# VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

**Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations**

**Interview with**

# William A. Luessow

Conducted by Ms. Deb Barrett

May 26, 2010

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**This interview is being conducted on Wednesday, May 26, 2010, with Mr. Bill Luessow at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Luessow was born on April 24, 1946, in Chicago, Illinois. He is a retired corporate travel agent, and learned of the Veterans History Project through one of his neighbors, Diane Simms, who is another volunteer on this project. Mr. Luessow has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.**

## Life Before Military Service

**Bill, where were you just before you went into the military? What was your life like? Where were you living? What were you doing?**

I had been in college for two years, and did terrible. So, I went just looking for a summer job to the airlines. At that time you could get on the airport – just drive on. I was driving to the TWA hangar, and I passed the American Airlines hangar on the way. They had a sign: Help Wanted. So went in and interviewed right away. I took tests, got hired and worked there for twelve years, and it was great.

**That was before you went in?**

No. After one year is when the service came. Because I had lost my school deferment and it didn't take the draft board too long (chuckles). I got a notice for a physical, and when I got that I knew I didn't want to go into the Army. I just knew I didn't want to go into the Army.

**And this was what year?**

This would have been 1967.

**So this was the height of Vietnam.**

Oh, yeah. So I went to the Navy Reserve because I had friends who were in there.

**Let's go back for a moment. You got a draft notice …**

No, I didn't get a draft notice. I got a notice to go for a physical.

**So you had a deferment for school. When you left school you lost the deferment.**

That was gone. Right.

**So, you went in for a physical and that's what reclassified you.**

That's what triggered everything. That's when it got started.

**What was your reaction? What was your family's reaction?**

We were resigned. Everybody else was doing it.

**Did you have friends in the military?**

I did. Two in the Army and two in the Navy Reserve – that's why I went there.

So I was taking the exam for the Navy Reserve and in the middle of it somebody comes in and takes my papers and said, "You had a draft notice sent out already, you can't take this." I told him I never received a draft notice. I was in a panic. He said, "You better get to your draft board." So I did. I went to the draft board and they gave me a letter – a one week exemption. They did send the draft notice out! So they gave me a one-week exemption. I got in and was sworn into the Navy Reserve and it was great.

**So you didn't have to go into the Army.**

I didn't have to go into the Army at all.

**That one week gave you the time to do that testing.**

Right.

**And why did you choose the Navy?**

Because all the way back to when I was a kid there used to be a TV program – I think it was called "Tales of Annapolis" or something like that. And I was always fascinated by boats in the water. I just thought it was neat. I liked the uniform (both chuckle)!

So I signed into the Reserves. At that point I would have to go for a year of meetings once a week, and at the time I was working for American. After that year I knew I had to go on active duty. That was in January, 1968. I went to San Diego to a school – it's called a Class A school.

## Induction and Basic Training

**Where were you sworn in?**

In Chicago. At the Naval Reserve Training Center.

**Where was that? Do you remember?**

Monroe and the Lake. Monroe right to the end, and it was right at the end of Monroe. Now it's part of the Yacht Club down there.

Oh. Basic training – I forgot about that!

**So you were sworn in. And right when you were sworn in …**

Then – this is where it gets gray. I had to go to basic training first, I'm sure. And dates …

**Did you go to basic training?**

I went to basic training at Great Lakes. But the Reserve program – if I was in the regular Navy I would go for six weeks. In the Reserves you only go for two weeks. And then you go for two weeks right after that on a training ship that's moored right there at Great Lakes. So that was the month of December 1966. That might have gone all the way back to 1966. I just can't remember. I'm sorry.

**So you were sworn in. Tell us what that day was like? How did you get to where you were being sworn in?**

Well, you get sworn in downtown. And then I got to Great Lakes on my own. I took a train up there. It was cold, I remember – it was snow and ice. Not knowing a thing, you check in at the guard shack and they tell you where to go. As soon as you go into that building you are the lowest piece of anything on this earth (Ms. Barrett chuckles).

**Tell us about that. What did they do when you got there? What did they have you do?**

First of all, they assign you a bunk. And the next day was haircuts.

**The next day.**

Yes, because I went there at night.

**Was this in a big group?**

Oh, yeah – maybe about 100. And we were all on one floor of a barracks.

**Haircuts – they shaved it all off?**

Yes. And you learn real quick – you don't talk, you don't move.

**What happened if somebody did?**

They would just make it hard. I remember one incident where they would wake you up in the middle of the night for inspection. And you would stand up and the master-at-arms went down the line and rubbed this guy's cheek. He asked, "Did you shave, sailor?" No, he called him recruit because we weren't sailors yet. He said, "Yes, sir; yes, sir." Well,

he didn't buy it. So they took him back to the latrine and took a razor and shaved him – dry shave.

**Ouch!**

So he came back and his face is red. But everybody shaved! The message gets across real quick.

**So when you checked in, they told you where your bunk was. Were there guys in there already?**

Yes, there were some.

**How did they wake you up that first morning?**

It was about 3:00 – just like you see in the movies. The guy had a trash can lid and was just banging and banging and banging. And up you went. You'd stand at attention at your bunk, and he'd do the inspection. Everything really had to be just so.

**Was it a case where you had to get up and make your bunk right away?**

Yes.

**How much time did you have to make up your bunk?**

Maybe two minutes at the most to have everything squared away.

**Were you able to have any of your personal effects with you, or did they confiscate them?**

No. At that point the only thing you have is Navy issue.

**What did they do with your personal things?**

I don't know! I don't remember. All you had was Navy stuff. And then you'd go to classes …

**That first morning, they got you up at 3:00. You jumped up out of bed.**

It was a rude awakening!

**Not a gentle shake on your shoulder.**

Your mom was not taking care of you anymore!

**So he did the inspection. What was he looking for – the shave, obviously.**

You got a manual – the Blue Jackets manual. And that tells you the Navy way.

**And how long had you had that?**

Not long. I probably had it when I went into the Reserves. No, I get this confused – I had to go through basic training before I went into the Reserves. So it would have been part of my issue when I went there. Yes. Because that's where I got my uniforms.

**So they gave you two minutes …**

To jump up and get your inspection …

**To make your rack – it's not a bed, it's a rack.**

It had to be squared away. I never had a problem.

**How did they decide what was appropriate?**

By the book!

**Was it everything tucked in?**

Everything tucked in, everything in order in your locker; shoes had to be facing a certain direction. You lose all personal identity. Every locker, every bed, every person looks the same.

**Everything had to be identical. So you could open all the lockers and they should all be identical.**

They should be exactly the same – exactly the same.

**And did anyone's locker not match?**

Oh, yeah.

**And what would they do?**

They would just pull all the stuff out and they'd have to repack it. There was no free time.

**So they got you up at 3:00 in the morning, they did this. What did you do then? Was it exercise? Was it breakfast?**

Yes. We would do exercise outside. Then you'd go to breakfast.

**What kind of exercise? Was it calisthenics?**

Yeah. Because it was in the middle of winter we couldn't do a whole lot – just jumping jacks …

**And you went to breakfast as a group?**

Yes. We did everything as a group! You didn't walk. You marched everywhere as a unit. You got to the chow hall and were in a single line. You use service terms here – "nut to butt," (both chuckle) – that's how you line up: nut to butt; there's no gap between you. You walked in and had about 15 minutes to eat. There was no sitting around and talking with the guys.

**Did you tell them what you wanted?**

No, no. You just take your tray and go down the line. Then you sit down and start eating. And then it's, "Let's go," whether you're done or not. Then it was a full day.

One day it was medical and you got all the shots you needed. That was in one of the drill halls. Those were huge buildings at Great Lakes. It was interesting. That part was interesting – the whole facility.

**So they lined you up and they just went down the line?**

They just lined you up and went down: boom, boom, boom. Nothing was personal!

**Because you weren't a person. You were a group.**

Then you had to qualify with an M1.

**So you had …**

We had rifle training.

**Had you shot a rifle before?**

No, never.

**How did it feel?**

It was a big bang – a big shock. I did all right.

And then there was the pool.

**You had to be able to swim.**

They wanted you to swim.

**What did you have to do to swim?**

There again they lined us all up. It was a big pool and asked who couldn't swim. A couple of guys raised their hands, and that was okay. Then you went into the pool. But you didn't just go in. You went to a tower that was maybe 20' high …

**Like jumping off a ship.**

And that was it. He told us to cross our arms over our shoulders like this, and just step off and go down.

**With you uniforms on?**

With our uniforms on. And then we had to tread water for five minutes. Then take your pants off, tie the cuffs so you could have some buoyancy. You'd take the pants and push them down and float on them. And there were guys gasping – they couldn't swim, and they didn't say so at the beginning. And they're gasping and trying to get to the side, and trying to get to the side. And the petty officers are along the side and have poles that are about 20' long and they're …

**Pushing you away.**

As they were coming along they would push them back out until they were gasping and going down. And then they would send someone in to get them.

**Did that happen – that they had to send someone in?**

Oh, yeah; oh, yeah.

**And what would they do?**

"Why didn't you tell me you couldn't swim?" (chuckles) At this point they were scared because they almost drowned.

**So you had to tread water for five minutes.**

Yes, for five minutes. I don't remember how many laps we had to swim.

**After treading water.**

Yes.

**They didn't care how you swam.**

Yes – just so you were alive.

**And then you got out of the water …**

We got out. And I don't remember what we did. There was just constant classroom training.

**What sort of classes did you have?**

Well, you learned etiquette – Navy etiquette.

**For example …**

Who to salute, who not to salute.

**What was the difference?**

For boot camp, anybody who had an epaulet – no matter what kind of petty officer they were, they got a salute. All officers got a salute. Of course, in the real world, the enlisted men you don't salute – no matter what. But all the officers you do. You don't salute indoors. You take your hat off anytime you walk indoors. You never put your hat on a table.

**What did you do with it?**

Tuck it in the back of your seat – in the back of your pants. How you wear your uniform. The knot had to be tied in a perfect square knot – not a granny knot – on your neckerchief. Your hat had to be an inch above your eyebrow, squared away – not on the back of your head.

Of course, when you get out again it's all different.

**But they were trying to create discipline.**

That's right. And it was good. For me it was good.

**Did people get stopped if they didn't?**

Definitely.

**Who would stop you?**

Any of the petty officers. And the master-at-arms was a tough guy!

**The master-at-arms – what was his role?**

In the Marines he'd be the drill sergeant.

**The equivalent of the drill sergeant. Do you remember his name?**

I don't. No.

And of course we were doing cleaning constantly. We'd clean in the morning – I mean a real scrub down. And in the afternoon, you'd have to do it again (chuckles)! It was busy work.

**What did you have to clean?**

Everything. All the floors, the windows – of course there were no blinds on the windows. And everything was stark – very stark.

**How many men were in your barracks? Was it just one long line?**

Yes.

**How many men?**

Like I say, it was probably about 100 – fifty on each side, in double racks.

**Were you on the top or bottom?**

I was on the bottom in basic.

The latrine. That was interesting because there were no doors. That was the first time I experienced latrines …

**It could be a little uncomfortable at first.**

Yes, at first.

You had to wash your clothes. There were no washers and dryers.

**How did you wash them?**

You took your clothes and put them on the table – they had a big washing table. And you took your scrub brush and you scrubbed it and rinsed it.

**Just one step above beating it on a rock.**

That's right! Very, very primitive.

**How did you dry them?**

When we went outside for calisthenics they went outside. And it was cold! They did eventually dry. We never used clothespins. I can't remember how we got them up, but I remember we didn't have clothes pins. They were tied on, some of them. I can't remember.

**Did they have your day divided so that you had physical activity in the morning and school in the afternoon?**

You didn't know what was coming. One day they got you up at 2:00 and got you going and out you went.

**Did you have any sort of work that you were expected to do on your own – like homework type of thing? Or was it all done in class?**

It's too vague. I can't remember.

**So you said you had breakfast, lunch and dinner as a group. Everything.**

Everything. And a very short time.

**What was the typical dinner like?**

You'd get your meat and potatoes. Everything was there; you just didn't have time to eat it (chuckles)! As a recruit you had no time.

**So this was for your first two weeks?**

This was for the first two weeks.

Then we went on – there was a ship moored there; just a small patrol craft, escort, The Havre. And since I'd been on it, I looked up the history of it. It was part of the support at the landing at Iwo Jima. They supported off Okinawa. It was one of the ships off Tokyo Bay when they had the signing. So there was some history to it. And it was the first time I had been on a ship.

**Did they tell you the history of it going in?**

No.

**It was just there.**

Right. And there you learned – oh, you'd stand the quarter-deck watch. It was starting to begin to feel like the Navy; like what you had in mind.

**Did they have any sort of ceremony or anything marking your passing from being a recruit before going on this ship?**

Well, I was still a recruit at that point.

**But after basic – your abbreviated two-week basic – did they do anything?**

There had to be some kind of a graduation, but I don't remember.

But when we were on this ship – and again, it was the winter. I had a bottom rack. And it was an old ship, so there were five [high].

**And how much room was between racks?**

There was no room! I couldn't roll over.

**You were kind of staring at the back of the next guy's head.**

You were looking at the canvas above you.

And I woke up one morning. And my shoes were always right under my rack. And they were floating! (both chuckle)

**That's not a good sign on a boat!**

So we all mustered, and we were all up on deck. And there was a problem. Ice had hit the hull and split a seam, and we were taking on water all night in one of the magazines.

**How far below deck were you?**

At that point – well the magazine was the next deck lower, so that was as low as it went. So we were pretty far below. But there were only maybe three or four decks because it was a small ship.

**So if your shoes were floating, what did you do?**

We dried them out.

They eventually put a list on the ship and put welders over the side, got it welded and we were back in business. But again it was basic training. And we were cleaning and polishing and cleaning and polishing. But the food was good.

**How did it differ from your two weeks on land?**

It just felt more like you were a unit.

**That unit feeling was starting to form.**

Yes. You knew guys now for two weeks. And it wasn't quite as stressful as those first two weeks.

**Did any guys not make it through those first two weeks?**

Not to my knowledge.

**So you all as a unit went on the ship?**

I won't say all. Because others had different orders. This was called back-to-back. It was kind of a special way of doing it. And after I got out of that, the meetings were for a year.

**So you were on the ship, and this was for two more weeks – same kind of hours? I mean, they got you up at 3:00 in the morning?**

It was more of a routine. You had a watch quarter and station [bill]. And your name would be on there as to what you would be doing, what the uniform of the day was. Again, it was easing you into what to expect if you got a ship out of basic training.

**So you still were being awakened in the same kind of way?**

No. On the ship it would just be revile, revile – all hands …

**At night time were you expected to …**

It was early. Again, I don't know.

There was a little library and you could take some books out. There was some free time.

**You did have some free time – daily or a couple times a week?**

Maybe a couple times a week.

**Were you able to communicate with your family at all during these four weeks?**

No.

**Not on land or on the ship?**

No.

**Were you able to call and just say, "I'm here?"**

No. I didn't. If others were, I didn't know. I don't even remember telephones. There may have been.

**So you couldn't get mail or anything.**

No. I never did.

**But you did have some free time on the boat.**

On the boat.

## Service After Basic Training

**And when those two weeks were over …**

Then I started the obligation of going downtown every week for a Reserve meeting.

**So you were back living at home?**

Yes. And working at the airport.

**And what did your work entail?**

I was a gate agent. At that time I had control of the flight. I met every passenger who went on because I had to assign them a seat.

**So this was your civilian job. And then you'd go …**

Then I'd go to the Navy. And there it was almost all classroom training.

**What kind of training did you get?**

More of the Blue Jackets manual.

**Was it more theory and strategy and things like that? Was it more hands-on?**

No. It was more …

**This is how you shoot this gun. This is how you do this operation.**

Yes. Most of it was to get you into a specialty somewhere down the line. I remember taking radio … [testing] – could you tell the difference between this and that.

**So hearing the sounds and trying to make the distinction.**

Yes. So I knew I wasn't going to be a radio man because I couldn't get the difference between the bleeps (chuckles)!

And then you'd take a test on mechanical aptitude. I didn't know anything about cars! But because I worked at the airline I had knowledge of typewriter and keyboard. So I was clerical. And they designated me as storekeeper, which was the supply end of the Navy.

**And was storekeeper on land?**

There was a rate and a rating. So my rate at that time was "seaman apprentice." Eventually I became a "seaman." And then they attached a rating to it, and they called it a "striker." This is what you're going for. And then I was an SKSN – I was a "storekeeper seaman." That's what I was going for. Then when I got the crow, I was a petty officer.

**So you had your four weeks of training, and then you had your year of meetings. How long were these meetings?**

7:00-10:00 – so three hours. And then there were breaks – they had a little restaurant down there. And at that time there was a submarine berthed next to us. And it was the USS Silversides, which had a very good war record in World War II. Now it's over somewhere in Michigan. But the meetings – they were educational, but they were boring. I mean, it was a long night. It was just a long night. It was very routine.

Then I got my orders that I was going to go to San Diego for this Class A school to become a storekeeper. So the whole family…

I really never thought about Vietnam and what was going on. Every once in a while, somebody from our class got killed over there. But it was over there. It wasn't a daily thought. Like now and Afghanistan – I don't think about it daily. I know there's a war going on there. It just didn't register. I was very, very naïve. So when I was going to San Diego, the whole family is there. It was tough. Then I did know about Vietnam. That was when the realization hit me that I might never see my family again.

It was a night flight. It was nice going out, because when I worked there of course the guys take care of you. So I flew out first class to Los Angeles.

**Did you fly on commercial flights?**

Yes. I flew American. I had a transportation request, but I did my own. I flew my pass.

**So you flew to Los Angeles.**

Yes, to Los Angeles and then to San Diego. That was a real rough flight over the mountains. We go there late. I checked in about maybe 11:00 – I had to be in before Midnight.

**And were you checking into a ship?**

I was checking into a school. So the first night I was in what they call a transfer barracks. And coming in at night there are no lights, so trying to find a place to sleep …

**You just pick any bunk that's available.**

Yes. But you can't see. I remember climbing into an upper bunk, and I remember just sleeping in my uniform. I didn't want to wake anybody up. And then, in the morning when I woke up, there was a light right above my head (chuckles)!

But then it was to clear out of the transfer barracks and go to the barracks where I would be for the next three months.

**So that was basically administrative: going to sign in …**

And then you were transferred to the school and signed in over there.

**Was everybody in the barracks that you ended up in for the next three months – were they all in the same class?**

Yes, in the same specialty. Some had been out in the fleet and came back for this. I met a fellow I was in basic with. We were good friends for the whole time we were there. That was just classroom. The weekends were free.

**Your evenings were free, too?**

The evenings were free, too. But we studied a lot.

**What kind of training did you get there? What did you learn?**

Mostly forms – what types of forms there are, how to fill them out, how they're routed, where they go, where the supply centers are, how you do your priorities. They just got you ready to fill a slot on a ship in this capacity.

**How did life in that barracks differ from what you had experienced before?**

Now you were back out in the normal world. We still did calisthenics. We still wore uniforms. You would salute an officer. Our instructor was a chief petty officer.

**You'd go to meals together?**

Yes. That was a long walk. Because we would have to go from where we were back to the actual Naval base to where the cafeteria was – the mess hall.

**So your barracks were not on the base?**

They were on – there's the Naval station, which is where all the ships and the regular Navy units are. That's the active base. And we were maybe four blocks away, which was the training center – the training command. It was a whole separate area of barracks.

**So you had to walk to the base for your meals?**

Yes.

**As a unit?**

No – on your own. And you had time to eat.

**Nobody rushing you!**

Right.

And they had a theater on base. In fact, one night we were at the theater and it was one of the buildings where there was a girder curved like an arch. And we were watching a movie and all of a sudden you were feeling something. I didn't know what it was. And I looked to my left, and the left side of the movie theater was up here! It was an earthquake! And everybody starts yelling and running out. Somebody up in the back yelled. And then it was very orderly. And we marched out. But there was glass all over the place. The sidewalks were broken. It was a pretty good jolt. That was an experience.

**Tell me a little bit about what you did with your free time? There was the movie theater. What else did you do?**

I had a friend who worked at American in Chicago. He transferred out to San Diego. He was a single fellow. He had a nice big Continental convertible. So we went out on the weekends. He'd come pick me up with the convertible, and off we'd go and do our thing. And that that time they had what they called "interline" parties. And people from all the different airlines – there would be an organized dance and party. So we went to those all the time. We met a lot of girls, and danced.

**So you did a lot of your socializing with civilians. Did you do anything on base for relaxation with the other guys?**

No. Sitting in the barracks we would just do a lot of talking. That's where you'd do a lot of letter writing.

**Did you write often? Did you get packages?**

I wrote often. It was the first chance in the Navy that I was communicating. And that time was fun. That was a good time.

I was watching a ship being built on the other side where the Navy base was. There was a shipyard across the Bay and I was watching a ship being built. And after the three months, that's where my orders were – I was going on that ship!

**The one you watched being built.**

Yes. It was the USS Concord. But the commissioning was delayed. This was in March, and the commissioning wasn't going to be until November.

So they didn't want me hanging around all that time. They cut me new orders, and I had a choice. I could take a destroyer from Norfolk, Virginia. Or, if I extended my enlistment three months, I could get shore duty and go to England. So I called American (chuckles) to make sure I could stay this extra three months. So I went to England for three months – I extended another three months.

**It was shore duty in England?**

It was shore duty.

**And what was shore duty?**

Not sea duty!

**How did you get there, first of all?**

I flew from Chicago to Newark, New Jersey, and went to McGuire Air Force Base.

**Was this on military aircraft?**

This was commercial there, and then military over the water to Mildenhall, which was Mildenhall, Suffolk, England – the Naval air facility there. And the Naval air facility was just one hangar, and 120 men and officers, on this huge Air Force Base. So we had our own little niche.

They were involved in alerts and doing all kinds of military things. We worked 9:00 to 5:00 and had the weekends off (chuckles). And our basic mission was that we flew mail, parts and supplies to most of the submarine bases in that area. So we supported the fleet. And we had old airplanes.

**So these were Naval pilots you were working with.**

Yes. This was all regular Navy, now. But most it – they call it the "Black Shoe Navy," and the "Airdales."

**And what was the difference?**

Well, the "Black Shoe Navy" was that you were on ships most of the time. So my rating – I would have been a Black Shoe. And there were others that were in Naval aviation. So they were all "AERO – something-or-other": parachute packers, hydraulics, – just everything for aircraft, but not for ships. Everything was just a different direction.

But because of my relative exposure to aircraft with American, it was kind of neat. I knew a lot about.

**So your civilian work helped you a little bit with your military.**

Yes, it did, a bit. If they asked for a part, I knew what it was.

**So you were doing the storekeeping.**

I was doing the supply. There were – oh, how many officers were there: We had a senior master chief petty officer, Chief Alfonso. We had two first class petty officers. Our supply officer was a Lieutenant Kibbler. And they were down in the office area. Then there was a supply area, and we were off in the back of the supply area. There were three petty officers – a first class petty officer and then two seamen, of which I was one. And then we actually filled the orders. And the other part did all the bill paying, record keeping and that kind of stuff.

They wore what was called "undress" blues. It wasn't your top uniform, but it was a blue uniform. We wore the work uniform.

**And what was your work uniform?**

Dungarees – dungaree shirt and pants, light blue. But they could take a beating. And it was fun. We were on one side of the hangar, and all the hard workers were on the other side.

We had three – the civilian version would be a DC3; again, the Navy called it an R4D. It's a two-engine propeller aircraft, piston driven. We had two, they were called Beachcraft Bonanzas. They were small two-engine aircraft. And their purpose was to be there for pilots down in London, where the embassy was. When the fleet came in they could keep up their air hours and not lose their flight qualifications.

And then we had another airplane. It was a Navy Convair C131. And that airplane was designated the Admiral's aircraft down in London. And that airplane was … [worked on] every day. It was polished. The interior was like Air Force One, but not on that scale

because it was a much smaller plane. But it wasn't rows of seats. It was a lounge here. And that was the baby. There was only one pilot who would fly that plane. It was fun.

**Tell me a little bit about what your life was like in London. What were your barracks like?**

Our barracks was a two-story building, center entrance so you could go either left or right.

**Was it the rows of bunks?**

No. There we had our lockers and we set them up in kind of an L-shape. So we'd have one rack in there with two people. It was like a little room. You had your own entrance, and it was private. It really was.

**Bunks?**

Yes. Two: one bunk, two people. Some people lived off base – you could do that.

**Nobody coming in and throwing stuff out of your locker anymore.**

No, no. The only time they'd wake you up was if you had duty and you had to go on watch. Again, weekends were free most of the time.

We had an English fellow – Dennis was his name, "Dennis the Bloke." That's what we called him. And we all paid him a little something to keep the area clean. So the floors were always in excellent shape. It was our responsibility, but we didn't have to do it because it was always nice. We paid him to do it! He was a character – a real wheeler-dealer. He was fun.

**But he kept the place clean and you didn't have to do it.**

Right. We had a master-at-arms. He was a first class petty officer.

**Did he know about Dennis the Bloke?**

Oh, yeah. Because he had access to everything; he had keys to everything.

Outside our barracks was a Quonset hut, and there was a little recreation area. I think there was a pool table back there. It was divided, and there was a poker table. And we played poker a lot of the time. It was just a little bit to get away.

There was a street behind that, and on the opposite side of that street was the enlisted men's club. No, it was a petty officers' club, which is where we went all the time. And opposite of that was the airmen's club, which is where you went if you weren't a petty office; an E3 or below.

And it wasn't planned that way, but it ended up that the airmen's club was the black club, and the petty officers' club was the white club. There was definite – there wasn't forced discrimination, but there was definite voluntary discrimination.

**Just voluntary separation.**

Nobody wanted to mix.

**And this was around 1968-'69.**

In our detachment we only had one black fellow in the whole unit. And we did have some fellows that mixed very freely with the black, and they would go over there. But they were always kind of like an outcast. It was different.

**It kind of reflected what it was like in the States.**

I think even more so, because there were a lot of people from the south in the service – at least in the area I was involved in. And I think it carried over. To me – it never bothered me. Where I grew up in Chicago there were – again, I guess it was similar. There was a demarcation but it was …

**You could mix.**

Yeah. It never bothered me.

But the base there – like I said, it was a big air force base. And they flew C130's, which were cargo aircraft. And they flew over to Europe. And we were the entrance point to Europe. So, like when I came in on that flight over Dover, Delaware, it was just a charter carrier. Maybe once or twice a week one would come in. They were called "Freedom Birds." Everybody landed there. Anybody based in England got off there. Then it went from there to Frankfurt. And everybody based in Germany got off in Frankfurt. So that was one of the missions of the base.

About 7 or 8 miles away was another base, called Lakenheath. And they flew the fighters there. So every once in a while they would come into our base, a couple of planes at a time. And they were the F4 phantoms. It was always more interesting to watch them than one of the cargo planes.

There was a top secret group. I have a book in front of me that I'm looking at – it's a history of Mildenhall – about the whole base, from when it was first commissioned, it was a British Air Force base until maybe into the 1970's – the whole history. It's in this book, so it's not classified. It was called "Silk Purse." And you couldn't get near this building. They had Marine sentries. They were the only Marines I ever saw in Europe. They flew the equivalent of a 707, but it was filled with communication gear. And there was one in the air all the time. That was the command post – the European command post in the air – that, should something happen in Europe and the ground forces are hit

and everybody is wiped out, there would be communication. They could run everything from that aircraft. But nobody got near those planes. It was very, very top secret.

We were in an area about 70 miles north of London. They called it the Midlands. And the area directly around the base was an area called the Fens. And it's kind of a marshland. They do farm it, but they farm peat. It was a very boggy area. And it was flat – a very flat area. The town itself was a nice little town.

**Did you feel very welcome? Did they ignore you? Were they curious?**

It depended on the cities where you went. London was no problem. You just mixed. We would not wear our uniforms off base because of all the protests and everything about Vietnam. You just would not wear your uniform. But we never had a problem – I never had a problem dealing with anyone. Everybody was very friendly.

We got to see a lot of historical … That's what we did on weekends. I had a friend. His name was John Abel. We would go – he had a car at that time – so we'd jump in his car and go someplace every weekend.

**So you saw the "trooping of the colors"?**

Yes. We went to London. The "trooping of the colors" is the queen's birthday. And it's a very formal parade. They ride in the luxury carriages pulled by the horses. That is very impressive.

But my first landing in England, when we came in, it was at night. The first sight I saw was orange, amber streetlights. Which are common here now, but they weren't then. All we had was the mercury vapor around here – they were all blue. I saw the orange and it was different. That's what registered; it was different. And it was also foggy (both chuckle). It was different. That was my first impression of England. It was not the same.

And as you would drive, the English were very formal people. They had nothing. The people were very [very poor]. They suffered a lot from World War II and it still had not caught up. They were like us in the 50's, probably.

But what struck me was that farmers would be out in the field riding on their tractor, and they were wearing a sport coat! They'd just always – it probably was the only sport coat they had, but they wore it all the time.

**Because that's what you wore.**

You wouldn't dare go out without a coat. You had to look decent.

**We're a little more casual country.**

Oh, yes. Very much.

**Did you get to do a lot of sightseeing?**

We did. Cambridge was very close to us, and of course Cambridge University is there. One of the things we did was called "… [punting] the Cam." The Cam River runs through the campus. And they have boats that were like a big row boat, but had a flat bottom. And you poled it with a long pole. And you just go along. And it was an area they called "the backs" – and it's the old buildings, which were very old, and these beautiful lawns that would come down to the river. It was one of the nicest days I had there. It was just beautiful.

There was a bridge that came over that was enclosed. I don't know how many hundreds of years old it was. That's what was impressive. You'd look at a building and it was built in 1100. My goodness! You can't even imagine it. All these cathedrals we saw – cathedral after cathedral.

**So you got to do some sightseeing.**

We did.

We did brass rubbing, where you take a sheet of paper and tape it up on headstones in cemeteries. You'd take a black charcoal marker and we would do brass rubbings of these old headstones. I don't know what happened to them. I don't have any.

**A lot of history there.**

Yes.

**And you communicated with your family.**

Definitely.

**When you were there, you knew that everything was going on in Vietnam. Did you meet anybody who had been there?**

No, not really.

**Did you get a lot of word about what was happening there?**

No. We were on the other side. I was just so naïve about the whole thing.

**Because you mentioned the people who were protesting.**

The only time we ran into a protest was when we marched in a formal parade in a town called Bury St. Edmonds. And it wasn't real far from us. But we had our dress uniforms,

which was the only time I think I wore it except for the change of command – where you wore your dress blues. You wore your medals rather than the bars. You have a white web belt that you wear. You wear white gloves, and white leggings like spats. So it was very sharp looking.

I still remember we formed up in a square there, in Bury St. Edmonds. And next to us was a British Marine detachment. They were sharp! They were sharp. Their sergeant major would yell at them, and I couldn't understand a word he said. But they would snap. And the British soldiers wear these hobnail boots. And when they (Mr. Luessow makes a sound of the boots scraping the ground) snapped-to, they kind of jump to make that sound really echo. They were impressive.

But in that parade there was a group where they were carrying caskets. And we were labeled as baby killers. And that really – we were not like that! That struck me because we were so far removed from all that. We had no idea what was going on at home.

**They were protesting the American military, but your group really had nothing to do with it and you really didn't have a lot of knowledge of what was going on.**

Right. I didn't know what was going on at home! That's when the riots were going on here in Chicago. I had no idea what was going on.

**You were in a different world.**

I really was. It was only afterwards that I learned all about what was going on. And I really then go into Vietnam – everything from the beginning to the end. It really was a waste.

I went in being very patriotic. I felt this was my job and I owed this to my country. And then, after all of that, it was like – what a waste. You were doing it for nothing. You weren't going there to win the war. It was all politics. It still is.

**Let's talk for a minute. You were in England how long?**

Two years.

**Two years. You finished your two years there?**

Yes. That was my whole tour.

**And what happened at the end of the two years.**

I was separated. I went to Philadelphia – that was the base I got separated from. Before I quit there were two things I remember that took place on that base.

**This was still in England.**

Yes. An Air Force sergeant took one of the C130's, which was supposed to be impossible to fly for one person. He took off and he was going to come home. Well, he took off and he got over the English Channel. And by then all the fighters were up there and he wasn't going anywhere. Eventually he crashed and killed it, and he died.

But that was in this book. I didn't remember it, but it was in this book on Mildenhall.

The other thing that is not in this book. But something happened, and to this day I don't know what it was exactly. I think I know that it was a Russian submarine that was in trouble. And the Russians were not letting anybody near them. The Americans wanted to get there – they wanted this submarine. And all the ships that were in England, they just took off – away they went.

**Away from or towards them?**

Away from England. They didn't want to have anything to do with it. The captain wasn't even on the ship. The executive office wasn't on the ship – this was on the Yorktown – the aircraft carrier. They just went. Boom. And we ended up with their crew – they would fly their crew to Mildenhall and stay in our barracks until they could be flown out to their ship afterwards. To this day I don't know what happened. It was so critical that all these ships had to go now, and they did.

**This was still during the cold war, so there was a lot of suspicion on both sides.**

I don't know what – I think I know from reading; the dates were about right. But that was …

**What do you think it was?**

That was the submarine deal. It was a big deal. There was a lot of tension there.

But those two things I wanted to get in because I remembered them. Then I went to Philadelphia.

**Did you fly across on a military flight?**

It was military to Dover, again.

**You were separated in Philadelphia.**

Yes. We were supposed to have – again, I was in what they called the transit barracks – and you're supposed to have duties during the day. But I didn't do anything. …

**Now, when you were separated, was this a complete discharge?**

No. I was separated to report back to the Reserves. I had two years more of active Reserve duty where I had to go every week.

**Was that in Chicago?**

Same place. And then the last year I was on the rolls, but I didn't have to do anything. So it was a total six year obligation, with two years being active duty.

**When you came back, your family was glad you were back?**

Oh, yeah. And I went back to work for American and stayed there for twelve years. It was good.

One other thing; when we were in England was this friend of mine, John, we went on a religious retreat.

**In England.**

Well, it was from England and we went to Germany. We went to [Berchestgarden], which is a beautiful area in the Bavarian Alps. So we flew over and we took off. We did nothing at all with the retreat (both chuckle). We were not involved with the retreat at all. And we had a ball.

We went to Salzburg in Austria – the area where the Sound of Music was made. We went though a salt mine where they had banisters going down from level to level. You put on a leather thing to cover your seat, and you straddle it like a toboggan, and down you went from level to level. That was cool.

We went to – it was Hitler's mountain retreat; the Eagle's Nest. That was moving to me. This was real; Hitler was real. And to get up there, the road was so steep. And they were saying you could just picture where the SS placements were. And we got up there. And to get into it we went into an elevator. And the elevator went straight up the center of the mountain to get up to the top. And the interior of the elevator was all gold! It was really, really neat. But I see these pictures where they're on the veranda, and you're standing looking out – yeah, that's what it was.

**So you had a chance to see some really historic sights.**

Yes. But that was one of the highlights. And then we flew back.

**So when you were done you went back to your job at American.**

I went back to American. I met my wife – she worked for American. I got married about a year after I got back. And then she became a flight attendant, and was based in Buffalo, New York. And I was here. So it took a little while until we got together. I did a lot of

commuting. We had two kids – a boy and a girl; the girl came first, Karen, and then Mark. They both – I don't know how we did it.

I worked for American for twelve years. I left there because I was having physical problems. The nerves were getting to me. As soon as we had big planes, the DC10's and the 747's, the whole job changed from one of really talking to people – that was really nice. Now it became herding them on. You were dealing with so many people. And at that point they were starting to get automated – people could check in at the ticket counter at the front. Now we were dealing with computers – before we didn't have computers. It was just getting too much for me. And that's when I quit.

My father-in-law wanted me – he was a cleaner, a dry cleaner; he had a couple of plants. He wanted to get with him and do a drapery business – taking down draperies. I did that for five years, but I never got the support I thought I was going to get.

Then I got into the commercial travel agencies; did business travel. Eventually I got hired at Argonne National Laboratory, which I loved. I was there for ten years. And we got out-sourced. So then I got a job with another agency, and I did the corporate travel for Spiegel. And what a difference from Argonne. There they were flying government and everything was cheap. I go to Spiegel and I'm writing $5,000 tickets, and they're going around the world in all the top hotels. Of course, they went out of business after a year.

So now I was in the same position I was after Argonne and it was so frustrating. It was a bad separation. I just had it. I was fed up. So I got a job as a school bus driver. And I got a job part-time driving a school bus. I did that for ten years. I quit last November, and here I am.

**When you left the service, did you consider or take advantage of any educational programs or anything?**

No, I didn't. I could have. The only thing, I'm taking advantage of the VA now, because I was always on my wife's policy and she lost her job. So I'm taking advantage of the medical with the VA.

**You mentioned a little earlier, if you'd like to expand on that a little bit, how has your time in the military impact the way you think about things today – the way you think about life, the way you think about events that are taking place in the world?**

Oh. The military is necessary. I personally grew up in the military – you mature: you go in as a kid and come out as a man. You take personal pride. I'm proud I served. It directed me, I think. I do the job – I know what's got to be done and I follow through. My house is neat (chuckles). I wasn't that neat before I went in, but I carried that over.

My experience wasn't that typical of being in the military, I don't think. I regret not being on a ship. I feel like I really missed being in the "real" Navy.

When I left England – I don't know if it's something they do all the time or not, but they try to get you to stay in. My division officer said he would recommend me for officer candidate school if I wanted to go there. I thought about it a lot. If I had gone in as an officer I probably would have made it a career. At this point I was ready to go home.

**Was it what was happening in the world that made you ready to go home? Or you just …**

No. My friends were getting married. The military is not for a married person. Not at all. I wouldn't recommend it for anybody. It's a real hard life – for the people who I saw who were married and enlisted, it was real, real hard.

**Do you have any friends you've kept in touch with?**

With this one fellow. Christmas cards are about it at this point. But for about, oh, maybe ten years we got together at least once a year. He lives in Pennsylvania – … [Cresco], Pennsylvania. I think about him a lot – I think about a lot of the people I was with. And I "Google" them, but nothing ever shows. It was fun. But it wasn't typical.

**You said your military experience had a positive effect on your life.**

Yes, it did. I think a lot of the time I was there it felt like it was wasted time. But I really didn't know what the detachment was really doing. I was just in my little cubicle. I'd send a part over there, but I didn't know what the part was for.

We had some other stories. There were a group of flyers. I don't know how they even had it all set up. But they'd go to Europe and they'd come back with grandfather clocks. And then they were selling grandfather clocks on this end. Well, they got caught by British customs (chuckles). That was a big to-do for a while.

And I mentioned these little Beachcraft that we had. We had one lieutenant who was a real ladies' man. He would come up on the weekends and take the planes out and show his date: "Let's go fly over here." Until he got caught.

There were typical stories.

**Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?**

I appreciate the chance to do this. I can't see how this should go to the Library of Congress! But it was fun talking about it.

**Thank you for sharing your story.**