

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Martin H. Bulmahn

Conducted by Mr. John Gay

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This is John Gay talking with Marty Bulmahn about his military experiences. We're sitting at our place on Washington Island, Wisconsin. Marty is one of the members of the Gislason-Richter American Legion Post 402. Marty, if you'd like to tell us what you were doing while you were a civilian prior to your arriving in the military.

Before I was drafted I was living in Kansas City. I grew up in Indiana, and after high school I went to Kansas City for a short period of time. And, in late 1959 I received notice that I was being drafted. So I went back home to a town called Decatur. And in January I was loaded on a bus with a group of other individuals and we were carted off to Fort Leonard-Wood, Missouri. I did my basic training at Fort Leonard-Wood.

This is in late 1959?

This is early '60 – January, 1960.

What a great time to be at Fort Leonard-Wood. I was just south of there at FortChaffee at the same time of the year. The mud was all the way up to your ankles.

And cold!

And cold. You were there then for eight weeks?

That's correct.

What was the training like? You had the usual?

I had the usual 50-mile hikes, the weapons on the range, marching – you name it.

Is FortLeonard-Wood principally infantry? Is it artillery?

It was principally infantry, at that time anyway. I don't know what it is now.

How many people were on that post at that time?

It was huge, but I could not tell you how many there were. We had the old-time barracks. They were coal-fired barracks. And I had fireman's duty a few times.

At Chaffee we had those kinds of barracks, and I had a bunk right by the door, which was continually being opened by people running in and running out. And I know in the morning when I woke up the butt cans had ice on them.

That's right.

Something people today wouldn't even know the meaning of, I guess. But it was a wonderful experience. So you had eight weeks down there.

Yes. And while I was there, there were a couple of guys who showed up to interview me. I had no idea who they were. They probably told me, but I didn't know who they were. So I spent an afternoon talking to them. And when I got home after basic training, some neighbors and friends wanted to know what kind of trouble I had been in because the FBI came around and questioned them to find out what kind of person I was.

So my orders were to go to FortHolabird in Baltimore, which was the military intelligence school.

I know Kirby was cleared for top secret and they did the same thing here on the Island. People went around asking neighbors what kind of a guy he was, and they were all afraid Kirby had gone off the deep end somewhere.

Yes. They thought I was in trouble.

So did they then send you off to FortHolabird?

Yes, they did. I spent – and for the life of me I can't remember how long I was there: four or six months? I don't even remember how long I was there.

What kind of training is there for military intelligence? Is there a lot of indoctrinating?

Yes.

Do you have to learn specific things like coding or things of that nature?

No. There's a place just outside of Baltimore where they have all those people – the coders and cryptologists. It might be Fort Meade.

So then, when I left Holabird, we had a choice of where we wanted to go – most guys did. They asked you what was your first choice, second choice, third choice. And my first choice was Germany because when I grew up my parents spoke German. My grandmother could hardly speak English. So I was able to speak the language when I was young. So I put down Germany.

Do you think that was part of what got you into ...

I'd assume so.

So I put down Germany and that's where I ended up. We flew to Frankfurt. We had a small post outside of Frankfurt and I spent a few days there. Then there were three other guys and I who had an apartment in downtown Frankfurt.

That was nice. So this is summer of 1960?

Yes.

And you were able to go off post right away?

Yes. That's right.

Going back to Fort Leonard-Wood, when I first got there ... When I was in high school I could fix any kind of vehicle. I did the engines, you name it. I could drive anything that had a motor and a steering wheel. So they found out about that. The first thing I was driving the guys back and forth to the firing range. So I thought I would be in the motor pool or whatever. But I was lucky. I didn't get in there!

That's a one-way street.

So anyway, we had an office in the I. G. Farben Building.

The big chemical outfit?

Yes, the big chemical outfit. And the guys from Fort Meade were in one part of the building. We were in the center, and right beside us there was an office with all civilians. It was obvious they were CIA, right next to us. But I loved the duty there because we ate out on the economy. We didn't have a mess hall to go to. So it was schnitzel three or four times a week.

And a little beer now and then. What were your duties while you were over there? What did you have to do on a daily basis?

Most of it, we kept files. From time to time they would bring people in from East Germany and we'd have to sit with them to make sure they had company while the other guys – the questioners – came in and out of the place.

What was the reason for all that? What were they trying to accomplish?

They were trying to get as many secrets as they could out of East Germany.

It was real espionage.

Yes.

So these are people coming over from East Germany and you were giving them a debriefing as it were?

Yes. Some of them were high powered guys. They could come and go. Others would sneak across – take their lives in their hands. Then, of course, in August of 1961, one night we got the message that the Russians were bringing tanks to Berlin and the military was on the move.

The beginning of the wall?

So we figured the war was starting, but then we found out they put the wall up already. That was on the 13th of August, 1961.

Did you get what you thought was pretty good information from some of these people you interviewed?

You never know for sure.

But it sounded good at the time, at least.

It's better than nothing, I guess.

Did you ever feel that you were talking to a double agent – someone who was leading you along – or would you be able to tell that?

You can't tell it. You have no idea. And the higher up's, some of those guys knew what the score was but they didn't pass that on to anybody.

Were those recorded in some way? Did you have a tape recorder going?

It was all by notes and that kind of stuff.

Did you then draw up a report on each one of the interviews?

Yes.

How long would you spend with a guy? Depending on how much he divulged?

Sometimes they'd keep a guy for two or three days if he had maps, vital information or what seemed to be vital. Other times an hour or two hours.

Were you an active participant? Were you the one asking the questions?

No. Usually they had one or two guys who did that.

He was a senior officer?

Yes. You had no idea what his rank was.

Civilian clothes?

Yes. Everybody wore civilian clothes.

You were wearing civilian clothes?

Yes.

I didn't realize that. So after the interview was over you took your notes and began to form a report?

Yes.

Was there more than one of you in the room beside the questioner?

Yes, usually two or three.

To make sure everybody heard the same thing.

Yes.

So you had quite a few people at that post.

We did. But the guys all lived in various places in Frankfurt. We had apartments all over Frankfurt, but the office was in the Farben building. Strangely enough we were there not too many years ago. Jane and I went over to Europe and I looked up the old place. It is so full of barbed wire. Nobody can get ... It now is an electronic installation. You can't get close to it. They have signs warning people not to take pictures, this and that. It's off limits.

You have to erase it from your memory!

It's off limits.

That must be all CIA, then.

I would assume so. And military. There's still a lot of military intelligence.

How far was your post in Frankfurt from the Russian line.

It started out with Berlin first, and we were maybe 150 miles from there – Frankfurt is. Then, of course, they started running through the entire length of East Germany. That, too, is 150 – 200 miles away.

So the wall went that far?

Yes. It went the entire distance across Germany.

I didn't realize that. I always thought of the Berlin Wall, but I guess it makes sense.

Yes, it was the Berlin Wall. But eventually – well, it wasn't necessarily a wall all the way but they had barbed wire, electric fences.

Dogs and sentry posts?

Yes. And the Russians said that was the key to keep the West Germans from going to East Germany.

They were pretty good with propaganda.

There were a lot of people killed trying to get across from East Germany into West Germany.

Did you ever experience anything like that yourself or was it too far away for you?

We were too far away. I did go to Berlin and had a chance to see the Wall. By agreement, the U.S. – the Allies – could go to Berlin on the train or they could fly in and the Russians couldn't stop them. So I went into Berlin for a weekend.

You went in by train?

Yes, and took a look at Checkpoint Charlie, which is where the main exit/entrance to East Berlin is.

Is that the Brandenburg Gate?

Close to it.

How long were you stationed in Europe?

What happened was, after the Wall went up everybody got extended – their tour. Originally it was four months. Then, as time went by it got down to, after a few months they said three months. By the time I got out it was two months that we were extended. So I got out in March of 1962.

So you were drafted for two years, you got in in early 1960 ...

And got out in March, 1962.

So you spent a couple of extra months.

Which didn't bother me because the last couple of weeks I was there was the beginning of the Fasting season – which is their Lenten festival, which is a great time to be there.

Like Mardi Gras with a German accent! Did your assignments change while you were there?

No.

It was pretty much the same?

Yes. It was the same thing.

You must have considered it pretty interesting work.

It was! Also being over there gave me a chance to do some traveling. A couple of guys and I – friends – we spent some two or three weeks going through the Scandinavian countries.

That must have been fun.

It was great. We went down to Munich for the Oktoberfest, to Paris ...

That must have been an adventure all by itself, to see those gals carrying eight steins in each fist ...

Ten steins!

They must have been able to take a horse and throw it.

I always said they plowed the field all day and waitressed at night.

So you had some time off. Were the brass pretty easy to work with over there?

Very.

You must have been in a sort of collaborative kind of group.

Yes.

That was neat.

And a lot of the guys you worked with, you had no idea what rank they were. You just knew that they were above me! Everybody was!

Did you get out of PFC?

Yes. I was corporal. Actually I was a Spec4, which is the same thing as corporal.

It took an act of Congress to get me a Spec4 because they were trying to get rid of everybody at that time.I was still getting my \$80 a month.

I was fortunate. By that time it was already up to \$100 - \$110 a month. When I went in I think it was \$84. Then it went up. And we got separate rations, so that helped pay for our food.

Living off post, there was a difference in the value of the dollar at that time, I suppose.

There was. When I first got there the dollar was 4 marks 20 for the dollar. By the time I left it was already down to 3.50 and it was dropping further and further. So you couldn't buy nearly as much when I left as when I got there.

Did you have the same group of guys with you the whole time?

Yes, pretty much so. But occasionally somebody else would come and somebody would go.

Did some of the guys re-up because of the conditions?

Not the guys I knew real well, but there were a few who did. They were career and they had their 12 – 15 in and may as well go for a few more.

You had a very unusual experience in the military. I think that's kind of the exception. You were kind of fortunate in a way, speaking German and having some education allowed you to go there.

The only really scary time was when we knew the Russians were moving and they told us to be ready on a moment's notice to head down to southern France someplace.

They were going to evacuate you?

Yes.

And the whole operation, or was that just to bring in the people with guns to defend the place?

They had all thermo grenades or whatever you call those things set up on the files.

Thermite?

Yes, to melt right through and burn everything.

They were very serious about it.

Very!

Did you have electronic gear in the building to prevent bugging, or is that something you felt pretty safe about?

We had been in there for a while, so we didn't have to worry about that. But that was in 1960's. They weren't very sophisticated with their eavesdropping and bugging the way they are now.

They just stood outside the door.

They couldn't get in.

So you were released in March, 1962 and came right back home – or did you tour Europe a little more?

I came right back home. When I went over to Germany we flew in one of those old four engine prop planes – the military air transports. And coming back we were on a troop ship, the Buckner I think, loaded with guys. It was a pretty small troop ship. Two or three days out we had some rough weather. There were quite a few guys who lost their lunch.

And bunks were four high or something?

Yes.

And back home to Indiana?

Yes. And I went back to Kansas City for the time being to go back to the insurance company until something better came along.

And you were there for a while?

For another year. Eventually I ended up working at the First National Bank in Chicago.

Right on LaSalle Street?

It was on Monroe Street

Where the big building is on the plaza?

Yes. Of course, that was the old building. They were putting a new one up – they started putting it up while I was there.

You missed the Picasso monument, did you?

I've seen it many times.

When did you meet Jane?

Strangely enough, she worked right across the street for Inland Steel. I was on Sheridan Road, which is right on the water, and her building – she was on Kenmore – our buildings butted together.

Where you were living in Chicago.

Yes. I noticed her. We'd go to work about the same time. Then I started going to the Young Republican meetings and she was there. So at one of the elections I was busy counting votes and she happened to be there. We went out for a drink afterwards and, as they say, the rest is history!

For the record, I must mention that Jane was a Polish girl who was strafed by the German spitfires when she was a little girl running across a field. She made it safely to the woods. What happened?

After the Germans took over and had an agreement with Russia, they agreed to pull back and Russia would move in and take over that part of Poland. So a Russian officer and his family moved into my parents' house, even though it was small – it only had two or three bedrooms – but they came in. After a year, the Russians decided that her father was not very cooperative because he would not allow his sons to be drafted into the Russian army. The reason the father would not allow them to be drafted was that they had been born in this country. It's a long, complicated story, but they were American citizens. So after a year they moved out – the Russian officer – and two or three days later the KGB came in and grabbed him and took him to Siberia. The day after they were arrested, they were loaded in these cattle cars that you see; they used the same ones for the Jews with one little window in the whole thing.

They called it the '40 or 8' – forty people or eight horses.

The day they left to go to Siberia they heard the bombs going off and her father said right away that the war had started with Germany. If it had happened a day sooner, they probably would have stayed in their house. But that might not have been the best thing. Anyway, they were in Siberia for a year, then southern Russia for a year picking cotton. Then they moved them wherever the British and Polish soldiers were. They went through Persia, spent some time there. Then to India and from there to Los Angeles. But only to Los Angeles to get on a bus that took them to Mexico where they had a camp.

Now this is Jane and all of her ...

Her sister and her parents – four of them.

There were about 5,000 girls or something like that at one time?

There were a couple of thousand people there. And so she was there for three years, and then she was fortunate enough to go to Chicago to a girls' school – the new Polish newspaper in Chicago sponsored girls to come to Chicago. So she was one of the lucky ones, and she was there for a year or two and then sponsored her parents to come there. So it took her about five-and-a-half years from the time they were arrested to get to the U.S., and it took her parents seven years, or seven-and-a-half years. And they got reunited in Chicago on Kostner.

Near Milwaukee Avenue?

Originally the place they were in was very close to Milwaukee Avenue.

That's a big Polish district in Chicago. You can go to a bar there and the waitress might not even be able to speak English. It's really a Polish community.

There are still places in the old Polish district, but it's not quite the way it used to be.

We go to the Red Apple now and again on Milwaukee.

We've been there. That's a good place.

There isn't a greater smorgasbord in all of the United States. It must be seventy feet long with all kinds of good things.

And of course the other good place to go to is the White Eagle in Niles, right by the Polish cemetery. So after a funeral everybody goes to the White Eagle.

So you met Jane in Chicago. She'd been there how long when you met her?

She'd been there for twelve years.

So she acclimated very well? Her parents were still living with her?

Yes.

You then decided after that drink that prospects were good?

Looking good; looking up. In 1968 we got married. We had two children and decided we couldn't raise them in Chicago, so we moved to Downers Grove. We were there until we came up here to the Island in 1998.

So thirty years, roughly, in Chicago after you got married.

Yes.

How did you happen to come to the Island?

It was probably about 1974. The kids were young. Everybody talked about DoorCounty. My mother came with us. We stayed in Rowley's Bay. That was before they had the lodge there. They had a couple of A-frames and one other building, and they had Grandma's Bakery and Restaurant there. So we stayed there for a week and I happened to notice there was an island here. I wasn't making that kind of money with two kids and we had a brand new house. Normally I would have said I wouldn't spend that kind of money to come up here. But we did. And we spent the day and we both said it was an interesting place and would love to come back.

So the next year, right after the first of the year, Jane called Flath's. We stayed there every year. I don't think we ever missed. We stayed there from 1975 on. No matter where we went, we always ended up here.

Was Edith Flath? She painted, too, didn't she?

She did, and we have one of her paintings.

Then, once the kids were in college we started thinking about retirement. We own property out by JacksonHarbor. But Jane said all of our friends were on the west side. Besides, every time we want a gallon of milk we have to run four miles to the store. So we started thinking about maybe spending the summers here and the winters in Downers Grove. And the house we have came up for sale and we got it. Then we rented it out – we were still working. Then, in 1997 we both retired.

What was she doing at that time?

She was with the Foundation – Ryerson Foundation – which was part of Inland Steel. She was secretary to the individual who ran the Foundation.

What were you doing at that time? After you got out of the Army did you go back to insurance?

I went with First National Bank. I spent years with them. I spent some time with a small insurance outfit and ended up with MetLife. They had an operation out in Aurora.

So you commuted from Downers to Aurora on a daily basis?

Yes.

That's a pretty good hike.

It's not really that far. It's a lot closer than going downtown every day.

And a lot less hassle!

Right.

Anyway, after we decided to retire Jane said she didn't want to retire in a cold place like Downers Grove. She said why didn't we sell the house there and maybe go south for the winter. So we moved up here in 1998 – July, 1998 – and we've never seen a winter up here! It's always been in Florida.

Where?

It's in Dunedin, a little town just outside of Clearwater, right on the Gulf. It's about 15 miles across the Bay from Tampa. I keep telling her I'd love to stay here for the winter just to see what it's like. She said, "Be my guest!"

Too many of those Polish memories from winters in Poland. We come up now and again – we haven't for the past three years. It's not any worse than Chicago, generally, and it's very, very quiet. You can walk in the middle of the road and not look over your shoulder.

In fact, I can imagine it's probably better than what Chicago is.

I think it is. We have some snowshoes and go through the woods, snowshoe a little bit.

I was in Chicago when they had that big snow in early 1967. That was terrible. This last winter they had an even worse one. Lake Shore Drive was completely shut down. It was really nice sitting in Florida watching the pictures from that!

We happened to head for Hawaii on the day it was boiling up, so we never saw it either! I don't think I regret it. Well, what did the military do to your outlook on life?

I don't know what kind of difference it made. I think it probably made me a little more patriotic than I was before. And that's not to say I wasn't beforehand. It probably made me a little more aware of what's going on around the world.

More concerned about it as well.

Much more concerned about it. It probably made me sort of a little bit neater guy – not quite as sloppy – because you know there's a place for everything in your footlocker ...

And it better be there!

And the bed better be made right! I think in that case it did help me that way.

Well, Marty, thanks for spending the time with us.

And I would tell any kid: If you have a chance to go in the military, take it! It is really a great experience.

The interesting thing I find is that people who were never in the military can never fully appreciate what you did or the kind of experience it was. But people who were in the military automatically know what kind of experience you had. So you kind of drop off the little things and just talk about certain other things. I agree. And I think it might not be a bad idea for our young men to be in the military. I have a grandson who just got out of the Marines after four years, including a couple in Afghanistan. And I have another grandson who just went into the Army. He's down in Fort Benning down in Georgia. He's just about done with basic. The last e-mail we got was that he was still alive and thinks he's going to be able to make it.

When you're in you complain about a lot of things. But you meet a lot of really great guys when you're in there. Some of us were talking about this one day. It sounds sort of dumb, but one thing I enjoyed was on Saturday mornings when we would have the parade at Fort Leonard-Wood. Everybody would be out, the bands were going, the troops were marching – I really enjoyed that.

It looked good and made you feel kind of proud. It sure did.

It was really a wonderful experience, I think.

Well, Marty, thanks for your time. I do appreciate it and we'll be talking with you and I'll show you this transcript when it's done.