Q. Today is May 15, 2000. I’m in the home of Stephen Riley. This is Raimund Goerler interviewing Stephen Riley for the purpose of the oral history program sponsored by the National Science Foundation. Mr. Riley, what motivated you to pursue a career in the U.S. Navy.

A. Well Ray, after graduating from high school in Rochester, New York in 1947, the prospects of going to college at that time were not great and we were still filled with patriotism from World War II and the military. And the opportunities for advancement and education in the GI bill I though were still there and were good and I said “Well let’s go see what the Navy is like.” So Steve Riley went into the Navy in 1947. I stayed in until, in three years he decided he wasn’t quite sure that that’s what he wanted to do, and he had met a young lady and they were going to get out and go back to Rochester, New York. And while he was there he became very interested in photography and it was not an easy way to get into, but he worked hard. I worked hard for it and achieved that. And I was going to go back to Rochester and get a job with Eastman Kodak and settle down. Well, in June 1950, the Korean war broke out and President Truman froze me in for a year. So the young sailor that held the all Navy bitch champ for three years was an impressed seaman for another year. And within that year I decided that I’d found a career and I’d found a place that I wanted to be. I was stationed in Norfolk at the time and I got sent to the squadron going to Korea and from there my whole life...
changed in that year. And I decided that I would make it a career or think about making it a career. And I stayed in photography and progressed through the ranks and I specialized in aerial photography. And became an aerial photographer in mapping. And became an instructor and I advanced, I made chief petty officer in 1960. At that time I started flying as a crewman and as a navigator in the Sky Warrior, the Navy’s photographic reconnaissance jets. And became quite proficient at that. When the Vietnam War started, I was one of few accomplished Navy photo navigators and along with four others, were commissioned as officers in heavy photographic squadron 62 and we were sent to Guam to photographic squadron 61 and we flew as photo navigators in the Sky Warriors and did mapping of Laos and North Vietnam and Vietnam at the commencement of the Vietnamese conflict. We did aerial reconnaissance and mapping, participating in mapping. One was to complete the northern half of South Vietnam from Hanoi south to Denay and Saigon. And it was the earlier part of the war and things were going pretty good. And then I was staying at Guam and day and a yeoman came down and said “What do you know about Antarctica, Mr. Riley?” And I said “I don’t know anything about Antarctica. What are you asking me that for?” And he says “Well I think you ought to find out cause you got a set of orders down there.” And I said “Oh boy I must have done something to somebody, to get in trouble.” But I didn’t. I came to find much later on that the National Science Foundation had a higher priority for photo navigators than Vietnam did at that time. And my name came up and off I was. I’d be confirmed June, 1965 until October, I went from about 110 degrees at Gum during the day to stepping off a hurricane
McMurdo Sound at Antarctica at –64 below zero. And that started my love affair
with Antarctica.

Q. This would have been 1965?
A. Let’s see, I think it was 1965, yea.

Q. How did you become interested in photography?
A. In the Navy?

Q. Yes, in the Navy.
A. Well there were several, when in boot camp I qualified, when I came in I came in
as to be a rear seat aerial gunner. And fortunately, the life expectancy of those
guys wasn’t that great and the war was over and they didn’t have a need for them
anymore. So I was looking at something which I would be, like and appreciate
and advance in and it was that or aviation electronics or weather or air traffic
control. And since I came from Rochester and Eastman Kodak was there and I
thought possibly of civilian employment afterwards, I’d like to try to get into
photography. And found out that once I got in it I enjoyed it and I liked it and we
took to each other I guess. And that’s how I got into photography, right a the
ground level, and just went right on up through.

Q. Can you describe for the tape your first impressions of Antarctica?
A. Okay. I’d heard all the stories when you got in the squadron of what to expect.
My squadron mates had been there years before and you kind of gear yourself
when you go through McMurdo, you receive all your Antarctic clothing and your
sea bag and you leave all your earthly possessions there and you suddenly come
into all this survival gear. And you trudge on and you load it on and you fly
everything. Everything is fine, you don’t see much until on the horizon you see the continent of Antarctica coming up out of the south of course. And you say “My God, nothing but snow, snow, snow.” And then a few mountains and you keep on flying past Hallet Station toward McMurdo. You land at McMurdo and it’s a bumpy landing because it’s a ski runway and we flew in C130’s and we landed we came out and the door opens and here I am. It was 64 below zero and some of the thoughts that went through my mind I can’t express to you too much. But one of them is “What am I doing here?” And you’re breath is freezing as it’s coming off and you wonder “My God, what I am doing here? What’s going on?” And then it goes up hill from there. Anyway, the initial shock is there. It happens to everyone. You just don’t expect it. It’s almost like your first time in combat. You don’t know how you’re going to act until you get into it and then everything settles down and you start to do your job.

Q. Speaking of settling down, can you recall your experience in being assigned to bunk at McMurdo?

A. Being a junior officer going down there, I got into kind of a, don’t know the name of it, but it was kind of a looked like a Quonset hut, only it was a Jamesway. A Jamesway hut made of insulated fabric in the shape of Quonset hut. I was assigned to this J1, it was where the junior officers were staying. But everybody had their own little huts. I got in there and here the bunks are down there, your lockers, and I notice that the bottom bunks were open. And I said “Man, I’m going to grab a bottom bunk.” So I proceeded to load my gear in there, go a bottom bunk, and we stopped at the store on the way down there and had gotten a
six pack of Heineken and put it under the bed. And everything was fine, went up, met everybody. We went to chow, came back and went to bed. During the night, the furnace went out which it usually did and I woke up the next morning and found out why I was able to get the bottom bunk. I was covered with ice and frost. The guy in the top bunk, he was in his skivvies, it was warm as toast up there. But I was on the bottom bunk and that inversion layer there, I learned my lesson. And that was my first night in Antarctica. And everybody runs into those little tales.

Q.  Can you describe for the tape what sort of assignments you had?

A.  My job was with the photographic division. I was a photographic division officer. I was in charge of carrying out the mapping program for the National Geodesic Survey, who was assigning the mapping program for Antarctica. We had a gentleman by the name of William McDonald, Bill McDonald, who is the civilian rep for them and I worked closely with him. He would assign the regions that we were to map and the years we were to do it in and any of the photography that we accomplished was forwarded to the National Geodesic Survey and they in turn made charts and maps and we charted Antarctica. So really we were going into unknown territory and refining down from rough rudiment charts, getting precise maps.

Q.  Can you tell me again who you worked with?

A.  His name was Bill McDonald, William McDonald. He was the civilian assigned from the National Geodesic Survey to the National Science Foundation to coordinate the mapping program. I supplied him with the raw materials; he
supplied me with the mission. We supplied him with the raw data and the
negatives which we processed at Christ Church which we forwarded from
McMurdo Station. We didn’t have the water or the ability to do large scale
development of material. We could in emergency but we had the machines in
Christ Church. And Bill would then take them and from there they would go the
National Geodesic Survey and they would use their mapping processes and rectify
the prints. We had one C-130 Hercules dedicated to photography. It had a
mapping cameras, triametric set-up, six inch cameras. We had from horizon to
horizon coverage, two cameras photographed on each horizon and it went down
to the vertical. This is the way we could locate ourselves with landmarks. We
would usually photograph from about 25,000 feet, 20-25,000.

Q. In the photographic mapping, was there concern with ground verification? I
know with Operation High Jump there was quite a bit of …

A. No, we didn’t have any ground survey parties. The way we would have to verify
would be from the trimatric on would take from one horizon, you would take
distinctive marks from there and program your flight lines from there. You could
tell whether you had a straight line or not. This was photography and aerial
mapping the state of the art when we were doing it. Today a satellite could go
over there and do what we did and in three years probably in a couple of hours, if
that long.

Q. So this was for your purposes anyway proved to be a three year long venture?
A. For me, my turn down there was a three year thing. We’d worked on it before and
we had done some mapping. But this was the biggest effort we’d ever taken on.
We didn’t finish. We accomplished several million square miles, a million and a half square miles. And we did mountain ranges that had never been photographed before. In recognition of the squadron’s activities and the personnel who were assigned to that, several of us got prominent features in Antarctica named after us. I was fortunate to have Mt. Riley named after me. Others in the squadron had glaciers and bluffs and mounts and mountains and ridges and whatever geographic feature needed a name, it was kind of an honor. I will always carry that memory with me from that.

Q. About how large was your unit? Do you recall in terms of your photographic unit?

A. Of the entire unit, we had probably about 20-25 photographers. Not all were aerial photographers. Some were ground photographers, some were combat photographers. For the flight crews we probably had about ten. I think if you talk to John he can refine that for you. That figure. Ten or twelve. I tried to go on just about every mission. We also had a crew, a C-121, we had an aerial mapping configuration on that also, which we did. We couldn’t do the long range photography like we could out of McMurdo with the Hercules because the C-121’s were not equipped with skis. If we would range out we could land at Byrd Station or we could land at the pole station and refuel and continue on out there. They couldn’t take the wheeled aircraft out there. The wheeled aircraft were only involved in landing at McMurdo Station on the ice, although we did take the 121 to Pontarenas, Chili and we based out of there for about two months and we photographed there. From there we photographed the Antarctic Peninsula with that. And we kind of got trapped down there for a while. We lost an engine part
and had to have one shipped to us and it took forever to get there. We got to know that part of Chili pretty well before we got finished. Nice people.

Q. Can you think about and identify some of the officers and scientists with whom you had professional and personal interactions in those three years?

A. Oh sure. The commanding officers were always colorful guys. We had a commander Jean VanReef, one of our plane commanders. We had one commander, Morris, we had commander Dan Bailey, a real fine gentleman. We had another commander, Fred Schneider, a Hercules driver who went in and flew in a mid winter rescue mission to take out a stricken English scientist. That was one of the original fly-ins in the winter, this past winter, 1999, they made a big thing out of going down there in the middle of the winter to pick up a female doctor at South Pole Station. And they said this was the first. I hate to correct their history but it wasn’t. This was done in 1965. We went down there. And we went down there I think not just once but twice in the years I was there an opened up the station to receive and to rescue people. Matter of fact, I think Fred Schneider got the distinguished flying cross for that. And his crew got medals. But that was one of the big things that I remember. The other was the loss of a wintering over party two weeks before we were to close the base down. An unfortunate, sad, sad incident. They had encountered icing in a non-4D and I think it was spot we called nine mile point. They were out there refurbishing them and they didn’t clear out icing and crashed and we lost them. That’s when Lieutenant Brian Shoemaker wintered over and Brian and I were … some of the characters you meet down there, Brian and I were kind of characters. I enjoyed accompanying
him. We went to places you couldn’t go in the Hercs, the helicopter guys could go
to, one being the dry valleys which you envision Antarctica as a great white
continent and here, not too far from McMurdo station, is this complete part of
Antarctica which is devoid of all snow. It’s just like a moon scape. As a matter of
fact, it looks so much like a moon scape that one year during my tour, a
delegation from NASA came down, with the most prominent person being the
scientist, Dr. Werner Von Braun and they were going to look at that as a possible
training area for moon landing for the astronauts. I don’t think that ever came
about but if you had to go there and you didn’t see any snow, you thought you
were on the moon. There was just nothing but rocks and dried stream beds. While
there, I found petrified wood. One hundred miles up into the dry valleys we found
petrified seals that had come up there, probably 1000 years old. But it spiked me
to learn more and more about Antarctica. And it reinforced what I came to think
of later as the drifting continent and the way it was formed. And I was told by the
scientists that there was just about every form of mineral deposit that you could
have in any of the world to be located down there. Antarctica being a desert. No
one understands that it snows less than two inches a year down there. And one of
the things I have that I cherish is when they drilled a core at the South Pole
Station and one of the cores they pulled up and they could tell from the different
sediments on top of what years they were at was the year Christ was born. It was
about 2000 years old. At the club at night we would have, we’d make drinks out
of the ice that was brought back from glaciers that were 1000 years old. It was so
pure it would just crackle in the glass. We talked a little while about interaction
with the scientists. We had some fantastic guys down there. Guys that were
dedicated to the study of
Antarctica. They would go out and come in and go out and live with the penguins
in little huts for two or three months at a time, with nothing but little radio
transmitters. There were guys who were digging holes in the ice and scuba diving
down with the seals. These people, I’m sure their research and that was
invaluable to the program, they are still down there doing it. And I think it’s the
last great frontier. And what impressed me about Antarctica is the cooperation of
all the countries who are there and looking to be there and available to seek for
the wellbeing of the other signature nations to the treaty. No too far from
McMurdo Station was Scott Base, where the New Zealanders did their research.
And they operated a very, very small base, but they had the dog teams down there
still. A very, very interesting group of guys. At certain times of the year they
would come up, we would go down there, they would have our parties, we would
have our party. There was a little bit of social life in Antarctica. But it was not
the Antarctic in McMurdo that is down there today with the modern buildings. It
was primitive and it was a survival trek, especially when the South Pole or Byrd
Station would be cut off to sun spots or sound and would try to open them back
up after a storm. I went out to a base we reopened, all that was sticking out from
that base was one flag still flying, called Eights Station and we had to tunnel
down to open it up. And it was right there the way the guys left it. The batteries
were there, all the equipment was there, if anybody had come upon it.
Q. You touched on the fraternization back and forth with Scott Base. I believe you had also visited with the Russians.

A. I was one of the first groups to visit the Russian base at Vosok. And they had been out there so long and they welcomed us, just as comrades and as brother adventurers or explorers, or scientists. We brought our scientists out, we explored their station, our scientists did. We explored their other activities. They offered us what provisions they had. We traded, we brought trading material. They had trading material. It was fun to interact with them and I’m sure that we made their day and they made ours. I came back with some bear hats and different parts of their uniforms and I left a few items from the United States with them – magazines and things that they appreciated. And if they had needed us, we would have been there for them as they would have been there for us. And this was in the height of the cold war, the survival thing, and a mutual respect for each other existed. We didn’t talk politics.

Q. Mr. Riley, would you care to comment at this point on the various social cultures that you experienced at McMurdo?

A. I think that the scientists who had been there before and who had continuing projects were terrific people and they would share their knowledge and they would share their goals with we who were there to support them. In my particular capacity as a mapper, I wasn’t there to support them. We had our own mission, but as the photographic end of it there we were there to support what they needed and I had photographs that were assigned to do that. And they did. And I think the interaction was well done. When you have a group like we had down there, we
had people who were there, construction battalions who were there to build
buildings and to build bases for them and they had their own culture. They didn’t
mingle, we didn’t mingle that much but on a social level you got to know the
guys. There were some really fine people there and dedicated scientists. There
were other times that people came in and expected a lot more than they would get
down there and they didn’t get the treatment there, but I’d say for the most part I
thought you got what you put out. I made a lot of friends. And some I’d just not
see again too.

Q. At McMurdo, can you describe what the social life was like in this period?
A. Yea, we’d find some reason to have a party. We worked, during the summer
months you had goals and you had to make them. The bases were to be supplied,
the maps were to be flown, part of my job, putting the scientists into the field.
They didn’t do their work around McMurdo. They were put out in the rookeries,
out in the ranges, out in the mountain ranges. They all had their different
programs and so the biggest part at the beginning when there were too many
people in town and then you’d spread them all out and you’d be out there
supplying them. But we’d find a reason, the certain holidays. Like the scientists
had their own part of town. They had their own mess halls, their own collection of
people, like that. The Navy had their own part. And that was up at McMurdo. And
then down at the air strip, they had another village. Those are all the flight crews
and the flying personnel, the maintenance personnel was down there. The
helicopter crews lived up on what we called the hill. But this was up at a much
higher elevation. It was by Hut Point. So you didn’t have that much interaction
with the scientists. They had their own clubs which I was invited to many times and they had their own officers club there. But if you had time and you weren’t on duty you could stop in and that was probably social life where they showed movies at night. And we played games and shot the bull and that and basically had a good time. A lot of the scientists chose to partake in some of that and they were good guys and some of them never did show up. But at the same reason they invited us to their activities also, as they did at Scott Base. And as long as you didn’t interfere with anybody’s life. Saturday night was a big night. We usually had a Saturday night, if you weren’t doing anything that was a big night in town. Otherwise, it was working. You had full daylight 24 hours and didn’t make any difference. You had to create your own darkness, so in the huts if you were off duty, and you were flying all day, we didn’t have all night, but you’re flying to get your time. You had to go in there and shut everything you could find to find some darkness. So you had to respect that. You had to respect a guy sleeping at that time.

Q. Mr. Riley, when you were in Antarctica you had an unusual experience with a cruise ship. Do you want to talk about that?

A. Well, I didn’t have the experience as much as I witnessed it. They had a cruise ship that was one of the first ones to ever come down there. I think it was the Macadam. They set sail and they had quite a few tourists aboard and they were kind of warned off that they shouldn’t come down there. But they proceeded anyway, we’ll do what we want to do. So they got down there and right off of McMurdo was Hut Point and they routed Hut Point and immediately ran aground
and teach them a little lesson they were left to sit out there for a while before help was given to them out of there. But I think they had several ladies aboard. I don’t think anybody off the ship ever put foot on the soil. They let them tie up there for a day or two. I’m not positive of that. My memory fails me a little bit. But they certainly took away from our work force, a distraction, while they were there.

Now I know it’s a common thing down there now, but at that time it really wasn’t welcomed by the people who were there. But again, it was what I was talking about before – you’re there to help anybody and they got them out of there. But they really came down not prepared.

Q. What kind of nationality was this?

A. I can’t remember. I can’t remember. But it was supposed to be a double hauled ship and was suppose to be capable. Well it got in there and it go out, so I guess they … McMurdo was tucked away. You really had to crash ice to get into there. It wasn’t something that you could just fly into. The coast guard worked for a couple of months to break ice, to get the tankers in to get the supply ships in. And once they got in, at one time they had to move this gigantic, huge iceberg and it took several Coast Guard ice cutters to move this thing. They got behind it and pushed it out of the channel. It was a huge thing. There’s pictures of it in the archives. You should have some. That was the year that they did that. The Coast Guard worked hard. Everybody worked hard. The Air Force didn’t spend much time down there. They’d land and get the heck out of there in a hurry and the Army. The Army had contingents down there. They brought down Huey Helicopters and the Army was out providing support to the scientists out in the
field. So it was really an all service effort. Of course, the Navy had the biggest portion of it and at that time the Navy controlled the budget. They had the purse strings. So they were able to do quite a bit. Over the years, things changed and the Navy wasn’t able to keep up the budget, so the Science Foundation took it over. And it was an era, I’ll tell you, you’ll talk to other people who were there before, but it really was an experience and something that you can carry all your life. There are not that many people who have been there. We have an old Antarctica Explorers Foundation that they’ve established now, which I hope Ray that you’ll consider associating with. Good people. John has all the information if you want to talk to him.

Q. How have you maintained your interest in Antarctica?

A. I’ve kept contact with all of the shipmates that I had there, many of them. You shared things and you shared experiences and you shared hardships with guys. You come to know each other. It’s just like war. You got to know them. We lived so close, in such close proximity to each other, and we got to know the good points and the foibles and we got to accept it and it was kind of like a brotherhood. Once you were there, no one else had shared those things and you can always go back and when we get together, you can almost have total recall. There’s a little bit of embellishment but when somebody starts to embellish, there would be another guy that would break in to make sure that it’s cleared up. And we started this Old Antarctica Explorers Association, people who were down there in the Navy years. And we hoped to continue that. We had to do away with
the squadrons and the Navy’s participation in the exploration of Antarctica, but I think that over the years the people who were there will miss us.

Q. You mentioned that John Reimer was the person who was involved, has got more detail about the Antarctica Explorers?

A. Yea, I got in on the computer, but he should have it printed out for you tomorrow.

Q. Okay.

A. If not, I’ll get it for you. I can put you in touch with a guy and you can have everybody talk to you. One thing about it, guys that have been down there, they never stop talking. You could go on and on and on and it’s something that I’ll never forget. I never intend it. I still have a lot of my survival gear. I’ve got my Byrd cloth. We used to wear special colored coats when we were down there depicting different things. We made them out of hoods and I’ve got a picture of me standing on my head at the South Pole, so I wouldn’t fall off the earth. It was a great day.

Q. Mr. Riley, can you give me a sense of some of your highlights of your three years in Antarctica?

A. Yea, I think one of the biggest was the feeling of accomplishment and when we got notification from National Geodesic that the quality of our photography was really great and the one yea we were really fortunate that the weather had held and we were able to get an abundance of photography which would keep them busy for a long, long time. And they were generous enough to inform us of that fact and it made my crew feel great and me feel great, that we worked and our work had accomplished what we wanted. And also the fact that they also honored
me by naming a mountain after me. I appreciated that. It meant a lot. I know it means a lot to the other guys to get their names on those things too. And what was the other?

Q. You mentioned your air medal?

A. Oh yea. Right after I got down there, right after that first experience getting off the plane, about three or four weeks later they held a muster in front of the statue of Admiral Byrd and the commanding officer presented me with the air medal that had been forwarded from the Vietnam for my work over there. And it was kind of different and I appreciated it. It was kind of one of the highlights. There are many, many others and I just don’t recall them all.

Q. Mr. Riley, I also need to ask you the flip side of the highlights. Can you identify any disappointments?

A. I think that one year we were disappointed because of weather and other factors, that we were not able to get much of a mission done in the mapping program that we wanted. But it was not through our fault, it was nature. And we more than made up for it the following year. But it was a disappointment, when you prepare, prepare, prepare, and then you’re prevented from doing it. Things are beyond your control. One of the disappointments was that one of my shipmates crashed just before we closed up that season and we all were disheartened with that. Not much of anything else. Every day was another day and you strove to get it done.

Q. It occurred to me that one of the questions I should ask is as a navigator as well as a photographer, can you comment on what kind of special training the pilots had to fly in Antarctica. Had they had previous polar experience?
A. There was no previous available, that anybody before that, before they went down there. I had flown off of carriers and jets and had used the state of the art navigation equipment that we had at that time. And we were pretty proficient at it. And then to go to Antarctica, I’ll start with what I know best, the navigation end of it. Once we got down near Antarctica, the magnetic field to the earth played havoc with any magnetic devices you had on the plane. The compasses were of no value, there was no navigation aides down there, there was no Loran, there was little tach on the fields, but we had nothing to navigate with except what we called dead reckoning navigation. We used our _______ to get some line and maybe shoot a _______ now and then if there was one bright enough in the sky. But our navigation was all based on what was known as grid navigation. You grided the earth off in there into squares. And you could become proficient at it. And it took a lot of work and a lot of practice, but to get back, it was regular aerial navigation, to go from Christ Church to Antarctica, dead line, but I mean once you got there and you were out on your own in the continent, you had to be up high enough to hopefully spot a mountain range there somewhere and head for it. Cause the sun was always up there. And it was just kind of going around in circles. There were times when you got a little anxious. Thank God you got a guardian angel sitting on your shoulder and everything worked out okay. For the pilots, they would practice, they would practice, they would practice at Quonset before we’d go down there with the skis in the open field landings. And once you got down there, our pilots in the time I was down there were the best. The best you could find, flying perks and all of them, most of them went on to fly, the
junior officers went on to fly other more combat planes, and they were ready for whatever they went on to. But before a pilot was considered ice qualified, he had to go through rigorous checkouts. It didn’t make any difference what rank he was. If you had a junior pilot who had been down there for two or three years who was a plane commander and you could have a lieutenant commander, a commander come in, and he was still flying in the right seat until the check pilots said he was ready to fly. And there were times when some guys weren’t ready for a long time. We had one pilot down there who was a jet pilot and one of my best friends, Ed Feeney, and he was tough. And once Ed gave you a go, he knew you were qualified. Those are the guys I like to fly with. You just didn’t take anything for granted, you just didn’t. It was just like going aboard carriers. You just didn’t take things for granted. You could find yourself in the most dangerous positions in white-outs where everything is white. The snow is white, the sky is white, and you have to go rely on your instruments and using your head. And those guys could do it. I would flown anywhere with any of them.

Q. Mr. Riley, can you comment on the subject of Antarctica as an enhancement to a military career. Was it an enhancement to your career? Can you comment on the subject generally?

A. In regards to my career it certainly was an enhancement because it was a range of experience that I had in Antarctica photography and deployment and experience. So I could bring that to the table in my resume and that and I think it really helped me. That along with the other things I had gotten into. Flying and the success. If it hadn’t been a success, it could have been a real detriment. Because when you
were down there in the Navy, you were working for the National Science Foundation, you kind of had two hats. You could be pleasing your bosses in the Navy real well and if the National Science Foundation wasn’t pleased with the results of your thing, you could find yourself in a bit of a problem. And rightfully so. They’re looking for a product. I think it helped me, it didn’t hurt me. I don’t think, if I were a fighter pilot, I don’t think I’d want to be sent to Antarctica. It’s not kind of in your career path. I know that gents that were down there took great pride in the accomplishments that they had. And everybody that I knew went on to do quite well. We had one fellow make admiral out of there. His name was Klein. Virgil Klein. I lost track of Virgil but most of the CO’s made captain. And there were two fields. There were career transport pilots there. There are some people in the Navy who became pilots and plane commanders and that’s where they stayed. And these guys we had were great. They were good. We had a couple of guys that were enlisted pilots, Pierre Gernan for one, and Pierre was a plane commander and he was a lieutenant and good. He could fly several different models.

Q. So for the support pilots in particular in Antarctica, it was probably a career enhancement. Is that what you are saying?

A. Well, yea. We had two marine crews too, that came from Vietnam and they had been flying support planes into Vietnam and when they came down there, this was the biggest treat in the world. Nobody shot at them for a couple of years. They were good too. And they had enlisted Marine navigators who were the cream of the crop. They were the saving force for me, to get me up to speed. So I think for
the most part it’s what you made of it. But if you didn’t make it, you weren’t
going to get it. But they helped a lot of people along. A lot of responsibility.

Q. Mr. Riley, you had three years of photographic experience in the Antarctica. Can
you talk a little bit about the special challenges facing photography that you had
to overcome?

A. Well the processing that we were able to do down there, we had to be very, very
careful of our water usage. Because the water was just not available. We had a
small nuclear power plant there and when it was on line and working, we didn’t
have a water problem. But when it wasn’t, we had to do quick processing on any
prints we made. So they weren’t really processed, they weren’t thoroughly
washed, but we were able to operate that way. The weather conditions, we had to
have special cold rooms where we would leave our equipment. We would bring it
in from outside, but we couldn’t bring it into the photo lab, the building itself,
because of the condensation. If we took a camera from inside, outside,
immediately the lenses would fog up and we’d be out there shooting pictures and
we wouldn’t be taking a darn thing because the thing would be all fogged up on
the inside. So those are little tricks you get to know and then the equipment you
had to make sure, we had a lot of things that were degreased because they would
freeze up. And our aerial cameras, the same way. We had to make sure they were
the proper temperatures because we installed them or else we would have a failed
mission because of condensation. A lot of that problem. Just basic things that
you would do in the winter here, except the problems are expanded down there.
Q. When you were in charge of the photography, did you succeed someone or was this a responsibility newly created?

A. No, there had been a succession of photo officers down there. In my particular field, I was the first photo navigator they had down there. That was something that they hadn’t had before. So I brought quite a bit more experience in that field with me. But as far as the photo officers, I forgot the guy’s name now. That’s awful. Good guy too. No, there has always been one or two that were down there. Sometimes you would have your assistant that would be in Christ Church. You would always have some junior officer assigned to you as the assistant division officer. But there usually was at least one photo officer assigned. And you had several good chiefs you know. Couldn’t do it by yourself. If you didn’t have good chiefs, you were in deep trouble. And I was blessed with good chiefs.

Q. Okay.

A. And the people that went down there were pretty selective. I was pretty selective in who I would take down there. If a man didn’t measure up, he almost got rewarded by staying in Christ Church. But I brought who I felt were the best qualified down to the ice. You didn’t want to bring someone who didn’t want to be there down there.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about … so in other words you had the power to select subordinates?

A. Sure.

Q. Okay.
A. A lot of the photographers never were able to stay down there for a lot longer than the officers. If the officers were down there on a two year tour, and in my case I extended for a year, for a three year tour, but the turnover, for the troops, for the enlisted guys, a lot of them would stay down there for a long time. Once you get a flight engineer qualified on a Herc in Antarctica, you get people who are qualified down there, it takes you, the first year you figure out what you’re supposed to do and then the second year you’re the expert. If you stay down there a third year, then you’re really an expert. And some of these guys had been down there for years and they knew their job inside and out. And the Navy was at that time willing to let them stay there because of that experience level. In photo it was, for the most part, three years, four years. And John who you are going to talk to tomorrow, they would go out and go somewhere and then it was a volunteer. You volunteered to go to that program. So right away people were, your crew, was something special because they volunteered to do that. You usually don’t volunteer to get into arduous situations. And that was considered arduous sea duty. At that time you got on a ship for six months, you get a port once in a while. If you go down to Antarctica, not many people are fortunate enough to leave there. They were in for six months and if you wintered over, you were there for a year.

Q. So the Navy considered Antarctica a kind of hardship?

A. Yes. Arduous sea duty.

Q. Extra pay for them?
A. They got sea pay for it, but it wasn’t that much. The provisions were, the food, was fabulous. It was of the same rations that were served on submarines. It wasn’t gourmet, but you had your very, very choice, which you attributed to a lot of girth.

Q. I’ve heard that before in kind of isolated environments, meals take on a special significance.

A. And there the same way. We ate well. Now you didn’t get fresh milk all the time. Now the planes would fly in, they would bring in what they could bring back down with them. They would bring in fresh milk, you were pretty happy to get that. Or something fresh from New Zealand. Because it was summer in New Zealand and they got good crops. They had good prime products up there.

Q. What about things like eggs, powdered mostly?

A. No, no. We got fresh eggs. We had powdered eggs too, but fresh eggs, fresh milk, as much as you wanted. Turkeys at Christmas. And I think when the weather was bad and it would be bad, you never could tell when it was going to be bad and then flights were cancelled. Like there’s quite a distance between McMurdo and there. If weather was bad, they wouldn’t be able to make it down or something would stop the mail from coming in. If you didn’t get mail, it hurt for a little bit. But we had ham patches. We had a ham station down there and we’d go down and talk and we would talk to ham operators in Arizona, Barry Goldwater was down there quite often, and they would patch you through to your home. They’d put a collect call from their place in Rhode Island or wherever the guys were, at Quonset Point and I’d talk to my wife maybe every other week or two weeks for a
few minutes. “Hi Mary, how is everything. Over.” And the guy on the other side, the ham operators were super friends of the guys that were in Antarctica.

Q. That was still going on the 60’s. I’ve interviewed people from the 50’s and that was a very important part of base life.

A. Very important part of base life. We got a ham shack and that was the only way we had anything going through. Now I guess they’ve got a telephone booth to call. Super important. That was a morale builder, the only way you could get through. And the ham operators, God bless them, they would come on and it would have to be a certain time of the day that you’d get through and it seemed like we would get through better through New Mexico for some reason or another. There’s people down there and throughout there and they’d pick up. And there were some people in Rhode Island that would pick up too. And they would work through those messages for hours at a time. Just with their ham sets, flipping it back and forth and patching it through.

Q. In regard to the ham radio, did you have some kind of a rotating schedule? What determined whether somebody was going to get a ham patch or not?

A. Just luck of the draw. If you happen to go in there. If you had some time off, the guys would be working. It would be the other radio operators that weren’t working their special jobs, they would go in and run the ham radio.

Q. Okay, so it was very casual.

A. It was a casual deal. Your chances of getting through were better if you were at Pole Station or at Byrd Station. There aren’t very many people at those bases. We were down in Chile, when we were hired down, that was the only way to get back
to the states, cranked up the HF on the C121 and …So there was a little bit of communication, but you couldn’t stay on there long and you couldn’t say much. Cause you had more people.

Q. So it was just a few minutes at a time on the radio?

A. Yes. How’s everything at home, everything okay? Yea, okay. It was all general things. It would have to be general.

Q. Okay. That brings us to the end of this interview and I appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Riley, and you’ll be receiving a copy of the tape along with my interviewer’s notes for you to review. I do appreciate your cooperation. Thank you.

A. Thank you. It’s been a pleasure talking to you. I hope we put a little bit on there that somebody some day might get something out of it. If you’ve never been to Antarctica and you have the opportunity to go, don’t ever pass it up. You would be one of few in this whole world that’s ever been there. And you’ll carry it with you all of your life.

Q. Thank you.