

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Air Force Reserve History in Youngstown, Ohio

Vienna Air Force Base History

O.H. 81

JOHN BARAN and ALEX BAPTIST

Interviewed

by

David S. Arms

on

February 27, 1976

ALEX BAPTIST

Alex Baptist was born in Girard, Ohio in 1921. He went to school in Girard, graduating in 1937 or 1938 from high school. He then went to work for U.S. Steel Corporation, and in 1944 entered the Navy. When he was discharged in 1946 he continued his employment at U.S. Steel.

In July of 1952 Baptist submitted an application to Youngstown Air Force Base and was hired as an auto body repairman and painter. When the base transferred over to reserve status, Baptist transferred over to be a fire truck mechanic and at present is still employed at this job.

JOHN BARAN

John Baran was born in Masury, Ohio in 1925. He graduated in 1943 from Brookfield High School, and then joined the Navy for two years. After his discharge from the Navy, Baran returned home to Youngstown, Ohio.

In 1952 he submitted a federal application to Selfridge Air Force Base in Michigan. Six months later he was interviewed at the Youngstown Air Force Base (now Youngstown Reserve Base) and received a job in the fire department on November 3, 1952. At present Baran is still employed at this job.

ELIZABETH A. REITZEL
July 25, 1978

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN BARAN and ALEX BAPTIST

INTERVIEWER: David S. Arms

SUBJECT: Vienna Air Force Base History

DATE: February 27, 1976

ARMS: This is an interview with Mr. Alex Baptist and Mr. John Baran for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project by David Arms at Vienna Air Force Base, Vienna Township, Ohio. It is February 27, 1976 at approximately 11:30 a.m.

I would like to start this interview by asking each of you in turn to give a little of your personal background. Where were you born, that type of thing?

BARAN: I was born in Masury, Ohio in the year 1925. I graduated from Brookfield High School in 1943. I went to the Navy for two years and was then discharged, so I returned home. In about 1952 the base was being built and I noticed an article in the Youngstown Vindicator that they were taking applications for employment out here. So, I submitted a federal application to Selfridge Air Force Base up in Michigan. About six months later I was interviewed at the Youngstown Reserve Base and received a job in the fire department. That was on November 3, 1952, and I have been here ever since.

ARMS: I see. What is your job now?

BARAN: I am the Assistant Chief of the fire department.

- A: Where did you get your training? Did you take any formal training?
- JB: Yes, I received training at the fire fighting school while I was in the Navy, in 1944. Since I have been here I have been to fire fighting school down in Greenville, Mississippi. I have also been to Chanute Air Force Base two different times for fire fighting training. Last September I went to the rescue school out in Chanute.
- A: Alex, how about you, could you give a little of your personal background?
- AB: Well, I was born in Girard in 1921. I went to the Girard schools. I got out of school in about 1937 or 1938, somewhere around there. I went to work for the U.S. Steel Corporation at the McDonald works. I went into the service in 1944. I went to the Navy for two years and got out in 1946. I applied for federal employment at Lordstown and I was offered a job over there, but I refused it because I was making more money at U.S. Steel. Now I heard about this place here opening up. I came out here in July of 1952, submitted an application right here on the base, and within a week's time I was hired. I was hired the 14th day of July, 1952. I was hired in as an auto body repairman and painter. When the base transferred over from the regular fighter base to reserve status I transferred over to be a fire truck mechanic and I have been here ever since. That was in 1952, since the place opened.
- A: So, your job now is the mechanic on the fire truck?
- AB: Right, strictly as fire truck mechanic.
- A: I see. Have you received any special training for this?
- AB: No, except a year ago this month I was sent to Dobbin's Air Force Base in Georgia for a familiarization course on a new fire truck that we have in use right now. Nothing pertaining to maintenance. This course was just to get familiar with the truck and that's it. We just use our own judgment; read our manuals and find out what's wrong and how to fix it. That's it.
- A: Did your job include any fire fighting at all, or are you strictly a mechanic?
- AB: Well, in case they need any help I have had just a little

experience. I can give people help if they need it, such as operating the equipment and taking it to the scene, or anything that they may ask me to do.

A: So both of you came to work here when this was a U.S. Air Force Base? Could you give me an idea of some of the changes that have taken place? What did you used to do when this was an active Air Force base?

JB: The fire department job is pretty much the same. But as far as the base itself is concerned, when I arrived here about half of the buildings were up. It was all seeded down with rye grass mostly. It was all barren like the fall of the year. About all you could see as far as the grass was concerned was the yellowish dirt, because it was just freshly painted.

When I arrived here we had the F-84 aircraft. Then in three or four years they went to the F-86 and then we even went into the F-102. We operated out of Selfridge Air Force Base in Michigan when I first came here, I believe. Then in 1960 the regular Air Force pulled out. We were already picked up by the reserve unit which was on the lower portion of the base at the time. This was the Air Force base; the active portion was up on this end. In 1957 and 1958 they installed the lower portion of the base with a reserve unit. The reserve hangar was down there, the heating plant, the water system, and their supply building. There were two independent outfits operating here at this particular time. When the Air Force pulled out we went strictly reserve. We faced actual base closing in December of 1965, which was on a two year period. I think the official closing was scheduled for October of 1967. And that brings us up to today.

A: When this place was an active Air Force base and everything, about how many people were assigned here? Only military people, or everybody?

AB: Well, when we first started out, there were approximately 200 to 250 airmen plus less than 100 civilians at that time in 1952. Basically the military came out of Selfridge Air Force Base. They were in the process of shipping all of their equipment down here. Once it was here we were accepting it, putting it in service, and building up the fleet that we have right now. Then it was gradually built up after they got the F-84's in. If I am not mistaken I think the F-84's were actually flown in here in August or September of 1952. I'm not quite sure of that date.

A: At that time you were in the body shop. How many vehicles did they have up there?

AB: Well, when we started out here we actually started out over in this first hangar. We didn't have a motor pool. This motor pool wasn't built until about a year and a half later. I did what work I could do over at the hangar there, and then after the airplanes came in I was moved over here to the fire station.

I was doing my work here in the fire station; what little work there was to be done. Mostly it was making minor changes of registrations on vehicles and transferring from Selfridge Air Force Base to Youngstown, and things like that. There was very little to be done, a little bit of painting to get rid of corrosion and stuff like that. But, I really didn't get into it until the motor pool was completed in approximately the latter part of 1953. Then we went into full scale major repairs then, and that went on until about April of 1960.

In April of 1960 they did away with the body and painting end of it, and they transferred me over since I had experience in mechanical work. They transferred me over to an appointment as automotive mechanic. From there I wasn't in that long. They had an opening for a foreman. I applied for it and I got the job. This happened two months after the reserve unit took over. I held that position until 1965 when they had reduction in force. Being the youngest of the foremen at that particular time, I had to revert back to mechanics. And, I have been the firetruck mechanic ever since.

A: So after the motor pool was established and everything, about how many vehicles did the base ever have? What was the most they probably ever had?

AB: Approximately 275 in that area.

A: I'm not very up to date on the Air Force requirements and everything. What is the most common type of vehicle that the Air Force might use?

AB: Well, they vary. They more or less use small trucks. They also use sedans for normal transportation around the base. Then you get into the construction equipment. They do a lot of construction. They get into material handling, like fork lifts, warehouse tractors, and aircraft towing tractors.

Then you get into your fire equipment. That is basically one and one half tons, half ton pickups and everything else that is used all of the time. The engineering equipment (construction equipment) isn't used everyday. It is just here for training purposes.

A: Where do these vehicles and this equipment come from?

AB: They come direct from the Air Force supply depot.

A: That is throughout the country?

AB: Yes. The government stocks them all.

A: How did the Air Force vehicles get sent here? Do you know? In other words, do they go out and request them?

AB: I don't know too much about that. If you think you need one you put in a request for it. And if they think you need it, why they will give it to you.

A: But I mean how often is equipment replaced?

AB: Well, they have a time limit on that. Six or seven years or 72,000 miles is used to be. Which ever comes first. They keep pretty well within that limit.

A: And what happens to a vehicle after it has been here seven years?

AB: It is auctioned off or salvaged.

A: From here, or do they send it someplace?

AB: No, they send it to Columbus General Depot.

A: Would you say that the vehicles maintained by the Air Force are in good shape?

AB: Yes, I would say so because we do all of our work periodically. We have a regular schedule that we stick to. Everything is on a schedule; your maintenance of three brake systems, oil changes, lubes, safety inspections. If you think it needs done, why you go ahead and do it. They are practically completely rebuilt once a year or once every two years. They don't show any rust or anything. They are always painted periodically and are kept up in very good shape.

A: Now you mentioned that you applied for federal employment and were accepted in Lordstown but turned it down. That is the Lordstown arsonal?

AB: Right. It was the Army depot.

A: Then you applied here?

AB: Right.

A: What was your interest in working for the government?

AB: Well, at that particular time it was the only place that you could work. You know, it was really something that you could depend on.

A: You said that you worked for U.S. Steel before that?

AB: Right.

A: You didn't like your job down there?

AB: It was a job. We didn't know half the time if we were going to work. We were always going on strike. We had to take what they gave us. It wasn't anything that you could really apply any knowledge to. There was hardly ever any chance of advancement. So, you would just wind up being a laborer all of your life. So I figured I would go into some kind of work that I liked, something in which I could probably advance to something higher and be satisfied.

A: So you came up here to work. Have you ever regretted the decision to come up here?

AB: No, not at all.

A: And you have been promoted right along?

AB: Anytime that there was a promotion and I felt that I wanted to apply for it, and I was qualified for it. That is the way they work it.

A: How did your family feel about your working out here?

AB: Very well.

A: They liked it. Where do you live now?

- AB: I live in Cortland now. I just bought a home in Cortland and have decided that I am going to settle down before too long. I am going to try and hit the retirement roles here in about another four years.
- A: What do you see for the future? In other words, do you think that the Air Force base here is pretty solid ground?
- AB: Well, up to now it has been. We don't know what the future holds for us. No one knows that because things change everyday. There is nobody that can predict the future.
- A: But you think that this is a lot more secure than your job down there at U.S. Steel?
- AB: Oh, yes. Definitely.
- A: John, you have been in the fire department nearly most of your life. You went into the Navy and had some fire training there. What did you do on active duty as far as fire training there?
- JB: I did the same thing I am doing right now, fire fighting duty.
- A: Where was this?
- JB: Jacksonville Air Force Base, Florida.
- A: And after you got out of the Navy you came back home, is that it?
- JB: That is right.
- A: Did you ever think of staying in the Navy?
- JB: Not really.
- A: Well, did you enjoy your work or you did not like the Navy, or what?
- JB: Well, I think everyone likes to be home.
- A: Now you came up here on the fire crew. How many people were in a crash crew type of thing at that time?
- JB: We probably had about twenty or twenty-five. When I was hired in here, there were only three civilians working here,

a chief and two assistants. They hired an additional three civilians and this made a total of six civilians plus military at that time. I would say probably twenty or twenty-five. But during the course of time we have reached a period where we had a total of military and civilians, maintaining our six civilians, as high as 40 to 42 people working out of the stations here.

- A: Now you say that you work right with the military then as a civilian? Why was this? In other words, how come it wasn't all military or all civilian?
- JB: Some installations go one way or the other. But the Air Force likes to kind of keep a little of each.
- A: Is there any special reason for that?
- JB: Well, the reserves can leave, but the civilians will still be here to maintain operations.
- A: But the active duty crew at that time stood the regular shifts right with you?
- JB: We would pull identical duty. At that particular time the civilians were working a sixty hour work week. And we would pull identical duties right with them at all times.
- A: What do you work for a work week now?
- JB: 72 hours. Three 24 hour shifts.
- A: In other words, you work a day and then you have a day off?
- JB: That is right. Every two weeks we get three days off in a row.
- A: When you worked with the active duty people and civilians, was there ever any friction between the civilians and the military?
- JB: We got along pretty well because we were being supervised by civilians. Over all, a civilian is in charge; the chief is always in charge. Although, they did have their military men as well as a military fire chief. It worked out real good, I would say.
- A: What about throughout the base? Has there ever been any time that you have noticed any real friction or anything like that?

JB: Not of any size.

A: How about discrimination in hiring procedures or anything like this? Has there ever been any problem with that? Racial or social discrimination?

JB: Very little.

A: You have been in the Navy and Air Force both. Do they have a similar fire fighting program? Is it all basically the same?

JB: Basically, yes. But each branch of service likes to pick out their own equipment. So the equipment does differ, although basically it is the same.

A: In your time here were there any memorable fires? Have there been any big fires?

JB: Over all we have really been very fortunate, although we have lost a few aircraft. In this area I don't think that we have ever lost anything. Although an F-102, one evening, on the base itself here pierced a tank on take off. I wasn't here but I guess they really did a job on it because it was a couple thousand feet on the runway when he pierced the tank. Fortunately both pilots did get out of the aircraft.

A: As part of the responsibilities here, you are also basically the fire crew for the civilian part of the Air Force?

JB: Right. We respond for all civilian aircraft whenever required.

A: Do they have their own fire fighting down there at Municipal?

JB: There are no fire fighting men or equipment over there at all. We have direct communication with the tower here, and we also have a crash phone in the alarm room, from the tower. All the tower operator has to do is pick up the cradel and it activates us here in the station.

A: In your training do you have periodic drills that you have to get ready for?

JB: Yes, we have a requirement by an Air Force regulation; our structure drills, our hot pit drills and our egress on the aircraft. All of the important stuff is itemized right in the regulation. We have to fulfill it on a monthly, quarterly, or an annual basis.

- A: As assistant chief, what is your regular normal day like, when you come in?
- JB: The fire department routine is pretty well standardized. The first thing that you do in the morning is check out all of the equipment. Every piece of equipment that we have here is checked out by the driver operator, and this takes approximately an hour to an hour and a half on the big equipment. On general station clean-up we are required to maintain a truck on a stand by basis anytime an aircraft is flying. In the afternoon we try to get either some drill in for the department or some type of a class for everybody. Evenings are more or less stand by. We require a man in the alarm room 24 hours a day.
- A: So you eat, sleep, and do everything right here? What kind of meals do you have?
- JB: Well, some bring their meals in a brown bag, some cook a little, and occasionally on a holiday we will have a pretty good meal. We make everything at the fire station since we have all of the necessary facilities here. We have a refrigerator, stove . . .
- A: But basically the meal you have to furnish yourself. It is not provided by the Air Force?
- JB: Right, the installation we have is very small and we have no open mess going. We have no place to go.
- A: How about when the reservists are here on a drill weekend or something like that?
- JB: We have a reserve fire department in here that performs the same duties that we do. They are here for training and some even pull a 24 hour shift with us to help us out for that particular night or two that we need more fire protection.
- A: Normally do you stand the 24 hour shift or are you just the mechanic, or do you just come in everyday? How do you work?
- AB: I come in at 8:00 in the morning and go home at 4:30 five days a week. I just stand by down here and like John stated, the equipment is checked over by the operators. If they find something wrong they just call me right away. If it is something I can fix in just a few minutes I just go ahead and do it right away. But if it is a big job like a leaking

pump or something, a component won't operate and then it takes a little longer. I do most of my maintenance here, but if I need assistance the men help me out too. It isn't a one man job, trying to maintain this big equipment. If the truck is going to be taken out of service for any length of time for major repairs, then I take it to the motor pool. I tear it down up there because they have special tools. If I need the assistance of other mechanics there they are available for helping to get this truck back in service again. We try to keep these trucks from going out of service. The reason I stay down here eight hours a day and keep the small stuff in repair is so it doesn't get into major repair. We have been pretty fortunate with this equipment now. We have newer equipment and we don't have too many breakdowns. What we do is just of a minor nature.

- A: Let's say we have a breakdown and you have to take something out of service. Is it normally fixed on the base? In other words, do you ever have to take equipment off base to fix it?
- AB: No, we fix it right here.
- A: How about parts and everything, do you just order those right from the manufacturer?
- AB: Some parts we have to and some parts we can buy locally downtown.
- A: Is the Air Force pretty good on providing spare parts with no problems?
- AB: We get the parts, but sometimes they are a little slow. We try to keep a stock of fast moving items on hand when we can. We have never been out of service for too long. A lot of our parts come from depots. They stock a lot of this stuff in the depot. Well, sometimes we have to wait for it, but not too often. Waiting is very rare.
- A: But the money always seems to be there. You don't seem to run into money problems do you?
- AB: Not that I can tell you about. All I do is request a certain part and it is up to the people at the motor pool to get it for me.
- A: So actually even though this is the fire department most of the spare parts and things like that come through the motor pool?

AB: Yes, that is my job at the motor pool.

A: Now both of you have been here since the place has gotten under way. John, could you give a little of what you have seen happen and what would be interesting that you think that the people might want to know about? For example, your own history of the place as you saw it develop from no grass until all of a sudden there are a lot of buildings up there.

JB: Well, since I have been here I think half of the buildings have been built. We are running about 45 buildings here now and I think when I came we had about 20 or 25. Getting back to the amount of people here, I think that our maximum amount when we were an active installation must be about 800 or 1,000, if Al will go along with that. We had six barracks here for the airmen plus the other big BOQ up there for the officers. I think with that amount of people plus the civilians plus the guys that were living and active duty people who were living off base, I think it would be up to about 800 or 1,000 people.

AB: We had that many, at least.

JB: In the course of time, we got involved in a small housing unit out there that was built later. We have a recreational building and we built a service club and a base gymnasium. We also have our own water system out here. We treat our own water. We have pumps and wells and it is treated and put into the water tank. Our water tank here is approximately 145 feet off of the ground. The capacity is about 300,000 gallons. It is a gravity water distribution system. We have our own sewage treatment plant on the far end of the base, which we operate. As we received the jet-type aircraft, we built an engine test cell for aircraft engines. At that particular time we had an alert hangar which is still on the far end of the field down there. Aircraft taxied right to the runway there, where we housed aircraft 24 hours a day in that particular alert shelter. We also had ready pilots in it and had mechanics down there. You had sleeping quarters for pilots.

And at that particular time, we were an active base and we flew the aircraft and put a lot of time on the line. We were out there everyday, weather and all. A lot of times it was two, three o'clock in the morning. Of course the fire department crews would relieve each other out there so there wouldn't be too long a pull for each turn.

- A: But there have been a lot of changes in buildings going up and now they are coming down I understand. Is this just a change in the Air Force policy? Are the buildings getting too old?
- JB: Well, our buildings weren't the permanent type buildings and they were built to last a period of ten years. I think since they first put them up they have received over twenty years of service out of them. The understanding that I have now is that they would never replace them unless they were torn down. So, they have started to tear down a few.
- A: You said that there are some barracks. Is there housing on the base?
- JB: There are three housing units out on Kings Grave Road. There is one single unit and two double units. At that particular time the base commander was in unit one, which was the single dwelling unit.
- A: Was there a PX and a hospital here at that time?
- JB: We had a small infirmary on base at that time because of the active duty people. They used to maintain people in there twenty-four hours a day. Our PX facilities were pretty small but we did have PX. We did have a real small clothing store, very small, but it was a clothing store. And about the time that they were ready to pull out, we did get a commissary store on base.
- A: Now most of the people who signed, did they live on base or off base?
- AB: About half and half.
- A: Did they live out here in Vienna?
- AB: Yes, in the outlying district.
- A: So really when the base closed it was kind of an economic shock to Vienna, wasn't it?
- AB: Very much.
- A: I noticed that contrary to a lot of bases, coming down the road down here there are no buildings or stores. Were there ever any stores, buildings, bars, or anything out here on the access road?

AB: No.

A: Al, did you have any military that worked up at the motor pool at the time or was it all civilian?

AB: No, it was all military. All military but myself. I was the only civilian connected with the motor pool.

A: And when the active base closed?

AB: I was still the only civilian.

A: I mean, now that the active base closed and went to reserve did they hire all civilians?

AB: Then they started hiring. About three months before all of the military moved out they started to bring civilians in.

A: Most of these people that come to work up here, do they hold federal jobs someplace else, do they just transfer in or what?

AB: The majority of them did. The majority of the people that are on base right now got transferred in from Rivenna Arsonal and Lordstown, and different places like that.

A: How long ago did Lordstown actually close?

AB: I can't tell you offhand. John might know.

JB: Probably about five or six years. Lordstown was closing for years and years, you know. When they finally made it, it was about five or six years ago.

AB: Yes, it has been that long because we have quite a few of them at the motor pool who came from Lordstown.

A: So there was an arsonal at Lordstown and an arsonal at Rivenna? So really now this is the only federal place in this area, or are there any more?

JB: I think it is the only one.

AB: I think it is the only one.

JB: At that particular time the Brookfield Radar Base was run.

A: Who ran that?

JB: That was the Air Force. About the time that this place closed, they went all automatic over there.

A: That is over in Pennsylvania?

JB: No, it is down here on Route 7 between Brookfield and Hubbard.

A: Well Al, is there something of the history of this place that you remember that stands out in your mind?

AB: I think John pretty well covered it. I was only here a few months before John, and he covered all of the changes.

A: I noticed that this tower down here is a brand new tower. Is that run by the Air Force, or is that run by the municipal airport; what is the relationship of the tower?

JB: FAA runs that.

A: That is an FAA building type.

JB: That is right. This was built about three or four years ago?

AB: Yes.

JB: The reason it was built is because our airfield here slopes about 80 or 90 feet on this big runway. They were not able to view it from the other side over there, the whole airfield itself. So, they placed it on this side so that they have a view of the whole thing.

A: One last thing I wanted to ask you, Al, concerns when they have special groups coming in like the Thunderbirds, and they have to visit. Did that situation ever require anything special from the fire department here?

AB: We would pull a standby on them. We make sure that we stay closer and that we are aware of the situation and we do take more precautions than normally.

A: Do your responsibilities as firemen also include emergency first-aid, or is that handled by the dispensary?

JB: Our infirmary now is down to a one man operation. Here we have more or less shouldered the ambulance runs and the first-aid. The first-aid is really getting to be a requirement in fire fighting now. As a matter of fact, the rescue

school last September gave us about seven days of it out there. The fire departments are going to EMP's (emergency and medical training). We are pretty fortunate here because I think about ten of our guys have already gone through that school. The base is so small that we are not authorized to maintain an ambulance. But, we have a military field ambulance. For some reason or other we always get the chore that is required to make that ambulance run to the hospital, whichever one it might be.

A: Has it been that often that you have used it?

JB: Well, we have been pretty fortunate lately, but we have used it.

AB: If there is an accident on base or something like that?

JB: We almost used it here a month ago when that car flipped down here on a Monday night. The men went down with the rescue vehicle and forced their way in. They used that air chissel to get in. It was flipped upside down and you couldn't open the doors on it. They cut open one door and got the lady out of the vehicle.

A: So, on a drill weekend where do these guys stay when they are tearing down all of these barracks and BOQ's?

JB: The reserve requirement is that we are within 50 miles of where they are supposed to drive. They don't have to stay on base. We have two barracks open, one for NCO's and one for the officers.

A: Is there anything else that either one of you would like to add concerning what we were talking about before?

AB: No, I think everything has been pretty well covered. I don't have anything more to add.

A: Well, thank you both very much.

End of Interview