

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Charles “Butch” Farabee (BF)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Butch recounts work at Grand Canyon, including air traffic issues, in the 1980’s

Date of Interview: 07/04/2020 Part 16

Method of Interview: Phone interview

Transcriber: Arjun Yedavalli

Date of Transcription: 11/27/2020 – 12/10/2020

Transcription Reviewers: Sue Priest

Keys: Grand Canyon aviation program, air traffic, FAA, Nellis Air Force Base, John Miller, Rick Ernenwein, Steve Hodapp, sound measurements, aircraft noise, Dick Marks, Mike Ebersole, Elling Halvorson, Prince of Japan, Overflights Act, Senator McCain, Walter Dabney

TM: Today is the 4th of July, 2020. This is part 16 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Charles “Butch” Farabee. My name is Tom Martin. Hey Butch, good afternoon, how are you? Happy Fourth of July.

BF: Well, happy 4th of July to you, and Tom, I give you full permission to use this talk today.

TM: To record this oral history over the phone. Thank you. Eventually, by the time we’re all done, you’ll have the drill memorized.

BF: Yeah, I’ll have the 6 words memorized.

TM: Exactly right. Thank you very much. In our last interview, you ran through the 1986 mid-air collision between a tourist helicopter and a tourist fixed-wing aircraft. We were talking later after the interview and it sounds like you got involved with the issue of overflights over Grand Canyon earlier than that. Could you head in that direction now?

BF: Okay, so, this is the way I remember it. As in charge of the aviation program for the Park Service, the helicopter and the fixed-wing contract, which meant that I then had to establish relationships with Grand Canyon Helicopters, Grand Canyon Airlines, the flight tower/the air traffic control tower, and other people and entities within the aviation community at the south rim at Tusayan. But also, either I was told to do this or I took it upon myself, and I can’t recall which, I started documenting the various flights below the rim other than tour types—in this case it would be mostly military, not always, but mostly—and including some pretty large aircraft, not only military jets, but also just military four-engine, not so much bombers but tankers, that people would get photos of or they’d be reported. Somehow I became sort of a natural funnel for some of this information. Some of the photos would come through me, and over time, I ended up collecting a number of photos of these airplanes. I know I made a number of phone calls to Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas to talk to them, not the traffic controllers but the flight managers. You know, some colonel or some lieutenant colonel probably.

TM: Were they sympathetic?

BF: They seemed to be, at least they paid lip service. I’m giving them the benefit of the doubt and just saying that they actually were concerned, partially because of the complaint. They didn’t need to have civilians like myself representing the National Park Service, an agency, and the park itself, complaining about their aircraft within the park.

TM: That makes sense.

BF: Also I suspect from a selfish standpoint, they didn’t want their pilots to end up hitting a wall either.

TM: Butch, can I jump in here, cause I've never really seen this since before '86. What sort of commercial helicopter and fixed-wing activity was happening below the rim at the time?

BF: I don't know how many fixed-wing operators there were out of Las Vegas.

TM: As a Johnny-come-lately if you will, somebody who came in after the 1986 rule changes to stop flying below the rim, that's all I've ever seen and known. So, the normal tours, fixed-wings from Vegas and helicopters from the south rim, were they down around Phantom Ranch or Hance rapid?

BF: Well, they weren't buzzing Phantom Ranch but they were well below the upper rim. I don't know how often, probably not that often, did they ever get into the inner gorge. Perhaps they did on occasion. But, it wouldn't be unusual at all for a fixed-wing or a helicopter to be below the rim. Technically, the Park Service didn't have any control over it. The only control would have been the FAA and, of course, for early on in the process of when we first started documenting the noise intrusion stuff... Actually Tom, I forgot what I was saying.

TM: Well, what I was thinking was isn't there a 500 foot elevation over people and structures, but if there are no people and structures, its reasonable and prudent.

BF: That's correct, your 100% correct and I guess that's what I was going to say although I forgot.

TM: Well yeah, it sounded like you were heading in that direction, which means that hey, if I can fly 50 feet over the Tonto Platform and there's nobody there, that's reasonable and prudent.

BF: Well, and I think that some of these pilots, and they basically were nice guys, but some of them would come and go. Some of them stayed for years and we got to know them pretty well. In fact, for the helicopters, some of them flew for us. But for others it was really a fill-in job for two months kind of a thing.

TM: Kind of fill in your logbook sort of thing, get some hours?

BF: Or that the helicopter companies might have been shorthanded for some reason. Or, things got super busy and they just needed more people. I don't know the community enough to know how they would get these guys to show up, but they would. So, there was a full spectrum of interests by the pilots. Some of them were very concerned and some of them probably could have cared less.

TM: Were they coming to you with concerns about near misses, or what kind of concerns did they have?

BF: No, they weren't coming to me for concerns, did I say that? I'm not so sure I said that.

TM: I missed that. I misunderstood. I'm sorry.

BF: Well, if I did, I should not have said it quite that way, anyway. The concerns I had, of course, were all the other planes and partially because of the air traffic. My job was search and rescue and emergency operations and the Park Service aspect of flying which meant that I was concerned about midair collisions—this is before the 1986 collision—and I was concerned about wrecks, that sort of thing. That's one of the reasons why I was trying to get a handle on who was doing the flying, particularly the Nellis Air Force guys. There was an unofficial but a pretty well documented, anecdotally at least, patch, that's figuratively speaking a patch, for flying below the rim if you were a jet pilot flying out of Nellis. The same thing is true in Death Valley. If you flew below sea level in Death Valley, you were part of a below sea level group.

TM: So you would get a patch for your flight suit?

BF: Figuratively, not literally. That was a mark of airmanship and bravado, and whatever else it takes, probably stupidity. So I was concerned about wrecks and mid-air collisions, and all that sort of thing. I wasn't necessarily focused on the other concerns which was mostly visual intrusion and noise intrusion, and harm to any number of things with the environment like lambing of the big horn sheep, or the fragility of the some of the Indian ruins perhaps, or the peregrine falcons if I remember right. That wasn't necessarily my thing. My thing was really the accidents. But, in the middle of the summer, maybe even the spring of '85, I was brought in by the superintendent and there was sort of an informal working group mostly with resource... [pause for phone I think initially it was an informal group. It was John Miller, Rick Ernenwein, Steve Hodapp was the chief of resources at the time. The resource guy acquired some devices to measure sound, both the ambient sound as well as sound of the helicopters and the flights in general. I participated in a number of those listening sessions. We'd go out on several different points between the South Rim village and Desert View. The resource guys principally had places they wanted to check out. It wasn't anything I chose. But I'd would go along just out of the sake of interest to maybe learn how to use the devices and whatever, but also just, I guess, go get some handle on what's the big deal here because I'd spent a lot of time hiking in the park, but as a fixed-wing pilot—although, admittedly, not a very good fixed-wing pilot and not very much time—noise wasn't that much of a thing to me. We'd go out and we'd measure the sound. I think there was some sort of rhyme or reason. I think there was some sort of a schedule. I'm making this totally up, but just as an example, between say 10:00 in the morning and noon, and then 2:00 in the afternoon till 3:00 on every other day. Some sort of schedule that they could come up with, a pattern perhaps. So, they did that and I tagged along mostly. I wasn't leading the charge on any of this.

TM: And these machines would pick up any aircraft noise. Basically there would be a baseline of natural quiet and then when a plane flew over, whether it was a tourist plane, or a general aviation plane, or a commercial airline, or a military flight, all of these would tag the machine.

BF: Well, yeah, within reason. If you were 40,000 feet it might not. It was a way to try to get our little finger into the pie here and get some sense on data, because we were getting all this anecdotal things from the Sierra Club and from Grand Canyon Trust and probably others about maybe their constituents/their membership complaining as part of their position to document and try to curb impacts to various parks and what have you. This was one issue that, over time, had been building, and as I say, anecdotally there were lots of reports of planes and helicopters within the park, or over the park, or within the rims of the park. One of the things I used to laugh at, and I had to put out some information, was because the field rangers, and more particularly the people that were in the inner canyon, the backcountry patrolmen and perhaps the river people, if a helicopter or a plane was in the area, they would report it as violating something. Then I'd have to explain to them, just as you did a few minutes ago, about the 500 feet. They can fly right now, there's no law that says they can't fly and literally be 5 feet above the Tonto Plateau, as long as they're not endangering other people or structures as you say. That was a reoccurring occasion for me. You could hear somebody on the radio reporting: this will be a 301, there's a plane flying over the rim going east to west or something.

TM: So it does sound like this was normal flying operations for the commercial people would be to head down into the inner gorge, at least top of the Tonto right over the deck. That would be a pretty exciting flight, I'm sure. If I was a ranger on patrol in the backcountry I might call that in.

BF: That's what they did. I think the small six-place Cessna's were more apt to fly below the rim than the bigger ships just because of the numbers of people, the Twin Otters with 18 or 19 people on board. But anyway, anecdotally these things started coming to a head and at some point Dick Marks, perhaps with a push by Steve Hodapp, who was the chief of resources for the park, pulled together this informal,

initially, group to sort of begin working on this document these things. Start getting some background noise information; get some information on the helicopters, the noise for certain kinds; just that sort of thing. As far as I know that's how this entire issue started. That's how this group... That's how the Grand Canyon and then the NPS, and then the Department of the Interior, and then the FAA, everybody and their brother finally got on board, is because of this little tiny effort that Dick Marks had initiated. Now, if Steve Hodapp were here and maybe Rick Ernenwein, they might have a slightly different take on some of this in terms of the timeline. But as I remember it, that's the way it was. So, the park put its head together and this group became more formal. This committee became more formal, it was less informal. It consisted of Steve Hodapp; Marks was the head of the thing, although he wasn't necessarily at every little gathering. So Dick Marks and Steve Hodapp who was his chief of resources, who would be like his number two person in terms of this effort; Rick Ernenwein, who was a resource guy. As it turns out, over the years he actually makes a career with the Park Service doing pretty much this sound stuff. He becomes like the sound guy for...I don't know if the entire Park Service but much of the Park Service. He became the specialist. It's much more complicated than I know anything about. Rick ended up making the next 20 years plus specializing in this. So there was Rick, then John Miller was a basic resource specialist for the park. He ended up becoming my chief of resources when I was the superintendent of Padre Island, eventually. Then Mike Ebersole, because one, he was a relatively high time fixed-wing pilot. Was also very good friends with a lot of aviation people out of Tusayan. I think we mentioned the other day about him starting a balloon business. Flying balloons across the canyon business.

TM: How did that work out for him? I've never talked with him about that.

BF: Well it didn't work out for him. In generality, he made 1 or 2 flights across. And there were a couple of other people that sort of bought in to the business as well, put in some money to buy a balloon or two. One of the reasons it sort of went belly up pretty quickly is that the winds are too variable over the inner canyon. So where are you going to land on the other side? It was easy to launch, it's harder to figure out where you are going to land and whether your going to be able to have anybody pick you up. Which is easy if you're in Grants, New Mexico, probably, but on the north rim of the Grand Canyon, its hard. So, as a result of that, they stopped the business pretty quickly. Now I think that he ended up, in theory, still having the business for a couple of years, but from a practical standpoint, he did not do much flying, at least not commercially anyway. So Mike Ebersole and myself. So however many people that is, 5 or 6 people were on this committee. Pretty quickly we started coming up with some alternatives. They were put together in a document. We actually went out to the public with 5 public hearings to get input. I mean there was no decisions or anything made, it was just looking for input. But we had to start someplace so we ended up talking to our other groups, the Sierra Club would be one that would come to mind pretty quickly, National Parks and Conservation Association, I think. We ended up sending out notifications to a mailing list that was developed, just to start getting some input. Now, I think in today's climate and the way things are organized, we were pretty elementary in what we were doing and how we were doing it, but we really didn't know what else to do at this point because it was such a novel issue that we were trying to undertake here. Also we were trying to learn is this a big deal or not? Maybe we're making too much of it. So, we were trying to answer those kinds of questions. We ended up having 5 public hearings or meetings. The first was in San Francisco; the second was in Las Vegas; the third was in Phoenix, and Governor Babbitt attended that one; the fourth was in Williams, AZ, right outside the park; and Flagstaff was the last. Then there was an informal get together, not quite as formal as the other five, at the Grand Canyon itself, actually, in the Shrine of the Ages. At least these meetings had been announced and... These meetings were the end of October and like the second day of November of 1985.

TM: Did anybody show up?

BF: Yeah, it wasn't like an overwhelming standing room only kind of a crowd. So the way we got San Francisco, we did get probably a fair number, maybe 100 people, showing up and most of them were probably Sierra Club types.

TM: I was going to say, you'd think Los Angeles might be closer, or Albuquerque or Tucson or Phoenix. You were in Phoenix, that's right. That's kind of surprising to see a meeting in San Francisco.

BF: I think part of it had to do with that that's the regional office for the Park Service. I think that had something to do with it, but I'm not really sure about that. And they were all pretty close together. Couple of things to mention along the way, which I thought was kind of ironic or interesting, is at the second meeting, Halvorson was there. What's his first name?

TM: Elling.

BF: Yeah, Elling Halvorson was there. I think it was on a Saturday night. It was in the evening, anyway. The next afternoon, like at 1:00, I was supposed to be an active tour guide for the Prince of Japan, who is now currently the Emperor of Japan, Naruhito. So I was supposed to do this. I ended up, and I think Dick came with me, flying back to Grand Canyon from Las Vegas on Halvorson's plane, Grand Canyon Airlines, free because all of a sudden we were late, and the Prince is showing up as well as some honorary ambassador from San Francisco that was in his party. So I asked Dick, because I was really a little worried about the optics of this. But, at the same time we were sort of caught between a hard place and a rock, because I needed to be there at least to greet the Prince. You can go to the Arizona Republic and see the Prince and I on the front page of the Sunday paper from the day before, so it must have been a Saturday. It was a Sunday edition, which I didn't even know I was on the front page until I picked up my kids to take them away for a day or two. So that was kind of interesting and, of course, touring the Prince around was interesting as well, but I'll come back to that at some point if you want. But to stay with the overflight part, Las Vegas, then Phoenix with Governor Babbitt, and I'm pretty sure John McCain showed up, Senator McCain was there as well, which is the only time I ever met him. I'm pretty sure that was the same time. Then Phoenix and then Williams and then Flagstaff.

The other thing of interest from my perspective in terms of just these meetings was in Flagstaff. We met at the government building there in Flagstaff, some big meeting room. By the library someplace. I'm in the audience and I'm in my suit, but I don't have any real function there other than to carry somebody's briefcase, basically. We had some demonstrators, they weren't vocal, they weren't necessarily disturbing too much because we actually had a Flagstaff policemen, too. One of the things that took place is one of the speakers, who was dressed up in some sort of a costume... What keeps running through my mind is like a robot kind of nuclear person. But more interesting from my side was, he pulls out a Kingsnake out of a pocket or out of his coat or something. He's standing up in front, not intimidating but sort of waving it around, Dick Marks, Steve Hodapp, the regional director, Howard Chapman, was up there as well, he's sort of waving it around. I took like three different courses on herpetology—like advanced and advanced-advanced herpetology—so I was pretty comfortable around snakes. Pretty quickly, either I got a high sign from Dick Marks or maybe I just took it upon myself, but I went up and I took the snake out of this guy's hand, and pretty gently, I mean I'm pretty good with snakes. Had the snake in one hand, and I had this guy in an armlock and escorted him down the aisle outside the doors of the meeting room to a lobby of some sort, where the Flagstaff policeman met me. He wanted to know if we wanted to pursue some sort of charge or something with this guy. I'm not exactly sure what would have been the charge, but my reaction was no we don't want to do that. We just need to have this guy be not be so intimidating, if you will, with this snake. If Mike Ebersole were in on this conversation, I'm sure, cause he's mentioned it to me several times, that that's one of the things in his mind's eye over the years that he recalls pretty clearly was me doing this. Flagstaff as an example,

we might have had 40 people in the audience. Most of them would have been anti-noise anti-flying. But in Williams, a day or 2 before, it was like the other way. We had a fairly sizable group in support of the flying industry/aviation industry, because that's a lot of their livelihood from a tourism standpoint is generated by aviation over the park.

TM: Elling had got the contract to construct the Trans-Canyon pipeline in the mid 1960's, and realized that he could start a helicopter or tourist business flying aircraft over the park, taking off outside park boundaries at the gateway community of Tusayan. That business exploded over 20 years between 1965 and 1985, and there you were. By the time the meetings rolled around into the early 1990's, Elling was taking big busses and loading them full of his employees and having them come to these meetings. Was there any sign that he was doing that there in 1985?

BF: No, I don't remember any of that. I think it was still so grassroots and at the beginning stages. One, there's probably no concern on his part or the others of that group. It's still pretty low-key, we're in a fact-finding stage. In theory, the Park Service, but mostly the Grand Canyon National Park, probably with the support of the Regional Office, but not much beyond that, was going to make a finding of some sort. I don't know what we were going to really do, but as we concluded those 5 meetings and we went back and over the next several months got together to figure out where we going from here, it became pretty obvious that this was actually a much bigger issue than we were giving it credence. I mean, it's just sort of like an inverted pyramid. We started at the bottom of the pyramid and as we kept putting things together and having meetings and getting letters and things from constituents and the Sierra Club people and stuff, it kept expanding.

TM: Can we go back to optics for a minute. You mentioned the Prince of Japan flying in one of Elling Halvorson's planes with you and...

BF: No, I just met the Prince at the El Tovar.

TM: Okay, so with Dick Marks?

BF: Well Dick and I flew back. Actually, now that I think about it, I'm not sure that Dick flew back. I think he may have had the superintendent's car. But, since I was the one giving the tour, I'm pretty sure that I actually came back by myself.

TM: Well, the optics I was thinking about was the fact that the park was renting helicopters from Halvorson for search and rescue, and water pipeline work, and all sorts of other things. So there was a well established relationship with the helicopter operators outside the park. Clearly there was a need for that type of equipment, and yet there were problems. You had mentioned in another interview about painting the tour helicopter from its normal orange color to a green color so people could identify it was a National Park Service.

BF: I found the date on that one.

TM: What was the date?

BF: It was May of 1985.

TM: Okay. So this really was a big deal. Well before the '86 collision you were trying to solve problems just simply with paint, and that was working I think.

BF: Yeah, it was good.

TM: So yeah, I am not surprised that this was a bigger issue than you had realized.

BF: Well, these were all sort of taking place at the same time. The meetings, which we had to set up a month or two in advance anyways, were at the end of October. We were getting complaints from the general public about this helicopter landing at Phantom Ranch. There's probably some hyperbole attached to the complaints, but they were sufficient enough that we knew that, well it's our helicopter, it's our contract anyway. I know that when I went to...I think it was Warren...whoever the chief of operations for Grand Canyon helicopter was at the time, they were very amenable. Although it cost them a little money, they were very amenable to having that helicopter painted so that it became distinctive, so they weren't continuing to get blamed, and rightfully so. They should not have been blamed for us flying in with pipes or some sort of emergency or whatever.

TM: For general operations at Phantom Ranch.

BF: Plus, we were below the rim, too. Anybody that's hiking down the Bright Angel or the Kaibab who particularly are sensitive or they've been reading their newsletter from their environmental group, one of the things they might want to easily do is complain about that helicopter flying across Plateau Point down to Phantom Ranch. So, it was good business on our part, it was good business on the Grand Canyon Helicopter's part to paint that thing. I was particularly proud of that. I thought that was pretty neat. It looked good, it looked professional.

TM: Still has a unique paint job today. It's a different type of helicopter with a different paint job, but there it is. You can identify it as the park ship right away.

BF: And that really is important. When you as an agency trying to promote the resources, protect the resources, and there you are the biggest abuser, meaning us, the biggest abuser... Although we could justify it, we were still creating noise and impact visually and whatever. Then as the management assistant, once I took over that position, even though I still had search and rescue and fire, I sort got out of being too...I didn't need to baby sit too much the aviation aspect of that. I still remained in that working group, but as time went by, the working group responsibilities got bigger. The mission of the group became greater and it sort of started taking on a life of its own, partly the stuff that I really don't know too much about at this point.

TM: I'm assuming that the intended outcome would have been a park overflights management plan. Not the NPS operations but general aviation operations over the park. Was that the idea? Or did it actually include "this is what the park does with aircraft, this is what tourists do with aircraft, this is what military does with aircraft."

BF: Well the military, we kind of painted out a picture. After enough complaints to a colonel down at Nellis Air Force Base, I actually had his number and name, I could go directly to him rather than going to their flight control or whatever. That wasn't too big an issue after a while, although it was kind of fun along the way before I left. There was this pretty impressive photo—and it turns out it was put on some calendars—of the Blue Angels, the Navy's aerobatic team, flying through the Grand Canyon below the rim. From just a sheer visual, kind of impressive, "today is the 4th of July" patriotic look, it was pretty impressive, now. I mean I guess if you were on Plateau Point and those 5 or 6 jets come flying over, that might be...for some of you it would be a little disconcerting I suppose.

TM: Yeah, the noise impact would be severe.

BF: It'd be pretty fast. Once you got off of the ground, because you probably dropped to the ground, it'd be out of sight practically. The intent was to come up with something that was satisfactory for everybody. We were trying to accommodate the people on the ground, the people that were in the air; because there is a sizable community of people who can't hike, who can't ride a mule, who really don't

want to go into the park but they would like to see the park, just like the river-runners or people that ride the rafts. So, we were trying to accommodate everybody. I suspect over time, we diluted our effort to some degree. After I left, I'm sure it became more focused and more trying to take care of the resource more than the visitors, or the people who wanted to fly and look and whatever.

TM: So how did the air crash of 1986, as you talked about in the last interview, how did that impact this team and the plan they were working on?

BF: I think that's a great question, and I don't have a great answer. I don't even have a minor answer, really. It obviously had some impact. We as the park, could point to this "aha" moment, and say "Well see, that's what we're trying to avoid, everybody." I think last time I used the analogy "a nail in the coffin." I don't know if that's totally true, but it was impactful. Everybody, certainly us, certainly the environmental people, could point to that and use it as a very visible, very important reason for trying to have some control over this. The fixed-wing and the helicopters, as a rule, pretty well adjusted themselves. They had a system down. They had some idea of which way they were going to go. They were going to go, and again I'm making this up, maybe clockwise at a certain time; would only go into certain parts, the near part of the Phantom Ranch, Supai, or Little Colorado area. So, you know, they had some control over themselves internally. I guess, if they hadn't, there probably would have been more accidents, or maybe an earlier accident. I know that there was one. I think over time while I was there, of course Grand Canyon Helicopters was the big player in the helicopter program, but there were a couple of smaller operations as well. Papillon Helicopters, which actually was pretty prominent in Hawaii Volcanoes.

TM: This is Elling Halvorson's company as well, isn't it?

BF: Well, I don't know.

TM: Eventually, yeah.

BF: Is it? Okay. But they're a different color scheme, they're a different group. The pilots aren't interchangeable or anything. I know that on one occasion for sure, we ended up citing them because they landed within the park at the Little Colorado junction with the Colorado. I think that they had been doing that. We didn't know about it, no one really complained about it, but they actually had a champaign flight where they would fly people in, land, put out a table, and I suspect chairs, too, and have a little champaign lunch or something. That was taking place for a short period of time before we caught on to it, before anybody really said anything to us. We sort of laid in wait for them to do that again, which somehow we found out about a schedule and we were able to catch them there. How did I get off on just the fact that the aviation group, the fixed-wing and the helicopters, they sort of adjusted their schedules and their areas that they would fly over internally. But that's what we were looking for as well is how to do this. The FAA the entire time, at this point, kept saying "You guys don't have any real business doing any of this except unless it either impacts the park, which we couldn't prove at the time, or actually were landing in the park." The FAA kept pulling this back on us. I can't give you any concrete examples other than telling you that for a number of years, the Park Service was very secondary to the FAA. The FAA kept controlling everything. They were the ones that said the airspace is ours.

TM: Right, this is conflicting mandates from two government agencies. One agency, the Park Service, asked to preserve unimpaired for future generations. That's a long haul mission. And the FAA is about the safe promotion of aircraft flight. Promotion means more and to do it safely. So there's a conflict right there between these agencies.

BF: Yes, your 100% correct, but sort of the other side of that controversy, also, is that we as an agency did not have any way to document that it was impacting on the resource. We had anecdotal stuff, but we didn't have enough anecdotal stuff. We didn't have enough details, enough data, enough listenings, and enough peregrines harmed, or whatever it might have been to get the attention of the FAA.

TM: Right, but even if you did, even if you could show impairment on the ground, the FAA is still in control of the sky and they don't care about another agency's impairment.

BF: That's right. Well, they didn't care anyway. They were friendly, it wasn't like they weren't friendly, but they mostly said "Hey, this is ours." Anything a foot off the ground all the way up to the moon is theirs. I don't know that they particularly said "get out of our way" but they weren't all that cooperative either.

TM: This was 1989? I'm trying to remember the year Senator McCain's Overflights Act, which actually set them the flight ceilings at the rim or above.

BF: I know that that all took place, I was long gone at this point. Although, having said that, my job in DC was the NPS Aviation Manager. I had my hands full trying to just keep track of all these other balls—including 25 planes, 2 helicopters, and 35 pilots, as well as search and rescue and EMS and diving and incident command program—that I didn't pay much attention to that sort of thing. It wasn't impacting me, it wasn't something that I needed to be in the middle of. It wasn't that I wasn't concerned, it's just that there were a lot of other people, such as Rick Ernenwein, Steve Hodapp, and some others that were actually doing an excellent job. They didn't need me to muddy up any kind of waters.

TM: And of course, that Overflights Act had some Trojan horses in it as well. Then, of course, McCain pulled out the high-flyers/the commercial airlines. Their noise now doesn't count and neither do the transport flights, what are called transport flights, which are often tours. So this is a really complex moving target game, if you will, between the people who would make a lot of money running these flights with the justification as you point out these people can't walk, they can't walk the trails; they don't have the time, most of them are on a short time frame if they're doing the western circuit of the parks, versus the Agency trying to preserve the natural quiet and other resources of the park.

BF: Well, but you know, we would get people who would write in, or who would testify, or at least make a statement at these public hearings about all of the mule poop on the trails and the urine, which on a hot day, as you well know, the stench is really bad.

TM: Pretty disgusting.

BF: So, there was always "what about these?" kinds of questions and things. I need to make sure... I think I said like October and November/early November of 1985, but it might have been of '86. I need to sort of double check that somehow for you. I can do that, but I can't do it right now.

TM: Just putting in a point about it is clear that you're not sure.

BF: I do remember, I'm pretty sure that my touring the prince around was in the end of October of 1986, and I'm like 99% sure that I went from Las Vegas aviation meeting to meet with the prince. So if I said '85, I could easily be wrong on that. I'd have to double check.

TM: Well, tell me about the Prince of Japan. What was that like?

BF: He was, I think, Oxford trained. He could speak better English than I can. Nice young guy. At that time he was probably mid-20s/late-20s. He wasn't married yet. He was accompanied by a whole raft, 20 or 25 or more photographers and news people, mostly Japanese, or at least that's who showed up

anyway. We had lunch at the El Tovar. Then he and I and this honorary ambassador sat in the back, just the three of us, and there was a driver up in front, the three of us sat in the back of this really big stretch limousine. The biggest one I've ever been in. I'm in full uniform, although I don't have my Class A coat on because it's a little chilly I think. We spend, I don't know, an hour and a half or so driving around. I tell the driver where to go and where we are going to get out on some point, you know, Mather Point, and we worked our way back along the rim towards Desert View. When we got to Yavapai Point, the little Yavapai Museum, which we took a little tour in. I probably had to fake my knowledge about the geology of the park at that point. We went out on the point after out of the building and got out to a place where we could overlook everything. So there are these 20 or 25 press people who all recognize the Prince and the family. The Japanese emperor's family is pretty...sort of next to God in some ways. I'm standing there and the young man and myself, I was probably like 40 at this point, I ended up putting my arm around on his shoulders. It was sort of an instinctive thing on my part. It was just sort of a friendship.

TM: Like you might... I can see you pointing with one hand and putting your other hand up on his shoulder.

BF: Well I put my arm all the way around his shoulders like I'm his lost, long buddy, right. He smiled and everything was fine, he didn't blink twice, but, these 25 press people behind me, there was this very audible gasp of me having done this and maybe even touching this guy. I remember that clearly, and I think that perhaps even he was smiling at that like "how absurd was this?" We spent total perhaps an hour and a half driving around and looking, but we had lunch before that as well. Then I think he flew over to Las Vegas. That was part of his tour. I found him to be very nice. But, I did get a very nice gift. I got a nice letter from the... The superintendent got a very nice letter thanking me for all the stuff that we did for him, which wasn't much other than rolling out the red carpet for an hour/couple hours maybe. But I got the insignia, or the emblem, or the logo, or the representation of the Japanese throne, is a chrysanthemum. So they sent me a very nice, which I still have, a very nice tie clip, which doesn't go very well with my T-shirts, but I got this nice gift from the... I suspect he did not pick it out personally, but the Japanese government did send me a nice letter through the superintendent thanking me, as well as this chrysanthemum tie clip. Other than that, I don't have too much to say. I sort of followed him... I read about him, I don't know if I saw anything on TV or anything, but read about him getting married. That's quite a big thing for the Japanese people, and he's now the emperor. He might remember the tour, but he doesn't remember me I'm sure.

TM: Perks of the job.

BF: It was kind of fun, its something that I can tell my kids. Unfortunately, a lot of my peers have met presidents and vice presidents and stuff. I never did any of that, but I did meet the president of West Germany in my position as a management assistant.

TM: Was it Chancellor Kohl?

BF: No, it was a guy by the name of... He was a doctor. Carstens, Karl. Kohl was a chancellor wasn't he?

TM: Yeah.

BF: No, this was the president.

TM: But he may have been later, I'm not sure.

BF: I have a hard time remembering all of our presidents, let alone West German presidents. I don't have much to say about the prince anyway.

TM: How was it that you came to leave Grand Canyon?

BF: Well, I was the Management Assistant, I had SAR, I had fire, I was raising 2 boys by myself basically, and I had been at the park for 6 years. One day I get an announcement on my desk, put there anonymously, announcing a job in Washington DC, a promotion, a GS-13 because I was a GS-12 at the time, announcing a thing called the Emergency Services Coordinator. The guy that was the chief ranger of the Park Service was a very good friend of mine, Walt Dabney, who worked for me in Yosemite. He and I would climb together, run together, and bike together, and were excellent friends and still are. So Walter was the chief ranger. I get this announcement on my desk, which I ignore. I'm really not interested. Why do I want to move to Washington DC, I'm perfectly happy out in the West where the mountains are and all that sort of thing.

TM: Right. I mean you are from the West, not DC-savvy very much at all.

BF: Nope. I ignored it, I read it I suspect but I don't apply, I'm not really too interested. I probably didn't even talk to anybody about it. And, the job closed. The announcement, the expiration time—you have to apply by a certain time kind of a...—that came and went and I hadn't applied. I've never asked Walter about this, but I think he wanted me to come there, or they didn't get whoever they wanted to apply. So, they re-fly the announcement, they put the announcement back out again. Same job description, same requirements, same responsibilities, etcetera. This time, I actually sort of sit up and take notice. Say, well, okay, maybe... I probably actually started paying attention to it and I thought "Well, you know, this is a totally different thing." In the back of every rangers mind, at least for a long time, is they did not want to go to a central office, like a regional office or a desk job, and certainly would not want to go to Washington DC for a couple of reasons. One: most of my peers would be afraid that they would be stuck there. I thought about that, and this is the honest-to-god truth and I've told this little moral 100 times to various people, that if I couldn't get out of there at a certain point, then I didn't deserve to get out of there. I mean, that's the way I looked at it. I applied, got the job, had to go back there in...I can't remember, it might have been at the end of the school year, close to the end of the school year I think.

TM: So in the winter of '86/'87?

BF: No. I probably applied then but...

TM: Or the spring of '87?

BF: It was the spring of '87 is when I went back there. I have to look up the actual Enter on Duty (EOD) date. Anyway, it was close to the end of the school year, which my kids were at the Grand Canyon school. Their mother lived in Flagstaff, and she would be taking them for the summer anyway, so, you know, it gave me a chance to get back to DC and get my feet on the ground, and even though it was terribly hot and humid, I really wasn't prepared for that. The heat wasn't a big deal, but like they say in Tucson it's a dry heat. Well, it isn't a dry heat in Washington DC. And, at the time, and while I was doing that job, and afterwards, I have always thought that was the best job I ever had in the Park Service.

TM: Really? So I'm just thinking, let me look at the time here. We have been at this for an hour 12, the next question I've got is and I'll ask this, and then we'll wrap this up. Washington DC doesn't have search and rescues, it doesn't have plane crashes, it doesn't have high water dam failures, it doesn't have people falling off of cliffs, and all of the myriad of search and rescue activities that Grand Canyon and Yosemite have. So this would have been a huge, well certainly it was a step up pay-grade wise, but it would have been a huge change for the types of things you were doing or exposed to. I mean, you're head of search and rescue, head of structural fire, you're not going to be doing any of that in DC.

BF: Well it was a leap of faith for me. The job entailed overall responsibility, I guess, for search and rescue; EMS (Emergency Medical System program); diving; aviation; health and fitness, which ends up taking half of my time as it turns out; the incident command program; and lifeguards, which I pretty much never did anything with.

TM: I mean to be fair, that fairly complex and extensive list you just went through, you could do all that stuff in your sleep, so what more better person to write policies and procedures in Washington DC for that type of activity across the agency?

BF: Well, I appreciate the confidence that you've given to me on that one. I had a pretty good handle on it, but at a national level, I could focus on... I was pretty good about going over a cliff and getting somebody or making an arrest, but at a national level you've got to deal with 50 different states, and other entities and other agencies, etcetera, etcetera. So it was a real challenge, and that's what made it so much fun for one thing, but it was also that I had my finger in so many different pies at a level where I could actually make a contribution. My boss, my good friend Walt Dabney and I, he only lived a mile away from me out by Dulles Airport, he and I agreed right off the bat that technically we work for the Director and the Secretary's office, but in reality our heart is working for the GS-7/GS-9 field ranger. That's who we want to respond to, that's who we want to take care of. We weren't, and I'm not speaking for Walter although I probably could, but in my case, I knew that I had to satisfy the Director and the Secretary, which I would do on numerous occasions actually, but I also knew that, in that job, and then in the ranger activities, which is what this whole group was called, and there were about 10 of us I suppose, that our mission was to help make the field ranger or the ranger activities in the parks easier and safer and more efficient. We all worked in one corridor of the main Interior Building in DC, and Walter had a sign made that he put up over the beginning of that corridor, which is only about 8 or 10/10 or 12 offices, "What have you done for your parks today?" That was his mantra. He and I were terribly simpatico about that, trying to get those things done. But we also knew, on many occasions when we would be running, literally, jogging anyway, down the hall to get to the Secretary's office or to the Director's office to put out some brushfire or to respond to some issue. But in the back of our mind we wanted to help the ranger in the field, that was our real mission. And I enjoyed that. It was adrenaline in a different kind of way. I wasn't rappelling 2000 ft. I could still occasionally go out and do stuff, make aviation reviews and that sort of thing, but mostly I was a desk jockey.

TM: Let's call it here and next time we met, let's talk about your time in Washington DC, because I would like to know more about that. Certainly how it relates to the parks back home that you cut your teeth in, as they say.

BF: I would like to briefly mention a minor thing about the Grand Canyon, maybe actually 1 or 2 minor things. One was the caves at the Grand Canyon, and my helping orchestrate one guy in particular who I befriended after I arrested him, to help out with the cave program at the Grand Canyon as a volunteer.

TM: I'll want that story. I've written that down so we'll go back. I definitely want that story, too, and then we will spend some more time in Washington DC. Well with that, this will conclude part 16 of Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Butch Farabee. Today is July 4th, 2020, my name is Tom Martin and Butch, Happy 4th of July.

BF: Well you too, you too. Thanks you.

TM: Thank you.