Randall “Randy” L. Lanning oral history interview

Colonel, United States Air Force
Cold War –Global War on Terror

Interviewed: August 17, 2023
Identifier: 23-036

Keywords:

World War II (1939-1945)
Vietnam War (1961-1975)
Cold War (1945-1989)
United States. Air Force Space Command
United States. Air Force ROTC
United States. Air Force Junior ROTC
Pentagon (Va.)
Guided missiles

Repository: Virginia War Memorial Archives

Related Collections Note: ACC 1360, Lanning Family Papers, Virginia War Memorial.

Related Interviews Note: Video, Randall Lanning oral history interview, 17 August 2023, Virginia War Memorial.

Title: Randall L. Lanning oral history interview, 17 August 2023

Collection (host): Virginia War Memorial Oral History Project

Interviewee (creator): Lanning, Randall L.

Interviewer: Marshall, Sylvia

Date of interview: 2023-08-17

Region of Virginia: Central

Branch of Service: United States Air Force

Conflicts/Era of Service: Cold War; Global War on Terror

Military Service History
Service Dates: 1973-2003 Active Duty; 2003-2017 ROTC Program
Highest Rank: Colonel
Units, ships, etc.: 508 Strategic Missile Squadron, 351st Strategic Missile Wing, Strategic Air Command
Locations of Service: Whiteman AFB, Missouri; Georgia Tech; Dugway Aberdeen Proving Ground, Utah; Royal Air Force Greenham Common, Ramstein Air Base, Germany; Pentagon, Washington, DC, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama; Royal Air Force Chicksands, United Kingdom; Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado; Rutgers/Princeton, New Jersey; England; Thule Air Base, Greenland; McGuire AFB, New Jersey.
Medals or Service Awards: **Leg**ion of Merit; Meritorious Service Medal w/ 5 Oak Leaf Clusters; Air Force Commendation Medal; w/ 1 Oak Leaf Cluster

Extent: 1:12:37; transcript (20 pages)

Abstract: Colonel Randy Lanning, ret. discusses his over 50-years of military experience and service. From Junior ROTC to ROTC to service as an officer in the Air Force, Lanning reflects on his long journey and many hats worn throughout his military career. He begins his discussion with a brief retelling of a story highlighting his father's military service in World War II as an Assistant Ship's Navigator and communications officer aboard a LCI during the Juno Beach landing during D-Day. He then continues by sharing the many experiences and many titles held as he started in Guided missile Operations in the immediate years following the Cuban Missile Crisis, into the Vietnam War; also, his time at the Pentagon, nearly a decade of international tours, and then finally using all of his experiences and knowledge to teach the next generation of

servicemen/-women at the college level at Rutgers and Princeton, as well as a pair of JROTC programs in different regions of the United States of America.

Transcript Notes:

Transcriber:	TEMI
Abstract by:	Gerald Sayes III, VWM Intern
Additional Notes:	
	RL: Randall Lanning
	SM: Sylvia Marshal

Interview Transcript:

SM (00:00:05):

All right, so we're now recording. Today is August 17th, 2023. This is Sylvia Marshall, the archivist at the Virginia War Memorial interviewing for our oral history project. Um, thank you for being here. Can I get you to state your full name and branch of service?

RL (00:00:24):

Randall Lynn Lanning, United States Air Force.

SM (00:00:28):

And the years you served, and what was the highest rank you achieved?

RL (00:00:32):

Years served, 1973 to 2003. Highest rank achieved was full Colonel oh six.

SM (00:00:39):

Great. Now, could you tell me a bit about yourself and what your life was like before joining the Air Force?

RL (00:00:47):

Well, I came from a military family myself, and as a result, my sister and I were always the new kids, and we moved from military base to military base. As a matter of fact, I graduated from four---I attended four different high schools before I finally graduated. And now that, you know, I'm a dad myself, you know, my kids went through, the same thing. I did know from a very early age that I wanted to enter military service, especially the Air Force. And I guess that started with my stepfather service, and the fact that at a very early age, I started building model airplanes. And I never, never lost that, that interest. So, unlike a lot of people I knew from a very early age that I wanted to be in, in the military, especially in the Air Force, as long as all of the gates allowed me to do so.

SM (00:01:50):

And speaking of your stepfather, I did wanna ask about him and then also your father and his service as well.

RL (00:01:58):

Right. I'll start with my, my biological father. His name was Marvin Dean Lanning. He was born in 1923, and he died in 2006. But my dad was from Salina, Kansas, and he entered, uh, the US Navy right after high school. He graduated in 1941 from high school, and he went into the United States Navy and was assigned to what they call a landing Craft infantry, or LCI. And he was the Assistant Ship's Navigator and communications officer for LCI 5 0 6, uh, which had a crew of 21. His big war story was, is was that he went in on D-Day, June 6th, 1944, uh, at about 10 15 in the morning on the sixth wave of the invasion. And on the way in his LCI hit a mine and

was damaged, but he was able to offload the British troops, landed at Juno Beach and pull successfully away taking wounded and German prisoners back to England.

RL (00:03:11):

And that was his big war story. So, still a lot there. Just, just in that short of time. My parents divorced when I was six years old, and my mom married Dale W. Brink, and Dale was in the Air Force, and he was of the age where he caught World War II, Korea and Vietnam, all three of them, in various roles. In World War II, he flew basically training aircraft and fighters. In the Korean conflict, he flew transports. And in the Vietnam conflict, he flew an airplane called the A-1 Skyraider. Interestingly enough, he never transitioned from propeller planes into jets, but again, he was a real inspiration to me as was my biological father.

SM (00:04:11):

And from there, again, you knew from an early age you were going to join the Air Force, and you had the junior ROTC in high school.

RL (00:04:20):

Correct. When we moved to Florida Eglin Air Force Base, uh, I was attending Choctawhatchee Senior High School, and the year I got there, 1968, was the first year for the Air Force Junior ROTC program at that school, and I was told it was one of only a handful nationwide. So my junior year and senior year in high school, I was in the Air Force junior ROTC program, just when the program locally and nationally was just getting started. And as I was finishing off my Air Force career, I started adding up years. And if you take the two years I was in junior ROTC as a cadet, the four years I was in college in the ROTC program, the 30 years I was on active duty, and the 14 years I spent teaching Air Force Junior, ROTC. If you add all those numbers up, I'd been putting on the Air Force uniform for 50 years.

SM (00:05:25):

Wow. And could you describe the experience in being in junior R-O-T-C at the time, and what that was like being a cadet and going through that process as a young man?

RL (00:05:38):

You mean the, the, in the junior program or the college program?

SM (00:05:40):

The junior program. Yeah.

RL (00:05:42):

Well, everything was new. And the fact is that the program locally and nationally was so new that there just wasn't a lot of organization to it. For all the years. I remember our colonel, he was a guy named Woodrow B Wilmot, was his name, and what stuck out to me was that Colonel Wilmot---keep in mind, this was in 1968---Colonel Wilmot was a B-10 pilot. And if you look up the B-10, the B-10 was an interwar aircraft. I mean, it was ancient. And when I thought, boy, my ROTC commander was a B-10 pilot, that goes way, way, way back. But, that was also when

Vietnam was going on, and Eglin Air Force Base was a big hub for that. And I remember the junior ROTC cadets got to go out for what they call firepower demonstrations, where the school bus would pick us up and take us out to Eglin Air Force Base, and we would, uh, watch this, this, this was at night.

RL (00:06:44):

Things like napalm and, and things like that, gunnery ranges and things like that. And at the time, you know, I guess I really didn't appreciate the fact that I got to see, you know, something really firsthand like that, where they were actually dropping actual ordinance as they were in Vietnam. Pretty impressive. But again, junior, ROTC was very much as in its infancy then. And I guess you could say that I kind of got in on the ground floor of the junior ROTC program, but I remember it as a very positive experience. And if I can digress, good old Colonel Wilmot said that the band director had approached him and they were looking for seven cadets to form a color guard to perform with the, with the band on the field. And so, seven of us were segregated from the ROTC, uh, program. And during ROTC, instead of coming to ROTC class, we worked with the band, and we worked out our own little, uh, drill routines on the field. Uh, we had three flags and four rifles that, uh, that we did. And, uh, so we got to, uh, do a little drill performance on that. And that, that was a lot of fun, too.

SM (00:08:06):

And you mentioned Vietnam. Speaking of that, you know, could you talk about what it was like growing up during that era? What were you hearing, especially since you intended to eventually join the military?

RL (00:08:19):

Right. Well, first of all, you know, a lot of people I graduated with, and I graduated from high school in 1969, a lot of people went directly from high school to Vietnam. Right into the army. Because as you know, the draft conscription was still in effect back then. And because I had already been accepted into a college ROTC program, I had what they call a 2-S deferment. In other words, because I was in a, in a military commissioning program I was not liable to be drafted because after college, I was going to go in anyway. So I didn't worry a lot about the draft when I was graduating, because I knew I was going in anyway. And the same thing happened in my early years of college is that a lot of guys were sweating out, you know, being drafted while you were in college because they didn't have that deferment.

RL (00:09:18):

And some of the guys I went to college with who were not in ROTC did get drafted while they were in college and had their college careers interrupted because they had to go off to the army. One guy, in particular, we started off as freshman, he got called up, he went to Vietnam. And when he got back from Vietnam, you know, I was like a junior or senior in college, and it's like, he just went away for a while. And, and, uh, but I didn't have to worry about that. It's interesting that my birthday, October 5th and lottery was very, very low. In other words, had I not had a deferment, I'm sure that my draft number was so low that I would've been called up pretty clearly.

SM (00:09:58):
And you went to the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

RL (00:10:01):
Yes, that is correct.

SM (00:10:02):
Um, could you tell me about, you know, your first aid there and getting started with the R-O-T-C program there, and the differences in the junior ROTC and now the college ROTC?

RL (00:10:16):
Well, it kind of led up, as I said momentarily, a minute ago, I had a very positive experience as a high school junior, ROTC Cadet. And going to college, I was really excited about it. I went to live with my biological father, the guy that went into Normandy, and he worked and lived in Omaha. He wanted me to go to the Lincoln campus, even though he lived in Omaha, Nebraska, and I said, "I don't care I just wanna make sure that there's an ROTC program there." Which there was, and Offutt Air Force Base is near there. Midwest, Nebraska, very conservative, and, you know, there was none of these Vietnam protests or anything like that. We were just, you know, kind of went along with our, with our day-to-day routine.

RL (00:11:07):
And, because of my prior experience with the high school band, I got on the, the color guard at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. And, uh, unfortunately, our practices were at, at 6:00 AM in the morning, uh, in the field house. And that didn't work out too well when, when Nebraska snow came in and you had to navigate to the field house at 6:00 AM in the morning in snow. And coming from Florida, I was not used to driving in snow. So it was really white knuckle there. To tell you one of my fondest memories, although it's not so fond, is one time we were presenting the colors, and I had the American flag at a basketball game. And because the flag was hanging down in front of my face, I couldn't see ahead. So, I depended on the other people in the, in the color guard to, to guide me, literally.

RL (00:12:06):
So we, we marched out, we, we pivoted, we presented the colors, the national anthem played. And, as you know, with the national anthem, that was just before the game started. While we were marching off the [court], all of a sudden, I felt the flag pull back. And what had happened is my buddies didn't take care of me, and I got the, the eagle on top of the flagpole caught in the basketball net, and everybody was laughing, and everybody thought, "oh, look at that guy. What an idiot." And here I was in front of a stadium, or a court full of people watching me try to get that eagle at the top of the flagpole out of the basketball net. And that happened a long time ago, but it's, it's etched right here in my mind, <laugh>.

SM (00:12:52):
It's one of those memories. Late at night, you start thinking about it. It's like ah.

RL (00:12:56):

Yep. Yeah, that was something. But anyway, I stayed with the, uh, with the honor guard throughout my, my college career and, you know, and that I, I just liked the idea of, of patriotism and, you know, honoring the flag.

SM (00:13:16):

And what about your graduation and then eventual commissioning?

RL (00:13:20):

Well, I was commissioned right along. I was a history major, because it was Vietnam, if you were vertical and ventilating, they pretty much t took you. I mean, uh, they, they were still, Vietnam was winding down, and a lot of the requirements that they used to have were very liberal. When I was graduating, I remember that we had to run a mile and a half for our end of year physical fitness test. And we were a couple weeks from graduation, and our professor of aerospace studies, a guy called Don Kelleher, uh, was out. And me and, uh, one of my friends was walking across campus. He says, "Lanning, Darrell, get over here." Yes, sir. He says, "have you turned in your time for your mile and a half run?" And we said, well, sorry, sir, we haven't had a chance to run it yet.

RL (00:14:17):

"I didn't ask you if you ran it. I asked you if you turned in a time." And you know, that, that just goes to show you that they, they just wanted to, to get you on active duty. So, graduation and commissioning was wonderful. My stepfather was able to commission me and, my biological mother and my stepmother pinned me on. And, at that time, you know, I didn't have a wife or kids or anything like that, so it was great. But, our secretary, Eva Swanson from the detachment typed out the commissioning oath that my stepfather used to swear me in. And that I'd like to come back to that piece of paper downstream a little bit, but I just wanted to acknowledge that, you know, the, the ROTC detachment separate secretary typed out the oath of office for my stepfather to read. And like I say, I want to come back to that piece of paper a little bit later.

SM (00:15:27):

And so, now that you're in the Air Force, could you take me through the evolution of your career and your various duties, responsibilities, and positions? You've had an extensive one, so I'll give it to you.

RL (00:15:41):

Well, yeah. Because I was in for 30 years, you know, they, a lot of people say, "Well, what'd you do in the Air Force?" Well, you know, you got three or four hours, you know, we, like you said, when you're in 30 years, you do a lot of stuff. And my career was kind of equally divided between four major areas: guided missile operations, political military affairs, academia, and command. So, some of the assignments were guided---most of my assignments were guided missile operations. But I did quite a bit with political military affairs when I was at the Pentagon and at Air Force Space Command, two assignments in the college ROTC assignment, because I enjoyed it so much as a cadet that I wanted to do it on active duty. And then two tours in command.

RL (00:16:36):

And so various things happened during that time. In that 30 years, nine years were spent overseas, six years in England, and three years in Germany. As I mentioned, a tour in the Pentagon, and resident Air War college, class of 92 for Air War College. And all of those were just, I feel blessed because even though there were some assignments that I liked better than others, I can honestly say that I never had an assignment that I absolutely hated or despised. And I feel that that's a blessing, you know, because some people, "Oh, I just got to get out of here." You know, "I just can't take this anymore." And it was never like that for me. Every assignment had had its ups and its downs, and some were better than others, but I never, I can honestly say that of the nine assignments that I had, none of them I absolutely hated it. They were all great.

SM (00:17:39):

And a follow up question to that, could I ask about your experience with your, your first assignment with the Guided Missile Operations And getting started with that, and what was that like for you entering into your official role?

RL (00:17:53):

Well, when I filled out what we call the Dream Sheet, the Air Force Form 90, it told the Air Force "this is what I'd like to do," and I wanted to be an intelligence officer. That's what I wanted to do, because I thought that would be the best use of my history degree and so forth. Uh, I was actually assigned to, uh, guided Missile Operations. And, um, it, that turned out to be, again, a very much a blessing for me. I was assigned to the 508 Strategic Missile Squadron, three 51st Strategic Missile wing, strategic Air Command, Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri. And, uh, the guided missile operations were about beneficial to me because, as you might imagine, when you're working with nuclear weapons, there's not a lot of room for winging it. You know, we used to say, in the missile business, read a step, do a step, get a banana.

RL (00:18:56):

And because they wanted you, they were very strict about things, and they, as they should be. With Missile wing, with nuclear weapons, they wanted to make sure that you could do that. And I'll never forget when I got out to our basic training in Vandenberg Air Force Base, brand new Second Lieutenant showing up, and, I'll be doggone if I didn't fail the first test that I took, that was really devastating for me. My first active duty test: fail. It was a written test, and, you know, I did fine after that, but that was really sobering, and another kind of eye-opening thing. I think it's probably important that I say this here, that I did 30 years of, of active duty service with the Air Force, but I saw not one day of combat, not one day.

RL (00:19:57):

And, you know, there's another volunteer here, Rick, who's a helicopter pilot he was in for four years. And at least two of those were, were in combat in Vietnam. Well, here's a gentleman who saw, was in the military for only a limited amount of time and, and a lot of combat. And I went a full 30 years with zero combat. And, but that doesn't mean that we didn't have, you know, our own set of experiences. And, I'll tell you two, if I could, war stories. One of them I'm not too proud about. Well, I'll, I'll tell you the first one first. It was April of 1974, and we were going down for a night alert. The minuteman crew consisted of two people. You went downstairs

behind a blast door, and the way the alerts worked back then, you were down for 12 up top for 12 to rest back down for another 12.

RL (00:20:56):

And then you went home. Well, we had just changed over, it was about seven or 8:00 PM and when you're behind those blast doors, you get out of your uniform, you put on a sweatsuit, or shorts, or something to get comfortable. And we were just settling in. I was just starting my master's degree, and the primary alerting system went off. And it was a very, very high level of alert. And when we started, there was nothing, there was nothing on going on worldwide, what's going on here. But it was a valid message, and it was an authentic message, we both agreed. And, one of the things we had to do in reaction to that message was, open the safe and insert the launch keys. That's a big deal. That was a big deal.

RL (00:21:47):

And the other thing that we had to do was close the blast valves, which could only be reopened with a maintenance team. So we knew things were serious. And I remember that ticking because after that message came through there was probably four or five minutes where there was nothing. And it's those times where you think, am I ever gonna see the light of day again? Am I ever gonna have a family? Am I ever gonna have kids? Am I ever gonna see my parents again? Because this was a big deal. And, the thing is we just didn't know why, because there was nothing going on in the world. And then another message came back, and they ratcheted the level of alert back down.

RL (00:22:37):

And, as it turns out, what had happened was that the Russians had launched one missile from an operational silo toward the United States, but it was short loaded. So it fell into the sea long before it hit the United States, but it was on a trajectory to hit Fairchild Air Force Base. And unbeknownst to us at the time, that same message, told the bomber crews to crash, start their engines, taxi to the end of the runway and hold that was that close. And they couldn't keep that long because they were burning jet fuel just sitting there waiting. So this was a big deal. And how I knew it was serious, because we learned later that out out of the 15 launch control centers, three launch control centers called into the command post to say, "Do we have to react to this message?"

RL (00:23:34):

And yeah, you do. And they were relieved in the field. In other words, they failed to follow an authentic and a valid message, and they were relieved in the field. Which leads me to my second story, because at another time, I was relieved in the field myself. We were on an exercise where an exercise message come through. And back then we had a grease pencil, and we copied a message format. And then after the message was over, you know, both, both crew members had to agree that it was a valid and an authentic message. And we processed the checklist and went on through. And then after the message came in, the evaluator that was looking at me grabbed my copy format book, he just ripped it out of my hands. And then he went back and huddled with the evaluator commander, and they come back and said, "Lieutenant Lanning, you failed to copy a phonetic."

RL (00:24:40):

I remember to this day, it was an E for Echo. I just didn't copy it. That line where the e was supposed to go was blank, and there was supposed to be an E in there, and it was blank on my, my copy format book. And I thought, "Oh dear. Oh my word, I'm in trouble." And so they said, "I'm sorry, but we have no choice, but you failed to copy and authenticate a valid message, and we're gonna have to relieve you in the field." And so what that means is the standby crew from the base has to come out. And, even though my crew commander did it right, I was the one that screwed up. So we both went back, and the new crew had to come out.

RL (00:25:27):

And what's, what was bad about it is the primary alerting system that came on, and they notified everybody that the crew on Bravo one launch control center has had to be relieved in the field. And they didn't say, "And that was Randy Lanning and Charlie Cepco." They didn't say that, okay. But everybody knew, "Uh oh, Lanning and Cepco screwed up." And so we had to go through the training. But, you know, to me, that was character building. That was, that was big character time, because, you know, learned to me the attention to detail, and, you know, I obviously, I never made that mistake again. But, uh, that just goes to show you that back then, how, how a strategic air command and, and, and the custody and release of nuclear weapons was so absolutely important that the you, it, I can't think of another profession where the expectation was perfection. I can't think about any other thing with that. But with nuclear weapons, things happen, okay, people are human, but the expectation is perfection. And that was really driven home to me in those two stories about the actual elevation level readiness and my relief in the field during an exercise.

SM (00:26:46):

And so, from that, going into your political military affairs, that branch of your career, what was it like, you know, leaving the guided missile operations going into this new avenue?

RL (00:26:57):

Well, I need to cover one more aspect of guided missiles, is that my second active duty assignment after I left the minute mass system was my first college ROTC assignment at Georgia Tech. And I had such a positive experience in college, both as, as a cadet that I knew I wanted to do it. But ROTC assignment as an instructor was kind of kiss of death. And everybody said, if you wanna do this, and you wanna have a career, get in and get out early because it's not gonna help your career. So I went from Whiteman to, uh, to Georgia Tech, and again, a very positive experience. And it's interesting how things changed back then. And this was 1977. Back then you, you had to have a master's degree, and you had to be married. There was no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

RL (00:27:57):

And fortunately I had met my wife, and we were married at Whiteman Air Force Base week before I left for Georgia Tech. So I, I fulfilled that and, and I just got in under the wire. But anyway, while at Georgia Tech, I was beginning to think, "Okay, what am I gonna do after, after this assignment?" And I thought about going back to, to big missiles, but I heard about this program that kind of came about under President Carter called the Cruise missiles. And that was

a new technology back then. And, the Air Force was looking at something called the Ground Launch Cruise Missile. And, uh, they were forming a, a test team out of Dugway Army proving grounds to evaluate, uh, what they called initial operational test and evaluation of the Ground Launch Cruise Missile System.

RL (00:28:56):

And I knew this was for me, I really wanted to do this. And I found out the test team leader was a guy called Tom Bowen, and he was attending Air War College over at Maxwell Air Force Base, which is about three and a half hours from Atlanta where I was at. And so I drove over there, I did a face-to-face interview with it, got hired. So my assignment after that was the ground launch Cruise Missile initial operational test and evaluation system, and Dugway Army Proving Grounds is literally out in the middle of the Great Salt Lake Desert. There was an old line that "Dugway is not the end of the world, but you can see it from there." It was, it was really out there. And my wife, I mean, it was, was just, but that, again, that turned out to be one of the best assignments we ever had, because there was nothing to do out there.

RL (00:29:47):

You did a lot with your, you know, with the people you worked with and the people on the base. And it was interesting that my youngest daughter and I, when I met my youngest daughter, Heather in Salt Lake, and we'd said, "Ah, let's go out to Dugway for old time sake." And, you know, that's where we used to live. That was the, the, the, the test team, uh, building and things like that. But it's hard to believe that, uh, it was, that it was that long ago. It's funny, because my dad used to to write me letters to "Dungway". Dad, that's not how it's spelled. But again, we were told that this missile could be canceled. In other words, it was a trial program. You know, we were trying to negotiate with the Soviets to build down their missile forces.

RL (00:30:37):

And so we always had to keep our Form 90, our dream sheet current about what happens if, if they cancel the ground launch Cruise Missile Program. Well, it didn't get canceled. So, we were looking for opportunities to go, and we wanted to go, because I really wanted to get overseas. And so I was what they call initial cadre into the 501st tactical missile wing at Royal Air Force Station, Greenham Common in the UK. And so that's how I got into the cruise missile business. And from then over to the headquarters at Ramstein Airbase, Germany. And then while we were at Ramstein, President Reagan and Gorbachev signed the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which eliminated those missiles. So all of a sudden, I was out of a job.

RL (00:31:37):

So now, guess what? I was sitting around, there was nothing going on. I mean, okay, what, what are we gonna do? And see, when I left, when I left to go to the Cruise Missile Program the big missile guys in Strategic Air Command said, "You deserter." You know, "You bailed on us. We're not taking you back," you know? And so I saw my career ending because I'd hooked my wagon to an assignment, to a system that had been traded away. Well, pivot point, just key point, I was sitting over at Ramstein. I mean, literally because the treaty had been signed, there was nothing going on. We were just counting time over there. I got a call from a colleague named

Dawn [Drenthe?] She said, "Randy, do you have any assignments cooking now that the treaty's been signed?"

RL (00:32:30):

I got nothing. I got nothing here. She said, "I've just been offered a great job elsewhere in the Pentagon, but I need a replacement. Would you want to come to the Pentagon after this assignment? But you gotta move fast. You know, because my, my job in the Pentagon---my move is contingent upon me finding a replacement right away." I'm your guy. I'm that guy. So, I had some senior officers run some checks, you know, some validity checks for it. And the, because nothing was going on in Europe with the cruise missiles is you, you go, whenever you can go, you go. And so I was headed for the Pentagon, and all of a sudden, you know, I think that was a key turning point in my career because had that opportunity not come along, I saw my, my career just fizzling out as a, as a Major someplace, and working at a codes office at a missile base someplace.

RL (00:33:42):

So that was a real turn. And my assignment was, in the Pentagon, the chief of the---well, basically, it was political military affairs involving anything in any country in Scandinavia and the UK. So, in other words, if there was, if the Air Force was working an issue with any country in Scandinavia or England, I was the guy. And so since I had just recently come from the UK, it, it worked out really well. I had a good time there, I was only there for about a year. And then, uh, the arms control people said, "Well, hey, we don't have a GLCM guy"---that's ground launch Cruise missile---"we don't have a GLCM Guy, why don't you come over and work for us?" Okay, well, I was really having a good time with the Scandinavia/UK desk, and I really didn't want to go, but I really didn't get much of a vote.

RL (00:34:43):

So I was transferred over to work the Ground Launch Cruise Missile Drawdown and onsite inspection agency for the treaty. And, uh, then another guy who worked for the Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force for International Affairs said, "Hey, Randy, I need a second up here. You want to come up and work for Ms. Libby Keefer, the, uh, the Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force for International Affairs." Oh, hurt me, you know? So, I just did a touch and go in arms control, and I was up working for the Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force for International Affairs. And that was, that was another big turning point for me. And again, great time. Probably the highlight of my time up there was that I was the Air Force Project Officer for the 1992 Paris Air Show. That was, that was rough duty. You know, it's two weeks in Paris at government expense. And Desert Shield Desert Storm had just finished off. And the Air Force wanted to show off all of its planes to Europe. And it was the first time that the F-117 stealth fighter had ever been flown to Europe. So there was a lot of issues, it was a lot of work, but it was also a lot of fun.

RL (00:36:05):

And then the other political military affairs was at Air Force Space Command. And, because of my time at the Pentagon, I was assigned to the chief of the International Affairs division for Air Force Space Command. So if Air Force Space Command had any issues with overseas events,

overseas bases, and we had tons of them. Okay, we worked with Canada, Australia, Denmark because of Greenland, some classified sites elsewhere in the world. But any political military issue that came up that involved any of Air Force Space Command's overseas tracking and satellite stations, I was the guy. And again, what a great opportunity. Seven trips down to Australia, because we had sites going on down there. Trips to Thule Air Base, Greenland. You know, I mean, I literally got to see a lot of the world because of that.

RL (00:37:09):

Probably, if I could digress for a minute, to tell a story, Air Force Space Command had this thing called the Greenland Permanent Committee. It involved all issues with Thule Air Base, Greenland, and it rotated. It met every six months; sometimes it was in Colorado Springs, sometimes it was at Thule Air Base, and other times it was Copenhagen, Denmark, because of the relationship. Well, in one July it was up at Thule, and we'd had a, a nice, you know, meeting. They, it was a last night, they always put on a big dinner at the, what they call the top of the World club at Tule Airbase. And we had on our dress uniforms and things like that. And it was, uh, it was a nice, nice evening, but everybody was suffering from little bottle fatigue, if you know what I mean.

RL (00:38:04):

We were getting hot in our uniforms. We were ready to go back, pack and go home. I mean, it was a nice trip. We were ready to go. We were full, we were tired, great time, time to go home. And the Senior Dane was a deputy foreign minister, he was like a three star general equivalent, and we were all literally getting up to go, and he just stands up and he goes, "We climb Mount Dundas." And Mount Dundas was a mountain right outside the base. "Are you serious? You you really want us to do that?" And so our delegation leader was a one star general, and we kind of looked over at General, general---I forget his name, and he kind of goes, "Yeah." And of course, the base commander is just freaking out, you know, because, "Oh dear, what are we gonna do?"

RL (00:38:53):

So this was about 11 o'clock. Okay. So he says, "Everybody go home change into climbing gear, we'll line up buses, meet back here in climbing gear at 12:30 AM." And so we did that, went home changed, and the bus. And so, uh, they took us out to Mount Dundas, and this, this was Danes, Americans, Greenlanders, we were all there together. And by the time we actually got to the top of Mount Dundas, it was about 2:00 AM in the morning. And it was not an easy climb, it was not an easy climb. And we got up there, and I paused, I paused for a moment. I said, this was July; "I'm standing on the top of a mountain overlooking ice flows in broad daylight at two o'clock in the morning." And I thought, "I'll never do this again."

RL (00:39:50):

I'll never do this again in my life. You know? And I just remember that moment, "I am overlooking the ice flows in Greenland in broad daylight at two o'clock in the morning." I can't trade that experience for anything. And thankfully, I had the foresight to reach down and pick up a rock from the top of Mount Dundas, which is in my shadow box. That really, really stuck out to me. But, you know, those are just the, kind of the opportunities you have in the military that don't involve combat, but what a tremendous opportunity that was.

SM (00:40:33):

That's a pretty amazing story. I was going to ask, what was your hardest moment during that command, during that assignment. Because you mentioned being in Paris, but did you have any other moments where it's just, you know, a growing moment for you?

RL (00:40:58):

Well, I did have other growing moments, let's put it that way. But actually, I steered pretty clear of the Pentagon. Number one, my boss, she worked, Libby Keefer worked directly for the Under Secretary of the Air Force, which is the number two position, and her name was Anne Foreman. And she was wonder---both of them were wonderful, and it made it really a joy to work for them. I know that handling of classified information is in the news right now. Well, I had my own experience with that. Not in the Pentagon, but when I was at Greenham Common. I accidentally left some---back then, it was overhead transparencies, remember those, and they were secret.

RL (00:41:56):

And I gave a classified briefing on Friday afternoon, and I don't know what I was thinking, but we just finished, and I walked right out of the room and left those slides there over the weekend. I come to work on Monday, and I thought, "Oh dear, those slides are still in the conference room." I went over there and the slides were exactly where I left them. I don't think anybody, I was the last person using the conference room, probably nobody had been in before; they were exactly as I left them. The folks that I worked with in that other building said, "You know, Randy, we are gonna have to report this." And I said, "Yeah, I get that. I get that."

RL (00:42:44):

They [appointed] an investigating officer, they realized it was an accident, it was an oversight. There was a high degree of confidence that the information was not compromised. It was at the secret level, it wasn't like it was top secret or anything like that. But again, that was another character building moment for me that, you know, just don't get too cocky here, don't become lax. But as far as my time in the Pentagon, I don't remember any really adverse things that happened in the Pentagon. But I will say that that was the road, if you like, for me making Colonel. Because if you backtrack it, had I not received that phone call in Germany saying, "Do you want to come to the Pentagon?"

RL (00:43:36):

That was a big [thing] right there. When Libby Keefer decided to hire me at the Under Secretary of the Air Force level, that was a big turning point. I remember she walked in one day and she says, "Randy, what do you wanna do next? What do you want to do next in the Air Force?" And I said, "Well, I'd like to go to Air War College." She said, "We can make that happen." And, and sure enough, you know, my assignment to Air War College was what came about. And as a result of Air War College, that was a ticket to full Colonel. I didn't do anything special. Because my career could have very easily gone a different way. Had the cards fallen a different way, my career could have gone a different way. But one thing led to another, and all the cards seemed to fall where they should.

SM (00:44:36):

And then while I'm thinking about it, back to Germany and England, and then also your other work, how was it, you know, juggling family at that time as well; moving to different countries, getting established, building camaraderie in the community?

RL (00:44:52):

Yeah. It was interesting. When we went to England the first time, although I was married, we had no kids. Because Greenham Common as a base was just coming up, there was no base housing. So we had to basically fend for yourself. And because there was no designated housing, I had to go over ahead of my wife, Diane. So when you had a lease signed, you know, we can bring your wife over. And, again, I feel blessed that we moved into a community called Woodley, which was about maybe 45 minutes from Greenham Common. And our duplex mates, the British call him semi-detached, were friends; Andy and Sue Hignall, who are our age, and we are dear friends to this day.

RL (00:45:51):

We're gonna do a video chat with them next week. That was 1982. So we have known Andy and Sue as our kids have grown up. We've known them as good friends since 1982. Sue organized Diane's baby shower for our first daughter, Joanna. It really was the camaraderie. And a lot of people that were on the test team in Utah also went to Greenham. So we had, it's not like we didn't know anybody. And the idea was that we, the idea was that we, you know, get to know people in the community. Funny story: one of the couples that we knew really well from Greenham Common, Rick and Chris Sample, who by the way, live up near Gettysburg, we still very good friends with them, but they wanted to have an Anglo-American scavenger hunt.

RL (00:46:50):

In other words, each of the people invited, the [Americans], had to bring an English neighbor, and then we would do a scavenger hunt. And it was a lot of fun. But Andy, who we invited, Andy and Sue, Andy was on my wife Diane team. He didn't want any part of a scavenger hunt. He came to the party, but we were racing it up and down the village, trying to get what they found. And then we ran by this pub, and "Well, there's Andy and Diane sitting, drinking a beer. Aren't they supposed to be, you know, aren't they supposed to be on the scavenger hunt?" "Andy, why aren't you..?" "Ah, I'm not interested." I mean, we still had a good time, we still had a good time, but it was, it was really great. After we went to Germany they came over and, as a matter of fact, their son Ian, who of course now is an adult, gave our daughter, Joanna, chickenpox. But, you know, even though we haven't physically seen them in many years, you know, with video chats, and today, we really keep [in touch], and these are what I call in the "lifelong friend" category.

SM (00:48:00):

Sorry, I had to go back. Now we can go back to the Air War College, and that segment in your life.

RL (00:48:07):

We were only there for 10 months. Air War College is a 10 month class. It's the shortest PCS we ever had. And again, a very positive experience for me. Probably the highlight for me in Air War

College was that you could compete for an award. They have, I forget the name of the award, but it was like the Air Force Historical Association Award for Excellence in something, whatever. Anyway, I knew that, because of that, nobody had written a definitive historical paper on the ground launch Cruise Missile. It hadn't been written. So, I wrote---it was a labor of love---I wrote a paper that compared the older mace and matador missiles with the cruise missile. And, I actually was able to get some information declassified for that paper. I won first place on that. I'm really proud of that award. And as a matter of fact, excerpts of that paper have been printed, reproduced in books on cruise missiles since then. So, although I'm not an author per se, I'm pleased that some of the work that I did on that Air War College paper has found it's way into books.

SM (00:49:39):

That's amazing. And then going into your academia, that side of your career. So I know you did enjoy that side, and getting connected with students. If we just talk about your work there.

RL (00:49:58):

Well, if I had to pick one assignment, out of the all of them I had, if I had to pick the one assignment that was the most rewarding for me, it would have to be the assignment as Professor of aerospace studies at Rutgers and Princeton. When we were finishing off in Colorado Springs, I was at the 26 year point, and had pinned on the captain, sorry, Colonel. And so I could have retired at the 26 year point in Colorado Springs. And we looked at that seriously. And then I decided, "You know, I'm just gonna take one more assignment to Rutgers University." Because, again, I knew I wasn't gonna make Brigadier General, so do something you wanted to do, you know, do something fun.

RL (00:50:51):

And so I had no connection with Rutgers Princeton directly. But one of the guys I was on missile crew with, clear back at Whiteman, was a Rutgers graduate. And he went on and on and on about what a great school it was and things like that. So we moved to New Jersey and I was the PAS there from 1999 to 2002. And, again, very positive. There are cadets I'm still in contact with. I commissioned a young lady named Angela Webb clear back in 2004, and I'm going to retire her in 2024. And so, you know, literally start to finish. It's just to have that kind of connection. You don't have that with every kid, but, you know, these kids were there, they were focused, they want to do stuff, they made mistakes.

RL (00:52:02):

You're [their] PAS but you're also kind of their dad, you know? I mean, I had parents that say, you know, "Why can't you do something about my son or daughter?" I says, "I'm sorry, sir. You know, your child is, is 18. I can't talk to you about, you know, what's going on with your son or daughter." But it was really, of all the assignments I had, that was without question the best one. And the capstone is I was only at 29 years, and I wanted to do the full 30, and they would not extend me an ROTC; I had to go. And so just down the road at McGuire Air Force Base, they said, "Hey, we're looking for a director of staff."

RL (00:52:52):

You know, "If you want to come down for one year, we'll do that." And that turned out to be another wonderful assignment. You know, I was director of staff for the 305th Air Mobility Wing, and at my retirement, it was a blend of having a military retirement on base, but with the full participation of the cadets at Rutgers and Princeton. And to me, that was the trifecta right there. I've heard it said that, you know, a bride wants her wedding day to be that very special day in her life. And to me, I wouldn't have changed anything about my retirement. It was just, it was just everything that I envisioned, or I hoped that it would be. My daughter, Joanna, played the national anthem on a saxophone. My youngest daughter, Heather, spoke on my behalf, which is real, when I think about an eighth grader doing that.

RL (00:53:50):

And she wrote a poem that was beautiful, it really came together for me. And so, you know, from start to finish, there was a lot of things that connected all the way up. But, I just wish everybody could have had as positive a military experience as I did. True: I was never in combat. I didn't experience a lot of the, the adversity like PTSD and things like that, that people get in combat. But, you know, that is just the time that I was born and the assignments that I had, that's just the way it went.

SM (00:54:33):

And even after your retirement, you still weren't quite finished.

RL (00:54:36):

Right. Yeah, I wanted to go on to Air Force Junior ROTC, again, because of the strong affiliation or affection I had for young people. And I, I think personally, teaching is one of my gifts. I started off at Old Bridge High School in old Bridge, New Jersey. I was there for five years, then, I had the opportunity for a brand new startup unit, brand new program at Mascoutah High School, outside Scott Air Force Base in Illinois. I was at Old Bridge for five years, and then at Mascoutah for nine. Again, a very positive experience the whole way through, but I will say this, they say that, you know, when it's time to retire. I was finding that as I was getting older, there was less and less I could relate to, to the younger kids coming up.

RL (00:55:39):

I used to be able to, to give a motivational speech to a kid, and I'd crack a home run out of the park. And it got to the point where I would try to motivate kids, and [it would] just bounce it off, you know? I called them knuckleheads. You know, when the knuckleheads start outweighing the really good cadets, you know, it's time to do something different. But I will say that I was exposed to some of the finest young people I've ever met when I was at Mascoutah. And, again, it's gone beyond just the teacher/student relationship. One girl I met when she was a freshman, her name was Sarah Culp; her dad was active duty. Sarah was shy in retiring as a freshman, and she worked her way up all the way up to Corps Commander. It's hard to not get emotional just thinking about Sarah. I'll tell you one story. Sorry if I get a little emotional.

RL (00:57:03):

Sarah was Corps Commander, and during her tenure the principal was walking out of this building, and one of our cadets was up on the roof----you're not supposed to be on the roof of the

school, but he was up there filming for a story. He belonged to the school newspaper, but he had forgotten his Chromebook or iPad or whatever he had up there. He was going up, look for it. He wasn't supposed to be up there. So the principal looks up and he said, um, be in my office at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, you know, and then he left. The next day, Ryan Palmer was his name, shows up at the, uh, principal's office at eight o'clock like he was supposed to, but Sarah Culp went with him, and the principal said, "What are you doing here?" She says, "Sir, I was on the roof with Ryan. You didn't see me, but I knew it was the right thing to do for me to come."

SM (00:58:26):

Wow.

RL (00:58:29):

You talk about integrity, that just, uh, that just blew me away. I'm sorry. I knew I was, I was probably gonna lose it somewhere along the way.

RL (00:58:43):

But we are talking about a 17 or 18-year-old kid that she could've just skated. She just, "Hey, I didn't get caught. Nobody saw me." You know? But as the core commander, number one, she was taking care of her troops, she was up there helping him look for the Chromebook. Because he got in trouble, because he did get caught, and she was up there. She didn't feel it was right to let him take it all. And, also, because your not supposed to be up there, she was risking her command. In other words, uh, the principal could have said, "Colonel Landing, I want you to remove Sarah from, from leadership." Because, you know, she did. So she was putting it all on the line to do the right thing.

RL (00:59:45):

And, you know, you just don't find people that do that. You just don't find people that do that. And to me, you know, you can have, you know, 50 knucklehead screw ups, but when you have somebody like that do something like that, it just says it was worth it. And I can't take responsibility for Sarah's character, that's mom and dad's and Sarah's, but it tells me that, you know, there are good people out there that know right from wrong, they're doing the right thing. And that was just one of several things that she did that just say, this is just absolutely top drawer people. And she wasn't the only one, but Sarah just sticks out to me as, as somebody, and unfortunately she had medical issues that she could not go into the Air Force, but she, she's, she's working for a space related company right now, she graduated from Purdue University.

RL (01:00:46):

Just, just so proud to, to see her excel. And right along with that, I'm so proud of my own daughters. I mean, you know, Joanna, my oldest daughter, is a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. I think, I'm not just saying this, I think at this stage in her career, she's, she's got a better record than I do---I did. You know, and I want that, I want that for my daughter. And although Heather, our youngest, uh, has no, no aspirations for military service, she's made her own way. She's a marketing specialist in New York City and doing great things out there. So, I guess I feel blessed that throughout my life that I've been able to be surrounded by good people.

SM (01:01:42):

And to follow up on that, you know, what has it been like being a father of a act of duty person in the Air Force and since you were a veteran yourself and being on both sides now?

RL (01:01:55):

Well, I've got to stop and inject here something about my wife, Diane. You know, because Diane and I have been married, last June we've been married 46 years. Two children, and, you know, Diane has always been there. In other words, she's not a person who likes the limelight, let's put it this way. But she's always there steadfastly supporting me, and she did throughout my career. Especially when I was in command positions, we'd have to go to that function and this function and that function. And that really wasn't her. But, but she went anyway, you know, she had to do that. She was a great mom. She's got an EDS degree in school psychology.

RL (01:02:51):

She's actually higher educated than me. Great mom, great role model, a strong Christian woman. Again, it all part of this family of having the privilege, of being associated with wonderful people throughout my life. But, it has been rough. You think about the stress on the family, and I can only think how much more difficult it is if you have a serving military member that's in a combat position, that, that even makes it worse. Uh, but throughout our marriage, Diane and I were never, uh, separated for any length of time. I mean the line length, the longest we were separated was when I went to Squadron Officer School in Montgomery, and Diane was back in Atlanta.

RL (01:03:46):

So it wasn't really that much of a separation. But, for example, my daughter, Joanna, has three tours to Afghanistan. One of them was a year long. She's had a rough go of it. You know, again, it is what, what's going on in history at the time when this, when this goes on. She took a year tour for a married guy who---you could either go for six months or a year, and Joanna said, well, because I wasn't married, she wasn't married at the time, I'll take the year tour. In other words, she gave up that six months so that the guy that was married would only have to be gone six months, which was a very noble thing for her to do. So I, I think life as a military kid, because I was a military kid, it's a rough life, but it can be a rewarding life. I just hope that in the end, that Joanna finds her military career to be as rewarding as mine was. And I guess that's why I'm still doing this stuff. I'm still a docent at the Air Force Museum. I'm volunteering here at the War Memorial. I just want to keep my hand in the service business because I think it's important to be a contributing member of society. I just think that's important.

SM (01:05:21):

Well, I have just one more question for you. Especially since you've worked with students, what advice would you give to someone considering joining the Air Force?

RL (01:05:37):

Wow. Considering it.

SM (01:05:39):

Mm-Hmm.

RL (01:05:41):

I guess in today's environment, I would say don't take it for granted. In other words, when I was teaching junior ROTC, some of the cadets had the attitude, "Well, if nothing works out I'll just join the military." Well, you better think through that one again, because people like Sarah, who I was talking about earlier, you know, she would, I'm convinced, [have] made a fantastic officer. But when you look at all the potential military disqualifiers, whether it be physical fitness, whether it be a medical condition, whether it be infractions with the law, or anything like that, there's a lot of things that can rule out. I, I haven't fact checked this, but I had heard from more than one source that the, the eligible population for military service from between the ages of 18 and 23 is only 15%.

RL (01:06:44):

And that's if you want to join, you know, that that's if the person wants to join. I would see these guys, "Oh, I want to be a Navy Seal," and you can't even run a quarter mile around the track. You have to want it, and you have to, to, to go for it, because it's not an easy road, whether you've seen combat or not, it's not an easy road. I've really been pleased, but I'm also saying, and maybe to kind of wrap things up, I'm also glad that I lived when I lived. In other words, I'm glad that I had the experiences I had during the time that it occurred. In other words, I look back to the, even though there was a lot of turmoil in the world, I look back at the sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties, with, with a lot of affection. We were in Great Falls, Montana, we just saw film on the Cuban Missile Crisis. We were there, we were in Great Falls, Montana, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. That was really tense for us. But overall, like I say, I feel very proud and pleased that I've had the experiences that I've had, and hopefully I'll have more being here in the Richmond area.

SM (01:08:12):

And this question just came to me, so I lied. That wasn't my last question last time. But, you know, the growth of the J-R-O-T-C program from when you were first a cadet until when you were teaching the new Cadets. How did you see that program grow throughout the years until what is what it is now?

RL (01:08:33):

Well, uh, of course there was a big gap. There was a big gap from 1969 when I graduated from high school to when I, when I took up my first junior ROTC instructor job in 2003. So there was a big gap there. So I really can't speak to what happened between 1969 and 2003. Okay. Mm-Hmm, <affirmative>. But, uh, I will say that the program has become a lot more structured, uh, some would say too structured. It's gotten increasingly managed, if I say by headquarters, junior ROTC. When we first started, pretty much anything goes, and now they have inspections where somebody from headquarters comes out and they evaluate you. One of the things that I always wrestled with, true confessions here, is even though I think by the time I started junior ROTC I was definitely in my fifties and maybe even early sixties, but you didn't have any physical fitness requirements, but you had to maintain weight requirements.

RL (01:09:43):

So what that meant was that as a, I'll say a 55-year-old guy, I had to meet the same weight standards as an 18-year-old kid. And when you're getting up there in age, that's tough, that's tough to do. But the learning materials have gotten better, and, uh, you know, there's more innovation. I just, sometimes I feel like junior ROTC has become too structured, in other words. In order to be a junior ROTC instructor, you have to be retired, you can't just do four years and then go apply. I think it's a great program, but like so many things in life, the more you put into it, the more you get out of it. If you don't put much into junior ROTC, you won't get much out of it.

RL (01:10:37):

And, uh, for example, when I was in ROT, that's where I learned to make a bet. That's where I learned to tie a tie. That's where I learned to shine a shoe. You know it's those kind of life skills and leadership skills. Even if you don't enter military service it's a great citizenship building program. So I'm for it. I still try to remain engaged with it to the best I can, but I knew in 2017, because of the changing nature of the kid, it was time to do something else. My values had just gotten so far away from what I, what I perceive the, the values of, of these young kids coming up. Thankfully I had retired before Covid set in, so I didn't have to worry about [that]. Because I talked to ROTC instructors [who] had to muddle their way through covid. And that, that was a challenge, you know, that's a challenge.

SM (01:11:33):

Well, that was the bulk of my questions. And I'll let you have the last word. If there was anything I didn't mention that you wanted to talk about or something that you just wanted to end your interview with?

RL (01:11:46):

First of all, I guess I should thank you for the opportunity to do this because, I was looking for a way to kind of summarize this in a way that people could understand. And who knows how many people, if any, would ever review this, but at least it's on record of a way to tell my story. And everybody's got a story; all veterans have stories. And I think that's a big plus for the Virginia War Memorial, here. And I guess all I would close with was an opportunity to say thank you for the opportunity to do this. I'm looking at the clock, and we've probably been at this for about an hour, hour and a half, maybe.

SM (01:12:27):

Tom flies.

RL (01:12:28):

Yes.

SM (01:12:29):

Well, thank you for sitting down and sharing your story, and then we'll transition into the next bit.