Steven York

May 29, 2015
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Rachel York: I am Rachel York, and I am here at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library with my dad, Captain Steven York on May 29th, 2015. So, thank you for coming in, Dad.

Steven York: Well, you're welcome.

Rachel York: To get started -- these are the questions that everyone gets in the beginning -- when and where were you born?

Steven York: I was born on August 3rd, 1964 in San Francisco, California.

Rachel York: Cool. What was it like growing up in California, San Francisco?

Steven York: Well, it was interesting, because in the '60s and early '70s the Vietnam War was going on, so as a kid it was kind of… we played war and army. And the baby boomers were building all the neighborhoods up in our little city. I lived in actually Daly City, so my friends and I were in a little group and we would take wood from the construction sites and build go-karts, and we'd ride them down the hills and crash them into things because the hills were pretty steep. Of course, you had the protests and the Vietnam War, of course. We didn't realize that was going on, but I had three older sisters and they all were a part of that. When I did get older and saw that I was a part of that, it was kind of cool to know I was a part of history in that respect.

Rachel York: That's awesome. So, were the protests and everything… they weren't a big part of your life?

Steven York: Not at all. I mean it happened, and it would be like something happening on like the other side of Lake Michigan, since we live in Chicago now. It happens and you're aware of it, but it doesn't really affect going to the grocery store and other things. I just never noticed it.

Rachel York: So you had a pretty positive view. Like, what did you know of Vietnam?

Steven York: As a kid, I thought war was cool. I didn't understand what war was all about. Some of the neighbors -- the teenage boys -- the draft was going on, and they were all going over. As a kid, very naively was like, you know… wishing there was a war, because I had

always seen World War II movies and Korean War movies, and I was thinking: "Wow, why wasn't there a good war for my generation?" Then I realized, the Vietnam was going on, and I started paying attention to the evening news, because every night they had stuff going on with the draw-down in Vietnam. That was kind of exciting. And then our next-door neighbor came back from Vietnam -- and this had to have been about '71 or '72 -- and he had a lot of pictures, Polaroids. So I'm eight years old, and he's showing me pictures of dead bodies and body parts and the gore. And, of course, as an eight-year-old boy you think it's kinda cool. It's gross, but it's cool. It's kinda like road-kill. You're looking at it and you're like, "Wow, this is really cool!" But you don't realize what's really going on there. So to answer your question: yeah, it was kind of cool when I realized there was a war going on -- to be a part of it, but as a kid using kid-lenses looking at it. Not as an adult, of course.

Rachel York: More background. What did your parents do? What did your dad do, and what did your mom do?

Steven York: So, as a child, my father worked in the paint industry and the hardware industry for department stores selling paint and paint supplies. I want to say it was Macy's in San Francisco, but it could've been a different department store. I do remember, he did work at a Macy's. Back then, they didn't have Home Depots, so you went into a large store to buy your paint. Then he started a business -- when I was in the sixth grade -- with another two gentlemen, and they sold hardware supplies to the stores that sold hardware products like Home Depot and Lowes before there was a Home Depot and Lowes. That was what he did, so he was an entrepreneur and a business man and became very successful at it. On the other hand, my mother was a housewife. She was sick with a disease called MS, multiple sclerosis, and my earliest memories were of my mom driving in a car once or twice… mostly being sick in bed, or in a chair and needing our help to get around and do things. I remember she'd be sitting in the kitchen and it was… when you had to make coffee, and -- I don't know if you're familiar with this -- but you would boil water in one pot, and then you'd put a filter on top with another pot with coffee, and you would pour the coffee. So my mom would tell me what to do at the age of five, and I was doing that, or scrambling eggs. So, she was always there for supervisor, for the most part. We played in the neighborhood, but, you know, they were regular American houses, you know, of the '60s… '50s and '60s. My father was a post-WW2 veteran of the Air Force. He was in the Berlin Airlift as an enlisted guy doing supply and transportation stuff in Rhein-Main Air Base

Rachel York: So how long was he in the military for?

Steven York: I want to say three years.

Rachel York: Only three?

Steven York: Maybe two. Yeah, it was a different time back then. As I told you in the past, I think he was a punk as a kid. As a seventeen-year-old, he dropped out of high school during the Depression and all. Well, after the Depression… so he had to work, and I think it was in eighth grade… he was born in '29. I think he got in trouble and he went to court, so they

said: “You either join the military or you go to jail.” So he went into the military, and that actually turned him around and gave him functional skills as an adult.

Rachel York: What about siblings? Do you have any siblings?

Steven York: Yes, I have three sisters. I was the fourth. They're all older than I am. One was born thirteen years ahead of me, the other was ten years ahead of me, and the third was two years ahead of me.

Rachel York: Cool. So you didn't really grow up with the older ones?

Steven York: I did, but again, it was during the ‘60s and they were more interested in going out and getting high, and hanging out with the hippies and doing whatever they enjoyed doing. The two oldest ones… my third sister, who I was closest to… just like me, and we went to school, and we played. We had different friends, of course, but we…I would say the two older ones were there, but they were more interested in leaving when I was a kid, because they didn't want to deal with a sick mom and dealing with a little baby brother and a little baby sister. They wanted to be teenagers, and go out and play and have a good time.

Rachel York: Cool. So, did you have a good relationship with your family?

Steven York: I did, yes.

Rachel York: Cool. So…

Steven York: I was the baby, remember? I was the baby. I was the little boy. So, you know, I could do no wrong.

Rachel York: Everyone loved you.

Steven York: BAMF. B-A-M-F [Bad—Ass--Mother—F*@#er]

Rachel York: Yeah, you are! So you kind of already talked about what was going and how you remembered the Vietnam War. Did you have any relatives serving in Vietnam? Or did you know anyone close to you serving in Vietnam?

Steven York: Well, growing up, of course I ran into people in life that had served in Vietnam, but I wouldn't say I knew anybody in my immediate family that served in Vietnam. Like I said, my next door neighbor was in it, and then my sister married a boy across the street, and his brother was in Vietnam. They said it changed him. There were four boys that grew up across the street, and she married one of the boys, and one of the older brothers went over there, and it changed him. I think he became an alcoholic. I think he dealt with… post-traumatic stress certainly manifested in him. He became an alcoholic. He cleaned up later, but I don't really know of anybody -- other than people I've run through in life -- that served in Vietnam.

Rachel York: How did Vietnam going on while you were growing, affect your decision to join the military?

Steven York: I wouldn't say it had a significant influence, other than always wanted to be a pilot in the [US] Air Force. My interest was always World War II and World War I. I glamorized warfare. It just was prettier in Hollywood movies. People died not violently - they just died. There was no blood on the TV. They'd been blown up and there'd be no bits and pieces left over. They were just not there. I would… in the Vietnam-era war, I began studying in college later on when I was closer to eighteen, nineteen, twenty. When I would go to the library, I would look through stacks and I'd find books. I was kind of more interested in the POWs, because I do remember -- back in '73 when they returned the POWs after the B52 strikes -- they all came into the Air Force base, by Travis Air Force Base, by my house in San Francisco. So, I remember that being on the news. I remember watching the news of the POWs coming off the airplane and being filmed by the media. So, I was fascinated by their story more than anything else, at least in the beginning. Then, of course, when you read a book about one topic, all of a sudden it opens up other areas of interest.

Rachel York: So, not Vietnam, but World War I and World War II were really what made you want to join the military?

Steven York: Yes, yes.

Rachel York: When did that interest start?

Steven York: When I was younger than five and older than three, I don't know exactly what age I was. I remember getting on an airplane with my family, and we were flying from San Francisco to Chicago. The flying excited me, and most books about aviation were war-related. Well, they were back then. And so I started looking at the picture books and the airplanes, and of course, the airplanes of World War I were glamorous and pretty, and they were all made of paper and canvas and string, and so that led me into airplanes. World War II… and then I started reading the short stories in **Reader's Digest**. They'd had excerpts of combat and stories. Of course, it was all glamourous to be a pilot. You got all the medals, all the women. And it was just kinda… just, as a kid, the glamour of that got me excited about that.

Rachel York: What about your dad being in the military?

Steven York: That may have. I can't sit here and honestly say that influenced more other than just being able to talk to him about airplanes. But he didn't have any knowledge or how they flew, or what it was to be a pilot. But maybe it did.

Rachel York: But he was there?

Steven York: Yeah, he was there. Your words, not mine.

Rachel York: Kind of going back a little bit, I guess. So you were a kid, and you really enjoyed aviation. But what high school did you go to? What was your high school experience like?

Steven York: In [Del Campo] High School I went through '78- '82. It was in Fair Oaks, California. We moved from the San Francisco Bay Area to the Sacramento Valley when my father started his business. Land was cheaper. Sacramento was more centralized. Just to digress, his business was distributing hardware supplies throughout the West Coast, and that was a better location than the congestion of a metropolitan city like San Francisco. So, the Sacramento area was a military city. There were several Air Force bases in the immediate vicinity. There was Mather Air Force Base, McClellan Air Force Base, Beale Air Force Base, Travis Air Force Base, and they also had Aerojet, which was related to the space industry. Back in the sixties of course, we were doing the moon shots, and rocket testing was done in -- I think --Sacramento. So there was a significant military influence there. Constant airplanes flying over. So in high school -- now to answer your question -- I got involved in an organization called the Civil Air Patrol, which was the auxiliary of the Air Force, if you will. Like an ROTC without any sort of combat training, but Patrol did search and rescue, and they let kids fly airplanes. So, it was an opportunity for me to get involved with the military and fly airplanes, I thought. So, you know, the discipline and all that with the military. So I did that while I was in middle school and my freshman year. Then, in high school, I played sports and played golf, played football, and I did track and field. I studied, of course, all the sciences because I knew I had to get into a university or a college to become a pilot in the Air Force. So, I took that track in high school.

Rachel York: When did you start learning how to fly, then?

Steven York: So, I would say the age of sixteen. I turned sixteen, and there was a local airport [i.e., Phoenix Field ICAO: NZFX] a couple miles down the street from our house, maybe five miles away. That's no longer there of course, and I took flying lessons there and learned how to fly a Cessna 150. So, I started when I was sixteen, got soloed at sixteen, got licensed at seventeen, my private pilot's license, and flew a little bit, but it was so expensive to fly. It is expensive to fly. I didn't do a whole lot of civilian flying. I have something between fifty-one hundred hours in Cessna's maybe. Yeah.

Rachel York: What did you do in the Civil Air Patrol if you weren't flying?

Steven York: So, you'd learn how to do search and rescue. So, an airplane would crash, for instance. Before the satellite all the GPS, and to this day, they still do a lot of visual identification. So the Civil Air Patrol would send up airplanes, and they'd fly search patterns on the ground for the crashed aircraft, or maybe a lost hiker or something. And they'd also send in ground teams, and the ground teams would have radio stations. Cadets -- the young guys like us -- and we'd go out and they'd have us walk a field and do something. But they taught us camping skills -- military training kind of like camping – and, of course, when you're a teenager it's awesome to play war. We'd wear army fatigues and Army uniforms and walk around the hills of Sacramento and that kind of stuff. I did do some training on civilian defense. Back then, the Cold War was prevalent and nuclear bombs… and civil defense included radio logistical monitoring, so I learned to do that with a little Geiger counter. So there was some education involved with Civil Air Patrol.

Rachel York: So you weren't necessarily flying?

Steven York: Right, I wasn't old enough to fly, so I was doing other things in anticipation of that. And also, Civil Air Patrol teaches leadership development skills, so part of that is progresses through the rank structure of Civil Air Patrol to learn how to lead people, and at one point, how to follow people in small groups. And we'd go out in the field on one of the weekend exercises, and they'd give us a training exercise where they put us in an area with, like, a compass, a pocket knife, and a piece of string. Then they'd say, "Okay guys, you got three hours figure out where you are, and work together and get out of this situation." And you know, you work together. I think you call Moon Survival Program were exercises -- they do this in graduate school -- where they put you in a room with five people, and they give you a piece of paper with a number of items, and they say, "Okay, let's say you're stranded on the moon, you have a life raft, a fire extinguisher, a canteen. What is most important to you?" Then you guys have to figure out what's important and how to use it to get out. Well, they did the same sort of exercises with the same resources we had in the wilderness, I guess.

Rachel York: So, that was a big part of what you did in high school, and growing up?

Steven York: Prior my first year of high school, but after my freshman year it was kind of dorky to get military haircuts and march around and play army. I was chasing girls and being involved with high school in the early '80s and late '70s. Do… I did more sport related things.

Rachel York: Were any of your friends interested in military, Air Force type stuff in high school? Did that affect it at all?

Steven York: I had friends who went into the military after high school, but I didn't have, like, a best friend that we were both gonna join the military and be pilots. Like, fly upside-down and do weird stuff. No, I didn't have that. I just had regular friends like you and everyone. You just have your small group of people. One person wants to be a doctor, one person wants to be an architect, and I just happened to be the guy that wanted to be the pilot.

Rachel York: What did you do after high school?

Steven York: After high school, I went to college to northern California at Humboldt State, and spent four years, and I played sports in college. I played rugby and traveled with the rugby team. It was a very social sport. Drank a lot of beer. Chased a lot of women. Did what most college guys do. Studied business. My dad wanted me to have a fallback degree in case I couldn't be a pilot. Couldn't do what I wanted to do -- that I could possibly run his business, or just be set up nicely for a career. So I did that, and I did get involved with student government at my college in my third year. I was the school treasurer at my school in Humboldt, which was a twenty hour a week job, where I had to do accounting and budget kinda stuff. I was involved in student council, in a leadership position, so it was kind of exciting to do that. But I didn't really go to college thinking I was going to join the Air Force every day I was in college. It wasn't like it was in front of me, and I have to do this to get into the Air Force. I just went to college and played and had fun. I didn't have a great GPA, but I had a good time and made some good friends that I'm still friends with thirty years later.

Rachel York: Why did you choose to attend college?

Steven York: Why did I choose to attend college?

Rachel York: As opposed to going right into the military right after high school?

Steven York: Oh. Because, to be a pilot, you had to have a degree.

Rachel York: And so you choose to do that to set yourself up to be a pilot, and you chose to do business because as a fallback?

Steven York: It's kinda like, if you don't ask the question, the answer is always no. So, if I didn't get the degree, then I would never have the opportunity to be a military pilot. So at least I gave myself the opportunity to be a pilot or be an officer, and then a pilot.

Rachel York: Why did you choose to attend a state university as opposed to the Air Force Academy?

Steven York: Oh, I didn't have the grades. The GPA. I played a lot in high school too. So for me, I got into college, so that was good enough. What I found out later was, it really doesn't matter where you get your degree or what your degree is in, as long as you get a degree. What I've learned since then, it kind of does matter a little bit, but it's really individually. If you're a good person and a good student, you'll do well. It doesn't matter where your degree is from.

Rachel York: So you went to college, and after that what did you do? Did you go enlist, or what did you…

Steven York: My senior year in college -- it's now November, December -- I'm driving in my car, doing something, and I hear on the radio that the Air Force is going to be in town recruiting for nurses or something, medical professionals. "If you are interested, call this phone number." So I called the phone number. We didn't have cell-phones back then, so I wrote it down. I called the phone number later. I talked to this recruiter -- happened to be a major and he was based in Oakland -- and I told him I was interested in being a pilot. I was graduating in June and he told me that he sent me some information in the mail. Before the internet, couldn't email. Basically he said he was the person for that region, who selected people or put packages together into the military to be an officer, and then a pilot. So he sent me the information, and essentially it was application and a questionnaire. No different from any other process. I sent it back to him, and he said it looked good. They scheduled me, and I went down for a physical. I believe it was Travis Air Force base -- which was about a six- or seven-hour ride from Humboldt. And it was a very intensive -- like NASA -- physical where they pretty much poked and did everything to you. Tested everything on you. Breathing, blood, everything. So that was the end of October for a time-frame. Then they submitted my paperwork to the Air Force. Oh, I had to take this test, the Air Force Officer Qualifying Test (AFOQT). I took that test when I took the physical. So they submitted all that stuff all that into the Air Force. In January or December I guess, I got a reply back that I wasn't accepted as a pilot, but I wasn't rejected either. Would I have a secondary career choice as possibly a navigator? And I said, "Okay." You know, sure. I put that down, with no intention of being a navigator.

Not that there's anything wrong with navigators, but I wanted to be a pilot. So I hung up the phone, and called the Navy right after I hung up with the Air Force. Told the Navy recruiter what had happened to me, and he said that they would take a look at me and come down and take their physical. So I went down for the Navy physical, and as I was waiting for the results from the Navy physical in January, the Air Force called me back, and I got my acceptance into officer training school and pilot training.

Rachel York: You got accepted to both right away?

Steven York: When you get accepted into Officer Training School, they're assigning a position; they're giving you a job at the same time.

Rachel York: So, you're not getting that at the end of officer training school?

Steven York: If I wanted to be a bean-counter or a nurse, you would get that letter: welcome to Officer Training School to be a bean-counter, a nurse, a school geek, or whatever. I knew right… I didn't have to, there was no draft anymore, so I could've said, "No, thank you" and walked away and had no obligation at all.

Rachel York: So, how long after graduation did you start officer training?

Steven York: Two months. I graduated in June and went in August. I think it was August 5th, I went to San Antonio, Texas. I think Diane… Princess Diana was getting married at that time-frame. Whatever that day was, I think it was somewhere in that time-frame, because I remember that being in the news. So my dad drove me down to Oakland, we got on a bus, and I don't really remember flying to San Antonio, but we did fly from Oakland to San Antonio.

Rachel York: Oh, your dad went with you?

Steven York: No, he just drove me to the reception [area for the] Air Force. It was a Military Entrance Processing Center, MEPS. They're all over the place. He dropped me off, said goodbye. Walked in the door, they swore us in, and then basically put us on buses and we went to the airport, and I flew to San Antonio. And go off the bus… it must've been commercial because not everybody was doing the same thing. Got off the bus, it's midnight, and we get to these dormitories at Lackland Air Force Base -- the officer wing, which was called the Medina Complex. Get off the bus, it's two o'clock in the morning, and I'm thinking, "You know what? I don't have to report until five pm this afternoon, so I'm gonna sleep in and check out this place, and I'll report when I wake up and all well rested." Well, I fell asleep on this little bunk bed. They were the metal bunk beds -- if you could visualize -- and it was right in front of an air conditioner. And I've never been in humid weather because I grew up in California, where it got hot, but never humid. It was just miserably hot, so I'm right in front of the air conditioner. No blankets. I go to sleep and, lo and behold, they woke us up at, like, five in the morning and we started our day. And it was like anything you'd expect, you know, in movies… boot camp. They made us stand in formation. We walked around; started to learn how to march; we got in uniforms; we got in processed. So, reporting in by five pm didn't mean that's when my day started. That's just a, "no later than" time. My day started when I got there, I just didn't know

anything about it. But unfortunately, I got a cold that first day. A flu, real bad. I was coughing and wheezing, and just felt miserable for the first three or four days. The thought of quitting was on my mind constantly, but I wanted it so bad, so I said no. And people were quitting because they got sick also, or they just didn't want the hard work. I just choose to stick it out like many others have done. I'm no different in that respect. You go through that, "Why am I here? This is crazy. I don't need this." And yeah, you get through it.

Rachel York: Going back a little bit, what did your family think about your decision to join the Air Force? Did they support you, or what was…?

Steven York: Well, they supported me. Both my father and mother did, but I think they understood the reality of being in the military. And you're not joining a country club, even though you think you are. The end result of the military is potential combat and military death. Worse, I think, being injured, and not being physically one-hundred percent when you get out. They knew that, but I didn't see that. I just thought it was going to be a flying club. Go up and rip some Gs [i.e. gravitational forces on the body] and do whatever pilots do.

Rachel York: Cool.

Steven York: Sisters, I don't recall. You know, they're sisters. Just girls.

Rachel York: So you just… right out of college you go into training. You did that in San Antonio, when?

Steven York: I was August of '86 through November. It was three months basically.

Rachel York: For officer training?

Steven York: Yeah, ninety-day wonder.

Rachel York: What was a typical day in training like for officer training?

Steven York: So, if it was ninety days, the first forty-five days you're a lowerclassman, and for the second forty-five days you're an upperclassman. For the first half of officer training school you're just learning how to march, and take orders, and clean the dorms, and learn how to fold your clothes, and just… you're being indoctrinated into the military system. Brainwashing, if you will. No different than going into a sorority, or going into a high school, or just learning how that system operates. The second half of OTS, you're the upper-class, so you're giving the commands. You're the ones teaching the lower classes how to do things, and you're responsible for the dormitories. So a typical day in… most military guys have similar experiences, I'm no different. You wake up, you have ten minutes, I don't recall how much time, to brush your teeth and get ready, shave and get your uniform on. You fall out and go to breakfast. You do everything together. You march to breakfast, you eat your breakfast, and as a lowerclassman you couldn't talk, and you had to sit straight in your chair, and you just inhaled the food real quickly. Then you would go to class for a couple of hours and learn about military history, or whatever the topics were. I don't remember all of them. Have a lunch break, maybe go march in

the afternoon, or spend an hour out running and physical training, and then have a midday meal, evening meal. You did stuff in the dorms in the evenings. I don't recall exactly what we did, but they were just full-on days. We had academic stuff to study, just stuff to clean and things looking pretty and had additional duties. You might have to mow grass, or you might have to paint the sidewalks. I mean there was just so much, so they just kept us busy the whole time. Again, indoctrinating into the process. Indoctrinating you into the way of thought for a military person. It's no different today, it'll be the same. It was no different two thousand years ago, it just is what it is.

Rachel York: Was it difficult?

Steven York: It was difficult in that you're putting in very long hours and it's physically demanding. You're no longer with your mommy and daddy. It's up to you; you can prove that you can do it. That was the difficult part, but it wasn't difficult. Anybody can do it, but you have to but your mind to it. If you don't want to be there, you're going to have problems.

Rachel York: What would you say is the most valuable lesson you'd learn from officer training?

Steven York: I think it's attitude. You know, it's, "look good and sound good," because if you look good, people think you're sharp. If you sound good, they think you're sharp. You might not be, but if you look good and sound good, you might be successful.

Rachel York: What was it like living in San Antonio? Did you get to go out or anything?

Steven York: Yeah. So, the first portion -- when we were lowerclassmen -- you didn't have a chance to go out. But when you were an upperclassman, on Saturdays after the morning inspection -- they had an inspection around eleven o'clock -- and you were off until five o'clock Sunday. Somebody always had a car, so we would all jump into a car and go to the river-walk. We had to wear our uniforms, of course, and back in '86, Top Gun had just gone out. So we thought we were really cool to wear our Air Force uniforms and walk around in San Antonio, and pretend we were the Hollywood versions of pilots and stuff. That was kind of cool. Chasing women because, of course, you can't have girlfriends or anything. Some guys did prior to getting there. So just getting away from a room full of men, mostly men, it was nice to go to bars and see real people.

Rachel York: After officer training, did you just go right into pilot training?

Steven York: I finished in November. I had, like, a week before I had to be in pilot training which… I went to an Air Force base just north of San Antonio in Lubbock, Texas called Reese Air Force Base. So, I flew back to Sacramento, picked up my car, and drove to Lubeck, Texas. And then I started pilot training with a class -- 8801 -- and… I want to say it was late November or early December. The first day of training -- the first day of class -- there were fifty-five guys in the classroom and they only had room for fifty. So they took the five youngest guys and put us in the class 8802, which started in January. So for the whole month in December, and actually the first part in January, I just hung out in Lubeck in what they called "casual status." I worked in the… They gave me a job in the simulator building, and I sat at a desk, and I know I did something… I don't recall what I

did, but I was able to do… was I was able to study a little bit prior to starting the pilot training program. So yeah, I started pretty quickly thereafter. It was nice, because it gave me the opportunity to relax a little bit after officer training school.

Rachel York: So, there was no separate selection process for pilot training? You just knew right going in that you were going to do it?

Steven York: I think there is. I mean, there was a selection process, I'm not sure how it worked. But you were always an officer first, and a pilot second. You were an officer first, and your military specialty second.

Rachel York: Can you describe your experience in pilot training? How did it differ from officer training? Or what did you do?

Steven York: Pilot training… it wasn't as regimented as officer training school. Nobody told you how to eat your food, and you didn't have to march around everywhere. You would go to a classroom, if you will. First of all, the whole base is there for your training. Everyone there supports you. So you're, right off the bat, a prima donna. You think you're a badass because you're the one. So you get there, and they beat you up in the beginning with academics. You're long days, twelve, sixteen hour days in academics. You're learning systems. You're not learning how to march anymore, you're not military discipline. You're learning how to be a pilot. There's just so many classes we had to take. Aerodynamics, aviation regulations, Air Force regulations related to flying. And then we had to learn procedures and processes on airplanes. You know: what the button does; how to start the engines; how to taxi; how to talk on the radio, everything you could think of. A typical day in pilot training was… there were three different phases. Phase one, it was just all academics. Phase two was you went over to the T-37s and you'd learn how to fly the primary trainer in the Air Force. That consisted of learning aeronautics, formation, and instrument flying. We would fly two times a day, possibly three. You would do a simulator and a flight, or a simulator and two flights. I mean, it was just everyday was just kind of random. And they took our class, and we started in a large group. [Class] 8802 started with fifty people, and they split it up into two groups of twenty-five, and then over the course of the year people would wash out. Not make it or roll back -- you'd go into the class behind you. We started twenty-five guys in my group, and only… at the end of the year, only ten of us from that initial group graduated. We had twenty-five to thirty people in the graduation group, but the originals -- we just had a lot of people struggle. Again, and back to your question, so you might get to your work at 4 o'clock in the morning. Wake up at 4, and get there at 5, and it's dark out. You have the morning briefing, where you'd get the weather for the day, you find out what runways you're using, and you see this schedule -- who's doing what. And you knew that from the day before, but there could have been some changes. They didn't use computers, they had a big dry-erase board with our names on one side and magnetic tags, and they'd put all these magnetic tags on the board so it was like a constant puzzle. And if those magnets fell off, then you know it was a bad thing. After the weather briefing, they would do what's called stand-up. Every pilot in the Air Force remembers this: you'd be sitting there in… you're all sitting there with all your instructors on one table, and you're on the other, inside. The tables were set up in a U, so the outer portion of the U were where the instructors sat, and the inner portion was were the students

sat. Instructor would go to the center of the class and describe a situation. “Today, you're flying and you're getting ready to land the airplane and you get a red light flashing at you on your panel. Lieutenant York, what would you do?” And you stand up. And in the Air Force, you had to say this exactly the punctual... not punctual, but you had to say it the exact correct way with the pronunciation perfectly, and you'd say, “Sir, I'd maintain air traffic control, I'd analyze the situation, and take appropriate action.” Then if you screwed that up, they'd say sit down. They'd call someone else, “Lieutenant Jones”, and then he'd get up and he'd say the same thing. And then you say, “Okay, I see a red light, is it flashing or steady?” It's steady. “When I look, do I see any looking at my engine instruments to see if I need to go through any?” And he'd describe the situation to you and until you pretty much knew what was going on. And then you're going to tell him what to do. So, “I'm gonna keep flying the airplane, and identify the problem as an engine fire, so I'm going to run the emergency action item for engine fire,” and then you recite that. And then you go through the process. And if you were successful, then your day continued as normal. But if you weren't successful and he called on you and you made a mistake, and he told you to sit down and you weren't successful, then you wouldn't fly that first period, and you would have to study and get together with your instructor and review what you didn't get right. And sure enough you would get called again a day later. So every day was like that, so you had to be prepared. So if you were doing just basic flying, you just did basic aircraft stuff. But then if you started doing formation flying, then you had emergencies that required two guys standing up. So then they'd call Lieutenant Jones and Lieutenant York, you guys are flying today and da, da, da, da. Then you'd go through the procedure. Then instrument, we had the similar stuff. So every day was like that. After the morning standup, you'd go out to fly. You'd sit down with your instructor, brief up, and fly. The flights were usually an hour. The brief was an hour, the flight was an hour and a half, then there'd be a debrief. Then you'd had a little break, and then you do it again. Then you did that every day. Then you might have a class on a day here and there, and every so often you had a physical fitness test you had to do. So, I mean every day was like that. You were always studying, and I just remember on some days -- and I did this once -- I woke up, I went to work at five o'clock in the morning, it was dark. I got back to my apartment at like eight o'clock at night or seven o'clock at night, and I just fell asleep and I woke a short time later, and I thought it was the next morning and I had overslept. I jumped in the shower, and I realized it wasn't seven am, it was seven pm and I had only been there for a few minutes. So you're just tired and under a lot of stress because you all want is to make it and you want to be successful. Friends wash out, and it was kind of like, “I don't want to be the next guy.”

Rachel York: Did you ever have any down-time?

Steven York: We'd get days off here and there, but not really. It was a whole year of intense training. I would say though, in each phase, once you figured it out, once you got to a certain point after like two or three months -- you kind of knew what you were doing. It wasn't as stressful, and you didn't have to study as much. You were always studying, but it wasn't like you didn't know what you didn't know. You already knew what you knew, and you knew what you didn't know. And you didn't study everything, you just kinda focused on the things you have to. Of course towards the end... Okay, so we finished phase two which was the T-37s, and phase three there was a short break in between,

and you went into T-38s and did the same process. It was a little bit longer, but towards the end there you got your assignment for the Air Force, and you knew you were gonna fly. You're follow-on training was going to come next and so it was a lot more laid back. But you were still there, twelve or sixteen hours every day.

Rachel York: So, it was a year-long process?

Steven York: Yeah, it was fifty weeks. Fifty weeks back then.

Rachel York: So aside from the T-37s and T-38S, what other planes did you learn how to fly?

Steven York: That was what I learned how to fly there, and then after that I flew B-52s. And that was all I flew in the Air Force.

Rachel York: You didn't fly anything else?

Steven York: I went into SAC [Strategic Air Command], and once you go into SAC, you never go back. That's all it was.

Rachel York: So were you happy with your assignment to fly B-52s?

Steven York: Not initially. I wanted to travel and see the world, and I picked every airplane there was in MAC -- Military Airlift Command. I thought I'd fly C-130s in Germany or C-141s in Asia, and travel and just enjoy the world. But I got into SAC, and B52 and we sat alert. We would fly… So a B-52 back in the Cold War was one of our defenses against the enemies of the US at that time. The job was to sit alert -- nuclear alert. You were going to sit at your base, for seven days, in your alert facility and protect the country from the enemy -- the Russians. Just like **Dr. Strangelove** -- the movie -- that's what we did. I did not want to do that. I did not want to sit alert. I did not want to be stationary, and you were going to be stuck in the US. In the middle of the US. In places where you generally don't want to be. And that's what I got.

Rachel York: How did you end up getting the B-52? Why did they give you that?

Steven York: I didn't get fighter qualified, and I was told later that the better students weren't volunteering for SAC. They weren't volunteering for B-52s, so SAC at that time had put in a request to the Air Force that they wanted the guys that were in the top third of their class that weren't fight qualified to go to B-52s. They felt the other guys they were getting were the ones at the bottom that were the weakest. They weren't passing the follow-on training of B-52s because at that time, the B-52s flew… their mission involved low-level refueling, high altitude stuff, and it was a very complex mission, and a lot of guys were struggling of just how to fly an airplane. I mean you might have passed pilot training with your wings and became a pilot, but you were still learning how to become a real pilot, and those guys were not doing as well. And also, the B52 is a very physical airplane. It required a lot of muscle to fly the plane. It's not like the glass planes that we fly today where you don't have to think about it and the plane does what you want it to do. You had to actually physically fly that airplane, and some people weren't able to do

that. So I think what happened was I got a B-52 because I did well in my class, and they just gave it to me.

Rachel York: Why weren't you fighter qualified? What happened there?

Steven York: We were ranked in our class by our academics and our performance in the aircraft, and I busted my T-38 check ride. So when you're flying on a check ride, what happens is you get to a certain point in your training and you fly with someone who evaluates you to see if you should continue. I went up in the T-38, and I didn't do a maneuver correctly, and the instructor busted me and I had to fly with another instructor, and they signed me off and I continued the program. And I think when I got ranked in the process, there were enough people ahead of me who didn't bust as many flights like that. So my ranking wasn't as high as theirs.

Rachel York: Was that upsetting?

Steven York: No. I mean, it is what it is. You can't change your past.

Rachel York: So, you finish pilot training and you get assigned to the B-52. What was your first military assignment after that? And where was it?

Steven York: Okay, the assignment was I was supposed to go to Blytheville, Arkansas to Blytheville Air Force Base, and they just changed the name to Eaker Air Force Base. So I finished pilot training in December of '87, and I had to go to training for the B-52. But prior to the training, I had to go to survival school. There's the land Survival School up in Spokane, Washington at Fairchild Airforce base. Two week program, one week program, I don't remember. You learn how to live in the woods. Make tents, kill animals, clean them, cook them. Just basic if you were shot down or crashed your airplane, how to escape and evade the enemy. And then if you were captured and there was some POW training. They throw you in a box, no bigger than the chair you're sitting in. You sit there for a couple hours, and to deal with it. They learned a bunch of things from Vietnam, Korea, and WW2 that pilots weren't properly trained how to be a prisoner-of-war. How to resist, and all that stuff. So, I went there, and we down to Homestead [Air Force Base], Florida, which is just south of Miami and did water survival. Because it was B-52, it was going to have an ejection seat, and there was going to be ejection seat training. So that was like just relaxed. A one week program, we didn't wear flip-flops, we wore our uniforms, but it felt like we were in flip-flops and t-shirts the whole time, it was just laid back. From there, when I went back to California to Castle Air Force base, I learned how to fly the B-52, and that was just under six months. And we did like fifteen flights and like fifteen simulators, and you learned how to fly low level; you learned how to drop bombs; you learned how to refuel, I mean all the stuff involved with airplanes. We did a lot of simulators, and then when I finished that training, I went to Blytheville, Arkansas, and I got there in August of '88. July, August of '88 -- somewhere in that timeframe. I remember, I got there and I ran into this kid who was a navigator a couple of classes ahead of me at Castle, and that son-of-a-bitch had been sitting there, waiting to start training to do alert because they wanted three or four guys in a class. They just didn't want one guy to show up. I mean, I literally walk into the base, I got processed, went into the squadron, and that son-of-a-bitch told the guy in the alert facility training

or whatever it was, that I had showed up. So, literally two days later I'm learning how to sit alert. He had a whole month off and I get two days! And then, the worst part was, after we finished all that training, I ended up sitting alert like a day later, and he gets another month off because they didn't need navigators back then. You know, anyway...

Rachel York: So, B-52 training was then after regular pilot training?

Steven York: Right. And every pilot in the military does that. You go through pilot training to qualify as a pilot, or not qualify, and if you do successfully complete that program, then you go to the follow-on training which, in my case was the B-52 Combat Crew Training School.

Rachel York: Was that difficult at all? Was that more difficult than regular pilot training?

Steven York: No. It wasn't. Once they got you, they want you to succeed. It wasn't difficult where they're trying to wash you out. Initial pilot training, they're looking to put you under stress, to see if you have any weaknesses to wash you out. So some of the training is designed to stress you, to see if you can maneuver and deal with it. Once they invested -- they invested a million dollars in us that point, or, that's what they said back then -- now they've invested in you. They want to keep you. So it wasn't as bad. It was gentleman school, eight to five. I mean, there's a lot of work, but it wasn't a sixteen hour day with grueling work or study. I mean, they built time into your week in order to study, and we were able to go out and do whatever. Usually, the weekends were free. It was just like having a regular job, with the exception of you were learning how to fly the airplane. So, there was some skill. You were assigned a crew and an instructor, so you did stuff with them. Then you had your friends, you did stuff then. So it wasn't that bad.

Rachel York: Where were you for that?

Steven York: Merced, California. That's about two hours south of Sacramento. Of course, we'd always, on the weekends, we'd drive up to Sacramento. We had a place to stay at my house. Me and a friend, or a friend and I would do that. We would go to Mather Air Force Base, which was were navigator training was, Navigator School, and every Friday night they had this thing called, "Jock Night," where a lot of the local girls would go to the bar and meet their navigator husband of the future. We would go in with our flight suits and our pilot wings on thinking we were bad asses, of course.

Rachel York: That's funny.

Steven York: Yeah, it was.

Rachel York: So, that's cool you got to be near your family and stuff in Sacramento. Then after that, you went into Strategic Air Command in Blytheville. Can you describe your experience with SAC?

Steven York: It ended up... I mean, I enjoyed my experience there... So, I'm leaving Castle Air Force Base. I get back to Lubbock. I out-process at Lubbock. I'm driving my car from Merced to Lubbock. Then Lubbock to Blytheville. So, I decide I'm going to spend the night in Little Rock, Arkansas on the way. However, I drove it, and then drive in fresh the next day to

Blytheville… the next day, which was about two hours away. I drive through the Ozark somehow and I say, "Arkansas is not so bad." I get to Little Rock, and I say, "It's not so bad." It's not a big city but, you know, it's a city. I left the city limits of Little Rock and there was just, like, nothing. I mean, absolutely nothing except farm fields. And all of a suddenly I get to Blytheville and, bam! There's the base. And it's just like… I was just gonna… "God, no. This is not true." I mean I was single. I had Texas Tech in Lubbock, and California, we ran around. I was just really not happy. Anyway, get to the base. In-process. I told you, they put me through training right away. They got me a place to stay, got assigned to a crew and started sitting alert. We flew some training missions and… but life in Blytheville was essentially of seven days of alert, followed by five days off, followed by ten days or nine days of flying, possibly flying once or twice, and then seven days of alert. So, you sat alert once a week, every three weeks, and I did that continuously for three years until the Gulf War. You were assigned a hard crew. You did everything with that crew. You didn't physically do everything, but your schedules were all the same. They took vacations at the same time you took vacations. You ended up making friends, and I'm still friends with some of those guys today. I keep in touch with… maybe because we're pilots and we're in the same industry. But yeah, Blytheville. We had a Sonic, a McDonald's, and a Sonic. Did I say Sonic? Yeah, that was it. There was just nothing there. It was just depressing.

Rachel York: So, what was a typical day like sitting alert?

Steven York: So, every day was different, but every day was the same. Every day you had your breakfast, of course. The first day of alert you would change with the crew. You did a change-over. Then you'd get the weather briefing, and then you'd get the secret briefing for the week. What's the Russians doing? Where are the subs? All the intelligence and important stuff like that. Then you'd go out to the airplane and you'd charge the battery. The planes were on alert, ready to go. They were literally three steps, five steps, crank the engines and you were taking off. So, to do that, you needed a fully charged battery, and the battery would hold its charge for a couple… few days. But, every day you'd go out there, make sure all your switches are in the right positions, run a checklist or two, giving the battery a charge for maybe thirty minutes or forty-five minutes. And we did that for just about every day. You know, that was your responsibility, and so we did that. Of course, I was a copilot, so I was learning how to be a captain, or an aircraft commander if we're using the correct terminology. So that happened every day. On alert, like I said, the airplanes were ready to go. Like I said, they had these things called cartridges that were loaded into the two of the engines. We had eight engines, so on the two end-board engines, they had these cartridges. And they were no different than a shotgun shell, and they were big. They were twice the size of a coffee can, basically, in length, and maybe the same width. And they'd screw these in, into some external place on each engine, on engines four or five. When you did have to start the engines in a hurry, you'd hit a switch, and it would ignite those two things, and it would get the engines start spinning. Then you could ignite the… with fuel and then start the rest. So that said, that's all we did. That was your only responsibility was to make sure those airplanes were ready to go. We might have a simulator because we had a simulator at our base, a two hour sim. to practice hydraulic malfunctions or electrical malfunctions, or you might have a bomb… experience with your whole crew doing bomb runs. You're just training. Just normal training stuff. Lot of guys took classes at the education center

during the day or they had additional duties in the squadron. That's when they did their additional duties. There might be just something going on at the… there's a restaurant, the officer's club. You might go there for lunch. Literally, you did nothing.

Rachel York: Sitting alert wasn't stressful or anything?

Steven York: It wasn't. It was just… at that point, you were there. You were always ready. You had a pager with you or some kind of a beeper. It wasn't like a pager, but something that would go off. Throughout the base they had sirens and klaxons everywhere so that if it went off, you had to be able to respond to your airplane from whatever you're doing, wherever you were. You had priority. Everyone on the base was supposed to stop, and you had priority to get onto the aircraft. So you knew you were going to get one practice klaxon every week to go through the process of doing what we did. That was the stress -- just knowing, "Do I really want to [go to the] golf course today, we haven't had a practice all week, we're due, we're supposed to get off tomorrow. They're going to give us one. It's probably going to be today." So that was the stress. It wasn't a stress of, "Can I do my job?" or "Is the world coming to an end?" Because, at that point it wasn't. Or at least, that was my fear.

Rachel York: So, you were never worried that the real thing was going to happen?

Steven York: No. I was prepared to do that mission. And I had no problems doing that mission. That mission being dropping nukes on Russia -- wherever. Because I knew that if I was doing my mission, that our country -- the US – would… were no longer there. There was just… nothing, we were just going to finish the job.

Rachel York: Did you ever think about that? You're responsible for the future of the world, potentially.

Steven York: No.

Rachel York: Never?

Steven York: Just… I was gonna do my job. It is what it is.

Rachel York: Cool.

Steven York: So, yeah, that was alert. One day of alert we did our target study and what was called CCP -- Command and Control Procedures. That was learning how to decode the documents. Practicing decoding documents related to the mission. Like **Dr. Strangelove**, where they get the CRJ whatever message and they have to open up the envelope. Well, there's a process in the Air Force that's similar that we had to learn what to use. It was very simple, but you just had to practice it, because back then everything was done over radio and high frequency radio and so there was always the potential for mistakes to be made, so you had to be 100% accurate, all the time. You could not make a mistake, so that's why we trained it all the time.

Rachel York: Yeah, unlike in **Dr. Strangelove** where there were several mistakes, what did you do when you were not on alert?

Steven York: When I wasn't on alert, as a co-pilot, what was really cool… they gave us little airplanes to fly to gain pilot and command experience. So we got the T-37s, the ones that I did in pilot training, they qualified us. And so, I would go out with another co-pilot, and they'd give us the credit card and tell us to come back in a few days and we'd go out and just fly that airplane wherever we wanted: Florida, New York, California. Yeah, three legs one day, four legs the next, and you learned… what I realized now, you were learning how to be a pilot-in-command. You were getting that experience in that small airplane. Making fuel decisions, weather decisions, stupid bad decisions, but yeah that was kind of fun. So we'd get off alert, we'd have five days, you were off. So you didn't have to fly the T-37s, but a lot of us did, and then when we were back to regular work weeks we'd fly usually once a week, and the missions we flew lasted usually eight to twelve hours, it just depended, or eight to ten hours. They always involved an air refueling. They always involved a high-altitude bomb run, and they always involved a low level altitude somewhere, 99% of them. Later in my career, the missions changed a little bit. So we'd spend the day before that flight planning it. You'd mission plan it. You'd have to go to a target study, and if you were in a formation, you had to do a formation briefing and whatnot. And then you'd brief as a crew the day before, and then you'd go home have a dinner… do whatever, and then show the next day to fly that trip. And then you'd fly that trip. And then, the next day, you generally were off, and then you'd fly once a week. There might be a class on communication security, or chemical weapons, or whatever civil defense type of stuff. You would have a schedule for the week and you would just do that. So you had ten days to do all of your flying and training, and then you'd be back on alert.

Rachel York: What did you do for fun like for down time?

Steven York: I played golf, and I used to fish. In that area, I had a boat and I'd go out fishing with friends. You know, just normal life. Chased women. Ended up meeting a girl, got married. Had a daughter who, of course, is sitting right across from me right now. So, you just live life. You're in the military, but at least in my case, I wasn't 100% living in the Air Force. I wasn't playing the military the whole time. I did my military job, and then I'd throw my t-shirts on and just be a regular civilian.

Rachel York: So, for you at that point, it was more of just having like a normal job? You had a life outside of the military.

Steven York: I did. But I mean I was, and still am, 100%. I mean, I was there in the military, but it's in a civilian world. At five pm, you go home. Well, I was always on call. They could call me and I would come into work and do something. You know because our job was nuclear alert, and every airplane on that base had a mission. Therefore, if things in the world got really bad, we had to be called in. So you were always in the military, but you still live your life. Even today, guys in the military don't play Army, don't play Navy, all day long. They live regular lives.

Rachel York: So, what was your outside life like? Like, family life and stuff?

Steven York: So, we traveled a lot. We went to, up in Blytheville, we'd take day trips to Little Rock or Memphis or, you know, on those five day weekends when I wasn't flying the T-37s, we might go to Charleston. You know, eat, drink, whatever twenty-year-olds do. We just had fun. Yeah, explored.

Rachel York: So when, because you were in SAC [Strategic Air Command] for three years before the Gulf War?

Steven York: Yeah.

Rachel York: When and where did you meet Mom? How long were you in there?

Steven York: When I got to Blytheville in August, I went to Memphis. I got there on a Tuesday or a Wednesday, I went to Memphis.

Rachel York: So, this was at the beginning?

Steven York: Yeah, yeah. On a Friday night, went down, got a room at the Marriot. Went out, had a good time, and then either Saturday or Sunday, it had to be Saturday, she was working at the store, at one of the malls there in Memphis. I met her, thought she was a nice person, and a few days later, I called her back like on a Wednesday, and I asked her out on a date.

Rachel York: So, you were together for the whole time?

Steven York: Yeah, and I didn't want to be. It's not like I wanted to be married. I mean it just worked out. I mean.

Rachel York: It just happened?

Steven York: Yeah, twenty-five years later. Twenty-seven years later.

Rachel York: Twenty-seven, oh my God. Well, if you include the dating… so then, you were at Blytheville, and you married Mom in, like, '90. Were you… after that, where did you go?

Steven York: So, Blytheville. Of course, the Gulf War happens in '90, '91. We got deployed in the Gulf War. We had units. People from my base went to different bases throughout the globe. I ended up getting stationed at RAF Fairford, up in England for the Gulf War. So when the war ends, they closed our base. They had some defense realignment.

Rachel York: In Fairford?

Steven York: No. After Fairford, I came back to Blytheville, and then they closed the base. At that point, they upgraded me to aircraft commander, so I was going to fly in the left seat. So when they did that, I was going to go to Griffiss Air Force Base in New York, and then they decide to close that base, so they sent me to Barksdale. So then I went to Barksdale Air Force Base for a couple of years.

Rachel York: Where is that?

Steven York: That's in Shreveport, Louisiana. I flew B-52s. I upgraded to aircraft commander, then I got to Shreveport, and flew there as an aircraft commander for a couple of years. They wanted to upgrade me to instructor, I wanted to get out. I didn't want any additional Air Force commitments. But then, economy kind of turned bad, so there weren't pilot jobs in '93 – '95 time area. The job market wasn't that great. So I decided I was going to stay for two more years, but I didn't want to stay in Barksdale. I wanted to be closer to Memphis, which is where my wife wanted to live. So I took an assignment to be an instructor at Columbus Air Force base for my last couple years in the military, which was a drivable distance from Memphis. You know, it was much closer. So I ended up being a T-37 instructor, or I went through their training. Lived in Columbus for a couple of years before I separated in December of '95.

Rachel York: Okay, so going back to like '90 and '91, you were sent in to combat in Fairford for the Gulf War. Can you talk about that?

Steven York: Yeah, so, we were on alert in Blytheville. I was with my crew, I was a co-pilot. My aircraft commander was actually a Vietnam veteran, had flown B-52s in Vietnam. We were evaluator crew, which was called, "Stan Eval" [i.e. Standards and Evaluation]. We were this select crew, and we would be out there to evaluate other crews and do training stuff. So we're sitting alert, the whole base had deployed except for four airplanes and five or six crews. So we're sitting alert because we still had the alert commitment. We weren't getting ten days off here or there. We sat alert, you got a couple days off, and then you were back on alert. You would get off alert and you'd fly some to get your training requirements. So we went up for this four hour miniature flight, where you just refuel and some traffic pattern stuff. And we landed, we're taxiing in and we notice the squadron commander's car, or the wing commander's car, or somebody's car was driving up. Had a white roof on it. We're thinking, "This can't be good." Of course, we shut the engines down, and we get out the airplane. We're all sweaty and stuff. He's like, "Guys, I'm just gonna tell you. It's Wednesday, you're taking this airplane on Friday to Fairford. Pack your bags. I can't tell you how long you're gonna be there." And this is before, and this is still Desert Shield or Desert whatever. The preview of the war. Desert Storm?

Rachel York: Yeah. Not…

Steven York: Whatever. This was in January.

Rachel York: This isn't Iraqi… That was after Desert Storm.

Steven York: So, yeah, this is all Desert Shield.

Rachel York: Yeah, Desert Shield was before Desert Storm.

Steven York: Yeah, so this is like January. We go home, we get our bags packed, come back on Friday. It's just pouring down. It's 10 o'clock in the morning. You know you go home, tell your family you're leaving, and they're all sad and worried and stuff, of course.

Rachel York: What was Mom's reaction?

Steven York: She was kind of pissed that I didn't tell her when I first got home. I had been gone for a week. You're in your early twenties, so I did what every young twenty-year-old man wants to do when he gets home. So, we did. Then, I said something to her, and she was mad at me for not telling her before, if you know what I mean.

Rachel York: Yeah, that's funny.

Steven York: So, we hug, kiss. She was sad. And we hadn't even had our… we had gotten married in March of '90, so this is six [months] later or seven months later. We hadn't even had our first anniversary. So, I get to the airport, she drops me off with my stuff. It's pouring down rain -- just the worst weather possible. Not a big deal. So, we load the plane up as a crew, get the weather, and now we're going to fly to England. First time, I had cross the North Atlantic. Never had done it before, and there was procedures to follow.

Rachel York: Wait, like, as the pilot right?

Steven York: Yeah, I just had never done it. So, I was screwing up the radios. All the radio calls, you have to get position reports over certain radios; read your coordinates to the air traffic controllers; tell them where you are and where you're going and what you're after. I couldn't even do that. Finally, the navigator got so frustrated, and he's like, "I'll do it." So he started making all my radio calls. We landed in England, and Fairford is just outside of Oxford. Couple of hours outside of London, to the west. And they got the worst snow storm they had gotten in fifty years. Of course that's the day we're landing, so there's like blowing snow and just nasty weather. We get in. Now, we had a couple of days to acclimate, and then we were going to start flying missions to Iraq. And at that point in the war, they had bombers in Saudi Arabia; you had bombers in Diego-Garcia; you had bombers in Morón, Spain, and now in Fairford, England. We were just throwing lots of iron at the Iraqis wherever we chose to. Our missions were going to be out of the north. So Fairford, the runway wasn't that long, so we couldn't take off with enough gas in a full bomb load to get all the way to Iraq and back. So we had to air refuel. Air refueling is where you fly behind another airplane real close and they take a tube and stick it in your nose and you inhale the gasoline essentially. Then they go off, and you continue. So, our air refueling were gonna be…since we were carrying weapons, we couldn't fly overpopulated areas in England, they didn't want us to. So, we did our take-offs, we had to fly around London, then we flew across France. Italy would not allow for us to fly in their airspace, so, we had to fly around the boot heel of Italy, and then we'd meet our tankers heading eastbound over the Mediterranean. There would always be seven tankers and four bombers. We had off-loaded like 200,000 pounds of gas, and the planes took 6,000 pounds a minute, so it took an hour to air refuel. It was a process. So, the first three tankers would kind of be one, two, three, out of the way, and you'd kind of go four and four with the other four tankers. Then you'd do a three on four air refueling with the second set of tankers. So, it was always a mathematical problem,

because how much gas do you take from each tanker? You had to figure out the math and so assuming that went well, then you'd reform up in formation. And now we'd fly one minute apart in trail, six miles behind each other, and we were all 500 feet on top of each other. So if the first airplane was at 30,000 feet, the second was at 30,500, and the third was at 31,000 feet and so on. And then we would fly into Turkey, and in through Turkey we'd enter to Iraq. Then do our mission, and exit through Turkey, meet another tanker somewhere from Greece heading the other way. They were based in Greece, I think. And if we weren't able to get gas form those tankers from whatever reason -- if they couldn't show or if the weather was too bad -- we were supposed to divert back into Turkey somewhere and land, refuel, and then go back to England. But we would always get enough gas. We went back the same routing around Italy, across France, so our days were typically… our flight times as sixteen to eighteen hours, fifteen to sixteen hours. Our duty days ended up being somewhere close to thirty hours. So, you had five or six hours before you got out to the airplane, a couple hours at the airplane, the long trip, the debrief, and it was just a very, very, very long day. So we did missions like that. I did three missions like that, and then the ground war started, and we started doing missions from the south in supporting the ground troops. Where we'd go… the same air refueling, but instead of going in to Turkey, we'd hit Egypt and turn right and fly down, and hang a left, cross the Red Sea, we'd go into Saudi Arabia, and had these airways. Highways in the sky, for inbound traffic and outbound traffic. We had this routing… we'd fly, and they had this area with this gird on a chart, and they'd call them kill boxes. It was nothing more than a matrix labeled with, like, one axis having letters and the other axis having numbers. So you'd go in with a target, say, "alpha one," and that was your target for the day. Actually, more realistic, it would be like November 6th, so you're bombing something down here. Anything within a one-mile box, and you'd get in and check in with the controllers and you'd say, "Hey, what's going?" and using code words, and they'd say, "continue as assigned," and they'd give you a different box. And instead of… they would say, instead of bombing November 6th, they would say, "No, we want you to bomb Mike 6." So the war had progressed to a certain point, so you were always bombing ahead to where the group troops were supposed to be. We did missions like that, and then we'd come back out, and you'd see another group of B-52s coming in, and every fifteen, twenty minutes there be a formation of bombers going in and out. It was kind of cool. So those were the two kinds of missions I flew out of Fairford.

Rachel York: What was going through your mind when you were bombing? I think it's a different experience than other soldiers would have had.

Steven York: So, the first mission was kind of interesting. We were the spare crew for that day. There were four bombers launched and we were the fifth. We did everything the four bombers did, but we weren't supposed to be in the formation, we were supposed to be the lead for the next day. But we were the hot spare, so we started engines, and they started engines, but when they taxied and took off, we just stayed in the parking area. But we had a full load of bombs, and we did everything they were going to do because we were going to be the spare airplane. So they launch, but one of the planes couldn't get one of the landing gear to retract or something mechanical. So they had to abort and come back, so they launched us as the spare. None of us thought that we were going to fly that day. So there was none of that pre-game jitters going on because we were all thinking we were flying the next day. So we launched and we spent the first

part of the trip, we were now thirty minutes behind them, and we have to fly a little bit faster to catch them, so we're using more gas to catch them. We're hoping to get more gas from the tankers, but that didn't happen. But it wasn't a big deal, it all worked out in the end. So we finally hooked up with those guys, and all of a sudden you realize, "I'm going to kill somebody." And, you know, that's when you realize it's not a game anymore. And that was the thought that went through my mind, is "Ma, I'm really gonna kill somebody. What if they get me?" And the difference, I always thought about, I am going to kill them. They're going to try to kill me. I never fear that I was going to get killed, but I had the fear that they were going to try to kill me. Does that make sense?

Rachel York: So, you were never, like… did you ever feel that you were in danger?

Steven York: Yes.

Rachel York: Okay.

Steven York: I mean, so we get into…the biggest fear was hitting your own airplanes, first of all, because we had so many aircraft over there. But then once we crossed into the Iraqi border from Turkey, prior to that we turned off all our lights, you disconnect any automatic radios anything, and it's dark. Now instead of being six miles behind each other, we were thirty seconds behind each other. Three miles apart, so you're a lot closer to hitting the other airplanes. I remember flying in and there was this road that bisected the country, and there were trucks going across it. All of a sudden I see these orange lights, like roman candles start going off. They're not near us but and the captain I'm flying with, he's like, "Yeah, that's triple A [i.e., AAA, Anti-Aircraft Artillery], that's 100mm stuff." And there was like a white flash, something white over there, and I'm point off into the distance. He said, "Yeah, that's a flare, you see how that's kind of different… that looks different." Then we saw a missile launch. And then again, I'm kind of… the time is all… this happened more apart. And then we saw a missile launch, and what was interesting -- you'd see the flame of a missile, the ignition phase of a missile, and of course, we had electronic warfare officers in the airplane, and they'd say, "They got some radar looking at us in the one o'clock position off our nose." And then you'd say, "Yeah, I got a missile launch." And of course the navigator was plotting the bearing from where we were at that moment to where we saw the missile launch, so maybe triangulate on a site to help the intelligence guys later. And then the flame would go out after a while, and the EW [Electronic Warfare Officer] wouldn't see anything, so then you were just waiting, "I hope it doesn't hit us." And you're like, "Oh my God, here it comes," and then twenty or thirty seconds later, the EW would say "I got radar," so they turn on the radar again. What they were doing was they would take a look with radar at the sky, they would probably see us with their binoculars or whatever they use at night, and then turn their radar on and take a picture of it. Turn it off. Launch where they thought the third or fourth airplane was going to be, because they always knew we were flying behind each other, and then they'd shoot the missile off, so then when we'd see the launch. We tried to change our position somewhere so that their missile wouldn't hit us. And then right when it was getting close they'd turn their radar on again, and if they got lock on something then it would hopefully from their perspective… it was going to hit us. But that never happened. But the most scared I was… I was afraid we were gonna get hit by some of our own bombs. We were the lead airplane the third

night. We were bombing -- I think it was an electric substation near a dam in Northern Iraq or something. So we couldn't bomb the dam, we couldn't bomb the city, all we could bomb was the substation. It was a very specific target. We had a target-specific plan of attack, and that plan of attack was we were going to be the lead bomber, and we all had our timing. We were all thirty seconds apart, 500 feet stacked up, so that when we got to the point prior to the IP -- the IP is the initial point, that's the point the bomb run starts -- at that point, prior to the IP, we were gonna say plus or minus our speed. We were five seconds early or five seconds late, and everyone was going to adjust their timing to reach the IP and their target at that adjusted timing. So the navigator gives … tells us, "Yeah, you're on time." So I give the code word over the radio: on time. And the plan was -- at that point -- we were gonna push our power up as fast as we could go, and make the turn on to the target, and drop our bombs, and fly at maximum speed out of the target area. We're taking eight miles a minute, eight or eight point four knots. I don't recall what the bomber did. So we get there, we make the radio call, we're just pushing the power up, and the navigator says, "No, wait. You're gonna be five seconds early. I need you to wait." Well, the other airplanes are accelerating now in anticipation of the turn, so we delayed. We're like, "no, we can't." We pushed our power up… the number two airplane ended up rolling out in front of us. And I'm sitting in the right seat, and I remember seeing the number two airplane just drifting overhead, because we had these windows right here, and I just see him parked right in front of us, 500 feet, on the bomb run, and I'm thinking "His bombs are gonna come straight through our cockpit, and I'm just…" And I know, I am dead. I am just over, that was death. I felt it. At the age of twenty-six, that was it. What we did was the captain pulled up in a close trail, like where we would be if we were air fueling, and now instead of being 500 feet below him, we're maybe fifteen or twenty feet below him. And we're just flying formation off of him, and we're not talking on the radio or anything. Maybe we were fifty feet, but in any case, we were just right below him, all we had in our wind screen was airplane. So they make about five or six seconds on the time to go was when we saw bombs coming out of their plane, or when we knew they were releasing, so we were about five seconds behind them. So always just knew the bombs were going to go through our cockpit. I visualize this image of the bomb… there was a bomb run in World War II with some B-24s to some oil refinery in Romania where that had happened. Where the plane above had dropped some of its bombs and it went through the wing route in the plane folded in half and on top of itself in a ball of flames. Everyone died. So that's what I visualized, at that point. I knew I was dead. And then when that didn't happen, and what I thought about it since, planes just don't just fall out of an airplane and just immediately decelerate. They fall of out the plane at the same speed of the aircraft in decelerate at a very slow rate, so they probably would have never had hit us. But you don't know that at the time, and that's the fear. That's why I say… was hitting our own airplane. The other visualization I had from that era, when you watched TV -- if you were able to watch TV back then -- all of the media stations had their TV cameras pointed at all the triple A… all the pretty colors of the triple A that the Iraqis had from the ground. And they had a specific cone of visual sighting, so it looked like it was everywhere. When you're actually in the airplane, and you're flying, a lot of that stuff was low altitude and it was nowhere near our airplanes. It was real pretty to see the blue sparkly lights, or the yellow sparkly…the white sparkly lights. But the bigger stuff, the orange stuff, and the missiles was what we were more concerned about, or fighters, if they got close to us.

Rachel York: Wow. I guess, when you were flying you didn't see the people you were killing, but did you ever like think about them? What was your opinion about that?

Steven York: I was going to kill them. That's it. I'm sorry, that's what you do. You're gonna kill people. They would've killed me so it was just I'm going to kill you. That's it.

Rachel York: Interesting idea.

Steven York: Yeah, I know. Your daddy's a killer. Shhh.

Rachel York: So you would fly a mission and you would go back to Fairford. Was it like a pretty constant missions?

Steven York: Yeah. So, we'd fly and we have a day and a half off. I ended up… My first three missions, I flew one a day every three days. Then we got some time off, and then I caught a head cold after my fifth mission. And then the war ended. I only flew five missions, but the day I caught my head cold was the day the war ended. I felt horrible because my crew was gonna fly without me. But I could not fly. I was just totally sick and fully congested. And then when they were taxiing, what happened was, there was a surrender -- and then again I might have the details off a little bit -- but we were still going to flying that day. We were not sure that the Iraqis were going to honor the cease-fire. So, the bombers were lining up getting ready to go, and someone high up said you didn't have to go and they all taxied back. So those guys didn't fly the last day. What was interesting was, we were all young officers, lieutenants and captains. Towards the end of the Gulf War, all of a sudden these lieutenants colonels and majors, all these guys flying -- staff, jobs, desks -- that didn't fly anymore were volunteering to fly on these missions to get credit for the missions, so some major jumped in the seat that day that would not have flown any other way, but he just wanted to do it so he would get war credit for his military records, which I always thought was kind of interesting. Not cool, just interesting.

Rachel York: So, did you ever have any down time when you were in Fairford?

Steven York: Yeah. So, after the third mission we got a pass: three days off, four days off, and we'd take off in the late afternoon so be over in Iraq in nighttime by midnight. I forgot the math, but we always got back around five or six am in the morning. So we got back from the night we bombed the Baghdad area… we bomb sort of medical… nuclear facility or biological weapon plant just north of Baghdad. So, we decided, "You know what? We're flying back, we got this three days off, four days off, let's go to London." So, we all got back five or six in the morning, and we got three or four hours of sleep. We got on some train and we went down into London. Got off, found some rooms, and we played for a couple of days. Sight-see-d. Sight-saw? And but when we got off the train, there were bomb threats on the subways in London at that time, and we were all so tired and we just didn't care, we just didn't give a shit, we're like, "Y'know what? When it's your time, it's your time. If they're gonna bomb us in a subway…"We rode those subways without a fear in the world. All these other people were afraid of the subways. We're just like, "What's to worry about?" But that first day we were in London, this was the day after our mission, the headline on the London newspaper showed a B-52 with contrails at

night, from a distance. Somebody taking a picture on the ground…talking, you know, this is a picture from Iraq. And we were thinking, at that point I didn't realize that they could really see us. You know, I figured that we were so high up at night they couldn't see us. But that's when I realized that they actually could see us. So, that was kind of a moment of, "Oh man, I wonder if that's us. They could see us. That's not good."

Rachel York: What was it like living in Fairford?

Steven York: We got there in Fairford… they had a tent city set up that we were going to live in when our unit got deployed there. Mechanics, pilots, everything. There were 2,000 doctors and nurses there or some number, large number, and that was supposed to be some triage base for chemical weapon people. For victims of chemical weapons, because they expected a lot of chemical weapons in Iraq, but when that didn't transpire those doctors and nurses had nothing better to do. So when we get there in January, they gave up -- the doctors and all their officers had rooms at the Fairford hotels and dormitories -- they gave up their rooms and gave them to the flight crews. It was really cool, because we were the ones flying the combat missions and they wanted us well rested and whatnot. And they voluntarily took the tents. That by itself, that was huge, but what made it more special and meaningful was this was the coldest winter in England in the last fifty years. It wasn't like they were living in tents in summertime, nice San Diego-like weather. Pretty bad conditions. So when we were at Fairford now, when we had down time, we're living in the dormitories, so we had TV sets in our rooms; we had ACs; we had little kitchenettes where we could cook; we had… somebody had set up transportation so we could go from the dorms to the other side of the base where they might be a restaurant or two. We also could get off base, real close to the gate, and we could walk into the city. We would go to this place called the Bullhouse or something like that, which was an old English pub. We had a bunch of gunners on the B-52, and these guys set it up with the pub owners, and we had a little private area we could party or we could sit with the locals. We would just go out and drink English beer, chase doctors and nurses and just be young men at war. A lot of guys grew mustaches.

Rachel York: Did you?

Steven York: No. My favorite story though: I smoked back then. I smoked cigarettes. You weren't allowed to smoke on the airplane. So, because we were "Stan Eval" crew, one of the wing commanders, or the base… it was the DO? at the time, I think. Anyway, it was one of the colonels at the base. He decided to fly with us, and I told him I was going to smoke. I didn't care what he was going to do, and I was already a captain, an O-3, at the time. And I didn't care, so I would go out and bought my cigarettes, and when it was time to go smoke, we had to wear helmets on B-52s with oxygen masks. So, I disconnect my oxygen mask and wrap the cord… the hose around my neck, and I'd go to the station right behind where the gunner and EW sat, and there was a port on the top of the air … place out where you could put a sexton out and look at the stars. I'd open it up and it was a hole about an inch round, and it would create differential pressure and anything from the smoke would just get drawn out of the plane so it wouldn't stink up the airplane. So I'd go and plug in my oxygen hose so I had it readily available and I'd smoke. I'd smoked a lot, five or ten cigarettes on that trip. Maybe more. So, when it was over, he said something over to my captain, and said, "I smoke too much." That when the war

was over he was going to do something. It was like, “Whatever. You know what, I'm getting shot at right now, I really don't give a flying anything for this guy. Don't care.” Well, the next day, I wasn't flying and we're in our dormitories, so we go out to the back of the dorm, and I light up a cigarette. It's like two or three in the morning, and I can't sleep and I'm smoking. All of a sudden I see this guy leaving the hotel, this married man, leaving the hotel with some girl that he had met. Some nurse. And at that point, I knew right then, that I had nothing to worry about him getting even with me for smoking because I just busted him with his girlfriend. So to me, that was kind of… but then, after the war ended, I did quit smoking. That was my promise to myself, if I got through this that I would quit smoking. With a few exceptions, I've been pretty good for the past twenty something years. For the most part. Hong Kong does not count.

Rachel York: Hong Kong is not a real place now. So what were… when you were there, did you work with any foreign military personnel, and what was that like?

Steven York: We did work with the Navy. Just kidding. Yeah, obviously there were British people, the British controllers. Everywhere you fly, it's international. I don't remember there being any specific foreign people I worked with. It was all US personnel.

Rachel York: What about with high ranking officers? Did you ever have to deal with that?

Steven York: Not in a way… you're asking the questions. Our unit deployed as a unit, so you're chain of command was such that you had colonels, lieutenant colonels, majors, and that's what we dealt with. There were no admirals or generals coming to our base. At least, at my level. It was just us guys. If it happened, it didn't happen with my crew. Now, I did have the -- because we were, “Stan Eval” crew -- people would fly in our jump seat to observe, and that happened on two or three occasions. But yeah, it was really just isolated and local. I really think at that time -- this becomes the political side of warfare -- that somewhere in the congressional budgetary process, the Air Force wanted to utilize Fairford as a base in the war. Had they not, in the future budgets, Congress could of said, “Well, you didn't use that base, so you must not need it.” I don't really know if they needed us at Fairford. We could have deployed elsewhere, but I think they wanted to prove it out. Maybe, so we weren't in the lime-light, we weren't the headlines, so senators or generals weren't coming to our base. It wasn't a glamourous place to be. It was nice -- nicer than a desert. I guarantee you that.

Rachel York: Yeah. How long were you there?

Steven York: Probably just around two months. Six weeks to two months. It wasn't bad. I got back to Blytheville in March just before my anniversary, so it worked out.

Rachel York: Really?

Steven York: Just a few days, literally. Save.

Rachel York: When you were there, did you write home a lot?

Steven York: Yeah, I had letters. I got letters from my parents, my other family members, my wife, and I'd write her back. I remember, they told us we couldn't tell anybody where we were, for blackout or security reasons. But there was a pay phone in front of the hotel -- again, before cell phones -- so we'd call home and talk collect. Make collect phone calls once in a while, but everyone kind of knew where we were.

Rachel York: Nice. So, when you got out of Fairford when all of that was over with the Gulf War, what did you do?

Steven York: So I got back to Blytheville, they gave us a period of a couple of weeks off, I don't remember exactly. Then they sent me to Castle Air Force Base to be an aircraft commander. From there, I went to Barksdale [Louisiana]. Spent two years at Barksdale Air Force Base as an aircraft commander and decided that I really wanted to get out. I wasn't going to make the Air Force career. To position myself, the best base to go to was Columbus, so we could buy a house in the Memphis area. You know, have my wife find a job. We were close enough that we could spend the last two years with my income before I could hopefully get on with an airline thereafter or do whatever. So, that's what we kind of did. For that period of time in Columbus [AFB, Mississippi] I ended up going to grad school and getting an MBA at Mississippi State. That was what I did in my off time there.

Rachel York: Before you went to Columbus though, and you were at Barksdale and Castle. You were a captain at this point. What were doing since you weren't on SAC anymore?

Steven York: Oh, that's a good point. The Cold War had ended, so we no longer sat alert. Lesson learned from the Gulf War was: prior to the Gulf War, we flew our bombing mission in training, and we did a lot of nuclear stuff. Lot of, "one bomb, one target." It has to get on target at all costs. Single ship. What we discovered, what I discovered, what, I think maybe discovered was, we needed to do… was go back to the basics and learn how to conventional bomb again. Learn how to formation, and do more conventional tactics. So at Barksdale versus my first base, we were more… we still had nuclear training, but we focused more on the stuff we had just learned in the Gulf War and practiced more conventional tactics. We'd go up, go out over the Gulf and do mining exercises. We'd look for ships and take pictures of them. We'd do low-level over water, more in a maritime sort of strategy, versus the traditional SAC nuclear, "one bomb and one target." "One missile, one city," kind of thing.

Rachel York: At that point, when they were reorganizing the Air Force, how were you affected by that?

Steven York: That the drawdown and the Air Force affected me… that there were less bombers and there were less jobs. And that was ultimately my…. reason I got out was because there was less opportunities for the non-academy graduate person. I was the not the golden boy. I was not going to be the head of the class, so might as well get out and make the money with the airline. That's kind of what I thought.

Rachel York: So, that was the reason you decided to get out of the military?

Steven York: Yeah.

Rachel York: Would you have stayed in longer if you did it again?

Steven York: If I did it again, I think I enjoy… since the military, the study of academics, the study of history, I maybe would have stayed in to get them to pay for a PhD. And I would have stayed in to teach. It would be perfect if I could have flied and teach at the same time, but that doesn't always work that way in the military. Maybe in that respect, but I probably still would have gotten out, given the same conditions. Every generation has a different set of circumstances. I certainly would have not stayed in SAC for twenty years. Nope, I couldn't have done that.

Rachel York: Was there a possibility to get out of SAC [Strategic Air Command]?

Steven York: No. That's my point. I would have gotten out. I just would have not of stayed in because of SAC [Strategic Air Command].

Rachel York: SAC [Strategic Air Command] doesn't exist anymore, does it?

Steven York: It doesn't exist in the traditional since. I think there is a part of the Air Force that has the SAC [Strategic Air Command] functions, but it's incorporated in somewhere. But SAC [Strategic Air Command] doesn't not exist as a division of the military.

Rachel York: So, I guess the end of the Cold War changed a lot.

Steven York: Yeah, it did.

Rachel York: Well, have you kept in contact with anyone you were friends with in the military?

Steven York: Yes. As a matter of fact, two weeks ago, I'm an airline pilot now, I ran into a former B-52 captain in Cincinnati. Talked for a little bit. He was getting ready to go fly, and I was getting ready to go sleep. So, in the lobby of a hotel, said, "hi" to each other. I still keep in touch with a handful of people, but being in the airline industry now, you run into the people you flew with. It's a small world.

Rachel York: Backtracking a little bit -- finally I remember my question -- what was it like coming home?

Steven York: So, the war ends, and we're at Fairford, now and we're sightseeing and stuff. Every week, we had a different place we were going to go. I remember, we were about to go to Stonehenge, no, Bath. And I was going into the squadron to go check on something, mail or something, and one of the colonels came up to me and said, "Steve, there's airplanes coming tonight. Go back to the hotel, tell everyone to start packing, we're leaving tonight." So, we didn't really have a lot of time to tell our families that we were coming home. Somebody back at the base, back in Blytheville, was able to contact our wives and girlfriends and families, so… I don't know. That evening, a tanker showed up, a couple of tankers showed up, and they were flying back to the States, we all crawled into the back of these KC-135s, and they stopped at the Azores to refuel, pick up some

gas. We went back to Blytheville. The guy flying our plane, on our approach, had to do a missed approach because he screwed something up. Found out later he was a new captain going through training or just had… he was in a bad situation, so we were all expecting to land. You're in the back of the plane, there's no windows, and all of a sudden you feel the power kick in. And the plane does these weird maneuvers, and you're just, "What the heck is going on?" We all thought we were going to die. You know, we get through all this crap, and we're going to die at our home. Our bodies on our own runway. What I remember though, we pulled up and I guess there was some ceremony, but I remember walking off the plane and seeing my wife in a black leather coat running towards me to give me a hug and a kiss. And that's what I remember most about coming home. And of course, it snowed in Blytheville. So it snowed in England on the first day when we get there in January, and we get back in March and it snows in Blytheville like five or six inches. unheard of weather, so that was kind of weird.

Rachel York: What was your family's reaction? Were they there?

Steven York: No, my wife was. Of course, my parents were alive at the time, and my dad was really proud and my mom was just happy I was safe. Of course, in-laws were the same. I think we took off for like a week to the beach and just got away from everybody and enjoyed our honeymoon. Not our honeymoon, but our first anniversary. But, yeah I mean it just goes on. You get back to normal. I don't think there was anything unique or special. I did… When I went back to Castle Air Force Base to upgrade, because we did that, I was there over the Fourth of July, so we went to my parent's house, your grandparents, and we went to the country club to watch the fireworks, had dinner there, and they recognized me. They had a poster and they made me stand up, and everyone clapped hands. And then I found out all these old men who I had been golfing with for ten years or for ten years prior, they were all World War II bomber pilots and fighter pilots. And you know, I had no idea. One guy, I remember, "I flew B-24s in the South Pacific." "I did this, I did that." "I was a B-17 guy." I was like, "Are you kidding me?"

Rachel York: That's awesome.

Steven York: Of course, it was, but at that point, I got it. So, it was not as glamourous.

Rachel York: Not cool anymore.

Steven York: Still cool, but not as glamourous.

Rachel York: Right, the reality of it. What was the highest rank that you achieved in the service?

Steven York: I was an Air Force captain, which is O3.

Rachel York: O3, okay. Did you get any medals or awards after that?

Steven York: Yes, I got all the typical Air Force medals and awards for flying in the war. I was in… military medals, I was in combat and all that. I got an air medal, but nothing unique.

Rachel York: Nothing.

Steven York: Yeah, they're cool. They look pretty on the wall But, you know, I was in the right place at the right time.

Rachel York: So, what did you do after you were out? Even after Columbus, what happened after that?

Steven York: I smoke a lot of pot, did some heroin. No, no, I was joking. When I got out, my father just passed away, so we had to take care of my mother and the estate. So I got out, not just because of his death, but the timing of it was kind of weird. And I did a non-flying job for a year, just office work consulting. I had my MBA, and so I did some management consulting type stuff. Met a company in Memphis that did airline training for pilots called CRM -- Crew Resource Management. Teaching pilots how to communicate better and problem-solve, and they were looking for a B-52 specific guy. So, I kind of did that for part time. I taught at the University of Memphis for a little bit, and I did the consulting. And then I got… so this was over a two year period-ish, three years max. Then I got into aviation again, corporate aviation and flew rich people all over the world. Celebrities. And after that go into cargo, big airplanes, international.

Rachel York: After your time in the military, did you go back to school or anything?

Steven York: For the first portion of time, no. I was just flying and the consultant stuff. I was just flying and doing that, but then four or five years ago I decided I wanted to get a degree, because I'm flying cargo in the cargo industry and I have long layovers all over the world, so I decided to get a degree in military studies, and I did that. Finished that a year and half ago, got a master's in that, and I like the study of energy security now. And US-Sino relations, and thinking about when I retire from aviation in about ten years, to possibly just teach in my retirement at a college or junior college. Maybe pursue a PhD between now and then. My current job gives me the flexibility and the opportunity to pursue higher education.

Rachel York: Were you going to say something?

Steven York: I just need to be one degree higher than you.

Rachel York: Exactly.

Steven York: That's it.

Rachel York: All the time. When you got out of the military, did you ever have any trouble or… what was your experience readjusting to civilian life?

Steven York: I didn't really have any issues, I mean now I… you know, flying so often after the war -- I guess this was after the war -- I would see a shooting star and think it was a missile. Now, every so often, a firework will go off or something, but I don't go freak out and hide under a table, but I have that initial shock of, “Is that a triple A or something?” The klaxon from alert, I hear that sound, I immediately know… I tense up for a second. If it went off right this second, I'd have that feeling in the pit of my stomach, like, “Oh shit.”

And I'd realize, "Oh wait, we're just sitting here." But I don't like the thought of killing anymore. I don't want to kill anything anymore. It just bothers me. I mean, just the other day, I'm in my car and I see this half-inch green caterpillar wormy thing on my window, and I'd just go to flick it off and it flicked down and it feel into the crack of the window, and I actually felt bad that it was going to die inside the car. I was like, "Wow. I just killed a worm." I never had those thoughts before the Gulf War. I could care less about worms or anything. I used to blow up frogs when I was a kid. I put a firecracker on a frog and blow him up. That was fun. So it did change me a little bit sure.

Rachel York: How did your experiences in the military prepare you for your civilian career?

Steven York: Well, certainly, as a pilot, it totally prepared me for that. But the… I guess it was the natural progress for me to go from what I did in the military to the aviation community. It also prepared me for how to deal with people. People in charge of you who are both smarter and not as smart as you. And how to deal with the good and the bad.

Rachel York: As a pilot -- that's what you've done for the bulk of your career -- do you notice a difference between from people who've learned how to fly in the military and people who didn't? Like is there a significant difference.

Steven York: Yes.

Rachel York: Could you describe that?

Steven York: Over time, everyone flies the same. It's the process of learning how to fly, the attention to detail. When I learned how to fly… At this point, all pilots are the same. You know, we all know how to fly, turn and everything, talk on radios. I learned how to fly instruments in a T-38 and we were flying at 300 knots, six miles a minute. I made my decisions at that speed, where a civilian pilot is learning in a Cessna flying at maybe 100 knots, or one mile a minute, mile and a half a minute. So, that learning to think quicker, I think differentiates the beginning pilot from a beginning civilian pilot… from a military beginning pilot. But over time, we're all flying the same airplanes at the same speed, so we tend to balance out. I think that's the biggest… the significant difference between the civilian and the military pilot, at least at this level.

Rachel York: Did you plan to go into aviation after the military? Or, would you have done any other sort of career?

Steven York: I think I would have done any other career, but I just gravitated back to aviation because it's so easy to do for me, and you get to travel, and it pays very well. Well, it used to get paid much better, but so you're priorities change when you have family and children. You have to provide for them, so you can have fun or provide for them. I choose the middle of the road where I have fun while I provide, so that's why I'm a pilot. Someday I'll grow up I guess, I don't know.

Rachel York: Maybe. Cool. Let me see, what, I guess, aside from learning how to fly and people skills, did you learn anything else in the service that has helped you with life, careers?

Steven York: I'm sure I have. I mean, just the biggest stuff was learning how to… I mean I matured in the military. I became an adult male in society, a functioning adult male in society. So you learn when to talk and when to keep your mouth shut. So, that's kind of an important skill.

Rachel York: Stop. Sorry. Okay. Are you involved with any veteran organizations?

Steven York: Just… I donate money to American Legion. I never participated actively in their organization, but I do give money. So, I'm a member, but not really.

Rachel York: Why have you been not as active?

Steven York: Just hasn't been important to be a part of that sort of organization. Not that there's anything wrong with it, just haven't thought about it. Just too busy being a father to my daughter. I just haven't thought about it. I'm not against or for any military organization, I just haven't done it.

Rachel York: Do you think… What is the importance of those organizations today?

Steven York: I think each one has to be looked at separately, and I think they all have a function in society. What I recognize is there is a lot of people that have a lot more stress combat than I did coming back from combat or military service, and those organizations serve a purpose to help people like that possibly. I don't know. They have their function in society.

Rachel York: Kind of just thought of this on the spot, how -- because being in the military and being a pilot in the Air Force specifically was so important to you throughout your life -- how did the reality of what you did compare with kind of like your dream growing up?

Steven York: Well, in that regard, my favorite book as a kid was about B1-7 pilots in pop… crew members, not just pilots, in World War II, flying from bases in England. Edward Jablonski's **Flying Fortress**, I believe is the name of the book. And I would read these stories, and so when I was a kid I would fantasize I was a bomber pilot flying missions over Germany in World War Two and yadda yadda. And low and behold, when I go to the war, that dream and fantasy became my reality, and that I was flying missions out of England, going to the pubs, chasing the nurses, I mean it was just like the movies and the books I read about. So you know, that kind of came true, I guess, in that respect. But the reality of being in a war, and killing and dealing with death and trying to be killed kind of changed that perspective, or at least gives you an understanding where the Hollywood of media is just different than the reality of the emotions.

Rachel York: When you talk to other people about your service and how you feel in the Gulf War, what is the perception you see other people having of it?

Steven York: I really don't talk about it that much, but I talk about it a little bit. Everyone thinks it's cool and it's badass. But you know, other friends that are military pilots, I maybe talk in more detail and we compare stories. They might appreciate them more.

Rachel York: Have you ever had any negativity towards it?

Steven York: Not really. You know, some people just may not agree with it, but they don't disagree your service to your country. But they may not have agreed with reasons for being in that war, or that war, or war in general. And that's fine.

Rachel York: That's life. What do you think younger generations can learn from your experiences?

Steven York: That service is important. I do believe in... makes you a better person, whether it's military or non-military. I think part of learning to be a functioning adult in society is giving of oneself and not just being greedy and taking, and living off the work of others. Whether it's donating your time, but giving is I think important.

Rachel York: Have you ever gone back to where you served or where you were stationed?

Steven York: As a matter of fact: part of my job currently is flying cargo for military and we were flying food and weapons and whatever to troops in the Middle-East. Well, not the Middle-East but Afghanistan. And we were out of... we had a contract with a company out of Brize Norton, England, which is right close to Fairford. So we were flying from Brize Norton to Afghanistan and back. And.... one of our days off, and we took a day trip and rented a driver and we drove past Fairford, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, that's Fairford. That's where I was stationed. Stop the car!" And we stopped the car. I got out and I took a picture. I'm like, "Can we drive by the Bull?" And we drove by the bar we used to go to, the Bullhouse. And yeah.

Rachel York: Still there? Still the same?

Steven York: Everything is the same. It's England.

Rachel York: How did feel, you know, going back there?

Steven York: The same. I didn't have any emotional breakdowns or anything, but it was like, "Yeah, this is where I was." We used to walk down this path, and there's a river over here. It was more exciting, more than it was.

Rachel York: When, I mean, kind of going on things we might have missed, did you miss major life events while you were at war or while you weren't at home?

Steven York: I don't think I missed anything major. You lose some time, for me it was only a couple of months so it wasn't really anything. I miss more of events as a civilian pilot in the airline industry, but what I learned from that is an event is just a day and a date. And if you're celebrating a birthday it doesn't have to be on the exact day or date, just as long as you celebrate it. So yeah. I think your paper might be in the camera.

Rachel York: Oh shoot, thank you. Sorry. Did you have any children after your service?

Steven York: Of course! I had you, Rachel.

Rachel York: Like, obviously you had me after you got out of the military. Would you have had children while you were in the military?

Steven York: Yeah, but we were still young. Our choice was not to have children for several years, to make sure we had a good relationship. And if we had a good relationship, then to have children. I did not want my relationship with my wife to be based on we had to be together because we had a child versus we want to be together, and let's have a child. And you happened, anyway. What?

Rachel York: What? Is there anything else you want to add or you thought I would have asked but I didn't?

Steven York: No. I thought you kind of covered everything. We've been here for quite a while.

Rachel York: What is your definition of a citizen soldier?

Steven York: My definition of a citizen solider…it's funny because that's a term easily defined as, you know, someone who is from a country that represents that country and serves that country in some sort of military function, and I think that's the common… But, to me, a citizen soldier is someone who does what they think is right for a nation, a nation-state, a territory, as we roll into the 21st century, the borders between countries are becoming less apparent through the technology of the modern generation, so a citizen solider to me is not somebody who is necessarily related to the military anymore, but is somebody who'd doing what they think is right for their country.

Rachel York: I guess, going off of that then, was your decision to join the military affected by that? Like, do you think, "I'm doing this to do something for my country?"

Steven York: Oh yeah, absolutely. I was going to join the military and get every medal there was and be some badass. But then the reality, the glamour of that goes away pretty quickly when you realize it's just… you're serving a purpose to defend your country and you're doing once a week every three weeks. That's the reality of the military. It's just a routine and a grind. It's not all the glamour. So, yeah.

Rachel York: Well, I mean there's anything you don't want to add.

Steven York: No, are we done?

Rachel York: I guess.

Steven York: All right, well thank you, Rachel.

Rachel York: Thank you dad. Thank you for coming in. Oh! The Pritzker Military Library thanks you for your service to our country and for coming in today to share your story.

Steven York: Well, thank you too, and I appreciate what you have done.