

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, October 1, 2015 at the home of Daniel Spinabella (Wojtkiewicz). My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Dan, who served in the United States Air Force and is a veteran of the Viet Nam War. Dan Spinabella, a/k/a Wojtkiewicz, learned of the Veterans History Project through me and has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans History Project. Here is his story:

Dan, when and where were you born?

September 4, 1945 in Chicago, Illinois

What were your parents' occupations?

My father owned a restaurant, pizza place, and my mother worked for Zenith corporation.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Two sisters – one older, one younger and one brother.

Did any of your siblings serve in the military?

My brother, Albert, Army.

Was he older than you or younger?

Four years younger.

He was in Viet Nam?

Yeah. Infantry.

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

Enlisted.

How did that come about and why did you choose that specific branch of service?

Well, my buddy was interested in it and we went in under the so-called "Buddy Plan" – didn't last long – two months we were together and then separated.

Right, right.

Yeah, right out of high school, we went.

You just got out of high school –

Yeah.

You went in in October of 1963 – is that when you graduated high school?

I didn't graduate – I dropped out, in Junior year.

Did you eventually get your high school diploma?

Yeah, through the service – G.E.D.

Where did you go to enlist – downtown Chicago, recruiting office – where did you go?

Nah, I think there was one on the north side of Chicago, but I don't recall where. – it might have been on Western Avenue.

So you signed up there.

Yeah, there was one right there.

What was the procedure – what did they tell you to do – what happened?

Sign on the dotted line – ha, ha.

I know, but where did you go for physicals and things like that?

Oh, physical – went to downtown – their main intake facility.

Was that in the Armory or something?

No, I don't think it was an Armory, but it was a federal building –

Oh, the federal building.

Yeah, with all the recruits – getting physicals.

Were all the services there?

Yeah, all the services.

So that's where you received your physical and all your tests.

Right, yeah.

You chose the Air Force because you yourself wanted to fly –

Yeah, yeah, flight and aircraft interested me more than tanks.

That's what they want to know – why did you choose it?

Something that attracted you. So you took your tests and you're in – you signed on – how was your departure for training camp – where did you go, actually?

Lackland Air Force Base, Texas for basic training.

And how did you get there?

I'd say plane.

You flew there?

Yeah.

Once you got there how were your early days of training – how did you adapt to military life?

I thought pretty well. I got a little home sick but not terribly but not where it was a disability or anything – or liability.

You were how old – 18?

Yeah.

So first time probably really away from home -- How long were you at Lackland?

I believe 12 weeks – is their basic training.

And what did you do in basic – can you describe a typical day?

Well, physical fitness was a big one and learning the military – not law, but ranks –

Military code –

Ranks and codes, yes, that's what it was.

And how about rifle and guns –

Oh, yes, but not extensive training – only to quality.

They didn't emphasize that?

Right, yeah. Because when I got out of Tech School, they would issue me a tool pouch with tools instead of a sidearm.

What did you study there?

Then I went to Amarillo, Texas after basic training.

Was that for specialized training?

Yeah, yeah.

So what did you choose?

Amarillo Air Force Base, Texas –

What did you do there?

Flight line jet mechanic – I was trained there.

How long a period of time were you there?

I think that it was 10 or 12 weeks.

So that included training, classroom teaching too?

Right, yeah, classroom and in the hangars, you know, on the job training.

So you were a jet mechanic, right?

Yes.

That was what you wanted to do – they put you in –

Well, I chose like firefighter and something else, civil engineers and jet mechanic – that was my third choice – that's what I got.

Okay.

So I was happy with the assignment.

Now you're in the service for a few months – how was the social life, and food – how was your adaptation to the military life – barracks – etc.

I thought it was pretty smooth. I didn't have any problems.

Food was okay?

Yeah, better than – I went in weighing 118 pounds and I came back about six months later, home, at 145 pounds, so the exercise and the food were really – agreed with me.

Yeah, right. You came home on leave after you went through training and stuff?

Right, basic training and tech training.

Where were you assigned to duty after that?

That was to Perrin Air Force Base, Texas – my first assignment.

What was going to be your job there at Perrin?

Flight line mechanic.

So you did that type of work while you were there –

Yeah.

How long did you remain there?

Two and a half – two and a half years, about.

Oh, so that was your main station there?

Yeah, right.

You serviced the planes and things?

Right, yeah, on the flight lines.

What type of plane was it, do you know? Fighters –

Yeah. F-102A – Delta Daggers they were called.

Were those fighter jets?

Those were interceptor jets.

What's the difference?

Well, fighters can fight air to air, and air to ground, where Interceptors went after the bombers and that, you know; it was more specialized.

Interceptors are bombers, did you say?

No, try to shoot down the bombers.

Oh, I see. So interceptors were –

Intercepting –

Okay, they were between fighters and bombers.

Right, yeah.

What did you have to do on those machines, everything, or just a matter of what broke down?

Well, if you're Crew Chief, which I eventually became, not right away – but Crew Chiefs they oversee all the specialists working on the planes like radar, armament, electronics – so I had to call – if there's a problem I had to make sure the right people were out there to fix it.

These different things that you mention, radar, armament and electronics, did you have to go through school and learn each of those things?

Very basically – just very basic because they had guys who specialized in it. So I called the proper specialist to take care of the planes, and then have to sign off on paper work and what not. But when the planes returned, we'd refuel them.

Where did they come in from – were they going to Viet Nam – these planes?

Well, repair, that was called ADC – ATC base – Air Training Command and Air Defense Command. But see most of them were training flights where they were training pilots and then they'd do their flights, which I didn't know what that entailed, but when they came back we had to make sure that they were ready to go again.

Oh, so they didn't really go to Viet Nam –

No, no, no they were-

These were training pilots who would eventually perhaps go to Viet Nam.

Right, yeah.

So they did flights like –

Local flights for training missions.

You're in Texas so you're close to the ocean.

No, that was north; that was north Texas.

Well, Texas is pretty big.

Yeah, right around Oklahoma – 25 miles south of Oklahoma.

Near the panhandle, right?

Yeah, Amarillo was in the panhandle.

So what was the highest rank that you ever achieved?

E-4 – which is Airman First Class. And now they call E-4 Senior Airman.

While you were in the service for the entire military period, your name was Daniel Wojtkiewicz.

Correct.

And after you left the service you desired to change your last name –

To my stepfather's last name.

Your stepfather's name was Spinabella.

Spinabella.

So today you are Daniel Spinabella, but for your entire military career you were Daniel Wojtkiewicz. And for our purposes here your papers are signed Daniel Wojtkiewicz. Did you ever go overseas?

Yes. Went to the Philippines, they were asking for volunteers for Viet Nam, so a lot of us volunteered. We came home on leave expecting to go to Viet Nam –

What year was this?

1965 or 1966, yeah. So when we went back to base we flew out of – we had to report to Payne Field in Washington State, and that's where we departed for overseas.

How did you go overseas, by ship?

Flying.

Oh, you flew overseas, oh, okay.

Air Force.

M A T S? That's right, you're the Air Force, ha, ha.

Was it a regular MATS plane – military air transport plane or just Air Force plane?

Yeah, it was a transport plane, yeah.

So you flew overseas and you're there in the Philippines – describe what your duties were – what happened?

We got out of the plane and we thought we were in hell almost because it was so hot and humid; we got there in time for the monsoon season – so I mean it was extra humid.

So you were in barracks there?

Yeah.

So what were your duties there – what did you have to do?

The same thing – flight line mechanic.

So you never went on any actual bombings or raids or anything like that?

No, they were all single place planes, you know, so it was only the pilot and no maintenance person.

Single fighter planes –

Yeah, and from the Philippines – did I say it was Clark Air Force Base –

No, you didn't say that. But that's where you went – Clark Air Force Base?

Yeah. From there I went TDY – which is temporary duty; they sent me to Formosa and Thailand. I was there for maybe two months on The Alert Pad –

What does that mean?

That means they don't fly any training. When they go that's because they have a real combat mission.

So what did you do there?

Made sure the planes were ready to go at all times.

So maintain all the planes.

Right.

Was it you alone or were there other mechanics –

Oh, yeah –

Many mechanics - a lot of planes?

No, maybe there were six or eight planes in the Alert Pad. There were other planes in different areas of the base.

This Alert Pad – somebody's gotta be there 24/7?

Yeah, yeah, pilots and mechanics.

Did you have full training for - there's two types of training – air frame and the engine – yeah –

But I was general – the general – that's why they call them flight line mechanics, 'cuz we don't take them in the maintenance hangars and do major work. WE farm that out to the guys who specialize in it.

Oh, I see, yeah, right. I think that you have to re-up again and then you get the other part of that training.

Or if you just started there when you went in – with that type of training.

So you were a generalist.

Yeah, just crew chief – what the crew chief does. And then I spent two months in – I said Formosa, two months in Thailand.

Oh, was there a base in Formosa – where did you stay?

Yeah, you know, I don't remember the name now.

But there was an American Air Force Base –

Yeah, American Air Force Base.

How about in Thailand?

U-D-O-R-N, Thailand. You know, I don't know if that air base was called that too but that was the town, you know. And it could have been, but I wouldn't swear to it – if it was Udorn Air Base.

So what did you do there in Thailand?

Alert Pad.

So we're talking all of '66 and '67 you were in the Philippines, Formosa and Thailand – doing that stuff.

Right, yeah, till late '67 when I went back to the Philippines and from the Philippines I went home.

Were you in Thailand more than two months?

Two months.

Then where did you go?

Back to the Philippines.

And how long did you stay in the Philippines?

Till my tour expired.

Oh, really?

Yeah. So it was not quite 18 months. Because I think it was an 18-month tour normally, and I had 16 months left, or something like that.

Okay.

But they sent me anyway.

You volunteered for it. You never were in any real combat were you?

No, but when we flew from Payne – when we took off from there, we were on our way to Viet Nam. In the middle of the flight the pentagon changed all of our orders and that's when we ended up in the Philippines.

Oh –

Instead of Viet Nam.

They do that, you know, and they do it for a reason, I'm sure.

I think they had the same – the same types of planes and outfits at the Philippines already and we were redundant, you know, another one that they really didn't need there, so , there was a whole stink in Congress about it –

Oh, really? If you would have gone to Viet Nam you would have seen a lot more –

Yeah, but at the same time Air Force had it pretty cushy because you were always protected by the Marines and Army.

You weren't in the first lines of combat.

Right, you know, they defend the Air Base.

Yeah.

But also, in the Philippines I was transferred to Squadron for F-100.

Are those fighter planes?

Those are fighters, yeah, fighters. And that's what I was on when I went to Thailand and Formosa, with the 100s.

So you were servicing those planes?

Right, yeah.

So you really didn't witness any destruction or –

No. On the way to Thailand, we stopped – you don't have to write this –

Go ahead.

We stopped in Viet Nam to drop off supplies en route. So I was in Viet Nam for maybe an hour and a half.

So you just went down for awhile –

Yeah, then we moved on our way, but even then I just saw the heavy armament and all that – and that kind of woke me up a little bit – make you nervous – kinda glad I'm not here.

Right, yeah. How about friends that you met in the service. Have you been in touch with them or renew friendships afterwards?

I had one friend that we were in Texas and in the Philippines together and we still keep in touch. He's in Tennessee now. But he comes in every 2-3 years and we get together.

Do you have any reunions of any of the guys you served with?

No, no. We don't.

Just you and he get together

Yeah, and he's tried to contact other guys but they're not interested, dead, or they just don't care about getting together.

So just you and he are the only ones.

Yeah. He comes with his wife.

Oh, that's nice. You get together. Now, when you were in these far-away places, especially Viet Nam, Formosa or Thailand, how were your communications from home? How did you stay in touch with family and friends?

Mail.

I always ask this – how long did the mail take to reach you or for you to send a letter to home.

Oh, geez, you know, I don't know, only at one end.

I know. But if you got a letter from your – you weren't married at the time – you were young – but if you got a letter from your mother that was dated, and you got that letter, how long of a time did that take? If I got a letter and it was two weeks old –

Yeah, I was just happy to get it – I didn't go into detail –

Yeah, so you don't have any idea of how long it would take.

You know, by the time it catches up to you, you know, especially when you're TDY and not at your home base, it might have been a week.

Oh, sure, at least.

A week to ten days. But you always send it air mail, so.

Well, yeah, ha, ha. I'm sure they got your mail quicker when you sent it out than when you got their mail – it had to find you – where you were at.

Yeah, well, they keep track of you pretty good.

Yeah.

But then again I don't know if anything I ever sent, uh, was edited or not.

Oh, censored, yeah.

Censored, I don't know. I don't think it was.

I don't know.

But I couldn't say for sure. I wrote to my mom and uncle; those were the only two. And they never said anything about the envelope was open or –

They would have said something – because in the second world war it was definitely censored – yeah.

Did you have any recreational or off-duty pursuits – did you go anywhere when you weren't working – was your job a 9 to 5 job or were you just on call –

Except down at the Alert Pads – those were 24-hours – three days on. But in Texas it was like a 9 to 5 job.

Were there any organized sports or anything – baseball teams or basketball –

Not many, but on the 9 to 5 type job, it would cover three different shifts so I worked actually all the three different shifts at one time or another.

Oh, wow – so you really didn't have much time when off duty –

Well, you'd go to the barracks – I mean they had the Airmen's Club, where you could mess around with musical instruments or play ping pong, shoot pool.

Oh, they played ping pong there too –

Yeah, they did.

How about playing cards, movies –

Yeah, the guys would play pinochle and that but I never got into cards. They had a theater there.

Did they have – movies for the guys – movies that you could just go and see.

Yeah, but I don't think I ever went to any; didn't interest me.

Okay. The war didn't end – did it – your enlistment was up.

No – right in '67.

Where were you when your enlistment was up –

I was in the Philippines and I was due to ship home from the Philippines; it was a commercial jet – United or Braniff, one of those

Oh, really, that's how you got home – by commercial jet.

Yeah.

From where –

From Philippines – Clark Air Force Base.

You mean the regular planes came into Clark AFB?

Yeah.

Oh, I didn't know that.

Yeah, and then we stopped at – oh, my flight ended in San Francisco.

Well, of course family members who probably used those planes too.

Yeah, I think so, dependents.

Dependents, right.

But it happened that Charlton Heston was on that flight.

No kidding!

Yeah, --

Did you get to meet him?

No, I didn't want to bother him; he sat across the aisle in coach.

Why was he there – he wasn't in the service.

He had something to do in the Philippines – I don't know if it was with the USO –

Could be – yeah, he was a supporter of the troops.

I was really surprised to see him.

Wow – you recognize him, of course, right away.

Yeah, yeah.

So you came home by plane – and how was your reception by family and friends

Well, we got – I was discharged from – in San Francisco is where I got my discharge papers. And then it was up to me to get from San Francisco to Chicago.

Oh, okay.

But I did have a flight voucher which basically paid for it – but I had to arrange it. So I coulda stayed in Frisco for any amount of time I wanted to basically, but I just shot straight home – wanted to get home.

Okay. Was there an Air Force Base there in San Francisco?

I don't know. I don't know.

You just were in the city and you came home.

Yeah, it was –

Don't you usually get discharged from a base or something?

Yeah, right, yeah, you know, do all your final paperwork and that –

Right, exactly.

I don't know if it was an air base or Navy –

But it was some base.

It was a government facility.

That's good.

I don't know if there was an air base there or not.

Well, I don't know – 1967 – yeah.

It's all a blur right now.

Yeah. So how was your readjustment to civilian life?

Easy, I'd say.

What did you do – go an get a job – because you didn't have a job that you could go back to because you were only a teenager.

Right. Yeah, well, I was runnin' pizzas for quite a while for my dad's restaurant.

Oh, okay, so you worked for your dad.

Not afterwards –

Oh, you mean before.

Yeah. After – while I was in high school. I took maybe 2 or 3 weeks off and then I started looking for jobs and I ended up with - I don't know if it's pertinent or not – Westinghouse Air Brake – but I only stayed there 11 months.

Well, that's okay. What was your job there?

I was a drafting / layout – which I took a lot of drafting classes in high school, so it kind of helped me there.

Did you go back to school – wait a minute – you said you dropped out of high school so you didn't talk about how you got your GED.

Well, it was in Texas.

From the Air Force?

Yeah. Yes.

So did you get it from a specific school, like a diploma – that you actually had –

It' says G E D and it might say U.S. Military type, you know. My parents were really glad to see that.

Oh, okay. I'm sure they were. But after you got out did you pursue any higher education?

Uh, I took a couple of classes at Wright Junior College, but never amounted to anything.

Was that under the G.I. Bill or just on your own?

No, that was on my own.

What kind of classes were they?

Algebra – math classes.

As far as contact with fellow veterans, you're just in contact with one friend of yours.

Yeah.

Do you want to give his name?

Joe Wilson.

And he's from Tennessee, you said.

Well, he's originally from south side Chicago but now he lives in Tennessee.

Oh, I see, so he's a Chicagoan –

Yeah, right.

When we got out we connected, as friends again, and he's the one who got me the job at Westinghouse Air Brake.

Okay; that's a connection.

After that my dad realized that I wasn't gonna go too far doing what I was doing, and even if you did, the money still – the pay wasn't so great. My brother was still in high school and he was taking printing classes. He got a job part time in Chicago, and my dad I guess spoke to him to see if he could get me into printing; 'cuz my brother was in quite well, even though it was part time.

Yeah.

So then I ended up going into printing, started out \$2 an hour delivering packages first, you know, just to get in there, and I eventually had an apprenticeship, and that's when I used my G.I. Bill. What they do is, as you're an apprentice you're not making very much, so what they did, they would pay the difference between an apprentice and a journeyman

Supplement, okay.

So that was the G.I. Bill education, instead of going to college it was in a trade.

Sure, sure; well, that's okay, as long as you get it.

Yep.

So how long did you go to school – printing school?

Oh, I almost was – all the time –

How long did that last – a year, two years?

Because I'd be on and off classes –

Oh, you went part time –

Yeah, to school, yeah, you know, it could have been for ten years because I kept moving up in the print shop –

Oh, I see

To where it would be more and more technical jobs and skills and you have to go to school for that.

Where did you finally get a job at?

It was at that same print shop and I was there for 15 years.

What was the name of the shop?

The printing shop my brother got me into was Unique Color Print Shop – a small trade shop.

But that's where you worked then.

Yeah, for 15 years.

Reflections – looking back on everything, how do you think your military experience affected your life.

Positively.

Well, how so?

And I guess a lot of people would say I'm glad I did it but I wouldn't want to do it again.

Yes, I agree with you.

But no, I can't think of anything negative except that I kinda had survivor's remorse – I didn't know a lot of guys that were killed but I knew they were young guys like me who just never came home.

Well, yeah, you can't help having emotions when you see things like that.

Even today on Veterans' Day and that – here I have my whole life behind me and these guys never had that.

Yes, I know, that's an emotional thing and you've got to deal with it. But you're certainly not alone.

It wasn't debilitating or anything like that, but I was just really down.

So, life lessons that you learned from the military – yourself..

Never volunteer, ha, ha. But no, I came out, my work ethic was really, really good. I'm sure that spilled over partially from the military – because my father and brother's work ethics were outstanding too – I mean my whole family – my son too kind of inherited that, I guess.

Well, that's good. You had an overall positive experience.

Yeah, yeah.

So, do you belong to any veterans organizations today?

No, no.

Well, I think that's about it, unless there's anything else, any other story that you'd like to add to it. Of course you'll have a chance to review it; I'll give you a copy of the transcript and if you forgot something we can always add it at the end.

This will be part of the record -- E-4 Airman First Class -- Pacific Air Force when I went to the Philippines, and then Air Defense Command -- there's ADC and ATC -- and Air Combat Command and Tactical Air Command -- I don't go into the units or flights, it would be too small and I don't remember them anyway.

That's what I didn't ask -- are those medals or commendations that you're describing -- did you receive any medals, honors or awards?

Yeah, yeah --

What are they -- just say them out loud.

Good Conduct Medal, National Defense, Viet Nam Service, and Viet Nam Campaign.

Okay, good. All right. Dan has filled out all of his Field Kit information -- that's what we're looking at right now.

That's it for now. Thank you, Dan, very much for allowing me to have this interview and thank you very much for your service to our country.

You're welcome, and I'm glad somebody is following up on stuff like this.

Yes. I wasn't in the service but this is the least I can do so I'm happy too.

Thank you.

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