

MILITARY WOMEN AVIATORS ORAL HISTORY INITIATIVE

Interview No. 14

Transcript

Interviewee: Major General Jeannie Leavitt, United States Air Force      Date: September 19, 2019  
By: Lieutenant Colonel Monica Smith, USAF, Retired  
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South Conference Room  
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**SMITH:** I'm Monica Smith at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Today is September 19, 2019, and I have the pleasure of speaking with Major General Jeannie Leavitt, United States Air Force. This interview is being taped as part of the Military Women Aviators Oral History Initiative. It will be archived at the Smithsonian Institution. Welcome, General Leavitt.

**LEAVITT:** Thank you.

**SMITH:** So let's start by me congratulating you on your recent second star.

**LEAVITT:** Thank you very much.

**SMITH:** You're welcome. You're welcome. So you just pinned that [star] on this month. Is that right?

**LEAVITT:** That's correct, effective 2 September.

**SMITH:** Great. Great. So that's fantastic, and we'll get to your promotions and your career later. I just have some boilerplate questions. First, let's just start with your full name and your occupation.

**LEAVITT:** Okay. Jeannie Marie Leavitt, and I am the Commander of Air Force Recruiting Service.

**SMITH:** Fantastic. So when did you first enter the Air Force?

**LEAVITT:** I was commissioned December 1990, and came on active duty January 1992.

**SMITH:** Okay. And approximately how many total flight hours do you have?

**LEAVITT:** Counting trainers, a little over 3,000.

**SMITH:** And let's list, for the record, all of the aircraft that you have piloted.

**LEAVITT:** I have been checked out and have primary flight time in: T-37, T-38, and F-15E Strike Eagle.

**SMITH:** Any civilian aircraft? Any civilian flight time?

**LEAVITT:** I have a few. I got my private pilot's license in a Piper Tomahawk...

**SMITH:** Good.

**LEAVITT:** ...as part of an Air Force ROTC program.

**SMITH:** FIP, Flight Indoctrination Program or something like that?

**LEAVITT:** It was a test program they did called the Private Pilot License Screening Program, PPLSP.

**SMITH:** Oh, cool.

**LEAVITT:** They tried it out for a few years, and I was lucky enough to be selected.

**SMITH:** Great. Well, we'll talk about that in a few minutes. Do you hold any civilian licenses, or just military flying?

**LEAVITT:** I've got my private pilot's license and the ratings that came out of pilot training, but I haven't pursued other commercial tickets...

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** ...yet. [laughs]

**SMITH:** So — yet. Let's talk about your road to the military, and let's start with where you were born and grew up, in a city that's not unfamiliar with aviation. So in St. Louis, is that correct?

**LEAVITT:** I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. That's correct. I was the third of four girls.

**SMITH:** Oh, fantastic. So tell me about your life growing up. What were you like as a child?

**LEAVITT:** Well, I was the third of four girls, and so there were the two older girls and then the two younger girls. And so we were always the big kids and the little kids. And so I was the older of the little kids. And my little sister was a year behind me in school. And we were super competitive at absolutely everything we did.

**SMITH:** So what were some of your, like, fun things to do as a young girl?

**LEAVITT:** We played a lot of sports: soccer, softball, tennis, also horseback riding. So I got into horseback riding when I was probably about 12 years old. I had been begging for quite a while, and then when I was 12 years old, I found out about a Girl Scout mounted troop that they had in St. Louis, that they had horseback riding with a Girl Scout troop, which was a great opportunity for me.

**SMITH:** Were you in Girl Scouts as well?

**LEAVITT:** I was in Girl Scouts from the time I was about — first grade.

**SMITH:** Alright. Great. Tell me about your parents. What did they do? And I want to make sure we get their names.

**LEAVITT:** So: my father was James Eugene Flynn, and he was medically retired from the Air National Guard when I was a little child, before I remember. And my mother was Patricia Evelyn Flynn, and she was a schoolteacher.

**SMITH:** Alright. So what was your father's specialty in the military?

**LEAVITT:** I don't remember his military time, because it was before I was born.

**SMITH:** Before. Right.

**LEAVITT:** I believe he was in supply.

**SMITH:** Okay. Were any other members of your family in the military that you recall? Or did you have any people that you knew who served?

**LEAVITT:** When I joined the Air Force later on, I did find out that one of my uncles had been a Naval Aviator. But I was not familiar with the military growing up.

[5:00]

**SMITH:** So what's your earliest memory of aviation, as a child? Or did you have one, as a child?

**LEAVITT:** I remember going to air shows. Our parents would take us to air shows, and I remember going to air shows with my dad as well — just him taking me when he was going and watching the airplanes. And I absolutely loved it.

**SMITH:** What base? What would this be? Scott, or a civilian place?

**LEAVITT:** There was Scott Air Force Base,<sup>1</sup> and then there were sometimes air shows down at the Fourth of July fair that they had in St. Louis.

**SMITH:** Okay. Do you remember, like, your earliest, earliest memory of an air show? Would that have been elementary school, or middle school? Like, I'm just trying to get an age range.

**LEAVITT:** It was probably elementary school.

**SMITH:** Okay. Do you remember anything about it that struck you, that you recall? Any memories of that actual air show?

**LEAVITT:** I just loved aviation. I also knew that we could not fly, because my mom was terrified of flying.

**SMITH:** Ahh.

**LEAVITT:** So flying was not an option at all when I was growing up. Not even commercial.

**SMITH:** So you really didn't envision yourself flying. It was just you liked —

**LEAVITT:** I was fascinated with flying.

**SMITH:** You were fascinated with it. [crosstalk].

**LEAVITT:** I loved to watch airplanes flying. I was fascinated with flying. And I wanted to fly in any airplane and never had the chance growing up.

**SMITH:** Alright. So in high school, tell me what you thought you were going to do for a living. Like, what were your dreams growing up about what kind of occupation you would have?

**LEAVITT:** For a while, I thought I was going to be a veterinarian, because I loved animals. And then I visited my cousin, who was going through a vet school, and I did not like when they were doing all the things with the animals that had died. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Oh.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.scott.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/159786/scott-air-force-base/>.

**LEAVITT:** And so I didn't like that. So I thought: okay, I'll do something else, and just have a lot of animals as pets. And so I liked math and science. Those were my favorite subjects. So my uncles, a number of them, were engineers. And they all told me I should be an engineer.

**SMITH:** So apparently you followed their advice, because you went to the University of Texas as an aerospace engineer, correct?

**LEAVITT:** That's right.

**SMITH:** So tell me about, you know, the decision to go ROTC, Reserve Officer Training Corps, at UT. How did that — how did you make that decision?

**LEAVITT:** When I was studying aerospace engineering at the University of Texas, the problem that graduates were having is it was a hard time — it was hard to get a job without work experience. And so there was a program called the Co-op program,<sup>2</sup> where you would work a semester and go to school a semester, and alternate for three semesters of work. And then at the end, you had a year of work experience, and it made you more marketable to be hired when you graduated. I looked at the different programs. My whole family hoped I would go with Boeing — or McDonnell Douglas at the time — in St. Louis. And NASA sounded really cool, so I went to NASA Johnson Space Center in Houston for my co-op program.

**SMITH:** And how long was that program?

**LEAVITT:** So it was alternating semesters. And so the fall of '87, I went and worked at NASA. And while I was there, I ran across a second lieutenant who was waiting for pilot training. I didn't know anything about the Air Force at all and started asking him a bunch of questions, because I had heard he was going to pilot training, but he was working at NASA. So I didn't really understand how that worked. And so I asked him about it, and he said he was waiting for pilot training. And then I asked him if the Air Force was going to pay for him to become a pilot and then pay him to be a pilot. [laughs] And he said: yes, that's called pilot training. So I said: well, that sounds really cool and decided I would go look into it. He had done ROTC at whatever school he had gone to, so in January of 1988, when I got back on campus, I had to pull out a map to find the ROTC office. I found it, walked in, and said: I want to be a pilot.

**SMITH:** So what year were you in school at this point — in January of '88? What — were you a junior or sophomore?

**LEAVITT:** This was — effectively sophomore year, because I had gone to school for a year in St. — or, not St. Louis — in Missouri, before transferring down to Texas. And so...

**SMITH:** Oh, okay.

**LEAVITT:** ...you lose a lot of credits when you transfer.

**SMITH:** So you actually started college what year?

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<sup>2</sup> Cooperative Engineering Education Program or Co-op, <http://www.engr.utexas.edu/student-life/career-services/co-ops-and-internships>.

**LEAVITT:** 1985.

**SMITH:** '85. Okay. So this would have —

**LEAVITT:** So '85 to '86, I went to University of Missouri-Rolla.<sup>3</sup> And then in '86, I transferred down to the University of Texas.

**SMITH:** Okay. And what was the reception like, when you asked to join the ROTC unit?

**LEAVITT:** I think they were initially amused, because I did not look very military-like when I showed up. And they said: yeah, well,

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everyone wants to be a pilot. And they said: what's your major? And I said: aerospace engineering. And they said: what's your GPA? And I still had a 4.0 at the time. And they pulled out a chair, and I sat down, and we started having a conversation.

**SMITH:** Then you filled out the paperwork and applied. Was it a relatively straightforward road from application to earning an ROTC slot?

**LEAVITT:** Well, they wanted me to take the ROTC class in the spring to prepare for field training camp, because at the time, if you were a two-year cadet, you would go to six-week field training, where the four-year cadets went to four-week field training camp.<sup>4</sup> The timing for that class, it would have been like, AS-200, the Aerospace Studies 200 — conflicted with a course I needed for aerospace engineering. And it was one that was only offered in the spring: Orbital Mechanics. And so I said: "I'm sorry, I can't go to the AS-200 class." And so they handed me a VHS tape and said: "Okay, then watch this."

**SMITH:** Really?

**LEAVITT:** And so I went into one of the rooms, and I started watching it. And then the PAS<sup>5</sup> came, and I think I probably had [laughs] a pretty shocked look on my face. People being yelled at, and all these things happening. And he stopped the tape, and he said: don't worry about it. You'll do fine. And that was pretty much my experience, other than being issued some uniforms before I showed up at field training camp. I was not very prepared.

**SMITH:** So tell me about field training, then. That must have been a kind of firehose effect of: here's the military. Like, get in step.

**LEAVITT:** The first day of field training camp was very, very challenging.

**SMITH:** Yeah.

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<sup>3</sup> University of Missouri-Rolla became the Missouri University of Science and Technology in 2008, <https://www.umsystem.edu/reach/campus/rolla>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.afrotc.com/search?term=field%20training>.

<sup>5</sup> The Professor of Aerospace Studies is the ROTC Detachment Commander, usually a lieutenant colonel or colonel.

**LEAVITT:** Pretty much the entire camp staff knew me the first day. I was the cadet that really did not know what was going on at the beginning of the day. By the end of the day, I was much better. I had much better situational awareness. But it was a very tough first day.

**SMITH:** Yeah. So you're a quick learner, and you got things under control quickly. How would you describe the rest of the experience at field training?

**LEAVITT:** It was good. I very much wanted to be a pilot, but I didn't know, going to field training camp, whether or not I was going to pilot training. They took us from Lackland to Del Rio, Texas, to Laughlin Air Force Base for a day. And anyone who had a pilot slot had the opportunity to fly in a T-37. And I was heartbroke, because I did not have a pilot slot. I hadn't had the chance to compete for one. The captain who was in charge of my flight must have seen something, because he called me out of the alternate activities and said: we're going to put you up in a T-37. And I got to fly in a T-37 that day, and it was amazing.

**SMITH:** Great. Oh, that's fantastic. Good, good leadership [laughs] from that captain. So you complete field training, and then you go back. Did you go back to UT in the fall? Or were you —

**LEAVITT:** I did.

**SMITH:** Okay. Did you have another semester where you had that you could choose [a Co-op]—

**LEAVITT:** I did two more semesters at NASA. I had to juggle the rest of my schedule, because doing the Co-op program and field training — ROTC was challenging, but...

**SMITH:** Sure.

**LEAVITT:** ...the detachment worked with me, and so did NASA.

**SMITH:** Yeah. Yeah, it must have taken a — taken your academic route and probably extended it a little bit, so —

**LEAVITT:** That's why I graduated December of 1990.

**SMITH:** Yeah. Yeah. So tell me about actually earning a pilot slot in ROTC. How did that occur?

**LEAVITT:** So I got back from field training camp, and they offered me an ROTC scholarship.

**SMITH:** Yay.

**LEAVITT:** The problem was, it was before the pilot board met.

**SMITH:** Ahh.

**LEAVITT:** And I knew that I wanted to be a pilot more than anything. And so I actually turned down the ROTC scholarship, which did not make my detachment totally happy, because obviously they had, you know — they had wanted to offer me this ROTC scholarship. But I was on an academic scholarship with the University of Texas. And so I politely declined and waited for the pilot board to meet. And then a couple weeks later, maybe a month later, the pilot board met, and I was selected for pilot training.

**SMITH:** So were you told previously that you had to choose between the scholarship and pilot board?

**LEAVITT:** No. They wanted me to take the scholarship, and they said I could keep it if I got selected for pilot. But timing-wise, I had to accept the pilot — or, I mean, I had to accept the ROTC scholarship before the pilot board met, which I didn't want to do.

**SMITH:** Got it. What was the concern? That —

**LEAVITT:** I wanted to go to pilot training. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** So I figured that if the Air Force wasn't going to send me to pilot training, that maybe I'd try going via NASA or another route.

**SMITH:** Oh, because once you accept the scholarship, then you're locked into that career field.

**LEAVITT:** You're committed. You're locked into serving in the Air Force.

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**SMITH:** Got it. And you didn't want to do that unless you were flying.

**LEAVITT:** I wasn't sure. I was brand new.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** All I had done was field training camp so far. So I had limited exposure to the Air Force at that point.

**SMITH:** I don't want to say you didn't want to do that. You were not sure of your future goals. So were you a DG out of your ROTC —

**LEAVITT:** Field training camp? No. ROTC, yes.

**SMITH:** ROTC. Right. Not field training. Okay. Tell me about your decision to go to graduate school. So you graduate from UT in 1990. And did you already know that you were going to go to graduate school several years before? Just tell me about that decision.

**LEAVITT:** The decision to go to graduate school was based on an experience in the summer of 1989. Between your junior and senior year, they had a program where you could go shadow someone in your career field and they had us fill out a dream sheet. So, you said what kind of airplane you wanted to go shadow in. And this is 1989, and so they asked me to list my planes, and I put three fighters. I don't remember the order. Like, F-16, F-15, F-4. And the detachment staff came back to me and said: you can't put those. And I said: why not? And they said: women can't fly fighters. And I said: well, I'm not asking to be trained. I'm just writing what my preferences would be. And they said: well, no. You can't go to shadow in a plane that you could never be assigned to. And I said: well, since I can never be assigned, I think it's all the more reason to send me there. And so they told me I should change, and then I said: with all due respect, I'm not going to change them, because they're asking me where I want to go. And I'll be happy no matter where they send me. Any experience is going to be amazing. But I want to write down my preferences...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...because that's what they asked for. And so I don't think the NCOs were overly thrilled with me at that point, but they submitted it. And much to everyone's shock and surprise, I ended up with Moody Air Force Base, which at the time had F-16s. So I showed up in summer of 1989 at Moody Air Force Base. There were two other cadets with me: one from VMI and one from Citadel, I believe.

**SMITH:** Were they male? Excuse me.

**LEAVITT:** They were both male. Yes.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** No one knew why I was there. I was by far the — well, I was definitely the only female cadet that summer. And no one knows why I got it. I have no idea why I got it, but I did. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Well, you asked for what you wanted, first of all.

**LEAVITT:** I did.

**SMITH:** So good on you for that. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** So everyone was quite surprised. We — the three of us — the cadets that I was there with — we knew there were three flying squadrons at the time, and each one had one back [seat] — two-seat F-16. And so this was before the days of cell phones. So we had to come up with this whole plan for how we ensured not a single back seat went up empty. And so we came up with an order of flying. You know, we did something very fair, like Paper, Rock, Scissors, and came up with an order. And then we did not let a single back seat go up empty. And so all of us got four to five back-seat rides over the course of three weeks, which was amazing. And what was great is a couple of the instructors I flew with in their back seat, they took a lot of time after the debrief, because I was very, very interested. And they would answer all my questions. And we'd go through the tape, and they'd explain what we were looking at. So by the last couple flights, I had a much better idea of what was going on when I was up in the air.

**SMITH:** So explain that "looking at the tape," because not everybody knows about the debrief.

**LEAVITT:** So when you're flying in fighters, they have tapes in the airplanes. It was tapes in the old days. You know, now it's all digital. But at the time, it was actual tapes. And you would record different things, whether it was the heads-up display or one of the multi-function displays. Like, the radar was frequently one of the things recorded. So you could come back and take a look at what was on the display and what was happening in the air. And so some of the instructors spent a lot of time — because I was very interested, very curious, and asking a bunch of questions. And they took the time to explain it to me.

**SMITH:** Great.

**LEAVITT:** So during that summer, at one point I walked through to get a drink out of the snack bar area. And there was a captain who was sitting [laughs] at a table. And he had books spread everywhere. And I walked by, and I said: what are you doing? And he said: if I have one bit of advice to you, he said, get your master's before you become active duty. And I said: okay. And then I went and grabbed the water and left. And so that was really what prompted me.

**SMITH:** Because he was studying for a master's class? [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** He was working on his master's as a captain.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And it was challenging to do.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so when I was watching the pilot slots come down, all of my friends were putting, you know, moment's notice. You know? I'll take first available location. And they were waiting about 10 months. And so I decided that there were some 12 months

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master's programs. And so I would go to a program that I could get my master's in 12 months, since I was graduating in December, to be able to go two extra months and have my master's.

**SMITH:** Right. Now, the Piper Tomahawk training — was that before or after the F-16 rides at Moody?

**LEAVITT:** That would have been probably before and after.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** And so I can't remember the exact time when I did that, I'd have to go back and look at my logbooks. But it was after I got my pilot slot. And they wanted to send people to — it was Hondo at the time, where you would go for the Flight Screening Program.<sup>6</sup> But it didn't work well with my whole trying to work at NASA and everything else. And so they came up with this test program called the Private Pilot's License Screening Program, and a few of us from our detachment got it. We were really hoping [laughs] — we're like: okay, we'll get Cessnas out of Austin Executive Airport, which would have been really convenient, kind of Gucci. And we ended up in Piper Tomahawks at Georgetown,<sup>7</sup> which was, you know, 30 miles north of Austin. But it was an amazing experience.

**SMITH:** So the program did what for you?

**LEAVITT:** So instead of going to the Flight Screening Program, you would go through your private pilot's license. And it was civilian instructors. It was a contract they had with the FBO<sup>8</sup> up at Georgetown. And they took us through ground school and all the way through our private pilot's license.

**SMITH:** Great. Were you received well in that program? Or —

**LEAVITT:** In that program, absolutely.

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<sup>6</sup> FSP evolved into Initial Flight Screening, or IFS at Pueblo, CO. Mike Hammond, "Initial Flight Screening operations begin today," AETC Public Affairs, Oct 12, 2006. Accessed Feb 13, 2020, <https://www.aetc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/263488/initial-flight-screening-operations-begin-today/>; <https://www.aetc.af.mil/Flying-Training/>.

<sup>7</sup> Georgetown Municipal Airport (KGTU).

<sup>8</sup> A Fixed Base Operator (FBO) is the commercial entity authorized to provide fuel and other services at an airport.

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** It was the — you know, it was an FBO. And so they were training [laughs] — they were training cadets to become private pilots.

**SMITH:** Yeah. [laughs] Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so it was a good program.

**SMITH:** Yeah. Fantastic. So you have all this experience. You haven't even pinned on second lieutenant yet. And here, you've got F-16 time, you have your private pilot's license, and now you're off to Stanford to work on your master's, making really good use of time that would have been spent waiting to go to pilot training anyway. So what did you get your master's in, and why did you pick that?

**LEAVITT:** Well, I went to the professor that I liked the most at University of Texas. I knew he would not take me, because he wouldn't take anyone for less than 20 months or something. And so I went to Dr. K,<sup>9</sup> and I said: I want to get my master's, but I only have 12 months. And he said: well, I won't take anyone — and I said: I know. So, where should I go? And he said: go to Stanford. And I said: okay. And he said: if you can't go to Stanford, go to Purdue. And I said: okay. So I applied to two schools, Stanford and Purdue, and got accepted to both. I went and visited both in the fall, and it was very, [laughs] very cold in West Lafayette, Indiana. Purdue came through with offering money first, but I held out and waited, and then Stanford offered me a fellowship to pay for my schooling to go to Stanford. So I got my master's in aeronautics and astronautics.

**SMITH:** So did you have a plan with that, or was flying — did you see that as something to augment your military pilot pursuit — that master's program?

**LEAVITT:** I never really considered getting it in anything else.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** I loved engineering. I loved aerospace engineering, and it never crossed my mind to do anything except that kind of degree. And so the degree that Stanford had was aeronautics and astronautics.

**SMITH:** Okay. Did you have NASA aspirations? You had worked for NASA or spent time —

**LEAVITT:** That was one of the paths I was keeping open.

**SMITH:** Yeah. Yeah. That seems—it makes logical sense. Did you have any mentoring? Like, you know, you had — it seems like you came across certain people that gave you really good advice that — just by happenstance. But did you have anybody actually mentoring you?

**LEAVITT:** There was no master plan. [laughs]

**SMITH:** [laughs] Okay.

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<sup>9</sup> Possibly Professor Stelios Kyriakides or Assistant Professor John Kallinderis, who were both part of the the UT Aerospace Engineering department during the 1990s,

**LEAVITT:** No, it was — I was very fortunate to receive good advice.

**SMITH:** Cool. Cool. So let's talk about — you graduate — you actually — you know, a couple of really big things are going on during the time between your undergraduate graduation and your master's school graduation. So, Desert Shield, Desert Storm.<sup>10</sup> I'm just curious. What were you thinking during those times? Did you think: oh, maybe I should have gone to pilot training [laughs] so I could participate? Or, did it impact you?

**LEAVITT:** Well, I knew that no one could...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...because there was such a backlog at the time. And actually, while I was at grad school, the ROTC graduates in my class, we had to re-compete for our pilot slots...

**SMITH:** Really?

**LEAVITT:** ...because they had so many extra pilots at the time.

**SMITH:** Oh, that's right.

**LEAVITT:** It sounds a little bit crazy, given the current circumstances. And I didn't actually realize why I was re-filling out my paperwork. And so I was at Stanford. My detachment called me up

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and said: we need you to go over to — I think it was San Jose State — somewhere where there was ROTC — and fill out this form. And I said: I can't. I'm in the middle of midterms or finals, or something. And I said: I do not have time. What does it say? Let me just do it over the phone. And so I had to come say something like, if you let me have 12 months, I will finish my master's in aeronautics and astronautics from Stanford. And then my pilot training bases were very deliberate. They were such that I did not want to go to an SUPT base. So this is just when bases were starting to go to SUPT.

**SMITH:** Explain SUPT— oh, you're going —

**LEAVITT:** Oh. Specialized — I think it was Specialized — Undergraduate Pilot Training. And so how it used to be, prior to SUPT, everyone went to T-37s, and then everyone went to T-38s. When they started SUPT, you — everyone went to T-37s, but then you would track, and you would either go T-1s, if you were going to go heavy mobility, or T-38s, if you were going to go fighter/bomber type of things. And so I knew that the only way I could fly in a T-38 would be to not to go a SUPT base. So I rank-ordered my bases based on that. And so my first choice was Williams Air Force Base in Arizona. My second choice was Laughlin. And I don't remember beyond that, because I got my second choice. And it wasn't until a couple weeks later, when a friend of mine called me up, and he said: oh, my gosh. Can you believe we're re-competing for our pilot slots? And I said: we're doing what? [laughs] And he said: yeah, didn't you

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<sup>10</sup> Desert Shield commenced in Aug 1990, but the actual war (Desert Storm) commenced in Jan 1991 and lasted less than two months. Both operations were sparked by the Iraq invasion of Kuwait on Aug 2, 1990.

have to fill out the form? And I go: I didn't ask why. And I go: oh, my gosh. So I was really, really worried...

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** ...for a while that I was going to lose my pilot slot, because I would have worded it vastly different, had I known what I was doing. I would have said, you know: absolutely, first available, whatever the case may be. But very luckily, I don't know why — I was sure that I was going to be recategorized as an engineer, just based [laughs] on all the education I had. So I was very, very relieved when I kept my pilot slot. But about 50 percent of the — well, we were second lieutenants. We were commissioned awaiting pilot training — about 50 percent of them lost their pilot slots...

**SMITH:** Wow.

**LEAVITT:** ...which was very, very challenging, because you're already commissioned, and they're like: okay, pick another career field.

**SMITH:** Right. So had you already been commissioned at your UT graduation?

**LEAVITT:** That's right. So in December of 1990, I was commissioned...

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** ...but not active duty until January of '92.

**SMITH:** Okay. So you're — when you say your det,<sup>11</sup> was it your det at Stanford? Was there some affiliation, ROTC?

**LEAVITT:** Stanford had no det.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** And so that's why my detachment from the University of Texas called me up...

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** ...and they wanted me to go to the local detachment, which I think San Jose State would have been the closest one, or maybe Cal Berkeley.

**SMITH:** Was closest...Okay.

**LEAVITT:** Neither of which were conducive, based on my finals schedule, so —

**SMITH:** Right. Right. Yeah. And the program that allowed you to go to graduate school, is that a delayed accession<sup>12</sup> —

**LEAVITT:** There was no program. It was me rolling the dice.

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<sup>11</sup> Detachment.

<sup>12</sup> Smith is referring to the Educational Delay option through ROTC, but no program was used.

**SMITH:** Oh.

**LEAVITT:** So I did not have any kind of admin delay or anything, because I asked, and they said: you're not eligible, because you're a pilot.

**SMITH:** Wow.

**LEAVITT:** So it was a complete gamble.

**SMITH:** Wow, that's — you have good timing. [laughs] You have really good timing.

**LEAVITT:** Got to be lucky. Yup.

**SMITH:** Oh, my gosh. So you do get to Laughlin, and first you graduate from Stanford. So, congratulations. Any honors that should go on your record, at that graduation or either of your graduations?

**LEAVITT:** Yes. I don't remember which is what. I remember it was *summa cum laude* at University of Texas, and I don't remember with Stanford. I'd have to go back and look.

**SMITH:** I just knew there had to be something, so [laughs] I wanted to make sure you included that. Tell me about when you arrived at Laughlin and what your class designation was. I think my math's right. 93-06?

**LEAVITT:** 93-04.

**SMITH:** 04. So yeah, I was — math was wrong. Okay. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** Yes. So I showed up in January of 1992, and I was class of 93-04. And I got to Del Rio, Texas. Moved into the dorms, and it was — I was a little concerned at first, because talking to some of my fellow students, a lot of people had graduated in May. And so they had been kind of relaxing. Maybe they were working. Maybe they were lifeguarding. I had just finished finals. [laughs] So I was worried I was going to be burned out when I got there. But what I found was I actually didn't have to get back into, you know, push it up mode, because I had never slowed down. And so I was still in like, go, go, go mode. And so it wasn't a factor at all. But I was concerned when I first got there.

**SMITH:** Because you graduated in December.

**LEAVITT:** I did.

**SMITH:** Oh, okay.

**LEAVITT:** And so I graduated, drove, and started pilot training very soon thereafter.

**SMITH:** Wow. Tell me about your first day at Laughlin

[30:00]

in pilot training.

**LEAVITT:** I remember there were — the class had, you know, two flights. So two different flights within the — I don't remember what my flight was in T-37s. I remember I was N flight, Nacho flight — I don't

know why I remember that — in T-38s. But I just remember about maybe half of my class was Academy, or a little bit less. There were a number of ROTC, some OTS, and I think we had some Guard and Reserve as well.

**SMITH:** As far as other demographics, how many women were in your class?

**LEAVITT:** We started with three women.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** So they — the other two were both Academy, and I was ROTC.

**SMITH:** And when you say you had two sections — so about how many total in your class, just roughly?

**LEAVITT:** I have to think, because we lost quite a few towards the end of T-38s, because there was this pilot overage.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And actually, at the end of pilot training, they offered that if you did not have any payback to the Air Force, you could walk away at the end of pilot training.

**SMITH:** Wow.

**LEAVITT:** Waive all your commitments. And I had turned down the ROTC scholarship, so I was [laughs] actually one of the people that had zero commitments. Like, I had signed initially for an eight-year commitment when I was awarded the pilot slot. And then a little while later, it was kind of funny because the detachment personnel came to me and said they had penciled through eight and written ten. And they said: you need to initial here. And I said: why? And they said: the pilot training commitment has changed from eight to ten. And I go: well, can I like, X through it and put six? And they [laughs] go: no. I said: well, what if I don't do — sign? And they go: then, you don't go to pilot training. And I remember going: this is so unfair.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** Like, we had a deal.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** You can't change the deal. And they're like: you don't have to sign. You just can't go. And so I said: okay, well, eight years was forever. And so...

**SMITH:** Sure.

**LEAVITT:** ...forever plus two is still forever. So I was like: alright, I'll sign. [laughs]

**SMITH:** [laughs] Oh, my gosh. So as far as your instructors went, what were the demographics of your instructor corps, like, when you got there? All male? Any women? Do you remember?

**LEAVITT:** There was one woman in the other flight of T-38s, I remember.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** But not in our flight. So I didn't have any female instructors in T-37s or T-38s. There were female instructors, just not in my flight.

**SMITH:** Right. Right. Tell me about the competition during UPT. Were you — I just want to know how your interaction was with your classmates. And you graduated at the top of your class, so at some point, people had to recognize that you were a threat to them in terms of — you know, if somebody else wanted [that top slot]—

**LEAVITT:** I don't know. I don't know if I just wasn't tracking it, but I don't really remember, like, being in the competition.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** I was working very, very hard. Again, that competitive nature that came from me and my little sister — and we both did very well in high school. We both got full scholarships to college. I mean, the competition continued through college, and so I mean, it really helped out and opened a lot of doors. But I remember getting to pilot training, and some people had far more hours than I did, because I had my private pilot's license, plus about an hour or two, because I couldn't afford any flight time. And some of these people had instrument ratings, some people were certified flying instructors—CFI, and so I was a little intimidated when I first got to pilot training, just because I felt very far behind some of my classmates. But I worked very, very hard. I'm a very, like, team person. And so I'd worked with a lot of my classmates, whether it was studying, the chair flying — it's pretty funny to see now, because they have the virtual reality. I remember, like, the cockpit [chart] taped to my wall, and I had tape on the floor of my dorm room when I would like, do the reporting points and try to like, walk through and talk on the radios and — you know, what I'm going physically in the airplane. So I worked a lot with my classmates. And I actually was surprised when it ended and I was told my ranking and what not. I mean, I knew I was in the top part of the class, but I didn't think I was going to be the top graduate.

**SMITH:** So let's talk about what you put on your dream sheet, and —

**LEAVITT:** We didn't do dream sheets.

**SMITH:** You didn't do dream sheets?

**LEAVITT:** Mm mm.

**SMITH:** Oh, wow. So how did — you just had a drop for your class, or —

**LEAVITT:** They didn't have a drop.

**SMITH:** How did it — how did it —

**LEAVITT:** You selected. And so it was — I didn't realize it wasn't always like this, and I know it's not like it now, and it wasn't like it other times. But while I was there — well, another part of this, the whole "too many pilots" thing — so

[35:00]

what we are watching with all of the assignment drops that would come down, which was a list of airplanes, about half of the graduates would get airplanes, and half would get banked.<sup>13</sup> And so there were three categories. You could be banked tanker, banked fighter — I guess there were four. There were a couple banked bombers. So banked fighter, banked bomber, banked transport, banked tanker — where you would go do something else for three years, and then come back from the bank. So you would get your wings, graduate from pilot training, go do something else for three years, and come back. And so how it would work is a list of airplanes would come out, and then you would pick your assignment based on rank order. And they would telecom between — there were five bases at the time. So both Williams and Reese were still open. We were the last class [with] Williams [open], because Williams closed right after 93-04. But — so the drop would come down, and it would be a list of the airplanes. We had been watching them, and there had not been a fighter — at least, definitely during the T-38s, when I started paying attention more. We had not seen a single fighter come down. So there would be banked fighters. But there wouldn't be any actual fighters in the drop. So when my drop came, we saw it, and we [laughs] were all really shocked, because it had five actual fighters.

**SMITH:** So tell me how they show you this list of aircraft that's available to your class. What was that day like?

**LEAVITT:** I don't remember. I think I just had like, a printout. And actually, [laughs] I found the printout in my house when I was putting together some stuff recently. I'm like: oh, my gosh! It was only page one, but luckily, that's what I picked from, was page one. But it was a listing of assignments. And so when it first came out, there were five assignments that said "fighter," and then in parentheses, "TBD." To be determined. And so everyone [laughs] goes: what is that? Like, is that an actual fighter? Like, no one could believe it. And then I got called into the flight commander's office, and they would tell you where you ended up, rank order wise. And my class was also one where they had decided that they would never again have FAIPs.

**SMITH:** Oh.

**LEAVITT:** First Assignment Instructor Pilots. Yeah, everyone finds this very funny, but it was it was a point in time [laughs] — so at that point in time, they had decided that they would never again have FAIPs. They wanted experienced pilots training pilots, not First Assignment Instructor Pilots, because I would have done anything for a FAIP, because I really wanted to keep my options open, because I knew things were changing. Like, the law had changed.<sup>14</sup> It was a matter of time. You know? So I —

**SMITH:** Yeah, let's talk about that. I'm sorry to interrupt...

**LEAVITT:** Okay.

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<sup>13</sup> The banked pilot program is examined in Mark Babione's 94-020 AFIT thesis and in Bruce Callander's 8/16/2008 *Air Force Magazine* article, "And Now, the Pilot Shortage," <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a282334.pdf>; <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/0496pilots/>.

<sup>14</sup> Women were excluded from combat aircraft by law until PL 102-190 was signed into law in Dec 1991; they were excluded by DoD policy until it changed in Apr 1993 (SECDEF Les Aspin), and 2013 and 2016 (SECDEF Leon Panetta).

**SMITH:** ...that thought. We'll get back to the actual drop. But you were talking about the combat exclusion policy and public law.

**LEAVITT:** There was a law and a policy. Right.

**SMITH:** And policy. Right.

**LEAVITT:** So the law had changed.

**SMITH:** Right, in '91. So —

**LEAVITT:** Right. But Department of Defense still had their policy in place that was: no women in combat.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so I knew it was a matter of time. So, I would have loved a FAIP, but there were no FAIPs. Never again, or so they said, in 93-04. And so when they came up with the rank orders, I got called into my flight commander's office. And he said: okay, you finished number one overall. You need to go talk to the squadron commander. [laughs] So I went to the squadron commander, and he said: okay, you cannot select a fighter, a bomber, special ops. And he said: if you're going to ask for something you cannot have, please have the professional courtesy to let us know.

**SMITH:** Wow.

**LEAVITT:** And I said: okay, sir. I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm like: I don't know, but thank you. [laughs] And so —

**SMITH:** Was he giving you an order?

**LEAVITT:** No, he was — I was fine with him saying that, because he said: this is what you cannot have, by DOD policy. So he said: you cannot have these types of aircraft.

**SMITH:** Even though the law had changed.

**LEAVITT:** The law had changed. The policy had not.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So he said: if you're going to select one of those, please have the professional courtesy to let us know. And I said: that's fair, sir. I need to think about it. And so at that point, I got far more unsolicited advice than you could ever imagine.

**SMITH:** Oh, boy. Let's hear some of that. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** The vast majority of people said: don't even think about asking for that fighter. They knew what I wanted.

**SMITH:** Peers, or...

**LEAVITT:** No, instructors.

**SMITH:** ...instructors. Okay.

**LEAVITT:** Instructors.

**SMITH:** Now, I'm going to point out that, you know, there's also a competition among the instructors to get fighters at this point, because —

**LEAVITT:** Well, there had been no fighters. No fighters had come out in a very long time. Not for FAIPs. Not for students. Not for anyone.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So this was very new and different.

**SMITH:** So five fighters for one class is like —

**LEAVITT:** Well, for five different bases.

**SMITH:** Oh. Okay, so this is —

**LEAVITT:** Because it was going to be a telecon between all five bases.

**SMITH:** Oh, that's right. I totally forgot about that.

**LEAVITT:** So it was basically

[40:00]

one per base. Sheppard didn't count, because Sheppard was separate.

**SMITH:** Alright.

**LEAVITT:** It was ENJJPT.<sup>15</sup>

**SMITH:** And the first — so the — how did they determine who goes first?

**LEAVITT:** Well, it rotated from base to base. And as fate would have it, for class 93-04, it was Laughlin's turn to pick first.

**SMITH:** Yay.

**LEAVITT:** So I had to think about it. So there was a whole contingent of people saying: do not even ask for the fighter. You know you cannot have it, and you will forever be labeled as a troublemaker, and you will ruin your career. And you know, very few — if any — I think there was like, one person, who said: the law's changed. You know? Just ask for that fighter and walk out. And I was like: that's a little bit — the two, you know, bookends. I'm not sure what I'm going to do. And so I talked to my family, and they were very, very supportive. And you know, because part of that whole reason why I never flew growing up is because my mom was terrified of flying. And so I didn't fly in any commercial plane until I was 18. But she was very, very supportive, because she knew I loved this. She knew this was my passion. And so they were very supportive for whatever I wanted to do. And when it came down to it, I knew it was

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<sup>15</sup> Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training Program, <https://www.sheppard.af.mil/Library/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/367537/euro-nato-joint-jet-pilot-training-program-enijpt/>.

going to change, at some point. I mean, the fact is, the law's changed. It's just a matter of time. And I didn't know if it would be weeks, months, or years. But at some point in time, that law was going to change. And I'd say: oh, I always wanted to fly a fighter. And I didn't want people to say: well, did you ever ask?

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so I was like: I have to. So I went back to the squadron commander, and I said: sir — and I explained it just that way. I said: I have to ask, because I know it's going to change, and I just don't know when, but I have to. And at first, they said: okay. Well, the wing commander will come back and explain the policy. And I said: sir, I really want it on record. Like, I want it to go across to AFPC that that is my selection.

**SMITH:** Right. Air Force Personnel Center. Right.

**LEAVITT:** Air Force Personnel Center. And it was like: ugh, okay. I got called back a few times. And so when —

**SMITH:** Really? So —

**LEAVITT:** I did. [laughs]

**SMITH:** So with the squadron commander and the wing — group commander?

**LEAVITT:** The wing commander I talked to right before it all happened. And so how it was orchestrated is you would go into the theater area, the base theater — not base theater. The squadron theater there at UPT. And they would have you sit in rank order, from first to last, and then there was a telecon. And it was those overhead things with the Vis-a-Vis markers. [laughs] And they would put that on the projector for overhead, and then as someone would select an assignment, they would line through it at the five different bases. And that was how the whole process worked. And so shortly before the drop, those five fighter TBD changed, and it became one F-15E to Luke, and four A-10s to DM, Davis-Monthan. And so that was the drop I was looking at when it was time for my assignment. So just prior, the auditorium was packed. I had subsequently run into a number of people who were like: I was there that day. I remember that. Because everyone wanted to see what was going to happen.

**SMITH:** [laughs] Sure.

**LEAVITT:** So right before, I got pulled out. And the wing commander sat down with me and said: okay, here's how it's going to work. AFPC is going to direct you to make a choice. You'll make your selection. I will read it to AFPC, Air Force Personnel Center. They will quote the DOD policy and direct you to make another selection. And at that point, the ball is in your court, and I hope you make the right choice. And I said: I will, sir. And that was that. So for me, it was very anticlimactic, because I knew how everything was going to play out.

**SMITH:** Well — but also, did you feel like they were trying to intimidate you to not select a fighter?

**LEAVITT:** I think they were okay with me asking for it, because I explained the why.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** But I think they didn't know what [laughs] to do if I didn't make another choice.

**SMITH:** [laughs] Like, if you went to the A-10 right after — yeah.

**LEAVITT:** Right.

**SMITH:** Yeah. Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** Or, you know, I went through every single possible, you know, assignment. And I told them. I said: I will do anything for a FAIP. You know? Just to be, like, a Tweet IP at Laughlin. I would absolutely do anything for that assignment to keep myself eligible for fighters. But at that point in time, they had decided, no more FAIPs.

**SMITH:** And that happened during the time you were at UPT, the no-FAIP, or you're not sure?

**LEAVITT:** I can't remember, because I didn't [laughs] really pay attention until it got close to my drop. And so that was the rules when I was there. It didn't last very long. But that was the rules for Class of 93-04.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** And so when it all happened, I stood up. I asked for the Strike Eagle. They quoted DOD policy. I was directed to make another selection. And so I did.

**SMITH:** What was your next selection?

**LEAVITT:** So I selected

[45:00]

a KC-10 to March Air Force Base. And the main reason why was because at the time — I don't know if it's still the case — but some of the KC-10 bases in particular, they had T-38 ACE<sup>16</sup> which I don't remember what ACE stands for, but I don't think they flew enough hours in the KC-10, so they were able to go fly in T-38s. And I loved that airplane. Small, supersonic, high-performance trainer aircraft. And so I chose that assignment so I could still fly the T-38.

**SMITH:** I think it's "air crew enhancement," something like that. But I'll have to look that up. ACE.

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

**SMITH:** But it was a program where pilots in a weapons system could earn, you know, more time on weekends with the —

**LEAVITT:** They could fly more hours. Exactly.

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<sup>16</sup> Accelerated Copilot Enrichment was a Strategic Air Command (SAC) program that allowed pilots to fly T-38s to build their airmanship and log flight hours/events at a lower operating cost than flying their primary weapon system, <https://www.whiteman.af.mil/News/Features/Display/Article/912913/talons-out-companion-trainer-program-keeps-pilots-in-air/>; <https://www.ctairandspace.org/copy-of-1957-cessna-t-37-tweet>.

**SMITH:** --In a trainer aircraft that they were familiar with. Wow. So what was the reaction afterwards? From your classmates, just in general? Were people upset? Were they just like: oh, I can't believe she — was there any, like, reaction in the room when you stood up and said, you know: F-15E.

**LEAVITT:** I don't really remember. I remember it was just so packed. And I was...

**SMITH:** Well, you were — sure.

**LEAVITT:** ...like, nervous, even though I knew how it was all going to play out.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** It was still, you know, my heart was beating. So I just remember it being very crowded, and then it all played out as I expected. And then it went on down the line and went to the five different bases. And not surprisingly, the first five to go — well, other than my assignment — was the five fighters.

**SMITH:** Sure.

**LEAVITT:** So the other four bases, the top person each requested a fighter, and then the second person at Laughlin requested a fighter as well.

**SMITH:** So any other women in the top, say, three that you remember in that class?

**LEAVITT:** Uh-uh.

**SMITH:** Okay. So let's go through graduation. You know, great time. You get what awards at graduation?

**LEAVITT:** Ooh, I had —

**SMITH:** Were you DG?<sup>17</sup>

**LEAVITT:** I was DG. I had the ATC Commander's Trophy. Academic Award, I think, and either Flying or Officer. I can't remember which one. Not both, but one of them. So I don't remember which one. I'll have to go back and look. Yes, so I did get some recognition at the end of pilot training.

**SMITH:** Appropriately so. Then about a month later, the then-Secretary of Defense Aspin —

**LEAVITT:** Oh, no, no, no. There was a lot between then. It was April.

**SMITH:** Wasn't it a month — okay, tell me what happened.

**LEAVITT:** So January —

**SMITH:** Two months, yeah.

**LEAVITT:** So January, I graduated.

**SMITH:** Yeah.

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<sup>17</sup> Distinguished Graduate.

**LEAVITT:** And again, I had never slowed down, because I had undergrad to grad to pilot training, so I immediately packed up, moved out to California. Found an apartment, got all settled, and I was ready to go.

**SMITH:** Had you already gone — did — had you already gone to survival, or did you have to go —

**LEAVITT:** I hadn't gone to survival yet.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** So I showed up in California, and I showed up in March. And I remember, because I showed up to my squadron, and I said: this is me. I'm ready. You know? And they said: okay, your class starts in like, March or something. And I said: well, can I get some books? Can I study? And they said: well, no. We'll train you, you know, when you need it. And I'm like: can I do sims? Can I — [laughs] and they said: no, just find a place to live. And I said: I did. And they were like: well, get settled. And I'm like: I did. [laughs] They're like: okay, we really don't care what you do. Just, you know, this is when your training starts. And it was kind of a foreign concept to me. So I remember meeting up with some of the people in the squadron, and they were telling me about this Pacific rim tour they were going to go on. I said: oh, can I go? And they said: sure, we'll get you on, you know, crew orders, and you can go. Because I'm like: I'd love to see what the mission is...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...and understand about it, and all of this. Well, so the "no more FAIPs ever" didn't last all that long. So a friend of mine, who had graduated top out of Sheppard, had ended up with a Tweet<sup>18</sup> to Laughlin. Okay? So he was not the happiest guy. So when I was in '38s, he showed up in Tweets. And he called me up, and he said: you will not believe what happened in the next drop. I was like: I don't want to hear it. Don't even talk to me. I'm like, I can't hear you. Because I'm like: it can't affect me, so I don't want to hear. And he was like: no, you're not going to believe it. And I was like: do not tell me there was a Tweet FAIP. He's like: worse. And I'm like: do not tell me there was a T-38 FAIP. And he goes: worse. And I go: what could be worse? And he said: there were two T-38 female-only FAIPs, and only one got taken.

**SMITH:** Wait a minute. The assignment was coded as female-only?

**LEAVITT:** So after my drop, SUPT was going into effect, and they realized that to come back and instruct in the T-38, you have to have been a fighter, and if no women go to fighters, then they will never again have female T-38 instructors.

[50:00]

I don't know why they did this. But for whatever reason, Class 93-06 had two T-38 female-only FAIPs, and only one got taken. So I called up the AFPC. [laughs] And I started to explain who I was, and the person on the other side of the line said: "Oh, we know who you are." Because I guess I had caused a little trouble in that previous drop. And so I kind of laid out the situation. And I said, "Hey, I would have done anything just to have a Tweet to Laughlin," and he's like, "You don't want that." I'm like, "I would

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<sup>18</sup> T-37.

have done anything.” And he goes — he kind of laughed. And he said, “Okay, you want that T-38 assignment that wasn’t taken?” And I said, “Absolutely, more than anything.” And he said, “Well, have you moved yet?” And I’m like, “Oh, yeah. I am settled in California. I’m PCSd.” And he’s like, “Oh.” And he’s like, “Well, if you hadn’t moved,” he was like, “probably could do it, but you’ve moved, and —” I’m like, “I’ll move on my own dime. I’ll do anything.” And he’s like, “I’ll ask the question. But,” he goes, “if it were up to me, I’d say sure. But,” he said, “it’s not up to me.” And so —

**SMITH:** What month is this? Is this February yet? Or still —

**LEAVITT:** Maybe late January, maybe early February. I’m not sure of the timing. And so I — at that point, I was like: okay. And [laughs] I remember I was going to ride my horse, because I had horses. And so I’d — I was going to ride my horse, because I didn’t really know what to do, and when I’d gone through the orderly room, I had, you know, given my address and all of that. And as I was going to check mail, I’m — no kidding — in boots and jeans and carrying carrots. And I see someone from my office. And I’m like: what are you doing here? He’s like: there you are. [laughs] And he goes: you need to call this phone number. And so I said: okay. So I called, and it was this lieutenant colonel. And he’s like: okay. I’m going to put the general on. I said: okay. And this general, who was out at March, he said: okay, do you want to fly the KC-10 or the T-38? And I said: well, quite honestly, is this a trick question? Because I’ve already selected the [laughs] KC-10. And he kind of laughed. Then he said: do you want to go fly the ‘38s? And I said: absolutely! And he said: okay, you’re going to Vance. And I said: that’s awesome. Thank you, thank you, thank you. And so then I PCS’d to Vance Air Force Base. And my friend, who was out at Stanford with me, he was stationed at Edwards. He was like: how can you PCS in and out within one month? You can’t do that. And I said: well, that’s what I’m doing. And I don’t know. It’s just what they told me to do. So I moved to Vance, and after —

**SMITH:** In Oklahoma.

**LEAVITT:** In Oklahoma. So Enid, Oklahoma. I went to Vance Air Force Base and stayed there for maybe about three or four weeks waiting for Pilot Instructor Training to start at Randolph — PIT.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So at Vance, I flew with — they had a — like, a graduated student flight, which is students who had already graduated the ‘38 that were waiting for some kind of follow-on. So I just flew for them — with them for a couple weeks, and I then went to Randolph Air Force Base to start PIT.

**SMITH:** So what month are we in?

**LEAVITT:** We’re probably — maybe late February, early March, going to —

**SMITH:** Okay. So you’re at PIT when —

**LEAVITT:** There’s — yes, there’s two of us that are females in that PIT class, because one was class 93-06 who picked that other one.

**SMITH:** That’s right.

**LEAVITT:** Now, General Sherrie McCandless<sup>19</sup> and I were in that PIT class together.

**SMITH:** Alright. So at the end of April, while you're — where were you at — what phase of PIT were you at the ground, or like in a platform instruction, or—

**LEAVITT:** We were already flying in the back seat. So we had finished all the front-seat stuff, and we were doing the back-seat flights at this point in the syllabus.

**SMITH:** So you're in PIT. I mean, you're not —

**LEAVITT:** I am in PIT

**SMITH:** It's not — nothing preliminary. No ground-only stuff. And —

**LEAVITT:** I had never stopped flying the 38, because...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...I had been flying at Laughlin, then at Vance, and at PIT.

**SMITH:** Did you get to fly the '38 at March at all?

**LEAVITT:** I was only there a couple weeks. Seriously, I was there for about two weeks. [laughs] It was a very quick...

**SMITH:** [laughs] Quick touch-and-go.

**LEAVITT:** ...pass through March. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Oh, my gosh. So, yeah. So we'll get to Secretary Aspin's remarks on — at the end of April. I think it's April 28, '93.

**LEAVITT:** Well, there's a phone call that came in first that's probably relevant.

**SMITH:** You tell the story. [laughs] Let's go ahead.

**LEAVITT:** [laughs] So while I was going through PIT, I tended to go grab a frozen meal in my room every day at lunch, just because it was fast and easy. So one of the days I was in my Q room, heating up a microwave meal for lunch, and a phone call comes in, and it was a three-star general. At the time, I didn't really understand who he was. In hindsight, I understand now that it was the A-1 — the HAF A-1.<sup>20</sup> And he asked me —

**SMITH:** Explain — I'm sorry.

**LEAVITT:** Oh, sorry.

**SMITH:** Headquarters Air Force.

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<sup>19</sup> Maj Gen Sherrie McCandless is the Director, Office of Legislative Liaison, National Guard Bureau at the Pentagon, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/portals/31/Features/ngbgomo/bio/3/3047.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Headquarters Air Force A-1 is the three-star general on the Air Staff at the Pentagon in charge of Manpower, Personnel, and Services for the Air Force.

**LEAVITT:** Headquarters Air Force, Director of Personnel.<sup>21</sup> A three-star general — lieutenant general. So  
[55:00]

he starts asking me about back in January, when I asked for that F-15E. And he said: when you asked for that F-15E, were you trying to make a point, or did you actually want to fly the Strike Eagle? And I said: oh, I absolutely wanted to fly the Strike Eagle. I'm like: more than every — anything. I've had five back-seat rides in F-16s, and — I just talked about how much I loved that, and I absolutely wanted to fly it. And he said: well, you realize that if you were to go fly it, you would be the first female to fly fighters for the Air Force, and there would be a lot of attention and a lot of publicity. And I said: quite honestly, sir, I would not want any of that. I said: I would much rather be some random number, you know, months from now — you know, number 43, where nobody cares. And I can just go be a fighter pilot. And he said: well, this is a significant change, and if we did this, you know, you would be the first. And so there would be attention. And I said: well, sir, I don't want any of the attention, but if it's the terms of the deal, I'll take it. And he laughed, and he was like: no, no. Nothing's changing. You know, go back to PIT. [laughs] I was like: really? And so I finished my lunch, and for the next few days, I'm like: any messages? Did anyone call? [laughs] And then I went back to normal, because you know, a week or so passed, and absolutely nothing. So I'm like: okay, that was a false alarm for that.

**SMITH:** It got — did it get your hopes up at first?

**LEAVITT:** It did. Oh, absolutely. I was, no kidding, like: surely there's a phone call for me. Like, a message? Anyone call? Nothing? So yeah, I had my hopes up for about a week or so, and then I kind of said: okay, it's — nothing's going to happen. And then I was told to go to the ATC Commander. So now it's the AETC, the Air Education Training Command. Back then, it was Air Training Command. It was a four-star general, General Viccellio,<sup>22</sup> and I was told to go to his office. Quite honestly, I didn't believe my classmates, because they were really good at practical jokes and what-not. So I did not believe them. And —

**SMITH:** Give me an example of a practical joke before that.

**LEAVITT:** There were so many, I —

**SMITH:** Just one before that that was — if you think of it later, tell me.

**LEAVITT:** I will. Okay.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** So I got validation from one of the instructors I trusted to not pull a prank on me, and so I went to General Viccellio office at Headquarters ATC, and I went into his office. I did not really — I had no idea what was going on. I — for some reason, I did not make that connection. I didn't want —

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<sup>21</sup> Lt Gen Billy Boles was the Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel on the Air Staff at the Pentagon, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/107682/general-billy-j-boles/>; <https://media.defense.gov/2013/Apr/22/2001329966/-1/-1/0/AFD-130422-036.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> General Henry Vicellio, Jr., <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/105339/general-henry-vicellio-jr/>.

**SMITH:** When is this? Is this still April, or are we in May?

**LEAVITT:** This is April.

**SMITH:** April.

**LEAVITT:** And so —

**SMITH:** Before the announcement.

**LEAVITT:** Before the announcement.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** So this is where I found out that it was actually changing. And I think he thought someone had told me. Everyone was smiling and shaking my hand. I had no idea why. And he started talking about some of the specifics. And I said: sir, I'm not really sure what we're talking about. He's like: well, you're going to fly F-15Es. And I was like, completely overjoyed. And then they're like: but you can't tell anyone, [laughs] because of the announcement.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so I — it was very strange, because I had to go back to the squadron, and everyone said: what was that all about?

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And I'm like: I don't know. You know?

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** And so they actually added a line<sup>23</sup> on Friday, because they wanted to get some footage of me, some B-roll, that they could use when they do the announcement and all of that. And again, people are like: why are you flying on Friday? Why did we have a line on — I don't know. [laughs] So I sounded probably a little strange, because I couldn't say anything.

**SMITH:** Right. Normally, you don't fly on Fridays like that, or —

**LEAVITT:** No, no, no. It was like, an additional line, just for me.

**SMITH:** Oh, just — just for you. Okay.

**LEAVITT:** Like — so like: Lieutenant Flynn will fly in this line.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And there were cameras and people filming. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Yeah, it wasn't a syllabus ride. Yeah. Yeah.

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<sup>23</sup> A flight on the day's flight schedule.

**LEAVITT:** It was not a normal thing.

**SMITH:** Right. And what was going on was the Air Force had gone through and looked at every woman pilot graduate to see if anyone would have qualified for a fighter, and you were on a very short list of women pilots who, had the policy been different, would have qualified for a fighter. And that —

**LEAVITT:** I think I was an obvious choice...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...because I had actually stood up and asked for it.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** But they did — they went back to all the classes — because remember, they didn't always pick their assignments. Like in your case, I think it was dream sheets.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so they went back to dream sheets, and they also went back and made sure, like, someone who was not in a major weapons system. And so, if you were flying like, T-37s or T-38s, or like, C-12, C-21s, things like that, things that are not major weapons systems, they went back and they looked at if you would have qualified if that policy hadn't been in place. And so they did, and I fell in that category. And I think mine was easy based on the fact that I, no kidding, stood up and asked for it.  
[laughs]

**SMITH:** Right. Right. So you get — you get all this footage taken, and then

[1:00:00]

tell me where you were when you heard about Secretary Aspin making the announcement that...

**LEAVITT:** So —

**SMITH:** ...the DOD policy has now changed. The public law had already been changed two years prior, but this is the end of April, or April 28, in '93. And he makes this announcement that directs the services to get in line [laughs] to open combat aircraft to women. And where were you when that happened?

**LEAVITT:** I was in the Pentagon. So, once General Viccellio told me, and they took the footage, they then sent me up to the Pentagon, because right after Secretary Aspin's press conference, General McPeak,<sup>24</sup> who was Chief of Staff of the Air Force, had a press conference. So they flew me and two other female pilots who had followed in the pipeline shortly after me. We all went up there. So one was then-Captain,

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<sup>24</sup> General Merrill A. McPeak was the Air Force Chief of Staff from Oct 1990-Oct 1994; he retired Nov 1, 1994, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/106137/general-merrill-a-mcpeak/>.

now Senator, Martha McSally,<sup>25</sup> and Captain Sharon Preszler.<sup>26</sup> And Senator McSally was a T-37 instructor pilot, a FAIP. And Captain Pressler was a C-21 pilot. So, neither one in major weapons systems. Both would have — finished high enough that they would have been eligible for a fighter. And so the three of us went up to the Pentagon. I was a second lieutenant. They were both captains. And we went through media training to get prepared for the press conference.

**SMITH:** Well, that was wise.

**LEAVITT:** That was wise.

**SMITH:** Yeah, because media would be part of your life from there on out.

**LEAVITT:** And there was a lot of vocal opposition to DOD changing the policy. There were a number of hearings prior to Secretary Aspin making the change, and there were a lot of vocal — not advocates. The opposite. Like, people who did not want this to happen.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** They were vocally opposed to the change. And so all of that was very fresh and very recent in the press. And so they would do media training, and then kind of throw those comments at us and see how we'd react.

**SMITH:** So how long was this training? And then —

**LEAVITT:** The press — the media training was for like, a day or two. And then we were there for the announcement. And so Secretary Aspin made the announcement. All the service chiefs were there. And then General McPeak said: and right after this, the Air Force will have a press conference, and we'll introduce the first female fighter pilots. And so they cleared people out, and then the — we stood up there, and we were part of that announcement.

**SMITH:** So were the other services included in — did each service have their own announcement? Like, the Navy —

**LEAVITT:** We were the only one. Navy was reeling from Tailhook, quite honestly.

**SMITH:** Right, and they actually had already had women checked out in fighter aircraft. But not —

**LEAVITT:** Not in combat.

**SMITH:** Not in — not to employ, but for —

**LEAVITT:** Right. They were not combat-coded.

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<sup>25</sup> Martha McSally was the first woman to pilot a fighter aircraft in combat. Carl Bergquist, Air University Public Affairs, Dec 6, 2006. Accessed Dec 18, 2019, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/128823/1st-air-force-female-pilot-in-combat-reflects-on-career/>.

<sup>26</sup> Lt Col Sharon Preszler flew C-21s before being selected (in 1993) to train as an Air Force F-16 pilot. Tarsha Storey, "First female active-duty fighter pilot retires," 20th FW/PA, Oct 13, 2006. The article lacks dates to substantiate its title claim. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, <https://www.shaw.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/214074/first-female-active-duty-fighter-pilot-retires/>.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** They were not mission-ready, but they flew them in like, training or aggressor...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...kind of roles. And so the —

**SMITH:** Which was still a big feat. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** Absolutely.

**SMITH:** And — but, you know — so —

**LEAVITT:** So the Navy didn't have — none of the other services had a press conference planned. I think the Air Force wanted to really, like, get the attention.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** [Recording skips].<sup>27</sup> At the time, the Marines actually didn't even have any female pilots.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So there was no — they said: first, we have to get female pilots and we can — [laughs]

**SMITH:** Because everything in the Marines is combat.

**LEAVITT:** Right.

**SMITH:** So yeah, that was their argument for many years. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** Exactly.

**SMITH:** So — but — and I'm not saying that's not true. I'm just saying that was the argument. So tell me about what happened after that. Not — we're going to take a break before we get to RTU and actual F-15E training. But your life had to change dramatically right after that announcement. How did people react? What was your — what was life like for you then?

**LEAVITT:** So I went back to PIT, and my assigned instructor was great. He was an F-4 guy, and he was always talking about fighters, because everyone knew my story when I showed up. I was fairly high-visibility when I showed up. And my flight commander was not a proponent of women flying in combat.

**SMITH:** Did he make that known to you?

**LEAVITT:** Oh, absolutely. Yes. He sat down with me.

**SMITH:** Before?

**LEAVITT:** Oh, absolutely. When I showed up.

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<sup>27</sup> Occasionally, the post-production software skipped mangled words, especially when spoken fast. It is unclear if Leavitt said that it worked out well or that it didn't work out well.

**SMITH:** Okay. So tell me about that.

**LEAVITT:** So my — so Lieutenant McCandless and I were called into his office. And he was a fighter pilot, and he explained to us why women should not fly fighters. And we listened and said, “Yes, sir,” and then left his office.

**SMITH:** What were some of his reasons, if you can recount them?

**LEAVITT:** I don’t remember. There were a lot of people opposed. And so I’d be mixing up reasons and why.

**SMITH:** Oh, gotcha.

**LEAVITT:** So I don’t remember why. But my assigned instructor pilot, he was

[1:05:00]

an F-4 pilot, and he was all about, you know, whoever the best pilot is. He didn’t care about the gender. And so when I got back from Washington, D.C., the flight commander — well, my instructor went ahead and started moving me — my pucks — you know, it’s when they assign — they put little pucks for where you’re flying. Well, he started moving me to the front seat, because he said: there’s no point in you flying back seat anymore. We might as well set you up for success, because the follow-on training was going to be in these advanced T-38s, the AT-38s. And so he said: we’ll just start putting you in the front seat. So he moved all the pucks to the front seat. And then the flight commander directed that I would not fly again until I left. And so he pulled all the pucks off, and he said: she’s grounded, because she’s not going to finish this syllabus, and I don’t want to waste any sorties.

**SMITH:** So how long did you — were you at PIT before you PCS’d?

**LEAVITT:** Well, the great news was, that only lasted a couple days, because...

**SMITH:** Well, that’s good.

**LEAVITT:** ...General Viccellio decided he wanted me to fly on his wing before I left. And then suddenly, I flew every day. So it worked out really well. I was very happy. I never told General Viccellio that, but I was very happy he wanted me to fly on his wing, because that meant I got to fly every day.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So, it worked out.

**SMITH:** Wow. Wow. It never ceases to amaze me what some people will do with power that is misdirected. So, yeah. So —

**LEAVITT:** So I think my last flight was with General Viccellio. It was the four-star with his exec captain in the back seat, and then I was on the wing with the squadron commander in my back seat.

**SMITH:** Fun, fun.

**LEAVITT:** There you go.

**SMITH:** Alright. Well, we're going to take a break if you don't mind.

**LEAVITT:** Sure.

**SMITH:** And we'll start back up with F-15E training.

**LEAVITT:** Okay.

**SMITH:** Or actually, fighter lead-in.<sup>28</sup>

**LEAVITT:** Okay.

**SMITH:** Yeah.

[TAPE PAUSED at 1:06:50]

**SMITH:** Okay. Before the break, we were ending up with your flight on General Viccellio's wing.

**LEAVITT:** That's right.

**SMITH:** And that was your last flight at Randolph at what would have been Pilot Instructor Training. And then you had other training that you needed to complete before F-15E qualifications. So why don't you take me through those?

**LEAVITT:** Sure. So the next training was at Holloman Air Force Base in Alamogordo, New Mexico. It was called IFF, or Introduction to Fighter Fundamentals. We went to — there were a number of us, because at that time, we also had the first people coming back from the bank. We talked about the bank earlier. So some of the people who were at Randolph were in a different flight, but they were going through requal<sup>29</sup> after having gone to pilot training and then gone and done other things. And they were going to go to fighters.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** And so I actually knew a few people at Holloman, which was nice. Like I said, we all went to Holloman and started training together.

**SMITH:** How long was that fighter lead-in for IFF?

**LEAVITT:** I think the training was about maybe seven weeks long, plus or minus a little bit.

**SMITH:** So you're the first woman to fly<sup>30</sup> a fighter in the United States Air Force. This is, you know, not — we're not speaking about the WASP. We're speaking of combat-certified fighter pilots. So, tell me about your reception at IFF, apart from the people that you knew. What was it like?

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<sup>28</sup> The course is called Introduction to Fighter Fundamentals, or IFF, <https://www.aetc.af.mil/News/Article/1786475/iff-where-fighter-pilots-begin-their-careers/>.

<sup>29</sup> Requalification training.

<sup>30</sup> The first woman to be trained as a mission-ready fighter pilot. The WASP were the first women to fly military aircraft, including fighters and bombers, but they were not allowed to join the military. Other women had piloted fighters, but no U.S. military woman pilot had been certified mission-ready in a fighter aircraft.

**LEAVITT:** It was challenging, because I didn't get to just go like everyone else did. And so when we showed up, I went straight to press conferences and Public Affairs, and they wanted B-roll again. So they had me taxi an airplane. I hadn't even started the program, and I had to taxi an airplane around with an IP in my back seat, so they could have the footage. And we did a press conference, none of which I wanted to do, but I knew those were the terms of the deal. But it certainly made it harder to come in and be one of the people in the squadron when you're treated differently than the rest.

**SMITH:** Sure. Did that continue — the media coverage continue throughout your time at IFF, or was it — you know, did the Air Force keep the media at bay for you so you could complete your training?

**LEAVITT:** The Air Force did a good job of having me do it up front and then letting me do whatever that training was. But it was anywhere I went. Like, even when I went to water survival after that, it was a week-long training, and they had me do a press conference — which, it was a week of training in Florida. [laughs] But it was just kind of what we did back then.

**SMITH:** Right. Land survival, same thing? Or was that —

**LEAVITT:** Yes. Land survival came a little later, and it got delayed because I had the chicken pox, which also made the news. So it was — yeah, it was kind of like anything I did. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Under the microscope, for sure. So how did that make you feel about your decision? Did you have any second thoughts,

[1:10:00]

or were you —

**LEAVITT:** I loved the flying. I did not like the media, the press attention...

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** ...things like that. But again, to the Air Force's credit, I went in eyes wide-open. I knew what the terms of the deal were. So I loved the flying, and so I went through the media events.

**SMITH:** Right. Just something you had to do. So tell me about Luke. Is that the next step, or no?

**LEAVITT:** So after Holloman, I go to water survival in Florida, and then pick up my stuff in Oklahoma and head out to Phoenix — I mean, to Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix, Arizona.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** That's the next stop.

**SMITH:** So first day there. What was that like?

**LEAVITT:** So I liked that they did things a little different. Instead of having a press conference for me and the rest of the class going elsewhere, they did something a little different. So they said: this is Class 93-BBE — that was the designator of our class — and they said: these are the 16 students, and she is one of them. And so all 16 of us were there for the press conference. And obviously, most of the questions went towards me. But it was really nice for me for the other — for my classmates to see what it was I

did every time. And so I thought that was a good way of doing it. And they even told them up front, that: you're going to talk to her now, and then nothing for six months, because she'll be in training.

**SMITH:** Oh, nice. I'm sure that was a relief for you to hear that.

**LEAVITT:** I was very happy with that plan.

**SMITH:** Yeah. So after this, how is your relationship with your classmates? Did you know any of them? Had you —

**LEAVITT:** I did not know any of my classmates going in...

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** ...when I started. Because the ones I had been with at Holloman, they were going to other fighter platforms.

**SMITH:** Okay. So tell me about — this is RTU<sup>31</sup>—Replacement—

**LEAVITT:** This is RTU. So the squadron commander was — T.J. Wyatt was his name, and he called me in his office. And it was kind of funny, because he said: well, I figure you can fly, or you wouldn't be here. But I hear you have a horse. And he was like: tell me about your horse. So I told him about my horse, Smokey, and — [laughs]

**SMITH:** Smokey?

**LEAVITT:** Smokey was his name. Yup.

**SMITH:** What kind of horse?

**LEAVITT:** Appaloosa stallion. And he passed away a few years ago.

**SMITH:** I'm sorry.

**LEAVITT:** But I had him for a very long time. And so I told him about Smokey, and you know, our experiences and the whole bit. And he was a cowboy, T.J. was. And he said: well, you're horse people. He's like: you're good people. You'll do alright. And so that was my introduction with my squadron commander. Last night, funny enough, I ran into — I didn't know it at the time, but he was the maintenance officer when I got to Luke.

**SMITH:** Oh, wow.

**LEAVITT:** And so it was very interesting, because he told me that he and his chief got called into T.J. Wyatt's office, and they said: alright, here's the deal. We've got a female pilot in this next class. And the maintenance officer described his chief as very, very rough around the edges, very salty. And so he did not know what his chief was going to say. And his chief goes: is she an officer? And T.J.'s like: yes, she's a lieutenant. And he said: so she's been through pilot training? And he goes: yeah. And he's like: alright.

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<sup>31</sup> Replacement Training Unit.

And that was that. And the maintenance officer was like: oh, my gosh, because he expected a far different reaction. But it's kind of like the airplane. The airplane doesn't care who's flying it.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** It doesn't care the gender.

**SMITH:** Right. Did any of your instructors care, or you know, just reception-wise?

**LEAVITT:** I think by the time I got to FTU it got easier, because each time they would call to my previous place where I was going through training, and once they realized I was a competent pilot and a hard-working, diligent, young officer that just wanted to learn, it made it easier as I went from base to base.

**SMITH:** Okay. Tell me about your first flight.

**LEAVITT:** It was amazing. I mean, I told you I liked the T-38. It was, you know, a supersonic, high-performance trainer aircraft. But to get inside the Strike Eagle and light the afterburners and take off was absolutely amazing. And then we did a lot of simulators going up to that first flight, but I absolutely loved it, that first flight.

**SMITH:** Did you have a sense of competition during that training, or is it just: hey, we're all trying to just get certified. We're obviously all great pilots, or we wouldn't be here. [laughs]

[1:15:00]

**LEAVITT:** Yeah. And the Strike Eagle's a two-seat airplane, so...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...eight of the students were pilots, and eight were WSOs or Weapons System Officers, as we call them. And I just remember working very, very hard. The competition at that point — I wasn't in competition with anyone.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** I just wanted to be the best Strike Eagle pilot I could be.

**SMITH:** Alright. So from graduation out of Luke, you get assigned to the 336th Fighter Squadron at Seymour — Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina. And then tell me about your first day there.

**LEAVITT:** Well, on the way, I had to go to survival training...

**SMITH:** Oh, so that's —

**LEAVITT:** ...at Fairchild. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** And right towards the end of the B course, I remember one of the instructors stopping by. I was in a debrief and — or, we had finished debrief, and we were talking in one of the briefing rooms. And he said: I want to introduce you to my daughter. And then he said: you have had the chicken pox,

right? And I was like: I don't know. And he goes: well, I don't think she's contagious. But they left. Well, I had actually not had the chicken pox. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Oh, no.

**LEAVITT:** And I then got the chicken pox, right after graduation. And so everything got delayed. So I had to shift to a later survival class, due to having the chicken pox. But after that, I went to Fairchild for survival training. And that one was kind of interesting. I was a little naïve, still. And I remember the instructors. They're SERE, so: survival, evasion, resistance, and escape instructors. And we're all in this auditorium. And he's like: how many fighter pilots do we have out there? And you know, I just — I raised my hand. I didn't really think about it. And he was like: one. And I was like: ugh. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Oh, no. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** And so I was "LT" from the rest of the time on out. So they were always referencing me. And then it didn't help that during my survival training, *Air Force Times* did one where I was on the cover of the magazine. Because he was like: hey, LT. You seen the latest *Air Force Times*? And I said: no, I haven't. And he's like: well, I've got a copy for you right here. And so it was right before we went into resistance training. So not great timing, but that's okay.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** But I went through the SERE training, and then I moved to North Carolina, where I went to Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base to the 336th Fighter Squadron, the Rocketeers.

**SMITH:** Okay. And your reception at the 336th? So, this is an established F-15E squadron, but you're obviously the first woman to pilot the aircraft.

**LEAVITT:** Well, the first day it was kind of funny, because I was in the middle of moving in, and I got a call. And they said: the squadron commander wants to meet you. And I said: I don't know where my uniforms are. Like, I haven't unpacked yet. And they said: that's okay. Just come in. And my car often didn't run quite right, so I had the motorcycle. So I had to hop on my motorcycle and show up. Boots, motorcycle helmet. I mean, like, a terrible first impression. But I was like: hello, this is me. But I was directed to come in. So — but there, I had people from my class that were also coming in, and so that helped. There were three of us lieutenants that came in at the same time to the 336th. And I had really hoped that I would not be one of the Snack-Os.<sup>32</sup> There were two Snack-Os, but I was. I was one of the two Snack-O. So I spent my first year as a Snack-O.

**SMITH:** Snack duty officer, meaning...

**LEAVITT:** I'd also been — that's right.

**SMITH:** ...you control all the goodies for sale. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** Yes. So — yes, it's — so it's kind of one of those no-win jobs. If you do it really well, no one notices. If you don't do it well, everyone notices. [laughs]

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<sup>32</sup> The most junior officer is often charged with operating the very high-demand snack bar, and called the Snack-O.

**SMITH:** So yeah. So you can tell me the favorite snack of the Strike Eagle [laughs] crewmembers. What could you not run out of?

**LEAVITT:** Everything. Well, I learned one morning — because at the time, I was not a coffee drinker, and I was sitting in a briefing room getting ready to brief. And someone came in, and they said: there is no coffee. You do not fly if there's not coffee. And I threw everything down and raced over, and never, ever, ever did I let anything run out. Coffee, creamer, sugar, you know — drinks, snacks. You name it. I never let anything — and I made it back in time to fly the sortie, so it was good.

**SMITH:** [laughs] So you were there from let's see, April '94 through January of '98, according to your...

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

**SMITH:** ...military resume. What was your first deployment like, or were you deployed during that time, I guess I should ask.

**LEAVITT:** I did a couple deployments during that time. So my first one was to Dhahran.<sup>33</sup> And we — it was in support of Operation Southern Watch.<sup>34</sup> And we flew missions enforcing the no-fly zone over southern Iraq. So we would launch out of Dhahran,

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and then either protect assets we had or enforced the no-fly zone on the ground.

**SMITH:** And how were you received there? [laughs] This is Saudi Arabia.

**LEAVITT:** This is Saudi Arabia. And at the time, I was not allowed to drive.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So when we would leave the base, I was a designated passenger, because I was not allowed to drive. When we would go to restaurants, I could not go into the main area. I had to go into the family area. So, no women or children are allowed in the main part of the restaurants. The women and children go into the family area. The good news was, at the time, Dhahran was out on the east coast, and I was not required to wear an abaya.<sup>35</sup> They just told me to wear long sleeves, long pants, no tight-fitting clothing, when I went out. And so I would always be the passenger, and off we would go. So the first time I was flying, I remember my squadron commander said: we're not sure how they're going to react to a female voice. And I said: there's other women pilots. And they said: well, yeah, but not in fighters. You know, they fly some of the other airplanes. And so I just kind of have a plan. What does that mean?

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<sup>33</sup> An air base in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>34</sup> Operation Southern Watch began in April 1991 to implement a no-fly zone over Iraq. "1991-Operation Southern Watch," Air Force Historical Support Division, Sept 18, 2012. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, <https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458951/operation-southern-watch/>.

<sup>35</sup> A loose-fitting black cloak worn by Muslim women (also called a burqa) that was, at one time, required dress for U.S. military women when traveling off-base in Saudi Arabia. Ann Gerhart, "McSally: No Muslim garb at war," Jan 7, 2002, *Washington Post*. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision2012/mcsally-no-muslim-garb-at-war/2012/10/25/6f215608-1d38-11e2-9cd5-b55c38388962\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision2012/mcsally-no-muslim-garb-at-war/2012/10/25/6f215608-1d38-11e2-9cd5-b55c38388962_story.html).

So when we came back to land, he goes: you don't ever talk on the main radio unless you're the flight lead. We have other radios, Have-Quick, where there is frequency hopping and things like that. So I hadn't talked on the main radio until it was time to land. And when we came in to land, I called—the three airplanes in front of me called gear, got cleared to land—I called gear, and there was no response.<sup>36</sup> And I called gear again, and there was no response. And I was pretty frustrated. I was a pretty young pilot, and so I asked my back-seater to make the gear call, and he did. And we got cleared to land. And I came in really unhappy. I talked to my squadron leadership, and I argued that there was a safety of flight situation. Like, I didn't care what rules they had, and I understood, and I abided by the rules of not driving on the roads, but clearance to land was a safety of flight thing. So they brought that up with our host folks. And after that, I did get cleared to land. It usually took a second call, but I got cleared to land after that.

**SMITH:** Well, good for you for speaking up about that. Yeah. So I'm just going to ask if you can just walk us through the upgrades, like, your flight lead and, you know, two- and four-ship — just what upgrades you had during your time with the 336th before you went to Fighter Weapons School.<sup>37</sup>

**LEAVITT:** So pretty early during my time, I decided I wanted to go to Weapons School, and the reason was because of my weapons officer. Whenever you would fly with him, he was an outstanding instructor and great leader, and I said: I want to be just like him. And so I decided really early on, before I had started upgrades, that I wanted to go to Weapons School.

**SMITH:** Who was that?

**LEAVITT:** At the time, it was Captain Steve Kwast.

**SMITH:** Can you say his last name one more time?

**LEAVITT:** Kwast. K-W-A-S-T.

**SMITH:** Thanks. So you did everything you needed to do to get yourself qualified for Weapons School early, or on time?

**LEAVITT:** Well, I mean, obviously you have to do all the upgrades in sequence. And so you first build hours. And so I was always, always, always available. If anyone would fall out of the sortie, I was the first one to the ops desk when they would make the announcement. You know, any pilot with crew rest — and I'd be at the pilot — or at the ops desk before they could finish the announcement. So I flew any chance I got and then upgraded to two-ship and four-ship, and instructor, and mission commander, during that time. And then you have to build up — you had to have a certain number of hours — I think 50 hours as an instructor pilot — before you were qualified to go to the Weapons School.

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<sup>36</sup> The "gear" call (indicating the pilot verifies that all landing gear indicate down and locked) is made before receiving landing clearance.

<sup>37</sup> "The U.S. Air Force Weapons School trains tactical experts and leaders to control and exploit air, space and cyber on behalf of the joint force," May 10, 2016, <https://www.nellis.af.mil/About/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/284156/united-states-air-force-weapons-school/>. Graduates wear the Weapons School patch as a badge of honor and are respected for completing the challenging program.

**SMITH:** Would you say your upgrades were on schedule or ahead of schedule compared to your peers?

**LEAVITT:** I didn't have a lot of peers. [laughs] I didn't have a lot of lieutenants. So the two other lieutenants that came in with me were WSOs. They were back-seaters, which you don't have flight lead upgrade and what not. So I probably upgraded towards the beginning of the window when you're eligible to do it. But I didn't have a lot of people like, same time-frame as me, just based on when I came into the squadron.

**SMITH:** Okay. During this time — I'm just curious. Were you keeping up with — well, then-Captain McSally and —

**LEAVITT:** No.

**SMITH:** No? You were busy enough. I mean —

**LEAVITT:** I had met them in the Pentagon.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And we did the couple days of events up there, and that was the extent.

**SMITH:** Were you knowledgeable about — or did you have an awareness of the other women

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combat aviators in other services, or —

**LEAVITT:** I was not.

**SMITH:** Okay. Just curious. So Fighter Weapons School. January — I have January through July of '98 at Nellis. And that's — I think this is during the Balkans time — the Balkans War. I'm just curious if —

**LEAVITT:** I have to go back and look...

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** ...because I had done another deployment to Prince Sultan Air Base<sup>38</sup> in summer of '97.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** Also doing Operation Southern Watch.

**SMITH:** Southern —

**LEAVITT:** And — but my focus was, you know, on going to Weapons School.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** And so it starts in January, ends in June, and then I was at my next base by July. So —

**SMITH:** Okay. So no Kosovo deployments.

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<sup>38</sup> An air base in Saudi Arabia.

**LEAVITT:** No deployments to Kosovo.

**SMITH:** Yeah. And tell me about Fighter Weapons School, how you were received there, because you were the first one, right? Had — Captain McSally had not gone through.

**LEAVITT:** She did not go through the Weapons School.

**SMITH:** She didn't go. Right.

**LEAVITT:** So no woman had gone through fighter platforms. There had been women that went through Air Battle Manager...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...Intel, you know, some of the other disciplines, but none through the fighter tracks. And so I was the first one to go through any of the fighter tracks. It was hard.

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** It was definitely the hardest I have ever worked, was for those almost six months. I gave 110 percent. I had wonderful classmates. There were four of us total, so it was two crews: two pilots, two WSOs. They went through the training together, and it was incredibly challenging. I learned so much during that time, and I've never worked that hard.

**SMITH:** What made it so difficult? I know you can't share everything, but just, you know, what was the most — what was the — I don't know if you can just describe your typical day at the school. Maybe that'll be good.

**LEAVITT:** Oh, my goodness. Well, the missions were so involved. And so you would spend an entire day planning up the mission — the routes, the attacks, the tactics, all of it. The morning of, you know, set up all your boards for the briefing, and then a couple hours prior to the sortie, you would brief the sortie. Everything you did was graded. The plan, the brief, and then you would go out and fly the sortie. And it was a — you know, like a 4v6.<sup>39</sup> I mean, they were all very, very challenging scenarios, and high-threat. You know, high surface threat, high air threat, challenging weapons, challenging targets, sometimes mobile targets. It was very, very difficult scenarios and — go fly the mission. It was probably about an hour and a half to two hours, just depending on if you were refueling. And then you'd come back, and you debrief the entire mission, which takes a very long time, because you're going to debrief your — the plan, the brief, and then the execution.

**SMITH:** Give me an example of how long an hour and a half mission—comparable to a 4v6 — how long a debrief, all of the debriefs, would take?

**LEAVITT:** Well, after you finished debriefing as the students, then the instructors started debriefing you, and they go back to the very beginning: what your plan was, how your briefing was, how your execution was, and then they debrief your debrief. And so it is unbelievably long. I mean, there was many a night

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<sup>39</sup> Four versus six aircraft.

you'd debrief till, you know, 2 or 3 in the morning, just because it was — it would take that long to go through. And so there were —

**SMITH:** Hours — I mean —

**LEAVITT:** Hours, yes.

**SMITH:** More than four?

**LEAVITT:** At times, yes. Absolutely.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** Well, because once we got into the more advanced scenarios, you would have multiple debriefs. So you would do the air-to-air debrief, where you would pair everyone and figure out ground truth — like, who was actually shot, who wasn't — because it's all obviously training scenarios and simulated weapons. And so you go back and recreate everything that happened, and with the surface attack, we may be dropping actual weapons. You may not. And so that portion takes quite a while. And then you come back and debrief your flight. So there's multiple debriefs that you do as the student, because your students at weapons school are experienced instructors. [laughs] And then the weapons school instructors are very experienced instructors, because they're now instructing these weapons school students. And so the debrief could go on for many hours.

**SMITH:** So how was the school for you, other than, you know, being super intense? Did you feel like you were received well, or not? I'm just curious — in that environment, as the first woman to go through as a fighter pilot.

**LEAVITT:** Well, they were very good about shielding me that whole time. And I remember when it was getting close to graduation, I was really, really adamant that I did not want any spotlight on me, because it was such an incredibly hard program,

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it was no harder for me than for anyone else. And so I did not want to be singled out from my peers on that. And so that was one of the things I really did not want. I just — my whole goal was to graduate, because it was so incredibly hard...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...to complete the training. And so for that, I would say the cadre — the instructor cadre that was there when I went through, they were great. I mean, previous — I know there were ones that told me outright to my face, like: we don't ever want to see you at Weapons School. So that was fine. They left. I came. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Good timing. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** Yeah, absolutely.

**SMITH:** Yeah. So what was your plan? Did you have a plan after Weapons School, in terms of what your assignment track would look like?

**LEAVITT:** I knew I wanted to go to Mountain Home Air Force Base, because it was in the days of the composite wing, which was an experiment that we did as an Air Force.<sup>40</sup> And so we combined a bunch of different platforms in one wing. So the idea was if things were to kick off around the world, you could pick up that wing and take it wherever you needed to go. So I went there to the F-15E squadron. There was also an F-15C squadron. There was an F-16 squadron, B-1 squadron, and a KC-135 squadron, all in that wing. We also had a geographically separated unit, some EA-6Bs at Whidbey Island.<sup>41</sup> So it was a very unique wing construct.

**SMITH:** Sounds like it. And this was — let me get the dates right — July '98 through June of 2001.

**LEAVITT:** That's correct.

**SMITH:** Okay. So how was that squadron when you showed up? You're — obviously, they knew you were coming. I mean, each place, they know you're coming, so — but you're breaking ground at every location, because you're the first woman pilot — combat<sup>42</sup> pilot in this unit as well...

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm. I guess so.

**SMITH:** ...in your squadron [unintelligible].

**LEAVITT:** Yes. It was — yes. So when I went there, it was funny because it was — I said I — it was the first time I — someone introduced me, and I was defined other than my timing and my gender, in that people would always go: this is Tally.<sup>43</sup> She's the first female fighter pilot, you know. Okay, that's still being defined by my timing and my gender. But I remember being up at Mountain Home, after I had been there for a little while, and I was now the Weapons Officer, because I had to kind of stand in line to be the Weapons Officer, because there was already someone who had just graduated Weapons School, and he was the Weapons Officer. So I kind of got in line, and I got to do that after him. I remember one time, one of our captains was introducing someone, showing them around the squadron, and they said: that's Tally. She's our Weapons Officer, and she will kick your butt in BFM. And — which, BFM is basic fighter maneuvers.

**SMITH:** [laughs] Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so I was like: yes!

**SMITH:** Yes! Yay.

**LEAVITT:** Inside, I was thinking that. And I said: hey. [laughs] But it was like — it felt really good to be referenced based on my capability, not my gender and timing.

**SMITH:** Right. Yeah. So "Tally," was that your call sign, or —

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

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<sup>40</sup> "366th Fighter Wing History," Apr 2, 2007, <https://www.mountainhome.af.mil/About/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/308623/366th-fighter-wing-history/>.

<sup>41</sup> NAS Whidbey Island, [https://www.cnicy.navy.mil/regions/cnrnw/installations/nas\\_whidbey\\_island.html](https://www.cnicy.navy.mil/regions/cnrnw/installations/nas_whidbey_island.html).

<sup>42</sup> Fighter. Women pilots in other (non-lethal) platforms had been certified mission-ready for combat operations.

<sup>43</sup> Leavitt's call sign.

**SMITH:** And how did you get that?

**LEAVITT:** That one, I never really shared. Yeah. So I got that at the Rockets, at the 336th Fighter Squadron. Right after I got MR,<sup>44</sup> I got named, and I got named Tally. And funny thing is, most people have — at this point, aren't in the Air Force, and so most people have no idea why I'm called Tally. It's —

**SMITH:** [laughs] But you're not going to — oh, you don't want to —

**LEAVITT:** Oh, I'm not going to share it. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Okay. But there's always a good story behind the call signs.

**LEAVITT:** I know.

**SMITH:** So I ask everyone.

**LEAVITT:** Sure.

**SMITH:** You know, and several have said: oh, I've never shared that story. So you're not — you wouldn't be the only one, if you change your mind.

**LEAVITT:** Okay.

**SMITH:** So after Mountain Home — so June of 2001, and then you go the — you go back to Nellis to the 57th Ops Group. Is that correct, or did you go —

**LEAVITT:** To the Weapons School...

**SMITH:** To the Weapons School.

**LEAVITT:** ...to go instruct.<sup>45</sup> Right. So I had a few deployments while I was at Mountain Home.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** So —

**SMITH:** Supporting what operations?

**LEAVITT:** I went to Al Jaber in Kuwait, and we were supporting Operation Southern Watch again. Went to Incirlik, Turkey. Spent the Millennial New Year there in Turkey, actually. [laughs] We were supporting Operation Northern Watch<sup>46</sup> on that deployment. And then I had one more deployment to the CAOC.<sup>47</sup> This wasn't with my squadron. So those two were with my squadron. This last one was just me as the

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<sup>44</sup> Mission Ready.

<sup>45</sup> Leavitt humbly downplays this accolade. Instructing at the Weapons School is a tremendous honor; it recognizes the warfighter as best among peers, entrusted with training the next generation of combat experts.

<sup>46</sup> Operation Northern Watch began on Jan 1, 1997, "Incirlik Air Base History," Nov 15, 2018. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, <https://www.incirlik.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/300814/incirlik-air-base-history/>.

<sup>47</sup> Combined Air Operations Center.

Weapons Officer. So I went to the CAOC at — it was at Riyadh, Eskan Village.<sup>48</sup> And that one was a drastically different experience than my previous — when I was at Dhahran. Being in Riyadh —

**SMITH:** Different.

**LEAVITT:** And you couldn't fly into Riyadh. They flew us into Prince Sultan Air Base, and then I remember, I was handed a flak jacket and an abaya. And I was like: where am I? Because it was nothing like that in Dhahran.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so that was a

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vastly different experience. We also didn't go off-base. Like, at Dhahran, we would go off-base. So I would sometimes need to fly out of Prince Sultan Air Base, because I was the Weapons Officer for JTF SWA — it was called Joint Task Force, South West Asia. And I was dual-hatted as the Weapons Officer and the TST Cell Chief, which is Time-Sensitive Targeting Cell Chief. So that was during execution. And occasionally, I'd need to fly different places for weapons and tactics conferences or things like that. And so someone would drive me. They'd hand me an abaya, and I'd, you know, fly out of Prince Sultan Air Base to wherever I needed to go, usually Bahrain.

**SMITH:** Wow. So those deployments — any other deployments before —

**LEAVITT:** Those were the three out of Mountain Home.

**SMITH:** Three out of Mountain Home.

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

**SMITH:** Okay. And so tell me about being selected to go back to the Weapons School as an instructor, because that's a huge honor. That's like, the fighter world — oh, you were [laugh] — you know, you were a Fighter Weapons School instructor. So what was the application like? Did you have to interview? No?

**LEAVITT:** I don't — it was really kind of strange in that I — everyone said: well, this is what you're going to do. And so the Weapons School wanted to bring me back, and I don't really remember even having a conversation. It was more: hey, you're going to Nellis. And I was like: well, where? Weapons School or 422.<sup>49</sup>

**SMITH:** Who told you that?

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel Flores, "Air Force Command and Control at the Start of the New Millenium," *Air Force Network Integration Center*, Apr 1, 2019. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, <https://www.cyberspacecapabilitiescenter.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1801870/air-force-command-and-control-at-the-start-of-the-new-millennium/>.

<sup>49</sup> 422nd Test and Evaluation Squadron, <https://www.afhra.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/433591/422-test-and-evaluation-squadron/>.

**LEAVITT:** I guess my squadron commander up at Mountain Home. I don't [laughs] remember even having a discussion...

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** ...so much as: this is what you're doing. We're sending you to Nellis.

**SMITH:** Did you feel like you were being mentored, or having a — you know, being groomed at that point? Or —

**LEAVITT:** That very well may have been the case, but I was oblivious to it.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** I was just like: okay, I'll go to Nellis, because I loved the flying. It was awesome flying from an aviator's perspective.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So I said: absolutely. And I said: I'll go to either Weapons School or 422, which is the test and evaluations squadron. And they said: you're going to Weapons School. And I said: okay. So it was — there wasn't a lot of discussion. It just was. [laughs]

**SMITH:** So while you were at the Weapons School, 9/11 occurs.

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

**SMITH:** And tell me about just what it was like being at the Weapons School in the aftermath of 9/11. Did everything — just tell me what it was like.

**LEAVITT:** Sure. So when I went back to Nellis — you noticed the OG part.<sup>50</sup> So that first year that I was at Nellis, I was at the Weapons School, but they had me be the Stan/Eval<sup>51</sup> person. So I worked up in the Ops Group — flew with the Weapons School for that first year. And we would deploy to Tyndall<sup>52</sup> once every class. And so we would take them, and it was called Air-to-Air Weapons Employment phase — AAWE. And we would take the students there, and we would shoot missiles — training missiles, and fire the gun in an air-to-air mode, because we would fire air-to-ground back at Nellis. But for shooting the missiles and shooting the gun air-to-air, we would do that at Tyndall...

**SMITH:** Tyndall.

**LEAVITT:** ...in the water off in the Gulf. And they would have tow-planes that would tow this banner, and you shot at the banner that was behind the airplane that was towing it. And so we were at Tyndall for AAWE at the time, when it happened. And I remember, because we were trying to coordinate cars. I didn't have a car, so I was calling one of the other instructors who had the keys. And I said: hey, what time are we going over to do the planning and briefing? And he wasn't making a lot of sense. He's like: turn on your television. I'm like: what channel? He's like: any channel. And I turned it on, and it was in

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<sup>50</sup> 57th Operations Group, <https://www.nellis.af.mil/Units/57-WG/>.

<sup>51</sup> Standardization/Evaluation.

<sup>52</sup> Tyndall Air Force Base near Panama City, FL, <https://www.tyndall.af.mil/>.

between when the first two — when the first one had already hit the World Trade Center, before the second one hit. And it was that cognitive dissonance I think a lot of people had, because we couldn't comprehend the fact that this was intentional. And so you're trying to figure out how in the world this could even be an accident, and then when that second one hit, it was shortly after I had turned on the TV. All doubt was gone. And we said: let's go over now. And we just went out to the cars and drove over. And Tyndall was a base where there were two sides of it. And so you had to drive from where we were in housing over to where the flight line was. And I remember, because the word hadn't gotten out yet. Because we pulled on, and you know — and we're like: we should probably be in a higher THREATCON.<sup>53</sup> [laughs] Like, that's — it's probably like THREATCON Delta right now. And so we get on the base, and nobody really knows what's going on. We download the training missiles. They tell us we're going on alert for air defense of the country. And we said: what are the rules of engagement? They said: we don't know. And we spent the day waiting.

**SMITH:** You had live weapons loaded?

**LEAVITT:** They were up —

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they were — that was the plan, is they were loading up live weapons. But we knew whether the weapons were loaded up or not, we were on alert. And we would take off and defend as required. And so yeah, it was —

**SMITH:** No reaction time. Like, you didn't really have a lot of time to...

**LEAVITT:** Mm mm.

**SMITH:** ...process everything. It was just, you know — then your training kicks in. It's like: okay. Time to go. You may have envisioned an engagement like that happening overseas as opposed to over the CONUS<sup>54</sup> or —

**LEAVITT:** Exactly. It was one of those things that was just incomprehensible to our nation up until that point. And it was — the world changed that day. It really did.

**SMITH:** Absolutely. So the rest of the time at — when did you go back to Nellis? Like, how long did you sit alert at Tyndall?

**LEAVITT:** So it was a couple days later, and it was really strange, because it was before commercial traffic had started flying. And so we flew our flight of Strike Eagles across the country, and I don't remember what number I was in the formation, but we were going, and [laughs] the flight lead — you know, sometimes we'll ask for a block of altitude, just to make it more comfortable, so everyone's not at the exact same altitude, so you can stagger the altitudes a little bit. You might ask for a 2,000-foot block. Well, the flight lead was like, request — he requested a 20,000-foot block. And the guy's like: sure, no problem. Like, whatever you need. It was very surreal, because there was not a single other airplane

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<sup>53</sup> The current threat condition level (THREATCON) is posted at the base gate.

<sup>54</sup> Continental U.S.

flying, and there was no one talking on the radios except us. And so it was really a surreal experience to look at my radar, and no matter how far I bumped out the scope, there was not a single contact on it.

**SMITH:** Eerie.

**LEAVITT:** It was.

**SMITH:** Eerie. So you go back to Nellis. Did things change in terms of the structure of Fighter Weapons School after that point? Were there curricula changes as a result of the 9/11 attacks, or —

**LEAVITT:** Well, we —

**SMITH:** That you're able to talk about. If you're not, we'll just move on.

**LEAVITT:** There were adjustments, I'd say. And then before I left that assignment, I ended up deploying to the CAOC during Operation Iraqi Freedom, like major combat ops. But that was spring of 2003.

**SMITH:** Okay. Alright. And then August of '03 was the end of your assignment. You — by that time — tell me the positions.

**LEAVITT:** Well, spring of '03, I deployed again.

**SMITH:** So spring through August was the deployment, or —

**LEAVITT:** The deployment, I think we went— so what happened was at that time, General Moseley<sup>55</sup> was the CFACC, the Combined Forces Air Component Commander. And he was a Weapons School Graduate, and he asked that the Weapons School send him four current instructors. And he wanted one from the Strike Eagle, one from the F-16, A-10, and HH-60 to work directly for him over in the CAOC. And so I was the designee from the Strike Eagles. And so we went to Shaw Air Force Base, where — it was then CENTAF. It's now AFCENT.<sup>56</sup> But the Central Command Air Forces was stationed at Shaw, and we looked at some of the plans that were for the first couple days, and we were one of the many Red teams that came in and looked at it. And then we ended up deploying over to Prince Sultan Air Base to the Combined Air Operations Center, the CAOC. And we assisted both the CFACC and the CAOC Directors during the time leading up to major combat ops and then through the major combat ops portion of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

**SMITH:** I don't remember CAB What's that stand for? CAB director?<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> General T. Michael Moseley was the Commander, 9th Air Force and U.S. Central Command Air Forces at Shaw AFB, SC when he became the OIF CFACC, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/104651/general-t-michael-moseley/>; "2003-Operation Iraqi Freedom," Air Force Historical Support Division, Jun 13, 2013. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, <https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458942/operation-iraqi-freedom/>.

<sup>56</sup> The air component of US Central Command began as CENTAF in 1983. In 2008 CENTAF became AFCENT, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/124070/centaf-now-afcent-with-redesignation/>; <https://www.afcent.af.mil/About/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/217800/us-air-forces-central-command/>; <https://www.afcent.af.mil/About/>.

<sup>57</sup> Smith misheard the last "CAOC" as "cab."

**LEAVITT:** Oh, it's — no kidding, just the cab.<sup>58</sup> It's the upper part where the CAOC directors are.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** Yeah, so the — there were three one-stars. So it was two U.S., and one British, one-star that were the CAOC directors. And so we would work for them and then for General Moseley as the CFACC. They called us tactical coordinators.

**SMITH:** Did you deploy in support of OIF or OEF?

**LEAVITT:** Later on.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** Right. But this one, I tried to convince them to let me fly, because I was still current and qualified [laughs] out of Nellis.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** There were a number of Strike Eagle squadrons deployed. And they were all kind of low on, you know, the high time experience. And so I tried. Didn't work. You know, all the squadron commanders were more than happy to have me come fly, but they said: no, your job's here at the CAOC. So I didn't end up flying during that portion of it. So for that part, I was just working in the CAOC.

**SMITH:** Then you spent a year in PME at Air Command and Staff.<sup>59</sup>

**LEAVITT:** That's right.

**SMITH:** Then

[1:45:00]

you go to Korea, right?

**LEAVITT:** I did. U.S. Forces Korea.

**SMITH:** How did that...

**LEAVITT:** I was the —

**SMITH:** ...assignment come about?

**LEAVITT:** Well, my husband and I got married during Air Command and Staff College.

**SMITH:** Yay. Congratulations.

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<sup>58</sup> The battle cab (six years later) is described by Frank Hartnett, "USAFCENT launches new Combined Air and Space Ops Center," US AFCENT Public Affairs, Sept 4, 2009. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/News/Features/Display/Article/224063/usafcent-launches-new-combined-air-and-space-ops-center/>.

<sup>59</sup> Professional Military Education at the Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base, AL. Selection for in-residence PME indicates the faith of senior leadership in an officer's potential to command.

**LEAVITT:** Met at Mountain Home — thank you — and we were at Air Command and Staff College, and the assignments team came down, and my husband had done two remotes to Korea, he had done staff, he had been in Germany. So they were willing to send him anywhere, no matter where he wanted. But mine was a whole 'nother scenario. And there was actually a handwritten note on there. And I was like: what's that note say? And it said: "Smoking hot for a remote." [laughs] Because all I had done was flown the Strike Eagle — or, Strike Eagles stateside. I had been at Seymour-Johnson, at Nellis, at Mountain Home, at Nellis. So even though I had done deployments, I had only been stationed stateside flying Strike Eagles. And so they were great. They said: we'll send the two of you wherever you want. If you both want to go to Shaw, we'll send you to Shaw. But they said the day you hit two years' time on station, we're sending you remote. Or, you could go remote on your own. [laughs] And so we said: we'll go remote. So I —

**SMITH:** And this was — it sounds like you visited AFPC, or —

**LEAVITT:** No. They came out to Air Command and Staff College.

**SMITH:** Oh. Oh, okay.

**LEAVITT:** They sent a team out — an assignments team came out and talked to the different students about follow-on assignments.

**SMITH:** And they had your records, so...

**LEAVITT:** They did.

**SMITH:** ...that was nice.

**LEAVITT:** They did.

**SMITH:** That was very nice.

**LEAVITT:** They had the SURFs<sup>60</sup> printed up. And they — so I ended up going to U.S. Forces Korea, which was in Yongsan — Army Garrison. And originally, my husband was going to have to go to Kunsan, which would have been his third Kunsan tour.

**SMITH:** Wow.

**LEAVITT:** There was some rule that Osan and Yongsan were too close, and so we'd have to go for two years. So we argued and made the case that you know, it's not like we can live together, because the Seoul traffic is too crazy. And he had already done Kunsan twice. And so luckily, reason prevailed, and they let me go to Yongsan, and him go to Osan, and go for one year. And so that's what I did right after Air Command and Staff College.

**SMITH:** So these were unaccompanied tours...

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<sup>60</sup> The Single Unit Retrieval Format (SURF), part of the Assignment Management System. The SURF contains a summary of an individual's Air Force assignments, education, and other pertinent career data, <https://www.afpc.af.mil/Force-Development/>.

**LEAVITT:** Unaccompanied tours.

**SMITH:** ...but you managed to get them scheduled at the same time.

**LEAVITT:** Right.

**SMITH:** So wise on your part. And what were you — Chief of Special Tech Ops. Tell me what technical ops — what does that mean?

**LEAVITT:** That means all the highly classified programs that go on in the peninsula was what I was responsible for.

**SMITH:** So we won't talk about that.

**LEAVITT:** Exactly. [laughs]

**SMITH:** And we'll move right on [laughs] to your return.

**LEAVITT:** Now, that's where our daughter was born, was in Korea.

**SMITH:** Ah, yeah. Great.

**LEAVITT:** Yeah.

**SMITH:** Great — in Korea. So Shaw Air Force Base, you're the Chief, Master Attack Plans in the 609th — and Weapons Officer.

**LEAVITT:** And the Weapons Officer. Right. Dual-hat. So Chief, Master Air Attack Plans and Weapons Officer for AFCENT — or CENTAF I guess it was at the time.

**SMITH:** And this is the 609th CPS, so —

**LEAVITT:** Combat Plan Squadron.

**SMITH:** Thank you.

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

**SMITH:** That's what I needed to hear — 9th Air Force. And that — I show 2005 to 2007.

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

**SMITH:** [laughs] What you can tell me about that position — so obviously, it's a planning position.

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

**SMITH:** And you were the Weapons Officer, so —

**LEAVITT:** So I would run all the weapons and tactics conferences. So I would deploy to Bahrain to do that for each rotation. And we started doing the spin-up conferences for units before they'd go downrange, because too often they were spinning up in a certain mission set, and then they'd get downrange, and it was very different missions going on. And so they weren't ready. And so there was a big spin-up time when the units would get downrange. And so we started doing conferences before they did — when

they were in their training, so they could tailor their training to be ready for the missions they were going to face. And so we did some of that. I would do like, the Realistic Training Review Board. Anything weapons-related was what I would do.

**SMITH:** Alright. Any deployments during that time, or you're probably pretty busy planning.

**LEAVITT:** I did a number of trips over to Bahrain for the weapons and tactics conference. I was pregnant, so at some point, when I hit about the seven-month point, our son was born at Shaw. [laughs] And so — but I did a number of TDYs, but no deployments.

**SMITH:** So were you flying during this assignment?

**LEAVITT:** No, it was a staff job.

**SMITH:** Okay, yeah. Because I thought this was — I had two where I was like: oh, I wonder if there were kids during [laughs] these assignments.

**LEAVITT:** Yup, one each at the staff jobs. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Okay. Smart. So then you — still at Seymour-Johnson, you become the assistant DO,<sup>61</sup> and then you're —

**LEAVITT:** So, from Shaw, my husband stayed at Shaw because he was at the 57th Wing, and I — the kids and I moved up to Seymour-Johnson.

**SMITH:** Excuse me. Yes, the previous assignment was at Shaw. And you become the assistant DO for the 334th?

**LEAVITT:** It was a holding pattern. Right.

**SMITH:** To become co—

**LEAVITT:** --Because I knew I was going to take command of the 333rd Fighter Squadron.

**SMITH:** So how did you know that? Who had —

**LEAVITT:** Well, they — this one, people sat down and talked to me, which was nice. I really, really wanted to be a DO first, which is the director of operations, the number two in the squadron. And that is the normal path,

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is you normally go be a DO and then become a squadron commander. And the 9th Air Force Commander said: you're behind timeline because you took back-to-back staffs. And you should go to command.

**SMITH:** How did that conversation come about? I mean, this is a —

**LEAVITT:** A three-star.

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<sup>61</sup> Director of Operations.

**SMITH:** 9th Air Force— yeah, a three-star, having a — I mean, obviously you had a good interaction with him.

**LEAVITT:** I was a major, and I was his Weapons Officer.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And he was also a Weapons School Graduate. And I remember the first time I met him was the first briefing. We were doing intro briefings, and they were behind timeline. So they said: okay, you have to catch us up. Like, you have to go less than your allocated time. And I said: okay. But it was all kinds of interesting weapons stuff, so he asked a million questions, and then we were way behind schedule. So I was like [laughs] never on his bad side, but the new 9th Air Force Commander knew me because of all the weapons things we were working and the knowledge base I had, because I had been there for a while. And so as soon as I came back from maternity leave after my son was born, I would constantly drop hints about going back to flying any time I briefed him. [laughs] Just to mention — hey, it'd be great if I was back flying again. And so he became involved in sending me back to fly.

**SMITH:** Great. Good.

**LEAVITT:** And he wanted me to go to a combat squadron, because he thought that was the right path for me to go. And my husband was about to become the commander of the combat squadron at Shaw — one of the combat squadrons. They have three. And Seymour-Johnson has two combat squadrons and two FTUs, formal training units, because the Luke FTU had moved to Seymour shortly after I went through Luke. And so I even told them — I said: sir, every fighter pilot bone in my body wants to be a combat squadron commander, but I'm a mom, and my husband's a combat squadron commander. So I really need to go FTU. And that worked best for the wing anyway, because in terms of who was moving and what they wanted to do, the wing very much wanted me to go to the 333rd Fighter Squadron, which was an FTU.

**SMITH:** Oh, okay. Why do I have —

**LEAVITT:** It's a fighter squadron.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** But it's the formal training unit.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** One of the two. So, 334th and 333rd are both formal training units for the Strike Eagle.

**SMITH:** Okay. And from there, you also become the special assistant to the Ops Group Commander. Is that the Fourth Ops Group Commander, or was that —

**LEAVITT:** Yes, it was simply a title when I graduated squadron command.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** So I ended up only getting to be a squadron commander for 14 months because I was promoted.<sup>62</sup> The 9th Air Force Commander wanted to bring me back to Shaw. The assignments people were like: we're tired of moving her. [laughs] Because they knew I was going to be going to school in the following summer. And so it's the October time frame, and they said: no, we're not going to move her again. And he said: okay, fine. I'm going to deploy her to Afghanistan. And so I went back to Shaw. I went back and forth between Shaw and Seymour-Johnson for the next probably, you know, few months until I deployed to Afghanistan in January of 2009.

**SMITH:** Okay. Tell me about that deployment.

**LEAVITT:** I deployed to be the Deputy Ops Group Commander, 455th Ops Group, Bagram, Afghanistan. And I had never been to Afghanistan. I was actually really surprised at how scenic it is. There's like, mountains all around, and snow-covered mountains in January. But I flew with the different squadrons—the different Strike Eagle squadrons that were based there. I would fly with whatever squadron was there when — while I was the Deputy Ops Group Commander. So the Ops Group Commander flew A-10s. He had two Deputy Ops Group Commanders. One flew C-130s and then one flew fighters. So I was the fighter deputy. And that was a four-month deployment for that one.

**SMITH:** So during any of your deployments, any issues with personnel being inappropriate or — I'm just asking the question, because some people let me know about things that happened downrange.

**LEAVITT:** By this time, I had been downrange so many times. [laughs]

**SMITH:** And you're a colonel. Right? So —

**LEAVITT:** A lieutenant colonel.

**SMITH:** A lieutenant colonel.

**LEAVITT:** So I was a colonel select. Right. So I'd been selected for colonel.

**SMITH:** So they'd have to be pretty stupid. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** I was still a lieutenant colonel.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** But yeah, so I was flying combat lines. And so it was very busy, to be the Deputy Ops Group Commander and flying combat lines was very busy. And you tried to fly with the other units as well, since you're at the deputy ops group level.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So I flew with the other squadrons — with the EA-6Bs, with the C-130s, the other units in the wing — I mean, in the group.

**SMITH:** Okay.

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<sup>62</sup> To colonel.

[1:55:00]

And then at the end of that tour, you are — actually, let's just talk about you being a squadron commander.

**LEAVITT:** Sure.

**SMITH:** We — I'd like to ask. Like, what was your first staff meeting like as a squadron commander?

**LEAVITT:** So I had learned a technique that I thought was really good. I had borrowed it from somebody, and I've used it since, which is to start out with a briefing that kind of just lays out who I am. Because the organization has been there and has been functioning, and everyone knows each other, and there's one big change, and that's me. And so it was — you know, we fear change. And so, you know, let's let you know who this person is coming in. And it talks about like, what — you know, what my background is, what you can expect from me, what my expectations are from you, and you know, things like that, just to put everyone at ease. And so that was what I did with different, you know, groups within the squadron. And the thing is, at that point, having had so much time flying the Strike Eagle and being a Weapons School Graduate and a Weapons School Instructor, that certainly helped, because you have the flying side. You have the credibility.

**SMITH:** Absolutely. What did you call that again? "We fee change"?

**LEAVITT:** Oh. "We fear change." I mean, it's just a human nature thing. Like, people fear change.

**SMITH:** We fear change. I —

**LEAVITT:** We fear change. Yeah, so —

**SMITH:** I missed the "fear." [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** [laughs] Yeah.

**SMITH:** I thought it was a title. I'm sorry. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** No. People fear change.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so to put them more at ease is just to introduce myself and let them know who I am and what they can expect from me and what I expect from them.

**SMITH:** Alright. So any hindsight advice you would give yourself before assuming command of your first squadron or —

**LEAVITT:** It was kind of funny, because I had been out of the flying world for a while. You know? I had been at Air Command and Staff College, Korea, Shaw. And so a lot of people have this kind of — I'm trying to think what it is — like a fear of taking bold moves. You know? Like, concerned about their career. I didn't have any of that. Like, none. Because when I was a lieutenant, all I wanted to do was go to Weapons School. And then, you know, after that, all I wanted to do was be a squadron commander. Well, I was there. You know? So I wasn't thinking about anything next. I'm like: this is all I've ever

wanted to do. This is amazing. And so it was funny, because you know, a couple of just very basic things — you know, like what's important to your boss is important to you. And I remember our wing commander put out this message about being fit. And so I thought: okay, well — and I had a great director of operations. And he's like: what do you think about doing a challenge with the squadron? And if anyone can like, meet or beat our score for the PT test — the physical fitness test — we'll average our scores and, you know, they can have a day off or something. And I said: oh, that's a great idea. That's awesome. And —

**SMITH:** Who was that? Do you recall?

**LEAVITT:** Oh, yeah. Totally. I just saw him actually last night at one of the AFA events.<sup>63</sup> But — and he was, at the time, Lieutenant Colonel Neil Allen<sup>64</sup> was my director of ops. And I said: sure. I said that sounds like a great idea. And he said how will you score? And I said: well, I can usually score 100, because this was — now I'm like high 99-ish. But — because they changed the run times, and it's a little harder now. But at the time, I could score 100. So he's like: well, I'm not quite 100, but I'm close. But we'll average our scores. And I said: okay, that's fair. And so like six weeks prior, I tell the squadron, so that everyone can be ready. I said: alright, here's the deal. We're going to have a training day, and one of the things we're going to do is we're all going to take the PT test. And if you can meet or beat the average of mine and the DO's scores, you can have the day off. And you have ample time, because it's six weeks from now. And so I was always very deliberate about working out visibly. You know, so even though I could work out on my way to the office, instead I would go to the office, be there for a little while, grab my gym bag, you know, go out and go to the gym there so that everyone could see me. And it was funny, because when the day rolled around to do the test, my DO's like: you're not going to believe this. He's like: I pulled a muscle and I can't run. And I'm like: oh, my gosh. Are you serious? I'm like: come on. How are we going to do this? He's like: we'll just — we'll use my score that's, you know, still current. I'm like: alright, alright. He's like: I'll handle this. I'll work it. Don't worry. And so he's up there talking first before I talk, and he said: okay, how many lieutenant colonels are going to do the full PT test with no exemptions? You know? And I raise my hand. And he's like: we've got one. He's like: I want you to see that you should lead by

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example, just like your squadron commander's going to, yadda, yadda. So he played it off really well. And so we just made it a thing. Like, every six months, I'd challenge the squadron. Well, the funny thing was, I was walking through the gym one day, and I had never noticed this, but I had walked by, and it had a little plaque thing, and it talked about I mean it was like a paper put in this thing, and it talked about, by squadron, how many perfect scores there were. And I had a pretty small squadron. It was probably 70, 75 people. Some of these squadrons were 400, 600. One of the squadrons was more than 1,000 people. Our 4th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron. But I walked by, and I see [laughs] this plaque,

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<sup>63</sup> Air Force Association.

<sup>64</sup> Lt Col Allen later commanded the 336 FS from Feb 2008-Jan 2010, and was awarded the Bronze Star;  
<https://www.afhra.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/433236/336-fighter-squadron-acc/>;  
<https://www.seymourjohnson.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/307480/4th-mxg-deputy-receives-bronze-star/>.

and each squadron has a few names, few names. And my squadron has the most names with the perfect score. And I had to laugh, because it was purely, you know, the incentive...

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** ...of getting a day off drove that. But it was pretty funny to see. And so, you know, knowing what's important to your boss, that's important to you. And then part of it's kind of being bold. And again, I didn't know not to be, because I really hadn't been around the environment, because a lot of people are like: well, you don't want to do something that's going to, you know, kind of be pushing things too far. And so one of the things that happened was we had B-Courses, which is a Basic Course. There were two FTUs, two Formal Training Units, the 333rd and 334th. Each one had two B-Courses a year. And so you would have what we call the SAT deployment, the Surface Attack Tactics. It's like the final phase. And so when I showed up, they go: okay. So we're planning this SAT deployment out to Mountain Home Air Force Base. And I go: oh, my gosh. That sounds fantastic. I go: really, we take the B-Course students out to Mountain Home? I'm like: It's awesome weather, awesome ranges — because on the east coast, the weather was not great, and the ranges were not great. And I said: that is fantastic. And they said: yeah, we take every other class. And I go: every other class? I go: [laughs] —

**SMITH:** Wait a minute.

**LEAVITT:** What about — why not the other class? They go: well, there's only enough funds to send two classes, so each FTU sends one class per year. And I go: what about the other class? And they said: well, they — we do this, you know, scenario out on the east coast with our ranges. And they did the best they could with the given airspace, but it was still the ranges they had been to for the whole course. And I said: well, I don't — that's not fair. I mean, that doesn't seem fair to the students, like, whether or not you get this amazing deployment or not depends on which class you were in. And I said: surely, there's got to be a way to do it. And they said: no, we've looked at it time and again. Here's the money. Here's the constraints. And so we went round and round and round, trying to figure out how we can do this. And then I was like: alright, we've got to come up with something completely different. Like, I don't like this scenario. And everyone's like: neither do we. And so there's got to be something we can do. And I said: wait a minute. Nellis. I go: Nellis always needs Red Air. Like, they will pay units to come in and be Red Air — the adversaries for the Weapons School, for the 422 Test and Evaluations Squadron. I go: they always want Red Air. I go: how about they pay to bring maybe like, a 6-ship or an 8-ship, and we just pay to bring a few more, because it's not that expensive. The main cost is bringing the main body. And I said: we can just bring a few extra airplanes and personnel, and so we could do it [at] far less expense.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And everyone loved the idea. So we come up with this whole plan, and the first time we tried to brief it, we didn't get past the first slide because we were behind on the timeline with the students. But we got caught up and went back in a second time and pitched the whole idea. And maintenance was on board, and you know, Nellis was ready to support. They were very happy at the idea of having a unit volunteer to come in and do Red Air. And people thought I had lost my mind. They were like: you're really going to bring lieutenants to Nellis? They go: are you crazy? And I said: this will work. I know this can work. And so I brought in the senior ranking officer of the B-Course. Luckily, he was a former WSO, and he had gone to pilot training. And so he had[n't] been through the B-Course before. And so he was

very mature, and just a great senior — great leader for that B-Course. And I said: okay, here's the deal. I go: you do not want to be known forever as the class that ruined it for all who followed.

**SMITH:** [laughs] Right.

**LEAVITT:** I go: do you understand? [laughs] And he's like: I got it. We won't do that. And I go: perfect. And so it was an incredible deployment. We — I was probably pretty lean-forward in hindsight, because we went ahead and put students in the jets to cross the country. They had never flown more than probably like, a two- or two-and-a-half-hour sortie, and they had only refueled like, right over the base. Well, I mean, it's just east of the base. And now, they had to refuel to get over to the other side of the country.

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And then right before we got into the ranges, we topped off on fuel and did orientation flights and cleanup sorties that we needed to do. So it was probably a little aggressive, a little push-it-up, but it worked out great. It was an incredible deployment, and it became something that they did. And even when I was a 57th Wing Commander, not long ago, I ran into the 333rd Fighter Squadron, and I said: hey, what are you guys doing out here? And they're like: oh, we're doing Red Air, and we're also doing a B-Course staff deployment. I was like: that's really cool.

**SMITH:** Oh, yeah. [laughs] That's something you started.

**LEAVITT:** So yeah, it was great to see...

**SMITH:** That's great.

**LEAVITT:** ...that that worked.

**SMITH:** That's a good lead-in to your time as the — your first wing command. So I'm skipping over National War College, and I don't really want to skip the Chief of Staff of Air Force Fellowship at CIA, but I kind of figure you can't talk about that anyway, so [laughs] —

**LEAVITT:** It was a really cool assignment, and I can't tell you much about it.

**SMITH:** Yeah. [laughs] So your first wing command was actually the 4th Fighter Wing.

**LEAVITT:** That's correct.

**SMITH:** So tell me about that. You actually — I mean, I'll preface it with — you had two wing commands, which is like, amazing, because not very many people get to do that. But they were back-to-back, which I've not —

**LEAVITT:** They were not.

**SMITH:** They weren't back-to-back.

**LEAVITT:** Mm mm.

**SMITH:** They weren't. There were two years in between. Okay. [laughs] Good, because I was going to ask you — wait a minute, that seems almost impossible. So I'm glad to know I was wrong about that. So

the 4th Fighter Wing at Seymour, from 2012 to 2014 — tell me how you found out that you were getting that command, and —

**LEAVITT:** Well, kind of like the squadron command, I didn't get to go the path I wanted. You know, for squadron command, I had wanted to do director of operations first. The normal path before going to wing command is to either be an ops group commander or a vice wing commander. And that was what I had hoped to do. When my name went in for the Command Select Board, the list came out. There were, you know, ops group commanders, and there was this very small category of CSAF Fellow. And I had no idea what it was. There was actually only one name on the list that year. It had been started a year or two earlier by General Moseley. We had swapped out Chiefs of Staff; it was now General Schwartz.<sup>65</sup> And so I was designated as a CSAF Fellow, and I had no idea what that was. And friends of mine have even said, like: congrats, I think. Like — I go: I don't know. I don't know what that is. I really don't. And so the idea behind the program was to kind of accelerate people, because we are the only service I think that does the two O-6<sup>66</sup> commands, like ops group command, and then wing command. Some of our sister services just do a single O-6 command. And so that was the idea behind this program. They would do a broadening type of assignment, and you would get a joint assignment in there, and you would report directly to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. And so that was what that program was when I worked at the CIA. So instead of being an ops group commander or a vice wing commander, I didn't wear a uniform for two years, and I worked at the CIA. And so it was a little intimidating, the thought of going to wing command. Because the last time I had commanded, I was a squadron commander. And I had commanded 70, 75 people. Very small. 4th Fighter Wing, more than 5,000 people. Huge wing. I had been the deputy ops group commander at Bagram,<sup>67</sup> and I was very, very thankful for that experience, because that was the closest thing I came — I got to observe group command closely, watching the group — the ops group commander, the maintenance group commander, mission support group commander, and seeing how some of that worked. But I had never experienced — I had never been an ops group commander. I had never been a vice wing commander. And so the thought was a little bit daunting. I decided to create my own spin-up program. This next year — so the first year, I was the only CSAF Fellow. The next year, there were three CSAF Fellows, so there were — let's see — four the year ahead of me, but I didn't really know them, and we didn't do a lot. I mean, I mainly just worked at the CIA. And then the year behind me, three more came in. Well, I knew two of the three pretty well. And so we decided to create our own spin-up program. Not spin-up program, but professional development program, because they would do some things with us. They were great, but a lot of the times, you were working at your appropriate agency or job. And so we started bringing in different general officers we knew. We'd invite them, and just like, have lunch and hear from them, and get like, senior leader perspective and things like that. And then I

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<sup>65</sup> General Norton A. Schwartz became Chief of Staff of the US Air Force in Aug 2008. He retired Nov 1, 2012, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/104626/general-norton-a-schwartz/>.

<sup>66</sup> Spoken, "oh-six," as in O-6 in the military rank structure.

<sup>67</sup> Afghanistan airfield.

was at one of the professional development opportunities, like a Capitol Hill engagement thing — and met the 89th Wing Commander, which was General Van Ovost,<sup>68</sup> and I said: hey, can I shadow you? And she said: well, I'm a really non-standard wing. She's like: you probably should shadow the 11th, because it's more normal wing. And I said: okay, great. And so I shadowed the 11th Wing Commander for a day. A friend of mine was a vice wing commander at Luke, so I set up going down to Luke and shadowed him for a day. And then he set up for the different group commanders. I had a half a day with each one. And he said: okay, the rules he gave him is if you could shape your future wing commander, that's what you give her. And so it was a great spin-up. I just totally made it up. [laughs] But I wanted to do something, because it was...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...a little intimidating to go from that squadron command, Deputy OG, to suddenly being a wing commander.

**SMITH:** Right. And plus, you'd been out of the aircraft for several years.

**LEAVITT:** For two years. Three years.

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** Right. Exactly.

**SMITH:** Wise idea. Very wise.

**LEAVITT:** So, yes.

**SMITH:** And did it work for you?

**LEAVITT:** I was — I found it very helpful. I found it very useful going into that position, having had that little bit of spin-up that I created. So the way I found out was the Commander of ACC, COMACC — at the time, it was General Hostage.<sup>69</sup> He called me up and let me know that he was going to bid for me to go to Seymour-Johnson. And I said: thank you, sir. I really appreciate the trust and confidence. And he said: great, and I look forward to meeting you someday, because I had never met him at that point.

**SMITH:** [laughs] Just out of the blue, he gives you a call. That's great.

**LEAVITT:** So I — he knew other people that knew me, and so they — you know, he had...

**SMITH:** Right. Of course.

**LEAVITT:** ...decided to bid on me. He just —

**SMITH:** Right.

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<sup>68</sup> Lieutenant General Jacqueline Van Ovost was MWA OHI Interviewee No. 5, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/108814/major-general-jacqueline-d-van-ovost/>.

<sup>69</sup> General Gilmary Michael Hostage, III assumed command of Air Combat Command in Sept 2011; he retired Jan 1, 2015, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/104754/general-gilmary-michael-hostage-iii/>.

**LEAVITT:** I had never actually met him.

**SMITH:** Right. That's — I'm always intrigued by how these assignments are selected, how the leaders are selected. And it's nice to hear the inside story. So from there — so tell me about from 2014 through 2016. I apparently did not write that down... [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** Sure.

**SMITH:** ...what you were doing...

**LEAVITT:** Sure.

**SMITH:** ...between the 4th Fighter Wing and the 57th.

**LEAVITT:** So when I left the 4th Fighter Wing, I was the Principal Military Assistant to the Secretary of Defense.

**SMITH:** Well, that's pretty important. [laughs] How did I miss that?

**LEAVITT:** So Secretary Hagel<sup>70</sup> hired me.

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** And I worked for him for part of the time, and then when he left and it transitioned to Secretary Carter,<sup>71</sup> I worked for him the rest of the time that I was there. So that was between 4th Fighter Wing and 57th Wing.

**SMITH:** Okay. Back to D.C. You moved around quite a bit. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** We did.

**SMITH:** And I meant to ask: is your husband — is he a flyer as well, or —

**LEAVITT:** He was an F-16 pilot...

**SMITH:** Okay.

**LEAVITT:** ...for many years. He retired a few years back. When I was — I guess at the end of my time as the 4th Fighter Wing Commander is when he retired out of Langley. He was stationed at Langley at the time.

**SMITH:** Okay. So then you get to command the 57th Fighter Wing back in Nellis.

**LEAVITT:** 57th Wing.

**SMITH:** 57th Wing. Excuse me. Thank you. Because it's not — right. Right.

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<sup>70</sup> Chuck Hagel was the 24<sup>th</sup> Secretary of Defense, serving from Feb 2013-Feb 2015, <https://www.defense.gov/Our-Story/Biographies/Biography/Article/602798/>.

<sup>71</sup> Ashton B. Carter was the 25<sup>th</sup> Secretary of Defense, serving from 2015-2017, <https://www.defense.gov/Our-Story/Biographies/Biography/Article/602689/ashton-b-carter/>.

**LEAVITT:** It has many things. Fighters and many other things as well.

**SMITH:** A whole smorgasbord. I'll just let you explain what that meant to command that wing, after you had been to Fighter Weapons School as a student, and back as an instructor. And it's not just the school. So explain what the 57th Wing mission is.

**LEAVITT:** It is a huge organization, and it has such an incredible impact throughout our Air Force. It's really kind of the center of war fighting excellence, if you will. The Weapons School is there. There's also Red Flag. Everyone's familiar with that. AMMOS<sup>72</sup> is kind of like the maintenance equivalent of Weapons School. Similar, shorter program, but the same type of idea: to get the absolute experts in the maintenance world. There's also Operation Green Flag, both West and East. There's also the Thunderbirds, which a lot of people know. 561st Joint Tactics Squadron. They do all of our 3-1s, 3-3s; they're manuals.<sup>73</sup> The tactics techniques and procedures. It's a very diverse wing. There's also an Adversary Tactics Group, where these are the professional MiGs. And we don't just have the air aggressors. Everyone knows the air aggressors, but there's actually space aggressors and information aggressors on the cyber side. And so they make things really, really hard when folks come in to — whether it's Operation Red Flag or Weapons School. They — they're very well trained, and they present a very formidable threat for our airmen to train against.

**SMITH:** So what was it like

[2:15:00]

to command that wing? What did that mean to you personally, as part of your career?

**LEAVITT:** It was such an incredible honor, just knowing the significance of the wing and the impact it has throughout our Air Force and war fighting and, you know, it being the center of all of that. It was an unbelievable honor, and very humbling. But again, my whole goal was to become a squadron commander. So it far exceeded any goals I set out to achieve. And so it was an incredible honor.

**SMITH:** I'm sure. Tell me about some challenges that you had as a commander, particularly as a wing commander or at any point —

**LEAVITT:** One of —

**SMITH:** How you got through those. Like —

**LEAVITT:** One of the challenges we had at Seymour-Johnson was Sequestration. When I was a 4th Fighter Wing Commander at Seymour-Johnson, we were planning for an inspection. It was a huge inspection, and it was the first of a new way of doing it. So in the past, we had done either a phase 1 or a phase 2, meaning: we were either going to mobilize and deploy aircraft, or we were simulating that we were downrange and we were employing. And so they decided they were going to go to this new combined unit inspection model, where you would do a Phase One and a Phase Two, which we used to

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<sup>72</sup> Air Force Advanced Maintenance and Munitions Officer School, <https://www.nellis.af.mil/News/Article/286069/advanced-maintenance-and-munitions-officers-school-graduates-100th-student/>.

<sup>73</sup> Three-dash-one, three-dash-three.

do long, long ago, but it went on for a few weeks. Now, they were going to do it in a very compressed timeline. And so we were the first wing out the chute that was going to do that, and it was in March of 2013. I showed up there in summer of 2012. The wing hadn't exercised in quite a while, so there was definitely some rust to be knocked off, just because they had had so many real-world combat deployments. And so we still had the ongoing deployments. We still had the formal training units. But we had to make sure everyone was ready in case we were to deploy for a major combat ops type of scenario. And so we had done a number of exercises, and it was getting really close to March 1st, because March 4th was when my inspection was, and March 1st, Sequestration hit.<sup>74</sup> And it was really, really uncertain, because we didn't know what was going to happen. And I asked the Inspector General team that was coming in. And they said: we'll do your inspection. No guarantees if we're going to do anymore. We don't know. But we're here, and we're going to do this one. And so we did the inspection. The team did awesome. They knocked it out of the park. It was pretty incredible. Partway through the inspection, we had to furlough our civilian employees. And so the IG team actually came to me and said: I need to take some of your people. So it was really kind of strange, because I had to send some of my people over to be on the inspection side. So I gave them my best, because what else do you do, right?

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So I gave them — and so it was very, very strange. And then we finished the inspection, and it was just incredible. The — you know, just — I'm so proud of the team. They really did. They knocked it out of the park. But then the — oh, my gosh. Now what happens with Sequestration? And so they decided that initially, my formal training units — so March kind of went as we were figuring out what we were going to do, and then beginning in April, they initially shut down both of my formal training units as well as one of my operational squadrons. One operational squadron was getting ready to deploy, so they kept — got to keep flying. And I got very, very vocal about my formal training units, because it's the assembly line. You know? Like, if you stop it, like, you can never go back and produce those students. And so after about a week, we were able to start flying formal training units again. But the one operational squadron did not fly for 99 days. Not a single sortie.

**SMITH:** Wow.

**LEAVITT:** And it was one of many combat squadrons that were stood down. And I went to that squadron commander, and I said: you drew the short straw. You know? Like, this is not cool at all. But it is what it is. And I said: so the question is what you do now. I said: you guys can kick the dirt and say: woe is me, and this sucks. Or, you can, you know, decide to do something with this time and turn it into something useful.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** But it's over to you, squadron commander. And everyone took leave for a week or two, and then they're like: oh, my gosh. We're bored. Ahhhh. And they're watching all these airplanes take off, and they can't fly. But to their credit, they really stepped up. And they did some amazing things in the

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<sup>74</sup> Alan Black, "Sequestration impacts ripple across Air Force," SECAF Public Affairs, Mar 8, 2013. Accessed Feb 13, 2020, <https://www.afpc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/422046/sequestration-impacts-ripple-across-air-force/>.

sim, revamped all of our scenarios, came up with some fantastic scenarios in the simulator. Very, very involved on the volunteer side. In fact, they ended up getting Volunteer of the Year from the City of Goldsboro. [laughs] That squadron — but they did a lot of

[2:20:00]

pretty good things. They made very good use of their time — professional development and what not. And so I was very proud of that squadron, because it was luck of the draw which squadron you were in when Sequestration hit. And so it was very, very challenging. And I remember really well Veterans Day that year. So it was November 11. It was a Monday, in 2013. And the reason I know this is because the City of Goldsboro loves that wing and that base. They love the airmen of the 4th Fighter Wing and the 916th Air Refueling Wing, which is the tenant wing now. And traditionally, we would send all kinds of things for their parade, whether it's firetrucks or the different robots, and all kinds of things that would go in their parade. Well, we couldn't — we couldn't send anything because of the restrictions that were on us because of Sequestration. And so my Command Chief — a very smart man — Chief Master Sergeant Jeff Craver<sup>75</sup> — he came up to me, and he said: you know, ma'am, we may not be able to bring firetrucks and all these other things. But you know what we could bring? We could bring a whole bunch of airmen, and we could march in that Veterans Day parade. And I said: okay, Chief. I go: I'm listening. And he was telling me how they were going to do it. You know, like, go through the First Sergeants — and I go: two guidelines. Okay? I go: the first guideline is, let's walk, not march, because we don't practice the marching, and I don't want to do it poorly. [laughs] I go: but the second thing is, I want to make sure that no one is voluntold, meaning, you're told to volunteer. Because this was a Monday. So people were looking at either a three-day weekend or not, depending on if they went and walked in this parade. And so he was like: okay, that sounds good. I've got it. And off he went. So the morning of the parade came around, and I needed to do opening remarks up on the platform. And so they had people lined up over on the one side street. I went up on the platform and gave my opening remarks. And my public affairs officer, she stayed up there. Then I had to run down a couple of blocks to get to the front of the group. And I couldn't believe what I saw. I mean, it was airmen as far as the eye could see. And my squadron that had been grounded for 99 days, they asked and wanted to be right up front and lead the parade. And this went on for — there were more than 600 airmen, I think.

**SMITH:** Oh, my gosh.

**LEAVITT:** It was huge. And so when we walked through the streets of Goldsboro, it was unbelievable, the reaction from the community. And they're like, "I love you!" You know, "Thank you!" Just the incredible appreciation that they had. And my public affairs officer, who was up on the, you know, platform where it all started, she's like: people were tearing up when they just see that, like, as far as the eye could see. And after it was over, it was funny, because I'm very much a "trust, but verify" person — so I went up to a couple of the airmen. I'm like: so, did you volunteer, or did someone tell you? And they were like: oh, no, ma'am. They were like: I volunteered, and this was incredible. This was so cool to be part of this. I can't believe how much the community appreciates us. And so it turned into a really neat event.

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<sup>75</sup> 4th Fighter Wing Command CMSGT Jeffrey Craver served 30 years, retiring Jan 15, 2016, <https://www.seymourjohnson.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/662308/30-years-the-craver-story/>.

**SMITH:** Cool.

**LEAVITT:** It just goes to show, when you have a good Command Chief, they can do some pretty neat things.

**SMITH:** [laughs] Absolutely. Absolutely. So that brings us to your — well, not from the 4th, but from the 57th Wing Command to your current position as Commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service. And how did you — did you apply for that? [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** Nope.

**SMITH:** You were told what you were going to do, but how did that assignment come about?

**LEAVITT:** I probably couldn't have been more surprised. Just, it's a significant change to go from the 57th Wing, center of war fighting excellence, to Air Force Recruiting, something I was not familiar with at all. And it was kind of funny, because leading up to it, I — my boss would ask me, like: do you know where you're going? And I'm like: I don't know. Like, do you know [laughs] where I'm going? And he's like: I haven't heard a thing. And so General Goldfein<sup>76</sup> himself, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, called me one day, and he said: congratulations. I'm sending you to Recruiting. And I was like: thank you, sir. And I knew nothing about it other than he referenced it was in Texas. And I didn't know what base in Texas. And so I had a very steep learning curve. I had to google where it was and find out who the current commander was, and — but when I got there, a very, very steep learning curve, because it was so vastly different than anything I had done, and I wanted to really understand the mission, the challenges, the issues, so that I could help advocate and make it better. I would go home and go: oh, my gosh, my brain is full — because I would ask so many questions. Just, all the terminology was different.

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I remember being in a meeting one day, and they were talking about LO recruiters, and I could not figure out what an LO recruiter was.

**SMITH:** LN?

**LEAVITT:** LO.

**SMITH:** LO recruiter.

**LEAVITT:** LO recruiter.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And in my world, LO only meant one thing: low observable. So we had LO barns. We had LO everything. So I knew what LO was, but it, like, did not make sense. Like, why would you want a low observable recruiter? It seems counter-intuitive. So finally, I had to stop them, and I said: what is an LO recruiter? And they said: line officer. And I go: oh, okay. [laughs] And so there was just so much different terminology.

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<sup>76</sup> General David L. Goldfein became the Chief of Staff of the Air Force in Jul 2016, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/108013/general-david-l-goldfein/>.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So much new terminology. But now that I've been in it, it's such an incredible mission. You know, the mission of Air Force Recruiting Service is to inspire, engage, and recruit the next generation of airmen. And in the process, you get to change people's lives. And you think about the impact of what you're doing, and the fact that these airmen you bring in, they're going to be part of our Air Force for years, decades to come, potentially. It's pretty incredible to be part of it. And I have professional recruiters, so a lot of my job is, you know, enabling them and making sure they have what they need. And then I spend a lot of my time on the "inspire and engage" portion, which is just incredible, when you get to inspire and engage this next generation. So these young men and women — and you go: if I inspire some young person to dream big and work hard and achieve more than they thought possible, it's a win for national security, whether they join the military or not. And so it's an incredibly rewarding mission.

**SMITH:** That's fantastic. I have — I listened to one of your welcome announcements, where — to your troops at the Air Force Recruiting Service. And there are a couple of things that I — leadership-wise, you talk about leadership as being from the bottom up. And I'd like you to explain that. What do you mean by, you know — typically, people consider the top tier leaders. You consider those individuals really are at the bottom of the organization. So how does that change how you approach a unit?

**LEAVITT:** Well, I got this from General Goldfein, because I saw he talked about, you know, the squadrons, and everyone is there to support the squadrons. Well, similar for me, it's — at the top of this is my front-line recruiters, or "recruiters on the bag," as they call it. And so the flights support them, and the squadrons support them, and the groups support them, and the Headquarters — I mean, we are here to support those front-line recruiters. And so one of the things, when I first got to Air Force Recruiting, is I said: okay, I came from warfighting background. That was everything I had done up until that point. And I said: one of the first things you always have to do is figure out supported-supporting relationships. And so we are supporting. That is our job at Headquarters. You know, we don't task the field. We support the field. So they are the supported; we are the supporting. And it's an important mindset. You know, some of the processes are going to be similar, but understanding that mindset that the field is supported, we are the ones that are supporting. That's why we're here. And so one of the things I would say is — any of my staff, you own "Yes." So if the field's asking for something, and it's something we can do, you own Yes, all day long. Before you say no, you've got to come back to me, because we have to see if there's a way to get to yes. So it's a mindset thing. And so that's the idea — is that the top of it is the field. Those front-line recruiters on the bag that are bringing our airmen into the Air Force. We all exist to support them.

**SMITH:** I also — there are a lot of things online about you, [laughs] which is good. And I mean, positive. I'm speaking — something you said is that you hope you'll be remembered as a leader, a mentor, and an outstanding fighter pilot. So I'm very curious who has mentored you in your career, or who do you consider as your mentors?

**LEAVITT:** I never really thought of myself as having a mentor. What I have had is some great bosses, some great leaders, who have taken interest. They see the passion. They see the enthusiasm. They see that I'm willing to work really, really hard. And they may not have like, walked into this thinking they

wanted to help me, and then when they see how hard I'm willing to work, then they go — hey, and then they provide some vectoring and some guidance. But it hasn't been like one person has followed me through my career. It's really just been each time I go to a new place, working really hard,

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and then people taking interest in my career.

**SMITH:** Was there any point where you — you know, earlier on, where you're like: oh, I think I'm going to make general. Or that it — you know — I'm just curious.

**LEAVITT:** My goal was never to make general. So I have so far exceeded any goals I had.

**SMITH:** Sure.

**LEAVITT:** It was kind of one of those things where every job I've had since squadron command, if it's my last job, that's okay, because my whole goal was to become a squadron commander. But I love what I'm doing, and our family loves being part of this adventure we call the Air Force.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so that's why I continue to serve.

**SMITH:** So speaking of family, I'm just curious about your support network as well. So who would you consider to be — or just describe, if you would, your support network.

**LEAVITT:** Well, so my husband and two children are, of course, my team. And then my parents both passed away a while back, and so my three sisters and I are all very close. And so they all live in St. Louis. It makes it real easy when I go visit, because they all live really close to each other. [laughs] You can walk between the houses.

**SMITH:** Nice.

**LEAVITT:** But they've always been very supportive, and they're a lot of my support network.

**SMITH:** Do you have much contact with other women pilots? There aren't very many women F-15E pilots, and I'm not trying to pigeonhole friends into — you know, that they have to be of the same gender. But I'm just curious what your interaction is with other women military pilots.

**LEAVITT:** Well, I'm — I don't have a lot of bandwidth, with the two kids and husband and busy job. And so I'm not on social media, and I'm not the best at keeping in contact with anyone. And I've never noticed the gender part. And I think part of it is because growing up like in college, aerospace engineering, it was more men than women by a very large ratio. When I went to pilot training, far more men, and so on. And I remember one time being at a commander's conference when I was in Air Combat Command as a 4th Fighter Wing Commander. And it was me and all my counterparts. We were all the wing commanders, discussing something. And we went on break, and whoever was sitting next to me leaned over, and they go: is it weird being the only female in the room? And I go: am I? I had no idea. And I actually had to look around the room. And I go: oh, my gosh. I did not realize that. I go: I didn't notice, to be honest. And so the good news is that — fast-forward a few years, when I was at that same

conference as the 57th Wing Commander, there were more women in the room, so that was very nice to see.

**SMITH:** Nice. Who was — other than the two women pilots that were with you at the press conference — the initial press conference way back in '93, when was the next time that you met a woman fighter pilot? Or, you know —

**LEAVITT:** I would say that I met them on and off, but not as — necessarily assigned with them, but when I was at Nellis as an instructor, units would come through all the time. And so I would meet them, because they'd come TDY for a couple weeks to support the weapons school as Red Air, or sometimes they'd fly as our number 3 and 4 in the formation. And so I'd see them in passing, but not actually have a lot of interaction with them. You know, one of the things that was interesting with the Weapons School — I was kind of disappointed that no women followed in the fighter track for a long time. I didn't realize exactly how long it was until the second one went through. And she was a Strike Eagle WSO: Axis, Kari Armstrong.<sup>77</sup> She went through in Class 15-A. And I was Class 98-A.

**SMITH:** Wow.

**LEAVITT:** And so it was 17 years [laughs] between when I went through and the next female went through a fighter track.

**SMITH:** Wow.

**LEAVITT:** The good news is that since then, right when I showed up at Nellis, we had a female A-10 pilot graduate from the Weapons School. And then while I was the 57th Wing Commander, we had an F-16 female graduate from the Weapons School as well. So I was like: okay, in recent time, it's better. But I don't know why there was that 17-year gap.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** Not sure why.

**SMITH:** Did it — what types of flight organizations, if any, have you joined? Like — I'm curious. Like, the Daedalians,<sup>78</sup> or any women — any of the women flight organizations? It sounds like probably not, but —

**LEAVITT:** I have not been very involved, and it's sheerly due to bandwidth...

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**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...to be honest. Right? So I —

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<sup>77</sup> Capt Kari Armstrong graduated from the Air Force Weapons School on Jun 27, 2015. Susan Garcia, "Weapon systems officer makes history at USAF Weapons School," US Air Force Weapons School, Jul 7, 2015. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/607240/weapon-systems-officer-makes-history-at-usaf-weapons-school/>.

<sup>78</sup> The Daedalians is the premier fraternity of military aviators, <https://daedalians.org/>.

**SMITH:** No, I'm just curious. Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** One of the things we did in February — we put together a commercial called “Origins.” I don't know if you've seen it.

**SMITH:** Uh-huh.

**LEAVITT:** Okay. You should google that. “Origin,” “Origin Story.” And it was in conjunction with the release of *Captain Marvel*.<sup>79</sup>

**SMITH:** Yup.

**LEAVITT:** Because if you've seen *Captain Marvel*, her backstory is that she's a female fighter pilot...

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** ...back when there's a not a lot of female fighter pilots. And so we decided to make this commercial to capitalize on that, because the Chief of Staff of the Air Force is very interested in increasing rated diversity. While we have a somewhat reasonably diverse force, when you get into rated, it gets considerably less. The vast majority of the pilot force, in particular, are white males. And so he wants to see more female pilots, more minority pilots. And so we're making a concerted effort to engage in outreach and let people know about the opportunities that are available to them. So to do that, we made this commercial called “Origin Story,” and we brought a whole bunch of women out to Edwards Air Force Base. And we had a couple different backdrops. We had one with an F-35 and an F-22, and another one with a B-52, F-35, F-22, and a couple of F-16s. And we had just — and we also had a C-17. So we had like, these different set-ups. We captured a whole bunch of footage and made this commercial. But what was neat, that was not necessarily intended, was we ended up with a wonderful professional development opportunity. So we had like, a social on Thursday night for those who got in early enough, and then Friday morning, extremely early, was the photo shoot, because it was supposed to be a sunrise shot. Every couple years or so, they have a really foggy day at Edwards. We found that day. [laughs]

**SMITH:** [laughs] No.

**LEAVITT:** So it was very foggy. You would never know this commercial was shot at Edwards Air Force Base, but that's where it was filmed. But it — and then afterwards, we had a lunch. And you know, I spoke, and the Air Crew Task Force lead, General Short,<sup>80</sup> he spoke. And you know, so we — it turned into this great professional development opportunity. And it was funny just how much people appreciated it. You know? These women love talking to other women. One of the gals, she's like: I did not know there were this many female fighter pilots in the Air Force. And so it was really, really neat. And it was so funny, because when we would go to film, we'd actually have to like, tell people to stop talking. Like, stop talking while the camera's running, because there was so much engagement, and people were just so appreciative to talk to other female pilots and hear about their path and their

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<sup>79</sup> The Air Force recruiting commercial was posted on YouTube by aviatrix99 on Mar 2, 2019 and by U.S. Air Force Recruiting on Jun 28, 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Brig Gen Christopher M. Short, a veteran A-10 and F-15E pilot, is the Director, Aircrew Crisis Task Force, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/477755/brigadier-general-christopher-m-short/>.

experiences. And there is an event that's starting today. I'm going to fly in to it tomorrow. But it's called the AETC Women's Fly-In,<sup>81</sup> and it's a professional development opportunity that there are a lot of women that are going to fly in to be part of that.

**SMITH:** Fantastic.

**LEAVITT:** General Van Ovost is going to speak. I'm going to speak. There's a number of speakers lined up.

**SMITH:** That's great. That's great. So have you had any — have you ever met any of the Women Airforce Service Pilots?<sup>82</sup> And I'm curious what the interaction was.

**LEAVITT:** I have had the opportunity to meet a few of them, and it is such an honor. I love to meet them, and I love to hear their stories. They are so inspirational. I always thank them so much for blazing that path. You know? That was long before that was even a thing. And the fact that they stepped up and did that was incredible, and I just love to hear their stories. So yes, I'm a huge fan of the WASP.

**SMITH:** [laughs] That's great. That's great. Just what is your take on the integration of women into combat flying? Like, obviously you're a [beneficiary] of it. [laughs] But I'm just curious how you see what happened? And, you know, is there anything the services, in your opinion, could have done better to smooth it? Or was it ruffled? Did everything go smoothly? Just what is your assessment of the 1990s effort to kind of move us forward?

**LEAVITT:** Well, I'd say there was definite resistance at the beginning. There were a lot of people that were vocally opposed to it. But we are a military organization, so at some point, you salute and move out.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** There was, actually — I remember my first assignment, there was a WSO that refused to fly with me.

**SMITH:** Oh, really?

**LEAVITT:** And so they sent him off to the staff. Said: alright, then you won't fly at all. And off he went. And that set the tone, and there was no more concerns with that. [laughs]

**SMITH:** Well, that's a good leader.

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That actually — you know, that could have gone quite differently.

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

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<sup>81</sup> Madeleine Jinks, "AETC hosts women's fly-in event in the Lone Star State," AETC, Sept 24, 2019. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, <https://www.aetc.af.mil/News/Article/1968920/aetc-hosts-womens-fly-in-event-in-the-lone-star-state/>.

<sup>82</sup> The WASP were the first women to fly military aircraft, <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/wasp-2014-rose-parade>; <https://twu.edu/library/womans-collection/collections/women-airforce-service-pilots/>.

**SMITH:** Some people might have just been creative with the scheduling. So — but that's not really a good way to run it.

**LEAVITT:** I had a good leader.

**SMITH:** Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** And leaders really need to set — you set the tone.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So whatever you do with the given situation is setting a tone, and so that helped out huge.

**SMITH:** Who was the commander?

**LEAVITT:** Lieutenant Colonel Carel was his name.<sup>83</sup> Denny Carel. And so — but yeah, culturally we definitely had some room for growth and room for better — what had happened is there's so much heritage and so much tradition, which is wonderful, in our fighter squadrons and fighter community.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** But along the way, they had picked up some bad habits and tried to call that heritage, and it really wasn't. And so you know, there was definitely some readjustment that needed to be done, and that happened later on, which was good. So much better in terms of the culture and the environment now than when I walked into it. But one of the things, really, was the life support gear. And huge praise to the ladies who have made a change, because I was in that first wave, and we did not want to make waves, and we did not want to cause trouble. And we did not want to give anyone a reason to not let us fly.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so life support gear did not fit well. Flight suits didn't fit well. You know? This is the first time I've ever had a female flight suit.<sup>84</sup> I didn't even know they existed until recently. Someone told me. And I said: really? There's women's flight suits? They said, oh yeah, they fit you. It's such a difference.

**SMITH:** Oh, great.

**LEAVITT:** And I said: oh, my gosh. That's fantastic. And so a lot of women have really been leading the charge to get some of those things changed, because it's different. You know? Like, for example, when you're doing ocean crossings and you need to use the bathroom in the airplane. You know, they made me prove that I could do it on a training — local training sortie before they let me cross the ocean in a fighter. And so — but the gear certainly was not optimized for it, in any way, shape, or form.

**SMITH:** Mm hmm.

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<sup>83</sup> Lt Col Dennis C. Carel assumed command of the 336th Fighter Squadron on Jan 22, 1993, <https://www.afhra.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/433236/336-fighter-squadron-acc/>.

<sup>84</sup> Bailee Darbasie, "New direction for female-specific flight equipment," 99th ABW/PA, Apr 1, 2019. Accessed Dec 19, 2019, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1801680/new-direction-for-female-specific-flight-equipment/>.

**LEAVITT:** And so it was — it was a challenge, but again — so some of those things could have been addressed much sooner. And sometimes, because they're not affected by it, they don't think about it.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And so I think, you know, when you talk about how to better integrate, is to — you know, bring in those other perspectives and try to see it through someone else's eyes and understand that: hey, it'd be nice if flight suits fit — if I had gear that I could actually use. And like, for example, G-suits. I always had to have G-suits modified. But it was fine. I mean, I knew because they had to take panels in at the waist — but I just would never part with my G-suits. You know, when I would PCS, they're like: no, you'll get new ones. I'm like: I'm not letting these go. They're going with me, [laughs] because I want to be able to fly when I get there.

**SMITH:** [laughs] Right — have to wait two or three weeks until one is tailor-made. So yeah. Actually, one of the first Navy pilots, she said it seemed like everything came down to flight suits and bathrooms. [laughs] But — so that's interesting. What kind of advice — we talked about advice that you would give before command. But in — advice before entering the service, I feel like is part of your daily [laughs] job right now. But how about advice about balancing career and life? Like, you know, you've made this work for — and your family has made this work for I don't know how long, 15-plus years.

**LEAVITT:** Mm hmm.

**SMITH:** So what would you tell not just young airmen, but anyone, about balancing life and career?

**LEAVITT:** It's interesting, because I've heard the analogy that, you know, it's not really a balance, because if you have work/life balance, you know, if you think of like, a teeter-totter or see-saw, it's like, 50 percent, you're failing at both. So that doesn't really work.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** So it kind of fluctuates back and forth. And so there's times where you're having to focus more on your work, and times when you're focusing more on family. And so for example, when I'm not on the road, I don't go into the office before 8:15, because I'm going to make my kids breakfast and bring them to school. When I am on the road, I'm going to help them with homework. And the kids like me to check their homework. And so they — you know, we have an au pair, like a nanny. And she'll take pictures of the homework and text it to me, and then I correct it, and write down any corrections they might have. The kids are real smart. So there's not many corrections. But I'll send any corrections or comments I have back. I'll text to them. But for us,

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it's always been a family decision. Like, if my children ever said they were done, and they didn't want to move anymore, I'd be done. There'd be no discussion. They love this adventure called the Air Force. And I think one of the things is we've always tried to focus on the positive. You can have any given situation, and it can be good or bad. And sometimes, it's hard. You know? My husband went to Iraq for five months when our daughter was just about to turn 3, and our son was not yet 2. And then fast-forward a little while. When I went to Bagram, our daughter was 3 and our son was 2. And that was really, really hard. You know? I will definitely say that. That was definitely hard. Fast-forward a few years, when we

were in Washington, D.C., we had all been together for two years, and then my husband had to go to — well, he got an assignment to be the Operations Group Commander at Kunsan. So, Korea number 4. [laughs] So when we sat down to tell the kids, we had a family meeting, and they got a little upset, and there were tears. And we explained that, you know, Daddy was going to a really important job, that he was going to be in charge of all flying operations. And we said: well, you know, Hawaii is halfway. We could meet him there. And they're like: ooh. You know? That got some attention. And then we said — they said — or, we told them: how about we go visit him in Korea? And they were like: ooh. That was very interesting, because our daughter had been born there. She wanted to go back and see it. Our son was feeling very gypped, because he was five, and he had never been out of the country. Our daughter had been to Korea, obviously. She was born there. She'd been to China and Costa Rica. And so he was feeling it was fairly unfair. So we ended up — I was working at the CIA at the time, and I had a lot of flexibility and a lot of leave built up. And so pretty much if he would leave the peninsula, I would take the kids and go visit. So we met in Las Vegas, we met in Fairbanks, Alaska, we met in Hawaii, and we spent Christmas and New Year's at Kunsan in Korea. And so it — we turned it into a big adventure.

**SMITH:** Right.

**LEAVITT:** And at the end of that year, I remember our daughter was in first grade, and it was her turn to do the "all about me" poster. And so she had to do three fun facts. And her three fun facts were: she was born in Korea, her mom and dad were in the Air Force, and she had been to four countries and 25 states. And I was like: those are pretty good. Those are legit. And she came back one day, and she was sad. She came home from school. And I said: what's wrong? And she said: some of the kids think I'm lying. And I said: oh, sweetheart. I said: well, you have not had the typical experiences of a 6-year-old. She was still 6. And I said: when I was 6, I had only been in this country, and I think I had been to two states. And she was like: [gasps] what kind of childhood did you have? And I'm like: no, no, no. That's more normal. Like, it's because Mommy and Daddy are in the Air Force. And it was like this little light bulb came on, like: oh, I get some pretty cool experiences. And so it's — you know, we talk to them all the time. And right now, they have no interest in me retiring. So I'll continue to serve.

**SMITH:** Which gets my "what's next?" for you [laughs] question, if you're continuing to serve.

**LEAVITT:** So the great news is, I get to stay in this job at least till next summer. And so I don't know what's after that. But I love this mission, and the people are incredible, and the mission is amazing. And so we're really enjoying it.

**SMITH:** Fantastic. So we're getting close to the end, finally. I know [laughs] — but I want to make sure I cover everything you want covered. Is there any area — like, I have one final question. But is there anything that we've not talked about that you want to discuss or have included in your military aviation record — your oral history. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** I don't know of anything.

**SMITH:** Okay. [laughs] I just wanted to ask — I saw that you were in this Military Hall of Honor,<sup>85</sup> and it just made me think: wow, I wonder what General Leavitt considers her greatest accomplishments or most memorable experiences. And if you want to pick a couple or —

**LEAVITT:** Well, my biggest accomplishment is being a mother, but I know you're talking aviation.

**SMITH:** Well —

**LEAVITT:** So —

**SMITH:** It's—

**LEAVITT:** In terms of — hands down, my most important job is being a mother. We have two amazing children.

**SMITH:** Yup.

**LEAVITT:** And they mean the whole world. And so — but if you're talking flying-related, probably the combat missions. You know, flying over Afghanistan in particular. I remember missions where we had friendly troops on the ground that were stranded for some reason, and

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we were the reason they got back to friendly territory that night. And so knowing that you've made a difference — and it was funny, because one day I was in the tower where the operations group headquarters was, and this young Marine came in, and he was on R&R. He was like, on his halfway point of like, a year tour. And he came through, and he really wanted to meet some of the pilots from Dude Flight, and that was the call sign we would fly with in the Strike Eagles. And he was talking about his experiences. And it was so rare for us as aviators to get to talk to the people we protected. Because normally, they were out in the forward operating bases or other locations. And so it was really neat. We — I took him over to the Strike Eagles squadron and let him talk with some of the crews. And to just hear it from his perspective was pretty incredible. And so probably those type of things. And then the other ones are when young ladies in particular will follow a path because they know they can, because someone's done it before them. You know, it's the whole trailblazer idea. I didn't used to like that term, "trailblazer," but then I thought: okay, if it means that it's easier for those who follow this path, then you know, I guess that's okay.

**SMITH:** Then you're okay with it. [laughs]

**LEAVITT:** That's right.

**SMITH:** It's grown on you. Yeah.

**LEAVITT:** I won't call myself that, but...

**SMITH:** Right.

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<sup>85</sup> <https://militaryhallofhonor.com/honoree-record.php?id=228822>.

**LEAVITT:** ...I'm not going to, you know, counter it. Like I said, if it means others can do things they want to do and have less resistance, then that's a good thing.

**SMITH:** Yes. Yes. Well, General Leavitt, I just want to say what an honor it's been to interview you. I'm so thankful that you were able to come to D.C. for the Air Force Association Convention, by the way, and take some time out to come to the Smithsonian and conduct your oral history interview — my great privilege to meet you and to interview you. So thank you so much for your service. Thank you for being an outstanding fighter pilot and leader, and I wish you every success.

**LEAVITT:** Thank you very much.

[2:52:29]

[END]