Transcription: Peter Blakely

Today is Wednesday, February 8th, 2012. My name is James Crabtree. This afternoon I'll be interviewing Mr. Peter Blakely. We're at Mr. Blakely's home in Georgetown, Texas, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to let me interview you today.

Peter Blakely: Glad to do it.

It's an honor for me and for this program. The first question we always start off with is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

Peter Blakely: OK. I was born and raised on a farm in upstate New York, up to 31 miles north of Syracuse, about a mile and a half east of Lake Ontario, east of the eastern end of Lake Ontario. I always wanted to fly. I don't know why, but I did. I was fascinated by any airplanes around. Of course back in those days, the early 30s, beyond a few Piper Cubs, there really wasn't much else, but I was fascinated by them. In fact, I got my dad to buy me a ride in a Piper Cub one day in Syracuse. I don't remember the occasion, but I think we were out there for a state fair or something on that order. I spent hours at the Syracuse airport. Dad sent a pickup truck into market in Syracuse once a month on Saturday, and with eggs and hens to sell, and I rode in with him several times. We'd leave the farm about 5:00 in the morning and I carried a little brown bag lunch and had a dime so I could buy a couple of Cokes during the day, and he dropped me off at the airport about 6:30 in the morning, and he picked me up then about 4:30 or a quarter to 5:00 in the evening.

So you really did spend a whole day.

Peter Blakely: I just spent the whole bloody day. And mind you, this was back in, let's see, I probably was 8 years old, maybe 7 or 8 when I was doing this. So it was in the latter 30s, and there weren't a lot of airplanes around, but there were a few and enough to keep me fascinated and I'd walk around the ramp and what not and talk to people, and I guess generally make a nuisance of myself, but I really enjoyed it. Typically I built a lot of model airplanes, both before the war and then during the war. Our family manned an aircraft spotter check during the war, and in Lake Ontario, southern shore, about every I guess it was every 10 or 15 miles, there was a shack put up that was about probably 10x10 with a cupela on top and a small ladder and a stand in the middle. You could stand on that thing with your head in the cupela and it was all glass and you could see around, watch for airplanes. If you heard one or saw one, you had a device you could turn and aim at the airplane and that gave you a heading. From our location, then you had a telephone you would crank and connect with I believe it's either Syracuse or else Wava, I'm not sure which, and gave them the information.

Who put that together?

Peter Blakely: I'm not sure I know. But I think it was the federal government because to my knowledge it was pretty well all along the border. I don't know about the southern border, Mexico, but it was there at Canada.

Worried about the Canadians.

Peter Blakely: Somebody coming in that way.

Interesting.

Peter Blakely: But I graduated from high school in 1947, and I went to Boden College in Brunswick, Maine, for a year and a half.

Joshua Chamberlain was the President.

Peter Blakely: Yes, and that in those days, that was liberal arts. The plan was to go to Boden for three years and MIT for two years, and then you got a degree at the end from MIT and one from Boden. I got on greatly with the science and calculus, but of all things, I started to say I flunked, I didn't really flunk, because I just quit going to sociology. I could not handle sociology. And I studied the book, I think I could quote it verbatim, but I got in for the first exam, and the prof, he wrote something on the board, there was no question mark, and boy, the rest of the guys grabbed their pencils and they started writing. I couldn't figure out what the question was. And the prof came by where I was, and said you got a problem? I said yeah, what's the question? He said it's up there on the board. I said no, that's a statement. I said I don't understand what you want. He says you don't know the material, do you? I said, I can quote you the book. You can ask me a question and I'll answer it, trust me. And anyway, I got up and left. I didn't write anything after my name. So I just walked out, and the dean called me in about a week later and he said, you've got too many cuts in sociology. I said dean, I dropped the course. Well he said you didn't really drop it because you were too late to take an official drop. I said well OK, let me put it this way, I'm not going back. And he said what's the problem? So I told him. And he chewed me out for a while. Then he finally got and closed the door and said let me tell you something. He said I was a math major, in fact I was a math prof. He said you can get along great in calculus and science. I said yeah, that's no problem. He said I also flunked sociology. Well, we had to have it anyway. So I went home for Christmas and told dad what happened. He said well, let's go down to Cornell. And Cornell was about 90 miles away, and dad had a masters degree from Cornell in animal husbandry from years back, and so we went down and looked over the engineering school, and really like it. I had stopped on the way home at MIT and looked at what they were doing there, and I was disappointed in MIT in that all of their classes and courses were text book. There was no lab work at all. And I thought gee, I don't care much for that. Anyway, Cornell, they had, you had to take two hours of sand casting and some well digging, and you kind of had to be at least somewhat familiar with the problems that the people would have trying to make this thing you design. And I was impressed with that. Anyway, I transferred to Cornell. The day I was old enough, which I'm thinking back must have been 20, I went to Rome, New York, Griffiths Air Force Base, and I guess I probably went with a recruiter from Ithaca, because I went over there and was in a group of 21 guys, or 20 guys and one girl, to take the physical and whatnot for Air Force flying school. And I was very fortunate in that I passed the physical, although I had to stay over another day because my blood pressure they said was a little high. It wasn't really high. What they had done was chopped off the top half of the pressure for a normal person and it had to be under the midpoint, and as soon as they put that cup on my wrist, boy my blood pressure shot up and I knew it. So I spent the night there and got it calmed down and got through it. And so back then, that was in January, I went back to Cornell.

And was that like ROTC that you were involved in?

Peter Blakely: No, that was applying for Air Force flying school.

OK, but you were still in college?

Peter Blakely: Yes. And I told the draft, got a wire from the Air Force, congratulations and all this stuff, and we'll let you know as soon as we have an opening in a class, so be prepared. Well, I was well prepared, but the draft board, I dropped out of school after that term. I went over to see the draft board and told them what I was doing. I said I'm going in as soon as they call me. Well, the thing dragged on and I had to go see the draft board several times. Finally I got, they had an opening in a class, and assigned a class 52B, and I'd be going to Goodfellow Air Force Base in San Angelo, Texas. So they asked me, the recruiter asked me how I wanted to go, and I said what do you mean? He said, well how do you want to travel? I said gosh, I think a bus, maybe train. I don't want to go by bus, but I never thought about flying. I said how about train? Great. So they got me hooked on this train. As a matter of fact, that made me train commander. There were about 200 guys heading towards St. Louis and then most of them down into Texas for training, a lot of Army.

What year was this?

Peter Blakely: That was 1951. That would've been early February 1951. Anyway, I managed to keep the guys all under control and got all their records turned over to the right people, and got off the train in St. Louis, and had to swap trains, and wound up, went to Abilene. We got to Abilene about noon, and I stepped out of the train station and I couldn't open my eyes, the sun was so bright. It was unbelievable. All the buildings were sandstone, you know, very light color, and I couldn't get my eyes open. I thought holy cow, I've had it. This ain't gonna work at all. So I finally was able to squint and make my way down to the bus station and got a ticket to San Angelo, and I worried about it quite a bit. But anyway, I got to San Angelo, and got out to the Air Force base and the next day, the sun came up and it wasn't quite as bright, so then I was all right. I spent a month in pre-flight, and then we started flying. This was basic flight school and we started off in the T-6, which was a lot of airplane to start off in, North American, called the Texan, and it was a tail dragger, and it was noisy as all get out and not the most comfortable thing to fly, but it was, I learned if you could fly the T-6 and get it on the ground and not ground looping, you probably could fly just about anything. So that was, we had six months of basic. We'd go to ground school half a day and then flight half a day. Ground school was meteorology and navigation and maintenance, mechanics of the aircraft and so on. Then from basic, we were all asked where we would like to go next, what we would like to fly. I told them I'd really like to fly the F-51, and they said well that's not gonna work because we are only sending National Guard pilots to 51 school, and then it's only the ones that are going back to squadrons that have 51's, so OK, well that was out. I said well, I sure don't want to fly anything that's big. So I guess that leaves jets, right, so I'll take jets. And that worked out all right and they sent me off to Bryan, Texas, and at Bryan Air Force Base, which we were the first class after it "reopened," and I say that because if you look at our barracks and some of the quarters, you would question whether it was really open or not. But we survived, we made it.

Let me ask you, sir, before you go on too far, during flight school, what was the attrition rate? Was it pretty high?

Peter Blakely: No it wasn't, it was fairly low. I think at Goodfellow we lost about four guys if I remember, washed out. One of them was killed and three washed out.

Out of about how many?

Peter Blakely: Well, probably out of about 25, so that's not too bad. In advanced, we didn't, we only lost one or two, except in advanced, a week before we graduated, two guys quit. I thought how can you do that? I hadn't realized it, but we had never sworn in. We were the last class at that time that went through flying school as civilians.

That is interesting.

Peter Blakely: We never had sworn in. And we didn't swear in until we got our commission. Well, these two guys quit and went to the airlines, which I thought was pretty chicken. But anyway, that's the way it went. And we started off at Bryan with T-6's, old, beat-up T-6's I have to say, and then we were lucky after about four weeks or maybe a little less of that, we got T-28's. We were the first group that got T-28's, and that was a nice airplane to fly. It was allegedly an F-86 trainer. The cockpit was laid out similar to the F-86, and the aircraft had some characteristics like the F-86, specifically on approach for landing it came down at a pretty steep angle like the F-86, so you get used to that. And then we flew that I guess for about three months, and then we got T-33's and F-80's, F-80A's and B's, and T-33A's. The A&B were somewhat underpowered and had some unusual and rather bad characteristics, but they were good airplanes in the sense you could do a lot with them. But you also could get hurt in a hurry if you weren't careful.

Now during this whole process, was it everything you were hoping it would be? Were you really enjoying the training?

Peter Blakely: Yeah, very much so, and it was a lot of work in the evening, but in the class as with all the classes, there were student officers. These were those who had graduated from college and got your commission before they went into flying school, and probably a third of our class was student officers, and the other two-thirds were cadets like I was. Of course, the student officers, many of them were married and they'd go home and eat and come back in the morning. So they got away from flying and the Air Force for a number of hours a day. We didn't, we never got away from it, and I think it was better that we didn't get away because we would talk in the evening, if anybody had any problems with any particular thing, we'd get together and we'd hash it out and this was helpful. Meteorology and navigation, some of the guys had trouble with those, and again, we would hash it out and I think it really helped. And as cadets, one thing they did in basic, at least, I don't think we did it in advanced, I don't remember for sure, but in basic at Goodfellow, when we went from one class to another, we'd march and we sang at the top of our lungs, and if we weren't really singing hard and loud, we got chewed out for it. I thought this was, you feel a little silly doing this, but in the end it was all designed to beef up your lung power and particularly your resistance to G-forces, so it made sense. In the final analysis in advanced, I think the cadets, the ones who were going through as cadets had an advantage over the student officers because they didn't get that kind of workout. Incidentally, I should've started this thing off by telling you that what I'm talking about happened 60 years ago, and you always get a disclaimer, and my disclaimer is, the story I'm telling you, I have no problem with, but some facts if I'm talking airspeed, weights, this kind of thing, then I'm kind of subject to get off base a little bit. I just don't remember that well.

Well, you know it far better than I do or probably anybody else listening to the interview, but let me ask you, sir, when you went in then in 1951, the Korean War was already going on. Was that your goal at some point to get over there into the action?

Peter Blakely: Well James, I'd have to say I didn't have a goal of getting into combat, but I mean it was there, and I knew it was coming, particularly if I got fighters, and I figured I would get fighters because I'm small. They won't put great big guys, can't get into the cockpit, so they won't put 'em in fighters. But when I signed up, it wasn't by intent to sign up to go to war. It was my intent to sign up and to learn to fly and fly for the Air Force.

Sure, but you knew it was something -

Peter Blakely: I knew it was there.

During the training, there was a very real world purpose for everything that you were doing.

Peter Blakely: Right.

When was it that you were able to start flying the Saber?

Peter Blakely: OK, in March 22nd of 1952, graduated, got our commission and our wings, and orders. The orders that I got were to go to Las Vegas, Nevada, Nellis Air Force Base for fighter gunnery and combat tactics training. That was a 10 weeks course at Nellis, and the first 5 weeks were in the F-80, and then half the class graduated into F-86's and the other half stayed with the F-80, and I was fortunate to get F-86's. It was the F-86A, and any aircraft with an A designation means it's the first production model and it's gonna have problems. It did. It had some very unusual characteristics and some that were, they had a reputation of being a widow maker, and it lived up to that reputation fairly well.

Were you single at this time?

Peter Blakely: No, I was married. I got married two days after I graduated. But anyway, after that 10 weeks, I took a couple of weeks off to see my folks in upstate New York, and then I headed off to Korea. Interesting aside I think, my wife stayed with her folks in San Angelo while I was in Korea, and in fact I got her a job at the Px.

Now did you meet while you were at Goodfellow?

Peter Blakely: Blind date, yeah. And we got her a job at the Px. We got a new car and a payment book with God knows how many payments there were, but there was a lot of them. And she and her mother went with me to Love Field in Dallas from San Angelo. It's a couple hundred miles. And then Love Field, waiting for the airplane, I had a ticket to San Francisco. We put all of our money on the counter and divvied it equally – she had half, and I had half. We had topped off her tank before this, so she had enough gas to get back to San Angelo and to drive to work for a week, and then she would get paid at the end of the week. She had that, and then I had the ticket to San Francisco. We split our money right down the middle and we each had $7 and 40 some odd cents, and we felt comfortable with it. It was a different world. So anyway I took off for Korea and went through Japan, a base in Japan, and then a long train ride to the western-most point on the main island of Japan which was Iwakuni. From Iwakuni, the next day they flew us to Korea. We have two bases with F-86's in Korea – one was K13, and Suon, which is where I went. The other was K16, or 14, I don't remember which now, and the 14 and 16 both were at Seoul, and one of those was F-86's – 16 I believe it was. And so I went to K13, the 51st Fighter Interceptor Group, which had three squadrons – 25th, 16th, and 39th. I got assigned to the 25th.

What was your first impression upon arriving in Korea?

Peter Blakely: Well, it stunk to begin with. It was pretty hard to get away from the odor. But you know, I was kind of fascinated by it. It was different. People seemed to be industrious, civilians. We had some Koreans working on the base, not a lot, but some, and they seemed to be good people.

Now the squadron that you joined, they had been there, they had seen action.

Peter Blakely: Oh yeah, they'd been there for, the 51st went in probably in about 1950, sometime in '50.

How were you treated as the new guy on the block joining the unit?

Peter Blakely: Well, no problem. I got sent over to personal equipment to draw my gear, parachute, and all the other paraphernalia that goes along with it, and come back and put in here, and come down in the morning, no need to be down before 5 o'clock so, and see what's going on. So I was able to get an airplane and went out for a check ride with one of the other pilots. I guess it was about the third or fourth day before we got a combat mission assigned to us. But no, it was very comfortable, a good bunch of guys. You know, we were all in the same boat. The F-86's at that time that we had were also A's, and if I recall, I think I flew the first two or three missions in the F-86A's. Then we got E's. The E had a hydraulic flight control system which was far superior to what the A had, and it ultimately grew to one other model named the F. But the E was a real good aircraft. Shortly after I got there, the engines were modified, which allowed more fuel flow, and you were able to draw full take-off power at altitude. By take-off power I refer to exhaust gas temperature, because that's a critical factor. It turned out that we had most of the airplanes adjusted where at take-off roll, you would go forward with the power lever to a stop, which was adjustable, but you went to that stop, you got maximum exhaust gas temperature at about 91 or 92 percent rpm. So you were a little short on air flow, but not much. And so you had plenty of power to get airborne, and then as you climbed, the exhaust gas temperature started dropping down. At that point, you would go around this little detent and start sneaking the power lever forward so you could keep up to that temperature, and it worked well. When I got my own airplane after about 35 missions, I had it set that way and I could draw full power at about 48,000 feet which was great. So that was a help.

What was it like on your first mission? You'd been through all the training, and now you are finally there, you're in a combat situation.

Peter Blakely: We didn't run any MIG's on the mission, and the flight leader, knowing I was new, I was flying his wing, and he said keep it clear. OK, and he rode over and went down like he was attacking something, and he did some maneuvers on the way down and I stayed with him and kept checking, but my job was to keep any enemy aircraft spotted, keep 'em away from us. We did that for a few minutes and then he pulled back and said OK, that's fine, and we headed home. So it was a rather unexciting mission in that respect. But we hadn't gone very far north. We had gone probably maybe 100 miles beyond the front line, but no more than that on that mission. If I compare the F-86E that we were flying to the MIG-15, the two airplanes have a lot of similarity. The F-86 is 37 feet long and 37 feet wide, and the MIG is only 33 feet long and 33 feet wide. Combat weight, that's weight without fuel, is very similar, both 10,000 some odd pounds. We had 650 caliber machine guns and the MIG had a 137mm cannon which was pretty

impressive, and they had two 12.7 mm guns, quarter 223 mm cannons. We could throw a lot of lead fast, in other words. A fairly small 50 caliber compared to what they were throwing up through those cannons. Both had a similar top speed. The F-86 had a maximum speed of 1.02 mach, which in statute miles an hour, like you'd have on your car, was about 700.

And mach is the sound barrier.

Peter Blakely: Mach is the speed of sound. It's not the barrier, but it's the speed of sound. So we could go 1.02, or 2 percent faster than the speed of sound, and you were losing altitude to do it, but you didn't have to go straight down. On the other hand, the E or the F, you could go straight down if you wanted and you could go straight down with full power, not for long of course because you cover a lot of ground in a hurry, but there was no limit. Now the aircraft was very forgiving, the E and the F were, and you could pull a lot of G's and get away with it. It was a good airplane.

When was the first mission you flew that you encountered enemy aircraft?

Peter Blakely: Oh boy James, that's a good question. I don't have anything that would show that, but I'm thinking it was probably give or take 10.

Do remember what that mission was like the first time you actually encountered them?

Peter Blakely: Keep in mind, I was a wing man. It really starts off on the wing for quite some time, and as a wing man, your job is to spot the aircraft, but your main job is to spot the aircraft that are a problem, that could become a problem for you, not the ones that your leader is attacking. You don't worry about that. You worry about the ones that he's not attacking that may be attacking you. So it's different than when you are looking through the gun site and going after somebody. It's an entirely different feeling. Anyway, I suppose it gets the adrenaline going, but I don't honestly remember any fear or anything like that. As a matter of fact, we had some missions, once in a while about every two months it would be a photo aircraft, F-80, RF-80, which would be a recon F-80 with cameras, they would send one up to the Alum River on the Manchurian border. Now that was 200 some miles beyond the front lines, and it was a pretty good haul getting up there, and he would be taking his pictures, he would be 18,000 to 20,000 feet in that area, and that aircraft had a maximum speed of .72 mach, so it was kind of slow. We would send usually, frequently anyway, 128 airplanes with it. We would send 64 who would orbit behind and above the F-80, and watching out for MIG's, and we'd send the other 64 across the river and their job was to keep the MIG's on the ground and not let them take off. So we put a lot of power into protecting the RF-80. It would draw a tremendous amount of flack. And I learned I don't like flack, because there's nothing you can do about flack. It's there, you're either going to get hit or you're not and you can't do anything about it. There are gun stats and radar control guns that would fire, always under lead to begin with, they would be maybe 150 yards behind you, and you would hear boom, boom, boom, and about the third or fourth boom they had gained and it would go off right where you were. So we would watch his aircraft and if we saw them nibbling up his tail, we would tell them OK, well we're going to move up, but you had to anyway move, and he would. The gun would fire a couple more times and it would stop, and then go again. Now he's got to recomputed, try it again. But we never had an F-80 got hit on that kind of mission. But I remember I don't like flack. I don't mind MIG's so much because the MIG is just like your airplane. It's got a pilot in it and the question is, are you trained better and come through it better than him. So at least you know what you are fighting against. But the flack, it's not so much fun. But if you can hear it go boom, then you know it's kind of close. I

mentioned the size of the airplanes, and both airplanes were swept wings. The wings were swept back at 35 degrees on both aircraft, and if you see the aircraft from above and look down on it, you'll discover that they look a lot alike.

Yeah, they certainly do looking at the diagram right there.

Peter Blakely: From the side, the MIG has a much bigger vertical fan than the F-86. From straight on or straight behind, they are very similar, but from above, and this unfortunately is the angle that you are shooting from because he's gonna make a turn and you're going to be looking at him like that. So all the friendly aircraft, F-86's, F-84's, all the aircraft the Air Force had and that the NATO countries had over there, have a yellow band around the fuselage. I think the band was probably give or take 18 inches wide, and on the wingtips and tail, all this designates 4th Fighter, and you can see the two airplanes look a lot alike. So aircraft identification can become a problem, particularly if you are in limited visibility, rain and showers or something, whatever, and that can be a problem. The 4th Fighter rider ___ operating out of civil had a band on the vertical fin, a yellow band, and identified that group. On the top there was a narrow band of different colors that identified the squadron. Our designator was a little different. The 51st had checkered tape, and a color band. At times, I had a couple of occasions where I had aircrafts in my gun site, I mean dead on, ready to pull the trigger, and I wasn't sure what I was looking at, so I didn't fire. I know one of those times it was an F-86, and the other one I'm not quite sure what it was. But when you don't get much look at one, even if you do, like I say, if it's bad weather, it's hard to tell. We carried drop tanks on the F-86 every mission, and dropped them when they went empty, 165 gallons each. Fuel is always a problem with jet fighters, and there was no aerial refueling in those days so you used what you had and then you better get out. The MIG also carried drop tanks. Theirs were a little bigger I think. They looked like they carried probably 200 gallons. But as soon as our tanks were empty, we would drop them, and usually if we were going pretty deep that would be around P'yongyang, and I reckon there's a lot of aluminum down there in that area. Once in a while you'd have a tank that wouldn't drop and maybe pick up some moisture on the line and freeze on, and if it wouldn't come off, then you had to turn around and go home. There was no fooling around. Any northerly heading, north of west or east, was fair game. It didn't matter what its markings were, because if you needed to get out of there, you needed to be heading south.

What was a typical mission for your squadron like? Did you ever do any support of ground troops?

Peter Blakely: No, it was all, we did a lot of support of fighter bombers. They went after the folks on the ground. In fact I'd say that probably was most of it was supporting fighter bombers. Interesting though, from an hour before sun-up until an hour after sundown, we had 12 airplanes on alert. There were 4 airplanes on two-minute alert, and those airplanes were down at the takeoff end of the runway, parked diagonal to the runway, so they could fire up and get out of there in a hurry. Then there were 4 more airplanes with those, and those pilots were in a tent behind. They were on 5-minute alert. And then there was 10-minute alert, 4 guys stayed in operations and their airplanes were ready to go. So if you had 2-minute alert, you sat in the cockpit. In the winter, it wasn't a lot of fun.

It was cold in Korea.

Peter Blakely: Cold yeah, darn right. We had no heat until we got the engine going. So if you had 2-minute alert in the morning, you had to be, well in the winter you'd be down to the mess

hall about 3 o'clock getting a bite to eat, and then you'd go down to the flight line and put on your gear, climb in the airplane, taxi the airplane down to the end of the runway, and get it parked, shut down, and the fuel truck would come and top off your tanks, and then you sat.

How long would you sometimes sit on alert?

Peter Blakely: Sometimes you would sit until noon, which if you had morning alert, it could be six hours easy.

And you would spend that entire time in the cockpit?

Peter Blakely: Well, usually your kidneys or your bladder wouldn't allow that. But you tried not to drink too much coffee because it was a lot of work to get out of the airplane, and meanwhile, the other 4 guys have to get in their airplanes and cover 2-minute alert, and if you had bad luck, they would get scrambled and you wouldn't. They would get scrambled while you were out of the cockpit, oh shoot, so you wasted all that time. But it was a pretty long time.

How often when you were on alert status like that would you actually get called? Half the time, 30 percent of the time?

Peter Blakely: I guess for some reason I got a lot of scrambles. I got probably 40 percent of the time. I think closer to 20 percent was more normal.

What would that be based off of? Would that be they got a report that enemy aircraft is in the area?

Peter Blakely: It could be a number of things. It could be enemy aircraft, a report of aircraft coming down south. It could also be that somebody in Seoul must know what the weather is up north, where's the contrail layer, what's the ceiling, and what's North Korea look like weather-wise, and they are doing this to forecast maybe for tomorrow's mission or whatever. And sometimes you never knew. Sometimes you'd check into Seoul, they'd send you north, and give you a heading they wanted you to take, and call after 20 or 30 minutes and say OK, you can come back home. Well, what was this all about? You don't know. For some reason they did it.

One question I hadn't asked you, this was really the first time that jet fighters had ever been used in combat, and I guess in your case you had flown props up until transitioning to jets. Was that a tough transition, or was it a fun transition?

Peter Blakely: Well, the F-80 was the first one we flew. You'd have to really be careful in the F-80 because it has a maximum speed of .72 mach, and when they say maximum, they mean maximum because at .74, the ___ would come off. It's an airflow problem with wings. And the aircraft is extremely clean, aerodynamically, and if you put the nose down, the airspeed builds up swiftly. So it was easy to get to .72 and even easy to go beyond it and get into trouble. That's one problem of the airplane. Another one is the airplane wants to float on landing. It really does, it just wants to keep flying. It doesn't have a lot of drag so as you come in over the fence on a landing, it just kind of floats on down above the runway, and it's a little tricky to get the darn thing down on the ground. Once you get it down it's all right. So I think those are the two main characteristics that give you a little trouble to begin with. The third one is in those days it was typical of all turbine engines, they were very slow to accelerate, and that engine in the F-80 was easy to stall. The compressor, and when you stalled the compressor, the tailpipe temperature

went high, and it made a tremendous noise, that you could hear for miles around, and the aircraft shook like a leaf, and you needed to come back on power to try to get that compressor to catch up with itself, and it accelerated very slowly. When I first started flying the F-86, the flight manual said, GE who makes the engine, guarantees that you can get from idle to take-on power in one minute or less. Well let me tell you, you don't have a minute. That's a long, long time, and so then they went to work on it and improved it quite a bit. Anyway, on November 21, in 1952, the 49th mission, we had 32 F-86's escorting 16 F-84 bombers to a town called Kunari is the way we spelled it. No telling how the Koreans spelled it. I was flying the wing of a major and we were leading a mission for the F-86's. It was his 100th mission, and that's why they put him on this mission as leader. The way it was briefed, we were the, I was either first two off the ground, and it was set so as this F-84 came off the target, two F-86's would escort him home. Our job was to take the last F-84 home. So we were first off the ground and scheduled to be last down, so right away you're short on fuel. By the time we got over the target we were supposed to be at 22,000 feet, and it was raining and overcast, so we were at about 18,000 feet, so we were low. OK, that burns more fuel being at low altitude. We got to the target area about four or five minutes ahead of the F-84's. Either they were slow or we were fast. Anyway, there goes some fuel in waiting. The mission went off pretty well until we got down to the next to the last F-84. We were flying in these rain showers, between showers, and a MIG came through between the showers and got on the F-84. By the time we saw him, he was on him and shooting. I thought the F-84 got hit because it looked like he was smoking. He probably got hit and started a fuel leak is probably what it was, because they didn't lose any F-84's as it turned out. Anyway, we saw this, and the major I was flying with told the last F-84, jettison your bombs and get out of here, head south, and told the other two F-86's still there to take him home. Then we turned to the MIG's and tried to keep them from going to the south. Well, we got, I don't know how many there were, there were either two or three flights of MIG's which would be 8 or 12, and the two of us, and we had a real downy brook for about probably 5 minutes. We were almost at a fuel level where we had to leave there to get home anyway. So this 4 or 5 minutes that we spent hassling with the MIG's, all at very low altitude, and by that I mean between maybe 100 and 300 feet off the deck, and of course full power, and burning fuel like crazy. Anyway, we got split up and I decided I better get the heck out of here because I got down to 200 pounds of fuel and from where we were, we normally would leave there with about 1600 pounds of fuel to get home. So I knew wasn't going home, and I just turned southwest and full power and headed for altitude and got to I think it was 42,000 feet, it may have been 44,000 before the engine quit. I climbed real quickly because I didn't have any fuel holding me back weight-wise and I'd fired a lot of ammo and it was pretty well gone, so that worked OK. The engine quit. I was heading, and I thought maybe I can glide to an island called Pangyangdo, which was about probably 50 miles north of the front lines, but it had a 4,000-foot sand beach, hard sand when the tide was out, and the tide was out, so I thought OK, I'll get to Pangyangdo and land and that's gonna work fine. But as soon as the engine quit, within a very few seconds, I mean 3, 4 or 5 seconds, the canopy frosted up, and I don't know if it's on the inside or the outside, but you're on the instruments, so immediately this was kind of a poor arrangement. But I had no choice, and so I just flew the instruments heading toward Pangyangdo, what I thought was Pangyangdo. We were supposed to have 100 and some knots of wind from the northwest, and OK, that'll help me, but I think it shifted more from the west than the north, so it didn't help me near as much as I thought it might. Anyway, the canopy finally cleared up somewhere at lower altitude. I don't remember exactly where. But when I broke out of the overcast and the canopy cleared, I was at 8,000 feet and I was a long ways from Pangyangdo, but I could see Choto, which was an island where we had a radar station and a few GI's manning it. It was north of the front lines probably 100 miles, 80 to 100 miles. But the sea was a froth. The wind was blowing at about probably 40 knots at sea level and it was blowing the whites, the tops off the waves, and I thought man, I'm probably not

going to be able to get in my dinghy, and if I don't get in the dinghy, I won't survive, and if I do in there, I'm not sure I'll survive, because this was November 21st and the water was cold and you had about 30 seconds in the water to survive. So I thought OK, I'll pull upwind, and paralleled the island about a mile north and at about 7,000 feet, and then OK, time to get out. Getting out of the airplane, I had always mentally at least practiced bailing out. The first problem is to get out of the aircraft, and blow yourself out of the airplane without losing feet and elbows and stuff like that, and the next problem is to get the parachute open. So you have to get your head down when you blow the canopy because it comes straight back and there's a steel rail that will take the top of your head off. You get by that and then you get your feet topped into the stirrups at the seat, otherwise you will lose them on the canopy rail when you go out.

Where was the handle for the eject, was it behind you?

Peter Blakely: No, it was down at the right armrest. When you first pull it up, it blows the canopy aft, and you get your head down. When it comes up, it brings up a trigger. That trigger blows the seat out. Well, you've got to get your elbows tucked in and your feet tucked in, and your head back when you blow this thing out because it's quite a jolt, and my shoulders dislocate easily which the Air Force didn't know about, and I was afraid that either the ejection or the parachute opening might dislocate one or more shoulders, which would not be a good scene. So I really had strapped in tight, and tried to hold my arms.

How were you able to push the button in that position?

Peter Blakely: I just reach over like this. Anyway, I blew it out and counted to 10. I may have counted a little faster than they would've suggested, but I did give it several seconds, and then I pulled the D-ring, and wait for the jolt. Well, nothing happened. Woah, I said, right, and then I fumbled around and found the cable and I gave it a tug and I got the D-ring in one hand and the little ball on the end of the cable in my other hand and parachute, and so I through the cable away, and I reached behind me – it was a backpack – and I thought, I can pull that Velcro tab open and get in there and pull those pins out myself. I'm tumbling, and I can see the airplane go by, and then I see the island go by.

What altitude were you?

Peter Blakely: About 7,000 feet when I went out. Anyway, when I reached back, my recollection is I felt a pipe. I don't know if I did or if I just felt metal, which I knew couldn't be it. If it was a pipe, the ejection seat fires and there is a cylinder, it fires into the cylinder and that's what shoves it out. Anyway, I found this metal back there and thought that's not right. Then I realized I was still in my seat. So I undid my seatbelt, I found that, and boy when I did, my parachute opened like that, and I made two swings I was on the ground. It's really a good thing that I screwed it up because if I hadn't, I think the wind was blowing hard enough and I would've blown clear over the island and gone way out in the water south of there. But I landed on the side of a very steep cliff. It turns out that little island is all cliffs. And my parachute hung up in a little tree that was about maybe 5 or 6 feet high, a little shrub, and I fell forward, and looking straight down about 400 feet to the rocks on the ocean. I mean this was luck. Somebody was really watching out for me, somebody other than me. Anyway, they came by in another 20 or 30 minutes or so with a helicopter and came up from the north, and the wind was also coming from the north, and the chopper came in slowly to get the cable to me. But the wind was a little gusty and it was blowing up the side of this hill, a cliff, and then it would quit momentarily, and the chopper sort of came down toward me and off he went over the side and I watched him come

back. Finally he backed off and put out the longer cable, the longest piece of cable I think I've ever seen. It may have only been 500 feet but it looked like 1000 feet or more. And he got it swinging and he was able to swing it up to me, and I finally was able to get in the thing and gave the operator a thumbs up and he took up tension, and I cut my parachute straps and off we went. I swung way out over the water and came way back again and almost lost my lunch, but I managed to keep it, and then we spent the night on the island, and flew back the next morning.

How did they know where you were? Did you have a transponder on?

Peter Blakely: I had called just before, I got my radio, I had shut everything off, all the electrical trying to save it so I'd have some radio at the end, and that worked all right. I was able to get the radio on and called Choto and told them I was fixin' to bail out. They said OK, but the rescue will be oh about getting there because they're picking up a guy up north. That was fine, he had the same problem. So that worked all right. We got out of there. James, I was asked at one time at a little talk what kind of equipment, personal equipment did they have, and if you're interested, it's quite a long list of stuff, but -

Sure.

Peter Blakely: I started off with boxer shorts and a t-shirt or long underwear in winter, two pairs of heavy cotton or wool socks, a wool or cotton flying suit – not nylon, because nylon, if you have a fire, melts and you don't want that, and then a poopie suit, and that's a rubber suit that was personally fit to each pilot and it was a very difficult thing to get into and out of, but it had pretty good floatation.

Now are you in this photo?

Peter Blakely: No. It had a good floatation and it had a liner which was kind of like a sleeping bag floated, that was sort of like long underwear and you were supposed to put that on before you put the rubber poopie suit on, but I'd never wore that thing and most guys didn't, and the reason is you are already pretty cramped in the cockpit and if you wore that, you became even more so and you've got to be able to move around in that cockpit so you could see what was behind you. So I'd never even wear that. And then boots, a G-suit that was under the poopie suit, knife, had a knife on the boot, .45 pistol in a leather holster – we had to carry that all the time, and I hated that gun, Mae West and a parachute which was a backpack. On mine, since I'm kind of short, I had a sponge, probably an inch and a half or two-inch deep firm sponge that had cutouts in it and it had a knock-down 22 Hornet rifle that came apart in two pieces and it was stacked in there, and some ammo with it. I also had a jacket that was secured to the parachute straps and it rolled up and sat on a little ledge behind me and the parachute then sat on it, so it kept the weight of the chute off my shoulders. I sat on a dinghy pack, that's a one-man life raft rolled up and stuck into this kind of rubber package, along with a bunch of other stuff, a bailout bottle, and 2 minutes of oxygen. You were sitting on that and then a long knob came up and it plugged into your oxygen hose all the time so it was there. You had a two-way emergency radio in there, compass, ammo, dried food, and the dinghy had a pocket with fish hooks and line, and a little bit of dry food, a signal mirror, shark repellent, flares on a flare gun. Now all this stuff you're sitting on so it was kind of lumpy and not real comfortable. Then several of us had a plywood box about 2 inches deep under the dinghy pack, which got me up into a more comfortable position, and that was strapped over my parachute so it stayed with me when I bailed out, and in that I had food and cigarettes and some .22 ammo. Then of course you had your helmet with the oxygen mask and a built-in mike, had matches and cigarettes, gloves, one

pair of driving gloves and one pair of lined, warm gloves, and a map of North and South Korea. And we had a lot of gear. Somebody asked me one time when I read that list, how much all that stuff weighed. Well I hadn't thought about it. I don't know what it weighed, but I couldn't get in the airplane without help. You had three fairly big steps to get up to get into the cockpit, and I had to have my crew chief boost me, so it probably weighed, you know, dripping wet in those days I weighed about 135, and I imagine I weighed 200 or so by the time I had all that to carry, and awkward stuff.

That is a lot of gear.

Peter Blakely: Yeah, and awkward stuff.

After that mission, I know you said it was your 49th mission when you had to bail out, how long was it before you were back flying again?

Peter Blakely: Well, I had scheduled R&R after that mission, and I went ahead and took R&R and went back to Japan for maybe a week and then came back, and flew again right away. I didn't take R&R because I was scared to go fly.

The whole time you were in Korea during the war, were you able to communicate with your wife pretty much only through letters?

Peter Blakely: Just mail. I wrote to her every day and she wrote to me every day, and so we'd get 'em three or four at a time.

How long would it take for a piece of mail to reach her? A couple of weeks?

Peter Blakely: No, I don't think so. I think it was more like a week. It wasn't too bad. I wasn't moving around. My address stayed the same. And we had 20 airplanes, we only had 26 parachutes, but you also had a couple of airplanes on the ground, and we probably had 40 to 45 pilots.

So you shared planes.

Peter Blakely: Yeah, and there was a limit to how many missions you could get, and some guys would not go on R&R figuring if they stay there they are going to fly more and get home quicker. Well, that didn't happen because the guys that did the scheduling, you either take R&R or set on the ground. You can do that if you want and stay here. You don't have to go anywhere else but you're not going to get more missions. So they doled out the missions that way, which was good, fair enough.

Did you tell your wife and family about having to bail out and that sort of thing, or did you try to protect her from worry?

Peter Blakely: When I got back the next day to Suon, I got debriefed and there was I guess a public information officer (PI) was there. He said he was going over to see the Red Cross. I says OK, let me ask you something. Don't have the Red Cross contact my wife. I said I'm going to Japan and I'll get through a phone call in the next day or two to her, but I don't want her to hear from the Red Cross that I got in trouble. And so they were able to honor that. So when I got to Japan I called her, and I called my folks also. But I wrote them a fairly long letter and told

them what happened and told them I was perfectly all right. I had another interesting mission, more interesting than most. One day I was called down to operations in the afternoon from our barracks and they introduced me to a guy who had flown a photo recon F-86 down to our base and they had us scheduled the next morning, I think we took off about 7:30 maybe to go to Bladoastock. Now Bladoastock was a long, long ways from Suon, and the round trip was about 200 miles further than the F-86 would fly with drop tanks. So this meant that we were going to shut the engine down at least once on the way home, maybe twice. The F-86 was a really good glider. It had a 13:1 glide ratio, and that means you go 13,000 feet horizontal for every 1,000 feet you sacrifice in altitude. It was real good, and it did that at .85 mach which in terms of statute mph was about 600. So you covered a lot of ground and you covered it quickly, pretty quick. So what we could do to stretch the airplane distance-wise was go to altitude, maybe 40,000 to 45,000, and shut it off and just glide, and you had to get down to 17,000 or 18,000 feet to get a chance for it to fire up again, get down to that altitude and make a restart and climb back up at full power and do it again if necessary. It's kind of a puckering exercise because the engine only has one spark igniter, so if it doesn't work, you're not going to get it going. It was quite reliable, but not 100 percent. So we made a pass over Bladoastock I think it was 8:30 in the morning when we got there, and there was a lot of snow on the ground. This was probably December in '52, maybe January of '53. We made a pass across the city at about 1,000 feet. I think we were moving right along. We were probably doing, I know we were over 500, I think probably close to 600 mph, and then pulled up and did a wind ____ and came back, moved over about 2 miles, and got some pictures across there. I don't know what they were trying to take pictures of. We were concerned about flack. We could see flack towers, but nobody shot at us that we saw anyway on the way over. On the way back, some of the guns were live, but not enough to bother us. As we passed the city, we went to full power and headed for altitude, and we all got back, but it was really close.

That's something else. Did you spend the duration of the rest of the war there in Korea?

Peter Blakely: No, I was there 9 months, and came back in March, I got over in about July, sometime in July I think it was of '52, and came back in March of '53. They sent me to Nellis, Las Vegas, and I taught fighter gunnery and combat tactics for two years there, and then got out. It was a tough decision to get out because I really enjoyed the Air Force. I enjoyed what I was doing and I had a good record, was doing well, but I didn't have a degree and I decided for security I'd better get my degree and then get back in if I want. And I did want to get back in. I applied for recall in, let's see, I finished my degree in February of '58, and so in the latter part of '57, I applied for recall. Incidentally, I flew with the Syracuse International Guard while I was back after I got out, and we needed the money, frankly. But I applied for recall in late '57, and I got a wire back from the Air Force that said we don't need fighter pilots anymore. Everything is going to be missiles in the future. This was 1957! And the Cuban thing came up so I called I think it was St. Louis and told them I wanted to be recalled, and they said well, we're only calling units. To any reserve or guard unit, when we call it, you'll be in active duty. I said OK, who are you gonna call, what units? We don't know. Well, that didn't help either, so we finally gave up.

Interesting. And how was it that you ultimately got here to Texas?

Peter Blakely: Let me see. When I graduated from engineering school, I went with McDonald Aircraft in St. Louis. I was there six months and then they sent me to Almagorda, New Mexico for a year, at the flight test program, and then Mac and I weren't getting along all that well, so I left and went with GE in Cincinnati. We were in Cincinnati about 7 years, and then I left GE and

went with a small company out in Burbank, California, that serviced aircraft engines. It was all reciprocating engines at the time.

So you really kind of stayed with the aviation thing.

Peter Blakely: Yeah, engines, stayed with engines. The company was only servicing piston engines at the time, but they were going to get a turban program, so they hired me to attack that. I guess we were in California then about 15 years. Then we bought during that period of time toward the end, I wound up being part owner of the company and we wound up and bought I think it was $169 or $189 million, and bought our largest competitor which was in Dallas, and put the two companies together, changed the name, and Borg asked me to move to Dallas, which I did and I ran the operations there. It worked out well. We made .2 of 1 percent net profit the first year. The economy was going south at the time that we put this together, so boy, what am I gonna do. Anyway, we put every cent we could into marketing, every penny we could come up with beyond break even. Our bankers told us we don't want you to lose money, but you don't need to make any money in this economy, just break even. OK, which we did and put it into marketing and gained market share. The next year, we did 50 percent better. We made .3 of 1 percent net profit. Then the economy turned and started going up. And we had about 9 or 10 percent the first year, and our competitors were really hurting. I had all the shops at the time. I had almost, which were shops and engineering and support I had about 2,000 people, and I laid off 6 percent of the people as the economy went down. Our nearest competitor laid off 40 percent of their people. That's what we would have, but we were getting, picking up market share and it really worked out well. Then, let's see, I was in Dallas for 7 years, and Ryder Systems, the truck rental people, had a small company in aviation, and Ryder bought our company, bought all the common stock. We had gone public on the New York Exchange, so I had a fair amount of stock, and Ryder bought all the stock, and I paid 25 cents for most of the shares, 40 cents for some of them, and they bought them for $25 a share.

That's great. So being back and being in Dallas and your wife being originally from San Angelo, I guess that's part of what caused you to want to retire to Texas.

Peter Blakely: Yeah, and when I decided I was gonna get out, I told the board I wanted to. They said I think you should, I don't want to stay in Dallas, and I said I'm not sure where I want to go but I know I don't want to stay in Dallas, and I think you should be willing to move me back to California. The chairman said we'll move you anywhere you want to go. So I said we'll have to figure out where we want to go and I'll let you know. So we made a list of where we thought we might like to live and retire. The first two or three places were in California, and there were some in Arizona, and a couple in Texas. San Angelo was number 9. We got in the car and we started visiting these places and drew a line through each of them. They had changed so much since we had been there that I wouldn't want that. So San Angelo wound up on top of the list. It was also still on the bottom. So we went to San Angelo. We had owned a little townhouse over there that his mother lived in, his father had passed away. So we stayed there a few days and tried to make a new list, and we weren't able to come up with anything else. So then we knew some people in San Angelo and we went out and had a look at the country club. They had some lots and we saw a lot that we really did like, so we wound up buying a lot and got a builder and built the home, and moved over there. We were there 14 years, and playing the same golf course. I thought it was a law that you had to play every day that it was open. It was open six days a week and they were closed on Monday's for maintenance. And snow, rain, or shine I played. When I got over here, I realized it was not actually required to play everybody there. But anyway, Betty's brother had lived in San Angelo and he had moved to Waco. Her

mother had passed away so it was just me and Betty, and my folks were both gone. So I really wanted to play someplace that had more golf courses to offer, and we had owned, for six years we owned a townhouse in Horseshoe Bay, and while we were there one time, there was an ad in the paper that Dell web was gonna do a development on Highway 71 where the Pedernales River crosses the highway, and so I got in contact, and eventually we got a letter, so we're giving up on that. It's too expensive to put utilities in. It was solid rock. So we decided we're going to go to Georgetown instead, and we didn't know anything about Georgetown. Anyway, we came up here and had a look, and at that time, Sun City was probably a few thousand acres, and plenty of land, but that was it. We started off Williams Drive, and you could only get in here with a four-wheel drive vehicle and you had to wear a hard hat, and they drove you around a little bit and that was it, so we came back a couple of year later and they had a few model homes. We didn't see anything that turned us on particularly, and then eventually we came over one time and they had I guess a second or third set of model homes and we saw one that we liked, but we really would like it a little bigger. He said we don't have a model of it but we've got one under construction, and I can show you the blueprints. Well we had built a couple of homes over the years, so we could look at blueprints all right. So we said hey, we like that. So we picked out a lot, and turned them loose to build the house.

That's great and so now here you are.

Peter Blakely: Here we are, that's right.

Well sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to let me come out and interview you.

Peter Blakely: Thank you, James.

This program in part is to thank veterans for their service, but also to save this posterity, and at the Land Office, we have the original Registro that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand of all the settlers that came to Texas. It's a huge leather-bound book about that big, and we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received when he was killed at the Alamo, and so our goal is to add these interviews to that archive so that maybe 200 or 300 years from now people can listen to them and learn something from them. With that in mind, is there anything you would want to say to somebody listening to this interview long after you and I are both gone?

Peter Blakely: Well that's a good question. If you're talking 200 or 300 years down the road, I have absolutely no idea what aviation will look like. But if it's anything at all like aviation is today, I'd say if you have any interest in flying, pursue it, go get 'em, and the U.S. military is a good way to do it. Flying is terribly expensive, and they not only let me fly their airplanes, they paid me to do it for crying out loud, but it was well worth it.

Well sir, on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everyone at the Land Office, we want to thank you for your service.

Peter Blakely: Thank you.

Thank you very much, sir.

[End of recording]