This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, January 23, 2018 at the home of John J. Severin, Sr. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Mr. Severin who served in the United States Air Force and is a veteran of the Korean Conflict. Mr. Severin learned of the Veterans’ History Project through a mutual friend, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans’ History Project. Here is his story:

John, when and where were you born?

I was born October 7, 1933, in Natchitoches, Louisiana. It’s an Indian name.

How do you spell that?

N-a-t-c-h-i-t-o-c-h-e-s, Louisiana. It’s the oldest town in the Louisiana Purchase.

Oh, okay. What were your parents’ occupations?

Farmers.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

Two brothers and three sisters.

Did any of your siblings serve in the military?

No, they were too young. I was the oldest.

What did you do before entering the service?

Going to school.

Did you finish high school?

No. I got my G E D in the service.

How did you enter the service – drafted or enlisted?

I enlisted – volunteered.

Was there anything connected with why you enlisted in the service?

No, I was just –
Why did you choose the Air Force? Why did you choose that particular branch of service?

Because a lot of my friends had been drafted and was in there, but I didn’t get a chance to serve with none of those; they were all gone in different place.

Where did they send you? Where was boot camp?

Lackland Air Base, San Antonio, Texas.

How did you get there?

By bus.

How was training camp? How were your early days of training?

It was getting accustomed to military life and everything.

Give me a typical day of boot camp – what time did you get up in the morning – what did you eat – what did you do during the day – did you go to school?

Did you have training exercises – what did you do?

Yes, we got up at 5:30 or 6 o’clock, freshen up and go to breakfast. Then the day started with different activities like marching, going to rifle field –

Did you have classroom teaching also?

Yes.

What did they teach in the class?

They was teaching us about the basics of the air force.

Rules and Regulations?

Rules and Regulations of the Air Force.

How long did your basic training last?

Three months.

And what happened after that?
After three months I was stationed at Bergstrom Air Force Base in Austin, Texas. B-e-r-g-s-t-r-o-m Air Base.

And what did you do there?
I was with the 27<sup>th</sup> Fighter Escort Wing.

What did your aptitudes show that you were going to be doing?
They wasn’t sure yet. They was getting people in different fields like where they would need them in the company. So they’d take our flight and send us anywhere.

How long did you stay at Bergstrom?
About three months.

And did you have any specialized training while you were there?
No, we just waited for a ship out to go to – they just split our squadron up, sent half to England and half to Germany at that time.

So you were in the 27<sup>th</sup> Fighter Escort Wing.
Yeah.

And what was your job? What were your duties?
I was just a basic Airman.

So after three months they sent you out – where did you go
I went to England.

In the meantime, how did you adapt to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks, the food – how did you adapt?
I did okay. I went along with the system. You had no choice.

Okay, ha, ha, exactly. So you’re in England now; what did you do in England?
Well, when I got to England they sent us to Tech School.

Before we go on, how did you get to England? Did you fly?
No, we went on a ship from Camp Kilmer, New Jersey to Southampton, England.

**And how was your journey on the water.**

About 15 days.

**Was it an easy crossing or was it stormy?**

No, we was lucky; everything was calm, going and coming back three years later.

**So, calm voyage, huh?**

Yes. Fifteen days.

**How were your accommodations on the ship?**

Okay. You’d get up in the morning, go to breakfast and you’d do different things during the day like – you would have breakfast, lunch and dinner and then you could go deck side and things like that.

**How were your sleeping accommodations? Did you have hammocks or bunks or what?**

We had bunks, yeah.

**How high?**

I was up on the third bunk because I had an old timer tell me always try to get up on the top. I got lucky, going and coming.

**Okay, ha, ha. Okay, now you’re in Southampton, England. What did they have you doing there?**

Southampton we went to Lakenheath Air Force Base – L-a-k-e-n-h-e-a-t-h AFB in England.

**Okay, and what did you do there?**

From there I went to Supply School.

**How long was that, Supply School?**
I went to Cook and Baker School in Baltoz, Germany – B-a-l-t-o-z, Germany.

So that was your specialized training – you were trained to be a cook and baker?

Yes.

Was the war going on then?

Oh, yes, the Korean War.

But you were not involved in the war effort as far as fighting or destruction or things like that?

No. See, When I got out of basic, they took half of our flight to England and Germany at that time –

Okay, that was you.

Yeah, the top of the alphabet started – the rest of them went to Korea at that time.

Oh, I see.

To Japan and different places.

But you were sent to England and Germany and not Korea.

Yes, that’s in case Russia tried to come and knock England off. You know we were sitting ducks, actually.

So, what kind of -- did you have any military duties to perform while you were going to cook and baker’s school? Like when you were finished with school – did you have guard duty, things like that?

No, just went to school and then worked – it was like a three-month school; 90 days.

And after 90 days, what happened?

I went back to England.

Right, you were in Germany in school.

Yes, and then I went back to England.
And what did you do in England?

Cook.

Cook for your –

The troops, yeah.

And you were stationed at Lakenheath?

Yes, Lakenheath.

So you were cooking there?

Yes.

Did you spend all your time there?

No, Lakenheath we spent about a year and a half at Lakenheath.

What was the highest rank you ever achieved?

Airman First Class.

What were your recreational or off-duty pursuits? Did you work a regular schedule from 9 to 5? What did you do afterwards?

WE worked two days on and two days off.

What did you do when you were not working?

Well, on one side of the base we had a golf course; we’d go play golf or something or go to the Rec Room. And on the other side of the base they had the racetrack.

Oh.

And when we had money we’d play big shots and go watch the horses.

Was it an actual English race track, like steeplechase or –

Oh, yes, Princess Margaret used to go there.

Really? What’s the name of that racetrack? Do you remember?

No, let’s see -- it’s a famous name though; can’t think of it now.
It wasn’t a steeplechase, was it, where they jumped over hedges?
Oh, no, this was flat racing, thoroughbred racing.

Okay. I don’t know the race courses in England.
Queen Elizabeth used to go there when she was Queen, and I was there for the
Coronation too.

Oh, did you see it?
Yes. We went to London and seen it, I mean, you know –
Yeah, that was in 1953.
Yes.

So you went to London, but could you get really close to see it?
Oh, yeah, you could go to the – you can only see, just like the White House, you can see
from the fence in, the guard chamber, the guards and different things.

Were you up close enough to witness this?
Oh, yes, yeah.
Really?
We used to see the Queen and her sister – Margaret and Elizabeth when they went to
the race track; they would be up high, you know –

A special box, probably.
Yeah. The royalty seats –

Oh, yeah, the Royal Box, I’m sure. So you did see them a few times?
Yes.

Wow! Okay, and while you were in England how did you stay in touch with family
and friends?
I’d write to my parents.
By letter?
Yes, by letter.

How long would it take for a letter to go across the ocean, do you think?
Oh, I don't know, like – the mail we’d get once a week.

In a week?
Yes, must be a week.

You weren’t married at that time?
No, I was single.

So after you were one and a half years in England, what happened? Where did you go?
From Lakenheath, England a place called Greenham Common.

Is that also in England?
Yes, Air Force Base.

It’s in England though?
It’s an English Air Base. Both of them were English Air Bases, Lakenheath and –

So you stayed in England.
Yes.

You were there for how long?
Another year and a half and then I came back stateside.

But what did you do in Greenham? Did you do the same thing, cooking and baking, that you did at Lakenheath?
Yes.

And while you were there, what did you do on your time off? There was no race track next door – what did you do there?
Oh, there we used to go to Market Days, they have a flea market like –

**Like Antiques Roadshow?**

Yes. Something like Antiques Roadshow, yeah; that’s about it.

**How about – did you play sports? Was there organized baseball or basketball?**

Oh, yes, we had our basketball – team

**So you had team sports?**

Squadron team, yeah.

**Did you ever visit other places in Europe as a tourist?**

Oh, yes, the Mayor – I had a chance to go to England, I mean, Ireland – from England I went to Ireland, yeah, we went to Scotland one time, and then I got a chance to go to France, Switzerland, Austria, all on tours –

**Like a tourist.**

A lot of times the Old Man would take us – he had to get so many hours – the Major – we called him the Old Man – he had to get so many flying hours to get his self in shape – he got – he’d take guys from this squad and that squad.

**Oh, I see. So he would take you to different areas –**

Yeah, three-day pass, they call it. Yeah.

**And you did that quite a few times.**

Oh, yes, yeah.

**So you got to see a lot of Europe.**

Oh, yeah, Holland, Amsterdam, Holland, Marseilles, France.

**So you had a pretty good time in the Air Force.**

Oh, yes, yeah.

**So you spent your four years mostly on duty in England.**
Yes.

So with your time coming up, how did they handle your transfer back to the states?

I came back on the same boat that I went on.

Do you remember the name of that boat?

Yeah, Darby, a troop ship –

U.S.S. Darby?

Yes. A troop ship -- Southampton back to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey.

And how long did that trip take?

Fifteen days. Went over in July, came back in July.

Oh.

The Atlantic was mild.

Lucky you.

Yes, good luck.

How was your reception by family and friends when you got home?

You were now 21 years old; you went in early, at 17 –

Yes.

How was your readjustment to civilian life?

Well, I got my discharge and then I came to Chicago.

Right, you were from Louisiana.

Yes. I came to Chicago because they had no employment, no good jobs.

But did you at least go back to Louisiana to see your family?

Oh, yes, yeah.

So you did see your family then you realized there were no jobs?
Yes.

And then you came to Chicago.

I only spent about three weeks in Louisiana, when I came back.

I came to Chicago.

Did you know anybody in Chicago; friends here or anything, or just on your own?

Friends of mine – I got a ride back to the city and I worked different places.

How about friend you met while in service? Did you stay in touch with them after you got out of service?

No, not – excuse me – because they had a lot of rotating, like, back then. The guys I went to basic with, only two or three of us stayed together and the rest spread out – like that –

Scattered.

Then I met new friends – but they were like from different parts of the country. I didn’t stay in touch with them.

Okay, so you got to Chicago and you knew some friends here – where did you stay when you got here? How did you get established?

With some friends of mine.

Did they tell you where to go for a job?

Oh, yes, I got a job right away.

Where did you go?

Western Electric.

What was your job there?

It was – first I had the stock room and then I went to relay adjuster –

Say that again –
Relay adjuster – adjusting the four relays – the F relay on the bottom of the form.

Did they send you to school at Western Electric?
No, they just -- on the job training. See, at Western Electric they had different floors. The stock room is on the first floor – then the punch presses, the cafeteria. And then when I got married they put me adjusting relays.

Are you a member of any veterans’ organizations today?
No, not at the present. I’m not active with them but I participate.

How long did you stay at Western Electric?
Wife: the strike and you got laid off.

So they had a strike and you got laid off.
Yes, yeah.

Did you go back or was that the end of it?
I worked there about two and a half years.

Did you work someplace else after Western Electric?
Yes, and I went to diesel mechanic school.

Was that with the G I Bill?
Yes.

How long did you go to school?
I just went to night school, and at that time I worked for Sears & Roebuck, mail order over on Homan Avenue.

I remember that old building. Did you ever work as a diesel mechanic?
No, I think this is what happened. They told me when I did my diesel mechanic work, go and do an apprenticeship – well at that time they didn’t need no apprentice. So they said
I’d have to wash buses for about two years until they get an opening. I said, okay, thank you, and good bye. So then that was it.

**So you didn’t pursue that. Did you just stay at Sears?**

No. I stayed at Sears part time – actually it was full time. Then I went to barber school.

**Oh, barber school. Was that also with the G I Bill?**

Yes.

**So what happened? Did you finish that and get a license?**

Yes, yes.

**State license?**

Yes.

**Is that what you did? Did you open up your own barbershop or work somewhere?**

Yes. First I served my apprenticeship in the Loop, at the Dearborn Street Station.

**Oh, yeah, Dearborn Street. And then?**

Then we moved to Romeoville; then I had my own barbershop.

**Oh, you did.**

Yes.

**Were you alone there or did you have others?**

No, I was a one-chair shop.

**Sole proprietor>**

It was a Welco Truck Stop at the Flea Market.

**On Route 53?**

Route 53 and 55, yes.

**Oh, wow. And did you stay in that line of work?**

For 25 years.
Wow – so 25 years as a barber.

Yeah.

And you retired from there?
No. When they closed up I was in the pallet business about four years – repair wooden pallets, about four or five years – after I left the barbershop.

So you’ve been retired now for a few years?
Yes.

So what did you think of the service in general? How did your military experience affect your life?
It helped me; helped me a lot.

How did it help you?
Well, by getting an education and a job, and different things like that.

So how about life lessons that you learned from the military.
Oh, yeah, obedience –

To orders – and discipline --
Yes, and discipline, yes.

So overall it was a good influence in your life?
Oh, yes, yes. Very good influence; I enjoyed by time in the service.

You got to travel –
Oh, yes.

Okay, well, that’s about it. Anything else you want to add about any of your experiences – you didn’t see any bombings or destruction or casualties?
No, at the base I was on, when we got there it was in Quonset huts; it was an RAF base; it’s an English airbase; that’s where they bring the big bombers in. But on that base we had all different services, - Army, Navy, chemical warfare and everything.

Did you receive any medals or awards?
No, no.

Just Good Conduct –
Yeah.

So you never saw any casualties?
No, but we were on alert, like, for example, if you get a warning, like something – they could camouflage that base in three minutes, you know, with smoke and fogging. It’s foggy in England anyway; you can’t see from here across the street in the fog.

So they were always on alert.
Oh, yes, we had to be.

Interesting. Okay, so I think that about covers everything. I will give you a hard copy of this interview for your review; you can read it and let me know if there’s anything you need to change. If not, you can keep that copy. I will send the original to Washington along with the tape and the paperwork you signed.

Okay.

Well, thank you, very much, for your interview and thank you for your service to our country.

Okay.

John J. Severin, Sr.
419 Laurel Avenue
Romeoville, Illinois 60446
815-886-4863