

**Dale L. Cleckner
Veteran**

**Laura Bush & Anthony Coccia
Interviewers**

**RFA Oral History Project
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LB: Please state your name.

DC: Dale L. Cleckner.

LB: When were you born?

DC: January 11th, 1932.

LB: Where were you born?

DC: Ashland, Ohio.

LB: What branch of the Armed Forces did you serve in?

DC: United States Air Force.

LB: How old were you when you enlisted?

DC: Nineteen.

LB: What made you decide to join the military?

DC: The army wanted me and I thought the Air Force was better so I chose the Air Force.

LB: Was there any particular reason why you chose the Air Force?

DC: Well, I thought I had more to offer than just duties as a rifleman. I would be a technical person.

LB: Where did you enter your basic training?

DC: Sampson Air Force Base, New York.

LB: How long did this training last?

DC: It actually lasted four weeks and then I spent another four weeks at the basic training base waiting for assignment.

LB: What skills did you acquire during this time?

DC: I learned to keep my mouth shut and do what I was told.

LB: Did you and your comrades have a motto that you followed?

DC: Well, I guess the one we followed most often was "cooperate and graduate" and work together.

LB: How did you live out this motto?

DC: Well, we helped one another and it didn't make any difference if it was academics or it was on the drill field or where it might be. We looked out for one another.

LB: Do did you go to school with these people?

DC: We had all kinds of classes.

LB: On the Air Force Base?

DC: On the Air Force Base.

LB: Like basic high school courses?

DC: These were like Air Force history, drill, speech, all kinds of things along that line.

LB: How was the training you received different than the way they train Air Force troops today?

DC: I'm sure that today it's more technical than it was when I went through it. Computers have made a lot of changes and I'm sure basic training has been affected as much as the rest of the Air Force.

LB: What wars did you serve in?

DC: I came into the Air Force during the Korean conflict and served right on through to Vietnam.

LB: During the Korean War, did you serve overseas?

DC: I did not.

LB: What were the names of the cities you served in during the Korean War?

DC: Rantoul, Illinois. Duluth, Minnesota. Geneva, New York.

LB: Were you connected at all, because I know Geneva has that Hobart College.

DC: No, the basic training Sampson Air Force base was just south of Geneva.

LB: Did you serve in the war from its beginning?

DC: No, I came in in 1951 and the Korean War started in 1950.

LB: What were your initial duties when you started out in Korea?

DC: During the Korean War I went to tech school, learned to maintain instrument trainers to train pilots and ended up there as an instructor in a technical school.

LB: What skills are involved in training pilots?

DC: You have navigation, you have all the different procedures that they would use in the airplane which would be bailout procedures and anything along those lines.

LB: When was it that you began training the crew members for the flight procedures?

DC: I was an instructor for maintenance to train people to pull maintenance on the trainers initially and then the last year and a half on my first tour of duty then I went to a fighter outfit and trained pilots there.

LB: What is the most important item to remember when training troops?

DC: Get their attention.

LB: And how do you do that?

DC: Some of them you got to slap along the head. Not really, but you have to be abrupt and sometimes downright rude.

LB: What types of personalities did you encounter with this training?

DC: Every type you can think of.

LB: When did you begin training the crew members in the flight procedures?

DC: That would have been in 1954.

LB: What did you remember from your training that you made sure to go over with the crew members that you trained?

DC: You had to teach navigation aids and now everything's a lot more mechanized than what it was when I first started. Now you have a lot of different types of navigation systems that are a lot more advanced.

LB: What requirements were needed in order to move from training into working as a pilot?

DC: They were trained as a pilot first. We only kept them current and made sure they stayed current on their requirements. Every year a pilot has to take an instrument exam, which is to be able to fly the airplane on instruments when he can't see anything. We used to administer the instrument exam in the trainers before they actually took them in the airplane. They had to pass it in the trainer first before they could get in the airplane.

LB: So it's like your road test, someone is in there with you and they're writing down the comments and then they show that to their superiors?

DC: Yes.

LB: How does an electronic flight trainer work?

DC: Well, there's a lot of different kinds. Most of them now are computer generated. Before everything was electronic or mechanical and some of them even used air pressure. The last equipment that I was on, we had thirteen different computers that generated the missions for the different crew members.

LB: What does it take to build an electronic flight trainer?

DC: A large company with a lot of money and a government contract.

LB: What did you like the least about training the aircrew members?

DC: I don't know that there was anything I really disliked about it. It was different every day. Different people, different missions. You never got bored.

LB: How has the technology used to train the Air Force members changed since you've been in the service?

DC: When I first entered the service, nothing was digital. Now everything is digital and that has been a big change for the old-timers.

LB: What types of planes did you work around?

DC: I was tied to the B-52s.

LB: So you were actually working with what's in Griffiss right now?

DC: Yes.

LB: Did you have a favorite plane?

DC: I didn't actually work with the planes themselves, I worked with the people who flew the planes. I had a very short stint working on the flight line.

LB: What tasks are needed to be done in order to maintain the equipment?

DC: You have what they call TOs, which are tech orders. You follow the tech orders to a letter.

LB: What were usually in the tech orders? What were the most common orders you were asked to do?

DC: You would have alignment procedures if you were working on say the instruments in the B-52. The particular instrument you would be working on there would be a portion of the tech order that would tell you that you would do this, this, this in that order.

LB: Were you involved in Air Defense command during the Korean War?

DC: I was. I was assigned to a fighter outfit. I did not train the fighter pilots, I trained the people that flew the other types of airplanes. We had the cargo airplanes.

LB: What's expected of an Air Defense Commander?

DC: They were responsible for the protection of the entire country. That was the northern perimeter of Canada, both coasts, and the Mexican border.

LB: What did you like best about this job?

DC: I liked being stationed in Duluth, Minnesota. It was a great assignment.

LB: What is it about Duluth that's so great?

DC: The summer was unbelievable, even though it was only a couple months long. The people were great there.

LB: What personality traits did they exhibit?

DC: Most of the people were Scandinavian so they were very patient with you until you did what they wanted you to do.

LB: What problems did you face while you were in Air Defense Command?

DC: I didn't really have any big problem. I had great people to work with, great people to work for, and great off-duty time.

LB: What did you do in your off-duty time?

DC: Went to the various lakes around the area, went fishing, went into town and took advantage of the local nightlife.

LB: What medals or recognitions did you receive during the Korean War?

DC: The only thing I received during the Korean War was a National Defense Medal.

LB: What sticks out in your mind most about the Vietnam experience?

DC: I think the way it was received by the American public. I don't think that they really appreciated what the Armed Forces were trying to do, whether they agreed with it or not.

LB: Where did you serve during the Vietnam War?

DC: I reentered the Air Force. I had a break in service, I got out in 1955 and went to college for

a couple years then went back in the Air Force in 1958. From there I went back to tech school in Illinois and from there I was sent to a bomb wing in Indiana and from there I went to a bomb wing in Puerto Rico and from there to a bomb wing in Michigan, back to Puerto Rico.

LB: Was it common for a lot of young men at the time to go into the Air Force then go to college?

DC: The Air Force had a good off-duty education program and a lot of people took advantage of that.

LB: Did you experience culture shock in Puerto Rico?

DC: Not really, I was assimilated into the local people very quickly. I took a year of Spanish with Florida State University. When I was off base I used my Spanish and it was very much appreciated by the local people.

LB: Were you ever afraid when you were on duty?

DC: No, I didn't have any problems in that area.

LB: In what war were involved in the Strategic Air Command?

DC: When I came back in the Air Force in 1958 after tech school I was assigned to the Strategic Air Command and didn't leave it until I retired.

LB: What exactly is strategic air command?

DC: That is the bomber force that delivers weapons of mass destruction.

LB: So security must have been pretty tight around there then?

DC: Yes, very much so.

LB: Did you have to have any particular papers with you to show that you were qualified to work there?

DC: Your paperwork was all in your personnel file and depending on where you worked you either had secret clearance or top secret clearance or even higher.

LB: Did you have a code of ethics that you had to follow when you were on duty? Like you couldn't say to people outside what you were working on?

DC: Where I worked it was an involved atmosphere so we kept everything pretty much within that.

LB: About how many people did you work with in Vietnam?

DC: During the Vietnam conflict, we had a small, small group. It was pretty close-knit. You knew people at almost every base because there just weren't that many. On the trainer I was working on most of the time we only had maybe six or eight people.

LB: Did you work with one specific plane or trainer or did you flip around to many different ones?

DC: I worked mostly on the electronic [unclear] trainer until I got more rank. Then I was in charge of all the different training devices.

LB: Did you have a favorite training device?

DC: I guess I'd have to say the ECM.

LB: What did you like about that?

DC: It was diversified. You generated the mission that you had the crew members fly, you maintained the equipment. As I stated previously, you never got bored because it was different every day.

LB: What do you remember most about the Vietnam War?

DC: When we sent crews from the various bases to fly missions into Vietnam.

LB: How did you keep up with the news about what was happening in Vietnam?

DC: We had access to a little more information probably than the general public did because crew members would come back and give us some information.

LB: What was their opinion about the war?

DC: They were doing their job.

LB: Did the news you heard make you approach your job differently?

DC: I don't think so.

LB: What were your superiors like?

DC: They were generally pretty easy to work with. I guess in any job there's someone you don't agree with every day.

LB: What did they teach you about leadership?

DC: They taught me there's various ways to do it. Coercion was one way, by example is another. My examples had [unclear] about coercion.

LB: Do you feel that people who are not in combat are often overlooked?

DC: They don't get the attention perhaps, but I wouldn't say they're overlooked.

LB: What person did you remember best from your service?

DC: The one person I suppose I remember the most was when I was in Air Defense Command, I worked for the master sergeant who ran base operations and my trainer was directly under him and he was a great guy. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for you. He looked out for you, and taught me to look out for the people who work for me.

LB: If you could change the way you approached something during the wars, what would you have done differently?

DC: I can't think of anything right off the top of my head that I would have done differently.

LB: In what way did your service change your perspective on war?

DC: I never gave much thought on war until I was asked to go to war. That does change your outlook somewhat. You stop to think what all has to be done and then you think, well what do I want to do? I thought that I could do more in the Air Force than I could do in the army.

LB: In retrospect, do you think your military service was worthwhile?

DC: Oh, very much so.

LB: What have you gained from the military service?

DC: I've gained an education, I received a bachelor's and a master's degree while I was in active-duty. I had all the technical training that the Air Force gave me. It instilled in my children a sense of obedient behavior, shall we say. They saw the example I was setting by obeying my superiors and I didn't have near the problems that I bet a lot of parents did.

LB: What would you say to people like John that you met downstairs who say that they want to go into the Air Force?

DC: I'd say go for it. I think it's a great experience.

LB: Next, would you like to explain these pictures?

DC: I really only brought two pictures here to show. As I mentioned to you earlier, this is what I would call a before and an after. This one, I was in the Air Force maybe six months when this was taken. This picture you just had to take to send home to everybody to show them "yes, I'm in the Air Force." This is a picture towards the end of my career and I was receiving an Airman Senior NCO award from William Anders, who was one of the astronauts. That happened here at Griffiss. This picture is of the equipment, part of the equipment that we had when I retired from the Air Force. This is the B-52 weapon systems trainer, this is the pilot station where the pilot and the copilot did their training.

LB: Is that company link still in business today?

DC: I believe that they're out of business now. They were in Binghamton. This was a New York State company. They built the first trainer that I worked on in 1951. And here's the trainer in 1984.

LB: How many different models of training did they have?

DC: They had tremendous amounts. They made it not just for the military but also for commercial airliners.

LB: Is there anything else that you'd like to add to your story?

DC: Nothing else I can think of.

LB: Well, thank you very much.

DC: It's been my pleasure.