

S/Sgt James Andersen

Born: July 13, 1943
On Island
Died:

Period of Service: Viet Nam

Sources: Monument,
Service questionnaire, JGay
interview

Commander of AL Post 402 1986-87 and 1992-96, joined post in 1967.

Enlisted Jan 16, 1962, trained at Lackland Air Force Base, TX, Keeler AFB, Mississippi. Released Travis AFB, San Francisco. Stationed Lackland, Keesler, Antigo AFB, Calumet AFS , Nakhon Phanom Air Base Thailand, Muchrahan Laos, Than SA Knot, Saigon.

Medals include Air Force Good Conduct, Viet Nam Service, Air Force Longevity ribbon, expert marksmanship.

Has run the Island Outpost for the past forty years, opening it in 1972. Prior to that had helped his uncle and father on the American Girl freight carrying boat between the Island and Green Bay.

John Gay interview is attached.



VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

James E. Anderson

Conducted by Mr. John Gay

September 28, 2011

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This is John Gay on September 28, 2011 talking with Jim Anderson at our place on Green Bay Road on Washington Island, Wisconsin. Jim was formerly commander of the American Legion Post Gislason-Richter, Post #402. We're going to ask Jim his experiences in the service: where he was when he enlisted, where he trained and where he was stationed, and any memorable events that took place during that period and what he did after getting out of the service. Okay, Jim, why don't we just let you begin your talk.

I was enlisted in the Air Force in 1962 – January, 1962 – from Washington Island, Wisconsin where I was born and raised. From there I went to Lackland Air Force Base, Texas for my initial basic training. Then on to Keesler Air Force Base, Mississippi to radar controller school.

How long were you at Lackland?

Eight weeks.

What kind of training was that?

Basic, basic: military marching, PT and getting acquainted with the service.

So there wasn't any specialized training at that point.

Not really.

I went to Keesler Air Force Base.

Where's Keesler?

In Mississippi.

And if you were selected for a training school you left basic early. Otherwise you would spend twelve weeks at Lackland. But I was selected for a school, so I went to Mississippi and finished up basic training there while I was going to school.

I was there for three or four months in a basic radar school. Then I was transferred for further training to Oklahoma City Air Force Station, in Oklahoma. I spent approximately a year-and-a-half or two years there where I finished up training in the radar field.

What does that mean – radar training? What do you have to do there?

Well, basically I was in aircraft control and warning. At that time there were a lot of radar sites because the threat to our country was from manned bombers. Basically our duty was obviously to detect the bombers coming and be able to control interceptors to shoot down the bombers. This was before the missiles really came into play.

Was this a radar grid – everything set into a certain area?

Right. Well, your radar station had an area of control. You could usually operate two to three hundred miles effectively. But at that time they had a lot of interacting radar sites so the controls would overlap. There were a lot of these little radar sites, particularly up in Alaska and Canada.

That was the DEW Line?

That was the Distant Early Warning Line – the DEW Line. Basically, that's where I would have ended up once I had been fully trained – in one of those radar sites. But it was basically an operational thing. We were involved in controlling aircraft, refueling aspects and whatever we could do and watch for planes that might be coming.

That was the time when the Soviet Union was the biggest threat to our country, and they felt the manned bombers would come over the north. So that was what it was all about.

It was kind of interesting because at that time they were branching out. The radar operational field was going into more computerized aspects versus what they called the manual system, which I was in, which was hands-on – watching the radar scope. They were right in the middle of it, so they needed people in both areas. Had I stayed in the service I would have been transferred into a SAGE system: Semi-Automatic Ground Environment System where it was more computerized.

Computer was back-up at that point?

Yes. Basically the manual system was just in the process of being phased out. But then Vietnam came along and they needed that type of ...

Vietnam had started when you went in?

Vietnam was just getting going. We heard about it, we knew about it. It was clicking along.

I had an account where there was a major in special operations of some kind, I never did find out what. He came to the office one day and said he was going to close the account. I was kind of stunned and asked if it was anything I did. "No, no," he said, "I have to leave and will be out of communication." I asked where he was going and he said "I'm going to the southeast [Asia]." I asked what was going on there and he said I'd hear about it one of these days pretty soon. So they had apparently a pretty good idea what was coming.

When I was in Oklahoma City a lot of the guys were talking about going to Southeast Asia and actually volunteering for it. At that time a lot of the guys would put in for helicopter training for pilots because they could be a warrant officer and fly. Some of the guys did that.

You were at Lackland?

I was at Lackland.

I was at Fort Sam and the helipad was right there next to my bunk, practically.

It was interesting, because in Oklahoma City I got a transfer to Antigo Air Force Station in Wisconsin.

Where is that?

Antigo is north of Green Bay, about 80 miles. And that was the new radar system – Semi-Automatic Ground Environment System. Basically what it did, it just had radar signal. It would receive radar signal from sites further north, and then we would send that signal and operational data back to Madison. The theory there was that if the bombers came through Canada, if they didn't make it into the continental United States we still had control capability to try to intercept their bombers. But, like I say, that was in the new system. And the only reason I got to go there, I obviously tried to get there because it was so close to home. But they needed just a few manual operators there as a back-up. So, basically, I didn't do a whole lot there.

This was in 1961?

I went to Antigo in 1963 – Fall of 1963. I was there. It was a small radar base. There were sixty of us there. It was a radar station, which, as I say, they had a lot of these across the country. But I didn't do a whole lot there. We were just the back-up system. I wasn't very happy with that, but I was in the environment that I liked.

Then the Vietnam War started getting more and more heated, and the air war was starting to take off in Southeast Asia, and we started bombing North Vietnam. The need for the radar control system over there came in dramatically. At that point they sent me up to a radar station up in Calumet, Michigan, up in the Keweenaw Peninsula, where I was a manual operator because there they brought in a bunch of guys who were in the SAGE system, but they had to bring them back to manually operate in the environment in southeast Asia. So I was sent up there to train guys. It was quite a deal. We had quite a few operators come in from all parts of the country, and it was a nice assignment. I liked it. It was beautiful, in the summer.

While I was there I met a guy named Captain Wade, and he'd just come back from southeast Asia. He was in the manual system and I got talking to him. He said, "You know, we could use you in Southeast Asia." I didn't think. I said, "I'm probably going to be discharged in a few months." I was just about due to get out.

You'd enlisted for four years?

I had enlisted for four years, yes.

So, anyway, I went back to Antigo Air Force Station after my two months of helping these guys out to train. I wasn't back in Antigo more than a week and my roommate came in and said, "They want you in the orderly room right away." I said, "I just got off of work." I worked Midnight to 8:00 and then went to bed. He said, "No.

They want to see you right away.” So I went and asked what was going on. They said, “Jim, you’ve got to be in Saigon in ten days.” I said, “Saigon!” This was in July, 1965. He said I had orders for Saigon and more orders were pending, but they had to get me ready to go.

At that time I was due for discharge in January, and this was in July. I said I was due to be discharged in January and wanted to know if it was a temporary TDY, or PCS – which means permanent change. He said, “This is a PCS.” I said, “Well, that’s a year tour of duty and I don’t have that.” He said, “Well, you do now!” He said I could either volunteer to extend or they’d just extend me. So I said I’d go. I thought here’s another adventure.

So at that time I left this little radar station and they took me down to Madison where I got all my shots and everything at the air base down there. I still didn’t have complete orders, so I said I was going home to Washington Island – you know where to find me; when my orders come in let me know. At that time, it was 1965, and President Johnson sent something like 150,000 guys over in one shot. The air war was just gearing up.

Initially I got my orders to go a radar site in South Vietnam up near Da Nang, to a place called Dong Ha. It was right on the DMZ. It was a real hot area. Anyway, that was where I was headed when I left the States. I flew out of Travis Air Force Base to Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

Where is Travis?

It’s in California – San Francisco.

So we flew the northern route. We flew up through Alaska, into Anchorage and refueled. Then we flew to Japan and spent the night at Misawa Air Force Base and refueled there. We went on to Clark Air Base in the Philippines where we received jungle survival and weapons training.

At that point, Clark Air Base was the hub of everybody coming and going to Southeast Asia. It was a big base, especially for Air Force. It was like ‘old home week.’ Everybody was coming and going because that was the place for Southeast Asia. So I ran into my old roommate from Oklahoma, people from Antigo – I saw quite a few guys I knew. I spent approximately two weeks at Clark receiving small arms training, indoctrination, what would happen if you were captured – what to do or try to do – that type of thing.

At that point they changed my orders from South Vietnam to Thailand because they had just opened up a radar control base on the Thailand-Laotian border in northeast Thailand. It was Nakhon Phanom. We were going to be the first permanent party in. It was all temporary people. It had just been built. There wasn’t much there, but it was very close to North Vietnam, and it’s just what they wanted. We were on the Laotian border and 40 miles from North Vietnam itself.

Is that on the Mekong?

It’s right on the Mekong River.

So there was a lot of talk about that, because the security up there was real lax because the government of Thailand did not want a big military presence in the country. At that time they were with us, but tomorrow they could be with them. So they were apprehensive about too much activity. But I didn't realize until I got there the amount of aircraft that were in Thailand, using that as a base of operations.

Anyway, once we got going I ended up in Bangkok and I spent a week there because we couldn't get up north to our site due to bad weather. So we were staying in downtown Bangkok dressed in civilian clothes – we couldn't wear our uniforms and we weren't allowed to leave the hotel during the day. They kept us pretty well under wraps until the weather cleared. Then we flew up out of Don Mueang Airport, we flew up to the site – NKP. We called it NKP for short. They had another nickname. It was called 'naked phanny' because everybody felt their rear-end was hanging out to dry up there at the border.

We got up there in a 123, which is a small cargo plane – the predecessor to the 130. We landed at Nakhon Phanom after dark. There were no runway lights. There were no lights at all. They flashed one runway light on so the pilot could come in, because the base was under harassment. It was a complete blackout. We landed on a PSP strip – they didn't have concrete; it was just metal pierced steel plating that they laid out on the jungle floor. We taxied down that and they dropped the rear cargo door ramp and said, "Everybody get out because we're getting out of here!" He never quit moving! He just kind of came to the tarmac and we all grabbed out gear. There were probably 30 or 40 of us at that time.

So you hit the ground running and he kept going.

We grabbed our gear, and in fact I forgot one of my bags and had to run back into the plane as it was moving, grab it and jump off again. So there we stood in this jungle. We couldn't see anything. I'll never forget that. And all you could hear were monkeys and elephants and tigers. It sounded like you were in a zoo.

Pretty soon a flashlight came. This sergeant came down and picked us up, and walked us back into the hooch area. We lived in hooches then. They had been living in tents, but the Navy Seabees had just put hooches up.

What is a hooch?

Basically it's just a wooden structure with screen tacked on it. They had aluminum panels that would drop in case the rain would come in. So they were just screened wooden structures with a wooden floor. That's what we lived in. It was a step up from a tent.

Was malaria common?

Yes. We all took malaria pills. We had all kinds of inoculations.

Anyway, they showed us a place to sleep that night. And in the morning we woke up to see where we were. At that point our main group of radar people were there. They had several plane loads of people but they finally had all the radar people in place to

make the transition from temporary people from Clark Air Base who were running the control site. So we got them into that. Basically we just chose – it was quite a deal because I'd never been involved in that big an operation. Most of the radar crews I had been on were 5, 6, 7 or 8 guys, maybe. We had 20 – 25 guys. We had a captain, four lieutenants, a master sergeant, crew chief, a lot of NCO's and a lot of airmen. So it was all seasoned people.

Were these all Air Force people?

All Air Force people, right. So basically we made up out of that group of men three crews: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie. Because the radar site went 24 hours a day. There was one crew on duty at all times, one off and one working another shift. We kind of got our feet wet up there.

Was there activity while you were there?

Against us? A little bit. Every once in a while. At the time we didn't have any security except Thai military to protect us. We had our own air policemen, but this was when I first got there. And that's why everybody was so scared, because the only people who had arms were the policemen. They only had bolt-action rifles, and most of the time they were asleep!

So it was kind of dicey. And what tripped the trigger – we had only been there two or three weeks. We got a 'twix' that night. It was about 2:00 in the morning, and we were running radar operations. We got a twix that we were going to be attacked. When the people from Clark had left there was a big arms locker up on the control room. It was probably 20 feet long. They told us it was full of M16's. At the time we had 45 caliber grease-guns and hand guns at each radar scope. And that was the extent of our armament.

Anyway, Captain Weathers told our crew chief to unlock the arms locker and give every man an M16 and put everybody outside they had to, to protect the control – the perimeter – which there was none because it was just woods. We didn't have any fence.

So we opened up the locker and it was empty! I'll never forget that. Anyway, our squadron major was notified and he came up. We were on a little elevated site above the base because they always try to get elevation on the radar. So the next morning we had a C130 land at NKP from Clark, and it was just loaded down with M16's, M60's, everything. And it was all marked 'eggs,' 'food.' The Thai's didn't want us to have it there, but we needed it for security. And at that point we started basically protecting ourselves, because we had to.

Did you have any incursion on that night?

On that night nothing happened. Several nights – we always had warning. We'd always have to go outside. And by that time we had sandbag bunkers around the control room. We would, if we had to, a bunch would stay in to run the mission, but the rest would go out and guard the perimeter.

Did you guys have to build the sandbag bunkers?

No. The construction people did that. I never did like those bunkers. I was always afraid of snakes in them.

You probably were right!

There were a lot of snakes there.

What would happen? Let's say you did have a warning that there was something coming in. You notified someone immediately?

Essentially they notified us. I forget exactly how it would go. We had intelligence out there, and by that time we had a bigger contingent of Air Force security people. They were basically in charge of our security at that point rather than the Thai's. And they would come around and basically would be in charge.

This one night we had to get out in the bunkers. A guy came in and said if we saw anything it would be trouble, so just shoot. But at that time it was just jungle. This was in the early stages of the base. They were still trying to spread the perimeter back and make it more safe.

Basically we didn't have that much of a problem.

You were there for how long?

A year.

So they extended you one year.

Yes.

But basically what we did, our mission there – the air war in North Vietnam was really going at that time. We had decided to start bombing North Vietnam. And North Vietnam – I don't know if you're aware of the geography of North Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia.

They all come together.

Yes, they all come together. And basically they had the Ho Chi Minh Trail. People think it was like a highway. But the Ho Chi Minh Trail was all of Laos. They looped down through Laos. They couldn't get into South Vietnam just coming across the border because we were there. So they brought all their men, supplies, war goods, through Laos to get into South Vietnam. That's what North Vietnam was trying to do to get into South Vietnam. So basically our mission there was the bombing of Laos. And it was huge. A lot of people didn't know that. And we bombed North Vietnam, too.

We had four fighter-bomber bases in Thailand. They were to the south where they were more secure from attack. We had Korat and Takhli. They had 105's there.

And at Ubon, which was south of us. They had F4's. And Udorn, which was a little west of us and they had F4's there.

At our particular base, we were the smallest base there because basically we were a radar control, rescue base. We ran rescue missions to pick up pilots who were shot down.

Did that happen fairly often?

Yes. It happened a lot.

So you went over to Laos to pick them up?

Laos or North Vietnam itself. Basically the deal there, at our base we had the 'Jolly Green Giant' helicopters and the Sandy's, which were the A1E's – the old World War II A1E's. They would fly with the Sandy's, the helicopters, for pick-up missions. That's where we became quite involved in controlling that.

Did you ever go out on some of these missions?

I'd go out on training missions with them, but on actual rescue missions, no. They didn't want you because you weren't trained. But I'd go with them when they were training. They were always practicing pick-ups and stuff. But on actual missions, no. If you weren't one of them you didn't go.

Basically what would happen was they would have a strike. A normal strike would be planned. It would start about 2:00 – 3:00 in the morning. In the operations rooms, we had a big control room. We had big Plexiglas boards where we could write down information so the people, the commanders, could see what was going on – big 40' X 40' plotting board that showed a whole overlay of Southeast Asia. And we had weapons boards on each side of them. The control room was completely dark, but the boards were lit up so you could see what was going on.

But just to make it fairly simple, what would happen is all these planes – F105's and F4's that were going up north; we called up north, which would be North Vietnam, or northern Laos or Laos itself. They had many, many missions. But for a big mission up north, the F105's would have to refuel before they took off to go to Hanoi. So we would refuel them right on the border – what we called the fence; the Mekong River we called the fence. They would be KC135's. But we could not let them go up into Laos because there were so many SAM sites – Surface to Air Missile sites. And these big tankers couldn't evade the missiles, whereas the fighter planes could evade.

So the refueling process would take place in northeast Thailand. What would happen, for instance, we'd have maybe a dozen tankers. And they'd be code-named 'red,' 'orange,' 'blue,' 'yellow.' And they would be stacked at different altitudes, running a horseshoe pattern. They'd just fly an oval pattern at different altitudes. And we'd have the 105's come up from Takhli and Korat. And they'd have code names – 'knife flight,' 'blade flight,' 'eagle,' 'bear,' whatever. And on the big boards these, say "Bear flight go to blue anchor." So the controllers would know and they'd have the frequency they'd be using on the boards.

I worked right with a first lieutenant on the control scope. So I would feed him the information. Bear flight would come up and he'd say, "Invert bear flight checking in for gas to go north. What tanker?" We'd look up the code and say, "Bear flight blue anchor." We had blue anchor on our control scope and we'd give him vectors to that particular tanker. It was very, very coordinated and slick.

Who worked that out? Did it come down from Washington?

That came from Air Force planning right in Thailand and Saigon. But it was kind of a dance. And each flight, like bear flight or dog flight, they'd have four aircraft in it and all would come up to the tanker to refuel and then go. And they all kind of regrouped after they refueled and go north to their missions.

Then we would stay in contact with them on the radio. Because we had radio to radio contact with them all the way up to Hanoi. At that time they would be on their own, but we would just be there.

So you could see all these on your screen, and you would know what a yellow guy was or a blue guy.

Right. They would flash codes for us if we were confused. They had IFF – Identification Friend or Foe. If we were confused as to a certain aircraft we would just say "Squad Mode 4" and he'd hit it and we'd see it on our radar screen so we knew we had the right guy. So we'd keep them straight that way.

That was really very sophisticated.

It really was. It was very tense a lot of times.

It was very interesting because you'd hear the pilots talking and then they'd go up and make their strikes. But then, to make their bases to get back to Thailand they had to refuel again on the way back. That's where it got really dicey. Because a lot of times they'd linger over the target and burn up too much fuel. Or if one of their buddies got shot down they'd fly by around them to wait and help until we could get a rescue helicopter to them if we could. So then they'd be running out of fuel. So they'd come back over northern Laos just squawking "Emergency" at you. On "Emergency" they'd just squawk. It was four bars on the radar screen. So then we'd have a vector to them. We could watch them and talk to them.

And get them fueled up.

And try to get them fueled up. A lot of times they couldn't make the fence, which was the Mekong River. And the 'powers that be' did not want to send these KC135's up into Laos to meet these guys because they were dead ducks. They had to just fly straight and high. They were big and couldn't dodge, whereas the F105's and F4's, if we had a SAM alert they'd just hit the deck – dive down, evade, jink or whatever. SAM missiles are about the size of a telephone pole. But for a KC135, they'd nail them.

So we'd be faced with talking to a guy and he'd say, "I'm going to invert. I'm going to flame out if I don't get a tanker here." And we'd have a tanker, but we'd have to get permission to give him the go-ahead to go. And it would get very frustrating because it would all have to go back to Seventh headquarters in Saigon – to some four-star sitting there – to say to let the tanker go. By that time it was too late.

So more than once it would happen that the pilot of the KC135 would say, "Invert, give me a vector to bear flight needs fuel. I'm going to go. Pilot's discretion." That means he's taking full responsibility and he'd just take off.

Did some of those guys get knocked down?

We lost a couple, but basically most of the time it worked.

So it was guts.

So we'd give them a vector and hook them up. More than once, within a minute or two, they'd get a million dollar aircraft home. But the pity part is that when the pilot landed that 135 he was done flying. They'd relieve him because he'd disobeyed an order.

Here he's trying to do something for his buddy.

Right. And everything we did was on tape recorder, so everything was taped. Everything we said to the airplanes was taped so if there was a mistake they could go back and find it or whatever.

Was that mainly to send a signal to the other guys to not disobey orders?

Basically, yes. They were saying don't take this chance, and the guy just said, "I'm going." And it happened more than once.

Was it successful when they did those things?

Most of the time it was, yes.

You'd think there would be a risk reward.

You'd think so, but the military doesn't work that way. That didn't happen all the time, as far as relieving. It happened once or twice that I knew of, that I heard about.

So basically we'd control that aspect of it. And then if, and this happened a lot, we had a plane go down. Most of the times it was the 105. They'd get shot out of the sky real easy because there were so many SAM missile sites in northern Laos and North Vietnam that we'd have SAM warnings go off steady. And we'd have to tell them they had a SAM site coming up and they'd hit the deck and try to evade the SAM.

They'd come down over the jungle and fly treetop?

Yes. But that would make them susceptible to small arms fire. A lot of times that's how planes got shot down.

Small arms fire?

Right. The 105's, you could bring them down with a rifle if you got lucky because they were all engine. So then if one went down the rescue thing would start.

Was the 105 a jet?

Yes. It was a single-engine fighter jet. They called them 'The Thuds.' They were just a big, heavy workhorse.

So, if I can describe a rescue mission. Basically the guy would know that he was going down. He would call us – we were the closest base and were controlling everybody over North Vietnam. He'd say, "Invert on scratch," and he'd flash emergency so we'd get a fix on him. At that time we'd scramble helicopters, depending on where they were. A lot of times if they were too far into North Vietnam, we'd have intelligence. And on this big board it would show areas where they didn't want a helicopter to go in because the chances of getting out were nil. So if a guy went in there he was down. Most of the time, I will say, they made every effort they could to get in to the guys.

Sometimes these rescue missions went on for two or three days. The guy would evade, evade, evade. Basically, the way it would work, we had these A1E's, which was a World War II propeller-driven aircraft. They were code-named 'Sandy,' their call sign. But they carried all kinds of armament – machine gun, napalm – and they were slow-flying. And we'd send out two Jolly Green helicopters. We'd have a high Jolly and a low Jolly. And we'd have four Sandy's. And we'd divert them to the scene. At that time the pilot that was down, they had hand-held radios. We would tell the pilot what frequency to come up on to get Sandy lead, Sandy 1, 2, 3, 4. Sandy 1, whoever was the on-scene commander at the time. He would make the decision. They would try to locate the guy first of all by various methods – smoke flares, visual or a description like "I'm on a rock ledge with a tree right behind," that type of thing. And then the commander would fly in that area to try to get a visual he was happy he could get into. Then, at that point, if there were bad guys around – most of the time there were bad guys around. Laos and Vietnam were full of them. So at that time they would usually open up on the Sandy's. Later on in the war they got trickier. They would wait until the helicopter would come in to make the pick-up, then pop up.

Usually what would happen is the Sandy would make contact and he would call in the low Jolly. We always had two helicopters at different altitudes. We always had one as a back-up in case the low bird went in so they could try to get everybody out with the other one. He would come in and they'd make the pick-up. On the Jolly Green Giant's helicopter they would have two pilots and two PJ's – para-jumpers. These guys were actually Air Force commandos. They were trained in medical, small arms fire – they were like a Navy Seal. If they had to jungle-penetrate – go down into the jungle on a cable ...

Hanging from the helicopter?

Yes. And if the guy on the ground was hurt or unable to get to the penetrator, a para-rescue man would ride the penetrator down armed. A lot of times they'd be under fire and they'd get the guy on the penetrator and fly up.

What is a penetrator? Is that a basket?

It was a jungle penetrator because there was so much jungle growth. It was kind of like an anchor with flukes that would go out. When it hit the tree line the flukes would go out and punch a hole in the canopy. Then you'd just climb in the penetrator itself and they'd lift you up and fly off to get them the hell out of there.

Drawing the guy back up, is there an automatic reel?

There'd be another guy – the other PJ – would be running the winch manually with a button. The guy would give the thumbs-up. Or they were on radio contact and the guy would say "Lift me up and let's get out of here." And a lot of times, as soon as they were airborne the helicopter would just start jinking and flying, and this guy would be hanging on the end. Because they had to get out of there because they were receiving small arms fire until they'd get to a higher altitude. Then they'd winch the guy in. So a lot of those pilots had exciting rides!

Better than a theme park!

Basically that's what we did. We just kind of helped with the general control. We also worked a lot of Navy pilots at night. They'd bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail constantly.

Was that a general swath of land? It wasn't just a highway.

No. It could be all the way from a woods road to a trail to a major road. But they'd just hide there at night. And we had a lot of people at night trying to find out where these people were coming through. We had sensors. They'd move mostly at night, so truck lights would light up and they would ...

Follow them.

And at night we'd have a lot of planes from aircraft carriers fly in. They'd just pick an area and we'd help them with elevations and everything – to make sure they weren't flying into a mountain or anything – and they'd look for targets.

But Laos itself, and then there was just a lot of clandestine stuff going on. We had Air America, which was CIA Airlines. We had the Hmong's working with us in Laos. Because Laos itself was divided. There was the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao.

A lot of the Hmong came up to Minneapolis. There's a whole bunch up there.

Right. We worked with the Hmongs. In fact, we lived right next door to some in a hooch. I have many stories about that.

One time we had a MIG 21 come right down the runway; a big red star. He came right on the deck. They didn't want to bomb us because of the political situation, but he was out of Hanoi. But I'm sure he did that as a pilot thing, too. He just wanted to let us know they knew we were there. But he came right down on the deck. A big MIG21 with a bright red star. Everybody was running! And he just took off and turned north again.

That was pretty brave on his part. He could have been blown up.

Yeah. They had one area in North Vietnam that came into Laos called the Mua Gia Pass. That's where most of the supplies came through, so that was always being bombed. We had a rescue mission there one day. I was quite familiar with the guys that got shot down. It was Captain Curtis, Lieutenant Martin and Art Black and Bill Robinson. They were the two PJ's. But they got shot down in the Mua Gia Pass. Captain Curtis, Robinson and Black all got captured by the North Vietnamese and they took them up to Hanoi. They spent seven-and-a-half years in a POW camp. Lieutenant Martin evaded.

Were they with McCain?

Yes. There were several camps, and they all got transferred back and forth. But Lieutenant Martin evaded into Laos. And Laos was a bad place to get captured. You were better off being captured by the North Vietnamese because at least you were in a prison system. In Laos you were in a cave or whatever.

Anyway, to make a long story short, he got picked up in Laos by the Pathet Lao. It wasn't a prison situation there. It was a bamboo cage. He was with a Navy pilot by the name of Dinger. The two of them overcame their guards one night; got their weapons and killed all the guards and took off into the jungle. By this time these guys were usually sick or hurt.

Emaciated.

Yes. So they were on the move. They were going through a village looking for food and a guy came out with a machete and killed Lieutenant Martin. The reason everybody knew this was the Navy pilot, this Dinger, who was with him got rescued. He got up on a little hillside and they just happened to see him. He was waving. He was the only prisoner to escape by himself out of Laos. And he told the story. In fact, they made a movie about it.

So Lieutenant Martin was killed. The other three came home. In February, 1973 they were all in the first plane load that came home.

That was pretty lucky. They were treated poorly, I suppose?

The prisoners in North Vietnam were treated awful. It was terrible. I don't know how they did it. They were beaten. They were in solitary confinement. A lot of them

lost their lives just from beatings. They were tortured beyond belief. They would tie their hands behind them and tie them to their ankles, then hoist them off the ground and let them hang like that. Finally they would all break. It was quite a deal. They didn't want to break but your body just can't take that. So they would give them as much false information as they had.

Admiral Stockdale – he was a Navy captain that was shot down – he was the ranking prisoner in the POW system. He won the Medal of Honor up there because he tried to kill himself so he didn't have to take it. Then they let up on him. But he gave the command to take as much torture as you can, but if at some point you can't don't let them maim or kill you. Then just give them information.

And they only way they could communicate was tapping through walls. They had a tap code. Because they weren't allowed to communicate at that time. There were just two men to a cell. They went through some bad, bad times.

And they had a Cuban up there who was torturing them, too. They all called him, 'The Cuban.' Fidel was his nickname. And they just beat these guys beyond belief. And they'd make you kneel for 24 hours on gravel. Just any little thing. And they'd just whack you. And a lot of times these guys would go into confinement. Stockdale, they put him in confinement for two years without a light bulb – dark – in a 6' X 8' cell. They'd have a little bucket to go. It was terrible. And a lot of people don't know that.

Yes. And then Jane Fonda.

Right. There were many, many heroes in the POW camps, and quite a few of them got medals for that.

I can imagine. It was a terrible war. Did you ever get some free time when you were up there on the DMZ?

We'd get down to Bangkok. They'd give you R&R – two or three days. And sometimes, a couple of times, we'd go down to Bangkok for training to review methods we were employing. Which was kind of a treat, to get down there. You'd get a good steak dinner. Because we were in the jungle.

Was there any town nearby? We were in Chiang Rai, which is right on the Mekong.

Chiang Mai, probably.

Well, Chiang Mai, and then we bussed up to Chang Rai, which was even further north, right on the Mekhong across from Laos. You could take a long boat across to Laos. And Burma was right across.

You were way up. Nakhon Phanom was down a little ways, and we were right across from the town of Tahket, in that area. And Tahket was always under attack, if you would. The whole time I was there you could hear artillery fire all day long – 365 days, constant. I think that kind of wore on me more than anything – that constant artillery fire in the distance. It wasn't a danger to us, but just the idea of it so close and steady.

But it was a good experience and I'm glad I got to go. I met a lot of good friends.

Do you keep in touch with any of them still?

I've got a good story about that!

This first lieutenant, he was a career officer and I was, at that time, a three-stripe airman first class – buck sergeant, they called it. I was his right-hand man. I'd sit by him and feed him information. Sometimes I'd be talking to airplanes, too – whatever you could do to help. He and I became, in those circumstances – rank, we all respected each other's rank and everything – but we became very close. A lot of times we were on a first name basis; all the time, actually, it was. It was just a different situation.

We left Nakhom Phanom and he stayed on in the Air Force as a career officer and I went home for discharge. But it was like 20 years later and my phone rang in the middle of the night, and it was this first lieutenant. He asked, "Is this Jim Anderson?" and I said it was. He said, "This is John Gill." Out of nowhere!

Where was he calling from?

He was calling from Washington D.C. At that time he had been in the Air Force and just finishing up 30 years. He was a full colonel and was on his last duty assignment and was at the Pentagon. He said, "I think about that year we were together and all the guys in our group. That was the highlight of my career, that year. I just had to get in contact with you." I asked him, "John, how did you find me?" He said, "Remember, we used to sit around the campfire," we had campfires at night and have a beer or something; "and you always talked about that island in Lake Michigan. I couldn't remember the name of it, but I knew that's where you would be. So I started calling islands in Lake Michigan until I got a Jim Anderson!"

To make a long story short, I went out to visit him. He was just retiring and he lives in Virginia – he still does – and we stay in constant contact now. But I went out to visit him and we stayed at the Air Force Base right downtown. We stayed in officers' quarters and spent three days together. We went to see all the war monuments. We had a good time.

You saw the Vietnam?

Yes. We did them all.

Did you ever see the Marine Corps silent drill when you were out there?

I didn't see that, but we did all the stuff. That was quite the deal.

That's terrific. So you have some really memorable experiences.

Yes, there were a lot of them. There were a lot of funny things.

Some of the pilots we brought in, shot up. I remember one Navy guy we brought in; took him right out of Laos. He was all covered in bandages because he was burned so

bad. We always had a party whenever we brought someone in – everybody who was involved from the pilots to the PJ's to the radar people; it was all a team. So we'd always meet at the Airmen's Club, which was just a shack. We'd have a beer. But this pilot was drinking beer out of a straw and was just as happy as could be. Because being captured in Laos was terrible. A lot of those guys didn't get home.

That was all the same kind of native up there in that area? The borders were ...

It was an assortment of people, and most of them didn't really care for us, quite frankly. It was an amazing system. What I really liked was the dedication I saw over there. And the feeling of doing something as a group of men. I'd never experienced something like that in Stateside duty. You became so close.

We had a lot of ... I don't want to go into it now, because when I left there I signed a paper that said I'd never say what I did or what went on in Laos. But we were involved over there a lot.

And before I left, the NCOIC was a Chief Master Sergeant Richardson. He was a colored man. I would have done anything for him. I would have done anything that man asked me. At that time we were getting ready. He was involved in the process. They were going to try to get a radar control unit like we had, but put it up in northern Laos. It was called Lima Site 85. And they got it going and were looking for people to run it. He came to me and said, "Andy, we've got this project going on. We need good people. Why don't you reenlist, go home for a year and come back." He came right down to the C130 just as I was going to get on to ask me one more time, because he had talked to me. I looked at him and wavered a minute. It was going to be a clandestine thing where they kind of marshal you out of the Air Force into a civilian thing because they didn't want it to be Air Force people up there, per se. I said, "Rich, I'm going home." He game me his card and said if I changed my mind to let him know.

To make a long story short, they did get that radar site up and running a year later, and it was overrun by North Vietnamese. They were operational, I think six or seven months, and the North Vietnamese weren't putting up with it. They didn't just control aircraft, they could ram it right down their nose.

So they had a commando team go up. They thought they were up high enough on the mountain, with only one side they could come up. And the Hmong were guarding them – the Air Force people. They were Lockheed employees at that time, but they were all Air Force. It was a regular radar control group like I did. But they had a commando team that scaled the outer wall with ropes and stuff – the North Vietnamese – and they came in and killed just about everybody. They had three or four get out. The CIA Air America got a couple of guys out.

After it was overrun, the next day the Air Force came in and bombed it to get rid of it.

So he was lost, your pal.

No, he didn't go. He was just involved in the operational part of it, getting it going. He wasn't up there at that time. But that's quite a story. It's called *One Day Too Long*, a book about it; how it all went down.

They knew it was close. The warnings were there. But this actually came from Washington because it was so important – this radar site – that they stay there; they kept them there. They were going to take them off the next day, but that night ...

But there were good stories. It was a lot of fun.

So there are books about those experiences.

There are a lot of books. Yes. I've got them all. That *One Day Too Long* is a good book.

I have a lot of the prisoner of war books. There were a lot of guys who wrote their experiences down in books, and I have all of them. So you kind of read each one and they kind of come together to give you a complete picture. Because they all describe certain guards, certain people, certain times.

And you knew some of the people in those books, I suppose.

Yes. Sure.

That's very interesting. Jim, thanks for sharing all that with us. You came out in 1966?

Yes, 1966.

And you came back to the Island.

I came back to the Island and started working for my father, who ran a freight service. And that evolved into my working in a sporting goods store in the winter because I needed work. And from there I started a little store of my own. That was forty years ago.

Jack Anderson ...

Was my uncle – my dad's brother. I worked for him.

You dad's name was what?

Cecil.

So you've run the Island Outpost for the last forty years. It's a very good store. Well, thanks, Jim. I appreciate it.