



Thad Weidmann
United States Air Force
April 1966 - February 1970

The government had a lottery system in the sixties to determine who would be drafted. I was rated 1A physically with a low lottery number, so there was no doubt I would be going. I had gone to work for Bell of PA (which eventually became Verizon) soon after graduating high school. I received my draft notice about 6 months later.

There can be times in your life when other people will have a major impact on your life. One of those times for me, was when I went to see an Air Force Recruiter. At that point in my life, just out of high school, I had no idea what I wanted to do for a career, but I felt the Air Force might be a better fit for me, even though it would be for 4 years. When I went back to see him to get the results of the entrance test I took, he said I aced all 4 sections and could pick anything I wanted. I said I did not know which one to pick and asked him what he recommended. He said electronics. I said OK and enlisted in April 1966. Bell of PA gave me a Military Leave of Absence to enlist in the Air Force. When I got to technical school at Keesler AFB in Biloxi, Mississippi after basic training at Lackland AFB in San Antonio, Texas, I had that Eureka moment "Electronics was the career I was looking for?". Getting hooked on Star Trek on it's original network airing while at tech school also helped fuel my fascination with electronics. I finished tech school for Ground Radio Communication Equipment Repair (MOS 30454) in November 1966.

I got my orders at the end of tech school for an 18 month tour at Incirlik AFB in Turkey, which has been in the news lately. My 2 roommates both got orders for Vietnam. I called my then fiancée, Pat Babjak, and said let's get married while I am home on leave. I



did not tell her where I was going until after we got married.

It seemed at the time that the odds were against us getting married. We were both 19 and both parents thought we were too young. Someone stole my wife's wedding dress at an Isaly's after she picked it up to bring home, so she had to go buy another one. We had no place to have a wedding reception, so one of her cousins let us use her unfinished basement. On the plus side, my best man and I both wore our Air Force uniforms for our wedding on December 3, 1966. Somehow, we made it through that and other hurdles. I will be married to my best friend 50 years on December 3, 2016. The church we were married in (the previous Holy Trinity church in Duquesne) was not so fortunate. It is scheduled to be demolished after being abandoned for many years and replaced by the new church in West Mifflin.

I left for Turkey on New Year's Day 1967 on Pan Am flights that took me to the airports in New York, London (England), Paris (France), Athens (Greece) and finally Ankara (Turkey) over several days. I then got a bus from Ankara to Incirlik AFB. For heat on the bus, they used an open can with kerosene on fire. It was an unusual trip, but nothing compared to those who went overseas on troop ships for a month. I felt very fortunate.

My assignment at Incirlik AFB was to maintain the VHF and UHF transmitters and receivers used to communicate with aircraft during takeoff and landing. We also took care of radio equipment at remote surveillance sites in the mountains. Going off base and interacting with the local people was interesting. For some reason, you

had the idea that if you spoke louder, they would magically understand you, which, of course, didn't work. On the flip side, sometimes you were going through animations trying to make the store owner understand what you wanted, only to find out he spoke English. The public men's room was also a surprise with just a hole in the floor and no fixtures.

One of my favorite memories from Turkey was in the Airmen's Club. When the jukebox started playing 'We Gotta Get Out of This Place' by the Animals, everyone stopped what they were doing and started singing the song.

My father's lung cancer got worse while I was in Turkey. The Red Cross got me an emergency leave, along with a seat on a military cargo C-141 Starlifter. I flew home with a replacement jet engine in my lap stopping in Madrid, Spain to refuel and landing in Charlestown, South Carolina. One thing about leaving the states, it makes you appreciate what we have here when you return. The Red Cross also got me a Humanitarian Reassignment to McGuire AFB in New Jersey. Some people are not fans of the Red Cross, but they were a major help for me.

I was supposed to stay within 100 Miles of McGuire AFB, but we wound up driving home to Pittsburgh in a sixty Corvair to see my father almost every weekend. I was hoping that if the car broke down, it would be within 100 miles of the base. My father passed away July 4th.

My assignment at McGuire AFB was to maintain the VHF and UHF transmitters and receivers used to communicate with aircraft during takeoff and landing, similar to Incirlik AFB in Turkey. I was able to live off base and my wife was able to join me. My wife got an office job at a state home for mentally challenged kids. She loved working with them. Our first home in New Jersey was an 8 foot wide trailer with a gravity feed oil furnace. One night our neighbor was beating on our door yelling that our trailer was on fire. The furnace flame had gone out and oil continued to drip into the furnace. With the excess oil in the furnace, flames began shooting out of the chimney after I re-lit it. We were later able to rent a house closer to where my wife worked. Our base was right next to Fort Dix and we could watch them while driving to work. Their basic training was way harder than mine. This was my favorite assignment. It was like a regular job and every once in awhile, you had to watch out for pranks like someone blowing cigarette smoke in the back of a transmitter you just turned back on after repairing it. If I could have stayed at McGuire AFB, I might have stayed in for 20 years.

My last assignment was at MacDill AFB in Tampa, Florida. I was able to live off base and have Pat stay with me here also. She got an office job at a local department store. I was assigned to a mobile communication

squadron that was part of a joint Army/Air Force task force called the United States Strike Command (See Wikipedia). Our job was to be ready at a moment's notice to go anywhere in the world to provide Short Wave and Microwave communications if US troops were deployed as part of a military action. Our unit had been deployed to North Africa several months before I got there. Some of the guys in our unit had been to Vietnam. Several of them had lost communication with another unit, only to find out the other unit had been blown up by the Viet Cong. To keep our skills up, they would periodically call an alert at 3 AM and have everyone deploy, sometimes to a large field within 50 miles of our base and other times to an Army base like Ft Hood, Texas via C-130 cargo planes. You had to lip read to communicate while airborne because the noise was deafening. We had 3/4 ton trucks with short wave equipment and whip antennas and other 3/4 ton trucks with microwave equipment and satellite type dishes. Both had generators associated with them that you had to keep running when we were deployed by changing the Jerry (gas) cans as they would run out. Snakes would sometimes wrap themselves around the fuel lines to keep warm, so you had to keep an eye open. We also had deuce and a half (2 1/2 ton) trucks that pulled

large trailers used for communication centers that had turbine (like jet engines) generators. We used to warm up our C Rations in the exhaust of these turbines. To keep the communication cables between trucks off the ground, we propped them up on top of lance poles set up like a letter 'A'. Four months before I got out, after coming back to the base after one of these local deployments, I was standing on the front wheel of the deuce and a half trailer with my hand against the lance poles that were strapped to the side of the trailer. I jumped down off the wheel, but my wedding ring got caught on a nail that was sticking out of one of the lance poles. By the time I hit the ground, my finger was ripped off by my wedding ring. Surprisingly, there was very little pain or blood. I guess I was in shock. I took the rest of my finger to the hospital hoping they could sew it back on, but they could not because of the way it was ripped off. The exposed bone hitting the bottom of the aluminum bowl of antiseptic solution they were soaking my hand in sent chills through me. They amputated the rest of the bone sticking out so they could close the wound, put a pressure cast on my arm from my fingers to my elbow and give me a sling. Right after that, my wife had a heavy floor fan fall on her foot and we went to the hospital again, this time for her. We had to laugh at the hospital at how we must have looked walking down the hall with me in a sling and her hanging on me limping with a broken foot. Fortunately, the finger I lost was not critical. I can still function normally, but with a little less lifting ability. I even adapted somehow to continue to be able to touch type without having any idea how I am accomplishing it. The VA gave me a 10% disability. Compared to the many horror stories I soon heard from people trying to make me feel better (like farmers having their foot pulled into their harvesting equipment while trying to clear a jam and then having their arm pulled in while trying to pull their foot out), I was very lucky.

One of my favorite memories from MacDill AFB was watching the B52 bombers take off. It was amazing watching this plane (with wings so long that they had wheels on the end of them to keep them from dragging on the ground) lumbering down the runway and using every inch of it to build up enough speed to take off.

After I got out, I used the GI Bill to further my electronic education doing correspondence courses that included building an entire 25 inch Heathkit transistorized TV that lasted me for 20 years. Bell of PA promoted me to the level I would have been if I hadn't gone into the service and bridged my time so I didn't lose any seniority. The electronics background I got from the Air Force allowed me to excel first as a Switching Equipment Technician maintaining the local switching offices, followed by working in a central monitoring center responsible for all Bell of PA switching offices in Western PA and then as a supervisor for a total of 38 years when I retired in November 2003.

After retiring from Verizon, I became a Life Member of VFW Post 188 in Duquesne and volunteered to be Quartermaster and Adjutant from 2007-2015 (8 years). I also joined the American Legion in Dravosburg and became a Paid-Up-For-Life member. I later transferred to Pleasant Hills when I found out my son, Mike, and his Father-in-Law Don Rottman were members here.

Don Rottman's wife, Donna, and I began working on the current newsletter with Donna developing the newsletter and me making bar copies. I later began a joint web site venture (alpost712pa.org) with Paul McQuade developing the web site and me maintaining and updating it each month from Donna's newsletter. In addition, Paul set up the web site so that I could e-mail Donna's newsletter. I also created a Facebook presence (AmericanLegion.PostSevenOneTwo) to further distribute Donna's newsletter and provide a daily activity broadcast. We are currently distributing Donna's newsletter to approx 400 unique visitors on our web site each month, 198 e-mail recipients, 397 Facebook friends and 100 bar copies for a total of approximately 1095 contacts.

Because of my experience with the Duquesne VFW, I was hired by the American Legion Home Association (Pleasant Hills Post 712 Inc.) in June 2015 to pay the bills and later promoted to Manager in October 2015 to also process bar money and social membership. I

was unable to do both VFW and Legion jobs, so I resigned the VFW Quartermaster and Adjutant positions in October 2015. I attended the final Post meeting of the Duquesne VFW in August 2016. Because of many repairs needed and lack of funds to do them, the insurance company refused to renew their insurance. The VFW members were forced to vote to surrender their charter, building and contents to State VFW.

One rewarding thing involving my time in the Service was my nephew, Mark Babjak, joined the Air Force, went to the same tech school (Keesler AFB), learned the same MOS (Ground Radio Repair), had an assignment at McGuire AFB, had an assignment in

the Middle East at Qatar and used the GI Bill after he got out to further his education at the University of Pittsburgh, earning a bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering. I thought this was an amazing coincidence until I later found out he had specifically requested these assignments because that's what I had done and he felt that I had done well. It's a great feeling seeing your values being reflected back to you by family members.