

Joe Campbell interviewed by Judy Allen May 10, 2023

Navy and AF ROTC graduates continue their training at Officer Candidate or Training School before receiving their commission as a second Lieutenant.

AIR FORCE ROTC

Air Force ROTC offers a four-year program and a three-year program, both based on Air Force requirements and led by active-duty Air Force officers. Upon completion, a student enters the Air Force as an officer.

Brigadier General Joe Campbell, USAF pilot

Joe Campbell is a graduate of Baylor University. Joining ROTC, he took four years of courses, and after graduation was commissioned as an officer to the Air Force as a Second Lieutenant.

"I married the final year in Baylor. Betsy and I were married ____ years. She was with me during my entire service." His wife passed away in 2012, eight years after he completed his service. "Losing someone you have been with that long, my wife, best friend and mother of my children, was devastating," he said. "She always gave sage advice. She was total encouragement, making 27 moves to different locations and different houses. To be able to pick up and move and reestablish everything takes a special person. She also kept me centered. That is important and she did a great job of that."

He and Betsy drove together to his initial training. He had sixteen months flight training at Moultrie, Georgia and Big Springs, Texas. His training on aircraft included the T-34; T-37, T-33 and four months of advanced training in Oklahoma City with the C-124 and also at Little Rock on the C-130.

"One bad thing that happened during training was in Big Springs, Texas at Advanced Flight Training. What I call my 'table-mate' (he and I were both married and had our wives with us) sat at the same table with one instructor. We were taking a formation flight one day and on return, he crashed. I watched as I rolled down the runway landing. He and the instructor ejected from the aircraft. One chute opened and one didn't. I knew one was killed. The guy in training with me did open his chute, but was severely injured. I went with some more senior officers to tell his wife he was injured, and then I had to go back to an airplane and fly again. This was what was done to not have a dread of flying. I was able to meet my tablemate again twenty years later! I have lost several other friends due to crashes – that is an event you must be prepared for," said Campbell.

Military life can be difficult in other ways, too. Campbell said the hardest part of military life was being required to be ready for deployment anywhere, anytime. "Once I was called and told to pack and be at flight operations in one hour. I was gone a month. My wife did not know where I was or when I would be home. I was sent overseas in the war zone."

Overall, Campbell said he and Betsy adapted easily to military lifestyle. "It is always difficult to know you will be in a location 2 – 4 years. You have to build your lifestyle around that. You are always having to make new friends and tell friends goodbye."

"There was never a doubt that I was considering military service as a career. I enjoyed flying and that type of profession. It was a pleasure to me, and I never had a doubt I was going to do at least 20 years!"

Campbell said, "I totally enjoyed my job as a flight crew member. I enjoyed the adventure and sights and people and locations I visited. I enjoyed the excitement and challenges of flight. Almost every flight had something unique and a different perspective to be addressed. The people you come into contact with almost always presented a new twist to how things were handled. I appreciate the friendship that comes from the close working conditions and hardships faced – not only as a military member, but also for family members. Family members are often left to cope with hardships without the presence of the spouse/parent." He said he felt his family was strengthened through being together during his 32 years of service. He is very proud of his family's independence and initiative. "One day while living in Greenville, South Carolina with my wife and little girl, I went on a ten-day trip to Vietnam. My wife picked me up at the base when I returned and began telling me what all was going on. I noticed we were not going the way where we lived. We pulled into a location and Betsy said, 'This is where we live now.' She had found a new place less isolated and moved us into a new apartment duplex where other military people were.

He hopes future generations understand that military life offers opportunities to establish friendships that last forever. "Teamwork is learned, problem solving requires trust and survival comes to the forefront," he said of life in the service.

Campbell formed many relationships and worked with many people during his time in the Air Force. "You develop an affinity to feel good and enjoy life, and to know that you have a comradery with people you served with. Special friends made in the service that Campbell still sees and visits with are Clay Ford and Gary Spence.

Campbell said his wartime experience changed him. "I became more aware that life is precious and you must be aware of your surroundings at all times." Campbell also said, "I have more enjoyment of life. My experience made me very thankful of who I was the life that I had. Mainly, it gave me a stronger religion. I am still very strong in my faith." He said his oldest son, as a child, got a small aluminum cross in Bible School and gave it to Campbell. "I carried that small cross with me always."

He shared memories of a time that made him realize "One is never out of sight!" Campbell said, "I was in Africa and a CBS film crew was there for a 60 Minutes segment. I was filmed leaning against the aircraft main gear tire, getting out of the hot sun. When I got back to my deployment location, my wife had sent a letter telling me where I was and asked when I was coming home. I had been gone some 80+ days at that time.

Another unusual experience was when my friend Clay Ford and I were flying 'forest firefighting' missions in California. For this mission we were told to go to a specific point, degree and mile, from a navigation facility. Our load of retardant was approximately 3,000 gallons and was armed and ready for discharge on the fire. As we proceeded to our designated holding position, we noticed our plane was flying into a valley between large mountains with the terrain rising as we proceeded. Clay and I discussed that the mountains were too close to turn around. We opened the rear ramp and doors, extended the two discharge tubes and prepared to dump the entire 3,000 gallons of fire retardant if we needed to. Max power was applied, flaps extended for extra lift, airspeed lowered to increase altitude, and just as we were about to discharge the load, we cleared the ridge line to open skies."

Campbell flew planes fighting forest fires in Idaho, Utah and Washington. "This was done flying a military aircraft. We would fly about 110-150 feet above the treetops," he said.

He had several jobs in the Air Force, including pilot, Group Commander and Wing Commander. "Over the 32+ years, I had several things I was involved in," he said. "The longstanding one was Vietnam, I was a pilot in a multi-engine heavy lift aircraft. I took supplies to Vietnam and on return, would bring back damaged equipment and body bags. That was very difficult to handle. I knew it was not a pleasant thing, but also knew that someone was waiting for that bag, so it was a tough art of the mission. Other things I was involved in included rescuing missionaries out of Africa. I flew in and would pick up a load in France and fly to Africa. Being over there and trying to rescue the missionaries, meant spending the night in the middle of the jungle. We had to sleep in the aircraft and lock the doors, securing the aircraft from the inside so bad guys couldn't get in the plane. We heard gunfire overnight and in the morning, we saw bodies laid over the fence."

Campbell said, "Military service can mean being in situations where you can be killed and you have to deal with this on a daily basis. It never became routine. I think military persons compartmentalize thoughts – what you are doing, while you are doing it, you don't think about the possibility of being killed, or what could happen. You think of current things going on. Bad things are put to the back of mind. This gets you through the day."

Active service for Campbell included being with the 63rd Tactical (then Military) Air Lift Wing (TAW); 433rd TAW; 459th TAW; 913th TAG; 302nd TAW; and the 403rd TAW. He served from 1960 to 1994 – a total of 32 ½ years.

He was honored as a one of the first Native Americans in the Air Force and one of the first Native American General with a display at the Pentagon.

Campbell spent time in Texas, Georgia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Mississippi, Germany and England.

San Antonio was a very special location for Campbell, (and is where he retired to live). "There were several places where I really enjoyed living. Special units that I embraced, enjoyed had had great comradery. Colorado Springs is one of my favorites. I was at Peterson AFB. I go back every three to five years for reunions. September of 2022, there were about 400 people in attendance. One of the places my wife really enjoyed was Doyleston, Pennsylvania. The location of the base was near towns she enjoyed. The base was close to Philadelphia and fairly close to where George Washington crossed the Delaware. In Pennsylvania, we could experience all four seasons, and the covered bridges and beauty of the land helped make it a beautiful part of the world," said Campbell. He said they also had a great time in Greenville, South Carolina, which was in the base of a mountain. "Being from Texas, we saw different weather in these places."

Campbell said, "I was born and raised in Bennington, Oklahoma. We had one type of growth of trees, and it was a farming community. I am a farm person. I grew up shaking peanuts. I have sack them in the back of a thrasher. I have picked cotton. I enjoy being in the country, and I enjoy being around Durant. That is my part of the world. I have raised chickens and hogs and showed them at the livestock show at the fair. I remember spending the night showing a hog when I was 10 or 11 and slept in the pen with my hog. I can remember going to Durant and eating Dairy Queen ice cream. I remember the skating rink, which I am sure is long gone. When I was nine or ten, my mother was a pianist and played for church. She wanted me to learn, so I went every Saturday on the bus from Bennington to Durant and got piano lessons."

My parents were Bronson and Lucille Riddle Campbell. Mother attended Wheelock Academy and used to tell me she played the piano as all the girls walked in to dinner,” said Campbell. He attended school in Bennington through the 8th grade, then they moved to Spring Lake in Texas.

He retired from the Air Force in 1994, and four years later contracted cancer. “It changed my whole life of what I was wanting to do. I am very fortunate the good Lord decided I needed more time on Earth and I was cured. I thank the Lord every day and am thankful for the doctors. I have been in remission for over 20 years. Every day is a day of possibility for me.”

Traditions in his family include, “Love one another, support each other and love your God.”

Campbell has advice for future generations, “Have a dream, go for that dream. Stay focused, trust in your God and know that family comes first.”