

Interview with
STERLING KEITH PALMER

August 8, 2018

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STERLING KEITH PALMER

Sterling Keith Palmer was interviewed by Randall J. Bunn on August 8, 2018 in St. George, Washington County, Utah. He related his military experiences in the United States Air Force.

RB: Where were you born?

SP: I was born in Monticello [San Juan County] Utah [on] March 24, 1949.

RB: You mentioned that you grew up in Blanding [San Juan County] Utah. What was your childhood like? [Was] your father a farmer or a rancher?

SP: He was a farmer-rancher and also a heavy equipment operator. I suppose I grew up as a typical child in a small, isolated Utah town. I grew up as an only child because, out of my five siblings, I am the youngest by nine years. By the time I could remember anything, they were all gone.

RB: That is interesting. Did you graduate from high school in Blanding?

SP: Yes.

RB: Was it Blanding High School?

SP: No, it was San Juan High School.

RB: [After] you graduated, did you go to college?

SP: Yes, I did.

RB: Where did you go?

SP: I started at BYU [Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah County, Utah] for two semesters and then went to the University of Utah [Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County, Utah for one quarter.

RB: You mentioned you are a Latter-day Saint. Did you serve a mission with The Church [of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints]?

SP: Yes, I did. After my quarter at the University of Utah, I was called to Hong Kong in what was called the Southeast Asia Mission at the time. I served in Hong Kong.

RB: What time period was that?

SP: I served from 1968 to 1970.

RB: Did you learn a foreign language when you were there?

SP: Yes.

RB: What language did you learn?

SP: The Cantonese dialect of Chinese.

RB: After your mission, what did you do?

SP: I came back home and tried to decide what I was going to do with my life. I was [almost] twenty-one years old at the time. I had always wanted to be a pilot, but I did not know the road to take. I was planning to go back to the University of Utah. One day, I walked by the [United States] Air Force ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] office [thinking]: I will go inside and pay them a visit. This was at the tail-end of the Viet Nam War and they were recruiting pilots vigorously. They said, "We will take you." They only had a two-year program and I was a new sophomore at the time. They either were desperate or I was a good talker! [Laughter]

RB: Did they accept you?

SP: They accepted me and the rest is history.

RB: Why [did] you always want to be a pilot?

SP: I do not know. From the time I could first remember, I was very interested in airplanes. Once in awhile, one would come into the Blanding Airport and it was a very memorable experience for me. I got to go on light airplane rides once or twice when I was youngster. My youngest brother enlisted in the Air Force for four years. That tweaked my interest too. Coming from a poor family and poor circumstances, I could see no way forward to becoming a pilot. I did not know if I had the ability to be a pilot, either, so there was self-doubt.

RB: [Did] you participate in [the] Air Force ROTC [program] at the U [University of Utah]?

SP: Yes.

RB: When did you graduate?

SP: [In] 1973.

RB: What was your major?

SP: Sociology.

RB: After you graduated, did you immediately go into the Air Force?

SP: It was not immediate because by now, the Air Force had figured out that the Viet Nam War was coming to an end and realized they did not need all of the pilots that they had, [so] they started cutting the supply line down. As a result of that, they started pushing classes back. The Air Force Academy cadets get first preference because when they graduate in May or June [and] they are on active duty, so they immediately fill up all the pilot training classes.

I was getting married that August too, so they said, "You can remain on the hook and we will put you in the first class we can get you in, or you can pick a date." I said, "How about January 1974?" They said, "That will work." I actually went on active duty in January 1974.

RB: Were you commissioned at that point?

SP: I was commissioned when I graduated from ROTC.

RB: Were you commissioned as a second lieutenant?

SP: Yes.

RB: You were on inactive duty until you went on active duty.

SP: Yes.

RB: Where did you go in January 1974?

SP: [I went to] Laughlin Air Force Base [in] Del Rio Texas.

RB: What did that consist of for you?

SP: A year's worth of pilot training. We spent the first few weeks learning basic military drills, exercises and getting a lot of the paper work filled out. We were doing things you have to do before you can go to pilot training, such as ejection seat training, a lot of academics. After that, we went into the actual academics to fly the T-37. I do not recall how long that lasted before we actually started flying. For the first few months, we would do academics for half the day and fly half the day. That went on for about six months. If you make it through the T-37 successfully, then you go on to the T-38. It was the same process; for the first two or three months, you do academics half the day and fly half the day.

RB: What was [it] like the first time you get behind a cockpit and you are learning to fly?

SP: During the summer between my junior and senior year, as part of the ROTC program and the weeding out process, the Air Force gave you, at that time, forty hours of light aircraft training. They do that through a contract that was based, at least for us, at the University of Utah, at the Salt Lake International Airport. I was able to get enough flying time to get my private pilot's license.

RB: [So] it was not the first time behind a cockpit.

SP: Yes. There were a lot of differences, but I was used to a little bit of flying when I got to the T-37. It being a jet, and having to wear a helmet, oxygen mask and parachute, was extremely different. In terms of getting in the air it was somewhat familiar to me.

RB: Were you comfortable when you first learned to fly, getting your private pilot's license?

SP: Yes, I was comfortable then.

RB: Other than the changes with the jet, it was not that big of a deal for you.

SP: It was a big deal in the sense that the airplane went a lot faster. You start doing acrobatics and then you go into instrument training. For a private pilot's license, you did very little of that sort of thing. A lot of people suffer from air sickness and quite a few people washed out just because of that alone.

RB: Did you?

SP: No, I never [was] sick.

RB: That was never a problem for you. You finished the T-37 and went on to the T-38.

SP: Yes.

RB: When did you finish that training?

SP: I graduated on Valentine's Day 1975. It should have been a month sooner, but again, they had pushed the class back and so it added a month to my pilot training. They were really at this time — during my T-38 course of training, they came to my class one day and said, "We have too many pilots. Here is the deal; you can find a job in the [National] Guard or [Air Force] Reserve if you like, you can go home right now and all is forgiven, or you can stay and do what you are doing." Everybody in my class stayed. [Laughter]

RB: That did not help them out very much!

SP: No, it did not.

RB: [So now] you have graduated from undergraduate pilot training — is that what they call it?

SP: Yes.

RB: If they were trying to eliminate some, did they have to take some and not allow them to become pilots?

SP: No, not that I am aware of. I do not think that had any impact on the training or selection process.

RB: After you graduate — and your wife [Kathleen Denise (Hanson) Palmer] is with you in Texas, I take it — where did you go?

SP: The way the process worked back then — it used to be that the [man] who graduated at the top of his class got his first pick of the group of aircraft that came down for assignments. My class was the first one they changed [to] where the top ten percent got their choice; that wound up being four [of us]. I do not know how the process worked for everybody else, but they were supposed to be randomly assigned; they did not get a choice. We all requested what we wanted, but how it all worked out is still a mystery to me.

RB: Were you in the top ten percent?

SP: Yes.

RB: What did you choose?

SP: I took a C-141.

RB: Very good. Did they send you off to train on that aircraft?

SP: Yes.

RB: Where was the training?

SP: [I went to] Altus Air Force Base in [Altus] Oklahoma.

RB: In 1975 you end up in Oklahoma and your wife was in Texas, I [believe]?

SP: She was with me in Texas, but due to the short period of training at Altus — I believe it was three months at the time in order to become a copilot — she elected to go back to Salt Lake [City] and stay with her parents while I was in training.

RB: Tell about your time at Altus learning that aircraft.

SP: That is probably one of the most exciting times of my life. I was finally wearing wings. I got the aircraft that I wanted and the base that I wanted. All of this is extremely hard work. I am transitioning to an entirely different method of flying and flying a very large airplane. It was hard work, but I was diligent at it and came out okay.

RB: Why did you choose the C-141 of all the aircraft in the inventory?

SP: That is an interesting question because a lot of the [men] wanted fighters and I could have had one as well. I was the only one out of the four who did not pick a fighter. There are a lot of reasons for that. By that time, I had had enough of wearing an oxygen mask, a parachute and flying upside down. That was part of it. The other part of it was that the fighter world was in a tremendous transition coming back from Viet Nam. The future was rocky in terms of where you were going to be stationed and for how long. The main reason is I wanted to see the world. That is what the C-141 did; we flew all over the world. To this day it was the right choice.

RB: That is interesting. My understanding is that a fighter pilot is like the surgeon in the medical field. They are the premier and consider themselves the cream of the crop. But you chose not to go in that direction, so it is interesting.

SP: Most of what fighter pilots do is train. They go out to the range and train. They very rarely actually do their job, what they are trained to do.

RB: That is true.

SP: I wanted to do something that was real. That was a big part of it.

RB: Did you say [the training] was [for] three months?

SP: Yes, right at three months.

RB: What was your follow-on assignment? Did you stay at Altus?

SP: No. At that time there were five actual C-141 bases and I was assigned to McChord in Tacoma, Washington.

RB: Did you wife join you there?

SP: Yes.

RB: How long were you at McChord?

SP: I was there from 1975 to 1978, about three-and-one-half years.

RB: Was your first son [James Palmer] born there?

SP: Yes, at the [United States] Army Hospital at Fort Lewis [Washington].

RB: Tell about that assignment. Did you go TDY [temporary duty] much?

SP: Yes, that is almost all I did. [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

SP: I was gone two or sometimes three weeks [to] a month.

RB: What assignments did they send you on? Were there particular places that you flew on a regular basis?

SP: Yes, there were different types of missions. At the time, that was the Military Airlift Command — MAC — and there were three C-141 bases on the west coast and two on the east. Primarily, the [men] on the east flew to Europe and we flew to Asia. There was a lot of intermixing, not so much for the east [men] going west, but we went to Europe a lot. There were what we called channel missions which were like the airlines flew; regular missions to supply Air Force bases in the Pacific. There were special air lift missions where somebody would hire us to fly a special mission. Usually it was the [United States] Navy. We did a lot of support for carrier groups. They would pull in a port somewhere and would need to be re-supplied, primarily with fresh fruits and vegetables. We would bring mail to them, which was a big deal. That could happen anywhere from Singapore to Diego Garcia to Mombasa, Kenya — wherever they would come in. There were emergency missions too; typically relief. If a hurricane or typhoon came through someplace, we would have to haul supplies in.

RB: Did you enjoy that Air Force experience?

SP: Yes, I loved every minute of it. I would do it again in a heartbeat.

RB: Excellent! What happened after that assignment at McChord? Where did you go?

SP: By that time I had upgraded to become a flight examiner. You co-pilot [and] if you do well, then you can upgrade to aircraft commander. If you do well there, you become an instructor pilot. If you do well there, you become a flight examiner, which is giving the other [pilots] flight examinations. The handwriting was on the wall. When you reach that point, then it is time to move. They would hand pick [men] to go back to Altus and become instructors there. That is what I did.

RB: So you went back to Altus. Were you a captain at this point?

SP: Yes.

RB: And an instructor there?

SP: Yes.

RB: Was this in about 1978?

SP: Yes, I think it was 1978 or 1979. I am sorry, it is too long ago. [Laughter]

RB: No, that is fine. You could easily look at your bio or resume and figure that out, but that does not matter. Did you like being an instructor?

SP: I did. I enjoyed it because I was home every night for the first time.

RB: That is true.

SP: I was getting tired of being gone and flying the world and I enjoyed instructing. Every day — it was dependent on if you were training co-pilots, aircraft commanders, or instructor pilots — the regimen could change, depending on what kind of class you had. Co-pilots would spend the first ten missions in a simulator and then go fly for, I think, six missions. They were always four hour missions. I enjoyed that because it was a lot of ups and downs and mock emergency procedures. I very much enjoyed that.

RB: Was it the same as when you were training?

SP: Basically.

RB: You were in the other role?

SP: Yes.

RB: Did you like working with brand new pilots?

SP: Yes, I did. For the most part because they were like I was at the time — young, eager, and anxious to learn. It was a very enjoyable experience.

RB: Very good. How long did they have you there as an instructor?

SP: Normally, the assignment would be for three years, but at about the eighteen-month point, I got a call from the assignments people — actually it was above them — and they asked me if I would be interested in going to Hong Kong to be assistant air attaché at the consulate there because of my language background. I said no. [Laughter]

RB: You turned it down?

SP: I turned it down for a variety of reasons. I was thinking about getting out of the Air Force and going the [commercial] airline route. I did not really want to, but it was the thing to do and I fell into that. I know this sounds silly, but the main reason was we had a dog at the time and animals going to any British place had to go in quarantine for six months. That was a tough decision, but they kept after me. My wife and I spent a lot of sleepless nights talking about it. I finally agreed to do it.

RB: You did?

SP: There were not too many of us in the Air Force who spoke Chinese at the time.

RB: I can imagine!

SP: They were not going to give up on me. [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter] In the Air Force in general, and you with a pilot background — you put your dog in quarantine and you went off to —.

SP: It turned out not to be that bad. The quarantine situation in Hong Kong was not too far from where we lived and we could visit the dog as often as we wanted. It turned out to be okay; not great, but okay.

RB: Your dog survived and you survived. Did your [children] go with you to this assignment?

SP: We only had the one at the time.

RB: Yes, 1983 was [when] your other one [Matthew Palmer was born]. Tell about that assignment. It sounds very exciting.

SP: Yes, it was very exciting. I do not know if you understand what attachés really do.

RB: Not exactly. [Will] you describe that?

SP: I can only tell you part of it. It is intelligence collection. That was my main job. As a result of that, I traveled in China quite a bit. We would go in a couple of times a year for two weeks at a time and travel wherever we wanted to go. I was interested in air force facilities, airports and [such]. The good part was that my wife went with me because we traveled as tourists. We would observe and record; that is all I can say.

RB: Did the Chinese know what your status was?

SP: Yes, I am sure they knew. It was a very unusual situation because at that time, Hong Kong was a British colony. We were technically accredited to London [England]. However, we were there because of China. We had another attaché office in the embassy in Beijing. Those [attachés] received a lot more attention from the Chinese authorities than we did because they were officially accredited to China. They were a lot more lenient with us because they saw us as less of a threat. We [were able] to go see things out of Hong Kong that those [others] in Beijing did not get to do. Our office was very beneficial and productive for the intelligence system. We actually worked for the DIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, on loan from the Air Force.

RB: In 1979 or 1980 —?

SP: I was there from 1981 to 1984. Once I left Altus, I had to go back to Washington, D.C. for a year. Technically, the job requirement was Mandarin language.

RB: Did you have to learn Mandarin?

SP: Yes, I went to the [United States] State Department School, studied Mandarin and there is also an attaché course that you have to go through. That went on for a year before we went to Hong Kong. That is why it was 1981 before we got there.

RB: In 1981 — for a decade almost, ties with Communist China had opened up under [President Richard M.] Nixon. They were still, somewhat, developing at that point. What was China like at that time?

SP: They were trying to figure themselves out, I believe. They were struggling day to day, trying to survive. The military was trying to modernize and expand, but they were still using old [equipment] that they had [received], primarily, from the Soviet Union. A lot of things they had manufactured themselves under license. One of our big airplanes over here [pointing to an aircraft at the Sky Western Aviation Museum] was built in China; one of our MiG-15's. Their concentration was primarily on ground forces, and a lot of them. They were trying hard, but they were a very poor nation, struggling, trying to get into the modern world. The Cultural Revolution had just ended and left them in a lot of turmoil. The people were extremely friendly and nice to us. We never felt threatened or anything like that. We [were able] to see almost all of China as a result.

RB: Did you travel by train?

SP: Every way; train, boat, airplane, car [and] bus.

RB: Were you in the large cities as well as out in the provinces?

SP: Yes.

RB: Interesting. Were there any experiences that you had — you said you felt comfortable, but did you ever feel threatened?

SP: No. Through our training experience we knew that we were being watched all the time. Sometimes we could pick out who was watching us, but sometimes not. We had to be careful that we did not do anything overt that would cause suspicion. Every time we started a trip, we had to go to Beijing first; that is where we would start our trips and be briefed by the intel people there. Interestingly enough, every time we went there — this was the Chinese doing — they put us in the same hotel and the same set of rooms.

RB: Do you think they were monitoring your conversations?

SP: Absolutely.

RB: How did your wife feel about that?

SP: She saw it as an adventure. The whole secret to having a successful military career is having a wife that supports you. She saw it as an adventure and she is still an adventurous person. She enjoyed the travel for the most part. It was not like a luxurious tourist trip by any means. It was okay; it was very interesting.

RB: Did your children accompany you?

SP: No.

RB: They stayed in Hong Kong. At the end of that assignment, where did you go?

SP: I had to go back to flying so —.

RB: Were you a major at this point?

SP: No, I was still a captain. They wanted me to go back to the C-141 because I already was trained in it and training is so expensive. That was fine with me; they gave me my base of choice and so I selected Travis Air Force Base in [Fairfield] California.

RB: You went from Hong Kong back to California?

SP: Yes.

RB: Did you have a second young toddler [Matthew] by this point?

SP: Yes.

RB: Was this assignment similar to McChord [where] you went on missions?

SP: Yes, very similar.

RB: But you were more senior as a pilot by this point.

SP: Yes.

RB: What was that assignment like for you?

SP: It was [almost] the same except, because I was now a senior captain, I [was] selected for major while I was there. My life was a little bit different because of the fact that I spoke Chinese. We were warming up with the government of China. At two different times, I was selected to go when they brought their president and then their premier separately to visit our country. I was selected to go fly with them on their visits through the country to help them. That was interesting.

RB: Really? What kind of places did they visit?

SP: The first one, I picked them up in Toronto [Canada] and then we went to Niagara Falls, New York, Washington [D. C.] Los Angeles, California [and] Hawaii. Then I left them in Guam. The second trip was very similar to that. I cannot remember if it was [the] president or the premier who came first and second.

RB: They had an entourage and they traveled to these places. Were you an American delegation that supported them?

SP: Yes. I flew in the cockpit with them, in case they had procedural questions. It was very interesting.

RB: I can imagine. Did you have any kind of private conversations in the course of this travel?

SP: Yes, some. My favorite experience was — they flew 707's; that was their Air Force One. It was actually one of their airliners, but they outfitted it out especially for the VIP's. They had in the back a regular — no kidding — bed like you would have in your house for the president and premier to sleep in. I was standing up front, by the galley, in the middle of the night, one time, talking to the flight attendants, and the president of China came out of his room, padding up the aisle in his pajamas!

RB: Wow! [Laughter] That was something!

SP: He came [directly] to me and we talked for quite awhile.

RB: Interesting!

- SP: It was an experience of a lifetime.
- RB: There is the public persona, but you saw him in a private moment just like everyone else, in his pajamas. That is great! In doing that, you spoke Mandarin. How was your foreign language ability?
- SP: My Mandarin never became nearly as good as the Cantonese. My understanding is that there are about 100 Chinese dialects. They overlap to the extent that the grammar is very, very similar. It is the sounds and the tones that are different. The grammar was not a problem for me. Cantonese is a much more [difficult] language to learn. There are more sounds and tones. That is what it is all about. You can have one sound in Chinese; depending on the tone you use, it can mean something entirely different.
- RB: It is becoming aware and trying to pick up on those subtleties in the language and the tones. Were they impressed with your Chinese abilities as an American?
- SP: Yes, it was very unusual for them to see this blue-eyed, blond-haired gringo, being able to speak to them. I might be the first and only one they ever saw.
[Laughter]
- RB: If they were talking to one another, could you understand what they were saying?
- SP: Mostly. You never understand everything completely, especially if you get off into some technical discussion.
- RB: Yes. That vocabulary was not something that you had learned. This was a part of this assignment at Travis. When did that end?
- SP: I was there for two years. I was taken out of the squadron almost immediately and went to work for the wing commander. He had a special projects office that he wanted me to run. Our primary job was — at the time we were repatriating the remains from the Viet Nam War. Every time a C-141 would come in with the bodies on board the airplane, we would have a special ceremony and that was my job. Interestingly enough, Eileen Collins of astronaut fame [retired Air Force Colonel and NASA astronaut] was also in my squadron. She was somewhat younger than me. She came to work for me in the special projects office. She and I became good friends. She is a very, very special person. She was an excellent pilot, very intelligent and very, very kindhearted.
- RB: Wonderful! Did she go on to become an astronaut?
- SP: Yes, later on.
- RB: I do not know much about her. Did she —?

SP: As far as I know, she is the only female commander that has ever been an astronaut and actually flew the shuttle.

RB: You knew her when she was still an Air Force pilot?

SP: Yes, she was one of the instructor pilots who helped me get re-current in the C-141's. [Laughter]

RB: Did you make major while you were at Travis?

SP: Yes. [It is] an interesting story. I do not want to bore you with it. I was out on a mission one time in Yokota Air Force Base in Japan. We were in flight planning heading back to [the Air Force base in] Elmendorf [Anchorage] Alaska. My wing commander would sometimes go out to meet crews and fly with them as part of his job. He came to me and said, "I am flying with you back to Elmendorf." You never —.

RB: What could you say?

SP: The pressure goes up now. He said, "Before you go, we have to do something." I thought: what did I do? I am in trouble. It happened to be the first of April and that was the day I got promoted to major. We went down in front of the Welcome to Yokota sign, and he pinned on my major's leaves. We got on the airplane and headed back to Elmendorf. He sat in the auxiliary crew member's seat. We left about 4:00 in the afternoon so immediately [we went] into darkness. He sat back there and I noticed [that]. I am said to myself: why are you not in the back, asleep? Why do you not get in the bunk and go to sleep? He never did. Finally, about four hours later, we crossed the International Date Line so guess what day it is now? It was March 31st. I [feel a] tapping on [my] shoulder. I looked around and it is him. He said, "Major, you are out of uniform." He pulled off my major's leaves and put the captain's bars back on.

RB: [Laughter] That is great!

SP: By the time we got to Elmendorf, guess what day it is now? Locally, it was the first of April. He did the same thing again, "You are out of uniform." We had another ceremony putting on the major's leaves.

RB: [Laughter] That is very good! [Laughter]

SP: It was an interesting experience.

RB: [Was] he the wing commander at Travis?

SP: Yes.

RB: [Was he an] 06 [officer grade 6, full colonel]? He would not have been a General.

SP: No, they were 06's at the time.

RB: After that experience at Travis, and with the Air Force, did you have some input into the assignment and where you would like to go?

SP: Yes, I did, plus the wing commander liked me. [Laughter] At that time, this was coming up on the second year that the Air Force had bought the VIP light aircraft, the Lear jet, that we called a C-21 and the Beechcraft King Air called a C-12. I caught wind of the fact that a job in Osan in Korea was coming open. There was a small detachment there. I volunteered for that. They did not have a lot of takers, so I was selected to go there. I was the commander of that unit. Any time you can become the commander of a flying unit in the Air Force, it is a very good thing. I had five pilots work for me, a couple of office staff, a maintenance [man] — our maintenance at the time was a civilian contract. We flew VIP's all over the Far East. We went as far as Bangkok. The good news was that every quarter, we would have — ten-percent of our flying hours are allocated to training. It was strictly up to me what we did with it, as long as everybody stayed current. We would go back to Hong Kong every quarter and train there. I [was able] to go back home. [Laughter] That was a wonderful experience. My wife was able to go with me because — most assignments are unaccompanied — but because I was the commander, she and the [children were able] to go with me.

RB: When was that?

SP: [This was from] 1986 to 1988. During that time period [it] came assignment time. They said, "We need you to go the Pentagon to work [with] the Joint Staff." I thought: oh boy! In the Air Force, you cannot merely fly airplanes and get promoted. You have to do different things.

RB: Yes. There comes a time when it is — as I saw it and people in my own career — the captains are the worker bees and they do it. If you want to go up, you cannot be a worker bee your entire career whether you like it or not.

SP: That is absolutely true. The best you can hope for, generally speaking, if you only want to fly, is to become a major. I had aspirations. At that time, due to the reorganization of the Air Force, this joint-ness was becoming a very big deal. Going to [the] Joint Staff that automatically becomes jointed. I went off [to] the Pentagon for three years, worked at J-5.

RB: What is J-5?

SP: That is Strategic Plans and Policies. I was the Air Force connection to the DOD [Department of Defense], or to the military. I had a counterpart in DOD that I worked with. I spent a lot of time working policy issues. The biggest problem at the time, and probably still is a problem to a degree, was how we treated the

Taiwanese vs. Mainland Chinese. The Chinese would come to town once a year with their senior delegation and meet with our senior people. That is when they would ask to purchase military equipment and we would agree or disagree. I was always the host of all of that. At the time, [General] Colin Powell was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, so I got to know him fairly well. That was a tremendous experience.

RB: What was he like?

SP: He would be my definition of a true gentleman.

RB: Really? How so?

SP: There were 1,638 of us on the Joint Staff. He knew every one of us by our first names.

RB: That is impressive.

SP: Yes, he was the kind of man you would do anything for. He would see you in the halls, "Hi Sterling, how are you doing?" I was walking down the corridor one day when he came along, "Sterling, what are you doing? Come here, I want to show you something." He took me to his office where he had a collection of baseball caps that were on a shelf on the entire perimeter of his office. He wanted to tell me about some of them. That is the kind of [man] he was. When the Taiwanese would come, they could not wear uniforms and we could not host them in a public place for a dinner.

RB: Was that because of our relationship with mainland China?

SP: Yes. One year, we had a breakfast at General Powell's house. I was in charge of that, so I showed up at 5:00 in the morning. There is General Powell working in the kitchen with his staff. He saw me and came to talk to me. Later on at breakfast, there were the Chinese's five highest military [men], all of our service reps, secretaries, Colin Powell, and me as a major sitting at the table having breakfast. [Laughter]

RB: That is neat! [Laughter]

SP: That was a unique experience. I dealt mostly with the mainland Chinese [people]. I would go to events at their embassy, go out to lunch with them and such [events]. It was a glad hand sort of thing.

RB: Yes, [a] very formal relationship with them. Where did you live when you were in [Washington] D.C?

SP: We lived in Virginia, a town called Burke.

RB: Burke, yes. In Fairfax County?

SP: Yes.

RB: By this point, were your [children] teenagers?

SP: Not quite, but getting close. They went to regular schools there in Burke. I was selected for 05 [lieutenant colonel] during this period.

RB: Very good.

SP: It came time for assignment again at the end of my three years. They came to me and said, "You are going to be the Ops [Operations] Officer in 55th Airlift Squadron at McClellan [Air Force Base] in [Sacramento] California. This was a dream assignment, something I never thought I would see in my life. Most people did not know the squadron existed. We flew WC-135's, the 707's.

RB: What does the WC stand for? [Weather Cargo aircraft]

SP: W is for weather, although that is not what we did. I can talk about it now; it has become declassified. We had six of those airplanes. As the Ops Officer, unless you really mess up, you automatically slide into becoming the commander of the squadron.

RB: This was a good opportunity with the progression.

SP: Yes. That is what I did for a few months. When the commander was reassigned, I became commander of the squadron.

RB: That was at McClellan, but McClellan was part of the Materiel Command, and yet there was another squadron —.

SP: We were only tenants on the base.

RB: Okay, I understand.

SP: That is where Air Rescue Headquarters was located. For some reason, because they did not know what to do with us, we were under Air Rescue Service. We had nothing to do with them, but that was my senior commander. They were there on McClellan.

RB: Can you talk about what the mission was?

SP: Yes. The history of that squadron goes way, way back, before satellites were in existence. During bombing missions in World War II — I do not know about

prior to that — because we did not have accurate weather reporting [or] collecting capabilities, they would send out aircraft to do preliminary looks at the weather. They would come back to report. The bombers would take off or not, or alter their route, according to the weather. That is the origin of the squadron. Our squadron actually flew the last mission of World War II. They were sent out on the third mission to drop a hydrogen bomb on Japan, —

RB: No kidding?

SP: — to do the mission scouting. They got halfway to Japan, and they were called back; the war was over. In my mind, that was technically the last mission.

RB: Wow! Yes, their mission, but the war ended at that point.

SP: They were flying a lot of different aircraft at the time, including U-2's. The nuclear age had arrived and it morphed into monitoring what was going on with the nuclear-powered nations. We had only evolved into the WC-135's so what we did was air sampling. We would go sniffing around the countries that had nuclear capability and collect air samples, literally air in bottles and we had — the Wurlitzer Company made them; it was the same technology as a juke box, where the arms would slide out. They had big sixteen inch filters; they would slide one out into the air stream and collect particulates. We would send all of this to the lab in Florida and they would analyze what was going on. You would be amazed at what they could discover about what a nation —

SP: — was doing just by —.

RB: — traces they left in the air.

SP: Yes. It was unbelievable. All of the Chernobyl information came from our squadron. But, we could not sample over a sovereign nation. We had to wait until the air mass blew off shore into international air space.

RB: Hence the weather connection, with weather and air patterns.

SP: The weather name followed on from back — they really did weather [then]. It was a good cover because back then it was all classified.

RB: Very interesting. Did you ever fly a C-135?

SP: No, not until then.

RB: Did you train on that or learn that?

SP: Yes.

RB: Was it much different than the C-141?

SP: In terms of the feel of the aircraft flying, it was very similar. The difference was the systems because you have two different companies and their philosophies going into the airplanes.

RB: Who made the C-135?

SP: [The] Boeing [Aircraft Company].

RB: And the C-141?

SP: [The] Lockheed [Aircraft Corporation].

RB: Is the C-135 larger?

SP: Than the C-141? No, they are very close to being the same.

RB: The C-5 is the one that is larger.

SP: The C-5 is the big one.

RB: Did you progress from being the ops commander?

SP: Yes, I became the commander.

RB: You were the commander of the detachment?

SP: Of the squadron.

RB: How did your job change from ops to the overall commander?

SP: As the ops officer, I spent a lot of time learning the airplane and the mission. Now, I was responsible for everything. We were one of the last squadrons in the Air Force. We did our own maintenance on the airplane, we had our own training; we had a simulator. We were probably the last squadron in the Air Force to have everything in-house. That evolved over time. You become responsible for all of that, so now I am in charge of maintenance [workers] as well as all the operators.

RB: What command did you belong to?

SP: We had become the AMC.

RB: Air Mobility Command?

SP: Yes.

RB: It was MAC before. [Military Aircraft]

SP: Yes. It became AMC [Air Mobility Command] while I was in the Pentagon.

RB: Was it about 1992 when that big organization took place?

SP: Yes.

RB: You are now in AMC. How long were you the squadron commander?

SP: It was an interesting time, because after about a year, the Air Force was in a tremendous downsizing mode.

RB: That is right, in the early 1990s.

SP: They decided to close our squadron down. That went back and forth for a long time, but ultimately the decision was made. I had the dubious honor of closing that squadron down. That was not pleasant; we had to disburse all of our assets. We sent all but two of our airplanes to the bone yard. We sent two more to Offutt [Air Force Base, Omaha, Nebraska].

RB: Did the mission go away or did [it] get picked up?

SP: It did not go away, but the airplanes that we sent to Offutt, where the [men] do the rivet joints, the electronic snooping around electronically with their different models. They sent our airplanes there and they maintained the capability of doing the air sampling. We were on call all of the time, in case something happened that we did not know about, to be on alert to go sample the air to see what was going on. That never happened during my — Chernobyl happened right before I [arrived] there. That was an alert situation, but mostly we knew well in advance. It was primarily China that was doing tests, and intel could tell us well in advance so we could be postured to go sample. Generally speaking, we would go over the North Pole and along the north side of Russia to check them and out into the Pacific to [check] the Chinese.

RB: Was there another squadron that did checking in the Middle East?

SP: No, we did the whole world.

RB: Did that include Pakistan and India, too?

SP: Yes. We did all those areas; South Africa, Mediterranean, obviously looking at Israel and the other Arab nations to see what they were doing. We would go off the east coast of South America, checking on Brazil and Argentina. These were regular missions that we would do once a month or once a quarter. We would go

through the Korean Straits just to see what was going on with North Korea, India, Pakistan — I cannot think of anybody else.

RB: Those are the main ones. Do you recall what year you actually closed down that squadron?

SP: That was about 1994.

RB: That was towards the tail end of the downsizing period. Did you start looking for another assignment?

SP: Yes. I thought that I would never make O6 [full colonel] because I had had such a brief time as a commander of that squadron. However, I had been the commander of two flying squadrons, so I thought: maybe. By that time, I had twenty years in and I thought: I am just going to look towards retirement. I did not quite have twenty [years] in. I thought I would put in another one or two and then I will retire. The Air Force had other ideas. During this reorganization period, —

[END OF RECORDING ONE.]

SP: — a lot of the overseas bases that used to have maintenance and logistics support, or aircraft that would go through, primarily the air lifters, were being closed or all of those operations were being moved back to central locations.

Now, they would go into a place like Bosnia, for example, or somewhere in the Middle East, and that support was not there. AMC mobilized what they called, Air Mobility Support Groups. They had the combinations of all these support units as separate squadrons — squadrons within their [groups]. Whenever an activity occurred, they would send all the transporters, all the maintenance [staff], all the comm [communications] [men], to this location TDY [temporary duty] and they would do the job that used to be done by the permanent party. There were a few bases where they put separate squadrons. I think there were five or six of them in the Pacific, and five or six in the European area that were permanent underneath where they still had centralized capability.

They did not know what to do with me. The Air Mobility Support Group in the west part of the world was at Travis. They assigned me there and I stayed; we lived in Sacramento - Roseville, and I commuted down to Travis for two years. They did not know what to do with me, so I wound up — we did a lot of exercises. We would go to Thailand, Korea and Japan — to do exercises with our allies. Where we practiced, we had the central operations center where they would do all of the fighters together. We would join together in a big group and do mock exercises. I did a lot of that and a lot of planning with our allies in, primarily, Korea. That went along for a while and I got selected as O6 [full colonel] while I was there. Now, it is a problem for both me and the Air Force. [Laughter]

They chose me to become the squadron commander at Rhein-Main in Frankfurt [Germany], Air Mobility Support Squadron. We were there supporting — again back to all these basic support units. I had a maintenance unit, a comm [communications] unit, and we also had the command post for the entire base. There were only two [full colonels on the base. Rhein-Main was in the process of downsizing and eventually closing. I did that for two years and now it was time for me to retire. I wanted to get in twenty-six years because after that you [don't receive any] more pay raises because of time in grade. I said I want to go back to McClellan because that was where my family was. The last year I was in Germany, due to the downsizing and the school situation, my wife and my youngest son went back to Roseville — we kept our house — for him to go to school and I wanted to go back there. They sent me to McClellan and I worked as part of the base closure commission, closing down McClellan. That was not a pleasant duty.

RB: Why not?

SP: I had closed down one squadron. Rhein-Main was in the throes of closing; I was the next to the last commander there. Now I get to close down McClellan.

RB: You were the clean-up [man].

SP: It was depressing.

RB: I can imagine.

SP: [I spent] two years there. As a 06 [full colonel]; if you can stay somewhere two years, you are lucky. Now, they started pushing me to go to Bosnia and became a base commander there. I said, "I do not think so." Later, they came back and — this was my do-or-die moment in my mind — they wanted me to go back to the Pentagon for some job that I cannot remember. I told my wife, "It is time for us to hit the road." So I put in my papers.

RB: Was this in 1997?

SP: It was 1999 when I retired.

RB: You came in 1975, so that would have been twenty-four year point?

SP: Yes.

RB: I assume your oldest son had already left home, and so your younger son, born in 1983, was still at home. Was he in high school?

SP: Yes, he was in high school.

RB: That would have been a big change for him. Was that the main reason, or did you not want to go do the work in the [Washington] D.C. area?

SP: I felt like I was not going to become a brigadier [general] and frankly, I did not want to. That just was not my [interest]. I [decided] two things: it is downhill from here and the other thing is I want to get out while I am young enough that I can do something else. That is what drove it.

RB: You put in your papers to retire, turned down that assignment and got out. Were you living in Roseville?

SP: For a little while. Things tend to happen to me in life. This was another one where, at a base retreat of some kind, I ran into a [man] who was working for Flight Safety. If you are familiar with Flight Safety, they are the largest corporate jet training corporation in the world.

RB: That is the name of the company, Flight Safety?

SP: It is owned by Warren Buffet. [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

SP: He was one of the instructors in San Antonio [Texas] for the company. He said, "Will you come work for us?" We planned to stay in Roseville, but I got thinking about it. We had always liked San Antonio, so I said, "Why not?" I worked for them until 2007.

RB: That was quite awhile then.

SP: Yes, a little over seven years.

RB: From 1999 to 2007. Did you son graduate from high school there?

SP: No, he graduated from high school in Roseville. Both of them did; they graduated from high school there.

RB: That makes sense. If he was born in 1983, he would have graduated about 2000 or 2001. You got out of the Air Force and worked until 2007. Did you continue working after that?

SP: I kept getting offers to go fly. I did some flying while I was working for Flight Safety. Our training was all on a simulator in a classroom, but we would oftentimes get offers to fly the aircraft. That was good for us because it gave us experience in the airplane and got us away from the humdrum of daily teaching. USAA [United States Automobile Association] is headquartered in San Antonio. They had their own air force that they do not talk about. We trained them and so

we would often go fly with them. This [man] talked me into going and flying for him. I said to Flight Safety, “I have had enough.” Warren Buffet did not get rich by being extremely generous with his people. We worked our tails off, sometimes sixteen days in a row without a day off.

RB: Wow!

SP: I enjoyed doing it, but enough is enough; I [was] tired. I flew corporate a year or two, but got tired of that also. I decided to come back to retire.

RB: Why did you choose St. George?

SP: My wife was not going to go back to Blanding; I did not want to either, but I always tell her it is her fault. Neither one of us wanted to go to Salt Lake [City], which is where she is from.

RB: Why not? Snow, cold, city —?

SP: All of that. Big! Both of our sons were in southern California. Her mother and dad were living in Salt Lake [City]. I had relatives still in Blanding, so we were centrally located.

RB: That makes sense.

SP: Plus, we love St. George.

RB: It is a very nice retirement community and a nice community in general. You came here in —

SP: [In] 2008.

RB: — and have been here ever since?

SP: Yes.

RB: If you had to look back on your Air Force career, what was the best thing about it? If you had to sum it up in a few sentences.

SP: First of all, I was able to do something I love while serving my country. It almost seems unfair that I got paid for that. Flying airplanes and going places in the world that I would never have gotten to do in a commercial flying job, or anything other kind of a job. Probably, the premier thing for me was the quality of people that I got to meet and work with. They were absolutely top-notch folks. My one regret would be that I was gone from my family so much. In the military, it is part of the game. If you're going to succeed, you have to do that, or you do not succeed and decide you want to do something else.

RB: That concludes our interview and I appreciate you taking the time to talk about your experiences.

SP: You are very welcome.

RB: Thank you very much.

[END OF RECORDING TWO. END OF INTERVIEW.]