

John S. Barber
Narrator

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New York State Military Museum
Interviewers

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Wayne Clarke/Mike Russert: INT.
John Barber JB

INT: Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please?

JB: John S. Barber. Born 11/2/32 in Salem [New York.]

INT: What was your educational background prior to entering the service?

JB: I went to Salem High School and graduated from there.

INT: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

JB: I enlisted in the Air Force.

INT: Why did you select the Air Force?

JB: At the time I had just received my notification from the draft board so I thought, *Well, I think I'd rather be in the Air Force and try to learn something, rather than go in the Army.*

INT: Had you ever flown at the time?

JB: No.

INT: What year did you enlist?

JB: 1952. April 21st.

INT: Where did you go for basic?

JB: Sampson.

INT: What was Sampson like when you went there?

JB: Cold. We stayed in a barracks right down there next to the lake, Seneca Lake, and it was April and it was cold out there. Really cold.

INT: How about the conditions in the barracks and so on?

JB: They really weren't too bad. Or at least I didn't think they were. They kept us busy all the time.

INT: Did you get uniforms right away?

JB: Oh, yeah. We did. A friend of mine went to Lackland and he said it was three months before they were issued anything.

INT: So you were issued everything right away?

JB: We were issued almost immediately. In a way, I was a little surprised at that.

INT: How long were you at Sampson, approximately?

JB: Forty-eight days, I think, if I'm not mistaken.

INT: Where did you go from there?

JB: Then we went to Sheppard Field. We left Syracuse from the airport up there and it was freezing cold that morning. Snowing and sleeting. And we got down to Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas. They opened up the door—it was an old C-46—and of course we had our blues on, and I thought we'd been sent to hell. The heat almost took your breath away. It was such a dramatic change, and I'll never forget getting out of the plane—of course there were a lot of guys on the tarmac—and they looked at us like, "What's wrong with them?" But that was all part of it.

INT: Did you receive specialized training there?

JB: Yes. I went to school there for probably three months. Engine school.

INT: Did you specialize in anything?

JB: Reciprocating engines. Jets were still really new back at that time, of course. I think they did have a jet school there but we were reciprocating.

INT: Do you have any stories you want to tell us about your time at Sheppard?

JB: Not that I can think of. I know one thing: I was glad to get out of there. The only thing that really sticks in my mind was that my wife came down, and we lived off base—

INT: So you were married?

JB: I was married at the time, yes. We'd have school from four in the afternoon until ten, eleven, whatever it was. But you'd have to have your khakis on—long sleeves, with your hat—and of course they'd line you up on the blacktop. And then we'd have to march off to school. I can't believe that I lived through that period of my life, from the heat. It was just unbelievable. But I got through it.

INT: Where did you go from there?

JB: Let's see. Then I went to Chanute Field up in Champaign/Urbana, Illinois. Then I went to specialized engine school up there. 4360's mainly. I was up there for two to three months, roughly. And then that's where I got sent overseas, from that point.

INT: Where were you sent?

JB: Originally they sent us to England. There were thirteen of us that had the same specialty at that time. They sent us to Burtonwood, outside of Liverpool, England.

INT: Did you fly over there?

JB: No. We went by boat. In the Air Force we traveled by boat. [Laughter] But anyhow, we went to a processing center when we got to England. They kept us there three or four days and then they took the thirteen of us and put us on a bus and they sent us over to Burtonwood. We go through the gate—it's an RAF [Royal Air Force] airbase—and maybe there were American personnel there, I don't know. If there were, we never did see them. But I can recall very vividly we went to base operations, and they sent us to a squadron area. I remember walking in and this British Major, I think he was, and I said to him right away, "Sir, we're in the wrong place." He looked at the orders and he said, "Not according to the orders." I said, "I realize that, but we're the United States American Air Force. What are we going to be doing?" He said, "We have all these shops. We're going to take the thirteen of you and send you down to the small instrument shop—carburetors, hydraulics." And I said, "But that's not our specialty. I told you we're in the wrong spot." "Well, you're here."

I never really cared for England after that. Of course, we stayed in a Quonset hut. This was the spring of the year, if I'm not mistaken. You had the pot-bellied stove and the soft coal. The dampness was constant. I never could get used to that. You had to have somebody keep the stove going all night or you'd freeze to death. So we were there about three months.

INT: So you were only a small American unit on an RAF base?

JB: RAF base, yes. So we were there about three months and then one day somebody came into the shop—they came around to each of us—and they said, "Report to the CO." So we went back over there and we walked in, and he came out and he looked at me and he said, "Barber, you were right." I said, "What's that?" He said, "You're in the wrong place." I said, "I told you, sir." He said, "You're getting out of here." "Where are we going?" "I don't know right now, but you're moving. We just got notification."

From there, they sent us to Rhein-Main outside of Frankfurt, Germany. We had orders to report to the 317th Troop Carrier Wing at Rhein-Main. So we went into base ops and showed the guy the order, and he said to another guy standing there, "Did you ever hear of this?" The other guy said, "No." And I said, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "We never heard of the 317th." And I said, "Well, it says that, and Rhein-Main. We're here." So he said, "Well, we don't know where they are right now. You guys will go over to transit and stay over there." So they put us on a bus, and I'll tell you, those barracks—they were like a condo. It was unbelievable. They were beautiful. So we thought, *Well this is a nice way to live, anyhow.*

So we were over there, and I think we were there about ten days. Finally, somebody comes along in a truck and says, "You guys are going over to ops." So we went over. All this time, of course, nobody unpacked their duffel bag. Nobody did laundry. So we finally went to ops, and the guy said, "The 317th is down at Neubiberg." I said to him, "Where's that?" He said, "Just outside of Munich." And I said, "Well, how are we going to get there? Nobody's got any money or anything." So he said, "Well, report back tomorrow. Come back here tomorrow."

So we went back the next morning. He said, "They're going to send a plane up for you." So I said, "OK. Good. But what do we do in the meantime?" He said, "Go back to transit." So we went back over to transit, where we were, and checked in again. It was almost another week but finally, we got a notification report. So they finally picked us up in a C-47. That was some ride, through thunderstorms and what-have-you. But we got down to Neubiberg, so we were with the Wing Headquarters. They took us there.

Of course, now this is going on three to four weeks since we left England. So this officer, whoever it was, said to us, "So where have you been?" So we went through the whole spiel with him. And finally we got assigned...I got assigned to the 317th maintenance

squadron. And that's where the 317th Troop Carrier Wing was. And I spent about the next twenty months there, I think it was. Eighteen to twenty, something like that.

INT: What was your assignment?

JB: I started in engine build-up. I was working in there and then I was a flight line mechanic to boot. They had 119's, troop carriers, there. We did a lot of things with NATO at that time—airdrops, and what-have-you. That was a good experience.

INT: In what way?

JB: Germany was real nice, and where we were was down in Bavaria. We used to get down to the Alps, Garnisch-Partenkirchen. Where was Hitler's—

INT: Berchtesgaden?

JB: Berchtesgaden, yes. Visited there a couple times. A beautiful country. Really nice country. And the German people, I thought, treated the Americans very well back at that time.

Munich, a lot of the city was still blown apart, when I was there, from World War II. Parts of it they fixed up but there were other parts that were total, complete rubble. It's what you seen on the news in Iraq today, certain parts of it. That was a little difficult to adjust to, never having seen anything like that before. But overall I really enjoyed the experience of being over there.

INT: Your wife wasn't able to come over?

JB: No, she didn't come over there. As I said, it was a year and a half, eighteen to twenty months by the time I got back. And I was anxious to get home, because just before I went over she got pregnant. We had a boy. I think he was about nine months old before I saw him. Naturally I was anxious for that. But like I said, I really enjoyed the experience of it.

INT: When did you return to the States?

JB: I'm going to say it was November of '54. November or December. Probably November, I think.

INT: What was your assignment after that?

JB: You know the service. They give you three choices. At the air base in Neubiberg, before I came back, three bases they'll try to get me assigned to. And I put in for Griffiths, which was out in Rome at the time; West Palm Beach in Florida; and I forget where the other one was. I think over in Massachusetts someplace.

INT: Westover?

JB: Westover. Of course, I got sent to Waco, Texas. James Connally Air Force Base. I said to my wife, when I found out—I remember writing her and saying, “I guess there aren’t any air bases in the States except in Texas, because we can’t seem to do anything but end up there.” But we enjoyed Texas both times we were there.

INT: Was your assignment very similar?

JB: Yes. I worked on B-25’s, mainly, there. Of course, they were left over from World War II.

INT: Was it mostly component changes you were doing, or were you pulling the whole engines?

JB: I was doing everything. Maintenance, changing engines, changing props, changing cylinders, whatever needed to be done, carburetors, what-have-you. So it was the whole gamut. And then just before I left there—about the last four of five months—I was crewing a B-25 and I had five civilians working for me. That was interesting because a lot of guys were at the time being discharged, and then they were coming back in a civilian capacity doing exactly the same thing they were doing in the military. And a lot of them were retirees. So they were getting a pension from the government besides getting a salary from the government again. I guess it worked out very well for them. And those guys I had were really good, because they had all kinds of experience. You told them, this is what needed to be done, and they’d do it. It was a good job. I don’t know why I got out. [Laughter]

INT: Did you find those aircraft to be very labor intensive?

JB: Not really. Not overly. In Germany I worked on 119’s and those were the 4360’s and those things were just absolutely phenomenal. Absolutely phenomenal. Maintenance was minimal on those—and they still are, I guess, a very, very safe type of engine. Hardly anything ever went wrong with those—major.

We were just down to DC a couple months ago, three months ago, on a trip and we went out to that new Air and Space Museum out at Dulles, and we were walking around looking. That was right up my alley. And when I got over in a corner I saw a cutout of a 4360 engine that looked exactly—just exactly—like the one we had out at Chanute Field in Illinois. They had cut it out and you could see the inside of it, the working parts, and it was just...I said, “Oh my God, I’m going back in time here.” I almost think they sent it from there, I don’t know. I would highly recommend that to anybody. I was much more impressed with that than I was with the Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian. That’s nice, but I like the one at Dulles better.

INT: When were you discharged?

JB: April of '56. April 20th. I spent four years, right to the day.

INT: And you were at Waco when you were—

JB: Yes. I was discharged from there. From Connally. That was the Air Training Command that I was with there.

INT: After you were discharged, did you make use of the GI Bill at all?

JB: Yes. In fact, I started school at Albany State in '56, that fall. I went the first semester. My wife had a job, we had the kid, she had a full-time job. I was working a part-time job and trying to go to college. Of course, back then they didn't have the loan programs that are available now. All of a sudden I decided, *I don't think this is my niche right now*. So I dropped out after a semester there at Albany State. I did quite a few jobs over a period of time, and then once they reinstated the GI Bill...They dropped it there for a few years. I can't remember how long, what the period of time was. But when it was reinstated I thought, *I think I'll go back and get my teaching degree*. And my wife had a good job at the time—she was secretary to the superintendent there in Salem. So I went back to school and got my degree. And I'm very happy I did it, to say the least. Very happy.

INT: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

JB: Yes. I belong to Legion. I'm going to join the Korean...there in Glens Falls. I just haven't gotten around to it but I intend to do it eventually.

INT: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone you were in service with?

JB: One guy down in New Jersey. We've gotten together different times over the years. He and his wife and my wife correspond a couple times a year to each other.

INT: How do you think your time in the service had an effect or changed your life at all in any way?

JB: No doubt about it. When you go through it...I go back to basic training. I couldn't wait to get out of there, and I think probably most guys that have gone through that felt the same. But when I look back on it, I think that was one of the best times I had in my life. I learned more about discipline, and just life. A lot of intangibles I think you get out of the service, you really can't put your finger on, but they promote your life throughout your whole span. I don't regret joining the service a bit. In fact, I think every guy should have to do it. But that's my own opinion.

INT: Thank you.