

# Speaker: Leslie High

Date Recorded: 10-26-2016

My name is Leslie D. High. I'm a retired captain in the United States Coast Guard, and I'm now retired. Only been retired for 41 years. I started in the Coast Guard back in the '40s during the war, and I was going to college for a couple of years. While I was there, my dad told me about the opportunity with the Coast Guard Academy, and I went to the Coast Guard Academy.

Took me two years to get in there, but when I arrived there I'd already had two years of college, so it was a very, very easy program. I had been working 40 hours a week in the college. I went to the Academy and I got this all free for doing a couple of square corners and double timing.

I graduated in my class and fairly high in the class, so I got the U.S. Coast Guard Taney as my first assignment and went to the west coast. I did marry my wonderful wife on graduation day, so we both joined the Coast Guard and became Coast Guard people immediately. From then on, we just found all these wonderful people in the Coast Guard to be part of our family and that's the way we felt about them.

We went to the west coast. I went to the Taney. They'd got a new ship called the Acushnet, and they needed a brand-new ensign who they wanted to be somewhat alert, so they picked one of the top guys and I got to be on that ship and we took that ship, towed another ship to Yamacraw through the Panama Canal, and went to the east coast and outfitted that ship, the Acushnet.

We went to Maine. I was on sea duty for two years, and then they assigned me to a Loran station in Kwajalein as CO, so I went to that training in Connecticut, went to be on the isolated station for 12 months. I was gone about 14 months. Then I got a chance to go to aviation.

When I came back, I went to Pensacola. I got my wings in early '51. I got a wonderful air station at San Diego. Great place to start. I got to serve with people like McDermott, who was an expert on offshore landing. I learned some early on techniques that were just fabulous. I served with many great people at San Diego.

Then I got Kodiak as a duty pilot there. We flew out the chain servicing LORAN stations and other stations. Got to do the landing on the side of the mountain and picking up mail. We flew down and picked it up at 10 feet off the ground. These are all things that aviators love doing.

Then from Kodiak I had a CO that I saved his fanny, so to speak, by ... He had registered publication problems, and so when he got transferred he took me with him to Traverse City, Michigan. He wanted me to handle the registered

publications. I went to Traverse City. Great place. By that time, I was a lieutenant. I got to fly all kinds of airplanes. I noticed the HO3S helicopter was in a museum yesterday. I'm the guy that probably has the most hours in that machine. That brought back lots of nice memories.

Then from Traverse City, since I suggested somebody else go on the icebreaker instead of me ... I had done my year of isolated duty from my family so I thought some aviator could go on the icebreaker. "We're going to punish you by sending you to Bermuda." They sent me to Bermuda for three years, where they had the Cadillac of seaplanes, called a P5M. We got rid of those in the Coast Guard at that time, but I got to fly that airplane and it was a wonderful airplane.

As we transitioned to the UF, I was also then training people. One of the interesting stories there, I was showing a guy how to fly the UF and we had an engine fire. I was in the right seat. He said, "You want to take it? You want to take it?" I said, "No, no, no. This is an opportunity. I'll put the fire out, you land the airplane." He was able to go ahead ... I said, "Just keep your altitude and remember when we land you got to taxi off the runway before we run out of speed because we haven't got any way to control the direction of this airplane." That was one of the little incidents.

I went from there to the United States Coast Guard Academy as the staff aviator. That was a four-year tour. As soon as I arrived at the Academy the class of '65, who had just come in that year, selected me to be their class advisor. My wife and I became class advisors for this bunch of guys, and we've been with them now for 55 years. They were just like sons and daughters to us guys.

I write to them every year and they write back. Even at this event, several of them came. One came from California, one from Colorado, and we had a bunch of people over in Pensacola we met with. These are all class ... These are people who are like my kids. Anyway, that was a wonderful acquisition.

When I left the Academy, they were going to send me to Detroit as a CO, but they didn't have the money to build the air station so I wanted ... When they couldn't put me there, they wanted to put me into a significant job, so they put me at Savannah, where we were starting a first standardization program. It had a little problem with the H-52, and they were bending that airplane, and so we decided we had to start flying our airplanes in a standard manner.

Before that time, the way we used to learn to fly a new airplane, we'd send a pilot to the factory and he would fly with a test pilot for a couple of flights, and that guy came back and taught us how to fly the airplane. Just ridiculous, unprofessional way to learn to fly an airplane.

Anyway, we started a standardization program. We had four pilots, four of the smoothest pilots you'll ever know. One of them was Win Corley, Ken Baum, and Max Casper, and a guy named Al Reif. Then I got to become the senior man at running a brand-new program. Then they decided we want to do standardization programs for all of our airplanes, so they decided to get a bigger air station.

They found Mobile, and so they decided they needed a project officer for that. Who was the lucky guy to get to be project officer? A guy by the name of Les High. I got that wonderful, wonderful opportunity. In fact, that's the reason I'm probably being touted a little bit for this particular evolution of it.

Everybody loves Mobile, and they're amazed by this, the old guy that came aboard with a briefcase and a set of orders and that's all they had. Then, of course, my number-two guy at the air station was a guy by the name of Don Bellis. These are mostly aviation personnel, so he ran the people and I pretty much ran the managing the reconditioning of the air station. Anyway, we had a wonderful project. We got the thing built in a little less ... We got it commissioned even the same year we started our standardization program.

Then I became the exec at Mobile for a year and a half, which ... Can you realize what an opportunity that was? We were starting a new air station and I got to write all the directives, and therefore they had Les High's tenor in them. I was known to be a firm military pilot, and I was known to get things done. That's why I supposedly got the job. Richmond, head of aviation, came to recruit me to do Mobile, and I'm glad that I accepted that opportunity. Of course, he knew and I knew he could order me to do it.

Anyway, after I was at Mobile, he promised me an air station so he finally gave me Detroit. I went to Detroit for a normal tour of two or three years. My first year there, I got selected for the National War College in Washington, so I was only at Detroit for one year and then I went to the National War College.

Out of there, they assigned me as chief of training and procurement, which is all the training commands, which has seven in the Coast Guard including the Coast Guard Academy, and procurement of people, which was all the recruiting during the Vietnam days and so forth. I had the best job in headquarters, even a better job than a commandant.

Then while I was in headquarters, I ... This was my opportunity. We had been training most of our aviation enlisted people in other schools, and so I hired a guy by the name of George Kreitmeyer to do a year study. He and I knew it was going to be ... We could do it better. By that time, I moved on but George Kreitmeyer took that study. We got to improve by a commandant.

Admiral Siler was a dear friend of mine, and then he told the next commandant we wanted this program, so that became approved. They got the money. They built the aviation technical training. I had a little part in that too. I've had some fun in my aviation days.

Then from there, I went to one of the largest training commands at Yorktown. I was a commanding officer of the training center at Yorktown. I was there two years and then after we had done just about everything I wanted to do, I retired in San Diego and have been retired in San Diego for 41 years.

I had served with Admiral Smith for a long time at the Academy when the class was there. He was the superintendent. Later on, and when I was running these aviation training programs ... I ran a Navy aviation program every summer. They'd send me three airplanes. I'd start a little unit in Elizabeth City. I'd get the pilots and the crew, and we would have cadets come and become aware of what aviation was all about. In fact, as aviator at the Academy, my wearing a green outfit and so forth, different from everybody else, I was making these people enthused about being in aviation.

Admiral Smith liked what I did. He just liked my being military and being very ... Getting things done. Anyway, he used to come and visit me. When they started the air station at Mobile, he was the commandant of the Coast Guard, so he decided he wanted to come and see how it was going. He called up and he said, "I want to come and visit you, Les. I'm going to come on Saturday," and whatever. I'd been there about three or four weeks.

In the meantime, I heard that there was a C-130 going to Bermuda. We were closing Bermuda, Argentina, and Biloxi. I wanted to ride out to Bermuda and put tags on all the stuff I wanted. I called up the commandant and I said, "I got people here to debrief you," and I said, "But Admiral, I'm not going to be here." He chuckled and chuckled and he says, "Only Les High would tell the commandant 'I'm not going to be there when you come on a visit.'" You like that story?

Speaker 2: I do.

Leslie High: My life has been filled with wonderful stories like that. Of course, he came for the commissioning and he always ... He liked what I did. He was the commandant. I'll admit to your tape probably, I did things for the Coast Guard wasn't particularly ... Seniors didn't bother me. The job was what I was doing. Most of the seniors knew that. I was just being Les High. Part of what's happening here today is that many of these people are telling me stories about ... I was kind of a firm guy. I've had lots of stories. Need some more?

Speaker 2: Sure.

Leslie High: I was with McDermott in San Diego, the expert of flying offshore. We learned to do some offshore landings. I'll tell one little incident. I was flying a PBM with a guy by the name of Frankie. He was the pilot and I was the copilot. We were both aircraft commanders, but I was the junior guy.

We had a lady on a sailboat about 200 or 250 miles out, and she had had diabetic shock and the doctor said, "If we don't get her off the ship, she's going to die." We went out there. We had about 40-foot swells, maybe 50, but you land parallel to the swells and hope that the chop is not too bad and so forth.

It looked fine. We could probably land okay. We landed, and of course, when we landed we were in the swells. We were going up and down like this and every time we went up and down, when we went down the sailboat's mast went out of sight, the swells were so ... Anyway, we went upwind, dropped the doctor off in the raft, he drifted down to the boat, examined the lady, and he said to the husband, "She's got to go out with us."

He says, "No way am I going to send my ... I saw you guys land. I'm not going to let her go on that airplane." The doctor convinced him that she was going to die if she didn't get on the airplane with us. He put her on the raft with the doc, then, of course, we had to go downwind and they drifted down to us. We picked them up.

It was a difficult takeoff. We had several runs. You have to get going close enough to flying speed before you fire off the JATO, and so we had a couple of runs that just ... We weren't quite there. I think with the third run we fired off the JATO, got airborne, but as we took off, I don't know which float it was but one of the floats hit the water and it smashed it.

We now had a wing float that was smashed in. It wasn't off, but it was smashed, and we knew it wasn't watertight. Basically, when we landed, we knew we had let that wing get down. In those days, we didn't have the bridge in San Diego, so we landed over the strand, which was real low land in the southern bay, and then came up the bay, and then of course Frankie and I knew we had to get somebody out on the wing while we turned in the other direction.

After we landed, we got some people ready to get out of there and so as we slowed down we kept turning until we could get some people out of the way to hold the wing down. We got the gal back. She was saved and so that was one of my fun things.

Another typical flight out of San Diego ... Not typical, but one I tell my kids about. I could sleep well. I was an aircraft commander in those days, and we used to have a flight. I was running the section and we had a call that was a fishing boat off Cabo San Lucas, which is down the end of the Baja California. It took us seven hours to fly

there.

We'd get the call in the early evening. "We got an injured seaman. We got to get him back to the United States," and so forth. Then the public health doctors would try to decide, "Do we need to go get him?" By about ... They'd be working at it. We'd find out at ten o'clock. We had to leave by ... If we wanted to be there at sunset we had to leave about midnight.

We'd find out maybe ten-thirty. I could sleep. I could go lay down and I could sleep for whatever time I had didn't matter if its half an hour or an hour and a half. We'd get a little sleep because we'd been up all day now. We're going to fly all night. Then we'd take off, loaded to the gills. In San Diego, you had to go around the bay and you had to stay below 200 feet. Here we got an 118-foot airplane wingspan, and we're flying below and we're loaded to the gills.

We take off out of there at about midnight, pick up the person, fly back, get back and land and it's about two o'clock in the afternoon. We came to work day before at eight o'clock. I've had about an hour sleep, and now we've picked up a guy and we're coming back. That was one of my longer flights.

My service career has just been wonderful with Coast Guard people. As I said to the group the other night, they gave me a chance to talk for a few minutes. I was just pointing out that everywhere I worked, the people that were working with me just made the Coast Guard and me shine. They just used to amaze me, the things that they could do.

I'm just talking about Mobile. I got there and there was this guy, Don Bellis, who's an engineer, and he handled most of the people. He and I would meet. I kept a log of that particular evolution, so we got a daily log of history of the building of Mobile, handwritten by me. Of course, it's in the history log of the Pterodactyls.

We would meet each day. We would decide what we were going to do. Our long-range planning was for tomorrow or maybe two days from now because it was a new project. There was nothing to follow. We had to go from there. Anyway, we would meet with the two of us and whoever we thought needed to be there. As the numbers grew, we had different people come.

We decided what we had done that day for the record, what we were going to do the next day or so or the next week, and we put it in the log. It was a briefing document. We knew that as people came we couldn't spend a lot of time briefing them, so we'd show them the base, let them read the log, then bring them back and brief them one more time on what we wanted them to do, and bingo, we'd put them to work. We had a system that really worked.

When Captain Durfey came after several months, he did not change our routine. He used to sit behind me and as I worked with Don and the people there, and then I'd turn to the captain and say, "You got anything to add or change?" Of course, he didn't change anything because I was the one that was started and I knew where all the things were.

It was a great project because we were closing three air stations, so we had to facilitate people, airplanes, from three air stations. The money somewhat. Of course, they recruited me. Admiral Richmond recruited me, so I think he really felt, "I got to give Leslie what he wants because I asked him to come here and do this. Now I can't tell him he can't have stuff." He made a great effort to ... That part was really great.

Then but what was amazing was that the people, the things they did. I'd have an item in the log, "Painted the west wall of the supply building." That took three words, but that took hours and hours and hours of work. Don was able to get these people. Their standard expression was, "If you ask me or tell me to do it, Commander, it will be done." It was really true. That was the Coast Guard people that have made me shine all through my Coast Guard career.

They give me a lot of credit, but basically, it's the Coast Guard people taking care of the Coast Guard and Les High. I have to admit that they just blessed me. Now they're doing that at this reunion. I can't ... They're featuring Les High. Anyway, it was an amazing group, amazing things they did.

One of the things, we needed a new paint and supply building. Our guys weren't doing anything for a while. The Air Force had a contract to build that building. They tried to do it a couple of times with 25,000 or \$30,000. My guys came to me one day and said, "Commander, can you get me \$1,500 and we'll build that building?" I said, "Come on, you guys can't build it, you're not stone ..." "We'll figure it out."

One guy said he was a stone expert. He saw his dad do stonework once in awhile, so he could do that. They built a building for our paint and oil storage to all the specifications that are supposed to be. They called it the Don Bellis Building. That was just one of the simple stories. He painted the hangar, for goodness' sakes. His standard expression was, "Give me five gallons of paint and 10 gallons of thinner and we'll paint anything."

As you looked in my log it was, "We did this and painted, and did this and painted, and did this and painted." I must be entertaining you a little bit because you're smiling. You like these stories?

Speaker 2: Yes, yes.

Leslie High: That was the unbelievable part. I've read this log a couple of times recently and it amazes me first that I was able to make so many of those decisions right off the top of my head, but we didn't have any time to plan. We couldn't wait until next week to decide what to do, we had to get onto the next thing.

Don was very good at ... He was establishing the aviation engineering area, so he made all kinds of decisions without my being involved because he knew I didn't have time. They were his areas anyway. Of course, I made lots that he wasn't involved in. Captain Durfey was a perfect CO because he pretty much let us do our thing. When he came, he did all the CO things. He went to see the dignitaries. I didn't have to do that anymore. Met the mayor and ...

One of the things that I really was tickled about, we were talking to the local people at the air station. I mean that on the field there. They were talking about they had charges for landing. They were charging airplanes \$100 per landing and so forth. We were talking about how are they going to charge the Coast Guard? I said, "You can't charge us \$100 a landing. Some helicopters going to land five times in a minute." We talked about the nature of things.

They said, "What do you think would be the proper fee for you?" I said, "I think we ought to do something like about \$100 a month for the Coast Guard." They agreed to that, so we got airplane landing rights for 100 bucks a month. This is just one of the simple little things we did when we were building this air station. Like I said, I got zillions of these stories, but I'd ... Aren't you running out of time?

Speaker 2: I've got time for another story.

Leslie High: Okay. That was a nice thing there. I will admit that at headquarters I really enjoyed that. I may have been one of the first aviation people that got to be chief of training. That was nice because I got ... I had been at the Academy as a graduate back in ... I was in one of the three-year classes. During the war, they cut the classes to three years to get us out sooner. I was one of the ... I was the last three-year class.

Speaker 2: What was your aviation number?

Leslie High: 549. My helicopter number is 195, I think. Yeah, 195. I'm kind of an old guy. I can probably tell some more stories than some of these people because I've been around. That's what's so wonderful. I got a chance to talk to the people at this place, and one of the things that really has impressed me, we were sitting with some of the award winners last night, the young people.

One of the young guys said to me, he was telling me the things he heard in what I ... I had a four-minute ... They let me speak four minutes. He was repeating stuff.



Many of the women were repeating things that they heard. These young people and women at a Coast Guard Aviation meeting listened to this old guy. Can you imagine that? I mean, most of the time they just wouldn't pay any attention at all.

That part really impressed me. Of course, now everybody seems to know me. Another fun event about three weeks ago, my class went back to the Academy and it's my 70th reunion. There were seven of us, one widow and six of us. When we marched on the field, they had an honored class of this 50-year class, and they marched on last, but we were just before them. There were the six of us.

We had our little white hats on. It had '47 on it. We graduated in '46 but we were the class of '47. We had their little hats. Evidently, we looked pretty ... First place, all six of us walked on. Two of them with canes, but ... I got behind the people with the canes to make sure they got there. Then we came on the field under ... They made the announcement about us. We were going so slow, they were supposed to be at the end of the park but we didn't get there.

I guess as we ... They have a standing ovation for us. These old people coming on the stand. The nice thing about it after that is we walked around. People would look and they would just ... You'd see them and as you walked toward them they would smile and they'd look at your hat, and you could almost see them say, "I wonder if I'll ever make 70."

Of course, the women would just smile. "Here's this old guy can make it here." Of course, the other night as I was getting up and down on the stage I could feel the people in the room. I wonder if this guy could make it up there. They were all cheering. I could feel them cheering for me. That's what they've been doing for me all my career, is cheering for me. I feel like a really blessed Coast Guard guy, I know, and to be a part of this organization.

The guys that started the organization, which are Gus Shrode and George Thometz and a couple other guys, and they were in Long Beach and I was retired in San Diego. I used to go to all their meetings, and when they wanted to start the club they wanted me to be a part of the group and I said, "No, look. I live 100 miles away. You guys live together." I didn't join them, but I really was ... I flew with those guys out of San Diego in 1951.

They were two years ahead of me at the Academy and had served in headquarters. I was with Gus Shrode. He was in the office, the inspector's office. He really liked what I was doing in training. When they wanted to inspect the Academy, I said, "Why don't you put me on your team?" The Academy was run by admirals. I had the money, so I controlled it, but there were some things I wanted done like I didn't like the study hours and all this sort of stuff. I didn't want to direct an admiral to do

that, but I could get the inspector ...

Putting this on public tape, but okay. I don't care now, at this stage in my life. Anyway, they put me on this study, and of course, I went there and I told Admiral ... I've forgotten the inspector general. He just thought this was wonderful, that Les High would come and nail his own organization. I wanted to upgrade. Look, I wanted to upgrade, not for me, for the Coast Guard. That's why I was known as Mr. Coast Guard.

I ran into a guy the other night. He was with me in Detroit, and he later became CO of the air station. That's the first thing he greeted me with. "Mr. Coast Guard." I was a fairly firm guy, and people were ... I suppose there were some that are a little afraid of me until they found out that if they surge with me and did what they were supposed to do, they had no problems.

I smiled a lot. I had ... My feeling about the Coast Guard was a friendly aloofness. Nobody ever called me by my first name that was junior to me very often. I just ... Particularly when I was commanding officer. That was not a vain thing. I was representing the position of commanding officer. We need to make the commanding officer in command and keep it there. I'm not really a believer in being buddy-buddy. I'm friendly but not buddy-buddy.