HISTORICAL MEMORIAL CENTER

Pennsylvania State Police

Oral History Interview of:

MAJOR LYLE H. SZUPINKA

May 31, 2007

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INTERVIEWER:

This is the Pennsylvania State Police Oral History Project. The date is 31 May 2007. My name is Corporal Bob Mertz (ph), PSP retired and I am interviewing Major Lyle H. Szupinka, PSP retired. The interview is being conducted at Major Szupinka's home in Amity, PA. Major Szupinka, do I have permission to videotape this interview?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yes, you do.

INTERVIEWER:

Welcome, Major Szupinka. Tape one. Okay. Major, to begin the interview, if you could give us a -- just some general biographical data; place of birth, family structure, civilian employment, prior military service, et cetera.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, I was born in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania in 1947 and I retired when I was 58 years old. In 1974 I was married to my wife Cynthia Ruthanne (ph). We have three children, Brian, Amanda and Kerry (ph). Now I went to Chartiers Houston High School. I graduated in 1965. I then worked for the Radio Corporation of America and in 1966, I joined the United States

Marine Corps Reserves and it was only in 1968 that I joined the Pennsylvania State Police.

INTERVIEWER:

Had you had any prior police service prior to employment with the State Police?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Our Reserve unit in Steubenville, Ohio was a Military Police Unit. When I got out of the Marine Corps from my active duty which was basically basic training, I looked at the Pennsylvania State Police. I liked what I saw. They looked sharp. They looked good in uniform and having just, you know, did my duty in the Marine Corps, I was really impressed and that is an organization that I looked hard at and I prayed to God that I'd be able to become a member.

INTERVIEWER:

So that -- you've answered my next question, what made you want to be a trooper. Had you had any friends that were in the State Police that may have prompted you to make the decision to join?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I didn't have any friends that were actually in the Pennsylvania State Police, but I had some other friends that were police

officers in the City of Washington in the Borough of Houston. I thought that that would be a great fantastic career to pursue. I looked at not only being able to help people, but I looked at that fact that that would be an exciting career, an exciting job to have.

INTERVIEWER:

How old were you when you first applied?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I was 21 years old. I went to the Academy on November 7 of 1968 and I was about 18 months out of Marine Corps boot camp. So I went to the Academy in 1968. For the most part, the physical aspect -- and having to have been through a Marine Corps boot camp, I found the physical aspect to be fairly simple. I was in good physical condition and the learning aspect was a little bit tougher, but I really didn't have any problems. And then when I graduated from State Police Academy, I went and I was assigned to Troop A Greensburg.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you recall who initially interviewed you for the job?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Trooper Dick Craig from Troop B Washington. He's been retired -- I know time flies by, but I bet it's been maybe 15 years or more

since Dick Craig has retired. He was a criminal investigator at Troop B.

INTERVIEWER:

I see. What kind of tests or interviews did you have to take to get on the job?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, there was a written exam and I scored high on the written exam, and I was called to go to the Academy to take my physical examination and then an oral interview. And I can remember walking into the library at the Academy and I was young and a little nervous about being interviewed and then when I walked in there to that library, it looked as large as the Civic Arena in Pittsburgh. Years later when I went back and actually saw how small that library is, I was actually stunned. I guess it was my nervousness. But they asked me my questions and I can remember after the oral interview, they never told me -- really told that I was accepted, but they had me sign enlistment papers. And shortly thereafter, I got a notice to report to the Academy for their training.

INTERVIEWER:

I see. What was the background investigation process like?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

It was not as complex as it is today. They took all my data naturally and they ran the criminal history checks. I had had numerous character references. They interviewed them. They went into the background of my parents and my brother to check for any criminal history, but it was nowhere near as complex as it is today.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you recall who conducted your background investigation?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

That was -- Trooper Dick Craig...

INTERVIEWER:

Craig.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...did the background investigation.

INTERVIEWER:

In 1916, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote and I quote him "No political influence or other influence avails to get a single undesirable man on the force," meaning the Pennsylvania State Police, "or to keep a man on the force who has proved himself unfit." Do you feel this statement held true while you were with the PSP?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Oh, absolutely. There is no shortcut. There is no political pull if you want to call it that that can -- in any way, shape or form where you can become a member of the Pennsylvania State Police. You have to go through the criteria that is set. You have to pass the background investigation, the polygraph. You have to score high enough on the entry exam. There's no way unless you follow the correct procedure. You just can't do it. There is no political influence that helps you become a member of the Pennsylvania State Police.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay. How much time were you given to report after you were notified that you had been accepted?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I believe it was four weeks, maybe six weeks. It wasn't that long before I had to report. In fact, that was one of the first times I'd ever crossed the Pennsylvania Turnpike and instead of stopping at one of the rest areas on the pike to get gas, I mistakenly got off on an exit and being a young kid, I actually got on going the wrong way. I traveled an additional probably 75 miles before I realized it and I got off and started back east towards Harrisburg.

INTERVIEWER:

That's kind of funny. How did you feel when you were notified and hired and what was the reaction of your wife and family? Were you married at the time?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

No, I wasn't married.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, wasn't married.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

So I was living with my parents and they were as enthused as I was and they were proud and I felt very, very fortunate that I was able to be accepted. I knew short of a catastrophic injury during training that I would make it because I was determined and I knew that I could do it and I knew that I'd be -- eventually become a trooper in the Pennsylvania State Police.

INTERVIEWER:

How big was your class? Do you remember?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

There was approximately 100 cadets in my class.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you recall how many reported and how many actually graduated?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I think we lost five or six out of that 100, which was a real good percentage compared to today's standard.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you remember your first -- the first time you walked in the Academy and run into some non-com or a commissioned officer the first day, the first night there? Do you remember?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yes, I do. But in all honesty compared to the Marine Corps, basic training at Parris Island, South Carolina, it was nothing that I couldn't handle.

INTERVIEWER:

It seems to be something that everybody remembers. I know I do. I remember.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I was fortunate. I had one leg up on a lot of the people there. There was a lot of prior military people, but I had -- already knew how to march. I had a military discipline. I knew military procedures. I knew when to say yes, sir and no, sir. So I had a leg up. Plus I was in good physical condition having -- you know, within 18 months coming out the Marine Corps boot camp. So I had a little bit of a leg up. I knew that they were there to train me and that the harder I trained, the better I'd have it when I became

a trooper and I accepted that and I knew that there would be nothing that they could do that would discourage me. Nothing at all.

INTERVIEWER:

Did they try to discourage cadets?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, they don't really try to discourage you. They try to put you in pressure situations so that you can get used to working under pressure. I think any policeman once they're actually out there working they're constantly under stress and pressure. There's always a chance of something occurring and I didn't realize that, how bad it was until I finally retired. Every police officer -- I guess you learn to accept that stress and you don't really realize how much stress you're under until you finally retire and it's like someone takes a load of bricks off your shoulders. So the training is good. That's designed to put you in stressful situations. It's designed to test you so that when something critical happens when you're out on patrol that you don't lose it. That you're able to handle the situation.

INTERVIEWER:

Did you -- someone who hadn't had prior military service, fellow cadets, do you think that they had more of a problem getting through the Academy than someone who had military service?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I think they would because like I said, I was in excellent physical condition. I already knew how to march and I knew the chain of command in a military organization, which Pennsylvania State Police is. But once they learned that, there would be no problem. But they had to accept that also. You had to accept a rugged structured format, a rugged structured organization, which is different -- if you hadn't been in the service, you can't appreciate that and realize what that's like.

INTERVIEWER:

What was a typical day like in Hershey?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Typical day, get up at 5:00 a.m., go for your morning run. All day it would be classes, physical training and many times you run into -- late into the evening.

INTERVIEWER:

How long was the training?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

For us it was four months.

INTERVIEWER:

Um-hum.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

At that time, there was an accelerated program. There was a big push to increase the number of troopers.

INTERVIEWER:

When did your day end? It started at 5:00 a.m.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well...

INTERVIEWER:

When...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...it varied. Sometimes it'd be nine o'clock, sometimes 8:00, sometimes as late as 10:00 or 11:00, all depending on what was on the schedule for the day.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you recall who the director of the training school was at the time?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

No, I don't.

INTERVIEWER:

You don't?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Don’t recall.

INTERVIEWER:

Now what kind of subjects and skills were taught and how often were you tested?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, you were taught, you know, the physical skills, boxing and wrestling, Crimes Code, Vehicle Code, Rules of Criminal Procedures. They actually had typing classes, spelling classes, writing classes, block printing which is essential for any type of reports that we do. Firearms training, shotguns and at that time our revolvers.

INTERVIEWER:

And did you have to learn to ride a horse?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Every cadet learns to ride a horse and I think they still do today. Most people it wasn’t a real problem. You had some farm boys who rode horses all their life and they really enjoyed it. I didn’t have a problem, but you did have some people from the inner-city that had never actually even been around a horse and -- but they learned and they did well. Sure. And I can remember not only learning to ride the horses, which was a confidence builder. I can remember all the days we spent cleaning the stalls and

grooming the horses. In fact, I can also remember when we had a State Police rodeo and I...

INTERVIEWER:

Um-hum.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...think it was 1974 that they discontinued that. But I can remember -- even before I was in the State Police, I can remember going to South Park in Pittsburgh in Allegheny County just outside of Pittsburgh and being impressed by the troopers on horseback, by their shooting skills and the motorcycle riding and I was sorry to see that end in 1974.

INTERVIEWER:

Why did it end? Do you have any idea?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I think it -- a number of problems. I think number one it came to be a very expensive proposition, so expenses was definitely a concern and at that time, you know, late ’70s, there were a lot more problems with crime and civil unrest and the detail that they used on the rodeo detail, that took a lot of troopers off the road. We really needed those to do police work and I think when they looked at the overall picture, it was something that they just could not have any longer. But I thought it was a great public

relations event. I never had the opportunity to be part of that and I kind of wish that maybe if I would have joined the State Police earlier, been born earlier and everything that that was something I would have loved to have been involved in, the rodeo.

INTERVIEWER:

And do you recall who your roommate was in Hershey?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Taylor. Trooper Taylor and he's from the eastern part of Pennsylvania and he retired probably ten years before I did.

INTERVIEWER:

What was his rank? Do you recall when he retired?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

He was a trooper when he retired.

INTERVIEWER:

Did any particular instructor impress you at the Academy over others?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

At the time, it was Corporal Bill Regan (ph), who later retired as a major in the State Police and he was our physical -- one of our physical education instructors and he used to drive us and push us hard and we didn't like it at the time, but years later you look back on it and that was one of the best things we did. I was

always a poor swimmer and I can remember -- I don't remember exactly what I did wrong, but we were at the pool at the time and he made me do about ten or fifteen laps and I almost drowned because I was a poor swimmer. But I actually do -- did those laps and he stood there and watched me do those laps and I'm thinking this is horrible, but later on you come to appreciate, you know, what they put you through and it really helped you in the future.

INTERVIEWER:

I would say knowing Major Regan that -- see if you agree with me. It didn't matter much to him how far you could swim or how many chin-ups you could do. It was that you tried until you couldn't go anymore. That's what impressed him.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Bill Regan was also in the Marine Corps and he liked discipline. He liked pushing you and he wanted you to give 100 percent. I was very fortunate not only to have him train me at the Academy but years later once I graduated, was on the road and I progressed through the ranks, I've had numerous opportunities or -- had numerous opportunities to actually work with him and a good guy. A hard charger, good hard worker.

INTERVIEWER:

I think it's -- I mean talking about progressing through the ranks, you were promoted to corporal in '78. Is that right?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yes. Prior to that, I patrolled out of Trooper A Greensburg, Somerset, Kiski Valley and Greensburg Headquarters and then I was transferred to BCI in Harrisburg for drug enforcement. We did a statewide investigation. I stayed there for about a year. Then I transferred to the Western Drug Task Force which later became the Regional V Strike Force doing undercover investigations. And then I had a notion I should study for the promotion exam and in 1978, I was promoted to corporal and at that time I cut my hair and I shaved because I'd been working undercover for years. Then I went to Troop B Washington and I was a patrol unit supervisor at Troop B Washington.

INTERVIEWER:

I think it's awfully impressive that -- how fast you were promoted which meant -- which means that you did a lot of hard work. Corporal in '78, Sergeant in '80, two years later, Lieutenant in '83, only three years later and Captain in '85. You -- that's a lot of studying. Isn't it?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

A lot of studying. I was determined. Once I had made corporal, I had studied and the number of hours I had studied the books that had to be studied, I was fortunate and I ranked third in the state for corporal. And my thought process was that I've spent that much time studying that as soon as I was eligible, I should study for the next exam because why forget all the stuff that I'd learned and how hard I'd studied. And I figure well, while I was on a roll and I was really studying hard that I might as well continue that and when the sergeant exam came along, I ranked fifth in the state for sergeant. When the lieutenant exam came along, I ranked seventh for lieutenant and at that time, they were giving competitive testing for the rank of captain which included role-playing and box exercises and what have you and during the very first test, I was ranked in the very top group for promotion.

INTERVIEWER:

Impressive. Very impressive. I'm going to ask you if you -- but I'm not going to ask you to recite it, but do you still remember the Call of Honor?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yes, I do.

INTERVIEWER:

And I would imagine you could recite it.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I could recite it.

INTERVIEWER:

And if you want to, you can.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Oh, no.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay. Okay. Your career with the Pennsylvania State Police, you pretty much -- well, we've touched on it. How about some of the major highlights of your career; major investigations, incidents that you recall of a sizeable proportion?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, that's one of the things that I miss most about being with the Pennsylvania State Police. I like those large-scale incidents where you may have hundreds of troopers involved and local and federal police officers because I always felt that during those major incidents, that's when law enforcement would step forward and they show you the best that they had to offer. I think my first major incident would've been in 1989 when they had the riots at Camp Hill just outside of Harrisburg. I know I was called by my Area Commander and at that time, I was the Commanding

Officer of Troop B Washington. I was called by Major Terry Clemens (ph) who was my area commander who was at Camp Hill and he told me that he wanted me to bring at least 100 if not more troopers and as soon as I could, I was to report to the command post at Camp Hill. Well, we gathered up as many troopers as we could. We came up close to 100 and we traveled the Pennsylvania Turnpike. We got there late in the afternoon. They fed us and at that time, they had just put down the riot and I can remember going in and talking to the Deputy Commissioner who was Colonel -- Lieutenant Colonel Ken Walp (ph) and he told me that I was being charge-of-the-night detail at one of the compounds inside the institution. And he told me that -- I'll never forget this. He told me -- he said Captain, I want to tell you that the riot is over and I said yes, sir. I understand that. He said we've got a lot of prisoners there. He said we don't want to have anymore problems, anymore trouble. Do you understand what I mean when I say the riot is over? I said yes, sir. He said what does that mean. I said the -- you know, he said that if -- I told him -- I said if anything happens, we're to end it and we're to end it fast and swift so there's no reoccurrence. He said that's right. And I can remember marching into the institution. I think you

were there. You remember marching into the institution and the smoke, the fires are still burning and we went to one of the lots, one of the yards inside and I can remember looking out there and I figure we had about 800 prisoners down in the dirt and I think it was October. It was cold. Most of them didn't have anything on other than a T-shirt and maybe their boxer shorts and they were all laying on the ground and they were flex-cuffed to each other and our job was basically to keep them in that position until further orders to make sure nothing else would happen and we formed a perimeter around them. We had them backed up against the fence and we had the helicopters all night long overhead with their searchlights on them and I can remember that the inmates during the evening, they'd actually chew through the flex-cuffs and they would stand up. The next we know, they'd be -- they wouldn't be handcuffed. It wasn't until days later they actually received the metal handcuffs and we'd have to put them back down and cuff them. And I can remember how cold they got during the nights. We had 55-gallon barrels and we were burning everything we could trying to keep warm, but I can remember those inmates, many of them through no fault of their own were stripped down laying out on that ground in

that cold weather. And I can remember because we had time to prepare, we had notice to go there that we were able to take our riot helmets, our nightsticks. We took all the shotguns we could and other riot gear because a lot of the first responders who were there before us didn't have that equipment. And the next morning when we were relieved, we simply handed over our weapons and helmets to the shift that was relieving us and I know it took -- after the riot was over and everything, order was restored, it took six to eight months for us to get all our equipment back, even shotguns. They were scattered throughout the state. And I was proud of our people then as many of the other encounters we had. The professionalism they showed and their strict adherence to the rules and the mercy they showed a lot of these prisoners, I was really impressed with the conduct of our personnel, but it was an exciting detail. It was -- sorry that we had to go there and that amount of people during such hard times. I know they totally destroyed the institution. But, you know, if anything was good to become out of that, I know that years later -- originally all our riot helmets and gas masks and other equipment were kept at the P&S (ph) units in the troops. After that because of that incident, there was -- not

long after that every single trooper was issued their own personal gas masks, riot helmet and all the other equipment we needed so that if we ever went to an institution like that again under similar circumstances, every single individual in the State Police would have their own equipment. So that's one of the good things that came out of that and actually prior to that when there was ever a problem at the State Correctional Facilities, as State Police we were the first that were called and it was our role to stop what was occurring. Whether it be a hunger strike or a riot in the yard, we were the primary force that was used to stop those incidences. Many times being in Troop B we had to go to the Western Penitentiary in Pittsburgh. But after that, the Bureau of Corrections went into an intensive training mode where eventually State Police were in a secondary role. We actually backed up the correction officer. They would be the first in to put down the disturbance, whatever and we became a secondary role as backup to them. So there was good things came out of that. We're better trained today in riot control procedures. We're better equipped than we were back then and the correctional institution, they are better equipped to handle such incidents on their own.

INTERVIEWER:

As the training officer of the troops, how many men were you responsible for, personnel...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, as the Troop Commander originally in Troop B, we had close to 300 people in Troop B alone and then later on when I was promoted to Major and I became Area Commander of Area III, I had three State Police Troops. It was close to 1,000 people counting civilian personnel. We covered 17 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania with 17 stations.

INTERVIEWER:

And that would've been Troop A, Troop B and Troop G?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Right. Troop A Greensburg, Troop B Washington and Troop G Hollidaysburg.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay. There were -- there was another incident you were -- I think as an Area Commander you were involved with. I believe it was 9/11.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Right. The attack on America, September 11, 2001 where a United Flight 93 was brought down by hijackers in Somerset

County, Somerset County being a portion of Area III, and I can remember the day that that happened. I was in my office. My area command was located at Troop B Headquarters in Washington and one of the troopers asked me if I had heard what had happened in New York City with the World Trade Tower. That a plane had crashed into it and I said no, I didn't. So I -- as I went to the TV and I turned it on and starting watching the news coverage, then I -- they kept repeatedly showing the first aircraft that went to the Trade Towers and the -- before you know it, they were reporting a second aircraft and then they talked about the plane that went to the Pentagon. And as I was watching this broadcast, I was thinking how horrible this was and then they started reporting that there was a commercial airliner believed to have been hijacked that had crashed in Somerset County. My first hearing of that was actually from Fox News on -- through the television and you can imagine once that happened, my phone began to ring and I started receiving calls from Troop A confirming the fact that there was a commercial airliner down. They didn't have much information and they were responding to the scene and I can remember that being in my area, I knew that I had to get there, but I also knew that there

was a lot of things that I had to do before I actually went to the scene. And wanting to get there, I left there dressed in a coat and tie and I knew I had to put a uniform on. I actually couldn't get the uniform on because the phone kept ringing and I had calls from Troop A Greensburg. I had calls from the Commissioner's office in Harrisburg wanting -- what was going on and I kept relaying the information which wasn't a lot. I didn't know a lot. I had other Troop Commanders calling me and Area Commanders wanting to know what was happening and if they could help and I had friends and neighbors and family calling me. And I couldn't get a uniform on to get there and I had to make my own calls to make arrangements to make sure there were sufficient people there. First call I made was Troop G to Captain who is now a Major, Joe Holmberg. I knew he was close to that site and I knew my Commanding Officer from Troop A was actually at the Academy in Hershey and I told Joe, I said get as many troopers as you can I said and get to down to that site and start setting up some security until I can get there. And then I called Troop A and same thing. I told them send as many cars and as many troopers as you can to the crash site. And at that time, I didn't know how many may have perished. I didn't know if

it was 100, 200. It turns out there were 44 deaths, but I didn't know that at the time, and I also told the Captain in Troop B, I said I want you to get 50 troopers, at least 50 and I want you to send them over to that crash site as soon as you can get them there. And there were numerous problems that we encountered. People didn't know how to get there. We learned a lot and one of the primary things we did was we told everybody to go to the Somerset Station. They could find that. There was no way they could find the crash site without help and if you listen to any of the radio traffic, the number of troopers who were responding trying to get there were constantly asking for directions. So we learned real quick send them to a place that everybody knows and we'll shuttle them in from there, which was the Somerset station. I know when I got there, it was approximately hour, hour and a half after the plane crashed and one of the first things I wanted to do was to go to the actual crash site because I wanted to actually see what we were dealing with. So I met with the senior-ranking FBI agent and we actually went over to that crater and what surprised me was the fact that when the plane impacted with the ground, 90 percent of that aircraft was covered by earth. So when you went there, you know, the part of the

fourth that was there was still smoking and on fire. You could smell a strong odor of burning rubber. You could smell a strong odor of jet fuel and the ground was actually burning and smoking in places. But as I looked around, there was nothing there that resembled an aircraft. Had you not known that that was an aircraft crash, you would've looked at that and you would've said something happened here, but I don't know what because there was pieces of debris -- small pieces of debris laying everywhere and there were a lot of papers blowing around and the ground was on fire and all the smoke and the smell of burning rubber and jet fuel. But there was actually nothing to tell you that that was an aircraft. The second thing that really surprised me was if you've ever been to a bad airplane crash, they're nasty with the human remains and what have you. And when I was going to that site, I was preparing myself that that basically this wasn't going to be a pretty scene. This was going to nasty. But when I got there, I was surprised to find that I saw no human remains. None whatsoever. There was nothing there that I thought I would see and we were there for 13 days, one short of two weeks and fortunately originally we had to let in the ambulances and the fire trucks. But once we knew that there were no

survivors and once the fire was out, we knew that this was a crime scene. We had to treat it as such. We set up a massive perimeter. During the days that we were there, we used a little over 700 troopers working 12-hour shifts and it was a very tragic time for America. It was a very tragic time for all the troopers and personnel that was assigned there. A lot of them had a hard time dealing with that. It was such a horrible thing, the loss of life coupled with what else happened that day in the United States, and for all of us it was a very trying experience. But once again, working with federal and other state agencies and a few local police that were there, I think law enforcement stepped up to the plate and we showed the best that we had to offer on that and I'll never forget that incident. Not only the tragedy there, but the respect paid by all the police officers, especially the troopers that responded there.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. And -- well, I don't think any of us will ever forget it and to be those -- being a part of it actually...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

You know, one...

INTERVIEWER:

...there...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...good portion of that is after I retired, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, they contracted me to do programs throughout the United States as first-responder training. And part of the program that I do is based on what happened that day in Somerset County. How we responded, what we did right and what we did wrong and even after I retired, I kind of hope that I'm helping prepare other state and local law enforcement officers should any large-scale major incident like that occur. That maybe they'll be better equipped from what I learned at that site that I can further tell them and then pass it along to them.

INTERVIEWER:

Were there any other major incidents you care to describe?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, there was a lot of incidents. Troop B as an Area Commander, High Point Raceway, one night they had a stabbing and the people that were there were rioting and burning cars and myself and Lieutenant Harvey Kohl (ph) who was a Station Commander at Uniontown at that time, we responded. We had about 70 troopers from A and B and there probably had to be 1,000 or 1,500 people camped out there. And the place was in

shambles, intoxicated individuals, drunks, you name it and I was proud of our people that night. We went through that campground and when it came daylight, we had more prisoners than we had troopers. We -- once again we had them all laying in the dirt handcuffed and actually we had so many prisoners that we had to bring in school buses. And once it got daylight, we rounded all our prisoners up that we had lined up in the -- laying in the dirt at the entrance. Put them all on school buses and took them all to the magistrate and once again, I was never prouder of our people, how they took control of the situation and we basically ended the problems there. For years to come, we haven't had any problems there. And then they used to have riots at Penn State University and they rioted one night and they caused extensive damage after a basketball game and they became notorious for rioting during the Centre County Festival of the Arts which we called the Arts Festival and I can remember the very next year at the Arts Festival after we had the riots and there was extensive damage and some police officers were injured. I remember we took up 250 troopers including 50 of our troopers on horseback and we were prepared and at 2:00 a.m. when the bars were letting out, we let it be known that we were

ready and we had most of our 250 officers standing in formation near the area that they called the canyon and all the students passing by and all the troublemakers saw us there in full riot gear, 250 strong with horses and since then we had no problems whatsoever. And we went back each year after that and each year we would decrease the number of troopers we had and basically we put an end to the riot that were occurring at State College. But once again, our troopers were professionals. They conducted their-selves exceptionally well under the circumstances in dealing with the rowdy crowds that they had there.

INTERVIEWER:

You say you had the horses out. Tell us how that procedure works to get the horses there.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, it's not very difficult. Simply call the Academy. You let them know what's going to do occur and then you request horses and the Academy has a core group of riders that work with the horses on a daily basis and the horses are good. We use them not only for riot control procedures. We always use them to search for lost individuals. The incident I just mentioned on 9/11, we brought up a whole detail of State Police horses

which helped secure the perimeter. But we had the horses at State College every single time that they were there. They are specifically trained in riot control formations and when we went to State College, we just didn't go there and show up. We actually had a high school in Bald Eagle that let us late at night use their parking lot and before we actually went to State College, we brought the entire 250 troopers or 150, whatever we were taking. We'd actually take them to the parking lot at Bald Eagle High School and we would practice riot control procedures and we'd practice procedures using the horses out front in crowd control. I will take one trooper on horse. There were five troopers on foot any day. What they can do is simply amazing. I can remember one particular incidence where they kind of saved me at State College. While we were there, I usually would ride with a corporal or a trooper and -- rather than sit at the command post and we'd actually go out on patrol and we would make arrests. And I can remember on one particular incident we had several drunks that were yelling and screaming in the street and they were beating on a stop sign and there was actually so many people in the street, we were an unmarked car. We couldn't move the car and I was a passenger and I told the Corporal just

wait here. I'll go get him and place him under arrest for Public Intoxication. I said I'll go get him and then when you can move the car up, just come up and get us. And when I went up to him, he saw me coming and he took off on foot and I started chasing him. I was a Major at the time and he was about, I don't know, 25 or 26 and here I am in my late 50s. But I was chasing him up the street and there were so many people coming down the street that he was actually running into them and knocking them over and that's the only way I was able to keep up with him. He was clearing a path. But we got to the top of the hill and I was able to grab him and I put him up against the building and told him he was under arrest and a lot of the other people that were coming down the street started to surround me and they were yelling and chanting and causing quite a commotion. But as I was running up the street chasing him, I can remember hearing behind me the horses coming up. I could hear the hooves on the street...

INTERVIEWER:

Yes.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...and I knew they were right behind me. And what the troopers on horseback told me -- there was two of them. They saw me

chasing this guy and they figured that if I snatched him up, it would probably be a problem. So they were covering me. They had my back. But they came into me when I had him against the wall and those two horses were able actually to back that crowd up and get them off my back and I'll never forget that either.

INTERVIEWER:

That's remarkable. So they would send the horses out and the reason I'm dwelling on this horse thing is the fact that it's the history of the State Police. We started out on horseback and we still have horses. But I -- did they have trained riders in the troops that they didn't have...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Oh, sure. They had the core group at the Academy, but each troop has also a number of people that are trained in the ride formations and riding the horses so that when they went out into the field, they brought their core group of riders out. They'd bring the horses out in horse trailers and then they make arrangements for the troopers that were actually assigned to the State Police Troops who were trained riders to join them and actually participate. One thing about whenever they brought the horses out, they were never refused. They would show up as fast as they could if it was an emergency or they would show up

for a preplanned incident and once you requested them, you knew they were coming. They were self-sufficient. They'd make all their own arrangements for stables and -- to stable the horses, to feed them. They'd make their own arrangements for veterinarian services and everything. They were self-sufficient. They would report to the Commander and they'd simply say what do you want us to do. So that took a lot of the pressure and load off the work of either the Troop Commander or the Area Commander. So the horses -- I would hate to see the day come when we would decide to get rid of the horses. I'd hate to see that. They were so valuable in riot control situations or in security, especially in the wooded areas or to search for lost people in every terrain, wooded areas. I'd hate to see the day that would come that we would not have a mounted unit.

INTERVIEWER:

There is -- there has been a reduction in horses, however. Has there not?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yeah. There's nowhere near as many as they used to have. I don't know how many they have today. Like I said, I'd hate to see the day come when we no longer had that mounted unit.

INTERVIEWER:

So ultimately it was your call as the Area Commander as to whether or not the horses are brought in and whether or not the helicopters are used. Is that correct?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yes. In and -- as an Area Commander in the Pennsylvania State Police, as you progress through the ranks, each step you take further removes you from police work. When you become Corporal, you're a First-Line Supervisor. You're still on the street. You're still working, but all of a sudden you're in a supervisory position and when you become Sergeant, it further removes you from police work and eventually when you become a Captain or Major in the State Police instead of being paid to do police work, they're paying you to command and to take care of and do the administrative work in your State Police Troops. It's a situation where they're paying you to supervise and command, not do basic police work. So basically when you reach the rank of a Major unless it is a major incident, basically you'd not become involved.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay. Talk a little bit about before we go on here officer of the day and sometimes that was your duty occasionally. But Lieutenants were used in the troop more for that? Is that...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yeah. Lieutenants are used as officer of the day, an occasional Sergeant are used and basically you'd work an eight-hour shift and then over the other hours that you were off, you were on call. If anything major were to occur within a station or a troop, they would call the officer of the day. And the officer of the day had the responsibility of assessing the situation, seeing if additional personnel were needed, and depending on the seriousness it was that officers of the day's responsibility to pass that information up the chain of command by calling his Troop Commander who in turn would call the Area Commander. And depending on the seriousness of it, the Area Commander would call the Deputy Commissioner or the Commissioner. That's one thing that since I retired I do not miss and -- especially as a Troop Commander and as an Area Commander is that late-at-night phone call; one, two, three or four o'clock in the morning. When my phone would ring when I was working, my stomach would tighten up because I knew this was not going to be good. Somebody was seriously hurt if not dead or there was another major incident coming up. I do not miss that. I can remember the troopers that died in the line of duty when I was a Captain or a Major and I can remember those phone calls and when they

came, they were never good. And I used to joke with some of the command personnel just for the heck of it some night about three o'clock in the morning, why don't you give me a call and tell me something good because I knew when that phone call came in, it wasn't going to be a pleasant situation.

INTERVIEWER:

That's a tough position to be in that's for sure. When it rings at 3:00 a.m., it's not good news. That's for sure. Some other incidents -- I know there are many that you -- as the troop commander that you were involved in, but then we'd probably be here all day. But are there any other major incidents that you...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I can...

INTERVIEWER:

...(inaudible)?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...remember I had an individual whose name I won't mention who took a shot at one of our State Police Lieutenants. This was several years before I retired. And he was a bad actor. He had been in prison for robbing banks. He did a lot of time. He got out of prison. Short time out of prison, we had some more robberies. We had informants telling us that he was doing them.

We knew that he had acquired a sawed-off shotgun and we were trying our best to arrest him. One of our Lieutenants out of Troop B -- and I was a Major then. One of the Lieutenants out of Troop B spotted this individual. The individual took a shot at him, crashed his car and fled. At that time, we had close to 200 troopers. We'd set up a perimeter and he eventually exchanged gunfire with one of the troopers from Troop B. He was shot and wounded at the time. That went for several days. This was just before I retired before we apprehended him and once again, the diligence of our personnel -- this was an individual who had shot at two of our troopers and there was no way -- even though we had, you know, over 200 troopers tied up on a large perimeter in a large wooded area, there was no way we were leaving until we had him. And I was proud to say we got him. We got him.

INTERVIEWER:

When you talk here today, you've talked about various incidents that occurred and you were in charge and you always talk about the professionalism and how proud that the troopers make you as their ultimate superior. The bad stories, the bad press that some of the people get in the State Police is an exception to the rule. Is it not?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

They did a study one time concerning misconduct by troopers and they found that it was less than one-tenth of one percent of troopers that have engaged in some kind of serious conduct that would put their job in jeopardy. It's a very few individuals within the State Police who tend to give the organization a bad name. But the bad press doesn't bother me that much because when you look at these individuals that do something to bring dishonor on the State Police, each and every one of us who don't engage in that conduct, we look at ourselves and we say we're better than that. And it's good when the public expects more than that from -- sure a few individuals give you a bad name, but we can live with that. But by far, the vast majority of our people, 99.9 percent of our people would never do anything intentionally that would bring dishonor on the force or bring dishonor to a fellow trooper. It just doesn't happen. Those -- and there have been some serious (inaudible), but those are few and far between and it's good that the press holds us accountable because we are better than that. We are one of the best uniformed law enforcement organizations if not the best in the United States and even now when I go for my speaking engagements with the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, you cannot believe

the respect that Pennsylvania State Police Troopers have even among other State Police organizations. Now we're held out as a model, top-of-the-line professionals and I'm proud of that and I'm glad. When you become a police officer, you live in a glass house, not only as an organization but as an individual. You have to watch what you're doing because everybody watches you and they hold you, your conduct to a lot higher standard than the average person. But if you're not willing to accept that, you're not willing to deal with that, then don't become a police officer. Don't become a police officer. Don't do anything that's going to going to dishonor your fellow troopers, and I'm proud of that and they can hold us accountable. They should hold us accountable.

INTERVIEWER:

I agree. Years ago when -- even back when you and I came on the State Police, we didn't make a lot of money and there weren't too many benefits. But we wanted to be State Policemen. How do you feel it's changed now with all the benefits and the fabulous salary anymore and -- over time, et cetera? Do you think that the State Police are getting the same caliber person that they got back in -- say 30, 35 years ago?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, I can remember when I joined the State Police. Actually when I joined, I didn't even know what I was going to be making. I did not look at the salary and I did not look at the benefits.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you recall...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I actually did...

INTERVIEWER:

...(inaudible)...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...not know what I was going to make until I received my first paycheck, but I can remember earlier as a trooper I think I was making about $6,000 a year and there was no overtime. I can remember when a serious police incident occurred they didn't have to call you out. You heard the incident and you simply showed up and you put a uniform on. And people have said, you know, you look at the State Police Officer or the average policeman today and they can't do the things that a trooper could do when I came on years that have passed. A lot of them are smaller in stature and what have you. But on the same token, what the police officers and what the troopers do today as far as technology and better trained and better equipped, some of the

old-timers couldn't do that either. So I think it's a wash. I think the troopers today are every bit as trained if not better. They are far better equipped. It does bother me that some -- and there a few that don't appreciate what they have and look at it to some extent as simply another job. It's not a job. It's a life calling, a life dedication, lifetime profession. It's just not another job and generally when you -- and you do run into the occasional trooper who has that type of attitude. For the most part, many of them don't last long. They'll either get their time in and retire or find other employment. I can remember when I first became a trooper most of the troopers were single. Didn't matter what shift you worked. There was somebody waiting there at the end of your shift to go out and either hunt or fish or golf or engage in other activities. Today towards when I -- you know, the end when I was going to retire, I didn't think my own self that the troopers were that close, but a good part of it was that most of them were married and instead of going out with the guys as we used to do, most of them were going home to their families. So again I think it's a wash. No, they're not the same person that we had when I first joined, but it's not all bad either. There's a lot of good men and women out there. Back when I joined, there

were no women. I can remember 1974, first female cadet class went through and they talked about all the problems they'd have with the women on the State Police. We haven't seen it. In fact in my years as being a Trooper Commander, an Area Commander, we've actually had less female troopers engage in physical confrontation than their -- than a male officer. So that never held true. But I think the troopers today for -- most of them are extremely dedicated, well trained and good officers.

INTERVIEWER:

I'm asking you questions that aren't even on this general interview guide format because of your position and your rank and it's -- it would help to make people understand from your point of view and I just -- like the questions I just asked you because there are those who think that the State Police -- the reputation isn't what it once was and from what you say, you totally disagree with that and so do I. But the average trooper that I interview probably -- he didn't see or hasn't seen what you have and he hasn't been in the position you were in, so that's why I'm going off the

-- kind of going off the interview...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, today we are actually held more accountable than we were when I first joined the State Police. Back then we pretty much had a free reign. Now we -- you know, we'd never intentionally abuse somebody, but we weren't under a microscope as a law enforcement agency that we are today. And I don't think that the incidents today where a police officer or a trooper becomes involved in misconduct are any greater or more severe than they were back then. But today it tends to come to the forefront a lot quicker with all the media coverage that we have. There are people out there who challenge us to do a job and to do it better, so I think there is actually more coverage of misconduct than there was back then, but I'm not sure it's any worse than it was then. When you have an organization that approaches six or 7,000 sworn enlisted, to think that every single of these individuals are the greatest thing that ever came along that would never engage in some kind of misconduct is being overly optimistic. But as a law enforcement body, you come right down to look at the acts of misconduct. They are few and far between when you look at the total number of personnel that we have. But as I say, it's in the forefront anymore. Everybody is being held more accountable and don't have a problem with that. I

don't have a problem with being held accountable for -- as a law enforcement agency and occasionally we do things that we shouldn't do. I can remember an old city policeman tell me one time when we had a well-publicized misconduct incident and I was a Captain and he said oh, he said address the problem. He said -- don't be overly concerned, he said. As police officers, occasionally we'll trip over our nightstick, but we're just going to get back up and keep right on going and do what we have to do. He said bad publicity, bad incidents...

(Hearing Resumes)

INTERVIEWER:

This is the Pennsylvania State Police Oral History Project. The date is 31 May 2007. I'm interviewing Major Lyle H. Szupinka at his home in Amity, PA. This is tape two. Okay. Major Szupinka, getting back to your early years on the job when you came out of Hershey, give us a summary of what kind of equipment was available to you, what kind of cars you drove, were they air conditioned, were they not, sleeping accommodations at the stations, et cetera.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

When I was off of coach-pupil, my initial assignment was Troop A Kiski Valley Station. The equipment we had back then compared to today, there's no comparison. I know I had a Colt 38 revolver, six-shot revolver with a six-inch barrel and then on our belts, we had an additional 12 bullets, so we went out with 18 bullets. We had one set of handcuffs and if you wanted to purchase it on your own, you could carry a blackjack. When you look at a trooper today what they carry, when I retired we had 40-caliber Beretta semiautomatic handguns, over 30 rounds of ammunition that you carried with you. Most troopers were carrying two sets of handcuffs because we live in a day and age where more frequently you're taking more than one person in custody, so they're carrying two sets of handcuffs. In addition, they have an expandable baton, a metal baton which they carry right with them on their belt. In addition to that, have pepper spray which we never had and now our troopers even have tazers. So they're better equipped now, more so than we ever were. The only thing we had was a 38 revolver and the set of handcuffs. Basically that was that we carried on our web (ph) belts. The vehicles, there were no air conditioning, no AM/FM radios. They were stripped-down Fords and Plymouths, mainly

Plymouths. Some of the vehicles -- well, in fact one of the vehicles that I was assigned out of Kiski Valley to patrol with did not even have a State Police radio. When on patrol, I was junior man. I was to drive the car without the radio and every now and then, I would actually go to a pay telephone and I would call in. A lot of the older troopers didn't like that, so they complained and eventually they sent us a portable radio about the size of a lunchbox with about a 15-foot antenna that you laid on the front seat and let that antenna hang out the window. But nine times out of ten, that didn't work and the vehicle was a '67 black Ford four-door. No air conditioning, no power steering, no power brakes. If you were using it to run radar -- and our radar was different. Our radar at that time, you had to be practically on top of it before it gave you a reading. So if you were driving down a road and you saw a car sitting next to the road, you had more than ample time to slow down. No power steering, no power brakes. I remember one time -- even my personal vehicle had power steering and power brakes. I stopped a motorcycle one time in that old '67 Ford and I come up behind him and I forgot it didn't have power brakes and I thought I was going to hit him. He was stopped on a berm and I was doing everything but

standing on that brake pedal afraid that I was going to crash into the back of him. I was hot. I can remember sitting out along 66 in northern Westmoreland County on a day like today when it's 85, 90 degrees sitting in that black Ford and you would just sit there and sweat and you had to keep it running. You had -- so you had not only the heat of the day in that black car but you had the heat coming up through the floorboards for the engine and you couldn't shut it off because they would vapor-lock and they simply wouldn't start. You get a fast one on radar you couldn't even pursue them because the car wouldn't start. You look at the trooper today, AM/FM radio, air conditioning, state-of-the-art vehicle, online onboard computers in the vehicles and what have you. They're even carrying portable radios when once they leave the vehicle with that portable radio, you still have contact with your station. When I first started, once you left the vehicle, you were on your own. I can actually remember I was just off coach-pupil training. I had less than year in the State Police and I would be the only patrol for northern Westmoreland County. I'd be on the road and they'd have one trooper on the desk and I'd be the only patrol out. I had less than a year on the State Police and I'd be out there on my own. Since most of us were single,

most of us actually slept at the station. Trooper Headquarters used to refer to them as barracks. That's because they used to be an actual -- like an Army barracks where the upstairs -- now they're all offices, but they actually all used to be bedrooms and we all stayed there. Kiski Valley, other than a weekend we never even ran a midnight patrol. We would shut the station down at midnight. We would lock the doors. We'd turn the State Police radio off and whoever worked 4:00 to 12:00 on desk would sleep on-station and answer the phone. If an incident came up, they would call somebody from home and they would respond to the incident and then the station would not actually open up until eight o'clock in the morning. I can remember many occasion being a young trooper -- I lived closer to the barracks than any other troopers, so it was not uncommon when I was off-duty two or three o'clock in the morning to get a call from Kiski Valley station telling me that they had an incident and they needed me to respond to the incident as soon as I could because I was -- closest one. And I'd have to drive into the station and pick up a car.

INTERVIEWER:

Were you paid overtime for that?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

There was no overtime. No. None whatsoever and the other trooper that called you out, he would do the best to help you. I can remember one winter night -- I think it was January or February. It was cold, snowing. It had to be about zero and he called me about 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and they had a burglary in progress at a gas station. So I got dressed and I drove into station and I never put a uniform on, didn't have time, and sitting out in front of the station all warmed up and idling was a marked car and they had a shotgun laying on the seat for me. Car was running, all warmed up by the time I got there. And I can remember responding to these incidents and traffic accidents with not even a uniform on because they had no midnight patrol and if it was an emergency incident, we didn't even worry about putting a uniform on. But that was clean back in -- it'd be '69 and 1970. It was -- totally different today. You have a lot more troopers out there and you have a lot more backup. Basically when you were on the road, you were pretty much on your own. You had to take care of yourself because you didn't have a backup. And can you imagine less than a year out of the Academy, you're the only trooper on the road for northern Westmoreland County and the other troopers on the

desk? You know, if you needed a backup, you'd have to call the local police or what have you. Like I said, there was no overtime. You had a major incident and you would just hear about it through word of mouth or on the radio or television, something was going on in your station area. You didn't call people out. They just showed up. They'd show up, put a uniform on and go see the Sergeant or Corporal. What do you want me to do? What do you need me to do? And I can remember working many triple-headers which have since been banned and outlawed, you know, where you would come in and you would work a 3:00 to 11:00 or 4:00 to 12:00, then you would come out the next morning and work a 6:00 to 2:00 or a 7:00 to 3:00, and then you'd come out on your midnight shift, 11:00 to 7:00. We used to call those triple-headers where basically you worked, went home, ate something, got a little bit of sleep and turned around and you went straight back to work. They used to refer to that as the old triple-headers and we used to work that all the time. We used to have our days off split up. When I first joined the State Police, I was -- as I mentioned earlier, I was in the United States Marine Corps and I didn't get out of there until 1972 and I was a Staff Sergeant when I left the Marine Corps.

But I can remember that at some stations, being a junior man I only received one weekend off a month and the weekend I received off was the weekend that I had my military commitment, so I really didn't receive any time off. But back then, you were happy to have the job. You loved what you were doing. You didn't like your days off split. You didn't like to -- in my case, I didn't like having two days off then knowing I'd, you know, have my military commitment, so I really wouldn't have any time to relax. But you actually liked what you were doing so much that that was put on the back burner. It really didn't matter that much. You loved your profession. You loved what you were doing.

INTERVIEWER:

What were your benefits like back in (inaudible)?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Few and far between. I believe we had medical coverage. Fortunately I never had to use it. Nothing like it is today. I can remember a guy who lived near the Kiski Station, an older gentleman who has since passed away. He needed somebody to watch a summer home for him and he let me stay there rent-free. Just watch the place and you can stay here and I can remember one time he said what do you guys make as troopers, and this was a businessman. And I told him well, this year I

made I think close to $6,000 and he had an astonished look on his face and he said do you know, he said I paid more than that in taxes this year. It put it all in perspective, you know. But I was happy to have that and like I say, there are a few people who are blessed to have a job that they truly, truly enjoy. State Police has its ups and downs, as does any job. Any job has its ups and downs. I don't care what you do. But to have a profession where you enjoy getting up and actually going to work, you're truly blessed when you have something you like and a supportive family that sees you through those hardships and what have you.

INTERVIEWER:

That was my next question. How did your work schedule impact on your family life?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I -- my wife has always been supportive of me and one of the things that I still regret is the promotions I took. Now I -- in my career when I retired, I had -- I was working on my 37th year. But during that time, I'd had like 17 or 18 transfers and -- but many of those transfers were due to promotions. When I made Lieutenant, I went to Troop J Lancaster and then Harrisburg and as Captain, I went to Erie, Troop E Erie for a while and when I

went to Major, I did a year out in Harrisburg and my wife was very, very supportive of me. Always telling me to study for the test. Wherever the opening was, take it and work your way back and she was supportive of that and she always supported me. But then later on when I think back of that, I was -- I always wondered of myself if I was being a little selfish because at that time, I had three children and the years that I was on the road traveling to Lancaster and Harrisburg and Erie were years that I missed with my kids and sometimes I kind of think -- I mean it worked out great in the end. You know, when I retired as a Major, I was making a good salary and good benefits, so I was able to really provide for my family. But those few years when I was traveling, those are years that I lost with my children that I could never get back and sometimes I've thought to myself maybe I just could've stayed around. And you talked earlier about some of the young troopers. When I was going through the ranks, just about all of them were working really hard trying to get promoted. Not all of them. Today there's a -- somewhat of a different mindset. You have a lot of young troopers who are family-oriented and they say well, if I take Corporal or Sergeant, I may have to go across the state and I'm just not leaving my

family. So that's another plus for today's trooper. They're more family-oriented than we...

INTERVIEWER:

So...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...were at times.

INTERVIEWER:

...the promotions that you took, it -- Lieutenant, you had to go to Lancaster. So tell us -- and then to Harrisburg. Tell us how -- why you have to work your way back. That's -- and how it occurs. Vacancy here, vacancy there. You...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, based on competitive testing, you're put on a promotion list and when your number's up, they'll call you and they'll tell you where the opening is. It could be across the street or it can be across the state and you could either take that position or bypass it. In my case when I made Lieutenant, I was assigned as a Patrol Section Manager at Troop J Lancaster. Reported into Troop J Lancaster and I spent a year -- actually not quite a year. About six months sleeping in a barracks upstairs. They had a officer's bedroom. I stayed there, then I rented an apartment in York and after I was there a while, I transferred to the Attorney

General's office as Executive Officer for drug law enforcement and I had a place in Harrisburg that I was renting. And I would travel back home on weekends. The worst times of my career were the times that I was away from my family, the times that I had to travel because basically when you get off work at four o'clock on a Friday afternoon and you have a four-hour drive to get home and then you have to be back at eight o'clock on Monday morning, so -- which means you have to leave at three or four o'clock in the morning to get there Monday morning, it doesn't leave a whole lot of time with your family.

INTERVIEWER:

Um-hum.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

So that -- the worst times of my career were those times when I had to travel. But like...

INTERVIEWER:

(Inaudible)

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...I said, it worked out in the end because I was able to, you know, obtain the rank of Major and like I said, the salary and the pay is really fantastic. Long run it worked out, but those were

hard times when you travel and I -- unless you've had to do that, you can't tell somebody what it was like.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, it's probably -- it would probably be a tough decision for anybody to make. Why -- do I take the promotion and go across the state or do I pass it up...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Um-hum.

INTERVIEWER:

...because if you pass it up, there's no guaranty it's going to come around again.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Right. Once you're promoted -- for example, when I went as a Lieutenant to Troop J Lancaster, since I lived and resided in Washington County, I've lived there all my life, my desire was to come back to Troop B. But I have to wait until there's an opening in Troop B and until there's an opening in Troop B, I can't go back to Troop B. And the problem -- if you turn down a promotion and someone else in Troop B would've taken that Lieutenant promotion, had I taken a subsequent promotion across the state, that individual would've been ahead of me in line to come back, so they would've got to transfer before I did.

So you're better off if you're going to take it, take the transfer and then you're put on a waiting list and there may have been one or two Lieutenants before you that want to come back to Troop B. In my case, I had to wait for two positions to open up because there was a Lieutenant ahead of me. In fact, I think it was Lieutenant Antolic (ph) came back before I did because he was ahead of me on a promotion list. So you can be out there for quite a long period of time. Now Corporal isn't bad there. There are a lot of Corporals in the State Police and there's a good turnover of Corporals. So if you take promotion for a Corporal and have to travel across the state, the chances of you coming back relatively soon, chances are good. As you get up higher in the ranks and especially when you become a Major or a Captain, there's only 17 Troop Commanders in the state. So if you're out of Troop B and you accept Captain, you have to go to Harrisburg. If you get back to Troop B, it means that the Troop B Commander has to retire or be replaced. You're not coming back. So it's more difficult to hire when you go up in rank.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, what you just -- you said that nowadays that these young troopers aren't as for lack of a better word ambitious because they don't want to do exactly what you had to do. They'd just

rather accept where they are, stay where they are and the promotions aren't as important as the family or that's the way they -- the mindset today.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Um-hum. Plus back when I was working on promotion that was a way to achieve a pay raise. Today a trooper makes a decent salary. I don't think they're that much concerned as you were back then. If you want to make family life better for your family, one of the ways to do that was to be promoted so you'd have the pay raise. But they're better compensated today so a young trooper is not put in that situation.

INTERVIEWER:

Um-hum.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

You know, if they -- want a pay raise for my family that I have to take a promotion with the new contractual provisions. And one thing I never want to forget too as a Commander, Station Commander, as Lieutenant or Troop Commander -- I was in Erie and Washington and then Area Commander. At times, we would clash heads with the FOP, Fraternal Order of Police who are the bargaining unit. But even as a Major, I am a member or was a member of the bargaining unit and where we would clash heads

would be over disciplinary issues. They would say you want to fire everybody and we would say you don't want to fire anybody. You know, back and forth. So it was definitely over disciplinary issues and sometime interpretation of contract. But even as a Major, I don't ever want to forget what the FOP has done for me over the years. When I was working and every single benefit that I have -- my salary and every benefit that I have that I took into retirement, that was a result of collective bargaining by the Fraternal Order of Police and I don't care what rank you obtain, you never, ever want to neglect and forget about the FOP. Like I say, if you're in a command position, you're going to clash heads over discipline. They'll say commands want to -- wants to fire everybody and we say well, the union doesn't want to fire anybody, you know, and that's just a natural course of consequences. But you don't ever want to forget and I'll never forget what the FOP has done for me. You know, the retirement that I enjoy is a result of collective bargaining through the FOP. And I can remember when I joined the State Police, there was no unionization. We were not part of a bargaining unit. And as a result, I was making five, 6,000 a year. So, you know, what the

FOP has done for the Pennsylvania State Troopers Association, you can never forget that.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you recall what year that the FOP entered into contractual bargaining with the state and what brought it on?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I don't remember the exact year. I remember incidents leading up to it where there were meetings being held by rank and file members of the State Police concerning unionization, starting a union and I can remember that that was looked upon very unfavorably. I can remember where people were trying to recruit people to attend what would later be the union meetings to learn who the organizers were and what was going on. I can remember -- and I don't want to reflect negatively on the old-timers in the State Police. They had a job to do and they were doing it to the best of their ability. But I can remember when we received our very -- one of our very first contracts that -- where we received personal days. That was the day -- it wasn't a leave day, it wasn't a sick day. If you had a family emergency or something came up where you just had to have a day off, you could take what was called a personal leave day and I forget what -- we started out with one or two a year and I can

remember hearing about that and I said oh, I don't believe that. And I asked one of the other troopers and he said oh, yeah. We get a day or so off and then I went and I asked one of the command people. I said is it true we get this thing called personal day. He said yeah, he said but we don't talk about that too much. You got it but they really didn't want you to take it. You know what I'm saying? And I don't want to cast disparaging remarks on a lot of the old-timers in the State Police, but they came up in a lot of ways like I did. We were happy for what we had and we strictly loved what we were doing and the salary and the benefits were secondary. But times change and people change and you could not continue that old way forever and it had to change and I think it's all changed for the better.

INTERVIEWER:

But you -- in your opinion, was there a lot of resistance to the changes being brought about?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Not by the rank and file because they benefited. State government -- when you look at the cost factor and state government is always looking at cost factor, you know, ways to save money and what have you. It impacted on more of our cost, the salary and benefits and what those costs -- even today.

In the scheme of things in the state government, State Police are small in size compared to places like PennDOT and whatever. We're a relatively small organization and our impact salary-wise and benefit-wise is significant, but, you know, the job we do -- there are not a whole lot of professions out there where an individual is in a position to save a life, take a life or give a life. There's very few professions out there like that. I mean, we just had Memorial Day and our soldiers will do that. You know, they'll save a life, they'll take a life if necessary or they'll give their life and law enforcement is kind of the same way. There are only a handful of professionals out there who watch over you at night when you sleep, take care of you if you have a problem. If you have a problem, they will actually show up and if necessary engage in violence on your behalf to protect you and what's a person that does that -- what are they worth to you? What are they worth to you?

INTERVIEWER:

Priceless.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

You know, sure they're priceless and you can only appreciate that when you call and need them. Fortunately the majority of Pennsylvania residents never have to call for a police officer and

when they do, that's when they really appreciate the role that the police officer paves.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you recall -- this goes to the uniforms. You were talking about sitting in a black car with no air conditioning. Did you have -- what was your uniform like? Was it long-sleeved shirts or...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

We had long-sleeved shirts with wool trousers and during the cooler months, we had a blouse that we wore that was three quarter of the length and we wore what was called a Sand Brown. We had a belt to come across your chest that went around your waist and then we had what we called a (inaudible) which was a big winter coat, that old blouse and I wore that when I first came on the State Police, it was hot. It was uncomfortable. Every time you got out of the vehicle, you had to readjust it and pull it down and you had to readjust your belt around your waist because it would always get catty-cornered. It wasn't sitting just right and I can remember they finally came out with new shirts and short-sleeved shirts. They finally let us start wearing short-sleeved shirts. Even in the hotter winter days, we'd have to have a long-sleeved shirt and then I think it was '83 that they changed the shirts again and we came up with the new shoulder patch.

1983. In fact, I still have a couple of the old State Police shirts. I have the old Keystone patch and I can remember the color scheme in our car in 1968 when I joined the State Police, we used to drive white vehicles with a Keystone State Police emblem on the door and the hood and trunk were painted green. Now I figure they were painted green to try to keep some of the glare -- whenever you looked out the windshield or out the back, keep the glare off you in the summer. And we had that single light on the roof that was painted red and inside we had two bulbs that would make a 360-degree circle...

INTERVIEWER:

Um-hum.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...and you look at the strobe lights on police vehicles today, you know, technology is great.

INTERVIEWER:

Yes.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Great.

INTERVIEWER:

It sure is. We talked about communications, the communication system. As opposed to 1968 on a scale of one to ten, what's the communication system like today?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

There is no comparison. When I joined the State Police, the entire State Police was on one radio frequency. So when you were sitting at a station broadcasting depending on the weather conditions, you could at times hear halfway across the state. Every State Police station was on the same State Police frequency and you had a State Police radio in the car that was outdated to where you actually picked up what looked like a telephone headset and you would talk into the headset. We had the old-style teletype machines and -- which were constantly in use and you actually hit a button before you could actually use the machine and it would plug you into the system and it was your turn. You got to send a message by teletype. The teletypes would come in on paper 24 hours a day and you'd have to read every single teletype that came in. Some of them had to do with wanted persons, stolen vehicles and what have you. Today it's state of the art. Technology is great even with onboard computers where a trooper patrolling today in Washington County can actually through his terminal converse

with a trooper patrolling out of Trooper K Philadelphia online. Could actually talk back and forth. The technology that's used today is just fantastic compared to what we had when I was working back in 1967. No portable radios. Or '68. No portable radios, anything of that nature.

INTERVIEWER:

Were the patrols one or two-man patrols when you first came on the job?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

The only two-man patrol was midnight and there were times like I said because our station closed down after midnight except for weekends, there was a -- there were times on the midnight patrol when you were responding and going to incidents where you should've had someone with you but you didn't. One-man patrols or -- now, you know, lady patrols even. But back then it wasn't uncommon for you to be out there by yourself or maybe have one other car in the county with you as a backup. So, you know, it's just totally different today.

INTERVIEWER:

Now this next question I'm going to ask you might touch a nerve. Have you -- on the news or hearing of a fellow trooper who was killed in the line of duty, have you known that to happen to

anyone close to you outside of being the Command Officer? I know it's happened in your troop, but someone that was close to you throughout your career.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Corporal Joe Pokorny who died December 12, shot and killed. I worked with Joe in Troop B for years and as a Major and I can remember, you know, Corporal Pokorny, you know, always a smile on his face and used to come in my office. He loved to hunt and loved to fish as I do and we would sit there and talk about hunting and everything and that occurred right after I retired and they called me. The barracks called me at home after I retired and let me know that it happened and it's a hard situation and I've had, you know, a number of deaths as Commanding Officer. I had Trooper Ross in Erie was killed in a traffic accident, the middle of the night, midnight patrol and Sergeant Art Hershey out of Bedford Station on the turnpike at an accident scene standing along the road and he was hit and killed and...

INTERVIEWER:

He was actually on his way to a detail in Harrisburg. He was an...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

...(inaudible).

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yeah. And he stopped at a crash site and was out of the vehicle and he got hit and killed. And we had out of Finley Station Trooper Tod Kelly. Pulled off I-79 to pick up a piece of scrap that was laying in the fast lane and he figured he -- I guess he figured he'd jump out and kick it off the road. Well, when he got to it, it was a four-by-four-inch thick, six foot long bar of stainless steel, so he couldn't kick it out of the way. It slowed him down and I guess he had tried to pick it up and get it off the highway. It was heavy. And he was hit and killed. And then Trooper Sepp from Ebensburg was shot and killed helping local police. They were pursuing a car and the guy shot and killed him. And sad, sad occasions when you go and you talk to the family and, you know, when you look at the wife and children involved and always the front office would come out, the Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners and I've seen more than one Commissioner sit there and cry with the family and I'm not ashamed to say that. That's a sad, sad situation.

INTERVIEWER:

It is.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

But I also can remember the respect that was given to these troopers. I can remember various funeral details where we would go from -- we'd be on our way to actually the gravesite and as we'd go down along the road, there'd be people standing along at attention and I remember once we passed through a small town. It was a considerable distance to get to the gravesite and in front of this volunteer fire department I think it was a Ladies' Auxiliary. There was five or six of them and they were all dressed up. They were holding this big American flag. They were all crying.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. That's...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...as, you know, the hearse went by and...

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

But the respect that, you know, they show our troopers -- you know, you talked earlier about, you know, the bad publicity. But

that is far -- the respect shown us when something tragic like that happens is far, far greater than any...

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...disrespect I've ever seen out there.

INTERVIEWER:

Well -- and I would imagine -- I mean, it affected me. I -- this isn't my interview, but I've gone to many, many -- all of the funerals that people have lost their lives and it's something you never forget. But as Area Commander, it's kind of -- it has to be real tough for you because you have to deal with the families...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Um-hum.

INTERVIEWER:

...face to face and -- but probably -- I'll ask you. Those families probably the fact that their son or daughter was a State Trooper and you were there with a Captain or whoever, it helped a lot because I would think the pride they have in that child and the fact that you were there representing -- or even a Commissioner would make a real big difference to that family.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, that's the least we can do.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

That's the least we can do. And I know we always work with them as far as, you know, survivor benefits and that and many a times, we'd assign a trooper to be with them 24 hours a day at their beck and call to help and assist them initially. Anything they needed, you know, we'd be there to help them.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, it's a conversation you hate to get into because it's...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I must be getting old because I get emotional.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, we all do because it's even hard for me to talk about some of these things. As a matter of fact, I went to -- you speak of Joe Pokorny. They just dedicated a portion of the Parkway to him and I...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Um-hum.

INTERVIEWER:

...attended that (inaudible).

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

And see that's great because years from now, people will see that sign...

INTERVIEWER:

Um-hum.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...dedicated to Corporal Joe Pokorny and they'll ask what's that all about and they'll hear the sacrifice that he made. How he was brutally killed...

INTERVIEWER:

Um-hum.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...and they'll hear that sacrifice. You know, so that's good that they do things like that. That's real good.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. It's heart-wrenching and -- moving on to a lighter topic. Now that you're retired -- you've been retired two years?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

A little over two years.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. What have you been up to?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

People frequently ask me what have you been doing since you retired and I look them straight in the eye and I simply tell them I do anything I want to, which is really great. A couple things I found out about retirement though and I always try to tell the younger troopers. Number one, you know, you're just new on the State Police and you say well, I have 20, 25 years to go to retire. You will snap your fingers and one day you will wake up and it'll be time for you to retire and you'll wonder where all those years went. So you need to make the best of them and enjoy them while you're working because trust me, you'll wake up some morning and all of a sudden you'll say hey, where did the time go? It's time for me to retire. The other thing is if you plan on retiring, you need to have a lot of outside interests. If you have a lot of outside interests, you won't miss a beat. I stay busy. I'm busy every single day; hunting, fishing, golfing, boating. I'm active in my church and I can honestly say I'm busier now than I was when I worked. There's so many things that I didn't get a chance to do and you don't want to wait around and not retire. You need to retire when you have your physical health and your family has their health. It's not going to do you any good if you retire and then you or your spouse comes down

with some kind of illness and you can't do all the things that you'd planned on doing. So you have to retire early enough that you and your wife can do or you and your -- whoever your spouse is can do you what you planned on doing and a lot of outside interests. Do a little bit of financial planning because it does cost money to have fun. But I think the retirement -- the key to retirement is outside interests. You have a lot of outside interests you will not miss a beat.

INTERVIEWER:

What are some of yours? What do you...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Oh, I love to hunt, especially archery hunt. Everything from deer hunting to groundhog hunting. Since I've retired, I've been to Canada on a wolf hunt and shot a wolf. Wife and I went on a bear hunt and we both got a nice bear and in fact in a couple weeks, we're going back to New Brunswick, Canada on another bear hunt. We travel a lot. I have a daughter in California. Her husband and her are both schoolteachers. We spend a lot of time in California. I spend a lot of time at the beach, a lot a time at the shore. I am busy, but I can see if I didn't have the outside interests that I wouldn't be. That's key. Have a lot of outside interests and like I said, you won't miss a beat. I have a fishing

boat. I don't do as much fishing as I want and I also have a power boat. I have a speedboat. You probably saw it in the driveway. I went golfing with some of the troopers and one of them says did you have your speedboat out yet and I said jokingly but in all -- serious I'm only one guy. I can only do so much in one day. I'm too busy hunting and golfing and fishing and that and I haven't had a chance to have that powerboat out. And like I said, outside interests are the key and...

INTERVIEWER:

How old were you when you retired?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I retired at 58.

INTERVIEWER:

Fifty-eight.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

When you looked at our upcoming contract, when you looked at what I stood to make on retirement, there was actually no reason for me to stick around another two years. And like I said, I went to Hawaii and during Sunday morning, my wife and I were on our way down to have breakfast and as we was passing through the lobby of the motel, there was a preacher in the motel giving a Sunday morning service. So the wife and I just stopped for a few

minutes to listen and what he had to say was very interesting. He said that before he came to Hawaii, he used to live in the State of California. He used to sell motor homes and he said that you cannot believe the number of motor homes that came back to me that were one or two years old and were being sold back to me. And he said you want to know why they were being sold back to me, he said individuals were retiring and their plan and dream was that once I retire, my spouse and I are going to buy a motor home and we are going to travel the United States and see the sights. He said that you cannot believe the number of people who waited too long to retire. They bought their dream motor home, had it a year or so and either one or the other would pass away or one or the other would come down with such a debilitating illness that they were not able to travel. And his whole message was don't wait so long to retire because if something happens, you don't want to be sitting around talking to your spouse saying oh, we should have went here or we should have did that. Retire when you've still got your health, when your spouse still has their health and you're still able to do the things that you dream about and you work hard for.

INTERVIEWER:

True. I kind of skipped over something here. I (inaudible) the serious side, but I'm sure there are some humorous incidents that you remember. Can you just tell us one or two that -- something that -- with some humor to it (inaudible).

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

How about a drunk crashed on the Parkway, car's up on the guardrails in the middle of the road and he's sitting in there with the accelerator floored and doesn't understand why he's not going anywhere, where his back wheels are up off the -- and he is so drunk that he doesn't even realize -- and I'm standing next to the car and he cannot realize how -- and how fast -- he looks at the speedometer. How fast this car thinks is supposed to be going and he keeps going in and out whether he's sitting still or moving and how I can be standing right next to that car at that speed. It's hilarious. I think some of the funniest occasions and tragic occasions occurred when people had some drink in them.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

The number of people especially when I was a young trooper back in, you know, '68, '69, the number -- 1970. We'd respond to a domestic incident and both of them would be drunk and be

fighting and arguing and for some reason, they believed that because you were a State Police Officer, you had the power to grant them a divorce. So you could stand in front of them. They'd be yelling and arguing and screaming, telling you to divorce them. That they knew that you were a State Officer and you could do it and you would kind of wave your hand and you'd say a few words and you'd pronounce that they were now no longer husband and wife and they pretty much -- you know, he'd look at her and say I told you I'd divorce you some day and they'd settle down and you'd go -- leave, you know, and -- I mean, there are...

INTERVIEWER:

Do you ever wish...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...so -- I remember...

INTERVIEWER:

...you were...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...sitting in -- I guess I can tell this now. I remember sitting in a surveillance van when I used to do drug work and it was hot and we're sitting in there and we used to sit in the van and look out the little peepholes and watch the drug deals go down. And

someone with a 25-automatic accidentally cranked off a round in our surveillance trailer and that shell went ping, ping, ping, ping, ricocheting in there. And everybody jumped and we all looked at each other and nobody was hit, and of course our bosses never, you know, ever heard -- but that thing went off and everybody kind of jumped and froze and you could just hear that thing ping, ping, ping throughout the van inside the van ricocheting. And we looked at each other and nobody was hit and we just kind of forgot that it ever, you know, really occurred and...

INTERVIEWER:

(Inaudible)

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Yeah. There was a lot of good times. Some bad times, you know...

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

...but there's a lot of good times and that's why I tell young troopers make the best of what you have because some day you'll be retired. Enjoy every single minute of it.

INTERVIEWER:

You know, just last week the Reagan diaries came out and daily, President Reagan made an entry. Do you ever -- had you ever wished that you had done that?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

I wish that I had done that because the stories, it would make a good novel from the -- I can still remember the first traffic stop I made on my own, what it was about and how I felt. And if I were -- would've kept track of all that, if I were -- written a daily diary, it would be priceless to me. It would be priceless to my family and you could probably make a buck off of writing a book because just look at -- you know, most of my career was spent in Troop B Washington and because we live or were stationed next to a major city, Pittsburgh, the number of VIPs that we had to escort into the city from the Greater Pittsburgh International Airport, the number of Presidents of the United States that I've had the opportunity to actually talk to because of my assignment and a number of other dignitaries that I had the occasion to rub shoulders with and in many cases actually talk to, situations such -- like that are priceless. I have photographs of myself and my wife with President Bush, George W. I have photographs of myself with Vice President Dick Cheney. I have photographs of myself -- and all these are in uniform with President Clinton who

I've met on numerous occasions and I also saw Nixon and President Carter. The number of local celebrities that have a privilege to meet and talk to -- Pittsburgh Steeler football players and had my photograph taken with them. The opportunities to do that sort of thing, numerous -- if I could've kept a diary of all the business -- I remember an incident we talked about earlier where President Bush, first -- father, not the son came into Pittsburgh to address a conference and we escorted him with the Secret Service from Pittsburgh International Airport to the Convention Center downtown Pittsburgh and I was standing in a holding area where President Bush was waiting to address the audience and I was in uniform talking to some County Police Officers and some of the troopers and I heard an individual behind me say this is a guy I want to talk to and I turned around. It was President Bush -- had his hand stuck out and I was just flabbergasted. I didn't know what to say. So he stuck his hand out and he said President George Bush and I stuck my hand out and I said Captain Lyle Szupinka from the Pennsylvania State Police and he actually stood there and talked to me for about five minutes, passed the time (inaudible) and he said well, I've got to

go on now and speak. He said Trooper, have a good day and he -- I'll never forget that and I...

INTERVIEWER:

Wow.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Another occasion I was at a dignitary protection seminar in Washington, D.C. that was put on by the Secret Service and we were in the Oval Office Building next to the White House with a Secret Service agent and he got a call on his radio and he made us stand back because President Reagan was coming through the corridor. So we stood back against the wall and he had his Secret Service agents with us -- with him. And as he passed us, he stopped and he said well, who are you gentlemen. And the Secret Service agent that was escorting us told him that we were law enforcement personnel from throughout the United States and President Reagan actually stopped and chatted with us for a few minutes. And he said I have some business to take care of and he went on down a hall to the Oval Office Building. Times like that...

INTERVIEWER:

(Inaudible)

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

They’re priceless.

INTERVIEWER:

Yes.

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

They’re priceless.

INTERVIEWER:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, Major, I think we’ve just about covered everything here, but in closing is there anything else you’d like to add to the interview?

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Well, I don’t know of any better decision I could’ve made other than joined the Pennsylvania State Police. We talked about, you know, how it’s changed over the years, but I would recommend anybody out there if they want a rewarding career, a professional occupation that has some hard times -- there’s some sadness involved there and some tragedy involved there, but the opportunity to do good and interact with people and the excitement that it has, I would recommend anybody that’s interested in becoming involved in law enforcement consider the Pennsylvania State Police as a career. We’re one of the best if not the best uniformed law enforcement agency in the United States and I’m proud of the fact that I was privileged to have the

opportunity of being a State Trooper and I know that when I'm long and gone, when my kids are long and gone, my grandkids will see the photographs and they'll say who's that. Somebody will say who's that and they'll say well, that's my great, great granddaddy. He was a Pennsylvania State Trooper and they can never take that away from me and I'm so proud of that.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, Major, I worked for you for I don't know how many years as you were coming up through the ranks and I can say that I'm proud to have worked for you. I was always treated fairly by you and I usually never had an interview like this, but I think that under your command everybody was dealt a fair hand. And we...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

Thank you.

INTERVIEWER:

...talked about discipline and we talked about this and that but...

MAJOR SZUPINKA:

You know, a lot of things I said -- and it took me a while to learn this, too. Being from the Marine Corps, strict and all that, it took a while for me to realize too that the greatest asset any organization has -- I don't care if it's a public or private

organization. The greatest asset you have are the people that work for you. It's not technology. It's not a new uniform. It's not a new weapon. It's not a brand new patrol car. The greatest asset you have are the men and women that work with you and if you treat them right, they'll work for you and they'll work hard for you.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay. On behalf of Major Regan who's the Director of the Board of the Pennsylvania State Police's Historical Education Memorial Center, we want to thank you for giving -- allowing us to interview you. It's certainly been an interesting...