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## The Curtain Rises

How often can fifty or more years zip by and unexpectedly something emerges from the past, punches you in the gut and leaves you teary-eyed and emotionally spent? Couldn't happen to me, I would tell you. But it did. In November of 2010.

I was living in rural Connecticut a hundred miles north of New York City in the town of Kent, a rural community that time had passed by, with large open hay fields on the approach to the village, in the distance white church steeples piercing the horizon, a commercial center with but a handful of stores, and a local history embedded in the revolutionary war when its iron foundries were making cannon balls for George Washington's army.

I had walked up the hill to our mailbox to collect the usual mixture of bills, advertisements and magazines, and perhaps a note from one of our kids, and right away saw an envelope with a return address that read

**Department of Defense  
Washington, DC 20301**

I had served in the U.S. Air Force in the late 1950s, the latter two years of a three-year tour stationed in the Pentagon, an assignment that had come about through a series of orders that no military

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manual could have ever published. Or no ranking officer might have condoned. What could this be about?

Curious and anxious, I tore open the envelope and sat down on the grass to read the letter inside.

“Dear Mr. Perkins,” it began.

“An out-of-the-blue letter from the U.S. Air Force.”

“I am an historian with the U.S. Air Force Historical Studies Office in Washington, D.C., and am researching the history of USAF conservation and environmental programs.”

What came next stunned me.

“I am not certain if you are aware of the impact that your research and proposal had on not only the U.S. Air Force, but later all military conservation programs and ultimately all federal agencies’ conservation programs, but it has endured.”

My proposal? Endured? Had I done something wrong?

The letter, signed Jean Mansavage, Ph.D., went on:

“...today the Department of Defense manages 30 million acres of land on which there exists the highest density of threatened and endangered species...”

Not wrong. Incredible!

I went on reading. Thirty million acres! That a land conservation program I had suggested and later promoted had by 2010 encompassed such a massive area was staggering, its size alone today putting it easily in the ranks of the Sierra Club and The Nature Conservancy. From a simple proposition and perhaps two years’ work, how could this have happened?

I was overwhelmed. I stopped reading. I could barely see the print on the letter through the tears that were swiftly coming.

Dr. Mansavage’s letter was asking whether she could come to Kent to interview me. Her assignment was to document how the program had come about, she wrote, and during the intervening years how it had fallen to the United States Air Force to be its steward. Left unsaid, I assumed she also had to determine how a junior officer got into the Pentagon in the first place and whether he was a credible resource.

Still sitting by the open mail box, the entire episode came rushing back. Not all at once, but in bits and pieces as I was later to relate to Dr. Mansavage.

I was fresh from training at Ellington Air Force Base in Houston, Texas, naïve to military protocol, uneasy in my new job and cautious not to make a mess of it. In Washington but two weeks and following my first staff meeting, brashly I made a recommendation to my immediate superior, Major Tim Dunn, on how the Air Force might solve a problem our division head, Major General Ben LeBailey, had described in his office on the 4th floor, D ring, of the Pentagon.

There's a bill in a House committee that would open military land to exploitation by agricultural, mining, and logging interests, the General had said, as much as I can recount. We can't run an Air Force, he went on, with a bunch of civilians and bulldozers crossing our runways and fucking up the mission. The boys upstairs in Legislative Liaison asked us to think of what they might do about it.

(Legislative Liaison was one of many Pentagon links to the Congress.)

I was in an assembly of a dozen or so officers, Colonels and Lt. Colonels and a Major or two. All were World War II and Korean War veterans, most of them combat pilots, wearing their wings proudly, given to action and fearless, and by their posture stiffly resolute. But Legislative Liaison's request had them shifting in their seats and looking about the room as if choked for air and seeking help. There was none. The General kindly ended the meeting. Let me know next day or two if you have any ideas, he said.

In my mind's eye, with Jean Mansavage's letter in my hand, still sitting on the grass by the mail box, I could see that office, the men at the meeting, the hopeful look on the General's face and much of what came afterward.

That evening, leaving the Pentagon's River Entrance parking lot and driving home to Falls Church, I thought of a plausible answer

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to the General's question. Sleep on it, I told myself, thinking how presumptive a lowly lieutenant might be seen offering a suggestion his superiors were reluctant to make. Yet I thought my thought a good thought, coming from a junior or not. What risk was I taking? The following day, on my way back to the Pentagon, I decided to try it out on Tim Dunn.

I had come quickly to trust Tim. He had once been a lieutenant himself, he reminded me, a navigator-bombardier serving in the Pacific theater aboard a B-29, the model of aircraft that dropped the A-bomb on Hiroshima. His assignment in the Pentagon was in stark contrast to his combat experience. His PIO (Public Information Office) responsibility was Magazines and Books, standing by to answer questions and assist writers and reporters covering USAF matters and, aggressively, to define and pursue projects that might reflect favorably on the service. Smartly, and looking for an early promotion, he had eased into a very visible desk job.

On my first day, he said call me Tim, no salutes, no "Yes sir, No sir," We're working together here. We could wear civilian clothes, he went on. That way no one can stand on rank. We're grownups. Fuck-ups don't get to the Pentagon.

Tim wasn't running a training squadron, I realized, my only experience with rank. He was in command of his office and I was a crew member and, unless I fucked up, valued and respected. And I respected him, proof lying in my recollection now many decades later of his extended very Irish name: Mathew Timothy James Edward Dunn III.

I went straight to Tim's desk. Six of us were elbowed into a crowded office — everything gray, the desks, the chairs, the paint on the walls — among them Major Jim Sunderman; Bill Mack, a captain, and secretary Virginia Waugh — and offered an idea that might spark the General's interest. Characteristically, I later came to recognize, Tim tilted onto the back legs of his chair, locked his hands behind his head, and said, "Talk to me."

We could designate all Air Force lands as conservation districts, I told him, with well-defined land, water, wildlife and timber management programs and make it work in ways without

interfering with operations. He nodded an understanding nod. Then I added the thought that had come to me in a half sleep the night before: And encourage powerful conservation groups such as the National Wildlife Federation and the Wilderness Society, whose interests might also be served, I went on, to lobby against the bill.

I wasn't expecting Tim's reaction. Ranking Air Force officers, flight operations their life-time experience, generally chew on administrative decisions before pushing them along. Yet Tim literally jumped out of his chair. "Great," he said, grabbing my hand like he didn't want me to go away. "Just great. Give me a one-pager I can talk from. I'll take it right to General LeBailey."

Startled by his swift response, I was slow to say, "Yes, sir." Oops. Uncertainty settled fast upon me. I imagined the unintended consequences of my recommendation, hearing the General laughing, Tim coming back to the office humiliated and flushed with anger and me being the putz.

Nonetheless, this soldier had taken a position. There was no backing away.

In several agonizing minutes, on a worn Underwood, I banged out a brief memo for Tim that went as follows:

"Designate all domestic U.S. Air Force bases as conservation districts for the protection of wildlife and the management of soil, water and timber resources. Issue guidelines. Require base commanders to designate a field grade officer to be responsible for inaugurating and managing the program. Promote the program widely. Attract the attention of conservation-minded agencies and organizations such as the National Wildlife Federation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and ask for their support of the program and their opposition to turning over public lands to private interests for their exploitation."

As I hit the last key, Tim, now standing next to me, yanked the memo from the typewriter. How could you know to write that? he questioned.

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Before I could answer, he disappeared across the hall.

Waiting for him to come back, I rationalized what I had done and why I had done it and prepared for the argument, if there was to be one, of why I had chosen to make the suggestion, write the one-pager and, in the end, to justify how I might be qualified to offer up such a reply to General LeBailey's request.

It was a question that Jean Mansavage was also to ask sitting in the living room of my Kent home. What were my qualifications for making such a proposal? She waited for a reply, patiently, as might a concerned sister. Based pretty much on what I had told Tim 54 years earlier, I wrote her the answer that follows:

As the minutes passed, waiting for Tim's return, I saw myself the youngster in a small New Hampshire town, population 3000, just a few miles from the White Mountain National Forest, living on a hillside with a sweeping view of the Presidential Range, from Mt. Lincoln to Mt. Washington, during the 30s and 40s. And I'm eight to twelve years old, school but a diversion, and too young to be drinking beer and chasing girls, the local rural pastimes.

The nearest radio station is WBZ Boston, 175 miles away. I could pick up its signal on the Philco after sundown and through the static listen to 15 minute segments, Lowell Thomas and Gabriel Heatter with the news, the Green Hornet and Jack Armstrong, tales of crime and adventure. The daily Boston Globe arrived same day by train usually after six pm. I had to walk a mile to get our copy. The local weekly reported soft news, weddings, births (sometimes not in that order), visitors to town, break-ins and arrests, and the like. Talk at the counter of my dad's restaurant, the White Mountain Café, men mostly, ladies sat in the booths, chatting about local "goings on," jobs at the Saranac Deerskin Glove Factory and Norton Abrasives, high school sports, dancing at Art's Ark with music by Win Wright and the Ramblers, but mostly about hunting and fishing. This was my world, small and distant.

I see myself back there now, sitting at my desk in the Pentagon, waiting for Tim to return, my brow popping with perspiration, growing ever more uneasy, bringing up pictures from the past to fill my head and calm me, seeing bird season coming on as the leaves begin to turn, the first flakes of snow flitting through the trees, a single barrel, single shot Sears shot gun cradled against my chest, with chums Bob Rowe and Boyd Cole, walking the alders, alert to the electric burst of a woodcock or partridge, and feeling good about myself. Not about the shooting, but about the doing.

Bob and I skied Cannon Mountain, the site of the first aerial tram-way constructed in the United States. There were no open slopes, only narrow trails. There were no grooming machines, the sharp winds blowing the runs bare, rock and ice part of our race downhill. Our clothes like our skis were used, home-sewn of heavy wool that caught the snow and froze hard, by the end of the day melting wet as we drank cocoa waiting for one of our moms to pick us up. Freezing and unfreezing, skiing or going to school, or just beating home through the woods in the dark, was how our winters went.

Hiking through the short summer and early fall, not hunting, not fishing, just walking and climbing was for me and Bob, Boyd and his cousin Sandy, and Pinky Towle, the police chief's son, not sport but a ritual. The near slope of Parker Mountain was my backyard. We spent hours, days and years hiking it, building tree houses, following streams, climbing giant pines to see where we were. We figured once that from the top of Parker Mountain we could draw a straight line to the North Pole and it would never hit a single city or town on its way.

But the more adventurous trails we walked were in the National Forest, from Franconia Notch, beginning at Mt. Lafayette, across from Cannon Mountain, to Mt. Guyot and to Mt. Garfield; from Crawford Notch, Mt. Adams and Mt. Jefferson. Irregular paths, early legs of the Appalachian Trail, were not well marked, some so steep we'd be crawling on hands and knees. Our stretch of the Trail some hikers thought as the toughest section for hikers going either way.

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We first learned about the National Forest not from neighbors but from the CCC boys, a troop of them one day descending on our town to build a playground in our public park. Clad in work clothes and ankle-top boots, city kids from the Boston area, others from the Bronx and Brooklyn, they jumped at the task, involving us, their enthusiasm catching, a spirit of togetherness surfacing, learning names, where they were from, putting up swings and chinning bars, and listening to their stories at lunch break.

From distressed neighborhoods, they had discovered a different life of incredible vistas, pines higher than a five-story walk up and craggy hilltops, living in lean-to's, building roads and harboring ponds and waking mornings to the sounds that come from the forest, so different from the ell's roaring above the streets back home. Bob and I, and Sandy, too, probably decided then that we had to learn what the CCC boys had learned.

We learned both from hiking and from reading. During WW II our local library as a way of encouraging kids to read held a contest. Entrants would be buck privates at the start. For each book read there'd be an advancement in rank, a promotion. The first reader to become a four-star general would receive a prize, my goal. I took out three of the shortest books I could find, returned them the next day, each with a brief report, hoping I'd become a sergeant. The librarian shook her head, dismayed. She wouldn't let me get away with it. She might have sent me home. Instead, she led me to a section labeled Nature Books.

Now I was dismayed. For an outdoors boy, nature was for girls, like horses and Home Ec. Thinking back on it, I couldn't see the forest for the trees, literally.

The first book she handed me was no *Walden Pond*, but a tattered tome about trees, their names and identifiable characteristics. My report, submitted the next morning, got me the grade of private first class. From then on, I stuck to the nature section, worn volumes about fish, farming, rivers, growing apples, personal journals and the like, some of them published in the late 1800s when the United States was raw, the librarian promoting me all the way to my four stars and a win!

The war years were fundamentals for a youngster too young to fight but of an age ready to grasp bigger meanings. With uncles and cousins in uniform and overseas, one a marine captured at Wake Island, another a ferry pilot delivering aircraft and munitions across the south Atlantic from Brazil to North Africa, patriotism and the American flag were more than symbolic; they were proof of who we were, “of a God given nation in the defense of a greater good” I recall reading somewhere. Gold stars pasted on the windows of houses next door told stories of both sorrow and pride. Letters received and sent by V-mail, back yard victory gardens and ration stamps for gas and butter demonstrated a resolve not only to win, but to be victorious. How much I wanted to be a part of that, to this day I still recall.

In a small farmhouse down the street, where the Houle family — French Canadians from Quebec — kept chickens and goats, Conrad Houle, a year or two older than I, wanted what I wanted but couldn’t get, being in the war. So we settled for much less. We built a mock airplane frame out of pine branches and slash, with seats and a dashboard, deep in a patch of trees where no one could see us. When he could, Conrad would dig into the paper scrap pile for copies of *The New York Times* that carried front page stories of the war, with maps. We’d take the papers into our make-shift airplane and read aloud to each other while climbing our B-17 to altitude, crossing the Dover cliffs on bombing missions, or in a P-38 flying low over the Sahara seeing Montgomery’s tanks chasing Rommel across the sands. We were warriors and the woods were where we lived and fought.

Escape, adventure, challenge, and just plain fun was for us in the outdoors — sleeping out, cooking out, hiking out, playing ball and horsing around, learning to swing an ax, drive a fence post, tie a fly, walk a pasture, identify trees, seeing them come back in the spring, every spring, their buds just beginning to show. So close to the land, we could feel the world in rebirth.

Chronologically, by this account, as I sit there waiting for Tim, I am not more than 15 or 16 years old, away at school, contemplating college, and recognizing that ahead lay the changing years. But I

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don't want it all to change, not the mountains and hillsides, the rivers and the streams, the wildlife and the woods, but I was fearful it would.

I learned about change, maybe in 1948, when Mr. Elliot came to the door with some bad news. Mr. Elliot was a local farmer who delivered raw milk to our back porch in quart-sized bottles, cream on the top, and during winter, the freezing cream pushed the paper cap two or three inches high above the rim. Can't deliver no more milk, Mr. Elliot said, and went on to tell us about bovine tuberculosis. "The gub'ment gonna shoot all my cows." The gub'ment did. After that we had to buy our milk at the local A&P.

I was distressed, not about having to walk to the A&P, but by the image of some blank-faced gub'ment official putting a pistol to a cow's squarish forehead and pulling the trigger. One cow after another crumpling in Mr. Elliot's pasture. Rural small town kids know cows. Benign animals you can hug, feel their warmth, and learn from: watching a calving and discovering how babies are born long before mom and dad deal with the subject, if they ever do. We also know about critters: porcupines and woodchucks, skunks and beavers, bear and deer, partridges and woodcocks, pigeons and hawks, telling one from the other, where they nest, where they feed, how they come and go, and how we get along in that small part of the world where we all live. The images are etched into our memories.

Now I'm 18 or 19 and I hear talk, from game and tree wardens (later to be designated conservation officers) and foresters, and it sounds like they're losing the fight to poaching and clear cutting, to dumping and well contamination and, most of all, to ignorance.

And I'm going to Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. In the class room, Professor Herb West's courses on the Nature Writers, his insistent railings against polluters, bull dozing, over development and trash in the streets and along the roads, and his teachings of the Humanities, books whose writings could bring out the moral best in his students. Author and outdoorsman Corey Ford, his nurturing, his friendship and generosity, his introduction to me of Hugh Grey, writer and outdoorsman Dan Holland, *Field*

*and Stream's* fishing editor. Pan Am pilot and heralded Dartmouth skier of the late 1930s, Everett Wood, a statuesque man, a hunter and fisherman with hair like straw drawn straight back into a rush of curls. Parker Merrow of West Ossipee, a publisher, his ramblings against deer jackers, clear cutters and sluice miners coming out of the soil. Together joined for drinks by a warming fireplace at One North Balch Street, Corey's house in Hanover, NH, their talk of conserving wildlife and protecting the land working into me like seepage.

So there is no Aha! moment. Just a day when some kid whose elders have helped him think like a man and hears a General say, "a bill in committee...threatens Air Force land...what can we do about it?" simply responds, almost like he's programmed to be there, with a suggestion that could answer the General's question and lead to the protection of vast acreage, some of it for recreation, some of it for habitat, and much of it just to look at and be proud that it's there.

I could hear Tim coming down the hall, his clipped steps already familiar. Was I about to become the fuck-up or the grown up, I'd soon know.

Tim gushed his way through the doorway of our office suite, beaming.

I told Jean Mansavage all this. She had a canvas bag chocked full of folders and loose pages and while we talked she spread them out on the coffee table where we sat. A dogged researcher, her interest in environmental and U.S. Air Force history led to her Department of Defense assignment, concluding at the time no one involved with the program in the Fifties would still be alive. She had questions to ask of me, and documents to either prove or disprove what I might tell her, wanting to be sure, as she hinted, whether I was the real thing, that a young officer was in that place at the time and had witnessed what he said he had witnessed and done the things he said he had done.

The others, Tim, Ben LeBailey, and everyone I knew back then

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working in the Pentagon had long since died. She hoped in me she had a reliable source.

She asked for names. As I gave them to her, she searched through the pages in front of us, copies of orders, meeting minutes, published articles, marking them as we talked, looking for evidence that could correlate the events I was describing. She was thorough, surgical in her manner.

Originally from Wisconsin, she had earned her doctorate at Texas A&M and among her earliest efforts for the Department of Defense had successfully documented cases of missing in action (MIA) American combatants, first in the Korean War, later in World War II, and in 2005 provided MIA research protocols for the Vietnamese. Evidence of her unique skill had been framed prominently on the walls of a Pentagon corridor. She was a super star at what she did.

Jean's probing questions went on, stopping only when she got a hint of what she was looking for. I answered what I could, pausing often while mentally thumbing through a 54 year old recollection of people and events, places and times. When I told her that a Lt. Colonel Ben Royal from the Provost's Office had been assigned to the "conservation program" to help me write the regulations and to keep me out of trouble, Jean, by then each of us comfortable using first names, pulled a page from her pile.

It was a copy of the orders issued in May 1956 assigning Lt. Colonel Benjamin Royal to the conservation program and unmistakably confirming what I had just told her.

Jean's questioning stopped. She had what she needed proving me definitively real. She shoved her papers back into her bag and hugged me a grateful hug.

Tim was a happy man, and for a few minutes so was I. The General had bought the proposal, had called his opposite in Legislative Liaison who endorsed the idea, and given Tim the responsibility for making it happen. Ben LeBailey wanted a detailed proposition, the what, when and how that could answer whatever objections that might arise as the proposal made its way through the approval

process. The “it” part Tim passed on to me. How long will it take you to get “it” done, I recall Tim asking.

I hadn’t a clue. The one-pager had exhausted my competence.

Lieutenants are rare in the Washington, DC, military mix, rarer still in the Pentagon. I was the lowest ranking Air Force officer in a building of 32,000 employees, all of them military or government personnel, and in that company, truly, I was of no apparent importance. Yet Major Tim Dunn did not question that what he had asked of me I might be incapable of producing, assuming that behind the one-pager lay a greater knowledge. Unnerved, I began to think of what to do next. Tim had so far treated me like a grown-up and I had to act like one.

I couldn’t know then, nor could Tim, but he and I were about to trigger an event years in the making. And in the weeks to come, absurd but real, I would be explaining myself to three of the highest ranking generals in Air Force history: the Air Force’s Chief of Staff, General Thomas D. White; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Nathan Twining; and World War II’s foremost air war strategist, the U.S. Air Force’s first chief of staff, retired General Carl “Tooeey” Spaatz, warriors all and, as this Lieutenant discovered, ardent environmentalists.

Was it purely coincidental, I have since asked myself, that I was assigned to the Pentagon, that a General had a question I could answer or was it something bigger, a stroke of luck?

I still do not know, but it all began with a series of linking events that began in the fall of 1952, the start of my sophomore year at Dartmouth College.

I closed the mail box at the top of the hill and walked down the road to the house to show my wife Jean’s letter.