

Carlton Rhodes Audio Interview
February 15, 2014

Carlton “Sonny” Rhodes was a reporter with the Arkansas Gazette at the time of the Damascus missile explosion in September 1980. He is currently a reporter with the Arkansas Democrat Gazette and an Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. This interview was taken over the phone.

Q Mr. Rhodes, how are you involved in the Damascus missile silo incident?

A At the time, I was a reporter for the Arkansas Gazette and I was working out of Conway and so that was in my coverage area and so I covered about, I can't remember now, I think it was 11 counties in North Central Arkansas and so, you know, Damascus is right there on the Faulkner/Van Buren County line so it was in my coverage area. So they had originally sent me up there when there was the rocket fuel leak, tried to interview the people who had been evacuated and so I stayed up there until about 2:00 a.m., you know, looking for people to interview and then because all of them -- I had just gotten into bed was awakened by a call from an editor with a newspaper I knew in Heber Springs and he thought it had exploded so I had got out of bed, drove up there, worked until 6:00 the next day. You know, I tried to gather information about the explosion, you know, talked to the various authorities who were involved.

Q Approximately how far did the explosion take place from where you were right then?

A Well, when it actually exploded I was in Conway, which is about 20 miles south of Damascus.

Q Did you hear the explosion?

A I didn't. There's a ridge or two between Damascus and Conway and I think that might have buffered it, but Heber Springs, which is probably pretty close to the same distance, I guess that would be east of Damascus, you know, I'm not sure if it was the same sort of terrain involved there, but I think maybe it was easier for the sound and the vibrations to carry to the east than it

was for the south.

Q And the explosion, how much damage did it do to the countryside?

A To the countryside, you know, it's pretty amazing, they always had a silo and I think most of, you know, the brunt of it just kind of went straight up. Now, there was an enormous concrete covering of the top of it that it blew probably 100 yards, but it just landed in a field. So, you know, to try to answer your question as concisely as possible, you know, there was damage close to the silo, I'd say within 100 yards or so, but beyond that it really wasn't much damage other than, you know, where large chunks of concrete might fall, but it was interesting, like I said, I feel like most of the explosion just went straight up, it just felt like someone fired up a shotgun, you know, it didn't do that much outwardly.

Q How did people react to the explosion?

A Well, there were a -- immediately I talked to people who were actually there at the time when it exploded and I'm trying to recall now the term the guy used, it was something like it was a full retreat, he said people, you know, law enforcement people, Air Force people just running wild eyed not knowing what was going to happen next and I don't think you knew, if anybody knew exactly what was going to happen. They didn't understand what all might be involved in a nuclear explosion, so a lot of people learned a lot about nuclear missiles after that. I don't want to get too technical here, but for these missiles or bombs to explode there -- maybe you've done your research on this, I don't know, but there is these explosives, you know, around the outside of the warhead that have to go off in just a precise manner to cause a nuclear explosion and the chances of that happening, something like that were pretty remote. Nobody knew that at the time, so that nuclear warhead was just blown out, I think it landed in a ditch, again, maybe about 100 yards from the silo and the Air Force quickly recovered it and got it out of there. But

anyway, to get back to your original question, the people I talked to were just terrified to see this, to feel the ground shake and to see this ball of fire going up into the air and the explosion. They said, you know, they were standing alongside Highway 65, which was several hundred yards from the silo. They could feel the heat and so they all got in their vehicles and got out of there as quickly as they could. And it was interesting that as I was driving up there, I didn't know what to expect, because there had been a leak there about a year before and I had actually been there and observed this cloud of gas that was kind of floating over the countryside, so it was highly toxic and so I didn't know when I was going up there if I was going to drive into a cloud or a rocket repellent. I asked later if there was going to be radioactivity everywhere, so I was like the only person going north on Highway 65. It was just a line of traffic going south as fast as they could go. And then afterwards, the reaction of the people who had been evacuated, their reactions were that they felt like they had been neighbors to a nuclear missile long enough. By this time it was 1980 and those things had been there since the '60s and so they were ready to see the missiles leave. Of course, they were not happy about having to leave their homes for several days.

Q The evacuation, exactly how did that come about? How did it happen?

A Well, that night, when the --the Air Force and the local law enforcement authorities called and went home to home throughout, I think initially a five mile radius of the silo and told people they needed to leave. I think they had set up a like a relocation center there in Fairfield Bay, telling people to go there and spend the night, but then they kept expanding the radius and so by the time, you know, I mentioned this Monty Rowell, who was a reporter for KCON, a radio station in Conway, by the time he and I got up to Clinton, which is another 20 miles up the road, even Clinton had been evacuated, and that was just the strangest thing. That was like stepping into like a Twilight Zone episode or something. People, we got the idea that the law officers had

gone through and said, you know, get the heck out of here, and again, this is hours before the explosion. This is when they were just fearing this rocket propellant leak. The place was just a ghost town. You could drive around town and see houses with their front doors open and the TVs on and like all the lights on in the houses, but no one was to be found anywhere in Clinton. They had all gone to Fairfield Bay and stayed there. So to answer your question, I think the evacuation was stressful, but they had already gotten everybody out of there just because of the fear of this toxic rocket propellant that could be floating around anywhere and it would not be very easy to see at night.

Q How did the people around Damascus feel about the missile silo both before and after the accident?

A I never saw any polls, I just talked to a few people and I feel like before they kind of saw it as like their patriotic duty, it was part of the national defense. It's kind of hard now, now that we're no longer in the Cold War to imagine how people felt then, but they saw it as like being good neighbors for the national defense against the Soviet Union. But afterwards, this is something I said earlier, they kind of had the idea that we feel like we've done our share, it's time for the missiles to be moved and let people in other states be neighbors to these. Again, I don't know where you are in your research, but there were, I think 54 of these Type II silos scattered across the country and I think there were 18 in Kansas and I can't remember if it was Nebraska or Arizona, but there was another state, there were 18 in each state. That, this was before the Reagan administration because the nuclear disarmament agreements, they agreed that they would be decommissioned, fill the silos, you know, fill them up and have Soviet inspectors come look at them. Now, I think there are some people that are not sure there were missiles, they are where they were now.

Q How did earlier incidents in Arkansas such as the oxidizer cloud and the incident at Camden, did those catalyze any wrong feelings about the missile silos?

A I don't know that they did. Again, the people around Damascus refer to that, and yeah, you can refer to that '78 incident, that's what I was talking about, where the propellant leaked out and floated around for a while before it dissipated, yeah, I think the people right there in Damascus were edgy. There was one guy who I interviewed, his name was John Stacks, he was a farmer who lived probably closest to the silo, he sued the federal government because he contended he had inhaled some of that propellant and that affected his health. To answer your question, I think the people around Damascus had some concerns, but I don't think there was any widespread concern about it. I think we all tend to kind of not be real concerned about things until they affect us directly.

Q Thank you.