

Personal Reflections of Newfolden and Military Service

My wonderful editor suggested that I write another article about my time in the US Air Force, so here goes. As many of you know, I grew up on a farm about five miles west of Newfolden, MN. It was a typical small town farm where we raised wheat, oats and corn. We had livestock including chicken, pigs, sheep, cows and usually a couple of turkeys. Yes, I milked cows, slopped hogs, fed chickens, etc. The community was almost entirely of Norwegian and Swedish background, many of us were second generation Americans. Everyone was a Lutheran and we thought a mixed marriage was a LCA Lutheran marrying an ALC Lutheran! There was not a lot of tolerance in our community. We had no racial minorities in the community except when the Grant Forks Air Base basketball team came to town to play exhibition games in our high school gym.

With this background, I enlisted in the Air Force in July 1964 and traveled by airplane (the first time) to Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, TX. As those of you who were in the military can attest, it was a rude awakening. We arrived on base and had the usual experience including a haircut, shots, exams, uniform issue and assignment to barracks. The barracks were, of course, open bay with about 60 beds. When the lights were turned off about 1:00 am, I thought to myself “What the hell have I done?” Then I remembered that hundreds of thousands of others had survived basic. so I can do it too.

The military experience was the best education I ever received. I met other young men from all over the country, from all racial backgrounds, many difference religions and came to the realizations that a little country boy from Newfolden could compete with any of them. Every group had good people and some not go good. The man in the bunk next to me could be from any ethnic group, religion and lifestyles, in others words someone from any walk of life. It was another truly educational experience. I learned of racism while in the military. Here are a couple examples. While in language school, a man from Alabama heard that his girlfriend, who was attending college, went to a college party where a black man was present. He broke up with his girlfriend immediately. I didn’t understand it then and still don’t. While stationed at Ft Meade, MD, a friend and I went to a beach on a hot summer day. We were charged a two dollar membership fee to use the beach, which we thought nothing about until we left and the person at the gate said “Please come back and bring your friends as long as they look like us.” In other words, it was a white only beach. We never went back. While stationed in Japan, I and others took small trips to see the country. Japan, at that time was not very open to non-Japanese, so we did create quite a sight as we traveled. I am forever grateful

for the education I had in the Air Force. We have come a long way from the 1960s but still have a long way to go.