

This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, May 7, 2024 at the home of Helmut L. Reuter. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Al, who served in the United States Navy and is a veteran of the Korean Conflict. Al Reuter learned of the Veterans' History Project through me, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Al is a neighbor of mine; we both live in Carillon so I've known him for the past few years. Here is his story:

Al, where and when were you born?

Elmwood Park, Illinois, 7-4-34.

What were your parents' occupations?

Both my parents came from Germany and my Dad was a Baker.

How about your Mon?

Mother was a homemaker.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

One younger brother.

What did you do before entering the service.

I was in high school. I went in right after high school.

What prompted you to join? Did you join with a friend? Or by yourself?

No, I just – I just wanted to have my duty taken care of. I didn't want to wait to be drafted, so I just started in the Reserves.

You enlisted in the Reserves. Was that as part of your high school education, or after high school?

No, right after high school. Graduated in '52 and started with the Reserves in '52.

Where did you go?

Glenview Naval Air Station.

Was that like a recruiting station there?

That's where I went to sign up.

That's in Glenview, Illinois.

Right. Not there anymore.

Right, I know; it's gone. Did you have other family members serving in the military?

No.

Why did you choose that specific branch of service? Why did you choose the Navy?

I just liked airplanes – liked the Air Corps – I just liked flying – that was my passion at the time.

How did you get to Glenview when you first started? How was your departure for training camp and the early days of training?

I just had to drive there from my home – living with the parents in Elmwood Park. I had my own car at the time.

So you actually drove yourself to Glenview.

Yes.

How were your early days of training? Can you describe a typical day of boot camp?

I'm not sure – we had the Marines that would give us our boot at Glenview.

How long did your boot camp last?

It was three months – not exactly sure

What did that consist of?

Well, had all our actual – the basics were at Glenview and the naval part was at Great Lakes and the Armory was at Fort Sheridan.

I'm familiar with those, of course, but what did you do at Great Lakes and at Fort Sheridan?

Well, fort Sheridan was all just gunnery – just practicing gunnery; Great Lakes, again, the ship thing – the water thing – but I didn't – we didn't have anything to do with the aircraft at that time. It was all just general Navy boot.

Basic training.

Basic training.

You got training in all the stuff you needed. And there was classroom teaching involved?

Oh, yes.

You were describing basic boot camp and that lasted for approximately three months. After you were finished with boot camp, did you have any specialized training?

Not that that time. At that time I was tested to do yeoman work, which is paper pusher.

Oh, ha, ha.

And I got my Airman designation after boot and then I just went home to a regular job, at that point.

Why?

Well, I just went for Reserves; I wanted to have my boot behind me; I wanted my other training behind me – but this was only Reserves, So now I was, so called, “discharged” from the Reserves and I only had to show up once a month for the weekend training.

And how long did that continue?

I can't remember exactly but I'm guessing about another six months.

Okay.

Maybe a little longer; then I decided to go for my Rating. So I went back into the Active Reserve to go for my Specialized Training and that was at Michigan – at the time it was Electronic Technician – that was at Grosse Point – Grosse Isle, Michigan. That was a Naval Air Base.

Grosse Isle, Michigan

And what I did, I don't know if it's important or not, but during boot I was a Platoon Leader and then when I went to the Rating School I was the Company Commander – during the rate school.

How long did that rating school last?

I think that was six weeks – to qualify for my 3rd Class Petty Officer designation.

So you went in in '52, correct?

Correct.

You were in and out – so now we're talking about 1953, after Rate School.

After my Rate School I got out again, went back to work and then in '55, I enlisted for the regular Navy – spent three years active duty.

Where did you enlist – back at Glenview?

At Glenview and they needed instructors for the simulator training, so they changed my rate from Electronic Technician to TD – Trade v man (AI made a correction – Department of Education – Instrument Flight Simulator Instructor) --because that was the designation as an Instructor – TD was the designation – TD.

Okay; so from 1955 – AI has dates on his papers here – so from March 4, 1955 to January 19, 1958 you were in the active Navy?

Yes.

That's three years.

Yes.

Okay, let's go back to your early days of training, we sort of jumped over that – how did you adapt to military life, in boot camp, when you were there?

I was young. I had no other plans, so I thought I was adapting fine. I was happy to be the Platoon Leader because it gave me a few extra privileges; made a lot of good friends and really learned a lot when it got to the marching, and the Navy and the Air Corps. They gave us a plane ride just to give us -- have an idea of what it's going to be like being in the Navy.

Right.

Although I never went aboard a ship.

Never on a ship – wow!

Spent all my time in the air.

Never on a ship; only in the air. So you really enjoyed the physical regimen, the barracks – were you in barracks when you first went in?

Oh, yes.

And how was the food?

It was great. I mean, I enjoyed the food.

And the social life and everything?

Absolutely. The thing that – I know I don't like to brag about it, but the TD designation meant that I had – was somewhat a hybrid because the only people we were responsible to were the Captain of the base, and the Flight Training Officer. In other words, in any military service you have to salute the officers. I was never an officer, but these are the only two officers that I would actually have to salute. The others, I was on an even keel with them as an Instructor.

Who was subordinate to you? Did you teach classes? What did you do as an Instructor?

Train new recruits, or what? What was your job as an Instructor?

All right, this was my job. We had simulators that we would operate and simulate different weather conditions, flight simulators. At the beginning it was for propeller types – called link trainers. They called it a blue box. Then we were training Reserves from World War II – a lot of them from World War II that were still in the Reserves -- and teaching them how to fly by instruments because during the war they really didn't have to. Then, as time went on, they had to learn how to fly jets, instead of propellers, and I have a picture here showing what the simulator would be, so I could make any kind of a –

You could simulate any conditions –

Any conditions, not only of the weather, but the aircraft, whatever it is, just to try to get them to try to save themselves.

To prepare them for what they might encounter when in the air.

Correct, yes.

So this is basically what you did the entire three years that you were in the Navy?

In active duty, yes.

And did all of that take place at Glenview?

Yes, except for occasionally we would go to a different station – just to see how they operate.

And where would that be? What other station?

Well, part of that was with Lakehurst, New Jersey – but this overlaps into my helicopter –

So mainly – my main training period was at Glenview for three years.

When you did go to Lakehurst, how long did you stay there?

That was only a couple of weeks.

And you did it more than one time?

No, Lakehurst was just once –

For two weeks –

North Island, that was as a crew member.

Where is North Island?

California – LA – and there just went as a crew member. Just to put in my time. We had to fly – and I had to put in my – at any time I had to do four hours a month flight training to get my flight pay. I did qualify for flight pay.

Did you ever actually fly?

I was not a designated pilot. The pilots, at some point, would allow me to fly the plane. But the whole idea was to give them a flight plan I the trainer; check out the aircraft; and then have them fly the same plan for real.

Hmmm. Okay. Interesting.

So you trained many men over the 3 or 5-year period that you were there.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

What is the highest rank that you achieved?

Second Class Petty Officer.

How about friendships forms and camaraderie of service?

Nothing definite; nothing permanent – just a little side note – kind of funny, but when I went through their rate school in Michigan, they gave me two body guards.

Why?

Well, a lot of guys didn't like what was actually going on – you know, you always get some wise guys, and I wasn't the biggest guy, so they assigned a couple of body guards to me.

Did other guys have them too or just you?

Just me.

Was it because of the Korean War – anything to do with the war?

No, just to keep everybody in line – during training.

Oh, wow!

Then the Skipper would give me instructions and I had to get my crew to carry them out, and if anybody gave me any lip, I always had my body guards with me.

Oh, I see.

It's a fun part of it.

Okay. How did you stay in touch – of course you were here in the States. You didn't have to communicate by letter or anything like that.

Not really. Once I got out of service no more communication to anybody.

But I'm talking about family and friends back home. You just constantly – you were either on leave or you could go and see them. It's not like you were away.

Right. Well, there, it was like a job. I lived at home. I worked at the base five days a week.

Like a 9 to 5 job.

9 to 5 job and I could go home two days.

So you went home on the weekends.

I was living at home on the weekends –

And on the base during the week.

Correct.

So it was like a 9 to 5 job.

Yep, absolutely. I got per diem to live off the station.

You lived off base. What were your recreational or off-duty pursuits – when you weren't working? Did you go out with the guys or did you just go home to your friends?

Well, I was told by a couple of the pilots that I didn't know what it was like to fly, so I went out and bought myself an airplane, kept it at Sky Harbor in Glenview, an airport --

Really? (showing photograph of plane)

And I just practiced flying.

You gotta tell me what type of plane is this – a single engine –

Single engine – it's a Piper - Cruiser

Piper Cub --

It's a Piper 12 – PA-12.

So you did learn to fly it?

Yes, I did.

Do you still have that plane today?

No.

You ended up selling it?

I would take some of the – on my days off – for hours experience – I would fly buddies to some of their out-of-state weekends – for home visits.

Oh, that's nice.

It paid for my gas, whatever, get my flight time in.

So how many hours did you actually fly?

I didn't keep track of it.

Like hundreds of hours?

No, I wouldn't say that. On the average weekend I might have put in about 10 hours.

Oh. If you did that often enough, that adds up to quite a few hours.

But this is mostly to local –

Ok. And did you give it up after you left the service?

Yes. I kept it for about a year after and then sold it. I got my family. I had four children by then.

You weren't married when you were in the service, were you?

I got married probably – trying to think – we were married in '53 –

So you were married in service.

Yeah. I got married while I was on Active Reserve.

But you came home – so your wife just lived at home –

Right.

In Elmwood Park?

Elmwood Park.

And you would come back home.

Right. She was my high school sweetheart.

Oh, how nice.

And did she work – have a job, or just at home?

She worked as a secretary and after we had the kids, then she just stayed home with the kids.

So how many children did you have.

We have four total -- three girls, one boy.

You didn't have much of a readjustment to civilian life because you weren't really and truly away from home; you were here.

Exactly.

So you have not had contact with fellow veterans over the years?

No, not at all.

Today are you a member of any veterans' organizations?

No.

There's a group here at Carillon; it is a veterans group but they just meet for breakfast.

Well, yeah, I did go there, but I'm just not into it.

Okay.

Got too many other things to do. Originally you would have to set foot aboard a foreign country –

Right, for the VFW –

but they changed that.

Yes, they have.

I was thinking about it, but I haven't.

Even the American Legion – you could join them.

Right.

So, Al has some photographs of himself in the helicopter squadron and newspaper clippings – 721 was that your Squadron?

Yeah, HU 721 –

I don't think we mentioned that –

Yeah, we did – HU 721

Okay, I know I wrote it down.

It's a Hiller—squadron HU 721 – here's the actual photo; it might be a little clearer. Those were the Piasecki double rotor helicopter –

A photo taken at Morton, Pennsylvania depicting the helicopter squadron.

Yes.

I don't think I can persuade Al to part with any of his original photographs –

That's all I have.

Yeah, that's all he has. He's got photos of the helicopters. These are the bigger size helicopters; are those the Piasecki – is that it?

Yeah, the fuselage, I think it was a C-24 fuselage that they build them from.

And how many troops did they carry, do you know?

Well, we were basically rescue, the original I don't have a picture of, the Hillers –but this was just a blimp in New Jersey where the helicopter base was at. Also where the Hindenberg had their problem, and that's the blimp hangar at that place.

I didn't know they had a blimp hangar.

Yeah, I almost got a ride in one, but –

That would have been interesting –

The weather never was right.

When you left the service in 1958, you were done, right?

For the active part.

Oh, for the active – oh, you went to '60.

That was three years; then '60 was the Reserves.

So after you were finished with the Reserves for the second time and you were all done with everything, did you ever make use of the GI Bill – were you eligible for the GI Bill?

I was eligible for it; making use of it through the VA hospital.

But you never went for any further education with the GI Bill once you got out?

I had two years of college for weather – I was thinking maybe aircraft – you know, for aviation – I have two years of that but I never followed through.

And was that o the GI Bill?

Well, that was – they call it USAFE courses – I forgot what it actually is – but it was promoted by -- sponsored by the service and it was through the University of Wisconsin. Aviation information, weather related –

Weather, like meteorology –

Meteorology, it's ultimately with my training, because I was thinking of going with TWA, and then I changed my mind last minute.

Would you have been a –

Simulator instructor.

Oh, at the airlines too.

At the airlines.

So what did you do after you left the service? What type of work did you do?

I worked in public service, Commonwealth Edison as a lineman.

So you never did pursue any of this any further.

No, no, I had four children and I needed a steady paycheck.

So did you retire from ComEd?

No, I just quit after a total of ten years in and out, in and out – while I was in service my seniority continued but after the ten-year mark, I decided to go self-employed and I went into business.

Oh, what kind of business?

As a realtor and general contractor.

And you are still a realtor, part time today.

Still, self-employed.

Al is a realtor, same as the previous gentleman I interviewed, Lloyd Lundberg; he is also a part time realtor selling homes here in Carillon where we all live.

How do you think your military experience affected your life?

I think it was great because having the experience of teaching people taught me a lot about how to deal with people and helped me with the way I would act as a salesman in the real estate business. So it just taught me how to deal with people mainly.

Are there any life lessons you learned from military service?

Well, it's hard to tell. What would you say?

Discipline –

Discipline, truth, your exercise – everything in general, life in general. You have to pay attention to things –

Right, pay attention – listen, I guess --

I enjoyed it –

It was a good experience.

Right. I would never, never guess it all back; I would do it all over again. The people that I dealt with, I hope I helped them, number one. So I enjoyed doing that – transfer those thoughts into my real estate business, and keeping healthy, just all general things.

Right.

Just live a good life.

In general it was a very good experience for you.

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Well, that's good; glad you enjoyed it and you seem like you made a go of it. You were in it certainly long enough. Do you today utilize VA services at all – for medications or whatever?

Oh, I have all kinds of medical problems so I utilize the VA Services – all the medications are coming through the VA.

Good. Anything else you'd like to add.

I was just saying for the first time, I've been trying to get some of my kids involved in service and I failed at that, but right now I have a nephew that is in his second year in the Navy, so I'm proud of that. We finally got somebody in the family back in service.

Very good; I would promote the services too; I think they're a great experience. I think that we've covered everything but if there's anything else that you might have forgotten, some incident that would add some flavor to it – something that happened – anything scary – you never saw any combat, did you? Or witness any casualties?

No, not really; everything was kind of routine. We'd have a plane crash, I'd have to go and stand guard. We had to fly to California one weekend; the plane I was scheduled on, I had the engine burn a wing off, they bailed out -- it was a buddy of mine took my place because I had a christening at home, so needless to say, he never wanted to help me out again.

So you would have been on that plane.

I should have been on that plane.

But you weren't.

Yeah.

Well, when you get close calls like that, it makes you think.

But that was just general things; nothing really exceptional. We had a good relationship with Link Company – they're the ones that made the Link trainers; we would work with him very closely. He taught us how to not only teach – operate on them, but to maintain them. It was a good experience; that's where my electronic training came in handy.

Okay; everything seems to go hand in glove – and the years go by, don't they.

Yes.

Well, Al, it's been very interesting talking with you; you had a colorful experience in the Navy. Thank you so much for your service to our country and thank you too for this interview today.

Okay, thank you; proud to have been there.

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