Chapter 2: Military Years

In the fall of 1955 I enlisted in the US Army for a 3 year term, as mentioned above with the promise of school to learn to service heavy construction equipment. After checking into Pittsburg for a physical, my DD214 says 5 Oct. 55, with many other recruits we were put on a long train ride to Columbia, SC. Basic training would be at Fort Jackson, a few miles out of Columbia. The basic training, in the 101st Airborne Division with the Screaming Eagle patch, was very disciplined and physically challenging even for this farm boy. Every item of clothing stamped with the last four of service number RA xx,xx1 662. Somehow, I soon became a bus driver transporting fellow soldiers around to various classes and activities. Also sometimes jeep driving for the battery commander. I still had to take all the training and classed, but rather than being passenger I was driver getting around the base to classes and activities. My minimal hunting and rifle skills from the farm didn't help much, as I struggled to get acceptable ratings in marksmanship. My recollection is that only one or two weekends near the end of the 12 week training we got some weekend leave and maybe bus ride into Columbia on a weekend day. I recall that upon entering the Army my net worth was perhaps between $200 and $500 plus my second Harley 74 motorcycle. Initial pay as a private was $78 per month. My Army pay for three months of 1955 was $223.60.

Though basic was in the Airborne division there was no jump training. Following basic training I was shipped off to Fort Belvoir near Arlington, Va. And Washington DC for the equipment repair school. Maybe this was between 3 and 6 months in duration and we got lots of weekend days off during which I often went into Washington DC exploring the government monuments, historical buildings and museums.

At the end of my Fort Belvoir heavy equipment training, instead of being shipped off to some Army engineering outfit building bridges and airfields, I was shipped a few miles north to suburban Philadelphia. This was to a Nike Antiaircraft Artillery site. The Nike base comprised two sites a couple miles apart, the control site with search and tracking radars and guidance computers. The second site, the missile launch site contained 10 – 15 Nike missiles in underground bunkers and associated service, support and launch facilities. About 12 to 15 such sites surrounded the city of Philadelphia to detect and shoot down cold war enemy bombers. Around the US and much of Europe there were more than 200 Nike Bases. My job at this time, on the launch site, was to maintain large backup power diesel generation, the missile elevators, and miscellaneous missile support equipment like handling cranes, air compressors and such. One duty was to start up the big loud diesel generators for an hour each week, believed to be responsible for my later hearing loss as we had no protection.

There were other typical military duties too, like kitchen police, guard duty, and various site maintenance tasks.

Our Nike site was at Paoli, Pa. One day when I was assuming guard duty at the front gate the guard I was relieving shared with me that someone local had stopped by inquiring of anyone interested in side employment, perhaps gardening and similar work, and Mr. Bracken had left contact information that the off going guard I was relieving shared with me. Being quite interested in making a little money on the side I was immediately interested. Indeed in this vein I had already at various times had several part-time jobs around Paoli including grocery store shelf stocking and repairing automatic pin spotters in a bowling alley.

At the earliest opportunity I was down to the local property inquiring, where I found Mr. Bracken struggling with a smaller older Ford tractor with mounted mower, much like I

had left on the farm 8 or 9 months before. This was a natural for me! I jumped on and manipulated the tractor to get the mower bar into the corner to trim grass close up the rail fence where Bracken was having difficulty. Immediately I was hired and unknowingly at the beginning of a life-long relationship. Shortly, I became the gardener and general purpose worker on the property. Their home was called *Little Magnet* and consisted of a large main house, a pool and bath house, tennis court, horse stables, and a separate guest house. There was perhaps 3 – 4 acres of ground including a wooded hillside separated from

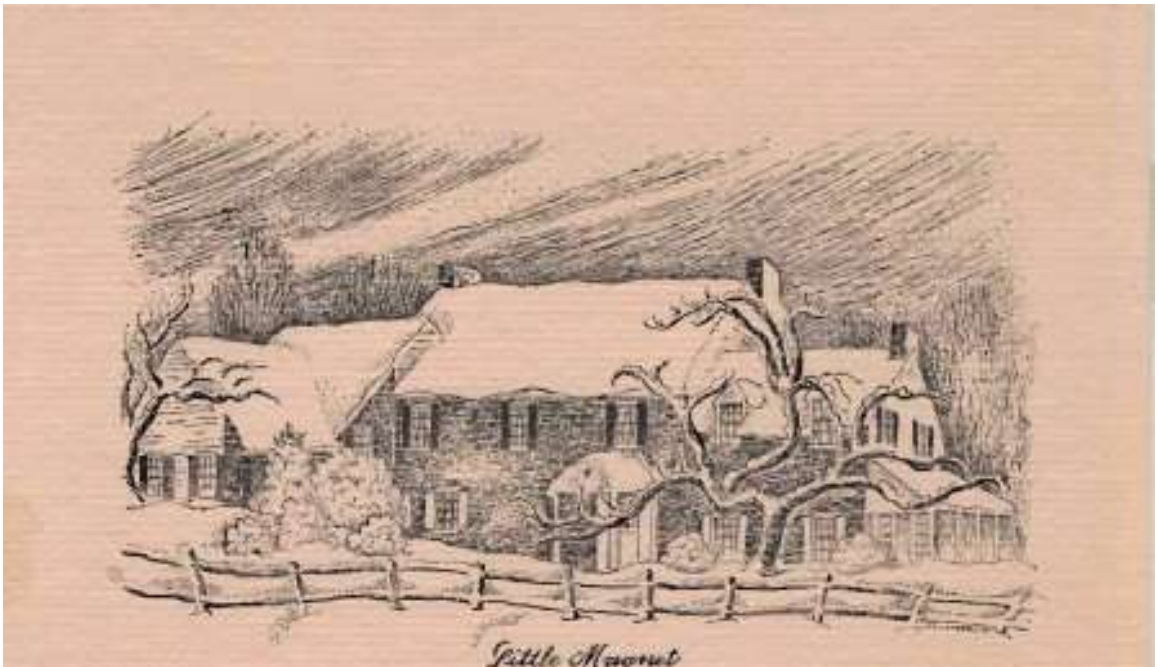

Figure 2.1 Little Magnet in Winter, from a Greeting Card.

the buildings by a small stream. In summer when grass was flourishing the usually once a week lawn mowing took about 8 hours. This in addition to numerous other gardening tasks as trimming shrubs, trimming ivy from the walls of the stone house, and such tasks. The works on this jobs soon expanded to quite a few hours a week and filling all the spare time from my real military job that I wished to spend. Occasionally on a weekend John Bracken[1] and I would be working together on some project effort, maybe like repairing rail fence, building a bridge across the stream, or the like. Gradually over the first few months, certain long term tasks would be defined that I could work away at on an intermittent basis. One such was clearing the wooded acres of some unwanted brush and old downed trees. Also, gradually over several months or a year I became almost treated like another member of the family. The family comprised of John, and his spouse Elizabeth Latimer-Bracken, and children Bill, Sally,

[1] I will call him Jack here sometimes as his family and close friends did, through I think I never learned to do this in our life long relationship. Similarly with Libby, Mrs. Elizabeth Bracken. Born in Pennsylvania on 10 Jun 1912. *John Paul Bracken* married Mary Elizabeth Perot. He passed away on 19 Sept 2010 in Nazareth, Northampton, Pennsylvania.

Betsy, and Ann Latimer[1]. The children are all of a prior marriage and Jack is step-father. Only Betsy and Ann were still in Paoli as I recall and they perhaps attending college somewhere in the Philadelphia area. I was invited sometimes to holiday dinners with a group of family and friends. Me, the gardener, and sometimes I thought I sensed a discomfort with the part-time maid serving.

That area of rural Paoli was sectioned into large perhaps English Tutor style estates, the Hires Root Beer family rumored to be nearby, and next down the road the Hudsons, I heard to be renowned in some sort of medical publication. Lots of horsemanship and riders. On Thanksgiving morning at a small local Episcopalian, or Anglican Church many came on horseback to the *Blessing of the Hounds* then followed by traditional English fox hunt.

The Brackens had alternate or vacation homes in the Poconos, downtown Philadelphia, and Porto Rico. They would sometimes disappear to Europe or elsewhere for many weeks in summer leaving me with the run of *Little Magnet*, suggesting I could use the pool, invite a girl friend, share the beer in the bath house, etc.

Figure 2.2 A Bracken Townhouse in Philadelphia, from a Greeting Card.

John Bracken lead a very accomplished life. He retired as Captain in the US Navy Reserve in 72. In 1942 was appointed Commander All Forces Aruba-Curacao with a large role in fueling the Army in Europe. In this assignment he was drafted as escort officer for the touring Eleanor Roosevelt. Later in 42 he volunteered for the Pacific War and was assigned duty as Ensign on USS Marblehead under Arthur G. Robinson. In 1945 he assumed command of the US Overton[2].
He saw action at many pacific islands, viz. Makassar Straights, Kwajalein, Gehh, Ninni, Saipan, Tinian, Eniwetok. In early 50s he volunteered again for Korean War service.

In civilian life Jack was a well regarded lawyer and Partner at Morgan Lewis & Bockius in Philadelphia. Active in the ABA and Philadelphia civic life, reputed to be on

[1] Some of this is being created 65 years later from memory and sketchy records so the writers begs tolerance of any error.
[2] Bracken wrote and self-published separate monographs about his time on both vessels, *From the Bridge of the Marblehead*, and of the Overton, *The Call of the Siren* – this writer having signed copies of both.

Jack Kennedy's short list for Attorney General. One Saturday morning he came out and handed me a copy of a paper from a law journal. The paper was an accounting of how Admiral Doenitz had requested in the war crimes trials of Nuremberg to be deposed by a seasoned naval person and Jack was summoned by the US Attorney General to accompany Wild Bill Donovan to conduct the deposition[1] (I seem to have, temporarily I hope, misplaced the paper). We remark here that Dönitz became President of Germany for a couple weeks after Hitler's suicide.

Jack taught me to drink a little scotch, arranged for me to get an Esso oil company credit card in the days when there was no Visa, MasterCard or credit for a 20 something Army Private, and helped write a professional resume when finally I was getting out of the Army and seeking a technical job. Throughout Jack and Libby's lives we kept in touch. When I was at CU Boulder and they visited Colorado Springs for a law conference they called and invited Pat, my then spouse, and I down for dinner at the Broadmoor. Much later when I was working in California they would winter at their friend's place in Palm Springs and invite me out for weekends. This chapter is supposed to be about me, but it must be clear that like my Father in Chapter 1, the Brackens had a very great and lasting influence on the 'gardener's' life.

Back on the Nike base there were duties and responsibilities. I was learning the rudiments of how an antiaircraft missile works, about the function of various components, how to assemble, replace parts, load volatile propellants and serve as a launch crew member on the frequent readiness drills that we never knew were drills or real Russian bomber attacks until afterward. Once a year a crew, that I managed to get on, flew to Texas to practice a real missile launch at the Red Canyon Missile Range located approximately 165 miles north of El Paso near Carrizozo, New Mexico. In spare time we shot pool in the day room a lot and watched Dick Clark's American Bandstand on TV which was telecast from down town Philadelphia.

Meanwhile, I was gravitating from diesel generators and heavy construction equipment repair disciplines toward missile flight control, guidance radars, computers, and similar technologies. Also hearing about all the great wealth of jobs that existed outside of the Army in the rapidly developing cold war technologies. I learned if I reenlisted for another 3 years I could spend the first year at Fort Bliss, Texas studying electronics, computers, radars and such. Then return as a maintenance technician on the control sight of a Nike Battery, most likely in the Philadelphia area. Recall that I was currently on the launch sight of the Paoli Battery. Also I could see that our maintenance technicians were *primadonnas* who achieved rank quickly, worked odd and perhaps fewer hours, skipped Saturday morning spit and polish inspections because of their odd hours and had their own room in the barracks instead of living dormitory style. Of course they did have all night shift work as someone had always to be keeping the surveillance radars working and if something failed they might be working continuous long shifts.

The Army permitted me to terminate my first 3 year enlistment about 6 months early in April 58, and reenlist for an additional 3 years while choosing the Nike electronics school. After visiting on the farm in Gastown, I set off driving to Texas. By this time the motorcycle had become impractical as only transportation and I got Dad to shop around for a used car. He found a 1953 Ford Fairlane that was uninteresting green. Somewhere around Paoli I had gotten it repainted two tone red and cream. Repainting cars was not that uncommon or

[1] *An Explanation at Nüremberg*, John P. Bracken, Naval History, Fall 1990.

expensive at that time. However, on the trip to Texas I encountered a serious sand storm somewhere in New Mexico and this blasted the uncured red paint from the front and hood leaving lots of exposed green.

A few days after arrival at Fort Bliss I was settled in with a new class of students learning basic electronics, then in a few weeks moving on to radar and computer studies. Most of my classes for the year seemed to be on "2nd shift," beginning about 3 pm and ending around 11 pm.

Just across the river from El Paso was Juárez, Mexico, in 1958 a very popular and relatively safe tourist destination for Americans in general but also for soldiers and airman from Fort Bliss and adjacent Biggs Air Force Base. Main street across the international bridge is Benito Juárez Avenue, on the north part near the border is lined with curio shops and bar-night clubs. Very famous is Kentucky Bar, which claims to be origin of the Margarita. Our school routine was often show up near midnight, order a rum & coke, easy on the coke, and spend a lot of the night drinking, dancing and sometimes roaming from bar to bar. Prostitution was rampant in many bars but surely not among us service men. At that time drugs were pretty much unknown to average Americans, however at this writing in 2020s drug smuggling, wars among cartels and drug related crimes are so prevalent that many Americans would not visit the city.

Figure 2.3 My First New Car, 1958 Ford Fairlane Hardtop, & V2 Rocket Fort Bliss Enlisted Barracks in Background.

One girl friend, Chery, I remember in El Paso was the teenage daughter of a career airman stationed at Biggs Air Base adjacent to Fort Bliss. Late one night she and I climbed over the fence at Beaumont Army Hospital to swim in the pool. A few months after arriving in El Paso I traded the sand blistered 53 Ford for a new 1958 Ford Fairlane. This may have been the nicest car I ever owned. On Christmas vacation I drove it with an Army friend to Laurel, Miss. to spend the holiday with the girl friend who was visiting relatives for her holiday. My Army traveling companion was visiting his own relatives in nearby Hattiesburg. This was my first trip to the deep south. Mississippi was a "dry" state at the time, but I remember driving one night through some tree-lined narrow country roads to a place we could buy some backyard liquor, guided by one of Chery's relatives. She stayed in Laurel while I returned to Texas after the holidays and the relationship faded.

Shortly after starting Nike school I got a side job as part time taxi driver with Terminal Cab Company. This didn't pay a lot, a percentage of fare and tips, but it was sort of fun and

interesting, and a little side money. Also, I could more or less go to work anytime. Sometimes I got fares going to Juárez, usually to wait and bring the same fare back. Crossing the border required turning off the radio.

When school finished, April 1959, I drove back home in Pa. for a brief visit, then to my new assignment at Newtown Square again in suburban Philadelphia. This time working as the electronics maintenance technician on the control half of the pair of Nike sites, control and launch. I resumed the gardening job with the Brackens, now about 7 miles away. The Nike work was much as expected and I got several promotions over the last three years finally to Sargent First Class (E6), with 3 chevrons up and 2 stripes down.

Near the end of this second 3 year enlistment in late 60 I happened into a Pontiac dealer and found myself trading in the Ford for a new yellow Catalina convertible.

Frequently I learned of Army colleagues getting good civilian jobs at places like Douglas Aircraft who made our Nike missile, Martin Aircraft, IT& T who ran the DEW Line early warning radars in the far north, and General Dynamics Convair building the first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), Atlas. This was the hay day of the cold war and there were many competing technologies and companies. Following the newspaper adds and sending out resumes I got a few interviews and shortly was offered a position as "field engineer," which was high classed technician, with Martin Aircraft. The position would be in central Washington state on Larson Airforce Base at Moses Lake. Martin[1] was prime contractor, with many subcontractors in charge of construction of silos and installing Titan I ICBMs at three sites Odessa, Quincy and Warden with a total of 9 ICBM silos.

Figure 2.4 My 61 Pontiac Catilina Convertable at front of Smay Gastown Farm House.

I was discharged in April 61 and set out for a visit to Gastown followed by cross country drive to Moses Lake.

[1] Martin Aircraft located south of Denver, later Martin Marietta and at this writing part of Lockheed Martin Corporation, was building Titan I Missiles in Denver and deploying to Washington, California, Idaho, South Dakota and Colorado.