

# Civil Air Patrol Oral History Interview

NHQ.2.2015-J.R. Vazquez  
Major General Joseph R. Vazquez, CAP  
17 April 2015



**NATIONAL HISTORY PROGRAM**  
Headquarters CAP

Civil Air Patrol Interview Release Form

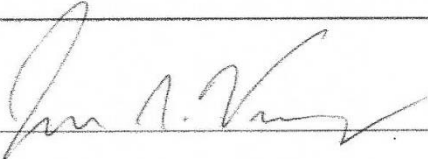
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CIVIL AIR PATROL  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview  
of  
**Major General Joseph R. Vazquez, CAP**  
by  
Chaplain Major Marvin Owen, CAP

DATE: 17 April 2015

Edited by Capt Jessica Allen, CAP

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## **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, Major General Joseph R. “Joe” Vazquez, CAP National Commander from 2014-2017, speaks candidly about his experiences in CAP.

At the time of the interview, Maj Gen Vazquez was the current CAP National Commander. He begins by sharing his early experiences in CAP, including learning to fly and eventually become a glider flight instructor. He recalls his experiences – the challenges and accomplishments – of his services as Wing and Region Commander, and National Vice Commander. He also recounts some of his experiences as Director of Operations during the tumultuous time of Tony Pineda’s command tenure. Finally, he reflects on personal leadership challenges and individuals who have influenced him, describes how those experiences and people have influenced his leadership philosophy, and offers advice to future leaderships.

## **GUIDE TO CONTENTS**

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## CAP ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Number: NHQ.2.2015-J.R. Vazquez  
Recording Interview With: Maj Gen Joseph R. Vazquez, CAP  
Date of Interview: 17 April 2015  
Conducted by: Ch Maj Marvin Owen, CAP

**O: Marvin Owen**

**V: Joseph Vazquez**

O: Okay. We're recording an oral history interview with Major General Joe Vazquez. The date is April the 17th, 2015. General Vazquez, thank you so much for visiting with us.

V: It's my pleasure.

O: I'd like to ask you about your experience in CAP, if you would kind of an overview from your earliest days and what got you involved in CAP in the first place?

V: Well, I started off in 1975 as a cadet, joined CAP as an alternative to the Boy Scouts, which I had been in. And I was at Robins Air Force Base looking for the next youth organization that I could join and I didn't know what was the best opportunities, but found this interesting little article in the base recreation magazine about Civil Air Patrol and it talked about the youth or cadet program and I thought, "Wow, that's great."

And I went to my first meeting and saw these cadet wearing the air force style uniform, fatigues at that time and I said, "Well, wow, that's for me." Because I had been wearing a scouting uniform before that, and this was like the real thing. And so at age 15, that was fantastic and I also was very much interested being an air force brat, so to speak, or my father being an air force officer, I was very much interested in that way of life, in any case. And so one thing led to another and I joined a unit and just started progressing from there and through the cadet program for the next three years and then eventually to the senior program. And early on, I always thought, "Wouldn't it be neat to work my way up the pyramid, so to speak."

And I always envisioned one day I would become a CAP colonel Thought that was the highest ambition you could possibly get and I thought maybe after a working career, and I decided all this while I was a cadet, after a working career, that some... Because I knew you had to become a wing commander to be a CAP colonel, then maybe I'd get retired and maybe at some point I could be a wing commander. I also looking to become a pilot.



And so I had all this stuff figured out when I started working toward it. But then of course, along the way, it was working way through the cadet program and getting up to the Earhart Award eventually before I went to the University of Georgia.

O: Okay. Did you ever achieve, are you a pilot?

V: Oh, absolutely. That happened when I finally went to work with DuPont as an engineer out of the University of Georgia and had the money to start taking pilot training. Because before that I just a starving college student, so to speak and I didn't have really the funds or the... And the only time I had any kind of aviation experience was as a CAP observer, because that's what I did at age 18. I went into the senior member program early so that I could start flying CAP airplanes, fly in them as an observer. At that time, you could not be an observer and be a cadet. You had to be a senior member. So that's why the moment I hit 18 years of age, I immediately transitioned.

O: Okay.

V: By the time I was working for a living and earning an income where I could take my own pilot training, by that time I already had logged over a hundred hours as a CAP observer. So [...] my first flight lesson, I was already well in advance of a normal flying student at that point because I was used to the cockpit and everything and flying a single engine Cessnas, flying in single engine Cessnas, the only difference was sitting in the left seat and handling the control. So it was the only real difference. But as a CAP observer, I knew navigation and how to go from point A to B and all the things you would have to know short of the meaning of skills of handling the controls.

So that's why I was able to solo in about right at six hours of flight training.

O: Oh my goodness. That's outstanding.

V: But because I had a hundred hours as a CAP observer before that.

O: I was curious what part of engineering were you?

V: Software engineering. I worked for E.I. DuPont as a DuPont engineer at the Savannah River plant and I graduated from the University of Georgia. I actually had two degrees, one in computer science, but also with a major in psychology before that. And about six years of college and I started off chemistry premed so I took a really circuitous route to end up the way I did, but I did end up with a bachelor of science with two majors. And computer sciences, of course, was the basis on which I was hired at Savannah River plant. And I was a DuPont engineer for most of my career and then I was transitioned due

to an outsourcing within all of DuPont to CSC. Most of the IT or information technology people like myself were transitioned over so I was with CSC for the past 10 years and then I took the early retirement.

O: Okay.

V: Just in time to take over the role of vice commander of Civil Air Patrol, which is a full time job, the vice commander job and the commander's job are full time, but just like everybody else, we're volunteers so we don't get paid for it.

O: Do you pay for your own travel and everything or are there funds for that?

V: No, I get a travel expense fund for that. So my travel is taken care of and the incidentals but the fact remains just like any other CAP volunteer, I'm a volunteer.

O: Yes.

V: So unpaid.

O: Well, that's pretty incredible. How many years have you been in CAP now?

V: This is my 40th year.

O: Okay.

V: 40 years.

O: That is great. What were some of the positions that you had coming up or specialty tracks?

V: Well, specialty tracks, I've sort of done a little bit of everything. I mean, officially I've got certain specialty tracks, command is one of them, stan eval is another one, communications is the third. But in reality, I probably have worked in way more than a dozen different areas, I just never officially recorded the rest of them. The first 20 years or close to it, it was all at the squadron level really. [...] CAP and I was doing a whole lot of different jobs, but then of course I became a pilot and rapidly progressed right to flight instructor within a couple of years. I had virtually all of my ratings and even picked up a fighter pilot's rating.

O: Okay.

V: And then eventually became a glider flight instructor. So I've got flight instructors in power and glider just picked up over the years. So I've done a little bit of everything in aviation but I picked it all up and most of my ratings when I started working for a living, which was about 1984, that's within a year I picked up, I was a private pilot and within two years after that, I was a flight instructor. So I've been teaching since 1987 and I was doing it part time with local fixed base operators or local FBO type of instructor. And in fact it was kind of I didn't have much of a life for a while there because I was flight instructing every weekend and at night.

O: Goodness.

V: And then during the day I was an engineer at the Savannah River plant. So I had no free time literally for a long... I picked up a lot of experience but it was in aviation but it got to the point that I almost burned out. And then fortunately I got transferred out of Augusta Georgia. That was my first assignment and went up to West Virginia. And so that sort of broke that cycle a little bit and then I started flying more with CAP more than I did flying on the side. Of course I'd been a CAP member all along since 1975, but I really didn't fly full time, most of my efforts weren't with Civil Air Patrol flying until about 1989, because that's when I started getting to units that had an airplane assigned to it.

Because before that we didn't have an airplane assigned to Augusta. There was no CAP airplane for me to if I wanted to have a fly in. I had to do that all on my own and it was only later in my career when I was moving up and down the East coast for DuPont that I actually had units that had airplanes. And then usually I was the sought after commodity because I was a flight instructor and everybody wants a flight instructor in their unit because they want to take care of all the pilots and the check rides and all the rest of it. So I was doing that for a while.

And then it was about 1990 was my first command, but briefly as a group commander at South Carolina wing when I moved back down to South Carolina. And then when I moved over to Seaford Delaware in late 1990 through about 1993, I was a squadron commander. And that's where I really learned the about Civil Air Patrol leadership was as a squadron commander because that's when you have all the problems of administrative volunteers and just you get exposed to the nuts and bolts of what it takes to be a volunteer leader really at that level.

O: Yes.

V: And then I moved up from there and ended up a variety of... I was a group commander in a number of different places and then moved to Richmond, Virginia in 1993, I met my

wife who was a check pilot with Virginia Wing at the time. So she checked me out when I came into the scene so to speak because I was transferring in from another wing at that point. And then almost immediately joined the Virginia Wing staff. That was the first time I was on a wing staff in '93 and as director of senior programs. I actually did that for a little bit. And then a group commander position came open. I started doing that. And within a year I was also a group commander, but on the side, I was also the wing stan eval officer.

O: Okay.

V: So I took that over and started doing that full time. And then by about 1996, I was made director of operations for Virginia Wing because... And oh, by the way, picked up credentials when I was still in Maryland as an incident commander, well mission coordinator is what we called it back then, but now it's a commander. So I was running missions and doing all the things that you would do as an IC. And in addition to being a mission pilot, mission check pilot, check pilot. So I was doing all those types of things in operations.

And then 1997 we had the wing commuter takeover and who offered me a position to be vice commander of Virginia Wing. And I volunteered, I said, "Great, let's do that." And so for the next four years, I really got an exposure. And that was the first time I went to a national conference and saw the leadership of the national board and that entire experience. And then in 2001, I was selected as the next commander of Virginia Wing.

O: Okay.

V: So I was a wing commander for about, only until about actually to 2003, because the position of vice region commander came open and I had a number of good candidates coming behind me that could take over Virginia Wing so I elected. So I was only wing commander for about two years. And I rolled right in the Middle East region as the region vice commander. I was there for four years. And then through a combination of circumstances, I actually went up and became the volunteer director of operations at national headquarters.

O: Okay.

V: And did that for about 14 months. And then came back to Middle East region and became region commander. And then I was region commander for a little over three and a half years. Somewhere toward the end of that three and a half years, I ended up taking early retirement from my career. So I had time available and I decided to run for national vice commander and I was elected by the national board to be the vice commander. And I was in that position for about the past three years and then a little over six months ago, I

put my hat in the ring to be national commander and I'm the first board of governor selected national commander as we've changed the constitution and bylaws.

O: Yes.

V: But I was there when those constitution bylaws changed because as the national vice commander being elected, I also sat on the board of governors. So I was on the board of governors for two years, and then we had the constitution and bylaws changes and then I was voted off the island because now we had four [...] CAP members at large instead of two members at large and then the commander and vice commander, we just removed the commander and vice commander from the board of governors and instead have four CAP members at large, which really is more to our benefit to do it that way because the national commander still sits on the board of governors as an advisor. So that's kind of the rationale-

O: Must be kind of an ex-officio member or just an advisor?

V: Right now, Don Roland and myself, we're both the advisors to the board of governors and we have an official role to be present. And I'm the one that, as the CEO of the corporation, I brief the board of governors on the activities of Civil Air Patrol and what's happening. And in fact, I just gave that update earlier today, which was basically to bring them up to speed with what we've been doing for the past four months, because they meet every four months.

O: All right.

V: So that brings me up to the present so.

O: That is very interesting progression as you went so. Well that's good. One thing I wanted to find out, when you were director of operations, how did that relate to John Desmarais's position at national? Was he there at that time?

V: Yeah, he was there at that time. This was way back under Tony Pineda.

O: Okay.

V: And he had set up this shadow staff system, I think we can call it because before that, there really wasn't any, but he set the system up of a volunteer member that is the shadow of the paid staffer. And I was the first volunteer director of operations. Now what later happened was that position then rolled over and became the advisor position. So I became the operations advisor and Amy Courter took over and I was still in operations as

the operations advisor. And then shortly after that is when I stepped back into Middle East region and became the region commander.

O: Okay.

V: But I was there sort of working with John Desmarais and I've worked with him even before that when I was a vice commander Middle East region. So yeah, I've known him for a long number of years.

O: Well, that is great. I was just wondering how that fit in. I'd like to just dress on the last side, I appreciate the progression of your career and knowing what happened. Would you tell me a little bit about some leadership, maybe your philosophy of leadership. I want to explore challenges that you faced and maybe how you resolved them and things that you've learned that might benefit others, just [...] possibly newer and less seasoned commanders.

V: Well, fundamentally it really depends on the level of the organization that you're referring to. At the squadron level, the lesson that people, you can never forget that we're a volunteer organization number one and you have to remember that volunteers need to be motivated. Like having a crew of paid employees, you can compel them to do anything because they're earning a living, well, volunteers, they require more motivation. It's actually harder, in my opinion, to manage volunteers at that level. It's just remembering that you're dealing with volunteers at the lower levels.

At the upper levels, region and wing commanders, wing commanders in particular, the one thing I learned is they have to learn how to manage, which means you're at a delegation. One thing I'd seen too much of, and I still see too much of it to this day are wing commanders that burnt out after a few years because they take too much on themselves and they can't delegate properly. So at the lower level, it's more direct leadership and knowing how to lead volunteers and at higher levels is knowing how to be an effective manager and how to delegate and how to trust subordinates to get the job done, or to extend the trust to them until you're proven wrong and then you turn around and you extend it to somebody else if you have to. But you have to be able to delegate.

There's a lot of things I admit over the years I know I could have done better than subordinates in a particular job but if I do their job for them, then I'm doing my job and their job at the same time. And I could never run a wing that way, certainly could not have run the region that way or anything higher. So I'm one of those, I was, I guess, fortunate the way I did things and I was able to enjoy being a wing commander or a region commander, but I know some people that I don't think they enjoy it because they get into it and I think they take on too much and they have problems managing or delegating what you're doing.

O: Well, what are some qualities that you look for in a leader or that you think characterize a really effective leader in our organization?

V: Within Civil Air Patrol it's experience, it's the best predictor.

O: Okay.

V: And you really, and I'm a big believer in if you've [...] a group commander should be someone who's had squadron commander experience, a wing commander should be someone at the minimum that's been a squadron commander at a minimum because that's the fundamental membership unit. And again, if you're going to be a good region commander, you should have been a successful wing commander. And finally, a national vice commander or a national commander needs to be someone who was a successful region commander. In other words, all these different building blocks because these different levels of CAP all have unique challenges and you really can't succeed at the next level unless you have the experience of the level prior to that. So that's something I'm looking for.

And for people that have an aspiration to move up the chain, and I know several people that have talked to me about it and I've given them advice. And in one case, they took my advice and this person's now a wing commander in consequence. I tell them if they want to be a commander, they better go and get some good, solid squadron commander experience if they want to be a wing commander. And if it's someone that's at the wing level or wing commander that wants to be a region commander or higher, well, if they want to be the national commander or at a national level, then I tell them that you need to get your time in and volunteer to be a region vice commander or region chief of staff and work your way up to region commander because that's really where you get the experience for the next step up. So it's really experience is the key and having good experience because that's the only way you can learn.

Now there's other industries that people can get people from the military and people from business, from private industry, they've got leadership experiences on the outside, all that helps, but CAP is so unique that you really have to have the experiences in CAP leadership fields to really be qualified to move up.

O: Okay. Thanks. Now, from what you mentioned, I don't believe you didn't serve in the military, did you?

V: No.

O: Okay. So all of your training and experience was really CAP related. So good. Well, are there any, I'm sure I shouldn't say any, what are some challenges and how did you deal

with those as you, if you could in broad terms, I know that won't, you don't need to divulge anything personal, but I would love to know how you've handled difficulties along the way.

V: Well yeah, it's kind of funny, the difficulties tend to be much the same, no matter what level you're in, because you always have... You have challenging personalities and you're going to find them at every level in CAP. You just have to know how to deal with people, number one, I guess. I couldn't really point to any one situation because there's always situations.

But as far as challenges to me, well, I guess for myself, was public speaking, being able to stand up in front of a crowd and gab. I did not view myself as very good at that. I thought, well, I'm probably one of the worst speakers there is. And I got over that through practice and through knowing my subject. And now I can do what I thought was impossible 20 years ago because I'd seen these people, when I was at squadron level in particular, we'd see these wing and region commanders at wing conferences, they come in and they start speaking with no notes and I used to marvel at that and think, "Wow, they must really be so talented to do that. There's no way I could ever, ever think about doing anything like that."

O: Well, I never would have envisioned, but I can understand that. Well, are there particular people along the way that either mentored you or had a major influence or you looked at the examples of their lives?

V: Well, I'd say one of the more recent major influences was Colonel Charlie Glass, who was the region commander that I worked for when I was region vice commander. And he was also Virginia Wing commander when I was his director of operations. So I kind of followed him up in a way, but he's former Air Force reserve colonel and a executive in general electric and gave me quite a bit of insight, I guess, into not only the Civil Air Patrol, but the Civil Air Patrol Air Force relationship. And I got a lot of good information about how to deal with our Air Force brethren and we have 20% of our members are former or current military. And I learned quite a bit about interactions with the military, some of the things he taught me. So it was really a very good education. I think Charlie prepared me more than any other experience to be national commander in so far as within the past ten years.

O: That's great. Well, if you have difficult people along the way, what are some things that you might, I know each one's different, but are there some things that you could share that might be helpful in trying to approach a difficult person, realizing we work in the volunteer setting?

V: Well, you have to, first of all, sometimes if it's possible to reach out to them and get them to understand that there are other people besides themselves CAP. I think that's



where a lot of the problems are, is when we get people that they're very short-sighted and they see things strictly from their own viewpoint and they're not really looking at the bigger picture. It's just a matter of education and sometimes it's putting people into things that they're really good at where they're not going to create an issue with others because really the problems are when you have two or more volunteers fighting each other.

O: Yes.

V: That's the real problem. And I can adapt to someone that is lousy at doing their job or if they're forgetful or whatever, that's not a problem to me. The problem is when you have one volunteer in blood feud with another. And I've seen this happen all the way up to wing levels, where you had an entire clique forming on one side of a wing versus another clique on my another side of the wing. That's one of the things that as a region commander, I started to encounter sometimes and it's because the leadership of that wing allow situations like that to development.

And sometimes we see that, I see that at the national level we've got some situations sort of like that, that have developed. And the important thing is from my standpoint is I've got to put the right leaders in to manage those situations, which is basically someone that's not kind of be part of one camp or another, but is looking out for the big picture. And as far as difficult people that, you're at a smaller level, you can find that kind of thing happening all way down even in the squadron where you have one group against another group. So one of the biggest management problems or leadership problems is getting people work together [...].

O: Okay. And some conflict resolution [...].

V: Right, conflict resolution.

O: Okay. Well good. Thank you. I wonder, are there any final thoughts that you'd like to share that might be on your heart?

V: Well, one thing, and I'm glad you're doing these oral histories because I'm going to bring all the former region, excuse me, national commanders. I offered them free transportation, room at the national conference. We're going to bring them all to the national conference. So I think it's important for all members of CAP to meet the former national commanders. And they actually comprise of an organization called the National Advisory Committee. It's actually in our constitution bylaws, but that committee, to my knowledge, has not had a real face to face meeting in over 10 years. So this'll be the first time we've done it.

O: Okay.

V: So as a parting thought is that I value the past and I value some of the lessons learned from previous national commanders and I hope that I can, by doing this, share that with more of our members today. Just so they get some connection to the Civil Air Patrol of years gone by.

O: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your time and-

**APPENDIX**



Major General Joseph R. Vazquez, via CAP National Headquarters.