

This interview is being conducted on Wednesday, November 21, 2018 at the workplace of Kevin L. Ryan in Romeoville, IL. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Kevin Ryan, who served in the United States Army and is a veteran of the Persian Gulf Conflict. Kevin 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:

Kevin, when and where were you born?

I was born in Orlando, Florida, April 23, 1970.

What were your parents' occupations?

My father was a businessman, in sales; my mother was a stay-at-home Mom and she also worked part time in retail.

How many sisters and brothers do you have?

I have three brothers and one sister.

Did any of your family members serve in the military?

My older brother served in the Army as well; in active duty, late 80s. He served down in Texas – Fort Hood.

What did you do before entering the service?

I was a student – high school student. And I worked retail as well – at the local grocery store stocking shelves.

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

I enlisted.

When did that happen – or what were the circumstances –

I actually enlisted in what was called the “Delayed Entry Program.” So I actually enlisted and was all but effectively signed up when I was a Junior in high school.

Oh.

It was just a matter of graduating and then I would be in and fully sworn.

That’s a program that they had

They had a program that was called “Delayed Entry”.

No relation to the R.O.T.C. or anything like that?

No. It was just a matter of – you took the test, you took the ASFAB and you got in, and then you just – you weren’t like committed. You could have turned away at any time, but you’re basically saying, yeah, I’m gonna go into the military after I graduate -- that’s my intention.

So you graduated in –

I graduated in May of 1988 and left six weeks later.

Wow! And why did you choose that particular branch of service?

My Father was in the Army, right toward the tail end of WWII – in Austria – and since my brother was also in the Army – so got a little Army heritage.\

Okay. Wait a minute – you were born in Orlando – how did you get to Chicago?

My folks moved up here when I was about two years old. The whole family moved up to Chicago – so I basically lived in the Chicago area my whole life – just, I was born in Orlando.

How about your departure for training camp? Did you go to downtown Chicago?

Yeah, we went downtown – the enlistment center down there – can’t remember what it’s called. My Godmother actually drove me down there the night before and dropped me off – we went out to dinner and she dropped me off and said goodbye.

Then you do all the physical and swearing in, and you're off.

Where did you go?

I went to Fort Bliss, Texas for basic training, in El Paso, Texas.

And how long did that last?

Was it ten weeks basic training – 12 weeks?

What exactly did you do? Can you describe a typical day of basic training?

A day of basic training - umm –

How did it start? What time did you get up in the morning –

Usually you were up pretty early – I would say by five o'clock we were pretty much out of our beds – 'cuz you had to get to breakfast, you know, started your training for the day.

Your typical day was basically filled with nothing but running and calisthenics – just other military training – you know –

Physical –

Physical, a lot of physical training; lot of emotional and mental training. I like to tell people they kinda tear you down and then they build you back up to the soldier.

So you had classroom teaching too, didn't you, during that time?

Yeah, there was a lot of classroom – you still had to know all the military protocols, weapons training, basic first aid training – just the regular protocols and procedures of being in the military – classroom time.

So that lasted for ten weeks?

That was ten weeks; that was basic training.

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

You know, basic training, when you first start, it spooks you – because you got these drill sergeants that are screaming in your face all day, so it's a little kinda shock and awe kind of thing, you know, and at the time it's very intimidating and scary, I guess you could say. Looking back on it, it was probably one of the better times of my life because I was the most fit, disciplined, you know, type of thing. But that was basic training; after you get out of there you go to your permanent duty station, so –

Right, but while we're still concentrating on basic training, how did you like the food – things like that?

Umm, honestly you inhaled your food. You had about 45 seconds to eat; the eggs were always runny. They had what we would refer to as “shit on a shingle” –

Oh, yeah, I've heard –

Which was some type of meat – not to cuss, but – overall the food in basic training was not that spectacular, but like I said, you ate very quickly.

Okay, basic training came to an end, and where did you go then – what was your next duty station or school?

After basic training ended I was stationed at San Antonio, Texas for my AIT school which was for 91 Bravo –

Wait, what's AIT – what does it stand for?

It's just your education training – I can't remember exactly what the acronym stands for but it's your Advanced – can't think of it.

That's one of the questions – Did you have any specialized training – was this specialized training?

Yes, it was specialized training as a combat medic.

Combat medic – what did that involve – tell me about that.

It was a ten-week program, it was after basic training, and it was all medical training –

Like what?

Basic small surgical type procedures, suturing, giving I Vs, basically all focused around a combat situation .So, if somebody got wounded on the battlefield, how to essentially keep them alive until they could get to the hospital.

Like extra additional first aid.

Yeah, it was just – more than first aid, I mean, you were literally training to keep somebody alive for a period until they could get him to the field hospital.

Okay, when that ten-week period was over, then where did you go?

After that schooling I was stationed at my permanent duty station, which was in Crailsheim, Germany C-r-a-i-l-s-h-e-i-m.

How did you get there?

They flew us in a regular commercial airline – landed in Frankfurt, Germany – went through the processing and then I was stationed in a small base, the medical unit there on the base in Crailsheim.

What were your duties there?

Well, we worked in the clinic that was on the base; we serviced all the active military personnel and their family members who happened to be stationed there.

Active and dependents?

Active and dependents, yes. We were essentially like a small little hospital or medical office, basically, and took care of all the personnel whenever they were sick or needed anything. We also did the typical physicals and those kind of screenings for the active military.

So did you ever see any combat?

I did not.

How long did you do this – was this like a regular job you came to work at 9:00

It was essentially kinda like that – it was a little bit more than 9:00 but it was essentially a regular job. We'd have P T at 5:30 or so in the morning, and then the clinic hours were on average from 8 to 5, Monday through Friday, some Saturdays.

So did you spend your entire three years there?

Two and a half years there.

And during that time did you come back to the States occasionally, on leave?

Yeah, I did have a couple of leaves where I came home. They were always as a result of somebody passing away. All three of my grandparents that I had when I was over in Germany all passed away in the two and a half years I was in Germany.

And you were able to come back home?

For two of the three -- yes.

Did you ever witness any casualties – I'm talking about – was there any combat going on anywhere at that time?

When I was over in Germany the Persian Gulf Conflict happened. My particular unit did not get called up to go over there.

What was your unit – did you mention it?

It was called the 16th Medical Detachment – and we were all nothing but medics – a doctor, one physician assistant, pharmacist, pharmacy tech, basically like a small little hospital essentially.

What was your title?

I was a Specialist E 4 – one of the medics, essentially like a nurse would be in a hospital.

Equivalent to a registered nurse?

Registered nurse, essentially – that’s not the title but essentially.

Similar to that –

Yeah, yeah.

Was that the highest rank that you achieved?

Yes.

What medals or honors did you receive while you were there?

Umm, I had – some of the medals I got during my service was the National Defense Service Medal, Southwest Asia Service Medal, Overseas Service Ribbon.

What about friendships formed and camaraderie of service? Did you make friends with people that you kept in contact with after leaving the service?

One – two people in general that I kept in contact with – one of my roommates when I was there – him and his wife I kept in contact with. I was actually the best man in their wedding and I’m the godfather to their daughter.

How nice. Is he a Chicagoan or not?

No, they live in Minnesota. He was from Minnesota; she was from Missouri. They actually met during the Persian Gulf Conflict. Her Reserve Unit got called up and stationed over where we were at and that’s how they met. That’s the biggest friendship that I retained. I mean, I have a couple -- with social media today I haven’t been able to find a couple other members that I served with, but I wouldn’t say that we were “close friends” – just keeping in contact with them a little bit.

Are you still in contact with this particular man?

Yes.

What’s his name?

The gentleman's name was Tag – T-a-g-u-e Ferguson – and he actually stayed in the military for 20 years.

Twenty year guy – lifer. How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home?

The old fashioned way – writing letters, and then there were 2 or 3 pay phones on the base. We would stand in line and call to the Operator and essentially call collect back home if you wanted to talk – it was not free. You basically called collect.

Collect – yeah, and phone calls were expensive at that time.

And it was literally – it was 2 or 3 pay phones and you would stand outside of a pay phone sometimes 30, 40 minutes – an hour or more – waiting in line for your turn to get on the phone and call home. It was a lot different than it is today.

For sure! You're talking pre-computers, or computers were just coming in.

Yeah, basically, just coming out – I mean, there wasn't much – computers.

So what were your recreational or off-duty pursuits?

While I was in the military – my friends and I, we would play a little sports – flag football or just go out, you know, bike riding, things like that.

Was there any organized sports, like teams, basketball or baseball – that one group played against the other?

Not that I recall, no. We had flag football; it wasn't really organized – not sponsored by the base or anything.

Was this a large base – or you said it was a small base.

It was very small. I think the whole base was about a mile or mile and a half diameter.

Oh.

It was not very big.

And that's the base in Crailsheim, Germany.

Right.

And that was an American base or was it German ?

It was American, I mean, you gotta go through the gate – it was a gated area.

Did you come in contact with the locals? Did you go sight seeing on the weekends when you were off –

Sure, you would go into town – I mean, the local town was right there. It was only a couple of miles down the road. So, yeah, you'd go into town; you'd go to the shops, the eateries. You definitely interacted with the locals. My experience with most of the German nationals there – they – I wouldn't say – they're not unfriendly, but they're not as you know, outspoken as maybe you are here today where you're walking down the street and you see somebody and you catch their eye and you'll say, "Hi" – they don't tend to do that. If you have an interaction specifically, then you interact, but you don't go out of your way to interact.

Do they speak English – or did you speak German?

They spoke English. I didn't speak much German. If I have any regret – it was not learning the language more, honestly. They pretty much spoke English -- that you could function, but –

You didn't try.

I didn't really try, I mean, I suppose I could have been more forced to – if you had to – but – didn't really try.

Yeah, that's a regret, probably; if I was there for that length of time I certainly would want to be able to speak the language.

I look back at it and I'm like – two and a half years – and it's like – wow – you learn basic communication to get around but you didn't learn the language. It's like, oh, my gosh! – You know.

So how did you return home – your duty is over – your time has come – your three years are up, how did you return home?

When I got out of the military – went back home and lived with my folks.

But I mean, did you fly back home?

Yeah, we flew back home into Missouri, and then there was a check out point – basically get discharged – do all your discharging, paperwork and all that –

Like a Fort in Missouri?

It wasn't Missouri – it was Fort Dix, New Jersey. I will say, from a story standpoint, they were a little delayed in getting me done and getting me to the airport, so when I got dropped off at the airport to get my flight home, actual home, home -- I had to run through the airport with my bags – my duffel bags – and I'm trying to run through and I got to the gate, and thank God it wasn't like it is today, where you have to go through crazy inspections, and I still had my uniform on – and the lady was there, she said, no, you're fine – and they checked my bags right there at the gate. And she bumped me up to First Class.

Oh, how nice!

Which was cool – so it was like an hour and a half flight and I got First Class for an hour and a half flight.

How were you treated as a returning veteran – you had your uniform on, right then and there. Because you know, after Viet Nam, returning servicemen were not treated well – remarks were made, etc.

I was never treated bad at all. It's disgusting, actually --

It is.

How some of our soldiers were treated in that era.

It is. But you were treated okay.

I was treated very well – like I said, that lady saw I was running through the airport and she bumped me up to First Class seat for the flight home – so that was kinda nice.

How was your reception by family and friends?

Oh, they loved it, you know. Mom was most especially happy, you know, her baby boy was home finally.

Right. Sure, three years is a long time.

Three years, over in Germany, so you didn't really see each other a lot.

You were like from age 18 to 21.

Yeah, I returned – when did I get out – couple of months after I turned 21.

Yeah, July of '91. How was your readjustment to civilian life?

It wasn't too bad. I took a few weeks off and then I just started working again. I've always been someone who can't not work –

Where did you go to work?

Umm, my Aunt, actually worked at a Walgreen's, manager, and she got me a job at a Walgreen's. So at first I was working at a Walgreen's, in retail, well, in the stocking, working at the register, all that kind of stuff. And then I was starting to go to school.

Did you use the G I Bill?

Yes, I did.

And where did you go to school?

Moraine Valley Community College for a little bit and then I got my degree at Prairie State College.

So did you go like two years to Moraine?

About two years.

Where is Prairie State – I don't know.

In Chicago Heights.

What classes were you taking?

I primarily focused all around, some General Ed, but my primary focus was on science, biologies, things like that. I had originally intended on becoming a nurse, so it was all focused on that kind of classes. As it so happens I became a Dental Hygienist - still a lot of the same classes needed.

Right. So how long were you in school – four-year curriculum?

All told it's four years – umm, two years in each place. Two years at Moraine Valley and another two years at Prairie State. But there was a several year gap between Moraine Valley and Prairie State, where I started working in the trades – doing carpentry work, roofing, roof work –

Oh, really?

Siding, soffit fascia -- and than kind of stuff.

Why did you not continue – how come there was a gap?

Bills started getting in the way – you start getting some bills --

Oh, were you married?

I was not married at the time, so bills started piling up; I started to pay the bills so I started doing less school and working more – and then that just became working all the time, you know –

So you just sort of drifted into it?

Yeah, and I kinda drifted into that. Then I was in my early 30s, I said, enough of crawling around on roofs any more and working in the winter time in Chicago – outside --

Uh-huh, right.

- so that's when I said I gotta get back into school. So that's when I got into Prairie State College and I went to their dental hygiene school.

Did that take two years?

Yes, it's a two-year program.

They took your other credits?

Yes. They took all my other credits. I think I had to update one biology class, so that was good. They were able to take all the credits that I had already obtained.

That was good, yes, it really helps – well, you didn't wait too long.

No, thank goodness. I think nowadays in today's world they probably would not have accepted it. I would have had to have started all over again.

Probably.

So that's a good thing.

But you also had your military service with medical – that should have counted.

Surprisingly it accounted for a few classes, but it didn't account for much. I mean, the experience of being in the military and having that experience – but as far as getting any type of certifications or licensure, it really didn't – it counted for a couple of classes – basic classes. It wasn't a whole lot, surprisingly.

All right. Have you had contact with fellow veterans over the years?

Just my one main buddy – the one friend.

Are you a member of any veterans' organizations today?

I don't have anything in like American Legion, but I am a member of an organization called Team Red White and Blue.

What is that?

It's just a veterans' organization that is—for active and veteran personnel – and all they do is – it's just a get together kind of thing. They do a lot of working out, running, bicycles, things like that. It's just a hey, let's get together and work out together.

It's not a formal organization?

I don't know how formal it is – its called TEAM RWB.

How did you hear about it?

I was searching through Facebook or something like that and I saw this -- what is this thing ? – and I clicked on it, you know, Team, Red White and Blue – it's all around the country but they have –

That's what I was gonna ask – it is around the country – national.

Yeah, it is all around the country, but it's basically – kind of like a get-together; their primary focus is getting out and doing things – working out, running, doing marathons –

Physical activity.

Physical activity, riding bikes, things like that. It's really about kinda just getting out of the house and doing stuff.

First time I heard of that.

I'd consider joining an American Legion, but I have never done that yet.

Or VFW – because you were in Germany.

VFW, something.

Now the VFW accepts more servicemen; before you had to serve overseas; but they're changed that.

Well, right, but unfortunately, their men and women are dying off.

Right, people your age are not joining; their membership is declining. All

Those organizations – whether its the Lions, Elks or the Moose.

Any other stories about your service that you care to share?

I think the biggest thing, my claim to fame, I guess, I like to say – when I was over in Germany it was the end of the Cold War, so the Berlin Wall fell when I was over there.

Did you see it or did you go there?

I saw it; I have a couple of pieces of –chunks of the Berlin Wall that I still have today.

That's interesting.

It's my claim to fame, I guess, I always tell people.

So you went to see it after it went down – of course you saw it standing too.

Standing, yeah, it was pretty wild – a wild experience because people in West Germany really weren't too keen on it. Not that they didn't want people, but you got all this influx of people. I always say to people it would be as if the United States opened up the southern border and just told everyone, come on in; no checks or balances. And that's what happened. When it fell, it was literally a mad rush because people didn't know how long it was gonna last, so they wanted to get out of East Berlin; they wanted to get out of there. This could last a day and next thing you know we're back under –

But they were all Germans.

But they were all Germans, but now today – my brother was there a couple of years ago and everything is perfectly fine and normal, you know.

Pausing for reflections – how do you think your military experience affected your life?

Umm, it probably – it's made me a very trustworthy, faithful, I guess you could say, honorable person – committed – when you say you're going to do something, you do it, kind of thing. I am never late for anything; drives me absolutely insane to be late – because that was trained into me – punctuality and that kind of stuff. I think the military in general just gives you a sense of responsibility – being responsible for yourself and your actions.

So it had a positive effect.

Very positive, oh, yeah, in a heartbeat, I would – people always ask me if I would do it again, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Knowing everything – in a heartbeat, I would go back in for sure.

You were fortunate because it wasn't wartime; if it was, you might have a different opinion.

You know, I don't know. I don't think so, honestly. I have – I like to consider myself one of the more patriotic people in the world. I get goose bumps to this day every time I hear the National Anthem. I still get goose bumps.

Yeah, I feel that way.

I bought a house, closed on a Thursday, that Friday morning I went and dug the hole and put my flagpole up and have flown a flag since.

Good for you.

So, I think – I think you almost have an obligation for the sacrifices that were done for this country to serve and do your part. So I think no matter what would be going on, I would serve again. When 9-11 happened I went back to the Recruiting Station and tried to get back in.

Really – were you too old at that time?

My knee was – they didn't want me back in because of my knee.

What happened to your knee?

Probably running and everything in the military, it just – got arthritis in the family, so my knee was a problem, you know, so they didn't want to take me back in; my right knee.

Otherwise they would have?

Otherwise I would have; if they would have accepted me I would have gone back in a heartbeat – in a heartbeat – you attack my country, then, sorry, I must take up arms and defend it, you know.

Yeah. Good for you. So what are the life lessons that you learned from your military service?

Life lessons – oh, mercy, I don't know – like I said be loyal, be responsible –

Like responsibility, discipline –

Be disciplined – if you're going to do something, do it. If you say you're going to do it, commit to do it; don't do it haphazard; be committed to whatever you're going to do.

Okay, that's it, on my part. If there's anything else you feel you want to add, we can always put it in, but I think you've been pretty thorough. We had a good interview and I thank you very much for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

Thank you, I appreciate it, very much.

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