

**Frank Bierline  
Veteran**

**Marlene Zecca  
Chemung Country Historical Society  
Interviewer**

Frank Bierline: FB  
Marlene Zecca: MZ

MZ: Today's interview with Vietnam veteran Frank Bierline is taking place at the Chemung County Historical Society in Elmira, New York. Mr. Bierline is sixty years old having been born on September 22nd, 1942. He served in the United States Air Force from July 27th, 1960 to July 26th, 1968. Frank currently resides at 28 High Haven Road, Pine City, New York.

My name is Marlene Zecca and I volunteered to interview Frank Bierline as part of the Veteran's History Project. Our camera operator today is Heather Wade. There, that takes care of that formality. So, I was wondering if maybe we could start with when you enlisted. Were you drafted?

FB: No, I actually enlisted in July right after school was out and went on to Lackland from there but I enlisted.

MZ: You did. You were concerned about the draft or that was just something you wanted to do?

FB: No. It was something I wanted to do. Yes.

MZ: Did you select the Air Force?

FB: Yes. I was interested in aircraft, airplanes and you got your choice of what you wanted to do when you enlisted and I picked the aircraft maintenance field. I was lucky enough to get it. So, it was good.

MZ: Did you have like a boot camp and training?

FB: Yes, we went through five weeks of boot camp and basically we had it much easier than the other services - the Army, the Marines especially and the Navy too have a really tough boot camp but the Air Force is more laid back and relaxed. It's tough for a couple of weeks then they ease up on you once they determine you're going to make it. You're going to get through it.

The difficult part about it was it was so warm down there because it was in July and it was in Texas. So, it was really hot. The exercises and the drills and everything it was really warm.

MZ: Were the first two weeks primarily physical or was it the whole thing?

FB: The whole thing..it was a lot of training. It wasn't classroom training. It was drill training and what the air force is about and the policies that you would be following and things like that. In the off hours when you weren't doing the training parts, you'd be doing marching or calisthenics or field marches, things like that.

MZ: Did they teach you how to use firearms?

FB: Yes.

MZ: That was part of the training too?

FB: Yes. We just had rifles. We didn't get into..they didn't have the high tech weapons that they have today. We basically used M1 and M2 Carbines. That's what we were trained on. We didn't have pistols. The Air Police, the police part of our group, had pistols. We just used rifles. We weren't assigned a rifle. You just checked it out when you went to the firing range and shoot it and turned it back in. So, we didn't have a gun...

MZ: You didn't have to clean it or go through all of that.

FB: You learned how to do it but we didn't do it ourselves.

MZ: So, you were about eighteen years old at the time when you enlisted?

FB: Yes, just short of eighteen.

MZ: You completed high school?

FB: Yes.

MZ: Where are you from originally?

FB: I completed high school in Watkins Glen, NY and I am originally from close to Pittsburgh. I moved up into New York when I was sixteen. I finished school here and then went directly into the service.

MZ: Is there anything else that you can remember about Lackland? Anything about your instructors or any guys that you met there or any stories?

FB: I was thinking about that this morning. One of the...I don't remember their names of course. I have pictures and everything. One of the second in command drill instructor was a black man and he was huge and he was just a terror for the young troops. They had, I think, I didn't think about it at the time but I think later he was a plant because he acted out and did all kinds of things and got into trouble all of the time. Then one day they came and grabbed him and took him and you heard all these noises like they were beating him up and stuff like that in the next room then you never saw him again. I think it was to keep everybody in line. But I think later,

I'm pretty sure he was a plant. He was an instructor doing this but he stayed with us about a week before they took him out.

MZ: Were they going to do that as far as you can tell?

FB: I don't know.

MZ: (unclear)

FB: And you were kind of stuck in your little group of maybe fifty or sixty men. You didn't get into other groups. You all stayed right together. You marched together. You went to lunch together. You went to dinner together. You didn't get to talk to any other groups. You were isolated. So, this guy, that was his job to go around to other groups and get thrown out of every group to keep everybody straight.

MZ: How many would be in a group?

FB: About fifty or sixty. I'm not sure. It was a two story barracks. Part of it downstairs was administration office for the boss, for the leader. The rest were recruits and then upstairs was full of recruits. Of course, they had bathrooms up and down and all of those things. I think it was between fifty and sixty in our group.

MZ: Did you have any free time at all during the.. was it six weeks that you were in Lackland? Any free time to break away from the base and go out?

FB: The only time we got off the base was around the fifth week towards the middle of the fifth week they took us to a baseball game. They loaded us all in a bus and took us downtown to a baseball game and then brought us back. That was it. Otherwise, you were either out working, marching or doing your exercising or in school or at lunch or whatever.

MZ: So, you must have been in pretty good shape by the end of the six weeks?

FB: I actually gained twenty pounds. I was skin and bones when I went in. You ate a lot more because you were exercising.

MZ: How was the food?

FB: It was actually really good. I always felt bad for the other military services because the Air Force treated the men right. They had excellent food. Even when we went out on our field trips, we didn't stay overnight. We just went out early in the morning, marched out there, stayed all day and came back in the dark. We marched back. We marched maybe five miles. Even the food- they brought out a truck with (unclear). We had cake and everything. It was a full meal just like at home - home cooked. So, it was good. We had it well. Very easy as far as that goes.

MZ: Where did this take you then from Lackland? Where did you go from there? Did you get to pick an assignment?

FB: No. What they do is that they put you through basic training which is learning how the air force operates and your physical conditioning. Then they send you off to school whatever career you've chosen or they assign you to.

So, I went to Amarillo almost in the panhandle and I went to jet aircraft school. It was, I think, thirteen weeks that I was there learning the basic skills of airplanes - how they worked.

MZ: How was that experience compared to boot camp?

FB: It was a lot more relaxed. You went to school all day five days a week sometimes six days a week. It was just like going to college except we were just in one class all day because we were just learning one subject.

Then, after class was over - you marched to class and stayed there all day then marched back. Then you would have lunch at school. When you got back to your barracks, you would have your evening meal. Then, you were free to do whatever you wanted to in your area. You couldn't go off the base or out of your quadrangle which were squares with barracks, three and four story barracks all around it.

Other outfits were in our training group. I don't remember the name of our group but there were maybe five or six groups in that it was like a block of buildings.

Q: So, the class that you took were you with the same, I presume, the same men, the same group day after day taking the same course?

FB: Yes but it wasn't the same people at boot camp, of course, because they could have gone to (unclear) school.

MZ: But once you got into this situation. You were limited as far as your exposure and who you could see you were in this group situation again confined with a group. So, you weren't able to get off the base at all for thirteen weeks.

FB: I don't think so. I don't think I got off the base once.

MZ: They pretty much controlled that or is it just....?

FB: You have to have a special pass to get off. You had to have a really good reason not "I want to go to town this weekend" or anything like that. You had to have a good reason like sickness in the family something like that to get off the base. They wanted you to be controlled. You were being taught marching skills again because you marched back and forth everywhere you went. You could circulate in that quadrangle that we were in into other groups - things like that. I didn't do it very much because there was a lot of studying to do too, homework and you had to get up

five, four thirty, five o'clock in the morning to get your drill work done and then march on to class. It was a half hour march to class and that was intentional because they wanted the group to be able to work together.

MZ: So, the classes that you took, was this all on airplane maintenance all different types of airplanes?

FB: No, actually is career field related. You pick a career, airplanes for instance, then you may get to pick what you work on. My career field was "43". It was several numbers and letters together. "43" indicated one or two engine fighter/bomber. So, that's the only thing that I was trained to work on. So, I couldn't work on Air Force 1 for instance because its four engine and it's not a fighter/bomber. But, I could work on any small bomber or any fighter plane with one or two engines.

I actually worked on, at one time, a small passenger plane that was two engine. I guess that was allowable. Then they had some of the other digits in this number which was your career field. It was the rank that you held within that career field. So, if you take an additional tests in this field you would advance almost like a rank. You would advance through these different classes and they would change your rank. I started as "43131C" and went to 43151C to "43171C" as I advanced through my knowledge of maintenance.

MZ: Did they provide any entertainment then at all? You had maybe some free time on a Sunday per chance or..?

FB: No really. They kept you pretty busy. Then there was KP. They were always looking for KP or for guard duty or whatever just to keep you busy. The main thing was to keep you busy so you didn't have time to get into trouble.

MZ: Did they have the latrine crew too?

FB: Yes. You had to do everything. They didn't have any house cleaners.

MZ: Laundry?

FB: You did your own laundry. So, you were self supporting and the old saying was that they gave you \$100 and took back \$80 because you had to pay for whatever you had done. Going into boot camp they gave us, I think. \$60 but you had to buy all this stuff from the PX and you would come out of there with about \$3 left. They knew how much it was going to cost and that's how much they gave you but you didn't need money so it was ok. It was fine.

MZ: In Amarillo, to get laundry done, you had to pay to get it done or is it just buying personal items out of the KP?

FB: We actually did our own there but once I got away from the tech school and got into other assignments, you would pay for it or they had sometimes laundry things in the barracks where

you could do your own laundry. At boot camp and at school, you did your own thing, your own work.

MZ: Is there anything about school now that you are recollect any stories, anything - any pranks. Did you guys play pranks on one another?

FB: This will be later but one of the times we were marching back it was a special occasion and some of the higher officers in the group were reviewing the troops and they were on a stand. They were up so your eyes were about knee level so they could see out over the top of all these troops coming by . There were groups of them. There was our class and I think they formed up two or three classes into a group and marched them through. There were maybe twenty groups ahead of us and tenor fifteen behind us all going down here and there were maybe ten feet between each group with the leader marching in front.

We had just passed - and I didn't get to see it - the grandstand and when you pass the grandstand they would give you the orders of "eyes left" or whichever side the officers were on. So, you would "eyes left" to the grandstand to the men, to the officers.

After we passed and the second group were coming by we heard this yelling and noises. What happened was one of the troops had a camera he had it in his pocket and as he walked by - he was somewhere in the center - where he thought he would get away with it he pulled his camera out and was taking a picture of the officers so he was not marching properly. They got him. So, they were yelling at him and went out and got him. We didn't know him but we heard about it later what happened. So, it was funny.

Q; Did you hear what happened to him?

FB: No.

MZ: It's just that he was out of step there huh?

FB: Yes.

MZ: So, where did it take you from there after the schooling?

FB: After schooling, I got orders. Usually, they give you orders for your next assignment just maybe a month or so before your current assignment is over. Sometimes, they wait until the last minute. In my case, they waited until the last minute. I had orders to go to, I believe, South Carolina.

MZ: You weren't able to choose or prioritize where you wanted to go?

FB: You could request but no guarantees. So, I had these orders to go I think it was South Carolina or somewhere. Usually, they give you about fifty or sixty copies because you had to

hand them to everyone every time you had to go out a doorway practically. You give somebody your orders so they know you're going in the right direction.

I assumed that's where I was going. Then about...so, I didn't need shots for overseas. About two weeks before, maybe less than that, before the school was out they said "Oh sorry, you're going to Okinawa instead here's your new orders". They said you will get thirty days vacation leave time. During that time, you need to get these shots for overseas.

So, I took the paper and rode the bus from Texas then to New York with a bus ticket. On the way, I was reading these orders and going through my papers and thing things. It took a day and a half. I think, to get there. I all of the sudden realized that I needed thirteen shots. I had thirty days to get them.

MZ: They didn't provide the shots?

FB: It was too late. They couldn't arrange it. It was here you go.

MZ: Was it..if the timing would have been, if they made a decision earlier would they have arranged the shots at Amarillo at the base?

FB: Yes.

MZ: So, now you were left on your own to get your shots.

FB: I was on my own. I had to go to an Air Force or Army base to get them. Otherwise, I would have had to pay for them and may I couldn't even have found the shots that I needed. But, any military base would have them.

So, I went to Sampson Air Force base which was open then.

MZ: Is that up in Romulus?

FB: Yes. Romulus. I got the shots up there. Since I drove up, I had to get them all at once. I got seven in one arm and six in the other because I had to have them. I was sore for a day.

MZ: Any other side effects?

FB: No. Just sore arms. I didn't even know what they were but you had to carry your shot record with you at all times. They just started stamping.

Then, I took a plane to California and caught the "banana boat" I call it to Okinawa. It was a C54 transport plane, four engine, propeller driven and it took a long time to get there. I called it the "banana boat" because the back half of the plane was filled with troops -passenger seats. It was a military plane. It was a military/civilian kind of thing. I think that they were, maybe, hauling for the government. The front of the plane was full of bananas so we had the banana smell all the way. There was no dividing. There was just strapped on cargo and seats.

I had the group name. I believe it was the 18th Fighter Wing or the 18th Maintenance Division. So, I spent the next year and half pretty much in a hanger overhauling or repairing.

MZ: Planes.

FB: Yes. Every so often, they come in for a major revamping adding new things and replacing engines. That's what I did.

MZ: The planes that came in, do you know where they were coming from?

FB: They were actually planes on the base.

MZ: On the base.

FB: Their time would come for replacement. A lot of the parts needed to be replaced after a certain amount of time like the ejection seats have cartridge shells in them that fire the seat out. The tightened seat belt, things like that. Eject. Any problems that were written up while the plane was flying. Those were the kind of things we do.

MZ: So, you were there for a year?

FB: Eighteen months.

MZ: A year and a half.

FB: I also went to school while I was there. I took advanced training while I was on the base.

MZ: They continued to provide training?

FB: Yes.

MZ: Did that increase your rank with the more training that you received?

FB: It helped with rank. You could go through the training in anticipation of helping you get promoted but it was not guaranteed. It was all in performance. Training was a big part of it because it would help your performance but there was no guarantee you would get promoted.

MZ: What was life like on Okinawa then?

FB: It was the first time in the service that I was able to do things on my own - go out and not tell anybody where I was going as long as I showed up for work in uniform. If I was selected for any special thing like KP or if I had to go to the dentist for a checkup, as long as I showed up at the point where I was supposed to be on time then the rest of the time, I could do whatever I wanted to do. I could go off the base. We had badges to get in and out of the base with. When you go through the gate and show your badge and you go out. Once you were off the base, you could do anything you wanted to do.

MZ: Did you meet any of the local people?

FB: Yes. I got a motorcycle over there so I could get around. That's where I got interested in motorcycles because it was really cheap transportation for the local people. There were a lot of motorcycle shops. It was cheap for us too. It was fun. You could go a lot of places you couldn't go with a car. A lot of Okinawa is beaches, narrow roads and dirt roads. It was very nice to get around. We'd form groups and go on trips and stuff like that.

The only thing they did, the Air Force, was to tell us don't go to the south end of the island because there was a lot of communist activity down there.

MZ: There was concern for your safety?

FB: Yes. So, they said stay away from that part of the island otherwise you'll be fine.

MZ: That proved to be true then as far as you're..

FB: Yes. In fact, on Christmas day - I don't know what year it was. It must have been '61 - three of us took three motorcycles in and went around the island except we cut off the communist part and drove across and then went around the rest of the island.

It took us a day and a half and we had to drive on beaches. We wanted to see the water entirely around except for the part we couldn't go into. We got one flat tire and things like that.

MZ: Was it easy to find gas? You could probably do your own maintenance doing a trip like that.

FB: You had to be careful. Also, I had a four cycle engine. A lot of the Japanese motorcycles then were two cycle so they'd use oil and gas and it was pre mixed. You could ride up to the gas pump and get your premix right there. So, if you went up there to get gas with mine just to get regular gasoline, you would have to watch them really close because they wouldn't realize it and they would put the wrong kind of gas in. You would have to stand right there and say "No, no, no. This." They were pretty friendly. I had motorcycle work downtown engine overhaul and things like that.

MZ: Did you have any communication problems? Was it difficult? Did they understand English? I don't know what their native tongue is.

FB: Okinawan Japanese I think its subset because they had been separated for awhile. They spoke Japanese but most of them spoke English. It would be rare to find somebody that you couldn't communicate with in English and after you are over there six months, you learn twenty or thirty words and you'd get along just fine.

MZ: Do you remember any of those words now and what they stood for?

FB: Some of them and they're fading. Some of them - and I am not sure of the meaning of them anymore. I can't come up with any of them right now.

MZ: That's ok. Just wondering if you had any. What happened then from Okinawa?

FB: From Okinawa, I took another vacation then when I came back... I didn't take vacation or leave during the time I was over there. When I came back, I was assigned to Scott Air Force base in Illinois. So, I flew directly home.

MZ: Is this a request or is it just that periodically they reassign people so that they don't stay in one area very long?

FB: On overseas tours there's a limit and it depends on the condition of the assignment. For instance, Okinawa is eighteen months. If I wanted to stay longer, I could request to stay longer. I never considered that. Some guys did.

Some tours are what they call "remote" . They're maybe one year. I don't think there are any under a year. So, if you get a "remote" tour in a twenty year, that's a pretty tough place to live. It has severe something - weather or whatever that makes it...or if you are married, you can't take your wife. So, they restrict it to just a year.

MZ: Were you married at this time?

FB: No. I got married when I was at Scott Air Base. I was there three and a half years. It was a training outfit - the outfit I was in was a pilot training outfit. I had two seat planes. They were easy to work on. They were real nice. Nice pilots. You'd see the same ones over and over.

MZ: You got to know the pilots pretty well.

FB: (unclear) . That was the first time that I had actual flight line duty. Before that, I was in the hanger or in the classroom. At Scott, I actually got two of my own airplanes that I had to take care of. If a problem came up that I couldn't do like sheet metal work - we didn't do sheet metal and we didn't do electronic work, we did mechanical kind of work. I would have to schedule it in to the hanger for maintenance or call the sheet metal man to come out and fix the plane whatever.

MZ: Basically, you were responsible for overseeing the maintenance doing all of the mechanical maintenance but if anything else you were responsible for making sure arrangements were made.

FB: Yes.

MZ: So, you had a pretty close relationship with the pilots.

FB: Yes. The schedule came out on when your plane was going to fly. If you couldn't have it ready. If something was wrong with it, you had to let them know so they could reschedule to

they could take a different airplane. Usually, it was far enough in advance you had time to schedule in maintenance so you could get it done.

If you had two - some guys had three - if they were more experienced. They had three planes to take care of.

MZ: By this time, the Vietnam war was going on. Did you have any fears or concerns about being assigned into a war area. Would that have been ....

FB: I didn't worry too much about it. I think I would have been worried about it but I think I would have been safe enough because the Air Force is going to protect their planes. I didn't do any flying as a regular rule. I would have been as safe as the air planes and they would really protect the airplanes.

Not that they wouldn't protect the troops but some troops had to go out and carry the weapons. I was never issued a weapon that I kept on my person. I felt really safe especially in Okinawa. We were facing down China at that time. That's why that base was there. We weren't worried about it even though we had planes ready to go. Every second of the day, they were ready to go. We didn't worry about it. It was just not something we worried about.

MZ: So, you were three years in Illinois?

FB: Three and a half. Then, I got married there. That was one of the better places especially after we were married, we lived off base then. We got an apartment downtown but the barracks were nice. The food was good. You didn't have to eat in the mess hall if you didn't want to.

Again, you were free after you got off work. If you didn't have any special assignments, you were free to do whatever you wanted to. You could go downtown, go to the next state or go home for the weekend. If you weren't scheduled to work, you were free. It was just like a job.

MZ: As long as you met your obligations, you didn't have to worry, your free time was yours. You had a little more free time I take it now quite a bit more than previous experiences.

FB: Then, I got my orders for Iceland. That kind of... I didn't mind going there because I'd had easy assignments until then and I thought well maybe it's my turn to get a bad assignment. I was hoping for Germany or someplace.

So, I went to Iceland and was there for a year. I took one leave while I was there for 30 days.

MZ: Your wife wasn't with you at this stage.

FB: No, she stayed in Pennsylvania. She was pregnant and our first son was born while I was in Iceland.

MZ: That must had been kind of hard not to be able to be there.

FB: Well not only that but he had problems breathing. He was in the hospital a lot. It was kind of irritating because the Red Cross would normally handle getting the parent home for that time. I don't know who made the decision but the Red Cross and the service came back, that if he died you could go home.

MZ: Wow.

FB: So, I didn't go. It was strange.

MZ: That's pretty rough. I don't think a lot of people realize sometimes even though you don't see combat you do make sacrifices.

So, what was Iceland like? Cold?

FB: Very cold.

MZ: Barren? Desolate?

FB: It was cold. It was probably, I remember the warmest it got in the entire year was forty one degrees. Most of the time it was below freezing. Every night it was below freezing.

The area where our barracks was built was in the middle of a field with lava rocks. Its black rocks all over the place with grass and no trees.

MZ: No trees? Vegetation?

FB: Nothing. Just grass. It was the only thing that had a long enough cycle to grow. On other parts of the island, they had trees. Big cities with Icelandic people there of course

We were pretty restricted. It was a Navy base. We just had a small section of it with hangers and our fighter planes. We were responsible for chasing the Russian planes away. We had the flight training. The pilots had to fly a certain number of hours a month to keep themselves current on their license and their flying.

We had eight or ten planes ready to fly all the time. Then we had four in the (unclear) barn which was down at the end of the runway ready to go to intercept Russian planes.

I worked up in the hanger which was unheated by the way.

MZ: It was not heated?

FB: Not heated but the planes were sitting outside. They only went into the hanger if they needed maintenance to get out of the wind and stuff like that. Most of our work was outside right on the ramp. The wind was just non-stop just constantly. We had parkas and boots and gloves and you couldn't work with your gloves on. Some of the things you had to do, so you took your gloves off do it real quick and like put your gloves back on.

We had these heaters. We had a trailer a semi-truck trailer as a camp out there close to the runway close to the airplanes. We had this what they called a "salamander heater " which had about a ten inch hose on it and some kind of heater on the other end of it which would blow air through this hose. You would stick it in the door of this building to keep warm and that's our only heat. But it was fun. I liked the work and had a lot of good experiences there.

If they would fly two airplanes out of the (unclear) because a Russian plane would come by then they would fly two planes to intercept it. If more than one Russian plane came along then they would fire four planes.

When the second set took off if we were in the barracks the horn was off or if we were at work, they would call us and tell us they'd need more planes. So, we would have to go out and tow two more planes or four more planes with tugs five miles down to the (unclear). They would have to be planes ready to go. They had to be fueled and everything. We had to keep them all fueled and everything just perfect ready to go as if the pilot was going to be there in a minute.

MZ: These were all fighter planes.

FB: They were F102's - a very nice plane. Nice to work on.

MZ: They would have been jet type?

FB: Yes. They are the ones that have - they are single engine. They had an air operated rocket pods so when the pilot would pull the trigger to shoot, the belly would open up as part of pulling the trigger the belly would open up and would fire rockets out of there (unclear) and would close up again. So, they would close up again and the airplane would be more streamlined and kept the rockets out of the weather. They were stacked behind each other in long tubes. They'd fire the front ones then the next ones would go.

MZ: They would automatically take its place?

FB: They would fire from wherever they were located. When each one came out, they had a longer barrel to go through. I didn't get involved in loading them or anything but that's what they told me. That's how it worked. We had to just be careful to stay out of the way of those doors. If they opened on the ground, they'd kill you. They opened really fast.

MZ: And the rocket drops out?

FB: It comes out just like a gun barrel. As the doors open, you would see if you were standing in front to the plane when they opened up.

MZ: You would see a barrel come down.

FB: You would see four or five maybe six tubes and the rockets were inside there flying right out the front. Like I say, if the first one was maybe three feet long then the second one would have a

three foot barrel to go through. The second one would have a six foot barrel to go through and another twenty four, thirty six rockets per plane. It was kind of interesting.

They used them to...we had pictures. The pilots would take pictures if they intercepted a Russian plane. They would fly along side of it and take pictures. We never flew less than two planes on intercept because they could help the first pilot if he got into trouble. One pilot would get up close to the Russian plane and the other would get out a ways and take a picture of the two of them. We had postcards and things with pictures on them of Russian planes.

MZ: Any challenges with keeping those planes going during that time? Any times where you had difficult problems to keep them ready?

FB: The jet engines were pretty good because they uses (unclear) oil. They crank easily. The only problem with getting one started was supplying the air. They have an air starter. You have a small cart that you haul around that has a jet engine on it. It whole purpose is to provide air pressure like a compressor but a lot of it. It has a hose that's maybe six inches across in diameter and you connect that to the starter on the plane. Then the small jet engine pumps air through there into the starter motor on the jet on the engine and it cranks the engine with that. Once it gets up to a certain RPM, you flip on the fuel. You've already flipped on the ignition. You turn on the fuel and it starts. Then you disconnect.

MZ: You disconnect and run like hell?

FB: Well no. As soon as you see the engine catch, you'll see the heat come out the tailpipe. Then, the pilot will wave off that you can disconnect it. Then you shut the engine down on the cart and disconnect the hose. You also have electric plugged into the side from another power unit. You disconnect that and move it back a ways. Then he warms it up, checks everything, pulls the chocks and a way he goes.

MZ: You don't just get in there and turn the key in and give it the gas.

FB: There's no keys.

MZ: No keys.

FB: There may be today but there were not keys then.

MZ: Did anything interesting happen or any experiences in Iceland.

FB: There was a good part and a bad part. The bad part was one of our pilots was flying one of the F102's and, again, we had these rocks out there. It was cloudy - really low clouds . They were practicing maneuvers. He came out of the clouds too low and hit the rocks. The plane was almost full of fuel and just went up. They didn't find any...the parts of the airplane were very small. Wheels and things were intact but sheet metal and thing was just...

MZ: Blown apart.

FB: They found very little of him. He was scattered all over the place. That was tragic.

Then, one of the fun things. We wanted to get a picture of the troops. The maintenance guys wanted to get a picture of one of these F102's home with us in afterburner. Afterburner basically boots the horsepower of the engine by about 50% but basically shoots a fire stream out the tailpipe maybe thirty feet long.

MZ: So, you guys wanted to be in a picture with this afterburner?

FB: And get a picture of it. And it had to be in dark or almost dark so it would show up so the fire would show up but so you could tell what the plane was. So, we got it. Our boss had a "run up" license so he could taxi the airplane from one spot to another. If there was an engine problem he could fire it up for the technician to maybe adjust something. So, he got his...he had his uniform on of course and his hat.

We weren't allowed to wear hats around a airplane even though you were supposed to wear a hat because hats would be sucked up in the intake and you would have a problem with the engine. You weren't allowed to have anything in your pockets anything metal that could be sucked out of your pockets. No pens. Nothing like that. You could wear a ring but you weren't encouraged to do that either.

So, he fired up the plane up. He had his hat on his skull cap. He brought his scarf. He had his scarf like one of the World Was I aces. He started the airplane and moved it out so it was facing down the ramp so there was nothing in front of him. Now you've got to understand these engines are pretty powerful and when it's in afterburner you cannot hold it with the brakes. It will slide the tires it's so powerful. In fact, it's tough to hold it in 100% RPM at wide open pedal to the metal. You can barely hold it with the brakes. He put it in afterburner and it starts jumping the tires.

MZ: This is all for this picture that you guys want?

FB: All for this picture. So, he fires it up and we get out there. Next door maybe five hundred feet away there's an administration building with a lot of officers working in there. The tailpipe is pointing right to their building so they're going to get a nice big boom. When this thing kicks in it really booms. It's like thunder.

So, he pulled it out there and got it straight got the brakes on, popped the afterburner, got the picture and pulled it back out in afterburner. Then he taxied around and parked it. Even though its thirty degrees out there or less windows started going up in this building so the officers could see what the noise was. It was unusual. We could've gotten into big trouble. We got our picture and didn't hurt it anything.

MZ: Was this before you were leaving Iceland?

FB: No. It was probably mid around six months or eight months.

MZ: You were there for just a year. This was kind of one of those kind of bad places to be so it was a short tour of duty?

FB: Yes. I'm not sure it was considered remote but it was a one year tour. It was remote.

MZ: At the end of the year did you get to go home to see your son and wife?

FB: Yes.

MZ: How long did you take?

FB: Whatever leave you have, you can take part or all of it. You could take three days if you wanted to. The minimum you could take would be the amount of time it would take to get from wherever you are to your new assignment and that's not counted as leave time. They give you three to five travel days or eight to ten travel days whatever it takes. Then the vacation or leave time that you take is added on to that. If you don't want to take leave that's fine you have those three to five days whatever they give you, whatever they allow you, and you are paid for that just like you are working.

I usually took thirty days because you get thirty days a year. So, I took thirty days and I think I had more than that saved up but I just took thirty. We had, I think, five days travel time and my next assignment was Hill Air Force Base in Utah. We drove out.

MZ: Now, your wife and child could be with you in Utah.

FB: Yes. We were there from the time - I don't remember the dates exactly. I would have to look them up - until I was discharged. We stayed at Hill.

MZ: So, that was your last assignment?

FB: It was a bomber outfit. It wasn't a fighter type aircraft that I had been working on. It was a bomber that were converted to electronic warfare so they weren't really setup for bombs but jamming devices. Jamming radar. They were actually used to test power defenses against foreign planes. They would pretend they were the enemy. That's was what the whole squadron was for was to see if they could infiltrate.

MZ: Our?

FB: They were B-57's. We would take TUI's - temporary duties - somewhere depending on what the operation was going to be . One time we went to Bermuda. There were three outfits scattered around the United States that were locked into this job. We flew all of the planes that were going to participate in this mission to Bermuda over a period of a week or so.

Unfortunately, our group went in the last day before the operation started. Otherwise, we would have been down there for a week. We were the last ones to arrive. We flew down on a transport plane. The two pilots would fly while the jamming officer flew the plane down. I think we probably took twenty planes down. The other groups brought all of theirs that they were going to use.

Then they all just took off and flew on these missions. We were the ground crew course. We spent, I think it was, a day and a half, two and a half days and we didn't leave the runway. I never get off the runway the whole time we were there because all we did was service planes and keep them flying. If they came back and needed a tire change or whatever, fuel them up or brake changes whatever we had to do whatever was written up on them, we'd fix it.

MZ: Twenty four hour a day job for two days. For forty eight hours you just basically kept working.

FB: Yes.

MZ: Did you catnap or something.

FB: If you had time to take map you just sat down on side of the ramp or leaned on the side of a tire and dozed. Then we came home. They basically bombed New York City. So they flew out and ran their jamming radar and stuff and then the real guys that were going to bomb did this play bombing. There were only two or three planes. By the time - you do it so that all the fighter jets that are protecting the shores would scramble up. They can only fly for a certain amount of time then they have to go back and refuel and fix any problems. Then they would send in another wave of planes and some more fighters would come up.

MZ: Did everybody understand that this was a drill. I mean the fighter planes that went up in response.

FB: There job was to scramble up to protect the...

MZ: But they understood that this was a drill.

FB: Pretty much. I don't know if they were involved in it but there job as defense would be to make sure that nobody gets in. Once they would catch up with this plane and see it they now they would know what it is. Its electronic warfare because they know what the planes are like. It had forty antenna sticking out of the plane for jamming so they know right away what was going on. So, I think part of it was a surprise. They knew it was coming but not when.

So all of these planes, these interceptors, were back on the ground with no fuel or tire changes waiting or whatever. Then the two or three which were going to bomb New York City just came in and bombed New York City "electronically".

MZ: Electronically.

FB: That's what they do. That was fun. That was an interesting job. Then I made the decision to get out mostly because I was sick of overseas tours and was starting a family. I had taken the aptitude test and it said that I should get into computer work and all things balanced out and we decided that the best thing was to just get out.

MZ: You served eight years then.

FB: Yes.

MZ: Two four year tours of duty?

FB: Yes. Two four years.

MZ: So the opportunity here was to get out or reenlist another four years.

FB: Yes. Right. You enlist four years at a time. That's the most and the least. So, if you reenlist, you're in there for four more. You can't change your mind once you sign the paper. I needed to go to college but wanted to use my skills that I had when I started this school. So, what I started to do - what I did - I started to work at the base the day after I was discharged from the service because they overhauled planes from the Vietnam War - the F4s that were being shot up in Vietnam - they'd bring them in there to this hanger. They'd fly them in or bring them in on a truck - however they could get them there- and we would put them back together.

MZ: So, they hired civilian mechanics. At this point, you were a civilian mechanic. Of course, they knew your training. You'd just gotten out of the air force.

FB: I actually interviewed for the job in fatigues. I just got on a tug and went down the ramp and stopped and went in and interviewed and they said we can't hire you because you're military. I said yes but not next week. So, they went ahead and interviewed me then I went back to work.

I worked there just over a year long enough to see a plane that just came back from Vietnam just shot full of holes. No landing gear. No wings. We flew it out. We rebuilt it completely from scratch and flew it out in less than a year. It just sat there for a long time waiting for parts - waiting for this , waiting for that then finally starting to putting it together. We'd work on it for awhile then it would sit for awhile. Then we would work on it again. It was an expensive plane so they had to fix it if we could.

MZ: Help me, so you said you stayed at that for about a year.

FB: About a year. Then we came back here.

MZ: Then you started school?

FB: Yes. I went to college at Corning Community.

MZ: Did you benefit from the GI Bill?

FB: Yes. They paid for the whole thing.

MZ: That was good.

FB: At that time the GI Bill was big enough that the checks were sufficient to go to school plus a little extra to pay for your gas to get there. Then, I worked part time at a gas station pumping gas too and I worked at Schweizer Aircraft for awhile. So, that helped.

MZ: So, you got your Associates?

FB: I got my Associates at Corning then I went to Elmira College. I actually got a job at Elmira College after Corning.

MZ: So, after the military, you got your Associates from Corning.

FB: Associates from Corning. Then I applied for a job at Elmira College and was accepted.

MZ: All in computer?

FB: I was a computer operator there. That was my first job. I worked there for I think around two years and, at the same time, I started taking classes because the classes were three dollars a semester.

MZ: Because you were an employee.

FB: Yes. Because you had to pay an activity fee. If you needed a book, you'd have to buy that. The classes and tuition and everything were free. Most of the time, you could pick up a book because you got to know the instructors. You could pick up a book. I basically got my degree for about \$.75/credit.

MZ: That's good.

FB: In the middle of that - actually, I worked at Elmira twice - I got a job as an operator over in Cornell. I worked in the animal science lab for a year and a half.

MZ: That was still a computer job:

FB: Yes. Computer operator.

MZ: That was a night time job if I remember correctly?

FB: Yes. About a year and a half. Then one day the woman that I worked with at Elmira the first time called me and asked me if I wanted to come back. The wages weren't very good the first time I worked there but they were able to spend more money the second time so I did go back and stayed there until almost by accident I got the job at Corning Incorporated and I stayed there for twenty two years.

MZ: At Corning?

FB: At Corning.

MZ: It was that long?

FB: Yes. Twenty two years.

MZ: You had gotten your Bachelors then from Elmira College?

FB: Yes.

MZ: You had completed that while you were working there?

FB: Yes.

MZ: Did you have to use the GI Bill then as well or because you were an employee it was so much better?

FB: I really don't remember if there was any GI Bill left by the time I went to Elmira College because I think I used almost all of it up in the two years I went to Corning because I needed summer school as well. I needed more math background than I had in high school so I had to take extra math classes. So, they put me in to take classes year round to catch up (unclear). It was a pretty rigorous course, much tougher than Elmira was. So, I think I used almost all of my GI Bill at Corning.

MZ: Have you kept in touch with any of your fellow airmen?

FB: There's two people I know. I haven't talked to one of them since then since I knew him at Scott Air Force Base. My wife, of course, was there and she knew him and we went to parties and visited back and forth and all of that. So, she knows him too. We still send cards and letters every year at Christmas time. The other person is a guy I met in training at Amarillo. He wasn't in our group but he was from New York so I met him somehow and we became friends. He went to Okinawa as well a week or so before I did. I guess that they were changing a lot of orders for people to go there and they grabbed him too. His name is Charles Dusenberry .

There's another guy that was there that I actually bought that motorcycle from. He's living down south now and he's not in very good condition. His last name is Townsen. I talked to him on the phone once a year or so ago. I hadn't seen him in years. Thirty years. Dusenberry was a closer friend. We've been in communication off and on for the whole time. He lives in Bath. His family live in Bath. His dad lives over there. He lives in...where is the city that had the bomb a few years ago where McVeigh blew up the building?

MZ: Oklahoma City.

FB: Oklahoma City. He lives near there. He actually lived in Oklahoma City when it happened. He has since moved slightly out. He married a woman from Elmira, from Bath but then they were divorced and he's married again. I never met his new wife but those are the only ones that I kept track of.

MZ: So, around Christmas time you usually send a letter?

FB: Yes. With Charles, with Chuck, we send emails all the time. I got one from him last week with jokes or whatever or something he's seen about the military or something. He'll send to me and I'll laugh back with him.

MZ: Do you have any thoughts in retrospective about your military experience - what it meant to you, how its impacted your life?

FB: Yes. I think one of the things about the service is especially with the enlisted people. I think it tough for them to really tough for them after they get out of the service. Because of the way the military treats you and again it probably will depend on what military career field you got into. If you got into computers, it wouldn't be the same as it was for me in the aircraft field because you don't get the leadership training so much until you get up in the higher ranks.

If you stay in the military for your entire career - twenty or thirty years - then eventually you will become manager or chief or whatever and you get those leadership skills but if you don't get them and don't get them in college you're kind of shortchanged almost. But I think it should be a requirement to be in the military for at least two years - every male and female should do it.

MZ: I was going to ask you if you felt the same way about...yes - just because of the discipline.

FB: You turn a lot of kids around that way.

MZ: You have a better focus on your life and maybe what you should be doing with it.

FB: Especially if you get to choose what you want to do when you're in there. If you do get that you are going to sign up for longer because they want to get their money back from the school. You'd hardly be out of school and train you on the job for two years. You wouldn't have time to pay them back. If you get to choose what you want to do especially if you can pick a career that you can use once you get out then it's a golden opportunity. (unclear). It's not that tough. Anybody can do it.

MZ: Especially in the Air Force.

FB: Yes. My favorite joke: The army is "be all you can be". So, a guy goes in and he says "I want to do this." They say fine. So, he goes in and they say "OK. You're a cook" He says, "That's not what I wanted." and they said, "But that's all you can be."

MZ: Is there anything else that you'd like to add before we wrap this up?

FB: No, I can't think of anything.

MZ: No more humorous stories that you dare tell?

FB: I don't think so.

MZ: That's fine. OK. Thank you.

FB: You're welcome

MZ: Very good. We will get a copy to you.