

Civil Air Patrol Oral History Interview

NHQ.3.2015-J. Hughes
Chaplain Colonel James Hughes, CAP
17 April 2015



NATIONAL HISTORY PROGRAM
Headquarters CAP

Civil Air Patrol Interview Release Form

Interviewer: Ch. Lt. Col. Marvin Owen, 87988 Lake Point Drive, Florence, OR 97439

Name of Person(s) Interviewed: Ch. Col James Hughes

Address: 436 High Country Circle Morganton, GA 30560

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Signature of Interviewee: *James Hughes*

Date: 04 June 2018

Signature of Interviewer: *Marvin Owen*

Date: 9 June 2018

CIVIL AIR PATROL
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview
of
Chaplain Colonel James Hughes, CAP
by
Chaplain Major Marvin Owen, CAP

DATE: 17 April 2015

Edited by Capt Jessica Allen, CAP

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Access Agreement	i
Title Page	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Forward	1
Summary of Contents	2
Guide to Contents	3
Oral History Interview Transcript.....	4
Appendix.....	11

FOREWORD

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

Editorial notes and additions made by 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, CAP Chaplain and former Georgia Wing Commander James Hughes reflects on his experiences in CAP, and, apropos of the Chaplain Corp's 65th Anniversary, discusses the role and evolution of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) Chaplain Corps.

Ch Col Hughes begins the interview by briefly sharing about his introduction to CAP, compelled by an interest in aviation. He mentions how he was first encouraged to become a CAP chaplain, and goes on to describe how, after 12-14 years as a chaplain, he accepted the post as Georgia Wing Commander. He recalls the many challenges that he personally, and the organization as a whole, faced during his tenure as Wing Commander, and reflects on the lessons learned from those experiences. Continually, he shares his perspective on how the CAP Chaplain Corps had transformed during his time in CAP, and offers thoughts on what he sees to be its future role in CAP and the Air Force.

GUIDE TO CONTENTS

1. Introductions
2. Early Involvement in CAP and Becoming a CAP Chaplain
3. Transition from Chaplain to Wing Commander
4. Challenges Faced as Wing Commander
5. Reflections on Time as Wing Commander
6. Balancing Command Responsibilities and Church
7. Perspectives on the Future of the CAP Chaplain Corps
8. Proposal for Changes to the CAP Chaplain Corps
9. Anticipated Challenges to the Chaplain Corps
10. Closing Remarks

CAP ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Number: NHQ.3.2015-J. Hughes
Recording Interview With: Ch Col James Hughes , CAP
Date of Interview: 17 April 2018
Conducted by: Ch Maj Marvin Owen , CAP

O: Marvin Owen

H: James Hughes

O: Today I'm interviewing Chaplain (Colonel) James Hughes for the 65th anniversary of the Chaplain Corps, the Civil Air Patrol. The date is April the ... I have forgotten the date. Anyway, it's Friday, April, just prior to the Wing Conference and I'll fill that in later. And that is not going on the [crosstalk] 17th. Yeah. 17th. Thank you so much.

Chaplain Hughes, what is your personal experience in CAP and how did you get involved?

H: Well, it began back in the '90s. I was looking at the opportunity of learning how to fly, and I had the impression that Civil Air Patrol might be a place that I could do that. I called the number in the phone book for Civil Air Patrol and I did get the squadron commander for the Savannah squadron in Georgia. And he said that what I should do is just show up. And I did. They were meeting on Hunter Army Airfield in a building that was due to be torn down, it eventually was. And I got started there.

I had no concept of the chaplaincy. It was a squadron commander who directed me to contact the wing chaplain and to become a chaplain. So I did. And met a lot of interesting people early on. The first uniform that I had, the one that I wore for a year, was the blue uniform, but they used to call it the Smurf suit. And the reason I was able to have that is because the former squadron commander of that Savannah squadron had died and his wife had brought all his uniforms. So I wore a dead guy's uniform for a year and bought the patches and everything for it. And eventually I got the Air Force blues, and I eventually got a flight suit and went from there.

But the original interest was to learn to fly. And it turned out that I did learn how to fly that way. One of the senior members that I met owned a Cessna 172 and they were looking for partners. My wife and I became a partner in that 172. I learned to fly in that airplane and my wife learned to

fly that airplane. And my daughters and I ... I had two young daughters at that point, elementary age. We had many adventures in our little Cessna as we flew all over Georgia doing various things. And so that was how I got started in Civil Air Patrol.

O: Okay. Thank you very much. How did you transition from being a chaplain to the wing commander position in Georgia?

H: Well, you have to know that I've been a chaplain a long time. I think 12 or 14 years. I had been a squatter chaplain, a group chaplain, a wing chaplain. Worked at the regional level. And I'm trying to remember, I'm pretty sure I was working at the national level. I was the secretary of the Chaplain Corps Executive Committee when we had a prayer breakfast and former National Commander General Wheless was to be our speaker at the prayer breakfast. And one of the statements that stuck out in his presentation was that at that particular time the Civil Air Patrol does need chaplains to become commanders. And I think that he was dealing with some of the issues of integrity and honesty that was a problem with the leadership of Civil Air Patrol at that time and how it was something that was hurting the organization as a whole. I mean, there were other things going on that were not what they should have been. And that idea stuck in my mind.

Within two years of that comment, the Georgia wing commander offered me the position of vice commander. And so I served as vice commander. But the problem was that he eventually lost his job. He was removed. And so they removed me as well. There I was, not attached to anything, and I of course had given up my chaplain endorsement in order to become a commander. So I started working at a squadron as a finance officer and as a professional development officer. I was just working in that. Then about a year after that a region staff person came to me and asked me to be the Georgia wing commander or at least to apply for it because the wing was in such bad organizational shape that they felt like they needed somebody who could pull it back together. And I did interview and I did get the job as the wing commander and it really wasn't a bad place. We worked very hard to save it from moving to a level three freeze. We did have a CI during that time.

And so it was a very intense time because Civil Air Patrol itself was going through some significant transitions. Wing banker was being introduced and the wing maintenance programs were being introduced and all these were causing a lot of stress and angst among the members. And so we were doing it. Probably the biggest project that we had was the repeater transitions that all the repeaters in all of Civil Air Patrol had to be replaced. We had 14 repeaters in Georgia that we had to go and renegotiate with the tower owners. And so it was a stressful time and a lot

of transition, but a lot of good things came out of it. I finished my tenure as the wing commander and became a chaplain pretty soon after that.

O: Good. I'd be interested to know how long ago that was you finished your tenure. And if any of the things that you learned as commander helped you as you transitioned to be chief of chaplains?

H: Yeah, 2010 was when I transitioned out of the wing commander job. And very soon after that was working with the chaplains again and became the deputy chief of chaplains fairly soon after that. But the thing that I learned by being commander was what a high level of tempo that most commanders have to function, particularly wing commanders. You are answering 50, 60, 80, 100 emails a day. You're signing hundreds of documents a week. You're dealing with operational issues. You're dealing with personnel issues. You're dealing with promotion issues. You're dealing with traveling to squadrons to hand out cadet awards. And you're also planning the Wing Conference. And you're also interacting with state legislature and you're interacting with state emergency management people. So it is a demanding job.

And I think that coming up through the Chaplain Corps, I had no idea about those things or what kind of pressures commanders are under, and what kinds of decisions they make because I had to deal with some adverse membership issues. And that's a very stressful and frightening time, where you have individuals who are accused of doing things that are very destructive to young people and to adults in the families in the Civil Air Patrol. So it's a very challenging ... And so I think that working as a chaplain now, I have so much better understanding of what they actually face and can be more helpful, be more supportive, be more knowledgeable about what they're facing on a daily basis.

O: That's a great insight. I appreciate your sharing that. With the Chaplain Corps specifically ... Well, before we actually get into that, I'm compelled. I just wonder how in the world did you balance your church responsibilities with all of that as wing commander?

H: Well, being a Methodist helps, United Methodist helped there. I was serving a church and have always served churches. There is a flexibility that we have because of our vacation time. We have generous vacation time. And so in one way, the church is supportive of my work in Civil Air Patrol because it is a community oriented organization. And it's one that serves people and is disaster response oriented. So they understand that aspect of it and they're also supportive of that.

But the other side of it is that it's my vacations and I could use my vacation how I see fit. And so it's not really open for question in a lot of

ways. And so I have to be very smart. I have to plan well, particularly on trips like the one I'm on now. This is a week of vacation for me. I do get five of them.

O: Great.

H: And so I just plan well.

O: Good.

H: And that's how it is.

O: Thank you. Well, on the Chaplain Corps specifically, we're looking at the 65th anniversary and I would like to know if you could discuss a little bit about the past, not the history, but where you think we are now. And what you see as future directions is really what we'd like to look at.

H: Here's the thing about the Chaplain Corps, it has changed considerably in the last 15 years, as Civil Air Patrol has changed. The Air Force has changed. The country's changed. Everything's changed. But where we have experienced that specifically was in the '90s, late '90s, the chaplain program was run by the Air Force. We had an active duty full colonel who ran the program.

O: I did not realize that.

H: And that meant that that colonel had an office at National Headquarters, actually had a number of offices and lots of resources and a nice budget that enabled us to print materials and have resources for recruiting. So this Air Force colonel, their full-time job was Civil Air Patrol. So they did training, they wrote materials, they did the character development materials. They had a budget and they brought in five or six reserve officers every year. And they spent a week writing that material. He did all the appointments. And so there was a volunteer chief in those days, but that job was mainly ceremonial at that point. Well, as budgets changed over the years, that position went away. I mean, it started as a full colonel and then the next person they sent in there was a lieutenant colonel and then the next person they sent in there was nothing.

They decided to provide money. So the headquarters hired a reserve chaplain, Bob Hicks was his name. And he served as the national staff chaplain, ran the program. And he did that for about five years. And then around 2004, 2005, that position went away because of finances. So it was replaced with an administrative assistant. And then of course we have another administrative assistant, this is what we had to work with. So from the volunteer side, the job description went from ceremonial to being

completely responsible for everything chaplain. And so over the past few years that has been happening and the last four chiefs, which were volunteers, had to transition that. And it's been very difficult and challenging because nobody in the Chaplain Corps was raised in that environment.

As you progressed up through the ranks, you served at the group wing region level and then supported the national level. Nobody had training or experience in any of these responsibilities. Being a wing commander has made a big difference because of my understanding of how Civil Air Patrol works on the administrative side, on the strategic planning side. And that is the role that we play. My job now includes work at National Headquarters as a volunteer staff director. So it's a huge change.

O: That is very interesting. What about where you see us right now, in transition. You obviously have taken some of the things that you were presented with and already dealt with those and with the, what now is the CEI, become more responsible.

H: Yes. I think that where we are right now is we are responding to maybe six or seven years where the Chaplain Corps floundered. Some of that had to do with the fact that the job description was changing and the chiefs really weren't up to speed to those changes because they weren't raised in that environment. The work that the chiefs, the chaplains have done have been as staff support. And so when I came on, there were a number of problems that we faced as we were losing our place in the character development aspect of things. And we were losing our place in cadet programs and in other aspects of our work at mission chaplain and in working with commanders at every level. And so we have embarked on a very ambitious reorganization. There are some tools that are now available to us that have not been available before. And because of all these changes, now the chief is the office of primary responsibility. So that means we're responsible for all the documents, the training documents and the regulations, so that we have worked very hard in this first year to change.

If it isn't working, we've changed it. It's essentially the approach is I've talked with other chaplains and CDIs across the nation. The word I've given them is I'm not here to defend anything. I'm just here to change it. I think we have taken some major steps in solving some problems that we've had for 15 years through the changing of the regulations. And so that's where we are now. We are now working through implementing some of these changes that we have established through the regulation changes that we've done. And so we have a trajectory of the next three years because that's the length of my tenure of some more significant changes.

O: Good. Would you be at liberty to share, kind of talk in broad strokes about what some of the changes that you'd like to see?

H: Oh, I'm glad to because I have been sharing these with the chaplain region staff colleges last year and this year because it's no secret what I plan to do. The first thing was to see to it that every squadron in Civil Air Patrol was resourced with a CDI or chaplain. We've set that up. Now, it's a matter of seeing that play itself out over the next few months. Next year, we're going to look at the mission chaplain and reinvent that in so many ways, because the chaplains have to be flexible enough to deal with the everyday life of Civil Air Patrol, but also be prepared to deal with the region-wide disasters. And in the past, we have trained to be supportive during those region-wide disasters, but it's been years since we've had them. And so chaplains have been training and they haven't had a chance to use it.

So what we're going to introduce next year is the on call chaplain approach. So that every sortie, every event, every Civil Air Patrol cadet or senior or squadron operational event will be supported by an on call chaplain. So it's not that we will necessarily increase our work, but we will certainly position ourselves to be available if anything should go wrong. For if a squadron, cadet squadron on a Tuesday night decides need to have some orientation flights, there is an on call chaplain for that individual orientation flight. Chances are nothing will go wrong, they'll do the flight, the cadets will get their orientation flight, the plane will come back, they'll put it back in the hanger. Everything will be fine.

That's just the way we hope things happen all the time. But if something were to go wrong, a chaplain would automatically be informed and connected into that event to respond immediately to whatever difficulty they may have had. We'll have the opportunity of training to be mission chaplains and functioning as mission chaplains in between the big events.

O: That is good. What challenges do you see ahead for the Chaplain Corps?

H: I think the biggest challenges that we have is transforming our culture. The chaplains and CDIs that we have now have been a part of an organization that has done business in a particular way. And so in order to be more effective, in order to be more efficient, and also to have more fun doing it, we are working on cultural issues like the mission chaplain idea, where we're not just training for the big events, but we're also finding ways of supporting the everyday event. We're looking at in being very intentional in value adding to the CDI so that they actually become more partners in the Chaplain Corps work that we do.

And we're entertaining the possibility of developing a management system at the wing and regional level that incorporates CDIs as well as chaplains. In other words, instead of there just being wing chaplains, we may have wing program administrators in certain wings that are CDIs. That would be a huge culture change.

O: Yeah. It really would. Well that's good. Any final thoughts that you would like to express, particularly with regards to the 65th anniversary?

H: That would be something I really would like to close with because it is the 65th anniversary of the Civil Air Patrol Chaplaincy. It is an outstanding heritage, not just for the chaplains, because of course our founder was Gill Robb Wilson and his granddaughter is a chaplain today. There is that rich heritage of having the world's largest volunteer chaplain seat, which is what we are, having it being so well integrated into a Civil Air Patrol program, and so expected and such a profound contributor to what's going on in Civil Air Patrol, including the cadet program with its character development, but also working in missions and interacting with that. Chaplains are in particular, the point of the spear in our interaction with the Air Force. The agreements and support that we have there is most clearly seen.

There are other aspects of Civil Air Patrol that way, but the chaplaincy has always been sort of the forefront in that. But when you look around the world and even within the United States, other organizations envy the Civil Air Patrol Chaplaincy. The Coast Guard, for example, and the Air Cadet League of Canada. The cadets that we interact with through IACE, they marvel at the fact that we have this chaplain program and they don't even know how to start it. And so it has had a rich history of 65 years. We are rethinking, rebuilding, retooling ourselves right now. And the way in which we're trying to celebrate the 65th year is to make us into something that is a paradigm of excellence.

O: Well, that is so great. Well I appreciate very much your insights and being able to record this for future generations of CAP members and CAP chaplains. This interview has taken place on April the 17th, oh 2015, with Chaplain (Colonel) James Hughes, who is serving as our chief of chaplains for CAP. Thank you, sir.

APPENDIX



Chaplain Colonel James Hughes, via his personal collection.