

AIR NATIONAL GUARD

ORAL HISTORY

TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

INTERVIEW OF

Major General DONALD J. STRAIT,

New Jersey ANG (Ret.)

By CMSgt David P. Anderson

ANG History Program

NGB-PAH

on

May 15, 2008

Edited and annotated by Dr. Blair Haworth, March 2012

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Preface

Donald J. Strait was born in East Orange, New Jersey, on 28 April 1918, and grew up in the nearby town of Verona, where he graduated from high school and went to work for the Prudential Insurance Company. In January 1940, he enlisted in the New Jersey National Guard's 119th Observation Squadron and was soon mobilized in the run-up to the United States' entry into World War II. Originally an aircraft armorer, Strait qualified for pilot training in March, 1942; he received his wings and a commission as a second lieutenant the following January and received his preferred assignment as a fighter pilot.

After conversion training, he reported to the 361st Fighter Squadron, 356th Fighter Group in March, 1943. The group deployed to England with its Republic P-47 Thunderbolt fighters in August 1943 as an element of the Eighth Air Force. While with the 356th, Don Strait flew 122 missions in two combat tours, first flying P-47s, later North American P-51D Mustangs. In the process, he achieved command of the 361st Fighter Squadron, the rank of major, and 13.5 aerial victories, making him the leading ace of the group and one of only two known prewar National Guardsmen to become aces in World War II.

After his return from the European Theater, Major Strait worked in flight safety analysis until his demobilization, then he returned to civilian life with Prudential. Strait soon rejoined the New Jersey National Guard, assuming full-time status with the establishment of the New Jersey Air National Guard (NJANG), serving as commander of the 108th Fighter Wing and eventually as the longtime chief of the New Jersey Air National Guard. Along the way, he mobilized with his command in support of the Korean War, graduated with honors from the Air War College (his only higher education), served as a civilian presidential appointee in the Department of the Air Force, led the deployment of over 200 ANG fighters to Europe in response to the 1961 Berlin Crisis, and embarked on a second career in the aerospace industry.

Donald Strait retired as a major general in 1978. His first unit flew an airplane with fixed landing gear, one whose enclosed cockpit was something of an innovation; his last command flew a supersonic fighter heavier than the bombers he had escorted as a fighter pilot twenty years before – and which was obsolescent. His career would be impossible to replicate now, on educational, technological, operational, and even legal grounds. As such, his story merits attention.

David P. Anderson, a Chief Master Sergeant in the Wisconsin ANG who was on an active duty tour with the ANG history program in the National Guard Bureau, conducted this interview shortly after General Strait's ninetieth birthday. The interview took place in the general's home, adjacent to his well-stocked trophy room, which lends a free-associative character to the three and a half hours of proceedings. In editing the resulting transcript, instead of reorganizing I have added topical headings to sections and have indicated time-points on the recording; these are given in the footnotes in [square brackets]. With help from the interviewer, I have tried to clear up as many inaudible passages and ambiguous transcriptions as possible. The ones remaining are indicated, as are educated guesses on my part. I have also attempted to identify as many names given as possible, to provide technical glosses where they appeared necessary, and to reconcile General Strait's account with official and other records where they diverged.

During his final review of the transcript, Dr. Charles J. Gross, Director of ANG History at the Air National Guard Readiness Center, deleted several negative personal comments made about individuals by Maj. Gen. Strait. Those deletions are clearly marked by “[Deleted]” in the transcript.

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Joint Base Andrews, Maryland
30 March 2012

Preliminaries

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay, we're rolling. Today is 15 May 2008. This is David Anderson, senior historian with the Air National Guard History Office at the National Guard Bureau. [I'm in] in Jackson Springs, North Carolina. I'm here with retired Major General Donald J. Strait, formerly with the New Jersey Air National Guard. We're conducting an oral history interview.

First of all, sir, you accept the signed form of release and --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Absolutely.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay, great.

Prewar

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I guess we want to talk about your pre-war, why you joined the National Guard Observation Squadron. Can you -- can you first tell me did you have any kind of impression of aviation to join?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's a very interesting question because as a youngster, pre-high school, I was very interested in airplanes and I used to build all kinds of models that didn't have actual engines, but they were flown by rubber bands.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And that was the early version of model aircraft. I had a great interest. During the summer, while I was in high school, I used to take my bicycle from Verona, New Jersey, and drive or ride up to Caldwell Wright Airport in Caldwell, New Jersey, which was a Curtiss-Wright aviation facility. They were doing extensive flying there at the time because they were building propellers for various aircraft that were being flown by the Army Air Corps at the time.

So I used to spend the weekends, on Saturday and Sunday, up at the airport talking to crew chiefs, talking to pilots occasionally, just watching airplanes fly because I was extremely interested in aviation. It was a pretty extensive bike ride and my mother used to pack me a brown-bag lunch, and I would spend the whole day there watching these airplanes maneuver and being tested.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How far of a bike drive?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I would say the bike drive was probably six to eight miles.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was a pretty arduous drive because there were a lot of hills involved and it was tough going both ways.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So it wasn't something downhill or easy riding. In those days bicycles weren't very efficient. You had to really pedal them and put some effort into it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: About what year is this you're saying you

bicycled?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Now we're talking, we're talking 1934, 5 and -- yeah, 34 -- 3, 4 and 5.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. And when did you graduate from high school?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I graduated from Verona High School in 1936.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Did your parents give you any, pass on any interest in technology, or aviation, or anything like that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: My family had no interest in me going to college. They never talked about it, they never advanced any thoughts to me about college. Consequently they felt that when I graduated from high school that I should go to work, and that was the best thing for me to do, and to get myself established in industry in some capacity.

So my father worked for Public Service Electric Light and Gas Company, which was a big utility company in New Jersey. So he was able to get me a job, a clerical job, in his home office in Montclair and I went to work there at a very low salary, I think it was about \$10 a week.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I worked there for about a year-and-a-half and I was very frustrated. I just didn't have any interest in what I was doing because I couldn't see any future in it. At the same time I was a very successful baseball player.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I pitched for Verona High School for three years and was very successful. After graduating from high school I was able to get on a team, the Glen Ridge Athletic Club team, which was in an industrial league and it was considered to be semi-professional. In fact we had a number of ballplayers, including Billy Johnson, who played third base for us, who later ended up after the war playing third base for the Yankees.

I was doing extremely well. In two years, '37 and '38, I had only lost one ball game as a pitcher. I was doing exceptionally well. I then had great interest of possibly trying to get a minor league contract with some professional baseball team. At the time the Giants had interviewed me twice as to a possibility of joining one of their farm teams.

In 1939 I was pitching in the championship playoff, and this was September, and I lost the game three to two, but the next morning when I got up I couldn't lift my right arm. My arm had been severely injured during the game and after consulting a doctor he advised me that I stretched the deltoid muscle and that he didn't -- he wasn't sure whether rest would recover it or whether it was just something that I had to accept and it would improve to the point where I can live okay, but I wouldn't be able to throw baseballs again.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. So -- okay, so in September of '39 we've already, World War II has begun.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, as far as the invasion of Germany [*sic*].

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Germany --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- by then Germany, over in Europe, they invaded Poland.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But not as far as the United States.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No, no, no, no.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No, but is that -- are those sorts of events going on, on your mind?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I'm more interested at the time -- early in 1940 I was very frustrated with my -- because I had -- oh, I had -- after Public Service I had been able to get a job with Prudential Insurance Company in the home office in Newark. I had worked there for about a year-and-a-half and I was taking insurance courses at night and I had absolutely no interest in it. I was pitching on the Prudential Insurance team, baseball team, and doing very well there, but I had absolutely no interest. My mother and father were so pleased that I had gotten a job with an established company and I could stay there the rest of my life and have retirement, and good medical plans, and so forth and so on. So they thought that was the ultimate as far as they were concerned.

The National Guard

I was extremely frustrated. In January, early January of 1940 there was an article in the Newark Evening News advertising that the 119th Observation Squadron, which was located at Newark Airport, was looking for eight recruits. So I answered that. I didn't tell my parents about it. But I went down there and I

arrived as scheduled and there was 100 people looking for those eight assignments. However, once they saw that they weren't flying assignments most of them backed out. So I hung in there until midnight, at which time I was accepted as one of the eight and I was sworn into the 119th Observation Squadron.

I came home and told my mother about it and I thought she was going to have a stroke. She was so upset. She couldn't figure out how I could do such a thing after the great job I had. I was making \$12 or \$14 a week for Prudential at the time. She couldn't understand why I had done it.

So I joined that unit and then at the time it was a National Guard, Army National Guard unit in the 44th Division. We had weekend drills and summer camps and so forth. Then in September, we were mobilized for one year's service by the President and they called up four Army National Guard observation squadrons. So I went on active duty in September at Newark Airport.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What did you sign up to become, what was your career field?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, initially I had nothing. I didn't have anything to offer, so they put me in the transportation. Between transportation and the kitchen I spent most of my time -- and on security duty. In January of '41 they sent me to aircraft armament school out at Lowry Air Force Base [Field?] in Denver, Colorado. I went to -- I spent school there, about four months, where I was training as an aircraft armorer. I enjoyed that. It was interesting.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What was the 119th flying at that time?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We were flying O-46s and O-47s.¹

¹ The Douglas O-46 and North American O-47 were observation aircraft intended to carry out a variety of missions in support of Army ground forces, mainly artillery observation

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So then I came back to the unit and when I came back to the unit I went into the armament section as an armorer, aircraft armorer, and an opportunity came along to become an aerial gunner. In the back of the O-47 they

and photographic reconnaissance. This role harked directly back to the two-seaters of World War I, but by World War II, the artillery-observation role could be better performed by lighter, Piper Cub-type liaison aircraft, while the reconnaissance mission was better suited to faster aircraft such as fighters and light bombers.

[Figure 1]File:Douglas O-46.jpg

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



This is a file from the [Wikimedia Commons](#). Information from its [description page there](#) is shown below.

Description	The Douglas O-46A of the National Museum of the United States Air Force at Dayton, Ohio (USA).
Date	28 October 2005
Source	National Museum of the U.S. Air Force photo 051028-F-1234P-002 (cropped)
Author	USAF

had a circular ring and they had mounted on that ring a .30-caliber machine gun.

So I was able to qualify as an aerial gunner, as an expert aerial gunner, because we used to have an opportunity to shoot at targets, aerial targets, and they would count the bullet holes and depending on how many rounds you shot and what your score was and so on. But I qualified as an expert.

Additionally I became a tow reel operator. In the back of an O-47, or down in the belly of an O-47 and in the back of the O-46 they put a windless and they had 3,000 foot of cable and we used to let that out and there would be a target, a 6x30-foot target, and we used to tow up and down the Jersey Coast, both day and night, for the anti-aircraft guns to train on. That was an exciting experience. I got a lot of flying time, a lot of flying time.

Flight School

In the fall of 1941 I was really getting a lot of flying time, and the pilot that I used to fly with was a real nice guy.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What was his name?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: His name was Colonel --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, you can move on. If it comes back to you --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, I'll think of it, I'll think of it in a second because he's a good friend of mine. I think he's still alive. Oh, golly.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Was he the commander?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no, no, no. He was just a pilot in the squadron. He was the second-lieutenant pilot.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, okay, but he retired as a colonel?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, and eventually in the Air Force.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But anyway, he said to me one day, "Don, you're wasting your time." He said, "Why the hell don't you go up to Newark, go to the recruiting station and sign up for aviation training as an aviation cadet."

I said, "I think I might do that." So I went up and I qualified and they sent me down to Montgomery, Alabama, to Maxwell Field, where they determined whether I was to be a pilot, a navigator or --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Bombardier?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Bombardier. And I qualified for pilot training and was sent to Union City, Tennessee for flight training in the P-17².

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Union City was a contract school by Embry-Riddle, and they did a really excellent job. So I went through flight training and ended up in Marianna, Florida, which was a single-engine school for single-engine pilots. I graduated in January of 1943, first class of '43, and in my class at the graduation there was 100 graduates. They started to call off the names of the individuals alphabetically to tell them where they were going for further training. Seventy, the first seventy on the list all went to twin-engine because they were building up the B-17 force in England and they needed pilots and co-pilots.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

²11:45: Strait says "P-17," which was an experimental variant of the Curtiss Hawk biplane fighter; the Stearman PT-17, the workhorse primary trainer of the period, is probably what was meant.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Fortunately I was one of the 30 that went to fighters. I don't know what I would have done if they had have called me out for B-17s. I don't think I could have handled it because I wanted to be a fighter pilot so badly and I had done very well in flight school, in senior, in advanced flight school as far as doing combat maneuvers and things, flying formation. I was considered exceptional by my fight commander so --

Anyway, but I was sent to Westover Field³ for training in the P-47.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Did you -- when you were going through pilot training did you already receive your commission? Did you already receive your commission?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, I didn't receive my commission until I graduated.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: From pilot training?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: From pilot training.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. So you get your wings and your commission?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Wings and the commission, yes.

More on the Guard

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. And are you still assigned to the New Jersey National Guard through this training or are you released from -- are you still

³ Chicopee, Massachusetts; now Westover Air Reserve Base.

considered National Guard?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, no, I'm not a Guardsman at all now. I'm out of it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I mean, you're on active duty, I know that, but --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, I'm not a Guardsman anymore.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's -- I'm out of the Guard.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You're out of the Guard and you're assigned to an active-duty unit.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Right.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. When you were still assigned to the Guard unit, the 119th, were you a full-timer or just doing this one weekend a month?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I was on active duty then.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right, but prior to being mobilized.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, no, I was not a full-timer. No, I was just doing it on weekends or something like that.⁴

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. And then when you were mobilized then you --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was full-time.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- obviously it's full-time.

⁴ [14:11]

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: See, because they extended our year. We were on a year and then they extended it, yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What was -- do you remember what your mission was, did they give you a mission?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We were an observation unit and we were doing a lot of work in conjunction with the coast artillery, training them. At the same time we were participating in maneuvers down here in the South, as an observation unit actually observing the movement of Army forces in the field. That was our principal assignment.⁵

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Do you feel that the readiness of the unit was up to par?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, we had an outstanding unit.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Really?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Because our pilot level was extremely high and we had a couple of second lieutenants, but the majority of the guys had been in the 119th for years, before I was ever involved in it, and they were very senior people.

⁵ The Louisiana and North Carolina Maneuvers, held on the eve of U.S. entry into World War II, provided valuable experience to a U.S. Army racing to incorporate observed lessons and new equipment. Among the conclusions drawn from the exercises was that the observation aircraft that equipped units such as General Strait's National Guard squadron were unsuited to the modern battlefield, and they were quickly relegated to target-towing and anti-submarine patrol duty. For more, see the early chapters of Edgar F. Raines, Jr., *Eyes of Artillery: The Origins of Modern U.S. Army Aviation in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2000).

The maintenance level was as good as you could ever have because most of them were full-time at the time and they were really outstanding people.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: And obviously your weapons guys and all that they're up to speed.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Every -- it was a top-notch organization.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How many people would you say were in the unit at the time?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I would say a little over 200.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And we had I don't know how many, we had about a dozen airplanes. We have O-46s, O-47s, and we did have one BC-1A, which was a single engine airplane, twin cockpit.⁶

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That used to have the gun firing through the propeller.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I had to -- I was one of the guys that had to synchronize the firing of the gun through the propeller, and that was an exciting moment. You got everything right and not end up shooting holes in the propeller.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, my Gosh.

⁶[15:35] The BC-1A was the designation for the earliest production version of the AT-6 advanced trainer.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So -- but I had, as I say I had a great time in the 119th. I loved the organization. I was treated very well. It was exciting, it was doing things that I wanted to do, and I did everything I could to try to advance myself. If it wasn't -- and Henry Orban.⁷

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Henry Orban was the pilot?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, he was the guy that said to me, "Hey, Don, get your butt up." I've seen Henry a number of times after the war was over.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Who was the commander of the 119th back then, do you remember?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes, Chet Charles, General Charles. He became a general. He was a colonel at that time, but he became a general later on.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Chet Charles?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Chester A. Charles.⁸

Advanced Training; 356th Fighter Group and 361st Fighter Squadron

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. So you're gone, you go to pilot training and you finish up. What were you flying for advanced pilot training?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The AT-6.

⁷Henry Orban: Col (ret) USAF, 8 Feb 1918-8 Aug 2009;
<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/nwfdailynews/obituary.aspx?n=henry-a-orban-hank&pid=131186234&fhid=6138>

⁸ Brig Gen Chester A. Charles, NJANG, d.5 April 1979;
<https://newafpims.afnews.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-120212-017.pdf>,
accessed 13 Mar 12.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: The AT-6.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Now that was about a 450 horsepower airplane and we went to -- when they went up to Westover to check out a P-47, I went up to 2,000 horsepower and it was -- and the airplane weighed 6 tons. It was tough. To make things worse is we had hard-packed snow runways. The snow on the runways was just like glass and we had terrible accidents, guys taking off, losing control, going through the snow banks, across fields, hitting barns and such.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was awful. We had a lot of accidents. After they got 60 guys checked out they formed a fighter group.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: And which one was that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And that was -- mine was the 356 --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: The 356.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- fighter group and I was assigned to the 361st Squadron. Now just as a little side --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay, yeah.

Later History of the 361st FS

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- just as a side I want to tell you something. This is so interesting. I received this --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Pamphlet.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- yes, from the United States Air Force. Look at this.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: "Our squadron has a long and storied history that predates the Air Force. The squadron has operated in wartime and peacetime, overseas and at home, and under various designations. During each era of operations the squadron has accomplished different core missions, from fighter interceptor operations to fighter training. Now the squadron's mission is testing the F-35 Lightning II, our nation's next generation strike fighter." Wow. Oh, "And there are now -- right now the 461st Flight Test Squadron, October 2006, at Edwards Air Force Base."

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But you see where it started from?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, the 361st.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's my squadron.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So they consolidated two squadrons. Hum, that's very interesting.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So now what they're doing on the 13th of June --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- they're trying to get back all, as many 361st fighter pilots as they can --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- and the other squadrons and they're going to have a party, a big affair out at Edwards to -- also which will include a demonstration of the new F-35.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Interesting.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And they're out of their minds [thinking] that I'm

[not] going to be there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I've already bought my ticket and in fact they called me last night again. They want me to give a 15- to 20-minute presentation.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. I mean, I'm flabbergasted that they can even run two parallel histories into one organization.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I just ran through this with the Alabama Fighter Squadron there. This is very interesting.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, it is very interesting and the guys that are running it, let's see. This is the front page of the thing.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. Wow. Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I don't know how they got a hold of me, but they wrote me a letter.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Probably through the fighter pilots' association.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Through -- somehow they got a hold of me. But they're trying to get as many 361st people there as possible, but that's difficult.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They're all 80s, high 80s.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How many are left in that squadron?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I can't -- I couldn't tell you.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: From your wartime --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, we had an association after the war and we gave it up about three years ago when we were down to getting 25 people for a meeting. Now it's very limited.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I don't even go anymore.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. So the unit was inactivated after World War II?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, in '45.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: '45, okay. So -- go ahead.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So they're so excited that I'm -- that I'll be there, having commanded the -- have been an original member and then having commanded it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

The 361st FS in World War II

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So -- and then a fighter ace, the leading ace of the group and all that. So they're out of their minds.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Absolutely. Now that raises a question concerning when you talk about squadron commanders what, where were you the third, first -- well, you weren't the first but the second or third? Because there couldn't have been that (inaudible).

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was about the fourth.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: The fourth, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah. Some of them flew 50 missions, some of them didn't.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Some of them dropped out. Our first squadron commander was worthless and they got rid of him very shortly at the end of the war and brought another guy in and he stayed for a little while. Then they brought another guy in and the guy that preceded me was, his name was Waller, Colonel Waller. He was a pretty nice guy. [Deleted]⁹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I got so frustrated because I've always been a very aggressive, dynamic, hard-charger individual, you know, and wanted to excel. I -- nobody beat me. I got promoted to second lieutenant, from second lieutenant to first lieutenant and -- let's see -- let's see -- in five months.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I made captain in less than a year and I made major in '44. A little over a year-and-half I made major. Nobody in the group advanced as fast as I did.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: This isn't because the guys preceding you are dying or getting killed in combat?

⁹ William Waller, III, DFC; <http://militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=29884>, accessed 13 Mar 12

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no, no. In my judgment --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Somebody recognized your qualities.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- they just weren't leaders, they weren't dynamic leaders.



Figure 2:
Major Donald J. Strait with P-51D "Jersey Jerk" [44-15152?], 1945

Leadership Philosophy

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, what is your leadership philosophy? I mean, when you -- at the time --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: To be the best at everything. I can tell you examples during World War II and in the Guard where nobody beat us. Who won the first Spaatz trophy?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right, your guys.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We did.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: We as in who, the 108th?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, the 108th, the 141st Squadron, my squadron and my wing.¹⁰

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We won the third one. I can tell you a story about that which you wouldn't believe, but we won it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We did -- we accomplished things that nobody else did because we were the best. Who got the first supersonic airplanes in the Air Guard? The 108th.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

¹⁰ [23:16]

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: At McGuire, the F-105. I championed that. I can tell you stories about –

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, we'll get to that and I'm glad that you're getting excited because this is good.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You're liking that. As I said --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- I didn't want to -- I wanted to be the best at everything that I did. I'm a -- as a golfer I won the club championship here four times. I won the Pine or the Moore County Senior Championship two times in a row, you know. I'm not a loser.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, you want to be the best. Does this mean you have to work -- do you practice a lot or does it come natural?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, sure. No, no, it doesn't. I anticipate things, I think about things. I go to bed at night thinking about what am I going to do tomorrow, you know. I'm always trying to stay ahead of the problem and trying to think of things, how to excel.

To give you an example, I just turned 90 a few weeks ago and my kids, my family came down here, the whole family came from Vermont, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland. I even had my grandson from Iraq call me on the phone. But we had 33 people here. When the party started I walked out into the party in my flight suit, my world -- the flight suit I had not worn since 1972.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Nobody could believe I could still fit into it. It fit perfect. In fact it's hanging up in the room there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, I saw that, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So -- I mean, things like that. I was always doing, trying to do interesting things. I can tell you what --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, we will, we'll get into it.¹¹

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: (Inaudible) General LeMay and all of it.

Training (II): the Prewar Guard and Army Air Corps

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah, yeah. Getting back to the pre-war era, was there anything else that you want to, that struck you, you experienced that influenced you coming into World War II or what -- maybe even impressed you when you came back to the Air Guard after the war? Was there anything you remember?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, I really don't want to get into after the war but during flight training and all that I really worked hard to excel. My flight leaders -- I wanted to be sure that I was going to go to single-engine training because I would have died if I had to -- I don't know what I would have done if they had sent me to twin engines.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You really dreaded that, going to multi-engine.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, I hated it, and that's why I was so aggressive when we had our little combat exercises. Nobody got on my tail, nobody, not even --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, obviously not.

¹¹ [25:14]

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- not -- and this was in training.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Nobody did. So -- because I wanted my instructor to say, hey, this guy is a single-engine fighter pilot and he should go to fighter school.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you train with the same instructor throughout the whole course?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no, no, all different ones.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Different, and basic -- primary and basic and advanced, they were all different.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. I meant to ask you before when you were talking about your parents and living in Verona, did you have brothers and sisters?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes, I have a sister. My sister is 87 years old. She was here for the party.¹²

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, good.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, my mom and dad -- my dad died at 93. I have good genes because in his family he had seven brothers and sisters and they all lived, everyone died over 90. My dad died at 93. My mother died in her 80s and she had cancer so -- but my father's side was phenomenal.

But as I say when I got into that 119th Observation Squadron, boy, and they

¹² [26:40]

put me in transportation, and I -- again I told you I spent most of my time in the mess hall working. In fact we had a Jewish guy who was our mess sergeant and he was a character. He liked me because I worked hard. So he wanted me to cut, transfer into the food service and I didn't want that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What was your rank when you decided to go into pilot training?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Corporal.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Corporal, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, \$30 a month.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Obviously you came in as a private.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes, I came in as a private and then I became -- the highest rank I ever had as an airman was as a corporal.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Was a corporal, okay. When you were training in the P-47 at Westover were you still doing fighter tactics and --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, principally learning the airplane. We were getting a lot of experience just on landings and takeoffs and, you know, doing certain maneuvers, loops, and trying to do combat turns, getting the experience.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We had a lot of ground school and they had some instructors there that were pretty highly experienced guys, and so we were getting a lot of experience in that regard. But I'll tell you one thing I did, which really paid dividends, when I reported -- when they established the fighter group, assigned me to the 361st, I reported as a second lieutenant to my squadron commander, who

was a major at the time. I reported in, saluted, said, "Lieutenant Strait reporting for duty, sir."

The 361st (II)

He said, "Sit down, Strait," and I did. And we talked a little bit and then he said to me at the end of the, at the end of the interview he said, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

And I said, "Yes, sir. I want to become assistant engineering officer."

He said, "Why?"

And I said, "Because I like engineering, I've worked in the armament section as an airman and I really enjoyed it and I just want to, I just want to stay close to the maintenance and operation of the airplane."

He said, "Okay, you got it." Now this didn't change my position as a pilot, as an operational pilot, but this was an additional duty.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So instead of sitting on my ass in the ready room all day playing cards and shooting the shit I was in the hangar working with the airmen and watching engine changes, propeller changes, and every time there was a test hop I got it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Aha.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So now I'm getting a lot more flying time, a lot more experience than the normal jock who's doing nothing but waiting to fly.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. Did you ever experience an airplane falling out of the sky --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- post maintenance checks or any of that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, I never had any trouble at all. Now the other thing was that we had assigned to our squadron a technical representative from Republic Aviation Corporation and he was highly experienced on the airplane. He knew everything about it. His name was Jim Crisona,¹³ and I became almost his, a buddy of his, because I was able to glean a lot of, you know, background and experience from Jimmy.¹⁴

I kept that job until I became the squadron operations officer. I never gave it up.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I loved it. Then when I became commander of the squadron I called all the pilots together and said, "Here, I want -- here's what you're going to do. Anytime your airplane is in the hangar for maintenance you're with it. Instead of sitting on your butts in the operations room drinking coffee you're going to be out there in the hangar trying to help your crew chief do anything that he might be able to do with you, but you're going to be with your airplane until it comes out of the hangar."

Oh, they grumbled and they bitched and, "Oh, Jesus Christ. Why do we have to do this? It's cold out there, you know."

¹³ Photo at <http://www.state.nj.us/state/darm/links/guides/sdeng010school.html>, srch=crisona republic, accessed 13 Mar 12

¹⁴ [30:30]

So anyway later on after a few months of experience I had guys come to me and say, "You know, sir, that's the best thing you could have done for us. We learned more about our airplane and our relationship with our crew chief became so much closer," he said, "it was a marvelous thing for you to do and we appreciated it." But initially they bitched like hell.

The P-47

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. Did you know you were going to go to Europe with the P-47 once you were assigned?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That was the only place that was out, it was operating.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, it wasn't operating in the Pacific?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no, not at that time.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, initially. So we were -- well, we're going to get into that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, we're kind of rolling into World War II as we speak because it's, you know -- it's kind of pointless to stop now. And you're rolling. I mean, you're doing great.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Okay.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How many hours did you end up flying in the P-47 or --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It's hard for me to tell you because I actually flew the P-47 for ten years in the Air Force, including Korea.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And I can't -- in fact I commanded the last fighter group, National Guard outfit that was on active duty. I commanded the last P-47 group in the Air Force.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What was that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That was the 108th Tactical [Fighter Group].

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, I didn't know the 108th -- the 141st flew P47s?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Right after 1947 or '46, whenever they stood up.¹⁵

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Right, yeah. When we went on active duty during the Korean War it was the 108th Tactical Fighter Wing with the 141st Squadron, the 149th out of Virginia and the 153rd out of Mississippi, that was the wing.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So we went to Turner Air Force Base¹⁶ as a wing during Korea.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: And that was -- you were still flying the P-47s?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Still flying the P-47s.

¹⁵ [32:39]

¹⁶ Turner Air Force Base, Albany, Georgia; now closed.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Or F-47 by then.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Were those the N models or the (inaudible) models?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no, the 153rd had the N and we all had the Ds.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You had the Ds.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The 41st and the 49th.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: When you first started flying the P-47 was the razorback, the --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- before you got the bubble on top?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Right, before we got the bubbles. We didn't get the bubbles until we got into England.¹⁷

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Get to England, right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was during the war. I can't remember when we got the bubbles, but I think it was in early '44.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay, yeah, that would make sense.

¹⁷ The early P-47s had a framed cockpit canopy with an aerodynamic fairing behind it. Combat experience showed that this arrangement made for a dangerous blind spot to the rear of the aircraft, so P-47Ds from production block 25 on featured a plexiglass "bubble" canopy allowing all-around vision. Deliveries to combat units began in May, 1944. P-51D Mustang fighters received a similar modification at about the same time.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We went operational in September with the other canopy.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: September of '43?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay, in England, okay. Well, I guess why I'm asking, you know, what, how would you characterize the P-47, having your engineering background, having all the flying background, I mean was this -- and obviously you flew the P-51, which in your opinion it is the more -- which is the better design?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, you got to think of the mission. The P-47 was a very rugged, tough airplane, beautifully designed and built for close air support, interdiction, that type of a mission. It did not have the range to do long range escort, although initially in England that's principally what it did, it was escorting the bombers as deep as they could go with escort. That was about the middle of Germany. It couldn't go to Berlin, or Yugoslavia or the deep targets because the P-47 did not have the range.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Even though we had external tanks and things like that we just didn't have the range. So the P-47 in my opinion, the only reason it did substantially well in the air was because of experienced pilots. The Germans were really hurting. I mean, they were -- they had a tremendous fighter force but their experience level was nowhere near the experience level of the American pilots.

So with the experience level and the mass that we had over there we did well with the P-47 in attacking the *Luftwaffe*. But as the war progressed and we got into the long-range escort with the Mustang, that's when we got into the real air

war and we were able to get into the deep German targets where they had their best air units and so forth.¹⁸

So the Mustang number one had beautiful range, was a very efficient operating airplane. It had one bad feature, you got a chip in the coolant you're gone, you're done, whereas the P-47 I have actually seen that come back to the base with a whole cylinder operate -- shot out of the engine and it's still operating.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I mean, the P-47 was really a tough airplane. It was a great airplane.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It strikes me that there are so many aces that flew the P-47. In fact isn't the [leading ace in the] European Theater of Operations a P-47 pilot, Gabby Gabreski.¹⁹

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah. Yeah, oh, yeah. I knew Gabby very well.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So it was designed as a close air support aircraft yet accrued such a high number --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Mainly because they had a lot of guys and they had a lot of experience --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- you know, a lot of airplanes. They overwhelmed them.

¹⁸ [35:38]

¹⁹ [36:19] Francis S. ("Gabby") Gabreski, later Col USAF; leading U.S. fighter ace in the European Theater of Operations with 26 aerial victories, all flying P-47s. Col Gabreski won an additional 6.5 victories in Korea in F-86 Saber jet fighters..

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. Was your first victory in a P-47?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Do you recall what that was like?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes, I can. Just a minute.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, I had a knee replaced and --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, okay. Well, take your time.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I had it done in January and I'm just now starting to hit golf balls again.

(Pause.)

The European Theater

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How old were you when you went to Europe with the 361st, do you remember?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I was born in 1918 and I went to England in '43, so what's that 24 or 5?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: 4, yeah, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: My first victory was on March 1st. No, no, wait a minute. On February 6, 1944 I shot down an Me 109, I think it was.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The bombers had bombed the target a little southwest of Paris and after they came off the target -- we were to the south of them, escorting them. I spotted a couple of airplanes low, flying low down on the deck and my wingman and I peeled off and went down and attacked them. They split. They were going this way and all of a sudden one went this way and one went that way.

So we -- I took off after the one to the right and chased them a hell of a ways south and finally was able to get some hits on him and he jumped, he blew the canopy and jumped out. Then we turned around and come back and we damn near ran out of gas, damn near. We landed at the most southern base that the Royal Air Force had in England. We just got in there and it was almost dark. We just got in there with fumes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, boy.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We were lucky. I thought we were going to dump in the channel, I really did.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So you really didn't have time to celebrate your victory.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no. We spent the night. They had no accommodations, so we slept on the floor, and the next morning we got up and flew back to our base. But that was a big lesson for me because that was poor management. I should have never chased that guy beyond what was smart operating range to give me enough fuel to get home. But, you know, excitement of your first kill and so forth so --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, you get caught up.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So -- but anyway that was a lucky one that we got

back okay.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: When did you become director of operations for the 361st or I thought you had said you became squadron operations officer or something like that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, I became squadron operations officer -- I can tell you I think. Let's see here.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did your squadron spend the whole time in England or did they move forward?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, we stayed in England until the war was over.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: [rustling papers] Squadron ops officer, July of '44, July of '44.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So you're still in your mid -20s.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You were probably a major by them?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No. No, I didn't get to major until December.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was a squadron commander -- I was the only captain in the 8th Air Force commanding a squadron, the only one, which was interesting.²⁰

²⁰ [40:38]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. When did you guys convert to the Mustang?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: In October.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: October of '44?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was a very interesting thing. What happened was this. All of a sudden, and I didn't even know it, all of a sudden there's 20 Mustangs flying over Martlesham Heath ([aside]: there's my maintenance people out there). They came in and landed and the same pilots took our 20 P-47s and flew them up to the depot, Burtonwood Depot.²¹

So there we got 20 Mustangs, no ground school, no nothing, no documents about how to fly the airplane or what to do with it and so forth. The first mission, the time I flew the airplane, my crew chief started the engine. We didn't have any training. The airplanes are here. They gave us the little book that tells you about boom, boom, boom, boom, and I flew four or five hours on the, around England to get some experience before we went on a mission.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I understand it's a more challenging airplane to handle in the air because of the torque.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Because of the torque.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The torque was brutal. We had some terrible

²¹ Two miles northwest of Warrington, Lancashire, U.K.; later Royal Air Force Station, Burtonwood.

accidents with torque until we got the locked tail wheel.²² It made a big difference on takeoff.

So where are we now in this?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, we're in World War II now.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: All right, in World War II.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Okay. Okay, we're in World War II. All right. So I flew P-47s until, through D-Day, after D-Day, and then -- that was in June and then early August our division commander, who was General Jess Auton²³ came down to our base and he wanted to talk to all the pilots.

He said, "Guys, here's my problem. Pilots are finishing their 50 missions and going home. I'm losing experience like you cannot believe. Most, all, everybody's replacement pilot has no operational experience at all, so we're losing a tremendous amount of individuals. So here's what I would like to do. I want to offer you a 30-day leave in the States, go home on a fast boat and come back on a fast boat unescorted, and continue to fly operationally and fly operationally as long as you desire. All you've got to do is call me on the phone and I'll get you the hell out of England and back to the States as fast as possible."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

²² This feature limited the range of motion of the tail wheel to 6 degrees left or right of center, preventing the torque from the engine and propeller from amplifying small turns in ground maneuvers.
(<http://rwebs.net/avhistory/opsman/pursuit/section7.htm>)

²³ [42:30] Brigadier General Jesse Auton, 1904-1952, then Commanding General, 65th Fighter Wing, VIII Fighter Command, Debden, England

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: "How many are interested?"

Me and my best friend, Ray Gansberg,²⁴ two people out of the whole bloody outfit, two people. I had flown 87 missions then in the P-47. I was -- and all I had to do was fly 50 and I could have gone home, but I loved it. It was so exciting and challenging and I enjoyed it. It was fun. I was really enjoying it. It was a challenge, it was like it was a ball game or so forth.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So General Auton had said to me okay. When he got back to his headquarters some staff called up and said, "Sir, you're going to go home on the *Mauritania* out of Liverpool on such and such a date," and boom. So they sent us home, Ray and I. We got into New York and we decided that we had a little time, had a day or so to get administratively on leave and so forth.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So we went into New York and went to one of the big hotels there and we were sitting at the bar drinking like mad. We were in uniform. Somehow Ray the next morning realized that he had been rolled. Somebody took his wallet, so he had nothing.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, dear.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He didn't have a dime, no ID, nothing. So the next day they got themselves some emergency papers and so forth, but he had no money. So I gave him every dime I had so he could get a train ticket back to Chicago where he came from. So that was -- of course we laugh like hell about that. You know, how dumb can you be. How can you lose our wallet. How can

²⁴ Capt. Raymond H. Gansberg, USAAF, d. 5 Dec 44, Ardennes American Cemetery; via ABMC.gov.

you let anybody do that.

But anyway, Ray and I were very close friends. So anyway, he went home and I went out to Long Island where -- I had met this girl before we had gone to England at the Suffolk Air Base where we were training. We were doing dive bombing and gunnery. There was a gunnery range there and we were doing some air-to-air off the Long Island Coast. I met this gal, who was a gorgeous gal. I've got some pictures of her out there. I spent most of my month out at her place sailing, and swimming, and just having a hell of a time. Her father was a doctor and he had moved his family out to Long Island because he wanted to get them out of New York. He was worried -- his practice was in New York and he was worried about the possibility of the Germans launching some submarines or something and shooting some shells into the city and doing a lot of damage, so he wanted to get his family out of that environment so he moved them out there.²⁵

And I had a chance to chat with her dad a lot. He was a wonderful man, a graduate of Princeton, and he also went to Columbia Medical School. He was a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve on active duty at the time at Governor's Island. He was forming medical teams to be sent throughout the world and all that. A real nice guy.

So I spent most of my time there. Then Ray and I had to report to Atlantic City to be processed to go back to Europe. So what happens is we get down to Atlantic City and the first thing we do we get a flight surgeon in there and he said, "You know, guys, I've been looking at your records and you guys have a lot of flying time, you've flown a lot of missions and so forth. Do you realize that we've got thousands of pilots being prepared for operations in the United States and haven't been shot at yet or hadn't had no combat exposure and so forth? Wouldn't it be sensible for you guys to stay home while you're here and go and help train

²⁵ [45:53]

these guys to go to Europe and all that?

I got so fucking mad at that guy. I said, "God damn it. Either you get us out of here or we're leaving in the morning and we're going to find a God damn boat and we're going back to England." I was so mad at this guy. I was so mad at this guy.

Anyway, they tried to talk us out of it and they did talk some guys out. I know one guy they talked out and he's never been my friend since. They talked him out of it. He was a fighter ace, too.

So anyway, we went back to England and we went in the Mustangs. On December 5th we were escorting the bombers all the way to the target, which was Berlin. This being Berlin as we, as the bombers came up on it, dropped their bombs, we were on the right side and we made a turn like this because they were going to turn and go back towards England. We were right about here when I spotted 40 Focke-Wulf 190s --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, boy.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- coming in this direction. So I turned my squadron right into it, I went right into them, and we shot down 13, I shot down 2, and that was the day I became an ace. But Ray somehow, I don't know how, what happened to him, but he got hit and he went, he crashed and didn't survive and was killed. He later I found out that he was buried in Brussels at an American cemetery there and I have a picture in my room there of his grave site in Brussels. His body was never brought back to the United States.

I went and saw his mother out in Chicago after the war was over. It was too bad because there was a guy that was a perfect fighter pilot, you know, aggressive, good attitude. He could speak German too. He said, "They'll never capture me. I'll walk out," he said, "if I get shot down." But somehow he got hit bad I guess and

never survived.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Your relationship, were you the flight lead and he was the wing man or --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, he was in a different flight than mine. I was leading the squadron and he was in -- he was leading one of the --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: The elements or --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The other elements. I'm not sure which one.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So -- but anyway it was too bad.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But that was the day I became an ace. It was --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sort of bittersweet?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You know, you lose your bud, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I had some wonderful experiences. I can tell you some interesting -- are we into the story business now?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I might tell you about two missions. On Christmas Day -- in the squadron we had decided that we wanted to give the airmen a party, the airmen in the squadron. There was about 180 I think. So I was able to go into town and there was a brewery in town, in Ipswich, and it was called

Tolle, T-o-l-l-e, and they made a good beer.²⁶ I went there and saw the plant manager and talked him out of two barrels of beer for our party. He was very glad to do it, a very nice guy.

He brought the beer out and iced it for us and fixed it all up for the party. But that morning, Christmas morning, and the weather was crappy and we weren't sure that we were going to be able to take off or get back into England. So they told us that there was a good possibility we were going to have to go to a French base, which had been designed as our alternate in case we had bad weather, always go to that base. It was Cambrai, I think it was. We were told to take blankets because there was no place to sleep or anything, so you slept on the floor somewhere.²⁷

So we took blankets and a few other things. We were prepared to come, not make the party but the party was going to go on and we had taken all of our Christmas things that had been sent to us, you know, cheeses, bologna, all kinds of stuff that our parents had sent to each guy, you know. We fixed the room, the operations room all up, we decorated it with greens and flowers and everything we could to make it look nice. We were going to have the big party at 4:30.

But anyway, we took off and we weren't sure we were going to get back. But after the mission had been accomplished we started back and the controller told us that we could go back into England. But the interesting thing was I shot down an Me 109 that day.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, I shot down a Bf 109.²⁸ So I came home with a

²⁶ Tollemache?

²⁷ [50:45]

²⁸ The official designation of the aircraft was "Bf 109," derived from the manufacturer,

victory plus was able to get the squadron home for the party. It was really a fun event.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you ever fight the [Messerschmitt {Me}] 262?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, I never -- I saw them. I chased one day. I spotted one one day who was down fairly low and I figured I had a chance and I was closing in on him nicely when all of a sudden he went, "shoop," and at that time I thought maybe they had tail warning radar because something indicated to him that somebody was getting ready to chase him. I lost him, I couldn't do it.

But on the 31st of December we -- it was bad weather again and we were escorting the bombers into western Germany. We were to rendezvous with them over Antwerp. So I was leading the whole group at the time. I was the group lead. The squadron commanders led every fourth or fifth mission as a group lead. So I was leading the group that day. So we were advised that we had to get off -- the bombers were airborne and we had to get off the ground as soon as possible or our bases were closing in and we wouldn't be able to get off at all.

So -- and of course -- but the bombers were already on their way, so we had to get off. So we took off immediately and they told me to orbit over the North Sea just off the English Coast opposite our base, we were very close to the water, and to orbit there for an hour and then set course for Antwerp and rendezvous with our bombers.

So we got airborne and we were in good shape. We were circling around a couple of times and I said to myself this doesn't make any sense. Why the hell don't we go to Antwerp, you know? You go over to Antwerp and let's orbit

Bayerischer Flugzeugwerke. The company took the name of its chief designer, Willy Messerschmitt, in 1938, leading to the familiar "Me 109" usage. Later Messerschmitt aircraft such as the Me 262 jet fighter mentioned below carried the Me prefix officially.

there.

So we did, and we orbited over Antwerp and eventually our bombers came by and we joined up and escorted them. Now if that had have been the next day, the next day was the big air battle when the Germans, when the Germans sent some 200 fighters across the Rhine River to attack French bases where there were American fighters.²⁹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I would have been airborne with 60 Mustangs, plenty of gas, and there's this whole German force coming right across underneath me. We could have had a field day. Christ, it could have been the Congressional Medal of Honor or something, you know. What an event that could have been. I dreamed about that for years. What an event that could have been.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The next day. Here I am with 60 fighters.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What did you guys do the next day, on that following day? Were you guys grounded from weather?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I don't remember. I don't think we were airborne that day. I'm not sure. I'm not sure what -- I would have to look it up in the records.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you participate in any of the supporting, the Battle of the Bulge?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah, we did. We were flying P-47s then. In fact

²⁹ [54:02] 1 January 1945.

my roommate, Reggie McDowell³⁰, got shot down that day.³¹ He got hit in the engine and he crash landed in the battle area and American troops came up to the airplane, got him out of the cockpit, put a helmet on his head, gave him a rifle and he spent a week in the trenches. When he came back home, we finally got him out of there and got him into France and back into England, he never flew again. He was so operationally exhausted that the flight surgeon sent him home.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He was the nicest guy too. He lives in Florida right now. But he got hit badly. He was my roommate, Reginald C. McDowell.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. How many victories did you get in the P-47?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Three.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Three.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And I got 10-1/2 in the Mustang.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: 10-1/2.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: If I had had Mustangs at the beginning of the war --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It would have been different?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I would have had 40.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How many missed opportunities did you have

³⁰ Capt Reginald C. McDowell

³¹ Captain McDowell evaded capture after being shot down on 18 September 1944 in P-47D 42-26534; if this is the incident General Strait refers to, it is not the Battle of the Bulge.

(http://www.littlefriends.co.uk/356thfg.php?action=list_records&sort_order=ASC&order_by=Squ&recs=All#tabletop)

overall, a lot?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no. Anytime I had a chance to shoot I usually got something.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: When I became squadron commander I was so upset at the group leadership in my group. Now the guy whose name was Phil Tukey, General -- he became a general in the Maine Air Guard in the war, General Phil Tukey.³²

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And [Deleted]. But anyway, [Deleted] and I were very close friends,[Deleted] flight leader under Hub Zemke.³³

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Hub Zemke fired him, sent him to division headquarters. My group commander was named -- he was shot. He was -- they named an airbase after him up in the northwest, Malmstrom, Einar Malmstrom.³⁴

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Malmstrom.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They named -- he was my group commander at the time and a fine man. He got shot down. We were strafing an airdrome on the

³² Brig Gen Philip E. Tukey, Jr., Maine ANG; d. 4 March 2001, <http://www.mhas.org.uk/memories/obituaries.html>

³³ Col Hubert Zemke, 1914-1994, commander of the 56th and 479th Fighter Groups, 17.75 victories, POW 30 October 1944.

³⁴ Col Einar A. Malmstrom, commander of the 356th Fighter Group, POW 24 April 1944.

Rhine River called Fritzlar³⁵ loaded with airplanes, and we were attacking that airdrome with bombs and strafing. Einar -- I was the first squadron on it and then we finished that. I made seven passes, stupidly. My wingman got shot down on the first pass.

But anyway, we lost quite a few guys that day. But Malmstrom came down and he attacked the target and he got hit and he crash landed into a field and became a prisoner of war for the rest of the war. But was sent down to replace Malmstrom.

Now he was a reasonable guy [Deleted]. I believe you had to stand up in front of the pilots occasionally and give them hell, you know. There were times when maybe there was some lack of discipline, air of discipline, or there was too much communication, or there was some other problems and you had to get up and face the facts and level with the guys.

So when I became squadron commander I immediately -- at my airbase I would -- we lived on the base and the other two squadrons lived off the base, but on the base I was given the quarters of what had originally been the Royal Air Force group captain leading the Spitfire group that was on our base. And the quarters were lovely. They were a big room like this and in the one corner it had a sink. That was the only sink. Any of the other rooms, the other rooms the toilets and the sinks were all in the back of the building. So I was given the group captain's quarters, which were lovely.

So I -- my intelligence officer was a guy by the name of [Captain] George May and George May was a former lawyer in New York City, he was Jewish, but he was dynamic. The guy had all kinds of abilities to present things and draw

³⁵ 100 mi. north of Frankfurt; now a German Army Aviation Corps facility, *Heeresflugplatz Fritzlar*.

fancy things, you know, to bring out points, just a great guy, a wonderful briefer and everything else. He wrote all the mission reports at the end of the mission, you know, and eventually they went into the Air Force files.

But anyway, George, I said, "George, you're going to live with me." We decided what we were going to do is this: he was going to put a map on the wall, a big wall, so that every day when he got all the latest intelligence reports in the afternoon he could come down and on my wall he would post the location that had been seen that day of *Luftwaffe* airplanes either on bases, or airborne, or so forth.

So I knew every time I flew the disposition of the *Luftwaffe*. I know where they were the day before, where I might be able to see them, and things like that. So that way all my flight leaders and I we were, we were really up to what the intelligence situation was as far as the air strength of the *Luftwaffe*.

Well, during my second tour -- I don't think-- I think most every mission that we shot at airplanes I was on it because I knew what, I knew -- I could anticipate what was going to happen.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: One mission we were escorting the bombers and they were over what they called Doumer Lake,³⁶ which was in, as you headed towards Berlin and it was just west of Berlin, big Doumer Lake. We were escorting the bombers over Doumer Lake. My outfit was on the right, Tukey was up on top with his, leading a squadron, and the other squadron was on the left side. We got a call from the controller that there was a large group of enemy fighters forming to the south.

³⁶ Phonetic rendering; possibly Dümmer, in Lower Saxony about 350km by air west of Berlin.

So Tukey got the message. I was then directed to go explore it. Well, we went -- we went down and we ran into 150 plus fighters --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- right into them, right into them. I guess I had had about five, about maybe ten missions in the Mustang. I was still on my fuselage tank.³⁷ Now the fuselage tank was right in back of the pilot and that was 75 gallons. In order to get the proper CG you had to burn that down to 25 gallons. I was still at about 35 or 40 gallons, which was not good because it affected the performance of the airplane.³⁸

So I went and I shot down a guy immediately. I went like this to get over on another guy and the airplane went like that. I went down to 13,000 feet. My wing man stayed with me. We got down there and there was airplanes all over the place, you know. The *Luftwaffe*, they had broken and guys were heading for home and all this kind of stuff.

So anyway, we spotted another one and I shot at him and got some hits on it and he went into a cloud, like this, turned into a cloud. My wingman was over here. He came out of the cloud and there he was. So my wingman, so my wingman shot at him and hit him and the airplane went down. So that where's I got my half.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

³⁷ The P-51 gained much of its advantage in combat range over the P-47 from an 85-gallon internal fuel tank behind the pilot's seat. This tank was a late addition to the design, and when full it degraded the Mustang's directional stability by moving the aircraft center of gravity (CG) rearward. The problem was especially severe on takeoff and for inexperienced pilots, but as this example shows, it was by no means limited to them.
(http://www.joebaugher.com/usaf_fighters/p51_8.html)

³⁸ [1:01:48]

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: See, we each got a half that day.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But unfortunately I had too much fuel in the fuselage because you had to burn that down to 25 or it affected the CG to where it would snap on you like that. But that was some air battle.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. What was the -- what's the in your opinion the most, the better fighter to fight against, the Focke-Wulf or the Messerschmitt?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I think the Me 109 was the toughest.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Why is that? Why was it -- what was it that made it tougher?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I think I was more -- it had more, it seemed to have more -- it seemed to be a better fighter from the standpoint of it could turn better, it could accelerate, it could climb faster, a little bit more maneuverable. [The] Focke-Wulf was a very good airplane but not quite as -- and then again it depended who was flying the damn thing, you know. You got, sometimes you got some good guys and other times -- I've got pictures in the other room there where I shot down an airplane and the guy is going down like this, diving away from me, and he's still got his fuselage tank on. The first thing I hit was the fuselage tank and that burst into flames and then the whole airplane went up. Well, you immediately drop your tanks when you're in an engagement, you know.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I thought the guy was maybe -- I met a Luftwaffe pilot in England some years ago, had one mission and he was shot down in a Focke-Wulf, one mission. He had limited hours. Here we went over there with 200

or 300 hours in the P-47, you know. We were ahead, we were experienced guys.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Went through flight school --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- a whole year in flight school. These guys had a few hours and they were launched, you know. It made a big difference.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: When you first got over to England you were flying off of someone else's wing I assume?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes, yes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You flew under someone else's wing?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes. What they did was when we first went operational, they took a couple of pilots who had experience and were in other fighter groups and put them with our fighter group to give us some experience. The guy that I flew off his wing he originally went into the [Royal] Canadian Air Force, and then he went to England in the Royal Air Force, and then he went from the Royal Air Force into the United States Air Force.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Was he part of that Eagle Squadron or --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, he was not in Eagle Squadron.³⁹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

³⁹ The Eagle Squadrons were three Royal Air Force fighter squadrons (71, 121, and 133) formed from U.S. volunteers before the United States entered World War II. On 29 September 1942, the RAF transferred the squadrons to the U.S. Eighth Air Force, where they became the 4th Fighter Group.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He was a very nice guy. In fact I have a picture in the other room over there of him flying through some overcast --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Do you remember his name?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes, I've got to go -- I know it. He came from New Hampshire, but I've got to go look at the wall. Come in and I'll show you --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.⁴⁰

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It's done by the same guy that painted mine with the B-24s.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Don't tell me it's not going to work. That's strange, unless it's still unplugged but (inaudible) didn't get it. I'll have to check that out.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But anyway --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oscar --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oscar Coen.⁴¹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oscar Coen.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

⁴⁰ [1:05:20]

⁴¹ Oscar H. Coen, later Col.; 5.5 victories; d.23 Jun 2004; bio at <http://www.military-art.com/mall/profiles.php?SigID=1334>

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I think he originally came from New Hampshire and then he lived, the last I heard of he was out in Washington or Oregon.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But that's the guy. I flew his wing, Oscar Cohen.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Was there -- did he pass off any knowledge onto you, anything, you know, leadership?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, he was an experienced guy and he just, you know, gave us a lot of basic background that we needed to --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. Who would you say were the most impressive leaders that influenced you during your war experience?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Only one guy, Hub Zemke. Did you ever hear of Hub? [1:06:30]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Hub Zemke and I became the closest of friends. This guy in my judgment was the finest air commander that we had. When this painting was being done Hub Zemke was involved in it. This was "Advance into Europe."⁴² You can see Hub's name right there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He called me on the phone and said, "Don, I'm going

⁴²The picture may be viewed at http://www.nicolastrudgian.com/archivedetail.php?collection_id=13

to sign a painting. You've got to come out and I want you to be, sign that painting with me, Gabby Gabreski."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Gabby Gabreski, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Cooper⁴³ myself and Hub -- Hub insisted that I come out and sign that painting with him. We became such close friends. I actually was able to sit down with him after the war and say, "Okay, why was your outfit a good outfit," and they were the best.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And I said, "You know, give me, tell me" -- and he -- it was all discipline, you know. He was a highly disciplined guy. After the war he sent me this as a little gift. He was -- he sent me this as a little gift.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: A little mallet.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: A little mallet, yeah, made out of some trees on his property.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. Is he still alive?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, he's not, he's passed away. Hub and I were very close friends. He -- and at first when we -- when we went to sign these paintings, we signed a thousand, there's something missing on that painting. There's no pylons on the wings.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We walked into the -- this was out in California at Ojai, a gallery out there, and we walked in to see the painting for the first time,

⁴³ Paul T. Cooper, later Maj Gen, commanded 446 Bombardment Squadron.

Hub and I, we both looked -- walking like this and we both looked at each other and smiled. No pylons.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No pylons.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That painting was done by Nic Trudgian,⁴⁴ Look at that village

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It's beautiful.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Look at that, look at the people looking up at the airplanes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You see the German tank here?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Here's the American forces. That's the channel back there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You see the American forces and these people over here looking at the airplanes?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: This is Hub's --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

⁴⁴ Nicolas Trudgian, b. 1959, British aviation artist.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- because I had no business signing this painting, no, because this is -- this is the 56th Fighter Group.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.⁴⁵

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But there's Gabby signed it and, oh, I can't think of --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Paul Cooper.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Cooper, yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But he --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So how did you first meet Hub?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I met him during Korea.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was based with him down in Georgia. When we went on active duty during Korea I met Hub.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We got to know each other because he was the -- you had to really search him out, you know. He really was a tremendous individual. He should have been a general officer but he -- his problem was he told the generals where to go.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, he was too honest.

⁴⁵ [1:08:35]

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He was a leader.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. So where did the name Jersey Jerk come from on your airplane?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's a very interesting story. When we -- we got our P-47s and we were down at our base, Martlesham Heath, and we were getting ready to go operational. I said to my crew chief, "I would like to name it Jersey Bounce," because I figured Jersey Bounce, you know, bouncing, it was a good name. I wanted Jersey in it.

So my crew chief, who was a real tough kid, he was a leather worker from Boston, but you never saw him when he was dressed nice and neat. He always had a beard, you know, he was sloppy and so forth, but what a crew chief. His name was Watson, Doc Watson.

"Doc," I said, "let's put Jersey Bounce on it."

He said, "We can't do that."

I said, "Why not?"

He said, "Well, there's a guy in one of the other squadrons already named his airplane Jersey Bounce," and so we couldn't use it because it was already used in another squadron on the base and in the group.⁴⁶ So I said, "Well, let's give it some thought." So I came back from my fifth mission with no name on the airplane. I got out of the airplane and I was standing there talking to him and he said to me, "Sir, we have a name for the airplane," the crew did. See, I had a communications sergeant and an aircraft armorer and Watson. So he said, "We've got a name for the airplane."

⁴⁶ P-47D 42-8469, Lt. Alex S. Koczak, 360FS; www.littlefriends.co.uk.

I said, "What is it?"

He said, "Jersey Jerk."

I said, "For Christ's sakes, Watson, I'm not a jerk."

He said, "Sir, let me tell you why we want to name it that. Any guy that would take off in a single engine airplane, cross the North Sea in the wintertime and take a chance of getting his ass shot off by the Luftwaffe or by anti-aircraft fire has got to be a jerk."

I said, "Name it."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Is that right?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's the story. That's the actual story.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I said, "Name it." That airplane right now is the most --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I can show you one out here that Corgi, which is a toy company in England, they just did a model of it, did a thousand of them. They cost about two hundred bucks, and I'll show it to you later. It's fabulous, fabulous. The engine runs on it and everything.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ [1:11:44; an example may be seen at <http://www.flyingmule.com/products/CG-AA34406> ; http://www.google.com/search?q=%22jersey+jerk%22+corgi&hl=en&safe=active&rls=com.microsoft:en-us:IE-SearchBox&prmd=imvns&source=lnms&tbm=isch&ei=245fT7HmA4X7ggeKhqGKCA&sa=X&oi=mode_link&ct=mode&cd=2&ved=0CAsQ_AUoAQ&biw=119

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Fabulous. That airplane -- as I say it's got five paintings, five paintings.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, but that's all in the P-51, right?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, it's got four -51s and one P-47.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, one is P47, right. Okay. Did you say that you flew the bubble P47, the bubble canopy P47?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah. We switched to bubbles in -- now I -- I have been invited by Nicolas Trudgian, to come to England for the weekend of July 12th and 13th when they're going to have the big air show at Duxford.⁴⁸ That's where it was located in the United -- U.S. Air Force Museum, American Air Museum, and they're going to have a big air show. It's called the Legends⁴⁹ and they fly nothing but World War II airplanes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It's a fabulous affair. Nic has invited myself and my son over, to come over on Wednesday, and we're going to spend some time with him. But he's coming out with a new booklet of nothing but drawings of airplanes done by pencil.

[4&bih=539](#), acc 13 Mar 12]

⁴⁸ Imperial War Museum Duxford

⁴⁹ [Flying Legends]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow, wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: For my birthday --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, neat.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's my airplane.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: This is over England.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yes.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He did that for me --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's nice.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- for my birthday.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It's a nice sketch.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Isn't that nice?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: This guy that I talked to about, that did the airplane out there, on the computer, this is the calendar he did.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That was my Christmas card and he did this whole calendar all on the computer.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow, look at that.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I had a Mustang. He put this, the Mustang to look like an airplane.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But these are all airplanes that he did.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. I like that one. That's my favorite.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But anyway --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That was your double kill day.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, that was my double kill day. That's what the picture is of.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Done by an artist from Kalamazoo.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So when the war ended did you stay in Europe until you were discharged?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, here's what I did. On May Seventeenth we escorted the bombers to targets in Yugoslavia, which they were oil targets. We flew almost six hours on that flight. It was a long flight. We never saw a thing. This was May Seventeenth. Now the war was over -- excuse me -- this was March Seventeenth. The war was over May 8th.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We flew almost seven hours and I was so fed up. You didn't, you know, you didn't see anything. All we did was -- the weather was good and we didn't see a thing. We just escorted the bombers and then brought

them back to a certain point in France and then went home.

So I landed that day and General Auton had said to me, "You know, Don, it's up to you. Fly as long as you want, let me know." So I come down that day and my girlfriend, Louise, she had been putting a little bit of pressure on me and she felt that I was kind of extending myself beyond what I should, you know, and the war was getting to the point of where things were winding down. She said, "You know, you ought to give some thought to maybe coming home." So I decided after that mission that, shit, I want to shoot down airplanes. I don't want to fly around here scenically. So I decided that I would pack it in.

So my intelligence officer, George May, I told George that I was all done. So you ought to see the report, and I'll show it to you later, that in the official mission report for that day he wrote a paragraph like that about, just about me, which was fantastic. I never saw that mission report until early, early in the 90s when Al Gillem,⁵⁰ who was a West Point graduate and a wing commander that I served under and he was the finest general officer I had ever known, Al Gillem called me on the phone and he was commander of the Air University.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He was a three-star general and he called me on the phone and he says, "Don, I've got something for you." He said, "I discovered a film, micro view film, with the mission reports written by the intelligence officers of your 56th fighter group, 256th fighter group [?], including one by the one -- by squadron, including yours."

So he sent it to me and I went into the community college and they had a machine there which would show micro view and I went down to the 361st and then I went through all the 361st reports, mission reports. It took me all summer to

⁵⁰ Lt Gen Alvan Cullem Gillem III, April 20, 1917 – September 3, 2009.

do that because it was very slow. Every time I wanted a copy, because I was involved or I thought it was important, I had to put a dime in a machine.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yes.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I'll show you the book later, it's that thick --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- with all my mission reports. That's the first time I ever saw that mission report writing about me when I finished my tour, the first time I ever saw it and it's fabulous.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So -- oh, so then I called General Auton up and he said, "Don, you've got to do a couple of things for me."

And I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "I want you to take your intelligence officer" -- not your intelligence officer, your executive officer, who was a non-flying officer, Charlie Young [?] his name was, and Charlie -- he said, "I want you to spend a week in Paris, just go over and have some fun, drink a lot of champagne, enjoy yourself." He said, "You got a little light airplane down there," which was a single engine that sat four people I think. He said, "Take that little airplane, fly over there," which I did.⁵¹

Charlie Young and I, we had a great time. I came back and I told him what a great time it was and what a great idea it was and I said, "I'm all set to go." He said, "No, I want you to come up here to my headquarters." He had the highest

⁵¹ [1:18:22]

regard for me. He said, "I want to -- I want you to see how we plan the missions, how we operate and how things go at this level."

I said, "Well, I think that's a great idea." So they had a car come and pick me up and drive me to his headquarters and I spent three or four days there. Then he arranged for me to go home, onto [the] *West Point*,⁵² which was a Navy troop ship. So I docked in New York the day the war was over in England, the 8th of May, I docked in New York.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

Postwar

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was funny that when my Air Guard unit was called up for active duty for the Korean affair, who comes to see me because we were going to go into the Strategic Air Command, General Auton.⁵³

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He flew into Newark and we had had a big controversy because our wing commander was a general . . . [Deleted] So what happened was I was the, I was a lieutenant colonel and I was the next senior officer, so I ended up having to take the wing on active duty down at Turner Air Force Base. We're now in SAC, but we were going to be given a nuclear mission, which we did.

⁵² AP-23, previously the civilian passenger liner *SS America* (1940).

⁵³ Then Chief of the Fighter Division, Strategic Air Command.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What were you flying then?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: P-47s.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow, that's right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So anyway we get down there to Turner and I was there two or three days, got the whole outfit, the Mississippi outfit, the Virginia outfit, my outfit, and everybody is there and we're all based, we're all doing good, everybody is situated good, and who comes into me, who my new commander is, is Alvan C. Gillem, a graduate of West Point, captain of the basketball team, the finest officer I have ever known. Incredible guy, just incredible. He ended up being a three-star Air Force general and later commanded the Air University.

Al Gillem, Al Gillem was -- just a second here. He's still alive. He's 92.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was recommended for the -- when I got up -- let's see. In 1971 I was recommended for the Distinguished Service Medal and this is the report that was written about me and it's -- I to this day I don't think there was a general officer in the Air Guard that had anywhere near the record that I did. You know, during the Korean War there were only two Air Guard officers promoted to full colonel --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I didn't know that.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- myself and colonel -- and a colonel in the Colorado Guard, the only two general, the only two officers promoted to colonel, just the two of us.

Well anyway, they sent this tremendous thing and if you read it you could see where it was pretty outstanding. I mean, we got the first -105s, everything is in

here. But they put the quote from Gillem, "The continuing high quality of his service was reflected in comments of superiors, officers, with then whom he served both on active duty and in the Air National Guard status. Lieutenant General Alvan C. Gillem III, then a colonel, wrote in 1951 that Strait is the finest officer of his grade and experience I have ever known. A Guardsman, he can hold his own in any company."⁵⁴

That's a pretty good -- if you knew Gillem, you know, he was a brilliant guy. So anyway, I was recommended for the DSM and it comes back and they awarded me the Legion of Merit. I was disgusted.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: There wasn't a guy -- I can't tell you anybody that had the record that I had. Who was selected, who was selected to lead Stair Step?⁵⁵

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right, you are.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Me.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You know, there wasn't anybody else involved. General Sweeney himself and LeMay approved it.⁵⁶ So anyway, but I -- I got the Legion of Merit. I was disgusted. Well, anyway, that's --

⁵⁴ [1:22:40]

⁵⁵ In response to the Berlin Crisis, the United States mobilized numerous Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard units in the fall of 1961. This call-up culminated in Operation Stair Step, the Tactical Air Command's deployment of over 200 federalized Air National Guard fighters to western Europe as reinforcements in November. (<http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=1854>)

⁵⁶ General Walter C. Sweeney, Jr. (1909-1965), Commanding General, Tactical Air Command; General Curtis E. LeMay (1906-1990), Air Force Chief of Staff.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You got the Distinguished Flying Cross.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I had three of those.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What did you get those for?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: For shooting down airplanes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I mean, is it -- do you get it for a number of airplanes shot down?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah, yeah, plus the number of missions that I led, where I attacked superior forces and so forth.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And I got the Silver Star, which is the best medal you can get. Then I had 14 clusters to the Air Medal. I got one for every airplane I shot down.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But anyway, I --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So when did you discharge from active duty, from World War II active duty? Because you got home on May 8, 1945.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah, I can tell you exactly. Let's see. 18 November 1945.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I came back from England on 8 May and I was married on the 19th. My wife had everything all organized.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Is this the same woman you met in Suffolk County when you were on 30 days --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, yeah, we've been married for 57 years and have 3 children. But anyway, she had -- she had it all planned and it was -- I'll show you some pictures of the wedding later. It was a beautiful wedding and everything went very well.

So then we went down to a redistribution place in Atlantic City, which was really lovely. I mean, they took great care of you. The food and everything was great. It was really nice. So I volunteered to go -- I wanted to go to, continue to fly operationally in the Far East. I pleaded with them to assign me to a fighter outfit. They wouldn't do it.

They said, "We got more guys that have never been shot at," and all this kind of crap. "You've done your duty, so we're going to try find you" --

I said, "Well, at least get me in a fighter outfit." No fighter outfits available. So I ended up by taking an assignment in the office of flying safety, which was then located in Winston-Salem [N.C.], in a building in Winston-Salem. Now it was -- I had a damn good job. They assigned me as the director of fighter aircraft accident analysis. What I would do was to analyze all fighter accidents that were occurring throughout the world, P-38s, P-47s, P-51s and so forth and make reports and so forth and so on.

It was a nice job and I learned an awful lot from a safety standpoint. It was a damn good job and I realized it later, that it was good experience.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But after a while we were living in a hotel in Winston-Salem for a month and we couldn't stand that. So finally I said I've got to

find a place to live. So we went out to what they call the Reynolda section of Winston-Salem, which was a very lovely section, big homes, and I walked up to this nice house and walked up the porch, rang the doorbell and said, "Ma'am, I'm" -- I was in uniform. I said, "Here's my problem. I'm looking for a place to live and I thought maybe there might be somebody out here that might have an apartment over their garage or something that might not be occupied and I might be able to rent it."

She said, "I don't have anything like that, sir," but she said, "the folks next door, the Darrs, have a building like that and," she said, " I'm pretty sure it's not occupied."

So I went next door, rang the doorbell, and Mrs. Darr came. I said, "Here's my problem, ma'am."

She said, "I'll tell you what" -- she said, "I have a facility like that," but she said, "I can't commit it. How about you going down to see my husband⁵⁷ who is vice president of Reynolds Tobacco Company and he's in the Reynolds Building in Winston Salem and talk to him."

So I went down there and went upstairs to his office. The secretary, I told the secretary I needed to talk to Mr. Darr and she ushered me in. I sat down and he said, "What can I do for you?"

I told him what I wanted to do and he says, "Well, let's do this. How about coming out to my house for dinner tonight?"

So we did, Louise and I went out for dinner and Mr. Darr took us down and showed us the building. It was in terrible condition and it hadn't been painted or -- it was just, it was in bad shape. I said, "I'll take it, it's fine." I said, "I'll take

⁵⁷ Edward A. Darr, later president of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.

it."

So he offered me a very modest rental. My wife and I went into that place and we repainted the walls, we did new carpeting, we -- my wife made new curtains, we fixed that place up and it was fantastic. So we invited the Darrs down for dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Darr walked in and they just shook their heads and after dinner Mr. Darr said, he came to me and says, "Don, no more rent. This is yours for as long as you want it. What you have done for it, it was just fantastic."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They were lovely people.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But that's the way I got things done. I just went out and walked the streets.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Get the hell out of the hotel, you know. We were sick of that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. What did you do after you got discharged?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Okay. Well, then you see after I got discharged -- I had left the Prudential to go into, on active duty in September --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- when they recalled the wings. I went back -- let's see. In January or so or February I went back to work in the Prudential. The Prudential, the first thing they did, I went to personnel and they interviewed me and they said, well, we're going to give you six years of raises that you missed

while you were on active duty, which I thought was a very nice thing.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So my job then was -- they put me in the ordinary disability claim department and I was a claim examiner, no experience, but they taught me. I was making about \$4,500 a year, a year, at that job. I was there about -- let's see, that's 45, 46. I was there until the Air Force became a separate service, which is what, September of '47?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: September of '47, right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The adjutant general of the state⁵⁸ called me on the phone one night --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: The State of New Jersey?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, the State of New Jersey and said, "Don, is it possible that you could come down and visit me?" His office called me and said, "Visit the adjutant general."

I said, "Yes." I said, "I'll work it out." So I went down to Trenton, went into see -- I saw the AG and he said, "Here's the situation. I'm -- we're just starting up the 119th Observations Squadron again. It's going to be now the 119th Fighter Squadron at Newark and we're getting -- we're already getting P-47s. I need an operations supervisor and with your experience level and during the war in P-47s that we think you're the ideal guy for the job."

So they offered me money. Then I became a technician, a technician.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

⁵⁸ Brig. Gen. James I. Bowers (1897-1982)

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So then the pay was maybe, I don't know, maybe 4 or \$500 more a year than -- but I would get drill pay, which would make it pretty decent. So I took the job. Jesus, anything to get out of the Prudential.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So what was your rank then?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Major.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So I took the job and had a long talk with the adjutant general and said, I told him what my biggest problem was [my] lack of education. I had only been -- I had only been to high school. So he said, "Well, let's work on that."

So they sent me to air tactical school. They sent me to air command and staff school. In 1945 I graduated from the Air War College, the first Air Guard officer --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: In 1945?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes. No, no, no, in '55.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: '55?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: '55. I graduated from the Air War College.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So you were the first Air Guard officer --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The first Air Guard officer to graduate. See, that was another thing in this report for the DS medal.

So anyway -- but so they -- so they sent me to school and then I went to a hell of a lot of other schools, nuclear weapons and everything else.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And we did very well and then they came up with a Spaatz trophy and we won a Spaatz trophy the first year and General Spaatz himself personally presented it to me. I have a nice letter here from General Spaatz thanking me for my letter to him. That was in 1949 I guess it was.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So when you -- when you signed up with the 119th already there's the 141st that's at Trenton or --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, it hadn't been established yet.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It hadn't been stood up yet?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It hadn't been established yet, no. First it was just the 119th.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's all we had.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So how long -- because it seemed like on your bio it mentions a lot about the 108th. When did you leave the 119th and go to the 108th?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Go to the 108th?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I left it when we went on active duty.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I commanded it then. I was -- I got promoted to lieutenant colonel. I was promoted to lieutenant colonel in '47.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

Korean War Mobilization

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was then the executive officer of the 108th Tac[tical] fighter wing⁵⁹ which was headed by [Deleted]. . . . I automatically became the wing commander that took the outfit on active duty. Then after active duty, during Korea, we were, got rid of our P-47s and we were going to get F-84s, straight wing -84s, but the Port of New York Authority wouldn't allow us to operate them off of Newark Airport, and I don't blame them.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Why is that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Why? Because of the tremendous -- a jet fighter flying with heavy commercial traffic. Newark Airport is a big airport.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So anyway, they fought the hell out of it and so we decided we had to get the hell out of Newark. So after Korea we went into McGuire and we had built a hangar, the Guard had built a hangar for us, but it was finished during Korea and so the Air Force said, oh, shit, we need that building. So they went, they grabbed it.

⁵⁹ Then the 108th Fighter-Bomber Wing.

So we had no facility there, so they gave us some temporary facilities at McGuire. Then eventually they gave us a beautiful spot on the base and we built a wing headquarters, we built a supply building, we built a hangar, we built an engine shop and a couple other buildings. Then we took over some other Air Force buildings that were on our site and for our mess hall, and transportation, and all this stuff. It was beautiful -- it's a beautiful facility right now.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It is. Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Have you ever seen it?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yes, yes.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Outstanding. So I was involved with all of that, the construction of all those buildings. I'm the one that got the 119th moved into Atlantic City.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Aha.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That was my project.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That was the next question.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I got that done, working with the NAFEC, I guess it was, National Aviation Experimental something.⁶⁰ I was able to get facilities down there and now they have fabulous facilities at Atlantic City.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. They've got an important mission too.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, they've got a good job.

⁶⁰ National Aviation Facilities Experimental Center. Federal Aviation Administration, Atlantic City, New Jersey; currently the William J. Hughes Technical Center. The Center conducts research and development work for the U.S. air traffic control system as well as providing operational technical support.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: They do the air defense.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah. So anyway, we built up the outfit there and it did very well. But you see I'm a fighter man and I wanted to stay in fighters, and if I hadn't of been there longer when we -- we would have had -- we would have had F-16s right now if I had have been there. I wouldn't have had tankers or anything like that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But we had a good air medical outfit, which is still there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It's still there.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So -- but the tanker outfit has done very well. I can't complain about that. It's been the best. You know they've never had an accident?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I've heard that.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Never, never had an accident. Since 19 -- when they were formed at Newark Airport, they were formed at -- I guess it's about '48 or something like that, they've never had an accident.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They've flown all over the world doing, you know, doing air --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You're talking about the 141st?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, I'm talking about the --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: The 150th?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The 150th.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Because right now they're both, both squadrons are in one wing.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, yeah. It's different now, it's different.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, it's different.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The 141st is not fighters anymore.⁶¹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But I'm the guy that kept us in the fighter business.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right, right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I'll tell you a big story about the -105 later on.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: When the -- when the 108th was activated for the Korean War can you describe the readiness of the unit, you know, the training?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, it was a great, it was a great P-47 unit, but they put us in the SAC with the mission, a nuclear mission.⁶² We had not had any nuclear training whatsoever.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

⁶¹ [1:36:33]

⁶² As the 108th Fighter Escort Wing.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But we had to go through all kinds of training.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Is that why they sent you guys to Turner?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, we were a SAC unit then. So they sent us to Turner and -- well, somewhere in here. I can't put my finger on it. I went through all kinds of nuclear training. We were -- when we got into F-84s what we were doing is what they call the LABS⁶³ maneuver. We were doing this stuff. We pulled up here and the bomb would go off that way.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So that was our mission and we were -- all our people were trained on nuclear weapons and so forth. But we only stayed in the SAC about maybe, maybe a year at the most, and then they shipped us back into Tactical Air Command and we became the 108th Tactical Bomber Wing.⁶⁴ They moved us to Godman Air Force Base⁶⁵. We were flying P-47s there and we flew P-47s until the end of our assignment during the Korean War. We took our P-47s and sent them down to Texas where they were being modified, and overhauled, and so forth, and being sent to South American countries.

⁶³ Low Altitude Bombing System, a technique in which fighter-bombers delivered nuclear weapons by approaching at low altitude, overflying the target, and reversing course by means of a modified half-loop. After the fighter passed the vertical, it released the bomb at a computed point so that the weapon continued upward and then came back down while the aircraft leveled out and left the target area. The intention was to allow the fighter delivering the bomb to avoid both ground fire and the effects of the nuclear explosion.

⁶⁴ 108th Fighter Bomber Wing

⁶⁵ Co-located with Fort Knox, Kentucky; now Godman Army Airfield.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Really?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Isn't that interesting how they -- you know, here you had three Air Guard units that were flying the P-47s, so it what's that roughly, about 20 aircraft per squadron?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, right around that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sixty airplanes then. I don't know how many Mustangs were over in Korea but they, you know, there's always that debate about, well, maybe the P-47 should have been sent to Korea versus the P-51.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It would have been a better airplane for that mission, no question about it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right, right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You couldn't have fought the MiG, though, but --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's true, but they said there just wasn't enough P-47s. Is that an accurate assessment, I mean from your experience?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I think there was plenty of P-47s --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- as far I can remember.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But one interesting thing occurred while we were at Godman Air Force Base. I got a call one day -- see, I wasn't the wing commander. I forget what our wing commander's name was. I was made the fighter bomber

group commander. I was a full colonel. My wing commander called me up and said, "Don, General Timberlake⁶⁶ is coming in here tomorrow and he particularly wants to talk to you and I about something."

So General Timberlake came in and he was the commander of the 9th Air Force and he said -- so we got into the wing commander's office and Timberlake says, "We got a hell of a problem." He said, "The United States Government has just accepted [a request] from Yugoslavia to train ten Yugoslavian pilots in the P-47. Now they're going to send these guys to the United States and they're going to be under the 9th Air Force and we're going to have to develop a flight training program to give them 40 hours of flying in the P-47. They cannot speak English."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, boy.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, so who ends up with the ball? Old Don.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You. Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So General Timberlake said, "Okay, Strait, what's your plan?"

I said -- "First," I said, "I want to have you canvass the Air Force for all, for anybody who can speak Croatian and Serbian," which were the dialects in that country, "so that we have some means of communication. Then," I said, "we got to select a place where we have a decent airfield, not Godman, we can't fly out of here, this is a short field, but we need a decent air base." I said, "What about Shaw?"⁶⁷

He said, "That's perfect."

⁶⁶ Lt Gen Edward J. Timberlake, d. 1990

⁶⁷ Near Sumter, South Carolina.

So I said, "Okay. Well, I'll put together a team and we'll go to Shaw Air Force Base and receive these guys and we'll check them out and give them the training."

Timberlake sort of smiled and laughed and shook his head and said, "Shit." He says, "What a deal this is."

So anyway, we got a number of people who could speak the language. These guys arrive at Shaw, they're in Russian uniforms completely, cannot speak English. The full colonel that was in charge of them was the -- the rest of them had had pilot training and, you know, had some experience. He had little or none but, "I check out first. I lead."

Well, he was a basket case. We had to check him out first. So what we did was he took a P-47 and we put it up on jacks so that they could get in the cockpit and they operate the flaps and they could pick the gear, learn how to pick the gear up and all this kind of stuff, and put them through a training program. Then we checked every one of them out, the ten guys, gave them 40 hours of flying, and never scratched a wing tip.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We never scratched a wing tip. I got a beautiful commendation from General Timberlake and from my wing commander, who was a West Point graduate at the time, for that performance. It was, you know, come on, that was a heck of a performance.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You stop to think, the guys can't even speak English.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. Were your instructor pilots from the Guard

doing it?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, they were all --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So this is the Guard --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: This is a Guard function.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Guard function.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, but we were on active duty at the time.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, of course, I understand that, but --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, these are all Guardsmen.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- these are Guard pilots training the Yugoslavians?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah. And my deputy, Joe Zink,⁶⁸ who later became a major general in Jersey, we ran that thing and did a fantastic job. Timberlake wrote me a beautiful letter, which I have here --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- and a hell of a nice letter from Stapleton.⁶⁹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Do you recall how long this took place, this training program? I mean, at least as long as you were on active duty of course.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Maj Gen Joseph D. Zink, retired 1 July 1983.

⁶⁹ Maj Gen Carl William Stapleton, retired 1 Mar 1973, d. 12 June 1989; then commanding 108 FBW.

⁷⁰ [1:43:46]

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, oh, yeah. It took three or four months.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: And did it continue after you guys came off active duty or --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no, no.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- was the program over?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We sent them home.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So it was just that one cadre of them?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, yeah. It was just that group. And I don't -- and they never got P-47s. I don't know why. There's the letter from Spaatz.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. Is that the original?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's the original, that's the original letter right there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: From Carl Spaatz?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, Carl Spaatz.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Now the only thing about this letter, it's dated November 6th and it's not -- it doesn't date it but it had to be in '48 or 9.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

(Examining.)

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. Amazing.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I'm looking for --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, I just never -- now probably Dr. Gross⁷¹ has heard of this, about Air Guard pilots training Yugoslavians, but that's -- it's certainly news to me.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah. I have -- I've got the letters here. I've got so damn much stuff. It's a very interesting thing.

Pearl Harbor was -- was it in '41?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Uh-huh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Okay. We came down to -- the 119th deployed into the air base out here at Southern Pines [N.C], Knollwood Airport. There was a big exercise going on down here and our squadron was based at Knollwood and we were living in tents in the woods. On the way home -- this is a picture of our convoy on the side of the road having lunch. This was the day that Pearl Harbor, December 7th, and we were coming through Baltimore and women were coming out of the building saying, "Oh, the war has started," giving us the information. We were in trucks riding through Baltimore. That's a picture of our convoy.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, my gosh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It's interesting stuff.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: This is a letter --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So you as a Guardsman have been mobilized three times?

⁷¹ Dr. Charles J. Gross, Chief of ANG History in the National Guard Bureau.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: For World War II --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Right.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- and then Korea --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Right.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- and then the Berlin crisis.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Plus the Cuban crisis.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Ah, that's right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was the only Air Guard officer in the United States who was called to active duty for the Korean --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: For the Cuban Missile Crisis.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- Cuban Missile Crisis, the only one. That was -- for about a month-and-a-half I was assigned to TAC headquarters and my job was planning the utilization of the Air National Guard for striking Cuba.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That was my job, called up personally by General Sweeney. He thought I was the world's greatest.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And this is the letter I got from the wing commander, but I got one from General Timberlake somewhere.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. When your unit was mobilized for the Korean War how many of your members were sent to Korea as individuals?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I could never tell you that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I wouldn't know that. I volunteered but never made it. God, I wish I could find that letter from Timberlake. Here's one from Vandenberg.⁷²

(Examining.)

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, this is -- oh, this is where I was, got a letter of commendation from General Timberlake. I conducted an exercise down at Eglin for the Air Force Academy. Well, anyway, was it -- oh, the military, 1952 United States Military Academy Air Indoctrination Course. I conducted that and I got a commendation, a nice commendation.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, that's good.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: "For his excellent conduct of the squadron familiarization portion of the program." It's a nice letter.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Good. Teaches those ground guys about air power.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah. Yeah, that's what it was. I've got to look for that damn letter from Timberlake about that. General Timberlake and I became great friends, great personal friends.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. It sounds like he was quite a charismatic leader.

⁷² General Hoyt S. Vandenberg (1899-1954), Air Force Chief of Staff , 1948-1953.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He was, he was. He was very dynamic and -- at the -- before I came off active duty when I was at Godman he said to me one day, he said, "You've got to come up here for a while."

So I went up to his headquarters, which was at Bragg at the time, and he -- I served in his operations there for over a month. He just wanted to give me some senior staff experience.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So -- and he and I played golf three or four times a week and there was one par three there every day we would get to that par three, and he would put a \$20 bill on the mat and say, "Okay, everybody put your \$20 bills down. The closest to the hole" -- he won every time.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What a hustler.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He would nail us for about \$60. That guy, he really got me.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Was he a fighter pilot? I don't know his background.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I don't know. But he was a great guy.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Marvelous leader. They wrote a book, you know, and there's a story in the book and it's called *Aces in Combat*. It's a nice book and they did a chapter on me called hard charger, which I have the copy out there. It's very good.⁷³

⁷³ Eric M. Hammel, *Aces in Combat: the American Aces Speak*. Pacifica, Ca.:

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Good.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, anyway, I hope I didn't lose that stuff from Timberlake. Okay, where are we now?

After Korea

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So when you came out, when the unit came off of active duty and you returned what were -- what kind of challenges did you face to get the unit back into --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No facilities.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I mean, we had a tremendous construction program. We were operating out of tents at McGuire, you know, because we just didn't have anything. Flight line guys are all living in tents, they're operating out of tents. But when we got the buildings all done we were in beautiful shape.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you have to work through the National Guard Bureau to get all that done?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, well, I had to work through the AG's office into the Bureau. That's where we got our funds from.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That was a big task doing that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So I was very busy and at the same time we were

changing airplanes and all that, you know. When we came home from [Operation] Stair Step we had no airplanes.⁷⁴

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You lost -- oh, they stayed over there?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They stayed over there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Why is that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, because the Air Force come in and took over the bases and operated the airplanes themselves. They formed wings and took over all the Air Guard airplanes and kept them for some time. Eventually they brought them back to the United States and dumped them in the storage out in --⁷⁵

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Arizona.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- Arizona or something. That was quite an affair but --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How long was that where you didn't have any airplanes to fly?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, it was a couple of months. I personally, I personally went to the National Guard Bureau and told them how to do it, to take -- we were then flying the F-86H, which was a nice airplane, a hell of a good airplane. I said, "Take three or four airplanes away from each group and give us 15, you know."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And that's what they did, was on my -- at my

⁷⁴ September 1962

⁷⁵ [1:51:55]

suggestion. That's the way we got airplanes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Otherwise there wasn't anything: a few T-33s, that was about it, guys flying. But --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So you went to -- after you came back from Korea and you were building the base, you were flying F-84s and you flew those --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, we were flying -- we were flying principally -86s then I think, early model -86s.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And then we went -- and then we, our Atlantic City squadron went into F-100s, and then we went into -84Fs after that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But I wanted to --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- follow up on a couple of things. I know I'm getting very disjointed here.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's all right, that's all right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: When I went to the Air War College I graduated with honors⁷⁶ and I had never had any college education or anything. So I came home from the Air War College, it was a year of active duty with my family, came back

⁷⁶ 1955

home to Jersey, and the adjutant general⁷⁷ got a call from the Pentagon. Wimpy Wilson⁷⁸ said, "Listen, we need a deputy assistant secretary of the Air Force for Air Force ROTC, Air Guard, Air Reserve and Civil Air Patrol Affairs.⁷⁹ We think down here that Don Strait is an excellent candidate for that job. Do you think -- would you be willing to let him come on active duty for that or do you think he would be interested?"⁸⁰

And so the AG [Adjutant General] called me and I said, "Yeah, I would be interested. It's good experience."

So I went down to Washington and was interviewed by, a fellow by the name of Smith⁸¹ who was the assistant secretary of the Air Force for personnel and so forth. He interviewed me and he said, "I would love to have you come." So I talked to Wimpy and Wimpy said it's a hell of a good deal for you and it's good for the Air Guard to have a guy like you up there at the secretary level.

So I went back to my AG and he said, "Okay, I'll tell you what we'll do." Now this is the interesting thing. Sometime the State of New Jersey decided that I had done such an outstanding job that they wanted to take me off technician status and make me a state employee and pay me, pay me the salary according to my rank, which was a hell of a deal --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

⁷⁷ Maj. Gen. James S. Cantwell (1918-1983), adjutant general 1954-1970; president of the National Guard Association of the United States, 1963-1972.

⁷⁸ Maj Gen Winston P. Wilson (1911-1996), Director of the Air National Guard 1953 (acting), 1954-1962; Chief of the National Guard Bureau, 1963-1971.

⁷⁹ Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Reserve and ROTC Affairs.

⁸⁰ [1:54:10]

⁸¹ David S. Smith, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower, Personnel, and Reserve Forces (*U.S. Government Manual, 1956-57*).

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- getting major general or eventually major general's pay.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So -- but the AG said, "Now if you take this job in Washington you can only go for 21 months because after that you'll lose your status in Jersey."

I said, "Well, that's -- 21 months is a good period of service."

So I went down there and took that job. I never gave up command of the 108th. I kept an F-86 at, with the D.C. Guard.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, at Andrews.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: At Andrews. I kept an eighty – my old -86 there, and whenever I had to go anywhere in the Air Force I always flew an F-86 to keep my currency up. But I went home every single weekend to command the Jersey Air Guard. Now let me tell you that was a lot of responsibility. Here I am serving in the Pentagon, Friday night I'm hopping in an -86 and flying to McGuire and sleeping there over the weekend. My family didn't have me. We had three children then. So that was a big chore.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And then when the Air Guard started to get F-100s I didn't know anything about them. So I arranged for Operations in the Pentagon to send me out to Nellis [Air Force Base]. I flew out there on a Sunday and at noon time or 1:00 on Monday afternoon I was in an F-100 going down the runway.⁸²

⁸² [1:56:34]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I sat in the simulator. They filled out a questionnaire, which I signed, and I flew for 30 hours. I got 30 hours in the -100 --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- because I wanted that experience. Then I hopped in my -86 and flew back to Andrews. Now let me tell you, you know, how many guys would do things like that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Every weekend I was involved in the Jersey Air Guard. I didn't want to lose command of that fighter wing, so I kept myself very active there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But that was an interesting experience.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What were some of the big issues back in the 50's concerning the Air Guard and what did you hear...?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The biggest, the biggest issue was the relationship with the United States Air Force. The Air Force thought we were shit.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.



Figure 3:

Republic F-84F

F-84Fs of federalized Air National Guard units in Newfoundland, November 1961, prior to flying the Atlantic to Europe in response to the Berlin Crisis. Because of the long over-water distance to the next airfield in the Azores, the planes were towed to the end of the runway prior to takeoff to conserve fuel. During this Operation Stair Step deployment of more than 200 fighter aircraft (the largest overseas movement of a fighter force since World War II), not a single plane was lost. (U.S. Air Force photo)

Operation Stair Step

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They just didn't think we had any -- I don't know whether they were jealous of it or not, but I can tell you stories about when Stair Step came up, General Sweeney they were going to call up a number of F-84 outfits and General Sweeney went around to visit the wings that were involved and he came to my wing. I was the last one, and I put on a 45-millimeter⁸³ presentation for him, which knocked his eyeballs out. It was a good presentation.

I ended up by saying, "General, the 141st Squadron today is the most highly experienced fighter squadron in the United States Air Force and Air Guard. There's none better."

Sweeney sat there and smiled. Then I showed him why and he couldn't believe it. [O]ur experience in the airplane was tremendous. All the pilots were ex-Air Force guys, you know, all with tremendous backgrounds.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was really -- and had won everything, you know, won two Spaatz trophies and had done everything. Accident wise, won every damn flying safety record you could believe in recognized by the Air Force. So Sweeney when he -- then when he got done he said, "Is there anything I can do for you, Strait?"

I said, "Yes, sir. With Stair Step coming up," I said, "somebody has got to lead this operation," and I said, "I want to lead that mission."

⁸³ 35mm slide-based presentation?

He said, "That's the reason that I'm going around to see the various wings, to make that determination."

That night I got a call from his director of operations, a general, a very well-known guy, I can't think of it now, four-star general,⁸⁴ real nice guy who I knew quite well. He called me up and he said, "Don, Sweeney just told me you're the man. You're going to lead the mission. Can you come down here tomorrow?"

I said, "I'll be there." So I went down and discussed the whole thing. That was a fine operation, fine operation. We flew all those airplanes up to Harmon. We got into Harmon⁸⁵ and it was a max range mission from Harmon into Lajes.⁸⁶ I had a tech rep with me from Republic and we -- the F-84 was like this, but the tanks, the tanks were like this.⁸⁷

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I could show you on an airplane. But they weren't level with the airplane. They were like this. So that meant there was a volume of air up in here which didn't have fuel in it. We developed a means of jacking up the nose wheel to level the tanks and filled them right to the brim, which gave us an extra 40 or 50 pounds of fuel, which was critical. Then I designed a way to -- instead of starting off in revetments all over the air base and having a long practice, every airplane that was going to depart Harmon was going to start engines at the end of the runway. That's where we started the engines.

⁸⁴ Possibly General William Momyer? Director of Plans, HQ TAC, July 1958-October 1951 (<http://www.af.mil/information/bios/bio.asp?bioID=6504>)

⁸⁵ Ernest Harmon AFB, Newfoundland

⁸⁶ Azores Islands

⁸⁷ The F-84F's external fuel tanks had their long axes at a substantial angle lower than the axis of the fuselage.; that is, when the fuselage was level, the forward end of the tanks pointed toward the ground. See figure 4.

We took off out of Harmon in pouring rain. It was downhill. They said when we went off the end of the runway we caused a wake in the water, which was right out there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We were so heavy, just about got the airplanes (inaudible).⁸⁸

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How many airplanes? It was just the airplanes from the 141st?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no, no. This was the whole Air Guard. I think it was 100 -- well, the reports say 218 but I can't remember that. I don't think it was that many.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I think it was well over 100 -84s. There was five or six wings.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right, right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Not the whole wing but --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Are these airplanes capable of midair refueling?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes, they are.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They were.

⁸⁸ [2:00:37]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's what I thought.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So anyway, we took off and we set course for the Azores. They put a Navy boat out there and they put a TACAN station on it because we had no means of communicating with, as far as reference to our position other than that TACAN station. LeMay and Sweeney were in their command ships flying along the procession. They were scared to death that we weren't going to be able to handle this thing. They had tankers out there so if we had an emergency that these guys could get on the tanker, even though they never had a tanker refueling in their careers. I never had a refueling in a tanker, not in the -84.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, anyway, we took off, we climbed to 35,000 [feet]. We burned our fuel out on the tanks, which are big tanks, and then we cruised, climbed to 40,000 [feet] and we went into the Azores and we made -- from 40,000 [feet] we made a straight in approach like this and landed. I taxied up. I was the first airplane. I taxied up, opened my canopy, and who's on the ladder, it was Sweeney. LeMay is in the car sitting down here.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Sweeney said, "How much fuel you got there, Don?"

I said, "800 pounds." I was the leader of the flight. I don't know what my number four man had, but he must have 400 or 500 pounds. It was that close, it was that -- we got every airplane in there on schedule. We never scratched a wing tip. Brilliant job, brilliant job.

Sweeney -- LeMay hollers up to Sweeney, "Tell Strait to come and have dinner with us at such and such an hour this evening."

I said, "Sir, I'm in a poopie suit and I don't have any clothes."

He said, "I don't give a shit if you're in your underwear." That's what he said.

So I said okay. I went to dinner with them tonight in my flying suit. I had taken the poopie suit off and put on my flight suit because my clothes were all on a transport. The next day we went into Morón, Morón Spain,⁸⁹ and we got into Morón and the weather wasn't very good, but we got in there in good shape. They took us -- they said we couldn't stay on the base because it was, there wasn't any place for us to stay. So they took us into Seville and put us in a hotel.

Well, then they told me and my ops officer -- and my ops officer is a famous guy, Jim Horowitz⁹⁰ who later became -- Jim was an Air Force graduate of the military academy, brilliant Air Force record, but also a writer. He wrote all kinds of books and all that and he changed his name to -- I can't think of it but I have his book in there.⁹¹ But anyway, Jim Horowitz was a brilliant officer and I had -- he was my DO. He joined my Air Guard unit -- the Pentagon called me on the phone and said this guy Horowitz is getting out of the Air Force. He wants to go into the publishing business, writing books and all that, and he said if you can grab him you've got one of the finest officers that we have, young officers.

So I personally got in contact with him and talked him into joining the 108th, which he did and he loved. But Jim was my ops officer. So we were told that the next day the weather was, no way we could get into Chaumont.⁹²

(Interruption to proceeding.)

⁸⁹ Morón Air Base, Spain, approximately 35 miles southeast of Seville.

⁹⁰ Capt James A. Horowitz, b.1925, USMA 1945.

⁹¹ James Salter.

⁹² Chaumont-Semoutiers Air Base, France.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sorry, you can keep talking. I'm just going to delete it. Sorry about that. So anyway, you were going into Chaumont.⁹³

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So we decided, well, we might just as well have a good time. So everybody got in their clothes and we went down to the -- in the hotel they had a big dance operation, a big bar and all that. All the guys were there. Then the girls started coming out and doing these Andalusian dances and they're snapping their fingers. The guys are drinking like hell. Everybody got drunk except Horowitz and I. Horowitz knocks on my door about 3:00 in the morning and he says, "Sir, the mission is on."

I said, "Oh, Christ, this is going to be something." Well, we had a hell of a job getting the guys up. They were, some of them were really in bad shape. So we got on the bus and guys were puking in the bus. We got out to Morón and had some breakfast. I lined up everybody and I checked every single one of those guys and said you ain't going, you ain't going, and you ain't going. I took one of my officers there, Art Martone who was a lieutenant colonel and said, "Art, you keep the guys behind, get them sobered up, and come back, come back to Morón -- not Morón but Chaumont the next day."

He said, "Yes, sir."

So the rest of us took off and flew into Chaumont and the weather was terrible. We were stacked at 30, 35,000 feet. The brought us down in twos and into a GCA and we landed -- and there was Major General Spicer.⁹⁴ We were the first outfit in out of all the units. So General Spicer was in the tower and we put those 84s in there just like this, popping their drag chutes. The runway was soaking wet. It was just about -- we just about could stop the airplanes with the drag chute.

⁹³ [2:04:50]

⁹⁴ Maj Gen H.R.Spicer (1909-1968), commander of Seventeenth Air Force; retired 1 June 1964.



Figure 4:

Republic F-84F

Arrival of an F-84F of the New Jersey Air National Guard at Chaumont Air Base, France, as part of Operation Stair Step. More than 100,000 ANG and Air Force Reserve personnel, with planes and equipment, were deployed to Europe because of the Berlin crisis. (U.S. Air Force photo)

So we got in there and General Spicer came over and congratulated me on everything and gave us each a bottle of champagne. So Spicer said, "Have a good time. I'm going back to Seventeenth." He said, "I'll give you a call tomorrow." So General Spicer and I were good friends. He was a tough guy, very tough general. A lot of people didn't like him because he was so tough, but I loved him.

So anyway, we got into the base and the next morning I get the word that General LeMay was coming to visit us. So General LeMay comes in and lands and gets into a staff with me and says, "Show me the base, Strait." So I showed him the base and he asked me how many rounds of ammunition I had. I had been tipped off what he was going to ask me, so I had it covered. I bang, bang, bang out the answers to him. He said, "Take me back to the airplane." I took him back to the airplane and he said to me, "Strait, you got a problem."

I said, "What's the problem, sir?"

He said, "You can't stay in command of this outfit as a brigadier general." He said, "We have no general officers commanding fighter wings in the Seventeenth Air Force." So he said, "You can't stay."

I said, "General, this is my outfit." I said, "This is the best God damn squadron in the business. I've trained it, I want to be with it, and I want to fight with it, and I want to serve with it." I did that. (Hits the desk.)

He said, "Get on the phone, call Sweeney and he'll arrange to have you shipped back to the United States."

Boy, it broke my heart because I had worked so hard with that squadron. Do you know that during the time that they were in the Seventeenth Air Force they were the only squadron that passed every ORI⁹⁵ and they received a distinguished

⁹⁵ Operational Readiness Inspection.

unit award when they left the Seventeenth Air Force, the only Air Guard outfit that got it, the only one, that squadron, the 141st.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.⁹⁶

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So anyway, I went back to -- I called up Spicer and said, "Christ, you know what happened?"

He said, "I know what happened." He said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "Well, I'm just sitting here depressed."

He said, "Come and get in a God damn staff car, have them drive you up here," he said. "We'll have some fun."

So I went up to the Seventeenth Air Force and there were a lot of guys in the Air War College there, including one of my best friends Bruce Hinton, who was a hell of a fighter pilot.⁹⁷ He was there. So he learned that I was coming, so I stayed with him at his place where he lived with his wife and family. Spicer said, "We're going to have a little party, such and such a night." He said, "I just shot a ray buck," which was a small deer or something.⁹⁸ So he said, "We're going to have a venison cookout."

So we had a nice evening, it was really wonderful, and Spicer really did a nice job. He arranged for me to get on an Air Force airplane out of Orion, Maine, fly back to Dover, I guess it was, where they had picked me up. The 108th Tac Fighter Wing was still in existence at McGuire and I had two squadrons. I had Atlantic City and I had the 149th at Richmond. So I commanded that for the rest of the time that the outfits were in Europe and I had periodically, every three months

⁹⁶ [2:08:55]

⁹⁷ Col USAF, ret., d. 27 Jun 2009

⁹⁸ *Rehbock*, roebuck.

they would send me over to England, or over to Chaumont to visit the outfit and see how they were doing and so forth.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you have to deploy your own maintenance support functions and all that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We did everything.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You did everything.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: All en route. Yeah, we had transports.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So they stayed with the airplanes even while stationed in France?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Our crew chiefs and all as we progressed they were right with us.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: As I say, that was some operation --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- and particularly with the range. You know, I thought sure we were going to have some, lose some airplanes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What was the planning like? I mean, when you first were notified that you were going to take --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Thirty days, 30 days. The Air Guard had from the time it was alerted to the time we deployed out of McGuire was 30 days. Now we had to train max range, you know. We had to take off and fly max range in order

to get experience to be able to fly that Harman-to-Lajes.⁹⁹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you have to establish your own training plan?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Was it from the 108th and you sent it to all the other units?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, I think TAC, I think it came out of TAC headquarters.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They gave us the guidelines they wanted us to do and so forth. That's what Sweeney was going around checking on, to see what the status of the units were, could they do this. This was a big operation.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Can you recall what other units?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I could have. I've got --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, I got the Stair Step history.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah. You --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So were you in communication with those units daily?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I went out and visited some of them. Once I got the word I visited some of them with some TAC people.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What was the biggest obstacle in the planning

⁹⁹ [2:11:15]

process, do you recall?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No. Mainly to get the guys used to fuel management, really close fuel management. That was the big thing.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So nothing like billeting or anything like that for enlisted troops?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, we had --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How were they going to eat and all that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, we had no trouble with that. That all worked out fine.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You were all on active duty orders so --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah, we were active duty.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That was some function. Our unit did very well over there, let me tell you. They were -- they waxed those ORIs.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: In fact one colonel told me in the Seventeenth Air Force, he said, "That as far as I'm concerned they scored better than any Air Force unit."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right, right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They were good and they were professional and

highly experienced, highly experienced.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did our crews -- did our airplanes get loaded up with nuclear weapons or anything during --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, there's no nuclear involvement over there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Even though you guys had been trained on it?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They sent us down, they sent us down to the Mediterranean for weapons training and all that, where we went.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I keep thinking of things that I want to mention.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, and I'm interrupting you. I'm sorry.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, that's all right.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Because I don't want to forget what I was asking.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.¹⁰⁰

Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I do want to kind of roll back a little bit, when you were the deputy assistant --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Secretary of the Air Force?

¹⁰⁰ [2:13:15]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- Secretary of the Air Force for Reserve Affairs if you want to call it that.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, that's what I was.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What was that like? What were the -- what do you recall were the great experiences and how did that play to what the Air Guard is all about? I mean --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, the big thing was that I had a lot to do with the budgeting for those affairs and I testified before Congress a number of times. In fact one testimony I made, I got ready to make my presentation and the congressman -- I don't know whether it was a senator or a congressman said, "Strait, we have your report, I've looked it over, and I don't see any reason for us to take your time to make a presentation. We'll accept your report as filed."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Now that was quite an honor.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But I was prepared to testify.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I got a lot of wonderful experience from that, you know. That was an Eisenhower appointment you know.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was appointed by General [*sic*] Eisenhower. That was really a -- that was a big thing in my career because it gave me fabulous exposure at the highest levels of the Air Force, you know.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was involved in all kinds of parties and, you know, my wife and I were, socially were -- and I got to spend a lot of time with Wimpy [Wilson] on trips and so forth and so on. In fact after that when Wimpy was -- there was a time that they wanted me to become chief of the National Guard Bureau.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was offered that opportunity and I turned it down.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Do you regret that?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, maybe a little bit. But you see I got to a point in New Jersey where I ran out of gas. What could I do? I had been promoted to major general, I had -- I was what they called assistant chief of staff for air, in charge of all the Air Guard units in the state, and the Air Force knocked me out of the airplane, you know. I was flying the -105 and they came and said you can't fly anymore unless you have a safety pilot.

I said, "Well, what's a safety pilot? I don't have any -- I don't have any two placed -105s, they're all single engines, all single cockpit."

And they said, "Well, we've had a number of accidents," and they had. They lost General Simler¹⁰¹ and some other guys foolishly but --

So I said the hell with it. That's when I decided to get the hell out. I was running out of gas and I was holding up a couple of very fine officers who couldn't

¹⁰¹ General George B. Simler, the commander of the Air Training Command and commander-designate of Military Airlift Command, died in a T-38 crash at Randolph AFB, Texas, 9 September 1972.
(<http://www.af.mil/information/bios/bio.asp?bioID=7148>)

develop because I was a major general and there's only so many spots in the state. So I decided to eventually pack it in. That was in '72. I left.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you ever -- when you were the deputy assistant or assistant secretary rather, did you ever find yourself trying to reeducate the active duty or the Air Guard?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, absolutely.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Because you had talked about, you know, the Air Guards is a bunch of bums. You know, there's the old phrase about the Air Guard being a flying club. I mean, what --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, that's -- that was one of my biggest jobs, to try to -- and end -- and see the thing that was good was the fact that in the Pentagon were a lot of my classmates out of the War College, in key jobs --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- personnel, guys in operations and so forth, and I would see them every day.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So you had personal relationships.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I would leave my office and walk down and sit around and shoot the baloney with those guys, you know. I gradually got to the point where these guys then left the Pentagon and went to TAC Headquarters, Tactical Air Command and so forth and so on, and people out to Wright Field. So it -- they were really becoming, you know, knowledgeable of what the Air Guard could do.

The F-105B

What happened was that the airplane situation started to get really critical. We were running out of airplanes and I was -- I got -- the Air Force buddies of mine, they showed me all of the sheets wherein they program the fighters into here to here to here and then into the depot or into the storage, you know. So I got to see all that stuff. While I was seeing that all of a sudden what happens is about 90 airplanes sitting on the ground at Seymour Johnson, F-105Bs, there they are. I asked these guys, you know, in the Pentagon, "Well, what the hell, what's -- what's wrong with those airplanes?"¹⁰²

Well, the biggest they said is they got over 300 TCTOs¹⁰³ to be accomplished on them and we can't fly them and we don't have the money to do the technical order compliances nor do we have the capability to do them.

I said, "Huh, that's interesting." So as time went I began to really think about that. I went to Republic Aviation Corporation and said, "Hey, if I get those Bs could you give me a maintenance team to help me do those TCTOs?"

And he said, "Shit, yes, send them. You get those airplanes and we'll put people down there and pay for it ourselves to keep those, get those airplanes flying again."

¹⁰² The Republic F-105 Thunderchief was the largest single-engine, single-seat fighter built. The F-105B, which entered Air Force Service in 1957, was the first version produced in large numbers, went through a difficult development period and was difficult to maintain in the field. The definitive version of the F-105, the F-105D, entered service four years later.

¹⁰³ Time Compliance Technical Orders. TCTOs provide instructions to modify military systems or commodities within specified time limits, initiate special "one time" inspections, or impose temporary restrictions and track configuration on systems or equipment. [TO 00-5-15, AIR FORCE TIME COMPLIANCE TECHNICAL ORDER PROCESS, 1 JANUARY 2010, <http://www.robins.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-091001-055.pdf>, accessed 13 March 2012]

So I went to the Pentagon, got together with the guys that were handling these, the disposition of fighters in the Air Force, and I got them to assign those F-105Bs to the 108th TAC Fighter Wing.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ April 1964

figure 5

File:F-105B-57-5829-NJANG.jpg

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Description	English: A U.S. Air Force Republic F-105B-20-RE <i>Thunderchief</i> (s/n 57-5829) of the 141st Tactical Fighter Squadron, 108th Tactical fighter Group, New Jersey Air National Guard, about 1968. The 141st TFS was based at McGuire Air Force Base and flew the F-105 from 1964 to 1981.
Date	1968
Source	United States Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, Alabama via Donald, David (2004). <i>Century Jets: USAF Frontline Fighters of the Cold War</i> . AIRtime. ISBN 1880588684
Author	USAF

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wasn't it an obsolete airplane by then?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no. It was a supersonic airplane.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, yeah, but --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was a Mach 2 airplane. It just -- it just needed to be put into condition and fly.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So they put me on the -- they got that approved. There was an official announcement about it. I happened to be in the Pentagon when the official announcement was made. I was walking down a hall and here comes at a jog a colonel, full colonel. "God damn it, Don. You got me in a heck of mess."

LeMay finds out that the -105Bs are going to the Air Guard and the Air Force is still flying -84Fs.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He's raising hell and I'm laughing. Well, anyway, it got calmed down and I went down to Seymour and checked out the -105 with my flight safety officer, Eddie Borden. We got ten hours in the airplane.

We flew the first airplane -- they flew the first airplane up to McGuire and had a big ceremony. General Wilson was there and the governor was there. They had all kinds of big wheels there. They put on a big show.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's the first one. This is a picture of me checking out in it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So anyway, they had a nice program. So I got together -- I had a maintenance officer that had been a SAC maintenance officer by the name of Wally Aiken¹⁰⁵ and he was my director of maintenance. I said, "Wally, what are we going to do?" I said, "I got all these airplanes coming," and I think there was 25 of them coming to McGuire. I said, "We've got over 300 TCTOs to accomplish on them, we've got engine problems. We need to get an oil spectral analysis program going," which there wasn't any in the Air Force but we needed one, and we needed some other things. We needed to get a means of testing, infrared testing for leaks in the wings.

So Wally and I sat down and we put together a program. We built special maintenance stands to put in the hangar, because you pull the airplane in so the guys could climb up on the wings and over -- just beautiful, just for this.

Republic sent a group down. We got all the kits that was necessary and we took about three or four months and got that whole fleet fixed up for flight.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How many airplanes did you guys have?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: There was about 22 or 23 at the time. The big thing was the engines. They were getting some problems with the engines where they were picking up some little pieces of metal product in the oil system, in the oil.

So I went to the Bureau and I said, "I need to get, I need an oil spectra analysis kit from an outfit up in New England." I said, "It costs \$7,500," and they wouldn't approve it, the Bureau wouldn't.

So I said, okay. I came home and went to my, the guy in the state that

¹⁰⁵ Phonetic rendering, [2:21:00]

worked for the adjutant general and said, "Here's my problem." I said, "I need the state to give me seventy-five hundred bucks. I need this, it's vital."

He gave me the money, I bought the kit, we put it in effect at McGuire and what do you think happened? The next thing you know I was getting oil samples from the whole damn air base, for all the Air Force airplanes wanting to get their oil samples inspected with this oil spectra analysis kit.

Well, anyway, we took and flew every one of those airplanes. We checked out every single pilot in the 141st without a two-seat airplane. The first time they got into it they flew it. We flew for five years and never scratched a wing tip until one day a guy comes in, lands, goes to pull the drag chute and picks up the gear, the handles were very close, picked up the gear. The airplane slid on the tanks and it gradually went to the right like this and went off the edge of the runway and there was a culvert there. That damn nose gear went into the culvert and sheared the nose gear.

That was my first accident. I was in tears because we had done such a fantastic job. General Sweeney, when we put those airplanes and got all the special equipment to do all these checks, he couldn't believe it. He sent his maintenance people up there to see how the hell is Strait doing this? Where is he getting oil spectra analysis, infrared? They didn't even have that in the Air Force. Sweeney said, "How in the hell is he doing this?"

He made me come down and brief his staff at his morning staff meeting about what we were doing. They couldn't believe it. So he sent his whole group up there to see it. It was some performance. I mean, and what happened was we were getting Guardsman, mechanics, from Vietnam, you know --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- highly experienced on the F-105, highly

experienced. That's all I had on the flight line was F-105 mechanics, the best.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We did a heck of a job. We got that whole program going. That was exciting, that was exciting.¹⁰⁶

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It's a neat airplane too.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, you know, what we used to do, Ernie Borden and I, my safety officer, in fact he called me last night. Ernie said, "You know, we got to do something, get a little, let a little air out of our heads." He said, "We're getting too tight."

So I said, "Okay. Well, I'll tell you what we'll do. Let's get a couple of - 105s, we'll arrange to get a tanker over at Kansas at we'll go nonstop into Nellis."

He said, "Great, we'll do it."

So we did, we arranged to do it, and we flew into Nellis. They had -- me being a general they had the staff car right there, picked us up and took us to our quarters, which were beautiful. I arranged to rent a car and then we went downtown, spent the whole night watching shows and drinking and having a big time. Came home at 2 or 3:00 in the morning, got up at 7:00, had lots of coffee and some breakfast, got in the airplanes, went on 100 percent oxygen and flew to Kansas, to -- what's the name of the air base in Kansas?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: McConnell.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: McConnell. Landed at McConnell and went to bed. We were done, we were wiped out. That was a -105 base too so --

¹⁰⁶ [2:24:48]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, that's right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But that's the kind of stuff we did all the time. Really a great experience.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Ernie called me last night and he's my best, one of my best friends.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Now when you needed all these, this equipment to support the F-105 you were going through the state legislature or through the TAG or through the Guard Bureau...?¹⁰⁷

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, only if we wanted special things. No, we got everything out of the Air Force.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Out of the Air Force?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah. In fact the depot -- I knew the depot, the major general that was running the depot, I knew what he had more than he did because I walked all of his storage areas. I knew where he had special tanks, I knew if I needed this I knew where they were. And I used to go out there and say, "Hey, I'm hurting, I need this."

"Well, I don't think we have it."

"Yeah, you got them. I just looked at them," you know. We would get the stuff and it was a beautiful program.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. Did you guys ever deploy with the F-105?

¹⁰⁷ [2:26:20]

F-84F

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, we didn't, no. Never deployed. But that three or four years, I flew the airplane for three years. I don't know how long the Guard flew it. They have one -- they have a Guard airplane on, displayed. Have you ever been to McGuire?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yes.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Did you see the F-84F?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I'm trying to think if I've seen -- the only airplane I've seen at McGuire is the F-4.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah. Well, that's at the beginning.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. I don't --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And that would have never happened if I had -- I hated the F-4. But if you go around the corner to the building there's 200 airplanes and this is one of them.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Yeah, because there were only two other Guard units to fly the F-105, D.C. and Kansas. Oh, no, I'm sorry, Georgia too, Georgia flew it.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, that airplane is displayed at McGuire Air Force Base.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Now let me tell you that story. That's the airplane

that I flew to Chaumont.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Is that right?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: This is some story.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: In 19[62] -- well, you see, we left our airplanes there because the Air Force took them over and eventually they flew them back to the United States and most of them went into storage. In the early 90's the Navy wanted to put an aircraft carrier in New York harbor as a monument, display area and so forth.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right, the *Intrepid*.¹⁰⁸

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The *Intrepid*. So what they did, they asked the Air Force if they had a few fighters because they wanted to, they needed to flesh out the deck with more airplanes. So the Air Force said, yeah, we've got some. So what happens is this airplane ends up on the deck of the *Intrepid* unbeknownst to me or anybody, nobody knew it, my airplane.

In the later 90s the guy in charge of the *Intrepid* calls up McGuire Air Force Base and says, "Hey, we got an F-84F on the deck here and it's in terrible shape. It's all corroded and it needs painting. We don't have the resources to do it. We have no other choice but to either push it overboard into the river or is there some way that you could come and get it?"

So the guy at McGuire Air Force Base -- now I didn't know this, but the guy at McGuire Air Force Base says, "Yeah, we'll work out something." So he calls the Guard up at McGuire and they also call up the Pennsylvania Air Guard who had a

¹⁰⁸ [2:28:38]

big helicopter, a heavy helicopter, and they come up and they pick this thing up.¹⁰⁹ There was hooks in the wings to pick it up. They picked it up, flew it to McGuire, dropped it on the ramp at McGuire, pushed it into the hangar that I had built, but now the outfit is in tankers and all that and they aren't using that hangar.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So the guy who was commanding the Jersey Guard at that time invited me to come up to Jersey for some celebration. So I went, spent the night there, and the next day he said, "Hey, Don, I want to show you some of the new buildings we're building." This is when they were building buildings for the tankers and all that.

So I said, "I would like to -- while I'm here," I said, "I would sure like to go look at my old hangar that I operated out of and where I had the -105s and so forth."

So we opened the door and there sitting in the corner is that airplane. I said, "My God," I said, "that's the airplane I flew to Europe, -2077."¹¹⁰

He said, "No, Don, it can't be. No way."

I said, "That's my airplane." I came home, I got a picture of it and sent it to him. He couldn't believe it. He thought that story was great with the fact that we had led the Stair Step operation and here 20 years later the airplane is back to its

¹⁰⁹ Possibly a CH-47 Chinook of the Pennsylvania Army National Guard.

¹¹⁰ The actual tail number of General Strait's F-84F was 52-7066, and this is the tail number on the airplane at McGuire as displayed at the *Intrepid*. The jet, however, was actually tail number 51-9430, repainted at some time not determined in the course of this work. By coincidence, the real 52-7066 had also been preserved after service with the Indiana Air National Guard, ending up as a monument in a park in Vienna, Indiana. General Strait visited 52-7066 in November 2011 while passing through the area. ("Fighter Ace Reunited with Plane" Parkersburg (Indiana) *News and Sentinel*, November 20, 2011, <http://www.newsandsentinel.com/page/content.detail/id/554328.html>)

original location. He got the Air Force to approve taking this airplane, putting it on a pad like it is there, and had a big ceremony and they put a big monument in front of it. I don't know whether the monument, you can see the monument. They put a big bronze, brass monument there dedicating the airplane and saying that I, it was my airplane and so forth. They invited me and my wife and one of my kids to come to the ceremony.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But isn't that amazing?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It is.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Off the *Kearsarge*. When it comes to the -- not the *Kearsarge*, but the *Intrepid*, and then down to McGuire and they refurbished the whole airplane. This last Christmas I went to see it and I raised hell about the fact that --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It's in good shape.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, it had -- it needed some maintenance and I raised hell about it and hopefully they fixed it. But it has my name and I insisted they put my crew chief on it, who was black.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I have picture of me out there standing by the airplane with my crew chief, who was a black boy and he was a fine crew chief. But isn't that interesting?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, that is neat.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I mean, how could things like that happen? When I

walked into the hanger and I said, "My God, that's my airplane." This guy, I can't think of his name now, he's retired Air Guard, and he said, "No way." Interesting story.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Do you ever wonder whatever happened to the Mustang you flew in Europe?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, I know, I know exactly what happened to it. I developed a friendship with a guy in the Air Force historical facilities down at Maxwell Field.¹¹¹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, the research agency.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah. I developed -- and I have his name here somewhere. I just can't think of it now. And I said to him -- well, I had originally -- I had never gotten a copy of the general [order] or the order that awarded me the silver star. I had never gotten a copy of it. That's an important decoration and I wanted it. So I called this guy up and I was directed to this guy.

This guy says, "Well, let me get -- do you know the general order number?"

And I said, "Yeah," and I knew the date.

So he said, "Well, let me take a check." He called me back in about two hours and he said, "Hey, I got a copy of it and I'll send it to you," and so he did and it's in there.

But anyway, I got to know this guy real well and I said, "You know, I have another thing that's been bothering me." I said, "That Mustang that I flew during the war was brand new when I got it and I flew 35 missions in it and never had a write up, never had a write up on it."

¹¹¹ Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was perfect. My crew chief did a perfect job.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Is this the same crew chief that you had when flying F-47s?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, when I flew the -47. So I said, "I would like to know what the hell happened to it."

He said, "No, that's no problem." He said, "We got records here of what happened to every airplane that the Air Force ever had."

So he looked it up and called me up on the phone and he said, "In September of '45 it was flown to the Burtonwood Depot up at Liverpool. They took the engine out of it and the gun sight and threw it over into a pile of other airplanes and on the 6th of February, which incidentally is the date my wife died, the 6th of February, 1946 they torched it. They burned it up. That was it.

If I would have known that was going to happen to it I would have had them take the rudder off it or something and ship it to me. I would have done something.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The only thing I have from it was the Pitot cover.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you get all 10-1/2 kills in that airplane?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes, in that --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: In that one airplane and they torched it.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They torched it. Well, they had so many airplanes,

you know, they didn't know what the hell to do with them. They sent a lot of them to units over in France and Germany, and after the war was over -- but they didn't know what the hell to do with all those airplanes so --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, I know, I know. There was an awful lot but --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Now today there's 160 Mustangs left in the world.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You know they just had a big air show? You know, I was featured at that air show.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, I was going to meet you at there.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, were you?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, but stuff got in the way.¹¹²

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They put out a nice book of legends, you know. I was one of the legends.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But anyway, the guys that were -- the guy that runs the Mustang program down in Kissimmee, Lee Lauderback, is a very close personal friend of mine. In fact he just sent me that big book.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They're doing a documentary on that air show, which eventually will come out in a DVD, so I'll get copies of that. But I was invited to

¹¹² [2:35:30]

sit at the head table at the dinner. I sat next to Lee and his girlfriend, Angela, and my son Russ, my son Russ was with me. So it was a nice affair.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They did a beautiful job out there. The closing thing on the air show was they flew -- the stands were all here and they flew this way.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: A P-5[1].

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: All with Mustangs.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: P-51.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's quite a formation.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was gorgeous. The opening ceremony was beautiful and they were right on time, 8:30. They had these guys jump out of an airplane and they had a big flag, 6 by 30 feet, and it had a steel bar across the bottom of it, and they kept it vertical, you know, so you could see it. As they came down they had smoke. They were just putting smoke around it and so forth. They played the National Anthem.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, nice.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was beautiful, a beautiful ceremony. That was a great air show. I really enjoyed it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. Well, let me get back to Stair Step for a

second and ask you what's the big deal about Stair Step to the Air Guard in your opinion?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, if you read some of the articles about it in [Charles J.] Gross's book and so forth there's no question that that really had a lot to do with the professionalism of the Air Guard. LeMay was the biggest -- he never had much to say about the Air Guard, never thought much of them, but he did express himself later to the fact that that was a very professional performance of the Air Guard.

To be in 30 days, to deploy that number of airplanes, they put F-4s¹¹³ over there, and they put F-86s, and they put F-84Fs over into Europe and didn't have any accidents, they had no problems, everything went click, click, click, and it was a highly professional performance. It gave great recognition to the Air Guard, no question about it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No question about it. As I say, my unit did a fantastic job.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.¹¹⁴

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The guy that ran my outfit who I -- he was my deputy, Joe Zink, you know Joe later became -- he was a big wheel in the Pentagon. He was on the Joint Chiefs of Staff or something like that as a reserve officer,¹¹⁵

¹¹³ F-84s?

¹¹⁴ [2:38:00]

¹¹⁵ Military Executive, Reserve Forces Policy Board.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I'm not familiar with it. So he took over for you after you had to be sent home?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Right.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, he took over. He was a colonel, full colonel, graduate of -- he was a Princeton graduate with a law degree. He was a -- I forget. He wasn't just a lawyer, he was a step above a lawyer. But he was -- and he just didn't like the law business, he liked the airplanes and he flew B-17s during the war. He was a bomber pilot.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, okay.

The NJANG After Stair Step; Fairchild Republic

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But he converted and he flew -105s and -86s and did a hell of a good job. A very interesting guy. He had little or no personality. He was very reserved, quiet in nature, but very smart, very smart. I had -- he was my deputy for years and deputy commander in the Jersey Guard. Joe and I were very good friends. That's one of the reasons why I got out of the Guard, so he could be promoted.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I mean, I was -- when I went to work for Republic, you know, I was jamming all those guys up.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So I eventually -- I commanded the Jersey Guard for

about four years while I was at Republic and I was flying down there every weekend. You know, they would come and pick me up in a C-47 and I spent, again spent the weekends down at McGuire, and that was no good. It wasn't good for my family and --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. When you were at Republic they changed the name to Fairchild, right?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, no. No -- well, Fairchild Republic.¹¹⁶

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, okay. Were you involved with the A-10 development?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, hell, I was it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You were it?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, well, yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I didn't know that.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Sure.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Tell me -- yeah, let's --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I went to work for Republic in '69. They invited me to come down and talk to the president of Fairchild Hiller it was. I did and he

¹¹⁶ The corporate relationships here are complicated. The Fairchild Engine and Airplane Corporation, one of over 70 companies founded by Sherman Fairchild, acquired the helicopter manufacturer Hiller Aircraft in 1964 and changed its name to Fairchild Hiller. The company sold the helicopter division back to Stanley Hiller in 1973, having previously changed its name to Fairchild Industries in 1971. In 1965, Fairchild bought Republic Aviation, which then operated as the Fairchild Republic Division of Fairchild.

offered me a hell of a job.¹¹⁷ At that time I was beginning to run out of gas with the Guard and there wasn't much for me to do, no challenges.

So he offered me a pretty good salary jump. So I said, well. I talked to my wife and she's a Long Island girl so we had a chance to go back to Long Island and we moved into a lovely place in Babylon. So they offered me a job to come to work for Republic, but I was going to become the project officer on a joint contract that we had with Germany to develop a VSTOL fighter, USFRG it was

¹¹⁷ General Manager, Republic Aviation Division, Fairchild Hiller Corporation (*Jane's All the World's Aircraft*, 1968-69, p.269 s.v. "Fairchild Hiller")

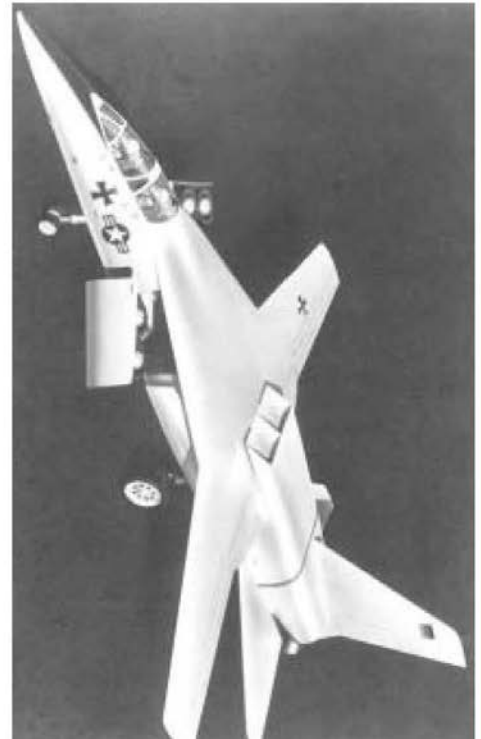
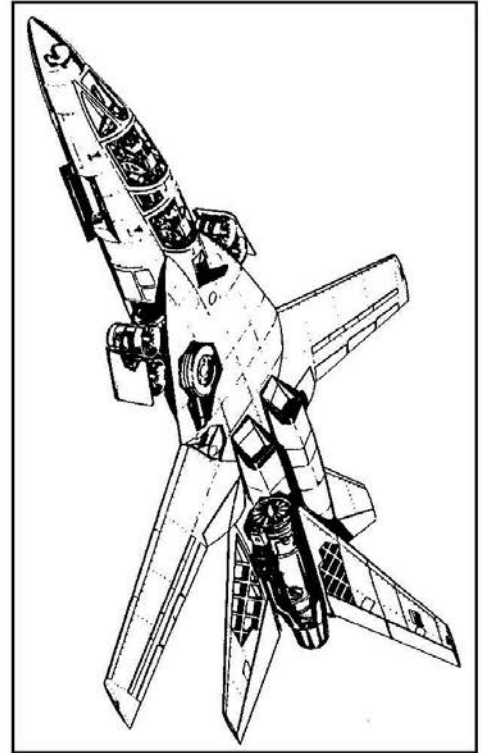
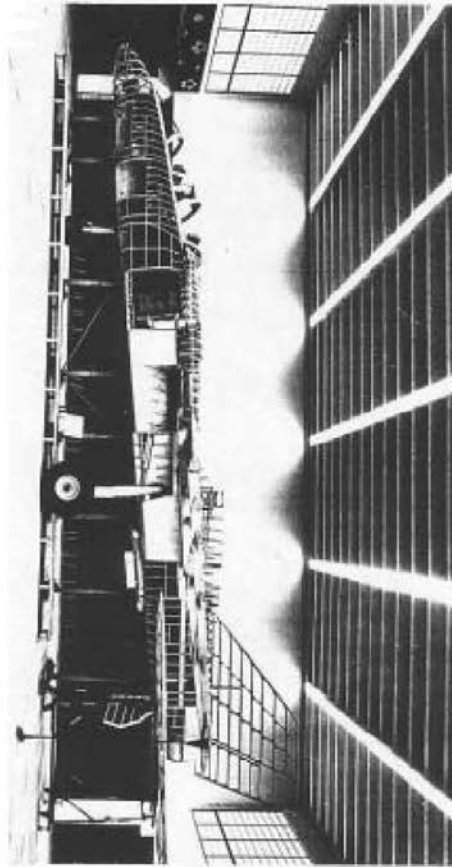


Figure 6: US-FRG V/STOL

called, a USFRG. This is a pretty substantial contract.¹¹⁸

So I went to Republic and went there for a few months and then they sent me to Germany, over in Munich. I worked with Messerschmitt-Bölkow on --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: How ironic.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, in the development of this fighter. This fighter was -- the airplane it had swing out lift engines. In other words, we had -- we could deflect the thrust vertical off the back by the nozzles, but we had to have some way to get the lift on the wings. So we had swing out engines which we would start up and so that the airplane had an engine here, an engine here, and an engine here, which made -- would give it vertical movement.

Well, we never could get the swing out lift engines to really be a reliable commodity. So after I was there about a year the United States Congress decided that there wasn't enough progress being made and they withdrew the funds on the contract and the Germans bailed out. I came home.¹¹⁹

So I came home to Republic and at the time I was made an assistant general manager of the factory. We were building the aft sections for the F-4, the aft sections for the F-14. We built all of the vertical fins for the space shuttle. We built all of the wing control surfaces on the F-47, the big, bigger F-47s, you know, but built by Boeing. We built all those and we shipped them out to Seattle by --

¹¹⁸ The Advanced V/STOL Tactical Fighter Weapons System was a joint design study for an F-104G successor that ran from 1964 to 1968. The German consortium EWR (the Heinkel and Messerschmitt Bolkow companies) collaborated first with Boeing, then Fairchild Hiller (Mike Hirschberg, "V/STOL Fighter Programs in Germany: 1956-1975 (Presentation, International Powered Lift Conference, 2001), slides 48-50; see also *Jane's All the World's Aircraft*, 1967-68, p.91; 1968-68, p.97. See figure 6.

¹¹⁹ [2:41:55]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: 747s?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- rail car. 747s, yeah. So we had some nice contracts, but the Vietnam War was ending so our -105 business went like this. We weren't building any, we weren't repairing any, we weren't building spare parts, we lost a lot of money.

So it was obvious that we had to do something to try to get the factory back into building an airplane again. So the F-15 program came into existence and we competed with that and we had a very good airplane. In fact it was a high mach airplane and we tested it in the NASA facilities at Langley, did very well. But the United States Air Force couldn't see us building the airplane, even though they liked the airplane, because they didn't think we had the capacity tool wise. Our factory was not modernized, it just wasn't. We didn't -- we weren't like --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: McDonell Douglas?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: McDonell Douglas and so forth. We couldn't compete with them. So anyway, we did not get that contract. So now we're desperate. We can't keep the factory going on just the subcontract work that we're doing, even though it was about \$100 million a year, it wasn't bad.

Well, then they appoint me general manager of the factory. I've got 5,000 guys working for me and I have five unions, which were brutal, and I'm -- all I'm doing is building spare parts and aft sections of the F-4 and the F-14, all that kind of stuff. It was \$100 million and in Fairchild's Corporation we were the leading money makers in the corporation. If we didn't do well the corporation didn't do well.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The corporation headquarters was down in

Germantown in Maryland.¹²⁰ That's where they had the headquarters of Fairchild. The guy that was head of the place was a bitch, I hated him.

So the Air Force comes out with a requirement to build a close air support airplane. This looked to me like baby this is ours because if anybody has got the experience to do this we do and we can build it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So we designed our airplane. I was there when they put the first design on the paper. We designed our airplane. We competed against five other companies, including McDonnell, and Northrop, and Boeing, and so forth. They picked the Northrop airplane and our airplane, build two each, and take them to Edwards and test fly them. The Air Force would test fly them against each other and come up with a winner.

So that was my project. So we built the two airplanes. I spent weeks in Washington briefing congressmen because I know goddamn well that the winner could be a little -- there might be some political concerns, particularly with California, which was the big area for building airplanes and all that and we were competing against Northrop out there. So I -- the governor of New York even gave me his office and I went down there weekly, spent hours down there. I took my secretary down there.

So anyway, we worked and worked and worked and I had all my buddies in the Air Force, you know, talking about, giving a presentations, nice, good presentations, 45 millimeter,¹²¹ very good presentations. I would give them personally myself.

¹²⁰ This statement is problematic: Fairchild's headquarters were in Hagerstown, Maryland, but the company also had a plant in Germantown.

¹²¹ 35mm? See above.

So they came to make the announcement and they picked the A-10 as the winner. 813 airplanes, four and a half billion dollars, that was the contract.

[2:46:35]

The big announcement came that we had won. I immediately scheduled a big party at Republic because those people had worked their balls off to win this contract, to build a good airplane. The president of the company heard about the party and he cancelled it. He said, "We don't need to celebrate. No necessity to celebrate."

That really upset me, it really upset me. The unions were very upset about it because I included the unions. I had -- I was later told by the senior union there that I was the only general manager in the history of Republic who could work properly and cooperatively with the unions. I was the only general manager.

Well, anyway, we -- the owner of the company was, headquarters was Germantown, Maryland and they had a big factory there which was going to build a few parts for the A-10, but the main program was building it at Republic, which had been approved by the Air Force when they approved the contract, when they sold us the, when they bought the contract to build the airplane at Republic.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So the president of the company decides he doesn't want to build the airplane at Republic. Now in the mean time I've got all the unions behind me because I'm going to increase the amount of employees. I've got the, all the state senators and the congressmen all behind me because it's big business for Long Island and New York.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I have stood up and sold this thing. I even had my

picture on the front page of the Newsweek,¹²² like this and a big fighting picture, you know. We're going to win this contract and so forth. Well, he decides that he doesn't want to build the airplane. He wants to -- he'll build parts of it at McGuire, at Republic, but he'll assemble the airplane and flight test it at Germantown.

[2:48:42]

Well, I went down and met with him and I told him, I said, "This is a -- that's a tough job because that means you've got to ship all this stuff over the rail and to meet production schedules it's a very difficult task, it's going to be expensive."

He looked me right in the eye and said, "Don, that's the decision, that's it."

So he said -- I said, "Well, that's -- I don't think I can accept it." I said, "I have placed my, put my heart into the sale of this airplane." I told him all about my relationship with the governor and all the congressmen and all the people in New York and all the unions and so forth and so on. I said, "I just can't accept it and I would like to be able to work out some sort of a retirement from the company and I'll leave."

And he said, "Okay, fine," just like that, you know. He didn't give a shit because he was going to build it down there where he's the big hero, you know.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He was wanting to become a millionaire and that was his -- I've heard him say that over and over and over, "I want to become a millionaire."

So anyway, I announced my, the fact that I was leaving and the unions gave

¹²² Long Island *Newsday*?

me the biggest party you could ever believe, all kinds of nice gifts. The president of the biggest union, and I forget which one that was, he got up there and he made that statement. He said, "You know, this guy, he's the only manager we've ever had here who we can walk into his office and talk to him and resolve matters that were difficult." He said, "Every month he would have a meeting with the five unions. Come into the office, we'll close the doors, and let's take our -- let's roll our sleeves up and let's resolve all of our difficulties and problems." He said, "That's the way it should be," and at the same time I let them know if we didn't win this contract they're out of business, you know.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They had to be behind me 100 percent because it was a team effort.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So anyway, they gave me a heck of a nice party. But -- and do you know he . . . [Deleted] . . . sent two people to the party that weren't even invited just to hear what they were going to say.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That son of a -- so my wife and I had a beautiful home on Long Island. We were on a little bit of an estuary on the water and we had a little dock out here. It was the nicest house we ever had. It was gorgeous. She was a Long Island girl, you know, and so she loved the beach and she loved

the seafood, going to the seafood facilities and buying fresh seafood and all. She was a marvelous cook, a marvelous cook, and a beautiful gal.

But anyway, so we sat and we talked and I said, "Well, we've got to get out of here. I can't afford with my retirement" -- see, because at that time I wasn't getting any reserve retirement.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I wasn't 60 years old.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: 60 years old yet.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: This was in -- this was in '75, 1975. So what we did was we put the house on the market and it sold it just like that. I said, "Let's -- what do you think about going down to Fort Walton Beach," which was right on the ocean and beautiful, beautiful beaches and all that down there at the time. Now they're very overdeveloped with hotels and so forth.

So we went down there and found a nice piece of property overlooking Choctawhatchee Bay and I found a builder that would build a house for me and he would use only brick that came from Chicago and it had Chicago written right on it, marvelous. He built a gorgeous house.

I went to the shipyards in Philadelphia and got pieces of wood -- well, I'll show you. There's a piece of one out there I made a bench out of, that thick, pine that they used to put -- for decks on the old ships and they were giving it away because they weren't doing that anymore on ships.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So I got a whole bunch of that and built my own

mantles, you know, over the fireplaces. Really the place was gorgeous, the house we had. It was right on the golf course. So -- and there was a number of friends of mine that lived on the golf course. That's the reason we went there, because of dear old friends, Air Force, full Air Force retired. One guy was my executive officer when I had the job in the secretary's office, Don Rogers.¹²³ His wife is still there. He has since died.

But anyway, so we went down there and built this nice house and lived there. One night we were having a drink of scotch on the back porch and Louise says to me, "Don, we've got to get out of here."

I said, "Why?" I said, "Gee, this is first class, everything is fine."

She said, "I never see my grandchildren." She said, "They live in Vermont, they live in New Jersey, and they live in Virginia. It's too much of a trip down there. You know, they're young families and they just don't have the time." She said, "I never see my grand kids. The only time we see them is when we go north at Christmastime and see them all and that's it." She said, "It's not good enough."

I said, "Okay." I put the house on the market and sold it in a week at the price I wanted. I forget what it was, about \$100,000, and I said, "Where are we going to go?"

She says, "Well, what about Foxfire," which is where this is. We had come down here out of Long Island for a week's golf and we liked it, we liked the area, we liked the climate, we liked the clubhouse. We thought it was real nice.

¹²³ d.3 Mar 2009;

<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:C4JXfOHMA5gJ:www.the-leader.com/obituaries/x2081093416/Don-Rogers+don+rogers+%22air+force%22+obituary+fort+walton+beach&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>]

So we came up here. We left there just before Christmas, came up here, rented a little cottage or little townhouse up here, and spent three or four -- about six months in it, I guess, while we built this house. We bought this piece of property, it's one acre, on the golf course for \$21,000 and built the house for \$90,000 and have been here ever since. This way we're four hours from our Virginia family, we're another six hours to my daughter's house, and then another six hours to my son's house, so we could four, six, six, spend the night at each place and then -- it was perfect, you know. We had the grand kids down here and everything worked out perfect. That's what happened.

But that situation -- I took a shellacking in that job on Long Island, boy I did.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: But they ended up building the A-10 at Long Island.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah, they built -- no, no, no.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did they build it in Germantown?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, in Germantown.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, I always assumed they --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, test flew it -- they flew it all out of Germantown. The final assembly was at Germantown.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: See all we built up there was we built the engine pods and I forget, some other structures.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Wings, we might have built the wings. I don't know what it was.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Shipped the parts by rail down to Germantown where they assembled it and that factory had fallen flat on its butt, you know. They had -- they built some transports there and so forth. They had no business at all. The only business they were getting was stuff that I dumped on them.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. I spent nine years as an A-10 weapons guy.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, you did?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. I was an aircraft armament specialist.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I saw the gun, I saw the gun fire for the first time. We built the nose section and took it up to Burlington, Vermont, to the General Electric plant up there, and we put it in the nose section at a test site, fired it. I saw it fire for the first time.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That was incredible, incredible, because of the flash. You know eventually we flamed out some engines, you know, and we had to put those spoilers to deflect the --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And so --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: And they took those off after a while so --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Now I ended up going out to -- during the competition I ended up going out to Edwards many times. In fact I was out there when we flew the A-10 for the first four flights. I was out there to observe it. At the same time they flew the F-16 for its first flight.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So I had a chance to see the F-16.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Neat.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And I went over to the -- they were just opposite us. They were over here and we were here. I went over to the people there and I said, "You know, let me tell you something. If I could start my life over again," I said, "I would become an F-16 pilot." I said, "That airplane is fantastic."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It is.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They couldn't keep -- they couldn't keep up with it, with anything ever flying, the F-4 or anything. It was marvelous.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I agree and I think that, and this is my opinion, that, you know, the A-10 and the F-16 are two airplanes the Air Guard has been flying for a long time.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah, they still are.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: And still are, and we have, in my opinion, have made them better.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, absolutely. Oh, the Air Guard has made the airplane.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yes.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The units in the Air Guard have done a great job.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yes.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Now you see I didn't -- I wanted to -- I really wanted to win that F-15 contract because I'm an air-superiority man. I'm not a ground support guy.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But my whole philosophy was I got to keep the plant open, you know. If I don't win this contract they're going to close the plant and Don Strait's name is going to be known for that forever.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I don't want that, no. So we won the contract and --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's good.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- and that was it. But boy when the word came out that they were moving the final, woo, woo, woo.¹²⁴

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That was a lot of stress on you.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Did I take a beating, did I take a beating, congressmen calling me, messages from the governor. I've got a file in the other room that thick of congratulatory messages that I got when they announced the winning of the A-10 from friends of mine throughout the Air Force really saying what a job, you know. If anybody deserves it you do and, oh, really great

¹²⁴ [2:58:15]

messages.

Post-World War II: NJANG, Air War College

CMSGT. ANDERSON: At the end of World War II did they ever offer you to stay on active duty or not and, you know, did you ever have the chance to stay on? I mean, why did you come back to the Guard is what I'm getting to.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: At the end of, at the end of World War II I was very concerned about my future service in the Air Force. The Air Force was deteriorating, it was collapsing.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Really?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, thousands, everybody was getting out. Nobody wanted to stay in the Air Force. I couldn't even get a flying job at the time, you know. That's why I went to flying safety was at least -- it sounded like a decent assignment. I had to get my four hours of flight training every month in a two-engine airplane.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You know, I couldn't fly fighters, I wasn't on a base. So I became very emotionally disturbed with my service and said to myself finally I'm going to get the heck out and I got out in December after serving some six months or so in the flying safety.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: So if the New Jersey TAG had never called you wouldn't have joined the Guard?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I might have if I had heard about it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I would have heard about it, because I -- I brought back some guys that went to flying school with me from Jersey --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- that came back and joined the Guard again once they heard about it. Yeah, I probably would have gone back into Jersey Guard once I heard about it. You know, it was growing. It's just that, it's just that the AG called me and he was looking for an experienced guy and I just -- I don't think anybody had any better record than I did from New Jersey.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, he clearly knew about you, he knew you were back.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, oh, yeah. So anyway, it worked out great for me. I'm a product of the Air National Guard. I can say that with all respect because the Air Guard did everything for me.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They gave me a start, they gave me opportunity, and then after the war they gave me an opportunity to get into the business at the beginning and to see it grow and to see it get decent facilities and fly decent airplanes and get good missions, and of course being able to go to school, you know. I mean, I had no education and that was the whole Air Force, you know, had no education. That's the reason they set up the Air University was to get those schools going.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So I went to all of those and then of course the War

College was the best thing that I ever did. That was a great, great year. Plus the contacts I made.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I mean, guys that -- many, many guys that I served with all became generals and in good positions. That gave me a door, you know, wherever I needed it. I could always find somebody that would help me out, you know.

Current Events

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Sure. Well, you look at the Air Guard today and you see all the challenges do you think we're going in the right direction or do you think – ¹²⁵

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, the biggest problem now is the fact that we're getting out of the airplane business.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's sad, but at the same time that's the way the -- that's the way our forces are going. You know, they're going to these -- they're going to these -- what do they call them --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Unmanned vehicles.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Unmanned vehicles. Fighters are so expensive, we can't build a number of them to support a large force. F-22 is limited. F-35s, they're probably going to build more of those than anything because they're going

¹²⁵ [3:01:50]

to be throughout the services --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- and I think even some European countries. So -- and what we're flying today is just running out of gas. It's just -- you can't -- they just don't function anymore, you know.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It costs too much to try to maintain them and keep them operational.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So the Air Guard situation, we're going to be going out of business in a lot of states. There just isn't going to be enough missions to keep them going that I see.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. I don't know how they -- you know, there are those who are saying they'll keep flying missions in every state and we won't fold any flags and I just don't know....

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I doubt it very much unless we get into flying some small little transports and things like that.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, that's what they're trying to do.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It's going to very limited air wise, very limited.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: They've --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I'm just so pleased that Jersey has been able to keep the -16s.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yes.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's my -- and of course that was my original squadron.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And I -- did you know I commanded that squadron?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, I commanded the 119th.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: When?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: After the war.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay, right, okay. So when you came back you took command of it?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I commanded the 119th. I went from a private to the commander.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Pay backs.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And they invited me up there a few years ago and gave me a beautiful picture of the F-16.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, I saw that.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But you know what they did at this affair, they

invited me to come up and I went up with Ernie Borden, my buddy who lives in Jersey, and we went down and we went into the briefing room and they gave us a nice briefing. The colonel that was running the place then was an American Airlines captain. He --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Who was that? Do you remember who that was?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I don't know his name now.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Was he the wing commander?¹²⁶

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, he was the wing commander.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Mike Cosby?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It wasn't Cosby, no.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I thought he was in American.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But this guy was an American Airlines guy, really, really a good guy. But anyway, he -- we had a nice briefing, we had some coffee, and he said, "Don, I want to take you and show you around the new facilities we have."

And I said, "Okay." We walked out of the briefing room, down the hall a little bit, and there was a big picture on the wall that had a cover on it. He took the cover off and there's a picture of my Mustang, one of my Mustang pictures out

¹²⁶ [of the 177th]

here.¹²⁷

We walked down the hall a little bit further and he takes the thing off, another cover off, and there's another picture of my airplane, the one on that wall there with the B-24s. I couldn't get over that. They went and bought those pictures, which cost 2 or 300 bucks, and had them framed and put them up just for me. It was really nice.

But you know my son flew with that outfit?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Russ, my son Russ, my youngest boy, when he left high school he went to the University of Alaska by choice. This guy is an outdoorsman, the best. He went to the University of Alaska and never came home for four years. He stayed up there every year and got a job with an outfitter flying float planes, you know, up these rivers with fishing parties.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He did that for -- and then the last two years they made him an Alaskan citizen so his education didn't cost anything because they give free college to their students. So he got free college.

But anyway, in his senior year he called me on the phone one day and he said, "Dad, I want to go into the Air Force," but he said, "I don't -- I will not go in unless I can become a fighter pilot."

I said, "Russ, come on, how do you know you have the qualities to be a fighter pilot or whether they're going to put you into single-engine training," and all that stuff.

¹²⁷ [3:04:35]

"Dad, I repeat," and he said, "if anybody can take care of that for me you can."

I said, "Russ, I'll give it a shot." Well, this was after the Air War College and so I had some guys in personnel in the Pentagon and I called them up and said, "Hey, I've got a problem."

So I told them what it was and they said, "That ain't no problem. We'll assign him to Williams." At the time Williams was open and I think it's closed now.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right. Yes.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So he went to Williams, went through single-engine training, and then went into jets down in Florida for jet school down there, and then he came back to the Jersey Air Guard and flew -102s, -106s.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He has 2,000 hours in a -106.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And then he checked out in -16s. Well, in the meantime he had gotten a job with American Airlines. So he's flying with American Airlines and they promote him to captain and send him to fly out of Washington. He was living in Jersey then.

So he decided that that was just too much of a chore for him, so he decided he had to move. So he moved to Virginia and bought a house down there and started to fly out of Washington and flew out of Washington this entire time. He became, just recently became the senior captain flying out of Washington National.

On April 1st of this year he called me up on the phone and said, "Dad, are you standing or sitting?"

I said, "I'm sitting."

He said, "Good." He said, "I just retired from American Airlines."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I said, "What do you mean you retired?" He's 58 years old.

He says, "The situation is getting -- the airlines are no fun anymore." He said, "I've got 30 years, I've got a fantastic pension plan, which I don't want to see anything happen to." He said, "I swear that the unions are going to strike this fall and it's going to put them out of business and they're going to go bankrupt and I'll lose a good percent of my retirement." So he says, "72 captains and I all retired as of 1 April."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And I said, "Great." That's what he did. He's retired now.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Is he -- did he retire from the Air Guard too?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Not yet.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: He's still in the Air Guard?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: At 60.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Well, I mean, he doesn't collect but --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He will at 60.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, but he's already out of the unit now is what I'm asking.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, he went into the [Air Force] Reserve when he left Jersey Air Guard. He flew with Atlantic City.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He went into the reserve and they made him the Air Force liaison officer for the State of Virginia, you know, selling Air Force and the Air Force Academy. He used to go out to the academy for training and all this stuff but --

So he's a good guy, he's a good kid, and he's got three boys. One of them just went to work for CIA, spent his time in the Navy on the aircraft carrier, *Forrestal* I think it was. Then his middle boy is graduated from VMI and he's on his second tour now in Iraq. He spent his first tour in the 4th Infantry Division as a platoon leader. Now he's on a battalion staff in the 4th Infantry for 15 months. His middle boy, or his last boy, Ryan, I just went up there last weekend to Virginia Tech. He graduated from Virginia Tech, got a commission in the Army, and he's going into helicopters next year.¹²⁸

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What're all these kids going into the Army for? Clearly you're not talking to them, right?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, the problem was [Deleted] . . . was a lousy student and he went into Air Force ROTC at Virginia Tech and after the first year

¹²⁸ [3:09:20]

he damn near flunked out.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And so he had to -- he couldn't stay in the Air Force. He couldn't go to pilot's school. Christ, [Deleted] . . . So he stayed there and went into the Army and did very well. Do you know the last year at Virginia Tech he made the dean's list.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was so proud of him.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Good for him.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He -- and he's a great kid, but what a fisherman he is --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- like his father. They're going up to Maine for ten days next month for trout fishing. But anyway, Ryan is a great youngster and he's going to -- he'll be good. I don't like helicopters, but that's the only thing he could do to fly so --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And he's in the Virginia Air Guard.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh. Now the National Guard.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: National Guard in a Richmond outfit.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah, okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And he'll fly helicopters with that unit.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Great. That's great.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So that's -- my kids have done well.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's a full life.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, it is. Well, what else have we got to talk about?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I think we've got everything.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I mean, it's --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You kept on going. You were rolling thunder.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That was great.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You know, a lot of little things. You know, when General Gillem was the commander of the Air University he asked me if I would come down and give a presentation to the squadron officers -- not the squadron officers.¹²⁹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: The Air Command and Staff College?

Guest Lecturing; Reminiscence of Lt Gen Gillem

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Air Command [and] Staff [College] on a

¹²⁹ Squadron Officers' School, Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

commander's concept of leadership. I worked like hell on that presentation and did a lot of, did it all in slides and so forth and so on. And so I went down there and gave that presentation and Gillem swore up and down, he said, "You know, I've heard a lot of lectures," but he said, "that's as good as any I've ever heard." He said, "You did a hell of a job."

I had a 45-minute answer period. I did that for two or three times and that was a lot of fun, I enjoyed that. But just being with Gillem -- if you knew Al Gillem you would -- he was a fantastic commander. When we arrived at Turner and he took over command we had -- he wanted to develop a touch football league. So all the squadron, the three squadrons all had teams and we had a team in the wing headquarters. I was on it and Gillem was on it.

Gillem would never come to practice. "I don't need to practice," he said. "I just want to play the game." This is the way he is, "I don't need to practice."

I said, "Okay." So we played the 141st Fighter Squadron. So Gillem is in there and he says, "This is when we ought to pass." He said, "I can out jump any of those guys."

So he takes a long run down the left side and he's running down there looking for the ball and one of the 141st pilots automatically falls down in front of him, so Gillem goes, he falls over the top of him, breaks his arm. The first game, breaks his arm. Oh, gee, did he take a beating, did he take a beating on that. "I don't need to practice."

Then another occasion, and I'll tell you another story. It's very interesting. When we first got there we were having a lot of problems in the officer's club. It was a poorly run club. They were having problems with dress and the guys were -- you know, some guys were wearing t-shirts. I don't mind a sport shirt with

a collar and so forth because it was warm down there.¹³⁰

So Gillem has a meeting, gets all the officers together, and he discussed this and says, "Now from now on this is the way it's going to be. You're going to do this dress-wise and we're going to stop this business of not wearing the proper clothes."

One guy gets up from the 149th and he gets up and he says, "Colonel," he said, "how often do you go to the club?"

And Gillem says, "I go as often as necessary."

He said, "Well, we live in the club," he said. "We live on the base, you live in town, we live on the base, and it's a place for us to go and relax and we don't worry about whether we've got shorts on or t-shirts." He said, "We just go there to have fun and so forth and so on."

And Gillem says, "Well, I can understand your situation but unfortunately this is what we've established and this is what it's going to be."

So the kid sits down. Then he gets up again shortly and he says, "You know, I can't understand that."

Gillem says, "I'll tell you why. It's the same reason they put tits on a man because some day he may have a baby."

Well, that broke up the meeting. "The same reason they put tits on man," he said, "because some day he may have a baby." And Gillem just brought the place down.

¹³⁰ [3:13:10]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, gosh. Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And when he was over in -- he was in command of the bombardment of Vietnam when they bombed Hanoi.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, really?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Al commanded them. He was -- he -- he left Turner and went to England and commanded a B-47 outfit or something over there. Then he came back to SAC headquarters and he was a director of operations for SAC. Then they sent him over in command of the forces, the bomber forces in the Southeast [Asia region] and he was in command of that operation over there.¹³¹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He had a big assignment, big assignment.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But a marvelous, marvelous individual. While he was over there I used to fly down to Georgia and his wife lived in -- well, right near the big base down there. I can't think --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Robbins.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Not Robbins but -- Army base.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, Army base. Fort Stewart?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, Fort -- no, not Stewart, Fort --

¹³¹ [3:15:10]; General Gillem was commander of 3d Air Division, and later Eighth Air Force on Guam, 1968-1970. (Mike Worden, *Rise of the Fighter Generals* (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1998), p. 176)

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Pickett? No.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Benning.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Fort Benning, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Benning, yeah. Anyway, she -- her father was the mayor of the town. She was a beautiful woman, his wife. So -- and while Al was over there I used to fly down there in the P-47 or something and land, spend the night at her house. She lived -- she was living with her mother and her mother had a mansion, beautiful home. They had servants, you know, and all this stuff. I would take her out to dinner and Al really appreciated that. It gave her a chance to talk Air Force and, you know -- I did that a number of times.

Beth, her name was Beth, and I got to know her very, very well and she was a lovely lady and she and my wife were great personal friends. It worked out very nice. But old Al, I'll tell you, he was something.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I was just thinking when you were talking about Vietnam in '68, the Pueblo Crisis, a lot of Guard units are not, a few Guard units got mobilized and deployed.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Right.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Were you ever asked to come on active duty?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yes.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you -- did anyone ask you if you wanted to serve a tour in Vietnam or anything?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No. I was a general officer, so I couldn't fly. So what happened was this, Republic arranged for the Air Force, for me to go over and

spend a month at Takhli [Air Base] and a month at Korat [Air Base] to observe F-105 operations, which I did.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was very beneficial because it gave me a chance to see the battle damage being done to the airplanes and how we could expedite spare parts to them better and all this kind of stuff. So I did that for a couple of months and that was --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Just as a civilian, though?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: As a civilian.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. That's interesting.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But I was treated like a general on the base because all the guys that were there were all good friends of mind, the commanders, you know, and they gave me top quarters. In fact they gave me the quarters that the President stayed in when he went over there. I think it was Roosevelt or somebody went over there and I stayed in his bed.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I had a lot of good times over there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. You met -- I bet you met some really great F-105 legends like --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- Jack Broughton.¹³² I don't know if --

¹³² Col (ret) Jack Broughton (b.1925) flew 102 missions against targets in North Vietnam

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I didn't know Jack Broughton but I knew a hell of a lot of others.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: In fact one of my best friends who was in my underclass in flying school, Larry -- Lawrence Guarino, G-u-a-r-i-n-o. Larry Guarino was shot down in a -105 and spent five-and-a-half years in a prison camp.¹³³

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: His -- he was a Jersey boy and I did a lot of things for his wife to help her out. She had four boys. She had four boys and she got every one of them -- while he was away all of them graduated from high school and went into college. In fact one of them just retired from the Air Force a few years ago. He was an F-15 pilot.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Larry came home and is still alive. He lives down in Florida. I talk to him every month. He was a -- he wrote a book and she wrote a book, both wrote books about her life as a mother of four boys and her husband is shot down and he's a prisoner of war. He took a beating. He took a real beating.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: After the -- after he came back to Maxwell for some rehabilitation, his wife was with him, and she told me that the priest down there

as vice-commander of the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing based at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base; author of the memoirs *Thud Ridge* (1968) and *Going Downtown* (1988).

¹³³ Lawrence N. Guarino, later Col., spent over eight years as a POW.

told her one day that, he said, "You know, I think Larry has touched the hands of God." He's a very, very sharp speaker and he can tell me things about my life that I don't even remember.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.¹³⁴

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: His mind is -- because that's all he had to do is think, you know, lay there and think. He was with -- I think he was about the fourth- or fifth-longest in prison.

Legacy

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. So what would you say is the highlight of your life or your career? Clearly shooting down 13-1/2 enemy aircraft --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I want to read you what I wrote.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: If I can find it. That's a little -- you might want to take that with you.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Let me see if I can find it. I had it. Oh, here it is. In my biography, which I wrote -- oh, "Career highlights. Fighter ace, 13th Air Force -- 13-1/2 victories, Eighth Air Force, World War II. First Air National Guard officer in New Jersey to be appointed major general. First Air National Guard officer in the United States to attend the Air War College. Graduated with honors. His fighter wing, the first reserve force unit to receive the highly

¹³⁴ [3:19:35]

sophisticated F-105 Thunderchiefs."

There's my highlights --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- written in that document. Don't you think those are pretty good?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Those are pretty good.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And that didn't get me the DSM, though.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: A bone of contention for you.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I can't understand it because I was very active in the Air Guard. I went to all the conventions and all the meetings and all that. There wasn't another guy that could touch me in my career.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was beautifully, beautifully written on this document here. It told about, you know --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It's politics.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And then some other clown gets recognized for something that wasn't worth a damn.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Are you still a member of NGAUS, National Guard --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I'm a life member. Yeah, I'm a life member.

Joe Foss

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Okay. Dr. Gross and I were talking about how many members of the Air Guard, you know, went into World War II to become aces and then came back.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: How many?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: There were two.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was going to say.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You and General Foss.¹³⁵

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, well, okay.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, you and General Foss.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Isn't that quite an honor?

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, it is. Because, you know, we were talking, you know, there was some that were aces but later on joined the Guard and we said, well, okay, that's nice, but it's -- we were looking for people that pre-date the war that were Guard members. So that's certainly -- that's certainly an honor. I don't know --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I didn't realize that. I didn't realize there was only two.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

¹³⁵ Joseph Jacob Foss, Major, USMC Reserve, later Brigadier General, South Dakota ANG and governor of South Dakota; credited with 26 victories and awarded the Medal of Honor. Foss was a pre-World War II member of the 147th Field Artillery, South Dakota National Guard.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: That's interesting.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It is. And I was thinking that -- I don't know how many Joe Foss got in World War II.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I can tell you. I have a book in there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, yeah, I have a book too and I could look into it, but off the top of my head --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I think he had more than I did.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Really?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: You know, Joe Foss and I were very close friends.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: In fact I -- when I was in the Jersey Guard, I became -- one of the additional duties I did was to take over the Boy Scout program for the district. I was the district commissioner of the whole Boy Scout program. It was a big job. My secretary at McGuire used to do all the work for me.

But anyway, I -- we were having a big party where we were out, we were going to recognize two boys as Eagle Scouts. So I talked, I called Joe on the phone and said, "I need -- I want an outstanding speaker."

And he says, "Well, when do you want me to come?" So he comes and he arrives in just a flight suit and flies into McGuire and he comes out to my house and spends the night. We go to the affair and he gives -- he walks into the building and of course we had announced that he was going to be there, and the press was all over him. They said, one guy says to him, "I would like to have a copy of your speech, sir."

And Foss looked him in the eye and said, "I'll tell you how you can get a copy of my speech. Get your ass in that chair back there and listen to it. That's how you -- that's the copy that you're going to have. I never know what I'm going to say until," he says, "I get on my feet." That's what Foss said.

He gave an outstanding presentation, brought the house down. The kids loved it. It was a big crowd, too, because it was quite an affair.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: He was instrumental I suppose, I'm going off of memory, in setting up the South Dakota Air Guard.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. He was -- he was the head of it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, I knew -- I was holding short to say whether he was the commander of the Air Guard or a TAG or --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I think he was the commander of the Air Guard. I'm pretty sure he was.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Joe was a great guy.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I was at a number of Guard functions where he and I got together.

Conclusion (I)

Well, you know, I've been asked many times to try to write a book and so I started to put together a lot of stuff and the more I got involved was the more difficult it became for me to remember dates, specifics, and I just wasn't in a position to want to put something in print that I wasn't sure was absolutely correct.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So I have never done that, never done that, and --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, there's other ways you can -- you know, you might think that it's a day, you know, a certain date and then you can check another reference to see if that date, you know, flushes out.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It's tough.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: But on the other hand it's not so much the dates that matter compared to the experience and your interpretations of it.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I had guy from Wisconsin offer to come and spend some time with me and write the book, put together the book. We never got -- we never -- and he writes for Aviation magazine.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What's his name?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He's a police officer and he flies his own airplane. He lives in Oshkosh. I can tell you. I've got it out there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I can tell you, I just --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No, that's okay.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: My memory is not the greatest.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Well, I think we've covered everything. Is there anything --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I can't think of anything else.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No, you've brought up some stuff that I didn't even realize, like the Yugoslavs.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's really big and I appreciate you really giving some detail into Stair Step, you know, and knowing that you were always interested in airplanes.¹³⁶

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yeah, yeah. I used to -- my biggest thing was to build these airplanes with elastic bands with two props, and there was a big field across from where I lived and I used to stand up there to see how far I could fly those airplanes before they hit the woods, you know.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And then I -- later on my dad arranged for me to have a ride in an open cockpit airplane at Caldwell Wright. That was a big thrill.

Oh, I did -- I meant to tell you about Charles Lindbergh.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: When I was in the Pentagon, Charles Lindbergh was

¹³⁶ [3:26:55]

a major -- I don't know if he was captain, major, or general, I'm not sure what his rank was.¹³⁷ But anyway, he was having a lot of trouble getting all these letters from the Air Force saying, sir, we recognize that you haven't been very active and that in order for you to keep your reserve commission you're going to have to get active in some capacity.

They kept harassing him with this crap. So he calls up the Pentagon and says he would like to come in and talk to somebody, so they sent him to me because I'm in charge of reserve affairs.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So he comes into my office and we sit down at the table like this and just casually we're talking and so forth. We got along beautifully. He told me what his problem was and I said, "Sir, you don't ever have to worry about that problem again because," I said, "that's over. It's ridiculous that you were treated this way. I apologize and I want you to know that it will never happen again."

And he thanked me and he left and later he wrote me this -- he wrote me a nice -- he sent me this picture with his signature on it and he sent my two boys at the time books, little books written by Ann Murrow Lindbergh. I forget what they were called, two little books, and he signed them, his name in them, as a little gift.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

¹³⁷ Lindbergh had resigned his commission as a colonel in the Army Air Corps in April 1941 after President Franklin D. Roosevelt publicly criticized Lindbergh's opposition to U.S. support for the Allies. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Lindbergh sought reinstatement. He was unsuccessful, but flew approximately fifty combat missions, including one aerial victory, in the Pacific as a technical consultant for various U.S. aviation concerns. President Dwight D. Eisenhower restored Lindbergh's commission, and he received appointment as a brigadier general in 1954.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, you know that picture in there is really worth some money. I bet it's worth as much as \$10,000 because they say he very seldom ever did that, very seldom, particularly to personally autograph it somebody. So I bet it's worth a lot of money.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: What did you do to solve that problem since you laid out --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I just got the people that were writing him all the letters and said stop.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Charles Lindbergh has a retirement for the rest of his life. I don't want another piece of mail except if it's something that's a necessity or of personal importance to him to be sent to him.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I got the people that were doing it and said, "You're out of your minds. You don't treat people like that."

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: The man, a distinguished individual like him. I forget what he -- he had to be a general.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I think so.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I think he --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I can't say for sure.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I can't say for sure either. I don't remember. But

anyway, it worked out. We got him straightened out.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. And he used to be a Guard guy for a while.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, early in his career.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, in St. Louis. That's why the 110th Fighter Squadron is called Lindbergh's Own.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I saw him the day he took off from Long Island to fly across the Atlantic.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: You did?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Yeah, I saw that. I was on Long Island. My father took me out to see it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you think it was a big deal?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, Christ, yeah. At that time, you know, going across the Atlantic with nothing --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you think he was going to make it?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I don't know. I wasn't sure.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.¹³⁸

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But it was a great, great flight.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He did a hell of a job.

¹³⁸ [3:30:35]

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah, it was a good job.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, Dave, I hope I haven't bored you.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No, no, not at all. This is -- this has been great. I really appreciate your time and your insight. You are the --

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: -- first fighter ace I've met, not the first major general. It's always great to talk to a former enlisted man that went on and became, you know, a great champion for the Air Guard.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, you know, I meant to tell you about the -- you've heard of the American Air Museum at Duxford?¹³⁹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yes.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I went -- I was there when they put the first spade in the ground. I was there when the Queen dedicated it. I was there when they took the windows out of -- the building is shaped like this. They took the hall glass windows out in order to put an SR-71 dead center in the building --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- with a B-24 and a B-17 on its wings. I was there when they did that and put the windows all back. They had a rededication and they had the President, the original President Bush there and they had Prince Charles --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

¹³⁹ Part of Imperial War Museum Duxford, established 1997

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- as the representatives. At my table that I was sitting at there was a British guy and the rest were Americans. The British guy said to me, "Would you like to meet President Bush personally or Prince Charles?"

And I said, "I would like to meet Prince Charles."

And he said, "I'll arrange it."

So a few hours later he goes like this to me. Down to the end of the room where we were in and Prince Charles comes and we sat there for four or five minutes.

"Well, General, where were you stationed during the war?"

"At Martlesham Heath."

"Oh, I know the base very, very well." He says, "It's one of our principal Spitfire bases during the Battle of Britain. Now what kind of airplanes did you fly," and so forth, "and how many missions did you have and how many airplanes did you shoot down," boom, boom, boom. We had a magnificent conversation.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: That's great.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was really great. I was so honored to have that, you know. He was immaculately dressed, you know.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It was -- but I wanted to meet him rather than the President.

D-Day

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I was struggling with the time line before, with your involvement in World War II, so bear with me. Did you participate in the Normandy invasions?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. Sure, I flew six or seven missions.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you shoot down any aircraft?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: No, no, no. We just --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: It was just all air support.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We were -- when we were done, the first day, we took off before dawn and we were assigned a sector. Here's the beachhead here.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We were back in here in order to patrol that area, to keep the Luftwaffe out. We did that, and then we did that and then -- we did that for a couple of days and then after that they started to give us ground targets, bridges, marshaling yards, advancing columns of German tanks and things like that, which we were striking back in the beachhead.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: And, you know, my best friend all through flight training, George Phillips, he was from Sewickley, Pennsylvania. His father was a vice president of Pennsylvania Railroad. George and I graduated together, got our wings together, and he pinned my wings on and I pinned his wings on. He went to some special program, flight test. I think they were trying to make the P-51 into a

dive bomber or something¹⁴⁰. So he went to that program and of course I went to P-47s and eventually to England.

Well, he ended up later on, and I never knew this because I had lost complete track of him, he ended up getting into a fighter wing in England and was shot down on D-Day.¹⁴¹

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: He was -- on fire, and he jumped out and hit the tail and his body was blasted. His body landed, ended up in a field and the French picked his body up and buried him in a grave in a little French town cemetery. After the war his family was able to get his body back and he's buried now in a cemetery just west of Philadelphia.

But George was a fantastic guy. Gee, I really -- he and I were great friends. I'll tell you, in my life -- when I was in flight school we got \$75 a month. I sent \$50 of it to my mother. I kept \$25 for my personal expenses.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: When it came time to get our uniforms and I was fitted for my uniform and when the bill came I did not have the money. I said to

¹⁴⁰ The initial production P-51 Mustangs were Lend-Lease aircraft for the United Kingdom. When that contract ran out, the U.S. Army Air Forces wanted to keep the Mustang line running, but had no money from its 1942 appropriation authorized for fighters. Funds were available for attack aircraft, however, resulting in an order for P-51s modified with dive brakes and structural reinforcement as A-36 dive bombers. The A-36s served mostly in the Mediterranean and China-Burma-India theaters.

¹⁴¹ 1st[?] Lt. George W. Phillips, 357th FS, P-51B 43-6640, died 6 June 1944 (littlefriends.co.uk)

George, "What do you think I ought to do?"

He said, "It's no problem." He said, "I'll give you the money." He had plenty of money his father being a big wheel.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So George gave me the money to buy my, pay for my uniform. Then when I got my first check I gave him the money to pay it back. But that's the kind of guy he was. He and I were very close friends. Well, we roomed together, you know, went all through flight school.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: But I was so sad to hear that he had gotten killed. I never was able to meet his parents.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I tried to locate some of them after the war but it was -- I couldn't do it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Did you have a loss rate in your squadron during the war?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We lost in our group, fighter group, we lost 72 pilots.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Out of how many?

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Out of -- well, that's during the whole war.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Oh, okay.

Martlesham Heath

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Now there's a picture in there of the monument that the Royal Air Force erected at Martlesham Heath. Martlesham Heath was a World War I Royal Air Force base. In World War II it was a Spitfire base used extensively during the Battle of Britain. Then we came over and started to expand our requirements for facilities they gave us Martlesham Heath to operate out of. We couldn't operate the P-47 out of it until they put in two runways because it was too heavy and we couldn't operate it out of mud and so forth.¹⁴²

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Right.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So we put runways in there and we built some other buildings and put -- the base was in pretty decent shape. In 1957 the RAF sold it to a developer who came in and gutted the whole interior of the airbase, made a big housing development in there. Virginia Barter, they built a pub and named it after Barter.¹⁴³ They put a nice church in there and built a lot of nice buildings.

But they left -- on the exterior all the buildings are left intact and they're still intact, they're still there, all except my building that I lived in and the officer's club. They were torn down and they put an industrial building across the street in that area. But where my, where I used to live they built, put a bank there, Barclay Bank.

But the dormitories where the airmen lived is still there. My operations building, which I can show you a picture of out there, is still there.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I offered that company that developed that

¹⁴² [3:37:00]

¹⁴³ [Virginia Barton?]

place \$25,000 some years ago, in the 80s, to buy that building. I wanted to make into a museum for the 356th Fighter Group. Those bastards wouldn't sell it to me. Do you know that building is empty today. Oh, it broke my heart.

Well, anyway, what happened later on we formed an association in the United States and we had meetings every year of the 356th, but the base, the people that lived around Martlesham decided they wanted to do something to preserve the history of Martlesham Heath. So they formed an association and they call it the Martlesham Heath Aviation Association. They have over 300 members, many in their 90s. They meet monthly. They have a big Christmas party every year. They made me a vice president and I, you know, I go over frequently or as often as I can to talk with them and so forth. They've done a magnificent job.

About ten years ago they were able to get a hold of the control tower, which was empty. They took over the control tower and they completely renovated it, all themselves. They got a 50-year lease on it. They couldn't buy it. They got a 50-year lease and they repainted the exterior of the building, fixed it all up, and collected all kinds of stuff from the Royal Air Force and from our fighter group, there's many pictures of me and other guys all in the building, and made it into a museum. They're open every Sunday afternoon from 1:00 to 5:00 or something like that and they've had well over a million people come and see it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: They have a big show there every year where the BBC comes and does a program out of it. I've been back to some of those. They've done a marvelous job, really a marvelous job. They are fantastic people. I can't get over the Brits. I'm going to go down to Martlesham on this trip that I'm going to take in July to a luncheon, they're going to have a luncheon for me and my son, just to pay my respects to those people --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: -- because they are so fantastic. They appreciate so much what we did during the war there, how much we have money wise put into the restoration of the control tower. They have a beautiful monument. They have a monument square, which is still in existence, and there's a gorgeous monument there listing the 72 pilots, the Americans that were, that lost their lives, and also the Royal Air Force people that lost their lives operating out of there. That's still in existence and maintained nicely. It has grass around it and then flowers and shrubs.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: So it's a great bunch of people and they lose 20 or 30 every year and then they get 50 more, you know, the young, the younger generations. They just like to keep it going, and they have some nice visits, you know. They visit museums and other airbases. It's a nice -- and one of my best friends that's -- he's the vice president of the Martlesham Heath Aviation Society and they send me a little magazine every month and I talk to him at least once a month. He calls me on the phone or I call him. Every time I go there I stay with him.

The original pub that we operated out of during the war is still there. It's still there, the original pub.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I go back to that and stand in front of the -- that's where they had my party when I left to come home. They had a party for me and I stood in front of the fireplace and that fireplace is still there in that pub.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: It's really interesting.

Conclusion (II)

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Wow. That's all I have.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: Well, that's great.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Thank you.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I'm sorry, I was going to give you some lunch.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: No, that's okay. That's fine.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: I would --

CMSGT. ANDERSON: I'm not going to stop you.

MAJ. GEN. STRAIT: We went right through it.

CMSGT. ANDERSON: Yeah.

(The interview was concluded.)

* * * * *

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