

**Joseph John Schmitt  
Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke  
Interviewer:**

**Interviewed on 21 July 2010  
at the New York State Military Museum  
Saratoga Springs, NY**

**WC:** Did you attend school in Rockaway?

**JS:** No, I attending school in Woodside, NY, that's where I lived, 8<sup>th</sup> grade at St. Mary's and then Newtown high school.

**WC:** Did you graduate?

**JS:** Yeah

**WC:** And what year did you graduate?

**JS:** 1959

**WC:** Did you go on to college at that point?

**JS:** No

**WC:** Did you take a job?

**JS:** Yes

**WC:** And what kind of job did you do?

**JS:** Auto repair work

**WC:** Did you enjoy doing that?

**JS:** At the time, yes. I had actually gotten into that when I was about 16 during the time I was in school, whether say working after school and I stayed with that after I came out of school, up until about 61. Being that the draft was coming, and knowing that somewhere in the next couple of years, I would probably be drafted into the service, I decided to enlist in the Air Force. Which is what did, by April of 1961

**WC:** Now why did you pick the Air Force?

**JS:** I felt I could get a career. Something I might be able to learn that I could use later on when I came out of the service. That was my intent. Prior to my actual enlistment, at that time, you had to do what was called aptitude testing, and in my mechanics I scored very high, if it wasn't a 100 I was right under it. So with all promises made by the recruiter, you got a great future in front you and all of that. Of course when I enlisted, and I went in, I was hoping my primary was to get could training on jet engines, I sure there must have been thousands of fellows had the same thing. Of course in short enough order, once you end basic training you quickly find that government plans for you and your plans are two separate things. As I found out at that time so that particular part of it never happened.

**WC:** Was that your first time away from home, basically?

**JS:** Yes

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

**JS:** Yes

**WC:** And, where and what did you do?

**JS:** After I left basic training that was in San Antonio, from there Chanute air force base up in Bloomington, or normal Illinois it's in the southern part of Illinois and that's where I went to tech school for just under six months, I was in tech school up there. And at that time, what I went into of course, what was called a liquid fuel systems mechanic specialist technician, our first line of defense, Atlantis I CPM, which was what I was trained to work on, the fueling and pressurization systems of the rocket and what I learned in the school all of those months, was everything, pretty much from the liquid nitrogen and oxygen, RPI, the helium all the pressurization systems and how they worked on the missile and periodic maintenance certain valves and certain things had to be changed on it was called periodic preventive maintenance, it was out first I nucleated ICBM and as the easiest ones and I believe that became operational a couple of years, just a couple of years before I went into the service in 59' there took to get fired from the point of where the launch commissioned officer with the red phone would go off from the pentagon to get the rocket into air it took 15 minutes which even then it's an extraordinary long amount of time that would be from the time to go until can actually fire would be 15 minutes and it was a lot involved to get it off the ground. Towards the end of actually a few months before I had that service the air force was all converted into Minutemen was a solid propellant ICBM difference in from the red phone going off and the rocket fire 15 minutes of the liquid fueled Atlantis which was what I was trained on 3 miles per hour heading for who knows where do we go to return to strike time much, much faster.

**WC:** Now, where were these missiles fueled at all times?

**JS:** Oh no we have to be finished that was advantageous about the Minutemen coming in there was solid fuel that will already loading so in other words, if they only took 3 minutes to get that literally up on the gantry. Depending on the type of site was to get fired it was already loaded, whereas the first the first ones which was what I was working like no everything was in storage tanks and of course you didn't, everything had to be pressurize RP1 into would put the liquid oxygen into the helium had to go into the system, everything had on the first ones and but it was interesting working down in the cycles with these things at least at the time.

**WC:** Now you mentioned some of had nuclear warheads.

**JS:** They all did

**WC:** and those nuclear devices were always in place?

**JS:** Always in place and there were pretty big units today, I guess that all stuff has to be declassified in all these years later but they were pretty big, the nose cones the rockets were close to 40-45 feet without the nose cone and then you added the nuclear nose cone that had to be maybe, I getting rusty probably here, maybe, what was probably 8 to 10 ft.

**WC:** What you did you have to be monitored for radiation exposure?

**JS:** Everybody wear badges when you were working in the maintenance shops and anywhere near these nuclear warheads everybody have radiation badges I personally never saw or heard of anyone where the collar changes where there was something had leak through it or whatever pretty much what I remember.

**WC:** What did a typical work day consist of you doing? You didn't really have the fuel or fuel no fees and unless there was like an exercise going on?

**JS:** Right, it was like normal work day was just like working a regular job was 8 hours a day, it was depending on your shift that you had.

**WC:** Mostly preventative maintenance?

**JS:** For argument sake, the helium, RP1 not so much the RP1 that wouldn't evaporate but on the missile site on the silos and those silos by the way where, I was stationed known Warren Air Force Base that was outside, Shyann, Wyoming we had silos in Colorado, Nebraska and they spread over 100 miles and the idea at Wyoming that time of course was the obvious of Washington had someone in you could take out one side but you're not going to take up one complex when those did have there was a certain amount of evaporation or loss and every so often, I wouldn't say every so often, everyday a call would come in, from a LCO an officer on one of the sites, and it would be we need oxygen because they are getting a reading on their panel that the pressure the amount that they have in storage to load aboard the missile was low so you would have to take a truck over, they go out and service the liquid nitrogen and nitrogen or whatever it might be that was low. The biggest, in my time in the service probably nothing much ever happened and it was pretty quiet. That is obvious but the Cuban Missile Crisis in October of 62' that one was, I think for not only myself but every guy that was at least in sack at that time on these bases we had never seen it go to a yellow alert, everything prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis was just the an IG coming out of Omaha, Nebraska coming into the base. Investigators general, doing some check, everyday got to be on their toes, but he Cuban Missile Crisis it was, when it went into an actual yellow alert which was just before war, that was scary at that time and for me the only other thing that occurred was me and my partner were working in a silo that day but clocks went off up in where there are. The captain or LCO told up to button everything up and come up topside immediately and we did it only took a few minutes to button everything up and we went up the ladder and we went to these big doors that might look like a bank vault you have to get through and when we reported in to him we didn't know what was going on and he said have a seat just relax he says the president has just been shot and that was November 22<sup>nd</sup> of 1963 and then we watched they had a camera in there from Dallas on the television in there. It was the captain, me and my partner I remember a couple of sergeants and their were part of the missile cruiser and we watched what was unfolding in Dallas and that was history and for me at the time that I was in the service and probably about the big two. The biggest things that ever occurred to me as far as being in the cold war at that time.

**WC:** Was there any rumors that maybe the Russians were at all behind the assassination?

**JS:** No, I don't remember that at all, I don't I think just that all I do remember was everybody in the shock of what had happened but I don't recall any rumors and even at

that time it did go to a yellow alert again as I said during the Cuban Missile Crisis the year before but that was quickly back referred by a stand by once they found out what had happened in the hours that happened after of course of President Kennedy was assassinated it was pretty interesting.

**WC:** Now what rank were you discharged?

**JS:** Second

**WC:** What were your living quarters like? Did you have good food?

**JS:** Oh Excellence. In the Air Force at that time at least in the sack it was actually dormitories you had to men rooms in a dormitory and a recreation room had a pool table, television there were two floors the best I can remember I am going to 60 men per floor 2 men per room and then of course they would surround the food it would be set out of ways on the base and food whole breakfast, bunch you know that kind of a thing it was very routine you were just like an outside job you worked 8 to 4 or whatever you shift was. You had two days off or if something happen of course it was very very routine work job or whatever.

**WC:** What did you do during your time off?

**JS:** At the time, I had playing guitar since I was about 14 or 15 and I formed up for a couple of guys I had meant back in Shyann and we had I band going so on Friday and Saturday night in sort enough order we working jobs it was great it was different in the Air Force

**WC:** Did you consider making the Air Force a career?

**JS:** No, only one time did it kinda of take a line but it never happened. I loved Wyoming and even today I can't imagine its changed much but I really loved the country out there and the people were great and I think it ticked my mind that if I could spend another 16 years here I will reenlist but of course that wasn't to be and prior to my leaving the service already everybody was being that they were changing to a minuteman everybody that was going to relist had to go back to tech school while these changes were starting to come in getting rid of the Atlas and moving on to minute man so mow that actually happened it was a humorous thing as we all had those. Once I got out to the permanent base and that was in December of 1961 somewhere shortly after that I found out that me and a couple of the fellows came from Illinois we transferred one of the job duties would have to be use would not you to deliver this fuel if you had to make the trip out to these missiles silos are you going to learn how to drive the tractor and trailer and that was like what an experience. None of us have experience with anything like that so somewhere is in a few weeks whatever it was I know my time came and I had to report down to the baseboard phone call this morning and this particular and I did and this old master sergeant where there will be seven remediate you know he come up to me all right kid have you got any experience driving truck at all, I said well vans I said I worked on doing auto repair before I came in I worked for a truck place for a while learned how to drive a standard shift, he says oh that's good, well I want to show you some stuff and in short enough order, I can remember an old international tractor 15 forwards on it 5 on the main locks and 3 on the underdrive and overdrive and he hooked up a 35ft empty tank on the back and we were off and he said I am show you a few things and get behind the wheel and all these gears and he gave a couple clues and stuff and I going to say in 45 minutes of the sergeant sitting next to me in the tractor riding around some of these

roads just big old spaces he said stop the truck and he says now see that gate he said go out that gate and make a right follow that dirt road you going to come to some old World War 2 barracks and it used to be a training base for World War 2 he said you go down there and you practice all you want you learn how to park this thing, you learn how to shift it and you do anything you have to and don't come back here until you know how to drive this truck and that's how I learned to drive a tractor trailer and sure you make mistakes but you practice and you learn.

**WC:** Now did you stay in contact with anyone you were in the service with?

**JS:** No, once I had left, No

**WC:** Okay, so you didn't attend any reunions?

**JS:** No, nothing I can across the American Legion and VFW but never any ICBM or cold war guys like myself.

**WC:** So you did join a Legion?

**JS:** No, I didn't join and have made no use of any benefits once I get discharge in April 1964 and went to work in Denver for a short while, and then my brother called me up, my older brother from New York City, he said come on back I can get right in working for the city, driving a bus a great job. I came back and the rest is history.

**WC:** Thank you so much for your interview.