

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
LaVERNE GRIFFIN
Colonel, Air Force, Korea and Vietnam

2000

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Griffin, LaVerne (b. 1928) Oral History Interview, 2000
User Copy: 2 sound cassettes, analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Master Copy: 1 video recording; ½ inch, color.

Abstract:

LaVerne Griffin, of Portage (Wisconsin), discusses his experiences learning to fly and becoming a reconnaissance pilot who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. He talks about joining the Army Air Force in 1946, and making the transition from small propeller planes to the P-51 Mustang and jet-engine aircraft. He estimates that he flew 25 missions in Korea and 150 in Vietnam. He talks about being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross after flying reconnaissance missions looking for signs of nuclear armament in Russia at the outset of the Cold War. Griffin, who entered military service after graduating from Portage High School in the mid-1940s, earned an aerospace engineering degree from Penn State University in 1963, using the education to help work on infrared and laser detection systems, and also to analyze enemy equipment. He gained experience as an operations officer, wing commander and squadron commander as he rose through the ranks, and served as an advisor to the National Guard, teaching reconnaissance, before retiring in 1974 with the rank of colonel.

Biographical Sketch:

Griffin was born in 1928 in Milwaukee and graduated from Portage High School. He married in 1954 and had three children.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000
Transcribed by Joseph Deutsch, 2012
Reviewed and corrected by Liz Van Deslunt, 2013
Abstract written by David Hunt, 2015

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: I'm talking to LaVerne Griffin, and it's 8 December, year 2000. When were you born, sir?

Griffin: 1928.

McIntosh: Capital "V" in LaVerne?

Griffin: Capital "V," yes.

McIntosh: "F-F-I-N?"

Griffin: Right.

McIntosh: What's your street address?

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

McIntosh: We have to have your approval in order to put any information you give me in a book, so in that space, if you could sign that please, sir. 1926?

Griffin: '28.

McIntosh: '28. In Portage?

Griffin: Milwaukee, I was born.

McIntosh: And entered military service?

Griffin: 1946. August, 1946.

McIntosh: August of '46. You enlisted in?

Griffin: I enlisted in the Army Air Force.

McIntosh: Okay, now, where was the first move? Where did you go first after enlistment?

Griffin: Well, you go to Fort Sheridan to enlist or whatever and they give you your uniform. Then I went through my Basic Training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

McIntosh: And from there?

Griffin: From there, then they assigned me to Shreveport, Louisiana, Barksdale Field, as a tabulating machine operator of IBM machines. You know, they used the old punch cards.

McIntosh: Sure.

Griffin: Well, I did the sorting and the collating and things like that.

McIntosh: How did you get that task?

Griffin: I should have bought the stock then, [McIntosh laughs] but at that point they leased everything to the military, they didn't even sell it. I suppose they have to do tests or whatever it was. It was a good assignment, but I took flying lessons in a Piper Cub on the side, I was interested in flying and I put in--

McIntosh: Privately?

Griffin: Privately.

McIntosh: Before you got in the Air Force?

Griffin: While I was an enlisted man in the Air Force.

McIntosh: I'll be darned, I didn't know they would allow you to do that.

Griffin: You just go downtown and pay for it.

McIntosh: It's on your own time and your own money?

Griffin: Yeah, seventy-five dollars a month, and out of that I saved enough for a couple hours flying instruction a month, so I went down and had an old ex-Navy guy teaching me how to fly in a Piper Cub, and I accumulated all of 11 hours of flying time, soloed, about the time I was accepted for aviation cadets.

McIntosh: Oh, you had to take an exam for the cadets?

Griffin: Oh yes, it was a very stiff exam.

McIntosh: You mean physically or mentally? Or both?

Griffin: Both, yeah, both. They had the stanine [standard nine] test and they did a lot of little things in it, and you had to have a good background in math, which I attributed to Portage High School where I graduated. The math teacher, Julie Rushwoods, was excellent. She was the principal and the math teacher. I was competing against guys with college educations, so I almost felt it was due to her that I was able to get into the program. I never had any problems, but I think twenty-four out of 324 were accepted out of these tests to get in. We started out with 640 classmates and 300 and some graduated.

McIntosh: Where was this? Was this somewhere else?

Griffin: This was at Randolph Field, Texas. Just across town, really.

McIntosh: So then they put you back in the Piper Cub?

Griffin: Well, they put me back in the Stearman, that's a PT-13.

McIntosh: That's a biplane?

Griffin: Biplane, right.

McIntosh: That's a basic, or is that a primary transmission?

Griffin: That's a primary transmission. Of course, I thought I was God's gift to aviation because I had already flown a Piper Cub, right?

McIntosh: Piece of cake.

Griffin: And so the first day my instructor says – and I'd probably been bragging about it and telling them, "oh, this'll be—." He said, "Well, Griffin, I understand you already know how to fly," he said, "so it's okay if we dispense with the formalities of this introduction, right?" And I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "Keep your seatbelt fastened, we're flying over 3,000 feet," and he just goes [makes inhaling noise], like this, which is called, I learned later, in English, bon, but I mean my feet flew up under the instrument panel, and my eyes bugged out, and the seatbelt wasn't quite as tight as I thought it was, and I thought I was gonna fall out because there was an open top there. Well, he taught me humility, and I remember when I was upside-down, "I'll never learn to fly, I can't even keep my feet on the rudder pedals!" and we got down and he taught me a lot about humility. Then I went on and I went to Basic in the AT-6 trainers.

McIntosh: You were still in line to be a single plane pilot then?

Griffin: From this point you could go either, everybody was in the same category at this time.

McIntosh: They didn't tell you whether you were going to a twin engine or single?

Griffin: No, not until you finished your basic training.

McIntosh: So it was still an option for you?

Griffin: We had primary training, basic, and advanced. And when you got to advanced, you either went to B-25s or P-51s.

McIntosh: That's when they decided rather than you. Is that right?

Griffin: Right. You could ask for it.

McIntosh: I understand that they based it on your abilities as a pilot, didn't they?

Griffin: A lot of it, yeah. If you couldn't fly formation you weren't going to go into fighters, probably.

McIntosh: So you're on a fighter track here?

Griffin: After I got through with basic I asked for fighters and I got it, so whatever the reason I don't know.

McIntosh: [Did] that mean another airfield?

Griffin: That meant Williams Army Airfield in Phoenix, Arizona.

McIntosh: Oh, I'm not familiar with that term.

Griffin: Yeah, Chandler. Well, it became Williams Air Force Base, but I think in 1947 the Army Air Force became the Air Force, so while I was in training I went in as an Army Aviation Cadet and came out as an Air Force.

McIntosh: They changed the term. So now we're flying AT-6, right?

Griffin: At Randolph, in Basic, we fly in the AT-6.

McIntosh: Very popular airplane. Everyone I've talked to who flew it.

Griffin: Yeah. That was nice.

McIntosh: Very forgivable.

Griffin: 650 horsepower or something like that, and of course they're tail draggers now. Most people think of airplanes having nose gears on them now, and in those days the wheel was on the tail. They're a little more difficult to land and take off.

McIntosh: Because you have to maintain that thing, it's elevated, then, until you get air speed down?

Griffin: Yeah, the correctional stability and things like that, on landing, you can see. When you get that nose wheel it'd be like a tricycle. It'd go straight ahead, but with the other one you really had to be on the rudders to make sure that you didn't veer off one way or the other. From there, after about seven months at Randolph, we went to Williams Field for Advanced in the P-51 Mustang.

McIntosh: Now that was a jump.

Griffin: Yeah, that was. And in those days they didn't have two seat airplanes to check you out. They just gave you a ride in the little back, piggy-back, and demonstrated how it was going to be. That instructor, no way was he going to sit back there and let you have the controls, so you got in this little cubby hole and he said, "This is the way we do it, Griffin," and he went around, and then he said, "Now you get in there and do it," --by yourself, not with him in there.

McIntosh: In other words, you had 15 minutes of training?

Griffin: Well, first of all, they put you in the back seat of these AT-6s so that you got the idea of having a longer nose over the front, so you got in the back and made a few landings from the back of that, and then you took this piggy-back ride with the instructor. And then they had one on a cement concrete tower block there, just mounted there, and you got in that and you started it up and you went through all of the things and they'd say, "Now you're on take-off, now you're on landing, down-wind," or whatever it is, "What do you do?" And you'd go through your checklist. Wheels would come down and all that.

McIntosh: So an outside Link trainer?

Griffin: Right, exactly, they called it a captive air or something like that.

McIntosh: I've never heard of those.

Griffin: Yeah. And anyhow I remember not getting anything right in that and I thought, "Wow, this is going to be tough," but I never had any problem in the airplane, so it's just one of those things.

McIntosh: So tell me about the P-51.

Griffin: Well, it was nice, it really gives you a jolt when you power it. And it got a lot of torque. You know what that is?

McIntosh: Yes.

Griffin: The propeller's turning one way and the airplane wants to go the other. So you have to –

McIntosh: So you push on that left rudder, is that what you do to compensate?

Griffin: Well, it's the right rudder. In England it's the left rudder because their engines turn the other way, you know. The Spitfire would be just the opposite of a P-51.

McIntosh: All English airplanes rotated counterclockwise and all Americans vice-versa. It all depends which way you're looking at it.

Griffin: I wouldn't be one hundred percent sure about the Spitfire, but I know most of the English airplanes, especially the older ones. It was all different directions.

McIntosh: Okay. So now that you're an accomplished 51 pilot, what'd they do with you?

Griffin: Then we graduated there in June of 1948, and they sent me to March Field, California, to fly jets. And it was the P-80s--and now that it was the Air Force they changed the name to F-80s. And I was actually in RF-80s, R meaning "Reconnaissance," and the difference is we had cameras in the nose instead of guns. This was March Field. I flew those for about-- We had no check out in those, other than just get in it and go; nowadays you know they always have two-place trainers and everything.

McIntosh: Tell me the difference, all of a sudden going from a propeller to a jet. What was your reaction?

Griffin: First place, you think it's never going to get rolling because it takes so long to get going. And then when you get in the air, because they have a boosted aileron on a fifteen-to-one ratio on the thing, whereas a P-51 is just one-to-one, in other words one pound of pressure puts one [pound]. In here you put in one pound of pressure and you get fifteen pounds out

there. You could tell a guy's first flight, at take-off he gets off the ground and he's going like this –

McIntosh: Compensating and compensating and compensating.

Griffin: Right, just doing it is so sensitive, let's say, comparatively speaking, that everybody would just wobble off but then, 30 minutes, they got the feel of that. It was a little different touch.

McIntosh: The increased power, how did that impress you?

Griffin: Well, it really isn't evident. You don't develop your power in a jet until you develop airspeed. Horsepower is a function of the airspeed. So when you're starting at zero--

McIntosh: You're much better off in a propeller plane?

Griffin: It takes a lot longer runway, that's why they take a lot longer runway to get off. But once they get moving, then the ram pressure into the engine creates additional horsepower. But it's nice, and of course you get used to it. Then I was there about a year flying those.

McIntosh: What was your real duty then?

Griffin: We would go up and down the coast of California and take pictures of various targets and things, Boulder Dam maybe, up in Las Vegas area.

McIntosh: In other words you were practicing photography?

Griffin: Practicing how to make maps, mosaics.

McIntosh: What level are we flying, taking pictures? 10,000, or higher?

Griffin: You had all different kinds of requirements for pictures. You might be taking them at 30,000 feet, straight down vertical pictures, and they want to make a map out of it. You may be diving in right below the Boulder Dam with a camera in the nose to see if the generators are working, the turbines or whatever they call those things at the bottom. So that would be like a target in combat where you want to find out if they broke the dam or damaged it or destroyed it, you got to get down close. So you had different requirements for--

McIntosh: And how did you run the camera? Was that on a button of some kind?

Griffin: Yeah, it was on a button on a stick, and you could also set it to where it would take one every so many seconds if you wanted to, so then you

wouldn't have to fuss with it. If you're flying straight over, trying to make a map, you don't want to be bobbling around because your cameras are looking down vertical and they're only as steady as the airplane. You'd set the intervalometer up to give you a sixty percent overlap on each frame of the photography like this, that means that all the ground you covered is in stereo, because you could take these glasses and sit down over it and see the thing in three dimensions. So you would set your intervalometer up to depend on your ground speed and altitude to take these pictures.

McIntosh: They always had enough film? It was never a problem to run out of film?

Griffin: No, and it was nine inch film. It's as wide as this sheet of paper, or a little wider.

McIntosh: The film was?

Griffin: Nine inches.

McIntosh: The roll about this big?

Griffin: It was probably a little bigger than nine inches because the negative itself is nine inches. So, it must be nine and a half inches since it's got a little edge on it. So your pictures are either nine by nine, that's the size of the negative, or nine by eighteen, depending on the type of camera you had in there. That was a negative.

McIntosh: Right. About how many pictures would you be taking? Was there a limit?

Griffin: Well you could run out of film, yeah, if you were making a mosaic and just taking one after another and going back and forth over so many square miles of ground.

McIntosh: There was a limit?

Griffin: There was a limit, yeah.

McIntosh: And did they take the armament off planes like this, to save weight or give you increased speed or something or other?

Griffin: Well, they took them off for two reasons. One, you needed the space to put the cameras in where the guns normally were, and second, they didn't believe that reconnaissance pilots should have guns because they didn't want them playing around, trying to shoot down airplanes after they got their mission completed and not coming back with the film.

McIntosh: Good point, good point. The hot dogs, you have to watch out for them.

Griffin: Oh yeah, as a matter of fact, one of the guys in this unit I was in had shot down 12 German airplanes. That's more than most fighter pilots did, right? And I asked him, I knew how he did it because I tried to do the same thing in Korea myself, I said, "I know what you did," I said, "When you got through with your mission you just sat way up there at high altitude and if some Germans went flying under you made one pass right through them and took a shot and came home." He said, "There may have been some of that." [both laugh] But after that they took the guns out.

McIntosh: So you're still in an F-80 here now?

Griffin: Right, RF-80.

McIntosh: RF-80, yeah. And then, after Arizona, then what?

Griffin: That's California. After California, then we had a big cut-back in –

McIntosh: The war hadn't started in Korea yet.

Griffin: No, 1949, Louis Johnson, I think, was the Secretary of Defense, big cut in military spending. Cut the unit, disbanded the unit, and I was sent to Strategic Air Command in Barksdale Field, and I was supposed to fly RB-29s, that's a reconnaissance version of the B-29, and I didn't want any part of that, so I said, "Is there anything else I can do?" And they said, "You can be a supply officer." Nobody wanted to be that. And I said, "I'll be that. I'll be the supply officer, let me fly the C-47s," which I'd already flown. I got checked out in one of them at March Field. That's a twin engine, the old C-47.

McIntosh: The DC-3, yes.

Griffin: Yeah, and they sent me to supply school and gave me a supply job, and about less than a year later they sent me to Labrador as a supply officer. And I was up there flying, but I was out of Strategic Air Command which was my goal. And I spent a year in Labrador and then I came back to a fighter unit in Alexandria, Louisiana, F-84s this was.

McIntosh: 1950?

Griffin: 1951 I came back. '50 I went to Labrador, and '51 I came home; it was only a year tour. I went to this F-84 outfit in Alexandria, Louisiana, where we would practice aerial gunnery and strafing and things like that. Well, this outfit got transferred to France, and I didn't have to go with them because I'd been back from overseas less than a year and they guarantee

you a year in the States if you want it, and I said, "I don't want to go overseas again right now." I wanted to get back into reconnaissance again.

McIntosh: Were you married then?

Griffin: No. And I went up to Shaw Air Force Base and they had a spot for me. They transferred me up to Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, back into RF-80s again.

McIntosh: You didn't do the 84s right away?

Griffin: I did the 84s for six months, that's about all.

McIntosh: This training, about--

Griffin: Well just, you know, gunnery missions and things like that, training, and those were the old F-84s. I was glad to get back into reconnaissance, and I went back to South Carolina and I spent a couple years there in Reconnaissance, and then went to Korea.

McIntosh: South Carolina in the RF-80s again?

Griffin: Yes.

McIntosh: Okay, alright. Then to Korea in--?

Griffin: 1953. Then I got to Korea in May of 1953, April or May of 1953, and I flew maybe twenty-five combat missions before the war ended on July 27, 1953.

McIntosh: In 86s?

Griffin: RF-80s and RF-86s. They had both at the time. They had a few RF-86s in the squadron and I had gotten current in those and checked out in those, so I flew those too.

McIntosh: Now we have to stop and tell me the difference, your opinion of those two aircraft.

Griffin: Oh, well, the F-86s were the swept-wing and they could go through the speed of sound, and the RF-80 could not.

McIntosh: My reading tells me that the 86 was a damned good airplane.

Griffin: Yes, I think they say they had a fourteen-to-one kill ratio over there and yes, it was a good airplane, and the reason we got it in reconnaissance--it

was not a good reconnaissance airplane because they had to jury-rig the cameras in there, take those guns out and they had cameras shooting into mirrors and you'd get a vibration and, you know, you get the picture. But for survival you just couldn't go way up north in an RF-80 unless you had a big escort of F-86s and that gets kind of expensive, and so the wing commander before I got there said, "Give us a couple of 86s, we'll put cameras, then we can go up there by ourselves." And so that's why we had maybe only four airplanes in the unit, but when we needed to do that, a few of us that were current in those airplanes would go up and do those missions.

McIntosh: Were you shooting people then?

Griffin: No, some of them had guns in, a couple, and like I said, I'd finish my mission, I'd wait around to see if a MiG would drop down me somewhere and I'd get one pass at him. It never happened, but some of the F-80s had guns in, too, and I remember strafing some boxes on a road one day, they told us they were bringing MiGs down in crates or something, but that's the only time I ever shot at anything.

McIntosh: So then you got back to the 84s?

Griffin: Well, the interesting note on the spy type of missions. In the RF-86s, if you remember the Korean War, the Yellow River was the boundary between Manchuria and China, and the MiGs were based across the river in, we called it a sanctuary.

McIntosh: Political thing.

Griffin: But we couldn't fly over there, but they could fly out of there and when they got back over the line you weren't supposed to chase them. I know a lot of fighter pilots that did, but they weren't supposed to. We weren't supposed to fly over there for any reason, but now they tasked us to go up there and reconnaissance, to get pictures of their bases. And way up into China, a place called Harbin, north of Vladivostok. It's west of Vladivostok, so it's in China. That was the longest mission I ever flew was up there.

McIntosh: That was a staging area for the Army, is that what they're interested in looking at?

Griffin: I think they're just looking to find out what kind of airplanes they might be bringing into the area. I never took any pictures for the Army up there, these were all Air Force targets and maybe some power plants up there, I think. On this last mission of the last day of the war, I flew that mission and I had a guy on my wing that had four MiGs to his credit, a fighter

pilot, and he was just supposed to look out for me. He said, "Now don't worry, if we get into any problem, I'll take care of you." And I said, "Hey, if we get jumped by MiGs, I'm heading home because I don't have any guns on this airplane and I'm not sticking around to watch you become an ace." [both laugh] We didn't see any so he was right there the whole time. I wrote a little story up about that and I called him "Wannabe." I can't remember his name, "Major Wannabe," "Lieutenant Wannabe."

McIntosh: What was your rank?

Griffin: I was a captain. I was one of the most experienced pilots in the squadron at that time because everybody else was just getting out of flying school and coming over, they'd already been through the mill once, so by 1953 they're sending guys over either for their second tour or brand new guys. It was my first tour but because I'd spent that year in Labrador I got over there late, to Korea. I volunteered for Korea while I was in Labrador and I got a letter back that said, "Exigencies of the service being what they are, we need a supply officer in Labrador worse than we do a fighter pilot in Korea," so I decided they needed a sock seller better.

McIntosh: Was your experience in Labrador boring, or was it--?

Griffin: No, it was interesting. Played hockey there. Base team never won a game. We played the Canadians all the time.

McIntosh: Well they just toyed with you I'm sure.

Griffin: Yeah, right! [both laugh] We enjoyed warm beer after the game, that sort of thing. No, it was interesting. I was young, had a lot of friends there, and I was flying a C-47. It was a good time.

McIntosh: My first airplane ride was in a DC-3 in 1939.

Griffin: DC-3, yeah.

McIntosh: Yeah, same plane.

Griffin: Sure.

McIntosh: Incredible aircraft.

Griffin: Yeah, great, I flew that many years and then after I got back from Korea I flew it. So then the war ended on the 27th of July and we stayed around, and then I went on exchange duty with the Marines in K3 Korea. We were flying Banshees. That was a forerunner to the Phantoms. It was a twin-engine, straight-wing airplane. This was called F2H-2P, which means

photographic. It had beautiful cameras in it and everything. It was the same base that Ted Williams flew out of, and Jerry Coleman, who played baseball for the Yankees, but they were pilots at this K3.

McIntosh: Where was K3?

Griffin: Pohang, by the sea.

McIntosh: I went and didn't have a chance to get into the interior of Korea when I was there.

Griffin: Oh, okay. Pohang was nice. It was a nice sand beach down there and everything. But then I was only there a month or so and I got called back to the Air Force because the guy who was also a captain, senior to me, the operations officer, had an emergency leave to the States. His mother died and they asked me to take over the area of the squadron. So I got called back, just before I was supposed to go out to a carrier. I'd been practicing field carrier landing practice on this runway and I was kind of anxious to go to the carrier for one shot, you know.

McIntosh: They give everybody a chance to land on a carrier?

Griffin: Yeah. The Marines had to qualify once a year. These were Marines, but they still had to qualify a carrier landing.

McIntosh: Not at night though?

Griffin: Well, no, I hope not, I think they just had to qualify, one of those things. Then they'd go out and qualify and come back and say, "Oh they're qualified." And I wanted to do it once or twice, I never thought of it as a big longevity thing, I don't think I would have enjoyed that, but I thought--and of course they called me "Air Horse," these Marines. They said, "Air Horse, do you know what a cold shot is?" And I'd say, "What's a cold shot?" And they said, "These catapults, they're run by steam, Air Horse. When you get a cold shot you don't get enough steam, you just dribble off the edge of the front of the bow of the carrier," they said, "And you better get out of there quick because that carrier is going to run right over you." And then they'd laugh. Good group of guys, great food, good service there, and I really enjoyed that tour with the Marines. But I got called back to Air Force and then we moved. Things were developing in the Cold War now, between July and December of 1953, someone decided that they were going to move our squadron to Japan because they were going to give us new RF-86s with a bulge in the side where they'd fitted some long focal length cameras, I think I showed you a picture of that, and because these were a different type of F-86 than was there on the day of the war, they could not be stationed in Korea. One of the rules of the armistice was

no change in equipment. So, unbeknownst to us at the time, they just said, "You're moving to Japan." That was great. We'd go to Japan for a haircut, that was great. Korean barbers, they all chew kimchi, did you ever--?

McIntosh: Oh yeah, I was on a hospital ship for a year or so.

Griffin: I'd take every flight I could to Japan because every couple weeks I'd need a haircut. But any rate, we got down to Japan, Nagoya, Komaki Airdrome, Komaki Airbase, I guess, and got these new RF-86s and almost immediately started flying. And then we got into this overflight business in the Cold War which you read about in the paper there. And it's been classified, was classified, for forty-six years or something like that, forty-five years.

McIntosh: What was your perimeter then as far as how far would you go, politically speaking? As far as the airplanes would go, there was no area that was not available to you? You could fly anywhere in Russia?

Griffin: Well I don't know that we could, no. We flew where we were told. I don't know.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

Griffin: You're not asking about the range of the aircraft, you're talking about the political range?

McIntosh: Right.

Griffin: I think they decided that--I was told by a Major General that was in on the planning of this, just a year ago, that Curtis LeMay, who was the Commander of the Strategic Air Command, was very nervous about the nuclear capabilities of the Russians, and in that area they had no intelligence, in the Far East. And people here were buying bomb shelters and stocking them up and things like that. It was really pretty tense, so they decided to risk, whatever, meeting the Russians. They had to get this information so they selected us to try to obtain this information about the nuclear capabilities of the Russians in the Far East. So they developed these airplanes or put the cameras in them and said, "Ok, your first mission is going to be up here around Vladivostok, there are a lot of airbases around that area." That was the first mission. And then I subsequently flew two more of those same type of missions in the same area, for me. Other guys went to China I think, later on. I just found that out because you didn't know what the other people were doing. Of course I knew what was going on when I was there because I was on the first three missions. Nobody flew a mission that I wasn't on. There'd be four airplanes on a mission.

McIntosh: Now the Russians knew that you were there. What did they send up to chase you with?

Griffin: Well I don't know that they knew we were there.

McIntosh: Oh really?

Griffin: No.

McIntosh: I would think they would pick you up on radar.

Griffin: Well this is it. They briefed us, and we wanted to believe it, that the radar would not pick you up above 38,000 feet.

McIntosh: Geez, they've brought down Gary Powers.

Griffin: Okay, six years later.

McIntosh: Yeah, I suppose, maybe back then.

Griffin: Six years later. So we had to – I showed you on the map, where we got out over the Sea of Japan--we had to be at 38,000 feet before we crossed a certain 38th parallel or 40th parallel, or whatever it was.

McIntosh: For just this reason?

Griffin: Because someone, maybe flying B-29s back and forth there, had figured this out off the coast. So we did, we dropped our tanks and we got above 38,000 feet, we were actually at 42,000 feet, and we got right over Vladivostok and I didn't see any airplanes, didn't see any. Now, I think I may have told you that the one thing we couldn't stand to do was pull contrails. You know you see those contrails from a big jet.

McIntosh: Yes.

Griffin: If we saw a contrail from our wingman there then you knew you were doing it. We had a code word, "California" for my two airplanes and "Alabama" for the other. That was all we'd say because there was complete radio silence. I heard this, "Alabama!" so I knew my two wingmen, who had split off at the time we reached the coast to get other targets, had run into contrails. It has to be a certain moisture, temperature, all that sort of stuff. Unbeknownst to me they aborted the flight. They decided they couldn't do it and they –

McIntosh: That would attract attention.

Griffin: Yeah, you'd see four. [laughs]

McIntosh: Right, those weren't birds.

Griffin: No, no, no. Those weren't birds. But mine didn't and we just kept going and I have a plot in there, I think, of all the pictures I took on the first mission. Then we went back out over the Sea of Japan and dropped the two remaining tanks, the empty tanks, so that they wouldn't be found on land. It said, "Made in Cleveland," or whatever it said on the tanks, and then we covered in northern Japan where we were met by a bunch of high-ranking officers in a C-47 and got on board and went down to Tokyo and had the pictures developed on this first mission. We stayed overnight and the next day we were called into General O. P. Weyland's office, he was the Four-Star General in charge of Far Eastern Air Forces, and he pinned a DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross] on us, on each of the four pilots, and said, "Boys, I'll take care of the paperwork later," and he just pinned those. We hadn't done anything for that guy, the paperwork takes a while. It only took a month for that paperwork. Later on I got one and it took two years to get the paperwork. You'd get put in for it but you wouldn't get in for it in two years. But we got it the next day. So we were real proud of that. And I think he was just glad to see we got back with no difficulties, no screw-ups, that the radar didn't pick us up and whatever, that there were no problems. So because of that, then they turned us around and a month later--no, the 22nd of March was the first one, the 3rd of April was the second mission, so we're talking just a couple weeks, right?

McIntosh: Tell me: What were your instructions if you developed plane difficulty?

Griffin: You mean a cover story?

McIntosh: Well, a cover story or were you supposed to eat the pill or--?

Griffin: Oh, we didn't have any pills.

McIntosh: You must have had some--

Griffin: We had a cover story. I think it was kind of weak, like we were lost. We were supposed to tell them we were sampling, doing high altitude wind research. Of course we were wearing these, what we called poofy suits, these anti-exposure suits, and how you'd be up there wearing those while on that side of the Sea of Japan with cameras in the airplane. It was pretty weak, let's face it, but we were young and we bought that. Well, the Gary Powers issue hadn't come up yet. We didn't know what they might do to people.

McIntosh: He didn't take his pill like he was supposed to.

Griffin: I understand that he didn't necessarily have to take the pill.

McIntosh: I thought he was instructed to take the pill.

Griffin: The guy that was his backup pilot said he didn't have a pill, I know the guy who was his backup pilot.

McIntosh: The backup guy didn't have one.

Griffin: He was sitting there dressed, ready to go, in case something—and he's not quite sure why Gary Powers, to this day, had that pill, because John Shin, the backup pilot, didn't have it. But any rate, we didn't have anything like that.

McIntosh: So they sent you right back up there to take more pictures?

Griffin: I guess if they'd given me that I'd have said, "No, I don't want this mission."

McIntosh: [Both laugh] That's an easy choice!

Griffin: Yeah, right, give me the pill or get me taken home, yeah. So they sent us right back in within two weeks. Then, the 3rd of April was the second mission and then the 22nd of April was the last mission, and then I rotated to the States on the 1st of May. But I led the first three missions.

McIntosh: That's a real tribute.

Griffin: Well I was just the right guy at the right place, the most experienced pilot because like I said, all the other guys were Lieutenants and hadn't accumulated as much flying time.

McIntosh: So they gave you another medal?

Griffin: We got a medal for each one of them, the Distinguished Flying Cross for all three of those flights.

McIntosh: Three extra gadgets on it.

Griffin: Yeah. The one in Korea that I told you about, I was put in for the Silver Star. Everybody that flew over there was getting a Silver Star, that went across from the Yellow River to do these, were getting a Silver Star. And I got put in for my Silver Star the last day of the war. Well, the paperwork got lost. The guy at the awards and decorations office rotated to the States

and, not knowing any better, I didn't follow up on it. I wasn't going to toot my own horn.

McIntosh: 'Till it was too late.

Griffin: Yeah. And they kept saying, "We're going to get that for you, Griff, we're getting that," but it never happened. Here I thought I flew the longest one than anybody. Never got anything. Didn't get an air medal. I got air medals for flying missions right there in Korea, but not this thing, because actually I was put in for a higher one when nothing happened.

McIntosh: So you could have done that later.

Griffin: Yes, well, when we got back to the States, the Colonel knew about this, the wing operations officer said, "Griff, we're going to get you that Silver Star yet," but it didn't happen. I never pushed it, like I said.

McIntosh: Well that's too bad.

Griffin: If I'd have known a little bit more, I would have taken care of my career, maybe been trained at West Point. I would have gone and done something like that.

McIntosh: So you'd have been a career boy then.

Griffin: Well, I guess they're taught to take care of themselves if nobody else does. I always took care of my people and I thought people would take care of me, but that's naïve.

McIntosh: The people who were trained through the Air Force Academy were okay guys?

Griffin: Oh yeah, but at that time it wasn't the Air Force, they didn't have the Air Force Academy, but we had West Pointers and Annapolis guys in my squadron.

McIntosh: Flew in the Army, or in the Air Force?

Griffin: Yeah, oh yeah, sure, there was a certain percentage. They had two of them in my squadron that were Annapolis graduates.

McIntosh: They couldn't qualify for carriers, or—?

Griffin: They didn't want to. Because the Air Force didn't have its own academy, they got a quota from the other two academies and guys who said, "I want to fly with the Air Force," I suppose were given that choice. Basically

their training was at Annapolis or West Point and they were good guys, they were very good guys. I was a senior officer over them—not the squadron commander – but the senior in charge of flying, and I think I made sure that I didn't want to see one of those guys get ahead that didn't deserve it, because you hear about it. That never happened, those guys were all good, and wherever they got to they deserved.

McIntosh: Now you were in the regular Army. When you signed up you signed up for six years, or no time, you just signed up?

Griffin: Yeah, every four years or so at that time it came up, but in the '50s there after the Korean War I think I applied for regular status and I got it, in maybe '57, so I became a regular.

McIntosh: So then how far into the career now?

Griffin: After the Korean War? That was 1954 that I returned, which would be eight years after I entered the Service. I came back to South Carolina again, Shaw Air Force Base.

McIntosh: What kind of duties did you have?

Griffin: I was a squadron commander. They needed people badly I guess, and I was a captain and they made me a squadron commander. I was the only captain squadron commander in Shaw.

McIntosh: It was still two years until you were a Major then.

Griffin: They wouldn't promote me.

McIntosh: You kept telling them that. [both laugh]

Griffin: They wouldn't promote you until you had so many years' service. This is interesting, Jim: They called it promotion-less service. You had nine or 10 or 11 years, but the little fine print said, "Since age 21." Well I had graduated when I was nineteen. We all thought, and I still believe, that this ruling was written by West Point officers because they all were 21 when they graduated except – and there was an exception in this – for West Pointers who graduated during a war in the accelerated classes. And that made all of us Reserve-types really angry.

McIntosh: Huh. That's really unfair.

Griffin: You should have seen some of the letters that were written. A guy writes in, said "I shot down 19 airplanes before I was 21 years old in Germany,

and out of England. How come my time in those two years doesn't count as an officer?" There's no answer. That was blatant discrimination.

McIntosh: Typical chickenshit.

Griffin: And here's what the bad thing for me was, humiliating: My classmates, who I went to flying school with that were 21 years old, they got promoted. So I'm seeing guys that are contemporaries of mine, just because they're two years older than me, get promoted.

McIntosh: Just because you went in earlier.

Griffin: Just because I was two years younger, yeah. We both had the same amount of experience, let's say, but they're two years older, they get promoted. So anyhow, that was kind of a sore point. Eventually I spent nine years as a captain and then I got promoted when I got my promotion-less service. But in the meantime I was a squadron commander and we picked up the F-84Fs which are the swept-wing version of the 84s, RF version, at Shaw, and I was a squadron commander for that for a while, until we had a big parade one day and the wing commander came down and looked at all the squadrons and said, "A captain commanding this squadron?" And the group commander said, "Yes sir, we don't have too many field grade officers flying 84s." And they just, "Mhmm," walked on there and the next weekend the group commander said, "Griff, you gotta go, the old man thinks we gotta have some of these field grade officers as a squadron commander, who do you think would make a good squadron commander?" [laughs] And I said, "Well, the boys all like Major Frige." "Well, I'll think about that," he said, and Monday morning Frige walks in with his bags and says, "You're supposed to check me out in the airplane." But we got along fine, I was back to ops officer, which is in charge of flying, you know, but it was a good, good group – great. So I was there and then I got married in 1954 when I got back from Korea. I was ready to be married. I don't know why I wasn't when I went over, but when I got back I was ready, I'll tell you. And I married a woman whose husband was shot down in Korea, had been a friend of mine. So I started off with two children ready-made and eventually I had three more of my own. In 1954, I got married and we lived in South Carolina for three years. Then I wanted to go with the National Guard as an air advisor and so this group commander and I flew up to Washington, D.C., and we went into the National Guard commander's, his name was Winston P. Wilson, and they called him—I didn't call him, this guy called him—"Wimpy," because he'd been a colonel with him. He said, "Wimpy, this guy wants to go to the Meridian Mississippi Guard, I don't know why," but he said, "Can you help him out?" Well, just a week later I got orders to the Meridian National Guard as an air advisor.

McIntosh: But still on active duty?

Griffin: Oh yeah, I'm the only Air Force officer there, I had three Air Force sergeants working for me, one in maintenance, one in communications, and one in administration, but I was the only Air Force officer on the base in this key field, Mississippi, Meridian, right in town, and we had F-84s there. And so my job was to teach these guys how to do reconnaissance. I was there four years and it was a good assignment. Flew a lot of different airplanes there. Flew the governor around in a nice, pushed-up C-47. We had T-33s, we had C-45s, that's a little Twin Beech. So I spent four years there and I learned a lot of tact with the Guard; I was not very tactful before, I found out. I found out in the Guard if you wanted to get something done, you better let them think they thought of it instead of telling them.

McIntosh: You were dealing with civilians there, weren't you?

Griffin: Yeah, civilians and full-time air technicians, full time. Good guys but didn't, at that time, sort of objected politically. An Air Force guy on the base was not the most popular guy on the base. It took a while to figure that out, how to get things done. But I eventually did, they became a good unit and I still got a lot of friends in Meridian, Mississippi. As a matter of fact this article was published down there, in Meridian, they wrote back, "Hey Griff, we see your name in the paper here." So I still have friends in Meridian, Mississippi. Then my four years were up and I put in for aeronautical engineering training and the Air Force sent me to — I'd been going to night school while I was there, at Livingston State College, and about had enough credits for a degree in English — they sent me to Penn State for aerospace engineering. It took me two and a half years to get my engineering degree there. I flew out of Homestead Air Force base to get my flying time. Everybody still had to fly 120 hours a year, T-33s.

McIntosh: That's a pretty nice aircraft?

Griffin: Yeah, it's nice, there's one on that BFW pole out here, that's a T-33. So that took care of Penn State. That was hard; hard to go back to school after 16 years without having math and be thrown right into advanced courses. I worked about as hard as I've ever worked trying to make sure I didn't flunk out. It was embarrassing to flunk out. They'd probably make you a weather officer and send you to Thule, Greenland — that happened — or Johnson Island. That's what happened, yeah, two guys who quit the engineering course, or said "I can't take this anymore."

McIntosh: Well they could always leave.

Griffin: The ones I knew just went into another curriculum and stayed.

McIntosh: Everybody wanted to put in 20. Is that it? Or more?

Griffin: Or more? Oh, yeah, you mean they could always just resign from the Air Force. Yeah, at this point everybody had 10,12 years' service, so they would pick a lesser. But I do know a guy that started out in engineering, a friend of mine, he just said he couldn't hack it, and became a weather officer and his first station was Thule, Greenland or somewhere. [laughs]

McIntosh: It's almost like punishment.

Griffin: Yeah, right. So then I got out of there in 1963 with a degree in aerospace engineering and they assigned me to Wright-Patterson, in the Ford Technology Division. Now this is a building that has no windows in it and they bring over captured enemy equipment: rockets, engines, everything. They take it in there and they study it and send the results up to the DI, the Defense Intelligence Agency, or the CIA, or what we're doing. I didn't like that job. I'd write a paper about something – it was all secret. Couldn't tell your wife anything. Top secret. You'd write a paper, they'd send it up to DIA and they might disapprove it or send it back and so you'd spend a man-year doing nothing. To me, I wanted to be out in the work, so I used my influence, what little I had, with the colonel over there on the other side of the base, who was in reconnaissance, development of reconnaissance systems, and he got me over there where I was working on infrared detectors and laser detectors—

McIntosh: Well that was much more interesting.

Griffin: —and cameras and flash bombs and things like that. Oh yeah, that was happy, that was good duty. This other would have been alright if I hadn't ever flown an airplane or been out, but it just wasn't the kind of thing that I wanted to be. I like to be around people where I could talk about my job. That's happiness, just BS-ing it at the club, later on, here you'd go home, you couldn't even tell your wife. Couldn't tell anybody at the club either. "I work in FTD," "Oh, that building without any windows?" Ford Technology Division. It was an interesting experience but I enjoyed it more when I got back into the systems command, the development of the cameras, and then they sent me as the sole representative from the whole systems command, which is the one that develops systems, back to Shaw Air Force Base to the Tactile Aerial Reconnaissance Center. My job there was to see that the stuff we were working on at Wright-Patterson would fit the needs of the people out in the field who were going to be the end users of it. Because let's face it, you take some of these civilians at Wright-Patterson that been there 30 years working on a project, they kind of forget, they might build a camera but you couldn't fit it in a fighter, it'd be half the size of this room. "Oh, this is a great thing!" Well, how are we

going to get it to Vladivostok, or over there? So, not practical. The budget works that every year they get this money. The best thing I ever did for the military, I think, was to make sure that these guys got no money until it was blessed on this end. You know what I mean? That redirected a lot of spending, is what it did. Oh, they wanted things. They just didn't want what these guys were working on, maybe, or in that format. It was useful, because we were just blowing our money away developing things that were academically interesting but not practical. That was a worthwhile job. I enjoyed that. Of course, that was in 1965, and then in 1968 they were short of pilots in Vietnam so they put me back in the cockpit. They said, "You're going back to the cockpit to go to Vietnam." Trained in the F-4s right here at Shaw Air Force base, RF-4s, Phantoms. So I did and then I went to Vietnam in November of '68.

McIntosh: Flying F-4s?

Griffin: RF-4s.

McIntosh: I had a friend, Jack McCullen, who flew those. He did two tours. Now you're in another hot airplane. That was a step up from the other stuff.

Griffin: Yeah, and I hadn't flown jets for a few years because when I went down to Shaw Air Force Base they put me in C-54s to get my flying time. I've got to go back to jets so I called my friends down in Meridian in the Guard and say, "Hey, I need a little jet time," and he said, "Come on down, Griff, we'll fix you up."

McIntosh: This was nineteen-what?

Griffin: '68. I went down to the Guard and they gave me a quick recheck in the jets, my friends were still there 10 years later almost.

McIntosh: Then you got to Vietnam when?

Griffin: I got to Vietnam in November 1968. And again, it started in, what, '65? Well, most of the pilots were over then, but I was there in '68 so I'm a latecomer and a lieutenant colonel by now, and they made me a squadron commander – ops officer first, and then a squadron commander. That was nice. It was a great job. I flew about 150-some missions.

McIntosh: 150? In Nam?

Griffin: Yeah, in Nam and over Laos and them. I was flying out of Udorn, Thailand. It was a pretty heavy flying schedule there.

McIntosh: 150 missions!

Griffin: Well, you're there a year.

McIntosh: My God, that's flying every other day almost.

Griffin: Yeah, it's a lot of flying but it's better than sitting around.

McIntosh: Oh yeah, I understand. And mainly your missions were back to recon?

Griffin: At the time I was there, if you had 100 missions over North Vietnam, you could rotate, you wouldn't have to stay there a year, but I didn't have 100 missions over North Vietnam, so I had 150 missions. I don't know how many were over North Vietnam, they were over Laos. Laos was not a friendly atmosphere, either. There may not have been all the SA-2 missiles there but if anything happened to you and you went down, you were in bad shape. You were always told, "Don't go down to Laos. If you go down, go down in North Vietnam and make sure you give yourself up to a military man." Because the civilians treated you--

McIntosh: They were safer in Vietnam than they were in Laos.

Griffin: Yeah. Especially if you could – the civilians in Laos were cruel, the ones that I heard about.

McIntosh: Yes, they'd kill you.

Griffin: Yeah, they'd kill you. Of course then the chances in Laos, if you got down okay and with your beeper and your little radio you might get rescued, but you could get rescued in North Vietnam, too.

McIntosh: So your missions were not recon?

Griffin: They were recon, sure. Trying to find out, you've heard of Mu Gia Pass and all of--? They were bringing supplies to the Viet Cong down through these. We're all out looking for these supplies. I've been down through the Mu Gia Pass that high off the road, seeing them repairing the road with shovels. My pictures showed a guy with a shovel right there, patching up the road from bombing the night before. We were looking to see where they were parked along the road, so we were flying [at] a very low level along the roads with cameras that looked to the side, and sometimes you could see under the canopy of the trees.

McIntosh: Flying at tree level?

Griffin: Yeah.

McIntosh: Didn't you get a lot of ground fire from that? Your speed, I suppose.

Griffin: Yeah, the thing we learned to do was not stay on the same road too long because evidently they had telephones. I found that out at night, I'm following the road at night, dropping cartridges to take pictures of the road and up ahead I start seeing tracers coming straight up.

McIntosh: Waiting for you.

Griffin: Yeah. "How'd they know that? Boy, I'm traveling eight miles a minute!" I think they had a line down there and they said, "There's one coming up, here he comes." You don't see that during the day, and being the ops officer or the commander, I started putting my guys on nights as soon as they got there because they got a great appreciation for enemy gunfire if they could see it, and then they knew that they were being shot at during the day and they did things differently, a little more carefully, than they would. I never lost an airplane.

McIntosh: Very good. Excellent.

Griffin: That worked out. Most people wouldn't let you fly nights until you'd flown a lot of days but flying night--

McIntosh: It was a lot safer.

Griffin: Yeah, you'd think it wouldn't be.

McIntosh: Were you permitted to shoot at enemy aircraft if you were intercepted?

Griffin: Well we didn't have guns now, you remember.

McIntosh: That's what I mean.

Griffin: Well you're permitted to take their picture. [both laugh] I never got into any haggles with any MiGs up in Hanoi area if that's what you're talking about, because while I was there in 1968, '69 mostly, there was a lull in the bombing. You know how that political thing went. Sometimes they'd be going to beat the band and it just happens that while I was there they quit flying over North Vietnam for a few months. So I'd had a few missions and then we'd have a few missions and both sides, we'd fly right over these missile sites and they wouldn't shoot at us. This was part of an agreement I guess. I don't know what was going on, but they'd assign four fighters to accompany me and if these guys shot at us these guys were supposed to shoot back at them but they weren't supposed to shoot at them unless they shot at us first. The political ramifications were driving us

nuts. One day you were flying a mission over here, and the next day if you went across that border you could be court-martialed.

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

McIntosh: The rules keep changing.

Griffin: You weren't supposed to be in there unless they fragged you in there. "Fragging" means an order, fragmentation order, that comes down that you're going to do this. Otherwise, you don't. We never quite knew what to do.

McIntosh: Was the F-4 adaptable for camera work?

Griffin: Oh yeah, it was very good.

McIntosh: You had more room there, you didn't have to worry about getting squeezed.

Griffin: Right, and then you had another guy in the back, too, so you'd operate the radar and the cameras. It was a two-place airplane. He did the navigation at night. You couldn't find your way around these roads without having a guy in the back reading that radar scope, looking at the terrain.

McIntosh: So he took care of taking the pictures and the--

Griffin: Right, and getting you over the target.

McIntosh: So you always flew with the same guy or did you rotate?

Griffin: We tried to fly with the same, everybody was paired up. And particularly on nights where that's all his mission, it's the guy in the back seat who's keeping you from hitting the mountain.

McIntosh: So if you were a base commander what were you doing flying this much?

Griffin: Wing commander.

McIntosh: Wing commander. Oh, then you had to fly that much.

Griffin: Well yeah, all my guys were flying and--not the wing commander, squadron commander. I was the wing commander later. In Vietnam I was a squadron commander. You gotta be the leader.

McIntosh: First one in?

Griffin: I always figured that gave me a chance to fly more than the other guys. I liked to fly and I thought I was doing what I was trained to do, so I always took every mission I could. I didn't want to beat somebody out of it but I got my share. Just like everybody else. I'd say all of the guys there probably flew within a few missions of what I did, no matter what their rank was. Let's see--

McIntosh: That takes you up to 1969.

Griffin: That was Vietnam. And then I--

McIntosh: Rotated home?

Griffin: Rotated home. I came back to Shaw Air Force Base again. There aren't that many reconnaissance bases in the Air Force and this was one of them. I came back there and worked in the headquarters of the Tactical Area Reconnaissance Center for a year.

McIntosh: Before you leave Vietnam, what type of quarters were you in there?

Griffin: A trailer, a house trailer. The ops officers and the commanders lived in house trailers. The regular pilots had what they call hooches, wooden framed little things.

McIntosh: Tents.

Griffin: Yeah, something like that.

McIntosh: With canvas on them.

Griffin: I think so. And more of them in there.

McIntosh: The food was okay?

Griffin: It was okay, yeah. It was alright. It was good. Of course I was flying out of Thailand, not Vietnam, the base in Udorn. That's like being on R&R for some people, to live where we lived. We'd go downtown to get a meal.

McIntosh: Downtown?

Griffin: Udorn. Udorn, Thailand.

McIntosh: That was a nice place to be?

Griffin: The food was good. It isn't someplace you went downtown to do anything except to eat. Wasn't much down there.

McIntosh: Air Force was the only Americans over there in that place?

Griffin: Well, this was an interesting base, Udorn. We had all kinds of airplanes there: the Jolly Green Giants, the helicopters, the rescue ships. We had Air America. Now those guys were wild. You've heard of them, haven't you?

McIntosh: Tell me about them.

Griffin: They were the CIA operative. They flew C-47s and C-46s in to resupply the Laotians that were loyal Laotians.

McIntosh: The Hmongs and all those.

Griffin: Yeah. They had little strips up there. I got invited to some of their parties over there and these guys were pretty heavy drinkers. Most of them had been kicked out of the military or something. They were mercenaries, is what they were. They were hired on to fly these missions.

McIntosh: They were not military.

Griffin: They're not military, no.

McIntosh: They were civilians.

Griffin: Yeah, they're civilians. They could've been, maybe — I don't know. I just know the kind of guys that get out of the service. Well, these guys got back in, the CIA hired them. They were good pilots. They weren't kicked out of the Air Force because they were bad pilots. They had other problems.

McIntosh: Social problems.

Griffin: Well it could be drink. It could be — and they weren't all that way. And the missions they flew, when they came back from that and they'd say, "You never know. I was going," he'd say, "I was going into this little lima site,"—they call them lima sites, the little strip—"I got the gear down and they started shooting at me down there, I was supposed to land and dump this off." It'd been taken over in the meantime.

McIntosh: Changed hands.

Griffin: Yeah, changed hands, they never knew. Sometimes the guys on the ground were smart enough they wouldn't shoot till they actually touched down. I saw one land there once with the wheels up, they foamed the runway, and he came in this big C-46, and slid right down the runway. They were kind

of a different group. Some of them had their wives there and they put on a good party. I know that, and you were lucky to be invited to their parties. They had Mongolian barbecues every week.

McIntosh: [Laughs] Mongolian barbecues?

Griffin: Yeah, Mongolian barbecues. Haven't you ever--?

McIntosh: No, tell me about that.

Griffin: You'd go through a line and you got a tray here and they'll have several different kinds of meats and you throw it on there and you throw a bunch of vegetables and green things and stuff, and a lot of hot sauce and stuff, and you give it to the guy at the end of the big grill and he throws it all out on the grill and stirs it up like this for a minute or so and puts it back into your bowl and it's hot-hot, I mean from the – makes you drink a lot of beer. That's a Mongolian barbecue. All fried up.

McIntosh: This group used to feature that?

Griffin: Yeah, they featured that. If you got an invitation to that you were lucky, probably had to be a squadron commander or something.

McIntosh: Is that right?

Griffin: Oh yeah, they just couldn't handle everybody that would want to go. They had a compound, because it was CIA or whatever, Air America. You couldn't just get in there. Nobody could get in there unless you were invited. Yeah, that was a crazy group of guys. Then they had the Forward Air Controllers there and people like that. So it was a big base. Udorn was a big base. We were only 90 miles going east from Laos and only twenty or thirty miles from the capital of Laos, Vientiane. That was an interesting tour.

McIntosh: So back to America.

Griffin: Then I came back to Shaw Air Force Base, spent a year in the headquarters there, and I had one interesting thing while I was there. I was briefing an Israeli general on how to avoid surface to air missiles and I said, "Well, the thing you have to do is you have to come in low, because the missiles aren't effective on the ground. They can't turn them around. Then of course if you're going to bomb them, just before you get there you pop up and then dive down and don't give them enough reaction time to get the missiles. Wipe that out, and then you'd go back here and get the next line." "Oh," he said, "we can't do that, we've got to get them all at once." He said, "You know, those Egyptians, they've been out in the sun

too long," he said. [both laugh] Of course Israelis hadn't been, right? They're right next to them. But I think he had a point, he said, "They are really good fighters unless you can get them on the run. If you can get them panicked," he said, "to begin with, like we did in the Six Day War, we routed them," he said. "But we find they're very tough if we only take out a few at a time." [laughs] Can you imagine? This was an Israeli general, so I enjoyed discussing that with him and his theory of why we had to hit every target all at the same time. So then I'm there a year working on that and I'm a full colonel now, got promoted to full colonel, and a guy in England called and asked me if I wanted to come over and be his deputy for operations, and I said that I'd really like to do that, get back to flying F-4s again. So I did and I went to England and spent three and a half years there and ended up being a wing commander, of the wing, when I retired in 1974.

McIntosh: Where in England?

Griffin: Alconbury, England. Fifty miles northeast of London, 22 miles from Cambridge, near Huntingdon.

McIntosh: I was up in Cambridge a year ago, I went up to Duxford, to see the Duxford Museum. Great museum.

Griffin: Cambridge is a nice town. My daughter went to school there for her junior year abroad.

McIntosh: So you were in England for how long?

Griffin: I was in England three and a half years.

McIntosh: As a wing commander?

Griffin: As an ops officer and wing commander. I stayed in the wing.

McIntosh: What a career you've had.

Griffin: I flew all the time and that's –

McIntosh: Different. Most guys didn't get so much flying as you did.

Griffin: Well, no. Usually when you get promoted to colonel you don't get into a flying job, so that when he called me and said would I like to do that I got down on my knees and begged him, I said, "Boy, can you get me over there!" Everybody wants to be a wing commander. There's only 130 of them in the whole military, I guess. There's a lot of colonels. There aren't

that many wing commanders. It's a brigadier general's job. But there are a lot of brigadier generals that aren't wing commanders too.

McIntosh: So you retired from there.

Griffin: I retired there, yeah, and came back to Portage.

McIntosh: How many years was that now?

Griffin: Twenty-eight. About 28 years. I probably should have stayed in.

McIntosh: For 30?

Griffin: No, just to get promoted.

McIntosh: Oh, I see.

Griffin: Because I was in the job, and when I retired the four-star general said, "You should have stuck around another year," but he didn't tell me that before I retired. He later became the chief of staff. For my career-wise, I could've stayed in, but I knew I'd go back to the Pentagon and get in one of the little offices somewhere. I'd never had a job there, so I was primed, ripe, due to go.

McIntosh: That would have been the next move?

Griffin: Yeah, I'm sure that would have been the next move. Some job in some cubby-hole in the Pentagon.

McIntosh: Well you were getting to be pretty valuable to the Air Force. I'm surprised they didn't talk you into staying.

Griffin: Oh, it doesn't work that way when you get up to be a colonel, there's always somebody looking for your job and if you get out he can get it.

McIntosh: Get up off your chair and there's somebody else in it is a flash.

Griffin: Oh yeah, they all want your job, yeah. No, they don't beg you to stay. It's just – it's politics, a lot of it, when you get up there, and I wasn't very good at that.

McIntosh: You were good at flying. That's what you were good at.

Griffin: Well, I was good at flying, I was a good commander, I took care of my people. I always looked after my people. I never thought the people above me looked after me as well as I looked after my people. When you get up

there that's the way it is. I remember they came over there, and they got all these political--this wasn't a political correctness thing, but they had all these dogs they trained to sniff out marijuana, okay. So one day they land on the base and they got these –

McIntosh: This was in England?

Griffin: This was in England. I'm the wing commander. They said, "Colonel, we're from headquarters and we want to search the barracks with these dogs to see if they can find out who is using marijuana. Ten o'clock tonight."

McIntosh: At night?

Griffin: Everybody's in the barracks then, probably if they're using it then or whatever. I said, "You're not siccing those dogs on my people." I said, "Ninety-nine out of a hundred are innocent and they're going to wake up in the morning and say, 'Colonel Griff sicced the dogs on us.'" I said, "We know who's using marijuana." I had what they call an OSI officer, special investigations, right there on the base that worked for me. I never talked to him. I said, "They tell me who's using it. They're onto this. We know. Get out of here." I always felt like they went back to tell the general that Colonel Griffin wouldn't cooperate. But my guys liked me, and if I wanted something done, I could get it done. They'd give 110 percent. So we had a good unit. When they gave us a test we were always the best. But I never let these guys come in and do things, so they'd go back. Well, that the way it works. They would come over there and I don't know if you want to record all this but just for interest and seeing how the general works, he ruled, what I called, by bar graphs: if you had a higher incident rate of, let's say, black and white problems on the base, or fights at the NCO club, that's an incident, and you had to submit it. He's got 10, 12, 13, 14 air bases in the whole of Europe, and if your incident rate shows on the bar graph as being higher than the others, they come over to help you out, see?

McIntosh: "Help"?

Griffin: Yeah, well, my incident rate was far lower than the others. So they came over there –

McIntosh: To investigate.

Griffin: To find out how we were covering up our incidents.

McIntosh: [Laughs] You couldn't win.

Griffin: You couldn't win. This is a Staff Judge Advocate's office, that's a branch, and I got a lieutenant-colonel working for me, he comes in and says, "Colonel Griff, they're accusing us of not submitting all the incident reports." He said, "What have I got to do, manufacture some up and send them in?" I said, "Hell no. Let them tell them what we're doing." What we did, what I did, was I got blacks and whites out to play together in sports. I gave them off an hour a day to play on the football team, or whatever. I took the best black guy I had, who was a major, been with me in Vietnam, great guy, made him the coach of the team. And everybody liked him, black or white, he got along, just a great guy. And so they got along good. Then the intramural program was going good and so these guys are not having as many incidents, they're too busy playing stuff, they're all into sports. I had the officers playing the enlisted men in basketball, the squadron commanders playing the sergeants. And the sergeants would jab you and all, the next morning they'd come in and say, "Hey Colonel Griff, you didn't get hit in the gut last night, did you?" "Oh no, no, why?" [Laughs]

McIntosh: They loved it.

Griffin: Oh yeah, they loved it. I'd go over to the NCO club and walk in there and have a beer with them, and they'd come up and say – because I always let them know that when I was a corporal I had more authority than I did today, in the Army Air Force, brown shoe – and they'd say, "Is it true, Colonel Griff, you used to be a grunt like us?" [Both laugh] I said, "Hell, I wore brown shoes. You guys don't even know what brown shoes are."

McIntosh: Terrific.

Griffin: Brown shoes, yeah. That was the Army Air Force. But any rate, it was a great career. I enjoyed it.

McIntosh: I think it's wonderful.

Griffin: Nothing much I'd change if I had to do it all over again.

McIntosh: Alright.

Griffin: Now those pictures, which would have been nice to have, either copies or a record. I don't know how you would keep those. I've got some of those smaller ones with me, but they're going to send me these pictures of the airplanes and the revetments on that first mission.

McIntosh: Well, we'd like copies, if we could.

Griffin: Well, we're going to have to make copies.

McIntosh: Sure, we can make you a copy whatever you have. If you mail it to us we'll mail it back.

Griffin: What do you want pictures of?

McIntosh: Examples of the propellers and such.

Griffin: Not the airplanes or anything like that?

McIntosh: No, not really.

Griffin: Okay. Just something that was a mission.

McIntosh: Typical of a mission, that's what we'd like. That'd be just perfect.

Griffin: Did you ever hear the term, "burn me a copy" of something?

McIntosh: We used to burn the discs, the CDs.

Griffin: Thirty years ago, when they had just copy machines in the office, people would say, "Go down and burn me a copy of something." You'd put it on there and you've got one kind of paper that does this, and another kind of paper. When I was a wing commander over in England, and I had this three-striper, a black sergeant, working in the office for me, and I kept all my confidential stuff from the wars and everything in a safe there, and I told him to get one of those things and burn a copy of it. I got ready to leave, I said, "Where's the stuff in my safe? All the stuff on the on tape." "Well, sir, I burned that."

McIntosh: "Just like you told me."

Griffin: I couldn't chew him out, it was just a misunderstanding, and I liked the guy. The guy was a great guy. I probably even hung my head and he felt so apologetic; I tried not to—

McIntosh: You were devastated.

Griffin: Yeah, but I was trying to not show it. But holy cats, that's stuff I'd carried around with me for years because it was still confidential from the Vietnam War.

McIntosh: It'd be safe now.

Griffin: Yeah, it'd be safe now, but I had pictures of these trucks taken right on the deck. You could count the holes in the radiator, things like that, that I was

saving. And they were just confidential pictures, nothing top secret. All combat film's confidential. I just kept it with me. I figured someday I'll use that in my memoirs or whatever.

McIntosh: So the Air Force didn't want you to talk about any of those secret missions until just recently?

Griffin: Yeah, well, when you get out, you swear to something, that you'll never reveal anything that's classified until it's declassified. And they just never declassified that.

McIntosh: Even though it was long since lost.

Griffin: A couple years ago, another guy and I said, "You know, we're going to die, and they're never going to know about this pre U-2 era of the Air Force." Everybody knows about U-2s, but they don't know what did it before that. Well we did it, and couldn't talk about it, so we're all going to die and the Air Force is going to be happy because it's not going to be embarrassing to them, to admit that we were doing this. We got one guy interested in it, in the National Consulate's Office, and he got a couple missions declassified and then it all fell apart and it's all okay now.

McIntosh: Okay, very good. Excellent.

Griffin: I hope that works out all right for you.

McIntosh: You did a super job.

[END OF INTERVIEW]