

Civil Air Patrol Oral History Interview

WSWR 1.84-1

Gen. D. Harold Byrd

19 December 1984



NATIONAL HISTORICAL COMMITTEE
Headquarters CAP

CIVIL AIR PATROL
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview

of

General D. Harold Byrd, CAP

by

Colonel Walter M. Sanford, CAP

Date: 19 December 1984

Location: Dallas, Texas

CIVIL AIR PATROL ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

Civil Air Patrol Oral History Interviews were initiated in early 1982 by Colonel 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 Civil Air Patrol.

The principal 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 secondary nature is the preservation of the contributions of individuals as Civil Air Patrol continues its growth.

F O R E W O R D

The following is the transcript of an oral history interview recorded on magnetic tape. At the time of the interview the interviewee was over eighty years of age and his recollection of certain facts was limited. With the aid of the interviewee's personal secretary some major emendations have been made. The reader should bear in mind that he is reading a transcript of the spoken rather than the written word. Also, no attempt to confirm the historical accuracy of the statements has been made. Therefore, the transcript reflects the interviewee's personal recollections of various situations as he remembered them at the time of the interview.

Editorial notes and additions made by CAP historians are enclosed in brackets or are indicated by the use of an asterisk. Where feasible, first names, ranks or titles also are 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.

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

That I, GEN. D. HAROLD BYRD, have this day participated in an oral-magnetic-taped interview with COL. WALTER M. SANFORD, covering my best recollections of events 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

Harold Byrd DONOR
Dated 19 December 1984

Accepted on behalf of the Civil Air Patrol by Walter M. Sanford
19 December 1984

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

In this oral history interview, Gen. D. Harold Byrd, CAP, relates some of his early experiences in the establishment of Civil Air Patrol at the start of the United States's participation in World War II, and particularly the Civil Air Patrol's operations in Texas and the Southwest. Evident are the personal financial and time contributions made by General Byrd and the assistance rendered by the State of Texas. Evident also is the meaningful association General Byrd had with Gil Robb Wilson, George Haddaway and Generals Spaatz and Doolittle. General Byrd affirms the fact that Civil Air Patrol performed coastal patrol along the Gulf Coast area of the United States and then along the border between the United States and Mexico. Later General Byrd recalls his important role in the establishment of Civil Air Patrol's Cadet Exchange Program.

General Byrd emphasizes that the Civil Air Patrol has a major function of search and rescue and encourages the continuation and strengthening of this objective.

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C A P ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Number WSWR 1.84-1
Taped Interview With: General D. Harold Byrd, CAP
Date of Interview: December 19, 1984
Location: Dallas, Texas
Conducted By: Colonel Walter M. Sanford, CAP

S General Byrd, I want to thank you for your taking time to undergo this interview in the interest of Civil Air Patrol. First, let me ask, are you a native of Texas?

B Yes, sir. I was born in Detroit, Texas.

S Detroit, Texas?

B Yes, sir.

S Just like the city up North? Same spelling? Where is that near?

B I moved away when I was a year old, but I was born there.

S Where is Detroit?

B Up in East Texas, near Paris.

S I understand that you went to the University of Texas.

B Yes, sir. I was exposed there for two years.

S What was your major?

B Geology.

S That is what led you to your interest in the oil industry?

B That is right.

S Tell me a little bit about your interest in oil.

B Well, I was in the Burkburnett Field as a roughneck on a well and got experience in the oil field on that well. I have always used geology and never thought I would do anything in the oil business. I have had pretty good success with it.

S And you developed your own company, did you?

B Yes, sir, Byrd-Frost, established in 1931 with partner Jack Frost (The company now is D. H. Byrd Production, Tower Building, Dallas, TX).

S That is when you set up the business?

B Yes, sir. My father taught me a lot of things when I was just six years old. So, I have always used them.

S You set up your own company, and did you not have the dubious title of.....

B "Dry Hole Byrd."

S How many did you drill?

B 56 consecutive dry holes.

S That is a record, is it not?

B And then I drilled two fields (successful wells) in the same day.

S So, you finally got a good one.

B Yes.

S And where was that?

B Santa Anna Field. I drilled the discovery well in Coleman County, Texas.

S When did your interest in aviation start?

B Well, I always used aviation in my oil business. I flew over areas and adjusted those areas to being interested in the oil.

S Did you have your own airplanes?

B Yes, sir. I have always had one or two airplanes.

S What kinds were those?

B Well, first one was an Eaglerock, then a Stinson, and then I had a Lodestar. That is my favorite of all airplanes, the Lockheed Lodestar.

S That is a pretty big aircraft?

B That was a big one, yes sir. Seven passengers.

S Did you use those planes later in the Civil Air Patrol?

B Yes, I used them, but I do not think I wrecked them.

S Were you a pilot yourself?

B Yes, sir. I am not much of a pilot, but I have had a license since I acquired my own plane.

S Where did you learn to fly?

B At Burkburnett.

S At Burkburnett? Did they have a small field there?

B Yes, sir, near the oil field. I would spot the fields there from the air and then I used the data to find oil.

S When did you become interested in Civil Air Patrol?

B On December 1, 1941. Along with Gil Robb Wilson I organized Civil Air Patrol with a small group of interested citizens and was appointed Commander of the Texas Wing by President Roosevelt.

S You were interested in such programs ahead of that?

B Yes, before that. It was my interest and knowhow that put the Civil Air Patrol into the war.

S I see. And how did you do that?

B Well, Gen. Carl Spaatz of the United States Army Air Force also was a member of our Civil Air Patrol. Through him I established it (Civil Air Patrol) into the Air Force.

S You governed operations in Texas, did you not?

B Yes, sir.

S Did you have any difficulty at that time in establishing.....

B No. Everybody was cooperative. The Governor and everybody else was. I, of course, had little problems, but they worked out.

S Where did you set up your headquarters?

B Beaumont, Texas.

S You helped establish a unit at Beaumont?

B Yes, sir. I had a base at Beaumont and (from there) we flew over the water. We did a lot of good. We located a German submarine, and we flew right over one of those submarines and it ducked. We could not do anything about them.

S. You flew patrol over the Gulf. Is that right?

B. Right. The Germans had submarines in the Gulf and I flew right over those submarines and they would duck under the water. They thought I was armed.

S Who supplied the airplanes for you there?

B I supplied nine airplanes myself.

S Did other people join up with you and bring their own airplanes there, too?

B Yes, there were several of them supplied their planes.

S Do you remember the names of any of the people who worked with You?

B Yes. Wilson Germany was one. An early one. He had an airplane. And then I had down at Beaumont, let me see..... I forget who it was down there.

S Was not George Haddaway with you?

B Yes, George Haddaway was with me.

- S About how many people did you have at the beginning?
- B Oh, just a few, I would say (to start) at Beaumont, Corpus Christi and Brownsville.
- S You helped establish bases there (Corpus Christi and Brownsville), too?
- B Yes, sir.
- S When did they start calling it Texas Wing?
- B In 1941.
- S That was still in the early days of your own operations?
- B That is right.
- S Do you remember any specific happenings of special interest at that time?
- B German submarines.
- S Do you remember any special flights that went out there ? I mean relative to the war activity and the flights you made looking for the submarines.
- B I did that when General Spaatz was still in Civil Air Patrol and he helped to work that out with the government.
- S Did you lose any planes at that time? Any fatalities?
- B Five planes were lost, but I don't remember about fatalities.
- S Where did the people come from?
- B They were volunteers.
- S Volunteers. Did they all come from Texas to help you here in Texas? Did they come from other states?
- B Some of them did (from other states), yes. Came from Boston, New

York and all around. They came to help me.

S Do you remember any specific problems that you had at that time?

B No. I got gasoline. I prompted my state into furnishing me gasoline.

S The State of Texas?

B It took a good deal of gasoline. They furnished it to me. They gave it to me.

S Did you have any problem maintaining and keeping the airplanes running?

B Yes, and no. Very little. We had a lot of good mechanics right in Civil Air Patrol. They were raised up that way, so they could take care of the planes.

S As time went along, you continued your interest in the program. What assignments, later, did you take on? What positions?

B I just started it. There was not a CAP or a government agency. I just started both of them.

S After the war was over, you continued with CAP?

B Yes, sir, and they kept flying. They were very important after the war.

S Were you not Texas Wing Commander and then Region (SWR) Commander?

B Yes, sir. I became Wing Commander in 1941 and from 1948 to 1953 I was Region Commander. Also, in 1948 I was named Vice-Chairman of the National Executive Committee with Gen. Carl Spaatz as Chairman. As I recall, I was elected Chairman of the National Board in April of 1959, and retired in April of 1960, becoming a "Chairman Emeritus."

S You were succeeded as Region Commander by Doctor Rushing, were you not?

B Yes. Doctor Rushing worked with me, and I made him Region Commander.

- S In your dealings with the Headquarters at CAP.... National Headquarters.... you had a lot of contact with the Air Force and then people in Washington.
- B That is right.
- S Who were some of the people you dealt with in order to help the program?
- B Gen. Jimmy Doolittle and Doctor Rushing and General Spaatz.
- S You were familiar with Gil Robb Wilson. Did you work with him at all?
- B Oh, yes. Gil Robb Wilson was with me in organizing CAP on 1 December 1941.
- S Do you feel that the contacts you had with these people... your friendship... helped you in the program? Was it beneficial?
- B Oh, yes, it helped me in the program, and my business. I just used their influence. Got things done, in the oil industry as well as in the aviation industry.
- S Over the years you were instrumental in entertaining cadets on the Foreign Exchange Program.
- B Yes, I started that with Col. Earl L. Johnson.
- S What kinds of things did you do for them?
- B I hosted them with time and money and encouragement, and I worked with England and Germany and Texas.
- S The foreign cadets would visit here in Texas. Did you entertain them at all?
- B Oh, yes. I had them in my home. I entertained them two weeks here, and all over Texas. They visited my district units. They gave me a lot of encouragement, and I gave them some, too.

- S Did you ever go overseas with the program?
- B Oh, yes. I was over there three times on European and South American tours.
- S When you were Chairman of the Board you had to go overseas and set up the program?
- B. Oh, yes, I assisted in setting up foreign programs.
- S In looking back, do you think of things that you would have done differently?
- B No, not many. I followed the program pretty good. I always had good advice, you see, from General Spaatz and from Gen. Jimmy Doolittle.
- S You knew General Beau, of course?
- B Yes, he was in the program.
- S As an Air Force officer.
- B That is right. He helped a good deal.
- S What were you not able to do that you would have liked to have done?
- B Nothing. I did everything I wanted to do. I did it pretty well, with the help of my friends.
- S Do you remember any of the people that specifically stood out while working with you?
- B Yes, General Spaatz, General Beau and General Doolittle.
- S Other than they?
- B The governor of Texas, Coke R. Stevenson.
- S In thinking back over your wartime experiences and the operations in Texas which you primarily looked after, do you think you had good equipment?

B Well, I had the best I could buy. It was pretty good equipment. And I kept it up.

S I recently reread the book "Flying Minutemen" which mentioned that when other activities slowed down (toward the end of the war) you were performing other assignments, like courier service and chasing wolves in West Texas. The book mentioned your going out there in a Piper Cub airplane, trying to shoot the wolves from the air. Can you talk about that a little?

B That was a lot of fun. It was a wonder we did not get killed. But we did not. We killed wolves out of the airplane... and antelope.

S What was the reason? Were these feeding on grasslands, cutting the grass needed for cattle?

B Yes. *

S Did you get involved in the flights along the border with Mexico?

B Oh, yes, I started that, and made a deal with Mexico where I could fly on the coast of Mexico on their land without a visa.

S What were you looking for?

B Submarines, mostly.

S How about along the Rio Grande area, along to New Mexico?

B Yes. In Mexico they were not as friendly toward the United States as we would have liked, but it worked out all right.

S What were they looking for there, up the Rio Grande and along the border?

B For immigrants coming across the border stealing cattle.

S Were there saboteurs coming in, also? Spies?

B Oh, yes. They would set up in an area there. Some to steal cattle

* Actually wolves were feeding on the cattle.

and take them back across the border.

S So, to review for a moment, you kept up your activity with the program after the war, serving in capacities at National Headquarters.

B That is right. I was pretty important after the war because I worked with England and France overseas as well as with this country.

S You became the (SWR) Region Commander and from that you eventually became Chairman of the Board.

B That is right.

S In those days the National Commander was an Air Force officer. Of course now it is a CAP officer.

B Yes, sir.

S As I recall, when you were Chairman you were only a full colonel.

B That is right.

S I remember that later Col. Claude Chambers (CAP) and I pinned on your stars for you. That was sort of retroactive. (Done at Southwest Region Headquarters, Dallas.)

B That is right.

S What do you envision for CAP now? What kind of programs would you like to see them get into?

B Search and rescue, the main thing. We get planes lost and people lost, and they call out the Civil Air Patrol all the time.

S Does the uniform idea suit you?

B I had the first one made, to suit me. And then the Air Force came on and changed it somewhat and I went along.

S That was when the Air Force approved using their uniform with slight changes?

B That is right.

- S Of course, when CAP was formed it was the Army Air Force.
- B That is right.
- S Down at Beaumont, Texas, where you had your flying units operating, how about housing for those people?
- B People were good to us. We could find housing. That was not much of a problem.
- S Did the CAP personnel pay for their own subsistence?
- B Oh, yes. All my men paid their own way. And they paid the people for their housing, too.
- S Did they stay long periods of time? Or did they come and stay for a couple of months and then go back?
- B Some of them did, but most of them stayed down.... stayed with the program.
- S Did you actually spot any submarines?
- B Oh, yes.
- S You were not able to sink any?
- B No. We would fly over them and they would duck. They saw those little planes and thought we were all loaded with bombs. We did not have any bombs. We finally did get them.
- S Did you sink anybody with them?
- B Some 78 submarines were located. We sank seven.... two unassisted.
- S What kinds of planes were the bombs hooked onto?
- B Primarily Stinsons.
- S Do you still have the Lodestar?
- B No. I think my son, Caruth, has that airplane.

S You have two sons?

B Yes, Harold and Caruth.

S Were they old enough for the CAP during the war?

B No.

S Do you have a life membership in Civil Air Patrol?

B I do. I manage to keep up with the CAP activities and receive the CAP News.

S General Byrd, I would like to thank you for contributing to the Civil Air Patrol's historical files by way of this interview. You have been very instrumental to the program over the years and your efforts have benefited our great Nation. *

* Said off the tape.