

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

ROGER MICHAEL BRENNAN

Air Traffic Controller, Air Force, Korean War

2004

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1915

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Brennan, Roger Michael., (b.1931). Oral History Interview, 2004.

Approximate length: 1 hour 4 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Roger Michael Brennan outlines his service in the Air Force during the Korean War, talks about being a student using the G.I. Bill, his time as an industrial education teacher, and his work with the Wisconsin Education Association. Brennan describes his entrance into the Air Force as a volunteer in 1951 and basic training in San Antonio, Texas as well as advanced training as an Air Traffic Controller in Biloxi, Mississippi. He discusses his deployment to Japan in 1952 to Johnson Air Force Base and then to Yokota Air Force Base. He reflects on his return to the United States and describes finishing his service at Lockbourne Air Force Base [Ohio]. He details his long involvement in education, beginning with his own schooling at University of Wisconsin-Stout, as well as his time teaching at Humboldt Park School, and then his career with the Wisconsin Education Association. He mentions his personal relationships with past presidents and governors and his involvement in bill writing. Lastly, he describes his medical issues as a result of his service in the Air Force.

Biographical Sketch:

Roger Michael Brennan (b.1931) enlisted in the Air Force in 1951. He served during the Korean War in Japan from 1952 to 1954 at Johnson Air Force Base and Yokota Air Force Base, and then finished his enlistment at Lockbourne Air Force Base [Ohio] until 1955.

Interviewed by Dan Driscoll, 2014

Transcribed by Jeff Javid, 2015

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

Driscoll: Today is May 30th, 2014; this is an interview with Roger Michael Brennan, goes by Mike, who served with the United States Air Force in the Korean War. This interview is being conducted at King's Veteran Home in Wisconsin. The interviewer is me, Dan Driscoll. Well Michael, can you tell us where you were born and a little bit about your life before joining the Air Force?

Brennan: I was born in Green Bay Wisconsin, at the height of the depression in 1931. So I grew up very poor, but we very happy, so we never knew we were poor. Um, I spent a lot of my youth on the weekends at my uncle's farm because his wife had passed away and we went out there every weekend and my mother would clean house and cook for them and I would do everything that a city-slicker shouldn't do on the farm-- get in trouble that way. I attended East High School in Green Bay. I graduated from there in 1950. I basically took no college prep courses because we were so poor that I never thought I'd end up going to college. I did decide I wanted to go to college and I started out that I wanted to be an architect. And I went one year to the university extension in Green Bay and that was the time that the Korean War broke out. And a number of us couldn't decide if we wanted to be in school or we wanted to go in service, so I volunteered to go into the Air force. And I went in there in uh June of 1951. I went to Keesler Air Force Base, not Keesler, I went to San Antonio [Lackland Air Force Base, Texas] to, for my basic training. I guess the thing I remember the most about that is, number one, there were so many of us at the base at that time we were in tents. It would get like 110 [degrees] during the day and at night it would drop to freezing. So at one time I think out of ninety-six men in our flight we had half of 'em in the hospital either with pneumonia or heatstroke. Then one day a little cloud came over and it hadn't rained there in a long time, this cloud looked about the size of a screen on a TV, and it rained so hard, and the ground was so packed, that it just washed everything, tents and everything, away. I was taken to another base and I think I was part of a guinea pig program where they first dilated eyes, and uh so that's one of the things I remembered. My basic was extended because I was they were waiting for my school to open up, then in uh, then I went to Biloxi, Mississippi where I went through airways and air communications service and there basically I was going through weather program. I went through a very stringent physical, beyond my belief of why it was necessary, but we even went through the pressure chambers for pilots. But uh, there I learned to be basically a visual air traffic controller, and how clearances worked and all of that.

Driscoll: So Michael, roughly the time you went down to Biloxi? Can you remember the date?

Brennan: Yeah, well I went down there I think, let's see, June, sometime in August. And I remember getting a leave over Christmastime. I left at 90-something degrees to go into Green Bay and it was 20 below and I thought I was going to die.

Driscoll: So that was August of '51?

Brennan: '51, yes

Driscoll: And did you know you were going to be an air traffic controller, or were you, did you volunteer?

Brennan: Well I think the way I ended up there they did a large number of tests when we were in basic and they pretty well determined where they thought we'd be most comfortable doing the job and so I was assigned to go to air traffic control. As I said there was basically learning to be a tower operator where you did everything instructions for landing visually, giving weather, clearances, entering and leaving patterns, clearances from the control centers, and all of that. And then in, I think it was around May of '52, I [giggles] was a little irritated because my best friend was in the Navy and he flew over and I had the pleasure of going across on a troopship, and the thing I remember the most about that was that we took the northern route and it happened to be typhoon season. And from the time we left Oakland to the time we sailed into Yokohama Harbor we basically had to tie ourselves into our bunk because the ships were standing on end or dropping. And I guess from what I was told men who had been at sea for thirty years and more were getting ill aboard this ship because of the weather we were going through, so. And we did sneak out one time up out on the doors out on to the bow of that ship and this pretty good sized troop ship and we went to the railing and we could actually see the water over the fantail that this boat was standing so, ship or whatever it is, was standing so high on end. So that was my first experience with the service, and I was glad I didn't join the Navy at that point.

Driscoll: [Laughs] Well uh Mike, if I can backtrack for a quick second, did you volunteer for the Air Force?

Brennan: I volunteered, yes.

Driscoll: With the intent to go to the Korean War?

Brennan: Well yeah. When I was in school there in college the one year after high school, we basically sat around and studied some and the other half of the time we discussed whether what we should do because of the Korean War. And I decided that I wanted to volunteer, and the reason I volunteered I was hoping there would be a G.I. Bill and I felt that was the only way I'd ever get to college, so I volunteered to go in for four years.

Driscoll: And your parents reaction? The family reaction when they heard of your decision?

Brennan: Well my father didn't like my decision because he was in World War II and, he was going, he went to France, and he said I would hate every day of it, and I would cry to come home and all of that stuff. I found out I really enjoyed the Air Force, I thought it was an excellent branch of service. I'll tell you a little later about how I got hurt but if I hadn't gotten hurt I probably would have stayed in it as a career, but they mustered me out after four years. A lot of the decisions I made throughout my life my parents thought that I was making the wrong decisions. They turned out to be the right decisions, they were just looking at it from a different perspective, I think that's all.

Driscoll: Sure. So about May 1952 you're on a troop ship from Oakland, California to Yokohama, Japan.

Brennan: Yes. And then I was assigned to Johnson Air Force Base. I went to, I got in there very late and they put me into a barracks where I slept. The first morning I was in Japan and I couldn't figure out why they were shaking my bed so hard to wake me up, and I woke up and there was no one else in the room and what I found out, I went through my first earthquake in Japan. That Air Force base, I was in the control center of all clearances for planes entering and leaving the Far East. It was Tokyo Control Center. At that time there was no radar, there was nothing at the Tokyo International, it isn't an international airport today. The Air Force basically controlled all of that at that time, or the services did. So I spent maybe five months there, and it was kind of a different experience because we would clear planes to leave the Far East and a different control center would clear them to come in, and every so often we'd find out that someone would goof and we'd have two planes at the same altitude going opposite directions. And at that we didn't have satellite, we didn't have the radio communications, we had to do it through teletype and then it would be sent over to them some way at the other control center, and so I had those experiences. I also had my chair taken right out from under me when I was working there with my second earthquake. So uh, I was then assigned to Yokota Air Force Base. There were three bases in central Japan at that time; there was Johnson which had the central defense of three F-51 fighters was the total defense for the central part of Japan at that time. Then I went to Yokota Air Force Base and that was basically the B-29s flew out of there every three days regardless of whether the, I think B-45 bombers, which are photo-recon, flew to Korea and then North Korea, and then they would sneak into China and come back. And then we had some tankers on that base also. The third base over there was Tachikawa Air Force Base. They basically were the supply base that all the supplies went to Korea in. And any time there was bad weather in any of central Japan, they had to come into our base. I spent probably six months as a control tower operator. I saw some air history being made there. I did the first landing instructions to the first group of fighters that ever flew the Pacific non-stop by being refueled. And I guess one of the things that I remember in the tower is they were training some new people on the B-29s and they were fully loaded with 3500 pound bombs on all the 29s that were going out. And they had some of the experienced crew working with them and apparently the

pilot didn't give it enough—you had to just wind those things up because we only had, they would back up to the fence, which was 1000 feet of mecatum [?], and then we had 8000 feet of runway, and then there was more mecatum [?] or another and then there was a tall fence and the only way we were going to get over that fence was to back up, bring the planes as close to the fence as they could, rev em up with the brakes on as fast and as hard as they could, and then get down there and pull their gear in order to clear that fence, it's the only way they got over it. And as I say they had an instructor there for the pilot, they had one for the copilot, they had one for the bombardier, and they're rolling down the runway and apparently the pilot didn't give it full power and he was starting to wobble, so the guy that was instructing him hollered, "Give it more power!", and the young bombardier got shook up and he salvoed 3500 pound bombs right on the runway. [Laughs] I remember there was an officer in the tower with me and he saw this and all the sparks flying and everything and he went to the floor. And I remember when it was over I said, "Jim, you know the only difference, if all those bombs had been fused and gone off I would have gone about six feet higher [Brennan laughs] than what you did." It took 'em I don't know how many hours because they had worn those casings so thin, totally ruined the understructure of that B-29. And that was my one experience in the tower that I remembered. And they were very short of GC, ground control approach, which basically was, I guess it was the baby of radar in some ways. We had the fourth radar unit that had ever been built in England; it was a CPN4, and basically what that was it was all tubes. We had to change runway every time the wind shifted, and we only had one runway, so when we had a shift of wind we had to move that unit and I can remember a number of experiences there. These pilots basically flew out every three days regardless of weather. So sometimes it was absolute zero and we had to track them down the runway to get them off. And then these people would come back descending at 140 miles an hour, not being able to see two inches in front of their face out that front windshield, and we never lost one landing 'em, but once they got on the ground many of them at times could not see where the runway was. And I remember one time a pilot called me and he said "GCA [Ground Control Approach]," he said, "I just lost it, I have no idea where I am." And we had one little window, about a four by four window in that unit, otherwise it was all little electronics. And I went and pulled the curtain and there was just this great big light outside our window, and he missed us by about a foot of taking us totally out. And there were times in bad weather where the winds would shift and we've had antennas removed off the top of our unit. That was one of the things I remembered. We had an emergency declared, we were on one end of the runway and the wind automatically, it shifted, so that we had to move this unit down to the other end of the runway. Moving the unit down there we blew out 126 tubes is what they counted after. So once we got down there they had to pull these units, put them all new units in, I had to line the scopes as the master controller. We were on a very high platform with steps going down the back. We always pulled two Buda Diesels, in order to, in case the electricity went off these would automatically kick in and we wouldn't lose our power. In all of that excitement the mechanic got so excited and this platform was moveable, and

he moved it in there, and I came out of the unit instead of coming out of a very dark unit, not being able to see well when you come out, I wound down the platform I took the steps to go to the Buda, the diesels, the steps weren't there. So I ended up going down and I landed, this leg was thrown back across a steel beam; talked the plane down, went to the hospital, stayed there for three days while they put this thing in a cast and everything. And they gave me a board to sleep on and they told me I'd have severe arthritis from being thrown across this beam which I have had in my neck and my back and all that so— I thought—it was funny they had a simulated bomb run of the B-36s on Japan, because they landed in Okinawa, our runway's base we weren't supposed to take them. This one pilot, apparently what he did, he would, there were ten engines on this B-36, and he would, what they call feathering an engine. He'd shut this engine down, he'd shut this one down, he'd shut that down. He declared an emergency, and that was the first B-29 that ever landed on the main islands of Japan, so I talked him down, and they went over the plane and they couldn't find a thing wrong with the engines, so what we found out later was they had a pool and whoever landed in the Far East first won a large pool. He won that pool. So I talked the first B-36 down that ever landed on the mainland, and I also talked the first B-52 down that ever landed on the mainland of Japan. So, uh, we basically we never lost an airplane talking them down at that point, it was, I don't think we really understood the stress we were under, but I know that the pilots thought we walked on water because we got 'em back down safe. So, one experience I had there was that about ten of us, young, smart, energetic airmen, decided we were going to climb Mount Fujiyama. Well there are actually pathways that wind back and forth up that mountain, because it's my understanding according to the Buddhist religion you have to climb to the top of that mountain once in their lifetime. And the ten of us started out, and we got up a ways and here's an old man pulling this lady up this mountain while we zoom past them like they're standing still. We got up a ways and we sat down, our tongue was hanging out 'cause the air was getting thinner. Here comes papa-san pulling mama-san right by us. And they had different stations there where they burned into a stick each station going up that mountain. And we got about, we did, we passed this couple a number of times, they passed us back a number of times.

We slept in a very large open building where our feet were against the feet of the people that were in the next row, and their heads were against the feet; this thing was loaded with bodies up there. And the next morning we climbed, finished climbing to the top, it was a beautiful day. We saw the crater, we saw the Yokohama and Tokyo Harbor. We saw the lakes that were down there; it was absolutely a beautiful site up there. Well it took us all of one day and part of another one to climb the mountain, but we decided there had to be a faster way going down, so we looked at the last ash slide from when the volcano had erupted the last time, and we decided that's the way we were going down. So here's ten idiots running down this mountain, and it was such an angle that going down that you were just about laying down. Luckily we didn't hit any stones or break legs or anything. But we descended that mountain I think in about two and a half to three hours from top to bottom, and that's the tallest mountain in the world

because it starts below land and below sea level, and it's 12,000 something-hundred feet, so even though many mountains are higher they don't start at sea level, so that's one of the things that I remember. I remember going to Tokyo on leave, and we were on one side of Tokyo and we were told about a very good bar on the other side of Tokyo. So we got in this cab and we told this cab driver, we asked him how long it would get there, and he told us, we said well, if you can get there in half that time we will double what we pay you. Well, if you've ever been in a ride it was like being in the Indy 500, that man was on sidewalks, he was all over the place. He got us there, we paid him double. But that was a ride I remember in Tokyo too.

Driscoll: So you described a lot of hard work as a controller there on the air base.

Brennan: Well we were twelve hours on, and twelve hours off because they were so short of people there. The other thing I do remember, I walked by the mess hall one time and they had turkeys thawing out there for, it must have been 1952, '3, or '4—I don't remember but probably '2 or '3—but the turkeys were stamped "frozen in 1931." So, apparently they had them down in the salt mines someplace in Mississippi or someplace, so we had very good, very old turkey [laughs].

Driscoll: So how long were you at Yokota Air Base?

Brennan: The last day there, I came back in June of '54, so I was there over two years.

Driscoll: So a lot of familiarity with the different aircraft, the different missions flying to and from Korea, but you were describing some of your life when you weren't working. Getting out on the town; do you have some more stories to pass along? What did you think of Japanese food? Did you get to meet any of the locals?

Brennan: I liked their food. I think the way I learned to like Japan, I really didn't like going into Tokyo and those cities, so where most of the people would jump on, and they had one of the best train systems in the world, I mean they entered the station at a time and they left at a time, and if they didn't do this their engineer was actually fined. So you'd go to get on this train and here'd be this little old "moma-san" and she'd just about run you over to get off the train. But we would always go on the train going the other way to the end of the line, and then we would walk up into the real Japan, not the Japan that surrounded the base. That I enjoyed, and I enjoyed some of their food. Their method of cooling a beer was putting it into a pail of water because they had no refrigeration at that time. But I didn't spend a lot of time off base, I really—when you work twelve hours on and twelve hours off, and I think I went a year without a day off in that procedure, you really don't feel like doing too much after that. You go back and eat breakfast at whatever time you get off and then go and take a nap, and time to get up eat and go to work again.

- Driscoll: That's a lot of hard work, what was the morale of some of your fellow airman? Pretty enthusiastic about the work, or--.
- Brennan: The morale was good, I think we all knew we had a duty, our duty was to guarantee that not only that were these crews able to get off the ground safely, but to get 'em back. And when they came back they were supposed to come back over an electronic homer once every five minutes. Well ever so often it was like a bunch of flies coming back because this one was low on bombs, they had a bomb [inaudible]; this one was low on fuel; this one had people hurt aboard. So our job, when I first started, before I became a master controller, my job was to separate those people, get them into an altitude, bring them around and line 'em up with the runway and then the final controller takes over, and that's where the master controller works to do the final control where you tell them they're too high, too low, too right, too left, whatever it might be. We sent twenty B-29s out one day, something you never heard about, full crews, the last day mission they flew for nearly a year, we got two of them back. 18 of them were shot down over there, so-- The morale, I thought the morale was very good. We had a job to do, and we were there to do it. Even though the strain was there, you got a great deal of satisfaction at doing what you did over there.
- Driscoll: Can you describe your living quarters, mess hall, how did they take care of you on the base?
- Brennan: Well when we first got there we were in large barracks with probably 20-30 people in there double-bunked, and then before I left they had built new barracks where we had two to a room, and I had a roommate over there he liked to drink. The more he drank the faster he walked, and one time he was running so fast he ran right through a glass door, I was taking him back to the base one time and I'm talking to this guy and all of a sudden I looked, he wasn't there; and I turned around, well, the Japanese stored their human waste in containers out in the field and here's this poor guy up to his chest in one of these so we had to try to get him back on base. We thought we got him in bed, and apparently he went out the back instead of going to the latrine and he fell into a trench out there and there were three dogs in the trench so we knew he got eaten alive on top of it. But the food was very good, I mean, like there are things you like and there are things you don't. I didn't eat a green pepper that was filled with rice for most of my life because I had such a bad experience because the rice wasn't cooked and that went in it, all the things like that. But on a whole we had very good food. Our barracks were very nice when they built the new barracks, so it was, you put up with what you had to put up with, that's all.
- Driscoll: Remember any of your fellow airmen by name? Keep in touch with any of them while you were there?
- Brennan: No I didn't keep in touch with any of them, I remember my roommate's last name was Brooks, and he was from out east and my daughter ended up marrying a

Brooks in Wisconsin so that's one name that stuck in my head. I remember Gabe, which was an old tech sergeant there, that I remember him, but the Johnson brothers, the Dakotas, things like that. But beyond that I really don't remember too many of them.

Driscoll: Now a lot of your fellow airmen and officers were they veterans of World War II or were they relatively new to the service?

Brennan: Well, a lot of the pilots had been in World War II and they were recalled, so we had some pilots that were getting up in years a bit too. They were also training new younger pilots at the same time. It's the same with a lot of the crews, a lot were in the reserves—they were called back in. So we had veterans flying there, as far as the controllers go I don't know of anyone that was a controller in World War II that I ever met that I can remember anyway. And I don't know if our commander was there or not, I just don't know his background that well anymore.

Driscoll: So how long were you at Yokota Air Base? You got there in late 1952?

Brennan: I was there close to two years, and then I went to Yokohama to take a ship back again being in the Air Force. And I got delayed there because the ship we were coming back on developed a big crack in it so they had to tie it together with the anchor cable I understand, and they had to take it back in and weld that ship back together before we could come back over. But the trip back was much nicer, we were not in a typhoon. I landed in Oakland, we were about four to five hours out of Oakland; it was just hotter than blue-blazes out there and we were told to put on our winter blues which you could never understand. Once we got underneath the bridge in San Francisco it turned just ice cold, and I don't think I've ever been so cold as I was going back on that ship. Then I went to Astoria, my cousin's husband was in the Navy and I visited them. I had taken a bus to Astoria, Oregon from Oakland, was it Oakland, well anyway. I took a bus and this driver drove the mountains like he was crazy so I decided I'd fly back. So I took a small plane from Astoria back to the big land [?]. Then we took off coming back and we were, we put our seatbelts on and even the stewards never got out of their seats all the way because it was rough weather all the way back. And at that time the strobe lights were going, and people were worried we were on fire and everything like that because the clouds were so thick, all this light business you got to identify these planes visually was all reflecting off the clouds, and so that was my trip back. And then I went home on leave. Then I went to Lockbourne Air Force Base in Columbus, Ohio.

Driscoll: And the date roughly?

Brennan: That was about [background PA system noise] probably July of '54, and there I, we, we still the uh, we didn't have the old type radar units we had more updated equipment to bring these people in. I spent nearly a year there, the closest I've ever come to losing a plane, is that we got a call from control center on the eastern

United States that a weekend pilot was up and he was lost, had absolutely no idea where he was, and he was low on fuel. And everyone east of the Mississippi was alerted to watch for this man, for this plane, and I happened to see a very light dot on my scope and I gave this man a identification turn, and then we did what we called the emergency approach, which is get 'em down the fastest runway even if you're going with the wind if you're declaring an emergency and you don't have time to switch everything. This guy I got him down, and got him on the ground, got halfway down the runway and his engine shutdown. He was out of fuel. And I never got a thank you from him, or the base commander, or my commander. It was our job I guess, and even though I had saved a life probably or a number of lives, who knows where they're plotted [??] we never got a thank you for it. So it was, in some ways I think the Air Force shortchanges people because I had a friend who was in the Army, he had gold stars and silver stars, never saw any battles, but he was an engineer building basically a cemetery in Belgium was one of them. He was always behind everyone, but he got all of the awards, the Air Force doesn't do that. They really, they don't really show appreciation for what their people do I don't believe.

Driscoll: What was kind of the recognition from the general population when you came back from the theater of war over there in Asia back to the United States, how were you received?

Brennan: Well we weren't received really, there was no welcome committee, we weren't as bad as the Vietnam War because there weren't the riots going on the way they were, but there was very little appreciation I think of what anyone did in the Korean War. It's kind of uh, it's been referred to as the Forgotten War, and I think that's very true. So basically it was just basically coming home, adjusting, and deciding what I wanted to do. I had ended up training a number of people as master controllers for a GCA when I was in Japan, and I enjoyed the teaching so rather than going back to be an architect I decided that I was going to go to Stout, at that time it was Stout State College, which is now Stout University, heck when I graduated it was Stout University, the names were changed. I went under the G.I. bill. I had my bachelor's degree in industrial education. I was a person who went through all high school and basically with no preparation, I had general science and general math. I got into mathematics and loved it, so I came out with a math minor. I came out with a science minor. I was rather very close to having a major in psychology, but my main field was industrial education. So, I spent four years there and during the summer I worked as a foreman in a canning company. Basically to try and get the additional money that I needed that the G.I. bill would do it. I had some great experiences there, like I ran the night shift. The day foreman ended up spraining an ankle, so I ended up taking his shift and mine. I basically would work so long watching these conveyors going by that I would fall asleep standing up. And one week period I slept in the plant and I had three hours total sleep in a row of any kind of sleep, so I had an experience there of learning to supervise people and production and all of that. I helped a man who was inventing the first machine that would nip beans, they used to have to nip all

those by hand, we worked on a machine that revolved and would automatically nip those. So I spent most of my summer there. I ended up in the hospital in one of my years, I got meningitis right before finals, so I was supposed to stay in bed all summer and I went to work in the canning company and worked all the time, went back and then I had to take my finals in calculus, expository writing, chemistry, physics, and something else. I mean it was quite a challenge to do that, but I ended up graduating out of there with a bachelor's, I stayed on, I met my wife there. We got married; I graduated; she graduated in 1958, ah, ya, '58, she taught in St. Paul Park. I had transferred a few of my credits so I had basically graduated in the semester of '58. I stayed on for the following semester. We got married that summer, we went back to Stout, worked on our Masters, I ended up leaving there and going and teaching one year in Milwaukee. And I taught industrial ed which I found out on Friday I had to teach such things as pattern making, electricity, foundry, architectural drawing, drafting, all of these things. If I had to stay in Milwaukee I would have gotten out of teaching. I stayed there one year; she taught at some north side schools and then I moved to Fox Point Bayside, which is a very rich suburb. When I was at South, at Humboldt Park School in Milwaukee, at that time was when they were developing the junior high school system. And what we got at Humboldt Park was all of the students that were thrown out of any of the schools came to our school. So I basically got along very well with my students; I had a very nice finishing room underneath the steps. Whenever I got one of these kids, I would take these young men in underneath the steps and talk to them and tell them if they thought they were gonna run the class they better swing and put me on the floor because otherwise I was going to run that class. I never had any problem with any of these students because they had not been treated as individuals of any quality at all. And we used to clean up, and we told jokes in there that I'm sure if the superintendent walked in on that I would have been fired on the spot, but that was their life. I had children that wouldn't show up at school, someone would send them to their house and they were ashamed to come to school because their clothes smelled so bad. They had piles of clothes in the living room—either they had only a father only a mother or they're both alcoholics and you really had to look at how little most of these students had at that time. I ended up going to Fox Point Bayside, and that was the opposite, that was the gold coast of Milwaukee. We had probably 70% of my students at Humboldt Park School there were Jewish, a number of the non-Jewish students, but a large number were students that had been thrown out of the Catholic school there and dumped back into the public schools. But I stayed there for nine and a half years, and during that time my life really changed because of something I did. There was a teacher there that a lot of people really didn't like for some reason, and I never understood this, and she ended up with cancer and she ended up, she was very active in the state teachers' organization. Very professional Wisconsin Education Association, very professional at that time, and she was very active in there. And I was the one that would go to the hospital and visit her, and she was basically the one that got me assigned to my first committee at the state level. And I was the chairperson of the person to develop the first legislative platform for the public employees that we

represented, and they had been established in 1852 and this was in the early 60s. So I developed that committee, we wrote the platform, I had a boss, no I didn't have a boss there, but the man who was head of the teachers group there was a very staunch Republican. And we had people going on that wanted to find out what was going on in the legislature, and he would never convey any of this to the memberships, so in I think it was 1969, in Milwaukee, we had a delegate assembly of about 1100 people that really were the controlling of the organization, and they mandated that someone be hired as his assistant in the legislature. Well this lady that I had been going to see, she recommended to this executive secretary Henry Wenlich [sp?] at that time that I get this job. Henry liked it because I lived in a very Republican district; I was a member of the Republican Party because to be a Democrat in Mequon was like having a bounty on you. So he thought I was a very staunch Republican and so he hired me, and I had a great welcome there. The whole organization was on the fourth floor and I reported to him, and he said I found you an office, I got you an office, and he said follow me so we went to the elevator and went down one floor. We went down the hall, he opened up a door for me, said here's your office, I walked in, he slammed the door and went back upstairs. And I knew at that time I wasn't too welcome. So I decided well, I was going to go over to the Capitol and start seeing what was really going on, well he directed that I not go to the Capitol.

Driscoll: And this is while you're working for the Wisconsin Education Association?

Brennan: Yes, so then I decided—you get print outs of everything, of all motions and procedures and that. I was going to go through and track that to see what was going on, only to find out that he had that totally destroyed. So my only outlet was that I travel the state for a couple years under Henry there, and I would go and give a speech anywhere in the state. I could talk to two people or 102 people, I didn't care, but my goal out there was to let the membership know that if they were not involved in this political process—because so much in education depends on the legislation, the funding, the laws and all of that, the retirement—I said it's like looking through an opaque window not knowing what's going on and you're out here. So I spent really just three years traveling the state from one end to the other, and then he decided that he didn't like this change that was going on so Henry retired. And we got a new executive, and he was Morris Andrews, and the first day I met this man I was going to give a speech in Watertown. And he decided he was going to ride around. Well, from the time I left Madison to Watertown, gave my speech and all the way back, there was never a pause that he wasn't asking questions about certain things, and I knew I had a fireball for a boss and he was a pure political animal. At that time when he came aboard they were going to take and put cost controls on the schools, so we borrowed I think it was \$60,000, we formed the Wisconsin Education Association Council; the incorporated structure could not get involved, but by having the second arm there the council is what would get involved. So we basically went to Green Bay and we started the first political organization. We targeted I think it was seven different people, one of them got elected, six of them were beaten, and they knew

we were in the game to be good, to be there. So we kept building this organization so I not only was director of legislation, which is basically their chief lobbyist. I had to read, look at, over 2,000 bills a year to find out if any bill effected the K-12 schools, the vocational technical schools, the TAs at the university; we had a police organization up by Rice Lake; anything that would affect them any way in their retirement or funding and all that, so I had to look at every one of those things; go around the state giving speeches. I'd be ready to go home, and have dinner and I'd get a call you're gonna be in Rice Lake tonight speaking at 4:00 o'clock, so we had more planes in the air sometimes that I thought [laughs] we had the Air Force back. So I ended looking at all these bills; then to a bill there are amendments, which are minor changes. We had to, any bill we followed, and we followed about 10% of all the bills that I had to look at it, that were introduced. I had to look at every amendment to see if it was good or bad. Then we would get the budget bill which was up to a 1,000 pages on a Friday and I had an employee, I called him my Italian mafia because he got things before anyone else could get 'em. I had copies of the budget before legislators had it because we would get them on Friday, Monday morning they expected us to appear and tell them everything that effected education or any of these groups on Monday morning already. So we had, I had to read that, prepare it, be ready to go and present that all on a Monday. One of the things [background voices, other noise ongoing] I learned there was that as I went through the bill they would say repeal section 111-70, that's all it would say. I would write down of all of those repeals, I would look them all up, and then I would give them to our friends so they knew what was in the budget bill, because most of those people don't read those bills, they vote up or down, half of the time they don't even know what they're voting on. So I tried to build relationships, which we did build relationships that way. On a budget bill, when it was passed in one house or maybe two, first of all Joint Finance would amend it, so we had to look at those. Then they would go to a house and they may substitute the bill and you have basically a whole new bill going to the other house, they can end up substituting, so sometimes you end up with thousands and thousands of pages just to pass a budget bill.

Driscoll: Yeah.

Brennan: And I can remember being in the Capitol one time, for forty hours, with no sleep, [background voices] but mostly, um, I went home for about three hours and back for eight more hours, and work at walking on the marble floors, and I had the brace from the [noise] deteriorating problem with the Air Force here, ah, I ended up with blisters so bad I couldn't walk. but I was there forty hours without any sleep. And, ah, we would, ah, I would get a call, and ah, sometimes the, when the houses can't agree they get a joint committee to go together to decide what was going to be in the bill [noise and woman's voice] and I would get a, I would get a call--"Be down in such and such a room"--so I would meet some of the people that were on this this Joint Finance, on this joint committee, and they would ask me what we were after, what we were going to go back upstairs at 2:00 o'clock in

the morning, at 3:00 o'clock and try and get that stuff in the bill. Ah, we wrote the first minimum standards for schools. Ah, what courses they had to offer, I--on the back of one of my employees, at about 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning, we put it into Joint Finance, they put it in, and that's how that passed, but we started the thing first, ah, um, what the schools had to meet. Well, what we found out was that that some some of these schools had basic math. You look at Nicolet High School, they had a number of foreign languages, they had calculus, they had trigonometry, they had all that, so it set up a minimum of that these schools would have to offer. Ah, we also found that, ah, schools were operating at 183 days, some at 150 days. Well, that's quite a difference in trying to educate children. So, we mandated the number of days, 183 days, which five could use for parents conferences or snow days. Well these good school boards don't really like spending any money, would decide that their school day was going to run from 7:00 in the morning until noon, and that way they didn't have to pay their teachers as much, and their children were gyped again. So we had to turn around and write the minimum number of minutes that, ah, that thee, they had to meet for the elementary and the high school. I spent two years working with Senator [James] Devitt writing the first handicapped education act, and when we passed that bill there were 98,000 children in this state outside that had no access to public education. So I helped write that. I had an experience of working with, ah, ten of the eleven Indian nation groups in Wisconsin. They were trying to pass a piece of legislation they were making no headway so they came to us. Well I spent two years with them; we developed a bill. Once the bill was developed we had to go up, um, near Green Bay to the reservation up there and all the chiefs from all the nations met there, and the sub chiefs and all that, and we had to present this, and had to make sure we we're not infringing on any of the rights of the tribes. So we had to present that. We went into the legislature, we passed that bill, and the elders can now or could unless the governor's taken it away, can now go in and teach the history, the culture and the language without being certified as a teacher, because most of that is conveyed from generation to generation by speech not by writing, so we opened up that.

Driscoll: Well, Mike that's a impressive career, after your time in the Air Force. Now you left the Air Force in '54?

Brennan: '50--1955.

Driscoll: '55 after Lockbourne Air Base in Ohio, is that correct?

Brennan: Yeah.

Driscoll: And a great career in education; did you get involved with any veteran groups: ah, veterans groups? VFW, American Legion after you left the Air Force?

Brennan: Well, I didn't get much involved there. I had a lot of good experiences, I met a lot of great people. I had lunch with President Carter in the White House.

Driscoll: As part of what organization?

Brennan: Representing the Wisconsin Education Association.

Driscoll: I see, okay.

Brennan: Um, I knew both Bill and Hillary Clinton when he was governor, and, ah, I used to present retirement stuff at the national meeting of lobbyists and that, and they were always present at these meetings so I knew them very well, in fact I was in Hilton Head and rode up on the elevator with Bill Clinton the day he announced he was going to run for president, so I've known both he and Hillary back from those days. I met, ah, we met a meeting, or five of us met with President Ford, ah, I met with, know, Senator, he was Senator, Secretary of State Kerry now, I've met him; Tip O'Neil; General Haig, so I've met a lot of people at that level. I've also met, been associated with a lot of governors, that I think is the most down-to-earth governor I ever had to deal with was Marty Schreiber, and he invited us out to the governor's mansion to talk over some stuff one morning, and he said, "If you bring me the rolls, he'd made the coffee", so we picked up donuts and then we got into the mansion and we sat at this little table and it's cold and the table is wobbling, so here's the governor down on the floor shoving matches underneath the table to get it steady, and that's the kind of guy you was--he was just down to earth--but, ah, you know, the--So I worked with, I knew Tommy Thompson when he was in the legislature, in fact I had him in my home already back then many years ago, um, so I knew him, I knew the ex-president of Stevens Point, ah, and so I've worked with I think five or six different governors during my career. So I got to meet all those people and I was involved a lot with, we met with the administrators association--which they don't do anymore-- because we coordinated with the superintendents and principals; um, we met with the different groups that were in the retirement system which would be the fire, police, the state employees and that, and I helped write the retirement bill that is now law here and in that bill I attempted six years to get an adjustment for people once they retired called a post-retirement adjustment. Five years the state flew in the actuary from Michigan and he told this state committee, which I ended up serving on, the state retirement committee, but at that time I was just the [inaudible] before then, and he told them five years in a row I didn't know what I was talking about, and the sixth year they finally agreed that the assumptions that I was looking at and how they were determining that there was money there, so we passed the first post-retirement adjustment law in the United States, and that is the thing that depends on what the market does but, ah, these people have adjustments basically up and they have a 5% flow period so if the market ever goes down they don't have to adjust it again, so I, those were the things that I was involved--I didn't have much time and that. Ah, when I had time off I went to Vilas County, to Conover, and there I designed and built my own cabin and built garages and I built a shop for doing my bird carving and that kind of thing, and, ah--Once I got, ah, I retired, I went to work for Wisconsin Cheese--excuse me--

Wisconsin Cheesemen and I worked in one of their warehouses and I did all their computer work of everything entering and leaving the warehouse. Ah, after that I went out to the VA hospital in Madison. I started off as an escort there; I ended up ten years sitting at the front desk, directing people; I also--people had to tell them where to go there but I couldn't do it at home [Driscoll laughs] and that's the reason I went there. So I have 3,000 hours of volunteer time at the hospital in Madison, so, um, my health deteriorated, um, I ended up not only, the leg I had hurt in the Air Force, ah, not only did that deteriorate, it's been operated on four or five times, but when I was at the VA the nurse in the operating room when they set this thing put a caste on it, they're supposed to put it on a pillow that breathes. Well, this leg was put on a pillow that was plastic and couldn't breath and these casts today generate tremendous heat--that heat came up the back of my leg and I had a third-degree burn in there about an inch or more deep, and I laid in bed three months having that heal from the inside out, and every time I wanted to, ah, to one area down there this guy that was there he kept saying, "Yeah, I got to talk to the nurses about that, I gotta, they're doing research--" I found out he was the one that put the plastic pillow; now that I not only had the deteriorating ankle, I have what's called reflexive dystrophy which is, instead of healing going to the brain, everything goes to the brain, it's, it's burning in fire and that, so that's, and I ended up with a, I've been on massive pain medication since the '50s and I have developed a nonalcoholic cirrhosis of the liver; I've been the pain medication has eaten that away. So, I have too much ammonia in my body, so that's why I ran, really ran into trouble; I was trying to stay home. My wife passed away a year ago--I'll just--I stayed in my home, and I was the president of a co-op, of a sixty-four member housing co-op there while I was there, and, ah, but my just health got so bad while I was in the hospital three days I'd be out a week and I was back there, and finally they found out the problem and I just couldn't do it anymore and I ended up here at King. And so far my experiences at King have been very, very good; I think the staff is very professional. They will go out of their way to help you; ah, the food is much better than I anticipated; the activities here, if anyone gets bored here it's their own fault, because there's so many things to do; and now that summer's here they've got concert out in the, on campus out here, and all of that, so, ah, so far it's, it's quite an adjustment when you leave your home and move to a one-room, but I've been very pleased with what's been going on.

Driscoll: Well, Mike, it's a great story, the, ah, can I ask you, what was your final rank in the United States Air Force?

Brennan: Airman, First Class.

Driscoll: Airman First Class, and then on to get a, his degrees started in education, and a long career in advancing Wisconsin's education; a career that has taken him to meet several presidents as well as, well a lot of other national leadership, and here he is today, a Korea War veteran of the United States Air Force who just gave a wonderful story to the Wisconsin Veterans Museum; and Mike, if it's okay with

you I think this is a good time to stop, take a short break, and then if you have any more stories or memories you want to pass along, we can start that in a follow-up interview. But, again, this interview is with Roger Michael Brennan--he goes by Mike. He served in the United States Air Force during the Korean War. I'd like to thank Mike, and on behalf of the Veterans Museum, you did a wonderful interview. Thank you.

Brennan: Thank you.

[End of Interview]