

## Bill Zahm

**Interviewer:** We're at the Nevada State Veteran's Home in Boulder City, Nevada. It's May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006. We're interviewing Bill Zahm. My name is Shannon Berndt, and our cameraman is Ed Feldman. What, let's jog your memory for a few minutes and tell me what were you doing before you were in the service?

**Bill Zahm:** Before I was in the service I was working as a tool and dye maker. And, I was making .50 caliber bullet dyes for the war effort.

**Interviewer:** And where were you doing this at?

**Bill Zahm:** In a machine shop in New York.

**Interviewer:** In New York?

**Bill Zahm:** Yes ma'am.

**Interviewer:** You lived in New York? What was the town that you lived in?

**Bill Zahm:** What town? I think that was in the Bronx if I remember correctly.

**Interviewer:** The Bronx?

**Bill Zahm:** I'm 86-years-old. I might forget a few things.

**Interviewer:** Well, we appreciate you doing this for us.

**Bill Zahm:** Oh, it's my pleasure. If I can help in any way for the home I gladly do anything I can.

**Interviewer:** Well, thank you. So, you were in the Airforce?

**Bill Zahm:** Correct.

**Interviewer:** So that means that you enlisted, you weren't drafted, right?

**Bill Zahm:** No, I was drafted.

**Interviewer:** Oh, you were? They drafted?

**Bill Zahm:** At first I was in the infantry in Fort Dix, New Jersey and they came along and gave us an aptitude test. And when they saw I knew algebra and mathematics good enough that they could use me in the Airforce they transferred me to the Airforce.

**Interviewer:** You need those skills in tool and dye making, wouldn't you?

**Bill Zahm:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so, well, that's awesome. And so you were drafted and then you were moved to the Airforce.

**Bill Zahm:** Correct.

**Interviewer:** Tell me about your first days in the service. You can either tell me, you start with when you were drafted. What was that like?

**Bill Zahm:** Well, it was hard at first because we went into an area in New Jersey where there was a lot of rain and mud and we had to do our basic training in the fields. And here I am with a brand new pair of new boots and we go into the mud and we were in there all day. We get back home and we get into our room for the end of the day, we shower, and we get ready for our meal. And the next day we got to start all over again. Here these shoes are soaking wet, can't wear them. So I put these, they gave us two pairs. So, I went to the other pair and the same thing happened the second day. The third day I didn't know what to do anymore. So I went back to the first pair figuring they were a little drier, but it was one of those things that you go through in the service. You have to go through \_\_\_\_\_ (00:03:49) where they would dig out and you have to go through climbing ropes, scaling walls, and at that time I was like 120, 125 pounds. I was able to do most anything. In fact, when I went to high school I played on the high school basketball team and I played center. I used to be a six footer for the jump on the ball. I was very agile in those days. It's unbelievable the way I am today.

**Interviewer:** So, how long, did you make it through full boot camp before they drafted you, before they put you into the Airforce?

**Bill Zahm:** Yes, I'd made it through boot camp and then they put me into the Airforce. I was transferred from New Jersey down to Miami Beach and they put us up in hotels on Collins Avenue in New Jersey. And we used to go out and do our basic training in the park area on Washington Avenue in Miami.

**Interviewer:** Was the basic training for the Airforce different than for the army?

**Bill Zahm:** No, it was basically the same. You have to remember in those days they were just learning themselves how to train people. This was in 1942 in August and after being bombed in Philippines and Hawaii, you know, they had to get troops in so they could go ahead and protect the rest of our country. And they did whatever they could to teach us something. We weren't taught thoroughly, but it was what they could teach us. Then they took us up to a firing range to teach us how to shoot a rifle. Some people never shot a rifle before. And we would shoot our targets out in the water. And unfortunately, I was in a group waiting to go up

to fire next and there was one individual started swinging his rifle around. He was having fun, swung the rifle from, he was holding onto the firing end and swung the butt end up, hit me in the jaw, and knocked me out. They had to get the medics to come and they took me to the infirmary in an ambulance. When they took me there the doctor said, Mr. Zahm, you got a couple of teeth left. I got to take them all out. And I lost all my teeth at the age of 22.

**Interviewer:** That was young.

**Bill Zahm:** So that's the way I've been living without teeth but that guy I don't know who he was, what they did with him, but I heard he was transferred out, and he was gone. So I don't know what it was all about, but I continued my training and then from Miami they transferred me to Chanute Field, Illinois, which was a training for Air Corps people. And we learned how to do repairs on the engines and do sheet metal work and basic things that you would have to know about an airplane. And we weren't trained thoroughly but they had to have people doing some of this. Unfortunately, for some of them they weren't equipped to do it. I was mechanically inclined as a young man. I did a lot of auto repair work and stuff like that. The first automobile I had I rebuilt the whole engine. It was a model A Ford. I rebuilt that engine and we used to have a lot of fun with that car, spent a lot of money on that car, but it was a second-hand 1930 car and I paid \$22.50. And I used to pull in to get a tank full of gas that only held ten gallons and I'd wave a dollar, fill it up! For one dollar I used to fill up a gas tank.

**Interviewer:** Those were the days.

**Bill Zahm:** Yeah, so those were. I used to call them good days but there were better days too.

**Interviewer:** Well, can you tell me where you were when you heard of Pearl Harbor being bombed on December 7<sup>th</sup>?

**Bill Zahm:** I was at home. I lived in the Bronx then with my wife and we lived in a little furnished room. She had no mother. Her mother died when she was three weeks old and her father died when she was seven. And she lived in a home and she came out to a dance with some of her friends when she became old enough to go out. They would let her come out with a group. And we were dancing. The first dance I had danced with her I said you and I are going to get married. And she said you're crazy. I said you'll find out how crazy. Well, to make a long story short we were married 63 years and I lost her in '03 right before her birthday, a week before her birthday. She was born the same day that Kennedy was killed -- November 22<sup>nd</sup>. So, anytime the 22<sup>nd</sup> came down it was sort of sad, too.

**Interviewer:** That's true. So, after you were trained and everything where did you serve?

**Bill Zahm:** I went through Chanute Field training and then they went and gave me orders with my papers. They put them in an envelope and I had to go by train from Chanute Field up to Chicago. And I had to go to the training center where they had people come in to volunteer

and I had to meet an officer there. And when I met this lieutenant I gave him my papers and we went on from there to Salt Lake City, Utah. Salt Lake City, Utah was a training for overseas training for people going into the Pacific. And originally we were supposed to go to \_\_\_\_\_ (00:11:28) and India. And that's the way I understood it anyhow. And we were assigned a barracks. We came in there at two o'clock in the morning and they said go to the barracks, you find an empty bed, go to sleep, in the morning you fall out, and if your name is called get your packings, your bag, and just stay on the side, don't leave your barracks. And that's what I did. For three weeks I did it.

**Interviewer:** In Salt Lake City?

**Bill Zahm:** In Salt Lake City. So the sergeant and I called the roster said how long you here? I said three weeks. He said three weeks you were supposed to be gone in three days. I says, I don't know why they didn't call my name. He said come on with me. We go back to the orderly room and I had all the clerks looking through the files, looking for me. They couldn't find my name in any of those files. They didn't know what to do with me. The only thing I could visualize is that lieutenant never turned the papers in and they might have shipped him out the next day and he took my papers with him. So here I am and they don't know what to do with me. Come pay day I don't get paid and I would send money home to my wife, but they said don't worry that'll be taken care of. And those days we only got \$18 dollars a month. That was the pay that the private got. And I waited and waited, they had me shoveling coal into barracks to keep the fire going in the barracks to keep them warm. And after awhile they wanted me to do the stokers in the airports to keep the airplanes warm. I had to take the ashes out. I did it all. I didn't complain. But after doing it for like a week I said that's ridiculous. Here I was making .50 caliber bullet dyes to cast more bullets and they got me shoveling coal. They could get anybody to shovel coal. So I asked for them to send me to the commanding officer and they sent me in and I spoke to the commanding officer. I told him I don't feel I belong here, something's wrong. And I explained my circumstances to him and by that time they sent me to Sioux City, Iowa. And at Sioux City, Iowa they had trouble with the sergeant that was running.

Nurse [interrupts]: Hi. No, I was told we had a new patient, sorry.

**Bill Zahm:** We had a sergeant there that was running the whole air base supply. And he seemed to have loose hands and everyday he left the airport with a bag full of clothes and he used to go down to the airport and fill up his car with gas that belonged to the airport for the airplanes, not for us. And the lieutenant, the captain that was in charge took me out and he said you're going to be working here with this sergeant. I said fine sir. I'll do what I can. And I knew what it was to do a certain amount of inventory and stuff. And I went in and I accepted the job. And the next day they called me back into the office, to the commanding officer. He says, Zahm, you're taking over in charge of the supply room. I'm shipping that sergeant out. He had loose hands. And they shipped him out and they put me in charge. So I did what I could, whatever was needed at that airbase. I had all the supplies and I had ten people working there and I gave each one an assignment and they took, one took care of clothes, one took care of shoes, one took care of laundry, and then I had each one of them assigned a job. Then we had

firing arms. I put one guy in charge of that to make sure nobody got into it. It was locked and he was the only one that would have a key to it. And I ran it for quite awhile.

**Interviewer:** Did you get a promotion with more responsibility?

**Bill Zahm:** Yes. I became a corporal from a private. I was supposed to have a sergeant's rank as a supply man. They usually have a sergeant, but he gave me corporal. And after working there one month he gave me corporal's rank. So I stayed and I had no choice. I worked there for quite awhile and who comes along in there, Jimmy Stewart. He comes as one of the crew of flight 308 that was going to Europe. And they were using B-17 bombers then. And he was so friendly with every one of the people on there, never called anybody by their last name. It was either Joe or Frank or Jim, you know. That's the way he was. And the lieutenant in charge of the war department movie house said, Zahm, I need you at night to sell tickets. I'm running short every day. I'm not getting the right count. I said you got numbers on tickets. You should have so much money for each number. It's not working out. Please come in and help me. So I accepted the job at night. So I got a few dollars more that I would send home to my wife. It wasn't much I'd take like five dollars per month, but it was a lot to me then. And every morning I had to tally up the money and go to the bank in town and put it in the war department movie house account. And I did that everyday. I had a jeep assigned to me and I would take care of that. So I had the both jobs that I did. And then my wife gave birth and I wanted to go see my wife and the baby. My daughter was born, like I say, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1942 this was. She's going to be 65-years-old this month, November this year. Unbelievable, but here I am. I do the best I can here. I try to meet the new people that come in here and tell them when I came here nobody ever came into my room. I was alone. I said now you've got me. I'm your buddy. If you need something, if I can help you, you're going to get it, and that's what I do here at the home.

**Interviewer:** That's awesome.

**Bill Zahm:** Then I meet the families. I talk to the families. I tell the families you don't have to worry about the individual that you brought in here, but you have to remember that they're here. Please come and visit. And if you can, volunteer. We need volunteers to go out and take us around when we go shopping or go on an outing. And I managed to get a couple of people that came in here, they're living here today that I had brought around, and I feel good about it. And it's people that did need help. They couldn't get it at home.

**Interviewer:** That's good.

**Bill Zahm:** So I feel good that I did that. And I tell the families, you know, they're going to be doing good. If you remember you got your own family, take care of them but don't worry about your individual here whether it's a man or woman. They will be taken care of. And they do a good job here. And all I want is, like I tell my own children, live your own life, take care of your children, but remember I'm still here. They got me a cellular phone and I speak to four of them. I speak to them almost everyday.

**Interviewer:** Oh, that's great. Were you in Sioux City the whole time in your service career?

**Bill Zahm:** Yes, so I was discharged from Sioux City. That was in 19, I think it was 1944. I wasn't in that long but my wife, excuse me, was in real bad shape and they had the Salvation Army and Red Cross caring for her at home because there was nobody else to take care of her. And they asked for me to try and get a discharge. So I didn't know what to do. And here it is it's a war effort, they call on us to do a job, I'm willing to do whatever they ask me to do, but I couldn't see shoveling coal as one of them, and I reneged on that after awhile, but I went to the commanding officer and I spoke to the couple of sergeants in charge of the orderly room. He said, look, we can put in for an honorable discharge because of dependency and we'll see if we can get it to you. So I said, alright, let's try it. Excuse me. So they did try and it took about four or five months and I was approved for a discharge. And when I went home I went immediately to work for AT&T on radar direction finding equipment. As a machinist I was able to make the parts they needed.

**Interviewer:** With your tool and dye skills or...?

**Bill Zahm:** Yeah. I made them all parts that were needed for it. And at that time they were just starting what radar direction finding equipment and they had to come up with better equipment. And I worked in New York down around Wall Street. It was 80 Broad Street, New York. That's where the AT&T building was. And then they built the building out in New Jersey and it was right in the Union City, New Jersey. So I'd travel from home in New York all the way to Jersey everyday to do my job because I felt it was necessary.

**Interviewer:** Was it quite a ways?

**Bill Zahm:** Oh yeah. It was quite a ride. It took me about an hour and 15 minutes every day. I had to take the bridge from New York to New Jersey and travel all the way to the job, but I did it. Excuse me.

**Interviewer:** Tell me about your most memorable experience while you were in the service.

**Bill Zahm:** It was weird, but here we are when I first went in into the service. One of the fellows opposite me comes down with spinal meningitis so they quarantined the whole barracks. They wouldn't let us go out to eat with any of the others. They would wait until everybody else got through and either bring the food to us or we had to march over to the mess hall and eat there, but nobody else could be around us because they weren't sure if it would be spread. And we went and did that for about a week and we were up at night, we had nothing to do, and the lights go out at ten o'clock. So a group of us went into the latrine, put a blanket down and we started to play poker. And we're playing poker and it turns out we were there until seven o'clock in the morning. And then the hospital staff comes in and they start taking temperatures. You got a low temperature, you got to go to the hospital. So six of us went to the hospital. So here this guy O'Brian that was next to me, he didn't have spinal

meningitis, but we were all in like a separate area in the hospital. They kept us away from all other patients. O'Brian comes down with the chicken pox so the nurse has gone mad. She said, how am I supposed to take care of patients and take care of him? I said, I'll tell you what. I had chicken pox. I had all childhood diseases. I don't mind. You tell me what to do for him and I'll do it. And she gave me all his food and medication and I was an assistant to the nurse. I took care of him until everybody turned out fine and we went back to our barracks. Nobody else came down with it.

**Interviewer:** Well, that's, that's a great memory.

**Bill Zahm:** That's a weird one.

**Interviewer:** Did you make any close friendships?

**Bill Zahm:** Oh yes, but I don't know where they are. I haven't heard from them. I used to get cards every once in awhile from, in the Pacific, from a couple of guys, but it's all lost. I had a book of photographs while I was in. We took pictures together, groups, and I had it at home in a beautiful binder. And as kids would be, my kids took it up to their room and showed it to their friends. That book disappeared. It's gone so I have nothing. I had phone numbers in there and addresses. It's all gone. But I haven't heard from any of them anymore.

**Interviewer:** It's hard to keep track. Did you see the men as they were coming through to go overseas?

**Bill Zahm:** Oh, the ones that left, yeah, yeah. At Chanute I met a couple of them that were ready to leave. They were going on to Salt Lake City for a replacement.

**Interviewer:** How did your experiences contribute to your thinking about war and military service? Did you have a different attitude after you were in the service than before?

**Bill Zahm:** No. My attitude was I'm as part as anybody else in this country. If we have to go to war and protect our families and our friends, we're going to do it. We all had to do what we could at that time. And thank god we did what we could. We lost a lot of people. It was dreadful. Even this war right now doesn't make me happy. We come up with a figure of almost 3,000 people that were killed. It means a lot to me because I would know what would happen to my wife if I were killed and she was left with just her daughter and have nobody to take care of her. What does she do then? That's the way I looked at this. It's terrible.

**Interviewer:** Yes. It takes a lot of sacrifice of young men to keep our country free, doesn't it?

**Bill Zahm:** That's right. I pray for them everyday.

**Interviewer:** Yes, you've shown that you're a kind, caring man, and your prayers I'm sure help a lot. Do you believe to like a Veteran's club or anything like that?

**Bill Zahm:** I'm going to the American Legion here in Boulder City, but I can't attend meetings because I got to have a special vehicle. I can't walk, I can't stand. That's why I am in a chair. I got hurt working security at night in a park when I was able to walk. And I was walking in the park at night, which like two blocks away from any living soul, and I heard a noise near a trailer where we had copper pipes and fancy plants they were going to put in. So I started to walk towards the trailer and someone had taken a wooden pallet apart with the nails sticking up and I couldn't see it in the dark and I walked into them. They stuck into my shoes but then come through to my feet. They tripped me. And I fell like spread eagle they call it. And I hit a boulder that was on the side of this whole bunch of like bowling balls they were using for decorations in the park. The top one came down. It was like six foot away, rolled down a hill, and hit me in the right hip. And when they hit me in the hip I started to scream and cry. Nobody could hear me. I laid there for about an hour and a half and finally my relief person came and took me to my car and got me in my car. I got home and I called my supervisor and I told him I'm going to go to the hospital in the morning. I don't want anything tonight. So that's what I did. I went to the hospital and they went and took MRIs and everything else and they told me I'll be alright and they would give me medication. It was getting worse. \_\_\_\_\_ (00:31:30). Then there was absolutely no improvement and I went on my own to different doctors. I couldn't get nobody that would want to do a replacement or repair of any kind. I didn't know what I needed. And I had an oriental doctor say, you come with me. I'll take you into a room where you'll be on a gurney nude and I'll see if I can put a needle in where he was looking on a TV set watching where the needle went so he could get it into the joint where he felt I needed it. So I agreed. He did it. It was a painful stick but I didn't mind that. I was going to get some help because I was in constant pain. And when he got done I didn't get a minute's worth of peace. I had another doctor at another time give me an injection in the back hip. Another doctor went and gave me another injection. It wasn't doing any good. And finally I went to the VA clinic and they sent me to a doctor. They said, they don't recommend anything. They said, at my age and being that I was a diabetic I could only get more trouble than what I have now. Try and bear with it, which I did. And I've been living up to it now where every time we had to change the doctors here the doctor that came said I have a doctor I want to send you to and they would send me to their doctor. And I would get the same thing. They said I'm not a candidate for any kind of repair in there. So I live with it the way I can and I try not to take any strong medication. The most I'll take is Tylenol. They want to give me morphine that one time. I said you got the wrong candidate. I'll live with the pain rather than go through taking medication of that sort because when I was capable of walking I volunteered at the Veteran's Clinic in the pharmacy. I worked there for two years sending out prescriptions that the pharmacist filled. I would package them, put the names on the bags and put it in the bags and seal it and send it out to people that needed it. When I saw the girls standing around talking to each other about what they did on the weekend I used to jump at them. I said, come on. There's somebody out waiting for that medication. Let's get it to them and I'll mail it. They were glad when I left.

**Interviewer:** Well, New Jersey and the Bronx is a long ways from Boulder City. How did you end up in this area?



**Bill Zahm:** Well, my children moved first to St. Louis then to Texas. Then they all seemed to congregate in the Los Angeles area and we were flying back and forth whenever I can from New York to, until we got to the point where we said it's ridiculous. Let's go move where the kids are. I had a beautiful house where I lived. The house was a 100 years old when I moved into it, three-story house with a tremendous basement. I had a machine shop in the basement. I used to use as a hobby and I also did some repair work for some of the air people at Westchester Country Airport. And I used to do all of it at home. And when we decided to move from the home out here it killed me just leaving that house. I had a tremendous cherry tree in the back. It had beautiful Queen Anne cherries and I had concord grapes growing all over the back. And it was a hardship leaving and always going. I had a lot of friends because I was commander of one of the Veteran's posts there in 1940, 52. And it so happens it was the man that owned the Sun, Greenspan. He was the first commander of that post and I was the fifth. So when we got here I'll tell you about that. That goes back to another story, but I was commander of the post and I did what I could for the area there. But when we moved out here I moved in with one of my daughters temporarily because they were at a point where the kids were going to get divorced.

**Interviewer:** Oh, they lived here in the Vegas Valley or in California?

**Bill Zahm:** No, in the San Fernando Valley. And one of my other daughters said I have a friend that has an apartment complex. We want you to go in there and run it for them and they'll give you a two bedroom, two bath unit where you don't pay anything. So, it sounded fair to me. I asked my wife to be sure that she'd want to try it. So she said yeah. So we moved there. We lived there for, oh, maybe about six, eight years. And then while we were there we made a lot of friends. Everybody that was in the building was a friend of ours. And we had one group we used to go out on weekends together. One would make arrangements for one club, one would make another club. I loved to dance. I used to dance night and day as a kid. And as it would work out one of the husbands died from cancer. Then one guy that used to play golf all the time, every day he'd go out on golf course, came back one day he doesn't feel good, went to the hospital, lasted a couple of days, and died. I don't know if he had a stroke or what. I never found out, but I was left with the two women and we used to travel from whenever I got a chance I'd take them to Vegas. I would drive out and that's how we got involved in Vegas. So as things worked out, after awhile the two women passed away. So I said to my wife, my wife would cry every time she'd walk out of our house and look up next door. That's where her friend lived. She ain't there anymore. She started crying. So I called up my kids and I said I'm taking mom on vacation. We went to Vegas. I went and hooked up at the Stardust, took a room there. I got her ten dollars worth of nickels and sat her down by a poker machine. I said you stay here and I'll be back. And I went out and I looked for an apartment. And I got an apartment down near Meadows Lane in Decatur behind the Target store. There were new apartments that were built there. And they were very nice. We lived there for awhile until they raised the rent every six months. It got out of hand. So I bought a mobile home and on West Twain near Decatur and I was able to buy it for cash and we lived there. We were very happy until we got to the point where she got sick and I got this injury and it got to be a

problem. Well, after she got sick I was in the home alone. And I had to have somebody come in and take care of me. And I had a woman come in in the morning and at night and she would shower me and dress me and make my food, do the laundry, and keep everything clean until it got to the point at night I had to do everything myself. And I fell in the bathroom twice. After the third time I fell it was so small in there that the fire department had trouble getting in there to get me. And I said I got to do something other than this. So as things worked out this Mac James was running for office and he had a sign he wanted to put up in front of my mobile home. I put the sign up and every day I'd go out and come back the signs down. I'd put it up again. Finally, I said to heck with this. I went and put it up in my room at the window so everybody could see it. Across from me was a trash man. When they got done with their food they had to bring their trash there. The sign was there. And I got him elected. I got him a thousand votes. So I said let me call him and see if he can help me. Then I'd tell him my problem and he called here to get me in here. And it took like one day. They said fill out the papers and you're in.

**Interviewer:** Oh, that's wonderful.

**Bill Zahm:** And that's how fast it took. And since I've been here I participate in anything that they might need me in.

**Interviewer:** Oh, well, that's awesome. Do you have any other memories you'd like to share of when you were in the Airforce...or any other memories?

**Bill Zahm:** No, they were all good memories. We were all like brothers there. Any one of the fellows that were in the same room with us were all like brothers. There was only one guy we couldn't take, but we took care of him. He came from somewhere in Tennessee or thereabouts and he wouldn't shower. And we couldn't stand it. So one day we all got together, grabbed a hold of him, dragged him into the shower, put him under the showers, got water hoses, and watered him down with his clothes on until he had to take the clothes off and washed himself and get into a clean uniform, but those are one of them things that I could remember. Other than that, that would be about it.

**Interviewer:** Well, thank you so much. That's all the questions I really have unless you can think of something else.

**Bill Zahm:** I hope I could give you more of a...I remember pretty much everything, but at times I do forget a little here and there, but I figure at 86-years-old I'm entitled.

**Interviewer:** That's right.

**Bill Zahm:** I thank you very much.

**Interviewer:** Well, thank you for helping us out.

**Bill Zahm:** You can use this any way you want it. If you want me to sign something, I'd be more than happy to sign it.

**Interviewer:** I think Angela already had you sign it.

**Bill Zahm:** Oh, alright.

**Interviewer:** So, well, thank you so much.

**Bill Zahm:** You're quite welcome.

**Interviewer:** It was nice meeting you.

**Bill Zahm:** Same here. Thank you very much, both of you.

**Interviewer:** You're welcome.