

# Donald Stafford Palmer

Interviewed by Judy Hansen  
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My name is Donald Stafford Palmer, United States Air Force. I served as an aircraft mechanic Instructor and mechanic from January 1956 to September 1959.

I have one ancestor who was a 49'er that came through Salt Lake City in 1849 or 1850 just after the Saints got here. One of his traveling companions on the trip west is buried on top of Echo Canyon. They made their wagon look like a boat so when they got to the water they could just use it like a boat with oars. They made it to California and my Grandfather Ambrose Palmer became the Sherriff of Caleveras County California during the gold rush if you can imagine what that scene was like. Some guy that he was partners with has written the history and the church has it. It can be found on-line.



My Grandmother Bakken came over from Norway during the Land Grant time<sup>1</sup>. If you had 160 acres and you farmed it, it became yours. Her brothers Gabriel, Siegfried, and Annie; my grandmother all got 160 acres west of Williston, North Dakota. We recently found out their property is called the Bakken Old Field. Grandma had 160 acres right there in the 1900 census with her two brothers and their 160 acres on top of the oil dome that is now the big oil field. Of course the mineral rights have been sold away but the whole oil field is named after the Bakken family.

I was born in Williston, North Dakota on October 6, 1936 the son of Elbert Henry Palmer and Susie Amanda Morkve. I was the brother of my three sisters; Bernice, Betty, and Alice. We lived in a home that my father built in Williston in the 1920's. It is still there today bordered along the sidewalk to the front door with cement tulips. It was so cold there dad said the real tulips would never make it.

In 1946 our family moved to Lehi, Utah so dad could continue his interest in raising mink where there was a fur breeders cooperative to mix and make feed for his animals when it wasn't so darn cold. My father worked for the Bureau of Reclamation during WW II and raised mink and foxes as a second job.

They purchased five acres of ground; on which sat a cinder block home just to the east of Lowell and Thelda Brown on 500 North. The overpass that comes down by the seminary building covers much of

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<sup>1</sup> Homestead Act of 1862

those five acres today. The south boundary was adjacent to land owned by Neil and Erma Larsen. The old Bamberger track right-of-way was just south of their property which the fifth east road is today.

I started school in the elementary building where the Legacy center is today and at the old High school where the fire house and the Library are now. I really liked my school years here in Lehi. I can remember some of my great teachers; Mrs. Southwick, Lloyd Gurney, and Basil Dorton and his famous wood ruler!

My high school years were a blast playing basketball, baseball, football and some track. I can still hear Dean Prior calling for us to hit so hard he could hear the collision sound. During one practice someone ran into the goal post and the sound vibrated the pole and rang out over the whole field. Dean came running over and yelled, "Now that is what I want, hear that?"

We played basketball when Lars Peterson was our coach. I still remember being at the gym every Saturday morning from the eighth grade to the time we finished high school. We would always have a game of 'HOARSE' with the coach and we would never win! I remember the time I was running a track; a 440 relay, when the sole of my shoe came off enough to flop with every step. Lars was laughing so hard at my plight that after the race he came up to me and complimented me on, "Way to pick 'em up and lay 'em down Don."

I remember the fun times we had with our traveling assembles and our dances. It was fun to decorate the gym for the Junior Prom and the Senior Hop. I remember Bud Hutchings would come and play big band music with his orchestra and our promenade. The traveling assembles were held at the other high schools in our region and I had the opportunity to act as the MC for our school.

Of the great teachers I had at the high school none made a greater impression on me than E.N. Pearson, our wood shop teacher. I learned so much from him I wanted to be just like him and become an industrial arts teacher. After graduating from high school I enrolled in college at Utah State University in Logan, Utah. I shared an apartment with Glade Peterson from Lehi and the little house we shared only had a wood stove to keep us warm. It was a battle each morning to see who would get up and start the stove.

I remember riding back and forth to Logan with my buddies Lewis Berry, Paul Peterson, and Carey Peterson all from Lehi. Lewis's mom would bake the most scrumptious caramel cakes to send with us and not many of them ever made it. I went to school there with Gary F Evan and others from Lehi. We played intermural basketball and shared many good times together. I was enrolled in college until the end of the quarter of 1955.

I joined the U.S. Air force at Fort Douglas in January of 1955. I traveled to Parks Air Force base by train from Salt Lake City. Parks was near Oakland, California and it was very rainy for my boot camp experience. I was with a flight of airmen from Utah and Idaho for the first few weeks of my training. After marching around in the rain and mud for many days, I contracted pneumonia and was sent to the hospital on base. I remember the guy we called the vampire who would show up at our bed side every

day for our blood. I heard this loud thump one day and one of my friends had passed out and had hit the floor. We hated that vampire guy!

Because I was delayed by my hospital experience, my flight from Utah and Idaho had moved on without me. I was reassigned to a flight with airmen from Watts, Los Angeles, California and some big Scandinavians from Minneapolis, Minnesota. There were fights in the latrine every night between these two groups and all I could do was pull the covers over my head and never take sides in the confrontation (he laughs). They broke that latrine to pieces more than once I'll tell you! It was a struggle to make it out of that group because I was not from Minnesota and I was not from Watts. These men were all black and it was quite an experience. They had enough going on that they pretty much left me alone. Once in a while, they would lift up my blanket, look under there, and say, "Are you OK?" And I'd tell them I was OK just getting a little sleep. I never got in a confrontation with any of them. I never took sides with either group because I didn't want to get pounded on.

From there I was sent to Amarillo Air Force Base via Winslow, Arizona. We flew down there in a C-47; a rickety old thing. It's a wonder it made it. It took a day or so to get there. We landed in Winslow and I remember how bleak that was. There was nothing but sagebrush and tumbleweeds. They gave us something to drink and then loaded us back on for the remainder of the trip.

When we got to Amarillo they put us in the barracks. I remember going in there that night and there was about ½ inch of dirt on the bed. That was an experience I've just never forgot. We shook the dust off, went to bed, and started our training. For me it was mechanics; that was the area I tested high in. I went to work on F-86's which were single engine jet fighters with a radar nose. They had a thing that looked like a nose on them but they had radar capability. While I was attending school in that they looked at my records and saw that I had training in teaching when I started Utah State because I was there for four quarters. They could see on my record that I wanted to be a teacher. They said, "We are in need of help over on the B-47 school side retraining airmen into the mechanics field." They asked me if I was interested in helping with that and I said, "Sure" because I was on orders to be shipped to Japan. I was going to go there and work as a crew chief working on single engine jets. When I went there I found out that I was working with civilian teachers. As an Airman 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> class; I can't remember the dates but I was right there with college graduates and civilian employees teaching fourteen different systems on B-47 which was a lot of fun. I learned a lot. I was just telling DeAnn today the people really treated me nice and if I ever needed help they would come and assist me. It was an experience for a YOUNG airman teaching Master Sergeants and Technical Sergeants about B-47 airplanes and the maintenance that needed to be done on them. I did not have a lot of training on the B-47. I had done quite a bit of training on the F-86 single engine jets and my career track there was to work as a crew chief; the guy that takes care of the plane. That's what I would have been doing had I gone to Japan working on the fighters instead of the bombers.

When I went over to the bombers school they gave me a 13-day crash course on injection seats, fuel systems, hydraulic systems, you name it. Of course it was set in a pattern that they wanted to teach so I worked from the Air Force's instruction sheets which I had done all my life teaching school.

I had been dating DeAnn Walker from Lindon, Utah before I joined the Air Force. Somewhere during 1956 and the beginning of 1957 DeAnn and I decided I'd come home and we'd get married. We were married on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1957. We had gone to Salt Lake to spend our first night together and got half way around the point of the mountain when her sister sat up in the back seat of the car and said, "Surprise!" (They both laugh) I had come home, got married, and we loaded up our belongings (he laughs). DeAnn didn't quite know what we were doing. We were headed back to Amarillo in a little clunker of a car; it was a little Ford. She thought we were going to go visit her parents. You know for two young people being married we had to depend on each other. Once we left Utah in that rickety old car, our work in Amarillo, living right next door above two ladies that were Christian Scientists; who were quite ill and didn't believe in any doctors to help them, it was quite an adventure. DeAnn put up with all that more than I did because I was usually out on the Naval Base. Anyway, we had quite an experience there.

(DeAnn adds) The problem with the base was when he would leave to go there they never knew when they were going to come home. They would keep them there for extra hours or days and they could never call home. That was the hard part and by then I was pregnant and all alone.

We were young and didn't make much. DeAnn got \$91.30 and I got \$50 something every two weeks. We hocked my Elgin watch so many times to try to keep enough food on the table. We had to pull together which is a good thing for young married couples. They've got to depend on one another. We did and we made it through that. We were there for about five or six months.

They closed the school down on B-47; they stopped teaching it there. They reassigned me as a mechanic at Wichita, Kansas so we loaded our little clunker again and headed for Wichita. I was out on the flight line working maintenance on whatever needed to be fixed; tires, hydraulics, lowering and attaching engines, you name it. We did all kinds of stuff up there at the air base on the flight line. I worked a lot at night out there and DeAnn was alone which was kind-of spooky for her.

Our little boy that we lost in the service came along the end of February; premature. Today they would have saved that baby. He was really pre-mature he only weighed 2 pounds 3 ¼ ounce. But anyway that really hurt. (DeAnn adds) The problem was when I went to the hospital that day I was so sick; and I didn't know anything because it was my first baby and no one was around there to help me. They had certain days the men could go see the doctor and certain days the women could see the doctor. I had got sick on the Airmen's day so I just had to go sit in a room until they got done with all the airmen before they took me in. It was really a bad situation and our little guy just didn't make it.

So she was in the hospital and the Elders; Branch President Bryant and T. Bowering Woodbury Mission President of the Central States Mission grabbed me by the arm and said they could help me with the death and burial arrangements of my son. DeAnn was L.D.S. and I was not. I didn't have a clue what to do but they knew what to do and how to proceed. All of my friends were L.D.S. in High School and I think I was the only kid; maybe there was one other kid in the whole Lehi High School that was not L.D.S. A lot of them didn't know I wasn't L.D.S. because I would go to sacrament meeting with them and I would go to scouting. In High School they treated me really well and from that T. Bowering Woodbury

taught me the gospel. A friend from Alpine; Bill Moeller who just passed away here last October, was an airman first class; a Buck Sargent is what we called 'em. He was a gifted man as far as talking his way into anything and had some pull. They did help me; he and Dale Peterson from California who were both good members of the church got me under their wing and taught me too. We went to church together and then I was baptized out there in Kansas at Wichita.

We did some fun things. Bill Moeller was in charge of the swimming pools; all of them, the Officer's and the enlisted man's swimming pools as a life guard. This was kind-of near the end of my experience there. I had worked the flight line doing about everything a mechanic can do. We'd see each other every Sunday and he asked me if I wanted to come over and work at the pool. I said, "They won't let me do that" and he said, "No, let me see what I can do." (He laughs) Like I told you, Bill could talk anybody into anything and pretty soon I get orders to report to the Officers Swimming Pool. This was in the first of the summer when it was just getting started so all my last summer there I was a full-time life guard with Bill and Dale; L.D.S. guys out at the Officers pool. I was a good swimmer and could have pulled any one out of the pool if needed. I had a great summer. What a fun time we had. We laughed and joked.

But about that time I had applied to be released from the Air Force and that is why it doesn't say four years, it says three years and six or eight months. I applied to go to BYU to get into school that September. The order came through and they approved that so I got out three months early from my four year obligation.

We came home, we were married, had lived in Wichita, I'd joined the church, we'd had done a little mission. We had a real smooth wonderful time together as members of the church because we immediately had a family to be around us and friends down there all in Wichita, Kansas. We used to sing at the church house right next door to another church house. The windows would both be open in the summer time and we'd try to out-sing each other (both he and his wife laugh).

We were called on a little mission. I had just received the Priesthood; I think I was called as a Priest. I had gone quite quickly through Deacon, Teacher, and Priest. They called us to do some work as missionaries. We found the Walter Ewers family; we don't know where they are now and they would be quite old if they are still alive. We helped the Lord convert them so we had some missionary experience right from the get-go and we really enjoyed that. About everybody out there was a missionary. I don't think we had a missionary tag. I think they just put us out there and told us to go work with families that we found. I don't know how we became in touch with the Ewers. Mr. Ewers was really a large fellow. The day we baptized him we had to jury-rig two pairs of white pants so we could put them on him. We finally got him pinned together with these white pants and baptized him. Dale Peterson and Bill Moeller baptized him in a font that was green cement. They had just poured it but it was hard enough they could fill it with water. They walked out across it on a plank and he was stitched together; however we did that and baptized him and his wife. We were there for the baptism of those two great people.

At noon all the guys would play volleyball in the hanger. The B-47's that I was working on and taught school on were quite large. It was just the predecessor to the B-52 bombers; the big dudes. The hanger was big enough you could put six bombers in it. That particular airplane had a canopy like a small jet

fighter would have. The canopy opened upward like a hinge. There were six of them in there when we were playing volley ball at lunch time which we always did. Somehow the ball got spiked, hit the floor, bounce up, and hit the handle of the manual water. In case of fire or emergency you could pull that handle and it would open up everything in the hung hanger. Well, we all just kind-of looked at each other because we could hear these gears turning. It was making a grinding noise and then ***all of a sudden*** we looked down and we were standing in six inches of water (Everyone laughs). I looked over because we were standing between two airplanes and there was water going through the canopy and down the ladder they used to get into the airplane. It was like Niagara Falls going down through there. The airplanes were just soaked and we; OH MAN did we get in trouble. That ended the playing volley ball in the hanger. It's a wonder we all survived. Those Officers did not know what to do and they got a severe reprimand; and we did to. I think the Officers and Sergeants probably got demoted. We were never allowed to play in there again. I'll always remember that. What an experience.

Another experience happened to me down in Amarillo Air Force base we were out for Armed Services day. They had done some fly-overs with their jets and bands played. We were all standing there at attention waiting to pass and review. Some guys came in on a F-84 which was just like a stove pipe with wings on it; it is an old-old jet just after the Korean war. Well, two of them came in just perfect and taxied around to the side. Here comes this third guy and we're all standing there watching this and he gets too far down the runway where he landed and he could not stop. So he goes right off the end of the runway and snags the fence that guards the base from route 66; the national highway, and drags this fence with him (he laughs). He gets out there and finally there is so much weight of this fence being drug behind him that he comes to a stop. Then you see this jettison that throws the canopy off and it goes sailing in the air, this pilot jumps up and runs out there about 50 yards, stops and looks at that. Of course we're trying to maintain some decorum in the ranks (he laughs) and it wasn't possible. We were all laughing so hard (he laughs again). I'll never forget that Officer running out there looking at his jet with all the fence hanging off the wings (everybody laughs). There again you know someone got reprimanded for that one. We thought it was funny!

The blacks didn't like each other. They fought amongst themselves. Our flight as we were marching had a colored fellow that was well built; big strong guy. He was trying to guide us down this parade route and somebody in the back said something smart. He walked back there and we thought he was just going to chew 'em out. He knocks this guy flat on the tarmac right there in front of the whole group. I thought, "How in the world can he do that, he's the guide-on-barrier." He was in charge of that whole flight of marching airmen (he laughs). Knocked him colder than an icicle, they hauled him off, and we continued on with our parade. In the barracks they did not like each other and they had some serious consequences from that. It wasn't as bad among the mixed races but the blacks they sure fought a lot with each other. We do have to be sensitive when we tell this kind of stuff now-a-days.

I remember one day I went out to do a parade again; it was probably another Armed Services Parade. I borrowed somebody's hat because I couldn't find my blue hat that you wore as Air Force. I either borrowed one or got one that was too small. That guy that comes lookin' at us said, "You don't look right Airman. What hat have you got?" I says, (he laughs) "I got the hat that I could find," and he says, "That hat's too small and it sticks up there ...(motions his hands over his ears)... like terrible." He says,

“Come with me, fall out.” So I went over around the corner of the hanger and they filled in the gap where I was. He said, “We don’t need you so home (he laughs). “ So I didn’t have to stand out on that tarmac for a whole half a day or more just because the hat wasn’t lookin’ quite right. I thought, “OK, next time I’ll wear the small hat.”

We had a great time. I worked the night shift for a while in the tire shop. One of the airmen was concerned for his wife because we were out at the base at night. He bought her a .22 pistol. He said now if anyone comes and messes around with our trailer house just warn them and then let them have it. He had come home one night and I guess he didn’t follow procedure or something and the minute he touched that door handle she shot three holes in that door (he laughs). She didn’t kill him but she came close. The story that went around a few days was he got her a pistol and she used it on him. There were things like that happening all the time.

Brent Dorton was a year younger than me playing basketball all the years as a sophomore, junior, and senior at Lehi High. I remember standing in Wichita at the mess hall and opening the letter that said Brent had been to Lake Powell, they had gotten out of the boat, and the boat blew away from ‘em. Brent drowned that day. Brent was a friend of mine and we used to pal around a little bit. That was a sad day. Brent had a lot of good qualities.

We had a great time together in our marriage, we took good care of each other, we learned a lot of things. I was growing in the gospel. I came home and Vern Webb ordained me an Elder. We went to the temple in 1960 and were sealed. All of our children were born in the covenant. We have five daughters that are all active in the church. Diane Cardon lives right here married to Lane Cardon. She is our third daughter and is the head secretary down here at the Lehi High School. Our oldest; Deia Burton is teaching school in Cedar City. She got her degree. They are ranchers that live in Parawon but she teaches school. What a genealogist she is. Debbie is a flight attendant for American Airlines. She is married to a fellow who is involved in financial stuff and is a basketball official. Donna, our fourth daughter lives in Draper and her husband is the CEO of the University of Utah Hospital. He was hurt very seriously in a bicycle accident out in Tooele in one of those ironman things. They didn’t know they were going to save him. The Lord intervened there because he was hurt very seriously. He was critical for a while and we are lucky to have him. Our last daughter is Danaca Hadfield. She is married to John Hadfield who owns Hadfield Construction Company. We have two Miss Lehi’s and a 1<sup>st</sup> runner up to Miss Utah in our daughters. We are proud of our family and feel blessed to have them.

I went to BYU and graduated in Industrial Education and then in 1968 I also got my Master’s at BYU. I got a job and taught at Murray Jr. High and then went across the street and taught at the High School. I taught thirty-three years in Murray, Utah. I also served five years at the Missionary training Center and then we were called a year and a half before the Mount Timpanogos Temple was finished to serve on the committee and got to watch it all being built. We were the first couple to go on the walkthrough to time everything and took the first tour through. We served a mission in Ireland and also in the Seminary down here in Lehi for two years. We were an experimental couple.

(This interview transcription was not edited by Don)