

This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, July 11, 2023 at the Home of Anthony Koufos. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Tony Koufos, who served in the United States Coast Guard and is a veteran of the Viet Nam Conflict, specifically the Cuban Missile Crisis era. Tony 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;

Tony, when and where were you born?

Hammond, Indiana, April 21, 1940.

What were your parents' occupations?

My mother was a housewife and my father was a railroader – he was a hustler on the railroad – Monon Railroad in Hammond.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

Two older brothers.

What did you do before entering the service?

Let me think – out of high school – well, my first job was at Junior Toy where they made little push carts and little toys for children.

Manufacturing.

Manufacturing -- and the second one was Lever Brothers Company – that was manufacturing – we made Lux Soap and Mrs. Butterworth Syrup[and Good Luck Margarine. Lever Brothers was a big corporation – big company; that was in Whiting, Indiana.

How old were you when you entered the service?

I believe I was 21.

When did you enter the service?

January 1963.

Did any other family members serve in the military?

My middle brother – yes, all three of us. My oldest one was in the Navy for two years. My middle brother was in the Army and he had a six-month Reserve stay in the Army in Fort Leonard Wood.

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

I enlisted officially right before they would have drafted me.

What made you choose that specific branch of service?

Well, I was choosing between that and the Air Force, but – when I was a child I almost drowned at the local swimming pool where the Seniors knocked me off of the life preserver and forgot to pick me up off the bottom. Someone at the side of the pool reached down and grabbed me by the neck and pulled me up. So I had a little fear of water and I said I gotta get over that, so I joined the Coast Guard.

Oh, I see.

And they made me jump off of a big tower and go to the bottom and pick up a brick and get it to the top of the water and tread water while you're holding this brick.

Wow!

And then you take off your pants and you tie knots in the legs and you flap it over your head and you make two pontoons out of it to save your life –

Wow, Right, right. So you learned all that stuff.

That's right.

Where did you enlist – was it in Hammond?

That would be – gee, I'm assuming –

Or did you come to Chicago?

That doesn't stand out in my mind

You don't remember – where you enlisted?

I think probably Gary, at the Miller Beach, where they had a satellite base there.

Ok. Where did you go? How was your departure for training camp?

They put us in an airplane and flew us to San Francisco. Government Island was the Coast Guard Base.

What did you do? How were your early days of training?

I enjoyed it all because I was very athletic and I enjoyed all the challenges. I also was –

I sold real estate at age 20 and 21 – and had to learn how to communicate so when the commanders were chewing our butts out, I wouldn't get too emotional over it.

Ha, ha. You were a little older at 21 – I'm sure. A lot of the boys were 18 or 19.

19.

So could you describe a typical day in boot camp – like what time did you get up in the morning –

I think from 5:00 to 5:15 was a total wreck – because reveille was called at 5:00 and you had to be on your square in 15 minutes, which incorporated going to the bathroom, putting on your clothes, fixing your bed, and make sure that you could drop a coin on it and having it bounce – everything had to be perfect. But the biggest, craziest thing is when reveille was called in the morning, – now you're in a room of 98 fellas – and all of a sudden this big, loud 'BOOM' when all 98 guys hit the floor –

At one time – ha, ha –

And we were double bunks, you know one guy's higher – they all hit the floor at the same time.

And then we had assignments – so we all had clean-up assignments. Well, my assignment was to wipe all the baseboards all the way around this huge building – room. So I would bend over and of course we had to fold our pants and tie them into the leggings – because its boot camp and they had leggings.

(Tony will include a photo of himself with the “leggings”).

So by the time I got out and was on my square at Attention, my pants were baggy because they would fall out. So for about three days I got face to face with the Commander who was chewing my rear end out. So, I gotta figure this out. So the next day I pulled my pants down, I folded my pants into the leggings, nice and tight, so it looks nice, and with my left hand I held my pants and with my right hand I dusted all around this room –

Tony is demonstrating how he accomplished this – very funny – ha, ha

So then I come out on my square, I'm at Attention looking spiffy, and he comes up to me and he says, “Koufos, you figured it out.” Ha, ha, good for you – never forget that.

Then, of course, first thing we do is run down to the drill field.

Don't you eat breakfast first?

No, I think we worked out before.

Wow!

And classes all came up after breakfast.

Ok. So before breakfast you did what?

We all ran down to the drill field for exercise. So we had side straddles and push-ups, and sit-ups and running in place – all that was kind of the morning thing, and then – one thing I remember is there was gravel on the drill field. So when you did the sit ups your butt really hurt – bleeding – bleeding – so I had to get a pad and put it inside my pants so when I did the sit-ups it wouldn't rub my tailbone.

Gotta be creative, right, ha, ha.

And then of course during the day we would–

You had classes –

We had classes and then we had -- I got on the boot camp rowing team.

Tony is showing me photos of his boot camp days; he's showing me what leggings are – and what he did during boot camp at Alameda, California – Government Island.

I remember standing in long lines and getting the shoulder shots, cleaning details and classes. And then, okay, that picture – there's 8 men and the coxswain. I was on the rowing team; we lost to the worst and beat the best.

How many men were in this boat?

There should be 8 plus the coxswain – four and four. This picture shows the amount of ribbons that you won each week; we did very well – Kilo Company was the name of the company.

I'll see if Tony can part with one of these pictures –

Oh, well, we lost by a nose – there's the nose of the boat. I guess we won the trophy for all these wins so that was pretty good.

You had pretty good competition too.

Yeah, Honor Company; we won that; Kilo Company, and then graduation --

How long were you – was your basic training?

Twelve weeks.

Did you have range practice too?

We – I think we didn't have it on the base. We had to go elsewhere.

But you had it at that time?

Yes, yes, absolutely.

And I won an award for expert shooting with an M1 rifle; clipping in the newspaper at home –

The Hammond Times – write up – successfully completed boot camp –

May 1963.

And here's a Certificate – U.S. Coast Guard.

And because I went in as a non-swimmer I graduated as an intermediate swimmer.

Wow! You did good.

Yes. And this was the Dexter – a ship that I was on. We had one 5-inch gun on it.

So this more or less covers your entire basic training.

Yeah.

During that 12 weeks did you have any specialized training?

No. Of course when I went in I trained and taught police departments before that. At 20 years old, in there. I trained in judo; started at 18 right out of high school. I was active in high school. I played football and basketball and track. We were city champs every year we played football. Senior I was co-captain, 8th grade – undefeated team, I was 98 pounds, defensive halfback.

Tony is not a big guy; he's not big today so with all these things he's saying about his physical activity just seems funny; but he is very athletic.

In the Service you used your previous –

Yes. Conditioning –

Previous conditioning, exercises and the information that you had to teach –

Yes.

While you were in the service.

Yes.

You were teaching your fellow enlistees.

Yes. And that was after we got out of boot camp.

Okay. After boot camp. Give me an overall view of your boot camp. How did you adapt to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks, the food, the social life – how did you adapt to that, would you say?

I just enjoyed it all.

So you had no difficulty.

No, I enjoyed the challenge. Just say I respected the whole concept.

Okay. Where did you go after boot camp?

Boot camp -- we were put on the Dexter ship –

What kind of a ship was that?

It was a retired Navy destroyer escort and it had one five-inch gun on it. And so – we sailed from San Francisco – Alameda is right there – we sailed to Seattle and we were there –

A base in Seattle?

No, just ported there. Had one day of liberty, so we'd shift. There was three shifts. So if there was a stop, one shift would have the stop. Then if we went to another location, we only stayed one day to refuel; then the next shift would get that liberty, and that was it.

How many men were on this ship – the Dexter?

Probably, that's a good question, I would say our whole company; so at least 100 guys.

One of the trainings in boot camp was a simulated sinking of the ship.

Oh.

And they put us in this ship; and they put us below decks, and then they simulated holes below the deck. And then they would take cherry bombs – we're inside the ship and now water is coming in and we're swimming around, and they have these chinks – these boxes with a screw type of apparatus to it so that we could cover the hole and then screw the thing down to stop the leak.

Right.

And while we would be working on this hole, the guys on the outside, the officers, would be throwing cherry bombs all over the place. So they throw a bomb and you're working on a hole and BOOOOM!! – this big bang would come through – and the thing you were working with, you had to reassemble and put it back up there - ha, ha –

Ha, ha

And of course there was always a small percentage of guys who didn't take this seriously. Because we were supposed to save the ship; and you only had so many minutes and they officially called it – we sunk! We died! And some of the guys would be swimming around, you know, rather than doing the job.

Okay, ha, ha.

So, but you took it seriously. And after we were all done, we got out and we were at attention, and then the Commander said well, you officially died. The ship sunk.

The Ship sank. Ha, ha, okay. So how long did you stay in Seattle?

Seattle was just like a day and a half to refuel. It was interesting -- I met a girl there – with this other guy; we were the two from boot camp who won the medal; so we went to a movie together, because we got to be buddies there. And met a couple of ladies and then took them to a movie. After that I was gone and this girl wanted – we hit it off well, personality wise – and she wrote me the rest of the way through my six months. At one time or another I tried to get liberty to just run up there for a day or two, but it never really worked out. So I never got to see her again.

Okay.

So then we went from Seattle to Ketchikan, the inland route –

The Inside Passage?

The inside passage and it was interesting that we didn't get liberty at that location but some of the guys that went on liberty said that town was nuts! Beer was rolling in the streets, just like it was raining beer! When the Coast Guard comes to town, the Navy comes to town, when the woodsmen, the guys – the loggers – logging camp guys all come to town –

My goodness.

It was battle and war and everything – in every bar.

That's an old west town. I've been to Ketchikan so I can picture that -- - the docks, and the water there; I know the harbor there.

And believe it or not, somewhere in my archives I bought a little postcard of the picture of Ketchikan at night and it was the most beautiful picture, with the lights and the mountains behind it and the reflection on the water – just a gorgeous postcard.

So how long were you at Ketchikan?

Ketchikan, one day. Day and a half, refuel.

But it was memorable.

Yes, it was, right; one of the guys said lucky you didn't get liberty that day because it was crazy out there. From there we sailed to Juneau, Alaska. Juneau was interesting because –we were only there a day – so we went to the Chamber of Commerce to see – sightseeing – where do you go? So the guy said why don't you go to the glacier.

Right.

So, we went to the glacier and the observatory; beautiful building they built. They built the building down a way from the glacier. Well, when they built this they figured the melting process would take at least 250 years before it would knock over the building as it melted and came down. Well, they misjudged that –

I bet.

They said within less than 25 years the glacier would eventually knock down this beautiful wooden building they built as a museum, so to speak.

Was it right there in the center of town?

No, it was a little out a bit. So, the interesting part is, we saw totem poles, that's interesting, I asked if there were any Eskimos here, and they said no, we imported the totem poles. Ha, ha

Ha, ha.

That was the weirdest thing to stick in there. So then, as we left to come back, we took the ocean back because the Captain didn't want to run the risk of running aground going back in shallow water.

Um-hm.

So then we were out on the ocean –

Did you encounter any storms along the way?

Yes. If you look behind you and see how white those clouds are – it was black – as far as you can see in any direction. So the regular personnel on the ship said “Oh, the Dexter's going down this time; it's not gonna make it through this storm.” The front of the bow would come out of the water and down, it would bang and the ship would hit hard and everybody was not allowed to go to the forward third of the ship while we were in the storm. So they said, “Oh, it's going down; it's gonna sink; we're not gonna get through this.” They were scaring all of the Reserves.

Oh, ha, ha.

So we finally got through that and sailed all the way down to Monterrey to refuel again and then --

Back to San Francisco through the Golden Gate Bridge. It was like a vacation for me because I never traveled or anything. And I've not really traveled since then, even though I would like to.

You mentioned to me before, when you were filling out the paperwork, that you were on active duty for six months and then you became an active Reservist.

That's correct.

Is that how you entered the service – with that purpose in mind?

Yeah, --

Because your brother did that, too.

Yeah, but I was going to college at the time -- and so Indiana University Extension was not far from where I grew up. So I went part time to Indiana for a couple three years there. The interesting thing was one of my classes was a psychology class and strangely enough when we were learning this in the future – the teachers of certain classes learned those classes because of personal needs. The professor there committed suicide.

Oh, wow!

That's kind of interesting – a business major, so to speak.

Business?

Yeah. And then previous to that I got my real estate license and broker's license.

You were pretty busy.

Yeah.

So you're back in San Francisco, your home base, so to speak. And how long were you there then?

I was probably not – oh, that's right, we were there probably another week and so the Commander came in and said we want volunteers to go out to Alcatraz and do some work on the Aid to Navigation that's on the island. So a couple of guys said you know, we've gotten through this far pretty good, let's volunteer and see what they have for us. So there was about ten of us that volunteered to go and do some work on Alcatraz because they had just recently closed it.

Oh, I visited Alcatraz; it was interesting.

So when we got out there, and I remember the boat ride out there, it was choppy –

It's always choppy; that's why they built the prison there.

Yes, that's right. Nobody could swim that one. While we were there we did some work on the Aid to Navigation out there, the lighthouse, so to speak. The Commander introduces us to the secretary to the Warden was still out there taking care of details and stuff. So he took us for a tour after we were done with our work we toured, like you would have taken a tour.

Like a regular tourist.

And he showed us this –

Cells –

Yeah, well, the guys did different things – in the galley, in the kitchen -- where some of the guys planned their escape – so the way they tried to escape is – they were painting the ceiling in this big building, and it was pretty high up, so they had drop cloths that were hanging while they were scraping. So these guys were sneaking across to get behind the drop cloths to get to the other side to dig a hole, to get out and finally to get down and try to make their escapes. And then they told us about certain convicts that killed each other and things like that. But then that was it; we came back and within a few days it's time to go back home.

So, another major airplane flight back home –

So your six months of active duty was up.

Yes.

So you flew back home to Indiana?

Back to Indiana and back to civilian life, so to speak.

Did you make any permanent friends from this period of time – people that you still are in contact with?

Actually for awhile I did. In fact – maybe one other thing to add to when we were at Juneau – can I backtrack to Juneau?

Sure.

Four or five of us Coast Guard went to the Red Dog Saloon. And in this Red Dog Saloon they had this little old lady at the piano and she challenged anybody that whatever titled song that they knew that she would play it. And if she didn't play it, we would all have a free round of beer.

Okay.

Well, she didn't know that a guy by the name of Miller, his hobby was collecting old 78 records.

Oh.

So, long story short, we drank free all afternoon –

Ha, ha.

Because we kept stumping her; he'd come up with these titles; 'cuz anytime we'd be in town somewhere, he'd have a newspaper and following an ad that somebody was selling records and he'd go there and buy them. He was an avid collector of old 78s.

Those were pretty big and heavy too, those vinyl records. Wow! So you did make some friends that you were in contact with for awhile?

Yeah. He lived down by Orange County –

He was a California resident.

Yes. Most of the people in there were Californians; not a lot of Chicagoans. Ours was more or less a Reserve Unit Company, Company K; we had Johnny Shauf, who was All American football; he played in the East West football game that was popular for collegiate back then. We had a lot of world class swimmers that were in our company.

Was that a special company?

Yeah, it was Reservists who are usually the college people who want deferment or something so they continue their scholarship – because they were on athletic scholarship. So that's the guys I was up against to win that medal.

Wow!

Where were we at?

Well, you just came back to Indiana – so what did you do -- you continued on as a Reservist for seven more years – so what did you do in those years. You went in two weeks –

Two weekends a month.

Two weekends a month. And what did you do? I never really interviewed a Reservist so this is interesting – one weekend per month.

Yes.

And where did you go?

The base was in Miller Beach, Indiana, east of Gary, and there was a base right on Lake Michigan.

Okay.

And in that base we had Navy, Marine, Seabee and Coast Guard. So all four were on the base.

Four different services.

That's right. So basically we were there to be available for whatever needs were necessary. You didn't do a lot of – I'm trying to think of –

You never were called up were you, for anything?

No. Nothing happened.

You were telling me about the Cuban Missile Crisis that happened during this time.

That was mainly in boot camp; after that it passed; nothing ever really developed after that. So then soon after that was Viet Nam, and of course, they took –if anything we would be called up locally for inter-lakes – because Coast Guard was inter-lake protection. So we would end up guarding the Great Lakes.

Great Lakes, hmm.

That's how I would interpret it.

So what did you have to do on these two days on the weekend. What were your duties?

Probably do maintenance, the building –

Did you do practice of any kid?

Well, yeah, 'cuz I taught –

Is this when you did your teaching?

Yes.

Tell me about that – the teaching training.

They – I'll show you – I have my billy clubs in the garage –

Okay.

Because we would get the billy clubs – back then – it isn't like police work is today –

Right.

You couldn't really hurt the other guy because civilians had civil rights, you know, where the policemen had to be cautious to detain people and protect – to keep order. That was part of my duties there.

And then I did – they took us to target range because I -- when we fired the rifles in boot camp in California – I won marksman status there. We fired the Thompson submachine gun – that was fun. If you didn't really hold on to it, it would rise up on you.

Yeah.

And then we went to the pistol range and I literally couldn't find the target. I'd shoot like this – and bullet was over there (indicating).

Oh my goodness.

I mean, a .45 will move and you've got to be aware. And I said doggone it I need to learn how to fire a .45, so in Reserves that next month, I had a neighbor in the building I was living in, he belonged to the National Rifle Association and he went target shooting every Saturday. And I said will you take me with you and show me how to shoot a pistol, .45. Well, we went four weekends and I ended up going back to the Reserves and firing a .45 and I fired as an expert with a .45.

Wow! So did you ever – same thing with your M-1 Rifle, you said you never got your ribbon – your marksman ribbon.

Yeah. This is from the Flying Tigers – that sells – it's a Naval Supply Store on Cicero Avenue in Alsip and I would buy these Coast Guard flags to put on my mail box, and I said by any chance do you sell medals and ribbons? And they said yes.

Can they sell those?

I guess, you know, these are all left over stuff; it's a Navy surplus store.

Wow!!

So I said do you have a ribbon that you mount on your shirt that represents marksman? And they said yes. So I said order me a few to put on my shirt. So after 50 years I got my ribbon. Ha, ha.

Wow! You had to buy your own ribbon! Okay, ha, ha.

So, talk about your training – what you did with the different types of training that you did not only with the Coast Guard but with the Marine and the letter you got.

Well, basically we've got their Reserve Marine Unit and we'd all go out on the beach near Lake Michigan and I'd literally have them attack each other and I would show them what to do when somebody attacks you and how to handle and throw and pin, knock them down –

So this was what –

This was judo and karate.

Judo and karate – you were the instructor.

Yes. I have two Black Belts; one in Judo and Jiu-jitsu. In my competition, I was Indiana State Judo Champion and my championship match was refereed by a two-time Olympic Gold Medal Champion. I was so thrilled by him being my ref, and when we went at it, we were going at it, and I took a guy down to the ground; that was equivalent to a half a point and you needed a full point to have a win. And I took him down and then the ref says, “Clean it up so I can start the count.” And they have 30-second pins – 30 seconds is like an hour.

That’s a long time, yeah.

Right. So I was trying and I got a little frustrated and I just left him up. And the ref looks at me with wide eyes, “why did you let him up; you almost had the win.” So I let him up and then we went at it again and I was more the aggressor than my opponent and I took him down again; we grappled and went to the ground and I was on top of him and the ref taps me on the shoulder and says, “Match over; you won!” So he gave it to me.

Oh, wow!

Because I was willing to give my opponent another chance, which was –

Good sportsmanship.

Yes. And he appreciated that. But he was something else. Strangely enough, months previous, our Judo Club – went to St. Louis –

Was this in the service?

This was outside – civilian –

We’ll try to stay on military time –

On weekends –

Did you have different classes on different weekends – teach one group for X number of weeks and then teach another group.

You gotta remember, it’s one weekend a month. So you can be teaching the same class for quite awhile.

Exactly. So you did this over the seven years that you were in the Reserves.

I don’t remember the times that the Commander saw me from that point on.

Well, how long do you think that you did that during your Reserve duty?

Gosh, maybe six months, maybe a year.

Okay, six to 12 months that you were teaching.

Yes.

And the rest of the time in the Reserves –

Then we had, well, like maybe one weekend would be target shooting; another weekend would be base maintenance.

Did you ever take vehicles out and drive around in convoys?

No, Coast Guard doesn't do that.

Did you take ships out? Ha, ha.

We wouldn't even take a rowboat out on Lake Michigan. I can't remember, you know. But you didn't have a lot of responsibility. Just like when you're in active duty -- it's hurry up and wait; so there was a lot of waiting.

Did you finish your college degree while you were in the Reserves?

No, didn't finish that. And didn't go back till 30 years later.

Really?

Yeah, in the 90s.

Did you use the G.I. Bill when you did go back?

No. Most of the classes that I took were not credit courses because I wanted to learn about true health, so I was a natural health studier, so I just took courses in natural health. When Dr. Ray, who is a wonderful Renaissance man, we would have people in our classes that were sent home to die by their doctors. And we worked with them in our classroom workshops and they'd get well. And I said why is the IRS and the Feds harassing this doctor when he's getting people well when the doctors couldn't help them.

Right.

So that's when I learned there's something up in River City.

Okay. We never talked about your medals and awards – honors – like what's the highest rank you ever achieved while you were in the Coast Guard?

As a Seaman. I didn't advance my work there because I was selling real estate at the time and spending most of my extra time doing that.

When your eight years were up, what was that like? What did you have to do?

Well, not a whole lot. Just file for your discharge and, you know, if I had to do it over again, I probably should have stayed in just to get a pension of some sort.

Right, right, exactly. Are you a member of any veterans' organizations today?

Yes. The American Legion in Plainfield And also the Family Legion here (Carillon).

How has your military experience affected your life?

Fortunately, I didn't have to experience what a lot of veterans have, so I just think it was a great improvement and I think everybody should at least go through boot camp – everyone – to really get and understanding of the value of life and freedom.

What life lessons did you learn from your military service?

Probably just the fact to be tolerant of others that think differently than you do and try to understand those around you and appreciate what you have, and what we have in this country.

Very Good – okay. Thank you, Tony, very much. If there's anything else that you forgot or want to mention, we can always add to it. But I thank you very much for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

You're very welcome.

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