



ORAL HISTORY GUIDE

Dr. Forrest Marion

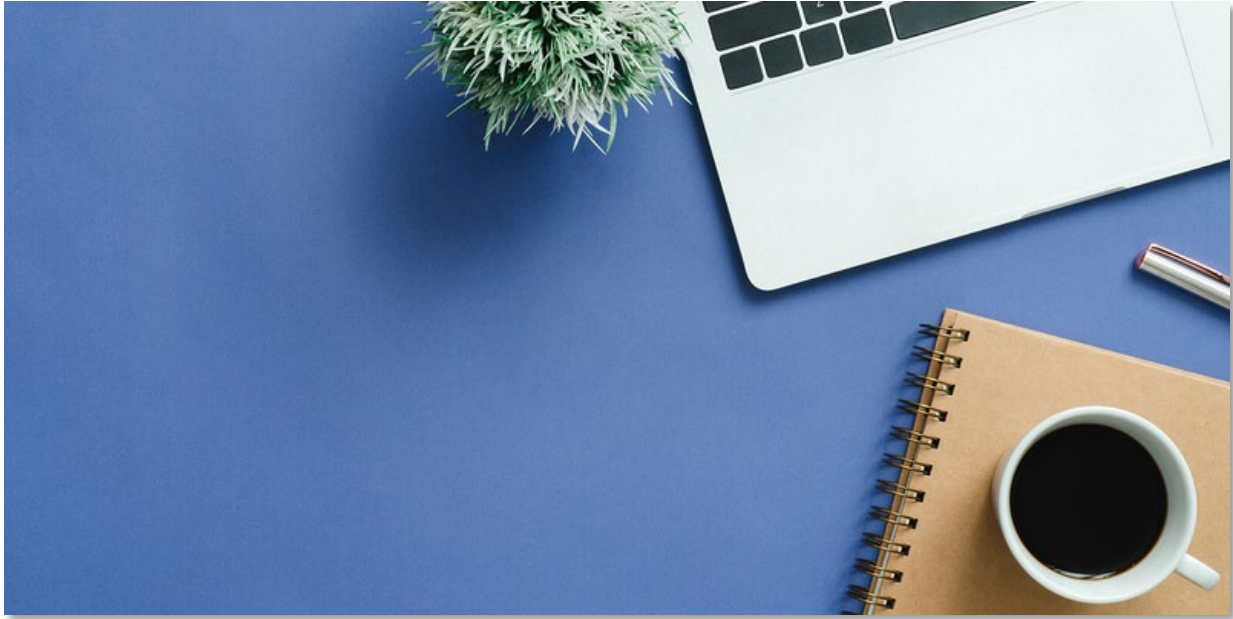
Air Force Historical Research Agency

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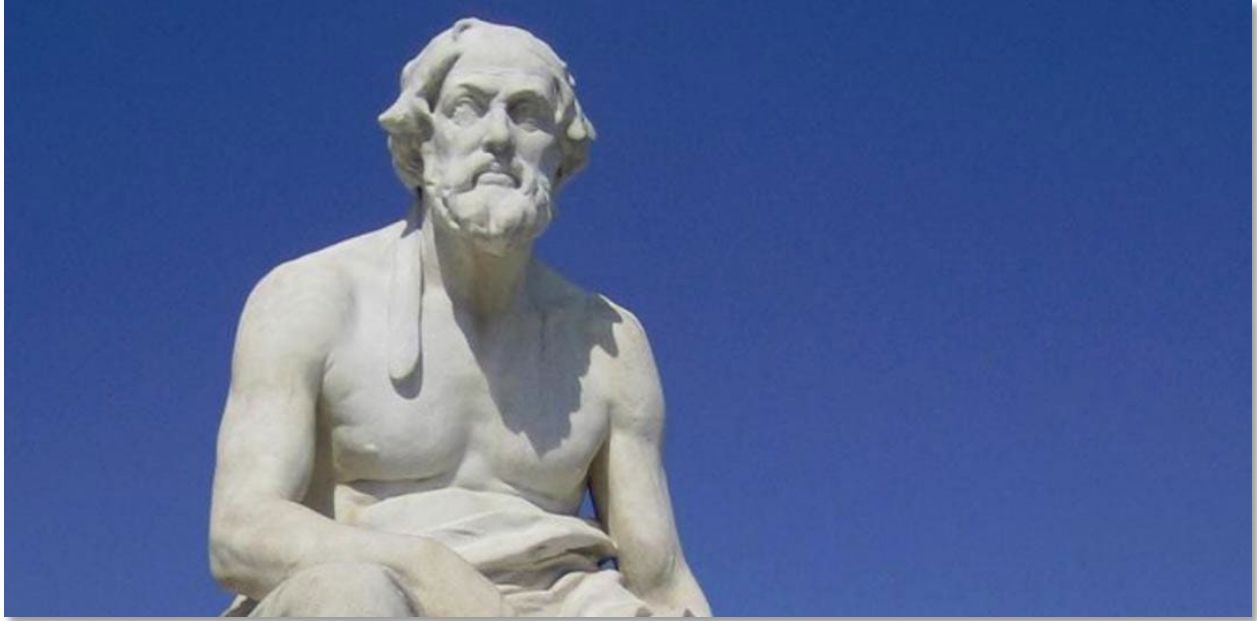
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INTRODUCTION

It's been said that all history is biography. Perhaps that's an overstatement, but there's enough truth in the saying to warrant some thinking on the matter. If a significant portion of what we consider history involves people, and a sub-discipline of history exists that is geared particularly to capturing the stories of people and their observations, actions, and ideas, then it makes sense to devote some attention to that arena. That sub-discipline is oral history (OH).



FROM THUCYDIDES TO BERNARD MONTGOMERY

Oral history's long track record begins with the ancient Greeks. Herodotus and Thucydides are considered among the earliest, if not the earliest, historians. Twenty-five centuries ago, Thucydides practiced an early form of OH. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides – who also served as an Athenian general for a time – described how he spoke to individuals about their experiences, and especially how he used their speeches (the ancient Greeks revered and excelled at oratory).¹

Reading Thucydides and reflecting on his work reveals some of the timeless issues historians still face today. One is the problem of dating certain events. A 20th-century contributor to a modern translation of Thucydides's book observed, "We say that the Peloponnesian War began in 431 B.C. An Athenian had to say that it began in the archonship of Pythodorus, which was meaningless to non-Athenians. . . ." This issue of how to date events is still found in certain contexts. In 2009, one deployed historian learned that Afghan Air Force generals with long personal histories often referred to events as taking place "in the time of" Zahir or Daoud or Najibullah—or whoever ran the government at a particular time, especially after a coup. (With some countries, it pays to know which coup occurred when!) That lesson was another way of highlighting the importance

¹ The Apostle Paul made this clear in his famous address at Athens (see New Testament's Book of Acts, chapter 17).

of oral historians taking the time for reading about the relevant cultural-political-historical context prior to conducting interviews which involve an unfamiliar group or region.²

Another timeless issue for historians concerns the need for accuracy in the reporting of events and statements. In the introduction to *History of the Peloponnesian War*, M. I. Finley wrote that Thucydides “was constantly probing and experimenting, trying out techniques and refining them. To ensure maximum accuracy, he kept his narrative sections rather impersonal, making infrequent (though very telling) comments and allowing the story to unfold itself.” This serves as an excellent reminder for oral historians who, in addition to adopting a general set of procedures that work for them, also do well to be open to modest experimentation, adjusting their techniques as they gain experience.³

Thucydides was particularly concerned with the accuracy of the speeches he sought to use in order “to lay bare what stood behind the narrative, the moral and political issues, the debates and disagreement over policy, the possibilities, the mistakes.” The speech was his main document type. Sometimes he used only one speech out of many presented at a single event or gathering. Other times he employed a pair of speeches “which by their diametrical opposition presented the sharpest possible choice of actions; sometimes an address to his troops by a commander before an engagement.”⁴

Historians still practice this. In his masterly biography, *Monty: The Making of a General, 1887-1942*, 20th-century historian Nigel Hamilton included the text of Lt. Gen. Bernard L. Montgomery’s address to his troops upon assuming command of the British Eighth Army in North Africa. Not only inspirational to the soldiers and clarifying as to the new commander’s intent – which it certainly was – the speech offered insight into Monty’s leadership and personality as Eighth Army confronted Erwin Rommel’s famed Afrika Korps in late 1942. At the time, the fate of Egypt and the Middle East – if not much more – hung in the balance.⁵

In April 2011, a deployed historian scribbled some notes on what the unit’s vice commander said to his staff, including on force protection. The next morning an insider attack took the lives of multiple U.S. military personnel at the deployed location. When it came time to write on what had happened, those notes proved helpful for the background and context for the attack. Whether jotting down a few key statements on what a commander discussed at staff meeting or

² Thucydides, Rex Warner, trans., *History of the Peloponnesian War* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1954 [1972]), 21-22.

³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 25.

⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 25.

⁵ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General, 1887-1942* (New York and St. Louis: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), 622-25.

perhaps conducting a timely 5-minute interview soon after, today's service historians (oral historians) should be prepared to record official communications in some form, especially those that appear potentially to be more significant than many others.

As much as studying Thucydides may be helpful, he was not perfect. At the same time, we must avoid judging him "by contemporary standards of historical inquiry," which Finley, a professor of ancient history, asserts "would be wholly fallacious." Nevertheless, today's historians must refrain from what we know to be an inappropriate practice, one Thucydides described plainly: "I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation."⁶

Finley comments on the obvious "incompatibility of the two parts of that statement" before noting, "All historians after Thucydides continued to quote speeches." How many of us have been tempted to cheat, maybe just a little, in that very, or similar, area? From Thucydides until today, historians must strive for objectivity, guarding as best they can against their own partialities or assumptions creeping into the text. In terms of OH, historians must take care that their line of questioning – including follow-on questions which may not have been planned beforehand – minimizes the same danger of implying certain partialities or assumptions which may influence the narrator's response or its interpretation.⁷

OBJECTIVITY

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⁶ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 26, 29.

⁷ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 26.



THINKING ABOUT ORAL HISTORY TODAY

A Few Thoughts



With a few thoughts from an ancient Greek historian to ponder, today’s oral historians will recognize the phenomenon of continuity and change that touches many aspects of their work. While the variety and availability of documentary sources are much different than in Thucydides’s day—and the influence of technology and terminology may be even more impactful on the historian’s work—the human element remains relatively unchanged. That is one reason for the Army’s century-old practice of conducting staff rides at key battlefields as part of the professional training of its military officers.

The most recent *U.S. Army Guide to Oral History* (2006) introduced OH with a basic definition which is helpful for Air/Space Force oral historians:

Oral history interviews preserve the perspective of the individual. The purpose of oral history, therefore, is to interview individuals in order to capture and preserve their spoken perspectives, judgments, and recollections. . . . [from an Army regulation] oral history activities “are conducted to obtain historical information that may not otherwise be recorded.” Interviews supplement the written record, which all too often slights the role of individuals in important decisions and events

and generally omits the detailed information that nonparticipants require in order to understand what happened and why.⁸

This definition is worth taking time to read through s-l-o-w-l-y, emphasizing as it does the individual-centric nature of OH, its supplementary role alongside the written record, and its ability to capture the why (also the how) of key decisions and events.



From this definition, one appreciates that OH is not rocket-science – but it does require a certain amount of preparation to do it well. As others in the field have pointed out, the act of finding a participant/observer to a key decision/event, turning on a recording device, and asking a few basic questions may constitute history of a kind; however, it is not oral history as accepted in the historical profession today. Based on experience, a rough estimate of preparation time for each interview is as follows:

- for an expected 30-minute interview, allow 4 hours' preparation time
- for a 60-minute interview, allow 8 hours' preparation
- for a 120-minute interview, allow 16 hours' preparation

This amount of time should provide an adequate opportunity to read (books, articles, newspapers, etc.) in order to grasp the context/background of the key decision or event in view, to gain an overview of the career of your interviewee, and to think through and craft quality questions. A key point to remember is that OH deals with an individual's life and career at the granular level. Avoid at all costs the military tendency to approach OH with a checklist mentality, which makes it more likely for the oral historian to miss certain details of the narrator's (interviewee's) story which may be relevant.

It is most important that oral historians have a reasonable amount of information on the narrator's career prior to preparing their questions. Otherwise—as experience has shown on occasions when individuals for some reason failed to provide a career summary beforehand—one is forced to spend valuable time in asking the most basic questions that the oral historian should have had during the preparation phase. Not only is that frustrating, but it also detracts measurably from the quality of the interview, perhaps making it appear as though the interviewer was unprepared. Neither does such an interview tend to promote the image (perhaps *messaging* in today's parlance) that the service's history program wishes to convey to the uniformed community and the public.

⁸ Stephen J. Lofgren, *U.S. Army Guide to Oral History* (Washington, D.C.: [U.S. Army] Center of Military History, 2006), 2.

Tips for Oral Historians



Currently, the Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA) at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, hosts the Historian Training Course (HTC) for new Air/Space Force historians. The AFHRA Field Support Historian schedules and manages this course (teaching much of it), one portion of which includes instruction and discussion on OH. Without covering everything that is normally included in the OH portion of HTC, here are some tips intended mainly for those who are relatively new to OH.



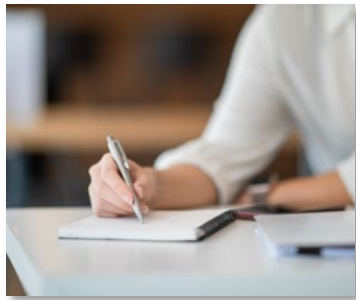
Preparation, Promptness, and Presence

These are three areas that deserve emphasis. Once an interview candidate has been identified—usually a key member of a unit/organization, subject matter expert (SME) in an area of interest, or key participant/observer of an event/decision of interest—the oral historian must allow adequate **preparation** time. By selective reading prior to the question development phase, the interviewer gains a general familiarization with the context/background for the upcoming interview. This helps with developing quality questions, better prepares the interviewer to ask intelligent follow-on questions that may not have been anticipated and increases the interviewer’s confidence in being well prepared to conduct the interview.

By arriving 5 to 10 minutes early for the interview (**promptness**), the oral historian communicates professionalism to the interviewee, or perhaps to the front office, as well as allowing for a quick review of the questions and ensuring the recording equipment/batteries are ready to go (recommend having a backup recorder and batteries). By adhering to the allotted time window for the interview, the interviewer communicates respect for the narrator’s time (recommend trying to finish a few minutes ahead of the planned ending time, but also be prepared for the narrator to extend the time—which is usually a sign they are enjoying the experience).

By dressing professionally, practicing basic courtesies, and being conscious of respectful, professional conversation, posture, and body language, the interviewer communicates a favorable **presence**. (Keep in mind that this occasion may be one of the few times—perhaps the first time—the narrator has engaged with a service historian, in which case their opinion of the program’s historians as well as the program itself may be heavily influenced by your conduct.)

A favorable presence also sets the table for establishing rapport with the narrator (assuming the two do not know one another). Often the interviewer's realization of some connection that may be drawn with the narrator (geographical, relational, career field are just a few) proves helpful for establishing a degree of rapport. (That, of course, assumes the oral historian has secured a reasonable amount of information on the narrator's background and career.)



Going Through the Questions

Top quality questions are key to a good interview. They should be clearly and concisely worded, without opportunity for simply “yes” or “no” responses. Assuming one goes into the interview with strong questions, the oral historian should stick generally with the question list, realizing of course that some questions will be answered over the course of the narrator's response to a different question. In other cases, the historian will realize that the prepared question is not as relevant or important as he originally thought. If a question goes nowhere the first time, and the oral historian thinks it is important enough, come back to it once more, perhaps asking it another way. For questions the oral historian suspects may be of a sensitive nature, it is recommended to save those for the end of the interview. You do not want to ruin an otherwise good interview by upsetting the narrator with a sensitive question. (For examples of some of these pointers, the question list for an interview in March 2023 is in **Attachment 1.**)



Include Leadership

For interviews with commanders or senior leaders, a couple of questions on leadership is a great option, assuming the main purpose of the interview has already been addressed. Leadership is always a relevant and important topic for a military audience, and your effort in this area may elicit anecdotes that have yet to be captured for posterity. Some of them may be quite instructive and inspirational. In a career-encompassing interview in 2006 with retired General John L. Piotrowski, he shared multiple leadership anecdotes that—unplanned by the oral historian—constituted the highlight of the entire interview. Here are a handful of them which help to illustrate the value of asking about leadership:

“Go everywhere, and find out what's really going on. You have to go places where you feel the most uncomfortable [that's where you don't know what's going on].”

“Commanders don't have to have good ideas. They have to recognize good ideas when they hear them.”

At Seymour Johnson, the wing was having more [foreign object damage to aircraft] and engine afterburner blowouts than the entire rest of USAF. Piotrowski sent an experienced chief there who found out the problem within 2 hours. The experienced maintainers had migrated to the air-conditioned trucks, leaving the 3-levels on the flight line.

General Piotrowski gave a great example of an appropriate way to violate a regulation ... when Iran-Iraq war started in 1980, he was ordered to get an AWACS to Saudi Arabia in 24 hours, which was impossible without breaking crew rest ... he told his boss he was doing it, then placed extra crews and flight surgeons on the aircraft.

At Aviano as the tactical group commander (essentially a wing), General Piotrowski shared great anecdotes on supporting the nuclear mission there, and on relations with the local Italians ... he halted the practice of allowing local Italian officials to shop at the Class Six and BX, which was against regs ... but when he informed them (about 10-12 individuals), he brought a personal gift to each one consisting of some of the items they typically purchased on base. There was no negative response to the Americans in the community, as had been predicted.

Paraphrasing General Piotrowski: Never say anything bad about your predecessor, look for reasons to praise your predecessor for bringing you to this point, even if you're going to do things 180 degrees out.

After the Interview



After the interview, if classification is a potential issue and the interviewee is an active service member, you may want to ask whether the narrator considers the interview to be unclassified or not. In addition to the oral historian's professional judgment, asking the narrator about classification provides a basis for how to treat the interview initially. If the historian and/or the narrator suspects the interview is classified, follow the procedures outlined in relevant Air/Space Force instructions in addition to local procedures. Before saying good-bye, make clear to the narrator what will most likely be done with the interview and whether or not the interview is expected to be accessioned into a particular archive.

If the oral historian is considering the likelihood of using the interview for a presentation or a written product of some kind, suggest asking the narrator whether he/she is willing to review a draft of the portion of the project that incorporates information from the interview. Experience

shows that practice to be helpful not only for ensuring accuracy, but also for gleaning additional details the narrator may share subsequently in e-mails or phone calls.

Moreover, the likelihood of using the interview for a follow-on project of some kind boosts the interviewer's stake in the process and it particularly heightens one's alertness to previously unforeseen follow-on questions and issues that may benefit the anticipated project. That makes for a better interview in addition to providing material for the follow-on project.



FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Like any human endeavor, OH cannot be predicted with perfection, and the oral historian is wise to expect the unexpected. On one occasion, near the end of a lengthy interview with a retired four-star, the oral historian asked if there was anything else he wanted to discuss. The historian had not asked him about his wife, the general said, and he became emotional as he described her excellent qualities and helpful influence on his life and career. In the end, the general's additional comments provided a poignant conclusion to the interview, but it was totally unexpected. (Given contemporary sensitivities, interviewers must be extremely cautious when approaching any personal concern; the safer course is to offer the narrator the opportunity to address anything [including personal matters] that the interviewer has not already asked about.)

In 1876 and following, the centennial of the United States generated considerable interest in local and state history, historic preservation, and genealogy. In one rural Pennsylvania county that chose to revive its historical society, a local historian talked about the importance of capturing the stories of “the aged residents who are still with us, whose memories are stored with facts which, if not secured, will perish with them. These ‘away going witnesses’ to history move amongst us, wither, decline and die, and it is only when their lips have been forever sealed that the value of their information is fully recognized.”⁹

⁹ Katharina Hering, “‘That Food of the Memory which Gives the Clue to Profitable Research’: Oral history as a source for local, regional, and family history in the nineteenth and early twentieth century,” *Oral History Review* [Berkeley, Calif.], vol. 34, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2007), 40.

Despite the dramatic changes in technology, organization, and terminology from a century and a half ago, those words remain insightful. Perhaps they may prove motivating to U.S. Air Force and U.S. Space Force oral historians—as much as for any other historians and archivists—charged with doing their small part to preserve the historical record of their service and its people, and to promote its appreciation and its use for the common good.

ATTACHMENT 1

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

LT GEN WILLIAM T. LORD, USAF RETIRED

6 MARCH 2023, PETERSON SPACE FORCE BASE, COLORADO

Conducted by Dan Williams and Forrest Marion

-General Lord, given our limited time I'd like to ask only one main question from a number of your earlier assignments and experiences so as to devote the bulk of our time to the period from about 2002 when you pinned on your first star through 2012 when you retired.

-One topic of historical interest from your years at the Air Force Academy relates to the integration of female cadets into the Cadet Wing in **1976-77**, which was your last year there. What do you recall were your impressions at the time as to how well the integration of women was handled by the Academy and by the cadets themselves?

-Another high-interest historical topic from your early years concerns RAF Greenham Common where you served from **1981-83**. The Ground-Launched Cruise Missile (GLCM) controversy was closely associated with Greenham Common, so what was your perspective on that issue and, especially, how it was managed at your base?

--As I understand, the 2161st Communications Squadron, which you commanded, provided the communications for the build-up to bedding down GLCM at Greenham Common. What was your view of the preparations for receiving the cruise missiles and your squadron's part in particular?

--What lessons did you learn from your first command assignment?

-Next, you moved to become the Program Manager for GLCM with the 485th Engineering Installation Group at Griffiss AFB, New York, **1983-85**. Given the GLCM connection at your previous base, to what degree was this assignment a somewhat natural progression for you?

--What do you want to highlight from your time as the PM for GLCM?

-In 1985 you moved into the space business as Chief, Communications Architecture Division in the System Integration Office, Air Force Space Command, right here at Peterson (**1985-87**). Did you ever think that this would be known as Peterson *Space Force* Base?

--In those days, what were your basic thoughts on the domains of air, space, and cyber in terms of how they should be organized in the Air Force?

-From **1987 to '88** you worked for the AFSPC vice commander, Maj Gen Ralph E. Spraker. What did you learn from him in terms of leadership or any other area? [*Lt Gen Kutyna was CC*]

-From **1989 to 1993**, what do you want to highlight from your command assignment of the Audiovisual Unit, and Ops Officer of the White House Communications Agency in Washington DC?

--Did any connections you made during your White House assignment prove helpful in later years, and, if so, how?

-Next you moved to Tinker AFB, Oklahoma, as commander of the 38th Engineering & Installation Group, which was also your first assignment as an O-6 (**1996-98**). What do you care to highlight from this assignment, including its influence on the rest of your career as a senior leader?

-Between 2000 and 2004 you held two Directorships, first in the Communications and Information directorate at Hq AMC as an O-6 (**2000-2002**), and then in the same directorate at Hq ACC as a brigadier general (**2002-2004**). This period, of course, encompassed 11 September 2001 and the start of the GWOT, so is there anything you want to highlight in terms of GWOT's influence on the Air Force's views on cyberspace and the development of AF cyber?

--Did this period see the genesis of the idea to stand-up an Air Force MAJCOM dedicated to the cyberspace mission? Please explain, including the basic pro- and con- viewpoints.

-The stand-up of the US Space Force has brought the issue of Service *culture* for a new breed of warrior to the fore. What were your thoughts in the early 2000s on the desirability of a *cyber culture* in the Air Force or in the joint cyber community?

-Also, the US Space Force is calling itself a *digital Service*. To what degree does that viewpoint look back to the Air Force's cyber experience from a decade or two ago?

- From **2005 to 2007**, prior to commanding Air Force Cyberspace Command (Provisional), you served on the Air Staff as the Director of Information, Services and Integration and Chief Information Officer. What interactions did you have with Lt Gen Dave Deptula, the first DCS for ISR, with respect to capitalizing on "actualizing" the potential of cyber operations? Also, regarding the issues of the "what, where, why, who" should be in charge of cyber operations?

--What guidance did you get from CSAF Gen Mike Moseley on the direction to take to get to a separate MAJCOM-like cyberspace organization?

--In **January 2007** the People's Republic of China successfully demonstrated an anti-satellite weapon (ASAT) on one of its own defunct weather satellites. Did that event have any repercussions in the Air Force's cyberspace arena, do you recall?

-During your tenure as commander of Air Force Cyberspace Command (Provisional) (**October 2007-July 2009**), what were your biggest challenges as well as the successes you'd like to highlight?

--How much leeway did you and your staff have in terms of the organization of the command to include the several wings that became part of the organization?

[688 IO Wg, 450 EW Wg, 689 Cyber Wg, 67 Network Warfare Wg]

--To what degree were you and your staff concerned with balancing efforts between *deterrent, defensive, and offensive* cyber capabilities, or was it perhaps more a matter of the struggle for resources?

--From your perspective, was the main reason that Air Force Cyberspace Command (Provisional) was not activated as a MAJCOM in 2008 stem from the interest in standing up what became *Air Force Global Strike Command* in the wake of the SecAF/CSAF firings that summer? Please explain.

-Please explain how Air Force Space Command entered the picture and the sequence of events that led to the activation of the Twenty-Fourth Air Force (24 AF) under AFSPC in **August 2009**?

--To what degree was it a good or logical decision to place 24 AF under AFSPC?

--As the Chief of Warfighting Integration and Chief Information Officer for the Air Force, what role did you play in helping 24 AF to achieve full operating capability?

-In **December 2010**, what were the reasons for redesignating 24 AF from Air Forces *Strategic* to Air Forces *Cyber*? What was your view on that change?

-Had Air Force Cyberspace Command (Provisional) been activated as a MAJCOM, what difference might that make in today's Air Force, to include the career progression and personnel management of Air Force cyber professionals? What other areas do you want to mention?

ATTACHMENT 2

Mandatory Statements

The following two statements are required to be read at the beginning of every Oral History interview (DAFI 84-101.4.3):

INTERVIEWER: “This is {title/name} of {unit} History Office. Today, I am interviewing {subject rank/full name/unit/position of each respondent}. This interview is {Unclassified, controlled, or classification} and is being conducted at {location}. With the understanding that the respondent will be quoted or cited accurately, the interview will be used by historians and authorized personnel completing Department of the Air Force history reports and other research. The interview is being recorded. Today is {date}.”

INTERVIEWER:

This is {title/name} of {unit} History Office. Today, I am interviewing {subject rank/full name/unit/position of each respondent}. This interview is {Unclassified, controlled, or classification} and is being conducted at {location}. With the understanding that the respondent will be quoted or cited accurately, the interview will be used by historians and authorized personnel completing Department of the Air Force history reports and other research. The interview is being recorded. Today is {date} {for multi-session interviews, include “This is interview # of # interviews”}

The opinions and facts expressed in this interview are those of the speaker. These comments have been transcribed as they were recorded during the interview. Unless otherwise noted, no attempt has been made to check or correct dates and other facts mentioned by the subject. The opinions are those of the subject and do not necessarily represent those of the United States Air Force.

ATTACHMENT 3

Legal Release Form

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

That I, _____
have on (date), _____ participated in an audio/video-taped interview with _____
covering my best recollections of events and experiences, which may be of historical
significance to the United States Air Force.

I understand that the tape(s) and the transcribed manuscript resulting therefrom will be
accessioned into the Air Force Historical Research Agency to be used as the security
classification permits. It is further understood and agreed that any copy or copies of this oral
history interview given to me by the United States Air Force and in my possession or that of my
executors, administrators, heirs, and assigns, may be used in any manner and for any purpose by
me or them, subject to security classification restrictions.

Subject to the license to use reserved above, I do hereby voluntarily give, transfer, convey, and
assign all right, title, and interest in the memoirs and remembrances contained in the
aforementioned magnetic tapes and manuscript to the Office of Air Force History, acting on
behalf of the United States of America, to have and to hold the same forever, hereby
relinquishing for myself, my executors, administrators, heirs, and assigns all ownership, right,
title, and interest therein to the donee.

Unrestricted Access for all military personnel and civilians except for information that is
classified or deemed subject to Privacy Act restrictions by appropriate authority.

DONOR _____

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Accepted on behalf of the Office of Air Force History

BY _____

DATED _____