

Tyler Beck

HIS 485

Oral History: The Pilots of Plattsburgh Air Force Base

Interview #1

Frank Baehre

Pilot U.S. Air Force

Interviewer: (Tyler Beck)

Narrator (Frank Baehre

Finding Aid

Interview with Frank Baehre. February. 20 2014 at the Battle of Plattsburgh

Museum, Plattsburgh, NY. Recorded with a smart phone.

Biographical Information

- Baehre was born in Buffalo, New York on September 22, 1948. He was an only child in the suburbs outside of Buffalo. His father died at a young age and his mother was left to raise him alone. He went to Cleveland Hill High School in Cheektowaga NY, where he graduated in 1966. Baehre attended SUNY Buffalo and enrolled in Air Force ROTC his freshman year. Baehre graduated from Air Force Pilot Training in Lubbock, Texas where he left to serve in Vietnam and Thailand in 1972. After his one-year tour, Baehre returned to the U.S. and joined SAC (Strategic Air Command) and was a member of the Air Force until his retirement in 1993. He is married to Sandy Baehre (1970) and he has two children. Baehre has flown a number of planes during his career including: the T-41, T-47, T-38, the AC-119K, B-52Hs, and the FB-111s.

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Interviewer: Where and when were you born?

Baehre: Sure, I was born in Buffalo, New York on September 22nd 1948.

Interviewer: Okay. How was your family life growing up... in Buffalo, NY?

Baehre: Well let's see uhh... My uhh... mom and dad lived in one of the newly developed... uhh... suburbs in uhh... just outside of Buffalo after the Second World War. Uhh... Both my mom and dad were... oh gee... fairly young in years and probably in their forties when they married. This was the second marriage for my dad, first marriage for my mom. Uhh... my dad died early on when I was about four years old. I know it was before I started school. So I was raised in Buffalo, more specifically in Cheektowaga, New York. I attended Cleveland Hill High School... well, elementary and high school system in Cheektowaga. [Pause]

Let's see I graduated in 1966. Things I remembered during that time of course was, hey this was the 1950s we are now in the postwar boom after World War II. Everybody in the neighborhood is having kids... I've got lots [of] kids... of a friends to... uhh... to play with in the... uhh... neighborhood. And uhh... other things I can remember back in those days. During my second grade summer, I built my first plastic model airplane.

Interviewer: Really what was it?

Baehre: It was the Douglas Sky Rocket by Revell at about 1/48 scale.

Interviewer: Oh. Okay. Continue.

Baehre: And uhh... strangely enough that hobby has stuck with me all my life and I still am an active participant in the hobby. Coming around uhh... the latter part in elementary school the Soviet Union launched Sputnik and that changed stuff in the educational system. We saw the uhh... results of a lot money being poured into education. Plus a lot of kids, being the initial post-war baby boom. What this translated for me was, I got picked to be in one of the umm... set of advanced classes that uhh... were started in about 1960. And uhh... that meant my high school education was accelerated. I received extra years of math, extra years of... uhh science, extra years of language trying to force... uhh education in as a way to increase the uhh... American competitiveness in education and science.

Interviewer: Ok. Um... How was that [laughs] experience having so many more different classes than the normal curriculum?

Baehre: Well with five years of high school Latin and three years of French and all that... uhh other stuff, it got me interested in developing a way to study, a way to perform on... uhh on tests but I don't remember really testing pressure as you hear it described nowadays. Um... the accelerated class, we were probably about 10 to 20 percent of the student population uhh... but it was a nicely distributed class between boys and girls across uhh... across a suburban demographic for as much as I was diversified [in a mostly white community] and it really wasn't during that time. We were all a bunch of white kids in the white suburbs going to a uhh... white school that was nicely supported.

Interviewer: Alright did you have any siblings?

Baehre: Nope. No I was an only child.

Interviewer: So with the baby boom it really didn't affect you, well you said your father [had] past on early.

Baehre: Yeah, my dad died early on and uhh... while my mom was carrying me she broke her hip and that pretty much put her out of having extra children also.

Interviewer: Okay I see. So what did your parents do for a living?

Baehre: My dad worked for of all people, of all places, Barry and Shumway. They were a construction outfit in Western New York. Their uhh... company built a lot of the World War II-related construction in the Buffalo area. With both the uhh... Bell Plant in umm... Niagara Falls, another aircraft production plant at the current Buffalo airport. I remember my dad's firm was involved in hanging the sliding doors in one of the major hangars uhh... at the Buffalo airport. Uhh... then when uhh... he died my mom wound up going to work too for Shumway Insurance. Barry and Shumway construction well rather Barry

and Shumway was related somehow to Shumway Insurance and I think after my dad died the Shumway folks basically took my mom under their arm and uhh... letting her be a insurance agent and she worked at that as an insurance agent, I remember her working outside of the home probably until about the time I started oh maybe 6 or 7th grade and then something changed. And she no longer had to work outside the home.

Interviewer: So you talked about what you did in high school and everything. What were you doing before you entered the service?

Baehre: Well, after high school uhh...I took a civil engineering degree at the State University of New York at Buffalo. I got to stay home and go to college right in my hometown. What a joy.¹ [Laughs] Well we don't have to go down there. Uhh... One of the defining moments happened during freshman orientation coming into uhh... college. SUNY Buffalo had the requirement that you had to as an uhh... male uhh... coming into the college, make a choice in your freshman year. Either you would take one year of freshman phys ed or one year of Air Force ROTC Reserve Officer training program. Do I look like the kind of person that would jump in on the one year of phys ed? No! I jumped into the one year of ROTC training uhh... because that was my choice to go uhh... go that route. Now once I made that choice umm... the uhh... Air Force through their ROTC program made everybody sit down and take his or her overall aptitude test. It was called the Air Force Officer Qualification Test or AFOQT for short. Umm... remember I said I'd been building plastic models ever since being a kid? The knowledge that I picked up at that time by just pursuing the hobby and just being interested in airplanes uhh... led me to score at probably one of the highest percentile basis for the uhh... pilot portion of the uhh... Air Force Aptitude Test. I remember the officer who sat down and went over

my results with me. He said, “Frank you could probably fly the box the airplane came into.”

So I did very well on the uhh... uhh aptitude test. Up until that point, I had no inkling of ever becoming an Air Force pilot, none at all. Umm... been interested in aircraft. I remember in fifth grade you had to do the “what do you want to be when you grow up essay,” and I wrote that I wanted to be an aeronautical engineer. Hmm, [Pauses] ok. So here we are discovering that gee you’ve got the aptitude that says Air Force, to come into the Air Force as uhh... as a pilot and you’re working through the engineering curriculum at uhh... SUNY Buffalo. Well, aeronautical engineering, tough curriculum! When you really hit college, what you do as a freshman, you do, “Ooo let’s take a look here at these.” Most of the courses are going to be common for your first year or so in engineering before you start to go off into your specialty. Umm... civil engineering offered a course in surveying, and I like to do outdoor stuff.

So I’ll take that surveying course and then I said ok, now that I took that surveying course I like that stuff. Let’s look more at being a civil engineer than an aeronautical engineer. So now I’m going to be balancing a Air Force student basically... as an Air Force ROTC cadet and a engineering uhh... engineering student. The next thing the Air Force did: they said, “Okay now that you did so well on the Air Force Pilot Aptitude Test, let’s see how you [sic] on the Air Force Flying Physical.” So they took me over to uhh... Griffiss Air Force Base, which is about three hours away in Rome, New York from Buffalo. They ran me through the Air Force Flying Physical, which is basically designed to eliminate anyone who’s got anything that’s not very “normal,” but

very “normal” means excellent hearing, 20/20 eyesight both near and far, umm... and then good basic health. I scored very well on the 20/20 vision and the uhh... hearing, so now they [the Air Force] have got themselves someone who done well on the uhh... not only the Pilot Aptitude test but has also past the Air Force Flying Physical.

The time now is 1967 going on 1968. Remember where we are in American history at that time. We are heavily involved in Vietnam, we are still building up the troops uhh... the troop’s strength in Vietnam and specifically we are involved in the Rolling Thunder Bombing Campaign over North Vietnam, where we are just gobbling up lots of pilots that have to come through Air Force training so they can cycle through their South East Asia tour. Here I am coming through the system as a qualified guy with high aptitude, ooo [chuckles] they... they loved me. [Laughs] They loved me...and... and I enjoyed the course work with the Air Force ROTC and umm... that also. So by about the second half of my junior year, I realized that my head was majoring in Air Force and uhh... my head and heart were majoring in Air Force and yeah I can work through some civil engineering to a lesser degree but I have now changed my career goal from being a civil engineer out of college to rather being a Air Force Pilot.

Interviewer: So, you skipped over a couple of my questions here I had for you but...

Baehre: Want me to back up for you? [Laughs]

Interviewer: No, no you answered most of them right there. So did you enlist yourself or were you drafted in?

Baehre: Well, I uhh... went... you voluntarily take Air Force ROTC, it is an enlistment umm... to come into the uhh... program as an officer candidate, where if you complete the course training then you will come in commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the

uhh... Air Force uhh... reserve coming on to active duty. So, it's... its more... it's definitely not being drafted. As a matter of fact uhh... I carried a uhh... [Pause] started college with a 2S Student Deferment but then had that upgraded to I believe it was a 2A Military Deferment but I'm not really sure on the designation. If you were all ready pronged [designated] to come into the Air Force and uhh... I was actually awarded an Air Force scholarship for my last two years of college. They [the Air Force] had me; they had me hook, line and sinker. I had now a commitment to come into the uhh... into the Air Force. No longer really my choice but I voluntarily stepped into it.

Interviewer: It started as your choice but it evolved into more.

Baehre: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did any of your friends follow the same route you chose?

Baehre: None of the kids I went to high school with uhh... followed, even the kids who went to SUNY Buffalo with me. One of them did do Air Force ROTC his freshman year and then dropped out. Other folks to [took] the umm... [Pause] gym route and took phys ed instead. None of my high school friends came through the ROTC program and completed it. Of course you make different friends when you're in the uhh... ROTC program and we uhh... graduated, I think it was thirty-four officer candidates all of which came on to active duty in umm... the uhh... summer of 1970.

Interviewer: How did your family, your mom especially feel about you going this route?

Baehre: Uhh... she was supportive but not enthusiastic.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Baehre: [Laughs] What a great follow up to that question! Umm... supportive but unenthusiastic... She signed the paperwork to the permission but she wasn't really enthusiastic about know that, gosh she was a uhh... [Pause] in her uhh... twenties during World War II [Pause] and uhh... her dad had been an uhh... private during the Spanish-American War. So she's got a different perspective on military conflict then... then I did at the time. Since, gosh I hadn't been to war and now she knows a lots of people during the World War II timeframe and her dad who had gone to war previously. So she is not enthusiastic but she is not prohibitive either. I... I... every mom has a good guilt card to play now and then. I remember my mom played her guilt card just as I was coming up on commissioning and uhh... I knew that uhh... I'd be leaving the Buffalo area to go wherever the Air Force was going to send me and I didn't know where that was gonna be. And she pulls out the, "but what happens if I don't feel good someday?" I can remember my almost-college graduate reply, "Well Mom then you see the doctor."

[Smiles] That was the end of that debate.

Interviewer: [Laughs] So do you remember the day you left for... the place you would go for active duty?

Baehre: That would be August ninth 1970. A Saturday, in Buffalo, the sun was shining. We packed up our 1967 Plymouth Barracuda Fastback with everything we owned. I had already gotten married on June thirteenth 1970. So we uhh... my wife and I met in high school. We packed up our Plymouth Barracuda on August ninth 1970, including a roof rack, which was a joy [Smiles] to pack. It was wrapped in canvas back in those days, and headed down to Lubbock, Texas for my initial active duty assignment which was at

Reese Air Force Base in Lubbock, Texas where Air Force undergraduate pilot training [was.] Where the Air Force basically taught you to fly the Air Force way.

Interviewer: Umm... How was training there? What was your experience like there?

Baehre: I remember hot. [Laughs] I remember hot, I remember flat, I remember brown.

Interviewer: It's a lot different from New York.

Baehre: A lot different from New York. We came home for uhh... Christmas that year, my wife and I and uhh... had to drive down to, oh like Springville and that just so we see can hills and green even though it was "winter green." Yeah, uhh... Lubbock, Texas uhh... we were there to learn to fly. Lubbock was our first time we were away from home for either [Baehre and his wife] of us so it was, gee here we are in Lubbock, TX. We started driving out on Saturday; we got to Lubbock on Monday with class starting on Wednesday. That should work out to the thirteenth of August 1970. Uhh... so hit Lubbock, Texas Monday morning. Okay we have today, as in this morning to find an apartment. So we learned how to find an apartment in under a day. We were successful. Okay, so let's see uhh... we are going to need some stuff to live with here. Let's find a shopping plaza here in Lubbock, Texas and we did. Umm... so it was one of those life-changing things where not only are you starting a new career, but you're going to start it in a different place that you have never been before, with a person you have never moved with before, uhh... and because you've never been to the place before you've got to find everything new first time.

Interviewer: So, I expect that was a difficult experience?

Baehre: Yeah!

Interviewer: I have never had such an experience so it is tough for me to relate to that type of situation. But umm... speaking of your training do you uhh... what do you remember about your instructors there? Any kind of fun moments? Interesting moments?

Baehre: Most of my uhh... Air Force flight instructors and they were all instructor pilots that had all for the most part had flown something else previously than the trainer that they were training us to fly in. So uhh... [Pause] we flew three trainers: one was a propeller driven T-41 basically a Cessna 172. My instructor for that had uhh... taught people coming into the uhh... military during World War II how to fly, so he's been doing this for like 30 years by the time I get hooked up with him. Uhh... so he was experienced and n-nothing would faze him. Completed the T-41 training, started flying the T-47 jet trainer now. Umm...

[Pauses and thinks for a moment] The instructor pilot I was assigned to was actually the umm... let's see how did it work out? The section commander had to instruct so many pilot candidates himself and so he pulled me in as one of his uhh... students that he would teach even though I was assigned to a different instructor pilot. Uhh... very experienced guy had flown B-47s just like the one out there out here. Nope, I take that back, he... this was not the B-47 pilot. I can't remember what this pilot had uhh... flown but by being experienced he knew that uhh... if he got us started along the right way to think about flying, the right way to think about aircraft, the right way to think about emergency procedures, the right way to think about flying uhh... he could set a seed that would you know pay off well in the future. The pilot uhh... instructor pilot that I was assigned to and sat around his table in the morning before it was time to go out and fly with the other guy didn't have that luxury. He had only flown those T-37 trainers both as

a student pilot and then turned right around and this was his uhh... first assignment after pilot training. [Pauses] His inexperience as an instructor showed. He was what we would call a "screamer." There is lots of ways you can teach people to fly. One way is to scream at them. It is not as effective as other ways but it is one way to do it. Not only was he a screamer but he was a mask shaker. [Moves seat closer] Now let me show you what a mask shaker does. [Moves next to interviewer] Now here is the T-37, you're the student pilot in the left seat, I'm the instructor pilot in the right seat. I want to catch your attention; I grab your oxygen mask and shake it back and forth [shakes the interviewer's head.] You liking this method so far?

Interviewer: No. [Laughs]

Baehre: Yeah. [Chuckles]

Interviewer: I can see why. [Laughs]

Baehre: He was a screamer and a mask shaker and umm... I was just very happy that I didn't have to uhh... fly and learn from him because I [Pauses] don't think I could have learned very well in that environment. I flew with him I think a grand total of... maybe one or two times and uhh... Let's put it this way he did not earn my respect as an Air Force instructor. After we finish flying T-37s, you then fly the supersonic T-38 where instead of sitting side-by-side like we did in the T-37, you sit with the instructor being behind the student pilot who is in the front cockpit. T-38 is an uhh-supersonic jet: the first time you get to go faster than the speed of sound is on your first flight in it. The instructor demonstrates that.

Interviewer: How is that?

Baehre: There is no difference [Smiles] You watch the Mach meter go up to you know, .75, .85, .95, you know .98. It will bobble there a little as your aircraft is pushing through the uhh... air that is going to break uhh... sound barrier and then it will pop up to 1.01, 1.02 and that so. You don't notice any difference when you are inside the airplane except that your Mach meter has gone up a bit.

Interviewer:.. Hmm, I didn't... well I've seen so many planes do it [Laughs] and you see the uhh... cone come off the plane when it happens but...

Baehre: It will only do that if the atmosphere conditions are just right.

Interviewer:.. Oh. Okay.

Baehre: Uhh... low altitude, high humidity will uhh... will do that. What you're seeing is the compression shockwave of the supersonic air being pushed out in front of the airplane and when it passes a spot it drops the air pressure and you see the condensation. So you see the F-14s and the F-18s that are doing the flybys on the carrier deck with the big Mach shockwave in front of them, but inside of the airplane, not a thing.

Interviewer: That's interesting. I never knew that. But umm... So we talked about your instructors, how about your fellow trainees. How was your experience with some of them? Did you get along? Any good friends or?

Baehre: Umm... [Pauses] Good friends? [Pauses] Gosh... you know because after pilot training we all, there were 52 of us in the class. We all went in 52 different directions. I maybe saw one or two of them uhh... afterwards uhh... in the Air Force. You are good friends when you're flying with each other umm... but uhh... nothing really lasted. My class was unique, I graduated from SUNY Buffalo in... on May thirty- first 1970, and I

came on to active duty in August of 1970. Well, the Air Force umm... in Colorado Springs, the Air Force Academy graduates about the same time and then everybody in the Air Force Academy graduating class gets 30 days of leave before they show up to active duty. Well. [Pauses] Those time frames pretty much overlap in the first part of August there, so half of my class, about 25 out of our 52 student pilots had just been Air Force Academy graduates, where they had four years of the Air Force drilled into them to a much greater degree than any of us ROTC guys did. So our class was about half academy graduates, about one quarter Air Force ROTC graduates and about the other quarter were graduates of the six week Air Force uhh... gosh what was that called at that time? Basically the Air Force candidate school that was run down in San Antonio was basically four years of Air Force ROTC pressed into six weeks.

Interviewer: That's a lot of information to put in 6 weeks [chuckles].

Baehre: Yeah but you're not a student at the same time and so your focus and concentration... your focus on this thing is uhh... a lot closer. Coming out of Air Force pilot training as we are getting near the tail end. Uhh... graduation and assignments were all based upon class ranking. So the way that worked out is again there were 52 of us in the pilot training class. The Air Force sent out a list containing 52 different flying assignments. Some fighters, some bombers, some tankers, some transports, some helicopters. You know a mix of umm... aircraft and a mix of different places were you might end up having to learn to fly that aircraft. So again, war in South East Asia still going strong at the end of '71, not as intense as '65 and '68 but still going on strong then. Umm... the first guy in the class, the one rated with the highest scores on flying and in

the written tests goes in and says, "Ok I take an F-4 Phantom to Vietnam." Number two guy comes in, he did the same thing as the first. So did number three, and four. Number five comes in, all the fighter versions of the F-4 Phantom were gone. Number 5 picks the reconnaissance version of the Phantom. It kept going on like this, so I graduated plumb in the middle. I was number 26 out of 52.

Interviewer: Right in the middle [Laughs.]

Baehre: Yeah! Right, I worked hard at being normal. [Laughs] Uhh... worked right in the middle, by this time everything that was going to South East Asia that had guns on it or would drop bombs had already been picked. The last thing on the list that still fit in that category was a AC-119K Stinger Gunship. That had guns on it but they fired out of the side. Was a version of the oh... C-119 transport.

Interviewer: The Spooky? Is that the one? The early version I mean.

Baehre: The Spooky was the AC-47.

Interviewer: Okay.

Baehre: The AC-119G was the Shadow, the AC-119K was the Stinger, the AC-130 was and still are Specters. So I took the uhh... last thing heading to South East Asia with guns on it because at the time I wanted to get into the South East Asia conflict. I wanted to do something that at least had an attack in the name of it and it was my last choice.

Interviewer: If you had an earlier pick what would you have taken? If there was some, say, fighters or the Phantoms left over, what would you have picked?

Baehre: I would have taken an F-106 Delta Dart. It was an Interceptor aircraft that sat alert here in the United States and it was designed to shoot down uhh... Russian bombers

or other aircraft intruding in U.S. airspace. I had really wanted to fly the F-106 Delta Dart because it was just a pretty airplane. [Laughs] The AC-119K Stinger was the least pretty airplane probably in the world. [Laughs] The F-106 was really nice and I had really wanted to fly that but there just weren't any left.

Interviewer: So going to Vietnam, what was it like when you first got there? What was that like?

Baehre: Okay, well uhh... it took about six more months of training stateside until I was able to ship out overseas. You had to learn how to fly the basic 119, how to use the uhh... guns and defensive stuff on it effectively, I had to learn had to do that in a couple of different places in the states. They you... had to go through various different Air Force survival classes, everything from basic Air Force survival at Fairchild Air Force Base Washington to uhh... Air Force Jungle survival taught at Clark in the Philippines to water survival taught at Homestead down in umm... [Pauses] down in Florida. So it took about six months from about the time you finished Air Force basic pilot training until you were ready to go your final assignment. To get to Vietnam you headed out to Travis [AFB] in San Francisco, that's where the... [Pauses] was that were Travis was? [Pauses and thinks] No Travis was down in Los Angeles I take that back.

I flew out of Travis as a 2nd Lieutenant, when I crossed the International Date Line heading to South East Asia, my date calendar clicked over on February uhh... 9th of 1972. I went into the uhh... bathroom there in the civilian contractor plane and took off my 2nd Lieutenant Gold Bars and put on my 1st Lieutenant Silver Bars and came out as a new Air Force 1st Lieutenant when I hit the ground in South East Asia. Landed at Nakhan Phanom in Thailand, there were a couple other hops along the way. Nakhan Phanom in

Thailand sits right on the Laotian border, a little bit inland from the Mekong River but only about 10 miles inland. This was going to be my initial active duty assignment after pilot training. I got there in February of 1972 as a co-pilot flying the uhh... right seat in the front of the uhh... AC-119K Stinger Gunship. That assignment was basically spending that whole year in the right seat of an airplane that has nine other people in it. It has at least five different radios that I would be working, either talking to air traffic control agencies [civilian or military,] talking with people on the ground. Our basic mission in this squadron was to intercept truck traffic coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, shoot it up with our 20mm Vulcan cannons and basically kill trucks coming down into South Vietnam. That was the primary mission while the secondary mission was to support folks on the ground in Laos, if we had any people in Laos because of course we could never confirm if we had people on the ground in Laos because they weren't really our people, they were Laotian teams, some Thai teams on the ground. Of course they were trying to be pushed out of neutral Laos by the North Vietnamese who were also in Laos. [Chuckles] So we often would uhh... team up with a team that was on the ground and we would put up suppressive fire around them to keep them safe at night. The umm... my first three months were at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand, then I spent 6 months at uhh... Da Nang, Vietnam. We were also working the Ho Chi Minh Trail out of Vietnam but we were also defending the last few remaining U.S. or South Vietnamese firebases in South Vietnam. Also as our secondary mission that evolved into our primary mission.

Interviewer: So do you have one mission that sticks out above any of the others?

Baehre: Uhh... let's see [Thinks] We are flying out of Da Nang during the summer of 1972 and uhh... during the daytime, the area around Da Nang uhh... belonged to the Americans and South Vietnamese. At night it belonged to the Vietcong. Vietcong would often set up their 122mm rockets and fire them in at Da Nang airbase. They weren't really aimed; they [the Vietcong] did not have the capability to precisely aim except that, "Gee if I point this rocket in the general direction of Da Nang and fire it off. It will hit somewhere on the base". That kind of sophisticated targeting [Laughs].ⁱⁱⁱ That kind of targeting was just fine to let me tell you. One night we were fortunate enough to catch a team [Vietcong] setting up. We had the uhh... ability to look with our let's call it a Starlight Scope and infrared, the first infrared tracking system and caught a Vietcong team setting their rockets up and uhh... put down good suppressive fire on them. Kept them... the Vietcong down long enough for a local uhh... Army of the Republic of Vietnam to come in with their armored personnel carriers and engage the Vietcong force and shoot them up. We went back to Da Nang and then a few weeks later our crew got invited up by the Vietnamese to their camp off the Da Nang airbase and we uhh... were presented medals by the short in stature Vietnamese general who was in charge. So [Laughs] That one sort of sticks in my mind.

Interviewer. Being that you're in South Vietnam there is those MiGs and everything flying around. Did you ever come into contact with any?

Baehre: No, the MiGs always stayed in the North. They only stayed north in North Vietnam. Flying over Laos however where the Ho Chi Minh Trail starts in North Vietnam comes down the backbone of the mountains leading to South Vietnam.

Occasionally and it only happened one time, again we fly at night and generally the MiGs did not fly at night. One night one did launch out of I think it was Kep and the initial vector heading they uhh... the U.S. radar picked up on was heading into Laos perhaps attempting to shoot down us. We were there that night, we also had...we also knew there was an AC-130 Gunship working that night and there was uhh... also a couple flights of F-4s with bombs looking to drop that night. So the MiG turned toward Laos, we got the uhh... warning over the uhh... radios that the MiG was inbound and ordered us out. Now, a 119 gunship, our combat dash speed [our highest speed we could fly at] was 180 knots. That's like nothing [Laughs.]

Interviewer. Yeah, he [the MiG] could catch you.

Baehre: He can catch you really fast. So turned off all of our lights and headed west. He never made it into Laos, it apparently was a way to get us to leave the area without him having to really engage us, because we weren't going to be capable of fighting a MiG.

Interviewer. That maneuver by the MiG was apparently affective because it got you all out of there. Did you ever fly with an escort flight?

Baehre: Yes. Yes, we often flew with F-4s as escorts and so if we would go into a gunship orbit, which was a 30 degree banking turn around a point of the ground. Usually that point being a truck or set of trucks. [Pause] Laos was heavily defended by 23mm and 37mm anti-aircraft artillery that the North Vietnamese had brought down the trail to defend it. Any time that a 23 or a 37mm gun would come up on us, we had an escort available. If the escort was able to see the muzzle flash on the ground we would coordinate with the aircraft [F-4] and clear him in to drop his load of well usually cluster-

bomb units, sometimes napalm or sometimes 500lbs bombs on that uhh... on that particular gun site. So yeah, we worked quite often with the escorts like that but the escorts were there to take...lessen the danger of Triple-A fire [anti-aircraft artillery] from the ground, not defend us against enemy aircraft.

Interviewer: So what was life like on the base? In uhh... Thailand or Vietnam, what was it like? Was it different? What was it like over there?

Baehre: Different in Thailand because the bases were by nature more secure because we didn't have enemy guys uhh... on the ground. In Vietnam we were uhh... always confined to the bases we were on whether they being Da Nang or Bien Hoa near Saigon. Uhh... we were basically confined on the base. Living on base in Vietnam was pretty much like being on base here at Plattsburgh. You had run of the base, uhh... usually I should say "walk" of the base [Laughs.] Had the normal mess halls, the officer's clubs uhh... recreation centersⁱⁱⁱ, some times theaters would be outdoors but you had movie theaters. Umm... that's what I am remembering from Vietnam.

In Thailand we could get off base. So we spent the majority of our time on base but occasionally we would jump and hitch a ride in one of the local Thai "Baht Buses" as they were called because baht is the Thai unit of currency. It cost you 2 baht to get into town and 2 baht to get back to the base. We head into Nakham Phanom City, which was actually right on the Mekong River forming the border between Laos and Thailand. When I got to go downtown one of the most specific things I remember about downtown Nakham Phanom was the Ho Chi Minh Memorial Clock [chuckles.] Sat right there in downtown Nakham Phanom. [Remember Ho Chi Minh at the time worked the

independence of all the countries of South East Asia from the French. So he was still the local hero, although Thailand was not one of the countries that Ho Chi Minh worked the liberation from the... the French, he still had a might fine rep in downtown Nakham Phanom.] So we could get off base and gosh shop in the local towns there. Hey a pilot always needs a big watch so we bought Selco Watches from some places downtown. I've still got mine but I don't have it on today but I've still got mine at home that I bought in 1972. Other things we did is we used the base's exchange systems to get the newest cameras^{iv}. Also get that great stereo system so when you got back to the "world" as we used to call it, you would have the better stereo system than anyone else in the world. Yes I still have most of mine [Smiles]. In my case I uhh... banked my combat pay so I could buy a new car when I got back to the states. It was a little sports car, a Triumph Spitfire. A brand new 1973 Triumph Spitfire. So that's what life was sort of like for me uhh... me on base. How else can we delve into it?

Interviewer. One thing would be, what was it like interacting with the locals there?

Baehre: We never really had a chance to really interact with the Vietnamese locals on Da Nang and uhh... Bien Hoa. The uhh... Air Force hired lots of them to be maids and to do the basic cleanup of the barracks but you really didn't develop a relationship with the people in Vietnam. In Thailand, yeah you got to know your Thai maids very well because they would be in and out of your quarters on a daily basis but as far as getting to know other folks besides the Thai maids, not that much. If you had bought a lot of stuff from say a particular jewelry store in downtown Nakham Phanom you developed a relationship with that particular store owner and you could... could... make yourself believe that

because who knew him and vice versa and that you shopped there often that you were getting better deals from the guy that just stopped in one day. That was one of those you got to believe kind of things.

Interviewer: So how were you keeping in touch with your wife and mother at home?

Baehre: Back in the days and we are talking about 1972 now, the primary means of communicating with the folks at home was writing a letter. My wife and I corresponded very frequently uhh... that way we won't wait until we received the other person's letter to write back. So there was this constant stream of going. Some upgraded to the new technology of the time being, "I'm going to sit down and record a cassette tape and send that." So sometimes uhh... I can't remember if I do or don't have any in my collection of me sending Sandy a cassette tape. [Pause] Um... remember the cameras we were talking about? The 35mm cameras? The thing I did do was load mine up with slide film. It took a couple different carousels worth of 35mm slides and I do remember sending one cassette tape home narrating the slides.

Interviewer: Okay, that's interesting.

Baehre: The Air Force at that time or I guess the military at that time did have the military amateur radio stations at the time which were basically uhh... short wave radios run by uhh... amateurs that if the uhh... person you wanted to talk to could find a station back in the states and you could find time to be at the MARS [Military Auxiliary Radio System] station at the same time then you could talk to each other by radio but not directly. You got to tell the guy working your MARS set what to say to your wife who would then tell your wife.

Interviewer: So basically a delayed almost reaction?

Baehre: Exactly, it was... an example of the conversation would be: "I love you honey", "He says I love you." The other operator would repeat, "He says he loves you." She would respond, "Tell him I love him back." He loves you back, he loves you back.^v

[Laughs] So actually it was a three-way repetition there before the message got passed. Most folks didn't bother with that one [Smiles].

Interviewer: So umm... of course you got leave and R&R. Where were you sent? Did you go back to the states?

Baehre: You had your choice. We [Baehre and his wife] chose to meet each other in Hawaii and at the time the uhh... I think the military as a whole would offer up R&R which was rest and recuperation for seven days that didn't count against your leave balance but they will let you marry that up with an additional seven days from the leave you were accumulating so you had 14 days to meet. Well I met Sandy in Hawaii and we spent basically two weeks to explore several of the islands of Hawaii.

Interviewer: Hawaii is a beautiful place. My uncle has traveled there multiple times because he was in the Army himself. So when you were in the multiple areas of which you were stationed in, did you ever admire or create a good relationship with your commanding officer[s]? Well actually it would be your pilot being that you were a co-pilot?

Baehre: Yeah your pilot was of the crew you were assigned to was your immediate supervisor, but then you uhh... the pilots would report then to the squadron commander. The squadron commanders were usually pretty good, usually pretty good. Boy, doesn't that beg the next question! Let's talk about the other ones, the ones that weren't as good.

We had one guy over at Da Nang, the detachment commander there. Umm... his name will remain anonymous for the time but again I was there for the summer of 1972 so he can be researched. I was the squadron historian^{vi}. We were convinced or we wanted to be convinced that the presence of Stinger Gunships cut down the number of rocket attacks on Da Nang. So umm... [Pause] he asked me to pull out all of the combat records for the last year of umm... uhh... times were we had one of our gunships around Da Nang and marry that up or compare that against a list of nights that Da Nang was attacked by Vietcong rockets looking to prove... looking for a correlation there. Umm...[pauses] you know it is impossible to prove a negative or how does it go? You can't disprove a negative? I could go into the uhh... archives and show that on nights were we didn't have 119 gunships we had a higher percentage chance of Da Nang taking rockets than on nights that we did have 119 gunships flying around Da Nang. Uhh... that was all the correlation in his [the squadron commander] mind to prove that yes, the presence of a 119 gunship around Da Nang decreased the likelihood of being attacked by rockets. You recognize immediately the illogical flaw there. [Laughs] You... you can't disprove, we deterred every wild elephant from attacking Da Nang, we deterred all dolphins from attacking us from over the beach it... it was everything.

Interviewer: Everything was scared away. [Laughs]

Baehre: Anything that didn't happen, we proved we were there.

Interviewer: So he [the commander] wasn't your favorite, was there any that you uhh... admired or liked from your squadron commanders?

Baehre: You know aside from that guy, aside from that guy, I'm having a real difficulty remembering squadron commanders. I can remember at least two of my aircraft

commanders. Gosh! Not that many squadron commanders with the exception of the one guy, that had me prove myself as a squadron historian.

Interviewer: Well the bad experience is the one that sticks out most in your mind. So umm... while you were there in Vietnam, were you involved in any major offensives that were going on?

Baehre: Yes. During the springtime of 1972 uhh... again by the spring of 1972 the vast, vast majority of U.S. combat forces had been withdrawn, the U.S. still had a lot of air assets in theater but not that many ground combat units on the ground in South Vietnam anymore. The North Vietnamese felt that this would be a good time to during the spring season to make another offensive similar to the 1968 Tet Offensive. This was called the 1972 An L c Offensive, were the North Vietnamese objective was to hit major cities in South Vietnam at the same with a major push down toward Saigon itself. To get to Saigon from the North or should I say the Ho Chi Minh Trail you had to go through the South Vietnamese city of An L c. The [South] Vietnamese Army was able to make a defensive stand at An L c but it was about oh gee the better part of a month campaign to first slow down, stop and then defeat the North Vietnamese offensive. During that time we did a lot of flying around the Bien Hoa/ Saigon area supporting the South... South Vietnamese troops at An L c. Later on in 1975 after the US air assets had left and of course all the U.S. ground assets had left, An L c was the same highway that was used as the offensive route for the successful North Vietnamese campaign in 1975 against Saigon.

Interviewer: So when did you actually leave? When were you sent back home?

Baehre: Part of Richard Nixon's strategy as President was Vietnamization, and what that basically translated to was transferring US military assets that had been operated by the U.S. to the South Vietnamese. Uhh... again I was a co-pilot in a AC-119K, the Vietnamese had already been given the AC-119G Gunships which were less capable and less sophisticated. The K models were now being selected to be pressed on to the South Vietnamese in early 1973. I go into South East Asia on February ninth of 1972. So in theory I would have left one year later in 1973, but because our gunships were already flagged to be given to the Vietnamese and I wasn't an instructor at the time, just a co-pilot. There were a bunch of us that were the same way that were co-pilots and navigators that weren't instructor qualified but were coming up on rotation back to the states. We were allowed to leave in December to make it home by Christmas.

Interviewer: So, now coming back to the states where were you assigned upon your return back to the United States?

Baehre: Okay. About midway through our tour and we knew it was going to be a year tour, you started deciding who'd you wanted to be next.^{vii} In Vietnam I'm... in our unit specifically I had met a lot of pilots and navigators who had flown in Strategic Air Command [SAC] previously. Coming back to the states you're basically your choices were the Airlift Command: where you would be hauling cargo to people all around the world or get into a tactical air command unit flying fast mover type aircraft that could be deployed all around the world, or you could come into the Strategic Air Command where you would be at your home pulling alert all the time. I felt that that would be a nice lifestyle to get into plus let's face it, I was a kid of the '50s and '60s. I saw all the great Strategic Air Command movies, I knew General Curtis LaMey... I knew of his name, we

saw all of the great movies. From *Bombers B-52: Strategic Air Command* with Jimmy Stewart, *A Gathering of Eagles* with Rock Hudson and *Doctor Strangelove* with Stanley Kubrick. So [Pauses] uhh... what had come to uhh... was B-52s. I had put that down all over my assignment preference sheet and of course I get orders to a KC-135 Tanker. So [sighs] Lt. Baehre has to uhh... wander into the squadron at night because nighttime in Thailand was daytime at SAC headquarters, pick up the phone and talk to Lt. Colonel Russo there who was in SAC personnel saying, "Surely sir in this one Lieutenant's case here an error has been made and I'd really, really like to fly not only B-52s but the newest model B-52Hs." He listens to me for a bit and says, "You know all the B-52Hs are deployed along the northern tier at this time, from North and South Dakota through Michigan to uhh... gosh let's see, into Michigan. We had one wing in Ohio, and as I said they are all north it is going to be cold there." Well then I said, "That's okay I'm from Buffalo." He responded, "Well Lieutenant, let me see what I can do." A little bit later on I get amended orders sending me to B-52s in Kincheloe Air Force Base about 20 miles south of Sault Ste. Marie Michigan. So we get to Sault Ste. Marie Michigan and uhh... I got a good story.

Interviewer: Alright.

Baehre: I got a good story and I'm going to tell this story to the squadron commander at my new base when I get... get checked in there. I tell him the story [about the conversation with Lt. Col Russo] and he says, "Was that Mervin Russo that you were talking to?" "Well yes how did you know that sir?" The commander replies, "Well he just left here from squadron commander to work SAC personnel. You talked to the former

squadron commander and he brought you into his unit.” So uhh... got into B-52s and uhh... in Northern Michigan and flew B-52s there for the next 4 ½ years until that base closed.

Interviewer: What was the experience flying those big planes? They are very impressive looking.

Baehre: They are. They are and still are. You know that was the... if you had to pick one airplane that signified U.S. Cold War airpower, you pick the B-52.

Interviewer: What it has been flying for over 60 some odd years?

Baehre: First ones went into squadron service in 1955.

Interviewer: They say it is the only plane where different generations can fly it. Your father can fly it followed by you then even your kids can fly it.

Baehre: The newest B-52 and that was the one I flew was the H model. The newest one of those came of the production line in 1961. You do the math. [Laughs]

Interviewer: [Laughs] And that’s the newest one.

Baehre: Yeah, that’s the newest one and they have been flying for 50 years now.

Interviewer: So when you were assigned to them were you assigned as a co-pilot or as a pilot?

Baehre: Yes, I came into B-52s as a co-pilot but an experienced co-pilot. Most of the time a new co-pilot would come into the B-52 right out of Air Force Pilot Training.

Where... as I’m coming into B-52s: where I had to work only 4 not six radios, where I only had to work with 6 people not 10. Flying B-52s was an easy transition from the 119s and so I came into the B-52s as an experienced uhh... co-pilot and umm... [Pauses] after

going through B-52 training out at Castle [in California] I got back to the unit in the fall of 1973 to get trained now specifically in the B-52 uhh... H model. So here we are at Kincheloe in the Fall of 1973: Ooo let's see remember the October 1973 Mid-East War? Okay so uhh... the uhh... Soviets were going to put paratroopers on planes coming out of the Soviet Union to help the Egyptians of the 3rd Army that got caught up and stopped by the Israelis on the wrong side of the Suez Canal. President Nixon says [to the Soviets,] "No you're not. To make sure that you know that you are not going to do this, I am going to direct the Strategic Air Command to put now uhh... 2/3s of the B-52s on ground alert." That's the time I came into the B-52s.

Interviewer: Ironically right at that time.

Baehre: Yeah [Laughs] at that exact time.

Interviewer: Now the ones that you were flying, were they the planes that were carrying strategic nuclear... tactical nuclear weapons? Or were they carrying more conventional weapons?

Baehre: Uhh... the B-52s carrying conventional weapons were the ones assigned to South East Asia. They supported the Archlight missions there. I'm flying strictly strategic weapons. At the time that was both gravity bombs and uhh... the first generation cruise missiles uhh... on the B-52s.

Interviewer: That's a lot different then manning the guns on the gunship you flew on.

Baehre: Yeah, but in a lot of ways it's the same. You still have crew coordination to work, you still have basic navigation, basically you were... the uhh... as the co-pilot you were basically doing your job and what the flight engineer did on the 119 by keeping the fuel system working great and all that. All the busywork in the cockpit as opposed to the

guy in the left seat who is responsible for the overall mission of the aircraft and supervising the crew doing their individual crew duties.

Interviewer: How many sorties were you actually flying with this plane now that you were actually on home soil?

Baehre: We flew pretty much weekly to more than every other week doing training missions out of northern Michigan and uhh... the training missions that we flew were pretty much standardized although the routings may be different. You would take off from your home base uhh... about an hour later meet up with a KC-135 tanker, take an on load of gas for both his practice of offloading and for your practice of flying and getting the fuel on. After you got the fuel on you'll continue on to someplace else where your navigators do a celestial navigation training leg, where if its night time they take celestial shots off the stars. If its day time they are doing shots off the uhh... sun to use their navigational skills to get the airplane to another place without the use of any ground aids. Usually then you would do a low level training route with included the two people downstairs (the navigator and the radar navigator who used to be called the bombardier^{viii} but now called radar navigator) guiding the airplane along the low level training route, keeping within 3 miles of the center line while the pilots are flying the aircraft making sure your not running into other airplanes. Using visual references to make sure the navs are keeping you on the right direction coming up to your low level practice bombing run. A low level practice bomb run at the time were all done by radar stations on the ground that were very accurate with tracking radar and the uhh... uhh... bombers flying their training bomb runs where as you entered the corridor that would take you to the simulated targets on the ground, the ground radar site would lock onto your airplane so

they could precisely measure where you were. When you got about 30 seconds from where you would hit your target they pilot or co-pilot would turn a... one of the aircraft UHF radios to a tone setting where it put out a loud piercing but constant tone.

The tone was tied into the navigation and bombing system so when the aircraft reached the bomb release point the tone would stop. So as you come on the bomb run the radar site is tracking you, when you turn the tone on he's got a uhh... pen that would trace out your path on a map. When your tone stopped the pen would lift and they could score where you were in relation to where you needed to be to hit your target. It would give you uhh... a bomb distance in both range and a uhh... deflection from the uhh... from the target so you would get your bomb scores. Then it was to climb up out of the low level training route, fly back to your home station and come back into the local air traffic pattern. You would usually practice a couple instrument approaches with the pilots and co-pilots and a couple touch and go landings with the pilots and co-pilots. That was pretty much a B-52 training.

Interviewer: Well how high is a low level-bombing run?

Baehre: Well okay. Low-level bombing runs are someplace oh... between about 3,000 feet above the ground to about 300 feet of the ground.

Interviewer: That's close for as big as that plane is.

Baehre: Well you've got about a 150-foot wingspan from the fuselage but again you're not going to roll into a 90-degree bank and drag along the wing tip. You've got a big airplane that you are flying close to ground.

Interviewer: What is the highest you ever flew in on of those?

Baehre: Oh let's see? I think we got up to around 47,000 feet once about level 47 uhh... 470 and I can't remember what put us up there. It was something unusual like we had to get over a thunderstorm or something unusual like that.

Interviewer: So the new climate in Michigan wasn't new for you. Being from Buffalo you are used to it. You said you were there until the base closed?

Baehre: Yes.

Interviewer: Is this when you were assigned to Plattsburgh?

Baehre: Absolutely! Absolutely. I had now become an experienced B-52 pilot and experienced enough that I was next in line for instructor pilot in the B-52 and go with the rest of the guys from Kincheloe to Ellsworth Air Force Base in Rapid City, South Dakota or if I'm ever going to get out of the B-52 this is my chance to jump ship. I put in my application to come to the F-111s at that time. That was the other bomber; the only other bomber that SAC was flying at that time was FB-111s. I always wanted the ability to fly the newest thing. There is always the attraction to fly the newest thing, not the oldest thing. So, not only that my next-door neighbor uhh... when we lived at Kincheloe had flown in the FB-111 as a right seat navigator. He was a navigator and I was a pilot and figured that if my next-door neighbor A.G. Mason could come here and fly FBs well damn it so could I. [Smiles] So I filled out the paperwork and application, got the endorsements from my squadron commander and got picked to come to the FB-111. FB-111s were assigned to only two separate bases. One was at Plattsburgh and the other was at Pease on the sea coast of New Hampshire. I told the folks at SAC personnel that I'd like to be stationed at Plattsburgh. You can almost hear them laugh in the background,

everybody wanted that cozy seacoast assignment down there... stuffing their faces with lobster along the Atlantic Coast. We wanted Plattsburgh. Realize that I say “we” wanted Plattsburgh was because back when we got married in 1970 we took a big loop of a car trip through the U.S. on our honeymoon and we came down from Montreal through the Champlain Islands and knowing we were going come into the Air Force. As we’re driving through the Champlain Islands I look over to the west and see KC-135s in the traffic pattern. I said, “I never even knew there was an Air Force base there.” Uhh... “but boy is this a gorgeous area it would be really cool if we could get back here some day.” It took me seven years. Seven years until we got here in 1977 when the B-52 base in Kincheloe closed.

Interviewer: So when you came here did you have to go through training for the FB-111?

Baehre: Yes. The FB-111 training was right here in Plattsburgh.

Interviewer: Well that’s convenient for you [Laughs].

Baehre: Of course [Laughs.] As opposed of coming here [to Plattsburgh] for six months and then moving down to Pease. So we come here for 6 months and then we are basically here for five years.

Interviewer: So what was it like now transitioning to a smaller aircraft than you have been used to?

Baehre: Even fewer radios and fewer people to deal with! [Smiles and Laughs]

Interviewer: So what did you like about the FB-111?

Baehre: [Pauses] I like the thrill of the speed. I like being the only pilot on the airplane. I liked being able of flying a capable airplane that had some really neat systems on it, that I wish had been on previous aircraft. For example the Terrain Following Radar System

where you can engage that and now the machine will keep you 200 [puts 2 fingers up] feet off the ground hands off.

Interviewer: Really? That's impressive.

Baehre: Okay now let's talk about this "hands off" thing for just a second. This is not hands of [demonstrates on an invisible flight stick by throwing hands in the air,] this is hands off. Where my right hand is around the stick but not touching it and my left hand in on the throttle. That's hands off [Laughs]. That's hands off. Marvelous and capable aircraft but unlike the B-52 and the 199, never really trusted it. It had so many different ways to kill you in the F-111 but if you were on top it all and never let the airplane get away from you, it was a treat to fly.

Interviewer: So what do you mean different ways... it would move around?

Baehre: Yes. You have here yourself a smaller aircraft. Two engines are all you've got on them and they're right next to each other. Oh they are not exactly right next to them because we put a fuel tank between them. Okay a fuel tank in the middle and back of an airplane. What could go wrong with a design like that?^{ix} [Smiles] Well when this engine throws a turbine disk from it's inside because its coming apart usually the turbine blade which is red hot because it is inside a jet engine, goes out through the side of this jet engine into the center fuel tank and now pierces the center fuel tank. So now you've got fuel going out the hole that you just put in the center body with the hot probe that just set it on fire. Now you've got an uncontrollable fire in the back of your airplane. Oh and by the way you don't know it's [the fire] there.

Interviewer: You don't get a warning?

Baehre: You don't know it's there. Well because the uhh... way the 111 engines could fail like that, you could have the failure happen without it being near one of the fuel... uhh engine fire warning loops that went around the engine. They were designed to melt and release a uhh... neutral gas and when the gas would release would be, "Oh gee the line melted and released the gas was because the ENGINES ON FIRE!" So [Laughs] that would turn on the fire warning lights so you would know you have a fire. But like I said you could chuck an engine blade into your aft-body fuel tank and not ever know it until the fire burns through the control system at the back of the airplane. It makes your rudder go hard over to one side and now the airplane runs into a rapid, uncontrollable uhh... roll. That's your signal you've got to eject. [Laughs]

Interviewer: I'm going to ask if this ever happened?

Baehre: Not to me.

Interviewer:.. Have you seen it happen?

Baehre: Yes, we had... we lost two airplanes over the course of time up at Plattsburgh. One in the mid '70s around 1974 and then again in 1977 that uhh... both were over the state of Maine. Both were aft-body fuel tank fires like that and both resulted in uncontrollable rolls ending with an aircrew ejection. The entire F-111 fleet was suffering similar problems with failures. So in late 1977, early 1978 all the F-111s no matter what type, were all grounded until they could get a handle on both the aft-fuel tank body fires problem and one of the crews had ejected or attempted to eject. They had a problem with the escape rocket motor that was supposed to boost their capsule away from the airplane. So the fleet was grounded for those two reasons. They did find a fix for the rocket motor

nozzle for the problem with the escape capsule but they never did find a fix for the uhh... aft-body fuel tank fire problem.

Interviewer: So that was always there?

Baehre: Yup. It was still always there but that was about the... they started doing what was either more frequent inspections on the engines or went to a slightly different design with more Kevlar wrap around the aft-body fuel tank. So it would be less likely to be punctured by a runaway fan blade.

Interviewer: So now you are living here in Plattsburgh. You had said you already liked it when you drove through this area. What was your relationship like with your family here now in this new place?

Baehre: Sure. By the time we had arrived here our daughter had already been born. She was three years old when we moved here and my wife was pregnant with our son. So coming here, we had lived on base at Michigan because there really was no off base housing but there was a nice established town here in Plattsburgh. So when we got here we thought, "Gee let's buy a house instead of living on base," and uhh... and so, we did so. So now we had neighbors who were not military and we were able to establish more routes here in the local community. Without uhh... being having just other Air Force folks as our friends.

Interviewer: Where was your first house?

Baehre: 17 Smokeridge Drive in uhh... just off of uhh... the uhh... let's see. How familiar are you with Plattsburgh?

Interviewer: Pretty well, I have been here now for 3 years.

Baehre: So let's start heading out uhh, 374. We are going to drive by Route 22, which would take us to gee, the county jail uhh... up towards Bushey's.^x We are going to make a turn on the next road to the right and that's going to be... Yeah the next road on the right [Smiles.] You're about ready to go up a longer hill on 374, which is still a divided highway. Just before you go up that longer hill, look to the right. Our house was right there, right back in that area. So it wasn't that far out of town at uhh... at all.

Interviewer: My grandfather, when my mother was born here, they lived in Cumberland Head.

Baehre: Okay.

Interviewer: Right over there. They lived by a couple people who served on the base.

Baehre: Oh sure.

Interviewer: So that was interesting. I had never known that before I came here. When I picked the school they [the grandparents] said, "Oh by the way we lived up here and your mother was born here." I think, well you tell me this now. How long were you stationed here in Plattsburgh?

Baehre: The first assignment time was from 1977 to 1982. The uhh... the Air Force selected me to go to one of their development schools down in Montgomery, Alabama. Went down there for what is called Air Command and Staff College from 1982 to 1983. The Air Force had always a policy of broadening their officers and uhh... especially their pilots. I had 2 flying tours, its time for some career broadening to a non-flying assignment. Went to Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. Worked with systems command there for uhh... three years in a non-flying tour. The office I was in

developed stuff for SAC for B-52s and FB-111s. After about doing that for about a year, for the last two years there I got picked up to work on the stealth cruise missile program, which was again brand new at the time. It was highly secret uhh... technology and I did that for the last two years. Before finishing up that non-flying assignment coming back to Plattsburgh in 1986 for another flying assignment.

Interviewer: This was back on the FB-111s?

Baehre: Back on the FB-111s.

Interviewer: Were you instructing?

Baehre: Yes, I had been upgraded to instructor before coming back... actually before leaving I was an instructor at the uhh... 417 CCTS training people how to... who hadn't flown the FB before how to fly it. That's before I came back uhh... having again to get re-qualified in the FB-111. As luck would have it the other person in my re-qualification class, the other pilot in the class was my best friend from the first time through. We had both become instructors before we leave and now we come back. Something had changed in the four years we were away. We came back knowing more about the FB-111 than the guys who were instructing us, so we would often have the most interesting discussions with our instructors on how stuff really worked [Laughs].

Interviewer: So you came back here [to Plattsburgh] in 1986?

Baehre: I was here then until 1989. During that time the Strategic Air Command went to scheduling in the bomb squadrons instead of having a general wing schedule. I was asked to set that up for the bomb squadrons here. Did that for about a year the I was elevated to the position of the Operations Officer of the 528th Bomb Squadron, which was the unit, I

had been with before. I was always a 528th and was always a friend of the 528th not necessarily the 529th.

Interviewer: So I assume a lot of new responsibilities came with that new post?

Baehre: Okay. I am now in charge of training... uhh... everyone in our squadron from the time they come out of CCTs [combat control teams] to get them combat ready to begin with so they can pull alert in the FB-111. [Pauses] Then scheduling them for conventional weapons training because now we were starting to use the FB-111 to drop conventional bombs with. Teaching them how to fly tactical formation in the FB-111 that we hadn't done before and uhh... [Paused] basically keep everyone... if you haven't learned how to do it we will teach you how to do it. If you know how to do it we are going to make sure you do it frequently. I'm that guy who makes all that happen.

Interviewer: [Laughs] Oh okay. Where did you go after 1989?

Baehre: 1989 was again I was picked for the next Air Force professional Officer School, which was the Air War College again down in Montgomery, Alabama. It's another year of uhh... another year away to [Pauses] uhh... to pick up more skill sets. That was a year. Coming out of Air War College gosh for the first six months down there, you're the Air War College student but for the next six months it's find your next job. So uhh... you'll remember that I've never been overseas except for that South East Asia experience. Our kids now were... our daughter was in junior high and no, no, I take that back. She was coming up on her junior year in high school. Our son was just starting seventh grade. What a great transition time, if we are ever going to get overseas this was the time. My wife and I said, "Okay this is the time to attempt to get an overseas assignment." You are at a flexible point and here is the time to do it and if you are able to get one for two years

instead of the normal three years, that will let Amanda [Baehre's daughter] finish her junior and senior year wherever we are. Our son will finish off seventh and eighth grade wherever we are.

Interviewer: It would be easy to move.

Baehre: Yeah the beauty of the transition. Okay, overseas assignment are generally to countries where a different language is spoken. Well uhh... I had three years of French [Smiles] remember back when. Our daughter had already had two years of French at Peru [High School]. "Well gee, how about a French speaking country? Yeah and wouldn't Europe be a great place to be? Yeah it sure would! [Pounds desk] Okay Air Force Assignment System we would sure like a two year assignment to Europe in a French speaking country." I'm thinking Belgium. [Laughs] NATO headquarters, this is going to be so Cush. [Laughs] We got the phone call back with an energetic young major from the Air Force Assignment Office and he says, "Well sir I have two possibilities for you that I'd like you to consider. I think you will enjoy either of them. First one we would like you to be military attaché in Bogota, Colombia [Pauses] Or we have the Air Force Office in Rabat, Morocco at the embassy. Which would you like?" [Baehre answers,] "Now explain to me again how the first one related to anything that I asked for?" [Laughs] He said, "So you are going to be enjoying Rabat, Morocco aren't you?" Okay here is the deal: Rabat, Morocco, every adult because it was a French protectorate until 1962, could speak French as a second language. It was going to be a two year assignment, they had an American school there where kids learned in English in an American school setting. Daughter did eleventh and twelfth grade, my son did seventh and eighth grade. Here the kicker was. If you drive up to the north tip of Morocco you could look across the Straight

of Gibraltar for the seven miles and you could see Europe. That was the best they could do for us. [Laughs]

Interviewer: You can see the end tip of Spain but that's it [Laughs].

Baehre: [Yelling!] You can see it! [Laughs] So we took the assignment to uhh... Morocco for two years of the most unique stuff I had ever done in the Air Force. Working out of an embassy, being a security assistance officer. What that basically means is that because Morocco bought a lot of U.S. equipment they needed U.S. support for that equipment. So I helped them get spare parts, aircraft deliveries of new fighters and uhh... that type of stuff for the two years I was there before coming back to the states again.

Interviewer: Now you're in Morocco and the Gulf war starts. You are a lot closer to it. Tell me about it, you had mentioned it before the interview.

Baehre: Sure we had arrived in uhh... Morocco in September of 1990. If you recall that Saddam Hussein went into Kuwait I think it was July of that uhh... that year. Uhh... we knew that tensions were going to be building uhh... by that time President Bush had uhh... told Iraq that they had until the fifteenth of January [1991] to uhh... get out of Kuwait. They didn't. We watched the countdown to that conflict umm... from the time we arrived in September until January of the next year. As we got closer to uhh... let's see... once we got into October pushing on November, uhh... the ambassador decided that this might be a good time to start decreasing the American presence in Morocco. So uhh... he allowed people who wanted to send their families back to send their families back at their own expense. Okay some people... you know took them up on that offer, not too many did. Okay because not too many did... we still have a large American presence in Morocco as we are getting into November and December. Now we [the

embassy] are going to start identifying the people in the embassy who are going to be called “non-essential” and we [the Air Force and embassy] will now direct them, the “non-essentials” to leave along with all dependents. Not only will we direct them to leave and this is now coming up on... Let me see did we do Christmas in Morocco? Yes we did do Christmas in Morocco, but they had pulled out many of the “non-essentials” and their dependents by Christmas time and right before Christmas time they [the US Embassy] said, “Okay here’s the deal. Right after Christmas about January first or second, we are going to charter a Royal Moroc 747 and fly out every last “non-essential” person working at the embassy and all dependents.” That would just leave essential folks at the embassy and I was one of those designated essential folks so I watched the captain and my secretary leave [Laughs] and I’m still there.

Interviewer: So you sent the family back?

Baehre: Yes, sent the family back.

Interviewer: So how was that experience being in Morocco due to it being a Muslim nation?

Baehre: It’s a Muslim country and it turned out to be completely quiet. The king [of Morocco], as a wise leader, and I very seldom indicate that people are wise [Smiles] as kings, but he designated two official protest days where the Moroccan population could come out and protest the Gulf War and that was it. Times up. [Laughs] You people got to go home now. [Laughs] At that time Moroccans respected their king enough so that’s what they did.

Interviewer: So did your role change at all with you know you said you're helping by bring in supplies and spare parts. What they needed, did your role change now with the Gulf War?

Baehre: Not especially, we did have a small American support site that we pulled out. It was a refueling system that we pulled out of one of our Moroccan bases that we sent over to Saudi Arabia during the uhh... to being place there to do refuels of C-5s and other large aircraft. There really was no involvement of me, my job remained the same.

Interviewer: Okay. How long were you there until you came back to the States?

Baehre: Sure uhh... we arrived in Morocco in September of 1990 [and] came back to the states in uhh... late August of 1992. So we were there for about 2 years.

Interviewer: And you came back to Plattsburgh?

Baehre: No I didn't. I uhh... [Paused] by this time I knew I would not be continuing my career in the Air Force much longer. The Cold War was over, SAC had already been disestablished. You want to talk about a guy... with a guy with less than career prospects, how about a SAC bomber pilot where all his airplanes have all been retired and the Strategic Air Command isn't there any more. So it was one of those cases where [the Air Force says,] "Frank, we would really like to thank you for winning the Cold War for us. Now go find something else to do." [Laughs]

Interviewer: So where did you come back to?

Baehre: We came back to Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, New York. Remember where I had my first Air Force Flying Physical back in 1964? We closed that circuit knowing that uhh... well I could go there because they were still flying B-52s that I had experience in. So I could go back there as a B-52 staff officer. Knowing that my time was going to

be short in the Air Force waiting for the final uhh... set of orders to say, "Okay thanks we are going to retire you early." So uhh... hung out there at Griffiss, when I got the final retirement orders the conversation with my wife went something like this because the Air Force would send you anyplace when you retired. Either go back to where you first started from or somewhere else you wanted to go. "Well Hon, where would you like to retire?" Sandy said, "Uhh... Plattsburgh." So we moved here in uhh... October 1973, or 1993 rather, and have been here ever since.

Interviewer: Well that was one of my questions: Why did you come back here to Plattsburgh? [Laughs] Did you like Plattsburgh yourself?

Baehre: Oh yeah! [Smiles]

Interviewer: What was it exactly that you did love about this area?

Baehre: Uhh... the seasons. The seasons, uhh... the natural beauty here. The friends we had made in the Plattsburgh area outside of the Air Force. The convenience of Plattsburgh, the relative safety of uhh... Plattsburgh. The kind of place where you know you could let your kids play in the neighborhood and not be concerned about them, you could let them go off to school and not be worried about them. Plattsburgh was just the right size community for us even though we [Baehre and his wife] had met each other in the larger city in Buffalo. It felt more right to us to come back here.

Interviewer: Was the base closed by the time you came back or was it jus about to?

Baehre: Uhh... the base was about to be announced for closure. It hadn't been closed just yet and would still be open for about hmm.... Six months after we got back here.

Interviewer: How did you feel about the base closing? Were you feeling nostalgic about were you... this was a great place here and felt upset?

Baehre: If the 111s had still been here at the time and they were retired in I think 1991. Had the FB been here I would have been heartbroken to come back here and watch other people fly my airplanes. [Smiles] With the 111s gone, the Cold War is now over. The Soviet Union had collapsed, the entire reason that I was in the Air Force was in my own mind's eye had gone away. So now uhh... if there are base functions here that are convenient like the base exchange gas station where you can cheaper gas, the commissary where you can get cheaper food, the BX where you can get uhh... goods and that. It was nice to have but not critical.

Interviewer: Did you ever want to go back to Buffalo?

Baehre: We still had family in Buffalo, we still visit Buffalo but we never wanted to live there again.

Interviewer: And why is... is [that?]

Baehre: Big, busy, umm... yeah big and busy let's go with that. Plattsburgh had more of an attraction to me with Buffalo a repulsion but Buffalo has a repulsion. Have you ever been to Buffalo?

Interviewer: I've been to Rochester near Buffalo but not Buffalo. [Laughs] That's about as close as I've gotten, but I know many people who have gone to school there and lived in Buffalo. They all say they stand it until they are done there.

Interviewer: Okay. Well I think that covers everything. We talked for a long time there.

Wow! Almost an... hour and a half. Thank you very much Frank.

Baehre: You are certainly welcome.

Interviewer: If there is anything else I will let you know and we can arrange to meet again.

Baehre: Okay sounds good to me.

**Interview with Henry Wurster. March. 20, 2014 at the Battle of Plattsburgh
Museum, Plattsburgh, NY. Recorded with a smart phone.**

Biographically Information

- Wurster was born in Fort Lewis, Washington on July 18, 1949. He was the son of a career Air Force Officer and was the youngest of two boys. He lived in various places as a child before his family settled in Dover, Delaware. He attended Citadel University in Charleston, South Carolina. Graduated from ROTC and was trained in Laredo, Texas (1971) before he was deployed to Vietnam (1972.) He returned and was stationed at Plattsburgh Air Force base. He was also stationed at Strategic Air Command Headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska and also the Pentagon. He has flown the KC-135 tanker and the FB-111.

Interview #2

Henry Wurster

Pilot U.S. Air Force

Interviewer (Tyler Beck)

Narrator (Henry Wurster)

Interview Finding Aid

528th Bomb Squadron

Air Force

Airplanes

FB-111

KC-135

Mid-air refueling

Supersonic

T-37, "Flying Dog Whistle"

T-38

T-41

Advanced Training

Survival Schools

Jungle Survival Training

Duty Selection

KC-135

Selection process

Class Ranking

Instructors

Methods

Personal Interactions

Laredo, Texas

Strategic Air Command (SAC)

Omaha, Nebraska

Training

Comraderic during training

Flying T-41

T-47 after T-41 completion

T-38 supersonic trainer

Air Force Career Development School 1984

Air Force Command and Staff College, Montgomery, Alabama

Air Force Professional Officer School 1988

Air War College, Montgomery, Alabama

Alaska

Citadel University

ROTC

See also ROTC

Cold War 1970-1992

Delaware

Dover

England

Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington State

Fort Lewis, Washington State, 1949

Grew up in military family

Levond Dickerson

Boom Operator

Pentagon, 1992-1995

Chief of Dual Use Technology

Defense Technology Security Administration

Department of Defense
Department of Commerce
Office of the Secretary of Defense
Plattsburgh
First Assignment
Life in Plattsburgh, 1972- 80
Local restaurants
Return to Plattsburgh, 1989-1991
ROTC
Spain
Strategic Air Command, Omaha, Nebraska
Headquarters, 1980
Vietnam
Linebacker 2
Utapao, Thailand

Interviewer: Okay we are going to start off. Where and when were you born?

Wurster: I was born in July eighteenth, 1949 in uhh... Fort Lewis, Washington.

Interviewer: Ok um...what was your family life growing up?

Wurster: Well my dad was uhh... an Air Force Officer and a pilot so [Pauses] so we moved around quite a bit. I spent uhh... I mean when I first remember was probably in uhh... [I] Lived in Greece and Germany like... you know in first and second grade.

Came back to the states and uhh... came back to Dover, Delaware when I was in about

uhh... third grade and we ended up actually living there until I was a sophomore in college.

Interviewer: Really?

Wurster: Because my father was stationed in Dover flying uhh... transport aircraft: 124s and 133s. Then uhh... yeah that's pretty much where I grew up.

Interviewer: Okay. Well do you have any siblings or are you an only child?

Wurster: No, I have an older brother who is five years older than me. Uhh... [Pauses] he is still... still living [Laughs].

Interviewer: So umm... where you... you talked about living in Delaware and that you went to college there. What college did you attend?

Wurster: Well actually I went to high school in Delaware and I went to Dover and left and went to the Citadel [University] in Charleston, South Carolina and graduated from there in 1971.

Interviewer: Okay did you attend ROTC going there?

Wurster: Yes. The way Citadel... the way it was set up uhh... as a state school but they had ROTC for both Army, Navy and [Short pause] Air Force ROTC there so you took your ROTC and then graduated with commission in your chosen service.

Interviewer: Did you want to go the ROTC route before you entered college?

Wurster: Yes... yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: You did want to. Is that because of your experience with your father?

Wurster: Yeah, I had pretty much decided early on that I wanted to uhh... you know... go to the Air Force and fly. So that's what I...it kind of was the mean to the end.

Interviewer: What about your older brother? Did he join too?

Wurster: Yeah. My brother was uhh... also an Air Force Officer, he was... he didn't fly in the Air Force but he was a career officer. [He] retired and spent most of his career in maintenance [of aircraft.]

Interviewer: Ok umm... [Pauses] Did any other members of your family serve in the Air Force besides your father or was there any of ... uhh your friends that went with you too?

Wurster; Uhh... no, not... not out of high school I mean or whatever. Of course when you go to college you meet a few guys in college. We remained friends and went into the Air Force together. [Pauses] Yeah... but there wasn't a... you know mass join up and we all went together kind of thing. You know the "Band of Brothers."

Interviewer: Everybody likes to think it is that way. After you graduated from Citadel, where did you go for training?

Wurster: Umm... I graduated in May of 1971 and in June of '71 I went to Laredo, Texas and started flight training.

Interviewer: What was it like down there?

Wurster: Uhh... [Pauses] well [Laughs] it was hot. I remember the thing that struck me the most about Laredo was the uhh... aside from driving for two days through Texas to get to Laredo because it is at the bottom of the state. Uhh... when I got there the Rio Grande River which I... you know, was always in the cowboy movies and it was... you know this "grand" river and all. It looked like a trickle going through a dirt field and uhh... after about... I had been there two weeks and it started raining and of course on that cleatchy cement they call the desert, the rain can't go anywhere so it piled up in that [river.] The Rio Grande River in fact was over the top of the international bridge that

connected the United States to Mexico and swept away everything on both sides of the river for oh about a mile. So that was the uhh... from one extreme to another. It was a land of extremes. That is what I would say Laredo is.

Interviewer: So, what do you remember... anything about specific instructors down there? You have any special memory that sticks out looking back during training?

Wurster: [Long pause] Uhh... [Pauses again.] Well I do remember my instructors and I mean it was a lot... a lot of work to get through pilot training, I mean it was an intense time. The nice thing about it was though everybody uhh... that was there... we were all pretty much the same age, demographic and all. Some of the fellas were married, some of us weren't but you had a common goal though and you worked towards it. It was uhh... a lot of work but a lot of fun. Uhh.... And it was uhh... the challenge of flying was pretty exciting. The instructors were all for the most part, they were there to help you get through.... Do whatever they could to get... you know get you out the other end with a set of wings. You know, there were a couple colorful characters. [Laughs]

Interviewer: I have heard a couple experiences were there is one instructor that is the bad one, the one that sticks out the most. You know, the "screamer" or "mask shaker" as Frank [Baehre] explained to me. Any of those [instructors] there?

Wurster: No, uhh... not really. I mean... uhh... not really. I guess I was lucky there because I didn't have a "screamer" or any extreme on either way. All pretty competent people.

Interviewer: What trainers did you.... were you starting out on uhh.... down there?

Wurster: I started on the uhh... when they called it the T-41, which is essentially... which it is a Cessna 172 uhh... high wing prop aircraft that is still in service today. People fly it all over the you know.... States. Uhh.... [I] went to the T-37, which is a small... they called it the “Flying Dog Whistle” because it was so noisy [Laughs,] but it was a twin engine uhh... side by side jet trainer, that since been replaced. Then we went to T-38s which was a supersonic uhh... jet and they still fly today as well.

Interviewer: Which one did you like best out of the trainers?

Wurster: Oh I liked them all. You know because... I mean [Pauses] because... you were learning as you progressed. I think the T-38 was the... the... a whole lot of fun. I just remember the first takeoff that I had in that thing when they hot the afterburners. I felt like I was sitting on a telephone pole with a rocket ship on it. [Laughs] Phew! Off we went. Jeez I have to fly this thing. I was on a ride rather than you know piloting. Got over that [feeling] quick. You had to or you didn't stay. [Laughs]

Interviewer: Now coming towards the end of training umm... was assignments based on class ranking?

Wurster: Right.

Interviewer: That's how it was? So what was your ranking in class?

Wurster: Uhh... well. Oh yeah, well I think the way it worked... started out uhh... [Pauses] We started off with seventy-five people in the class and by the time we got down to the end of the T-38s there was like fifty people left because they washed like twenty-five people out. I was... I had a couple... I had a least one bad checkride.^{xi} I remember I was down in the bottom end of... the bottom end of the class actually. In T-

38s we had a uhh.... what they called a Four-Ship, a formation we went. Formation training was the end of the program and our last uhh... big checkride was what they called the Formation Check, the Four- Ship Check. Four aircraft went out together and everyone was like.... And I had a great day that day. I had a good checkride so I moved up a couple notches from the bottom. I always laugh when people ask, "You were in the bottom of the class?" I'd say, "I was just happy to be there." You know they had sent twenty-five guys packing so, you know... it was pretty tough. Yeah I ended up in the bottom... the bottom third for sure. Then the class ranking came out and the way they did it in mine was they have changed it since but they had a block of airplanes and had an aircraft and a base. [Pauses] Depending on how everyone was ranked because... the rankings went with check rides, uhh... academics and you know pretty much tally it up much like they would do in college or anything else. They would say, "Okay the guy with the 99.9 average was number one and you know... the spread was probably and it would be about 99 to uhh... about an 95. That's how tight everything was in there and it got down to decimal points. They broke it out and they [the pilots] picked down the line and you had a block of... you know this guy had uhh... twenty-five airplanes to pick from [and] this last guy [Laughs] he had one. [Laughs again]

Interviewer: Was that the case for you?

Wurster: No, no I had several [aircraft] but I picked the [KC]-135 to Plattsburgh having never heard of Plattsburgh, New York in my life. But there was a guy in my class, Ed Ahern who had gone to uhh... St. Josephs College in New York and he came up here [Plattsburgh] for ROTC summer camp. He says, "Boy I've been to Plattsburgh and I'm

from New York and it's a beautiful area. You'd love it up there," and I said, "Well that's about a good reason as any." So I picked it. This is where I end up and uhh... can't say I ever regretted it. It was and has been pretty cool. It's a good spot.

Interviewer: So after you picked the assignment where did they send you for training for the KC-135?

Wurster: I went from uhh... Let's see [Pauses] there were several. I mean for the actual KC-135 training we went to Mersed, California, Castle Air Force Base. That's where the training was. That training lasted uhh... I want to say... boy [Pauses] I can't really remember but it seemed like it was around six months. It was a pretty extensive training. En route to that we went through some survival training in uhh... Miami [for] Water Survival, went up to Fairchild Air Force Base in Washington State for uhh... normal survival, winter survival training and uhh and you know uhh... the POW [Prisoners of War] experience and all that kind of stuff. So I graduated from pilot training in May of '72 and showed up after going to all the different schools and everything in Plattsburgh in uhh... let's see what would have been October. About the end of October of '72.

Interviewer: Okay so what was your role on the aircraft? Were you the main pilot, co-pilot, or navigator?

Wurster: I was the co-pilot.

Interviewer: Oh so the co-pilot. So specifically what did you do? What was your responsibility on the plane?

Wurster: Well for the co-pilot uhh... just like backing up the pilot but our specific responsibilities were, we were in charge of the uhh... aside from flying the... you know 50% of the flying that you do. I mean you ran a coordinated effort among the crew so it

was difficult to say there was any specific tasks but I mean I ran... monitored the fuel panel and all the management of the [fuel] offloads during air refueling and such for flying longer distances. Radio communication was... it was just the standard stuff. Just like any other co-pilot or pilot you know, when the other guy wasn't flying, you'd be flying and he would be doing all of that stuff. It was really... what you trained... I mean we always say that the co-pilot is the captain in training. I mean your basically learning and getting the experience so you can essentially move to the left seat. You know, to become the captain, [or] aircraft commander.

Interviewer: I see a lot of things especially with the tankers [in regards to] mid-air refueling and how dangerous it is. People always say, "You have to get the line up right and the boom operator has such a difficult task." Would you... I mean you obviously knew the guy, the boom operator. Did he ever give or tell you an experience where he had difficulty at it? I mean... any interesting experience trying to do a mid-air refueling?

Wurster: Well I know.... I mean you know... just because of the numbers of people and all the different variants that go into it, weather and everything. There were some pretty exciting days. [Laughs] I think probably one of the funnier ones was on a standardization crew. This was when I was a captain, an aircraft commander at the time and my boom operator was a fella by the name of Levond Dickerson. He was about six foot five, pretty soft-spoken fella, never really said very much. He was outstanding you know, very smooth good boom operator. If he said anything once he went back to the boom pod, you knew something was really going crazy back there. We were on a fighter deployment uhh... taking A-7s somewhere. This guy came up in the A-7, and all of a sudden Levond

goes, “AC. Boom. I’m going to have to give this guy verbal corrections.” I’m going, “Oh, shit,” because normally a boom operator would do it with lights and you know you would just click the switches. For him to say that was like, it was.... like a thirteen year old girl screaming for an hour... you know, that about the difference between how quiet this guy was. So I said, “Okay, I’m ready.” He goes [Dickerson] and he says to this guy, “Move towards the center of the aircraft,” [Laughs] and all of a sudden. Bahowmm!! The tanker shook [Makes a shaking gesture and sound] and the contact light, which was about oh, I don’t know, this big. [Makes a circle with his fingers] Probably an inch square on both sides. He [Dickerson] goes, “Contact.” He said, “He’s stable now boss.” [Chuckles] Well I thought, I just had this picture in my mind of somebody taking a uhh... Shish Kebab skewer [Laughs and makes a poking sound] and that is essentially what he did. I talked to him {Dickerson} after and he told me, “Yeah he [the A-7] was all over the place.” As he came across, they had the extend feature on the boom that runs it out, I forget the exact number was. It was out past ten feet, and he hit the probe and drove it into the airplane and it locked on. So it shook the tanker, imagine what it did to that little A-7. His teeth must have been rattling in there. [Shakes like the A-7 would have] So [Chuckles] that was kind of interesting. The guy did great and got all of his fuel and everything like that and didn’t have any problems. So it was kind of fun.

Interviewer: So what was... your experience first like... first coming to Plattsburgh?

What was uhh... the base like? Was it uhh... different to you?

Wurster: Sure, it was uhh... [Pauses] I remember I drove... I drove here. Coming up the Northway, coming up the Northway, coming up the Northway you know. [Laughs]

Interviewer: I know. I know what its like.

Wurster: Wow, this is... we just keep going north. [Smiles] Then I finally got here and I went, "Okay this is it." [Pauses] I had my first meal at the uhh... Carol's Hamburger, which is now the Burger King right across the street from here. I went to the BOQ [Base Officers' Quarters] and checked in. That's what I did... you know... I wasn't married. I just had everything I owned in the back of my car or my... my van. Checked in and uhh... got ready to report for duty the next day over at the squadron. On how it turned out, I didn't really have any preconceived notions about what it would be or wouldn't be, but it was... you know... and coming in October.... the... the weather wasn't extreme yet.

Interviewer: You hadn't got a dose of the winters just yet.

Wurster: [Laughs] We hadn't got any... hadn't gotten the shot of the blizzard conditions.

Interviewer: So how long were you stationed here in Plattsburgh?

Wurster: Oh... I'll put it to you this way. Out of the twenty-four years in the Air Force, I spent sixteen of them at Plattsburgh. My first assignment... I even had... I brought my résumé along to make sure I can remember. [Grabs paper] So I came in '72 uhh... and left in 1984 for the first time. I mean it was... let's see how did it go? See '72 to '80 in tankers. [Pauses] Then I went to the [FB]-111s in 80. Yeah, so I basically spent twelve years here on my first assignment. Then went from here to uhh... [Pauses] Montgomery, Alabama for Air Command and Staff College [and] spent a year there. Then went to SAC [Strategic Air Command] Headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska and spent three years there. Then came back from uhh... from Omaha [Pauses] to Plattsburgh. Then we spent... that

would have put us back... it was uhh... 1988, and '88 to '91 and then I left Plattsburgh again to go to Air War College in Montgomery. Then [I] went to the Pentagon and spent the last three years of my career at the Pentagon.

Interviewer: Okay. A lot of different places there, so you switched to the FB-111?

Wurster: Yes.

Interviewer: What was that experience like switching from a big tanker to that smaller one?

Wurster: It was a lot of fun. It was... it was something that I wanted to do. You know, I mean you had to apply for it and put in for it and all that. I...I mean as far as flying the airplanes, I've said this to for anybody who has ever asked. I mean to compare the two is pretty much apples and oranges aside from the fact that you fly. In... in the tanker, the mission that you did was all crew coordinated, in the 111, with all the automation, there was one other person but uhh... it... it was a very intense five hours of flying when you went up on a mission. So what with... they were quite a bit different, but both of them had their challenges. You never got it perfect no matter how hard you try in either airplane but you always aspired to be really... you know to do it just right. It was a lot of fun, the 111 was... it was quite the airplane.

Interviewer: Any mission or trial... I mean training run that sticks out in your mind?

Wurster: Oh uhh... [Pauses] many of them do. I mean, you know I... I can think of... I can think of a lot of different rides that certain things happened and uhh... but they were all... it was all pretty exciting. That's what kept you coming back. [Smiles] You know, there wasn't one day that was like the other. It was always pretty cool.

Interviewer: I've heard from Frank [Baehre] that he liked it too, the FB-111. Umm... being that is only one guy or two people if it's a dual uhh... two people in the cockpit. Umm... what was your favorite thing about the airplane?

Wurster: Well you know it's funny, out of the... I mean, out of the mission, I enjoyed refueling because I had been in the tanker on the other side. I really liked getting on the backside and doing the refueling that was a lot of fun. Good sport. Well low level was... that was spectacular. You know just being down two or four hundred feet of the ground... you know and zooming along and the whole thing about [Pauses] I mean I look back on my Air Force career and I can't believe they paid me to do it yet. [Laughs] My father always said, "If you find something that you like and have fun at you aren't going to think its work," and I never really did think it was work. It just was uhh... always something special.

Interviewer: You just enjoyed going to work everyday?

Wurster: Yeah. Well there were some days; I really can't say there weren't some days were I just went, "[What] the hell am I doing?" In retrospect I was all... put it this way, I wouldn't do anything different yet.

Interviewer: So then you said that after you went on the FB-111 for two years, you went to uhh...

Wurster: It turned out to be uhh... let me see here. Maybe three years or so, 80 to 84 or so.

Interviewer: Okay, and then you went to the uhh... Montgomery, Alabama for Air War College?

Wurster: Air Command and Staff College. That is the intermediate service school. That was a year of uhh... there is a year in the Air Force that you know... if I were to put it on the racket stack you know, [Pauses] its about like a root canal. [Laughs] Now we got through it and it was good training. Left there and went to SAC Headquarters, which was my first uhh... staff job.

Interviewer: What was it like at SAC Headquarters?

Wurster: Well uhh... again that was uhh... [Pauses] all new... new stuff. You know but primarily you were there doing a lot of [Pauses] speech writing, uhh... position papers on anything you know... all different Air Force issues... you know issues dealing with aircraft, Air Force Structure... I learned a lot. I mean it really does broaden your horizons and your perspective with some pretty good knowledge.

Interviewer: So did you apply for that one?

Wurster: Yeah, I mean coming out of Air Command and Staff... you... then you are back in the assignment system and they look for a place to put you. Omaha was my choice, you know to go there and uhh... it turned out to be pretty good. Its [Omaha] interesting, a good place to be from.

Interviewer: I have heard good things about it. Umm... so

Wurster: With Omaha and Plattsburgh, if you put their landscape on an oscilloscope, it's [Omaha] a straight line compared to the north country. The beauty... every time I came back here [Plattsburgh] I always felt like I was home.

Interviewer: So, how long were you there, until you came back to Plattsburgh?

Wurster: Oh... let's see what did I do. I was staff at... '88. Yeah... okay, 1988 I came back. So yeah, and it was three years.

Interviewer: Okay and you came back and you were on...

Wurster: Back to flying status uhh... back to the 111, and I started off... you know retraining in CCTS and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: What was your rank at this time?

Wurster: Let's see I was a uhh... Lieutenant Colonel.

Interviewer: Okay.

Wurster: I ended up uhh... when I came back I re-qualified and then I ended up after... at the end of the three years becoming the commander of the 528th Bomb Squadron. That was my last flying assignment here and we retired the colors of the 528th because Plattsburgh was starting to close down and it switched from the Bomb Wing to the 380th Air Refueling Wing. So we had uhh... I had retired our squadron and the colors. We had flown some airplanes out to Davis-Monthan, the uhh... reclamation center there. I then left here and went to Air War College.

Interviewer: Had to be tough to see a plane you were so fond of uhh... retired?

Wurster: Yeah, yeah it was. It was kind of interesting in a way. One of the things that I remember is that the guys out there are sensitive. You can't call Davis-Monthan the "Boneyard," that's why they call it the reclamation center, and actually I didn't... I really didn't understand how complicated and how uhh... sophisticated they system that was out there. They have [Pauses] aircraft and systems out there, from basically what you would consider boneyard or junkyard type things all the way up to their... their pickled

and cosmo lined^{xii} off once a year, started where all the systems are run and then re-pickled. So they could you know... fire them up and fly them away if they needed to. It a pretty... its pretty neat place.

Interviewer: Yeah, you see all the pictures of the B-52s taking up a majority of the space.

Wurster: Right and there... there are all kinds of different things out there but uhh... yeah it was interesting.

Interviewer: So then you said after the uhh... 528th was retired you moved on to the Pentagon. What was your role now in the Pentagon?

Wurser: Well the Pentagon, I went to work for the, what they call the... the Defense Technology Security Administration and it was a uhh... agency that was attached to the Office of the Secretary of Defense. It's uhh... plans and programs division and what our jobs was... was uhh... [Pauses] My title was Chief of Dual Use Technology. What we did, we were the DOD component for uhh... licensing uhh... of what they called uhh... [Pauses] Let's see what did they call it? It was uhh... controlled [Pauses] uhh... items or you... to the prescribed countries. Now the prescribed countries then were China, India of course the Soviet Union and all the communist countries and any. If they were to come in or a company were to come in and say Dell computers and they say, "We want to sell uhh... 5,000 computers to uhh... the Chinese government." They would have to come in for a license to us because it is a controlled commodity. They would come into the Department of Commerce, apply for the license and it would go through all the different service agencies including the DOD where we were. Uhh... could be the... you know the uhh... Nuclear Agencies, Commerce and every... then you would meet and everybody

would agree or disagree and the license was either granted or not granted. So... the place where I worked it was called Dual Use and these were commodities and equipment that can be used either commercially or militarily.

Interviewer: Okay.

Wurster: Then there was the branch that was all munitions that were considered such. So it was pretty interesting. Again it was another job where I walked in not knowing anything about it and got to spend three years there as Division Chief. I learned quite a bit about it. I guess in that... in retrospect that's one of the neatest things about doing a career in the Air Force or in the service because the number of things that you are exposed to...you know so... it was kind of interesting.

Interviewer: So you were in there during the... when the uhh... when the Soviet Union collapsed?

Wurster: Yes.

Interviewer: What did that mean for your job? It probably changed in retrospect to that because now those countries weren't technically associated with the Soviet Union anymore?

Wurster: Well it happened rather slowly because it is such a huge bureaucracy... I mean still... there were uhh... yeah it started to uhh kind of twinkle down a little bit but still there was work to be done. I mean... you know. I'll give you an example, I mean uhh... one of the uhh... big things in the type of studies we did and in my division I mean we had a whole group of scientists that worked and military officers and then licensing officers so they would do analysis of these different uhh... whatever the commodity was. India was [Pause] wanted to buy fertilizer plant technology. Well one of the big outputs

of a fertilizer plant is soft water and one of the big requirements for building a nuclear weapon is soft water. I mean and these guys figured these things out and they know. Now show us why you really need the fertilizer plant... you know and... those were the... those... was one example of the types of things that went on. So it was kind of interesting. It was fun that way.

Interviewer: So... you also dealt with countries that were always an ally? Did you deal with Israel you know... selling weapons? Did that go through your department?

Wurster: That was not part of my department but there where... yeah they were part of the deal. You know... then there was... I mean within the Pentagon itself I mean... because we were dual use, there were other agencies that were selling them airplanes. You know Israel is buying F-16s uhh... the Saudis are buying F-15s. I mean... so that was the type of business we were in but I was down... I was primarily in the dual use business. So uhh... but yeah. In fact I don't remember and licenses to [Pauses] to Israel [Pauses] that I can remember. If it came across the desk we worked it you know but most of it was to uhh... most of our dealings were with uhh... the former Soviet Union, China uhh... that type of thing.

Interviewer; So what was it like... I mean you must have lived in DC doing that? What was it like living down there?

Wurster: Uhh... I had decided when we uhh... when I got the assignment... my family stayed here in Plattsburgh in fact. My wife is still a teacher in the Plattsburgh school district, so I was down there. I lived you know... I got a small apartment right in Crystal City and walked to work at the Pentagon everyday. Pretty much I spent five days there and would come home on the weekends you know... so it was... it was okay. It is funny

now both of my sons live there [D.C.]... with their families. Yeah so... I was just down there... well I was there when you wrote me last time.

Interviewer: A little ironic that you were there and now they are down there?

Wurster: We were laughing and I said, " Geez, it seems like yesterday I was down here and Christ that was like twenty years ago." '95, '94-95.

Interviewer: So umm...

Wurster: But it was... it was... okay. It was interesting.

Interviewer: So after you did that for three years you said?

Wurster: Right.

Interviewer: Then you retired and came back here to Plattsburgh?

Wurster: Yes.

Interviewer: What was your decision to come back here in Plattsburgh when you could have went anywhere?

Wurster: Well you know.... Like I said I came up here early on I found out that Plattsburgh was... was a pretty nice place to live actually. The kids uhh... both my sons were in uhh... school still here. My oldest uhh... was in high school and the other in middle school. Judy had a job and uhh... when I came back I got a job and started working.

Interviewer: Where did you work?

Wurster: I worked at CommutAir which was a uhh... small... it was an airline up at Plattsburgh Airport and I ended up working there for fifteen years.

Interviewer: You stayed doing a similar type of job.

Wurster: Yeah, yup.

Interviewer: So obviously the base and the community here had a positive impact on you?

Wurster: Yeah and the base and the community uhh... just the general environment. It was a great place to live and raise kids. Im mean... and I though everybody was... nice. It was fun. Hey it was cold but...

Interviewer: You can deal with that.

Wurster: [Smiles] I thought so.

Interviewer: Except this winter. [Laughs]

Wurster: [Laughs] Its getting harder to deal with, but no... yeah.

Interviewer: Did you see any changes that happened once the base closed? You know... the town started to be different?

Wurster: Well I mean yeah... probably one of the largest changes when the base closed was the uhh... the uhh... diversity that the base brought of the different people from all around the country. As far as the community goes, I can't say that there was a huge change, I mean... I always said about Plattsburgh: there are these places that have these great highs and great lows. Its pretty much been about the same, that I can remember. Uhh... there have been some changes and they have worked very hard to keep things going and I think our economy suffrd a bit when the base closed. Our county and everybody has uhh... done a pretty good job you know... keeping it... keeping it viable. All and all you know... I'm still here.

Interviewer: Well it is impressive how quickly they started changing and selling pieces of the base of to companies.

Wurster: It was something that... there were some very forward people... you know thinking people... knew it wasn't going to happen by itself. You had to be proactive and set up to the plate. So... yeah it was good.

Interviewer: So what was your overall impression of your career in the Air Force? How did you feel about it?

Wurster: Like I said earlier. I wouldn't do anything different. I enjoyed... it was great, a great career. Uhh... I was very fortunate; fortunate to serve for twenty-four years and uhh... when I left I had no regrets. When I look back on it, I left at the right time and its... so its... all and all its been perfect.

Interviewer: You say no regrets. You never wanted to go over to South East Asia at one point.

Wurster: I did.

Interviewer: No. Not early on in tankers uhh... I went over on to Jon Tiger and I flew in Linebacker 2 when they were bombing Hanoi and did uhh... refueling over there and uhh... right at the tail end of Vietnam War.

Interviewer: I don't know how we skipped that.

Wurster: So I did a deployment to uhh... Utapao, Thailand. Uhh... England, Alaska and Spain. So yeah... we did some traveling. Yeah, so it was all good.

Interviewer: I don't know how we skipped that? When I talked with Frank, he talked on and on about being in Vietnam.

Wurster: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was that like to be apart of Operation Linebacker? You said you were part of a tanker so you were refueling all those B-52s?

Wurster: I mean... yeah it was pretty exciting. You know... it was uhh... because I was just fresh out of pilot training you know... I was kind of wide-eyed, bushy tailed at the time. It was pretty new to me.

Interviewer: That's interesting and then you went to Alaska you said?

Wurster: Yeah, that was another one of the uhh...that was in 135s. They [The Air Force] had tours of duty where you would go out for thirty day and go... they called it the Tanker Task Force. We uhh... did that in Alaska in Fairbanks, Alaska. Then there was another rotation where you would go to Spain that would eventually turn into Zaragoza. I went to Alaska in February and you think Plattsburgh is cold. Fairbanks, Alaska was minus 50 degrees [Laughs]. The sun when across the horizon like, "ehhh." It got grey out at noon and then it was dark. I can grantee that at 50 degrees below zero Fahrenheit; the water thrown in the air will not touch the ground. It turns into ice fog and floats away. [Laughs] We did that one night, we were playing peeknuckle and I said, "Man it's freezing," and the radio said it's 50 degrees below and to make sure you have all your gear on. I said, "I remember Mr. Wizard." It was a show I used to watch as a kid. The show said that if you take water ant throw it at 50 degrees below zero it will turn into ice fog. I said, "Time to test it boys." [Smiles] So we went and got a big pan of water and went out on the back porch and sure enough it went "poof" and floated away. Then he said [The Wizard] because the kid on the show asked, "What if you heat the water?" The [Wizard] answers, "Well it will freeze faster because once the cooling process starts it will go faster on the hot water than the cold." I said, "That's got to be bologna." [Laughs] We took a pot of boiling water and of course in the time frame, which must be a Nano-second, the exact same thing happened. It when "poof" and turned... and just floated

away. We gave up... it was just too cold to be out here. We were back inside playing cards and drinking beer. [Laughs] That was better.

Interviewer: So you said you were there for thirty days?

Wurster: Yup, that long.

Interviewer: So if you were there in February, you saw practically no sunlight?

Wurster: Yeah it just stayed dark out.

Interviewer: So then you moved to Spain, a totally different type of environment.

Wurster; Yeah we did. We did another thirty-day rotation in Spain later on I mean... it wasn't. It was good. Got to go to downtown Madrid.

Interviewer: It's got to be nice being there?

Wurster: Oh sure.

Interviewer: Being in Spain right now wouldn't be bad.

Wurster: I'm sure. It's beautiful. It was a lot of fun. I had learned a little bit of Spanish in college and I remember walking up to one of the [Pauses] policeman. I said, "Donde está el prato?"^{xiii} I wanted to go to the Prato which was the big museum... you know that uhh... and he goes, "Si hone habe escribá..." I said, "Mas despaso pór favor?" He says, "You speak English?" I say "Yes" [Laughs] He says, "Well go down here and take a right." [Laughs] I went, "I got it thank you sir." He laughed, "Thank you for trying." I answered, "Okay." [Laughs again]

Interviewer: Spanish is difficult. I took a lot of Spanish in in High School, college level classes.

Wurster; I took two years [college] of Spanish and three years in high school.

Interviewer: I don't remember most of it now because it just goes by. It's been about four or five years since now. It is a tough language because of all the conjugations and what not.

Interviewer: So is this when you came back to the states.

Wurster: With those you know... you know... they were just temporary duty. With the tanker task force was uhh... they were always operational in these units but they would... would take uhh... a crew from Plattsburgh for a thirty day assignment and then they might take a crew from Barksdale you know... so they were manned by Stateside units going there for temporary duty. It was a good deal for us.

Interviewer: Those are the only two overseas experiences you had?

Wurster: Yeah.

Interviewer: Let's see what else could we ask here. Umm... we pretty much hit everything here. [Pauses] I think that's it. Anything else you want to talk about? Anything that comes to mind?

Wurster: No, no. I just uhh... [Pauses] it just it was all good.

Interviewer: Alright that's it. Well thank you. If I find anything I will get ahold of you.

Wurster: Yeah, please do.

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- ⁱ Here Baehre is speaking sarcastically.
 - ⁱⁱ More sarcasm used here to describe the Vietcong.
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Bowling alleys, movie theaters
 - ^{iv} 35mm film camera's were the big rage back then
 - ^v Both would repeat the message until the husband hears it.
 - ^{vi} Would record all of the sorties and missions the squad completed or participated in.
 - ^{vii} What kind of pilot you wanted to be next.
 - ^{viii} Name was changed after the Second World War. Means the person who drops the weapons.
 - ^{ix} Sarcasm again used.
 - ^x Bushey's New and Used Furniture
 - ^{xi} A "Checkride" is when the trainee pilot will go up in the aircraft with the instructor riding along. The instructor will then take the trainee through a series of maneuvers to evaluate the pilot.
 - ^{xii} Stripped and cleaned
 - ^{xiii} In a pure American accent.