

**This interview is being conducted on Monday, November 28, 2016 in the Clubhouse at Carillon, Plainfield, Illinois. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Bill Swain, who served in the Army and is a veteran of the Viet Nam War. Bill learned of the Veterans' History Project through me and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:**

**Bill, when and where were you born?**

I was born January 18, 1940 in Detroit, Michigan.

**What were your parents' occupations? How many siblings do you have?**

My Dad was a steel salesman; my mother was a housewife and I have a twin sister named Linda, who is, incidentally, 4'11" and weighs 81 pounds.

**So you're not identical twins, safe to say. Ha, ha.**

No, we're not.

**Any other sisters or brothers?**

No.

**And what did you do before entering the service?**

I was a college student and worked in the metallurgy lab at Great Lakes Steel in Ecorse, Michigan.

**Is that where you went to school as well?**

No, I went to school in Alma, Michigan. Alma College.

**Did you graduate?**

No, I left after three years because I broke an engagement with a girl and felt terrible about it, but I was just plain too young to get married, and after that, decided to join the military.

**When was that? When did you join the military?**

1962.

**And was the Viet Nam Conflict still going on?**

It was just getting started.

**So you enlisted in the Army in Detroit?**

I did, in Detroit.

**Did you choose that specific branch or did they just put you there?**

They chose me because of high grades on the test – high scores.

**They gave you I Q tests and things like that?**

Yes. In fact I got a call from the recruiter saying, Guess What? Your grades – your scores were high enough so you could get into Army Intelligence. I said what is that? He said I have no idea.

**How old were you at that time? In 1962.**

I was 22.

**Where was your training camp – how did you get to your camp?**

By train to – I think it was St. Louis and then a bus – I went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

**What were your early days of basic training like?**

Kind of fascinating. I remember the first day after I had finished in a group of guys that were house painters – until our class opened up – I remember the Sergeant coming through and saying I'm gonna show you how to make a bed. And if you can't bounce a quarter on it, I'm going to tear them up. So I heard him coming down the hall and every single bed he just turned upside down. And he got into my room and he flipped it on my bed and it bounced up about 15-18 inches, and he said, "Where'd you learn to do that?" And I said, "By watching you, sir." And he said, "That's B S isn't it?" And I said, "Yes, pretty much."

And I had gone to a military school – Culver Military Academy in Indiana – so I used to make my bed that way every day. And when I told him that, he said, "The Company Commander's gonna love you because he doesn't know how to do any of this stuff. You'll be his aide." So I became Platoon Sergeant.

**In basic training?**

Yeah, yeah.

**Describe a typical day in basic training.**

In basic training we got up at about 4:30 for reveille, had breakfast and, depending on what phase we were in, we might march 12 miles to the firing range; we might just have classes – it varied, at different times.

**So you had both physical routines and classroom teaching?**

We had calisthenics every day.

**And then classroom teaching?**

Yes, it had nothing to do with intelligence. A lot of the guys there had none.

**Ha, ha. How long did you stay in basic training?**

It was 8 weeks and I was there about 12 weeks.

**Did you go on to have specialized training?**

I went to Fort Devens, Massachusetts for Intelligence Training.

**And how long did that last?**

It seemed to me that was about 4 or 5 months. It was mostly the different things we had to do in code breaking.

**So is that what you were going to be into – code breaking?**

Yes.

**That was your main duty?**

Yes. I was part of a group that did that.

**So five months – where did you live during those months? Were you actually on a base living in barracks?**

Yeah, I was in Fort Devens, Massachusetts - yeah, it was a barracks, kind of, and we had – everything was not top secret yet because few if any of us had cleared for top secret yet; that all happened while we were there. In other words, we would not have gone on beyond that had we not been cleared.

**Right. How large was your class? Were they all doing the same thing, basically?**

Different aspects of it, yes. No, individual classes were not big. ASA was not big. ASA stands for Army Security Agency.

**How did you adapt to military life after 5-7 months – the physical regimen, the barracks, the food – how did you adapt?**

Honestly, it was pretty easy because I'd gone to military school.

**How long were you in that military school?**

Two and one-half years; I graduated.

**And did you like it?**

I did. They had every imaginable sport in the world and I was involved in lots of sports – and you could be an absolute idiot and you couldn't help but learn there. We had mostly doctors for professors in high school; it was a unique and fun thing.

**Was the Viet Nam War ramping up or coming down or what – during your time in service?**

It was ramping up. It went on another 7 or 8 years.

**Yeah, it went on till '67 or '68.**

Longer than that.

**After five months or so you graduated from school.**

Yes.

**And where did you serve? What did they do with you next?**

I had my marching orders to go to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. It was quite unique; I believe there were 32,000 Airmen and there were about 220 of us Army Security Agency people in a solid brick building, no windows, with barbed wire around it.

**Really! On the base –**

Yes. It was always kind of interesting to me because the 32,000 people on the base didn't know what we did except that it was Top Secret. So they left us alone.

**Oh, okay. But you mingled with them – isn't that an Air Force Base? You were part of the Air Force as an Army person?**

No, no. It was a place that we found – that the Army found that they could set up a building which would house a Security Agency – had nothing to do with the Air Force.

**So, did you have no interaction with the Air Force?**

No.

**You were like a unit of your own men.**

Yes.

**How did you get to Clark Air Force Base – details of your trip abroad.**

I flew there from Boston to San Francisco to Clark Air Base in the Philippines with SAT – Southern Air Transport, which only handled GIs.

**Is that like the Military Air Transport Service – earlier version? MATS?**

Yes – it was their source of airplanes. They had stewardesses and all that sort of thing.

**So you went directly there.**

Yes.

**So this is the main job you did during your entire time in the service –**

Eighteen months.

**And the whole 18 months you were stationed in this one building?**

Uh, yeah, stationed at Clark Air Base, yeah. I went various places. I went to Seoul, Korea and visited our operation there, just because I could. And I traveled – I went to Guam, various places, because I wanted to see them.

**Was that as part of your military or just on your own on your off days?**

Just on my own with military flights.

**Like an R & R?**

Yeah, they were hops.

**What did your duty consist of – it's not top secret any more – today, can you talk about what you did then?**

When we were assigned there we each had different jobs. I wanted to be a linguist and I never found out why I wasn't because I got grades higher than some of them who did get it – but mostly because I wanted to go to San Francisco to study language. But I was a machine operator; I would run the computers that would try to unscramble the code, and that sort of thing, and that's generally what I did the entire time. The information would come in, it was from intercepted code from the Vietnamese. And it would be sent to us and our job was to decode it – decipher it – whatever you want to call it. And there were different jobs within this dull, grey building. The final ones were the ones that put it all together and came up with the final information. And it was a little teeny bit like, uh, what's the game they play where they spin the wheel –

**Wheel of Fortune?**

I remember one of the things that we did, the very basic thing was – when they give the letters that are most prominent, as they do in Wheel of Fortune, we started by doing the same thing. Now they would have been letters that were most prominent in the Vietnamese language, --

**Oh, right.**

but that was a quick way to look and see if it was a real simple code.

**Did you have to learn Vietnamese?**

No, no, we had – that would have been absolutely worthless for anything else. So I wasn't too upset that I didn't go to language school. But, anyway, it was set up beautifully by the military and by the government, so that nobody by themselves was worth stealing and taking to Russia or to Vietnam or anything else.

**So no one knew the entire sequence –**

No, nobody knew enough, really.

**You all knew bits and pieces.**

Bits and pieces, yeah.

**That's generally how it works.**

Yeah. And truthfully, I never knew what the other guys were doing.

**You had your own job to do.**

They had their own jobs and they were sworn to secrecy.

**Did you have like regular shifts, 9 to 5, or 24-hour a day shifts – how did that work**

Mostly days.

**So it was like a 9 to 5 job really –**

Yeah.

**So you really did not see combat of any kind?**

No, we were not allowed to be in a combat zone.

**So you never witnessed destruction or anything else like that?**

No.

**How about friendships formed and camaraderie of service –**

I had a lot of really, really great friendships because you spend so much time with the guys – kind of an interesting story – a friend of mine, also named Bill from Boston and I went to a town in the Philippines called Baggio – which was a resort town in the mountains. And you would go from 95 degrees and 95 humidity, to 72 degrees and relatively dry – the fun about that was the natives wore overcoats in 72 degrees; for them, that was cold.

**Really.**

I played golf there with my friend from Boston one time and we got paired up with, yes, John Derek –

**Really – they were there for business or just –**

They were there because he was married to Ursula Andress and she was doing a nude layout for Playboy.

**Wow – they were doing it there in the Philippines?**

In Poczinan (phonetic) Falls – I remember seeing it in Playboy. What was so funny was – he kept telling me they were having a dinner and a big deal to meet Ursula Andress that night for the Press. And I would say I'd sure like to meet Ursula. And John Derek was nice enough to say, I thought you would. And that's all he ever said. So consequently, I didn't meet Ursula Andress, but my heart was in it.

**I'll bet.**

And he was the strangest guy in the world. To play golf he wore an all gray suede suit with the leather thongs around the top, open so he showed the hair on his chest, and he had on leather boots – suede leather boots.

**Wow!**

And he was one strange guy who just couldn't get enough of himself.

**He was very good looking; I remember him well.**

**Okay, that was interesting.**

That was fun.

**Any other stories from the Philippines? That you can talk about?**

I met a girl who worked for SAT – a Japanese girl, her name was Seiko Suzuki – and we weren't allowed to have any kind of relationships with foreign nationals – but I met her and she would come in about once a month. And we had a little thing going and we went to Baguio together, and I got to see a little bit of World War II there. She was Japanese and we stopped at a small village, the bus stopped – and the entire village came out and just stood and looked at her and kept saying NIPPONGO – NIPPONGO

**Because she was Japanese.**

And she turned to me and said, "They don't understand why I look like them but I'm so white." And I said, "No, they do understand who you are." And it's embarrassing, frankly, but they did, and – it had been a lot of years – but some of them never forgot the war. Anyway, what that led into was, about a month after that I went to Japan to see Seiko. I went to Tokyo, and the morning I got up there, I had to go to the Tokyo Hilton to meet her. She was in a wedding ceremony, so she said I'll be up as soon as I

can. So that was about ten o'clock in the morning and the wedding was gonna last till around noon, so I walked out to have a cigarette, and as I walked out a huge group of photographers and people came walking in, right at me, as I was going toward them, and it was Gina Lollabriggida –

**Really!**

And I softly bumped into her by mistake, I couldn't get out of the way – they were having an Italian Film Festival – and so somewhere in Japan the next day I was in the newspaper somewhere because all these flashbulbs were going off – and I turned around to tell her I was available and – it was too late! Ha, ha.

**Ha, ha, your 15 minutes of fame –**

It was about 15 seconds of fame, but that was fun, ha, ha.

**That's something to see the movie stars up close.**

Yeah, that really was.

**That's interesting.**

Yeah. Oh, and the last – there's one more story – if I can think of her name. My parents met me in San Francisco in the Fairmont Hotel to drive me back to Detroit. Ann Margaret was there making a film at the Fairmont Hotel with Van Heflin. And I was having a sundae or a soda with my parents. They had this soda shop at the Fairmont Hotel. And I said I'll be right back I'm gonna go up to the room – and I turned the corner and ran right into Ann Margaret and knocked her sun glasses off – just knocked her back – and she bent over very hurriedly and put the sun glasses on, looked around, and took off. And I said, "Ann, don't you want my number?"

**Ha, ha.**

Pretty much the same result as with Gina Lollabrigida –

**Well, you're knocking these women over –**

Well, yeah, that was as much my fault as it was hers – so yeah, I had a lot of –

**A lot of run-ins –**

Under rather strange circumstances. And that's kind of the end of all the excitement.

**How about communications from home when you were in the Philippines?**

**How were they?**



I would get a letter from my Mom, usually about every two weeks or something like that.

**Were you engaged back home or anything like that before you went into the service – oh, you left to go to the service because of that.**

Yes, yeah. No, I wasn't engaged.

**So you had no real ties back home except your parents.**

**How long would you say it took a letter, regular postage, to get to you?**

**From the United States?**

A week to ten days.

**That's not unusual.**

And it didn't matter because time didn't mean anything.

**What were your other recreational or off-duty pursuits – if you weren't going out –**

**I mean did you play cards, or baseball or anything –**

I played softball.

**Regular sports-type activities.**

Yeah, I was gonna go out for the football team and discovered that they were recruited by the head of the ASA there – and a group of 220 soldiers had a football team with an average line of 270-pounders and they won the All Pacific Championship.

**Really?**

And that's what you can do when you can recruit whoever you want.

**Yeah!**

And I figured that if I went out for them I would be taken home in a crate!

**Right!**

So I just watched.

**So you played softball.**

Yeah.

**How about any kind of bowling – or stuff like that?**

**Did they play soccer back then? They didn't play soccer –**

Never seen a soccer game in my life, no. One of my best friends, Hector Aponte, was a – taught soccer there. He was from Hell's Kitchen in New York and he was Puerto Rican, and I never went over to watch him teach, so no, I had never seen one. My son started at age six and that was the first time I ever saw one.

**Yeah, so your tour of duty – your time was up –**

Yeah, it was 18 months and I was there 17 – I took a ship back, which got me out a month early rather than flying back.

**Do you remember if it was a liberty ship?**

It was a liberty ship and I was in charge of the ship's library – and for the greatest use of a ship that you've ever heard of, there were 240 people on it and the ship during war time, which it was, would hold 10,000.

**My God!**

So they spent whatever money it cost to send it back to San Francisco --

**For 240 guys –**

That was for the first quarter of it. We picked up some guys in Guam, or something like that – we picked up another 200 or 300, but – it was long and boring. I got all the food I wanted because they were set up to feed thousands.

**How was the crossing - did you run into any severe weather or anything?**

No, the only tough part was when they had a drill for runaway rudder – when they couldn't control the rudder – and the ship would go back and forth and yaw and pitch – and so for 15-20 minutes you were kind of green; but you got over that pretty quick.

**Other than that it was okay?**

Yeah.

**So you're done now – any other stories from the Philippines that you care to relate – or did you travel other places like Tokyo and Seoul, Korea –**

I went to Seoul, Korea and Taiwan – Taipei and again visited the ASA Group there. And that was all kind of interesting. I felt kind of bad; I came back from Taiwan to Clark in a Navy airplane and it was filled with GIs who were wounded. And I was sitting there reading MAD Comics – and just feeling kind of out of place.

**Yes.**

But they were all happy to be alive and that sort of thing.

**And out of the battlefield.**

And I remember the pilot coming in and saying do you have any interest in airplanes? And I said "Yes, I love 'em." And he said, "Well, come on up." When we got to the front, the two guys, the flight engineer and the copilot were asleep. And I said, "Who's

flying this thing?” And he said , “Well, right now, an autopilot.” He said, “Guys, wake up, for heaven’s sake, we’ve got a guest.” So that was kind of fun. We only flew about 150-200 feet over the ocean –

**Oh, wow! Really!**

For a long part of it – they had bad weather up above.

**Oh, I was wondering, why would they do that -- to conserve gas or something?**

No, just because they had to.

**So you took the liberty ship home; that dropped you off where?**

San Francisco.

**And your parents were there to pick you up?**

Yes.

**So how was your readjustment to civilian life?**

It wasn’t difficult; it really wasn’t. I didn’t see the people that were parading against the war in Vietnam – I was too early for that. But I would have been mad, had I seen it.

**Yeah! That was terrible.**

I thought that was ridiculous.

**So you went back to Detroit?**

Went back to Detroit then I was re-stationed at the National Security Agency.

**As a part of your service?**

Yeah. NSA.

**Wait a minute – were you discharged?**

No.

**Oh, you were still in the service.**

Yeah, I still had six or seven months to go.

**Was that in Detroit?**

No, that’s when I went to Washington, D.C. – National Security Agency.

**Well, what did you do when you got home to Detroit?**

Oh, I spent a week or ten days at home, acclimating myself and then I was sent back to National Security Agency.

**So your tour of duty – your military service was not over?**

No, no, I had 6 or 7 months to go.

**So you went to NSA in Washington, D.C.**

Yeah, which was really quite a place – and it was huge, absolutely huge. And of course now they're getting articles about it because they're listening to people talking all over the world, and that sort of thing.

**Oh, yeah.**

And they could do it then, but – I'd walk into the room where I worked, and you were on a suspended floor because there were cables under the entire thing. And just as a guess, there were probably a thousand computers in there. And had you designed one at that time, I'm sure the government would have bought it, or two or three. But when you walked in everything you looked at was surrounded by a black curtain and that's because we were top secret – we were cleared for Top Secret – but it was on a "need to know" basis. So that's why everything was surrounded by a black curtain.

**We didn't talk about your medals, honors or awards – what was your rank when you were in the Philippines?**

E-5.

**That was your highest rank – when did you achieve that? You didn't go in an E-5?**

No, but I was a E-5 for quite awhile. When I got there I was an E-3 and then very quickly was made an E-4. And then I was an E-5 for several months – which would be a Sergeant – in my case it was an E-5 Specialist.

**What was your duty at NSA? Same thing – just decoding messages?**

More of the same thing.

**Where did you live in DC?**

In a nice barracks – no fault of the Army's, but I used to eat next door at the Naval Intelligence Group because the food was so much better. And one of my buddies was in the Naval Intelligence. Ha, ha.

**Oh, ha, ha.**

That's just because I could.

**Yeah, uh-huh! So you actually were discharged from the NSA, Right?**

That's right.

**And what year was that?**

1965, July 27<sup>th</sup>.

**So you spent three years in the service?**

Yes.

**Have you had contact with fellow veterans over the years?**

If I did it was the first month –

**So you didn't continue –**

No, because none of them lived anywhere near me.

**Are you a member of any veterans organizations today?**

No.

**We have a VFW Post here in Carillon.**

Yeah, and I might join them. I never think about it because it never comes to mind.

**Jim Singler is the Commander.**

I was unable to spend any time in the Reserves because there was no Intelligence Group anywhere near Detroit.

**Oh.**

Probably within 400 or 500 miles. So I was a veteran –

**So you were totally discharged.**

Yes.

**How did your military experience affect your life?**

Oh, it made me grow up, I think. You got to see the top and the bottom of humanity. If I had a complaint about the Philippines it was that there was no middle class. They were either rich or poor, the poor got treated horribly – just plain horribly – and of course, all the Filipinos that worked on the base were poor. And when they left the base they were just treated badly. And I never liked that; never could understand it.

**Yeah. So how about life lessons learned from the military –**

No, I didn't like part of the experience in the Philippines. I'm very, very happy that I did what I did. I would have never not gone in the military. I grew up and that was part of my life; it was going to be –

**Was your father in the service?**

No, he went down and was accepted and his boss wrote a letter saying he shouldn't be because he sold steel to the military.

**Oh.**

And my uncle, his brother, was in the steel business and he was in the Army. So, anyways – yeah, there was some disappointment because I always wanted to be a pilot.

**Why didn't you go into the Air Force?**

I had failed the depth perception test in the Navy – then I passed in the Air Force, but there were no openings, so they said go in as an enlisted man and we'll bring you out to fly. And somebody said, "I wouldn't do that; they may never pull you out."

**Oh.**

And I didn't want to go in for four years just to walk around – and my Mom got a letter telling me to report to Florida after I was in the military – for the Air Force –

**Oh, and you would have probably got to fly then – learn to fly.**

Yeah. Oh, and while I was at Clark on my own, I took the test for helicopter pilot. And I did it unbeknownst to the Commander in our Group, and I passed the test and Then I sat before a Board. And then got to take an Orientation Flight, which in this case was with an Air Force helicopter – and waited till they called me and nothing happened. So I went to the Company Commander and said I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was doing this, and he said well, I can tell you why you're not going – and I said Why? He said well, they spent \$75,000 to get you your clearance. I could have told you then you're never going to get out of this.

**Oh, really!**

Yeah, so, I did it all and by that time they were shooting so many helicopters down I decided maybe it's better to forget about that.

**Yeah. Right. Well, you made it through. You did your duty and served your time and everything was fine. Is there anything else that you wish to add to the story?**

Well, it was just a big eye opener. The military is so massive and so huge and yet you all share a lot in common.

**Yes.**

When I was in basic training, half the guys in basic in Fort Leonard Wood were going into Army Intelligence and frankly half of them had none.

**Ha, ha.**

They really didn't.

**Well, they probably were weeded out then, wouldn't you say; they probably didn't make it through as far as you did.**

I don't know if it had something to do with the fact that they just needed a lot of people, but there were several guys in our basic training company that I know never made it past basic training.

**That happens too.**

One of them had epilepsy – and he had an epileptic fit in front of the company and one of the Sergeants kicked him. Now, that's not how you handle somebody with epilepsy. But his answer to him was, "Have it on your own time."

**Oh, God!**

So, that was some of the downside, but all in all it was an experience that I wanted to have and I did.

**Well, that's great; that's great that you did – so I want to thank you for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.**

My pleasure; thanks for interviewing me.

**This is Fran Prokop again; we are continuing with the interview because I neglected to ask Bill Swain some final questions about his return from service.**

**So, Bill, how did you get discharged from the NSA in Washington, D.C.**

There was nothing; I just went home. I couldn't be in a Reserve Unit because there was none within 300 miles of where I lived, so I just went home and almost immediately went to work for Great Lakes Steel again.

**Was this the company that you left when you entered the service?**

When I was going to college.

**So did they hold the job for you?**

No, they just gave me another job.

**So how long did you stay there?**

I was there a year and a half; they were gonna go on strike and my Dad had just bought stock in Emery Air Freight and he said why don't you try the air freight business.

I went to Emery; became an air freight salesman and essentially became a manager, moved to Houston; from Houston moved to Chicago; from Chicago moved to Minneapolis, moved back to Chicago – and Chicago I was there for a number of years and ultimately, the last two companies I was with, I was the international sales manager and it was really a fascinating job. I went overseas probably 30, 33 times – something like that –

**Really!**

And what made it doubly interesting, I'm a nut for airplanes, and if we could fly wherever I was going in a freighter – the freighters, of course, carried our freight, I would sit in the cockpit.

**Air cargo plane, you mean?**

Yeah, and I would be in there with just the pilot and copilot, and I would sit in there and they frequently would let me fly, which was always fun. Flying at two in the morning is a little boring but I still got a kick out of it. So I've been all over the world as a result of what I did for a living, and can truthfully say that I've been to -- from Israel to Australia – and all over Europe.

**Wonderful! You had a very interesting life.**

It was a fascinating ending.

**Let me ask you this – did you ever use the G I bill or go back to college? Did you ever get your college degree?**

I did not, probably because most people thought I had it.

**And it wasn't asked – I mean, you're a smart guy and you could – you don't have to have it to advance in your position.**

In fact I was offered a job by Great Lakes Steel, to get my Master's Degree in Metallurgy; they were a little bit shocked when I told them my major was English. They said well, then, forget that, ha. Ha.

**Ha, ha.**

And I never told them I was in Metallurgy; I worked there through college and then gone back for it; it really prepared me for what I did. I was a trouble shooter. I'd go on the road, places they were having trouble, General Motors for instance, if they were



stamping fenders and they'd split – the steel would split someplace -- I would have to go in and see why it was splitting; is there something they could do to remedy the situation or was it our fault. And almost always I had to say that they were right, because they were huge accounts, and we're sorry – so that was kind of enjoyable.

**Along the way, I know you're a married man today, when did you get married – when you were in Detroit – what year?**

Got married in Detroit, a little over 50 years ago –

**When was that – what year?**

Well, this is '16 – so that was '66.

**You got married while you were at Great Lakes Steel?**

Yes, yes in 1966.

**And your wife has traveled with you through all the different homes you lived in.**

Oh, yes, yes. The job took me to Houston, to Chicago, to Minneapolis and back to Chicago, so we went to some interesting places. Houston is probably the worst place I've been in my life; it was typically 100 degrees and 100% humidity, just like Southeast Asia was –

**Yeah, yeah**

Except there was no war going on.

**Okay, Bill, I think that will sum it up; very interesting and I'm glad that we had this little extra chat, so again I thank you very much for the interview.**

It was fun – thank you!

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