

Sign Oral History Project

**Oral History Interview with
Ralph T. Holland (USAF, Major General, ret.)**

Commander, 810th Strategic Aerospace Division,
Minot AFB, ND, 24 October 1968

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Interviewers: Thomas Tulien and Jim Klotz

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Transcribed by Jim Klotz with additional editing by Thomas Tulien.

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Thomas Tulien

Sign Oral History Project

RH **Ralph Holland**

TT **Tom Tulien**

JK **Jim Klotz**

Note: General Holland had been provided copies of selected documents from the Minot AFB Oct 1968 case file and extracts from witness interviews. Mr. Tulien arranged 3-way conference call.

[Tape start]

TT —We're all three on line.

RH OK

JK Good afternoon General, how are you today?

RH Oh I'm doing pretty good.

JK This is Jim. We spoke the other day.

RH Yes, Jim.

- JK Well, Tom, you want to go ahead?
- TT I'm just wondering did you get the transcripts?
- RH Yes I did. I got them and I read them and it kinda refreshed my memory that there were some people in the missile area that saw what they thought was a UFO. And I had the meeting with them to put all the facts and information together that we sent on up to SAC and Air Defense Command and the whole place, you know.
- TT Yeah, those guys were pretty impressed to be in a General's office I guess [chuckles].
- RH Yeah.
- TT So, I guess you didn't spend much time down with the crews.
- RH Well as Division Commander I had Minot Air Force Base, I lived there, and I had Malmstrom Air Force Base, and also was phasing out a base called Glasgow, Montana—a B-52 base, so I had 150 missiles at Minot and 200 at Malmstrom. In addition to that, being a General Officer in SAC, you know, we flew Looking Glass. Looking Glass was the airborne Command Post.
- TT So you would go over to Offutt to do that?
- RH I would go to Offutt to do it and I would spend, as I recall it was five days and we would fly on station 8 hours a day. It would take you 30 or 40 minutes to get up to altitude, and then when you were relieved, 30 or 40 minutes to get back down so you killed about 10 hours, you know.
- TT Right. But you also had a couple of planes on alert all the time at Minot and Ellsworth, is that right?
- RH Well we had planes on alert at Minot, yes. You know [JK talking over]—
- JK He means backup for the airborne command post. I just received the SAC history and they said they had backup airborne command post planes here and there in case the airborne one was lost.
- RH Well, that's true, and they had most of them, all of them I knew of were at SAC Headquarters, so if the weather was bad—I remember one time the weather was lousy at SAC and visibility was very poor and, you know, the command post airplane was filled with electronics and was a very expensive machine. So, they retrieved us down at Barksdale in Shreveport, Louisiana but another plane had taken off and was airborne. It was OK to take off but not to land, see? So yes. But SAC did that for about 30 years you know.
- TT Yeah, you know when they stopped the PACS and ALCS flights, it was so quiet there was no mention of it, but when you think of how incredible that day was, you know—
- RH Yes, yes. The other thing I wanted to ask you, I'm sure you've looked up my bio on the Internet?
- TT Right, yeah we have.
- RH OK.

- TT Minot was unique in having the two wings there and the Air Division and we're not quite sure how that worked. Apparently you were there as sort of the field operations for SAC, right?
- RH Right, I was over the wing, the wing commander of the missile wing reported to me, and the wing commander of the flying wing there reported to me, as did the other wing commander at Malmstrom. And what my job basically was—I had a small staff. I had an operations section and I had a maintenance section and what we did was to make sure that these people complied with the policies and procedures of the command and if they were meeting all their responsibilities. You know SAC had a hell of a training program and—
- TT I have no idea how you guys kept track of everything. When I look at the history it amazes me.
- RH SAC was, I tell you, your units had to either stay up or they had somebody else running it for you (laughs).
- TT How many people were in your office?
- RH In my personal office I had an Exec and I had a secretary. Then I guess in my staff on the Division I probably had 15 people.
- TT Oh, OK, so it was a relatively small office.
- RH Relatively small, right.
- TT Where were you located on base?
- RH My office was in the missile building.
- TT Oh, you were with the missile guys then.
- RH My office was in the same building as the missiles, yes.
- TT We're not that familiar with where the building locations are on base, where exactly was that?
- RH It's on the main complex where the housing compound is on the west side of that complex. But the main building, the building housed the missiles and they had as I recall they had three missile squadrons in the missile wing and they had a command post, as did the B-52 wing have a command post.
- TT Right. So you were close to the 91st there.
- RH Yeah. I was in the same building with the 91st.
- TT So you interacted with both the 91st commander and the 5th Bomb Wing commander?
- RH Yes, both of them on a pretty much a daily basis. I left them alone as long as I felt they were doing what they were supposed to be doing. And I spent as much time at Malmstrom as I tried to spend with the missile wing there at Minot to see what was going on.
- JK You were doing a lot of traveling then, general?

RH Oh yeah, I had (chuckles) I had a Convair, the T-29, the prop airplane¹ for me and my staff. When I would go visit, I would take my staff along with me and we would look at certain things in certain areas that we wanted to be sure were complying with—and then we would return, but it kept me busy. I was on the road a lot. When I went down to SAC to fly now, I would fly aboard one of our KC-135 tankers² and we'd go, have a refueling with a B-52, or maybe two, and then recover at Omaha and then they would return. So a lot of time in the air too. It was a good job. I was a little disappointed when I left SAC and went to the Air Materiel Command down in Warner-Robbins, and I stayed there a couple of years and then went to Viet Nam and I worked for some really fine people there, you know, 4-stars.

TT Were you over with Arc Light?

RH Well, I was my first commander was—I'll think of his name in a minute—Lou Clay was the PACAF Commander and his father was a 4-star, you know in World War II and he was a 4-star. And the other one was John Vogt V-o-g-t, and my first commander was named Cavell, 4-star and he was called back and reduced to 2 stars for not complying with the Rules of Engagement. But anyway, I enjoyed those tours and then I was back at Warner-Robbins as commander and it's better to be the commander than the vice commander (laughs).

JK I would guess so.

RH But anyway, Minot was a very good assignment, the people—I'm from Georgia originally and the people around Minot are very independent people, you know...

TT Yeah you bet, Scandinavian background.

RH Right, right, I was impressed with them and they're hardy people too. I got along quite well and they were supportive of the base. I haven't been back, but at that time there were no little sales, pawn shops and that sort of stuff right off base. Now you were there—is it still open country coming up to the front gate?

TT Oh yeah.

RH Ok, well that's great. It's a good base and I had the missile wings, both of 'em were very good. You may know that the missile crews they would be as we used to say, "in the hole" for 24 hours and have 24 hours off and then they had a chance to go to college, we had college degrees on each base and then the fourth day they would be back in the hole, but most of those guys got their Master's degrees. Yeah, it was a great program. SAC was a well-run outfit, and I was under General Lemay 'course in SAC, and General Power, and none of 'em put up with any inefficiency.

JK Well, that's Lemay's reputation for sure.

RH Yes. It's never the—it was a tribute to him that he said that he couldn't tell whether you were incompetent or unlucky—he didn't have time to determine—he'd get somebody else

JK Well, not only were the people up around Minot good, but I think you had great crews too.

- RH They were all very good people, and you know we had the slogan up there that “only the best come north,” and that was there before I got there. We had very few distractions, I had the B-52 wing at Carswell in Fort Worth, Fort Worth-Dallas, and there were a hell of a lot of distractions there, you know, to take people away from their business, but Minot, you would do your job and there wasn’t many places to go and—
- TT Yeah that’s true. I had a question too about the role of the 15th. Did you report directly to Nichols at the 15th, General Nichols?
- RH I reported directly, the 15th was an Air Force, and SAC had three [Numbered] Air Forces as you may know, the 8th Air Force, 2nd Air Force, and 15th Air Force, and my boss was the 15th Air Force by the name of Catton C-a-t-t-o-n- and his deputy was Nichols. Anyway, Nichols took care of a lot of the activities, you know, when I didn’t want to bother the boss I would call Nichols, he was 2-star and Catton was a 3-star.
- TT So, but all of your communication would go through the 15th to SAC? Or could you communicate directly to SAC?
- RH Well basically you go immediately to 15th but it’s also simultaneously into SAC, you know. 15th had a command post and that was the alternate command post if SAC was destroyed—just like headquarters Omaha, was to go to 15th.
- JK The 15th was at March?
- RH March Air Force Base.
- TT Are you OK if we talk about this incident? We don’t want to put you in a spot.
- RH Yes. Well let me tell you what I knew about it. You called me the other day and said, “Did I remember it?” Yes, and the thing I remembered most specifically was that there was a B-52 that sighted this object and made a radarscope photo of it and after reading through your things, I remember there were some people out into the missile area that also observed something. And you sent me the reports my people sent to SAC and ADC and all of it see? And we thought, I thought that I had the crew in and I talked to them, and it was a good crew and they were, I felt, reliable people, and so we sent all the information in and thought maybe that we really were onto something, but, you know, the analysis by the higher headquarters came back and said, no, there was (chuckles) no UFO.
- TT Yeah, they wanted to down play it.
- RH Yeah.
- TT Yeah, they talked too about that in the documents, you know, they didn’t want it to get out of hand.
- RH Now the other thing that is of interest I think, that there was no civilian sightings that I recall in the paper or anything, and so that’s interesting, kind of leaves a confusing picture a little bit.
- TT Well, you know it was between 3 and 5 in the morning.
- RH Yeah.

- JK One of the funny things one of the fellas said, this was near that little town of Grano up there—I says, “well, you know, I don’t expect there’s many people there at night,” and whoever I was speaking to just laughed and said “there ain’t too many people there during the day either.”
- RH (Laughs) that’s right. But anyway, I thought that was interesting that there were no sightings by any of the civilian population. Normally somebody’s out on the road, you know.
- TT I’m just trying to get some idea what your involvement might have been in the investigation aspect of it. I mean basically you briefed the crew and was that it, or were you more involved in doing some more investigation?
- RH Well I just, my thing, I got briefed by the crew and of course the wing commander came with his, the crew, either he or his operations officer I don’t remember which and they told me, I wanted to know what they had seen and what did it look like and were they sure what they were talking about and they told me they were and then there was this input from the missile people that some of the maintenance personnel was out in the area and they had also observed some unusual thing and I think a couple of alarms went off. ‘Course we had alarms going off all the time. And anyway then our job was to put the thing together and send it on to higher headquarters for them to make an analysis of it. As I recall, and course it’s been a long time, I’ve been retired a long time, but there was an office in the Air Force that looked into UFO matters—
- TT That’s correct.
- RH And so we sent, you know, that’s who this whole thing went to. Now I do not recall anyone from higher headquarters coming to make any further determination other than what we sent in you know.
- TT You would have sent that to Nichols?
- RH Well that would be up to, I would think after it went up on up through 15th Air Force to SAC, that would be SAC if they were going to send somebody to—
- TT Would that have gone to Compton then or the DCS?
- RH Now Compton was Vice Commander of SAC and Holloway was Commander, so it would have been, I would’ve, course 15th Air Force could have sent somebody but there’s more capability at SAC headquarters than there are at one in the numbered air force headquarters.
- TT Oh sure. I think they had 10,000 people there or something there didn’t they?
- RH Yeah, I’d think that it would be a SAC team that would come in if they really wanted to explore it further. I think they concluded that there really wasn’t anything. I guess you can get some false returns on your radar, but this didn’t sound to me like that and—
- TT No it doesn’t, even the documents don’t make it appear that way.
- RH No, right, right.
- TT That’s what’s confusing.

- RH And I don't know what these people saw out there, you know (chuckles) that's, that country is without the smog and stuff that you have around Los Angeles and the other places so the visibility is pretty damn good so you ought to see pretty well you know.
- TT Of course these guys were out there all the time. They know the routine aircraft—
- RH Right, right. The one thing I want to assure you that there was no, I mean you know as I recall again that they had the outer which is the fence then you had the inner which was the soft area, then you had the lid that goes on top of the missile and no lid ever went anyplace. Hell if a lid had moved (laughs) SAC would've been down there in two seconds.
- TT Oh, I'm sure, yeah
- RH We used to have—you can have the outer alarm, but if you have the inner alarm and you, the launch control crew, you know each launch control crew had ten missiles. So they had, so the launch control crew could reset, and if it reset fine, if they couldn't reset it though, we had to send security police out there to maintain the place until they could get it repaired.
- TT Right.
- RH And I imagine they're still having problems like that.
- TT Oh, I'm sure, although I'm sure they've improved their technology too. Another question, and you looked at some of these recalls from the crew—
- RH Yes.
- TT One thing they talk about is that, and you know, a couple of them are claiming that you provided them this information, that there had been an alarm at one, at a site, it's not clear where that site is, which launch facility that a team had been sent out and there was a large object hovering over the security team and that it took off toward the B-52 when the B-52 came in the area, does that ring any bells?
- RH No, as I recall back, and in the stuff you sent me refreshed my memory somewhat, that I was briefed by the missile commander about some of the situations, that, peculiar situations that had happened and the sightings, you know, that supposedly had taken place, and I had told the B-52 crew in the briefing that there had been some unusual things taken place in the missile area and I wondered how theirs correlated with them. So I was trying to get the whole thing correlated one to the other. We had a nice meeting. All we could do was to put down the facts what we had seen and heard, you know and send them home.
- JK Right, right.
- TT I don't want to pin you down on this but you read what these guys were saying you told them—
- RH Yes.
- TT Runyan, the co-pilot—
- RH Yeah, he had the wildest damn story I—

- TT Now McCaslin was the navigator, he doesn't remember as much as Runyan is remembering—
- RH Yeah Runyan seemed like that he was remembering some things that he had gotten afterwards, you know. Yeah, I thought the radar operator is what he said, and when, I think I told you what impressed me the most of the whole thing was that the radar operator told me that he had a radarscope photo solid of that return, of that thing.
- TT Here's another question concerning those photos before we get off that. Did you know that the Bomb Wing Intelligence did an analysis of the scope film that morning of the sighting?
- RH I don't know whether they did or not, but I would suspect that they looked at those, yes.
- TT We've talked to the Bomb Wing intelligence officer that did the analysis.
- RH Yeah, I would suspect they looked at those very thoroughly.
- TT Yeah they wanted to verify the crew's recall of what happened.
- RH Yes, well that's, I would say the whole thing was a high priority for us all because we were concerned that maybe we had something, you know. It was unusual what was happening.
- JK Yeah that's right. There's one other thing I want to ask you is you. During the briefing there was another somewhat similar incident mentioned that occurred within a week or two at some other base. Do you recall anything like that?
- RH I don't recall anything. I did read that and I don't recall anything like that and so it didn't happen at Minot and it didn't happen at Malmstrom but we had six missile wings you know, and no, I don't recall any incident other than the one we had. But anyway it was an interesting thing and that's what makes life in the military interesting, you know.
- JK Well an incident like that has pretty much got to stir everything up, doesn't it?
- RH Yes, yes, that stirs everything up. I tried to call Davidson, and I know you said he was gonna be on vacation for three weeks, and all I got was his answering machine. I hope that he calls me, and if he gives me anything of interest, I'll let you know, I want to know if he was the one that briefed me early that morning. He's a good guy and I'm sure he'll talk to me and what I wanted him to do was to refresh my memory somewhat, after all I'm 84 years old (laughs).
- TT Well you sound like you're doing good!
- RH But anyway, if I get anything when Davidson calls and he can prod my memory something that I think might be of interest to you I'll give you a buzz.
- TT OK, great. We really appreciate you talking to us
- RH Well I thank you guys and I wish I could be more help but they told us it wasn't a UFO so, for us to go back to work so—
- TT Alright thanks.
- JK Thank you very much General.

[Transcript end]

¹ Convair T-29:



² KC-135 tanker:

