

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, March 27, 2025 at the home of John Kaniuga. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with John who served in the United States Air Force is a veteran of the Viet Nam war. John 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:

John, will you state your full name for the record?

John Kaniuga, K-A-N-I-U-G-A.

When and where were you born?

I was born in Dowagiac, Michigan, Lee Memorial Hospital November 2, 1947.

What were your parents' occupations?

My Mom was a – she worked at the Heddon's H-e-d-d-o-n-s Lure Factory. My Dad worked for Studebaker, after being discharged from the Navy Air Corp. Sometime in my early years he became a car salesman.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

I ended up with five brothers and one sister. I was the oldest.

Were any of your brothers in the military service?

No.

What did you do before entering the service?

Student – at Southwestern Michigan College

How did you enter the service – were you drafted or did you enlist?

I ended up with a draft number of 34, so I enlisted in the Air Force.

So you enlisted in the Air Force. And how old were you at that time?

I think 19 or 20.

1969 – you were born in '47 – you were like 22.

22.

Why did you choose that specific branch of service?

I didn't like the ocean; didn't like shooting at people with guns.

Did you want to actually fly or did you just go in –

My Dad was in the Navy Air Corps – so my Dad was pushing me towards it.

Okay. So what happened? How did you -- how was your departure for training camp and early days of training?

Okay, basic training was in Indianapolis, Indiana –

Why was that? You were in Michigan –

That's where the recruiting station was.

There was none in Michigan? Or you didn't go to the one in Michigan?

That's where I took my physical –

Oh, really! Indianapolis, Indiana. Wow!

Yeah. Then we flew to Atlanta, picked up a bunch of new guys – I think the whole plane was trainees --

Oh, yeah, probably, and then –

Then we landed in San Antonio, bused from the airport at 4 o'clock in the morning or 3 o'clock in the morning –

And what base was that?

Lackland Air Force Base.

How were your early days of training? Could you describe a typical day of basic training?

Oh, we'd get up, make our beds, usually – some of the guys took showers; but we'd shave and then we'd do barracks – no I think we went to breakfast first and then came back and cleaned up the barracks and then fell out into formation – and marched to where we needed to go. We got bused to wherever we needed to go.

So what were your duties – did you have calisthenics, were you just marching, did you have classroom studies.

We had lots of calisthenics – in a big parking lot.

And how about artillery – I mean rifle range – shooting.

Well, yeah, that was like a week or two -- weapons training on the M-16 and we all got to shoot a .45 caliber pistol.

One week of weapons training, okay. Was this your first time away from home?

No.

So how did you adapt to military life – like the physical regimen, the barracks, the food and the social life?

Well, you got to know your bunk mates; you'd go play basketball with them – or they had other activities.

So you had no problem adapting?

No, no.

And because you were just a bit older – a lot of the guys were 17 to 19 – were you in any position of authority like a squad leader or anything like that – because of your age?

I don't remember. It wasn't something – there were a number of four-year college graduates who did get more responsibilities – team or squad leaders --

You were just with all the guys –

I was there.

So how long did basic training last?

Basic training lasted like six weeks; then you had a little graduation dress-up, you go to the parade. The base Commander comes up and congratulates you all and then after that you get orders – assignments.

How many guys do you think were in your unit or who graduated with you? How big was the graduation group?

There was quite a few guys - probably 300.

All new recruits.

Yeah. Our barracks, you know, we were assigned a barracks – there were two floors in our barracks, upstairs and downstairs, I got pictures of it.

We'll look at them.

So probably 80 guys in that building – it was a wooden World War II style building – very crude. I remember the first night we were there the TI (training instructor), a black guy, real friendly basically but very strict, and he says, "Okay, I want you to throw everything out of your suitcases, toiletries -- you'll get everything new tomorrow –

Uh-huh.

But make sure you save your toothbrush; you're gonna need it to clean the latrine."

Ha, ha. So did you get all new stuff?

Yeah, we did. They still have some of the stuff.

Okay, so you're finished with basic training – did you get leave after basic Training to come home?

Yes. I think it was ten days.

So you got your orders; where did they send you?

I moved from one side of Lackland to the other.

Oh, and why was that?

Because they put me in electronic cryptographic equipment repair school, which was a year.

Oh, now that's considered specialized training? Correct, one year.

I had a high aptitude for electronics.

After you completed that training did you get a certificate – was that college level

What was really interesting was that my Dad's golfing buddy had a TV repair store and he hired me to come in and help him – and that's how I got the --

Before you went into the service?

Yeah.

Was that like a part-time job?

While I was in high school – and he taught me how to read a resistor and capacitors and circuits –

And obviously you were interested in that field because you took to it.

Right. Yeah.

Soo it served you in good stead for your future. Okay, so one year. What was your rank now after you completed the course?

Private 2nd Class.

So now you've been at Lackland for 12 months or more including basic training. What happened after you finished school? Where did you go?

Well, we got a break. I came home and I got married.

Really!! So you had a girlfriend before you went in?

Yes, she was a home girl.

So, when did you get married? What was the date?

April 4, 1970.

And your wife's name?

Nancy.

Now that you were a married man did your wife go with you afterwards or did she stay back home?

No, she came with me.

Where did you go?

My first duty assignment was Grand Forks Air Force Base, North Dakota.

And what were your duties there?

We serviced the missile command centers; we had 15 of them – don't know whether I should say that – that's way in the past.

Yeah, exactly, Okay, you serviced the missile command – and that was your main duty while you were there?

Yeah. We were assigned a little concrete building along the airfield; that's where all of our equipment was stored. It was basically easy because we had to be one the center – it was kind of a call center /repair shop. So we'd get these calls in the middle of the night and they'd say – "Our equipment is -- the printer is spitting out paper." And it would actually print a page a second --

Oh, wow! Fast.

So that means – you could (inaudible –

I said, "turn it off."

Ha, ha, that's the best thing to do. So you or somebody in that office was on call 24 hours a day.

Yeah. We had three people on staff all night – all day.

Would you say – other than that did you have a regular 8-hour day?

We worked swing shift. So we'd have three on, three off – and then it rotated. So you'd work days today, the next shift you'd work evenings and then you work nights.

Well it was covered 24 hours a day.

Yeah. And then we – as I obtained the rank of Staff Sergeant, I didn't have to do night shift.

When was that? When did you reach that rank? And is that the highest rank that you achieved?

Yes. I achieved that at minimal time in grade; E-5 – July 1, 1972.

Oh, so that was just before you were going to be leaving.

Actually I was planning on re-upping.

Oh, and what happened?

Well, I worked a 12-hour shift and I had to go in and process my paperwork because I was getting ready to transition from what I was doing to -- you know, either getting out

or reenlisting and some Second Lieutenant came up to me and started ratting on me because my uniform was wrinkled, and I apparently didn't have the right kind of hat on; my shoes were dirty – and I said, “I don't need this -- I'm out of here.”

Ok. So – how long did you stay doing this particular job?

Well, after I was there a year, they upgraded the communications equipment and they sent me back to Lackland for five weeks –

So you had to retrain on something?

I retrained and then they sent me to New Jersey for eight weeks.

Wait a minute – 5 weeks Lackland and then 8 weeks in New Jersey – was that for more training in New Jersey?

Right. That was at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, by Long Branch.

And what did you do there – just basically the same type of work?

Well, first of all, somehow we lucked out and got an apartment right on the beach.

So your wife was with you?

Yeah, for the New Jersey portion; she worked as a waitress. I went to school from midnight to 8 a.m. We had weekends off and would take the bus into New York City. A lot of things were free for soldiers from the USO.

And in North Dakota your wife was with you too.

Right.

Did you have an apartment off the base?

Yes. In all we had three different apartments.

You didn't mention that.

Then I think the second – my second year there, my good buddy Gordon Parent – who I was with in basic training at Lackland – there was a strip club across the street from the base called Club Almaredo. Both of us used to be bartenders so we got bartending jobs.

Ha, ha, bartenders. I'm surprised that it was right there across from the base.

There was like – Almaredo was basically all service people in trailers.

So this was while you were in the service –

Right –

You worked there like after hours or whatever –

Right, we got permission from the Tech guy – Supervisor.

Okay.

Somebody at the base –

They had to okay it. Was your wife working while you lived there? Did she get a job?

She was a teacher and she got her Master's Degree at the University of North Dakota. The Air Force also sent me to Programming School so I took COBOL and FORTRAN at the University of North Dakota. I also took two business courses.

COBOL and FORTRAN were the original, right? I remember those.

You spoke about your friend, I didn't catch his last name – Gordon –

Pa-r-e-n-t; he was there with his wife. And then Joe Bettits; he came along later and his wife's name was AnnMarie.

Are you still in touch with these people if they're still alive today?

Gordon – what happened to Gordon -- he ended up in New Jersey. When I went to Eastern Michigan after I got out of the service, he was living in Toledo and that was kinda close as we lived in Adrian, Michigan. We did visit him a couple of times for dinner.

You had contact.

Yeah, I think Joe Bettits, you know, we always sent Christmas cards and stuff. But along the way – no, actually both of them got divorced.

Are you in contact with them today – those two guys?

I'm actually in contact with the wife –

Oh, which one?

Audrey, Gordon's wife.

You were in North Dakota so there is no question about communications from home as far as staying in touch with family and friends – you could call – you could go home.

We'd go home once a year –

And you could call on the phone; it's not like you only had to write letters.

We didn't have cell phones.

Oh, not cell phones; just regular phones.

Yeah.

How about any recreational or off-duty pursuits? Were you involved in any team sports like basketball or baseball?

Softball; we played softball

Did they have softball teams there?

Yeah.

And did you play against other bases or other divisions?

Yeah, other divisions. We had the fighter group; we had the missile group; we had the bomber group.

And they all had their own teams?

Yeah.

And you played against each other?

Yeah, right.

You could do that in the States but when guys are at war, they don't have time for that stuff. That was the only thing – softball – sportswise?

No.

What else?

I was a hunter, so I'd go bird hunting.

Pheasants?

Short tail grouse.

Prairie chickens.

And then during winter/fall season we'd hunt geese and ducks.

No pheasants?

They don't have pheasants.

They don't have pheasants in North Dakota?

They have them in South Dakota. My supervisor used to go into South Dakota and shoot pheasants.

What medals, honors or awards have you received? Are they listed on your DD-214? This would be the time to state them because you don't have to write them. You can say they are listed in my interview.

I was a Trainer, Supervisor Trainer. I also invented a device that helped us test equipment.

Wow! And did you give that to the service?

Yeah.

Just like that.

And they gave me some kind of award. And I got \$25.

We should get a picture of that award.

It's just a piece of paper.

They didn't give you anything special for inventing this device? What do you call that device? John is looking up the name of the device that he invented. John has found an Award Certificate that he received On December 19, 1972 – (reading) Award Certificate granted to Staff Sergeant John Kaniuga – his suggestion entitled “ use of locally fabricated test box for alignment of auto sevacom ? (phonetic) equipment.” So John invented this device. He also showed me a newspaper photo of himself with the device dated April 20 (1970) in *The Leader*.

There is an article here about John's device stating, “Kaniuga received the award for Academic and Military Performance. The serviceman maintained a 90% average in the academic portion of his courses.” Wow! Very good – this is when you were in the Air Force school. John will give me an ORIGINAL newspaper

Photo from *The Leader* publication from South Bend, Indiana – with his photo showing the device that he invented and I will be sending this photo in along with his transcript.

While you were in the service when did you invent this device?

While I was a Trainer – as a Trainer what I'd do is , you know, I'd have to show the new guys that came into our squad how to do the common repairs on equipment. And there was this one test that we had to do where we had to keep putting in these coax cables in the back of the equipment. We had to hook them all together with the test equipment to do the performance. Well, I said, why don't we just have a box with a switch on it?

Ha, ha – and that's what you invented – the box with a switch?

Right.

What year was that – do you remember?

It was '72 and that's when I became a Supervisor Trainer.

Supervisor of Training?

Yeah. There was another guy who kinda – I mentored – and that was Paul DeMatteo; he was from New York. We later visited him and his wife Laura in Queens, New York.

Okay. Anything else that you invented – or that you discovered or anybody else invented that would be noteworthy?

Not that I remember. The only reason I remember it is because, you know, I kept all this –

Yeah, you kept all your paperwork. John has, like all veterans have – most of the veterans do have paperwork from their service. They have their DD-214; they have other things. It's very important to keep that DD-214 for any benefits you might want.

It's called my "jacket."

He's got all his information inside of his jacket.

Once they discharge you, they give you your jacket.

Okay, after discharge. Interesting – I didn't hear anybody say that. That's something new for me.

Where were you when you were deactivated?

I was in North Dakota.

Now you mentioned before that you went on an "early out" -- how did that come about?

Well, they ended the war and they said that anybody that was within, I think six months of service, could ask for an early out. And I had just gotten accepted in Eastern Michigan University, so I applied for the early out and they gave it to me.

So you left the service in December of 1972. You looked at the date – December 1972.

Right.

How was your reception by family and friends?

It was good.

How did you get home? Did you drive?

Right, we had the car and the trailer. And then my wife had gotten her Master's Degree – and her ultimate goal was to get her Doctorate.

Oh, really! Wow! How was your readjustment to civilian life?

Easy. I still had friends – we moved in with my wife's grandparents for a couple of weeks over Christmas then left for Eastern Michigan in Ypsilanti.

Did you ever use the GI Bill?

Yes.

What did you use it for?

My tuition in Eastern Michigan University. I also took a CPA Review course which the GI Bill partially paid for.

Tuition for school – but not later for buying a house or anything?

No.

Just for school. You already said you were in contact with fellow veterans over the years.

Right.

Are you a member today in any Veterans' organizations?

American Legion.

John lives here in Carillon in the same senior community that I live in. I have interviewed many veterans who live here – but are you familiar with our organization here or are you?

Yes.

With Debbie Leinweber – you go to those meetings?

No.

You don't – but you know about it.

Yes. I go to the one in Plainfield, and Lloyd Lundberg –

Oh, yes. Lloyd – I interviewed him too.

Yeah, and I've gone to the meetings at the Romeoville Legion.

So you are active in the American Legion.

Lloyd invited me to some organizational function in Naperville for servicemen – where the luncheon's going to be – in Westmont?

So how did your military experience affect your life?

Well – after military I was able to pass classes -- inaudible -- I was more focused. It's like, you know, people say thanks for your service – I say no, thank you for letting me serve.

Exactly; you got – you did well. How about some life lessons learned from the military?

Don't worry about the small stuff.

Right. Anything else that you want to expostulate on? Anything else in the service – funny anecdotes or anything else that you care to elaborate on?

I do have one funny story –

All right.

Almaredo which was across the street from the base had – I was familiar with the cop because the cop -- Chief of Police – one cop -- he had a part-time cop too. They used to come into the strip club all the time, you know, just to check on things.

Right.

So he hired this assistant deputy – whatever he was -- and he tried to pull over a missile convoy –

Why?

Which caused the shutdown of the base.

What was his reason?

He said they were speeding through. Well, we do speed and we do run stop signs.

But you're allowed to do that?

Yes.

Obviously they didn't know that.

He didn't know that.

So what was the result?

The base locked down and we had helicopters in the air and security police all over the place?

Was he reprimanded for this?

He got fired.

The officer who stopped him – Wow! Okay, I guess that is unusual.

Here you got a van that's got three nuclear weapons in it, you know, ICBM missile –

Right, you have to make way for certain things, and that's one of them, I would think. Okay. Anything else that you can think of?

No, I had – we just had a normal life – went camping, fishing in Canada and the Badlands and Upper Michigan.

On your time off?

Yeah, and I took those courses at the University of North Dakota. They had golf courses and I had – we didn't play as long as we do around here –

Right.

But we used to get – there was one year we were there it snowed 11 months out of the year; it snowed in June and then it snowed in September or August – on Labor Day weekend. It didn't stick, but –

Yeah, it's cold, cold –

We went to Thunder Bay.

Oh, you traveled around – you went to Canada –

And then we went to -- we met our friends from college; they were living in Salt Lake City and we went to the Badlands and Mount Rushmore.

South Dakota – nice. So you had ample time off and able to do things like that. That's nice.

Yeah; usually do camping – a lot of camping.

You didn't -- before you went into service did you graduate from college?

Yeah, I graduated from a two-year school.

Oh, from two years –

Southwestern Michigan.

Like an Associate Degree.

Associate in Business.

If there's something else that comes to mind, I'm right here, and we can always add something more. You can't change it – I will send you an email copy of the transcript for review. You can add things to it; you can't change things.

Okay.

That's all for me. If there's nothing else you wish to add to the story, I thank you for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

You're welcome. (End of Interview)

We're back on the record on April 28, 2025. While reviewing John's transcript I realized I did not ask him about his post-military life – his jobs and what he did. So we are trying to correct that portion with this addendum.

John also reviewed the written transcript to this point and made several additions which he did not remember at the time of the first interview, but after reviewing his documents John added --

I graduated with a BBA from Eastern Michigan University in April 1973.

Got my first job as a General Ledger Accountant at Gibson Guitar in Kalamazoo MI.

I passed the CPA test and worked as a staff accountant, became a controller, a management consultant for a number of firms including Plante Moran and as a self-employed turn around consultant specializing in Bankruptcies for more than 30 separate entities.

We got the early-out approved so we packed up our house into our new 4 by 8 trailer and we drove back to Marcellus, Michigan, which is where my wife lived and we basically moved in temporarily with her grandparents. We stayed with them over Christmas; I drove to Ypsilanti and I started looking for apartments. We found an apartment on the east side of Ypsilanti; it was available for students and military – just a small one-bedroom apartment – and got our stuff in –

So you didn't work after you got out – you went to school?

I went to school, yes.

When did you get out – what was that date again – the year? 1972

1972.

So you were a student after you got out and continued your education until you graduated?

Yes. This was about a year and a half.

And you received a –

Bachelor of Business from Eastern Michigan.

Did you use the GI Bill?

Yes. We lived in Ypsilanti the first year – the first six months after I got out. My wife had a Master's Degree in Counseling; she found a job in Adrian, Michigan, about 40 miles away – so we moved to that location after I graduated. I went to Summer School and got all my credit hours. My wife had an English Degree as a teacher. She was able to procure a job with Ypsilanti Herald and did tours of the newspaper. She had a similar job in North Dakota. Mayor Coleman Young spoke at my Commencement – he was the Mayor of Detroit.

Where did you go the next year – you're out of school now.

I interviewed with lots of CPA firms for Accounting and Data Processing – I pretty much went the whole summer without any interviews other than the ones that I took before I graduated.

So where did you finally end up working.

Well, I took a month off after graduation and studied for the CPA test. I passed three parts – Michigan has a 5-part test.

Oh, Really? So you passed three parts. So did you have to retake it?

After I went to work for Gibson Guitar in Kalamazoo. I interviewed with the FBI; I interviewed with the Michigan Department of Treasury to be a sales tax auditor; both those jobs were in Detroit. I also interviewed with Clarke Equipment in Niles – but discovered they were on the downslide, so I passed on that job. As I was driving through Kalamazoo, I knew my wife wanted to go to Western Michigan to get her Doctorate so I went to the Unemployment Office to get a list of companies so I could send out resumes. The guy said, “Why don’t you fill out an application.” I wasn’t eligible for unemployment but they would do a job search for me, so I did. He said, “Would you be interested in interviewing today?” Yes, I’m here!

Well, it was Gibson Guitar in Kalamazoo – I interviewed with the Personnel Manager, General Manager and then interviewed with Gene Johnson who was the Controller, who just happened to live in Chicago. He drove back and forth on weekends. So they were very interested in me. I drove back home and got there about 9 o’clock. My wife said you’ve got a couple of messages. I called them back, talked to Gene and he offered me a position, picked up my moving bill and said “we want you to start Monday. This was Friday.”

Wow!

So we went into panic mode –

But you ended up doing it –

Yeah. Nancy had to give two weeks’ notice. It would be a long commute but I could stay at her grandparents’ house. But he said if you need to you could stay in a hotel. Nancy’s grandparents had company staying with them but they offered me the extra bedroom. So I show up at the apartment, walk in the door and my new boss is standing there.

What?! How come?

He lived in the apartment above.

Oh, for Pete’s sake! Ha, ha. Isn’t that a coincidence!! So he lived in the apartment above – oh my God!!

So anyway, I found a house for rent, they moved us and Nancy got enrolled in school. She waited till the winter term to start going to Western Michigan.

So how long did you work at Gibson Guitar?

Two years – well, they had a cost-cutting layoff – I was part of the layoff. So I worked there like four months, got laid off for three months, but I used that time for – I took a CPA Review course, correspondence course, and the GI Bill paid for that too. I took the test and passed the other two parts, so I had the CPA. Then they hired me back as a Cost Accountant while they were building their new factory in Nashville.

What was your next job?

My next job was with a small CPA firm in Kalamazoo. You needed two years of work experience with a CPA firm to get a Certificate. So I got my two years there and then moved on to numerous other jobs.

So you had many other CPA jobs?

Yes, other CPA jobs and others –

Were they all in Michigan?

Yeah, most of them were, up until the time I moved to Illinois.

And did you move to Illinois for a job? (turn tape)

We just turned the tape and John said he was doing Consulting and Bankruptcy Consulting along the way and finally moved to Illinois in 1989. Where did you work in Illinois?

I worked for one of the bankrupt companies, IVEX Packaging, for the Paper Mills Division; we had a plant in Joliet. They were doing a whole bunch of – on the bankruptcies they do a whole lot of consolidation, cost-cutting and trying to peddle their business again. I got cut off in the cost-cutting layoff – well, basically all the accounting functions were done in Lincolnshire, where the headquarters was.

Ivex Packaging moved to Lincolnshire?

No. Ivex Packaging was in Lincolnshire; all the accounting functions moved, so they didn't need accounting in Joliet.

What happened to you?

I became a consulting for a company called AccountTemps – and that led to – I'd go in and solve company problems and if they liked me sometimes they'd hire me – bring them out of trouble. Most of the time they didn't make it, for whatever reasons and then we'd turn to another company –

So you had a lot of different jobs with a lot of different companies over the years.

Yeah, I probably had 30 jobs.

Wow! So there was no one company that you stayed with for many years and retired from?

There was – the last one was Covenant Security here in Bolingbrook – and I was with them for 20 years.

Were you an accountant with them?

Yeah, I was an Accountant. I did bids for government contracts mostly. And then I switched to being Insurance Manager and other jobs.

So you were quite active – you had a lot of different jobs over the years, and you worked a good 30-40 years after the service.

Yes.

Okay, so Covenant was your last job and that's how you ended up here in Carillon.

That's right.

Okay. Well, you were pretty thorough with that information. Anything else?

No.

You read the changes that you made into the record. I think we covered everything – John was pretty explanatory – we have at least two more pages about his role after he left the military. I'm sure all his military experience served him in good stead in civilian life and he was a very capable person.

I enjoyed the service; it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Good, I'm glad you did enjoy it. Well, thank you very much. Thank you for your service, and thank you again, John, for this interview.

You're welcome.

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