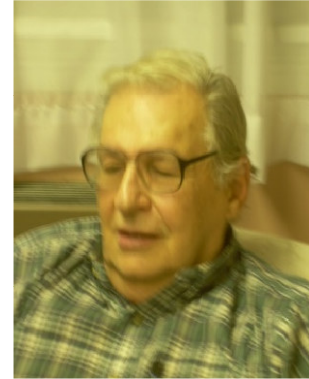


**Gene S. Kratz** interviewed October 9, 2007

Airman 1st Class, US Air Force, Jan 1954 – Oct 1957; Seaman 1st Class, USN Reserves, Jan 1958 – June 1960

Prior to joining the Air Force, Gene was working as a mechanic in a Hudson garage in East Norriton. He was getting wiry and looking for a change. He loved mechanical things and wanted to be a pilot or bomber mechanic. In January 1954 he enlisted in the Air Force. The recruiter said there would be no problem in getting the job he wanted.

Gene was sworn-in in Philadelphia and then headed to Sampson Naval Training base in Sampson, NY. It was coldest place in the world according to Gene. They were issued summer uniforms as they didn't have winter uniforms on hand. Gene was thinking that he had made the wrong move going into the military. The barracks were so cold that when they washed the floors, which they often did, there would be ice on the floor the next morning. To top it off, they had to wait outside for chow.



Training consisted of drilling and training like any military branch. They would march and counter march, work with the rifle and learn survival skills. Shoes had to be shined, faces shaved and pants had to have creases. The goal was to break the men down to build them back up. The training lasted for twelve weeks, into March.

A Job Offer...

At the end of basic training, the men were given tests for speech, mechanical ability, etc... Gene got a ten on mechanics. The mechanical test was 400 questions long and Gene did so well that when he told one of the officers he wanted to work in the motor pool, the officer said, "No, you should go to bomber school in El Paso." The officer, Robert Walters, also gave Gene a business card and told him that his dad owned a Chevrolet dealership in Hebron, OH and if Gene ever needed a job, he should just call.

The men were told that everyone who wanted to fly was to report to a certain building. Gene wanted to fly and it meant being inside, out of the cold, so Gene went. There were a total of 77 men there. After a series of tests, Gene was one of the last six. He had a bent pinkie finger from a motorcycle accident. The officer told him to go have the finger fixed and then come back. The finger couldn't be fixed, however, and eventually it was removed. After spending two months in the hospital, Gene went back to see about pilot training, but now, he didn't have enough fingers to qualify. So it was back to the regular Air Force.

Gene was assigned to Travis Air Force Base near San Francisco in California. He worked putting freight on pallets to be shipped to Japan or Korea. He felt he wasn't learning anything there, so he applied for a job as a flight steward. The job required one month of training in West Palm Beach. Just before heading to the school, some friends who were serving as flight stewards told Gene this was not a good job to have: They had been flying 27 days a month. This wouldn't do as Gene's wife was coming out to live with him. Gene told his commander he wished to withdraw his request to become a flight steward and the next day, he was given orders to report to Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, AK.

Gene's job was still in air freight as an aircraft loader. They would load supplies to go out to various military outposts in Alaska. Part of his job was to calculate the weight and positioning of cargo so that the load wouldn't be too heavy or unbalanced. Gene got to know the flight crews and soon was flying along on deliveries and search missions. The Alaskan countryside was harsh and remote. If a plane crashed and there weren't any survivors, the plane would be left until spring. During one search mission, Gene was in a C-47 twin engine plane. The pilots had not flown this type of plane before and it took them about eight attempts to land it. This was a harrowing experience for all on board.

In Anchorage, during the winter it would be light from about 10 am to 3 pm. In the summer, one could read a paper outside at midnight. Special uniforms were issued to deal with the cold. Mukluk boots made of white felt and parkas with hoods that could protect the face were issued. Gene had to turn these in when he left.

Gene's wife had come to Alaska, but after six weeks, she decided it wasn't for her and moved back home. To make matters worse, Gene had applied to live off base and as a result, his tour there was extended from one-and-a-half years to two years. Gene made the best of his situation and began to enjoy Alaska after awhile. In the summer, they could climb mountains and enjoy the outdoors. One of Gene's friends worked in the mess hall and was able to keep Gene and his buddies supplied with food for their field trips off base. Another time, a USO show came to Anchorage and Gene was able to see Bob Hope, Francis Langford and Jerry Colona in the show. Gene remembers doing a lot of reading on all subjects. The barracks had a library and bowling alley in the basement for entertainment. Anchorage was a frontier town and Alaska was not even a state at this time. Things were very expensive there, a hamburger cost \$8. Gene was able to get a part-time job in town as an auto mechanic making \$14 an hour.

Delivering all Kinds of Cargo...

One of more interesting cargoes delivered was 100 cases of eggs and some Polaroid cameras to Fire



C-124 Globe Master

Island. The load was delivered by parachute and during the decent, the chute came off. The commander on Fire Island said it was the largest omelet he ever saw. Another time, a bull dozer needed to be delivered and had to be taken apart and delivered a little at a time because of the weight and then be re-assembled. To make things harder, if a delivery couldn't be made once the plane was near the destination due to weather, the part had to be unloaded because it couldn't sit stay in the plane overnight. Finally, the bull dozer was assembled and ready to go. Someone drove it out on the ice to test it and it fell through the ice and is still at the bottom of the lake

today. Another cargo was 10,000 pounds of cable to be delivered by parachute. On the first attempt, the chutes broke off and the cable ended up buried in 14 feet of permafrost. On the second attempt, the load landed like a feather.

Gene was able to get his fill of flying by working his night shift and then sometimes flying with the crews on his time off during the day. He did this every three or four days. Gene got to know two of the pilots, Major Sherrell and Captain Conover, and on one flight they let him fly a C-124 for about ten minutes.

When Gene's two year tour in Alaska was up, they asked him where he wanted to go. Gene chose McChord Air Force Base outside of Seattle so they transferred him to Pope Air Force Base at Fort Bragg, NC. Here, Gene worked in passenger services and was in charge of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> shifts. One thing that interested Gene was the pathfinder crew that was stationed at Pope. This crew would go in ahead of the Air Force and set up an airfield in quick order. Gene wanted to do this, but was denied because he didn't have much time left on his enlistment. There were some good times at Bragg as the weather was nice and they could play golf and go to Myrtle Beach, SC on the weekends.

At the time (1957), money was tight in the military so they were letting men out eight or nine weeks early. Gene was asked if he wanted to re-enlist. Gene asked for permission so speak freely. Permission was granted so he said "I was knocked out of pilot training and was kept from being a bomber mechanic, I asked out of steward school and was sent to Alaska for two years, I was frozen in rank at Airman First Class for two years, I asked for McChord AFB and was transferred here where I am working in passenger services and wasn't allowed to join the pathfinders. The past four years have been a waste of time and I didn't learn anything. I suggest you look at what people are good at when you assign them to their jobs."

Needless to say, Gene did not re-enlist. He remembers being paid \$17 for his transportation home.



Gene Kratz and a C-130 at Pope AFB

Soon after returning home to this area, however, Gene and a friend who had been in the Army decided that they would join the Naval Reserves in Willow Grove. The Navy gave them the equivalent rank that they had in their previous service which meant Seaman First Class for Gene. They were sent to school for air crew where Gene learned to operate the Magnetic Air Detector (MAD). They would head out over the Atlantic in a Gunman S2F Tracker on most weekends and look for submarines. If they spotted one, they couldn't do anything about it other than drop a buoy and radio in the location.

During one flight, the radio in their plane went dead. The pilot said I'm going to go back low so the fighters out of McGuire don't jump us. As they flew by Atlantic City, they flew so low that Gene said the fishermen on the pier were looking down on them. When they landed back at Willow Grove and went to collect their pay, they were told that there wasn't any money for the day and that was the end of Gene's naval career.

Gene thinks that if he had been able to become a mechanic in the Air Force, he would have made it his career. He was surprised at how poorly run the military was. He is proud of his service where he did his job, didn't get in trouble or make waves and just rolled with the punches. Now, years later, he is seeing some of the benefits of the service as he is eligible for veterans' medical benefits.