

## Transcription: Jimmy Pickens

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*Today is Friday, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009. My name is James Crabtree and I'll be interviewing Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Pickens. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Colonel Pickens is at his home in Abilene, Texas, and 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 today to talk to us. It's an honor for us, and usually the first question we always ask is just to tell us a little bit about your background and your boyhood and your life before you entered the military.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Yeah, fine, I'm very, very happy to do this because I'm a historian as well as a teacher and a retired guy, and I want to make sure to try and get these snippets, these stories, put them in the record, put them into a historical form so that our stories will not be forgotten. History is such that it is quite easy to get lost, and like at the commissary here at Dias Air Force Base, I periodically see an old gentleman who can barely move, and yet he's out doing his shopping and he wears a hat and on it is P-47 Thunderbolt. He was a World War II P-47 pilot who was shot down over Germany and all that, and his story, like all of our stories, needs to be recorded because he's 90 years old and he's not gonna be around much and he won't be able to tell that story. So that's the reason why I'm doing this.

*Yes sir, well we're glad you are.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Anyway I was born on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1935, and that's back in the old days back when the earth was cooling. I was born in Silver City, New Mexico, a small town in the southwestern part of New Mexico, to my father, my mom and dad. My dad was a transplanted Texan and he had come to New Mexico and he became a government hunter and trapper and game warden.

*And they call that area Little Texas, don't they?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** No, not that part, not the southwestern side.

*Oh, I'm thinking of the southeast.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Now the southeast side, yes, that would be Little Texas. But dad had come out there. He tried to make his way and he was born and raised in east Texas, and he came to west Texas to work in the oil patch, and found out that's too darn hard work and he didn't get enough money, so he worked his way west, to work as a trapper and hunter. As a result, then I have two older brothers and my mom was a farm girl from Oklahoma, and they lived a wonderful life and raised their family there. Fact is, my father, later he worked his way from trapper and hunter all the way to head the Game & Fish Department in the state of New Mexico, and that was about 1960. But anyway, so my background was quite simple. Me and my brothers learned to hunt and fish and love the outdoors, and to ride horses and set traps and to fire weapons and all that kind of stuff, so we just had a really enjoyable kind of life. My dad never, he and mom's idea was that we were not to live, we might live in a city, but we were supposed to act like country kids. So he taught us. We always had chores and he had animals and everything else and eventually, in my later years, we moved to Albuquerque and then to Santa Fe since my dad got into higher positions in the Game & Fish Department, and dad bought a farm north of Santa Fe

in a little Mexican Indian town called Tasuki, and that's where us kids really spent our formative years. Of course our formative years were during World War II.

*I was going to ask you about that since you said you were born in '35, so I guess you would've been 6 years old when Pearl Harbor was bombed.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** That's right.

*Do you remember that day?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** And I recall that. I recall it, it's sort of a vague recall. I vividly remember VE Day and VJ Day, but I just vaguely remember the Pearl Harbor Day. Of course we then were raised, us boys, we were playing war all the time, playing soldier, digging trenches and foxholes and doing all that, fighting the Japs and the \_\_\_ our formative years. And so that was sort of our background. Of course watching newsreels and of course airplanes fascinated me, and it was my, right then and there, that I was going to be a pilot. That's the way I worked. Ultimately because of my eyesight, I wasn't a pilot. I ended up as a navigator, but flying airplanes, that was where I was. And anyway, and by the way, in 1950, my father was involved in taking Smokey Bear, the living bear that was the living symbol of the anti-forest fire bear for the Forest Service, we kept that bear for about two or three weeks at our home and I was able to take care of little Smokey.

*Wow, that's pretty neat. I don't think a lot of people nowadays realize that they actually had a real bear as the original Smokey Bear.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** That's right, and the fact is, I'm involved right now, there is a film producer who is working on some things because my dad took 16 mm movies of Smokey and all that kind of stuff, and I'm working with this guy on narrating the Smokey Bear portion of this movie that he's developing. But it was a pretty unique thing because not many folks got a chance to play with a little black bear like that, and especially one that later on became so famous after dad took him back to Washington and they put him in the zoo there, he became so famous and was getting so much mail that they gave him his own zip code. So the bear with the zip code. But anyway, my brothers, my oldest brother is a career Army officer retired as a full colonel from the Army. He was an intelligence guy and Special Forces guy and that sort of stuff, ranger, paratrooper, and he went to Washington when he graduated from high school to work for the FBI and go to school at Georgetown. My middle brother and I, when we graduated we went to New Mexico A&M, and New Mexico A&M down in Las Cruces was a land grant college, so it had a mandatory first two years of ROTC. Of course the Air Force was my choice, and I stayed in ROTC through the four years and in 1957 I was commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Air Force, and that's another interesting story because my oldest brother had come back to New Mexico to finish up his college, and in 1956, he was in Army ROTC and he was the commander of the ROTC Cadet Corps in the spring of 1956, he was the commander because the Army and the Air Force switched back and forth being commanders. Then in the fall, I was the commander as the Air Force guy. So that's a unique circumstance for New Mexico A&M, now New Mexico State. They had Pickens' back to back as commanders of the ROTC unit.

*Sir, what was the Air Force like in 1957?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** In 1957, of course that was when the transition was taking place going from a propeller-driven Air Force to a jet Air Force, and when I went to navigator flight school, I went

to Harlingen, Texas, a town on the tip end down by Brownsville where the Rio Grande empties into the Gulf of Mexico, and when my class graduated, about half of them went to B-52's, the very same B-52's which are still flying today, 50 years later.

*That was your class of navigators?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** That was my class of navigators.

*That's amazing they are still flying those.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** The B-52's were coming online, and so of course they had a great requirement for navigators because they had EWO's (electronic warfare officers), they had bombardiers, and they had navigators. So they had three nav's onboard, and there was this tremendous sudden requirement. Also they were transitioning from KC-97's to KC-135's, and also the C-130 was coming online, and the C-130 is still flying. So all of my guys except for a small group of us, there were about four of us guys who stayed in Harlingen to be navigator instructors because they were increasing the size of the navigator training classes to fill these slots in the Air Force. So I stayed as an instructor and a few other guys went to, at that time they were F-89's, F-101's, because we still had a big air defense operation because of the Soviet man bomber threat. But that was basically it. Like we flew T-29's which were reciprocating engine, propeller-driven airplanes. I got a couple of thousand hours in those. And we never flew above about 12,000-15,000 feet. They were pressurized. And then I spent four years down there total, and then in 1961, again because of the Air Force was expanding, so they expanded ROTC. Of course Air Force academy wasn't on the line yet. The ROTC was not providing enough officers for all these air crews, so they expanded the officer training school, OTS. They called them 90-day wonders. We had aviation cadet programs at Harlingen, but we then needed to expand the officer corps for all these different jobs. Again, the Air Force was expanding. So I went up there as an instructor, and while I was there I was not flying as an instructor, I was training college graduates who had no ROTC and turning them into second lieutenants at the end of 90 days.

*Wow.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** I still had to fly because we had to maintain our proficiency, so I flew with anybody in anything I could. The 433<sup>rd</sup> troop carrier wing which was at Kelly was flying C-119's, and I would go over there and fly with those guys. Then I did get to be an instructor flight examiner at Kelly, and we had one T-29 and a C-54 and a 118, and a C-97, which gave me a chance to fly, we flew a lot of Central American missions supporting the embassies all the way down to Panama, and then also I got to take some NATO people on a tour of Europe, and that sort of stuff. So I still kept the proficiency in that.

*To go back a little bit, sir, to being a navigator, because that seems like a pretty complex position, obviously a vital position, what to you was the most challenging thing about learning to become a navigator?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** The most challenging thing, radar was easy but we had old radar sets, and the radars weren't as sophisticated as they are now. Now you get a radar set and you look in a radar scope and you can pick out specific, individual things and all that. Back in those days, the old radars were just it could tell you where a mountain was and tell you where Dallas was and things like that, and tell you where a big thunderstorm was, but it was not discriminatory. So radar was pretty easy. It was the celestial navigation because we did a lot of navigation by the stars. So it

was hard work, and then getting to identify the stars and then getting the accuracy of taking a sextant and measuring an altitude of a star while your airplane was pitching up and down and doing all that kind of stuff, and was the thing that was the most demanding of all.

*You mentioned, too, that on some of those bombers and planes they would have two or three navigators. Was that for redundancy purposes?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** That was because the job that it was was so complex and required so much time and all that, that you needed a guide. Sort of like what they did, we thought fighter airplanes, you could really do your job very well with just one guy in there. Then they discovered that woops, wait a minute, like with the F-4, they had a guy in the back seat, the other who was a navigator because you had all this different equipment to run and you just get overwhelmed by it. And that was the way it is like in a B-52, its job was dropping bombs and how do you get there. Well you have an electronics warfare officer who is responsible to make sure that the airplane gets through the SAM's and all that kind of stuff, and he had a full time job getting you there. Then the bombardier was the one, or the radar guy, radar nav bomb, he had to navigate the airplane as well as drop the bomb on the target. Yeah, those guys. And so it was just merely the fact that they were overwhelmed. Of course as the Air Force progressed and with things like the F-4 and the Strike Eagle and things like that, the F-15, they found out that you really need, one guy needs to fly the airplane, one guy needs to take care of getting the bomb on the target, and that's like the B-1's. We got B-1's here at Dias and we have two pilots, two nav's. The two pilots really are redundant, where the nav's, one guy is protecting the aircraft with electronics, and electronics is where it's at today, and the other guy is putting the bomb on the target. Of course the threat in Afghanistan and Iraq is rather limited, except from the fact that you got to be careful. Like if we do something with Iran, those guys, the Russians have given them some very sophisticated AAA kind of stuff and it's dangerous.

*Speaking of dangerous, of all the years that you flew and routine missions and not, were there some that stand out to you as being particularly dangerous times you were flying, whether it was a storm or just the place you were flying into, or that sort of thing?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Oh yeah, the thing that we found, and that's a description that air crews use, you know, what is flying? Flying is nothing more than hours and hours of boredom broken periodically by periods of absolute stark fear. Those are those circumstances that will happen and they will occur at very, in many cases totally unexpected times. You will be flying along and suddenly an engine will explode, and everything turns to crap very quickly. Or something like that. But bad weather was extremely, had put me in some very, very bad circumstances sometimes, and that was because I was flying airplanes that flew low altitude. As long as you fly at low altitude, you are in that weather and bad things can happen. Like when I went to Japan in 1964, I got there in June. The Gulf of Tonkin didn't happen until August, and so my unit which assigned primarily to flying outside cargo support of in-country in southeast Asia – the Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand – we were tied with the Army unit and the Marine units at Okinawa, which was 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade, and the – I can't remember whether it was 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines or 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division in Okinawa.

*Well it's 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines – it probably was at that time, too.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** OK, I think it was 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine. Anyway we had, so what they needed, we operated with them. When we got the call, the alert for the Gulf of Tonkin, then what we did was we went on alert because they were telling us that we may have to air drop the 173<sup>rd</sup>

Airborne in some place. We didn't know where, whether it would be the southern part of North Vietnam or exactly where. So anyway, that was our operation, and in 19- I can't remember, I think about '65 or '66 after we took all those guys into Vietnam, we had to resupply them. I know in the Philippines, I think it was Subic Bay, yeah, Subic Bay they brought a ship in with a whole bunch of rockets, hundreds of tons of 2.75-inch foldington rockets that the Marines at Chuai were shooting at the bad guys, their A-4's. And they need them right away, so they couldn't take the time to get them there by ship. So we went to Subic Bay, picked up a full load of these rockets, and shuttled them to Chulai every day for 7 days because they needed them badly. Well, it just so happened that there was a typhoon sitting out there in the South China Sea, and here we were in a 124 non-pressurized, low altitude, we flew usually about 6,000 to 10,000 feet, 205 knots, and we went every day through the typhoon going to Vietnam and through the typhoon coming back from Vietnam. So we were in the typhoon twice a day for seven straight days, and let me tell you, that is not a pleasant situation because we were, and I mean, the rain was so bad, the water was so thick in the atmosphere that I couldn't see more than a mile in front of the airplane with our radars. The turbulence was severe. But what do you do? The guys needed the weapons, we provided them, and we were gonna go do it, and we did it for seven straight days. I'll tell you it was scary because for two solid hours every day we knew we were going to get battered around and struck by lightning and turned every which way but loose, and all we could hope was that the airplane stayed together, and we had 50,000 pounds of rockets with us, see.

*I would think being struck by lightning with the payload to that might be a little hairy, but...*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Those were the really scary times, and also just making approaches, when the weather, during the rainy season in Vietnam, in some of those fields because we were the only airplane capable of carrying those big communications trailers. They were huge things, 50 feet long, weigh about anywhere from 30,000 to 50,000 pounds, and they would fit inside our airplane just with inches to spare. Once you got it in, of course it was not gonna come out except if you open the nose doors and pull it out very, very slowly. We would go into places, you know the way the Marines are, they never go to a nice place. They would go to some godforsaken place back there in the boonies, surrounded by the bad guys always, they never seemed to go where there were dancing girls and all that other kind of stuff, and then we would have to go in there and take 'em that stuff, and when the weather got bad, there was hardly any radar assistance or anything else like that. It was just flying by the seat of your pants trying to get that stuff in there, and the weather would really get doggy. It would be just absolutely miserable – low ceilings, rain and everything else, but very few navigation aids – and we would get in there and try and find the airport and make the landing. Usually they were PSP'd – do you know what that is?

*No I don't -*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Pure Steel Planking, it's old World War II stuff that they used to put down -

*Oh, OK, yeah. OK, yeah.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** - on a runway. And I would pave 'em with concrete, but in those days they just were actually old World War II and old French things that were in there. It was really, really, you make a mistake and you just die in a smoking hole in the ground.

*Yeah.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** So those were the kinds of things. Periodically we always got shot at, but small arms and as long as we didn't have explosives on board, they could shoot holes in the old airplane and it wouldn't affect her at all. So when we were on the ground however, sometimes they would shoot 130mm rockets at us, and sometimes they would shoot mortar rounds at us, and those kind of things. But it got to be whether it was just, we always believed in the old silver bullet concept. We're gonna be all right unless God has a bullet for us, and we can't do anything about that.

*I've also heard it described too, as a big sky, little bullet theory.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** That's exactly right. The worse thing they ever did to us, we were being stupid, we were flying a low-level support mission down into the delta, and we were going to terminate the mission over in Bangkok, Thailand, so the load master took a trash can, that we always carried trash cans on the airplane because we were just a big trash hauling airplane, and we filled it with San Miguel beer, poured ice in on top of it and set it in the back of the airplane. Then we took the cargo and put it in and all that. We said, well when we're going down here, let's go fly low-level and see if we can't see any VC or NVA or stuff like that. Well we were flying along there and suddenly wham! It sounded like when you got hit with a small arms round, it was like somebody taking a baseball bat and hitting on the side of an aluminum building, and we got wham! And the old load master called and said hey, we just took a round, where'd we get hit? That bullet went right through the bottom of that trash can and that round went in there and the concussion of it broke every bottle of beer, the whole thing. So we landed in Bangkok and all we had was beer mixed with ice and shreds of glass. But it was great flying. I mean flying there, and also I was flying trash haul and I had some friends in 130, so I had some friend flying B-57's, close air support, and things like that. So whenever I was in country, I was always seeing my friends and we were always sharing war stories and doing stuff like that.

*How long, were you stationed at a base there in South Vietnam for a period of time?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** No, I was stationed in Japan, but we would go TDY to in country. That was back in the days when they were counting people, and as long as we didn't stay in country 30 days, we wouldn't count. So if we would stay 29 days, it was OK. That was like I say, they were bean counting, and so we would go down there and spend two to three weeks shuttling in country. We went to all the bases, all the way from Danang in the north to Bintui in the south and Chulai, and \_\_\_tuit and Plaku, Benoir, Tomsenu, you name it, we were there. So I flew officially we began recording combat missions when we were in about 1966, and I got over 150 combat missions in that period of time – 300, 400 combat hours. But I flew 2,500 hours of flying time.

*That's a lot, yeah.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** So we spent a lot of time there, but it wouldn't count if we would go in country and then go out country to Thailand or something like that, even though we were supporting the 105's that were flying the missions up north and all that kind of stuff, that didn't count as a combat mission. They would count it only, there was all the bureaucratic stuff that count. But I spent three years flying in country. Every month I was there, like I say, flying those missions and all that kind of stuff. But it was very fulfilling because the fact that we were doing what we were trained to do. If you're trained to go fight a war, then you go fight it. There's nothing worse than training all the time and then not being able to use all that training.

*During that time over there, sir, when you were flying those missions in Vietnam, did you ever encounter enemy aircraft or was it such that they didn't even fly much?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Oh no, if we would've, we would've been dead meat because we were just a target. We only took small arms automatic weapons fire when we were low, making approaches into these places, except one time. We were flying over Laos, we were coming from Danang going to I think Kurat in central Thailand, and we were over a section of Laos right near the Mekong River that they were fighting over it and somebody, I don't think it was intentional, but we got some 37mm fire, and when you see that flack occur and you are at 8,000 feet and that's right in their wheelhouse, it's a scary thought. We were big and slow and easy to hit if they would've wanted to hit us. That's why I don't think they were either accidentally, they had missed shooting at the airplanes that were dropping bombs on them or that they were just new guys and they didn't do a good job. So we did not have any of that. I had friends who flew up north and one friend that the guy was snakebit. I'd fly with him and we'd lose an engine or do something else like that, and he transitioned to B-66's flying EWO missions up over the north, and on his second mission he got shot down by a MIG and spent six and a half years in the Hanoi Hilton, those kind of things. Again, big sky, small bullet, circumstances like that.

*During that time when you were doing that flying, I guess you were married at that point? Was your wife back then in Japan, Okinawa?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Yes, my wife and girls were in Japan, and so I would come back and get a week off after every one of my missions down south and we would have an enjoyable time and then I would kiss my family goodbye and I'd be gone for another two to three weeks.

*And you did that for about three years?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** I did that for three years, from '64 through '67. We were in for the big build-up and the big intensity of the war when it happened. We opened all the new bases, carried in all their new radars and towers and things like that. We always tried to make a rule that we were the first big airplane to land on their runways and we would always tap the brakes and leave rubber tire marks on it just to say that the 22<sup>nd</sup> troop carrier squadron was there.

*When you were in country, did you have any communication with your family back in Okinawa by phone, or - ?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** No, that was back in the days when you never, there was no way. In an emergency you could get it through the operations links that the way we received our missions and our flight orders and things like that, but that was only extreme emergencies. Otherwise we were just gone.

*That definitely is a sacrifice on the family's part to have a loved one go for 30 days at a time and not have any contact.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Oh, it certainly was. I mean my wife was, she was a trooper. She had to take care of everything and then I would come home and be there for a week and get things straightened out the way I could and then there I was gone again. My wife served 23 years in the United States Air Force just like I did and she had the much tougher job.

*So when that three-year period ended, where did you go to after that?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Oh, after that then I had a choice. I was fortunate. They selected me to go to the U.S. Air Force Academy as an instructor, or to the, and I had another assignment which was to fly with the 81<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Wing which flies Air Force 1. So there were my two choices.

*Those are both good choices.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** They were great choices, but I said hey, I don't want to, it's prestigious and all that to fly Air Force 1, but I wanted to be with my family. So I chose to go to the Air Force Academy, which was a great, I mean that was the finest group of people that you would ever want to serve with.

*What were you instructing?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** I was instructing the 4<sup>th</sup> classmen in Air Force, first of all I taught the 4<sup>th</sup> classmen which was the freshmen. I taught them on military history. With the 3<sup>rd</sup> classmen, I was teaching them to be teachers so they could teach the 4<sup>th</sup> classmen how to be cadets. Then I also, we had a navigator, we had airplanes assigned there, and we gave the kids a semester of basic navigation training, so I was flying T-29's and teaching the kids navigation and weather, and also taught them astronomy because we were still teaching celestial navigation and that type of stuff. And by the way, my last 4<sup>th</sup> class, I left the Academy in 1970, and the 4<sup>th</sup> class that entered in '69 is the class that presently has the chief of staff of the United States Air Force, the commander of combat command, the commander of special ops command, and their most famous guy is the guy who is Sully Sullenberger who is the hero of the Hudson.

*Oh yeah, a famous pilot. So that's a pretty prominent class then.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Yeah, and to me, they were just 1,200 little shaved heads, scared to death kids that they came in. But that was my last contribution. But anyway I spent three years there doing that. Then I got selected to go to graduate school, went to grad school at the University of Arizona.

*And I know you said ultimately you ended up there at Dias Air Force Base in Abilene. What were you doing at the end of your active duty career?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Well, let me fill in that little space because after I graduated from grad school, then I went back to Vietnam and spent a year at Tom Sinut in the 834<sup>th</sup> Air Division which was running the C-130 operation in country, and part of my job then was not only scheduling and doing all that part of the 130's, but also was to brief the commander of 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force, the four-star who was running the Air Force operation. I briefed him daily. So I did that seven days a week.

*So that was around 1971?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** That was '71, '72. The fact is, I left, and by the way just a sidelight, I think people might in historical record and all that sort of stuff, I told you my oldest brother was a U.S. Army guy. I saw my oldest brother more while I was in Vietnam than I had seen him any of the other time except when we were growing up.

*That's amazing.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** We just happened to get stationed together and see each other and do all that kind of stuff, and it was just the weirdest kind of things. Like for example in 1961 before we went to Vietnam, I was on my way to Tulee, Greenland, on a special operation, and I was at Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina. I walked into the BOQ and who is standing there, it's my brother who was on his way to Panama to jungle survival school. So we meet there, even though we're going totally different places. In Bangkok, Thailand, I walked into the military hotel there and here's my brother. He just had come out of the jungles in Laos. I got to Okinawa and there was my oldest brother. When I step off the airplane at Tonsenut in 1971, do my first briefings with the big four-star, and I find out that my oldest brother is working over in Mac-D headquarters briefing the commander of all U.S. forces in Vietnam. He and I would get together about once every week or so and have dinner and tell what was going on in our life.

*That's definitely a small world.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** It is, a small military world, and you know that. You spend time and the next thing you know here's somebody you were stationed with 10 years ago.

*That's definitely true, yeah.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** But then after my Vietnam tour, and I happened to be on the airplane – my father-in-law died while I was in Vietnam in '72, and so they sent me home early, and I was on the airplane the day that the North Vietnamese invaded the South in 1972 in the Easter offensive. Otherwise I would've been there for another six months to a year because the fact is, I lost two of my 130's within the next two weeks supporting our guys trying to roll back the North Vietnamese.

*During your first three years, I guess basically two- or three-year time period in Vietnam and the time that you went back, did you notice a change in morale or a sense of the mission or what was going on?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Oh yeah. The first three years from '64 to '67, there was no doubt we were gonna kick their rears, do our job and come home. When I got there in '71 and '72, there was a significant change and it was basically this. I don't want to be the last guy killed before we leave. And it was significant. That was just not good.

*No, you can't do anything if that's what is going on.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** I'm fearful for that kind of approach in Afghanistan right now. That's what is scaring me. I would hate the thought that you give what you got and then you end up turning your back on it and the sacrifice and those kind of things.

*Do you remember where you were when Saigon fell and people were flying out of there on helicopters and things?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Yeah, I sure do. Fact is, a good friend of mine was the commander of Operation Frequent Wind, which was the extraction of the last Americans, the last Marines, as always with an embassy, the Marines are the last guys to come out. But anyway, yes, that was

1975 and I was, when I came back from Vietnam in '72, I went to the air training command inspector general team and I was there doing that and the last part of my tour at Randolph at San Antonio was the resistance training and survival training part of the United States Air Force. So we worked the POW resistance training operations. So I knew that that was gonna happen and I was very fortunate to go back to Fort Mead and read the debriefings of our Air Force guys and some of the Navy guys. Fact is, I read John McCain's debriefing from his time there and so we could see if we needed to update and do what we needed to do to prepare our guys if they became POWs. But anyway that's where I was and it was a sad day. And then after I left there, then I was selected to command a squadron of flying training squadron out in California.

*What base was that?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** That was at Mather Air Force Base. It has since closed. Sacramento. And from there, then I was the commander there for a year and a half and was selected to be the deputy support group commander. Then in 1978, I got passed over for promotion to O-6 and I said well, I've reached the end. I have done as they say, I've reached my highest level of incompetence, and it was time for me to cut the bonds and so I was looking for a good job, and I couldn't find a real good job and so they said they needed C-130 navigators. So I could go to Dias or I could go to Little Rock or I could go to Fayetteville, North Carolina, and I chose to come to Dias. I was a line navigator for about a year which was so much fun because here I was an old lieutenant colonel, and you have to treat the old lieutenant colonel with some amount of respect, so I got all these goodies, and yet I was just a line crew member, and it was fun, it was really a lot of fun. And then it all got ruined when a friend of mine came in as the wing commander and he put me in charge of plans and put me in charge of ORI preparation -

*Paperwork.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Ah man, so my last year was totally miserable. And then I stayed and my wife and I just liked Abilene because Texas is such a good place to be, and it's got all its advantages, and here we were in a house and some stability and all that kind of stuff, and so we ended up in Abilene, Texas, and then shoot, I went to school at ACU. We've got three colleges up here. And Abilene Christian University, I went back to update my stuff in the field of science, and got hired as an 8<sup>th</sup> grade school teacher.

*Oh, that's great.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** So I went right to work and taught for 24 years at Wiley Independent School District teaching little 13- or 14-year-old kids.

*Wow, what was that like after having taught at the Air Force Academy and then instructing 13-year-olds?*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Oh, it was enjoyable. Of course the discipline aspects were certainly different, but it was neat because little 13- and 14-year-old kids are so inquisitive, where at the Air Force Academy you had the cream off the top of the milk. These kids were brilliant, all this other kind of stuff, but the inquisitiveness and the just being so open and everything else, you could wow 13- and 14-year-old kids. You could do something really silly like I walked in the class one day and I said you know what the national animal of Texas is? They said no, what is it? I said, it's an armadillo, and I fell on the floor, stuck my feet and hands up in the air like what do you see

armadillos doing, and it just broke 'em up. It was fantastic. For the next week they paid attention to me. It was fun.

*I'm sure not every kid at that age has an instructor in junior, I guess that's junior high, that is a retired Air Force officer and a former instructor at the Air Force Academy. I know I never did, so that's got to have been neat for them.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** They always loved the time when I would say OK now, if we get this done we'll have time at the end of class for me to tell you a war story. And they said oh yeah, yeah, yeah. And of course I have learned to embellish my war stories. They get better as time goes on.

*Well that's great. Sir, I tell you, we really appreciate you taking the time to share some of your memories with us, and everybody here at the Land Office appreciates your service to our country. I don't know if you know or not, but Commissioner Patterson is a retired lieutenant colonel in the Marine Corps and served as a back seater in F-4 and was a Vietnam veteran.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Yes, I knew that. I keep up with Jerry. I'm very active in politics here in Abilene, and Jerry is one of my real special people.

*Oh, that's great. Well he's a big history buff as well, and this was kind of a program he wanted to start to preserve these memories, and we've got a lot of veterans here at the Land Office, but even the folks that work here that aren't veterans are very appreciative of our veterans and their service.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Yeah, by the way Jerry, he belongs to an organization I belong to, we're Sons of Confederate Veterans. We have a lot of fine fighters in our history and it's always good to get together and talk about those things.

*That's right, that's great.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** But I appreciate you guys and what you're doing. As I said at the beginning with history, if we don't record it, if we don't get it out here and put it in a place where people can use it, what have we done? We end up in the condition like we are now in Washington where people don't understand what the history of our great nation is.

*That's tragically true and it's also, we're losing a lot of World War II veterans and really one of our big goals with this program is to record their stories and it's always gratifying. But just any veteran, I mean we've interviewed some present war veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, and all those will all be put in our archives. You think about those that served in Civil War and other conflicts, how amazing it would be if we were able to actually hear their words. In some cases we've got their written words and their diaries and things. We have here in our archives at the Land Office documents that were written by Stephen F. Austin. We've got the original land grant that was given to David Crockett's widow after he was killed at The Alamo, so we have these priceless pieces of history, and so our goal is we'll add this stuff to it and maybe a couple hundred years from now, somebody will be listening to these interviews as well if they want an idea of what our veterans have done through the years.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Well I hope so.

*Yes sir, and also eventually we'll get a transcript copy made of this that we will send to you, and then also we will burn copies of this interview onto CD's and we'll mail those to you as well.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Thank you.

*And then if you have any pictures that you would like for us to put on our web site, feel free to email those to me or send me copies. We can scan them and get those back to you. If you go to our web site, if you look at that [VoicesofVeterans.org](http://VoicesofVeterans.org) web site, we've got quite a few of our interviews on there, not all of them by any means, but quite a few of them where you can go and see their photo, read the transcript and then listen to the interview, and that's a great resource and we're trying to push that out to schools, too, especially for any schools where the teachers have some freedom in their curriculum, and they are teaching World War II history or that sort of thing that the students can go and listen to these interviews and maybe write a paper about it or that sort of thing.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** You keep that up. That is a good, good thing.

*It's a great resource. We're just trying to push it out there more and let people know about it. Then also the last thing, sir, if you have any other veterans that you know in Texas anywhere in the state that you think would want to be interviewed, have them contact me and we'll try to set up an interview.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Next time I see my friend in the commissary, the P-47 pilot, I mean just for him to talk as we do as he shops, it is fantastic, and I'll try and get him to contact you.

*Yes sir, all right, well again I really appreciate it and everyone here at the Land Office thanks you for your service.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Well thank you for your service and keep up the good work.

*Well this was a fun interview and feel free to call me at any time.*

**Jimmy Pickens:** Sure enough, thanks a lot.

*All right sir, take care.*

*[End of recording]*