

Final salute pays tribute to CAP national curator Bill Schell

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— Civil Air Patrol Col. Bill Schell

By Neil Probst



Then-U.S. Air Force Reserve Maj. Bill Schell was pleased to learn he wasn't the only U.S. military serviceman in the Arctic. Here, Marines fuel the Twin Otter aircraft Schell flew during trips to ice stations.

His cadet membership launched a career of adventure

With his March 23 passing, Col. August William (Bill) Schell, national curator for Civil Air Patrol, became a part of the CAP history he worked so diligently to preserve.

A retired U.S. Air Force major, Schell saw the world and took part in many of the nation's most historic events — from the release of U.S. prisoners of war from Vietnam to launches of spacecraft from Cape Canaveral, Fla.

The Air Force took him everywhere, but his bridge



A cold Bill Schell, then a major in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, poses at Ice Station Ruby, where he visited U.S. scientists tracking Soviet submarines beneath the ice. The Arctic, with months of complete winter darkness and wind chills of nearly 100 degrees below zero, was a place Schell felt blessed to visit but thankful not to be stationed for years.

to the Air Force was, of course, Civil Air Patrol.

When Schell joined as a cadet in 1944, he joined a CAP with a markedly different cadet mission.

At the time, “the reason for the cadets (program) was to train young men to go into the Air Force when they turned 17,” Schell said early in 2009.

“It was preilitary. It was, ‘Hey, we have a war going on, and we need some guys coming in,’” he said.

Schell stayed with CAP through high school and college, rising to chief warrant officer and earning observer wings.

It was then he made a decision that would set the course for the adventures he would enjoy for the next 30 years.

It was 1950, and Schell was beginning college at the University of Miami.

“Because of the knowledge I had gained as a CAP cadet, I decided to enter the Air Force ROTC program and try for an Air Force commission,” Schell said.

Launches galore

Not only did Schell witness the spaceflight launches of Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom and, later, Neil Armstrong while stationed as a public affairs officer at Patrick Air Force Base on Florida’s east coast, where he also commanded the base honor guard, but he also played a part in defusing — quite literally — the Cuban Missile Crisis while stationed in Turkey in 1963.

“They were installing the Jupiter missiles over there, and the fact that we had Jupiter missiles in Turkey made (Soviet Premier Nikita) Khrushchev put his missiles in Cuba,” said Schell, then a nuclear ordnance supply officer.

When President John F. Kennedy secretly told the Soviet leader he would remove American warheads from Turkey if Khrushchev would reciprocate in Cuba, it fell to Schell to separate the warheads from the missiles in Turkey and return them to the U.S.

“I came to be the individual who performed the final act of the Cuban Missile Crisis,” Schell said.



Animals outnumbered people in the Arctic when Schell was there. Danes kept sled dogs for transportation and companionship, and Schell also found himself surrounded by abundant foxes and hares.

Worldly ways

History seemed to closely shadow Schell throughout his career. In the mid-1970s as a public affairs officer, he found himself involved in media relations during Operation Homecoming, when thousands of U.S. POWs held in Vietnam were freed.

The POWs were first transferred to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, where Schell helped the media interview the servicemen while they were hospitalized for out-processing.

He had no idea while he performed his duties that he would meet a future U.S. senator and presidential candidate.

“I met a lot of the returnees, including, and I’m sure he doesn’t remember me, John McCain,” Schell said.

Something more

Twenty years had now passed since Schell’s CAP-inspired Air Force adventure began. Yet something was missing.

Schell had yet to work at Strategic Air Command, or SAC, the Air Force’s answer to Cold War threats that could potentially bring nuclear war to the United States.

He got his wish and, even better for him, was assigned to SAC Headquarters at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., shortly after returning from Vietnam.

SAC maintained, among many other things, long-range bombers centrally located in the Midwest, out of reach at the time of potential threats from hostile nations.

The North Pole

Little did Schell know he would soon be near the North Pole. During his stay at SAC, Schell was assigned to man the public affairs office at Thule Air Base in Greenland.

Thule held its own historic significance as an early warning radar site that existed to warn the U.S. military of incoming missiles should they be fired by the Soviet Union.

Thule Air Base also supported Danish allies who manned a tiny outpost very close to the North Pole.

A Danish liaison officer and friend of Schell's invited him to visit the outpost in 1976 for a story Schell, then editor of the *Thule Times*, would write about Danish-U.S. relations.

There perhaps was no finer adventure for Schell, who was headed to a place few humans have the opportunity to experience except perhaps through a television screen.

He stayed with U.S. Marines and Danish military personnel for three days at Denmark's Sirius Nord, at the far northeast tip of Greenland on the ice-laden Arctic Ocean.

Land of ice

Schell now found himself 1,000 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

Shortly after arriving at Sirius Nord, he jumped on a Twin Otter, a dual-propeller aircraft that carried him to an ice station called Ruby. There, he observed experiments U.S. scientists conducted to track Soviet submarines beneath the ice.



Schell, working in the public affairs office at Thule Air Base in Greenland, shakes hands with Santa Claus in 1976. At the time Schell was editor of the *Thule Times*, a Thule Air Base publication.

"The scene was one of total isolation," Schell wrote in an account of his experience.

Arriving at the ice station, he found himself facing a nearly 50-mph wind that made 45 degrees below zero feel like 100 below.

Following the brief trip to Ruby, where he nearly suffered frostbite, Schell returned to Nord in a sea of white.

Fortunately, he was only there for a brief visit; the five Danes he met were working two-year shifts guarding the sovereignty of their Arctic territory with their presence.

Twenty-one others lived there as well, all attached to the U.S. Naval Arctic Research Laboratory at Barrow, Alaska. They were scientists with the laboratory who tracked the Soviet submarines.

They told Schell of their unique challenges, like the lonely times

without sunlight.

"That's really something, when you're up there for



Schell, front row third from left, stands with his special weapons team in 1963 at Cigli Air Base in Turkey, where he supervised the disarming of nuclear missiles, helping mark the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

four months with nothing but dark around,” he said.

In the Arctic, in fact, complete darkness descends from October to March. Then during summer, the area is bathed in unending sunlight.

Schell said he ate and slept well at Nord and enjoyed brief ventures to ice stations with research scientists. Travel was by either airplane or sled, because no paved roads were to be found.

Animals outnumbered men; dogs pulled sleds and kept the Danes company, along with unique mammals.

“We had arctic fox all over the place. (And) they had arctic hares. All-white. The tips of their ears were black,” he said.

Full circle

Back in the states in 1977, Schell said farewell to the Air Force and shortly thereafter went to work with the National Security Agency in Baltimore.

His departure from the military coupled with the newfound stability of home life afforded him the opportunity to return to his roots.

Schell rejoined Civil Air Patrol, the organization that had led him to the Air Force and his many adventures as a Cold War warrior, POW homecoming media coordinator and Arctic adventurer.

As CAP’s national curator, Schell devoted much of his time to ensuring CAP’s past was properly preserved and documented.

He was always thankful to CAP for kick-starting his eventful life.

“It has been one great adventure (after another), and all because of the fact that I joined CAP,” he said. ▲

CAP history made, remembered and preserved

The memorabilia that Col. Bill Schell had been collecting as a hobby became the start of the CAP National Historical Collection when he was named CAP’s first national curator in 1999. By requesting the creation of a curator position, CAP national historian Col. Leonard Blascovich secured Schell’s collection skills for CAP and freed up some funding for Schell to pursue additions to it.

Blascovich said eBay became a favorite hunting ground for Schell to bolster the CAP collection, which Blascovich estimates now stands at roughly 10,000 items. Included are CAP uniforms from 1941-2009; most CAP insignia and wing patches; many examples of magazine advertisements; stories written about CAP; pieces of mail denoting CAP service and postmarked from World War II to present day; and some of the original air medals awarded for World War II service. One item of particular significance is the original “droopy wings” insignia that had been presented to its New York designer after the insignia was adopted for CAP use. Lost for a long time, Schell tracked it down on eBay following the death of the designer’s wife.

Currently, the collection is housed in a climate-controlled Maryland warehouse.

Blascovich noted CAP is working on a plan to loan out parts of the collection to museums and shows and is putting photographs of the memorabilia on CDs to facilitate historical research.



Col. Bill Schell took display boards filled with Civil Air Patrol historical artifacts to many CAP meetings and shows over the years.

Photo by Jim Tynan, CAP National Headquarters