



## Alex Orr, Jr.

Major, U.S. Army Air Corp/U.S. Air Force Reserve

March 2, 1944 – April 15, 1968

I grew up in Tyler on Lindsey Lane. After attending Tyler Jr. College a year, I went to the University of Texas in Austin. Back then there was only one University of Texas; now I think there are 14 or 15 branches. I was majoring in electrical engineering when I got my orders to report for active duty. In March of 1944, I had signed up for the Aviation Cadet program in the Army Air Corps, and in January of 1945 I was called to active duty.

I reported to Ft. Sam Houston, which was where they inducted most people for all branches of the Army. From there I went to Keesler Field, Mississippi. After staying there for 90 days of basic training, I was given an On the Line Trainee Assignment while I waited for Aviation Cadet training. I was sent to LaJunta Air Force Base in southeastern Colorado, and was there until June of 1945. Next I went to Hobbs Army Airbase at Hobbs, New Mexico, to attend a basic training school for flight engineers on B-17's. I got to fly about 240 hours as engineer on B-17's. Hobbs was primarily a training base for pilots who had been in another type aircraft, but I was fortunate to get to fly in the Flying Fortress. Sometimes when student pilots were present and the instructor pilot was not, I got to sit in the co-pilot seat and fly a while. Of course they put it on

automatic pilot, but it was a real thrill for this 19-year-old to get to fly on that plane. I was at Hobbs until September 1945.

Of course, the war was over then, and the Army Air Corp didn't need more pilots, navigators, and bombardiers, so I was sent to Chanute Field, Illinois, to become a weather officer. Well, the training didn't start, and we wondered what was going on that there was no school. Finally they called us to a meeting in a gymnasium and told us that all of us who had signed up for this Aviation Cadet program from civilian status were going to get to go home. We were not needed. One of the conditions of the program when we went in, was that if we were washed out of the program for something other than lack of proficiency or physical reasons, we reverted to our prior status. My prior status, of course, was civilian, so I got out November 15, 1945. What a great day!

My dad met my train in Longview and drove home to Tyler. After a few days at home, I went back to UT. I was there from January 1946 to May 1948 when I received my degree in electrical engineering. I went to work for Texaco as a sales engineer. I stayed in the Air Corps Reserve, which was still part of the Army until, I think, in 1949 when the Air Force became a separate branch. I applied for and got a direct commission as a Second Lt. in the Air Force Reserve. I stayed in the reserve until April of 1968 when I was discharged as a Major with 24 years of service. That's about it.

I took advantage of the G. I. Bill, and it's coincidental that my G. I. Bill pay ended the last month of my last college year... the month I graduated. I remember living on the GI check which, I think, was \$50 a month for a single veteran and then finally got as high as \$75 a month. That money was used for room, board, and whatever expenses I had. Luckily, while I was on an active duty, I saved a US Savings Bond a month and had 500 or 600 dollars saved that supplemented that GI Bill. I would have had to have a job and would not have finished college nearly as early if I hadn't had the GI Bill. It paid everything.

Let me tell you, it's a different world now. When I went to the University of Texas, the tuition was \$25 a semester. Most people look at me and say, "You know, I don't believe that," but tuition was not by the semester hour. The GI Bill covered all my books. In engineering, I needed drawing instruments, a slide rule. The bill was a godsend. It really was.

My time in service was a positive experience. Oh, I grew up a lot in a little less than a year. I learned that you don't always get to do what you want to do.

I always respected authority, but even more so after being in the service. I learned: “Don’t volunteer for anything.” When I was at Abilene, I was First Lt. in a reserve unit when there was a recall for the Korean War. People in my unit, some of them officers who had been prisoners of war, were recalled. I never heard a word. I was twenty-four years old, single, and an engineer, but I didn’t get any notice to come to San Antonio for a recall physical. I went to this active-duty sergeant and said, “Sarge, I haven’t heard anything about a recall physical. Major Johnson and Captain So-and-so have already been down there, and I haven’t heard anything. Should I contact someone?” He looked at me a minute and then said, “Lt., keep your mouth shut.” I never did hear a word all during the Korean War, so I was in the service during the War, but I was not ever on active duty. I thank God for that, too.

I’m full blooded Baptist. I was born into a Baptist family, out at Winters, Texas, south of Abilene. Yeah I was and always have been a Baptist, and met my wife at a Baptist church, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She’d been a Baptist all of her life – well, ever since she began going to church and became a Christian. We went to Richardson Heights Baptist Church, Richardson, to Memorial Drive Baptist church in Houston, and Memorial Baptist Church in Tulsa. D. A. Williams, a native Tylerite, was our minister there. He had been a paper boy here and had even delivered our paper on Lindsey Lane. It’s a small world. Yes, I’ve always been a Baptist and all the children, Lynnette, Kevin, and Lex, were baptized in the Baptist Church.

Do I see that God has guided and protected me through the years? No doubt about it. About the second or third time that I was up in that B-17, we had an electrical fire, and I thought we were going to have to bail out. Luckily, we got the fire out, but it was a close call. Another time, when we were landing, we came close to crashing. No telling whether we would have gotten out of it. While I was at Hobbs, a B-17 caught on fire with four people on board. One of them was a person who was in this On the Line Trainee Program like I was. He was the only one who got out alive, and they found that the parachutes had been sabotaged. Two others got out of the plane, but their chutes did not open because the lines were tied with twine instead of rubber bands that would pop off and let the chute open. He was the only one who got a chute that opened, and I got to thinking, “Boy, you know, that could have been me. I could have been up there and gotten one of those chutes.”

Some enlisted people who packed parachutes had been paid to sabotage them.

It was hard to believe, but some people will do anything for money. I don't know what happened to them, but I know they were court marshaled. The authorities shut down flying for a few days until they checked all the parachutes. They wouldn't let anybody go up until they checked them all out.

I was not in a unit that has reunions. When they discontinued the aviation cadet program, I went to that weather officers' school which never got started, and then I got out. I stay in touch with a couple of fellows who were in that same program. They were both people who went to the University of Texas and we entered the service at the same time. That's about it.

The military today is so much stronger than when I was in service. One B-1 bomber can carry bombs that would be the equal of all those two thousand pound bombs that were dropped from B-17's during WWII. We don't need as many planes any more, but the strength is infinitely greater. The technical things that they can do now are amazing, especially with the satellites and the Stealth airplanes. I had an uncle who was a career Air Force officer, and my wife's brother retired as a full Colonel in the Air Force after 24 years, so I have stayed in touch with the Air Force, even though I'm no longer a part of it.

How would I compare patriotism then and now? I think that it's generational. I don't mean that the young people are not patriotic, but they didn't go through the times of the depression and WWII when if you went to a movie and they played the Star Spangled Banner or the flag passed by in a news reel, everybody always stood up. Well, you'd never see that now. I notice that when TV shows the national anthem being sung at football games, a lot of people don't stand, take their hats off, or put their hands over their hearts. A lot of them don't sing. I don't think patriotism is anywhere near as strong in the hearts and minds of a lot of people today as it was back in those times. That doesn't mean that there wouldn't be more patriotism shown in a time of war.

During WWII when Roosevelt was president, the media did not report everything to the public. A lot just passed us by. A lot never got in the newspaper, and there was no television. What you heard was on the radio. For example, the atomic bomb was a big secret. I was at Hobbs, New Mexico, when that they tested that atomic bomb out there in Alamogordo, but it was not my turn to fly that night. In the middle of the summer, the weather was so hot and turbulent that we flew at night when it was cooler. Friends of mine who where flying the night the bomb was set off reported the next morning, "Something really big must have happened up north of here." They were at

about 25,000 feet when they saw this monstrous flash in the sky. I don't remember anybody saying there was any turbulence from it. It was too far away. Well, we didn't know what that "big" was until that first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

When President Truman decided to drop the bomb, I didn't know anyone who was against the idea. The government had already estimated that there would be a million casualties if we invaded Japan. The bomb was a terrible thing that killed, like I think 80 thousand or more people in Hiroshima, and I don't know how many at Nagasaki, but it saved a bunch of American lives and it ended the war that might have gone on another year or two.

I enjoyed every minute of my 24 years in service. I never wished that I'd used that time for something else. I was on active duty for two weeks every summer and enjoyed that. No, I wouldn't change a thing. I wouldn't want to do it again, but I have a lot of pleasant memories from those days.

God has continued to bless me in the years since. Every day we have His blessings. Nannette, my wife, and I recently celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We wanted children but didn't have any for four years. Nannette's oldest brother's brother, a dentist in the Army in Germany, and his wife helped us adopt a little girl from an orphanage near Munich, Germany. When time came to get the baby, Nannette was expecting and could not make the trip. I brought the 8 month old baby from New York City to Tulsa, and she became a citizen when she was three years old. She's the oldest of our three children. We have six grandchildren, ages 7 to 30, and two great-grandchildren.