

## The History Professional *An Interview with Yancy D. Mailes*

*Yancy Mailes is the Director of the Air Force Materiel Command History and Museums Program. He began his professional career in 1987 with the F-117 Stealth Fighter program and became an USAF historian in 1996. Prior to arriving at AFMC, Mailes served as the Director of the Air Force Global Strike Command History and Museums Program. During his career he deployed numerous times, most recently as the historian for the only high altitude reconnaissance wing operating in southwest Asia.*



*Yancy D. Mailes*

*Interview by Thomas Faith*

### **What are your current duties at the Air Force Material Command (AFMC)?**

I oversee the entire AFMC History and Museums Program that includes establishing and implementing policy while preserving the Command's institutional memory as well as its material heritage. I lead a headquarters team consisting of historians, curators, and archivists who gather critical documents preserved in the command's archive and used to write the command's annual history along with classified/unclassified special studies, books, and briefings. Together, the archive and annual history serve as the corporate memory for this institution. In addition, as a Functional Manager for three distinct careers fields (historians, archivists, and curators), I manage a field program consisting of 14 field historians, 8 museum specialists, and 2 archivists. As part of the Command's heritage activities, I provide oversight for 4 field museums and 21 Historical Property Accounts that include 10k+ artifacts and 278 static aircraft.

### **When you began your history career as a Wing Historian, what were your duties like then?**

The focus of a Wing Historian is much different than my duties today. To begin, I started my historian career as an enlisted man and now I am a civilian. With that said, not much has changed since I traded the uniform for a business suit. I entered the program without a degree, but later earned a bachelor's and master's from Boise State University in Idaho. I love that blue field! At the wing, an historian is focused on documenting the mission of preparing for war. They observe wing leadership as they lead the team through various exercises that test the unit's capability to deploy and win war. While observing is very important, the historian's first duty is to document. The wing historian is required to publish an annual summary, most often classified, of the unit's efforts for that calendar year. Some subjects vary, but others are constant. Historians focus on organizational history along with what is important to the commander. While the historian is focused on the wartime mission, they also lend their talents to documenting base history. The job is unique in that the wing historian must have one foot in the distant past and be able to quickly speak to any past event, including base history, but they must also have one foot firmly grounded in the present so they can document today. I often say, if you don't write history today you will not have heritage 25

years from now and you will not have lessons learned to assist the leadership decision process. Lastly, most folks do not know that the wing historian is a deployable asset. It is mandatory that they travel down range to document the war and bring home the truth. During my career I deployed eight times. My most memorable was in 2003/2004 to Iraq.

### **You also previously served as Director of the Air Force Global Strike Command History and Museums Program. What did your responsibilities consist of there?**

Those duties were similar to my current duties in that I am a manager. The big departure is that here at AFMC I fell in on an existing program that had been in place for several decades. The office, the program, had its processes and those were difficult to change. The most difficult hurdle to clear is transforming the physical archive into a digital cloud-based system. As I will talk to in a moment, I had learned that leadership wanted answers in minutes and hours not days or weeks. Leadership needed trons not paper. If we wanted to be part of the decision process and operationalize history by weaponizing the archive, we needed to take all the goodness trapped in the archive and make it available to a wider audience. In doing so, we would gain additional customers and expand our influence.

At Global Strike we had the opportunity to create what worked best as we resurrected the Strategic Air Command archive and looked to the past to assist the present. Myself and Dr. Bill Harris, now the Deputy Air Force Historian, reflected on our personal experiences to shape our initial thoughts and our infant program, but we had a great resource, the guidance of the SAC historians. The SAC Command Historian, John Bohn, had left us guidebooks on how to "Do" history, but he did it with a staff of 18. We had three, and later five. So we needed to use the lessons of the past, but make it work for a smaller operation. In those early days of Global Strike, we directed historians to write special studies in digestible lengths, and relevant to the command. Bill directed that I quick-turn a special study on the B-2's strike missions during Operation Odyssey Dawn. I penned that piece in less than 45 days, and from that, researchers referenced our lessons learned and the 20+ oral history interviews to shape long-range strike exercise planning. We had proved our worth and as a result, Action Officers and leadership began to ping the History Office asking how SAC had handled particular problems. It

was the perfect storm for an historian. The Air Force had shuttered SAC almost three decades before, and while Global Strike hired folks who had sat alert, they were not leaders in SAC. At most they were junior Captains or possibly senior non-commissioned officers who were not on the staff and who lacked firsthand knowledge of the SAC leadership decision process, regulation transformation, and mostly importantly, how the Air Force sustained a nuclear fleet, both from a hardware and personnel standpoint. The only true references lay in the archive, a resource we rebuilt and managed. Overnight we became a source of knowledge that everyone wanted.

When Bill left in 2012 we had just scratched the surface of how we could change the program by reflecting on the past and how we could build a better customer base. For years, various leaders in our program had sought to gain efficiencies in the production of writing the annual history, what we affectionately called “filling the bucket.” That process took time and in some cases was a self-licking ice cream cone. We asked ourselves, “Who are we serving with this product? How can we buy back white space so we can give presentations, write articles or books? How can we better serve our commander?” With Bill’s departure I became the Command Historian and teamed with my Deputy, Don Koser. Together, he and I built a new team and hired Mr. Shawn Bohannon who helped us build the John Bohn Research Facility. Our vision was to become part of the leadership decision loop by operationalizing history and weaponizing the archive, but we understood we had to balance history and heritage, so we could inspire and educate.

One of the big lessons we learned was that leadership did not want to know what happened, but rather what did not happen. They asked us for the courses of action (COA) that SAC leaders did not choose when bedding down a new weapons system or attempting to exert a new type of deterrence in the 1980s. They wanted to know if leadership lacked money or manpower at the time they made these decisions. Because previous SAC historians had “filled the bucket” we had an abundance of reference material to use. This came in handy as Global Strike planned to field a new bomber, a new ICBM and a new cruise missile as Action Officers needed to reflect on the past. In many cases, because they had not fielded a bomber in 20 years and an ICBM in more than four decades, they did not recreate the wheel, but rather did a simple cut and paste action. Sadly, our greatest success came after the ICBM officers’ drug and cheating scandal went public. Prior to the public announcement, as news quietly circulated about the scandal, Global Strike leadership immediately reached out to myself and Don asking how SAC handle morale problems. We produced various background papers that made their way to the SECAF and CSAF. History had influenced the decision chain! Overnight we became subject matter experts and leadership requested our input on a regular basis. We had weaponized the archive and operationalized history!

### **How do you approach nuclear deterrence as a historical subject?**

The question is not really about deterrence, but more about how we can hold targets at risk and what is the proper force posturing. As

our nation’s first offset strategy, the nuclear arsenal served as the backstop (deterrence) for all conflict. As you know, the mere presence of the weapon was deterrence and stopped nation states from waging world war, but modern conflict, be it the GWOT or the rise of ISIS, had left the weapon sitting in the weapons storage area being replaced by the sneakiness of stealth and lethality of precision guided weapons, or in many cases, the rise of the remotely piloted vehicle. Since 1992, bomber crews had not sat alert, but rather focused their attention on the next deployment where they could drop the latest conventional weapon. When the B-52 crews delivered their last conventional weapon in May 2006, a quiet malaise overtook those two bomb wings as they focused their attention on the nuclear mission. A year later, the accidental transfer took place, the nation then focused its attention on correcting the nuclear atrophy, and as a result, created Air Force Global Strike Command.

Nuclear deterrence is a romantic subject, trapped in the distant past, surrounded by the legend of SAC and the power of an immense industrial complex. The need for the weapon drove the Air Force. It drove technology. It drove the nation. As we moved to the second offset strategy and stealth and precision guided weapons took center stage, nuclear deterrence slowly faded into an obscure part of our history. Of note, as teams from DARPA and small segments of the Air Force introduced ideas like PAVE MOVER and ASSUALT BREAKER, the greater Air Force, the institution that built and controlled the weapon, resisted the new technology wanting to re-invest in the nuclear arsenal, a system that had become bloated. The force posturing was wrong and it stymied our ability to invest in weapons we would employ. If you truly want to deter then you must convince the enemy that you will use the weapon, but you must also have a conventional option to stomp out the brush fires. The power of the weapon is great, and after serving as the SAC Historian for five years, I feel we must keep both the nuclear and conventional missions alive. Today, as in the past, the nuclear genie keeps nation states from duking it out, but our conventional mission fights tonight. My hope is that spaced-based weapons, hypersonics, or other emerging disruptive tech will allow us to forever shutter the nuclear mission. I can only hope.

### **Is there a particular aspect of your personal or professional experiences that you think most influences your approach to your current position?**

Before joining the Air Force History and Museums Program, I served as an enlisted weapons technician working the F-117. I was part of flight test stationed at Plant 42 in Palmdale California, just outside of Edwards Air Force Base. My past helped me understand the function of flight test and how AFMC operated. Several years later I became a staff historian at the Air Armament Center (Eglin AFB, Florida) where I documented weapons testing. I had the opportunity to document the first tests of many of the Air Force’s satellite assisted weapons including the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM). I also deployed and witnessed these weapons being used.

### **What do you think are some strengths of the AFMC museum program collection?**

Our four museums are very focused with the Edwards museum covering all aspects of flight test from X-planes to the F-22. The Eglin museum, located in Florida, is laser focused on weapons development. Hill and Robins Air Force Bases both have fantastic collections and a variety of aircraft to inspire and educate. Each location is staffed by passionate, smart folks who want to highlight the history of airpower and legend of Airmen. We have a great relationship with the National Museum of the United States Air Force and we attempt to partner with them as we train our folks and look at new methods to present material. Visitation is down in most of our museums and we are looking at innovative methods to attract a new customer base. We are looking to the National Park Services and their methods of interpretation to attract and hold the attention of the new generation. We want to introduce new technologies that are interactive and that tell a story.

### **What considerations do you make when collecting archival materials and objects related to present-day military activities?**

Our years of writing the annual history and fielding a variety of requests for information has allowed us to understand what our customers want, most of the time. We field many questions on heraldry and organizational changes, along with deployed operations. Here at AFMC, we control everything from the uniform to nuclear weapons and our historians are documenting all those missions. Many researchers come to AFMC for information on past weapons programs wanting answers to why we fielded the systems, the flight test conditions and results, our relationship with industry, and how we used

those weapons in combat. Our collection methods have not always been thorough, and we are now revising our methodologies to ensure that we fully document the life of weapons system. We have also implanted a process to live history, to witness it if you will, and capture what is important to leadership via oral history interviews. In a world where we create so many documents, many of them are hollow. We are attempting to use cross-referencing to ensure that our primary source collection is rich and valuable to future researchers.

### **What are some things you hope to accomplish at the AFMC History and Museums Program in the next few years?**

We have built a robust Strategic Plan that will allow us to become indispensable to the command and unite the field program. We are building a new customer base along with our archive. We are in the initial stages of bringing the Sara Clark Collection back to Wright Patterson and making it available to the public. In addition, we are expanding our collection efforts and targeting information that we feel will be useful to future researchers. As we unite our field program we will continue to build a central digital portal called HISINT (History Intelligence). This is a one-stop shop for all our products and allows us to work in minutes and hours rather than days and weeks. To do this, we have started to digitize our collections along with those in the field.

### **Finally, what is your favorite aspect of your duties?**

I can't believe they pay me to do this! I love my job and I love history. I had the chance to be the SAC Historian and now I'm living the dream of working with the archive that houses where it all began.

## **CALL FOR PAPERS: NASA and the Rise of Commercial Space Symposium – March 18-19, 2021**

NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center History Office and the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) History Department are pleased to invite paper proposals for a two-day symposium in Huntsville, Alabama, exploring the history of commercial space to the present day. Today, the commercial space industry is taking on an increased leadership role and position of innovator in both space access and exploration. This growth of commercial space over the past decades offers the potential for a new paradigm for space exploration—one in which industry transitions from supplier to partner. Still, many questions remain. These questions span from the most seemingly consequential "How will humanity explore the Moon and Mars?" to the most basic, "What is Commercial Space?"

The format of the symposium will be a combination of panel discussions, keynote talks, and group discussion. The intended outcome is a deeper understanding of the relationship between NASA and commercial space as well as an improved definition of commercial space. As part of

this goal, each presenter must also propose a definition of "commercial space" and develop that definition as it relates to their chosen topic. The intention is to publish an anthology of selected papers.

As part of the effort to offer insight to broad constituencies, the organizers envision a range of products emerging from this symposium. The possibility of on-line blogs and other means of communication are being considered. So is a fully referenced edited collection of essays on the origins and development of commercial space activities. Participants are invited to make their presentations available in written form for dissemination.

If you wish to present a paper, please send an abstract of no more than 400 words and a short biography or curriculum vita, including affiliation by November 1, 2020 to Dr. Brian C. Odom at [brian.c.odom@nasa.gov](mailto:brian.c.odom@nasa.gov) or Dr. Stephen P. Waring at [warnings@uah.edu](mailto:warnings@uah.edu). Visit <https://www.nasa.gov/centers/marshall/history/nasa-and-the-rise-of-commercial-space-symposium.html>