

Oral History Transcript

Interviewer: William Patton

Interviewee: Dr. Robert C. Patton

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Q:            Alright, I think we're recording. Okay. So, to get started, I wanted to talk about what your job was and what you did while you were there.

Dr. Patton:   Well, I was just a general medical officer in a clinic in a hospital So, we just took care of all the service men on the base. I think we had about 5,000 people on the base. No civilians usually, just members of the military.

Q:            And you were in the Air Force, right?

Dr. Patton:   Yup. Air Force.

Q:            Okay. And it was in Thailand. Is that correct?

Dr. Patton:   It was in Takhli, Thailand? It was about a hundred miles north of Bangkok.

Q:            And did you just stay there most of the time?

Dr. Patton:   A whole year? Well, we made trips of course. You know, we'd make trips around the country to different sites, and then I went to Laos for a month. I got assigned, and I worked work for the embassy in Laos for a month.

Q:            Did you get to pick the Air Force or was that...

Dr. Patton:   Yeah, I think we think we picked it when we started medical school. We all were drafted of course. And I think when school started we went ahead and made a choice. I can't remember whether we all got our choice or whether we... most of us did that I know of.

Q:            Had you finished medical school or were you still...

Dr. Patton:   Yeah, I finished medical school and a year of internships, so I was actually five years out. So, I had already had sort of a little bit of advance education and we had a deferment until we got out at that point.

Q:            Right, so how long were you in Thailand?

Dr. Patton:   There a year. And I was in the air force for two years. The term was two years.

Q:            So how did you handle that? Hearing that you were drafted, were you...

Dr. Patton: Well, we all knew we were...you know, we all signed up for the draft when we were like 17, and we pretty well knew it was going to happen. And then you, when you got a chance to sign and get a choice, that was fine.

Q: So how did your family, how did Mrs. Patton take it?

Dr. Patton: I mean I think she knew that we were going. Most all of my classmates, we were, I think we were all drafted. Some went right away. Some waited a year or two and did some more training.

Q: Did they train you in the United States or did they just send you out there?

Dr. Patton: Well, when I finished my internship we got our orders and I had to go to a place in Kansas and then later on I even went, oh, I spent a week before I went to Thailand to do jungle medicine injuries and all that kind of stuff. And we had a little small arms training, nothing major, but we, yeah, we had a couple of weeks of that.

Q: Was there interesting things you got to do while you were in Thailand or was the medical stuff pretty standard?

Dr. Patton: Well... somewhat, we had some tropical diseases like gingi we took care of, and we didn't do a lot of trauma. We had one aircraft accident on the base and unfortunately they all died of injuries as we shipped them out. Whatever was bad we would send over to Japan, the major stuff. But you know, we saw some, yeah, we saw interesting stuff. We went, I told you we went out on civic action once a month at the local villages and we saw some interesting things out there.

Q: Did you go to Thailand for that.? Or would it be in just that area?

Dr. Patton: It was just, no, it was, yeah, we were in Thailand, the area around where we might travel around 50 miles or something about. We carried truck and supplies and go out and you know, go to a village and ask, set up a clinic, and say who all wants to be seen. And then they line up and we'd start seeing them.

Q: Could you communicate with them?

Dr. Patton: A little bit. We had interpreters and we learned some basic stuff.

Q: Did they like that the Americans were there?

Dr. Patton: They all wanted to be seen.

Q: Yeah. And they just wanted the western medicine?

Dr. Patton: We got kinda overwhelmed by it. Yeah, we got along fine with... The Thai people are really nice people, and I don't think there was any adverse kind of problems with the Americans and the Thai's. Of course we hired a lot of Thais. The base probably hired several hundred of them to help run the base. They were working everywhere. So there was a big, it was a big influence on the economy just having the base there.

Q: Right, so was the base nice? Was it...

Dr. Patton: Oh yeah.

Q: A lot of stuff there?

Dr. Patton: You know, we had a library and church and we all lived in these... Our hootches we lived in weren't fancy. We have a big officer's club where we ate and of course we had the hospital and we could fly in and out of there on airplanes anytime we wanted to, wherever we wanted to go. And we were right near railroads, and we got on some of the Thai railroads. Made some trips. Yeah, it was a nice base. It really was.

Q: Did you ever feel like you were in danger at any point? Was there ever any time...

Dr. Patton: Not really, no. Not where we were. Pilots were killed all the time. You know, they were flying over North Vietnam, but no, not us.

Q: And what about your relationship with the pilots? Did you guys get along with them?

Dr. Patton: You know, the doctors and the pilots didn't really mesh together very well. First of all, we sometimes outranked them. Without even... We just immediately, we became captains just by signing the dotted line. So they didn't necessarily like that. But we didn't have any conflicts. We saw them all. Flight surgeons took care of most of the pilots, anything special. But we, if they got sick in the middle of night and we were staying in the hospital on call, we would take care of them.

Q: So how much did you understand about what was going on with the war?

Dr. Patton: Well, we all, you know, we all understood what was going on and most of us weren't exactly pleased with the politics, but we just decided we were going to do our duty and do our job and get out. But I can't say that we were all... Of course, I wasn't in the middle of a combat area and that might've been different.

Q: Yeah.

Dr. Patton: Not sure we were all happy with what was going on and we weren't happy to be gone from our families for a year, but we just decided to do it and move on.

Q: Did you keep up with what was going on outside of, you know, where you were?

Dr. Patton: Yeah, we tried. In fact I had newspapers sent from home over there and armed services had newspapers and radio. Yeah, I think there was probably a radio station.

Q: You said you watched the moon landing while you were there?

Dr. Patton: I was working one night in the hospital and watched it.

Q: That's really cool. Okay. So how about when you came home, was it kind of weird to go back to just, you know the normal doctor life?

Dr. Patton: A little bit weird. You know, you fly from a primitive country back to this country, but it didn't take too long. Of course, if I had been a marine in the jungle and involved in... it probably would have been a lot harder. But with us I don't think it was. Because I came right back and went to Shreveport and went to work at the hospital.

Q: Yeah. Did you feel like you gained anything from your experience over there or just kind of one of those things...

Dr. Patton: Friendships, and it's interesting being in a third world country. So you know, the other cultures and other people. I think we all got something out of it.

Q: And did you keep up with any of those people?

Dr. Patton: Well, a year or two after we got back I had a friend that was with me there came through, and we talked about him coming here, and then I knew where a couple of people had gone. But after that no, no reunions or anything like that I'm aware of. I did learn that the base commander ended up being a Christian evangelist. We read about him later. Interesting guy.

Q: So did you have any funny stories? Anything that you remember and I'm trying to think. You told me about how you when you got there you kind of got to pick whatever you wanted...

Dr. Patton: Well, you know, we all had, in the military, you have these sergeants who run the show. They run everything. They're the ones behind... So whatever needs you had had they would get you whatever you wanted. You know legal stuff. And you know, we did some crazy things like anywhere else. We'd go out at night. I had some friends...I had a friend who was a....one of my roommates was a veterinarian who took care of all the guard dogs and some of the other things he did had to with public health and that kind of stuff. And occasionally we'd go out at night and we'd shoot flares over the jungle just for the heck of it. And then wake up all the birds and they'd all shut up when the flare went out, we'd shoot em up. And we just did crazy things like that. Nothing...but the main funny things where with all the people I knew, I was with some really good people. We had a good time.

Q: So were the doctors that you were with from all over the place?

Dr. Patton: All over the place and the dentists, we had dentists from several places and we'd all eat together and we'd make trips together. I've got pictures of things that we would go to. We'd make trips and see various sites. And so that was the fun part of it really was all the people, good people that I met.

Q: So, it feels like overall it was a fairly good experience?

Dr. Patton: You know, it was just being gone for a year and being gone from what you were mainly doing for two years.

Q: So did you have any kids at that point?

Dr. Patton: Yeah, we had Michael. When I went, Mike was about a year old, and then Richard was born while we were in the Air Force over in Warner Robins.

Q: So the year you were there? Is that 68 or...

Dr. Patton: 68 and 69 because I got back here in 70, and then went to Mobile.

Q: You mentioned traveling around,. Tell me about the C-130's, what those were like.

Dr. Patton: Well yeah, the bases were sort of isolated. I think there was maybe five bases. All of them were a different kind of mission. Some of the B-52's that were bombing in various places, and we were tactical air command with the particular airplane we had. And there was some F-4 fighter command's up above us and we would travel, it was a schedule, but C-130's would fly around the bases. Kinda made a circle and you could go, that's what you'd have to do if you wanted to go somewhere? Or go to Bangkok and, you know, a C-130. So we flew on those all the time. And then I flew in a helicopter to Laos.

Q: Yeah. What'd you do in Laos? Just relax there?

Dr. Patton: I was assigned to the embassy in the capital of Laos. And you know, that was during the days of the Secret Laotian war with CIA and Air America and all those things going on. So, I guess I worked for them and probably didn't even know it. I was told I was to leave all my stuff back and get in civilian clothes and I'd be gone a month. It turned out had some nice people there too. There was an organization called AID. It was an American aid organization. It still works today, and they had a compound of houses and a clinic, and I took care of a lot of their people, and I got to know a nurse and her husband who he was running the AID program there. And they were building schools and all kinds of things. And I got to know them real well and they kind of took me under their wing, took care of me, so it wasn't a bad thing. We just ran a clinic. State Department pediatrician was in charge of it, and he went all over the world for the State Department. That was one of the things where he did when he was assigned there and he lived out in the community on the Mekong river. So yeah, we saw some neat things. The Communist troops were all over the place there and we just, we'd mix, you know, you could see him everywhere you went. And they didn't bother us in any way.

Q: And you never felt like it was about to be...

Dr. Patton: Not really. I mean they had guns and they walked... You know, no, not really. So we just had a little American compound. That's where all the Americans that were working up there were living in. We had a clinic there and that's what I did.

Q: So did you have... You have these pictures right here? Did you a have camera? Like how were you...

Dr. Patton: We all had cameras.

Q: Y'all all got to have them?

Dr. Patton: We all bought the best Japanese stuff we could buy. We all bought it. And so we took, everybody had cameras, of course these are the kind of cameras... Those are the cameras that nobody uses any more, you know, these are the ones that you had to...

Q: How'd you get these pictures?

Dr. Patton: Let's see. One of my friends made, I think made those. Some of my friends were...He was probably on a refueling airplane. One of my friends was a flight surgeon, and he flew on some missions over Vietnam with those radar jamming B-66's and that may have been what he did? These airplanes would take off and as fast as they took off, they'd turn on the afterburners and within about 50 miles they'd have to get refueled cause they'd burned up all their gas. And that's the way they worked because they were just gas guzzlers. But anyway, we all took pictures. I mean, and I got, of course, slides, your grandma's got probably hundreds of them, but that's one of the things we did while we were there.

Q: All right. Well I think, I think that's all the questions I had. We'll pause...

New Speaker: [Few minute break to get out some pictures]

Dr. Patton: They were some people that worked on the base. I think this lady had a big restaurant downtown where the base was located. We'd have some kind of parties or something and they'd had like egg rolls all up, you know, all kind of oriental type of food. These are all earlier stuff.

Q: I think it's the other way.

Dr. Patton: Yeah. I was going to show you... This is back in medical school... That's before Michael was even born... We had these little instamatic cameras. That's what all this is made from. You remember those? You throw them away. Anyway. Yeah, we took pictures all over the place and then I started doing slides... Trying to see if there's a place... There's the officer's club and this is my friend who was a dermatology guy that came from Arkansas, and I talked to him one time almost thought he was going to come here.

Q: Really?

Dr. Patton: But he didn't, and then this is a market. There were markets everywhere.

Q: Was it near a city or was it kind of a...

Dr. Patton: It was a little city called Takhli.

Q: Okay.

Dr. Patton: And it wasn't a big city. Of course, Bangkok was humongous place. We were about a hundred miles from Bangkok, and you could get on a train ride down there.

Q: I can see you guys with the cameras right here. You guys with the cameras.

Dr. Patton: I know, the Blues Brothers. [laughing] Yeah. We all had...That's all we did. Go around and take pictures. These two guys were dentists and I forget who that... Anyway, we were all cool.

Q: Y'all thought y'all were something. [laughing]

Dr. Patton: Yup. No, we didn't have our uniforms of course as you notice and let me see what... This is in my hootch. We had these hootch places where we would, uh, where they kept us, which was just kind of hut places. We had air conditioning, but they were fine. We had outdoor showers. But you're welcome to take any pictures and she might have something that she could give you.

Q: Yeah, I'll definitely take some of these pictures and look at them at least.

Dr. Patton: Alright, but I wasn't involved in the combat stuff. Only thing I had to do was leave your family, had to leave the family for a year. And that was, that was probably the worst part of it.

Q: Was the work good? Did you enjoy that?

Dr. Patton: Well, we worked hard. It was about three or four of us, you know, taking care of, you know, 5,000 people. And we were on call at night and we'd have to go in and spend the night in the hospital and we'd see all the people get sick in the middle of the night and we had people in the hospital, and if there's anything beyond what we can take care of then and we would air it back on to Japan. You could call an airplane in and pick people up in a minute. Like the plane crash we had where all those guys were burnt real bad, and they weren't going to survive. They crashed on takeoff. Something happened, and we took care of them temporarily, and it was a horrible thing and they were all burned up. Somebody came in and they all died later. I don't think anyone survived. Because it was full of jet fuel when they took off.

Q: Was that near you or was that...

Dr. Patton: Right on the runway right there.

Q: Oh, where you were?

Dr. Patton: That's the only emergency that I think we had the whole time.

Q: Wow, so what was your rank?

Dr. Patton: Captain. We went in as captains. That's why the pilots didn't like us because they went in as lieutenants.

Q: Was there a reason for that? Why the doctors were captains?

Dr. Patton: I guess your education level.

Q: Yeah okay, that makes sense.

Dr. Patton: I guess. And then some of the hospital administrators would be major. Some of them who they've been in their for life, if they were regulars, there for good, and they would be like colonels or whatever.

Q: Right.

Dr. Patton: And we always thought we were better than they were cause, you know, they were just government bureaucrats sometimes. So, I'm glad we were there. Cause I think the care, I think that medical care we gave was really good. I mean, I had one guy who was there with me who had had at least a year of internal medicine before they took him in. So, he had that background and, you know, we could do minor surgery and things like that, but anything terrible then we ship them out.

Q: Well, that's why they got doctors to be there just cause they could do more than what a medic could do.

Dr. Patton: It was like a little city, you know, everything a city had you had to have all that. Cause there were a lot of people. Like I say, we had about four or 5,000 people running that base. And then there were like five bases. You can figure out how many people that took. So, I'm sure when I left and went home after a year, then somebody came in and took our places.

Q: And how much longer till the war was over?

Dr. Patton: You know, it wasn't officially over until 75. So I got back in, I went, came back in 69, and it was still pretty, pretty hot. Tet was 68. The big battle of Tet were all the people were killed. So, I was right in there, right about that time, or right after that. When that business started happening.

Q: Right. Okay. Anything else? I think...

Dr. Patton: I don't think so. Unless you can think of something.

Q: Let's see if I have any other questions. Um, we talked about that...The other question I had was while you were there, did that change your opinion about the war from when you were at home or did it stay kinda the same?

Dr. Patton: Well, I was a skeptic and I think I even talked to your grandmother about going to Canada. I mean, I wasn't happy.

Q: Yeah.

Dr. Patton: Most of us weren't, but It would have been a horrible thing for your family to do that.

Q: Right.

Dr. Patton: And some people did it. To run away or, you know, or avoid the draft and go to Canada. You couldn't recover from that. So we just, most of us said, we're opposed to that issue



would just do our duty and get through and come out. Well, some of the...I had friends who loved it. I mean, the pilots loved it.

Q: They just loved to be able to go out there and...

Dr. Patton: Well, as they told us, it's the only war we got. You know, combat pilots are combat pilots to be combat pilots. They liked to fight and they liked to fly and they did some amazing things and we had an officer's club there where they all... They had their little section, we had the main section, and they had a board there of the dead pilots who were killed there. It was covered with names. I mean it was... In fact when I went to the Vietnam Wall several years ago, and I found one of the guys... Ed White, the astronaut who burned up on the... You remember he was one of the astronauts who died? His brother was there and he got killed on a mission, never came back. And I looked him up and his name was on the wall. That was kind of an impressive moment along with my brother's classmate, roommate in college.

Q: So you've been up to the memorial?

Dr. Patton: That's something, yeah.

Q: That's pretty cool.

Dr. Patton: It's cool. And it does...It does get to you a little bit. And I've been to Normandy and that gets to you.

Q: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Patton: So uh, yeah. You know, it was no way that I could agree with the war and what we were there and all the losses.

Q: But you had the guys who just wanted to fight. They didn't really care so much about why?

Dr. Patton: The military guys, you know, McCain, all of them, those navy pilots. Man. And they were scared.

Q: Yeah.

Dr. Patton: And there's some harrowing stories about them when they got shot down and captured and all, but, yeah they did their duty and there was something... They say it's exciting.

Q: Did you ever get to go in a fighter jet? Did you ever get to fly?

Dr. Patton: I lived right next to where, you know, where they were and with them taking off every night at three o'clock in the morning when you're trying to sleep. I mean, they were really loud. And then I had, one of my friends on the base was a flight surgeon and he flew with them a couple of times. And then eventually what happened is it was some doctor who was killed flying out of Vietnam on some mission. I don't whether it was anti-aircraft or

whatever. And they came out with an edict doctors couldn't fly, flight surgeons couldn't go up...

Q: Wow.

Dr. Patton: In fact, one of my friends, I think that was all he said, there was a Sam missile flew right by the window where he was, and he could hear the motor and he didn't do it after that.

Q: Yeah, I bet.

Dr. Patton: Anyway, so, you know, they were shooting missiles at them all the time. These were the, we had the radar jammer guys on our base, two or three of them, and they just go up and fly around and jam all the anti-aircraft radar and that kinda stuff. But they didn't love flying after a couple of accidents.

Q: Did you get to keep up with any of strategy that was going on?

Dr. Patton: Well, I mean, the best I could. And I probably know more about it now than then.

Q: Right.

Dr. Patton: Cause, you know, I read a book, uh, I'm trying to remember the name. It's a great book called... *Robin Olds: Fighter Pilot*. And this guy was an ace during World War II in P-38's. And after the war, he flew I think in Korea and then he commanded an F-4 fighter group out of a base right north of mine. And I read his book, and he wrote in there about the pilots on this base. And they would escort them on some of their missions because F-105's were not fighters, they were bombers, fighter bombers. So I don't think they were capable of dog fight stuff. He ended up being an ace. He shot down like five Migs and was not supposed to even be flying. He just disobeyed orders and did it. So I read about stuff like that later on. I read that book like three or four years ago... Anyway, so I've learned more about it now than back then. And we were just trying to get through and come home. I guess I wished I had sat down with some of those guys and said, hey, tell me about it. But we were kind of isolated, you know, the pilots had their little social groups in place and I've got a feeling had they not had a separate like officer club and we all ate together and socialized, it probably would have been better for us. Sorry I didn't.

Q: So yeah. So the pilots had their own little...

Dr. Patton: In fact, they had a special officer's club where they would have their parties and do crazy things and we'd, well, we'd have to walk through there just to go home, but we didn't socialize that way. Now, the flight surgeons probably did and they were their own separate place away from us. And they probably could have told some stories, but I wasn't a flight surgeon.

Q: Okay. I think that's good.