

Russell J. Wolfe interviewed August 8, 2007

PFC, US Army, 101st Airborne Division, October 1955- October 1957

Before Russell entered the service he was working in Lycoming County as a milk tester for the Penn State Extension Service. Then he volunteered for the draft. This pushed his name higher up the list. He did this because he'd resigned from his job and wanted to be drafted as soon as possible. This was shortly after the Korean War. He did not select the army, he just assumed that he'd be in the army, and he was right. Two weeks later, he received a letter, much earlier than expected. He was anxious to go as it was a new experience for him.

Another new experience was going away to boot camp. In October of 1955 he took a train from Pittsburgh to the Fort Jackson, SC, for boot camp. On the train were four people from his town. They all soon became buddies. He was scared when the train arrived at boot camp, because he knew the men running the boot camp were going to give them a hard time. It was clear from the start that they were going to be tough: The men were hollering and yelling at them, and he felt as though couldn't do anything right. On the first night, before they could go to bed, they were taught how to make a bed the "army way," which was different than the "regular way." The people who ran basic training in the army were Korean War veterans who were very strict and the men were taught to do as they were told.



The first few weeks of basic were rough, but after about six weeks, they became more climatized. They were tested on their strengths and weaknesses, and then assigned to a job. Russell was assigned to Advanced Heavy Weapons Training. He worked with mortars and machine guns. He was part of a mortar crew that trained together, and he worked in the Fire Direction Center (FDC). They had to figure out where the rounds would go. After he completed Advanced Training, he flew on his first plane ride to Fort Devins, MA, where he was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division. He was at Fort Devins for six months and had more mortar training while there.

Good News and Bad News...

After a while, a captain came to the men and said, "I have good news and bad news." The good news was that some of them were going to Hawaii. The captain called names, but Russell's wasn't called. The bad news was: "The rest of you are going to Iceland." Now, no one really knew what Iceland would be like, although they had ideas. Russell thought it would be cold, very cold, but other than that, he didn't have any clue about what it'd be like.

A Very Different Country...

One of the most notable features is that there are not any trees in Iceland. There were hot springs there, and the Icelanders used those to heat their swimming pools. Once, they took a bus into town. It was a lot like England, with brightly painted houses and buildings. Periodically in the summertime,

the army chooses a few people to go fishing in some nearby streams. Russell was chosen to do that once.

The only way to connect to the outside world was through letters from home. There was a base newspaper, but that only informed him of things happening on the base, so he only knew what was happening outside of Iceland when a family member or friend mentioned something like that. The men weren't allowed off of the base, but there was a library, theater, pool hall, church, and such places as that on the base.

Sunlight and Darkness...

When they arrived in September when, there was about 12 hours of darkness in the day/night. But by January, it was pretty much all dark. Then in the summer, it was total daylight, only dark a bit around midnight. This was hard to get used to, but the men were kept busy enough that they were always tired enough to sleep.

Russell was stationed at Keflavik airport with Air Force and Navy personnel. While there, his duty was to man the perimeter of the base, which was surrounded by the type of wire around prisons (concertina), although there was no just sitting there and looking out all day. One of their jobs was to guard the ammunition with a rifle because Iceland is a jump-off point for England. Once, the men were put on alert for a crisis in Lebanon in the Middle East, and they were ready to ship out, but then the mission was called it off.

On a typical day, Russell would get up around 5 AM and his day would end around 6 or 7 PM. It wasn't as cold as he thought it would be. In the winter, it would get down to about 20 degrees. But sometimes it would be quite windy, so much so that they'd have to have a rope to hold onto to get to the Mess Hall. They had parkas and everything to keep warm, because the wind chill was pretty low. They did have a couple feet of snow, but not too much more than Pennsylvania.

A typical day of duty would be: get up, eat breakfast, then have physical training. After physical training, you get your equipment ready, and then do whatever you're assigned to do on that certain day. Many days, they'd take up sides (good guys/bad guys) and they'd have war games. He was often on the "good guys" side.



Russell Wolfe, November 1955.

He didn't get to know his commanding officers too well, but one officer was nice and would talk to Russell. The officers liked him though because he was good at following orders, unlike some people. The people who didn't follow orders would be disciplined, or get a talking to, in front of everyone, which was quite embarrassing. The only time this happened to Russell was in basic training when he

decided to shave at night instead of in the morning, which was when you were supposed to shave. He was then told to dry shave in front of everyone.

An unusual souvenir he brought home was a whale's ear. He got it because there was a whale that people were cutting up at a local whaling station. He asked about the inner ear part and a man gave it to him.

The big thing Russell looked forward to when he got home was fresh milk, because they didn't have fresh milk in Iceland. Although they got enough to eat, it was only edible – not very good-tasting. The men would have kitchen duty around 3 AM until around 9PM. About once a month they'd have to do this (KP). The people in charge of the kitchen would assign things to you like washing dishes and cleaning up if you were in the Mess Hall too late. Everyone learned to eat fast.

Russell had a chance to have R&R in Germany. They first flew to England for a few days before heading to Germany for about a week. Germany was interesting to see. They flew into Frankfurt, and then visited some towns in that area. They always stayed at military bases. One thing Russell remembers seeing in Germany was the Cathedral of Cologne. They could still see damage from WWII on the buildings. It was evident enough to see that there had been a war there; entire holes in buildings sometimes. The German people weren't negative toward the men in uniform. They were quite friendly.

Thankful to be Home

When their time in Iceland was up, the men were glad to get out of there. They flew to McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. When the plane landed, some of the men got down on hands and knees and kissed the ground. Being in Iceland was considered a Hardship Tour. It was from McGuire that Russell was discharged in October, 1956. He'd been in Iceland for a year and a day. This was just the beginning of a busy time for Russell as he was married later in the same month to his fiancée who he had not seen during his whole time in Iceland.

One of Russell's fond memories of the service was honoring the flag, which choked him up with patriotism. Especially when there were hundreds of people marching in the field with the flag flying, and it was such an amazing sight to see. Russell was proud to serve, and he took his duty seriously.