

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

ROBERT WILSON

MAY 20, 1999

RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA

INTERVIEWED BY ROBERT HILDERBRAND

ORAL HISTORY #1999-8
ACCESSION #MIMI 016

MINUTEMAN MISSILE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



ABSTRACT

Robert Wilson was first assigned to the 44th Strategic Missile Wing at Ellsworth Air Force Base as chief of the codes division in the 1970s. The codes division did all launch, targeting, ground and flight targeting codes for the Wing. After a year and a half, he was reassigned as an Operations Officer for the 66th Strategic Missile Squadron. Mr. Hall oversaw a crew that prepared training and evaluation materials for the missile crews. A year later he was moved to the 44th Services Squadron in charge of the dormitories and dining facilities. This included distribution and oversight of the food to all Launch Control Facilities.

EDITORIAL NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for Minuteman Missile National Historic Site. The interviewer, or in some cases another qualified staff-member, reviewed the draft and compared it to the tape recordings. The corrections and other changes suggested by the interviewer have been incorporated into this final transcript. Stylistic matters, such as punctuation and capitalization, follow the Chicago Manual of Style, 14th edition. The transcript includes bracketed notices at the end of one tape and the beginning of the next so that, if desired, the reader can find a section of tape more easily by using this transcript.

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INFORMANT: ROBERT WILSON
INTERVIEWER: ROBERT HILDERBRAND
DATE: 20 MAY 1999

[Beginning of side one, tape one] [Interview begins]

ROBERT HILDERBRAND: This is Robert Hilderbrand interviewing Robert Wilson at Rapid City, South Dakota, on twentieth May, 1999. Will you start by giving us your full name and rank and your unit assignment and something about the duty positions you held?

ROBERT WILSON: I'm Robert Wilson. I am a Lieutenant Colonel, retired, Air Force. When I came to Ellsworth Air Force Base, I was assigned to the chief of the codes division. I held that position for about a year and a half, and then I moved on to the Operations Officer of the 66th Missile Squadron, which is around the same area we're talking about, the local Wall area. Alpha through Echo Launch Control Centers. Then I was the commander for an interim period of time, for a couple of months. After about a year there in that position, I moved on to the 44th Services Squadron. There I was responsible for all the billeting and dormitories and the dining facilities in the missile sites. A lot of the people who worked for me worked in the missile sites as cooks and drivers that took the food out and etc. So I was basically a member of the battle staff where we also, during that time period, where we assumed positions that, as far as an alternate command post in the missile sites.

When I was in the Codes Division, we basically made all the codes of ground and flight and launch codes for the hundred and fifty missiles and the fifteen Launch Control Centers. It took me eight security systems to get to work everyday, basically. There was about fifteen officers and about ten enlisted people assigned to that particular division. Every time a missile went down and we had to bring it back up, we had to re-load it with codes. And we did a code change once a year and so we changed all the codes every year. So, it's kind of an expensive situation.

HILDERBRAND: Was the code the launch codes or the targeting codes?

WILSON: The launch codes, the ground and flight targeting codes, all that was done through the Codes Division. They made the codes and sent them out either with the missile crews or the maintenance crews that went out and loaded the missiles. The missile officers loaded the ones at the Launch Control Center. They put them in place there. But the ones in the missiles were actually done by the maintenance crews.

HILDERBRAND: How often did the launch codes change?

WILSON: We went through a code change about once a year. It was quite extensive. You had to change all the codes in the missiles as well as the launch control centers.

HILDERBRAND: Did targeting codes change more frequently than that?

WILSON: Yes, you got targeting changes periodically during the year and you got to send out a new targeting tape, basically, that would have to go. The Ellsworth missiles were not the remote targeting capabilities that the F. E. Warren missiles were and I've been in both places, but they had to be loaded manually, basically.

HILDERBRAND: Each individual missile?

WILSON: Yes. By tape, yeah.

HILDERBRAND: Why would they change?

WILSON: It's security. You want to change the codes periodically and ...

HILDERBRAND: No, but I mean the targeting codes. Why would they change?

WILSON: Strategic moves by the powers that be and by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Basically, their priorities would change and they want to change whatever that missile might have been targeting on, change the war plans and those kind of things.

HILDERBRAND: Did you know what basis the codes were being changed on? What the purpose of the change was?

WILSON: No, they wouldn't tell you what the purpose was.

HILDERBRAND: Did you try to figure it out?

WILSON: No. No, not at Ellsworth. Now, you could do it at some sites. You could actually read the targeting data from the Launch Control Center and figure out by longitude and latitude on the codes where that particular missile was going.

HILDERBRAND: But you couldn't do that with the missiles here?

WILSON: No. The crews didn't have that kind of access. No. No, it's a little different program. Not an access that you would normally do on a daily basis.

HILDERBRAND: What happened, did you have to change targeting codes in the event of a missile being off alert?

WILSON: You didn't change it, you had to replace it. You had to reload it. Basically you had a brand new computer out there. When a missile went down and you

brought it back up, you had a brand new empty computer from a layman's standpoint and you had to reload those tapes.

HILDERBRAND: I guess what I meant was, what happens to the targets that that missile was supposed to have been aimed toward, when it was off alert? Did you target some other missile to take those targets out?

WILSON: Well, I think they took that under consideration when they built the targeting, when they developed the war plan.

HILDERBRAND: Was there enough redundancy that that wouldn't matter?

WILSON: I would think so. I don't know that for a fact. But I would think so.

HILDERBRAND: Just go ahead and describe some more of your duties. What stands out in your mind as some of the things that you did, the tasks that you performed in the missile business.

WILSON: I think the business of the food business was kind of interesting. It evolved from having a fairly experienced cook on the missile site preparing meals from scratch to the frozen meals. Basically, the frozen meals were made at F. E. Warren in a large facility and they were sent to all the missile wings. They were sent out to the missile sites. They were basically thawed out and fed to the crews and to the staff at the Launch Control Centers.

HILDERBRAND: When did that change occur?

WILSON: The early '70s I think I think is when they went to the frozen meals.

HILDERBRAND: Why?

WILSON: Standardization, more than anything. Cost. You didn't have to have as qualified a cook at the site. You didn't have to have the experienced guy, the career cook out there. You could put the first termers out there to prepare the meals.

HILDERBRAND: So before that you had to have someone out there who might be someone who would be cooking and ...

WILSON: Hopefully. [Laughter.]

HILDERBRAND: Who might otherwise be cooking on base, in a mess hall for lots of people.

WILSON: Sure.

HILDERBRAND: But on the missile site you've only got a very small number of people.

WILSON: Right, exactly. There was a wide variety of quality depending on who the cook was.

HILDERBRAND: What? You mean they sometimes messed it up?

WILSON: Oh, I hope to tell you! Yeah. Yeah. It got to be where, if you had a good cook on site and you wrote him a letter, about a week later, he's no longer there, because they brought him to the main facility. [Laughter.] So you had to be careful what you said about the cooks.

HILDERBRAND: I suppose that's true about all your best people, in every capacity.

WILSON: Oh sure. Exactly right.

HILDERBRAND: You start praising someone and the next thing you know they've been promoted out of your facility.

WILSON: Exactly. So if you had a good cook you, you normally lost him in no time flat.

HILDERBRAND: But how could they mess it up, if it's just prepared frozen...

WILSON: This is before the frozen, this is why they went to the frozen.

HILDERBRAND: Oh, oh I see.

WILSON: This is why they went to frozen. Don't get me wrong, they could still mess up a frozen meal. But generally speaking it was a lot harder to mess up.

HILDERBRAND: A lot more satisfaction on the part of the people who had to eat the food.

WILSON: Right. When I pulled my missile crew duty in Missouri, I spent a lot of my off time [off site]. See, we put in thirty-six hour tours where we'd go twelve down in the hole, twelve upstairs, and twelve back down in the hole. Well, during the early years of my career duty, you could go anywhere you wanted to while you were upstairs. In other words, you could leave the site. That later changed, but I would go down the road and I had met a lot of the farmers in the local area and we'd go hunting and fishing. I'd get a load of ducks or some fish and bring it back to the site and we'd have duck and fish or whatever it might be. Especially if you had a good cook that could prepare all that. It was kind of a fun thing to do. A lot of people took advantage of that situation and got themselves into situations that they shouldn't have gotten themselves into, and they restricted everybody to the site.

HILDERBRAND: You mean they might not get back in time?

WILSON: Well, that or they were picking up six packs of beer in a military uniform and drinking them in a military vehicle and those kinds of things. They were caught. Cooks and security police were caught doing that kind of thing, and that kind of ruined it. It was only a small percentage of them but it ruined it for everybody else.

HILDERBRAND: Was there ever any alcohol on the sites?

WILSON: I wouldn't doubt it, I wouldn't doubt it. I think there was.

HILDERBRAND: It wasn't permitted?

WILSON: Oh, no, it was not permitted. No, no it wasn't permitted but I think it happened. It happened a number of times. But like I said, it was very minor, very minor.

HILDERBRAND: But would you say it was not likely to be a crew member?

WILSON: No, not likely.

HILDERBRAND: Or likely to be someone else. Cops or somebody?

WILSON: Probably, Yes. Cops upstairs or somebody upstairs. Upstairs area, we used to be pretty loose as far as who could come into that site, in the early days in missiles. In fact, we'd invite the farmers and the ranchers and whatever in. We'd have dinners or whatever and invite them in just to have an open house. We could do it just about any time we wanted to. They restricted that type of thing later on.

HILDERBRAND: Was that ever true here, or was it restricted from the beginning here?

WILSON: I don't know. I don't know what they did here in the early days, when that was taking place. I know my farmer friends that I knew very well at one of the sites in Missouri said that everybody became awfully discourteous there after a while. I think therefore there was a period of time where the Air Force forgot about its neighbors, the farmers and ranchers. I spent some time with a rancher at a kind of a family thing where we were invited out to the farm houses and ranches, some of us.

HILDERBRAND: Was that here?

WILSON: Here. Right here. They talked a lot about the problems they were having with some of our folks and all the ...

HILDERBRAND: Can you be more specific?

WILSON: Oh, a lot of litter problems and those kind of things. And just the general men, they were making nuisances of themselves and sometimes, you know. So, we didn't do a lot of PR work there and there was a period there when we didn't do anything and then we'd change it again. So there was a period of time.

When I was in Missouri, there was a time where we forgot about that. When I went to college in Missouri, and I looked at a site that's being built. There's a big old hole in the ground. I said, "You'd never get me down that hole." Well, about four years later I wound up pulling alert in that sucker! I can remember in college that the Air Force had a big PR broadcast where they brought in information teams and they got us all in front of them in assemblies. They told what was coming and how they were going to improve the roads and how the economy was going to improve. They were going to build all these things and they really made it a big deal. Well, all those people left. Nothing more was said. While I was there, they were going to put the ABMs in around the Sedalia area, which was right in the heart of one hundred fifty missiles that are already there. People were blocking the roads saying that "We don't want nuclear weapons in our area" and they already had them! Because the Air Force had left and forgotten the people and they didn't do the PR, I think, that they really needed to do.

HILDERBRAND: How was it here? Was it worse here?

WILSON: I think because of the lack of the population area, I don't think it was. There were some farmers that didn't like us.

HILDERBRAND: Did you ever know any stories of incidents?

WILSON: No. I think I heard stories where they were not getting paid and a rancher or farmer went up to helicopter and chained himself to the helicopter.

HILDERBRAND: What? For money?

WILSON: Yeah! He said he hadn't been paid. But I know the rancher up near Oscar real well. His land was bought from him and he liked it. He thought they were good people and like I said, I was real good friends with farmers in Missouri and they loved me. They would come up to that gate and say, "Is Bob up yet." 'Cause I had to go up and sleep for a while because I just pulled an alert all night long. They'd leave their pick-up there for me and I'd leave and get in their pick-up and we'd go hunting and fishing or something, or I'd go help with the chores and have lunch with them. Those were the kind of days that I really enjoyed my crew duty. Just because of that kind of thing. It's fun. I'd drive out as much as possible because I didn't like to chopper. I choppered out when I was on missile crew, I choppered out quite a bit. I didn't like choppers. We went over a low level route and you could see B-52s flying below you! [laughter] When you're in a chopper, it's kind of nerve racking! As far as here

is concerned, I I think the ranchers, by and large, were good to the missile people here. There's always those few. But of course we had a few renegades out there that didn't make life very nice for our ranchers either. So, it was a little bit of both sides when you had confrontations.

HILDERBRAND: There was sometimes animosity on the part of the Air Force personnel toward the ranchers? They didn't like them?

WILSON: Well, sometimes, yeah. Or they didn't like the way they drove. Or just didn't like their attitude towards them and those kind of things. You got to understand, these are eighteen-year-old kids that are out there guarding our missile sites and playing security and those kind of things. They're just right out of high school.

HILDERBRAND: Were most of those problems with the security personnel?

WILSON: Well, that's where we had most of our people. You got to understand, between North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana, there were more security police there than the rest of the total Air Force. You had a group of security policemen that were headed by a full colonel. That doesn't normally happen on a regular base. Usually you have maybe a major or a captain running your security for you, but here we have a full colonel running a group of several squadrons of nothing but security police. Those security police are generally first term airmen, brand new out of high school. Any time you have a thousand kids you're going to have maybe three or five percent problem children. You've got fifty, sixty kids you're dealing with all the time, for one reason or another.

HILDERBRAND: Was that sometimes cultural? They were from a different part of the country?

WILSON: A lot of it. Sometimes it was cultural, sometimes it was immaturity.

HILDERBRAND: 'Cause they were cops?

WILSON: No, I don't think it was because they were cops. We had cooks the same way that had the same kind of problems. Adjusting to South Dakota is really [something]. Most of those kids from New York City never even drove before. They didn't even have a driver's license before they got here. One of my lieutenants was from Puerto Rico and he put studded snow tires on his Corvette! [laughter] I mean, that's something you wouldn't normally do. But that's the way he was. You didn't have snow in Puerto Rico. His first snow storm, I think he about killed himself in that sucker, in that Corvette. We took the food out to the missile sites, to the fifteen Launch Control Facilities. I had drivers that were transportation types, they weren't cooks, they were transportation types that we hired, that were first term airmen. They're out there driving a reefer truck. You know anything about a reefer truck, the reefer

portion of the compressor sits way up on top. They're top-heavy. Well, if you're a squadron commander in the Air Force, your safety record is looked at very closely. How your kids drive and whether they're driving a POV, a privately owned vehicle, or a government vehicle, it's the same. But a government vehicle's even worse. If you crack up a government vehicle, the Squadron Commander gets involved in briefing the Wing Commander on what the heck happened. Normally when you're a Squadron Commander, you may get one accident, you're about authorized one. Well, I had three because I was a Squadron Commander for four-and-one-half years, so I had a lot more opportunity. You take a reefer truck like that onto South Dakota roads in the middle of the winter ...

HILDERBRAND: High wind.

WILSON: Well, even along the icy roads. I choppered out near Echo and all of my accidents happened in that same squadron. This place is located up near Echo. It was south of Kadoka. I choppered out to see this accident where we dumped a reefer truck. There was food scattered all over the place! I mean, it was a mess! But I could hardly stand on that road, much less drive on it. Of course, I was used to being on missile crew. I was so mad because the missile crew had been there earlier on that same road and didn't report it. I told my Wing Commander, I says, "It wasn't my cook's fault. It was that crew that went on that road beforehand and didn't report it." 'Cause that road did not deserve to be driven on.

HILDERBRAND: What happened to all the food?

WILSON: We trashed it. Because anytime something happens to that food the vet will condemn it all. We had a security police, for example, come into our dining facility with a dog and the vet's right behind him saying "Condemned, condemned, condemned." We had to throw out all the food! We told the cops "Don't ever bring a dog in again." That's just the way they are. So that's what happens to the food.

You just have to pitch it all 'cause it's scattered all over the place. The tow truck has to come out and tow your vehicle out. I had another one where we had a female airman had gotten confused on directions and thought she was on a main road and she wasn't. All of a sudden she came up to a ninety degree angle and there's a fence right in front of her and she tried to make the turn rather than go through the fence and just knocked it. We dumped another one just east of the base there also, so they all happened in the 66th basically.

HILDERBRAND: About that change from thirty-six hours to twenty-four hour shifts.

WILSON: Okay.

HILDERBRAND: Was that an improvement?

WILSON: Well, they had three different kinds of shifts. They had forty-hour shifts also in some places: eight, eight, and eight. But the thirty-six hour, you see I liked thirty-six because of the way they did things. But twenty-four was due to some security enhancements to the codes where your one guy could sleep, okay? The thirty-six hour tour was based on, you couldn't have one sleeping down there. You both had to be awake.

HILDERBRAND: So the change from thirty-six to twenty-four came about because it was now possible for one person to be asleep ...

WILSON: Exactly.

HILDERBRAND: ... because the other one couldn't in some way make a mistake and validate a code.

WILSON: Well, he couldn't arm the missiles.

HILDERBRAND: Yeah.

WILSON: Still couldn't launch them, but he couldn't arm the missiles. There were some arming things that a guy could do by himself, he could arm them, but he couldn't launch them by himself, unless he fixed up some really neat stuff.

HILDERBRAND: So somebody must have thought that a twenty-four hour shift was better to make the change. Why was that?

WILSON: I think from a manning stand-point more than anything. It takes a lot more people for a thirty-six hour tour.

HILDERBRAND: You needed fewer crew members, system-wide, if you had the twenty-four shift?

WILSON: Right. Exactly. Yeah, I think it was budgetary factors. As well as they made it a lot more secure where a guy could sleep.

HILDERBRAND: What about from the standpoint of the ...

WILSON: See, originally, in the Minuteman I system, there was a twenty-four alert. Original tour in the ... when the guys wore their white uniforms. I don't know whether you're aware of that, we wore whites originally in the missile business and then we went to the blue uniform. They didn't want to be like painters and plumbers and that's the reason that came about.

HILDERBRAND: So the white uniform made the missile unit stand out more from the rest of the Air Force?

WILSON: No, they looked like painters and plumbers.

HILDERBRAND: Why did anybody ever do that in the first place, though? Why did they have them wear white instead of blue?

WILSON: 'Cause that's all they had.

HILDERBRAND: Oh. I see.

WILSON: It was a painter's uniform. It was a plumber's uniform. That was a construction uniform. They wore hard hats on base, too. Yeah, hard hats and the white overalls basically is what it was. In fact, my first commander wore whites during the evaluations 'cause he was kind of superstitious about things.

HILDERBRAND: Was the twenty-four hour alert safe in the sense that people there had enough sleep?

WILSON: Yep. Yeah, I think so. Yeah. Yeah. It was not a problem. It's not an easy place to sleep in, I'll tell you that. It's not the coziest place to sleep. It's actually kind of cold down there. Have you been in one yet?

HILDERBRAND: Yes. Yes.

WILSON: Oh, okay. All right.

HILDERBRAND: Was there a lot of noise?

WILSON: Yeah, there's a lot of noise. The fans and the generators are going all the time. It can be rigged for silent running as we say. There was some crew members that rigged it.

HILDERBRAND: You mean rigged in an unauthorized way?

WILSON: Yeah. Oh yeah! Yeah.

HILDERBRAND: Tell me about that.

WILSON: Oh, there was a crew at Whiteman that wasn't even on a thirty-six hour tours, they both fell asleep. They had to break in to get them out. They broke into the place and the Wing Commander was right there when they broke in.

HILDERBRAND: Now why did they need to break in?

WILSON: 'Cause they couldn't wake them up.

HILDERBRAND: So they thought maybe something bad had happened to them?

WILSON: Oh yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah. And they were just sleeping.

HILDERBRAND: Was that the end of their careers as missile crewmen?

WILSON: All the alarms and bells were disabled. They pulled circuit breakers and things like that.

HILDERBRAND: Was that the end of their career as crewmen do you suppose?

WILSON: That was the end of their career.

HILDERBRAND: Period, huh?

WILSON: I think the commander got passed over for major, of course, and became an enlisted man the last ten years of his service. I'm not sure what happened to the deputy. I don't know what he got.

HILDERBRAND: Did it happen often that circuit breakers were pulled?

WILSON: Oh, it's hard to say how much of that went on. I think some of it went on, yeah.

HILDERBRAND: Was some of it just a game? Because it's fun to try to beat the system? These annoying little noises that you don't think are really important?

WILSON: Well, yeah, yeah. If the commander wants to sleep you shut down everything except for the printer and you can hear the printer print out. Anytime that anything happens, you get a print out and you can hear the printer print. So you don't have to hear the buzzers and bells or whatever. It's not authorized, of course, but it happened. They did it.

HILDERBRAND: Was there constant warnings that you shouldn't do that?

WILSON: Yeah, you just can't pull circuit breakers for the heck of it.

HILDERBRAND: Well I guess what I'm getting at was this: sometimes rule-breaking is known about at higher levels and although if you get caught at it and they were forced to punish you for it, but in reality they know it's going on and as long as you don't get caught, they don't want to acknowledge it, but they let it go.

WILSON: Yeah. I'm not so sure that they really condoned any of that to tell you the truth.

HILDERBRAND: In a kind of overall sense, how seriously did the people you worked with take what they were doing?

WILSON: I think they were pretty serious about it. I really do. I think we were there for a reason. That reason resulted in success. That why we were there was because, "You shoot at us, we're going to shoot back at you and we're going to be ready."

HILDERBRAND: Were you sort of constantly reminding yourselves of that? I mean talked about how important this job is?

WILSON: Well, yeah. If you were watching the news or were any where in-tune with what was going on in the world today, that was pretty obvious to anybody that was half-way educated. The people who were out pulling work down in those holes were very well educated people. They kept current on the affairs of the world. We had intelligence briefings on the affairs of the world also, so it kind of reminded us what was going on.

HILDERBRAND: Was that the purpose of those intelligence briefings?

WILSON: No. No, not really. I think it was just to let us know what was going on.

HILDERBRAND: How far beyond the news did they go?

WILSON: Not much. You could probably read the next day's *Newsweek* and get the same briefing. But the difference was the source. When you got it from them, it was from a source that was classified. When it came out of *Newsweek*, that makes it unclassified.

HILDERBRAND: They must have had a reason for doing that. They were trying to accomplish something.

WILSON: Well, I think it was to keep us informed. Keep us informed on what the world was like and what was going with the other side of the world.

HILDERBRAND: Why do you think that mattered to them? To the people who were doing it? Who were briefing you?

WILSON: I've never given that much thought, to tell you the truth. A lot of us thought the intelligence was a big joke because we could read the next day's paper and read about the same stuff.

HILDERBRAND: Um hmm. Did you sometimes resent the time it took you to go do it? You know, "We've got a briefing today, we have to ..."

WILSON: Well, we always got intelligence before we'd go on alert.

HILDERBRAND: It was part of every alert?

WILSON: Yeah, it was part of it. You would get an intelligence briefing every day. Every time we went on alert we had an intelligence briefing. Basically where all the subs were and those kind of things. What the threat was, more or less.

HILDERBRAND: So was there a scale of, of the threat?

WILSON: Oh yeah! Yeah, there was a scale.

HILDERBRAND: And they would tell you that every, every time?

WILSON: Oh yeah.

HILDERBRAND: Was it just about always the same?

WILSON: Yeah. Yeah. Basically. Basically it was the same stuff every time.

HILDERBRAND: Were there ever times when it wasn't? When there was a kind of different tone to it?

WILSON: No, not while I was in the missile business. There were some times, of course the Cuban Missile Crisis for example, there was a time yeah, it was big time. You were cocked, ready to go. But generally speaking, there was a time where nothing really happened and the threat didn't get any worse or it didn't get any better during the time. And that's because we were doing, I think because we were doing our jobs.

HILDERBRAND: Was there a danger that that might bring complacency?

WILSON: Yeah. Yeah. There was always that danger. But they kept you pretty well-qualified to do what you wanted to do. You had to take a test before you went on alert. And you had to pass the test at a hundred percent.

HILDERBRAND: You mean every time?

WILSON: Yeah. Oh yeah! It was kind of a tape test, okay? What they called a tape test where they give you some messages or you had to decode them.

HILDERBRAND: What if you made a mistake?

WILSON: You didn't go.

HILDERBRAND: Someone else would replace you on alert?

WILSON: Yeah.

HILDERBRAND: How often could that happen before it was the end of your career?

WILSON: Not many times.

HILDERBRAND: Yeah.

WILSON: Not many times.

HILDERBRAND: Did it happen very often?

WILSON: No. No. That's the whole idea of this. You had to be up on what you were doing. You attended emergency priority training once a month and you had to pass it ninety percent.

HILDERBRAND: If I gave daily tests to my students at the university and required them to be a hundred percent and flushed them out after they failed a couple of times to receive a hundred percent, they'd all be gone in a week!

WILSON: No, no, now wait a minute now. If you told them something today and you tested them for the next three hundred and sixty five days the same thing you told them today ...

HILDERBRAND: They'd do fine.

WILSON: So, see what I'm saying?

HILDERBRAND: Yeah. Okay.

WILSON: Okay. I'm not talking about something different every day.

HILDERBRAND: Yeah.

WILSON: I'm talking about redundant tasks. You had to know how to do this, how to react to it, and then the evaluations were the same way. The evaluations, when you were in the trainer. I was an MPT operator also for many years. The Missile Procedures Trainer Operator. In fact, I was in the 3901st, which is an evaluation squadron in California where we went out to all the sites.

HILDERBRAND: Is that Vandenberg?

WILSON: Um hmm. Yeah. We went to all the sites and we evaluated the trainer missiles and evaluated the trainer operators and maintenance technicians that worked on our simulators. But I was a trainer operator for many years, and you had to know your stuff. You had to know the weapon system from an operator's

stand-point. 'Cause when a crew reacted or did something wrong according to your script, but you got to know how to react to it and get the right kind of data back to them.

HILDERBRAND: Was the training adequate? More than adequate?

WILSON: Yes, it was in most cases. I had an advantage that I went to Chanute Air Force Base for three weeks before I went to Vandenberg. At Chanute, you learned how to do the weapons system. That was the Air Training Command training that they did away with several years after I went there. But you learned how the weapons system worked. You learned how the environmental system worked. You learned how the computer system worked. How the time-sharing worked. When you went to Vandenberg, you learned how to use that system. You didn't learn how it worked, you learned how to use it. When they did away with how to do the weapons system, how the weapon system worked and they just went to use it, I don't think you had as knowledgeable a crew member as you did in my years when you had to learn the weapons system.

HILDERBRAND: Did it happen that individuals could seem to have been adequately trained and were in a unit, and just weren't able to do the job?

WILSON: That's right. Um hmm.

HILDERBRAND: Why would that happen? What was wrong with those people?

WILSON: [chuckles] They weren't too smart to begin with.

HILDERBRAND: You would sometimes receive personnel that really shouldn't have been there?

WILSON: Yeah. Yeah. In the years when I went into missiles, there were a lot of non-volunteers that were put in the missile business and I was one of them. And I was in the personnel business, basically, and I was directed as a non-volunteer into the missile business. I was sitting up at Tulee Green and you could hear me screaming up there when they told me I was going into missiles. It turned out that I did very well with it, but at the time when I got assigned to missiles, I didn't want to go. But I didn't have a very good record in the personnel business 'cause my record was not very good compared to other personnel officers. So, who you going to pick to go, when you're a personnel guy and say, "I need so many personnel officers out of your bag to go with the missiles"? Well, who you going to pick? You're going to pick the worst guys.

The same thing happened when they had the rated supplement. They brought in a lot of pilots and navigators because they didn't need them all in those days, and they brought in what they called a rated supplement in the missiles. Well, I think some of that happened when they brought some of those guys in. They

brought their worst pilots and the worst navigators that they had and they gave them to missiles. But I don't know that for a fact, we had some really good ones. Don't get me wrong. But there were some of those guys that didn't make it either. You would think a pilot coming over would do very well. Some of those guys didn't do very well.

HILDERBRAND: Well, it's funny to hear you say this, because at least my impression was that this was kind of an elite force.

WILSON: Well, no it wasn't. Initially it may have been, but after a while, they couldn't get anybody to volunteer. See, initially the reason why you went into missiles, the very beginning of Minuteman I, was to get your Bachelor's Degree. Called the Minuteman Education Program, okay? So a lot of those guys didn't have a college degree in the early years. Well, now that that was gone, they had what they called the Master's Degree Program. A lot of those guys didn't really want to do that because they didn't have the major that they wanted to go into. They didn't have my major, I didn't want to go into the education program because I didn't want to start from scratch. It would take me years to get my Master's. So, they had a lot of trouble getting volunteers to come into the program. And so they took non-volunteers. That's who I worked with. I worked around a lot of non-volunteers. I worked around a lot of guys that were very knowledgeable. Don't get me wrong. They were probably the sharpest officers in the Air Force. But again, you had a group there that probably shouldn't have been there. It didn't last very long. They couldn't pass their evaluations and they were eventually removed.

HILDERBRAND: Was there careful screening for other, say psychological factors?

WILSON: No. No.

HILDERBRAND: Was there any at all?

WILSON: Not much.

HILDERBRAND: Was there a sense that people who are going to be on the crews, the missile crews, should be psychologically stable and reliable?

WILSON: They would screen the medical records, and if you had a history of something like that you could not get qualified. If you had a history of it.

HILDERBRAND: Of some sort of instability?

WILSON: Right. They call it the Personal Reliability Plan, the PRP program. If you had a history of that kind of thing, you couldn't qualify under that program.

HILDERBRAND: How did the PRP work?

WILSON: Well, it was basically more of a medical thing. It was a commander's option thing. Say your wife died. Well, they may take you off PRP for a while because of the stress that you had. Or if you got a DWI, then they'd take you off the program until you could prove yourself back into it. If you got sick and you had to be on some kind of medicine that might be disqualifying, they'd take you off PRP and follow you up. So they did have that kind of authority.

HILDERBRAND: There's the popular image of this being the kind of business where maybe the one person in the capsule is looking over his shoulder suspiciously at the other one to see whether he was about to launch on his own or something.

WILSON: No, no. It didn't happen. I pulled alert with a lot of deputies 'cause my last year in the missile business, every time I'd go out I got with somebody different. So I didn't have my own deputy in my last year in the missile business as a crew member.

HILDERBRAND: Did you have a strong sense that you were making a big contribution to national security?

WILSON: I think there was that. I think so. Yeah. I think we were, but I don't think we were ever appreciated.

HILDERBRAND: Why do you say that?

WILSON: We were a non-rated force for one thing. When you're in the Air Force, it's fly and fight and gofer. If you didn't fly, promotions, generally speaking were not as good. The glory of the Air Force is to be a pilot and especially in my day, if you looked at any general officer's picture, they all have wings on. So what's that tell you? The possibilities of advancement

HILDERBRAND: Was there an equivalent of wings for a missileer?

WILSON: Yeah. You had a missile badge.

HILDERBRAND: Okay.

WILSON: You had a missile badge.

HILDERBRAND: But it wasn't prized quite the same way?

WILSON: Well, the perception was that we were looked down upon by the staff when it came to promotions. Until they went to a different system of promotions and then they found "ah ha" the missile guys were getting promoted over the pilots because it was a fairer system in a way.

HILDERBRAND: That mean they were brighter? Is that what it was kind of based on?

WILSON: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Well, you if you wanted to be promoted in the missile business, not only did you have to do a good job and have good ratings, you had to have your professional military education done. All of it. At the level you should be at. You had to have a bachelor's degree.

HILDERBRAND: You mean to be promoted to major.

WILSON: Yeah. If you wanted t be promoted to major, you should have it. You should, generally speaking, have pretty close to a perfect record, a Master's degree, and your professional military school. Your squadron officer's school and your Air Command and Staff done in some way or another, either by residency or correspondence. That was the name of the game. If you didn't have that, your chances were not as good.

HILDERBRAND: Did you have a sense that what you were doing was maybe even more important than what the pilots were doing? The strategic importance of the ICBMs?

WILSON: Well, I didn't, because I thought we were an equal part of the triad.

HILDERBRAND: So the problem was that you didn't see yourself being perceived as an equal part.

WILSON: That's correct.

[end of side one, tape one] [beginning side two, tape one]

WILSON: I think we knew the Soviet threat was real. But in the back of our mind, I don't think we thought that they would ever attempt to shoot us because of what we were doing and because it would be suicide on their part. Not too long ago, I watched a news clip of some of our U.S. inspecrttors over in Russia with the head of the Russian military. They were looking at a missile and he said it was targeted to F. E. Warren Air Force Base. That kind of sent it home. Here that big old thing was actually targeted towards where I live. I was stationed there for a number of years.

HILDERBRAND: And you must have known while you were here that there were missiles targeted for western South Dakota?

WILSON: I guess in my own mind, I says "Why would they target us?" Why would a land based missile target us when we can get them out of the hole faster than they can hit us.

HILDERBRAND: Did you even think that when the Reagan administration, for example, was saying that that wasn't true? That was the basis for concern? The potential for a Soviet first strike that could destroy our missiles while they were in the silos?

WILSON: I figured I could get ...

HILDERBRAND: You just didn't believe it when Reagan was saying that?

WILSON: I just figured I could get my missiles out of the hole before I could get hit. So why would anybody want to target [land-based ICBMs] unless it would be a submarine. Submarines can get us a lot faster. The submarines move. And they nail us first. But I just couldn't believe that they'd want to target an empty hull. It didn't make any sense to me.

HILDERBRAND: So did that make you think that you were really safer being here than if you were in Chicago or New York?

WILSON: Yeah! Actually, I was safer than an aircraft guy 'cause it takes them longer for an aircraft to get off the ground than it does a missile. I mean when you really look at it.

HILDERBRAND: Of course, they were probably targeting Ellsworth?

WILSON: Yeah! Oh yeah. They'd probably be targeting the base. Ellsworth.

HILDERBRAND: Probably close enough to that ...

WILSON: Why would they target F. E. Warren? They don't have any aircraft. All they got is missiles and they're way out. All they got there is the command and control area.

HILDERBRAND: Well, we do know that you were wrong.

WILSON: Oh yeah! Oh yeah! Oh sure. Yeah.

HILDERBRAND: But this was your way of perhaps dealing with not having to worry about that?

WILSON: Sure. Yeah. Yeah. Because it didn't, it wouldn't make any sense to me. I mean you got to have a little common sense here. And say, "There's no way they would shoot at this empty hole."

HILDERBRAND: So, did you think that our missiles would ever be used?

WILSON: Well, I was hoping not. The whole idea was deterrence and I think that was pretty well drummed into us.

HILDERBRAND: Was there some relationship between how well you did your job and the idea that they would therefore never have to be used?

WILSON: I had to always be ready. I think I was good at my job.

HILDERBRAND: I mean did you think that if you did your job really well and everyone knew that we were well prepared, that that would guarantee, as well as these things can be guaranteed, that they would never have to be used?

WILSON: Yep. Yep. I think so. Because we got visited by a bunch of foreign officers from the Soviet Bloc. I was a Trainer Operator at the time, and at F. E. Warren. You had to be careful what you said to these guys because you didn't want to give away any secrets. We showed a simulated launch not using the codes or anything like that. Just to show them the guys turning keys and the missiles launching off the board there. They got this I think he was Yugoslavian or German, says, "It took about thirty seconds, didn't it?" I says "Well, I don't know. It's pretty fast." I never admitted how many seconds it would take or anything like that. I says, "Yeah, it's fast."

HILDERBRAND: Did you think in terms of seconds when you were doing it? I mean was there a certain number of seconds that you were supposed to be able to perform your various functions then?

WILSON: Oh yeah. You had timing. Timing was critical. Timing was real critical. In fact, just to open the code box. That had our codes in it?

HILDERBRAND: Um hmm.

WILSON: It was normally locked unless you got a message that says, "Open it up, take the keys out of the safe." You had two locks on it. Each officer had a lock. Well, when I was on crew, that lock was a three combination lock, where you had to spin it. Then you had to pull on it and open it up. Well, you got to understand, you got two guys opening this poor lock. They're both trying to get their combination and if one guy jerks, it messes up the other guy and, and you don't have a lot of time. They made a new lock after I was on crew. They made a new lock where you just dialed in the numbers and pulled. You know, the digital number on the bottom of the lock. But in the old days we had these really heavy locks with the combinations and you had to have a pretty easy combination to make sure that you could do it again.

In fact we had what they called a lock bar where we put their padlocks when they came back off alert. They'd put them on this lock bar. You couldn't take them home with you. Then you'd pick it up on your way to alert. You'd have

your lock. When they went to the new lock, they didn't worry about that anymore and then all these lock bars were turned into salvage. A friend of mine at F. E. Warren had a tendency to go to the junkyard all the time. He loved to pick up junk at the junkyard. He picked up these lock bars with these locks on them, a lot of the locks were on. So he hit the crew records. Got a bunch of crew records and found social security numbers and birth dates and stuff like that and he opened over half of those locks! And those were thirty-six dollar locks! Or fifty dollar locks. I mean they were really nice locks. Padlocks. They had their own codes in there. In fact I won't even tell you what my combination was. But all I had to do was go to one number and I was in. I was out. It was that quick.

HILDERBRAND: Did they know that you were using numbers that had significance to you?

WILSON: Oh, I have no idea.

HILDERBRAND: I would have thought that maybe they might have frowned on that because someone could, if they knew your social security number, knew your date of birth, they could try these various combinations to get in.

WILSON: Sure. I mean, yeah. Well, it was on the lock bar which didn't have anything to do with the missile sites. Once you're out to the missile sites there's only two of you out there. Supposedly your other guy's not supposed to know your lock combination.

HILDERBRAND: But if he knows your social security number and your date of birth

WILSON: Well sure! Yeah, yeah. If he wanted to mess around and try and figure out what your ...

HILDERBRAND: Or if there are intruders who managed to gain control of the facility and ...

WILSON: Well, you figure if intruders get in there, they're going to get into that lock box one way or another. With a something that would open it up! [laughter] They'll have it. So really I'm not so sure how important that was.

HILDERBRAND: Do you remember times when your faith that missiles wouldn't ever have to be used was shaken? When you thought, "Well maybe things are going a little sour now?"

WILSON: No.

HILDERBRAND: Or maybe, were you ever on alert at a higher state of readiness?

WILSON: No, not really. No, I got a few. I was on alert when we got some messages that we normally wouldn't get that were kind of interesting. But nothing that put us at a higher state of readiness. Now there were some guys that did. That were out on alert when some things happened. There was a time when I think, there was a multiple launch when Russia fired some test rockets. And some guy hit the button where he had the crew's level at a higher state of alert. Nothing, nothing real big, but enough that we didn't normally do. But it was all of the sudden a whole bunch of [blips]. I think it was a multiple launch, test launch. It kind of shook up the world.

HILDERBRAND: In a situation like that, would you think that the crew members would think "Well, this isn't going to be real?"

WILSON: I don't know. They just react. You know, it's one of these things that's kind of a knee jerk reaction. Once you've been trained for so long ...

HILDERBRAND: That's the training, I suppose.

WILSON: Yeah. the training gives you a knee jerk reaction. You don't have time to think about it. You really don't. You just go.

HILDERBRAND: Did you ever have second thoughts about the whole business of the missiles? I mean about what they were and what they would do and that you were part of a system that could mean the end of the world as we know it?

WILSON: No. Never did. Never did.

HILDERBRAND: You never talked about that? Didn't ever have a beer and get philosophical with someone?

WILSON: Nope. Never have. Kind of interesting. No, never have. I wound up enjoying my life in missiles. I enjoyed the work. I enjoyed the people that were in it. That was kind of different because my whole goal was to get out of the Air Force after four years. In the personnel business, I worked for people that came in from other career fields that were basically colonels that they were sent out to pasture in the personnel business. They didn't know my job. I hated to work for people that didn't know the job. It was just horrible. I had a heck of a time that first three or four years in the service because I was working for colonels that just were sent out to pasture. They were just out there ready to retire. Not so in the missile business. In the missile business, I worked for people that knew my job, that had been in my job, that knew exactly what my job was all about, and were very good at what they did. It made me feel better. Because now I'm working for people who know what I am supposed to doing. That's something I never forgot.

HILDERBRAND: How was the morale, over all, in your unit?

WILSON: Well, [long pause] it was up and down. It was up and down.

HILDERBRAND: Take it one way or the other.

WILSON: Well, I think we had such good commanders when I first got into the missile business. They were very well liked. They were the epitome of professional officers. Later on, we got some guys that were just hungry for promotion and their only concern was results.

HILDERBRAND: Does that signify a change in the missile business? Or was it just the luck of the draw?

WILSON: Luck. I think it was the result of luck of the draw. I think they started sending more officers into missiles to get their breeding basically so they could come back to wherever they were doing and get promoted. It was, get their missile experience out of the way. So, that was some of it.

HILDERBRAND: Missile became a more desirable career field for promotion? Did you say more interested in promotions?

WILSON: Yeah. Get the experience and get the heck out as soon as possible. We had some great commanders. In fact, there still is some out there that went through the whole thing with them. From being a missile crew member to a division chief to being an operations officer to a squadron commander to director of operations to a wing commander and to division commander. Those people are just they're the greatest people in the world. They're very knowledgeable in what they do and they're there for a damn good reason.

HILDERBRAND: Were there other factors that affected morale?

WILSON: Yeah, sometimes the missile competition affected morale of troops who were not in it. Because everything was geared towards those guys going to the missile crew.

HILDERBRAND: To Vandenberg?

WILSON: Yeah. I was a renegade in the early years in Missouri and I didn't support [the competition] because I felt my job was to get trained as a missile combat crew commander and that I needed time in the MPT to be trained and continue my training. That I didn't need to be there at three o'clock in the morning or midnight getting my training. I felt that because of all their emphasis on missile comp and providing all this prime time trainer time to all our missile comp guys, that I was relegated to the bad times and I thought that that wasn't the point.

HILDERBRAND: I would have thought that one of the goals of the missile competition was morale.

WILSON: [chuckles] Yes, if you win. Yeah. Yeah. But the problem was that the other crew members really didn't like it. A lot of them didn't. I was part of a probably dirty half-a-dozen, in what I called a dirty-half-a-dozen in our squadron that didn't buy what we called a "Win With Whiteman" button. I told the squadron commander "I'll give you your dollar if you don't give me a damn button." He was so mad at me. But all I asked is I want to be combat ready and I think this has affected my combat readiness.

HILDERBRAND: Did the arms reduction talks have any affect on morale?

WILSON: I don't think so.

HILDERBRAND: SALT 1 and 2 and START. Did that affect the way people perceived the way they were perceived by the powers that be?

WILSON: It was pretty obvious which missiles were going to go first. If you knew anything about the missile business you knew the different missile sites and what missile site had problems. Which was more up to date. You know which ones are going to give up first. I knew that Ellsworth would probably be one of the first because they had the most antiquated system of the whole system basically.

HILDERBRAND: Did the whole idea affect people at all? The talking about getting rid or standing down some of our missiles and bargaining them away to the Soviets?

WILSON: A lot of that came after my time. A lot of the real stuff came after my time as far as the stand down business.

HILDERBRAND: So mostly, SALT and Salt 2 didn't matter because you didn't really think it would come to anything that would affect ...

WILSON: Right. Yeah.

HILDERBRAND: An issue that always seems to come up is the official Air Force position about the blowing off of the lids of the silos, which I guess suggests to a lot of people the possibility of a launch. The Air Force position on that is that it only ever happened once, as a training exercise. Is that right? Is that true?

WILSON: Blowing off of a lid?

HILDERBRAND: On a launch facility.

WILSON: I've never heard of one except for a Titan. Titan, of course, they blew the lid off, that thing went over the fence down in Wichita. But the whole thing blew. I think they had a whole missile crew up in *****

HILDERBRAND: Now, there were people who were killed in the line of duty, died in crashes and things. Were you involved in some after action of that in some way?

WILSON: Sure was.

HILDERBRAND: Tell us about that.

WILSON: Yep. I was the mortuary officer my last four and a half years in the Air Force. It's kind of an additional duty they put on the services commander. The mortuary officer always has the position on the staff when you have simulated crashes and those kinds of things where you get involved with that. But part of my responsibilities as the mortuary officer is the search and recovery team when you have an aircraft accident, to go out and find the remains. And find all the remains. And all the parts of the remains. And make sure those remains are identified and that they are properly taken care of. Then the responsibility also is to brief the next of kin and get disposition on the remains and arrange for preparation, casketing, escort service, and funerals and fly bys. One year, we got the call that a helicopter went down just over by Bear Butte. Colonel Barrington is the base commander at the time and I can remember to this day his words on a radio. He says "Get Wilson's crew out here." We got the crew of airmen, went out to Bear Butte [long pause]. This is still tough.

HILDERBRAND: Thanks for going through it. [long pause] Maybe it's too tough.

WILSON: No, I can get through it. We had five souls that were killed, three airmen and two officers. [long pause] Turn that off.

HILDERBRAND: You bet.

[pause in interview]

WILSON: Well anyway, I got a call from Barrington and he said, "Wilson, can you get your crew out here?" We went out to Bear Butte in a bus and the news media were sitting on the fences, of course, and I had this big yellow hat that said MORT on it, so I took that hat off real quick, I didn't want them to really know who I was or what my crew was out there for. We had five souls down that were killed. There was one female that was, I think she was pushed out of the helicopter before it went down, but she survived but has no recollection of what happened to this day. But there were some bodies that were not all that good shape. All ended up having closed caskets on them. We brought the reefer truck to the site. I think that's kind of one of the reasons why they give that job to the

Mortuary Officer is because he's got the reefer truck. So we brought the five souls to the base. We brought in a forensic expert from the Air Force to do the autopsies and their identification. We only had four, I think it was three or four slots at the hospital ward. So we had to keep one or two of the bodies in the reefer truck. We put a guard on, over where we had it there. The next couple of days, I had big sheet, a status sheet of all the things I needed to do for all these five guys. I check marked what I needed to do. I briefed five next of kin plus their parents in a ten hour period in one day.

HILDERBRAND: That the hardest thing you ever did?

WILSON: [laughs] At the time it wasn't. Later it affected me more than I thought.

HILDERBRAND: At the time you were just doing your job, I suppose.

WILSON: Yeah.

HILDERBRAND: Yeah.

WILSON: In fact the chaplain who went with me on a couple of them, he didn't go with me on all of them and I was surprised, I don't think he could have handled it, but he thought I should be a chaplain! [laughter] I was good at my job. I was very good at my job.

HILDERBRAND: Do you think he didn't go on all of them because he couldn't have handled it?

WILSON: I think so. I don't know that for a fact, but he didn't go with me on, I asked him to go with me on a couple of them because every next of kin's different. One of the next of kin told me that I was not to talk about her husband because it was no longer him. He was already gone. The only thing left was the body. The parents didn't think that way and they were there, too. So you had to handle everyone a little bit different. The airmen that were killed were security policemen and they [the next-of-kin] had gotten stories from their husbands that when they got out on the choppers, the chopper guys were always screwing around. They were sure that the chopper guys were screwing around and they're blaming the Air Force and blaming the crew members or whatever. So you had to go through that.

HILDERBRAND: Was the pilot killed?

WILSON: The pilot, co-pilot were killed and three of the security policemen killed. So you had three enlisted people and two officers that were killed. All five, we had to do something different with each one of them. We had one that was buried in the Black Hills. We had a fly over. We had one buried in a certain uniform. Then we had another one buried in Illinois and we had a fly over for him. He

was buried in a different uniform. We had another kid that was buried in his cowboy outfit. Another one buried in his fatigues, I think. Everyone was different. Had an enlisted help from Headquarters SAC, they helped me with the fly-overs. They came in and raised fly-overs. In all this time when you're doing all these things, you forget about the people around you. You make sure that the search and recovery team gets out-briefed by the psychologist and the chaplain and make sure that they're briefed and out-briefed. If you know anything about crisis situations you need to do that. But you forget about and I forgot about, and I broke down completely, was the people around me, the secretary, the first sergeant those people right close to me, they were impacted more than I knew. My first sergeant was an ex-security policeman and it really, really got to him. And I didn't know about it. It just blew right over me. Came to me later that it hurt really bad that I didn't think about those people. But that was a, quite an operation. I'd done this many times before singly, but never, never in a group of five and never doing that. I had a lieutenant, I had a female lieutenant that worked for me and I gave her a choice. I had some next of kin coming in to talk about different things and I says, "Well, you can talk to the next of kin or you can go out and inspect bodies at the funeral home." She took the lesser of the two evils and went to inspect the bodies. You know, it's a lot of stress. So she went out and did the inspection of the caskets and the bodies and the preparation and I took care of the next of kin.

HILDERBRAND: Were some of the next of kin really angry?

WILSON: Yes. Yes. They were, they were. The wives especially because they'd gotten the stories from their husbands.

HILDERBRAND: Was any of that directed at you?

WILSON: Oh yeah. Yeah.

HILDERBRAND: You just felt the anger, but it wasn't ...

WILSON: No, I didn't. I was very good at handling those kind of situations. I had gone in to a wife and told her that, in another accident where the individual lost his head in an accident, I told her that it was a closed casket and she wanted to know why. It took a while, but we sat and we hugged and I finally told her why but it wasn't real easy for her or me to do that. But it's those kinds of things that you learn as you go on. When I was a lieutenant, I was involved with the other side of it, with the notification side of it. During the Vietnam War I was a personal affairs officer where we notified next of kin of the missing in action and the deaths of their spouses and sons and daughters that were killed in Vietnam. So, I had that side of it too. The mortuary side of it is after the notification has taken place.

HILDERBRAND: Um hmm.

WILSON: The shock is similar going up and down their parents [unintelligible] So, that was a terrible time. A terrible time.

HILDERBRAND: I'm sure that's your worst memory.

WILSON: Oh, yeah. No doubt about it. No doubt about it. But we got the job done. But it was terrible for the families. We had a lot of sadness during that time period.

HILDERBRAND: You mentioned something about the news media before. How did they behave? Were they a problem for you?

WILSON: No. No. I stayed away from them. It was not my job to say anything to the news media and that was the information officer. That's kind of neat about the military, you don't have to worry a thing about that cause you don't talk to them, you don't mess with them. They just they get all their information through official channels. So you never had to worry about that.

HILDERBRAND: Well, let's change the tone.

WILSON: [boisterous, relieved laughter] That's okay.

HILDERBRAND: I'd like to have talk about sort of the conditions around here, the environment, the terrain. Is there anything special that comes to mind about problems presented by being in western South Dakota?

WILSON: I had the opportunity to be in maintenance for about thirty days as kind of a sharing program. In missile maintenance. Joe Stone was the wing commander in those days, was an old maintenance guy and he thought that I needed to go over and be a maintainer for a while. So I got to go out with the maintenance crews to the missile sites and open the hole and go down into the missiles and work on them. I got the opportunity to go to Juliet Three. You got to understand Juliet Three is about the furthest site away you could get from Ellsworth Air Force Base. I did it on the coldest day of the year in 1982, I think it was. It must have been thirty to forty below outside. But there was no snow. But it was cold! We did a battery change. A battery change in a missile site is all grunt work because these batteries weigh a ton and it's all just grunt work.

That was kind of interesting, I got to see a lot of sights. I got to see bald eagles and coyotes and you name it. But you drove forever and you got out there and you had to wait forever for the screw to go down and to get in and it was just, just miserable. Our guys didn't realize those maintenance guys, they go out everyday and they work on things. The first thing they do when they go out to a missile site, before they go out, there's a box full of stuff that needs to be replaced out there. They may not take it all. They may just take a couple of them and go out there 'cause that's all they have time for.

HILDERBRAND: Um hmm.

WILSON: But there's a box for every site that has something to be repaired.

HILDERBRAND: On a priority basis.

WILSON: On a priority basis. It doesn't affect the alert status, it's just kept in this box and then they pick it out and go out to the site and fix it if they can. They have periodic maintenance teams that go out essentially and do a lot of that stuff. But if you're just going to go out there you might as well take this out there and fix it. It's kind of interesting the way they do things.

HILDERBRAND: I suppose you've heard horror stories about blizzards or excessive heat?

WILSON: Oh yeah. Well, the blizzards are the ones that guys get stuck out there forever. They'll be stuck out there for three days at the Launch Control Facility. At least when they've got that to go to. And they'll be spending a few nights. And the missile crew too will be staying, instead of a twenty-four alert, they're pulling a seventy-two hour alert. They're just stuck out there. What was nice in the old thirty-six hour tour, if both crews were out there, then you just flip-flopped all day long. So it wasn't as bad. But those twenty-four hour guys, they stayed down there seventy-two hours. That's a little tougher.

HILDERBRAND: There wasn't ever a back-up crew. Another one couldn't go ...

WILSON: No. No. You couldn't get anybody out there. And hopefully every once in a while, if you could get a chopper out there, then you would replace them, but generally speaking, they just stayed out there. It didn't happen very often. The roads are not very good here. They're a lot better than some, but I pulled alert in Missouri and everything was paved. I didn't go on a gravel road except for a while, one site had a little gravel road to it. But over here, it's all gravel and you were dumping cars and stuff all the time over these gravel roads. Going too fast for the conditions that they were in. Not the weather, but the roads. They drove too fast.

HILDERBRAND: What about animals? Did you ever have any interesting encounters with them or hear of some?

WILSON: A crew member in Missouri got in a wreck and they blamed it on an owl. An owl came up like this and distracted them, and they went into a ditch. You have deer hits around here a lot where you run into deer. But other than that, that's about it. I used to have flat tires all the time. I'd go out with my site manager when I was in the 66th, anytime I went out with my chief site manager, we'd have a flat tire. No doubt about it, we'd have a flat tire just about every

time. I went hunting with him and we had a flat tire. So he was bad luck. In fact, he's still in the Rapid City area.

HILDERBRAND: There were occasionally individuals or groups that protested on the missile sites. Were you aware of that?

WILSON: Oh yes!

HILDERBRAND: And what did you think about it?

WILSON: We used to laugh about it. Oh, laugh about it. We really laughed about it. We thought, this is hysterical. Most of us, we just couldn't bear it. This one guy would come up and he'd dress as Jesus Christ and he'd carry his cross and he'd come out and protest almost every year. We just thought he was a big joke. Just a big joke.

HILDERBRAND: Was it policy to stay away from all of that?

WILSON: Yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah. It's another one of those where you kept your distance as a crew member. Let the information officer handle the problem. We didn't get involved.

HILDERBRAND: What did you think about why they were doing that?

WILSON: Oh, we just thought they were nuts.

HILDERBRAND: They were nuts?

WILSON: Yeah.

HILDERBRAND: Okay. How were race relations in the unit? Was that ever a problem?

WILSON: No, it was never a problem. In fact I think the biggest problem was not within the base community. It's when you get outside the base community.

HILDERBRAND: Um hmm. So African Americans, when they came to Rapid City or smaller towns around here when they were off duty, perhaps?

WILSON: Yeah. Yeah. This is a very bigoted area. It really is. It's horrible.

HILDERBRAND: Did you see improvement over the time you were here?

WILSON: No.

HILDERBRAND: Did it change?

WILSON: No. No. In fact, when I got here, I was, I was flabbergasted. I was flabbergasted at the way they reacted to not only African Americans but Native Americans. I lived in Oklahoma, you know. I respected the Native Americans. When you're in the service, you can't afford bigotry. That's not what you should be up to. In fact, most people that have kids that live on base all their lives, or most of their lives until they're ten, twelve years old, and they move into the community, they cannot understand, and we're talking about white kids now. They can't understand when they get into a community that is bigoted as it can be.

HILDERBRAND: They haven't encountered that on the base.

WILSON: They haven't encountered it on the base. One of my bosses, he and I were stationed at Vandenberg and he moved to Florida. He retired and oh man, the kids couldn't understand all this. They'd been sheltered, basically, from this bigotry. On the base it was no problem.

HILDERBRAND: Did African Americans bring it back on to the base, I mean complaining about the way they were treated in town? Did the base try to ameliorate that problem?

WILSON: The biggest complaint I got from my black officers and my black airmen was that there were no places for them to associate, pick-up women because there weren't any for them, they said. They didn't feel welcome at that time. Especially when you consider young airmen, you know the eighteen to nineteen year olds, they're going to the party places. The twenty-one year olds are going to the young bars and stuff that like. Yeah, they just didn't feel welcome.

HILDERBRAND: Did that ever lead to serious problems for some of them?

WILSON: No, I didn't have any problems. I didn't have any real serious stuff myself. I didn't see that my troops encountered much. They'd get into fights and stuff like that. Our biggest ...

HILDERBRAND: That didn't happen?

WILSON: No. That? No. I didn't have much in the way of fighting. I had some of my airmen that came in from some of the cities were pretty street-wise. Some of them wound up in the Air Force, that was because of different situations.

HILDERBRAND: Were there special problems that you encountered when women came into the units?

WILSON: Well, I had a lieutenant that had a little problem with an NCO one time, but I put a squash on that real quick.

HILDERBRAND: Were gender issues a problem among crews ever? I mean, were women, that was probably after ...

WILSON: Yeah, women on crew came in after I wasn't in. I got to meet the Titan women in , well no

HILDERBRAND: Bad movie title: "Titan Women." [laughs]

WILSON: Titan crews had women way before Minuteman ever had. I got to talk to a lot of the females on crew in those days and they were having it was fine. There was no problems. But there was some interesting things about that that I won't talk about here! [laughs]

HILDERBRAND: Really?

WILSON: Yeah! [laughter]

HILDERBRAND: Well, I guess that's your choice!

WILSON: Yeah, supposedly you've heard of "Mile High Club"? Well, they also had a thing in the missile business in the Titan era that was something similar to that.

HILDERBRAND: Yeah, I get your meaning. [laughter] But it didn't present problems?

WILSON: No, I don't think so.

HILDERBRAND: Command certainly would have frowned on it.

WILSON: Oh yeah.

HILDERBRAND: There was no ...

WILSON: Problems, no.

HILDERBRAND: Didn't compromise the mission?

WILSON: No. Not at all. No.

HILDERBRAND: Just some kind of more general sort of questions. We talked about your worst memories, do you have some best memories of your time in the missile business?

WILSON: I think I talked a little bit about it earlier. When I had the opportunity to meet the people next to the site, the farmers. Farmer Brown, Junior Brown is his name from Appleton City, Missouri. Appleton Missouri, I think, or Appleton City. And his son Wayne. And his dog Rusty, I think his name was. They were

just down-home folks that were the best people in the world for a guy like me. I was a city boy, understand? I've learned a lot about country living from them and spent a lot of time in their house and on their pasture and even took my wife down there and she got here first dove in one of their fields. Shot her first dove. Just had a very excellent relationship with those folks there. I got married while I was on crew duty and brought my missile officers to my wedding.

[end of side two, tape one] [beginning side one, tape two]

WILSON: Oh yeah, yeah. I still am in contact with my old roommate that I had when I was on missile crew, and he was very successful. He was Polish, and he was "Ski" and I was "Flip." It was "Flip" and "Ski" and they'd always, always mess it up and call us "Skip" and "Flea." I got the nick-name "Flip" from the missile guys at Whiteman and it followed me everywhere I went. I tried to stop it and when I went to F. E. Warren I figured it would be over with, but as soon as somebody from Whiteman would come up there, it'd all start up again. Then when I went to Vandenberg and it was there, and I guess that was my nick-name as a missileer was "Flip." It was given to me by a man named Longeneau at the Whiteman Air Force Base Officers' Club Bar one night. He just called me "Flip" and it just stuck with everybody, so.

HILDERBRAND: And that was from the famous comedian, Flip Wilson?

WILSON: Yeah, I guess. I don't know. Yeah, I guess that's where he got it from. We had a good bunch of guys. We were all bachelors at the time, and we just got along real well. We spent a lot of time at happy hours when we could. During the summer we'd wind up playing pinochle in the club. Because when you're a missile crew member, you're not working every day. You're just not the established five day-a-week and the weekends off. You may be off during the middle of the week and so you're at the club, where the swimming pool is and you're doing your thing. We just had a nice group of guys that we just hung around and did a lot of neat things with. And it just worked.

HILDERBRAND: Was there a special relationship among the crew members. Especially between members of the same crew team?

WILSON: Yeah. Well, I've got to tell you a little thing. We were at the club one night, and the wives and everybody were there, but we had two guys that were getting evaluated. They were still in training and getting evaluated. We were waiting for them to get out. To give you a good idea of how the information goes, we knew before they knew that they'd busted [failed] their evaluation. That's how close we were. When they came out of there, we knew that they'd busted and we felt bad for them. Because we were always pushing for the other guy, hoping he would make it and do well.

HILDERBRAND: Did they give them another chance?

WILSON: Oh yeah. They got another chance, but you know a bust on an eval is not real good. It's not good for anything. The idea is to pass them all. It's real easy, well, I can't say it's real easy, you can make a critical error just at the drop of a hat. And critical error, one error can bust the whole thing, if you did the wrong thing. They had minor errors and major errors and critical errors. They used to ask us a lot of trivia questions, junk like that.

HILDERBRAND: Would one failure pretty well mean you'd never make major?

WILSON: If you're pretty close, you could probably recover.

HILDERBRAND: Overcome one, maybe?

WILSON: Maybe, yeah. But you never could overcome two. Never. I haven't seen anybody actually flunk two evaluations that did. Because I had a deputy, he had busted two before, and under me he got a five-o, which is a perfect ride. His evaluators got kidded for it. Then we got de-crewed and he busted his next one. He wound up getting riffed out of the service basically because of this. Yeah.

HILDERBRAND: That kind of erratic performance must have been really unusual.

WILSON: Well, I ...

HILDERBRAND: Was it personal?

WILSON: Well, he just didn't have it all there. But some guys just couldn't do it. Some guys just make a little error. They designed those evaluations where they really tested you. You had to know your business. In the heat of the battle, you could forget something real easy. If you forget that one thing and there's one where if your key turned on a missile that had people in the hole and they had the missile safed, you shut down the missile. It was a clear call. A lot of times they forgot that they told a guy to get out or if they told a guy to get out. The missile looked like it was launchable when it wasn't. It just really shouldn't have been. That was easy to do. But anyway, we had a good time. We partied hard and we made sure our business was done too. It was an interesting time. Whiteman was kind of an interesting place 'cause you had a site about forty miles south of Kansas City, and I heard rumors that some of the professional women would come down and stop at the site. [laughter] I don't know that for a fact, but I've heard rumors that they did that.

HILDERBRAND: Did you ever hear rumors like that about here?

WILSON: No, I hadn't. I could tell you more about Whiteman. I could tell you about the Hotel Five UFO that they had, too, that was kind of interesting. Where they

supposedly had a UFO that came over the site. People saw it and that site was never the same. Did crazy things for a long time. It was kept kind of secret from a lot of people, but a lot of people knew about it. And they always talk about, I think it was Hotel Five.

HILDERBRAND: So, did you think that was caused by a UFO?

WILSON: I have no clue, but boy I tell you I guess it did strange things out there. The way people would talk about it that knew about it that were out there during that time frame said, "Yeah, that sucker would do some crazy things." Until they replaced the whole missile and all, a lot of equipment that was there.

HILDERBRAND: Um hmm.

WILSON: So.

HILDERBRAND: Well, I'm about out of questions. Do you have any other comments? Anything that you'd like to say to get on the record? Comes to mind?

WILSON: Well, I got to tell you another funny story.

HILDERBRAND: Go ahead.

WILSON: In those days, all fifteen Launch Control Centers had HF send and receive, what they called the Christmas tree. The HF antenna. You had to be listening, and the numbered Air Force would do an unannounced radio check, oh about once every six, eight hours. You had one Launch Control Center that was always supposed to be what we called the MRCS, or the main guy that they contact all the time, every hour. He would call them and say, "I need a reading. I read loud and clear." That's fine. But then, one time, they'd call, they'd pull the whole squadron. Well, this particular day, I was it. I was MRCS. It was Saturday in October or November of 1968, I think it was, and I'm trying to remember this day. There was a football game on, I think it was either Texas and Oklahoma or Texas and Arkansas, and it was on Armed Forces Radio, we called AFARTS. You could dial it in on this HF radio. You could dial AFARTS and listen to the ball game. I couldn't do that and I really wanted to listen to that ball game.

Well, my roommate was pulling alert the same time I was, but he was over in Delta. Which is a different squadron than I was. I was over in the 509th which was over at Juliet. I said "Do me a favor. Answer as me. And when we get that no-notice, call me up right away so I can notify the squadron through the normal channels." Notify the whole wing. And that's what we did. He answered as me and I listened to the ball game. I can guarantee you that if you can go up to that HF radio today and there's two door panels up there, and if you unscrew them and take it around, there'd be a whole list of radio frequencies you could listen to. I had to listen to that football game. I was a big

football fan. You know how people get carried away with football. I had to listen to that game. So I listened to the football game and sure enough, that no-notice radio check came on during that game. He called me up when he got it and no one ever knew the difference. Just old Ski and I just took care of it. Those were some fun times.

There was one time where we called upstairs and, when you called upstairs it was on a direct line to the security guard upstairs. I think we had the dumbest cook in the world that day. I called upstairs and the cook answers. I says, "Where is the Flight Security Controller?" "Oh, he's not here." "Well, who's got the gun?" "I do." [laughter] Oh man, I tell you! Here we got this cook who didn't have all his rocks together to begin with and the FSC had given him his gun and put him at the desk. I mean that was strange.

HILDERBRAND: Was that ever, was that authorized?

WILSON: No, it wasn't authorized! It was crazy! It was nuts! It was unbelievable. But that's what happened with some of our guys. They'd left the station, and they'd go down and they got caught by the police in the middle of the town and in a government vehicle when they should be at the site. That's when all that kind of thing changed. They restricted everybody.

HILDERBRAND: Um hmm.

WILSON: When things happened they react to stuff, no different than anybody else. But I am really impressed with what they are going to do out here. I hope it's going to be good. I really do. I wouldn't mind giving tours out there, to tell you the truth! [laughter]

HILDERBRAND: Well, it may come to that, that they'll call on some of you to do that. I think that would be great.

WILSON: Yeah. Yeah. That would be fun. That would be fun to do 'cause you can talk about where things are located. There's a lot of trivia questions involved with the capsule down there that they used to ask you and you had to go searching for. There's a forty foot shovel down there to dig out through the fence. We figured that at the end, there's going to be nothing but glass or there's pavement there.

HILDERBRAND: So it wasn't something you thought about on a daily basis, that you could be trapped down there?

WILSON: Well, you'd go out and look at that hole, that cover over where you're suppose to dig out. We used to tear that place apart, take a look at everything and figure out different things and try things and just experiment with it. See what

we could do. We found some interesting things. Found some interesting things.

HILDERBRAND: Did you have an idea of where you were supposed to go if you ever dug out?

WILSON: They never told us that. [laughter] They never told us that. I think there was a .22 down there that they provided. A .22 rifle down there with a bunch of ammunition. Some survival food and those kind of things, but who knows what. That was the big out, of course, if you couldn't get out the elevator or the stairs was the whole idea, to be able to get out.

HILDERBRAND: There wouldn't be any vehicles that would be operational when you got out.

WILSON: No. No. No. There wouldn't be much of anything.

HILDERBRAND: If you were out here, it would be a long walk!

WILSON: [laughter] Yeah. Depending on what time of year it is. [laughter]

HILDERBRAND: Yeah. Well, uh ...

WILSON: Okay. Well good!

HILDERBRAND: Thank you, Colonel Wilson.

WILSON: Thank you! It's my pleasure!

HILDERBRAND: This concludes our interview.

WILSON: Okay. Good. We can do that.

[End of interview]