

MILITARY WOMEN AVIATORS ORAL HISTORY INITIATIVE

Interview No. 5

Participant Edited Transcript

Interviewee: Lieutenant General Jacqueline Van Ovost

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By: Monica Smith

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SMITH: My name is Monica Smith, a Smithsonian Institution consultant at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Today is July 22, 2019, and I have the pleasure of speaking with Lieutenant General Jacqueline Van Ovost, 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, Gen Van Ovost.

VAN OVOST: Thank you. It's great to be here.

SMITH: Would you please state your full name and your occupation?

VAN OVOST: Sure. Lt Gen Jacqueline D. Van Ovost. I'm the Director of Staff at the United States Air Force Headquarters.

SMITH: Fantastic. And where were you born?

VAN OVOST: I was born in Arlington Heights, Illinois, just outside Chicago.

SMITH: What were – tell me about what you were like growing up.

VAN OVOST: I'm sure I was hard to contain when I was growing up. [laughs] My father was in the medical business, and then he became part of the – in the aviation business, so I naturally gravitated toward the aviation part of what he was doing, and I was constantly exploring and reading as a child. Frankly, I was a little bit of an introvert, but I was very focused on – you know, my dad would have a magazine or a book. He bought encyclopedias, and he would find me on the ground reading when he came home, because I would have done my homework or whatever, and I would want to read something different than what the school was teaching me. And so I'd just reach for something and start reading. And so I kind of had a voracious appetite like that. And then I – you know, as I grew up, in grade school I recognized that I got a little bored with the normal course of training, and I was always reaching for activities that would expand the mind outside. Not really athletics, but debate club, math club, science club, those kinds of things. So I tried to keep myself busy and out of trouble, basically. [laughs]

SMITH: Well, that's something that has not changed. [laughs] Tell me about the rest of your family. Tell me about your parents' names...

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: ...and what they did.

VAN OVOST: Sure. Hans and Joy Van Ovost. My parents came here in 1960 from Holland, from the Netherlands. They immigrated and wanted to come to the Promised Land. They'd heard about the dreams that America has, and how vast, and the opportunities that they would have here versus in Holland. So they made a decision to come to America and start a family here, which I know can't be easy to do when you leave all your family behind, essentially, and you go to a new world. But I'm really grateful that they came to the United States and provided the opportunities they did for three sisters. I'm the baby. There's three of us, three girls, and we all had great opportunities here in America, based on the fact that my dad and mom worked hard, and they made a way. And essentially they ended up having a small business themselves, which allowed us to learn about hard work and dedication and what it takes to earn money and to pay bills and have employees. So they required all of us to work after school in the home business, because that was our source of income.

SMITH: What age did that start?

VAN OVOST: 12. 12, yeah. So my parents had a small aviation and a small medical business. At the time we were phasing out the medical business, and in the aviation business, I was required, when I came home from school, to sweep the hangars out, to change oil in the aircraft, to wipe the windshields off, and to refuel the aircraft at night, to close the hangars, ensure we have security, and to make sure the taxiway was clean. So that was my job every afternoon and on weekends.

SMITH: So an early introduction to aviation.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. [laughs]

SMITH: Did you see yourself going into aviation at a young age, or –

VAN OVOST: I did. I did. My two sisters, they mainly gravitated towards the medical side of what my parents were doing, and I gravitated towards the aviation piece. I always wanted to jump in the airplane. I'd fly with whomever would go if I had the opportunity. And of course, I wanted to be at the controls if I could, for most of the time I was flying. And whether I could see over the dashboard or not, I wanted to hold the stick, you know, and I wanted to play with the knobs and learn what it did. And I spent a bit of time with some of the civilian mechanics that we had, just – I would sit with them,

[5:00]

and I would hold their tools, and you know, help pull out the plugs and clean them and bring them to the sander, and you know – of course, as I grew, they gave me a little more and more responsibility, but I really enjoyed the mechanics of it, and the fact that the different types of airplanes were – they looked different, and why they were different, and how they flew was different. And so I started to learn that, well, that's because the air foils are different, or because the engine is different. And that's when I learned that that's – I wanted to know more about how airplanes fly.

SMITH: So when was the first time you actually took a flight in an aircraft?

VAN OVOST: Well, probably when I was about 8 months old. And I know I don't remember it, but I have – my dad has this fond photo. My dad at the time was working in a medical business, and that medical business bought the first Lear jet. And so – and Danny Kaye, who was an actor and a singer and a dancer, he was interested in getting a Lear jet. And so he came and saw my father's boss, saw the airplane, and then wanted to ride in it. So there's a picture of Danny Kaye holding me while my dad is getting ready to get in the airplane to fly. And so he's – I'm in the back seat with Danny Kaye. And so the story goes that Danny Kaye held me for the flight, so [laughs] that was my really first exposure to general aviation.

SMITH: What about the first time you actually manipulated the controls? Do you have a memory of—?

VAN OVOST: Yeah, about 11, 12, when my father had a Bellanca Super Viking, which is a beautiful, fast airplane. And he used it to go on trips to teach people in the medical – he used to do teaching in medical. He taught folks pulmonary therapy. So he would go to universities and to hospitals, and he would fly his Bellanca. And when I could skip school, he would let me go with him, and then I could sit in the airplane and help manipulate the controls. And he would put, you know, literally phone books – remember when the phone books were really thick? He would put a phone book up underneath me so I could look over the dash and fly the airplane. So that was a lot of fun.

SMITH: So you were surrounded by aviation at a young age. And did you see yourself going into the military? Or, let me just ask. How is it that you came to be in the military?

VAN OVOST: Yeah. So I – I never really gave the military a thought, as my parents – they weren't from the military, and not affiliated with any military schools or anything. So we didn't – I didn't really think about that at all, frankly, until late my junior year of high school. But what I knew I wanted, based on the fact that I flew – I had flown a lot of airplanes as a teenager, and I got my – I soloed when I was 16, I got my private pilot at 17, I got my commercial rating and instructor rating at 18, both single and multi-engine – and I wanted to continue that way, and I wanted to gain experience, but I also learned I wanted to develop airplanes. I wanted to know more about how they worked and what made a good airplane for what kind of mission, whether it was flying agriculture or flying aerobatics or flying commercial. And I recognized that I wanted to fly jets, because jets were fast, right? And I saw jet fighters, and I thought, you know, civilians could fly those. You know, I wasn't quite putting all that together. But I knew I wanted to fly fast, and I didn't want to fly in the airlines.

SMITH: Why not?

VAN OVOST: I just didn't see myself – maybe it's because I couldn't sit still long enough to be an airline pilot, is what I was thinking. I just kind of wanted to do something different than an airline pilot. And then frankly, when I was – probably when I was 16 or 17, I was helping Piper, which was a small aviation corporation that built airplanes – Piper Aircraft Corporation – and

they were one airport away from our airport. And my – our mechanic actually worked there as well, checking out airplanes when they first came off the line. And we would essentially do a small checkout on the aircraft. We'd do a very thorough pre-flight, and you'd fly the airplane for the first time, and then you'd come back, and you'd have your list of problems you found, whether it was avionics, or flight control problems, or whatever you found: brakes, or something wasn't even, or the seats didn't roll back. Whatever it was, we did the full checkout on that airplane. And I thought to myself: this is pretty cool. And when overseas partners bought these airplanes from Piper, they would need to be flown overseas. And I flew – and so you'd fly the airplane to a location, and at that location – which in this case, it was Lakeland, Florida – has a company that they tear out all the nice interior stuff. They put fuel bladders in it, and then they stick a pilot in it, and they fly it to South America, or whatever.

[10:00]

Hawaii, or wherever the airplane's going to go when you sell the airplane. And I walked into that organization – I dropped an airplane off, and I wanted to go see who these pilots were, you know? I mean, this seems pretty cool. And I saw a young guy. He's coming back from some trip overseas. I think it was Europe. And this airplane that I dropped off was headed down to South America. And so he's coming in. He's got a bag, you know, and he's all ruffled hair, whatever. And I was with one of the leadership, and he just said: hey, whatever his name was. This airplane has got to go. Two days, it's got to go, whatever, Costa Rica or wherever. He said: can you take it? And he's like, ugh. Okay, what day is it? And they're like: well, it's like Sunday or Monday. And he goes: okay, two days? And you have to go in two days. And he just looked at his watch and goes: okay. And he has this locker, like in my gym locker. He's got a locker, right? And he's opening up his locker, and he's shoving his stuff in it. And I'm thinking to myself: I want to be that guy. I want to test airplanes and bring them – yeah, I'd bring them to wherever – where they go. But more importantly, it's really cool that he gets to fly these new airplanes to all these different exotic places. And so they got me thinking about other jobs than being an airline pilot. And then I found out that – and I really wanted to more – be like a test pilot, and that's when I – you know, I talked to Piper at the time. And there's a civilian test pilot school, and it was something like \$200,000, which is a lot of money, and it was certainly a lot of money when I was going through school. And you have to be sponsored by Cessna or Piper or one of the aircraft corporations – Beechcraft – to go do that. And I thought to myself: well, I don't know about that. But then you said – you know, but there's a military test pilot school. Well, hmm. How do you do that? Well, you've got to be a military pilot. Interesting. Okay, well, maybe there's a way there. And then I found out, asking about military airplanes and jets, one of the instructors that flew out of our facility, his son was a physicist and instructor at U.S. Air Force Academy. And so he said: my son is at the Air Force Academy. Are you interested in doing that? And I'm like: well, what's that about? And so he hooked me up, and we talked about academy, and then going to be a pilot, and then going to test pilot school.

SMITH: So this is late in your junior year of high school?

VAN OVOST: Yes.

SMITH: So you're kind of behind –

VAN OVOST: I'm behind the power curve.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: That's correct. That's correct. I'm behind the power curve. And I'm not an athlete or anything. That's one of the big pillars, is being, you know, athletically sound at the Academy. But I thought, okay. So I'm going to toss my paperwork in and see, you know – I'm behind, but I did get an interview. And I was selected as one of the 10 from – representative. Actually, I got both senators and representative. They all kicked me in. And I think it's because of my flying experience, that I knew what I wanted to do, and I wanted to be an aeronautical engineer, and all those things kind of fit the mold for the Air Force Academy. So anyway – so I got to go to the Air Force Academy, but it was only – or again, it was a last-minute deal, and it was a little uncertain for my parents, because they wanted me to stay, and they wanted me to continue to teach, because I was teaching, frankly, for a year. I didn't get in my first year at the Academy, so I stayed for another year, went to a community college, and tried again, and got in the second year.

SMITH: You were teaching – what? Were you a CFI?

VAN OVOST: Yeah, I was teaching, a single-, multi-engine instructor, and I was also doing Part 135, which is the small-airline, in a Seneca. We had Piper Senecas. So I flew a lot in the Bahamas, back and forth, and then I flew banners down the beach as well. We had a little Citabria for the business. We had a banner business. So I used to pick up the banners and do launch and recovery on banners, and now I'm flying the banners with my commercial license. So I did that for a year, along with going to a community college for a year before I went to the Academy.

SMITH: What was the name of the airfield, the airport that –

VAN OVOST: Fort Pierce, Florida.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. Yeah.

SMITH: So tell me about your community college.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: Tell me about your summer at the Academy.

VAN OVOST: Well, so that was a – because I was really focused on being a pilot and [laughs] kind of, this was the way – you know, and once I roll in, I'm committed, that – you know, this whole briefing about – this is going to be – you know, there's military training first, and then you go to academics, and all that. I'm like, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then I become an aeronautical engineer? [laughs] And I get to?

SMITH: Let's get to the – let's get to the fun stuff. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: Exactly. So – and then I was working out, you know.

[15:00]

But I'm a lowlander, they call you, you know. Low altitude, Florida; high altitude, Academy. And they're saying, this is going to be different. You're going to be winded out until you get going. And so – but I wasn't really concerned, you know, because I was – you know, my – in my forethought, I was really only thinking about my academic year and being prepared for academics, because I know it's hard, right? So I got my year in at community college. I took all the advanced courses, so I'm – you know, I wanted to be ready. Because I had committed. Even though I didn't get in the first go, I was committed to going in, and that I was going to go in. That was the plan. So I was going in, so I was very focused on that piece. Not as much focused on the athletic piece, but I thought I'd catch up to that. So getting off the bus at the Academy was, you know – as it is for everybody, is a very humbling experience. Because you're kind of at the top of your game, and then you're, you know, at the very bottom of the game as soon as you are getting yelled at as you – as you essentially are sitting on the bus. And they take you off the bus, and you begin your experience. And I thought to myself – well, you know, you just kept thinking: a lot of people have done this. A lot of people have got through this. I can do this, too. I can get yelled at. That's no big deal. And I'll learn. Whatever. I'm a good learner, so if they need me to learn about military history, about customs and courtesies, about all that, I can make my way through that. And so I was, you know, pretty confident. Once I got over the, "What?" [laughs] "What, what?" You know, then I understood how it was going to roll from there. And then, I roll in. I was actually the – for my squadron, I was actually the lead – fourth classmen, the lead freshman for the squadron for my first semester.

SMITH: What was your squadron?

VAN OVOST: I was in Thunderbirds 27. So that was, again, an experience, because as the leader, you're also trying to – you're trying to make sure the team – and that's kind of how I always felt, is it's all about the team. So these are all these freshmen, and then we've all got to get through. We've all got to get through this, right?

SMITH: How many were in your class?

VAN OVOST: So I – we were the first class to graduate a thousand, but in my squadron, we probably had maybe 28 or so – 27, 28 freshmen.

SMITH: How many women?

VAN OVOST: There were three of us, I think, in that squadron, for freshmen. I don't even know how many upperclassmen there were at the time.

SMITH: But that's – this is your core group that you're going to [crosstalk] go through the Academy with.

VAN OVOST: [crosstalk] Yeah. For the – well, they switch it up. You're – time at the summertime is with the class, and you get a different group when you go to your freshman year.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: Alright, because they – you're all together, and then they split you up amongst all the – well, you have like five or six squadrons of freshmen, and then you get all split up amongst the 40 squadrons there. They just take you and pair you out amongst the 40 squadrons, the freshmen. And so again, about –each squadron had about 120, 130—it's the freshmen were about 30-ish, in the squadron. So for the year of academics, the academic year starting, you're in this squadron. You have upperclassmen, seniors and juniors and sophomores, and then there's freshmen. So I was the leader for the freshman group, which is more on the military side. It's more of a customs and courtesy, making sure you know your stuff, and everyone's tight, and their uniform is good, and their beds are good, right, and that everyone's learning, and they get their academics done. And so that was – but frankly, that was at a cost of my own personal academics, because I thought: oh, I could do this, because I had a year of college, and I should be able to make it through. But it's – it's a much, much deeper schedule at the Academy. You have many more courses than you would normally at a community college, out of the semester. So – and so essentially, I didn't do that the second semester, and then ever since – well, since the second semester, all the way through to my remaining time, I remained above a 3.0. But before that, I was below – my first semester, I was below a 3.0, which really disappointed me.

SMITH: Did you volunteer for that position, or – okay.

VAN OVOST: Yeah, you end up getting picked, but you – you know, you need to be all in...

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: ...to do that. And I was. I think a little bit – if I had to go back and do it again, I think I would have focused a little more on my academics, because when you roll out the first semester with a lower academic grade than you want, it really – it somewhat defines some of your destiny in the rest of the time. But I wasn't paying attention, because frankly, getting yelled at was more of a stressor than the classes to me. So I'd rather fix the yelling...

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: ...by going all in, spending extra time shining shoes, making sure everybody else's room is good, making sure my room is good – perfect, frankly.

[20:00]

And that time-sink took away from my academics.

SMITH: Sure. Of course. Tell me about flying at the Academy.

VAN OVOST: I went to the – to the aeroclub. And as an instructor – first of all, I went and flew as a freshman. I didn't see – not many freshmen were instructors. Well, none were. And then I

wanted to become part of our team, our competitive aeroclub team. And I tried out for the team as a freshman, and there hadn't really been – well, there weren't any when I was in. Never had been. It was a little hard, because they were kind of questioning: why are you here? And up until a point when they actually allowed me to speak – it's different when you're a freshman. They don't really tell you when to speak. So they're interviewing many upperclassmen for the positions on the flying team. And eventually –

SMITH: And what aircraft was that?

VAN OVOST: That was like a – it's a souped-up Cessna 172, is what it is. Because it's high altitude, they had to have the bigger motor in it. But this was all about competition, intercollegiate competition, which you see in other – at other universities. There's other flying teams. And there was precision team on preflight, flying, the mechanics of flying, the route study, and route flying for time and all that. So that was what you were competing against other colleges for. But what I didn't know when I applied was that you can't be an instructor, because it's kind of an unfair advantage for you to compete as an instructor against students from other universities who are not instructors. Had I known that, I think I would have taken a different tack at the whole thing. But once they finally let me talk, and I explained why, and why Cadet 4th Class Van Ovost, was here to interview to become part of the flying team, they were kind of taken aback, I think on – wow. Dang. Because I had a thousand hours of flying time before I came to the military. And then you could kind of tell, they were a little unsettled by competition, because they were going to give us oral – you know, they're going to give us writtens and orals, and we were going to go fly together, and I was ready for any – all that. But eventually, one of the officer leaders of the flying team had to come down to explain to them that I couldn't compete. But they were pretty relieved, I think. And so I said: okay. That's going to – we're going to go that way. I'm – how about me becoming an instructor for the flying team? And that got the interest of the officers, [laughs] not so much the interest of the team. But what I didn't want to do was ruin their *esprit de corps*. But I was watching them, frankly, because I wanted a woman on the team, and there weren't. And there was plenty of women on the intercollegiate teams for the other colleges. So I couldn't be the woman on the team, but they got one the next year. So that was –

SMITH: You paved the way. You asked the right questions...

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: ...and poked in there. Yeah.

VAN OVOST: Right, to make sure that there was – and then I was around. I was around the aeroclub. I taught at the aeroclub for people who wanted to get their license outside of the flying team.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: And then I did some quizzing with the flying team, and I helped them with some of their oral work, and some of the written work, and some of the preflight, you know, testing

that we do for them for their competition. But I just went over and focused on people who wanted to get their licenses instead. So I flew on the aero club when I could, and you know, just like any other job, and – yeah, so I got paid to do that. And you had to write: hey, I'm getting supplemental income from doing this work at the aero club on the weekends. So that was – it was very interesting. And then I did soaring, and the other fun things over there. But I didn't become a soaring instructor because I wanted to stay with teaching powered flight.

SMITH: Soaring through the Academy?

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: Through the aero club?

VAN OVOST: Through the Academy, yeah.

SMITH: Yeah.

VAN OVOST: I went and took the soaring course, and soloed, and did all that. But I didn't want to – see, in freshman, you can decide if you want to become a soaring instructor, and then if you, you know, do well, you can enter that phase. But I wasn't interested in becoming a soaring instructor. I was still interested in becoming the instructor for the flying team...

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: ...because of the powered flight experience I brought to the table.

SMITH: Did your reception with the aeroclub, male pilots at the aero club – did that – was that mirrored at the rest of the Academy, or –

VAN OVOST: No.

SMITH: Good.

VAN OVOST: You know, I don't think so. I just think it was, you know – first of all, to have the first woman show up, and then stay through kind of the hazing that went on, if you will, the kind of – the harassment of all the other folks like – they're like:

[25:00]

why do you deserve to be here sitting among us? And then secondly, to just watch their faces as I – because they would tell you you're supposed to say all these, you know, experience, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I did. And the guys just stopped writing because they were writing it down– they just stopped writing, and just –it was just – it was priceless [to see their faces]. And all the other freshmen are going: yeah! [laughs] You know, so –because I thought – again, I thought I was a few – a shoo-in until, essentially a week or two later when I recognized I was out because I was overqualified.

SMITH: Well, tell me how [UPT] flying slots are delivered at the Academy.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: How do you decide – or, how is it decided where you're going to pilot training?

VAN OVOST: Yeah. So at the Academy, it is kind of a – you know, we look at your GPA and your military performance. It's kind of a total ranking of someone, plus your ability, of course, to pass the medical. So they look at kind of your class standing to determine where you're going to go. But if you have – if you are medically qualified, and we had enough slots, you were going to go. So that's one of the reasons I chose the Academy over going – I was thinking about University of Florida, ROTC. They also offered a scholarship for aeronautical engineering, but only two people got flying slots my senior year there – my senior year in high school, I learned only two got slots, because the ROTC slots are spread amongst all the ROTC units. And the Academy, because they're putting all that – the resources into you and developing you at such a high level with leadership, they expect you to be in the military forever, right? A career, frankly. And so they give them more slots, because they want more *career* pilots, because it's quite expensive. As a matter of fact, it's a 10-year return on investment for them. You know, and you sign up – and that's the other thing I was kind of oblivious to. It's just like, I sign, sign, sign. You do realize you just signed – as pilots, you sign on for 10 years. I'm like, okay. Whatever. Plus you're signing for four years to go to the Academy. So as a 17, 18-year-old, you just signed away 14 years of your life. That's intimidating these days. And people turn that down because they – they're like, whoa. You know, that's...

SMITH: That's too much.

VAN OVOST: ...that's too much.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: You know, they can't think beyond that. But then when you go – if you go to ROTC and you sign up your junior year to be full-time ROTC, and then you become a pilot slot, you still owe them 10 years, right? But you're more mature in your thought. But anyway, so – you know, so I signed all that way. And I'm like, absolutely. So then you get into a big auditorium, and you know, you were selected. You're medically qualified, and you met all the academic standards, and you know, all the military standards to say: okay, you can go be a pilot.

SMITH: What year is this?

VAN OVOST: Your junior year.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: And no, I'm sorry. They tell you in your junior year: for sure, pilot slot. And then I think it's your fall semester of your senior year that they bring you into the thing, and they say: okay, here's the rack-and-stack. And essentially, by class ranking – which is not just academics, it's military and your other performance – they – you know, you stand up when your number is called, and they have all the slots for all the different UPT areas, and you know, once one fills up, you can't go to that one, right? But it's – you know, there's different – you know,

there's like three or four different classes you could go to, with – at Vance, or, you know, whatever, Reese or whatever. And everybody wanted to go to Phoenix to Williams, because it was like a party city, right? And of course, everyone wanted to go to Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training, which was not an option for women. So that was, you know, kind of stricken off. But I thought about Willie, and Willie had open slots when my name was called.¹ And I thought: I can go do that. But I thought better of it. I thought: eh, I don't want to get involved in partying too much. I was afraid of – like, I was afraid of my oversuccess there. So I went to the next best one for me, which was Reese Air Force Base. That was in Lubbock, Texas. It had enough of Texas Tech, you know, kind of the party area, and enough isolation that I would be able to focus on flying – flying jets. So I took Reese and the slot that I wanted. So it all worked out.

SMITH: Alright. Fast-forward past Academy, graduation. First day at Reese.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. Reese was interesting. Again, my time as an instructor pilot and as an instrument rated pilot really came into play. We had two other women in my class, and we stuck together. And I would take them to the simulator to help them, especially fix-to-fixes,² you know, tough stuff for – conceptually, how do you do this? And you know, how do you get to the perch,³ and you know, the things to happen during final,

[30:00]

right? And so, you know, academically and in the simulator, it was not a problem. So my job was to ensure everybody made it, you know? Just rolled out there and said – okay, so when you get free sim time – we couldn't afford instructors, right, to be in the sim, so I would sit with them, because I want them all to pass, especially the women. So we spent a lot of time together.

SMITH: Was it an Academy class, or –

VAN OVOST: It was a mix. There was someone not from the Academy there, and I want to say probably maybe 50 percent Academy, -ish. So it was the summer, so meaning all the ROTC folks just came out as well, right? So we would work together. You know, Reese was fine, and the weather was good, you know? Good flying, you know. The T-37, the first aircraft was, you know, easy to fly. It was not a problem. And so I was ready to solo, and they sent me back because they wanted the class president to solo first. So I hung out and trained other people. And so any time it came to do – frankly, there you had to do this, you know, typical – well, here's the block of instruction. You have to do these, you know, nine rides, and you can opt out of one of them, you know, per block. And so every block I opted out of one, only because I'd already met the standards, like, pretty early. And again, it was only because I had all this experience, and this was the slow flying. It's a Tweet, it's a Cessna.⁴ It's not a big deal. So it was pretty easy, frankly. And they all said: well, you're going to come back as an instructor. And I'm like: well, no. I'm

¹ Williams AFB, AZ is often called "Willie."

² Point-to-point navigation using VORs and TACANs.

³ The perch is the dynamic point in the overhead traffic pattern where the pilot decides to initiate a descending, 180-degree turn to final; it is usually abeam the runway numbers, but may vary based on winds or other factors.

⁴ The T-37B is nicknamed the "Tweet" or "Tweety Bird."

not, because I'm going to be high enough ranked out of this class that I'm going to go get what I want. And that was, I wanted to be a test pilot. And there was only one woman that was going to test pilot school at this time: Eileen Collins, and she flew a 141. So I said: no, no. I'm getting a 141, because I'm going to test pilot school. And they said: no, no, no. You're going to be pulled back here, you know? Because you get the couple that get to go, then you get the instructor cadre, and then you get the rest, right? I said: no. So that was fun. We had a good class. So some people washed back, and we had some folks wash back into our class. The standard stuff, but you know, it was all about teamwork and getting everybody through. And so that was a kick in the pants. But I loved it. I love teaching. I would have loved to stay as an instructor, except I had other things I wanted to do. So you know, several of them was teasing me on drop night, because you know, they're like: you're going to be a 38 instructor. You're going to be a 37 instructor. And I'm like, no. No, I'm not. And I wasn't. I got a 141.

SMITH: So you did well enough where you were, well.

VAN OVOST: Yeah, I did. But I'll tell you, you know, they give you that dream sheet, and they say, you know: what airplanes do you want? And it's got something ungodly, like 30 slots in the dream sheet. And so I put every fighter aircraft there was, because what I didn't want them to say was: I got my top 1, 2, or 3, because the percentages of top 1, 2, or 3 matter, you know, because that stuff gets briefed up the chain.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: And because women couldn't fly fighters, I knew they couldn't give me my top 1. They couldn't give me the F-15. So I put all F-4, and A-10, and cross-commissioned F-14s. [laughs] And then, the last one was a 141 to Charleston. I didn't put any other airplane on there. And they gave me a 141 to Charleston. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] Strategic. Oh, my gosh. Brilliant.

VAN OVOST: And they were like: yeah. She's going to be a problem later. [Laughs]

SMITH: Brilliant. Oh, I should have done that. I should have talked to you before I filled out my dream sheet. Oh, my gosh. So did you have any issues with the other instructors in terms of, you know, just resistance to you because you were flying so well, or –

VAN OVOST: You know – no, I think – first of all, we had a female instructor there.

SMITH: Oh.

VAN OVOST: So that was good.

SMITH: Who was that?

VAN OVOST: Sandy Miarecki.

SMITH: Oh, yeah.

VAN OVOST: Sandy was from California. You know Sandy, right?

SMITH: I know Sandy.

VAN OVOST: Yeah, Yeah. Sandy was out with us there. She was – she was 2nd Lieutenant. It was her first – her first group of students.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: But – so she was there. And no one – no one had an issue there. I tell you, though. Let me roll back to the Academy. At the Academy, before we stood up the Pueblo operation, which is the pre-UPT operation, for Academy grads, we went through at the Academy – and those same airplanes that I was teaching in, right? We would give you your first checkout, your first brush military flying, with the rigors of checklists and stand-ups and stuff like that. Now, we do it at Pueblo. I don't know if you know we've contracted that out down there. But it used to be at the Academy, for Academy grads. So I went through that class, and you go through it your junior year summer. You're going to be a pilot. And so I had to go to it. But you go to the military unit, and they train you how to fly this airplane that I had been

[35:00]

flying for three years now, and for which I have more hours than the instructor that's sitting with me. And I found it really interesting, because the flight commander came over, and I had – the instructor must have been like, a major or so. And the flight commander came over – we're getting a prebrief for the first ride, and he's aware – he's aware of my background, my instructor. Flight commander came over, and he starts addressing me. And of course, I stand to attention. You know, he's like, a lieutenant colonel or something. And no, he's a squadron commander. And he said, "So what are you going to teach Major so-and-so today?" And it's supposed to be my second flight, because I think "Major so-and-so" was a little intimidated after the first flight. But – so then I said, "Sir, I'm not here to teach Major so-and-so. I'm here to learn military flying. I take my instruction from my instructor." And he goes: good. I said: okay. Sit back down. The instructor just kind of winked at me, and I'm like: okay. Whatever. "Whatever you want, sir." However, you know? However. So then I was cautious, you know – just because you know, doesn't mean you know, right? And so always defer to the pilot in command, who is that instructor. But I didn't see that at all in my Tweet time, and nor did I really in the T-38 time. Everyone was very supportive of everyone that was going through there. I don't think that there was any concern. Now, there wasn't – I don't want to say this – they thought: well, it's no big deal if, you know, with T-38s if she doesn't fly this extra formation ride, because she's not going to fly 3-foot formation anyway.

SMITH: That irritated me. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: It is, you know –

SMITH: Yeah.

VAN OVOST: It's like, okay, whatever.

SMITH: Yeah.

VAN OVOST: I can actually fly formation with my aerobatic team anyway, right? But I didn't find any pushback in that at all.

SMITH: That's good.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: So after UPT, graduation.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: Tell me how your dad and everybody reacted at graduation.

VAN OVOST: My dad's warming up to the fact now that I'm flying jets. He's pretty happy about it and is a little more stable about what it is the Air Force is going to do with his daughter, because you know, he was really concerned. He really wanted me back there, and he was concerned about where I might go and what I might do. And when he learned that his daughter got a 141, which is a cargo airplane, he thought: okay, that's like an airline. You know, he's thinking airline. And I'm like: yeah, that's not why I joined. And so he was pretty proud of the fact that I was flying. Going to Charleston and flying to Europe, especially, when I had time off, I'd visit my family in the Netherlands, which made him pretty happy that I was doing that.

SMITH: How about Mom?

VAN OVOST: Mom was always scared about flying. She was not a big flying kind of person, and she just wanted to make sure I was safe. And she figured: as long as you get good training, I'm happy, and I'm happy for you. So – but you know, I walked into the C-141 unit, and I had done pretty well at pilot training. My goal was to go to test pilot school. And so I sat down with my ops officer, the number two in the squadron. He does a normal in-check with all of his pilots, which is good. And he said: so why did you choose the 141? And I said: well, because I wanted to be a test pilot. And the only female test pilot – flew the 141.⁵ And by now, the second female was applying, also 141.

SMITH: From Charleston.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. So I said that was the winning plan: Pam came here, I'm going. You know, Eileen, Pam, and now I'd like to go.⁶ And so he says: oh, okay. I said: so, any flight you want me to take, any dirty job you want me to do, I'm here for you. I'm single. I want to fly all the time. You know, even if it's just as a third pilot, I want to get all the experiences I can, and as soon as combat operations are open to women, I want to do airdrop. And he says: wow. Okay. And I said that I'm here for you. And I'm getting my degree. So you know – and I barely

⁵ Captain Parker became the first woman pilot graduate of USAF TPS in 1989.

⁶ Eileen Collins flew T-38s and C-141s before graduating from TPS in 1990. Pam Melroy flew KC-10s, logging 200 hours of combat and combat support hours during Operations Just Cause and Desert Shield/Storm before going to TPS in 1991. Both became NASA astronauts, and both piloted and commanded space shuttle missions.

remember that, but he remembers that vividly, that I came into the squadron and just kind of said: here's the deal. So now, I'm the awards and decorations person, I become the squadron exec, I'm flying as much as I could. As soon as combat came open to women, I was doing combat airdrop as a copilot.

SMITH: When did that happen?

VAN OVOST: Upgraded to – '92, right?

SMITH: '90, '92. Yeah.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. So '89 – so I was there in '89, so maybe '91, about two years after I got there.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: So –

SMITH: Explain that mission—airdrop mission.

VAN OVOST: The mission for the C-141s was to bring cargo and soldiers into a combat zone and

[40:00]

seize an airfield. So it was basically an airfield seizure mission. So you would load them up out of Pope AFB or wherever the base was— Fort Bragg, in this case, 82nd Airborne. And you would go to a low level, just like you were ingressing into Europe or something. And then you would pop up, and then you would kick them out the back, and then you would come back down, low level, back to a safe location. That is the generic airdrop scenario. And most likely, you had to do air refueling to come in, because you know, when you're loaded up out of North Carolina, and you're trying to get to a drop zone in Europe, you're going to need fuel somewhere along the way. So you also get air refueling, where you have two airplanes that come together and get gas in the sky. So women could not – well, although they had the capability to do it, the point was, they would never put women in a combat zone at the time, which is why there was no need to qualify you in low level and airdrop, because you would – we would never use you in that way, which made sense until the law was passed.⁷ And then, once we could do that, then anything associated with that, I wanted to be a part of.

SMITH: So actually – so the combat exclusion policy – it seems like the Air Force lead turned it a little bit, with opening airdrop and that special ops low level.

⁷ President George H.W. Bush signed H.R. 2100 into public law on Dec 5, 1991, rescinding a 1948 law that prohibited women from flying combat aircraft. PL 102-190, Part D repealed "Air Force and Navy and Marine Corps Provisions which prohibit the assignment of female members to combat aircraft." A commission was established to study and make findings regarding the law, and the SECDEF was authorized conduct test assignments of women to combat positions. Accessed Sept 25, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/house-bill/2100>.

VAN OVOST: Right. It was more of a policy thing, because we weren't—fighters was the big, flashy thing.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: But performing combat or combat support was not really thought about. When you think about it, even folks that flew tankers were up in the air zone of, you know – of an enemy, essentially. And we were doing all that without really realizing it was combat. But they wouldn't let you – for example, in air refueling, they wouldn't let you do special ops low-level. And all the difference there is you're refueling some special ops capabilities, at night, and in places they don't expect you. So women could fly what we call white world air refueling, but not black world air refueling.⁸ So the Air Force allowed some of the policy: well, it makes sense. It's coming. It's not about fighters. It's about capability, and we need more pilots to go do these things, so yes. Combat airdrop. Combat low-level air refueling. Go ahead. And so women did it. Just get in the program, get qualified, and start training with 82nd Airborne on the ramp. Yeah.

SMITH: Do you feel like that improved your Test Pilot School application?

VAN OVOST: Absolutely. Absolutely. I was really concerned. I know the two previous women who went to Test Pilot School had no combat airdrop experience. But they were instructors in the airplane, and I was still very young--when I went to Test Pilot School. But the fact is, the more missions you do, the more you know, because – what's the goal of Test Pilot School? When you get out, you need to be able to test weapons systems to do their mission. And part of the mission on the 141 was low-altitude, you know, refueling, combat air drop. And if you weren't part of that, how can you test the C-17 to do that work, right? So getting that – those quals were kind of important for me – to get air refueling, and instructor, and you know, and airdrop was pretty important for me, because I couldn't at the time go be a fighter pilot.

SMITH: So when you found out you were accepted to TPS, you were an aircraft commander?

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: And tell me about [applying to TPS].

VAN OVOST: I put in for TPS. Frankly, I put in for TPS at the same time as we were putting in for the first 10 women for F-15s. And I had a package in for F-15s and for TPS. And I thought, name recognition. I wanted to get TPS going, you know, because I'm still an aircraft commander, not an instructor. But mind you, I was an instructor, and I have over 1,000 hours of civilian time. So, a civilian instructor. So I put the package in, thinking: okay, just so that they'll see my name at the board, so that next year, or the year after, when I become an instructor, or when I – if I go to fighters, I'll have fighter time – they'll remember: Jackie Van Ovost has been trying to get into Test Pilot School, right?

⁸ "Black Ops" or "Black World" is synonymous with Special Operations.

SMITH: Tell me about the application for fighters, though. How do you – how did you hear about that?

VAN OVOST: Well, it just came out that they said that it was available. They were targeting the ladies that were in T-38s, that were doing the training in T-38s. Everybody had to bite at the apple if you wanted to go do it.

SMITH: '92?

VAN OVOST: That should have been '92, for – because I went to '93 B class for – summer of '93, I was at Test Pilot School, so I might – so it must have been in late '92 input, because I learned by summer – mid '92 input.

[45:00]

Because I learned by fall that I was selected for Test Pilot School. So at that point, when they called me in to interview, I took a mathematics test, and a five-flight eval in the T-38. So after that – and they said: this was a two-way street. You know, are you interested –you learn about what test pilots really do—do you really want to do this? And I said: yes. And at that point, I told AFPC that I'm not interested in the F-15, because I can fly all the fighters, or I can fly one fighter. And frankly, I wanted to be at TPS, and you never know when the opportunity comes around again. So I had it in my hand, and I went for bird-in-hand. And so – and I'm super excited that I did, frankly. I went to TPS, and it was exactly what I thought. As a matter of fact, when I was a senior in aeronautical engineering at the Air Force Academy, there was a Test Pilot School graduate there, and he taught a Test Pilot School short course, if you will. It was about what pilots and engineers do—flight test pilots and engineers. And I took that course as a senior. And so you – your final gets you out at the Test Pilot School, and you fly like an F-4 and a T-38 or something like that. And you do a project associated with flight test. And I just said: absolutely. This is what I want to do. And so I did a research project for, you know, whatever. The four weeks of my research time as a junior, I went to Test Pilot School and did some aeronautical data research for them. I was all sold on TPS, which is why when they said, "Come," I think one of the reasons – even though I was fairly junior in military flying, that I had spent time as an intern there. I spent time in the course at the Academy. I had an aero background, and I had flown probably 40 or 50 different types of general aviation aircraft at that point. So they were like: that makes sense. That was the full-package piece. And I went there, and I'll tell you what. It was a stressful year, because you're flying a lot of airplanes you've not flown before, and it's all under a graded structure. You're under the gun. There are 10 pilots and 10 flight test engineers, and you're competing against the 10 pilots. Now, my point was to get along to graduate, you know? Standard academic issue. We work together; everybody passes, right? But when I got there, there were still some remnants of things that Pam Melroy and Eileen went through, which were people that were not excited about women being at flight test.

SMITH: Peers? Instructors? Both?

VAN OVOST: Instructors.

SMITH: Oh.

VAN OVOST: Not peers. None of my peers, even though I had Koreans in the class. But they were most – one of them was a little standoff-ish, but they were most grateful to have me there. And there were two women there: a flight test engineer, and myself. Dana⁹ was the flight test engineer, and myself. So one pilot, one engineer. But the students were all very, very helpful. Different backgrounds, B-1, B-52, F-15, F-16, and F-14 and F-18, all very helpful to someone like me, who had only flown a heavy for military.

SMITH: You were the sole heavy?

VAN OVOST: No, I – well, so in heavy – frankly, in Test Pilot School, in heavy, they considered the B-1 guy a heavy guy, the B-52 a heavy guy, me a heavy guy, and we had one more heavy guy, and he was 141s, C-12s. Dave Allvin.¹⁰ So it was the four of us that were heavies. There was four heavies and six fighters, but we worked together. Because there was heavy tests that the fighter guys had to do, and then there's fighter tests we had to do as part of the class. But the class was flying, and academics, and testing, and report-writing. So it was really – it was a very stressful 11 months, because you're doing flight dynamics, performance. But it was an exhilarating 10 months! I mean, 11 months. When your first check ride is actually in an F-15, and you've never flown one before. And so that was intimidating, frankly.

SMITH: How many rides did you get? Some – whatever, before that check ride.

VAN OVOST: No sims. None. You get a walkaround.

SMITH: A walkaround and a check.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. It's a performance check, and it's your first check. Now, you're flying a T-38, and you're learning how to do tests, and you're learning how to gain – understand energy of the aircraft, how you collect it, and how you break it down.

[50:00]

And the first check ride was a performance check ride, performance test. And so the scenario that you “captured” this Soviet aircraft, and we want to understand how it performs: its energy, called P_s, and then where—if you had a United States Air Force F-16 pilot—what would you tell the F-16 pilot about how to beat this Soviet aircraft. So you're about two months into the course at this point, and you've flown T-38s. And now, to be fair – to be fair, as we check against each other, the F-15 pilot didn't do this exam in the F-15. They put him in some other airplane, because they didn't want him to be comfortable. But heavy pilots were all going: okay. This will be interesting. But you get the manual of the airplane, and you study that—about the performance limits, you study emergency procedures, the boldface procedures, and then basically how to start the airplane, how to walk around it. And then the weekend prior, I took the F-15 pilot who was in

⁹ Dana Louie.

¹⁰ David Allvin.

the class, and he came over, and we all sat around and – in the airplane, and he was like: okay, this switch does that. [laughs] This does that, right? And we did the walkaround. And then – so then comes the check ride time, and you have a – what you have is a two-seater, okay? So you have an instructor behind you, and it's a legitimate – I mean, it's an F-15 instructor, right? Test pilot instructor. And you brief them on what you're trying to do to gain the data, and you know, you're all mic'd up with, you know, recordings and all that to get the data, and your little tape that you stick in the airplane to get data. And then, once the briefing is done, you get suited up, and – oh, you get the egress training, what to do in case you have an emergency. You get the ejection seat training. And then you do the walkaround, you get in the airplane, [laughs] canopy down, start the engines, and you know, frankly, I got done starting all the engines and everything, and I was ready to taxi. I'm thinking to myself: I just started the engines. That's pretty cool, you know? [laughs] I made it, you know?

SMITH: What was that takeoff like?

VAN OVOST: That was –

SMITH: Tell me. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: Frankly, on the performance, some of you, when you roll the dice, you get certain performance measures. So you don't exactly know what you're testing, right? Thank the Lord that I rolled the dice for a MIL-power¹¹ takeoff, because it's a clean F-15 with no external fuel tanks, so no drag, right? The guys that rolled an afterburner takeoff, much harder to do, only because you've got to get on – because there's a profile you need to fly, and it's much, much more like you pull through 40, 45 degrees almost immediately, just to get out and just to get on that climb platform, an afterburner climb. So I rolled the MIL-power takeoff, which is awesome. And so – but I tell you, I took off at Edwards, and you turn sharply to get out of the pattern. I flash, I look down, and I see the shadow of an F-15. And I think to myself: I'm flying an F-15!

SMITH: That's so cool. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: Sweet! That's about like the last thing I remember, because I have this whole list of cards I'm going through, and I'm like: climb, fast accel, then trim shots, and all these other things we were doing. And then I think a supersonic run was in there as well. Getting cleared through the corridor, getting supersonic done. But you had to calculate the fuel it was going to take, and you could only go a certain amount of minutes flying, because that's – even though the airplane itself could go much longer, you had to develop your profile so that it was only so many minutes. And so – and then finally, came back around, and boom, landed, right? Tower flyby. And then poof, pop down, land, and –

SMITH: How many minutes?

VAN OVOST: It's right at 60 minutes. You get an hour.

¹¹ Military power, as in, no afterburner

SMITH: Oh. That's great.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: Well planned.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: Life's good. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: Touchdown. [laughs] Clock stops. So that was, you know – but it was a lot of stress, because I wasn't used to flying it. I mean, frankly you're just trying to remember the boldface procedures, where – you know, and hook it up at Last Chance. And Last Chance is always fun because someone hooks up to you, and then, technically they're checking your weapons, pulling your pins – in this case, there's no weapons, because we're clean. But you've got a crew chief out there, and you know, he's like, "Hi, sir. How are you doing?" I'm like, "Doing great. I'm doing great." "Oh, sorry, ma'am." [laughs]

SMITH: They're just not used to you.

VAN OVOST: They're just not used to women in the cockpits, so – [laughs]

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: So –

SMITH: Right. You're number three,¹² so I feel that it's –

VAN OVOST: Yeah, so each of the – whether it was flight dynamics, mission computer, you know, performance – you know, I drop weapons on the A-10, F-16, all of that. Radar drops. A lot of the low-levels

[55:00]

Are set up for fighters, I'm just not used to the speeds and turn radius associated with fighters versus heavies in those environments. So I had to do probably a lot more studying than a lot of other folks, which put my stress level a little higher. But I really enjoyed it, because we got to fly World War II birds and the Goodyear Blimp and, you know, it was a lot of fun.

SMITH: Did you get to fly any bombers as well? You talked about the fighters.

VAN OVOST: Yes. Yeah, I flew the – I didn't get to fly the B-1. It broke that day. I flew the B-52, and I think that was it for the bombers we had. And then of course, the B-29, B-17, B-26. Yeah.

SMITH: Wow.

¹² Van Ovost is actually the fourth woman pilot USAF TPS graduate.

VAN OVOST: Because we had the Confederate folks come out.¹³ So why is that? The reason that we fly those airplanes is to learn about the Norden bomb site and how they came up with it, and why the airplane flew the way it did, and why – what the stability factor was, and what kind of flight controls it had, and what were the pluses and minuses of the systems and the flight controls and the way the wings were designed. And so the first thing you do when you walk around an airplane like a B-17, you walk around with the instructor, and he goes: okay, why are these ribs here? Why is the tail shaped the way it is? Why are the wings swept back a little bit versus straight? Why are they elliptical? Why, you know, and so when you look back at this airplane, how fast do you think it flies, you know? And then that's when – that harkens back to the time I was at the Piper plant, and I was looking at all these different airplanes going, they're all built differently. They have different shapes of wings and different shapes of tails and different propellers and different engines. Why is that? Because each airplane is designed for a certain mission, or a certain envelope. Whether that's going to be aerobatics, it's got a wing that's symmetrical, so you're just as good upside-down as right-side up, you know. And inverted – inverted oil and air and fuel systems versus non-inverted. And so you can walk around an airplane now and explain why these tabs are on the airplane. And you could tell if an airplane has good flying qualities or bad, just by looking at it, not even flying it. And the only way to do that is to expose yourself to a lot of airplanes and a lot of different designs. You know, I flew the Albatros, the L-39 – both the L-39 jet and the L-39, which is a separate Albatros. Same name, but it's a sea plane, right? You know, a sea plane, and why it is designed the way it is and what are the pros and cons. Where is it unstable at? You know, so because when you fly – test-fly an airplane, you want to see right away where the instability is, and where you need to go, and how do you want to expand the envelope.

SMITH: What advice would you give your pre-TPS self?

VAN OVOST: [laughs] You know, like I said, I went to TPS early in my life. And I think I would have done better in TPS – you know, I wasn't the top grad, you know, and at that point I was pretty aggressive, so I was a little disappointed in my total overall performance. But I think if – I had been a fighter pilot like Dawn Dunlop¹⁴ who came behind me, and she came out of F-15s. And she did super well. And I think it's not only because she's a super sharp individual, but she had exposure to that, because the vast majority of the time was fighters – you know, flying F-15s and F-16s. And I had to not just learn the airplane. I had to learn the mission. And that was all new to me, because I don't do air-to-air. I don't do BFM. And so I had to spend my time in T-38s instead of practicing flight test techniques. I was practicing BFM, because I had never done that. And so I tried to get someone else – hey, can you do some BFM with me at the end of your time? Because I need to know that, because if I want to test the F-16 to see if it's a good BFM fighter – Basic Fighter Maneuvers – then I have to go learn how to do it. So maybe I would have

¹³ The Confederate Air Force, chartered in 1961 in Texas, changed its name to the Commemorative Air Force in 2002. The CAF mission is to preserve and honorably display historic aircraft while educating and inspiring people about the craft. Accessed Sept 25, 2019, <https://commemorativeairforce.org/pages/About-the-CAF>.

¹⁴ <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/473225/brigadier-general-dawn-m-dunlop/>.

jumped on – if I really thought that I'd still get Test Pilot School, I'd have taken the F-15 and then gone to Test Pilot School. But, you know...

SMITH: You never know.

VAN OVOST: ...you never know.

SMITH: Yeah.

VAN OVOST: I think as a youngster, I was aggressive enough. I think I had the right studies, the right mathematical background to do it. The only thing that would get my confidence up is if I'd have flown fighters more.

SMITH: After TPS, you go on to C-17 test pilot.

VAN OVOST: Yeah, C-17 flight test, mainly. And you know, I had the opportunity to fly P-1 through P-6, the first six jets off the line. So that was really a lot – it was really great. I was air drop, air refueling. All the things I did in C-141s, right? And flight dynamics, and mission computer software work on it. And so there was really a lot of flight controls work, which was really nice, because I did a lot of flight controls work at Test Pilot School. And then I became the Flight Commander lead test pilot for the C-17.

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And then I went back to Test Pilot School and I taught for a year there before I departed out of there. And you got back into the flight dynamics and teaching test pilots, which was really a lot of fun, flying the Sherpa, which as you know, is a flying boxcar. It's a nightmare for flight dynamics. But you know, the whole reason we're fly it is for that reason. And so – so that was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed the time there, and I learned a lot as a test pilot, grew a lot as a test pilot, and I got my master's of mechanical engineering from the folks at NASA, which was really a lot of fun.

SMITH: Never sitting still. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: Yeah, so that's the problem.

SMITH: How did you have time for all of this?

VAN OVOST: Yeah. [laughs]

SMITH: How did you balance everything? So by this time, you're married. How were you balancing flying, like you're – at the rate you're flying, and...

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: ...managing home life and –

VAN OVOST: Yeah, the – you know, at Edwards, a lot of the performance testing, a lot of the things we did, were early in the morning. So once Test Pilot School was done, I basically got

throttled back with the exception of taking two classes a week at night for my master's degree. And I was able to go do things downtown with my husband and get involved in some faith-based activities that we were involved down there. And so, you know, I knew I needed to make time for it. The weekend was really my time to go spend and do things that Al and I wanted to do together. And then we flew some, you know, on the side, with small airplanes as well. And so that was – you know, that was that. And I didn't have any biological children. I have stepchildren. So when they came, they came for the summers, and so I would take deliberate time off to spend time with them and help them while they were there. So, yeah.

SMITH: After Edwards, Air Command and Staff?

VAN OVOST: Yeah, Air Command and Staff. They sent me to a year in school, and that was fun. That was at Maxwell, and you know, did some early – you know, research. Again, continued research work on – science and technology was kind of the little electives that I took there. And then took that work into the Pentagon, where I was the C-17 Program Element Monitor,¹⁵ which is on the C-17 program. Kind of the eyes and ears in the D.C. area for C-17s and procuring and upgrading C-17 aircraft. This was an interesting position to be in. It's an acquisition position, which I'd done a lot of acquisition work, but you're essentially helping Congress understand why the C-17 is an important weapons system for our Air Force and for the Joint Force. This is the part I hadn't seen yet, because I knew we were procuring airplanes. We were modifying them and making them better. We were flying them all over the world, but the whole part about the Congress' responsibility to raise an army – this was my first exposure to that, because they wanted to know: why do we have to modify the airplane? They're fairly new. Why is the airplane having problems? Or, why do you want to have a multi-year buy? Why do I want to spend taxpayer dollars to do this or that on a C-17 program? And I made a really good candidate for this position, because I flew the airplane, and I could speak to the mission, so I had a little bit of credibility. So the general officers would go over to the Hill, and they'd grab me and put me down, and then, you know, because the congressmen and women didn't necessarily need to speak to the general officer. They wanted to hear it from someone who had flown the airplane. And so that was very helpful. And I was in the program – I had started in the program when it was not – things were not well. Early on in the C-17 program, things were not going well. They were thinking about limiting us to a total of 40 aircraft because of the problems we were having in developmental tests. It wasn't going fast enough. It wasn't going well enough. And so we were taking a lot of heat for the program. And it was going over budget. So over time and over budget, not good. And so – but by the time we got done with this, and by the time my two years was up, the program had turned a corner, and they were doing a multi-year buy, which means they were going to go to a 120 airplanes. That's a far cry from the 40 they wanted us to stop at. And that goes to our ability to communicate how important the airplane was, and what we were doing to fix it, and that we knew we had problems, and we had problems with – at that time, McDonnell-Douglas, now Boeing, and how we were going to fix it and go forward. And every airplane has its stumbling points. Our weapons system. And at some point, you need to fish or

¹⁵ PEM.

cut bait. But we knew the airplane could do more, and we just knew we had to power out of that. And so we put a lot of dedicated people on that, and that whole team turned around that airplane. And so that was really fascinating to watch, where you were called up all the time to the Hill to explain this, that, and the other, to now, all of a sudden, they want to buy more.

[1:05:00]

So that was awesome.

SMITH: Due to you.

VAN OVOST: That's good.

SMITH: Your experience. That's great. You want to take a break?

VAN OVOST: Sure.

SMITH: Okay.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SMITH: We were finishing up talking about your PEM duties in the C-17 PEM.¹⁶ And before that, I had talked to you, or asked you a question about balancing your home life with your professional career. And I know that you made a decision about your last name when you got married. And I'd just like you to share your decision to keep your maiden name.

VAN OVOST: Maiden name. Sure. Well, as you know, when you're asked about, you know: what is your identity, right, and my – first of all, Van Ovost is an uncommon name, and I want to say there's only one other American – one other person in America, and he's related to me – that has that last name. And so my – the thought of – I had done a lot of work as an instructor, and you know, in pilot training, and frankly at Charleston with that last name. And I remarked about how I wanted to put my Test Pilot School package in. And I wanted – for name recognition, because sometimes, it's just because the people continue to apply, they know – you know, they recognize the name. And the name recognition I thought was important for my continued career. So I told Alan, my husband, that – you know, who is – we got married somewhere in there, but I had already applied to Test Pilot School – that I wanted to keep that last name, so that the next time when I put my Test Pilot School package in, it would still say "Van Ovost," because I wanted to be a test pilot. And so [laughs] – and so he's like: okay, whatever. And so I said, "Whenever I'm done with my military career, I'll just change it over to your last name." And so far, that hasn't occurred, but –

SMITH: 20 years later. [laughs]

¹⁶ Program Element Monitor.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. [laughs] Yeah, 26 years later, I still haven't quit my first job. And so – but it was for name recognition. And I didn't want to hyphenate it, which was an option too, because I already have two words in my last name.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: And it was just – it was – they get my name goobered up right now as it is. So that was the decision. I don't – when I'm with my husband at church or doing outside activities, I just – I want to be called "Jackie," and then, you know, and people call me by his last name. And of course, my kids and grandkids, you know, call me "Grandma" with his last name as well. So you know, they don't know. I mean, they don't care. So it was just a personal decision for name recognition. Because of the awards I had had, because of, you know, my standing in different areas, I wanted to keep it going. And I thought at some point, I would just go ahead and change it over, but I kept staying in. And so I thought: well, I'll just keep the name. And then people do recognize you, right? When you change your name, you know, I look at the Academy grads, you always put your – you know, your last name in parentheses – your maiden...

SMITH: Maiden name.

VAN OVOST: ...name in parentheses. Remember me? That's my maiden name. And I thought: well, you know, as opposed to doing all that, I'll just stay with "Van Ovost."

SMITH: And now, many people are doing that in a variety of career fields.

VAN OVOST: That's right. It's normal. Right.

SMITH: So, yeah. I've failed to ask you what your UPT class designation was.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. We were 89-12 at Reese Air Force Base.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: Lubbock, Texas.

SMITH: Thanks. So now after – jumping back to – you're at Air War College after PEM. Is that correct? At your –

VAN OVOST: So, no. I went to PEM, and then I went to KC-135s at McConnell.

SMITH: Oh, no. Then you went to the 135s. Yeah.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: So that's your first command, squadron commander at –

VAN OVOST: Right. 384th Air Refueling Squadron, Squarepatchers. Yeah.

SMITH: How did you find out about – that you'd made it on the squadron commander's list...

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: ...first, and then tell me about commanding a refueling squadron.

VAN OVOST: Yeah, I think – so this goes back to mentoring, right? I was very interested in going back to flight test at Edwards, and frankly had almost, you know, bought a home, you know, out there at Rosamond, thinking that that's where we were going to go after my duty as C-17 PEM, because I wanted to go back to fly. And my boss – my two-star boss at the time, Art Lichte,¹⁷ said, are you thinking at all about going back to operational flying? And I said: well, no. [laughs] I'm a test pilot. He said: you know, one of the mistakes we make in developing – in deciding what kinds of systems that we want – or we don't have people that can then articulate what we need the system to do – called requirements.

[1:10:00]

And we'd like to take a handful of people out of the acquisition and back into requirements, and the only way to do that is to go operational again, to help us describe, to – before we buy something, and it gets to the flight test phase, what it is that we want, you know, out of a system. What do we need it to do? And because we can't articulate it, we rely on the contractor goes: you want this box? And you go: what else you got? This box? I want that box, right – versus describing it. So he made a compelling case, and frankly, my opportunities to command beyond the squadron commander level were smaller in flight test, because there was only one test unit, than going operational. And then the person who commanded that test unit, 418th Flight Test Squadron, which is a great squadron – it had all kinds of airplanes and helicopters. It was like the “jack of all trades” squadron. That'd be awesome to command. And he did a great job commanding it. And he went off to be the deputy group commander for – at Edwards, but we – it was always a fighter pilot that was going to be the commander. And so beyond O-5, lieutenant colonel command, the base itself, Edwards, was a fighter base. And my ability to command beyond that was very, very small. So he kind of convinced me that, you know, I should take a look at operational flying. And he said you haven't flown refuelers yet, and that's part of the mobility world, so you need to go to tankers. And so I said: okay. Well, interesting. I hadn't applied to any of the boards for Air Mobility Command, because I was applying for test pilot – you know, to be the 418th commander. And I was doing my work as a PEM. And my boss pulled me into a meeting with then the Air Mobility Command Commander. And we talked about the C-17 or whatever. And then he goes, you know: hey, Jackie here is interested in coming back to operational flying. And he goes: oh, really? And I said: yes, sir. I'm interested. You know, like, you know. Like I'm going to say anything different to a four-star. And so, you know, we talked, and I said: but I – you know, I didn't – I didn't apply, you know, for Air Mobility Command – for command. And he just looked at my two-star, and he just laughs. Ha, ha. [laughs] I didn't know what that meant. And so I – so I got my stuff, and I'm – you know, I'm done with the briefing. I'm grabbing everything up and going to go. And then I left. I'm going down the

¹⁷ General Arthur J. Lichte was, as a major general, Director of Global Reach Programs, Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, HQ USAF from Jan 1999-Apr 2000; Major Van Ovost was the C-17 PEM from Jun 1999-Jun 2001, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/104855/general-arthur-j-lichte/>; <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/108814/major-general-jacqueline-d-van-ovost/>.

hallway, and my boss peeks his head out – two-star, and he goes, “Hey, Jackie.” And I turn around. I’m like, “Yes, sir?” And he goes, “You wrote your name down.” “Uh, okay, sir.” You know, I’m on to the next subject. You know, right now. And he goes, “You know what that means?” I’m like, “No, sir. I don’t.”

SMITH: You’re in.

VAN OVOST: And he goes, “He’s not concerned about you not meeting the board.” “Ah. Okay.” You know, and then the next thing now, what they do is, you know, there’s multiple boards. They just take the data from that board and move it over. So I thought to myself: well, I think I’ll have a shot actually, going back operational and doing well. And so that’s what they did. They put me in as a – kind of the number three person, the Assistant Director of Operations, in one of the squadrons for six months until I learned the mission, and then they moved me over to squadron command. So that was a lot of fun. It was – I took – I was in training for 135s when 9/11 hit, and I was at Altus, which is the training base. And at that point, I was one ride away. I finished the ride, and I came to McConnell, and life had changed. And my first trip was to PSAB¹⁸ to clean up. There was still some normal work to be done at – in Saudi Arabia, and then I took command. And then I went and I took my unit for the first time to Afghanistan. And we had the special ops low level mission.¹⁹ So we were the night guys, doing that work, in areas that we hadn’t refueled before. And we didn’t have refueling tracks, because it was all new. It was all new. And so it was very interesting, because we packed that unit up and left. And I had just taken command. And my husband’s like, “Okay, I’ve got like, 30, you know, ladies that, you know, with kids, that he’s now is in charge of.” [laughs] More than that were – but these were young ladies. And so – but we went and deployed, and it was amazing. You know,

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when you’re deploying with a unit, it’s just like nothing else. Focused on the mission, focused on them, keeping them going, and Alan was just so awesome with all of the – with the full unit of 80 spouses. He was taking pictures. And at that point, we were just learning about the World Wide Web. And he made a website, and he would post pictures of all the events. They did two events a week. And he would post pictures on the World Wide Web, and then I would get there before the first brief. And I would print them out, and I would cut them, and I would put them under the plastic in the briefing rooms, of people’s families, and several of my – several – two. Two had babies while we were there. And so my husband was there, and took shots of the baby and, you know, and all that, and put it on the Web, and then we’d cut it out and put it up underneath there. And it was fun to watch their – you know, because they would always check the rooms to see if they had their families and what they were doing. And my husband and I had an anniversary. I don’t know if it was our tenth, or something like that. And of course, we were all deployed. And he got all dressed up, and he took all the spouses out to Olive Garden. So imagine two long tables of people with my husband at the end. He took them all out for our

¹⁸ Prince Sultan Air Base, near Al Kharj, Saudi Arabia.

¹⁹ SOLL.

anniversary dinner. And so they got a lot of photos of that and sent them in. And so that was – you know, that was a lot of fun. And it really helped the team.

SMITH: Yes.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. So that was good. So we sort of deployed a couple of times, obviously pretty much – you're only back for 60 or 90 days, and then you're deployed again. But was really – you learned a lot about people, about the mission, and how we fit in the larger mission for, you know, aerial attack and what not. So it was good.

SMITH: After –

VAN OVOST: Best squadron ever.

SMITH: Yes. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: 384th Air Refueling Squadron.

SMITH: And probably too short. Less than two years.

VAN OVOST: Too short, I know.

SMITH: Yeah.

VAN OVOST: Because we had to – off to school, you know. It's one of those – keep it moving in the career.

SMITH: So, Air War College?

VAN OVOST: Yeah, I went to Air War College, and then went from there – that was back at Maxwell. And you know, got to refresh, reload, learn. You know, bring first lessons – firsthand lessons from Afghanistan. There was a lot of us had come out right from there. Literally, I came out, and I PCS'd. And so we got to share a lot of that. That's when we started the "lessons learned" team down there that started gathering that data on how we're going to get better and better in Afghanistan. And so that was a really good – a good thing. And then I was able to go from there over to U.S. Transportation Command, where I was in a Joint Operations Center doing planning for Central Command, Pacific Command, and then running the ops floor, which is not just Air Mobility, but it's, you know, land and sea components. So it's trains, it's ships, it's land assets, convoys. In Afghanistan, convoys – and then you know, regular airlift. Because air—we moved a very small percentage of cargo. You know, we did less than 10 percent of the movement of goods and people, mainly people, down to – downrange. It was mainly a ship and rail. And so I did a lot of work with my Army and Navy brethren there.

SMITH: Fantastic. And your lessons learned from your squadron deployments, and also your work with U.S. Transcom? So this is a sensitive topic, but – sexual harassment in the deployed location...

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: ...has gotten a lot of attention. What has been the reaction from what you've seen, to complaints and just how units are treating that?

VAN OVOST: Right. So when I went down there, the – we – I was stationed outside of Afghanistan, right? So I was in Bahrain. And in Bahrain, they treated women okay, the locals. But we pretty much didn't let people off of the airfield. And so we – as an Air Refueling unit, we would land, and we'd go fly up the air corridor, fly into Afghanistan, and then come back. So things in our camp were pretty straight. I mean, pretty much us running it. We had some medical – you know, medevac²⁰ issues. We medevac'd some people out to our location. And we didn't have a lot of – a lot of concerns that you saw when you were on the ground in Afghanistan, and with units that frankly didn't have a lot of women in them.

[1:20:00]

So – however, we always kept our eyes open. And it was more of a – you know, watching people who are in emotional states that are not good after long periods of time in combat, when they would come back through, if they would be R&R'ing²¹ at our station or what not, we could kind of watch that. And it – you know, when we used to say: okay, if you're going to go at night to the showers, you know, just, you know, go with your roommate, right? That was normal talk. That's a good idea. Normal talk. That's not normal. That's not normal. [laughs] You shouldn't have to walk to the showers with somebody else, right?

SMITH: No.

VAN OVOST: Now, I never took myself up on that advice, mainly because I was running the place, but you know, it's not so much that I think that they would be physically harmed, but what I didn't want was an opening, because we had had a couple of, you know, openings where, you know, a Marine Corps unit would come through, or an Army unit would come through, and it would be just a little harder on our medics, you know, and I didn't need for them to get, you know, catcalled or anything like that. I didn't want any of that to happen. Over time, you know – it was definitely was a two-person deal when we were in Afghanistan. Over time, you know, it became very clear that we were going to prosecute people if they harassed you. And that was just about harassment. And that was the big thing I was concerned about. The other thing we did evolved over time, was we started deploying people one-by-one. An army of one, if you will, outside the unit. When we have a unit deployment, it's a lot easier. We're a cohesive unit, and we look out for each other. When you deploy as a person, as the medic to augment an Army unit, or another unit you're not familiar with, you're not as close to the team. And therefore, the principles of "this is a cohesive unit" may not apply. And those are the ones that we were very concerned about, and that's why we started up a unit that does nothing but look after where our onesie, twosie people are, that are not affiliated with another Air Force unit.

SMITH: Right.

²⁰ Medical evacuation flights, transporting patient(s) under the care of flight medical personnel.

²¹ Rest and Relaxation (time off).

VAN OVOST: Because what they may do is – they’re doing great work and support of the Army, and they’re absolutely qualified – your weather folks, or intel folks – are absolutely qualified to do that work. But it’s outside of that that we were somewhat concerned. We wanted to make sure that the standards were withheld – upheld, and that they knew who to call if something were to happen. So over time, we developed these units that – they may not have been co-locating with them, but they would have to come through that unit in process and then go to your base, so that they knew somebody, and that they had numbers, and then they were calling on them routinely to make sure: is everything okay? Do you have what you need? Because it wasn’t just about the cultures of the other services, or the Afghanis, or whatever. It was also: hey, do you have the right armor? Did you get your gear – because some would come in without the right numbers of filters for their masks, or whatever. And we wanted to make sure that it’s in the Air Force system that we logistically supplied them. We had to have that tie. So essentially, we had somebody who had ad-con, administrative control, over every airman in the AOR²² like that. And eventually, we put them off in Manas because then we made every – we made that the gateway, all of the single airmen transitioned through there, and it made it a lot easier.

SMITH: Manas?

VAN OVOST: Manas is Kyrgyzstan.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: Yeah, I was there on the northern route in. And that made it a lot easier. And also, like, we had the SARC²³ and everybody was also associated with that unit. And those key people would then interface with the SARCs from the Army and the Marine Corps, you know, and frankly the Air Force, who are the ones that are on the ground there. But we needed someone to make sure we were watching trends on what’s going on. And we had a lawyer up there as well to make sure we’re giving the right advice to even squadron commanders that would call and say: hey, we’re having these issues with the Army, because Army Legal. We want our own ad-con, admin control, capability there. And now, we’ve evolved to what we call deployed teams of three. So if you are not going with your unit, we’re trying to – and right now, it’s about 80 percent of the time – we’re able to find at least two other people, like in the NCR²⁴ area,

[1:25:00]

that are going to the base that you’re going. And that – what we try to do is get you to train together, get your gear together – like all three different units – and then get deployed together. And that’s your battle buddies.

SMITH: Right.

²² Area of Responsibility.

²³ Sexual Assault Response Coordinator.

²⁴ National Capital Region.

VAN OVOST: And then that admin commander is going to hold all three of those battle buddies responsible, right, so that they're together, making sure that – you have a small, cohesive unit if you're not going to flow as a unit. Just trying to get out of the business of sending one at a time.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: Sending one at a time was something we did of necessity. We did it of necessity because the Army did not have enough people to do their jobs, because they were so stressed in doing the ground work. So some of the support work got moved to the Navy and the Air Force, and we didn't have units that were built around doing that work, so it became a onesie-twosie deal. Yeah.

SMITH: So let's – are you incorporating some of your AEF command experience, and the staff experience with this?

VAN OVOST: Yeah. When I said – yeah, when I said we've evolved to –

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. Yeah.

SMITH: That's –

VAN OVOST: My AEF – yeah, because again, when I first started, remember, there was no – it was – first of all, you know, the Air Force never left the desert, right. And so after 9/11, it was just kind of return to the Desert. But we just moved from one base to another and did a different mission. So we've been learning from the AEF, but our AEF broke down once – once the Army committed to ground combat, because we just didn't have enough people. They didn't have enough people, and then the cohesive units started breaking down, because we had to support them. We were directed to send this many airmen, and they would be doing all these odd jobs.

SMITH: Let's jump ahead to you – or back, depending on [laughs] what assignment we're talking about – to your first wing command, Twelfth Air Force.²⁵

VAN OVOST: So after my time at U.S. Transportation Command, I went down to Randolph Air Force Base and the 12th Flying Training Wing. Awesome wing. And the goal, or the mission, there was to train pilots to be instructors in T-38s, and T-6s, and T-1s, and then also to train our navigators, our electronic warfare officers. That was what we called—we used to call “nav training.” And that was really very exciting. It was an exciting time to be the 12th Flying Training Wing commander, because first, we stood up something called Unmanned Aerial System Training there, in a trailer. And our team did all that work. So I had a phenomenal team that put together the training. First, they did some T-6 work because we had the airplane, and then we set up these classrooms to where they could learn how to fly a UAV, because we were doing all that training at Creech, and it was building as you were flying. And they needed a proper training unit. So we stood up the training unit in these trailers. And not only did we do the

²⁵ Smith should have said the 12th FTW.

pilots, but we did the sensor operators, the enlisted as well. So for the first time, we had the two of them training together as newbies in the system and got it so that we could actually take control of some UAVs – you know, not just simulation, but actually take control, and be – that part of their curriculum. So that was super exciting. The other one was the fact that we took the curriculum for our navigators, flying in big T-43s, which are 737s, doing nav panel training. We took that curriculum, completely revamped it with Air Education Training Command, and we made them more like combat officers, made all of them do electronic warfare and combat systems operation, so a more deep, rich experience. And we did that, not using T-43s, where they would sit in the back of an airplane, but we did it in T-6s and modified T-1s. We modified a T-1 to put the – now, we call them “combat system officer,” because we totally changed what they were doing. It was not just nav – panel nav work. And they’re flying the airplane from the right seat. And they’re having to make the tough calls. You know, they have a pilot in the left seat of the T-1, but they’re also in the right seat. And then there’s panels behind the pilot in the T-1, and you have an instructor nav and also a panel nav or an electronic warfare officer. And then, all new simulators that worked on electronic warfare, because we had gotten away from electronic warfare. We stood up the unit at Pensacola, next to the Navy’s combat system officer training, trying to get synergies from the two – from the platforms, of trying to fly each other’s platforms and get the high-end training. So I moved them out

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of Randolph, out of San Antonio, took down that unit, and stood up a group at Pensacola. So, very exciting times, because it meant that we really had some very highly qualified combat systems officers coming out of there, trying to reinvigorate our electronic warfare capability. Because all the systems were getting more complicated – everybody’s using electronic warfare now. So the panel nav plan was old think. It was old think. We need to move to new think. So that was pretty exciting.

SMITH: Was that an initiative of yours that you –

VAN OVOST: No. That had been started before I got there. I was only there for two years.

SMITH: Yeah.

VAN OVOST: So it was in the works.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: And I was there to assist in the final fruition pieces, which is the final curriculum development and review and Red Team, and the MILCON standup. I got there, we’d just laid in the MILCON for hangars and a building at Pensacola – no, I’m sorry. The MILCON was laid in. We did the final design and build during my time. And then the airplanes got there, and the instructors got there. So when I left, I physically – at Pensacola, at the museum there, physically turned the flag over from the person who was at Randolph to the person who was at Pensacola. So it was almost right at the very end. So that was very exciting. So a whole bunch of people. Air Education Training Command, 12th Flying Training Wing, you know, Old Crows – the

Association of Old Crows, the folks that were – you know, all of them. Everyone got together to make that capability happen.

SMITH: Wow. Sounds like –

VAN OVOST: Yeah, it was awesome. What a great time to be down there. And General Schwartz²⁶ at the time was Chief of Staff of the Air Force. He came down because we said we were going to increase the number of lines that we were flying drones, right, in the war, and we had to get to 60, 65 lines. And the only way to do that was to increase pilot training for UAVs and sensor operator training. And he was looking for any way to do that. And we said: trailers. Let's do it. And so that was –almost completely – we just got started just before I got there, and that was another one that just got done inside 18 months. That was fun.

SMITH: Fantastic.

VAN OVOST: Really cool.

SMITH: And it sounds like Joint Staff was in your future at that point. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: But we'll get to that in a minute. Unlike many that have commanded a flying training – or a flying wing, you got to command two flying wings.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: So tell me about being notified and actually commanding the Presidential Airlift Wing at Andrews.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. I was pretty surprised. Frankly, I thought, you know, what a better way – no better way to leave the Air Force as on top, wing commander, 12th Flight Training Wing.²⁷ Love teaching, love what they did, loved all the youngsters and all the young blood that was going through there. And my boss said, well, we – well, you know, it looks like you're moving. And I thought, you know, okay. Moving, meaning retiring? Or moving, [laughs] meaning, going to another job? What? Because, first of all, I don't take anything for granted. Every opportunity I've had, I love it. I put everything into it. And if I'm – if that's my pinnacle job, it's my pinnacle job. But that was not to be. So Gen Lorenz²⁸ was my commander at the time, Air Education and Training Command. And he told me – I was at his house. We were doing a party or something. Folks walking around there, and he said: hey, you're moving to Andrews. And that's all he said to me. And I was – I didn't quite understand what he meant, because we have another command at Andrews called Air Force District of Washington. And it is supporting the National Capitol

²⁶ General Norton A. Schwartz was the 19th Chief of Staff of the Air Force, serving from 2008-2012, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/104626/general-norton-a-schwartz/>.

²⁷ The 12 FTW conducts the Pilot Instructor Training (PIT) mission, training instructors for all Air Force UPT bases.

²⁸ General Stephen R. Lorenz was the 29th commander of Air Education and Training Command (AETC), serving from July 3, 2008-Nov 17, 2010. "AETC Commanders," AETC. Accessed Oct 2, 2019, <https://www.aetc.af.mil/About-Us/History/AETC-Commanders/>.

Region here. All the Air Force elements of the National Capitol Region. We're just – it's an important job. It's a two-star job, and it – and I thought I could be on the staff, supporting the two-star.

SMITH: Which, you were a colonel at the time.

VAN OVOST: I was a colonel. So, alright. So I thought, I'm going to be staff, CAG²⁹, you know, something like that. And I – so I didn't know whether I was going to be excited about that or not, because I didn't want to leave flying, and I didn't know what it meant, because he'd just said "Andrews." And I thought: well, you know, I've never done special airlift before. And so for some reason, in my mind, I thought you had to have done special airlift before to be the 89th. So I just didn't think I was the 89th [commander]. And then he – finally, later in the evening, he comes over and he's like: how come you're not over-the-moon happy? And I said: so what am I going to be doing at Andrews Air Force Base? He says: you're going to command the 89th. I didn't tell you that? [laughs]

SMITH: No, sir. [laughs]

[1:35:00]

VAN OVOST: Of course.

SMITH: You left that important nugget out.

VAN OVOST: Aha. That changes my attitude, sir. And he says: what did you think? I said: never mind. Never mind. It doesn't matter. So wow. Having an opportunity to work with Air Force One and all the blue and white aircraft. And I thought to myself, I had about 105 airplanes at Randolph while it was under my command. 105. And I have students that are out there trying to kill their instructors,³⁰ right? And when I go to Andrews, there are 17 airplanes. 17. I'm like, how hard can that be? It's only 17 airplanes. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] So tell me. How hard can that be, Gen. Van Ovost?

VAN OVOST: Yeah. Yeah. First day, the phone rings off the hook about problems. And so – but it's –this is a very important person; airlift for 535 congressmen, who are sometimes quite demanding. Then of course, there's the President, and the Vice President, and Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and all the chiefs and service chiefs and the Chairman.³¹ So if – as you noticed, there's the pool there is right around 700 people for 17 airplanes. So you could tell there's a – first of all, there is a demand. And the demand exceeds capacity. And you fly into regions all the way around the world that are not military airfields. And you have to have folks that are very confident in flying in all kinds of weather, in all kinds of locations, you know, from different kind of rules for flying, like in the old Soviet bloc, to coordination on the ground,

²⁹ Commander's Action Group.

³⁰ The phrase references a student pilot's—and even a student instructor pilot's— seemingly endless aptitude for inadvertently placing the aircraft in a potentially fatal situation.

³¹ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS).

everything. And the amount of planning that goes into every trip was unbelievable. I did – really did not know how much went into every flight, because not only do you have to have a primary plan, you have to have an alternate and a contingency plan. And what if you don't get cleared into such-and-such airspace? What if you land two minutes late? Our block time, plus or minus 10 seconds, was the goal.³² And so you could be flying 14 hours and trying to hit a plus-or-minus 10-second block time. So flying triangles – and you couldn't – you can't be early either, because early means that when you land there, and the red carpet rolls out, the Secretary of State rolls out, the Prime Minister is not there.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: You can't go circling above their nation for a bunch of hours, right? So you have to actually develop timing triangles in your normal crossing of the Atlantic tracks and whatnot. The other thing we're doing is we're maintaining communications. That's one of the biggest challenges, because you're moving from satellite to satellite to try to maintain bandwidth such that they have internet access, they have phone – secure access, the video teleconference – all that is bandwidth. And if you have to change from one satellite to another, it can drop. And you don't want to drop a call with the President, right? You just talked to another leader, and you don't want to drop the call. So it's a – it's a dance that you play. You – actually, when you flight-plan, based on the time of day and the day of the month, you actually know what satellite you're going to be transmitting off of for your capability to maintain secure coms for that president, for the Secretary of State, whatever, and for how much bandwidth. You work with the folks that do the bandwidth work, and you make the flight plan. If it comes onto a VTC – a video teleconference, which has a lot of bandwidth required – in some cases, if you're about to change to another satellite because you're losing range of that one, or if you're trying to delay it, you may come in – you may go into a turn, or may take the autopilot off and keep it going straight and level until the call is complete. Even though you wanted to go here, you'd go straight and level until the call was complete, and then make the turn. So all of that went into planning. And then the meals, and making sure that they're comfortable, and that everything is safe. So it's a big, big deal. And you're part of their personal staff, frankly. You're part of the President's personal staff. You're part of the Secretary's personal staff – Secretary of State, and Vice President. And so there's a lot of responsibility that goes with that. So it was really – it was an honor to fly with them. I flew Air Force 2 for Biden³³ and for Secretary of State Clinton.³⁴ And it was an honor to fly with them. And then I flew – I didn't fly the President. The folks that fly the President, we put them through pretty rigorous training, and they have the most amount of hours probably in our entire Air Force. And we focus their training on the specific

³² Block times for takeoffs, landings, and other phases of flight are often tightly controlled in busy airspace and airports around the world; missing a block time means the aircraft can be denied takeoff, entry into an airspace, or landing by the controlling agency, regardless of the mission priority.

³³ Joe Biden was the 47th vice president of the United States, serving from 2009-2017, <https://www.biography.com/political-figure/joe-biden>.

³⁴ Hillary Rodham Clinton served as the 67th Secretary of State from 2009-2013, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/clinton-hillary-rodham>.

[1:40:00]

mission. So we don't allow people that don't have the right experience in the airplane to fly that airplane. These are folks that are in-depth. So when I get on Air Force One, I'm doing a spot inspection on them, and I'm just checking for the teamwork on Air Force One.

SMITH: At that point, did you think: this is it? [laughs]

VAN OVOST: I sure did. I thought: wow, it doesn't get any better than this, right?

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: Once I got over the – how hard 17 airplanes was going to be –

SMITH: But then you were promoted. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: Right. And they said: we want to keep you. And I said: okay. And they say – said, well, what I hadn't done yet was Expeditionary Center³⁵ work, which was how to deploy and set up an airfield, which from an Air Mobility standpoint, I had air refueling, I had airlift and mobility, I had command and control. I didn't have "set up an airfield." And so I went to Travis to be part of the Expeditionary Center to work on our expeditionary capability, being able to roll out to an airfield, stand it up, do command and control, and bring in flights to bring in logistics, or mainly – most of my time I spent was humanitarian disaster, getting in there to bring supplies in. But it was also for contingency operations. I wasn't in the job very long when I was asked to deploy for a year downrange as the Director of Mobility Forces. Now that I had the full complement of capabilities, they put me to work as the Director of Mobility Forces for all of the U.S. Central Command.³⁶ And that was air refueling, airlift, air drop, opening up airfields. So all of the work I had done at that point – and my experience with VIP³⁷ transport, because we did a lot of [Afghan] President Ghani³⁸ transport at the VIP level, into and out of the CENTCOM AOR.³⁹ So at that point, I had all the tools necessary to be the director of Mobility Forces for a major combatant command like CENTCOM.

SMITH: So tell me when you were—I'm missing your one star pin-on, or...

VAN OVOST: Oh, right.

SMITH: ...your promotion. Was it just before Director of Mobility Forces?

³⁵ The USAF Expeditionary Center supports the Air Force's ability to rapidly mobilize around the world. USAF Expeditionary Center Fact Sheet. Accessed Oct 2, 2019, <https://www.expeditionarycenter.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/?Search=USAF+EC+mission>.

³⁶ CENTCOM.

³⁷ Very Important Person.

³⁸ Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani.

³⁹ The CENTCOM Area of Responsibility spans more than 4 million square miles, from Egypt to Pakistan, and north to Kazakhstan. "Area of Responsibility," U.S. Central Command. Accessed Oct 2, 2019, <https://www.centcom.mil/AREA-OF-RESPONSIBILITY/>.

VAN OVOST: So it was while I was –

SMITH: While you were there.

VAN OVOST: I was – while I was there. I was selected before, because Director of Mobility Forces is a one-star position. So I was selected for a one-star while I was still a commander at Andrews.

SMITH: At Andrews.

VAN OVOST: And – but it takes about a year to pin that on. So my actual pin-on was done downrange, in Al Udeid.⁴⁰

SMITH: Nice.

VAN OVOST: So I was bummed that I couldn't bring my family there, but at that time, we had wi-fi and Skype. So I had my exec there Skype it, and had to hold my iPad, doing the Skype thing so my parents and my husband and my family could be there to watch my pin-on to one star. So it was like a field promotion, you know? [laughs]

SMITH: Fantastic. [laughs] It was.

VAN OVOST: Because I'm with everybody that I work with, right, and with the Central Command team, and so that was – that was special. It made it really special.

SMITH: Did you have an idea at this point – I'm talking either at the 89th, when you were Director of Mobility Forces, that more stars were in your future? Or, I know you don't take anything for granted, but –

VAN OVOST: Yeah, I think when I became the 89th commander, it was becoming obvious that they wanted me to stay around. You don't give someone two wing commands. So they obviously approve of me, but I was a little young. I was a little early. So they wanted to put me into another command to season me out and go to work some of the very senior executive level things that they needed me to work there. This was – this was a groom for a one-star position. A lot of folks that came out of the 89th were going to one-star positions. And so once I put all that together and recognized that I could be a keeper, but again, I don't take anything for granted. I just work hard, and if it happens, it happens. So I wouldn't say I was shocked that I was on the one-star [promotion] board, but you know, one star's not easy to make. My Air Mobility Command leadership had faith in me, and they – as in my AETC leadership, and they gave me these opportunities, and I was able to capitalize on them. So then it happened.

SMITH: You also had the opportunity to fulfil some civilian educational experiences. This is after Air War College. You've gotten – I might be a little out of order, but I don't – I just don't want to forget it.

⁴⁰ Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: You've spent time at Syracuse...

VAN OVOST: Yup.

SMITH: ...a course.

VAN OVOST: Harvard.

SMITH: Harvard, a course. There's several others.

[1:45:00]

How did those opportunities come about? Did you pursue those, or –

VAN OVOST: Well, I didn't pursue them. It's part of the development of an officer. We look at opportunities, and we look at the talents of that officer, and we think: what are we going to use that officer for in the future? And so things like the Syracuse leadership,⁴¹ the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, you know, policy.⁴² For example, I went into policy. In this case, I was – when I was on the Joint Staff. And so they said: hey, you know, you should take this course on policy. And the latest course I took was moving –essentially change in big organizations. The department is a big organization, and I was doing a lot of change as the vice-director of the Joint Staff, and now as the director of the Air Staff. And having that course was helpful, because you're moving big organizations. And so we recognize that, you know, after you go to Air War College, alright, that's it. That's a lieutenant colonel, colonel course. Doesn't quite get – you know, we do a senior leader course and a Capstone course at the one-star level. That's generally how to operate on a one-star level. But how to move a large organization – and then frankly, the other leadership course you go to is from Center for Creative Leadership, where we think about you as a leader, your emotional intelligence, your 360 feedbacks on are you listening to the right things? Are you saying the right things? Do you have habits that are destructive to yourself, frankly, or to others seen as a hostile work environment? We have these lists of courses, and consider: okay, where is this person going and developing? Will they be shaping policy? Or line leadership? And then the general officer team leadership selects the course and directs the major command to send you. For example, Gen. Van Ovost just completed Air Mobility Command command tour, here's a slot we think that would be good for her at some point. And the MAJCOM⁴³ agrees with it, and then they line me up and send me to it. So not everybody does well, and it's not rack 'em all up, and it's good. It's really for what you're trying to do at the time, and does that make sense?

SMITH: Got it. So it's definitely geared towards the individual as opposed to –

⁴¹ National Security Management Course at Syracuse University, 2009.

⁴² Driving Government Performance at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2017.

⁴³ Major Command, such as Air Education and Training Command and Air Mobility Command.

VAN OVOST: Right. Right, as opposed to our senior leader course for one stars – brand new one stars, and the Capstone course,⁴⁴ which is a one-star course as well. The capstone course is the Joint course. That's when you have all the Joint one-stars get together.

SMITH: Okay.

VAN OVOST: Senior leader orientation course is for the one-star Air Force people, but the Navy has something equivalent. So it's a two-week, service-only: here is what I expect of you as a general officer. Basic stuff.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: And your spouses go to that as well, by the way.

SMITH: Oh, really?

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: That makes sense. So I want to – we did talk about your U.S. TRANSCOM experience. I do want to make sure I mention that you were also Chief of the Standards branch there...

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: ...before you became Chief of the Joint Ops Directorate, and that preceded your wing command. So let's move on to the Director. You're on the Joint Staff. This is September 2013 to February 2015, and you're Deputy Director for Political Military Affairs.

VAN OVOST: Mm hmm.

SMITH: You actually authored a book during that time, or was that before?

VAN OVOST: Well, it was before.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

VAN OVOST: That was an Air War College piece.

SMITH: But was that – but do you think that had any impact on your staffing as a Ru –

VAN OVOST: being selected for that?

SMITH: --being selected for joint staff.

VAN OVOST: No, I don't think so. I think my – my time working in CENTCOM with the nations there, because – in Mobility, you – you're at – in some cases, they're civilian airports. So you are an ambassador for the CENTCOM commander or for the Air Command or the

⁴⁴ The CAPSTONE General and Flag Officer Course is designed to make individuals more effective in planning and employing U.S. forces in joint and combined operations. National Defense University. Accessed Oct 2, 2019, <https://capstone.ndu.edu/>.

CFACC.⁴⁵ And what you work on at the one-star level is mainly policy. You don't execute. You don't jump in an airplane and fly it. You ensure everybody's doing their job, and you remove barriers. And some of the barriers are the number of people that can flow through somebody's airspace, or the number of times you can land at this airport, or the facility you can use at this airport, which is not America. It's Saudi Arabia or whatever. So that's sort of more of a policy type thing, which is why, I think, from that position, going to the Joint Staff and working policy, because – really, it's – although it wasn't really a joint position, I was

[1:50:00]

working for a CENTCOM commander, so it made sense for me to go to a Joint Staff position after that. But when they – and I thought they would give me a Joint Staff position focused on the CENTCOM area. Instead, they gave me Europe, which is fine, because I worked also with a lot of NATO partners in the CAOC, and a lot of NATO Air, because I'm trying to take – they have some air capabilities. We're just trying to blend them in in CENTCOM and use them. So I had a lot of contacts in NATO, for air refueling and for airlift. I was on the Joint Staff. I was the Deputy Director of J5, which is strategy for Europe, NATO, and Russia. And I say those separately, because they – we'd treat them all separately: Europe, European Union, NATO – which are the NATO countries. Not all NATO countries – not all European Union countries are NATO countries, and vice-versa. And then Russia was handled separately. I was there – when I took over as Europe/NATO/Russia lead, we were in the – you may remember the “reset” button? We were just hitting the reset button—with Secretary Clinton—with Russia, trying to do more. And we started working up – as a matter of fact, my first month there as the Europe/NATO/Russia lead, I was a one-star. We had a Harvard-planned Russia/U.S. general officer course. And it was a week-long course. It was like 10 or 11 Russian generals and 10 or 11 Joint generals from America. And we spent time together doing some planning together and a little table top exercise piece, and you know, kind of get-to-know-you work, because we're resetting. We are – we're going to be friendly with Russia right now. And so that was very interesting. Drank a lot of vodka, [laughs] and learned about what they're – and frankly, they were in Syria, and at the time, we were not in Syria. They were at Tartus.⁴⁶ And they were explaining what they were trying to do to stabilize the president there, and kind of what they were there for. And they were explaining to us – because we were interested, but we didn't want to go there. We were in Iraq at the time, right? And what we were very focused on was ISIS – was at that time Al Qaeda, more – so just terrorists, coming across between Iraq and Syria, and what they were doing about it. Now, they were over on the coastline in Tartus. But they were spending some intelligence looking on the border with Iraq and we thought that we'd be able to help each other, right? Because the most important thing was, we wanted to make sure that ISIS was crushed, right, the terrorists, and maybe we could do this together. Share intelligence together to go after them. So I'm assisting with a plan, and we're trying to do some exercises. They wanted to have a big tank competition as well. They wanted us to bring our tanks over, and

⁴⁵ Combined Forces Air Component Commander.

⁴⁶ City on the Mediterranean coast of Syria.

they wanted to do this big shooting competition in tanks. And I thought: okay, that's kind of, you know, hmm? But anyway, so I thought, alright, well, I'll bring it up to the Army. And— anyway, so we're doing that and the Olympics. Sochi Olympics were coming up that winter, and they were concerned about – they had Chechnyan terrorist issues. And so they were concerned about safety, because no one wants to have a problem during the Olympics, the Sochi Olympics. So we were focused on helping them. We wanted to bring X-ray machines, because we wanted to X-ray the walls. There was a lot of military – there was a lot of construction that went on, and they weren't – they didn't quite clear everybody who had done that. So all the areas where the DVs⁴⁷ were going to be and where the athletes were going to be, we wanted to X-ray all the walls. And so we were going to bring in equipment and some of our dogs. And we were going to help them. We had this plan to help them with Sochi. That's what we were working on. And then as the run-up to Sochi occurred, all of a sudden, we're focused on Sochi, and stuff is happening in Crimea. And so goes the end of that, when they took over Crimea. And then what was cast to me when I took the job, you know, from – although I wouldn't have changed my mind, they're like – oh, it's Europe/NATO/Russia. You're going to go to Paris. You're going to be drinking wine. You're going to love it. It's going to be – you know, easy-peasy– just be glad you're not CENTCOM, right? I'm like, okay. I'm in. And so, I mean, less than two months in the job, and I'm working harder than the CENTCOM person. The CENTCOM officer was like: I lived to say that this day, that the Europe/NATO/Russia person is working harder

[1:55:00]

than the CENTCOM person, [laughs] you know? Because our whole life with Russia just got turned upside-down. And trying to get the Chairman to meet with Gerasimov,⁴⁸ and what he – said when he was their Chairman, their lead military person. And all of our strategies, and all of the events over in the Situation Room in the White House and all of that, it was very exciting, but it was very trying, trying to develop a strategy for Russia, when we had, we were just having to throw away everything we had just worked on and start all over with “Deterrence 101.” So, yeah. And then Ukraine, and going to Kiev, and walking the streets there and seeing what happened and seeing where the bullets were, and you know, the uprising and what they're trying to do to get their country back, right, and how to get Crimea back and all that. And do we sell them weapons? And do we train them? And all of that, it was just amazing to go through that.

SMITH: Lots of turns.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: And complete upheaval.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. Yeah, I learned a lot.

⁴⁷ Distinguished Visitors.

⁴⁸ General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Accessed Oct 2, 2019, http://eng.mil.ru/en/management/deputy/more.htm?id=11113936@SD_Employee.

SMITH: So you moved from the Joint Staff to the Air Staff.

VAN OVOST: Well, I spent a little bit of time in the Joint Staff as the Vice-Director of the Joint Staff. So I spent that time essentially assisting the director of the Joint Staff to ensure that all the combatant commanders and all of our plans and everything were all aligned. And so that experience was directly relevant to why I got hired to be the Director of Staff for the Air Force, because at that time, Gen. Goldfein, now the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, said: I want to run my staff like the Joint Staff. It's the premier staff. They're very focused on the mission. I want to change the – what we're doing here. And the only way to do that is to bring on a director of staff. And we had something previously called an Assistant to the Vice, which had some similar duties, but not really at the level that the chief wanted. And so he asked me to come up and take that position and make it into a director's position, first among equals, to be close to the Chief and Secretary, and ensure that not only was the staff aligned in what they were trying to do with priorities across the Air Force, but our MAJCOM commanders – and that we're closely tied into the Joint Staff. And that's the experience I brought to the table.

SMITH: So you are one of a handful of women at your level, three-star level. You have Joint Staff experience, Air Staff experience. You report directly to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. And I'm just curious. At that level, in meetings, how are you received? How has it been throughout your time on those staffs?

VAN OVOST: Yeah. Yeah, you know, I think that there's still – I think that there's a culture thing still between the Air Force and the Army and the Marine Corps. You can – when you talk to some of the senior leaders, sometimes you get this feeling like: you're not tracking what I'm saying. And then when you provide the level of detail – which is what goes back to studying, being the smartest person in the room, or trying to be – you're never going to be perfect, but you have to provide value, and that's always – that's why I like a vice or a director position. You're supporting somebody else. The only way you're of value is if you bring something to the table that they didn't have. And it's not about hoarding information. It's about making them successful. And so when someone, you know, is in a dilemma, and you call them up – you know, your Marine buddy or your Army buddy, and say: okay, this is where you're at. This is what the Air Force is doing to solve that problem. How can we help you? Can I send my lead that does that over to see your lead, and can we partner on that? Shall we partner and experiment? Because it's all about bringing it together, because we don't fight as an Air Force. We fight as a Joint Force. So we – you and I need to be just as fluent on what you do and what I do. So here's what we're trying to do. And I just met my counterpart the other day, my new Marine counterpart. And I know him from TRANSCOM and from my Joint Staff time, right? Because now I'm in and with all these other Joint officers. And you know, and his commander is going to be doing something. And I said: you know, here's what your commander's going to experience there, because I've been there. Why don't I give you some materials

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that you can read, and then you can brief him, so he'll be more confident about that engagement. And he's like: wow, that would be great. And I said: and just call me anytime, and so now, he'll call me, right? You have to show that you have something. When I became the Director of Staff for the Air Force, which again was a – an unusual position, because people were not expecting what the Chief did with that – when he opened up at the very first meeting, he said: I'm glad that Jackie Van Ovost is here. She's bringing her Joint Staff experience here to the Staff, to up our game. She is the first among equals. I'm going to turn to her for the advice. And he said that deliberately, so it puts everybody else on notice that, you know, for no good reason, Jackie Van Ovost is now going to be watching your stuff, so that when I ask them – and that I can only be valuable to them – every time I sit down and I say: you're going to provide this to the Chief or the Secretary. This doesn't hit the mark, and here's why it doesn't hit the mark. Now, you were hired to do this job, and you can absolutely go in there with this. I don't recommend it. Here's what I recommend. And only when your recommendations make sense, and they're successful when they walk out of that meeting, are they going to say: I'm going to listen to her again. It's really – with any job, it's all about relationships. So if I don't make them better, they're not going to come to me. If I don't make the Chief and Secretary better, they don't need me. So that goes back to my philosophy – which was probably yours as well – is “servant leadership.” I am here to serve. I serve at the pleasure. I am here for a position, and if I'm not making you better, then you need to move me on. And that's how I feel about it. Now, what does that mean? You've got to get smart in a lot of things. You've got to be willing to put it out there, and you've got to be willing to say: I have no idea what you just said. I really don't. That's not my background. Can you help me understand so that I can help you in the future? And you have to be humble enough to say that in front of another three-star or a four-star, you know, for them to call you, you know? And now I have the MAJCOM commanders calling me. They call me. I had two calls this morning, and I keep saying: well, why are they calling me? What do they need? They need insight. And they're looking for insight from the Chief and Secretary. And if I can provide it, it's worth their call. But this is the four-star calling me. Why not their deputy, right? They want to hear it from me. So at some point, I was of value to them. But what have you done for me lately? I've got to stay in there and be of value. And that's for any job we take. And that's inside, outside of the military, by the way.

SMITH: So your 12-year-old self. Did you ever think this is...

VAN OVOST: Yeah, no way.

SMITH: ...where you would be [laughs] –

VAN OVOST: Yeah. [laughs] No way.

SMITH: I mean, any concept? Anything you would tell your 12-year-old self?

VAN OVOST: I think – my 12-year-old self was a shy introvert. I was kind of the person that made friends with only a very small amount of people. And I don't know what would have given her more confidence, because she was already trying to fly airplanes, and she was already trying to take cowlings off and wash windshields and learn by sitting next to people who flew. By

doping airplanes from the person who bought – who bought an airplane or was trying to build an airplane. I don't know. I came out of my shell more so starting at the Academy, when I started to get more confidence, when I got more of those leadership skills. See, I didn't even know what leadership was as a 12-year-old. But I would encourage her to join more clubs and to take leadership positions, because I didn't really take leadership positions until what, my sophomore year and junior year? I could have done a lot more, earlier. Maybe because I was just so fascinated with other things, and I didn't – I didn't really associate with people of my age, frankly. I didn't. I mean, when I came home, I was dealing with 20-something-year-old flight instructors to 50-year-old, you know, folks. And I was – I was more comfortable with older people than I was with my own peer group. And I needed – I should have gotten comfortable with my peer group earlier. I think I would have made more friends, and I would have been less of

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an introvert, had I done that. But I know that that little girl tried just as hard as she could. I mean, you know, she did. And she wasn't the smartest cookie, but she just tried hard, and that's why she did well. And failure happened. It happened multiple times in my career, and it goes back to I just try to work hard on recovering. I'm never perfect. I'm not perfect. My goal is to be better every day, and I will let people down, but I'm going to come back, and I'll make it up to them at the end.

SMITH: What about advice to someone going into her first command? Whether a squadron...

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: ...or wing command. Any advice you would give?

VAN OVOST: There's standard advice about, you know, how you take a unit, how you assess a unit, and take it to the next level: the "good to great" advice. I'm going to leave that aside. You know, I would talk to the person about their confidence level in leading people. We give them lots of tools, and we try to give them time – all folks in command or prior to command, to think about a command, and think about what they would do in that unit to shape that unit to make it better. Women bring a special tool, and that is our empathy. I really feel like the empathy has allowed me to see things that my male counterparts have not seen.

SMITH: Can you give me an example?

VAN OVOST: That, in the normal course of things, when you're looking someone in the eye and you give them a debrief, and you can tell that they're not getting it, right? We tell that faster. I can watch a male give a debrief. I'm not talking about a fighter debrief. I'm talking about a regular debrief. And skip right over the part where – you know, where this person's not absorbing anything anymore. They're just not, and they're – just continue to give the feedback. And they're writing stuff down, but it's not – it's not jelling, you know? And I think I can pick up on that a lot faster than the guys can. And so ideally, we would just stop and take a break, and we would talk about something else until they're ready to absorb it again. Or, when you see a

family situation, and you're asking someone to say: can you take this trip, or not? And you see what's going on in their eyes, and then you're like: okay, what's going on with your life? What's – you know? And not that – if you'd said: no, I'm not going to take a trip, because my wife is sick and my baby, and I – I can't be gone for more than 72 hours. If I – you know, you could say that, and a male flight scheduler would probably go: I get it. But males won't say that. They just won't. They'll look at you, and you'll go: you just had a baby, didn't you? How's everything going? Are you sure you want to go? Right? And I can't tell you how many times people have come up to me – at first, I'm just trying to remember their face. They come up to me and go, you know, you were my commander, and you were my this, or you were in that squadron when I was in this squadron, and when we were deployed, you did that. I totally don't remember it, alright? And it was something totally me, but totally, you know – you know, it didn't make a mark on me. It made such a mark on them, because I didn't just bark out an order, or say, well, you had to go do something. I asked them something, or I said: you noticed this on me. Or, you noticed this piece. And it stuck with them. And they said: you know, I think you'll make a really good commander, or I think you're a really good commander, because you caught onto that. And I know you had a lot going on, and it was just me, but you stopped, and you did this. And you know, again, for the life of me, I don't remember those. And then families that come up to me, like: I'm the spouse of so-and-so. I'm sorry, what base? What, you know –

SMITH: Thousands of people later. Right.

VAN OVOST: Right. Right. And you know, maybe males gets that too, but I still think it's – and it's not that I'm giving them leeway at all. Standards are the standards. But like when you teach somebody, you kind of notice, different people absorb things different ways. That's how, you know – whether you're getting praise, or you're getting critiques, or – I need you to do more than you're doing right now. You need to be able to read people. Because in the end, it's all about people.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: It's all about people.

SMITH: It occurred to me I missed two important things I wanted to ask you. One is from the 12th Flying Training Wing. You told me one time about when you had a minority 89

[2:10:00]

ride, that you used to pull them in separately.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: I'd just like you to speak to why 89 ride meaning...

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: ...this person is about to wash out of...

VAN OVOST: Right.

SMITH: ...pilot instructor training. Why did you realize and see a need to give that person an opportunity to share with you if anything untoward had been happening?

VAN OVOST: Right. So when – when someone was having a hard time getting through training – and in this case, pilot training – we have an opportunity as a commander to do – to look – to do a look that's above and beyond what the squadron commander, lower-level commanders, have done. And it's not that the training – it's not the training, because that person probably got the same training as, you know, eight other people, right? This is about how that person receives that information and how they learn. And for some reason, if we have someone who's having trouble getting through a phase of flight, it's because we're not teaching them well. Something is wrong, something we're not communicating well, and so I want to find out – even if it wasn't a minority, I want to find out what went wrong. What's going on? How do you feel? How do you feel about your instructor? And then in some cases, we'll find – with minorities who didn't have opportunities that white males had – that sometimes it's just their confidence level. And when they get in the airplane, they have low confidence, and so therefore they have low expectations, and they perform to those expectations, right? It's about somebody assisting them through that one thing that's going to get them the confidence back that they can get back on the horse, if you will, and continue the training. So we look to see that we gave them not just the regular rides, but all – every tool possible, did we use every tool possible, to keep this person in and keep them in pilot training. And when you look at their capabilities – we talk about, you know, experiences that folks have when they're 12 to 15 years old, right, and that shapes who they are. And if you find out that they never had any exposure to any airplanes, anything that went very fast, you know, and then all of a sudden, you're in a T-38 trying to be an instructor, flying in the back seat, which is not easy to do, and they're having a hard time with it. So first of all, I have a fully qualified pilot that wants to move forward, but I have to have a sharp instructor, because if not, it's bad news. So I had the opportunity to add sorties to their curriculum, but also change their instructor, or change the units, or whatever was necessary to try to get them through. But in the end, if I've reviewed it and said: you know what? They could have gotten another opportunity here. They needed a little work in this area. Let's do that. In the end, if they went through that course and they're still not ready to go, we need to not discriminate against anyone that comes out and washes out of that training. We need to put them back into their major weapons system, where they were doing well, before they came to us, so that they don't feel like they're rejected. Yes, they're not going to be an instructor in a white jet,⁴⁹ but they can go be an instructor in their airplane, or return to being an instructor in their airplane, without any marks on your record. Okay, you went through the whatever, 11 weeks of course. Didn't work out. Right back where you were, you know? And we want to make sure that every one of those is handled correctly. Because one, we need pilots, and two, frankly, if we don't harness the power of all our minorities, we're not going to make it. We will be in crisis mode in the Air Force if we're not tapping into all of the talent – and so they don't all grow up the same way. None of us do. How

⁴⁹ The Air Force paints its training jets white.

do we tailor the pilot experience to them? And that's what is so exciting about pilot training next, and what we're trying to do there, because this is about – it's not about block learning that you and I went through. This is the block. We're going to learn instruments. That's all you're going to do. Not going to do aerobatics. Not going to do touch-and-go's. You're going to do that. To personalize learning, the first thing that we do is we learn about the person, how the person receives information, what the background of the person is. You know, what are the holes? How do we fill those up? How do we shore those up before we move forward to the next thing? And then they move forward at their own pace. They won't graduate with the full team. They manage to graduate ahead, about the same, or behind. But our tailored program is to ensure they achieve the objectives, and that would be revolutionary, and not just in pilot training, but everything we do: maintenance, you know, space operators, cyber operators, intel. Because it's about personal learning. It's not about block learning anymore.

[2:15:00]

SMITH: That's a –

VAN OVOST: It's a big change for our Air Force.

SMITH: Yes.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. It's going to help us with minorities, for sure.

SMITH: Another thing I recall you sharing was about a retention panel for women pilots, that you were participating in.

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: Could you speak a little bit about how that panel came about...

VAN OVOST: Yup.

SMITH: ...and what were some of the findings that you –

VAN OVOST: Yeah. Gen Welsh⁵⁰ called the panel together – a previous Chief of Staff of the Air Force – because of our retention numbers for women were just atrocious. And we had had a women's forum, I don't know, 15 years ago. Not much came about after that forum that I saw at the field level. I wasn't on the Staff. But it didn't seem like a lot of the changes that we wanted happened – now, there's legislative changes, and whatnot, and some of those changes are not easy to do. But he called a panel together, and we each had a wicked hard problem to work on. And for me, I – and it was just not women. It was women and minorities. I worked on the pilot panel, since I was a pilot. But there were other panels there. And then Gen Welsh and Secretary James,⁵¹ personally took the outbrief from every one of our panels, and what we thought we

⁵⁰ General Mark A. Welsh, III was CSAF from Aug 2012-Jul 2016, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/104966/general-mark-a-welsh-iii/>.

⁵¹ Deborah Lee James was the 23rd SECAF, serving from 2013-Jan 2017, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/467806/deborah-lee-james/>.

needed to do. Frankly, it is a – it is not uncommon. We see it in all the companies. We should know this – that, you know, we should not have to choose between, you know, motherhood and our career in the Air Force. And that – that alone means that we have got to make dispensation for women who need a little bit of time off after pregnancy. And we don't have to want to take a physical fitness test six months after. We want to stay with the baby and not turn him or her into the daycare in 90 days. How do you do that, and keep the women in the force? Whether we roll them into part-time work with the Guard or Reserve for two or three years or keep their – for a pilot standpoint, now – keep them in the sim, keep them flying, but only doing it one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer, and then come back into active duty, in the year group that makes sense for them. Or, we give them longer – women – up to 12 weeks of maternity leave.

SMITH: 1[2] months?

VAN OVOST: 1[2] weeks of maternity leave.

SMITH: Oh, 1[2] weeks.

VAN OVOST: Yeah. Yeah. You know, we started at six.

SMITH: Instead of –

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: Right. Yeah.

VAN OVOST: Right. Because some women want to keep going. Like, for example, people maybe in the maintenance field. They wanted to keep going in their career. They didn't want to go out for a period of time. But it should be open to anyone, right? Any career field that wants out for one to three years – you go out, you go to the Guard, Reserve – and you roll back in, scroll back in, at the level that you were in before. In other words, to not lose your place. For example, I'm an '88 graduate of the Academy.⁵² To stay with my class, if I want to pop out for three years and be in the Guard or Reserve for three years, and just kind of keep my skills warm and do some good work, but not full-time work, then maybe when I come back, I'm now with the class of '91, three years later. So I meet the same promotion boards. The second thing that we brought forward and is now being instituted is the year for promotion. We're trying to open up the window such that, at a certain year, we used to call it – we call it “in the zone.” Like, this is your primary year for selection to lieutenant colonel. Before that year, you had a “below the zone” year, and after that, you would have something called “above the zone” year. And it's a total of four years: two years prior, primary year, and the one above. What if you just said: this is your promotion zone. Anywhere in here, four years, good to go. What would that mean? Well, look at the pressures that would be off, right? It would be okay for you to take one more assignment, whether that's getting your master's degree, whether that's rolling into the, you know, Guard and Reserve, while you're working on a family, to come back. You know, going

⁵² General Van Ovost is using hypothetical dates to illustrate the pilot panel findings. General Van Ovost has served continuously, without any breaks in service or change of component.

and doing career broadening and coming back. You've got a big window now. It's not one shot. It's four legitimate shots at becoming a lieutenant colonel. How would that change your development? If it's really all about development, why aren't we doing it now? And that's exactly what we're doing. That will help everybody. Yeah, so – yeah. There was a lot of good things that came out of that.

SMITH: Thank you...Yes.

VAN OVOST: Just takes a while. We had to get legislation, because all that's by law. And by the way, we had to work with the other services, because you can't just do one thing to – because it's the law. You know, we had to get full buy-in from the Navy and the Army. And it's the same thing, retention bonuses and how we do those things, because you can't be off on your own when you're changing the law. The law won't be just applicable to the Air Force,

[2:20:00]

which is why it's so – you know, all these personnel things take a lot, a lot of legislative work.

SMITH: Speaking of laws: 2016, combat exclusion policy...

VAN OVOST: Yeah.

SMITH: ...leveled for all of the services.

VAN OVOST: Right. Right.

SMITH: The Air Force was pretty well –

VAN OVOST: 99 percent there already. Yeah.

SMITH: Already. So any big changes that you saw at your level?

VAN OVOST: No, because, just like we just said, the Air Force was all in already. The things about, you know, TACPs and people who – if you wanted to go be embedded with an Army unit, you know, you could now go do it. Hasn't been a lot of call for women who want to go do that, okay? Now, it's really – it's a great opportunity– I mean, look. We've got a lot of Silver Stars. I mean, you know, we've got a lot of heroism on the ground coming from our TACPs.⁵³ No doubt. No doubt. Combat controllers too. And so if you are physically able to go do that, you go. But for the most part, we are a technical service, so we fight in space using our technical knowledge. We fight in weapons systems and drones and in airplanes using the technical knowledge that we have to apply to a system, for which we have to be fully prepared and trained to go do. We just don't have a lot of ground-based roles that require a bunch of brawn to go do. We have some, and once those are open, not a lot of women have been wanting to go do that, but it's open anyway. I think it was a good change. It was, you know, heralded as a big change. I was a little concerned that we would end up forcing women into it, like the Army did. You know, if you

⁵³ A Tactical Air Control Party Specialist (TACP) embeds with Army and Marine units and calls in air strikes on targets. Accessed Oct 2, 2019, <https://www.airforce.com/careers/detail/tactical-air-control-party-specialist-tacp/>.

didn't want to go Infantry, you're now going Infantry, because 40 percent of the class went to Infantry right out of the Military Academy. That includes women, so now you're going to Infantry. You don't have a choice not to go, you know? It's a slot to fill. And so that's the backlash from it, right? If we didn't want to become Infantry – but then again, the Army's not going to choose someone they think is going to fail. It's just that that might not have been your first choice, right?

SMITH: Exactly.

VAN OVOST: It's being – artillerymen, you're going to haul those shells. Even though you're an officer, you've got to haul those shells. And so, you will train, and you get the physical fitness up so that you can go do that work, whether you volunteer or not. So just like – you know, if I didn't make it to pilot training or acquisition, I might have been a Security Forces person, right? Sometimes you cross-train. If you wash out of one area, you cross-train, and all that's left is Security Forces, I wouldn't have wanted to become Security Forces, but if I did, because I had to, because that was a slot I had to fill. So it's the same thing with the women. If they don't make it in, say, F-14s, they may have to become – they can become Surface Warfare Officer. They may have to go become a submariner. And they may not want to go spend all that time in the submarine, but it's a slot, and it's open to you. So you know – now, at first, women were saying: oh, I want to apply to that. But once the initial surge of interest was over– it was still low, low numbers in the subs. They had a choice before. Now, when those selected complete their tours, we're going to backfill with somebody else. Yeah. But hey, it's an all-volunteer force.

SMITH: That's right.

VAN OVOST: We volunteer to be here. We volunteer to serve at the pleasure, and there's our opportunity to serve. Yeah.

SMITH: There you have it.

VAN OVOST: What I don't want is women to go –it's a hard time to get them anyway, minorities, and if they go to a career field they don't like, then they tend to get out, and then we have a retention problem.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: But you have to be fair, because there are white males that didn't want to go there, either.

SMITH: Right.

VAN OVOST: Right. [laughs]

SMITH: So what's next for you? [laughs]

VAN OVOST: Yeah. [laughs] I serve at the pleasure. Yeah, I've been – I'm working for the Chief and the Secretary. First of all, who gets to do that, right? And the amount of, you know,

working with the senior leaders has just been amazing. We have a great cadre of senior leaders in our Air Force. And there's great, great promise for where our Air Force is going, and it's been exciting – to be a part of that. You know, I don't know. I mean, I've said, you know, I have some unique talents. If you need those talents, sir or ma'am, I'm ready to serve. If you don't need those talents, you know, then – you know, someone else – fresh blood needs to get into this position, because this is a not easy position to maintain for so many years. Frankly, at this level, there's a lot that goes into this assignment. Timing's a huge thing.

[2:25:00]

And then there's not that many general officers. And there's a pyramid effect going on. But like I said, I – I'm not perfect. My job is to do better every day, and if the Chief and Secretary give me an opportunity to serve, I'll try to serve the very best I can. Otherwise, when I'm grown up, and I'm ready to take my husband's last name, and get out of the military, I want to teach. I want to go back to teaching – in flying. I'd like to do a lot of STEM mentoring for minorities, and I want to get that going, to use our airport as a platform for that.⁵⁴ And teach – open an aero department and bolster the Civil Air Patrol unit that's there, along with a list of other things. So I have a list, and it's not a bucket list, but it's a list of things that I want to go do. And so when I'm relieved from this call, I'll have that call to go to. So I'll be busy either way. [laughs]

SMITH: I am certain of that. I am certain of that. Gen. Van Ovost, we're coming to the – towards the end of our time. I just wanted to ask: is there anything else that you'd like to have included in this oral history, any last – not “last words,” that sounds –

VAN OVOST: [laughs] Yeah, no kidding.

SMITH: Parting words. [laughs]

VAN OVOST: You know, I think I said it all – when it comes down to what being successful looks like. And what being successful looks like is different for every person, and different in every job that I've ever had. When I've been asked to go to one place or another, you know, at first, you think: gee, I don't have the skills to go do that. But you're there because people see that in you. They try – I mean, we talk about your potential to serve in the higher grade. Everybody has that potential, that potential to move on to something. Even those who don't get selected for colonel, or brigadier general, or even squadron command. Your potential develops in another direction. It's not better or worse. It's different. I look at my classmates from the Academy. And most of them are all out of the military now. They're all doing great things. Moms who have two or three children at academies, who are moms, you know. They're an inspiration. Folks that started their own jobs, folks that are working for CEOs, folks that are working in public affairs, nonprofits. They're all – you know, they look at me, and they say: wow, you made three-star, and you know, that's important. I'm like: it's just as important as what you're doing, because society needs all of us. Most importantly, we need people who are engaged. Let's go back to policy. Public policy makes a difference. It's not easy to work public policy. But a lot of the –

⁵⁴ Gen. Van Ovost and her husband run an airport in TN.

my classmates are working policy in some way, and they're making a difference. They're making a difference for the next generation. Everybody does that. That's what I like about my class. Because we're all engaged. And can you imagine if every high school graduate comes out and commits to doing some sort of public work in some way, making something better? Not just working their job. And then, from there, honing their skills. And then, you know, once you start doing that, you get this – just this internal reward that you made a difference for somebody else. And when you think about it that way, we have a lot of work to do. We have a lot of hands to do it. That's what success is. I've had just this wonderful opportunity, and I've done the best I could with it. And I've been rewarded in some way, and I will continue to serve, whether I'm in uniform or not. And I appreciate the fact that you're taking these histories down, because we have a lot of women who have done a lot of great things. And I want to make sure it gets recorded, because our grandchildren will look up to us, and they'll say: they can do that too. Grandchildren will look up to the mom who homeschools, the mom who makes public policy, and the ladies who broke the sound barrier. And that is what makes life worthwhile. This is not about existing every day. It's about improving every day. So, thanks Monica, for inviting me.

SMITH: Thank you.

VAN OVOST: General Van Ovost, it's been my pleasure to record your oral history. Thank you so much for your service and for taking time out to do this.

SMITH: You're welcome. [laughs]

[2:29:59]

[END]