

## Transcription: Billy Hatcher

---

*Today is Monday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Billy Hatcher. Mr. Hatcher is at his home in Fort Worth, Texas, and I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today. It's always an honor anytime we can interview a veteran for this program. The first question I guess is just tell us a little bit about your background and your childhood before you went in the service.*

**Billy Hatcher:** My name is Billy Hatcher. I came from Fairfield, Texas, to Fort Worth when I was in second grade, and then I grew up in Fort Worth, went to Dunbar High School, went to Tarrant County College for a while, didn't like the school, so I went to the Air Force.

*And what year did you join the Air Force?*

**Billy Hatcher:** 1970, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1970.

*1970. What persuaded you to sign up to serve?*

**Billy Hatcher:** My father asked me, he wanted me since I quit college, he talked me into going into the Air Force.

*And so in 1970 that was during Vietnam and all that sort of thing. Tell us a little bit about what your thought process was at that time.*

**Billy Hatcher:** I was in love with my country, and after dad talked me into going into the Air Force, I became \_\_\_ because I wanted to serve.

*And so after your dad persuaded you to sign up, how long was it before you actually went down and did the paperwork?*

**Billy Hatcher:** December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1970. I went down in December.

*And you got signed up there. Did you go to the processing center in Fort Worth?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, in downtown Fort Worth, 76101.

*OK, what were you thinking at that point? Were you excited or nervous?*

**Billy Hatcher:** I was excited about joining the Air Force.

*And so you get signed up, how long is it before they send you off to your basic training?*

**Billy Hatcher:** OK, they sent me December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1970.

*So very quickly then, like I guess a matter of days?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yeah, it was a matter of days.

*So there wasn't any time that they had you wait, or be in the delayed entry program or that sort of thing?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No sir.

*So you were right into it. Where did they send you to?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio for basic training there.

*Did they send you down on a bus?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No, we went to Dallas and they put us on a jet. I was flying there. I fell in love with flying. Get me a job flying!

*What was your basic training like?*

**Billy Hatcher:** It was fun meeting all the guys from around America and stuff, and we just enjoyed each other, learning how to be airmen.

*How long did you spend in training there?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Basic training was six weeks.

*Six weeks.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir.

*And so then when you get out of that, did you know what your specialty was going to be already?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, they had signed me up to become a B-52 two-tail gunner, but I had to go through combat training first.

*So where did you do combat training?*

**Billy Hatcher:** The first day was in Spokane, Washington, Fairchild Air Force Base.

*And what was that like?*

**Billy Hatcher:** It was scary. They put us in a prison war camp to train us, and then halfway through the training it was exciting, and we were learning so many things about combat training, about surviving if we got hurt and captured.

*And so you ended up ultimately becoming a tail gunner then?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, B-52 tail gunner.

*Tell us about that because that's definitely quite an aircraft.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, OK, I did my combat training and I finished the combat training there, and they sent me over to Fairchild Air Force Base in California for my second phase of combat training on the aircraft.

*Do you remember the first time you went up in a B-52?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, it was one of the most exciting things I've ever done in my life, to hear those eight engines crank up and we ran down the runway, and along, off into the wild blue yonder.

*How many people were on board the B-52 when you took off that time? Was it a regular crew or was it more people because of training?*

**Billy Hatcher:** It was a regular crew, six-man combat crew. All of us were going through training together.

*And what was the biggest thing they taught you during that training in terms of being a tail gunner?*

**Billy Hatcher:** They trained us on the computer and the radar, and how to, the first thing was just teaching us how to fly, I mean how to work together as a crew.

*Tell us a little bit about that process, what that was all about.*

**Billy Hatcher:** It was a six-man combat crew, the pilot, copilot, radar navigator, navigator, electronic works officer, and just we had to learn each other. The way it works, they train you with each position, and then they have about 300 or 400 crew members, and they pick six of you to launch at a time, and since all the aircraft are alike, you can operate each aircraft.

*Sure, tell us about some of the other crew members that you were in training with. Did you train with them for quite a period of time or did they move you around a lot?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Well the first six months of training in California together as separate crew members, we fly every day to learn the aircraft.

*How long would a typical training flight last?*

**Billy Hatcher:** A typical training flight would last about 8 hours.

*So where would you guys fly to?*

**Billy Hatcher:** We would fly up the coast of California to Washington state and then turn around and fly back, out over the ocean.

*Wow, so you got a lot of miles in that way.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir.

*What would you do during that entire 8 hours? Was it simulation of an actual mission?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, we'd simulate a mission and I'd get behind the radar and the guns and practice, sometimes they would hook up what they call a combat training computer to them, and I faced the aircraft for about 4 or 5 hours during the mission.

*Well, tell us about some of the aircraft that they would potentially have you going up against. I imagine they were MIG's in theory?*

**Billy Hatcher:** MIG's in theory, and every now and then they would send us on a live combat mission. They would send an Air Force phantom against a gunner.

*Tell us how that would work.*

**Billy Hatcher:** We'd launch out over the ocean and we'd wait, I mean we'd be flying on our mission, and then they would attack us with Air Force phantoms to test the gunner's skills to see if he could pick 'em up on radar. Most of the time we couldn't catch their \_\_\_ because they were so fast and they knew where we were, and the radar could pick up aircraft out to 10 miles out.

*Was there a way that you could simulate firing at them and knowing if you had hit them?*

**Billy Hatcher:** We would just, we'd lock onto them with radar and we'd practice firing, and they would practice firing at us. Most of the time we'd get blown out of the sky.

*Which I guess emphasizes the importance of fighter escort for a lot of those bombing missions.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yeah, so after we finished combat training that's what they would do, they would send up fighters to escort a plane where we would go.

*During one of those 8-hour missions, did you bring your own food with you? Were you able to eat at all during those 8 hours?*

**Billy Hatcher:** They would give us box lunches and we would take them up with us. We'd eat on our 8 hours, communicate together on the radar.

*What about the restroom, did you have a restroom or a head on board?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No restroom, we had to turn a bottle over and we'd have another little unit in case you had to use the restroom the other way.

*Yeah, so that was kind of improvised for long missions then.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, the gunner would be locked in a little section of the tail.

*Yeah, I mean that's kind of what I thought was that there wouldn't really be an on board lavatory, so that's definitely a long mission. So you would fly those 8-hour missions pretty continuously during training, was it every day you said?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Usually every day, or every other day.

*Would they give you weekends off?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, we'd get weekends off.

*So you were in that training for six months?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Six months in California, that's correct.

*And then what happened when you were done with your training there?*

**Billy Hatcher:** After I finished combat training, they sent me, they asked me what base I wanted to go to, and I told them I wanted to go to Carswell so they shipped me to Carswell to be upgraded to what they called electronic warfare, to be trained to drop nuclear weapons.

*And that was close to home for you, too.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yeah, it was right here in my home city. I was so happy to go home. I liked to stay home with my mom. During the day, I'd go to Carswell.

*Tell us about being stationed at Carswell then in the early 70s.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Carswell was a wonderful base. The weather was beautiful and it was full of B-52 bombers on the runway, in the hangars. We learned our combat mission and we would just communicate with each other and have fun being airmen.

*Sure. What was a typical day like for you then once you were at Carswell? How often would you fly on training missions?*

**Billy Hatcher:** We would fly every other day.

*Wow, so even after training you were still –*

**Billy Hatcher:** We were still upgrade status planning.

*And with the B-52, were there ever times that once you were done with training you were on alert status? I've heard some guys talk about how they had to live close to the bombers and that sort of thing.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, I would be on alert 4 days on and 3 days off.

*Tell us a little bit about what that was like, especially when you had all that down time that you couldn't go anywhere. How would you guys kill time?*

**Billy Hatcher:** We would watch television and play cards in the deluxe \_\_\_\_\_. So we'd spend 5 days on alert and 3 days off. And then we would get off alert and go home. Alert was boring, but it was part of training. We were trained to drop nuclear weapons, and we would stay there on alert with our planes and our bombs inside of them and they were guarded by security police. It was called a no lone zone, no one could get into the area where the aircraft were loaded unless someone was with him.

*Yeah, definitely during the height of the Cold War and the nuclear bombs and that sort of thing that people were so worried about. So you'd go there at Carswell, and they had an area that was completely secured.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Completely secured. They called it the alert facility and it would be right on the flat of the runway, and they would lock down something like 20 crews, let's see – about 5 crews at a time inside the facility and we stayed on alert until time to go back home.

*And I guess everything you needed was there in terms of food –*

**Billy Hatcher:** Food, yes sir, and you'd bring clothing with you and it was like a hotel in the ground. If the alert buzzer went off, everybody had to run to their aircraft.

*Were there times that you would have an alert go off that was training but you wouldn't know it was a training mission until later?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Well yes, there was a few times when they would transfer people to get to the aircraft, and then we'd crank up and sit there in the alert facility for about until they would call it off.

*And so it was only then that you would know that it was only a drill.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, then. You never knew whether it was a drill or whether it was the real thing we'd have to launch for the Russians.

*And if you guys were to launch, would you have flown over the North Pole? Would that have been the route?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No, our route was spread out – let me see which one – for Russia we would fly straight across America and then across the Pacific Ocean.

*OK, that was your route.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes, that was my route. Some of the aircraft would be on the other side of the earth and they would fly the other direction back into Russia.

*Sure. And I imagine during that time you got to know your crew really well.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, you knew your crew because you were flying with them 24/7 and you all went through it together and you already stayed together and you worked together.

*I imagine you would form a pretty close bond that way, too.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, you were a very nice, tight knit crew, because your life depended on the other members of the crew when you went into combat.

*Now you were tail gunner, but were there other gunners aboard, on the sides?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No sir, there was just the one tail gunner and the B-52 bomber.

*And that was it. So you were kind of just the flank security, but everyone else didn't have any sort of weaponry I guess.*

**Billy Hatcher:** No, everyone carried a pistol in case you get shot down.

*Yeah, that doesn't do a lot against a MIG.*

**Billy Hatcher:** No sir, there was just one tail gunner and he would be in the tail and that was it.

*What type of weapon was it? Was it a 50 cal?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Four 50-cal's. Four 50-caliber machine guns with radars and a computer hooked up to it. You didn't have to aim manually anymore. You could match buttons and they would lock onto the target automatically while you're on radar and you just track them into a range and you follow them at 10 miles out. The guns were capable of firing at about a mile or so out, and you pick 'em up 10 miles out and then you fire when he gets within about a mile of the aircraft.

*Did you ever have a chance to fire against live targets like the pole targets, that sort of thing?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No, we just used the computer hookup \_\_\_ inside the aircraft and it would simulate the planes coming in to attack us. We'd have live fire over the Gulf of Mexico but we never fired at any aircraft.

*Tell us what the live fire drills were like then flying over the Gulf.*

**Billy Hatcher:** We'd fly out over the Gulf and we'd have a special zone for the aircraft to fire, and we'd start firing when our commander, he gave us permission to fire, we'd start firing on, we'd just fire out, and then what I would do, after I fired, all the shells come out of the bottom of the aircraft on the machine gun, and what I would do, and other gunners, too, we learned that you could lock on the shells going down and fire on them, the shell casings. That was fun.

*How long did you spend at the station at Carswell?*

**Billy Hatcher:** I was at Carswell for my entire time come to think of it.

*Wow.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Except for when I went on combat duty across, up at a post in Vietnam.

*Well tell us then about your combat tour.*

**Billy Hatcher:** OK, my combat tour, we went to, we launched out of Carswell on some little airplane with wings. We went to Florida and then we picked up a B-52 bomber and we flew it from there, from Florida to Guam, across the United States. About 7:00 in the morning we took off because we flew across the United States. We launched up, picked up a tanker full of fuel and we had aero-fueling. The planes would give us, the KC-135 would give us fuel and we'd continue our mission. We were flying, it took me 19 hours to fly from Florida to Guam.

*Wow, that's a long day.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yeah, the sun came up behind us when we were taking off. I watched the sun all the way across the sky until we landed in Vietnam. Until we landed on Guam, the sun was with me. That was the longest day I've ever seen the sun, 19 hours.

*Yeah, that's crazy when you do that. How long did you spend in Guam?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Six months on Guam and then they switched me, I left Guam. I was supposed to have been six months in Vietnam. I was on Guam three months and then they switched me to Thailand for three months.

*What year was this, '71?*

**Billy Hatcher:** 1971 and '72.

*When did you actually get into Vietnam?*

**Billy Hatcher:** We flew over Vietnam, the Air Force B-52 crews would never land in Vietnam because it was too dangerous. Our aircraft, they would blow 'em up from outside the perimeter.

*You guys would always fly out of Guam.*

**Billy Hatcher:** We'd fly out of Guam or either we'd fly out of Thailand. The missions out of Guam was something like, I think it was 12 hours out of Guam, from Guam to Vietnam. We'd fly to Vietnam, we'd drop our bombs, we'd turn around and fly back to Guam and land.

*And that would take you 12 hours total?*

**Billy Hatcher:** 12-hour missions, yes sir.

*What were some of the missions that you guys would have? I can imagine you were bombing North Vietnam -*

**Billy Hatcher:** North Vietnam, that was in December of 1970. The president, they were signing a peace treaty, or trying to sign a peace treaty for Vietnam, and the Vietnamese left the peace table and went and called off the peace meeting, and the president of the United States wouldn't take it, so he set up special missions to destroy part of North Vietnam and Hanoi. When we did that for him, December 16<sup>th</sup>, the mission started December the 19<sup>th</sup> and we continued flying missions against them. Then the day after Christmas, they wanted the Vietnamese to come back to the peace table and we flew into North Vietnam and destroyed part of Hanoi. That was the first night I saw, on December 25<sup>th</sup>, they attacked us with surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft shells, and fighter interceptors, and that's the night I saw my first B-52 shot down with my first crew on it.

*I've read about that bombing mission in 1970. I know a lot of POW's had said it was the first time they had seen the U.S. strike the North Vietnamese and how they were excited that this was actually happening even though they potentially could have been hit, too.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, we wouldn't have hit them. We knew exactly where they were at so we would just continue our missions and fly in there and drop bombs on the part of the city to force them to come back to the peace table, and they did. It started December the 25<sup>th</sup> and we flew the

missions. It was one of the 10 days of the worst combat of the war, and in the history books they called us the Doves of Peace, because we were trying to bring the peace, bring the people back to the peace table.

*What was going through your mind the first time you flew that combat bombing mission?*

**Billy Hatcher:** It was OK on the first part of December, but on December the 25<sup>th</sup>, that was the first time we seen they attacked the B-52's from the ground, and we were flying 10 miles up in the sky and they were using surface-to-air missiles that could reach us, and anti-aircraft, heavy anti-aircraft that could reach us, and it was the most fighting things that I'd ever experienced in my life to see my friends being shot out of the sky and they were trying to shoot me out of the sky.

*Exactly. And your missions were at night primarily?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, we would fly at midnight every night and for 11 days straight, and they would be waiting on us every night that we came in, and we knew they were waiting on us, but it was what the president wanted, so we had to bomb them until they came back to the peace table. And they came back and signed the peace treaty, too.

*Yeah, definitely a well known mission because like I said I've read about that and am familiar with some of that history. How did you deal with losing some of your fellow airmen that you had trained with?*

**Billy Hatcher:** It was hard to deal with it, but the missions had to be continued, they had to be continued even if you lost men. I think we lost out of 50 aircraft launched, we came back with 25. That's more aircraft than we ever lost in the war.

*Yeah, and I know that you mentioned, too, the fighter interceptors. Did you see any of those yourself personally?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No, but one of my best friends shot one of them down. He got his, but the rest of us, we were just fighting, I mean we were just riding through the fight. It was like riding through a firework show.

*Sure. I imagine it's got to be a pretty helpless feeling at a certain point when you are flying like that and there's nothing you can do, and it's just a matter of fate if you get hit or not.*

**Billy Hatcher:** It's a matter of fate you can get killed. Well, the radar could pick up everything that was flying towards you and around you, so you stayed in your seat and you concentrated on your mission and watched. Sometimes I would direct bomb runs from the tail if a plane behind lost his bottom radar, the tail gunners would take over and guide him back to the center line and then he would drop the bombs from you. Each aircraft we flew in \_\_\_\_, and there were three B-52's together. One would be one mile back and one mile up in the sky.

*Tell us how as the tail gunner you would help guide them.*

**Billy Hatcher:** OK, we would set the B-52 up on our radar on the center line, and we would guide him to the area and then after the first aircraft dropped his bomb, there would be a cue for the second aircraft to drop his bomb.

*OK, I got you. And you were able to talk to them over the radio, too?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, you'd talk to the pilot of the second aircraft and guide him behind you to a certain, I mean to make sure he was directly behind you, and use the radar. Our radar would plot aircraft behind and you'd guide him back to the center line and once he reached the center line where you are, you would guide him until it was time for us to drop the bomb. They would holler "hack" and everybody would start dropping bombs right behind each other.

*Wow, and you did that you said for 11 straight days?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes, 11 straight days.

*What was it like when that was finally over?*

**Billy Hatcher:** It was OK. They skipped us out and sent us back to America. But I was just happy to get out of the combat because it was so frightening, I was ready to quit halfway through the missions, but the mission had to be accomplished, so we continued doing what we were trained to do.

*So you finished off those 11 straight days of bombing missions and then you were back to Guam, and then it wasn't much longer I guess then you said that they sent you back to Carswell?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir.

*Tell us what that was like getting back to Carswell having been to Vietnam.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Getting back to Carswell, it seemed like it wasn't real just to come back from the war, but it was a good thing to come home, and we just, when we got back we trained more and more in case we needed to go back again. Then the war was over.

*How were you treated at that time by the civilian population?*

**Billy Hatcher:** We were treated like heroes and especially the B-52 members because it was one of the most magnificent planes they'd ever built.

*That's good to hear that you were treated well in Fort Worth.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yeah, I was treated well.

*So then after that, how much longer did you stay? I think you mentioned to me before you got out in 1974?*

**Billy Hatcher:** In 1974, they were having what they called a reduction in forces, and they asked us if you want to get out, if you go back to college we'll let you out six months early. So I signed up to go back to college. I got out and I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross twice, and an Air Medal six times.

*That's amazing. That is really quite an honor to have the Distinguished Flying Cross.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, it is.

*Tell us about when you were awarded that, about the ceremony and that sort of thing.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Back in the States, it was packed up and they sent it through the squadron, and the squadron would give you the paperwork saying that you were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medals. They usually didn't have a big ceremony because there were so many of us.

*Oh really, I thought they would have a little bit of a ceremony.*

**Billy Hatcher:** They did at debriefings. They would bring us up to the front and then tell the rest of the crews what we had done.

*And you received the Distinguished Flying Cross for those missions over Vietnam?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, there were two Distinguished Flying Crosses each.

*For the same 11-day period?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir.

*So were there two different particular instances they cited?*

**Billy Hatcher:** They cited the 10 missions over North Vietnam because they were such critical missions and we faced such danger and atmosphere trying to accomplish the missions that the president asked for us to be awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses for what he called contribution to the mission of the Air Force.

*Yeah, that definitely takes some heroism to fly a mission like that when you know that there are really good odds that you're not going to return.*

**Billy Hatcher:** A lot of us didn't return.

*Did you ever talk to any of those family members of those that lost loved ones in those missions?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No sir, they kind of kept us separated from families and stuff. We were just the only ones you ever really could see was your crew members. The families we weren't, we didn't communicate with the families too much.

*Sure. Now at this time were you married?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No sir, I was single.

*Did you keep in touch with your folks back home?*

**Billy Hatcher:** I'd write mom and dad about once a day.

*But I guess they didn't really know what you were doing in terms of some of the missions until later, right?*

**Billy Hatcher:** No sir, they didn't know it, what we were doing. They just know I got to Vietnam. But it was strange they way they sent us to Vietnam, when we were on alert, they came into the facility and all these generals came in and said the ones that going, pack your gear, and you're going on a special mission, and you can't tell your parents or anybody where you're going.

*Yeah, interesting. So when you decided to get out, what college did you end up going to?*

**Billy Hatcher:** I went to Tarrant County College for a while, for that six months, and then I transferred to Texas Western University.

*And you stayed in Fort Worth the whole rest of your life pretty much?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir.

*That's great. And as a Vietnam veteran and an Air Force veteran, are you pretty active with any veteran's organizations or groups?*

**Billy Hatcher:** Yes sir, the Disabled American Veterans. They monitor my paperwork and stuff.

*That's great. And how did you hear about us for the interviewing?*

**Billy Hatcher:** It was in the Veterans Land Board paper that I received in the mail. I wanted to call and see if I could get in there.

*Absolutely. Well sir, we're really glad that you did call us and this program is all about trying to preserve these stories and these memories for posterity. We have documents here at the Land Office that go back 300 plus years. We have the original Register that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand, with the original settlers of Texas. We have the Land Grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at The Alamo. So our hope is that we're going to add these interviews to those archives and that potentially hundreds of years from now people can listen to these different interviews and get a little bit of an idea of what it meant to serve in the military during that time. With that in mind, is there anything that you'd want to say to somebody maybe listening to this a hundred years from now?*

**Billy Hatcher:** I'd say to them support the United States of America and treat her with love and serve her if you can because she will serve you when you get back. The military, she will serve you well and she'll love you if you love her.

*Yes sir, that's well said. Well sir, I want to really thank you today for letting us interview you, and Commissioner Patterson is a Vietnam veteran himself, and there's a lot of us here that are veterans, but even those that aren't, everybody here at the Land Office wants to thank you for your service to our country, and this program and this interview is just one small little way that we can say thank you for your service.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Thank you sir.

*Yes sir, well thank you and like I mentioned before, we're going to send you copies of this interview on CD in a week or so, and along with a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson.*

**Billy Hatcher:** OK, thank you sir.

*And then also if you have any pictures that you'd want us to put in your file, feel free to send those to us as well, and I'll give you all the information on that.*

**Billy Hatcher:** OK, I have a lot of B-52 pictures and stuff from even when we were flying.

*We'd love to have those. We'd love to put those even on our web site if possible.*

**Billy Hatcher:** OK, I'll send 'em to you.

*Yes sir, that sounds great. All right sir, well we'll be in touch and once we get these CD's we'll get them in the mail to you.*

**Billy Hatcher:** Thank you very much.

*Thank you, have a great day.*

*[End of recording]*