

# SETP FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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**COLONEL EUGENE P. DEATRICK, JR, USAF (RETIRED)**

**September 27, 2007**

**Dana Marcotte Kilanowski**

**Interviewer**

## INTRODUCTION

The following is an interview with famous Air Commando and test pilot, Colonel Eugene P. Deatrick, USAF (Retired) for the Society of Experimental Test Pilots Foundation's Oral History Program, made possible by the generous support of the Northrop Grumman Corporation and individual donors, for the Society of Experimental Test Pilots Foundation, Lancaster, California. In this interview, Colonel Deatrick will discuss his experiences as a cadet at West Point, as an Air Force test pilot during the Cold War, his air rescue of downed Navy pilot Dieter Dengler in Laos during the Viet Nam War in which the major motion picture "Rescue Dawn" starring Christian Bale was based, serving as Commandant of the Aerospace Research Pilot School (USAF Test Pilot School at Edwards AFB) and serving as Director of Test, AFSC. Colonel Deatrick has accumulated over 12,000 flying hours in over 50 different airplanes during his long and distinguished aviation career.



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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Colonel Eugene P. Deatrick Jr, USAF, (Retired), has flown more than 50 types of aircraft and logged more than 12,000 flying hours in a long and distinguished career in flight testing and aviation. A native West Virginian, following graduation from Woodrow Wilson High School in 1942, Deatrick was selected to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, graduating in 1946.

Entering the United States Army Air Force upon graduation from West Point, Deatrick trained in the North American B-25 Mitchell Bomber. He flew the Boeing B-29 Superfortress from Florida and then was assigned to the 10<sup>th</sup> Air Rescue Squadron in Alaska. He flew the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress, Stinson L-5 Sentinel and the Consolidated OA-10 Catalina.

After a short assignment at Warner Robins AFB, Georgia, he was transferred to Eglin AFB, Florida as an engineering test pilot. There he flew his first jet, the Lockheed T-33 Shooting Star. In 1951, he was selected to attend the 1<sup>st</sup> USAF Test Pilot School class at Edwards AFB, California. After serving as aide to the Commander of Air Research and Development Command, Deatrick performed flight tests at Wright Patterson AFB, Ohio. He was certified as an instructor in 14 different aircraft and often flew with Major General Howell Estes, Jr. In 1957, he became Estes' executive officer and moved with the general to assignments in Washington, D.C., California, Maryland and Illinois. Deatrick volunteered for duty in Southeast Asia in 1966 and was selected as the Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Squadron and flew the Douglas A-1 Skyraider.

While on a familiarization flight over Laos on July 20, 1966, Deatrick banked his Skyraider around a river bend and spotted a man sprawled on a rock, in the middle of the river, waving a white cloth. Although there were no reports of any pilots downed in the area, Deatrick took a chance and called for rescue helicopters and stayed in the area to direct the air rescue of a grateful, exhausted, emaciated young Navy pilot named Dieter Dengler, who had roamed the Laotian jungle for 23 days after escaping from a prison camp after 6 months of captivity.

Colonel Deatrick has flown 402 combat missions from Pleiku AB and earned the Distinguished Flying Cross twice, along with 22 Air Medals and the Bronze Star with "V" for Valor. Returning from Vietnam, he was selected to serve as Commandant of the Aerospace Research Pilots School, now the USAF Test Pilot School, at Edwards AFB. His follow on assignment was the National War College in Washington, D.C. and in 1969, he reported to J-3 (Operation) of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In 1972, he became Director of Test, Air Force Systems Command, Andrews AFB, Maryland. Colonel Deatrick retired from the USAF in 1974. He has served as President, National Aviation Club and in 1999, received the organization's Cliff Henderson Award for Aviation Achievement. In 2000, was honored as an Eagle at the Gathering of Eagles Foundation's Air Command and Staff College's annual program to honor distinguished aviators.

## INTERVIEW

**Kilanowski:** This is Dana Marcotte Kilanowski for the Society of Experimental Test Pilots Foundation Oral History Program. I am interviewing Colonel Eugene P. Deatrick Jr, at the Grand Californian Hotel in Anaheim, California, during the 2007 Society of Experimental Test Pilots Symposium. The date is Thursday, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007 and the time is approximately 1:20 p.m. in the afternoon. The cameraman is Dennis Archuleta, courtesy of the Northrop Grumman Corporation. SETP would like to thank the Northrop Grumman Corporation for their generous on-going support of SETP's Oral History Program.

Good afternoon, Colonel.

**Deatrick:** Thank you.

**Kilanowski:** May I please start the interview off with your name, date, and place of birth?

**Deatrick:** Eugene Deatrick, 1924, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

**Kilanowski:** What drove your decision to become a pilot?

**Deatrick:** Oh, I hate to say it. I went to West Point, and on plebe maneuvers up in Watertown, we were on a long march one day and a T-6 strafed us, and we all went into the wet weeds. And I saw the pilot wave as he went by, and I thought, "If I ever go to war, that's the way to go." So that was my early beginning of it. When we had an opportunity to go into flight training, why, I took it. I can't claim making all those models when I was a kid, but I always had a fascination with flying, and that really put me over the line.

**Kilanowski:** How did you come to be selected to attend West Point?

**Deatrick:** I had been in the high school Cadet Corps in Washington, D.C., and the war was beginning to heat up, and I thought I'd like to be an officer. I was fortunate enough to get an appointment from Senator Randolph at the time, and entered in the class of 1943.

**Kilanowski:** How did you come to be a pilot in the Army Air Corps after your graduation from West Point?

**Deatrick:** Well, I applied for flight training while we were at West Point. We were the last class to take flight training while we were at the Point, so I applied for it and, fortunately, lasted through the whole thing and got my wings on graduation.

**Kilanowski:** That's wonderful. What was your first flying assignment flying B-25s?

**Deatrick:** It was out at Enid, Oklahoma. We went to multi-engine transition out there right after graduation. Following that, I went to MacDill Air Force Base. There were 200 of us, 100 in bombers and 100 that graduated into fighters, and I was in the bombers. We were divided up between the five wings at the time, and I went to MacDill Air Force Base and B-29s.

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me about your experiences flying B-29s with the 307<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group?

**Deatrick:** Well, it was quite an experience. The B-29 was fairly new at the time. When the war ended, everyone was leaving and they didn't know what to do with second lieutenants. I was a young bachelor and wanted some flying time, so I kept pressing them, and pretty soon they finally had to do something with me. I think I had about 800 hours total [flying] time, and most of it in a B-29 while I was down there. I flew Gooney Birds on the SAC route on weekends just to build up my flying time, finally got checked out as a first pilot.

After that, why, they wanted a B-29 pilot up in Alaska. Only two of us had checked out. A classmate of mine and his wife had just had twins, and I was a bachelor, so I volunteered. Then I found out you had to have 1,500 hours of first-pilot time up in Alaska to fly the pole. When I was in San Francisco, I found out they wanted a pilot out on the chain for a one-year tour, so I volunteered for that. Instead of going to B-29s up there, I went out on the chain and flew out there.

**Kilanowski:** And that was the Aleutians?

**Deatrick:** Yes.

**Kilanowski:** Was that rescue, search and rescue?

**Deatrick:** Search and Rescue.

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me any of your search-and-rescue experiences?

**Deatrick:** Oh, most of it was evacuation of people. Bernt Balchen, the famous Arctic explorer, was our CO. I always told the story that flying was miserable up there. You could anticipate almost anything. He had a flying safety meeting one day, and if I had a Norwegian accent, I could do it a lot better, but he said, "I know that I've asked you to fly in weather than no one should be flying in, but we have to, and I do expect losses. But," he said, "I would appreciate, if you crack up an airplane, please do something other than writing on it."

It was quite a learning experience flying out in the Aleutians, and I spent six months at Adak and six months at Coal Bay. We had a B-17 assigned to us. Most of it was just evacuation, medical evacs, nothing great.

The Berlin Airlift had started, and then they insisted that were at 45 all the time. I said the only reason that would help is in case we went down in the Bering Sea, we could shoot ourself before we froze to death. [laughs] But it was a damn good flying experience, as far as I was concerned.

**Kilanowski:** Well, really, flying in all types of weather was an invaluable experience. Did you do any flying for the Berlin Airlift?

**Deatrick:** No. I came back home in 1949, I guess it was, and went to Warner Robins to a test outfit there.

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me about your experiences flying as an electronics test pilot at Warner Robins?

**Deatrick:** Most of it was involving radar testing. Again, nothing in my career was anything like an X-1 flight or YB-49 flight or anything. It was just routine testing of equipment mostly, radar equipment at Warner Robins. They were thinking of closing Eglin at one time, and then they decided to keep it open, and they moved us from Warner Robins down there, and we were the first real outfit, or the test outfit, being assigned down there.

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me about your experiences with the newly formed Armament—

**Deatrick:** Armament Center?

**Kilanowski:** Yes.

**Deatrick:** Well, once again, it was mostly routine testing of not the aircraft, but of the equipment. My only real experience was I was a bachelor and flying everything I could, and they came to me one day and said, “The general’s son has just graduated from VMI. He’s a new second lieutenant, and we want to get him back to Baltimore, where he’s going to be assigned.”

So I said, “Fine. I’ll take him.” Got a [unclear], put him in the right seat, and it was pouring rain that day and a long line of cars came out. They put the lieutenant in the back, talked to him on the radio, and took off. About thirty miles north of the airport, the right engine caught fire. Through outstanding airmanship, I got it back on the ground safely and taxied up. The cars came back out.

Fred Upps [phonetic] came out and said, “Where’s the general’s son?”

I said, "He's in the back."

He said, "He ain't there." And he had bailed out!

It was years later that we were at a party for a West Virginia astronaut. Jennings Randolph had invited us to West Virginia. After a little private party down there, I went upstairs and met with Dick Copeland [phonetic], who had worked for North American. I'd known him about ten years. I told him I'd been downstairs and mentioned that this guy went to Woodrow Wilson High School, and I thought it was here in the district. Turned out he was in Charleston. Dick said, "Well, I went to high school at Roosevelt."

Said, "Were your folks in the service?"

He said, "Yeah, Dad was in the Army Air Corps."

And all of a sudden it dawned on me, Copeland, that was the general's name. I said, "Did you ever bail out of an airplane?" And that was the first time in ten years both of us knew, because I'd never seen him before or after. [laughs] That was my most famous flight.

It was down there I got my first T-33 flight and got into jets. Someone found out I'd checked out in jets and said, "You can't do that unless you've flown a P-51," which I hadn't. So they forced me to go fly P-51s for a while. [laughs] I figured the only difference is that a P-51 was a way of keeping people out of T-33s, because there weren't many of them. But it was a good experience. I went from there out to Edwards, to school.

**Kilanowski:** Actually, you were the first TPS class at Edwards. [1951] Did you apply, or how were you selected?

**Deatrick:** I didn't even know there was a school. Someone came by one day, Harry Andonian, who I'm sure you know. He and I were down there together. Asked me if I wanted to go to the Test Pilot School. And I was the engineering test pilot for the outfit. I said, "Have you asked Andonian?"

They said, "Yes, but he turned it down because he said that he was too busy with his programs."

I thought, "It can't be very good if Andonian turns it down." I almost did, but I accepted and said I'd like to go. It was really, I guess, in your lifetime you make a decision, and that decision to go to the Test Pilot School sent me down a whole new career that I would never have known.

**Kilanowski:** What were your first impressions of Edwards?

**Deatrick:** God, what a place. [laughs] I had been up in New York and visiting with General and Mrs. Doolittle. The general said, when I told him I was going out to Edwards, he said, “When you get out there, look up an old friend of mine named Pancho Barnes.” So I wrote it down [name].

I arrived late in the afternoon, a Friday, and Friday night was always a big night at the club, because it was a five-hour drive to L.A. or any other place. I met Colonel Boyd, and I asked him if he knew anyone by the name of Pancho Barnes. I always remember, it was like asking Noah if they knew where the ark was. He said, “I’ll take you over and introduce you.”

It’s the only time I ever saw Pancho in a white lace dress or in a dress. Several wives had gathered around her, and General Boyd, or Colonel Boyd, introduced me. I said, “I was with General Doolittle, and he asked me to be sure and say hello” and Pancho and I became good friends after that. [laughs]

It was a desolate place, but the school kept you busy, and it was sort of sparse. We lived in the BLQ, and the dust blew in and dust blew out. But that was the beginning of a new life for me, and I’ve been tied to it mostly ever since in my career, anyway.

**Kilanowski:** How did you get to meet General and Mrs. Doolittle?

**Deatrick:** When we were cadets at West Point, John, his son, was a classmate of mine, and we got our first Christmas leave, and I was from West Virginia and I couldn’t get home in the short time we had for Christmas, so John invited me down to Washington to spend the weekend, and in the little apartment that Mrs. Doolittle had, was Mrs. Doolittle [Josephine “Jo”], John [John P. Doolittle], myself, Jim [James H. Doolittle, Jr.] who was the other brother, his wife [Elva], and triple junior [Jimmy Doolittle III], who retired as a colonel here, [Edwards AFB].

I always remember Mrs. Doolittle said, “You’re sleeping on the kitchen floor, and if you’d like breakfast, we eat at eight o’clock. If you don’t, why, we’ll step over you.” [laughs] But that was my first meeting.

That Sunday, unbeknown to anyone, there was a knock on the door and General Jim popped in. He was in town quite secretly. I didn’t spend any time with him. He spent it with the family and left and went back to England. I told him many years later if God himself had walked through that door, I couldn’t have been more impressed. The only general I’d seen up until then was across the parade field. But we’ve been longtime friends over their whole life. Mrs. Doolittle was just a grand, grand woman.

**Kilanowski:** I’ve heard she was a really lovely, lovely woman.

**Deatrick:** Far more lovely than General Jim! [laughs].

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me about the [Test Pilot] School back in 1951? What was it like? What did you fly?

**Deatrick:** We had the B-25. I'm trying to think what else. We had the T-28. That's about it, I think. I'm trying to—

**Kilanowski:** Were you allowed to fly [jets] in that first class?

**Deatrick:** No, I don't remember ever flying the jet. I don't think we had them then.

**Kilanowski:** And what was it, slide rule?

**Deatrick:** Oh, yes, I've still got it at home. [laughs] I was fortunate. Being a West Virginia hillbilly, I wasn't too bright, and, fortunately, my roommate was—or later on, I went through performance, went back to Eglin, where I was stationed, and later went up to Wright-Patterson, got back in up there, and they found out I hadn't gone through stability and control, so I came back out. Riccioni [Everest E. Riccioni] flew with me and we did our work together, so he took a great deal of the mental load off of me. But, no, if all engineers were brilliant, you wouldn't need flight test, and in those days, the slide rule, when you see what they're doing today, it's just fantastic, the difference in flight testing.

**Kilanowski:** I'm sure it really changed. Can you tell me about your impressions and experiences with General Albert Boyd? What kind of a man was he?

**Deatrick:** Colonel Boyd I didn't know. No one knew him too well. Some people did. And I certainly didn't early on. I hardly knew him when I was a student there. Years later when I became an aide exec for General Estes, Colonel Boyd I'd known better even prior to that, got into flight test when he was still at Wright-Patterson. A disciplinarian, a man who had, I think, great foresight. I wish I really knew the man better.

I told him one time just before he passed away—he was in the hospital—that I finally realized the beginning of the Test Pilot School that he had Yeager, who was a hillbilly from West Virginia and couldn't add two and two any better than I could, and Jackie Ridley, who was a hillbilly from Oklahoma who had a brilliant aeronautical mind, and Chuck could land and tell him something in hillbilly and Jack could translate it into aerodynamics. And I said, "It must have dawned on you, if you could find a school where you could train one man to do both things, fly well and think well." And that was the beginning of the Test Pilot School. [laughs] He was a wonderful gem and sort of distant to most people.

**Kilanowski:** Your follow-on assignment was to the Bomber Flight Test Branch at Wright Air Development Center. Can you tell me about that?

**Deatrick:** Yes, I had been made an aide to General Partridge, who was one of the first commanders, and we were in Baltimore at the headquarters of Systems Command then,

and he and I just didn't get along. So he called me in one day and said, "Look for a new job."

So I called Colonel Boyd, and he said he'd get me anything. "I'd like to come back to flight test, but I don't want to come if you don't want me."

He said, "Pack your bags and come on out." So I went out and I was then in flight test from, I guess, about '51 till '57.

**Kilanowski:** At Wright Field?

**Deatrick:** At Wright Field.

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me about your experiences flight testing the B-29 at Wright Field?

**Deatrick:** Wasn't any much testing of the airplane. We did a lot of component testing using the B-29. My biggest thrill came when we got the B-47 and the B-52 and I got on both of those programs. I was at Eglin when one of the first B-47s landed down there, and I looked at the airplane and said, "If God will let me fly that, I'll never complain again." And he did. It was one of the most beautiful airplanes in flight. I enjoyed the hell out of it. But, once again, I never really did any what I call unique or outstanding pieces of flight testing. Most all of it was just routine.

**Kilanowski:** You did some very interesting testing with the B-47 and the B-52, though, in Operations Castle in '54 and Redwing in '55. [Operation Castle and Operation Redwing were a series of high-yield nuclear test detonations by Joint Task Force 7 at Bikini Atoll and Enewetak Atoll.] Can you tell me about those tests?

**Deatrick:** Yes. I flew as copilot on both of them, in the B-47 with Jim Bauer, and we went out. Most of it was load survey. There are three things that happen when you explode the bomb: heat, pressure, and radiation. Radiation isn't too bad because you can get away from it. It's the heat and the pressure wave. So they would try to position us from the bomb site somewhere in the various attitude like this out so that we'd only get probably about 80 percent of the load. The problem was, no one could estimate what in the hell the yield of the bomb was going to be. One of the first hydrogen tests, they were looking at 8 megatons, and it went 15. That was on the B-52 test.

Our problem was that we had to land very light because of the length of the runway, so we usually flew around for about an hour at low level just burning off the fuel to land. We weren't sure what happened at 15, when it doubled almost. If we tried to put the flaps down and they stuck, we'd go off the end of the runway. If they went down partway and stuck, we couldn't get to Guam or we couldn't get anywhere. So a decision was made on that particular flight to leave the flaps up, fly back to Hawaii. We didn't have a toothbrush or anything with us, but we went back to Hawaii. That way with the length of the runway there at Hickam, we could make a no-flap landing if we had to.

I guess one of the biggest experiences of watching an atomic test is it's one of the most beautiful sights you'll ever see, the colors and everything. I always told people when I came home that hopefully we'll never use them, but if they shoot 1,000 this way, and we shoot 1,500 that way, what you want to do is go out and watch it, because it's a beautiful sight, and then pray you're dead about two hours later. [laughs]

It was about 200 miles, I think, the distance, say, between New York and Washington, and we set out one shot. With our back to Bikini and with glasses on, you could just feel the surge of wind when it passed us down there. God help us if we ever use them.

But the flights all went very well. We did a lot of training, positioning ourselves for it. Had a damned good navigator, fortunately. One of the nuke tests on the B-52, fortunately, we were going away from the bomb blast at the time, but we were here. The bombardier on the drop B-52, which was the first aerial drop of one of them, was going back and forth between radar and visual on his run-in. I don't know enough about the bomb nav system, but it got screwed up that he had a tailwind, and he started his countdown 120, 60, 15, and all we got was, "Get the hell outta here!" Fortunately, we were going away, so we were well positioned, but, boy, I'll tell you, the bump when it comes, you know, it's—God help us if we ever use them.

**Kilanowski:** Have you had medical tests over the years to see if you had any—

**Deatrick:** We never got close enough to get any radiation. Some of the people went through, as you know, for radiation sampling, but ours were all load survey. How close can you be when you drop it? The B-52 had been the load survey test airplane up at Boeing, so it was heavily instrumented just for that, but I don't think—I don't glow in the dark yet! [laughs]

**Kilanowski:** And how did you come to be assigned as executive officer to Major General Howell Estes for over nine years? That must have been an interesting job and a trying job.

**Deatrick:** Well, it was. I met briefly—General Estes was a SAC officer, Strategic Air Command, and he had just gotten a star and was a commander out on Eniwetok when I was there in the B-47.

When I came home from the B-52 program, I wanted to get on the B-58 program, and they said, "You've been here long enough. You're going to have to find a new job." Someone introduced me to Colonel Jack Koser, who was Director of Plans at WADC, and he was source-selected for Estes' pilot. He didn't want an aide. What he wanted was someone that could, when he wanted to take a trip, fly with him.

So I said I became the highest paid radio operator in the Air Force. I'd met him, and he said working plans, and I thought that would be interesting for me, I really hadn't

gotten to that level yet, and get to fly with him. But we were gone all the time, and about seven months after I'd started in 1957 with him, he said he was going to the Pentagon as the Assistant Chief of Staff for Air Defense, and it was just the beginning of the SAGE Air Defense System. I went down as his executive officer. I always said the only reason he didn't fire me was he liked my wife and knew she'd starve to death if he did, and so I stayed on. It was just interesting.

Then they closed that office when they formed Hanscom, and he became the Assistant DO of the Air Force under—that name doesn't come to me right now. But we did most of the traveling for the office, a trip to Europe and all around the DEW Line, and it was just a hell of an interesting job for me.

I stayed when we went out to L.A. and then came back to Andrews, deputy to General Shriever there, and then he got his four-star, and I went to MAC, and I figured if I was ever going to see war, that was it. So I volunteered to go and went over as an A-1 pilot.

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me how you came to be selected as Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Squadron at Pleiku?

**Deatrick:** I can't really tell you how I got that job. I know that General Hunter Harris wasn't too happy to have a lieutenant colonel that spent seven years as an aide to Estes. I don't think they get along too well together. But somehow how he got me into it, and I just happened to be, I think, the ranking officer when I got there.

"1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando was Pete Everest, if you remember General Pete. I went to him one time and asked him if I could get into F-100s, and he said, "Yeah, Estes will get you in, but you've never been in TAC, and they'll check you out and you'll end up in Saigon in the thing. What you want to do is volunteer for A-1s."

I didn't have the slightest idea what an A-1 was at the time. So I told Estes that that's what I wanted to do, and we got the assignment. I moved the family out to L.A., and I went to see Russ Schlee and say, "Can you get me a dash-1 on an A-1 so I know what the hell I'm going to be flying when I go to Hurlburt?"

He said, "We'll do one better than that." We jumped in the Air Commando and he flew me up to Lemoore, where they had a whole ramp full of them. And I'll never forget, I looked at the engine, it was a 3350, the same one we had on the B-29 in the early days, and I hardly took off, you didn't lose one engine every time. I thought, "My god, I volunteered for the wrong airplane." They had changed it from a carburetor to a fuel injection system, which made it very good.

I'll never forget the Navy captain that took us around. As we were leaving, he said, "Colonel, I want to tell you something. This is a 6G airplane with a 40G cockpit. Don't ever leave it." [laughs]

So I went over, and when I got there, most of the squadron was made up of Air Defense pilots who had volunteered to go on A-1s rather than being out of TAC. We had some people out of SAC. We were an oddball group. I always jokingly said I hadn't been over a 30-degree bank until I got into A-1s, which was a gross exaggeration.

But up at that particular time before the surface-to-air missile came along, the handheld one, you could fly 1,500 feet down South Vietnam, 12.7 was about the biggest gun they had down south, had a lot of carrying weight. You could stay for three or four hours and do a lot of very good close air support, so it was a very effective airplane at that time.

**Kilanowski:** What was the mission of the Air Commandos?

**Deatrick:** Close air support. We had, I think, the 3<sup>rd</sup> or the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry moved in. And we had the A-1E, which was originally a Navy radar ship. We took the radar out of it, the blue room in the back, put a stick in the right seat and gave them to the Vietnamese. And I think in November of '65, the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese blew the hell out of Ben Hoa, and they decided it was easier to train them back in the States. They took all the A-1Es and split them, and the 602<sup>nd</sup> went to Nha Trang, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Squadron, as they call it, went to Pleiku, and I got there shortly after they had moved up there. It was years later before they transitioned, and we were losing a lot of A-1s and not enough—and a lot of them went up to North Vietnam on the search-and-rescue missions.

**Kilanowski:** Did you work with the Ravens at all?

**Deatrick:** No.

**Kilanowski:** You flew 401 combat missions and you flew the C-47 for 930 hours. What was your most memorable flight during your time at Pleiku?

**Deatrick:** I guess it has to be the rescue of Dieter Dengler. I always said the most rewarding recognition I got was Dieter's book signed, "You saved my life."

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me about that mission?

**Deatrick:** It was a once-in-a-lifetime, I think, coincidence. We were assigned that morning to take off about eight o'clock and do an armed recce up on the Laotian border, North Vietnamese, which meant that anything you found that looked strange up there, you could bomb. There weren't supposed to be any friendlies. As we taxied out, something went wrong with, I forget, one of the airplanes. We came back in, got it fixed, went out again, and the other one went out. Now it's lunchtime, and I said, "Goddamn, I'm going to get a mission in today, one way or the other." So we left in the afternoon.

If it hadn't been for that, we'd never have found Dieter. It was just that one step after another. And when we got up there, the mountains were probably about 1,500 feet,

and there was a solid overcast with maybe 500 to 1,000 feet below the overcast to the thing. The area we were in was in northwest of Danang. So I put my wingman up a little higher so that he could maintain navigational contact with Danang. We'd have some idea of where we were, and it was just pure jungle.

That was probably one of the things that caused me to come back, but there was a river, I would say a quarter of a mile wide, a deep ravine. So I went up at about 100 feet and had a full load of napalm on, and as you made almost a 90-degree bend, a rock came about three-quarters of the way out into the river. The river went around it. And as I went by, this native was waving a net at me, and I didn't think much about it until I must have flown for five minutes, no villages, no nothing, and it just seemed strange.

So I went back around, didn't say anything, and I went back and over, and he's still there waving at me. So I called Andy, my wingman, and I said, "When I go over this, I'll tell you when I'm over him, and see if you can see anything that looks like a fisherman. He has a lot of white nets on the rock."

So when we went over, I told him where it was, and Andy said, "It looks like he has an SOS written with his nets."

What Dieter had done is after they had escaped from the [prison] camp that they were in, then the lad Duane Martin, who was a helicopter pilot out of MAC, one of the tribesmen cut his head off, and Dieter had gone back into the jungle and came to this thing. He had been picking up the flares, parachutes that we use at night for illumination over a target, and he had a whole bunch of these things. As he told me later, he was almost dead. They didn't think he would have lasted another two or three days. He said he couldn't even remember how to write an S, and he was just struggling to get these parachutes.

Well, I made a check with the command post, Airborne Command post, had anyone been shot down in this area. Dieter was shot down in February, and this is July. In the meantime, it's about eighty miles from where he was shot down and been captured. So they had no trace of anyone being shot down in the area. I said, "Well, I've got someone down here, and he looks like he has an SOS."

Two of my lads were going north on another mission. I had them hold at the coast and said, "Get hold of a Jolly Green Giant." They went all the way to Saigon to get permission to run this pickup, and they brought the Jolly Green, homed in on me, and I took the Jolly Green in to where this guy was, and I made some circles and watched him. Then I saw him when they started to haul him up, and I thought, "My god, if that's a VC with a bandolier, blows them out of the sky, I'm dead."

But he pulled him up, and I asked, "Who is it?"

Said, "It's a Navy lieutenant that claims he was shot down six months ago."

I never did see Dieter after that. They took the helicopter to Danang and I took all four of us in. We got a new mission assignment. The base commander there was an old friend of mine, usually came out. As we landed, I saw this Jolly Green winding down with an ambulance in front of it.

When Ed got there, I asked him, “Is this the guy they just picked up?”

He said, “What do you know?”

I said, “We just found him.”

He said, “Don’t move.” Black cars pulled up, some civilians got out, and they kept it a secret. There were seven people [prisoners] in the camp and they went out in pairs, and they didn’t want anyone to know that there were others out there. And I found out the Navy came in, stole him, flew an airplane in and stole a Jeep, went to the hospital, literally just picked him up, put him in, and flew him back out to the carrier. I found out later he’d gone to North Island [Navy North Island, San Diego, California] where he was being debriefed, and I wrote him a letter. He came to the L.A. Airport when I came home in February. We got to be good friends after that.

**Kilanowski:** My goodness. Thank heavens that things happened that day—

**Deatrick:** Anything could have. It’s just a chance in a million I even went back, because it didn’t impress me to see a native waving something. I don’t know what it was that made me go back. If we’d gotten the mission off at 8:00 in the morning, we’d never have found him, I don’t think.

**Kilanowski:** They based the movie *Rescue Dawn* on your—

**Deatrick:** *Rescue Dawn*, the director of that was a German, as you know, and we did a documentary about ten years before, which is more detail of exactly what happened, and I have that at home. The movie is a movie, and there was a bad portrayal and review of it that bothered me, because the main idea of what he wanted to show was what prisoners went through in that particular—based upon a real-life report. And he was mad, one of the reviewers was mad, because he didn’t have an A-1 spot him. Everything up until the time that he was spotted, that was what the focus of the movie was, and it was a movie. It was not a documentary, and the fact that he didn’t have a Jolly Green Giant come pick him up, they had Hueys, hell, it was forty years later and you couldn’t find a Jolly Green or an A-1. [laughs] But I think he did a very good job. Have you seen the movie?

**Kilanowski:** No, but I intend to.

**Deatrick:** Well, I think you’ll find that—and I said to someone, of 100 people that’ll go see that movie, 99 of them won’t even know who in the hell Dieter Dengler was. All the little technicalities of wrong airplane, I said no one will ever know that. It’s to portray what happened to those guys while they were in the prison camp. I think he did a good

job of it. The documentary did far better of explaining Dieter's life from childhood. But I think he did a good job of it.

**Kilanowski:** Well, it must feel good to have changed somebody's life.

**Deatrick:** As I said—

**Kilanowski:** Is there anything else you'd like to say about your feelings about that mission or—

**Deatrick:** No, I'm just grateful that it occurred and I was happy someone found him. He was a true survivalist. The Navy said he's the only man that gained weight in survival school. He escaped from the prisoner-of-war camp several times while he was there.

When I met him, he built a house out in Mill Valley, the other side from San Francisco. He had stuff stored and he had a tunnel built under the next man's house, so in case he had to get out, he could go out. He was a true survivalist.

**Kilanowski:** My goodness.

**Deatrick:** Told a very touching story. I told him to call my wife [Zane], who lived in L.A., if he was ever up there. TWA flew his mother and his brother over to the States, and Dieter called Zane, asked her to come down, and they waited in the VIP lounge. I don't think his mother probably had ever been more than twenty miles, if that, from her hometown in Germany, and Zane just happened to overhear the conversation. In German he asked her, "Is there anything you need right now?"

She said, "Well, I'm hungry."

He said, "Didn't you eat on the airplane?"

She said, "No, I didn't have any money."

[Dieter] Took her down to North Island. The next morning, Dieter went up to pick her up, and she's out scrubbing windows in the BLQ. And he asked, "What in the lord's name are you doing?"

She said, "Well, they've been so nice to me, I have to repay them somehow."

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me how you were honored with the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal and the Bronze Star for Valor?

**Deatrick:** Oh, a couple of little missions, someone put me in. I was never impressed with medals too much. But I was looking through notes before I came, and I can't even tell you what—I remember one of my last missions was someone wrote me up for the DFC.

I got the Bronze Star with the V for Valor. We got mortared one night. We had just finished putting the dividers up for the aircraft, and we didn't have them in singles yet. They were dual. After the attack started, it only lasted about ten or fifteen minutes, the whole base, they just walked mortars right down from one end of the base down past our containment. I went out and moved some airplanes while they were on fire and got them out of there. They were loaded. Someone put me in for a Bronze Star with Valor. I wasn't thinking. I shouldn't have done it. [laughs] We saved a couple good airplanes. They hit every one of the airplanes.

**Kilanowski:** I would say that's valor that you're moving burning airplanes with live ammunition on them.

**Deatrick:** Well, I thank you, dear.

**Kilanowski:** How did you come to be selected as Commandant of the ARPS program, the USAF Aerospace Research Pilot School [now designated the USAF Test Pilot School]?

**Deatrick:** I have no idea how. I wrote General Estes in January and said, "I'm coming home in February, and if there's anything you can do, I'd like to get on the A-7 program," that was just coming about.

Secretary of the Air Force, a good friend of mine, a good friend was down in Bangkok with AFSC at the time, and I went down just to relax. I was pretty well just about ready to leave. Secretary came through, and General Ferguson, who was the Commander, Systems Command, he spent the afternoon out at Joe and Lily's, and Lily had gotten a big tray of diamonds and what you would buy as bracelets and everything going down to [unclear]. We had a long chat.

Late that evening, we were out to dinner, and I was sitting next to the general, General Ferguson, and he said, "Where are you going when you get back?"

I said I'd written General Estes. "I haven't heard from him. I have no idea yet."

He said, "How would you like to be Commandant of the Test Pilot School?"

When I got my ears wrung out and my head back on top, why, I said, "I'd love it." So I'm sure that somewhere along the way, before General Ferguson even came, I had been selected.

**Kilanowski:** Was the school assignment a good assignment? Was it a highlight of your career?

**Deatrick:** Oh, it was one of the highlights. I guess two of the highlights of my career was, one, to be the commander in Vietnam, and then to be the commander of the school there. Some of the finest people I've ever met went through the school, and the staff I

had were outstanding. The generals that were promoted, General Herres, Abrahamson, Mike Loh, were all majors then and ended up four-star generals, and many others. Chief of Staff of the Air Force was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando, bailed out when one of his bombs exploded, and we got him back. So it was having that group of people, being surrounded by them was two of the highlights of my career, yes. That was an honor for me.

**Kilanowski:** I've noticed that at least in the early seventies, a lot of the former forward air controller pilots were selected for Test Pilot School. Was that a purposeful selection, or did these pilots have special qualities that would make a good test pilot?

**Deatrick:** You're ahead of me, because I was never aware of that.

I'll tell you a quick story. General Mike Loh was the first commander of ACC when it changed from TAC, and he'd been a student at the school. So I asked Mike if he would come up and be a guest speaker. I was then President of the National Aviation Club in Washington.

So Mike came up, and at the dinner we probably had a couple hundred people. And just before I was to introduce him, they handed me a piece of paper and said, "The exec faxed this up and this is what General Loh would like you to read to introduce him."

So I took the latitude of being out of the Air Force almost several years and I said, "Most of you know what General Loh's background is, so I won't delve into that, but many people have asked how do you get into the Test Pilot School." And I said it was a very simple process that for each class of sixteen there were about two hundred applicants, and they sent them out to Edwards. This is a little off the true path of it. But they sent it out, and I would send them down to test ops, and they would downsize it to fifty, and I brought them home and put them all out on the floor. My son and I picked out sixteen of the best-looking wives and asked their husbands to step forward. [laughs]

But, no, having the school was a great experience for me, and I've enjoyed the association with the fellows that have gone through the school, even while I was there. Those two assignments were my best, I guess, along with the tour with General Estes. Bless his heart, he just died recently, and next week I go to his funeral in Arlington.

**Kilanowski:** Oh, I'm sorry. That's too bad. He sounds like such a great man.

**Deatrick:** He was a hell of a man.

**Kilanowski:** While you were Commandant, the Manned Orbiting Laboratory program was initiated.

**Deatrick:** Yes.

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me about that?

**Deatrick:** I didn't get into that very much. They were already training separately out of the school. They graduated, Abramson, the whole gang, Bob Lawrence, who was killed. So the MOL program was going downhill when I just arrived. I didn't spend much time on that, so I really don't know much about that, Dana.

**Kilanowski:** What were your impressions of Iven Kincheloe? Did you know him well?

**Deatrick:** When I came to Edwards, I landed in L.A. on Friday afternoon. I called General Pete Everest, Major Everest then. I said, "How in the hell do I get to Edwards?"

He said, "Stay there. When they page you, we'll have an airplane to pick you up."

So pretty soon, a couple hours later, they paged me. I went down. A C-45 was parked out. Captain Kincheloe had come to pick me up. [laughs] And we went to the club that night. That was my first meeting with Iven. I never knew Iven too well. As I said, I was a student at the school, and Iven—I don't know what the hell he was doing. I didn't think—the CF-104 had started about then. I got to know Iven a little bit better later on, but I think everyone had a very high regard for his capability. Unfortunately, we still had downward seat ejections in the 104 when he was flying it back to Edwards.

**Kilanowski:** Can you tell me about the accident and then about that day, how you heard about it?

**Deatrick:** I don't know. If I remember correctly, he went to pick the 104 up and fly it from Palmdale, deliver there over to Edwards, and he was just scooting across the desert, and I think the engine quit, if I remember, for some reason. And all they had was downward seat ejection, and there was no escaping that.

**Kilanowski:** That was quite a loss to the flight test community, wasn't it?

**Deatrick:** Yes. During that period, we were losing quite a few people. Even in '58 when I went to the Pentagon for the first time, I'll never forget we went to Arlington for Colonel Danny Grubaugh's funeral. [Lt Colonel Boyd L. "Danny" Grubaugh] He was killed in a midair collision with a B-57. [on June 16, 1958, when his Martin JB-57E flying out of Edwards AFB, collided with a North American F-100F, flying out of George AFB, over the Tehachapi Mountains.] My wife, we were waiting outside the chapel. Iven came over and said could he ride with us. And my wife made the comment, "I'm never going to come to one of these again, because you all stand around looking at each other like who in the hell's going to be next." And there were quite a few. Two weeks to the day, I think it was, about that, we were there for Iven's funeral. We lost quite a few then.

**Kilanowski:** Yes, the losses were really, really, really high.

How were you selected as an honorary member of the Fighter Aces Association in 1968?

**Deatrick:** One of the Fighter Aces had known me before, and when Dieter and I came home, there were several nice awards in the L.A. area. Every year they make someone an honorary Ace, and Dieter and I were selected for that. And that was a group that I had known, Jim Brooks and “Tex” Hill, who had been the commander under Claire Chennault. So through that group was a whole new association with the Fighter Aces. I always told Jim I was ashamed they gave us a pin, and it wasn’t much bigger than our SETP pin, but it had a gold “H.” It had a gold “H” written on it for “Honorary.”

**Deatrick:** I was ashamed to wear the thing because if you wore it, no one could see the “H” on it. I didn’t want anyone coming up and asking me how many airplanes I had shot down. But that’s how we got to be honorary Aces.

**Kilanowski:** Well, that was really nice. Then you were next selected as Director of Tests, Air Force Systems Command at Andrews. Can you tell me about that assignment and your most significant experiences?

**Deatrick:** When I finished the National War College, which I had gone into, I went to JCS, and I said I saw the light at the end of the tunnel and asked to go to Andrews, because we’d already bought a house and I’d gone to high school there, and I liked Washington. So I just asked if I could get an assignment out at Andrews and retire out there when I finished my thirty years, and found out I got the job as Director of Tests.

I guess my biggest accomplishment was a plebe in my company at West Point was now my boss, Brigadier General Abbott Greenleaf. And Abbott had a thing that no one should have more than one currency on an airplane. I had long talks with him that on the B-70, if that’s all you flew, you’re not going to get a hell of a lot of flying time. It’s a test aircraft. And if you want a chase airplane, you want someone that’s current in the B-70, that knows what the B-70 is like, but you’ve got to be current in the B-58 to follow chase on it. And those are two very expensive airplanes if you just want to get flying time, so you need a minimum of three airplanes as a currency. I finally convinced him of that.

The rest of it was general staff work and the end of my tour of duty at Andrews, and have been in Washington ever since.

**Kilanowski:** I wanted to ask you, you’ve flown over fifty different types of airplanes and over 12,000 hours, and I was going to ask you which was your least favorite plane to fly and why.

**Deatrick:** There wasn’t any least. I enjoyed every moment in every one of them. Perhaps the biggest thrill was finally checking out in the B-47. I always said the two most exciting flights were when I took off. Being essentially a bomber pilot, when I was forced to check out in the P-51, I never felt so much power in all my life, so I had an enjoyable time flying that for a while.

And then when I had the school, I checked out in the F-104, and my first flight in that, I was going through 5,000 feet, my brain was still back on the runway. [laughs] Those were two of the most memorable takeoffs that I can ever remember. But I enjoyed every one.

**Kilanowski:** When you talk about flying, you always have a big smile on your face. You must have really loved it.

**Deatrick:** I did. I think most people that aspire to be pilots enjoy every moment of it.

**Kilanowski:** And can you tell me your worst flight? Was there ever a time that you thought you were going to crash?

**Deatrick:** There was a time I did crash. [laughs] I've sank a PBY and ran a B-17 off the end of the runway at Adak. And we crashed a B-50 coming home. I was the IP, and my squadron commander and I didn't take the airplane fast enough, and we tried to make a three-engine landing and go around. We crashed. So those are the worst ones. Fortunately, I lived through all of them. Scotty Crossfield always said he liked to introduce me as the most effective Air Force pilot he'd ever met. I had two accidents in one week, and he said they did that so they'd only have to have one Accident Board and save them a lot of money.

**Kilanowski:** And it didn't hurt your career?

**Deatrick:** Oh, I don't think so. The general up there was the class, I think, of '39, and he called me in when I finally got recurrent in everything. I'll never forget, as we walked out, he put his arm around me and he said, "Gene, don't ever forget, unless you crack up an airplane now and then, no one will ever know who in the hell you are." [laughs] I didn't like the reputation at the time, but I think that was in 1948, mostly, and things were a hell of a lot looser than they are today. I'd probably been thrown out.

I know as a result of that, when I went to Warner Robins, they'd come out with a regulation that if you have three major accidents within five years, you had to meet a Flying Evaluation Board. And I've had three within five years, and when I went to Warner Robins, one was called downwind and wet. I was coming home from Shima, got to Adak, and I heard a Gooney Bird land. And I thought, "Hell, if he can get in, I can." It was a beautiful landing right on the end of the runway, but I went down that thing with a 5-knot tailwind in the rain. We went off the end and went to the ditch that the engineers were building.

So when I went to Warner Robins, I used to get them so mad because they would never change the runway because it was downwind. It was a 12,000-foot runway, and why change the pattern? But I'd always make them change the pattern because I said, "If I'm going to have one more accident, it isn't going to be downwind." [laughs] So I wasn't too popular down there when they'd do that. But I don't think it hurt my career.

Bernt Balchen, I was one of the first ones to check out in the PGY when he decided we'd save people out in the Bering Sea, and I grant I was highly—shot 100 landings in a light airplane up at Anchorage, went and picked up a PBY, brought it out and—We caught a wingtip on takeoff and I never realized a takeoff in choppy water in a PBY gets full-stall takeoff and every wave you hit, you gain another knot, and pretty soon it'll break. And just as we did, the right wing went down, caught a wingtip, and we turned around and pulled the power off, and I heard “glug, glug, glug.” It split the hull and it sank. No injuries out of it, fortunately.

**Kilanowski:** How long did it take you to be picked up?

**Deatrick:** Oh, they were right there with a boat and picked us up. I'll tell you, you don't want to go down in the Arctic water. [laughs] Took an hour, I think, before I could stop shaking.

**Kilanowski:** Gives me the shivers just thinking about it.

**Deatrick:** Yeah. As I said, that was interesting flying up there, and I probably didn't have more than 800 hours at the time, so every flight was a new lesson. I'll never forget in the B-17 when I was taking my recurrency, just to see if I could do it, we took off and with just 15 inches of manifold pressure, we were going up 500 feet a minute, and when we came back around to land with about 40 inches on, the airplane, with flaps up and the gear down, was going down about 500 feet a minute, and it's one of the strangest takeoffs and landings I'd ever made. Even the IP who was giving me my recheck had never seen anything like it. Winds up there were just on and off.

**Kilanowski:** So, really hazardous flying conditions.

**Deatrick:** It was, yes.

**Kilanowski:** What drove your decision to become a member of SETP?

**Deatrick:** This was 1956, and I was just finishing up out in Eniwetok. Van Shepard was, I think, the president of SETP at that time. I ran into Van out here. He said, “You should join the Test Pilots Society.” I'd never heard of it, and it had just been formed. I was in the throes of leaving flight test and going to work for Estes, so it took me another year to join. Otherwise, I'd been almost a founding member. But Van asked me about joining.

I think the first banquet I went to was in the Beverly Hilton, and you know it's sort of a well, and I brought General Estes out and several people. But I think that whole group of us were about 300 all down in the bottom of the well, and that was the beginning and it grew from that.

**Kilanowski:** So you've seen a lot of changes in SETP over the years. What do you think have been the most positive changes to the organization?

**Deatrick:** Oh, I think just flight testing itself has changed a lot. It's hard now for me to go to the technical sessions and keep up with what they're doing. I think most of the test pilots are bright youngsters come up in the computer age, and they're well ahead of us as to what we were doing. In '51, we still had the same old group of fighter jocks and bomber pilots that their whole careers had been based mainly upon their combat record rather than upon their engineering background.

I remember when I became Commandant, someone asked me about getting into the school. The person had about 800 hours. I said, "Right now I'm turning people away with a master's degree that had over 1,000 hours, and most of it combat time in Vietnam." And you just can't do that. So I think experience, and youngsters are brighter. Everything else is technically more advanced than what we were. Slide rule's gone, and they're building with CAD computers now.

**Kilanowski:** What is your hope for SETP for the future? Where would you like to see this organization go?

**Deatrick:** Oh, I think it's doing very well as it is. I think it will grow. One time I tried very hard back in Washington, when I retired, I was invited one evening, and the general manager of the new Hilton Hotel was at dinner with us, and I asked him, "Would you like to have the SETP here in the Hilton?"

He said, "Well, I would, except we're booked for two years," and this was just steel framing going up.

I wrote Fox Stephens, who was president that year, what my idea was is to have it one year in L.A. and one year in Washington so that people have some opportunity of travel. Fox told me we lost by one vote on the board, so it's always been out here [Los Angeles area].

I can't say. I don't know what the future is. I think that everything they're doing right now is—I've met several of the Commandants. Even the last one today has done a real fine job of building the school and keeping up with what they need to.

**Kilanowski:** How did you come to be selected for the National Aeronautic Association's Cliff Henderson Award for Aviation Achievement in 1999?

**Deatrick:** I don't know. It was an honor when I was president of the club. Marian Henderson, who was an actress [Marian Marsh] and married to Cliff Henderson, I always had her come to our awards when we started making them. Sometime after, I spent three years, I think, as president of the Aviation Club, and afterwards, someone put me in for it.

**Kilanowski:** That must have been a nice honor. What is the highest honor that the National Aviation Club bestows each year?

**Deatrick:** What is the highest honor? We don't put it on. We merged the National Aviation Club with the National Aeronautic Association. The NAA selects the Wright Brothers Memorial Trophy winner, and the National Aviation Club always sponsored the dinner. So the NAA picked the winner. We put on the affair. And I would say that's probably the highest award, the Wright Dinner Award.

**Kilanowski:** You were selected as an Eagle for the 2000 Gathering of Eagles.

**Deatrick:** 2000. That's when I think General Holloway had put me in. I think I mentioned before, I had them invite Dieter and myself both down, and they wanted me—I hope I said—to talk about rescuing Dieter. I've always felt the rescue was not the greatest thing; it's what he did and went through and his life. So we went down and did a Mutt-and-Jeff act of my preparing how we rescued him, and then Dieter would carry on with what they did in the camp.

**Kilanowski:** So that was a really nice honor. And you were selected as a Distinguished Alumni of the Test Pilot School in 2001.

**Deatrick:** I forgot that story when the young—I can't think of his name right now—was president of the class and invited me out as the guest speaker, and it was an honor to come back and—

**Kilanowski:** George Ka'iliwai, Colonel George Ka'iliwai III.

**Deatrick:** Yes. And as I said, I really didn't dwell on what advancement was made in testing. I went back and told of the night of meeting Colonel Boyd and meeting Pancho, kept it as clean as I possibly could, what life was like back here in those days, and I think they enjoyed it.

**Kilanowski:** Oh, I'm sure they did. And then you received the National Aeronautic Association's Wesley L. McDonald Elder Statesman of Aviation Award in 2005?

**Deatrick:** Admiral McDonald was a War College classmate of mine, and we've named that award—it was called the Elder Statesman Award—in his honor. He's not in very good health right now, and Wes and I had been very close friends. I was privileged. I told him, "I am neither elder nor am I a diplomat." [laughs] But I was selected by the club itself, the board of directors, and I was very proud to be one of the first to be Wes' selectees in his name.

**Kilanowski:** Oh, that's really wonderful. I wanted to ask you what your biggest disappointment in the field of flight testing was.

**Deatrick:** Having to leave it. There weren't any disappointments. I wouldn't change my career for one iota. I hated to give it up, and I did some flying afterward. Scotty Crossfield and I were very close friends. He bought a Cessna 210 he was killed in, this year.

Scotty and I were flying along into a heavy headwind along about Dayton one day, and I said, "Crossfield, this is the most ridiculous flight I've ever been on."

"What are you getting at?"

I said, "The first man to go Mach 2 in an old jet bomber pilot, and the damn cars are passing us down there." [laughs]

But whatever you flew, I've enjoyed it.

**Kilanowski:** That's wonderful.

You've mentioned Scott Crossfield several times. What happened with his crash? That just hit everybody so hard. He was so beloved.

**Deatrick:** We're in the middle of an investigation [air crash investigation] right now. My feeling is—and I flew a lot with Scotty. And one of the things I'd like to say, Scotty was an icon when I first heard of him out here at Edwards, and so I didn't really know Scotty until we were both back in Washington, D.C., and we got involved together in the National Aviation Club.

Scotty bought the Cessna 210 from an old test pilot back then. The plane was in pretty poor shape. What I didn't realize is I don't think Scotty—I'd have to go look at the record, but my guess is, did not have very much instrument time. He had a Bonanza out here. We were on the X-15 program, and he'd just fly it back and forth to Edwards and L.A. So when he bought it, he bought some good instruments for it, and he, knowing he wasn't a very good instrument pilot, went up to the University of North Dakota for a month, went through their instrument school, got his ticket, and when he came home, he asked me if I would go fly with him until he felt comfortable flying on instruments, and I flew quite a good deal with Scotty.

He was meticulous, and anyone says that he was just a flyboy that went out and pressed the envelope without much regard really didn't know Scotty. Every flight we made, if we stopped for fuel when we refueled and everything, Scotty went through the whole thing of checking the airplane, make sure the caps are all on, tire pressure, everything. He was meticulous. And normally Scotty—we'd get the weather, wherever we were, on his computer, laptop, and then check it again before we took off.

The details of what happened there I'm not thoroughly clear with, but there is an investigation going on. The NTSB was supposed to give a final reckoning last Wednesday, and they've delayed it, which I'm glad. And I've got a feeling there was a screw-up with the air traffic controllers not warning him of this rather rapid buildup of a

hell of storm that wasn't there when he started a couple hours before getting the weather. So we'll have to see what happens with the thing.

But Scotty was no wild—General Doolittle's granddaughter [Jonna Doolittle Hoppes] has just written a book about the general. The title of it is *Calculated Risk*. And I think General Jim and Scotty were of the same background, good aeronautical background, analysis. Anything Scotty did was calculated as to what the risk was. If it was too great, they wouldn't do it. But Scotty was not only a very close friend, I had a great admiration for him and I personally will vouch for the fact that I've never known Scotty to make a wild decision, at least in my presence and all the flying I did with him. And I hate when someone accused him of doing such, and I want to clear his name.

**Kilanowski:** What do you think your greatest accomplishment or contribution to flight testing was?

**Deatrick:** Staying alive and getting into too much trouble. [laughs] Oh, I don't know, Dana. As I say, I never felt I did anything outstanding in flight test. I enjoyed the career and did a lot of the tests, none of which were, in my judgment, any great adventures doing something outstanding in any way. It was just long test missions, and I enjoyed every moment of it. And I hope my tour as the Commandant, the students and the instructors were happy with my administration, if there was one.

**Kilanowski:** Well, they must have been. They named you a Distinguished Alumnus.

**Deatrick:** Well, I'm not so distinguished. I remember when I was very proud of the fact that I'd flown over fifty different airplanes, until I got down to Maxwell [AFB] when Dieter and I were there at the Gathering of Eagles, and they had our bios. And I read "Fitz" Fulton's, and I apologized to the whole audience that day, that the man with 400 airplanes-plus makes me pale, and I stopped reciting that one as an accomplishment. [laughs]

**Kilanowski:** What are you most proud of in your life, Gene?

**Deatrick:** I guess my whole career the fact that my wife and son backed me all the way through it, that I had very good assignments. I always said the thing I enjoyed most about the Air Force was the fact that they were like haircuts. You're going to get a bad one every once in a while, but it'll always grow out. I had very few bad ones, and I enjoyed every moment of it and tried to do my best. I'm sure I failed many times, but I outlived the law of averages and still in very good health, and I seem to have kept all the friends, some I've worked with, for, and under.

**Kilanowski:** And what are your thoughts and hopes for the future of flight testing and aviation?

**Deatrick:** Oh, I think it'll progress. I think eventually we're going out into space. Somewhere along the way, we'll be on the Moon or Mars. There's too much out there,

and I'm firmly convinced we're not the only thing around. Somewhere out in that vastness there must be something like humans somewhere. Push across the mountains.

A friend of mine one time said, "Did you ever think of what would have happened if the Pilgrims had landed in San Diego instead of in Plymouth Rock and they looked at the mountains and said, 'What's on the other side?' And they started across it and got into the height and the twistiness and said, 'The hell with it. It can't be any better than where we were,' and we'd never have known the rest of the United States existed."

No, I think there's a future and I think we'll eventually get out there, if we don't blow ourselves up before that happens. The world's in a heck of a mess right now, and when you think of all the bright, wonderful things that could be happening instead of fighting each other. I told my son [Will Deatruck] the other night, I've reached the stage of fully believing that if the last two of us are left on God's Earth, one of us will figure out a reason to kill the other one. [laughs] I think it's in the genes somewhere.

So I don't know, but I think flight testing, there will always be testing. Engineers are never that perfect, and they need someone to test it. UVs, UAVs are coming along, and they may find the future even in civil transportation. There's a hell of a future. I think of where I've been just eighty-three years, first crystal radio I listened to, moved to the District of Columbia when we had four channels of black-and-white TV. Now you're on a computer and I talk to my son on a video conferencing on the computer every night. He's in San Diego. So everything's possible.

**Kilanowski:** Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

**Deatruck:** No. I appreciate your even considering me for this, and it's been a great life and I've enjoyed every moment of it.

**Kilanowski:** Well, thank you, Gene. Oh, Dennis [Archuleta] has two questions for you.

**Archuleta:** I was just going to ask you, do you have someone that was a mentor to you, and were you a mentor for someone else?

**Deatruck:** In what regard? You mean in flight testing or—

**Archuleta:** Yes.

**Deatruck:** No. Buck Buchanan preceded me as the Commandant of the Test Pilot School. I told General Ferguson, "I hope to hell you don't want me to be a teacher up there like Buck." He had a Ph.D. in aerodynamics. I said, "I add two and two and get five like Yeager." [laughs]

No, I don't think I was a mentor to anyone. I hope I inspired a bunch of youngsters that became generals afterward. But it's a great faculty up there that gather. I remember General Ferguson, we were rating units on a bell curve. Five percent had to be

outstanding, 5 percent had to be below, the rest were somewhere in between. I said I've got twenty-eight instructors that are supposed to be the best in the Air Force, and I can't mark some of them down. We won that battle anyway.

[End of interview]