

## Monty Rowell Interview

March 1, 2014

**Monty Rowell was a reporter with KCON, the Conway, Arkansas radio station. He currently works on staff at the University of Central Arkansas radio station, KUCA. We interviewed him at the UCA campus in Conway. Monty Rowell was actually on site at the time of the Damascus explosion.**

A The warheads were kind of round, this is the way they were described to me, I was always told they were never in danger of detonating because it had 19 buttons on it that they all had to be pushed simultaneously to detonate it. The only thing that I recall that was a hazardous other than the warhead themselves was the rocket fuel, high potent stuff called hydrogen tetroxide. It would burn you just to look at it, it would burn your skin. I mean, it was pretty toxic stuff and that's what actually exploded and caused all heck to break loose.

Q How were you involved in the Damascus missile crisis?

A I was fresh out of college by about a month and a half and I was the news director at a local radio station here in Conway, KCON, and about 6:30 p.m. on September 18, 1980, I had just gotten home, it had been a very long day, I had started my day at approximately 5:00 a.m. going to go to a breakfast meeting here in town, so it was a very long day to begin with and I got word that there was a leak inside the missile sight here in Damascus and I was familiar with the site; number one, because they had had a leak there a couple of times before, I know of at least one other time about six months to a year earlier that they had had a leak, and I think there might have been another one or two as well. But at that particular time, there were -- at the time II missile systems were looked at as being very old, aging, and it was starting to develop some problems, not only at that sight, but other sites in the region. There were a few other sites where some leaks had been reported, but anyway, I headed up to Damascus and the site was just north of the City of Damascus in Van Buren County and the local sheriff was there. His name was Gus

Anglin, in fact, Gus is still alive. And when we got there, the Air Force was not the people there, he was worried about safety concerns, what he needed to do, and for an ole time country sheriff, I always thought that Gus did a heck of a job in handling that situation because the federal authorities were not telling him anything. I did a quick interview with Gus, came back to Conway, you got to remember that this was the day before cellular technology. A pay phone was a reporters best friend back then. And came back and filed a report with the 10:00 news and went back to Damascus. This is about a 30 minute drive up there from here, got up there, they had evacuated a number of homes from around the area. They had closed off a good portion on Highway 65, I believe from Highway 124 that goes to Quitman and then they closed it off down to Highway 25 north that goes to Heber Springs. So it was a good chunk of the area that they closed off. The Air Force had emergency personnel on site and where we were, to kind of give you an idea, we were right out in the middle of the highway. At that particular time Highway 65 was a two lane highway. We could not actually see the silo and the missile bay from the highway because from where we were there was a hill, a little hill that went up and then went down the side and Air Force personnel were actually had their men up on the hill. We could see what they were doing, we didn't know what they were doing, but we could see what they were doing. And as I was getting close to Damascus, I got behind an Air Force tanker truck that was carrying some of the most God awful sticky stuff that I have ever seen. It got all over my car and come to find out, it was mineral oil and what they were going to do, they were going to use mineral oil to neutralize the rocket fuel. So I stayed around the site pretty much all night, a good chunk of the night. About midnight, 1:00 in the morning I had heard that they had opened up an evacuation center at the Clinton High School, which is on further to the north, went up there, that was not the case, there was nothing there, so I came back and in just the amount of time that I

came back they had tightened security even more. I was stopped at Highway 65 and I believe Highway 124, that's where they had closed the highway and I was met by two Air Force personnel carrying M1 rifles and that terrifies the heck out of you when you see the barrel of one of those coming toward your car and they searched my car, you know, this was a whole new territory to me because I was 22, 23 years old, I was fresh out of college, I had never seen anything like this and they let me on through. I was surprised that they let me come on through and went back down there to the site. At this particular time there were the three Little Rock TV stations was there, most statewide newspapers were there, the Arkansas Gazette and the Arkansas Democrat, the local paper in Conway, the Log Cabin Democrat, myself and a radio station in Clinton, KGFL was also there. And pretty much at about 1:00 in the morning we, the hard core news, we had decided we were going to spend the night and when you -- I was too young to know any better, first of all, some of the older types, they decided to leave at about 1:30, 2:00 in the morning and there have been times that I wondered what if you go left, you know, and I, to this day, I could not tell you why, but something kept telling me you better stay put, you just better stay put and still the Air Force was not giving us any briefing. We had no clue what was going on, not a clue, and any little bit of information that we got, we were trying to figure out which one was telling the truth and who was lying to us. We didn't know what was true and what was not true. Well, about 2:30 in the morning there was still a lot of activity up there, little did we know at this particular time, they had been down in the silo two or three times and looking back, they had their hands full, they definitely had their hands full. At about a little bit before 3:00 a.m., I had buddied up with this older reporter out of Little Rock, his name was Fred Jordan, at that particular time he was working for the CBS affiliate in Little Rock, and we were making small talk and Fred and I were standing relatively close together and all of the sudden, when it

happened, it shook the ground so hard that Fred and I bumped into each other. And it looked something like out of an early morning sunrise that had gone terribly long. The first thing we were told to put on that we saw come off was the bomb doors and you got to understand the bomb doors, when those things come back, you know, to launch the missiles, those bomb doors we were told could withstand a direct hit of a nuclear weapon and thousands and thousands and thousands of concrete made up this silo and the force, I can't describe you the force, I have never seen, to this day I have never seen anything quite like it or felt anything like it. When it first, when the initial explosion occurred and Fred and I bumped into each other, I immediately ran across the road into the ditch and my first thought was why are you doing this, you are getting ready to get fried anyway. And then there was a second smaller explosion that happened within 15, 20 seconds after that one. So we -- I remember getting us out of the ditch and you got to understand, the equipment we used back then was very heavy. The tape deck that I was carrying back then was state of the art and it weighed probably 10 pounds, it was very heavy. And I looked around, I started watching for fire and I was watching smoke, watching which way it was going and it was all pretty much going north, northeast. I looked around and I was the last car there and then I took off and I headed towards Clinton. To this day I could never tell you why I headed towards Clinton, but that's the way I went. And I got into downtown Clinton probably about 3:20, 3:25 in the morning and local radio station there in the square and I went over, I said I am willing to share any audio with you that I have got and the guy's name is Sid King and that's where Sid and I met and we are friends to this day, and Sid set me up with my own private office, my own private telephone line and any audio I got I shared with him. We were able to get our hands on a radio that could pick up the Air Force radio communications and there was a lot of chatter during the night. You gotta remember that when this thing went up, it literally knocked

people out of bed, you know, that live right there in the area. They had evacuated I think two miles out and then five miles out and then probably about ten miles out as I recall. Sid's radio station at that particular time actually went off the air at dark every night, and he signed it back on at 3:15 in the morning or whatever it was, and everybody was evacuating, it was such a great unknown. I mean, we didn't know what we had, and I don't think the Air Force really knew what they had. It really just took on a life of it's own. I called my boss, got him out of bed to get our station on the air. The rest of that day, it was running about ninety to nothing, it was running really, really hard. The cause of the accident, there was a workman earlier the day who had been doing some work on the missile itself. There are different platforms at various stages of the missile, and as I understand it, he was working up near the top of the missile and he was using a device called a wrench socket. He dropped that wrench socket down in the silo. It bounced off the side of the silo and pierced the side of, I believe it was the second stage of the rocket, which punctured that, and that's where the hydrogen tetroxide started spewing out. I don't recall how many gallons of that stuff came up, but there was a lot of it in the silo.

Q From what I recall, the entire tank emptied out which caused the tank to crumple, the oxidizer to fall out.

A But I can remember leaving Clinton mid to late morning and I couldn't come back down Highway 65. They had closed Highway 65 for a while and so I had to take the back way going through the little counties, Scotland and Cleveland and then down to Morrilton to the interstate back home and they had brought a lot of evacuees from the area to Conway. In fact, as I recall, the injured airman at the time was brought over here to the hospital, Conway Regional Hospital, at that time it was Conway Memorial Hospital, as I recall and you probably know this better than I do, you've got to remember, this is 35 years or so ago, but the first airman that died, his

name was Livingston and as I recall, there were two of them that died, is that correct, or is it one?

Q There have been multiple reports and we know that only one died and from what I have pieced together, Kennedy, the other one, was thrown from the explosion and so he got largely clear, both started suffering from lung problems.

A Just Kennedy, as I recall he is from Maine, and he was standing, as I recall from him telling the story a year or two later, basically at the top of the silo an explosion threw him out. They took us out to the site three days later, four days later, and I'm still not sure to this day I can describe to you what I saw and do it justice. Imagine, if you will, that building right there at the edge of the street just looking straight up there, there were pieces of concrete blown out the size of that building. And I remember when I first saw it, I'm going what is that and I took a look at it a little bit closer, and it's concrete, you know, and probably the biggest chunk of concrete that was blown out of the ground was the size of that building. Over the next several months -- let me back up and tell you the ruse that they did on the warhead, the warhead landed in a ditch several yards away from the silo itself. The Air Force radio chatter here in the night kept referring to "it." They never called it a warhead, they called it "it." And at one point we were led to believe that the warhead had been taken out by helicopter. A couple of days after the incident they had a flatbed truck come up that had a big, huge metal container on it, there were police escort in front and back of it, supposedly the warhead was in that. I never knew really whether to believe that or not. It made for a great story to tell at the time. But the warhead, we were told was taken to a facility where they disarm weapons out in west Texas, I think it was west of Oklahoma City actually. There's a federal prison west of Oklahoma City, there's a military post west of Oklahoma City and supposedly that's where they took the warhead. Over the course of the next several months, I went to several military briefings, debriefings at the Little

Rock Air Force base and that's where the missile wing was stationed and during the Reagan administration they decided to disarm the systems.

Q How did the explosion affect both the countryside and the people?

A It's interesting from a standpoint, when those missiles were put in, you've got to remember this was during the Cold War and I think -- I don't want to say that it didn't affect the countryside any because where it is up there right now they have filled it in and you would never know that there was a missile site there now unless you drove up to it. The only reason I know it's there is the cattle guard is still there where you would cross in there. I can't remember how long the shifts were, but the Airmen that were stationed there in the silo, they were in there for like two weeks at a time and whenever the shift changes, the ones that were going in, they would stop at the little country store and get snacks and stuff on their way in so a lot of the military personnel were friendly, if you will, to the neighbors who were up and down through there. And then we started having the leaks, the oxidized leaks, that happened at Damascus, and that happened at several locations. I think that is when it started getting people's attention a little bit. And when the Damascus accident blew up, I think it actually scared the hell out of everybody. There were lawsuits filed right and left after Damascus, families were saying that the fuel burned their lungs that night and I think all that stuff settled out of court years ago. I'm not sure I can give you a fair answer on that because I think it really just scared people for a while and I think their nerves were actually calmed a little bit when the site was shut down.

Q Did people have any objections or worries both before and after this incident?

A I think everybody had their worries, now objections, I don't recall any. I think everybody worried some. I grew up near one northwest of Morrilton that was about two and a half, three miles from my house and never gave it a second thought. The only reason we ever knew it was

there was when the Air Force helicopters were circling it when they landed up there. I can't say that we ever worried about it. It was just there, we knew that it was there.

Q Do you know anything about any of the other Arkansas missile accidents like the oxidizer leak in 1978 or the Camden fire in 1965?

A The Camden fire?

Q There was a fire, we haven't been able to get a lot of information, but we learned there was a fire at a missile site at or near Camden?

A Searcy.

Q Searcy.

A I was a little guy. That occurred, did you say '65? I'm not sure about that date. I was seven or eight years old. There were several people here in Conway that were working at that site in Searcy. In fact, there were, I think four or five people in Conway that actually died from that. I had an uncle that was working up there at that missile base. They were all under construction at that time and I don't really know enough to talk about it. I remember it happening. You said '78? One of you said 1978. I think 1978, '77, '78 was about the time we were starting to see the disintegration of the missile program. That's when we started seeing the leaks. Damascus had had a leak about six months or so before the explosion. There was one missile base north of Plumerville north of Interstate 40. There was another one, as I recall, near Quitman there. So we were starting to see a little bit of that at that time. The problem was that when that stuff was reported the Air Force had already gone in and fixed it and was reporting it after the fact. That's all good and fine, but tell people what's going on. That's where the Air Force was not being up front and to their credit, they finally came around after Damascus. That was the good thing that came out of it. We saw cooperation out of the United States Air Force



after Damascus that we had never seen before. They started mingling and visiting with the neighbors more and they knew what was going on. It really eased tension quite a bit.

Q How do you feel about the secrecy surrounding the production and storage of nuclear waste and weapons?

A I don't have an opinion on that, in fact, I don't think I'm even qualified to answer that.

Q We were just curious because the other part of our website is largely about Rocky Flats and the nuclear production that was going on there.

A Right. Let me give you a couple of other things about the Type II systems. We talked about all the things that happened here in Arkansas. Back up a little bit, Google Rock, Kansas, there was a Type II missile that exploded up there. That was one that started getting everybody's attention a little bit. There was another one, let's see, it was Kansas, Arizona and Arkansas that had Type II as I recall. I want to say there was an incident at the one in Arizona as well. The one in Rock, Kansas should have been a real red flag to the government that the Type II systems were in trouble. And there was a Type II missile on Highway 65 north of Conway in a little community called Springhill, two incidents out there. One, we had a protestor that went through the fence and got on top of the silo and the military, they came up here from Little Rock Air Force base and he started pouring Holy water all over the silo and his name was Richard Sauder and he was Jewish and he was really stirred up about nuclear weapons, specifically the Type II. So they arrested him, took him into custody, basically slapped his hands. He came back a few months later and he was going to try to do it again, the local sheriff met him up there and he said you cannot go on this property, if you step over this line we will take you into custody. I don't know enough about his religion and why he felt he had to do this, but he marched around the outer fence of that silo at Springhill one Sunday afternoon 33 times. I stood there and watched

every one of them. It was muddy, it was swampy and he would come back to there where he started, he had a gold cross and he would kneel to one knee and he would hold that cross up to that silo like that and then he would say a prayer and then he would march all the way around it again. As a result of Damascus, I got told a lot of weird stuff like that.

Q I read a couple of news reports from local newspapers on the '78 oxidizer leak and it had caused several problems, too, because it showed problems with the Air Force because they warned people in the area but they didn't do it thoroughly and a farmer called John Stacks was out working with his cows and he thought the orangish cloud was just smoke from a fire.

A It probably affected the milk of his cow, too, didn't it? As I recall, he filed a lawsuit against the government that contended that that cloud of oxidizer, if you will, affected the milk that his cows produced.

Q I think it might have even killed a few of his cows.

A You're ringing a bell pretty good with me. I think you're right.

Q And he worked about three hours in the cloud or so?

A He was out there for a while.

Q And from the official report I've read on oxidizers, just a few minutes in there can leave you feeling bad.

A As I recall, if you breathe it, it leaves a burning sensation in your lungs and in your nose and that sort of thing. It really, really irritates as I recall.

Q According to the news reports, he suffered from headaches for at least two years after Damascus.

A Did he live in Quitman? I think he and a bunch of people that live in the Quitman area filed a lawsuit with the Air Force over that. But to give you an idea of just how much attention this

thing got, we went from being a pretty sleepy community in the county until 3:03 a.m. on September 19, 1980. And that night on the nightly news it was the lead story on NBC, CBS and ABC. Vice-president Mondale was in Hot Springs, Arkansas that morning. There was talk of him trying to come up here. We had people calling from all over the country. I had a piece of audio describing that missile explosion that we had it set up at the office because we were getting so many calls from around the country wanting sound and voice that's on it. We provided audio to NBC, CBS, ABC news, radio stations in New York, Tampa, Los Angeles, San Francisco, I mean the list was just endless, the Log Cabin Democrat newspaper got a call from the Daily Times in London wanting a report of what was going on. We kind of got thrown into the world's stage pretty abruptly to say the least. I told people, I said I considered myself a college student until September 20, 1980, and then I grew up a little bit.