

Interviewer: Courtney Daigle

Interviewee: John King

Date: 3/26/2019

The first few minutes of the interview were cut due to technical difficulties

John King: (talking about his time in the army reserves) and some of the men were dental assistants, but I was the supply clerk for the unit. That's how I got into that and they only met on weekends

Q: Yea

John King: and that worked out good so that's (inaudible sounds) and back then people that were in the reserves, people that could get in the reserves were basically those that had deferments, so mostly all the people in the reserves were in college or just graduated college or something like that.

Q: Yea, um

JK: So it was like your ya know your person who came out of high school had to either wait to be drafted, join the army, navy, whatever, so that was kind of a predicament back then and when we got married to grandma, uh I was in the reserves and actually at that time long hair was in. I'll give you this little bit of info, long hair was in, and the army wasn't too appreciative of long hair, you know hair over your ears and that type of stuff, so, what we would do when we would go on active duty is we would take zip-a-dee-doo and slick our hair down and tuck it behind our ears and hope we weren't so noticeable, hehehe, and uh, eh, that's the way it was and then near the end of the time in the reserves for the meetings, they approved wigs. So you could wear a wig to the meeting, to cover your long hair, but that was kind of weird.

Q: I know um you guys have been Catholic forever, and like you were raised it. Would a lot of people get exemptions, was that considered a valid excuse?

JK: Yea no, so the only people that got religious exemptions that I know of were people studying to be a priest

Q: Yea but like the weekends when you had your meetings would you skip church for that weekend is what you're saying?

JK: Uh yeah

Q: Ok

JK: Well what we would do Courtney is, we would say hey, we wanna go to church. They say well ok and we leave and go out to eat breakfast and all that and come back/

Q: Yea

JK: (laughs) I shouldn't tell you that (mumbles)

Q: No, tell me everything

JK: It was all kind of a big game for us back then, it was how do you get out of work, uh

Q: Like a normal college student would

JK: Yeah, uh normal, yeah, and you know, because then there were a lot of people protesting against the war you know and all that kind of stuff.

Q: Was there a lot of protest um at UMSL [pronounced um-sell], or in St. Louis, or not really?

JK: Not really at UMSL, but at Washington University in St. Louis they has a lot of protests. But not at UMSL, it was pretty conservative, it was mostly a commuter school back then, they didn't have anything. So um

Q: Is it true that at the time you could um pay for college and buy a house then?

JK: Yeah, well college was cheap, I had a part-time job while I was going to college working at a grocery store and uh I was able to buy a car, pay for my college, and everything working part time, it was not the days with expensive college.

Q: So um most people would be able to afford college to avoid the draft?

JK: Well if they didn't go away to school, if they stayed in st louis, I went to what is called a commuter college but if you weren't smart enough or couldn't get in, then basically, you got drafted, unless you get one of the other deferments, 4f, religious, or something like that. They had one deferments where if you got married and had a young baby or something like that you could get a temporary deferment. You never really got out of serving, unless you were 4f and uh so that put a lot of stress on people and yeah and you couldn't just enroll in college and get a deferment, you had to stay a full time student, you know

Q: Ok, so it's not just like you could enroll in college and only take one class and then just work, you had to be a full time student?

JK: Right yea, you had to be a full time student and they only gave you four years of deferment, so I mean if you don't get out in four years, you'd lose your deferment if you don't graduate in four years.

Q: So there's no such thing as graduating in four years and then going to grad school to get more deferment?

JK: No, uh, no unless, probably not, you know, if you're going to be a doctor, maybe, or religious, or then you know, or clergy or something like that, they'd probably give it to you, but yea generally speaking, no after once you got out of college and you had to make the decision do I get drafted, do I draft that's two years, if you enlisted with the army that's 3 years, the airforce if you enlisted was 4 years of service, so like my friend John Schwartz, he flunked out of college, so what he did, is he just had his name put up in the draft, so he got drafted,

Q: Um how common was it for people to flunk out [of college], was it just John Schwartz, or like a lot others?

JK: Yea well it was relatively common, yea some people just didn't want college, you know what it is Courtney it's like you don't apply yourself, you flunk out, you know and then, um, but for me, you know it's, uh I didn't want to go in the army, [laughs] and so, I didn't know what I wanted to do so college seemed like the logical answer to go into,

Q: And you got your degree in business or math, right?

JK: I, I, had majored in mathematics for two years until I was sitting at the kitchen table and my dad says "what are you going to be a high school teacher, a mathematics teacher?" and I said huh, I don't wanna do that so anyways I switched to business and then got a, but I had to get it done in four years, so I had to take some summer courses and that, and I got a general business degree in four years. So I got a BS in business and then later in life went back and got my masters in business, and that so, let's see what else. Back then, oh! When I was in that maintenance battalion, one of the things that going on were the riots, you know, blacks were rioting and that and um so a couple meetings they, I forgot how many, but they had a couple, uh green berets, come in, uh active duty army to show us and teach us riot training and give us riot training you know how to do the formations and all that,

Q: Did you ever have to use it [riot training]?

JK: no, No We used to joke cause they sure don't want use us for it. We kinda drove these guys crazy, but it was, it was, the way things were back then, and it was always uh, you know in the army reserves, it was most the people, there just wanted to serve their time and then get out [chuckles], basically there weren't what you call gung-ho or anything like that

Q: Were there anybody that was gung-ho, to serve in the war that you noticed, or knew? Or no?

JK: That served in the war?

Q: Or that wanted to, like wanted to actively go over there?

JK: Well there was some people in the active reserves that had been there a long time like the csm and company commanders, and stuff like that, and then uh, when I was in that, uh dental unit, the 5506 dental detachment, we used to, when I got into that unit, they had, on the weekends, on Scotts Airforce Base, the dental clinic, Scotts Airforce would open the clinic to the army and then the uh dentist and the dentist assistants, open the clinic and then the poor people could come and uh get their teeth cleaned and worked on, you know, so that worked out good, and then, uh it was kinda funny then for some reason, the airforce cut that off so, we couldn't do that anymore, so somebody said, suggested that we go to East St. Louis and our company commander, who was from Cruseville [?] Missouri, a little country boy, said oh no, but it got into the press that he said it was too dangerous for us, [laughs] so we [coughs] army made us go

Q: So you're saying that East St. Louis is too dangerous but Vietnam isn't?

JK: [laughs] so anyways, to punish us, they made us go to Ft. Leonard wood every weekend for our meetings. And then they chartered this big bus, you know the whole 60 people or more, on one of those big busses, and we rode down for the weekend, at fort leonard wood and then they'd bus us back, over time, people come up with reasons why they shouldn't go, or reasons why they had to drive, and I can remember one time going down on the bus, they chartered this bus, hundreds of dollars probably, there was only like three or four people on the bus going down, it was a joke. So anyways, and then that unit, was uh the headquarters were in south st louis so close to where I grew up, and uh and yeah, that was the reserve unit there, most the people like I said that were in the reserves were guys who had gone to college, and that so and so forth and so on, and so it was always kind of an us vs. them situation, but nothing really bad or anything, like that but just kind of , you know, we were just, serving our time,

trying to get done, get out of there, and uh, let's see summer camp. Uh, I went to two weeks annual training, I went to camp McCoy Wisconsin, the first year. The first year [in the reserves] I didn't go to summer camp because I got activated that summer, the next year I went to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and we drove a, I drove in a deuce-in-a-half up there,

Q: Mhm

JK: And uh, a truck, a two and a half ton truck, there and stuff and back, so that was kind of fun, and then I switched into another unit, the Dental unit, and then, when we went, in the dental unit, we went to Ft. Sill, Ft. Carson, Colorado, and uh Fort Leonard Wood twice, you would be attached to a hospital and uh at the dental clinic and uh since I was the supply guy, they really didn't have much for me to do.

Q: Yeah

JK: So one time they uh had me to go to the motorpool and get a van and have me dropping people off, like the dental assistants and all that, at various clinics, and pick them up when they were done with work [laughs]

Q: Doesn't sound like such a bad deal

JK: Well no it wasn't a bad deal, actually, I didn't want to do it, but, so I had to take a drivers test, and I tried to flunk it but the guy passed me, so [laughs] anyways, one time, at ft leonard wood, one year, one guy in our unit was a pro golfer, so I brought my clubs, and this was the first year, um, and anyways, I snuck away to play golf with him and got caught, which wasn't good, and then the following year, we went to ft carson Colorado, and since we're Colorado, they said oh okay you don't have to stay on post, you can stay off of post if you want, so what we did is there, we found some place, this hotel that had a basement, uh apartment, it was like there was six of us, with uh, three or four bedrooms, three or four rooms down there, six beds and all that and we would stay there, and uh, one guy was suppose to he had KP so he had to get up in the morning and do his KP and he was suppose to reset the alarm but didn't one morning, so we overslept. And they uh, you know the reserve units, the active army is always looking over their shoulder so anyways, we went in and the regular army found out we were late, so they gave everyone an article 15 and docked us a days pay and we had to move back on post. One guy he wanted to fight it, he goes im going to get a lawyer and were gonna fight it, they were like ok but you have to stay here and cant go back home, and everyone goes we're going back home. So we all took the article 15. You got any questions how it was back then?

Q: Yea um, so you said, 1968 was your first year in the reserves so the year you transferred to the dental unit was 1970 right?

JK: yeah, uh, I enlisted in February 1968, I switched to the dental unit on February 1970. And then I spent the 4 years, my remaining 4 years with the dental detachment.

Q: And then what year did you graduate college?

JK: June of 1968

Q: Ok and then you married grandma in 69?

JK: I married grandma in 1970.

Q: And then how was the war when you were active and graduated? Were you more worried that you would be sent over?

JK: No, actually not, back then, they weren't activating whole units, unlike in desert storm, that you see now. I guess they must have used the draft to supplement the amount of soldiers needed, so they weren't activating reserve units at that time. So no, I wasn't worried as long as I went to the meetings and all that I wasn't worried about being activated, or ending up in Vietnam or anything like that so.

Q: And then you had my mom in 1972, You were still active then right?

JK: Right, you know what, we did a pool with all the buddies in the reserve unit, I was at summer camp that time and she was suppose to be due while I was at summer camp, and we took a pool, and everyone put up like \$5 a person and you had to guess the date Jennifer was going to be born. Ok? Well Grandma here screwed up the due date somehow and thought she'd blame it on the doctor. The Doctor screwed up the due date, and based upon all the information, Jennifer was born 2 weeks later than when everybody thought she was going to come, and so the guy who had the latest date won the jackpot.

Q: How much was it do you remember?

JK: Was it what?

Q: Do you remember how much that pot was?

JK: No, not really, you know maybe around \$100 or so. 20 people something like that. [inaudible comment from Grandma] Grandma is explaining about the doctors [laughs and more inaudible comments from Grandma]

Q: By the time Monica was born, was the war still going on, or were you still in?

JK: No, well uh, when did the war end?

Q: I know 1975, but I couldn't tell you the exact date

JK: Monica was born in 1975, right? August of 75? And I got out in 74. So I was already out of the reserves when Monica was born. The war was winding down and all that and yeah. You know Schwartz, my friend Schwartz went to Vietnam and he was in 173rd Airborne unit, but he got put into a personnel position and he really didn't see any real hard combat other than guard duty and stuff like that, and Al Bauer went to Vietnam in the airforce and was stationed near Saigon. He died of lung cancer which we always thought was due to agent orange, but he was also a smoker, so those were the only people close friend to me that went to Vietnam.

Q: When they came back did you notice any differences?

JK: I don't know, I think Schwartz might have some PTSD, ok he cries every time he goes to a military funeral, but yea, I think it affected him.

Q: Yea, what about Al Bauer, did you notice any changes when he came home?

JK: Al Bauer? No, not too much, he was a mechanic in the air force, so we always joked that he had guard duty to guard the planes, or something like that.

Q: So after the war, they got the GI Bill, so they were eventually able to go to college?

JK: Well Al Bauer never went to college, but he could have gotten the GI Bill. Schwartz when he got back he took the GI Bill and he went to St Louis University, and got a degree from St Louis University. So that helped him a lot.

Q: Do you think if he never gotten drafted that he would have gone to college?

JK: I don't know, probably not, that's a good question. Probably not.

Q: And then you have a brother, was he too young for the draft?

JK: Whats that?

Q: Was your brother too young? How much younger is he than you?

JK: No Denny, my brother. Here's what he did. Did you guys talk about the lottery system for the army?

Q: Kind of

JK: Well you see I was doing a little research on my phone, the draft lottery started uh in December 1969 and what they did, you understand what they did, throw 365 balls in a bucket and pull the numbers. Anyways, your birthday was assigned a number, so your birthday could be number 1, it could be 365. So they redid the draft system then, if you were 18 and the first year they did it, they went to 195, you were pretty sure you were going to get drafted. They weren't really giving deferments at the time, so my brother Denny he didn't, he joined the reserves, Uncle dan joined the National Guard, because they didn't want to take a chance of getting a bad lottery number.

Q: Was your brother in the same reserves unit as you?

JK: no he was in uh, a unit that made parachutes. He ran a sewing machine. He was in the reserves. National guard was pretty much basically MPS. National guard was getting called up but Dan never did.

Q: So when your friends were in Vietnam did you ever write to them or try and stay in contact?

JK: No not really, we never did, you know JK communications were a lot different back then. You know you either had to write or I think they got to call home once a week or something like that. You had no emails, so I kinda lost touch with them when they were gone.

Q: Do you remember how long they were gone?

JK: Back then it was a year, yea, Schwartz was drafted so he extended 2-3 months, so he could get out right away. So you had your training, and if you got sent to Ft Polk you knew you were going to Vietnam.

Q: What about your high school? Did most of your class end up going to College? I know you didn't really keep in touch with them

JK: Well reunions and that. Yeah, I know some people went to Vietnam and made it back, but most people went to college, even junior college to avoid the draft. And it wasn't expensive to do as it is today, you know kind of ridiculous.

Q: What about people who didn't make it back from Vietnam? Was there anyone?

JK: No I don't, there wasn't anyone. I don't know of anyone from my high school class that died in Vietnam. I had a friend who joined the navy so he wouldn't have to go to Vietnam, and they made him a Marine Medic, and he got sent to Vietnam and he got shot in the arm. So he had his arm but it didn't work that well. So that's the only person who I know that got wounded over there. We joke about it [PTSD] but you know, you never really know what they're really thinking.

Q: When you first joined the reserves in college, did they send you to basic training or only once when you went active?

JK: No, basically the reserve unit issued me some fatigues, and stuff ya know, dress greens and all that, duffle bag stuff and all that and I just started attending the meetings. They didn't have a lot for us to do.

Q: When you finally went active how long was your basic training? Was it about 9 weeks how it is now, or was it shorter?

JK: Yeah, it was about 8 weeks so it was about the same

Q: And then how long was your AIT?

JK: 8 weeks so I think it's 120 days is what the rule of thumb is. So if you had a real technical advanced individual training it would be longer and run over but what's interesting was kinda different is uh was my basic training unit was at fort bliss, they took all the guys that were reservists and put them in the same company, which turned out great, so we had like 90% of the people in our company, uh no platoon, take it back, platoon, they were C company in our platoon they were all reservists so we're all kind of in the same boat so it was kind of fun. You know all of the, RA's which were regular army and the uhm I was the enlisted reserve, so ER, RA is regular army, and I forget what the draft was, you could tell by their big uh kinda designated numbers, their service number, by the first two. My service number was ER177 something, well if you were regular army it was RA something something something, if you were national guard it was NG something something something and if you drafted blah blah something something. So you could tell by the service number how where they were coming from. So but yeah I was at fort Bliss and uh when we were there visiting your Dad, I went back up and uh [inaudible comment to grandma] and uh I think most of that stuff was gone then, when I was there, you know the barracks and all that stuff. Fort Huachuca we were in world war 2 barracks and they were all gone. So but anyways that's how I served by country. So now I get, uh get my veterans discounts at uh home depot and Lowes. [laughs] I guess I can, I guess I can be buried in the national cemetery. But it was a different uh back then everybody liked their hair a little longer than the army didn't like the hair longer you know what I mean so uh we called ourselves Weekend Warriors. So when you're a weekend warrior, you know you have your long hair and you get to do something about it when you go to the reserve meetings, but they weren't real big sticklers on it you know until you went on active duty or two weeks annual training, we called it summer camp cause we always went in the summer time.

Q: It seems like during the war though uh St Louis was a pretty conservative city uh protest wise

JK: Yeah, like I said, most of the protests happened at Washington University, which is a liberal college, yeah if you look em up. I mean it's a good school, they just burnt down the ROTC building I think one year.

Q: Oh, Nice

JK: Yea they had a big, yea don't you remember that? Look it up sometime. But yea the protests were mainly at college campuses, depending on the college. At UMSL, no, no protests.

Q: Not even like a student group like Students Against the War?

JK: Uhhh, if there were I didn't pay attention to them you know [laughs]. You see a lot of protests on the news a lot of riots, things like that/

Q: When soldiers who were drafted would come home from Vietnam, in St Louis were they treated as heroes or anything, or were they kind of like shamed?

JK: Well uh I don't know if they were shamed, but nobody said anything, to anybody, like great job or thank you for your service, nothing like that, other than you're home. You know wasn't any [pause]

Q: And then um what were your personal feelings towards the war? You were just trying to avoid the whole thing. Did you try and vote against the war or anything like that to try and end it?

JK: No, I voted for Nixon, I think, yea. Nixon year? On the one election I was on active duty, November 68, I voted absentee, and I think Nixon was running I think. I wasn't against the war, I just didn't want to go, if that makes sense? Uh, you know it was a strange war because President Lyndon Johnson was getting body counts everyday you know body counts and stuff like that, he was getting obsessed with it, it was just a mess you know, you know the soldiers over there started smoking pot. I don't know if it was right or wrong, but they did and some guys brought it back with them. Schwartz never did, he said he would never go on guard duty with someone who was smoking pot, so he made sure they weren't. But uh, [inaudible comment from Grandma], they didn't address PTSD or anything like that, they drank beer, they could drink beer over there, but back then the cans would be rusty cause they weren't aluminum.

Q: What about you guys on the reserves, would you ever drink on the job?

JK: No no, we wouldn't drink no, we'd just go out for breakfast and then back to the unit, when uh we went on two weeks annual training, we might go to a bar but I never drank on the job.

Q: Did you ever notice anyone drinking on the job?

JK: No I never noticed anybody, no, it was like hard to describe you know, I was in a dental unit so most of the time we'd just sit around talking and the supply people come back and we'd just shoot the bull you know there wasn't a lot to do.

Q: Take smoke breaks every hour?

JK: Yea, I guess I did smoke back then, I don't know we probably smoked right in the cage, I don't know. Yeah we did smoke, yeah.

Q: And then what were you saying about Ft Leonard wood?

JK: Oh, we used to have our weekends there, we'd have to go to Ft Leonard wood, and that's why we didn't want to get stuck on post so we'd get someone to drive. But uh, the key was in the reserves was to go to your meetings and get two weeks of summer camp, and six years you'll be out.

Q: Doesn't seem like such a bad deal

JK: Yea, compared to what the alternatives were. Even if I enlisted and had three years in the army, say I didn't go to Vietnam, that's fine, but I still would have had to serve three years and the air force was four years, where I graduated from college in June and went to summer camp, uh active duty from august through November so I was home in December and got a job the following January working for Ralston Purina company. SO uh I was working at a regular job while in the reserves.

Q: What about at Ralston Purina, was everyone there in the reserves? Or did they serve their time, or what was that make up of the men there?

JK: Most of the older people there, uh were weren't. there was one guy, Bob Peters we were both in the reserves, uh but most of the older people have already been in, they were older than me, they served in Korea or whatever so, they were all done with their service requirements. Yeah so, and then once you got to the lottery system, people pretty much knew uh um what it was going to do. You see my youngest brother Bob, he never went in I think, he got a high number or something like that, he never served.

Q: Do you remember what years he was able to be drafted? Did he not turn 18 for a while?

JK: Yea um, uncle steve's wife brother died over there. When did they quit the lottery? I'm not sure when that was. SO my brother Bob might have been too young for all of this stuff. Bob was 67-68, lets see he was only 4-5 years younger so he might have had to do all of this stuff.

Q: I think that's it, yeah, I don't have any other questions, unless you have any other stories or anything from your time in the reserves

JK: No other than uh, [inaudible] I had to get my uniform starched every time, for the meetings, uh I guess the biggest thing was you know it was something you did, after a while you got used to it.

Q: Yea, I think that's everything, thanks

JK: Yea well just to give you the mindset of someone who avoided going to Vietnam, by joining the army reserves.

Q: The way you've been describing it, the norm in your community was to just join the reserves

JK: Yea well the big issue back then was people were getting moved up, If you had influence, they would move your name to the top of the list and that was a problem. Between my friends it was kind of a thing to do.

Q: One last question, would you guys always watch the news and keep up to what was going on or just kind of ignore it and be normal college student

JK: I don't know, it was kind of like give me a break, it got annoying, especially in places like Berkley California, which was very anti war. It was pretty conservative; the only protests were at Washington University and they kicked out ROTC. That was probably the biggest new for St Louis. I don't think we had them [riots] in St louis, just Detroit and Chicago and all that. But yea it was a time in my life where I was young, married with a young kid, had a job, [laughs], I wasn't about to go protest or anything.