Ward Davis – Life during the Korean War

By Ward Davis

February 15, 2004

Box 1 Folder 6

Oral Interview conducted by Natalie Duffy

Transcript copied by David Garmon  September 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho
ND: What was you early childhood and life like?

WD: I was born September 8, 1931 in a small town in Oregon which is in the southeast part of Oregon and it was during the Depression, the 1930’s Depression, and everybody was kind of poor. My dad worked for JC Penney Company and things were kind of bad. In California was my mom’s family and we decided to go and help them out. We had a hundred-pound-bag of beans and some other items that could help a family live for a while. They put the hundred-pound-bag of beans on the fender of the car and me in the back window of the 1928 Chevrolet Coupe and we started the long trip from Oregon to California, and in those days the car couldn’t go faster than thirty or forty miles an hour. So we had to go over the Grapevine. In those days the Grapevine was really hard to go over, and it took several days for us to get to Cedar [Sierra] Madre, California where my grandparents and my aunts and uncles lived. They all lived in the same house because of the Depression. They all went to work and tried to provide for the family and get things done. While we were there, my sister was born, Anne, and I remember that, though I was only a year and a half old, I remember the house was a bustle. And after that we moved to a little town called Chico in northern California for a short time then we moved back to southern California to a town called Maywood where we spent a lot of our time. That is where I first attended Fishburn Avenue Elementary School. I remember going to school there and having friends.

ND: Where were you in life when the Korean War started?

WD: When I was in high school, the Korean War broke out and my friends were drafted, so I joined to see the Air Force. We were all concerned about the Korean War but we didn’t quite understand it, it was kind of like an adventure. But I didn’t want to be a ground captain in the Army and I thought I’d try to get a career that the Air Force could teach me so I joined the Air Force and became a sheet metal technician in Los Angeles, and they shipped us on a train all the way to San Antonio, Texas to Kelley Air Force Base which was a boot camp there.

ND: What can you remember of your early Army experiences?

WD: The boot camp was so crowded that they took our squadron and transferred us to the base called Sheppard Air Force Base in northern Texas and we finished our basic training there, and then a couple of us got shipped to Oakland, California to the sheet metal technician school there. So we were there for several months. Because it was so close to home I used to fly home on weekends on leave and see my friends and family, and after we finished school I was transferred to a permanent station in Florida called Eglin Air Force Base, it was about thirty miles from the Alabama border right close to Pensacola in a little town called Friendship. The Air Force Base was a big Air Force Base and had about six of these fields and the fields had all technical operations and ammunitions. In our base I was stationed in Field Three and ours was a drone Air Force Base, and we had all these old B17’s and World War II bombers and half of the B17’s were converted to drone aircraft which were operated by radio control and then the other half were mother aircraft they called them, where the pilots actually flew them and they had these other
remote control pilots to fly the drone airplanes. So it worked out that in those days where they was a Jeep that had all the radio equipment and the Jeep would start the drone aircraft up and taxi it out to the runway, get it in the beginning of the runway, and the mother ship had already taken off and it was coming in behind it and the Jeep and the airplane would be in contact with each other and the Jeep would take the drone aircraft off. And when they got off the ground the mother ship would take over control and they would fly the drone ship out over the Gulf of Mexico, which was a big target range out there, and they would shoot it down and use it for target practice.

ND: What did you think of your commanding officers?

WD: Base commanders were like gods and we really respected them in a military manner, and he [his commanding officer] was a good commander, but one time he was killed over the Gulf. One time they were developing new weapon systems to go in this jet called the F94, and they had a good cannon in the doors of the ship and they were operating the gun sight by radar control and the systems were perfecting it. So they had a big test with the Pentagon and members of Congress to come out and see how all the money they appropriated was working. And so our commander of our base was flying in the mother ship with some Generals from the Pentagon and Congressmen from Congress in the plane and they moved the drone aircraft over the Gulf of Mexico in the target range, and the jet that was supposed to shoot the drone down zeroed in on the wrong airplane and shot the mother aircraft down. So the Generals were killed and the Congressmen were killed and our base commander was killed. And for the next seven days we flew a criss-cross grid pattern over the area where they were shot down trying to find survivors, but we never did. For a while the flags flew at half mast. So after that I spent about a year there in Florida and then I got orders to report to San Francisco and then I would be shipped over to Japan.

ND: Why were you shipped to Japan?

WD: The Korean War was still going on and so they were rotating some other people over there and going to take over to replace them in Japan. So this is during Christmas holidays in 1952-1953 and I spent thirty days leave at home during the Christmas holidays and then January I had to report to San Francisco to board a ship and sail across to Japan because in those days you had to be in the system to launch and we sailed.

ND: How was your journey to Japan? And what are some of your memories of Japan?

WD: We had a very interesting time, a lot of people got seasick but I didn’t which I was happy about. And most of the time it was very boring, and most of the time we played cards and played P-knuckle and read books and sat around and talked because it was very, very boring; and we had duties sometimes and we had to stand watch and things like that but it was barely enough to go around and everybody had a chance because most of the time we were just bored sitting around. And we finally got into Yokahama, Japan which was a big port there, right here in Tokyo and that’s where we docked and they got us off a ship and put us right on a train, and the train went about nineteen to forty, fifty
miles to a little town called Tachakawa, Tackakawa Air Force Base, and I was stationed there. This is during the winter and I never realized how cold it was in Japan, how much snow they had but they really had a lot of snow there, like two or three feet of snow on the ground at the Air Force Base and the Japanese made two to three foot ice sculptures. So I spent a few months there and then they came out with orders and I got transferred down to the southern island Keooshoo, and to a little town called Hashia [Ashiya] which was where the Ashiya Air Force Base that was used in WWII as a Japanese fighter maze which the Americans had taken over now and used it as a maintenance squadron where we fixed aircraft that were used for flying our soldiers, especially the Air Force over Korea and dropping them for the war over there. And it was the 43rd Squadron and they worked on all the airplanes and made sure that they were in shape so they could fly over. I can remember all of the trucks; and truck after truck of endless amount of road line of trucks that coming through the base there the 2nd Airborne. And we worked on about thirty or forty airplanes and held like about probably a hundred people each; and they were all loaded with their full backpacks and weapons and everything ready to go to war. And we loaded them all on the airplanes and the pilots took off in Japan, and flew them over there; they all jumped out of the airplane to participate in a big event.

ND: Where were you when you heard that the war had ended?

WD: Then after I was there about six months the war ended, but before that I remember working on the airplanes. There were two airplanes that used to fly back and forth to Korea and bring dead soldiers back. We had the Army Base that was like the mortuary and they would take them there and send them back home to their families. It was a really sad thing, we knew these airplanes, we could tell them by their number, so we were sad when we saw them coming back with our dead soldiers. And once in a while we had worked on them and they had a really very bad dead odor about them, like I said, I remember that. So I was there about six months like I said and the Korean War ended and everybody was pretty happy about that. And so our airplanes were used a lot to bring a lot of the boys back home, bringing them where they could get back to the United States or go to the hospital or whatever they needed to do. So we did that and that was a group thing you know we really enjoyed getting to know those guys who were there fighting, back and getting them sent on their way home.

ND: What did you do when the war was over? Where did you go?

WD: And then one day while all of that was going on, the war in Korea was quite a doubt over, I got my orders to pack all my clothes and tool box and go to the fly tent and pick up some special equipment, and so I did that and I went to the fly tent the special equipment I picked up happened to be a rifle and some ammunition, so that was kind of a shock and I didn’t know what was going on and it was all secret orders, nobody could tell you, nobody would tell you what was going on. So there were about sixty of us that were all ordered up to the flight line, and boarded these aircrafts. When we got in the air the pilots came on and said, “Well, I’m gonna open the orders now and tell you where we’re going.” And so he opened the orders and said we were instructed to go to Okinawa. And then he said he had another set of orders that after we left Okinawa we were going to
leave to somewhere. And so we went to Okinawa and refueled. Okinawa if you remember was a very heavily fortified island during WWII, it really had a lot of casualties on it, kind of a hot spot for an island. But anyway, we went there and refueled the airplanes and when we got in the air again he [the pilot] opened the orders. And the orders were to fly to Clark Air Force Base which was in the Philippines, right close to Manila the capital. So we flew to there and we got off and it was very, very hot and sweltering and jungly and didn’t like that very much. But we were there for I don’t know two or three months and they removed all the insignia off of our airplanes, the American insignia, and they put the French insignia which is like a bull’s eye with the color of their flag on it, white and black bull’s eye on there. And we were told, “Okay, everybody report to the flight landing, we got to go to our next place now.” And nobody knew where that was but we had a good idea because the French airplanes they now looked like and so we had a pretty good idea we were going to French Indochina which turned out to be Vietnam. But the French had colonized that area so it kind of belonged to them but the Vietnamese didn’t like it so they were fighting so we flew over there and we landed in the city called Haphong which was in the north part of the country. And so after we were there a few weeks they divided the country in half like they did Korea, like North Korea and South Korea, and they had North Vietnam and South Vietnam and we were in the northern part so we had to pack up all our stuff again and go on the airplanes to the south and we went to the base there. I don’t know which city is the closest to the name of the base, the French base called Pour [A]n and that’s all I know. I don’t know which city it was because they changed all the names when the Vietnamese took over the country, they changed all the French names into Vietnamese names so I can’t remember what any of those towns are. But I was there in Vietnam for several months doing maintenance on the airplanes and there wasn’t much to do because the French, they were flying the airplanes, never got a shot at because they were para-dropping supplies into this little port called Yam Yam Foo, and that was because they were trapped in there surrounded by the communists, the Vietcong, would get all the supplies and they liked that so they wouldn’t shoot at airplanes, they didn’t want to discourage them because they got a lot of good stuff too. And so one day, one of the pilots from France decided, “Hey they’re not shooting at us you know that’s pretty good, you know we could put some bombs in the airplanes and then just leave the clamp shell doors off the back and then when we go over their gun installation we could push these bombs out on top of them and they wouldn’t know what hit them.” So they started doing that, and they used Napalm and some other kinds of things and gasoline and all kinds of things and then they started shooting at the airplanes, because that was happening because they were great big airplanes they were called flying box cars, they were C190’s. Flying box cars were huge and they were targets so they started shooting at them and they’d come back full of holes and there were a lot of wounded on board and so we had to repair them and clean them up and everything like that, and a couple of times they came back so badly shot up that we had to do temporary repairs and have them flown back to Clark Air Force Base to do more extensive repairs because we were just a forward kind of repair field, we did minor things.

ND: Were you discharged soon after the war ended? How long were you in Vietnam?
WD: So we spent several months there and then I got orders you know that, when we were there a couple of our boys got captured, they were parachute reapers and they rigged the parachutes and para-dropped over into the fort because they were pretty cocky guys, they thought they could do anything. A couple of them took off one day in an Army vehicle called the weapons carrier which was bigger than a Jeep and they were going to go to the beach because they were hot. And the rule was that whenever you did that you had to take somebody along to guard the vehicle but these guys didn’t, they left their guns and everything in the weapons carrier and they went out swimming. And when they came back they were surrounded by communists and they captured them and took them away and we never heard from them again. We heard some rumors that they ended up in China and the United States and Vietnam were in some negotiations about swapping prisoners and I think they finally got back to the United States, but they were in big trouble. They were caught over there and Americans weren’t even supposed to be there and so they got in a lot of trouble, they were probably court-martialed. So then one time I was there and we had to do maintenance in the place up where we were and the French had a little prisoner of war camp on the base there and my Sergeant put me in charge of the detail for the day and I had three or four other guys with me and we had to go pick up a half a dozen of these prisoners and take to go around all the base collecting all the garbage cans, putting them on the truck and then take them out to the dump, which was in the north. And we had a French interpreter his name was Danny and he told us, “Once you get across the air field over there you’re in communist territory,” he said, “so if they break and run for it you need to shoot them.” And I really was kind of afraid of that, I didn’t was to shoot anybody, that’s not what I joined the Air Force for, so I said, “Oh, okay,” and I tried to figure out a way to make them scared so they wouldn’t try it. So I took some extra ammunition along and then all of us that were guarding them and everything did some target practice while we were out there in the dump and that really scared them. They sat down in the back of the truck all huddled together and they didn’t try to run or escape. We took them back and put them back behind the barbed wire. So after that, there was a few months and they rotated me back to the United States. So I went back to Japan. Clark Air Force Base is no longer in existence, that’s where they had the great big volcano eruption a few years ago and the volcano absolutely buried the whole Air Force Base there, so that Air Force Base is no longer there. But there was this great big Air Force Base there at one time. Anyway we came back to Japan and all my friends that had been there before had left and were all gone, they had all been rotated back to the United States. So I had to make some friends; I wasn’t there very long and I had to prepare to go back to the United States too. Oh, the other thing that happened while I was in Vietnam on the Air Force Base, we had to make some special parts for an airplane one time that had a broken sheet metal and we didn’t have any tools to do it with, we had to make the part. So we asked the French if we could use their equipment and their sheet metal shop to build it and they said “Yeah, go on over there.” So we went over there and they were just getting ready to break for lunch. And the French are a very loose people and all these guys that were working in the shop there, they made us stop work. They had made a bunch of musical instruments with all kinds of sheet metal and they started playing; they were singing and dancing and they brought out the bottles of wine and they had a leg of lamb cooking on the grill and they had a huge lunch. And that lasted about an hour and then they all laid down and took a nap for two hours. So from
about two to three, we couldn’t do anything, they wouldn’t let us work or nothing we had to join them and they just had their lunch and happy little siesta and that’s what they did every single day. So anyway, back in Japan I got ready to come back to the United States and I came back. Instead of coming through San Francisco we came back through Seattle, and I had an aunt and uncle who lived there. My uncle died but my aunt was still alive so she had met me at the dock and gave me a nice dinner, and that night I had to catch a plane to Los Angeles. And I went back home, I got to be with my family again for a thirty-day leave; I had a thirty-day leave, after three years I had thirty days off so I spent that with family getting reacquainted with everybody and then I had to report to San Antonio, Texas again, right to the old place where I did my initial basic training, Kelly Air Force Base. And I was only there just a few weeks and they came out with more orders and transferred me all the way back to California to Norton Air Force Base, to the mountains of San Bernardino there in California. And I spent like the rest of my time there, it was like about six or eight months and that’s when I met my wife and after that I got discharged July 1955 and then I got to leave in September.

ND: Are there any feelings you have about your experiences in the war?

WD: All this time that I was in Vietnam nobody in the world knew we were over there, but it was in 1954 and I still have letters that I wrote my mom and dad when I was over there, that are addressed from there and I was telling them all about the stuff that was going on. And then I even tried to get on my discharge papers the fact that I needed a campaign medal or ribbon they called it, campaign ribbon, for Vietnam. But they wouldn’t give me one so I wrote them a letter because they wouldn’t honor it because they said that nobody was there at that time. And so I tried to argue with them but it didn’t do any good, but I was there in 1954, probably one of the first Americans along with the other sixty guys that I was with in Vietnam. But the Korean War was a very interesting war because I saw most of it being a civilian. And in Air Force, it was going on but I was only for six months in Japan helping support so that’s about it.

ND: What are your feelings about the various peoples that you came in contact with during your military experience?

WD: The Japanese people were great people, they knew that you were a serviceman and they like it because you had money and you would spend money; and that’s about all the relationship that I had with the Japanese people except for one story. I was out doing photography and me and my friends were out in the Japanese countryside one day and we met a lady who spoke some English, and asked it we would come and paint her house. So we went, she grabbed us by the arms and started pulling us and we went to see that her dad was a farmer of rice patties and next to the little Japanese house there was an American style house. It turned out that she had been married to an American Air Force guy and he had gone back to the states and didn’t want to take her and, so I don’t know what the whole deal was there but he built this house while he was there. So we helped her paint her house and get it all fixed up and she said that she’d like us to kind of rent it from her. So we did, and went to get some furniture and we bought a bed and some things and put it in the house and we used to go there on weekends and get away from the
service life and she used to cook for us and we had nice meals and refreshment and we would farm with her and they were really nice people. But, that was during the time of the Korean War that was going on. The Korean people I don’t have any interaction with but I remember that being in the service you didn’t like them because they were all communists and being in the military, it was fighting communism, we didn’t like them. And I had a couple friends from high school that were killed over there and so that was pretty hard. One of the guys, Paul Miller, was a nice guy and he was killed in the Korean War. When we went to Vietnam we were with the French, because they didn’t want us to do anything in town. Now we were allowed to go in town and we did a couple of times and we ate at some restaurants there and I enjoyed that. They had some French cooks and we had some nice dishes. One of the dishes that I remember was spiced tomatoes and onions and it kind of soaked in vinaigrette to kind of soften. I remember how good it tasted and the spaghetti with that. And then I went there a couple of times and bought perfume, they had a lot of French perfume. But the Vietnamese, it was hard for them because you didn’t know who was a communists and who wasn’t, it was very treacherous at night time. The communists would walk the streets of the cities and nobody ever went into the cities at night, we could only go during the daytime and every single night the airport bases were attacked by small-arms fighters. And the French had these black Moroccans, and they were big guys, they were really tough-looking and they had tribal scars, cut up their faces and they were dressed in the French uniform with these kind of hats tipped up at the side like sombrero hats. And they were the ones that stood on the wall around the fort every night and protected everybody inside the Air Force Base and we had guns by our beds and ammunition and we were told not to try and help them, not to go out to the walls at night and everything like that, that they were there to protect us and if anybody broke through then you protect yourself, you grab the gun, fight like that but that never happened. But that’s what we were told to do. And I do remember at night there was nothing to do but read and so what we did was stayed with, and had sent over all these motion pictures, and we had this portable screen, kind of like the kind they have at church that you put up. Before they had television we had these little motion picture screens, portable screens, we put that up outside because it was so hot and then we would watch motion pictures all evening, and do motion pictures, they would put them on and we would watch all these movies and then we’d put them on the airplane and send them back to Clark Field and tell them to bring us back some new ones. And every once in a while when we’d be out like that at night watching them you would hear the small army firing, going all around the perimeter of the base and once in a while a stray bullet would ricochet off the barracks. The barracks we lived in were like Quartson huts, they were made out of steel and they had a funny little roof at the top that was wide open so that the heat wouldn’t rise and go out and we had ventilation, but the barracks were all made out of steel, so that was kind of interesting. The French were interesting people, they were friendly to us because we were supplying them with airplanes and people to help work on them and trying to help them with their little colony that they had. And so they were okay, I don’t have any way or the other about them at that time because they are kind of slime bags now because of what they’re doing. The French have always been kind of a weird people, they gave up their country in WWI, they gave up their country in WWII to Germany; I mean they don’t have much backbone for fighting. When we were over there we were in our barracks one night and all of a sudden real
scruffy guys came in and they were Soldiers of Fortune that were flying these airplanes for the French, fighter airplanes—they were old WWII fighter airplanes and they were helping them, they were Soldiers of Fortune and some of them were part of the old original Flying Tigers during WWII. And they didn’t know anything else but they flew airplanes and shot at things and that’s what they did for a living. The French had a contact with them, they paid them a lot of money to fight for them, but most of them were Americans. So they came over when they heard that Americans had come to the base; they came over and talked to us and wanted to know all the news about America and things like that and we talked to them about all the adventures that they’d been on and Soldiers of Fortune. And one time they threw a great big party for us and we all went out to the beach, I think it was a Saturday, Sunday, I can’t remember when it was, and several of us who didn’t drink had to guard the party and they had just cases of beers that they had brought out for everybody to drink, and swimming and just having a party and those were the flight type guys, but they weren’t attuned and all the beach was covered, littered with beer cans. And all these little naked children, these little kids they didn’t have any clothes on, they would just go run around there and pick up beer cans and disappear and come back and they were cleaning the whole beach up. And that night and the next few nights our base got attacked with homemade grenades and homemade bombs made out of those beer cans, so it was really interesting to see the ingenuity of these Vietnamese people and how they sent their kids to collect these cans because they could make little bombs out of them. But I have a lot of pictures taken with these little kids and they’re in some of my files someplace, but there were a lot of little Vietnamese kids over there.

ND: How did you feel towards the government for not acknowledging that you were in Vietnam?

WD: Originally I was kind of angry about that until I finally just decided, you know I know I was there, and it didn’t prove anything for me to have it on my record so I just decided not to be worried about it. At first I was angry with them but then I understood that sometimes the government has to make everybody happy in their quiet way for the benefit of the rest of the population. And we live in this free country and the government protects us and sometimes they have to do things that maybe the rest of the people wouldn’t understand, in order to protect us. So I imagine they’re doing that right now too with this upcoming war with Iraq and the war with terrorism and all that stuff. I’m sure there’s things going on right now that we probably wouldn’t like if we knew about it but they are to protect us. So originally I felt bad about it but I don’t anymore.

ND: What were some of the sights you saw and traveling you did while in the war?

WD: I really enjoyed traveling. While I was in Japan too, I don’t think I told you this, but one of my high school buddies was in the Navy and he was stationed in Tokyo. And he was not aboard a ship, he was stationed in a Naval Base up there and I found out about it, I think one of my friends originally told me about it, his name was Wayne Buckley, and we went to high school together and he was a member of the Church and his mom and dad and my mom and dad were good friends, and his brother used to be a
Barber in Maywood. So Wayne was stationed up there so I took a three-day pass and I hitch-hiked—see I was down on the southern island and he was on the main island on Honshuu and Yokohama Naval Base and so I got to the base up there and he and I went to his quarters and spent the night there and we went in and he showed me the city of Tokyo, and we got to go around there. So I’ve been quite a few places in Japan, it’s a very pretty country and we used to go on passes once in a while to Mooshoo [Mushu] and there was a little town that we went to, I can’t remember the name of it, but they had a little place called Monkey Mouse and a little place full of monkeys and it was very, very beautiful. Oh, I remember the name of the town was called Hipoo [Hipu] because it means mineral waters or something like that and they had this hotel up there, that was a beautiful hotel and they had all these natural warm springs, and we would just go up there and take these mineral baths and so we took train rides on weekends and picture-taking excursions and stuff like that. On the weekends sometimes we would travel and spend the night in another little town called Poowoka [Puwoka], and they had a cinema motion picture out there and they used to have all of these American motion pictures and the latest ones would come there, even better than the motion pictures we would get on the base and they had a great big cinema scope screen, and so we would take the train ride there and then have dinner and catch the train and come back home. And that was really a fun trip; we used to do that quite a bit while we were in Japan. But I saw quite a bit of the country there but not too much of the country in Vietnam because we weren’t allowed off base very much, but it was interesting to travel. In the Philippines we were able to go off base quite a bit there, while we were there but we couldn’t go very far though because we never knew how soon we were going to complete our airplanes and we had to leave so I didn’t get to see too much of the Philippines; but I saw a little bit of it just around Clark Air Force Base there, a little town called Bangel which was right outside the base.

JD: How did you and the other soldiers feel towards the President of the United States?

WD: President Eisenhower was the President at this time and everybody liked him quite a bit because he was an old Army General, and was one of the great generals from WWII. And he was a very popular President and all of the military liked him as the President, all of us really supported President Eisenhower.

JD: How were you and the other veterans treated after you returned to the United States?

WD: We were treated fine. I was discharged in 1955, I joined in 1951 and I discharged in 1955 July. And nobody really recognized that you were a veteran with the war or anything like that. It wasn’t like WWII, and you came back you had parades and all that kind of stuff; and it wasn’t like [the] Vietnam War when you came back everyone called you baby killers and all that kind of stuff. It was kind of like in-between those two and it was like a non-entity, you just don’t get treated any way, you didn’t get treated badly, you didn’t get treated good. That was the Korean War. It wasn’t a very popular war with the citizens, most people called it a policing action, it wasn’t even called a war, but it was a war. But we didn’t get treated badly, but we didn’t get treated wonderful so I don’t know, it was just kind of like in between WWII, everybody came home and got treated
like a hero, and the Vietnam War and everybody came home and got treated like traitors. And the Korean veterans were just kind of like forgotten, not too much of anything.

JD: What was your rank in the Army?

WD: I was a sergeant, I started out as a private, and I went up to private corporal as a sergeant. When they were getting ready to discharge me, they tried to persuade me to stay and make me a staff sergeant, but I was going to get married and go about my life on the outside. So they wouldn’t give me that extra rank.

JD: How did you feel about not receiving the extra rank?

WD: It was alright, I just wanted to leave. It really wasn’t that big of a deal because I wasn’t going to be retired from the Army; and the more rank you have the more money you get when you retire so that wasn’t going to affect me, and the extra pay that I would have got would have been only for a few months anyway, so it was better for everybody that it just didn’t happen. I just wanted to be with my wife, get home and raise a family and that’s what we did.