

**This interview is being conducted on Wednesday, December 19, 2018, at the home of Peter J. Bistolfo. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Pete who served in the United States Navy during peace time from 1958 to 1964. Pete 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:**

**Pete, when and where were you born?**

Chicago, Illinois, September 25, 1940.

**What were your parents' occupations?**

My Dad was a lithographer, and my Mom was a homemaker.

**What did you do before entering the service?**

I was in high school, and after high school I enlisted into the Navy.

**So how old were you when you entered?**

It was just prior to 18 – I went into active service – a program they called the “Kiddie Cruise” that they offered at the time.

**Kiddie Cruise?**

Kiddie Cruise, yeah –

**Were any other family members serving in the military?**

I went in with a good friend of mine, we went in basically the same day and our numbers – serial numbers – are one number apart. We went in on what they called the Buddy System.

**How many sisters and brothers did you have?**

I have one sister.

**So there was no one else serving in the military from your family, like your father or uncles –**

I had uncles – during World War II, yeah.

**So you volunteered – you enlisted.**

Yes.

**With your buddy.**

Right.

**And where did you go – once you did enlist – before we start that – why did you choose that specific branch of service?**

It was more an interest to see the world – join the Navy, see the world – travel – and I did just that.

**So you weren't sorry you joined the Navy then?**

Right, – I did not have plans for school at the time; I was undecided, and so, hopefully it helped decide my career forward.

**So where did you go?**

Once I enlisted, obviously you go through boot camp and that boot camp was at Great Lakes, Illinois. Then from Great Lakes they sent me to Communications School in San Diego –

**Wait a minute – how long were you in Great Lakes? How long did boot camp last?**

It was eight weeks –.

**And what did you do in boot camp? I mean, did you have artillery training or was it just classroom studies?**

We had classroom studies; we did have artillery training, pretty much the .45 pistol – a lot of training with gases and fires – shipboard fire drills, exposure to tear gas, that type of thing.

**And that was for eight weeks –**

Yes, it was.

**Was that the first time you were away from home?**

As a matter of fact it was.

**And how did you adjust – how did you adapt to military life?**

My first few weeks I was ready to re-enlist. Once I left boot camp then you kind of have a change of heart.

**Oh, so you liked it better in boot camp.**

Well, initially, you know, you get kinda brainwashed – a lot of discipline.

**So, after the eight weeks at Great Lakes, where did you go?**

Then they sent me to San Diego, California, a little south of that called Imperial Beach – between National City and Tijuana, Mexico. I went there to Communications School.

**Would that be considered specialized training?**

It was, yes.

**How long did that last?**

Oh, let's see, that was from November, until May.

**So about six months?**

Yeah, six months.

**And what did you learn there?**

Well, basically they taught us the Morse Code, the ability to intercept the Morse Code.

**Did you like that? Were you interested in that?**

Yes, I enjoyed it quite a bit.

**How did you adapt to the physical regimen, the barracks, the food and social life – things like that.**

There wasn't much social life. It was just a whole different lifestyle. Once you got rid of – or away from boot camp, the regimentation wasn't as strict. We still had marches. We still had Call to Duty – that type of thing. Having to stand at attention for the Captain's Inspection, I should say. But other than that, you know, we had time off; it was like a 9 to 5 job at different times during the day.

**How long did that last – six months –**

That was school.

**What happened after you were finished with school, after you graduated?**

After we graduated then they sent me to a little town in Morocco, Northern Africa, called Sidi Yaia (phonetic).

**What did you do there?**

We applied our training to security communications – communications intercept – listen to other countries using Morse Code.

**Which other countries? Can you say?**

Uh, we tracked Russian shipping involvement; we tracked France –

**Did you speak any other language?**

I did not, no.

**So, Russia and France mostly?**

There was some action with the Egyptians at the time, from what I remember.

**Was your job there like a 9 to 5 job as well?**

You would have what they call “watches” – and they would be 8-hour shifts. You could be on for 8 hours, off for 8 hours and back on, then you’d have a couple days off and then, you know, back at it.

**I didn’t ask you – how did you get to Africa – by what means of transportation?**

We were flown there. What was interesting is, this was during the Eisenhower Administration in 1959, and because Morocco at that time was under a dictatorship, we were not allowed to have the American flag flown above the Moroccan flag, so the American government did not feel that was appropriate, so they flew us into Cadiz, Spain, which is just off the Mediterranean, not too far from Gibraltar, and from Caiz then they flew us by boxcar – boxcar is a type of a plane -- to Port Lyautey, which is a Naval Base on the coast of Northern Morocco. Then from there we were transferred by bus to Sidi Yaia.

**So you did not sail by ship ?**

Not to and from Morocco, no.

**How long did you stay in Morocco?**

I was in Morocco approximately ten months. From there, besides giving me 30 days time off to see the family at home – between that time – then they shipped me to San Francisco, Treasure Island. I waited for my orders to be sent to the island of Guam in the South Pacific. Again we were flown – they wanted us there fast. We were flown from San Francisco to the island of Guam, and refueled in Wake Island. What was interesting about Wake Island, especially from the air – you saw the airstrip from one end of the island to the other. Wake Island is pretty small. Guam was small, but not like Wake Island.

**Wake Island is just a landing strip and nothing else?**

Right.

**How many men were with you doing the same type of job?**

Oh, 50, 60 maybe.

**Wow – all communications specialists?**

Yes.

**What were your living accommodations in Guam – in Morocco too?**

They have barracks – what was interesting was the day we came into Morocco – needless to say it's very hot – it was 123 degrees – but as they say in Arizona it's dry heat and you don't feel it. Who's kidding who?

**Right.**

What was interesting also, in Morocco, we did not need to wear our white uniforms or the Navy blue wool uniforms because of the heat – and our uniforms were basically the typical Navy dungarees –

**Oh, dungarees – not khakis at that time?**

No. I don't know if khakis are in the Navy at all.

**I think that's Army.**

Yeah, they're still – blue shirt and dark work pants.

**Yeah, it's pretty hot there. So, you just refueled in Wake Island and went on to Guam.**

Right.

**And in Guam you did the same type of work?**

Same type of work. There was kind of interesting – different type of duty – we were listening to our own ships.

**American ships.**

Yes.

**Monitoring them.**

Monitoring them –

**For what purpose?**

Uh, making sure that they conform to how they were supposed to communicate, and obviously, sometimes location too; we'd track location.

**So then you weren't doing any kind of foreign listening – that was mostly in Morocco.**

Right, right.

**Were you trying to gather foreign intelligence?**

Yes, yes.

**How long did you stay in Guam?**

In Guam I was there approximately 14 months.

**Did anything interesting happen while you were at Guam – that you can think of?**

In Guam the temperature doesn't change but six degrees all year long – it's about 79-85 Degrees – guaranteed to rain every day –

**Just for a brief period of time?**

During the monsoon season it was heavy rain; in the rainy season it would rain pretty much all day long – and during the drier spells we'd get a couple of hours of rain.

**Everything must have been pretty lush around there – a lot of greenery.**

Yeah, it was definitely a tropical island. What was interesting is – because of the humidity – because of the humidity, our barracks were heavily fortified with concrete. The windows had no glass, just screened and heavy-duty wooden louvered shutters – reason being because of typhoons coming through the island. Our lockers were equipped with heating elements to keep our shoes, uniforms and clothes from molding – if you leave them out overnight you get mold pretty easy. But interestingly you do get used to the humidity and the temperature –

**With no change in the climate –**

Right, right.

**So did anything interesting happen or any accidents – did you go on any trips while you were there at Guam?**

When we were not at duty, doing our work, besides inspection and cleaning the barracks and that type of thing, we had a chance to go to the beach a lot and go through the jungles. We found many artifacts of World War II – shovels, bayonets, helmets and unfortunately a couple of skulls –



**Really? Oh, Wow!**

Guam had old landing strips, you know, air force landing strips, and a few of us were able to acquire a car over there. We used to drag race on these old landing strips on our time off. Guam is still noted for Anderson Air Force Base – the Strategic Air Command base to this day.

**How many men were on the island at that time?**

Oh, I don't know – between the SAC base and the Army base and the Marine and Navy base – I don't know.

**What did you do on your off time – what were your off-duty recreational pursuits?**

In Morocco they had a nice woodshop; I utilized that quite a bit. We went into town – into the town of Sidi Yahia, if you will – what was interesting in Morocco there's a lot of fog in the evening – and all of the headlights on all of the vehicles were the yellow fog lights. It took me a little while when I got back to the States to become accustomed to the white headlights of the autos; over there you needed to have yellow headlights.

Some of the duty that we had in Morocco – because we were on a communications base – we had a lot of extra electrical equipment. A lot of it was copper wire and – we had a high degree of pilferage – so when we were put on watch, they gave us dogs to patrol the fence with a firearm, and we would go out at midnight till four in the morning, or whatever the watch might have been, mostly at night, and walk the fence with the dog to see if there's any pilferage, trying to get into the fence.

**You mean natives?**

Natives, yeah. Because obviously copper wire was valuable to them.

**What language did they speak – was it French?**

It was Moroccan – it's a combination – hybrid of Arabic and Spanish.

**Hybrid – you didn't understand any of it, did you?**

No. On somewhat of a sad note while I was there, there was a horrendous earthquake in Agadir, Morocco. It was just – south of Casablanca. I didn't personally go down, but several members of our base along with Sea Bees went to Agadir to help – humanitarian services to help the people out' it was pretty bad.

In Guam, it was pretty laid back. Basically, like I said, we go into the little town called Agana (phonetic) and go to the local pubs to drink beer and come back.

**What I'm asking about is, since you had all the service bases there, did you have any organized sports activities – teams like baseball, basketball, to play against each other, or something like that?**

Not on our base, no.

**Bowling – anything?**

No, that wasn't available to us. At Anderson Air Force Base on Guam, that was fully equipped. They had bowling alleys; they had all sorts of sports equipment. They had a number of people to support it and the funding, also.

**How about friends you met while there? Did you stay in touch with any buddies that you met in the service?**

I did for many years – not any longer – but in school I met a young man from Brooklyn, New York, actually Queens, New York, and we hit it off pretty well. And I was invited, before I actually went to Morocco we went to the Brooklyn Navy Yard waiting to be shipped out, or transferred to Morocco – so I spent a good 3-4 weeks in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. We'd just do normal cleaning duties during the day and in the evening they'd let us out and I'd go into Queens and I met his family and we became close friends – and my parents go in touch with that family and they corresponded for many, many years.

**What's his name?**

The gentleman's name is Rafaelli – Francis "RED" Rafaelli – he had the brightest red hair you could imagine.

**You don't keep in touch with him any more?**

Not any longer – just time and age.

**Yeah – how did you communicate with family and friends when you were in Guam and in Morocco?**

U.S. Post Office – letters.

**No phone calls or things like that?**

No. I still have those letters and my wife and I, Lois, were recently going through those. They were absolutely hilarious.

**You weren't married at that time?**

No, no.

LOIS: I was still in high school.

**We were courting, by the way.**

So you were writing back and forth.

**Yes. Those are fun to read back in the day. So it was strictly letters; you never made phone calls –**

Right.

**Unless you were back in the States.**

Understand back in 1958 – 64 there was not a lot of technology around.

**I remember those days. After your 14 months were up how did you return home?**

From Guam they decided to send us home by bathtub – meaning MSTTS – Military Transport Ship – and it’s just a big bathtub in the water. It took 14 days to go from Guam to –we went back to Treasure Island, San Francisco.

**How was the crossing?**

It was calm – those ships are low in the water and don’t do much. In the meantime I learned to play chess –

**That’s good –**

Had a lot of time; we didn’t have any specific duties, just kind of lying around and –

**During those 14 days –**

We had a roll call – I don’t know why; I’m not sure if they were checking where we would go on ship. You can’t get lost.

**Did you stop anywhere along the way?**

Interestingly enough we stopped to refuel in Hawaii. We were only there maybe 12 hours; we could not get off the ship but what was interesting was we approached the island of Hawaii – actually Oahu was where we came through –

**That was Pearl Harbor.**

Right – was – you see debris in the water. Once you see plant debris and start seeing seagulls and that type of thing so you knew you were getting close to land. You would start seeing that maybe two or three days out. And once we landed, the most – still is in your mind, the smell of pineapple. And we were – when we were refueling we were real close to the Dole Pineapple processing plant.

**So you never got off in Hawaii – too bad.**

No, no.

**Then you came directly to San Francisco?**

San Francisco and then they let us –

**Where did you muster out from?**

From Treasure Island – then I got a civilian flight home.

**What was the highest rank you ever achieved?**

Second Class Petty Officer. I achieved that during the time I was in Reserve Duty because of time in service, you have to wait X number of months and/or years to be in a certain rank of service before you can go on to the next. In my active duty I came out a Third Class Petty Officer, but in Reserves I was able to advance to Second Class Petty Officer.

**Tell me about the Reserves – how is it that you came to be a Reservist?**

It was an obligation; not that I had a choice, so I would go to Reserve meetings – I think it was like once a month for two of the three years.

**Wait a minute – when you signed up originally you knew that you were going into the Reserves.**

You have a six-year obligation. Once you sign on the dotted line, you have a six-year obligation. I'm not sure what the current regulations are, but in any case at that time we had a six-year obligation. You can service a small part of it or most of it on active duty, or on Reserve duty. I chose to go kind of half and half.

**So what – where were you during the Reserves?**

Actually went to River Forest, I believe it was. At that time we were married so --

**When did you get married?**

In March of 1962.

**What did you do when you got out of active service? Did you ever use the GI Bill?**

I did not, no.

**How was your readjustment to civilian life?**

Being on Reserve Duty – it was just – I would go for two weeks in the summertime to Great Lakes – and we just spent the government’s money – not doing anything.

**What else did you do besides those two weeks?**

We would go to meetings like once a month and by doing that we would have a two-week Reserve time – typically in the summertime.

**But that’s all you had to do was go to monthly meetings?**

Right.

**And go to the two-weeks summer event?**

Right.

**And that’s the sum of Reserves?**

That was my reserve obligation, right.

**But if they ever called up the Reserves for some reason, for national security –**

Then I could be recalled back on active duty. Right. The Kennedy –

**Bay of Pigs?**

No, wasn’t the Bay of Pigs – the Cuban Missile Crisis was going on right when I got out in September of ’61 and there was a good possibility my service could have been extended.

It was not, so I was able to get out and start civilian life.

**So what did you do when you got out of the service?**

The very first things, quite honestly, I was a busboy at a restaurant. And then I had drafting skills out of high school and from there I got a job at Automatic Electric in Northlake as a draftsman, and from then, after we got married, my wife saw my paycheck and decided something’s got to change, and we decided to – continued the drafting

career through several companies until 1968 when I got my first indoctrination into computers. I went from '68 to 2006 in the computer field.

**So did you have to go to school for that?**

Most of it was hands on.

**Oh, really, just hands on experience on your own?**

Yeah, I did continue my education as needed; did not earn a degree but continued my education.

**Including computers too?**

Most of it, a lot of it was math.

**Why didn't you choose to use your GI Bill?**

I'm not sure if I was eligible for it, quite honestly.

**Really?**

LOIS: But then all of a sudden, somebody told him about it.

**Are you a member today of any veterans' organizations?**

I am not, no.

**So you don't see anybody from the service that you knew –**

Since I've joined Carillon I'm meeting with the Veterans Breakfast – which is an interesting group.

**We have a VFW Post here – maybe you'll join.**

I know.

**So, how do you think that your military experience affected your life?**

Probably the best thing that ever happened to me; it allowed me to grow up. It was a maturing experience.

**Any life lessons that you take away from being in the military?**

Learned to be a little more humble –

**How about discipline and regimentation –**

Just do as you're told. The Navy isn't too bad on discipline. The Air Force and the Navy – understand I was in during peacetime, so we weren't put to – life situation skills needed. So it's hard for me to answer that.

**But all in all it was a positive experience?**

It was a very positive experience, yeah.

**Okay, that's about it. Is there anything else that you would like to add?**

My service buddy went on to the USS Lexington carrier. His initial time in the service was spent at Great Lakes fixing an Admiral's yacht. And then he got transferred to the Lexington. The Lexington came to the South Pacific and stopped in Guam and I was able to meet him for a short period of time.

**That's an interesting story. He knew were there?**

We had communicated through letters –

**So that was exciting –**

It was; it was – so we had a chance to –

**How long were you both in the service at that time?**

A couple of years. I was in Guam –

**So you were in Guam –**

Right, right. Nobody wants to go to Morocco.

**I didn't know we had people there, other than during the war, in North Africa.**

No, there's a lot going on. You'd be surprised.

**I'm sure; I'm sure. Okay. I'm through. If there's nothing else you care to add –**



As far as real excitement – no, it was just a positive experience. The cultural difference in Morocco is unbelievable. Back in 1958 – 1959, the women all had veils. I'd say 90% of them had veils. We did have an incident at the town bar in Sidi Yahia where a Marine had too much to drink, threw a bottle at the picture of the King on the wall, and he was immediately escorted back to the United States. That was a suicide mission on his part because the locals would have taken his life.

**Wow!**

So, but those are just – they are incidents that hopefully don't occur too often.

**Yes, right. Well, again, it's been very interesting. I'm sure you had an interesting time in the service, and I thank you for your service to our country and thank you for this interview.**

Thank you very much, Fran, I appreciate it; thank you.

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