

USAF Life Support/Flight Equipment Career Narrative

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USAF 1966-1991

Conflicts Served: The Cold War, Vietnam Era, and Desert Storm

The draft convinced me that I needed to join the branch of the military that I preferred and that was the USAF. All my friends who were not drafted joined the Marines and I was determined not to become a "bullet stopper" and follow in their footsteps. I had heard a lot about the USAF so I wanted to rush down to see the local Air Force recruiter before I got drafted. Little did I know I had already been drafted. There was a piece of unopened mail at my house that turned out to be my draft notice. I ignored it and went off to Lackland AFB for basic training. The entire time that I was going through basic training I was worried that the US Army was sending somebody to claim me as one of their own. I don't think I stopped worrying about that until I got settled in at my first assigned base.

The most promising career I had heard of as a teenager was in the printing industry, so I enrolled in a printing course and after graduation worked at a printing company in my hometown. When I enlisted in the Air Force, I told the recruiter about my work experience and he assured me it would be easy for me to get into the printing business. Little did I know the U.S. Air Force had different plans for me. Instead of working in the government printing office in Washington, DC as I had expected, I was transferred to Ft Lee, VA to learn how to cut meat and the fine art of cooking and baking. Afterward, I was transferred to Grand Forks AFB, ND where I worked in the dining hall and the newly build missile sites.

My life support career started in 1968 when I was given the opportunity to cross-train, and a choice of assignments. I was offered air traffic control or life support. I preferred air traffic control but chose life support

because the school was in a better location (Illinois versus Mississippi!). There was no way as an African American that I was going to Mississippi during the civil rights era!

The career field was officially called Aircrew Life Support but was sometimes referred to as PE as a carryover from the 1950s when it was named Personal Equipment. As a Life Support Technician, I was responsible for the personal flight equipment the aircrew member used during flight and the emergency equipment and training they would need to survive after escaping from a disabled aircraft.

My Life Support career involved responsibilities as a technician, a supervisor and a manager, all of which shaped me into what I would do after retirement.

My training began with a three-month tour of Chanute AFB, IL where I learned the basics of the career field. As for my first impression of life support? I was scared! I realized that I had been placed with a great deal of responsibility and had people's lives in my hands. My first supervisor (Cesare Bruno) had me so afraid of killing somebody if I didn't put their flight helmet or oxygen mask back together correctly that I literally replaced anything that didn't function properly. I didn't repair anything, it was removed and replaced! If an oxygen mask valve started sticking it went straight into the trash! I was stationed at Perrin AFB, TX and worked in two different squadrons, the 81 ADS and the 82 ADS. I was also fortunate enough to work at the local ADC Water Survival School. One of the groups that came through for training was some of the first astronauts. Little did I know that in the class was one of the astronauts that I would work with 40 plus years later. His name is **Vance Brand**, commander of three space shuttle missions and I got to train him again while we were both NASA Dryden employees. Another astronaut in that class went on to become very famous but I won't tell you who he is until we get to the end of my profile.

After finishing my two-year stint in Texas, I was assigned to Andersen AFB, Guam which is the closest I got to the war in Vietnam. I worked on B-52s, Tankers, C-130s, and Helicopters. My memories of the Vietnam War were the sights and sounds of a lot of scared aircrew members getting on and off of those B-52s. Most notably was how young some of the aircraft tail gunners looked.

When B-52s were transferred to Guam to support the bombing campaign over North Vietnam, we didn't understand why they all came to us without the parachutes configured with lowering devices. For the uninformed, those devices were used to lower the aircrew member to the ground if he found himself hung up in a tree after ejecting from a disabled aircraft. Each aircraft had about a dozen parachutes that we had to download from incoming aircraft and configure the parachutes right there on the ramp with lowering devices. I'll never forget the pain in my fingers from installing those devices!

There was close to 200 B-52D and G models on the island. Lots of sorties were flown each day and then there were the night missions.

When President Nixon ordered a second Linebacker operation in late December 1972 and the bombing resumed over Hanoi during the day and Haiphong at night, we were launching 100 B-52s at night dropping over 150,000 tons of bombs over North Vietnam. We worked our buns off loading, unloading and pre-fighting life support equipment on every B-52 scheduled to fly plus the spares night after night. That's right; it was 12 hours a day, 7 days a week of constant work!

With nearly 200 aircraft and I don't know how many vehicles on the flight-line at any given time, it was inevitable that somebody was going to run into something. It almost happened to us one night. Our truck with about 7 life support troops onboard died in the middle of the taxiway as a B-52 taxied towards us. I was driving and onboard with us was the infamous Chief Sid Perry who was a TSgt at the time. I thought I could get the truck started in time, but was unable to. The aircraft bomb racks, loaded to the gills with bombs scraped the top of our truck as it

taxied by. I thought we were all going to die that night but luckily nothing happened and we didn't tell anybody about it. I'll always believe the folks in the control tower knew about it but they didn't say anything about it either and it was never mentioned at any of our shop meetings.

Another incident that I remember was a night when a B-52's bomb bay doors opened on takeoff and spilled out a bunch of propaganda money (counterfeit North Vietnamese currency that was used to discourage the enemy and disrupt their economy). Everyone on the truck stuffed their pockets full of the money. I left Guam three months after the last official battle, called the 11-day war or as it was more popularly known, "The Christmas Bombings of 1972". After returning to the states I gave all my propaganda money away except one bill. I hate that I did that to this day.

AERONAUTICAL PIONEERS EXCLUSIVE

Hãy coi chừng
một cuộc cải cách
tiền tệ nữa. Các
bạn có thể mất
tất cả tài sản,
công lao mồ hôi
nước mắt của bạn.



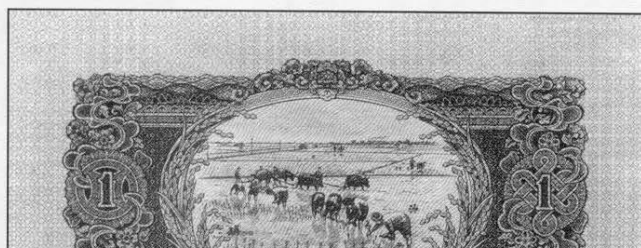
In the following story about Bobby McElwain, there is a reference to money that the United States used to drop on North Viet Nam. The money had two applications, the first was the propaganda notes that were attached to the edge of the bills. Through the help of a very kind Vietnamese woman, Thomholai Nguyen, her friends call her "Di", we got a very simple translation of the documents. She said the front side of the bill (top) warned the people to be very careful, and let them know that there would be

one more drop of money. It also said that the war brought on by the Communist will destroy all of the property and real estate that the people spent their blood, sweat, and tears to obtain.

The back side of the bill said that the Communists will take all of the money and use it for a war that they can not win. Because of the Communists making of war there will be nothing to buy, everything will be burned and the war brought on by the Communists will destroy the country and all of

the money will be worth nothing. The other goal of the counterfeit bills was to harm the economy by providing money that was close enough to the original that the people could spend it after tearing the propaganda note off the end.

I would like to again thank "Di" Nguyen for her help with the translation of the notes. Please continue on to find out more about Bobby McElwain and more of the interesting experiences that he had in his aeronautics career. **AP**



Đảng thì vung-phí
tiền của đồng-bào vào
một cuộc chiến-tranh
tuyệt-vọng. Khi chiến-
tranh còn tiếp-diễn, sẽ
chẳng có gì mấy để mua.
Chiến-tranh thì tàn-nhà

I was transferred to McGuire AFB in 1972 and worked C-141's for a year with Jim Rooney, Joe Lee, Irv Carey, Ray Turbyfill, L.C. Ford and a few others that I can't recall. I then went overseas again to Ubon RTAB in Thailand, but only stayed for two weeks. The war/conflict was over and all of the aircraft were being transferred out, so I was reassigned to Kadena AB in Okinawa, Japan where I worked on F-4s with Ray Blanchette and Otis Jackson to name a few. For some reason that nobody ever explained to me, the F-4 was identified as a specialized aircraft for our career field so I had to go back to Chanute for F-4 Life Support training. While stationed on Kadena I was also assigned to the 61st TRS and later to the 44 TFS where we rotated every six weeks to Taiwan. I also had a TDY to Osan AB, Korea while assigned to the 61st.

Finally, in 1975 I came back to the United States and was assigned to the 479th TTW at Holloman AFB NM. At Holloman, I worked for and eventually replaced my mentor and friend, John Shields in the 465 TTS where I worked on T-38s. I had six people working for me and we had one squadron, but we eventually developed into a wing and had four squadrons increasing to around 20 people. I continued to be the shop supervisor for about six months, then someone who outranked me (Frank Birkenseher) took over.

In 1979 I got the assignment I enjoyed the most during my Air Force career. I was transferred to Langley AFB, Virginia to Headquarters Tactical Air Command and was assigned to help oversee and manage the life support programs of all the Air Force bases in the command. I assisted Lt Col Al Schneider, Chief John Weir, and later my mentor and friend, Chief John Shields in establishing policies and procedures for all the units in Tactical Air Command. I was also responsible for the suggestion and AFTO 22 programs, management of the MAJCOM's land and water survival school slots, the Life Support Supervisor course slots, and the distribution of newly developed equipment such as the HGU -55/P helmet and the MBU-12/P Mask. As I recall, it was I along with Chief Tommy Tompkins, TSgt Jerry White, a representative from another MAJCOM, and Mr. "R.C." Wilson of SA-ALC who wrote the first T.O. for the 12/P mask. Ask me one day in private why Mr. Wilson was called "RC" 😊. I also helped write the first technical order for the 55/P helmet while at TAC HQ. I thoroughly enjoyed this assignment because I got to see the career field from a different perspective.

Memories of my time at the headquarters impacted me the most during my AF career. I learned a lot during that time especially when I visited other bases to evaluate their life support programs. Although I was there to see if the units were complying with technical orders and command standards, I saw many useful ideas that could be shared with other units. Passing on that information had a positive impact on other programs and people in the command. Those ideas and suggestions even made me a better technician, supervisor, and manager.

Of all the medals, awards, formal presentations and qualification badges that I received, the most meaningful to me was the recognition I didn't get. I feel that my contributions towards the war efforts during my time on Guam deserved better recognition than the letters of appreciation that I and a lot of the people I worked with during that time received. The hardest I ever worked in my life was during the two years I spent on Guam.



My final assignment in the Air Force was at the 35 TFW George AFB, CA where I was the Life Support Superintendent. I retired from active duty on 1 Sep 1991 and thought I'd miss the friends I met along the way who made the career field so special. It turned out however that I didn't miss a thing. I continued my career as a NASA Life Support Aerospace Engineer meeting annually with active duty AF Life Support/Flight Equipment personnel at the MAJCOMs Conferences, the Annual SAFE Symposiums, and attending our annual reunions which I'm so proud to say I help create.



As a NASA Life Support engineer, I conducted ejection seat and survival training for NASA flight status personnel on F-15, F-16, F-18, T-38, B-52, SR-71 & U-2 aircraft.



I also provided emergency passenger and survival training for personnel flying on NASA's T-34, DC-8, 747, C-12, C-20, G-3, and the Space Shuttle Carrier aircraft. Providing engineering support on the development, testing, and maintenance of NASA's Aircrew Life Support Systems was another one of my responsibilities. I was also a member of the NASA Dryden Speaker Program where I provided briefing around the country about my profession.

NASA
Dryden Flight Research Center
presents
NASA Yesterday, Today
and Tomorrow



**Life Support
Technician
Bobby McElwain**

Wednesday, November 18, 1998
6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.
Lewis Center for Educational Research
20702 Thunderbird Road
Apple Valley, CA.

These programs are free and open to the public.

Bobby McElwain, a Dryden life support technician, will explain how pilots and aircrews are taught to fly safely and what to do if there is trouble.

His safety training of Dryden employees includes, but is not limited to, the SR-71 high-speed research aircraft, the F-18, F-15, F-16, B-52 and T-34.

McElwain often tells first hand accounts of how knowing what to do in an emergency situation can save lives.

The NASA Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow lectures occur the third Wednesday of each month in the Lewis Center for Educational Research, 20702 Thunderbird Road, Apple Valley, Calif.

Watch for future announcements.

And finally, I assisted NASA's astronauts on their departure from the Space Shuttle as part of the Space Shuttle Recovery team. As for that other astronaut that came through the water survival school at Perrin AFB, his name is [Neil Armstrong](#), the first man to walk on the moon.

I am now fully retired now and enjoying every minute of it.



TSgt Robert Gibbs and Sgt Bob McElwain conduct parachute training with Apollo 11 astronaut Neil Armstrong at Perrin AFB in Sherman, Texas in this 1968 handout photo courtesy of NASA (Photo/Agencies)