

# **CIVIL AIR PATROL ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

WNHC 31.86-2

COLONEL JAMES J. MITCHELL, CAP



**NATIONAL HISTORICAL COMMITTEE  
Headquarters Civil Air Patrol  
Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama**

CIVIL AIR PATROL  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview  
of  
Colonel James J. Mitchell, CAP  
by  
Colonel Louisa S. Morse, CAP

Date: 5 February 1986  
Location: Hilton Head Island, South Carolina

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

That I, James J. Mitchell, have this day participated in an oral-magnetic-taped interview with COL L.S. MORSE, CAP, covering my best recollections of evnnts and experiences which may be of historical significance to the Civil Air Patrol.

I understand that the tape(s) and the transcribed manuscript resulting therefrom will be accessioned into the Civil Air Patrol's Historical Holdings. In the best interest of the Civil Air Patrol, I do hereby voluntarily give, transfer, convey, and assign all right, title, and interest in the memoirs and remembrances contained in the aforementioned magnetic tapes and manuscript to the Civil Air Patrol, to have and to hold the same forever, hereby relinquishing for myself, my executors, administrators, heirs, and assigns all ownership, right, title, and interest therein to the donee expressly on the condition of strict observance of the following restrictions:

NONE

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James J. Mitchell, CAP DONOR  
Dated February 5, 1986

Accepted on behalf of the Civil Air Patrol by

Lester E. Hopper  
LESTER E. HOPPER  
COL CAP

Dated

5/19/1986

## CIVIL AIR PATROL ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

Civil Air Patrol Oral History interviews were initiated in early 1982 by Lt. Col. Lester E. Hopper, CAP, of the Civil Air Patrol's National Historical Committee. The overall purpose of these interviews is to record for posterity the activities of selected members of the Civil Air Patrol.

The principle goal of these histories is to increase the base of knowledge relating to the early accomplishments of Civil Air Patrol members who in their own unique way contributed to the defense of our great country. Certainly not of a secondary nature is the preservation of the contributions of individuals as Civil Air Patrol continues its growth.

## FOREWORD

The following is a transcription of an oral history interview recorded on magnetic tape. Since only minor emendations have been made, the reader should consistently bear in mind that he is reading a transcript of spoken rather than the written word. Additionally, no attempt to confirm the accuracy of the information contained herein has been made. As a result, the transcript reflects the interviewee's personal recollections of a situation as he remembered it at the time of the interview.

Editorial notes and additions made by Civil Air Patrol historians are enclosed in brackets. If feasible, first name, rank or titles are also provided. Any additions, deletions and changes subsequently made to the transcript by the interviewee are not indicated. Researchers may wish to listen to the actual interview tape prior to citing the transcript.

## SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

Colonel Mitchell starts this oral history interview with his early experience with aviation and progresses to his joining CAP in December of 1941. He graphically portrays the many restrictions imposed on civilian flying during World War II. His description of tracking missions and the early development of the cadet program provide interesting information on these two areas. Based on his diverse CAP background he provides much needed information on the postwar activities within CAP.

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Conducted by:	Col. Louisa S. Morse, CAP

LM: In order to get started here, let me ask you a question or two. When did you first start flying?

JM: Originally in 1931, and then into 1932, and then we had some problems with the airplane and I didn't get to take any formalized flying lessons until about 1939, when I worked on my private, which I secured in 1942--shortly after the war started I secured my private license.

LM: You did not get your license until after the war had started? How did you get in CAP and when?

JM: Well, I was flying at Palwaukee Airport, and when we found out what had happened at Pearl Harbor, we all got together, we had a meeting on the Friday following December 7th at Palwaukee Airport, and there were about 20 or 30 of us that got together and we heard something about CAP being formed, we decided that we were going to do what we could. Following Pearl Harbor, everybody was grounded, right then, during that week, as far as private flying was concerned, and when we again started flying we had to file a flight plan, no matter what we did, and we could not, at least where we were in Palwaukee, we didn't have radio in our plane, and we couldn't file a flight plan to go anywhere unless we had radio in our Piper J5. It was a pain in the neck, these flight plans, but I forget now how long they lasted, but it was for some weeks or months after that until they finally disbanded the use of these flight plans. I was also flying for the company, the company airplane, and this was something that was creating problems for us because we were working on the

flight training of pilots that were in the War Training Service, formerly known as the Civilian Pilot Training Program, and I was involved in that sort of thing of setting up the insurance for these people, mostly fixed base operators and colleges and universities.

LM: When did you first serve on active duty? I understand that you did not live at a base, but when did you first participate in tracking missions?

JM: Well, that was in mid-June 1942. The regional headquarters was at Sky Harbor, and I was flying out of Palwaukee, and I had to fly over to Sky Harbor and get assigned to go and fly on a tracking mission at Fort Sheridan Army Air Base, right on the shores of Lake Michigan, and what we did there was we were assigned an altitude, I think I had a median altitude of between 800 and 1500 feet, stay within that vertical area, and then you sort of simulated a dog-fight, the idea being to train the three men on a manually operated anti-aircraft gun that was not firing at us but aiming at us, and we would fly above the area and it was sort of a dog-fight thing. You'd go straight and then do a loop and then do a wing over and other things like that to make them try to follow you.

LM: You were trying to dodge them.

JM: We were trying to dodge them theoretically. That's right.

LM: Well, then this was the tracking mission part of CAP. What kind of an aircraft did you fly?

JM: I was flying a Piper J-5 Cruiser with an NC 38577. I was part owner of this airplane. It had a 75 horsepower Continental engine and was a three place, pilot in front, two passengers in the rear.

LM: Now this tracking, how long do you suppose you continued to

do this tracking. Did you do many flights?

JM: No, we didn't because apparently--I believe I did some more tracking for a longer period--just a minute, let me check this out.

LM: You say you realize now you did some tracking prior to the June date.

JM: Yes, and I find in looking at my log book that I have a couple of entries on April 12, 1942, with that same airplane, the Piper J-5 Cruiser, and did that type of tracking at Fort Sheridan on the shores of Lake Michigan.

LM: O.K. Now after you completed this tracking work, or possibly while you were still doing it, were you doing other types of flying for CAP?

JM: Yes, we were. We started to put together--but first of all, by that time, we were a recognized squadron. It was the squadron, Palwaukee Squadron, and we were working on interesting young people, high school age and older, to get interested in aviation with the idea that when they became of age they could enter the Army Air Corps as basic recruits.

LM: Pre-induction training, in other words.

JM: This was induction training. In that case what we did was we took them up and let them fly the airplane and showed them how to fly it and that sort of thing. I was just a private pilot at the time so I wasn't doing any formal instruction then, but we did get the young people interested and we had a large complement of cadets in our squadron, and aside from the flying, we had a good drill sergeant, who had gone to, I believe, Culver Military Academy, his name was Harry Gouche, and he was a very good drill sergeant. And then we got into competition with some of the other squadrons around the area, and this brought a lot of the

young people out.

LM: Well, that was the early stage of the cadet program, then. How many cadets do you suppose you had in the squadron?

JM: Well, at one time I think we must have had better than 50 cadets.

LM: That was a pretty good size squadron then.

JM: Yes.

LM: Did you have an assignment within the squadron?

JM: Yes, I was--when we got formalized, and I don't remember exactly when that was, but I do know that I became a regular lieutenant, CAP, and I was in Operations.

LM: This was all in Illinois, I believe.

JM: That's right. I lived there until 1970.

LM: Did you have any military service before or during the war?

JM: No, I never did.

LM: Tell us a little bit about the squadron activities in wartime. You said they had a good drill sergeant. What else did they do. Do you remember what type of classes you had?

JM: Yes, we had navigation classes. Basically, we were using the private pilot's requirements for map reading and deviation and variation and weather, meteorology, and we had some people that were very well trained in meteorology, and we used some of the flight instructors at Palwaukee, who talked to the young people particularly, and many of those of us who were older, on the matter of flying safety. Later on, we started trying to

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simulate dropping so-called bombs, and we used little bags of flour, in small paper bags, and flying at about 500 to 800 feet, trying to hit some spots in some of the fields nearby the airport, that were good targets, because we weren't flying over any built-up areas, and that got to be a very interesting thing. In addition to that we started to get into short-field take-off and landing work, coming over a barrier. We felt that the time might come, if Chicago was attacked, when we might have to land on boulevards or parks or golf courses or other areas, where small aircraft could, if necessary, to maybe assist the medics or others in connection with an attack by our enemy, so-called enemy.

LM: I recall something about our having surveyed the state for locations where we could land in an emergency, if the fields were bombed out or destroyed. Do you recall doing anything like that?

JM: Yes, that was quite a bit later. That was during the Berlin airlift, the Cold War.

LM: I think you're right. That was later.

JM: That was the Cold War. That's getting ahead of the wartime. I know I personally, in fact I still have the pictures, to this day, of all the areas we picked in and around Chicago that we felt we might get aircraft in on. I still have those, by the way, and they could become part of--not that they would be useful, but at least we could see what was built up in Chicago at that time. And in my log book, I know I have that recorded, and I could look it up.

LM: O.K. Let me ask you another question about the wartime activities. Do you recall whether your squadron was recruiting or feeding people in to Coast Patrol or the other active duty missions?

JM: Yes, there were some people. I don't recall from our

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squadron, specifically any of the men--because what would happen, they wouldn't show up and then somebody would tell us that they signed up for Coastal Patrol, and that was all we heard. We didn't know who did it or how it was done or--

LM: You didn't know much about Coast Patrol.

JM: Except we knew what was going on.

LM: Well, I didn't even know what was going on. We knew people were going.

JM: Well, the reason I knew we were going was that I was working for an aviation insurance company, and there were 22 bases along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and our firm insured all of them, and because of that I got to know quite a bit about what was going on in wartime.

LM: That's interesting. Well, you didn't visit the bases, though?

JM: No. I did not visit those bases, because my area of my company work was the midwest.

LM: Well, you were inland. You didn't have the coastal areas.

JM: No, it was the mid-west--Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Illinois, that was the area that I covered at that time.

LM: O.K. Now, let's go on a little bit with your experiences in CAP, not necessarily the wartime ones. You were in Operations in the squadron. Did you ever become the squadron commander?

JM: No, I didn't. I took different jobs and helped put on air shows and things like that, and a fellow by the name of Charlie Richardson became Illinois Wing Commander, and I think that must

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have been around 1950 or 49 or somewhere in that area (April 1949), and he asked me to come on the wing, and I went on the wing at that time.

LM: Do you remember what your wing staff assignment was?

JM: Yes, I was the Civil Defense Coordinator for the state of Illinois for the Illinois Wing, and I was also tied up with the Aeronautical--Bureau of Aeronautics for Illinois, and I was on an interim commission at one time, when they were thinking about disbanding the Bureau of Aeronautics, and on that committee we came to the conclusion that it would be a mistake, and we turned our report in to the Governor, that the Department of Aeronautics should be preserved.

LM: Should continue. O.K. Well then from Civil Defense Coordinator did you go directly from that to Wing Commander?

JM: No, I spent quite a little while as CD Coordinator--

LM: As a wing staff officer, did you have any interesting experiences?

JM: Yes, one of them was in July of 1952, the Illinois Wing was assigned five L-16s, Aeronca L-16s, and I along with 9 other pilots, we wanted two pilots to an airplane, were flown by Air Force to San Marcos Air Force Base in Texas, and we picked them up and flew them back to Chicago, making stops at--San Marcos to Rockdale, Texas, Rockdale to Palestine, Texas, Palestine to Texarkana, Arkansas, and from there to Little Rock, and from Little Rock to Walnut Ridge, Walnut Ridge to Chester, Missouri, and from there to Decatur, Illinois, and then finally we delivered the airplanes to Decatur, Illinois, no, in Chicago to Rubincam Airport for the wing. It was a very uneventful flight, nothing happened of any consequence, we had no radio in any of these, and we were limited in how long we could stay in the air, because not having radio, technically we weren't

supposed to fly more than an hour and forty minutes on any single flight. I don't know why, but that was their rules, and I know on one of those flights from Palestine, Texas, to Texarkana, it took me two hours and five minutes, but nobody said anything.

LM: Well, in other words, the airplanes were in flyable condition when you picked them up.

JM: They were in flyable condition, and we had no problems with them.

LM: They were the initial batch of L-16s that the CAP got from the Air Force.

JM: I don't think that was initial. I think we got some before that, because I brought one -- no, wait a minute, I delivered-- oh, I did so much of that.

LM: (Reading Mitchell's log book). "L-16 local - San Marcos." That was a test flight.

JM: I had to accept it, that's right.

LM: I believe that was about the time that the initial L-16s were acquired.

JM: Is that right?

LM: I think so.

JM: You would know that.

LM: Well, before that we had L-4s and we had other planes, but we got L-16s and then we got L-5s after that again.

JM: Well, what I could say here is that everyone who was going to be in command, we made commanders in each of the groups of two

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pilots, and each of the commanders was assigned an airplane, and they made a local flight with it before we started out, and here we are, I did an hour in mine, and I accepted it on behalf of the wing.

LM: Good. Well, that's great. Well, then you subsequently became the wing commander. Were you deputy commander before that?

JM: Yes, I was deputy commander for about a year before Dr. Gherman, I succeeded him as wing commander in 1958, I believe it was, you can look that up.

LM: I have the dates. (23 August 1958 to 28 September 1961.)

JM: I was on for three years anyway.

LM: Then after you were wing commander, what did you do?

JM: Well, I --

LM: I think you were on a couple of national committees. You were never region commander.

JM: No, I was never regional commander. I was chairman of the National Insurance Committee, let's see--

LM: For quite a few years.

JM: Quite a few years, '62 to--

LM: And now you're on the Historical Committee.

JM: Now I'm on the Historical Committee. Right.

LM: O. K. Let me ask you another question. What do you think of the value of the Historical Committee?

JM: I think in the long run it's going to be one of the most valuable things that CAP ever did in peacetime.

LM: And why?

JM: Well, I think the record of CAP during the war was something to be proud of. I firmly believe that people who get involved in CAP are good people, and they are good citizens, and it's a mark of a good patriot.

LM: Do you think that the CAP history is generally known?

JM: No, I don't believe it is generally known, and that might be something that could be worked on from another point of view at National Headquarters.

LM: What do you think of the Oral History Program?

JM: This program?

LM: This program of getting oral histories.

JM: I think it's invaluable, because, as in my case, I forget a lot of the things that I did until I look in my log book or talk to somebody that we did something together and this way they are preserved and they might be of interest and be something to be interesting for other people to know what we did during those days.

LM: Well, I certainly agree with you. I think there is an awful lot that has never been written, and it won't be written unless we get people to talk about it, and get it down in this way.

JM: I fully agree with you there.

LM: Do you have anything you'd like to offer in the way of additional recollections, anecdotes?

JM: Well, I'd like to get together with you again some time, after I have made a study of some of the things that we did. For example, I took 52 cadets down to Texarkana and we went through the jet flight school, spent, I think it was about a week there, and every one of us got a minimum of five hours in T-33 jets.

LM: Was that a national--

JM: That was a national encampment, right, and that was a tremendous thing to us.

LM: Was that the Air Training Command Indoctrination Course?

JM: I guess it was. It was a fighter group down there.

LM: Oh, the Jet Orientation Course?

JM: Jet Orientation Course.

LM: You were an escort then--

JM: I was the escort. I was the senior officer. And then I was the senior officer on a trip to Israel, where I had 15 cadets from six countries, including the United States.

LM: What year was that? Do you recall?

JM: 1964. And then again in 1970 I had three cadets I took to, I accompanied to Australia.

LM: Oh, really? I didn't realize you had done that. Was that the first time that cadets had gone to Australia?

JM: No, I don't know, I don't believe, no, there must have been

others before that because they seemed to know what to do, just like the Israelis.

LM: What year was that?

JM: That was in 1970.

LM: 1970. And you had three cadets. Where did you go in Australia, was that New Zealand or Australia?

JM: That was Australia. We had the New Zealand group, and we went into Christchurch, going and coming, dropping them off and picking them up, and we spent a day in Christchurch.

LM: Were there cadets from other countries?

JM: Not in that group. There were three American boys. One from California, one was from Pennsylvania, and I can't remember where the third was from.

LM: They were CAP cadets but this was not with foreign cadets in the same group?

JM: That's right, just American cadets.

LM: Because in Europe most of the groups have cadets from other countries.

JM: Yes.

LM: Well, that's interesting. I did not realize that you had been on IACE twice. Did you have other special activities--encampments?

JM: Yes. Oh, gosh, yes. Oh, I know. You see you start thinking and--

LM: Well, that's why it's good to ask questions.

JM: We started a glider program. In 1963 the Illinois Wing, and I had just stepped down as Wing Commander, we set up a glider program for cadets 14 years and older at a place called Crystal Lake Airport, in Illinois, and we were using an L-5 as a tow plane. I did both towing as well as instructing. I had a glider instructor rating along with my regular aircraft rating, and we ran that program for cadets from 1963, and I think it's still running to this day, as far as I can recall.

LM: This started out as a wing activity?

JM: It was a wing activity, and later on in this thing we had to move over to another field, and in May of 1964, a farmer by the name of Aavang, near McHenry, Illinois, offered us his private strip to run our glider program activities, and was very cooperative, and we had several gliders out there, and that was run from '64 on. During the summer, later on, we had a week's glider program at Eastern Illinois University, in which these cadets would go down to Eastern Illinois University and be based in the university housing, and we had a local airport there, and we ran mostly a glider instructional program, but also we gave instruction to some of the pilots that wanted to learn to fly regular single engine aircraft, and I was involved in that quite substantially, and one of our men that was really involved in it was Lt. Col. Ray Johnson, and a guy by the name of Vic Heurlin. Vic Heurlin was a very accomplished pilot in every direction. He was a corporate pilot for a Lockheed business jet, and he was also Air Force, I think he's a colonel in the Air Force now, I don't know what he was then, but in Air Force Reserve. He was very interested in this program and he was the man that really masterminded the organization and running of these. Every year we'd take these kids down to Eastern Illinois University and run them through this program, and inside of a week, we've always soloed every one of them that went down, in gliders.

LM: That's marvelous.

JM: Well, that was just one of the activities that I feel was a very, very good thing. The part that we did on an on-going basis, from year to year out of Aavang and Crystal Lake Airports, that was the beginning of a lot of these, where the kids would get a taste of glider flying, and we had two tow planes going and I think at one time up to three gliders out at the Aavang Field, and every Saturday and Sunday, we'd do this on the week-ends, for the kids as well as ourselves, because most of us were working. On July 4th of 1964, our little glider program was invited to participate in the rededication of Midway Airport opening up to scheduled airline flying again. We flew one of the gliders from Aavang Airport at McHenry, Illinois, to the Midway Airport, which is on the south side of Chicago. It took us about an hour to fly that far, and it was only about 40 or 50 miles. I flew the tow plane, and one of the other men flew the glider.

LM: You towed it all the way?

JM: Yes, towed it all the way. I was the tow plane pilot.

LM: That was quite a job.

JM: It got hairy at times.

LM: You had quite a varied career in Civil Air Patrol.

JM: Oh, I had a lot of things that I don't even remember.

LM: Well, that's the way we all do. There are lots of things we don't remember.

JM: I know you did too.

LM: You've given us quite a few interesting anecdotes, and brought out some things that many of us never knew or won't

remember.

JM: Oh, before we leave the gliders, I had another nice experience. I think I've got it in here some where. When I was on the trip to Israel. I flew a glider in Israel.

LM: Oh, how fascinating! Did the cadets fly gliders too?

JM: Yes, they did. Because they were two place gliders, and an Israeli pilot would fly there, but he let us fly them.

LM: I know the cadets who went to Switzerland all had to have either student pilot tickets or private licenses and they did get to fly, gliders.

JM: Those 15 cadets that I had in Israel. I not only flew the glider but I flew a fighter plane, and I did a segmented roll. I had never even tried that before, and I did a segmented roll. I was up for an hour in a Fuga Magistar, Israeli Air Force jet. And that was July 24th of 1964. I flew an hour. And you know the funny thing about that. This guy was letting me do all the flying. We were at a party the night before, and you know we sort of made this up. And anyhow he let me take it and I said "Can I roll it?" He said "Go ahead and try it." I was going to start doing my segmented roll, and he said "Wait a minute." We were right out near Tel Aviv, and Israel is only ten miles wide there from the Mediterranean Sea to Jordan, and he said where you're headed you'd be right over Jordan territory and they'd shoot us down. So we had to go north and south instead of east and west. (Laughter)

LM: Even in those days there were border problems.

JM: That's right. Oh, heck. We were in a kibbutz on the Sea of Galilea, and at the kibbutz we were in, there were two people working in the fields, and one of them was killed and the other one was wounded very badly while we were there. The Syrians just

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shot them right down.

LM: Well, unless you have something more to end or say, I think we'll just shut off the tape, and say thanks for your participation in this Historical Committee Oral History Interview Program and we will get back to you with the finished product.

JM: Thank you very much.