

Civil Air Patrol Oral History Interview

NER 1.2023

MSgt Larry Leissner, CAP

1 February 2023



NATIONAL HISTORY PROGRAM
Headquarters CAP

ACCESS AGREEMENT

KNOW BY ALL MEN/WOMEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

That I, Lawrence E. Leissner, Jr, have this day participated in an oral-digitally recorded interview with Lt. Col. Andrew Notarfrancesco, CAP covering my best recollections of events and experiences which may be of historical significance to the Civil Air Patrol.

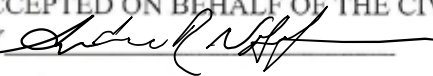
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DATED 19 Apr 2023

ACCEPTED ON BEHALF OF THE CIVIL AIR PATROL

BY  Lt. Col. Andrew Notarfrancesco

DATED 19 April 2023

CIVIL AIR PATROL
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview

of

MSgt Larry Leissner, CAP

by

Lt Col Andrew Notarfrancesco, CAP

DATE: 1 February 2023

Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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FOREWORD

The following is the transcript of an oral history interview conducted over the phone and recorded on using an online audio recorder. No attempt to confirm the historical accuracy of the statements 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.

To listen to the interviewee's original responses, a link to the recording is available in the appendix. Transcribing the recording into written form without the interviewee's written consent is prohibited.

Editorial notes and additions made by CAP historians are enclosed in brackets. If feasible, first names, ranks, 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 recording prior to citing the transcript.

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

In this oral history interview, MSgt. Larry Leissner speaks candidly and interestingly of his experiences as a Civil Air Patrol cadet, soldier, Air Force NCO, police officer, and Civil Air Patrol senior member.

The interview begins with his personal background. MSgt. Leissner then describes his experiences as a cadet in N.E. Philadelphia Composite Squadron 104 (NER-PA-214) and his time participating in the International Air Cadet Exchange to Belgium in 1989. He also recounts his experiences in the military, discussing his service in the United States Army and Air Force Reserve. He shares experiences of his time in Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm and Operation Enduring Freedom. MSgt. Leissner also discusses his service as a police officer and senior member in Civil Air Patrol.

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CAP ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Number: NER 1.2023
Recording Interview With: MSgt Larry Leissner, CAP
Date of Interview: 1 February 2023
Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Conducted by: Lt Col Andrew Notarfrancesco, CAP

N: Microphone started. All right, so this is, uh, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Notarfrancesco, Pennsylvania Wing, assistant historian, group three historian. I'm sitting down with, uh, MSgt. Larry Leissner from Squadron 104. Uh, if you could start, if you could just give us a little bit of background about yourself.

L: Uh, myself on the, uh, I guess I'll start with me personally. Uh, born and raised in Philadelphia. Lived here my whole life. Uh, went into the Army actually at age 17. I had my 18th birthday in basic training, and I served four years active duty in the Army. I served in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard for about three and a half years. Went into the Air Force Reserve for 11 years, and I finished out in the Pennsylvania International Guard just under six years. So all in all my military career spanned 24 years. Uh, I recently retired out of law enforcement. I worked as a police officer in Philadelphia for just over 20 years, and I currently work for the United States Government as the Assistant Director of Security for the Naval Sport Activity Philadelphia.

N: Great. Um, when did you decide to join Civil Air Patrol, and how old were you, uh, when you joined?

L: That's actually very interesting because I recently started my position with the Naval support activity in Philadelphia, and really that's where I started Civil Air Patrol. My godfather had worked at the government facility there and told me, uh, as a, as a kid, all of my uncles had been in the military, and I had a strong sense of wanting to serve from a very early age. My godfather had told me that there was something with, you know, kids that looked to be about my age in uniform, and he's seen them out marching and whatnot, and I should go around there and check it out. So around November of 1983, I went and visited Squadron 104 at the, what was then the Aviation Supply Office. Uh, soon after I joined, I went to Encampment In 1984, I went to Encampment again in 1986, I attended Cadet Leadership School in 87. I earned my Mitchell Award as a cadet, and then later my Earhart Award and participated in IACE in 1989 after graduating high school, just before I went into the Army, uh, from the get-go, basically, I enjoyed the military like structure. Civil air patrol had back then. Uh, it, it was a little more, I don't wanna say militarized, but regimented. Uh, I participated in emergency services training, attended training courses at Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania. And really it was the encampment experience that was almost kind of a primer for basic training in the military. We lived in barracks. We got up early in the morning, we went to pt, we cleaned the barracks. We, you know, marched around. We had different classes, we had different activities, and it was just, for lack of a better term, mini bootcamp. Uh, upon entering the United States Army in 1989, I, I felt fairly well prepared.

L: Civil Air patrol had already given me an introduction to the structured regimen and lifestyle, uh, a head start on being physically fit and basic facing movements. Though

civil Air patrol mirrored the Air Force, some of the commands were different from the Army. Minor, minor issues. It, it was an easy adjustment. Once I joined the Army, I automatically became a senior member, and I was in a unit in Germany, and we were part of the Ramstein Cadet Squadron, but I was stationed a little further south, and we were the Stuttgart Operations Flight. When you're in an overseas unit, if you are not on an air base, you cannot have an actual squadron. So that's why we were Stuttgart Operations falling under Ramstein Flight. Uh, when I PCS'd, or had a permanent change of station, to Fort Bragg, I was also a member of the Fayetteville Composite Squadron down there. We met right on Fort Bragg at Simmons Army Airfield. So, I continued with Civil Air Patrol back then. So that, I, I say all this because I started Civil Air Patrol and it set me up not only for my military career, but you know, starting a government career. I'm literally back, uh, the number two person in charge of security at the base where my civil air patrol career started. So, it's, I drive into the gate, and we drive right past the building where it happened every morning. So, I, I just, I, I, I don't wanna say I chuckle, but it's, it, it, it's, I'm actually at a loss for the word it almost endearing.

N: That's really great. Um, could you talk a little bit about what your experiences were as a cadet in Squadron 104? Uh, like who the commander was? Um, any standout activities or experiences you had as a cadet in a squadron, um, leadership positions you held and what squadron life was like back then?

L: Okay. Uh, first thing, our squadron meetings back then were Sunday afternoons from noon until four. Uh, when I first signed up, my commander was Captain Bob Gallagher,

and after he'd been in charge for a while, uh, Captain Roberta Toomin took over after her it was Captain Ross Franklin, and I wanna say there was another commander, but when I was, my last bit as a cadet, our commander was Captain Ed Decker. Uh, squadron life, when I first started was a little disorganized. We, we had kind of a, a small ragtag group, and there were a couple people who showed up regularly, a couple that would come and go various times throughout the first year or so. But we started to get a few more cadets from, I believe Squadron 102. And they were a little more experienced. They were cadet officers, and we just became a little more structured. Uh, we would have, generally, we'd start with opening formation. We'd have a uniform inspection, and we would do drill from then we would have some classes, and that was the normal routine. We would do PT generally once a month. And the thing I found ironic is now as a senior, when I was a cadet, we would have testing maybe once a month. Every now and again, we might have it twice a month, but it, it was not something that was a regularly scheduled event. And back then you would take the test, submit it, and not find the answer out until the following week. Now, of course, the cadets have online testing. They take the test, click submit, and immediately know whether or not they passed or failed. And they can almost test that will, except for a few of the milestones. As far as squadron activities early on, again, we weren't doing a whole lot. Uh, once we started getting the structure and everything, we became more involved with emergency services, uh, conducting local training group SAREXs (search and rescue exercises), uh, of course the Hawk Mountain activities. And our squadron began to grow. I actually don't remember which commander, I guess it was under Ross Franklin. We started to grow a bit, and we just began to have more and more activities. As our squadron grew, we needed a little more room for

classroom space, so through the generosity of the United States Navy, we were able to use some of the facilities in Building One. And I will say the, the Navy has always been very supportive of us there, even though their own Sea Cadet program is also housed there, they even of equal amount of support. So, we're always very thankful for that. Uh, the squadron activities, as we begin increasing in emergency services training, we began to get called out for missions. We would have model rocketry training. Back then orientation flights were very sporadic, and generally it was in a member-owned aircraft. Uh, we would have some small group, group, uh, group level ship training weekends. And then, of course, you know, the, the wing activity Fort Indiantown Gap for, uh, encampment and Cadet Leadership School. We, we pretty much, we, we started just really developing out the squadron flushing thing out, things out like a set basic training program where at one point we had an eight program, and it didn't really matter which week you came in because we taught all the same classes on a rotating basis. So, we just had a simple check sheet. If you had classes on this, on that, so your first week or two, you would be paired off with someone who would go over basic uniform, wear an appearance, you know, white shirt, black slacks, and black dress shoes. And then you would get all the classes, you eat it, you would have the pt. And as people were ready, they could test the Curry achievement, take the drill test, and pass the PT test, and they'd be promoted to cadet airmen. Uh, we began to, at one point, I wanna say our cadet active cadets were up over 30 cadets.

N: Oh, wow.

L: And that was, that was the late eighties, mid to late eighties, and probably a bit more. I mean, we, I think we had on a somewhat regular basis, around 40 cadets attending at one point probably had 50 to 60 on roll. And that's when your monthly membership report would come out on this really wide, uh, green and white bar printer paper. They would literally print it out and mail it to you. And it was probably a 17 inches wide, whatever it was. It was huge. Uh, then I went into the Army, and while I was in, in Europe, I actually participated in, you know what? I did participate in an encampment. So I got maybe track that down and see if I should have a, an additional encampment device. Huh. Uh, when I got out of the Army, I was going to college and I kind of drifted away from civil air patrol. I didn't come back to it until I moved back in the city about, about four years later. And I was a young senior member. We had a pretty active squadron. We had a lot of classes. We were in a different building on the base, and the emergency services was in full swing. We continued to get called out permissions. We went to a lot of different training wing level exercises throughout the state. Uh, also as a cadet, we attended ranger competition, things like that. So, uh, we were very busy and we had a, a pretty big sized unit, but then again, there were, there was a lot more membership throughout civil patrol then.

N: Mm-hmm

L: You didn't, you didn't have all the other distractions such as, you know, online games, the internet, things like that.

N: Right. Were squadron meetings always on Sunday, or had they switched to Fridays when you were a cadet?

L: When I was a cadet. Wow. I mean, it's literally been 30 some years. I wanna say they were always on a Sunday, but I honestly am not a hundred percent sure. They may have switched to Fridays at some point when I was a cadet, when I came back in the mid-nineties, they were definitely Friday night meetings and, uh, we would actually have Wednesday night staff meetings.

N: Okay. That's interesting. Cause I know I, I've only known the Friday meeting, so that's, that's really interesting to hear. Um, you had mentioned that you went to IACE. Could you talk a little bit about your experience as a cadet on IACE?

L: Oh, absolutely. Uh, I got to go to Belgium and, uh, I think we had one or two days in Washington DC where you get to know the other Americans that are gonna be in your group. And then we flew to Europe. We got linked up with the rest of our group, and we had Air cadets from Sweden, from Great Britain, uh, from Israel. I know I'm forgetting some, but those are the ones I definitely really remember. Uh, we went on a lot of different activities in Belgium over the course of, I, I think it was about 10 days. Uh, again, it's getting a little fuzzy at this point in my life, but we went to Belgian air bases. We stayed on a couple bases. We ate in their dining facilities. Uh, we went to one of their premier fighter bases at the time, that was Kleine Brogel Airbase. And we were actually in one of the hardened aircraft shelters when they fired up an F-16 engine. So they'd

given us the foam type ear plugs, and even then, we still had our hands covered in our ears. And it, it was just amazing how the, the roar of that engine really went through your entire body.

N: Wow.

L: Uh, interestingly enough, the following day, within one or two days of our tour of Kleine Brogel airbase, we went gliding. And while, you know, I was getting ready to go into the army to be a paratrooper, and, you know, that was actually the first time I'd ever worn a parachute when we went gliding. So we, we had a pretty, pretty action packed day gliding. It was amazing. Just, you know, soaring in silence, really. And when we were done, all the gliders were down. We helped put everything away and, you know, bunch of teenagers, we were playing soccer or football, whatever we had going on. And we noticed that all of our Belgian escorts, pretty much all of our adult escorts, because uh, one of our escorts was a chaplain from Pennsylvania. Father Bob, don't remember his last name or anything, but, uh, we noticed they were all staying to one side and kind of huddling in a group and looking around. But again, we were young, we were playing ball, we didn't pay much attention. And out of nowhere, an F-16 comes roaring by, probably no more than 50 feet off the, uh, off the, the grass runway where we were doing the glider operations and they proceeded to do multiple low-level fly bys. And it was just amazing seeing a, a jet that close, that low, that loud it, it was literally amazing. Uh, the weekend we were there, we stayed with the host family and they were a family that had, you know, a son or daughter in the Belgian Air Cadets. So the family I stayed with, they were, they

were awesome. Uh, their son was in the Belgian Air Cadets. He was maybe a year or two younger than me. They were a wonderful family. We, we had a, a dinner in their home Friday night. And during the course of conversation, it came up that my cousin, who'd I'd grown up with at the time was stationed nearby at Bitburg Airbase. So, they had a surprise. They said, "Hey, why don't we take you to visit your cousin tomorrow?" So I literally went to see my cousin, uh, see his wife, see his oldest son who I'd seen before I went into the Army, but I met his second son, Michael, who was born in Germany and I hadn't seen before. So, my cousin was stationed at Bitburg as a security policeman, and he'd given me just a big handful of patches of, you know, uh, United States Air Forces in Europe and the different fighter squadrons. The 36th Fighter Wing was there at Bitburg, and Bitburg was actually what was known as the Zulu Alert Facility. So it was on the western side of West Germany, and they always had F-15s armed and loaded on alert. So if anything crossed from the Soviet area or any of the Warsaw Pact Nations, they were the first aircraft to be scrambled. So, they were far enough away to not be vulnerable, but close enough to be able to get airborne and intercept fairly quickly. Uh, when I got back to my host family, we, we had a, uh, we'd actually driven from Bitburg up along the northern side and just into Holland and we had dinner at a streetside cafe, uh, or no, I'm sorry, that was Sunday. We had lunch in Holland at a streetside cafe where we had mussels and just a big steaming heaping bowl of muscles. And it, it was a great experience. Uh, their son, you know, like I said, my cousin and it'd given me a great big handful, probably as high as a grapefruit is a round, of all these patches. So, the first thing I did was split them into two piles, you know, which ones I had duplicates of. And I just naturally, you know, handed one half to my host family.

N: Nice.

L: And their son was absolutely elated. And we communicated a little bit while I was in Germany. And the, and I do mean a very little bit because shortly after I, I arrived in Germany a few months later, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and we started really gearing up for Operation Desert Storm. But I'd written him a couple times and he sent a couple pictures of some of those patches, sew on to his backpack, and he was the envy of all of his friends with his Air Force patches, so.

N: Oh, that's great.

L: That was actually, yeah, that was actually really neat. But Belgium was just an incredible experience. Uh, they took us to some very old towns such as Bruges and Ghent. They showed us castles. Uh, we went to Brussels, we saw the Boy of Brussels, uh, fountain. Uh, I learned that the finest chocolate in the world is made in Belgium. I also learned that they're not French fries. When you're in Belgium, they're pommes frites. And if you ask for French fries, they will very politely inform you, they're not the French fries, they're pommes frites. We made them first and we make them better. And it was also the first time I'd seen anyone dipping their fries in mayonnaise. But it, it was an absolutely amazing experience. It's one thing to go on a tour where you're being rushed around, but we were living in, you know, we were with Belgians. They were, you know, telling us about the different towns and places they lived, or, you know, oh, this town we're going

to tomorrow. My family has always gone, you know, once a year or whatever. So it was, it was a very amazing and immersive experience.

N: That's phenomenal. What year was that?

L: That was 1989.

N: 1989. Uh, were there any,

L: And, and as a side, it, when I got back with my group, naturally I was trading some of the patches that my cousin had given me. And one of the Israeli cadets had given me a set of Israeli fighter pilot wings.

N: Oh, wow.

L: And they were, they were kind of like embroidered kind of foamy. When I got back to my squadron, uh, one of, one of my friends was a cadet named Alan Biderman. Alan was Jewish. And I thought, you know what, I, I'm not gonna do anything with these. I'm going into the Army. I gave them the Alan, and again, his eyes just lit up. He was amazed. He knew exactly what they were right away. And Alan went on to get his private pilot's license and owns an airplane, and he works for Boeing. He works on the V-22 project as an aerospace engineer.

N: Oh, really?

L: Yeah.

N: Wow. Wow. We've quite the, uh, squadron connection to that.

L: Yeah. So it, it was just, it, I mean, we, again, we had a, a good squadron. We had a lot of active cadets. You had those bonds formed back then. When you do a lot of activities together, it's not just show up for a weekly meeting and then go your separate ways. We did a lot together. So, we had that bonding.

N: Mm-hmm. Um, were there any other, uh, activities or encampments that stood out to you that were particularly memorable?

L: Uh, my first encampment in 1984, well even encampment in 1986, encampment East was held at four Indian Town Gap. And I'd gone there three times, two Encampments and Cadet Leadership School. But at Cadet Leadership School was mostly classes, uh, a lot more of the Project X team building exercise, but it was a lot more classroom and leadership activity based, whereas encampment was a lot of marching, a lot of different activities. But at the time we had activities where we got orientation flights in Army helicopters. We flew in Huey's the year I went, we got rides in M113 armored personnel carriers where they opened the top hatch and we all stood up and they took us for a ride on the dusty tank trails. Uh, we did live firing on one of the ranges. The Air Force combat

arms instructor would bring out rifles. We had a basic safety class, and we each got the fire 10 live rounds on, on the, uh, range.

N: Oh, wow.

L: We traveled everywhere by deuce and a half. If it was close enough say to the chow hall, we would march over. But other than that, anytime we got driven around, we piled into a deuce and a half and we got transported to various activities across the post.

N: Oh, that's great.

L: Yeah, it, it was literally, like I said, it, it felt like boot camp

N: That's awesome. I remember Young Marines, we'd have the deuce and a halves too and it was just, being a kid riding in the back of one of those,

L: Getting bounced around and everything else. Yeah,

N: You just felt really cool. Oh, that's, that's phenomenal. Um, now you were also in the squadron when the squadron patch was designed, correct?

L: I was.

N: Could you talk a little bit about that, uh, what year that was and how that came to be?

L: I believe that was around November, December 1984. Uh, one of the members that we'd gotten from Squadron 102 was a cadet named Bill Riker. Bill was a college student. I wanna say he was at Drexel, but I'm not a hundred percent sure. And at the time, the Macintosh, I, I don't even know if it was a pc, it was a Mac. You had the main unit, which was kind of a rectangular box with a, I guess a seven or nine inch screen. It had a three and a half inch floppy drive underneath the screen. Again, this was all one unit. And then you had two plugin peripherals. You had a mouse, and you had the keyboard. We decided, you know, because Squadron 102 had a unit patch, we decided to come up with our own unit patch. So we bounced around different ideas and eventually the aerospace textbook we used at the time was Aerospace 81. And if you're a, a student of anything dealing with space or aerospace, you realize in the early eighties, the space shuttle was the newest, best, greatest thing that happened since the moon landings. So the cover of Aerospace 81 was kind of orange, but it had a, a depiction of the space shuttle over earth. And I think the moon was in the background with some stars. We basically took this Macintosh computer and he opened up Macintosh paint and we, for lack of a better term, traced the cover of that to get the visual depiction of the space shuttle. Again, there were no scanners. You couldn't import a jpeg; Mac was essentially the only functioning computer around that time. And we just designed a squadron patch with the space shuttle on there symbolizing, you know, the future of aerospace and technology and, uh, very simple, you know, shield shaped flat top coming down on the sides to a point almost like a home plate design. And up top it simply said N.E. Phila Comp Squadron 104. But

yeah, we were actually in building one, I don't remember the room number, but I think it was the third wing, and it was right by the exit door, kind of under the stairs. And that was a classroom we'd used a lot. And he brought his computer in, you know, brought it with him in the car. We opened the door, carried it in, we sat everything up. And that was the same room that I'd first seen the movie, the "Right Stuff" and it was such a long movie we watched over the course of two weeks, two squadron meetings.

N: Wow, that's phenomenal. Um, so you mentioned that Civil Air Patrol prepared you for the military. Were you always, uh, intent on joining the Army or, uh, did you have, uh, were you deciding between different branches?

L: I pretty much was going in the Army. Uh, I had two uncles that had served in the Coast Guard, one uncle that served in the Army during Vietnam and then went to the Navy. And I remember going deep sea fishing for the first time with one of my Coast Guard uncles in Florida. And I got seasick beyond belief. So, I'd actually liked the idea of the Coast Guard where you're always, you know, you're always on duty. There's always a need for you, not just when there's a war, but with the seasickness. I quickly put anything sea related out of mind from there. Uh, an uncle that I spent a lot of time with, my uncle Jake had been in, in the Army and he'd been in Vietnam, and I never heard any bad stories about Vietnam. He would tell me how they'd be out in the field for three weeks or a month at a time. And when they came, came back, they would have tents where they would show movies and they would have pizzas there and, you know, silly things like that. And again, nothing bad, but I'd asked him how you did laundry. He said, I never did

laundry. And I said, "You were in Vietnam for over a year. "How did you not do laundry?" He said, when we'd come in from the field, your uniforms were already torn up. So you would just go to the supply sergeant, they would hand you new uniforms, new t-shirts, new underwear. So, you go take a shower, get all cleaned up. If your boots were really bad, they'd give you another pair of boots. They just handed you everything. And I was just amazed at that point, uh, out of my five uncles, five uncles that were related by blood. And then two more who had married into the family, there were two Coast Guard. Like I said, my, my Uncle Eddie started off in the Army. So, there were, I wanna say five of 'em that were Army first. So, I naturally steered that way. Uh, [laugh] it, it's funny, uh, talking now my present job about leadership and taking care of people. One of my first mentors was my uncle Jake. Like I said, he was in the Army during Vietnam. He'd been in the National Guard, he was in the 103rd Engineer Battalion, and they had their headquarters in West Philadelphia out on Drexel's campus. But they did most of their training and drill down at Fort Mifflin.

N: Oh, really?

L: Yeah. The, uh, and they still do to this day, the, the Corps of Engineers has a facility right next to Fort Mifflin where they have a seagoing tug and they have other equipment and facilities there. But 103rd Engineer Battalion keeps all their, most of their equipment down there, that's where they'll, you know, teach backhoe operations or bulldozers or anything like that. Bridge building. Um, while I was in Civil Air Patrol, my uncle Jake would come back from, and they would have MREs, so he would give me MREs, uh, and

initially it was C rations, but I remember that quickly changed over around the mid-eighties. And there were times he would give me an entire case of MREs and he says, “How many, how many friends do you have at this Civil Air Patrol thing?” And I went, “Oh, about five.” And he goes, “So you can give two MREs to all your buddies. Right?” And I went, “I, I guess.” And he said, “No, you're gonna give each of your friends two MREs. What are you gonna do with 12? You share that.” And so that was one of the first lessons I really, really received in taking care of the people you're with. And that, that kind of, well, I mean, not kind of, that stayed with me through, I mean, the last 40 years basically.

N: Um, in the Army, you, you were in the, the 82nd you became a paratrooper. What made you decide to want to do that?

L: I'd always wanted to go in the Army. Uh, I remember the, the Army commercials “Be All You Can Be,” and they showed the guys parachuting in, and I, I remember the video, it, I'm, I'm picturing it now as I'm describing it. They show an artillery piece being dropped out of an aircraft and guys parachuting out behind it and, you know, everything's hustle and bustle and they're getting the gun in place. And then they fire a couple shells, and then there's, there's a black soldier smiling from ear to ear, holding a canteen cup of coffee, taking a sip. And as he puts it down, he says, “Morning First Sergeant.” And then it comes up “Army. We do more by 9:00 AM than most people do all day.” And that sealed it. I wanted to jump from airplanes and there was a brief moment when I was at the MEPs station, when I was considering something else. And the one recruiter there

Leissner

said, "Let me ask you a question. You're, you're a boy, when you were a kid, did you ever play Army?" "Yes, I did." He goes, "When you played Army, did you think of being a mechanic? Did you play being a clerk or maybe a communications specialist?" I was like, "Well, no." He goes, "You were a soldier in your mind, what was a soldier?" And "I'm like, "An infantryman." And he went, "Exactly." So, I, I signed up for Airborne Infantry at that point. Uh, my first duty station was actually not the 82nd Airborne. I finished my four years there. Um, my first year and a half or so, I was in long range surveillance for 7th Corps Germany, and 7th Corps was the southern half of Germany. 5th Corps was northern. So, we were a company sized element that provided human intelligence for, uh, a military intelligence brigade. We were actually organized under a military intelligence battalion. The, my unit was F Company 51st infantry, Airborne Long Range Surveillance, and we were 511th Military Intelligence Battalion 207th Military Intelligence Brigade known as the Eyes of the Jayhawk. And strangely enough, well, not really strangely, the 51st Infantry Regiment has a regimental model of "I Serve." They've reformed along with most of the infantry units in World War II and throughout Vietnam, they were long range surveillance in Vietnam. When they had a conversion during Vietnam where the long range surveillance companies became ranger companies, they kind of lost their lineage a little. So, when the Army stood up long range surveillance units in Germany, in, I think it was right around 1986, Echo Company was the long range surveillance for 5th Corps. And they were just outside of Frankfurt in a town called Stuttgart and F Company, which was my unit. We were in Ludwigsburg just north of Stuttgart, part of that greater Stuttgart military community. So I mean, again, that it was one of those things, even looking back on it, I had the aptitude scores that do almost anything I wanted, but I

wanted to do something you couldn't do anywhere else. I mean, you could learn to be an electrician in the Army or an air traffic controller, but you can learn that on the outside. Nobody else is going to train you and pay you to jump out of airplanes and be an infantryman living in the woods, living in the harshest conditions, and then meeting your objectives and succeeding in your mission.

N: That's really fascinating. Um, when the, the first Gulf War started, uh, you, you were involved, could you talk a little bit about, um, how your unit, uh, was stood up for that and then what your experiences were like, uh, during the first Gulf War?

L: Absolutely. Uh, I remember August 2nd, 1990, uh, I was on gate guard at our little facility. Our concern, as it was called, was Coffey Barracks. And it, it was a fairly small area. In fact, if you think about where Squadron 104 is located on the west side of the installation or the south side, there's a huge ball field and an area that used to have the Navy housing.

N: Mm-hmm.

L: Our concern would've fit in there easily to include the PT field, the motor pools and all the barracks buildings. The barracks we lived in were World War II Barracks. They were formerly occupied by the, uh, Waffen SS from Hitler's army.

N: Oh wow.

L: I was on gate duty, and it was a rotating duty. You'd get it usually for a month at a time. And I was working days, and we had a small black and white television back when, you know, you had black and white televisions with a rotary knob. And Sergeant yelled, "Yo, does anybody know where Iraq is?" And we're like, "No." And somebody goes, "It's right next to Iran in the Persian Gulf." And "Oh, okay, so what?" "Well, they just invaded their, their small neighbor Kuwait." And that was August 2nd, 1990. So, I was actually working when that happened. Uh, we've got the official word that we were going probably in early November. We all knew it was happening. We were hearing of different units, you know, every week. You know, you'd find out another unit that is officially informed they're going to Saudi Arabia in support of Operation Desert Shield. So we had a battalion formation in the gym and we were formed up inside the gym by company. And again, we were an infantry company in a military intelligence brigade. So, I think there were probably four or five other companies in our battalion. And we were a pretty big size company. We were probably about 150 to 170 personnel with our communications platoon, headquarters platoon, things like that. The, we were on one side of the gym. The battalion commander comes out and says, "You know, the 511th Military Intelligence Brigade Tactical or Intelligence Battalion, Tactical Exploitation 207th Military Intelligence Brigade is hereby ordered to, uh, Saudi Arabia in support of Operation Desert Shield." And our entire unit erupted in cheers. And then we noticed we really didn't hear much from anybody else in the gym. So they were, they were intelligence. You know, their job was to sit way behind the lines and gather electronic intelligence or whatever. Uh, they, they, their associated capabilities were. But we were, we were infant treatment. This was our job to close with and destroy the enemy. And

everyone erupted. And again, we all knew we were going. Uh, there were very few units that did not deploy as a whole. So when they told us we were definitely going, that's when everything really, really sped up as far as getting equipment, getting, uh, we actually had M-16A1 rifles, which had, uh, a thinner barrel. We had a maximum effective range of 460 meters. We traded those in for a 1st Armor Division unit that was, had already shut down and we all got M-16A2 rifles. The armorer of our unit, we only had one designated armorer, but each platoon had a couple assistants for him. One of my roommates was one of the assistants to the armorer. So, the day before Thanksgiving, I got to, you know, pile in the back of the truck with some other guys. And we went down to this other unit. We literally had all these racks of rifles we handed in our old ones. We brought back the new ones. And the day after Thanksgiving, we went to the range to zero and qualify with our new rifles around the middle of December, I wanna say it was around December 16th, 17th, we finally moved out. We had no desert uniforms because we were in Germany and it was a logistics thing. To get the desert uniforms and send them to Germany was just cumbersome. So they sent all the uniforms forward and they said, you'll get them when you get over there. Shortly after we got to Saudi Arabia, we moved north to where we set up and from there I got detached from my unit and sent with the military intelligence unit pretty much as a security component, because they were very undermanned. So I actually went into Iraq two days before the ground war, started with the 2nd Armored Cav Regiment, who we subsequently got attached to. So we moved it, it was amazing how quickly we moved. And I was actually with the units when they engaged the, I wanna say it was the 26th Republican Guard regiment at the Battle of 73 Easting or something like that. Oh,

N: Wow. Yeah.

L: Yeah. It was pretty much the largest tank battle since World War II. And, you know, they made initial contact and the lines were kind of wobbly, but as the battle continued, they straightened up the lines, they moved the support elements back a little bit, and they had M1 Abrams tanks and M2 M3 Bradley fighting vehicles pretty much staggered on, on an offensive line. Artillery was set up behind them. And I literally sat there in my Humvee drinking warm Pepsi, watching a tank battle, watching Iraqi, watching Iraqi tanks fire and the rounds, fall short, watching U.S. tanks hit them. Uh, even before that, we'd seen armor columns off in the distance. Of course, in the desert, the ranges are, are deceiving. So, it was probably four or five, maybe six miles away. And we would watch formations of attack helicopters come in and engage the tanks. We would watch A-10 Warthogs come in and engage tanks. It, it was, it, it was absolutely mind blowing to watch all this unfold in front of you at 19 years old.

N: Wow. That's, that's crazy. I mean, I don't really have much experience of, of remembering that. I was like, I think I was in fifth grade when that was happening. That's absolutely phenomenal. So were you there for, you were there for the duration of the war?

L: I was, uh, we came home towards the very end of April. Uh, and by home, I mean Germany. So we went back to Germany at the end of April, and shortly after the rest of the unit got back, we were able to take leave. So, I went home to see my family and

friends. And, uh, when I got back from leave, we were told that our unit was shutting down while we were still in Saudi Arabia. There was the big drawdown with the end of the Cold War. Most of the equipment had already been moved to Saudi Arabia, so it was cheaper to leave it in place and just send troops back to shut everything down. So that's pretty much what we ended up doing. Uh, I'd been back at my unit home off of leave for another, I don't know, month and a half. I don't even think it was two months. And my orders had come through to go to Fort Bragg. So then I reported to the 82nd Airborne, and I was assigned to a, I was a SAW gunner in a rifle company, Charlie Company 1st Battalion 504 Parachute Infantry Regiment, which historically the 504th was the first parachute infantry regiment. When people think of Airborne now, they think everybody's in a parachute. But World War II, you had three different types of regiments. You had airborne infantry, glider infantry, and parachute infantry, World War II. The paratroopers were in the C-47s that would tow the gliders. Glider troops literally just rode in the gliders and over the target. They would cut loose and descend that way while the parachute infantry would jump from the aircraft. Once they had an area that they could use for a forward landing zone established, they would bring in the Airborne Infantry and they would be troops in C-47s or C-46. They would land and disgorge, all the paratroopers and heavier equipment such as, you know, pack Howitzer and Jeeps and whatnot. So, the 504th was the original Parachute Infantry Regiment, and I was a Red Devil there. It, it was a great unit. We did a lot of training, a lot of jumps, a lot of live fire exercises. And when you're in the 82nd Airborne, even to this day, I don't know what they call it now, but we used to call it Division Ready Force. And there's always a task force element, which is a battalion size with attachments that is on two hour recall. So, if

you know, the, the governing authority, someone from Department of Defense or the Joint Chiefs of staff gives the order on 18 hours' notice. There's a task force from the 82nd Airborne that is ready to go wheels up 365 days a year if the word goes out. Right now, 18 hours from now, those aircraft are taken off from Pope Army Airfield and taken paratroopers anywhere they're needed in the world.

N: Wow. Uh, and you finished your tour with, uh, the 82nd?

L: I did, uh, my last year, maybe just over, I was actually a parachute rigger after the Gulf War. They traditionally after wars, they have huge drawdowns, and the Gulf War was no different. They had a large amount of parachute riggers that wanted to get out. They were taking advantage of the early outs being offered, and division recognized the need to fill those spots immediately. So, they made arrangements division wide. They were requesting 25 people to cross-train to be parachute riggers. And they outlined the requirements. I met them, and there were actually 33 of us that went to school. And it was, uh, operation Red Hat. So if you're not familiar, when you go into the Army and pretty much any, any military service, you go through basic training or boot camp, and then you'll go to your individualized advanced training in the Army. It's called advanced, uh, individual training for whatever your MOS is.

N: Mm-hmm.

L: If you're gonna be a parachute rigger in the Army, after basic training, you go to Airborne School and then you go to Parachute Rigger School. Because when you go through Parachute Rigger School as an army soldier or a Marine, your first test is to pack a personnel parachute in 60 minutes or less, and then perform a proficiency, jump with it. And that is literally the first test in the school. You're shown, you know how to pack all the steps that go into it. You do it over and over so that it becomes second nature. But at the end of that pack, they don't pull it down. They break out the log record book. You sign it, your instructor signs it right behind you, you put it into a bag, seal it, and then the next available opportunity, they take you out for a jump issue. You, your parachute that's been sealed in the bag and tagged with your name, and you strap that shoot on and you jump.

N: Wow.

L: So, my, my first helicopter jump was from a Chinook, uh, CH-47, and we were at Fort Pickett, Virginia, and I jumped with a parachute that I'd packed. So that, that's a really big confidence builder. When I was, when I left active duty, I went into the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, and I was still in an Airborne Unit. It was out in Chambersburg. So, I traveled about four hours, but I still jumped in the National Guard. So, my last jump was actually August 1996.

N: How long were you in the, the Army National Guard?

L: Uh, I was in the Army National Guard about three and a half years.

N: And do you have any eventful experiences there?

L: Uh, aside from continuing the jump? Uh, I guess two, two things of note happened in 1996. We, in February, we sent a platoon of personnel down to French Commando School in French Guyana, south America.

N: Oh, wow.

L: And in return, they sent a platoon of French Marines up to us to train. So in addition to the training, we did at 14 Indiantown Gap, live fire ranges, exercises, uh, some air mobile operations. We had a day where we brought them into Philadelphia. We had a French language, uh, I guess interpretive ranger at the Liberty Bell. And at Independence Hall, we had lunch for them at the 1st City Troop in Center City. We took them to the, uh, Court in the Plaza Mall in King of Prussia before we went back to Indiantown Gap later in that year, uh, close to the summertime. In fact, it, it was the summertime. It was July and August, uh, the US Army had been supporting operations in Bosnia, Herzegovina, uh, in the Kosovo area. And there is an active duty Parachute River unit at the New Cumberland Army Depot on the west side of the Susquehanna across from Harrisburg. And we'd worked with them in the past. They had about seven or eight personnel, and we always worked closely with them, and we'd let them know when we were having jumps, if they had people that needed to get jumps in and things like that. So we had a very good

working relationship with them. And they got tasked with packing a large amount of G-12 cargo chutes. Now, a G-12 cargo chute has a 50 foot diameter, and they weigh about a hundred pounds. Ballpark, it's been 30 some years, so forgive me, for 20 some years. Uh, they were using them for what we call CDS drops, and CDS Containerized Delivery System. It's basically a canvas wrapper, and you can put in boxes of MREs or anything like that. You wrap it in this canvas, which think of, you know, just wrapping something. And it had a net there to keep everything together. And they would rig it with, uh, shock absorbing material on the bottom, but they would have these bundles attached to a G-12 parachute. So, the Army put a requirement out to all their parachute rigger units everywhere for a large amount of G-12 parachutes to be packed. So once they were packed, they were just palletizing them, shipping them out somewhere else to be assembled with the containerized bundles. But, the new Cumberland unit, again, only having seven or eight people got a pretty large tasking. So, they reached out to us in another National Guard parachute rigger company from Tennessee. They were actually a, a lot bigger size. We had six, maybe seven parachute riggers in our section. They had a pretty good platoon size element, so 30 to 40 people. So, we went there for three weeks. And the last week we were there was, I guess, the first week of the Tennessee unit. So we went in, in a big cooperative effort. We packed G-11 parachutes, and they were great to us. They, they were really appreciative of the support we gave. And I mean, they took us to launch, they gave us letters of appreciation. And that last week we were there, the unit from Tennessee figured, well, while we've got everybody up there, we're gonna get some training in it. They'd already made arrangements with the Pennsylvania Army Guard for helicopter support for jumps. Uh, when I first started jumping with the Army National

Guard, we were only doing, uh, we were jumping, doing all of our drops from, uh, one Huey Helicopters. They shifted that after I'd been in about a year or so. And we shifted the jumping almost exclusively from CH-47 s. We were still doing some, uh, aerial delivery of resupply door bundles from the Huey's. But we'd gotten away from doing personnel jumps from the, uh, Huey's. We were doing them almost exclusively from Chinooks. So that week we were there, the Tennessee Army Guard had brought up a truckload of personnel parachutes, and I actually did two jumps in one day towards the, it was sometime in August 1996, and we jumped right at Capitol City Airport.

N: Oh, cool.

L: Yeah. It, it was, it was crazy.

N: Wow. That's awesome. Um, so after the, after the Army, you went into the Air Force, what made you decide to want to go into the Air Force?

L: Uh, there were a couple things. Uh, there was some, some internal things going on within my Army National Guard Unit, but I was also at the end of my initial eight-year service obligation, uh, civilian job I'd had in 1995, 96, ran across a gentleman who was in the Air Force Reserve one day. And actually my boss had ran into him, and it was a retail facility I worked at. And my boss said, well, he's in the Army. He's in the guard. He drives all the way out to Chambersburg. And this guy says, oh, well, you know where Willow Grove is, right? I said, oh, yeah. I jumped into Willow Grove for the 82nd

Airborne Convention when I was in the 82nd, 1992. He was like, oh, yeah, well, we're there and blah, blah, blah. Here's my card. And he was actually the senior enlisted advisor. His name was, uh, chief Master Sergeant Rich Banes. It's amazing. I remember these things. Uh, he had given me his card and I put it away. I didn't think much about it. And like I said, that from about February, 1996 on there, there was some internal things going on in the unit. And I started looking around for other options, and I remembered the Air Force. So, I broke out the gentleman's card, and I started talking to a recruiter during the summer. We, uh, we did the three weeks helping the, the riggers at New Cumberland. And then after that, I, you know, made the decision. And then I started to transition to the Air Force Reserve. Uh, when I signed up, the Air Force has one job. Well, they have a career field. They used to be its own separate career field, and it was combat arms training and maintenance. And what they do is most of the service branches have small arms marksmanship instructors, where that's an additional duty. So if you're in an infantry unit, you'll have some of your NCOs teach Marksmanship fundamentals, and they would teach the refresher classes. You would go to the range, and your NCOs would run the range. One of your lieutenants or above would be the officer in charge of the range. The Air Force has one job that does all that. They do all the classroom instruction, all the range work, all the weapons maintenance to include sub depo level maintenance. And that job is combat Arms instructor. Between the time I signed up and the time I actually got to school, the Air Force had undergone a big conversion with the security police, and they changed from Security Police to Security forces. And they formalized where security forces performed the law enforcement function, the, uh, military working dog or canine function, as well as the combat arms function. So, they merged it all in the

one field to just essentially provide a, a force multiplier. Previously in the Air Force, if you were a security specialist, that's all you did. You did not perform any law enforcement function. You were a security specialist. Likewise, if you were a law enforcement, you were gate duty or you would ride patrol. You did know security work, say at a missile base, going out and being part of an alarm response team. So, uh, in the Air Force Reserve, I became a combat arms instructor with the infantry. I had a pretty good background and working knowledge of all the small arms we used. And I became an instructor. I was in that unit, uh, the 9th, 13th Air Lift Wing at Willow Grove, which is part of the Air Force Reserve. I was there when September 11th happened, and we were activated in support of Operation Noble Eagle and Operation Enduring Freedom. And throughout the years, uh, sometime in late 2006 or very early 2007, Willow Grove came down on the Base Realignment Enclosure Committee, all commonly known as the BRAC List.

N: Mm-hmm.

L: And the active-duty side, which was the United States Navy, and the Marine Corps were shutting down, and that encompassed the majority of the base to include the runway. Uh, the Air Force Reserve proceeded with plans to close the unit and the Pennsylvania Air National Guard there, that was the, the 111th Fighter Wing. They actually sat down and really read into everything and realized the Air Force side of the base is not included in that. The Air Force actually owned the property where the 9th, 13th, and the 111th Wing were. So, the Pennsylvania National Guard actually fought it

and stayed there at the base. And, uh, they've, they've done pretty well with the base.

They brought in an Army National Guard Brigade Headquarters, an Army Reserve component, and the unit had subsequently switched from their A-10 s to a, uh, unmanned aerial platform commonly called drones.

N: Mm-hmm.

L: So, I stayed there until I retired in September 2013, after 20 years, 24 years.

N: Was that Army, were they the ones that were across the street in the Army Reserve Center there?

L: Uh, they, it was a combination. Well, yes, it was that unit that was across the street in the Army Reserve, and that building got demolished, and they're they built a new Hollowell Elementary School for, uh, Horsham Township. But the Army Reserve had a fixed wing C-12 unit on the back side of the base. I don't know if they disbanded them or if they moved them because there are Army fixed wing assets at Trenton and over at McGuire, uh, joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst.

N: Oh, wow. I didn't know that.

L: Yep. And the C-12 is just a military version of the Beechcraft King Air airframe.

Right.

N: It's a shame the Air Force couldn't keep that runway open.

L: Uh, there was a lot of political pressure. And what happens is, if you, if you have the runway, that is the largest cost on an installation because everything associated with the runway, and that's your firefighting, that's your, your base support, your air traffic control. Everybody was more than willing to be a tenant if the Air Force was going to, or if someone would essentially buy the runway. However, there was a lot of pressure from the neighbors in the area that people who had bought homes near an active military air base who'd always complained about the noise and whatnot.

N: Yep.

L: Uh, they, they were very vocal, and what they ended up doing was petitioning the township that they would not support a civilian airport at Willow Grove. So at that point, the whole idea of that area staying alive as an airbase fell apart.

N: That's a shame. I, I know even from like, when my dad was stationed at Willow Grove in the sixties, the fact that all those people bought those houses and built up the houses there, that always bothered him, that they complained so loudly about living in a place that they knew was right near a military base.

L: And ironically enough, with that, uh, as much as they complained about the base, there was a huge economic impact to the area after the base had shut down.

N: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

L: Huge, huge economic impact. Yep. I mean, many businesses, you know, within very close proximity to the base ended up closing down because the revenue had really dried up. Uh, and there there's been a lot of debates back and forth about how well the base would've done. But right now, the main base property was slated to be turned over to the township, to Horsham Township. And they had plans for commercial and, uh, housing development there, but that all ground to a halt once they did testing of the groundwater. In the area pfas from the firefighting foams

N: Mm-hmm.

L: And since that's expanded to the old, uh, Warminster Naval Air Development Center, also known as the Johnstown Yep. And other, other bases throughout the United States.

N: Yeah. That's a shame. Um, while you were in the Air Force, you, you did deploy to Afghanistan. Could you talk a little bit about that?

L: Uh, sure. Afghanistan was actually my third deployment with the Air Force. Uh, we were all activated after September 11th, 2001. And in September of 2002, I deployed the, uh, Ahmad al-Jaber Airbase in Kuwait. And they'd been in a base supporting operations Southern Watch. And in preparation for the, what eventually happened at the invasion of Iraq in 2003, they were providing a lot of over flights and, uh, surfaced air radar

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suppression missions. So, I was there for just about four months, September to December of 2002. That was my only deployment with the Air Force Reserve. I did have short stints of active duty supporting operations at bases, both my home base as well as Dover Air Force Base. When I transferred to the, with the closure of the nine 13th in 2007, I transferred literally across the hallway to the 111th, uh, 111th Fighter Wing. And I was, stayed in Security Forces. I was still a combat arms instructor. And in January 2010, I deployed to Kyrgyzstan. Uh, at the time it was the transit center supporting Operation Enduring Freedom, and essentially it was an air base transfer station. Any people on equipment would come in from around the world by civilian aircraft. They would land at Manas, and they would get military airlift down to the combat theater of operations in Afghanistan. So I was there for about six and a half months, I guess. And, uh, at the end of that deployment, and I was actually deployed there when they had the revolution in 2010, it was April 2010, uh, the base was locked down. The base became a literal ghost town. I think there were less than 700 of us on base. It might have even been less than four or 500.

N: Wow.

L: Yeah. And that lasted, uh, being that light staff, that was probably for about three weeks. And then we, as the situation stabilized in Kyrgyzstan, we started resuming normal ops. Uh, my deployment to Afghanistan in 2011 was in support of a NATO joint police training mission. And we were the only dedicated police training mission from the Department of Defense. Other units would have a two three man section helping with

police operations in addition to other operations they were doing. But we were completely dedicated to training the Afghan National Police in Ghor Province, which was central Afghanistan. So we had, uh, two and a half months of, of, uh, combat advisor training at Fort Polk, Louisiana in the middle of summer. Then we went and conducted another two and a half months of training with NATO partners in Lithuania. During that time, I had a 10 day training course in France, uh, some additional NATO training. And then we went to Afghanistan in November of 2011, relieved the team that was in place, and we started conducting training operations, uh, throughout the winter. And it was a harsh, brutal winter. When I was in Kyrgyzstan, it had gotten down a couple nights to almost minus 20. We would hit about minus 17, you know, minus 19. Every now and again, we might touch minus 20. And I thought that was pretty cold. Then I got to Afghanistan. Uh, we were living in the mountains. Our elevation was right about 7,500 feet, and it got cold. We lived at about minus 30 for about six weeks.

N: Ooh.

L: Yeah. We knew when it was getting warmer because it was so cold and so dry up in the mountains. It hadn't been snowing. The snow we had, and, you know, we'd accumulated some snow prior, but once it started to warm up a little closer to zero and five degrees Fahrenheit, then it would start to snow again. So it was, uh, it was pretty cold. We still conducted operations for the most part. I mean, there were, sometimes it was entirely too cold or we would limit our operations. But, uh, we trained a contingent, uh, numerous basic police classes. Uh, I taught an airfield security class. Our medics

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were teaching, uh, essentially tactical care or care under fire to the Afghan police. Uh, we supported a medevac of a Afghan national police officer and a townsman from a vehicle collision. Uh, just a lot of different things went on during that deployment. And when I came back, it was, uh, when I got back from Afghanistan in the previous two and a half years, just under two and a half years, I'd been away from my, my kids for just over a year and a half and sat down with the kids and, you know, I, I hit a point and I said, okay, this is enough.

N: Mm-hmm.

L: My, when I got back from Afghanistan, my kids were 10 and five. So, at that point, I'd missed more than enough of their lives. My oldest son, when I deployed to Kuwait, he was three and a half months old, and I was gone for four year, uh, for four months. So I'd been away longer than twice his life at that point.

N: Wow.

L: So I figured after 24 years, multiple deployments, especially those two real close, uh, I'd had enough. It, it was time to focus, you know, on my family and my civilian career.

N: Wow. Um, now, if I remember correctly, you received a bronze star, right?

L: Uh, I received a Bronze Star for exceptionally meritorious service as the non-commissioned officer in charge of a plea of the police, operational mentor, liaison, team three, also known as, uh, and I honestly look at that as the award at the end of my career. And I look at that as validation of everything I'd done in the previous 24 years. So, uh, yeah, uh, I was awarded the Bronze Star and, uh, I've retired with two meritorious service medals, three Air Force commendation medals, army Achievement Medal, numerous campaign medals from Southwest Asia, uh, expeditionary service metal, uh, Afghanistan, Campaign Medal. What's the other one? Yeah. So, uh, numerous US NATO and Farm Military Awards throughout my career.

N: Wow. Now, you were also, uh, on the Philadelphia Police Force and the Bomb Squad. What influenced you to, uh, decide to join the police force and then to go, uh, to the bomb squad?

L: I'd never really ever had a desire to be a police officer. As a kid. As a kid, I wanted to go in the Army. That's what I was going to do while I was in the Army. In fact, while I was a parachute rigger, I had a somewhat steady schedule. So, I took advantage of that. And one semester I took classes at Fayetteville County Community College. Actually, it was Fayetteville Technical Community College. Uh, one of the classes I took was criminal justice. And as part of the class, we could, if you wanted to, there was no pressure, but there was an opportunity to sign up for a ride along. I figured it, it would be interesting, see what the police officers actually do. So I signed up and it, it was one of those things where you're instantly hooked. And we started off with a couple routine

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calls. We had, uh, domestic disturbance. We had, uh, a stolen car, you know, no big chase or anything. We pulled the guy over. If the vehicle was stolen, he was arrested. And then we had, while we were driving around, actually not far from where I was living, the apartment I was living in, uh, a call come out for a robbery in progress at, I think it was the Red Lobster, one of the chain restaurants there. And they put a description in, actually, they hadn't even put the call out yet. We were driving, and the officer I was riding with a guy named Gallegos, really good officer. Uh, he sees a guy running and looking behind him constantly. So I, if you've spent any time in law enforcement, you quickly realize that's something outta the ordinary and deserves a little more investigation. So we followed him, and then the guy really started running as we were following this individual. Then the call come out about the robbery, but the officer I was with was already outta the vehicle on foot chasing him, apprehending him. The only thing we were told explicitly stay in the vehicle, you know, if anything happens. So the only thing I could do is flick the, uh, emergency blue lights on, let the other officers know where we were. So they get the mail in custody, and as they're apprehending them going through 'em, they're finding all kinds of money and wads of money. And back then you could go anywhere and pay by check. You could order pizzas and pay by check. Um, they found a couple checks made out the Red Lobster, and as everything was coming together, they realized this guy had just robbed a Red Lobster. And the officer I was with before the call had even come out, was already in pursuit of him, and apprehended him and made the arrest. And it, it was that light switch moment like, oh wow, this is, this is great. This is exciting. This is something I need to pursue when I'm not gonna be in the Army anymore. As going through the bomb squad, uh, I put in a transfer after I'd been in

patrol for about five years or so, put in for a transfer to go to the bomb squad. And eventually I was given an opportunity to transfer there. So, I went and spent the last 15 years of my career with the police department in the bomb disposal unit. Uh, a lot of training. It, it's an area where you may not be busy much, but you have to know an awful lot, and you have to know well enough that you don't have time to stop and pull out a book and reread something. You have to have a lot of knowledge in a lot of different areas. The ability to think on your feet and adjust and shift your focus and just adapt. It was a lot more of a cerebral game and a hands-on physical game.

N: Mm-hmm.

L: And that appealed to me. So, I ended up doing that for, like I said, the bulk of my career. I spent 15 years in the bottom disposal unit.

N: Wow. Were there any, uh, standout moments from that? Any highlights?

L: Uh, many. I mean, there were so many things. Uh, during the Democratic National Convention, I was down on the floor of the Wells Fargo Center during the papal visit when everything was locked down in the city. We were, you know, going anywhere and everywhere. Uh, Army-Navy games, being down on the field talking, in fact, one Army-Navy game. I don't remember if it was the last one I worked or the one before. I think it was the one before. So that would've been 2019. I was down on the field talking to one of the guys from the Golden Knights who'd parachute him in, and we were just, you know,

shooting the breeze. And he had his bag, and on his bag, he had the unit crest of the 51st Infantry. "I Serve." and I said, "Hey, Sergeant, um, who were you with when you got that?" And he said, "Oh, I was in F company." It was a long running surveillance company for 18th Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg. And I went, "You're not gonna believe this." <laugh> Tell him the story. And I actually still have it. He gave me, he came back and found me. He didn't have anything on him, but he came back a little bit later in the game and gave me one of their unit coins. So, I gave him a bomb squad coin. And it was just one of those weird things, "Hey, you know, 30 years I was in that unit when they were in Germany."

N: Nice.

L: So, I mean, thing with the squad lot that it, it was either absolute boredom or absolute insanity. They're numerous instances, uh, and you take a lot of different things. It's investigations, it's hands-on, it's diagnosing problems. It's coming up with logical solutions to, you know, various incidents and dilemmas and devices. So it, like I said, it was a lot more of a thinking game than, than even patrol. Because patrol, when you're a police officer, you never know what your next call's gonna be. It could be an auto accident, it could be a shooting, it could be a robbery, it could be a house collapse, it could be a fire, it could be a person in the river. There is no normal day, and you just have to be prepared for a wide variety of things working in bomb disposal. It's the same mentality, but in, in explosives or, you know, hazardous device environment, it, it might be a natural gas explosion of a house, and you have to go out and investigate the

explosion. It might be a suspicious package that you have to, you know, go and conduct diagnostic, diagnostic testing on, determine what you have. It could be recovery of military ordinance, it could be a hazardous materials incident. It a, a wide variety of anything and everything that, you know, could potentially go wrong, cannon does happen.

N: Yeah, I didn't, I didn't know, like it covered quite as, quite as much as that.

L: Oh yeah. I mean, I got called into work during the middle of the night one time to Solly in the Boulevard where there was a vehicle that crashed, burst in the flames. It was a Chevy Astro minivan burst in the flames, and whatever was leaking out of the vehicle was going into the sewers. To the point, the sewers on the opposite side of the, uh, travel lanes had flame shooting up out of 'me. So, you know, it was an explosion. We went out to investigate and found out that the van had a hole, kind of a hatch cut on the floor, and they had a portable tank. I guess it was a 200-gallon tank with a pump, and they were stealing gasoline from gas stations.

N: Geez.

L: Did, didn't have the load properly secured. It shifted on the turn, they lost control, crashed into a tree, and it caught fire.

N: My goodness.

L: So, I mean, it, like I said, it could be that it could be natural gas explosions. Uh, during the, during the protest in 2020, there were numerous, uh, uses of explosives in trying to steal money from automated teller machines. And we investigate it as a unit, I wanna say ballpark, around 75 incidents within three, four months. Wow. So, I mean, there were times we were very busy. And then whenever you hear the stories on the news about people, especially kids injured playing with fireworks, that's an explosion. We're out there investigating that and dealing with all those things.

N: Wow. Um, if we could shift back to, uh, CAP for a little bit, um, you've been very involved, um, last several years, uh, both the Wing and the squadron level. Can you talk a little bit about, uh, some of the jobs you've had and some of the experiences you've had recently as a Civil, Civil Air patrol senior member?

L: Uh, absolutely. I've been working at the squadron level for a while, and I supported my local unit as the Deputy Commander. Once I'd been back in for a little bit, uh, around the beginning of 2017, I was asked to take over to be the director of communications for Pennsylvania Wing. And the problem they were having was the people they knew they had that knew an awful lot about communications, didn't have the administrative skills to keep the program running. So they knew all about the radios and very little about running everything smoothly. My experience in the Air Force as a common arms instructor, I'd been the non-commissioned officer in charge as well as the superintendent. I had experience in running a program that involved a lot of different aspects and different things that required different skill sets. So I was able to use that knowledge from the

military and transferred at the Civil Air Patrol. And actually when they interviewed me for the position, I was very upfront and honest with them. And I said, I don't have a lot of experience in communications. I've mostly, you know, I did some high frequency long-range radio work in the infantry when I was a long-range surveillance, but since then, I'd been mostly an end user, turned the radio on, pushed the button talk, and that was the extent of it. But what I did have to offer was the administrative know-how to kind of get the program back on track and keep track of the equipment, make sure we were getting reports done, uh, training accomplished exercises not only planned, but executed and then debriefed, conducting after action reports and lessons learned, things like that. Getting any equipment installed, both out at like remote, uh, radio over Peter sites, as well as in vans. And I guess it was all vans. I didn't install anything in other vehicles, but I was able to provide a lot of that assistance until I started attending classes to, for a proposed career change. Uh, when I got back from Stan in 2011, well, 2010, I started learning how to fly. In 2011, I got my private pilot's license. I'd been outta Civil Air Patrol for a while at that point. Uh, 2001, I got married. We started a family in 2002. I'd been pretty busy, uh, up until around the time I was getting out of the Air National Guard. And actually, one of the things when I was retiring that kept sticking in my head when I was being essentially courted back into Civil Air Patrol by a friend, was I had 24 years of military experience and realistically about 20 years of leadership. And I didn't want that to go to waste. I wanted to be able to take those skills and use that somewhere. So I found that in Civil Air Patrol. Uh, it, it worked out well while I was going to class. Uh, I was also working full-time. I was doing a lot of flying, so I kind of scaled back from Civil Air Patrol for a bit. I end up getting my, uh, additional ratings of commercial pilot, uh,

commercial airplane, single multi engine instrument rating, as well as my instructor ratings for basic certified flight instructor, flight instructor instruments and multi engine instructor. And I was working at a flight school once I gained experience as an instructor, Civil Air Patrol, you know, I, I'd still been active with them, especially on the pilot side. They started calling, and I mean, these were people I'd worked with, uh, within civil patrol, both in ground communications and flying operations. They said, Hey, you're an instructor and we've known you for a while. We know how you interact with people. We'd like you to be one of our instructors. So I came on board and started as a civil patrol instructor, I guess about, uh, it must have been in 2022, early in 2022. So, I've been doing that. And most recently I am a mentor for onboarding new pilots into Civil Air Patrol. And that could be anybody from a guy who recently, a guy or girl who recently got their private pilot's license to someone who'd been in Civil Air Patrol before and was out and was just coming back into the program. And it's mostly just a formalized, uh, one-on-one training to get them familiar with our web-based mission. Uh, whatever WMIRS stands for now. I forget, it's been a long day.

N: Isn't that like web Management Information reporting system?

L: Yes, yes, that one. Okay. I, it's been a long day at my new job, so I, I'm lucky I remembered it. It, it, it's a lot of one-on-one, uh, mentoring with a new pilot. And for someone who's never been in civil air patrol, you're teaching an entire different aspect. And when I explain to people being a pilot in Civil Air patrol compared to being a civilian pilot, it's only about one third flying. The other two thirds is all the administrative

things that go into it, uh, building, you know, making sure your, your qualifications are properly uploaded, being familiar with whims and being able to enter sorties and update and things like that. So there's a lot of things that go into flying with civil air patrol that aren't in the airplane. There's, you know, accountability. We get a significant amount of funding from the United States Air Force, and anybody who's ever dealt with the military knows when it comes to money, they want accountability. They want quantitative results. So if they're funding proficiency or other training, they want to be able to look somewhere and see reports on what was done, how well it was done, anything that could be done to improve it. So, I'm helping out on that. And I know people, I, I know a couple people within Civil Air Patrol that said, I've spent a lot of money getting my flight instructor, I'm not doing that for free. And, and I've heard it from the civilian side as well, you know, you paid a lot and it costs a lot to maintain that proficiency. As an instructor, you need to charge accordingly. You don't give it away for free. I look at it from the point ever since I was a cadet, and especially since I've been a pilot, I've learned so much from flying with other people in Civil Air Patrol. And from the time I was a kid, I've learned so much from other people. This is really my opportunity to pay back and help out the next group coming up behind me. So it, it's, I don't wanna sound cliché and say full circle, but it, it really is not necessarily giving back to people that gave anything to me, but paying it forward really.

N: Absolutely. Um, are there any differences in the program that noticed from when you were a cadet?

L: Oh, absolutely. Uh, like I said, when I was a cadet, it, it was nowhere near as structured as far as the training, the advancement, the oversight, uh, and not just that. Civil Air Patrol today better incorporates technology, whereas before you would have to print out paper fill, fill out forms, mail them to someone, wait for them to get 'em in the mail, wait for them to, you know, make any paper corrections or update files and then mail you the results. Now with technology, we do so much online. Uh, we can, you know, sign a web copy of a document, upload it, and literally within minutes have it approved. Uh, from the flying aspect, I could have a flight release officer on the other side of the state, but because we're using WMIRS, I upload information. He sits on his end, looks at it, make sure everything is uploaded, he'll review all of my information, check it for correctness and accuracy and completeness, and then release me. So I could, I, I could theoretically, well, I have gotten released from people who've been away in places as far away as Texas. They were out there visiting family or doing whatever, but because it's all web-based, they're able to see the information as clearly as someone who was sitting down the street from me.

N: Right. Uh, that's all the formal questions I had. Is there anything that, uh, we haven't touched on that you would like to add?

L: Uh, not really at this time. <laugh>, I've had a very long day. This, uh, my new job has been exhausting. It's,

N: Oh, sorry. Go, go ahead.

L: Uh, no, I was just saying, it, it, it was, I didn't quite have a huge expectation or a very clear picture of exactly what I'd been, what I would be doing. And it's been very long days. I'm, uh, in a management position. So there's a lot that goes into things pretty much day in, day out.

N: Understandable. All right. Well, I do appreciate you sitting down and taking the time to, uh, be interviewed. Um, it is 8:20.

IMAGES AND DOCUMENTS



MSgt. Leissner as a cadet in Squadron 104 during orientation flights.



In Kuwait on Christmas Eve during Operation Desert Shield.



Hawk Mountain sticker on a mailbox at Bagram Airfield



Orientation flights for Squadron 104 cadets 17 November 2014

Observer training
29 March 2015

