



My Fellow Sir Knights,

It was with deep gratitude that I humbly accepted my election on 1 August 2020 as the 163rd Grand Commander of our Grand Commandery! This is the culmination of my dream that began when I was 7 years old and was “exploring” tall grass in front yard of the abandoned house next door to my house and discovered an empty sword scabbard. Having no idea what I had found I placed it in my “treasure cache” in my bedroom only to have it destroyed 8 years later when our house burned. Over the next couple of years I discovered that my prized discovery was a Knight Templar sword scabbard belonging to the Sir Knight who lived next door and who had died in the 1930s. This sword scabbard with its enameled crosses and helmeted knights ignited my love of history which still consumes me at 70 years of age. I wanted to become a Knight Templar!

In 1965, at age 15, the structure of the world seemed to be disintegrating after the loss of my “treasure cache” and everything else I owned in the world when our house burned. We moved to a new town, I had to get a part-time job and try to stay in school. By the 1967-1968 timeframe, a matter involving Vietnam and the Selective Service Draft finally pushed my world into chaos! Some of you may remember the Tet Offensive in January 1968 and the dramatic increase in the number of troops going to Vietnam. As a senior in high school in 1968, I was immediately reclassified as draft eligible upon graduation and I scrambled to try to get into the Air Force, thinking it would be better to fly over the Vietnamese jungles than to walk through them.

In December 1972 I received two letters the same week, the first congratulating me on being “selected by my friends and neighbors to serve my Country” and instructing me to report for medical in-processing. The second letter which arrived a couple of days later congratulated me on being offered an enlistment in the U.S. Air Force should I decide to accept! After arguing with the Selective Service Board, I managed to convince them to allow me to join the Air Force. After 7 years of enlisted service, I was selected for Officer Training School and served 27 years as an officer, retiring in 2007 as a Colonel with 34 years of total service.

Why am I telling you this story? Remember that empty sword scabbard I found when I was 7 years old and my dream of becoming a Knight Templar? Well, fifty years later, after an early morning round of golf and an afternoon of bass fishing, I was enjoying retired life. Late in the afternoon I was sitting on my deck at the lake watching the sun go down, reminiscing over my life and the fact that I had achieved my dreams, it occurred to me that there was one dream I had never achieved – I had never become a Knight Templar. So, the next morning I called a friend in town whom I knew to be a Mason and the rest is history! I was raised as a Master Mason on 25 July 2011 and on 14 April 2012 I achieved my dream of becoming a Knight Templar!

Over the next 12 months as Grand Commander I hope to spark the love of history and Templary in as many Masons as possible and to stop the decline of our membership. When I ask former Knights why they stopped participating in the Commandery, many say something like “it wasn’t fun anymore”. Let us bring back the fun, family and esprit de corps into Knights Templar in Illinois! Send me your ideas, together we can do this.

With All Knightly Courtesy
 Gene
 Auston E. Smith
 Grand Commander