

George Bowen
Narrator

6 Students
Orchard Park High School
Orchard Park, NY
Interviewers

Interviewed on
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Orchard Park High School
Orchard Park, NY

I: Interviewer

GB: George Bowen

I: So, did you end up charting through any water or anything like, while you were, marching?

GB: No, well in Basic yes, in Basic we had to march. It seemed like they took us down the muddiest roads they could find. [Laughter] But, in Korea, no, I mean there was, there was, mud, but it was like roadways or sidewalks, except they were dirt. When they rained why they got muddy but...

I: During your spare time what did you guys do in the service? Like, did you have a lot of friends and stuff there?

GB: Oh, yes, we all did, they were from all over the country. That's one thing... Some guys were from all over the country and each guy would talk about, you know, where he's from back home and the weather and things that went on back home, like I remember we were at Scott Field, St. Louis, and we had snow one day and I mean it was a couple inches of snow, and there was a kid with us there that was from Arizona he said, "I've never seen snow before". He was as old as I was and I thought that to live in Arizona and not ever see snow but, it's a different life. And there were people there from all over the country, they had different experiences to tell, I remember one kid had to go home because his family got flooded in the Mississippi River flooded; they had to go home and help with that. So... but we'd sit around there, on weekends or whenever we had time why you'd go into town maybe if you could. Not in Korea, but when I wasn't in Korea, why you'd get a pass and you'd go into town and see movies and what not. It was fun.

I: Did you keep in touch with your family?

GB: I'm sorry.

I: Did you keep in touch with your family?

GB: Yes. But only... when I was overseas it was only by mail. We didn't have the phone, while they did have telephones, you just didn't call, you used the mail, but, that was the only

correspondence we had. When I was in this country, of course I used to call on the phone, but when I was over there it was only by mail.

I: Did you have kids at the time? When you moved to Korea?

GB: Did I what?

I: Did you have kids?

GB: Yeah, I was not married. I didn't get married till a bit after I got out of school. I came back, got out of the service... well, I came back, I was stationed at Lockport up there, they had a radar site up there and I got out of the service in '57, went on to school, went to Alfred, got out of Alfred, and just before I got out of Alfred, I got married.

I: So...well you said you enrolled in the Air Force because it helped you with pursuing a job after?

GB: Yes.

I: Did it ever play a role in what you did?

GB: Yeah you had to know electronics which was good in fact that's what I did when I got out of the service. I wound up when I went to school I got an Associate's Degree in electronics, and then I wound up working at... I retired from the phone company. So, I feel that it helped me a lot. Like I said, there are things that they give you ... when I went into the Air Force, they had a different battery of tests you'd spend days taking these tests, aptitude tests, I guess that's another way of saying it, and they'd score you on different technical, clerical, food service and all sorts of different jobs, right, and I lucked out. Got picked, I should say for radio school, I went to radio school.

I: Was there any point where like you regretted joining?

GB: Not really, not really. Looking back on it, no. [Clears throat] Maybe at the time when I first went into Basic, I thought maybe why am I here, what did I do, but I stuck it out other than that no, there's wasn't any point that I really hated.

I: What did they make you do in Basic?

GB: Oh, In Basic, well you're a civilian you've got to learn how to become a military person, you've got to learn about the uniform, they put you through classes where they teach you all about the, the military. You know, and the ranks and things like this. Of course it was... it's going from being a carefree civilian to being a military person, in other words there's a , what do I want to say, they tell you, you know, you're going to do things, but, I'm the captain and you're the lieutenant and you report to me right? And there's a chain of command and if I tell you it's time to go eat dinner, it's time to go eat dinner and that kind of thing. It's not that you're expected to be on your job and things like that, so it's, it's learning the discipline. Probably some of the Army and Marine guys will tell you that they've got to teach you that if you're in battle then you've got to be able to trust the people around you that they're not going to run back and leave you out there all by yourself, you know, but I think that's kind of what they taught you.

I: What did they physically make you do in basic training?

GB: A lot of marching and we had to do uh, physical therapy, PT, gym, whatever you want to call it, and mostly marching. We had a big campout, I remember one weekend we had to go out

or one time we spent a couple days out in the field in the mud and rain with our little shelter hands, that kind of thing. On, also I'll never forget one time in basic, they made us go and pick up rocks because the story was the general's wife didn't like all those rocks in this great big field so we're all out there picking up rocks [laughter] two days later we're out there putting the rocks back because somebody else said wait a minute rocks prevent erosion put them back. So, we put them back [laughter]. I think that was just a learning experience and, um, you know you learn to take orders. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. But other than that, Basic was cold that's all I remember. They had a, they called it, butt cans, just a can that you'd put your cigarettes in when you were done smoking. You know, with water in it.

I: Kind of like a coffee can?

GB: Coffee can, you're right about that same size. You'd wake up in the morning and there'd be ice in the butt can, that's how cold it got in the barracks [Laughter]. And this was March and April of course, I'm talking Sampson, down near which is down near Geneva, South of Geneva, you know where Geneva is, downstate?

I: Yeah.

GB: And, a, it got cold, and we shipped out of Sampson and I was shipped to St. Louis and we got out of Sampson and it was cold. I mean it was cold. Two days later, or a day later I got down to St. Louis and it was ninety in the shade, so cold, but you get used to it.

I: So how long were you in Korea for?

GB: About four months.

I: About four months?

GB: I got to Korea after the war ended.

I: After the war?

GB: Yeah, and I was there about four months and the wing that I was assigned to got transferred to Okinawa, so I got in on the move. In other words, we packed stuff up and moved it all out and moved to Korea or uh Okinawa.

I: So, what happens, while you're over in Korea with supplies and change of clothes and stuff like that, how does that all work?

GB: Well, in the Air Force, you take with you, that's the reason why I don't have any, a lot of guys; Army guys brought back a lot of stuff because they didn't have to carry the uniforms. In the Air Force they gave us a duffle bag and an issue of clothing and you had to carry this issue with you all the time, which was your dress blues, your khakis, your fatigues, your shoes, uh, it was all in a big ole duffle bag and any time you moved from one base to another you had to take this with you. And you were allowed one, what do you call them, an AWOL bag, overnight bag, whatever you want to call it, you had your shaving stuff and things like that, so you really didn't have much room in there for carrying around too much. But, clothing wise you didn't have any problem. In Korea, uh, I got a picture someplace of our houseboy, and they used to take your, he was a little Korean boy. I think he made about eighteen dollars a month, at that time it was good pay for those people, I mean for them. I was making ninety dollars a month, so what the heck, anyway this guy would take your clothes and take them out and get them washed and they'd

bring them back. All we wore at Korea was fatigues. You know, today, they've got the dress blues and the khaki pants, khaki, but it was not a problem, and supplies were not a problem. The only, uh, you know, we ate in the mess hall, and that kind of stuff was, um, we had no problem with food. So, the only time I was ever really on sea rations was when we moved out of Korea, when I shipped out of Inchon, on a LST heading for Okinawa and they had no cooking on the LST, it's a small boat, actually it's one of those boats that runs up on the beach and the front-end opens and so we had sea rations for a week on the boat. It was alright, we lived [laughter]...

I: Did you see any casualties at all?

GB: No, I guess the war was over when I got there. The only casualties I ever saw was, a, uh, a couple of times we had planes crash. I know one time we were out just before dark and I don't remember what the reason, but, all around the base was, like, in a big valley and I remember one of the planes crashed up on the side of the mountain and they took helicopters up, but I wasn't up there, I mean we could see it burning from where I was, but we didn't go up there. But, casualties no, no more casualties and like I said, other than that the crash, that was about it. [pause].

I: Can you explain what this picture is?

GB: Oh, well before I went overseas, this is a transport [pointing at pictures] that I went overseas on.

I: Oh, is it?

GB: It's called the Mann, the General Mann and before I left I'll spread it here. I took this out of the newspaper and I sent it home and it was in my collection of stuff and my wife, a few years back decided that she would have us going through it, she decided to get this for my birthday, or I think it was, my birthday. So, she had it put in a frame for me and everything. This is a troop ship. [Pointing at picture] In fact, some of your folks did Frank O'Connor the other day; he's in the VFW, too. He went out over on the same ship, not the same time I did. This was a troop ship that went out of San Francisco to Yokohama in Japan and from there why I went on a plane from; they flew us from there over to Korea.

I: How were the conditions on the ship?

GB: For a troop ship it was good.

I: Why did they....

I: Like a lot of people?

GB: Yes, there was twenty-four hundred or something, twenty-three hundred people [Looking at picture].

I: 2,345, that's a lot. [reading from the picture].

GB: That included Army, Air Force, Marines. But, the facilities I don't know if any of you folks [] on a cruise, other than this, but what you see on cruises are state rooms and nice beds and all uh, this was another reason I talked about not going in the Navy was their bunks are, it's like a pole with a canvas stretched in between it and they went from the floor all the way to the ceiling and this is back in this boat. That's where we all stayed and my luck was I wound up on the very top one, it be like, you know, you want to go to bed you've gotta crawl up all these bunks to get

to the top and uh, it was not really.. it was crowded, that's the word to say and we all ate in one great big cafeteria or chow hall or whatever you want to call it and uh, but it was good.

I: What kind of hours did they have you work until? What time would you have to get up at and then, like, when would you stop at night?

GB: Like when I was in Korea?

I: Yeah, or even...

GB: I worked about an eight hour day, but it would depend because, uh, being in maintenance we had to have people on twenty-four hours twenty-four/seven.

I: Uh, huh.

GB: So you took turns, I mean sometimes, you'd work days sometimes they had a regular schedule made up, you might be on evenings for a week or two weeks and then you might be on midnights for a couple of weeks, and it was basically a forty hour week, but you know, but, it included weekends.

I: Oh, you had to do it on the weekends, too?

GB: Oh, yeah, that's like when I worked at the phone company my job was twenty-four/seven, so, you know, we had to take turns working Christmases, and New Year's, and whatever, things like that. In fact, it was that way no matter where I was in the service. Every base I was on I was twenty-four/seven, so, and after I left and came back to the States, like I said, I was stationed out in Lockport and that was also twenty-four/seven, but, we took turns and it was good.

I: Did you have many unique experiences that you remember?

GB: Unique experiences [clears throat] why I'll tell you, I had an impressive one I was thinking when I saw that she sent me the questionnaire [] when I got to Korea, we landed at a place called K16 which is in Seoul, it's the big airbase. I don't know if it's still there or not, but it was at that time the U.S. Armed Force had the base there. When we got there, the day we got there the plane that we had, we're waiting for our trucks to pick us up. The Australians were on the other side, right near us, and their plane was there and they were getting on and uh, I tell my wife to this day, every time I hear bagpipes I get choked up because they played the bagpipes to get them to march them onto the plane and I thought, that's neat. You know, not like us, they said, "Get on this old thing" and they got on the plane and they played the bagpipes and that was impressive. I've never forgotten that. And even to this day if I go to a parade I can hear the bagpipes I'm reminded of that. So, other than that, no, there wasn't any real, real you know, moving experiences that I, every so often I'll something will happen and I'll remember something. But, nothing earth shattering, no.

I: Were there any women on the boats or was it all men?

GB: Uh, this...

I: Yes those.

GB: Uh, There were some, uh, no enlisted people though, there were, there were like wives and children of personnel going over, but they were not with us they were up in the cabins, but there were a few yes ,but I don't know how many I just know that there were a few that at that time if you like, say you were going to join your husband overseas right, say in Japan, let's say or

Korea you couldn't because there were no dependents allowed, but if you went to Japan, they would be on that same boat and they would meet their husband in Yokohama. But, Korea, I can say when I was in Korea, was no dependents at all, just the military and at that time, there were [clears throat], uh women nurses in the medical. Like I say nurses, but as far as enlisted people, no, or even officers that were in Korea that were not while I was there. It's not to say there weren't any, but I didn't run into any. Our group there was our squadron was all, all men, in fact the whole wing as far as I know, but, no there were no, no women.

I: When you were there were you completely isolated or were you around a lot of Korean civilians?

GB: We were isolated; the base was out in uh quite a ways from the villages. I mean... there are, I've got a few pictures that ...driving down the road we saw some villages, but we couldn't go out the gate and walk into the town.

I: Uh huh.

GB: Like, uh, some bases or some towns where you are you can go out the gate right near the town, but uh where we were, no. You had, if you didn't have wheels, which none of us did, then you had to almost ride any place you went. You know, there were no people right close by. In fact, when I was there, everything was off limits. You could walk down the main road uh where you're going to, but you couldn't walk down the main road but don't get caught over here into a village because that was off limits. They were all off limits. And in Seoul, when I was in Seoul you were not to walk down the main roads, but, you could not eat in restaurants, restaurants unless they had a special sign out front that had been approved by the government. And the government, I mean our government, now our guys the military had to approve the restaurant and the reason for that is because they used human feces, is the word I guess, for fertilizer and that's why a lot of disease, we would get disease if we were to eat. So if you didn't eat in an approved restaurant, you, I mean you couldn't get caught in there, because it was an automatic court martial if they caught you, so...

I: Why weren't you allowed in the villages?

GB: Because, I guess they felt the war was still, it was still a combat zone and, uh, even though we didn't have to carry weapons when we went into town or anything, they said that they were all off limits. I think it might have been maybe still a lot of booby traps left. I really don't know. But they just said it's off limits, and so, uh, you weren't allowed like I said. You had to be careful. And they said if you went in to like Seoul, two guys together should walk all the time, not one guy. OK, don't let people get too close to you things like that. I remember they told us when you go into town, I carried my wallet in my back pocket, they said put your wallet up here [points to his shirt pocket] button the top because they walk up, like today you're walking to an airport some place and say they walk up and slash your pocket take your purse or whatever. I guess that was a good idea.

I: What kinds of things did you eat when you were in the Air Force?

GB: Air Force, Uh, whatever they served in the chow hall, it was a balanced diet.

I: I heard there was Spam and stuff; did you eat a lot of it?

GB: Not a lot. I remember eating, yes in fact, till this day, I don't mind Spam once and a while.

I: Uh.

I: What is it?

GB: But it was regular food you know, I mean, it was, we didn't, the only thing I remember like in Korea was where I got used to drinking coffee black, which I no longer drink coffee black, but anyway, I always used to have cream in my coffee, and over there the only cream they had was powder and you'd put it in there and it would float around and take about a week and a half to dissolve [stirring motion] and it wasn't good. So, I got used to drinking coffee black, but as far as the food itself was concerned, I don't remember, but at the time maybe you know, this stuff again, but nothing, nothing bad. You know, it's not like some people who had sea rations for months on end, but we didn't do that.

I: So, did you get to have something different every day?

GB: Yes, pretty much. The only thing you might have is you'd go out for breakfast or something, and they might always have powdered eggs or somethings, but, other than that [laughs].

I: So did you have those packets that were air dried?

GB: No.

I: I remember my Dad was in the Air Force and he had those.

GB: No, no, those came along afterwards. Our son was in the Army for about eight years and he was showing me some of the ones that they had. No, we didn't have that kind of stuff. The sea rations that I had at that time were in a can. They were made by World War Two. A lot of them were packed you know for the World War Two and they were leftovers. So, you'd open up a can of whatever and it would be, you know beans and franks or something or the, uh, chocolate. I remember opening the chocolate and the chocolate, the chocolate was, uh white. Hershey's chocolate was white and...

I: Why?

GB: Because it had been in the can for so long it dried out. At that time I was still smoking and they said that yeah there's cigarettes. So, you got three or four cigarettes in a package. You'd take the cigarette [tapping to show students] out of course if you tapped it, to tap it down so the tobacco got compacted it'd been there so long, you'd didn't get much of a cigarette out of one that was that long when it started. So, but, uh, you got by. It wasn't things to write home about because I could write about something better, but...

I: Is there anything you missed a lot while you were in the Army, like ice cream?

GB: Oh yeah...in Korea, there was everything I can say was powdered, powdered. I remember when we got to Okinawa on the base there was a PX, which was like a they had like a restaurant there and they had, they told us it was reconstituted milk. Now, as they explained it they somehow take the water out and make like a thick syrup out of it and then when they, because they can ship more of it that way, when they got it over there, they put water back with it and it becomes regular milk. My buddy and I went down to the PX and we hadn't had a milkshake in so long, we actually got sick we ate so many of those darn things. They were good [laughs]. You

know it was good and then after that, in Korea, you could only eat what was in the chow hall, but on Okinawa you could go into town, get in a restaurant and eat regular food but in Korea you couldn't.

I: When you went to college the government paid for it, right?

GB: Yes, the GI bill.

I: Yeah.

GB: So, the government, the government paid me one hundred and ten bucks a month. Out of that I had to pay all my expenses.

I: Alright.

GB: They did not have, they didn't pay for my tuition. At that time remember I went to a state school.

I: Uh-huh.

GB: And at that time, the tuition was free for New York state residents and I was a resident. So, I had no tuition. One hundred and ten a month, you could just barely, you know, get a room to live in and three meals a day or two meals a day, or whatever, I made out.

I: So, how did you end up living in Buffalo?

GB: I was born in Gowanda.

I: Okay.

GB: And when I came back from Korea, or Okinawa, when I came back to the States, I was stationed up in Lockport. At that time there was big radar mobile up there, radar site. And I was stationed up there so, and I used to go home every weekend, then I met my, well, she's now my wife and uh, I after I got out of the service I went on to college and we kind of stayed in Buffalo. So, I never had any desire to move. Sometimes, I thought I should. [Laughs] You know, we did alright here. So, I'm happy.

I: Was it hard to get back into like your life and your career after going in the Air Force?

GB: No, not really, not really of course you see I'd been back here for a while and I was weekends, I used to go home or when we had time off like an area that was twenty-four/seven and you might have Tuesday and Wednesday off or something but, I did get out, you know it wasn't really that hard. I got out like I said I worked for a little bit, but then I went on to college. I got out in March and I went to Culepin College in the fall. September, but it was not hard, it was fun.

I: So, after being in the Air Force did it make like things back here seem that much easier?

GB: Oh, yes. I think that, for one thing I grew up. I was uh I always thought I knew it all at eighteen, but I didn't [Laughs] and I got out and uh you know I think that it was a good experience. I don't regret it a bit and uh, I learned a lot. I saw a lot. I wouldn't trade it for a dime, a million dollars it was [] but, it was a lot of fun looking back on it, it at the time, maybe, some of the things weren't too good but, looking back at years to come, why it wasn't that bad. I enjoyed it. Would I do it again? Yes, I'd do it again [laughter], you know, but you learned a lot you learn other ways of life, uh, part of what I guess what you kids are learning now is how other people live in other countries and that you know, that was completely different for me I grew up

in a small town, Gowanda, just like Orchard Park, right? You get over there and you see people, that I've got some pictures there, there you don't know what poverty is until you saw it over there and I mean it wasn't because of the war. I mean it was just the way they've always been over there, like our houseboy made eighteen dollars or whatever a month and that was good wages for those people. Uh, I remember in Korea, and I'd never seen this before, but they used to let the Koreans on the Base every so often and we had they had planted grass, probably, rye grass or something but it was real green and rather than having anybody cut it, the Koreans would come on and they had a little cycle, which was a little handle, a little handle, about yeah long with a little cycle on the end of it and they'd cut this grass and they took it home and ate it. That was their food and they would take, they had an A frame, which I got some pictures of, an A frame and uh they would load this, similar to that tripod thing standing there [points to video camera] except they would pile this stuff on the what-cha- ma- call- it, the legs of the tripod, and they'd get around the front of it and they had like a backpack. The guy got the thing on and you'd see this little thing of green grass walking down the road, right? And there's two little legs underneath it and that's a guy taking it home, and he's going to have dinner that night. And uh, it was a different, different ways of life, you know. You see different things going on. How they live and their houses and everything completely different than anything we'd ever seen. And, uh, no, running water, no electricity, no television, at that time. But, in fact I saw pictures when they had the Olympics in Seoul here a few years back of downtown Seoul. Only it's a nice modern city now. [Laugh] You know it wasn't much to look at when I was left down there but, uh, and then in Japan and different places I went all over the Far East, not only Korea but they were the same type of living. The people were, the Japanese were a little bit more prosperous because the war had been over a little longer, but there again you could find if you got on the train to go someplace you could see, you know the straw roofs and stuff on their buildings. So, but, it was an experience. Of course, in this country, why, you know just like us. [Laughs] But, over there it was different, so it's like going today, probably going to a foreign country and going back in the hills someplace and seeing the way some people lived you know,. It was a learning experience.

I: Can we see those pictures?

GB: Yes, [gets things out of bag]. Oh, first of all, when you're overseas, or at least at that time, when you were overseas they had when you got to Korea or Japan, I guess it was, they took all of our greenbacks, all of our American money, and they gave us military payment certificates, MPC's we called them. That's just a sample, this was ten cents worth and you couldn't buy anything in the PX or anything using greenbacks, that was a court martial because greenbacks are worth a lot of money on the black-market over there. So, they did this and every so often the government, our government, come out and change MPC's, that way if you're sitting on a million dollars in PC, MPC money, maybe you're making it in the black market illegally or whatever, right? They change it so it's now worthless as of a certain day because they would say you can only change, maybe, two hundred dollars, I think two hundred dollars it was the maximum that you could exchange and if you had more than that you must have gotten to the post office and mailed it home in a money order before that. [Passing MPC around] But,

anyway, that's that, and in the Korean money is called Won, I just discovered this but last night I was digging through these things and I found this, and in one case I spelled Won, W-O-N, so do they, but on this bill it's H-W-A-N, Bank of Korea. [looking at the money] But, they're both, what are they ten Won. I don't know what the reading is or writing is. [passing money around]

I: Is a Won equivalent to a dollar or?

GB: When I was there one hundred and sixty Won to an American dollar. That's like going to Canada now and saying one hundred and thirty-five or a dollar thirty-five to American. And this was our little houseboy Kim [looking at photo and passing photo]

Teacher off camera: oh, you had a houseboy? Hum, times almost up.

GB: Okay

Teacher: So, we can wrap it up

GB: Okay.

Teacher: Mr. Bowen, do you have any final words?

GB: No, uh, Korea was an experience. I enjoyed the service while I was there. Like I said at the time I was kind of not, [Laughs] maybe, too happy with some of the things, all of the rain and things like that but, looking back on it, it was a really good experience and I don't regret a minute of it.

Teacher: Well, thank you very much.

GB: Yes, you're very welcome.

Teacher: We got to get a picture.

GB: Okay

Teacher: I don't want these students to be late for their next period class.

GB: Okay. [Laughter].

Teacher: Quickly.

GB: Quickly, that's, that's an oxen [passing pictures around] that was our chapel and this was the latrine, you folks have nice sinks to use that was ours.

I: uh huh.

End of Tape