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# Merv Lawton

**Interviewed by: Jean McDowell November 2001 at Moab, Utah**

**Merv:** This is Merv Lawton. In 1922, I was born in Cape Town, South Africa. I did all my schooling, private school, preparatory school and high school in Cape Town, which is right at the southwestern tip of South Africa. About the time that I was finishing school, World War II was starting. I was too young to join up at that time and my parents did not want me to join up.

I had decided that I would go to University and do a course in mining, engineering and geology and I went to Johannesburg to the Witwatersrand University, as it was one of the premier mining Universities in the world, it and McGill and then Rolla in the United States, but I could not stay there with the war going on. So, before the end of the year, I made arrangements to join the South African Air Force. I went back to University until the end of the year, wrote my first year exams, and then joined the South African Air Force in Pretoria, South Africa. I then went through the various stages of training and graduated with my wings, then moved to a camp where we waited to go North. A number of us were asked whether we would like to go to North Africa or go to England.

Most of us felt that England would be the place to go if you were interested in fighting because we thought that something would happen from England, either going overseas into Europe as they did or the Germans making an effort to come into England. However, there was no South African Administrative staff in England so I was seconded to the Royal Air Force to serve under their direction. Unfortunately the boat that was meant to take us to England was sunk on its way into Cape Town. They did not know when there would be another boat to take us over so they said, "Well, you'll just have to go up North." Okay, that'll do fine. Then they said, "Well what do you want to do now? You are seconded to the Royal Air Force. Do you want to desecund?" The majority of us again said "no" because we believed that being in the Royal Air Force and being on a Royal Air Force squadron we would probably get the latest aircraft before the South African Air Force would get them. So we went up North and did more advanced training in North Africa, serving with the Royal Air

Force at that stage. The Royal Air Force had a special training program and we had all different nationalities on the course. There were Canadians, South Africans, New Zealanders, Australians, Rhodesians- it was a real mix. This was great because you got a lot of different opinions from all over the world and it was a happy family.

I went to Italy and participated in the Anzio landings out of an airport near Naples. We gradually moved North and eventually I was with a squadron that alternated between the East coast and the West coast of Italy, depending on where there was going to be a major push. We did some work for the covering of the South of France invasion because the Spitfires of our squadron were special high-flying models that could get up to the altitude of the German reconnaissance planes that were taking photographs of the West coast to see what was going to happen in terms of an invasion and when it was going to come.

**Q: Were you a pilot?**

A: I was a pilot. The Spitfires were a single-seater. You don't have another helper in there. You're on your own. I stayed on the West coast for the South of France invasion and it wasn't too long after that that the War in Italy and France terminated and I, at that time, was at an airport in Venice. I stayed on there at the request of the Air Force to manage that field and all the movement of troops coming into Venice (mainly the American troops seeing Venice and that area before coming back to the United States to be released from the service).

**Q: Back to the United States?**

A: Yes, There were a lot of the American forces on the West coast and the Allies ... British forces, South Africans and others ... were on the East coast. The American High command offered to let some of the troops from the Western side come over to the East side and see places like Venice before coming home. I operated the airport that handled all those planes coming in with all the tourists.

**Q: Well, did you go to the United States?**

A: No, no, I was in the airport in Venice. I was then on my way home and moving down to southern Italy when a number of the people that were in the base camp on the southeast coast of Italy - South Africans also about to come home - were able to get permission to go up to northern Italy and have a look at it before they came home. So I joined them because I knew the north area pretty well from the various airports that I'd been stationed at. Well, we did a little bit more than we were supposed to do. We forged papers saying, "Please allow so-and-so and Major so-and-so and Major so-and-so and Major so-and so to get through to their destination. They are on a very special operation." Well, that helped us. It got us right through Northern Italy into Germany to Berchtesgaden. We went further north. Managed a few trips to Berlin, made a little bit of money there to keep going by helping the Germans in Berlin getting some liquor from the British zone.

Then there was an accident. We'd stopped by the side of the road and a convoy coming out of Berlin going West ran into the back of our staff car and wrote it off so we had to find a way to get back to Italy. Eventually we managed to get a staff car from Montgomery's headquarters. They gave us one. They were very, very cooperative. I must say that when we got back to base camp in Italy there were lots of questions asked. "Where did that staff car come from?" And for years afterward there were queries. "How did we get hold of that staff car." It was a bit of a joke, actually. But, nevertheless, nothing transpired that was adverse to any one of us.

**Q: It sounds like you had a good time after the war but what about when you were fighting? How did it seem?**

A: Well, you had a job to do and we did it. Initially we were doing fighter work but the numbers of German aircraft in the area gradually diminished so we started carrying bombs on our Spitfires and dive bombing with them.

**Q: So you didn't seem to get shot at much?**

A: Oh, we got shot at much. One day I was hit by anti-aircraft fire when I was climbing up from doing my bombing run. I had to climb up because of our radio, We had to be fairly high in order to get the radio message right back to base because of the mountains.

**Q: What did the anti-aircraft do to your plane?**

A: Well, the main part was that some of the shrapnel hit the radiators. I started losing all my coolant. And I knew the engine wouldn't last long enough for me to get back to our own lines, flying south over the mainland.

**Q: So where did you land?**

A: The shortest distance to get to "friendly territory" was to head east to the Adriatic and come down in the sea and trust that our air-sea rescue would pick me up.

**Q: So you did go down at sea?**

A: Yup. I got a couple of miles out to sea and that's when the motor failed and seized up, so I had to get out into the parachute and I came down in the sea. It was quite an experience. I got into the sea, got out of my parachute, and blew up my little dinghy that we carried with us, got in my dinghy and just sat down in the dinghy while the rest of my squadron was circling overhead. Then a little bit later on I heard the air-sea rescue amphibian. It was an old type of aircraft. It was called a "Walrus" and it landed on the sea. It was a nice calm day, no trouble there, and it came to where I was in the dinghy and I got out into the amphibian. Then we tried to take off and, for some reason, the engine wasn't giving its true power so it couldn't get off the water. So we decided that there was only one thing to do, to taxi back on the water, heading down parallel to the coast, and sometime during the night we would get to a position where we could go to the land and be behind our own lines. So that was our plan.

Well, round about one o'clock in the morning, we were rather alarmed when a lot of gunfire started coming towards us and hit the aircraft, hit the fuel tank, the walrus caught fire. So the three of us (the two people- the pilot and the co-pilot of the rescue

aircraft -and myself) we had to jump into the water and swim away from this burning aircraft. Now it wasn't too long before we could hear these motor boats and they were coming up towards us and we decided, well, there wasn't much we could do about it. So we just called out to them and they picked us up and it just happened that they weren't German boats. They were British boats. In the dark they'd wanted to switch their searchlight on to light us up but the searchlight, for some reason or other, wouldn't come on so they opened fire because they presumed that we were Germans laying mines in the area to try and damage our warships that had been coming up the coast to shell the mainland. So they picked us up.

We asked them if they were going to take us back to port and they said, "No, no, no, we can't go back yet. We've got to make amends for what we've done. You'll have to stay for the length of this operation tonight." Oh, very well. There were two of these motor torpedo boats. We were in the lead boat and then, at about two o'clock in the morning, there was a great big explosion and the boat behind us (the rear boat) had its stern blown off by a mine. Apparently what had happened was there were some floating mines around and the bow wave from our boat pushed the mine out and then it swung back in again and hit the back boat.

**Q: Did it get the people in it?**

A: Well, they lost a few, they lost a few that were probably blasted into the water and we couldn't find them so then they decided that this was it. We're going home now. They took the damaged boat in tow and started back for safe harbor. Well, we got back safely and so that was three events all in the period of one afternoon.....shot down, bailed out into the sea, the air-sea rescue craft getting blown up, picked up by British motor torpedo boats, the motor torpedo boat got blown up and then we went home! It was in British papers. They called him "Three-time loser."

**Q: So then you went on and had the good time touring Europe in the borrowed staff car?**

A: Yeah, that's right. We saw a little bit more of Germany and we went up the Nuremberg trials where Goering and all these senior people were on trial. We went there as a visitor. We were able to get in. And then we went home to Italy and South Africa.

**Q: Then you went home. What did you do when you got home?**

A: Went back to University and realized that I'd forgotten everything that I'd learned in that first year so I decided to start off again from scratch and start off first year again. Luckily I had a fair number of passes from my year before joining the Air Force so I didn't have to take all the subjects. There were a few I had to take. So I could concentrate on those.

**Q: What was your family like? What class? Were they wealthy or not? Or professional?**

A: No, my dad was an attorney. One brother also was in my dad's attorneys office and I had another brother who was a barrister. We lost him in the war. He was killed in Italy. The other brother who was in my dad's office was killed in an aircraft on volunteer work after the War, up in Rhodesia. He was in the Air Force reserve. They had a crash. So that's basically two brothers. My third brother was in Burma at the time of the Japanese invasion and he went through the Burma campaign and got into India. He was a mining engineer in Burma mining tin and, due to his knowledge of mining, he was seconded from the army where he was made an intelligence officer because of his knowledge of the country. He was seconded from the army to the mines in Rajasthan to manage some of these mines in order to keep up production. Then he went back to South Africa and got back into the mining business in South Africa after the war was over.

**Q: So your degree that you finally got was in mining?**

A: Yes. I got a degree in mining and I worked at a mine west of Johannesburg.

**Q: What kind of a mine?**

A: It was mainly a gold mine but it also produced uranium as a by-product. It was somewhat different from the mines around here in that there were a number of superimposed veins and the uppermost veins had uranium as well as gold. What they did was basically mine for gold and all costs for mining which was charged against gold then the tailings, which normally would have gone out to a tailings dump, were bypassed to a uranium extraction plant. So a lot of the costs of mining, crushing and grinding were carried by the gold so the uranium was a by-product and that's how come they were able produce uranium at a really low price.

**Q: So then you went to Canada?**

A: In 1957 they were opening up the uranium mines in Ontario, around a place called Elliott Lake, and the geology of the ore body was different from anything that they had in Canada. Most of the Canadian mines were very, very wide ore bodies and generally vertical and the whole opening underground was completely different from what we had with our gold and uranium in South Africa. But the South African method and geology was very similar to the geology of the Elliott Lake deposit. It belonged to Rio Tinto of Canada originally and then the company changed its name to Rio Algom because these mines were in the Algoma hills of Ontario. The person in charge was a Canadian who had done a lot of mining in South Africa and had been a manager of a number of different mines. He realized that what he needed for mining that uranium were engineers from South Africa that had worked on the gold and uranium mines there so he came back to South Africa and recruited people there.

**Q: You?**

A: Me. So in 1957, with 3 kids at that stage, to Elliott Lake in Canada.

**Q: Did you take time out to get married between...?**

A: I got married in 1951 when I was at the gold/uranium mine in South Africa.

**Q: So you were already a miner? You didn't get married in college?**

A: No, I didn't get married in college. I was already working for that mine when I got married.

**Q: What did you think about going to Canada?**

A: It was great. It was something new and we were getting a little bit tired of just working at this one place in South Africa and felt that a change would be a great thing.

**Q: And you had three kids?**

A: Yeah, plus the fact that we could see that the political situation was going to get worse in South Africa. We didn't want our kids to grow up in that atmosphere. We wanted to get out so we could see what was happening from far away.

**Q: How did apartheid affect you?**

A: I didn't like apartheid at all. I think if I had stayed on in South Africa we probably would have ended up in jail because we did not agree with the government that came into power in 1947.

**Q: So you were more British?**

A: Yes, right. So we operated this one particular mine for Rio Algom Ltd. in Canada until the AEC decided that uranium wasn't quite so important to them. They had put out very, very strict contracts about the amount of uranium that we had to supply to the AEC in the States. Not just the amount but also the time limit ... you had to have ore produced by that date. Rio Algom had about five different mines all running at the same time. But when the A.E.C. found out that the Russians were able to explode an atomic bomb and other nations were also working at it, they decided there wasn't any urgency to this so

basically they changed the contract to that amount of poundage but you were able to extend the time. You didn't have to have the ore produced by a certain date. So what our company did was they essentially closed down four of the mines and kept one going, which happened to be the mine that I was working at. When we were getting near to the end of our production (the ore was getting a little bit too low grade, we'd got most of the high grade out) they started reopening one of the other mines that they'd closed down. When they closed our mine down they moved me up to northern Saskatchewan to open up a copper mine.

So I went up to northern Saskatchewan to a little place on the reservation called La Ronge. It was way, way north and we could expect temperatures for a week or so each winter of about 65<sup>0</sup> below 0<sup>0</sup> F. It was cold. The winters were long, the summers were short. But we had a good time there. We were right on the shore of a lake with wonderful fishing and it was a big lake. Sometimes we'd take our boat from where we were living in town out to the mine which was almost on the waterfront, about 20 miles by sea...by lake from the little village of La Ronge and we'd fish on the way home. Wintertime we'd often drive on the ice across the lake from La Ronge out to the mine.

**Q: So how'd you get transferred to Moab?**

A: There was a law in Canada that said any company that was more than 50% foreign-owned could not open up a new uranium mine in Canada and we were 51% owned by Rio Tinto in London, England. So we could not open up the new mine in Canada but our company realized that the sales were generally coming down to the States. We did produce some that went East to Japan but most of it was coming down to the States. So they started to look for a property down in the States and that's how they came to the States. They were able to get an ore body out in Lisbon Valley, checked it out, and decided it was a "go" operation. It was quite alarming to us as mining people because we'd been used to mining a very competent rock (quartzite), but down here we were going to be 3,000 feet down from the surface in sandstone.

**Q: Did you get involved in building Rio Algom? Constructing it?**

A: Yes. They were putting down two shafts here when I received a telephone message at La Ronge one Saturday morning saying, "Meet us in Moab on Monday." I didn't know why. I'd heard about Moab, about the temperature there, the depth, that it was sandstone which is not as competent as quartzite. Plus the fact that when you put water on it which we always have to do underground to allay the dust especially in a uranium mine - you don't want people breathing the dust - what's it going to be like? How are we going to mine it? So it was quite a problem but we managed it. So I came down here that Monday morning. The director of Rio's underground operations asked, "Do you know why you're here?" and I said, "No, I don't." And he replied, "Well, you're taking over this operation to get it going." So we were it. The major problem there being they'd finished sinking the shafts and they'd been coming across from the one shaft to the other shaft, to make a through connection, and they ran into a water fissure and the mine flooded. They decided that the manager who was in charge at that stage had not done his job so they brought me down and said get on with it.

**Q: So you became the manager?**

A: I became the manager here at the Lisbon Mine.

**Q: How long did this last?**

A: From 1957 until I reached retirement age and that was 1988. I retired in 1988. Well, 1988 when I retired was the time when the existing three man County Commission was in favor of a toxic waste incinerator. The Commission was supporting the erection of a toxic waste incinerator up in the Cisco area.

**Q: I thought you were one of the first..oh, three is what they had before they changed it.**

A: They had three before. I was Chairman of the County Commission when there were three members.

**Q: How did you happen to get into politics?**

A: When people heard that I was retiring, those people that were against the toxic waste incinerator came to me and said “Please help us. Get onto the County Commission and squash the idea of a toxic waste incinerator there.” So the first thing I did was to make a tour of the country to visit toxic waste incinerators to see what they were like. I wasn’t the only one doing it. Some others if I remember correctly... Georgia Hamblin and some others had gone on the same type of a trip. Well, I had a look at them and I realized that it was not for us. They were not good. At that time all three Commissioners were Republicans so I thought, “Well, if I’m going to get on the Commission I don’t think I should go in as a Republican.” So I phoned up the Democratic Party and said, “Would you support me if I declare myself a Democrat?” I think they would have taken anybody, who’d got the experience that I’d got in mining and knew things that could happen if a toxic waste incinerator was erected.

**Q: Now was Sam Cunningham your campaign manager?**

A: To start off Bob Greenburg was my manager but he had to pull out after the primary election and he persuaded Sam to be my campaign manager.

The Commissioners were Jimmy Walker, Dave Knutson, and Dutch Zimmerman when I ran. Then it became myself, Fern Mullen (both running as Democrats) and Dave Knutson (Republican) and I became Chairman of the Commission. I stayed on for two years. After that, my health wasn’t that good so I thought it was necessary for me to pull out and when I retired from the County Commission Sam Cunningham was appointed by the Governor, that’s when she came on.

**Q: Shortly thereafter that then they elected ( ? )**

A: It was at that same time that the process was taking place of getting a County Council with the increased number.

**Q: So how did it seem to be in the thick of politics? What do you remember about it?**

A: Oh, very interesting! Very, very interesting! I don't know whether I was successful or not. I look back on it and I wanted to be the middle-of-the-row man. I wanted to try to draw the two opposing camps together. I would support the Republicans on certain good ideas and I would support the Democrats on other good ideas but when I supported the Democrats, the Republicans got mad with me. When I supported the Republican point of view then the Democrats would get mad at me so I seemed to be getting in trouble with everybody. It was a good idea but it was not so easy.

**Q: Well it sounds like you supported the idea no matter what the idea was.**

A: I tried to support the best idea of any problems. I don't know if I made more enemies than friends. Some people felt I was doing a good job and some people just don't know. That's perfectly normal in any politics I know.

**Q: Any thoughts about returning or trying to do it again?**

A: No, no, I wouldn't do it again. I did my share.

**Q: But now you're sort of into agriculture?**

A: Sort of, yeah, sheep. Because Sam had the idea of raising sheep, the Navajo Churro sheep. Now let's go back a little bit in history.

The Spanish brought the Churro sheep from Spain when they came over here. They brought them over for food, meat, and also for their wool. The Navajo people were very interested in these sheep and they adopted these sheep because they had such lovely wool to enable them to do the spinning and weaving of their Navajo rugs and saddle blankets. So a lot of these sheep were, shall I say, adopted by the Navajos. I don't know what the terms were, how they got them. They may have bought some, they may have been given some, I certainly think they probably stole some. But there were a lot of

Navajo Churro sheep and families were looking after these sheep. The young kids, boys and girls, were being the shepherds, to look after the sheep in the field. The mothers or grandmothers would be the weavers and when what we call the “Big March” down to Bosco Redondo a lot of the sheep got lost. They either got left behind or they died on the trip. Later, when they were there at Bosco Redondo, there were quite a few sheep there in a very small area so there was overgrazing. Well, the government went in. I think it was the army that was actually the culprit. They went in and slaughtered these sheep because of the overgrazing so the Navajo Churro became an endangered species in the country. Families that had had sheep before didn’t have them anymore. Sam’s idea, which I agreed with, was that we would get Navajo Churro sheep, raise them, find families where the grandmothers and mothers were weavers and wanted sheep again, and we would give them sheep. We would give them maybe one ram and four or five ewes so that they could get going again. The kids could go back to their culture of looking after sheep as opposed to some of the ideas of the government of having them...one was beekeeping, another was fish farms. There’s very little water on the reservation and I don’t know how they were going to have a fish farm! But we felt that getting back to their old cultural ways of the kids looking after the sheep and the mothers and the grandmothers getting back into weaving...

**Q: Who pays you for the sheep? Does it come out of your pocketbook?**

A: Yeah, we will give to the Navajo... we do recover a bit of money for meat, but the wool, we give them.

**Q: Was the RC&D involved in this? (*Resource Conservation and Development*)**

A: The RC&D is, you know, shall I say, supportive of us. It’s one of the things that the RC&D is involved in.

**Q: So they give you some funds?**

A: No, they don’t give us any funds. They haven’t got that money.

**Q: Are you satisfied here? Would you rather be in South Africa or Canada?**

A: South Africa still has political problems. And people are not happy in South Africa, the white people. It's a multicultural place now that apartheid is no longer in force in the existing government. Prior to them getting into power they were making promises to the rest of the Natives, the black people, that if they got elected then the black people would be equal to the white. They would have nice homes to live in. They would get into high positions in industry. And that never really turned out. It wasn't really practical because they didn't have the training for that. But they never got what had been promised to them. There's been a lot of almost fighting taking place because they are not getting what was promised to them. It wasn't promised by the white people, the Europeans, the Dutch and the English but by their own leaders. And jobs are hard to get for the black people. There was a degree of black people from the countries around South Africa coming into South Africa but when the new government came in, control dropped away, so tremendous numbers of black people came into South Africa looking for jobs. They basically flooded the market. So they don't have anything. They don't have jobs therefore they don't have money so what do they do? They steal. On my last trip to South Africa we went through Johannesburg and to see all the homes around Johannesburg. Ten foot high brick walls and electrified fencing on top of the walls or razor barb wire to prevent people getting in. There's always someone poorer than you and he will try to steal from the man who's got something. Even Mandela's house was protected in that way in Johannesburg.

Coming to Moab was like going around in a big circle. South Africa, southern hemisphere, it's summertime there when it's wintertime here. It was a warm country. From there I went to Ontario, a little bit colder. From there I went to northern Saskatchewan, very cold in winter. Then I was moved from northern Saskatchewan down to Moab. And that was like coming around in a circle. We found the same plants, the same kind of birds as we had in South Africa. House sparrows, for example, ravens, eagles. Different models of eagles, you know different model of the raven. We had more crows actually than ravens.

**Q: So are you sort of back home?**

A: Yeah, very much so, it's back home. The weeds, you've got the same weeds in the garden. Goatheads.

**Q: Goatheads?**

A: Yeah we have goatheads there and we have goatheads here.

**Q: Tumbleweed?**

A: No, we didn't have tumbleweed. You know and the flowers, in the flower gardens, we have the same flowers here as we had in South Africa. Very different from what you have up in Canada

**Q: Do you have any comments to make about Moab or your life?**

A: I don't have a great philosophy of life except keeping going. I'm getting older and Sam's getting older. A few years ago we could handle things pretty much ourselves but we have to get help now. Help is hard to get.

**Q: Why is that?**

A: The young people nowadays are different from the young people of old...they have different ideas and they don't have the same thoughts about work.

**Q: The work ethic?**

A: Yeah and this is not just Moab. This is over the whole country.

**Q: Is it affluence, that they're used to having more?**

A: I don't know what the reason is whether it's a case of affluence or not. I think a look at the surfeit of catalogues being printed today and sent out in the mail might indicate that most of the articles being produced today have one goal in mind..."Make life easier!"

After review -

**Q: Are there other points you'd like to add?**

A: I would like to mention that I was always very active in sports. In school I played cricket and rugby and I was involved in boxing. At the University I was still playing rugby and cricket and played rugby representing the University team in the League and also played representing the Province for a number of years. I played against the New Zealand touring team that came to South Africa in two different games. In one I played for the Province and in the other I represented the combined Universities. In Canada, since there was no cricket or rugby, I participated more in competitive sports, racing go-carts and also hydroplanes. In Northern Saskatchewan I raced snowmobiles and when I got to Moab I raced stock cars.

**Q: You mentioned your middle name of Dendy?**

A: Yes, that is a family name all my brothers and I had and which I have passed on to my sons. My brothers were Alfred Dendy, Roland Dendy, and Sydney Dendy but only one was actually called "Dendy" and then I also used that as the middle name for each of my sons.



