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In order to preserve the integrity of their audio record, these histories are presented with limited revisions and reflect the candid conversational style of the oral history format. Brackets or an ellipsis mark will indicate if the text has been annotated or edited to provide the reader a better understanding of the content.

Enjoy “hearing” these factual accountings from these people who were among those who were involved in the day-to-day activities of this historic partnership between the United States and Russia.

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SALIHZAN SHARIPOV

March 8, 1998

Interviewers: Mark Davison, Paul Rollins
[Interview conducted with interpreter from TTI]

Davison: Good morning. This is an interview between myself, Mark Davison, and Salihzan Sharipov.

Sharipov: Sharipov.

Davison: Sharipov: I'm sorry. And the interpreter Paul "Usa."

Interpreter: Carmines.

Davison: Carmines. Okay. We're here in Building 1 in the Conference Room to get -- you were gracious enough to give an interview before you left town to go back to Russia after your flight on STS-89. And I've given you a copy of the questions here. And we just wanted to find out a little bit about yourself for all the people that are going to be listening to this tape and watching it. The first question is, just tell us a little bit about your hometown, where you grew up living in -- I think it's, if I pronounce it right here, Kaza--

Sharipov: Kirgizstan.

Davison: Kirgizstan. Pardon my English. I'm slaughtering the Russian titles of your state. So if you wanted to -- I know this is a small map, but if you wanted to point it out.

Sharipov: This place.

Davison: And then the city that you were born in I think is --

Sharipov: I was born in Usgen City, which is a very small city of about 50,000 people. Our city has a great history. This year we celebrated 2500 years of our city. We have very great ancient buildings that was built in the fifth and seventh century. So I grew up in the city. My parents, my friends are all there. They are waiting in the city. Of course, it would be interesting to tour my city to see my friends.

Davison: So your family still lives there. I know you talked about your father still lives there?

Sharipov: My father, my sister, brothers, they live in Usgen City. We have a big family. I have four brothers and two sisters. So I grew up in a big family. I have a father and, of course, many relatives.

Davison: I'm sure they are very proud of you and all of your accomplishments.

Sharipov: I hope.

Davison: Can you -- Connie talked about the -- this -- is it Zirba Space Center, the professor that you had there, the academian?

Sharipov: Of course, mine is northeast Uzbek, but I was born in Kirgizstan. So Uzbek -- I have many Uzbek friends in Kazakhstan, Uzbek and Kirgizstan. So they all the time support me in my job. I have my best friend, he's chief of a big factory, Anto Quinott. In both space and English, Professor Rehedoff, he wrote a long time of his national space agency and he has a big experience about making many, many things that he wrote on space.

Davison: Have any of his payloads flown on Mir or a spaceship?

Sharipov: No. No. Uzbekstan and Kirgizstan became a freedom countries. So now each country has some difficulties with financing. So now they can't -- my thought here, they couldn't make something -- I mean, payload. So I hope in future experience they will do the same as USA and Russia and other countries reach space.

Davison: So I guess since your town was on the border and you had ties to both countries, you kind of bring them together by your space flight then?

Sharipov: Yes. But, you know, many years ago, about 70, maybe 80 years ago, it was one country, Tukistan. It was not Uzbekstan, Kirgizstan, Kazakhstan, Molodechnostan, Romania. It was one country, Tukistan. So after the revolution, it was necessary to make different states as in USA states and grow up five countries in Middle Asia, Uzbekestan, Kirgizstan, Kazahkstan, Molodechnostan, and Romanistan. My flight, of course, do some things during two countries -- two or three, maybe. I was born in Kirgizstan, nationality Uzbek and I'm a Russian citizen.

Davison: Interesting. The Question No. 3 here says: When did you decide to apply for the cosmonaut training program? How did that come about?

Sharipov: You know, every child when he is at school, each child wants to make something special in life. The same, I wanted to become a cosmonaut in my childhood. So it was my dream, and I everything, first of all, to become a pilot military pilot. After that, I did my best to enter cosmonaut office in my position of

space. I'm very happy that I came to Houston and had such a great flight with American colleagues.

Davison: The next question is somewhat related. You might have answered part of it. Explain the cosmonaut selection process, the educational requirements. You talked a little bit about the military flight experiment -- experience. I know you were a MiG-21 pilot. Did all that work together into how the selection process went?

Sharipov: Yes. First of all, selection process come from combat unit. We have a commission that selected pilots. They go in all combat units and they selected people that had the big experience of flying, very dedicated and, of course, very -- people who want to make -- work to become cosmonaut. Of course, we have several commissions. Of course, first of all, it's a medical commission. Of course, it's a test of your education, how you can work with -- you know, in space, equipment is very new and it's very devoted things. So it's best to check your dedication. And, of course, we have many other commissions that it's necessary to go through. It's a long process, and it usually takes about two years to enter the cosmonaut office.

Davison: This is kind of a personal question. What's your favorite airplane to fly?

Sharipov: Of course, every plane. Of course.

Davison: You like all flying; no favorite planes?

Sharipov: Yes. Of course, I fly L-39, T-38 and MiG-21. So I would say my favorite plane is that I wanted to fly MiG-29 and the T-27.

Davison: Oh, yes. The newest Russian airplane?

Sharipov: Yes. It's the best Russian airplane.

Davison: Very fast?

Sharipov: Very --

Davison: Well, maybe not compared to space, but very fast in relation to how high you fly.

Sharipov: And I liked, of course, the T-38. Very nice plane. I've flown it several times. I liked it.

Davison: I've flown in the T-38. A very comfortable airplane.

Sharipov: Yes.

Davison: Can you talk a little bit about how the Space Shuttle -- the take-off was and the landing and kind of your experience, how you felt?

Sharipov: The launch was very great. I, of course, expected that it will be such way, but the real launch was so great. Of course, we worried some we will launch on time because launch day was -- there was a --

Davison: The weather was in question?

Sharipov: Launch day was bad and the possibilities of the launch was 40 percent.

Davison: Right.

Sharipov: So we worried, first of all, about weather. And when it was time to launch, everything get clear. It was eventually launched on time. Of course, we were very happy and we did the launch -- we waited zero gravity. Of course, after the separation, the actual time when we felt zero gravity, it was great. I can't explain how it was because at that time I felt that I made my dream because...

Davison: You knew you were in space?

Sharipov: I worked a long time and I waited a long time to be in space. So I was very happy.

Davison: It would be a neat feeling. We looked at your bio. It talked about your map-making experience. Did that -- I'm probably going to pronounce this wrong -- chronography?

Sharipov: Yes.

Davison: Did that help you identify land masses when you were on orbit, seeing the elevation?

Sharipov: Of course, our daytime work time was planned. Every hour was planned by, you know, we have flight plan and we had jobs it was necessary to do. Of course, our flight was so short and we were just beginning to understand everything in space and to see earth to make -- to become -- we became -- we understand what's going wrong with us. Our flight was so short. And all of my chronography education, of course, helped me to observe to make pictures, to make video and to make our flight very successful.

Davison: You mentioned the pictures, that one of your assignments was to photograph the rendezvous and document it?

Sharipov: Yes.

Davison: Were you in one of the small Shuttle windows filming this?

Sharipov: Yes. I stayed behind our commander, Terry Wilcutt, and tried to make pictures because it was my job to make it. But during the rendezvous, I stayed in the "mid test" because it's a very important part of our flight. So it was necessary to Terry, it was necessary to control the Shuttle and make a document. So I tried to not interfere here because in flight test many people -- you know, we, of course, can --

Davison: Very crowded?

Sharipov: Crowded, yes. We can make pictures during the on-looking.

Davison: Did you have to turn upside down and stay to the ceiling while he was --

Sharipov: Yes.

Davison: -- at the controls?

Sharipov: I did pictures during the onlooking where I fly around.

Davison: Some of the other experiments that -- I see you worked with the transferring of frozen storage and then the station dosimeter exchange on the Mir?

Sharipov: Yes.

Davison: How did those operations go?

Sharipov: It was very easy because we trained many times in a simulator and I had very experienced instructors that taught me. It was very easy to make the job and it was very pleasant to make the job because, you know, everything that you did -- that I did in space, it will stay in my memory a long time.

Davison: Since you talked a little bit about this, how was the training at the Johnson Space Center here?

Sharipov: When I came to Houston, of course, I can't understand at that time English, and my English was not so good. Of course --

Davison: It's very good now.

Sharipov: I don't think so. Our training process is some different than American training process. So I had some problems. I tried -- it was necessary to learn everything for myself most of the time and to make -- have training with crew. I started learned everything for myself. And I want to say big thanks to our crew members because they helped me to get into the program and understand everything, understand everything. Mostly all my language, my training is connected with our crew, because without the crew, I would be nothing. In our crew is so nice colleagues. I have so nice colleagues and they worked for me.

Davison: I know Bonnie Dunbar was there.

Sharipov: Bonnie Dunbar, Terry Wilcutt, Joe Edwards, Jim Reilly, Mike Anderson.

Davison: And I guess Andy Thomas and Bonnie Dunbar had both trained in Gagarin Space Center in Moscow?

Sharipov: Yes. Bonnie, she speaks very well in Russian, and all the time she helped me. It was very pleasant to work with Bonnie Dunbar.

Davison: Just a follow-on question to that is, how was the training at the Kennedy Space Center, the Shuttle escape type training or anything like that?

Sharipov: It was unforgettable for me because it was great to see everything in Florida in the KSC. We trained several times in the KSC and, of course, even the OR crew. Before we went there, we had training in Houston. Of course, it was very easy. And the instructors, they helped a lot. They showed everything. They made sure that everything will be great with such instructors, with such training because I don't -- it was great, great training. KSC and JSC I liked.

Davison: The next question I think you've almost answered by how well you've done the interview. Was the difference in language a hard problem for you to overcome? It seems like you've already overcome that. But go ahead and answer how you did that.

Sharipov: Of course, my staying was a problem because I learned English not so long time. I have base of grammar and, of course, practice in USA, the USA in trying to speak everything English and brush up my English very well. The second part, I begin to understand -- I began to understand everything and speak English more clear. I think that practice was very big helper, helper to my training that went into our crew. Of course, I think the crew helped me a lot because I met many difficulties in training, and our crew at times with great pleasure helped me with anything I asked of them.

Davison: It's important that the crew works as a team. It sounds like your crew is very close-knit.

Sharipov: Yes. Yes.

Davison: Another Shuttle question is, how did the Shuttle launch and re-entry suit fit? Was it comfortable? Was it bulky?

Sharipov: Of course, if I say about suit, of course, it suits me and it was necessary to wear. It's law. But I felt very comfortable. Of course, we have different suits in Russia than USA. I think that it's a nice suit and it help in "demonstration." So I like -- I felt comfortable.

Davison: Did you get to go up on the KC135 and do any training, putting your suit on and off?

Sharipov: Yes. We trained on many times to wear it on, off and get used to -- used to the space suit. It was very easy and I did it with great pleasure.

Davison: It looked difficult on the flights how to get it on and off. So I was just curious if it was like that in orbit.

Sharipov: On orbit, we helped each other to take off and take on.

Davison: Okay. You-all helped each other then. That's very important. Okay. The next question is, what was it like to see the Mir for the first time out the Shuttle window?

Sharipov: Of course. Of course, it was my dream to see Mir Station, real Mir Station in space. I've been trained for seven years and I studied a lot about Mir Station and trained long, a lot. Of course, it was great to see Mir Station from long distance. It was so beautiful view and we saw Mir Station about more than ten miles. It was a little point. We got closer and closer and the station get bigger, bigger with the flow terminator. Sunset, after the sun set, it become as a star. It was so big star. It's unforgettable. It's so beautiful. I never forget this view. Of course, the writing document to see Mir Station closer, it was our job. And you have to -- you had to go see Mir Station.

Davison: The next question is about after the docking. How exciting was the reunion of your fellow cosmonauts after you docked and how hard was it to leave them after such a short visit?

Sharipov: Of course, after the docking we opened hatch and I see Solovyov and Vinogradov and "Davidov." It was great meeting. We kissed each other that finally we get Mir Station. This crew was,

they had been working a long time and they didn't see other people and we were expected guests. So our mood was so high. Of course, in one side our working was so short. We good friends. We worked all together. We understood each other very nice. It was a pleasure to work with the Mir crew. It was so easy. Our guys from our crew, the Shuttle crew, was so great. We were so great to see everything in Mir Station. We worked about six days. It was time, after working together, it was time to close the hatch. Of course, it was very pity to leave the Mir station. I don't think that I'm -- I love Mir Station and I want to work there because it's so great we go in space. I can't describe how it's beautiful.

Davison: You might have answered part of this in the discussion about your visit with the Mir. But how did the scientific equipment transfer operations go during the flight? You talked about how well the crew worked together. How much time did it take and were you able to find good storage places for everything?

Sharipov: Between our work on earth, we made sure before flight that everything will resolve any problem. And our work in space was a pleasure. We did everything so easy. So understandable was everything. Mir Station crew helped us. Jim Reilly is the person responsible for everything that we transferred. He checked everything and he controlled us to do everything, to make transfers. He worked with Pavel Vinogradov and with me. We do it -- did it with great pleasure.

Davison: I think you talked about this a little bit, too, but I'll ask it again. Are you looking forward to visiting the Mir, the International Space Station, in the future either on the Space Shuttle or the Soyuz?

Sharipov: Yes, because this mission was so short for me and I am waiting next flight. I've assigned to pick up crew to the Mir Station. I will begin training in autumn this year. Of course, it's my job, it's my profession. I have to fly and work, of course, with my colleagues from USA and from other countries.

Davison: That's a long flight --

Sharipov: Yes.

Davison: -- from the ground on commercial airline. What was your most memorable story or experience about your Space Shuttle flight?

Sharipov: Of course, our flight was so beautiful and unforgettable. Every minute of staying on the Shuttle and station was unforgettable for me. Every minute I remember. All flight time is good story for me. I remember every minute what we did there, how it was. I can't choose something from our -- something main from our flight. Our flight from launch to landing was great and extraordinary for me. It's a big

memory, each member, our crew members, how it was and how it was beautiful to work together.

Davison: Good. That's special. What did you miss the most while you were away from your home land?

Sharipov: Of course, I have many friends here and I get used to work with my American colleagues. I like Houston. It was great training for me, a great experience in my life. Of course, always home is best. So I miss my children because they didn't come to Houston. My wife came and stayed in Houston two months. I didn't see my daughter and son for seven months, and I'm waiting to see them.

Davison: That's a long time.

Sharipov: The day after tomorrow. I'm leaving tomorrow.

Davison: Well, is there -- that's all the formal questions I had. Is there anything that you wanted to add or ask, you know, the camera or the people?

Sharipov: I would say that my training in Houston is a big experience in my life. I made many friends. It was a pleasure to stay in Houston and training. I met very experienced instructors, very good people that they helped me to make my flight very successful, and I appreciate everybody who worked with me. So thank you everybody for training me and helping to become such as I am now.

Davison: We enjoyed having you by and having you in this country here. You're a very special person, and we appreciate you doing this interview for us.

Sharipov: Thank you.

Davison: We'll remember this just as much as you remember your flight, I'm sure.

Sharipov: Thanks.

Davison: Thank you.

[End of interview]