

PREFACE

February 25, 2014

12:00 p.m. (PST)

Red Rooster Barber Shop

Eugene, Oregon

Interview duration: 37 minutes, 19 seconds

Interviewee:

Pete Peterson, served in the U.S. Air Force from 1961-1965.

Interviewers:

Cody Schmidt, the lead interviewer, is a senior undergraduate student in Journalism at the University of Oregon. Schmidt served in the U.S. Navy 2007-2011 as an Information Systems Technician IT2 stationed on the USS Mount Whitney.

Drew Spainhower, a senior undergraduate student in Political Science at the University of Oregon. Drew is from Portland, Oregon.

Shelby Anderson, a senior undergraduate student in Political Science and History at the University of Oregon. Shelby is from Lowell, Oregon.

Schmidt, Spainhower and Anderson are students in the Veteran's Oral History Program under Professor Alex Dracobly at the University of Oregon.

TRANSCRIPT

Cody Schmidt:

Can you just state your name for the record?

Pete Peterson:

I go by Pete Peterson.

Schmidt:

Okay. What branch were you in?

Peterson:

I was in the Air Force, November 19, 1961 to November 19, 1965.

Schmidt:

We'll just start at boot camp. What are your memories of boot camp? From showing up there and traveling to boot camp?

Peterson:

[General Laughter] Well, you know, the first thing, like most young kids eighteen years old and never been away from home, you end up in a place where they're not real friendly. Uh, and how they knew you were a recruit, I don't know, but they're screaming and yelling at you. They do not let you go to sleep that first night, and they keep you awake so that you're so tired the next day, you're gonna go to sleep and o'dark thirty, whatever time we go to bed. But the guy coming in, beating in the garbage cans the next morning and you wake up. First off, you don't realize you're not at home and it's not your mother trying to wake you up. All of a sudden they're yelling and screaming and swearing at you and you think, "Oh my God, where am I?" and when it dawns on you where you're really at, "Oh my God, did I ever make a mistake." And it's, uh, it's a different thing. They have to train you and teach you in a matter of a few weeks

and they're gonna change your whole attitude towards life and it's basically what it's about. You start learning lessons immediately. What I tell everyone is, I think, I think all kids that reach the age of eighteen should have to go through basic training because you learn respect and discipline, and if you learn nothing more than that, it will change your attitude for the rest of your life. Now what else do you need to know?

Schmidt:

What was your expectation for what boot camp would be?

Peterson:

I didn't really have anything, the only thing I kept thinking to myself was, "I know X amount of people that went through basic, they made it, if they can do it, I know I'm better than they are, I can surely do it." But at times you wonder if you can do it. It's a complete change of life. Again, here you are an eighteen-year-old kid, you can sleep in to whenever you want, and mom will wake you up and have breakfast ready. I'm sorry but that life is over. And it's different and you have to make some adjustments. It's just a matter of maturity.

Schmidt:

Do you have any stories from boot camp that really stick out, for instance something that may have happened?

Peterson:

Yes, uhm, okay, now you have security instructions that you have to know. You learn different things, different codes. If I remember correctly, there's eleven security instructions. Well because I learned them and memorized them, they put me in charge of being what they call the "barracks guard." So, the first week, the sergeant comes in in the morning and I know he's not supposed to come in until I see his I.D. So I wanna see his I.D., and he says, "Let me in!" and I say "No sir, not until I see your I.D.!" Well he finally shows it and I let him in and asks me, "What's the first sergeant's device?" Well I didn't even know who the first Sergeant was. He

said, "What's the first sergeant's device?" And anyhow he said, "You better find out." I said, "While I'm standing at the guard door, how am I gonna find out?" So then he yells at me, "What's the first sergeant's device, boy?" I said, "I don't know sir," He said, "God dammit, you better find out!" And he hauled off and he kicked me in the shin. [General Laughter] "Yes sir!" He said, "Well, what is it?" and I said, "I don't know, sir!" And he said, "I told you to find out!" "Well how am I gonna find out, sir?" And he said, "Ask!" And anyhow I asked him what a first sergeant's device was. He explained that it was a small diamond inserted in the chevrons, and I never forgot that one. So that was, that was my first experience and then I went on through basic training to Air Police School.

I happened to be at the barracks yard there when Commander of the Air Police School came up and did the same exact thing. We had the exchange of the security instructions and whatever and I answered them all, and that was the case, I got this guy. Anyhow, he looks at me and he can't get me for anything, I knew all the answers. He reached up on the edge of my pocket on my fatigues and he starts running his hand and he hooked a thread and he started pulling that thread and that thing is coming out of there and the thing must've been three inches long and he says, "You're sure a sloppy bastard!" you know. And, "Yes sir!" [General Laughter]. Anyhow, he rattled me good and, uh, but he couldn't get me for anything other than that. He asked me, "Are you ever gonna call this barracks to attention?" And I said, "Yes sir!" And he called the barracks to attention and he goes in and inspects the place. But, the neat thing of it was, when we graduated out of the Air Police School, I ended up graduating number one airman for Air Police. I was awarded a trophy plaque and a letter of accomodation and the same lieutenant was offering the handout to me, and when he shook my hand, he said, "You know I knew from the first day I met you in the barracks that you were gonna make it." That was kinda neat. Today, I have that stuff. But that was my basic training, other than that, anything that you thought might happened, never happened. They always have what they call "Air Force needs" [Interruption] ...

My first year in the service after tech school, I was told that if you graduate in the top three people from tech school, you get to go to your base of choice. So my bases of choice, being from Portland, Oregon, was Portland International Aiport, Klamath Falls Air Force Base and Seattle-Tacoma, it was McChord Air Force Base in those days. Those were my three choices. Low and behold, I graduated number one out of a hundred and five students. My base of choice,

I ended up in a remote site in northern Alaska, a hundred and twenty miles below the Arctic Circle.

Schmidt:

Where at?

Peterson:

The place was called Galena [Galena Air Force Base]. We were the nearest fighter interceptor squad to Russia that the United States had and this was back in the Cold War days, back when the missile crisis with Cuba, the Russians were flying aircraft over the base in Alaska. Not necessarily over the base, over Alaska. We would scramble fighter jets to intercept them, we lost five F-102 fighters and one rescue helicopter chasing MiG's [Mikoyan, Russian Aircraft]. The airplanes didn't fly well when they're running out of fuel. Russia would send fighters and bombers over the imaginary line out there and we would scramble the aircraft to intercept them but then Russia would send more somewhere else. So instead of sending newer aircraft with full tanks, they scrambled their already airborne, so once they did that, they never had enough fuel to get back. So they ended up having to jump out and crash the fighters.

One of the more frightening times for me was Russia sent a squadron of bombers with fighter escort and we didn't intercept them until they were in British Columbia. And back in 1961 or 1962, it would've been 1962, the communications were not what they are today and so the people of the lower forty-eight had no idea how close we were to having Russian bombers being able to bomb the West Coast. Our pilots came back pure white. I was secondary command post at the time, so I knew the pilots ... but they were being buzzed by the MiG fighters and they were requiring permission to shoot down the bombers and they told them, "No, take video pictures only." And they came back, they were pretty spooked. One of them came back, he chased a MiG over the line and he went to peel off and another MiG buzzed him from behind. He said he didn't even know it was there. It was, it was really scary at the time, especially when you find out the rest of the stuff that was going on in the world at that time.

I guess the next most exciting thing for me that happened was the, I was standing guard over the entry way to the aircraft ... and a T-33 jet, these are trainers, small, small trainer jets,

flies up and lands on the tarmac and a person climbs out of the aircraft and he starts walking down the taxi way into the alert area where we have nuclear-loaded weapons. That's a no-no, you don't do that. So I'm challenging him and I make him advance to be recognized, and when he walks up I notice he doesn't have the right numbers on his badge. This fella is a full-bird colonel. I've got one stripe and man, I'm an airman, third class. [General Laughter] Anyhow, when I see he doesn't have the proper I.D., I pulled my .45 out, jacked a round into the chamber and told him to "spread eagle" and he wasn't too happy about that. I laid him down in the snow, in the dirt and in the mud on the ground and called for a sabotage alert team to come and assist us. Well, he was not a happy camper, because he happened to be the commander of the Alaskan Air Command, and he out-ranked our base commander ... Anyhow, we got him spread eagle and the sabotage alert team, picked him up, threw him in the back of a pick-up truck under armed guard, and hauled him down to our commander of security who happened to be a chief master sergeant, and he was not happy to be talking to an NCO [Non-commissioned officer]. But I know I did what I had to do. I was right and he happened to be the commander of all Alaskan Air Command. So they ended up putting a guard check at the end of the taxi way so he could come in, walk-in whenever he wanted too. That was a different ... that led into a bigger story.

I got transferred because we got told, "Once you serve your time in a remote tour, you get your base choice." Well, guess what? Three bases I picked? Same three. So they send me from remote Alaska, seventy below zero, to the Mojave Desert in Southern California. It's a hundred and sixteen degrees and I watched a hundred and eighty-six degree change in temperature, and I'd liked to die. But, one of the first things they do is they put you on gate duty because the heat is insane no matter where you're at. While I'm standing there reading the instructions for people to enter the base, a civilian vehicle pulls up. I stopped it, the guy inside is in civilian clothes, civilian vehicle, he's drunker than a skunk and so I asked for some identification and so he reaches over and pulls out a visitors pass out of the glovebox. I told him, "No sir, that's not any good. I issue the visitors passes." And he says, "I'm General Old." That didn't mean a whole lot to me at the time. [General laughter] So anyhow I said, "Well sir, if you're General Old, show me some I.D. and you can get on the base." He said, "I don't need any goddamn I.D.. I own this base!" Well come to find out, he was at a party on civilian grounds off-base, invited him to his quarters, they're behind him in different vehicles, and they can't get on the base because I won't let them on ... He ended up getting very hostile and he told me he's gonna go. And I said, "No

sir, let me tell you this. I qualified expert with every weapon I've ever fired and you'll never live long enough to make it to that next stop, son." And I said, "If you show me some I.D., you can be on your way." And again, "I don't need any I.D." And the guard shack picked up a line to the headquarters and I was calling my flight sergeant. He says, "Who are you callin'?" "I'm calling my flight sergeant, sir." He says, "Flight sergeant, hell! I want the wing commander!" And he jerked the phone out of my hands and shoved me across the guard shack and about that time I unsnapped my nightstick and I was gonna put him on the ground, cause I still I didn't know who this little fat, drunk was. Well, by the time I got recovered, he says on the phone, "Colonel Phiffer [sp?], you some son of a bitch, this is General Old." And I said, "Oh my God, he's gotta be a general, because the colonel is the wing commander and I know him. You don't call him at two-thirty in the morning and call him a dumb son of a bitch." [General laughter] Anyhow, I decided I better get out, so I picked up another direct line and I said, "Get the flight commander down here now! I have a person impersonating General Old." Well, he wasn't impersonating, he was General Old [General Laughter].¹

In his fame, he was a commander of Fifteenth Air Force SAC [Strategic Air Command]; he was a first person to fly a B-52 non-stop around the world and I just wouldn't let him on the base. He was not happy. He got the colonel, my commanding officer, who was a major, the duty officer, a lieutenant, our flight commander, the patrol sergeant, [they] were all standing in a line at the end of the main gate and he's going down the line chewing their asses. Now this is about three o'clock in the morning. Anyhow, he told the colonel that I was supposed to be fired from any job with any responsibility, I couldn't be on any base in his command, that's all bases from the Mississippi River to Guam.

So for one month, I did absolutely nothing. I had no responsibilities and it was the best month I ever had in the service. [General laughter] My NCO wanted me to take the garbage out and I said, "Sir, you want me to have the responsibility of taking the garbage out?" And he said, "Oh forget it, I'll get somebody else to do it." I really did nothing, I really truly did nothing. Then they decided the best thing for me was to ... ship me where I couldn't be seen by the general. So they sent me out to the Nuclear Bomb Storage area and I was stuck up there for about a month and I didn't tell you that when I left Alaska, I was promoted from Alaska, and I got down to March Air Force Base in California, that stripe followed me and I got it the first month I

¹ Presumably General Archie J. Old.

was there, so I had just been promoted. A week, or no, a month later, after this incident my NCO asks me, "Who do you know in the Alaska Air Force?" [Phone ringing] ... Okay, let me think, now where were we?

Schmidt:

Who do you know in the Alaska Air Force Base?

Peterson:

Okay, well I got a stripe from the Alaskan Command.

Schmidt:

Mhmhmm.

Peterson:

And after a month I ended up having my NCO ask me who I knew in the headquarters of SAC Air Force in Omaha, Nebraska. I said, "I don't know anyone there." "Well, they knew you cause you're getting a stripe from headquarters SAC in Omaha, Nebraska." Boy, the general sobered up and he realized what was happening and he ends up promoting me.

In the meantime, I wrote a letter to the president of the United States and the U.S. Congress requesting a congressional investigation against an alcoholic general. [General laughter] I took it to my commander, who was a major at the time, and I let him read it, word for word and everything that happened that moment, reading the instructions on entry, and the general pulling up, and everyone and everything that was involved. I requested an investigation and I showed it to the major. He read it and he says to me, "Son, I can't deny one word that you said here." But he said, "I'm gonna tell you - this is not polite - but I'm gonna tell you: if you send this letter to the president that man's gonna send you to Bumfuck, Egypt, within twenty-four hours." I said, "Well sir, I just came off a remote site in Alaska and I, I don't care to go back." He said, "Well, don't send it. You will be okay." I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. If anybody in my chain of command gets busted because I did my job, I'm gonna send it. But other than that, I'll hold on to it." Today, I still have that letter. [General laughter]. It's put away, but

it's, I probably should sit down and read it to get everything word for word but it was not nice [general laughter] ... it was pretty nasty. But it was a fun time, was a great experience, I got promoted and because of the promotion I got two promotions in a months time, that's unheard of in the Air Force.

I ended up becoming in charge of security for the nuclear storage area. I had run-ins with the SAC overall readiness inspection team, the old RI team, but because I was in nuclear weapons from Alaska as a young recruit and all these other experiences, you couldn't put enough pressure on me. I've been there, done that, and so I always got through the inspections with flying colors. I saved a few officers because they didn't know what the answers were, but I did. I had a really good life ... Being in the Air Force is really not like being in the military. You go to work for eight hours in your uniform and the rest of the time you're a civilian. It was a fun time, I got tired of the bologna that you get on off-duty time. In my case, being in Air Police, there was always some kind of training. You always had combat judo training, firearms training, whatever, there was always some kind of off-duty training. It just got old and so I said, "Well, four years was enough for me." Now, I don't know what more you want to hear, I've got some funny stories.

Getting back to the story of Alaska, one of the funny things that we used to do up there, you get young kids again, out of school, and they get stationed in the remotest part of Alaska, that's three hundred and fifty miles from anywhere, and you get off of this airplane. I'm thinking of a kid, his last name was Wolfson, he was from New York. He ended up being my roommate and he never had been, never had been anywhere where it's cold and he came in in December and we were probably about fifty below zero at that time. We'd take a broom handle and go around and poke holes in the snow and the ice. Then, when you'd get these young recruits in, they'd come a walking along and, "What are those holes?" And I'd go, "Oh God, stand back! Stand back! Don't get close to those holes!" And, "What? What?" And I'd say, "Those are ice snakes!" [General laughter] They'd say, "Ice snakes?" And I'd say, "Yeah! They live in those holes and if you get close, they bite you and you get frost bit! Everyday you're walking around looking for holes, you don't wanna get close to any hole out there in the snow." There was just a ton of crap that we used to do ... Having that cold weather like that, you have to learn how fast water freezes. So you have to throw a bucket of ice or water and it ends up landing as chunks of ice.

The Army came up and spent their winter maneuvers on our base and it happened that the temperature dropped to seventy below so they went out to check their vehicles, they kicked the tires for air pressure and they cracked the tires that were all froze solid. It's just things like that, that you don't run across everyday ... And I guess my happiest day was when I finally got the chance to get out. [General laughter]

Schmidt:

What was your feeling towards the Cold War when you were in?

Peterson:

Uh, fear, I guess ... You know you can't put yourself in that position, unless you're there. It's a case where, I didn't have to go to Vietnam. At the time, and we were deathly hot at the time. My one-year remote tour, the first year out of basic training, kept me out of Vietnam. Because you could only have one tour in a four-year hitch. We had the worry of the Russians. Again, we were the nearest fighter interceptor squadron to Russia. If they're gonna blow anything off the map coming over, we're it. It was a nuclear weapons area. You know, you always have that fear. It wasn't that you worried about it all the time but boy, when they start sending missiles to Cuba and all those other stuff and the Bay of Pigs and so on and so on.

You really start worrying about it. Again, we had no communications where we were. We got mail three days a week and that was your only communications from the outside world. So it was spooky, it was spooky. But you know, you really didn't worry about it until you go on alert. Then, all of a sudden, it's for real. Then when you find out the bombers and the fighters are already over us, it's spooky ... Okay, so know what else do you wanna know?

Schmidt:

Do you guys have any other questions?

Drew Spainhower:

Why didn't you re-up for another four years?

Peterson:

I just got done telling you. The b.s. from my off-duty time. That, I would've probably stayed and probably would've thought seriously about a career, but there's so much b.s. that comes to you on your off-duty time that you're not really away from it. You can't, you can't escape it. For instance, you worked all night, you worked from midnight 'til eight in the morning. When you get off of work at eight in the morning, now they tell you that you gotta go over to the medical squadron and get your flu shots. Oh great, so now we all go and stand in line and wait for whatever and it makes us continually do something. Again, we had to go out to the firing range. You had every month, you had what was called "Commander's call" ... and they ... would end up showing you these movies. This is something, this is something that I found kind of interesting, because each month you had to go watch some dumb, dumb movie that really didn't participate to you, it might be something about army tanks, or whatever, had nothing to do with the Air Force.

Anyhow many, many years later, standing right here in this barber shop ... I talk with a fellow that's a manager at the bookstore who was in the Navy, as an officer, and I asked him, "What did you do in the Navy?" We taught pilots how to identify enemy aircraft. I said, "Well, how did you do that?" He said, "We did it subliminally. One picture of a silhouette and added it to a movie frame and we'd show them movies and then, all of a sudden, this flash of an enemy airplane, and it was just one frame." He said, "As you watch the movie, they're getting black with all of this identification for aircraft." Well then two and two start adding up and I thought, "You know, they sent us to movies every month." And at the time I was in, I'll guarantee you, I would not have hesitated to blow you away because it was my job and if you hadn't have had the right I.D. and you're in the wrong place, there were a couple of times that I had orders to shoot on sight because people that weren't authorized were there. Boy, I was looking to shoot. Now I've been raised with guns all my life and I never have I ever thought about shooting someone. Once I got away from there, I lost all that feeling as well. But I really have to believe that we were probably brainwashed.

The fact that this is our job, you gotta shoot people, they are not authorized, you take them out ... You know highly unlikely, after listening to him talk about training the pilots and to

me there's no other good reason to go in and watch these movies. Especially, like I said, who cares about an army tank when you're in the Air Force? It didn't make sense, but you had to go do it. It was all, those type of things, that you just get tired of.

Schmidt:

You seen a lot of change in the military since you were in, even in the 60's ...

Peterson:

Oh yeah, yeah.

Schmidt:

What do you think the military's gonna look like in another twenty, thirty years down the road? What's gonna be something that someone's surprised about?

Peterson:

Well, I've been saying all along, it's gonna be more electronic stuff. Okay, when we started the Afghan War, people were saying, "Oh man! We're gonna be in so much ..." I said, "Those people over there are gonna have no idea what they're coming up against. We could wipe out the entire country and never put a soldier on the ground. B-52's will wipe them out, but, then they found out that, yes, we took out the army. But you know, it's a case where we developed weapons like the drones and stuff now that you don't even have to have a human being out there. You sit in Texas somewhere, bombing in Afghanistan ... And there's gonna be more and more of that. There's gonna be lasers, there's gonna be ... I really don't know but the technology is so much better and we're gonna be depending more on satellites and GPS's and there you go. They'll push the button, and he's gone! You don't have to, you know, I may be terrible to think that you take someone out just because you think he's a threat but they're doing it. They don't know it's coming and you don't know it either. It's a guy that's sitting in that office watching that TV screen and he says, "Yep, go ahead and send a rocket off at that one." And with the smart bombs that they have today, they can shoot them down a smokestack, it's gonna be hard to hide twenty years from now. Crying out loud, I really truly do not believe there will be an awful

lot of ground troops involved in battle ... But I, I just got done cutting the colonel's hair from the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] unit.

Schmidt:

Lance [Englet]?

Peterson:

Yeah, yeah. He's, you know, thinking that you're gonna have to have ground troops, blah, blah, blah, blah. But technology, I see it the other way around. Then here you have the government right now, gonna be cutting the troops, they don't need them because technology that we have. It's just gonna get better.

Schmidt:

Do you guys have any other questions?

Peterson:

Well, it was my pleasure. I wish I could've been able to tell you some interesting stories [general laughter] but I was just a common, everyday kind of troop of those days and I did have some unusual things happen to me that didn't happen to every person in the military, like I said. The award from basic training and one of the first things that happened while I was in that site up in Alaska, I ended up being picked as "Airman of the Month" for the base and you know, I had some awards that the average guy just doesn't get. Then to have the run-ins with the colonel and then the general, to tell you how big this general was ... he's a three-star general and at the time [Air Force General] Curtis LeMay, [the] Secretary of Defense, and the President of the United States were the only people that outranked him. So, I had three people higher than the guy I got spread eagled and threatened to kill. I, I'm doing my job, he would not show me I.D., he never did show me I.D. and but once everybody else showed up and said, "Yes sir, we know who you are." I went to salute him and he says, "Don't salute me, you dumb son of a bitch." I thought, "Well, okay." It was stunning, it was very, very serious and it was very, very scary. It all ended up working out.

Another thing that happened, I didn't say anything about this either. Right after he fired me from all jobs, then I told you I got promoted, President Kennedy was killed, okay? Once he was killed President Johnson flew into our base. Who do you suppose got to be the guard for the president of the United States? Who do you suppose was standing there when the general comes up? I'm not supposed to have any jobs of any responsibility and, "Yes sir, I know who you are." [General laughter] He just looked at me and never said a word. You know ... That's again, something that's a little unusual.

I have a photo at home of President Johnson. As a matter of fact, when I was standing guard, and it's rather interesting. In the background, you can see all the Air Police with their rifles, M1, security and you have the security for the president and they're all looking like this [gesture] and the President is out there shaking hands and doing whatever. That was, that was exciting, too. I don't know that President Johnson was the greatest president in the world but I can say I got to shake his hand. You know, and I got a picture of him. That, that was something that one of those G.I.'s don't get to do.