

Interview with Rich Adams

December 9, 2015

Interview by Gabe Logan

START OF INTERVIEW

Gabe Logan (GL): Alright, this is December 9, 2015, Gabe Logan, Northern Michigan University, Director of Center of Upper Peninsula Studies, and I'm interviewing Mr. Rich Adams in regards to, roughly, life at K.I. Sawyer during 1970s and his recollections of his time there, and so we can go ahead and begin there, Rich, Mr. Adams, if you would, please state your name and spell it and your birthdate for context.

Rich Adams (RA): My name's Richard Adams, that's R-I-C-H-A-R-D A-D-A-M-S.

GL: Just as it sounds.

RA: Yeah, right, yeah, not too hard.

GL: And your birthdate?

RA: 27 November, 1938.

GL: 27 November – happy recent birthday, yeah.

RA: I just turned 77.

GL: Congratulations. Rich, if you could, where are you from, sir?

RA: I was born in Paducah, Kentucky, and my father took a job in Arizona when I was about five years old, so I was actually raised in Miami, Arizona.

GL: Miami, Arizona, where's that? I haven't heard of that one.

RA: Well, it's east of Phoenix, about maybe 50 miles, it's a small town. He was a diesel engineer and they were just getting electric power with diesel engines and so he was, he moved out there to help them set up the electric generator.

GL: What was, what business was he in to do that? Was it with the military, or - ?

RA: No, he had learned how to work on diesel engines and he worked on a lot of tug boats on the Mississippi River, and I'm not sure how he was contacted for the job since I was only a little guy but we ended up moving to Arizona, so I was raised in Arizona.

GL: Did you have any siblings?

RA: Yeah, I had six brothers and sisters. Two sisters and the rest were brothers. I'm the oldest of all of them.

GL: So, let's see, '38, so it was still a territory. [Both laugh]

RA: Yeah! We did have cars there.

GL: Ok, so you came of age in Arizona, then –

RA: Right.

GL: And did you graduate from high school or you went to school at the school there?

RA: Yeah, I graduated, actually my dad quit that job and he took a job in Winslow, Arizona. He was, he ran a 7Up bottling company plant in Winslow, Arizona, and I graduated from that high school in 1956.

GL: In '56.

RA: Yeah.

GL: Did you work in the plant as well?

RA: I did.

GL: Yeah, I'm sure.

RA: Yeah, I worked in the 7Up bottling plant there during my summers and I drank a lot of 7Up and I got a lot of cavities! [Both laugh] Because back then they didn't have diet soda, it was all sugar.

GL: No, no... What did you do in the plant?

RA: I took, they didn't have cans then, they just had bottled pop, and I was the one that fed the washing machine for the pop bottles that washed them out and then the7 filled them, yeah.

GL: Oh, ok. That's a unique job. And then did you go into the military shortly after that?

RA: I went into the military right from high school. Winslow was a small town, even smaller than Marquette, and so unless your father had a business there, there wasn't really any industry there, the railroad went through there so back then they didn't have a lot of college loans and all that kind of thing, so, and I didn't really want to go to college, anyway, I'd had enough studying and stuff, so most of the kids there, if their fathers didn't have business they joined the military, so in high school I was in Air Force Cadets and that's how I got interested in the Air Force.

GL: And then that's the branch of service you joined was the Air Force.

RA: Yes, yeah.

GL: So '56, ok. So you got in there right at the start of the Cold War, congratulations. [Laughs]

RA: Yeah, right!

GL: Where did you go from Arizona in '56?

RA: In 1956 I joined the service and I went to a place called Parks Air Force Base near San Francisco for my basic training, which I'm sure it doesn't exist anymore, and they, they

interviewed me in the Air Force for what kind of jobs I qualified for, and I was able to be an air traffic controller, so I went to Keesler Air Force Base for six months' training in their Air Force school at Keesler Air Force Base for controllers.

GL: Where was Keesler?

RA: Biloxi, Mississippi.

GL: Biloxi, ok.

RA: Yeah.

GL: Ok. And then you served, you mentioned you served in Vietnam, can you tell us a little about when you went over there and –

RA: In 1968 I left Tinker Air Force Base –

GL: Oklahoma City Tinker?

RA: Oklahoma City, and I was assigned Da Nang, Vietnam as an air traffic controller. I went to Da Nang in I believe it was October of '68 and I was assigned as a crew chief controller in Da Nang tower, which at that time was the busiest airport in the world, we had a takeoff and landing every 30 seconds on parallel runways 24 hours a day with all different kinds of traffic from airliners to the slowest plane, porter type the CIA used, so we had a lot of mixed traffic there so it was quite challenge to be able to do that job at Da Nang. We were also surrounded by the enemy, so the only thing that kept them off the base, and every once in a while they came on the base, was –

GL: This would be the Viet Cong?

RA: Well, yeah, the Viet Cong, NVAs – was a perimeter of Marines around the base, and every once in a while they'd come, what they'd call come through the wire, and they would blow up some planes and, we had M16s in the tower and there was cases where we had to shoot from the catwalks because they're trying to blow the tower up, of course, and we never turned the rotating beacon on because they'd use that beacon as a target for their rockets. And I called in a lot of, we had Puff the Magic Dragon that circled at night, it was an AC-47, because we were attacked just about every night, and when a rocket would go off I could see it from the tower and I would call in the fighters and Puff the Magic Dragon to pepper that spot with bombs and bullets and stuff like that, but the Viet Cong would usually set the rocket off and then they'd run, so they weren't there.

GL: They knew what was coming.

RA: Yeah, they knew what was coming next.

GL: You guys, did you feel kind of like a sitting duck up there?

RA: Well, they said, our rotating beacon was on top of the tower, they said never turn that on [laughs] cause that's, they could tell right where to shoot, but they weren't real accurate with their rockets, they would, every once in a while they'd hit something they tried to, like they hit a

barracks once and killed like 40 people in the barracks, the rocket went right through the roof and then it blew up inside with shrapnel all over the place, so, but usually they hit all over the place and you could always tell when they were going to hit because there was a German Red Cross ship in Da Nang Bay and the Viet Cong would notify the ship to back up out of the harbor because the Red Cross ship treated anybody, and that was their only hospital when they were wounded, they took Viet Cong and treated them also, so they didn't want that ship sunk, so when that ship started backing up out of the harbor you knew you were gonna get hit that night.

GL: Good lord. [Laughs] I don't know much about air traffic control, obviously, but, so without the radar, the signal, then, would you have to visually, are you visually making landings and –

RA: Well we, we visually control the traffic unless the weather was below three mile visibility and a thousand foot ceiling, and then most of the planes, well, in fact, all of the planes came in under radar control cause it was called high bar against flight rules, so, but because there was so much traffic there we couldn't separate, use standard separation, and that was one of the things that made it hard, because you had to use your own skill in how to get all this traffic in and out of there, and, you know, where normally you got three miles behind planes and all that, well if you had a slow-moving plane there's times when I'd have the slow-moving plane touch down on one end of the runway and I'd have the fighter touch down on the other end, they're both sitting down at the same time, I just didn't have enough payment and time to get all the traffic in.

GL: And that's because it was so busy, as you say.

RA: So busy, yeah.

GL: The busiest in the world.

RA: In the world, at that time, yeah.

GL: Ok. Wow. So then you came to, so that's '68, and how long were you in Vietnam, then, through '70?

RA: Yeah. I came, I came October '70 I came to K.I. Sawyer, that was after my month's leave and all that. So I put a bit over a year in Vietnam.

GL: Ok. So you came from the equator to the northern Polar Regions?

RA: Yeah, in October, yeah.

GL: What was that like when you arrived here at K.I., what was your job?

RA: Well, I worked as a crew chief at K.I. Sawyer control tower from 1970, and then I was promoted to chief controller for about the last year I was in the service, but I still went up in the tower and controlled traffic even though it was kind of an office job. So, it was quite interesting here, but I, I had to get back in the books when I got here because I couldn't control the traffic like I did at De Nang, since it was slower here. So –

GL: And you had your radar.

RA: Yeah. They took me off the mic and said, "You gotta spend a couple of days and get back in the rigs and you can't control these B-52s like you did those fighters there" [Both laugh]

GL: So you arrived here then, you're working in the tower, did you live in K.I. on base, or were you - ?

RA: Yes, I lived on Skybolt Street, I believe it was, yeah, it was Skybolt Street right on base, yeah.

GL: Ok, what was life like moving here in October 1970 in terms, you're here in the fall and, do you remember your first winter here and - ?

RA: Well, first off I remember we came in the back gate at K.I. Sawyer and, if you ever come to K.I. Sawyer from US-2 and take that road into the back gate, you wonder if you're ever going to get to an air base cause it's all woods and all and so I was talking to my wife and she's from Michigan so she knew about the base here and I said "Are you sure there's a base at the end of this road? It seems like nothing but woods here!" And so we finally got here and I spent the first night in a transit trailer, they had transit trailers till you got a house and all, and it was right near the flight line, and that night in the middle of the night they had an exercise and they started up all the aircraft, and the trailer was right up near the flight line and the whole trailer started rocking, and we had three small kids at that time and they all came running into our bedroom and said "What's going on? What's going on?" you know, so that was kind of our introduction to K.I. Sawyer, that first night when they had the exercise.

GL: How many planes would K.I. Sawyer have, and what type of planes would they have?

RA: Well, when I was there in the 70s they had B-52s and KC-135s, tankers, and I believe it was interceptors, F-101s, and T-33s, the T-33s were the target for the 101s, when they went out they practiced their runs on the T-33s. So of course during the time I was there the aircraft changed, I believe they upgraded to 102s and then 106s. I think they had 106s when I left there.

GL: So when you were there at K.I. obviously the snow was probably something you didn't have to deal with prior to that.

RA: The first winter there was quite awakening to me because they, they had some kind of record snowfall that year and where we lived on base, the snow would drift up against our house, and of course all the kids thought we're the luckiest house there because we had most of the snow and they could play in it, but for me, so there was times when I had to dig my way out of the house because I couldn't open the door because the snowbank, the snow had drifted so much up against the house, but that didn't keep me from work, if I couldn't get to work they would send the snowcat, that box thing on tracks, up to get me at my house and take me to work, but usually they wouldn't take me back home, just to work. [Both laugh]

GL: And then when you were at K.I. what would your day, you said you initially were with Air Traffic Control but you had to relearn it for K.I.'s standards, so what would be a typical day there at the base?

RA: Well, for me I worked what they call a “shift swing afternoon morning mid”, that means one day I worked like the evening shift, and then the next day I’d come in at noon and work till I guess around 5 when the evening shift would come on, and then the next day I’d work mornings, which would be like six till noon, and then I’d come in that very night and work from midnight till six in the morning when the morning crew would come, and then you’d have one day off. So, to get two days off you’d have to stay up after your mid shift, so except for your leave and, you only had one day off, so you didn’t have a lot of time to think about what you’re going to do, you know. [Laughs]

GL: So planes were coming in then 24/7 for the most part?

RA: Nights it was slower. And of course when the weather was bad it was slower, too, because the pilots couldn’t get up in the air and practice their touch-and-goes and all that because they were under IFR rules, you know, but when the weather was nice, and sometime I’d have to think when I looked out and saw the sun shining and blue sky, “Uh oh, I’m gonna have to really work today!” [Laughs] Because they would all take off and practice, you know, their touch-and-go landings and everything they had to practice, where they couldn’t practice all that during the weather. But the planes came and went, regardless of the weather, if the weather was over half a mile and the ceiling was over 200 feet and the runway was zero one where they could use precision approach, then they kept flying. But the B-52s, since they could go so far and carry so much fuel, they would call in and see what the weather was, and if it was anywhere near being bad they would say, “We’re going to our alternate” which might be Sacramento, California, or something like that. You can bet it was somewhere nice, because when I used to see them loading the planes they was putting their golf clubs on and they’d have tennis rackets and all that and I used to wonder in the middle of winter, “What the heck are these guys doing putting their golf clubs and tennis rackets on?” And then I found out they were hoping for bad weather so they could head somewhere, some Sac. base that was in nice weather, and they could get there and go in crew rest and play a little golf and tennis and stuff in January and February! [Both laugh] So that was kind of nice, and the fighters had the same thing, they had, I think, as they called it, William Tell, and they would go to Florida, a section of them go to Florida in the middle of winter, and practice, there’d be several base of squadrons go there, and they would practice their bombing runs and strafing and it was a contest as to which squadron could be the best, but they left to go there cause, to go to Florida out of K.I. Sawyer in January was really nice, so they enjoyed going down there! [Both laugh]

GL: What was the population, approximately, of K.I.? Was it, I’ve heard that it was the largest town in the Upper Peninsula at that point.

RA: Yeah, I, you know, thinking back, I think it was around 6,000 but don’t quote me on that. But it was, they had their own, you know, store, filling station, and everything a small town would have, they had their post office and, so it was like a little small town, yes.

GL: Ok. Were people there from all over the United States, then, for the most part?

RA: Yes, they were all from all over. Most people from the south had a little problem at first there cause they were used to warm weather, you know, and they hadn’t drove in icy roads, they

don't realize when you turn your wheel sometimes the car don't turn, it just keeps going straight, and when you come up to a stop sign and you hit the brakes, well, you know, the car keeps rolling! [Laughs]

GL: Right on going.

RA: Keeps going, yeah.

GL: Did Sawyer have a reputation as opposed to some of the other, I'm sure every Air Force base had its own personality, but how was Sawyer regarded compared to the other Air Force bases around that you were familiar with or heard about?

RA: Well, I think Sawyer created a lot, there's a lot of civilian jobs on K.I. Sawyer, and except for complaints by young people that all the airmen dated the pretty girls in town [laughs] I don't think there was a lot of complaints, there was one time that somehow they started to complain about them, and back then they had a paymaster, and you were actually paid in dollar bills, so the base commander said, "I want everybody paid in two dollar bills so the town can see how much money is put in the town" because two dollar bills weren't common, so the people could see how much Sawyer contributes to the economy. But mostly I don't think there was a big problem, in fact the businesses actually liked K.I. Sawyer when the mines were having problems with laying people off and shutting down, and the auto dealers courted the airmen and people from the base because even though they might not have made a lot they had a steady paycheck every two weeks, so they would have new car shows out by the base exchange trying to get airmen to buy new cars and stuff.

GL: Yeah, I see.

RA: Because they had a steady income. [Laughs]

GL: Smart business. [Both laugh] So we have Air Force, the bombers, what was their role, and please educate me on this, what were the roles of the B-52s, what were they doing there, was it -?

RA: Well, SAC's idea was -

GL: And SAC is Strategic Air Force Command?

RA: Strategic Air Command - was peace through strength. So they would load the bombers up and they would send them up over the North Pole in orbit, they would be gone for 23 hours, and they would send tankers with them to refuel them -

GL: In air?

RA: In the air. They would be in the air 23 hours, that's their flight plan, 23 hours. And each one of the bombers, of course, had a target in case they get the right signal to go and that was the idea to let Russia know that we were ready if they tried anything, and also we had the interceptors that monitored our northern border that would take off for anything incoming aircraft that weren't known as friendly, they would go they them and they would scramble quite often for, say, an airliner that missed his, what called identifying going through the aircraft defense area, they had a line and you had to penetrate this area at a certain time, and if you were off by, I don't

know how many minutes because I wasn't into that, they would scramble a fighter on you to verify who was going through this, what they call ADIZ area, Air Defense Identification Zone, so they scrambled quite often out of K.I. Sawyer to just check. As far as I know they didn't see any enemies there, I hope not, but it was usually a plane that was missing its flight plan time or, you know, was off course a bit or something like that.

GL: Were they, were the B-52s, were they carrying nukes or - ?

RA: Yes.

GL: They were?

RA: As everybody knows, I'm sure they know, they had nuclear stored at K.I. Sawyer.

GL: No, actually I don't. Where were those stored?

RA: Where that mill that makes two by fours –

GL: Ok.

RA: In that area right there was where they were stored, they had tunnels, I guess, in the ground, and when they moved these nukes you'd always know because they had guards and, not tanks, but these weapons carriers with machine guns, you know, protecting them and stuff.

GL: Was it aboveground, were they moved aboveground, or underground?

RA: They were moved above ground, yeah, when they moved them to put them on the bombers, yeah, they were aboveground. But they were, I think they were stored inside, I've never been there, but I think there's tunnels inside there where they stored the bombs.

GL: Were those rotated out, were they sent - ?

RA: I wasn't into that kind of thing but I think they were rotated because, you know, I would see the, you couldn't get anywhere near them of course when they were moving them back and forth, so they must have rotated them to work on them or update them or something, you know.

GL: Sure. Were there any mishaps that you heard of, or - ?

RA: Nope.

GL: Well, that's good.

RA: I didn't hear of any, I know they, they had some mishaps where planes crash with those aboard and stuff like that, but I don't think they would arm them where they'd go off until – unless they were going toward their target, of course. I don't know that much about the bombs.

GL: As far as the winter and the landing and the takeoffs, was the airport, were there ever any accidents in terms of weather-related, or did the Air Force always manage to do business as usual?

RA: Well, they wanted to do business as usual because if K.I. Sawyer was ever taken off alert status the wing commander could probably lose his job. So, you know, he didn't want to call into where the headquarters were for all of SAC and say K.I. Sawyer's down, we can't, take us off alert status, so they had a lot of snow removal equipment and it was pretty well going 24 hours a day. Because they could take off in any weather, but of course they couldn't land in any weather, so they didn't want to be taken off of alert status.

GL: I see.

RA: During the storms the snow plows were out there all the time. And then what we'd do is we would, until the plane wanted to land, we'd let the snow equipment stay on the runway, and we had, there was a guy called Snow Man One, he was in charge of all the equipment, and from the tower we would contact him and tell him and then he would take care of, of course, there's many pieces of equipment on the runway, he'd take care of the equipment on the runway, getting it on and off and like that, and we used to have one guy, he was Finnish, and if we said, "Snow Man One, tower, get the equipment off right away, we've got an emergency coming in." Well, he'd get all excited, and he would talk in Finnish! Well all the snowplow drivers knew, if he starts talking in Finnish, get the heck off the runway because there's something gonna happen here, you know. [Laughter] So he'd get excited and start talking in Finnish!

GL: [Laughs] That's a little different.

RA: [Laughs] Yeah!

GL: So you were there up until 1976 –

RA: Yeah, I retired in '76. I had orders for Korea and I had about 23 years in then and my wife said, "I've had enough of this, you being gone" and we had three teenage boys by then, which, you know, they need a man around, and so she said, "You better get out." I was gonna go to Korea because I could've left my wife on base and she could've stayed right there in the house till I got back and then I could put another term in at K.I. Sawyer and maybe make 30 years and retire in such a way that maybe I don't have to get another job or anything, you know, unless I wanted to, but she said, "I've had enough of the you being gone," so it was either get out or look for another wife [laughter] and I didn't want to do that, so...

GL: Why did you all decide, did you retire to the Upper Peninsula then, was this your final place?

RA: Yeah, when I, when I was ready to get out of the service I started looking for work because with my retirement pay, of course, at fifty percent I didn't make enough to take care of three boys and a wife and have a home and a car and all that, so I started looking for work and I started with the Department of Corrections and they like military people because they were kind of military their own self at that time, you know, you had, in fact they were more military than the military, I thought, when I went to work for them, because they had, you know, when the captain came in you had to stand at attention and they inspected your uniform before you went on post duty and so it was kind of a military organization, so they liked people who had been in the military because they were used to that kind of thing.

GL: Was this Marquette?

RA: Marquette Branch Prison, yeah.

GL: I just interviewed a gentleman who was a captain there for 30 years, he lived, I can't remember his name right now, I just interviewed him so I'm thinking you probably knew him.

RA: Well, I could've knew him but actually, working in a prison wasn't my cup of tea, so I went to work for CCI, a few years after I worked at the prison I got a job at CCI, and when I went for the interview there I walked in to the fellow that was gonna interview me at CCI and I had my uniform on because I'd left work to go straight there, and his eyes got really big when I walked in there and he said, "Are you from the DNR, are you a conservation officer?" and I guess our uniform looked kind of like conservation officer uniform, and I said, "No," he said, "Oh," he said, "I got a warning this weekend about catching a fish that was illegal." [Laughter] "And I thought he was coming back to give me a ticket or something," he said, "I'm so relieved that you're not the conservation officer come to give me a ticket, you've got a job!" [Laughter] So I went to work for CCI and I worked for them till 1981 when they had the big layoff and a lot of mines around here closed.

GL: When you say Cleveland Cliffs, was it the Palmer Mine?

RA: Yeah, Empire Mine is where I worked.

GL: Empire Mine.

RA: Yeah.

GL: What was your job there?

RA: I was a grinding mill attendant.

GL: What did that entail?

RA: Well, I took care of the mill, the big mill that makes little rocks out of big rocks. So if it stopped I had to figure out what the problem was and get it going again, so... I liked working there but in 1981 they closed, well they closed Republic Mine, Mather B Mine, Eagle Improvement Plant, so there was like 2,500 men around here without good jobs, so...

GL: What caused the mine closures?

RA: Brazilian iron ore. At least that's what *The Mining Journal* said. They could ship iron ore from Brazil all the way up here cheaper than we could produce it out here at the Empire Mine. But of course they didn't have any environmental rules, and probably their workers came to work on a bicycle, you know, and they maybe made a dollar an hour or something, and Americans aren't gonna do that.

GL: No.

RA: So that's kind of, you know, and of course the steel plants were buying iron ore wherever they could get it cheapest, they didn't care where it came from. So that's what, supposedly, I lost

my job, and even today they're running into that problem because iron ore is, you know, not, the foreign countries can make it a lot cheaper than we can do here on the Marquette Range, so they're kind of in problems even today with that.

GL: Yeah, that's... Dave, your son, works at the mines, right?

RA: Yeah.

GL: I've been seeing all the signs up everywhere and there's certainly a...

RA: There's still not a contract settled and –

GL: Still not

RA: I don't know, there's rumors that the Empire might go down next summer, I don't work there anymore so I can't say that's true or not true, but... My son has about 24 years in there and of course, you know, he's worried about it, too.

GL: I think all of us are worried about that.

RA: Yeah.

GL: Ok, so while you worked there, just, since you have this background I didn't know about in air traffic control before we leave this period, one of President Reagan's more infamous moves was when the air traffic control folks were on strike and he broke the union and fired them all. Do you have any thoughts on that one or - ?

RA: Well, at the time I was working for, when I got laid off from the mine I went to work for Simmons Airlines as aircraft dispatcher because I kind of, I kind of fell back on my air traffic control experience and that's how I got this job, and so I had to go to New York and take a test for being licensed and –

GL: What year was this, about, was it prior to the '80s or - ?

RA: Oh, '84 I went to work for Simmons Airlines, yeah.

GL: Ok, so this was right around the same time, ok.

RA: Yeah, in 1984 I went to work for Simmons Airlines and –

GL: You went to New York to take the test.

RA: Yeah. Simmons Airlines was a small airline with just very few planes and it was under federal orders 135, which, they had flight followers but not licensed dispatchers, and as the airline got bigger they had to go under federal rules 121 which meant you needed a licensed dispatcher that's gonna call the pilot on the ground, and we'd look at the route of flight and all to make sure the plane can go safely, we look at the weather conditions and nav conditions, what kind of shape the airplane is in, does he have to go in thunderstorms, if so he must have radar, if the weather is good he don't need radar, things like that, we're kind of a safety factor for the airlines and although people don't know, for each flight an aircraft dispatcher releases that flight,

and the dispatcher is saying, “I believe this plane can fly safely between point A and point B” and it’s a partnership between the dispatcher and the pilot. Of course, the pilot, he’s up in the airplane so he’s got the main, but he cannot leave the ground till he gets a flight release from the aircraft dispatcher.

GL: I see.

RA: Yeah.

GL: And so –

RA: I went to work as a flight follower and then when they became 121 I went to a place in Long Island, New York City, it was taught by an ex-pilot that had a medical condition so he went in to this teaching for the test to take, and I won’t say they taught you the test, but you had three days of study, I’d say on what’s kind of on the test, not the questions but the subject matter, and, of course, I, since I’d been in air traffic control for almost 23 years I had no problem with that, and so once you pass the written then you have to, you go back to your home base, so to speak, if you’ve passed the written then you come back and take a practical, and the practical test is they give you a flight that you have to dispatch between the conditions and they give you all the weather and everything, ‘course it’s not a real plane, it’s just on paper, and you have to figure out “Can this plane do all this with what the weather is?” You have the departure weather, you have the arrival weather, you have weather in route and upper winds and, so you have to, on paper, see if this flight could make it or not, and my flight was supposed to go, I think, from Philadelphia to New York City, and it turned out that the destination airport, the runway condition versus the wind condition, the plane could not land there, because each plane has a certain criteria as to crosswinds and condition of the runway. So I had to divert him to another spot, I don’t remember where, but the instructor said, “You’re the first guy ever diverted that plane,” he said, “How come you diverted it?” and I told him why, but the reason that I knew this was in Simmons Airlines we worked all winter long with the North Central area, and we dealt with runway conditions, crosswind factors, and all that. So I was quite up-to-date in that kind of thing, even though I wasn’t a dispatcher, I was a flight follower, Simmons Airlines still required us to look at each flight to see if the plane could make it alright, so we were dealing with that every day.

GL: I see. So did that help you get a, did you get a job or was that part the - ?

RA: I had the job, I had the job, they just, I had to get a dispatch license, so, to do it, and they had to hire dispatchers from, well, they came from all over the country when the federal government said Simmons had to be a 121 operation, so...

GL: Ok. Were the flight attendants, I’m sorry, not the attendants – were the dispatchers and the followers, were they, how did they regard Reagan’s busting the union?

RA: Well, actually a lot of the air traffic controllers that were fired, some of them came to work for Sawyer – or, for Simmons as dispatchers and I got to talk to some of them, and they were told by their union, “Don’t worry about a thing, he can’t fire us all, there’s no way he can fire every air traffic controller” but what they did is they, they did fire all the air traffic controllers. Of course this made their traffic slow down but what they did is they took military controllers from

each base and they sent them to work the civilian traffic. Now here at Sawyer a lot of them went to, I think Pittsburgh. They took two or – they couldn't take them all of course because you had to keep the base going, but they would take, you know, two or three from this base, two or three from that base, and they'd send them to places where they'd fired the civilian controllers. And some of those controllers, actually, they were discharged, they came up and they stayed right there and worked for the FAA.

GL: No kidding?

RA: For a lot more money, of course. You know, they stayed right in the place where they were and worked for the FAA.

GL: There's a little story that didn't get told a lot.

RA: Yeah. But they union told the, I worked with a lady that just got out of air traffic control school at, Oklahoma City's where they have their FAA school there, and it's a hard school, you know, and she didn't really want to go on strike, but she said you didn't have much choice, if the union said you're gonna go on strike and not go to work, she said, "I didn't really want to because I'd just finished all my schooling and just started my job, so I didn't want to like, you know" but she said, "I didn't have any choice because if I had not gone on strike and for some reason they'd settled, I would've been ostracized, you know, I'd have been thought as a scab or whatever" you know, so she more or less had to go on strike with the rest of them, you know.

GL: And then she lost her job and –

RA: She lost her job and she came to work for Simmons Airlines as a dispatcher, yeah.

GL: Fascinating little sidetrack.

RA: Yeah.

GL: So before leave that, I want to add, what influenced you and your family to stay in the Upper Peninsula and - ?

RA: Well, my wife, she was not too happy about staying here because she said she married a G.I. to get the heck out of here. She's from the Sault area and I met her when I was working for the Air Guard in Alpena, Michigan, her father was a teacher there in Alpena and I met her. She used to be a car hop at the root beer stand between her college time, and so all the guys used to go to the bar, I'd go to the root beer stand [laughs] because I had a little interest at the root beer stand besides root beer, but [laughs] anyway, she wanted to get the heck out of Michigan and she was quite upset that I got K.I. Sawyer and that was like, you know, you get what they call a dream sheet when you're in the military and when you're leaving somewhere you put down where you want to go and usually they pick the last thing [laughter], seemed like, and the K.I. Sawyer happened to be the last thing and the only reason I put that was, I'd worked in Alpena, Michigan, for the Air Guard, which was a National Guard base there in the summer, and I liked it there so I didn't know what to put so I put, she was upset, though, I did put Florida and Arizona and places like that, but for some reason they sent me here.

GL: I guess you could've put Kinross and it would've been the only one worse [laughter]

RA: Yeah, that's right.

GL: And so you all have made a life up here?

RA: Well, I've got a, when I was getting ready to retire I sold my snow tires, my, all, anything that had to with snow I sold it, and this was in October. So as I was gonna go to Arizona because the Air Force will move you when you retire, anywhere you want to go they'll give you one move anywhere. So I was gonna go back to Arizona because I still had brothers and relatives back there and she was all fine with that, but then I happened to get this job at the prison, and I thought, "Well I've got a job here, maybe I'll just stay here," you know.

GL: "Buy all my stuff back!" [Laughter]

RA: I had to do that, I had to, you know, back then we actually changed tires, you remember you had your summer tires and your winters tires and you had to, so I had to buy all these tires back, my wife was all, she was upset at me, so we moved here to Gwinn and I went to work at the prison and I worked there a couple of years till I went to the mine, but yeah, she's still kind of mad at me about that, I don't mention it much [laughter].

GL: Well, you've made a nice life here.

RA: Yeah. That's kind of, you know, what, I've been married 50-some years and she's been mad at me for 30 [laughter].

GL: She'll get over it, Rich [laughter]

RA: Time we'll pretty much get over it [laughter]

GL: Well now when you drive back through K.I., I guess it was decommissioned in '95, correct?

RA: Yes, '95.

GL: And what do you see, what do you see when you –

RA: I feel like crying.

GL: Oh, really?

RA: I mean, it was a jewel of the Upper Peninsula bases, it was nice here, I really liked it here, and now, as you know, the buildings are dilapidated, there's been a lot of trouble out there, you know, it's got a bad reputation, and I don't live there, I've talked to people that love it there and I've talked to people that hate it there, but I know Gwinn police spend most of their time out at K.I. Sawyer. Yeah.

GL: Any ideas what could be done to revitalize it from your opinion?

RA: Well, you take, I understand Wurtsmith is not like K.I. Sawyer, they made a, I think a senior community out of it, and Kincheloe they've, that's a prison now, where the barracks were I guess they keep prisoners in that area, but here they, they haven't done much and, of course you can

buy a home really cheap out there, which would be a good deal but it gets rundown, a lot of places out there, if you go out there some of them are really nice and others are really rundown, so it's not been kept up and I don't know what can be done but, well, you take the electronic company from San Diego that was supposed to be out there in the [unintelligible] Center because it had no windows, well all they did is take advantage of all the government benefits to come here and then they left, you know, they didn't stay here, so I don't know what can be done but, it's enough to make you cry because it, they had a nice library, movie theater, hospital, dental clinic, all of that and all that's just gone now.

GL: Just gone, yeah. Yeah, you know, it's, I saw an old soccer field out there and that's just something that's –

RA: Yeah, they had lighted soccer fields.

GL: Yeah, it was kind of unique to the Upper Peninsula and, of course –

RA: Bowling alley.

GL: A bowling alley?

RA: Only bowling alley we had around here and now it's, I guess it's just an empty building, you know, they tore the lanes up and, so I, I don't, it's enough to make you cry for somebody that was stationed here, you know, it's...

GL: Saw it in its heyday.

RA: Yeah.

GL: Well... Well, is there anything else you'd like to add or thoughts on the Upper Peninsula, looking at it now for the past 30 years, 40 years?

RA: Well, a lot of people, when I first got here I thought I wouldn't like it here because I'd never lived in snow country before, but they have great recreational things out there, you could rent, you could borrow skis, you could borrow snowshoes, and so I learned to start getting out in the woods and doing things, and once you start doing some of the winter stuff I liked it a lot better. Now I have met guys that, not so much on the base, but dispatchers who would come up here, say, from Florida, and one guy left and went back somewhere but his first winter here he said "It's too cold for the kids to get outside," well he had several young kids and I said, "Well you've got to buy them snowsuits and let them get out and play." "Oh no, it's too cold." Well, you can imagine if you had three or four little kids in your house all winter long and you don't let them outside to play, it's going to drive you and your wife crazy, you know, so I learned to adjust to the situation and actually I really liked it, I did a lot of backpacking, canoeing, kayaking, all that kind of stuff and then in the winter I cross-country skied a lot, I never did downhill skiing but I cross-country skied and I went snowshoeing and K.I. Sawyer was great for all that because at that time there was nothing behind the base except Little Lake, there was no homes or nothing, and so you could go all the way from your house all the way out to Little Lake without seeing anything and there were like two track roads, so you had no property, you had a lot of outdoor stuff you could do, so I would say for most people if you get out and start doing it

and get out of the house you're gonna like it a lot more here, especially in the winter 'cause it is long winters.

GL: Embrace the winter.

RA: Yeah [laughs]

GL: That was the advice I got when I moved here and it sounds like that's what you did.

RA: Yeah, that's about it. I enjoyed my time at K.I. Sawyer and I would've put another tour in there but I had this lady at home that kind of shied away from that, so [laughter], had a lot of influence on me.

GL: Yeah, they do that. Alright then, Rich, well thank you for your time.

RA: Yeah.

GL: And that concludes our interview.

RA: Ok, I enjoyed it.

GL: Yes sir.