The Ageless Airmen

From the Mississippi cotton fields to classified communications

BY JEFF WOOD

LIFE IS ONLY AS GOOD AS YOU'RE WILLING TO MAKE IT, and Lesley H. Ratcliff has made the most of his and then some. His life has taken him from the farms of the Mississippi cotton fields to the high-ranking position as Senior Master Sergeant of the United States Air Force. He is an active Mason and Shriner, and he has raised a family of three children, nine grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren, which he sees as his greatest accomplishment in a long line of achievements.

Born on January 26th, 1932 in Auburn, Mississippi, Ratcliff was the second youngest of nine brothers and sisters. His entire world was working as a farmer with his mother and father in the Mississippi fields, raising cotton, corn, and sugar cane to provide for his family. “Everything we ate, we grew it,” recalled Ratcliff. “We were way out in the country. Milked our own cows. Everything. We had a little country store about two miles out where we’d buy bread and sugar, but the rest of our food, we raised.” Farming and family was the only life he knew. In fact, the first time Les Ratcliff ventured out of the countryside and into a town was when he was 13-years-old. “It was 20-some miles [into town], and we had no transportation. We use to go by horse-and-buggy, but I wasn’t quite old enough then. But when I did, it was a real eye-opener. It was one of the reasons I joined the Air Force, so I could see and see what was going on,” detailed Ratcliff.

It was this desire to see the world that led Ratcliff to join the Air Force in December of 1951, and after basic training, he attended teletype school in February at the E.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Shortly after graduating, he was assigned to Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama where he met his wife Violet J. Wiles, affectionately known as Jo. She was in the Air Force as well.

In telecommunication, I got to see the world, and I grew up actually. I was stationed in England for three years. I was able to take my family with me, and we enjoyed our time there...but the biggest enjoyment of being a part of the Air Force was that it made a different person out of me. I was now aware of what was going on in the world and molded right in with it. Nobody knew I was a country boy,” shared Ratcliff.

His job in communications was not one to be taken lightly. Along with his traveling to places like England, Greenland and Tokyo, Japan, his work was at the highest level, and it’s still classified to this day. “I was in charge of Air Force communications between bases and commanders. It was all classified information, I can’t really talk too much about it. Basically, when a secured message came through a base, it was our job to relay it to them and encrypt it or whatever had to be done. So I was in charge of all of it at the communication center, which included in most cases, telephone, teletype and crypto,” explained Ratcliff.

His service to our country as the Senior Master Sergeant lasted for 22 years and four months, and he garnered numerous medals and awards, like the Meritorious Service Medal, the Joint Service Commendation Medal, the Air Force Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Air Force Longevity Service Award and Outstanding Unit Award. His services were also supportive during the Korean War.

When he retired in June, 1973, Ratcliff took his good fortune and experience from the Air Force onto other jobs, like working as a real estate agent for 20 years and opening his own successful real estate company “Ratcliff and Associates.” Though, Lesley would sell his business and dedicate his life to taking care of his late wife Jo, who suffered an aneurism in 1992 and passed away in 1997. Lesley met and married his second wife, Elizabeth, in 1998, adopting her daughters Debra and Jo Ann. “We went along real well and I kindly adopted them as my daughters, and they adopted me as their dad,” shared Lesley happily, proudly adding that, “Debra works in a dental clinic and is a world champion inline skater, and Jo Ann has her own business installing drapes. Elizabeth passed away in the fall of 2012, prompting Lesley’s move into Independence Hill.”

With all his achievements and immense life experience, one would think it’d be difficult to pinpoint a favorite award or honor. Though, Lesley’s finest work has been as an active Mason, which led to his work as a Shriner as well. “They say it’s a secret organization, but really we help crippled children, burn hospital kids and blind children. People who can’t afford the care, we help them.”

When children get burned or need care, we put them in the hospital and it costs them nothing. We pay for everything,” he beamed Lesley proudly.

Now a resident of Independence Hill Assisted Living, Les Ratcliff is still doing a lot of good for our community with his work as a Shriner, still attending regular meetings about once or twice a month. Independence Hill was asked to participate in the Ageless Aviation Foundation Dream flight and last year, Les accepted the chance to fly in a 1940s Stedman plane. “They came here and asked if any veterans would like to go up and fly in their plane, so I volunteered. It was in November of last year, coldest day of that year, and we went up in that plane. It was an open cockpit, the air and the wind was hitting you in the face but it was still a thrill. We’re going again next month,” recalled Les with a smile.

“Life at Independence Hill Assisted Living could not be better, everyone on staff is fantastic. I looked at several places before making my decision, but once I walked in and saw the beautiful atriums full of trees, plants and water features, it was like being in a park. I love the outdoors so the atriums, as well as my own patio, afforded me the opportunity to continue to enjoy that feeling,” explained Lesley. In a life of many amazing achievements, Les Ratcliff believes the family he raised is what he is most proud of. All of his three children went on to also become up-standing citizens with major contributions to society as well. His youngest son is the senior vice-president of Jefferson State Bank, his oldest son handles the computer systems for the federal court system all over the United States, and his daughter is a public speaker and had her own radio show.

“I feel like the luckiest guy in the country. I started out as a poor boy in Mississippi, picking cotton, to being here and doing all the things I’ve accomplished. I’ve got a loving family that still gets together every Christmas — and I mean everybody, all the kids, grandkids — they come from all over to San Antonio. That, to me, means more than anything. I feel like I set a good example for them to follow, and they all went on to be very successful. I’m really proud of my kids the most. They’ve all done good.”