

**Veteran:** NELSON, B. J.  
**Service Branch:** AIR FORCE  
**Interviewer:** DeVore, Danielle  
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**Highlights of Service:** **Korean War Period; Staff Sergeant; Radio Repairman; Served in England**

Interviewer: This is Danielle Devore with Mr. B. J. Nelson for Mr. Edwards' History 1302. My first question is, how did you enlist.

Veteran: The Korean War broke out at the end of June 1950. I knew I was going to be drafted, so I enlisted in the Air Force on the first day of August 1950.

Interviewer: Why did you pick the Air Force?

Veteran: Because I wanted a bed to sleep in every night and not be wallering around in the mud in the infantry. I had gone to a military school, and I knew I would be called up and put in the infantry.

Interviewer: Did you have any friends join?

Veteran: I was the only one that went at that time.

Interviewer: Were you in Baytown when you enlisted?

Veteran: I lived in Highlands, and I enlisted in Baytown.

Interviewer: How long after that were you called to go?

Veteran: Within about three days I went into Houston and took my physical. After I took my physical, they shipped me out about eleven o'clock that night.

Interviewer: At the time that you enlisted, how did you feel about the war?

Veteran: I was ready to fight. There's something about the Korea War era. We were just a little too young for the Second World War, and we kinda felt like we got cheated

out of being able to fight, so the Korean War came along and it was about five years after the Second World War was over. I was about fifteen when the Second World War was over.

Interviewer: Where was your boot camp?

Veteran: From Houston I went to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, and was there about two weeks. They issued uniforms and got shots and everything, and then I was shipped to Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas, to finish my basic training.

Interviewer: How was basic training?

Veteran: It was terrible. It was hot, and we did a lot of marching. We had a lot of gasses. We weren't mistreated, but it's not a pleasant thing. You'd get up about four-thirty in the morning, and you were on the go until about nine o'clock at night.

Interviewer: How long did basic training last?

Veteran: About seven or eight weeks.

Interviewer: Did ya'll have a platoon?

Veteran: No, we had squads.

Interviewer: How many people were in your squad?

Veteran: It's the same size as a platoon in the Army, so that must be about forty people or something like that.

Interviewer: What kind of food did they serve?

Veteran: It was decent food, but it wasn't anything spectacular, and you didn't have much time to eat. You'd go in and get your food, sit down and eat in a hurry, and then get up and dump the tray out. If you didn't clean your tray, you had to go back and sit down and eat until it was all gone, and then you were late for the next thing coming along, so you had to eat what they gave you. The food wasn't all that bad, but I wouldn't have paid a lot of money for it.

Interviewer: Where were you stationed after boot camp?

Veteran: I was sent to radio school at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, and graduated from there in April 1951 and was transferred to Castle Air Force Base, Merced, California. I joined to the 93<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Wing there. I was there until mid-January of 1952. I got my overseas order and went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and from there {clock starts 'clanging' in the background, obscuring several of the following statements} transferred to \_\_\_\_\_. I worked out of 7<sup>th</sup> Air Division Headquarters at South \_\_\_\_\_ London. We were stationed at a little RAF station up in Norfolk Country up on the North Sea. I was with the 39<sup>th</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ Operation Squadron, Detachment One. We had regular control there.

Interviewer: What was radio school like? What was the daily life there?

Veteran: They had three shifts. One shift went to school from six to noon, one shift went from noon to six, and the other shift went from six to midnight. You rotated shifts, I think it was a week at a time—maybe a month at a time on a shift, and then you'd swap from days to noon to six, etc. There was six hours of school, plus you had your other duties like going out to march, clean things up. It wasn't bad. It was a good, fast-paced school. I went up there in October and left in April, so I was there around six and a half months.

Interviewer: What kind of radios were you working with?

Veteran: Any kind of airborne radios. I can't remember the names and nomenclature of all of that now. It was for two-way communication in aircraft or any kind of radio. The ones we used in the little reel-controlled aircraft we had, it controlled the controls as well as the parachutes. When we got ready bring the aircraft down, you'd hit the kill switch and it would kill the engine, pop the parachutes open, and then parachute down. The little reel-controlled aircraft wasn't but about twelve feet long and had about a twelve foot wingspan, and it traveled about 375 miles an hour.

Interviewer: After you graduated from the radio class, where did you go?

Veteran: Castle Air Force Base in California. I was with the 93<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Wing.

Interviewer: What did you do up there?

Veteran: I was a radio repairman until January of 1952. Then I was shipped over to England and spent about two years and ten months.

Interviewer: How was England?

Veteran: Oh, it was nice. That was good duty.

Interviewer: The weather was nice?

Veteran: No, the weather wasn't nice—it was cold.

Interviewer: And how was England different from the states?

Veteran: It's a different country. It would be like I would ask you how was Africa different from the United States. It's just a different country. And then, too, things were still rationed in England, even back then, because there was a lot of buildings still bombed out that hadn't gotten everything fixed up. I've been back numerous times since then, and it's much different now than it was back in the fifties. We made good pay, and things were cheap in England, so we got along better financially in England than we did here in the states.

Interviewer: In England you still did the radio control?

Veteran: Yeah, radio control.

Interviewer: Were there any dangerous aspects of the job?

Veteran: No.

Interviewer: Was there any point where you just wanted to quit and give up?

Veteran: From what? You don't stop and give up—they'd shoot you for that. No, I enjoyed the service. Before I went in, I worked for Diamond Shamrock Company, and I had a good job to come back to. Had I not had a job, I may have made it a career, because I was making rank relatively fast, and I enjoyed the service.

Interviewer: And what was your rank?

Veteran: I was a staff sergeant when I discharged.

Interviewer: How high is a staff sergeant?

Veteran: That's an E-5. Back then you had seven grades of enlisted personnel, and I was the fifth grade. I had two more grades to go as enlisted. They wanted me to go to Officer's Candidate School, but I would have had to reenlist for an additional four years, and I didn't want to do that. But had I stayed in the service, I would have gotten commissioned as an officer.

Interviewer: What was your part in the war?

Veteran: I kept the radios in working order and that was my job. There was three of us. I had two men working for me, and that's what we did. We just made sure the radios were in good shape. We had about twenty of those planes on the airfield, and we had to keep the radios ready for them at all times.

Interviewer: Did you ever go to Korea or have any friends go?

Veteran: Oh, yeah, I've had a lot of friends go, but I didn't go.

Interviewer: What was the most memorable thing you did?

Veteran: The most memorable thing I did was I met Queen Elizabeth. Shortly after I got to England about the first of February 1952, King George died within ten days after I got there. The whole country shut down for about two weeks, and so we had two weeks off, and we went down to London and spent a couple of weeks just sight-seeing. In 1953, there was a bad storm and tidal wave that engulfed the East Coast of England and the West Coast of Holland, and it killed a fair amount of people. One of the jobs that we had was picking up dead bodies for a few days, and then the Army set up a field kitchen—they had a tent for the kitchen—because the storm had tore all the houses up and the infrastructure was pretty well damaged. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip came around, and for some reason they put me in charge of this kitchen, even though I was in the Air Force and the Army was running it, I was the ranking NCO. The queen and Prince Phillip came around and told us we were doing a fine job and patted us on the back. They were just seeing the damage that was done in that area. We only had twenty-six

Air Force men at that RAF station, and the Army had about thirty or forty people. We took care of gunnery ranges. The radio aircraft we used were target planes for gunnery practice, and we had three gunnery ranges that we took care of, and we also took care of radios on bombing ranges that the RAF and USAF. We had three bombing ranges that we took care of, too, scattered up and down the coast. Anyway, the queen came by and inspected the damage and came by the field kitchen and told us we were doing a good job.

Interviewer: At that time, ya'll had other jobs besides working on radios?

Veteran: No, this was an emergency. It was just like if a hurricane was to hit here, it would be like calling extra Guard up. We were just helping English civilians and police pick up bodies, and then the people had to be fed so we fed them in our kitchen.

Interviewer: Did you make any long-term friends in the service?

Veteran: No, I never was stationed with anybody that I knew around here. We were shipped into that unit overseas from bases all over the United States. There were four of us living in a Quonset hut. One of the fellas was from New York, one was from Boston, one was from Missouri, and myself, and I've never contacted them. I've been to Boston a couple of times and looked in the phone book and never did see my roommate's name, and the other two fellas were career-military, so I don't know where they went. I came back before they did. I never did see any of them again. We used to have to call in every morning for a weather report to an RAF base down in Midlands, and I met a fella in England. My wife and I went back over there in 1979, twenty-five years after I came back to the states, and a couple of years later I met a fella that I used to talk to on the phone when I'd call in about twice a week, and this was the fella that answered the phone all the time. When we went back in '79, we went back up to the base I'd been stationed at, and it had been deactivated, and one of the RAF buildings was a pub, and I saw him. I knew who he was, but we weren't that good a friends when we were there. We'd just see each other on base.

Interviewer: What did ya'll do for fun in England? What was the nightlife like?

Veteran: Chase women! No. This little town we were stationed in was kind of in the middle of nowhere. These bases were built during the Second World War as fighter bases all up and down the English coast. Four of us had a two-bedroom apartment in London, or about 110 miles northeast of London. At least once a month, we go down to London for a long weekend. We'd get a three-day pass. We had a good club on the base where I was, and we'd go to the RAF club, and we'd have dates with girls and go to the movies. There was plenty to do.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

Veteran: Like I said, I enjoyed the service. It was a learning experience. While I was in England, the University of Maryland had branches over there on the Air Force bases, and I got some college hours while I was in the service over there.

Interviewer: What was your degree in? What kind of classes did you take?

Veteran: I was taking business administration.

Interviewer: And did you finish it?

Veteran: No. I got a couple of years of college is all I got.

Interviewer: When you were in England, did the people accept you?

Veteran: Oh, yeah. They're nice people. I've got some good friends in England that I met when we went back over. In fact, we've got a family that's been over here to visit us four or five times, and my wife and I have been back to England to visit from two weeks to six weeks, probably a dozen times since the late 70s and early 80s. A family that we met over there in 1979 has been over here to visit us about four or five times and are coming again next month. We've made some good friends over the years in England and Scotland. As far as the UK, I really prefer Scotland as the best place over there as far as I'm concerned, because I'm from Scottish ancestry.

Interviewer: How would you compare everything in boot camp to England? What were the major differences?

Veteran: The basic training is the worst part of military life, because you're just pushed, pushed, pushed all the time. When I was overseas, it was like a job. You'd go to work at eight o'clock in the morning and get off at four thirty in the afternoon. As I said, we had twenty-six enlisted men and one major up there at the base. About half the men were married and half were single. When we couldn't fly the planes, the single men would take all the duties and let the married men off, and that way when we wanted a few days off, they'd cover for us and we could take off. We had a good C.O. He never bothered us any. As long as we did our job, he was really lenient about letting us having time off.

Interviewer: Did you fly any?

Veteran: I was on flying status, but I had to get my flying time in usually on C-47s flying R&R hops to Germany or Denmark.

Interviewer: And R&R hops are?

Veteran: Rest and relaxation. I had to have four hours flying time a month. When I couldn't get my flying time in on C-47s, I had to fly B-50 bombers, and that's about a twenty-hour mission. I didn't like to fly that one, but I had to make a few of those long flights to get my flight pay.

Interviewer: Where did ya'll fly to?

Veteran: On the B-50 bombers we just cruised up and down off of the Russian coast. You got a red light on the plane, and if the red light goes on you're going to war, and we always had an atomic bomb on the 'gullet' on the B-50. We always had a designated target, so if the red light was to come on, we just headed to our target. You don't expect to get back from something like that. They say one plane, one target, and the mission had paid for itself, so you hope the red light never came on.

Interviewer: You went on this once a month?

Veteran: You had to fly an average of four hours a month, and you flew by quarters. When I was about to run out of time in my quarter, I'd sign onto a bomb crew and fly that one so I'd get all of my time in. I really preferred to fly the short



flights—two-hour flights to Denmark or a two-hour flight to Germany or Austria taking guys to R&R, because that way I'd get my flying time in, get to go over there and play around and have a good time. We traveled quite extensively while we were over there. We traveled in Europe and all over England. I wish I'd been married then. I wish my wife had been with me. We met in '50 while I was stationed in Wichita Falls. It would have been nice if she had been with me, because we could have really traveled at the expense of the government.

Interviewer: When you were in the planes or on the base, were you always on alert for war?

Veteran: We always had an emergency war plan. My emergency war plan job was to fly as a crew member on a transport plane hauling dependents back to the states, because there were a lot of dependents over there. A lot of men had their wives and kids over there, so in case a war broke out, we'd have flown all of them people back to the states. That was my emergency war plan job, which wasn't a bad job.

Interviewer: Did ya'll ever practice flying them back, or did you have just drills?

Veteran: No. You just knew what your job was, who to report to, where to report to.

Interviewer: When the Korean War was over, were you already back in the states?

Veteran: I was in England when peace was declared in Korea. They quit fighting in 1953, and I got discharged the eighteenth of June, 1954. Three years, ten months, eighteen days. Two years, eight months, sixteen days overseas.

Interviewer: Did anything change after peace was declared?

Veteran: No, same-o, same-o. I had a brother that was in the Marine Corps that was in Korea. He joined up July 24, 1950, and before July of the next year, he was back in the states shot up. He's dead now. He died of cancer a couple of years ago.

Interviewer: Would you do it all again?

Veteran: I don't regret any of it. At seventy-two years old, I wouldn't do it again now, but I don't regret it now. I had a good job in the service, and I enjoyed the service

life. I got to see a lot, met a lot of nice people, and got to go to a lot of places I never would have been. I've been to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia.

Interviewer: You went to those places while you were in the service?

Veteran: Yeah.

Interviewer: Like just on trips?

Veteran: No, I was getting my flying time in.

Interviewer: When you flew to Pakistan, were you on the same alert?

Veteran: No, I was just getting my flying time, and that's the sorriest place I've ever been in my life. Terrible. I've been to Saudi Arabia and several countries in North Africa, and Pakistan is by far the worst place I've ever been. Just filthy, dirty—dead people laying on the street.

Interviewer: What year was this?

Veteran: '52, '53, or '54. India got their independence from Great Britain in 1947 or '48, and they divided Pakistan and Bangladesh because they were the Muslim countries, and India was mostly Hindi or whatever the Indians were, and they've been fighting ever since then.

Interviewer: Anything else you'd like to add? I've asked all of my questions.

Veteran: I really believe it would be a good thing if every kid, and I think women, too, ought to spend a time in the service like that. Not in the fighting part. Most kids when they get out of high school have no idea what they're gonna be. If I asked you what you really wanted to do when you got out of high school other than go to school, most kids wouldn't know. When I graduated from high school, I went to college on a football scholarship. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I took the easiest courses I could take. I think if these young people could spend eighteen months to two years in the service of some kind—whether it would be like a Peace Corps type thing or a military-type service, whatever—it matures them and gives them time to grow up, get away from Mama, and kind of be out on his own before they had to make decisions about what they were gonna do with the rest of

their lives. When you get out of high school and go to college, you're not really set on what your degree is going to be in. If you go four or five years and get a degree and then don't like it, you've wasted your time—a lot of time and money. Money is not the big object as far as work goes. I would rather have a job paying less money if I enjoy it than have a job I hate and make a lot of money. The mark of success for most Americans is how much money can they make, and that's really not what's important. If you have something that you just hate to do, no matter how much money you make, if you're miserable and can't be happy in what you're doing, you'd be better off to go in the service. That's my philosophy of life. {END OF SIDE A }

{SIDE B BEGINS }

I enjoyed the service. I've been a lot places I never would have been, and it kind of builds your interest up in traveling. We have three daughters, and my wife and I and the three girls have been to every state in the United States but two that I know of—Delaware and North Dakota. My wife and I and all three of the girls have been to England and Scotland, and a couple of the kids have traveled to Europe. My wife and I have traveled all over Europe and to Israel and went on to China. It broadens your horizons. I was raised in the thirties, and if you got two hundred miles from home in the thirties you were doing real well. I think the Second World War peaked the interest of a lot of men who were in the service as far as traveling and seeing things, because a lot of them never got out of their home county. After I came back, I went back to work at Diamond, and we were eventually bought by Occidental Petroleum, and I retired from Occidental Petroleum in 1992. The service was a good learning and educational experience, and it was a broadening of the interest experience. You know, all the people—both men and women—in Israel have to go into the service for a couple of years. I think it would give them an opportunity to mature and know more about what they want to do with the rest of their lives. I know when you graduated, you probably had a higher level of maturity than my generation did, because we were raised up during the depression, and just hadn't seen anything. We didn't have TV and had very few radios back then. I didn't have any of my brothers in the Vietnam War. I had one brother that was drafted between the Korean War and the Vietnam War, and he was stationed over on Okinawa, and then when he came

back he was called up again during the Cuban Missile Crisis back in the early sixties. He was out before the Vietnam War started. My youngest brother never did have to go. He was in school, so he dodged the draft. But I don't regret any time at all that I spent in the service. It was an enjoyable experience.

Interviewer: Are you aware that this conversation was recorded and that the tape and the transcription will be placed in the Lee College library?

Veteran: That's fine. I haven't given any military secrets away.

{TAPE STOPPED—END OF INTERVIEW}