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COLONEL GARALD “ROBBIE” ROBINSON

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Col. Garald K. "Robbie" Robinson served as the commander of the 88th Air Base Wing of the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base during the negotiations. He assisted the U.S. Department of State in transforming the base into a negotiations site, while also being a witness to the Dayton Peace Accords negotiations.

INTERVIEW

Q: All right. Today is January 30th. This is part one. And this is an interview with Robbie Robinson. All right, Robbie, can you introduce yourself? Tell us about your upbringing. Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?

ROBINSON: Yeah, the early days. Well, first of all, my birth name is Garald. G.A.R.A.L.D. And everybody screws that up. That's why I pretty much go by Robbie now because that's difficult to mess up. And I'll tell you some funny stories about how things got screwed up here in just a minute. So I was born and raised in—it's a big town for Idaho, but it's a small town for America—Pocatello, Idaho. Population of about 50,000 people. I went through school and graduated from high school there. I guess I did well enough in school that I got an appointment to the United States Air Force Academy. So I went to the Air Force Academy and got a bachelor's degree in basic sciences. While I was at the Academy I showed up—I had a social security number—and then I got this letter that said that they assigned me a social security number because my name was not in the system. And I looked at the name, the name was Garland—G.A.R.L.A.N.D. Garland instead of Garald. So I told them, “That's not my name.” Then, they tried to fix it. They fixed it again and it became—instead of Garland—Garlad. That's not my name either.

When I was growing up, my family—my sister, my parents—they called me Gary, Gary was short for Garald. And I had a cousin named Jerry and he was a Gerald. I just did not like Gerald for whatever reason. So I was known as Gary when I was at the Academy. Then when I graduated from the Air Force Academy, my first assignment was to go through undergraduate pilot training in Columbus, Mississippi, and I became an instructor pilot. First, at Columbus Air Force Base, T-37, taking kids right off the street and teaching them how to fly jets. Then, I got reassigned to Mather Air Force Base in California, where I was selected to be part of the initial team for a new program. The idea was to take navigator students, who'd been training in big aircraft, and put them in small jets. The first time these students got in a jet, they were doing

things like flying upside down, pulling G's, and wearing helmets—stuff they weren't used to, and for some, it was a bit much. So, they decided to create a five-flight program to help them get a feel for that kind of flying. I got selected for it and was the second youngest out of about thirty-five people from across the Air Force who helped set up this new training program at Mather, which doesn't exist anymore. They closed that down some years ago. I did that for some years and while I was there, I picked up the nickname Robbie. Like I said, I was the second youngest guy out of thirty-five of us, but for whatever reason, it seemed like whenever they wanted anything they always went to me. And another guy nicknamed me Robbie, not because of Robinson, but there's an old movie—there was a robot and it was Robbie the robot. And they thought I was kind of robotic in my career as things were progressing along. So the nickname Robbie stuck and that's how I ended up with Robbie.

Q: Good, bad or different?

ROBINSON: That's why people still call me that today, I guess. So after that, after my assignment there, I was selected to go to RAF [Royal Air Force] Lakenheath, England. First, I went to Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico to go through the F-111 training program. It was the F-111D. Then, when I went to Lakenheath it was to fly the F-111F—you got a lot of the initial training in the states—we did the top-up training at Lakenheath. I stayed there for over four years as an F-111 fighter pilot. We were dual rated in both conventional munitions and conventional operations, as well as nuclear strike. I was part of NATO for over four years during the cold war when you couldn't go to places like Yugoslavia, they were off limits. But we obviously knew about the country and President Tito and all of that.

Following that assignment, I applied for and was selected to go to the U.S. Air Force Experimental Test Pilot School at Edwards Air Force Base. I became an experimental test pilot and stayed there, at Edwards, where I was one of the few guys to be triple-current—I was flying the F-4, the T-38, and the F-16. This was back when the F-16 was still a brand new airplane. I was doing a lot of developmental testing. I was the chief of propulsion systems and subsystems testing on the F-16. I got to fly what at the time was the new Block 30 aircraft with the GE engine, did all of the air start testing, and got a couple air metals for the hazardous testing I was doing. But I was also assigned to be the liaison with NASA. This was at the same time that we were just starting the space shuttle program. As part of the buildup of making that aircraft “operational,” that system operational, they were landing on the lake bed at Edwards. Then after the lake bed, we did the runway, and from the runway during the daytime to then at nighttime. So I was the Air Force guy who was liaising with NASA on all the support systems like helicopters, doctors, medical people, emergency responders, navigation aids, making sure they were all up and ready before the shuttle would actually launch. They would land at Edwards and then tow it back to the NASA part of the field, mate it up with the 747, fly it back to Kennedy and then relaunch it. I was heavily involved in supporting this operation.

After being at Edwards for four years as a test pilot, I was assigned to go to Air Command and Staff College, spending a year there. Following that, they said, “Oh, hey! Here's a guy who's been flying his whole Air Force career, he needs career broadening assignments.” They assigned me as an Air Liaison Officer with the Second Infantry Division, in South Korea. I spent a year over there—unaccompanied, acting as a liaison with the US Army in South Korea. This was just

before the Korean Olympics. They asked me if I wanted to extend and stay there for the Olympics. And I said, “No, no, thanks.” I want to get back to America.

Coming back from there, I had—what they call—gate time, flying wise, so the Air Force said, “Well, we want to now make you a program manager.” I didn't want to do that. And they said, “We think this is best for you.” So they assigned me to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. This was the first time—this was really not on my bingo card of things I wanted to do. I wanted to go to Edwards and resume being a test pilot. But they said, “Well, the four-star general, General Yates, is coming up with this new program where he wants to take some of the experimental test pilots and put them into acquisition jobs at Wright-Patt.” So I went to Wright-Patterson Air Force base in Dayton, Ohio. They put me in the F-15 program office and I was chief of production and deployment for the F-15, primarily the Strike Eagles.

After doing that for a couple of years, I was selected to be the executive officer to the commander of the Aeronautical Systems Center—a three-star general who actually oversees all of the major acquisitions across the Air Force. I was his executive officer for a year and that was during the Desert Shield, Desert Storm time frame—that's a whole different story.

After serving as the executive officer, I was selected to go to Air War College. So, I go to Air War College, down at Maxwell Air Force Base for a year. Now I'm thinking, “Okay, now I'm going to be able to go back flying.

Q: Right.

ROBINSON: Well, I'm about halfway through the year-long school and the Air Force announces that they had selected the F-22 to be the new air supremacy fighter, and Pratt and Whitney's F-119 engine for that system. Shortly after that announcement, I got a call from a general officer saying, “Hey, Robbie, we want you to come back to Wright-Patt after you graduate and we want you to be a program manager in the F-22 program office.” When I graduated, I went back to Wright-Patt and I'm doing my thing: running the F119 engine program for the F-22. After a couple years, I was on temporary duty down here in Florida, because Pratt and Whitney had a test facility at West Palm Beach. I was overseeing some of the testing that was going on when I get a call from Lt General Dick Scofield. He calls me up and he says, “Hey, Robbie, we want to make you the base commander.” And I said, “Well, Sir, I don't know anything about running the base.” And he says, “Well, that's okay. We don't care about that part.” He says, “we think you have leadership skills to bring the two halves of Wright-Patterson together.” His background on what he was saying during the call—Wright-Patterson was actually two geographically separated fields, so to speak. There's the Wright field—named after the Wright brothers—where all of the acquisition, Aeronautical Systems Center, the Air Force Institute of Technology, and the Air Force Research Labs are all located. Then, on the Patterson field side is where all of the Logistics Command's operations were at—we were two separate commands. Well, they merged the two command systems and logistics and called a new command: Air Force Materiel Command. That's where the four-star general for Logistics Command was located, the main runway, the flying operations, the commissary, the BX, the officers' club, and a lot of support structures—on the Patterson side. He asked me if I would take that job because they had now merged the two major commands together. But really between Systems Command and Logistics

Command, they are two different major entities with different cultures and ways of doing their jobs. They needed somebody, I guess, to try to be able to navigate between those two cultures, so to speak. He says, "Well, I'll give you about a week to think about it. And then I'll come down and twist your arm." And I said, "Well, I don't think I'll let a three-star general twist my arm anytime soon." I talked to my wife about it. We said, "Okay, yeah." So I took the job and took command in January of 1995.

One of the things that I didn't realize: I was living off the base. I was living in a suburb of Dayton called Beavercreek. And they said, "Oh, by the way, as the mayor of the town, you've got to live in the town. So you have to move onto the base." And that was not exactly good news for my two children. They said, "Okay, dad, you move on the base. We'll stay here." I replied, "We're all going together." So we did, we moved on the base. We moved into what was called the Bricks, which is right next to the officers' club, where the senior officers live. And Wright-Patterson itself is the largest single-site employer in the state of Ohio with over 30,000 people who live, operate, and work there. Not all military, the base itself has quite a few civilians on both the Wright field and the Patterson side. I was learning my way around there. And General Dick Scofield, he had previously been the B-2 program director, and before that he'd been the F-117 program director. So he is kind of the father of stealth. We became pretty good friends. He called me up and he said, "Robbie, you've got to live on the base." I said, "Okay, fine." We decided we'll just rent our home. At the time, I figured, "Okay, I'll do this job for two years. And as a colonel after a base manager job, I'll probably just retire and then go do something else."

So, as the base commander, one night I came home from work when the phone rang and it was Lieutenant General Larry Farrell; he was the vice commander of Air Force Materiel Command. He said, "Hey Robbie, could you meet with some delegates from the State Department tomorrow?" And of course, my first thought was, "Oh, man."

Q: They were coming.

ROBINSON: My first thought was, "That's when I go play golf." I had a tee time with my buddies, it was October time frame, it was getting late, and the number of days that were still going to be available to play golf were getting limited. But I said, "Yeah, what's this all about?" And he says, "Well, they're looking for a place to hold some peace talks. They heard about Wright-Patterson and they want to come and take a look." And we have—

Q: Did people talk about the Balkans at all prior to that? Was there any other indication or was this out of the blue?

ROBINSON: This was completely out of the blue. I mean, this was completely out of the blue. At my house on-base, I had a lot of extra communication that you don't have at others. The other colonels did not have the communication system I had in my house—it included a direct line from the general, the four-star general and three-star generals to me. I hung up the phone and I'm thinking: "He did not give me the definition of success. I don't know whether I'm supposed to convince these people to come or to tell them not to come. He just said meet with him. Okay, I can fill that square. I'll go over there. I'll meet with them and say, 'Hi.' We talk and then say, 'Thank you very much, have a good day.' Let them go on their way." But I said, "I think what I

need to do is get some of my support staff to join me.” I called my support group commander Al Schoolcraft—he had recently been promoted to colonel and he had come from Area B (Wright Field side of the base), from one of the program offices. I'd known him for quite a few years from my earlier time there at Wright-Patt. I called up Al and said, “You run the housing, the billeting, the security police. I would like you to join me tomorrow morning.” He was a golfer too, so we groused over that. He said, “Okay, I'll call Terry Matthews, who runs the housing.” And he called Mark Bracken, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Bracken, who was our squadron commander for security police. “Get Bracken, because we're I'm sure we're going to need security, and Terry Matthews—not sure what we're going to need with billeting, if we need it.” So there's the three of them. I said, “Okay, let me call civil engineering and get one of their guys, just in case, we need to do last minute stuff for them again,” not knowing what the heck they're going to need. I called up the vice commander, it was a civilian, and he had been a resident expert for civil engineering there for many years. He was a really good guy, Tom Shoup. So we had Tom, Al, Mark, Terry, and me. And I said, “Okay, we're going to meet them over at the Air Force Materiel Command headquarters.” It was called building 262. We're going to meet them at building 262 tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock. We'll see what they want. If we need to, we'll show them the base and see where it goes from there.

Next morning I got up, put on my uniform instead of my golf clothes, went over there and I met with them, and it was Patrick Kennedy with another gentleman. They gave me their business cards and over the years I've lost them. I guess somewhere they're in someplace or file. We introduced ourselves and they said, “We'd heard about Wright-Patterson, that you had this facility called the Hope Hotel.”

Q: Oh, wow.

ROBINSON: I said, “Yeah, yeah, we've got the Hope Hotel.” It wasn't too far. Matter of fact, it was basically across the street from building 262, where we were actually meeting them. They said, “We'd like to go over there and take a look at that as a possible place to have these meetings for the”—at the time they were calling it the “Balkan Proximity Peace Talks.” “Okay, fine.” But, I think I told Patrick Kennedy, “Well, you get in my car, and you have the other guy get in Al's car.” While we were driving over there, I told him, “The first thing you need to know about the Hope Hotel is we, the Air Force, don't own it. It's a privately owned facility.”

Q: What's the history of a hotel? How did you know what they're like? What's the connection to the base?

ROBINSON: The connection to why the Hope Hotel at Wright Patterson? I do not know. I would be speculating on how we ended up with that other than, like I said, Wright Patterson is the largest single site employer in the state of Ohio. With over 30,000 people and all of the important activities that go on at that base, we get a lot of transit traffic that comes in. And it may have been that the senior leadership says, “We need more ability for visitors to the base.” Okay, whether they're visiting Air Force Material Command, the senior level stuff that goes on within the material command, or whether they're meeting for Air Force Institute of Technology, whether it's one of the system program offices, Air Force Research Lab...there's several reasons why many people show up at Wright-Patt. So I think that they were looking for a way. And at that

time, they were also doing a lot of privatization of military activities. In fact, one of my jobs as base commander was to evaluate all of the core functions to determine what things we could privatize and could then outsource—thinking at the time that there would be a cost savings perhaps by outsourcing some things. It may have been related to “we need additional space and instead of building another visiting officer's quarters facility, we'll just let some private contractor come in here and let them build a facility and they can run it at a profit if they want to.” And the agreement was that when people came in, the first priority was to put them into those facilities we already had, that the Air Force had already built, visiting officer quarters, senior officer quarters, transit quarters, etc. Then, if we were overbooked, they would get non-availability, that's what it is called. From there, then they can go downtown to stay in a hotel, a Holiday Inn, Hampton, whatever. Most people like to do that.

Q: Right, right.

ROBINSON: Most people hope they can get non-availability. This Hope Hotel was a way to avoid that non-availability so they built this hotel and someone at the State Department had heard about it. Patrick Kennedy and his cohort, they wanted to see and evaluate if this was a place that they could possibly use as a site for these Balkan Proximity Peace Talks. Up to that point, I had absolutely no clue. I mean, I was aware of what was going on in the Balkans, because having been a former F-16 test pilot, I was very interested when a guy by the name of Scott O'Grady was shot down and then the subsequent rescue of him—that made national news. I was interested in what was going on over there from that perspective. Okay. But that was that—just tangential interest; it wasn't a core interest. There's a lot going on at that base, and as the base commander, I was the host for and the mayor of the town, right.

Q: Right.

ROBINSON: I did not know at that time. These discussions were really not on my radar site by any stretch of the imagination because that wasn't a core function. I was in the U.S. Air Force, not the State Department.

Q: State Department, right.

ROBINSON: That's their job. Our job is national defense, right? That's what we're called, the Department of Defense. My whole focus was on that and providing the infrastructure for other people to do their job. The air base wing that I ran, we had civil engineering, we had logistics, transportation, services, building civil engineering, communication, computers communications. I had a lot of people as group commanders that were working for me trying to keep that whole orchestra going—as a band leader, that was my primary job.

Q: Right. So you're taking Pat Kennedy over to the hotel, right?

ROBINSON: I take Pat Kennedy to the hotel and tell him, “We don't control this facility, but I'd be glad to show it to you.” My thinking was, if he's interested in the Hope Hotel for the peace talks, that's fine with me. So we head over there and go up to the manager. I introduce them and ask if he could show Patrick Kennedy the building and facilities. It was news to the manager

too—this all came together last minute, so I hadn't been able to give him any advance notice.

And we toured the hotel.

And we looked at it. They've got big ballrooms, and they've got rooms where they could have breakout sessions. And so Mr. Kennedy was interested in that. So he said, "Well, let me take a look at the room, take a look at your VIP quarters."

Well, they didn't have any. I mean, it was a big hotel, but they really didn't have any. I guess that wasn't really anything they had set up to have as special. Now, they might have had some bridal suite rooms or something — I don't know — because I never stayed there. To be honest, I never stayed at the Hope Hotel.

So we went through some of the rooms, we looked at it, and then Mr. Kennedy goes, "Well," he says, "No," he said, "This won't do."

And I said, "What—what do you need?"

And he says, "Well," he says, "You know, we're going to have these senior delegates and so we need to have some VIP suites."

I said, "Oh, well, I've got some VIP suites, you know, just basically across the street. If you'd like, we can go take a look at them."

And he said, "Yeah, let's do that."

So we jumped in the car — and again, Al Schoolcraft and Terry Matthews had the keys — so we drove over to the VIP suites. It's a four-story building, and it's only the top floor — the fourth floor — where the 'VIP' suites are. They're very nice rooms: large, well-decorated, spacious rooms.

So I showed him that, and he's looking around, he's looking at his cohort, and he goes, "No," he says, "You only got them on the fourth floor here?"

I said, "Yeah, just the fourth floor."

I said, "Yeah, the floors below are more just basic rooms. When I call them 'basic,' they weren't as big as these rooms, but they were still nice VIP rooms."

And he says, "Oh, this won't do."

And I said, "Well, you might as well stop looking then for DOD facilities, because these are some of the nicest you're going to find in the Department of Defense."

And he says, "Well, you can't have President Tudjman across the hall from President Milošević now, can we?"

And I'm looking at him like, okay, I've heard of these guys, but what's the significance? Well, obviously, they're fighting.

I said, "Oh, so you need separate facilities then."

And he says, "Yeah."

And I said, "Well, I've got more VOQs — Visiting Officer Quarters — right next door."

He says, "You've got more?"

And I said, "Yeah."

He may have misunderstood, thinking we had more high-end quarters, but I said, "We've got more Visiting Officer Quarters right next door."

He says, "Well, how many?"

And I said, "Well, I've got a five-plex."

He said, "You got five?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "What's important about five?"

He said, "Well, I've got the Bosnians, the Serbs, the Croatians, the Europeans, the Americans — I've got five different delegations."

He says, "So you've got five separate buildings."

He says, "That might be good. Let's go see them."

So, okay, fine. We leave that building, get in my staff car, and drive just basically around into the VOQ complex.

Well, these are more like your regular Holiday Inn rooms for your junior and mid-level officers, okay? But they were all five separate buildings — all identical — and they're basically across the street from the Hope Hotel.

And so we're going through, looking at those rooms, and he's looking at them, and he says,

"Well, yeah, these are kind of basic."

He says, "Do you have any VIP suites in any of these five buildings?"

I said, “No, we just looked at the VIP suites.”

And he’s kind of hammering it on like, “Oh gee, I don’t know what we would do here.”

So I looked at him and I said, “Well, look, if you need VIP suites in each of these buildings, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll tear out some walls and convert some of these single-room suites into two-room suites.”

And as I was saying this, I was looking over at the Vice Commander from Civil Engineering to see whether he turned any strange color, because I thought, well, if I’m getting too far in front of my skis, he’s gonna give me some body language — like, ‘Hey boss, we need to talk.’ But he’s sitting there with a complete poker face, like, okay, this is fine with him.

And so I said, “Yeah, I don’t have enough VIP suites, as you know. So this would give me an opportunity to have some more VIP suites that we could then have available to us on the base.”

Then Mr. Kennedy told me, “We’re coming to Wright Patt! We’re going back and recommending to Secretary Christopher that we’re coming here.” And I’m just thinking, “Yeah, what did I just do here?”

I mean, you know, I’m thinking back to my conversation last night with General Farrell — he did not say, “Robbie, get them here.” It was: “Talk to them.”

Q: Yeah, so there were no instructions, right?

ROBINSON: So, I mean, no one told me yes, no one told me no. And so I guess I was getting into—I’ve always tried to be a person who—remember, when I was at the Air Force Academy, there was a motto that’s stayed with me ever since I was probably 18 or 19 years old. Someone had a sign on their door that said, “You’re either part of the solution or you’re part of the problem.”

And for whatever reason, I saw that, and it just struck me internally and stayed with me ever since. And so I’ve always tried to be helpful and be part of the solution. And so I was getting into the problem-solving with him on, hey, what can we do here? You know, help you out.

So I offered, “Well, yeah, we’ll convert some of these single rooms into two-room suites.” Boom — he jumps on that and says, “Hey, we’re going to go back and recommend to Secretary of State Christopher that we’re coming here.”

Q: Wow.

ROBINSON: Well, I need to go back a little bit and say, you know, as part of when I first met him and we were driving to the hotel, he told me that they had just come from some other bases that, I think, either said, “No, we don’t want you,” or they didn’t find them good enough for their

needs—didn't have the right facilities, infrastructure, whatever.

And so they were coming to Wright-Patt, and then after Wright-Patt, they were going to go to, I think, Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska and a couple of other bases. I think they were also going to—well, I know they were going to go out to the Presidio specifically.

And I thought, okay, San Francisco, Presidio... you know, I'm basically thinking, why even waste my time? Why didn't you just go out there to begin with? Right? That's what I was thinking at the time.

I guess what I found out afterward was that one of the things he didn't tell me—but that I found out later—was that as part of their search, they were hoping to find a place close to Washington, D.C., so they could still jaunt back and forth from D.C. to someplace close enough, you know, etc.

But they were looking at San Francisco—they'd heard about the Presidio—and of course, that's a very nice facility. Afterward, I think it was turned back as part of the BRAC—the Base Realignment and Closure. So I think the Presidio had been BRAC'd as well.

But at the time, if it were me, I probably would have said, "Let's go to the Presidio and make it work." If I had been in the State Department, that's what I would have done.

So, you know, when he was looking for other places—Langley, which is close by—they said no. Then he came to Wright-Patt. Then they were going to go out to Offutt. There may have been other bases or facilities they were looking at.

But anyway, when I offered to tear down the walls, the whole conversation shifted 180 degrees.

At that point, it was no longer, "We're looking." It became, "What do we need to do to tell Secretary of State Warren Christopher?"

So he says, "Do you have a map of the base?" And I said, "Yeah, I've got a map of the base." So we left the VOQs, and everybody else kind of went off and did whatever they were going to do—because it's a Saturday, so I let them all go. I took Patrick Kennedy with me. We went to my office—that's there on the Patterson side also.

We went in, and I pulled out a map of the base and had these Marks-A-Lot pens. So I highlighted: here's where the Hope Hotel is, here's where the VOQs are--the compound, here's base operations.

And I said, "Okay, now, right next to base operations, there's a building that I think would probably work very well for you to use for the press—for you to have discussions with the press. This would be a good place to do that."

And of course, as people arrive at the runway/base operations, it's a short drive from base ops over to the compound, etc. So I marked all this out, gave it to him, and he said, "Thank you very

much.”

And I took him back to his car, and he left. This was a Saturday.

Early that next week, Secretary of State Warren Christopher goes on national TV and says they’re going to hold these peace talks at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. And that made it official.

Okay. When that made it official, then I went, “Oh my goodness, I’ve got to get a team together.” Because as the base commander, I can’t spend all my time working with them. So I call up Al Schoolcraft again and said, “Al, I want to make you the team leader with the State Department. As we’re putting this facility together, I want you to be—again, because you’re in charge of housing and building and security—I figured that’s where most of the issues are going to be related.”

I said, “If there are issues you cannot deal with at your level—you come to me, and I will take them to higher headquarters, whether it’s funding, contracts, whatever. I’ll work those issues. You work the liaison issues that they need at the tactical level, and I’ll handle the more strategic level.”

And so that’s what we did.

I said, “Okay, what we’ll do is, every day we’ll get the team together and basically do an all-hands-on—‘what do we need to do’—and come up with our game plan to make sure we can support this,” because they wanted to kick this off the 1st of November.

So we had two weeks to get the whole infrastructure together.

What did that mean? Okay. Well, Al is not in charge of civil engineering. So again, that was my job—to work with civil engineering on getting the rooms ready.

Okay, basically tear down the walls and do all of that to get the VIP facilities set up for them. So we’re having these daily meetings, and I’d go over to the complex every day just to check on things, to see how things were going.

There are some funny stories I’ll maybe tell later about that.

That’s essentially how things got kicked off and started.

Q: What was the reaction from your superiors like when it was like, “Okay, we’re actually doing it”? Was there still a surprise, or was it more like, “Oh, God”?

ROBINSON: Well, yeah, there was surprise, I think, by just about everybody. And again, as the mayor of the town, so to speak, I was getting a lot of calls. But you know, the majority of calls I was getting—and when people would come up to me—most people were excited about it. People were constantly asking me, “Hey, what can I do to help with this?” I mean, I was getting that

from lieutenants all the way up to colonels, and civilians—a lot of civilians on the base were asking me, “What can I do to help? What can I do to help?”

So I was getting a lot of that. And of course, my answer was, well, you might be able to help in one way or another, with escort duties, things like that at certain times—we’ll see.

The base population was concerned, though, about access, you know, because as we were building the compound, they were concerned about being able to get on and off the base, and how this was going to impact their ability to get their kids to school. Like my two daughters—well, my wife drove them to school every day. So getting them to school and getting them back home each day, people were concerned about that part: are we going to be seriously impacted by this compound on the base?

Because again, Wright-Patterson has 30,000 people. It had several housing areas, both on and off base. So people were concerned about how that was going to impact them.

So I had a big town hall meeting with people and said, “Okay,” gave all the information that I knew at the time. “Look, we’re going to build a compound. We’re going to have a chain-link fence that goes around the Hope Hotel and also goes around the five-plex there. But if you don’t go out that gate—that’s the headquarters gate, we’ll call it—if you go out the hospital gate, you’re not going to be impacted at all. If you go that way, you should still be able to get out onto the main highway, Highway 444, and go into Fairborn,” which is the closest town to the northwest.

“You know, if you’re going to other places like Wright State University, which is on the other side of the base, yeah, you can still do that and you won’t have any problems.”

Some people were skeptical about that. And then, after the peace talks were over, I had people come up to me and say, “Had we not seen it on the news or whatever, we wouldn’t have even known there were peace talks going on.”

So it truly was unimpactful to the base population. That was a good thing, obviously—that we didn’t have people complaining like, “I couldn’t get my kids to school on time because of the traffic.”

Q: Blah, blah...

ROBINSON: You know, we still worked through those issues, and Wright-Patt has several different ways to get on and off the base—both on the Patterson side and otherwise. I’ll focus on the Patterson side because that’s where all this happened.

Now, this happened over on the Wright Field part in Area B, which is, you know, geographically separated by several miles. So people there wanted to help—they came over, acted as escorts or whatever a few times. But by and large, everybody just went about their business while the State Department was doing their thing, heading up the negotiations.

Q: Right. So when the preparations were happening—you were rearranging things, building new things, adding things—the State Department was probably already sending people over. So you were probably already hosting somebody there. Was that like, well...

ROBINSON: Actually, from that part, we got inundated with help. I mean, GSA showed up with a huge fleet of vehicles to be used to transport these people around, because these Balkan Proximity Peace Talks, as far as I know, were never... The reason they called them "proximity" was so they could walk around and talk—and so they could still go off the base. And they did, you know.

So you'd see these kind of burgundy GSA vans that they brought in, and they'd go shopping, they'd go eat wherever, go to basketball games. They were very big fans of basketball. And so they would go to Kentucky, Indiana—other places around—with a lot of big, important basketball games going on.

So there was that part of it. Besides GSA, the Defense Mapping Agency showed up, because they played a big role in it. And so they were there. And then we had other agencies that showed up as well, that were interested in who was there at any particular time. So yeah, I was getting a lot of help from other places and other people that showed up who were interested in what was going to be going on.

So, you know, we built the complex—you know, the chain of events—and it went up so quick that, a little funny story: right across the street from where the Hope Hotel and the Five-Plex is—on, let's say, the north side of the street—on the south side of the street is one of the Wright-Patterson golf courses. Wright-Patterson has three golf courses—that's how big the place is. Three golf courses.

And one of those golf courses had a par-three hole that ran parallel with the road, just to the left of it. As the story goes, there was a foursome on the tee box. One guy hits his ball a little bit to the left, and there were these big trees to the left of the fairway, and he hits his ball into the trees. By the time they finished teeing off and walked up, the chain link fence had been stretched. He's looking through the chain link fence and asks one of the workers, "Hey, that's my golf ball right there. Could you throw that over the fence?" He got his ball, and he played on.

So things were happening fast. I mean, we literally invented 24/7 at that time, you know, to get everything up and going.

Q: So that was what—transformed in, what, two weeks, you said?

ROBINSON: We had to build the security, which included security gates and the chain-link fence and all that—not to keep them in, but to keep other people out. That was the primary objective. In fact, they could walk right through the gates. There were several stories of President Milosevic, for instance, just walking over to the officers' club, sauntering along. One little story was that, as he was walking through our neighborhood—because I live right next to the officers' club—he walked past my house and talked to one of my neighbors. I guess he was a smoker, so he asked for a smoke. They sat there and talked for a few minutes, then he went on into the

officers' club and had dinner or whatever.

At the officers' club, we set aside some special rooms they could use for luncheons or dinners if they wanted to continue conversations. So, yeah, we had a lot of traffic—back and forth, in and out. It was an interesting time on the base itself.

Q: Right. So it was pretty much the city operating like Geneva might, with a spot for something similar.

ROBINSON: Well, I've never been to Geneva, and again, I've never been associated with the State Department. I can only tell you what was going on. Whether this is common or not, I'm not a negotiator. Like I said, I've never been to Geneva, so I'm not a diplomat, and I don't do anything diplomatic.

Q: So let me ask you this.

ROBINSON: Yes, sir.

Q: Yes, you can continue. Finish your thought. But I was curious about when everything started to happen. Like, the delegations were coming in, so they were landing. They were using one of your runways to land, right?

ROBINSON: Well, Wright-Patterson, on the Patterson side where all this was happening, has the primary runway for Wright-Patt, and it is a very, very big runway. It can accommodate large transport aircraft because there is a lot of logistics coming in and out of there. So, yeah, there's a long runway with a big parking apron right in front of base operations. The delegates were coming in beforehand and parking there. I made a policy that anytime any of these foreign diplomats were coming in, I wanted base operations to call me and let me know. Then I would drive my staff car out there. I could drive my staff car onto the apron, the runway, and all that if needed. So, I'd drive up to their airplane, and when they came down, I'd be there to salute, greet them, shake their hands, and welcome them to Wright-Patt. Then there'd typically be a staff car to pick them up, and we'd escort them to wherever they were going. So, yeah, I was doing that day and night. I mean, that's what was happening. Even beforehand, they were showing up, spending some time, then going back. Even after the peace talks started, they still did the same thing. They didn't stay there the entire 21 days at Wright-Patt. People were flying back and forth to their countries quite frequently.

Q: All right. So, were there any problems? What was your main role when the negotiations were happening? Were you acting, as I said, as a mayor? If there were problems, would they go to you and talk to you? Or what was your role during that period of time? Were you like, "We're providing you with space," and dealing with other matters of responsibility, rather than directly overseeing their work? And then, I guess, there was a chain of command, so who else was working with them?

ROBINSON: Well, again, I had designated a team to work one-on-one with the actual State Department folks. There was a mini command post set up inside the Hope Hotel, where John

McCance spent his time. A lot of things were handled by the command post, Al Schoolcraft, and his team, who were there on a regular basis. In fact, as a kind of funny side note, after I appointed Al to be the team leader to act as the liaison, he came to me one day and said, "Hey, boss, I need a good executive officer to help me out, you know, working on a lot of these issues. Can I steal your exec?" I said, "Okay, fine." So I loaned him Todd Emmert, who was my executive officer, for that twenty-one-day period. On a day-to-day basis, Todd would come into my office—he had a desk right outside my door—and I'd go out, and if Todd wasn't there, he was over at the Hope Hotel. Fine. So, a lot of things were handled by them on a daily basis. Again, I would get daily briefings from them as we were building things, and then afterwards, I'd get updates on what was going on. But mostly, things were being handled by the State Department. The Air Force was not involved, as far as I know, in any negotiations. I mean, that really isn't our job—that's what the State Department does: handle the diplomatic process of getting people to agree not to shoot at each other, right? That's not my job. My job was to provide them with the infrastructure to make it easier for them to do their job without worrying about other things like protesters, lack of facilities, or communications that didn't work. So, on a day-to-day basis, a lot of those things were actually handled by my staff.

Q: But—

ROBINSON: The funding—again, there were things they wanted to do that they either didn't have the funds for or didn't have the ability to do. That was my job: to go up and work with the head of financial management at Air Force Material Command to address those issues and ensure we were all legal. Congress appropriates funds in different buckets of money, so they don't just give you a lump sum and say, "Okay, go have a good time." The funds are appropriated by what's called "color of money." I had to make sure we weren't spending our appropriated dollars in a way that would violate congressional laws. So, anytime there were issues like that, it was up to me to talk to the head of financial management, who happened to be my next-door neighbor. I knew him very well—he was a very, very nice guy. I'd call him up and say, "Hey, I need some help with this part. We need to do this." For example, the State Department needed a chain-link fence. Well, did we really need that chain-link fence? And if so, where were those dollars going to come from? I'd let the people above me handle how to reappropriate the dollars and ensure that everything was purchased correctly, so we weren't violating any laws.

Q: Right. And let me ask you, did you know how long they were going to stay when the whole thing started?

ROBINSON: You know, some finish after three days, right? So, we did not know whether this was going to be a three-day, three-week, three-month, or three-year process—how long it was going to last. In fact, going back to when Patrick Kennedy and I first met, in the back of my mind, I was thinking, "Well, I wish you good luck." But, you know, the world has not had what I would call a very good track record when it comes to negotiating peace agreements. Just look at what's going on today with Ukraine. We are still a long way from resolving that. And with how things are going in Israel, there are a lot of hotspots around the world, as there always have been. The United States has tried to be the peace broker, and while we've had some success, the batting average is not 100%. My personal expectation at the time was not that we were going to hammer out some great, wonderful, kumbaya deal. It was that we would at least give them the

chance to talk and hopefully try to find a way to negotiate a solution. But it was open-ended how long this thing was going to take. Again, think about Ukraine. If they sat down, could we say, "Okay, we'll give you three weeks"? You can't put an end date on it. It's going to take as long as it takes.

Q: Right, was that concerning for you? Like, as a commander, you know, you're hosting, and it might go on forever. It's disruptive, and it has an impact on operations and so on. Was that a concern, or was it just, you know, "We'll deal with it if it happens"?

ROBINSON: Look, I took this as something important for our country, but also important for the world, and I would do whatever I needed to do to help with this situation, for as long as it took. So, if it took a month, two months, or even years... Now, if it got to that point, if things really started stretching out, I guess at the time I was thinking, well, you wouldn't even have known that these talks were going on. And if you were on the flight line side of the base, you wouldn't have known about it either. The only people who really had any true impact were those immediately around the housing area associated with it, and we subsequently tore that housing area down at Wright-Patt. So that part doesn't even exist anymore, but there was a housing area right next to the Hope Hotel. Those people could have been impacted, I guess, and of course, the traffic going in and out, meeting with Air Force Material Command at Building 262—there may have been some minor impact, but by and large, they could have kept on going. I think the base would have just eventually worked around it

Q: So were there any, like, I know... What was the relationship like with reporters? I know they were trying to get in, lingering around, always trying to get information. Did you have any problems dealing with them? And I know the whole story about the protesters, so we can maybe touch on that later. But what was the relationship like with reporters and news agencies, because they were certainly looking for information?

ROBINSON: Right. And on the kickoff day, November 1st, when Secretary of State Warren Christopher arrived, we had set up a podium in an area where he could get off the plane, meet with them, and have his dialogue, including press conferences and all that. And that's what I was trying to tell the State Department: "Look, if you need a place for press conferences with these people, we'll provide a facility for that." So they could come on the base, and we would escort them. We don't just let people come on and say, "Hi, I'm from the press." That doesn't work that way. We'll escort you in or show you where to go, and then they could have their dialogues and discussions with them.

Really, the only two times I remember having a huge number of press was on the opening day and then on the 21st, when we had the signing or initialing ceremony at the Hope Hotel. We had already planned out how and where the press would be, and how they would have access to the appropriate delegates. But between that day, the 1st, and the initialing on the 21st, I wasn't personally involved much with the press. They never called me up and asked, "Hey, what's going on?" or anything like that. They may have called other people, but I don't recall any issues at all with the press after that. Again, we tried to accommodate them up front, so it became a non-issue.

Q: Right. So let's get to the protesters. I know we've talked about it before, but I'm curious about what that was all about. I know there's a whole story behind it.

ROBINSON: So that's an interesting story, and I'm glad you asked because I have an old saying: "The farther from the problem, the easier the solutions appear."

Okay, so I forget the exact day, but one morning, around seven o'clock, I'm sitting in my office when the phone rings. I pick it up, and it's a security policeman at the headquarters gate. He says, "Sir, we've got these protesters on the base." I'm like, "Okay." I tell him, "Just tell them to leave." There's a pause, and he says, "Sir, I think it'd be better if you come down here to see for yourself." So I say, "Okay, I'll be right there," hang up the phone, get in my staff car, and drive through the security gate into the compound.

They have security measures—dog sniffers, mirrors to check under cars, all of that to ensure there are no bombs or anything like that. So I get inside the compound and see this wave of people carrying signs about Kosovo. I'm thinking, "Kosovo?" I've heard of it but don't know much about it politically.

I get out of the car, go up to the security post, and ask, "What happened?" The security officer says, "A bunch of people just came inside the gate, and they're demanding to meet with someone." So, I ask one of the protesters, "Who are you?" He gives me his name, which I've obviously forgotten over the years, and he has an American accent. I ask, "Where are you from?" He says, "Chicago." I think, "Why is a guy from Chicago protesting about Kosovo?" So, I ask him, "What's the issue with Kosovo?" He says, "We want to be part of the peace talks." I think, "Seriously?" But I tell him, "Okay, look, stay right here."

I go into the Hope Hotel, head to the command post, and talk to Al Schoolcraft. I say, "I need to find a senior guy from the State Department to come with me so we can talk to these protesters." So, we get a senior State Department guy, and we walk through the crowd to find the leader. We find him, and then the State Department guy, the Kosovo leader, and I go into a visitor center building that no longer exists.

The conversation takes place, and the protester says Kosovo should be involved in the discussions. The State Department guy says, "I'm sorry, but we already have everything set up. We understand your situation and sympathize, but right now we just don't have the ability to bring you into the discussions." He then points to me and says, "I'd appreciate it if you followed this man's orders."

We come out of the building, and I speak to the protester. I tell him, "I don't mind you protesting, but understand you're on federal property, on an Air Force base. We have regulations against political protests on the base. I would appreciate it if you and your group could move just outside the gate and fence line. If you want to protest there, fine, but not on the base. I'm going to call the highway patrol and the sheriff's office—not to arrest you, but to protect you from traffic. Highway 444 runs right outside the gate, and I want to make sure you're safe."

He thanks me, and then he says, "Would you like to have your picture taken with me?" I said, "No, thanks." In my mind, I'm thinking, "I can just see getting a phone call the next day: 'Colonel Robinson, why are you defending these Kosovo protesters? Why are you part of their organization?'" So, no way do I want to be associated with that.

We got them outside the gate, locked it for the rest of the day, and I called the sheriff's office to say, "We've got some peaceful protesters at the gate. They're not violent, but they want to make their presence known. Could you send some officers out to make sure they're safe?"

That was pretty much the end of the Kosovo situation. After that, I don't know what happened. It was a State Department issue, and they handled it. Some news people did come out and film it. I've never looked for the footage, but maybe you could find an old clip on YouTube somewhere.

Q: So you might be somewhere, there might be a photo of you with all those protesters.

ROBINSON: Yeah, that's possible.

Q: If you're thinking through that, who knows? Yeah, it's possible. If you think through that, who knows?

ROBINSON: Yeah, because, I mean, that one hit me. That was a complete surprise. When I told this young airman, "Well, just tell him to leave," he was thinking, "He doesn't understand what's going on here now, does he?" So, I said, "Okay, could you come down here and take a look?"

Q: I can imagine he was like, "Oh my, what's going on?" He was probably shocked.

ROBINSON: Yeah, I mean, at the time, base security was not like it is now. After 9/11, everything changed on all military installations. The ability to get on and off any military installation was much easier back then than it is today. I mean, even the fact that we have barriers you have to go around and all that at many installations today—we didn't have any of that back then.

Q: Right, so were there any complaints about security measures for the high-ranking officials? Did the high ranks have to go through the security checks when going in and out? Were there complaints about it? Was there any impact on them? I know I heard some stories that some delegations were complaining about the dogs and being forced to go through security measures and so on.

ROBINSON: Well, if there were any complaints, they didn't come to me by any stretch of the imagination. I was not aware of them. I mean, I had heard that some of the delegates didn't like the fact that they had to go through the special security gates, you know, with the dogs and the sniffs, like I mentioned earlier, which I had to go through myself. I didn't mind it; I understood it. There was an additional level of security inside, so I guess they figured that once they were inside the base, they should be fine. It wasn't my decision; I think it was the State Department's to say, "Okay, we're going to provide this additional security within the compound," primarily to protect the delegates who were inside the compound. You had people like Milosevic, who was

identified as a war criminal, for example. There were a lot of different actors allowed into that facility. In fact, I told you that other agencies were also on the base, and they came to see me.

One day, I got a request to meet with some people. They came to my office, but they didn't really tell me who they were. They came in with this big book and said they wanted to show me some pictures of people. They said, "We understand you have this policy of greeting everyone as they come and go." I said, "Yeah." They said, "Well, you're probably the best person to know who's actually in the compound." I said, "Yeah." They opened the book and showed me these pictures, asking, "Have you seen this guy?" I said, "Yeah, he's here. I shook his hand just the other day." They were taking notes. "What about this guy?" I said, "No, I haven't seen him, but I can't say he's not here. It's just not a face I recognize." They showed me more pictures, took their notes, and then thanked me before leaving. I can't tell you who they worked for, and I'd be speculating if I did. I can only tell you that it happened. So, the U.S. government had a different agency, not the State Department, who was interested in knowing who was there as part of the different delegations—delegations from countries that were shooting at each other. For whatever reason, they were just interested in knowing who had shown up.

Q: So let me ask you, have you interacted with Richard Holbrooke and the main guys? Have you had interactions with them, or was it just limited? The interactions with Holbrooke were very limited.

ROBINSON: I mean, yeah, he came in and was going around, so I had to do this show a couple of times. He would get in my staff car, but typically when he would show up, the other person he primarily dealt with was Lieutenant General Larry Farrell, who had called me when we started down this journey. As it turned out, Larry Farrell's wife, Vicki, her brother was one of the delegates who was killed in Yugoslavia some months before the peace talks were even held. That guy had been working with Ambassador Holbrooke and was on that trip where they were going up a mountainside, and their armored personnel carrier ran off the road, tumbled down a valley, and they were killed. So, Larry Farrell, I think, knew Holbrooke from before, and my dealings with them were typically driving around. I was kind of like "Hoke the driver," like driving Miss Daisy. So, I'm in the front seat, and General Farrell and Ambassador Holbrooke are in the back seat, talking about whatever they were talking about. On a day-to-day basis, Ambassador Holbrooke and I didn't interact much. It wasn't like he would say, "Good job, Robbie." I guess I was a little too far down the food chain. But I was invited to the dinner.

Q: Right, you went out.

ROBINSON: No, there was a dinner for the senior delegates and the people who—now, I have to look back—I may have been invited, and I may have had a conflict, I don't know, but I did not go to the dinner. You're talking about the dinner they held inside?

Q: Yeah, yeah. I'm talking about that.

ROBINSON: Yeah, it was actually under a B-52 and all that. Nobody at my level was invited to go to that, as far as I know. Wright-Patt, again, there were general officers—four stars, three stars, two stars. My boss, Lieutenant General Dick Scofield, Richard Scofield, he went to the

dinner, but, you know, I was pretty low on the food chain.

Q: I guess.

ROBINSON: Yeah. Well, you know, at that level, Wright-Patt, I'm the base commander. I'm the host of the facility, but there are people we host who are really high up within the Department of Defense food chain. The people I worked with on a day-to-day basis, my chain of command was me, then Lieutenant General Dick Scofield, and then the four-star general, Henry Viccilio. That was my food chain. So, Viccilio went, along with his staff, and Dick Scofield and his staff. But, as I said, we also had the Air Force Institute of Technology, which was run by a one-star general; the Air Force Research Lab, run by a two-star general; and the Air Force Security Assistance Center, run by a one-star general. So, there were a lot of other commanders on the base, and I think they all went and did their thing. As far as I recall, it wasn't a huge dinner. I didn't go, but I was invited one day. It was actually on Veterans Day. Again, I got a phone call from Al Schoolcraft, who was there at the Hope Hotel. He said, "Hey, boss, President Franjo Tudjman wants to go over to the Air Force Museum, (which is in Area B) He wants to have a special ceremony there to honor the 8th Air Force aircrew members during World War II. He doesn't want it to be a big event; he'd just like a few officers from the Air Force to attend." Well, this was on a Saturday, so I said, "I'll call around and see who's available."

Q: So you weren't playing golf, then, right?

ROBINSON: Oh, no, no. It was kind of a blustery day. I remember, and I've got some pictures of the event. There were little snow flurries. It was November 11th, so we were starting to get into the cold weather, but no real accumulation. It was a crisp day, and in the pictures, we're all wearing overcoats. So I called around, and there was another two-star general, Rusty Gideon, the deputy commander for operations, the flying part of the command. He and his wife, Anne, showed up, along with Kathy and me. I think we were the only two Air Force officers there. There were also a couple of people from the State Department and, of course, Tudjman's delegation. We went into this old World War II Quonset hut with the round half-circle roof. Tudjman spoke about being a freedom fighter during World War II against the Nazis and how much he appreciated the 8th Air Force. Afterward, we went out, he laid the wreath, and that was that. I was very impressed by that part of it, though. That was interesting.

Oh, going back, I've got to tell you the story about when we were getting the facility set up. I forgot about this. During the two weeks before November 1st, when we were preparing the facilities, I went over to the compound. The compound was on one block, and the Hope Hotel was across the street on another block. There was no sidewalk from the complex, the five-plex, over to the Hope Hotel. I saw that the delegates weren't going to walk down the sidewalk, out to the street, and then over. They were going to want to go straight across the grassy field to the hotel. I said, "We need a sidewalk." So, I told one of the young civil engineering sergeants, "I want you to build a sidewalk that goes from the five-plex to the Hope Hotel." I jokingly added, "Make it curvy, because, you know, these are delegates, and they're probably going to drink a lot of wine and other drinks during their negotiations." So, I walked away, got in my staff car, and left. A couple of days later, I got a phone call: "Boss, the sidewalk's done, come take a look at it." Sure enough, there was a curvy sidewalk from the five-plex to the Hope Hotel. I think it's the

only curved sidewalk in the entire United States Air Force! So, you've got to be careful what you tell people because they follow orders exactly. I thought, "Well, the next thing I'm going to get is a phone call from my boss saying, 'Robbie, what did you just do?'" But that didn't happen. When it was all over and done with, we had a one-day celebration, and then we just got back to business as usual.

Q: Right. Was there any impact that it had? Was it a success? Was it encouraging people, like, okay, the deals are possible, the peace settlement is possible? Was it inspirational, I guess?

ROBINSON: I would say it actually was. And like I said, when it was first announced, I was getting all these phone calls from people asking me, "Hey, what can we do to help? What can we do to be part of this?" They were very hopeful that there would be a positive outcome. I mean, we couldn't define what success was, but they liked the idea of these peace talks being held at the base, even though their day-to-day jobs might be in contracting, acquisition, engineering, logistics, or what have you. They just wanted, if they could, to somehow be part of this event, one way or another. And in fact, that's how John McCance got involved. When he called me up, he was actually working for one of the organizations on the base, a reserve flying wing. The reservists had their jobs as international strategic transportation, so they were flying big cargo aircraft. I think he was the public affairs officer for that reserve wing at the time. He was a major. He calls me up and says, "Hey, I've heard about this. Is there anything I can do?" At the same time, one of the things I was trying to do was establish a new concept called "Team Wright-Patt." It was hard to bring everybody together, so I was thinking, "What could I do to try to bring people together?" I came up with this idea after seeing it work at another base. I can't take full credit for inventing the Team Wright-Patt concept. It was about getting people from different organizations to come together for meetings and keep everyone informed about what was going on. I saw it as a great way to integrate the reserve wing into these activities by having their public affairs head be part of the team. So, I said, "Yeah, John, I'll introduce you to our team, and then I'll leave it up to them to decide what they want you to do." So, John went down there and I think he ultimately became a liaison with the State Department on a day-to-day basis. To me, that was a success. But again, I think it's indicative of the people from other parts of the base and the community itself who wanted to do whatever they could to be part of the Balkan Proximity Peace Talks. And, you know, towards the end, they decided to change the name to the Dayton Peace Accords. That was fine, even though, technically, it wasn't in Dayton, it was at Wright-Patt, which borders Fairborn, Beavercreek, and Riverside. Those are the three communities that actually, because we have two separate facilities, are part of the Dayton metropolitan area.

Q: So, where were you? Let me just go back a bit. Were you there when they were packing their bags and creating that whole stunt, like, "We're leaving; it's over"? Was that communicated through you guys? Were you witnessing that? Was it believable?

ROBINSON: Yeah, when I say witnessing, I mean, again, I didn't spend all my time on this because, again, Wright-Patt is the largest single-site employer in the state of Ohio. My plate was full on a daily basis. But every day, I was getting briefings on what was going on and what I needed to work on. So, I was hearing comments from my team saying, "Well, it looks like they haven't reached an agreement," and at that point, I was thinking, "Yeah, okay, that's kind of

business as usual." They were getting ready to leave, and I thought, "Well, that's unfortunate." But I wasn't shocked by the news. They said, "Yeah, we're packing our bags and heading out."

Well, again, as we talked about earlier, how many times have we had these kinds of negotiations that weren't successful, and people just agreed to disagree and walked away? So, I thought, "Okay, this is another one of those times where they're just going to come up on the Thanksgiving holiday, and people want to go home." I was a little bit sad, obviously, that it wasn't successful, but I thought, "We'll see where this goes." Then, the next thing you know, we hear that they're not packing their bags; they're staying. We kept getting what I call "head fakes." We'd get announcements like, "Okay, President Clinton's going to come." Well, if the President of the United States is going to show up, that changes everything. We'd have to get ready for the President, working with the Secret Service and all of that. But he never came. We kept getting head fakes all the time, where people would say, "Oh, we think this," and I'd just think, "Okay, when it happens, it happens." After a while, I'd just say, "We'll deal with it when it becomes official." The discussion about "Yeah, they haven't reached an agreement, and they're going to disagree and separate, hopefully to meet again at a future date," led me to wonder, "Well, do we just leave the compound as is in hopes that they'll come back after the holidays?" I didn't know. I thought, "Well, we'll just play it by ear."

Q: All right. So after they signed, they left immediately on that same day? Was it like signing, then packing, getting on a plane, and just leaving? Was everything pretty much done, or was it ongoing for a few more days, with people slowly departing, packing, and getting ready to leave? I'm curious, did you still have to deal with them after everything was over, or was it more of a gradual return to normal operations?

ROBINSON: Okay. The day of the initialing—let's call it the initialing.

Q: Right. Okay.

ROBINSON: The day of the initialing, on November 21st, we all went over to the Hope Hotel, where they had everything set up, you know, with the big dais platforms for the dignitaries. We were all going to be there.

Q: And you were there, right?

ROBINSON: Yes, I was there for that. Yeah, I've got pictures of me being there. I had a front row seat, seeing the people up there. My wife was there too. In fact, I called up the mayor of Fairborn and asked him, "Hey, would you and your wife like to be here for this? I'd be honored to have you as my guests." I was able to call a few other people and invite them. I also had all my senior staff attend—group commanders and the colonels who report directly to me. They were all there for that event. They had the actual ceremony, where they did all the formalities of signing the books and everything that went along with the ceremony itself. Then everything broke up. I took my wife home, and I get a phone call saying, "Sir, they're starting to leave." So, I get in my staff car, go down to base operations, and General Viccilio, the four-star general, was there. It was literally like "*Gentlemen, start your engines.*" There were cars driving up to all these airplanes. We were trying to render honors, standing at attention, saluting as they went up

the ladder. It finally got to the point where I said to General Viccilio, "Sir, I'll take this part of the ramp if you could take the other part. We'll try to cover as much as we can." So, I went from plane to plane, and he did the same thing. It was just the two of us on the ramp. These people literally had their suitcases and were going up the stairs. I was trying to shake their hands, but they didn't have time for that. They were getting on planes, the ladders were going up, the doors were closing, and boom, they were off—taxiing away and gone. It was just like that.

Q: And boom, they're gone. We'll probably have more stuff to carry on the plane after they finish the shopping and all that. Who was prowling?

ROBINSON: Well, yes. Now, regarding that shopping, they were doing that continuously for all 21 days. It kind of became a joke within the Dayton community. People were reporting—this was before social media and X and all that—about seeing these burgundy vans, and everybody knew who was in the burgundy vans. They would pull up to different shopping malls and locations, and they would go in and basically buy the place out of things like Levi's and other items. There were planes flying back and forth all the time, so it wasn't like they all needed to wheel their big suitcases out for all the shopping they'd done over the twenty-one days. A lot of stuff had already been shipped back earlier. But yeah, that doesn't mean they still didn't have a lot of things with them. But yeah, so the delegates get on their plane and off they go. There may have been a few more people who hung around who still had residual tasks to do for whatever reason. I didn't have any dealings with those people on a day-to-day basis after that. As far as I knew, they were basically gone. Whether there were any other people who stayed for any period of time after that, I don't think it was much. And I mean, again, after President Tudjman, Izetbegović, Milosevic, and then Warren Christopher from the U.S., after they left, I think all their staff pretty much left with them, either the same day or the next day.

Q: Right, and then you alluded to the possibility that they might come back. Was that still a prevalent thought after they left? Was there still a chance that they might return for additional negotiations, or was it pretty much over at that point?

ROBINSON: We didn't know. Again, the U.S. Air Force wasn't involved in those diplomatic issues. Our job, you know, if they said, "Hey, we're coming back," we would have accommodated them and said, "Fine." It was only an initialing. We were told at the time that, yes, they were doing the initialing now, but then there was going to be a formal ceremony in Paris sometime later, I think the next month in December.

Q: Right. It was December, I think the 15th or something.

ROBINSON: So whether they were going to come back between then and the signing, I didn't think so. I didn't think they would, I mean, they'd already initialed it. Now it was basically, okay, the engagement had already been announced, and now the actual "wedding day" would be in Paris the next month. I didn't anticipate that there would be a need for them to come back to the base to do anything in detail. Now, your question makes me think that after they did the initialing... If they did come back, I can't imagine why they would have, but if they did, it would have been because of the infrastructure we had set up. The Defense Mapping Agency had a huge database that they had installed in Building 262. You could go there, and just like a drone, you

could fly down creeks, trails, and other locations they were using as they negotiated the boundary lines. So, if they were to come back, I would have thought they would have needed to use that database and the infrastructure that had been set up, because that was a big part of the negotiations—drawing the lines.

Q: Right. But I'm wondering, after they left, the infrastructure was still there, but I know you had to convert and build certain things. Was there a point when you couldn't start returning things back to how they were before? Was there some kind of process, or was it just, "We don't care about it"? I'm curious how the infrastructure was seen from the Air Force's point of view—was it just a matter of returning it to normal?

ROBINSON: Well, we didn't immediately tear everything down. We left it up for a while until we were sure that the dust had settled and they were no longer going to be using that compound. I'll call it the compound. In my mind, the compound was everything inside the chain-link fence and security gates. When they left, we took those security gates down so people had easier access in and out of the headquarters building, since it was a heavily trafficked area. We removed them immediately, but we kept the chain-link fence up for a while, until after the actual signing and ceremony were over. Then, next thing you know, Civil Engineering came in and started ripping out all of the chain-link fence around the compound, the Hope Hotel, and the five-plex. So, yeah, that all went away, and then the buildings were opened up again for use. People coming in transit who needed a place to stay were allowed to use them. I have to say, though, much to my dismay, when I went back to Wright-Patt a few years ago, I walked through the facilities, and many of the rooms we had converted are now back to single rooms. We had even put up plaques to commemorate that the Dayton Peace Accords had been held in the five-plex, and I think even those signs have been taken down for whatever reason. The only thing you'll see now, if you visit the base, is a peace bench. I believe it's a gray marble bench to commemorate the event. The bench is across the street from the Hope Hotel, but it's a few minutes' walk from the five-plex to actually reach that gray bench. That's about the only thing left that has any semblance of what happened back in 1995.

Q: Right. So, let me ask you, did you do any other special tours with any other delegates, or was it just that Air Force Museum instance? Were there any other requests, or was that it?

ROBINSON: Well, that's a good question, Frank. I'll start by saying that when Warren Christopher made the announcement, I saw in the press that President Milosevic was complaining. He said something like, "I'm not a monk, after all. Why are we going to this...?" He was basically complaining about going to some monastery. He preferred to go somewhere like San Francisco, where he could enjoy the nightlife. I guess he felt like he'd be stuck staying within the compound for the entire time during the negotiations, but that wasn't the case. Again, they were free to go, and they did it all the time. Just a funny little story I'll share: Apparently, a group of them decided to go out to dinner at a restaurant called L'Auberge, which doesn't exist anymore. It was in Dayton, Ohio, and if you wanted to go out for a fancy dinner, say for an anniversary, that's where you'd go. So, they went to have dinner at L'Auberge, and as I was told, they had Secret Service there. They didn't close the restaurant to the public, so it stayed open for other customers. One evening, a doctor or lawyer pulled up in an expensive car to have dinner. He gets out, and a Secret Service agent, with his earpiece on, goes up to him and says, "I'm

sorry, sir, but you can't park here. We're reserving that space for the delegation." The guy looks at him, hands him the keys, and says, "Okay, you park it then. I'm going in to have dinner." The Secret Service agent gets in the car, drives it somewhere else, parks it, and then returns with the keys. "I parked it in such and such a place. Thank you very much." So, yeah, they were free to go all the time, whether they were flying home, going out to dinner, or deciding, "Hey, I want to watch the University of Kentucky play basketball," or head to Indiana. They were not locked in like monks, even though that was the perception Milosevic had. That didn't happen at all. They were out doing their thing on a day-to-day basis—having dinner, shopping, enjoying the community, and seeing the sights.

Q: So, let me ask you, what are some lessons that you learned from that whole process—setting up, reorganizing—that might be applicable today? Any strengths and weaknesses? More of a lessons-learned question, I guess.

ROBINSON: Well, I guess, to me, the first thing I would say is that you've got to at least try. When I first met with Mr. Kennedy, my expectations were completely different from how it turned out. I'm glad I always had that philosophy of trying to be part of the solution and finding ways to solve problems, even though it really wasn't in my job description. Again, I'm an Air Force officer, not a State Department delegate or anything like that. But I saw a way that I could, in fact, help the process. I thought I might have something to contribute. You know, when I said I'd knock down some walls, Patrick Kennedy asked, "You can do that?" He was stunned by the fact that I was offering to tear down walls for some of these facilities. And he said, "You can do that?" I said, "Well, I'm the base commander. I've got a good staff. We'll find a way." I added, "Plus, I don't have enough VIP suites. This will give me a good opportunity to create some." Well, it turned out we didn't use them for VIP suites later, but at least it was a good idea at the time, and it helped the process. I think, ultimately, that was one of the key reasons why they decided to come to Wright-Patt. I can't speak for Mr. Patrick Kennedy on what they decided, but I tried to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

So, I think as the United States government looks for ways to help resolve conflicts, like the one in Ukraine, having the right infrastructure is crucial. It allows people to sit down and negotiate on an informal basis. That's what the "proximity" part of the name was all about. I think that worked. And being on a military installation that had that capability also worked because, again, they had free access to come and go as they saw fit, but it was secure enough for them. Plus, we had a runway, so they could fly in and out to their home countries easily. They could get in their staff car, and just a couple of minutes later, they were there, able to talk. If they needed to, they could get back on the plane and fly home. So, having the right infrastructure, I think, is really essential for setting the stage for successful negotiations, dialogue, and diplomatic relations when trying to resolve serious problems.

So, to me, as an outsider—I wasn't involved in the actual negotiations—but looking at what happened, if I were asked to do it today, that's what I would do. In fact, I hate to say it, but I'm sure the current base commander would probably throw me out the window, but I wouldn't object to them doing the same thing—going back to the same place and reestablishing that compound. It really does have everything you need. The officer's club was close by, so they could have their small negotiations. You have facilities where you could set up the infrastructure

to do the negotiations, decide on the boundaries, and build the maps. Everything they needed to do the negotiations and hammer out an agreement was right there.

Q: Right. It was a village perfect for mingling, having more informal conversations, but also for formal ones. It was the perfect setting.

ROBINSON: Yeah, it was a little village inside a big city. It was cordoned off, but honestly, there was no feeling other than going through security with the dogs. But after you passed that minor little hurdle, everything else was basically open. Like I said, Milosevic walked through our neighborhood, bumming cigarettes from my neighbors. So, how much more open can you be than that? Right? Bill Kohler—unfortunately, Bill’s passed away—told the story. He said, “I’m outside having a cigarette, and here comes this guy, and he asks me what I do, then asks if he can have a cigarette.” He leaves, and shortly after, another guy knocks on my door, wanting to debrief about his conversation with Milosevic.

So, yeah, I think to have successful negotiations where you’re trying to end a serious conflict, forgetting the infrastructure would be a mistake. That needs to be a key part of any negotiations: how these people are going to live on a day-to-day basis and making sure they feel comfortable and safe while doing their job. My job was to satisfy that part of the equation.

Q: Right. So, you were basically the infrastructure guy—the person who made whatever the State Department had in mind come to life.

ROBINSON: Right. Yeah. And here are a couple of examples. One day, when I was having a meeting with my staff, they said, “They want to bring in some of their equipment, but they need separate generators because they’re European and operate on 220V electricity, not 110V.” I asked, “What would it take to convert those buildings to 220V? Can you do that?” They said, “Yeah, boss, we can do that.” I said, “Okay, let’s do it. Let’s convert the buildings that the Europeans will be using to 220V.” So, they started doing it, but then I thought, “Wait a second, is there a problem with the voltage difference, or could we be setting ourselves up for a fire?” We decided to buy little fire extinguishers and put them in each of the rooms.

As the story goes, the civil engineers were going around, knocking on doors. If someone was there, they’d hand them a fire extinguisher. We thought it would be helpful because, if the European equipment caught fire, at least they’d have a fire extinguisher. They got to one door, knocked, and handed the fire extinguisher to the person, but as they walked away, they saw a hand reach out and put the extinguisher outside the door. We laughed, thinking the person must have thought the extinguisher was bugged, so they didn’t want it in their room.

Another story: I was walking through the facilities one day when a group of foreign officers approached. I asked, “Can I help you?” They said, “Yeah, we want to get on the roof.” I asked, “Why do you want to get on the roof?” They said, “We want to install satellite dishes.” I said, “Sorry, I can’t allow that.” The headquarters building is right across the street, and I’m not sure what those satellites might be capable of.” I offered them the parking lot instead, but they couldn’t put the dishes on the roof. It was just a funny little story.

Q: So, you had unusual requests. It would be interesting to find out what they were complaining about, even things like food and what they were drinking. I bet the State Department people dealing with that must have had their hands full.

ROBINSON: Well, I'm speaking of food—President Milosevic developed a very, very good relationship with the head chef of the officers' club. Oh, wow. In fact, he was flying in venison and other foods from his country, and they were taken to the officers' club, where the chef was preparing meals for them based on the cuisine native to Serbia. Wow. So yeah, that's the kind of thing we were doing behind the scenes. Our head chef would say, "Okay, you want venison? How do you want it cooked?" Things that, you know, here in America, we just don't see very often.

Q: Right.

ROBINSON: I mean, yeah, you can find it in some restaurants, but it's not something you'll see on the menu at your average Applebee's or anything like that. But yeah, we tried to accommodate what they wanted, even in that regard. That was part of what my team was there to do—exactly that.

Q: In other words, you were running a hotel, like you were in charge of a huge village-type hotel.

ROBINSON: Well, it wasn't just a hotel. Again, being the mayor of the community, the security, the communications, the infrastructure itself, as well as the food and entertainment. You know, allowing them access to the officers' club, which was right next to the swimming pool. They were going to the gymnasium, working out, swimming—you know, they kind of became part of the base population for a while. I didn't mind. Fine, if they want to get on the treadmills, I don't care.

Q: Hey, I'm talking to Pamela Eyring. She was a protocol person on base. John introduced me to her. Apparently, she was handling protocol for the whole thing. So, I don't know if you remember her.

ROBINSON: I don't know if I remember her.

Yeah. See, there were different protocol offices. The Air Base Wing, which I was responsible for, had a protocol office. Then the four-star general who commanded Air Force Materiel Command, one of the major Air Force commands, had a protocol office. My boss, Lieutenant General Scofield, who commanded the Aeronautical Systems Center, also had a protocol office. Each major organization on the base—Air Force Institute of Technology, Air Force Research Labs—had their own protocol offices. I do remember Pam, but I can't recall which office she specifically worked for. That was a whole different story. How you negotiated with the different protocol offices for various things was a task in and of itself.

Q: Yeah. So, what happened after they all left? Did you remain as the commander, or what was your journey afterward?

ROBINSON: Well, we had a little party. We went to the officers' club. I remember celebrating. As a matter of fact, I got a t-shirt or sweatshirt from someone, it had a pizza on it, and it said, "Give pizza a chance." One of the local guys who had a pizza parlor gave it to me. We celebrated that day. Then, boom, we went right into the Thanksgiving holiday season. We broke for a couple of days for Thanksgiving, but after that, something completely different and serious hit me right between the eyes. The civil engineers were digging a trench in area B on the right field side, getting ready to build a new fire station. They stumbled on something that had been buried years ago, which might have contained biological bomblets. So, my shift went from dealing with the Dayton Peace Accords to figuring out how to handle these possible biological bomblets that had been dug up and how to safely remove and manage them.

Believe me, my whole mindset went from, "We're number one," and being part of the Dayton Peace Accords to, "How do I deal with this?" At the time, this situation was classified due to the potential danger. Negotiating through that and dealing with the classification took months. Eventually, we got it resolved and had a press release where my boss, Lieutenant General Dick Scofield, announced the situation. It turned out that the items weren't biological bomblets, but were believed to be, based on an army officer's field manual. They were actually filled with simulants. To clarify, we did not have biological bomblets. But we didn't know that at the time, and because they could have contained anthrax, it was a serious issue.

As we were wrapping that up, I got a phone call one day. I was sitting in the cockpit of a C-21, a small VIP plane, getting ready to fly it. I thought, "I'm the base commander and a former test pilot, I'll check it out." As I sat there with an instructor pilot—who was decades younger than me—we were going through the checklist and getting ready to take off. Then, I got a call from base operations, and they said, "Is Colonel Robinson on the plane?" I said, "Yes, this is me." They said, "Stand by." They patched me through to General Viccilio, the four-star commander, in his office at building 262. He said, "Hey, Robbie, we're looking to reassign you." I thought, "Oh no, I've only been in the job for a year and a half; it's typically a two-year job." But he said, "We're going to send you out to Edwards Air Force Base to take over the test wing." This was something I'd been trying to do since I was a major.

So, I got the opportunity I'd wanted all along: to become the test wing commander. I'd thought that opportunity was gone, but for whatever reason, they pulled me out of being base commander and sent me back to Edwards. I spent three years there as the test wing commander, got checked out in the F-15, and flew everything we had on the ramp. After that, I retired.

Then, I went back to the house we had rented out when my boss had told me, "You're the mayor; you have to move onto base." My family had said, "No way, José." So, we moved back into that house. My former boss, who I had worked for as an executive officer, was now working for a high-powered consulting firm. He called me up and said, "Hey, Robbie, I just saw that you're getting ready to retire. As soon as you retire, we want to hire you as one of our consultants." So, everything worked out perfectly. We moved back to the house we loved, in the neighborhood our kids loved, and I got to work for my old boss, whom I highly admired. The transition to civilian life was very easy for me in that regard.

That's how I got involved with various celebrations—like the 10th and 20th anniversary

celebrations for the Dayton Peace Accords—and got reconnected with people who were part of that operation back when I was the base commander.

Q: Great! So, let me know— is there anything else we didn't cover? I'm thinking we can stop here, and then once we go over the transcript, we can note later what else we might want to add. I think we've covered everything that was on my mind for sure, but I don't know if there's anything else that might be worth covering. We can just call it a day for now and then look at the transcript later to decide if there's anything else to add.

ROBINSON: No, you've done an outstanding job of asking the important questions. I guess just to close things up for now, the question you asked about the people— I have to say that I was truly amazed by how excited the local community in the Dayton area and the people on the base, who work full-time doing other things, were to somehow be associated with something that could result in making the world a better place and bringing peace to the world. Even though our job in the defense industry is to protect national security and protect our country, they were genuinely interested in what they could do to be part of the peace process, even if it was just driving a delegate from A to B. Anything they could do to help out was really heartwarming to me. So, I guess I'll carry that with me as one of my fondest memories of the Dayton Peace Accords.

Q: Okay, great. Let's conclude.

End of interview