

Transcription: Herman Bendfeldt

Today is Tuesday, May 10th, 2011. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Herman Bendfeldt. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Bendfeldt is at his home in Gladewater, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me this morning. It's an honor anytime we get to interview a veteran, and I guess the first place, sir, we always start with these interviews is tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

Herman Bendfeldt: OK, I was born in 1929 in Niantic, Connecticut. That was during the Depression, so we were a poor family, but we didn't realize it because everybody was poor. I went to grade school, graduated and went to high school, and then in high school when I turned 16, they let 16-year-old boys out of school at 1 o'clock so they could work in defense plants because all the men were at war. My father strongly recommended against it, but I did it anyway. He said if you do that all you're going to end up with is no education and a watch, but that's about it. And he was right. So I quit high school in my sophomore year. I went to join the Merchant Marine, went down to New York City, because I'm in New London is where I lived, or Niantic, all the people were working in the submarine base for the Merchant Marines, and I thought these are men that are older than me, so that's a good idea. I went to New York City to go into the Merchant Marines. You could go in there when you were 16. Before I got to the office, I got a cinder in my eyes. It hurt so bad I turned around and went home, which is probably a good deal because at that time the first trip, you couldn't do it because they were sending the merchant ships to Bermansk in Russia and a lot of them were being sunk. So then I decided, the guys told me to join the Submarine Corps, join the Navy and go into submarines, but whatever you do, don't let them not promise you submarine before you get in, or else they'll put you on a tender. I didn't know what a tender was, but they thought that was terrible, so I went down to the Navy in New Haven, from New London to New Haven they gave me a train ticket, and when I talked to the Navy recruiter, he said we can't guarantee you submarines until after you get in the service. I said no, they warned me that I'll be put on a tender. You've got to promise me so I can't do that. So I said OK, I'm not going in the Navy. He said well, we paid your fare down here. So they brought me down by train and it probably cost 50 cents. So you're defaulting the government. This is a serious charge, so you better go in. I said uh-uh, I was afraid. So I walked out and I noticed across the way was the Air Force recruiter, so I thought well, it's the same government, they can't punish me. So I went over there and enlisted in the Air Force. That's how I ended up in the Air Force.

And what year was that, sir?

Herman Bendfeldt: 1947.

'47, so it was after the war had ended.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, in January.

But you were still 16?

Herman Bendfeldt: 17.

17, OK. So you signed up for the Air Force. How long was it after you signed up before you were on your way to basic training?

Herman Bendfeldt: Right away.

Like within a day or that day?

Herman Bendfeldt: Well, pretty near as best I recall. Of course, we were poor. In fact I lived right on the beach in Connecticut and all the rich people would come down during the summer from Hifer, and of course us guys would tell them that we were also from Hifer and down there. Actually I worked on a garbage truck which was kind of embarrassing so if I'd date a girl and tell her what was listed and then I'd go by in a garbage truck the next day. I only had one shirt. One girl was going with me but then she told me she wouldn't go with me anymore because her friends had pointed out I only had one shirt. So anyway, I went to the Air Force.

Where did they send you to for your basic training?

Herman Bendfeldt: Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio.

Was that your first time leaving Connecticut? Or leaving the northeast?

Herman Bendfeldt: Yes.

What was your impression of Texas and of Lackland in particular?

Herman Bendfeldt: Well first of all, I was the oldest of 11 children, family, and we were poor. Outhouse, that kind of stuff. I don't remember my first impression of Texas, except I know that I said I'd never come back, but here I am. Anyway, while I was in basic, I went to town and when I was in town, I don't know how come, because I was only 17, but I was in a bar drinking beer and a guy next to me said you've been stabbed. I said how do you know? He said well there's a knife sticking out of your back. And I said well pull it out, and he reached over and pulled it out and set it on the bar. So I walked outside and there were MPs, and I told them I'd been stabbed, and they said no, you're drunk. So I reached and put my hand in my back and showed them a handful of blood, so they took me to Fort Sam Houston to a hospital.

Wow, this was during your basic training?

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, and then -

Did you ever figure out who stabbed you or why?

Herman Bendfeldt: No, and then when I got to the hospital, there was a guy on a stretcher beside me and he had his one eye was hanging out and I was feeling sorry for him, but when the Corps man came out and said who's next, they pointed at him and they said he's supposed to be but better take this one first. He pointed at me which kind of surprised me. So the doctor took a stick with cotton on the end and stuck it in my back and pulled around, and then he said OK, here, he said inhale this and hold it, and I did, and he washed my back. He says you're lucky. That knife hit your lung but it didn't go through it. So they let me go. Then while we were on maneuvers -

Well, real quick sir, how do you think it was that you didn't feel that?

Herman Bendfeldt: I don't know, I didn't feel it at all. I still got the jacket with the hole in it. I guess it was a real sharp knife, I don't know. I didn't feel nothing.

That's a crazy story.

Herman Bendfeldt: Then, yeah, then on basic training, we were still on basic training and went out on maneuvers, and we were in the field but there was a main highway running beside the maneuver area, so there was an Indian from South Dakota told me, says hey, let's get your cab and go to town and get some whiskey. Of course remember I'm 17, so I said oh, OK. So we went out and we flagged out a taxicab. Of course we are in field gear with helmets and gun belts and so on. We went to town and got a bottle of whiskey which we drank in the cab. I didn't know, but at that time it was illegal to sell whiskey to Indians. So we drank the whiskey. Of course you know what happened when a 17-year-old drinks whiskey, so then we went back to the base and we stayed in the taxicab and went to go through the main gate. Well they know when we come through the gate we were in combat gear. They said you can't go off base in combat gear. So they went over and opened the door and pulled the Indian out. He was a big Indian, and he flattened the first MP and knocked him right down on the ground. So many more MPs came and they had a hell of a time subduing him, but they finally got him and they put us in the stockade, both of us. So then when I finally got through basic, I was declared incorrigible. I was given the title of a duty soldier which means this guy, you don't, trash cans and stuff like that, or cut grass.

Why was it sir you think they didn't just wash you out of basic training altogether?

Herman Bendfeldt: I don't know. Then while I was doing that, in a month, of course the guys I was with in this were bad guys, all the guys I'm working with are bad guys because they're incorrigible, too, and I got three Article 15's in one month.

Wow.

Herman Bendfeldt: And the First Sergeant told me hey, I've only known one other man in my career that ever got three Article 15's in one month, and that was me. He said you'd make a good First Sergeant one day. Well it was stupid because we were bad guys and one thing I'll give you as an example, another squadron was having a party downtown and they sent us down with the beer. They detailed us to the beer truck to take it to town. That wasn't very smart. You know right away, well we didn't come back. And that was when integration came, by the way. I was there when they integrated the blacks and whites, and we all moved our bunks way down one end of the barracks. 60-man overmade barracks is what we slept in, and we moved our, half the other bunks, half the other part of the barracks was for the blacks and we were not going to associate with them. So I looked out the window waiting for them when they come, and pretty soon here comes one black guy. It was George Washington Saxton. He was the Colonel of jeep driver, he was all our buddy because nobody had a car, but if you knew George, he'd take you for a ride, so hey. So that was the extent of integration. George moved in with us.

One guy that you already knew.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, we really liked him because if he was your buddy, he'd give you a ride so that was good. Anyway, I was working as an 055 duty soldier and one day they come out

and they said hey, we see in your records that you took typing. You know how to type? I said yeah, I know how to type. So they said oh, OK, so they assigned me to the maintenance group headquarters, and in maintenance group headquarters, they had an old major there, and he said well, you're a good soldier after I worked for him, still no stripes. He said but it took me 6 years to make one stripe and I don't think you're any better than I was. So he didn't put me in for promotion. He retired and then got a man in named Kellogg from the corn flakes family. He had made lieutenant colonel when he was 28. He was a captain made major, and the next day he got shot down and they automatically promoted him, so he made lieutenant colonel at 28, and he was in the back end ___ barge, so when he came in and I was working with him, he said you don't have no stripes, so he immediately started promoting me and I made a staff sergeant when I was 19 years old. This really made the other guys madder than hell because they knew that I'd been in trouble all the time. At that time, I was dating my wife, first girl I ever met, first girl I ever kissed, and I asked them permission to marry her, and they said yeah, you can marry her but you can only have one day off. So we had to catch a bus and go to Reno and get married in Reno, which you don't need anything at all.

Where were you stationed at this point?

Herman Bendfeldt: Mather Field in Sacramento.

OK, because I was going to say it would be a long bus ride from Lackland -

Herman Bendfeldt: No, I was at Sacramento at Mather Field.

So you went to Reno and got married and came back.

Herman Bendfeldt: We went by bus, then took a cab to wherever it was we got married. There was a meter there with 15 minutes on it. I said should I put some more money in there? He said no, that's plenty. It was 11 minutes it took us to get back. Then we took a bus back. When we got back to Sacramento, she got out of her bus and went home and I got out of my bus and went to Mather and I didn't see her again for a week. So shortly thereafter, I got married in '49 in May, and then in August of '50, the Korean War had broken out. I was already on orders for the Far East when the war broke out. So I reported down to San Francisco to go to the Far East. We took a ferry boat across the bay, but they made us all stand there with bags and helmets and all that stuff for about a half an hour. We didn't know why. Then we found out they wanted to take a picture of the Red Cross giving us coffee. They had us wait for the Red Cross. When we got on the boat, the Air Force, they told me you go on there, you'll find some empty bunk somewhere. When I got on there, I found it was the 3rd Division, and they had been under Rhine watch in Germany, and you know, the military, they don't tell you nothing. They didn't tell us where we were going or anything, you're on the boat. When those guys got on the boat in Germany, they thought they were going home. When they got to New York, they put them on another train and they ended up in San Francisco and they said get on the boat again. So they were pretty unhappy.

I bet.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, 3rd Infantry Division. And they sent them in, and this was in 1950, and those are the ones that ended up with the wrong kind of clothes and everything, and most of them got killed. I met one of them later, he was 19 years old, and he was a Tech Sergeant got a Silver Star, third highest medal they give. When we got to Japan and ready to go in, we hit a

typhoon and we had to go back out to sea. We couldn't go in. By that time, we run out of food so for two days all we had to eat was cole slaw. Oh, by the way when I was in Sacramento, I went to night school. I took a GED test and tried to get my high school diploma, and I failed that so I went to night school and learned math and took it again and got my high school diploma.

That's great.

Herman Bendfeldt: When I got to Tokyo, I was assigned to the headquarters Far East Air Forces, and I was in the invasion in the Escape Division, and what that did, that division is any man that got down behind the lines or captured and escaped. He came to us and we had a secret house in Tokyo where we debriefed them, how he got out from behind the lines. And then we'd take them on tours, you know, a pilot that bailed out and behind the lines and got out alive, we took 'em on a tour of the other outfits and he would give a speech on how he did it and they would question him about things they were concerned about. So it was pretty interesting work. I met everybody because I was there from '50 to '53. I met most all of them that got out, and there's a book, a man took our reports wrote a book called *Beyond Courage*, and there's a couple of them in there. Some of the stories are really interesting naturally.

I imagine.

Herman Bendfeldt: And there was people that escaped even though they said nobody escaped, but one of the stories they wrote was an escapee.

So you were able to spend the Korean War then in Tokyo.

Herman Bendfeldt: That's right. Well I had to go to Korea every month. You had to go to Korea in order to not pay taxes, so for 30 months I flew to Korea every month. Normally they would come around and say anybody hadn't been to Korea yet? And they had an old C-47 we would just fly over. I used to take a sleeping bag and lay on the floor, and we would get to Korea and we would just usually eat. Usually what happened, they had a big garbage can that they had on a fire and they had a big long pair of tongs, and the garbage can was full of boiling water but they had some food in it, and you reached in with the tongs and pulled out a can, and what you saw is what you got. You couldn't say I don't want that one. So I remember that one can of pork and beans was equal to five cans of beef and pork if you're trying to trade.

So they would fly you in there and you would stay for just a short period of time and then go back just so you would be tax exempt?

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah. And of course some of those guys over there resented it because they knew what we were pulling.

Sure.

Herman Bendfeldt: Says we're not gonna feed you. I remember I was there on Thanksgiving. They said they had Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings which they did, but they boiled the turkeys so they would come out white. They didn't look brown. And let me see, I made Tech Sergeant then. Let's see, what else.

Were you around much aircraft? Or you were in Intelligence.

Herman Bendfeldt: I was working in Intelligence, I was working in downtown Tokyo in the Miji Building which is just down the street from McG___ Headquarters.

How was it that you ended up being assigned to the Intelligence field?

Herman Bendfeldt: Well, I had an administrative AFSC, or duty soldier or what the hell ever I had, but anyway, no, they put me in as a clerk, but I ended up, I was a Staff Sergeant, so I ended up in charge of the night shift of the Intelligence. Of course we were working 7 days a week, and about 12 hours, at least 12 hours a day, and all the message traffic that came in, I would read it and determine which office should get it. So I read all of the traffic that came in on the Korean War, some pretty interesting stuff.

I would imagine.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, I really learned a lot on that stuff. I remember when the prisoners rioted on one of the prisons down there at Kojido I think it was, they put them on an island and they rioted, and they took over the prison. So the military called the 187th Regimental Combat Team off the front lines down there to quell the argument. Those guys were really pissed off because they captured them, and they didn't understand how they allowed them to take over the prison. They went in, surrounded them and gave them the order to lay down. None of them laid down and they said one round ball of ammunition loaded and locked, fire! And they fired and they got some of them. Now lay down. They didn't lay down. One round of rolled ammunition, loaded and locked, fire! By the time they got done there wasn't no man standing. They shot them all. Of course nobody knows that.

Sure. Now during the three years that you were in Japan, was your wife able -

Herman Bendfeldt: 30 months.

Oh, 30 months, I'm sorry. OK, 30 months you were there.

Herman Bendfeldt: I worked in the Miji Building. After a year and a half, MacArthur got fired and they brought the general who was in charge of the Army in Korea – anyway, he was married to his fifth wife and naturally he wanted her over there. This general always carried hand grenades on his chest. I forgot his name. He was famous for having hand grenades on his – always wore hand grenades, even when he was in the headquarters in Tokyo. And he wanted his wife over. So because he brought his wife over, then they let us bring our wives over. Of course I hadn't been married very long, I hadn't seen my wife in a year and a half. So when the boat come in, she was going to wear a green dress, so I bought some flowers and stood there waiting, and when the boat come in I saw a girl with a green dress and I started waving at her and holding my flowers up, and a lieutenant came up and put his arm around her, and I said woah, well it's been a year and a half, what the hell. But my wife, that wasn't my wife. She finally went to the chaplain and said he's got the wrong woman. So the chaplain come down, got right across from me and said hey, you hammerhead, you got the wrong one. She's up there. So I spotted her.

Was she mad at you because of that?

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah.

Yeah, I bet.

Herman Bendfeldt: But she was glad to see me. We hadn't been married long. She was very tolerant of me.

That's great.

Herman Bendfeldt: Before she came, we lived in the hotel in New Kito Building, and they had some crazy rules. As an example, because of malaria, everybody had to sleep under mosquito nets, and here we were on the 6th floor of the hotel, but everybody had to have a mosquito net, so we had to have mosquito nets. And when you do the night duty, that was one of your jobs, going around and making sure everybody had their mosquito nets on them. They wouldn't allow us to eat any Japanese food.

That's interesting. Was that a health concern?

Herman Bendfeldt: Well, they said it was because of health concern as well as the Japanese didn't have enough food. They were starving. So they didn't want us to eat theirs.

Were you able to get out very much into the Japanese population and see any of the cities or meet any of the people?

Herman Bendfeldt: Oh yeah, oh yeah. We lived right in downtown Tokyo in a hotel. So we got to, we were mixed right in with the Japanese. Between when we walked to work was probably two blocks, and when we come home, all the Japanese prostitutes would stand there and proposition us. They'd say one dollar for a short time, three dollars all night. I remember one night I come home and I noticed a gal, and she was all dressed up in a kimono. They others, they tried to look like American girls, which they did successfully for long. But this was a beautiful gal and she had a beautiful kimono on. I said what's the deal here? So I approached her and what we know, well the first thing you learn in Japan was to say how much, and that was igoorā. So I said igoorā. She led me to the American Base Exchange and pointed in the window. There was a big chocolate cake in there. So I went in and bought the chocolate cake. So then we got on a train and she took me to her house, and there was all her kids there, three or four kids, put the big chocolate cake on the table for them, and took me into her bedroom. What some women won't do for her kids, huh?

What had happened to her husband? Had he been killed in the war do you know?

Herman Bendfeldt: She didn't tell me. But she didn't have no husband.

Wow.

Herman Bendfeldt: When my wife got there, I had brought a car over and I'd drive to work and when I pulled into the parking lot, there was a guy would open the door for me and then say did you have any special instructions? He'd wash the car every day and sweep it out every day. It cost me a dollar a month. He used to use a bucket and get the water out of the Imperial palace grounds. In fact, we lived on the Imperial palace grounds in Quonset huts. We had a half a Quonset hut which was one room. That's what we had. And even though we had one room, my wife had a maid because it only cost 50 cents a day. So she had a maid, and one parked my car and then washed it every day.

That's amazing. In general, most of the Japanese, were they pretty fearful or reverential towards you and the other American troops that were there?

Herman Bendfeldt: Oh yeah, they seemed to like us. We didn't have any trouble at all. And they were very honest. They wouldn't steal anything. They wouldn't steal anything at all there. Koreans would steal everything. But the Japanese wouldn't steal nothing. So that was good.

Interesting.

Herman Bendfeldt: Let's see, what else.

Being in Intelligence, did you have a pretty good feel for what was going to happen ultimately there in Korea?

Herman Bendfeldt: Yes, I did. In fact, I was a Staff Sergeant but they had me as a top secret control officer, so I controlled all the top secret stuff. One day they come in and they said send these photos to Washington immediately. So I wrapped them up and send them to Washington and when they go to Washington, the wrapping had ripped and they received their photos and they were exposed, and they took pictures of them and sent them back. Said who did this? Because it was all supposed to be double wrapped, and I didn't know that. So I said I did it. So they said how the hell did you ever get a clearance to do stuff like that? And they checked. I didn't have no clearances, and I was a top secret control officer.

Wow.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, that's the way it was.

How did your wife like Japan?

Herman Bendfeldt: Oh, she really liked it. She in fact got a job and she worked as a file clerk in the same building. So she liked it. She liked it well. I wanted her to drive, but she was afraid to drive because you drove on the left hand side and the traffic was real bad because of ox carts and rickshaws and all that stuff. One day about 10 minutes from home, I jumped out of the car and left her in traffic. She got home about two hours later crying. I said what's the matter? I got lost. How can you get lost? I told you how to say we're at Tokyo station in Japanese, so you know how to get home to Tokyo station. That shouldn't have been a problem. She said yeah, you taught me how to say where's Tokyo station? That wasn't the problem, it was when they answered! Oh, I forgot about that. So anyway, then she parked her car in the middle of the motor pool. We had a short two screen Nash. There's a Nash parked in the motor pool, and they give her a ticket. Of course they couldn't punish the wife, so they want me in. And I asked her why did you do that? She said all the other American cars are parked there. I said yeah, but they're military. Then she got another ticket. She said the streetcar cut in front of her. Well the streetcar's on a track. So they called me in and said she gets one more ticket and you're going to be restricted to the base for 30 days. So told her and I said well you better behave yourself or we'll get another ticket.

When did you finally leave Japan and come back to the United States?

Herman Bendfeldt: It was in '53. I've got some notes here. Oh, one thing, before my wife come over, living in the barracks, at night the Japanese would walk around clicking sticks, walk around hitting sticks together. All night long you would hear click, click, click.

Why did they do that?

Herman Bendfeldt: That's what I wanted to know. So I asked them, and they said well, when you guys were fire-bombing Tokyo, we were afraid of fires, so we had night fire watchers out, and by hearing walking and clicking the sticks, we knew that he was awake so we could sleep comfortable. That's why they did it, to show that he was awake. Let's see what else I get.

During that time sir that you were in Japan, did you go home to the U.S. at all?

Herman Bendfeldt: No.

So you were there continuously.

Herman Bendfeldt: I worked on the night shift, I worked all night. I put in many hours 7 days a week. Although, I did get to take off a vacation with my wife. We went, they had rest hotels, and the one that we went to, Madam Shanghai-Shek had stayed there. I mean it was really high class and we took 'em over. So when we went there, we had to go by train and then we went by car, and then they had a cable car to carry us across the river. Then they met us with a staff car and when we come to the rest hotel, the whole staff was all bowing to us, all bowing down on the ground. It was on Easter and we were probably just two or three people in there staying, so we got pretty good service. I could never afford to go to that place again, I'm sure. Of course we worked 7 days a week generally, but I remember one time we took off, we were going to bear hunting. We decided to go bear hunting up in northern Japan, and every train in Japan, the last car had a white stripe on it, and that meant it was for Americans only, and they had one Japanese guy in there to take care of you. If you wanted a cigarette, he'd light it for you or something like that, but every train had a car with a white stripe on it and only Americans could ride. So anyway we were going bear hunting, so we checked out rifles from the supply, and so we were riding along in the train and we looked out and we saw a lot of crows. So we opened the train windows and were blasting away at crows. Of course the Japanese were working in the rice fields and we were shooting all around them. Shortly thereafter after we got back, they come out in the daily bulletin and said no shooting out of trains! So when we got to northern Japan and we wanted to go bear hunting, we told 'em and they said OK, we'll go in the morning. So in the morning they said OK, we'll go. Said where are we going? We got to go up on this mountain. I said climb the mountain? We're not climbing no mountain. They said that's where the bears are. We said the hell with it and we went home. When my wife got there, there was, gasoline was 10 cents a gallon. Of course the Japs didn't have any, so you could black market it. So I'd get a five gallon can of gas which is 50 cents, and I gave it to a guy that had a sandpan, and he took us duck hunting out on Tokyo Bay and he had built a blind and he put the sandpan under the blind and he had decoys that he carved himself, and went out and put out the threader decoy and put the sandpan under the blind and the ducks would come in and we'd shoot 'em, and then when we would shoot 'em, he'd cut the wings off and nail them to the decoys and make them look like better. So we killed a lot of ducks, took them home and the maid would cook them, and they were really good, really good hunting. And didn't have to do anything because the maid picked them and everything else.

So it sounds like it was a pretty good life there.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, except that the fact you had to work so much. You didn't get much time off. We was working at least 12-hour shifts.

And you said you were working at night, so when you go, what time would you go in to work?

Herman Bendfeldt: Well, I don't remember, but I know it was 12 hours.

So you would work from something like 7:00 at night to 7:00 in the morning, or 8:00 to 8:00, or something like that.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, and there was an overlap. You had to trade to the other guy who was going on, so you just had time to eat and sleep and put your clothes in the laundry or whatever. You didn't have time to do much else.

What would your duties consist of on an average 12-hour shift?

Herman Bendfeldt: Well, what my job was was to read all the incoming traffic and determine what distribution should be made of them, because you had a lot of sections in the headquarters, so I had to determine what distribution to be made of the messages. I knew who should get what. Let's see what else happened there. Well, by the way, I went to the Army Service Club, took the wife there, designed by Mrs. MacArthur. It was beautiful. The way they lit it, they had backlights and they had water tanks with fish swimming in them, and it was backlit. That's the way they lit it and you'd see all the fish swimming around. A beautiful club designed by Mrs. MacArthur. A very good menu and nothing on the menu was over a dollar. And if an officer would come in, he'd have to buy everybody in there a drink. So there wasn't any officers.

Yeah, they shouldn't be going into the enlisted club anyway I guess.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, well that's right because it would cramp our style I guess.

I guess that was the way to kind of keep them out then.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, and then anyway, I finally let's see, I don't know, do you have any more questions about Japan or do you want to move away?

Yes sir, so what was it like when you finally got to come back home to the United States after having been gone?

Herman Bendfeldt: What happened then, something really bad happened then. When we got on the boat, they told my wife the first deck, and they put me down in the hole. I'll never forgive the Navy for this. So for 17 days I was down in the hole and they let us up for an hour a day to hold hands with my wife and talk to her, and at night we'd hear music and they were dancing up there over our heads. Of course my wife says well I didn't dance. But then later on I heard through one of her girlfriends that she did dance.

Yeah, I wonder why they did that?

Herman Bendfeldt: Well the Navy guys wanted the women, that's why. 17 days they had all our wives up there. I'll never forgive the Navy for that.

Yeah, that's horrible.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yes. So then I went to _____ in Colorado Springs and I had the same job there, reading all the traffic and determining where it would go.

I know there's a big base there inside the mountain near Colorado Springs.

Herman Bendfeldt: Oh that wasn't there. Our headquarters was right downtown. Oh by the way, I was transferred from the administrative job into the Invasion Escape Division, did I mention that?

No sir, you didn't.

Herman Bendfeldt: OK, well after a while they needed a man in the Invasion Escape Division, so I went down there and what that job consists of any man that come out alive -

Oh you did mention that part, yes sir. I just didn't realize you had been officially transferred.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, so that was real interesting. We had a house with good looking maids that they stayed, and good food, and then we took them on briefing tours all around the country.

Interesting. So you arrived at Colorado Springs and you were doing more intelligence work.

Herman Bendfeldt: No, I was doing the same thing. Well, no, I had the same job. So then after a while the Colonel that was in charge said he was going to promote me to Master Sergeant. He put me in and didn't make it, so then he come the next month and he said OK, this month you're going to make Master Sergeant because I'm President of the promotion board. So he come out of the promotion board and says I can't believe it. I couldn't make you Master Sergeant. You don't know how many Tech Sergeants there are and how much service they got. It's impossible. I'm going to send you to OCS. So he put me in for OCS. Well I'd been working as a clerk. I didn't have any fatigues or work uniforms. So I mentioned it and they gave me a list of stuff I had to have, and I said geez, I don't have any fatigues. So one of the guys had just come out of OCS, and he said hey, when you go down there you're going to lose a lot of weight, and a lot of guys go and get tailored uniforms so they can go in and make a good impression, and shortly thereafter they lose weight and they can't wear them anymore. So don't buy any uniforms. I said well I don't have any fatigues. He said I'll give you mine. So he did. Unbeknownst to me, when you get down there, that's what you're going to wear, and this guy was about 6 foot tall, about three inches or more taller than me. So when I fell out in the fatigues, the crotch hung down to my knees and the sleeves were too long and the pants legs were too long. They gave us an exam before we went in, and because of my experience I come out top guy. A lot of these guys were airplane mechanics or something. So I had more knowledge about the Air Force than any of them, so I come out top, so they called my name out, Bendfeldt, where are you? I said here. They come over and looked at me and they couldn't believe their eyes. They said are you standing at attention underneath that uniform? Anybody that reports to OCS with a uniform like that is not going to make it. You're not going to make it through this program when you show up like this. So they really gave me a hard time. In fact there were 33 guys in my group or section or what the hell they called it, and only 11 of us graduated. But they really ruined me hard. They said you've had it.

And where was your OCS held?

Herman Bendfeldt: It was in San Antonio. And they told me you're not gonna make it. So finally I agreed with them. I said OK, I'm not gonna make it. They said put in your papers. I said no, because when I put in my papers, I'm going to take 30 days off and go hunting. So I'm gonna hang around here until October when hunting season is around. That really made them mad. So I wrote back to the outfit in Colorado, and some of the officers were good friends of mine. In fact, the Navy commander and I hunted together all over the States, and they took me on airplane rides down into, you know, if I wanted a ride to go see my wife's family or something in Sacramento, they'd fly me out there. They'd fly me anywhere I wanted to go because they were all pilots and they needed flying time. So that was a good deal. So anyway, when I wrote back I told them I was quitting. Two of them got in a B-25 and flew right down there and went in the barracks and told me, one of them was the Navy commander that I hunted with and the other was a Major, they said you quit, you've had it. Said what the hell's the matter with you? These young kids getting to you? You ought to be ashamed of yourself. They really chewed me out. They said you ever quit, don't ever cross our path again. Then I could see the stupidity of the whole thing. And then I really got in trouble because when they chewed me out, I'd smile at them and that really made them mad. And so when you got these demerits, you had to walk the ramp. It's an hour for each demerit. And I come out as ramp champ. Yeah, I was the ramp champ. When the wife came down there, I was walking the ramp and if you moved your eyes, the hour didn't count. They'd tell you at the end. But I walked four hours on a Saturday and eight hours on Sunday every weekend. And they let us see our wife on Sunday. You could take your wife to church. They used to call in Jordan and the 4H Club, happy horizontal half hour. So anyway, when I left there, they sent me to Shepherd to go through the Intelligence school, and when I went through Shepherd, they saw that I had worked in Invasion and Escape, so they pulled me as an instructor to teach that, and they also had me teaching map reading, and one other course. But anyway, I was teaching more than half of the damn Intelligence school. And then one day they were having some inspectors in there, and they checked my records and they said holy mackerel, you haven't been to teaching school yet. You have to go to teaching school before you can teach. I'd already been teaching for a year. So they sent me to teaching school. And then one thing they taught you in teaching school, you have to know the student's name. You don't just point at them. You've got to memorize their names and their seating positions. So one day the inspectors came in and I knew they were in the building, so I told the guys, hey, I don't know your names, but if I look at you and call you by name, you answer, no matter what name I call you. So that's what happened. And then the class started snickering over it, and the inspectors are trying to figure out what the hell's going on. Why are these students all laughing? And they hung around for a long time.

Did they ever figure it out?

Herman Bendfeldt: No. And the funny part of it is, I go back to a guy I called by a different name, and that really fractured the students.

Yeah I bet.

Herman Bendfeldt: Then I got foreign officers to teach, and one time in my teaching career I taught an hour and the Master Sergeant come in and I said what do you want? He says I'm the interpreter. They don't speak English. I'd already lectured them for an hour.

That's funny.

Herman Bendfeldt: They also made me, put me on a court marshal board and there was a Major on the board but he never showed up, so I ended up as the President of the Board. So I must've tried 100 cases anyway. We never found anybody not guilty, and then I got new members on my board, and this guy was charged with punching a sergeant and inflicting grievous bodily harm, and what happened was he was a big sergeant and he told a Mexican kid to be quiet, and the Mexican kid threw a punch trying to hit him in the private area, and the sergeant turned around and he hit him in the butt. Well obviously he didn't create grievous bodily harm, so what we posed, I said do you want to discuss this? The new guys said no, we know what, and they found him not guilty, which is wrong. He was guilty of hitting the sergeant, but he was guilty of a lesser of the offense. So when they found him not guilty, they disbanded all the boards, and I called the base commander and I said you know, I'm the loudest Sergeant on the goddam base and I've had all the reports for you. You don't appreciate it. They said no, no, you're going to stay on. We like you. You're a good man. So then we went and all the officers reported to the base theater, all the new board guys, and this colonel come in there, full colonel, and he started lecturing. He said the day that an airman can get by with punching the sergeant in the nose is the day the Air Force – he gives us a lecture and about half way through it, I finally raised my hand and I said sir, you say it's a hypothetical case but everybody in the room knows that you're talking about a specific case, and I would recommend that you read the record of trial before you call us all together because nobody was accused of punching the sergeant in the nose. And I told him what happened. The colonel stared at me for a long time and walked out. When I got back to my unit, I had orders for OCS.

Really, that fast.

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah, that quick. So they sent me to England, and I ended up as the Chief ___ Interpreter there in a B-66 wing. So they flew RB-66's, they flew over Europe. I remember they were taking pictures of everything, and then the U2's, when we got into the Cuban thing the U2's went and took pictures of Cuba and they took them into the Air Force PI's and said find the missiles, and the guy said what's a missile? So they called all of the commanders of the intelligence units back and raised hell because they had to give them to the CIA. Our guys couldn't interpret it. So he called me in, the commander when he come back, and says what the hell? I said well, your problem is you let the pilots pick the targets, and my troops could've did it by any castle and cathedral in Europe, because that's what your guys want to shoot. He says what's the solution? I said let me pick the targets, then I'll pick military targets, so they said oh, OK. So I did. I picked a little bridge in France, and they started building a new power plant next to it. Well I had stock in the company that was building the new power plant, so I had seen it and I knew what was going on. Anyway, they finished the new plant, and then every two or three days the B-66's were taking a picture of the bridge and the guys noticed it, and said hey, this airplane flying over a couple of times a week. So they turned it in to the Americans, and so they put up their French airplanes, forced our plane down, opened up the camera base, developed the film, and there was the pictures of the nuke. So France kicked us out. No more flying over. I went to a briefing of the guy in charge of all of the ___ infantry, things I don't even know. I don't know why our airplanes were taking pictures of that nuke. But I didn't stand up and tell him. But anyway, they kicked us out.

At what point sir were you in Vietnam?

Herman Bendfeldt: OK, well then I went back from there and they sent me to Rome Air Development Center, in the Research, and from there I went to Vietnam, '65.

'65.

Herman Bendfeldt: But see, when I was at Rome Air Development Center, I was an intelligence guy working with all of the engineers and scientists, and what I actually was doing, I'd go out and find out what they needed and then come back and tell them what to do. When they would start working on it, I'd evaluate whether it was meeting the need or not. Because the engineers and scientists really didn't understand what was going on with the troops, if you follow that.

Sure.

Herman Bendfeldt: As an example, they called me in and said we need, we don't have any, worked with Tactical Air Command Headquarters, I'm out, you got buddies down there, go down and get us some work. I said yeah, the head of Intelligence is a buddy of mine. So I went down there and told them. So he said all right, I'll see what I can come up with. So he sent a wire back and said he wanted a computer in a van and he had to have it within 90 days. So my forces called in and said what the hell's the matter with you? We're in research and ____, you can't do nothing in 90 days. I said well wait a minute, you sent me down there, and now I got to call them back and say we can't do it? You're embarrassing the hell out of me. And they said well, we have to break regulations for them. Tell them if he has a general sign the papers that we'll do it in 90 days. So I called him back and said hey, have the general sign. So had the four star general sign the paper and he don't deal with us. He sent it to the four star assistant's command who sent it to the three star that was over us, so it came with 11 stars on it and said got to have a computer van in 90 days. So then they said to me well what's it do? I said what do you mean what's it do? They want a computer in a van. They said no, no, no, you can't have a computer in a van. It's got to do something. So I said why don't you tell me that before? I can't go back down there. So we had just received a paper from Uncle Ramo which we had a standing contract, a level effort, and it told everything they could do. So I just went through and picked out things that I thought would be of interest to us, and because we already had the contract, we called them in and said we had to have this done in 90 days, and I got up and gave the briefing. And I'm reading what they wrote, you know, I took the bullets that I thought were interesting, and they said to me, hey, those things are just wafting, those are meaningless statements. Well I didn't dare tell them in front of my boss that I just copied theirs. There was a colonel that had just gotten out and went to work for him, and he looked at me and he says is that what I think it is? I said yes sir, that's what it is. So he said can we have a contract of meeting only. So they said yes. So then they come in and said we understand, we can do it. So they got the computer in the van. So then I was sent down to test it after they got it down to Florida, in England, so we were testing it and then we got a message that the TAC Commander, the four star wanted to see it. Well I didn't want him down there because this thing wasn't very damn good. So I told him the only time I was available was 9 o'clock Friday morning, knowing that that's the general's most important meeting time. He said I'll be there. So he came down with a three star. So I started briefing him and the three star, he turned to the three star and said what do you think? And the three star said well, I was a little doubtful before I come in, but now I'm getting a warm fuzzy. And the four star said don't you get a warm fuzzy. Every time you get a warm fuzzy, I get in trouble. The three star said well, not that warm and fuzzy. So they kept saying this looks good, this looks good. Finally I told the four star, look, we only had 90 days to do this, and I'm sure that it's not going to work exactly the way you want it, so you'll have some problems.

Because they kept saying how good it was. He said listen you, Citizen's Command never gives us anything what we want. It took you 90 years you wouldn't give us what we want. You give it to us and we tell you how to fix it. That's the way it works. And besides when it doesn't work good, that's good. We're going to use it for exercises and these guys think they know the answer to everything and when you get in the field during the war, nothing works. This is good practice. So we gave 'em that.

Interesting.

Herman Bendfeldt: Oh, then they sent me to Benwa. They said I had to go to Benwa on TDY. That's when I went to Vietnam. They said you're leaving tomorrow. My wife's in the middle of moving with a broken arm. And I told 'em. They said don't make no difference. You've got to leave tomorrow, and you got to get a physical and you better get going. You've got to have shots, physical, and dog tags. I said well, my wife's in the middle of moving. Nope, you got to go. So I went to get my physical. I went to them and told them I had to have a physical. They said you have an appointment? I said no. They said well you can't just walk in here and get a physical. You got to have an appointment. I said well that's good. They said why do you say that's good? I said well I'm supposed to go to Vietnam tomorrow. They said wait right here. Brought me in to the doctor right away. He says I haven't got time to give you a complete physical. How you feel? I said as a matter of fact, right here in my chest. He said don't matter if you're laying on the ground bleeding out of a major artery, you're going. So then I went to the shot place. Said I got to have shots today. They said you can't have 'em. The guy's off. I said good. Says we can't give any. I said good. They said why? I told them, and they said wait right here. Went to get dog tags. The dog tag guy's off. Said good. Wait a minute, why? So I got everything done in one day. So they sent me to Benwa. In Benwa there was all kinds of shootin' going on. But when I got off the bus, I was the only guy on the bus and I hadn't slept and I was really tired, and I threw my, but the bus driver got off and left me. I thought somebody would come and greet me. Nobody come. I was the only guy on the bus so I threw my bag out and I'd been issued a rifle which I knew nothing about, and I set down my bag and I was so disgusted I threw my hat on the ground and some airman walked by and said sir, your hat's on the ground. I said mind your own goddam business. And then a guy come by on a bicycle that knew me, and said hey, what are you doing here? I said I just got here. He said let's go get a drink. I said no, no, I'm tired and where's the billeting office? He said what did you say? Where's the billeting office? So he called his buddies over and said ask me again. Ask you what? What you just asked me. Where's the billeting office? They laughed like hell. They said you see those sandbag bunkers? You go find an empty bunk. So we went into the officer's club, and this was the 1st Air Commandos outfit. I could see these guys, they had cross draw pistols and Australian bush hats with a red feather in them. I said these ain't my kind of guys. So we went to the club and where the food is lamb's tongue and pickled pig's feet, they had a human foot up there. I said what the hell's that? They said oh, that's a VC foot. When new guys come in, they ask what we have to eat and we tell them and then we put the foot in their face, and they go ew-w-w. They thought that was funnier than hell. I'm thinking man, these ain't for me.

Yeah.

Herman Bendfeldt: So anyway, I went and found a bunk and there was a lot of shooting going on. Pretty soon I heard a ricochet and then another one. I said to this fellow, they're shooting at me. So there was a major sleeping over in the same bunker, so I woke him up and said hey, did you hear that? I didn't hear nothing. I said listen. And twik, I heard a ricochet again. I said you hear that? He said goddammit, you're getting combat pay, they have to shoot at something.

Now shut up. I got to fly another airplane in three hours and I'm tired. If you can't handle it, there's a bunker out there. It's half full of water and got snakes in it, but they can't shoot you. Now shut up. So welcome to Vietnam. I didn't meet the commander yet. But when I met him about three days later, he was in a t-shirt. I never found out what rank he was. He said welcome to the First Air Commando Squadron and the only organization in Vietnam that has over 100% VD rate. That's the way he introduced me. What the hell.

Wow.

Herman Bendfeldt: He said what are you? I said I'm an intelligence officer. He said another one? He said you're the fourth one this month. We don't need you. I said well let me use your phone and I'll call Saigon and see if I can find somebody I know. Maybe they can use me down there. So they did and I did and so I went to Saigon. Of course they didn't have any room to put me up. They said we don't have any place on the base. You got to go off base. I said well wait a minute. You've got all this goddam dark towers and everything and expect me to go to town and find a room? He said yup, that's what you're going to have to do. So that's what I had to do but that's another story. I'm getting too long-winded or do you want to know what happened?

No, that's fine. This has been a good hour long interview.

Herman Bendfeldt: So anyway I ended up there and they put me in the target shop and developed target materials and one night they come in, and they said the general says the reason we're losing so many airplanes is because of the radar in ____ Voo Airfield. So we're going to target it, find pictures of them. I looked and told them there's no radar on ____ Voo. Said there is no early warning radar. They said goddammit, if the general says there is an early warning radar there, there is one there. You better find it. So I said OK, so I just found a little building, I don't know what the hell it was, marked it, and they sent 30 105's over there and blew it all to hell. I have no idea what it was. Then they moved me up to the general's office and my job there was to find four targets a day to bomb. So they sent all the film to me and I'd look and find four targets a day to bomb, which is kind of stupid. The United States is having this war and here's the goddam captain over there picking the targets, with no previous knowledge of Vietnam or anything. And hell I had them blowing up every goddam thing, and then I remember one day they double fenced an area and were digging a big hole, so I said well it's double fenced and then it's got to be important, so I had it blew up. Then the colonel come out, he's the head of targets, and he said hey, you're in trouble. I said why? Well, you had us destroy this and here we got a message in from Washington says suspicious activity at this location and they wanted more coverage. Now what are we going to tell them? It's all blown to hell. I said well tell them it was dismantled. Dismantled, hell, there's bomb craters all around. I said well actually I didn't do it, the sergeant, I had a drunken sergeant and he never did nothing, just sit there in alcohol, I said he told me really. He said well the sergeant, he said wait a minute, and I said yeah, wait a minute, because the colonel is the one that approves it. So that was the end of that.

How long ultimately did you spend in Vietnam?

Herman Bendfeldt: I was sent there TDY probably six, well that's another problem because they sent me from Benwa down to Saigon and then when it come time for me to come home, I went to personnel and I said how come I haven't got any orders to come home? They said well, it's none of our business but the general has put you on a list with 16 other guys as indispensable and you can't go home without a replacement. I said when is my replacement coming? They says in the unlikely event you get a replacement, he's going to Benwa. He isn't coming here, so

you ain't going to get no replacement. So I went to the general and said you can't keep me here. That was a mistake. He picks up the phone and says don't let this man on any airplane without my personal OK. So man, was I stuck there.

When did you get out of the Air Force? Was that in '67?

Herman Bendfeldt: Yeah. Well – 20 years and one day. What happened was, anyway they wouldn't let me out of there. So finally a lieutenant asked me where something was, and I said well you just get here? He said yeah. I said what are you? He said I'm an Intelligence Officer. I said come with me. I took him into the general and said here, here's my replacement. So he OK'd me to leave. Then I had the Navy officer control the flights back to the States, and I'd go down there every day and he, one day a big airplane come in and he had two lines, this line gets on and this line can't get on the airplane and left it half empty. I said how come that? He said well, that's a charter airplane and you are not authorized for commercial air so you can't go on it. So I said well, shit if it's chartered, anyway I was so damn mad. I finally threatened to shoot him. I said if you don't get me out of here tomorrow, you put me on a commercial or else I still got my .38 and I'm going to shoot you. He says have you got your gear with you? I said yeah. He said well get on that airplane, a brand new C-141. So I got in and got in the back and it was body bags. So I rolled back of those body bags. That's how I got out of there.

Then what ultimately brought you back to Texas, because I know you're in Gladewater now.

Herman Bendfeldt: Well, OK, when I got back, I hadn't been back too long and first I had a buddy in personnel and he said we got orders for this major to go to Vietnam. And I'm telling you somehow he gets out of it, and we have to furnish a replacement and it's going to be you. So once you get notified, you can't retire. And I had 20 years and one day, so I put in my papers to get out. You had to have over 20, and I had 20 years and one day so I says that's it and I got out of it. I got out but I just took off my uniform and sat at the same desk and did the same work, ___ development center, for the next 22 years. So I put in 42 years. I got a letter here on my table that the Chief of Staff of the Air Force says that I did more than any single individual for Intelligence ground handling equipment than anybody.

That's great. And then what brought you to Texas in your retirement?

Herman Bendfeldt: My daughter. My wife had MS. She couldn't stand or anything. I had to take care of her. So my daughter said move down here and I'll help you. I moved out here and she moved to Alaska and left me here with her. It was a hell of a time taking care of her because she could only move her left arm and had to be tube fed and everything, so it was pretty rough. She lasted 7 years. She died last month.

Yes sir, sorry to hear that.

Herman Bendfeldt: My son died. He came down here and he died. So I lost both of them within a year. So my morale is not very good.

Yes sir. Well sir, hopefully being able to do this interview with us maybe will help your morale a little bit, because I know I've appreciated hearing these stories and I know future generations of Texans and others will appreciate hearing them as well, and most of all, I want to tell you thank you for your service on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everyone here at the General

Land Office. We all appreciate your service to our nation and this program is just one small way of saying thank you.

Herman Bendfeldt: OK, well actually in the final analysis I enjoyed my time and I've got a lot of good friends and I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Yes sir, well we appreciate very much, and like I mentioned before I started the interview, we're going to be sending you copies of this interview on CDs as well as a really nice certificate letter from Commissioner Patterson, too, and then also if you had any –

Herman Bendfeldt: I hope I did all right.

No sir, it's great. You had some of the best stories I've heard in quite a while and then sir, if you have any pictures or anything like that you'd ever want us to put in our file or put on our web site.

Herman Bendfeldt: I might have some.

When I mail all this stuff to you I'll put my card in there with my address and if you have anything you want to send me, feel free to do so.

Herman Bendfeldt: Oh by the way, they offered me Major if I stayed in. I said I'd rather be a retired Captain than a Major back in Vietnam. I'm out of here.

I can understand.

Herman Bendfeldt: And the CIA offered me when I was in Vietnam, they said the doctor wants to see you. I said the doctor? I never heard of such a thing. So I went to the doctor and he said how would you like to go to work for Air America? I didn't know Air America was CIA. I says no, I've got 19 years in, I'm not getting out. He said, no, it counts for retirement. I said does it count for promotion? He said yes. I said where do I go? He said I don't know. I said what will I do? He said I don't know, I was just told to ask you. So I said no, hell no. Then later on I found out I would've went to Laos. Remember we said we didn't have anything in Laos.

That's right.

Herman Bendfeldt: But that's where I would've gone. I met one of my buddies was there and he told me that's where I would've gone. He was there. He's having trouble now getting disability for being in that area and we say we didn't have anybody there, so he don't have any orders proving he was there.

Yeah, that's right.

Herman Bendfeldt: OK, I guess that's it.

Well sir again, I really do appreciate it and we'll be in touch again not too long from now.

Herman Bendfeldt: Thank you.

[End of recording]