

This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, June 26, 2018, at the Carillon Clubhouse in Plainfield, Illinois. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Frank H. Michalek, who joined the United States Marines and served after the Korean Conflict and before the Viet Nam War, from 1957 to 1959. Mr. Michalek heard 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:

Frank, when and where were you born?

I was born in Chicago (Illinois) on April 20, 1934, in my father and mother's home --

And you said by a midwife.

By a midwife, yes. 2634 Luther, on the south side, a few blocks from Cook County Jail.

I never heard of that street.

It was a short street – about a block long – and I was the last of six boys.

What were your parents' occupations?

My mother was a housewife and my father was a brewer of beer.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

No sisters, but five brothers.

Wow! And where were you in that order?

I was the last of the Michaleks – I was the sixth born.

Do you know if your older brothers served in the military?

All of them.

During World War II?

Two – yes, the four of them besides me were in the Second World War.

What branch were they?

Two were Marines and two were Army.

So, when you went into the service, was there any reason why you picked the Marine Corps?

Yeah, because the two Marines took me to the depot.

Ha, ha, okay –

Yeah, they grabbed me by my arms and I had no choice.

How did you enter the service – drafted or enlisted?

I was drafted.

Oh, you were drafted.

Yes, I had a deferment for four years while I was attending Chicago City College – and that was a critical occupation, to get teachers, so they wouldn't draft me from '52 to '56 – and then after I graduated college, then I was drafted by the U.S. Army –

Drafted by the Army, okay, and --

But my brothers took me to the Marine Corps Recruiting Station and the Marines said we will put you in the Reserves and notify the Army. And you will go when ever you're ready.

So when did you go?

I went March 24th, 1957, for a two-year enlistment.

Oh, wow, two years only?

Yeah, just – only, yeah. The Marines usually go four.

Right, right. So your brothers took you there –

Yeah, and I was intimidated.

How was your departure for training camp – and where did you go actually?

I went to Parris Island (S.C.) for my –what they call boot camp – for ten weeks, and then I went --

Wait -- How did you adapt to military life – training –

Very rigorous, but I was a member of Sokol, and they trained me and prepared me for active military.

Sokol is an active gymnastics association in Berwyn, IL

Yes. Gymnastics.

My daughter belonged to it.

I was really well-prepared.

She loved it. So you were able to do all the things –

Oh, yes –

Without too much effort.

Not much effort – obstacle course, everything, hikes.

Tell me a little bit about it. What did basic training consist of?

Basic training was physical training, marching along, marching maneuvers –

How many miles – long hikes?

Twelve miles.

12 mile hike with full gear –

Yes, with backpacks and rifle; and it was usually up or down, hill trail or sometimes a flat one.

So how did you adapt to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks, social life, the food – the whole thing.

It was challenging but very good discipline for me and matured me very rapidly.

How old were you when you went in?

22.

You were a little bit older than the average trainee –

My sergeants were 22. And I was just a PFC – private then I got PFC out of boot camp.

So where did you go after boot camp?

I went to Camp Geiger, which was also located on the Camp Le Jeune site, and Camp Geiger was like about nine months of basic training, infantry – my MOS was infantry.

That stands for?

Military Occupational Specialty.

Did you receive any specialized training?

Because I was a college graduate, a top sergeant, a master Sergeant recruited me because he wanted somebody with some degree to work in the post office, but I refused. I asked to be in the 155 Howitzer, to go on Mediterranean Cruise – I wanted to get out of the country and see the world.

Right. So, while you were in Camp Geiger for nine months, did you have classroom teaching – besides calisthenics?

Yeah, I did – I did have military subjects, like weapons and close combat and then we did a lot of maneuvers under barbed wire – lost of landings and maneuvers – different maneuvers where we were part of an assault team and did various type of challenging exercises.

So, what happened after the nine months were up at Camp Geiger?

I was on leave to go home for a furlough, my first furlough, and the sergeant that asked me to go to the post office, he said I had a choice, but I didn't. When I got back from leave I was put right in the post office – because he said he needed somebody intelligent and efficient and since I had a college education he didn't have to train somebody – so that was it.

Was that the base post office?

Yes, it was the Camp Lejeune Base Post Office.

What were your duties there?

I did filing of mail, delivery of mail into Jacksonville. I had to take confidential and secret mail.

Was Jacksonville a town in Missouri?

Jacksonville, North Carolina. While I was on duty in the post office, a lot of orders used to come through that I could look at and scrutinize, and there was a need for lifeguards on Angelo Beach. And from college I had a background in water safety instruction, life saving, so I had all the qualifications for this duty, and I applied for it, but my sergeant in the post office said no.

Wow!

And I said “Could I go talk to the Captain?” And he said no, so I went to see the Captain without permission.

I don't blame you.

And the Captain, he allowed me to speak with him, even though I told him I was there without permission, and I told him the situation, that I had requested to go TAD – temporary attachment duty – to Angelo Beach and was denied. So the Captain overruled the Master Sergeant and sent me. He was very good.

How much time did you spend at the post office?

Oh, probably three months.

Where is Angelo Beach?

Camp Lejeune.

In Camp Lejeune?

Yes, it's the largest amphibious base in America – Camp Lejeune.

Am I pronouncing that right – Angelo Beach?

Oh, Onslow – O-N-S-L-O-W Beach.

I thought you were saying Angelo Beach. That is on the grounds –

Right on the Atlantic Ocean.

On the Atlantic Ocean on the grounds of Camp Lejeune.

Yes, right on the grounds of Camp Lejeune. All of the training exercises for landing Marines were conducted at Camp Lejeune. It was the largest amphibious base in America, probably.

So you got transferred there and I'm sure your sergeant wasn't happy.

No, he wasn't. There was about 28 or 30 of us that were lifeguards, and we patrolled four beaches. It was the beach for officers, a beach for staff officers, a beach for enlisted personnel and then a beach for civilian employees.

So it was strictly a military beach; regular residents couldn't go on it – no residents allowed?

No, just civilian employees that worked there, like teachers and that, they had their own beach.

How long did you stay at the lifeguard position?

I stayed two summers – always the warm months when the beaches were open. They closed and secured them for the cold months.

So you were a lifeguard temporarily during the summer months?

Yes, probably six months.

And what happened afterwards?

It was a short street – about a block long –

Then I'd go back in the post office.

So it was just – he knew you were coming back.

Yeah, but he didn't like me leaving, yeah.

So you returned to the post office.

Yes. In addition to guarding the beaches, we guarded the amphibious landings to make sure that nothing went wrong, there were no accidents and nobody drowned.

When you were a lifeguard, what were your duty hours?

We went in the morning, all 30 of us, out in the ocean, in an amphibious duck and we were taken out one mile and we had to swim back a mile every morning.

That was your exercise?

That was our warm-up and everybody had to do that. Then there was two shifts – like the morning, shift and the afternoon shift; everybody worked four hours minimum. Usually we encountered some jellyfish and sometimes porpoise on the swim back, but not sharks too much – not at all.

Were there other boats with you on the swim back –

Just one –

The 30 men were swimming and just one boat alongside ?

Yeah, we'd jump in and they'd be behind us.

In case someone got into trouble or something –

Yeah, sometimes you got stung by a jellyfish –

Yeah, not fun.

But we stayed away from them; they were always in schools, too.

Oh, really?

Yeah, and then we'd exercise; we'd run on the beach. That was part of the training and conditioning. Then we would do regular calisthenics – it was a good two-hour warm-up.

So you had specific hours – what did you do after hours? Were you free to be on your own or did you have to stay on the base?

We stayed on the base because we had all meals and quarters on the beach.

Oh, so you had separate quarters.

Detached, yes, we had our own barracks.

When you were at the post office did you have regular hours there too?

Yes.

What were they?

The hours were usually longer – it would be from 6 to 8 hours per day.

What about after hours – recreational pursuits when you were off duty?

Off duty – we had a lot of facilities at Camp Lejeune – it's so large – there's thousands and thousands – but I didn't even know it, at the time I was there, exactly, was the water contamination – I didn't know it.

How did you find out?

I just found it out in the last ten years from the V A.

Oh, you never knew it when you were there.

I never knew it; they never told us. Nobody ever told us.

Did you spend your entire two years in North Carolina?

Yes.

And what was the highest rank that you achieved?

I got to – it would be called, I think it was S-3 – it was like – well, maybe 4 – it was Lance Corporal. It was a new rank that was brought to fruition – it was like two stripes on top and one on the bottom.

Okay. Almost like a sergeant –

Yeah, it was something new.

How about friendships formed during service –

Oh, I had a lot of friendships – ion the barracks when you live together for a year or two –

How did you like barrack-life, now that you mentioned it?

It was good; it was safe, the only time once some guy brought in these body – they were called crabs and he had them and we all got it. It just jumped from bed to bed.

Oh, yeah, geez –

So we had to get treatment for that. It was not body lice, but it was something like that.

We didn't ever know who really brought them in there.

Yeah, if one person has them and you've got 30 bunks or whatever –

Yeah, they're all on the ground level –

How was the weather out there – very hot?

It was very beautiful all year round; in the summer it was hot, kinda like Florida.

Steamy weather.

Yes, and we were not too far from Florida – just a hop, skip and jump away.

Yes, it's not that far away. How did you stay in touch with family and friends – by telephone, by letter?

Yes, letters, phone and then furlough.

Did you get furloughs often?

Two in the two-year period; one each year.

Oh, that's all? Was it a 30-day furlough?

Yes, 30-day.

And you were able to go home?

Yes, I'd go to Chicago. But I took small trips on weekends too. Marines that had closer homes – like Richmond – I developed a friendship with one Marine and he always took me to Richmond. And then I did little longer trips when I had four days to go to Massachusetts – there's always a Marine that has a sister and then the sister would come and visit him – and then she'd invite you to go – and then if we were close by in Wilmington, it seemed that the Marines attracted girls like –

Oh, yeah, nice uniform. Ha, ha.

It was the only time in my life, I think, that I ever was – that a girl picked me up. She had a beautiful convertible – wow!

Lucky guy!

Yes.

You never went overseas?

No, I wanted to but the Master Sergeant overruled my choice – and that's why the Captain of the post office said you've had some bad – and we don't want it to be all bad, so he said if you want to go temporary attachment to Onslow Beach, I will give you that. I'll grant you that permission.

That was nice.

He was very nice.

You'd be miserable there the whole time if you couldn't get anything that you wanted.

There's two kinds of officers – in the Marine Corps, that I got to meet. Some are the college graduates; they're called the 90-day wonders. And they're good, they're intelligent but they're not very militaristically sharp. And then you have the enlisted men who stay in for careers, and they just accelerate as outstanding – so they are

recommended for Commission. So they got to Quantico and they get officer's training. And then they come back and become officers, and that's what the Captain was. He was referred by his superiors to go to officer's school – so I kinda gravitated to the ones that were experienced Marines that became officers. They were just outstanding leaders. And the college guys weren't bad, but they were green behind the ears. And if they go to war it was very difficult for them to be in combat. But, like my brother, who was in the Second World War, he was in Iwo Jima and Tarawa and all those – and he was offered to get a field commission, they offered it because he had a high rank – he was like a tech sergeant – and they offered him a commission, but he refused to take it – because the enemy was always shooting at lieutenants. They were the first ones they always wanted to kill.

So, you were in from '57 to '59 – when you got out did you use the G.I. Bill?

Yes.

Oh, you did.

I did get my Masters and Ph.D. with the G.I. Bill.

In what field?

In Physical Education.

In P.E. for Masters –

Yeah, I had all three degrees – Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D.

Well, Bachelor's was Teaching, right?

Yes. All were teaching.

How about the Ph.D.?

It was Administration and Psychology and Health – I became a Health Educator in Chicago City College. That was it.

Have you had contact with fellow veterans over the years?

I've tried to reach some of them; it's very difficult, because they were spread out. I did have some correspondence with one in Alabama and one in Oregon.

But you never got together physically with them – any reunions?

Not after I retired. No. No.

Some branches of service – Navy guys – do have reunions – they meet year after year in different states.

If I was in long enough I would have had a strong attachment, but – those weren't offered to me because I wasn't in Korea, I wasn't in Viet Nam, I wasn't in the Second World War.

So, my brother, the one still living, may go to the Honor Guard thing –

Oh, the Honor America Flight?

Yeah, cause I would like to go with him as his – whatever you call them –

Caretaker?

Caretaker, yes.

They have young servicemen and women take care of them.

He's 90 already.

Wow. Would he want to do an interview?

Yes. He lived in Glen Ellyn but his wife died and he moved to Rolla, Missouri.

Oh, he's not here – too bad. I would like to interview him.

Yeah, if he comes to Chicago I'll just give you a call.

Yes. If you know in advance that he's coming here, call me and maybe we can set up something.

Yeah, he's -- he was in the tail end of the Second World War.

Good; that would be great.

I can do that. Sure.

Good. Are you a member of any Veterans' Organizations?

Yes, I'm American Legion – I couldn't really be in Veterans – because that was foreign wars.

Exactly. So you don't belong to the Post here at Carillon?

I am in one in Michigan.

How did your military experience affect your life?

I believe that it had profound effect in that we were taught how to protect each other, to work as a team to achieve our missions. And we were very well prepared physically. It was very challenging and if you didn't succeed in achieving the physical fitness you needed, usually you were eliminated, you know, for some reason – not dishonorably but more like a physical discharge. So it was challenging. And I think it was to prepare us for war.

Oh, I'm sure.

To see if we could carry out our duties.

So what are the life lessons you learned from military service?

Discipline –

Yeah, a lot of guys say that.

Leadership –

Good qualities –

And the activity became a philosophical statement in my life because I advocate physical education as an instructor that activity is life and where there is no activity, the conclusion I stated is there is no life. That is a simple philosophical statement.

That's true.

And then I was always trained in Sokol that physical fitness through gymnastics – it had a profound effect on me – to be physically fit. In fact I did it all my life and ten years ago – in 2010 I set a World Record at the World Games in St. George, Utah – I was very good in standing long jump and I set a world record at the age of 71 –

Well, congratulations, good for you!

I went 7'11" – almost eight feet – so it lasted about five years. And I had never been in college track or high school.

Are you active here in Carillon. Frank lives in Carillon and we have many activities here but I never see him in ping pong.

I used to be in ping pong 20 years ago.

Well, you should come to our practice.

Well, I may start back because now I'm loose – I'm widowed –

You didn't talk about your marriage. Were you married while you were in the service?

No. I got married in '63.

After you left service --

Married in '63 and had three children – who all participated in Sokol and became very good athletes. We advocated participation in high school sports. They're all now old – I have seven grandchildren.

Great for you –well, you did your duty to yourself and our country.

My wife was – she worked a little here and there – but basically I always called her the "domestic goddess" –

Ha, ha, ha – like Oprah.

Yeah, domestic goddess. And raising children is a challenge, so I respected her so much – that’s a job, to raise kids – I tried to help her.

I’m glad that you appreciated her while she was alive.

Oh, yes.

Good for you. I think I’m finished. Is there anything else that you wish to add to the story?

No. I think the fitness part of my military gave me extended longevity in my life – being physically fit allowed me to go 12 bonus years beyond my life expectancy. When I was born the life expectancy for me was 72, and I’m now 84 and soon to be 85. So, I’ve outlived my band – I was in a band for 40 years.

You didn’t mention that. What instrument did you play?

Drums; and we were together for 40 years. So, I’m the only one – we’d always try to guess who’s gonna be the lone survivor – it’s terrible to be the lone survivor.

Don’t go there. We thank our lucky stars that we live here in Carillon and we enjoy a healthy and a good life here.

Oh, yes.

Well, thank you very much, Frank, for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

Thank you, my dear.

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