Transcription: William Gregory

Today is Friday, February 3rd, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I will be interviewing Colonel William Gregory. This interview is being conducted in person in the Stephen F. Austin Building in Austin, Texas, and is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Also joining us today is his daughter, Ms. Cookie Ruiz. Thank you both for coming in. It's an honor for our program to have you here, and sir, I know you've got a great story about your time as a veteran, so I'd like you please to just share with us whatever you feel like sharing.

William Gregory: Thank you, James, for inviting me. My first flight was made 72 years ago in the spring of 1940 at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where I was a student. Our government had sponsored small programs at several universities throughout the country, and at our school we had two Piper Cubs and two instructors and we did some ground school in aviation. So we completed 30 flying hours which included a solo cross country. I felt very fortunate to be in this program because there weren't many people flying in Tennessee 72 years ago, or even anywhere in the country, and my family was poor so I couldn't have afforded otherwise. So a year later, in February of .41, a team representing the Army Air Corps arrived at the university to administer tests for interested students who had completed two years of college. It was for the aviation cadet program of the Army. The test was pretty strict particularly on the physical. You had to have 20/20 vision and could not be color blind, and they told us we would hear within 46 weeks if we had been selected. But by mid-August, none of us had heard anything. So I didn't think I was gonna hear, so I elected to go to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville where they had the second phase of the program and I was going to register there in the fall. So I found out I could get in the program but it was about three weeks before school started, so I went back home and I had received a letter of acceptance to the aviation cadet program. I just reached age 21, the war had been going on in Europe for two years at that time, and it seemed like the best choice to go into the aviation cadet program. There were 28 of us inducted into the aviation cadets at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, which is just outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and the next day we boarded the Chattanooga choo-choo for New Orleans and then onto Uvalde, Texas, where we were the first class at Garner Field. Garner Field was a brand new field and the barracks had not even been quite finished yet, so we have to live in the Kincaid Hotel for about 10 days, and I thought this was great, but it didn't last. Our barracks got finished and we started doing the military drills and flying and ground school, and it was really a busy time. We flew the PT-19 Fairchild there at Garner Field, and we finished on December the 5th, 1941. On December the 7th, 1941, we went by bus to Randolph Air Field which was considered the West Point of the Air at that time, and that was of course Pearl Harbor Day, December the 7th. Our tempo really picked up at that time after the war started, and we were going 7 days a week from early morning, about 5:30, to 9:30 at night, drilling, military formations, and ground school, and flying. I had my first night flight there and I was amazed at how black it was. Randolph was a long way from San Antonio, it still is, but there were no lights at that time and this was a dark night, and I thought man, I don't know if I can handle this at night. But my eyes adjusted and I never had any more trouble with night flying. But we flew the BT-9 there. It was built by North America. It was an old train plane, but I had no trouble with it, and so we finished our flight there at Randolph in late February of 1942, and then I went to Moore Field where there were a large group of us. There were about 85 of us, and again, Moore Field, which is Mission, Texas, we were the first class there as well. We flew the AT-6's and we also flew the PT-19 which is the plane we flew at Uvalde, but this one had canopies. We used the PT-19 for dogfighting, and I always liked to fly solo in the F because the instructor was

usually with one student, and the solo pilot invariably won the fight because of the extra weight of the instructor gave a decided advantage to the solo flyer. There were 78 of us graduated on the 29th of April 1942, and all of us were selected for P-38's, the entire class, and this school at Moore Field was a fighter preparation school. Actually I don't think it was really a good thing because all pilots are not suited to become fighter pilots, and I had a good friend, Harold Ed Brown, and in flying formation which you had to do in fighters, it was dangerous to be in the same sky with him when he trying to fly formation. I think he would have made it in other type flying, but not in the P-38. When we arrived, all of us went to the San Francisco area, Hamilton Field, and other fields around there, and when we arrived the Japanese threat was still very real because it had only been five months since the attack at Pearl Harbor, and there were many who thought the Japanese might attack again. My first flight was at Mills Field which is today called San Francisco International, but our squadron was located there due to the crowded conditions at Hamilton, and on my very first flight, I felt like the airplane was at least a half a mile ahead of me for the first 30 minutes. The transition from the AT-6 to the P-38 was awesome because we had had no twin engine training or transition before we flew the 38, and our instruction was not very good at this time. They showed us the cockpit and what all the instruments stood for and they showed us how to start the airplane, and I think they felt that if we could start the airplane again and tax it, we should be able to fly it, and that was kind of the way our training went. But on my second flight, there were three of us scheduled to fly with an instructor. He was to take off first and the new second lieutenant, he had been our cadet colonel at Moore Field. He was the number one cadet in our class. As he was taking off behind the instructor, I could see his engine was cutting out, a lot of black smoke, and I was hoping he would stop, but he went on, took off, he got about 300 feet and he lost control and crashed nose down, and was lost. I had to take off right behind him and flying through this black smoke of this lost airplane and pilot. We lost quite a few pilots in part because we just hadn't had much training or much transition. We continued to train and did quite a bit of flying. We eventually went to Hamilton Field and in October we were supposed to fly the airplanes to England to escort the B-17's. But there was a flight of four previously to our flight accompanied by a B-17. It was navigating for them, and they ran into bad weather and they had to turn back and ran short of fuel, and the B-17 and all four P-38's had to land on the Greenland ice cap. They all survived and they were rescued by dog sled about three days later, but because of this incident, it was decided that no more P-38's would fly over to England. So we went on the train from San Francisco to New York and then we got on the Queen Elizabeth which had been refitted for troop movement, and we rode the beautiful Queen Elizabeth to Scotland where we disembarked, and we rode a train from there down to our base at Cocks Hill in northeast England. We started receiving our P-38's in December and January. The weather was really bad in England that year as it always is in the winter time, but we did do some local flying. Then in March there were 12 of us out of our 40 pilots were selected to fly down to Chellaston a B-17 base, and to practice with them for two missions before escorting them over Germany. When we arrived there, their morale was very bad because they had been losing lots of airplanes and they were really happy to see us because they would like to have our help. We flew one practice mission but before we could fly the second one, our group CO received orders to send all P-38's to North Africa where Rommel was operating at that time, a threat, so we flew back to our base at Cocks Hill and they said we had to have dust filters installed before we went to the dusty area of North Africa. So that same day, late in the afternoon, we were going to fly to Belfast where there was a Lockheed plant near there, and it was almost dark when we took off, the weather was bad, and we flew under the clouds until we got to the highlands of England, and at that time we had to fly through the clouds and we hadn't had much instrument flying, and so we lost two pilots that night in that flight, and the other 10 landed there in Belfast, installed the dust filters, returned to England and then flew nonstop from Land's End, the southern tip of England, to Casablanca, and we trained them for

about 30 days at a base near Casablanca and after that, we flew to our base at Telergma, Algeria, which is near Constantine, and when we arrived there, of course the Luftwaffe pilots had been in the war, they had been flying combat for three years, and we were brand new and had limited flight time in the P-38. So our early missions were exciting. On the very first mission that I flew, everything was going OK and all of a sudden I could see these tracer bullets come across my wing. I realized I had to get out of that situation, so with some radical maneuvers I shook him off and got away and finished the mission OK. But it was a very exciting thing to know this guy is trying to shoot you down. We were generally outnumbered on all of our early missions. We flew in squadrons of 12 airplanes. There would be four in a flight and they flew a flight abreast. It was a formation that we had copied from the REL which had found this successful, and it worked for us as well also. There were 28 of us young pilots that started on May of 1943, started combat, and there were only 7 of us that completed 50 missions at the end of the year. I had four tent mates. We lived there in pyramidal tents and I lost all four of my tent mates during that year. So we were frequently outnumbered 3 to 1 early on. This changed later. But on one of the early missions, there were 12 of us escorting B-17's, and we were met by about 35 or 40 109's and we instantly got into heavy combat and we were all over the sky, and all of a sudden I was all by myself and I couldn't see another airplane at my altitude. I looked down and I saw one P-38 in a tight circle and there were four ME-109's chasing him, and so I realized I had to try to help him out, took a steep dive down to where they were in this orbit, and it appeared that when I got my sight on them I could also see him, so I wasn't able to shoot at them or him, and so I made a quick pass and I got two of those 109's on lee, and I decided this would be a good time to see if the P-38 could outrun the 109. I found that it could. So the two of them chased me for quite a ways, one finally quit, and then the other one chased me a while longer and finally he turned back, and when he did I turned on him and he did not reach his base. After escorting B-17's and B-25's, B-26's on a lot of their missions, my squadron was selected for the first dive bombing mission in P-38's. This had not been done before. So they provided some practice bombs for us and we did some practice bombing on the dry lakes there near our base and there were six of us selected for this first mission, and the target was Alghero in Sardinia. It's on the northwest coast of Sardinia, and they briefed us that after we dropped our bomb on the railroad there, that if we were lined up properly, we could make one pass at the seaplane bass which was in the harbor adjacent to the city. So we flew out very low on the deck to avoid contact by radar, and when we reached the target we climbed up to about 3,000 feet, and each of us individually went into a steep dive down on the target, dropped our bomb, and when I rolled out of this steep dive right near the ground, I was lined up perfectly with two large seaplanes, and the P-38 had four 50-caliber machine guns in the nose plus one 20 mm cannon, and when you were firing all of these it was an awesome cone of fire. So I lined up on the first one and gave it a long burst of fire, and it immediately burst into flame. So I sighted in on the second one, gave it a long burst and the same thing happened. As I was flying over them, I could see that they were both burning fiercely and there were two of the other P-38 planes that got one each, so we got four big seaplanes on that one quick mission, and it was a total surprise because we weren't shot at at all from the ground, and actually the planes had tarps on them. It was late in the afternoon and they had sort of bedded them down for the evening, but we kind of woke them up I think. After that mission, we did about six missions on the Island of Panarea. It's an island off the coast of Tunisia about a third of the way toward Sicily, and the Germans highly fortified it after they left North Africa, and it was essential to capture it before the invasion of Sicily. So we flew six missions, dive bombing missions on the Island of Panarea, and the B-17's and B-25's also bombed it as well. On our last mission, we were told that if there were white cloths, squares, at a particular place on the island, this was a signal that they had surrendered or were going to surrender. So we had bad weather that day, but we flew out there and when we arrived, the white cloths were at the designated place, and the island had surrendered. It was heavily fortified

on our early missions, but by then it had capitulated, and I think it was the only island in World War II that surrendered without an invasion, but that island did that. Then we were in the invasion, we did cover for the invasion of Sicily also, and it was an awesome sight to see all the ships lined up for 100 miles for that invasion, and actually as we flew over them, our own people fired at us a little bit. I guess they were told to fire at any plane they saw, but they should've been able to recognize our planes, but we had no one that was hit, so that invasion didn't last too long. Our ground troops really took it in a hurry and then we were also on the invasion of Italy, and I remember early on, my first flight over Rome where we were escorting B-17's, and I could see that big church that is so familiar to everyone, St. Paul's Cathedral, and I was just hoping that bombers didn't hit it on that day, and of course they didn't, and actually it never was hit during the war which was a very good thing. But I finally completed the 50 missions at the end of that year, and I had flown plane #55 throughout my 50 missions and I was still there when it flew the next mission, and unfortunately it did not return on the very next mission. I think if I'd have been there it would have returned. But I then returned to the States and became an instructor pilot at Ontario, California, and while there, in 1944 I flew the first jet fighter that we had which was the P-59, and it was a different sensation flying this jet and no props, and I was going through the air real smoothly, but it was different not having props. But we didn't build very many of those but it was a different thing to fly that first jet fighter. I stayed in the Air Corps on active duty after the war until 1947, and at that time it appeared like there was not much future. We were not doing much flying and the personnel had been cut back so much that it didn't seem like there would be many opportunities, so I requested separation and did get out of the active Air Force at that time and relocated in Shreveport, Louisiana, but I stayed in the Reserve and we would meet at Barksdale, adjacent to Shreveport, and we flew the AT-6 on weekends and we didn't receive any pay for it, but it was pay enough that we could fly, keep our hand in flying, which we did until May of 1951 when our unit was called back to active duty. We joined the 301st Bomb Group there at Barksdale at that time, and Barksdale had bombers, B-29's. I really wanted to get back in fighters, but they wanted me to fly B-29's, and it was really different flying solo in the P-38 and then having 10 crew members on the B-29. I kind of enjoyed all that help. But I flew the B-29 for the next two years through '53, and about once a year we would have a three months temporary duty in either England or North Africa, and the reason for this was to be about 10 to 12 hours closer to our target in the Soviet Union, and this was a good thing. We did this throughout that period, and I enjoyed my flights in the B-29. It was a fine airplane, built by Boeing, as all Boeing airplanes are, and then I switched to the B-47 which was the first really effective jet bomber. It was a six-engine jet bomber and I flew it from '54 to '56, and I was stationed at Orlando, Florida, during that period, and again, we still did the TDY to England and to Morocco, and it was on my very last mission in Morocco that my flight really had a good quarter. Under the SAC rating system, they rated crew by the quarter, and we actually came out number one out of 45 crews on that particular quarter. But when it was over, we flew home. It was a long flight, two night refueling, and the route is up near Tule, Greenland, for navigation purposes, and we had two night refuelings as I mentioned, and then landed at Orlando. It was really a fatiguing flight and so about two days later, it was on a Saturday, I got this call from base operations that I had been selected for a classified interview for a secret program, and could I meet the airplane at noon? I said that I could, and so I met the airplane and we flew to Turner Air Force Base at Albany, Georgia, and it was there that Project Black Night was being established, and it was the first organization to fly above 65,000 feet. We had the RB-57 which was a two-engine reconnaissance airplane, built by Glen L. Martin, and it was sort of a copy of the earlier P-57C, but this airplane had longer wings which were lighter because they were of a honeycomb construction, and larger engines, which allowed it to fly to about 6,500 feet. At that time, the Eisenhower administration was very concerned about the Soviet threat because we really didn't know what their capability was and they were actually very war-like it seemed. So

Eisenhower, he suggested the open skies policy to Khrushchev, if we did that, why they would be allowed to overfly our country and at the same time we could overfly their country. But of course Khrushchev summarily dismissed that. He wanted no part of it. So the administration was so concerned that they decided to overfly the Soviet Union without their permission, and so the RB-57 was the first airplane that was going to be used because they could build it quickly, but the government issued a request for proposal for an airplane that would fly at 70,000 feet, have a range of 3,000 miles, and a payload of 600 pounds, and they awarded for the prototype three aircraft companies. Lockheed was not included, but Kelly Johnson, the greatest aeronautical engineer I think of our time, decided to compete for this airplane requirement with Lockheed money, and he actually won the contract by developing the U2. So anyhow, after I had the interview there at Turner Field, I really wasn't sure if I had been selected, but they told me that I would hear from them very soon. So the next thing that I received was a telegram from those people to go to Worcester, Massachusetts, to the Dave Clark brassiere factory for a fitting for a pressure suit, and by that, I knew that I had been selected. So Dave Clark met us at the airplane. He was very pleased I think to have this contract, and there were two of us there and he took us through his factory, and he gave us a tour of the factory and we saw about 450 women seated at individual sewing machines making garments, beautiful garments for ladies, and of course he had had a lot of experience in fitting tight undergarments, and so he was a perfect choice for the first pressure suits. And we were the very first pilots, our group was, to use the pressure suit. We were long before the space program. So I was in the RB-57 program for four years, first as a detachment commander, and then finally as the squadron CO. The RB-57's had only built 20 airplanes, and 13 of them were equipped with cameras, 6 of them with sophisticated Elint equipment that could find enemy radars, and then we had one radar airplane, and then camera-equipped airplanes made one overflight from Japan, but the Elint airplanes, the 6 of those that were collecting radar signals, I went on three deployments with them as the commander – two in Turkey and one in England, and we would fly along the Soviet border at high altitude at night and the Soviets really turned on their radars then which is what we wanted them to do, and so we were able to pick up a lot of new radar signals that we had never received before. So the program was successful in that way, and on my last temporary duty to Adonna, Turkey, Incirlik Base, and this is my fourth year in that program and I knew it was going to be phased out, I received a message to return to Washington for an interview which turned out to be with the CIA for a job as the operations officer at a squadron they had at Atsugi, Japan. There were two squadrons of U2's, one at Atsugi and one at Incirlik, the base where I had just left in Turkey, and I was a lieutenant colonel at the time, and the commanders of both units were full colonels, so I was selected then for a job at Atsugi for the operations job. I went back to Del Rio, my home base, and we sent my whole baggage in April of 1960 to Atsugi and we were waiting orders for myself and my family. I was going to get to take my family overseas for the first time. Then on May the 1st, 1960, Gary Powers was shot down, and it created utter chaos in Washington. At first they didn't know what had happened to him. They didn't know if he had been killed or not, and they put out this erroneous message that he had been flying along the border and he had a compass error and inadvertently strayed inside the Soviet Union. It was a terrible story and they shouldn't have done this. Of course Khrushchev hadn't said anything until we made this erroneous statement, and I think, well Powers was about 500 miles inside the Soviet Union when he was shot down, and then later Khrushchev showed pictures of the airplane that had crashed and the pilot. So we really got a black eye for this. What they should've done is just simply told the truth. We knew, from the first flight, and this was a very successful program, the first flight was on July the 4th 1956, and they flew 25 successful flights before this one, almost four years they had been operating. On the very first flight, we knew, the U.S. knew that the Soviet radars were tracking this U2 throughout the flight. We also knew that they were sending up MIGs on every flight to shoot this airplane down. We had even forecast that at some point we were

probably going to lose one. So what they should've done I think was just told the truth and said yes, we offered the open skies policy, and you turned it down, so we have been overflying, and I think that would've been accepted much better than what was probably told. So with all this turmoil in Washington, the CIA had a problem deciding what to do with these two squadrons overseas. They finally decided to bring them back to Edwards Air Force Base, all of the airplanes and the equipment and all of the people except they returned all of the military people and didn't include former commanders to the Air Force. And so finally in late August, I received orders at Del Rio after this long wait and we had attended several going away parties and it became embarrassing, but orders not to Atsugi, Japan, as we had hoped, but to Edwards Air Force Base which is right near the flight test center. This base was a satellite base. It's about 7 miles from the rate flight test center, and it was a satellite WWII base that had been used very little since then, and when I arrived in late August there at Edwards, it was a mess, this north base, and as a lieutenant colonel, I was the ranking officer and became the acting commander. So my first job was for us to clean up this mess that had been deteriorating for so long, and so we really worked at this and got it looking a lot better, and then we did a little flying. But I thought my job was going to be to deactivate the unit because President Eisenhower had said that we would not do any more flights with the U2, and so surprisingly in October, I received a call from my head boss in Washington saying that they were going to send out a team to evaluate us on a simulated exercise where we would simulate flying to anyplace in the world, operate for about three months with a limited number of airplanes, and with no resupply. So the team came out, about 7 people on the team. They scheduled three flights for us. But before they got there, I called my staff together and we did a plan that really worked out well. We decided that we would set aside blocks of time for each section to have their time on the airplane, and we started this 24-hour advance of takeoff, and each section would do their thing during their block of time, and this worked out really well. So they scheduled these three flights which we made. They were all off on time, they covered the tracks very well, all the targets, and the equipment worked beautifully. So they declared it satisfactory, a success. So I didn't think that really amounted to very much, but anyhow that was good to have that happen and to have that success. But then on early November of 1960, only a few months after the May shoot down, I got a call from my boss to deploy to Laughlin Air Force Base where I had just been stationed, and to begin overflying Cuba. So we went there in early November, and we finished, and we flew several missions over Cuba at that time, the very first missions, and we finished about the 15th of December of 1960, and I thought that's wonderful, I'm going to be home for Christmas. But on the 18th of December, I got a call from Washington that I was to leave in two days for the Philippine Islands, so I was there at Christmas time at Subic Bay, the naval air station there at Cubi Point, and so I had Christmas there. And then early January of 1961, we began the first overflights of Vietnam, and this was long before the big buildup in 1965. So we finished in April and I arrived back home, and the next morning Helen had the Christmas tree lighted up and we had Christmas music going and we had presents under the tree and the doorbell rang, and it was the postman, and we opened the door and he saw all this Christmas cheer going on, the music and the lights, and he says are ya'll early or late? And I said well, in our life we celebrate the holidays whenever we can, and that's really kind of the way it was because I was gone so much in those years that we had to make the best use of our time when I was at home. So we continued to overfly Cuba and Vietnam at frequent intervals, and I went personally on all of these deployments, and it was in early January that the CIA got information from Cuban refugees that they had seen a lot of Soviet arrivals in Cuba in January of 1962. So the CIA was, well actually the Director, John McComb, he had ordered some increase in flights through that period, and in April alone we flew four overflights and we saw a lot of suspicious buildups, and we also detected 35 MIG-15's and -17's and 12 MIG-19's, plus a lot of anti-aircraft guns. Then we flew some more overflights through July and another one on the 5th of August, but we still hadn't

found any missiles at that time, and the weather was a problem. But on the 29th of August, Bob Ericson, he was a handsome young Swede, one of my pilots, he was scheduled for that flight and he passed over the western end of the island over Havana, onto the east, he covered the entire island and then back again over the western end, and it was a very long flight, 9 hours, and the mission terminated at Del Rio again. The film was quickly processed and then rushed to Washington for the photo interpreters to see, and my boss had called me after that mission and he asked how I thought it went. I said I thought it went pretty well. There were a little clouds over the east but the rest of it was OK. Then when the photo interpreters got that film, they discovered 8 SA-2 SAM sites, clearly identified. These were the surface-to-air missiles. And a 9th was discovered the next day, and also 6 guided missile patrol boats, and so then we stepped up the tempo again, and on the 5th of September, we found three more SAM sites, plus a MIG-21 at Santa Clara Air Base in Cuba, and that was the most advanced airplane of the Soviet Union, and there were a lot of crates there which indicated many more MIG-21's. The photo interpreters in Washington knew that the way these SAM sites were deployed, they deployed them in a circle, and in the Soviet Union when they did this, they put an intercontinental ballistic missile in the center of them. The SAM's were for protection of the big missile. So they knew, or thought they knew, that very soon that we would find this surface-to-air missile. But bad weather and bad luck and a little in-fighting between the CIA and the Air Force delayed our next flight, or we would have found the first missile in Cuba, which was the SS5 IRBM. But it was decided in Washington that this very secret operation which very few people knew about at that time, was going to become public, and that it was going to require a lot of flights and that we had been doing this surreptitiously and it would be better if the Air Force took this over, which they did at that point. But it was decided that they would use our airplanes, which had the J-75 engine, and that plane would fly about 3,500 feet higher than the Del Rio airplanes which had the J-57 engine. So on the first, well Major Steve Heiser and Rudy Anderson were selected by the 40 80th to fly the first and second mission, and they were good choices. They were excellent pilots. They both came out to my base at Edwards, and we gave them a couple of flights in the C model which had the J-75 engine, and they had no problem at all. Then my wife, Helen, prepared an excellent dinner. We had them both for dinner there before this first flight. The first flight was scheduled on the 14th of October of 1962, but the preparation began on the 13th, and there were three generals that appeared at this remote base where we had very little people from the Air Force or anywhere else because it was a highly secret base, but naturally they were very welcome. They wanted to be a part of this next mission because they pretty well knew that we were going to fly the IRBM. But they insisted and it was the right thing to do that my people prepare the airplane, which they did. My mechanics which were Lockheed civilians, they prepared the airplane, and the camera people prepared the camera, and all the others prepared the other equipment, and so it was just after midnight on the 15th that Steve Heiser took off from North Base there at Edwards. We had him positioned there at the end of the runway, and just short after midnight, pitch dark, and he met the sun over the Gulf of Mexico. Then he flew near the Yucatan peninsula before turning north and flew directly over the western end of Cuba where we had found the SAM sites before. He was at 72,500 feet and he was only over the island 7 minutes total, and so this mission discovered the first intercontinental ballistic missiles in Cuba, and of course there were many other missions flown. Rudy Anderson flew his first flight successfully, but he was shot down on his second mission and killed. He was the only loss during that operation. So then the Cuban missile crisis had become public. Our ambassador made a big show of this at the UN and accused the Soviets of having missiles in Cuba, and he had the pictures to verify that they were there. President Kennedy's staff was sort of equally divided as to whether we should bomb those targets or not, and it was about half of them that wanted to wait. During that time, there were 7 messages between Kennedy and Khrushchev. This was before the red phone was installed. So they had to wait for the answer and it was a

long, drawn-out, nervous period, and we almost went to war. I don't think most people realize how close we came to going to war. But finally with a lot of Soviet ships en route to Cuba, they were finally stopped and Khrushchev agreed finally to remove all of the missiles and the airplanes, and so this big event was over. After the crisis, there was some discussion of who found the missiles first, and of course we found the first surface-to-air missiles and the Air Force found the others. The Air Force received a lot of deserved credit because they did a really good job on this, and a lot of publicity and they got a lot of rewards, and of course my group received no publicity at all, and we couldn't because of who we were working for. But I received a personal letter from President Kennedy, and I have it framed, and it was a wonderful letter that acknowledged that he could not openly compliment us, but he wanted us to know that we had made a significant contribution to this awesome problem. So I read this secret letter to all of my group and I know that they all felt very good about their role in this. I personally received a medal of merit from the CIA, and my 3rd Legion merit from the Air Force, and I was advanced from lieutenant colonel to colonel three years before I was normally eligible. Two years later, in 1964, my boss, General Jack Ledford, came from DC out to my base and we flew to a secret base in the Nevada desert, part of the SR-71 which was a Mach 3 airplane flying at three times the speed of sound was being deployed. He wanted me to see the setup there, and he offered me the operations officer for the SR-71, which I would have been in charge of all the training and all deployments of these operations later. This was a job that most Air Force officers would have killed for to have been considered. But just 10 days before that, I had returned from Thailand after three months over there, and after I was back my wife, Helen, who was a wonderful person, wonderful wife, good mother and a beautiful woman, says I don't know how much longer I can tolerate all these operations. Now I really understood this because she really had sort of a dull life at that time because she didn't go anywhere when I was gone. So I explained this to General Ledford that I really appreciated the confidence that he had shown in my by this offer, but that I felt like I had to turn it down for these reasons, and he understood. He told me that when my tour was up there next year, that he would help me get whatever assignment I wanted. And so in 1965, I said I would like to go to the National War College for a year if there is space. They only admitted 25 officers each year, and so I was accepted at the National War College and it was a great year. We were with the Army, Navy, Marines, and the high-level civilians, usually colonels and lieutenant colonels, and it was sort of a stepping stone to making a general to be at the War College. I also got my Masters Degree at George Washington University during that same year. Then after that, during the next five years I was at the Pentagon from 1966 to '71, and I was in research and development for reconnaissance at that time. It was during this period that the drones which have become very popular now were just beginning research and development, and they weren't doing very good at all in those years. But it just shows what a long time it takes to develop a great weapon system. In 1971, I received a call from Major John Penson who was a commandant of the Air Force Institute of Technology, and he said he had reviewed my record and he wanted me to become his Vice Commandant because he was looking for someone who had command experience in strategic air command, and I told him that his job offer was so different from what I had been doing that I didn't think I might be suited for it, or I would be suited for it. And so he invited me out to AFIT anyhow at Wright Patterson, and so I did, I went out and visited the Institute of Technology and he showed me around, and he said that I would be his chief of staff and that he was going to retire after a while and I would be very active. I was impressed with all the things they do there. They offered graduate programs to Air Force students for the most part in engineering at the masters and doctorate level, and also in other degrees at the masters level, particularly engineering, and they are responsible for literally thousands of Air Force students who are assigned by AFIT to universities throughout the country to further their education. So I accepted the job and it was really an interesting job, very different from what I had done before, but very challenging, and I really liked the job, liked the

people there, and it was my final assignment. I was Vice Commandant there for four years and Major General Semakayitus replaced him, who also became a good friend and still is 'til today, and it was at my retirement ceremony which was on August the 31st, 1975, that I retired from the Air Force in the grade of a colonel, and through his substantial contacts with the Secretary of the Air Force, he revealed the history of my years commanding the U2 reconnaissance unit involved in the Cuban missile crisis, and I hadn't expected it to be made public that soon, but it was declassified, and it was on that day that my wife, my family and friends learned for the first time about this chapter in my life. Thank you.

Well thank you sir, it's an honor. I enjoyed just sitting here and listening to everything that you just told us, and I have all sorts of questions. I don't want to keep you forever, but I know your daughter is here with us today. I'll just ask you, what are your memories as a little girl, especially with your dad being deployed as much as he was?

Cookie Ruiz: Oh, the interesting part is the strength of military wives. I have really very little memory of this idea of dad being gone. He was gone 50% of the time for 9 years, but the way our family worked was always the day he left, we always started a project for the day he would come back. So there's not a sense of loss there. But what I do have is a memory of growing up with aviation, and so as a child, my best friend lived on the block behind me over about four houses, and to get there, I illegally would get up on this fence that I wasn't supposed to walk on, and I had to walk past a house of a cranky colonel who would come out of the yard and tell me to get off that fence, and his name was Chuck Yaeger, and he had at that point just broken the sound barrier and was famously known for that. My Sunday school teacher was Mrs. Borman. Her husband was a captain at the time, Frank, ended up as an astronaut. So really the entire space program was going on at that base. I do remember as a child the pride of having a father that commanded a base that no one could see. He would go miles and miles and miles into the desert, and other people when I would play at their house, they would say so what does your father do? As if a 9-year-old or a 6-year-old is going to have any knowledge. I remember meeting Kelly Johnson. I remember he would come to our home, and so the pilots would meet in our home because it was a safe place. And I remember my father maybe, I remember the shock of finding out that I was going to see 007 movies and finding out that at 28 years old, this is what my father had done for a living. Then later I must have been in my early 30's, when I was visiting my mom and dad, and my dad had said to me, because it was Christmas card writing time, go tell your mother so and so, I don't remember the names, never existed. So I went into the kitchen to tell my mom, mom dad says so and so never existed. She said go tell your father he's only got five Christmas cards to write and I've got 50, please finish. So I said dad, get with it, and he said no, no, tell her that again. So I went back in and I remember hands on hip, the towel in her hand, and she was like Greg, and he just smiled, and so all those years he had been writing his code that was sent, this family that we had grown up with and existed each year in a Christmas card, there was no family, but it was once a year the way that he was able to signify back to the CIA that he was still, was consistent. There's just all these interesting pieces. I often thought as a child that, I thought everyone had their mail read. I thought everyone got mail with black lines through it. I was very old before I realized that the United States Postal system didn't open up all of our mail to protect us, because all of those things could have been scary, accordingly as children we were taken into a borax mine at Edwards Air Force Base because the nuclear threat was real on that base, and so all the children in the base under high school age, I spent my entire childhood quarterly going into a borax mine deep below the desert where my belongings were, where I saw a space that had my name on it, and somehow the greatest thing that concerned me is I was going to have to take a shower in front of people, and how it is we thought we were going to wash off fallout, I don't know, but that was my concern. And so being

raised in and around pilots and aviation, everyone at Edwards was the top of what they do or they weren't there. And then a piece that dad doesn't tell here, but it was interesting, is that Francis Gary Powers had a big place in my life because I'd had to have 16 shots as a child to go to Japan and we never went because dad was on a wanted list, and Gary Powers was to have been part of his squadron, and so for that reason, years later dad ended up being the person selected to do his check ride, his first check flight to determine whether or not he was afraid of flying. And there's been a lot of harshness around Gary Powers and dad has always been exceedingly kind, so it was just there were so many things about the way I grew up, but always being around exceptional people that were pushing the edge and doing it simply as a part of what they do as another day and because it was the mission, and I'm really proud of that CIA medal of merit. It was given to him. My mother had to sign away his story because they never really thought it would be declassified and she reminded me as she was passing away that I had not signed that paper, but years later it was taken away from him and taken to Langley and then years later we got the medal back so we have it now. So those are some of my memories.

Sir, I was going to ask you, you were from Tennessee? What was it as a child or a young man that made you want to go into aviation because you started with it when you were college? What attracted you to flying?

William Gregory: Well, I grew up in a very poor family on a farm and it was a real problem for me to go to college. We were actually sharecroppers in those years, and so I worked hard in the fields as a teenager, and I just felt like there was a better life than that, and I managed to go to college at Murfreesboro, and through a government-sponsored program, and then that opportunity came along. I was just looking for opportunities to do something different and that opportunity presented itself, and if I hadn't gone into the aviation cadet program, I would have gone to the University of Tennessee and pursued aviation. I had found I really liked it and I was pretty good at it.

So that was definitely a calling for you.

William Gregory: It was.

Cookie Ruiz: How did you know to fly though?

William Gregory: I didn't know if I could or not, or I might get sick as a lot of people do, but it was a test. I did other things at that time trying to find myself, and flying this little 50-horsepower airplane was really a step and I found out that I liked it and I was pretty good at it, and so it was a thing I wanted to pursue, it was aviation. And actually it was the war that caused me to go into the cadet program because even though the war wasn't going on at that time, it was obvious that we were going to get in it sooner or later. So that was why.

And when was it that you got married?

William Gregory: In 1944.

So it was during the war.

William Gregory: During the war, yes. Helen was from Shreveport, and so I was stationed in California, and so we went back to California, Ontario, lived in Pomona, and it was a beautiful area at that time, citrus area, and when we went to Edwards years later, she was happy about

going to California, but we were driving through this desert – it was totally different. And she said it does get better than this doesn't it? I said no, this is as good as it gets. She started crying and then five years later she was crying because she was leaving. She really learned to love the desert. It's not a bad place to live, really. It's high, and so even though it's hot in summer, it's dry, and so it's not a bad place.

And how many children did you have?

William Gregory: Two, Cookie and my daughter Gretchen, who lives in St. Louis.

Cookie Ruiz: She's four and a half years older.

So she has even more memories.

Cookie Ruiz: She does.

Then I wanted to ask you, sir, in particular about the U2 program, because you're the first veteran I've had a chance to meet that was involved with that program, and I know that you were a commander at that point, but did you ever get to fly the aircraft?

William Gregory: Oh yes, I did.

Tell us what that was like the first time you flew it?

William Gregory: Well, it's a difficult airplane to land. It's not all that fast. It only cruises about Mach .72, and it handles OK once you get it in the air, but the worst part of it, it's difficult to land. It's kind of like a kite. It wants to continue to fly. But it's very air-worthy. When they built the very first ones, they were pretty flimsy by design, and they didn't think it was going to last more than about two or three flights, but it's still flying today after all these years. It's a different airplane today, totally different. It has longer wings, longer fuselage, but the same design is still flying to this day.

I know the wings were incredibly long. Did the early version have a wheel that would come off when you'd take off?

William Gregory: Yes, they had pogo's or wheels on each wing.

So when you would land -

William Gregory: They would touch down, yeah.

Cookie Ruiz: And what year did you, you had mentioned aircraft carrier qualifying?

William Gregory: Oh yes, at one point, it was in 1964 I guess it was, after the Cuban missile crisis, the CIA had a program where we were going to fly the U2 off of a carrier, and so I selected four of my pilots to do this. I asked to go through it with them. So we did the preparation at Lamoore Naval Air Station there in California, and I guess we did about 100 simulated landings in the T2A, it's a Navy airplane. And then we went to Pensacola where the USS Lexington was stationed. And it's now in Corpus as a museum piece. So we flew there and the last thing they did, they showed us about 30 minutes of film of airplanes that didn't make it,

that went off the end of the carrier or flew into the back end of it, or crashed on deck, and I kind of wondered about that, so we wanted to make sure, I guess they wanted to make sure we didn't do any of those things. And then when I flew out over the Lexington, it seemed so small. You're up 5,000 feet or so, but then when I got down in the pattern, all that good training came back. I had an LSO, landing signal officer, from the Navy that was assigned to my squadron, and he was there with us and he was there on deck. The carrier operation is designed so that you catch the second cable. There are four cables. But I really admire the Navy pilots that fly this night and day, and so I had no trouble at all. None of the pilots did. We all passed OK.

Did you ever get to the point of actually trying to fly the U2 off the carrier?

William Gregory: Yes. We did. We had one operation where we had two flights, and they didn't do this anymore because it was too expensive. We left San Francisco and we cruised all the way down to the South Sea Islands, and flew these two missions, and it's just too expensive to do.

Did they use a regular steam catapult?

William Gregory: No, no catapult. It could get off easily.

Really, I'm amazed.

William Gregory: But the problem was landing it, and on the first landing, a Lockheed test pilot was flying it and it bumped the nose and damaged the airplane. Kelly Johnson was there and I was there for that landing, and he had to do some redesign of those airplanes for it to work.

I'd never heard of that. I would have always thought that the wing span would be too big to allow it to land.

William Gregory: It was adequate, the carrier was adequate for it, but it was close. And they had to boost the landing gear, particularly the tail wheel area as well. They had to redesign it, and put a tail loop on it.

A couple of more questions. I know you all are probably running short on time. When I was 12 years old, I read the book Michael Beshloss wrote about the U2. It was called May Day, and it was by Eisenhower, Khrushchev, and Powers, and I remember around that time I saw the movie, too, that I think it was the 6 million dollar man, Lee Majors was in that. What can you tell us kind of about your memories of Gary Powers and that whole situation, because I think a lot of that has kind of been lost to history.

William Gregory: Yes, that group were selected from Air Force pilots, and they were interviewed and they were mostly first lieutenants and second lieutenants, and they were told that they would be flying an airplane, secret airplane. And they were to sign a contract for two years, and they would make $25,000 a year. It doesn't sound like much now, but they were making $6,000 a year at that time, so it was four times what they were making. But it was a high risk type of operation. So they selected pilots for and they trained at the secret base in Nevada, like the SR-71 did later, and then they had these two units. They first went to England, and the publicity was so bad they went to Germany, bad again, and then they finally went to Turkey and they were flying out of Turkey. But the first flight was made in July the 4th, 1956, and they collected an enormous amount of good intelligence, and we had thought that they had an

enormous bomber force because our people there on May Day would observe all these bombers every year, but we found out later when they got beyond the horizon, they turned around and they were flying the same airplanes by the reviewing stand several times over. And so they were able to track them on the very first mission and they were trying to use the MIG's -

But the elevation was so high –

William Gregory: They could not reach. So on this mission, he was going to fly all across the Soviet Union and land in Norway, and when he was shot down, he came down in a plowed field there in the Soviet Union. There were a couple of farmers. They thought he was one of theirs and they greeted him. And as he was coming down, he had this, they had given these pilots, there was a lot of talk about this later, a thing that they could kill themselves. It was a coin. In fact, when I took over the unit back at Evers, there were about 15 of those there and I sent them back to Washington. But he decided, I think they had actually told him, you know, if you feel that you are being so mistreated that you can't stand it, you can use this and it will be instant death. So he decided to keep the needle and throw the coin away.

Cookie Ruiz: You said like a silver dollar?

William Gregory: It was a beautiful coin. And he should've thrown the whole thing away because the Soviets found it and made a lot of it. Then when he came back, he was interviewed by our government at Washington over and over and over again, and then they called me and said they were going to send him out and they wanted me to fly with him twice. I really never knew why except maybe if he had developed a fear of flying or something like that. I flew with him twice and he was a good pilot and he was just unlucky. I think any pilot that had been on that mission wouldn't have fared much better.

Was he flying a too low of an altitude and they developed the technology to get up to him at that point?

William Gregory: No, it was a SAM site. He was at 72,000 feet and they had perfected the sound. Actually when he was on the ground, these farmers showed him two other chutes that were coming down. They shot down two of their own airplanes.

In the process –

William Gregory: In the process.

I never knew that.

William Gregory: So they were so anxious to get him that they sent the MIG's up and they fired right into the MIG's as well.

I didn't know exactly how it was that he was hit.

Cookie Ruiz: Was there some thought that that's part of the information that Rosenberg's, that was part of the couple that was tried for treason?

William Gregory: That was the atomic bomb. I think that was entirely different.

In the 50s.

William Gregory: Yeah, that was a different thing. But the bad thing about it, this was a really highly successful program until that shoot down, but there was so much bad publicity after the shoot down that it never really received the credit it deserved.

What I remember reading was that President Eisenhower had been assured there was no way that in a situation like that the pilot would be alive, and it was a big surprise when the Soviets rolled him out and had the big show trial and everything, and was that kind of how you all felt, you didn't think he would have survived?

William Gregory: Well, that's what they thought at the time, and a lot of Air Force people thought he should've killed himself, but I've really gone into this pretty thoroughly and I talked to the CIA people and they said they never required, there was no requirement they do that. They never demanded that was part of the contract. But a lot of people thought he should've killed himself, and actually he did kill himself later in a helicopter. But that was an accident, yeah. But he survived and by contract they were supposed to return to the Air Force. But they didn't return him. They returned all the others, and they were to receive the equipment grade of what they would have been if they had stayed in the Air Force. Kelly Johnson ordered him a job flying for him out there in California. And so I saw him several times. He was up at our base several times during that period, and he worked for Lockheed for about 7 years, and the job terminated. I thought that was a really gracious thing that Kelly Johnson did. He was a terrific guy.

If you would sir, tell us a little bit about Kelly Johnson. I know he was famous for the skunk works and that sort of thing.

William Gregory: Well actually he had a long career. I guess his first airplane, really he had a hand in the P-38 even way back then, and of course he was the designer on a whole series of airplanes, the C-130, the Constellation, which was a transport, the U2, and the SR-71, which still holds all the records to date, and it's unlikely that any other airplane will ever exceed that because there is a phenomenon at Mach around 2.1, 2.2, that is really difficult to get through and it takes a lot of extra design to do that, a lot of extra cost, and he went through that blockage so to speak. I was having lunch with him one day and he was working on a supersonic transport at that time because airlines were thinking of buying a supersonic transport, and he had a design for that. I asked him how he was going to, with the pressurization at that altitude, how he was going to design the windows. He said well, I'm going to make them smaller, rounder and smaller, but he had a design for that and if it had ever gotten -

I think Congress killed the funding on that in the early 70s.

William Gregory: They did. And I think it was a good thing. It would have been awful costly and of course the British had, well the British and French had this one, but they finally had to stop it. It was very costly.

Well sir, I don't know if you know this or not, but you're at the Land Office. We have archives that go back to the 1600s. We have the original Registro that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand of the settlers that came to Texas. We have the Land Grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo and says he was discharged from the Texas Army by reason of death, and this program is in part to thank you and other veterans for your service to

our nation, but also to save these interviews for posterity. Our goal is that a couple of hundred years from now maybe somebody will listen to these interviews and learn something from it. With that in mind, is there anything you would want to say to somebody listening to this interview long after we're all gone?

William Gregory: Well I think I've said it pretty much, but I would like to say that I have been richly blessed throughout my life. I don't think I could have accomplished what I did without help from God, and so I've enjoyed a good life. I've had a wonderful family and I've had an enjoyable career throughout my life, and I worked for the State of Texas for 15 years, and I enjoyed that as well. So I have been richly blessed and I thank God every day for that.

Yes sir, well we thank you for your service to our nation and from Commissioner Patterson and everyone else here, thank you for your service and also for letting us interview you today. Thank you very much.

William Gregory: Thank you.

[End of recording]