

This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, October 13, 2015 at the home of Joseph Kleifges. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Joe, who served in the United States Air Force. He served during peace time between the Korean Conflict and the Viet Nam War. Joe learned of the Veterans' History Project through me and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

Joe, when and where were you born?

I was born in Chicago in 1937.

The exact date?

August 16, 1937.

What did your parents do?

My mother was basically a homemaker and a secretary. My father was an electrician who worked for the Santa Fe Railroad.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

I had one sister and two brothers.

And were any of your siblings in the military?

My one brother, which everybody called Clyde – but his name was Tom, spent 33 years in the Air Force.

Really?

He retired as the second highest enlisted non-commissioned officer in the Air Force.

Is that why you chose to go into the Air Force?

No. I was in the Air Force before he was eligible.

Oh, he's your younger brother.

He's my younger brother.

How did you enter the service – were you drafted or did you enlist?

I enlisted.

And what were the circumstances – was that after high school or what?

Well, after high school I had a job where I worked in an industry which manufactured underground mining machinery. And after I had been there about a year, I decided before the possibility of a draft, that I would like to choose the branch of service that I wanted to go into – and not something that I would be drafted into.

Why did you choose that specific branch of service?

Well, I liked airplanes and I figured hey, get in there and do something with airplanes.

How did your enlistment come about – did you have to go to downtown Chicago or where did you go?

Yes, I went downtown to an enlistment office and signed up.

A recruiting office –

Yes.

Where did they send you? Where was the first place you went?

First place I went to was Lackland Air Force Base, which was their training facility.

How much time did you spend there?

Well, this – I was on an unusual group because it was after the Korean War and we only had a four-week basic.

Really? That's a little bit, isn't it?

Yeah.

Why was that?

I do not know; they didn't – I was not privileged as to why they did that but I think it has to do with because of the fact that basic training really, for the Air Force, is not as important as it is in some of the other branches of the service.

But did you learn all the basic things like others – like guns and marching –

Yes, I got involved in all of that.

How did you actually get to Lackland – was it by train –

Yes, we went on a train. It took us, I think, three days on the train.

And how were your early days of training – could you describe a typical day of basic training?

Well, that's very difficult because like I said we were an unusual group and at that time I was basically not even over five foot tall, and left-handed, so I did everything backwards. And I became what they would call the official road guard, in other words I never really learned how to march or anything like that.

What do you mean you weren't five feet tall?

Yes, I wasn't over five foot yet.

Really?

I didn't get to be five foot until I was almost nineteen years old.

Really? Well, how old were you when you went in to the service?

I don't know; but I was short.

But you were born in 1937 – '56 – so you were 19.

Yes.

Ha, ha, and you were short – but they took you anyway?

Not only that, I had flat feet.

Well, it wasn't war time; that's why they took you.

Yeah.

So tell me, really, how did you – what did you do for training. Give me like – what time did you get up in the morning – did you have to go on marches –

Got up at six; went to breakfast and we had all the things like you had to get shots; you had to have medical examinations; you had to have your teeth looked at, and all that

sort of stuff besides having to learn to march a little bit and how to make a bed and how to set up all your uniforms and everything else. It took four weeks to do that.

How about classrooms – did you have classroom instructions?

We didn't have classrooms per se; when we – after we got out of basic training then we were sent to a base where we would take our training.

Okay; that's my next question. Did you have any specialized training?

Yes, I did.

Describe that.

I was sent to Shepherd Air Force Base in Texas to train as a tow reel operator.

And what does that involve?

That involved flying in an airplane, throwing targets out on a cable and having the Army, the Air Force, the Navy and anybody else that wanted to get involved in shooting at it.

What was the purpose of that?

Basically training. They really were not supposed to hit the targets. They were supposed to lay patterns above and below until it became shredded.

Oh, wow! Joe is pulling out a patch that he has called "Second Tow" and it looks like a goose –

A goose –

A long-necked goose, ha, ha, with a target – oh, Target Squadron, interesting – a round patch. How long did that training last?

It was an eight-week school.

And did you have – was that with classroom instructions as well?

Classroom instructions; in fact it was the –how to maintain the different types of reels that they had in different aircraft; how to use tools to measure different things. In fact I

taught part of the classes on the proper use of precision measuring instruments – because I was a machinist before I got there and knew how to use them properly.

So that took eight weeks.

Yeah.

Where did you go – what happened after that?

After that we graduated; they put us on a bus – no they didn't even put us on a bus.

They gave us a certain amount of money and said it's up to you to get to Mitchell Air Force Base on Long Island on your own.

No kidding! They didn't give you a plane?

No.

That was in New York?

Yes. That's in New York.

Meantime – wait, before you left, how did you find that you adapted to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks life, the food, etc.

I never gave it a second thought.

You had no problem.

But I would recommend it for anybody, male or female, because you learn discipline, you learn how to follow orders, and you learn how to live with everybody.

I agree. So how did you get to New York on your own?

I think I took a train and then when I got into Grand Central Station in New York City, asked around, and they told us get on this train to get out to there and then take a cab out to the thing.

All part of your learning experience.

Yeah. It was sort of navigational training.

Right. Well, that's true, ha, ha. So you made it there.

Yes, so in other words, somewhere around 13 or 14 weeks after I enlisted in the service, I was already at my permanent station.

And that was at Mitchell Air Force Base.

Mitchell Air Force Base in Long Island, yes.

Did you remain there for most of your time?

Let's put it this way, because of the fact that we towed targets for different parts of the service, if we spent nine months of the year – well, actually three months of the year there, the other nine months was what they call TDY – temporary duty stations – that would be Traverse City, Michigan , Savannah, Georgia, Destin, Florida and Bourn Massachusetts.

What was the occasion – why did you have to go to these places?

Well, this is where the people were that needed the training.

I see. So you had to go there to them.

Yes.

Okay. What was the highest rank you ever achieved?

It was called Airman 2nd Class, which was two stripes. And being peace time there were really no , um, advancements because of the fact that – there was only like 150 people in our outfit, and if they got three or four increases in rank, that was for all 150 people.

Oh, wow! So you never went overseas or anything like that, did you?

Well, we did leave the country sometimes, but it was just to deliver parts or something like that – up to Canada or – you know – things like that.

Right. So that was about it – you never went beyond Canada.

Never stationed outside the United States.

So your job entailed, for the next three years – you were in for three years?

Yeah.

Besides going to Traverse City and to Savannah, did you go anyplace else?

Yes.

When you got there – you had to fly in your plane that was towing – you had a special plane.

Yeah, I was assigned to a crew and – not necessarily the same crew all the time – but as a crew, and I was assigned to a particular aircraft, but didn't always fly in that particular aircraft.

And that aircraft was a towing –

Was a B-26 – modified B-26 it was.

How about friendships formed in the service –

There was one fella that I hung around with – that I more or less stayed with till we got out of the service. We made contact two years ago; he lives down in Florida now. I lost track of him once he – he lived in Michigan and then moved out to California – and we lost track.

And now he's in Florida –

Yeah.

So he's the only one you really keep in touch with.

Well, it was very difficult because once you break up, it's very hard to keep contact with anybody. In fact, I tried to look up some of the people on the Internet and there's nobody out there anymore.

Wow – and how did you stay in touch with family and friends – of course, you weren't overseas, so you had no problem with that at all.

Yeah.

As far as mail or telephone contact –

No.

Okay, so how about recreational or off-duty pursuits – when you weren't working –was your job a 9 to 5 job?

Well, it could be 9 to 5; most of the time it was maybe 9 to noon or, see, if you were flying, you were only gone for three hours. Then usually after you buckled everything up you were through. If you were waiting for something you're liable to be there till ten o'clock at night – waiting for somebody to come in, you know. All depends.

All depends, yeah.

There were some times when – there were a lot of times when there was nothing for us to do - we just were told to take off for the day.

Oh. Okay. So this continued – this was your basic duty for the next three years.

Yeah.

Until 1959 –

In December, yeah, 1959.

So why is there a three-month overlap from the time you went in in September and then got out in December

I should have been in there longer, but because the outfit was disbanding, and we had an option of retraining and going into a different branch of the Air Force or get out on what they called "Operation Santa Clause." And I decided at that time to get out under "Operation Santa Clause."

And what was that exactly? Just because it was December?

No, because the thing that I would have gone into, which would have been “In-flight Refueling” was with the Strategic Air Command and I was not interested in getting into that part of the Air Force.

When you were finished with your tour of duty and got the orders that you could leave in December, you were still in New York, right?

Yeah, we were in New York at that time.

How did you – how did they notify you?

Well, they just said, here, you’re done and they gave you – I think it was sufficient money to get back to where you enlisted from – from New York. I don’t know how they figures it, so much per mile or something like that. And at that time I left with an acquaintance that I had and drove in his car; we went to Michigan and then from Michigan I got to Chicago.

So they just said you’re done and get home on your own.

Yeah.

So how was your readjustment to civilian life? What did you do when you got out of the service?

Well, my military life was very close to my civilian life. There was really no big transition.

What did you do when you got out?

I went back to the company I had left from –

They held your job for you?

Yeah, they held the job for me and all the advancements and everything else that were involved in it which had to do with time in service and things like that. And I worked there for 29 more years.

Wow – give me the name of that company.

It was called Goodman Manufacturing Company.

What did they manufacture?

They made underground mining machinery. In fact most of the stuff that's at the Museum of Science and Industry is things that they made.

Really?

Yeah.

That's interesting. You mean the coal mine that's there?

Yep; that's right.

Really – it's from Goodman Manufacturing – so you worked there for 29 years.

Yeah, and then they closed the plant and then the next day I got a job at a place called – where was it? I forgot the name, because I only stayed there a year and then I moved on to another company which was called Time Miles where I was their toolmaker.

Do you have any contact with fellow veterans over the years – just this one fellow

Yes, I do have contact with – not veterans that I was with but with other veterans – like down in Florida – the guy next door is an ex-paratrooper and we get together. In fact we had a parade down in Florida with all the veterans in it, which I can show you on the computer - it's three minutes long.

(I did see the parade after the interview).

It was with the Moose Organization

The Moose, right. Are you a member of any veterans' organizations?

No, I tried it one time to get with the VFW but they said since I didn't serve in a foreign war they wouldn't take me in – that I should go to the American Legion. And I just never got around to it. I joined the Moose instead.

Oh, yeah – I'm a Moose member too.

That's one of the best deals in the world.

Yeah, I like it.

Joe, we talked about after you got out of the service you were in the Reserves.

What did you do in the Reserves?

I did nothing in the Reserves because of the fact that I had spent more than two years in the service I was not required to go to any meetings or anything else but you're still in the Reserves for a total of seven years of service.

Okay, and Joe has a letter stating that he was in the Reserves until September fo 1962.

Yeah.

After your military service – how do you think that your military experience affected your life?

It gave me discipline, it gave me logic – because sometimes when you receive commands you don't always know the reason behind it, but as you get older you find out there's logic involved in it. You learn to live with people; you learn to respect individuals even if you don't agree with what they think, and it's my opinion that every male and female in the United States should spend at least two years in the military service.

I agree.

So that they don't think that everything has to be given to them. They will learn to work for what they want.

Right, right. So your life lessons learned from the military – what did you get out of this –

Yes – learned a lot of things; that's why I stayed single for so long.

You're happily married now for a long time.

Yes, almost 50 years coming up.

Wow, congratulations! Well, that's about it, really. It's been a very enjoyable interview – not too long because you were here in this country and not overseas and you more or less had the same job for the entire time –

Yes.

Is there anything else that you would like to add – any medals or honors that you received that we didn't mention?

Well, because of some training that I had in the service and was a member of the Mitchell Air Force Base Gun Club, when I did get out of the service I continued with marksmanship training and as time progressed I finally became what they call a "Distinguished Shooter" – and I think that had a lot to do with the training I had.

Right. And Joe has the medal to prove it – the Distinguished Shooter Medal given by the United States Army along with a letter of commendation.

It's given by the Department of the Army – what they call the Director of Civilian Marksmanship. It started back in 1891 and I happen to be the 791st civilian to earn that particular award. This award can be used on a military uniform.

And the award is the Distinguished Badge –

Distinguished Pistol Shot Badge.

And Joe has it, I've seen it.

They were at one time solid gold; now they're only gold plated.

All right. I think that covers everything, so if there's nothing else that you wish to add to this story, I thank you for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

You're Welcome.

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