

My Atomic Days

By Romana 12/03/2009

My Atomic Days began not long after graduating from the University of Washington, with a degree in physics, in May 1965. I had no connections to powerful people, so I could not get an exemption from impending military service. I was bumbling, suffering from very high blood pressure, and I had a speech impediment, but the U.S. Army said it wanted me. I was not interested in military service, but I did not know how to resist such a daunting threat.

My life, as well our society, was quite different at this time, almost like a parallel universe when compared to the present. This was long before I experienced marriage and gender-switching, or found out that I was autistic. Gasoline was less than forty cents per gallon. There was essentially no such thing as sugar-free, solid-state, hand-held calculators, digital anything, or even push-button phones. Soft drinks in aluminum cans were first appearing in stores. I did not smoke cigarettes, but the majority of people did. While there was a space program, the United States would not land on the moon until after *my atomic days* had come to an end.

Induction—Mandatory Military Service

SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM
ORDER TO REPORT FOR
ARMED FORCES PHYSICAL EXAMINATION

Approved Not Required.

To Mr. Dennis
359 Bronson

Local Board No. 7
Room 407, U. S. Court House
1010 5th Avenue
Seattle, Wash. 98104
(Local Board Street)

July 1, 1965
(Date of mailing)

SELECTIVE SERVICE NO.
45 7 42 910

You are hereby directed to present yourself for Armed Forces Physical Examination to the Local Board named above by reporting at:
ARMED FORCES EXAMINING & INDUCTION STATION - 2ND FLOOR
BLDG. 13, 1019 ALASKAN WAY SOUTH, SEATTLE 4, WASHINGTON
(Place of reporting)

on July 12, 1965 at 7:30 A.M.
(Date) (Time)

Elmer Rogers
Elmer Rogers, Relief Clerk

“Bend over and spread the cheeks of your buttocks,” was the command at the pre-induction physical. I had no idea what to do; I froze in place until I got clarification. Even having complied, I have never been sure what kind of anomalies anyone wanted to see. I did not enjoy being stripped naked and subjected to an embarrassing examination by the *Selective Service*.

I passed, so that draft notice could arrive at any moment. I looked into the military reserves, but they only wanted people with prior service. I tried to get a deferred job at Boeing, but they were not hiring. I tried *Officer Training School*—I got the highest ever score (up to that time) in the OTS exam—but my stammering led to rejection. I was really afraid of being drafted and being subject to the *lowest-common-denominator* type of service (i.e. Viet Nam on the ground,) so I applied to enlist in the Air Force; then the draft notice arrived, starting with the famous words, from *The President of the United States*. I never did like Lyndon Baines Johnson, nor did I like his clever letter.

SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM
ORDER TO REPORT FOR INDUCTION

Approval Not Required.



The President of the United States,

To

Mr. Dennis
359 Bronson

Local Board No. 7
Room 407, U. S. Court House
1010 5th Avenue
Seattle, Wash. 98104

(LOCAL BOARD STAMP)

August 11th, 1965
(Date of mailing)

SELECTIVE SERVICE NO.			
45	7	42	910

GREETING:

You are hereby ordered for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States, and to report

at ARMED FORCES EXAMINING & INDUCTION STATION - 2ND FLOOR
BLDG. 13, 1619 ALASKA WAY SOUTH, SEATTLE 4, WASHINGTON
(Place of reporting)

on September 7th, 1965 at 8:00 A. M.
(Date) (Hour)

for forwarding to an Armed Forces Induction Station.


(Member or Clerk of Local Board)

There was a late-breaking ruling. Once I had had begun enlistment proceedings for the Air Force, I could ignore my draft notice. Still, things were not *that* rosy; I had to leave for Texas on September 6, 1965, since I had to activate by the date on the induction notice. I was off to eight weeks of basic training reduced to six weeks...such a deal.

Lackland AFB—Basic Training

What came to be the Washington *flight* of enlistees boarded the Continental 707, to travel to San Antonio, Texas, by way of Los Angeles. Since I was the oldest, at 23 years of age, I was assigned to keep track of the records of all the enlistees on that flight. It was a long trip, and I really do not remember the details very well any more.

Half asleep, we were bussed to Lackland AFB. We were yelled at a lot, and were told to address anyone of any rank with the *sir*-greeting.

We were taken to a loading dock. It was close to 5:30 AM, and it got really hot as soon as the sun crossed the horizon. The sweat poured down my

forehead. The limestone formations around San Antonio stored plenty of water, which served to drive humidity into the 90's. This was not a uniform stop; we just got canteens and a few other basics.

I vaguely remember stopping by the mess hall, but I could not eat anything. Eventually, marching would give me an appetite, regardless of how stressed I might be.

Soon we would repeatedly hear a familiar song, "Rainbow, rainbow, don't be blue, we were once rainbows too." This referred our look in street clothes, which was soon to be replaced by dull green Air Force fatigues.

First there was that buzz hair cut; then endless marching even without uniforms. By the time we did get fitted for uniforms, we had all lost ten to twenty pounds, which seemed to be the idea for the delay in fitting. Between all the marching, there was often KP (Kitchen Patrol,) or other tasks grouped under the heading of *details*.

The Training Barracks

We were assigned to a barracks that had a central office and recreation section, with long hallways on either side, which contained our four-man rooms with bunk beds. At the very end of each hallway was a built-in fan that must have been six feet or more in diameter. Each hallway was a flight. Our flight was composed of enlistees from Washington and Oregon, while the other flight consisted of enlistees from a suburb of New York City.

Rumors flew about *those* enlistees from the East Coast. It was said that they were a rough bunch, and that piles of switch-blade knives and rubbers (condoms) had been confiscated from them. I never noticed much of an actual difference, except that they had New York accents and called a bottle of pop a soda.

We filled out address cards to send home. At the same time, the Air Force sent a copy of my grim photograph home. My parents immediately wrote that Boeing had called with a job. It was such terrible timing.



Staff Sergeant Fletcher–Training Instructor from Hell

Very soon, too soon, we were greeted by the hideous Staff Sergeant Fletcher, who wanted to punish us for his life miseries. After all, he had been kicked out of Viet Nam, and he hated women, especially his wife. Fletch, as I will call him, had a very colorful vocabulary; however, we as enlistees were expected to keep our discourse free from any and all profanity.

Fletch took an instant dislike to me. I was clueless and naïve recent college graduate; I really did not know how to act in such a hostile situation.

Fletch gave us no rest for our first full night. The whistle constantly blew, followed by the command fall-in! We assembled seemingly endless times on the grass. I could see frogs everywhere, but I dared not investigate, because I would have gotten thoroughly disciplined. I really wanted to hold one of those frogs so badly.



Even Fletch took part of Sunday off, so I did get to go frog hunting, but I had to carefully watch for who might be looking. Lackland AFB was a herpetologist's paradise, but I could not savor my little friends for very long. Monday was back to basics, which was mostly about marching.

Did I mention the marching? It seemed endless. We were given salt pills for the heat. Fletch wanted noise, so he ordered us to dig in our heels. This was not good for our boots, especially since we were supposed to make them nice and shiny afterwards.

Uniforms

I got fitted for uniforms, but I would seldom wear some outfits. I was only given one pair of brogan boots, since my size, 10W, was hard to get. I got several pair of drab green fatigues, all of which had inconvenient button-up flies. I got khaki 1505 summer uniforms, but they were not in season at that moment. I also got light and heavy-duty wool dress blues. The blue uniforms were not comfortable to wear, since they were not lined. Lastly, there were light-weight and heavy-duty wool overcoats.

Rites of Passage

There were two rites of passage required for all recruits: the obstacle course and the firing range.

A Swamp Filled with Obstacles

The obstacle course was an all day affair. We had to climb over or through things, or else dangle from strangely arranged ropes. It was noisy as we crawled under barbed wire, while blasting caps were set off in our midst. At the end of the course, we found that Fletch had played a trick on us; we had skipped the first two obstacles, which were the rope-swing over a pond and the horizontal bars. I was tired and fell in. Since I was wet, I could not hang onto the horizontal bars. Fortunately, we had all brought a change of uniform.

Dry-fire—No Dead Sergeants

Before being given real guns, we spent an afternoon at *dry-fire*, pretend qualifying with fake, wooden rifles that resembled bolt-action carbines. This was combined with lunch in the field. During past years, it would have been part of bivouac, but camping out had been eliminated by the two-week reduction in time for basic training.

M-1 Carbines—Still No Dead Sergeants

All the M-16's had been sent to Viet Nam, so we were stuck with World War II M-1's. I learned how to disassemble and reassemble a rifle blindfolded. This is a fact I am always careful to include in my resume.

At the firing range, Fletch made himself scarce. After all, droves of recruits were briefly being armed. Qualifying with a carbine on my stomach was not comfortable, and my first clip insisted on ejecting the hot casings down the back of my neck. Ouch, that hurt! Fortunately a sergeant (who was far more sympathetic than Fletch) helped me switch to a better-behaved clip.

Details

KP was not our only class of detail. Some were make-work parties, while others were supposed to give us valuable training. *Dorm Guard* was a standard detail that every uniformed recruit had to perform at barracks of new recruits. I got commended by another TI when I did Dorm Guard duty; however, the same cannot be said for Fletch, who sent many a Dorm Guard packing during our first week. The other TI's quickly tired of Fletch's antics. One night, I did fake guard duty with a fake rifle, carefully patrolling some miscellaneous, unimportant building. It was a very boring, but not stressful, duty.

Medical Shots

We lined up to get our inoculations, just like for everything else. In assembly-line fashion, we passed by an airman who gave us a quick injection using a repeating air-gun. Eliminating needles was supposed to be so modern; yet, I think the coming of AIDS brought that practice to an end.

Classes

We had to (*yawn*) attend a lot of classes as part of our training. Keeping alert in class was never easy, since what sleep we ever managed to get was never enough to power our rigorous schedule. Most of this training was just common sense stuff, such as *If I shoot myself in the leg, that is malingering and illegal*. Okay, but if I shoot Fletch in the leg.... I did not give voice to my evil thoughts.

The Rainy Season Arrived

The unbearable humid temperatures were soon replaced by constant rain. Parts of the base turned to swamp. However, it was easier to march in the rain than in the heat.

Despite better weather, the enlistees all wanted to escape Fletch. A Jewish airman (from the NY flight) complained to the base Rabbi, who came to investigate. I think he got moved to a different training instructor. There was a request for people to join the Air Force band; several eagerly volunteered. But I had no talent, so I had to suffer almost two more weeks; then we moved to a more casual barracks with a laid-back training instructor. The new barracks was open-bay, and the bunk beds were arranged three-high. I had a top bunk. I really cannot remember how I managed to climb up and down.

Orders

I got promoted to Airman Third Class (a one-stripe chevron,) along with orders to report to the Air Force Weapons Laboratory (AFWL,) at Kirtland AFB, near Albuquerque, New Mexico. I had been given an *AFSC* classification of 98127, a *scientific assistant*.

Kirtland AFB—Life in Barracks

After a quick trip home, I arrived by bus at my new duty station in New Mexico. I was assigned to the *Biophysics Department, Bionuclear Group*. We were in the main building of the laboratory.

My first barracks had three-man rooms. I had to change rooms three times before I found compatible roommates.

Once per month, we had to pass inspection. It was just a ploy to enforce a minimal standard of neatness, not as intense as at basic training.

Shortly after I made Airman First Class, I was additionally promoted to Buck Sergeant. I was able to move to an NCO barracks. There were no inspections, but I paid for maid service. The Air Force has gone back to Airman First Class again.



KP--Kitchen Patrol

At first, there was no escape from KP, that mindless activity we had suffered during basic training. Airmen would race to arrive early, around 4:00 AM, to get the best jobs. I had a plan, so I always reported just before the 5:30 AM deadline. I had purchased heavy rubber gloves; then I volunteered for silverware. No one else ever wanted silverware, so there had been no reason for me to hurry.

Eventually, KP faded into memory as a permanent civilian staff was hired for the chow hall.

The (Radio) Counting Laboratory

In the laboratory, all the rank nonsense was more casual, but I still had to salute officers on the grounds. I was assigned to measure gamma radiation (thermo-luminescent dosimetry) and high energy neutrons (sulfur pellet

dosimetry.) All the rack- and shelf-mount equipment of that day would be museum pieces now. The work of measuring radiation was tedious, boring and repetitive...the kind of stuff at which I excel.



As a point of reference, this was a pre-integrated circuit age, when tubes and transistors were still used. If a device developed a problem on one of its circuit boards, we often used freeze spray to isolate problems. Freezing defective transistors often made them temporarily work again.



Sergeant Graves was the electrical tech for our Bionuclear Lab. He once wired a Hollerith card punch to process data from punched tape output. He also built a digital clock, which we called the *decidate* clock. This was the time we wrote in our records; it was a lot like *stardate* on *Star Trek*. We all dreamed of when our *decidate* for leaving would arrive, but time passed ever so slowly.

Our lab computer was a CDC 6600, which was the fastest and most powerful computer at the time, even though its drum and hard drive capacity was mediocre by modern standards. It was also quite primitive for such a fantastic computer to have a standard Hollerith punched card interface. For a long time, our computer was the only such operational machine like this anywhere

outside CDC Headquarters at Chippewa Falls. This was where I got my start as a computer programmer, which would grow into a lifelong career.



Captain Dombek (far right) was my supervisor for most of my time at AFWL. I felt sad when his marriage fell apart. He had a cat named Punker. Punker was a defiant cat, whose amorous adventures did not stop with neutering.

Harry M., a civilian physicist, was sort of my mentor at AFWL. Harry was a veteran of above ground atomic testing while he was in the army. He told of watching atomic tests from the so-called safety of trenches, while wearing special goggles.



During my last year at Kirtland AFB, we updated the archaic shelf-look of our laboratory with more modern-looking consoles from *Bud Industries*. It was far more comfortable for those of us who were operators, as we generated our measurements.

Radiac Wash

Many of our detectors used shielded photomultiplier tubes to measure radiation from activated dosimeters. Lead bricks, either 21-pound or 27-pound weights, were used as shielding to keep out stray radiation. Since these activated dosimeters were radioactive, they could contaminate the detectors, so I periodically disassembled a unit to wash the bricks. Lead is a dirty material to work with, and it was a strenuous effort to cart them to a nearby sink, where I would scrub them with Radiac wash. Of course, the water was washed down a regular city drain.

Albuquerque

The city of Albuquerque covered many square miles. I know this intimately, since I walked most of it during my first half year at Kirtland AFB. This made me quite fit-looking.

Albuquerque was like a wasteland. I had been told this was because the original prairie of the nineteenth century had been devastated by just one pass of ranchers' sheep. Summers were hot, about 92° F., but the humidity was quite low. Even at 20° F., it was possible to be outdoors wearing no more than a T-shirt as a top.

Summer warmth could continue right into fall. One year, it was warm until November 30th; however, the next day turned biting cold as an icy wind took over the prairie. Once winter had arrived, warm weather would not return until late spring.

Sandia Crest, at over 10,000 feet in elevation, dominated the city skyline. It was a major recreational area.



Another major recreational area was the West Mesa, which was west of the city, up Route 66 (now Interstate-40,) past the Unser Brothers' garage (of racing fame). The West Mesa had a key feature called *The Volcanoes*, three ancient cinder cones.



I just hiked the area, but others also did target shooting. The entire West Mesa was covered with ancient petroglyphs, such as the one to the right of the sun-symbol.

I only photographed the petroglyphs, but some people defaced them. Eventually, the *Park Service* took notice and created the protected *Petroglyph National Monument*.



The Cushman Eagle—My First Motorized Vehicle

I got tired of the effort it took to walk around Albuquerque so I bought a 1959 Cushman Eagle motor bike from Bernie, a fellow airman. It had a two-speed transmission and a centrifugal clutch. It also burned oil, which meant I ran out once and pushed the vehicle back to base.



The Cushman was inconvenient at night, since its stator was so weak that it could not supply enough electricity to power the lights.

I soon experienced my first accident, when my Cushman tried to occupy the same space as a pickup truck. I somersaulted down wet asphalt. On the third roll, my helmet strap broke. I got a slit scalp, bruises, scrapes, and a break in the small bone of my right leg. I was taken by ambulance to the Sandia Base hospital. On the way, I relived memories of being on a hayride that I had never actually experienced. My diagnosis was a shoulder separation, with a six-week recovery time.

It was evening, September 8, 1966. As I lay in the hospital bed, I watched the premier episode of *Star Trek*. It was Saturday, not Friday, since the Albuquerque station had a new video recorder, which it used to delay broadcast by one day.

I repaired the Cushman, but it was never the same after that. I had to cut the rear fork to straighten it; then an Auto Shop tech welded it back on. I brazed the fuel tank myself. Eventually, it no longer leaked gasoline. When I got my Jeep, I tried to sell the motor bike, but without success. Eventually, the Cushman was stolen and gone forever.

Nevada--The Atomic Desert

Major atomic testing in the 1960's was done at the Nevada Test Site, next to *the atomic city*, Mercury, Nevada.

I think I went to Nevada at least three times. The motor pool in Mercury was run by the army. I found out that the army recruits advanced in rank twice as fast as someone in the Air Force. It was not fair.

I learned to drive a motor pool pickup truck. The vehicles had unsynchronized manual transmissions, so it was necessary to double-clutch to downshift.

My first trip to Nevada was a really important underground test, so we went by Air Force car. I remember going through the produce station at the Arizona Stateline. The inspectors were intrigued by the Styrofoam cookies in which we stored all our dosimetry. Styrofoam was new, so they had never seen it before.

At the end of the day, I went with everyone in our party to see *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* at the local theater in Mercury. The test was conducted as a shaft-blast inside a mountain in Area-5. A sealed metal shaft connected the deep blast area to the much higher measurement area. Our equipment was placed in the mountain; then we drove across

Frenchman Flats to watch. I remember the ripple that spread across the valley. It lifted me about six feet upwards as it passed.

The test was a failure; it had vented radioactive debris. Our equipment was not retrievable; we had to return to Kirtland AFB without it.

I was scheduled to Nevada during September 1966, but I was delayed by my motorbike accident.

Once, I flew alone on a C-47 (the military version of a DC-3,) from Albuquerque to Indian Springs AFB, Nevada. The plane was not heated, and the seats were attached to the wall. Attendant services were non-existent, but a parachute was available.



The test was cancelled, so I was given a ticket to fly back using commercial services. It had all been a waste of time.

One time I went with Captain Dombek for *Project Ajax*. He was a great friend; too bad he died of a sudden heart attack a few years ago. Our dosimeters were placed, but the test was put on hold.

We could not stay. I lost my return ticket to Albuquerque on the flight from Mercury to Las Vegas, but it was found in time. After the test went off, our dosimetry was delivered to Kirtland AFB by a fighter jet.



Greater Kirtland

I was stationed at what is now referred to as *Old Kirtland*. The greater area also included the Sandia Base, home of the Sandia Corporation, and Manzano AFB. In 1971, it was all consolidated as Greater Kirtland AFB.



What used to be Manzano AFB is now simply the *Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center*. It was a storage site for nuclear weapons. It was surrounded by four fences. There was a compound area next to all the tunneling. I once ate at the Manzano compound cafeteria.

This mountain is still a highly classified area, so determined web searches might return next to no information. Over the years, a newer, more hardened, repository has been built somewhere on Kirtland ABF; however, all those details are highly classified.

The Sandia Farm--Home of the Sheep



A herd of neutered male sheep, called weathers, was maintained at the Sandia Farm. The sheep were subjected to exposure of various kinds of radiation. The purpose was to measure LD-50, the dosage that would kill half the sheep within a given period of time. Sheep were considered to be equivalent to human beings, at least as far as weight and body density went.

At the time, I had no sympathy for the sheep, so killing them did not bother me.

The Sandia Pulsed Reactor--No More Evil Sheep

The Sandia Pulsed Reactor was located at a remote domed building, which the Sandia Corporation used to irradiate sheep from The Farm. Some of the sheep were not irradiated, but were kept as controls. Sometimes, control sheep would die of fright. Anyway, the sheep were extremely messy when handled, and my uniform always needed immediate washing. By any definition, sheep oil seemed to be 95% urine.



Once, I did my own test alongside the sheep. I exposed a black widow spider, taken from the side of my barracks. The spider was scarcely bothered, since arthropods do not produce a lot of free radicals. The spider was later encased in resin.



SPR II consisted of two sections of dampened uranium plates. When the damper rods were retracted, the temperature of the plates would go up. At the predetermined temperature, the two sets of plates would be shoved together, which would create an intense flux of neutrons and some gamma rays. The actual tests were applied boredom, carried out in a nearby control room. Paper drum graphs documented the rise in temperature. At the predetermined temperature, I could hear the clunk as *SPR II* was fired. It was anticlimactic. The plates were touchable when properly dampened; I even touched them once. Science fiction films often depict uranium being intensely, lethally radioactive, but that is not true for its quiescent state. In the 1987 film, *Project-X*, chimpanzees were irradiated with a similar pulsed reactor. However, unlike in the film, there are no fantastic colored lights when a real pulsed reactor was fired.

The Cobalt-60 Facility—Intense Radiation



The 1960's cobalt-60 facility was new for me, but it has since been replaced. It was built as a general purpose irradiation facility, as well as a place at which to expose sheep.

The cobalt-60 was stored in a shielded container called a pig. The isotope was contained within a movable cylinder that had a lead plug on top. When the facility was active, the cylinder would travel by servo motor up the exposure tube.

Five kilo-curries of cobalt-60 was quite intense, much more intense than people had predicted.

It took a lot of work to make the facility DOE-compliant. The first test created too much sky-shine, so the metal building had to be reinforced with high-density concrete. One can see the filled outlines of windows in the photos.

The lateral leakage was still too high after the concrete had been poured, so an earth and asphalt berm had to be constructed around the facility. I participated in the testing that led to eventual DOE approval.

The Flash X-Ray—Our first Death Ray

The Sandia visitor center had a clever model that showed how a Flash X-Ray worked. It was a simple wooden board containing a configured circuit of capacitors, resistors, and arcing-poles. The capacitors were charged in parallel but fired in series. Firing merely completed the first arcing circuit, which would cascade down the line with ever greater intensity.

Flash X-Rays are now common. Hobbyists can even buy target tubes on EBAY, from which to build their own flash X-Ray devices. The Sandia Corporation now has a huge X-Ray device called the *Z Machine*.

The old Sandia Flash X-Ray unit used a circuit equivalent to the bread-board model, placed in a giant cylindrical container filled with dielectric oil. A similar model is shown, with the capacitor array in a blue box.



When the beast was fired, an electron beam would cascade down until it hit a target made of tantalum, which would create a very fast, but intense, X-Ray pulse.

The device had a lot of problems, one of which was propulsion. Even though it was mounted on railroad wheels that sat on tracks, no one had thought that there needed to be a way to position it. There had been an attempt to move it using a motor pool pickup, but that endeavor burned out the clutch. I remember a project captain muttering, “Air Force trucks should not have clutches.”

Other Facilities—Los Alamos and White Sands



I also did testing at Los Alamos Laboratories and the White Sands Missile Range. I do not remember much, except that White Sands had a nice missile park.

Jokes--Over-the-top Humor

Jokes abounded in the Biophysics Department. Once, someone spiked party punch with reagent-grade ethyl alcohol from the chemistry laboratory. After that, access to the chemistry lab became restricted.



It became popular to leave phone notes telling people to call Mr. Fox or Mr. Bear, but the phone number was for the Albuquerque Zoo. For years after that, the zoo had an unlisted phone number.

There were also a lot of practical jokes, which people referred to as *gulls*. Anyone returning from leave had to be careful around their desks. I once wired a flashbulb into Lt. Gerhardt's top desk drawer. Despite his cautious examination of his desk, the bulb successfully fired.

Things had not been all fun and games during my tour; however, remember that there was not even one successful incursion of the Viet Cong at Kirtland AFB, thanks to our diligence.

Hopping--Aircraft to Nowhere

Military personnel had a special benefit. If one was on leave and in uniform, one could get a *hop* if a military plane had extra space. The catch was that the comfort level was usually low and aircraft seldom went anywhere that was convenient.

There was a major airline strike in 1966, just as I was ready to go home on leave. I got on a hop traveling from Albuquerque to Moffat Field in the San Francisco Bay area. I rode a bus for the rest of the way to home to Renton, Washington.



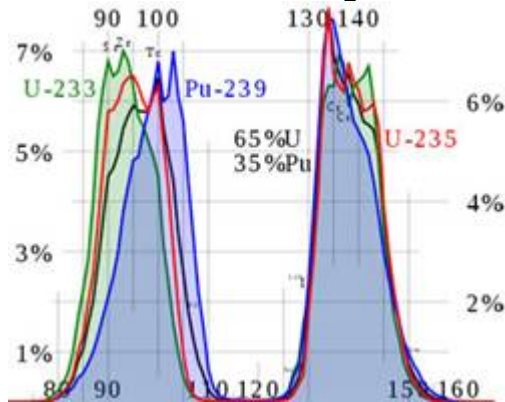
The plane was a Navy S2 anti-submarine plane. There were two of us trying to get the hop, but the other airman declined after seeing the plane. The S2 had two really big multi-blade propeller engines. The plane was not heated. I sat in a small seat behind the main cab, wearing a special belt. I was told, "If there is a problem, snap the hooks on the belt to the rings of the parachute on the wall in front of you; then jump out that door and pull that third ring." Fortunately, there were no problems during the flight, besides shivering boredom.

My memory says that I had flown on one other hop, but the details have grown hazy over time. I think it was a C-47, like the one I had ridden on to Indian Springs AFB. This time, I think I flew from Albuquerque to Denver, from where I traveled the rest of the way by commercial air.

Excitement—A Grand Theft

One day at AFWL, I was urged to attend a quick meeting. Someone at the door went over our clearances. A radiation measurement device had been smuggled out of Russia, so we were getting a first look. It had vacuum tubes, and it was big even by 1960's standards. I do not remember anything else, and I was never shown it again.

Edward Teller–Super-scientist



Wow, we got to attend a show-and-tell meeting with the famous Dr. Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb. A lot of his lecture was routine, including a discussion of the standard atomic test fission-yield curve, also known as the *Marylyn Monroe* curve, due to its familiar two bumps.

Dr. Teller gave an announcement that any worries about nuclear war would soon be a thing of the past. He was working on a sure-fire deterrent, to be revealed later. In the end, it was the first stupid anti-missile shield laser idea, which continues to be recycled. A 90% effectiveness has never been considered to be that great, since it has always meant that 10% of enemy weapons would still reach their targets.

Commander's Call–Planned Boredom

Each month, we had to go to a base theater for Commander's Call, where we would get rosy updates on the progress of the Viet Nam war. The news reels had all been specially propagandized just for military personnel.

Officers were often sent to special booster programs, from which they would return fully-indoctrinated. For a while, they wandered around like *war-is-good* zombies.

Still, no Commander's Call even came close to the quality of *Godzilla versus Gidrah*, the worst movie ever shown at that theater.

The Playboy Incident–Attempted Mind Control

My fellow barracks-mates were always trying to fix my aversion to standard vices, such as smoking, drinking, any kind of drugs, or even going to prostitutes. I failed to brag about erotic adventures, like most of the others were always doing. So, they bought me a subscription to *Playboy*, which I really did not want. My reaction contained as much indignation as I could

possibly generate, but the magazine copies kept coming. I gave them all to my roommate, Bob.

Even though I am now sexually experienced, I still cannot get any enjoyment out of girlie magazines. All examples of that class of literature are boring to me.

Travel–The Greater Southwest

I did travel a lot with guys from my barracks and from the lab where I worked. We visited places like Rocky Mountain National Park, the Garden of the Gods, Monument Valley, Mesa Verde, Canyon DeChelley, the Pecos Wilderness, the Bisti Badlands, the Nacimiento Badlands, the Carlsbad Caverns, El Paso, and Ciudad Juarez.

Travel to Ciudad Juarez



Our trip to Juarez had been a little crazy. I went with Mark, a Jewish guy from Massachusetts. He drove to places in the city outskirts that tourists usually never saw. He wanted to bargain for a bull whip, but some proprietors chased him out of their establishments with such whips.

I went to museums and snapped pictures of prehistoric art. Later, I was told that photography was not allowed, but I still have all my illegal pictures.



Then there was the stripper bar that everyone wanted to visit. I hated it. People would not give up trying to indoctrinate me to exploit women. It was the first and last time I drank a bottle of beer.

Traveling the Sandia Crest Trail

There was a ten-mile trail along the Sandia Crest, from the North Peak to the South Peak. It was all higher than 9,000 feet. I hiked the twenty-mile round trip with a bunch of the guys one summer. The trip back to the North Peak parking had been tortuous, but I did manage to catch two short-horned lizards along the way.



I got sick on the way back...just keeping my body going required more energy than I thought I had. During this time in my life, I did not know that I could suffer from ulcers. I only felt better after I drank half a large bottle of *Pepto Bismo*.

Travel to the Badlands—Bisti and Nacimiento

New Mexico was covered by endless sets of badlands, but I primarily just visited the Bisti Badlands and Nacimiento Badlands.

The Bisti Badlands were very remote, but they had been featured in *New Mexico Magazine*, primarily because of their strange sandstone formations that resembled chess pieces.



A bunch of us decided to visit Bisti...in two different vehicles. I went with my roommate Bob in his Volkswagen. We were there for over two hours, but we never did run into the others. To this day, I have no idea how we missed them, since we had photographed all the same formations.



I went to the Nacimiento Badlands several times. It was an open area just off Route 66, under *Bureau of Land Management* (BLM) control. I caught my first rattlesnake there; I was photographed holding it. Later, I tried to catch a baby rattlesnake. Luckily, I realized in time that that was a very bad idea, since baby rattlers do not have a head of significant width to grab.

Travel on a Southwest Holiday Weekend



One Labor Day weekend, we went on a multi-state (New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and Utah) tour in two cars. I went with Harry L. in his 1957 Chevy sedan. We spent one night at Monument Valley. I slept at the Navajo park, with scooped out earth beneath my sleeping bag. Though I experienced many aches and pains in the morning, I was treated to a fantastic sunrise, as the Sun came up through the notch in the big monument.



In Utah, we stopped at the *Navajo* Twins formation near Bluff. There was a roadside artesian well, which has since become part of a tourist trap. In Arizona, on the way back to New Mexico, a big truck in front of us straddled a very large dead dog in the road, so we could not help running over it. A few miles later, in a place called *Beautiful Valley*, we broke down. My roommate Bob had been a ways in front in his Volkswagen, but he never noticed what had happened, so he kept going.

It turned out that the dead dog had put a big dent in the fuel tank, which made half the gasoline unavailable. A BLM employee gave us some gas. We kept the tank topped off all the way back to the base.

Traveling with my Parents



My parents and my sister came to Albuquerque in the summer of 1967. My parents were in their mid-forties then, but I am now 67, so a lot of time has passed. I showed them around the base; then I drove my car home while they drove their van.



Before heading back to base, I celebrated my 26th birthday at the cabin of my maternal grandfather, Walter, near Lake Cle Elum, Washington. Of course, the cake was chocolate.

I returned to New Mexico alone, by way of many national parks and monuments, including Yellowstone. In Yellowstone I saw two bears: possibly Yogi and Booboo.



Near Rifle, Colorado, I had to negotiate a huge prairie dog colony that claimed a long section of highway. I can never go back to that area; I hit a prairie dog...it somersaulted down the highway behind me. The dogs have been waiting for me to return so they can get revenge.

The Jeep Wagoneer—The Definition of Junk



During my last year and a half in the Air Force, I got my first car: a 1963 Jeep Wagoneer. I had grown up thinking four-wheel drive was great, but I quickly learned such a vehicle could be a real pain to own. Having the usual, very vague three-speed on the column manual shifting did not help either.

My Jeep was made by Kaiser Industries, who had bought the line from *Willys Motors*, before selling it to *American Motors*. Kaiser did not make most of their own components, so parts were bought from other auto makers, and varied on a monthly basis.

The all aluminum overhead-cam engine was junk, because its valves were set in aluminum, not brass guides. My Wagoneer had slow-ratio power steering, which was really inconvenient, since there was no road feel, and turning the vehicle required large wheel movements at the helm.

The vehicle bounced erratically in back. When I went to check the rear shock absorbers, I discovered that there were not any at all. The previous owner had

abused the jeep so much that he had broken off the upper shock mounts. I had to get replacement mounts welded on.

I put my jeep on the lift at the base Auto-body Shop one Saturday. The shop foreman wanted me to take the gas tank off, before he would do any welding. As soon as I started, shop personnel made me take the car down. There was a twenty minute limit for using the lift. Finally, I got the mounts welded on and the gas tank reinstalled.

There was still a problem: special lower mounting bolts needed to be installed. It had not been easy to screw the mounting bolts into the rusted thread of the holes on the axel. When I woke up in the morning, I could hardly move. Fiddling with those bolts, while lying on a piece of cardboard under the vehicle, had thrown out both my shoulders. When I got the rear shocks on at last, I was greatly disappointed, since I could scarcely tell the difference between having and not having rear shocks.

After having driven home and having visited with my parent for a while, I set out on a long return trip to Kirtland AFB. I developed engine problems in Wyoming. I could hardly make it over one steep mountain road. I only succeeded by dropping the gearing into the 4WD low range, which gave me a lot of low-speed power. A gas station service tech discovered that my spark plugs were all shot. However, simple replacement had not been possible; I was informed that worn dies had been used to make the spark plug holes. The tech created makeshift dies out of old spark plugs. Soon I was on my way again, and I had way more than enough engine power this time.

Medical and Dental Services—Applied Apathy

Medical and dental services were awful. No matter how many tests I was given, nothing was ever done. My teeth were developing problems, and my vision was getting blurry, but no one seemed to notice.

When I had my motorbike accident, my Army doctor took almost no interest. I mentioned the painful bruise on my right leg; his comment was that a bruise like that would be expected to hurt, but it would get better. Years later, I learned that I had broken the small bone in my right leg. No wonder it hurt so much.

I remember what happened to Lt. Williams, who worked in another part of the lab. He was given a prescription to get 0.3 cc of adrenaline. However, the tech misread the instructions and proceeded to give the lieutenant three cc's instead. Lt. Williams passed out before the third cc was administered, which

would have killed him. There was a shake-up in the dispensary after that incident.

Old Sergeants—They Had No Life

I (and others) noticed that a lot of the retired noncommissioned officers (NCO's) often drifted aimlessly around the base during the day. Apparently, they had never had any life outside the Air Force. Since they did not seem to have families, I wonder now if a lot of them were homosexual. This was before the term *gay* became popular. At that time in history, homosexuality was a forbidden subject on all military bases.

Pets



My first pet was Iggy the iguana. Iggy was not really much of a pet. I tried to get Iggy a friend. However, when I put new iguana on the side of my barracks for a picture, I turned around for a moment to adjust my camera. In an instant, the new iguana totally vanished.

Iggy finally escaped in Renton when I took him home on leave.



When I moved to the NCO barracks, I got two aquariums, which I stocked with fish, newts, and frogs. Some of the frogs were African clawed frogs, which people called *mammy-frogs* because of the way they held out their front feet. These African clawed frogs were voracious devourers of cockroaches. Albuquerque had two types of inch-long cockroaches, and the

frogs relished both types. The cockroaches weighed as much as some of the newts in the aquariums, but the frogs never bothered the newts.

The End—To Home and Real Life

My time on the *decidate* clock had finally come to an end.

Just as the Air Force had been in a hurry to enlist me, so it decided to get rid of me as early as possible. I had to negotiate to get a two-month extension. I left the Air Force the last day of February 1969, way ahead of the original September date.

I thought I was going to get a job in Idaho, but that great drafter, Lyndon Baines Johnson, decided to freeze all federal hiring. All the national laboratories were, in the end, funded by the government. Endless potentially great jobs had vanished overnight. I would never again work in any field involving atomic energy.

I was given a DD214: an honorable separation from the Air Force and a deployment to the inactive reserves. Unfortunately, I have lost this form. My trip home was not auspicious. I took an old road near Flagstaff by error; then I skidded on an icy section of road and dented the left-rear of my jeep. I had to replace a bent wheel, and I got new tires, but the vehicle was a drivable piece of junk.

Once I got home, it would be almost a year before I finally got a job on Vandenberg AFB, California. Instead of atomic energy, my work focus switched to missile range safety software.

In those days, I did not realize that I had *Asperger's Syndrome*, and that I could be doomed to fail any and all interviews. I now know that every job I ever got was not because of any skills I might have had, but because the interviewers had done a sloppy job, just to acquire bodies for difficult to fill positions.

I originally viewed my time in the Air Force to be annoying and inconvenient. During the intervening years, I have come to suspect that the whole adventure might have been very good for me, by teaching me how to pass as normal (non-autistic) in an irrational world. I have had two good jobs, and I have a decent retirement income, which is far better than most autistic persons ever experience.

Still, I have long dreamed of seeing my nemesis, Staff Sergeant Fletcher, standing in the road in front of me, still clothed in his old training instructor's

uniform. I could ponder what I should do, until the thump, thump broke my concentration.

I would graciously stop and sincerely thank Fletch for all his hard work.

I could almost hear him say, “I hurt, %\$#&#”

After washing his foul mouth out with soap, using the vernacular he had taught me, I would simply reply, “Sarge, you have a personal problem.”

One day in 1971, I got my DD256 form: total satisfaction of all military service. Hurrah, I was free and clear of the military. Today, with wars continuing in Iraq and Afghanistan, documents such as this one are very hard to get.



Epilogue

I suspect that I may have fictionalized many facts. Some of the details of this essay could only be vaguely reconstructed using the labels on my photographic slides. My slides are over 40 years old. Most are covered with spots; some even have outbreaks of mold. The color dyes have all run together, so there is really not a lot of fine detail. What detail there is has also been further reduced by all the necessary processing in Photoshop.

Some of my slides were misplaced during our last house move. They are still in the original boxes, as I received them from Kodak.

I lack many other pictures because photography was restricted in places like the Nevada Test Site.

I did not recount all my memories of Staff Sergeant Fletcher. He literally had rants about how he was not going to allow instances of homosexuality in his ranks. He even bragged that he had once caught two airmen in romantic embrace and had them booted out of the Air Force. That may not have been true.

During my military service, I had no knowledge of homosexuality whatsoever. In retrospect, I have come to conclude that Fletch may have been one of two things: he may have been an outspoken homophobe that constantly

did witch hunts, or he may have been a closeted homosexual out to prove that he was not gay.

I also never found out why we changed barracks and TI's after four weeks of basic training. My sense was that it was not quite normal. Perhaps too many recruits had managed to escape Fletch. However, no explanation was ever given. I think this was why there was no group photo of my flight. I have searched through BMT (basic military training) photos posted online, but have not been able to find even one that included Fletch.

During *my atomic days*, I was poor at social interaction. I might even describe my social skills as having been embarrassing. I did not know what was wrong with me, so I did not know how to compensate. I certainly did not know how to deal with gender-identity issues, so I shoved them way in the back of my mind. My form of autism made denial quite easy.

I was careful not to reveal any transgendered inclinations. The Air Force would have handled such knowledge worse than I did. Even in the current days of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*, transgendered persons are not covered, but face severe disciplining.

During *my atomic days*, I was always leery of hierarchical authority; however, I always did my job to the best of my ability, and I did not participate in any contrary or destructive behavior. In the intervening years, my attitude has grown worse. Now, I can barely tolerate anything that I view to be illogical or irrational.

This may explain why I eventually joined the Saltwater Church. *Unitarian Universalists* are also often leery of authority. Still, some of my developing philosophy can be disturbing even within such a liberal setting.

I wish to thank the Saltwater Writer's Group for all the assistance given to me while I was formulating this historical essay.