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Oral History: Robert Reisbeck - Radar in Cold War

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Student Interviewer's Name: Lexie Crone

Interviewee Name: Robert Reisbeck

Time and Location of Interview:

This interview was conducted in one session on November 21, 2016 and it lasted approximately 30 minutes. It was conducted in Siloam Springs Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Siloam Springs, AR. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Robert Reisbeck:

Dr. Bob Reisbeck was born on June 7, 1932. He served in the Army during the Cold War where he monitored the Radar that was connected to the anti-aircraft guns. Once he was out of the army he and his wife, Sandra, moved to Colorado where he bought a Purina Feed Store. He later got a job offer in California where he worked with Carnation, which dealt with chickens, and then they moved to Oklahoma where he had a TV show and earned his Doctorate in Communication.

Interviewer: Lexie Crone (LC)

Interviewee: Robert Reisbeck (RR)

LC: Hello Mr. Reisbeck, to start off this interview, please tell me a little bit about your time serving in the Cold War. Which branch did you serve in?

RR: I spent two years in the Army. This was during the Cold War, in other words there was no war. I had been married to Sandra, my wife, eight weeks before between my first and second eight weeks of basic training. Anyway, luckily for me I was stationed at Brooklyn in a beautiful area of town, and we just really enjoyed it. We had a landlord that was just a perfect man, he had a fig tree in the back. Anyway, uh so mine turned out to be an eight to five job. I was probably twelve miles from where we lived to the gun sight where I was stationed. We had at that site four anti-aircraft guns and a radar system which drove the guns, in other words, this radar system watched the airplanes that we were aiming at. When we turned it on then the guns would follow just as we commanded it to, you know, and uh the idea of this was one of the early warning gun sights. We were watching for enemy aircraft.

LC: So was that your job, to watch for the enemy aircraft?

RR: Yes, that was my job. I was in radar and so it was especially interesting. This system of radar went from, oh from where we were at, maybe in New Jersey, it went across almost the top of Canada.

LC: So you watched the radar that whole way?

RR: No no, see there were gun sites all the way. They were looking for Russians, enemy planes. There was never an incident. We had practice, you know, and once you're called out from home, "Report, report, report."

LC: Did you know it was practice then, when they called you?

RR: At first, yeah. They were really training. You know, you get a kind of lump in your throat, you know, what if we see a plane? What if? We never did fortunately.

LC: What was the training like when you got the call to report?

RR: We went to the, see training was during my second eight in Fort Bliss, El Paso. And, uh, we got thorough training on that and when we reported we were ready to go. But, actually it turned out to be fun. Boring as anything, we did a lot of yak yak yak. I was Corporal. In fact, of all the enlisted men I was the highest rank you see. And uh, I had enough rank that when we had station call in the morning, in other words all of the troops met, each of the four platoons sent a man to be on maybe guard duty, garbage, wash duty and so forth. I was, boy I tell you our platoon was, "Get our man up, get our man up." I was a little ashamed to try that so I often selected others so that we made the excuse that no one could be on guard duty this morning because we have a practice drill in radar. That kind of bothered me, you know, of course. It was just a complete unit living quarters. Nice living quarters. Huts, nice looking. Mess hall, the whole business.

LC: So you all lived there together, your whole platoon did?

RR: All four platoons did, yes. Of course, each of the huts, they called them, one platoon wouldn't fit in one, and I don't think there were any two platoons in one together. They were commanded by Puerto Rican sergeant. Very, very competent. Very stern, demanding men you know, and they just really cream of the crop I think you know. And when it came time to re-up they raised the re-up requirements and it scared them. They thought they were gonna have to be able to speak better English or something, but nah, nah, nah. It was great though.

LC: So what made you decide to go into radar?

RR: The army made the decision for me. After we finished basic training they told us, so many people, "Allen you're going to Korea, Jones you're going to Northern Alaska, and Reisbeck you're going to Brooklyn, New York." Now they didn't announce that, you got a letter of course. Whoopee! I feel kind of guilty because I didn't really serve in active duty and everyone said, "Nonsense. You were there if you were needed."

LC: If you don't mind me asking, what was a day like in basic training?

RR: Oh, we had a real lax training. Our particular unit, real lax, called everybody troop. Even called the commanding officer, Coop. We had to spend a night out. Originally, the used to be trucked up to White Sands, New Mexico. I think they just stopped that. So, they decided that we would just go up to the baseball field and camp there. Set up our tents and spend the night there. Anyway, uh it was getting cold and first sergeant said, "Oh, it's too cold to stay out we'll just sleep here where we are." But we did get good

training, absolutely got thorough training. “Here’s how to turn on the radio, Step 1, Step 2.” I say that’s good training (chuckles) and it actually wasn’t too boring. Of course there were other platoons somewhere that were trained on firing 90 mm guns and uh we got at that time, there was a great group of Puerto Ricans that were drafted. You know, they were American, but they spoke Spanish, fluent at it, but they were picking up English slowly you know, uh and I was so ashamed of our men, some of em, “Speak English, you idiot.” That just turned my stomach you know. Demeaning, but we got along. One night I was in charge of quarters, meaning I went to the officer’s hut and I stayed there all night you see. Anybody needed anything they came and woke me up. One night a couple of privates came tearing in and said, “Corporal, Corporal come quick! There’s somebody breaking in to mess hall.” We ran around and it was two members that thought they were hungry and they were breaking in. And, uh, took em up, “Oh please Corporal, please, please, please don’t report this.” And I says, “Listen, it is my duty and requirement to report this and if I didn’t report it I’d really get in trouble.” They just got reprimanded. They thought, “I’ll go to jail just for trying to get some food.” I’ve had so many coincidences. For example, we had known a young man who is going around the United States. Oh, he went to Estes Park where Sandra and I were working. He went there on a trip just looking around. We went to shows together, movies you know. He really became a friend. Gosh, this was several years later, I was on the firing range and uh you know I’m a pretty good shot, but I had to coach those who were not, you know. So, I looked over and there he was. By that time he was a Lieutenant! And even more than that he became the Commander of my Platoon!

LC: Really? That’s amazing! How do things like that even happen?

RR: I know! When our younger daughter got married, they were planning on who they were going to invite and they said, “Let’s invite Phil, let’s invite Phil. He’s probably enjoy getting a letter.” Low and behold he said, “I’ll come.” He just talked and talked to my daughter. Just a straight honest, nice guy. Oh, I had more like that. While I was in New York I met a little Jewish boy from Brooklyn. I called him and he said, “I’d like to have you over for dinner.” Now, this is Brooklyn. They lived in a flat they call them. They lived upstairs and she had a big kitchen and was she a good cook. Sandra tried to emulate that, just really good. Now here’s another coincidence, he got out of the army. Mike and his wife moved to Los Angeles and opened a tourist company. They planned tours for people. And he must have made an awful awful lot of money because, he and his wife called one night they were in town and my wife invited them over for dinner. There they were! She was the pretties thing. Really enjoyed it you know, talking. He had to be very rich, very very rich. He had one daughter, she was at the time skiing in Switzerland, and the other one was studying in Paris. But anyways, we had to create time. He lived off the coast of Florida on an English owned island. A lot of people did that you know. I wonder, but anyway he wrote some nice letters and notes and then I never heard from him again. What I figure is that the um government, maybe the IRS or something was coming down on him, and they were going to get a lot of money out of him. The only thing I can think is that he fled to Switzerland or something. Congratulations whatever he did! I think of him often, but never ever hear from him. So, that’s really my story.

LC: So, what did you do after you were out of the Army?

RR: Well, we came home, uh Berthoud, Colorado. Then we moved to Julesberg, Colorado and I worked in a Purina Feed Store, big Purina Feed Store. Pretty well paid, and I talked with Warren, he was the overall boss, and I said, "I'm kind of thinking about buying this place from ya." "Oh good," he said. Well we did, and we put an awful lot of money in expanding. In fact, we expanded more than we could afford you know. And a job from Carnation in California came along, where I was in charge of, see see, the Carnation company owns the chickens. They pay to place the chickens in owners cages. Thousands and thousands and thousands of chickens you see. And, because those were Carnation's chickens you had to take care of them very well. I was in charge of several crews that would go to all of the Carnation plants and we would vaccinate, debeak, whatever was required. It's a labor intense job, but not a bad job really. So I was in charge of a lot of men, well paid you know. So, uh that's kind of it. Then we came to Oklahoma and I was county agent in McCalester, Oklahoma. That's in OSU. Anyway, I went to OSU and take a job with communication, very part time, and the rest was going to school. I earned a Masters and a Doctorate in Communications. I had a TV show. Absolutely loved it! Called Sun Up. I'd get up every morning and say, "Good Morning Oklahoma! What a beautiful day, you know. I'm Bob Reisbeck from Oklahoma State University. Well looking at the news, the first thing we can look at is USDA is not going to pay anymore for something, something something." But that was just minor. All of the others were stories that we had shot all around the state. It took a lot of time, and I'd watch it and pick out little sound bytes that I thought were good. And then I came home, see I'd already written the whole thing. I chose those sounds bytes and then marked them on the script so they could be transferred to the master tape. Like I say, it was hard, but I just loved every minute of it! Sandra said, "You usually came home a bear on Friday." But I'd do it again if I had to. Meanwhile Sandra became a Veterinarian. She went to school when she was 45 and finished when she was 50. Became a Veterinarian. Her father was there of course, anyway he asked the ultimate question, "Sandra, what is the difference between a veterinarian and a real doctor?" WHOA! His other son-in-law was a medical doctor and he asked him the same question. "There's no difference Dad. They're trained in certain animals, we're trained in people. Of course our training is a whole lot more and harder, but uh no Dad, they can write prescriptions and everything, just not for people."

LC: Well, thank you so much for doing this! It was very interesting and I enjoyed it!

RR: Oh you're welcome! Really enjoyed it!

