

Clifford A. Bristol, Narrator

New York State Military Museum  
Interviewer Wayne Clark

Interviewed June 21, 2011 at the NY State Military Museum, Saratoga Springs, NY

WC: Sir, for the record would you state your full name, date, and place of birth, please.

CB: Clifford Allen Bristol, born in Troy, NY, November 13, 1945.

WC: Did you attend school in Troy?

CB: I graduated from Troy High but grew up in Cohoes mostly, attended school through 7<sup>th</sup> grade, then I moved to Troy and finished up in the Troy school system.

WC: What year did you graduate?

CB: I graduated in 1963.

WC: Did you go to work at that point or go on to advanced schooling?

CB: I took a job right out of high school. I was only 17 when I graduated because when I went to grade school there was no kindergarten where I went to school, so I started in 1<sup>st</sup> grade and gained a year on most of the kids. When I graduated high school, a lot of the better places to work, like GE (General Electric) and things like that, wanted your military obligation fulfilled or out of the way. Basically I went in service not so much to be in service, but to get the military obligation out of the way.

WC: Did you enlist?

CB: Yes, I did.

WC: Why did you pick the Air Force?

CB: A couple close friends from high school went into service right out of high school. They would come home on leave and they seemed to like it so I thought why not?

WC: When did you enlist?

CB: December of '63.

WC: Where did you ship out of?

CB: I enlisted at Albany, NY and from there I went right to basic training.

WC: Where was your basic training?

CB: Down in Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. It was about nine weeks.

WC: What was the date of that? You went in in December of '63. Did you miss Christmas or go in after Christmas?

CB: After Christmas, December 27, I believe.

WC: Was that your first time away from home?

CB: Yeah.

WC: What was basic training like?

CB: [laughs] Actually, being young and in a lot better shape, I gained weight. I never saw so much food in my life as in basic training. It was a good experience. I didn't have any problems. A lot of people are better leaders than followers. Me, I was a good follower so I didn't have any trouble. Somebody tells me what to do, I just do it, that's all. I didn't have any problems.

WC: Once you graduated from basic training, did you go on to an advanced school?

CB: Yeah, a tech school at Chanute AFB, Rantoul, Illinois, about 150 miles from Chicago.

WC: What type of training did you receive there?

CB: It was for ground service on aircraft, maintenance, general servicing. I was part of the ground crew.

WC: Any mechanics?

CB: Yeah. Some, light. Basically it was servicing and inspection and if you found a problem, you would call the appropriate shop—electric, hydraulic, whatever. It was mostly troubleshooting, observation, servicing.

WC: Was there a specific aircraft you trained on?

CB: I trained on a B-52 but my first permanent station was up in Plattsburg, NY and they had B-47's, so you went through a whole course for that aircraft. It wasn't quite as long as Chanute.

WC: How long was the course at Chanute?

CB: About 12 weeks I think.

WC: When you graduated from that course, did you receive any promotion or stripe?

CB: Yes, it was almost automatic. I got it before graduation; it was more of a time thing. I got the first promotion while I was at Chanute. I went from E-1 to E-2, at that time it

was Airman Basic to Airman Third Class. They've since changed it but I went from E-1 to E-2.

WC: Once you completed that course, you went to Plattsburg?

CB: They gave you a preference of three bases that you would like to go to if possible. I was still young then and wanted to stay close to home and picked Plattsburg for that reason. I got the first choice as it happened.

WC: Did you put Griffiss on the list?

CB: Griffiss was one and Pease, in New Hampshire, was one. I tried to stay close to home.

WC: How long were you at Plattsburg?

CB: About a year and a half. I stayed there until I had two years in and then I went overseas.

WC: What was it like at Plattsburg? The winters must have been pretty brutal.

CB: [laughs] That was the coldest I've ever been, out on that flight line. I didn't go in so much for hunting but I like to fish and ice fish and Lake Champlain was close by. It was good, Plattsburg was good.

WC: Did you have much time off?

CB: Actually quite a bit. You were on call, on standby, but unless they called you in, you were pretty much on your own.

WC: You worked in the tire shop and changed a lot of tires. I've heard a lot of horror stories about tires exploding.

CB: You put them in an actual cage when you first serviced them. I've seen a couple blow. If you were standing next to it at the time, you'd be done. Yeah, you serviced them in a cage.

WC: Anyone ever injured in your group?

CB: [Knocks on wood.] Not while I was there. They're heavy, too. It's not like tossing around a 14-inch auto tire. It was heavy, it was dirty, it was fun.

WC: I've heard that aircraft tires are extremely expensive. Any idea of what they cost at the time?

CB: No. You could retread those up to four times so you got quite a bit of use out of the casing itself. Not over Vietnam where they'd land on the PSP (pierced steel plank) runways, the makeshift runways, but on a regular runway you could get a couple hundred

landings out of them. Over in Vietnam, they'd just get torn to shreds on those makeshift airstrips. They were pretty durable, you'd get a lot of use out of them.

WC: Where were you sent after Plattsburg?

CB: I was permanently assigned to the Philippines.

WC: Where in the Philippines?

CB: Not the main base in Clark which was in the northern end. I was on a three by five island in the southern part, Mactan Island. When I first got there, it was just tents. It was really crude. We were the first GIs down there since World War II. It was pretty makeshift, eating out of mess kits and the whole nine yards. It was like Boy Scout camp, it was fun.

WC: Did you have any problems with tropical diseases there? Snakes? Land crabs?

CB: Well, it was kind of buggy but no, it was under control. I never had any problem.

WC: Did you see any leftover evidence from WWII?

CB: There were some pillboxes left. [laughs] They were only about 35 feet above sea level. There wasn't much where you could overlook anything.

WC: Were there natives on the island?

CB: There were a lot of locals that worked in the mess halls and grounds keeping, stuff like that. The enlisted people had six to eight airmen to a hut and each hut was designated a local to take care of the clothing, the laundry for the men. They didn't have any services on base for laundry or anything; they more or less took them home and had their wives do them or whatever.

WC: How did you get along with the civilians?

CB: Good. They were tickled to death. That was their economy. Everything, compared to us, was dirt cheap over there. It was ridiculous. There was a good rapport with the locals.

WC: Did you go to Vietnam on a TDY-type status? (temporary duty)

CB: Right. I did two TDY tours, one for 60 days and one for 100 days.

WC: Where in Vietnam did you go?

CB: Basically just the main—Ton Son Nhut, Saigon now. Basically just Tan Son Nhut.

WC: What was it like there? Was it quite similar to being in the Philippines?

CB: Weather-wise and everything it was a lot alike but of course you're at war, you weren't as trusting with the people. I wasn't as adventurous as a lot of the guys over

there. I was only in downtown Saigon once while I was there, I was kind of skittish. The Filipinos were great but the Vietnamese, I just didn't warm up to them at all because you're at war with them. They looked kind of like Siamese cats, there was just something about them. I didn't want to associate with them. I didn't fool around with them much over there.

WC: Were you ever under rocket or mortar attack?

CB: Yeah, a few times. In fact about two days before I left. They didn't so much try to get to the people, the airmen, as they did the aircraft and the runways and stuff like that. They did a lot of damage just before I left. I was glad to get out of there.

WC: What were your living conditions like there?

CB: Again, that was quite a few years ago. Everything was open bay, there were no individual rooms.

WC: But you weren't in tents?

CB: No, they had permanent structures. It was good. You had plenty of water. Conditions were good. Again, you had locals doing your laundry and stuff like that.

WC: Did you do the same type of work?

CB: Yeah, I was assigned to the tire shop in Vietnam also.

WC: Were you working in the same shop both times you were there?

CB: Yes. I requested it. They were glad to get the help. It was pretty much a volunteer thing. They'd ask for volunteers and if nobody volunteered, they'd pick. After being in the tire shop at Plattsburg, I liked it. It was dirty but it was good. It was a good nine to five job pretty much, unless they needed more tires.

WC: Were you involved with jacking the aircraft up, too?

CB: Yeah. You didn't have to lift the whole aircraft, just whatever tire you were going to replace. They had different mounts and jacks and hoists. Some of it was manual and hydraulic. At Plattsburg they had the electric but out on the flight line you just had to use the hydraulic jacks. It went pretty smoothly, well, in the Philippines their equipment wasn't that good but all the other places I went, they had good equipment.

WC: Did you get combat pay in Vietnam?

CB: Yeah, I wasn't on flying status because I didn't fly with the aircraft but I did get the extra combat pay. I didn't smoke but for cigarettes and liquor you had ration cards, but you had plenty. There was ample stuff. Everything was plentiful over there, you didn't have any problem.

WC: What about the food there?

CB: Good food, even at Mac Tan Island. Like I say, when I first got there it was like being at Boy Scout camp. You'd have the mess kit and you'd have to dunk it in the hot water, but it was cool, it was good. The only thing I didn't like was the drink. I didn't like coffee or tea much at the time and the milk over there was called "recombined" and it was awful. I mostly drank water and I had my wife send me—I don't know if you remember at the time, little Fizzies to throw in there. You had to drink over there because it was so hot. The drink was the only problem. I used to like milk but you couldn't drink it, just the way it was processed. I'm sure it was good for you and everything, but it was awful tasting.

WC: You were married when you were over there?

CB: Yes. In fact, we moved the date ahead. We were planning to get married and then I got orders to go overseas so we moved everything up a little bit.

WC: Did you meet your wife in the service?

CB: I met her before I went in but we didn't start dating until I was in. She went to the same high school; she graduated a couple of years after I did.

WC: When you went for your second tour, were any people from your first tour there?

CB: Yeah, my boss in the tire shop was there both times and a couple of the other guys, which made it good.

WC: Was there much extending over there? People that did their one-year tour and because maybe they liked the extra pay or being over there signed up for [breaks off].

CB: Yeah, there was quite a bit. I had just gotten married when I went over, but several of the younger guys had met and married Filipino girls and brought them back.

WC: Did you ever get to see any USO (United Service Organization) shows?

CB: No, I don't remember any being available. [Vice President] Hubert Humphrey came and toured the base; that was the biggest dignitary.

WC: Did you get an R&R? (rest & recuperation)

CB: No. They did send us up to Clark AFB once in between to qualify for small arms marksmanship and they gave us two days up there to unwind but other than that, we waited until we got back.

WC: You mentioned in your paperwork that you were near one of the mortuaries on base at Tan Son Nhut?

CB: Yeah, like I say, you were young, you were 18. I really wasn't into the military end of it. I didn't realize the importance until I got to Vietnam and on the way to work every day, I would have to walk past the mortuary and you see the stack of boxes that they used to send the kids home in. One day you'd go by and they'd be stacked up to the rafters and the next day there'd be half that many. That's the biggest impression I had while I was over there. You took it more seriously after that.

WC: Did you ever see them being loaded on the aircraft?

CB: Yeah, I came home on a Red Cross flight with a lot of the wounded. Knock on wood, nobody close to me or that I was associated with got hammered.

WC: The Red Cross flight—was that for something special or just the way it worked out?

CB: It's been so long ago I don't remember. I think it's just the way it worked out. Whatever was available, they sent you on.

WC: When did you come back home?

CB: December of '66, just before Christmas. So actually, it was a little less than a year that I was over in the Philippines.

WC: Once you got back home you had a leave and a reunion but you weren't discharged at that point.

CB: Right, I went on to Dover, Delaware and completed my service obligation.

WC: How long were you at Dover?

CB: About 11 months.

WC: What was Dover like?

CB: It was a different command. Plattsburg was Strategic Air Command and Dover was Military Airlift Command which was mostly for transporting the troops and stuff. Dover was good. At Dover, the base itself was good, great. Close to the ocean, there was plenty to do.

WC: Did your wife accompany you?

CB: Yes she did. We lived in a trailer off base.

WC: Did you do the same type of work at Dover?

CB: No. In the Air Force you were assigned a number, 43151, which was your job code and the flight line workers had the same AFSC (Air Force Specialty Code) as Air Repair. It's hard to explain, but you could be in two different places of employ, and this was organizational maintenance which was actually out on the flight line itself, where I was in

a specialty shop, the tire shop. But they had the same AFSC so you could go to either place and I was out on the flight line at Dover, working on the whole aircraft, not just the tires.

WC: I meant to ask you, were you issued a weapon in Vietnam?

CB: No.

WC: You never pulled guard duty or perimeter guard?

CB: No. I don't know why they bothered having you qualify for marksmanship. Once a year you had to qualify.

WC: You were discharged from Dover?

CB: Right.

WC: Your date of discharge was December '67. What was it like—was there any anti-war movement? Any protesting around any of the bases?

CB: There was quite a bit of protesting because it was going on hot and heavy. When I went in, it was heating up but when I got out it was going full bore. In fact, they waved a real nice reenlistment bonus at you to try and get you to reenlist but a lot of them didn't.

WC: Did you consider reenlisting?

CB: I considered it simply because of the bonus but like I say, I'm a good follower, but I wasn't much of a leader. After four years you get up in rank a little bit and your responsibilities increase and I didn't like the responsibility. They said, "This is your airplane, take care of it." Sounds good but it was a lot of responsibility, a lot of money, and by that time, you've got a few extra stripes and you've got a few guys under you. I just didn't like the responsibility.

WC: What rank were you when you were discharged?

CB: It used to be airman first class, they call it sergeant now, E-4 on the pay scale. Early on up in Plattsburg I was only 150 miles from home, payday weekend, you're home just about every weekend. I was a little lax in my training and I didn't make rank quite as fast as some of the other guys. The military's good if you like it but it just wasn't for me. I like my nine to five job where I can come home at the end of the day.

WC: What did you do when you were discharged? Work? School?

CB: Of course, jobs were a lot easier to find back then. I got a job close to home in Watervliet, NY. It was a really good job, my older brother worked there.

WC: Whereabouts in Watervliet?



CB: It was a sandpaper plant—Behr-Manning which is now Norton Company which is no longer there. I went there right out of service and I worked there two and a half years. They were starting to lay off, the economy started to go a little bit south and they laid off. I went to work for Freihofer Baking Company and I worked there about six months. Behr-Manning called me and asked if I wanted to come back so I called my brother and asked what it looked like over there. He asked what it looked like where I was. I said that I was getting so much overtime that I was getting sick of it. He said that I'd better stay there. I did and I retired from Freihofer.

WC: How many years with Freihofer?

CB: Thirty-two when I retired. I've been retired almost 10 years.

WC: What did you do at Freihofer?

CB: It was on the inside, it was in the bakery itself, several jobs. The jobs were on a bid system so if the job came up, you bid on it and the senior person got it. So as time went on you got better and better jobs so I had seven or eight jobs during the course of the employ.

WC: Did you get to eat a lot of cookies and baked goods?

CB: I stayed away from most of it but there were a few. The éclairs were my weak spot but I ate a lot of fruit, too, because they made the pies. You weren't supposed to but I was in shipping and receiving for a lot of the time and had access to it. I'm the youngest of eight kids and all but one of us has worked for Freihofer at one time or another. The only one that didn't was my oldest brother that worked for Behr-Manning. He worked there all of his life, that's the only job he ever had. Three of us retired from Freihofer; the Freihofer family was good to us.

WC: Did you stay in contact with anyone you were in service with?

CB: [laughs] I went out and saw a friend of mine last year out in Wisconsin. That was fun, that was good. In fact, he was up in Plattsburg with me.

WC: Did you use the GI Bill to buy a home or anything?

CB: No.

WC: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

CB: The Veterans of Lansingburgh, down by us. That's a nice club. But I didn't go into the Guard at all. I just got the civilian job and stuck with it.

WC: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

CB: Like I say, you were a young kid going in but it opened your eyes to a lot of stuff. It made you take a lot of stuff more seriously. I don't know how these countries over in

Africa are, but even the Philippines, the way the people live over there, you talk about poverty, man oh man. They live in shacks, Vietnam, too from what little I saw. I didn't go off base that much. To see the way other people live, it opened your eyes.

WC: Is there anything else you want to touch on?

CB: We've got four children, two boys and two girls. The oldest boy did a hitch in the Army. If you're keyed to it, the military's a great life and I don't think it hurts anybody to do a stint in the military and it's a good career if you make it a career. It's like high school—some of your fondest memories are in high school and some of your saddest memories are in high school. It's the same with the military—I had a lot of laughs but I had a few things I'd rather not go through again. But all in all I got no complaints. It was good.

WC: Thank you very much for you interview.

CB: It was fun. I'm glad we could do it. [Holds photo of self in dress uniform.] This was taken at Clark AFB just before I came home from Vietnam. We stopped at Clark and picked up a lot of wounded at the hospital there. This was in December of '66.

WC: Thank you again.

CB: You're welcome.