

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, May 22, 2025 at the home of Charles A. Major. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Charlie, who served in the U.S. Army Reserve for over 22 years, with three breaks in service, all of which he will explain in his oral history. Charlies 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:

Charlie, when and where were you born?

Des Moines, Iowa – 7-17-49.

What were your parents' occupations?

My Dad was a purchasing agent at the VA, primarily Des Moines, and once in West Virginia. My Mom was a teacher, she was a typing teacher, a shorthand teacher. She taught in school and junior college – and my Dad worked in the VA Hospital. About 35 years.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

One brother that's a year younger than me.

Was he ever in the service?

No. Jim – his name is – James, but he passed away.

He was 62 in 2013. My parents died in 2011 and 2012 – a year to the day.

Cynthia: His brother never went to a doctor – was afraid of them – had heart trouble.

Oh.

He had a terrible heart. Any doctor or nurse had listened to him they would have heard his murmur – because he had a prolapsed mitral valve.

What did you do before entering the service?

I was – I went to Drake University – got my Bachelor in Biology – graduated in '71.

Were you drafted or did you enlist?

I enlisted. I had a low draft number – in the lottery time I was like 90 or 80 – they went to 150. I knew I was going to be drafted and I wanted to get into something that was medical.

Why did you choose that specific branch of service?

They offered medic training and they offered where I could utilize my biology major and had a nurse specialist job too. – but mostly it was being a medic.

How old were you at that time?

July I would have been – 22. Just had graduated from college – went into the Air National Guard. Air Force initially for basic and tech school, primarily in San Antonio and Wichita Falls.

So what happened after that?

I got out of the Air National Guard January 15, 1972 and I was then a 91-C and I went to my Air National Guard Unit and on January 29 I started at the VA. I was a new hire with the Veterans – they had appointments.

What did you do there?

I started out as a pulmonary function tech and then I was a respiratory therapist.

But this is while you were in the Reserves? So you were an Army doctor.

I was in the Reserves. I was a 91-C, which is Medic, and then primarily I was a 91-V, which is respiratory specialist.

Cynthia: He never went overseas or anything like that. He stayed in Iowa.

What is your name?

Cynthia.

Charlie's wife, Cynthia, is here and she will be coming in occasionally, to clarify, I'm sure.

How was your departure for training camp and the early days of basic training? When you were in boot camp?

Good. I went to San Antonio; I was with a unit full of Air National Guards -- primarily Iowa and Arkansas

So how did you adapt to military life while in boot camp.

Oh, I loved it. I liked boot camp; it helped me a lot – kinda totally changed my life and I went to tech school – and that was even better.

That wasn't your first time away from home, was it?

No.

Because you had been to college. You're in the Air National Guard – pulmonary – did you have any specialized training? Or you already came in with specialized training.

Yeah, I was already – with my biology degree.

So in the Army you didn't go for any other specialized training?

Uh, later I went into respiratory therapy in '72 at the VA – started the school and I went into that and that tied into my Air National Guard and Army Reserve as a respiratory therapist.

Was that your basic function throughout your time there – respiratory therapy?

Yes.

So where did you – and you took care of airmen serving here or people who came from overseas or were injured?

Oh, yeah – little bit of both. Mostly at the VA it was all veterans – some of them had been.

Men and women?

Oh, yeah. And I was in numerous medical units. Most of my units I was the only one because there's no respiratory – I was 91 Victor. I was the only 91-V in all the units.

You started out in Iowa.

Des Moines, Iowa.

That's where you started out. And how long were you there, in Iowa?

I was there '71 to '74 – by then I was just graduating from RT school, in '74 and then I went to –

So that's like advanced training?

Yeah.

And what was your rank at that time?

Then it was E-5 – Sergeant – SGT. I moved to Kentucky in '74, Lexington, Kentucky and transferred with the VA by then – respiratory therapist also – 91-V by then. Then I went to an Air National Guard unit in Louisville; that was like '74 to '75 – then I moved to -- '76 I moved to Tampa, Florida and there I went into the Army Reserve.

And that was different – why did you do that?

They didn't have a National Guard Unit close by in Tampa. They did have a big Air Force place in Tampa.

Well, it really didn't matter in your stripes or in your service. You were doing the same thing –

Exactly.

Except in a different location that you did it in.

Yes, yeah.

Did you get a higher rank or anything?

Eventually I think – my highest rank ever was E-6 – Staff Sergeant – SSGT.

So you never did go overseas. You spent all of your 22 years in this country.

Yes, all over the United States.

Right, so you were in Tampa, Florida now –

Let's see – that was '76 and '77 and then I got out of the Air National Guard in '77 and moved back to – Iowa City in '78. By then I was out of the – that was my six-year commitment. Then I went back in in 1980.

What did you do after you got out?

Respiratory – I was working at the VA.

As a civilian employee?

Yes. I was a respiratory therapist. The minute – two weeks after I got out of basic I became -- with the VA and I served 35 years.

Oh! 35 years with the VA.

Yes. And then I was also nine years with a private hospital – as a respiratory therapist. Part of the time I was Chief Supervisor of it and some of the time I was pulmonary testing – breathing tests. In the Army Reserve, yeah, 1980 I got back in the Army Reserve.

When did you meet your wife and get married?

My first wife -- I got married in '74. Then I got divorced in '92 and then I met my present wife, Cynthia in 2004.

When did you get married in your military service?

'74.

So you were in for three years – you got in in '71. And your wife was from Iowa and you both lived in Iowa?

Yes.

So you had your own apartment and lived off the base.

Lived in Coraville, went to RT school in Iowa City and Cedar Rapids. 1980 I was in a Cedar Rapids unit - Army Reserve. I got out in '84 – so I had a break in service from '77 to '80; then I got out in 1984, and had a break in service – got back in '87.

So you had a break from '77 to '80 – three years –

Yeah.

And then from '80 top '84 –

I was in Army Reserve in Cedar Rapids. And then from '84 to '87 I had a break in service.

While you had these breaks you still worked in the hospital at the same job?

As a respiratory therapist with the VA. In '84 I was in Cedar Rapids Unit and working with the Iowa City VA. I went to annual training and I got hurt in '85.

You mean like your two weeks training?

Yeah, 15 days – annual training – summer camp.

Did you have to do that every year?

Every year.

You didn't mention that – but you did that every year –

Every summer. I probably did 21 of those.

Ha, ha, 21 times! Okay.

Let's see – '84 to '87 – break in service – I was out – and '87, I had moved by then from Iowa to Virginia. I moved to Roanoke, Virginia in '87 and I got back in to the North Carolina Army Reserve Unit 312. That was a real famous unit in Greensboro, North Carolina. And I was a respiratory specialist there and I was also working at the VA in Salem, which is right next to Roanoke. I worked there for three years and I got out in 1990 and I moved back to Iowa – Iowa City.

In 1998 –

What about from 1990 to '98?

I worked in Iowa City – didn't have a break in service. In 1998 I went back in the Army National Guard and I was in that for a year and then I got into Army Reserve; that was in Iowa City and Des Moines.

So you went from National Guard to Army Reserves, back and forth.

Army Reserve like in '99, I would say – got in in '98 National Guard; got in the Army Reserve in '99. And then I was in that and finally at the end of all my service I retired in 2006 and that was from Army Reserve. Total about 22 years.

Everything – Army Reserve and National Guard – 22 years.

And Air Force.

Wow! So you had a lot of – what kind of a DD-214 do you have? (checking documents) Repeat that again – When you were discharged from each Army Reserve unit you got a service plaque.

National Service Plaque. I can print it out – a big picture of it.

Yeah, maybe we can have a picture that we can use.

I've got it in the garage.

Because your DD-214 only covers to 1971 – says you got in and out in '72.

So in all these years – you never really – you were living like you were a civilian even though you were in the service –

Right.

You never –

When I did my regular job I would also do the same job in the Army Reserve – I was a respiratory – 91-Victor Specialist and I also was a respiratory therapist.

So you never had any officers over you –

Oh, yeah. Always. Always had a doctor, had nurses; had other enlisted – didn't have many respiratory specialists – they were medics.

What business did you have with them? You had to report to them about their patients?

Oh, yeah, yeah, and doctors and take care of them – sometimes in the ICU – just a lot of different aspects of it.

Wow! This is really very different than the ordinary person that I interview. I've interviewed many people who were not overseas but never with something like this – and your whole long history of 22 years and the different times you came in and out.

I can't ask you the normal run of questions like how was your readjust-ment to civilian life because you never really left it. How about your contact with veterans over the years. Are you still in touch with any of the people you met in the service?

Yeah, yeah – with my unit members.

Mostly in Iowa or did you work here in Illinois?

Mostly worked Iowa City.

Here in Illinois have you worked for the VA at all?

Just in private hospitals but not for the VA.

What private hospital did you work at?

After I got done with my VA for 35 years in 2006, then I went to work at a military – let's see – it would have been Unit D, which is in Davenport.

Davenport, Iowa?

Yeah, and Moline – it's really Moline and Rock Island. And Bettendorf – has three cities – but doesn't have – you can cross out Davenport – I worked there from 2005 to 2017 – then I retired in that year.

But you were out of the military?

Oh, yeah.

You worked as a private person – that was your job after you left the military?

Yeah. After I left, yeah.

And you were there for like 12 years?

Yeah. I got out – totally out of the military -- October 2006. And then I just went to work in a private hospital. Unity Point in three cities – Moline --

And you left in 2017. Did you retire at that time?

Totally retired.

Is that when you moved to Illinois?

Yes, yes, moved here in 2018. Been here 7 years.

Are you a member of any veterans' organizations today?

Oh yeah –

Which ones?

DAV – Disabled American Veterans – let's see – I was the Army – American Legion, VFW – Veterans of Foreign Wars, Viet Nam Veterans Associations – that's pretty much it.

Well, you covered many wars besides Viet Nam. Viet Nam was '68 right?

Yeah.

So you were through all the different wars and you've seen veterans – probably seen veterans who were patients of yours who were in all those wars.

Oh, yeah, yeah – primarily Viet Nam veterans. But of course I had World War II guys –

Oh, yeah, I'm sure – still --

One of the reasons I got in was my Dad worked at the VA and he was in World War II from 1942 to 1946. He was in the Coast Guard for four years. Dad was a store keeper;

he worked on a destroyer escort, which is a flat-bottom ship – and it rides up and down in the water. It doesn't cut through – it's really a rough ride. Dad was in there four years then he got out and got in the VA a few days later.

And what did he do in the VA?

Uh, he was a purchasing agent from '46 to '80. He got out in 2000.

How old was he when he died?

He would have been one week short of 96.

Wow!

He died at 95. And he died in 2012 and before that he had worked in the VA from '46 to '80.

And he worked as a purchasing agent for the VA?

Yep, yep.

So then he introduced you, of course, to the VA and+ that's how you got in?

Yeah, I continued on after – like – Dad started in '42 actually and then I continued with the VA till 2006 – like over 60 years almost.

Right, right.

So other than these plaques, did you get any other medals, honors or awards?

I got the – kind of the standard ones when you serve in the Air Force –

Medical –

Yeah, medical medals and taking care of people at AT -- got medals for that.

What's AT?

Annual Training – that's the two week

Oh, right, uh-huh.

After the Annual Training was completed, I'd get a medal, so I got a lot of those.

Anything unusual happen at any of your Annual Trainings?

Yeah, I got hurt.

Oh, you got hurt?

Yeah, in '85.

What happened?

That's interesting – I don't remember exactly – I got sick; I got sick and I had like a nervous breakdown but it was really a manic episode –

Cynthia: He's bipolar.

Oh, okay.

And I went to Wisconsin, near Fort McCoy -- so that was Tomah – in '85 I got sick and then I came back from Tomah VA and went back to work at the Iowa City VA.

Did you get sick because of stories that you heard from your fellow veterans or anything?

No stories. We had a real strenuous two weeks and then we had a grass fire – and that really bothered me.

Were you injured in that grass fire or anything?

Mentally, yeah. Mentally – they eventually moved me to Tomah VA.

Okay. So that was your only – you were never otherwise physically injured?

No. I got sent to Chicago after that – to Great Lakes Hospital.

For how long?

Oh, let's see – that was '85 – I would say probably ten days – Chicago Great Lakes –

I would say July '85. I got out of Great Lakes and came back and went to work in Iowa City.

Okay, that sums up pretty much your service. How do you think your military experience affected your life?

Tremendous. It was – my military thing – then I just kind of fell into a VA job. Two weeks – 14 days after I got out of the Air Force, I was work in VA and I stayed with that for 35 years. And then another 12 in private hospitals. The Air Force really made a big change in my life.

How long was that Air Force basic training?

Six weeks – from August to October of '71. Then I went to Tech School in Wichita Falls. That was like about two and a half months.

And that was like advanced training school?

Yeah, yeah, exactly.

And that was advanced training for?

Uh, medic, 91-C.

And did you always go in with that thought that you're going into the Air Force to get your basic training and then be a medic afterwards – you went in with that?

Yeah,

You never were going to stay in the Air Force; you were just going to become a medic?

Well, no, I wasn't going to stay I was gonna be in Army Reserve and all that stuff, yeah. But primarily it was the Air Force and then it changed.

All right – this is the first time I'm hearing all this kind of stuff. I haven't heard this before in interviews. I'll take your word for it.

What life lessons have you learned from the military?

Uh, well, I had a whole lot of things really – I learned to follow the rules, lead a good life – mostly service. The big thing was service – service to help people – hospital -- the main thing was service and it changed my whole life . Basic helped to change a lot and also the Tech School. And then I came into the VA job.

How long was that Tech School – did we say?

Uh, October, November, December -- 3 months – 3 and a half months.

And the six weeks were basic training and 3 and a half months, okay.

Yeah.

And after that you went into the Army Reserve.

Yes, into the International Guard actually in Des Moines.

We got that at the beginning but I'm reinforcing it again. Well, I think that probably covers your veterans' history unless there's something else that you can think of.

I was, because of the VA, it just helped me in my jobs, I was – eventually worked my way up to Supervisor – I was the Chief Respiratory Therapist. That was my best job.

And your highest grade was E-6?

Well, yeah, but I was GS-10 in the VA.

Did you have to wear a uniform when you were working?

I had my uniform – my white coat –

When you worked – you just had a white coat?

Yeah.

Underneath your white coat you didn't have to wear a uniform?

I had – well, when I was in the military, of course, I would wear it.

When you were in the Reserves?

Yeah. But then private, of course, I would wear –

No, private, yeah, but when you say in the Reserves – you came to work with your uniform on and you put your white coat over.

I still have it.

Oh, you do? Do you still fit in it?

Oh, yeah, I still can wear it. Actually I wear it to Veterans' Day and I wear it to another – they have another thing where you get to go to an elementary school and they have a whole day that's just where you talk with a lot of other people – I mean it's a huge, all-day celebration.

Where is that at

It's at an elementary school in Tinley Park – and they have a huge crowd?

Is that for veterans' Day?

Yes, exactly. It's maybe a week before Veterans' Day or something like that. They call it – I go every year to that. I initially started going when my wife's grandkids went there – to school – I'll go and do it.

That's a voluntary thing that you do?

Yeah, and I've done it about six times – I'll continue.

Since you mentioned that – do you ever attend any reunions. Sometimes they have reunions.

Yeah, I know what you're talking about. No, probably my unit that I've been in the most in Cedar Rapids Army Reserve Unit – and we don't really have a reunion. That would be the one I'd go to the most.

Okay.

Yeah, it was interesting – I had a lot of stuff happen – when I was in AT I would – they wouldn't really know what to do with me because I was trained in respiratory –

Right, yeah.

And they would put me in all different job. I would go with motor pool. I would go with the First Sergeant. I would go with, not really the Commander, but – I would do something different every summer.

Oh, I see.

I would do AT –

So many different jobs –

Yeah.

Right, you were in a special category.

Oh, Yeah, ‘cuz I would do -- they’d put me in different jobs.

Well, you got a roundabout full education with different things.

Oh, yeah.

So did you enjoy those two-week intervals?

Oh, yeah. I liked them a lot.

Except for the fire.

Yeah, I didn’t like the fire.

Okay, so, is there’s anything else you’d like to add to the story – that you can think of. Any more about your Dad? How about any photographs?

I have –

I’m looking at a photograph of Charlie’s Father in World War II. He’s got a helmet on and is holding a microphone –

There in service he was like a steward – he had a shop on his destroyer escort and his job was to work at the store and he also had to go to battle stations too. He had multiple jobs, primarily he was a storekeeper, I guess they’d call it.

On the reverse of the picture there is a description typed – interesting to read –

“He was a Perry Coast Guardsman serving in the North Atlantic area” – he’s from Perry, Iowa – “he stands at his battle station on a 20 mm. gun aboard a Coast Guardsman destroyer escort operating as a unit of the Atlantic Fleet. The ship guards the sea lanes over which our fighting ships carrying men and supplies to the battlefield” – very interesting. Do you have any other photographs that you would be willing to part with? That are original photographs. I know you wouldn’t want to part with that.

I don’t really have a lot of military with me, but I have other photographs and stuff.

Well, Charlie's going to finish up the biographical portion page and will look around for any photographs he is willing to part with. He can give them to me if he so chooses. But as far as this, I think we are completed here and I thank you for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

Yep, that's good.

Charles A. Major

21254 West Crimson Court

Plainfield, Illinois 60544

309-236-7048

chamajor@yahoo.com