

# Civil Air Patrol Oral History Interview

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Col Lester L. Wolff

14 November 2018



NATIONAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
HEADQUARTERS CAP

**CIVIL AIR PATROL INTERVIEW RELEASE FORM**

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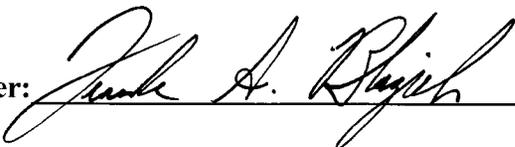
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**Date:** 14 November 2018

**CIVIL AIR PATROL  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**Interview**

**of**

**Colonel Lester Lionel Wolff, CAP**

**by**

**Colonel Frank A. Blazich, Jr., CAP**

**Date: 14 November 2018**

**Location: East Norwich, New York**

## **FOREWORD**

The following is the transcript of an oral history interview recorded on digital media. Since only minor emendations have been made, the reader should consistently bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken rather than the written word. Additionally, no attempt to confirm the historical accuracy of the statements has been made. 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 the National Historian Emeritus are enclosed in brackets. Where pertinent, footnotes have been added to provide additional information for the reader. Any additions, deletions, and changes subsequently made to the transcript by the interviewee are not indicated.

## **SUMMARY OF CONTENTS**

In this oral history interview, Colonel Lester L. Wolff reflects on his service in Civil Air Patrol (CAP) from entry in World War II, as co-founder of the Congressional Squadron in 1968, and on the present and future of the corporation. As a Democrat representing New York's 3rd and later 6th Congressional Districts, Wolff served in the House of Representatives from 1965 to 1981. During his tenure he elevated the visibility of CAP among his colleagues and sponsored or introduced legislation to aid CAP in its roles and missions.

Colonel Wolff begins by describing his educational background prior to joining the CAP and Congress. Although medically ineligible for military service, he joined CAP as a member of the New York Wing and participated briefly in coastal patrol duty as well as serving as a public affairs officer for wing headquarters. Although he left CAP in the early 1950s after serving as a squadron commander in Queens, Wolff returned to the organization in the 1960s. Sensing an opportunity to benefit both CAP and the U.S. Air Force, Wolff co-founded a unique squadron in 1968 with California Congressman Jerry Pettis. Known as the Congressional Squadron, the bipartisan unit welcomed members of the House and Senate, as well as staffers interested in aviation and CAP service. Wolff served as commander of the squadron from its founding until leaving the house in 1981, and discusses how the squadron's role in increasing awareness of CAP among Congress.

Still active in public service, Wolff continues to follow CAP activities and share his ideas with the organization. On the cusp of his 100th birthday, Wolff reflects upon the past 77 years of CAP and discusses the potential that current and future technologies and activities have in store for CAP over the coming years.

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## CIVIL AIR PATROL ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Recorded Interview with: Col Lester Lionel Wolff, CAP  
Date of Interview: 14 November 2018  
Location: East Norwich, New York  
Conducted by: Col Frank E. Blazich, Jr., CAP

**B:** Okay, for record this is November 14, 2018, I'm Colonel Frank Blazich here in the home of Congressman and Civil Air Patrol Colonel Lester L. Wolff, and Congressman, good morning, sir.

**W:** Good morning.

**B:** The first question is pretty basic and for record purposes, if you could please state your full name?

**W:** Lester Lionel Wolff.

**B:** Your current address, sir?

**W:** 2 Split Rock Road, East Norwich – actually it's Muttontown, New York, not East Norwich.

**B:** Okay. And your date and place of birth?

**W:** January 4, 1919, and I was born in Harlem.

**B:** Okay. Could you talk a little bit about your education as far as you can recall?

**W:** Well, I went to school, started school in Manhattan, I don't know where we were living at that time, uh, it was in the Washington Heights area, and went on to high,

school, school in another area of Washington Heights, and went to George Washington High School, the same high school that Kissinger went to.<sup>1</sup>

**B:** Oh wow.

**W:** Which is interesting because our paths crossed many times after that.

**B:** Understandably so.

**W:** He was a couple years behind me, and we interfaced with each other many times over the years when I was in Congress.

**B:** Okay. Next question is very broad: could you describe some of your childhood and upbringing, any of your earliest memories, maybe what your folks did for a living, things like that.

**W:** It's hard to go back to that, but I can tell you that I played with airplanes, model airplanes as a kid, that I remember.

**B:** Okay.

**W:** The relationship to what you are trying to develop, I had airplane kits that we constructed together with balsa.

**B:** With rubber bands?

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<sup>1</sup> Known today as the George Washington Educational Campus, the school is located at 549 Audubon Avenue at West 193rd Street, Washington Heights, Manhattan. The high school itself was founded in 1919. Henry A. Kissinger (1923- ) attended the school from 1938-1940. He served as U.S. Secretary of State from 1973-1977 and as U.S. National Security Advisor from 1969-1975.

**W:** Rubber bands, and just the ones that you threw. Very light, balsa, and sometimes uh, I worked on the idea of model kits.

**B:** Okay. Did you have any siblings?

**W:** I'm sorry?

**B:** Did you have any siblings, sir, any brothers or sisters?

**W:** No, I'm a lone wolf.

**B:** Lone wolf, alright. When did you really, uh, maybe after high school, perhaps while going to college, what career did you see for yourself, what were you interested in studying or doing?

**W:** The person that I, uh, that interested me in aviation was the fact that I wanted to be an aeronautical engineer, and had a friend I remember that was an aeronautical engineer and had gone to Alabama, University of Alabama and I was headed in that direction, but, uh, actually my parents unfortunately did not have enough money for me to go to a school that was outside of New York because of living conditions and the cost. And, uh, I applied to NYU and got into NYU which was an easy school to get into at the time and very cheap.<sup>2</sup> I remember the fact that it was about ten dollars a point at that time.

**B:** How times have changed!

**W:** And I just attended my eightieth reunion at NYU.

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<sup>2</sup> New York University is a private university, founded in 1831 and located in Greenwich Village, New York City.

**B:** What class was that then that you graduated in?

**W:** 1939.

**B:** Class of '39, during the Depression, too. What did you study, what was your degree field?

**W:** Marketing and economics, journalism, those were my three areas of interest.

**B:** Did you see possibly then working in the aviation field with those degrees?

**W:** I don't know, I didn't. What happened is the fact that I gravitated to the journalism major and went to work for, uh, the new house newspapers, uh, for a number of years.<sup>3</sup>

**B:** Okay. Next question is one that a lot of people perhaps get asked in oral histories. Describe if you could when you first began to hear about the war. You graduated in '39, when do you start to become aware of the conflict not just in Asia but in Europe?

**W:** Oh, all the time. Uh, and, uh, I became aware of it through friends of mind who really had interest in the Holocaust and that's what really motivated me I believe at the time because it was overseas some place. Not too many people were really that focused on what was going on.

**B:** With that being said, do you recall hearing about the bombing of Pearl Harbor and American entry into war. If memory serves, could you provide your initial reaction or thoughts about that?

**W:** It is really hard to go back to that.

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1940s, Wolff worked for both the *Long Island Press* and *The Bronx Home News*.

**B:** No problem. Were you part of any civil aviation organizations prior –

**W:** No.

**B:** Okay. So how did you first hear about the Civil Air Patrol?

**W:** A friend of mine came to me and told me about this organization that was going on and, uh, I at that time, I had tried to enlist in naval aviation and I was rejected because of asthma.

**B:** Were you listed then as 4-F?<sup>4</sup>

**W:** I was 4-F, but I wanted to do something and this was the first thing that came along that permitted me in some way to participate.

**B:** And at that time, New York's mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia.<sup>5</sup>

**W:** Fiorello LaGuardia was an old World War I pilot.

**B:** He was a bomber pilot.

**W:** And another friend of mine, uh, Cord Meyer, who became the wing commander, uh, for CAP, for New York. And Cord was a pilot in the Lafayette Escadrille, uh, and he

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<sup>4</sup> Classification by the U.S. Selective Service System whereby a registrant is not acceptable for military service, having been found not qualified for service in the Armed Forces by a Military Entrance Processing Station under established physical, mental, or moral standards.

<sup>5</sup> Fiorello H. LaGuardia (1882-1947) served as mayor of New York City from 1934-1945. From 1917-1919, he served as a major in the U.S. Army Air Service, commanding a unit of Caproni Ca.44 bombers on the Italian-Austrian front. From May 1941 to February 1943, LaGuardia served as director of the federal Office of Civilian Defense (OCD) and under his leadership the OCD established Civil Air Patrol in December 1941.

was in Queens and I was living in Queens and we got together, and it became my interest.<sup>6</sup>

**B:** And so, then you become a member of CAP I gather?

**W:** Yes.

**B:** Can you describe or recall the atmosphere of your community when you decided to join CAP.

**W:** I don't understand.

**B:** I guess I should ask, so when you join CAP, it is a uniformed organization and you become a uniformed member, were people confused, did they view you as someone in the military, how did they view your work?

**W:** They didn't know, we didn't know either.

**B:** Ha ha.

**W:** We were quasi soldiers of fortune, so to speak, a bunch of gadflies really, but we found that there was a mission, and that mission really proved to be a critical mission. The whole idea of making airplanes – we had nothing left, as I recall, there was nothing left in the Atlantic because whatever resources we had went to Europe or went to Asia and we were left unarmed.

**B:** The mission you are talking about is the antisubmarine patrol mission.

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<sup>6</sup> Cord Meyer (1895-1964) received Fédération Aéronautique Internationale Airplane Pilot's Certificate No. 176 and in 1918 flew in the U.S. Army Air Service's 103rd Aero Squadron, whose members previously flew as the Lafayette Escadrille, an American volunteer aviation unit begun in 1916 operating under the French *Aéronautique Militaire*. Meyer served as New York Wing Commander from 1949-1952 and as Northeast Region Director, later Commander, from 1952-1956.

**W:** Right.

**B:** Could you talk a little bit more about learning about it and your involvement with that.

**W:** Well, actually I didn't have a ticket so therefore I couldn't fly by myself and I didn't have an airplane, so CAP gave me the job of trying to be a gopher, and not only as a gopher but I did fly and I had taken some flight lessons before the war, actually.

**B:** Now was that with the Civilian Pilot Training Program?<sup>7</sup>

**W:** Yes.

**B:** Okay.

**W:** And, but I never got my ticket.

**B:** Gotcha, okay.

**W:** So. I had to fly second seat.

**B:** So. you were an observer then?

**W:** That's right, but in addition to that, uh, as I recall I think I told you over the phone, I was trying to find Ed Lyons who was the base commander of – I said 7, you said 17.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Civilian Pilot Training Program was a federally-sponsored program administered from 1938-1944. Federal funds provided college men and women up to 72 hours of ground school training and 35-50 hours of flight instruction at college and university flying facilities. The program's purpose was to increase the nation's civilian pilot community in regard to military preparedness.

<sup>8</sup> Coastal Patrol Base No. 17, Riverhead, NY, located at Suffolk Airport, was commanded by CAP Major Ralph Earle and operated from 18 August 1942 to 31 August 1943.

**B:** 17, Base 17, Riverhead, New York.

**W:** And he would turn over the stick to me because he knew I had some flying experience, because it was a very boring type of thing and yet it had a significant role in a turning point of the war, because at that time most people didn't realize what was happening, that the war was on our shores.

**B:** Once the German U-boats abandoned the East Coast as a target-rich environment, what did you find yourself doing in CAP then? What did you find yourself doing with CAP then in the latter stages of the war once the U-boat threat was diminished and the coastal patrol effort ended?

**W:** I got involved in the cadet program and then because of the fact that I had newspaper experience I became a public relations officer. Uh, and got a lot of celebrities involved in publicizing the work of CAP and enlisting people in CAP as such.

**B:** Do any names kind to mind of some of these celebrities?

**W:** There was one I remember – Joe E. Brown, who was a movie star, and we did a flyover in memory of his son who was lost in the war.<sup>9</sup> There was someone, some woman star from *Kiss Me, Kate* and we used her as a kind of spokesperson at the time.<sup>10</sup>

**B:** Okay. As a public relations officer, you were really part of the wing staff at the time?

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<sup>9</sup> Actor and comedian Joe E. Brown (1891-1973) traveled extensively for the United Service Organizations (USO) in World War II. His son, Captain Don E. Brown, died on 8 October 1942 when his A-20 Havoc bomber crashed near Palm Springs, California on a ferrying flight. In October 1945, in recognition of his work entertaining troops around the globe, the U.S. Army awarded Brown the Bronze Star for meritorious service, one of only two civilians (other being correspondent Ernie Pyle) to receive this recognition for wartime service.

<sup>10</sup> This is believed to be actress Patricia Morison (1915-2018) who played the lead in the original 1948 Broadway stage production of *Kiss Me, Kate*.

**W:** Yes.

**B:** Were you in a squadron at any time, in a community?

**W:** Yes.

**B:** Okay.

**W:** Yes, in fact I became a squadron commander out here in Long Island.

**B:** Which community in Long Island do you recall?

**W:** Well, it was in Queens.

**B:** Okay, probably Queens then.

**W:** Yes, and I was living there at the time.

**B:** And that would have been about late '44-45? Mid-forties?

**W:** Mid-forties.

**B:** Okay. How big was your squadron, do you remember?

**W:** Oh, we had about 40 people.

**B:** Cadets and seniors?

**W:** Both. We then built up the squadron to a point where we had really a large number of cadets and I put on a show, I remember I put on a show at Rockefeller Center.<sup>11</sup>

**B:** A drill event?

**W:** A drill event that was part of the exchange program that Gill Robb Wilson had started?

**B:** Part of the International Air Cadet Exchange?

**W:** Yes. Uh, and, uh, then I recall we conducted the tests for the Air Force written tests for cadets for the Air Force.

**B:** For aviation training?

**W:** Yes.

**B:** Okay. So then at the war's conclusion, a simple question to ask is why did you decided to stay with CAP?

**W:** Well, I felt that CAP was the core of something that was good for youth and also the fact that it had a role, it was seeking its role actually, and I stayed in CAP for a couple of years and then dropped off, and was brought back into CAP when I entered Congress.

**B:** Ahh, so really in the whole time of the 1950s you out of CAP at that point?

**W:** Yes.

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<sup>11</sup> A 22-acre complex comprising 19 commercial buildings located between 48th and 51st Street in New York City.

**B:** You would say you left CAP about late forties?

**W:** I really can't recall.

**B:** Okay, so when you first enter Congress, January 3, 1965, you weren't then a CAP member?

**W:** I was still considered to be a CAP member, I was a major.

**B:** Okay, then could you describe how your status as a CAP member was seen by fellow members of Congress. Had they even heard of CAP?

**W:** No, but the thing that I found, I found a role for CAP in that all the services had some sort of organization on the hill, and the Air Force had none, and I thought "gee, this is strange." And then really my CAP background came to the fore, and I said "look, this is a good opportunity for doing something" and I enlisted Jerry Pettis, from California, to start what is known as the Congressional Squadron.<sup>12</sup>

**B:** And that begins in 1968, correct?

**W:** Yes.

**B:** So, basic question to ask – you notice the Navy has something, the Army has something, I presume the Marines may have had their own separate little thing, even though they are part of the Navy Department.

**W:** Right.

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<sup>12</sup> Congressman Jerry L. Pettis (1916-1975) represented the 33rd and 37th Congressional Districts of California from 1967-75. An aviator in the U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II, Pettis also served as a pilot for United Airlines prior to entering Congress. He died on 14 February 1975 when his Beechcraft Bonanza crashed near Cherry Valley, California in adverse weather.

**B:** Okay, so the Air Force has nothing. Did you reach out to the Air Force between '65 and '68 when establishing the squadron, or did you just set it up?

**W:** No, I reached out to the Air Force and they helped me at that time. That's when I said that this fellow Frankenberg became assigned to me to help me with formation and what have you.<sup>13</sup>

**B:** What was the Air Force's initial reaction when you approached them about this unit?

**W:** Well, it was their political element which every service has and their need for funding was such that I had the easy access on that account. But the other part of it, for them, CAP is somewhat of a, kind of, trying to be soldiers.

**B:** Amateur, wannabe?

**W:** Yes, and something like that.

**B:** Not full-fledged?

**W:** Yes, and that has troubled me down through the years until today, because I think that the other services have been able to gain status that CAP has never been able to gain. What I mean by that is the WAFS –

**B:** The WASPS, yes, the Women Airforce Service Pilots?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Frankenberg (1932-2003) was a native of Newport, Rhode Island and a 1956 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. Pursuing an Air Force career, he served two tours in Vietnam as a Lockheed C-130 Hercules pilot and after retiring from the Air Force worked as the Operations Officer at Reagan National Airport, Arlington, VA.

<sup>14</sup> In operation from August 1943 to December 1944, 1,074 female pilots tested and ferried aircraft or trained other military pilots in order to free male pilots for combat operations during World War II. The WASPs were the first civilian American women to fly military aircraft in World War II.

**W:** Right, they gained status as veterans and CAP was never given that recognition. I think they should be given that recognition. I think it is important to recognize that we were part of the force at that time.<sup>15</sup>

**B:** Absolutely, and we lost a number of people in World War II that received no benefits.

**W:** Right, and even to the fact that they gave the Air Medal to a number of members.

**B:** Yes, sir. So really the idea of a special CAP squadron in Congress, the Congressional Squadron as we know it today, it comes to mind as an idea of public relations or an awareness element among the members of Congress?

**W:** And helping the Air Force get their message across.

**B:** Were your colleagues in Congress excited about this new unit? Did you find a lot of open acceptance for it?

**W:** Yes, I did. Why? Because CAP had grassroots areas for the members which was something that every member wants, some organization of support, so I got members coming in very well. In fact, I think we had two presidents that had been members of the Congressional Squadron.

**B:** Which two?

**W:** Jerry Ford is one.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Public Law 95-202, "The G.I. Bill Improvement Act of 1977," granted veteran status for former members of the WASPs. Honorable Discharge certificates were issued to former members in 1979, followed by awarding of the World War II Victory Medal in 1984.

<sup>16</sup> President Gerald R. Ford, Jr. (1913-2006) served as the 38th President of the United States from 1974-1977, as 40th Vice President of the United States from 1973-1974, and as a member of Congress from 1949-1973 representing Michigan's 5th Congressional District.

**B:** Okay.

**W:** I don't remember if Johnson came in or not, but I think that there were two presidents, and I'm not sure of the second one.<sup>17</sup>

**B:** Okay.

**W:** But, uh, certainly, uh a number of other, uh, vice president I'm not sure, but all I know is we got a lot of excitement out of that. I sold members on the idea that "this is a great grassroots organization, get ahold of them and they can be of help to you in the future."

**B:** I gather then you really didn't encounter any resistance to establishing the squadron, and the Air Force recognized the value of it.

**W:** Yes.

**B:** What kinds of resources did the Air Force provide for you in the first years?

**W:** None.

**B:** So, no resources, okay.

**W:** None at the start. Then we decided that we would have an active mission-oriented group for search and rescue.

**B:** Can you tell me a little about that then, when you all began flying missions?

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<sup>17</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973), 36th President of the United States.

**W:** That was something that we had old pilots that had joined with us and we expanded the Congressional Squadron to mean not only members of Congress but staff.

**B:** Okay, and that would have been late sixties, early seventies?

**W:** I'm not sure.

**B:** Okay, some time back then. Where did you all fly out of, what airport, do you remember?

**W:** I'm sorry?

**B:** What airport did you fly out of?

**W:** Uh, it was Bolling I think.<sup>18</sup>

**B:** They still had a field then. Okay, and these were planes that belonged to private individuals?

**W:** Yes, uh, there was only, until we got some resources from the Air Force itself, when they, uh, found out that we had some success in finding people.

**B:** Did you fly in any of those early search and rescue missions?

**W:** No, I did not.

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<sup>18</sup> Bolling Field, later Air Force Base, is located in Washington, DC and operated as a fixed-wing military airfield from 1917 to 1962. In 2010 it merged with Naval Support Facility Anacostia to become Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling. Since 1976, Congressional Squadron has flown missions out of Joint Base Andrews, Maryland.

**B:** Okay, and you were being more of a commander, organizing, handing more of the administrative elements of it?

**W:** Right.

**B:** Okay. Do any particular missions that you recall stick out in your mind?

**W:** No, but I know that we had, we were credited with one or two finds, but I don't recall them.

**B:** So, in addition to flying search and rescue missions, what were some of the other functions that you all would do as a squadron?

**W:** Uh, well again, they did some, uh, emergency, uh, when there were some emergencies such as floods, tornadoes, or what have you, CAP had a role in participating in those searches. But then I got the idea, I became chairman of the narcotics committee, and I got the idea that low-flying aircraft would be an eye that you couldn't escape, let me put it that way.<sup>19</sup> And as a result of that, CAP took on that mission and it is very successful, and continues to be successful.

**B:** And did the early efforts with the counter narcotics flights, did the Congressional Squadron provide a kind of test-bed, if you will, to show people who were dubious about the use of aircraft. Were you able to say fly anyone, explain to them "here's how it works"?

**W:** I don't think they understood it, frankly. They didn't understand, and I brought it over to the anti-sub patrol because of the fact that the only thing that was really of value at that time was low-flying aircraft and the same thing here, we have another war, a war

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<sup>19</sup> Wolff served as Chairman of the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control from 1975-1981.

on drugs, and you use whatever you can. We had no, no real ability except the idea of visual surveillance on the border, so it became a major mission of CAP. And then also the idea of education, which I think became a very important role for CAP and as well I liken the idea of CAP narcotics mission to the idea of two things. Number one, making people aware of how drugs were getting into the country but number two, that as a youth movement to, in some how or another, get CAP's, uh, the profile of CAP, uh, up in the anti-drug effort, keep kids off the street. I mean, they had Boy Scouts, but no one was really paying attention to the kids with the whole narcotics effort, which is evident today with the opioid crisis.

**B:** How did the Air Force react to some of these proposals that you were bringing out?

**W:** They reacted very well. It depended upon who was SecAF, that was very important.<sup>20</sup>

**B:** Could you elaborate about that?

**W:** Some of the secretaries, and I can't give you the names, and undersecretaries for recruitment and that sort were much more interested in CAP than others. Others kind of wrote CAP off as some of these guys that want to play soldier.

**B:** Understood, but others recognized the value.

**W:** Oh, recognized the value in a number of different areas. Recruitment was the first area, and second in the idea the Air Force couldn't publicize their efforts in what they were doing but CAP could so it was used in that fashion. But I was always resentful of the fact that they were not pushing hard enough for recognition of what the CAP was all about.

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<sup>20</sup> Secretary of the United States Air Force.

**B:** We'll come back some of that in a little bit. One question that comes to mind is did the Congressional Squadron host any receptions of anything of that nature to bring Air Force officials in a kind of relaxed environment to meet with Congress.

**W:** Oh sure, oh the receptions have been of great value, uh, bringing in – don't forget all the most important people in the minds of a member is his constituent. And here you are bringing the constituents, really, of your different wing staffs, uh, youth to meet the member. And the member always wanted a picture.

**B:** Oh of course. Now did you invite CAP members of your district to your office?

**W:** Yes, and, uh, I always tried to keep up even though I am semi-retired from the business of being of that nature. I've kept a liaison with Civil Air Patrol through John Swain who I think has done a magnificent job in keeping the profile of CAP before the members.<sup>21</sup>

**B:** How did you first meet John?

**W:** I really don't know. He came to my office, I think. How he came, he was actually in an oversight position on some of the things that were going on over in the budget, and I think he came in and we talked about Civil Air Patrol and he became a fixture in my office. He had a desk in my office, so CAP had a desk in my office.

**B:** Alrighty. And John I gather in turn flew with Congressional Squadron or worked with you all?

**W:** Oh, sure. He was very helpful at the beginning, too, because I couldn't devote staff, my staff, to CAP activities and I needed someone. And as I say, the Air Force

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<sup>21</sup> John P. Swain (1948- ) joined Civil Air Patrol in 1963 and has held a variety of positions, currently serving as CAP's Director of Government Relations.

assigned Frankenberg to me at the time which was very helpful because it gave somewhat of a, as the Chinese would say, a “chop” of approval.<sup>22</sup>

**B:** Gotcha, yes!

**W:** And that was quite important because other of the agencies, other of the organizations they were assigned to the agencies, had officers in the Capitol. Air Force had one, but CAP had nothing, so my office was the national liaison to the Congress.

**B:** And did CAP National Headquarters work directly with you during this period?

**W:** Yes, but not as much my staff worked with them, because then I assigned one person of my staff, and I can't remember who it was that I assigned but I assigned one of my staff to work with John, but John was an auxiliary member. But see, through the work of my committee activity, I had a large staff, and I had them prepare the reasons why CAP would be a natural adjunct to our overall anti-narcotics effort.

**B:** Understood, understood. In 1975, if I have my years right, CAP will switch from having an Air Force officer as the national commander and will go to a civilian member. When that change occurred did you notice any notable impact in your coordination with the national headquarters at that time?

**W:** No, no I think it was done in order to, in some fashion, permit the CAP to get assistance from the outside where they could not as part of the government operation, and it permitted us also then to get an appropriation. Because, when I put in the original supply bill, we had the cadre of members who were in some way associated with the idea or indoctrinated into what CAP was all about. We had a lot of support, and I went around,

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<sup>22</sup> A chop is the colloquial reference to a seal, used in East and Southeast Asia in lieu of a signature, frequently used with red ink.

I remember that, I went around to each Congressional office and I carried a, uh, almost a petition on the floor, and I get members to sign on.

**B:** Okay, so in a way then the Congressional Squadron was like a long-term lobbying effort

**W:** Yeah.

**B:** To build support, literally grassroots

**W:** That's right

**B:** To build the support within the Congress.

**W:** So, it had two roles. It had its role of public relations for the Air Force but it also had its role as an active duty force that was an auxiliary and in true sense. I mean the Coast Guard had an auxiliary that went out with their boats and all, and we had our airplanes and our guys and volunteered. Remember the fact that going back to the original areas, what I remember, don't forget, Civil Air Patrol has always been a volunteer force. Nobody took a whip out and pushed us into the Civil Air Patrol. We did it because out of something that is true American spirit. I mean, the idea of calling us "flying minute men" was really a very good nomenclature because that is what we were. We were the same guys that provided the assistance to our early Americans in a time when we were needed, and didn't wait for the idea or didn't just slough when we became 4F or the idea that we were too old. The castoffs, they were real patriots.

**B:** Did you find your position as a member of CAP changing because you were a member of Congress?

**W:** No, I did not. I think that CAP had its own lantern and good people. Again, these were volunteers, I mean these were people of stature, the wing commanders, people of stature, and they made their own success and they didn't need that approbation, but once again Americans in our tradition, you know? Americans like being for things and we were for the country.

**B:** With that being said then, do you find your role as a CAP member influencing or educating the Air Force in ways they didn't imagine?

**W:** Yes.

**B:** Could you perhaps describe some of that?

**W:** Ahh, you know one of the problems with the military, uh, is the fact that the public or part of the public has always resented the amount of money that is spent on defense and security. And one of the things we provided was the knowledge of why the Air Force was an important service. Look, it isn't that long that the Air Force came into its own. The individual services always retained a certain amount of air. I mean the Marines had their air force, but still, there was some competition that always existed in that regard. But I think that Civil Air Patrol, the headquarters, and I really give due credit to John Swain over the years, he's kept the information going to the Air Force of what we were doing on the Hill. With all due respects to the headquarters and all else, there was a conflict at one point of some, not the national commander, but as I remember there was some officer who was really in conflict with John, and it was a shame because of the fact that he was undoing everything that John was doing on the Hill. And don't forget John had no staff. John was a lone effort there and not being paid.

**B:** I raise my hand, also a volunteer.

**W:** That's great, and we need people like you and I think that it is very important what you are doing, on the idea of somewhat memorializing the efforts that CAP has contributed to this country.

**B:** Well, if we save our data we can learn from it and hopefully not repeat our mistakes.

**W:** Right, and sometimes we don't.

**B:** But all this discussion brings me coming back to the 1980 CAP Supply Bill which I would love to know more about.<sup>23</sup> This whole idea that we need legislation to provide financial resources to CAP to give them access to material, did this come about in some respect because the members of Congress with the squadron recognized they needed additional help, or did you hear from members of your district or other CAP members across the country saying we need more help to achieve our missions?

**W:** I really don't know the genesis of it. I think it was kind of mutual on both sides. CAP cited the need, and that had to be communicated to the members. One of the things I think that could be much more influential in CAP's future would be more involvement of your wing commanders and your grassroots approach to keeping contact with not the member's in Washington's office but the local offices, and that has not been done to my mind as sufficiently.

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<sup>23</sup> Officially Public Law (PL) 96-342, "Department of Defense Authorization Act, 1981." The law amended the CAP Supply Bill to provide for the reimbursement for fuel and lubricants used on training missions and authorized reimbursement for aircraft maintenance expenses related to operational missions and test and training missions. The original "CAP Supply Bill" refers to PL 80-557, authorizing the Secretary of the Air Force to make obsolete and surplus property available to CAP. Unfortunately, PL 81-152, "Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949," stipulated that the Secretary of the Air Force could no longer donate surplus or obsolete supplies and equipment to CAP without prior screening of the property for utilization by other agencies. This left CAP with a supply shortfall. In May 1954, PL 83-368 went into effect, amending PL 80-557 and nullifying the restrictive provisions of PL 81-152. The new law authorizing the Secretary of the Air Force, with the approval of the Secretary of Defense, to furnish such property directly to CAP.

**B:** So, in this case you are saying more of the state assembly members for example or state legislatures.

**W:** Right. I think to in the way of state offices to get funding there. There is funding there, in the way of education and even in the idea of SAR [search and rescue]. I don't see any reason why the state government cannot provide funding for search and rescue operations within their state.

**B:** Or the educational benefits for cadets.

**W:** Oh sure.

**B:** Okay. Looking back with hindsight then on the 1980 CAP Supply Bill, what perspective do you have on the significance of this effort?

**W:** I think it broke the ground for, you know, if you get something for nothing it doesn't mean anything, therefore we had to put out an effort and show the reasons why we merited the money. But in addition to that, the Air Force had to consider that in their budget so therefore they had to give due consideration to what support CAP was giving them. I think you have to give credit to a number of staffers on the Hill, the members not knowing too much of the activities of CAP, and there were some staffers that were really extremely helpful. Their names I can't give you but I can tell you that staff was even more important than members at that point because they had the technical ability to do the drafting.

**B:** Of the legislation? Okay. Just thinking aloud, from like a public affairs perspective, what perhaps would be the most useful thing CAP could do to maybe raise awareness of what we do or raise awareness of our needs?

**W:** I think, I'm not critical of it or your PR [public relations] operation, but I think it needs beefing up. What I mean by that is that fact most people don't understand what CAP means, they don't understand what CAP is.

**B:** We like to chuckle and say it stands for "come and pay," ha ha.

**W:** Ha ha, ah, there is a lot of free time that is available on the internet, on the television, social networking what have you, and there is really where a concentration – your website should not be an inert site. It should be a site that excites.

**B:** Make it more interactively appealing?

**W:** Right. Tie it to the crisis of young people today, tie it to the idea that people are seeking relief from problems through artificial means and CAP can be a vehicle in the way of not only teaching air education but the whole idea of what it means to be an American.

**B:** So, civics and citizenship?

**W:** Yes, there is a hell of a lot in youth today and I'm not critical, again, of youth, but I find that there is an attitude that "ah, the government, they are doing everything wrong." Well, that's a helluva thing, if we were doing everything wrong where are we today? Everywhere around the world. So, I think things that are most important are getting into the local newspapers. You are not breaking the *New York Times* every day. Providing programs for the cable stations. Giving whole new life to CAP. Now the mere fact that it became part of the overall force, I mean that is big news but I didn't see anything about it.

**B:** I think part of that may be that there is some confusion even among members about what exactly does this mean in terms of the doctrine of the Air Force. It is a bit of a

brave new world for the Air Force then too, but one could argue does CAP not be a perfect place to explain what it means and publicize what it means. Maybe that is where we haven't ourselves quite measured up to spec, so to speak.

**W:** Don't forget, every kid that is today part of the CAP is kind of a messenger. The fact that CAP integrated with boys and girls, this is something that is really breaking new ground.

**B:** Absolutely. We also had the first gender and racially integrated units before the Air Force did, and as a historian this is something I need to do more research on to highlight. *Mea culpa* there.

**W:** But really, I think CAP has to be more aggressive in its PR.

**B:** We talked a bit about the supply bill and the impact it has had on CAP today. When you leave Congress in 1981, do you stay part of Congressional Squadron in any way, or if not what kind of CAP work do you continue engaging in?

**W:** I lost touch except through John and trying to give him some ideas to pass on to National Headquarters. I've gone to a number of Congressional receptions and tried to bring members to the reception, but look, I'm an old man. I can't believe it my own life. It's mind-boggling to still be part of the scene.

**B:** I'm glad you still are. Here is a holistic question. In your opinion, how has the public's perception of CAP changed over the years?

**W:** It had its high point during World War II, it was visible. Today it is almost an invisible organization. More has to be done with the SAR because this is dramatic and shows a reason here. People going out and doing SAR are not part of the military but again they are volunteers that are doing work for the country's good, and each one of

those should be highlight to my mind. Even the whole concept of being involved in [ phone rings – paused].

**B:** How would you describe the relation CAP has with the Air Force today as opposed to all the way back to say World War II?

**W:** I don't know today, I think it's good. I've been out to a number of occasions where the Air Force and CAP have come together and I think the Air Force appreciates Civil Air Patrol. I think it is at its highest today, but I don't think that's the case with the public.

**B:** Understood. Is it a valid argument that CAP has played a larger role in specific regions of the United States or was it more effective in reaching youth in particular demographic areas?

**W:** I think the Pacific has always had a great interest. Why, because the fact that there were more people that were actually involved in it in the Pacific Region. The Atlantic Region has been good but again the interest has waned over the years. And again, I think it is due to the lack of building an image. I think that CAP has a great story to tell and those can be two places to invest.

**B:** Okay. Would the influence you think of civil aviation in the Pacific have played some role.

**W:** Yes, I do think so, that is certainly the case. But you see that has shifted too. We had a great capacity here in the East Coast, particularly in my district. I had Republic Aviation, I had three or four, uh, producers of, manufacturers. I had Sikorsky, uh, I find myself so frustrated, but anyways the point is they all moved their facilities out of there so therefore the interest has waned and it keeps going with both civil aviation and the

high profile of where our adversary is today.<sup>24</sup> But so eastern and western, again I think it is dependent upon personnel and who you have in charge of those particular areas.

**B:** Okay. CAP has played a larger role in recent years as an emergency management force multiplier, so to speak. Do you see this as straying from the aerospace education – cadet program mission in terms of emphasis, or do you view it as an integral part of those?

**W:** That’s difficult to say. I don’t think there is one element that is the dominant element in CAP’s role. Again, it is dependent upon people and I don’t think that CAP is enlisting the type of people – you have a number of aviation enthusiasts who will come to CAP. Why? They want to continue to fly, they want some flying time. But it’s the ancillary role that CAP provides as an emergency force that to my mind could bring in and aggressively enlisting titans of industry.

**B:** To follow up on this, with Congressional Squadron did you find yourself able to reach out to titans of industry or civil aviation to spread the message of CAP?

**W:** No.

**B:** Okay, just Air Force oriented?

**W:** Yes.

**B:** What can you offer in terms of where you think CAP is headed in the future. This is based on your current assessment but also having served in CAP almost from the beginning. Where do you think we are headed for the future?

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<sup>24</sup> From the 1920s to the 1960s, Long Island, NY was a “cradle of aviation” in the United States, hosting several major aviation corporations, including Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation, Republic Aviation Corporation, Fairchild Aviation Corporation, Sikorsky Aero Engineering Corporation, Brewster Aeronautical Corporation, and Sperry Gyroscope Company.

**W:** I think CAP must continue to find new missions. Keep the old ones but the old ones are a core operation. But I think as we discussed before the field of cyber, the field of drones, of AI [artificial intelligence], of communications – which can be very important – and continuing SAR. I mean, that is the basis of where the guys that are the soldiers of fortune and what have you want to be, they want to be *gung-ho*, they want to be in something that is active and exciting.<sup>25</sup>

**B:** If we could choose one thing you would like to see CAP accomplish, do, or change for the future, what would it be?

**W:** I'd like the CAP to be really considered as part of the defense forces of our nation and not be in the shadow of either the Air Force or some other service. It has a long history now, and it has the basis of contributions it has made, and I'd like to see it get greater recognition, although I see the increasing recognition that it's getting today.

**B:** Please explain as best you can your fondest or most impressionable memory as a CAP officer.

**W:** That's hard to say. One thing that really sticks in my memory is when Lucas Beau put the eagles on my shoulders.<sup>26</sup>

**B:** Do you remember when that was?

**W:** It is in the seventies and that was a great thing because of the fact that here I always looked up to the officers as any kind would. I came in as a warrant officer. In fact, if I go back to the days at Mitchel Field I remember one day I'm having my shoes shined and in those days of Mitchel Field you had to salute a car of an officer and I remember

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<sup>25</sup> Gung-ho is an anglicized pronunciation of the Chinese *gōng hé*, translating as “work” and “together.” For English-users, the phrase is taken to mean enthusiastic or overzealous, with usage originating from U.S. Marine Corps Major Evans Carlson as a means to promote a common purpose and spirit de corps.

<sup>26</sup> Air Force Major General Lucas V. Beau (1895-1986) served as CAP's fourth National Commander from 1947-1955.

my shoes shined and guy salutes me and I didn't know what to do, ha ha.<sup>27</sup> If I go back and if I can go back in my memory, I find that I got great satisfaction in being part of something that was making a major contribution.

**B:** And you still are.

**W:** Well, I'm still very grateful to John for keeping me updated as to the things that are going on. One thing I found, I used to get the CAP newsletter but I haven't received it in years.

**B:** I'll fix that for you.

**W:** Because I don't know what is really going on.

**B:** We have a magazine now, *Volunteer* magazine but they only publish it twice a year. Everything is now based off the website and the internet which can limit us to the exposure that we get.

**W:** I believe one thing you can do is to set up a network among the cadets, on some of the social networks.

**B:** The cadets are very talented with that.

**W:** What could be a great job is our young people getting into some of the social networks of Asia and Europe. There is something called WeChat and the kids of other nations, its almost like a pen-pal type of thing, because these kids that are involved overseas, they have families that are influential in some cases.<sup>28</sup> I had someone who did a

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<sup>27</sup> Mitchel Field, later Mitchel Air Force Base, was located on the Hempstead Plains of Long Island, NY. Established in 1918, the base was decommissioned in 1961.

<sup>28</sup> WeChat is a Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment app development by Tencent and first released in 2011.

story on me just recently, from China, and she tells me that she has an audience of 100 million. And that is only a small part of the population.

**B:** With the benefit of hindsight, if you could go back and change any development in Civil Air Patrol's whole history, would you or do you find yourself asking the question "if only CAP had done \_\_\_\_" what would you want to change?

**W:** I'd like to see a closer relationship between the Air Force and CAP, and a greater recognition of the fact that we are both have the same aims and work together better.

**B:** Okay. Last two questions. First one is a follow-up to a lunch conversation. When you mentioned you had two presidents in CAP, you mentioned President Ford and you thought maybe Vice President Nelson Rockefeller.<sup>29</sup>

**W:** I believe that he was, yes.

**B:** A member of the Congressional Squadron?

**W:** Right.

**B:** Okay. Could you talk a little bit about your relationship with Barry Goldwater and the Congressional Squadron?<sup>30</sup>

**W:** Yes, Barry Goldwater and I were, I guess, two ends of the political spectrum. In fact, both the reasons why as a Republican which I was at the time and left the Republican Party was Goldwater. But, you know, one of the problems that a lot of reserve people had, that were in Congress and served in the reserve, was the fact that we

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<sup>29</sup> Nelson A. Rockefeller (1908-1979) was the 41st Vice President of the United States (1974-1977) and previously served as the 49th Governor of New York from 1959-1973.

<sup>30</sup> Barry M. Goldwater (1909-1998) served as a senator from Arizona from 1953-1965 and 1969-1987. He served in the U.S. Army Air Forces as a lieutenant colonel, as a colonel in the Arizona Air National Guard, and as a major general in the U.S. Air Force Reserve.

were no longer permitted to be in the reserve. The Supreme Court came down with the decision that you could not be in the military reserve and serve in Congress. I found that CAP was a haven for those people who wanted to serve in some sort of reserve capacity.

And Barry Goldwater, I approached him with the idea of, uh, coming into the Congressional Squadron. But before that, my reason for leaving the Republican Party was that they summarily threw [Nelson] Rockefeller, and I was a Rockefeller Republican, they threw him out of the convention and I thought that was terrible and became a Democrat. But I renewed the acquaintance with Barry Goldwater because he was the type of guy that I could use as an icon for the squadron, and he said yes, he'd be glad to serve. And later he gave me a testimonial to the Air Force Association and they invited him to come up to speak, and although he could not make it, he sent a congratulatory message and it was nice. The relationship that we established was very good and actually if I look back upon it, my differences with Barry Goldwater were not that great. And if I look at it today, they'd be similar, so I feel that Barry Goldwater was a great patriot and he made major contributions to our national well-being. I look back at the relationship CAP enabled me to have with him with great regard.

**B:** There is a great follow-up. Did you find Congressional Squadron a very valuable tool – this is thinking about our current differences in Congress – as a means to bring together political opposites.

**W:** That was true before this present group and before we had the bitter tea of General Yen – the Tea Party.<sup>31</sup> I appointed during my tenure, I appointed Republican members as chairman of my subcommittees, which was an unheard-of thing. I caught hell from Tip O'Neill but the fact was that there are some things which you can't make partisan even if you try. And Civil Air Patrol provides a vehicle for something like that.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In reference to the 1930 novel by Grace Zaring Stone, later made into a movie of the same title in 1933, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Jr. (1912-1994) was a congressman from Massachusetts. A member of the House of Representatives from 1953-1987, he served as the 47th Speaker of the House from 1977-1987.

Uh, we used to be able to have a drink with the – Ben Gilman, who was a congressman, Republican congressman from upper New York state and I became the closest of friends, and we worked together.<sup>33</sup> I had a number of Republican colleagues that I worked with, became very close to. Today you can't do that, and that's, that's just terrible. People are putting party above patriotism.

**B:** Do you see Congressional Squadron as a means of chipping [through the ice]?

**W:** Yes, I think Congressional Squadron can be a vehicle for bringing people together, because there are, you know there are certain people in Congress who are opposed to any defense spending. But there are also people in Congress who are supporters of keeping our defenses strong, and the people are on both parties, so why can't they get together, and the Congressional Squadron can provide a vehicle. I think what could be done is the Congressional Squadron can provide a series of seminars or individual meetings to bring inactive members and people who are not members of the squadron together for orientation on the defense needs of the nation.

**B:** Maybe even orientation flights in the squadron's aircraft? The last question is entirely yours, Congressman. Is there anything else you wish to add that you would like for this history?

**W:** Not at all, I think you are doing great work in trying to memorialize the history of CAP. It is just unfortunate that in the early days we didn't think of record keeping, all we did is think of the mission so therefore it is important if you can gather together information from all verified means. I'm not a great source of history because 100 years is a long time.

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin A. Gilman (1922-2016) served as in the House of Representatives as a delegate for the New York 26th, 22th, and 20th Congressional Districts from 1973-2003.

**B:** You've been with CAP since the beginning and you are still with us now, that is the important part here.

**W:** Well, I still have great faith in the CAP, and I think it performs a great function, uh, not only in the defense of our nation, but in the whole psyche of our nation.

**B:** Congressman, I want to say thank you very much and we'll conclude on that note.

**W:** Thank you.

IMAGES



Figure 1 – Major Lester L. Wolff, circa 1946-49



Figure 2 – Senior pilot wings and World War II CAP identification tag



**Figure 3 – Close-up of identification tag. Wolff’s service number breaks down as follows: Region 2 – New York Wing (1) – member number 6,342. “C.A.P. – A.A.A.F.” references “Civil Air Patrol – Auxiliary of the Army Air Forces.”**



**Figure 4 – Lieutenant Colonel Wolff, March 1968.**



**Figure 5 – Left to right: Colonel Lester L. Wolff, Air Force Brigadier General Leslie J. Westberg, CAP National Commander, Major John P. Swain, circa 1975. Photo courtesy of Colonel John P. Swain.**



Figure 6 – Life membership certificate in the Air Force Association, presented to Lester L. Wolff, 4 May 1979.



**Figures 7 and 8: Congressman Wolff receiving the Congressional Gold Medal on behalf of the World War II CAP members, 10 December 2014.**



**Figure 9 – Congressman Wolff’s personal bronze replica of the CAP Congressional Gold Medal.**