

An Interview with John Raszcewski
Vietnam Era USAF Veteran
By Michele Starkey

John Raszcewski was born and raised in the Hudson Valley. He shared with us, "I was born in New Windsor, lived on Taft Avenue in the Town of Newburgh until 1957 and then we moved to Westwood Park. I graduated from Newburgh Free Academy in 1958 and went to Orange County Community College for two years. Then, I headed off to the University of Buffalo for about one year."

Raszcewski shared with us that his dad was a, "Navy man," which probably influenced his decision to enlist and serve in the military during a time when many in America were rebelling and going about finding themselves. After all, the 1960's were a tumultuous time in America. Yet, on the same first day of May in 1963 when James Whittaker of Redmond, Washington became the first American to reach the summit of the tallest mountain in the world, Mt. Everest, John Raszcewski enlisted in the Air Force.

Raszcewski shared with us that he did his basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. In June, he would be sent to Keesler Air Force Base which is located within the city limits of Biloxi, Miss. Raszcewski would spend the next year of his life learning everything available about electronic warfare. The counter intelligence training would encompass everything from communications jamming, enemy warfare detection and how to incorporate that intelligence into the B52 bombers that he would soon be supporting. During this time of training at Lackland, he would quickly rise through the ranks and into a leadership role within the school group. Upon graduation, Raszcewski was allowed to choose his next assignment and he chose California. Much to his dismay, his orders returned with a different destination and he was heading to Glasgow AFB, Montana.

How did you feel about going to Montana, were you disappointed that you didn't get the California assignment?

"I was really disappointed. Especially since I remembered watching a news broadcast back home in New York one time. They were talking about Montana and saying that it was 40 degrees below zero and the weather was horrible. That's all I could think about when they told me I was heading out for Glasgow."

What date was that and what unit were you assigned to?

"When I left for Montana it was March of 1964. I was assigned to the 91st Bomb Wing. The base itself was located about 20 miles north of Glasgow and not too far from the Canadian border. You have to remember, this was still the Cold War period and those B52 bombers were fully loaded on nuclear alert at all times. During that time, the runways needed to be rebuilt so my unit was sent to Spokane, Washington for about one month. When we returned to Glasgow, I was awarded the highest honor, Airman of the Month. I would actually receive that award twice during my career."

Was the weather terribly severe while you were serving there?

"Well, we actually beat out the record for the coldest spell. It was probably 55 – 65 degrees below zero and with the wind chill it felt like 100 degrees below zero. I remember zipping up my parka and peaking through a tiny hole just to run outside to get to the mess hall. It stayed that way for three entire days. Thousands of steers died during the winter because their nostrils just froze."

Were you married at that time?

"No. I was actually supposed to be married in April of 1966 in Newburgh. My father died in January of 1966 and I used up all of my leave time coming home for dad's funeral and making sure my mother was squared away before I left. My fiancée, Patricia, was busy making all of the arrangements for our wedding when my father died. While I was home for the funeral, Patricia and I went to speak with the Priest at St. Mary's Church and got all of our papers notarized. We made a decision that Pat would fly out to Montana and we would marry there."

Did your family from Newburgh attend the wedding?

"None of them could come and it was Pat's first time on an airplane. I made arrangements for her to stay at the Rainbow Hotel while we waited for the wedding day. Pat had left Newburgh on April 20, 1966 and we were married in Montana on April 23 in St. Raphael's Church. There were only seven people in the church including us and we walked down the aisle together while the old organist played something that sounded more like a funeral march than a wedding procession. We headed over to the Officer's Club for bacon and eggs and champagne. We never had a honeymoon – welcome to the military."

Were those happy days?

"Those were some of the happiest days of our lives...until I received my TDY orders for Guam and Project Arc Light. Pat was already pregnant with our first child and she didn't want me to leave. My unit, the 91st combined with the 406th out of Florida. Combined, we had over 30 bombers and became the first group to get B52's into Vietnam. We became known as the Black Eagles. There was activity 24 hrs a day and 7 days a week. We were so busy prepping the planes with bombs. I remember this one day in particular when we were loading up a B52. There are 108 bombs on the plane – 84 on the under belly and 24 on the wings and one of the airmen lost his grip and the bomb dropped and rolled under the stairwell. We just froze but the bomb still had the safety and it just rolled away."

Was that the scariest moment you had?

"Yes, definitely, that had to be the scariest moment. I mean, it's a 250 lb live bomb, it could have blown us to pieces. But, I lived through it and my son, John III, was born while I was in Guam. He would turn 3 months old before I would get to see him."

When did you come home?

"I left Guam in April of 1967 after more than 200 days in Guam. I developed a Strep infection while I was in Guam that affected my heart valve and delayed my discharge until June. Pat and I took a little time to tour around the U.S. before coming home to Newburgh. Our second child, Laura, was born in 1969."

Where did you work after the War?

"I went to work for IBM and would retire in 1993 after a 30-year career with IBM that spanned through the financial, engineering and finally the purchasing departments."

John and Pat still reside in Newburgh. Their son, John, is a police officer in Connecticut who is currently serving as a Chief Petty Officer with the Navy Reserves on his third tour of duty in Afghanistan. Their daughter, Laura, has blessed them with four grandchildren (three boys and a girl).

The VFW Post 1161 meets every third Friday of every month in the City of Newburgh Post 973 Bldg. The meetings begin at 1:00 pm and you can call Quartermaster Steve Fanizzi at (845)236-7295 or Commander Donald Ruckdeschel Sr. at (845)562-7828 for more details. John Raszcewski organizes a Casino Bus Trip and all are welcome. Call the Raszcewski's at (845)562-3705.