

**This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, January 23, 2018 at the home of John J. Severin, Sr. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Mr. Severin who served in the United States Air Force and is a veteran of the Korean Conflict. Mr. Severin learned of the Veterans' History Project through a mutual friend, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:**

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

I was born October 7, 1933, in Natchitoches, Louisiana. It's an Indian name.

**How do you spell that?**

N-a-t-c-h-i-t-o-c-h-e-s, Louisiana. It's the oldest town in the Louisiana Purchase.

**Oh, okay. What were your parents' occupations?**

Farmers.

**How many sisters and brothers did you have?**

Two brothers and three sisters.

**Did any of your siblings serve in the military?**

No, they were too young. I was the oldest.

**What did you do before entering the service?**

Going to school.

**Did you finish high school?**

No. I got my G E D in the service.

**How did you enter the service – drafted or enlisted?**

I enlisted – volunteered.

**Was there anything connected with why you enlisted in the service?**

No, I was just –

**Why did you choose the Air Force? Why did you choose that particular branch of service?**

Because a lot of my friends had been drafted and was in there, but I didn't get a chance to serve with none of those; they were all gone in different place.

**Where did they send you? Where was boot camp?**

Lackland Air Base, San Antonio, Texas.

**How did you get there?**

By bus.

**How was training camp? How were your early days of training?**

It was getting accustomed to military life and everything.

**Give me a typical day of boot camp – what time did you get up in the morning – what did you eat – what did you do during the day – did you go to school?**

**Did you have training exercises – what did you do?**

Yes, we got up at 5:30 or 6 o'clock, freshen up and go to breakfast. Then the day started with different activities like marching, going to rifle field –

**Did you have classroom teaching also?**

Yes.

**What did they teach in the class?**

They was teaching us about the basics of the air force.

**Rules and Regulations?**

Rules and Regulations of the Air Force.

**How long did your basic training last?**

Three months.

**And what happened after that?**

After three months I was stationed at Bergstrom Air Force Base in Austin, Texas.  
B-e-r-g-s-t-r-o-m Air Base.

**And what did you do there?**

I was with the 27<sup>th</sup> Fighter Escort Wing.

**What did your aptitudes show that you were going to be doing?**

They wasn't sure yet. They was getting people in different fields like where they would need them in the company. So they'd take our flight and send us anywhere.

**How long did you stay at Bergstrom?**

About three months.

**And did you have any specialized training while you were there?**

No, we just waited for a ship out to go to – they just split our squadron up, sent half to England and half to Germany at that time.

**So you were in the 27<sup>th</sup> Fighter Escort Wing.**

Yeah.

**And what was your job? What were your duties?**

I was just a basic Airman.

**So after three months they sent you out – where did you go**

I went to England.

**In the meantime, how did you adapt to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks, the food – how did you adapt?**

I did okay. I went along with the system. You had no choice.

**Okay, ha, ha, exactly. So you're in England now; what did you do in England?**

Well, when I got to England they sent us to Tech School.

**Before we go on, how did you get to England? Did you fly?**

No, we went on a ship from Camp Kilmer, New Jersey to Southampton, England.

**And how was your journey on the water.**

About 15 days.

**Was it an easy crossing or was it stormy?**

No, we was lucky; everything was calm, going and coming back three years later.

**So, calm voyage, huh?**

Yes. Fifteen days.

**How were your accommodations on the ship?**

Okay. You'd get up in the morning, go to breakfast and you'd do different things during the day like – you would have breakfast, lunch and dinner and then you could go deck side and things like that.

**How were your sleeping accommodations? Did you have hammocks or bunks or what?**

We had bunks, yeah.

**How high?**

I was up on the third bunk because I had an old timer tell me always try to get up on the top. I got lucky, going and coming.

**Okay, ha, ha. Okay, now you're in Southampton, England. What did they have you doing there?**

Southampton we went to Lakenheath Air Force Base – L-a-k-e-n-h-e-a-t-h AFB in England.

**Okay, and what did you do there?**

From there I went to Supply School.

**How long was that, Supply School?**

I went to Cook and Baker School in Baltoz, Germany – B-a-l-t-o-z, Germany.

**So that was your specialized training – you were trained to be a cook and baker?**

Yes.

**Was the war going on then?**

Oh, yes, the Korean War.

**But you were not involved in the war effort as far as fighting or destruction or things like that?**

No. See, When I got out of basic, they took half of our flight to England and Germany at that time –

**Okay, that was you.**

Yeah, the top of the alphabet started – the rest of them went to Korea at that time.

**Oh, I see.**

To Japan and different places.

**But you were sent to England and Germany and not Korea.**

Yes, that's in case Russia tried to come and knock England off. You know we were sitting ducks, actually.

**So, what kind of -- did you have any military duties to perform while you were going to cook and baker's school? Like when you were finished with school – did you have guard duty, things like that?**

No, just went to school and then worked – it was like a three-month school; 90 days.

**And after 90 days, what happened?**

I went back to England.

**Right, you were in Germany in school.**

Yes, and then I went back to England.

**And what did you do in England?**

Cook.

**Cook for your –**

The troops, yeah.

**And you were stationed at Lakenheath?**

Yes, Lakenheath.

**So you were cooking there?**

Yes.

**Did you spend all your time there?**

No, Lakenheath we spent about a year and a half at Lakenheath.

**What was the highest rank you ever achieved?**

Airman First Class.

**What were your recreational or off-duty pursuits? Did you work a regular schedule from 9 to 5? What did you do afterwards?**

WE worked two days on and two days off.

**What did you do when you were not working?**

Well, on one side of the base we had a golf course; we'd go play golf or something or go to the Rec Room. And on the other side of the base they had the racetrack.

**Oh.**

And when we had money we'd play big shots and go watch the horses.

**Was it an actual English race track, like steeplechase or –**

Oh, yes, Princess Margaret used to go there.

**Really? What's the name of that racetrack? Do you remember?**

No, let's see -- it's a famous name though; can't think of it now.

**It wasn't a steeplechase, was it, where they jumped over hedges?**

Oh, no, this was flat racing, thoroughbred racing.

**Okay. I don't know the race courses in England.**

Queen Elizabeth used to go there when she was Queen, and I was there for the Coronation too.

**Oh, did you see it?**

Yes. We went to London and seen it, I mean, you know –

**Yeah, that was in 1953.**

Yes.

**So you went to London, but could you get really close to see it?**

Oh, yeah, you could go to the – you can only see, just like the White House, you can see from the fence in, the guard chamber, the guards and different things.

**Were you up close enough to witness this?**

Oh, yes, yeah.

**Really?**

We used to see the Queen and her sister – Margaret and Elizabeth when they went to the race track; they would be up high, you know –

**A special box, probably.**

Yeah. The royalty seats –

**Oh, yeah, the Royal Box, I'm sure. So you did see them a few times?**

Yes.

**Wow! Okay, and while you were in England how did you stay in touch with family and friends?**

I'd write to my parents.

**By letter?**

Yes, by letter.

**How long would it take for a letter to go across the ocean, do you think?**

Oh, I don't know, like – the mail we'd get once a week.

**In a week?**

Yes, must be a week.

**You weren't married at that time?**

No, I was single.

**So after you were one and a half years in England, what happened? Where did you go?**

From Lakenheath, England a place called Greenham Common.

**Is that also in England?**

Yes, Air Force Base.

**It's in England though?**

It's an English Air Base. Both of them were English Air Bases, Lakenheath and –

**So you stayed in England.**

Yes.

**You were there for how long?**

Another year and a half and then I came back stateside.

**But what did you do in Greenham? Did you do the same thing, cooking and baking, that you did at Lakenheath?**

Yes.

**And while you were there, what did you do on your time off? There was no race track next door – what did you do there?**



Oh, there we used to go to Market Days, they have a flea market like –

**Like Antiques Roadshow?**

Yes. Something like Antiques Roadshow, yeah; that's about it.

**How about – did you play sports? Was there organized baseball or basketball?**

Oh, yes, we had our basketball – team

**So you had team sports?**

Squadron team, yeah.

**Did you ever visit other places in Europe as a tourist?**

Oh, yes, the Major – I had a chance to go to England, I mean, Ireland – from England I went to Ireland, yeah, we went to Scotland one time, and then I got a chance to go to France, Switzerland, Austria, all on tours –

**Like a tourist.**

A lot of times the Old Man would take us – he had to get so many hours – the Major – we called him the Old Man – he had to get so many flying hours to get his self in shape – he got – he'd take guys from this squad and that squad.

**Oh, I see. So he would take you to different areas –**

Yeah, three-day pass, they call it. Yeah.

**And you did that quite a few times.**

Oh, yes, yeah.

**So you got to see a lot of Europe.**

Oh, yeah, Holland, Amsterdam, Holland, Marseilles, France.

**So you had a pretty good time in the Air Force.**

Oh, yes, yeah.

**So you spent your four years mostly on duty in England.**

Yes.

**So with your time coming up, how did they handle your transfer back to the states?**

I came back on the same boat that I went on.

**Do you remember the name of that boat?**

Yeah, Darby, a troop ship –

**U.S.S. Darby?**

Yes. A troop ship -- Southampton back to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey.

**And how long did that trip take?**

Fifteen days. Went over in July, came back in July.

**Oh.**

The Atlantic was mild.

**Lucky you.**

Yes, good luck.

**How was your reception by family and friends when you got home?**

**You were now 21 years old; you went in early, at 17 –**

Yes.

**How was your readjustment to civilian life?**

Well, I got my discharge and then I came to Chicago.

**Right, you were from Louisiana.**

Yes. I came to Chicago because they had no employment, no good jobs.

**But did you at least go back to Louisiana to see your family?**

Oh, yes, yeah.

**So you did see your family then you realized there were no jobs?**

Yes.

**And then you came to Chicago.**

I only spent about three weeks in Louisiana, when I came back.

I came to Chicago.

**Did you know anybody in Chicago; friends here or anything, or just on your own?**

Friends of mine – I got a ride back to the city and I worked different places.

**How about friend you met while in service? Did you stay in touch with them after you got out of service?**

No, not – excuse me – because they had a lot of rotating, like, back then. The guys I went to basic with, only two or three of us stayed together and the rest spread out – like that –

**Scattered.**

Then I met new friends – but they were like from different parts of the country. I didn't stay in touch with them.

**Okay, so you got to Chicago and you knew some friends here – where did you stay when you got here? How did you get established?**

With some friends of mine.

**Did they tell you where to go for a job?**

Oh, yes, I got a job right away.

**Where did you go?**

Western Electric.

**What was your job there?**

It was – first I had the stock room and then I went to relay adjuster –

**Say that again –**

Relay adjuster – adjusting the four relays – the F relay on the bottom of the form

**Did they send you to school at Western Electric?**

No, they just -- on the job training. See, at Western Electric they had different floors.

The stock room is on the first floor – then the punch presses, the cafeteria. And then when I got married they put me adjusting relays.

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

No, not at the present. I'm not active with them but I participate.

**How long did you stay at Western Electric?**

Wife : the strike and you got laid off.

**So they had a strike and you got laid off.**

Yes, yeah.

**Did you go back or was that the end of it?**

I worked there about two and a half years.

**Did you work someplace else after Western Electric?**

Yes, and I went to diesel mechanic school.

**Was that with the G I Bill?**

Yes.

**How long did you go to school?**

I just went to night school, and at that time I worked for Sears & Roebuck, mail order over on Homan Avenue.

**I remember that old building. Did you ever work as a diesel mechanic?**

No, I think this is what happened. They told me when I did my diesel mechanic work, go and do an apprenticeship – well at that time they didn't need no apprentice. So they said

I'd have to wash buses for about two years until they get an opening. I said, okay, thank you, and good bye. So then that was it.

**So you didn't pursue that. Did you just stay at Sears?**

No. I stayed at Sears part time – actually it was full time. Then I went to barber school.

**Oh, barber school. Was that also with the G I Bill?**

Yes.

**So what happened? Did you finish that and get a license?**

Yes, yes.

**State license?**

Yes.

**Is that what you did? Did you open up your own barbershop or work somewhere?**

Yes. First I served my apprenticeship in the Loop, at the Dearborn Street Station.

**Oh, yeah, Dearborn Street. And then?**

Then we moved to Romeoville; then I had my own barbershop.

**Oh, you did.**

Yes.

**Were you alone there or did you have others?**

No, I was a one-chair shop.

**Sole proprietor>**

It was a Welco Truck Stop at the Flea Market.

**On Route 53?**

Route 53 and 55, yes.

**Oh, wow. And did you stay in that line of work?**

For 25 years.

**Wow – so 25 years as a barber.**

Yeah.

**And you retired from there?**

No. When they closed up I was in the pallet business about four years – repair wooden pallets, about four or five years – after I left the barbershop.

**So you've been retired now for a few years?**

Yes.

**So what did you think of the service in general? How did your military experience affect your life?**

It helped me; helped me a lot.

**How did it help you?**

Well, by getting an education and a job, and different things like that.

**So how about life lessons that you learned from the military.**

Oh, yeah, obedience –

**To orders – and discipline --**

Yes, and discipline, yes.

**So overall it was a good influence in your life?**

Oh, yes, yes. Very good influence; I enjoyed by time in the service.

**You got to travel –**

Oh, yes.

**Okay, well, that's about it. Anything else you want to add about any of your experiences – you didn't see any bombings or destruction or casualties?**

No, at the base I was on, when we got there it was in Quonset huts; it was an RAF base; it's an English airbase; that's where they bring the big bombers in. But on that base we had all different services, - Army, Navy, chemical warfare and everything.

**Did you receive any medals or awards?**

No, no.

**Just Good Conduct –**

Yeah.

**So you never saw any casualties?**

No, but we were on alert, like, for example, if you get a warning, like something – they could camouflage that base in three minutes, you know, with smoke and fogging. It's foggy in England anyway; you can't see from here across the street in the fog.

**So they were always on alert.**

Oh, yes, we had to be.

**Interesting. Okay, so I think that about covers everything. I will give you a hard copy of this interview for your review; you can read it and let me know if there's anything you need to change. If not, you can keep that copy. I will send the original to Washington along with the tape and the paperwork you signed.**

Okay.

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

Okay.

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