

## Leon Spencer Oral History Interview

CHARLIE SIMMONS: This is Charlie Simmons. Today is October 25, 2012. I'm interviewing Leon B. Spencer. This interview is taking place in San Antonio, Texas in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the preservation of historical information relating to this site. Leon, if you would please, state your name and your place of birth and your date of birth.

LEON SIMMONS: My name is Leon B. Spencer. The middle name is Boyce. I was the sixth of September 1924 in Montgomery, Alabama.

CS: Did you have siblings?

LS: Yes. I have one brother and one sister. I was the oldest child. My brother was born in 1927, and my sister in 1932.

CS: What did your parents do for a living?

LS: My father was an automobile mechanic, and my mom didn't work. She was at home with the kids. My dad did pretty well. We had a new car every year. We had the first car. I remember it was a Star, and the second one was an Essex. We were able to do that, as I say. He also did a lot of marine mechanics, too, on marine engines.

CS: You lived in the city?

LS: Right. We lived in an area called Capitol Heights which was almost a little city within a city. It still exists. Most of the people that lived there were working class people, blue collar type workers. The homes were modest. There were some brick homes, but a lot of them were wooden frame houses. I went to school and I took elementary training at Capitol Heights Elementary School which burned down back in the '70s. Then I went to intermediate school at Capitol Heights Junior High School, also in Montgomery. High school at Sidney Lanier High School, also in town. Then it was in the military.

CS: What year did you graduate?

LS: Nineteen forty-three. It was my graduation year, but I didn't graduate that year because I went in the service in 1940. That was my class.

CS: (inaudible)

LS: Right and before January '43.

CS: What dates did you go into the service?

LS: I went into the service on 17th October 1940 at Maxwell Field. It's now Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery.

CS: What drove you to do (inaudible)?

LS: I'm 16.

CS: How old were you when you got in?

LS: My father died when he was 32 years old and left my mother with three children. It was a pretty big burden on her. She didn't graduate from high school, but she had never worked before. It was really a burden on her, so I thought to lighten the burden that I would join the military. Plus, the fact that I had a part-time job in high school at the service station there on the military base. I saw the (inaudible) cadets flying aircraft there and everything. It was pretty intriguing to me. I enlisted there on 17th of October 1940 at age 16. I wanted to get in the Calvary, but the Calvary was on the downswing.

CS: How did you get a waiver, because they weren't taking 16-year-olds?

LS: They never asked for birth certificates back then. They were anxious to get warm bodies, even. Now, one thing that worried me later on was that, since you had to be a minimum age of 18, I was afraid I was going to lose two years' service. Fortunately, there were a lot of Congressmen who did the same thing. They had minority service, so they passed a law in 1946 giving you credit for minority service, so I was able to save those two years. I didn't complete high school and college until 1946. Actually, I started in 1946.

CS: You were in your 20s before you went back?

LS: Right, before I went back to school. I went to high school and got my high school diploma, and then I went to Huntington College in Montgomery, which was an all-girls' school at the time. In English class, there was 25 girls and me.

CS: That must have (inaudible).

LS: They didn't accept males, because it was an all-girls' school until after the War.

CS: You entered the service there in Montgomery. What sort of training did you have?

LS: First off, the only thing open at that time was the medical corps at Maxwell Air Force Base. I became an ambulance driver for the military. Then, after I was in about seven months, they sent me to San Antonio to Randolph Field at the School of Aviation Medicine. I graduated from that in '41. Then became a flight surgeon's assistant until June, '42. One day we were called to the base theater and they made an announcement that they were looking for (inaudible) pilot volunteers. You had to meet the class one physical.

CS: What was the date on this?

LS: June 1942. I had risen to the rank of staff sergeant at that point and I was 17 years old.

CS: A fast promotion.

LS: Oh, yes. Very fast. I was a corporal one month, and the next month I was a sergeant, and the next month I was a staff surgeon because the service was building up at that point.

CS: Pretty common in that particular time. You were in the medical corps. Were you in San Antonio when World War II hit?

LS: No. I was at Spence Field in Moultrie, Georgia. As I said, I became a flight surgeon's assistant in Maxwell. Then December the third, 1941, at that time I was a corporal and they transferred me to Spence Field in Moultrie, Georgia.

CS: What does a flight surgeon assistant do?

LS: We gave eye exams, blood pressure exams, what we called Snyder tests, color blindness test. All sorts of things. It's cadets. They were going into flight training.

CS: These were things that a normal surgeon would not, a doctor's assistant, would not.

LS: Right. We gave Snyder tests. We gave Rorschach tests for color blindness and things like that. Took blood pressure and eye exams and some things of that nature. Depth perception exams.

As I say, I was a corporal then, and a month later I was a sergeant, then a month after that I made staff sergeant. Then in June of 1942, we were sent to the base theater. They made an announcement that the Air Force was looking for a lot of volunteers for a new program, which they explained. You had to pass a Class One Flying. It was what they called the Class One Flying Physical. You had to pass an aptitude test, which I passed successfully and became an aviation student.

CS: What made you want to be a glider pilot?

LS: In the first place, they had flying based. There was 50% of your base. It was more of a monetary thing than anything else.

CS: Were you sending money home to your mom?

LS: Yes, absolutely. I did while I working, too. Anyhow, after I joined they made me an aviation student and I was sent to Randolph Field to what we called a holding pool, waiting for what we called pre-glider school training. In July of '42 I was sent to Spencer, Iowa to what we called pre-glider school. We flew pilot aircraft. Really trained in pilot aircraft. I had never flown before, so they taught us to fly to begin with.

CS: L-4s?

LS: Yeah. We flew L-2s, L-3s, and L-4s. I completed that training in September. Then, because there were no basic schools opened at the time -- the glider program was so new they had no precedent, so everything was by the numbers. They made many, many mistakes during the program. Anyhow, there were no schools open until December of '42 when I was sent to Vinita, Oklahoma to basic glider school. We trained with smaller gliders. They were three-place and I finished there in late December. We only had to fly 30 hours in light aircraft. Then I went back to Randolph Field again, because there were no advanced schools open.

CS: A lot of the training, you said they were three-place airplanes. Were they really (inaudible) and a copilot?

LS: Right. There was one thing that was done. They had taken the light aircraft; L-2s, L-3s, and L4s and lowered the landing gear, removed the engine, and put in a third seat. They were really a powered aircraft that they made gliders out of them and they were terrific little gliders. Easy to fly. There was such a demand. We had no gliders. In fact, I think when World War II began in 1940 there was only 160 glider pilots in the country licensed to fly sailplanes and things. We flew these things and we got 30 hours in light gliders, small gliders. Then, as we say, we went back to Randolph again and waited for the advanced

school to open. Then in January of '43, I was sent to Lubbock, Texas, but they had so many students there and only a few aircraft and gliders, so we sat there for two months. Then advanced school opened in Dalhart, Texas and they took us by bus, about 180 of us, to Dalhart. When we arrived there, they were just getting the advanced gliders. This was 15-place gliders.

CS: This was in the wintertime?

LS: Right.

CS: What was your opinion of Dalhart, Texas in the middle of the winter?

LS: Terrible. In the first place, we had tarpaper barracks back then. They were temporary and we had potbellied stoves in the middle of the barracks. It was freezing cold. On top of that, the wind blew constantly. In fact, we would go out in the morning to do calisthenics and we'd come back and there would be an inch of sand blown up against the door. We would stand in retreat ceremony and they (inaudible) flag lowering. Tumbleweeds would blow up against your trousers while you were standing there. It was a very arid place, but, in essence, it was pretty good for gliders because it was flat terrain.

CS: You couldn't hit anything.



LS: That's what I say. There was nothing around to hit. We trained. I graduated from glider training in February 27, '43 as a flight officer, which was a wartime rank. It was equivalent to a warrant officer, junior grade, but it was strictly a wartime rank.

CS: (inaudible) officer.

LS: Right. They called it an appointment, rather than a commission. They addressed you, instead of calling you lieutenant or captain, they addressed you as mister just like they did warrant officers. We had blue bars instead of brown bars. We called them pickles. (inaudible) warrant officers (inaudible). Ours was the same thing, except they had blue there where they had brown in warrant officers. There were a lot of advantages to being a flight officer because you made the same pay as a second lieutenant, but you got 20% overseas pay and commissioned officers only got 10%.

CS: That was even better.

LS: That's what I'm saying, so it worked out really great. A little aside. A lot of the graduates were boys that came from blue collar families and things like that. I think our paycheck then was \$328 a month at that time, which was a lot of money. I remember several of us, we had never made that much money, so we would get our pay -- they paid

you by cash, by the way. The wrote checks and everything. If you went in the line and lined up and they doled out your money. We'd take the money and go to the post exchange and get two \$100 bills and 128 ones and put the hundreds on each side and put a big rubber band around it like we had a whole lot of money.

CS: Back to the flight training. Were you flying mostly solo flying, or did you always fly with a copilot?

LS: No. We always flew with a pilot and copilot.

CS: Did you take turns?

LS: Right. What we did, we only got 12 hours of training. Six hours as pilot and six hours as copilot. This was how desperate they were to get to graduate a lot of us. At first, some of them only got eight hours of training, so they really rushed the program through because General Arnold, the head of the Air Force, he estimated that he wanted 6,000 glider pilots by a certain date.

CS: What would a typical training flight --? Do you just take off and you flew?

LS: Most flights lasted about 15 minutes. You'd fly up to 1,500 feet, they'd cut you loose, you'd land and 99% of your training was takeoffs and landings because that's what you would do in combat.

CS: What kind of two planes did they use?

LS: They had two different kinds. At Dalhart, we used a Douglas C47 which we called a Sky Train. At Lubbock they had Lockheed C60s, Lone Star. The glider was actually bigger than the plane that towed. A CT-4 had an 86-foot wingspan. It was pretty big. It was 15 they carried; 13 troops plus the pilot and copilot, so a total of 15.

CS: Was it pretty much the standard model of glider that was used?

LS: It was the workhorse of the glider fleet. We built a lot of other gliders. We built the CG-13 which originally it carried 42 people. Later they modified it for 42 people. During the entire War they were developing gliders. In fact, the CG-10 was the first glider that they built with the clamshell doors in the rear. That was the beginning of that. Nobody had ever done that before. Everything was open in the front.

CS: How many troops would the CG-4 carry?

LS: I forget. I think about 30, I think it was. Something like that. The last glider they built was called a CG-20 which was a huge glider. They were going to use it for Japan, attacking Japan, (inaudible) the War ended before they ever got to use them. It was so big that they decided to add engines to it, and it became the C-123, which was

used in Korea and Vietnam and things like that. It was really originally a glider called a CG-20.

CS: They used it in combat?

LS: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. It was mainly a cargo type aircraft, but it had a short field takeoff, the capability of short field takeoff and landing. It was called a CG-20 as a glider.

CS: Fascinating. This is fascinating. Did you train with loaded gliders?

LS: We trained with troops, and then we also trained with Seal weapons, which was like the 37 mm antitank guns. The 57 mmm [packhouse?], and the 105 mm antitank. We had two antitank weapons, the 37 and the 105, and then we had a [packhouse?] which was a 75 mm. We even carried small bulldozers. We had special bulldozers that you could carry in a glider. It weighed 4,400 pounds.

CS: Was that to build airfields for the planes that were landing?

LS: Right. They would land and they could build airfields, so the tow planes could come in and land.

CS: How much space did you need to land or go out (inaudible)?

LS: According to the instruction manual, you needed 600 or 700 feet, but we had to land in 300 feet. We called them short field landings. What they would do is they mounted 50-foot

bamboo poles in an area, and then they went over 300 feet and built 50 more. You had to fly over the 50-foot obstacle to land and stop before you got to the other obstacles, which was 300 feet away. We had to do that because the hedgerows in Germany and Normandy, the fields were very small; 300 and 400 feet, in a lot of cases. Some were bigger and longer. At first, we got what we called the fast landings. We'd land the glider at 110 miles an hour to get on the ground, obviously, as fast as you could because you can shoot them down with a pistol, almost. There's no armor or anything else. They were just fabric and steel tubing and plywood. The object was to get on the ground as fast, but we found out that you couldn't land a glider at 110 miles an hour on a 300-foot field. They started what we called a tactical landing, which was 70 miles an hour to get into these small fields in Europe, those fields. Actually, during the Normandy landing, I would say probably 75% of the gliders were totally destroyed. The fortunate thing about them was its metal tubing airframe. You could land a glider, tear the wings off and everything else, and still the troops were fine and the Jeep or whatever you had in there was OK, even though the glider was destroyed beyond repair.

CS: From the pictures, anyhow, it was total destruction. I guess the casualties weren't as bad.

LS: To give you a clue, though, of how destructive it was. Airlines land on nice, improved runways and everything. We had to land anywhere they told us to land. For instance, in Holland, the Holland mission, we used 1,900 CG-4As and we were only able to recover 281 of them out of 1,900. Plus, that fact like we were talking previously, a lot of these buys had very little training. You can imagine them teaching you to fly an airplane that big and give you 12 hours of training. Of course, we got additional training. What we called tactical training later on at Polk Field, some of the training was done. Actually, they called it [MacKall?] Field.

CS: You went back to Dalhart after you finished your training there, where did you go?

LS: After Dalhart, first we went to Waco, Texas. They weren't prepared for us there. We sat around there awhile and they sent us to Bowman Field in Louisville, Kentucky to receive tactical training. I arrived there on the 1st of April 1943. If you notice, I graduated the 27th of February. They fiddled around trying to figure out what to do with us. They sent us to Bowman Field. The only thing about it, we got to Bowman Field for tactical training and

they had no gliders, so we used light aircraft to simulate gliders. You'd fly to 1,500 feet, shut the switch off, pull the nose up until the prop stopped windmilling, and land a dead stick like it was a glider. Can you consider that? You've got a CG-4A which will carry 15 people and here you've got a little light aircraft. The similarities were not similar at all. I was there until the 10th of September 1943. We were on a cross-country flight to (inaudible) two light aircraft ran together midair; a midair collision. We were about 1,500 feet, I guess, and both pilots bailed out. By the time they got out of the airplane and they got the safety belt loosened and everything, they were only about 200 feet, so neither shoot opened. Of course, both of them died from brute force trauma when they hit the ground. I was flying towards the end of the formation, so I peeled off to buzz the field to see if they were alive, because I hadn't seen the parachute open or anything. When I did, I was flying a brand-new airplane where the throttle was on the left-hand side and right above the airplane they had a (inaudible) control. There were elevators and aileron control. You'd push (inaudible), the nose would go down. Pull it back, the nose goes up. Excited about seeing these people in and then dying on the ground. I reached up to grab the

throttle and grabbed the stabilizer. I shoved it forward and flew into the ground at 120 miles an hour. I was in three different hospitals for 11 months. I had all sorts of (inaudible) orthopedic hospitals for broken bones and things. Let me tell you weird part about it. It pushed the hot engine right up in my lap and I have scars all over my legs where the metal parts to this thing gouged in the leg. The gas tanks above me ruptured and covered me with aviation fuel. It broke the tail section back up over the vehicle and it didn't catch fire. That wasn't my time. Just wasn't my time.

CS: Somebody was looking out for you.

LS: Most of the people that tried to rescue me, they thought I had died. Fifty years later I went back and met the little 14-year-old boy that was the first one there on the scene. Fifty years later I went back and he's now 64 years old and I found him. I found the guy and he said, "I thought you had died." I was in the hospital until August '44. I had to go back to training again and I had to start all over again, not the flying training, but tactical training. They sent me to Laurinburg-Maxton, North Carolina where I took tactical training. I actually went through tactical training twice. I was probably the best-trained glider pilot in the country.



CS: When you finished up with tactical training, it was the fall of (inaudible)?

LS: I graduated from the tactical training in Laurinburg in February of '45, essentially the War was over. It was only one more mission after that which was the allies, the German mission, the vessel mission we called it, across the Rhine mission. That occurred on the 24th of March, '45.

CS: When you finished up your tactical training in February, you took a ship to England?

LS: What they did, they sent me to Sedalia, Missouri to train pilots to fly gliders. I became an instructor at Sedalia, Missouri, and I was there for three months. Then they sent me to Blytheville, Arkansas doing the same thing. Training power pilots to fly gliders. April of '45 they sent me to Baer Field in Fort Wayne, Indiana to go overseas. Of course, while I was there the War ended.

CS: This is April '45 and you ended up in Baer Field, Indiana. In 1945, as I say, I had all my overseas equipment issued, guns and everything else. Of course, the War ended and the government could have cared less about people waiting to go overseas. Their main emphasis was getting people home that was overseas. We sat there for three months with nothing to do. Then finally, I got orders for occupational duty in Germany. I went to Germany in December of '45.

CS: What duties were you assigned to there in Germany?

LS: First, let me tell you, I was assigned to a bomb group, 305th bomb group, as a glider pilot. When I walked into the commander's office to report in he looked at my wings with the G on them and he said, "How the hell did you get in this outfit?" I was assigned as a transportation officer to the 305th bomb group, which was in Lechfeld, Germany.

CS: That makes sense. They didn't expect you to climb in a B-17.

LS: I actually flew copilot on B17s while I was there to get flying time in, and things like that. What the 305th was doing, they had moved the 305th from England to Sint-Truiden, Belgium and then into Germany at the end of the War. What they were doing, they took all the guns off the B-17s and mounted cameras in the bomb bays and we were strip mapping Germany and North Africa. That's what we were doing there. In August orders came through grounding all glider pilots for the convenience of the government. They had no further use for them. The helicopters were coming on the scene, so they had no further use for gliders, so they declared everybody surplus, the glider pilots and no flying status. So, you had the opportunity,

you could stay as a ground officer or ask for release from active duty and I asked for release from active duty.

CS: What was the date on this?

LS: This was August, '45 -- '46, I'm sorry.

CS: You asked for release from duty. Then what happened?

LS: Which occurred in October of 1946. It was a final release.

I came home and finished high school and started to school at Huntington College. I had 79 credit hours there. In the meantime, I decided I wanted to go back into the service again. I was one of those people that really loved the service, the discipline of it, I guess it was. I went to the recruiting office and asked -- in the meantime, I had a reserve commission they had given me when I retired. Oh, boy the way, I forgot to tell you. I made second lieutenant in April of '46 while I was in Germany.

CS: There was a route for you to (inaudible) full officer status.

LS: I was promoted in April of '46. Second lieutenant. After I was released from active duty and I started and finished high school and was in college, I didn't get all 79 hours, by the way, in that little period. I wanted to get back in the service and I went to the recruiting office and they offered me staff sergeant. I said, no. I don't want to go back in as a staff sergeant. That's too low a

grade. I gave the recruiting sergeant my Form 100. He sent it to Washington and they came back and offered me tech sergeant. My object was to go back in active duty, as soon as I came back as a tech sergeant I put in for active duty as a commissioned officer again. Unfortunately, there wasn't much -- the service was winding down instead of building up, so 18 months later before I got orders to return, by that time the Korean War was acting up so I got recalled to active duty as a second lieutenant for the purpose of attending officer's communications school at Scott Field, which was a 12-month school. Of course, when I graduated from that it was November 1949. When I graduated from there I was assigned to the strategic reconnaissance squadron which was located at Fairfield-Suisun, California. I reported there after graduate from comm officer's school and in January we went to Japan. We left San Francisco for Japan to Yokota Air Force Base at [Hanchi?] on the big island. Of course, that was January of 1950 and the Korean War started in June, if you recall, of 1950. We were scheduled with the B-29 outfit I was in.

CS: Yeah, 512?

LS: Yeah, 512. That's right. It was B-29s. We were doing a reconnaissance flight, top secret stuff. We'd fly 17-hour missions right up to the Yellow River, right up to China

and we had to stop that because the Russians were sending Yak-9s across the border chasing our aircraft.

Fortunately, a B-29 is faster and we outran them because they were prop aircraft. We were able to outrun them, so we stopped going up to the Yellow River after that. They took all the guns off these airplanes except tail guns. We had a tail gun and that's all. Anyhow, they had to outrun these planes and they stopped sending them up there. The Air Force started sending in bombers to move into Korea, so they sent to Yokota, the base we were on, and we were already there with these big B-29s. They moved us up to Misawa, which is right on the northern tip of Hanchi just across from [Yokado?]. We were there until November 1951 then they moved us back to Yokota again because most of the bomber command had moved to Korea.

CS: Were you still flying recon then over Korea all this time?

LS: Right. All this time. We got all the Battle Stars. We had seven Battle Stars, the unit I was in, because we flew over Korea.

CS: What did you do when they started flying the MiGs over North Korea?

LS: We didn't have any problems with that.

CS: (inaudible)

LS: Yeah. We didn't go up to the Yellow River anymore. Remember, MiG Alley was up in that area. I tell you what we were doing, because it's not classified. What we would do, we had the airplanes that -- we didn't even know what was going on in some case. We had a single airplane at the bottom of it called a sniffer. That's what we called it. What it was doing, it was sampling the air for atomic energy testing by foreign countries. When we first started doing it, a chief would drive up. He'd put something up there. We'd fly the mission and as soon as we landed, he'd come out and take it out again. We had no idea at the time. It was top secret at that time. They were sampling for atomic; underground, any kind. I became the squadron electronics officer. I moved from communications to electronics at that period.

CS: Did you have any electronics training?

LS: Oh, yeah. I had a year. Don't you remember? I said at Scott Field I went to communications.

CS: That was electronics, or was it for communications? I'm sorry.

LS: All during this time I was Japan I was taking correspondence courses in electronics. I passed that and became what they called a C&E officer, communication and electronics. They were critical at the time. There was a

big shortage of communications-electronics people at the time. I spent three years in Japan. Came home in December '52 from Japan and I assigned to the 48th air rescue squadron at Maxwell Air Force Base where I was born in my hometown. Now I'm going to get into the good part. I was assigned at Maxwell which was (inaudible) University at the time as an electronics officer in the 48th air rescue squadron. What I was doing was, I became an instructor in air rescue tactics. I was training the junior class of West Point. We were training them. They moved them down to [Hagman?] Field in Florida. We flew down in what we called SA-16s. They were triphibians. Land on water, ice, anything else. They'd fly us down and we spent two weeks down there training cadets in air rescue tactics.

CS: What do you do in air rescue?

LS: Me, I was the electronics officer.

CS: What were the people being trained in air rescue, what were they learning?

LS: We had flying boats attached to the bottom of B-17s and things. We showed them rescue techniques. We had parachutists. The paramedics would jump like the special operations now. We did all of that stuff, too. What we taught the cadets was, what we did, how we did it, and things like that as part of their training of our

particular mission. I arrived there at Maxwell. Let's see. I got home in December of '42 from Japan, so I was assigned there in January. In September I received orders from Washington D.C. to report to Washington National Airport with no explanation of what I was going to do. I had to arrive, so I jumped in the car and packed a bag and left my wife in Montgomery and drove to Washington and got there on time. What I found out that what I was going to be doing, I was going to be the communication electronics for Air Force One out of the clear blue sky. It was only for 30 days, temporary duty. I'll tell you the rest of the story. It was 30 days temporary duty and I finished the 30 days because the officer that was supposed to have the job was still in Germany, and he had been delayed for some reason. They needed immediately somebody there, so they selected me because I had a crypto background and when I went through comm school, I had cryptographic training.

CS: That was when Eisenhower?

LS: Yeah, right. Exactly. As I say, I served after 30 days and all of a sudden, they found out that the officer still was tied up in Germany, so they extended me 43 more days. I had just gotten back from Japan and I said, "This is ridiculous." Our headquarters, the military transport service, was nearby at Andrews Air Force Base and the head



of personnel was my old boss at the 512, Squadron Colonel David. He was the head of personnel, so I went over and I said, "They just extended me 43 more days and I've just spent 30 days here. Why don't you take the officers over there and send them to Maxwell to my old job and assign me to this job?" He did. I went there for 30 days and stayed eight years.

CS: You were on Air Force One?

LS: Yeah. The whole time Ike was in office. In fact, I served with Kennedy, his aircraft for about six months. One of the nice things about being assigned to the special air missions, which is now at Andrews Air Force Base, but when I was there it was at national airports. Towards the end of my career there we got the jets, the big CVC-137s they called them. You couldn't land those at national airports, so we had a detachment over at Andrews Air Force Base. When I left that in 1961, they were packing up to move everything to Andrews Air Force Base and they had changed the designation from the 1254 Air Transport Wing to the 89th Military Airlift Wing, which it is -- well, they dropped the Military. Now it's just called the 89th Airlift Wing.

CS: What were they flying for Air Force One?

LS: When I got there, we still had the Roosevelt's airplane, the Sacred Cow. We still had Truman's airplane, the Independence. We weren't flying them. They were in hangar 10. They were just sitting there in hangar 10, but we had the two former Presidential aircraft there. We had started to modify Roosevelt's airplane. Remember that hydraulic lift in there for his wheelchair? It would just cost too much there, so we turned it over to the Air Force Museum. The same thing with the Independence. At that time, Eisenhower was flying a Lockheed Constellation, which was a C-121A. The civilian model is called a 749. Lockheed 749, but it was really in the Air Force, it was a C-121A VIP type. It was plush inside with couches and desks and things like that. When I arrived there, we had a C-121 fleet. I think there was eight of them and we had two Douglas DC-8s. As I said, we had the old Independence and the Sacred Cow there. When I arrived there, immediately we had problems because the communications equipment on the President's airplane was so antiquated that the radio operators had to carry a bag of crystals for radio operators. You could be called on -- if you flew into Idlewild in New York -- at that time it was Idlewild before it became JFK. They can call on you to change frequencies 54 times, any one of 54 frequencies. My first job was to

update all the communications electronics equipment on Air Force One and all the rest of the VIP fleet. What I did is, I was at a national airport and I went over and took a look to see what the airlines were using and their equipment was 10 times better than the Air Force equipment. I wrote up a requirement and sent it to the Pentagon. That was one nice thing about that assignment, you didn't have to go through all these other headquarters. It went directly to the Pentagon and I gave them all the designation of equipment stuff and they immediately said no. It doesn't meet military specs and so forth and so on. Fortunately, a four-star general who was out of (inaudible) command at Wright-Patterson came through our VIP headquarters there one day and I had a chance to talk to him. I told him the problem the Pentagon was giving me about this equipment and he said, "I'll take care of it." A few days later I received approval to use commercial equipment on the Presidential aircraft. You know today, they're still using this equipment.

CS: What was your rank at this time?

LS: I made captain.

CS: When you started? When you first got assigned.

LS: I was first lieutenant.

CS: Still lieutenant.

LS: I made captain in April '54.

CS: They're still using?

LS: The total antiquated equipment. I spent most of my career modifying aircraft at that point.

CS: What's it like flying on Air Force One?

LS: It was absolutely fantastic. All the airframe maintenance was done at Lockheed International at Idlewild, at JFK, but the overhaul equipment, engines and things like that, that was all done on Ontario, California by Lockheed International. We flew the airplane back and forth. I actually flew the airplane more hours than Eisenhower did in the airplane, but not with him aboard. We'd be flying at 20,000 feet eating filet mignon on Presidential plates and dishes.

CS: I guess the chow was pretty good.

LS: Oh, yeah. We had cooking facilities. We had rotisseries and everything else, not like the airline.

CS: (inaudible) sleeping.

LS: One thing about the -- we had stewards in the aircraft. In fact, one of the stewards who was Eisenhower stewards became head of the catering for Marriott. There was some sadness in this thing, too, because right after Eisenhower went out of office, his pilot Bill Draper, full colonel -- you got your choice of assignment. When you

left that unit, you could tell them wherever you wanted to go and that's where they sent you. He loved to fly, so he chose an F102 squadron up in Alaska and he was doing exercises one day. I forget what they call it, 4BX or something like that, and had a massive heart attack. Of course, he couldn't fly anymore for the military, so he came home and he had a lot of offers from airline companies and things like that. He had no worries about a job. He married an English girl and I talked to (inaudible) and he was just very despondent because he couldn't fly anymore. They were living in Washington, and one morning he went in the bathroom, locked the door, and he was in there a long time and she wondered what was going on and she knocked on the door and she tried to open the door and couldn't, so she called the fire department. The fire department came up and he had hung himself. Unbelievable.

CS: I can think of a better way to (inaudible).

LS: He had hung himself because he just couldn't take it, I guess.

CS: I guess if you love something that much.

LS: I'll tell you what kind of pilot he was. He'd been flying (inaudible) a four-hour flight or a five-hour flight with Ike from somewhere, and he would land at national airports. I watched him land and I said, this is a beautiful landing.

He didn't think it was a very good landing. He would off-load the President, go over to Andrews Airport and spend two hours just shooting landings because he was a perfectionist. He just couldn't take it.

CS: Sometimes it can be just too much for a perfectionist, I guess.

LS: That was the greatest job I ever had. It kept me busy night and day. At 4:00 in the morning I'd get a call from a flight where Secretary Dulles was in a flight somewhere from a radio operator on the airplane wanting me to find out about something. I had a lot of this kind of stuff. It was terrific. When I finished my career in June of '61, they said, "Where do you want to go?" I went home and asked my wife, "Where would you like to go?" She said, "I'd like to go to Hawaii." I spent three years in Hawaii before I retired.

CS: Just surfing, or did they actually have you doing things?

LS: The Vietnam War was beginning and building up. I worked 10, 12-hour days developing communication equipment for Vietnam for Da Nang, Pleiku, all these places over there. That was my last job. I was director of programs for an area called Pacific Communications Area. In the meantime, I had made major at the time. I made major in '62. As I say, they sent me over and I became the director of

programs for the Pacific Communications Area. I was a reserve officer, remember. I had worked in this job a while, and my boss, a full colonel, he'd given me outstanding effectiveness reports. In October of '64 I would have made lieutenant colonel, but I was a reserve officer and about a month before I was supposed to get promoted to lieutenant colonel, the Air Force came out with a program called CDOS, control data separation. The Pentagon had a problem because they had a whole lot of captains that were regular Army and they had nowhere to go because Congress controls the number of field grade officers, so there were no vacancies for the thing. They said, "We've got a solution to that. Any reserve officers that have got over 20 years, we'll force retirement."

When I retired at Travis Air Force Base in California there were 375 officers retired that day. From full colonel down to warrant officer. They would not grant any waivers because my boss, General Peterson, did everything in the world with the Pentagon trying to keep me on active duty and they said, absolutely not. Six months later they had lost so much talent that they had to start granting waivers. Unfortunately, it was too late because I already had a job with Motorola, Incorporated.

CS: Sometimes the military is their own worst enemy.

LS: Being with Air Force One, that was the greatest job in the world.

CS: I can imagine.

LS: What it does, it spoils you because you can deal with anybody you want to deal with.

CS: Did you fly to Europe much?

LS: No. Most of all my flights were domestic.

CS: I guess I'm running out of questions. I haven't been able to keep up with you here, and you got ahead of me. What else can you tell us, Leon?

LS: As I say, after I retired I went to work for Motorola, Incorporated and I became the area sales manager for Motorola, which was a step below vice president.

CS: This was in Alabama?

LS: No, this was in Washington D.C. Actually, I started out in Washington at Reston, Virginia. I don't know whether you're familiar with Reston or not, but the Motorola office was there. I stayed there a while and all of a sudden, the vice president decided that he'd had problems with his people up in New England. They weren't meeting sales quotas, so he sent me to New England. We lived in western Massachusetts, a place called Springfield. I asked him when I left, I didn't want to go. You can't take a Southern boy and move him up to New England, so I made a



deal with him. I said, "If I get the sales up to \$2 million will you move me back here?" He said, "I will." It took me two years, but I got the sales up to \$2 million and he did. He moved me back to Washington and promoted me to district manager. At the time, I was an account executive while I was up there. I was district manager for four or five years, then they made me an area manager, which I had seven districts under me. I had all the Northeast from Washington D.C. to Canada, and from the East Coast to Buffalo, New York. All of that was my territory. A \$45 million quota. As I say, I worked for them for 24 years and decided to retire.

CS: You just wore me out with the air career. I can imagine what you could tell us about your other 24 years.

LS: I retired early. I didn't wait until 65 because our office kept moving and we lived in Virginia in Fairfax County, and we started out in Reston, Virginia which is about a 15-minute drive for me, but we kept moving. They moved the office to Washington D.C. to 20th and Illinois West. We were there several years. The parking, we had 32 company cars and they charged \$100 a month for in-building parking. The controller decided that wasn't a good deal, so they moved out to Camp Springs which is near Andrews Air Force Base and they had a big parking lot. Free parking in the

building. We had the whole second floor and we were there awhile and then the company decided they wanted to build its own building. They built its own two-story building in Landover, Maryland. In the meantime, that's an hour-and-a-half drive for me every morning and every afternoon in traffic. I spent three hours a day in the company car. Leave home at 7:00 in the morning and get home at 7:00 and 8:00 at night.

CS: Right. I've done that myself, and it's no fun.

LS: Absolutely, not on that beltway. I just finally said, "Hey, I'm going to retire." I asked for retirement. I retired in December '88 and have never looked back. I do a lot of museum work for our museum at Lubbock, Texas. A lot of research, mostly on technical data. In fact, most of the stuff I deal with is engineering, rather than operational type stuff.

CS: I'd better close this down now. If we can keep it manageable. I just want to thank you for this work and the time you spent with me.

LS: You're welcome.

END OF AUDIO FILE