

INTERVIEW WITH GERALD SOMMERS
BY DOROTHE NORTON JULY 22, 2002
EDELSTEIN, ILLINOIS

MS. NORTON: What is your birthplace and date?

MR. SOMMERS: Hillsboro, Illinois. I was born on August 27, 1945, right at the end of the war.

MS. NORTON: What were your parents' names?

MR. SOMMERS: My father is Chester Frank Sommers. My mother's name is Catherine Sarsny Sommers. She is sense deceased in 1995.

MS. NORTON: What were their jobs and education?

MR. SOMMERS: My father finally finished his degree when he was in his forties I believe. He was an insurance agent for Country Life Insurance Company. My mother was always a housewife and child raiser.

MS. NORTON: Where did you spend your early years as a child? And how did you spend them?

MR. SOMMERS: I started out my first three grades at a school called St. Zenforosa on the south side of Chicago; right on the west end of Midway Airport. There was an east/west runway and when the airplanes would take off to the west they would fly right over our apartment. My dad worked at a filling station for Mobile, or Standard at the time. During that time he was called up to active duty in the Korean War. We stayed there and when he came back he did not disengage from the Navy. We moved to Rhode Island during my third through fifth years in grade school. We lived right at Narragansett Bay about a half or three quarters of a mile from the beach. I can remember those times being outdoors, more than anything because there was a gang of us kids there. We'd go swim one day, or we'd go out to the woods and prance through the woods. It was just a real neat place as a child to grow up because you were always outdoors, enjoying the beach or ice-skating on the frozen water, or whatever it was. We also dug clams and fished, and lots of whatever comes with living near the ocean. In my sixth grade we moved back to the Midwest, where my family had come from. My mother was raised in a little town called Witt, Illinois in Montgomery County. That's where I finished junior high and high school.

MS. NORTON: What high school did you graduate from? What year did you finish?

MR. SOMMERS: Witt High School. I graduated in 1963.

MS. NORTON: What university did you attend?

MR. SOMMERS: I went to Southern Illinois University and was engaged in the ROTC program there. Of course I had a real good time there, and was told that maybe I shouldn't come back! I failed at Southern and I was thinking about going back there to see if I could re-start a program but obviously, school was not on my mind at that time. A buddy of mine told me about the Warrant Officer program in the Army with Vietnam just heating up at that time; and that you did not need a college degree to fly a helicopter. That's when I went to helicopter school. I enlisted in the Army and I can remember right after I signed up for this warrant officer helicopter program, my draft notice came in the mail. My recruiter took the draft notice and told me not to worry about it. So I went on to basic training at Ft. Leonard Wood and then went to helicopter training; primary at Mineral Wells, Texas. It's about 54 miles west of Dallas/Fort Worth. That was for five months. I then went to the last four months of advanced helicopter training at Ft. Rucker, Alabama near Dothan. After that of course, you got your orders for Vietnam.

MS. NORTON: So you never did get a degree from University of Southern Illinois?

MR. SOMMERS: No, I never did. I was told that I didn't need to come back there because I was having too good of a time. Then I went in the Army and helicopter training. I spent a year and a half...I extended in Vietnam. I went to the 1st Air Cavalry Division and got there right after they came out of the Idrang Valley. That's what this one movie is all about now; We Were Soldiers Once, and Young. There was a book printed by Hal Moore. He was with the Air "Cav" in Idrang and I got there right after that occurred, or within a year after they came out. I was there for a year and another Lieutenant and I extended for an additional six months. I was there for a total of eighteen months. I came back and became a Cobra helicopter instructor/pilot at Hunter.

MS. NORTON: Did you get any decorations?

MR. SOMMERS: Oh yeah, just a few.

MS. NORTON: Like what? I bet they were good ones.

MR. SOMMERS: I think I got a couple Distinguished Flying Crosses, a couple of air medals with "V" for valor, an Army Commendation medal with "V" for valor, and thirty-nine air medals. There were a lot of them. But then, that's just what you did. The staff would usually award the enlisted people with rank in a war. That's what they would do; promote them. Then they usually award the officers with decorations.

MS. NORTON: Did your military service relate in any way to your employment with the FWS?

MR. SOMMERS: I am sure it helped on veterans' points. I terminated my military service time in November of 1969. At that time Georgia and I were married. We were married on July 4, 1968. She went with me to Savannah, Georgia where I taught in a Cobra. Then I got out a year and a half later. Then we went back up through D. C. to see all of the monuments and came back to central Illinois where I started my college education at Western Illinois University at Macomb. Of course I had VA benefits, and I had Illinois state scholarship benefits. I had all of these benefits coming to me. I also took a lot of flight training as well. I got a commercial ticket and an instrument ticket [license]. I also got a multi-engine license from the FAA. VA paid for all of that, plus my college. Then you got a little stipend as well. Basically, we lived like kings while I was going to college, with all of my schooling being paid for, and with Georgia being a Registered Nurse. She had another child, Heidi; there and of course she got gratis delivery at the hospital where she worked. We really lived high on the hog there.

MS. NORTON: When, where and how did you meet Georgia?

MR. SOMMERS: Georgia and I went to high school together. I was going with one of her best friends; a girl by the name of Sharon. Sharon and I would often double date with Georgia and whoever she was dating. We knew each other in high school. I believe that I came home for leave before I was going overseas to Vietnam. In that little two-week period that I was home on leave I contacted her. I happened to see her walking out whenever I was getting all of my insurance and power of attorney together for my mother. You know when you left for Vietnam they wanted you to have all of your official papers ready in case you didn't come back. I was checking on my insurance and I happened to see her walk out down the main street in Witt; which isn't a very big town anyway. So I ran out to say hello to her and made a date. We date a couple dates there before I left and that's all it took. Once I was over there, she would write these letters on EEG paper. They were accordion folded [computer paper]. I'd get letters that were sometimes seven and eight feet long, sometimes ten feet long! They were just about everything. I'd get them about twice a week. We wrote back and forth. I took one R&R to Japan and came back. Usually in the 1st Air Cavalry Division you got two R&Rs if you were there for a year. So on the second R&R that I had an opportunity to take, I asked her if she wanted to meet me in Hawaii. She hesitated. I think she thought I wasn't serious. So I took a second R&R to Japan. Then I came home. When you extend in a war zone they give you a free thirty -day leave where they fly you back home. Then you have to go back and finish off your additional time period, which you had extended for. In my case it was six months. I stayed in Vietnam for thirteen months, leaving five months left. I went home around Christmas time to visit all of the family and spend time. Of course about every third day I spent with Georgia. After writing all of those letters, I spent time with her. We became real close. I told her that when I went back I might get another R&R and asked her if she wanted to meet me in Hawaii if I did. So she said she would. I went back for my last five months. I'll always remember going to the plane

back to Vietnam. I was going back with some of the 101st Airborne soldiers. They were going back for a year and of course I felt good inside because I was only going back for five months. I finished out my five months. The Cav moved north up near the DMZ and all of a sudden we started getting fired upon. The war began a little more dangerous than it was before. They usually didn't mess with us too much because we flew around in a section of two helicopters and we always fired rockets. We were the aerial rocket artillery unit. Whenever the infantry on the ground would work the areas, they would use two of our big guns and if the enemy was so close to them that troop artillery would endanger our own friendly troops, they would fire as close to them as they could up to a certain extent; then they couldn't fire anymore because of the risk of wounding our troops. That's when they'd call us out. We could put the rockets a lot closer than the tube artillery could. The enemy never really messed with us because they didn't like rockets. They were a psychological weapon; they'd hear the noise of the rocket motor take off and they didn't like to hear that. And of course they didn't like the boom on the other end when the rocket would land. So they didn't mess with us too much. But when we went up north where there was such a heavy concentration of the enemy; all of a sudden we started getting fired upon. I took a round in the face up there. It just glanced off of me. It could have been a lot worse because with any kind of facial wound, you bleed like a stuck pig. There was a lot of blood, but it only took about five or six stitches and I was back to normal again. It burned my chest because it was a tracer round. The red phosphorous inside the tracer was still on fire so it burned my chest and my SOI. That's the big booklet that the Division issues you with all of the codes and everything in it. It burned that half in two. So I got a big blister on my left boob! I didn't like them shaving my chest either, but they did! Needless to say, I called Georgia, and I had my mother send money and put it in an account so I could write a check. She wanted to know what it was for. I said, "Well Mom, I'm meeting a girl over here!" She was really inquisitive and I told her everything. So I met Georgia Sue in Hawaii and when I came home we got married. So that's about the size of it. We got married in Witt, in a tiny Catholic Church there. We didn't have a big wedding; we just married in the Parsonage. After we got married, I have three weeks leave and then we went to Savannah, Georgia.

MS. NORTON: How many children did you have?

MR. SOMMERS: Let's see; we had Jill, who was born in September of 1968. Then we had Heidi who was born in 1972. Then Georgia had a miscarriage. Then we had Darren who was born in June of 1978. We lost Jill in an accident in August of 1978. We adopted Jay Kendal who is Korean. It took about a two or three year program of working with the adoption agency. It takes a year for a home study. Then we got him in 1983, I believe it was. In 1984 we moved back and he had been with us for about a year. Then, in 1985 we got Victoria who is also Korean. She was deemed 'slow learning' and to have real bad motor skills, but she turned out great.

MS. NORTON: What are they doing now?

MR. SOMMERS: Jay is in Miami. Heidi is married. She got a degree in Education. She taught for a while and decided what she really wanted to do, and that was to work in a salon as a Beautician. Then Darren is just about to finish up his degree at Western. He is in his internship and he'll go to the Army in the middle of August. "Tory" is going to junior college right now.

MS. NORTON: Why did you want to work for the Service?

MR. SOMMERS: Because I wanted to fly; and I wanted to work outdoors. I'm an Illinois Guardsman and met a man whose name was Howard Larsen, I think. There were two people; one I distinctly remember Howard Larsen and another fellow who was a passenger on his airliner. He stuck up a conversation and Larsen told him about FWS and pilots and agents and things. In that day they were Game Management Agents. They weren't even GS-11's at the time, I don't think. This was in probably, 1972 or 1973. This was when this TWA pilot who was in my National Guard unit told me about it. From that time on when I learned that you can work outdoors and be in Enforcement and fly as well... my degree was in Law Enforcement; I thought that this was something I might pursue.

MS. NORTON: What was your first professional position; state, federal or other?

MR. SOMMERS: I initially tried for the FBI and had completed all of the testing, background checks and everything. I was on the waiting list to go with the FBI and I thought, 'why just isolate myself to just one agency' so I took the Treasury Agents exam and passed it. With my veterans' points, which were extra ten points, I scored over 100. IRS Inspection asked me if I wanted to go to work with them. I said yes, I would. I took the first available government job that I could get and that was IRS Inspection.

MS. NORTON: Where did you go from there?

MR. SOMMERS: I was with the IRS in Chicago, downtown at 33 East Wackerd Drive. I still know the address. We lived in a little town called Bartlett out by Elgin. So I had a considerable commute. It was darn near Michigan Avenue right near the waterfront. It was a good job, and that's where I started my government service. I knew somewhere along the line that I would be able to transfer when the opportunity presented itself.

MS. NORTON: What duty stations did you have then, with FWS? When did you start?

MR. SOMMERS: I transferred in July 1975. I was interviewed by Dave Swenson and Ralph Vondane at the Chicago, O'Hare office. I can remember both Glenn Orten and Vic Blasovic being there at the time. They didn't say too much. They were pretty quite up there. I didn't know them. Of course, I was new and I wasn't even hired yet. But I can

remember going up there to be interviewed by both Dave and Ralph. To set up that interview, my coach who was getting ready to try for Secret Service and got aboard. We both started called these other agencies at the same time. At that time I can remember talking to Ed Nichols in Jefferson City. He told me they were full. The next people I called were in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I can't remember who I talked to. I can't remember if it was Swenson, or Mr. Hodges or who it was, but they said, they had my application out of stack. I was about the third or fourth one in the pile, but he brought it right up. My SF-71, the application. He said that they would take a look at it. That was in January when I called. No, it was in December of 1974. I had just finished CIS School in Washington, D. C. CIS wasn't even established in Brunswick, Georgia yet. It was still at 15th and K Streets in Washington, D. C. I had just finished that CIS training in August. That's what the training was for FWS so they got a cheap deal when they got me. Even though I am not too sure, to this day, that they were happy to get me! That's the way I transferred and that was my method of getting aboard FWS; I called in November, in January I had the interview with Swenson and Vondane, and then in July, I think on July 5th, I came aboard. My first duty station was in Springfield, Illinois with Ralph. I stayed there until November of 1977.

I was thinking that I might have to go to Indianapolis, but Willie J. Parker called me to fly in Washington, North Carolina. Al Noltmeier was getting ready to retire. With him retiring being both fixed wing and a helicopter pilot. He had the airplane pilot from Kentucky already picked out but he wanted me to fly the helicopter, so I went to Washington, North Carolina in November of 1977. I worked on the coast out there until 1984.

In 1984 I transferred back to Illinois. I was on the phone with John Mendoza who was our SRA at the time. They had lost Skip Lacy. I think Skip went to AFT or Customs. So they were without a pilot and John asked me if I wanted to come home. For that seven years in North Carolina we always had plenty of company in the summertime but I think the grandparents were getting tired of the commute back and forth from North Carolina to Missouri and Illinois. I decided that we needed to move the grandkids back to Illinois, so that's what we did in 1984. John put me in Peoria, Illinois. That's where I was an agent/pilot, and that's where I retired in 2001.

MS. NORTON: How did you feel about the pay and benefits when you started?

MR. SOMMERS: I thought they were great because I wasn't used to getting a large salary. Everything I received was good. Of course as soon as I came aboard, I was immediately put on twenty-five percent AUO. When I was with the IRS they only had me up to ten percent AUO. That was a good increase in salary. I transferred from a GS-7 in to a GS-7, but I went from 10% to 25% AUO and that was an increase. I was tickled to death. Then of course it was a year until GS-9 and a year to GS-11.

MS. NORTON: Did you have any promotion opportunities when you worked for FWS?

MR. SOMMERS: Only for my advancement. I think applied one time for the SRA position when I was in North Carolina. It was in 1983, and I applied for SRA in Jefferson City. I can remember Bob Hodges. I was on an undercover detail in Puerto Rico but Bob was kind enough to call me up and interview me over the phone in Puerto Rico. Somehow, he found me and they called me. They told me to call Bob because he wanted to talk to me. He interviewed me over the phone. Larry Keck got the position and that was fine.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever socialize with any of the people that you worked with?

MR. SOMMERS: Oh yeah! Always! Always, Dorothe! I always socialized with them. When you got through with working on the job you'd go back and get ready and go out to eat with them; especially if you are on a detail with them. You're in a hotel and away from home. One of the first things you did was go back and clean up, then go out and have dinner. Maybe then you'd go out and have a couple of drinks after, and talk war stories, or plans for the next day. That was always a must.

MS. NORTON: How did your career affect your family?

MR. SOMMERS: Well, I don't know if it affected it that much. Maybe I could have been home a little bit more. When you did migratory bird treaty work, [Migratory Bird Treaty Act] you were away from home because you were there where the hunters were and you were where the birds were. That's where you had to be if you were going to enforce the MBTA law. It took a good woman, a rock, back at home station to make sure that the kids were on line; whether it was discipline, food, clothes or school or whatever. It just so happened that I had a good woman. If you have a good woman at home, you don't really need anything else. I had a good woman at home. The kids were raised in the way that she and I had both agreed that we would raise them. I don't know what else to say. I think they were fine. I always made sure that Georgia was informed enough that if anything ever happened to me, she wouldn't have any problem slipping in to survivor benefits. I always kept her informed and kept the personnel dossiers where she could get at them in case anything ever happened. I think that the main thing was the time away from the kids, but that's about it.

MS. NORTON: Did you leave the Service just because you were eligible for retirement it wasn't mandatory?

MR. SOMMERS: I wasn't mandatory. I was two years away from that. In fact, I can still work now. This August is when my mandatory date comes up. When I first started out in IRS I can remember when the twenty years at 2.5% law passed. I can remember

the administrators, and the staff in the office where I worked in Chicago hearing about that Bill that Congress passed, where it was mandatory retirement at age 55. I can remember the jumping and shouting with glee. I think they probably broke out a bottle that was in a desk somewhere, and toasted to it. With that on my mind, I always set 55 as the age that I would go out on, so 55 was always on my mind as the age I would retire at in spite of the fact that there was a suit by FBI agents some tens years ago where they extended that mandatory age to 57. That still didn't have an affect on me. With the heart problem that I had in 2000, when I was grounded; that kind of convinced me that I would go out at 55 no matter what. I always had my retirement date set at January of 2001 after I turned 55.

MS. NORTON: What kind of training did you receive for your job? Was it all what you had learned while you were in the Army? Did you receive any special training through FWS?

MR. SOMMERS: All my flight training was as a result of the Army. Of course I stayed in the National Guard and I got constant training there. I was an instructor/pilot for all of these years too. You learn as a student, but you learn even more when you have to teach, because you have to know the material in order to teach it. I was in constant training in the NG. I took flight training also with the FAA affiliated schools. But most of the FWS training I got was the in-service training. I always wanted to be a pilot. I never really wanted to me a manager or a leader, so to speak. Even though you were a leader when you ran a large case, a covert case or something like that. Then, you had to lead and direct. I always wanted to be a pilot. I always thought that the best job in the FWS to retire as was as a senior resident agent. He had just a small group to supervise. He had a limited budget, but it wasn't the magnitude of a SAC; a Special Agent in Charge where there were numerous people to supervise, a large budget he had to be aware of. He was in more of a political arena, whereas for the SRA, that was limited. You had to know your chiefs for the state DNR enforcement programs and mix and blend with them in order to do a good job and get along with them. It was just a limited amount of training. There was some computer training, in-service training, and firearms training. I was a firearms instructor, so you always updated your training there. Geez, Dorothe, I can't remember too much other training. I never really applied to get too much of that.

MS. NORTON: What kind of hours did you work, and what were your day-to-day duties?

MR. SOMMERS: Most of the hours...well, of course we had that 25% overtime that we had to get which meant that we had to work a fifty-hour week. Especially during the migratory bird season, I think I was working eighty-hour weeks. It's what you had to do. Your goal wasn't to go out and work the hours for the pay. Your goal was to start an investigation and see an investigation through; whether it meant starting at four o'clock in the morning and finishing at nine o'clock at night. Whatever the hours it took to complete

the investigation, your goal was to see that the investigation total, complete and ready for the court system. Naturally, you would start your day by getting out and working migratory birds, getting out at 4:00am. But once that season was over, then your hours were taken up by preparing that investigation for the courts. That took a lot of hours to write the report up and to gather the state officers who may or may not have been involved in it, and to brief the U. S. Attorneys. The FWS agents were the trainers of the young U.S. Attorneys. Most of these attorneys do not get any wildlife or conservation law training. We really informed and trained many of these U. S. Attorneys when we were seeing cases in the federal court system. There was a number of duties you had to do, whether it was taking care of your government car and seeing that the maintenance is done on that or meeting state officers. I spent a lot of time with state officers. I spent a lot of time flying state officers as public relations work with the states to help them with their investigations. We also flew our own agents doing either recon or surveillance from the air. Along with this went updating my training in the airplane. There was a lot in maintenance of the aircraft and a lot involved preparation for a flight; whether it was having the camera equipment on board, briefing the state officers, checking weather. It could be just a simple thing like having a big bag of candy in the back seat for these guys to eat on to keep them from getting airsick.

MS. NORTON: Did you work with animals? How did you feel towards the animals?

MR. SOMMERS: Yes, to a certain extent. That's why I had the job that I had; to protect the animals. That was the bottom line. This was my goal and that's what we strived for, to protect the resources; animals, plants or whatever it was.

MS. NORTON: What support did you receive locally, regionally and federally?

MR. SOMMERS: In the arena of Law Enforcement, I always had volunteers from either counties or cities; officers who would say that if I needed help I was to give them a call. They were always at hand if we needed help. I never had a problem acquiring help from a state officer. They were always there to help. The U.S. Attorneys were always there to help. I could call them up any time I needed to; if there was a question about a matter of law, or a matter of evidence. They were always at hand. I never had a problem with the other federal offices next to me. Money always seemed to be a complication. Money seemed to be a problem in Region 13, I think it was, when I was in North Carolina. There were times when you had to take a sleeping bag with you. North Carolina is a wide state. It's not very tall, but it's wide and it took at least ten hours to go from the Outer Banks over to the mountains and Fontana Lake. There were times when peridium wasn't available in the springtime. During migratory bird season we had money because we all knew that the southeast was a big migratory bird region and they wanted you to work migratory birds. You had plenty of money to work in the fall and winter. But you were starving for expense money come spring and summer. In this region here, Region 3, we always seemed to have enough money to do the job. Money wasn't a problem in the

spring and summer although you were told to tighten up the reigns a little bit. Budget was always the issue for Law Enforcement. It always was and you just never...I don't know where the buck stopped. I don't know if it stopped at the Region or if it stopped at the Washington level. I wasn't a manager, therefore I didn't know. But I was at the bottom of the chain, and I was told to kind of put the reigns on. We might not be able to start an investigation or we're going to be limited on money. We'd better hold off and maybe wait until next year.

MS. NORTON: How do you think people outside the agency perceived the Service? What were agency/community relations like?

MR. SOMMERS: In Peoria, Illinois... for one thing, I never liked the phone system when they came up with these automated recordings. I hated that! I myself want to talk to a human being, and I always made it a point that if the phone rang in my office I would answer it. People were astounded when somebody answered it. They would be surprised and say, "Oh, you're here!" I'd say that fifty percent of the time, the calls were to get a hold of a state DNR agency for a state DNR question. I made it a point to find out who the person was that the caller needed to talk to. I think they were really thankful for that. I'd make myself available to answer questions, or whatever it was. I think they liked the fact that they could call a federal FWS agent on the phone in the Peoria office. I always heard about that quite often, and was glad to. The other federal, state and local agencies were glad that we were here and could be called upon in case there was a critter that needed to be taken care of.

MS. NORTON: What were the major issues that you had to deal with? And how were those issues resolved?

MR. SOMMERS: There were a lot of cases of too many geese in an area. When the geese decided to reside down in the eastern part of the state and not migrate. I usually referred to our ADC [Animal Damage Control] on that. There were Eagle killings, which we basically took care of through a matter of investigation. These were really hard to solve. Probably the best one was when I first came aboard and we were able to catch a killer of an eagle right that morning. It was because a hunter had complained about it and pointed us in the right direction. They were very difficult to solve. There was a limited amount of bird poisonings where people would put out the wrong stuff or some restricted toxic chemical that they shouldn't have. We handled this right through investigation in order to get all of the facts out and then prosecute them in court. Of course there were the standard hunting violations that occurred. It was just a matter of investigation and asking the right questions and going to the source.

MS. NORTON: What was the major impediment to your job, or to your career?

MS. SOMMERS: Again, I go back to budget. I just really think that especially in the southeast in the spring and summer there were probably investigations that needed to be done but you couldn't travel. There was always the question, and it never really bothered me that much, but it always seemed to be a difference between the state and federal attitudes. There were things like 'we think we're better than you are' or 'you think you're better than we are'. That aura always exists and it's just something that you have to deal with as a federal officer. You go and meet these state officers and you kind of open up to them. That's what you have to do. You just treat them like a human being and they are going to find out that 'hey, you're just like I am'. It's just a matter of a different type of law. Yours is federal, and you are to help them whenever their violator flees across state lines. That's what you are there for and you have to get that across.

MS. NORTON: Who were your supervisors when you came to work for FWS?

MR. SOMMERS: My initial supervisor was Ralph Vondane. He was my trainer and he was one of the best as far as I am concerned. I really enjoyed Ralph. To this day, I want to continue to communicate with him. He was an excellent supervisor and manager. Then I went to North Carolina and I really didn't have a supervisor there. My supervisor was the SAC. There were three of us brand new agents or "renegades" is what Willie J. Parker called us. We were responsible for North Carolina. It was a good two years before he finally got an SRA in there by the name of James R. "Ron" Bailey. He was my supervisor in North Carolina. When I came back to Illinois, I had John Mendoza. He was just...I always thought that John should have been the chief because he was so articulate. He was just a tremendous chief, and a tremendous person in being able to communicate with people. He always spoke from the heart, and the bottom line was the resource and you knew that. John would not tell a lie. That was one thing about John Mendoza's character was that he would never, ever lie to you. Even though he knew that the truth might hurt, he would tell you the truth. From John, I went to Neil Hartman. Neil was a good supervisor for me. I also had Joe Budson as a supervisor; he was also good to me. Then I had Larry Keck. Larry was where I ended up. He was my last supervisor. Larry was a supervisor. He would give you a little rope and you have at it.

MS. NORTON: Who were the individuals who shaped your career?

MR. SOMMERS: I am going to say that probably Ralph Vondane, Willie J. Parker; who was a real inspiration, and a guy by the name of Ted Curtis. Ted was the agent pilot down in Washington, NC as well as myself. Ted was really slow and methodical. He really slowed me down. He got the 'city' out of me. There was still some city in me from Chicago. Ralph slowed me down too, he taught me a lot. But Ted taught me to slow down. I think Mendoza taught me to articulate a little bit more. John was really a tremendous ethical and articulate person.

MS. NORTON: Well, they figured they had a good resource, you, and they just wanted to help you become greater! That's great! Who were some of the people you knew outside of the Service? Do you think they would have been able to work for the Service today?

MR. SOMMERS: That's a hard one. There were a number of state officers; plenty in North Carolina and in Illinois. There are state officers in Illinois that I know to this day, like Steve Avacek over in Woodford County. I'd love to get him to work for the Service. But I am not too sure that our retirement system is a draw any more. Since the retirement system changed during the Carter/Reagan era it's just not the system that it used to be under SERS. I know that the State of Illinois has by far a better retirement system than our FER system is. That will keep people away from our federal system. There is no doubt in my mind that the retirement system is no longer a draw. I do know a number of state officers and a few Guardsmen that would love to have the job that I had. This job has always been a dream. There's never been a better job that agent/pilot as far as I am concerned.

MS. NORTON: Do you remember what Presidents, Secretaries of the Interior and Directors of FWS that you served under?

MS. SOMMERS: I started out in 1975. Gee whiz, I know I can remember when I was with IRS in August of 1974 I saw Dan Rather on a platform. I was doing my surveillance for CIS training. I was actually following a man. He drug us right past the White House. And there was Dan Rather sitting on a stand with a camcorder going over the White House lawn. I was on surveillance detail with class then and Nixon resigned that afternoon. I will never forget that as long as I live. Nixon left on Marine One, the helicopter. I can remember seeing him on the news that evening.

I worked under Lynn Greenwalt, and I was one of the agents that kept his credentials. I never dropped them, or lost them in the river. When I left, when I finally retired, I still had Lynn Greenwalt's signature on my credentials, which I think is embossed. I can remember some of the other Directors, but one of them was the "Great White Hunter" and I didn't...even though the hunting element were supposed to be our allies, some of our Directors may have been more pro-hunting than they were protection. I didn't have too much respect for them. I can't remember their names right now, but it's gone, it's long past.

MS. NORTON: How do you think changes in the administrations affected our work in the FWS?

MR. SOMMERS: I think the administrative changes really affected us. It really didn't affect Law Enforcement because we were a kind of a special case. But it affected other people, especially during the budget reviews in the fall. Whenever they talked about

furloughing people and the budget wasn't approved; that's a case of Congress fighting with the Executive branch and they couldn't agree to a budget. We found in our people that they didn't know if they were going to be working after October 1. It never affected Law Enforcement because we had to maintain security and the system of investigations. We would always be working. In fact, when people were in danger of being furloughed, we were told that we could not even take leave at that time. They said, "Your leave is canceled". We had to be working whereas no one else would be. We were the security arms of FWS and I can remember leaves being canceled during that time.

MS. NORTON: What was the high point of your career?

MR. SOMMERS: I can't name any one thing. My whole career was a high point as far as I am concerned. I enjoyed meeting and working with new agents. I loved the war stories with the old agents. You can't ever throw that away. You have to maintain that and the communications with the old agents. There is just too much good about it. I can't name any one thing. I just really enjoyed everything about it.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever consider that you had a low point in your career?

MR. SOMMERS: Probably the low point was when I had a helicopter crash and my state officer was killed. As far as the career was concerned, that was the lowest point I ever had. That was hard to get through because that was the last thing you ever wanted was to have someone killed when the aircraft was in your hands.

MS. NORTON: What was the most dangerous or frightening experience you ever had?

MR. SOMMERS: I think being the water. Safety of course was always the issue in the federal government and it always will be. Sometimes you may have done something that maybe you shouldn't have done. Wind and water and cold never mix. I mean high winds where your waves will build up and maybe you didn't have the boat that you needed. Those were tense times. I can remember picking up a North Carolina state officer by the name of Earl Brinkley. He was in Kinston, NC. Earl just retired last June. Tom Bennett, Ted Curtis and I all got together and went to his retirement party. Earl was a tremendous state officer. He ended up retiring as a Sergeant. He was a good man and he was one of the ones I would have liked to have seen work for us. Any person from North Carolina will never leave the state because they love the state so much. North Carolinians will not leave. But I went and picked him [Earl Brinkley] up one time in real strong crosswinds. Ralph was a good instructor pilot, he really was. And I don't know if I didn't have my mind on it, or what it was, but I just never knew that when it came time for a crosswind landing, you didn't make a three-point full stall landing, because the crosswinds would blow you off of the runway. You always came in with plenty of air speed and touched down on one of your main wheels, then let the other wheels down as you slowed down, and then planted it on the ground. Well, I went and picked up Earl and I was trying to do

full stalls and I almost killed us. I almost went forward hitting the brakes and toppling over the prop. Another time I thought the wind was going to blow the high wing over so that the low wing would hit the ground. In fact, the maintenance man saw me land and he came out to look at the underside of the low wing to see if I hit. I never did, but I must have come within six inches of hitting the ground. If I had I would have cart wheeled. I will never forget that landing! Consequently, when I told John Mendoza that I would come back and fly the airplane, I said, "I will, but I want some training in crosswinds". At that time they had Greg Stover come up. I think we had ten hours of crosswind landings. I got to where I could do it in my sleep. When I didn't have that knowledge that was a dangerous time to me.

One thing I forgot to mention Dorothe, on a high point; and this following me throughout my career. I was a rookie agent and I worked my second migratory bird season with Ralph. A state officer by the name of John Hendricks came up and said that he had found some bait. We worked the bait and it turned out to be the Governor of Illinois. That stigma of being there to apprehend the Governor of Illinois for hunting Mourning Doves over a baited field stuck with me. It went through my career as being the one who nailed the Governor, even though Ralph and Dick Stout were involved and two state officers; John Hendricks who was a Sergeant at that time and did a lot of the leg work. John and I were both out there at midnight gathering this stuff. The other state officer was Orville Gosnel. Both of those officers could have very easily lost their jobs, but I can remember that as I high point.

MS. NORTON: Did you have anything that was humorous?

MR. SOMMERS: Oh, just a few. I can remember working out in a boat with Jerry Sigowski and Andy Pierce. We were working spring duck hunters. We heard shots and went to land. We were in a canal north of Chetaugwah. Andy stepped out and he got up almost to the top of his chest waders before he found himself on the gunwale of the boat. He did a hand over hand movement from the stern all of the way to the bow to where he could get his feet on dry ground. I've never seen a man more so fast in all my life. Sigowski and I just stood there and howled at Pierce trying to get in the boat. I can remember having morning prayers with Gus in the restaurant before we went out to work Horicon; just to embarrass him and just teasing Gus all along. I can remember that Ralph tried to keep me in stitches with all of his dry jokes and every now and then I'd throw one back at him. He'd have that strange look on his face. We tried to make the best of everything; a lack of money, adverse weather or whatever it was. We always made a good time of it. There were some great, really tremendous times out there!

MS. NORTON: What would you like to tell others about your career in the Service? About how you felt about your career, and how you feel about the Service.

MR. SOMMERS: I've enjoyed it. And I saw a trend; when we went from GS-11 Special Agents and the increase, which was another tier when we went to GS-12. That was kind of a task to behold. Some people individually took on the task. I have a lot of respect for Greg Stover for initiating that. He and Clark Bavin were kind of at odds. But Greg had a plant, or a close friend in OPM who helped him acquired his GS-12 and they couldn't ignore it. Then I saw the regions follow generally. That was a tier. I also saw a tier with reorganization when we went from thirteen regions done to six.

MS. NORTON: What are your thoughts on the future? Where do you see the Service heading in the next decade or so?

MR. SOMMERS: One thing I know is that computers have made a big change in the way we do business. And it shouldn't, in the law enforcement business. Computers should have expedited our ability to get a report on an investigation in a lot quicker. I think is has. I believe computers have made it a lot easier to do a report and get it in for review. On the other hand, we shouldn't be confined more on our emails to the regional office simply because they want to know if our goals have been met and all this "other" information that they want from the field. Yes, we do want to get ideas to the RO to a central point, but you don't want to lock your agents in the office, so to speak. Our information, and our ability to investigate come from being out among the people, from being out with state officers, other law enforcement officers; state, local or federal. It also comes from regular citizens. Information comes over the telephone, or even just meeting and conversing with people. We can't lock ourselves in an office to be married to a computer. I think we've got to watch that. The other thing I am really concerned about is that we don't want to let our ego, and those egos can grow, as we get higher up in the chain. I always made it a point to be an "Indian", and maybe that right away will negate the statement that I want to make. That is that we don't want to let our egos ruin a relationship either with federal or whoever it is that we are dealing with. I have seen egos ruin that before; just because 'I am holier than thou'! That's something that we need to avoid. I get more...maybe it's a matter of education. Maybe we need to educate our public. I see that constantly. One of the negative issues that I see constantly is, 'I can't care for my land they way I wanted to care for it. And I can't do it either because a critter needs to be preserved or a plant needs to be preserved.' Well, when people come up with that idea, that is that opinion, and that's the way they think. Either they are listening to rumor, or we haven't educated them enough. We need to educate more when it comes from shutting a forest down to cutting or blocking up a stream, or whatever it is. We just need to educate more. We need to enlighten people on why we need to save that critter. Maybe we haven't done a good job of that, but that comes from getting out there and meeting the people. I think our agents go out and meet the public more than any other officials that we have. Yeah, maybe that's slanted a little bit. And that's an opinion, but unfortunately we deal with the public all of the time. Some of it is good, and some is adverse. The adversity comes from us sighting the public. We might be the black sheep of the family because we write up these people but enforcement is a part of the

region, even though I understand we may be getting line authority in the next couple of weeks. Enforcement is a part of the FWS and whether you think we are a negative part or not, we are a part of it. We are there to see people do right and don't do wrong. If it takes a citation and a fine, it's going to be done and I am sorry about. It's my opinion and it's probably wrong, that maybe we were punished or penalized in some way on budgetary constraints because we are the black sheep and we do have negative relationships with the public. But we do also have good ones too, and I want to make that that that idea is conveyed.

MS. NORTON: If you should have any photographs or documents that you would like to share with the Service's archive; things we could copy and return, you can just send them to me. I'll take care of everything and send them back to you. Who else do you think we should interview?

MR. SOMMERS: Ed Nichols and other agents. I don't know ... How about the one who used to be head of Crab Orchard who didn't like Hoggins? Do you want that on tape? What's his name? Bob got the job as the SAC over him. He was the Refuge Manager over at Crab Orchard, but I can't remember his name. Ralph used to stop over there and talk to him all of the time. Tom Seachrist might be another one over in Indiana. Another one is Alice McLennan. She was a...

That's another thing that I want to convey. In all of the years that I worked, I know John Mendoza was one and Ralph was one, but we always made it a point that we wanted to thank the staff that was up at Minneapolis for supporting us in the field. I always felt myself that they did a tremendous job in supporting us when we were out there in the woods. You could always call somebody up in the RO and they would help out, no matter what it was. Whatever task you had to complete, they helped you out. They always need to be thanked, whether it's from the people in the office or the people out in the field. It always had to be done. You don't leave them out there in left field.

MS. NORTON: Thanks a lot Jerry, for your time and to your wife for having me to dinner and overnight. We've had a really good time remembering the old days!

MR. SOMMERS: Well I hope you enjoy the rest of the week with us.

MS. NORTON: Thank you!