

Captain Michael B Berger

Born: Aug 28, 1940

Died:

Period of Service: Viet Nam

Sources: Service
questionnaire, J.Gay
Interview

Enlisted in Marine Corps in April 1961 in Madison, WI, released on November 1, 1965 at Marine Corps Air Force base in El Toro, CA. Trained at Pensacola, FL where he became 2nd Lieutenant.

Joined American Legion Post 402 in 1991.

Founded a company in Menominee, MI, making large timber harvesting machines now used throughout the country. Owns a 1933 fully restored Wacko biplane.

See attached John Gay interview and pictures.



VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Michael B. Berger

Conducted by Mr. John Gay

September 18, 2011

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We are with Mike Berger at his home on Green Bay Road on Washington Island, Wisconsin on September 18, 2011. We're going to ask Mike what he was doing prior to going to the service, when he went in, what he did and so forth. Mike, you're in charge.

Thanks, John.

I was going to the University of Wisconsin. I was working my way through school, so I had a number of jobs while I was in school. A little bit unhappy, not knowing where I wanted to be career-wise. I'd always had an interest in airplanes from the time I was a young child, and I always had a fascination with flying military airplanes. One day I was walking through the student union and here are the Marine recruiters with posters on the walls of jets flying off carriers. I stepped in and asked what it was all about.

And they looked pretty sharp ...

In their dress blues. Well, sixty days later I was in Pensacola, to do the short story.

What year was this?

That was...[Feb. 1961]. I joined the Marine Corps out of the Madison Reserve unit, and was transferred down to Pensacola for flight training. I arrived in Pensacola in very early April and started my program there.

What did you go in as?

I started in the MARCAP program. There was a period of time when both the Navy and the Marine Corps took pilot recruits who were not college graduates. I had not graduated; I only had two years in. But if you had two years of college you could qualify for the MARCAP or NAVCAP program – Naval Aviation or Marine Aviation Cadet Program.

So you went in and didn't get commissioned until you completed the flight training program. But you did have various levels as you went through the program. We wore a cadet insignia on your chest. When you finished your primary training you had one bar. When you finished your carrier qualifications you got two bars. Then, when you completed the whole program you were commissioned a second lieutenant, or in the case of the Navy you were commissioned as an ensign.

So I went down to Pensacola. I finished the pre-flight program, took a little extra time for me because I needed a little additional math training. It was the best thing that could have happened to me, because when I got into the serious academics of the flight training program I had a much stronger math background, which was required for the engineering and aerodynamics courses.

How long did that last – that training?

The initial training, before you flew, I believe that was three months.

Pretty intense, then.

It was, every day. Besides academics you had military training and drills, physical training – a lot of physical training. It consumed every day, all day.

How many guys were in your class?

We had about twenty to a unit.

So it was pretty tutorial, I'd expect.

It was. It was quite well organized and I was impressed. It was the first time I had been exposed to any military discipline. As it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I regret that many more kids didn't have the opportunity, even in this day and age, not to have the opportunity to have some military discipline instilled in their character.

A lot of the guys have mentioned that, and I think it's probably pretty valid.

I would think so. I would hope so.

Once I completed [the initial] part of the program I went into the flight portion. Initially the training was in what we called the mainside – the main base of Pensacola. Then we went to an outlying field called Sauflley Field, and that's where we did our flying. We would fly half a day and we'd have half a day of academics. It was right on the beach; really a nice base. And, again, we had classrooms. At that portion of our training most of the academics was involved in navigation. And, again, the mechanics of flying and also the memorization of the various procedures.

They are very strict on procedures. When you went through your training exercises you had certain aircraft performance training that you would do, and you'd have to maneuver to a very specific set of instructions. We had all these different maneuvers we had to memorize, and they were quite strict on having it done right.

What kind of trainer did you have?

I flew the T-34 Mentor. It was a Beechcraft, single engine training airplane. They still fly them today. It's considered one of the early war birds. It's not a high performance war bird; it's a very basic war bird. You still see them flying around today. The civilians have some of them.

I did fairly well in the flight training program and the academics.

After my primary training I was sent to basic training. I went right into the jet pipeline. There were... [several] ways you could go. Everybody went through the same primary training. From there you would go to a piston-powered – bigger piston-powered airplane; the T-28's, the Trojans. Or you could go to the jet program. From the T-28 program you could then reroute into jets for your advance training, or you could go to

helicopters. So you had this bit of a pipeline. [Once in] the jet program you generally stayed right in the jet pipeline..., which I did.

Once I completed the basic training I went to Meridian, Mississippi. The base was brand new at the time. We were one of the first classes to go there. I was there about the first of the year.

Of ...

That would have been 1962, very early 1962. I remember being there in the fall, early winter. I can't remember the specific dates. I remember it was cold and the weather was bad. We had a lot of restrictions on flying because of the foggy weather.

Where is Meridian? Is it on the coast?

No. Meridian, Mississippi is inland – near Jackson, Mississippi. It was a brand new base. There I flew the T-2J Buckeye, which was a North American design two-seat, tandem, single engine jet trainer. That airplane was converted to a twin engine which made it perform quite a bit better. But it was still a great performing airplane – and it was a jet! It was quite exciting to be in.

How fast were you going when that thing was opened up?

Well, if you were flat-out at your optimum altitude I suppose you could get 325 or 350 knots, maybe. It wasn't terribly fast as jets go, but it was a trainer.

We did a lot of navigation work. That's when we started our formation flying, our acrobatics. The last part of the program was carrier qualifying. That's the first aircraft I took aboard a carrier.

Was that kind of spooky the first time?

Well, the interesting thing is you train so extensively that by the time the actual event happens it's almost a little anti-climactic. It's still exciting, trust me – you look at that little carrier down there and you're going to actually land on it! But you've done so much of your, what we call, FCLP training, which was Field Carrier Landing Practice. ... When we finished all our training there. Still on the same airplane, we went back down to Pensacola. We did our training at Site 6 at Eglin Air Force Base, which wasn't that far away. We would fly over there very early in the morning when the air was quite still. I remember the interesting aspect of that was landing on the same runway that Billy Mitchell used when he was training with his group to take off from the carrier to do the and it was in the same condition it was in when he was there.

That was in Eglin.

It was in Eglin Air Force Base – it was Site 6, which is one of the outlying fields.

We were down there at Apalachicola one evening after we'd visited our son at Auburn. We were sitting on a fishing vessel on the Apalachicola River. It was evening and we'd had dinner. This old sea captain, Billy Holiday, was treating us to some flounder and some shrimp that he'd picked up that day. In the evening we were sitting talking in this little, tiny galley. And a couple of jets went overhead – I think about 40' above us. And we almost went right through the roof! I learned about Eglin Air Force Base in a hurry!

It was a great place. We'd go there...very early in the morning and we'd land and brief for our landing practice that day. Again, you had the outline about the shape of the size of an aircraft carrier and where the wires were – the arresting wires that you would be aiming for. And you had a LSO, Landing Signal Officer, on the ground. He was watching your approaches. You'd be in radio communications with him and he'd be critiquing you on the way down – you're high, you're fast, you're low, you're slow – making sure you were getting proficient in flying that carrier approach. And after that was completed, then we went off and actually landed on the carrier. I landed on the carrier Antietam. It was... the last use of that carrier for cadet training. I think within a very short time thereafter the Antietam was retired and a different carrier was used.

Was that in the Gulf?

That was in the Gulf. Actually, that was off the coast of Corpus Christi that we had [carrier] landing... qualification.

This was still 196 ...?

This was 1962 – it would be more the summer of 1962.

Oh. We did gunnery down there, too. That's the other thing we did flying out of Pensacola. We did gunnery – air-to-air gunnery. That would be shooting at a target that was towed behind another airplane. That was the only down; well, I had a couple of downs in the course training, which was not unusual for one reason or another. [If] you didn't do satisfactorily that day – getting the squirrel-cage pattern you have to fly. You have to picture four airplanes doing this circular pattern while flying forward at 250 knots, perhaps, and being able to keep everything in perspective. It took me a while to catch on to that. They gave me an extra flight or two and eventually I did. Actually, they made me fly the target airplane. You can watch everybody and what they were doing.

And you hoped they were pretty accurate!

Yes!

But once the carrier qualifications were done, that completed your basic training. Then you went on to advanced.

We had two bases for advanced training. One was in Beeville, Texas and one was in Kingsville, Texas.

Where is Beeville – is that short for Brownsville?

No, Beeville is a separate little town. It's still there. I think the base is closed now and they consolidated the two bases into one at Kingsville. It's not too far from the Gulf, not too far from Corpus Christi, so it would be north and probably a little bit west of Corpus Christi. I don't think there was any other larger town near it.

There's not much of anything there.

No. It was pretty much a dedicated training base, although again the town is still there and flourishing. I think I drove through it five or six years ago just to see what was there. But the base was closed.

So once I got there we transitioned to the F9F Cougar, which was basically a Korean War-era airplane – a little post-Korea.

Who made that?

It was a swept-wing jet. It was made by Grumman, or as we affectionately called it: the Grumman iron works. Because it was one of the toughest, strongest airplanes built. It used – unlike the current jet engines, which are axial-flow engines; they have a compressor in the front and everything flows through the engine. The engines on those airplanes, the early jets, were centrifugal-flow engines that had a compressor very similar to a washing machine rotor. You tapped air off of that through some burner cans and then through the turbine. It was very rugged, very dependable good airplane.

We did both instrument flying – that's when we got certified for instrument flight. Again, we did aerobatics. We did a lot of air-to-air work. We did a lot of formation work. And the last part of your program in advanced was to take that aboard ship also. There was another model – the F9F-8T, which was the twin-seat trainer version, and the 8B was a single-seat airplane. We took that single-seat version aboard ship. So that was the other carrier-qual that I did. Again, the same boat – we went aboard the Antietam.

The interesting thing about the Antietam was that it had hydraulic catapults. And unlike all the newer boats, which had steam catapults which could launch a heavier airplane and I think an overall better catapult, the hydraulic catapults were a very sudden acceleration. The steam would gradually accelerate you, even though it's over a short distance and it was quick, the hydraulic cats were even quicker.

It's like the thing was shot out of a cannon.

There was an expression that if they made it 50' longer it would be better than sex! It was quite a sensation which you got launched off the hydraulic cat.

I'll bet it was.

It was great. And, again, we did gunnery with that plane also.

From there, then, the next step was advanced fighter tactics, and on the same base. We had different squadrons within that base. I think it was in VT24 when I flew the F9's, or maybe it was the VT26. And then we went to fly the F11 Tiger, which was

another Grumman airplane. It was marginal, but supersonic with an afterburner. It was a beautiful performing airplane. There we concentrated on fighter tactics.

Usually we flew two flights a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. And you flew – you had a small group of people: you'd have an instructor and usually three wingmen. So there would be four of us total and we would concentrate on fighter tactics.

All this is going on with training morning, day and night?

Yes. You did a lot of night flying – night-formation flying. Again, instrument flying and instrument approaches. Not too much in the F11. That was strictly daytime and strictly fighter tactics. And a lot of air-to-air combat work.

Did they separate out the guys who were going to fly bombers, or is this all fighter?

It was all fighter. If you were going to fly a multi-engine airplane, generally you were in the other pipeline. So you would – and I can't speak too much about that – but you would leave your primary trainer, the T34. You would go to the T28, which is again a single-engine, a radial engine. I think it was an R1340 – probably a 1200 horsepower engine, which is significant horsepower in the T28 Trojan. From there you would go to the S2F if you were going to fly multi-engine airplanes. So you'd train in various transport airplanes.

So once you made the earlier decision, that pipeline was yours.

It generally was yours to stay. And if for some reason you didn't complete it, they generally would not drop you back into another category. You would just be discharged from the aviation end and you would serve in a ground position. Or in the case of the Navy, you would have some sort of sea duty.

And we had quite a few fellows drop out. A number were killed. The training was far more hazardous years ago than it is now.

So they were killed in training.

Yes. We had a number of accidents, and I lost a few friends that way. We were just in training. And subsequent to that there were a number who were lost in other accidents, not combat related. Again, it's a hazardous thing.

Anyway, I finished the F11 training and was awarded my naval aviator wings in a ceremony at the base.

Now this base is where?

In Beeville. The whole last part of my training was in Beeville.

From there I was given thirty days' leave. That would have been right about November 1. They advertised an 18-month training program and it took me almost 18 months to the day to get through.

But you picked up a whole lot of knowledge in those 18 months.

Yes. There wasn't much in the way of leave. We have a little bit of leave over Christmas, but it was quite intensive. And it was an aggressive program. We operated a little differently than the Air Force did.

The Air Force did some of their advance training once you were assigned to a squadron. They had training squadrons that would take you into the airplane that you would fly in the squadron that you would be assigned to. Whereas we would do our training with the squadron in the squadron airplane. We would train right with the squadron we were assigned to.

I was sent out to El Toro, California. The base is now closed.

You specialized in closing bases, did you?

Well, the military specialized especially in later years in closing bases as the budgets were more restrained. And we'll probably see that sometime in the future – more and more of our bases being closed. But it was a great base.

My first squadron was VMA311, which was the Douglas Skyhawk – the A4. We went through a training program, both learning the mechanics of the airplane, the systems. Then we had a training syllabus. In order to receive what was known as an MOS, Military Occupation Specialty. In the case of the A4, that was an air-to-ground airplane. It was an attack MOS. So we had to complete a training syllabus which included dropping bombs, some gunnery air-to-ground with a 20mm cannon we had on the airplane, rockets and other armament that we had to qualify in. So over a period of months we did various training out of there. Every quarter we'd deploy either to Yuma, Arizona to the training weapons ranges there, or up to Fallon, Nevada. And we did training up in Fallon as well. Again, they had instrumented weapons ranges there so you could do your gunnery. They could count the hits that would go through the targets. We had bombs that simulated the aerodynamics of an actual 250 or 500 pound bomb, so we'd have all these smaller bombs with little smoke charges in them.

Dick Sheehy was telling me yesterday that he accidentally dropped one near a rancher's house down in Texas and started a prairie fire. He was in the doghouse for a long time. He said he never sweated so much in his life!

We did most of our training out in the desert, so there wasn't much to burn out there! But the deployments were always fun. We drank a lot of beer and stayed up late at night, and got up really early in the morning to fly your training.

You signed up for four years?

Three years after flight school. Actually we signed a six-year contract. But with three years of active duty required after your training. That's kind of inefficient back then. It had been less than that for some people in earlier years. But we had a three-year-after-completion of flight training. It was a short time. I was surprised that three years

went by so quickly. You'd think: Where did the time go? Then I had to complete the balance of the six-year commitment from the beginning of flight training to the end as a Reserve officer and had to take correspondence courses and whatever.

At this time Vietnam was going on. Were you anticipating being over there?

Actually, not. When I was just finishing my flight training, in fact, when I first got assigned to El Toro, the squadrons were minimally staffed because they had most of the pilots down in Florida in Key West with the possibility of going into Cuba. The Cuban crisis had occurred about that time, with all the subsequent negotiations that were going on. But we were prepared militarily – and not me, because I was a little short of that – but pilots who had just been assigned there earlier wound up being down in Florida waiting for the possibility of an invasion. Once that tension cooled down everybody came back. I had been assigned to the squadron, but we had only a skeleton staffing. The pilots started flowing back in and the squadron came back up to speed.

I went through all my qualifications and got my MOS. Then your average day was flying instrument training hops, chasing other airplanes, acting as a safety observer for other airplanes doing their missions.

But you went up every day?

We were a little bit restricted because of budgetary reasons. We didn't have money for fuel after Cuba. There were some cutbacks. So having fuel for flying was a little bit tight. So we didn't fly every day. Later on, when there was an expectation we would be going into Vietnam, then money became looser and there was more money available for fuel for training.

I can't remember the exact number of months, but it was close to a year. There was another squadron that was rotating back from overseas.

That's another thing I should mention. You would be with a squadron and the squadrons would rotate from Stateside, being based somewhere Stateside, and the Marines had a west coast base and an east coast base then so you'd be either at Cherry Point, North Carolina or you'd be at El Toro.

What do you mean by a squadron? How big is that?

A squadron would have about twelve airplanes and 24 pilots. That would be a squadron. It varies a little bit, but generally that's the size. And you'd have your commanding officer of the squadron – the executive officer – and all the ancillary positions you'd need: your S2 officer, your S4.

Did they have mechanics included?

Oh, yes. We had mechanics and we had electronics specialists.

So personnel-wise you're talking 40, 50 60?

There were probably about 60+ people. You became very attached to one another. It was a very cohesive group.

But at that time another squadron rotated back from overseas. Iwakuni was the primary base for the Marines for the west coast deployment. I was in the third air wing at El Toro, and the first air wing was out in the Far East, out of Japan. Iwakuni was where most of the air wings were based when you were deployed to the Far East. So you would rotate through the Far East.

There was a squadron that was returning – VMA211 – and when that squadron returned they were looking for a cadre of qualified pilots to reform that squadron once it became Stateside. What would happen is after the last deployment personnel would be scattered and you'd go from one assignment to another – two different squadrons – and the squadron being based back Stateside was reformed with a new CO, new Exec Officer, and new personnel.

So I went from 311 to 211, having had a background of flying in the A4. We transitioned from the A4B to the A4C, which is a later model of the Douglas Skyhawk. I stayed in 211 for about another year, and same basic exercises – staying current, staying qualified, and training other pilots.

This is all stateside?

This is all stateside.
And at the end of that year, then ...

We're in 1963 now?

Yes, about the end of 1963 – actually, into early 1964.

They were looking for forward air controllers, and one of the fellows who were in the squadron with me who was transferred out of the squadron into the air group – again, the rotation of personnel carried on. Unless you were frozen in that squadron – and you would freeze with a squadron one year before overseas deployment. And when you were frozen in the squadron they kept all the personnel together and you trained and trained for your overseas deployment.

But I wound up a fairly high-time pilot in the A4, and they were looking for forward air controllers. One of my friends who had been assigned to the group was assigned to forward air controller school. Word came back that they were going to be taking people out of the squadron and sending them out to Camp Pendleton for forward air controller training. And in this case you would be essentially a ground-pounder – you'd be on the ground. You might be flying a small airplane as a spotter, but you'd be the liaison between the attack mission of the aircraft and the people who were on the ground. Being experienced in the airplane you could direct the pilots more precisely to the target.

So you're kind of a spotter?

Yes. I didn't care much for that idea.

It leaves you kind of exposed, doesn't it?

Well, it was all the way around. I wasn't so much concerned with that at the time; I just wanted to keep flying. And about that time there was a posting for a request for jet pilots to transition to the C130. So a number of us from my squadron – VMA211 – volunteered for that assignment. And I was then transferred to VMGR352.

Those are the big ones?

Those are the big four-engine Lockheed C130 Hercules – a great airplane.

Those are essentially big-stuff carrying – they carry tanks and everything?

It thinks if we carried a tank we could carry a small one. You could carry a good load – it was a four-engine turbo-prop. Again, they wanted people with 500 jet hours to transition to those, and I had enough jet time. I went into the 130 training program. It was a great airplane to fly. We wound up doing a lot of missions over to the Far East.

What was your destination, then?

Generally we would go to – again, the Vietnam War was just starting up then. Generally it would be to Japan, Okinawa, Guam, into Iwakuni: Atsugi, which was the naval base in Japan. At that point I had less than a year to go on my three-year contract of active duty after flight school. I was sent over to the group, then, to finish out my last six or so months of active duty.

Although I was assigned to the group, I flew with the C130 squadron – VMGR352. So I had some group assignments. I was the S&C officer – Security and Classified Matter, and I took care of that as a ground job. But my flying job, which involved most of my time, was flying with VMGR352. At that time we started flying into Vietnam.

What is SMC?

Security and Classified Matter.

What did that entail? Is it something you can talk about?

Oh, sure. There were classified documents. There were always communications being passed back and forth between from Washington, D.C. up at headquarters levels down to the squadron levels. Some of this information was classified information, perhaps on the number of airplanes, where the airplanes were going to be deployed, weapons and transporting weapons. Occasionally we would transport nuclear devices.

So you handed all that over to the commanding officer?

Well, there was always a chain of command. There was always someone designated to who this information was to be given to. But it all had to be controlled. And you had to keep records.

So you were responsible. They wanted to have some sort of ability to get to you if you did it wrong.

Right.

There were rows and rows of locked filing cabinets and periodically you had to disseminate this information to one place or another. So I had that as a side duty, and I had a sergeant who basically did most of the work. I would often be off on these missions over the Far East.

I think my last month or so, within my last few months before I was going to get separated I volunteered for a 30-day deployment to Vietnam. I went over to Da Nang. I took an airplane over to Da Nang.

A C130?

A C130. We operated out of Da Nang. I saw a lot of my old squadron buddies because I'd go into Chu Lai and by that time my initial squadron, VMA311, had frozen and they were deployed over to Chu Lai. They were one of the first squadrons to go into the new base at Chu Lai, which was south of Da Nang, up in the northern part of the country. So I'd be carrying loads of supplies in there and I'd see some of my old squadron.

That was neat.

Yes, it was; it was neat. It was tough living conditions, then. They were just living in tents and flying off of an unimproved runway.

Just like the MASH on TV?

Very similar. It wasn't all that far removed, actually, when you think of MASH being in the '50's. Here we were in the early '60's, only ten years later. Conditions were very similar – better, but still similar.

So were you considered, then, still Stateside stationed even though you were traveling there?

Yes. My 30-day deployment was considered a temporary duty, so I was based out of Da Nang.

So were up into 1965?

Yes. We're in 1965.

So I did that until I separated in November of 1965. At that time the airlines – in fact, I'd known even earlier on that the airlines were looking for pilots. Again, just about the time I separated – only for your information, you're probably aware there are Reserve officers and regular officers and, as Reserve officers, we were always encouraged to take a regular commission and have basically a secure job with the Marine Corps. As much as I enjoyed my flying, I didn't intend to make the Marine Corps a permanent career. So I never took a regular commission and stayed a Reserve officer. And just about the time my contract was up, word came down from headquarters they were accepting no resignations of regular officers. You were told that you would resign your commission at any time, but being a regular gave you the security that you were going to be able to stay with the military as a career. And not having that intention I stayed a Reserve officer.

Subsequent to that then I was able to separate at the end of my contract, where many of my colleagues ...

So that happened right after you made your choice?

Yes.

So the airlines were hiring. And with another pilot friend of mine who was also flying C130's we interviewed with the airlines during our days off, in between flights to the Far East. I was hired by American Airlines, and the day I separated from the service, which was November 1, 1965, I started with American Airlines that very same day. So I didn't go one day without ...

Not much down time.

Right. And I worked off my leave. I had 30-days leave saved up, but rather than take my leave before I separated I worked my leave off through that period of time. So when I was separated I was out and went straight to the airlines.

Where'd you start?

I started in Chicago. Again, my intention was to get back to the Midwest. I got a little homesick for the Midwest, having been based out in California for three years. And as much as we liked it out there I had a fondness for ...

What was your hometown when you went in?

My hometown was Marinette, Wisconsin – just 31.6 nautical miles from here, as the crow flies. But 150 when you drive around!

So I went with American Airlines. I was discharged with the rank of captain and started with the airlines with a large cut in pay and worked for American Airlines for almost 32 years.

Based out of Chicago?

Nearly my whole career out of Chicago. My first year you didn't have a choice. At that time each individual pilot base that American had did their own training. Not long after they went to a centralized training facility down in Fort Worth, Texas.

Was this out of O'Hare?

This was out of O'Hare. Our base had its own training department. They would alternate: Each week they would change from the DC7 to the Electra – the four-engine turbo-prop. And it just so happened I fell into the Electra training, and I think that lasted almost four months.

You were in that military area out at O'Hare, out at the far end of the field?

No. Our training was at [American's] hangar. We had a hangar at the north end of the field. We had all our classrooms in there.

We provided air cleaners for that building.

The hangar is still there. We had our medical department there, our training department and all the mechanics were there at that end of the field. It wasn't too far from the Air Force tanker facility that was there. And I believe that was an Air National Guard, although it may have been regular Air Force at the time.

I was going to join the Reserves, and it just so happened that one of my old squadron commanders was the CO of a squadron at Glenview and flying A4's. So when I was going through my training in Chicago with the expectation I was going to stay in Chicago I went to see him. They were looking for pilots, so they'd be glad to have me. As it turned out I would [end] up getting sent to Boston.

By American Airlines.

By American Airlines. I was one of the lower – a little bit younger than most of the fellows – and we were assigned seniority numbers based on our age. We had quite a few fellows who had come out of the Air Force at that time and were in the same class that I was in – the initial new-hire class. And at the end of that training period with American you were assigned a seniority number based on your age within your class.

How old were you in 1965?

I was 26.

So there were other guys who were older than you.

Yes. It just so happened they had hired a number of older fellows. The last few of us were assigned to the various bases that were a little less desirable, you might say. And that was it, too. They had so many openings, and the senior man took his choice and so on down the list. So I ended up in Boston, which was fine.

But I went into Glenview to talk to my old CO. He said, “Well, we get credit for signing up a pilot in the Reserves, so why don’t you wait until you come back from Boston, if you’re coming back to Chicago.” As it turned out I couldn’t get back that quickly – it took me a year to get back. And by that time I had my second child by then.

When did you get married? It was in the service?

Yes. I got married. As a cadet you were not allowed to get married, but a number of us did get married. You didn’t advertise the fact. I could tell it now – they’re not going to come back and pull my wings! But Judy and I – my wife – had been going together since we were teenagers. I think I was about 15 at the time we had started dating. We’d been engaged at one point before I went into the military. That’s a whole other story about being engaged, being too young and wanting some adventure; wanting to see the world. I broke the engagement, but we kept in touch through my training and she would come to visit me from time to time. Once I completed my carrier quals and reached that higher level of cadet status, we were married in Pensacola. It was a very small wedding with four of us in attendance. I think it was five actually: the priest, Judy and I, a best man and maid of honor. So there were five.

Then, when I went to Texas for my advanced training she went back to Marinette-Menominee and stayed with her folks until I finished.

You’re then out in Boston and came back to Chicago?

I was in Boston for almost a year, then came back to Chicago. I never did join the Reserves again – I’d had a couple of kids by then and was busy. One thing led to another.

Life was changing.

Life was changing, and of course the War had intensified over those couple of years, too. They never did call up any of the Marine or Navy Reserves units to go to Vietnam. The Air Force called up a few – not very many. But it was sad to see the progress of the War and what was happening, the loss of pilots. Many of my friends – I know of a couple – who were killed whom I had been through flight training with.

The result of the whole effort over there seemed to be such a disappointment.

It was.

There was always the hope that we wouldn’t have to see this kind of war again.

Unfortunately.

And yet, history seems to repeat itself.

Unfortunately, also. So you were with American Airlines, then, 32 years.

About 32 years. I retired early. I had started a business. Again, a long story about why I ended up back in Marinette, Wisconsin – Menominee, Michigan; the two towns are just separated by a river there: one in one state, one in another, but they were basically Siamese cities with just the river between them.

So I lived in Menominee for over 25 years, and I commuted to Chicago. It was quite unusual at the time I started.

With your own aircraft?

Well, for a time later on with my own aircraft. North Central Airlines flew into Menominee, Michigan and had a flight that connected down into Chicago. It really was a fairly easy commute. Occasionally I'd have to drive, but not very often.

Was that a DC3?

No. When I went to flight school I went out of Menominee, Michigan on a DC3. I went down to Pensacola. I connected in Chicago out of Midway and then went on an Eastern to Atlanta on a DC7, then I was on Eastern Airlines from Atlanta to Pensacola on a Super Constellation.

I've got to tell you: When I was a broker I had a couple of institutions in Wisconsin and was going to visit one of them. And the wildest ride I ever had in an airplane was on a DC3, and we were still on the ground! The wind was blowing so hard the airplane was being tossed around.

I can believe it!

Well, by the time I was out of the service they had transitioned from DC3's to Convair 440's. So I commuted out of Menominee for many, many years on the Convair 440. And then they converted those Convairs to turbo-props and they were called the 580. Then things changed and they quit flying into Menominee. So I wound up driving to Green Bay. It was an hour drive to Green Bay and I'd hop on an airplane to go to Chicago to fly my trips.

It actually worked quite well, right through summer, winter. I was able to have a minimum number of problems.

Where were you flying to out of Chicago? Was that cross-country?

For many years, domestic. I started as a flight engineer on the Electra in Boston. By the time I got to Chicago I was a co-pilot on the Electra. Then I transitioned to a co-pilot on the 727-100's, then I went to the 707 as co-pilot, then I went back to the 727 as co-pilot and stayed there for many years. It took me about ten years to make captain.

Those people hired not long after me wound up as a flight engineer for fifteen years. Things were really slow. As they transitioned to jets from the piston airplanes they were more productive, so they needed fewer pilots. Although they were still growing and still adding, there were periods of time when there were very, very few new pilots hired. So the airline was static and you stayed in the same seat. I tell most people

once I started flying the 727 as captain, which was after ten years with American, I spent the better part of my adult life flying the 727 as captain.

What were your destinations?

All domestic. If you had to generalize the route structure for American Airlines, it was generally from the northeast to the southwest. So we didn't have flights into Seattle. We didn't have flights into Florida at that time.

This was before they had Dallas as one of the hubs?

We did have Dallas. Back then it was Dallas-Love Field. But we flew both into Dallas and into Fort Worth when I was flying. They each had their own airports. Now the Fort Worth airport is gone and they have DFW Airport, which is Dallas-Fort Worth Airport – the new airport. They didn't have that when I started, but it wasn't too long after I was flying that they built that new airport.

I flew everywhere from San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, El Paso, Austin, Amarillo, Oklahoma City which is where our big maintenance base was, Nashville, New York-LaGuardia, JFK, Boston, Syracuse, Albany, Buffalo, Cleveland. It was all domestic.

Then later on we started expanding somewhat after the airlines were given more liberty to fly wherever they wanted to go. Then American started adding different destinations and we started flying to the northwest and down south – Miami and other destinations south.

And from the 727 as captain, I transitioned to the 767 when it was brand new. It was a brand new airplane at the time, which had to be about 1986. As the old story goes, the last kid left home, the dog died, and life began. So I transferred out to San Francisco and we lived in San Francisco for a year in Sausalito. It was a great experience there.

Had your business in Marinette already started?

Yes, I'd already started it.

Were you able to monitor it from Sausalito?

Yes. There were many phone calls everyday.

I flew mostly transcontinental flights out of San Francisco. Again, it was a long range airplane – the 767 – at the time. It was very new and it was the first of the flight management computer systems that operated the airplane. It was a little difficult to transition from what they called the old steam gauges to the flat screen CRT's. And you flew, depending on whether you were co-pilot or captain; you flew with your right index finger or your left index finger! I'd be operating the flight control computer module – the FMC it was called. But it was a great experience and a wonderful airplane; wonderful airplane, very efficient and trouble-free. It was so reliable, so dependable. I flew a lot of transcontinental San Francisco to New York and Boston, some to Chicago, but mostly transcontinental flights. I did fly the DC10 as co-pilot, too.

But in 1987, then, I could hold the DC10 as captain out of Los Angeles. So I went down to Los Angeles and flew out of there for a year. That was in 1987. Then I came back to Chicago and flew the DC10 out of Chicago as captain.

Had you moved to Los Angeles and back to Chicago?

Yes. We moved to Los Angeles and after a year ... well, I was locked in. When you transferred bases you were basically locked in for a year. So after a year was up in Los Angeles I went back to Chicago and flew the DC10 out of Chicago domestically. Then, when I could hold international back on the 767 I did that, and flew that for the balance of my career.

Out of Chicago.

Yes, all out of Chicago, and international. And that allowed me a lot of time to work my business. We had better time off on the international flights. You got more flight time, and generally I was three days on and three days off. Depending on how I did the month, I might start early in the month and then have the last week off. Then in the subsequent month I might have the first week off.

So you'd have two weeks together.

Yes. So I was able to spend a lot of time with my business.

What was the business?

We started out as a steel fabricator. It's a long story how I got involved. I got involved because of my partner. He's younger than I am by ten years, and he was working for a steel fabricator at the time. We were involved in a boat project together, which is another long story.

But I found in him a wonderful work ethic. He was a very bright guy, although not particularly well educated. He was a mechanical genius as far as I was concerned; better than most engineers I've known in terms of his ability to understand mechanical processes and know how to build things that would be rugged enough to withstand the job it had to do. I often told him I wouldn't want him building my airplanes because they'd be so damn heavy we'd never get off the ground! But they'd never break!

And we started off. I invested. And I told him at the time that I wasn't investing in a steel fabrication business; I was investing in Robin Peterson. I invested in him as an individual because I thought no matter what he was involved in; he would be good at it. He would make it thrive. And he did! And because of a customer we had, we wound up specializing in building some tree-harvesting machinery.

The one that clamps on?

Yes, clamps on to the tree and the hydraulic chain saw – measures it to length, cuts it down, moves it over to here, lay it down in a way it wouldn't damage the surrounding trees.

Those are really unbelievable machines.

They really are. And we specialized in that and developed some really high end ... I'll tell you, my aviation interest and my knowledge of airplane design, hydraulics and electronics helped us out quite a bit in that business. Because I knew what capabilities were out there, hydraulically and electronically? And we were one of the earlier innovators in incorporating some of that advanced technology into these devices that we manufactured. Even into designing the ergonomics of the cab. I know airplanes are designed mostly in the cockpits for ergonomic efficiency, the way the switches move and where they're placed. And I incorporated a lot of that in the design of the cockpits for our machinery that we built.

Within a few years we eliminated the general job-shop fabricating that we did and we started specializing in building these machines. At our peak we had 125 employees and we had 110,000 square feet of manufacturing space. We had our own very high-tech CNC machine shop, so we made most of our parts.

Were you the only one of your kind doing this kind of thing?

No. We weren't. There were others. The Europeans were really the initial innovators, but most of their machinery was designed for European harvesting conditions. And there, much of their land and their tree stands were smaller, highly controlled. I'd equate it to harvesting trees in a park. Here we had much more rugged conditions, particularly up in the Canadian ...

And a lot of virgin growth.

A lot of virgin growth; some bigger timber. Out west they had bigger timber. We didn't specialize in machines that would handle really big logs. We could go to about a 24" to a 28" tree, which was pretty good sized tree.

How heavy would that be? You had to lift it after you cut it.

Yes. It might weigh as much as 10,000 pounds.

We had two different types – this is off-topic – but we had two different types of harvesting heads. We had what we called a controlled-fell head. There we would actually grapple the tree, put a little pressure – these were done with boomed harvesters so it would be like a big excavator, a big John Deere caterpillar or back-hoe – and we would convert those machines. We had conversion packages for almost every brand of excavator to the forestry application, putting in protection packages – wire cages protecting the operator – changing the boom geometry to be able to take better advantage of being able to, first, lift more and then being able to accept the harvesting head, and

putting on the hydraulic valve package that would control all the various functions. We had to have seven or eight different functions for these heads.

So we would do this conversion on the production excavator machines. And we designed the harvesting heads that we would attach to this. We had two different types. We had the type that was controlled-fell, as I called it, which would grapple the tree, put a little pressure on it, and then with a hydraulic chain saw cut it off. And then carry it vertically, then swing the cab or move the machine so you could allow that tree to fall in a way that would not damage the surrounding timber. So you had better control of that tree as it fell. Then the tree would rotate and you would activate spiked wheels that would draw that tree through the machine while it was being held with the upper de-limb arms. In fact, the rollers were actually pitched a little so it would hold the trunk of the tree in the machine. The upper de-limb arms which would not only grapple the tree when it was being carried, but they would float in such a manner that it would allow the tree to be de-limbed as these spiked rollers would pull the tree through. And we had a computer that would measure the length, and depending on how the tree was being cut ...

I've seen a video of that thing in operation, and they are a marvel in engineering.

Just zing, zing – the logs are falling. It's absolutely amazing. Yes, we did all of that!

And we had one other head, just to finish the topic – the subject of control-fell versus directional-fell. We had what was like a dangle head that would mount on the end of a boom. You would grapple tree, but when the tree was cut the tree was going to fall. So depending on where you grappled it you could aim it a little bit. But, basically when that tree was cut it was going to fall and you had to process it right there.

Depending on if you were going through a plantation you could use one type. On plantations in particular you had to be careful about damaging the surrounding trees, so control-fell was really nice for a plantation application.

And the dangle-head, the directional-fell head, was good for bigger trees, too. You didn't have to carry the whole tree, necessarily. You were just letting it fall and pulling it away from the stump as you carried it.

Do the Indians use that at the Menominee forest?

Yes.

That's been harvested for over 100 years, I think.

Yes. We had dealers there that sold to them. We sold through dealers. We didn't sell direct to the customer. We only sold through dealers. Forty percent of our business was in Canada. A little bit out west, in BC and the western provinces.

I appreciate the time you've spent with us and learning not only about your career, but what you've done since then. We thank you.

Thank you, John. It was a pleasure serving in the Marine Corps. I'm proud of my service. In some respects I have a regret that I didn't do more, especially when you see your buddies doing far more than you did.

I feel the same way. You always admire someone who's really stood against the other forces.

I might add that my VMA311 squadron had been a very active, interesting group of guys. We've had any number of reunions of that squadron since then. That group has really hung together, unlike a lot of squadrons that just dissolved and the people scattered. This group really stuck together. We've probably had about ten reunions over the years.

That's really terrific. Mike, thank you. I see that you've been pleased with your own service and what you did after. We certainly wish you further success.