



The Oral History of Ernest Mayer

September 13, 2023

Interview conducted by Stacie Allison

Occoquan National Wildlife Refuge

Woodbridge, Virginia

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Ernest Mayer

Date of Interview: September 13, 2023

Location of Interview: Occoquan National Wildlife Refuge in Woodbridge, Virginia

Interviewer: Stacie Allison

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 27 years

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held:

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge – Visitor Protection Specialist (September 1977 – January 1979)
Region 3, Springfield, Illinois – Special Agent Trainee (May 1979 – June 1980)
Region 3, Grand Rapids, Michigan - Special Agent (June 1980 – October 1983)
Region 3, Madison, Wisconsin - Senior Resident Agent (October 1983 – September 1988)
Region 3, Ann Arbor, Michigan - Senior Resident Agent (September 1988 – October 1992)
Region 1, Honolulu, Hawaii – Senior Resident Agent (November 1992 – July 1995)
Branch of Special Operations, Arlington, Virginia – Special Agent (July 1995 – January 1988)
Branch of Special Operations, Arlington, Virginia - Special Agent in Charge (January 1988 – January 2002)
US Department of Justice's US. National Central Bureau of Interpol- Liaison Officer (Feb 2002-March 2004)

Most Important Projects: Operation Friendship (Illegal Commercialization of Wildlife, primarily related to the sale of animal skins, feathers, and parts for the “Mountain Man” enthusiasts); Mesabi Fur Company (Branch of Special Operations) investigation into the illegal trade in protected fur animal skins; Operation Falcon (Branch of Special Operations investigation into the illegal take of birds of prey by, predominantly, falconers); Operation Trophy Kill (Branch of Special Operations investigation into the illegal taking of trophy animals, specifically Big Horn Sheep, Elk, Bear); Operation Psittacine (Branch of Special Operations investigation into the illegal taking, import and export of parrots); Operation Chameleon (Branch of Special Operations investigation into the illegal importation and exportation of reptiles and amphibians); assisted in the development of an Intelligence Branch within the Branch of Special Operations; assigned as a liaison officer in our liaison office with Interpol.

Colleagues and Mentors: Special Agents Rick Leach, Jerry Sommers, John Keeler, Kevin Adams, Donald Burger, Bob Hodgins, Bill Zimmerman, Larry Keck, Larry Hood, Dick Dickinson, John Gavitt, Vernon Ricker, Greg Stover, Darcy Davenport, Adam O’Hara, Mike Lucchino, Mary Jane Levine, Jill Schweiger, Dave McMullen, Tim Riley, Steve Middleton, Commodore Mann, Wildlife Inspectors Jill Schweiger, Frank Dela Hansad, Roy Brown, Joe Wright, Paul Chang

Brief Summary of Interview: Ernest was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1947. After moving to a small town in Southern California, at the age of 9, he describes the camping trips with his father, where they would sleep on old army cots in an old army tent and credits his parents for his love of the outdoors. His grandfather had been a state forester in Pennsylvania and taught forestry at the University of Pennsylvania. Ernest attended Chaffey College in Alta Loma, California and graduated with a degree in Liberal Arts Lithography with a minor in Natural Resources.

In 1969, he enlisted in the Air Force and would later become assigned to the 21st Security Police Squadron at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, Alaska as a law enforcement officer and later as a Military Wildlife Agent. After three years in Alaska, he was transferred to March Air Force Base in Southern California and was made a Security Police Investigator. After leaving the Air Force, he became a park ranger at the Joshua Tree National Monument in the Mojave Desert in Southern California. The National Park Service would later send him for training at FLETC (Federal Law Enforcement Training Center) and, upon completion of training, he transferred to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona.

He was hired by the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1977, as a Visitor Protection Specialist at the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. While there, he was selected to work on the Assateague Island Management Plan and would later receive a Special Achievement Award for his work on that program. It was there that he would become acquainted with and work alongside some of the special agents from the Fish and Wildlife Service. This would lead to his being hired as a special agent in January of 1979. His year-long training station would be in Springfield, Illinois where he had the opportunity to be mentored by Special Agent Rick Leach. His first duty station was in Grand Rapids, Michigan (dearly loved). He speaks about a number of projects he worked on jointly with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Canadian Wildlife Service involving numerous Lacey Act cases. Ernest participated in a covert investigation involving illegal bear hunting, specifically baiting, in and around Seney National Wildlife Refuge.

Later, he was recruited to assist the Branch of Special Operations during the takedown phase of Operation Friendship. In 1983, he applied for and became the SRA (Senior Resident Agent) in Madison, Wisconsin. While stationed in Wisconsin, he was asked to assist the Branch of Special Operations in several other covert operations such as the Mesabi Fur Company, Operation Falcon and Operation Trophy Kill. Ernest relates how much he enjoyed living and working in Michigan, so in 1988 he became the SRA in Ann Arbor, where he supervised operations in Michigan and Ohio and worked frequently with the Canadian Wildlife Service and Ontario Department of Natural Resources. He was supervising a Wildlife Inspector Program for the first time and really enjoyed that.

Desiring a change from waterfowl work, he applied and was accepted for an SRA position in Hawaii in 1992. While there, he describes his participation in the Hawaiian Alien Species Advisory Committee and regional planning for the Pacific Islands. In 1995, he applied and was accepted for a position with the Branch of Special Operations in Arlington and, in 1998, became the SAC (Special Agent in Charge) of that branch. He describes his involvement in the development of an Intelligence Branch within the Branch of Special Operations and as a liaison with law enforcement agencies and travels to Canada, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, Netherlands, South Africa and Madagascar. From 2002 to 2004, Ernest worked full-time with the U.S. Department of Justice's U.S. National Central Bureau of Interpol. He retired in December 2004, having spent 35 years in government service with 27 of that being within the Fish and

Wildlife Service. Since retiring, he and his wife, Monica have travelled to many wildlife refuges and national parks throughout the country and to numerous foreign countries.

THE INTERVIEW

STACIE ALLISON: This is Stacie Allison. I'm the interviewer. I'm interviewing Ernest H. Mayer. And today is September 13. The year is 2023. Thank you very much for offering to give us your interview. Let's start with your birth. Where you were born, when you were born. You can tell us who your parents were, what they did, and then we'll hit a little bit growing up before we dig into the Service.

ERNEST MAYER: Sounds good. Thank you. Stacie. So, I was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, December 29, 1947. So that makes me an early baby boomer. At about age nine, the family moved to Southern California, and that's pretty much where I grew up, in a little town called Highland, just outside of San Bernardino, California, Southern California. So, I think, as far as relevance to where I went with my career and ultimately working for the Service. My father, Robert Hamilton Mayer, and my mother was Lucille Elizabeth - Hill was her maiden name - were my parents. I had one brother, William Robert Mayer, and he was about ten years older than I was at the time, until he passed. Didn't have too much background.

My father liked to camp, and in those days when you camped, it wasn't RVs and that sort of thing. We camped out of an old army tent. My dad had originally worked for, during the second World War, an Army Surplus Center near Harrisburg in southern and central Pennsylvania. So, he had an old, big army tent that was just sides and the roof, no floor. You put it up and with poles and staked it out to the ground. Old army cots to sleep on, and Coleman stoves and Coleman lanterns with white gas, none of which exists anymore. So, my love of out-of-doors came basically, from my parents. I continued camping all through high school and college and even when I got married. We always camped. So, I had a pretty good love of the out-of-doors.

My grandfather on my mom's side had actually been a state forester in Pennsylvania and taught forestry at the University of Pennsylvania. He helped author a forestry book. So, there was a little bit of forestry background.

STACIE: What was his name?

ERNEST: That would have been Elmer Hill. So, I got a little bit from the grandparents' side on my mom's side of the family, for love of things in the wild, forestry in particular, but in general. He was also a bit of a historian and did some work on the charcoal kilns that were pretty prevalent throughout Pennsylvania, where charcoal was produced for steelmaking. And there's even a monument, I can't remember the name of the town, but there's a monument dedicated to him for helping preserve some of these, what they called coke furnaces.

STACIE: I've heard that.

ERNEST: Coke is basically just charcoal, and some other minerals mixed in with it, which was pretty much used in the steel industry.

STACIE: Where'd you go to school?

ERNEST: College-wise, after high school, I went to Chaffey College in Alta Loma, California, which is kind of near Upland and Ontario area, up in the foothills. My major was actually in Liberal Arts Lithography, which is a form of printing. And that's what I had originally wanted to be was a printer. I got a degree in that, but my minor was in Natural Resources. It was kind of a broad term, and we studied biology, botany, geology, that sort of thing. A very general program. I guess that's really where my interest was.

I did a lot of camping in US Forest Service campgrounds up in the San Bernardino Mountains and dearly loved that. I was going to go back and get a second major in Natural Resources Management. Unfortunately for me, I decided to take a break from college for about a year or half a year, and this was during the Vietnam era, and the draft was in effect. So, I received a draft notice from the Army to come into Los Angeles and take a physical and become an Army "ground pounder", to use a term they used at that time - a soldier in the field. My father, at that time, was working for the Department of Defense as a jet engine mechanic and later rocket engine mechanic at Norton Air Force Base in Southern California. So, with his familiarity with the Air Force, he urged me to think about enlisting. So, I did. I enlisted in the US Air Force and was then ultimately, in 1969, inducted into the Air Force.

With my background in photography and printing, I sort of felt that I was going to try to work my way into becoming a photographer in the Air Force. Since the Vietnam War was going on, there was a lot of aerial photography going on in Vietnam at the time, and I thought that was I was going to be kind of a shoo-in for that. When I was in basic training for the Air Force, down in Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, they gave me a physical down there, and they said I couldn't go into that career field because I was colorblind. Well, you don't argue with the military. It doesn't do much good. Although, I did have some success in later years arguing with the decisions. But, at that time, it was like, *okay, now what am I going to do?* Well, without consulting with me any further, they ended up deciding I would go into the Security Police Section, which is the same as the Military Police in the Army or Shore Patrol in the Navy. They called them Security Police Officers. So, they kept me on at Lackland Air Force Base for another couple of months, and I was trained as a Security Police Officer.

At the end of our training, we all expected to be sent to Vietnam. Well, most of the graduates before us, for almost a year and a half, had all gone to Vietnam. With us, they ended up giving us a list of five duty station locations that we could choose from to see if we wanted to go to one of those duty stations. Vietnam wasn't on that list. So, it was a fairly long list. I was married at the time. I got married to my first wife, Rebecca McCann, just before going into the Air Force in '69. I wanted to try to see if I couldn't get to some location where I could take her with me. Well, there were only three locations that I could take her to on that list of five, and that was Hawaii, Alaska or Okinawa, Japan. So, I listed them just about in that order. Hawaii, who wouldn't want to go to Hawaii, right? Then, I listed Alaska and then Okinawa. I almost made it to Hawaii, but I didn't. They ended up assigning me to the 21st Security Police Squadron at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, Alaska.

When I first got there, I was basically doing what they called "security duties." At that time, we had fighter jets, F104s and F-106s that were stationed in Elmendorf for protection during the Cold War, [with] Alaska being sort of a first line of defense, if you will, for the United States, should any foreign entity decide to attack America from Alaska. I spent a little time as a Security Police Officer, doing security duties. Wasn't too happy with that. I volunteered to work for the, I guess I'm going to call it the Police Section of it, which you would normally consider a Police Officer in the military. Drove a patrol car, stopped speeders, took care

of family disputes on base, theft of military property by military members and that sort of thing. And that lasted for about another six months, maybe.

Then an opening came up in the Military Wildlife Office there. At the time, certain military bases had a lot of land, obviously, and some allowed fishing on the land, some allowed hunting on government land. There was a whole education program in Alaska where, when new staff came into Alaska, we gave training programs for identification of wildlife, the laws of, not only the military, but also the state's hunting and fishing regulations. We had a program of raising rainbow trout and salmon to stock, predominantly, Ship Creek, which is a creek that runs between the base and downtown Anchorage, which had an annual salmon run. And we had several lakes on the base. So, we were raising rainbow trout to release in the base lakes. We were raising salmon to release into the creek. We put in a fish ladder over a small dam that was in the creek. We had nuisance beaver on the base that would dam up the streams from the lakes. So, we would have to go and live trap the beaver and relocate them to different locations.

I worked with the base veterinarian and a couple of the state wildlife biologists on a program where we would capture and tranquilize cow moose, early in the spring, to palpate them to see whether they were pregnant or not. We affixed ear tags to them and put collars around them. I'm probably one of the few people that you'll ever find any place that has actually ridden a moose. A moose that I was straddling (kind of a stupid move) and putting ear tags on, while the base vet was taking a tooth from the moose to age the moose, by the rings on the teeth. And when he pulled the tooth, the moose stood up, even though it was tranquilized, and walked around a little bit with me on her back and then laid back down. So, that was an adventure.

We had a black bear on the base, and on two separate occasions, we had – in one case it was just a female black bear that was getting into – we had a Boy and a Girl Scout lodge, just an old Quonset hut where the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts met *separately*, in those days. This black bear kept getting into the Quonset hut and rummaging through the foods that were stored there. We tranquilized her and used one of the military helicopters to take her further off the base to another part of Alaska, to get her away. And within about four months after doing that, another female showed up with two cubs. So, we captured both of the cubs and the female and put them on an airplane and flew them about 150 miles away. I don't know what the record is today, but at the time, this one female bear that we flew way across the inlet and across the big Susitna River and deposited her and her cubs on a sandbar, about eight months later, she was actually shot, actually very close back to the base. So, she somehow had made her way several hundred miles back around to the base. At the time, it was the furthest since we had tagged her. We knew exactly who she was and where she came from, So, that went on record as one of the longest treks that had ever been recorded for a black bear anywhere in the continental United States. Whether she still holds the record, I have no idea. But that was kind of neat.

Kind of a highlight for me when I was there, we had several dignitaries come to the base. Most people wouldn't remember, but at one point, we traded a muskox off of one of the Alaskan islands. This was in coordination with the state, of course. The United States swapped with China, a panda bear for a musk ox. So, I was there during that thing, sort of helping coordinate it. Then, another time, Vice President Spiro Agnew came to the base and was visiting with his wife, Eleanor, and he had a routine, in the mornings, of playing tennis. Sometimes she played with other military wives or local politicians' wives, and this particular morning, she wasn't playing with anybody, so she was just waiting around for her husband, the Vice President, to play. And she was bored. I was approached by the Secret Service and my Commanding Officer to see if I would take Eleanor, his wife, on a little sightseeing trip of the base. So, there was me and a Secret Service agent and Eleanor Agnew in the car, riding around for about two and a half hours on the base, and we took her to our wildlife office and showed her all the stuffed animals. And she was very attracted by

some of the plants that were in bloom on the base. So, that was kind of pretty neat experience for a young airman in the Air Force to get to be sitting right next to the Vice President's wife for a couple of hours. Very, very nice lady. So, that was kind of my introduction, if you will, to wildlife management, to wildlife law enforcement.

There were only, I think maybe 5 or 6 military bases, at that time, that had military wildlife agents. We had our own uniform, gray pants, light gray shirt, gray Smokey the Bear hat, a big silver badge, and a specific patch for military wildlife agents. Nobody knew I was in the military at that time, basically. The only people I saluted was my commanding officer and the base commander, because protocol would say that I should do that. So, that was kind of interesting. I was able to extend in Alaska for an additional year. So, I actually spent three years at Elmendorf Air Force Base. Then in my fourth year, in October of '72, I was transferred to March Air Force Base in Southern California, which was about 20 miles from where I grew up. So, that was kind of nice. I basically was back home at that point, and it was there that I was made a Security Police Investigator. Not to be confused with the Criminal Investigation Division's criminal investigators, but we were basically, I would say, a detective, if you will. And I spent my last few months with the military, as an investigator on the base. I got out of the military in September of 1972 [correction: February 1973], went back to civilian life, and I was looking for a job. Going to go back to college and finish my degree in Natural Resources, still kind of hoping to go on and continue in that new vein or that new channel for a career.

I started working for the California State Parks as a seasonal park aide at Silverwood Lake Recreation Area. This would have been in the spring of 1973. I got introduced to park service type duties, which ranged everywhere from cleaning toilets and manning fire towers and picking up trash to enforcing regulations on the boat ramps and in the lake and that sort of thing. I was still looking, though, for a little bit more long term or better paying job, I should say. I was looking around and, at the time, there was a program called the Veterans Re-Adjustment Program, where federal agencies were hiring veterans into all different varieties of work. And there was an opening for a park ranger at Joshua Tree National Monument, which is now a national park. But at that time, it was a national monument, in the Mojave Desert, just north of Palm Springs in southern California. I ended up being hired as a park ranger in Joshua Tree. That would have been in, like June of 1973. I became a member of the Rock Rescue Team.

STACIE: What was rock rescue?

ERNEST: So, Joshua Tree is an area that was popular with rock climbers. People that like to crawl up big boulders and repel off of them. Most of it wasn't real technical rock climbing, like you would think of people going up Half Dome or something like that, big mountain climbs. But there was a lot of pretty high piles of rock. Also, people would get lost sometimes in the desert or injured while climbing or hiking in the park. So, we were trained in basic first aid. We were trained in rappelling, climbing, taking people off the rocks or out of dangerous areas on stretchers - that sort of thing. I got introduced to that and ended up on the Rock Rescue Team. Until one time, we were doing a fairly technical transit between two boulders on a very narrow shelf, and I didn't handle that too well (*laughter*). So, I didn't last long on the Rock Rescue Team, but I did do that.

We went for a training program with the US Border Patrol on how to track people through the desert, because they had trained trackers that would track illegal immigrants coming across the border from Mexico. So, we learned how to track people through the wilderness, more to try to locate them, if they were lost. I became really interested in the medical standpoint from it and put myself through training at a local community college and became an Emergency Medical Technician II, which means first level and second level, so that we could handle any kind of emergencies, because we were a long ways from ambulance service. To get people into a hospital, if they needed it, you needed to be able to stabilize people. So, I

became an Emergency Medical Technician, at that point. Then, the Park Service sent me to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina to also get training with the US Marines that were being trained as field medics, because part of Vietnam was still going on.

One of the interesting things that happened in my life was, while I was at Joshua Tree, we had a small population of desert bighorn sheep that lived in some of the higher mountain areas within the park, and we did an annual survey trying to see them by helicopter from the air. Also, we had what were called adits. They were manmade springs, where water would be deposited into like a cavern area so that the sheep would have water during the drier summer seasons.

On one of the surveys on a helicopter was me and a helicopter pilot from the Grand Canyon. We were flying in to check on one of these water supply areas for desert bighorn sheep, and we spotted a campsite, an unauthorized illegal campsite out in the middle of the desert in the mountains. And we went in and found that, indeed, someone had set up a camp. Whether they were going to come back and hunt the sheep illegally, or whether they had already been successful and took a sheep out, we didn't know, but they left a fair amount of camping supplies behind. And for whatever reason, this pilot and I decided it would be a good thing to take some of that trash, junk camping equipment that was left behind, load it on the helicopter and fly it out of the mountains, which we did. And on the return trip out of the mountains, we went over a high ridge, and he was coming down to where we had originally taken off from, out in the desert, and a big – it was empty - but a big jerry can, a five-gallon gas can broke loose and slid underneath the pedals on the helicopter. So, the pilot had no control on the descent of the helicopter into the desert. I was strapped in the back seat and had to un-strap myself and hold on to one end of the strap and crawl forward and pull this gas can out from underneath. I didn't think too much of it at the time, other than it was a heck of a ride coming down off that mountain, until we got down, and he landed. And the pilot got out and basically collapsed on the ground and said, that is the closest he had ever come to dying in his life. So, I realized, well, you know what? That was probably the closest I'd ever come to dying, too. *(laughter)* So, an adventure, shall we say?

While I was there at Joshua Tree, I also was sent to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, which was the center that was set up in Georgia for training of pretty much any agency that had law enforcement. They had a Basic Law Enforcement Training Center there, as well as advanced trainings. I went through the Basic Law Enforcement Training Center, passed with honors, which was a nice thing for me. Then in July of 1975, I transferred from Joshua Tree National Monument to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in southern Arizona. In both locations, I did dual duties. I not only worked as a law enforcement officer in the parks, but I also worked as an interpreter. So, not only was I running around in a patrol vehicle, or (as one of the pictures I have) on a motorcycle patrolling, I also did interpretive programs, campfire programs, walks in the desert, that sort of thing. I was in charge of the visitor center and worked selling books and whatever, putting on presentations about the environment in the park to visitors that were coming to the Center. I did a little bit of horse patrol, which was new for me because I wasn't really a “horsey” person, being raised up, basically, in the suburbs in California. That was interesting learning, kind of thrown into it like, *that's a horse, that's a saddle, this is how you put the saddle on, go have fun.* Did that a little bit.

Since it was a national monument, the original families that had settled there for cattle ranching, some of them were still alive, and they were still able to have cattle on the national monument. We would monitor those cows and where they were at, and I actually became pretty good friends with one of the ranchers. On some of my days off, I would help them round up cows and brand them and do a little campfire cooking over the campfire after the roundup of the cows to brand them. We also had wild burros on the park, and this was about the same time the National Park Service was trying to round up burros in the Grand Canyon, and it became a pretty big PR problem for the Park Service, because people wanted the burros left in the park. The

Park Service is not really big on having, essentially, an invasive species living on the land and competing with the bighorn sheep and the deer that were in the park, for survival. We were rounding up burros, at the same time, tagging them and sending them off to rescue centers. And they were being, basically given to people to raise and take care of afterwards. But it became pretty controversial because the Grand Canyon [staff] - I don't know if they ever got around to shooting them, but they were planning on shooting some of the burros. So, there was a lot of controversy going on, and we kind of flew under the radar, so to speak, as far as what our program was down there.

I worked a lot with the US Border Patrol and US Customs. Now, of course, all part of – what do they call it today? Homeland Security. The Border Patrol and Customs were put under that after 9/11. An event occurred that set the stage, at least in my mind, for me for the rest of my career. The Customs Service had apprehended a person coming into the United States out of Mexico with a van. I don't know if it was a Volkswagen, but anyway, a small van with quite a collection of reptiles - different types of snakes, a few Gila monsters, and they didn't know what to do with them, other than he didn't declare the wildlife at the border. Therefore, they stopped him, seized them, arrested him, and were holding on to him. I interviewed the individual, and it became pretty obvious - he admitted it - that he was collecting reptiles in Mexico and had been, in parts of Arizona and New Mexico, collecting these reptiles for resale into the pet trade. I didn't really know what to do with that information. We didn't have the facilities or the training too much to take it beyond the one individual person that had collected this stuff – where they were going to and things. So somehow, I became aware that the Fish and Wildlife Service had a group of special agents that investigated that. So, I got in contact with them. Bob Wright was one of the agents in Arizona, at that time, and he came down and I basically turned over the information to them. They ultimately made a case against both the reptile smuggler and some of the people that he was supplying reptiles to. So, that was sort of an introduction to me, to both the idea that here's an agency that does longer-term investigations into the illegal commercialization in wildlife, and that there was even a market for such a thing. At about the same time, and this would have been in probably mid-1977, the Fish and Wildlife Service was hiring special agents. I put in for a position and was interviewed by Bob Wright and his boss, I'm sure his name was either Bob Kinghorn or Larry Kinghorn. I'm not sure of his first name. [note: It was Bob Kinghorn.] But Agent Kinghorn interviewed me for an agent position. Unfortunately, I was not selected.

I wasn't too satisfied with the way certain things were done in the National Park Service. We were encouraged to, for example, write tickets to people for putting a little trench around their tent for water runoff or whatever, so their campsites wouldn't get flooded, while I would see the maintenance workers out grading the roads wider and wider all the time. And I just thought, there's an inequality going on here if we're protecting the environment in one aspect when we're actually doing the same thing with the maintenance. Park rangers at that time – it was very difficult to advance. I'll back up for a second. When I first started with the Park Service in Joshua Tree, I was a GS-4. I qualified for food stamps in California. I didn't take them because my first wife was working so, we were able to do quite well, surviving anyway with that.

I started looking around for another position, maybe with a different agency. The Fish and Wildlife Service had a position at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge as a visitor protection specialist, which was just another name for a park ranger, except for refuges, like a refuge ranger. I applied for that position at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia, and in September of '77, was hired by the Fish and Wildlife Service. So, that was my start with the Fish and Wildlife Service, even though I just changed agencies within the Department of Interior.

I was at Chincoteague from September of '77 to about January of 1979. I did do some law enforcement work there. I worked very closely still with the National Park Service, because Chincoteague had a beach area that,

even though it was National Wildlife Refuge, it was being administered by the National Park Service for recreational purposes. So, I worked very closely with them. At the time, there was also an ongoing management plan for [the refuge.] Chincoteague Wildlife Refuge was actually not on Chincoteague Island. It was on Assateague Island. Chincoteague Island is a small island. It's actually populated by the town of Chincoteague. The fire department actually had wild horses that were introduced by the Spanish or whoever, I don't know, some little horses that had somehow managed to establish themselves on Assateague Island. We oversaw that program where the fire department would round those horses up annually and sell off some of them. Margaret Henry had a whole series of books, *Misty of Chincoteague*, *Sea Star: Orphan of Chincoteague*, and a couple of other books that were written about the wild ponies on Assateague.

Since I had worked for the Park Service, the refuge manager, J.C. Apple – he was kind of famous or maybe infamous as a wildlife manager at the time, there in the mid '70s. '79 through I don't know he probably retired in '80 or '81, something like that. So, I was selected to work on the Assateague Island Management Plan, which included the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service and a small Virginia state park, also on the north end of Assateague Island. That management plan had actually been mandated by Congress to be done as a management plan for an entire island; a multi-agency managed island. I went to a lot of public meetings, which was the first time I'd ever stood up and talked before a group of people. I did briefings for the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service and the Secretary of Interior. I did end up with a Special Achievement Award for working on that program.

While I was there, I continued to work also on my own time - it was my normal duty schedule, but I worked along with some of the local special agents from the Fish and Wildlife Service. We flew the beach, looking for people during the peregrine falcon migration through the Chincoteague and Assateague Islands, and the barrier islands there along the Virginia eastern shore. They would fly and kind of follow the peregrine falcons to make sure there was no one out trapping them illegally, anywhere on the islands, which was interesting. Back in an airplane again. Worked with Special Agent John Gavitt, Vernon Ricker, and the pilot was Greg Stover. Darcy Davenport was an old timer. It was a really a good introduction to law enforcement and how things were done. I'd work with them in the marshes during waterfowl season. There were certain waterfowl species that had hunting seasons still on them, like rails and geese. A lot of snow geese use that area for wintering on their migration south, and then again in the spring coming back north. Historically, all along the eastern shore, particularly, some of the people on Chincoteague Island, a lot of them were commercial fishermen, commercial clambers. During waterfowl season, now this would have been back in the '40s, about the time the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was signed into effect outlawing commercialization, there was a lot of illegal hunting where geese and ducks were shot, killed and went to market, illegally, in various cities, Washington, D.C. and Baltimore and Philadelphia. So, some of those old timers were around. Some of them I met, and actually, I talked to on a fairly frequent basis.

In mid or late 1978, I, again, applied for a special agent position. In January of 1979, I was hired on as a special agent with the Fish and Wildlife Service and sent down to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Georgia, again. But this time, that center was run by the Department of Treasury, as I recall, and they had a criminal investigation school, and that's where I received training to become an investigator.

I think this would be a point where I'd kind of like to point out that, what I believe was, at the time, the Golden Age, if you will, if I can borrow the term from Tom Brokaw, the Golden Age for the Fish and Wildlife Service Law Enforcement Program. The reason I say that is, initially, the Fish and Wildlife Service, as a federal agency, got involved in wildlife law enforcement, in addition to the states. Almost all states, at that time, had a wildlife conservation program. They called them various things, but basically, state game wardens, to use a generalized term, enforcing hunting and fishing regulations within the states. To show you

how far back our country goes with the idea of protecting wildlife, in 1900, the Lacey Act and the Black Bass Act were passed. And these laws gave authority and the duty to federal agencies to enforce state laws and other countries' federal laws, to enforce the interstate or international sale, or distribution, [or] transportation of wildlife taken illegally in another state or another country.

The Lacey Act actually became pretty much the backbone for federal law enforcement and is still used today as one of the best tools that the federal government, particularly the Fish and Wildlife Service, has for enforcing protective laws for wildlife that's not just endangered, but in general. A deer, for example, that may be shot in one state and transported to another state, and they end up selling it, is a clear violation of the Lacey Act, and "the feds could get involved" - the special agents investigating that type of activity, particularly at a commercial level.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which did about the same thing, came into effect in the early 1900s. The Bald Eagle Act and the Golden Eagle Protection Act all came into vogue. Laws were passed by Congress giving more and more authority to federal agencies, particularly the Fish and Wildlife Service, to enforce wildlife laws at a federal level and not just at the state level. Several states didn't care too much for that, particularly the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. They actually went all the way to the Supreme Court on whether or not states or the federal government had authority to enforce the hunting of migratory birds, ducks and geese primarily, within a state's limits. Missouri filed a lawsuit, in particular, against it, and the Supreme Court decided that the federal government did have authority to enforce those regulations, regardless of what the states were doing, when it came to hunting, at least, migratory waterfowl.

So, that was kind of instrumental, I think, in where and how the Fish and Wildlife Service program in law enforcement really got going. After the passing of the Endangered Species Act and later CITES, the international law for the protection of threatened and endangered wildlife, and this included, not just game animals, but all animals and plants, not just within the United States, but whether it was taken or done, anything outside of the United States; for example, African elephants or rhinos, taken illegally and transported across international borders, Desert Bighorn Sheep, eagles, of course, a lot of species of wildlife that were both native to North America or native to pretty much any country in the world, were given protection, if you will, by the federal government, and that responsibility was given to the Fish and Wildlife Service. Originally, what we now today call special agents with the Fish and Wildlife Service, were known by different names. Game management agent was one that held on for a long time, when the Fish and Wildlife Service wasn't even the Fish and Wildlife Service under the Department of Interior but was under the - was it the Bureau of Wildlife Management? What was the name of it? I'm not going to get it right now. [note: It was the Bureau of Fisheries and Biological Survey.] Eventually, the Fish and Wildlife Service in the early 1900s became an agency on its own.

A lot of the work was originally done by game management agents, many of whom were, at that time, either state officers that had been hired or were biologists, and law enforcement was actually a sub-duty of those. So, a lot of those biologists would go to Canada and band ducks and geese, along with the Canadian Wildlife Service, and then they would follow those migratory birds down into the United States to their nesting grounds. If there was hunting allowed (which there was and still is to this day) of those migratory waterfowl, the federal agents (game management agents, at the time) would assist the states in investigating or just doing what you would expect a state game warden [to do], sort of just regular police work in the field - checking people. If they're violating the law, you write them a ticket, seize the dead animals, that sort of thing.

After the Endangered Species Act was passed, a gentleman by the name of Clark Bavin was hired. So, Clark Bavin, I guess came on in 1972, and became the Chief of Law Enforcement in Washington, D.C. He had supervisory responsibility for all federal agents. The majority of the agents worked for Clark Bavin, but they also worked for the regional directors in each area. Most of the regional directors were managers, if you will, for all of the Fish and Wildlife Service's programs, whether it was with fisheries or with refuges. So, it was kind of a combination. At that time, special agents reported to a supervisor within the region. So, they originally were called assistant regional directors for law enforcement, and were also tagged, later, as special agent in charge of a region, and you worked for them. Clark Bavin was in the Washington office, and he oversaw the law enforcement aspects of that program also.

When you were stationed in a certain region, you pretty much worked on issues that were of interest to the managers in that region, and not necessarily on a national or international basis. Clark Bavin changed that attitude. He felt that more responsibility needed to be settled in the Washington office, particularly with the enforcement of the Lacey Act or the Endangered Species Act, because we were also doing investigations for illegally taken game, illegally taken animals and plants in foreign countries and brought into the United States, or vice versa, taken illegally in the United States and shipped out to foreign countries.

He also did what I would consider as the professionalization of the agents. So, it was during Clark Bavin's reign that agents started being recruited that had former investigative skills. So, he started hiring not just biologists to do part-time law enforcement or game wardens from the states that had come over and would work as special agents. And actually, the title special agents changed from game management agent to special agents, because they were doing more investigations into illegal acts rather than just field checks of people. He started hiring people that had other types of investigative background, which made me a pretty good candidate for that, because of my military training and plus the field work I had done for both the National Park Service and on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

Because of his program and his foresight into what kind of effort and where the Service should put its efforts, [law enforcement in the Fish and Wildlife Service] changed pretty drastically. That's why I call it the Golden Age. During his administration of the program, the National Repository for seized animals and for bald and golden eagles - both the carcasses and feathers - came into being, with the Center being dedicated in the Denver area and, later on, the National Wildlife Forensics Lab out in Ashland, Oregon, under Ken Goddard, came into being under Clark Bavin. So, it was kind of the Golden Age for the evolution, modernization, if you will, of what a special agent's job was and what types of interests they would have.

Okay. Back on track. So, after basic training and the criminal investigative training school, in May of 1979, I was assigned to Springfield, Illinois as a special agent trainee. Originally, when I arrived in Springfield, the supervisor Senior Resident Agent was Ralph Vondane. He was only there for about a month or two when I first got there, then was replaced by Special Agent Rick Leach. From a career standpoint, Rick Leach sort of became my mentor, if not in name, at least in actions. Rick Leach had come on with the Fish and Wildlife Service a few years before me and, if I recall correctly, Rick originally was a special agent with the Drug Enforcement Agency. He had a lot of experience in doing undercover or covert investigations. So, when he came on board, he identified two problems, both of them brought to him, basically, by the state's Department of Natural Resources as areas of concern for them, mostly with regard to migratory waterfowl and Mississippi River clamming. At the time, there were a number of companies that were taking freshwater clams, not for the meat, but for the shells. And the shells were then being illegally exported from the state and sold to Japan and China for buttons. At the time, it was fashionable to make buttons out of clamshells. They were nice and shiny and different colors. And we did some of those investigations while I was in Illinois.

Then, Rick Leach had identified some areas along the Illinois and Mississippi River where guides were taking people out on the rivers, during waterfowl season, to hunt migratory waterfowl, predominantly ducks of various sorts. Also, some pretty large, goose hunting clubs, I guess you would call them, in southern Illinois, where hunters would pay a fee to local farmers to hunt migratory waterfowl on their lands in their fields - mostly geese, particularly around Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge in southern Illinois. Some of the waterfowl that was taken were not only over limits, but the clubs also had to report to the states, and they were falsifying the records, underreporting the take so that the seasons would stay open longer in the state for hunting. The guides would shoot the birds instead of the clients, so they were taking over limits of waterfowl. Some of these over limits and some of the over limits taken by the local hunters would go to local people who would pick the birds [and] defeather them for the hunters. They would be also selling those ducks and geese. So, you had pretty large, particularly in the southern Illinois goose clubs, you had a pretty organized group of individuals commercializing, if you will, waterfowl; taking them in excess numbers and being sold, which was violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Some of the stuff was going across state lines, of course, which would have been a Lacey Act violation.

That was kind of my introduction to covert investigations. When I was there, there was a pilot, George, we called him Skip Lacey, who was our pilot. He did aerial surveillance of goose hunting and duck hunting areas. A lot of these places, particularly the commercial clubs along the Illinois and Mississippi River and in the goose fields of southern Illinois, were baiting waterfowl in. They would take corn or other grain and spread it in the water or on the ground to entice more waterfowl to come into the area. Again, in violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Jerry Sommers later replaced Skip Lacey. Skip transferred somewhere else. I think someplace in Virginia, if I'm not mistaken, and he was replaced by Jerry Sommers. I worked a bit with John Keeler, who was an agent down around Crab Orchard Wildlife Refuge, and a name that would come up later as being important in the Fish and Wildlife Service was Kevin Adams, [who] was also down there. Kevin eventually worked his way up through the ranks and became Chief of Law Enforcement after Clark Bavin and then another Chief of Law Enforcement, whose name I maybe will remember, but don't right now. [note: it was John Doggett.] Kevin Adams became chief, eventually, of the Division of Law Enforcement. Keep Rick Leach's name in mind because Rick Leach becomes pretty prominent throughout my career.

So, I spent a year from May of 1979 till June of 1980, in Springfield, Illinois. Having been a successful trainee, I was transferred to a one-man duty station in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which I dearly loved. Actually, I probably liked my duty assignments and what I did in Grand Rapids, as well as anything. I just kind of loved Michigan. The senior resident agent at the time there was a gentleman by the name of Donald Burger. I also worked with Agent Larry Keck, who was actually out of Indianapolis, Indiana. The SAC, Special Agent in Charge, for that region, Region 3, at the time, was Bob Hodgins and his assistant was Bill Zimmerman. They were both up in the Twin Cities in Minnesota. When I got to Grand Rapids, a couple of things happened. When I first got there, there was virtually no information left behind for me as to what the former agent had done. So, I really didn't know what was going on. My supervisor, Don Burger, was fairly new to that position because he replaced Rick Leach, who had been up there before him. So, he was kind of new to the state and didn't know much. And our relationships with the Michigan Department of Conservation was pretty dismal. Some events had occurred in earlier years which had put a wedge, if you will, between the Fish and Wildlife Service's special agents and the state wildlife officers.

I inherited the job of trying to mend those relationships, which was a challenge for me because I'd never been put into that kind of a position before. I would like to think that I was pretty successful in doing that. I developed some close relationships with some of their conservation officers, and some of their conservation officers were actually investigators. So, they worked on a broader scale, not just in uniform in the field, but

also worked on larger investigations that involved the illegal sale of fish and game, and I worked with them. I worked pretty closely with the Ontario conservation officers and also the Canadian Wildlife Service. We set up a number of projects; I was good at project management, and I liked to do that. I liked to look at how things were happening in different places, figure out a joint way of working with other agencies to combat illegal game and fish coming across from Canada; mostly deer and salmon and salmon eggs being illegally commercialized by fishermen from Ohio and Indiana and Illinois that were coming into Michigan to hunt and fish. They would take surplus stuff back with them or, in the case of salmon, they were selling the salmon eggs, the roe out of the female salmon, illegally against state law, across the line into the states they came from. So, we did a lot of Lacey Act work there.

Rick Leach had moved on from Springfield, Illinois, and went into Washington as a supervisor in a newly formed branch of investigations within the Washington office. It was a dedicated group of agents that was established to look specifically at the illegal commercialization of wildlife and plants and do large scale investigations, both covertly with undercover work and also overtly doing paperwork. Just like you hear about people money laundering drug money or that type of thing, looking into what other kind of federal laws would apply to the illegal activities that revolved around wildlife and plants.

I did a covert investigation with the state of Michigan on illegal bear hunting in and around Seney National Wildlife Refuge on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The hunters there were illegally baiting. Just like baiting waterfowl, they were baiting bears into various sites. Some of those sites were set up within Seney National Wildlife Refuge. So, it was a violation of course of federal law and state law. I was recruited to assist the Branch of Special Operations in what we call takedowns or the termination of an investigation where you went from active investigating to filing charges and getting arrest warrants and search warrants for individuals that were committing violations. So, in the takedown phase was Operation Friendship, which the Branch of Special Operations out of Washington had been looking into the illegal commercialization of mostly bird species, feathers, eagle feathers, both bald and golden eagle feathers, other migratory bird feathers that were used by people that liked to do – what would you call this - frontier fur trapper rendezvous. So, you had people using eagle feathers, selling garments, Indian headdresses, decorations for their frontiersman outfits in eagle feathers, and then selling those feathers or selling the garments, that incorporated various migratory birds, scissor tail flycatchers, eagles. All kind of stuff - bluebird feathers, you name it. So, Operation Friendship focused on that. I helped Rick Leach and the Branch of Special Operations with the takedown phase of that, in the states of Ohio and Indiana.

In October of '83, I applied for and became the supervisory special agent. That's the term that we used was senior resident agent, SRA, in Madison, Wisconsin. So, I moved to Madison as a supervisor for the state of Michigan. My immediate supervisor was Larry Hood, and his assistant was Bill Zimmerman, up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I worked mostly with another agent in the office, Richard or Dick Dickinson, doing investigations and field enforcement. We were still out in the field in Michigan [correction: Wisconsin] around – what's the big refuge up there – Horicon National Wildlife Refuge. It was a big drawing area for Canada geese migration. There was a lot of illegal hunting going on around there. Some baiting, but most of it was just over limits, people taking over limits of geese. So, we did do a lot of field work on that. While I was there I, again, was asked to assist the Branch of Special Operations in a takedown for a covert investigation [that] was being conducted primarily in the upper Midwest called the Mesabi Fur Company. The Branch of Special Operations had set up a fur buying operation for buying beaver pelts, pine marten, fishers, and some of those species were protected in various states. They were all protected. Well not all of them were protected. You could legally trap and take beaver and muskrat and things like that, but pine martens and fisher were protected by Michigan laws and Wisconsin laws. A lot of states were protecting

fishers and marten, if not under the Endangered Species Act, under the state's conservation laws for those species, at that time. So, I helped in the takedown phase of that.

The Branch of Special Operations was also doing an investigation on the illegal take of birds of prey, by falconers predominantly, called Operation Falcon. I assisted those with doing some interviews of falconers in different states, during the takedown phase, not the actual operation. I was kind of semi-active, even though I wasn't an agent within the Branch of Special Operations still there in Wisconsin, in Operation Trophy Kill, which was an investigation that was conducted for the illegal taking of trophy animals. Here, I'm talking mostly about elk and desert bighorn sheep. Those are the two big ones. Bears, in some cases, where hunting guides, again, were taking clients into closed areas. I hunted illegally in Yellowstone National Park, for example, on an elk investigation, as part of Operation Trophy Kill. One of the few times that my life was threatened, again. In an off-handed way, one of the guides that I was hunting with for elk, we were horseback riding - here's where my horseback riding experience came back into play - into a wilderness area inside the national park to hunt elk. And he stopped and whipped out a shotgun and shot into a tree and looked at me, and he says, "That's what I'm going to do if I ever think somebody's a game warden trying to catch me." And I'm sitting there going, *oh, God*. And one of the guides' girlfriends worked in the same hotel that we were in. So, she would periodically search the rooms of the hunters that were coming there. So, I was taking field notes, after coming back from a hunt, on pieces of toilet paper and folding them up and putting them in my wallet and carrying them around in my wallet. So again, kind of an experience that I learned and, again, all of those operations were under the supervision of Rick Leach at the time. So, I was still maintaining this kind of connection with Rick Leach.

So, I was in Madison from October of 1983 till September of 1988. And in '88, the position of SRA Supervisory Resident Agent opened up in Detroit, Michigan, Ann Arbor, actually. I mentioned that I really liked Michigan, so I thought I'd like to move back to Michigan. So, I put in for that position. I was moved to Michigan, where I supervised the operations in Michigan and Ohio. I had four special agents assigned to me and a wildlife inspector. Those were new to the Service at the time. This would have been in September of 1988. I think the Wildlife Inspection Program started just a few years before that, in the early '80s. I had an agent in Grand Rapids, Mike Lucchino.

We're talking about the mid-80s, and women in the military and women in the law enforcement services, whether it's at the state level or federal level, we're just coming into, I hate to say "vogue." That's kind of a bad way to put it. So, were being recognized as people who, if they had the training and the experience and the knowledge, they were just as good as any man. So, the Service did a pretty good job, I think, of recruiting women both into the Wildlife Inspector Program and into the Special Agent Program. So, I had a young special agent that came in there, Mary Jane Levine, who became a very, very good investigator. Jill Schweiger, who was a wildlife inspector, started off as a volunteer for one of my agents in Ohio. She got on as an inspector and came to work for me. Jill eventually moved up through the ranks and became the Assistant Regional Director, or ASAC, in Region 1 - I think in Portland, Oregon (correction: Albuquerque, New Mexico.) So, she moved up the ranks. This was one of the ladies, I was talking to you earlier about my belief in pushing people forward.

I had one of the first, if not the first, evidence custodian who was a young man, a student at the University of Michigan. He probably put in at least 400 hours of volunteer work with me and, eventually, became a wildlife inspector in Los Angeles. He got his law degree and came back to work with the Fish and Wildlife Service in Ecological Services. He was the - I don't know his title, he was the chief of law enforcement, no he was the head or the assistant head of the endangered species program in Washington DC for a while (Chief of the Division of Management Authority, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered

Species of Wild Fauna and Flora Management Authority for the United States.) He is now the Assistant Director for the American Aquarium and Zoological Parks Association, AAZPA (correction: Association of Zoos and Aquariums.) He's now their Assistant Director (correction: Executive Vice President.) So, he went a long ways. Craig Hoover is his name. He lives just down the road from here a little way.

So, the highlights of that was, I was supervising a Wildlife Inspector Program for the first time. I really enjoyed that, actually. I continued to do a lot of liaisons with Michigan, the Ohio Division of Wildlife Law Enforcement, was a liaison officer for the Service to the Canadian Wildlife Service and worked with the Ontario Wildlife Service.

I again assisted the Branch of Special Operations in investigations they were doing in Texas waterfowl investigations where, the same story, commercial duck and goose hunting clubs taking out people, taking over limits of waterfowl and baiting. I hunted undercover several times in hunting clubs in southern Texas.

So, I was there until October of 1992. I decided I needed a change of pace from Region 3 and doing so much waterfowl work. I applied for and was accepted as the first Supervisory Special Agent or SRA in Honolulu, Hawaii. So, I finally got from Alaska as I was telling you earlier, in the military, to an assignment in Hawaii. In November of '92, I moved to Honolulu, Hawaii as a supervisor there. Exciting times. A whole different aspect of types of investigations. The types of wildlife that were involved from what I experienced before. My area of responsibility was not only the islands of Hawaii, but our trust territories in the Pacific. So, I had an agent and a wildlife inspector out in Guam. Guam was actually a port of entry for both U.S. Customs and for the Fish and Wildlife Service. Wildlife that was being brought in, mostly marine species, some of which, of course, was illegal. Some of the corals, in particular, some of the giant clams, the tridacnas, were being illegally taken in some of the Pacific Islands and were being smuggled in from Guam, because that was where they came into. Once it was in Guam, it was in the United States. So, we worked very close with the Conservation Department in Guam and the Customs Service in Guam.

We had the Northern Marianas; it was a Commonwealth of the United States, the Northern Mariana Islands. Saipan, Rota, Tinian were a couple of the big islands out there. There was the illegal taking of the Mariana bats, where the native culture included the illegal harvesting and eating of bats. I got to actually play around with some of the bats that were being rehabilitated. They are just big furry little things. I mean, they're big. *(laughter)* The Mariana bat is pretty big. The wingspan must be a couple of feet wide anyway. I went down to American Samoa (which was also a trust territory or a Commonwealth – I think it's a trust territory) and Palau, which is now known as Belau, which were another group of islands. All of these islands came under the protection of the United States after World War II. The islands had problems out on Wake Island and Midway. Midway is a National Wildlife Refuge, and various pelagic birds, oceangoing birds, were being killed by aircraft out there. It was a problem coordinating with the military, trying to do what we could to protect some of those species of birds that were being killed out there. Not intentionally, but by the simple activity of the military not thinking about what they were doing as having an impact. My supervisor, the Special Agent in Charge was Dave McMullen, and his assistant was Tom Riley. They supervised that operation out of Portland, Oregon. I had two agents that worked for me, one in Hawaii and one in Guam, five wildlife inspectors, four in Honolulu and one out in Guam and an evidence custodian. I worked with Special Agents Steve Middleton and, out in Hawaii, Commodore Mann. My supervisory wildlife inspector was Frank Dela Hansad, Joe Wright, Paul Chang and Roy Brown were out in Hawaii. Roy went on and was at Arctic Wildlife Refuge for a while.

While I was in Hawaii, I also worked really in a different kind of role that I had not been involved in, in the Hawaiian Alien Species Advisory Committee. Hawaii was very concerned about the introduction of alien

species, particularly the brown tree snake, which had been introduced accidentally in Guam and had decimated the reptile and bird populations in Guam. Hawaii did not want to suffer the same fate, so there was a huge interagency committee. Fish and Wildlife Service's Ecological Services was involved, state ecological services, the conservation departments, commercial fishermen, and agriculturalists were bringing in plants for home improvement backyard projects. So, we were developing policies and techniques to protect Hawaii from invasive species, which was a different aspect of work that I had ever been involved in before.

I worked pretty closely with Fish and Wildlife Service's Ecological Service department in doing regional planning for the Pacific Islands, mostly working a bit with endangered species, a bit with invasive species and with general environmental issues in the various Hawaiian [Islands and US] trust territories. So, a lot of coordination work out there.

At this point, I'm getting fairly close to retirement age, and I was looking for a position that would set me up a little better financially, shall we say. So, I started looking at positions in the Washington office, and I applied for a position with the Branch of Special Operations in Arlington and was selected for that. That was in July of 1995. My immediate supervisor was Adam O'Hara. Later, Kevin Adams, who of course [had been] a trainee in Springfield, Illinois. His assistant was Dick Marks – well both of them – their assistant was Special Agent Dick Marks.

Initially, I went in there just as a working agent, if you will, and most of my job initially was to organize and track an ongoing investigation, which was called Operation Chameleon, which was focused on the illegal importation and exportation of reptiles and amphibians. Everything from Poison dart frogs to endangered snakes from all over the world - Madagascar, South America. The Branch of Special Operations were wrapping up Operation Psittacine at the time, which had been an investigation into the illegal parrot trade, with parrots coming out of some African countries and Central and South America being brought into the United States for the pet trade. So, we were still working on that. The reptile investigation was really very, very big, very international. My work in Hawaii made me aware of the international scope of the illegal wildlife trade. I read up a lot on it and was involved in different things with smuggling of mostly marine species, when I was supervising the operations in Guam.

So, I was doing a lot of coordination, initially, when I got in there with Operation Chameleon. One of the highlights of that was, we had an individual that had been previously prosecuted for smuggling reptiles into the United States. He lived in south-central Florida, and he was, again, under investigation. We indicted him and he fled to Belize. Well, Belize has a very limited policy for extraditing people back to the United States. But in working with the State Department and the Department of Justice, of course, in Washington, D.C., we figured out a way to convince the Belize government to class this person as an undesirable citizen in Belize, and they escorted him onto an airplane and flew him back to Miami, where he was arrested and subsequently prosecuted. So, that was kind of a neat operation. And I did a lot of coordination with the State Department, with the Department of Justice and with the Justice Department in Belize. That was cool.

Also, we had an individual from Malaysia who we wanted to be able to arrest, once we developed evidence of his smuggling of reptiles throughout the world. He was a very big smuggler of all types of animals, not just reptiles. He was into anything, mostly live animals for the zoo trade and things like that. We did a lot of brainstorming on how we could get this individual into U.S. territory or a friendly country's place, and we eventually ended up convincing him to come to a meeting with Branch of Special Operation's people that were working him covertly and talked him into going to Mexico City, Mexico. We got him investigated

there, and then I coordinated, again, with Department of Justice and State and Mexican judicial authorities to get him extradited to the United States for ultimate prosecution.

So, those were kind of new things to me. We worked with the Dutch authorities who came to us with information on a group of individuals they were working on that were also smuggling reptiles out of Madagascar through Germany and the Netherlands to a pet dealer in Miami and the Miami area of Florida. We used an international agreement, I should say, and a federal law. The US has an agreement with 20 or so plus countries called the Mutual Law Enforcement Assistance Treaty, so that you can share information on a foreign criminal and can gather evidence against that individual in a foreign country. In this case, what we had was the Dutch police, who had done wiretaps on some pet dealers in the Netherlands and some reptile dealers also in Germany. The Germans were smuggling turtles, tortoises and reptiles out of Madagascar and South Africa, and the Belize defendants were smuggling poison dart frogs out of South America into the Netherlands, into Germany. Some of those species were also coming to the United States. But the Dutch officials, under Dutch law, were wiretapping their defendants' telephones. Their method could not have been used in the United States. Our privacy laws prevented that type of information so we wouldn't have been able to do it *here*, but they could legally do it *there*. So, we were able to assist them in getting search warrants. We got the search warrants for the pet dealer in Florida to seize his business records and some of the animals that he had there. That information was turned over to the Dutch, so that they could prosecute *their* defendants in *their* country. We could also use *their* evidence in the United States to prosecute him in the United States. So, a little tricky there, but it was a legal process under this treaty. So, that was kind of a new experience. Not sure it had *ever* been used by any wildlife enforcement in the United States before, and it worked out great.

So, I kind of was in that role from July of 1995 to January of 1998. When Kevin Adams, who was then the Special Agent in Charge of the Branch of Special Operations, became Chief of Law Enforcement for the Fish and Wildlife Service Branch of Law Enforcement, I put in for the position and was hired by the Branch of Special Operations to be the supervisor, the Special Agent in Charge of the Branch of Special Operations, in February of 1998. I had six agents that worked under me and a secretary. A concept under Kevin Adams was to develop an Intelligence Branch within the Branch of Special Operations. This would have been a couple of people to analyze data that was being collected by the wildlife inspectors, data that was being collected by various special agents throughout the country on individuals and begin to put them into a database and develop link charts that could show you how these groups of individuals were conspiring together to illegally commercialize wildlife, both plants and animals. That program came to fruition while I was the SAC at the Branch. I think we, eventually, hired three analysts. Worked with a specialist that was developing link chart analysis out of a company in the UK I think and was marketing it to police forces to put together and work with that.

In that position, I was fortunate enough to travel extensively in foreign countries to meet with various agencies - wildlife agencies, customs officers, border patrol officers, just federal police - in different countries on, not only the investigations we were conducting but also, the international smuggling of wildlife had become so pervasive that Interpol had started up an Environmental Law Enforcement branch. This also included, not just the smuggling of wildlife, but the illegal harvest of trees in various countries for the timber industry, marine fisheries - Interpol was looking at the entire environmental issues. So, I was a representative from the Fish and Wildlife Service to the Interpol Environmental Crimes section. I flew to Lyon, France, a number of times. I worked with the Dutch police. Worked with the United Kingdom's, England's Branch of Investigations on Wildlife Crimes. South African police had a special unit for wildlife crime. Australians and New Zealand. I attended an International Wildlife Officers Association with mostly the U.S., Mexico and Canada; an association committee to look at wildlife crimes, both within their countries and across borders.

There was also an International Wildlife Officers Association that did the same thing on an international phase. I was our representative to that. So, I got to travel to South Africa, Madagascar, England, Netherlands, Germany, Australia and New Zealand – I guess that's about it - to represent the Service, both in investigations and in the general planning and coordination of wildlife protection worldwide.

Interestingly, today, we now have, the Service now has – not we, I am not part of the organization – but they now actually have special agents assigned to a number of foreign countries. Where they all are at, I don't know, but I know South Africa has a few. I don't know if we have anybody at Interpol at this point. But [we] did a lot. Some of the things that were set into motion, while I was in the Washington office, continue today in a different way, but the concepts are still there, in looking at wildlife enforcement as, not just a national issue, but an international issue, and how do we combat wildlife crime worldwide and protect species.

So, I was the Special Agent in Charge of the Branch of Special Operations until January of 2002. In February of 2002, I'm not sure how this all came about, but I think maybe because of my work with the Interpol's committees that I succeeded, put into a liaison position full time with the U.S. Department of Justice's U.S. National Central Bureau of Interpol. So, most countries within their Justice Departments have offices worldwide that work through Interpol. It's the International Police Organization, which is home based in Lyon, France. Each of the countries - there's well over 100-150 countries that are part of Interpol - they coordinate through these individual offices. So, I was assigned as a liaison officer and basically worked full time from February 2002 until March of 2004, in our liaison office with Interpol. You had the FBI, Drug Enforcement Agency, Marshals Service, just about every federal law enforcement agency had agents assigned to the Interpol office. So, I worked with a lot of different ones.

They didn't have a wildlife branch, per se, but since we were looking primarily at the illegal commercialization in wildlife as a major threat to the environment and to wildlife species, there was a monetary value. People were in that business of smuggling wildlife and plants for money. So, I was actually assigned to the financial branch of Interpol. I ended up working on a lot of financial crime stuff and a little bit of wildlife stuff, but it was still all financially related.

I also got involved a little bit into art fraud. Now, that sounds like a far reach, but some of the art that the Art Fraud Division - they were looking into things like the art that was stolen from Jewish families by the Nazis and is still out there being circulated around, to items of antiquity. Well, guess what? Fish and Wildlife Service enforces the Antiquities Act, right? It does, as well as the Antarctic Act. So, kind of a back doorway into an area of law enforcement that we don't normally think of special agents doing. Interpol had their own special person doing that, but it was a newbie, a new person to the branch. So, I took her and introduced her to people that I knew within the National Park Service - things come full circle - that looked into the theft of antiquities from Native American tribes. A lot of those antiquities, like headdresses and things like that also contain what? Migratory bird and eagle and hawk feathers and things so, it all dovetails back. Even though, if you really looked at it, I wasn't really doing wildlife crime, but I was doing affiliated things that crossed over. So, that was sort of an exciting piece of my career.

But those positions are short term. I was at Interpol from February of 2002 until March of 2004. In April, I returned back to the Fish and Wildlife Service. So, instead of going down to the Department of Justice office in Washington, DC, I was back in Arlington, Virginia. As part of the Department of Interior as a whole, the Service was getting involved in national disaster preparedness and response. Some of this was because of major hurricanes that had developed along the coast. Some of it was related to terrorist activities, after 9-11. How does the federal government and individual federal agencies coordinate activities, whether it's fire management of major forest fires, whether it's responses to hurricanes, which, of course, have affected a lot

of the national wildlife refuges along the East coast and the Gulf Coast. How do these agencies interface? Pretty much every federal agency had representatives working on this plan. Now, interestingly, that project was assigned to the Fish and Wildlife Service's wildlife refuges, and the Park Service had their interests, too. So, I was, sort of, working for wildlife refuges again, towards the end of my career.

Then, I retired in 2004 from the Service. So, in total, I spent about 35 years in government service. Thirty-one of those years was working in some branch of the Department of Interior. Twenty-seven years of that was within the Fish and Wildlife Service, primarily in the Branch of Law Enforcement. That pretty much was my career. I was pretty excited about it. They say, do what you love and love what you do. I did. I really, really, really had an exciting career, I thought. A very broad career, I thought, in different aspects of protecting the natural resources. As agents, we always used to say we spoke for wildlife because wildlife couldn't speak for themselves. Right? And it's true. So, I had a good career.

STACIE: You had a fantastic career.

ERNEST: And really, you know, I was all over the board in my career, a lot of experiences. I'd like to think that I passed on a lot of encouragement and knowledge to other agents and to our administrators in the Washington office about issues that were current and needed attention. At one point, I had considered retiring and maybe trying to go to work for one of the conservation agencies such as, the World Wildlife Fund or, my favorite, The Nature Conservancy. I love The Nature Conservancy and what they're trying to do. I never got around to that.

I went back to one of my first loves, and that was photography. I started my own photography business for a couple of years. I loved meeting people, loved working with my photographs, absolutely hated selling stuff. I had to go to shows, and I didn't have a business front, so I went to art and craft shows. I had worked with film, black and white film and then colored film, slides and that sort of stuff. And the digital world took us over. Initially, I hated digital photography. I just thought it was cheating. I shoot everything digitally now, but I really didn't care for it. After a couple of years, I quit doing that, and my wife started her own business. She's a glass artist, so I started helping her out.

STACIE: Would you like to give us her name?

ERNEST: Yes, my wife's name is Monica Mayer. I'm going to have to add her to one of the highlights of my duty station in Hawaii. I met her in Hawaii, and we were married in Hawaii, actually, on the grounds of the – what is the lighthouse? It's a national wildlife refuge. Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge. We couldn't go on the property of the lighthouse to get married because it belongs to the Department of Commerce. I don't know whose got the lighthouse! *(laughter)* But the refuge manager said it would be okay to get married. He was a photographer. The refuge manager at the time took photographs for us. We had this open field where we were getting married, and our little wedding party was there. When we were all set, and our wedding official was there and getting ready to marry us, we all had to stop and run away into the trees. It was an area where Albatross and Blue-footed Boobies landed and would nest. So, right in the middle of this thing, here comes this Blue-footed Booby, but it might have been an Albatross. Doesn't matter, because they both do the same thing. If you've ever watched them land, and they've been out to sea for a long time because they're pelagic birds, they can't land worth a darn. They just hit the ground and start rolling. So, we're like, "Get out of the way!!" So, we had to stop the wedding ceremony for the birds to land. So, that was kind of interesting. *(laughter)*

Since our retirement, both my wife and I love to travel, and we've traveled to many, many other national wildlife refuges and many national parks throughout the country. One of my job's duties, when I was the Special Agent in Charge of the Branch of Special Operations, was to coordinate and be the – I hesitate to say - spokesperson for the Service, but at least someone that the news media could talk to. So, I had been interviewed for newspaper and news clip things in Germany, and New Zealand, and Australia and the United States. So, my name has always kind of been out there. So, I've had a number of opportunities, during my retirement period, to get interviewed by a couple of different authors of books, mostly on what was Operation Chameleon, which was the very large reptile investigation that the Branch had done, while I was working for the Branch. I think it was in 2007 I was interviewed by Brian Christie, who was the author of the book *The Lizard King*, pretty much about reptile smuggling into the United States, out of the United States and the illegal trade within the United States. In 2010, another author, Jennie Smith also wrote a book called *Stolen World: The Tales of Reptile Smuggling and Skullduggery*, [which] basically also involved the illegal reptile trade based within the United States.

In 2011 and 2012, I was interviewed by an outfit called Raw TV. They worked with the BBC, and a little bit in association with National Geographic. They did a series of TV programs. It may still be airing today. Each segment was basically about people being locked up abroad. People that got involved in, knowingly or unknowingly, smuggling drugs, mostly from one country to another, and they would get captured, interdicted by customs officers or law enforcement people in a foreign country. And they got locked up in a foreign country and, of course, had no rights under the foreign law because they were a foreign national sentenced to different jail terms in some pretty horrible jails and penitentiary facilities in foreign countries. So, one of the ones they wanted to do was this individual that I talked about earlier, that fled from the United States to Belize. His name was Tom Crutchfield. It's out there, it's public knowledge. Mr. Crutchfield had fled to Belize to get away. Well, we requested the Belize government to return him to the United States as being an undesirable citizen in Belize. They arrested him and put him in a jail facility called Hattieville. Basically, a bunch of cages. Worse than any zoo you've ever seen, and he was in with smugglers, robbers, people in there for beating up other people, killers, some really hardcore criminals. So, they did a series on the exploits of Tom Crutchfield, and they flew me to London to interview me.

You know, you see these old movies where the police are interrogating people with big, bright lights and won't let them go to the bathroom and all kinds of crazy stuff. And you kind of laugh about it. Well, you've talked to me and listened to me and people on this tape have listened to me, and I try to not say things that are too inflammatory about people or things. Well, by the time they wanted to interview me of course, this isn't just a documentary program, this is entertainment. So, they wanted me to say what a horrible, nasty, terrible person Tom Crutchfield is and how I was enraged by his activities. And I told him, before the interview, I said, "I'm done. I'm not doing that." I'm no longer a federal employee, and they're not going to represent me if Tom sues me. Tom has been known to be litigious, and I'm not going to put myself in that position. Well, of course they didn't take that. So, I sat there pretty much all day. They did give me a really nice meal. I will have to admit, it was a very good meal. I was able to sit down with the whole film crew and a bunch of other people and have a really nice meal and a chat. But by the time it was all done, I'd been sitting under these hot camera lights, being harangued by the interviewer to say something really nasty, and I don't know, I probably said something or eventually they were satisfied enough that it did actually end up airing on TV. So, that was an experience.

In 2020, I was contacted by another group, Double Act Productions - I'm not sure where they were from - who were doing another TV program on Operation Chameleon. They came to my house in Tucson, Arizona, where I live now, and interviewed me. I've never heard anything from them since, so I don't know what happened. I mean, in 2020 with Covid. As a matter of fact, they interviewed me just before I actually caught

Covid and almost did not survive. It was about a 50/50 chance of survival with Covid. Luckily, I'm here still today. And to go really back in history, March of this year, I was contacted by another individual, Eric Montague, who is writing a book on the old Operation Falcon that took place in the 90s. So, that was really trying to dig up some memory from that. I've had the opportunity to try to talk to people and pretty much cover some of my beliefs on what kind of an operation the Fish and Wildlife Service's Branch of Law Enforcement is, the training we've had and how the precautions we take to make sure that investigations that were conducted by our agents were done legally and lawfully; that we weren't a bunch of jackbooted thugs violating people's civil rights or legal rights and that sort of thing. I still think we are one of the best law enforcement agencies out there. So, that's about it. That's about what I have.

STACIE: Well, thank you. I've decided you're a national treasure.

(Laughter)

ERNEST: I don't know about that.

STACIE: Well, thank you, Ernest.

End of Interview

Key words: endangered species, game wardens, hunting, international conservation, law enforcement, legislation, marine environments, migratory birds, military, reptiles, pet trade, visitor services, wildlife refuges