

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

DAVID BLACKHURST

MAY 19, 1999

RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA

INTERVIEWED BY STEVEN BUCKLIN

ORAL HISTORY #1999-5  
ACCESSION #MIMI 016

MINUTEMAN MISSILE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



## ABSTRACT

David Blackhurst was born in West Virginia and grew up in central South Dakota. Mr. Blackhurst began his Air Force career as a pilot where he flew missions over North Vietnam. In the early 70s Mr. Blackhurst came to Ellsworth Air Force Base to fly B-52 bombers. In 1974 he joined missile operations as a Missile Crew Commander. In 1979 Mr. Blackhurst went to topside operations as a facility manager. His main duty station as both a missileer and facility manger was at Launch Control Facility India-01. Mr. Blackhurst is one of only a few missile field personnel to ever work in both topside and underground operations in 44<sup>th</sup> Strategic Missile Wing.

## EDITORIAL NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for Minuteman Missile National Historic Site. The interviewer, or in some cases another qualified staff-member, reviewed the draft and compared it to the tape recordings. The corrections and other changes suggested by the interviewer have been incorporated into this final transcript. Stylistic matters, such as punctuation and capitalization, follow the Chicago Manual of Style, 14<sup>th</sup> edition. The transcript includes bracketed notices at the end of one tape and the beginning of the next so that, if desired, the reader can find a section of tape more easily by using this transcript.

## RESTRICTION

Researchers may read, quote from, cite, and photocopy this transcript without permission for purposes of research only. Publication is prohibited, however, without permission from the Superintendent, Minuteman Missile National Historic Site.

INFORMANT: DAVID BLACKHURST  
INTERVIEWER: STEVEN BUCKLIN  
DATE: 19 MAY 1999

[Beginning of side one, tape one.] [Interview begins.]

STEVEN BUCKLIN: Dave, tell me where you're from?

DAVID BLACKHURST: I was born in West Virginia and grew up in South Carolina.

BUCKLIN: When did you come to South Dakota?

BLACKHURST: 1973, January.

BUCKLIN: And have you been here ever since?

BLACKHURST: Ever since.

BUCKLIN: Ever since. Are you married?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: Children?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: When you came to South Dakota were you a member of the Air Force?

BLACKHURST: Yes I was.

BUCKLIN: So you were assigned to Ellsworth Air Force

BLACKHURST: Yes, I came here from Germany.

BUCKLIN: From Germany? I notice that you were trained in electronic warfare.

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: Can you tell us a little about that?

BLACKHURST: I left Mather [AFB, California] where I was trained, and flew for a year over in Thailand. Flying up over North Vietnam and from there I went back to Shaw as an instructor for ...

BUCKLIN: Shaw Air Force Base?

BLACKHURST: Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina. I was there for about six months and then transferred to Germany. Came back to Ellsworth after that, after a three and a half year tour in Germany.

BUCKLIN: Your first assignment at Ellsworth was with aircraft rather than missiles?

BLACKHURST: Yes, I came here to fly B-52s. As an electronic warfare officer.

BUCKLIN: Then you joined the missile outfit in 1974. Is that right?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: In what capacity?

BLACKHURST: I came on board as a missile crew commander.

BUCKLIN: Can you tell us what those duties were or what that entailed to be a missile crew commander?

BLACKHURST: There were two members on the crew, a commander and the deputy. The commander's job basically was to direct within a flight of ten missiles at one of the launch control centers. We were down in the capsule for, at that time we were down there on about twelve-hour shifts. We went out for, I think it was about a day and a half, two days, It must have been about three days. It was a three-day tour and we came home. During that time we would basically sit on alert waiting for something to happen.

BUCKLIN: Then later on it became twenty-four hour shifts? Is that correct?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: Did you experience the twenty-four hour shifts?

BLACKHURST: Yes. I was in both.

BUCKLIN: Then you changed responsibilities once again in 1979 and became facility manager?

BLACKHURST: Yes. I got passed over for major and had the option of either getting out of the Air Force or staying in. I chose to enlist. One day I was a captain, the next day I was a buck sergeant.

BUCKLIN: That was certainly a change of perspective, I am sure? [Laughs]

BLACKHURST: In fact, what I did was I went in and I requested to go back to same the missile site where I had been a commander.

BUCKLIN: And that missile site was?

BLACKHURST: India.

BUCKLIN: India One?

BLACKHURST: India One.

BUCKLIN: That had to really give you a well-rounded perspective of what it meant to be in a missile...

BLACKHURST: I think so. I saw both sides of the fence, I guess you would say.

BUCKLIN: I want to stick to your role as a capsule crew member first, then we'll come back and talk about your role as the FM. As a capsule crew member, you were commander, is that right?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: So, your mission was what?

BLACKHURST: Basically our mission was to sit on alert, wait for any eventuality that should we receive a message to launch our ten missiles and eventually if any of the other capsules were down, to launch fifty of the missiles.

BUCKLIN: So in event that you were ordered to launch, what would you do?

BLACKHURST: In each capsule there was a locked box that contained what we called the cookies that was basically the authentication codes. Each time we went through a training exercise in the training site on the base, we had to break these cookies open. We would get a message over the, I guess you'd say, the secure line that would come in and we'd get this "deedle deedle deedle" message and of course you had to authenticate it. Once you wrote down the codes, you'd break the cookies open, the commander and the deputy both had to agree that it was an authentic message. At that point we would insert the keys and go through a launch sequence and at the end was a three-two-one, on my mark, turn.

BUCKLIN: How long would this whole process take?

BLACKHURST: Probably from the beginning, when we got the message until we turned the keys, like in the practices when we were doing the training capsule, it would be three to five minutes at the most.

BUCKLIN: That is not a long time?

BLACKHURST: No.

BUCKLIN: Where were the keys kept?

BLACKHURST: The keys were kept in that lock box. There were two locks on the box. Both of us had a lock that we unlocked. It was a combination lock, both of us had to unlock our lock, take them off and open it up and then there are two packets inside. One with the deputy's key and one with the commander's key. Both were in the box right there.

BUCKLIN: Would your deputy be the same person over a long period of time?

BLACKHURST: Pretty much. I had probably five deputies during the time I was a commander.

BUCKLIN: And that is a five year period?

BLACKHURST: No, it was probably, let's see, '74 to about '85. Maybe a year-and-a-half, or so, they'd stay. But eventually what I would do, my deputies would end up becoming commanders and so in the process of being a commander I was preparing this young deputy to become a commander eventually.

BUCKLIN: So you've been a teacher for a long time?

BLACKHURST: You bet.

BUCKLIN: Were you armed?

BLACKHURST: Yes. We had 38 pistols.

BUCKLIN: Under what circumstance were to use those pistols?

BLACKHURST: In case somebody came in to the capsule or if my deputy freaked out, I was supposed to use it on him.

BUCKLIN: To what effect? Shoot to kill?

BLACKHURST: Right, shoot to kill. Basically shoot to kill. In the Air Force we didn't attempt to wound somebody, it was shoot them to kill them. It was use of deadly force, I believe is the proper term.

BUCKLIN: Any accidents with the weapons?

BLACKHURST: No. None at all.

BUCKLIN: How seriously did you and your colleagues take your job?

BLACKHURST: Over the time period, it was kind of like we would go into the capsule and at first we were in there and everything was pretty good and you took it real serious. After awhile we had a saying that it was kind of like hours and hours of sheer boredom punctuated by seconds of panic. But basically it was a serious job. We sat there and we waited for the...

BUCKLIN: Balloon to go up?

BLACKHURST: the President or somebody to decide that something was going to happen. And then we were supposed to be there.

BUCKLIN: How did you relieve the boredom?

BLACKHURST: I did leather work.

BUCKLIN: Really?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, I did a lot of leatherwork. We had a TV in the capsule. We watched TV. It was a couple of years before we got the TVs. But I did a lot of leatherwork down there.

BUCKLIN: What did other people do?

BLACKHURST: Oh, read, earned masters degrees, worked on their masters degrees. A lot of reading.

BUCKLIN: Tell us about the motto of the 44th, that's "Aggressor Beware"?

BLACKHURST: [Laughs] Yeah. Basically, I guess you could say the idea behind it was: We were there to guard the United States. It was a job that, I think, we did take seriously. So if somebody did attempt to do something to the United States we were there to defend it.

BUCKLIN: Do you think it reflected official American policy regarding the use of nuclear weapons?

BLACKHURST: I think it did at the time.

BUCKLIN: And that policy was?

BLACKHURST: We were there to guard, basically protect ourselves.

BUCKLIN: Were you aware that the United States had foresworn first use of nuclear weapons?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: Do you think you really contributed to national security?

BLACKHURST: I think I did. Overall, having flown B-52s and then in the missile field, yeah, I think we did. I think it was a good deterrent.

BUCKLIN: How did it compare being a missileer to being on a plane? Did you get a feeling of different status within the Air Force?

BLACKHURST: I think so.

BUCKLIN: Was it better as a missileer or better on a B-52?

BLACKHURST: Well, to be honest, being on the B-52, being on the flight crew, not being a pilot, I was almost a second class citizen, at that point. In the missile wing you were commander and you were the top of the line there. So that was, I guess, a little bit of an ego builder.

BUCKLIN: I have had a couple of people say they thought that it was more difficult to advance and get promotions in the missile business.

BLACKHURST: Definitely, I would definitely say so.

BUCKLIN: Okay. Did you think the threat of Soviet attack was real?

BLACKHURST: That varied, from time to time. I know at one point on alert we got a word, to basically, the keys were inserted and we were waiting to turn keys.

BUCKLIN: Do you recall when that was?

BLACKHURST: I don't remember the date, but I remember it happening. The way it all turned out, we got message down from Cheyenne Mountain that they had detected something coming over the northern horizon. As it turned out, from what we later understood it was probably the moon.

BUCKLIN: Really. [Laughter]

BLACKHURST: Somehow they had detected something. It got to be a real laughing matter afterwards but during the time it was very intense.

BUCKLIN: What did you think about during that time?

BLACKHURST: Just it was my job, what was I going to do, was I really going to turn that key? Did I have the, I guess you'd say, the guts to recite three-two-one, on my mark, turn it? But when it came down to it, I knew I could. Because that was my job.

BUCKLIN: Were there compunctions about the fact that this system you worked in would likely destroy life as we know it if you used it?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, and I think that is what made you stop and think. Was this really where it was? Is this really what we've got to do? But when it came down to it, I honestly believe I had no problems. In fact, when we went through training, the first time we went through, they took us into the capsule, out at Vandenberg...

BUCKLIN: That's Vandenberg Air Force Base in California?

BLACKHURST: Yeah. You went in the capsule the first time and within, probably within the first day we were out there, they took us in, told us what we were going to do, and asked us straight point blank if it came down to a point that you had to turn keys, would you turn them? I said yes, right away. I flew over Vietnam so I didn't have any problem there.

BUCKLIN: This part is the PRP or the HRP?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: So we are talking about psychological screening?

BLACKHURST: Yes. Right. Really it was a psychological screening. We had one or two guys who got down to the point of they gave us the command, we were in the training capsule, we knew it was really a training capsule. But they had built it to a point that you really thought you were really going to do something. They gave us the message, you put the keys in, broke the cookies, read it off, said right, OK, it's the time, on my mark, three, two, one, now. There were a couple guys who froze and wouldn't turn the key at that point.

BUCKLIN: Did you know anyone once they were assigned to the capsule crew who at some point said, "I can no longer do this"?

BLACKHURST: I don't remember, recall of anybody, especially not anybody at Ellsworth. We were all pretty a tight group and knew each other and we'd go out and we knew what we had to do.

BUCKLIN: I'm curious. From the moment you turned those keys then, how long would it take for a bird to be in flight?

BLACKHURST: They varied, as far as when the missiles would launch themselves, but there could be any time from almost immediately up to a thirty minute delay, I believe it was.

BUCKLIN: And how long does it take the missile to exit the silo?

BLACKHURST: Uh . . .

BUCKLIN: Once it ignites. Matter of seconds?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, matter of seconds. Probably five seconds or so.

BUCKLIN: Okay.

BLACKHURST: And it was out and gone. And it was, what we understood was about a thirty-minute flight . . .

BUCKLIN: To target?

BLACKHURST: To target.

BUCKLIN: Were you ever at a test for one of your missiles?

BLACKHURST: No, I never did get to one. I always wanted to go.

BUCKLIN: Did you ever see any other kind of missile in flight?

BLACKHURST: I saw one when I was at Vandenberg, out there for training, they'd launched one and I did get to see it.

BUCKLIN: And was that a Minuteman I or II?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, it was a Minuteman II.

BUCKLIN: Minuteman II.

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: What kind of feelings did that bring about?

BLACKHURST: Excitement. You know to see that bird, to see that thing go up and you see it in flight was just amazing. To think, "Wow, I'm going to do that, possibly."

BUCKLIN: Um hmm. Um hmm. I think that's not uncommon.

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: When you've trained and trained and trained for something, there is this sense of accomplishment even to see it used. Thankfully, in the form . . .

BLACKHURST: You bet!

BUCKLIN: of a test. [laughter.] Did you know much about the weaponry that was the Soviet counterpart?

BLACKHURST: Not a lot, except that we would be briefed. In the flying game I probably knew more about what I was up against than what I was as far as the missiles that the Soviets had. We would be briefed to maybe tell us what they had as far as the SS, surface-to-surface missiles that the Soviets had. I think they were SS-9s or something at the time, that as far as knowing exactly, how they compared, I can't say that we really knew a lot.

BUCKLIN: You faced Soviet weaponry over North Vietnam.

BLACKHURST: You bet.

BUCKLIN: Did you have any opinion about the quality of Soviet weaponry there?

BLACKHURST: None whatsoever.

BUCKLIN: No opinion about its quality?

BLACKHURST: Oh, I knew it was good, in fact I lost some friends over North Vietnam to the SA-6. It was called the Surface-to-Air-Missile.

BUCKLIN: Okay, now our Minutemen replaced what system?

BLACKHURST: I believe they replaced the Atlas.

BUCKLIN: Atlas or the Titan?

BLACKHURST: The Atlas and the Titan I think were the two earlier . . . they were liquid fuel rockets.

BUCKLIN: And the Minuteman?

BLACKHURST: It was solid fuel

BUCKLIN: Solid fuel gave us what advantage over the liquid fuel?

BLACKHURST: The liquid fuel, especially the oxygen, had to be uploaded, I believe at the time, just before the launch. I had a friend who was in Titans. In fact I met him when I went to Thailand, and he went through navigator school with me at Mather Air Force Base in California. Cliff used to talk about the Titan. He said that in it they had the fuel and the oxidizer in separate tanks in the ground and before they could launch them, they had to upload at least one or the other to the missile.

BUCKLIN: Time consuming.

BLACKHURST: Right. So they had quite a time before they were ready to launch.

BUCKLIN: So the Minuteman gave us a reduced time to launch.

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: Significantly?

BLACKHURST: Very much. Yeah.

BUCKLIN: You know, one thing I am curious about, too, . . .

BLACKHURST: It was a much smaller missile, too, in comparison.

BUCKLIN: When you were in the capsule, I am sure that it had go through your mind that in the event that there were a strike, that you had been told that there was a degree of survivability.

BLACKHURST: Um hmm.

BUCKLIN: That these launch control facilities could withstand an air burst or a near miss. Did you believe that?

BLACKHURST: Yeah. I did. The capsule floor inside was like a concrete egg in the ground. And the capsule floor was supported by four huge hydraulic, pneudraulic cylinders.

BUCKLIN: Like shock absorbers?

BLACKHURST: Really, like shock absorbers. You could go in and they were hung from the ceiling of that concrete egg. As you walked through the blast door onto the capsule floor itself, you could actually feel it move a little bit.

BUCKLIN: The blast door is a significant...

BLACKHURST: Yeah. It was an eight-ton door opened only from the inside. We controlled the entrance and exit from inside the capsule.

BUCKLIN: Could one person open it?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, one person could swing it open. Usually the deputy, that was just his job, to go back and let the new crew in or whatever.

BUCKLIN: Were there any kind of surveillance measures, or could they watch a capsule crew?

BLACKHURST: No.

BUCKLIN: No?

BLACKHURST: No. We were down there on basically on our own recognizance and if we wanted to mess off we could.

BUCKLIN: Um hmm. Okay.

BLACKHURST: The only thing that was there that was out[going] was a telephone line.

BUCKLIN: There was one other thing that was out, and that was the escape tube.

BLACKHURST: Oh, yes.

BUCKLIN: Can you tell us about the escape tube?

BLACKHURST: It was an interesting thing. We often talked about it. From what we understood, there was an opening into the capsule and we were supposed to open this door and it was filled with sand. We weren't sure totally how close to the surface the exit of it was. But it was like a corrugated, drainage tube or pipe, and it was filled with supposedly sand. We always hoped it was loose sand [laughter] so that if we ever had to go out that thing. But from what we understood, it ended probably ten to fifteen feet from the surface of the ground outside the physical fence of the site.

BUCKLIN: Of the LCF [Launch Control Facility]?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, the LCF. So it was kind of interesting to always think ... several times, we'd sit down there, me and my deputy, and we'd discuss this thing.

BUCKLIN: That was ninety feet long, wasn't it?

BLACKHURST: Yeah. Yeah, it had quite a slant to it. Supposedly you'd be able to crawl out. One of the missile sites, I think it was Juliet, out near Faith, it was one of

the deepest sites in the whole region, yeah. We understood it was probably about seventy to eighty feet down in the ground. Well, this tube goes out at an angle, so you know, it got interesting. [laughter.] We hoped that if there was an air burst, or if there was a burst, that the sand inside that tube wasn't turned to glass and then it wouldn't slide out.

BUCKLIN: That would present certain problems, wouldn't it?

BLACKHURST: Right! [laughter.]

BUCKLIN: I am also interested in what you expected to find when you went out? If you went out!

BLACKHURST: Yeah. If we went out that way, we figured there's probably going to be a bunch of scorched earth, that's about what it would amount to.

BUCKLIN: When were you supposed to exit under those circumstances?

BLACKHURST: When we felt it was safe. We had supplies down there that would have lasted us three or four weeks for the two men.

BUCKLIN: Did you have radiological gear to test so you would know it was safe?

BLACKHURST: Yeah. We had this big box that always stayed under the bed. That basically was our survival kit. It had a little shovel in it to start the sand out. It had some radiological gear in it to check to see what was outside, once we got through the dirt.

BUCKLIN: Did you have radiological protective clothing?

BLACKHURST: No, no. Not really that I remember.

BUCKLIN: Any standard operating procedure once you exited under these circumstances? Where are you supposed to go?

BLACKHURST: [Laugh] Good question. I guess we were supposed to try to get back to the base. If it was there.

BUCKLIN: But you didn't know...

BLACKHURST: We had no idea of how to get there. We were probably walking. When you got out, you surveyed the land and say, "Well, I know that way is the base, I guess we'll start walking."

BUCKLIN: But you had no specific orders or guidelines of operating procedures?

BLACKHURST: No, not that I remember. We were there to turn the keys, we were there to launch the missiles and that was our primary purpose. If we got hit or a close or something like that, of course, our top side would be gone.

BUCKLIN: By top side you mean the launch control facility.

BLACKHURST: The launch control facility upstairs, where our cops and all were.

BUCKLIN: How would you evaluate your unit's morale?

BLACKHURST: Probably good. Yeah, we always had a good time.

BUCKLIN: How?

BLACKHURST: I guess as far as the unit itself, we were pretty close knit group. We did things together, some of the guys played hand ball and all.

BUCKLIN: Was there a sense of rivalry between the three...

BLACKHURST: Between the three squadrons, yeah.

BUCKLIN: Was there? Like sporting competitions?

BLACKHURST: There would be different sporting competitions, softball teams, and bowling leagues and all. So, there was a good bit of rivalry between the three squadrons.

BUCKLIN: What squadron was yours.

BLACKHURST: I was in the 67th.

BUCKLIN: 67th?

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: Were you aware as a missileer of the strategic arms negotiations, the efforts to reduce the number of missiles? SALT I, SALT II...

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: Did those affect morale at all? In either way, positively or negatively?

BLACKHURST: I don't think they affected as far as morale, once it basically came down. I had already left the missile crew by the time they started talking about phasing them out. I always thought it was kind of a neat job. I enjoyed it. I had a good time.

BUCKLIN: Can you describe the interior the capsule for us?

BLACKHURST: I could say it was kind of a concrete egg in the ground with a big glass door. As you went into the thing, you had a low tunnel maybe four-and-a-half feet square as you went in. It was probably about six to eight feet from the end of the blast door to where you entered the capsule itself. There was a metal catwalk you walked across. It would move along with the floor. To the right just as you walked in it was our bathroom.

BUCKLIN: Latrine, wasn't it?

BLACKHURST: Latrine was just right there to the right. On the left was our air conditioning unit. That air conditioning unit would exchange the air ten percent in an hour and that's all. The rest of it was ninety percent re-circulated air in the capsule. Just next to it was our kitchen, if you will. It had a little tiny convection type oven, it was just a little tiny oven type thing and a refrigerator and a cabinet over top of it. Next there was a bed down here, believe it or not. I never really understood the reason of the bed, when we were down there for the three-day tour, because we weren't supposed to go to bed. But yet there was a bed down there.

BUCKLIN: Couldn't one person sleep while the other...

BLACKHURST: That was in the twenty-four hour shifts.

BUCKLIN: But not in the three-day...

BLACKHURST: Not during the three day-shifts. We were on basically for twelve hours and then another crew would come out from the base, relieve us, we would go upstairs and sleep, top-side.

BUCKLIN: After twelve hours...

BLACKHURST: After twelve hours we would go back downstairs, relieve that crew, and they would go upstairs and go home.

BUCKLIN: So now this was on a three-day rotation?

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: Then how long would you be down before you came back for another three day?

BLACKHURST: We were on three twelve-hour shifts and two upstairs.

BUCKLIN: And then back to ...

BLACKHURST: And then back to the base.

BUCKLIN: And then would you go back?

BLACKHURST: You couldn't go immediately back-to-back, you had to have at least one tour in between. Like one three-day tour. Very seldom would we go back out right away, though.

BUCKLIN: Which did you prefer the three-day or the twenty four-hour?

BLACKHURST: Probably I liked the twenty-four hour better.

BUCKLIN: Any particular reason?

BLACKHURST: It was less time away from home. [Laughter]

BUCKLIN: A pretty obvious answer. Was privacy an issue in these capsules?

BLACKHURST: Not with another guy down there. I think it would have been later, they did have some women on the capsule crews. It might have been at that point.

BUCKLIN: You never served on any gender mixed...

BLACKHURST: I never served.

BUCKLIN: What do think about women coming into the missileers? Okay.

BLACKHURST: I'm not sure how my wife thought, but I thought it was OK. [Laughter]

BUCKLIN: I've had people mention that they thought it was a problem, for the potential for sexual relations. You didn't see that as a problem?

BLACKHURST: I don't think so. I think the women that came on crew were professionals, just like the men. I honestly believe that.

BUCKLIN: Do you have an issue or opinion about gays in the military?

BLACKHURST: [Laugh]. That's a hard one to answer. It really is.

BUCKLIN: Did you ever serve with a gay, that you know of?

BLACKHURST: Yes, I did. I had a friend when I was in Germany, in fact I served with him in Thailand and he did his job as well as the next guy.

BUCKLIN: No morale issues?

BLACKHURST: No. But I don't think anybody really knew it at that time. He made a comment to me at one time, in fact he told me that he was gay. I had to really stop and think but he was still a friend.

BUCKLIN: Good soldier?

BLACKHURST: Yup.

BUCKLIN: Good air man, I should say?

BLACKHURST: He was still a good friend even though.

BUCKLIN: Okay. Were there any circumstances under which you would have not executed an order to launch?

BLACKHURST: I can't think of any. I honestly believe that I knew I had the will to do what I had to do and I think that it probably came from my year in Thailand, knowing what I had done there. That was my job. So I don't think I ever did have a doubt.

BUCKLIN: So if you were watching, create a hypothetical, if you were watching television, have you ever seen *Dr. Strangelove*?

BLACKHURST: Oh, yeah. That was a favorite.

BUCKLIN: You remember when Mandrake listens to the radio right? So if you were watching television and there was a debate about the president's sanity or the issuance of the go code (or whatever it is you call it), that wouldn't have affected you?

BLACKHURST: Nope. I think there were too many safeguards in between and *Dr. Strangelove* was a good movie.

BUCKLIN: I was just going to ask you why. That is one of my favorites too. What did you like about that?

BLACKHURST: I guess I like at the end where Slim Pickens rides the bomb down. [Laughter] I thought that was so cute. [laughter.] But you know, there were other movies that have come out. I don't remember the name of them, but I remember seeing them.

BUCKLIN: *Fail Safe*.

BLACKHURST: Yeah, *Fail Safe* was one and so there were several different movies and it was always portrayed somebody was out of kilter. I guess in the Minuteman system, there had to be two people that had to go wacky at the same time in one capsule, to launch any missiles at all.

BUCKLIN: When they instituted the Looking Glass flights, those planes could launch missiles without the capsule crew. Were they configured in such a way that one person couldn't do it in the plane, in the Looking Glass?

BLACKHURST: They had two people there too. They had a commander and a deputy.

BUCKLIN: Physically, was it impossible for one person to launch in a capsule crew?

BLACKHURST: It was in the capsule crew and as far as I knew it was in the aircraft also.

BUCKLIN: Okay.

BLACKHURST: I never was on a Looking Glass flight, so I never did know what the proximity of the keys were. But knowing what it was in the capsule, I would have to assume today that it was probably a proximity that they have to ... the keys, I believe had to be turned within one second of each other in the capsule. For one person to have reached both keys at the same time was impossible, unless they had awful long arms. [Laughs.]

BUCKLIN: Physically impossible?

BLACKHURST: You bet. It was physically impossible. I have to assume that in the Looking Glass aircraft, the KC 135, that they were in the same way. That they were physically separated so that two people had to be able to do it.

BUCKLIN: Were you aware of the power of the warheads on your missiles?

BLACKHURST: They were discussed, we knew we had one warhead and the ones down at Frances E. Warren, down in Cheyenne, Wyoming had several different warheads.

BUCKLIN: They were MIRVed?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, they were MIRVed.

BUCKLIN: So they would have been Minuteman IIIs?

BLACKHURST: Yes. So we knew they had more than one warhead. We knew we had one.

BUCKLIN: So did you know what it could do?

BLACKHURST: Not exactly, not exactly.

BUCKLIN: Did you have an idea what it might do to a city like Rapid City?

BLACKHURST: We felt it would probably do in a city this size. If you had a good air burst or I guess you'd say a clean bomb. If there is such a thing.

BUCKLIN: It would depopulate a city of 65,000 easily?

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: I am curious how you felt about the removal of the 150 ICBMs?

BLACKHURST: Kind of sad.

BUCKLIN: And why did that...

BLACKHURST: It was an end of an era.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: I guess I had to stop and think that, well, it is an end of an era. It was something that I grew up as part of and I guess coming from ... to back up a bit, everything I was in, I was in B-66s in Germany and Thailand and all. I closed them out in Germany. So that was the last of them. I got to Ellsworth and I flew B-52s for awhile, went through the training. Gradually, then, they were phased out. And then the Minuteman II was phased out. So, it's like everything I did in the air force is gone now.

BUCKLIN: When you say B-52s were phased out, do you mean out of Ellsworth?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, Ellsworth. They still fly, but Ellsworth doesn't have them anymore.

BUCKLIN: Was it like a father seeing a child grow up and leave?

BLACKHURST: Somewhat, yeah.

BUCKLIN: Okay.

BLACKHURST: It's an interesting feeling, I guess you'd say.

BUCKLIN: Did you think it was militarily justified to remove those?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, I do.

BUCKLIN: Why?

BLACKHURST: I have to look at it as the Cold War was over. Basically the Minuteman II was a Cold War weapon. We say the Soviet Union was dismantled. I look at it today and I say yeah, physically it is, but yet the weaponry is still there.

BUCKLIN: Does it trouble you that it is in the hands of more than one country now?

BLACKHURST: You bet, you bet. Especially some of the people who aren't really friendly to us, at all. The big thing that I see with the Soviet weaponry today that I think about is, it's there. The people who are in charge of it are not well paid and so it might go to the highest bidder. That does bother me.

BUCKLIN: That brings up another question, you served both during a period when the draft was in effect and during the all-volunteer military. Do you have observations about positives or negatives of either of those systems?

BLACKHURST: Not really. I think they're both working. I read in the paper just recently though, that the air force has not been able to fulfill their recruitment.

BUCKLIN: Because?

BLACKHURST: The people aren't signing up, I guess.

BUCKLIN: I've heard that and I've talked to several recruiters about this and it's because young people don't score well on general aptitude tests.

BLACKHURST: That may be. It's like some of my kids [where I teach] at the alternative school. [Laughs]

BUCKLIN: And some of mine at the university. I am sure that will go over well.

What is your opinion? There is a debate right now about whether or not we should renegotiate the restrictions on antiballistic missile systems that are in place with the agreements that we have with the Commonwealth of Independent States, otherwise known as Russia.

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: Not to mention China's growing arsenal that is becoming more accurate.

BLACKHURST: I think we really have to look at what China's doing. We've never really been, as far as I can remember, on as good a footing politically with the Chinese as we have the Soviets. If we can say we're on a good footing with the Soviets, and you know there, things have been so much up and down, and that gets

into politics. But I've seen China, I've been there and the Chinese people are neat. I've often thought that what we ought to do is instead of having wars, we ought to hand the leaders each a baseball bat, put them on an island and let them go at it. [laughter.] If that's what they want to do.

BUCKLIN: So would you say "Yes," that ABMs are something the United States needs?

BLACKHURST: I think overall, maybe it was a good idea. I think it was a good deterrent.

BUCKLIN: Um hum. Okay. Okay. This is a question that is sometimes uncomfortable for people, but did anyone die in the line of duty while you were in the missile business?

BLACKHURST: I can't remember, I think we did have we had a couple helicopter crashes. We lost some of our security people, I do know that. We also lost helicopter crews.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: But I don't think we ever lost any of our capsule crew that I can remember.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: At least not that I can really remember while I was serving.

BUCKLIN: Anybody injured?

BLACKHURST: No, not really. Not on capsule crew, again our...

BUCKLIN: Security police?

BLACKHURST: Security police probably was where any injuries or anything like that occurred.

BUCKLIN: How did you get along with the other people? The security police? The maintenance people?

BLACKHURST: Real well. In fact I've got a friend today, he was the Flight Security Controller.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hmm.

BLACKHURST: Top-side, he was a...

BUCKLIN: FSC?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, FSC. I still see Hank today. He was one of my first leather customers.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hmm.

BLACKHURST: I think I made him a bill fold or something, and every once in a while I see him and we say, "Hi," today. We still know each other.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hmm.

BLACKHURST: But that was one of my advantages when I left the capsule crew and became a facility manager is because I knew a lot of the young cops, the young security police. And went from one job right into the other with no problems at all.

BUCKLIN: So did your perspective about FMs change when you became one?

BLACKHURST: Not really. Those guys did their job and we did ours in the capsule.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: I knew what their job was. I made it a point to know what they did. When we would go top-side, especially on our three-day alerts, when we would go up, I would sit and talk to the sergeants and the security police, the facility managers. In fact there is a gentleman here in town, still a friend, he was a facility manager the whole time.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: I saw both sides of the job. Greg and I are still good friends.

BUCKLIN: Was it difficult for them to accept you as an enlisted man after they'd known you as an officer?

BLACKHURST: According to the major who was in charge of the facility manager, he told me ... I wanted to go back to my site, I considered India my site. I wanted to go back to that site as a facility manager. He says 'Oh, Blackhurst,' he says, 'those kids out there are going to look down on you, you were a captain and now your going to be a sergeant, a buck sergeant, no less. They're really going to look down on you.' My comment was, 'No, I don't think so, major,' I said. 'I didn't change, I only change the position of my rank. That went from my collar to my sleeve.' In fact I probably had less problems than some of the older master sergeants who had been master sergeants and that's the way they came in, then I had less trouble with the kids. Because they still respected me for what I'd done.

BUCKLIN: Then, was it a medical profile?

BLACKHURST: Yeah. That's how I ended up on missile crew. I ended up with what they call degenerative disc disease.

BUCKLIN: Um hmm.

BLACKHURST: They said that if I ever had to eject from an aircraft, I had a fifty-fifty chance of never walking again. I chose to walk instead of fly.

BUCKLIN: I think that's a wise decision. [laughter.]

BLACKHURST: But no, when I became a facility manager, it was because I got passed over for major.

BUCKLIN: Um hmm. Now you said you considered, was it India?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: Your home?

BLACKHURST: That was my site. I considered it mine.

BUCKLIN: So, where is that?

BLACKHURST: It's out by Red Owl and White Owl and Plainview. Out in the middle of nowhere! [laughter.]

BUCKLIN: How would you describe the terrain in that area?

BLACKHURST: I guess the name of the second town, Plainview, was probably a good description. I got a good look at it mowing the lawn out there as a facility manager. It was flat, there would be the sagebrush and you'd just see miles and miles of prairie. There were farm houses, ranch houses here and there, but basically it was pretty desolate. We made the best of, I don't want to say a bad situation, but we made the best of what we had out there.

BUCKLIN: Um hmm. Did the terrain cause any problems? Were the roads difficult to pass at certain times?

BLACKHURST: Sometimes, yeah. In fact, we'd get snowed out every once in awhile. We'd get a blizzard in this area and I remember going out one Sunday afternoon and not coming home until the following Saturday or Sunday night. And it was because of a blizzard. They couldn't get out to get us.

BUCKLIN: Had you experienced anything like a South Dakota blizzard before?

BLACKHURST: No. No!

BUCKLIN: You're from West Virginia. [laughter.]

BLACKHURST: From West Virginia and South Carolina and I mean, I got out here, and I think probably one of the first blizzards that I was here, I couldn't believe it. It was just, "You've got to be kidding!" Of course since that time, oh, I take it right in stride. "Oh boy, another day off from school!" [laughter.]

BUCKLIN: Were you adequately equipped to face those kind of contingencies?

BLACKHURST: Yeah. Out there . . .

BUCKLIN: What kind of gear did you have?

BLACKHURST: Oh, we didn't have as good a gear as the security police. They had these big white bunny boots that kept your feet real warm. We had the mukluk type boot, high canvas boot. We just wore long johns under our uniforms.

BUCKLIN: Was it cold in the capsule?

BLACKHURST: Well, you could kind of adjust it a little bit.

[End of side one, tape one] [Beginning of side two, tape one]

BUCKLIN: Okay, we were talking about, the weather I believe.

BLACKHURST: Oh yeah.

BUCKLIN: Your equipment for wintertime.

BLACKHURST: We would go out and basically as a capsule crew, and as a facility manager I had the regular gloves, parka, and so forth. I guess thinking of that, the Christmas just before Christmas when I left the missile field. My last Christmas out, we had a security crew get stuck in a snow bank. It was basically a blizzard, hundred mile an hour winds, and I elected to ask for permission to go get those kids. I took the front-end loader from the site, and we had the rope that we used to fasten to the leader if we had to bring somebody out of the capsule. We took that rope and I drove the front-end loader probably about ten miles out into the prairie.

BUCKLIN: How could you see?

BLACKHURST: Well, [laughs] I had the other security people. They had had a team on site. I forget what they were called right now, but they were kind of like a SWAT team. They elected to drive in front of me, I guess it was behind me. They went

with me, behind me, to help and I drove very slow. Like I say the winds were blowing, it was somewhere close to a hundred below zero, and the front-end loader didn't have any heat. But I had on my long johns, my uniform, a pair of bunny pants and another pair of pants on.

BUCKLIN: Do you want to tell us what bunny pants are?

BLACKHURST: Well, I borrowed them from one of the cops. They were insulated like overalls and I had those on and I had my boots on with about two or three pairs of socks. I had two pair gloves on, my parka up around my face. Well anyway, we got out to site, out to where these kids were, they were stuck in a snow bank pretty good. I didn't have to get out fortunately. I stayed in the front end loader. The cops in the Peace Keeper, which was a armored vehicle got out, fastened it to the back of the thing and we pulled those kids out. They had one of the little CJ-5 Jeeps. Then we drove back to the base, back to the site, back to India. When I got back in, I parked the front end loader in the garage, got back into the site, got into the building, when I went in I realized I couldn't move my hands.

BUCKLIN: Frost bite?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, and I had to ask somebody to help me take my gloves off.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: Because I couldn't move my fingers. I went into the kitchen and turned on the water, the cold water, and stuck my hands under the water. It felt like I was sticking them in boiling water. To this day, I can't go out without gloves on.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: That was kind of an interesting night.

BUCKLIN: And scary.

BLACKHURST: These kids were stuck and we knew they weren't going to make it if somebody didn't get to them. They were about ten miles from the site, they had gone out to check an alert warning from one of the missile sites.

BUCKLIN: An OZ or IZ had gone off?

BLACKHURST: You're right. Uh-hum.

BUCKLIN: I want to ask a question before I forget it. What would that kind of weather do to a missile that had to launch? If there are hundred mile an hour winds?

BLACKHURST: Probably knocked it off a little bit, but I don't think it would have done much. I think it would have gone.

BUCKLIN: Okay.

BLACKHURST: Because a lot of our blizzard winds are low to the ground so if it did anything it might sway it a little bit. But once that thing was on its way out of the hole, I don't think anything's going to stop it.

BUCKLIN: Okay. You got stuck on site because of the weather though?

BLACKHURST: Oh yes, several times.

BUCKLIN: A number of occasions. Not just during the winter, how about summers?

BLACKHURST: Summers, it got warm but we had an air conditioning unit in the room.

BUCKLIN: Any severe storms? Tornados?

BLACKHURST: No. Well, yeah. Tornados, yes. I was at India and we had a tornado warning, they had sighted it south of us. I can't remember which site in the 66th squadron had seen it. It was coming north toward India, and as it was coming north we were told to evacuate to the tunnel junction. So we put everybody downstairs, there was only two people left top side, myself as the FM and the flight security controller. We were the last to go. I was the last to one go in the tunnel junction if we did sight one.

BUCKLIN: And the tunnel junction is?

BLACKHURST: There was an elevator that went from top-side down to where you entered the capsule. There was thirty, forty, fifty feet below the surface of the ground. It would have sustained, we would have been okay down there.

That day, I remember looking out and as I looked out, it was towards the west from the missile site. I was standing there looking out the window and I saw this funnel cloud streak. It was across the sky and that thing looked like it must have been ten miles long at that time. It probably wasn't but it looked that big as I can remember. I can remember seeing it in the air. There had been one that had touched down south of us. I believe it touched down again north of us, but it didn't touch down where we were. When I saw that thing I immediately ran to the flight security controller's office and we opened the door and said we're coming down. So we went in for five-ten minutes and then I came back out to check to see if it was okay.

BUCKLIN: The flight security controller. Was that where were they stationed?

BLACKHURST: They were on the top-side, in the OCF. They had a little room of their own. In their office they kept the weapons, the logs, and in this room was where the door was that went into the elevator.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum. Ever have any interesting encounters with animals?

BLACKHURST: [Laughs] Yeah, I had several with my security police. At one time, a couple came back, it was probably illegal at the time, but they asked me, 'Sergeant Blackhurst, do you know how to skin an animal? How to skin an antelope?' I thought these kids were talking about going hunting, because it was getting toward hunting season. I said 'Yeah, I've done that, I hunt.' 'Well, sergeant, what would you do if uh...' Turns out that they had picked up an antelope.

BUCKLIN: Picked up?

BLACKHURST: Yes. What had happened, they were driving behind this cattle truck. This cattle truck hit an antelope, knocked it over into the ditch, and broke three of its legs. It was still alive. These two kids got out and looked at it, 'Well what are we going to do, gonna leave it here?' Then one got the bright idea of a getting a shovel and beating the thing over the head until it was dead. Then they didn't know what to do with it, so they decided to bring it back home. 'You guys gotta get rid this thing, it's against the law, you don't have a license.' So they trucked it back out and dumped it off the side of the road again.

BUCKLIN: No antelope feast for dinner?

BLACKHURST: No. I wasn't about to go that way. But we did have several of the guys bring in rattlesnakes.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: We had some good rattlesnake.

BUCKLIN: In terms of ...

BLACKHURST: Eating.

BUCKLIN: How would you prepare it?

BLACKHURST: Fried it.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: I'd skin it out. They'd bring it in and sure, you bet, we'll skin it out.

BUCKLIN: Diamondbacks, prairie rattlers?

BLACKHURST: Prairie rattlers.

BUCKLIN: Yeah. And it's good?

BLACKHURST: Oh yeah. Not much meat on it.

BUCKLIN: Anyone ever get bitten.

BLACKHURST: Uh, no. The usually killed the thing before, they'd beat it with a shovel again. [laugh] Or whatever, but nobody ever got bitten.

BUCKLIN: Ever eat bull snake?

BLACKHURST: Never tried that. I would assume it's the same thing.

BUCKLIN: I've never heard of anyone doing it.

BLACKHURST: We had a bull snake on site.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum

BLACKHURST: That was a pet.

BUCKLIN: Well, they're good to have, right?

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: And that is because?

BLACKHURST: They eat mice.

BUCKLIN: And they also eat rattlesnakes.

BLACKHURST: Yeah.

BUCKLIN: Yeah.

BLACKHURST: We keep them on the site. In fact one kid brought one back, we had a female cook on this site at the time. He came back and his shirt was kind of bulged out around his stomach. We kind of looked at him a little bit funny, but he walked into the dining area and this cook was in there and he told the girl, "Here, feel my stomach." She looked at him kind of funny and wasn't about to touch him, but he reached in his shirt and pulled out this bull snake and that thing had wrapped all the way around his waist. Here he had this thing and he

held it up and it was probably about four or five feet long. We ended up not killing it. We turned it loose on the site and it became a pet.

BUCKLIN: I'm sure that broke the boredom for that cook.

BLACKHURST: Oh, yes! [laughter.] Oh, yeah.

BUCKLIN: And likely a lot of other people as well.  
How were your relations with the people of South Dakota?

BLACKHURST: Oh, I think they were good. We would stop on the way out, on the way in from the base and we would see a lot of the ranchers.

BUCKLIN: Good relations with the ranchers?

BLACKHURST: Oh yes, yes. In fact out at Foxtrot out near Mud Butte, there was a rancher. The site was right close to his ranch and a lot of the guys would go out there and antelope hunt. They'd go out and help him, fix fence and so forth and then he'd invite them out to hunt. I never went but I knew some of the guys who did.

BUCKLIN: Now were you married when you came here or did you marry a South Dakota girl?

BLACKHURST: I was married but then just before I went into the missile wing, my ex-wife left. Then I met my second wife. She was the secretary for Jim Irwin the astronaut. He came here for, I think through the chapel. He had a Christian outreach organization called "High Flight" out of Colorado Springs, Colorado. She was his secretary.

BUCKLIN: So she was not from South Dakota?

BLACKHURST: No, she wasn't. She was from Colorado.

BUCKLIN: How did she like . . .

BLACKHURST: Oh, loves it.

BUCKLIN: Okay.

BLACKHURST: We both love it.

BUCKLIN: Were there any demonstrations at any of the sites?

BLACKHURST: Not that I was close to. There were some out near Wall. There was a demonstration that they went out and I think some people got carried off or whatever, but I never saw any of it.

BUCKLIN: Okay. Yeah, from what I understand that was an annual event.

BLACKHURST: Yeah. It was always out at that same site. I guess it was because it was close to the interstate. [laughter.]

BUCKLIN: Get some attention.

BLACKHURST: Yeah.

BUCKLIN: How was your relation with the media? Did the media treat you well as missileers?

BLACKHURST: I thought they did. I don't remember a lot about that. We did a lot of stuff with maybe you'd say as "PR" and they treated us fine.

BUCKLIN: Okay. Race relations within the Air Force?

BLACKHURST: At the time, I think it was somewhat strained. I know when I was in Germany, we all had to go through what they called race relations training or something like that. I was from the South, from the Deep South, South Carolina. I was born up in West Virginia and I've lived a lot of my life in South Carolina. But as far as having any problems with anybody of any other race, I didn't.

BUCKLIN: You were growing up at least partially during the period of segregation.

BLACKHURST: Oh yes. In fact, I went to a segregated high school in South Carolina. In fact, the University of South Carolina we were still segregated by the time I graduated from college.

BUCKLIN: So you mention that they were somewhat strained here?

BLACKHURST: Yeah.

BUCKLIN: Yeah?

BLACKHURST: I know when I was in Germany, we had to go through this race relations [training]. I never thought I was prejudiced, and I don't think I was until I went through that training. The sergeant who gave us the training there in Germany, I still remember his name, but he probably made me more prejudiced towards him than I was ever before. Because growing up in the South, I grew up with the idea of segregation. My mom and dad loved everybody. We had no problems, black, white, so what? You were still a human being. But by the time I was in the air force, I saw some of the problems.

BUCKLIN: And those would be?

BLACKHURST: At times, it was like there were two different groups of people in the air force at the time. Them and us. Which is kind of weird to say, thinking about it now. But, really, a lot of times, that was the way.

BUCKLIN: And now you're talking about relations with African Americans and whites?

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: How about Hispanics?

BLACKHURST: Hispanics? From where I grew up in the South, the African American and the white and it was kind of like the African American and the white and the Hispanic, the Caucasian and the Hispanics were on one side, and the African American was on the other. By the time I got into the Air Force, everything was kind of like a big melting pot. I got here to Ellsworth and I didn't see a lot of it. I had a deputy who was an African American and we were good buddies.

BUCKLIN: So in your opinion did race relations have any impact on your mission?

BLACKHURST: No. None, whatsoever. Not at all. We were basically friends, I guess you'd say. That was it, we were friends.

BUCKLIN: How about relations with the Native American community here in South Dakota?

BLACKHURST: I got an awful lot of friends who are Native American, and I've gotten to know them. And I love them just like I do any other buddies.

BUCKLIN: Now several of the missile sites sit on reservation territory, is that correct?

BLACKHURST: They were close.

BUCKLIN: And no problem between the tribes?

BLACKHURST: Not as far as I know.

BUCKLIN: When you were in the missile business did you experience any shortages, any problems in terms of major items of equipment being repaired?

BLACKHURST: I think that has been a perpetual thing with the military. We didn't see a lot in the missile field as far as the missiles themselves or whatever. They were usually pretty well kept. At times in fact, I guess I'd have to say when it came to

supplies on the site, you ask and it was there. So we didn't run in to a whole lot of problems in that way.

BUCKLIN: How about personnel shortages?

BLACKHURST: That we did have at times.

BUCKLIN: Any particular...

BLACKHURST: How that affected us was on the missile crew field and the missile crew by job. When we got down below we were pulling almost what we called, back-to-back alerts. Basically when we would come off alert, off for three days then right back on alert again. Until we got new replacements in for people that were transferred out or basically got out of service and we didn't have somebody coming in at the time. We would go back-to-backs, and that got a little tight.

BUCKLIN: Would you describe the Minuteman as a low maintenance, medium maintenance or high maintenance piece of equipment?

BLACKHURST: Probably, the missile itself was low maintenance. The electronics in it however, that was one of the jobs of the crew in the capsule to maintain watch on that guidance system. Every once in awhile it would just go belly up. Of course then we'd have to have people come out and work on the sites. But, overall because the maintenance was periodic, they would come out, they would check, they would change out what we called the can. That was the guidance system. They would change those out from time to time. Take them back to the base and check them over, work them over. So I think it was probably because of the preventive maintenance, if anything, that kept them from breaking so bad.

BUCKLIN: When you arrived to an LCF as a capsule crew member was there a procedure to go through to get into the LCF?

BLACKHURST: Oh yeah. I saw it from both sides. As the capsule crew would pull up to the gate, they had to radio in and let the FSC know who it was. That we were there and the facility manager then would go out and meet the capsule crew. The commander would depart from the truck, go up to the fence, hand his I.D. card through this chain link fence to the FM. The FM would check it, and as I remember we had to somewhat authenticate a little bit with each other. He had to recognize us, and he knew we were coming. We had to be called in [from HQ] that who it was that was going on the site, to the LCF. The FM was checking to see that, yes, this is the person that they said was coming.

BUCKLIN: Anybody every get jacked up during this process?

BLACKHURST: Not as I remember.

BUCKLIN: And what did it mean to get jacked up?

BLACKHURST: [Laughs] Basically, two security people would come out to the site and most of the times you were going to lay on your stomach, on the ground with your hands spread and your feet spread, and wait until they checked out and made sure who you were.

BUCKLIN: And that would happen because you had failed to authenticate correctly?

BLACKHURST: Right. And that happened. In fact we had one capsule crew, if we got an alert or an outer security warning out on the missile site, where the missile was. Sometimes the flight security supervisor would go out, break the thing and hide on the site to see [if] the cops going out to check the site were doing their jobs.

BUCKLIN: Were doing their jobs?

BLACKHURST: And that was part of their procedure, if they found him on site or found anybody on the site, it was spread-eagle them on the ground. Until they were checked out and made sure who they were.

BUCKLIN: And that could take...?

BLACKHURST: Oh, could take quite awhile. In fact, there was a couple of kids that came back and they were really laughing about what they had done to the flight security supervisor. They made him lay down in a mud puddle. [Laughter] I guess they were trying to get back him or something. I don't know, but they were really hee-hawing about it at that one time.

BUCKLIN: Was there some good-natured rivalry?

BLACKHURST: Oh yes, definitely. If you could get back at your sergeant in a good way, it was all legal. That was, you could go for...

BUCKLIN: They were fair game? [Laughter]

BLACKHURST: If he was going to play funny games, they could too.

BUCKLIN: Tell me what a typical alert was like?

BLACKHURST: From the capsule stand point?

BUCKLIN: Sure, let's do that first.

BLACKHURST: During both the three day and the twelve-hour, or twenty-four hour alerts, we arrive on site. As the commander, I would talk to the facility manager top-side, found out what was going on up top side. Make sure everything was okay up there. Then we would go into the flight security controller's office. We had authentication codes. We each had a number we had to know. We had a little table, it had numbers across the top and letters all up and down. They used them to get on the missile sites as well as to get into the capsule.

BUCKLIN: You had a letter corresponding to each number?

BLACKHURST: Right. They knew what our number was and we would read down these letters, and nobody could be around. If you were on the phone: Okay, so I authenticate with and so forth, you'd read it off, and...

BUCKLIN: James Bond come to mind?

BLACKHURST: Right, right. So we go through that and then the guy downstairs, it was usually the deputy who did this, down in the capsule, he would authenticate with the crew coming down. Once the [new] crew was in, the deputy downstairs would buzz the door and the door would unlock on the top. Then you could open the door. You had a set amount of time but if there was too much of a delay between the time that the crew was on top side and until the crew got down to the capsule, there was suspicion. As to, was this really somebody? You may have to send that crew up top-side and be authenticated again. If they took too much time.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hmm.

BLACKHURST: So, usually, when we got there we had all our stuff sitting right there at the door and as soon as the door buzzed, we would open the door, set our stuff inside and then the door would shut behind us. The door was locked again. Then we would get on the elevator and go down to the capsule, and the deputy was either down there waiting for us, with the door open, or very shortly after we got down to the basement. He would have the door open and we would go in.

BUCKLIN: By door, you mean the bomb blast door?

BLACKHURST: Yeah, the blast door. Once we got into the door, once we got into the capsule we went through an exchange of keys and the authentication, the cookies, as we called them. We'd exchange the goods and the new crew would take over and then the old crew would leave.

BUCKLIN: What did you think of this as an FM, the alert process?

BLACKHURST: I enjoyed it, I really did. I did a lot of studying while I was out there.  
[Laugh] And again, I started working with leather in the capsule and I just carried that right up stairs.

BUCKLIN: How often...

BLACKHURST: I did a lot of counseling with the young airman and the security police on the site. A lot of them I would be sitting there talking and they'd come over ask questions about, 'I understand you were a captain with us.' 'Yeah.' 'Well, tell me about it. Why did you do it?' So I would talk and we'd be friends and [they] would continue to ask questions and then they would come to me with questions about problems that they had or whatever. So, I did some counseling, I guess you'd say, on the site.

BUCKLIN: Sure, sure. How often do these alerts take place?

BLACKHURST: Usually about one a week. It was like four a month, is usually what we would figure. As a facility manager I was there for the three days, the top-side didn't change. Just the capsule crew went to the twenty-four hour.

BUCKLIN: Okay.

BLACKHURST: As an FM I was on site usually four to five times a month. As a crew commander on the twelve hours, we were usually out there possibly two to three times a week. Depending on how fat the crew force was.

BUCKLIN: And what did you do then, when you were not on site?

BLACKHURST: We had training on base. We had days that we were in the office there. We would go through training days and basically those training days were in a training capsule, in the wing. We would have a training mission, really is what it amounted to. During that time we had to go through emergency procedures and things that possibly could happen on the missile site. If we had an outer security, inner security violations, if the missile went down, we had to know what to do. If we could restart the guidance system. If not, what we had to do, how we notified the people at the maintenance. As to what was wrong with the missile, to get somebody out. Then as always, at the end, of the training there was always a lock sequence.

BUCKLIN: Every time?

BLACKHURST: Every time. Every time. That just kept that in the back of your mind. That if it happened...

BUCKLIN: I may be called upon to do this?

BLACKHURST: I may be called upon to do it. And can I do it.

BUCKLIN: So you would consider that an essential part of the training?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: Okay. Did you or your unit receive any citations, awards?

BLACKHURST: Not that I remember. Not that I remember. Overall I think the wing did.  
But what it was I couldn't tell you.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum. Did you ever have cause to go out to the missile site itself?

BLACKHURST: No. I never did get on a...

BUCKLIN: The LF?

BLACKHURST: No.

BUCKLIN: Do you have any humorous episodes that you recall that you want to share with us? You have already given us several vivid memories, but anything else?

BLACKHURST: Oh, hum. I guess other than the cops coming out and going through all of that. I can't really think of anything, right off.

BUCKLIN: Did you ever observe or know of, the ballistic actuators being used to blast the lid off?

BLACKHURST: No. I understood that they probably tried it before I ever got in to the missiles just to see if they would work.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: They said they worked pretty good. From what I understood it would move, and I forget what the weight of that thing was.

BUCKLIN: 80 tons.

BLACKHURST: Yeah, I knew it was huge, and I know one of the procedures they always talked about was that if they if they had an errant missile that was starting to launch on its own, the security police were to go out, park their truck on top of blast door. I guess the idea was kind of like the idea where you pull the sheet or pull the tablecloth out from under all the stuff that's on the table. The idea was the blast door would scoot out from under the truck.

BUCKLIN: The truck? And the truck would then....

BLACKHURST: The truck would then fall on the missile and cause it not to launch. I don't know if it would ever work, but it was a good idea. [Laughter]

BUCKLIN: Would that have prevented a detonation?

BLACKHURST: No, I don't think, well. To detonate, the missile was armed always at the last minute. As it's in flight, and it was automatically armed. So it would have not detonated in the ground.

BUCKLIN: Do we have any means of taking these out once they were in flight? Was there any recall?

BLACKHURST: Not that I knew of.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: Once it was gone, it was gone.

BUCKLIN: Irrevocably committed.

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: What do you consider your most significant accomplishment in the missile business?

BLACKHURST: Oh, probably to say, I was there. I was part of an organization that protected the United States. I feel good about that.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum. Did you accomplish your mission?

BLACKHURST: I think I did.

BUCKLIN: I think the fact that you and I are sitting here talking about this is an indication you accomplished your mission

BLACKHURST: You bet, you bet. [Laughter]

BUCKLIN: Any legends, I've heard stories about ghosts at certain LFs and ghosts at LCFs. Anything?

BLACKHURST: Not that I remember.

BUCKLIN: Unexplained phenomenon?

BLACKHURST: No.

BUCKLIN: UFOs?

BLACKHURST: I never ran into any of them. Western South Dakota is an interesting place to live and I think there may be things out there. I don't what they are, but I'm not going to question it. [Laughter]

BUCKLIN: Did you witness any of the extractions? Did you go on the deactivation?

BLACKHURST: No, I didn't. I was already out of the air force by that time, and teaching school. I would have liked to have gone out and see some of them, but I never did get a chance to. Today, I guess as I'm riding along and the sites that are close to the interstate that I can see as I drive by, I'll see those fenced in areas and [feel] kinda sad. Kinda gives you a funny feeling inside to think, that's part of me.

BUCKLIN: You're not alone. Almost everyone I've talked to has expressed that feeling. What do you think about preserving Delta One and Delta Nine as historic sites?

BLACKHURST: Oh, I think it's a great idea. I really do. I think it is something that the people need to see. They need to know. It's a part of the United States, and it's a part of what we are today as a nation.

BUCKLIN: Would you take your children out?

BLACKHURST: Oh, yes.

BUCKLIN: Did you take them out while you were there?

BLACKHURST: Yes, I did. During the time I was out there as a crew commander on missile crew and as an FM. I would have my family come out on Thanksgiving. I always tried to volunteer for Thanksgiving, that way I could have Christmas off.

BUCKLIN: Could they eat with you at holidays?

BLACKHURST: Oh yes.

BUCKLIN: How was the food?

BLACKHURST: Good.

BUCKLIN: Yeah.

BLACKHURST: Delicious. In fact we had one cook who, as we would go on alert, and I can't remember his name but he kept telling me he was going to the CIA. The

CIA? Finally he told me it was the Culinary Institute of America. [Laughter] Oh okay, now I understand. We had taco night when he was out there. We would all chip in two dollars, and he would fix one of the best, he called them tacos, but he would make his own tortillas, and he would make these things and he'd put them in these great big pans then he'd cook them in the oven. We just gorged ourselves. [laughter] But, oh, it was so good. Whether he made it to the CIA, I don't know. But if he didn't, he deserved to.

BUCKLIN: As FM you also had to see to recreational facilities, is that right?

BLACKHURST: Yes.

BUCKLIN: So what kind of recreational facilities did you have?

BLACKHURST: Well, at first when we got out there we didn't have a lot. Then the FMs on the site [decided] that we'll get a pop machine. So we would have pop machine on site. What we did with the money from that, I guess you'd say the profits, at India we bought a lot of board games, and we bought a pool table, a foos ball table, and we decorated the place as much as we could. I can remember we had a big mural on the wall at the whole end of the lounge area. We had this big mural. I'd like to know where it is, at some point. In my leather carving, I carved a leather owl, mounted it on a piece of barn board. The name of the site was White Owl Plainview and it was snowy owl. I'd love to have that back.

BUCKLIN: Also that was almost your mascot.

BLACKHURST: You bet.

BUCKLIN: Okay.

BLACKHURST: Fox, they had a mounted fox in their lounge. Some of the different sites, I don't remember what Hotel had, but just some of the sites had different little things there that were what portrayed their site.

BUCKLIN: Did you paint your blast door?

BLACKHURST: We didn't at India. One of the sites I remember going to as a commander. We got down into the thing and this blast door is painted as a Domino's pizza.

BUCKLIN: That's Delta One.

BLACKHURST: Yeah, I wasn't sure which one, but I remember going there. It's on the outside and it says 'We guarantee delivery in 30 minutes or the next one is free.'

BUCKLIN: That's right.

BLACKHURST: And so it was.

BUCKLIN: Does that express a sense of humor that you had to have?

BLACKHURST: Right, oh yeah. I think you had to have that kind of sense of humor. You know, it was serious. You couldn't be serious all the time. You had to have some humor or else you'd go nutty.

BUCKLIN: You needed an outlet?

BLACKHURST: Right, you had to have that. I think the blast doors at a lot of the sites were painted very similar to what we saw during World War II. With the...

BUCKLIN: Airplanes?

BLACKHURST: The airplanes. I know when I was in Germany we had two of our B-66s christened for the two twin cities that were close to our base.

BUCKLIN: Uh-hum.

BLACKHURST: One was Spangaul and one was ... or no, it was the counties, one was Kreiswittlich, which was county Wittlich and one was Bitburg-Prune. We had the shields painted on the airplanes.

BUCKLIN: So this is almost a custom, tradition within the Air Force.

BLACKHURST: Right.

BUCKLIN: Do you think that we should help the Russians develop a similar historic site?

BLACKHURST: I would think so, why not? I think their system, from what I've seen from pictures, and read a little about their system, was different somewhat from ours. But I think the Russian people, I think could gain from knowing what they'd done. I really do.

BUCKLIN: Okay.

BLACKHURST: Our world is so, how do you want to say, dependent, we're all dependent on each other, within a nation. Around the world, if we can find out, and we can know about our history. I guess stationed in Germany, I think of the holocaust sites. I think it's important to know what has happened in our world. I really do.

BUCKLIN: To know your past.

BLACKHURST: You bet. Cause if we know what our past is like, we don't have to relive it.

BUCKLIN: I guess I have just one other question and that is, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to speak to?

BLACKHURST: Can't think of it.

BUCKLIN: We've covered everything?

BLACKHURST: Oh, I think so.

BUCKLIN: Okay, well then, we'll conclude this interview with our thanks to David Blackhurst for sharing with us your experiences in the missile business and volunteering your time. I personally want to thank you for the job well done.

BLACKHURST: You bet, I enjoyed it.

[Interview ends.]