I live now, so that's how I found out about the panhandle.

Robert Campbell Jones

So we're at Eglin, and of course we're bachelors there, living out on the beach, and having a good time, and learning how to fly the F-4. There's numerous ranges around where you go out and practice bombing or air-to-air ranges out over the Gulf of Mexico. We got to shoot—they had a thing called the dart, and it's a big kind of a wooden frame thing. It kind of looks like a big dart, and it's probably 15 feet long and maybe 6 or 8 feet wide.

Robert Campbell Jones

This thing is towed behind another airplane with a big long line to let this thing out, and it's towed behind the airplane probably, maybe 2,000 feet or so behind this airplane. The airplane goes into a turn, and you come in and fire on that dart; and you're shooting real bullets. The tow airplane is way out here so he's safe, and you try to hit that dart in air to air, so we did that. We shot missiles. We did everything that you do—that we were going to do later on in Vietnam.

Interviewer

So give me a sense of the timeline here now. This would be spring of '67 now? Yes.

R.C. Jones

Spring of '67. We got to Eglin at around—maybe right after Christmas or so in '67, and this would be in springtime.

Interviewer

So Vietnam is very hot.

R.C. Jones

Yeah, Vietnam is big time andâ€”

Interviewer

Now are you scared at all about what youâ€™re heading for?

R.C. Jones

I was 23, I guess, and youâ€™re bullet proof. Youâ€™re invincible, and so nothingâ€™s going to happen to you. You canâ€™t hurt me. Itâ€™s impossible to hurt me.

Interviewer

You wantâ€”

R.C. Jones

So thatâ€™s how we all felt and especially youâ€™re a fighter pilot, and youâ€™re a tough guy, and all that; so no, we werenâ€™t afraid. I mean no one I knew was. At least they didnâ€™t seem like it, and I wasnâ€™t, so you just didnâ€™t think you had any mortality at all. It was just you had this job to do, and I mean there were guys that were looking forward to it. â€œSend me over there. I want to go over there and shoot some stuff and do the things that we were trained to do.â€

Interviewer

Were you looking forward to it?

R.C. Jones

I donâ€™t think I was that enthusiastic about it, but I mean I figured Iâ€™m going to do this. I know how to do that. Theyâ€™re not going to get me. Iâ€™m safe. Thereâ€™s no way.

Interviewer

Going from Eglin then toâ€”

R.C. Jones

From Eglinâ€”there were four squadrons at Eglin in the 33rd Tactical Fighter Wing, which is actually still there at Eglin. We left Eglin, it was in July, and I canâ€™t remember the exact date, towards the end of July of â€™67. Weâ€™d all been checked out and a lot of new pilots in the squadron.

Interviewer

How many in the squadron?

R.C. Jones

Well, this is a squadron where the airplane, the F-4 has two pilots so every airplane is two guys, two pilots. I say guys. In those days, there weren't a whole lot of women pilots. In fact there were none. But anyway, the squadron probably had I would say probably 30, 40 pilots, at least, maybe 50 even, so we had a big squadron.

Robert Campbell Jones

At the end of July, we flew our own airplanes. The whole squadron was transferred to Southeast Asia. At Eglin, we were the 4th Squadron, the 4th Tactical Fighter Squadron. We were transferred, and we actually went to Thailand because we had many bases in Thailand in those days. We went to Ubon, Thailand, which was a Thai base, but when we transferred from Eglin to Thailand, we became the 435th Squadron, so that was eventually the squadron I was flying with, 435th.

Interviewer

How many F-4s in it then?

R.C. Jones

Well, we had I want to say maybe 20 airplanes and we flew—we took off from Eglin and flew nonstop to Hickam, Hawaii in an F-4, and that was about eight to nine hours. Of course we're following a tanker, and we're tanking all the time, air-to-air refuel, and continually topping off as you're going off here because you don't want to burn it down to zero and then if you can't take any gas, you're going to have to jump out in the water here somewhere.

Robert Campbell Jones

So they had it all programmed as a regular programmed deal where they knew how much gas you had to take each time. So we followed the tanker. He drops us off into Hickam. We stay there one night, and this is a long time sitting in an F-4, because you don't get up and walk around and everything else. Getting out of the airplane, you're pretty stiff. Fortunately, when you're young you can almost do about anything.

Interviewer

Who was your copilot in that?

R.C. Jones

I'm trying to remember who I flew with over and it was just—we weren't paired off together like you see in Top Gun or something like that. You flew with a lot of different people. You didn't have the same guy all the time, and so I can't remember who I flew with. But from there, we stayed in Hickam for one night, and then the next day we all took off again following the tankers, and we went to Guam.

Robert Campbell Jones

And the Pacific is a big ocean. It's a long ways across there, and so from Hickam to Guam was just about as far as it was from Florida to Hickam, and so now we're out over the basic open ocean, see. So again, we're tanking off, and we had that regular program that you're supposed to take this much fuel and try to keep the airplane full all the time. Because if something happens now, you have enough gas, enough fuel to divert and go to somewhere, maybe back to Hawaii or somewhere else, some other island.

Robert Campbell Jones

There was a stretch in there I remember, probably maybe an hour—half an hour to an hour long where you—re in no man—s land here. If you can—t take fuel, and you got to go somewhere, you—re jumping out into water; but they had ships and stuff out there stationed along the way. I think they called them duck butts or something that were out there, so if you had a problem they could send somebody to hopefully pick you up.

Robert Campbell Jones

We got into Guam, stayed there a night, and then the next day, the third day, we flew right into Thailand. It was a littler shorter, but about 20, 22 hours total flight time, and the crazy thing about it was that out of the 22 hours, I bet you 15 of it was close weather formation, and I mean where you—re tucked in on the other airplane or on the tanker; and it—s clouds—you—re going through clouds, and so you can—t be way out there.

Robert Campbell Jones

You have to maintain contact with this guy, visual contact, and you—re getting vertigo, and you feel like you—re flying upside down, and everything else for hours at a time; and so it was a pretty tough road over there. It really was, the flight getting over there.

New Guys
Interviewer

So now you—re in Thailand at Ubon, is what you said?

R.C. Jones

Ubon. Ubon Ratchathani, the Royal Thai Air Force Base.

Interviewer

And you begin flying sorties out of—

R.C. Jones

Started flying out of Ubon—

Interviewer

Tell me about your first sortie.

R.C. Jones

Well, the first one, that was an eye-opener, too. We stayed there for—we got to Ubon, and I can—t remember exactly the date, and Robin Olds, who is fairly well-known in the Air Force, was the wing commander, and he was an ace in World War II, and he—s a well-known fighter pilot. He was the wing commander.

Robert Campbell Jones

And so we had in processing, and we had to do a lot of things before we could actually fly, so we—re probably there for maybe four or five days, a week at the most, until we flew our first missions. And of course we—re new guys, and we—re following in a big strike force going up to North Vietnam, and we—re kind of hanging on as wingmen because we don—t really—we—re not experienced enough to be leading in flights

and everything.

Interviewer

What was the mission?

R.C. Jones

Well, this day the mission was a bombing mission, and it was up in the Hanoi area. The heaviest defended area was obviously around Hanoi, and so there were missiles and anti-aircraft, and of course they had MiGs and everything there, too—enemy airplanes. But this first mission of mine, we're going up and coming in. I remember we stretched out. The flights are stretched out. Probably there was I think probably 48 planes in the strike force.

Robert Campbell Jones

You had 12 flights of 4, so that's 48 airplanes, and we stretched out over a pretty good distance. I mean the guys in front of us are probably 8, 10 miles at least in front of us, and they're the ones going in first, and we're kind of tail-end Charlie. So this first mission, I'm looking ahead and I could see where the target area is. It's fairly clear and the sky is turning black up there, and I'm thinking that's where we're going. We're going right up there where all that stuff is, and so, you just kind of, okay.

Robert Campbell Jones

We continue on and, all of a sudden, a guy out to my right, he burst into flames because a MiG 21 made a high-speed pass on him and shot a missile. And all of a sudden, flames are coming out the back of this airplane about 300 yards long, and he dumps all his stuff, and he's trying to make it back. They had to jump out, right off my wing. Off my wing—I'd say it was a couple of miles out, but I'm watching this and here we got to still go bomb. We drop our bombs, and we're getting shot at, and jinking, trying to get out of there, and we finally peel around.

Robert Campbell Jones

I end up with not even with the same guy that I came in there with, but you don't want to be alone up there so you jump on to anybody's wing, so I jumped on this guy's wing. He's from another flight, and we get out of there. We came back and we had—the crew chief, as we climb out of the airplane, "Sir," he says, "You got some holes in this thing." So we got holes in the wings and everything, and I looked around and said, "This is the first mission? This is going to be a long tour over here. This is a real eye opener." Fortunately, not every mission was like that, but a lot of them were.

Interviewer

The guys who jumped, what happened to them?

R.C. Jones

They were POWs. I got to see them later on.

Interviewer

You did?

R.C. Jones

Yeah. The guys who jumped out were POWs.

Interviewer

You knew them then?

R.C. Jones

I knew them. Yes, I knew them from—they weren't in my squadron, but they were in the wing, and I knew them basically.

Interviewer

So you go back now to Ubon.

R.C. Jones

Flying out of Ubon every day, yeah, and—

Interviewer

How many sorties did you—

R.C. Jones

How many sorties— In those days, the sorties that we flew, you had to have 100 missions in North Vietnam to go home, either that or one year, whatever came first. And for most people, they would get 100 missions in it would six, seven months, eight months maybe at the most. It depended on the weather. Obviously we couldn't drop bombs if you couldn't see in those days. You had to be able to visually see the targets, so I mean they drop radar bombs and stuff now; it's different.

Robert Campbell Jones

But in those days, we had to visually acquire the target, roll in, and manually drop your bombs. It was almost like World War II. You're manually dropping iron bombs. When the weather turned bad towards the winter—wintertime, the weather's bad in North Vietnam, so during that first time period in the summer, we got a lot of missions in and we called them counters. If it was in North Vietnam, it was a counter. Now we also flew in Laos and for some unknown reason, those didn't count, and I've been shot at in Laos just as much as North Vietnam. So you didn't want Laos missions. You wanted—

Interviewer

Was this a secret bombing mission in Laos? Is that the reason why it wasn't counted?

R.C. Jones

Well, maybe that was it. I don't know. I was just a lieutenant, and they didn't tell me all that high power stuff in those days, but maybe that was it.

Interviewer

How close could you get to your target if you were basically manuallyâ€”

R.C. Jones

Well, proximity to the target was important, but you had other considerations. Previous to this time period, a lot of people were getting shot down by small arms fire.

Robert Campbell Jones

The farmer with his rifle in the field is gonna shoot down an F-4 if youâ€™re coming in at 500 feet or 1,000 feet. They used to come whistling in as fast as they can, then pull up, drop the bombs, and leave. But these guys, they knew when you were coming. Whatever their intelligence was, they knew. We did some stupid things. We bombed at the same time every dayâ€”so it wasnâ€™t that hard to figure out. They changed the rules for us, which was good, and we could not drop any bombs below 4,500 feet because that was supposedly the range of a small arm, a rifle, 4,500 feet up. So we tried to bottom out right around 4,500 feet and thatâ€™s a mile or so, but youâ€™re close enough that you can see the target and hopefully put your bombs on it.

Interviewer

How could you measure success or failure?

R.C. Jones

Well, you could measure success or failure of your weapons delivery. Many times, youâ€™d drop your bombs, and roll up, and you could watch them hit as youâ€™re exiting. If that wasnâ€™t the case, normally youâ€™d have a pre-strike and a post-strike recce airplane, reconnaissance airplane, that would come through, and that would be an RF-4. And these guys really had big kahones â€”cause they went in by themselves, and theyâ€™re making what we call â€œthe run for the rosesâ€” right through Hanoi after a bomb strike. And the gunners are still thereâ€”

Interviewer

Taking pictures.

R.C. Jones

Theyâ€™re taking pictures. They have no weapons, no nothing, and they come whistling through with their IR [infrared] pictures, or whatever, cameras, and just whistling through taking post bomb damage assessment pictures.

Interviewer

And what were the targets there around Hanoi?

R.C. Jones

Well, we didnâ€™t bomb any churches or any schools, Iâ€™ll tell you that. Thatâ€™s all just not true.

Robert Campbell Jones

All of our targets were military type targets, power plants, truck assembly places, factories, bridges, a lot of that. I bombed the Doumer Bridge a couple of times in Hanoi. We seeded

the rivers with bombs, 500-pound bombs, that had delayed fuses on them, or they had metal influencedâ€”itâ€™s like a mine. We mined the river and these thingsâ€”if a boat came by, it would blow up. There were no timesâ€”in fact, youâ€™d be in trouble. Youâ€™d be looking at a court martial if you dropped your bombs on something that wasnâ€™t an authorized target, and especially in and around Hanoiâ€”

Interviewer

What if you just missed?

R.C. Jones

Well, Iâ€™m not saying that didnâ€™t happen. I think fortunately most of us were pretty good at what we were doing, so most of the time our bombs went where they should go. Now I canâ€™t say that there werenâ€™t misses sometimes. Now Iâ€™ll say this, later on when we were POWs and the B-52s came and bombed Hanoi, they knew where we were or they knew where the POWs were.

Robert Campbell Jones

And the only POW that was hurt was the pieces of plaster fell off the ceiling and hit him and cut his head, and everything else around Hanoi was completely raided. So we were pretty good at what we did and thatâ€™s not to say there couldnâ€™t have been a stray bomb that got loose. I mean thatâ€™s war. That happens.

The Day I Got Shot Down

Interviewer

How many missionsâ€”weâ€™re in the fall of â€™67?

R.C. Jones

This is getting into the fall of 1967. Weâ€™re flying missions every day. The weatherâ€™s pretty good, so we want counters. As a flyer over there, you donâ€™t want to go to Laos â€”cause it doesnâ€™t count, and you can get shot down in Laos, too. I mean you get the whole deal. We want a counter. We called them counters.

Interviewer

In other words, count towards yourâ€”

R.C. Jones

Counting towards 100, so it has to be a counter. You have to get in, drop ordnance in North Vietnam to have a counter.

Robert Campbell Jones

So we wanted counters, and North Vietnam was divided into separate areas. Now North Vietnam is a long, thin country. It starts out at the DMZ, and it goes all the way up to around the Hanoi area, Haiphong, Hanoi, and up to the China border. North Vietnam was divided into packages, what we call packages. Package one was way down by the DMZ, Package two, Package three, Package four, Package five was right around Hanoi, and then Package sixâ€”no, excuse me, package six was right around Hanoi and Package five was a little bit to the north.

Robert Campbell Jones

Package six missions were the hardest, the most dangerous, and you wouldâ€”if you got a Package six mission, you know youâ€™re going to get shot at and youâ€™re going to really hang it out. Package 1 missions, you might see a couple of guys shooting at you or something but those areâ€”weâ€™d love to have all those. I want 100 of those, â€”cause you go over thereâ€”and itâ€™s fast â€”cause youâ€™re only going to Package one, which is closer to Thailand. Youâ€™ve got to go right across Laos. Package oneâ€”you come back.

Robert Campbell Jones

In fact, there were a couple of guys that they were trying to set the record for how fast they could get over there and get back and get a counter. This is Iâ€™m talking about from being in a bar, to going over and having a counter, and coming back in a bar. One guy made it in an hour and ten minutes, so I mean dropping the weapons, home. But if youâ€™re going to Package six, youâ€™re looking at about a three and a half hour mission, tanking, refueling on the way up, refueling on the way back.

Robert Campbell Jones

Now Package six missions were very dangerous and it was a high threat area, and so they tried to limit everyoneâ€™s 100 missions that maybe out of 100, you might have 10, 15 or so in Package six. Because the more you go thereâ€”you go there enough, theyâ€™re going to get you. Thereâ€™s no doubt about it. Thatâ€™s a given. Thatâ€™s a given; so they tried to limit the number of times you went to Package six.

Robert Campbell Jones

Now I got in this little Catch 22 deal where you go to Package six and you have a little more experience, so youâ€™re good at it, so now, well, we donâ€™t want to send new guys up there, so now, well, let's go again. So geez, youâ€™re really good at it now so letâ€™s go again. Wellâ€”and, you know, youâ€™re bulletproof and you say, yeah, Iâ€™ll take that. Iâ€™ll go anywhere. It doesnâ€™t matter. They canâ€™t get me. It canâ€™t hurt me. So, I was shot down on my 58th mission, 58th counter. Now I had about 20 or so in Laos that didnâ€™t count, but on my 58th counter, 33 of them were in Package 6.

Interviewer

Wow.

R.C. Jones

So I was shot down on my 33rd mission over Hanoi andâ€”

Interviewer

Tell me about that mission, but tell meâ€”start me through that day of the mission where you were shot down.

R.C. Jones

The day I was shot down was the 18th of January, 1968, and the weather, as I mentioned, in North Vietnam had been bad, really all the way up through the winter months and Christmastime. Bob Hope came over and we were allâ€”it was almost like they had a bombing halt, and we were there.

Robert Campbell Jones

And then in January, we started flying missions again and many, many times youâ€™d go down and brief for a mission, and in briefing in a mission, you had to plan it. You had intelligence briefing, and you had the wing briefing, and the flight briefing, the whole deal. This whole thing would take hours and then you get down and ready to fly, and theyâ€™d cancel the whole thing because the weather never cleared. And that happened day after day.

Robert Campbell Jones

Well, weâ€™this one day, it was the 18th, all of a sudden the weather looked pretty good. So my squadron, in addition to dropping normal weapons, was also tasked to drop what was a new weapon then. It was called a Walleye. Itâ€™s a TV glide bomb, and a Walleye was initially a Navy weapon and they had droppedâ€™one of the squadrons off of one of the carriers had dropped, on a cruise, had dropped a number of them.

Robert Campbell Jones

The Walleye was a forerunner of the pre-laser guided bomb, smart bomb. The Walleye was like a 1,000-pound warhead, and it looked like a big torpedo. And it had a TV camera in the nose of this bomb, and the TV camera in the bomb transmitted up into your cathode ray tubeâ€™you know, your radarscope. You had a little TV mode, go TV, and it turns into a TV. Now this wasnâ€™t some kind of Sony Trinitronics thing, a really good TV, but it was a TV.

Robert Campbell Jones

And so the basic way you deploy this weapon was you rolled in on the target, and the weapon would lock on to contrast, black on white, white on black. So it would be perfect for likeâ€™it was a very accurate weapon, too, so a building, it would go through the window, a dark window, without touching the sides. Like a tunnel, it would go right in a tunnel. A boat out on a flat surface, this thingâ€™s sitting out there by itself. It would pick that right upâ€™and on the boat.

Robert Campbell Jones

The limiting factor was you had to get pretty close with this thing to lock it on and make sure it was good. It was a steady lock, and then, weâ€™d callâ€™weâ€™d pickle or release the weapon. Now it didnâ€™t have a motor. It wasnâ€™t self-propelled, but it had a little RAT in the back of it, which is a ram air turbine, a little propeller, and that propeller would turn and provide electricity for the weapon. It had little wings on it so once you locked it on, it would fly itself down to the target.

Robert Campbell Jones

Now you had to give it enough power, enough force, enough impetus to get to the target, which we knew we had to be a certain altitude, a certain speed if youâ€™re a certain distance away. So youâ€™d launch this weapon and then you pull off and itâ€™s on its own; it flies right down there. And we had a lot of success with this weapon. We were dropping bridges. One bomb would drop a bridge, whereas with iron bombs, World War II type bombs, it might take four flights dropping bombs, 50 bombs or something dropping one bridge. This thing, one bomb dropped a bridge. This is the first time weâ€™re going downtown with this weapon. Thereâ€™s four of us. A flight of four F-4sâ€™

Interviewer

You're flying the very first mission with the Walleye?

R.C. Jones

No, I'd flown other missions but not in Package six, not in Hanoi.

Interviewer

In Package six, okay.

R.C. Jones

The other ones where we practiced—we dropped in Package one, Package two. It wasn't highly defended. We wanted to see how this thing worked, and it was working wonderfully. We'd go up with a two-ship, and the first guy would roll it and the other guy would hold and watch. The first guy, he'd destroy the primary target. He'd come back up.

Robert Campbell Jones

They'd go get the secondary target now, and they'd destroy both the primary and secondary targets with two airplanes. It was incredible. So now we're going downtown, Bac Giang power plant, which is about 25 miles northeast of Hanoi, and this weapon was so accurate that in this flight of four, I was No. 4. One guy had a target, you got the front door; this guy, you have the chimney; another guy's got a window over here and some other part of the factory of the power plant.

Robert Campbell Jones

So we load up and we're ready to go. It's a strike force of 16 airplanes, four of us, one bomb each. We had four F-105 airplanes that we called Wild Weasels for they were SAM suppression airplanes. They went in first, so if there's any SAMs in the area, surface-to-air missiles, they had weapons that would fire against these surface-to-air missiles that are radar, so they would keep the SAMs down off of us while we came in and dropped. And then we had eight F-4s that were MiGCAP and they were eight F-4s that were equipped for air-to-air fighting. And if any enemy airplanes came up, they would engage the enemy airplanes and keep them—protect us, the bombers.

Robert Campbell Jones

So we're going in to the target, and it's amazing. It's clear. I can't believe it. After all this bad weather, it's clear, so we pick up the target and we roll in. It's a little tricky deal because it had to be a simultaneous roll in. Normally we're going one plane after another, but it had to be a simultaneous roll in because once one of these bombs went off, of course there's smoke and everything else, it would obscure the target and all the rest of them would just go ballistic. So they all had to hit pretty much at the same time, simultaneously.

Robert Campbell Jones

So we all roll in and we are all going down the chute, which we called—going down towards, it's probably a 30 or so degree dive. And we are trying to acquire the target, acquire the target, and you know, it's a fuzzy screen and—

Interviewer

I am going to ask you to stop here because we have to switch tape. And we are getting to a point that I want to make sure it's all consecutive there.

Interviewer

Ok, so just pick up where you were Bob.

R.C. Jones

Ok so we were speaking about, you know, the fateful day of my shoot down—the day I was shot down; it was the 18th of January 1968. As I mentioned, we were carrying Walleyes, TV glide bombs, and the weather was very unusually—it was good that day for wintertime. We picked up our target. As I mentioned, we had to have a simultaneous roll in so the first weapon that went off wouldn't obscure the target for the rest of the weapons.

Interviewer

Tell me again what the target was.

R.C. Jones

The target was a Bac Giang power plant and it's about 20, 25 miles northeast of Hanoi. Now this is in Package 6, so we're in the heaviest defended area, AAA, SAM surface-to-air missiles, and enemy airplanes.

Interviewer

What does AAA mean?

R.C. Jones

AAA means anti-aircraft artillery, and so they're shooting all kinds of anything at ya.

Interviewer

So the power plant was well defended.

R.C. Jones

The power plant was well defended. That whole area was well defended. I can't remember the numbers now, how many anti-aircraft units there were around that area, but there were thousands.

Interviewer

Do you know why the power plant would have been an important target other than the obvious reasons?

R.C. Jones

Well, I think other than obvious, probably not, but they needed the power and we were trying to destroy their industry and infrastructure, so this was a big part of it. Anyway, using this weapon which was very accurate, we all rolled in and this is a little tricky deal —cause you're going down the chute and you don't want to hit the other guy next to you, so you're jockeying for position while you're trying to lock the weapon on.

Robert Campbell Jones

It took a little while to get these weapons locked on and because they all had to be locked on, so No. 3 is locked, 4 is locked, 1 is locked, lead's locked, whatever. So we're finally all locked on and the lead says, "Okay, ready, ready, pickle." So we all punch the weapons off. Then we pulled off into two two-ship formations. I'm No. 4 so I went No. 3 is my element lead. No. 2 went with No. 1.

Robert Campbell Jones

We pulled off for mutual support and as we're pulling off, there's tracers going by my airplane and I look back and there's two MiG 17s that are parked at about 500 feet behind me. A MiG 17 is a Russian-made airplane. It's a Korean vintage airplane and it doesn't have the performance of an F4 but at low speeds it can out turn an F4 because it's smaller and kind of quicker. It can't go as fast but we're in a very vulnerable position here now. We've just dropped weapons and we're kind of slow, we're low. We're pulling off. We have tanks on the airplane, external tanks, fuel tanks. We had missiles on the airplane.

Robert Campbell Jones

We had a lot of extra things that we're carrying. We punch all those things off to get light and immediately start going into defensive turns. Bullets are going by the airplane and this whole thing happened probably in ten seconds. We're hit, and the airplane jostles and kind of goes out of control, and the radome comes right off the airplane. Then the airplane pitches over and we're hanging up here like this. The controls are worthless. So it's time to exit the airplane and so we both ejected and "

Interviewer

Who was your copilot here?

R.C. Jones

The other fellow was a guy named Bruce Hinkley, Captain Bruce Hinkley, and so we both ejected and "

Interviewer

Did you need to communicate with each other that you needed to eject?

R.C. Jones

Oh, we both said, "Let's get out. We're getting out of here." Yeah, absolutely. Nowadays, they have a system in the airplane where one pilot can eject both of you. We didn't have that so we had to individually eject. So we practiced this and this is a little funny story here because you go through the training, obviously, for all this, ejection seat training.

Robert Campbell Jones

They have a little trainer where we did some pilot training and you pull this thing and the handle " we had a face curtain. You could pull the face curtain like this or there was a handle right between your legs, so your hands are down here lower anyway, so I pulled the handle down here. I remember them saying when you pull the handle certain things have to happen and there's a little delay in there.

Robert Campbell Jones

The first thing that has to happen is the canopy blows off and then there's a quarter second delay and something else happens, and then this happens, and then it block pulls out. And this whole thing takes maybe a second and a quarter or a second and a half, and they said, "If you ever have to do this, you're gonna think that's a long time." And I remember pulling that handle.

Robert Campbell Jones

The canopy goes off, and my helmet just went flying off, and I'm getting burned here now 'cause the airplane's burning, and out of the intakes, the flames are coming right into the cockpit. And I'm sitting there getting burned and I remember thinking this thing's not gonna work, and it was just that was a second and three-quarters or something. That was all it was and I'm thinking this is not gonna work, and then boom, there you go.

Interviewer

Well, this is the experience that Mayhew talked about, that time just slows down.

R.C. Jones

Time just slowed down. It was incredible.

Interviewer

It pulls like taffy, doesn't it?

R.C. Jones

Yes. The time was incredibly slow and I was actually had thoughts go through my head because you have other alternatives if the ejection seat doesn't work. Then you have to unstrap and climb out like in World War II and jump over the side. I'm thinking I'm gonna have to do that but then all of a sudden you get "here we get it's a rocket seat.

Interviewer

So it's interesting. At the same time this thing's slowing down, your mind is racing so fast.

R.C. Jones

It's going fast. It really is.

Interviewer

Are you in radio contact?

R.C. Jones

I think we made a couple of maydays and the rest of our flight is involved still with these MiGs. Like I said, they shot two of us down that day.

Interviewer

The one you were paired with or the â€“

R.C. Jones

No. They didnâ€™t get both of â€“ they got another guy in the other element. They shot two American airplanes down and we shot down one of them, so it wasnâ€™t a good day. And to this day, I donâ€™t know where that MiG CAP was that was supposed to be protecting us, but it was a lot of confusion and everything so I mean Iâ€™m not throwing any darts or blame anywhere. It was a confusing time. People are screaming on the radio and all of a sudden this happens so quickly, that here Iâ€™m hanging in the parachute.

Robert Campbell Jones

And, hanging in the parachute, this is a weird deal, too, because you go from being in this cockpit where itâ€™s bedlam. Thereâ€™s people screaming, and shooting at ya, and youâ€™re jumping out of airplanes, and everything. Next thing is Iâ€™m hanging in a parachute and itâ€™s deathly quiet. Thereâ€™s no airplanes around. This isnâ€™t like in the movies or in World War II where youâ€™re right behind the guy and you follow him around, youâ€™re that close. Youâ€™re miles apart and youâ€™re shooting at people, half a mile apart, and youâ€™re going so fast that all the airplanes were gone.

Interviewer

So you didnâ€™t see the MiG that shot you, then?

R.C. Jones

I saw him. I saw him, but the rest of the guys in my flight, what happened to them? Theyâ€™re all gone. I look down and my airplaneâ€™s burning on the ground, and so you went from a chaotic situation in that cockpit where youâ€™re in mortal trouble here to hanging out in a parachute and itâ€™s quiet. Thereâ€™s nobody around and Iâ€™m looking down. Thereâ€™s my airplane down there.

Interviewer

Whatâ€™s going through your mind at this moment?

R.C. Jones

Well, the first thing thatâ€™s going through my mind â€“ thatâ€™s a funny question because â€“ Iâ€™ll back up one second. At Ubon, the Americans had one side of the base and the Australians had the other side, and there was a little Aussie unit over there and they flew F86s. And they were just up there as a token deal and it was like day defense, air defense of the base at Ubon. Iâ€™m thinking whoâ€™s bombing the base at Ubon? The Vietnamese arenâ€™t coming down there. Nobodyâ€™s coming down there.

Robert Campbell Jones

So these guys are just out there playing around, so weâ€™d go out and hang out with these guys, go over there and throw darts and stuff, and drink beers, and everything with them. These are good guys and so while youâ€™re at â€“ you had an R&R period while you were in Southeast Asia, so we had I think it was four weeks R&R. A lot of guys were married, would go home or theyâ€™d meet their wives in Hawaii or something like that.

Robert Campbell Jones

I was single so we got to know these Australian guys and they were our age and young guys. They said, "Yeah, come on down to Australia. We'll show you around and everything." So Jimmy Hall and I were scheduled to go to Australia in February. The first thing I thought of when I was hanging in that chute, you're not going to Australia now. You can't go to Australia, and I still haven't been to Australia and I want to go. But anyway, that's a side story.

Robert Campbell Jones

In reality, what I'm thinking is, man, somehow I've got to find somewhere to hide. I don't want to be captured here. So unfortunately we jumped out right over the delta and I look down and there's nothing but water and they're all rice paddies. You're charged up, and you're in shock, and the whole thing, so I'm thinking, well, I'm not gonna drown in this place, so I pop my Mae West "we carried all this survival gear" Mae West blow up.

Robert Campbell Jones

You're sitting on a seat kit and the seat kit goes with you, and you deploy the seat kit with a little handle and it falls away from you and there's a lanyard and all your survival gear is attached to this lanyard, and at the bottom of the lanyard is a one-man life raft. If you happen to go out in the Gulf of Tonkin, this thing is big enough, you climb in the life raft. This thing blows up, so all this stuff is hanging beneath me. Of course when I finally landed, I land in this much water and didn't need any of it.

Interviewer

Where's Hinkley? Could you see Hinkley?

R.C. Jones

Hinkley, I could see him off to the side maybe 100 yards away.

Interviewer

Same thing. He's pulled his "

R.C. Jones

Well, I just can't recall whether "he's probably smarter than I was and didn't do that, but he's coming down right over here. I'm over here and he was a little lower than me. I remember that for some reason.

Interviewer

What are the instructions now? I mean how had you been prepared for this with respect to what attempts there would be to retrieve you?

R.C. Jones

Well, as far as being rescued, we knew that once you're above the Red River in that area, they're not coming. There's just no way. Now unless you could get to "and this is a little mind game, too, that like I said, you're in shock. There were so-called safe areas. It's safer than landing right down in the Hanoi Hilton, but if you could get to a mountainous area, and there were some mountains that were northeast of Hanoi and there were some that were northwest of Hanoi.

Robert Campbell Jones

If you could land in the mountainous area it was a little less populated, so maybe your chances of evading and maybe they could sneak somebody up there to get ya. Thatâ€™d be better. So I can remember going on â€” and we probably went on about maybe 4 or 5,000 feet, and I remember looking off to the right and it was Thud Ridge and MiG Ridge. Thatâ€™s what we called them, the names of these little mountain ranges. MiG Ridge is sitting off there maybe 40 miles out there, so Iâ€™m thinking, well, I got to slit my parachute so I can get over there. And you could maneuver your parachute a little bit and the guys that were airborne know that, too. You could pull on one riser and your parachute would kind of slide to the side.

Robert Campbell Jones

Iâ€™m thinking Iâ€™ve got to get over there so I start pulling my parachute, and Iâ€™d have had to have a motor on that parachute to go that far. I mean thereâ€™s no way, so eventually here I come. And on the way down Iâ€™m looking around, and I look out on the horizon, and I see this airplane. Itâ€™s a MiG, and I see a plane through the MiG and heâ€™s turning in on me, and Iâ€™m looking and I said this guyâ€™s gonna come and shoot me right out of this parachute, and here he comes. And I donâ€™t know if it was the guy that shot us down or one of the other ones, but heâ€™s coming right at my parachute.

Robert Campbell Jones

So Iâ€™m sitting there thinking, well, we carried side arms. I had a little 38 pistol, and I pull out my 38 pistol, and Iâ€™m hanging in the parachute, and Iâ€™m like this. And Iâ€™m thinking if this SOB is gonna shoot me, Iâ€™m gonna get some shots off at least here. Well, this little peashooter I got is gonna go out about 50 feet and do this. This guyâ€™s got a 20-millimeter cannon in his airplane, so not much of a challenge here.

Robert Campbell Jones

But Iâ€™m sitting here like this and Iâ€™m thinking, well, I got tracers in my gun because we put tracers in them because thereâ€™s very few times that we thought that youâ€™re gonna have a gun battle out there with somebody, but youâ€™re gonna use this gun to signal. If you go in heavy trees or something, you can signal and the tracer will go through the trees and the rescue people can find you, so I knew I had tracers in this gun. I had five tracers in the gun, so Iâ€™m thinking, well, if I shoot first, heâ€™s gonna see this so maybe heâ€™s not gonna shoot me. I donâ€™t know. So I stood there like this and I think Iâ€™m gonna let him fire first and Iâ€™m gonna unload this gun off, whatever. So he goes right over the top of me and he was just kind of thumbing his nose at me, or whatever, I donâ€™t know, but he went flying by.

Robert Campbell Jones

The next thing I noticed, well, youâ€™re supposed to check your parachute right away, and I look up and I got about two or three panels that are blown out in this parachute, and itâ€™s a 24-foot canopy to start with, so youâ€™re coming down pretty fast. Then I hear theyâ€™re shooting at us from the ground. I look down and we came through a couple of cloud levels, and all that, and I notice thereâ€™s people out there, and all that, and you could hear noise now. Weâ€™re getting close enough to hear.

Interviewer

Now are you landing in the city of Hanoi or are you â€“

R.C. Jones

No. Weâ€™re in the rice paddy area where itâ€™s all water with a couple â€“ in between you see these little dikes and embankments in between, but basically itâ€™s water.

Interviewer

So these are farmers or whatever out â€“

R.C. Jones

These are just farmers, country people, whatever. Weâ€™re coming down and theyâ€™re shooting at us. A couple of bullets go through the canopy. I could hear them whistling by. So I land right in this rice paddy and Bruce, he lands right up on the bank maybe 50, 60 yards away.

Thereâ€™s Nowhere to Go
Robert Campbell Jones

I land like a ton of bricks and all this gear weâ€™re carrying â€“ I weighed 185. I got on the scales one time with all this stuff I had on. It was 240, so weâ€™re carrying a lot of gear. Land, pull this stuff off, and it was like Bruce comes running over, â€œWe gotta get out of here.â€ And I said to him, â€œWhere are we going? Thereâ€™s nowhere to go.â€ Itâ€™s just flat and people â€“ here theyâ€™re starting to come. So we climb out and immediately this giant ring of people form around us, and this was the hardest time because you hear all these MIAs, what happened to them? We saw them in the chute and all that, never showed up.

Robert Campbell Jones

Right here is where a lot of guys didnâ€™t make it because this is a mob scene and these people arenâ€™t happy. Youâ€™ve just been bombing them, you know. And these people, everyone has a weapon, everybody. Old ladies, kids, they got sharpened rocks. I saw bamboo rifles. I saw M-15s, M-16s, AK-47s, all of it, pistols, anything they could pick up to have a weapon. And they start closing in and I look at Bruce and I say, â€œWell, this is it.â€

Robert Campbell Jones

So we emptied our guns, tossed them in. We had radios. We broke our radios. You donâ€™t want them to get a radio. They may make some bogus calls and call in for a helicopter or something and then shoot it down, so we were taught to break your radios. And all of a sudden this old guy comes out of the crowd and he had a long Ho Chi Minh beard andâ€“

Interviewer

Wait, so theyâ€™re confronting you?

R.C. Jones

Theyâ€™re just kind of surrounding us and weâ€™re standing there, and this maybe 10, 15 feet away all the way around. I donâ€™t remember now. It seemed like there was 1,000 people. There was probably 100, at least. And so, this old guy comes out of the crowd and

these people were like paramilitia. Some of them had a military shirt. Some of them had a hat. Some of them had pants. This wasn't the regular army guys but paramilitia, and they all had weapons.

Robert Campbell Jones

This old guy comes out of the crowd and he wants our guns. He's like this, put your hands up and give me your weapons. So I got to give the guy credit because he walks up as close as you are to me and I could have shot him right between the eyes. I mean if things were reversed, I don't think I would have walked up to someone like that.

Robert Campbell Jones

So we emptied our guns and tossed them down, and right then the mass of humanity descended on us, and this is a pretty tough time because we had adrenaline going and that, but we're getting beat up and these people are jabbing you and the whole deal. And the first thing, we're in flight suits. They came up and "some of these people had never seen a zipper before because flight suits have got a lot of zippers on them, and these people are going, blah, blah, blah, blah with the zipper and I've never seen that before. So they took our flight suits, cut our boots off, just took "one boot went that way and one boot went that way.

Interviewer

It sounds like they're confronting you more as an object of curiosity than as an enemy.

R.C. Jones

I think that the confrontation was both curious and they didn't like us, believe me.

Interviewer

Are they physically assaulting you, though?

R.C. Jones

Well, they're coming up and hitting you and stuff, and punching you, and that type of thing, and "

Interviewer

"Cause one of the questions I would have is that if they've all got weapons and they're surrounding you, and they know you may still have weapons because the old man's not come up to you yet, why didn't they just kill you?

R.C. Jones

Well, that's a good question, why we weren't killed, and I think "I'll answer that in one second. But what happened was this old guy came out of the crowd, like I said, and he took our guns and then we had this mass of humanity.

Robert Campbell Jones

Then they put us against this earthen embankment which is on the side of one of these rice paddies, and we're in our underwear, barefoot and in our underwear. They wouldn't take our underwear. The Vietnamese are modest people. They take showers

with their underwear on, that type of thing. They do. They wouldn't take all our clothes so we're standing there naked. They wouldn't do that. Anyway, so we're standing there and it's cold. This is in January up there and it's cold, so we're kind of shivering.

Robert Campbell Jones

And they move everyone away from us on this embankment, and I'm sitting next to Hinkley, and we're sitting there, and all of a sudden I look out and there's about five or six guys out here, younger guys with rifles, and they're all lined up. I mean I look out there and Bruce says, "They're going to shoot us. They're going to shoot us." And I remember saying, "Nah, they wouldn't do that." And I'm thinking the hell they won't. So then this old guy comes out of the crowd, this same guy, and he goes up and he's arguing with these people, and we couldn't understand what they were saying but it was pretty obvious.

Robert Campbell Jones

And they're pushing him away and he's coming back doing this, "No, no, no, no." pushing him away. And right then it's one of those deals where my whole life passed in front of my face, and it wasn't so much that but it was like I was out of my body and I could see me sitting down there, and it was like I was God looking down at me. And this voice came and said, "You're pretty young." I was 24. It said, "But you still had it better than most."

Interviewer

A voice inside you said this?

R.C. Jones

This voice was coming and it was like I was up there looking. I could see me sitting down there. It was like this little nebulous dream right there.

Interviewer

A voice you recognized? Was it?"

R.C. Jones

I could see me and it was this voice talking while I was looking at me, and it said, "You still had it better than most." It said, "You got to go to college. You got to fly airplanes. You still had it better than most."

Robert Campbell Jones

And it said, "You're not married and you don't have any children yet, so you haven't experienced that part of life, but you still had it better than most." And this whole thing took 30 seconds, a minute, I don't know. After that, I wasn't afraid. I didn't care. I didn't actually even feel anything anymore.

Interviewer

Do you think this was a religious experience or how do you describe it to yourself now?

R.C. Jones

I think it was probably something that's in your brain that's some kind of chemical that kicks off when you're in a situation like that and it just kind of numbs you.

Interviewer

A defense mechanism, then.

R.C. Jones

Yeah, I do. I've heard other people have these experiences like this, out of body type of thing. It was kind of like that, I guess, but I know this, though. I wasn't afraid. I said, "You want to shoot me? Shoot me. I don't care." I did not care. I wasn't afraid at all, and I mean I think back now on it and we came pretty close to checking out there.

Interviewer

So the old man was arguing with them saying don't shoot you.

R.C. Jones

Certainly. I mean it became very obvious.

Robert Campbell Jones

I mean he's telling them that, hey, look. These guys are worth a lot more alive than if you just kill them right here. We got to bargain with them smarter. He'd been around when the French were there and everything and these were all young guys, like the young lions. We're going to kill these guys right now, so obviously he won the argument and talked them out of it, so we made it through that. That's probably the most dangerous time in Vietnam at least, of being a POW, was that initial capture period when guys were killed or whatever.

Interviewer

Well, particularly in this case because it was a militia, therefore not responding to any sort of authority.

R.C. Jones

There was no control, no. That's right.

Interviewer

And it's sort of chaotic, right?

R.C. Jones

Exactly.

Interviewer

I mean you don't know what's going to happen.

R.C. Jones

This is a fire drill going on. This is a mob.

Interviewer

And the anger most peculiarly is directed towards the fact that you were an invader.

R.C. Jones

Well, our planeâ€™s burning right over here on the ground, soâ€™

Interviewer

I mean they donâ€™t see any political advantage. They just see youâ€™re shooting at them and they donâ€™t want toâ€™

R.C. Jones

Weâ€™re invaders. Weâ€™re aliens that dropped in on them and trying to hurt their country, so I mean and a lot of themâ€™ and we saw this later on. A lot of them are high on opium. Theyâ€™re smoking opium all the time over there, the men, and their eyeballs are doing this and so theyâ€™re just, whatever. But fortunately the old guy talked them out of it and weâ€™

In the Movies

Interviewer

So what happens next?

R.C. Jones

Well, nextâ€™ this was about 3

Interviewer

Separate huts, you and heâ€™ heâ€™s in one and youâ€™re in another. They didnâ€™t want you talking to each other.

R.C. Jones

Separate. Heâ€™s in one, Iâ€™m in another nearby. No, I couldnâ€™t talk to him.

Robert Campbell Jones

So they then took us toâ€™ they had hate rallies, and they did this to a lot of people. I mean when youâ€™re captured, they did this almost to everybody, and they would bring you out, had torches, and bullhorns, and stuff, and theyâ€™d parade you through a couple of villages. A lot of guys didnâ€™t make it through this either. â€™Cause these people arenâ€™t happy and theyâ€™re working these people up with bullhorns, and â€™œThese are the bad guys,â€™ and theyâ€™d pull your hair back, and yank your blindfold off, and, â€™œHereâ€™s the bad Americans,â€™ and go through there andâ€™

Interviewer

But this is not the Viet Cong. This is still the militias isnâ€™t it?

R.C. Jones

This is still the militia village type situation. We havenâ€™t been with any regulars yet. So we got drug through a few villages. We took our lumps there and then I tell people that one

thing that makes Americans I think unique is that we have a sense of humor. Even in some of the most darkest and dire situations, you'd be surprised how humor prevails.

Robert Campbell Jones

Later that night, they brought out a film crew to film us, and they did this for propaganda, and they did it to a lot of guys. They'd give some guys back their flight suits. "You go hide over in those bushes over there." and then they had this big film crew filming like this just happened. And a lot of times they'd have the militia women involved because they really promoted this in Vietnam, women in the military, and if it wasn't for the women, that country'd fall apart in two days because they did all the heavy work and the men are off smoking opium somewhere.

Robert Campbell Jones

So, they"what they did with us, they set up a camera. It was very similar"I mean it looked similar but it was one of these big old things and had big, bright lights, and this Vietnamese that was kind of in charge, he spoke a little bit of English. So they had us standing up and we're still in our underwear. Now we're shaking. It's cold, and they had us tied, and I'm standing here. Bruce is standing right there.

Robert Campbell Jones

And they bring out these two militia girls and Vietnamese are small. Vietnamese women are really small. I mean these girls weren't five feet tall; they had to be 4' 7" or something. They're just little teeny things and they had them dressed up like Pancho Villa, bandoleers of ammo, rifles, and knives, and stuff. And they just had"one of them held my rope on one side and the other one stood on the other side of Bruce and held that rope. I'm fairly tall. She's down here like this.

Robert Campbell Jones

And I remember"they feed these people so much propaganda. Listen, these are the bad Americans right here. I remember I turned my head and looked at her, and she looked up at me, and our eyes met, and she just went (gasps) like this and covered her face, like if this guy looks at you, you're going to be pregnant or something, or you're going to die right now. If this guy looks in your eyes, don't let him do that, so she was shaking more than I was just holding the rope.

Robert Campbell Jones

And so we go through this little rigmarole and the Vietnamese that's running this thing, taking the movies, he comes up and he wants us to look humble, and sorry, and everything, and he can't speak English very well. He says, "Bow down. Bow down." Well, we're taught in survival school and everything else to delay, do anything you can to delay. You don't understand. We don't speak Vietnamese. I can't understand you type of thing just to delay and buy time. So, "We don't understand, understand." "Bow down."

Robert Campbell Jones

So he grabs our hair and yanks our heads down. He wants us to look sorry and then go back, he's going to start the movie. So as soon as he leaves, we pick our heads back up. "No, no, no, no." He says, "Bow down. Bow down." We said, "I don't understand. I don't understand." He comes, "Bow down." Pulls your

head down like this. He leaves, back up again.

Robert Campbell Jones

So we do this little game four or five times and finally he comes and he grabs our hair one time and says, "Bow down. Bow down." He leaves and I turn over to Bruce and I said, "See, I always told you they were going to put us in the movies." And the Gook "or Vietnamese, excuse me, he thinks Bruce said it; so he comes over and he grabs Bruce, throws him down on his knees so now they're looking eye to eye, and starts slapping him, and cuffing him, and everything.

Robert Campbell Jones

Does he know what he said or is it just " "

R.C. Jones

"Cause he talked. He said something. I'm sure he didn't understand what he said, but I said it and I'm sitting over here. We're 12,000 miles from home. I'm standing naked, just got captured, and I'm laughing because the Gook thinks Bruce said it and not me. And to this day when I see Hinkley, he says, "You son of a " he says, "You couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you?"

Robert Campbell Jones

So we made it through that, and we were taken into Hanoi that night in the back of a jeep hogtied, and we got into the Hanoi Hilton, and that's the last time I saw Bruce Hinkley for five years. He went one way, I went the other, and we knew we'd arrived now.

Robert Campbell Jones

So the militia somehow connected with the regulars.

R.C. Jones

Well, they eventually sent out a regular army jeep and these guys were regular soldiers with uniforms and everything. And they took us into Hanoi and we probably got into Hanoi at 3

I Can't Describe What the Feeling Is

Robert Campbell Jones

So what does the Hanoi Hilton look like?

R.C. Jones

The Hanoi Hilton looks like a real right out of the movies French prison and Heartbreak Hotel is a little eight cellblock area where all the new guys went, and so " "

Interviewer

Within the Hanoi [Hilton]?

R.C. Jones

Within the Hanoi Hilton. There's different areas within the Hanoi Hilton, different cellblocks in different areas. This was the Heartbreak Hotel and all the areas were all

named after Las Vegas hotels, the Sands, the Riviera, whatever, but this was Heartbreak Hotel.

Interviewer

By the prisoners, notâ€”

R.C. Jones

By us, yeah. You knew youâ€™d arrived because this was four cells on each side of this hallway, big, heavy wooden door with a flap that dropped down. The room was concrete. It had about maybe a 12, 14-foot ceiling, one bare light bulb, one window, open with bars, and there were two concrete bunks. They were formed right into the side of the room. The room, which I measured many times, is 7 x 7 with these two concrete bunks. And at the end of the concrete bunks were stocks, wooden stocks, that they could put you in and they could lock these stocks from outside the room, slide a bar in to lock the stock; so they didnâ€™t have to come in the room.

Robert Campbell Jones

But they put me in this room. The floor is wet. Rats and stuff running around because they had drain holes. The walls are 18 inches thick and all around this prison were big high walls with glass and stuff on the top. They put us in the stocks, and I remember they put me in the stocks with my legs crossed like this, and I donâ€™t know why they did that, just to be more harassment, you know; so your legs are crossed in the stocks. Youâ€™re worn out. Youâ€™re tired. This is it.

Robert Campbell Jones

So I remember nodding off. Iâ€™m stillâ€”Iâ€™m freezing cold and I remember waking up a couple of times and looking down, and even though it was winter, I looked down and said, God, you got really dirty and stuff. My feet and legs were just covered. They were black. And I looked a little closer and they were covered with mosquitoes, and it was just a black blanket over my legs. Youâ€™d try to shake them off and stuff, and after a while you donâ€™t feel them biting soâ€”didnâ€™t matter. So I stayed like that for a couple of days.

Interviewer

Did they feed you?

R.C. Jones

Not initially, no, and no clothes or anything for a while either. I mean youâ€™re cold in there.

Interviewer

Are they interrogating you?

R.C. Jones

Not yet. No interrogations yet. Youâ€™re just in there, and you got to go to the bathroom or whatever, you justâ€”there it is right there, so you donâ€™t get out of those stocks.

Robert Campbell Jones

Finally, they took us for interrogation, took me in interrogation. And I have to say this, that the interrogation was "the room" had been to survival school and it was amazing how close it was to what had been seen in survival school. There was a table with a blue tablecloth, a stool on my side, the Vietnamese on that side, and a picture on the wall "a light bulb hanging there and Ho Chi Minh's picture on the wall. And when I went through survival school it was almost just like that. It was funny. So they want to "you're in the interrogation and it's name, rank, serial number, date of birth. That was the code of conduct, and they didn't want to hear that.

Robert Campbell Jones

They said, "You are a criminal." I was never called a POW in the years I was there, not once. We were always "the blackest criminals in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." And I remember when the first time "he" got a couple of guards in there standing behind me with rifles and I remember I said, "Democratic Republic of Vietnam?" I said, "You mean North Vietnam?" And he had the guard just whack me. "No, North Vietnam." He said, "Vietnam is one. There is no north, no south. Vietnam is one."

Interviewer

What are they asking you, then?

R.C. Jones

They want to know "I mean I'm a first lieutenant. I mean I don't know the top secrets of the United States. Even if I wanted to tell them, I didn't know it. So they wanted to know basic things like your biography, and you don't want to tell them that stuff, what airplane you flew and all that. My airplane burning right on the ground. They know what airplane I flew. There it is. But we're trained at name, rank, serial number, date of birth. That's what you give them.

Robert Campbell Jones

And so that lasts for a little while and then they don't "there's two things that they won't buy. One is "I won't tell you" and the other is "I don't know." So they put us in what we call the ropes and this is the brand of torture that they were using at this time period. There were guys that were shot down well before me that had been there for a couple of years; so over time they kind of refined their methods and they knew what they were doing.

Robert Campbell Jones

And basically this was you're on the floor. Your feet are straight out in front of you and they put you in a set of leg irons, which are a bar with nu-bolts, kind of, and your ankles are in that. And then they take your arms and they take them back up behind you, and they take your wrists, put your wrists together, and they get your arms together all the way up like this only behind you. And you don't think that your arms can do that but they can. And then they take a couple of straps, and they wrap them through where your arms are coming back this way and they take the straps and put it over the bar and then start cranking you down.

Robert Campbell Jones

So basically your arms are coming up behind you and they're coming up "I remember my hands were like here in front of my face, and they crank you down, and my

face is right on my ankles like that, and just tie you off. And you're in this position where—oh, before that, they put a stick with a rag on it in your mouth and tie it behind your head so you can't scream and you don't make any noise, and just tie it off. I mean I can't describe what the feeling is. There's lightning bolts going through your shoulders and everything else.

Robert Campbell Jones

The biggest thing for me was I knew that I was going to vomit. I'm in this position—I'm going to vomit; and this thing is in my mouth and I knew I'm going to drown here—in my own vomit. So I start making noise and yelling a lot, and they just leave you in there for a little while longer. And finally they come in and they let you out of this thing and it's like when they let you out it's like, oh, God, it hurts even more. Anyway, they—

Interviewer

Do they connect the torture to your—

R.C. Jones

Yeah, I'm not answering their questions. They said, "You have bad attitude."

Interviewer

So they release the torture and they say, "Now are you ready?"

R.C. Jones

"You have really bad attitude and if your attitude is better, we do not have to punish you." And so this is punishment.

Interviewer

And are they showing you examples of people—prisoners who have indeed relented?

R.C. Jones

They played a tape that was, I believe, from Robbie Reisner, who was shot down in 1965. He was a more senior guy, and it was a tape that—"Listen to your compatriot, Colonel Reisner, and what he says." It was under duress that they made him say these things and even at that time, I didn't believe it. I didn't think this was really him and whatever, so that wasn't such an influence to me. It was just getting out of those ropes and not wanting to have to do that again.

Robert Campbell Jones

But now they say, "Okay." So you fill out your—now it's even harder because you don't want them to do this to you again and then you're afraid well, geez, they're going to find out if I lie to them and all that, so it's a real mental thing. They want to know, "Give me the name of everyone in your wing." Well, I couldn't do that if I wanted to. They want a name of everyone in your flight that was flying with you that day. Well, you have to summon up the courage—at least I did, to make up stuff to just tell them. Like I said, they're just looking for—we learned later they're just looking for an answer. So I was flying with—

Interviewer

Not necessarily the correct answer, you mean. They're just looking for something?

R.C. Jones

They're looking for something to put down on the paper.

Interviewer

So you could say Donald Duck and they would

R.C. Jones

I told them Mickey Mantle. I was flying with Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra. I was flying with the New York Yankees that day. And then, How do you spell that? Berra and everything, so I mean I'm sitting there like, oh, God, and I'm thinking what is Bruce going to tell them; and they're going to check it and all that. They never checked. They never did.

Interviewer

Well, Bruce is probably a Dodgers fan, so he's going to go there.

R.C. Jones

He's going to tell them Duke Snider or somebody. I don't know. But you're thinking and I gave them all these things and different Where are you from? I told them I was from Nebraska or something somewhere. But you learn you had to tell them something, so that's kind of we got through that part of it.

Interviewer

Did they ever find out what you were telling them was a lie?

R.C. Jones

Not to my knowledge, no, never did.

Robert Campbell Jones

So really, it's really an example in bureaucracy. They just needed to fill out a piece of paper to hand to somebody else.

R.C. Jones

It's kind of like our Army. You got to fill the squares, right? So they are basically in there to show you that we're telling you what to do. We're in charge here. You're not telling us. We can make you talk. I mean they can make you talk. That's easy. I mean all of a sudden you think you're John Wayne and you're going to die before you say anything. That's not true because someone's in the room and screaming and then all of a sudden you realize it's you, and you have to say something so then you've got to fall back and be strong.

Robert Campbell Jones

You have to use your mind and that was a hard thing to do because you don't want

to go back in those ropes again. And they put me in the ropes one other time, but it was justâ€”there were some guys that did the ropes six or eight times, and I mean those are tough guys.

Interviewer

Once you started answering these questions they left you alone then, just basically in your cell?

R.C. Jones

No. â€œYou go back and think about your crimes and we will talk to you tomorrow,â€ or something, and then you go back in the next day. And then they start ranting and raving about â€œWho is the aggressor?â€ You get backed into a corner. â€œWell, it was a tough war. Itâ€™s tough on both sides.â€ â€œBut who was the aggressor?â€ And finally you have to say, â€œWell, you are.â€ and he has the Gook just beat on you type of deal.

Robert Campbell Jones

You got a guy there with a rifle. They put a rifle up to my head a couple of times and the guy said, â€œIf you donâ€™t answer these questions, Iâ€™m going to have my guard shoot you.â€ He cocks the weapon, the whole deal, and Iâ€™m sitting, okay, here we go. And he said, â€œOkay, because of our lenient and humane treatment, we will give you another chance. You go back to your room and you think about your crimes and we will talk again.â€

Robert Campbell Jones

So you got through this initial period where everyone is tortured, almost everyone without a doubt is tortured, but they just want to break you and show you that they can break you, and they can whatever. After that, you would go in for an interrogation maybe once in a while just for an attitude check type of thing and it wasnâ€™tâ€”you werenâ€™t expecting to go in there and undergo heavy duty torture anymore.

Survival and Brotherhood

Interviewer

So this all happened in the first couple of weeks then when you wereâ€”

R.C. Jones

Yeah, Iâ€™d say initiallyâ€”youâ€™re tortured initially but then later on they wanted people to make anti-war statements. That happened a lot and fortunately for me, I was a junior officer. If you were shot downâ€”I was shot down as a first lieutenantâ€”if you were shot down as a colonel, lieutenant colonel, they kept those guys separate. They would have kept all of us separate the whole time if they could, but logistically they couldnâ€™t do it. They had too many guys being shot down and end up in prison.

Robert Campbell Jones

But they kept some of those guys, Reisner and a couple of the other senior people wereâ€”Stockdaleâ€”four years, four years in solitary. Let me tell you, youâ€™re different when you come out of that. Youâ€™re a different person. The hardest thing to deal with was being alone up there. Thereâ€™s strength in unity. I mean youâ€™ve got people around you that are Americans and itâ€™s mega-strength. If youâ€™re by yourself, itâ€™s much harder.

Interviewer

But you're alone in your cell, right?

R.C. Jones

Right.

Interviewer

Now where were you able to congregate with other prisoners?

R.C. Jones

I was in solitary for about eight weeks and then I moved in with one other person.

Interviewer

Who was that?

R.C. Jones

His name was Jim Seahorn, and he was an F-105 pilot, a little older than me. We were roommates for—we lived together for, oh, a few weeks, and then we moved in with two other guys, so we had a four-man room. So eventually we ended up in an eight or nine-man room, and that was pretty much the standard size.

Interviewer

All of them come home? All those nine come home?

R.C. Jones

All of those people that I knew came home. Now we had names of people that were in other rooms that didn't. They got sick or something and didn't make it.

Interviewer

Are you still in contact with those nine?

R.C. Jones

Oh, yeah.

Interviewer

Is there sort of a bond?

R.C. Jones

Absolutely. We have reunions all the time, and we get together. I mean I was closer to—I lived with one fellow, Glen Myers, for four years. Now throughout the time period that I was there—excuse me—they moved us quite a bit. We would move—they'd come in and take two guys out of here and put them in this room, two guys over here and put them—and it was weird, or you'd go to a different camp even.

Robert Campbell Jones

There were four or five camps in and around Hanoi and for no apparent reason theyâ€™d be moving us around. But this was really good for us because we could exchange the names and everything then. I think this Glen Myers and I, I think we held the record. For over four years, he and Iâ€™ whenever we moved, we happened to go together or we stayed in the same room; so four years, I lived with him day and night.

Robert Campbell Jones

I mean itâ€™s more than you live with your wife even, and so you learn a lot of things. You have to have obviously discipline but you have to understand that youâ€™ve got to be mature about things, and after a while, just the way this guy lifts up his spoon can make you angry, so you have to realize, hey, weâ€™re in prison here. We have to do this.

Interviewer

How about your faith that you would eventually be released?

R.C. Jones

We alwaysâ€™ personally, for sure, and I think almost every person up there knew that eventually we would be released, even though they told us thatâ€™ well, they told us a lot of things. One, â€œWe will try you. We will convict you, and we will execute you. You will never go home.â€ And then we heard that, â€œIf you go home, the American people will execute you. They donâ€™t want you back again.â€

Robert Campbell Jones

We were a little more sophisticated than in other wars. The only way youâ€™re going to be a POW in North Vietnam was to be shot down and to be shot down you had to be a pilot. To be a pilot, you had most likely to be a college graduate and an officer; so, the level was a little bit different than Korea or World War II where you had thousands of guys that were 17, 18-year-old high school kids. So we didnâ€™t buy any of that stuff. I mean the propaganda efforts were veryâ€™ not very sophisticated at all.

Interviewer

What was your lowest moment in captivity?

R.C. Jones

Well, I had hepatitis up there and I was the first one to get it in our camp, and it went through the camp like wildfire. And I went down to probably, just estimating, probably about 130, 135, and I was pretty sick. I was in a nine manâ€™ eight-man room at that time. The room was 20 feet x 20 feet, so they quarantined me in the room. We had these straw mats that we rolled out, four on each side, so the Gook, the Vietnamese comes in, and he moves everyone down on one side. So instead of this much room between me and the next guy, now I had about this much room, so I was quarantined. But I was pretty sick andâ€™

Interviewer

Did they give you any medicine?

R.C. Jones

No. Well, the only medicine they ever gave you was an aspirin or something. We had dysentery. I mean if you didn't go six or eight times a day, there was something wrong with you. The Vietnamese did. I mean that was a way of life.

Interviewer

There were no toilets in solitary confinement, so

R.C. Jones

No. We had a bucket. You had a bucket or a hole in the ground. That was it.

Interviewer

They would come and wash it down?

R.C. Jones

No.

Interviewer

So you had to live with the stench of your

R.C. Jones

Yeah, you lived with that. Sure, that was it, and you'd take your buckets out and dump them in a honey pot bucket in some area. Maybe in the morning, they let you out to dump your buckets and that was just kind of a way of life. You just got used to it.

Robert Campbell Jones

We all had dysentery. A good friend of mine, Jerry Gurn, got real sick, and I didn't know if he was going to make it or not because he really had bad dysentery. And they gave him a couple of sulfur pills. The Vietnamese doctor was just a nobody and he comes in; he gives him two sulfur pills and it said "these are from one of the brotherly socialist countries, Romania or somewhere like that. I remember it said "œsunfa," s-u-n-f-a, on that pill. He swallows both of these pills and he's sitting on that bucket 24 hours a day, and I went over there one time and looked down there and there's the two pills. I could still read sunfa on them, and they went through his whole body.

Interviewer

How did you pass the time in solitary confinement? What did you do to occupy your mind?

R.C. Jones

Everything you've done in your life is in your head. Every experience you had and everything you've done is still in there. You just can't get to it and when you don't have any more outside influences, cars, talking, people around you, whatever, and you're by yourself, all of a sudden these things start coming back. I could see the faces and I knew the names of everyone in my third grade class "you know, thinking about it.

Robert Campbell Jones

I could do complicated math problems, physics problems from here in my head and I

wouldn't even attempt to do that now. I wouldn't even know how to start it. But that's all in there. So you use this and guys would design houses, and I'm not talking about, well, I'm going to have a nice three-bedroom house. I'm talking about you go up to the front step. The step goes up eight inches. There's trim on the side of an inch each side. You have a little landing and you go in two inches here and then the front door latch is over here. I'm talking about, like, a blueprint in your head.

Interviewer

Are you aware that you're doing this as an exercise to distract yourself?"

R.C. Jones

Absolutely.

Interviewer

Yes? You say?"

R.C. Jones

Absolutely. This is part of survival training, too, and you're kind of taught this is what you have to do. You have to organize your time. You don't just sit there and daydream about home. I got to the point where I would allow myself "I exercised, which they didn't want us to do. You had to do it without them" if they dropped the flap and saw you in there doing it, they'd come in and beat you up.

Robert Campbell Jones

And then I'd say, okay, I'm going to spend so much time thinking about home. Now, okay, I'm done thinking about home. Now I'm going to think about math problems and next I'm going to think about, well, I'm going to design a house. And so I had a structure in my mind of my daily activities and almost everyone did that. And one guy, Gary Sigler, this house that he designed in his head, he came home and built it when we got back. So you had to be organized, and that's what we did.

Interviewer

When you then had time to be with other prisoners, you "I read a short interview with you about this, that you actually were able to create chess sets out of pieces of"

R.C. Jones

We did all kinds of things. We lived in different sized rooms through the years and at one time after the Son Tay Raid, they had a commando raid, which unfortunately was unsuccessful. But after that, the Vietnamese became afraid and they moved all of us back into Hanoi, and I lived in a 56-man room that was about 40 feet x 20 feet. And it was pretty tight, but we were happy to be all together.

Robert Campbell Jones

And so, we're in there with 50 guys or so and some of these guys are pretty smart. We've got English major, this guy's a math major, Spanish, German, and like I said, when you're in a situation like this, a lot of this stuff comes back so we had classes. We had Spanish classes. We had math classes. We had speaking situations where you'd get up and give an extemporaneous speech. And very organized through

the whole day and when we came home, there were guys that actually got college credits for these classes, some of them they took.

Interviewer

These seem to be very sort of heartening responses to such intense pressure. Did you also see people break and collapse under it?

R.C. Jones

No. Notâ€”now there were a couple of guys that I didnâ€™t live with but lived within other rooms, and I eventually, with some of these peopleâ€” where the guy had mental problems to start with and probably shouldnâ€™t have been in that situation to start with, exposed to being captured and being a POW. A couple of these guys kind of went off the deep end and they were just kind of catatonic.

Robert Campbell Jones

And then the Vietnameseâ€”in one situation, they kind of brought this guy back and said, â€œCan you help this guy? Do something.â€ He eventuallyâ€”they took him out and nobody ever saw him again. He died somewhere and never made it home. But we didnâ€™t have the situation where, I donâ€™t know, maybe in Korea or somewhere else, where the guy curls up and heâ€™s done. No. Itâ€™s a whole different level of people here, more educated, and their attempts at propaganda were very basic and just kind of stupid.

Sweet Salvation

Interviewer

Tell me about theâ€”the steps leading up to your release andâ€”

R.C. Jones

Well, weâ€™d been there week after week, year after year, and believe it or not, the days and the weeks seemed to go very slowly but the months and the years passed by quickly. All of a sudden itâ€™s Fourth of July and then itâ€™s Christmastime. And we always had toâ€”like I said, not knowing when youâ€™re going to go home but having the faith, and believing in your country, and we knew that some dayâ€”we felt sorry for the Vietnamese, most of us, â€”cause we knew that, look, Iâ€™m getting out of here someday but you guys, you got to stay here.

Robert Campbell Jones

But not knowing when that was was the hardest thing to deal with, and so you had to set these little goals for yourself. Well, we said weâ€™ll be out of here by the Fourth of July. Okay, then Fourth of July comes. No, weâ€™ll be out of here by Christmas, so it kept going like that.

Robert Campbell Jones

And over the time period they had the Paris talks and Ho Chi Minh died, and when Ho Chi Minh died in 1969, our treatment got a lot better. We were hungry all the time in the beginning. Weâ€™d torture ourselves by making up fake meals. â€œToday itâ€™s your turn. What are we having for breakfast?â€ â€œOh, weâ€™re having eggs benedict and a couple of waffles on there.â€ And guys are, â€œOh, God, and then lunch, weâ€™re havingâ€”â€ the whole deal.

Robert Campbell Jones

But Ho Chi Minh died and then the quality of the food didn't change much but we got enough then. I mean we're eating giant baskets of rice and everything. If we had come home two or three years earlier, we'd all been really skinny and really low weight, but they kind of fattened us up a little bit for the last year or two so most of us came home I was probably ten pounds lighter, but things had looked a lot different earlier. Now we're getting now into '71, '72. After the Son Tay Raid, which was in '71, I think, they moved half of us up to China and the other half stayed in Hanoi. Now we were right on the Chinese border and there was about 2 or 300 of us up there and they had about 200 of us down in Hanoi.

Robert Campbell Jones

And they thought, because Nixon was talking about we're coming downtown "if you don't let the POWs go, we're coming downtown to get them, and so they were afraid. So they hid us up "so they'd always have somebody up there so the U.S. would still have to talk to them because half of us were hidden up there, the other half down in Hanoi. So we're up in this high security prison, this old French prison, up in the mountains, and it's covered with overgrowth, and the walls are two-feet thick and stone.

Robert Campbell Jones

We're way up there and so we kept asking the guards, "When are we going back to Hanoi?" He says, "You will not go back to Hanoi until the war is over." So in the meantime, the B-52s are bombing Hanoi and the rest of the guys got a big air show every night down in Hanoi. So this was in "we heard bits and pieces of the Paris talks and everything else, but this was like in January or so of '73. One night all these trucks come in the camp and the next morning they load us all up. "Where are we going?" "We're going back to Hanoi." "Oh, the war must be over." Oh, whatever.

Robert Campbell Jones

So they take us back to Hanoi, which is a 30-hour truck ride, and then they split us up into different camps in Hanoi, and it didn't take us long to figure out that everyone in that camp was shot down around the same time you were, and that's the first time I saw Bruce Hinkley again. So these guys are all shot down within a month or two of when I was shot down, and all the early guys that were shot down in '65, they were in a different camp, so everyone was kind of separate in four different camps.

Robert Campbell Jones

So we're thinking, well, geez, maybe this is going to be it. Then we were there for a week or two and finally the camp commander of this camp I was in "and this is where I lived with McCain. McCain was not in my room but he was in the same camp and I saw him. He was still limping around. He had two broken arms and a "

Interviewer

You knew him? He was "even personally?

R.C. Jones

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. The camp commander calls everyone out and we're in a

military formation, and this is the first time weâ€™ve ever done this, standing out there likeâ€™theyâ€™re treating us like soldiers now. He reads the Paris Agreement to us and the first time we ever saw it, heard it, and he said, â€œAll it said was you will go home some time in the next two months.â€ And so, â€œGreat. Whenâ€™s that going to be?â€ â€œWell, we donâ€™t know.â€ Well, they sent us home in four groups andâ€™you need to stop this again maybe?

Interviewer

No, thatâ€™s okay. Go ahead.

R.C. Jones

Okay, talking about going home. They sent us home in four groups and, of course, by Geneva Convention and by what the Americansâ€™we demanded was you go home in order of shoot down. So the first group was really the guys whoâ€™d been thereâ€™Alvarez and all these guys that had been there for seven, eight years. And then I was actually in the third group. There was one more group after me but I was in the third group. So the first group went home in the middle of February, and then there was one at the end of February, and then my group was the 14th of March.

Robert Campbell Jones

And so itâ€™s funny. Your mind plays tricks on you. Weâ€™re thinking, oh, God, thereâ€™s going to be a couple of F-4s come screaming over here and drop some bombs, and this whole thingâ€™s going to fall apart. Weâ€™re not going to go. So we finally getâ€™people ask me another question about it. â€œDid you ever get a Red Cross package?â€ I said, â€œYeah, did.â€ The 14th of March was a Wednesday. The previous Saturday, I got a Red Cross package. It had been rifled through and there was a couple of books in there, but I remember The Godfather book was in there; so I read The Godfather while I was in jail.

Robert Campbell Jones

Anyway, it was like a day or two before that. They took us out and they had a room. They took us in there and they said, â€œYou pick out a pair of pants, and a shirt, and a little jacket, and a bag,â€ and I guess that was really, â€œsocks and shoes, these shoes.â€ We hadnâ€™t had shoes on for five years. We woreâ€™we called them zaps and they were sandals made out of rubber tires, and so getting the shoes on felt different. And so the day finally came on the 14th of March and they loaded us up into busses, and any other time weâ€™d been moved around Hanoi, which had been many times, different camps.

Robert Campbell Jones

I lived in about six different camps. You were always blindfolded and hogtied so youâ€™d never see anything. Now they put us in these busses and they wereâ€™I remember they were real little busses, busses built for little Vietnamese people, so weâ€™re kind of stuck in there. But there was nothing on the windows and weâ€™re gawking around riding through Hanoi going out to the airport like, â€œGod, look at this. Look at that.â€ And Hanoi was in rubble, man, and we had to go across a pontoon bridge to get across to Gia Lam Airport, andâ€™Phu Cat, excuse me.

Interviewer

We are actually out of tape nowâ€™I hate to say. But you can continueâ€™continue to the

end of the story

R.C. Jones

Anyway, we are riding through there and everyoneâ€”we were directed, and this was what we wanted to do, to be very solemn and we are not jumping up and cheering and all that. The Vietnamese couldnâ€™t understand this. But we didnâ€™t want to give them theâ€”

Interviewer

Satisfaction, you mean?

R.C. Jones

The satisfaction of saying okayâ€”because the maltreatment we had for so many years, weâ€™re not going to show any emotion to these people at all.